

**HANYA HOLM IN AMERICA, 1931-1936:
DANCE, CULTURE AND COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

Though she is widely considered one of the “four pioneers” of American modern dance, German-American Hanya Holm (1893-1992) occupies a shadowy presence in dance history literature. She has often been described as someone who fell in love with America, purged her approach of Germanic elements, and emerged with a more universal one. Her “Americanization” has served as evidence of the Americanness of modern dance, thus eclipsing the German influence on modern dance. This dissertation challenges that narrative by casting new light on Holm’s worldview and initial intentions in the New World, and by articulating the specifics of the first five years of her American career.

In contrast to previous histories, I propose that Holm did not come to the U.S. to forge an independent career as a choreographer; rather, she came as a missionary for Mary Wigman and her *Tanz-Gemeinschaft* (dance cultural community). To Wigman and Holm, dance was not only an art form; it was a way of life, a revolt against bourgeois sterility and modern alienation, and a utopian communal vision, even a religion. Artistic expression was only one aspect of modern dance’s larger purpose. The transformation of social life was equally important, and Holm was a fervent believer in the need for a widespread amateur dance culture.

This study uses a historical methodology and accesses traces of the past such as lectures, school reports, promotional material, newspaper articles, personal notebooks, correspondence, photographs, and other material—much of it discussed here for the first

time. These sources provide evidence for new descriptions and interpretations of Holm's migration from Germany to the U.S. and from German dance to American dance.

I examine cultural contexts that informed Holm's beliefs, such as early twentieth century German life reform and body culture; provide a sustained analysis of the curriculum of the New York Wigman School of the Dance; and consider how the politicization of dance in the 1930s—in both Germany and the U.S.—affected Holm and her work.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Disembarking from the trans-Atlantic liner *Aquitania* at the port of New York in September 1931, Hanya Holm (1893-1992) declared that she had come to teach young American women to trust their intuitions and their bodies' wisdom, and to help them find health and vitality.¹ She had come to the U.S. to spread new ideas about the body, movement, and rhythm; new ways of living; and new kinds of social connections, which she believed had the power to transform modern life. She was not an ordinary immigrant, in search of a better life; she was a missionary. Armed with her intimate knowledge of the "Wigman method" and its promises of rejuvenation, satisfaction of expression, and cultural renewal, she believed that she was bringing essential wisdom to share with Americans. Holm thought of herself as the prime representative of the highest figure in modern dance, Mary Wigman, successor to the reforms of Isadora Duncan and Rudolf Laban. She did not intend to adopt American approaches to modern dance; rather, she was in the U.S. to educate. In fact, to her "America" represented much that was wrong with modern life: mechanization, routinization, a frantic pace, loss of a sense of authentic community, and alienation from nature. In that sense, she entered the lion's den when she arrived; her task was great.

This interpretation is quite different from the standard narrative of American dance history. Most often referred to as one of the "four pioneers" of American modern dance, Holm has been described as someone who fell in love with America, purged her

approach of Germanic elements, and emerged with a more universal one. Narratives about her work in the 1930s often downplay her position as the Wigman School's American representative, and instead emphasize her role in the embryonic Bennington College Summer School of the Dance. In the late 1930s, *New York Times* dance critic and influential arbiter of modern dance John Martin celebrated Holm's "Americanization," and that trope has been repeated again and again in the literature. This dissertation challenges that narrative, particularly by investigating Holm's worldview and initial intentions in the New World, and by articulating the specifics of the first five years of her American career.

In contrast to Holm's biographer Walter Sorell, I do not see Holm's first five years in the U.S. as a period of preparation for her official choreographic debut. I argue that Holm did not come to the U.S. to forge an independent career as a choreographer; rather, she came as a missionary for Wigman's *Tanz-Gemeinschaft* (dance cultural community). To Holm, dance was not only an art form; it was a way of life, a revolt against bourgeois sterility and modern alienation, and a utopian communal vision. Artistic expression was only one aspect of modern dance's larger purpose. The transformation of social life was equally important, and Holm was a fervent believer in the need for a widespread amateur dance culture. Wigman and Holm—like Rudolf Laban, father of German modern dance—used religious terminology to describe their work; they were priestesses of a religion of dance.²

Americans had been flocking to the Wigman School in Germany in significant numbers since the late 1920s, and Holm journeyed to New York because "one should come to the many."³ Over the next few years, Holm would attempt to understand

American culture and the American mentality in order to make her ideas and methods accessible to her new students. She would use every available medium to spread her message: print, lecture, radio, interviews, conferences, symposia, demonstrations, and guest classes, as well as directing and teaching at the New York Wigman School. She forged strategic alliances and tried to expand the reach of the “Wigman revolt” into the fabric of American culture in any way that she could.

Without understanding the belief system Holm embodied, we cannot fathom her theories, her actions, her methods, or her relationship to American dance. Wigman and Holm believed that dance should be intuitive, creative, organic, and metaphysical. They sought the primal roots of dance. They rejected intellectual analysis, and even insisted that mere “doing” was not enough; the dancer must “be” the dance. Holm called this a state of “being with it” – a genuine presence, a true expression of the self, a response from the heartbeat and primal rhythm.⁴ The spiritual could be achieved through sublime physical discipline and sacrifice; the individual must be placed in service of “the dance itself,” which, they believed, exists in all time, separate from the forms, techniques, theories, and methods that seek to contain it.⁵ The contents of dance are eternal; only the forms are time-bound and changeable.⁶ The dancer’s task is to open her/his body and spirit in particular ways to allow the dance itself to emerge.

As I will demonstrate, Holm’s belief system was rooted in German body culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which aspired to transform society and usher in a healthier way of living in the modern age. The practices of body culture (including modern dance, but other practices as well) would counteract the debilitating effects of modern life by ridding the body of destructive habits; by developing more intuitive

senses; and by accessing primal drives through movement and rhythm. Dance played a special role in this utopian body discourse, and was particularly associated with the interest in “re-ritualizing” modern society, and with the search for national community.⁷ Dance, rhythm, and movement would be made accessible to all through new rituals, and thereby the “suffering German body” of the postwar period could be transformed and healed. Through their ritual acts, the dancer-priest(esses) would enact a rebirth of authentic German culture.

Hanya Holm attempted to transfer this worldview and these practices to American culture, but she encountered a number of difficulties, not least because Wigman presented her dance as a uniquely German art.⁸ Especially after 1933, with the rise of the National Socialist regime and accusations about Wigman’s collaboration with the Nazis, Holm encountered political challenges. In defense, she insisted that art should have nothing to do with politics. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, this stance largely protected her, at the time and in subsequent historical accounts.

By examining the details of this period of Holm’s life and career in depth, this dissertation casts new light on Holm’s pivotal 1936 declaration of the independence of art from politics. I believe that the interpretation of Hanya Holm’s early American career I propose has the potential to unseat many previous assumptions about Holm, the purposes of German modern dance, the role of German dance in the U.S., and Holm’s relationship to leftist dance.

Why Hanya Holm?

In the history of modern dance as an art form, Holm could be seen as a figure of only secondary importance. As a modern dance choreographer, she created a few

critically acclaimed works such as *Trend* (1937), *Metropolitan Daily* (1938), *Tragic Exodus* (1939), and, later, *Rota* (1975) and *Jocose* (1981), but she was generally more respected as a brilliant educator than an innovative artist. Her own protégés admitted that she was not a charismatic performer. Holm found great success as a choreographer of Broadway musicals in the 1940s – 1960s, but from the “high-art” perspective of modern dance, this has often been dismissed as less important, even a violation of her principles.

So why focus an entire dissertation on five years of Holm’s career? First of all, I experience Holm as an uncanny presence in American modern dance. Many of her concepts and beliefs exerted a profound influence on American modern dance, particularly in higher education, but without a distinctive “technique,” her influence is hard to pin down, shadowy.⁹

Holm extended the range of modern dance out of the realm of “concert dance.” In 1937, John Martin declared that with her monumental mass work *Trend*, “Miss Holm has perhaps brought the dance nearer to the substance and heart of the theatre in its fundamental sense than it has ever been brought before in our times.”¹⁰ *Trend* was also innovative in its use of an avant-garde score by Edgar Varèse and the first playback device that enabled the use of pre-recorded music in dance performance. *Metropolitan Daily* (1938) was the first modern dance to be broadcast on television. Holm was a fervent believer in the importance of amateur dance, and sought to create a dance culture that transcended theatrical performance. Her famous Demonstration Program—a choreographed illustration of her dance theory—spread the gospel of modern dance to a wide range of audiences, particularly young people, and excited them with its clarity,

accessibility, and the infectiousness of movement, which she hoped would inspire “laypeople” to dance.

Most importantly, I see Holm as a model of the dancer as missionary. Her career and philosophy exemplify a particular approach to modern dance – the promise of a more embodied, holistic life; the quest for authentic human connection; and faith in the intuitive wisdom of the body. She insisted that the practice of dance meant more than simply preparation for theatrical performance. Dance, to her, was religion and community. I seek to describe this worldview, and to examine what happened when it was transferred to a foreign culture.

Holm was certainly not the only modern dancer to embrace this view. Nor was she the only person to promote the Wigman method in the New World. Nevertheless, she was the most influential of the German dancers who settled in the U.S. in the 1930s, and her position as Wigman’s official representative carried great responsibility and deep challenges. For these reasons, I see Holm as the epitome of a particular, critical moment in American modern dance history, when cross-cultural interchange between European and American dance cultures collided in an atmosphere of extreme nationalism, economic instability, and radical political change.

Hanya Holm and Mary Wigman

The shadow of Mary Wigman looms over most discussions of Holm, as it did in Holm’s life. Wigman was a towering figure in dance on both sides of the Atlantic in 1931, acknowledged by many as a leader of modern dance, and one of the most powerful performers on the concert stage. She promoted her work as “absolute dance,” and, indeed, she exuded complete confidence in the spirit of Nietzsche’s “superman.” Like

Isadora Duncan earlier in the century, Wigman was forceful, outspoken, and unrelenting in her vision of a new dance. Both women rejected the precedent of ballet as artificial, and instead looked to ancient and “primitive” sources for mystical truth and physical revelation. Wigman hoped to transform German culture itself and to “conquer the theater with her dance.”¹¹ Legions of young women were inspired by her example. Classicists like Lincoln Kirstein and Sol Hurok considered her a dangerous woman, because she inspired amateurs to dance.¹²

Hanya Holm was among the first group of young women to abandon her previous life and risk financial hardship and rejection by her middle-class family to join Wigman’s artistic and cultural revolution. She recalled an encounter with her family when she began touring with Wigman’s first performing group:

I remember, it was in Frankfurt, I came home, and they said, “What, she is dancing?!” And . . . a cousin of mine, he just stiffened his back and walked out the room. He didn’t want to sit together with a dancer. It [dance] had that kind of an evaluation.¹³

In comparison with most of Wigman’s first group of students, Hanya Holm was older and already a participant in counterculture and the avant-garde. At the time she joined Wigman in 1921, Holm was twenty-eight years old, recently divorced and responsible for an infant son. She held a teaching certificate from the Dalcroze Institute, and had begun teaching Dalcroze Rhythmic Gymnastics to women and children in 1915.¹⁴ She had already suffered rejection by her middle-class family when she married outside her Roman Catholic faith.

Holm married Reinhold Martin Kuntze, an Expressionist artist and sculptor, in 1917. By 1920 Kuntze was well enough known to exhibit his work at the influential Galerie Emil Richter in Dresden.¹⁵ Holm later recalled that this period of her life and marriage was an “extremely, extremely interesting period” because the arts were the first aspect of culture to revive after the devastation of the war, and her husband was “really quite in the limelight.”¹⁶ Over the next few years, though, the devaluation of the mark caused severe difficulties for them, as for all Germans, and her husband abandoned her soon after she gave birth to their son, Klaus. She explained:

[W]e had the dreadful devaluation of the mark to that extent that there was no way of seeing where something comes tomorrow. And that’s where my marriage broke up slowly because the grass was greener in another country, and he left for another country and I was there. So, I said, “All right. And I’ll keep the boy.” Then I brought him up under very difficult, very hard circumstances. Because then soon thereafter, I started with Wigman.¹⁷

Holm joined Wigman with both eyes open. She had an inquisitive, probing mind, a secure sense of herself, and a firm belief in the power of rhythm and expression to transform social life. Her ten years with Wigman in Dresden formed the foundation of her understanding of dance, and gave Holm and Wigman a “common language that united them for the rest of their lives.”¹⁸ As Wigman’s letters to Holm demonstrate, Holm remained ever loyal to Wigman, through distance, war, and heartbreak.¹⁹

Both in public and in private, Holm was largely defined by her relationship to Wigman, particularly during the period I examine in this study. I assert that this has made it difficult to understand Holm on her own terms. It has been challenging to disentangle Holm’s voice from Wigman’s; Holm’s essays and lectures were often

explanations of Wigman's method, and Wigman's art. In many ways, the story I tell in this dissertation is the story of Hanya Holm's deep loyalty to Mary Wigman, and the ways that she mediated between Wigman and her own changing situation in the United States.

Holm's American Career

Wigman sent Holm to New York in September 1931 to direct an American branch of the Wigman School, which had been established under Sol Hurok's sponsorship after the resounding success of Wigman's first American tour the previous year. This position as Wigman's American representative thrust Holm immediately into the spotlight in the New York dance community. Subsequent chapters will examine this period of Holm's career in depth.

When the Bennington College School of Dance was proposed, in 1934, as a summer institute to centralize the growing art form of American modern dance, Hanya Holm was among the "Big Four" invited by Martha Hill to be on the faculty. One possible reason for her inclusion may have been to counter competition from European summer programs, such as the one at the Wigman School, which attracted a steady stream of Americans from the late 1920s through the mid-1930s.²⁰ Certainly, though, Holm was also included because of her excellent reputation as a teacher.²¹ She was respected as a teacher of amateurs, professionals, and teachers, and had been teaching special pedagogy classes for schoolteachers at the New York Wigman School for several years prior. Physical education teachers formed the majority of the student body in the Bennington summer program, reflecting the trend to integrate modern dance into physical education for girls and young women.

At Bennington, Holm's fellow artist-teachers were to be Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, the most prominent American modern dancers. In addition to giving the choreographers a chance to teach their techniques to hundreds of students eager to learn more about modern dance, the Bennington School offered each choreographer resources, space, and time to develop new works. This enabled Holm to create her first major choreographic work in the U.S., *Trend* (1937), as well as *Dance Sonata* (1938) and *Dance of Work and Play* (1938). Her position at Bennington canonized her as one of the "four pioneers" of American modern dance.

Holm gradually developed a performing group of the advanced students at the New York Wigman School, and in 1936, when she officially broke away from the Wigman School, she founded an independent dance company. The Hanya Holm Group completed several transcontinental tours in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and they found particular support on the "gym circuit," conducting residencies sponsored by the physical education departments of colleges and universities. Sources of funding became scarce during the Second World War, and she eventually disbanded the company in the late 1940s. Over the course of her career she choreographed more than sixty concert works. She won a number of prestigious awards, including a *New York Times* award for best dance composition of the year for *Trend* (1937), a *Dance Magazine* award for best group choreography in modern dance for *Tragic Exodus* (1939), and a Scripps Award for lifetime achievement in dance (1984).

Improvisation provided the foundation for her pedagogy, and composition was a core element of her curriculum. She mentored a number of choreographers over the years, including Louise Kloepper, Jane Dudley, Nadia Chilkovsky, Mimi Kagan, Nancy

Hauser, Elizabeth Waters, Eve Gentry, Valerie Bettis, Mary Anthony, Alwin Nikolais, Murray Louis, Glen Tetley, Don Redlich, Claudia Gitelman, and Jeff Duncan. A number of other choreographers studied with her briefly, including Pearl Primus, Alvin Ailey, Rod Rodgers, and Lucinda Childs. The diversity of these artists' choreographic styles is a testament to Holm's approach, which privileged subjective experiences of universal principles of movement.

In 1941, Holm founded her own summer institute at Colorado College, where she designed a comprehensive program of technique, improvisation, choreography, and repertory. She taught her unique modern dance technique and philosophy there every summer until 1984. Even after she became one of the most sought-after Broadway choreographers, the summers in Colorado served as a link to her modern dance practice, and she often created new concert works for advanced students there. She also taught modern dance at various studios and conservatories in New York, including the Nikolais/Louis Dance Lab, The Juilliard School of Music, and the High School for the Performing Arts.

As a choreographer of musical theatre, Holm was renowned for integrating dances into the overall action and plot, rather than treating them as novelty numbers. Her work on *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *My Fair Lady* (1956), and *Camelot* (1960) made her one of the most successful and respected Broadway choreographers of her time. Crandall Diehl, who worked with her on *My Fair Lady*, points to another critical element of Holm's success: "One of Hanya's great gifts was knowing how to collaborate . . . Shows like *My Fair Lady* never happen by accident. It's that kind of creative give-and-take and flexibility that make it work."²² She was awarded a New York Drama Critics Award for

best choreographer of the year for *Kiss Me, Kate*, and was nominated for a Tony Award for *Camelot*. She also worked successfully in opera as a choreographer and director.

Holm's concert work re-entered the professional arena in New York when she choreographed four pieces—*Rota* (1975), *Jocose* (1981), *Ratatat* (1982), and *Capers* (1985)—for the Don Redlich Company. In 1985, Jennifer Dunning of the *New York Times* praised Holm's dances' "musicality and whole-hearted exploration of movement" as "exhilarating."²³ The White Oak Project, a repertory company founded by Mikhail Baryshnikov and Mark Morris, reconstructed and performed *Jocose* in 1994; Anna Kisselgoff called *Jocose* "easily the best work on the program."²⁴

Holm was an early supporter of dance notation in the United States. She brought Irma Otte-Betz and Irmgard Bartenieff to teach Labanotation at her school in the late 1930s, and it became an important component of her curriculum. The Dance Notation Bureau in New York was founded in 1940 by Ann Hutchinson Guest, Helen Priest Rogers, Janey Price, and Eve Gentry, a member of the Hanya Holm Company. In 1952, Holm arranged for her choreography for the musical *Kiss Me, Kate* to be notated, and it became the first dance score to be accepted for copyright by the Library of Congress. Today, the Dance Notation Bureau houses notated scores for Holm's Broadway choreographies *Kiss Me, Kate* (1952), *My Fair Lady* (1956), and *Where's Charley?* (1958), and her modern dances *Quartet* (1961), *Rota* (1975), *Homage to Mahler* (1976), *Jocose* (1981), *Ratatat* (1982), and *Capers* (1985).²⁵

German Modern Dance in the United States, Early 1930s

In order to understand Holm's American career during the period I examine, it is essential to understand the role of German modern dance in the U.S. At the time of

Wigman's first American tour in 1930, "modern dance" quite literally meant German modern dance—*der moderne Tanz*. As Susan Manning has asserted, it was not until John Martin used the term in his lectures at the New School in 1931-1932 that the work of Americans Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Helen Tamiris came to be called "modern dance."²⁶

My research has confirmed Manning's assertion. I surveyed all issues of *American Dancer* – a magazine with national distribution, which covered a wide range of dance forms – between 1930 and 1935. Virtually every reference to "modern dance" during this period referred to German modern dance, or someone trained in it. My research also confirmed Wigman's stature in the U.S. In May 1930, Lois Haines asserted:

Today [Wigman's] form of dance expression is a full grown concept of enormous importance, casting a decided influence upon the trend of dance art, directing it into new channels . . . Mary Wigman is, after all, the greatest prophetess of German modernism in dancing.²⁷

During this period, *American Dancer* printed numerous feature-length articles about Mary Wigman, but not one about Graham, Humphrey, or any other individual American modern dancer.²⁸ The first recognition of American modern dance appeared in a series of articles in 1935, five full years after the magazine proclaimed Wigman's profound importance.²⁹ Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, Tamiris and others who would later be called "modern dancers" had already been producing independent works in New York for several years by the time of Holm's arrival, but they had not yet attained the nationwide recognition enjoyed by Wigman.

In the late 1920s, when the styles of American dancers such as Isadora Duncan and Denishawn began to look old-fashioned, the Germans represented the avant-garde. Martha Graham's artistic mentor Louis Horst traveled to Vienna in 1925 and brought back books with photographs of Wigman and other European dancers. The Wigman influence can be seen in a photograph of Graham's piece *Désir* (1926), which included a Wigmanesque deep back bend.³⁰ Deborah Jowitt notes that "the writer of an unsigned article that appeared in the *New York Times* early in 1928 stated confidently that Graham's February concert might be considered a farewell to her old style, 'before she goes over to the new German technique.'"³¹

The influence of German modern dance can also be seen in the vehemence with which American dancers fought against it. In 1930, Graham wrote "Seeking an American Art of the Dance," an article in which she implored American dancers to break away from foreign influences and find their own, American way of creating dance.³² She was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1932 to study with Wigman in Germany, but she changed her mind: "I didn't want to go to Europe without something American so I chose Mexico as a compromise."³³ Three years later she criticized American dancers for traveling abroad to Germany "to acquire an alien manner and form."³⁴ Similarly, Doris Humphrey responded indignantly to John Martin's assertion that Mary Wigman had provided a model for American dancers; in May 1931 she urged American dancers to create a tradition of their own.³⁵ In 1936 Ted Shawn remonstrated his former pupils Graham, Humphrey, and Weidman for imitating German "dynamism, distortion, 'abstract' and 'absolute' dance."³⁶

German modern dance represented modernism itself to so many people in the American dance community at this time that any institution seeking to provide instruction in “new approaches” had to hire a German teacher. Dancer and educator Marian Van Tuyl Campbell of the University of Chicago recalled: “During the ‘30s throughout this country there was quite a trend for German dance teachers,” especially in the western states.³⁷ Despite his later criticisms of German dance, Ted Shawn had initiated this trend by hiring Margarethe Wallman to teach at the Denishawn School in 1930.³⁸ Other progressive American dance schools and institutions soon followed suit by hiring Wigman-trained teachers: the University of Wisconsin (Harald Kreutzberg, 1931), the Cornish School in Seattle (Lore Deja, 1931), the North Shore Conservatory in Chicago (Erika Thimey, 1932), Perry-Mansfield camp in Colorado (Holm, 1933), Mills College in California (Holm and Tina Flade, 1934), Bennington College in Vermont (Holm, 1934), and the 92nd Street YMHA Dance Center in New York (Holm, 1935).³⁹

Methodology

History is a story about the past, and must necessarily be partial. The past itself can never be fully recovered, and the available sources are only partial translations of actual past experience and events. I recognize that the story about Hanya Holm that I tell is not the only story that could be told, and does not represent the totality of her life or work, even of the short period of time I examine. My task was to discover forgotten aspects of the past, to translate the past for the present, and to piece together—from disparate strands—a narrative that had not yet been told.

Research Strategies

Historical research methods are often messy, as sources from the past are unpredictable. I could not always find what I sought, and I discovered unexpected treasures buried in unlikely places. The methods I used to locate my sources are almost as varied as the sources themselves. To begin, I accessed published sources such as books, articles, reviews, music recordings, films, photographs, and interviews through library catalogs, databases, published bibliographies, and thorough investigation of relevant literature. I conducted comprehensive surveys for the time period under investigation in periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *American Dancer*, and *Dance Observer* by browsing hard copies and microfilm, consulting indexes, and, later, doing keyword searches in the New York Times Historical database. Finding aids, bibliographies, online catalogs, library websites, and communication with archivists enabled me to identify relevant archival material. Personal contacts, references in published material, and even internet searches yielded pieces of information about Holm's colleagues, students, and family. (For example, Google searches unearthed tidbits of information I had not been able to find elsewhere, such as digital images of artwork by Reinhold Kuntze, Holm's husband from 1917 to 1921.)

Traces of the Past

Historian Karl Toepfer proposes that the key to understanding the early 20th century German dance culture is through the *concept* of dance, rather than dances themselves, "for the vast majority of these have left so little trace that no one can reconstruct them."⁴⁰ This is certainly true of Hanya Holm and her work. Documentation in the form of film or movement notation does not exist for any of the modern dance

choreographies she created during the period under investigation; the traces left behind include photographs; musical scores; costumes; and written descriptions by Holm, her dancers, critics, and others. While these traces may be enough to reconstruct Holm's choreographies, no one has yet undertaken that project.

In contrast, Holm did leave behind substantive documentation of her concept of dance and its purpose in modern life. Traces of her concept can be found in published and unpublished essays, lectures, notebooks, letters, written school reports and official school communications, publicity materials, school brochures, advertisements, concert programs, photographs, film/video, written interview transcripts, and recorded oral interviews.

Archival research was the single most important aspect of my methodology, because this is where I most directly accessed traces of the past. Through archives I was able to access primary, unpublished materials produced by Holm and people close to her. The most relevant and extensive source for primary material on this topic is the Hanya Holm Papers at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, which has only recently become available publicly. Other archival repositories that yielded useful sources were the Franziska Boas Collection at the Library of Congress and the Columbia University Oral History Collection. I found small, but often crucial, pieces of information in other archives such as the Katherine Litz Papers and the Paul Tillich Archives at Harvard, and the 92nd Street YMHA archives in New York.

Source Criticism

Once I located sources, I processed and analyzed them, questioning their authenticity, authorship, original purpose, perspective, and date of creation. In some cases, I translated them from German to English, and in all cases I paid close attention to tone of voice and meaning of important terminology. I used sources to corroborate each other, to resolve factual or testimonial contradictions, and to assist in dating undated sources.

I examined all sources for witting and unwitting testimony, paying attention to indications such as marginalia and handwritten notes on documents; physical attributes of documents such as the size and style of promotional materials, or the type of paper used; and the order in which notes were placed in a notebook. With recorded audio interviews, I observed intonation and the emphasis placed on certain words; with videotaped interviews, I also noted body attitudes, gestures, and interpersonal interactions. Ultimately, I was dealing with people, and it was essential that I have a sense of what those people were like, what they valued, how they interacted with each other, and so on.

I looked carefully at the holes in the evidence: what was missing, and why? Often, silences were revealing: why was something important not discussed, when it logically could have been, or should have been? I considered why the extant sources had remained: who saved them, and why?

I paid close attention to bias in the sources. In the 1920s and 1930s, modern dance was a contested site of cultural meaning. In Weimar Germany, modern dance was virtually at war with ballet. Similarly, in the U.S. in the 1930s, leftist dance battled modern dance, and then they both took on German dance. Many writers during these

periods expressed strong opinions about modern dance, its purposes, and its forms. Coursework that I took from Dr. Marion Kant helped me to better understand the ideological landscape of German dance in the 1910s – 1920s, and I further explored this with extensive reading on the period. For each source, it was imperative for me to determine who the author was, why he/she made the source, and what his/her bias may have been. Dance historian Michael Huxley has also highlighted the issue of bias in German modern dance source material. He writes:

Bias can be found in the work of writers used as primary sources and that of translators. It may be necessary to place the source in question within the context of its author's other writings in order to establish her/his world view of dance and the place of modern dance within that world view.⁴¹

For the most important sources, I consulted multiple texts by those authors and researched their backgrounds to determine their worldviews.

Conceptual Structures: Chronological and Thematic

Throughout the research, I constructed chronologies, which provided a framework through time, as well as a “home base” for factual information. I continually updated them each time a source revealed new information, and kept track of contested pieces of information and their sources. Facts, impressions, and analysis of change through time informed the chronological narratives I constructed; some of these were later integrated into my final narrative, but many were not. I organized my sources (or, most often, photocopies or transcriptions of my sources) chronologically into notebooks. This was an effective strategy, since it enabled me to clearly see progressions through time. I also created computer files on specific sub-topics, updating them with each new relevant

discovery. In these ways, I organized my information into both chronological and thematic structures.

Interpretation

Postmodernism and poststructuralism have cast doubt on the existence of pure facts, and therefore on the ability of historians to reconstruct reality. However, historians still believe they can make sense of the past through sensitive and careful readings of sources, keeping in mind the partialness of every source. Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier write, “historians are prisoners of sources that can never be made fully reliable, but if they are skilled readers of sources and always mindful of their captivity, they can make their sources yield meaningful stories about a past and our relationship to it.”⁴²

Interpretation permeates every step of a historiographical process: making sense of individual sources, determining how those sources relate to each other, and assessing the significance of one’s conclusions. Once I gained access to the Hanya Holm Papers, I felt more confident that I could determine what was most central in her philosophy, because I had more direct access to her concepts. I analyzed her writings of the early 1930s, identifying key themes, metaphors and tropes. I examined these within the context of German modern dance of the 1920s, German body culture, and other cultural trends that may have influenced her in her formative years.

I often tested out more than one interpretation, and continually checked those interpretations against the contents of my sources. Several times, new sources led me to re-evaluate my interpretations. When various strands of information, opinions, and facts fell into place like puzzle pieces, I felt confident that I had found a viable interpretation.

Language and cross-cultural differences figured prominently in the interpretive aspect of my methodology. Virtually every source I used required translation of some kind: some sources were in German; some were translated from German to English; some were written in English by native German speakers/writers; and some used language that had specific meanings for its community members (words like *Gemeinschaft*, *Reigen*, swing, print-culture, space, rhythm, primal, and *Abspannung* signified full, complex concepts). I dealt with the issue of translation between German and English in a number of overlapping ways. Though not fluent in German, I studied German language, and gained enough proficiency to translate some documents myself. At times I asked native German speakers to confirm the accuracy of my translations. Native German speakers Marion Kant and Annette Steigerwald translated other documents for me, and provided cultural insights as well.

Cross-cultural differences are central to my interpretation, for I am proposing that Holm's vision of modern dance differed greatly from those of her American contemporaries. As a result, it was essential for me to understand the original context of Holm's ideas—to understand what modern dance meant in the context of 1910s – 1920s Germany. Toward that end, I read as many sources as possible—primary and secondary, in English and in German—on that history.

A related language problem was that Hanya Holm published a number of essays in English early in her career in the United States, when she was not yet fluent in English; several individuals have reported that she used ghost-writers and/or advisors.⁴³ I have been able to identify a few of her advisors (Franziska Boas, Gerald Goode), but I do not know the full extent of their influence on Holm's writings.

Selection

My searches produced many more sources than I could possibly use. Further, many sources revealed multiple strands of information. As a result, one of my most important, and difficult, tasks was to select which pieces of information to include, and which stories to tell. Paul Hernadi asserts in a discussion of historiography that the historian determines not only “What Really Happened,” but also “What Shall Be Remembered.”⁴⁴

I made a concerted effort to not be influenced by the impressions of people who knew Hanya Holm at later points in her life. Throughout my research, I noticed that dancers who worked with her in different periods had vastly different impressions of her.⁴⁵ My goal was to understand and describe a rather short period of time, so I tried to avoid hindsight; I wanted to determine specifically what had happened during that period of time, and what Holm thought about it at the time, not in retrospect.

Other criteria I used to select which materials and narratives to include were: accuracy of the interpretation, relevance to my central question, and importance to Holm and her worldview.

Sensing the Past

Role of Imagination

Since the traces of the past are always partial and incomplete, imagination is a key element of any historiography. Dance historian Alexandra Carter has noted that the role of creativity and imagination in history is rarely acknowledged:

In fact, to be described as a creative dance historian might suggest that you are not a very good one, that you are somehow “making something up.”

But of course, a historian does actually “make things up.” The notion that historians “make up” or construct the past has long been in circulation and debates about history as “fact” or history as a construct are ongoing. But as Geertz argues in relation to anthropological writings, historiographies are also “‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’—the original meaning of *fictio*—not that they are false, unfactual.”⁴⁶

Though acts of historiography may be imaginative, they are not arbitrary. As Carter asserts, historical narratives “are also publicly accountable for they rest on reasoned argument supported by keenly researched and verifiable sources.”⁴⁷

Imagination was a key element of my interaction with the primary sources of this study, and yet I knew that my imaginings were not arbitrary, for they were intimately tied to the subject through the closeness of my sources, and I continually checked my interpretations against the sources. I also endeavored to get a sense of personalities—Holm’s and other major figures in my narrative—in order to imagine why they did what they did, or said what they said, or wrote what they wrote. I tried to imagine what it was like at the New York Wigman School in the early 1930s. Memories by former students about the smell of the studio, the kind of floor it had, the fact that it was very warm in the summer—all these gave me imaginative fodder, and added to other kinds of evidence, such as photographs and school brochures. I consulted primary materials—visual and written—about Germany in the 1910s and 1920s in order to imagine the world in which Holm lived.⁴⁸ When browsing through newspapers and magazines produced at the time, I paid attention to such details as clothing styles, the kinds of topics that were deemed news-worthy, advertisements, current events happening at the time, and so on. Those kinds of sensory, intuitive impressions, which are impossible to quantify or pin down, enabled me to better imagine the past.

Role of Experiential Knowledge

My imaginings of Holm, the time period, her classes, and her choreography were informed by many sources of knowledge, including my own experiences as a dancer. I had the opportunity to study with one of Holm's former teaching assistants, Charlene Tarver, for a number of years, so I have intimate, embodied knowledge of Holm's movement concepts. In fact, I found these so profoundly simple, effective, and rich that I have integrated Holm's and Tarver's ideas and methods into my own modern dance pedagogy.

Early on in my doctoral work, I conducted several research projects that focused on Holm's pedagogical approach and her movement concepts. The emphasis on psychological wholeness, developmental movement, and interpersonal relationship in her approach particularly fascinated me at that time. I examined students' perceptions of relationship in a Holm-inspired technique class for Dr. Karen Bond's course "Meaning in Dance"; for a conference on dance and gender, I considered how the emphasis on relationship to others in her pedagogy reflected German relational feminism.⁴⁹ In both cases, my inquiries were based on a combination of scholarly research and experiential knowledge.

Chapter 5, which describes the New York Wigman School, is the most directly related to my experiential knowledge as a dancer. However, I was continually aware of the disjunctions between the New York Wigman School curriculum in the early 1930s and my own, late-twentieth century experiences. My teacher, Charlene Tarver, had studied with Holm in the 1960s, at a time when many of Holm's students in New York were Broadway dancers. Tarver taught in a way that was extremely precise, logical, and

thorough. There was virtually no trace left of the mysticism that I knew informed Holm's work in the 1930s. When Tarver taught "circles," for example, they were precise three-dimensional pathways in space and in the body; as I will discuss further in Chapter 5, circles had a fuller meaning in Holm's classes of the 1930s.

The Study

Nature of the Study

Since I propose a new interpretation of Holm's concept of dance as a utopian mission, this is a revisionist project. I seek to add new knowledge and new interpretations to the existing history. In order to do this, I emphasize the cultural and social contexts in which Holm formed her view of dance, and examine those contexts as dynamic entities that changed through time. In that sense, my study is more akin to "new history" than to a traditional approach that views contexts such as politics and economics as separate, impermeable layers.⁵⁰ The revisionist aspect of my project also shares characteristics with other recent histories of German modernism and primitivism, which have emphasized its utopian, anti-modern impulse.⁵¹

The more deeply I delved into Holm's writings, the more I began to be haunted by the presence of German *Volkish* ideology in her ideas and those of her predecessors. While I did not seek out this controversy, I also felt that I could not ignore the presence of those ideas. This raised serious ethical considerations for me as a scholar. Ideology—as the Nazis demonstrated only too well—can have mortal consequences, and I feel it is important to examine the ideologies that continue to inform our artistic practices and social values. I have endeavored to write an honest, well-substantiated account of her

work and a critical analysis of her ideas. As a historian, I must acknowledge the politics that so deeply shaped Holm's public reception, her decisions, and her work. At the same time, I am able to respect her artistic and pedagogical work.

Following that, I find an important distinction between "legacy" and "history." As dance historian Ann Dils asserted in a panel discussion at the 2002 National Dance Education Organization conference, the discipline of dance history education has often conflated "dance legacy" with "dance history."⁵² She argued that stories told by dance educators about the lives of the canonical figures of dance history constitute "legacy," but are often the primary means through which students learn dance history. While these stories and pedagogical strategies are valuable for creating contexts, and certainly generate interest among students, I agree with Dils that dance history as a discipline and a research method needs to transcend anecdote and celebrations of charismatic figures.

Rather than focus on Holm's legacy, this study examines the history of a small slice of her career, concentrating specifically on her first five years in the United States: 1931-1936.⁵³ These years were pivotal in her migration from Germany to the U.S.—and from German dance to American dance—and I believe that understanding these important years sheds light on her entire life and work. Further, it contributes new knowledge that could change how we view modern dance in New York in the 1930s, its formative decade. With its narrow time frame, this is almost a micro-study, which has enabled me to dig deeply into these pivotal years.

Historian Norman J. Wilson proposes that one purpose of history is to "cure us of our provincialism" by illuminating the otherness of the past.⁵⁴ Throughout the research process, I have struggled with how best to describe the "otherness" of Holm's

philosophies and practices in the 1930s. My sources revealed a view of Holm that differed greatly from the assumptions about modern dance I had held previously, and I realized that one of my primary challenges must be to convey those differences to readers in a cohesive, engaging narrative grounded in historical evidence. I believe that this study will contribute to the discipline of dance history by helping to “cure us of our provincialism,” which was created by earlier, nationalist studies of American modern dance.

Delimitations

This dissertation is not intended to be a comparison of German and American modern dance. Readers familiar with American modern dance history may notice certain connections, but it is beyond the scope of this study to explicitly discuss them. Holm’s choreographies of the 1930s also receive only cursory examination, in part because they were primarily created after Holm’s official break from the Wigman School in 1936, and therefore, in my interpretation, belong to a different phase of Holm’s career. It is also beyond the scope of this study to analyze the history of German modern dance in the Weimar and Nazi periods in depth, although I do make brief references to events that are directly relevant to my interpretation of Holm.

Chapter Structure

The chapters will proceed as follows: Chapter 2 is a critical review of the literature on Hanya Holm. It features an examination of her placement in the dance history canon, and analyzes a variety of texts, from eulogistic biographies to scholarly studies. Chapter 3 explores the cultural foundations of the mission with which Holm embarked on her American adventure in 1931: German body culture, life reform, and

modern dance. Chapter 4 examines Mary Wigman's view of dance in greater depth, and illuminates her relationship to her fiercely loyal disciples, including Holm. Chapter 5 describes the opening of the New York Wigman School, and provides a detailed explanation of its curriculum and mission. Chapter 6 reveals Holm's view of "America," its problems, and her prescription to cure its ills. Chapter 7 investigates how the politicization of German dance under Nazism affected Holm in New York. Chapter 8 considers how Holm "Americanized" her dance in the latter part of the 1930s, and what it meant to her to "unearth the American spirit."

NOTES

¹ Hanya Holm in Ruth Seinfeld, "American Girls Reason Too Much, Says Dancer Who Teaches Them to Think With Their Bodies," *New York Evening Post*, 26 Sept. 1931.

² On Laban's quest to create a danced religion, see Marion Kant, "Laban's Secret Religion," *Discourses in Dance* 1, no.2 (2002): 43-62.

³ Holm in Seinfeld, "American Girls Reason Too Much."

⁴ Hanya Holm, "To Be With It," *Focus on Dance* 8 (1977): 61.

⁵ Hanya Holm, undated typescript, Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/593, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts [Hereafter JRDD, NYPL-PA].

⁶ Hanya Holm, "Vocabulary of Choreography," undated notebook page, Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/599, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁷ Inge Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft; Körper- und Tanz-kulturen in der Moderne* (München, 2000) 9.

⁸ See Tresa Randall, "Dance and Locality: Hanya Holms Suche nach einem 'Amerikanischen Geist,'" *Tanz Metropole Provinz*, ed. Yvonne Hardt and Kirsten Maar, *Jahrbuch Tanzforschung* 17 (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2007): 49 – 65.

⁹ Claudia Gitelman argues that Holm's lack of a signature movement style or codified technique has contributed to her under-recognition. (Claudia Gitelman, "Finding a Place for Hanya Holm," *Dance Chronicle* 23, no. 1 (2000): 67.)

¹⁰ John Martin, "The Dance: A Major Work; Hanya Holm Strikes Out Boldly Along New and Important Roads in 'Trend,'" *The New York Times*, 22 Aug. 1937.

¹¹ Mary Wigman, "Der Neue Künstlerische Tanz und Das Theater" (1928), "*Jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer*": *Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, ed. Hedwig Müller und Patricia Stöckemann (Anabas-Verlag, Giessen, 1993) 77 - 82. I will discuss this lecture further in Chapter 4.

¹² Harlow Robinson, *The Last Impresario: The Life, Times, and Legacy of Sol Hurok* (New York: Viking, 1994) 161.

¹³ Hanya Holm, "Experiencing and Experimenting in Three Generations of Dance" [sound cassette] (9 March 1984) Learning from Performers Series (Cambridge, MA: Modern Language Center, Harvard University, 1984).

¹⁴ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/296, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁵ Galerie Saxonia München has a poster by Kuntze, created for an exhibition of his sculptures at Galerie Emil Richter, Dresden, ca. 1920: http://www.saxonia.com/cgi-bin/dynfs.pl?Kuenstler_liste=/galerie/001153.htm, last accessed 30 May 2008.

¹⁶ Tobi Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm" (1975), MGZMT 5-1007, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁷ Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm." I have not been able to determine how long Kuntze lived abroad, or where he went.

¹⁸ Hedwig Müller, "Introduction: A Matter of Loyalty—Hanya Holm and Mary Wigman," *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*, trans. Shelley Frisch, ed. Claudia Gitelman (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) xxv.

¹⁹ Claudia Gitelman, ed., *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

²⁰ Gitelman, *Liebe Hanya*, 36.

²¹ Reminiscences of Louise Kloepper (1980), on pages 29 and 51-52, Columbia University Oral History Research Office Collection [Hereafter CUOHROC]. A 1934 letter written by Martha Wilcox – who would later become an important Holm supporter – confirms that Holm was perceived as an educator, not a choreographer, at that time. Wilcox advised Litz to study with Humphrey-Weidman instead of Holm, writing: "you'd better stick to Doris & Charles and not try to mix their work with the Wigman—wait until you are older & perhaps want to teach but as long as you want to dance in a group it's better to work with them." (Martha Wilcox, letter to Katherine Litz, March 13, 1934, Katherine Litz Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection.)

²² Crandall Diehl in Colloquium, "Hanya Holm: From Concert to Broadway Stage," Hanya Holm: The Life and Legacy, *The Journal for Stage Directors & Choreographers* 7, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1993): 47.

²³ Jennifer Dunning, "Dance: Redlich Group Honors Hanya Holm," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1985.

²⁴ Anna Kisselgoff, "Baryshnikov Introduces Masters and Novices," *The New York Times*, March 5, 1994.

²⁵ *Notated Theatrical Dances; A Listing of Theatrical Dance Scores Housed at the Dance Notation Bureau* (1985, rev. 2007), www.dancenotation.org.

²⁶ Susan Manning, *Modern Dance/Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) xiii.

²⁷ Lois Haines, "The Influence of the Wigman Dance Revolt," *The American Dancer* (May 1930) 10.

²⁸ Articles about Mary Wigman, or reviews of her performances, appeared in May 1930, January 1931, January 1932, March 1932, August 1932, December 1932, and April 1933.

²⁹ *The American Dancer*, March 1935, April 1935, and August 1935.

³⁰ See photograph in Martha Graham, *Blood Memory: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 115.

³¹ Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, 168.

³² Martha Graham, "Seeking an American Art of the Dance," *Revolt in the Arts*, ed. Oliver M. Saylor (New York; Brentanos, 1930) 253.

³³ Graham, *Blood Memory* 143.

³⁴ Martha Graham, "The American Dance," *Modern Dance*, ed. Virginia Stewart and Merle Armitage (New York: E. Weyhe, 1935): 103.

³⁵ Doris Humphrey, "What Dancers Think about the German Dance," *Dance* (May 1931): 14.

³⁶ Ted Shawn, "Influence of Germany upon the American Dance," *Boston Herald* (10 May 1936).

³⁷ Reminiscences of Marian Van Tuyl Campbell (1979), on page 57, CUOHROC.

³⁸ Susan Manning, "Ausdruckstanz Across the Atlantic," unpublished paper given at the Centre National de la Danse, 2003. I thank Susan for sharing this manuscript with me.

³⁹ Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, 51; Gitelman, ed., *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*, 27; and Dianne Patricia Hunt, *Erika Thimey: A Life of Dance, A Dance of Life* (Washington, DC: Erika Thimey Dance & Theater Company, 1999).

⁴⁰ Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 3.

⁴¹ Huxley, "European Early Modern Dance," *Dance History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., ed. Janet Adshead-Lansdale and June Layson (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 156.

⁴² Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001) 3.

⁴³ Franziska Boas Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Reminiscences of Nancy Hauser (1982) on page 27, CUOHROC.

⁴⁴ Paul Hernadi, "Clio's Cousins: Historiography as Translation, Fiction, and Criticism," *New Literary History* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 248.

⁴⁵ For some examples of students' impressions of Holm, see: Claudia Gitelman, *Dancing with Principle: Hanya Holm in Colorado, 1941-1983* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2001).

⁴⁶ Alexandra Carter, "Practicing Dance History: Reflections on the Shared Processes of Dance Historians and Dance Makers," *Re-Thinking Practice and Theory*; International Symposium on Dance Research, Society of Dance History Scholars and Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings (Paris: Centre National de la Danse, 2007) 127.

⁴⁷ Alexandra Carter, "Making History: A General Introduction," *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.

⁴⁸ Some important resources I consulted include: Anthony McElligott, *The German Urban Experience 1900-1945: Modernity and Crisis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); images reproduced in Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890-1930* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁴⁹ Tresa Randall, "Meet the Other Body: An Inquiry into Dancers' Experiences of Relationship and Connection," unpublished manuscript, 2002; Tresa Randall, "Connected Knowing and Social Bodies in the Choreography of Hanya Holm," Paper presented at the Female "Bodies" of Knowledge Symposium, Temple University, Philadelphia, April 2002.

⁵⁰ Layson, "Historical Perspectives in the Study of Dance," 12-13.

⁵¹ Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft; Körper- und Tanz-kulturen in der Moderne*; Barbara Drygulski Wright, "Sublime Ambition: Art, Politics and Ethical Idealism in the Cultural Journals of German Expressionism," *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 82-112; David F. Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Martin Green, *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins; Ascona, 1900 – 1920* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986); David Pan, *Primitive Renaissance: Rethinking German Expressionism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

⁵² Thomas K. Hagood, Mary Alice Brennan, Ann Dils, and Luke Kahlich, "Legacy and Graduate Education in Dance: What's Been 'Left'? What Are We Leaving?" *Dance, A Living Legacy of Building Bridges*, National Dance Education Organization conference, Providence, RI, 2002.

⁵³ On the distinction between legacy, or heritage, and history, see also: David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999) 139.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

Introduction

This review of literature analyzes a range of materials that contribute to the body of literature on Hanya Holm. Since there are very few scholarly examinations that place Holm at the center of their analysis, I have broadened the scope of this review to consider materials such as edited collections of primary resources and scholarly books and articles on American modern dance, which include some discussion of Holm's role within that context. Many of the materials I review blur the line between primary and secondary sources, since virtually all writers on Holm were previously her students, and they draw on their own subject positions as first-hand participant-observers. This dissertation represents the first full-length, critical study of Holm's work in the early 1930s, the formative decade of American modern dance.

Despite Holm's reputation as one of the "four pioneers" of American modern dance, she is almost always given a less prominent place than her contemporaries Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. This review therefore begins with a brief examination of Holm within the modern dance canonical literature. With this foundation, I then discuss biographies of Holm; edited collections of resources on Holm; recent scholarly studies of Holm; recent scholarly studies of German and American modern dance; and recent scholarly studies of American modern dance that include some discussion of Holm.

Hanya Holm and the Canon

Since the 1930s, Hanya Holm's place in the literature on modern dance history has vacillated from central to peripheral, often depending on the explanatory model used. Whether or not Holm is accorded a prominent place in a dance historical study is often related to the importance given by the author to the "Americanness" of modern dance.

The rhetorical tradition of associating the spirit of modern dance with the spirit of American freedom and youth dates back to the earliest days of the art form with Isadora Duncan at the turn of the twentieth century. Duncan's work and her vision of a new dance were catalysts of modern dance, and her American identity is often invoked when the Americanness of modern dance is emphasized, even though Duncan spent the majority of her professional life in Europe, and arguably had a more direct impact on the development of modern dance in Central Europe than in the United States.

The formative decade of American modern dance—the 1930s—was a period of intense nationalism, in part a reaction to the very real and potent influence of European (specifically German) modern dance on American modern dance, as well as a reaction to the mood of the times. This nationalism in modern dance had significant consequences for Hanya Holm, and this is reflected in her frequent omission from the canon.

The Influence of John Martin

In her study of Mary Wigman, *Ecstasy and the Demon* (1993/2006), Susan Manning investigated the "Americanization" of German dance through Holm, and the omission of Wigman from much American dance history. She pointed out that the tendency to suppress evidence of German influence in favor of promoting the Americanness of modern dance began with the writings of John Martin, the highly

influential dance critic for the *New York Times* from 1927-1962 and early champion of modern dance.¹

In the early 1930s Martin celebrated Wigman as an inspiration for the less developed American dance scene, but his writings of the late 1930s downplayed the German influence. In *The Modern Dance* (1933), a collection of lectures Martin gave at the New School in New York in 1931-1932, he listed Graham, Humphrey, Helen Tamiris, Rudolf Laban, and Mary Wigman as the leading dancers.² Three years later, Martin's *America Dancing* (1936) invoked Isadora Duncan's "vision of America dancing" and downplayed the German influence. Martin mentioned Holm as a leader of American modern dance, but he specifically celebrated her Americanization, arguing that her sensitivity to the "American scene" made Wigman's methods "amenable to the American temperament."³ In this way, he was able to reinforce the idea that modern dance was uniquely American. By 1939, Martin shifted strategies again in his book *Introduction to the Dance*; as Manning describes it,

[Martin] differentiated between the Germanness that had infused Wigman's dancing and the universal applicability of her methods. Acknowledging Wigman's essential Germanness allowed him to posit the essential Americanness of the modern dance created by Graham, Humphrey, and Holm.⁴

What is especially relevant to the present discussion of Holm is that it was her "Americanization" that served as the lynchpin in this narrative. If she had remained symbolically "German" while influencing modern dance in America, it would have disrupted the nationalist narrative.

Bennington and the Four Pioneers

Stressing Holm's Americanization was especially important because of her position as one of the "Big Four"—the four dance teacher/choreographers who formed the faculty at the germinal Bennington College Summer School of the Dance, founded in 1934. Holm was invited by Martha Hill, along with Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, to become the faculty for what would become the most influential modern dance summer program. (The American Dance Festival, held each year at Duke University in North Carolina, is a direct descendant of the Bennington school.) The Bennington summer program played an essential role in establishing and institutionalizing American modern dance; it was there that the "Big Four" produced many of their most innovative works, refined their techniques, and spread their ideas to students from across the country.⁵ From 1934 onwards, the idea of the "Big Four" was used as an explanatory model to describe the development of modern dance, and whenever this trope is used, Holm is assured a place in the discussion. In 1965, the term "Big Four" was modified to "four pioneers" by a film of the same title.⁶

The trope of the four pioneers has served to structure a number of subsequent histories, such as *The Vision of Modern Dance* (1979/1998), a collection of artist manifestos by leaders of modern dance that has been widely used in undergraduate dance history courses for several decades.⁷ While most of the included authors present their philosophies and purposes as artists, the entry by Holm is a collection of pithy statements she made while teaching at her summer program at Colorado College.⁸ Her student, K. Wright Dunkley, had recorded them, and Walter Sorell included them as a chapter in his biography of Holm. Holm's contribution to *The Vision of Modern Dance*, therefore,

reinforces her reputation as a teacher, but does not present her artistic worldview or aims in much depth.

The Family Tree

The other common explanatory model used by modern dance historians that gives Holm pride of place, is the “family tree” approach. In *The Complete Book of Modern Dance* (1976), for example, Don McDonagh presents Holm, like her contemporaries, as the founder of an “extended choreographic family.”⁹ He lists Holm’s “offspring”: Mary Anthony, Valerie Bettis, Don Redlich, Glen Tetley, and Alwin Nikolais, who then spawned Phillis Lamhut, Murray Louis, Pilobolus, and others.

Similarly, in *Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief* (1965), influential dance historian Selma Jeanne Cohen uses a generational approach, but curiously neglects to include Holm.¹⁰ The book features seven essays by “second-generation” dancers José Limón, Anna Sokolow, Erick Hawkins, Donald McKayle, Alwin Nikolais, Pauline Koner, and Paul Taylor. Cohen provides historical context for understanding these artists in her introduction, which describes the influence of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. The omission of Holm from the text is therefore especially strange, since Nikolais was her protégé.

Cohen’s manuscript for this book, held in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, raises even more questions about Holm’s location in the modern dance canon. Cohen had originally invited Holm to write an essay, and correspondence between them indicates that Holm did not revise the manuscript sufficiently and in time for inclusion.¹¹ If Holm’s essay had been included, though, it would have disrupted the structure of the text by figuring her as a “second generation” artist. Holm was certainly “second

generation” in relation to Wigman, but she was a contemporary of Graham and Humphrey, the “first generation” American modern dancers. Would Cohen have discussed Wigman in the introduction, if Holm’s essay had been included? As it stands, the omission of any discussion of Holm as Nikolais’ mentor perpetuates Holm’s shadowy presence in modern dance history.

Whenever these two explanatory models—the four pioneers and the family tree—are not used, Holm fades even farther from view. For example, Joseph Mazo mentioned Holm only in passing in *Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America* (1977), and did not devote a full chapter to her as he does to the other modern dance pioneers.¹² Jack Anderson’s *Dance* (1974) and Marcia B. Siegel’s *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (1979) also contain only brief references to Holm.¹³ All of these texts emphasize the Americanness of modern dance, and omit discussion of Wigman and German modern dance’s profound influence on American modern dance in the 1930s.

Acknowledging the Influence of German Modern Dance

The tendency to omit Holm, Wigman, and any reference to German influence from narratives of American modern dance began to be overturned in the late 1970s and 1980s by dance writers such as Elizabeth Kendall (1979) and Deborah Jowitt (1988).¹⁴ Kendall and Jowitt briefly acknowledged German *Ausdruckstanz* as a precedent for American modern dance, and discussed the influential late 1920s and early 1930s performances in America of German dancers such as Harald Kreutzberg, Tilly Losch, Yvonne Georgi, Margarethe Wallmann, and Mary Wigman. Kendall, in fact, particularly

pointed out the connection of German modern dance to body culture that I emphasize in this dissertation. She wrote:

The Germans became theater dancers not because they were speaking through any known theatrical genre, but because each made himself, through fanatical self-discipline and mastery of the body, a precise performing instrument worthy of an audience. German dance substituted a cult of supreme self-discipline for theatrical tradition; it put forth a philosophy of the Physical distilled until it became the Spiritual.¹⁵

However, it was not until Manning's publication of her study on Mary Wigman, *Ecstasy and the Demon* (1993), with its final chapter "Mary Wigman and American Dance," that this history was more fully investigated in the English-language dance history literature. Soon after, Isa Partsch-Bergsohn's book *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences* (1994) and Ramsay Burt's *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (1998) also traced out connections between the two modern dance communities across the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁶ I will discuss these texts more fully below.

Biographical Material

Biographies of Holm

The only book-length biography of Hanya Holm—written by Walter Sorell in 1969 while Holm was still alive—is highly eulogistic, and relies more on interviews than on documentary evidence.¹⁷ Sorell organizes *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist* around three stages in Holm's career: "Early Years" on Holm's training in the Dalcroze method and with Mary Wigman; "A New World" on her modern dance teaching and

choreography in the United States, especially the 1930s and 1940s; and “Hanya’s Lyric Theater” on her career in musical theater and opera. He also includes a chapter on her “Principles and Viewpoints,” a short “Vignette of Her Personality,” a chronological list of her choreography, a list of her essays, and a list of honors.

Sorell consults a range of sources: extensive interviews with Holm; interviews with Walter Terry, Alwin Nikolais, Juana de Laban, Mary Wigman, Valerie Bettis, Don Redlich, and Glen Tetley; newspaper reviews of Holm’s choreography by John Martin and other (often unnamed) critics; and a transcript of Holm’s comments while teaching in Colorado Springs in the summer of 1964, prepared by K. Wright Dunkley. In his introduction, Sorell affirms the personal nature of this book. He asserts that the biographer must have an “inner eye that can see the human being’s expression that is truly real because it is intangible, the face hidden in its own mystery.”¹⁸ This passage reveals much about Sorell’s writing style, his approach, and the strengths and weaknesses of this biography.

Sorell, like Holm, was highly philosophical, and his words are both obtuse and inspired. He proposes that personality and truth transcend everyday, mundane reality, and as a result his text remains largely in a philosophical and idealistic realm. At times, he quotes Holm directly, and at other times he paraphrases her. This strategy gives the reader a rich sense of Holm’s worldview, but also makes it hard to disentangle their two voices. It is frequently impossible to know which assertions have come from Holm herself, and which are Sorell’s interpretations. Despite these issues, Sorell’s biography provides unique information on Holm’s life and passionate, engaging insights into her worldview. Above all else, this text hints toward the documentary research that must still

be done in order to have a more complete record of Holm's life and her unique contribution to dance.

Claudia Gitelman, one of Holm's former teaching assistants and a former dancer with the Alwin Nikolais Company, has written one book, edited another, and written several research articles and conference papers on Holm. Her studies are accurate, well researched, and provide a strong foundation for further research on Holm. While she has not undertaken a comprehensive biography, many of her publications provide biographical syntheses. One article in particular, "Finding a Place for Hanya Holm" (2000), is largely biographical.¹⁹ Gitelman calls for a recognition of Holm's importance to the history of theatre dance in America. She hypothesizes that Holm's immigrant background may have facilitated her fluidity across genres (modern dance, musical theater, opera) by making her flexible and open to change. Further, Gitelman suggests that Holm's lack of a signature style—her movement was always based on the needs of each unique work, and not on a specific vocabulary—has been interpreted by some observers as a lack of vision, contributing to under-recognition.

Gitelman's narrative describes select formative experiences in Holm's life and career, including her training in the Dalcroze method and with Mary Wigman; the 1936 debut of her company; and the establishment of her summer program at Colorado College in 1941. She proposes explanations for Holm's actions, including her decision to immigrate to the United States in 1931. She also suggests reasons for Holm's success as both a concert dance choreographer and a choreographer for Broadway musicals. Overall, Gitelman's narrative works well as an overview of Holm's career, and leaves considerable room for more in-depth research on specific topics.

Edited Collections of Resources

Much of the literature on Holm consists of eulogistic remembrances by former students that could be more properly considered “legacy” than “history.” These sources are valuable as first-hand accounts of Holm as an artist, educator, and mentor, and sometimes offer crucial pieces of information. However, as memoirs, their distance in time from the period I am examining limits their relevance and reliability.

A monograph edited by Marilyn Cristofori, *Hanya Holm: A Pioneer in American Dance* (1992), contains a number of primary and secondary sources.²⁰ These include memoirs by former students, including Alwin Nikolais, Eve Gentry, Mary Anthony, Glen Tetley, and Margery J. Turner, as well as a chronological list of choreographic works, photograph reproductions from the 1930s to the 1980s, reproductions of concert programs including Holm’s masterwork *Trend*, and a newspaper review from the 1936 debut of Holm’s first company. A brief introduction by Cristofori provides an overview of Holm’s life and career, but little analysis of her work or philosophies. Cristofori has made a substantial contribution to the literature on Holm by collecting and curating the essential primary sources contained in this monograph and in her video *Hanya: portrait of a dance pioneer* (1988), which features interviews with Holm, Nikolais, Gentry, and others, and short film clips of Holm and her dancers.

The March 1993 issue of the periodical *Ballett International*, compiled to honor Holm’s life and career, appeared after her death in 1992.²¹ Like Cristofori’s monograph, this publication contains diverse kinds of materials that could be classified as both primary and secondary. It contains an article by Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, a remembrance by

Murray Louis, and a published transcript of an interview with Holm by Susan Manning, conducted while Manning was researching Mary Wigman.

In this collection, Isa Partsch-Bergsohn's article "Hanya Holm: A Missing Link Between German and American Dance" provides historical analysis, describing Holm's career, especially the 1930s and 1940s.²² Partsch-Bergsohn characterizes Holm as combining the best of the old and new worlds: combining the discipline and profundity of thought of her European upbringing with the vigorousness and newness of America. She asserts that Holm objectified and abstracted Wigman's more mystical and expressionistic approach after immigrating to the United States. Further, she suggests that Holm planted the seeds of the Laban-Wigman tradition in American soil, where it is now more alive than in Germany.

Similarly, a 1993 issue of *The Journal for Stage Directors and Choreographers*, entitled "Hanya Holm: The Life and Legacy," combines valuable memoirs, primary sources, and some scholarly analysis.²³ Reminiscences in the volume include "Company Stories" by Mimi Kagan, Louise Kloepper, Alfred Brooks, Carolyn Brooks, and Eve Gentry; a portfolio of photographs of *Trend* (1937) by Barbara Morgan; an excerpt of Holm's philosophical statements, reprinted from *The Vision of Modern Dance*; and remembrances by students Joan Karlen and Susan Osberg. Scholarly analyses include an article by Marilyn Cristofori; a colloquium on Holm's Broadway work with Crandall Diehl, Murray Gitlin, Don Redlich, Marcia B. Siegel, and Harry Woolever; a reprint of the Chronology of Works edited by Marilyn Cristofori for *Hanya Holm: A Pioneer in American Dance* (1992); and a bibliography compiled by Andrea Sferes. Marilyn Cristofori's introduction provides another comprehensive narrative of Holm's life and

career, but little analysis. Andrea Sferes' bibliography of primary and secondary sources is extensive, organized into topics such as "Concert Dance," "The Broadway Years," "Teaching Philosophy," "Technique, Choreography, and Modern Dance," "Mary Wigman," "General Works on Hanya Holm," and "Videotapes."

The book *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm* (2003), compiled and edited by Claudia Gitelman, gathers together essential primary sources—translations of Wigman's letters to Holm—along with contextual and biographical information in the form of annotations and chapter introductions.²⁴ *Liebe Hanya* reveals important biographical details through careful research and engaging narratives, which is particularly useful, considering the lack of a comprehensive biography in English of either Wigman or Holm.²⁵ The letters span the years 1920 to 1971, and are especially remarkable for displaying "Wigman's unguarded commentary on her work and personal affairs" and for demonstrating the strength of the personal and professional bond between the two women.²⁶ Gitelman assembled a team of translators—Marianne Forster, Catherine T. Klinger, Shelley Frisch, and Joanna Ratych—to decipher Wigman's gothic handwriting and translate the letters into English. Wigman's biographer Hedwig Müller wrote an introduction to the book, which provides the context for understanding Wigman's pedagogical practices and the origin of Wigman and Holm's shared values.

As Gitelman recounts in her "Editorial Note," this book began after Holm's death in 1992, when the letters were found among her papers. Gitelman has interlaced two sets of letters—found in different locations in Holm's house—in order to present a seamless chronology. This is an incomplete record of Wigman's correspondence to Holm, with large gaps in time between some of the letters; there is evidence that additional letters

have not been found.²⁷ Gitelman has organized the letters—146 in all—into chronological and geographical clusters. Each cluster is introduced with an overview of its contents, and most letters are given annotations identifying people mentioned in the letters and providing historical, social, and biographical information. Gitelman's annotations and introductions are concise and informative, answering many of the questions raised by the letters themselves, or providing information that enhances the reader's understanding of their contents.

In addition to the letters, introductions, and annotations, Gitelman has included three appendixes. The first appendix contains translations of letters from Wigman and Holm to their student and assistant teacher, Louise Kloepper; the second contains letters from Wigman to her student Pola Nirenska; and the third contains summaries of letters from Johann Georg Benkert to Holm. This material serves to clarify and highlight certain stories contained within (or implied by) the letters by Wigman, specifically the story of the New York Wigman School in its ambitious early days; the story of Wigman's suffering in the immediate postwar period and her difficulties in obtaining a visa to teach in the U.S. in 1951; and the story of the love triangle between Wigman, Holm, and Hanns Benkert.

Since this collection of letters represents only Wigman's side of the correspondence (Holm's letters have not been found), we only hear Wigman's voice directly in these pages. Nevertheless, Gitelman has succeeded in filling out Holm's side of the story so well that in the end, *Liebe Hanya* is as much about Holm as it is about Wigman. In fact, Gitelman does this job almost too well—at times the annotations reveal a bias of looking at Wigman through Holm and an American perspective, and I found

myself wanting more information on Wigman's life and career, and on the German social and political contexts in which she wrote. Only the English translations—not the German originals—have been included, making access to Wigman's own words more remote. Many of Gitelman's references for German contextual information list only her discussions with Marianne Forster, rather than actual sources. Wigman had a highly philosophical approach to dance and its role in modern society, but the origins of her philosophies in German thought are mentioned only briefly. Gitelman makes reference to Wigman's "strong connection to a collective tradition of German cultural consciousness," but she does not provide adequate tools to understand it or relate it to Wigman's life choices.²⁸

An earlier article for *Dance Chronicle*, "Dance, Business, and Politics: Letters from Mary Wigman to Hanya Holm, 1930-1971" (1997), provides a preview of *Liebe Hanya*, with translations by Marianne Forster and commentary by Claudia Gitelman on a small collection of Wigman's letters to Holm.²⁹ As in the book, Gitelman provides an overall description of the letters and legal contracts found in Holm's home after her death, along with excerpts from a few letters and reproductions of several photographs and school brochures.

Gitelman places the documents in historical context by discussing the arrangements for the New York Wigman School, details about Wigman's U. S. tours, information on people mentioned in the letters, financial issues, descriptions of the school curriculum, and other relevant biographical details on each woman. She also describes the 1935 editorial by Edna Ocko that called for all Americans to break away from Wigman, whose complicity with the Nazi regime had been detailed in the radical New

York press. Based on the letters, Gitelman draws conclusions about how much Holm did not reveal her difficulties to Wigman at this time. These letters complicate the story about the 1936 name change of the school that Holm had told to Walter Sorell when he was writing *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*. Gitelman notes that the letters reveal Holm and especially Wigman as astute businesswomen. They also hint at problems between Holm and her first assistant, Fe Alf, as well as numerous difficulties encountered by Holm in the first few years of the New York school.

Recent Scholarship

Scholarly Studies of Holm

Gitelman's *Dancing With Principle: Hanya Holm in Colorado, 1941-1983* (2001) addresses a significant gap in dance history knowledge of an important institution, the Colorado College/Hanya Holm Summer School of the Dance in Colorado Springs.³⁰ Gitelman creates a narrative of Holm's relationship with Colorado—as a state in the Mountain West and a symbol of a certain Americanness—as well as with Colorado College in particular. She argues for the uniqueness of Holm's summer program in Colorado, emanating from one master teacher and a single dance theory rather than a collection of master teachers. In her summer program, Holm offered a comprehensive curriculum with technique, composition, music, and performance opportunities.

To create this narrative of Holm's relationship with Colorado over four decades, Gitelman draws on sources such as Holm's own papers, including concert programs, photographs, correspondence, notes on students, and plans for productions; material from Colorado College, including class rosters, brochures, and pertinent college publications;

press clippings from Holm's scrapbooks at the New York Public Library Dance Collection; and interviews with college administrators, Holm's colleagues, and at least one student from each year of the program. *Dancing With Principle* proceeds chronologically, grouping chapters by significant changes in the nature of the program or significant social/historical changes in the United States such as World War II and the dance boom of the 1960s and 1970s. Gitelman also includes two appendixes: the first with student rosters for each year, and the second with program information for Holm's annual concert at the end of the summer.

The book is clearly organized, with evidence integrated fluidly into the narrative, making it an accessible text. However, the chronological organization and sheer amount of anecdotal evidence from former students is at times difficult to wade through, and overall the book lacks broader conclusions that tie the evidence together. Most of Gitelman's analysis is embedded in the narrative.

Dancing With Principle is valuable to this dissertation research on several levels. Colorado was central to Holm's creation of an American identity, as I will discuss in Chapter 8. Further, Gitelman's descriptions of Holm's teaching methods and philosophies, and how they changed between 1941 and 1983, provide material for comparison with her approaches in the 1930s.

An article for *Dance Research Journal* by Mary Anne Santos Newhall, "Uniform Bodies: Mass Movement and Modern Totalitarianism" (2002), is concerned with Wigman's influence on American dance, specifically on the work of Holm dancer Eve Gentry.³¹ In order to trace a lineage of movement ideas from Wigman to Holm to Gentry, Newhall discusses three choreographic works—Wigman's *Totenmal* (1930),

Holm's *Trend* (1937), and Gentry's *Tenant of the Street* (1938)—and provides biographical and anecdotal evidence on each dancer's career. She identifies characteristic elements shared by the three dance artists, such as a quest for artistic freedom, an “idealized return to the essential” in primitive cultures, the conscious use of space in dance, the establishment of a relationship between the individual dancer and the surrounding universe, and improvisational methods.

Newhall begins from the premise that humans have an instinctive need to join together with others in rhythmic movement. She connects mass movement practices with ritual and the desire for a new, modern spiritual expression. She asserts that there is a conflict between totalitarian ideologies and the emphatic individualism of the modern artist, and, further, that modern dance was absorbed by the totalitarian ideologies of both right and left. Newhall describes the artist as a professional shaman, with specialized knowledge capable of bringing people together in space and time.

A strength of this article is that Newhall has a deep and personal understanding of these artists—she has performed reconstructions of Gentry's *Tenant of the Street* and Wigman's *Hexentanz*—and provides a rich and nuanced characterization of the artist-dancer as shaman. However, this intimacy also seems to limit her ability to question the implications of this belief system. She writes from the perspective of a disciple arguing for greater understanding of her mentors, rather than as a historian.

I assert that this orientation presents problems when she attempts to analyze these artists in relation to politics. She uses words like “co-existence” and “in tandem” to gloss over any connection between mass dance and totalitarian ideologies, even though she suggests such a relationship in her title. Newhall never defines “mass movement,” and

uses this term interchangeably with “mass dance,” “choric dance,” “movement choirs,” and even “group dance.” The history of German dance in the early twentieth century demonstrates that these were distinct, if at times overlapping, concepts.

In addition, Newhall’s analysis does not compare differences and similarities through time. She does not discuss how the use of mass dance by Gentry’s leftist American colleagues in the New Dance Group differed from Wigman’s use of mass dance in *Totenmal* or Holm’s use of mass dance in *Trend*. In fact, the many differences between the three figures and the three choreographic works under discussion are left out of Newhall’s narrative. Her purpose is to demonstrate likenesses between the three.

Methodologically, Newhall depends more heavily on interviews than on written documents for her primary sources. Interviewees include dancers who worked with Holm in the 1930s—Mary Anthony, Jane Dudley, Eve Gentry, Marva Spelman, and Becky Stein—as well as Sophie Maslow (dancer with Martha Graham and member of the New Dance Group) and Lloyd Morgan (son of photographer Barbara Morgan). These original interviews have certainly uncovered new, valuable information. However, the interviewees represent a specific contingency—professionals in the modern dance community—a limitation the author never acknowledges. Other kinds of primary sources are largely not consulted, and even Holm’s published writing is cited from secondary sources, rather than the originals. In the case of Holm’s 1935 article “The German Dance in the American Scene,” Newhall cites only the paragraph reproduced in *The Mary Wigman Book* (1973), not the original full article, which gives much more information about Holm’s position in the American modern dance community.

Newhall does not acknowledge the work done by other scholars regarding Holm and Wigman: in her discussion of the Wigman fascism controversy of 1936, Newhall does not cite Manning (1993), who has described this chain of events in depth, nor Gitelman (1997), whose article on the Holm-Wigman letters reveals new information about the name change of the school in New York.

Despite these limitations, this article is valuable on several levels. Newhall clearly connects Holm to the leftist American dancers, such as those who formed the New Dance Group while studying with Holm at the New York Wigman School in the early 1930s, and insightfully analyzes the importance of space in the German modern dance tradition. She raises—but does not answer—the question of how *Ausdruckstanz* was Americanized through the work of Holm and Gentry. Though Newhall does not place these artists in sufficient historical contexts, this article is an evocative demonstration of Wigman, Holm, and Gentry’s shared mission: to bring ritual back into modern life, and reinvigorate the body of individuals and the collective bodies of nations.

Susan Manning’s *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman* (1993) is of central importance to this dissertation for both its final chapter on Wigman and American dance and its analysis of the work of Holm’s mentor between 1914 and 1942. In this study, Manning examines Mary Wigman’s choreography through the lenses of feminism and nationalism, and relates these contexts to Wigman’s approach to dance modernism by combining “ideological critique” with more traditional dance historical methods. She argues that Wigman’s solo debut in 1914 marked a “point of ideological complication” in the development of modern dance by presenting the dancer as a dynamic entity rather than a specific persona defined by her

gender or nationality.³² In contrast, she finds that Wigman's group works of the Nazi period celebrated certain aspects of femaleness and Germanness as defined by National Socialism, but that they were still "ideologically complicated" and in subtle ways continued to resist domination by the state.

Manning draws on an impressive array of primary source documents, including film clips, scenarios, memoirs, reviews, articles and books by authors like Rudolf Bach and Rudolf Lämmel as well as by dancers and choreographers, photographs, programs, and publicity brochures from the Wigman School. She cites interviews with Wigman's former students, conducted by herself and others, to describe Wigman's choreographic work and artistic concerns. Secondary sources include Hedwig Müller's biography of Wigman, lecture-demonstrations and performances by former Wigman students, and books and articles by Gerhard Schumann, Walter Sorell, and others. Contextual and theoretical sources include Claudia Koonz's study of the women's movement in Weimar and Nazi Germany; George Mosse's work on nationalism and sexuality; Benedict Anderson's concept of nationalism as an "imagined community;" Raymond Williams' "sociology of culture;" feminist theories of the male gaze as applied to dance and theater by Ann Daly and Sue-Ellen Case; and numerous studies of social conditions and art and theater movements of the Weimar Republic.

Manning places Wigman's work within cultural and historical contexts such as modernist and avant-garde trends in the arts, political and social upheaval in Germany, changing roles for women, and the development of National Socialism. She describes Wigman's concept of Absolute Dance and, later, her reactions to Nazi demands. Curiously, Manning does not examine the importance of Nietzschean thought to

Wigman's worldview. She discusses the central role "ecstasy" played in Wigman's worldview, but does not explicitly acknowledge its connection to Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian.

Manning theorizes Wigman's representational strategy, which she calls *Gestalt im Raum*, using Wigman's choreographic and pedagogical strategies as evidence, and concludes that Wigman's dances were feminist because they subverted the eroticization of the female performer. Other sources of evidence include details of Wigman's training with Emile Jaques Dalcroze and Rudolf Laban and her subsequent innovations in developing her own improvisational method; oral histories with her students; descriptions of her classroom exercises; and descriptions of her choreography. By comparing and contrasting Wigman's work with the work of her contemporaries, Manning describes the differences between Wigman's and Laban's uses of masks, and different approaches to festival productions by Wigman, Laban, Dalcroze, Adolphe Appia, and, later, fascist productions like the film *Olympic Youth* [1936]. She uses this evidence to make claims about the feminism of Wigman's early works by tracing the development of Wigman's style with close attention to gender representation.

Manning's chapter on Wigman's reception in America in the early 1930s has, in several ways, provided a jumping-off point for this dissertation. As mentioned above, Manning examines how American modern dance historiography was constructed from the 1930s onwards in ways that elided the influence of German dance generally and Mary Wigman specifically, and she asserts that the Americanization of Holm contributed to this narrative. Manning also provides a preliminary analysis of some of the ways that Holm altered the Wigman methods while she was the director of the New York Wigman

School between 1931 and 1936. However, Manning does not discuss the implications for Holm's career as much as for Wigman's. Further, I will argue in subsequent chapters that Manning has left out some crucial aspects of Wigman and Holm's work and worldview that must be considered. In a sense, my dissertation begins where Manning's study ends.

Comparisons of German and American Modern Dance

Given Holm's position as a mediator between German and American modern dance, it follows that any study of the relationship between the two national communities would include some analysis of Holm herself. In this category, there are two examples, vastly different in method and approach: Isa Partsch-Bergsohn's *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States* (1994) and Ramsay Burt's *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race,' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (1998).

In *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, Partsch-Bergsohn traces out connections between modern dancers across the Atlantic Ocean from 1902 to 1968 by focusing on Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Kurt Jooss, and Hanya Holm. She describes the philosophies of the founders of modern dance, especially Duncan, Dalcroze, Laban, Wigman, and Jooss; the social environment in Germany in the 1920s; encounters between American and German modern dancers in the 1930s; the contrasting social environments of the United States and Germany in the 1930s, including the dilemma of German dancers under Nazism; and the situation of modern dance during and after World War II. Partsch-Bergsohn concludes the book with an examination of the career of Kurt Jooss in exile in England during the 1930s and 1940s, and then again in Germany in the postwar period.

Partsch-Bergsohn places modern dance within such contexts as avant-garde rebellions in the arts by groups such as *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*, Dalcroze's method of Eurhythmics, and Richard Wagner's concept of the "Total Work of Art," as well as the social and political contexts of two world wars, the Depression, and the Nazi regime. She integrates biographical information on Duncan, Laban, Wigman, Humphrey, Graham, Holm, Jooss, and others with interpretations of their work and evaluations of their significance. This study is important to my dissertation not only for its demonstration of numerous connections between American and German dance, but also for its analysis of Holm's career. Partsch-Bergsohn interviewed Holm and Louise Kloepper—Holm's teaching assistant in the 1930s—and combines material from these interviews with primary source evidence such as performance reviews and articles. Her descriptions of Wigman's teaching style, based on her own experiences with Wigman during World War II, have provided information useful to this dissertation. However, Partsch-Bergsohn's study is largely uncritical and sacrifices depth for breadth.

Ramsay Burt's *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race,' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (1998) is an "unashamedly revisionist" look at the ways in which understandings of modernity, race and nation affected the development of dance on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s and 1930s. He implicitly connects European and American modern dance practices by analyzing their shared concerns. His study serves to demonstrate the fluidity of dance across genres and across the Atlantic, which characterized the interwar period.

Burt suggests that the dance of this period was characterized by a questioning of the relationship between self and other as well as by challenges to distinctions between

art and entertainment, white and black, American and European, and ballet, modern, and African-American styles. He theorizes that modernity heightened the interactions with “others” through migration and urbanization, and thus brought about re-examinations of racial and national boundaries, sometimes collapsing them and at other times solidifying them. Burt asserts that the nationalistic tendencies of dance in the 1920s and 1930s need to be seen in the context of the impact of modernity, industrialization, harsh economic realities, and the breakdown of nineteenth-century social distinctions and cultural hierarchies on notions of national identity and sovereignty.³³

Burt also points out that many people in this period conflated race and nation, and that concepts of racial difference were expressed through bodily metaphors, making dance a potent place for the expression of anxieties over national and racial identities. Using examples such as Katherine Dunham, George Balanchine, Doris Humphrey, and Kurt Jooss, Burt argues that these dancer/choreographers experimented with the possibility of going beyond conditioned notions of gender, race, and national identity, often making their own bodies seem “alien” by exposing their private, personal experiences of modernity.

This study is highly theoretical, centered on Walter Benjamin’s and Siegfried Kracauer’s discussions of modernity. A number of themes emerge, including the social experience of metropolitan modernity; experiences of dislocation, disruption, and frenzy; concepts of the “mass;” and imaginings of otherness and of identities. Many of these themes illuminate modern dance of the 1920s and 1930s on both sides of the Atlantic in new ways.

Burt's comparisons of dance in Europe and America in this period are relevant to this dissertation. In Chapter 7, "American Moderns," for example, he describes how modernity as a theme was dealt with in American modern dance, particularly how the ideologies of nationalism and internationalism, new communities of consumption, and utopian visions were played out in the work of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, George Balanchine, and Katherine Dunham. Burt describes American modern dance of the 1930s with a particular eye toward concept, ideology, and politics, creating a dialogue with European responses to modernity at the same time. This enhances my ability to imagine Holm as a mediator between these two locations, even though Holm is not central to Burt's analysis.

Holm and American Modern Dance in the 1930s

Three studies of American modern dance in the 1930s—by Ellen Graff, Naomi Jackson, and Julia Foulkes—briefly acknowledge Hanya Holm's unique place in the New York modern dance community of that period. All three books examine significant trends and institutions that had previously been underrepresented in the standard modern dance historiography.

Ellen Graff's *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (1997) recovers the history of the radical, leftist, self-proclaimed "revolutionary" dancers of the 1930s.³⁴ A large number of dance practices are described, including Edith Segal's Red Dancers and her alliances with African American dancer Allison Burroughs in 1930; the creation of the Workers Dance League at a May Dance celebration in 1932; the Workers Dance Festival; the WPA-sponsored Federal Dance Project (1936-1939); *Dances for Spain* (1937); the American Dance Association; and the New Dance Group,

which was founded in 1932 by dancers at the New York Wigman School and still exists today.

Graff traces out an ideological shift from the politically conscious dance works of the 1930s, with their emphasis on socialist collectivism, to the postwar 1950s view of American modern art as a symbol of individual freedom. She uses rich primary source material like interviews, photographs, reviews, and other archival material to enable the voices of participants in these projects to emerge. The voices represented range from mainstream critics like John Martin, Margaret Lloyd, and Lincoln Kirstein, to leftist critics like Edna Ocko, Federal Theater Project director Hallie Flanagan, and of course dancers like Jane Dudley, Anna Sololow, Nadia Chilkovsky, Helen Tamiris, and others. This text demonstrates how the young American leftist choreographers adapted German mass dance/movement choir methods and theories. However, Holm's teaching methods—which formed the foundation of the New Dance Group's curriculum in its early years—are never explicitly examined, leaving room for much further work on the relationship between Holm and American leftist dance.

Naomi Jackson's *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y* (2000) excavates the history of a New York City institution that played a major role in the development of American modern dance and in twentieth century American culture more broadly.³⁵ Anna Sokolow's *Rooms* (1955) and Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* (1960) both premiered on the Y stage, and poets such as T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and W. H. Auden read their work there. Jackson describes the Y as promoting a particular conception of Jewishness, in which religion and custom were replaced with institution, constituency, association, and patronage, and

excavates the ways in which William Kolodney, educational director from 1934 to 1969, brought together this conception of Jewish community with modern dance. Through her narrative, Jackson notes the participation of Kolodney's advisors Doris Humphrey and John Martin; teachers such as Humphrey, Weidman, Graham, Holm, Anna Sokolow, Bonnie Bird, Nancy Hauser, and others; and a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish performers such as Alvin Ailey, Pearl Primus, Carmelita Maracci, Marie Marchowsky, Joseph Gifford, and Fred Berk.

Organization of the book is both chronological and thematic, combining themes such as "Democracy in Action: Educating the Human Being through Dance," "Audience Building, Jews, and Global Culture," and "Choreographing Difference: The Aesthetics of Diversity" with a history of the Dance Center, Walter Terry's Dance Laboratory, the children's group the Merry-Go-Rounders, the performance series at the Kauffmann Auditorium, and other programs. This study is meticulously researched and well written, combining documentary research with a clear interpretive stance and logical narrative structure. It is relevant to this dissertation in its descriptions of Holm's relationships to the Y, both as a teacher and as a choreographer/director. Jackson's narrative hints toward possible Jewish reactions to Holm, providing contrasts with Holm's mentor Wigman, who was Aryanizing her school in the 1930s. The relationship of Holm to the Y indicates some of the ways in which she sought to integrate herself into a more pluralistic, democratic environment.

Julia L. Foulkes' *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (2002) replicates the earlier tendency for narratives of American modern dance to acknowledge Holm as a member of the "Big Four" at Bennington, but

as an otherwise marginal figure.³⁶ However, I decided to include it in this literature review because of the new ways in which Foulkes examines the worldview of American modern dance in the 1930s in relation to feminism, nationalism, politics, and American social history.

Foulkes posits the significance of American modern dance in the 1930s as the embodiment of a fragile (and often flawed) democratic pluralism. Created primarily by white women, gay men, and African Americans, Foulkes argues that modern dance occupied a radical place on the edges of society, a place from which dancers sought collective social goals through the expressiveness of their individual bodies. From artist's manifestos—both written and danced—she determines that the mission of the modern dancers was to create an American art form with the aesthetic principles of dualism, minimalism, emotion, primitivism, rhythm, and harmony.

Through the 1930s, modern dance challenged conventions of femininity for women and the feminization of gay men. It gave African Americans a forum through which to express their social goals, even as it reinforced primitivist stereotypes of African and Native American dance forms. By the late 1930s and the advent of the Popular Front, earlier distinctions between socially-conscious modern dance and politically active and radically leftist modern dance faded away as all modern dancers became united in a growing American nationalism and the fight against fascism. However, the pluralism and populism of 1930s modern dance did not survive the Second World War, as American ballet became predominant and modern dance became increasingly elitist and abstract.

Modern Bodies is an ambitious study, discussing the lives and work of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Ted Shawn, Katherine Dunham, Edna Guy, Asadata Dafora,

Pearl Primus, Anna Sokolow, Alvin Ailey, and others. Foulkes primarily draws on written sources such as articles, letters, marketing materials, and reviews, and on interviews, particularly the Bennington College School of the Dance Oral History Project interviews at Columbia University. She supplements these materials with films, photographs, caricatures, and contextual sources on feminism, race, sexuality, nationalism and other relevant topics. This book is valuable to this dissertation because it provides a provocative and nuanced look at the worldview Holm encountered on her entry to the American scene in 1931. However, Foulkes rarely mentions Wigman or other German dancers who influenced the development of American modern dance. She only discusses Holm in passing, and does not acknowledge the ways in which Holm's concepts and philosophies differed from those of Graham and Humphrey.

Conclusion

As this review of literature has demonstrated, few scholarly studies place Holm at the center of their analysis, and Holm's place in the literature on American modern dance continues to be marginal. Holm had an approach and a philosophy—which will be explored in subsequent chapters—that differed considerably from those of her contemporaries such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, and she is often misrepresented and misunderstood.

Hanya Holm occupies a shadowy presence in the modern dance literature, which I have attempted to bring to light. When I first began this project—before I was able to access the Holm Papers at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts—I spent considerable time trying to track down that shadow. I

waded through the scattered references to her in a myriad of sources, put them in context, considered their sources, and pieced together an understanding of Holm's role in American modern dance. When I turned to Holm's own words, especially her unpublished notebooks, lectures, letters, and reports, a whole new perspective emerged.

This dissertation represents the first full-length study of Holm's career in the formative decade of the 1930s. I am deeply indebted to Claudia Gitelman for her work on Holm, and to the scholarship on German modern dance by Marion Kant, Susan Manning, Hedwig Müller, Inge Baxmann, Yvonne Hardt, Karl Toepfer, and others, which has enabled me to understand Holm's worldview and perspective upon her immigration.

NOTES

¹ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 261.

² John Martin, *The Modern Dance* (1933) (Brooklyn, NY: Dance Horizons, Inc., 1965).

³ John Martin, *America Dancing* (New York: Dodge Publishing, 1936) 171.

⁴ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 264.

⁵ Sali Ann Kriegsman, *Modern Dance in America: The Bennington Years* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981).

⁶ Jac Venza (Prod), *Dance: Four Pioneers* (New York: National Education Television Network, 1965).

⁷ Jean Morrison Brown, Naomi Mindlin and Charles H. Woodford, eds. *The Vision of Modern Dance: In the Words of Its Creators*, 2nd ed. (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1998).

⁸ Hanya Holm, "Hanya Speaks," *The Vision of Modern Dance: In the Words of Its Creators*, 2nd ed., ed. Jean Morrison Brown, Naomi Mindlin and Charles H. Woodford (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1998) 71-82.

⁹ Don McDonagh, *The Complete Guide to Modern Dance* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976) 75 – 80.

¹⁰ Selma Jeanne Cohen, ed., *Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965).

¹¹ Selma Jeanne Cohen, ed., *Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, [Typescript and handwritten notes], MGZMB 89-28330, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹² Joseph Mazo, *Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America*, 2nd ed. (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Company, Publishers, 2000).

¹³ Jack Anderson, *Dance* (Newsweek Books, 1974); Marcia B. Siegel, *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Kendall, *Where She Danced*, 202.

¹⁶ Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994); Ramsay Burt, *Alien*

Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁷ Walter Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969).

¹⁸ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 4.

¹⁹ Gitelman, "Finding a Place for Hanya Holm," 49-71.

²⁰ Marilyn Cristofori, ed., "Hanya Holm: A Pioneer in American Dance," *Choreography and Dance* 2, no. 2 (Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1992).

²¹ *Ballett International* 16, no. 3 (March 1993).

²² Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, "Hanya Holm: A Missing Link Between German and American Dance," *Ballett International* 16, no. 3 (March 1993): 14-17.

²³ "Hanya Holm: The Life and Legacy," *The Journal for Stage Directors and Choreographers* 7, no. 1 (1993).

²⁴ Gitelman, ed., *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*..

²⁵ Hedwig Müller's biography of Mary Wigman—*Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin* (Berlin: Quadriga, 1986)—has not been translated into English. Susan Manning's *Ecstasy and the Demon* examines selected aspects of Wigman's choreographic and pedagogical work. As I have discussed, the only full-length biography of Hanya Holm by Walter Sorell was written while Holm was still living and is limited by sentimentality and factual inaccuracies.

²⁶ Claudia Gitelman, "Preface and Acknowledgments," *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*, xi.

²⁷ Gitelman, *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*, 62.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁹ Claudia Gitelman, "Dance, Business, and Politics: Letters from Mary Wigman to Hanya Holm, 1930-1971," *Dance Chronicle* 20, no. 1 (1997): 1-40.

³⁰ Gitelman, *Dancing with Principle: Hanya Holm in Colorado, 1941-1983*.

³¹ Mary Anne Santos Newhall, "Uniform Bodies: Mass Movement and Modern Totalitarianism," *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2002): 27-50.

³² Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 27.

³³ Burt, *Alien Bodies*, 10-11.

³⁴ Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Naomi Jackson, *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).

³⁶ Julia Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

CHAPTER 3

CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF HANYA HOLM'S MISSION

Introduction

During her formative years in Germany, Holm was deeply influenced by the worldview and values of the body culture movement and its call to “return to nature” in order to restore a holism of body, mind, and spirit. She was first exposed to body culture around 1910, at age 17, when she began to study Dalcroze Rhythmic Gymnastics. In 1919, she first saw Mary Wigman perform, and joined Wigman’s first group of disciples in 1921. Holm was therefore part of the massive “cult of the body” that transformed German social life in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Body culture was a widespread movement that searched for authenticity, cultural renewal, communal identification, and new ways of living and experiencing life.

Like many body culture adherents, Holm was a fervent believer in the importance of developing an amateur dance culture (also called “lay dance”), in which people would participate in dance for recreation, health, self-fulfillment, and joy. As subsequent chapters will show, this was a significant part of her American mission. Rudolf Laban was the most influential leader of the lay dance movement in Weimar Germany, but it was a widespread goal in body culture that transcended Laban’s direct influence. Émile Jaques-Dalcroze also aimed to transform everyday life experience, and created massive festival productions in which the group, rather than the individual, was the central focus. Rudolf Bode, the Loheland School, Jenny Gertz, and Dorothee Günther, among others, advocated the importance of dance as an amateur activity. In the 1920s, Mary Wigman

developed a system of dance-gymnastics (*Tanzgymnastik*) for amateurs, which was intended to free people from bourgeois convention and the physical restraints of modern life through an ecstatic, rhythmic, and mystical process of awakening the body.

Amateur gymnastics, *Nachtkultur* (nude culture), and other forms of *Körperkultur* (body culture) were sometimes framed in contrast to modern dance, which was concerned not only with education and health, but also artistic innovation. I assert that modern dance and recreational forms of body culture are better understood along a continuum, rather than as an oppositional pair. German body culture, which this chapter examines, was a massive cultural movement that encompassed a variety of practices with often contradictory views of its purpose.¹ Nevertheless, all forms of body culture, including modern dance, shared a common fundamental belief system, and there was a continuum of participation from pure amateur recreation to professional performance.

When I began to look at Holm's writings of the early 1930s, I was struck by how much emphasis she placed on dance for amateurs. In lecture after lecture, she focused on the value of dance for amateurs and children rather than on matters more relevant to professional dance artists. At a time when her American contemporaries Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey were articulating their approaches to modern dance by developing characteristic movement techniques, Holm focused on her role as an educator and leader in the amateur dance movement. Early in her career, Holm had studied with Gustav Guldenstein, a Dalcroze disciple who, like Laban and Dalcroze, advocated the creation of a dance culture akin to the existing musical culture.² Guldenstein wanted dance study to become widespread enough that all educated people would have some familiarity with its fundamental skills, have an appreciation for its structure and history, and be able to

participate in it for amateur recreation, health, and personal fulfillment.³ From 1915 to about 1921, Holm taught courses in Rhythmic Gymnastics for amateur women and children, a formative early experience for her.⁴

This chapter provides a brief overview of the roots of German modern dance in German body culture (*Körperkultur*), which shaped Holm's conviction that the body, dance, and society needed to be reformed. Even before she began working with Wigman, Holm was steeped in the language and assumptions of body culture, and these informed many of her later teaching practices as well as her choreographic themes. I will describe the historical roots of body culture in the life reform movement, body culture's worldview and aims, the influence of Nietzsche, the role of dance in body culture, and the role of concepts of community. I also examine the influence of the Dalcroze method and the Dalcroze Institute at Hellerau, and Laban's practices and beliefs, particularly his School for the Art of Life, on the development of German modern dance.

Historical Foundations of Body Culture

Ausdruckstanz and Körperkultur: Terminology and Delimitations

A note on terminology: the term "*Ausdruckstanz*" (dance of expression) has recently been used to describe the work of Wigman and her followers; I, however, have chosen to use the term "German modern dance," a more comprehensive term. During the Weimar period, German modern dance was called by various names, including *der moderne Tanz* ("modern dance"), *Tanzkunst* ("dance art"), *Kunst-Tanz* ("art-dance"), *der neue künstlerische Tanz* ("the new artistic dance"), and other terms.⁵ Laban used the phrase "the art of movement," and referred to choric dance as "*Bewegungschor*"

(movement choirs). Wigman called her work *absoluter Tanz* (“absolute dance”).

“*Ausdruckstanz*” was occasionally used in the 1920s, but largely came into prominence in historical studies written after the Second World War.

During the Weimar period, German modern dance straddled two realms—Expressionism, the prevailing avant-garde art movement, and *Körperkultur* (body culture), a leisure movement—both in practice and in ideology. As this chapter will show, both Expressionism and body culture were attacks on late nineteenth-century bourgeois society, and shared the goal of transforming modern life by making it more spiritual and creating new kinds of social relationships. Expressionism created specific products—artworks—that were an expression of that worldview, while body culture promised a cultural healing.⁶ Body culture provided networks of amateur participants for German modern dance, in addition to philosophical support. I have chosen not to use the revisionist term “*Ausdruckstanz*” because I believe it can over-emphasize the generic connection to Expressionism, at the expense of the equally important connection to body culture.⁷

In the period after the Second World War, the historical connection of modern dance to life reform and body culture was forgotten or even denied. This postwar sublimation of German modern dance’s utopian and cultural goals can be attributed, in part, to the desire to purge German modern dance of any association with Nazi concepts of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community).⁸ In the period of *Stunde Null* (“zero hour”) after the Second World War, modern dance and body culture were discarded. I argue that the postwar denial of certain aspects of Weimar-era German modern dance has

led to misunderstandings about Hanya Holm's vision and her mindset at the time of her emigration in 1931.

This chapter is not intended as a comprehensive history of German modern dance or body culture, but is, rather, an examination of some of the aspects of German modern dance philosophy and practice that were most relevant to Holm's later work. Holm—and, indeed, the vast majority of the German modern dance movement at large—was deeply indebted to both Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman. Even though Holm never studied with Laban directly, his ideas pervaded the discourse of German modern dance in the 1920s, and many of Wigman's concepts of movement were direct descendents of his. Laban's first book, *Die Welt des Tänzers* (The Dancer's World, 1920), in which he presented his vision of how dance could transform modern life, became a virtual bible for modern dancers during the Weimar period. Most studies of Holm have not foregrounded the aspects of German modern dance that I mention in this chapter, and I assert that her writings and choices take on new significance when they are examined with this history in mind.

Overview and Scope of Body Culture

German body culture (*Körperkultur*) was a vast and diverse cultural movement that included nudism and nude dancing, rhythmic gymnastics, dance education, amateur dance participation, dance photography and criticism, solo and group dance performance, movement choirs, and mass dance. It was an immense movement peopled by large numbers of dancers, writers, theorists, educators, photographers, filmmakers, and, most importantly, amateur practitioners, including children and youth.⁹ An impressive literature was produced to document it, explain it, and spread its influence, including

books of nude and dance photography, histories of dance, treatises on the significance of the body in modernity, nudist magazines, dance magazines, manifestoes, and dance scores based on Laban's notation system, *Schriftanz* (written-dance). German body culture encompassed a wide variety of practices, organizations, and leaders who battled for followers and cultural dominance in a period of cultural redefinition in Germany. They all shared a desire to reform modern life and to find a new sense of the body (*Körpersinn*). In his influential 1927 book of that name, Wolfgang Graeser asserted:

Something new has appeared. It could be called a movement, a wave, a fashion, a passion, a new feeling for life; this is a reality that has inundated, pursued, inspired, reformed, and influenced millions of people . . . Fresh air, a more self-confident and responsible spirit seems to have spread across the land. Our attitudes have changed: toward life, spirituality and the body, toward what is decent and indecent, sensual and abstract, toward religion and sex. We see the past and we see history with new eyes. And everything that is new is connected, either directly or indirectly, with the new corporeality.¹⁰

Karl Toepfer, in his encyclopedic work on German body culture, *Empire of Ecstasy* (1997), asserts that body culture was an attempt to grapple with modernity, and that it was driven by "questions circulating, often unconsciously, within the social reality."¹¹

These questions included:

How can the body itself assume a modern identity? . . . What are differences between normative, ideal, and perverse bodies in a modern context? . . . How does modernity construct a new relation between the body and metaphysical dimensions to identity, such as soul, spirit, consciousness? . . . How does a modern body function as a sign of tension between individual and social identity?¹²

Answers to these questions varied greatly, and different groups within body culture not only contradicted each other, but also seemed to be at war with each other. In fact, Toepfer concludes, “As a whole, German body culture was neither a unified nor a unifying force on the European cultural scene,” despite its repeated attempts to be.¹³

Toepfer emphasizes the disunity in body culture, but it seems to me that the fundamental questions about the body and modernity that Toepfer lists point to shared concerns. I have identified a number of shared beliefs, assumptions, and tropes in the body culture discourse. Primary themes included: the body is a link to ancient or primitive practice and is connected to spiritual knowledge that can counteract the over-rationality of modern life; movement is a medium through which to discern natural, cosmic, and universal laws that reveal the magical properties of forms; and practicing body culture will develop heightened senses and consciousness in the individual, and strengthen a sense of communal belonging. There was a broad consensus that the body, movement, and community all needed to be reformed, and that the modern body needed to be emancipated. These beliefs are examined next.

The Life Reform Movement

German body culture developed, in part, out of the life reform movement (*Lebensreformbewegung*) of the late nineteenth century. As Michael Hau demonstrates in his study *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany*, life reform was an attack on the medical establishment and a quest for perfect health and beauty through alternative means like vegetarianism, therapeutic baths, psychotherapy, nudity, and sunlight:

[Life reformers] believed that modern civilization, urbanization, and industrialization had alienated human beings from their ‘natural’ living

conditions, leading them down a path of progressive degeneration that could only be reversed by living in accordance with man's and woman's nature (*naturgemaesse Lebensweise*).¹⁴

Life reform was both a means to self-fulfillment and a response to unhealthy, cramped, hectic living conditions in rapidly industrializing urban centers. Germany had industrialized and urbanized at a faster rate than the rest of Europe, and by 1910 contained as many big cities as all the rest of Europe.¹⁵ Body culture viewed urbanization as a threat to human physical and spiritual health.

At the turn of the century, disciplined and beautiful bodies modeled after the art of Greek antiquity — perceived to be timeless aesthetic and moral ideals — became cultural capital, especially for members of the middle-classes. Participation in life reform and body culture provided social distinction at a time when the bourgeois structure of German society was under attack.¹⁶ This discourse was also informed by an emerging “racial science” that assigned moral significance to physical characteristics and established hierarchies based on race, gender, and nationality.¹⁷ The possession of a beautiful body and participation in life-reform and body-culture became signs of cultural knowledge as well as indicators of physical and moral superiority.

American dancer Isadora Duncan's aesthetic philosophy, developed in the first decades of the twentieth century, was linked to this life reform discourse, especially to the idea that the ancient Greek approach to movement and the body provided a timeless aesthetic and moral ideal. Duncan invoked the ancient Greeks in her free-flowing garments and use of poses from Greek sculptures such as the Elgin Marbles, which she saw at the British Museum. Following Nietzsche, she proclaimed that the Greeks understood the true nature of movement, beauty, and life. She characterized classical

ballet, in contrast, as a series of lifeless poses.¹⁸ As in life reform discourse, Duncan's aesthetic prescriptions carried moral values: modern life, especially the role of women in society, was diseased, she claimed, and her approach to movement, dance, and art would create a healthier woman of the future. Duncan opened her first school in Grönewald, Berlin, in 1904, and was highly influential in German cultural reform at this time. Though Laban and Wigman would later reject Duncan's classical conception of beauty, they built upon her claims to truth, nature, social regeneration, and, in particular, her assertion that dance provides the keys to a better life.

German body culture gained momentum during and after the First World War. Michael Hau points out that hedonism and narcissism reached epidemic proportions during World War I and its aftermath, citing historian Modris Eksteins: "the more meaningless the war appeared, the more people insisted that the 'meaning [of life] lay in life itself, in the act of living, in the vitality of the moment.'"¹⁹ The notion of "vitalism" became a rallying cry for *Körperkultur* during the years of the Weimar Republic. In search of activities that were "vital," "natural," and "holistic," young men and women joined nude culture, hiking groups, dance, and gymnastics in throngs. Activities such as dance and rhythmic gymnastics were believed to create a holistic union of body, mind, and spirit, while nude culture stressed the pure pleasure of experiencing the body. Hans Surén's immensely popular book *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (Man and Sunlight) (1924)—which sold 250,000 copies—celebrated the practice of nudity as a sign of health, strength, and beauty that could counteract the dangers of urban life. Toepfer explains Surén's thesis: "The urge to be naked, he believed, lies dormant within us, yet it is as strong as the urge to feel the light of the sun."²⁰

Life reform and body culture were part of larger intellectual currents of thought, such as Sigmund Freud's proclamation that the discontent of modern civilized life results from the renunciation of instinct, and Max Weber's image of modern society as an iron cage. Historian Martin Green argues that around the turn of the century many of the best European minds were devoted to understanding this problem; however the life reformers "were trying to solve the problem of civilization and unhappiness more practically and enthusiastically, by *living* a new life together — by withdrawing from the cities and the professions and the "objective" ways of thought . . ."21 Life reform and body culture represented two radical ways to solve the problems of civilization and unhappiness.

Popular hygienic culture of the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods was a "discursive field that was shaped by laypeople, alternative medical practitioners, and university-trained physicians" who all used "aesthetic concepts, tropes, and images in order to make their ideas visible, or *anschaulich*, for a lay public."22 The body and dance culture that emerged out of this discourse borrowed and elaborated on those concepts, tropes, and images. As I will discuss next, the body itself would become a powerful, yet highly contested, symbol of both modernity and the quest to escape modernity.

Worldview of Body Culture

In her impressive study of the myth of *Gemeinschaft* in German body culture, dance historian Inge Baxmann asserts that the early 20th century initiated a discourse on the meaning of imagination, the unconscious, *Sinnlichkeit* (sensefulness), and social cooperation, which continues to affect modern life today.²³ Body culture generated an immense cultural energy that fed and organized disparate theories and practices.

Discussions of the body, rhythm, and modernity permeated all art forms, sports, leisure activities, education, and other realms.

Certain terms and concepts appeared repeatedly in the body culture discourse, such as: holism, experience, vitality, harmony, nature/natural, intuition, drives, fundamental sources, renewal, irrationality, expression, ecstasy, primitive, authenticity, and *Gemeinschaft* (cultural community). Each of these terms carried deep significance and represented beliefs about the body, human experience, the natural world, and the metaphysical world. In this section, I will explore the aspects of this belief system that most influenced Hanya Holm. I quote from a number of her writings and manuscripts for explication. Many of these quotations are from essays and lectures she wrote in New York in the 1930s, but I assert that they demonstrate continuity with the body culture worldview that developed in German-speaking areas of Europe in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

The Heightened Experience of Life

One of the most important goals of body culture was to achieve unity of body, mind, and spirit and to learn to truly *experience* life through disciplines of the body. This was connected to the call for “vitalism” and a greater emphasis on sensation itself. In the wake of the First World War, it was a reminder that life is fragile and should be lived fully. Holm called dance “a doorway to a more intense and fuller life.”²⁴ In the age of the machine and scientific advancements, with its new paradigms of movement, dynamics, and change, she argued, people must learn to sense their bodies and their experiences more deeply, to pay attention to physical sensations that “have been hidden by the restrictions and demands of daily life.” She continued:

And as the dancing body is freed from habitual restraints, and reaches out for new experiences in movement, the mind, too, will grow, and encompass new ideas, new impressions, and new fantasies . . . The dance in this light is not only an art confined to professionals, but an experience open to all.²⁵

Similarly, German dance critic Alfred Schlee asserted: “The essence of the German art ideal today lies in the stimulation to activity of the public itself, in the development of a *receptivity to experience* which shall create a new social culture.”²⁶ Hanya Holm admonished her students that they must dance as they live and live as they dance.²⁷

Health and Holism

Body culture aimed to heal modern bodies and souls. Nature, sunlight, physical activity in the fresh air, the joy of moving together in rhythm with other people – all were prescribed by body culture as solutions to the fast pace of modern life, the overcrowded living quarters, and the enervating effects of industrial production. Sociologist Georg Simmel, in his widely read essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), characterized the city as an “intensification of nervous life,” and argued that rhythm was one of the factors that distinguished rural and city life.²⁸ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, neurasthenia was believed to be caused by losing touch with the rhythms of nature. Therefore, reformist activities designed to reawaken the body’s natural rhythms were especially well suited to the problems of the age.

Activities that accessed the body’s natural rhythms could address psychological as well as physical symptoms. Holm advised a young teacher that she must design exercises that corresponded to the “type and the kind of psychological problem” indicated by her students’ movement; these exercises would “encourage a slow coalescence of the body-

soul-spirit-intellect unity [orig. *Körper-Seele-Geist-Einheit*].” Early on in Rudolf Laban’s career, he used prescriptive movement exercises to heal physical and psychological imbalances, inspired in part by Wilhelm Wundt’s 1872 book *Grundzüge der Physiologischen Psychologie* (Outline of Physiological Psychology).²⁹ Many contemporary approaches to dance and movement therapy originated with German body culture and modern dance.

Renewal, Race, and the Primitive

Concurrently with the idea that the modern urban body was degenerate and diseased, body culture asserted that people in “primitive” times/societies had more holistic and healthy bodies, and that those primitive drives could be – should be – uncovered and renewed. Holm wrote in 1933:

As the worn-out civilizations of past ages have been forced, often brutally, to return to more elemental ways for the renewal of their race-vitality, so too must the artist return periodically to the fundamental life-sources of his art.

In the dance this fundamental source is rooted deep in the nature of man himself. The urge for movement, and for the use of movement as an expression of human experiences, has been present in all peoples and all times.³⁰

One of the central activities of Wigman pedagogy was to uncover and explore these fundamental life-sources, to renew “elemental ways” of life. The Wigman School used the term “*Naturvölker*” (nature/primitive peoples, which reflected popular views about a hierarchy of cultures from primitive to civilized, and created an idealized primitive “past” in which people lived in harmony with nature. As Marianna Torgovnik has written, primitivism in twentieth-century European and Euro-American culture was a

search for universal truth through the projection of a utopian “primitive.” However, this utopian society was as much a product of the Western imagination as it was a reaction to actual societies past or present.³¹ Children, mystics, artists, and the mentally ill were also valued as being closer to nature, more authentic, and more honest.

Holm’s quote also reinforces the importance of concepts of “race” in body culture. A field of “racial science” sought to determine the essences of racial types, and was clearly connected to the eugenic movement of this time and the search for racial “purity.” In their overview of body culture, Kaes, Jay and Dimendberg write:

Despite the potential for progressive criticism of hectic, inhuman modernization, most of these groups followed a reactionary course in their longing for the utopia of a premodern world. The futile search for purity, for example, led some to propagate rabid racism (spouting forth theories about the superiority of an Aryan race) and anti-Semitism; others, in their contempt for materialism and bourgeois values, prefigured the hippie culture of the 1960s.³²

I will discuss the impact of racial concepts on Holm’s practice further in Chapter 6.

The Search for Authenticity

The concern with racial renewal was also connected to the search for authenticity and community. Body culture critiqued the eclipse of the “authentic self” by modern mass culture. The popular writings of philosopher Ludwig Klages promoted his approach to physiognomy and handwriting analysis, through which he proposed methods to discover people’s true selves and true intentions. Historian Michael Hau explains: “[Klages] tried to disentangle the self-presentation of people (*Schein*) from their true being (*Sein*).”³³ Modern dance also sought to access practitioners’ true being through exploration of the body, self, desires, and natural tendencies.

The mandate to live life consciously was closely connected to the search for authenticity. Body culture practitioners sought a more authentic (true, natural, essential) way of living and being with others. This generally involved rejecting the pressures placed on people by society and by the quickly growing mass consumer culture. Nudism took this to one extreme by throwing off the superficial confines of clothing. Modern dance also revealed the natural body, sometimes through nudism, and always by “natural” movement; it also revealed the authentic self through improvisation.

Primal Rhythm

Rhythm was one of the unifying forces in body culture. Karl Bücher’s 1896 book *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (Work and Rhythm) was highly influential and provided body culture with a theoretical foundation. Bücher had conducted a systematic ethnographic survey of work patterns and accompanying songs in pre-industrial and ancient societies in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. According to Michael Cowan, Bücher saw the result of his research as the rediscovery of a “lost world” of joyous work, which he contrasted with the alienation of industrial labor:

The “joyous work” of traditional societies was a form of labor attuned – in its duration and tempo—to the body’s organic rhythms, which Bücher saw expressed in chants, songs, spirituals, hand-clapping, foot-stomping and the like. But whereas traditional societies had used the body’s rhythms to guide the tools of labor, industrial society had subordinated the body itself to the rhythm of machines, with their fixed work schedule and—above all—their accelerated tempo.³⁴

Cowan points out that Émile Jaques-Dalcroze drew explicitly on Bücher’s work when he developed his system of Rhythmic Gymnastics.³⁵ Bücher’s ideas also formed the central trope of Holm’s 1938 choreography *Dance of Work and Play*.

The search for primal rhythms animated the artistic avant-garde as well as body culture. Naima Prevots argues that when Laban, Wigman, and the Dadaists collaborated briefly between 1916 and 1917, they shared a view of the drum as “a symbol of primitive cultures and their magical, imagistic components”:

[Laban] thought that the drum languages of primitive peoples were not phonetic and that “the language of the drum seems nothing other than the rhythm of his body made audible.” Huelsenbeck was noted for his performances on the drum, which were meant to create a primitive, magical, incantation of subconscious magical powers, and he called his book *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*.³⁶

Another theorist of rhythm who exerted a profound influence on body culture was Ludwig Klages. In 1923 he published *Das Wesen des Rhythmus* (The Nature of Rhythm), based on a lecture he gave at a convention of body culture schools in Berlin; this book theorized an irreconcilable difference between natural *Rhythmus* and mechanical *Takt*. Cowan explains: “Visible in biological processes (e.g., heartbeat, breath) and diurnal cycles (planets, tides, etc.), rhythm expressed the essence of life, while *Takt* made visible the rational, ordering and segmenting activity of the intellect.”³⁷ Rudolf Bode was a disciple of Klages, and asserted that only eurhythmic gymnastics could access and release the flow of primal rhythm needed to heal modern bodies. Laban, Wigman, and their followers emphasized rhythm by preferring percussion accompaniment. In 1932, Holm said, “One must have an inner rhythm to become a good player of primitive instruments. They express things that cannot be expressed in the music of our day, just as the dance expresses things that cannot be told in words.”³⁸

Gemeinschaft: The Search for Community

The concepts of “*Gemeinschaft*” (community) and its polar opposite, “*Gesellschaft*” (civil society)—first proposed by social theorist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887—played an integral role in shaping German cultural discourse in the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁹ According to Tönnies, forms of *Gemeinschaft* such as a family or a church represented a community in which people had authentic, shared values; forms of *Gesellschaft* such as a modern business were bound together purely by self-interest and were marked by a division of labor. As German dance scholar Inge Baxmann points out, in the 1910s and 1920s *Gemeinschaft* came to represent the values of an emotional identification between people in a community that was threatened to be lost in modern, urbanized, alienated social life. This concept of *Gemeinschaft* was strengthened by the new discipline of anthropology and its “(re)discovery” of ancient, “primitive” communities.⁴⁰ These concepts were even applied to the modern dance/ballet dialectic: modern dance was associated with “*Gemeinschaft*” (an authentic, holistic community) while all forms of “stage dance” and social dance — such as ballet, cabaret, and jazz — were associated with “*Gesellschaft*” (civilized society), and thus represented the alienation and degradation of modern, urban, capitalist life.

For many theorists, dance became a potent symbol for *Gemeinschaft* because of its cultic role in “primitive” societies. Baxmann points out that cultural anthropologists like Marcel Mauss and Karl Bücher, and psychologists like Wilhelm Wundt, “made rhythm and dance the paradigm for the unity of sociality, psychology and physiology. They emphasized the social meaning of dance for the formation of *Gemeinschaft*.”⁴¹

Dance was seen as powerful because it could embody the collective memory of culture communities and served a number of utopian visions:

During a time in which one feasted on Freud's theory of the unconscious and dream analysis and one sought answers to social disintegration and political polarization in Wilhelm Reich's theory of the collective unconscious, when one hoped to find a new form of perception, a new ideology in ancient Greece with Nietzsche or with Carl Gustav Jung in Oriental philosophy and religion, the new dance was seen as the synthesis of their cultural fascination . . .⁴²

In this context, "dance" was a manifold cultural concept that exceeded the bounds of actual dances. Jeschke and Vettermann explain:

The body, movement, and dance—terms that were often used interchangeably—functioned as metaphors and concrete ideas for this search for origins, as aids in helping people to reconnect with all that was alive, natural, and organic; on a rather poetic and self-referential, though not reflexive, level, body, movement and dance became motifs and contexts for modern, young life at large.⁴³

Toepfer adds, "a powerful dance culture emerged in German society during the modernist era because that society displayed an unusually intense preoccupation with the body as a redemptive sign of a deep, or metaphysical, identity."⁴⁴ Bourgeois life represented the dangerous fracturing of mind and body, and dance represented salvation through the unification of body, mind, spirit, and nature. The next section will explore the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, a philosopher whose work sought redemption of the body and the salvation of the soul through will and act rather than religion.

The Influence of Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) validated twentieth-century claims of modern degradation, and inspired body culture's quest to rediscover and re-embody primal impulses. Nietzsche looked to the dancing choruses in ancient Greek tragedies to propose a view of Greek culture that was governed more by the instinctual, wild, and creative energy of Dionysus than the calm rationality of Apollo.⁴⁵ He used this view of Greek culture to critique modern European culture, arguing that European culture was one-sidedly Apollonian and therefore unhealthy, and proposing that modern Europeans needed to resurrect the primordial energies of the Dionysian Chorus to find health, release, joy and wholeness.

Modern dancers such as Mary Wigman and Isadora Duncan were empowered by their readings of Nietzsche. Dance and religion scholar Kimerer LaMothe argues that Duncan, for example, interpreted "Nietzsche's dance images literally, as a call to develop, practice, and teach kinetic forms capable of fulfilling Nietzsche's vision for dance as enacting an affirmation of life."⁴⁶ Duncan, Laban, Wigman, and their followers all embraced the idea that rationality—specifically the rationality of writing and "print-culture"—had overtaken European thought, thus making it unhealthy and degraded. In order to rectify this imbalance, they proposed that modern European society needed to revalue the Christian view of the "body and its great reason."⁴⁷ LaMothe writes that Duncan, based on her readings of Nietzsche, concluded:

People must develop new ways of relating to their own bodily being; they must cultivate the physical consciousness needed both to generate values that affirm human embodiment and to know those values as true for

themselves. Duncan shows how dancing, in contrast to writing, has the potential to serve as such an incarnating practice.⁴⁸

Wigman was also galvanized by her readings of Nietzsche, as I will discuss in further depth in Chapter 4.

Irrationality and a New Sense of the Body

Following Nietzsche, body culture sought to counteract the negative effects of “print-culture” in Western society by returning to the “irrational body.” The body was seen as “the last residue of authentic experience,” capable of synaesthetic metacommunication.⁴⁹ Body culture wanted to replace print-culture with a community of the senses (*sinnenbezogenen Gemeinschaft*) and a modern culture of perception (*modernen Wahrnehmungskultur*),⁵⁰ in which all bodily senses—not only sight—would be valued:

The eye or the sense of vision privileged by the written culture was contrasted by dancers with the sense of “imagination” or the sense of “dance imagery”, a new type of experiencing perception and interpretation of reality far superior to intellectual recognition.⁵¹

Modern dance, body culture, and life reform all sought a new awareness of the senses. They emphasized the value of sensation itself, separated from any objective purpose; in other words, they practiced ways to consciously experience sensation. The goal was to experience an experience as you lived it—through your body, your senses, your intuition, your imagination, your conscious and unconscious memory, and so on. Body culture also designed ways to develop “intuitive seeing,” whereby someone could perceive another person’s essence.⁵² In dance, the attention of the intuitive gaze was

particularly directed toward determining the essences of movement and their emotional connotations—what Laban called the “inner reality” of “outer forms.”

Similarly, modern dance emphasized instinct, feeling, and will, as manifested by the irrational body. Wigman disciple Virginia Stewart suggested: “modern dance is an expression through an irrational medium of bodily movement of the grasped but inarticulate emotional and intellectual experiences which Man, in the whole history of his culture, has never been able to convert into words.”⁵³ German modern dance emphasized the subjective perception of experience; Wigman asserted that the spectator should not respond to her dances rationally, but rather “on a mental-motoric level.”⁵⁴ Laban promoted the new “language of dance” as a way to overcome what he called the “word ideology,” or the dominance of rational thought in modern, Western civilization.⁵⁵ An over-emphasis on rationality, Laban and others argued, had caused a dangerous imbalance, leading to a myriad of social diseases. Modern people needed to return to the original unity between movement and writing that had supposedly existed in ancient cultures. Laban proposed that movement/dance was the original language, or system of communication.

A brochure for the Wigman School demonstrates how her system of dance-gymnastics was believed to develop the intuitive gaze and the awakening of mental, expressional, and design powers:

A fundamental gymnastics gives to adults a uniform education of their whole bodies. The repetition of natural body feelings stimulates creative imagination (*die schöpferische Fantasie*) and leads to personal experiences of the pleasure of movement. Through the dance are loosened buried expressional- and design-powers, which gives an awakening of mental reconciliation and increased sensation of life.⁵⁶

In the Wigman method of dance training, the dancer experiences the loosening of her creative imagination (or fantasies) through the repetition of universal bodily feelings or sensations. Once those powers are loosened, the dancer must consciously shape them into external forms for perception by others.

Modern dance also called on Freudian concepts of the subconscious and primal drives, and the power of therapy to access deep emotions and fantasies. According to Wigman and Holm, the development of the dancer involved the “clarification” of “impulsive movement activities,” or “*triebhaften Bewegungsvorgang*.”⁵⁷ Their use of the term *Triebe*, or urge or drive, indicates a close connection to Freudian theory. Laban also used the Freudian term; he argued: “whereas music expresses the feelings and literature expresses reason, dance expresses the drives, the *im Lebenwesen waltenden Triebe* ‘the drives that dominate living beings.’”⁵⁸ Laban would later develop this idea into his concept of effort (*en triebe*), the amount and quality of force used to complete a movement. The next section will explore how a new art of the body and movement—modern dance—emerged out of the cultural context of body culture I have just described.

Modern Dance: A New Art of the Body

German modern dance emerged out of a time of crisis, cultural redefinition, and artistic innovation. In the first decades of the twentieth century, many artists and intellectuals questioned the nature of modern life and its impact on human life. The next section examines specific movements, people, and events that led to the development of German modern dance.

Avant-garde Art

Like body culture, the artistic avant-garde called upon utopian discourses to imagine a new way of life. They valued emotion, mysticism, and romanticism in a dehumanized, mechanical age. Expressionism – the predominant avant-garde movement in Germany in the first few decades of the twentieth century – promoted a new world view in which art was seen as a direct window into the soul.

This rebellion was not only about art; similar to body culture and other social reform movements of this period, it was intended to create a new kind of society.

[Expressionism] most emphatically did not view itself simply as an artistic movement – nor as a political one either. Rather it was the search for something more encompassing and more intangible: a new reality, “a new sense of life,” and a new ethics of humanity. Most expressionist artists rejected not only “art for art’s sake” but also “politics for politic’s sake” and then defined “true” art and “true” politics as overlapping subcategories of a philosophical ideal—“the ethical.”⁵⁹

Expressionist theatre historian David Kuhns adds: “in social consciousness and ethical commitment, as well as artistic form and aesthetic philosophy, Expressionism sought to revolutionize German society and renew its faith in humanity.”⁶⁰ Expressionist artists sought spiritual and cultural renewal by excavating primitive impulses, mysticism, and deep universal truths.

There was a symbiotic relationship between the development of German modern dance and avant-garde movements in the visual arts in the first three decades of the twentieth century. First of all, they shared a desire to explore abstract rather than representational forms. The artists of the group *Die Brücke* (the Bridge) excavated African and Oceanic sculpture as well as sixteenth century German forms such as the

woodcut in their search for “primitive” and abstract forms. In dance, Laban, Wigman, and others would use masks to abstract the human face, and Oskar Schlemmer of the Bauhaus created the *Triadic Ballet* (1923) for three puppet-like dancers and eighteen futuristic, architectural costumes. Instead of presenting story lines or even character studies, they created works with mystical themes, explorations of Freudian impulses, and archetypal figures. Similarly, Paul Klee proclaimed, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.”⁶¹

Die Brücke also initiated a discourse about the body as the site of human expression, emotion and instinct that set the agenda for all other Expressionist works. Emil Nolde, a member of *Die Brücke* from 1906 to 1907, was inspired by primitive art and had a strong personal mysticism in his work; he would later encourage Mary Wigman to explore dance as a form of bodily expression and mystical experience.

Members of the Munich-based group of painters *Der Blaue Reiter* (the Blue Rider), Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and Paul Klee, argued that art is the embodiment of the spirit, regardless of the form it takes.⁶² Kandinsky insisted that art should reflect the “inner necessity” of the artist, and that “the form is the outer expression of the inner content.”⁶³ *Der Blaue Reiter*, as well as many modern dancers, believed that art should lay bare the spiritual essence of natural forms. Modern civilization had destroyed people’s awareness of the spirituality of nature, they argued, but they looked for inspiration to “primitive” peoples, children, and the mentally ill, who were believed to be more in tune with nature. In the 1910s in Munich, the *Blaue Reiter* group expanded to include dancers and musicians; they worked extensively with dancers Alexander Sacharoff and Clotilde von Derp. In 1909, Kandinsky created a stage production, *Der*

Gelbe Klang (The Yellow Tone), which sought to demonstrate the “inner correspondence of color, movement, music, light, and sounds.”⁶⁴

Other avant-garde movements such as Dada also shared concerns with modern dance. The Zurich Dada movement, for example, which had direct contact with Laban and his followers, wanted to create “a ‘universal language’ of pure forms.”⁶⁵ Dadaists were also deeply interested in the emotional power of rhythm. Painter and filmmaker Hans Richter – who married Laban-trained dancer Sophie Täuber – called rhythm “the inner nature-force . . . through which we are bound up with the elemental nature-forces.”⁶⁶ As film historian Michael Cowan explains, Richter’s 1921 *Film ist Rhythmus* featured abstract shapes filmed rhythmically. Richter described the desired effect: “The viewer is—exposed—forced to ‘feel’—to go along with the rhythm—breathing—heartbeat:-- . . . through its rising and sinking, the rhythm makes clear what it really means to feel and sense . . .”⁶⁷ Such emphasis on physical reactions to form and rhythm reinforces the importance of bodily discourses at this time.

The Dalcroze Institute at Hellerau

Before and during the First World War, two sites in particular served as centers for life reformers who were interested in exploring nature, form, and the body. These two sites – the Dalcroze Institute in the garden city of Hellerau, and Monte Verità at Ascona, a utopian life reform community—profoundly influenced what was to become German modern dance. At both sites, people danced freely outdoors in environments dedicated to equality between the sexes, utopian life experiments, and rehabilitation of the body.

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, a Swiss professor of music harmony, exerted a major influence on the development of body culture in Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century. His system of “rhythmic gymnastics” linked music and rhythm with movement. Dalcroze believed that music students could better internalize rhythm if it were made physical, so students explored musical concepts physically, as individuals and in groups. Both Mary Wigman and Hanya Holm were first inspired to dance through exposure to Dalcroze’s method, Wigman at a demonstration in 1908 and Holm through her piano studies at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt in 1909. As mentioned above, Holm taught Dalcroze rhythmic gymnastics for several years before joining Wigman in 1921. Wigman was invited to open a Dalcroze school in Berlin, but she declined the offer after a summer course with Laban on Monte Verità inspired her to follow Laban.

Schools throughout Germany and in Paris, Stockholm, London, Geneva, and St. Petersburg, disseminated the Dalcroze system beginning in the 1910s. Dalcroze completed several demonstration tours throughout Europe, and in 1911 he opened his “great temple of rhythmic gymnastics” at Hellerau, outside Dresden, attracting immense attention from the press and from significant figures in the arts.⁶⁸ Hellerau, the first garden city in Germany, was dedicated to the reform of industrialized life. A planned community, it was “centered around a factory organized according to the craft ideal and homes for workers set amidst abundant open space”; Dalcroze was invited to bring his school there because it provided a perfect complement to Hellerau’s utopian vision.⁶⁹ The Dalcroze Institute modeled a new kind of educational community — coeducational, with classes open to all — that followed a progressive approach of learning through doing.

Dalcroze claimed to rediscover and mysticize the “ancient significance of musical and body rhythms,” and therefore to “reconstruct and restore the wholeness, the unity of body, mind and soul.”⁷⁰ The 1910 prospectus for the Dalcroze Institute at Hellerau declared: “The aim of the entire method is to build an entirely harmonious person, his understanding and his character together.”⁷¹ This method had implications for the community as well as for individuals, and, with the institute at Hellerau, Dalcroze attempted to “raise rhythm to the status of a social institution.”⁷² Dalcroze and his collaborators, particularly the stage designer Adolphe Appia, created festival productions such as their version of Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1912), featuring large groups of performers. In order to highlight the power of masses of bodies and the plasticity of space, Appia designed a series of steps for the performance setting. This festival production—along with similar experiments in “festive culture” by Max Reinhardt and Rudolf Laban—created a new genre of performance, in which the group, rather than the individual, was the protagonist of the drama.

The Dalcroze method emphasized improvisation as a pedagogical tool. In classes, students learned to improvise physically based on concepts such as breathing, phrasing, contrasting muscular force, changes in speed or dynamics, rhythmic patterns, canon, echoing patterns, “expressive realizations,” and “plastic counterpoint,” forms related to yet independent of music.⁷³ They explored the rhythms of their own heartbeats first, and then continued on to explore different rhythms played on a drum or piano. They moved different parts of the body, moved in spatial patterns, played with accents and syncopations, added their voices, and created rhythmic “dialogues” with other members of the class. “The variety of such exercises was practically infinite, and Dalcroze liked

nothing better than to compose hundreds of them, for he believed that the exercise, not the lecture or reading, was the key to effective learning.”⁷⁴

Many aspects of Dalcroze pedagogy were later integrated into Laban’s, Wigman’s, and Holm’s pedagogy, particularly the emphasis on group improvisational explorations of principles of rhythm and movement. I believe that one reason Holm advanced quickly to the level of assistant teacher, and then co-director of the Wigman School was because Wigman’s method was based on Dalcroze rhythmic gymnastics, and was therefore quite familiar to her. Holm’s response to seeing Wigman perform for the first time was not, “wow – something completely new!” Instead, it was, “Oh yes! The next step.”⁷⁵ Her work with Wigman was a natural extension of her previous experiences and training.

Laban’s School for the Art of Life at Monte Verità

Monte Verità (Mountain of Truth), near Ascona in the Swiss Alps, also played a significant role in the development of German modern dance. It was the original location for counterculture, and shared many elements with that later American counterculture location, Woodstock—free love, nudity, music, dance, communal living, and a rejection of bourgeois convention.⁷⁶ Ascona was a small mountain village on the north end of Lago Maggiore, which separates Switzerland from Italy. In 1900, Ida Hofmann and Henri Oedenkoven founded Monte Verità, a vegetarian nature cure sanatorium, on a hill near Ascona. It became a haven for young people looking for an alternative to the urban bourgeois lifestyle, and provided refuge to artists and writers such as Hermann Hesse, Marianne Werefkin, Otto Gross, Hugo Ball, and Tristan Tzara. Monte Verità fostered communal lifestyles, “marriages of conscience,” vegetarianism, nature cures, and organic

farming. It was also a center for occult activity, including the Masonic O.T.O. (Ordo Templi Orientis), of which Laban became a leading member.

In 1913, Laban founded his School for the Art of Life at Monte Verità. Here he first created his “dance-farm,” where members of the community worked every day in the gardens and kitchen before their lessons in dance, music, and art. They created work-songs — inspired by those in Bücher’s study *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (Work and Rhythm), discussed above — to coordinate their actions.⁷⁷ Laban believed that his dancers needed to be in contact with nature “in order to discover, deep inside themselves, the authentic dancer spirit.”⁷⁸ They lived in light and air huts, and Laban called them to work each morning by sounding a gong.⁷⁹

Laban gathered a group of followers around him, especially women. He exuded an erotic aura that pervaded his mystical approach to dance and free movement.⁸⁰ At Monte Verità, he founded a secret, scandalous lodge for women based on freemasonry. Historian Martin Green asserts that Monte Verità was a site of (predominantly non-political) feminism, and that Laban’s “kind of dance was notable for, among other things, the chance it gave women to manifest themselves as figures of power rather than of grace.”⁸¹ For a number of years, he lived in a communal arrangement with his wife, Maja Lederer, and their children; his lover and artistic collaborator, Suzanne Perrottet; and Wigman, his artistic collaborator. With them he attempted to found a “Labangarten” in Hombrechtikon, a small village near Zurich, in 1915. This was intended to be a school of living:

“[A] place for the education of reformers” in line with the ethical-social philosophy of the life reform (*Lebensreform*) movement. Every person

should be able to find their “creative lifestyle” here, it said in the promotional information, because this “Labangarten” provided a “gathering place for novel endeavors in form, in ways of living, culture and art.”⁸²

This venture was a failure, in part because the local villagers were opposed to it, but Laban would try several more times to create rural “dance-farms.”

Rudolf Laban and The New World of the Dancer

From about 1912, in his various schools in Munich, Ascona, Zurich, and elsewhere, Laban developed his concept of dance, which would form the basis of virtually all German modern dance of the next two decades. He called his system *Tanz-Ton-Wort* (dance-tone-word), a system of improvisation that linked movement to rhythm, speech, music, poetry, and silence. During this time, he also began to develop his theory of movement harmony, which related his “swing scales” to three-dimensional Platonic shapes. Through these harmonic scales, he sought the mystical significance of movement by connecting emotions and sensations to the experience of moving in space.

His concept of the movement choir was central. *Die Erde* (The Earth), a large movement choir work performed in 1914 by his students and summer guests in Ascona, presented a “new mythology” based on the relationships between the crystalline, plant, and animal worlds. Laban considered the movement choir to be the perfect vehicle for amateur dance, or what he called “laymen’s dance.” Dance, to Laban, was a form of ritual, and through movement choirs, “laymen” could experience the power and joy of dance for themselves. However, only the initiates of Laban’s inner circle understood the meaning of the mystical powers of elemental dance, which he organized into trinities:

dance/tone/word, crystal/plant/animal, force/space/time, willing/thinking/feeling, and body/soul/mind.

A Freemason, Laban was a member of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O), a mystical and theosophical sect that performed occultist practices on Monte Verità, and his movement explorations had mystical and religious intentions. Historian Marion Kant has argued that Laban's entire life work was devoted to founding a religion: she proposes "that Laban's dance theory is a quasi-religious belief system resting on occult Masonic thought and that all his achievements are to be regarded as meaningful and deliberately constructed elements of this quasi-religion."⁸³ His theories of movement harmony explained the universal and mystical meaning of human movement, his notation system provided "runes" to be deciphered by his initiates, his many books and essays spread the message to laymen, his movement choirs allowed "the masses" to ritually commune with others, and his schools and summer camps developed the religious community.

Martin Green, in his study of Monte Verità, calls Laban a "priest of art," who set out to exorcise the demons of modern degeneracy and the artificiality and decadence of conventional theater and dance.⁸⁴ Laban wanted to create a new kind of theater: "It must be a healthy festival of joy in the clear sunlight of daytime, without these pretences and trappings, which smother all the essentials."⁸⁵ Dance, he believed, offered the most potent means of social regeneration and the most effective way to conjure up buried spiritual powers. Green asserts:

What he meant by dancing was quite transcendental . . . It was the fusion of thought, feeling, and will. Men must rebel against the domination of abstract ideas and fill the world with the dance of the body-soul-spirit.

Dance is creativity. The most significant human creations, in all ages, were always born of the *Tänzergeist*, the “dancer spirit.”⁸⁶

Like his teacher and friend, artist Hermann Obrist, Laban’s vision of dance/art as religion encompassed ethics, philosophy, and the natural sciences. Both Obrist and Laban gave frequent public lectures because they each believed that there could not be an artistic revolution without an enlightened public. He was inspired by Obrist’s view of nature as a type of artist, and his belief in aesthetic laws intrinsic to nature.⁸⁷ Similarly, Laban was influenced by artist Wassily Kandinsky’s attempts to derive a working system of form harmony (*Harmonielehre der Form*), and to reveal the spiritual correlations of color, movement, music, light, and sounds. Further, Evelyn Doerr notes:

Laban was also drawn to the research on natural phenomena done by Haeckel, who wrote that the whole organic world of plants, animals, and humans is inherently connected to the inorganic world of crystals because both are subject not only to the same physical laws of motion but also to the same morphological principle of development—symmetry.⁸⁸

Laban viewed rhythm and symmetry as ordinary “Ur-forms” in nature. He believed that dance could contribute to the ethical, religious, and aesthetic development of human life by revealing and enacting form-symbols that had expressive, cultic meaning. He wrote: “The fleeting pathway of the dancer is filled with ethical spirit.”⁸⁹

Laban’s concept of *Festkultur* (festive culture) and its connection to occultist ritual can be seen in his *Sun Festival (Sonnenfest)*, staged on Monte Verità in August 1917 as part of a conference on the occult. Over a twelve-hour span from sunset to sunrise in three outdoor locations, *Sun Festival* integrated spoken words, simple group dances (which he called *Reigen*, round or chain dances), musical accompaniment by

drums and flutes, and natural scenery—sunlight, firelight, lanterns, rocks, mountains, the rising sun. Wigman and other members of Laban’s inner circle performed the dances and physically led the spectators to different locations, thus involving them in the ritual. Manning points out that certain elements of the action were understood only by initiates of the O.T.O.⁹⁰ Laban reminded his followers that, in order to fulfill their task “in a deeper sense,” they must consider “all [their] ways and actions to be preparation and part of festive culture.”⁹¹ Through festive activities, communal culture would be built up, and each individual self would be realized.

The *Reigen* was Laban’s favorite form, and his *Reigenwerk, The Swinging Temple* (1924), was perhaps the most representative of his beliefs. He described it:

Behind external events the dancer perceives another, entirely different, world. There is an energy behind all occurrences and material things for which it is almost impossible to find a name. A hidden, forgotten landscape lies there, the land of silence, the realm of the soul, and in the centre of this land stands the swinging temple. Yet, the messages from this land of silence are tremendously eloquent and tell us in ever-changing forms and shapes about things and realities important to us all. What we generally call dance also comes from these regions, and the dance-conscious person is truly an inhabitant of this land, consciously and directly drawing strength for living from its inexhaustible treasures. The remaining people can but get a taste of this vital nourishment through the enjoyment they derive from artistic works of dance.

. . . A person can prosper if he settles in that distant land and tills its soil. Its flowers and fruit are works of art woven out of the primeval depths of the inner being . . . In the heart of the land of silence stands the swinging temple in which all sorrows and joys, all sufferings and dangers, all struggles and deliverances meet and move together. The ever-changing swinging temple, which is built of dance, of dances which are prayers, is the temple of the future.⁹²

This description encompasses a number of central ideas in Laban’s danced religion: the dancer alone can truly perceive and inhabit the realm of the soul; observing

artistic works of dance provides vital nourishment for the laity by giving them a glimpse of this other reality; dance works of art are the fruit of the “primeval depths of the inner being”; and this other reality, revealed by dance-prayers, represents the future. In his dance-bible, *Die Welt des Tänzers* (1920), he called for a dance in which “the aesthetic and the constructive are the visible representatives of the religious.”⁹³

Wigman as Laban’s Disciple

After joining Laban in 1913, Wigman became his primary assistant, and she helped him to develop his theory of movement harmony. Though she would later concentrate more on performance and choreography of solo and group works, she would always share Laban’s vision of dance as a mystical, religious act. She considered the years she spent with Laban on Monte Verità to be the decisive years of her life. In 1917, Wigman presented her first public performances in Zurich at the Laban School and at a public theater; soon after, she decided to leave Laban.⁹⁴ Laban had given her a life purpose, but she was more interested in the darker side of human nature than Laban had been, and she set out to found her own dance cult. In 1935, after almost two decades of competing against each other for followers and dominance over German modern dance, Laban would call her the greatest German dancer “because of her monstrous gift for coming close in dance to the Powers of Nature.”⁹⁵

Wigman’s decision to leave Laban was apparently traumatic for her, and she spent a year of “unlike solitude” in a sanatorium, attempting to find her own artistic voice. At the end of that period, she emerged with a concert of solo works. Solo tours throughout Switzerland and then Germany in 1919 and 1920 brought Wigman

widespread acclaim. Quite by chance, she settled in Dresden in 1920 where she quickly developed both a school and a performing group.

Soon after, Laban also left Switzerland, eventually settling in Stuttgart. Switzerland had been the site of Laban and Wigman's collaborations and their first experiments in mystical and cultic dance. Germany would be the site of their greatest successes and their attempts to institutionalize (even nationalize) their approaches, as they became rivals in their quest to dominate the dance scene.

Zero Hour: The Battle for a New Community in Weimar Germany

After the devastation of the First World War, there was a sense in Germany that bourgeois society had been destroyed, and that a new world would grow out of the ruins. The prevalent metaphor of the "zero hour" suggested that people could begin anew without the burden of the past. In this vacuum of values and traditions, artists and intellectuals fought for their visions of a new society, just as a continually evolving assortment of political parties fought for dominance in the political sphere. In his canonical study of Weimar Culture, Peter Gay asserts that the Weimar Republic made insiders out of outsiders; Jews, democrats, socialists, and modern artists who had been shut out of Wilhelmine society suddenly became the leaders of the young republic in the wake of the First World War.⁹⁶ This was a situation fraught with conflict. A recurrent theme in artistic works was the rebellion of sons against fathers. Wigman recalled the atmosphere in her memoirs:

It was a fighting time, full of rebellion against everything rusty, dusty, and traditional . . . After the dam had burst which slowed down or totally interrupted the creativeness of many German artists during the First World War, there was no holding back in the twenties. The stored-up creative

forces broke through . . . Everything seemed young and novel, as if nothing had been done before. Extreme contrasts collided, controversies were brought to a head, there was constantly a meeting of minds which bore the most wonderful results.⁹⁷

In this environment, Laban and Wigman fought to institute their visions of dance. Body culture and its validation of dance gave them a receptive public and willing students.

When cries for “vitalism” were at their peak during and immediately after the war, modern dance provided ways to experience ecstasy and freedom of the body. Wigman wrote in her memoirs:

The young people of Germany at that time recognized these possibilities. They were growing up in a sad, discouraged world, a world that walked with its head hanging, its steps lagging. The monotonous mechanism of old-fashioned calisthenics, of knee-bending and club-swinging, was not enough for them . . . And they began to dance for the fun of it . . . The popularity of the new system spread rapidly throughout the country . . . Before long I found myself the center of a national movement.⁹⁸

Laban and Wigman capitalized on the receptivity of the public by creating vast networks of schools in the 1920s, which laid the foundations for their German dance communities.

By the mid-1920s, Laban and Wigman led networks of schools all over Germany and beyond, and they dominated the discourse in dance journals and newspapers. Laban had schools in Nuremburg, Stuttgart, Mannheim, Hamburg, Würzburg, Leipzig, Basel, Munich, Salzburg, Tübingen, Berlin, Budapest, Vienna, and Nordhausen, which trained amateur adults and children as well as aspiring professionals. He founded the German Society for Dance Writing, along with its journal *Schriftanz*, in 1928 to promote his newly released system of dance notation. In addition to choreographing works for the stage, he staged mass movement choirs, including one for 500 men and women at the

Mannheim National Theatre in 1929, and another for 10,000 amateur performers in Vienna the same year. Laban's vision of modern dance was widely disseminated by his book *Die Welt des Tänzers* (The Dancer's World), published in 1920, which became a manifesto of the movement. In 1926 he followed it with *Des Kindes Gymnastik und Tanz* (Children's Gymnastics and Dance) and its companion for adults, *Gymnastik und Tanz* (Gymnastics and Dance), as well as a treatise on choreography.

Although Laban remained the "master" of German modern dance, Wigman surpassed him as an acclaimed performer and choreographer, and even rivaled his influence as an educator. After only one year back in Germany, critic Hans Brandenburg announced, "She is now herself a phenomenon, and in her style perhaps the greatest the art of dance offers."⁹⁹ Solo tours throughout central, eastern, and northern Europe made her the most widely known German dancer outside of Germany by 1924, and established her reputation as the most important artist of modern dance on the continent.¹⁰⁰ Between 1920 and 1930, she choreographed over seventy solos and ten major group works. She also built up a considerable network of schools to rival Laban's; by 1926, there were 360 students at the Central Institute in Dresden, and 1,200 more in the branch schools in Hamburg, Erfurt, Frankfurt, Berlin, Chemnitz, Riesa, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Munich, and Freiburg.¹⁰¹ By the early 1930s, almost 2,000 students attended the Wigman Schools,¹⁰² including many international students. After 1925, the government subsidized her teacher-training programs.¹⁰³ Like Laban, she spread her ideas through writing essays, giving lectures, and performing lecture-demonstrations with her students.

Laban and Wigman's vision of modern dance as a mystical, spiritual, and communal undertaking that would transform German social life was widely accepted

among modern dancers. Body culture had provided them with a vast community of devoted followers, and modern dance quickly became one of the central activities of leisure and art.

Ways to Strength and Beauty

The 1925 UFA (United Film Artists) government-produced propaganda film for body culture, *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (*Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*), demonstrates how dance related to the larger body culture. In a program note for the film, Felix Hollaender explained its purpose:

Mens sana in corpore sano [a sound mind in a sound body] is the leitmotif of the film, and it is brought to life in a plenitude of examples . . . What was created was meant to be a hymn to endeavors aimed equally at awakening the sense of beauty and contributing to recovering the nation's health. It sought to show with what vigor our maligned era has seized upon and developed the issue of body culture – the extent to which it has been able to approximate the Greek ideal of beauty . . . This film seeks to indicate the kind of forces now at work that would make a rebirth of the body in the spirit of antiquity possible.¹⁰⁴

The film contrasted the ancient Greek gymnasium with the modern German gymnasium, arguing that in ancient Greece, physical exercise was integrated into education and “care of the body was as important as care for the brains.”¹⁰⁵ Young boys sitting hunched over their desks in a German school provided vivid contrast to this ideal. Unhealthy contemporary bodies – overweight, underweight, poor posture, slack-muscled, gaunt, limp – were shown alongside antique sculptures of “harmonious” bodies. The film called modern Germans to “emulate the ancient Greeks ourselves,” and showed athletes, gymnasts, dancers, and other *Körperkultur* practitioners in motion, as modern-day examples of healthy and harmonious bodies.¹⁰⁶ It concluded with footage of Mary

Wigman's *Scenes from a Dance Drama* (1924), performed by Wigman and her company members, including Hanya Holm, dancing on a grassy hilltop.

Even though modern dance and rhythmic gymnastics critiqued the competitive nature of sports, they were all part of the larger body culture phenomenon and shared the conviction that modern life and modern bodies needed to be reformed. In his article "Sports is the Will to Culture," Fritz Wildung asserted:

Sport is a rebellion against the threat of decay, an expression of the will to live. Young life does not want to be crushed on the treadmill of the economic system but strives to raise itself to higher forms. That is why it seeks the movement necessary to life and psychological balance in a kind of work that it recognizes as struggle and play and therefore a source of joy and well-being. Seen in this way sport is a playful form of work and thereby a necessary correlate of today's production processes.¹⁰⁷

A number of Hanya Holm's choreographies of the 1930s – particularly *Trend* (1937) and *Dance of Work and Play* (1938) – would contrast the negative effects of regimented, mechanical forms of work with more natural forms of work and play.

Conclusion

Throughout her long life, Hanya Holm maintained certain core beliefs, with roots in the German body culture of the early twentieth century described in this chapter. She believed that people could lead fuller, richer, and healthier lives—physically, psychologically, and spiritually—if they freed their bodies through movement, rhythm, and dance. She believed that consciously lived bodily experience could generate spiritual renewal on both individual and societal levels, and that “swinging” with others through group dance experiences created a healthy and holistic community. She believed so

whole-heartedly in these ideas—and in Mary Wigman’s genius as the dance artist who represented the highest fulfillment of these ideals on the stage—that she made numerous personal sacrifices to serve the cause, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate.

What was it about this philosophy that sustained Holm through a seven-decade-long career? Why was it so powerful, both for her and for the thousands of modern dance devotees in Europe, America, and around the world? I think the answer lies, in part, in the promises made by German body culture. As I have described in this chapter, this was the promise to reinvigorate modern life, and to cure social, physical, and spiritual ills. It was the promise of health and a richer experience of life. It was the promise of authenticity at a time when mass production seemed to threaten personal and social identities. For young women, it was also the promise of emancipation from bourgeois expectations and the cultivation of deep, meaningful interpersonal relationships, which I will discuss further in Chapter 4.

For Germans in the aftermath of the First World War’s crushing defeat, it was also the promise of a new kind of cultural community that affirmed their uniqueness as a people, would provide new kinds of social cohesion and authentic connections, and would create a stronger nation. For the followers of Laban and Wigman, this concept of community (*Gemeinschaft*) was central to their practice of dance as a modern art; by joining the dance community, they joined a group of people committed to a new way of life that was intimately linked to searches for authenticity and health. The ideas of “festive culture” formulated by Laban and Dalcroze proposed models for dance to become community. Laban and Wigman’s cultic dance communities enacted *Gemeinschaft* and, in that way, aspired to become models for a widespread revolution in

German culture. Inge Baxmann emphasizes that dance and body culture played a special role in the discourse of *Gemeinschaft*, as they symbolized the “regeneration of the social (and national) body.”¹⁰⁸ The generative, healing power of dance, rhythm, and movement would transform the postwar, ailing German body and soul.

Through the concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and the Nietzschean “German Dionysian,” modern dance was ideologically linked to notions of nature, the German landscape, primal impulses, the *Volk*, and folklore. The modern dancers hoped to lead the community away from the mechanization, cynicism, and decadence of the metropolis, toward the province, the location of nature people, the landscape and the folk culture that would unify the nation. Hanya Holm would bring this vision with her to America.

NOTES

¹ For examples of the diversity and contradictory goals of the movement, see: Yvonne Hardt, “Relational Movement Patterns: The Diversity of Movement Choirs and Their Social Potential in the Weimar Republic,” *Society of Dance History Scholars Proceedings* (2003) 45-50; Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Susanne Lahusen, eds., *Schriftanz: A View of German Dance in the Weimar Republic* (London: Dance Books, Ltd., 1990); and Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935*.

² Holm told dance historian Selma Odom that she had studied with Guldenstein in Frankfurt (Selma Odom, personal communication with the author, June 2001). She graduated from the New School for Applied Rhythm in Hellerau in 1916 (Hanya Holm Papers (S) MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.) This was a school based on Dalcroze principles, founded in 1915 after Dalcroze himself had left Hellerau.

³ Gustav Guldenstein, “Foundations for a Dance Culture,” (1930) in *Schriftanz: A View of German Dance in the Weimar Republic*, edited by Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Susanne Lahusen (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1990) 60 – 63.

⁴ Hanya Holm Papers (S) MGZMD 136/296, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵ Manning, “Ausdruckstanz Across the Atlantic.”

⁶ I thank Yvonne Hardt for clarifying this distinction. (Yvonne Hardt, personal communication with the author, January 2007).

⁷ For an example of this tendency, see Dianne Howe, *Individuality and Expression: The Aesthetics of the New German Dance* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). Howe places *Ausdruckstanz* within the Expressionist art movement and mentions body culture only briefly, not giving it any more attention than other cultural developments such as Einstein’s theory of relativity.

⁸ In her dissertation on dance under National Socialism, Suzan Moss argues, “dance which was closely associated with the gymnastic and physical culture movements that had spread since the turn of the century, was most easily merged with Nazi ideology.” (Suzan F. Moss, “Some Effects of the Nazi Regime on the German Modern Dance: Spinning Through the Weltanschauung,” (PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1988): 237.) However, as she demonstrates, dancers of what she calls the “expressionist wing” such as Mary Wigman also allowed themselves to be manipulated into thinking that the Nazis could bring their utopian dreams to reality (Moss 346-347).

⁹ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 2.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Graeser, “Body Sense: Gymnastics, Dance, Sport” (1927), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 683 – 684.

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- ¹¹ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 7.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹⁴ Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890-1930* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 1.
- ¹⁵ Martin Green, *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins; Ascona, 1900 – 1920* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986) 1.
- ¹⁶ Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty*.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82-100.
- ¹⁸ See, for example: Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); Isadora Duncan, “The Dancer of the Future,” *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 171-177.
- ¹⁹ Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty*, 178.
- ²⁰ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 33.
- ²¹ Green, *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins; Ascona, 1900 – 1920*, 3.
- ²² Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty*, 2.
- ²³ Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft*, 10.
- ²⁴ Hanya Holm, “The Aim of the Modern Dance,” n.d., Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA. One copy of this lecture contains a handwritten note that indicates it was originally given at the Barnard College Symposium of the Dance in March 1932. An expanded version of the lecture was published: Hanya Holm, “The Educational Principles of Mary Wigman,” *The Journal of Health and Physical Education* (June 1932): 7-10, 60-62.
- ²⁵ Hanya Holm, untitled lecture manuscript, 13 May 1932, Hanya Holm Papers (S) MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ²⁶ Alfred Schlee, “Expressionism in the Dance,” *Modern Music* 8.4 (May-June 1931): 13. Emphasis mine.
- ²⁷ “Pro Musica Interview,” (1936), Hanya Holm Papers (S) MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ²⁸ Cowan, 228.

²⁹ Evelyn Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008) 43.

³⁰ Holm, "Pioneer of the New Dance," 9.

³¹ Marianna Torgovnik, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990).

³² Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, "The Cult of the Body: *Lebensreform*, Sports, and Dance," *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 673.

³³ Hau 181.

³⁴ Cowan, 228.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Naima Prevots, "Zurich Dada and Dance: Formative Ferment," *Dance Research Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1985): 7.

³⁷ Ibid., 231.

³⁸ Holm in Ruth Seinfeld, "Modern Girls Learn Primitive Rhythms," *New York Evening Post*, January 5, 1932.

³⁹ Ferdinand Tönnies first published *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1887, and the 1912 second edition was a popular success. The terms were commonly used, and often misused, by German intellectuals throughout the 1910s and 1920s.

⁴⁰ Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft; Körper- und Tanzkulturen in der Moderne*, 7-8. Translation mine.

⁴¹ Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft* 9.

⁴² Inge Baxmann, "Stirring Up Attitudes: Dance as a Language and Utopia in the Roaring Twenties/Die Gesinnung ins Schwingen Bringen; Tanz als Metasprache und Gesellschaftsutopie in der Kultur der zwanziger Jahre," *Ballett International* (1989): 14.

⁴³ Claudia Jeschke and Gabi Vettermann, "Germany: Between Institutions and Aesthetics: Choreographing Germanness?" *Europe Dancing: Perspectives on Theatre Dance and Cultural Identity*, ed. Andrée Grau and Stephanie Jordan (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 56.

⁴⁴ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy* 20.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ Kimerer LaMothe, “‘A God Dances through Me’: Isadora Duncan on Friedrich Nietzsche’s Revaluation of Values,” *The Journal of Religion* 85.2 (April 2005): 248.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴⁹ Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft*, 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Baxmann, “Stirring Up Attitudes” 14.

⁵² Hau 159-160. The notion of “intuitive seeing” was particularly well-articulated by proponents of racial science, who sought to understand the essences of racial types.

⁵³ Virginia Stewart, “Introduction to the Modern Dance,” *Modern Dance*, ed. Virginia Stewart and Merle Armitage (New York: E. Weyhe, 1935) v.

⁵⁴ Mary Wigman, “Stage Dance-Stage Dancer” (1927), trans. Walter Sorell, in *The Mary Wigman Book* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) 108.

⁵⁵ Baxmann, “Stirring Up Attitudes” 14.

⁵⁶ Brochure for the Wigman School, Dresden (n.d.) MGZ “Mary Wigman Schools [catalogs, announcements],” JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵⁷ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵⁸ Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 108-109.

⁵⁹ Barbara Drygulski Wright, “Sublime Ambition: Art, Politics and Ethical Idealism in the Cultural Journals of German Expressionism,” *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 82-112.

⁶⁰ David F. Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1.

⁶¹ Paul Klee, “Creative Credo” (1920), in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 182.

⁶² Peter Selz, “Fauvism and Expressionism: The Creative Intuition; Introduction,” *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 126.

⁶³ Wassily Kandinsky, "On the Problem of Form" (1912), in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 166, 157.

⁶⁴ Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, 22.

⁶⁵ Cowan, "The Heart Machine," 227.

⁶⁶ Richter quoted by Cowan, "The Heart Machine," 227.

⁶⁷ Richter quoted by Cowan, "The Heart Machine," 227.

⁶⁸ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy* 16.

⁶⁹ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon* 52.

⁷⁰ Jeschke and Vettermann 57.

⁷¹ Prospectus for the Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze (1910), quoted in Selma Odom, "Wigman at Hellerau," *Ballet Review* (Summer 1986): 45.

⁷² Dalcroze quoted in Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon* 52.

⁷³ Selma Odom, "Wigman at Hellerau," 47.

⁷⁴ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 18.

⁷⁵ Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm" (1975).

⁷⁶ See Green, *Mountain of Truth*.

⁷⁷ Suzanne Perrottet quoted by Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, 32.

⁷⁸ Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 94.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁰ In her 1913 diaries, Wigman called Laban a "magician" and "irresistible." (Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, 17.) He fathered a number of children by several different women, most of whom he abandoned. He refused to be responsible for a family, and devoted himself exclusively to his mission.

⁸¹ Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 173.

⁸² Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, 49.

⁸³ Kant, "Laban's Secret Religion," 45.

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- ⁸⁴ Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 91.
- ⁸⁵ Laban, *A Life for Dance*, 32.
- ⁸⁶ Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 107.
- ⁸⁷ Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, 11.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁸⁹ Laban, *A Life for Dance*, 178.
- ⁹⁰ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 78.
- ⁹¹ Laban, *A Life for Dance*, 85.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, 89 – 91.
- ⁹³ Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, 88.
- ⁹⁴ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 58.
- ⁹⁵ Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 100, based on Laban, *Ein Leben* (1935).
- ⁹⁶ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968).
- ⁹⁷ Wigman, *The Mary Wigman Book*, 54.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53-54.
- ⁹⁹ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy* 108.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ¹⁰¹ Jeschke and Vettermann, 59.
- ¹⁰² Horst Koegler, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Ballet*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1982) 449.
- ¹⁰³ “German Dancing Introduced Here,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 13 November 1932.
- ¹⁰⁴ Felix Hollaender, “Ways to Strength and Beauty” (1924), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 677.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*. [Film] Dir. Wilhelm Prager. Berlin: UFA, 1925.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Fritz Wildung, “Sport is the Will to Culture” (1926), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 682.

¹⁰⁸ Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft* 9.

CHAPTER 4

MARY WIGMAN AND HER DISCIPLES

Introduction

Mary Wigman exuded a mystical, powerful aura that pervaded both her stage persona and her pedagogical style, and she attracted fiercely loyal disciples. But of all of Wigman's many devotees, Hanya Holm was perhaps the most important: she was instrumental in forming the curriculum of the Wigman School, ran the Dresden school in the 1920s whenever Wigman was out of town on tour, assisted Wigman with choreographies such as *Totenmal* (1930), and firmly established Wigman's influence in the United States, where it has had a lasting impact. When Wigman sent Holm to New York in 1931 to be her American representative, their relationship defined Holm's identity. Therefore, it is essential to this dissertation project to understand the nature of that relationship, especially from Holm's perspective.

Wigman's letters to Holm—which, as I have already mentioned, have been compiled by Claudia Gitelman, translated into English and published as *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*—are extremely valuable for this endeavor. The first thing they reveal is that Wigman and Holm had a special bond that lasted for decades in spite of personal heartbreak, distance, political controversy, and war. Through the letters, we see Wigman as an astute businesswoman, a passionate letter writer who kept track of students and colleagues across the globe, and a lover of nature and cultural festivities. Wigman's letters illuminate Holm as a loyal collaborator who remained humble about her successes on Broadway, and a compassionate friend who went to great

lengths to help Wigman and others survive the privations of the immediate postwar era in Germany.

Joining Wigman

Hanya Holm was the ideal Wigman disciple: loyal, hard-working, conscientious, and intelligent, with a fervent faith in the cultural promise of modern dance and a willingness to sacrifice herself for Wigman's *Kulturkampf* (culture war). When she joined Wigman's first professional class in 1921 at age 28, she had recently divorced her husband, Expressionist artist Reinhold Martin Kuntze. She later described her commitment to Wigman and to dance as an even deeper commitment: "It was to be another kind of marriage for me, one to last forever."¹ Holm and Wigman already shared a language—that of Dalcroze rhythmic gymnastics—and shared the belief that the body and society needed to be reformed. She quickly advanced to the level of assistant teacher in 1922, main teacher in 1924, and co-director of the school in 1929.²

Joining Wigman was not a commitment to undertake lightly; Wigman's biographer Hedwig Müller explains: "Acceptance at the school meant being accepted into a group that was committed to a common goal and a mission: free dance. Joining this mission was a life-altering decision."³ The middle- and upper-middle-class young women in Wigman's classes and performing group—including Holm—often suffered the displeasure of their families in exchange for being part of this movement since being a dancer was not considered socially respectable for members of the middle and upper classes.⁴

Wigman's disciples were willing to give up everything to study with her. They devoted themselves to her completely because they believed in her genius, and because they believed in the cause of "free dance" and its potential for revolutionizing social life.

Holm was so captivated by Wigman's extraordinary stage presence that she was prepared to surmount all the difficulties of daily life as a single mother to train with Wigman. This high degree of motivation was characteristic of Wigman's pupils. They were brimming with eagerness to confront new and unknown realms and to work with Wigman unreservedly.⁵

The "zero hour" after World War I, when all the values of the Wilhelmine era were thrown out, was a time of rebellion, experimentation, and youth. Wigman's modern dance occupied a prominent place in body culture, youth culture, and the artistic avant-garde.

Further, the process of becoming a modern dancer was liberating and exhilarating.

In 1927, Wigman explained in her article "Dance and the Modern Woman":

The longing for self-expression which is the characteristic of the age is driving the girls of to-day to seek satisfaction in dancing. . . Many call this deep-seated restlessness "Fashion," and perhaps there are a few who follow the trend of dancing and physical culture in the light of a phase. But they are in the minority, and do so often as a pretext to cover the futility of their existence. There is a fundamental seriousness in woman's conception of dancing which has nothing in common with the frivolous interests attributed to her by the cheap Press.⁶

Like many of her contemporaries, Holm was deeply inspired by the "fundamental seriousness" of Wigman's example. She was already convinced of the importance of rhythm, dance, and movement to the health of individual bodies and the whole social

body, and Wigman took this mission to an even deeper level—“absolute” art that dealt with matters of life, death, and fate, and which was intended to regenerate German culture in the modern world.

As Müller has pointed out, “Wigman’s school was a place to embark on a search for oneself.”⁷ Authenticity and intuition were imperative as they sought out Freudian drives and the essentials of human movement. In the spirit of psychotherapy, they turned to themselves as subjects of study; their own bodies and their own experiences provided the clues to the fundamentals of dance they sought. Holm later recalled, “we had to fight for everything, but everything, even ourselves.”⁸ The fight for dance was inextricably bound to the fight to find oneself, particularly as a woman.

Collaborative Discoveries

Those early days with Wigman were exciting for the young women who gathered around her as they collectively set out to “re-discover” the elements of dance.⁹ Holm explained:

[The atmosphere was] extremely, let’s say, cooperative. Extremely non-competitive. Strangely enough. And sharing. Whatever anybody has worked out and thought “that is a step farther in this,” shared it with the other and presented it. We presented these things in classes and said “look what I found out”. For instance, we did something which you call a “vibration.” At that time, vibration wasn’t known—I mean vibrancy—wasn’t known as an element. So we got together one evening. We were sitting there and just talking and sitting on the sofa and all of a sudden somebody began, you know, things began to vibrate. So we vibrated all night long! So the next day when we came to class, [we said] we found out something. Let’s see if we can do it on foot . . .¹⁰

Holm later remarked that at that time, they didn’t go to class, they went to a meeting,¹¹ and that “class was only the stimulant for homework.”¹² Wigman later observed that

during the first few years no one yet spoke of a Wigman school *per se*: “We rather were a small experimental club in which everything was tried out which the imagination would yield and which the bodily abilities would permit. But we all without exception were fanatics, obsessed with what we were doing.”¹³ This was an environment that Holm found immensely stimulating and satisfying; she had a curious mind, she enjoyed solving problems, and she preferred to work collaboratively. Chapter 5 will explain the movement ideas they generated through these explorations, which formed the foundation for the Wigman method.

Wigman’s first group of disciples was a dynamic group of ambitious and talented individuals. Gret Palucca, Berthe Trümpy, Harald Kreutzberg, Yvonne Georgi, Max Terpis, Margarthe Wallmann, and Holm all later distinguished themselves in careers of their own, but in the early 1920s, they were devoted to Wigman. Wigman describes their personalities, as they emerged through movement explorations:

[I]n our improvisation class with the theme “Bicyclist,” Terpis was leading the group, careful and concentrated, only envisioning his final aim; Palucca, as the second, seemed without any inhibitions, almost as if possessed the way she totally yielded to each challenge; behind her Yvonne, as always most inventive, intent on form and style; then Hanya, surpassed by no one as the finest craftsman and technician, buffoonish and discriminating in the choice of movement. She pretended to have an accident and stepped down from her imaginary vehicle in order to pump air into the rear tire. The last one was Kreutzberg, who blissfully entered. He constantly seemed diverted by things which appeared to happen at a distance but caught his interest. He noticed them in passing and made them a part of the whole with playful delight.¹⁴

Wigman's description reveals as much about herself as it does about her students; she valued concentration, the ability to surrender yourself to an experience, inventiveness, form, and play.

A Female Community

As a member of Wigman's inner circle, Holm was part of a close-knit community of women. Manning has pointed out that although Wigman had some male students such as Kreuzberg and Terpi, she worked exclusively with women in the performing group she developed in the 1920s. In this all-female community, the women's needs for affiliation and self-realization did not conflict. According to Manning, the oral histories indicate that Wigman's disciples felt that they could be fervently devoted to Wigman and her community and yet retain their individual identities:

In reminiscence after reminiscence former students at the Wigman School emphasized their devotion to "Mary." (More than one called her a "goddess.") Many told stories of parents' opposing their desire to pursue a dance career and of how their encounter with "Mary" and the Wigman School enabled them to realize their "creativity," "artistry," "individuality," and "sense of self." None articulated a conscious conflict between Wigman's mentoring and their self-realization. Indeed, all attributed their self-realization to her mentoring.¹⁵

Manning has called Wigman's construction of an all-female *Gemeinschaft* in the 1920s a "utopian reconciliation of authority and autonomy," in which "Wigman's dancers did not define themselves in relation to men but rather in relation to one another."¹⁶ The pedagogical approaches of the school were infused with this value on *relationship* as the foundation of the community.¹⁷

Holm extended this community of women into her living arrangements, forging strong bonds to other women that enabled her to pursue her career as a single mother. In the first few years of her study with Wigman, she shared an apartment with fellow students Yella Schirmer and Guri Thorsteinsson, and they collectively took care of Holm's infant son Klaus.¹⁸ Each would take a turn staying home from class, and the other two would demonstrate what they had worked on that day in classes when they returned home in the evening. This cooperative living situation made it possible for Holm to study with Wigman and still care for her son. In addition, it quite literally made it possible for all of them to survive as dancers with few resources. The financial situation in Germany was dire at that time, and the three women pooled their limited resources, including their daily allotment of heat briquettes.¹⁹ Holm remained friends with Schirmer and Thorsteinsson for the rest of her life, visiting them and their families whenever she returned to Germany. It seems that these experiences strengthened her belief in the power of dance as a community-building activity; for the remainder of her career, Holm would prefer collaborative working situations.

Wigman's Mission

Wigman's approach to dance, as I have already established, integrated a number of concerns: the Nietzschean desire to re-birth authentic, primal dance for modern people; the belief in rhythm, movement, and nature as keys to a healthier, more fulfilling life experience; mystical and religious beliefs; and her desire to express human struggle. In the next section, I will address several other interconnected aspects of Wigman's

mission: the war with ballet, the desire to rid dance of voyeurism, and the rejection of “stage dance.”

Wigman’s Nietzschean Will to Re-Birth Dance

Wigman was galvanized by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spake Zarathustra).²⁰ She embraced all of the main themes of this book: the critique of Judeo-Christian morality and Nietzsche’s declaration that “god is dead”; the ideal of the “*Übermensch*,” a “superhuman” or self-mastered individual; the “will to power” that demanded expression; and the idea of “eternal recurrence.” These ideas empowered her to fight for her worldview and to position herself as a natural leader. According to Nietzsche, only the “*Übermensch*” had the strength to deal with the reality of “eternal recurrence,” the idea that there is no escape from the trials of this world, and it is this ability that sets him apart from the common person. Wigman physicalized her struggles with death in her choreography, and believed her fate was to follow her “will to power” and lead the way to a new kind of dance—self-realized, passionate, and deeply spiritual—that would transform German cultural life by freeing bodies and souls. After her public debut as a solo artist in Zürich in 1916, at which she performed her Zarathustra, she wrote in her diary:

I am the dance! And am the Priestess of the dance
My body swings
Springs to you all
Of the movement of all things . . .
The pain of all striving things is my pain.
The desire of all circling movement
Is my desire.
I am Master over the space,
The Priestess of the risen dances.
I am the soul of the dance.²¹

The Dance in the Mirror of Various Cultures

A document in Holm's papers, entitled "The Dance in the Mirror of Various Cultures," demonstrates Wigman's indebtedness to Nietzschean philosophy and provides a glimpse into the Wigman view of dance history.²² A note on the document states that it was created "as a consequence of nine discussion evenings, September 1925 to June 1926" at the Wigman School in Dresden. The document theorizes a progression of dance practices through time in different cultural settings, highlighting ancient Greek cultic dances and ending with Wigman's dance. It reveals the concepts of nature and culture Wigman and her disciples embraced, creating an opposition between "nature peoples" and "culture peoples." It also provides concrete evidence of their rejection of ballet as an aristocratic form.

"The Dance in the Mirror of Various Cultures" outlines an evolutionary structure of dance history. It begins with "Elementary dances"—initiation dances, war dances, and sacrifice celebrations—performed by "nature peoples" in Africa, Australia, the South Sea Islands, and other supposed "primitive" cultures. The dances of "culture people" include cultic dances, folk dances, and courtly dance. This wide-ranging overview of human dance practices includes descriptions of Javanese Puppet theater, Indian temple dance, Biblical references to David dancing, Japanese geisha dances, Dionysian cultic dances, Greek choruses, medieval European death dances, and folk forms such as the Spanish Bolero and the Italian Tarantella. The document claims that Christianity denies the body and forces the dancer out of society. Ballet emerged out of European court dance, the document explains, but has become "decadent in our time."

The authors' view of ballet and modern dance ("our dance") demonstrates modern dance's claim to be the dance of the future, the form that will revitalize modern life. While the document praises ballet for creating dance as an independent art form, it ultimately rejects ballet on several grounds. First, it is of French origin, and only superficially changes when it adapts to "other races." Second, ballet lost its independence when it became part of Italian opera, and became literally a "diversion" (*divertissement*) in the pauses in the drama's action. The Ballets Russes represented a successful revival of dance as an art, the authors propose, but by 1925 the company had been shattered, and its former members had failed to "take root" anywhere. The authors note that former Ballet Russes stars Fokine and Fokina had been rejected by all of Germany the previous year, and they also critique Pavlova, the brilliant soloist, for her failure to develop a viable group.

In contrast, under the category "Our Dance" the authors herald the future. They identify three precursors to Wigman: Duncan, Dalcroze, and Laban. Duncan's work is described as "the search by the body," Dalcroze's work is described as "the search for rhythm by the body, dead end," and Laban's work is described as "the release of the body by movement." Wigman's approach is described as "the dance instrument." The idea is that Wigman has extended Duncan's emphasis on the body, and Laban's release of the body through an emphasis on movement, by developing the body as the instrument through which to create dance.

Above all, the thrust of the document is that "the dance itself" is an entity that transcends specific forms and manifestations. In other writings, Holm asserted that Wigman had succeeded in unearthing the dance and re-embodiment it for modern life: she

had “sought out the very source of the dance itself from which to make her pilgrimage to a new land.”²³ All of the dances described in this document were time-bound, changeable manifestations of this deeper reality—the dance itself—which, they argued, Wigman’s approach alone could access.

The War Against Ballet: We Are Standing at the Beginning

A major component of Laban and Wigman’s quest to institute their form of dance in Germany was their war against ballet. From the time of Isadora Duncan’s first performances in Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century, modern dance (then called “free dance”) had been cast as the dance of the future, while ballet was seen as the dance of the past.²⁴ In the Weimar period, this fight intensified. Modern dancers applied the pervasive *Gesellschaft - Gemeinschaft* discourse of the time to create a binary opposition between ballet (which they associated with tradition, spectacle, internationalism, professionalism, established society) and modern dance (innovation, self-expression, nationalism, amateurism, communal identification). Ballet was inherently flawed, they argued—it was a product of the city, and just a passing fad. It was thus associated with the decadence of “civil society” (*Gesellschaft*) and its decadence and disease in modern times.

In the spirit of bourgeois life reform—which, as described in Chapter 4, provided social distinction for its practitioners, as a beautiful, healthy body came to represent social capital—Wigman and her associates rejected the professional aspect of ballet. For them, dance was a spiritual calling and a new way of life—not a mere profession. They believed that ballet dancers existed on a lower rung of society, not much better than prostitutes. Holm later recalled their view of ballet dancers in the 1920s:

[A]t that time . . . no ballerina was a dancer, they were little—well, the stage-door Johnnies were there waiting for them. . . . the little rats, we called them, when they came on the stage, there was a twinkle with that guy in that box watching, and a twinkle with that and they were waiting at the end of the performance . . . If you were a ballerina you were a low woman.²⁵

Most modern dancers, in contrast, were from middle- or upper-middle-class families.²⁶ (Wigman was from a traditional upper-middle-class family in Hannover, and Hanya Holm was from a merchant middle-class family in Mainz, near Frankfurt.)

Wigman and her disciples thought of themselves as the representatives of a groundbreaking cultural and spiritual movement; they were not professional performers. Like Isadora Duncan before them, they insisted that what they did was worthy of the greatest respect, government subsidy, and institutionalization in the public schools.²⁷ It was not only art; it was a living philosophy, an enactment of a higher state of existence.²⁸

In contrast, ballet was mere “stage dance” to them. Wigman and Holm repeatedly claimed, “there is no bridge” to connect them to ballet; between ballet and modern dance was an un-crossable chasm that separated them in every way.²⁹ Modern dancers “stood at the beginning” of a new era, and they looked to “primitive” and “natural” sources for inspiration, not to the academic technique of ballet.³⁰

Rejecting Girlkultur

Wigman and her disciples also created an oppositional contrast between their life work and the “revue-girls” and social dance crazes of the Weimar period in cities like Berlin, where jazz music and dance became increasingly popular in nightclubs. Although modern dancers enjoyed the freedom of the “New Woman” of the Weimar period, they did not participate in “Girl culture” (*Girlkultur*). The cosmopolitan “New Woman,” the

revue-girl, American “*Girllkultur*,” and jazz were—in the worldview of body culture and modern dance—products of the city, decadent, mechanized, alienated, and alienating.

The Jazz Age of the 1920s affected popular urban German culture in much the same ways that it affected Paris and New York. Young people embraced jazz and swing music and dance—so much so that banning jazz became a major priority for the Nazis after 1933.³¹ Jazz was “ultramodern and ultraprimitive.”³² Its (African) American origin gave it specific resonances; it was seen as an American product, a result of industrialized society, and an expression of the fast pace of urban life, but it was simultaneously seen as an expression of primitive drives.

German *Girllkultur*—which encompassed all-female revue shows such as the Tiller Girls, as well as the activities of young women who participated in urban popular culture and emulated those female performers—had similar resonances. One contemporary commentator, Paul Landau, asserted that the “Girls” of revue and variety shows embodied the primitive yet modern rhythms of American jazz. These Girls (they were always called “Girls”) were idealized as youthful, fresh, modern, and confident. Historian Günter Berghaus notes that, according to the illustrated magazines and other mass media of the time, “these Girls’ ultimate aim in life was to find a husband, preferably a rich one. This in fact was one of the reasons why they joined the Girl troupes. Here they could present themselves in the most advantageous light to a large audience of potential spouses.”³³

At mid-decade, advertisements began to make use of *Girllkultur* appeal and its popular image: “healthy, beautiful, successful, and climbing the social ladder into aristocracy.”³⁴ Images of sports cars and skyscrapers reinforced their association with

modernity. The image of the “New Woman” was related to these cultural forms. The prototypical “New Woman” was a physically fit, emancipated young woman who went out dancing after a day at work as a secretary or other clerical position.

In contrast, female participants in body culture and modern dance rejected the association of the female body with the erotic spectacles of cabaret, nightclubs, and the ballet stage. They created a new kind of lifestyle and career that put movement, health, and rhythm at the center of their daily life. Renate Berger argues that, by presenting herself as a prophetess, Wigman made herself less controversial as a powerful woman: “Since Mary Wigman chose the role of the prophetess, she could be ecstatic without forfeiting her reputation.”³⁵ Unlike dancers like Anita Berber and Valeska Gert, who were more connected to the culture of the metropolitan avant-garde and nightlife, Wigman was ideologically tied with nature and rural life through body culture and life reform.

Rejecting Voyeurism

A document found among Holm’s papers demonstrates how Wigman and her disciples rejected the voyeurism of stage dance. Holm proclaimed that the days when the dancer sought to unconditionally please an admiring audience were over:

The times have changed, and so have its arts. One no longer searches so much for that sense of pleasure, which was at the center of everything and which permitted that uncompromising watching, that pleasure and admiration from the audience . . . The body [now] becomes the patron of its own passions and longings, its pains and joys. It becomes the fulfiller of its mission, and the cathedral of its faith and devotion. The physical must go this inexorable educating way, which raises the dancer from birth to become a priest in the temple of the art.³⁶

Modern dance was not intended to provide voyeuristic pleasure for the audience; it was a means to liberation for its young, mostly female, participants. Expressionist artists in other disciplines often used dance—particularly jazz dance—to symbolize their ambivalent feelings about modernity, but Wigman and other modern dancers represented an alternative to jazz dance, because they promised a solution to the problem of modernity.

Alfred Schlee also spoke for Wigman and her disciples when he claimed that modern dance was not “stage dance,” but was instead “group action,” concerned with “the portrayal of a common experience.” This was a crucial distinction. Schlee asserted that the *purest* form of modern dance was not dance performed on stage, but movement choirs, in which there were truly no spectators, only participants.³⁷ Even concert dance involved the audience as co-participants through kinesthetic empathy. This concept of kinesthetic empathy was essential to the worldview of modern dance on both sides of the Atlantic; John Martin would later point to it as one of the most important contributions of modern dance.³⁸ Kinesthetic empathy, or what Martin called “metakinesis,” was the idea that the spectator feels in his/her own body—muscularly, neurologically, and emotionally—the emotions and ideas conveyed through the dancer’s bodily movements.

As Schlee explained, modern dance performed on stage reflected and enhanced communal experience because “the spectator sees the image of himself in the dancer.” Instead of making the audience passive, voyeuristic observers—as they believed ballet and other forms of “stage dance” did—modern dance integrally involved its audience members through kinesthetic empathy and communal identification.

Wigman's Tanz-Gemeinschaft

In 1928, Wigman founded a dance organization entitled *Deutschen Tanzgemeinschaft*, echoing the contrast between *Gemeinschaft* (unified cultural community) and *Gesellschaft* (business-like civil society) that played such a major role in German discourse of the early twentieth century. Wigman's language particularly evoked Oswald Spengler's influential book *Decline of the West* (1918). Spengler expanded the idea—which had circulated since the early part of the twentieth century—of a *Kulturkampf*, or cultural war between French or international civilization and German culture.³⁹ In Spengler's version of this discursive war, "Culture" expressed soul, the *Volk*, homeland, faith, expansion, and flexibility; "Civilization" expressed intellect, a mob mentality, cosmopolitanism, skepticism, imperialism, rigidity, and decline. Words such as "rootedness" and "essential" came to be shorthand for this view of Culture as homeland, spirituality, growth, and unity.

These ideas profoundly shaped the views of several generations of Germans; historian Fritz Stern explains: "the main yearning of those generations was to free themselves from a rootless freedom. They wanted a new religious commitment, a new national order, strong human beings in a united nation."⁴⁰ This ideological model would later be appropriated easily by Nazi ideology; Jews, communists, intellectuals, and certain modern artists came to be seen as the enemy of the *Volk* and of true German Culture because of their perceived "rootlessness" and international affiliations, and/or their association with modernity, the city, intellectualism, skepticism, and criticism.⁴¹

The radical, right wing "Conservative Revolution" during the Weimar Republic embraced these ideas, and shared a number of views with modern dance. Like Laban and

Wigman, the Conservative Revolutionaries embraced an irrationalist philosophy that argued for strong leadership, sought meaning in everyday experiences, promoted humanity above the individual, and looked for a harmonious order of all things. And like modern dancers, Conservative Revolutionaries “turned to Nietzsche as a source of a self-sufficient, self-assertive, vitalist philosophy.”⁴²

It is important to remember that German modern dance, particularly Wigman’s version of it, was a middle-class endeavor. Although her early years with Laban in Switzerland had put her in contact with left-wing revolutionaries, during the Weimar Republic she was linked more closely with the bourgeois life-reform movement.⁴³ Writers for the leftist periodical *Die Weltbühne* noted these connections suspiciously, questioning her emphasis on “experience” over thought, and characterizing her work as an evocation of German folk dances, the Wandervogel movement, Niebelung myths, and *urgermanischen* (ultra-German) symbols and runes.⁴⁴ In 1926, Marcellus Schiffer published a fictional interview, “A Visit to Mary Wigman” in *Die Weltbühne*, which satirized the asceticism and mysticism embedded in her concept of absolute dance.⁴⁵

Absolute Dance

Wigman called her dance “absolute.” She wanted to put dance itself and the dancer’s experiencing of the world in the center, and push other elements—music, décor, light, costume, or storyline—to the periphery. She described “absolute dance” as essential, rooted, spiritual, and instinctual dance; this of course, she contrasted with the decadent, mechanical, foreign forms of ballet and “stage dance.” She began a lecture at the 1928 Dancer’s Congress in Essen by proclaiming: “The dance in its absolute form, without any other meaning than the forming of its innermost content, is not stage

dance.”⁴⁶ For her, dance was expression, creativity, improvisation, and instinct—values that were incompatible with the demands of the theater. Wigman equated stage dance with the kick-lines of the Tiller girls, and declared her desire to replace stage dance—and, indeed, all of theater—with modern dance:

We dancers, who believe in and regard our modern dance as the expression of our time, request from the theater not merely a secondary or equal status for dance. We want to conquer the entire theater with our dance gesture. This seemingly arrogant demand embodies the highest fulfillment of the dancing being and the deepest modesty within itself. We will not be contented with partial aesthetic pleasure, which the theater offers today. We want to be part of the grandiose spectacle of life that finds its ultimate meaning in the theater. We want not only danced theater—we want rhythmically-moved and vibrating theater.⁴⁷

Rather than simply reforming the dances presented in opera and theater-houses, she sought a complete cultural overhaul, in which dance in its “absolute,” pure form would prevail. She believed that she and her disciples were “re-birthing” dance in the spirit of Nietzsche, and therefore she spoke not only for herself, but also for dance itself. She thought that her demand for precedence reflected “the deepest modesty” because she was simply a vessel for “the dancing being.”

A quote by Wigman published in the American periodical *Theatre Arts Monthly* in honor of Wigman’s first U.S. tour also demonstrated Wigman’s conception of dance as a new religion and her desire to transform the theater:

The dance must find its way into the theatre. We have no uniform religion now to which to dedicate the dance. But in every person there is a deep religious sense that springs from the infinite. It deserves a common expression. The young actors of today are ready to take this greater meaningfulness into their work, they scorn the superficial make-believe of the present theatre. The theatre lags behind the needs of the people.⁴⁸

Wigman advocated transforming the theatre to reflect the religion of the new dance. Modern dance was able to access “the infinite,” she argued, and reflected a universal, deep religious sense that “deserves a common expression.” She argued that modern dance should be instituted in the municipal theatres because it was an expression of the people.

Wigman’s explosive remarks at the 1928 Dancer’s Congress at Essen were an expression of her aesthetic philosophy and her great desire to institute her form of dance into cultural establishments like the municipal theaters, but these remarks can also be read as a response to changing conditions in German modern dance in the late 1920s. After years of phenomenal growth, the market for dance professionals was saturated, there was an increasingly limited pool of amateurs interested in taking dance classes, and economic conditions were continuing to deteriorate. In response, many dancers began to turn away from amateur body culture and toward the patronage of municipal theaters and opera houses.⁴⁹

At the 1928 congress, Laban’s former student Kurt Jooss and Wigman’s former student Yvonne Georgi were among the voices advocating that modern dance integrate with ballet in order to provide new forms of patronage. Wigman adamantly refused, and continued to advocate abolishing ballet altogether. She insisted on the absolute nature of her approach to dance and its incompatibility with stage dance. When Hanya Holm arrived in New York, she brought an awareness of this struggle with her—the desire to maintain the communal emphasis of the new dance on one side, and the need to

acknowledge the requirements of theatrical dance on the other. How to balance those two priorities would occupy much of her energy over the next few years.

Modern Dance as Religion

The church seems to have been the most apt model for Wigman's *Tanz-Gemeinschaft*; like Laban before her, she conceived of modern dance as a religion. She often likened professional dance artists to priests or priestesses, for they spend years of apprenticeship being initiated into secret knowledge. She believed that artists were "chosen," and that "the creative power" was not "equally distributed among all men."⁵⁰ Holm agreed; she would write of Wigman much later in life, "She is the carrier of THE SECRET, the indivisible, the unexplainable, the immaterial, the no-beginning and the no-end."⁵¹ Wigman was the high priestess of their religion. Nevertheless, ecstasy was available to all: Holm proclaimed, "through the dance we are lifted above the commonplaces of life to a realm of personal ecstasy and universal exaltation."⁵² As in "primitive" dance, modern dance provided the dancer with "not only an outlet for the pent-up energies of sheer animal spirits, but a response to his deepest and most elemental awareness of the wonders and mysteries of life."⁵³

As already discussed, Wigman and Laban believed that modern dance created a "ritual return" to "primitive" fundamentals and that, ultimately, these ritual actions would bring about a regeneration of modern society. Wigman, like Laban, embarked on a search for the mystical meaning of shapes and forms. Hanya Holm remembered that in the early 1920s, "She [Wigman] was very much involved at that time in studying the significance and symbolic meaning of shapes and forms. We had one dance completely

composed on the triangle, *Das Dreieck*. Another was called *Das Kreis (Circle)*.⁵⁴

These symbols were thought to carry great power, and to hold the keys to mystical truth.

The dancers—like priests and priestesses—were responsible for discovering these secrets and ritually putting them into bodily form.

The participation of “laymen” was essential to this religion of dance, just as the work of priests in the church is supported by the masses of people who look to them for guidance. Dance laymen could gain stimulation, relaxation, and joy from participating in dance, but their participation was on a different level from the true artists, who translated life into dance for the masses.

In a 1934 radio address, Holm would affirm her view of modern dance as a religion to her American audience: “Like religion, the dance must have its forms, its messiahs, and its high priests, and like religion, its scope must embrace the many who come, for whatever reason, to its portals.”⁵⁵ In this religious community, she proposed, the individual dancer explores the mysteries of the universe “in the hidden corners of his own being,” in order to “unearth his particular kernel of truth.” However, the artist is compelled to “return with his message to the light and to the world at large. Only if the dance is kept, by the artist and by the spectator and lay participator, approachable and universal can it fulfill its promise as a delight and as a vital force in life today.”⁵⁶ While dance artists may work individually, Holm insisted that they had an obligation to make their art available to the many who sought to share in it, for whatever reason. Further, she believed that dancers must work with missionary zeal to ensure that dance provide the fundamental purposes of health, expression, and community in the new modern culture.

The Cultish Wigman School

The religious metaphors, the mystical creative process, the close-knit community of young women, and the focus on loyalty to the leader all created a cult-like atmosphere at the Wigman School. Karl Toepfer has commented on the cultish nature of the school, “with its gold and red walls and with Wigman, swathed in luxurious gowns, veiled in cigarette smoke, gazing with hawklike intensity and presiding on a throne in the corner as a mysterious princess.”⁵⁷ In his critique of German modern dance, André Levinson wrote that in “dance-cults” such as Wigman’s, “[w]hat you would take for a technical exercise or an extravagant joke turns out to be a mystic article of faith.”⁵⁸ Describing Wigman as a “demagogue” who “fascinates us by an appeal to instinct,” he claimed that she saw “the profession of the dancer . . . [as] a vocation leading to a priesthood.”⁵⁹ As a result, he continued:

Mrs. (sic) Wigman does not pretend to teach; she incites the pupil to create for herself. She provokes in her a state of grace. As the high-priestess of her cult, she merely manipulates the flow of spontaneous inspiration. Each impulse, to be valid, must come from the heart, the vitals, the depths of a nature shaken by the sacred fury. Mrs. (sic) Wigman initiates her goslings to this “lay mystery.”⁶⁰

In this cultish community, the needs of the group and their shared mission of transforming social life through modern dance prevailed over the needs of the individual. Though individuals may have felt that the highly self-referential creative process enhanced their self-realization, Wigman and Holm reminded them that this was not the ultimate goal. Holm implored their students:

How few make themselves real servants of the idea and the dance work of art! Most only want to satisfy their own vanity and desires. Only in the instant that they give themselves up as the focal point, will they be able to sail the dance work of art, as artistic work actually has as a prerequisite complete devotion to the idea.⁶¹

Though the dancer should draw on her/his own experiences, Holm believed, ultimately she/he is simply the channel through which the dance idea emerges. She would later explain that the goal of modern dance was to attain a moment in which the dancer is “dissolved and simply surrounded” by the dance itself.⁶²

Wigman and Holm’s insistence on universality rather than personal expression was tied to a larger aesthetic debate in dance modernism. Mark Franko has argued, “Early twentieth-century primitivist choreography initiated claims to universal authenticity through purging subjectivism (emotion) and privileging the moving body’s ‘presence’ (expression.)” Though Franko is here referring specifically to Vaslav Nijinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, I argue that this analysis could also be applied to Wigman’s aesthetic philosophy.⁶³ Wigman could call her art “absolute” by highlighting how her body surrendered to the expression—the forcing out—of essential, universal forces.

There were physical corollaries to this idea of surrender, as well. Deep, luxurious backbends characterized the Wigman style in the 1920s and early 1930s; photos of Wigman and Holm performing variations on this backbend adorn all of the promotional materials for the opening of the New York Wigman School. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, Wigman’s physical training system of *Tanz-Gymnastik* (dance-gymnastics) aimed to rid the body of previous habits and unnecessary tension caused by participation in civilized society (*Gesellschaft*). By practicing release and passivity—as

well as tension and activity—the dancer could bring his or her body to a kind of bodily “zero hour.” Only then would the body be able to respond to the primal drives and instinctive emotions that drive human will

Loyalty and Leadership

In order to put her visions into bodily form, Wigman demanded loyalty to the cause of the new *Tanz-Gemeinschaft*. She often seems to have assumed that her closest associates would be honored to be part of this great revolution in German cultural life. After all, she believed, they held the keys to a new kind of life that was spiritual, free, expressive, and deeply rewarding. As her letters to employees at the New York School in the early 1930s demonstrate, she was impatient when they demonstrated anything less than complete devotion to the work at hand.⁶⁴ Of paramount importance was the work itself—the school, performing, choreographing, and extending the reach of the Wigman revolt—and she expected her disciples to set aside their individual, personal responsibilities.

Though they embarked on collaborative, improvisational explorations in the studio—and though Wigman’s students felt that her mentoring enabled their self-realization—there was no doubt that Wigman was the leader of the community. Holm later explained, “There was no dictatorship in this group which was a single body with one head, the head of the master.”⁶⁵ Dictatorship was not necessary, since the disciples willingly followed their charismatic leader. Wigman set the course, artistically and pedagogically. In 1929, Wigman wrote, “Community requires leadership [*Führerschaft*] and recognition of leadership. The mass that refers to its own collectivity never forms a community.”⁶⁶ For her, *Gemeinschaft* implied a community bound by shared values, but

also with a clear hierarchical structure of leadership. This is an aspect of Wigman's worldview that I believe many dancers—past and present—have misunderstood. Many people have interpreted her insistence on lived experience as the foundation for creating dance as art to be an endorsement for any dancer's personal expression. However, as one former student phrased it, this really only applied to Wigman's lived experience:

[New German Dance] is actually for Wigman. It expresses *only* her and her alone and her lonely, lofty world. Wigman *is* the great dance genius of our times . . . The large number of her followers—professional and lay dancers, critics, enthusiasts for dance on the outside—simply misunderstand or choose not to understand that they have got her message utterly wrong . . . a genius creates the urge to the new, but is incapable of leading or forming it into a valid style . . . By the glamour of her incredible, fluid radiance and power of suggestion, Mary Wigman can make her followers *capable of dance* but she can never educate them to *dance as art*.⁶⁷

In this critique, Wigman's former student Friedl Braur argued that Wigman's artistic philosophy only applied to herself as the genius leader of the movement; she expected her followers to remain disciples. Wigman led through "the glamour of her incredible, fluid radiance and power of suggestion" and her students were inspired by her example. Wigman's ultimate goal was not teaching *per se*; it was to "re-birth" dance for modern times, in the spirit of Nietzsche, and lead her community to a new kind of life and art.

Holm's Loyalty

Hanya Holm set aside her personal responsibilities for the cause of Wigman's dance, which included leaving her son in a boarding school in Germany for five years after she left the country. She knew that this was the level of commitment Wigman expected. In exchange, she received Wigman's gratitude and love. In a passionate letter

dated January 1930, Wigman thanked Holm for taking such good care of the school in Dresden while she was away on tour, as Holm often did. Wigman wrote that her anxiety was relieved when she remembered that Holm was there:

I surprised myself by not becoming uneasy or doubtful about the situation for even one moment, because the name “Hanya” rang through me confidently and clearly . . . it gave me a very sincere urge to be able to express and to say to you what boundless confidence you have raised in me, not with many words, but through a state of being that is called loyalty to the work, complete devotion, responsibility and conscience . . .

Dearest, be still a moment and listen to me: I know who you are, I know what you do, I know of your love for me and of your devotion to my work, which is also partially yours. And I take you in my arms with all my thoughts and express what moves me strongly and sincerely: I thank you, Hanya.

There are not very many people to whom I would assign the term “friend.” But you are among these few and are very close to me, very trusted and endlessly dear to my heart.

My dear, true and fearless comrade, take these lines as they come to you, without ruse, without reservation, out of genuine human relationship, and out of the unshakable confidence that flows from me to you.

Ever your
Mary⁶⁸

This letter demonstrates the depth of the bond between the two women. Holm’s “loyalty to the work, complete devotion, responsibility, and conscience” constituted a “state of being” that Wigman highly valued. She rewarded this devotion with confidence, support, and trust, as Holm would later do with her own employees and students.⁶⁹ The letter must have meant a great deal to Holm. Wigman was at the height of her fame in Europe at that time, and Holm deeply valued the qualities that Wigman acknowledged: trust, devotion, hard work, responsibility, conscience, and loyalty.

Holm's actions a few months later demonstrated clearly the depth of her loyalty to Wigman and her willingness to sacrifice her own happiness for their shared cause. After a two-year love affair, Holm's suitor Hanns Benkert fell in love with Wigman. Holm had introduced Benkert, an industrial planner for the engineering firm Siemens, to Wigman so that he could advise her on business matters. He became a confidant for Wigman, and their relationship evolved: "After a few weeks she understands that she loves him . . . Benkert is to her the calm island in the turned up sea, which she requires in the hecticness of her everyday life, a self-confident, purposeful, straight-line man . . . a thoroughly 'successful human being.'" ⁷⁰ Benkert and Wigman escaped in his automobile for a few days together.

The affair caused deep turmoil for Holm. After vacillating for weeks about his feelings for the two women, Benkert confessed to her: "Mary has become everything to me during the past weeks but you are still there, too. Sooner or later this ambiguity will break me . . ." ⁷¹ He begged Holm to be the one to break off their relationship. She, in turn, begged to speak to him in person, but he refused. ⁷² Wigman, for her part, was not conflicted about the matter; Müller explains:

Mary Wigman is herself clear about it, because she loves this man, and her love is returned. For her, taking anything else into consideration would not be sincere. She energetically dismisses the reproach that she has unhitched another woman from her man—both voluntarily determined their love. ⁷³

At the time, Holm was working closely with Wigman as her assistant for the mass dance work *Totenmal* (1930), to be performed at the Dancer's Congress in Munich. Despite her anguish over Benkert, Holm remained Wigman's loyal assistant, managing the large

choruses of dancers and singers in *Totenmal*, overseeing the lights and working backstage to enable Wigman to perform her solo role. She remembered:

First of all I was responsible for the whole chorus. But I had to observe everything that was going on onstage, the entire technical and artistic apparatus, which included the dancers as well as the speakers. I had to give light cues, and there were moments in this production when I had to be at the switchboard. Whenever Mary was onstage I had to pay attention to what she was doing. It was a very taxing part for Mary. This was one of the reasons why I was charged with so many different functions.⁷⁴

Wigman also commented on the depth of Holm's loyalty:

When I had the chance to create my first great choric work, *Das Totenmal*, in Munich, it was Hanya again who stood by me as no one else would or could have done. The one decisive characteristic of her being and doing was that she had always put the work, its idea and creation, above anything personal—giving it more meaning by serving it, even when the work as such carried unmistakably her very own artistic signature.⁷⁵

Though the Benkert affair devastated her, Holm did not waver in her personal and artistic commitment to Wigman.⁷⁶ She continued to put “the Wigman revolt,” “our dance,” above all else.

Opportunity in the New World

Soon after the personal crises and artistic challenges surrounding the performance of *Totenmal*, Wigman embarked on a solo tour of the United States, which would begin a new chapter for Wigman and especially for Holm. On the heels of Wigman's first phenomenally successful American tour, which I discuss below, Sol Hurok proposed a

business plan to open a New York branch of the Wigman School. Müller explains Wigman's perspective on choosing Holm to direct it:

Only one [person] comes into question, who can fulfill this responsibility and function with its high requirements—Hanya Holm. She is the soul of the Dresden School, reliable, sympathetic and devoted in absolute loyalty to the work. She had proven herself—not for the first time—with the “Totenmal” problems. Without Hanya Holm's prudent and warm-hearted guidance of the fifty dancers, the enterprise would have become a disaster. It had formed the backbone of the whole work, despite the affair with Benkert that shook her relationship with Mary Wigman. Hanya Holm is the fire and flame for Hurok's proposal.⁷⁷

In addition to demonstrating her consummate professionalism in the face of personal heartbreak and her ability to work with large groups of dancers, she had repeatedly proved herself an excellent educator. The majority of Holm's time and energy in the 1920s had been devoted to her role as a co-director and master teacher of the Wigman Central Institute. She had helped Wigman to develop the curriculum, taught all subjects and levels of classes, and often took over the daily administration of the school when Wigman was on tour. In fact, many students from the Dresden school at that time remember that Holm was more systematic and thorough in her teaching than Wigman, and was a driving force behind the pedagogical vision of the Wigman School.⁷⁸ For her part, Holm may have welcomed the opportunity to escape any lingering tensions with Wigman and Benkert, and yet continue to serve the Wigman cause. Later on in life, she also stated that she had noticed the growth of the Nazis when she was in Munich for the 1930 Dancers Congress, and that she was glad for an opportunity to leave the country.⁷⁹

Wigman's American Solo Tours

Mary Wigman received a phenomenal reception during her first two American tours (December 1930 – March 1931 and November 1931 – April 1932).⁸⁰ Her

reputation as the most celebrated European modern dancer had preceded her. An article in the May 1930 issue of *The American Dancer*—seven months before Wigman’s first American appearance—proclaimed: “Today her form of dance expression is a full grown concept of tremendous importance, casting a decided influence upon the trend of dance art, directing it into new channels.”⁸¹ Wigman protégés Harald Kreutzberg and Yvonne Georgi had already completed U.S. tours, piquing Americans’ interest in seeing Wigman herself, “the greatest prophetess of German modernism in dancing.”⁸²

Wigman was greeted by a swarm of reporters everywhere she went, and a group of American dancers led by Ruth St. Denis organized a reception for her in New York. In a letter to Holm on December 29, 1930, Wigman described her first American appearances at the Chanin Theater in New York:

The first two concerts were sold out for weeks in advance and everybody was bursting with expectation. I, myself, was nervous as never before. And yet it went perfectly. And then something happened that rarely happens here. The audience shouted and screamed. Afterwards there was a reception on the stage, hundreds of people full of enthusiasm.⁸³

Wigman was an instant celebrity, and word quickly spread through the U.S. She performed to full houses at the Chanin Theater three times a week for a month,⁸⁴ and then embarked on a tour of other major U.S. cities. On the first tour, she performed to sold-out houses in New York, Montreal, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, and Chicago. The second, expanded tour took her to over thirty-five cities in virtually every corner of the U.S., including Toronto, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, Grand Rapids, Madison, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Omaha, Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Tucson, El Paso, and Houston.⁸⁵ She performed return

engagements in several cities. Wigman's performances expanded the dance audience in the U.S. by tens of thousands. One newspaper article reported that nearly five thousand people attended her performance at the Northrop Memorial Auditorium in Minneapolis.⁸⁶ When she performed in Los Angeles, she attracted the attention of celebrities like Albert Einstein and Greta Garbo.⁸⁷

Critical Reaction

Reviews by influential *New York Times* dance critic John Martin bolstered her reputation. He called her first tour "one of the most memorable adventures in the history of dancing in America," elaborating:

[I]t was not until Wigman arrived upon the scene that the newest element of modernism was presented by an acknowledged master, one who had become the symbol of a movement. The response was instantaneous and electrical.⁸⁸

Martin praised her masterful use of space, time, dynamics, the "metakinetic relation of movement and inner conviction," and the natural, instinctive, sensitive, and "instantaneously responsive" nature of her movement.⁸⁹ He declared that she was the inheritor of the revolution started by Isadora Duncan: "Isadora tore down the barriers and at last Wigman has built the new structure. She is in a sense the end of an epoch in that she has found what the epoch has been seeking."⁹⁰

Other critics concurred with Martin's assessment. Eugene Stinson of the *Chicago News* proclaimed her a genius, and compared her to other German artists, Beethoven and Goethe.⁹¹ H.T. Parker of the *Boston Transcript* called her "the dancer in this day without peer."⁹² Dorothy Koepke of *The American Dancer* wrote, "She is one of the foundations

upon which others have built their work and one is aware in looking at her that here is the source. Hers is the pulse and hers is the constant flame.”⁹³ From 1930 to 1932, Wigman was indeed the high priestess of modern dance in the United States as well as in Europe.

Impresario Sol Hurok, who managed her American tours, was a master of publicity. He dubbed her the “high priestess of the dance,” and newspapers and magazines across the country heralded her arrival with headlines such as “Miss Wigman Is Idolized by Throngs,” “Wigman Again Sacrifices at the Altar of Faith,” and “‘Untamed Emotions’ Genius of Wigman Who Dances to Gongs!”⁹⁴. Hurok was a classicist who specialized in producing concerts in the U.S. by the best European artists in classical music and dance, and this collaboration with Wigman was a strange marriage. He found her too “high-brow” and dark—“like a course in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer with a glance at Sigmund Freud.”⁹⁵ However, he had great faith in her box office potential and in the loyalty of her followers.

Hurok’s American publicity campaign capitalized on John Martin’s assessment of Wigman, calling her the greatest dancer since Pavlova, and claiming her as the inheritor of Duncan’s legacy of revolt.⁹⁶ Modern dance enthusiasts embraced the idea that the center of modernism in dance had shifted back to modern dance after a period of dominance by Russian ballet. In her study of Wigman’s reception in Canada, Sarah Nixon Gasyna points out that Wigman’s public image abroad gained an unexpected boost from the vacuum caused by the deaths of Ballets Russes icons Serge Diaghilev in 1929 and Anna Pavlova in 1931.⁹⁷ The press in Montreal, for example, reported that in homage to Pavlova, Wigman had performed *Dance of Sorrow* at a concert in New York on the day she heard news of Pavlova’s sudden death. The implication was that the reign

of the Ballets Russes—epitomized by Pavlova—was over, and Wigman was prepared to step into the limelight as an international leader of dance.

Sol Hurok

On the recommendations of Isadora Duncan and Anna Pavlova—both of whom he had brought to the U.S. in the 1920s—Hurok had begun courting Wigman in 1927. Wigman resisted the idea of an American tour for several years. As she recalled later, she was worried that “Americans were so busy building higher skyscrapers and better automobiles that they had no time or energy left for the appreciation of serious art.”⁹⁸ By 1930, though, Wigman’s situation had changed. The 1929 Wall Street crash had caused an economic crisis in Germany: the fragile postwar recovery of the German economy had depended heavily on American loans, and those loans were recalled after 1929. Wigman was forced to disband her company, and the Wigman School, like most German institutions, was suffering. The only students who could pay for their lessons in full were foreigners.⁹⁹

When Wigman met with Hurok again in the summer of 1930, she agreed to his proposal. Hedwig Müller explains her thoughts: “America—this had been a magic word for Mary Wigman for a long time. An enormous country, which must be conquered with the free dance. What challenge!”¹⁰⁰ Wigman asserted that the “spontaneous vitality” and the “directness and candor” of the American students who traveled to Dresden to study with her had convinced her that other Americans might also appreciate her art.¹⁰¹

American Disciples

Many young American dancers were inspired by Wigman’s passionate and expressive work, and by her vision of dance as a powerful, mystical, self-realizing

process. For some of them, seeing Wigman was a life-altering experience. Carolyn Brooks called it “one of the greatest emotional and artistic experiences of my life; I decided that very moment I would head for New York to study at the New York/Wigman School of the Dance.”¹⁰² Similarly, Elizabeth Waters recalled that seeing Wigman perform in Boston was “what convinced me *that that’s what I want.*”¹⁰³ Nancy Hauser later reminisced: “I studied with Doris [Humphrey], and she was very nice and generous and as nice as she could be until I saw Mary Wigman. And that did something I never felt before.”¹⁰⁴ Wigman’s 1932 San Francisco concert altered Eve Gentry’s perception of the purpose of dance as art profoundly; she wrote in her journal that Wigman’s performances had convinced her: “if dancing is to be an art, it must, as in all the other arts, be our expression, an assimilation of life itself . . . in pure joy, great joy, there is also a kind of pain.”¹⁰⁵ For Gentry, as for many other young women, Wigman represented the artistic exploration of the realities of modern life, in all their ugliness and beauty.¹⁰⁶ Brooks, Waters, Hauser, and Gentry all later joined Hanya Holm’s performing group and dedicated their lives to modern dance. They felt that Wigman’s model offered them a life calling of purpose and substance.¹⁰⁷

American students also sought out Wigman’s Dresden school beginning in the late 1920s. Louise Kloepper, who would later become Holm’s assistant and lead dancer, attended the professional certificate program at the Wigman Central Institute in Dresden and became the first American to receive a coveted Wigman Certificate in 1931. Margaret H’Doubler, founder of the first college degree program in dance at the University of Wisconsin, encouraged all her students to study with Wigman in Germany and, later, with Holm in New York.¹⁰⁸ At least one member of H’Doubler’s first

graduating class in 1928, Bernice Van Gelder, traveled to Germany to study with Wigman.¹⁰⁹ Erick Hawkins, who would later dance as Martha Graham's partner, went to Germany in 1932 to study with Wigman's protégé Harald Kreutzberg.¹¹⁰

The New York branch of the Wigman School was opened, in part, to satisfy the American desire to learn the Wigman method. Hanya Holm remarked upon her arrival in New York, "it seemed only right that one should come to the many, instead of the many coming to the one."¹¹¹ She later commented, "Hurok . . . said, 'Somebody ought to come because the people who want to know more about it cannot all come over there.'"¹¹² It was the only time Hurok undertook the expense of a school; he had great confidence in the financial potential of the venture, and hoped that they would be able to reproduce Wigman's success in Germany, where she and her disciples taught thousands of students in an extensive network of branch schools.

Even after the opening of the New York School, Americans continued to travel to Dresden to study with Wigman herself, sometimes after taking classes with Holm in New York. Other Americans who studied and in some cases performed with Wigman in the 1930s included Ann Port (1933),¹¹³ Drusilla Schroeder (1933 - 1935),¹¹⁴ Lucretia Barzun (1933 - 1934),¹¹⁵ Katharine Wolfe (1934),¹¹⁶ Mary Starko (1935), Letitia Innes (1935),¹¹⁷ Claudia Moore Read (1936),¹¹⁸ Jean Houloose (1935 - 1938),¹¹⁹ Charlotte Sturgis (1937 - 1938)¹²⁰ and Shirlee Dodge (1938 - 1939).¹²¹ Virginia Stewart led summer study tours to Germany—with study at the Wigman School the main attraction—from 1933 to 1937.¹²² After the Second World War, the pilgrimages resumed: Ruth Kriehn (1951 - 1952), Joan Woodbury (1955 - 1956), Julie Hamilton Plues (1955), Laura de Frietas (1958), Peggy Chambers (1958), and many others.¹²³ Marion Yahr, who ran a prominent

ballet school in Milwaukee, studied with Wigman both before and after the war.¹²⁴ In the 1950s—as before the war—students from all over the world attended Wigman’s summer courses, but the majority were from the United States.¹²⁵

Conclusion

In the United States as in Germany, Mary Wigman exerted a deep influence over her disciples, inspiring them to self-realization, passion, and physical, emotional, and spiritual fulfillment. Many of them understood only parts of Wigman’s mission, because they were focused on themselves, as Wigman’s method encouraged. However, as one of her closest associates, Holm seems to have better understood the totality of Wigman’s mission. In the next chapter I will describe how she instituted this mission in the New World.

NOTES

¹ Holm in Sorell, *Hanya Holm: Biography of an Artist* 14.

² *Liebe Hanya* 15.

³ Müller, “Introduction: A Matter of Loyalty—Hanya Holm and Mary Wigman,” xxii.

⁴ Holm’s family did not consider dance an appropriate career choice, and some family members refused to associate with her after she joined Wigman. (Hanya Holm, “Experiencing and Experimenting in Three Generations of Dance” [sound cassette] (9 March 1984) Learning from Performers Series (Cambridge, MA: Modern Language Center, Harvard University, 1984) and Olga Curtis, “Hanya Holm: she makes dances,” *Denver Post Sunday Empire* (1 Aug. 1965).)

⁵ Müller, “Introduction: A Matter of Loyalty—Hanya Holm and Mary Wigman,” xxii.

⁶ Mary Wigman, “The Dance and Modern Woman,” *The Dancing Times* (London) (Nov. 1927): 162.

⁷ Müller, “Introduction: A Matter of Loyalty—Hanya Holm and Mary Wigman,” xxi.

⁸ Holm, “Experiencing and Experimenting in Three Generations of Dance.”

⁹ Holm often used the word “rediscover” to describe their approach to movement exploration. (See, for example, Marcia Siegel, “A Conversation with Hanya Holm,” *Ballet Review: American Modern Dance: The Early Years* 9, no. 9 (Spring 1981): 8.)

¹⁰ Holm in Tobias, “Interview with Hanya Holm” (1975).

¹¹ Hanya Holm in “The Early Years: The Contribution of Hanya Holm to American Modern Dance” [Videotape] (Purchase, NY: SUNY Purchase, 1981). Dance Collection, NYPL.

¹² Holm in Tobias, “Interview with Hanya Holm.”

¹³ Wigman in Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 17.

¹⁴ Mary Wigman, “Reminiscences,” *The Mary Wigman Book*, 65.

¹⁵ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

¹⁷ Randall, “Connected Knowing and Social Bodies in the Choreography of Hanya Holm.”

¹⁸ Wigman also created unconventional living situations with other women. From 1920 to 1923, she lived with Berthe Trümpy; Trümpy had bought the house in Dresden for Wigman in 1920, and they converted some rooms to studios for the school, and lived in the other rooms. In 1923, Anni Hess (who Wigman called Hesschen) moved in as Wigman's housekeeper and office manager; she remained Wigman's beloved housemate and companion until Wigman's death in 1973. See *Liebe Hanya*.

¹⁹ Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm." In fact, in some recollections of the discovery of "vibration," described above, Holm remembered that it happened when the three women were bouncing on a bed in their apartment one night, trying to keep warm (*Liebe Hanya* 56.). By 1924, the lack of heat began to affect Klaus' health, and she had to bring him to a children's home to live: "Because that was a children's home, they had heat. That means they got coal. They got preference. But I didn't. So I brought him there because he really got a terrible business from the cold." (Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm.") He remained in children's homes, returning home on vacations, until he began school.

²⁰ Müller, *Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin*, 57.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²² "Der Tanz im Spiegel verschiedener Kulturen/The Dance in the Mirror of Various Cultures," Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA. Translation mine.

²³ Hanya Holm, "Pioneer of the New Dance," *The American Dancer* (April 1933): 9.

²⁴ Duncan, "The Dancer of the Future," 171-177.

²⁵ Holm in Siegel, "A Conversation with Hanya Holm," 8-9.

²⁶ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 91; Moss, "Some Effects of the Nazi Regime on the German Modern Dance," 126.

²⁷ Throughout the 1920s, both Laban and Wigman fought to create a state-subsidized University of Dance. Wigman succeeded in acquiring state subsidies for her teacher training programs in the mid-1920s. See *Jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer. Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, ed. Hedwig Mueller and Patricia Stöckemann (Anabas Verlag Giessen 1993).

²⁸ See LaMothe, "A God Dances through Me."

²⁹ Mary Wigman, "We Are Standing at the Beginning," *The Mary Wigman Book* 81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Marion Kant, "The Nazi Attempt to Suppress Jazz and Swing," *Hitler's Dancers*, 167-190.

³² Beeke Sell Tower, “‘Ultramodern and Ultraprimitive’: Shifting Meanings in the Imagery of Americanism in the Art of Weimar Germany,” *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockman (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994) 85.

³³ Günter Berghaus, “Girlikultur: Feminism, Americanism, and Popular Entertainment in Weimar Germany,” *Journal of Design History* 1, no. 3/4 (1988): 203.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁵ Renate Berger, “Moments Can Change Your Life: Creative Crises in the Lives of Dancers in the 1920s,” *Visions of the Neue Frau: Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*, ed. Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West (Scolar Press, 1995) 82.

³⁶ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³⁷ Schlee, “The Modern German Dance,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* 14.5 (May 1930): 420.

³⁸ See Martin, *The Modern Dance* (1933) 11-15.

³⁹ The word “*Kulturkampf*” has been attributed to Virchow, a medical doctor who attacked Bismarck and his policy toward Catholics; from the 1870s onward, the term came to represent the “cultural war” between Protestants (the State) and Catholics, the “reactionary minority.” Beginning in the early twentieth century, *Kulturkampf* came to mean the war between French/international civilization and German Culture.

⁴⁰ Fritz Stern, “National Socialism as Temptation” *Dreams and Delusions: The Drama of German History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 154.

⁴¹ George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964) 7.

⁴² Roger Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996) 47.

⁴³ Müller, *Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin*, 206.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Marcellus Schiffer, “A Visit to Mary Wigman,” *Die Weltbühne* 22, no. 2 (January 12, 1926), trans. Marion Kant. Walter Sorell includes a translated excerpt from this article in *The Mary Wigman Book*. However, he mistakenly refers to the source as *Die Weltwoche*, and does not acknowledge that it was a fictional interview and a satire; and he omits several key passages (Sorell, ed., *The Mary Wigman Book*, 96).

⁴⁶ Mary Wigman, “Der neue Künstlerische Tanz und das Theater,” *Jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer. Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, ed. Hedwig Müller and Patricia Stöckemann (Anabas Verlag Giessen 1993): 77. Trans. Marion Kant.

⁴⁷ “Wir Tänzer, die wir uns aus tiefster Überzeugung zum modernen Tanz als dem Ausdruck unserer Zeit bekennen, wollen vom Theater nicht nur den nebengeordneten und gleichberechtigten Bühnentanz.—Wir wollen die Eroberung des gesamten Theaters von der tänzerischen Geste aus. Dieses fast anmassend scheinende Wollen trägt die höchste Erfüllung tänzerischen Seins und die tiefste Bescheidenheit gleichzeitig in sich. Wir geben uns nicht zufrieden mit dem ästhetischen Teilgenuss, den uns das Theater heute vermittelt. Wir wollen beteiligt werden am grandiosen Spiel und Spiegel des Lebens, das Theater in seinem letzten Sinn sein kann. Nicht nur getanztes Theater wollen wir, sondern rhythmisch-beschwingtes und beschwingendes Theater.” (Mary Wigman, “Der neue Künstlerische Tanz und das Theater,” 81-82.)

⁴⁸ C. Madeleine Dixon, “Mary Wigman,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* 15.1 (Jan. 1931): 42.

⁴⁹ Schlee, “The Modern German Dance.”

⁵⁰ “Without the secret, what would all artistic creation be? Why was not the creative power equally distributed among all men? Why do only a few feel themselves to be called and why are even fewer chosen? The secret! One has to accept it and to bow to it.” Wigman, *The Language of Dance* 15.

⁵¹ Hanya Holm, “Mary Wigman Celebrates Eighty Years This Month,” *Dance News* (November 1966): 10.

⁵² Hanya Holm, (13 May 1932), Hanya Holm Papers (S)*MGZMD 136/9, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵³ Hanya Holm, “Pioneer of the New Dance,” *The American Dancer* (April 1933): 9.

⁵⁴ Susan Manning, “You Have to Hear What Isn’t On the Surface: An Interview with Hanya Holm by Susan Manning,” *Ballett International* 16, no. 3 (March 1993): 21.

⁵⁵ Hanya Holm, “The Scope of the Contemporary Dance,” [radio address] (2 May 1934) 7. Hanya Holm Papers (S)*MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵⁶ Holm, “The Scope of the Contemporary Dance,” 7-8.

⁵⁷ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 115.

⁵⁸ André Levinson, “The Modern Dance in Germany” (1929), in *André Levinson on Dance: Writings from Paris in the Twenties*, ed. Joan Acocella and Lynn Garafola (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1991) 103.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶² Eugene Stinson, "Music Views: Hanya Holm," *The Chicago Daily News* (Feb. 13, 1937).

⁶³ Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) x.

⁶⁴ See *Liebe Hanya* 31.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Sorell, *Hanya Holm*, 22.

⁶⁶ Mary Wigman, "Der Tänzer und das Theater," *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheater* 7 (1929/1930): 50. For further discussion, see Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 147.

⁶⁷ Friedl Braur, "Insight into the German Art Dance," (1935), trans. Johnathan Steinberg, in Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003) 229. In this essay, Braur critiqued Wigman's cultic leadership style and called for the development of "secure, clear thinking, discriminating and discerning TEACHERS," who could bring "new dance" out of the isolation Wigman had created.

There is an additional issue raised by this article and Wigman's response to it: the racial overtones of Wigman's cultishness. Braur was a Jewish student who, after leaving the Wigman School, taught in Tel Aviv before opening a school in Alexandria, Egypt. Wigman did not accept any criticism, particularly from "non-Germans" who she believed were incapable of understanding her and her dance (See, for example, her response to Levinson's critique: Mary Wigman, "Das Land ohne Tanz." *Die Tanzgemeinschaft. Vierteljahresschrift für tänzerische Kultur* 1, no. 2 (April 1929): 12-13.)

After this critical essay was published in *Der Tanz* in 1935, Wigman complained to the officials in Goebbels' Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda that this "foreign" criticism was damaging to German dance. As Marion Kant points out, Wigman's complaint and her implications about the "Jewishness" of the publication *Der Tanz* prompted the immediate "Aryanization" of the journal, and its editor, Josef Lewitan, was dismissed (Kant, *Hitler's Dancers* 158).

⁶⁸ *Liebe Hanya* 9.

⁶⁹ Holm's American business manager Thelma Cowan remembered: "She asked and expected a great deal by way of work, responsibility, understanding and loyalty. In exchange she gave complete confidence, loyal backing and candor." (Thelma Cowan, "Mrs. Cowan for Walter Sorell's article on H.H. for Dance Magazine—Jan. 1957," Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA., 10.)

⁷⁰ Müller, *Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin*, 167. Translation mine.

⁷¹ Letters from Hanns Benkert to Holm, Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/31, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁷² *Ibid.*

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- ⁷³ Müller, *Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin*, 167. Translation mine.
- ⁷⁴ Holm in Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist* 27.
- ⁷⁵ Wigman in Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist* 28.
- ⁷⁶ Eventually, Holm resumed her friendship with Benkert and sent him, his wife, and Wigman many CARE packages in the years after the Second World War. See *Liebe Hanya* 80, 82, 83, 84, 88, 89, 91, 93, 96-97.
- ⁷⁷ Müller, *Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin*, 184. Translation mine.
- ⁷⁸ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 272.
- ⁷⁹ See, for example: Siegel, "A Conversation with Hanya Holm," 10-11.
- ⁸⁰ Wigman also toured the U.S. with a performing group in 1932 – 1933, to less success, as I will discuss in Chapter 5.
- ⁸¹ Haines, "The Influence of the Wigman Dance Revolt," 10.
- ⁸² Haines, "The Influence of the Wigman Dance Revolt," 10. A 1931 book review of *Young Germany* provides another indication of Americans' awareness of Wigman. An English language text aimed at young adult audiences, *Young Germany* described the German youth movements of the time, including the *Wandervogel* (groups of hiking boys), *Jugendherberge* (youth shelters), and the physical culture movement, notably Mary Wigman's school of dance. (Anne T. Eaton, "Books for Children: Young Germany," *New York Times* (8 Nov. 1931).)
- ⁸³ Wigman quoted in *Liebe Hanya*, 12-13.
- ⁸⁴ Gitelman, *Liebe Hanya*, 13.
- ⁸⁵ An article written in advance of her 1931-32 tour claimed that she would perform in over 75 cities.⁸⁵ "Famous German Dancer to Sail for U. S. Soon," *Omaha World Herald* (20 Sept. 1931). However, her final itinerary seems to have included between 35 and 40 cities. (See Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.)
- ⁸⁶ "Nearly 5,000 See Wigman Dance in Minneapolis," *Musical Courier* (30 Jan. 1931), Mary Wigman, "Scrapbooks: Clippings and Photographs, 1930-61," *MGZRS, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁸⁷ Ruth Seinfel, "What Is Mary Wigman?" *The Dance Magazine* (Nov. 1931): 68; "U.S. Overwhelming, Says Mary Wigman," *Grand Rapids Press* (10 March 1931), Mary Wigman, "Scrapbooks: Clippings and Photographs, 1930-61," *MGZRS, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁸⁸ John Martin, "The Dance: Vital Issues; Mary Wigman's Successful Tour Provides a Great Stimulus," *New York Times* (8 March 1931).

⁸⁹ John Martin, "The Dance: Dynamic Art; Mary Wigman's Debut Brings an Insight into German Movement," *New York Times* (4 Jan. 1931).

⁹⁰ John Martin, "The Dance: Fundamentals; Mary Wigman's Art Raises Old Question of A Dancer's Influence," *New York Times* (18 Jan. 1931).

⁹¹ Eugene Stinson, "Mary Wigman Wins Praise in Dance Recital," *Chicago News* (21 March 1932). Mary Wigman, "Scrapbooks: Clippings and Photographs, 1930-61," *MGZRS, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁹² Mary Wigman, "Scrapbooks: Clippings and Photographs, 1930-61," *MGZRS, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁹³ Dorothy Koepke, "Mary Wigman," *The American Dancer* (Jan. 1931): 40.

⁹⁴ Mary Wigman, "Scrapbooks: Clippings and Photographs, 1930-61," *MGZRS, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁹⁵ Harlow Robinson, *The Last Impresario* (New York: Viking, 1994): 149.

⁹⁶ Mary Wigman, "Scrapbooks: Clippings and Photographs, 1930-61," *MGZRS, JRDD, NYPL-PA. See also Lucille Marsh, "The Shadow of Wigman in the Light of Duncan: Two Great Personalities Compared—Which Will Have the Most Lasting Influence." *Dance* (May 1931).

⁹⁷ Sarah Nixon Gasyna, "A City Bewitched! Montreal Under the Spell of Mary Wigman," *Canadian Dance Studies Quarterly/Etudes canadiennes en danse: publication trimestrielle* 3, no. 3 (June 2003): 3.

⁹⁸ Mary Wigman, "On Tour in America," *The Mary Wigman Book*, 133.

⁹⁹ Suzan F. Moss, "Some Effects of the Nazi Regime on the German Modern Dance: Spinning through the Weltanschauung," (PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1988) 124, 134-135.

¹⁰⁰ Müller, *Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin*, 154. Translation mine.

¹⁰¹ Mary Wigman, "On Tour in America" 133. This quote—reproduced in her memoirs—was prevalent in newspaper interviews by American journalists during her first two tours.

¹⁰² Carolyn Brooks, "Company Stories: Notes from the Early Days," in "Hanya Holm: the Life and Legacy," *The Journal for Stage Directors and Choreographers* 7, no. 1 (1993): 20.

¹⁰³ *Reminiscences of Elizabeth Waters* (1979), on page 11, CUOHROC. (Original emphasis).

¹⁰⁴ Nancy Hauser in Carol Horwitz and Kim Stockstad, “Voices/Interview with Nancy Hauser,” *Contact Quarterly* 14.1 (Winter 1989): 32.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Anne Santos Newhall, “Dancing in Absolute Eden” (MA thesis, University of New Mexico, 2000) 40.

¹⁰⁶ See Seinfeld, “What Is Mary Wigman?” 68, for another American enthusiast’s view of Wigman’s artistic goals.

¹⁰⁷ Mary Anne Newhall points out that Gentry, like Wigman, Graham, and other modern dancers of the era, chose to remain childless because of her commitment to dance (Newhall, “Dancing in Absolute Eden”).

¹⁰⁸ “Interview with Theodora Wiesner” (27 June, 1979). Oral History Archive, Dance Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹⁰⁹ Reminiscences of Bernice Van Gelder Peterson (1979), on pages 47-62, CUOHROC.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹¹ Holm quoted in Ruth Seinfeld, “American Girls Reason Too Much, Says Dancer Who Teaches Them to Think With Their Bodies,” *New York Evening Post* (26 Sept. 1931).

¹¹² Tobias, “Interview with Hanya Holm.”

¹¹³ Wigman, *The Mary Wigman Book*, 157.

¹¹⁴ *Liebe Hanya* 47 – 48.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Katharine Wolfe Papers, (S)*MGZMD 188, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹¹⁷ In May 1935, Mary Starko and Letitia Innes wrote a letter to the editors of *The Dance Observer*, giving their impression of the differences between German and American modern dance, from their perspective as American students at the Wigman School in Dresden. (Mary Starko and Letitia Innes, “Change and Security,” *The Dance Observer* 2, no. 5 (May 1935): 56.

¹¹⁸ Reminiscences of Claudia Moore Read (1980), on page 59, CUOHROC.

¹¹⁹ *Liebe Hanya* 70.

¹²⁰ *Liebe Hanya* 69, 71 – 73. It is not certain when Sturgis first arrived at the Wigman School in Dresden, but she returned to the U.S. in 1938, and performed briefly as a percussionist and dancer with the Hanya Holm Company, 1938 – 1939.

¹²¹ *Liebe Hanya* 71.

¹²² Ynez del Valle Kirby, "Los Angeles," *The American Dancer* (June 1933): 10; Brochure for the Second Annual Dancers' Tour to the Mary Wigman School of the Dance, Dresden, Germany (1934), JRDD, NYPL-PA; Brochure for Virginia Stewart's Fifth annual European dance study tour to Dresden (1937), *MGZRS – Res. 87-270, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹²³ On Ruth Kriehn, see the Ruth Louise Kriehn Papers, 1951 – 1973, UWM Manuscript Collection 94, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives; Joan Woodbury was the first Fulbright Scholar to study at the Wigman School; for reminiscences by her, Peggy Chambers, and Julie Hamilton Plues, see www.bearnstowjournal.org.

¹²⁴ *Liebe Hanya* 115.

¹²⁵ Jacqueline Robinson notes that the majority of the students in Wigman's 1956 summer course in Berlin were from the United States. (Jacqueline Robinson, "Mary Wigman, A Magician," *Dance Chronicle* 20, no. 1 (1997): 33.)

CHAPTER 5

THE NEW YORK WIGMAN SCHOOL

Introduction

The New York Wigman School, which operated from October 1931 through October 1936, was an influential institution in the burgeoning American modern dance movement of the early 1930s. In its first year, students from all walks of life and levels of dance experience flocked to the school, including university dance professors, aspiring young professionals, beginners, “business girls,” children, and physical education teachers. At the time of the school’s inauguration, Wigman was at the height of her worldwide fame, and was considered by many to be the leader of modernist dance. As I will discuss in more detail below, there was great appetite for learning about German modern dance among American dancers. Teachers trained in “German methods” were in high demand. Wigman’s successful 1930-1931 American solo tour had generated much excitement, and the opening of the New York Wigman School was heralded in newspapers around the country. The cultish, spiritual, and revolutionary German modern dance was alluring to a generation seeking new forms of art and expression. The New York school solidified the presence of German dance in the U.S.—literally giving it physical form and institutional weight.

This chapter describes the history, mission, and curriculum of the New York Wigman School of the Dance, focusing particularly on its first year. Hanya Holm was one of the architects of the Wigman School, both at Dresden and in New York, and it represented a major component of her life work. In order to understand Holm’s career,

we must understand the mission, values, and method of the Wigman School at the time of her arrival in New York. I particularly describe the school's commitment to dance as both art and recreation, and the importance of the concept of "*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*" (work-community). I outline the curriculum with details about the various courses of study, classes offered, movement concepts, pedagogical approach, the role of percussion, and the importance of group dance.

Opening of the School

Advertisements for the opening of the New York Wigman School of the Dance proclaimed that it would be "the only authoritative school in America to teach the Wigman method of the modern dance," and would be run "under the personal supervision of Mary Wigman."¹ These facts were highly important to Wigman, her teachers, and her followers, because they guaranteed authenticity, quality, and knowledge. The prospectus for the school emphasized this:

Mary Wigman founded her New York school in response to the demand from dancers and lay population alike in this country where the Wigman method can be taught as effectually as it is in Germany. At its head is Miss Wigman herself, in full command of its artistic and educational direction . . . On the teaching staff are young women who have been developed by Mary Wigman in three years of solid training and study at the Dresden Institute . . . This point is important: casual study at the Wigman schools in Germany does not equip a dancer to teach the Wigman method according to the high precepts of its founder. There are today no authentic teachers in America who are authorized to teach in an American Wigman school, other than those on the teaching staff of the New York branch.²

With statements such as this, Wigman attempted to exert control over the handful of teachers in the U.S. who had taken a summer course in Germany, and then returned to

teach “the German methods.” She worried that her philosophy and method were being diluted. Holm and the other teachers of the New York branch were sent, in part, to bring German modern dance in the U.S. under her direct control. It was highly important to her that only teachers certified by her teach her approach to modern dance.³

Wigman’s emphasis on authenticity resonated deeply with Americans at the time. In his cultural history *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture* (1989), Miles Orvell characterizes the shift that occurred in American culture in the early twentieth century as a shift from a culture of imitation to one of authenticity. While nineteenth-century Americans were fascinated with the replicative possibilities of machines, he argues, the emerging culture of authenticity in the twentieth century sought to reconnect with the “real thing” in the face of a rapidly industrializing world.⁴ This was a large part of Wigman’s appeal in the U.S.—she was “the real thing,” the true leader of modern dance. She promised an authentic experience, a deep exploration of self, and a heightened sensation of life.

The opening of the school was heralded in newspapers across the country, in dance magazines such as *American Dancer* and *Dance*, in women’s magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, and in *Time* magazine.⁵ Hurok’s publicity department sensationalized Wigman’s practice by stressing her use of “primitive” percussion instruments and the cultish nature of her followers. Newspapers across the country picked up an Associated Press wire about the opening of the school, and gave their stories headlines such as: “Mary Wigman Planning New School in Dancing; Plain Music of ‘Tom Tom’ To Give Barefoot Addicts Chance to Develop Primitive Art,” “Tomtom School of Dancing for Blasé Gotham,” and “New York’s First ‘Tom-Tom’ School of Dance Planned.”⁶

Members of the press who were acquainted with cultural trends in Europe emphasized the role of the Wigman School in body culture. Ruth Seinfeld of the *New York Evening Post* wrote: “Those who have seen Miss Wigman dancing in Europe . . . have said that her method is a better rejuvenator than monkey glands, that gray-haired women have gone into her school and come out young, vigorous, even beautiful.”⁷ Seinfeld’s husband Gerald Goode, who worked as Hurok’s assistant, wrote in a press release announcing the opening of the school:

Observers have commented on the growing beauty and grace of German girls, which they have ascribed in part to the new custom of dancing for exercise and recreation. Spines that have served no other purpose than to hold their owners more or less erect before a typewriter or a machine all day develop flexibility and strength. Hands become eloquent, feet become buoyant. Muscles which in calisthenics or athletics are likely to become hard and bulging, in the Tanz Gymnastik become supple and smooth, though no less strong. . . It has been said that American girls, who are considered the most beautiful in the world, will soon find their supremacy challenged by the dancing girls of Germany. Now that the Tanz Gymnastik has come to America, perhaps this danger can be averted. American girls can learn to dance and maintain their reputation for beauty against all rivals.⁸

Several newspaper articles published during Wigman’s 1931 tour also made reference to health and body culture. In an interview published by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Wigman commented on the resurgence of health and vitality among the young in Germany. While some people who lived through the First World War were still unhealthy, she said, the children “are growing strong again, and nerves are no longer so taut, and there is more relaxation for childhood in Germany than there used to be. And in the spring and in the summer Germany is green and there are ruddy-faced children to be seen playing where everything is green.”⁹

Students

Despite the sensationalist publicity produced by the Hurok office, it was most likely Wigman's reputation as a groundbreaking, modern artist that attracted the students for the professional classes. Among those who attended classes the first year were women who already held teaching positions in prominent university dance programs, such as Martha Hill of New York University, Mary Jo Shelley and Mary O'Donnell of Teachers' College/Columbia University, Marian Streng of Barnard College, and Marian Van Tuyl of the University of Chicago.¹⁰ Martha Hill and Mary Jo Shelley were later the directors of the influential Bennington College Summer School of the Dance. Professional dancers such as Ruth Page and Elsa Findlay also attended the New York Wigman School.¹¹

Most students who registered for the professional course—especially those who received scholarships—had already studied modern dance or related forms. Franziska Boas, daughter of the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas, had studied with Bird Larsen at Barnard College, and studied with Wigman in Germany.¹² Jane Dudley had studied a Dalcroze-influenced form of dance with Ruth Doing and body conditioning with Bess Mensendiek, in addition to some classes with Doris Humphrey, Emily Hewlett, and Bird Larsen.¹³ Nancy Hauser had studied a Duncan-derived style at the Noyes School of Rhythm, and had worked briefly with Doris Humphrey in the Norman Bel Geddes production of *Lysistrata*.¹⁴ Mary O'Donnell had studied in San Francisco with Estelle Reed, an American Wigman disciple.¹⁵ Saida Gerrard had received training in the Dalcroze method from the Swiss pedagogue Madeleine Boss Lasserre at the Toronto Conservatory of Music.¹⁶ Miriam Blecher had trained and performed at the

Neighborhood Playhouse.¹⁷ Nadia Chilkovsky had studied with Riva Hoffman at the Philadelphia Duncan Studio, and had toured with Irma Duncan's company; she performed with the Pioneer Dancers in the "First Festival of Proletarian Culture" in March 1931.¹⁸ Edna Ocko, who would later become one of the most influential leftist dance critics in New York, had trained in the Dalcroze method and with pupils of Bird Larsen.¹⁹

During the first year, approximately 130 students were registered at the school, of which 14 received scholarships.²⁰ Additional students attended the special Christmas, Easter, and summer intensive courses, which generally enrolled 60 students. These special courses were particularly attractive for teachers of dance and physical education. New York public school teachers were able to earn continuing education credits and claim a salary increase after attending 30 hours of classes at the Wigman School.²¹

The original prospectus, a large, attractive book with a heavy linen overlay on the cover, indicates that the opening of the New York School was a grand affair. In the text, the directors stated that they expected thousands of Americans to be interested in the New York School, just as thousands attended the Wigman Schools in Germany. Prospective students greeted Holm on the pier as she disembarked from the ocean liner Aquitania. The location of the school in a studio in Steinway Hall also reflected its high prestige, as well as Hurok's connections to the classical music establishment in New York City. On West 57th Street, the New York Wigman School was next to Carnegie Hall, in the heart of the Broadway theater district, and located in a center for classical music.

Administration

The New York Wigman School was an official branch of the Wigman School in Germany, part of Wigman's extensive network of branch schools in Hamburg, Erfurt, Frankfurt, Berlin, Chemnitz, Riesa, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Munich, and Freiburg. These branch schools—which taught beginners, children, and amateur students—were essential to Wigman's project. As described in Chapter 4, they established working communities of thousands of dance laymen throughout Germany, thus literally creating a national *Tanzgemeinschaft* (dance cultural community). Aspiring dancers and teachers attended the professional certificate program at the Central Institute, where Wigman and her inner circle developed the “Wigman method” and established the curriculum for all Wigman schools.

Despite its distance across an ocean, the New York Wigman School was created to serve the same goals as the other branch schools – to spread the gospel, to recruit new followers, and to support the Central Institute in Dresden and Wigman's artistic work. However, it also represented a major shift for the Wigman School, since it was the first branch school outside Germany. Wigman was keenly aware that she and her associates were on foreign soil.²²

The New York branch differed from other branch schools in Germany because it offered courses for serious dancers as well as amateurs. In Germany, students interested in professional training for careers as dancers and teachers attended the Central Institute in Dresden, where they took the rigorous three-year certificate program, with classes in technique, composition, music, pedagogy, group dance, and more. To attain certification, students had to pass a series of tests, present their own choreography, and submit a

written examination. When the New York branch first opened, Wigman and Holm planned to have American students in the professional course attend the program in Dresden for their final year in order to gain their certificates.

Hanya Holm's official title was "Chief Teacher," and during the first year, her duties included teaching, overseeing the other faculty, coordinating publicity with the Hurok Musical Bureau, and communicating with the Central Institute in Dresden on matters such as finances, administration, and curriculum. Holm wrote periodic progress reports for Wigman and Hans Hastings, the Associate Director of the Central Institute.²³ She also reported to Hurok; Hurok had provided the initial capital for the school, and ran it for the first year. Holm explained later, "Everything went through his office."²⁴ Hurok's assistant Gerald Goode assisted Holm with publicity by writing press releases and arranging guest appearances for her. Fé Alf, a recent graduate of the Wigman Central Institute in Dresden, was the Associate Teacher assisting Holm. Viktor Schwinghammer served as accompanist and musical director.

As the chief representative of the Wigman Central Institute in the New World, Holm was charged with a mission to spread the influence of the Wigman philosophy. As a legal agreement made clear, she was expected to:

[A]pply all her strength to the advancement of the New York Wigman School, to conduct the work according to Mary Wigman's ideas and those of the Central Institute in Dresden, and to see that the M.W. philosophy of dance is implemented faithfully within and outside the New York Wigman School in every possible way.²⁵

In other words, Holm knew that she was expected not only to run a school, but also to oversee the implementation of the "Wigman revolt" in the New World through every

possible means. Walter Sorell writes, “In the beginning Hanya actually played the role of a warrior for the cause called Mary Wigman.”²⁶ Holm took this task very seriously. As discussed in the previous two chapters, Wigman and her disciples felt that they were fighting a battle that had deep cultural and spiritual significance. They believed that their war against ballet, cabaret, jazz, and even competing modern dance approaches was a struggle for the spiritual and artistic health of German culture. Subsequent chapters will show that Holm believed she had to transfer this battle to a new land, where it had to fight new adversaries, when she arrived in the United States.²⁷

Mission

According to the prospectus for the New York Wigman School, Holm and her assistants would teach the Wigman method, which encompassed “both her [Wigman’s] method of dance-training and her philosophy of the dance.”²⁸ The Wigman method offered experiences that aimed to free the body from the restrictions of modern life, connect the body to the emotions and the soul, encourage the ability to “tune in” to others, and—for serious dancers—to provide the tools to develop the body as an instrument of dance as an art. While the ultimate purpose of the Wigman method was to reveal “the dance itself,” the teachers also stressed that students at any level could gain satisfaction, release, and a “heightened experience of life” through dance. A vision statement explained:

With the fluent body as the sole instrument, without the circumlocution of narrative and the support of formal music, the modern dance, as created by Mary Wigman, depicts the mood and reveals the vision of the dancer. With primitive directness, it expresses civilized meanings.

And because of its directness, the technique of the modern dance is within the reach of all. Rhythmic gymnastics is its basis of training. By stages, this training approaches the actual realm of the dance. The approach is an end in itself, a profitable adventure providing recreation and release for the body and the emotions.

From this approach, those who will, may pursue a course into dancing with professional or amateur intent. If the spark of art is present, the vitality and authenticity of the Wigman method must fan it into bright realization. If the spirit of the amateur is willing, there is health, emotional balance and pleasure to be gained. For those on the fringe of a talent, there is in store that breathless journey toward self-expression.²⁹

This passage demonstrates some of the key elements of the Wigman philosophy and method, such as her concept of absolute dance (“without the circumlocution of narrative and the support of formal music”)³⁰ and the importance of vision and self-expression. It also makes clear reference to the primitive-civilized dialectic and the influence of rhythmic gymnastics and German body culture on the method (recreation, release, vitality, authenticity, health, emotional balance, pleasure) described in Chapter 3.

In addition, this statement described the two paths offered to students at the Wigman School—professional dance and amateur recreation. Fé Alf elaborated on this idea in a lecture to the student body of the New York School in February 1932:

The Wigman School offers two separate courses, one for prospective artists, and the other for the amateur or lay dancer. They are distinguished from each other by their conception and their goal. The goal of the professional student is artistic creation and for this the body of the dancer must be trained to be a perfectly disciplined instrument of the dance. The goal of the amateur is the development of the human being. The work is directed for him and his personal development . . . The teacher does not dictate forms in movement or ideas. Each student must find his own style and thus his own joy . . . We consider this joy simply a harmony of the soul.³¹

Amateur students danced for health, recreation, pleasure, and emotional balance. The Wigman teachers believed that all students attained greater vitality and learned to live life more consciously through participating in modern dance. Holm explained in a lecture that the goal of the Wigman method was a body free for living and responsive to the expressive demands of the “living personality.”³² Students also gained the pleasure of self-expression and the satisfaction of communal bonding with others.

Promotional materials for the New York Wigman School used the phrase “everyone can dance” to describe the amateur courses, echoing Laban’s claim that “everyone is a dancer.”³³ As I have already described, dance “laymen” laid the foundation for a national dance community in Germany in the 1920s. Laban and his followers hoped to integrate dance more fully into the fabric of everyday life in German society, and they considered the movement choir to be the truest form of modern dance in Germany because it made everyone a dancer. Similarly, promotional materials for the New York Wigman School continually emphasized the importance of amateur participation. Holm wrote in an article published in 1933:

After an era of specialization in which the dance had been reduced to an accomplishment of technical virtuosity open only to a few, [Wigman] has opened the door to the masses. From the category of mere entertainment she has restored the dance, when we are most in need of it, to the possession of a people. Once more we are recalled to an old truth: in festivals, singly and together we may dance as all folk have danced before us. Joy and exuberance of expressive movement are ours for the asking.³⁴

In this way, modern dance was styled as a new form of folk dance in which everyone could participate.

However, Wigman's slight change in phrasing—from Laban's "everyone is a dancer" to her "everyone can dance"—was significant; she clearly distinguished between dancers and amateurs. At the Wigman School, everyone could dance, but not everyone was a *Dancer*. A 1932 brochure for the New York School cited Wigman:

Everyone can dance. This does not mean that everyone can become an artist of the dance. It does mean, however, that everyone can engage in some phase of the modern dance for the enhancement of the body, for self-expression, for an antidote against repressed modes of living.³⁵

Recall that in the hierarchy of the Wigman *Tanzgemeinschaft*, dancers—like priests and priestesses—were a special class of people with innate gifts and secret knowledge. Wigman retained for herself and her inner circle the status of dancers who were born with "the artistic spark."³⁶ "Dancer" was a title of honor, which only a few ever attained. The curriculum of the school, as well as its pedagogical approach, which I will explain below, all reinforced this hierarchy, and emphasized the importance of "the type of gift of the individual" in determining the role and mission of each member of the community.³⁷ This was also reflected in the types of professional certificates issued: performers, educator of laymen, or educator of professionals.

Despite the essential difference between amateurs and dancers and gradations of natural gift and skill, all participants in the Wigman method shared the ecstasy of freeing the body and learning to experience life, rhythm, and the body in deeper ways. The method was claimed to be useful for those at all levels of interest and ability. In a 1932 lecture at Barnard College, Holm explained:

Because the dance uses a medium available to all—the human body—a medium direct and necessary to life, it is particularly suited to this universal artistic education. This ideal prompted Mary Wigman to dedicate her art not only to the artists of today and tomorrow but also to all those the world over who are moved by the wonder and excitement of living and who would enrich their lives to the furthest reaches of their beings. The dance in this sense is not only an art, but also a deeply educational medium, a doorway to a more intense and fuller life.³⁸

Dance is a universal language, she claimed, because it is natural to all humans, and the body is the medium that is most direct in human artistic expression. Dance is “a deeply educational medium” because through the practice of dance, all people can learn to live life more fully, more expressively, and more intensely. In essence, this was why Holm and Wigman thought that amateurs would want to join their *Tanzgemeinschaft*, and why they thought it would ultimately transform social life.

Curriculum

The curriculum of the New York Wigman School was modeled directly on that of the Dresden Central Institute, which had been developed in the 1920s primarily by Mary Wigman, her sister Elisabeth Wigman, and Hanya Holm. The New York School offered courses at various levels for dancers, amateurs, and physical education teachers. Students at all levels of ability could register for an eight-month course of study, which combined dance classes with classes in percussion, group dance, and one or two solo lessons per month, in which the student received one-on-one feedback from Hanya Holm or Fé Alf.³⁹

Amateurs took classes—a combination of theory and practice—twice per week; beginners took class two, three, or four times per week; students in the intensive beginner class took class six times per week; and students in the advanced class took a two-hour

class six times per week. Students in the professional dancers' course and physical education teachers also took pedagogy. Periodically, the faculty would announce a "composition evening," at which the students in the professional course were expected to show their choreographic work.

In addition to the regular amateur courses, there were specialized amateur classes for children (8 – 12 years old), men, and "business girls." Each of these classes met once per week. "Business girls" referred to young women who worked in clerical jobs and took classes as a form of exercise and release; this was an important constituency at the Wigman Schools in Germany. The men's class prepared male students for "the masculine dance" by emphasizing "the clear and strict gesture."⁴⁰ Children's classes were concerned with "play and free fantasy development."⁴¹ After the age of 12, young people could join the adult amateur classes or the beginner-level dancers' classes.

Courses of study were intended to be complete educational experiences, comparable to a university degree. Jane Dudley remembered that it was "a serious school" that offered a more comprehensive training program than any other dance studio in New York at that time.⁴² The comprehensiveness of the Wigman method was highly important; this was a lifestyle—not simply a technique; Wigman teachers believed they were providing everything students needed for a life of dance.

The Approach to Movement: Tanzgymnastik

There was a fundamental contradiction in Wigman's approach to training the body for dance. In the worldview of body culture and German modern dance, technique was seen as unnatural. Techniques like ballet were seen to rob the body of its natural expressiveness and harmony with nature. However, in order to create dances for the

stage, Wigman needed to train her own body and those of her dancers to be able to do whatever the choreographic idea demanded. As a way to resolve this contradiction, she emphasized the naturalness of her approach; Holm explained:

The physical approach to the dance of Mary Wigman is based on natural movement. By this we mean, movement based on the structural and functional capabilities of the human body and the universal controlling factors of time, space, and energy.⁴³

Wigman built on Laban's research into human movement, and organized her concept of dance by drawing on many of his theories, including the trinity of "*Kraft, Zeit, und Raum*" (force, time, and space); the idea of movement scales (similar to harmonic scales in music); and the importance of "swing" or "flow" as the underlying life force of movement. She endorsed his belief in a "science of dance." He had declared in his influential book *Die Welt des Tänzers* (1920), "The task of the newly emerging science of dance will be to show that the whole of nature is ruled by the dynamic laws of harmony."⁴⁴ A decade later, the prospectus for the New York School asserted that the Wigman approach was based on "scientific law," claiming: "Never before has a system of dance training been developed that is so definite, infallible, and broadly applicable."⁴⁵ Wigman had absolute confidence that what she taught represented the most comprehensive, universal, and "infallible" approach to movement and dance as an art.

Holm also believed that the Wigman method was comprehensive, universal, and scientific. As I will discuss further in Chapter 6, she criticized the approaches of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, which she saw as idiosyncratic and lacking a comprehensive and broadly applicable theory. Humphrey focused on the principle of fall

and recovery, and Graham focused on the principle of contraction and release, but Holm believed that the Wigman method encompassed all aspects of movement. Holm's student Nancy Hauser explained:

It was a philosophy and a theory rather than a style, and it was not something which you took from someone else and put on your own body, but it was a way of thinking about movement, it was an understanding of the body, it was an understanding of the body in relation to the laws of movement, which included what Doris was saying . . . Fall and recovery. But it was talked about in different terms, and it included what Martha calls a contraction too, but it was not stylized like that, and it included vibration which developed into elevation, and the big thing was understanding the dancer's space, what that really meant.⁴⁶

When Wigman's disciples embarked on their communal discoveries of movement fundamentals in the 1920s, they turned to gymnastics for additional knowledge. Holm, for instance, took a Swedish gymnastics class to "augment" her studies and enhance her understanding of the body. From those classes, and guided also by her own curiosity, Holm gradually built up a movement system of stretches and exercises.⁴⁷ Claudia Moore Read, who studied with Holm at Bennington in 1934 and 1935 and with Wigman in Germany in 1936, noted the connection with gymnastics:

Hanya's work was solidly grounded in German gymnastics, coming from Mary Wigman. Now nobody over there would admit that . . . but even Laban, Dalcroze—they were all infused with gymnastics back in history, and [Holm's] work was solidly based, educational, logical. She knew anatomy; she's the only one [among the Bennington faculty] who really knew anatomy, I'm sure.⁴⁸

Like the gymnastics practiced by body culture adherents, the Wigman method aimed to free the body from the constraints of routinized, mechanized life in the modern

Gesellschaft (civilized society). In order to do this, Holm argued, first the “impeding habits” of the body needed to be “thrown off.”⁴⁹ The Wigman teachers proposed: “Once the body is freed of its habits, it develops in innumerable possibilities along natural lines.”⁵⁰ This included getting rid of physical evidence of other (“unnatural”) dance styles, to make the body “pure.” Holm’s student Martha Wilcox remembered that Holm urged her to stop teaching ballet and other forms of dance, so that she could get rid of the physical habits they created.⁵¹ Holm sought to “re-educate” her students’ joints and muscles. Through this process, the body’s true nature could be “awakened”:

The “awakening” of the body through this natural movement we call training in dance gymnastics. Its purpose is to coordinate and develop the functions of the body—the functions of the muscles, the joints, and the organs of breathing—to a point where the body will no longer stand in the way of the expression of an idea, a mood, or a personality. This training is both general and flexible in its approach, since it has for its aim, not the development of a “style” of movement copied after any one dancer or teacher, but the discovery of the universal truths of movement without which we can not hope to reach truth in feeling and expression.⁵²

Thus, the emphasis at the Wigman School was not on acquisition of virtuosic technique for its own sake. For all students, the goals were to free the “repressed” mind and body, to escape the confines of modern life—such as bourgeois morality, mechanization, and the physical confines of urban spaces—and to gain pleasure, health, and emotional balance. Professional students had the additional goal of developing their bodies into instruments, so that they would not be hindered by physical limitations in their drive to express human truth. Wigman and her teachers developed their students’ dance-worthiness through exploration of the body’s capabilities, and through exploration of movement concepts, as explained in the next section.

Tanzgymnastik *Movement Concepts*

Anspannung-Entspannung (Tension-Release)

One of the foundational concepts of the Wigman method was *Anspannung-Entspannung*, or the opposition between a tension and its release.⁵³ When the New York Wigman School first opened, all classes emphasized release as the starting point.⁵⁴ Holm emphasized the need to release physical tension, to bring the body to a “zero hour,” so that it could be receptive to the primal impulses of pure dance movement. She asserted:

Through constant systematic relaxing of the parts of the body and of the body as a whole we approach a state where dance movement can be experienced and expressed . . . The effortless flow of natural movement that can take place only in an unresistive, responsive body, is the secret of that vividness and vitality that lifts dancing from the category of exercise to its true place as an expression of life.⁵⁵

Like many elements of the Wigman method, this was based on Laban’s concepts; Valerie Preston-Dunlop reports that Laban had developed his theory of *Spannung-Entspannung* prior to 1918.⁵⁶ Wigman subsequently developed this concept herself, innovating ways to incorporate it into her classes. Wigman teachers emphasized that *Anspannung-Entspannung* could be found in nature, in the rise and fall of the tides, the moon waxing and waning, and winds blowing and dying down.⁵⁷ It was a cyclical pattern of action, a charge and discharge of energy. Holm explained:

Tension may be defined in part as that inner force by which the body overcomes gravity and other external forces, and asserts itself against its own inertia . . . Essentially it is not merely a muscle function, but a state or condition created when two or more forces are acting in opposition to one another.⁵⁸

Tension was a “driving power” that could “galvanize the relaxed, waiting body into action.”⁵⁹ *Anspannung-Entspannung* was central to the Wigman method because it represented simultaneously the driving power of action, and the ability to completely surrender the body to outside forces. Holm explained that the muscles “must be so loosened, so relaxed, that it is possible to release the body from the conscious direction of the will. Only then can the body as a whole respond with complete freedom to physical laws such as that of gravity.”⁶⁰ This principle was also reflected in the movement style of the Wigman School, which featured powerful, intense movements, luxurious backbends, dervish spinning, and ecstatic pulsations.

The principle of *Anspannung-Entspannung* could be applied in a number of ways. One application was to have students engage muscular tension throughout the body (*Anspannung*)—often by pushing the limbs out from the center of the body with great exertion—and then release that muscular tension in a collapse (*Entspannung*).⁶¹ Variations included reaching and falling in front of the body, behind the body, on each side, from different starting positions, and in various shapes. Tension was also explored as the tension between two points in space, manifested through two dancers, or through oppositional spatial pulls on a dancer’s body.

Students explored the state of relaxation or release (*Entspannung*) by swinging, bouncing, circling, and stretching each part of the body. For example, the shoulders could move up and down, forwards and backwards, circle in both directions, and roll in and out. The arms might then make pendulum swings backwards and forwards, circle out, circle in, and make circle 8’s that gradually reduced in size. Similar patterns would be performed for the hands, torso, hips, legs, and feet. Movement sequences might be

performed first in a state of tension, and then in a state of release, or the movements could alternate between the two states.

Wigman teachers asserted that this pattern was necessary for the healthy, organic functioning of body and mind. As with all the movement concepts, *Anspannung-Entspannung* had both an “emotional side” and a “functional side.”⁶² Based on discussions with Hanya Holm, Dane Rudhyar explained that *Anspannung-Entspannung* referred to “creative tensions,” and that “tension” should not be confused with “tenseness.” “Tenseness” was actually “thwarted and unreleased tension,” which had physical and psychological ramifications:

A state of tenseness is . . . always to some extent a state of congestion. The unreleased energy does not circulate; instead it becomes stationary potential: a physical congestion, leading to catarrh and infection—a psychological “complex,” leading to neurosis and perversions.⁶³

Rudhyar argued that *Entspannung* should be translated into English as “release,” not “relaxation,” as it was most commonly understood in the early 1930s. The Wigman method aimed to relax tense bodies, but the principle of tension and release implied more than that; it demanded that “the seed of new tensions should be contained in every release.”⁶⁴ It was a cycle of action and creative power.

Further, as Wigman’s student Erika Thimey explained, *Anspannung-Entspannung* created dynamics in movement:

When there is a certain tension in the body, a curve with the hip becomes more rigid, an accent, a certain dynamic style, yes? Or you can use the hip curve with a fluid energy, which of course becomes a kind of swing . . . To take the idea of dynamics further—or more deeply, perhaps—one of Mary’s basic ideas was inhaling and exhaling; inhaling, building up

tension, bringing it to a climax; and then exhaling, releasing tension, to again bring it to a different climax.⁶⁵

Release of tension was the preparation for the next “climax,” and the next breath. Thimey’s description indicates how much the various concepts articulated in the Wigman method were interdependent and interrelated—tension and release depended upon breath, and the play of tension and release produced swing, movement in space, and dynamics in phrasing.

The balance between tension and release in the Wigman method also had feminist implications. Wigman claimed all movement—including strong, grotesque, violent movement—as appropriate for women. Her work was an endorsement of female sensual pleasure and ecstasy. Wigman’s student Jacqueline Robinson described it:

[S]ensuous, voluptuous pleasure—delight in space, all the more alive, colored, malleable; delight in rhythm, breath, song; delight in sensations, subtle or violent; delight in effort; delight in letting go, in going to the end of things, as far as possible, knowing that there is no limit to the possible.⁶⁶

As noted earlier, Holm declared in the 1920s that the time for pleasing the audience had ended; instead, modern dancers were concerned with their own bodies and its “passions and longings, pains and joys.”⁶⁷ German body culture had reclaimed the body—particularly the female body—as the site of emotion, expression, health, and spirituality.

Karl Toepfer argues:

German body culture was largely the achievement of women who associated modernity with expanded opportunities for freedom of identity and action. These women believed that unprecedented assertions of

freedom and power for their sex depended upon revised perceptions of the female body and its expressive capabilities.⁶⁸

Wigman's embodiment of *Anspannung-Entspannung* was a potent symbol for this new female body—ecstatic, powerful, mystical, and free.

Swing

On a functional level, the Wigman teachers explained, swing occurs in the joints. In classes, students would perform swings with the arms, legs, and torso on different planes and in different directions. It was essential to first release all tension from the limb, in order to produce an authentic swing. Swing could also be a movement “state,” an underlying flow that provided the basis for all other movements; Holm wrote:

[S]wing, which is based functionally on the rotation of joints and the force of gravity on a relaxed arm, for example, can transcend this simple pendulum swing and become a state of movement produced by an inner experience of swinging. This *state* of swinging may be compared in some respects with the endless, organic movement of the particles of water in the ocean. Like the *state* of vibration—similar to the constant pulsation of the span of a bridge under the ebb and flow of traffic—this inner swinging will produce in the dancer a flow of instinctive, almost unconscious, motion that is the essence of all dynamic movement.⁶⁹

In this way, Wigman's concept of “schwung” (“swing”) was related to Laban's concept of “flow,” which he considered to be the inner force residing in the body.

“Swing” carried totemistic power in German modern dance and *Körperkultur*. Two of the movement's most important goals were to “swing” with others in order to create community, and to find your own inner force by tapping into the swing of the natural world. Yvonne Hardt notes that the term used to describe lay dance and festive

culture was “mitschwingen,” to swing or radiate, and that the word Schwingung signifies both a movement and waves of energy.⁷⁰

Jazz and “swing,” as I have already mentioned, exerted a strong influence on Weimar-era German youth culture.⁷¹ After arriving in New York, Holm made frequent trips up to Harlem to observe the Lindy Hoppers and other jazz and swing dancers.⁷² I will discuss Holm’s perception of jazz and African American culture further in Chapter 6.

Active/Passive Scales

When the principles of *Anspannung-Entspannung* and Swing were applied to movement that travels through space, it resulted in the passive and active locomotive scales (*Schrittskalen*). The passive scale included vibration, walking, gliding, floating, sinking, and falling. The active scale included walking, running, circles without changing front, circles changing front (rotating), suspensions, and leaping. A feature of the locomotive scales—as in musical scales—was that they were progressive; it was important that movement develop naturally as it progressed from simpler to more complex variations of passive or active locomotor movement.

To Wigman, as to Laban before her, the scales revealed harmonic balance in the body. In the 1910s and 1920s, Laban had developed a number of space scales that were intended to bring the dancer into harmony by practicing sequences of movement in crystalline forms (Platonic solids) such as the icosahedron (the form created by the corners of three planes). In the scales, the dancer moved from a central place out into space in specific spatial patterns. These included swing scales (later known as the dimensional scale and the defense scale), the A and B scales (later called the transversal standard scale), four-rings, three-rings, and the Axis and Equator scales.⁷³ The simplest

scale—the “dimensional scale”—was performed by reaching the right arm and shifting the weight of the body up, down, left, right, backward, and forward. The more complex scales moved along diagonals and angles created inside the icosahedron.

By referring to these exercises as “scales,” Wigman evoked Laban’s theories and practices, including his belief that his harmonic movement scales revealed natural, scientific movement patterns. Wigman’s locomotive scales, however, were less theoretical than Laban’s space scales and were comprised of recognizable human movements (walking, running, leaping, etc.).

Wigman’s concept of passive-active could also be understood in relation to Laban’s concept of “indulging” and “fighting” effort qualities. Laban described efforts, or the use of energy/force, in relation to the factors time, space, and weight. For example, he referred to slowness as indulging in time, indirectness as indulging in space, and lightness as indulging in weight; quickness was fighting against time, directness was fighting against space, and strength was fighting against weight. Similarly, Wigman’s passive scale was performed with “indulging” efforts, while the active scale was performed with “fighting” efforts.

Space

“Space” was part of Laban’s trinity of “*Kraft, Zeit, und Raum*” (force, time, and space)—one of the elements of human movement. During their early period of experimentation and collaboration [1913-1917], Wigman and Laban had concluded that space was the most important medium for dance. They felt that Isadora Duncan’s “search for the body” had not gone far enough, and Dalcroze’s “search through rhythm of

the body” had been a dead end.⁷⁴ Perhaps space held the mystical keys to truth. Wigman explained:

Time, strength, and space: these are the elements which give the dance its life. Of this trinity of elemental powers, it is space which is the realm of the dancer’s real activity, which belongs to him because he himself creates it. It is not the tangible, limited, and limiting space of concrete reality, but the imaginary, irrational space of the danced dimension . . . Height and depth, width and breadth, forward, sideward, and backward, the horizontal and the diagonal—these are not only technical terms or theoretical notions for the dancer. After all, he experiences them in his own body. And they become his living experience because through them he celebrates his union with space. Only in its spatial embrace can the dance achieve its final and decisive effect.⁷⁵

To Wigman, space was not merely a technical or theoretical notion; it was a “living experience,” and took on a totemistic role in her danced religion. Isa Partsch-Bergsohn writes that Wigman and Laban’s metaphysical idealism used space “as a metaphor for cosmic order.”⁷⁶ To Wigman, space was “timeless and visionary,”⁷⁷ imaginary and irrational.

Paying attention to space enabled the transcendence of the ego by manifesting the interaction of the dancer with external forces. Susan Manning has termed this strategy “*Gestalt-im-Raum*,” or “configuration of energy in space,” Wigman’s ability to animate supra-personal forces beyond her physical self.⁷⁸ For Wigman, space was a partner against which, and with which, she could dialogue in order to express deep human experiences. Critic John Martin theorized Wigman’s use of space in these terms: “as man and his environment interact upon each other, shaping and altering each other’s character and destiny, so movement and its environment, space, interact, and the resultant is dance.”⁷⁹ Space was not empty; it had volume and mass, and the dancer’s relationship

to that space had emotional meaning. Space made concrete the relationships between self and other and self and world. Wigman's emphasis on space enabled her to construct her theory of absolute dance, or dance free from a dependence on music (time).

American dancers sometimes referred to the Wigman technique as a "space technique." Martha Hill, co-founder of the Bennington College Summer School of the Dance, explained:

Wigman's heightened awareness of space was one of the biggest contributions to the American modern dance, because this was something which was not in our consciousness before . . . Wigman brought in the idea of space being very effective in shaping the movement in dance; space pressing on you, space as an active partner . . . [while] Martha [Graham] had a more painter's look to the body in space.⁸⁰

Similarly, John Martin called Wigman's use of space "her greatest contribution to the discovery of the dance."⁸¹ Holm, therefore, placed great emphasis on space in her classes and lecture-demonstrations. Jane Dudley, a student at the New York Wigman School from 1931 to 1935, remembered: "Space was used as a factor to deal with almost mystically: there was the focus to a point in space, the curve in space, the strong diagonal, the difference in experience between the person watching and the person doing."⁸² Like Laban and Wigman before her, Holm considered space to have emotional, mystical, and communicative potential. As Holm developed her lecture-demonstrations in the early 1930s, she came to focus more and more intensively on space, creating a series of "space études" to demonstrate the possibilities of dancers interacting with space.

Elasticity

In the Wigman method, “Elasticity” meant the ability to spring from the ground and return again with ease. It was seen as a fundamental movement quality, and was investigated in a number of ways. Like “Swing,” “Elasticity” was explored through all different parts of the body, and then was applied to movement traveling through space. These explorations progressed naturally from simple, stationary movements to more complex, locomotive movements. Leaping was taught, for example, by first exploring vibration on the feet, then adding elasticity in up and down movement, then gradually adding elevation into small leaps, large leaps, and leap turns. Skipping was taught by first exploring walking with emphasis on going down and up, then adding a hop, then skipping in 3/4 time and 4/4 time, skip turns, and “sailing skips” forward and backward.⁸³ Elasticity was a buoyant quality of the entire body.

Vibration

“Vibration” was another fundamental movement quality—a quivering energy and an underlying pulse in movement. As Holm explained in the quote above, vibration was a “state of being” similar to the pulse of movement under the traffic on a bridge. In classes, Holm would begin an exploration of vibration with a pulsing walk across the space, which would gradually develop into larger vibratory movement. Vibration, like elasticity, encompassed the entire body, but with a faster pulse. There is film footage of Holm performing this characteristic pattern, recorded at Mills College in 1939.⁸⁴

Holm referred to “vibration” as something you “found”—something that is there all the time, though you have to become aware of it and be able to channel its power. She

often repeated a story about how she and her fellow Wigman students “discovered” vibration in the early 1920s.

We sat on a sofa smoking and talking when all of a sudden somebody started to do this. [Hanya demonstrates bouncing] “Oh, how marvelous, let’s do that.” So we hooked arms and did that all night. Next day we went to Mary and said, “Mary, we found something—we can vibrate.” Then finally we emancipated ourselves from the sofa. We stood up on our feet and tried to get that same feeling. That is how that [vibration series] was born.⁸⁵

Their discovery soon became an integral part of the curriculum of the Wigman School, since it represented a fundamental movement pattern that could be applied in a number of ways.

Kreisen (Circles)

The active scale included circles, which were also practiced as a separate concept. This involved a number of variations on the idea of circles: rotations of the hips in place; rotations of the hips as the impetus for traveling through space; walking on circular pathways without changing the dancer’s orientation to the front; walking on circular pathways with rotation (changing the front). Holm continued to develop this concept for many years. The poet Ben Belitt described a class on circles that Holm taught in the late 1930s at the Bennington College Summer School of the Dance:

She was extraordinarily thorough, as thorough as a geometer, really, in indicating how these patterns might work: half circles, arc, full circles, spirals, the whole circuitry of movement and space. That was how she did a good part of her teaching: an iconography of forms.⁸⁶

As Holm taught them, circles involved very specific technical skills, such as the placement of the feet, the amount of rotation of the hips, and the tilt of the spine toward or away from the center of the circle.⁸⁷

Holm often admonished her students that they must practice movements like circles repeatedly and focus their attention on their own sensations and experiences until they “became” that movement. The goal was for the dancer to become “dissolved and simply surrounded” by the dance itself.⁸⁸ Further, circles were a basic form that carried mystical significance. She was later quoted from a spontaneous class lecture:

There are books written about circles and squares. The ancient people understood them . . . The more intelligent the ancient peoples were, the more mystical was the form in its use and significance. There is more to a round than just making a circle. You will have to run in circles for many days before you will know what a circle is. Then all of a sudden you will realize that you are not yourself anymore, that your space is dynamic and powerful and that you have to master that force. Turning is almost a dervish exercise with the world suddenly going around and you feeling very calm and quiet. If you work for half a year on circles, your turns will become different.⁸⁹

Circles (and spinning, described below) had the capacity to induce a trance state, and to transform the dancer into an embodiment of the circling space itself.

Drehen (Spinning)

Classes at the New York Wigman School also included the spinning exercise that Wigman called “endurance-turns on the spot.”⁹⁰ Nadia Chilkovsky remembered practicing “mystical spinning in the zikr manner of Malawi dervishes” at the New York Wigman School.⁹¹ Wigman described it:

Fixed to the same spot and spinning in the monotony of the whirling movement, one lost oneself gradually in it until the turns seemed to detach themselves from the body, and the world around it started to turn. Not turning oneself, but being turned, being the center, being the quiet pole in the vortex of rotation!⁹²

Practices such as spinning reveal how *Tanz-Gymnastik* combined physical exploration with mystical, even trance-like experiences that had the potential to unleash emotion and instinct. Marian Van Tuyl remembered, “I would spin out of Hanya’s classes almost drunk, because it was such a vibratory experience to go to a climax.”⁹³ The classes were designed to bring dancers into an altered state by the end of the session. Wigman referred to spinning as an intoxicating experience of possession, an “almost lustful destruction of the physical being.”⁹⁴ The mystical atmosphere was enhanced by percussion accompaniment and by Viktor Schwinghammer’s jazz-inspired piano improvisations.

Percussion

Wigman’s theory of “absolute dance” mandated that dance must be pure; it should not depend upon music, libretto, or décor for meaning. She often created movement in silence first, and then worked with an accompanist, adding percussion or piano sounds to correlate with the dance. She described the importance of percussion:

Since the dance—according to its very being—lives in an absolute world of rhythm, the world most closely related to it is that of the percussion instruments. The drum, the gong, the cymbals, and all their different variations are suited as hardly any other instrument to capture and underline the rhythm of the dancing body.⁹⁵

As noted in Chapter 3, the idea of primal rhythm was central to German body culture and to avant-garde art in the early twentieth century. Wigman's and Holm's Dalcroze training had given them both a strong foundation in rhythm, and Laban had also led classes with a small drum in his hand. In the 1920s, Wigman and her associates in Dresden acquired a large collection of drums from around the world from sailors in the port cities of Hamburg and Bremen.⁹⁶ When Holm arrived in New York on the *Aquitania*, she had a number of odd-shaped boxes and crates full of exotic drums from India, Thailand, China, and the African continent. This would remain a trademark of Holm's teaching style for the rest of her career—even as an octogenarian, she would surround herself with drums of various sizes and timbres, and conduct class through rhythm and verbal directions.

The Wigman emphasis on percussion was emblematic of the German approach, and during the first year of the school, the percussion classes attracted the most attention. There were a number of dance educators, for example, who took only the percussion classes. Marian VanTuyl of the University of Chicago remembered that she, Martha Hill of New York University, Marian Streng of Barnard College, and Mary O'Donnell of Columbia University Teacher's College all "beat the Wigman drums."⁹⁷ The Hurok Musical Bureau emphasized this feature of the Wigman method with frequent references to "tom toms" and "primitive gongs" in their publicity materials. In classes at the Wigman School, students were expected to provide percussion accompaniment when they were not dancing. Similarly, in pedagogy classes, student teachers were required to accompany their own classes on drums.

At first, Holm taught the percussion classes; later she brought in guest teachers such as composer Henry Cowell, who taught percussion and *gamelan* (Indonesian percussion), and Uday Shankar's music director Vishnudass Shirali, who taught *tabla* (Indian drum). In the mid-1930s, Franziska Boas took responsibility for the percussion classes. Boas became an accomplished teacher and taught percussion at the Bennington College Summer School of the Dance as well as in her own school.⁹⁸

Franziska Boas' notes on percussion classes reveal the approach she learned from Holm. Classes emphasized learning different types of beats, developing the ability to play drums while moving, and becoming proficient in accompanying others performing varying types of movement (lyrical, staccato, vibration, swing, elasticity).⁹⁹ Instruments used included sticks, rhythm sticks, wood blocks, rattles, drum muffler, hand drums, bass tambourine, tom toms, tympani, triangle, cymbals, African bells, gongs, temple blocks, snare drum, xylophone, and bowls.

Percussion instruments reinforced the mystical atmosphere of the Wigman School, which led students through trance-inducing activities like vibration, swing, and spinning. Holm reflected on her experience of the gong in this poem:

Who are you, gong, swinging, singing sun of the east?
What do your vibrations sing?
Who are the spirits, who live there in your iron shape?
Tell the softly banging hand your resounding answer.
Let us feel the breath of your unique language
Become the beating heart of a reverberating soul.¹⁰⁰

Wigman also wrote about the magical powers of the gong:

The Chinese gong was placed in a room of its own, from the center of which it governed everything else . . . To have it yield its secret, one had to know the magic formula which alone could make it sound . . . The

whole room seemed to wait in a peculiar state of tension for the growing of this sound. I too waited for it, ready with all my senses, as if I expected an apparition to manifest itself at any moment. But then the unexpected happened! It was not the bronze body of the gong which began to sound, but the whole room that vibrated. It was as if the earth had opened up and embraced everything with its warm breath. From everywhere, from all directions, a bewitching whispering and humming came toward me. The air seemed to shimmer, opalescent lights were dancing up and down, and one wave of warmth after another began to fill the room.¹⁰¹

This experience led Wigman to create *Monotony (Whirl Dance)*, in which she spun continuously for several minutes, gaining speed and momentum, until she stretched high, suspended, and then collapsed to the floor. Holm described studying percussion as a way to tap into primal impulses. She insisted that one had to play “primitive instruments” “as one breathes or walks,” not according to the metronome.¹⁰² Drums brought out the dancer’s individual rhythms.

Group Dance

Another emblematic feature of the Wigman School—which differed particularly from American dance techniques—was the importance of group dance classes. As discussed, movement choirs, choric dance, and group dance were essential to German modern dance. Laban was known particularly for his development of the movement choir form, and Wigman had been involved with some of his earliest choric dance experiments on Monte Verità. Wigman created distinctions between group dance and choric dance: “group dance” meant a dance with an intimate group such as her company—usually less than a dozen dancers; “choric” or “mass” dance, on the other hand, was dance for a large group—several dozen or more dancers. Though classes at the Wigman School were called “group dance,” Wigman also lead periodic “Chorus Nights” at the school in Dresden, which were attended by all students.¹⁰³ At these special

events, Wigman would lead her students improvisationally through a choric dance event, often for three hours without interruption.

At the New York School, group dance classes developed responsiveness, spontaneity, and the ability to sense others and work together rhythmically and spatially. According to a notebook Margaret Gage kept of classes at the New York school in 1932-33, Holm would ask students to work with a partner, often with eyes closed, and to “get a feeling for the other person’s rhythm.” In lines of five or six abreast, they would do a simple swaying movement together, then travel rhythmically through different spatial formations. Other movement assignments included moving a “wall” of people “by the dynamic swing of one’s own movement”—to break up that wall and “to lead group thru (sic) force of rhythm.”¹⁰⁴ They also practiced folk dances and explored themes such as “Horizontal Circles,” “Develop Formations out of Natural Sequence of Movement,” and “Feeling for Distance in Forms.” Holm’s use of improvisational exercises, which developed in dancers the “free natural expression” of personal ideas,¹⁰⁵ laid the foundation for group dance by developing the dancers’ responsiveness and spontaneity.

In a 1932 lecture given at the New York Wigman School, Holm’s assistant Fé Alf reiterated how such group dance activities served the goal of creating a new community. In choric or group dance, she asserted, “social contact—really working with one another and not against one another—is realized, giving birth to freedom and joy” (orig. emphasis).¹⁰⁶ These experiences gave birth to freedom and joy for all participants because they encouraged them to feel connected to others while retaining their own expressive capabilities. This social contact—essential to the formation of the community—was achieved by moving together in rhythm and space. Holm asserted, “In

our machine age the masses need a new form of artistic self expression. It is the lay dancer who is the chosen one to furnish this need . . . the professional creator of dance and the lay person must join together.”¹⁰⁷ In order to create a new cultural community, amateurs needed to be educated so they could lead the masses into a new way of life. As I will discuss further in Chapter 6, many leftist dancers in New York in the 1930s embraced this method as a valuable tool for organizing and unifying the working class, and Alf herself became intimately involved with leftist dance.

Pedagogical Approach of the Wigman Method

Improvisation was at the center of the Wigman pedagogical approach. All classes were taught through improvisation and exploration of movement concepts, rather than through teaching predetermined exercises. Holm often reiterated that improvisation did not mean “to throw oneself around into, say, freedom for freedom’s sake.”¹⁰⁸ Rather, improvisation required great discipline and focus on the task at hand. Wigman teachers served as guides through the material; they designed ways for each dancer to have an authentic experience of discovery. Holm explained:

For the amateur, as for the professional, the initial approach to the creative dance is through the medium of improvisation. In improvisation the student is encouraged to express in movement the spontaneous impression caused by a suggestion in music, atmosphere, or personal fantasy. She will learn gradually to throw off those habits and inhibitions that choke back her desire to express what she feels. She will learn . . . that her own personal meaning will not be clear to others if she uses borrowed phrases . . . slowly there will come a realization of the inescapable and subtle relations of form and idea and the natural dynamics of movements, intensity, and form in expression.¹⁰⁹

As discussed earlier, process was highly important to Wigman and her inner circle; for them, dance was life, expression, and instinct—not a product to be bought and sold. Dancers must have their own inner experience of discovery, they insisted, and not simply use “borrowed phrases” learned from others. Wigman and Holm believed they had unearthed the universal principles of human movement, and they insisted that to be a modern dancer you had to rediscover these principles in your own body. You had to have a lived experience of those ideas in order to truly understand them and be alive in the moment of dancing.

Holm vehemently opposed teaching “canned dances,” which she thought were “death to personal creativeness and a hindrance to a logically developed training of the body.”¹¹⁰ She emphasized authenticity rather than imitation. Each class would develop improvisationally, based on a movement theme and the students’ response to it. Nancy Hauser described the method:

[A] class evolves and develops . . . you don’t have any kind of curriculum except for a preparatory warmup exercise, things like that, which is equivalent to a barre. But a class itself will evolve from the movement which you begin establishing. And most often, a mature teacher who’s had experience will go into a class with nothing more in mind than, maybe, a first movement across the floor, a walk or something. And then things will begin. And it’s a very creative and wonderful process because it’s always alive. You never teach two classes that are alike . . . each class is almost like a miniscule bit of choreography, except that you’re developing it from a different standpoint. You’re developing it from the idea of learning certain things about movement.¹¹¹

May O’Donnell remembered that Fé Alf always seemed to be in a trance when she taught, because she was tuning into “feeling a step, then feeling the next rhythm that would come out of it . . .”¹¹² Students who responded well to this approach found that it

encouraged deep creativity and responsiveness. Jane Dudley commented: “This type of class could be exhilarating, joyous and inspiring, developing fluidity and fullness of movement, with grace and harmony in the body.”¹¹³ With its improvisational approach, *Tanz-Gymnastik* encouraged amateurs and dancers to explore the *feeling* of movements. Through this process, their imagination would be stimulated, and they would be more fully alive, fully conscious of their own actions and reactions.

The Wigman pedagogy was also guided by the belief that dance students inevitably pass through three stages of development, progressing from instinctual reactions to the use of the body as an instrument. In the early 1920s, Wigman and her teachers had developed their “Guidelines for Professional Training,” which outlined these three stages.¹¹⁴ In the first stage, the dancer’s “creative force” is expressed unconsciously. The dancer moves instinctively, “groping for expression” while gradually realizing “the dancer’s body.” In the second stage, the student begins to understand the artistic process. Vacillating between expression for expression’s sake and form for form’s sake, the dancer struggles for unity. In the third and final stage, the dancer’s creative force is expressed consciously, as expression and form crystallize into an entity. The body is no longer a “self-willed substance,” but is an instrument to be used toward an end—that of dance making.

Also in the “Guidelines for Professional Dance Training,” Holm reinforced her belief in “types of gifts” in individual talent. The three stages of development revealed the nature of the “student-material.”¹¹⁵ Although the Wigman School did encourage individuals to develop a “dance-personality,” they conceptualized students as exemplars of various types. In this way, Wigman and her teachers were, again, following the

example of Laban and other leaders of the *Körperkultur* movement. This was quite different from the American approach to education, which, as Holm described it, was more concerned with treating all students equally while highlighting rare exceptions. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

The School as *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*

The school was intended to be a “work community” (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*)—a group of people devoted to shared experience, exchange, and transformation. Promotional literature for the New York School expressed the hope that it would become a “cultural workshop where artists in other mediums will come for social and intellectual exchange, where American dancers will brilliantly mature, and where laymen will find satisfying recreation along high levels.”¹¹⁶ In an earlier lecture to students at the Central Institute in Dresden, Holm had explained the meaning of *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*:

Man is not only an individual creature; he needs coworkers for the supplement and perfection of himself, he needs them for reciprocal stimulation to counteract the danger of one-sidedness, and he needs them as resonance and co-swingers. The cooperation of teachers and students creates that strong linkage to the work community, which is to represent a school in its most ideal demands.¹¹⁷

The school embodied the meaning of *Gemeinschaft*—a cohesive community bound together by shared values—which was such an important concept to the German modern dancers. They believed that working with others made people more responsive to movement, rhythm, and life; it fostered the ability to “swing together” on personal, emotional, social, and physical levels. Working in a community made people more

whole, more perfectly themselves. In exchange, individuals were bound by their commitment to the community and its mission. Wigman explained:

Through the cooperation of teacher and student the school fulfills its task as a team work. The school is the focal point for all those who wish to serve its basic ideas. The aim of each individual, his personal accomplishments as a dancer—these are binding and create a common spirit as to convictions and conceptions of life. However different talents and temperaments may be, the same longing and struggling unites them.

In its ultimate and purest sense, the school is the guardian of its products and performances, of the dance work growing in and through it.¹¹⁸

Teachers and students, professionals and amateurs all served the school and contributed to a common purpose—to foster dance itself. Through their collective work, the secrets of dance made themselves apparent. The school was the guardian of these secrets.

The sense that the Wigman School was a work community was reinforced by the curriculum itself—especially the group dance classes and periodic choreography showings—as well as activities such as lectures, social gatherings, and guest classes by visiting artists. In the first three months after the school’s opening, for example, there were a number of such events. A tea was given on October 4, 1931 to celebrate the opening of the school, which was attended by all registered students, faculty, staff, Sol Hurok, and Gerald Goode. After Fé Alf arrived three weeks later, students attended a reception for her, at which Holm gave a lecture “on the evolution of the Wigman-dance and her working method with discussion following it.”¹¹⁹ On a break from her solo tour, Wigman greeted the student body in December and answered their questions; over the next four weeks, she taught several master classes. Soon after, John Martin lectured on

“The Modern Dance”; in addition to the entire faculty and student body, a number of prominent guests attended, including John Dewey, the educational philosopher and leader of the Progressive Education movement.¹²⁰ Another evening, Hans Hasting, Wigman’s musical director, gave a lecture on dance accompaniment and performed an original composition. Holm would continue this practice of evening lectures, gatherings, and guest classes over the next few years.

Holm’s relationship to Uday Shankar and his company provides an example of the kind of *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* she tried to create. Shankar was an international phenomenon in the 1930s, and had particular success performing in Paris, Germany, and the United States.¹²¹ Impresario Sol Hurok brought Shankar and his company to New York in 1932-33, 1934, and 1937-1938. Wigman and Holm both admired his work; Holm recalled that she went to see his concerts in New York twenty-two times in one winter, because she was so fascinated by the “knowledgeable security” of the performers, the communicative power of the complex rhythms, and the intricate movements of Indian dance.¹²² Holm invited Shankar’s musical director, Vishnudass Shirali, to teach guest classes in percussion at the New York School.¹²³ She became friends with Shankar, Shirali, and dancers Simkie and Zohra Mumtaz, and remained in touch with them for years.¹²⁴

There were other connections between the Wigman School and Shankar’s company: before joining Shankar in 1935, Zohra Mumtaz (Segal) had attended the Wigman School in Dresden, and received a Wigman Certificate in 1933.¹²⁵ Later, she helped Shankar to develop the curriculum for his All-India Cultural Center at Almora (1939-1943), and used the Wigman School curriculum as a model. The Wigman

influence at Almora could be seen in the attention to all parts of the body “to make them supple and dance-worthy”; the development of “group feeling”; the improvisation classes, in which Shankar would sit in the center of the studio with a drum and give the students a theme on which to improvise; and the practice of monthly student choreography showings.¹²⁶

Holm’s relationship to Shankar reflected her desire to access the essential truths of dance as a human art of expression. She saw Shankar as someone who had accessed some of those truths, and she wanted to learn from him. He and his performers had a “knowledgeable security” that arose from their success in tapping into the eternal springs of “the dance itself.” To Holm, Shankar was on the same quest as Wigman, so he was a natural member of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*.

Conclusion

As an *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, the New York Wigman School was intended to be a cohesive community bound together by shared goals. Though it was a business, it often functioned like a religious organization. The school was also seen as the “guardian” of “the dance work growing in and through it”; the members of the school discovered “the dance” through their collective work, and the school itself served as the repository for their shared knowledge. The curriculum of the school was comprehensive and provided everything dancers needed for a life of dance, whether they viewed dance as a profession or as recreation and health. Echoing German body culture, Holm often declared that life is dance, and dance is life.

Wigman and Holm believed that their system of *Tanzgymnastik* “awakened the body.” Once the body had been awakened, the dance itself could be freed. *Freie Tanz* (freed dance) made itself visible, as I have described, through tension, release, swing, vibration, spinning, and so on. In addition to releasing the natural instinct of dance in the body, *Tanzgymnastik* fostered health, vitality, and balance among body, mind, and spirit both for individual bodies and the collective body of the cultural community.

When Hanya Holm first arrived in the U.S., the Wigman School and her role in it defined her identity. She would continue to serve Wigman over the next few years by attempting to spread the gospel of German modern dance in the U.S. The next chapter will describe how she did this, and what challenges she encountered in trying to make the goals of Wigman’s dance understandable to her American students.

NOTES

¹ “Announcing the New York Wigman School of the Dance” (1931), MGZ “Mary Wigman Schools [catalogs, announcements],” JRDD, NYPL-PA.

² Prospectus for the New York Wigman School of the Dance (1931), MGZ “Mary Wigman Schools [catalogs, announcements],” JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³ Holm later told Walter Sorell that what particularly bothered her “was the fact that so many of those who had come to study with me the first year were people in teaching positions, or who had already made some kind of a name for themselves—and they thought that this passing acquaintanceship with the Wigman method was enough. Well, it wasn’t in my eyes, and I was afraid that some of them might even dare teach what they thought they knew.” (Sorell, Hanya Holm: *The Biography of an Artist*, 35).

⁴ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

⁵ J. Fred Lissfelt, “Wigman Is Modern Inventor of Dance Blazing New Trail,” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, 5 July 1931; “News from New York,” *The American Dancer* (July 1931): 39; “New York Borrows Wigman; Faculty of the About-to-Open American Wigman School,” *The Dance Magazine* (Aug. 1931): 28; *Vanity Fair* (Feb. 1932); “Dancing Schools,” *Time* (23 Mar. 1931): 60.

⁶ “Mary Wigman Planning New School in Dancing; Plain Music of ‘Tom Tom’ To Give Barefoot Addicts Chance to Develop Primitive Art,” *Toledo Times*, 5 July 1931; “Tomtom School of Dancing for Blasé Gotham,” *Buffalo Courier*, 5 July 1931; “New York’s First ‘Tom-Tom’ School of Dance Planned,” *Muncie Star* (Indiana), 5 July 1931.

⁷ Ruth Seinfeld, “Mary Wigman Sees Dance as Aid to ‘Repressed’ U.S.,” *New York Evening Post* (13 Dec. 1930).

⁸ Gerald Goode, “The Tanz-Gymnastic (sic) Comes to America: Athletic-Aesthetic Movement Launched with Opening of First Wigman School in U.S.A.,” (23 Sept. 1931), pp. 3-4, Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁹ Roelif Loveland, “Homeland Hopes Quicken Dancer,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (2 April 1932), in Hanya Holm Scrapbooks, vol. 1, *ZAN-*MD2, Reel 20 Microfilm, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁰ Reminiscences of Marian Van Tuyl Campbell (1979), on page 18, CUOHROC.

¹¹ Letter from Gerald Goode to Hanns Hasting (26 Jan. 1932), Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/297, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹² “Biographical Sketch,” Franziska Boas Collection Finding Aid, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹³ Jane Dudley, “The Early Life of an American Modern Dancer,” *Dance Research* 10.1 (Spring 1992): 4-10.

¹⁴ Hauser in Horwitz and Stockstad, “Voices/Interview with Nancy Hauser,” 30-32.

¹⁵ Tobi Tobias, “A Conversation with May O’Donnell,” *Ballet Review* 91. (Spring 1981): 67.

¹⁶ Selma Landen Odom, “Music and Movement Connections: The Overlapping Careers of Madeleine Boss Lasserre and Saida Gerrard,” *Canadian Dance: Visions and Stories*, ed. Selma Odom and Mary Jane Warner (Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/es, 2004) 95 – 106.

¹⁷ Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* 60.

¹⁸ Nadia Chilkovsky Nahumek, *Isadora Duncan: The Dances* (Washington, DC: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994); Graff, *Stepping Left* 179-180. She received a scholarship to the New York Wigman School when it opened in October 1931.

¹⁹ Stacey Prickett, “Reviewing on the Left: The Dance Criticism of Edna Ocko,” *Studies in Dance History* 5.1, ed. Lynn Garafola (Spring 1994): 65.

²⁰ Hanya Holm and Fé Alf, “Schulbericht Wigman School New York” (1932), Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²¹ Holm and Alf, “Schulbericht Wigman School New York” (1932).

²² In February 1932 on a tour stop in Portland, Oregon, Wigman wrote a “song to be sung with melancholy and feeling” that concluded: “Don’t be discouraged! Keep your head up, hurrah! After all there are six of us. Now here comes America.” (*Liebe Hanya* 23). The six referred to were Wigman and her accompanists Gretl Curth and Hans Hastings on tour, and Holm, Viktor Schwinghammer, and Fé Alf in New York.

²³ Several of these are located in the Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA. I will discuss their contents below and in Chapters 6 and 7.

²⁴ Tobias, “Interview with Hanya Holm” (1975), 59.

²⁵ Translation of legal agreement between Hanya Holm and Mary Wigman, in Gitelman, ed., *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman’s Letters to Hanya Holm*, 18.

²⁶ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 57.

²⁷ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²⁸ Prospectus for the New York Wigman School of the Dance (1931), MGZ “Mary Wigman Schools [catalogs, announcements],” JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See Mary Wigman, "Composition in Pure Movement," *Modern Music: A Quarterly Review* 8.2 (January-February 1931): 20-22.

³¹ Fé Alf, "The Problem and Scope of the Amateur Work in the German Dance Movement," Fé Alf Papers (S) *MGZMD 90, JRDD, NYPL-PA. The school report Holm sent back to Dresden regarding the activities of the New York School in January and February 1932 states that Alf gave this lecture on February 10, 1932, and that it sparked a long, concentrated discussion among the student body ("Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York January-February 1932," p. 1-2, Hanya Holm Papers, (S)* MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.)

³² Holm, "The Aim of the Modern Dance," 2.

³³ See . . . *jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer. Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, ed. Hedwig Müller and Patricia Stöckemann (Anabas Verlag Giessen 1993).

³⁴ Hanya Holm, "Pioneer of the New Dance," *The American Dancer* (April 1933), 9.

³⁵ Brochure, New York Wigman School of the Dance, *MGZ [Wigman Schools], JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³⁶ In her memoirs, she explained, "The artistic spark must be born in you." Mary Wigman, *The Mary Wigman Book* 53.

³⁷ Undated manuscript, Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA. In this document, Holm explains the "Guidelines for Professional Dance Training" at the Wigman School.

³⁸ Holm, "The Aim of the Modern Dance."

³⁹ The brochures from the New York Wigman School indicate that Holm did not begin using the term "technique" in relation to classes until 1934. Before then, classes were simply called "dance."

⁴⁰ Hanya Holm and Fé Alf, "Schul-Bericht Wigman School New York" (1932), Hanya Holm Papers * (S) MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA, p. 2. Translation mine.

⁴¹ Holm and Fé Alf, "Schul-Bericht Wigman School New York" (1932).

⁴² Dudley, "The Early Life of an American Modern Dancer," 11.

⁴³ Holm, "The Aim of the Modern Dance."

⁴⁴ Quoted in Vera Maletic, *Body-Space-Expression; The Development of Rudolf Laban's Movement and Dance Concepts* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987) 156.

⁴⁵ Prospectus, New York Wigman School of the Dance, *MGZ [Wigman Schools], JRDD, NYPL-PA.

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- ⁴⁶ Reminiscences of Nancy Mason Hauser (1982), on page 8, CUOHROC.
- ⁴⁷ Susan Buirge, "Interview with Hanya Holm," Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis Papers, Mss 181, Ohio University.
- ⁴⁸ Reminiscences of Claudia Moore Read (1980), on pages 25-26, CUOHROC.
- ⁴⁹ Hanya Holm, "Eight-Day Holiday Course for Teachers and Dancers Offering a Quick Glimpse of the Scope and Aim of Wigman Training" (1931), Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁵⁰ Goode, "The Tanz-Gymnastic (sic) Comes to America," 2.
- ⁵¹ Martha Wilcox remembered that Holm urged her to stop teaching ballet and other forms of dance, so that she could get rid of the bad habits they created (Reminiscences of Martha Wilcox (1979), on page 22, CUOHROC).
- ⁵² Holm, "The Aim of the Modern Dance," 3.
- ⁵³ Sometimes the term "*die Abspannung*" was used in place of "*die Entspannung*."
- ⁵⁴ Holm and Alf, "Schul-Bericht Wigman School New York" (1932), 2.
- ⁵⁵ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/590, JRDD, NYPL-PA, pp. 2, 4. A handwritten note on this document indicates that it was a lecture given in January 1933.
- ⁵⁶ Valerie Preston-Dunlop, *Rudolf Laban: An Extraordinary Life* (London: Dance Books, 1998) 49.
- ⁵⁷ See, Goode, "The Tanz-Gymnastic (sic) Comes to America."
- ⁵⁸ Holm, "An Educational Approach to the Dance of Mary Wigman," 7-8, Hanya Holm Papers * (S) MGZMD 136/590, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁵⁹ Holm, "An Educational Approach to the Dance of Mary Wigman," 7.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ My description of class exercises was compiled from a number of sources, including Wigman School demonstration programs in Germany and the U.S. (1928 – 1932) in the Hanya Holm Papers, interviews with Hanya Holm, and the reminiscences of students. See also Ruth Page, *Class: Notes on Dance Classes Around the World, 1915 – 1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1984) 87 – 93; Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 89-96; and Hunt, *Erika Thimey: A Life of Dance, A Dance of Life*.
- ⁶² Hanya Holm, "Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York January-Februar 1932," p. 1, Hanya Holm Papers, (S)* MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶³ Dane Rudhyar, "Notes on Tension, Release, and Relaxation," undated manuscript, Hanya Holm Papers * (S) MGZMD 136/610, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶⁴ Rudhyar, "Notes on Tension, Release, and Relaxation."

⁶⁵ Thimey quoted in Hunt, *Erika Thimey: A Life of Dance, A Dance of Life*, 15.

⁶⁶ Robinson, "Mary Wigman, a Magician," 42.

⁶⁷ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶⁸ Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy* 10-11.

⁶⁹ Holm, "The Educational Principles of Mary Wigman," 60.

⁷⁰ Hardt, "Relational Movement Patterns," 45.

⁷¹ "The Roaring Twenties: Cabaret and Urban Entertainment," *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 551-567.

⁷² Holm, "Experiencing and Experimenting in Three Generations of Dance" (1984).

⁷³ See Maletic, *Body-Space-Expression*, 57-79.

⁷⁴ "Der Tanz im Spiegel verschiedener Kulturen," 8.

⁷⁵ Wigman, *The Language of Dance*.

⁷⁶ Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States* 19.

⁷⁷ Wigman, *The Mary Wigman Book* 56.

⁷⁸ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon* 43.

⁷⁹ John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance* (1939; reprint by Dance Horizons, 1965): 231.

⁸⁰ Martha Hill quoted by Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences*, 66.

⁸¹ John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance*, 233. Susan Manning has argued that Martin emphasized Wigman's innovations with the concept of space at the expense of the innovation German critics such as Fritz Böhme considered equally important, the rediscovery of ecstasy. (Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 21.)

⁸² Dudley, "The Early Life of an American Modern Dancer," 12.

⁸³ “Wigman School Demonstration” (January 1933), Hanya Holm Papers * (S) MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁸⁴ *Hanya, Portrait of a Pioneer* [videocassette], produced by Marilyn Cristofori and Nancy Mason Hauser (Pennington, NJ: Dance Horizons Video, 1988).

⁸⁵ Buirge, “Interview with Hanya Holm.”

⁸⁶ Ben Belitt, “An Interview/Memoir on the Bennington School of the Dance: Words for Dancers, Perhaps,” *Ballet Review* 8.2-3 (1980): 209-210.

⁸⁷ Circles also provide a concrete example of how Holm “Americanized” her approach: over the course of the 1930s, she began to emphasize the technical requirements of performing circles rather than their emotional and mystical connotations.

⁸⁸ Eugene Stinson, “Music Views: Hanya Holm,” *The Chicago Daily News* (Feb. 13, 1937).

⁸⁹ Hanya Holm quoted in Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 186-187.

⁹⁰ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 19.

⁹¹ Nahumck, *Isadora Duncan: The Dances*.

⁹² Wigman, *The Language of Dance*, 39.

⁹³ Reminiscences of Marian Van Tuyl Campbell (1979), on page 23, CUOHROC.

⁹⁴ Wigman, *The Mary Wigman Book*, 52.

⁹⁵ Wigman, *The Mary Wigman Book*, 124.

⁹⁶ Seinfel, “Modern Girls Learn Primitive Rhythms.”

⁹⁷ Reminiscences of Marian Van Tuyl Campbell (1979), on pages 18-19, CUOHROC.

⁹⁸ See Allana Lindgren, *From Automatism to Modern Dance: Françoise Sullivan with Franziska Boas in New York* (Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/es, 2003).

⁹⁹ Franziska Boas, “Bennington Summer School Instruction Notes” (1937), Box 66, Folder 2, Franziska Boas Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁰ Hanya Holm Papers * (S) MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA, trans. Annette Steigerwald.

¹⁰¹ Wigman, *The Language of Dance*, 37.

¹⁰² Seinfel, “Modern Girls Learn Primitive Rhythms.”

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- ¹⁰³ C. Madeleine Dixon, “Mary Wigman,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* 15.1 (Jan. 1931): 41.
- ¹⁰⁴ Margaret Gage, “Notes on Wigman Technique 1932-1933,” located in Mary Wigman, “Letters, 1947-1973, to Margaret Gage” (S) *MGZMC-Res. 16, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ¹⁰⁵ Holm, “The Educational Principles of Mary Wigman,” 61.
- ¹⁰⁶ Alf, “The Problem and Scope of the Amateur Work in the German Dance Movement.”
- ¹⁰⁷ Hanya Holm, untitled lecture manuscript (n.d.), (trans. Nikolai), Franziska Boas Collection, Library of Congress.
- ¹⁰⁸ Holm in Tobias, “Interview with Hanya Holm” (1975).
- ¹⁰⁹ Holm, “The Aim of the Modern Dance, 4.
- ¹¹⁰ Hanya Holm, “Eight-Day Holiday Course for Teachers and Dancers Offering a Quick Glimpse of the Scope and Aim of Wigman Training” (1931), Hanya Holm Papers * (S) MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ¹¹¹ Reminiscences of Nancy Mason Hauser (1979), on pages 40-41, CUOHROC.
- ¹¹² Tobias, “A Conversation with May O’Donnell,” 70.
- ¹¹³ Dudley, “The Early Life of An American Modern Dancer,” 13.
- ¹¹⁴ Undated manuscript, Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA; Hedwig Müller also describes Wigman’s notes on the three stages of development. (Hedwig Müller, “Introduction,” *Liebe Hanya*, xxiv – xxv.)
- ¹¹⁵ Marion Kant notes the similarity of Wigman’s reference to “student material” to Nazi language. “Dolf Sternberger commented in his ‘Wörterbuch des Unmenschen’—a dictionary of the un-human—on the Nazi categorization of human beings as ‘material.’” (Marion Kant, “Mary Wigman and Hanya Holm: a Special Relationship,” *Dance Chronicle* 28 (2005): 421.)
- ¹¹⁶ Brochure, “Announcing the Opening of the New York Wigman School of the Dance.” JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ¹¹⁷ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ¹¹⁸ Mary Wigman, “Statements on the Dance: The School,” *The Mary Wigman Book* 129.
- ¹¹⁹ Holm and Alf, “Schul-Bericht Wigman School New York” (1932).
- ¹²⁰ Ibid.
- ¹²¹ After touring with Pavlova’s ballet company in the 1920s, Shankar had formed his own company of Indian dancers and musicians in 1930, and burst upon the European scene in

March 1931 to rave reviews. On Uday Shankar, see Joan L. Erdman, "Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West," *TDR* 31.1 (Spring 1987): 64-88; and Tresa M. Randall, "Interculturalism and Authenticity in the Work of Uday Shankar," *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars*, University of Limerick, Ireland (2003), 99 – 105.

¹²² Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm" (1975), p. 83.

¹²³ Reminiscences of Nancy Mason Hauser (1982), on page 20, CUOHROC.

¹²⁴ Hanya Holm Papers * (S) MGZMD 136/232, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹²⁵ Segal, who grew up in India and attended Queen Mary's College in Lahore, described her experience at the Wigman School in an interview: "As a dancer, I enjoyed a newfound freedom. I cut all my silk burqahs and made them into petticoats and blouses. By the end of my third year at the dance school, I was in a bikini, nimble on my toes, and ready to touch the sky!" (Aparna Gupta, "Zohra Segal: The Drama of Life," *Times of India* (24 Aug. 2003).

¹²⁶ The curriculum of the All-India Center for Dance and Music at Almora is described in Mohar Khokar, *His Dance, His Life: A Portrait of Uday Shankar* (New Delhi: Himalayan Books, 1983).

CHAPTER 6

ENCOUNTERING AMERICA

Introduction

In order to indoctrinate her American students into a genuine *Tanzgemeinschaft* following the principles of Mary Wigman, Holm believed that she would first need to understand her “student-material.” She would need to figure out pathways into the Wigman method that were compatible with the American mentality. As this chapter will show, this belief was reinforced by the rather one-dimensional view of American culture she held at the time of her arrival in New York. Holm thought that Puritanism, consumerism, and rationalization had created a dangerous mix in American culture that made the Wigman revolt and its cultural promises particularly relevant and imperative. She saw the United States as a nation and a people in need of healing.¹

At first, Holm experienced her encounter with America as a profound cultural collision. She felt that the “bastion” of American dance was strong, and that it would take considerable work for the Wigman School to make significant inroads into the dance community. Though she was homesick, her philosophy of modern dance prevented her from adopting a position of exile, outside the American social structure. Like a missionary, she was required to engage with Americans and with American culture in order to spread the gospel of Wigman’s dance.

This chapter describes why Holm thought American culture needed healing, and how she tried to transfer her German vision of modern dance to the American context in the early 1930s. I place Holm’s views of America within the historical context of

Weimar-era discourses about “Americanization,” investigate the role of race in Holm’s view of America, and suggest that she created a binary opposition between German dance (culture, community, *Gemeinschaft*) and American dance (civilized society, alienation, *Gesellschaft*).

Theorizing America

Americanism, Rationality, and Rationalization

From the beginning of her American career, Holm was determined to counteract the aspects of American culture that she believed were hindrances to modern dance. In her eyes, this included an over-emphasis on intellectual capabilities and a simultaneous neglect of emotions, faith, and the senses. Immediately upon her arrival, she told an interviewer that she had noticed among the foreign students in Dresden that “American girls reason too much.”² She explained:

The American girls in the school were always so clear-headed, so reasoning. They always wanted to understand, always asked questions, always insisted on knowing things with their minds first. Their approach to everything is intellectual. It was only later that they realized that one could know things just as well with the body, with the feelings.³

This was her goal: to teach her American students to “think with their bodies” rather than with their minds.⁴ The intellectualism of American students needed to be remedied if they were to accept German modern dance on its own terms.

Holm also expressed concern about the fast pace of mechanized life in America. In the same interview, she remarked: “[E]verything must move very quickly in America . . . The girls who come to us from America work so feverishly trying to become dancers

overnight as your great buildings are built overnight.”⁵ By drawing an analogy between the tendencies of her American students and the construction of skyscrapers, Holm highlighted the dangerous consequences of modernization. “America” functioned as a symbol of the problems of modernity that German modern dance aimed to heal.

In this way, Holm’s view of American cultural foundations was informed by the discourse about Americanism, rationalization, “*Fordismus*,” and mass consumption among some Weimar intellectuals and social critics. For many Germans in the 1920s, America often represented modernity itself, with all its possibilities and problems.

Historian Mary Nolan explains:

America was very much on the minds of Germans in the mid-1920s. Its advanced technology and unprecedented economic prosperity, its high wages and brisk work pace, its dizzying consumption patterns and emergent mass culture, its new women and disturbing family life—all were the subject of intense debate.⁶

The German construct of “America” during this time often connoted both the “ultramodern” and the “ultraprimitive,”⁷ and was a composite of key symbols such as the skyscraper, the assembly line (“Fordism”), and jazz. Art historian Beeke Sell Tower notes how these symbols were used to describe African American dancer Josephine Baker: “a mixture of jungle and skyscraper elements . . . ultramodern and ultraprimitive.”⁸ Images of America produced by early twentieth century German artists often invoked both associations simultaneously; America suggested an “admirable model” for Germany to emulate, and/or a “specter of Spenglerian decline.”⁹ The discourse on America reflected some of the fundamental dilemmas of the period: how Germany should modernize, and what modernization would mean for German culture.

The German admiration for American economic success in the 1920s depended largely on the concept of “rationalization,” or what Americans called “efficiency.” In fact, rationalization was indelibly linked with “Americanization” in the Weimar mentality.¹⁰ “Americanization” referred specifically to technological modernization and the efficiency of the assembly line, and more broadly to modernity itself. For many Germans, America symbolized the future—for better or worse. It could mean greater prosperity and simplified means of production, but it could also mean the loss of tradition, social distinctions, kinship, and *Kultur* (high culture).

Mass Consumption

If America were the future, then many Germans felt it was imperative to determine whether the American model of mass consumption — and its concomitant uniformity and standardization — was an inevitable stage of capitalist development. In order to do this, some Weimar theorists looked to American history and singled out two distinctly American phenomena: the frontier, “which forced pioneers to focus on basic needs and generated a desire for equality” and Puritanism, “which stressed conformity in belief and life style and condemned individuality as arrogance.”¹¹ Some theories linked Puritanism and mass production by calling Fordism (Henry Ford’s assembly line model) a form of “radical Puritanism”—an effort to force people into a regimented life.¹²

Immigration was also seen as a key factor in the development of American mass consumption. In one interpretation, immigration was believed to foster mutability, uniformity of needs, and the absence of tradition: “the experience of crossing the Atlantic made the immigrant a kind of cultural *tabula rasa* on which American culture, or more aptly, American consumption, could write what it chose.”¹³ Immigrants were

considered to be cut off from their roots and social networks. Europeans theorized that immigrants were “socially disenfranchised” and “intellectually and spiritually disinherited,” and therefore particularly vulnerable to the allure of mass consumption.¹⁴

Nolan admits that from a contemporary perspective, the attempt to link mass consumption to Puritanism seems rather far-fetched. “Their contorted ruminations about the heritage of Puritanism, the effects of immigration, and the fate of *Kultur* are a testament to just how difficult it was to understand mass consumption in all its complexity.”¹⁵ Weimar-era Germans were puzzled by the American model, and highly conflicted about modernity itself. As noted in Chapter 4, even jazz music and the revue-shows of *Girllkultur* were linked with American mass production and mass consumption.

Race and the American Metropolis

Race played a major role in German modern dance’s ambiguity about modernity. Like avant-garde visual arts movements such as Expressionism, Fauvism, Dadaism, and Cubism, modern dance founded its modernism on a primitivist ideology, seeking vitality, nature, and abstraction in ancient and “primitive” sources.¹⁶ In addition to Nietzschean references to ancient Greece, the use of medieval German woodcuts, and the pervasive search for primal rhythm, black jazz and tap dancers often served as “vitalistic metaphors of instinctual, savage, and sexual forces”—the “ultramodern and ultraprimitive.”¹⁷ Modern dancers appropriated certain elements of African-derived forms such as percussion instruments, jazz rhythms,¹⁸ and the idea of swing. A poster for a 1921 Wigman concert, for example, bears striking resemblance to the iconographic representations of jazz dancers in this period: it features a nude, black silhouette drawn

with a combination of angles and curves that simultaneously suggest sensuality and percussiveness.¹⁹

Like most white American dancers of the time, though, the German modern dancers denied any specific connections to African American dance forms. Wigman proclaimed vitalism and instinct to be universal forces, not the province of one race, and vehemently disassociated herself from jazz, a product of the American metropolis. Her dance was fundamentally and profoundly German, rooted in the German psyche and landscape.

Wigman and her disciples hoped to lead the community away from the mechanization, cynicism and decadence of the metropolis, toward the province, the location of nature people, the landscape and the folk culture that unified the nation. Though they lived and worked in an urban area, they promoted their *Tanzgymnastik* (dance-gymnastics) as natural, as a “return to the fundamental sources”²⁰ and “natural body feelings” that would “loosen” and “awaken” buried powers, providing “mental reconciliation” and a heightened sensation of life.²¹ In the spirit of Friedrich Nietzsche, Wigman and her dancers sought to unearth primal human drives in order to “rebirth” ecstasy and heal an ailing and alienated modern world. In order to do this, they had to separate themselves symbolically from the metropolis.

Connection to nature was closely associated with the concept of *Gemeinschaft* (the cultural community), which carried racial connotations. In *Volkish* thought, the notion of “the people” was premised on the “union of a group of people with a transcendental ‘essence.’”²² Members of the *Volks-Gemeinschaft* (people’s community) were believed to be tied together by a shared linkage to the native landscape, which

provided their source of creativity. To reinforce this, the modern dancers often used natural metaphors to describe their work and its results.²³

This ideology informed various manifestations of body culture, including the *Wandervögel* youth movement, whose nature hikes were thought to bind participants to the elemental essence of the Germanic landscape. As historian George Mosse points out, the Germans thought of themselves as “deep, mysterious, profound” because their essence was created by the “dark, mist-shrouded forests.”²⁴ In contrast, they characterized the Jews as a desert people, which to them meant shallow, arid, dry, and lacking in creativity.²⁵ *Kultur* was the true realm of the German *Volk*, representing soul, homeland, faith, spirituality, and unity. In contrast, Jews were associated with Civilization: modernity, the city, intellectualism, skepticism, and criticism; they were thereby marked as the enemy of the *Volk* and of true German culture.²⁶

Modern cultural forms like jazz and American movies were associated with both African Americans and Jews. In the 1930s, the official Nazi logo for *Entartete Musik* (“Degenerate Music”) was a caricature of the original poster for Ernst Krenek’s successful 1927 modern, jazz-inspired opera *Jonny spielt auf*; in the Nazi caricature, the lead character, a black saxophonist, was drawn with a Star of David in his buttonhole rather than a carnation.²⁷

Holm echoed such stereotypes when she described New York as a “Tower of Babel” with an “indescribable race mixture” that created an “unbelievable collision of opposing good and evil factors.”²⁸ America represented the clash of civilizations and values created by the modern metropolis, internationalization, and immigration. At first, she felt that New York was a “city of stone,” harsh, forbidding, and dangerous—very far

from the natural landscape that fed the dancer's soul. At the same time, she was fascinated by the energy and vitality of the city, which she saw expressed by the dancers in Harlem. She later recalled:

In the earliest years . . . we went every Tuesday up to Harlem, in the Savoy, in order to see how these people, how this vitality – whew! Was there a vitality there! That was marvelous. There was no alcohol served, nothing. They were only ready to let their energies spring and spritz. So it was marvelous, great. I learned a lot.²⁹

She learned a lot about American culture from those trips to Harlem. Certainly, the racial mixture of the patrons at the Savoy Ballroom must have seemed characteristically American to her.³⁰ In the early 1930s she noted the influence that the Harlem dancers had over the New York mentality in general:

The Harlem Negroes have a type of tension underlined with a restrained quivering vibration. This “stopped,” nervous tension is becoming more and more characteristic of New Yorkers especially. It is essentially a sex tension, as contrasted with the mechanical tension of Martha Graham.³¹

Holm's references to sexual tension reinforced the racist association of African American dancers with sex and primitivism, but at the same time, the Africanist presence in American culture was interesting to her.³²

As far as Holm was concerned, American culture—especially American metropolitan culture—was a blend of African, Spanish, and Puritan influences.³³ Jazz, in particular, she found prototypically American. Like many modern European artists, she saw modernism as a negotiation with the “ultramodern and ultraprimitive.”³⁴ When Holm arrived in New York with all of her crates and boxes of percussion instruments, she

also brought her assumptions about primitivism and animal instincts, which she perceived in jazz. Accompanist Viktor Schwinghammer invoked these stereotypes and associations when he played so-called “jungle music” and popular American tunes in classes at the New York Wigman School.

Assessing America

At the time of her arrival in New York, Holm believed that encountering America would mean encountering the lived embodiment of modernity itself. This was a thrilling and daunting possibility. Her first interview, cited above, indicates that she was apprehensive, yet resolute in her mission. She immediately set about to assess the extent of healing America would need, and how she would be able to provide it.

American Students

One striking aspect of the Hanya Holm Papers is the evidence of how often Holm analyzed the American mentality and her American “student-material.”³⁵ She wrote at least sixteen pages of analysis on American culture and her American students in her first two years in the U.S., entitling her documents “Pedagogical Systems in America Today,” “Notes on the American Spirit,” and “Notes on the American Dance.”³⁶ She was highly concerned with understanding the American perspective so that she could adapt her teaching strategies accordingly.

This project began immediately. In early January 1932, Holm and her assistant Fé Alf wrote a report for the administration of the Wigman School in Dresden, which described the work and accomplishments of the New York school in its first three months. They stated:

The work is very interesting for us, since the American life-condition and life attitude creates one student type, which differs from the German substantially. The rationality of this country naturally affects also the young human in his development to an extent that everything which cannot be grasped rationally is very hard to be accessible for him, because he negates everything emotional. This negation is the result of the deeply-rooted Puritanism, which as the starting point of American culture becomes a problem for all artistic growth. Body-functionally there are fewer difficulties. In the sense of the dance-wants-to-emerge (*tanzerstehen-wollens*) the demand is more intensive, demanding. They want to see the way clear before they enter into something; after that, however, they give the full effort. Our endeavor in the work with them is to melt this intellectual layer and make it permeable for feeling in order to clear the way for creativity.³⁷

In this quotation, Holm and Alf articulated a number of assumptions that were clearly influenced by the Weimar-era theories described above. The first assumption was that American culture fostered conformity: “the American life-condition and life attitude creates one student type.” In other words, the students were all the same, like mass-produced goods. This student type, Holm and Alf argued, “differs from the German substantially.” They felt that they were dealing with a foreign “student-material.”

Their next assumption was that American culture was guided by rationality. According to German modern dance, this was a hindrance to artistic growth, which should emerge from emotions, instinct, and sensitivity to sensuous experience. By critiquing the Americans’ rationality, then, Holm and Alf established why their American students needed the healing of Wigman modern dance. The Americans were not capable of allowing the “dance-wants-to-emerge” (*tanzerstehen-wollens*) to move through them, and needed to be taught how to access the wisdom of the intuitive body and the senses.

Another assumption was that the American denial of emotion had been caused by the Puritan heritage, which was deeply rooted in American culture. As I described above, this belief reflected the attempt to explain how mass production and the conformity of mass popular culture could come out of such a heterogeneous population. Some German intellectuals of the Weimar period theorized that the Puritans had forced uniformity on the American population with their strict, all-encompassing beliefs. Wigman's legal battle with New York's Sabbath Laws in 1931—when she went to court over her right to dance on Sunday—must have confirmed Holm's view of the Puritanism of American culture.³⁸

Holm and Alf admitted that the American students were competent “body-functionally,” and that they worked hard once they committed themselves to the tasks at hand. However, they declared, the students wanted “to see the way clear before they enter into something.” In other words, they refused to take anything on faith. Holm and Alf then proposed their prescription: each student's “intellectual layer” would need to be melted away to “make it permeable for feeling.” This would “clear the way for creativity.” They would teach the Americans to create through their bodies and their emotions.

Holm often conflated “rationality” with “rationalization.” She slipped back and forth between these two phenomena — rationality and rationalization — even though one was a process of thought, and the other a mode of industrial production. To Holm, they were different manifestations of the same basic cause: the American mentality that viewed everything through the lens of conformity, the marketplace, and the assembly line.

Holm's critiques of America and her American students were laden with references to mass production, mechanization, popular culture, and conformity. For example, to her all young American women looked alike; she later recalled: they all looked like "Hollywood descendents." There was a "unification of a look, each one wanted to be a starlet, and to be discovered [by Hollywood]."³⁹ When she first arrived in the U.S., she was very disturbed by this conformity and fixed point of view.⁴⁰ She proposed that perhaps some Americans felt frustrated by this uniform existence, but that they did not have the capacity to change: "One feels the superficiality, wishes to be different, talks about it and does not know which one of the cans of preserves might contain that herb of deepening. Among the supermarket articles one will search in vain."⁴¹ Mass-production destroyed authenticity. As a result, she claimed, her American students were helpless when they encountered unknown territory,⁴² they were products of a mechanized culture that had stripped them of their natural wisdom and curiosity.

Further, Holm felt that Americans were too skeptical, and she struggled to instill in them the sort of faith that German modern dance required of its community members. She described her professional division students:

The notion of belief is essentially alien to them; they have not encountered it. There is no bridge they are able to cross toward irrationality or mysticism. They are notorious doubters as long as they do not know, as long as they have not been completely convinced.⁴³

These students, Holm complained were not responsive to the mystical and ecstatic aspects of the Wigman method; there was "no bridge" they were able to cross. This was a problem for her, since the Wigman training of professionals required faith in "the

mysteries.” Holm considered Wigman “the carrier of THE SECRET, the indivisible, the unexplainable, the immaterial, the no-beginning and the no-end.”⁴⁴ She was frustrated by her American students’ lack of faith in modern dance’s promises for a more holistic, balanced, spiritual life.

Another result of rationalized production, Holm suggested, was the frenzied tempo of mechanized life. She lamented: “there is no time to listen into yourself, to find yourself.”⁴⁵ Her American students, she felt, did not take the time to undertake the kind of self-exploration that was so important for modern dance. Further, she concluded that the pace of American life was frenzied because there was a great desire for constant change, excitement, and physical gratification. “The greed for sensation is like a gaping mouth that is always wide open. New, new and new again; racing forward: future and present are one. The will to live is splendid and young.”⁴⁶ Holm admired this vitality, but was concerned by its superficiality.

The American Education System

One of Holm’s most important goals was to institute Wigman modern dance in the public schools, so it was important to her to analyze the American educational system itself. She wanted to know how that system was organized, what it valued, and how it might respond to Wigman modern dance. One line of inquiry she took was examining the educational system from a historical perspective. She echoed some Weimar theorists and concluded that the unique mix of Puritanism and immigration in American history had formed the values of the educational system:

Because of their [the Puritans’] belief in freedom of religion, rejection of the excessive luxury of the church, the suppression of any emotion, the

point of departure for education was rational, intellectual, objective and practical, to be used by everyone. This purely objective and democratic method of education was to function on as broad a basis as possible, always avoiding anything emotional. To compensate for the differences of the various immigrants, a cultural leveling (*eine kulturelle Nivelierung*) was necessary, the standards had to be adapted to an average.⁴⁷

According to Holm's analysis, the Puritans' belief in freedom of religion mandated that education should be democratic and free of ideology; their rejection of the opulence of the church mandated that education should be practical; and their suppression of emotion mandated that it should be objective and rational. As a result, Holm argued, American culture had been standardized and stripped of social distinctions—so that it could be the same for everyone, regardless of ethnic or national background. All the various immigrant groups had to come to agreement about the standards. She asserted that this approach was a function of the racial mixture of the immigrant population:

The rhythm and tremendous push of this indescribable race mixture, this clash of dark instincts, this unbelievable collision of opposing good and evil factors, this tower of Babel forced the education system into being a more and more uniform record seeking institution.⁴⁸

Holm viewed American culture as a collision of instincts (racial essences), and therefore the only way the educational system could mediate between them all was to impose objective standards. In such a combative racial environment, the education system had resorted to largely technical and quantifiable curricula.

Holm's writing indicates that she was critical of democracy, at least in the early 1930s.⁴⁹ She believed that democracy promoted standardization, fostered an unhealthy

cult of stardom, and destroyed *Kultur* (high culture). While Americans idolized celebrities, she noted ironically, the reigning philosophy was: “everyone as best he can, everyone, as he wants to, equal rights for everybody.” By leveling distinctions, democracy created mediocrity: the masses struggled along, and a few exceptional people rose above the average. In contrast, from Holm’s perspective, pedagogical methods should acknowledge students’ natural tendencies and gifts. Students should follow their *Berufung* (spiritual calling); they should not all be pushed into the same mold.

In the Wigman method, improvisation was the means to access the “elemental sources of the dance in human life”⁵⁰ and to “recreate the body with its unconscious habitual movements, into a highly sensitive instrument.”⁵¹ The use of improvisation in the Wigman method was not concerned with democracy *per se*. As I described in Chapter 5, the Wigman School was a hierarchical organization, structured around Wigman’s leadership and distinctions among the roles of teachers, dancers, and amateurs. For Wigman and Holm, improvisation had deep philosophical and practical significance: it was a form of both work and play that was intended, ultimately, to enact far-reaching social and cultural change. Improvisation occupied a different realm from that of politics.

Holm’s vision of the purposes of dance education was profoundly at odds with the standardization of American education and the cult of personality in American culture. She reminded her students often that they served a greater purpose: the dance itself. Distinctions between the “limited characteristics of the individual” and the “dancer as a personality,” who was capable of expressing universal experiences, were highlighted.⁵² She argued that one became a dancer-artist when one transcended the realm of individual

existence and acquired “a more comprehensive vision and a more universal impulse.”⁵³ Holm’s definition of the “dancer as a personality” was very different from the cult of personality that she believed was created by American education.

American Dance

Holm applied these critiques and theories of American culture to American dance as well. She viewed American dance as a product of industrial mass production, mechanization, and rationalization, and implied that it had been corrupted by capitalism. For example, she described the American approach to teaching dance:

They teach dancing differently than we do. They invent a routine and then sell it. A routine is a movement sequence made up of ballet or tap steps or Greek-American plastique movements. It has nothing to do with dance as the art of expression. Those applied sequences are finished with more or less technical bravura and one does not care one bit about individuality or experience.⁵⁴

In another document, she referred to these as “canned dances,”⁵⁵ thereby reinforcing the link between mass production of goods and mass production of dances. This process of inventing routines as products to be sold stood in direct contrast to the Wigman method, which insisted that *experience* should guide artistic creation, not set formulae or predetermined movement vocabularies. Wigman and her associates believed that each new dance should emerge organically, as a whole. Forms could not be fixed; they had to be authentic and living—constantly in flux. Holm wrote in her notebook that the contents of dance were eternal, but the forms were time-bound and changeable.⁵⁶

Holm was disturbed by the American tendency toward bricolage —juxtaposing contrasting elements and recycling previous forms — and the lack of organic forms. She

shared this view of American art with other Europeans of her time. Historian Rob Kroes argues that Europeans have long been perplexed by the crass commercialism of American culture as well as “its irreverent attitude of cultural bricolage, recycling the culturally high and low, the vulgar and the sublime, in ways unfamiliar and shocking to European sensibilities.”⁵⁷ He continues: “Where Europeans tend toward an aesthetics that values closure, rules of organic cohesion, Americans tend to explode such views.”⁵⁸ Holm valued organic form in art works, and found it sorely lacking in American art; she wrote: “the Puritanical basis of American culture and art . . . becomes a problem for the free development of both. From the outset, the organic, vital growth of artistic forms is being raped by the negation of the world of feelings.”⁵⁹ To her, the organic creation of artistic forms depended on free expression of human sensual and emotional experience.

Holm constructed a binary between German dance—committed to community, holism, nature, the fundamentals of life — and American dance — a product of the metropolis, alienation, and rationalization. In this explanatory model, German modern dance was guided by emotion and instinct, while American modern dance denied emotion and feeling by making gestures abstract and mechanized. German modern dance was natural; American modern dance was artificial. German modern dance was communal and public; American modern dance was personal and private. The characteristics “mechanized” and “personal” may seem to be at odds, but they were not in the German modern dance worldview, which equated “organic” with “communal.”

A later reminiscence by Holm demonstrates how these elements came together:

When I came to America in September 1931, the modern dance (in my opinion) was in a stage of self-defense against the competitors: kitsch and

superficiality. An emphasized denial of all feeling/emotion characterized the dance of the artists prominent at that time, such as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. These denials of any feeling were achieved principally through mechanization of the gesture, which expressed itself in a personal-private style. A style which permitted no confusions.⁶⁰

In other words, the American dancers' denial of emotion came out of a desire to emphasize the seriousness of their work; they were concerned with defending against the kitsch of popular culture and asserting that their work was high art. As a reaction against the over-emotionality of the post-Duncan era and the escapist and Orientalist style of the Denishawn Company, choreographers like Graham, Humphrey, and Weidman had created work that was severe and ascetic. Holm wrote: "[Martha Graham] negates any ornament (hand movement, placement of the foot, head movement, etc.), since these could put the seriousness of the work of development, the austerity of the form, the honesty of the artistic aims into question."⁶¹ Similarly, Ann Hutchinson Guest — who had studied with Kurt Jooss in England — described the American modern dance styles of this period as "non-human," concerned with design, moving architecture, and "sparse separated movement leading to positions and stillnesses."⁶² From Holm's perspective, it was a characteristically American and metropolitan approach to create such mechanized, non-human movement.

Holm argued further that the dominance of a consumer mentality in the U.S. forced American modern dancers to create styles that were iconic, personal, and private — styles that "permitted no confusions." Dancer/choreographers' styles operated like copyrighted products in the dance marketplace. The work of Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, and others was immediately recognizable, and they worked hard to ensure that

their dancers did not reveal any evidence of influence by another style. Holm believed that this approach provided a stark contrast to the German modern dance quest for communal, organic, and universal cultural forms.

Holm described Graham's work as "American in its impulsiveness, and peculiarly metropolitan in its lack of elasticity and its somewhat deadened intensity."⁶³ While she admired the American impulsiveness of Graham's dance, she critiqued its lack of elasticity. Holm believed that dancers should be responsive and alive in the moment, and she perceived the lack of elasticity in Graham's aesthetic as an indicator of its decadence. She saw serious consequences in Graham's approach to training dancers: "There evolves a method from her dance education, which rapes the living-material, the dancer-human."⁶⁴ She felt that Graham's dances lacked the ultimate goal of modern dance: "moved and formed humanness."⁶⁵ Graham stylized her dances immediately, and never went through the process of finding "the essential"; as a result, Holm argued, her dances were not "true works of art."⁶⁶

Holm felt that Doris Humphrey's work also fell short of becoming a true art of dance. It was too consciously aesthetic and for the most part unreal — too separated from human experience. As Holm saw it, Humphrey's work was "romantic, unreal, and especially colored by the new intellectualism of this generation."⁶⁷ Even though a few of Humphrey's dances allowed the viewer to feel the "elemental powers," Holm asserted, most remained on a rational level. "Intuitions, ideas, thoughts, are being relegated to either purely mental things (spiritual sects) or only practical things (business)."⁶⁸ In contrast, Holm sought to work from intuitions and those "elemental powers."

As a result of these differences, Holm felt that she was at war with the American modern dancers in the early 1930s. She wrote in a report to the Wigman Central Institute in the spring of 1933 — at the end of her second school year in New York: “It is very clear that we have here an open battle field and we have to fight for our place. As I said, the bastion is solid.” Holm was in the U.S. to spread a cultural revolution, and she took this responsibility very seriously. The reminiscences of dance students during this period confirm the sense of battle that played out between the American and German camps of modern dance. Jane Dudley remembered that Wigman had “taken the country by storm” in 1930 and 1931, but that American modern dance was also “militant” at that time, and resistance to the German influence was strong.⁶⁹

Saving America

The Great Depression as “Zero Hour”

Despite her critiques of the American mentality and American dance, Holm believed that the U.S. was ripe for the Wigman revolution. She declared in 1931: “Germany began to dance after the war, when the country was steeped in psychological gloom. Perhaps this time of depression is the time for America to learn to dance.”⁷⁰ German dance critic and modern dance supporter Alfred Schlee had made a similar statement several months before. He critiqued the stagnation of German dance, and declared:

[W]e look with much curiosity toward America. According to your news dispatches a renaissance of the dance may be under way. America is at the beginning again, and is excited, perhaps, about much that for Europe is old and done. It is going through an artistic development now which

seems superficially to be much the same as ours of 1918: but the sociological ground is quite different, and may be healthier.⁷¹

Both Holm and Schlee created a parallel between Germany in 1918 and the U.S. in 1931 – a time of national crisis, questioning, and the emergence of new directions. From within the German belief that dance emerges out of the people and the landscape — out of the “sociological ground” — they concluded that the young, healthy Americans might be able to create a young, healthy American dance.

Despite this hope, Holm felt that she was “swimming against the stream” when she first arrived in New York.⁷² She remembered: “It was very difficult to make people understand that there are hardships and joys of a very particular kind, you see, rather than just being nearer the goal of getting a job in Hollywood . . .”⁷³ So much of the content of the Wigman approach was based on the struggle between life and death, the idea of fate, and a certain darkness that emerged out of the tenor of the turbulent 1920s in Germany. All of this was quite alien to the American perspective.

Nevertheless, the worsening of the Depression turned the tide for Holm: “Well, you see . . . the times were helping a little bit, because the times became a little more problematic . . . then there were people who were willing to change that, and to go a little more into the deeper enjoyments of life.”⁷⁴ For her, working through the full range of human experiences — from dark to light — was one of the deeper enjoyments of life. Holm believed that modern dance thrived in periods of cultural crisis, as it did in the “zero hour” in Germany after the First World War. When people are forced by catastrophe to consider the deeper meaning of life, she argued, a healthier affirmation of life could emerge, which makes people more receptive to dance, an art of living.⁷⁵ This

belief in cataclysm and social rebirth would also surface as the main theme of her choreographic masterpiece, *Trend* (1937). At the beginning of her career in America, she hoped that the Depression would bring the sort of cataclysm needed to spark the development of true modern dance in the U.S.

Opening Pathways to Instinct

Holm had enumerated the unhealthy aspects of the American mentality and American life, but she nonetheless believed that America was redeemable. She would have to show Americans the pathways to instinct, intuition, and authentic experience. She encouraged her American students to let go of themselves, to trust, to allow their emotions to emerge, offering this prescription for change:

The mask had to be torn off; the frozen emotions had to be thawed. A true self expression, a letting go of self happens very rarely; one does not yet trust oneself to feel and does not yet have that self confidence or the courage to let that tender voice of emotional stirrings speak.⁷⁶

She believed that releasing physical tension through the Wigman technique of *Anspannung-Abspannung* and being open to the primal impulses of rhythm would help to counteract the frenzied pace of American life.⁷⁷

Holm felt she had to remind her American students constantly that the process of becoming a dancer was slow; “preaching patience belongs to my daily routine,” she lamented.⁷⁸ She asserted that the dancer has to travel a long, lonely road to unearth the mysteries of the dance itself:

The physical must go this inexorable educating way, which raises the dancer from birth to become a priest in the temple of the art. A constant struggle with its outside and inside human being, a sincere striving after its

own truthfulness determines its own way, which is full of thorns and is situated wondrously apart from the main road.⁷⁹

The path of dance would take participants far from mainstream culture, away from mass production and toward authenticity. She told her American students repeatedly that dance was an “original source of revitalization” that would allow them to escape “the boundaries of daily need and daily tasks” and “enter upon a new level of experience, a fresh and inexhaustible world of sensations, movement, and ecstasy.”⁸⁰ She emphasized that these benefits would come to anyone who participated in modern dance, whether amateur or professional.

Spreading the Message

In addition to directing and teaching at the New York Wigman School, Holm soon began to give lecture-demonstrations in order to attract more students and convince Americans of the benefits of the Wigman method. Her first public appearance was on January 22, 1932, when she, Alf, and six students of the New York Wigman School presented a lecture-demonstration at The New School in New York. This presentation was part of a lecture series taught by John Martin in cooperation with Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, entitled “Dance Forms and Their Development.” A highly diverse group of dance practitioners – experts on Greek theatre dance, folk dance, classical ballet, and modern dance – were brought together to demonstrate “the essence of the dance traced from its earliest manifestations down to the present.”⁸¹

Holm gave a lecture, “An Educational Approach to the Dance of Mary Wigman,” which described the pedagogical approach of the Wigman School, and emphasized that the Wigman training was “based not on an ideal of technical or esthetic virtuosity, but on

principles similar to those illuminating and determining the course of all true education, for art, as well as for life.”⁸² Holm discussed the development of the artist, the goal of transforming the intuitive body into an instrument, the importance of developing imagination and emotional range as well as physical capabilities, and the key principles of the Wigman method: tension-release; swing; breath; active and passive energies; vibration; space; rhythm; and improvisation.

After Holm’s lecture, Fé Alf led six students in a practical demonstration. This included the following elements: “Going (whole foot, tip-toes, walk/run); simple fundamental gymnastics in place/unharnessed pendulum swings; short tension étude building up to a steep increase and fall together; active and passive scales; short stride étude; suspension, short individual rhythms, group rhythm, and turning.”⁸³

The presentation was apparently a great success, and Holm reported that it succeeded in attracting new student enrollees.⁸⁴ In a letter to Hans Hastings, co-director of the Wigman Central Institute in Dresden, Hurok’s assistant Gerald Goode wrote enthusiastically:

The demonstration and lecture given by the Wigman School at the New School for Social Research was a success so thrilling that it took our breath away. The four walls of hall bulged with shouting spectators, the largest number that has congregated in that fantastic cellar since Miss Wigman appeared last year. Mr. Martin’s face was wreathed in smiles, particularly since his course has been so poorly attended recently. The capacity of the hall is 265; there must have been at least 300 present. Educationally, it was a triumph too; the lecture was clear and scholarly, just the sort of exposition that followers of the modern dance have been thirsting to hear.⁸⁵

Holm and the Wigman School were subsequently invited to give lecture-demonstrations at Barnard College, the New Jersey College for Women, the American Women's Association, the Bennett School, Vassar College, and other institutions.

The Wigman School's next engagement — at a Symposium of the Dance at Barnard College on February 27, 1932 — highlighted the distinctions between German and American approaches to dance. This Symposium included representatives from the dance programs of five colleges and universities — Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, New York University, and Barnard — and the independent schools of Don Oscar Becque and Mary Wigman, who gathered “to discuss dancing in the college field.”⁸⁶ Each group gave a demonstration of their methods of training. While the other groups primarily emphasized aspects of dance training such as the development of new terminology, the role of accompaniment and percussion, and how to increase students' range of movement possibilities,⁸⁷ Holm focused on dance's role in modern life:

More and more, a feeling is growing that art must not stand apart from life, but must partake in it. Modern psychology has realized, that the impulse toward self-expression that is present in all, should be encouraged and developed, regardless of whether or not the individual desires to devote his life to art . . . This ideal prompted Mary Wigman to dedicate her art not only to the artists of today and tomorrow but also to all those the world over who are moved by the wonder and excitement of living and who would enrich their lives to the furthest reaches of their beings.⁸⁸

Holm emphasized the important role of amateurs in modern dance in virtually every lecture she gave in the early 1930s. Amateurs were absolutely crucial to the Wigman revolt; the participation of amateurs was what gave Wigman's dance its greater cultural importance. In addition, Holm stressed the role of amateurs because this idea

was so different from the practice of American modern dance in both professional and educational settings.

Nancy McKnight Hauser's reminiscences about this lecture-demonstration also highlighted how different the Wigman method was from American dance in 1932. According to her recollection, the audience fundamentally misunderstood their intentions. The confusion started with the costumes they had made — bloomers worn over a tunic — which Hauser remembered as very funny looking, “a little like some of the European gymnastic outfits of that time.” In their demonstration, they began with the characteristic Wigman vibration walk, which creates a bouncing movement in the body: “We came on . . . doing this little vibrating walk . . . tip, tip, tip . . . you know, in our funny little outfits. (laughs) . . . People cheered and clapped, just to see us walking around like that.” Even though Hauser recognized in retrospect that it must have been funny, Holm had intended it simply as a demonstration of the principle of vibration, and she must have been distressed at their reception. Hauser continued: “I think that wasn't good for us, because nobody else had that kind of response. It was all very very serious, you know.”⁸⁹

The trend in American modern dance at the time, as Deborah Jowitt has described it, was “emphatically nonexotic” work, “thrusting dynamics,” and an “austere image.”⁹⁰ In this context, the Wigman group — with their light, vibrating walks and bobbing costumes — looked silly. Hauser continued: “And that's always been a problem, that this work lends itself to . . . You do enjoy it. You love it and you don't mind letting it show.”⁹¹ From the perspective of the American modern dancers, though, the Wigman dancers' physical expression of joy put the seriousness of their work as high art into question.

This was a fundamental challenge for Holm. During this time, Graham and her dancers critiqued the sensuousness of Wigman's dance, perhaps because it reminded them too much of the escapism of the Denishawn years. Jowitt writes, "When Graham's dancers, trained in severity, saw [Wigman] perform in 1931, they noted with some disapproval an Oriental sensuousness and intricacy of gesture, the seductive sway of her hips, a way she had of floating, when it suited her to do so."⁹² Holm wanted to convince them that sensuousness was not something to shun; it could lead them out of the alienation and decadence of modern life. Around the time of the Barnard symposium, she wrote an analysis of American dance in a report for the Wigman Central Institute. She wrote of Graham: "[she] is a very strong person and has a personality that opposes the keep-smiling America. But opposition alone is not necessarily the birth of an art movement."⁹³ Further, Holm argued, because Graham was vehemently opposed to "all smiling pretense," she limited her artistic horizon.⁹⁴

True universality, Holm felt, had to include a full range of human emotion and experiences. In an article published a few months later, in June 1932, Holm reinforced this idea with a photograph of herself in a lighthearted jump, accompanied by the caption: "Gayety and lightness is as much a characteristic of the Mary Wigman modern dance as the dark and demoniac."⁹⁵ This choice was likely as much a response to the frequent discomfort of American audiences with the "dark and demoniac" content of much of Wigman's stage work, as well as to the unfortunate response Holm's students received at the Barnard symposium. Holm was convinced that she must lead the Americans out of the decadence and limited perspective of Martha Graham and other American dance approaches.

Fostering An American Lay Dance Community

Since amateurs were such an important component of the Wigman *Tanz-Gemeinschaft*, Holm was dismayed at the lack of “true amateurs” among her New York students. As she wrote in a report, very few of the students in the amateur classes in New York came for the right reasons:

A tiny minority come to dance in order to relax, unwind, find balance, refresh themselves. The others, spurred by ambitions, haughty in judging themselves, feeling themselves as dancers, lusting for the stage, chasing routine, wandering aimlessly like will-o'-the-wisps from school to school, race through in search of the stone of wisdom.⁹⁶

In other words, most of the amateur students in New York had visions of fame and glamour, rather than physical, mental, and spiritual renewal. In their lust for the stage, they wandered aimlessly from school to school, and did not take the time to truly understand the Wigman method. This situation concerned Holm greatly, and she concluded: “They are dilettantes of life as well as art, very difficult to educate and teach. As far as I can say at the moment this type is a product of the city.”⁹⁷ In Holm’s view, they were classic products of metropolitan life: superficial, greedy, too busy chasing a false dream of success to take the time to appreciate the true joy of a life lived fully.

Clearly, Holm believed, her American students needed guidance in order to escape their metropolitan, alienated location and their seduction by mass consumer culture, and learn to find their authentic nature. She continued to emphasize the true role of amateur dance in the Wigman revolt at every opportunity. In one lecture, she proclaimed:

Originally the dance was born of those moments of physical exhilaration and emotional ecstasy too elemental, too simple and profound, or too mysterious for any daily kind of speech. Love and reverence, courage and grief were danced (orig. emphasis) before churches and literature were even conceived . . . This primitive joy, this simple and direct approach to social contact, this festive, ritual experience, we, too, require. To live exclusively within the boundaries of daily need and daily tasks wears down the body itself and dulls the natural zest for living. But through dancing, we may enter upon a new level of experience, a fresh and inexhaustible world of sensations, movement, and ecstasy.⁹⁸

This lecture echoed Laban's quest to counteract the dominance of written language and rationality in Western culture with what he believed to be the more direct and truthful language of the body.⁹⁹ It also styled modern dance as a modern-day folk form, an idea that Holm would develop over the next few years.

Group dance classes, children's classes, teacher training, and other amateur courses at the Wigman School were an important start to building a lay dance culture. However, Holm wanted to extend her reach, so she traveled to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities to teach amateur classes. A 1932 article about her classes for public school teachers in Baltimore proclaimed:

The *tanz-gymnastik* in Germany has become a part of national life, has been used in the development of mass dancing in which whole communities take part, and has been credited with playing an important role in the development of German women along lines of slimness, health and vigor . . . Those teachers who advocate the introduction of modern dancing into the public schools point out that it eliminates much of the monotony and drudgery of most of the gymnastic or mass dancing routines now in use.¹⁰⁰

The article also explained that all the teachers who attended Holm's classes had begun using the Wigman method in their own curricula in the Baltimore public schools.

Lay Dance in the Schools

Holm decided that the educational system would be the most receptive location in the U.S. for spreading the Wigman revolt. In response to a question about ways to institute modern dance into the public school system, Holm proposed that they should approach this goal in the same way that they did in Germany, by integrating their method with existing methods such as gymnastics. She identified the “employment of diploma-holding Wigman teachers in the schools” as the best, but most difficult, way, since it would ensure the “purity of the movement education.”¹⁰¹ In the meantime — until they had a group of American Wigman certificate graduates — they focused on training current public school teachers. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Wigman School had arranged with the New York City school administration that teachers could earn credit toward a salary increase by attending classes at the Wigman School. In order to accommodate the many interested teachers, the school offered intensive teachers’ courses over school holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

Holm identified progressive education as an important ally in this project. John Dewey, esteemed leader of the Progressive Education movement, seems to have been an influential supporter. He observed classes at the Wigman School in December 1931 – just two months after Holm’s arrival – and also attended a lecture on modern dance given by John Martin there.¹⁰² Dewey was likely enthusiastic about the Wigman School emphasis on lived experience and on learning through doing rather than through rote memorization, values it shared with progressive education. Holm explained this approach:

It is important . . . to introduce to the student forms which will enlighten him in the physical and expressive potentialities of his body. These forms are not give for him to copy — to ape — but to make him conscious of movements and expressions which he has not known before, and which he may make a part of his experience, or which may stimulate him to discover new forms of his own.¹⁰³

Over the next few years, Holm would continue to emphasize the progressive nature of the Wigman pedagogy. Those links to Progressive Education could enable her to replace dance curricula already in place in most school physical education programs with the Wigman method. She argued continually that dance for children, like dance for amateurs, could provide access to a heightened, freely expressive life, unconstrained by the pressures and limitations of modern life.¹⁰⁴ In this way, she echoed the beliefs of Dalcroze, Laban, and other leaders of modern dance and body culture, who argued that the liberation of children's bodies would lead to the liberation of their souls.

Holm also insisted that teachers must be trained specifically to teach dance to children. In a lecture at a conference of the Progressive Education Association in February 1935, she admonished conferees: “it is imperative that the teachers of the dance in the schools be more intelligently and thoroughly educated for their role.”¹⁰⁵ Holm courted schoolteachers for her training programs actively. The New York Wigman School was the only dance school to advertise regularly in the journal *Progressive Education* in the 1930s.

Holm considered this education campaign essential to the Wigman revolt because she viewed the school as an important place to foster the “genuine folk culture” needed for modern dance to thrive. She saw folk culture as a sort of repository of human knowledge, a living embodiment of the universal principles of human movement and

rhythm. Therefore the preservation and care of the folk culture was of primary significance. She viewed this as “a communal obligation in which the role of the school can be highly valuable,” so that the knowledge of the folk culture would not be lost.¹⁰⁶ The children themselves would benefit by being “successfully oriented to life,” or educated for the integration of the arts and life. Holm proposed: “It is the privilege of the teacher to encourage and keep open the gates to this spiritual vitality [the native inheritance of each child] by every means at her command.”¹⁰⁷ The results she envisioned were a populace of healthy, educated and enthusiastic amateurs; a thriving folk culture; and a fertile environment for the rare talented artist.

Lay Dance and Leftist Dance

In the spirit of an *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (work community), the New York Wigman School organized a number of lectures, social events, and choreographic showings to enhance the sense of community among the students. Fé Alf gave a lecture on lay dance in February 1932, which, according to Holm’s report, sparked a vigorous discussion among the students.¹⁰⁸ Holm encouraged these kinds of discussions within the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* of the school. She also encouraged her students to develop a social vision. In an examination for the professional division students, she posed questions such as: “What use is it to be a dancer? What place has it in [the] social order today?”¹⁰⁹

This emphasis on communal experience and social consciousness must have been part of the appeal of the Wigman School for young leftist, politically active dancers, who were especially interested in learning group dance methods as a tool for revolutionary dance. Holm later estimated that about eighty percent of the New York Wigman School

students at the time were “left-wingers.”¹¹⁰ Susan Manning has pointed out that leftist dance viewed the German precedent in rather different terms than did humanist dance.¹¹¹ As Ellen Graff has noted, leftist dance was led by children of Russian Jewish immigrants, who grew up during a period of anti-immigration sentiment, and likely encountered discrimination based on their religious and foreign identities.¹¹² Modern dance provided models for rebellion against society, and German modern dance’s emphasis on communal experience in particular seemed, in the early 1930s, to provide a model well suited to their political agenda.

Though a number of Holm’s students found her ideas and methods compatible with their radical social and political agenda, Holm herself was not involved in leftist dance. Holm occupies a shadowy presence in many studies of leftist dance, which have recovered this practice from historical oblivion in recent years.¹¹³

Leftist dance was a practice committed to the principles of Marxism and to the empowerment of the working classes. The slogan of the Workers Dance League was “Dance is a weapon in the class struggle.” At the time of Holm’s arrival in New York in 1931, the leftist dance movement was beginning to gain steam. Dancer-choreographers like Edith Segal, Allison Burroughs, and Nadia Chilkovsky had already performed and choreographed dances for the Lenin Memorial Pageant at Madison Square Garden, International Womens Day, Workers International Relief, the Office Workers Union, and other workers’ organizations. Segal had performed with the Red Dancers and Chilkovsky had danced with the Pioneer Dancers at the “First Festival of Proletarian Culture” in March 1931.¹¹⁴ The Workers School of Music and Dance opened in October 1930, with Segal, Chilkovsky, and Lily Mehlman on the faculty.¹¹⁵

In the first half of the decade, leftist dance developed a very strong following by performing at union rallies, in factories, at political events, and in theaters. Ellen Graff explains: “Workers’ dance groups sprang up in unions such as the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, in recreational clubs such as the German hiking group Nature Friends, and in association with workers’ theater groups such as the Theatre Union.”¹¹⁶ The Workers Dance League “sponsored concerts and contests among workers’ dance groups called Spartakiades and facilitated the exchange of ideas and dance scenarios through [the publication] *New Theatre*.”¹¹⁷ In 1934, the Workers Dance League estimated that its dancers had performed before thirty-four thousand spectators in a single season.¹¹⁸ Their audiences were a mixture of unionizing workers and activist intellectuals.¹¹⁹

The New Dance Group

Like German modern dance, leftist dance was interested in developing a lay dance community, and leftist dancers who had studied with Laban, Wigman, Holm, and other German modern dancers advocated using German methods of mass dance for revolutionary purposes. In fact, the influential New Dance Group was formed in February 1932 by New York Wigman School students Fanya Geltman, Miriam Blecher, Nadia Chilkovsky, Becky Lee, Grace Wylie, and Edna Ocko. The New Dance Group was committed to supporting the class struggle through dance performances and classes. The mission of the New Dance Group was “to create and perform dances bearing the message of the fighting, class-conscious proletariat — to perform wherever it can — before bourgeois audiences as well as mass meetings, trade unions, the waterfront, picket lines, etc.”¹²⁰ It grew quickly to three hundred members by 1933, and promoted itself as “a working-class dance academy.”¹²¹ Jane Dudley, who first appeared in a concert with

the New Dance Group in June 1934,¹²² remembered that it was “dominated by the Wigman work at first.”¹²³ The New Dance Group taught “Wigman technique” and lay dance/mass dance methods.

Classes offered by the New Dance Group were inexpensive — ten cents per class, when classes at the Wigman School cost between \$1.50 and \$2.00¹²⁴—and consisted of three hours: one hour of Wigman technique, one hour of lay dance/improvisation, and one hour of political discussion.¹²⁵ In contrast, the Wigman School catered primarily to middle-class and upper-middle-class students; the few exceptions were the working-class scholarship recipients in the professional course.

Holm’s View of Leftist Dance

In contrast to the overtly political work of the leftist dancers, Hanya Holm was consistently silent on political matters. Surprisingly, she was even silent on leftist dance; in over sixteen pages of analysis of the American mentality and American dance, I have not found one mention of leftist dance in New York. She was certainly aware of it — her own school was a hotbed of leftist dance activity, and her assistant Fé Alf provided early support for the New Dance Group, as I will discuss below. However, Holm tried to keep her own campaign for amateur dance separate from leftist dance. In June 1932, she asserted:

In Germany, the dance has already liberated great numbers of office workers, factory workers, and housewives from the monotony and sterility of their narrow daily tasks. In America, it seems more likely that this liberation will begin in the schools and colleges before it reaches the working classes.¹²⁶

This was a rather strange assertion, since she knew that German modern dance methods were already being used by leftist dance to “reach the working classes.” I read this statement as an attempt to disassociate herself and the Wigman School from leftist dance. There could have been a number of reasons for this, including the ambition of the Wigman School to attract a national constituency. As the leader of the Wigman School, she could not afford to be associated with a radical, political, and foreign movement linked especially to the Soviet Union and the Russian Jewish immigrant population in New York. In order to avoid these associations, Holm insisted that lay dance was a cultural and social movement, not a political one.

Further, as far as Holm was concerned, lay dance should serve modern dance — specifically the *Tanz-Gemeinschaft*— not external goals such as politics. She insisted that the public was *invited to participate* by dancers,¹²⁷ and that amateurs should not attempt to dance without the guidance of highly trained teachers and leaders. As cited in Chapter 3, Wigman had written in 1929: “Community requires leadership [*Führerschaft*] and recognition of leadership. The mass that refers to its own collectivity never forms a community.”¹²⁸ In the worldview of the Wigman School, lay dancers should participate through movement choirs or choric dances choreographed by professionals. Otherwise they did not belong on the stage. Holm was disheartened by the number of amateurs in the New York School who “lusted after the stage.”¹²⁹ They did not understand the true mission of the lay dancer: individual health and self-expression, communal belonging, and support for the cause of modern dance as an art.

Other Wigman-trained dancers in New York did not agree. Ruth Allerhand, for example, who had studied in Germany with Laban and Wigman, and who ran her own

school in Berlin before emigrating to the U.S., advocated lay dance as a component of leftist dance. In 1935, she published an article on lay dance in the leftist journal *New Theatre*.¹³⁰ Allerhand's description of the methods and purposes of lay dance reveal that she shared many aspects of Holm's vision; she wrote: "So long as the dance remains a visual experience, it is separate from the people, whereas it should be part of every day life."¹³¹ Unlike Holm, though, Allerhand was involved in leftist dance. She worked with trade unions in New York and was active in organizations like the Dancers Union and Dancers Association.¹³² Her article did not specifically promote using lay dance for political means, but its publication in the leftist periodical *New Theatre* clearly indicated its intended audience. Holm's student Jane Dudley had previously published an article in *New Theatre*, in which she promoted using the mass dance techniques she learned at the New York Wigman School for revolutionary purposes.¹³³

Fé Alf and the New Dance Group

The assistant teacher at the New York Wigman School, Fé Alf, also expressed support for leftist dance. In a manuscript most likely written within her first three months in the U.S., Alf observed a growing "dance proletariat" in New York City, and proposed the need for an organization to provide "leadership, clarification, and mutual understanding." A handwritten note at the bottom of the page declares: "Result: New Dance Group." Alf was never officially credited with founding the New Dance Group, but dance historian Ellen Graff notes that several dancers active in the Group did mention Alf's name in connection with its creation.¹³⁴ Chilkovsky, Geltman, Blecher, Lee, Wylie, and Ocko founded the Group in the same month that they heard Alf lecture on lay dance

at the Wigman School. Perhaps this lecture encouraged them to enlist Alf's help. Or did the idea for the New Dance Group originate with Alf herself?

Alf's role in the Group may have been hidden publicly because her contract with the Wigman School prevented her from participating in a dance organization other than the Wigman School itself.¹³⁵ As I have already established, loyalty was a primary value to Wigman and Holm, and belonging to the Wigman *Tanzgemeinschaft* precluded belonging to any other dance organization. Further, Wigman and Holm may have viewed the New Dance Group as problematic, if not dangerous: it could potentially erode their lay dance student population – the most important form of patronage for the Wigman School – and it also threatened to thwart the true mission of the School by dallying in the realm of politics. Some kind of conflict between Alf and Holm developed over the next few months, and Alf did not return to the New York Wigman School after the first year.

Holm's silence on political matters prevents a full understanding of her personal convictions, but as the director of the Wigman School, she denied the legitimacy of leftist dance. She believed firmly that dance should not deal in the realm of politics, which for her was far inferior to the realm of culture. She believed that dance — both lay dance and dance as an art — should emerge directly out of the people and their spiritual essence; it should not be artificially imposed on people for political means. In Chapter 7, I will examine how Holm's relationship to leftist dance became highly contentious by the mid-1930s, when the relationship between dance and politics changed.

Holm's First Two Years

As described in previous chapters, students flocked to the New York Wigman School in its first year, 1931-1932. It was novel and glamorous, and benefited greatly from the extensive media coverage of Mary Wigman's second American tour, November 1931 through April 1932; Wigman was the most celebrated modern dancer in the U.S., and many commentators compared her influence to Isadora Duncan and Anna Pavlova. Wigman gave master classes whenever she was in New York, and the Hurok office capitalized on every promotional opportunity. Holm quickly became a sought-after lecturer and guest teacher.

Despite this apparent success, however, Holm had a difficult time. She maintained a grueling schedule, teaching five to seven hours each day, six days per week, in addition to her administrative duties and role as the Wigman spokesperson.¹³⁶ She barely spoke English and felt acutely that she was in a foreign land. Wigman's letters indicate that Holm was uneasy and stressed.¹³⁷ The financial situation of the school was precarious, and Holm was under great pressure from Wigman, Hurok, and her other associates. Toward the end of the year, she frantically sought a sponsor willing to purchase the school from Hurok, who had only committed to financing one year; eventually Holm found a buyer in Margaret Gage, a wealthy student who taught at the Bennett School, a private school for girls. In the summer of 1932, Holm returned to Germany to visit her son, vacation at the North Sea, and cure her homesickness. According to Sorell, she also applied for an immigration visa.¹³⁸

In her second year as director of the New York Wigman School, Holm became more hopeful about the future. The school installed a resilient wood floor in the

Steinway Hall studio, Holm taught regular courses in Baltimore and at the New School for Social Research, and Louise Kloepper became Holm's trusted assistant and roommate. Even though the financial situation continued to plague them, Holm wrote in December 1932 that the student population had become more consistent and serious, and that the lay students demonstrated a fresher intensity and devotion for the work.¹³⁹

Wigman's 1932-1933 tour of her group work *Der Weg (The Way, or Pilgrimage)* was considerably less successful than her solo tours had been. Toward the end of the tour, in response to negative reviews, Wigman resorted to performing her solo concerts instead.

The month after Wigman's farewell performance in March 1933, Holm published "Pioneer of the New Dance," an article in which she hailed Wigman as a pioneer and a breaker of frontiers who could provide inspiration and guidance to the nascent American modern dance. She declared: "the inner compulsion, the boundless vitality that is the soul of Mary Wigman's art cannot help but find a response in the life of America."¹⁴⁰ She praised the American beliefs in individuality and inclusiveness, and reiterated her claim that Wigman had "created a dance, and even more a spirit of the dance, that is a challenge and a promise to all who would reinstate an ancient art to its position of true significance in contemporary life."¹⁴¹ Despite her apparent hope for the future, Holm's career as Wigman's American representative would soon begin to fall apart.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Holm's initial view of American culture, and how she attempted to spread the Wigman revolt to a new land. As I have described, Holm echoed

the prevalent Weimar discourses on *Americanismus*, arguing that historical factors such as Puritanism, immigration, democracy, industrialization, and mass consumption had created mechanization and standardization in American culture. These factors had created an “American spirit” characterized by youth, excitement, vigor, and a lack of concentrated purpose; Holm concluded that Americans were like adolescents in their energy and lack of sophistication. She would have to “melt their intellectual layer,” show them how to access deeper emotions and universal human truth, and implore them to take the time to explore the fundamentals of dance.

I have described Holm’s view of American dance, which she believed had been corrupted by Puritanism, intellectualism, and mass production. She declared that American dance lacked a true American spirit; it was a product of the city rather than a product of the underlying essence of the American people and landscape. In other words, American dance was *Gesellschaft*, civilization, and metropolis, while German dance was *Gemeinschaft*, culture, and province.

This chapter has examined the important role that race played in German modern dance’s ambiguity about modernity and Americanism, and how Holm brought these assumptions with her. The association of Americanism with jazz lent further credence to Holm’s belief that Americans like Graham and Humphrey did not represent true, universal modern dance – rather, they were limited by the animalistic and physical outlook of the American psyche.

In contrast to the narrative constructed by Holm’s biographer Walter Sorell, I am arguing that Holm’s first two years were not an incubation period. She came initially as a missionary, not an immigrant. Her theory of modern dance required that she pay

attention to her student's tendencies, and the cultural context around her, in order to make modern dance relevant to the American people, but she did not simply retreat into her studio – she fully engaged with many sectors of American society.

NOTES

¹ I have also developed this idea elsewhere, with more emphasis on the contrast between urbanization and nature. See Randall, "Dance and Locality: Hanya Holms Suche nach einem 'Amerikanischen Geist.'" "

² Holm quoted in Seinfel, "American Girls Reason Too Much, Says Dancer Who Teaches Them to Think With Their Bodies."

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mary Nolan, "Imagining America, Modernizing Germany," *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockman (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994) 71.

⁷ Beeke Sell Tower, "'Ultramodern and Ultraprimitive': Shifting Meanings in the Imagery of Americanism in the Art of Weimar Germany," *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockman (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994) 85.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nolan, "Imagining America, Modernizing Germany," 72.

¹¹ Ibid., 79.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 80.

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹⁶ There is an extensive literature on modernism and primitivism. See, for example, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture in Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) and Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (1990).

¹⁷ Tower, “‘Ultramodern and Ultraprimitive’: Shifting Meanings in the Imagery of Americanism in the Art of Weimar Germany,” 91.

¹⁸ In the first few years of the New York Wigman School, accompanist Viktor Schwinghammer played jazz-inspired “jungle music” and renditions of American popular songs such as “Lover Come Back To Me” for Holm’s classes. (Reminiscences of Marian Van Tuyl Campbell (1979), on page 23, CUOHROC.)

¹⁹ This poster is reproduced on the cover of *Liebe Hanya*.

²⁰ Hanya Holm, “Pioneer of the New Dance,” *The American Dancer* (April 1933), 9.

²¹ Brochure for the Wigman School, Dresden, undated. MGZ “Mary Wigman Schools [catalogs, announcements],” JRDD, NYPL-PA. Based on the contents of the brochure, I believe it dates to circa 1925.

²² George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964) 4.

²³ Laban, for example, described the people of Vienna as a decaying tree in his 1935 book *Ein Leben für den Tanz (A Life for Dance)*: When he was in Vienna in 1929 to organize the *Festzug des Handwerkes und der Gewerbe* (Festival of Handicrafts and Trades), he observed: “nowhere had one so much the feeling of a complete uprooting or the impression of a branch dying away on a huge tree as in this large city. People were un-German, and would have liked to be different.” The tree — the people — had lost its connection to the earth, and therefore was un-German. (Rudolf Laban, *A Life for Dance* (1935), trans. Lisa Ullmann (London: Macdonald & Evans, 1975) 145.)

²⁴ Mosse, *German Ideology*, 4-5.

²⁵ Mosse, *German Ideology*, 4-5.

²⁶ Mosse, *German Ideology*, 7.

²⁷ See Christoph Zuschlang, *Entartete Kunst, Ausstellungsstrategien im Nazi-Deutschland* (Worms: Wernersche, 1995) and Eckhard John, *Musikbolschewismus. Die Politisierung der Musik in Deutschland 1918-1938* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1994).

²⁸ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²⁹ Holm, “Experiencing and Experimenting in Three Generations of Dance” (1984).

³⁰ See Susan Manning for a discussion of race and spectatorship in American dance at this time. (Susan Manning, *Modern Dance/Negro Dance: Race In Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

³¹ Hanya Holm, “Notes on the American Dance,” Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/589, JRDD, NYPL-PA

³² Brenda Dixon Gottschild has illuminated the impact of what she terms the “Africanist presence” in American performance. See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1996).

³³ According to the Wigman School, American social dance was a blend of Spanish and “Negro” influences (“Der Tanz im Spiegel verschiedener Kulturen/The Dance in the Mirror of Various Cultures,” Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA). The Puritan influence I address elsewhere in this chapter.

³⁴ In a later oral history interview with Tobi Tobias, Holm commented that it was easy for her to use the jazz idiom when she choreographed *Kiss Me, Kate* for Broadway, because “every American knows how to do that” (Tobias 195). To her, jazz was an inherent part of the American experience. This interview also indicates how much Holm associated jazz with modernity itself: when Tobias commented that George Balanchine had also picked up on this aspect of American culture, Holm added that Antony Tudor had, as well. Tobias expressed surprise, asserting that Tudor’s work was very European. Holm’s response was, well, yes it was European. The way I read her response is that Tudor’s work could be European, and still have absorbed the “animalistic rightness of the body” of American jazz dance (Tobias 195). That was what made it modernist. For a discussion of dance modernism and concepts of nationality, race, and otherness, see Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies*.

³⁵ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³⁶ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/298, 589, and 598, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³⁷ Hanya Holm and Fe Alf, “Schul-Bericht Wigman School New York,” (1932), Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³⁸ “Sunday Dancing Legal; Mary Wigman, Summoned for Her Recital, Wins Dismissal,” *The New York Times*, 22 Dec. 1931.

³⁹ Holm, “Experiencing and Experimenting in Three Generations of Dance.”

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁴² Ibid., 4.

⁴³ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁴⁴ Hanya Holm, “Mary Wigman Celebrates Eighty Years This Month,” *Dance News* (Nov. 1966): 10. Though this tribute was written several decades later, it reflected Holm’s unchanging view of Wigman’s power and gift.

⁴⁵ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ I thank Dr. Jonathan Steinberg of the University of Pennsylvania for encouraging this analysis by asking me about Holm's view of democracy.

⁵⁰ Hanya Holm, "First draft of the 'German Dance and the American Spirit,'" n.d., p.2, Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵¹ Holm, "An Educational Approach to the Dance of Mary Wigman," 3.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁴ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/598, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵⁵ "News and Notices: Wigman School of the Dance" (1931), *MGZ [Wigman schools], JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵⁶ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/599, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵⁷ Rob Kroes, "Anti-Americanism and Anti-Modernism in Europe: Old and Recent Versions," *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: The German Encounter with American Culture after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005) 210.

⁵⁸ Kroes 211.

⁵⁹ Hanya Holm, "Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932," (trans. Annette Steigerwald) Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA

⁶⁰ Correspondence with Jarmila Kroeschlova (1962-1965), Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶¹ Holm, "Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932."

⁶² Ann Hutchinson Guest quoted in Kriegsman, *Modern Dance in America: The Bennington Years*, 95.

⁶³ "Notes on the American Dance" (trans. Marjorie Bahouth) Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/589, JRDD, NYPL-PA. Folder 589 contains a handwritten document by Holm in German ("Berauskungen über den amerikanischen Spirit"/"Notes on the American Spirit"), and an expanded version in English, with the appendix "Notes on the American Dance," apparently translated by Holm's student Marjorie Bahouth.

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- ⁶⁴ Holm, "Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932."
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ "Notes on the American Dance" (trans. Marjorie Bahouth) Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/589, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁶⁸ Holm, "Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932."
- ⁶⁹ Lucille Brahms Nathanson, "Interview with Jane Dudley." [197-] New York: WHPC-FM, Nassau Community College, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁷⁰ Holm quoted in Seinfeld, "American Girls Reason Too Much . . ."
- ⁷¹ Alfred Schlee, "Expressionism in the Dance," *Modern Music* (May-June 1931): 16.
- ⁷² Holm, "Experiencing and Experimenting in Three Generations of Dance."
- ⁷³ Ibid.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ For example, in 1938, she asserted that another war would hasten the development of modern dance in the U.S.: ". . . [W]hen suffering, want and danger have levelled (sic) all the values of existence, life then acquires deep significance. Dance then will be the first of the arts to be accepted. Dance will take hold of the new affirmation, carrying both sides: the joy and the sorrow; the tragic and the gay. Suffering is a great eye opener, and makes children mature overnight; nations as well as individuals." (Hanya Holm, correspondence with Robert W. Race of Monticello College (Jan. 19, 1938), Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL).
- ⁷⁶ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁷⁷ Holm quoted by Seinfeld, "Modern Girls Learn Primitive Rhythms."
- ⁷⁸ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/593, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁸¹ Brochure for The New School, Franziska Boas Collection 32/20, Library of Congress.
- ⁸² Holm, "An Educational Approach to the Dance of Mary Wigman," 1.
- ⁸³ Holm, "Schul-Bericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932," 2.

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- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/297, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁸⁶ Agnes Wayman, "A Successful Dance Symposium," *The Journal of Health and Physical Education* 3, no. 4 (April 1932): 47.
- ⁸⁷ Mary Jo Shelley quoted by John Martin, "The Dance: Educating Audiences" *The New York Times*, 6 March 1932.
- ⁸⁸ Holm, "The Aim of the Modern Dance," 1-2.
- ⁸⁹ Reminiscences of Nancy Hauser (1982), on pages 27-29, CUOHROC.
- ⁹⁰ Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, 151 – 152.
- ⁹¹ Reminiscences of Nancy Hauser (1982), on page 29, CUOHROC.
- ⁹² Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, 159-160.
- ⁹³ Holm, "Schul-Bericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932," 4.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.
- ⁹⁵ Holm, "The Educational Principles of Mary Wigman," 8.
- ⁹⁶ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid.
- ⁹⁸ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/593, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ⁹⁹ Inge Baxmann, "Die Gesinnung ins Schwingen Bringen; Tanz als Metasprache und Gesellschaftsutopie in der Kultur der zwanziger Jahre," 13-19.
- ¹⁰⁰ "German Dancing Introduced Here; Seventeen Physical Education Teachers Are Learning Wigman Methods," *The Sun* (Baltimore), 13 Nov. 1932.
- ¹⁰¹ Holm, "Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932."
- ¹⁰² Holm and Alf, "Schul-Bericht Wigman School New York," (1932).
- ¹⁰³ Holm, "An Educational Approach to the Dance of Mary Wigman," 4.
- ¹⁰⁴ Hanya Holm, "The Dance, the Artist-Teacher, and the Child," *Progressive Education* (Oct. 1935): 388.

¹⁰⁵ Hanya Holm, "The Dance Viewpoint in Progressive Education" (Feb. 1935), p. 6, Hanya Holm Papers (S)*MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁰⁶ Holm, "The Dance, the Artist-Teacher, and the Child," 389.

¹⁰⁷ Holm, "The Dance Viewpoint in Progressive Education," 6.

¹⁰⁸ Holm, "Schulbericht Wigman Schule New York, Januar-Februar 1932," 3.

¹⁰⁹ Hanya Holm Papers (S)*MGZMD 136/295, JRDD, NYPL-PA. Based on the content, this document probably dates to 1932 or 1933.

¹¹⁰ Holm in Siegel, "A Conversation with Hanya Holm," 18.

¹¹¹ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 267.

¹¹² Graff, *Stepping Left*, 19-20.

¹¹³ See Graff, *Stepping Left*, Manning, *Modern Dance*, *Negro Dance*, Franko, *The Work of Dance*, and others.

¹¹⁴ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 180.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁸ Manning, *Modern Dance*, *Negro Dance*, 62.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Prickett, "Reviewing on the Left" 72.

¹²¹ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 55.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹²³ Lucille Brahm's Nathanson, "Interview with Jane Dudley" [197-] New York: WHPC-FM, Nassau Community College, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹²⁴ Brochures for the New York Wigman School show that the fee for amateur classes was \$2.00 in 1931-1932, and was lowered to \$1.50 in 1932-1933. (MGZ "Mary Wigman Schools [catalogs, announcements]," JRDD, NYPL-PA).

¹²⁵ Nathanson, "Interview with Jane Dudley."

¹²⁶ Holm, “The Educational Principles of Mary Wigman,” 9.

¹²⁷ “Notebook #3, ‘Translations,’” (ca. 1933) Franziska Boas Collection 66/9, Library of Congress. A handwritten note at the top of the page states: “Nikolai on Notes from Hanya for Hanya.”

¹²⁸ Mary Wigman, “Der Tänzer und das Theater,” *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheater* 7 (1929/1930): 50. For further discussion, see Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 147.

¹²⁹ Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹³⁰ Ruth Allerhand, “The Lay Dance,” *New Theatre* (April 1935): 26.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Biography of Ruth Allerhand in: “The First National Dance Congress and Festival, May 18 to 25, 1936,” [program], 92nd Street Y Archive.

¹³³ Jane Dudley, “The Mass Dance,” *New Theatre* (Dec. 1934); reproduced in Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) 119 – 122.

¹³⁴ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 177.

¹³⁵ Wigman contractually prevented her employees from working outside the school. For example, there was discussion between Wigman and Holm about contractually preventing Schwinghammer from taking on other paid work (*Liebe Hanya*, 16-17). As I cited above, Holm’s own contract stipulated that she must do everything in her power to promote the Wigman method.

¹³⁶ Holm in Tobias, “Interview with Hanya Holm” (1975), 53.

¹³⁷ See *Liebe Hanya* 19, 31.

¹³⁸ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 36.

¹³⁹ Hanya Holm, “Schul-Bericht 1932” Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁴⁰ Holm, “Pioneer” 14.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 7

THE POLITICIZATION OF GERMAN DANCE, 1933-1936

Introduction

The years 1933 - 1936 set Holm's career on a new course, as German modern dance took on new political and cultural significance under Nazism. Changes in both Holm's and Wigman's cultural and political environments set each of them on their subsequent paths: Wigman strengthened her nationalist ties to Germany while Holm made her true emigration to the U.S., joining American modern dance during its formative institutionalization, and gradually reconceiving her American mission.

Among American dancers, German dance had served a number of ideological purposes before 1933. For some, it represented modernism. For others, it was a useful tool for mass dance. For still others, it represented an unwanted foreign influence and a hindrance to the development of a true American dance. American modern dancer Marian Van Tuyl remarked that throughout the 1930s, studying German dance marked dancers in unavoidable ways.¹ While this was desirable for many – since German dance represented the latest modernist ideas from Europe – after 1933 many people began to associate it with racist nationalism and fascist control over artistic freedom. The Nazis made the German-ness of German dance a matter of politics, not merely a matter of culture. It is this cultural and ideological shift that forced Holm to separate herself from Wigman and from Germany.

This chapter examines how Holm dealt with the new political role of German dance in New York. As reviewed briefly in Chapter 6, the Wigman approach to lay

dance/mass dance had served as a useful tool for American leftist dancers earlier in the decade, and the influential New Dance Group was created by students from the New York Wigman School. After 1933, though, leftist dance led the anti-fascism movement, and took particular aim at Wigman, accusing her of betraying the values of modern dance.

The Nazification of German Modern Dance

While Wigman was on her third and final tour of the United States, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. March 5, 1933, the night of Wigman's final performance, was also the momentous day on which the last elections of the Weimar Republic were held in Germany. Even in the midst of performing at Carnegie Hall, Wigman was so anxious to learn the results of the election that Holm signaled the results to her from the wings.²

Soon after, Wigman returned to a changed Germany. The National-Socialist German Workers Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, NSDAP) had taken power, and change was drastic and swift. Wigman also made swift changes: within one month of her return, she disbanded the performing group that had just accompanied her to the U.S., which included four Jewish members. Suzan Moss, in her dissertation on dance under Nazism, reports that Wigman had requested funding from the new government immediately upon her return, but that the National Socialists repeatedly delayed their response, forcing her to disband her group.³ Wigman also dismissed Fred Coolemans, who was of Jewish, Dutch, and Javanese descent, from the faculty, and dismissed most of the Jewish students.⁴

According to Wigman's American student Barbara Mettler, students protested Coolemans' dismissal by refusing to attend one of Wigman's master classes, but she did not revoke her decision.⁵ Coolemans was well liked by the students, and had been one of Wigman's closest collaborators for a number of years. The day after Wigman dismissed Coolemans in April, the National Socialists passed the "Law for the Re-establishment of Civil Service," which forced the retirement of "non-Aryan" civil workers in the government; other regulations were soon passed regarding doctors, lawyers, notaries, tax consultants, teachers, and professors, which stripped Jews of their jobs, educational qualifications, and, essentially, contact with the non-Jewish population. The same month, limitations were placed on the proportion of "non-Aryan" students in German schools. This began the period of *Gleichschaltung* (coordination) of organizations, by which the Nazis intended to segregate Jews from mainstream society.

As dance historian Marion Kant has pointed out, in 1933 the Wigman School was not yet required to comply with the new regulations for civil servants.⁶ Wigman willingly "Aryanized" her school. Perhaps she thought that the Nazis would support a higher institute for dance and a state dance theater devoted to modern dance, dreams she and Laban had long cherished. Hedwig Müller asserts that Wigman had previously been interested in party politics only insofar as it affected her ability to gain government subsidies. However, beginning in 1933, she was influenced by her lover Hanns Benkert's pro-Nazi views. He was a follower of the "Union of the Strong Hand," which promoted German industry's cooperation with the Nazis in order to repair the devastating economic crisis.⁷

Wigman's choices over the next few years would demonstrate that she was willing to collaborate with the NSDAP in exchange for subsidies, but this willingness had deeper roots, as well. Müller, Manning, and Kant, among others, have demonstrated that Wigman shared many cultural values, goals, and beliefs with National Socialism.

Manning describes their shared intellectual roots:

Like *Ausdruckstanz*, fascism drew on the neo-romanticism, life reformism, and cultural pessimism of turn-of-the-century Germany. The same impulses that occasioned the founding of Hellerau and Monte Verita—the desire to escape urban industrialization and find a life more attuned to nature, the valuing of emotion and intuition over intellect and rationality, utopianism mixed with a sense of approaching apocalypse—also underlay Nazi ideology. Many of the dancers heard in Nazi rhetoric an echo of their own beliefs.⁸

Müller provides this assessment: “Hitler proclaimed his intent to bring about the renaissance of Germany out of genuine German nature; Wigman believed in the renaissance of German dance out of German nature. To her, although their fields were different, their ideals seemed the same.”⁹ Although Wigman did not fully support all aspects of Nazi policy, she was inspired by Hitler's vision, and collaborated until 1937.¹⁰ As Kant's work demonstrates, a power struggle among the leaders of the dance community began in March 1933, as Wigman, Laban, Palucca, Rudolf Bode, and others attempted to position themselves with the new leaders.¹¹

In July 1933, Wigman held a conference for all the Wigman, Palucca, and Trümpy schools in Germany; this was intended to be a strategic meeting to discuss the place of the Wigman schools in the new Nazi bureaucracy. During this conference, Wigman and her associates decided to join the National-Socialist Teachers League and

the Fighting League for German Culture. Letters sent to all (“Aryan”) Wigman graduates in Germany encouraged them to follow this example.¹² Wigman pointed out to her branch schools that they would have to agree to rigorously enforce the “personnel conditions for membership” and dismiss their Jewish teachers and pupils.¹³

At this time, the administration of the Wigman Central Institute at Dresden was reorganized. Werner Hoerisch became administrative director, Hans Huber became pedagogic director, Hanns Hasting and Theo Other became directors for music, and Gretl Curth, Charlotte Dörning, Frida Nätsch, and Gisela Sonntag became Wigman’s associate instructors.¹⁴ Hans Huber, previously a protégé of Rudolf Bode and a follower of the philosophy of Ludwig Klages, was a member of the NSDAP. Over the next few years he would largely be responsible for politicizing the Wigman School curriculum and students.¹⁵ His associate Gretl Curth, with whom he had previously run the Hamburg branch school, was also a dedicated member of the NSDAP; along with her husband Hanns Hasting, she would eventually take complete control of the Wigman School.

In America

New York in 1933: We Have Here an Open Battle Field

Meanwhile, in New York Holm was finishing her second year as director of the New York Wigman School. She was heartened by the progress she was making, particularly with a small group of students in the professional certificate program. In the summer of 1933, she sent a report to the Wigman Central Institute in Dresden – an overview of the state of the New York School – in lieu of attending the July conference in Dresden. Holm apologized to the other conferees for her absence, which was

necessitated by her teaching schedule. She expressed her “great sympathy and interest” in the discussions that would take place, and her hope that the report would be useful to them.¹⁶

In the report, Holm provided an overview of her first two years’ work in New York. She also theorized about the nature of American society, American education, and her American students. I have already cited much of this document in previous chapters, especially Chapter 6. In sum, Holm lamented that the American education system promoted standardization, mediocrity, and a dangerous cult of celebrity; she described her American students as “notorious doubters” who had trouble trusting the wisdom of their dance mentors. In an assessment of the role of the Wigman School in the American dance scene, she asserted: “It is very clear that we have here an open battle field and we have to fight for our place. As I said, the bastion [*Bollwerk*] is solid.”¹⁷ She still thought of herself as a warrior for the Wigman revolt on foreign soil.

Holm did not explicitly state this report’s purpose. The content suggests that the Wigman School administration may have asked her to describe the effect that the school had had on American dance. Holm concluded the report with this assessment:

If we now begin to summarize in a more general way and feel our way into understanding the effect we have had, we have probably to say that it might be too early to come to any conclusion. But we can state that the mere existence of the school has made America nervous, has made it feel unsettled. One knows that here there is something that they do not have themselves; one knows that here there is something that cannot be bought. One senses that here something is given that has to be experienced. The theoretical standard of dance in the educational system is doubtlessly influenced and interest has grown. Dance has received more sympathy and respect.¹⁸

The Wigman School administration may also have questioned the value of continuing to maintain a branch school abroad, now that the Wigman School was committing to explicitly German nationalist purposes. If this was in doubt, they must have decided that the New York school was still valuable, since a document written by Hans Huber a year later, in September 1934, would continue to list it as an official branch school.

Holm's 1933 report demonstrates that her goals and mission in the U.S. had not changed in her first two years. She believed she was engaged in a battle of ideas with certain sectors of American society and American dance, a battle that had profound significance for human life. Her critiques of the American mentality underscore her self-identity as a foreigner. She believed that the American dance community felt threatened by the Wigman School. At the same time, Holm's tone expresses her faith in what she was offering to her students and to the broader American community.

When she sent this report to Dresden in the late spring or early summer of 1933, Holm seems to have not fully realized the implications of the Nazi takeover in Germany several months before. Her report gives no indication of the political situation, and does not address how the changes going on at the Wigman Schools in Germany might affect the New York School.

Wigman wrote to Holm in late July to inform her about the results of the conference, but she, too, failed to mention the political situation that had necessitated it. She made only one brief reference to "all the organizational things that came about through changes in the law and the intervention of the professional organizations."¹⁹ She told Holm that for her the conference was about "two weeks of collaboration" in which

“the goal was completely fulfilled: making contact again, deepening it, and last but not least, renewing the courage and commitment of everybody.”²⁰ As always, she emphasized loyalty and the importance of belonging to the *Tanz-Gemeinschaft*. Her letter updated Holm on a number of their associates, and also begged her to establish some kind of working collaborative with Tina Flade, who had recently emigrated to the U.S.: “Tina’s attitude has always been clean and very free, and I wish for all of us that her belonging to us can be expressed somehow.”²¹ She made it clear that she expected Holm to continue fostering the Wigman *Tanz-Gemeinschaft* in the U.S., and directed her to use whatever influence she had to reward loyal members of their community like Flade.

Wigman’s letters to Holm during this period indicate that she did not consider what effect her position in Nazi Germany would have on Holm in New York. She continued to expect Holm to represent the mission of the Wigman School abroad, and did not appear to acknowledge that this might cause problems in the American context.

Americans and the Wigman School

Perhaps it was a surprise to both women, but the Nazification of German dance would have serious consequences for Holm in New York. While the rest of the Wigman schools began to enforce the “Aryan paragraphs,” restructuring their student bodies and faculty to make themselves acceptable to the Nazis, Holm continued her work in New York, a place she described as a Tower of Babel with an “indescribable racial mix.”²² There were a number of Jewish students at the New York School, including several in the professional certificate program.

The restructuring of the Wigman Schools in Germany prevented the Jewish students in New York from acquiring a Wigman Certificate. All students in professional courses were required to attend the Central Institute in Dresden for the last six months of the three-year program and take their certificate exams there. It is not clear how many of the New York students had planned to do this before the Nazi takeover, but out of about ten third-year certificate students, only two, Drucilla Schroeder and Lucretia Barzun, traveled to Dresden for the 1933 – 1934 school year. Remarkably, the extant letters from Wigman to Holm during this period do not address how (or if) the other students of the New York Wigman School would complete the certificate program. No exceptions were made for students who could not travel to Germany.²³

At the same time, the Wigman School took steps to ensure that American dancers would continue to travel to Dresden: a memo in English titled “Advance Information Concerning the Summer Courses 1933” reassured potential American students:

The 1933 Summer Courses will be held as usual in Dresden from July 1st to August 31st. The classes will be given in both German and English thereby affording everyone enrolling in . . . [a course] . . . the opportunity of becoming acquainted with the work and method of Mary Wigman and her school.²⁴

American dancers did continue to attend the Wigman summer programs at Dresden. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the “Dancers’ Tours” to Germany organized by Virginia Stewart began in 1933, and brought substantial numbers of American students to the Wigman School in Dresden over the next few summers.²⁵

Holm became aware of the Wigman School’s decision to join the National Socialist Teacher’s League and the Fighting League for German Culture in late summer

or fall 1933, when Werner Hoerisch, business manager of the Wigman Schools, sent Holm copies of the letters described above.²⁶ However, she must have realized even before then that her Jewish students could no longer finish their studies in Dresden, and therefore were effectively barred from attaining a Wigman Certificate. There is no explicit discussion of this issue in her 1933 report. However, perhaps the emphasis that Holm placed on differences between the American and German students in her report provided justification for why they could not be expected to attend the Central Institute in Dresden. Perhaps her coded meaning was that many of the students in the New York School—that “Tower of Babel”—could never truly be part of the Wigman *Tanzgemeinschaft*.

Colorado, 1933: Holm Begins to Form an American Identity

The Wigman School’s official “Aryanization” coincided with a formative period in Holm’s emigration, the summer of 1933. While these changes were happening in Germany, Holm created a number of friendships and connections that would help her to forge an American identity, independent from Wigman. Rather than return to Germany as she had the previous summer, she took a short vacation in Bermuda, taught the summer session at the New York Wigman School, and then traveled to Steamboat Springs, Colorado to teach at the Perry-Mansfield camp, an important venue for the burgeoning American modern dance movement.

Perry-Mansfield gave Holm her first experience of the American West, exposing her to an America that was very different from New York City. At Perry-Mansfield she attracted several new disciples, who would follow her to summer dance programs at Mills and Bennington Colleges in subsequent summers and to the Wigman School in New

York. Most important among these new students was Martha Wilcox, a dance teacher in Denver, who had previously studied with Doris Humphrey at Perry-Mansfield. Wilcox was an athletic, independent woman who taught riding as well as dance, and also appears to have been a local celebrity in Colorado.²⁷ She befriended Holm and taught her how to dress like an American. At the end of the summer, Wilcox invited Holm to tour the Southwest in her 1930 Chevrolet Six Roadster; Holm later described that they toured Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico in “blue jeans and a little Chevy.”²⁸ Perhaps this journey reminded Holm of the roadster trip through Germany and Austria she had taken with her lover, Hanns Benkert, in the late 1920s. But the landscape of mesas and open skies of the American Southwest were profoundly different from anything in Europe, and symbolized her new life.

Growing Distance Between Wigman and Holm

Holm and Wigman’s relationship, and that of the New York branch to the Central Institute in Dresden, began to shift during the 1933 – 1934 school year. The two women corresponded much less frequently than in previous years. This was due, in part, to extenuating circumstances: Holm underwent an emergency operation on October 14, 1933, and then Wigman broke her arm on November 6.²⁹ Nevertheless, by March 1934 all injuries should have been healed, and Wigman began to express concern over Holm’s lack of communication, writing, “Do not let so much time go by again [between letters].”³⁰ I suggest that Holm’s silence is telling, related to the crisis she experienced when her mission in the New World was eroded by the radical changes occurring in Germany. She did not communicate this to Wigman because she did not know what to make of Wigman’s role in the new regime, or how German modern dance was changing.

By this time, Holm had committed to staying in the United States. In March 1934, Wigman wrote: “I was very happy to read in your letter that you are so sincerely and wholly ready for the work in New York.”³¹ She also asked Holm in confidence about the financial situation of the New York school: “Will everything work out without a loan?”³² This seems to indicate that the New York school was working towards becoming self-sufficient financially. However, Wigman would continue to think of it as a branch school until the official break two and a half years later.

Publicly, Holm remained silent about the changes in Germany, but there are indications that privately this was a period of crisis. Jane Dudley, who studied with Holm between 1931 and 1935, provided this analysis: “during that time Hanya Holm lost faith in what she had brought with her and her work was greatly weakened.”³³ It seems that this loss of faith happened between 1933 and 1934, after Holm realized that German dance was no longer relevant to the American context. She was suddenly set adrift, without a mission or guiding principles. Community, belonging, loyalty, and duty were primary values to Holm, but now she was cut off from her *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*. She began to spend more time choreographing dances for her advanced students – who were now her primary community – and less time promoting the Wigman method itself.

This circle of advanced students began pressuring her to sever her ties to the Wigman School, which now represented Nazi collaboration to many in the New York modern dance community, especially those involved with leftist dance. Nancy McKnight Hauser remembers:

[T]hat was a very difficult period for her. She hadn't brought Klaus, her little boy, over yet. And this was a very critical time, 1932, '33, '34, and

there was a group of us who considered ourselves radicals. It was the group that started the New Dance Group . . . we became very insistent with Hanya that she could not continue because Wigman, apparently, was staying in Germany . . .³⁴

The pressure to make a public statement about the role of the Wigman School under Nazism would intensify over the next two years.

In this period, Holm was less prolific in writing about the Wigman method and philosophy than she had been in the previous two years, but a radio address she gave in May 1934 demonstrates that her most basic beliefs about modern dance had not changed. This lecture, “The Scope of the Contemporary Dance,” was broadcast on WEVD’s University of the Air as part of the series “The Dance and Our Changing Times.”³⁵ In it, Holm asserted the importance of destroying old traditions “to reach a zero level,” from which to re-birth the true and essential dance.³⁶ She referred to dance as “a common bodily and emotional experience of mankind,” “one of the most basic and universal means of expression and communication.”³⁷ She critiqued cliqueishness in American dance – “The formulation of a cult fashioned after the purely personal characteristics of an individual dancer, and suited to the restricted taste of a limited number, can only retard the broad development of the dance as a whole” – and called on American dancers to broaden their approach and their audiences.³⁸ She repeated Wigman’s phrase “Everyone can dance,” and declared that dance itself would benefit by the inclusion of more amateur participants.³⁹

This lecture also echoed, perhaps unwittingly, Nazi ideology. Holm proclaimed:

[T]he dance today is in a state of rebirth, of re-formation. In this it is the natural product of the contemporary world state. Like almost all of the

nations (orig. emphasis) of the world today, it is experiencing a period of transition, of the collapse or modification of old traditions, and the forging of new methods and new ideals.

This revolution, by gentle or by forceful means, is as inevitable in the realm of the dance as in all the phases of evolution marked by cycles of climax, decay and renaissance.⁴⁰

As discussed previously, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* had popularized the idea of cycles of climax, decay, and rebirth in the development of nations and human civilization, a trope repeated often by Conservative Revolution writers and intellectuals during the Weimar Republic. After 1933, right-wing ideologues applied this idea to the Nazi revolution, figuring it as a rebirth of the true German nation. Even though in this lecture Holm discussed "the dance itself" in non-national terms, her choices of metaphors and language echoed the conservative discourse in Germany.

Institutionalizing American Modern Dance: Bennington and Mills, 1934

The summer of 1934 marked Holm's induction into the American modern dance establishment, when she participated in the inaugural Bennington College Summer School of the Dance. The Bennington summer school quickly became the center of modern dance education in the United States, and served to centralize and institutionalize American modern dance.⁴¹ At Bennington, the majority of students were female physical education teachers who wanted to learn the "new methods" in dance to integrate into their curricula; these educators gave modern dance an important form of patronage and support in higher education. When the modern dancers toured in the 1930s, they often performed, gave lecture-demonstrations, and master classes at universities with dance programs. In addition, the university programs provided eager summer students and college-educated aspiring professionals who completed their training at the New York

studios of modern dancers. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Holm's position on the faculty along with Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, solidified her position in American modern dance, making her one of the "Big Four."

Before she arrived at Bennington, though, Holm took a significant trip to the American West; she had been invited to teach an intensive six-week course in modern dance at Mills College in California, a progressive women's college that was becoming a center for modern dance on the West Coast. On her way to California, she traveled through Colorado, and toured the Grand Canyon with Martha Wilcox, strengthening her ties to Colorado through Wilcox, and enjoying the wide-open spaces of the desert. Just as at the Wigman School, Holm taught a complete curriculum, with courses in composition, percussion, theory, and pedagogy as well as technique. At the end of the course, she choreographed a small recital for herself and a group of students. Holm performed several solos, including *Pastoral* and *Ecstatic Rhythms*, and the students performed a "Group Study on a Dynamic Theme." *Dance Observer* noted, "a large audience was very responsive."⁴²

In August, Holm returned to the East Coast, and then continued on to Vermont to teach the final week of the inaugural season of the Bennington College Summer School of the Dance. That first summer, Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, and Holm were each scheduled to teach for one week, to give students an introduction to each technique. Holm felt constrained by the rivalries among the faculty and their disciples, as well as the technique emphasis of the Bennington program. Modern dance was highly partisan at the time, and there were palpable tensions among the faculty. Martha Wilcox remembered that Holm preferred teaching at Mills College, where she had the undivided attention and

loyalty of the students.⁴³ Wigman had a particularly strong following in California, and Holm enjoyed the support there. At Bennington, though, Holm had to compete with Graham, Humphrey, and Weidman for the students' loyalty and respect, and did not have the same kind of support system the others had. Dancer Theodora Wiesner explained that Holm was marginalized at Bennington because Graham had Louis Horst and Doris Humphrey had Charles Weidman, but Holm did not have a partner.⁴⁴ Holm felt unwelcome: decades later, Holm still recalled when she and her assistant Nancy McKnight Hauser first arrived at Bennington, no one met them at the train station, and they had to find their way to the rural campus alone.⁴⁵

Despite her reservations, Holm knew that teaching in the Bennington summer school was essential to joining American modern dance. Dancers close to Holm have asserted that Holm felt she needed to be represented at Bennington.⁴⁶ Bennington solidified the modern dance movement, and was the first major American modern dance festival. In addition to the "Big Four," John Martin and Louis Horst taught (dance history and composition, respectively), and Bennington quickly became the modern dance establishment.

Holm's participation at Bennington helped to convince American modern dancers and their constituencies that she was not interested in overthrowing American dance, but that she was willing to adapt herself to it. In *America Dancing* (1936), for example, John Martin wrote, "In [Holm's] hands the admirable Wigman technique . . . is already undergoing processes of adaptation, both conscious and unconscious, to free its potentialities in a new environment and make it amenable to the American temperament."⁴⁷

During this period, Holm walked a fine line: she was beginning to be acknowledged as a member of American modern dance, but she still had strong interests in Germany: she was employed by a German institution, and her son remained in a German boarding school.

Germany, 1934

Holm's Trip to Germany, 1934

Sometime in late 1933 or early 1934, Holm's longtime friend Gabi Poege wrote from Germany to advise her to bring Klaus to the U.S., before he could be drafted into the Hitler Youth. Holm did not have any financial resources, and this task proved difficult. Members of Holm's demonstration group remembered that this was an extraordinarily difficult time for her, and that she pursued connections with a number of wealthy supporters in order to secure the means to rescue Klaus. For example, Louise Kloepper remembered: "[I]t was a very difficult time. Her child was still in Germany and she wanted to get him out, of course. I don't know the details, but there was a little problem in trying to get him out . . . Once that was settled, she was happy again."⁴⁸ At some point, Margaret Gage, who had purchased the New York Wigman School in 1932, assisted Holm financially in this endeavor, but it appears that Holm had legal and political battles, as well.⁴⁹

Holm returned to Germany to get Klaus out of the country after teaching at Bennington in August 1934.⁵⁰ She visited her grandparents in late August before traveling to the Wigman School in Dresden. When Holm arrived in Dresden in September, a swastika hung above the door of the Wigman School, and associate teacher Gretl Curth wore a storm-trooper uniform.⁵¹ Following the "Night of the Long

Knives”—a bloody political purge by the Nazis carried out between June 30 and July 2, 1934—and the death of President von Hindenberg, Hitler had declared himself both chancellor and president, and Holm encountered a Germany that was quite different from the one she had left in 1931. It is important to consider what Holm learned about Germany and German dance under the Third Reich on this trip, since it sheds light on her decisions regarding the New York Wigman School.

Even before her arrival, Holm knew from Wigman’s letters that the long-established war between ballet and modern dance in Germany had entered a new phase: both were now fighting for official recognition by the NSDAP. Wigman had written to Holm in June or July 1934: “there is hope to get official recognition for “THE NEW GERMAN DANCE” and banish ballet back into its proper borders, borders it has penetrated in fantastic ways.”⁵² She added: “I hope I might still see you somewhere this summer, Hanyuschka, so I can explain these difficult things that are damned difficult, interesting, and valuable.”⁵³

The recognition for “the New German Dance” that Wigman anticipated came shortly after, in July 1934. As Marion Kant has demonstrated, that month NSDAP Ministerial Councilor von Keudell expressed official support for modern dance in a memorandum to the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, declaring that German modern dance had emerged “from the depths of German emotional and spiritual life.”⁵⁴ Von Keudell proposed that modern dancers could play an important role in “the festive and ceremonial in the life rhythms of the Third Reich,” and insisted that the four great exponents of *Ausdruckstanz* – Wigman, Palucca, Laban, and Dorothee Günther – should receive official favor from the government, as conductor Wilhelm

Furtwängler did.⁵⁵ In order to “protect” these artists, he recommended subsidies of their schools and the creation of a German Dance Theater in Berlin, which would host the first German Dance Festival.

At the time of Holm’s visit in September, Wigman was thrilled that the government had begun to subsidize her school and performing company. She was in the process of choreographing a new group work, *Frauentänze (Women’s Dances)*, for the first German Dance Festival to take place in December. Holm viewed rehearsals of some sections of *Frauentänze* during her stay in Dresden.⁵⁶ In subsequent months, Wigman wrote three detailed, exuberant letters about this work to Holm; she called the suite “very beautiful” and, after its debut in December, “a matchless triumph for me and my work.”⁵⁷ With her December 29, 1934 letter, she enclosed a few press clippings, noting, “Maybe you can translate them and make a little P.R. with them. It would be good if people knew something of us over there [in the U.S.]”⁵⁸ Wigman does not appear to have considered that Americans might question her acceptance of Nazi support.

Reorganization of the Wigman School

The National Socialist Cultural Ministry passed new regulations for examinations of “German Dancers and Teachers of German Dance,” which were enacted in September 1934. The required examination would be the precondition for acceptance to the Reich Theater Chamber, and would determine who could “exercise the profession of dancer in all public and private theaters, stages, concert halls, and other places of performance.”⁵⁹

The curriculum of the Wigman School was reorganized to satisfy these new regulations beginning in the 1934 – 1935 school year. A copy of the new professional training guidelines, “Die Berufsausbildung” from September 1, 1934 is located among

Holm's papers.⁶⁰ Pedagogic director for the Wigman School Hans Huber sent these guidelines to all the branch schools, including New York. In the accompanying letter, Huber noted that to accommodate the "forthcoming intensified and extensive official examination requirements," the branch schools would need to model their curricula more closely on that of the Central Institute in Dresden.⁶¹ The most radical changes to the Wigman curriculum were the addition of ballet –which the Cultural Ministry deemed necessary to prepare dancers for theatrical careers – and the addition of folk dance and racial theory. In his letter, Huber reported that the Central Institute was undertaking a large advertising campaign, in which several thousand brochures about the professional training program would be distributed throughout Germany. This campaign can be seen as an attempt to capitalize on the new forms of patronage for dance in the Third Reich.⁶²

During her visit to Nazi Germany, Holm would quite certainly have been confronted with the reality of the Wigman School's collaboration with fascism. Not only was Wigman receiving government subsidy; she had voluntarily restructured the school's administration, curriculum, faculty, and student body to comply with NSDAP policy. Holm's former lover, Hanns Benkert, an industrial engineer, had been given a high position in the Nazi government, and his influence enabled Wigman to keep her school open and secure grants for her creative work.⁶³ Further, Wigman had written several articles that pledged support for the Nazi concept of a racially defined *Volksgemeinschaft*. In one article, she wrote:

It is only natural and consequent if the shaken Germany also directs its search for true German-ness to the arts. It is the big change, like a storm flood, which ran over the country and people with an elemental power, and had to affect the areas of the arts, like it affected other expressions of

life. It is very hard for the individual that some values of life and love are put to the ground in the first moments of these huge events, but in connection with these great events, the fate of the individual had to stand back.

The call of the blood which is directed to all of us goes very deep into us and meets our essence.⁶⁴

These articles would soon be compiled into her 1935 book *Deutsche Tanzkunst*, which would provoke shock and outrage among many members of the American dance community. It is not possible to know how Holm reacted to these developments, because she fastidiously maintained silence about the role of modern dance under Nazism.

Holm returned to New York in late September 1934 with heavy burdens: she had not succeeded in bringing her son back with her, she faced daunting financial challenges with the New York Wigman School, and she must have known that the reorganization of the Wigman Schools in Germany would create political difficulties for her.⁶⁵ Elizabeth Waters, a member of Holm's performing group, characterized this time as "exceedingly trying" for Holm, describing her as scared and eager to adopt American customs.⁶⁶

Rise of Nationalism and Anti-Fascism in American Dance

Upon her return, Holm also encountered greater vehemence in the call for a nationalistic American modern dance, and the rise of anti-fascism among leftist dancers and modern dancers. Nationalism in American modern dance had gained a critical voice in February 1934 when Louis Horst founded *Dance Observer*, a periodical devoted expressly to the development of American modern dance. In October 1934, a student from the New York Wigman School wrote an article in *New Theatre*, charging that American modern dancers had entered a dangerous period of chauvinism, with the frenzy

of a “national-dance war-cry.”⁶⁷ Blanche Evan—who had recently taken the summer course at the New York Wigman School—argued: “Since the modern dance has had its only significant developments in America and Germany, the insinuation is unmistakable: ‘Down with German methods, German dance art, artists, teachers.’”⁶⁸ Holm also noted a steady increase of hostilities against the school at this time. “This is generally aroused,” she wrote in her 1933-1934 annual report, “through the forceful opinion of the dancers against the foreigners, as which we are regarded. This has not so much to do with the personal as more with the national origin of the school.”⁶⁹

At this time, several leftist dancers created anti-fascist works aimed directly at denouncing Nazi Germany. Edith Segal’s *Kinder, Kuche, Kirche* (Children, Kitchen, Church) (1934), was choreographed for the predominantly German-born Nature Friends Dance Group to protest Hitler’s view of the proper female realms. Miriam Blecher’s *Van der Lubbe’s Head* (1934), performed by the New Dance Group, criticized Hitler’s regime by portraying the false accusation and beheading of Marinus Van der Lubbe. Van der Lubbe was blamed for the Reichstag fire in 1933 “in an effort to consolidate the Nazi Party’s hold on governmental power.”⁷⁰ Holm must have been acutely aware of this work. Blecher was her student, and a member of her advanced demonstration group. *Van der Lubbe’s Head* won first prize in the Second Annual Spartakiade of the Workers Dance Festival and, as Graff reports, “established the New Dance Group’s role as standard bearer of artistic and social practice among workers’ dance groups.”⁷¹

Perhaps in response to the growing anti-German sentiment, Holm added a new mission statement to the school brochures for 1934-1935:

The New York Wigman School is dedicated to the creative dance of America. It is our purpose not to superimpose results of another country, but to base our approach on fundamental principles which we deem universal in character. We desire to further the growth of native rhythms, and through them to contribute to the development of contemporary American dance forms.⁷²

Despite this claim, the curriculum of the school had gone through only minor changes, and Mary Wigman was still listed as the “Supervisor” of the school. Holm had not abandoned her original mission. Nevertheless, the politics of her situation had definitely changed. In essence, the fall of 1934 marks the fracturing of the Wigman School as an institution into two distinct entities: a Nazified Wigman School in Germany, and a pre-Nazi Wigman curriculum in New York.

Between 1934 and 1936, Holm tried to join American modern dance without actually changing her principles, denouncing Wigman, or formally severing her ties to Germany. Though she would begin to downplay the Wigman influence on her work, she continued to write articles, give lecture-demonstrations, and teach master classes and summer schools in diverse settings across the country.

Around February or March 1935, she stopped writing to Wigman for three-quarters of a year.⁷³ Perhaps Holm did not know how to deal with the depth of Wigman’s collaborations with the Nazis. She had received several letters from Wigman, in which Wigman discussed her performing group’s Cultural Ministry subsidy and their state-sponsored tour of fifty-seven cities in Germany and Poland.⁷⁴ Holm may have realized that Wigman was allowing the Nazis to use her fame to promote their cultural program. The tour to Poland in particular was a goodwill tour, perhaps intended to reinforce Germany’s interests in the 1934 German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact.⁷⁵

From her vantage point in New York, Holm may have felt that it was increasingly difficult to avoid the Nazi issue, and this put her in a highly compromised position. In retrospect, we can see this period as a transitional time; the more Wigman's name became stained by Nazi associations, the more Holm emphasized her own, independent reputation. She began to call her performing group of advanced students "Hanya Holm and the Mary Wigman Dancers." They performed works by Holm as well as self-performed solos by students such as Jane Dudley, Miriam Blecher, and Nancy McKnight. Though their programs still used the term "Wigman Dancers," John Martin began referring to them in his *New York Times* columns as "Hanya Holm's group."⁷⁶

Holm had already joined American modern dance in two key locations — the New School for Social Research and the Bennington College Summer School of the Dance — and in the spring of 1935, she further strengthened these ties to the American modern dance community by agreeing to participate in a new Dance Center at the 92nd Street Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA) in New York's Upper East Side. Naomi Jackson explains that William Kolodney, the Educational Director at the YMHA, decided to inaugurate a dance program there in the fall of 1934 and enlisted the help of John Martin, *New York Times* dance critic. Martin recommended Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman for this project.⁷⁷ In April 1935, Martin recommended Holm, reassuring Kolodney that despite being German-born, Holm was "an excellent teacher and a thoroughly fine person" and that many of Holm's students were Jewish.⁷⁸ On May 25, 1935, the four choreographers performed on the same stage for the first time in a free lecture-demonstration at the 92nd St. YMHA.

Meanwhile, the dance community in New York was undergoing significant changes, and in particular had begun to rally around the cause of fighting fascism. Led by the Popular Front, a political coalition, there was a cultural shift away from an emphasis on workers' rights, to American nationalism and opposing the rise of fascism abroad. This cultural shift had direct impact on the modern dance community. In April 1935 the Workers Dance League changed its name to the New Dance League. Manning explains:

[This] transformation reflected the American Communist Party's new initiative of the Popular Front, intended to develop common ground among liberals and socialists of varying beliefs by shifting focus from the workers to the people, from the internationalized proletariat to cultural nationalism.⁷⁹

The New Dance League resolved to expand and incorporate all dance groups and dancers of all techniques who "are willing to support the basic program: *for a mass development of the American dance to its highest artistic and social level, for a dance movement that is against war, fascism, and censorship*" (emphasis in original).⁸⁰ In this way, Manning asserts, the divide between leftist dance and modern dance narrowed as leftist dance embraced the goals of modern dance: to develop American dance to its highest artistic and social level.⁸¹ The New Dance League, true to its stated aims, presented concerts by a wide array of artists, including modern dancers such as Graham and Humphrey, who had not appeared with the Workers Dance League. By the summer of 1936, the New Dance Group was sufficiently part of modern dance to present a concert at the Bennington Festival, home base for modern dance.

In this new environment, previously apolitical artists such as Graham and Humphrey began to create works with social and political content. Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, Tamiris, Anna Sokolow, and their groups appeared on a benefit program for the International Labor Defense at Carnegie Hall in December 1935. Although most of the works performed were purely formal, Graff notes that in this context, “even [Humphrey’s] abstract *New Dance* was perceived as a dance of social significance, its ideal community a model of a better world.”⁸²

The Leftist Press Condemns Wigman’s Nazi Patronage

The New Dance League was committed to fighting fascism, and in many ways this battle united the modern dance and leftist dance communities. However, the specific controversy over Mary Wigman’s ties to the fascist regime in Germany, which erupted in the summer of 1935, splintered the community along the older fault lines. As Manning has described, most of the attacks against Wigman came from the leftist dance community and were published in the leftist *New Theatre*, while *Dance Observer*, the journal devoted to modern dance, continued to support Wigman and view her as an apolitical artist.⁸³

In May or June, former Wigman disciples wrote an “Open Letter” to Wigman, questioning her activities under Nazism and accusing her of betraying her humanist values. They declared:

Young dancers who once were your students, today have a deep desire to speak their mind to you. Mary Wigman; one of the greatest dancers of our time. Never to be forgotten are those evenings many years ago, when we first witnessed your creations . . . We have read your article “Deutsche Tanzkunst” in the April issue of *Das Theatre*. It forces us to speak our mind to you openly.

Since the beginning of Fascism in Germany we have awaited a word from you which would mark off the art of Mary Wigman from the barbaric methods of Fascism. We thought, "What is Mary Wigman doing? Perhaps she is in solitude, perhaps she is fighting at a most difficult post, since she was not exiled as were many of her students."

But now we read this article. We cannot comprehend how an artist and a person of your calibre can make an avowal to Fascism and to the "New German Art." . . . Do you know nothing of the driving out and outlawing of your own students and co-workers, only because they interceded for progress, or were liberals, or even just because they were Jews? . . . Don't you know anything of the exile and physical destruction of many of the best German intellectuals, scientists, artists? . . . You know it! . . .

What causes you suddenly to speak so much of "German" dance art? . . . You say, "That this dance having had the courageousness toward . . . life, makes it so typically German." What is this courageousness toward life? Is it your "Totenklage" (Death Lament), your "Totesruf" (Death Call), your "Zyklus der Opfer" (Cycle of the Sacrifices) or perhaps Harold Kreutzberg's "Gesange des Todes" (Songs of Death). Is this the manifestation of the German creed of life? Are they not much more flight from life? Or do your death dances have a deeper significance? Is that which was formally flight from life to be today foreshadowing of what is to come? . . . Is there already hidden in this new "creed of life," your new dances program, the program of the "Iron Romanticism" – "Blood Frenzy," "Call to Massmurder" and others?⁸⁴

The authors of the letter wished to remain anonymous, "fearing recriminations against their families in Germany"; they sent the letter to the International Dance Bureau in Moscow through internationally known theater director Erwin Piscator.⁸⁵ The New Dance League endorsed the letter and published it in the *New Dance Bulletin*.⁸⁶ In August, Nicholas Wirth of the leftist periodical *New Theatre* published an article entitled "Mary Wigman – Fascist." He described her theory of New German Dance:

[According to Wigman,] this dance can only be conceived on German soil by German intellect and can grow into full maturity only in the German milieu. In reality, however, it is the dance created to the groans of men and women tortured in the concentration camps. It no longer needs percussion instruments for accompaniment; for the cry of hungry children, the beat of soldiers' feet throughout the land, serve the dancer much better

. . . In her repertory of death, there can be no little hope for humanity. In the decaying Nazi society, she is the prophet whose torch is escape from life. Her dance is a monument to the living dead.⁸⁷

Wirth's article was criticized for its lack of factual data.⁸⁸ It appears that he based his article on the "Open Letter," which was, in turn, based on first-hand accounts of events in Germany.

The Disciples Carry on

While these events were happening, Holm was away from New York, and therefore somewhat removed from the discourse, and she continued her work unabated. She taught for six weeks at Mills College in California, and then may have returned to Germany to again try to secure the means to bring her son Klaus to the United States.⁸⁹ Tina Flade substituted for her at Bennington that year. When she returned to New York in September, she reopened the New York Wigman School in a new location in Greenwich Village, and then began teaching at the 92nd Street YMHA Dance Center in late October. The fact that Holm taught in a Jewish cultural institution at this time might suggest that the accusations about Wigman's collaboration with the Nazis were not yet taken seriously, or had not yet affected Holm. Enrollment for her course was low, however, and the start date of the course had to be postponed in order to increase the number of registered students.⁹⁰ In October she published an article, "The Dance, the Artist-Teacher, and the Child" in the journal *Progressive Education*, which I will discuss in Chapter 8.⁹¹ In November, perhaps in fulfillment of Wigman's request, Holm published an article about her mentor in *The Dance Observer*, which provided a factual overview of Wigman's career, with brief references to her current projects.⁹²

Other disciples such as Virginia Stewart also continued to support Wigman in their work. Stewart had taken a group of American students to Germany over the summer, and in October, she published a lengthy report about German modern dance in *The Dance Observer*. Among the many activities Stewart described were the first German Dance Festival in December 1934; the founding of the *Deutsche Tanz-Bühne*, with Laban as director, under Goebbel's Cultural Ministry; Wigman's reorganized school and curriculum; her summer program; performances by Wigman and her group at the Dresden Opera and the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra at the invitation of the Mayor of Dresden; the Rangsdorf Dance Camp, organized by Laban, a professional summer program for 120 members of the Tanz Bühne; Laban's notation system; and efforts to establish an organization for lay dancers under the Cultural Ministry. Stewart also announced plans for the International Dance Festival of 1936, to be held in Berlin in advance of the Olympic Games: "Forty-two nations will be invited to send each its best dance group . . . It is planned to have the winners of the Festival perform during the Olympic weeks as guests of the German Government."⁹³ The opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, she reported, would include a dance performance of several hundred girls, boys, women, and men led by Wigman, Palucca, and Harald Kreutzberg. Stewart offered no political commentary on any of these developments.

Also in late 1935, Stewart and Merle Armitage published a new book, *Modern Dance*, whose content and reception reveal the nationalist tensions within the modern dance community. It contained essays by the leaders of German and American modern dance: Wigman, Palucca, Harald Kreutzberg, Hanns Hasting, and critic Artur Michel from Germany; and Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, Holm, and critic Paul Love from the

United States. Holm's essay highlighted her position as a mediator between the two national traditions, and will be discussed in the next chapter. Wigman's essay reinforced her Nietzschean vision of primal sources, the pursuit of ecstasy, and the superiority of "experiencing" over "mere knowing."⁹⁴ She also asserted the German-ness of German modern dance: "That which marks this new dance, revealing its intrinsic expression and differentiating it from other dance forms is that it reaches back to the fundament of existence as the source of all aesthetic creation and form, like any true German art."⁹⁵

In his essay, Artur Michel sought to explain how Wigman's art could be considered German in two respects. First, he argued, she had revealed that "the so-called classic style of stage dancing that had its origins in French traditions" (e.g. classical ballet) was "a style historically qualified, a style of the past, a style antagonistic to our present life."⁹⁶ Second, Michel continued:

[B]y setting up dancing as the function and expression of creatively experienced life, she not only gave it the dignity that places it on a level with other arts, but also paved the way so that it might be recognized among the deepest national artistic powers. As an artist, Mary Wigman was enabled, through her German nature, to attain in dancing the pre-eminence held by all real German art, that of expression as opposed to form.⁹⁷

In essence, Wigman's perspective was that formalism was French, but expression of "creatively experienced life" and "the original urge"⁹⁸ was German. Wigman herself elaborated:

During the process of artistic creation, man descends into the primordial elements of life . . . to become lost in something greater than himself, in the immediate, indivisible essence of life . . . This is the moment of grace in which man becomes a vessel ready to absorb the energies flowing into

him. This is the ecstatic state which substitutes the plane of mere knowing for that of experiencing.⁹⁹

This process, she believed, had been embraced and enacted by the most respected German artists of all disciplines through the centuries, and constituted the unique German contribution to the history of art.

A book review in *The Dance Observer* demonstrates the American reaction to this book. The reviewer, M. P. O'D. (Mary O'Donnell?), found it to be “at once a treasure and a disappointment,” with “an incomparable collection of controversial statements and implications.”¹⁰⁰ She took special issue with Stewart’s assertion that most modern dance in America was derived from German modern dance, writing: “This is a very misleading statement and as such arouses hitherto unsuspected depths of nationalistic fervor.”¹⁰¹ Many American dancers were deeply ambivalent to German modern dance at this time. American art forms, including dance, were asserting their value and their difference from European forms, and Americans bristled at proclamations that modern dance had been created in Germany. Wigman’s nationalist statements fanned the flames of American nationalist sentiment. At the same time, many American modern dancers continued to respect Wigman as a pioneering artist and a formidable, international symbol of the modern dance revolt.

Dance Observer vs. New Theatre on *German Dance Under Fascism*

The Dance Observer, the unofficial voice for American modern dance, decided to remain politically neutral on the issue of German dance under Fascism. They published two factual articles (by Stewart and Holm) about the current activities of leading German modern dancers, without any editorial or political commentary on their content. Holm’s

article appeared in the same issue as the book review and a letter to the Editor by Edna Ocko, described below, which explicitly critiqued Wigman on political grounds. This combination of articles demonstrates the deep ambivalence and conflicted opinions among American modern dancers toward Wigman and her associates who remained in Germany.

Though *The Dance Observer* refused to take a stand at this time, *New Theatre* and the leftist dance community did. In November, Edna Ocko – Holm’s former student, a founder of the New Dance Group, and leading leftist dance critic – came forward with an article in *New Theatre*, “The Swastika Is Dancing,” and a letter to the editor of *The Dance Observer*, “Anti-Fascism.” She pointed out that all the facts needed to substantiate Wirth’s claims in his article “Mary Wigman—Fascist” were contained in Virginia Stewart’s “German Letter.” In particular, she pointed to the fact that Laban’s Tanz-Bühne was a department of the Chamber of Culture under Goebbels, who she described as a “madman and murderer,” “responsible for the death of many brave artists who defied Nazi rule, responsible for the outlawing of hundreds of scientists, musicians, composers, artists; responsible for the sending of thousands of innocent victims in all fields to concentration camps.”¹⁰² Ocko also concluded that, in exchange for the fifty-seven-city tour through Germany and Poland, Wigman had conceded to including ballet in her school curriculum and to ensuring that every student give the Hitler pledge. Ocko declared: “Mary Wigman is lost. Her greatness is dimmed. She is part of a cult of hate, swathed in a flag that destroys progress and culture. She has betrayed her art for thirty pieces of silver.”¹⁰³

Ocko urged all dancers to boycott the International Dance Festival to be held in conjunction with the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a protest against fascism. She declared that former students of the Wigman School, such as herself and her colleagues from the New Dance Group, should lead the call for all dancers to sever their ties to Wigman; and she cautioned: “Let us not blindly include in this boycott all German dancers in America today, who as graduates of the Wigman School years ago still teach her technique. Let us rather persuade them that they, too, must be urged to join with us in protest.”¹⁰⁴

Although she did not specifically name Holm, she surely must have had her in mind.

In her letter to *The Dance Observer*, Ocko critiqued the editors’ “failure to take a stand on the implications of the German Letter, contributed by Virginia Stewart.”¹⁰⁵ She asserted that Wigman’s status in Germany should not be “glossed over by silence and tolerant non-commitment” and demanded that *The Dance Observer* declare support for the boycott of the upcoming Berlin International Dance Festival.¹⁰⁶

Holm’s Response

Holm would eventually take Ocko’s advice to sever her official ties to Wigman, but not for another year. At the time Ocko’s letter and article were published, Holm had not corresponded with Wigman in almost a year. Her November 1935 article on Wigman was likely the fulfillment of Wigman’s request from December 1934, when Wigman had sent Holm a number of press clippings and photographs and noted, “Maybe you can translate them and make a little P.R. with them. It would be good if people knew something of us over there.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, Holm continued to represent Wigman’s interests and dutifully comply with her requests. At the same time, she emphasized her independence: for example, a December 1935 advertisement for a “Christmas Course” in

the journal *Progressive Education* highlights “Hanya Holm,” and relegates “New York Wigman School of Dance” to smaller print at the bottom.¹⁰⁸

Between December 1935 and March 1936, Holm performed with her group at a number of events at the New School, Carnegie Hall, the Brooklyn Museum, the Bennett School, and Bennington College. In May, she participated in the National Dance Congress and Festival, held at the 92nd Street YMHA. This was sponsored by the New Dance League, organized largely by leftist dancers, and included a wide range of dance styles, from modern dance to folk dance.

After the fall term, Holm did not return to teaching at the 92nd Street YMHA Dance Center; instead, she sent her protégé Nancy McKnight, who was involved with the New Dance Group. Her son Klaus arrived from Germany at some point in 1936, most likely in the spring.

1936 Berlin Olympics and International Dance Festival

In August 1936, Berlin hosted the Eleventh Olympic Games. Hitler and Goebbels seized this opportunity to display Nazi spectacle and to promote a unified image of Germany on the world stage. Mary Wigman, Gret Palucca, Harald Kreutzberg, and Dorothee Günther choreographed *Olympische Jugend* (Olympic Youth) for the opening-night festivities. This was a massive spectacle performed by more than ten thousand amateur youth and dancers. The production was organized into five sections: *Kindliches Spiel* (Children at Play), *Anmut der Mädchen* (Grace of the Maidens), *Jüngliche in Spiel und Ernst* (Youth at Play and in Earnestness), *Heldenkampf und Totenklage* (Heroic Struggle and Death Lament), and *Olympischer Hymnus* (Olympic Hymn).¹⁰⁹ Rudolf Laban had also choreographed a choric dance work, *Vom Tauwind und der neuen Freude*

(Of the Warm Wind and the New Joy), which “he conceived of as a great ‘dedicatory act’” and which he intended to be the high point of the Olympic dance spectacle.¹¹⁰ This dance was cancelled after the dress rehearsal, when Goebbels declared it “too intellectual . . . Goes around in our [NSDAP] costume but is not really one of our own.”¹¹¹ This disaster hastened Laban’s fall within the Nazi hierarchy, eventually resulting in his emigration.

Concurrent with the athletic games, Nazi Germany hosted an International Dance Festival. Dance groups from Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, Greece, Italy, and Germany performed in the festival.¹¹² American dancers, including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Helen Tamiris, Anna Sokolow, Lincoln Kirstein, impresario Sol Hurok, and others boycotted the festival in protest against fascism. Graham, in particular, directly refused the invitation, sent by the German Ministry of Culture, for her and her group to perform. Her refusal has become canonized in dance history. According to a *New York Times* article, her refusal letter asserted:

I would find it impossible to dance in Germany at the present time. So many artists whom I respect and admire have been persecuted, have been deprived of the right to work for ridiculous and unsatisfactory reasons, that I should consider it impossible to identify myself, by accepting the invitation, with the régime that has made such things possible.

In addition, some of my concert group would not be welcomed in Germany.¹¹³

Though *Dance Observer* did not endorse the boycott, they mentioned Graham’s refusal letter in an April 1936 editorial. In May, *New Theatre* published a cartoon intended to rally support for the boycott, which featured a German dancer performing alone among

empty stages.¹¹⁴ Holm did not join the boycott, or make any public statements about it; but she also did not attend the festival.

Severing Ties from the Wigman School

During the summer of 1936, Holm taught at Colorado State Teacher's College, Mills College, and the Summer School of the Dance at Bennington College. In August, she and her group performed at Bennington; this was their first major performance in a major venue before their peers. In his review of the concert, John Martin declared that the official relationship between the New York Wigman School and the Central Institute in Dresden had ended.¹¹⁵ However, the school brochures for the fall term were printed – probably in September – with the Wigman name intact. Perhaps Holm hoped that Americans would be satisfied with that statement of independence, without formally severing her ties.

Apparently this strategy did not work. At some point during this period, the leftist dancers organized a boycott of the New York Wigman School. Holm later recalled,

[P]eople who were on top of the Communist party came and said I should make a statement that Wigman had nothing to do with the Hitler government though she was living over there. Well, she was left alone, and I said I'd make no statement because that might cost her head, or she might be burned in the next oven. All right if you boycott. And they boycotted. They threw stones in the window.¹¹⁶

In November, Holm formally changed the name of the school for the purpose of “clarification.” A press release written by Thelma Cowan declared:

From November on, Hanya Holm will conduct her studio of the dance under her own name, as the Hanya Holm Studio, discontinuing the title of the New York Wigman School of the Dance. Miss Holm has been prompted to this step in order to clarify the position of her school as an independent institution . . . As a result of natural development in a new world and adaptation to new stimuli the school and its principles have become her own in fact and now on in name.¹¹⁷

Holm also made a public statement, in which she made it clear that her “respect and admiration” for Wigman as an artist had not changed, and that she emphatically rejected political control over art:

A racial question or a political question has never existed and shall never exist in my school. In my own opinion there is no room for politics in art. I most emphatically refuse to identify myself with any political creed which strangles the free development of art, regardless of whether these political straight jackets are imported from Europe or manufactured here.¹¹⁸

This statement seems to have succeeded in distancing Holm from Wigman’s Nazi affiliations in the minds of members of the American modern dance community; in particular, it probably allayed American fears that Holm herself might be taking directives from the NSDAP. It also served to enable Holm to become a full-fledged member of American modern dance. As Susan Manning has pointed out, this statement affirmed her belief in the independence of art and politics, which put her firmly into the “humanist” wing of American modern dance.¹¹⁹ By affiliating herself with other humanists such as Graham and Humphrey – by teaching at Bennington, and then with this statement – Holm was able to survive the controversy over Wigman and the Nazis.

However, it is important to remember that this statement did not denounce Wigman in any way, and I assert that it actually affirmed continuity with Wigman’s most

sacred principles. For Wigman and Holm, the German dance revolution had always been about culture, not politics. They sought to combat moral decay and modern alienation by forging a new kind of community, and above all they were “absolute” artists who did not need to deal in the shady world of politics. Hedwig Müller explains, “[Wigman and her disciples] considered politics simply a matter of the rational intellect. Far more important for them were irrational, emotional matters—experience, culture, art.”¹²⁰

Holm’s statement can be read as a critique of leftist dance, with its international, avowedly political stance, as well as a critique of fascism. She affirmed that art was not only separate from politics, but existed on a higher level. Her statement also makes clear that she felt pressured to change the name of the school; when asked about it later in life, she stated that it was purely political.¹²¹ She seemed exasperated: she felt that she had already made accommodations by supporting the institutionalization of American modern dance and altering her approach to make it more amenable to the American temperament. But that was not enough; leftist dance wanted her to denounce Wigman. She refused to do this. Wigman was her mentor, who had opened up to her a life work of substance and meaning. She changed the name of the school as a symbolic gesture, a way to demonstrate her independence from the Nazis and from politics, but she did not denounce Wigman.

The timing of Holm’s declaration of independence begs further examination. Why did she wait until November 1936 to make the break? Leftist dance and some modern dancers had been demanding action for over a year. Earlier in the year, Holm might have been afraid of endangering her son, but he had arrived in New York safely in the spring of 1936. Claudia Gitelman, based on an interview with Bessie Schönberg,

reports that Holm “suffered ‘the tortures of the damned’ in confronting Wigman about the need to jettison her name.”¹²² Perhaps it took Holm this long to become convinced of the need to separate from the Wigman School, and to muster the courage to do it.

We must remember that, as far as Wigman was concerned, the New York Wigman School was still an official branch of the Wigman Central Institute in Dresden. John Martin’s statement that “for several years [Holm] has had no affiliation with the German dancer [Wigman] or her organization” was factually inaccurate.¹²³ Wigman was still essentially Holm’s employer. Wigman had admonished her in December 1935:

I demand – as long as you are in charge of this school over there, where you were put in position by me, and as long as the school is connected with mine – the maintaining of personal and business contact from your side. If from your side you do not wish to continue, let me know, but we cannot go on like this.¹²⁴

This letter must have reminded Holm that she still needed to answer to Wigman. However, Wigman’s letter also opened the possibility of severing the ties binding the New York School to Germany. Why did Holm wait ten more months to actually do it? I believe that Holm’s decision was only partially a response to the American political pressure.

Holm actually asked Wigman to make the decision. Walter Sorell, based on interviews with Holm and Wigman, wrote in his biography of Holm: “It is again characteristic of Hanya’s integrity and loyalty that, at this point, she still left the decision to Mary whether she should give up the school and return to Germany or stay on nevertheless.”¹²⁵ Wigman seems to have expected Holm to return to her homeland sooner or later.¹²⁶ In 1936, Holm was still a German citizen; she had begun the

naturalization process in the U.S., but Wigman may not have known this. Further, Holm was *Volksdeutsche*—a member of the German ethnic people – and Wigman may have felt that Holm should return to her homeland out of national loyalty.¹²⁷ In essence, then, Holm was asking Wigman permission to stay in the U.S. independently. Wigman’s response, as she recalled it later, was: “I replied to her letter: if you gained a foothold over there and if you would like to stay—by all means erase the name Mary Wigman and call it the Hanya Holm School.”¹²⁸

Even if Holm left the ultimate decision to Wigman, why did she wait until late summer or early fall 1936 to make her proposal? She may have realized that the continuing existence of the New York School, with its large Jewish student population, was a liability for Wigman, and put her in danger with the Nazis. Holm’s claim that any statement “might cost her head” was more accurate after the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin. Once they were no longer under an international microscope, the Nazis made it clear that anyone who was not a true believer, no matter how famous they were, would no longer be tolerated. Kant explains that the Nazis “were not interested in [Wigman’s] demands to be the high priestess of some new Germanic dance religion. Nazism would never tolerate ideological competitors.”¹²⁹ Wigman began to realize that she would not be granted special status. It is possible that Holm learned this from friends and colleagues returning to the States from Germany. Perhaps this was what finally convinced her to make the break, because she realized that it was in Wigman’s best interest for the New York School to disassociate itself from her.

Those who sought to discredit her to the Nazis had used her international contacts against her.¹³⁰ The boycott of the New York School actually helped Wigman to curry

favor with the Nazi regime and to demonstrate her loyalty to Germany. According to a memorandum sent to Reich Minister for Propaganda Goebbels in June 1937, Wigman had declared that “she stands for Germany,” and “has always felt herself to be German,” which explained why she had been “fully boycotted abroad.”¹³¹ In this way, the 1936 name change benefited Wigman as well as Holm.

Conclusion

These political problems were annoyances to Wigman and Holm, who disdained politics as inferior to cultural and artistic matters. Between 1933 and 1937, Wigman felt that the Nazi revolution provided an opportunity for her to realize her goals of a national *Tanzgemeinschaft*, and the controversy in the U.S. did not seem to concern her. For Holm, the controversies had real consequences for her survival, and she took the steps necessary to dilute their impact. As I will show in the final chapter, these events did not cause Holm to abandon her mission, but only to slightly change tactics and language.

NOTES

¹ Reminiscences of Marian VanTuyl Campbell (1979), on page 142, CUOHROC.

² Helmut Gottschild, interview with the author, Philadelphia, PA, 2002.

³ Moss 245.

⁴ Kant, *Hitler's Dancers*, 152 n. 39.

⁵ Barbara Mettler quoted by Suzan Moss, 246.

⁶ Kant, *Hitler's Dancers*, 92, 152 n. 39; Guilbert 106.

⁷ Müller, *Mary Wigman: Leben und Werk der grossen Tänzerin*, 215.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

⁹ Müller, "Wigman and National Socialism," 67.

¹⁰ See Müller, "Wigman and National Socialism" for a fuller description of Wigman's mixed feelings toward Nazi policy.

¹¹ Kant, *Hitler's Dancers*, 78 - 96.

¹² This letter is reproduced in Karina and Kant, *Hitler's Dancers*, "Document 3," 195-197. The copy sent to Holm is in the Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹³ Mary Wigman, "Rundschreiben an die Zweigschulen der Wigman-Schule-Dresden" ["Circular to the Branch Schools of the Wigman School Dresden"] (11 Juli 1933), Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁴ Laure Guilbert, *Danser avec le IIIe Reich*, 192.

¹⁵ Laure Guilbert, *Danser avec le IIIe Reich*, 165-166.

¹⁶ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Liebe Hanya* 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹ Ibid., 40.

²² Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²³ “New York Wigman School of the Dance” [brochure], Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/299, JRDD, NYPL-PA. [probably 1934-1935].

²⁴ Mary Wigman School of the Dance, “Advance Information Concerning the Summer Courses 1933” [School memo], Hanya Holm Papers (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²⁵ “Second Annual Dancers’ Tour to the Mary Wigman School of the Dance, Dresden, Germany” (1934) [brochure], JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²⁶ Mary Wigman, “Rundschreiben an die Zweigschulen der Wigman-Schule-Dresden” [“Circular to the Branch Schools of the Wigman School Dresden”] (11 Juli 1933) and “An die diplomierten Schüler der Wigman-Schule-Dresden, der Palucca-Schule-Dresden und der Trümpy-Schule-Berlin” [“To the Graduates of the Wigman School Dresden, the Palucca School Dresden and the Trümpy School Berlin”] (11 Juli 1933), Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

²⁷ A magazine advertisement features a photograph of Wilcox next to a brand new roadster with the caption, “For Economical Transportation: Martha Wilcox driving her 1930 Chevrolet Six Roadster says ‘It’s Wise to Choose a Six.’” “Perry-Mansfield” folder, Katherine Litz Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

²⁸ Olga Curtis, “Hanya Holm: She Makes Dances,” *Sunday Empire: The Magazine of the Denver Post*, Aug. 1, 1965.

²⁹ “New York Wigman School – Jahres Bericht 1933 – 34,” Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA. *American Dancer* magazine reported that Holm underwent an appendix operation (“Last Minute Flashes,” *The American Dancer* (Nov. 1933): 23), but Gitelman, based on an interview with Holm’s daughter-in-law Heidi, suggests that it may have been a hysterectomy. (Gitelman, *Liebe Hanya*, 42)

³⁰ *Liebe Hanya* 45.

³¹ Ibid., 44.

³² Ibid., 45.

³³ Jane Dudley, “The Early Life of an American Dancer,” *Dance Research* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 13.

³⁴ *The Reminiscences of Nancy Hauser* (1982), on pages 22, 23, CUOHROC.

³⁵ “Today on the Radio,” *New York Times* (2 May 1934). Other speakers in the lecture series included Agnes de Mille, Belle Didjah, Dorsha, Elsa Findlay, Martha Graham, Martha Hill,

Doris Humphrey, Esther Junger, Hazel Kraus, Mary Jo Shelley, Ruth St. Denis, Tamiris, and Charles Weidman.

³⁶ Hanya Holm, "The Scope of the Contemporary Dance" (2 May 1934): 3. Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 – 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴¹ Kriegsman, *Modern Dance in America: The Bennington Years*.

⁴² M. H., "School and College Notes," *The Dance Observer* 1, no. 6 (August/September 1934): 71.

⁴³ Reminiscences of Martha Wilcox (1979), on page 13, CUOHROC.

⁴⁴ Theodora Wiesner, "Interview with Theodora Wiesner," (1979), Oral History Archive, MGZTL 4-1746, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁴⁵ Holm in Siegel, "A Conversation with Hanya Holm," 24. See also Reminiscences of Nancy Hauser (1982), on pages 31 – 32, CUOHROC.

⁴⁶ Reminiscences of Martha Wilcox (1979) on page 13, CUOHROC.

⁴⁷ John Martin, *America Dancing* (New York: Dodge Publishing Company, 1936) 171.

⁴⁸ Reminiscences of Louise Kloepper (1980), on page 18, CUOHROC.

⁴⁹ Gitelman, based on an interview with Margaret Gage (*Liebe Hanya*, 26).

⁵⁰ Martin letter to Kolodney, April 1935.

⁵¹ This is how Pola Nirenska described the Wigman School when she visited during the summer of 1934. Quoted by Moss, 257.

⁵² *Liebe Hanya* 49.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁴ "Document 5" (13 July 1934), "Dance Under the Nazis: Documentary Appendix," selected and edited by Marion Kant, *Hitler's Dancers* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003) 199 – 200.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 200 – 203.

⁵⁶ Regarding the section “Lament for the Dead,” Wigman wrote to Holm on December 29, 1934: “I think you saw the first tryout of it?” (*Liebe Hanya* 54).

⁵⁷ Wigman in *Liebe Hanya* 52, 53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁹ Documentary Appendix, ed. Marion Kant, *Hitler’s Dancers*, 204

⁶⁰ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶¹ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶² For a discussion of new forms of dance patronage offered by the Nazis beginning in 1934, see Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 203.

⁶³ Moss 247; Reminiscences of Bernice Van Gelder Peterson (1979), on page 52, CUOHROC: Gitelman in *Liebe Hanya* 62.

⁶⁴ Cited by Suzan Moss, p. 248 – 249.

⁶⁵ For an indication of the financial difficulties Holm faced, see the letter she sent her assistant Louise Kloepper from Germany. She chastised Kloepper for renting the studio at Steinway Hall for another year, and admonished her: “Were you to think that there is enough money, this would be an error, and Mary will want to have it paid back to the last penny. So please, no grandeur that I will have to pay for with my blood.” (*Liebe Hanya*, 218.)

⁶⁶ Reminiscences of Elizabeth Waters (1980), on pages 15-17 and 18, CUOHROC.

⁶⁷ Blanche Evan, “The Star Spangled Dance,” *New Theatre* (October 1934): 24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ “New York Wigman School Jahres Bericht 1933-34,” Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/298, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁷⁰ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 61.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷² Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁷³ *Liebe Hanya* 60.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 53-58.

⁷⁵ Wigman’s tour to Poland was cut short by the death of Polish leader Józef Pilsudski (Virginia Stewart, “German Letter,” *The Dance Observer* 2.7 (Oct. 1935): 80).

⁷⁶ “Wigman Dancers” [concert program] May 18, 1935, *MGZB Hanya Holm, JRDD, NYPL-PA; John Martin, *New York Times*, 19 May 1935.

⁷⁷ Naomi M. Jackson, “Converging Movements; Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y, 1930-1960.” PhD Dissertation, New York University (1997) 95.

⁷⁸ Letter from John Martin to William Kolodney, April 9, 1935, 92nd Street YMHA Archive.

⁷⁹ Manning, *Modern Dance Negro Dance*, 75.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Graff 114.

⁸³ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 275 – 281.

⁸⁴ “An Open Letter to Mary Wigman,” in Mary Wigman: Clippings, [microfilm], *ZBD – 352, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁸⁵ Edna Ocko, “The Swastika Is Dancing,” *New Theatre* 2.11 (Nov. 1935): 17.

⁸⁶ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 276: Ocko, “The Swastika Is Dancing.”

⁸⁷ Nicholas Wirth, “Mary Wigman – Fascist,” *New Theatre* 2, no. 8 (August 1935): 5.

⁸⁸ Ocko, “The Swastika Is Dancing.”

⁸⁹ Nancy Hauser recalled that Holm may have returned to Germany again in the summer of 1935 to fetch Klaus. (Reminiscences of Nancy Hauser (1982), on page 25, CUOHROC.) However, I have not been able to find any other evidence of this trip. If Holm did travel to Germany, Wigman apparently did not know about it, as there is no mention of it in her extant letters.

⁹⁰ Letter from William Kolodney to Hanya Holm, October 18, 1935, 92nd Street YMHA Archives.

⁹¹ Holm, “The Dance, the Artist-Teacher, and the Child,” 388-390.

⁹² Hanya Holm, “Mary Wigman,” *Dance Observer* 2, no. 8 (Nov. 1935): 85, 91-92.

⁹³ Virginia Stewart, “German Letter,” *The Dance Observer* 2, no. 7 (Oct. 1935): 81.

⁹⁴ Mary Wigman, “The New German Dance,” *Modern Dance*, compiled by Virginia Stewart (New York: E. Weyhe, 1935) 22.

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- ⁹⁵ Ibid., 23.
- ⁹⁶ Artur Michel, "The Development of the New German Dance," *Modern Dance*, compiled by Virginia Stewart (New York: E. Weyhe, 1935) 16-17.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid, 17.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid, 17.
- ⁹⁹ Wigman, *ibid*, 21-22.
- ¹⁰⁰ M. P. O'D., "Books: Modern Dance," *The Dance Observer* (Nov. 1935): 91.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰² Ocko, "The Swastika Is Dancing."
- ¹⁰³ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁵ Edna Ocko, "Anti-Fascism," *The Dance Observer* (Nov. 1935): 93.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁷ Wigman in *Liebe Hanya*, 55.
- ¹⁰⁸ "Educational Directory," *Progressive Education* (Dec. 1935): iv.
- ¹⁰⁹ For fuller descriptions of *Olympic Youth*, see Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 194-202 and Kant, *Hitler's Dancers*, 117-121.
- ¹¹⁰ Kant, *Hitler's Dancers*, 119.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹¹² Artur Michel, "International Dance Tournament—Berlin, 1936," *Dance Observer* 3, no. 8 (October 1936): 89, 93.
- ¹¹³ "German Invitation Refused by Dancer," *New York Times*, Mar. 13, 1936, 10.
- ¹¹⁴ Reproduced in Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 277.
- ¹¹⁵ John Martin, "The Dance: Hanya Holm; Artist and Group Make Debut in Bennington Festival," *The New York Times Scrapbook*, August 16, 1936.
- ¹¹⁶ Marcia Siegel, "Mary Wigman 1886-1973; A Tribute," *Dance Magazine* (Nov. 1973): 80.

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- ¹¹⁷ Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁹ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 271.
- ¹²⁰ Müller, “Wigman and National Socialism,” 65-66.
- ¹²¹ “The Early Years: The Contribution of Hanya Holm to American Modern Dance,” VHS, SUNY Purchase, 1981, MGZIC 9-950, cassette 14, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ¹²² Gitelman, *Liebe Hanya*, 62.
- ¹²³ John Martin, “The Dance: Fantastique,” *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1936.
- ¹²⁴ Wigman in *Liebe Hanya*, 60.
- ¹²⁵ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 44. Holm also confirmed this in an interview: “I wrote Wigman and I said, listen, the situation is not easy. It would be easier for me if I would use my own name and not affiliate with the Wigman school, and she said fine.” (Siegel, “Mary Wigman 1886-1973; A Tribute,” 80.)
- ¹²⁶ Wigman had written to Holm in March 1934: “I was very happy to read in your letter that you are so sincerely and wholly ready for the work in New York” (*Liebe Hanya* 44). This indicates to me that there was some question about whether Holm would stay in New York. By 1938, Wigman seems to have accepted Holm’s emigration as permanent: “I wanted to tell you that whenever you have time and feel like coming, my house is always open to you and I would enjoy it tremendously if you would visit once again” (*Liebe Hanya* 70).
- ¹²⁷ Wigman made it clear at the time and even after the war that she never considered emigrating. She told Louise Kloepper in 1933: “You know Louise, I could go to America, yes. But whatever happens to my people should happen to me.” (Reminiscences of Louise Kloepper (1980), on page 20, CUOHROC.)
- ¹²⁸ Wigman quoted by Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 44.
- ¹²⁹ Kant, *Hitler’s Dancers*, 132.
- ¹³⁰ Kant, *Hitler’s Dancers*, 270.
- ¹³¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 8

HANYA HOLM AND THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Introduction

When I first began to look at the literature on Hanya Holm, the vehemence with which her Americanization was continually stressed impressed me greatly. From the late 1930s onwards, virtually every writer I encountered has mentioned it; Ric Estrada even titled an article on Holm “American as Apple Strudel” (1968), playing on the trope of “American as Apple Pie” and subtly tying Holm to generations of German immigrants who have become incorporated into the American landscape. As Susan Manning has demonstrated, John Martin initiated this interpretation of Holm in his 1936 book *America Dancing*, when he proposed that Holm’s keen sensitivity to the American scene had enabled her to alter Wigman’s methods to make them “amenable to the American temperament.”¹ This view of Holm served two purposes: it made it possible for Holm to survive the 1935-1936 controversies over Wigman’s collaboration with Nazism, and it made it possible for Martin to posit the essential American-ness of American modern dance.

Hanya Holm did make some changes to her approach to modern dance between 1931 and 1936, and beyond, and this chapter will survey these. I propose, however, that if they equate Americanization with abandoning her German modern dance approach, claims of Holm’s Americanization are inaccurate. I assert that a more appropriate way to look at Holm’s relationship to American culture is to foreground her quest to find an essential, “genuine” American culture out of which to build an essential, genuine

American modern dance. I hope that the previous chapters have shown that this goal was consistent with the worldview and value system she brought with her from Germany in 1931.

German modern dance was a search for primal, racially-based rhythms; a search for nature and the experience of nature that fed the dancer's soul; a search for a unified, emotional cultural community—and this is what Holm meant when she declared in 1936 that “the spirit of America” had become the basis of her work. From 1931, her goal had been to lay the seeds of a genuine *Tanzgemeinschaft* that would bring the whole American social body back to health, holism, and joy. By 1936, all that had changed was the community with which Holm was concerned—American rather than German. As a result, I consider this the moment of her true emigration from Germany to the United States.

Searching for the American Spirit

In an undated document, most likely from 1932 or 1933, Holm described “the American spirit,” proposing that it was composed of youth, excitement, aggressiveness, rapid tempo, energy, lack of concentrated purpose, lack of form, Puritanism, Romanticism, Idealism, and breadth. With these qualities, she likened Americans to adolescents; she thought that Americans lacked the maturity and depth of Europeans. As discussed at length in Chapter 6, Holm characterized American culture as rationalized, metropolitan, and plagued by the debilitating effects of machines on the nerves (neurasthenia). She constructed a binary opposition between German dance as *Gemeinschaft* (the cultural community, a sense of belonging, the people), and American

dance as *Gesellschaft*, (the alienation and competition of civilized society). Between 1933 and 1936, though, she gradually altered her American mission. Rather than attempting to bring Americans into the German dance community or to create a German *Tanz-Gemeinschaft* in the U.S., she sought to foster a genuine American modern dance rooted in nature, landscape, and universal fundamentals. Holm revised her binary construction, so that it delineated an opposition between an alienated, urban, rational and consumerist America and a true American spirit that she believed lay dormant in the undeveloped folk culture.

What she perceived as the absence of a viable, authentic folk culture in the United States concerned Holm greatly. How could modern dance return to human essentials, thus restoring a sense of community, holism, and spirituality to modern life, if there were not a common folk experience on which to draw?

Encouraging the Growth of “Native Rhythms”

By 1934, Holm had begun to identify her American mission as fostering the growth of “native rhythms,” which would enable the development of contemporary American dance forms.² Soon after, in her article for the 1935 book *Modern Dance*, entitled “The German Dance in the American Scene,” she explained that her approach to dance in the U.S. would not be valid if she did not change it to accommodate those native rhythms: “The dance, like any cultural expression, when brought from one country to another must undergo some changes. National characteristics and rhythms must be acknowledged and absorbed before any pedagogical method can be considered valid.”³ Following Laban and Wigman, Holm believed that rhythm was an expression of race; therefore, it was essential for her to tune into the racial rhythms of American culture.

Further, she declared, American soil contained the seeds of a healthy, energetic dance culture: “In America, more perhaps than anywhere else in the world today, there waits fresh and vigorous material for the dance. In its environment and in the temperament and vitality of its people the future American dance has an enviable heritage.”⁴ She saw her role as an experienced educator and artist who—as Dalcroze, Laban, Wigman and others had done for Germany—would till the soil, plant the seeds, provide sustenance, and prune away the unhealthy parts in order to create a rich and healthy American dance culture. She would use the tools of the Wigman method to unlock the dammed-up creative energies of the American spirit. She wrote:

In America especially the untried vitality and youth of the country responds to the call of this renaissance of the dance in life. The American joy in activity, the love of bodily endeavor for its own sake find a wonderful outlet in the dance of Mary Wigman, which is rooted so vigorously, so triumphantly, in the physical exuberance of living. The inherent affirmation of the continuous growth of things; the eternal belief in the ultimate invincibility of the human spirit in the face of all odds—these are elements of Mary Wigman’s personal credo that find a spiritual home as well in America as in her native land.⁵

Holm felt that among the modern dance schools in the U.S., the Wigman method alone could tap into these spiritual elements. She described the Wigman method as “an approach to life,” which contained elements “that find a legitimate echo and that fulfill a rising need in the cultural and emotional life of America today.”⁶ At the same time, she acknowledged that there were great differences between German and American dance “in spirit, in philosophy, even in the actual rhythms and patterns of existence.”⁷ She argued that American dance must build upon “your [Americans’] impulsiveness, your

impatience with detail, your preoccupation with speed and finish and the grandiose sweep of your conceptions.”⁸ American dance must come out of a genuine American spirit.

Lack of a Genuine American Folk Culture

Despite this potential, Holm contended, American folk culture was in a “crude state” as a result of the youth of the United States as a country, and because of the great emphasis on mechanical and industrial achievement at the expense of the arts.⁹ One solution, she proposed, was for the primary and secondary schools to actively preserve and encourage the development of folk culture. In her 1935 article “The Dance, the Artist-Teacher, and the Child,” she theorized that folk culture is a repository of human knowledge, a living embodiment of the universal principles of human movement and rhythm; therefore, she suggested, preservation and care of the folk culture is of primary significance. She argued that this is “a communal obligation in which the role of the school can be highly valuable,” primarily as a way to “keep open the gates to spiritual vitality” in children so that the knowledge of folk culture would not be lost.¹⁰ Only if children received their natural inheritance of a vital folk culture would the community be able to support a vital amateur dance community and the “rare artistic personality” who would emerge.¹¹

As discussed in Chapter 6, Holm was frustrated by the lack of “true amateurs” among her American students, and she perceived this as an obstacle in the quest to foster amateur dance. In her 1933 school report, she characterized the amateur students in the New York School as “dilettantes of life as well as art . . . this type is a product of the city.”¹² She did not find the kind of amateurs she sought—interested in dance as health,

as vitality, as “life experienced consciously.” She did not find representatives of the (rural) folk, but only non-professionals “who think themselves to be dancers.”¹³

American modern dance, she concluded, was also a product of the metropolis, alienated from nature. She described Martha Graham’s technique as American in its impulsiveness and metropolitan in its “lack of elasticity and somewhat deadened intensity.” As a result, she felt, “it lacks the movement and dynamics latent in the American spirit.”¹⁴ A genuine American modern dance would only emerge if the folk culture itself were developed.

Challenges in Creating an American Lay Dance Culture

When she began to travel the country, though, Holm was surprised by the plurality of rural folk cultures. She later remembered how she marveled at the differences in orientation of people in different regions of the U.S.: “These discrepancies taught me a great deal since they don’t exist in Germany. There the peasant is different from the city-dweller as everywhere else, but his outlook on life, his cultural background is in no way marked as it is here.”¹⁵ Therefore, not only were her ideas about a unitary “American spirit” shaken, she could not envision a way to make modern dance relevant to rural people.

Further, Holm began to realize that her oppositional conceptions of the metropolis and of landscape/nature did not hold the same resonance in the American context.¹⁶ To American modern dancers, the metropolis represented modernity and Americanism, not decay and mechanization. Deborah Jowitt explains: “Their bodies incarnated dual facets of modern design: the strong jagged lines of angle and zigzag, and an overall streamlining for action, with no decorative details to catch the wind.”¹⁷ Graham

embraced “the aggressive, fast, nervous dynamic and ‘phallic’ architectural space of New York,” and developed a technique for training the body to be powerful and quick, with an economy of energy.¹⁸ Humphrey explored rhythm, asymmetry, and dimensionality in her movement style.

The American modern dancers, furthermore, did not share Holm’s interest in folk culture. American choreographers such as Graham and Humphrey did borrow images, traditions, and styles from culturally distinct groups such as the Shakers and Southwest Native Americans.¹⁹ However, they maintained a strict demarcation between “high” and “low” culture, and transformed those sources into abstract representations of ideas.²⁰ Graham and Humphrey did not see rural folk as Holm did—as the embodiment of the landscape and racial culture of the nation. Instead, they invoked the symbol of the frontier — a wilderness that had been conquered by Americans’ sheer willpower and hardiness of spirit. Humphrey wrote:

This new dance of action comes inevitably from the people who had to subdue a continent, to make a thousand paths through forest and plain, to conquer the mountains and eventually raise up towers of steel and glass. The American dance is born of this new world, new life, and new vigor.²¹

Holm’s Theatrical Turn

When Holm first arrived in the U.S., she did not perform or choreograph new works; her primary goals were to direct and teach at the school, and foster the amateur dance culture needed by the Wigman School. By 1933, however, she felt that the work she had done with her professional division students offered the most promise of all her

endeavors, and she began to develop them into a performing group.²² The more fully Holm joined American modern dance, beginning around 1934, the more emphasis she placed on creating choreographies and developing reproducible technical exercises—the two central activities of American modern dance. It is as if she knew that in order to join American modern dance, she must begin to create these kinds of products.

The Demonstration Group

Holm had used her advanced students to demonstrate the Wigman principles when she gave public lectures as early as January 1932, as I have described. Over the next few years, this group gradually added choreographed dances to their repertoire, both dances created by the students themselves, and dances created by Holm. In the first few years, the group consisted of Nancy Hauser, Lucretia Barzun, Marjorie Bahouth, Jane Dudley, Miram Blecher, Dorothy Kennedy, Drucilla Schroeder, Franziska Boas, Louise Kloepper, Melvenc Ipcar, and others. Like Wigman's earliest group, it was a satisfying collaborative endeavor for both leader and dancers. Nancy Hauser remembered that Holm choreographed through improvisational collaboration with the dancers:

We would come into the studio and Hanya would say, 'I want a movement that goes across and I want you listening.' Well, we worked on that listening for months, weeks, until it took on a sort of a depth and vibrancy that began to feel remarkable. First it just seemed like drudgery, you know. What are we doing this for? But it took two years to complete that piece.

I remember one improvisation. I was working next to Jane [Dudley] and she was always a bit scary because she was big and powerful, and she didn't always know where people were. But we were doing something. We began sort of rushing up against the wall and we almost ran up the wall at times, because it was like waves crashing. And this went on for two hours, probably. And that went into the dance. These things happened.

So it was really a remarkable piece when it was finally done.²³

Holm later recalled that the dancers developed a sophisticated cohesiveness as a group during this time. One étude she created for her lecture-demonstration program was performed without music, and was based on a dialogue between the dancers in terms of dynamics, phrasing, and timing: “. . . just the bodies . . . within their own dynamics. And the people were so well organized to each other that they could do it without having any problem.”²⁴ This was the benefit of spending weeks, months—even years—improvising together on themes, and was a perfect demonstration of Holm’s pedagogical and creative philosophy. This group of students eventually grew into a professional company, the Hanya Holm Group.

Changes in Pedagogy and Approach to Movement

Holm made gradual changes in her pedagogy and movement style over time. As I demonstrated in Chapter 6, from the moment she first arrived in New York, Holm had keenly observed American culture and her American students. She was a sensitive pedagogue, and responded to her “student-material” by gradually changing her approach. In the face of Americans’ desire for technique, she reluctantly introduced specific warm-up exercises into her classes, particularly when she taught at the Bennington Summer School of the Dance. Later in the 1930s, she integrated into her classes some of fellow German immigrant Joseph Pilates’ exercises, which developed strength and flexibility, especially in the torso. Some observers noted that her movement became more “American” by taking on sharper angles and a more percussive attack.²⁵

Franziska Boas argued that Wigman and Holm’s use of improvisation as a teaching method was alien to American dancers in the early 1930s, and that the emphasis

on technique among American dancers “created an impasse” for Holm because American dancers found her approach too chaotic. By 1933, Holm’s “attempts at developing sensitivity, feeling and the individuality of the student” were “forced into the background.”²⁶ However, she refused to create stylized movement, as the American modern dancers did. Sybil Shearer remembered that in Holm’s classes at Bennington the movement material consisted of “lots of gliding, running, leaping, bouncing, and no sitting on the floor stretching, no distorted movement.”²⁷

Even before her emigration, Holm had always been a systematic and conceptual teacher. Based on interviews with former students, Manning notes that in Dresden: “Holm had provided clearer theoretical explanations for Wigman’s methods than any other teacher there, including the choreographer herself.”²⁸ Isa Partsch-Bergoshn adds: “[Holm] once mentioned to me that Wigman changed her approach to teaching almost daily, and that it was Holm’s decision to stress the structured aspects of Wigman’s work in her own teaching in America.”²⁹ Nancy Hauser asserted that Holm taught the same curriculum for 40 years.³⁰ Over time Holm did increasingly emphasize technical competency, and de-emphasize improvisation, sensation, and emotion, but the fundamentals of her approach remained true to those described in Chapter 5.

Debut of Hanya Holm and Her Group of Dancers

In November 1936, just a few weeks after she officially broke her ties to the Wigman School in Germany, Hanya Holm debuted her performing company in Denver, Colorado. More than anything else, this debut embodied Holm’s shift from the German community to the American community. Here was a company of young American women – most from the West and mid-West states – performing in Colorado, with its

evocations of the American frontier and the stunning landscape of the Rocky Mountains. Like fellow migrant George Balanchine, Holm used her dancers' athleticism, confidence, and expansive movement styles to create an "American" look. Critics remarked on the unique qualities of each dancer, from Elizabeth Waters' strength to Louise Kloepper's phenomenal jumps. In a radio interview, Holm declared, "the spirit of America has become the vital inspiration of my work."³¹

The Hanya Holm Group performed a total of nine works at the debut in Denver. *Salutation*, a group work to a score by Henry Cowell, opened the concert. In his review of Holm's concert at Bennington in August, Martin had called the dance "an excellent opening; its vigor and clarity serve as a kind of statement of what is to follow."³² The next work was *Drive*, a solo performed by Holm; Sorell described it as "a vibrant dance, motivated by demonic impulses" and "expressing the force of modern life with the aid of drums."³³ *Dance in Two Parts*, a group work, was accompanied by a jazz-inspired score by Wallingford Riegger. The dance developed from an uneasy restlessness of groups of people ("A Cry Rises in the Land") to a glimmer of a hopeful future ("New Destinies").

After the intermission, Holm performed two solos, *Sarabande* and *In Quiet Space*, and then the group rejoined her for *City Nocturne*, a satire on urban, jazz nightlife. Martin found *City Nocturne* to be an excellent piece, original, pungent, and beautifully danced.³⁴ Dancer Eve Gentry noted that the audience in Denver laughed heartily at *City Nocturne*.³⁵

The next dance on the program also demonstrated Holm's comic side. In *Four Chromatic Eccentricities*, Holm gave exaggerated portrayals of four different personality types: ebullience, frivolousness, self-pity, and "chasing one's tail."³⁶ Martin declared that

with *Four Chromatic Eccentricities*, Holm had achieved “the rare distinction of being funny without departing for an instant from the dimensions of pure movement.”³⁷

The evening concluded with two energetic ensemble pieces, *Primitive Rhythm* and *Festive Rhythm*. The first was performed to a piano and percussion score, and the dancers added to the rhythm by thumping their hands and feet on the floor. Sorell writes,

The rhythmic, almost savage, surge which reflected the joy of the dancers in being children of nature had a contagious quality about it. The idea was one of a *perpetuum mobile*, with the whole tightly knit group treading continuously, with arms thrust out like rhythmic accents, finally turning into a state of ecstatic exuberance.³⁸

Similarly, *Festive Rhythm* was a joyous, leaping, whirling finale.

In the mid- to late-1930s, Holm made several transcontinental tours with her company, performing in gymnasiums and other makeshift venues on college campuses and small towns throughout the U.S. She became renowned for her Demonstration Program, which provided an entertaining introduction to the principles of modern dance for lay audiences. In publicity for her group, she highlighted not only the “American-ness” of her dancers, but also their regional upbringings. A 1938 press release pointed out that the members of Holm’s group represented a “cross section of American heritage”; they hailed from Washington State, Oregon, California, Colorado, and New England.³⁹

Choreographic Works

Holm’s American concert dance works of the late 1930s exemplify what I am calling her theatrical turn, as she moved away from a utopian view of dance as community toward a more pragmatic view of dance as theatrical art form.

In 1935, she had characterized American dance as “more objective” than the emotional, subjective German dance:

Emotionally the German dance is basically subjective and the American dance objective in their characteristic manifestations . . . The tendency of the American dancer is to observe, portray and comment on her surroundings with an insight lighted mainly by intellectual comprehension and analysis. . . The German dancer on the other hand starts with the actual emotional experience itself and its effect upon the individual. The distinction is one of “being” as contrasted with “doing”—of immersing the self in an emotional state as the necessary prelude to creation as contrasted with objective reconstruction of a known situation.⁴⁰

The contrast Holm identifies between German and American modern dance also provides a useful way to consider her own “Americanization.” While she retained an emphasis on subjectivity in the creative process, Holm’s concert dance works of the late 1930s began to utilize a more characteristically American approach by addressing specific social problems choreographically. In these dances, Holm theatricalized the modern problems of decadence, alienation, unemployment, escapism, and religious and ethnic persecution. Her dances took on an objectivity that was, indeed, quite different from German modern dance of the 1920s.

Trend

Holm’s masterwork *Trend* (1937), which she created for the Bennington summer festival, put into theatrical form a vast, Spenglerian vision of Western civilization’s decline.⁴¹ Through a series of solo dances, Holm critiqued conformity, hero-worship, mechanization, restless sexual energy, and greed, which she believed were dangerous elements of metropolitan American culture.⁴² She contrasted the solos with group sections, in which thirty-three dancers created powerful mass images of alienation,

struggle, apocalypse, and finally, the promise of a new, healthy community. It was her own, danced interpretation of Spengler's *Decline of the West*. When the dance premiered in New York in December 1937, Holm wrote these program notes:

TREND expresses the rhythm of our Western civilization in which social confusion overlays, but cannot eradicate, the timeless creative forces that persist beneath the surface of contemporary existence.

The hectic drive of meaningless activity and strife, apathy and routine patterns of conformity, in which all the vital forces of life are debased or distorted, lead to ultimate disintegration.

Out of the ordeal itself there emerges an awareness of the essential purposes of living; out of despair a renewed affirmation.⁴³

Trend was a monumental work not only in theme and size, but also in artistic innovation. The first dance to utilize recorded music through new sound technology, *Trend* surrounded its audience members with the harsh, dissonant sounds of an avant-garde sound score by Edgar Varèse.⁴⁴ The performing space was also radically reconceived. For the premiere at Bennington, *Trend* was performed in an armory, which scenic designers Arch Lauterer and his assistant Gerard Gentile transformed with a series of ramps and platforms.⁴⁵ When *Trend* was performed in New York at the Mecca Theatre (now City Center on 55th Street) several months later, Holm and Lauterer seated everyone in the balconies, and transformed the orchestra section into a large performing space, so that everyone in the audience looked down on the dance. This spatial configuration highlighted the three-dimensionality of the dance, an aspect that was further reinforced by Lauterer's lighting design. Following the avant-garde reforms of Adolphe Appia, Lauterer believed that theater lighting should bring out the dynamic form

of the body in the space.⁴⁶ Holm and Lauterer created a mood of “eerie and chilling loneliness”⁴⁷ in the lighting design for the solo sections, reinforcing *Trend’s* theme of alienation in modern life.

Holm later insisted that *Trend* was about America, not Europe.⁴⁸ The first sections represented the problems Holm perceived in modern American society—religious fanaticism, materialism, conformity, hero-worship—and *Trend* seems to have been a projection of her hope that Americans would also go through the kind of cultural “cleansing” that Germany had gone through in the 1910s and 1920s. In January 1938, considering the possibility of another world war, she wrote:

[W]hen suffering, want and danger have levelled (sic) all the values of existence, life then acquires deep significance. Dance then will be the first of the arts to be accepted. Dance will take hold of the new affirmation, carrying both sides: the joy and the sorrow; the tragic and the gay. Suffering is a great eye opener, and makes children mature overnight; nations as well as individuals.⁴⁹

She made these comments very soon after the New York premiere of *Trend*. *Trend* represented her hope for the future—a hope of rebirth out of chaos.

John Martin hailed *Trend* as a landmark in modern dance: a total dance-theater work, in which the movement, set, costumes, music, and lighting fused into a unified artistic statement. He claimed, “*Trend* is far less closely related to ‘concert’ dancing than it is to theatre, that heroic type of theatre which we are accustomed to call tragedy.”⁵⁰ In this we can see Holm’s indebtedness to the innovations of the European theatrical avant-garde of the early twentieth century: she built on Richard Wagner’s concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total art work), on Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht’s use of epic

theatre, and on Adolphe Appia's concept of an abstract stage space. While American modern dance in the late 1920s and early 1930s had customarily been performed in stark concert halls, Holm had worked in grand-scale theater and opera in Europe, and this was evident in her choreography and direction of *Trend*.

The image of *Trend* retained by most observers was the rushing of dancers up and down the steps and platforms that made up the set—a sea of motion, light, and space. After *Trend*, Holm became renowned for her lyrical and kinetic dance phrases. Even though the dancers struck bound, forceful, symmetrical tableaux—as shown in Barbara Morgan's photographic documentation of the work—they also moved with swiftness and flow from one postural statement to the next.⁵¹ Beatrice Seckler, a Humphrey-Weidman dancer, recalled *Trend's* “flowing form” in which “one thing led to the next, and then to the next.”⁵²

In *Trend*, Holm re-imagined German modern dance's use of the primitive trope, particularly Wigman's use of percussion accompaniment. She used the Wallingford Riegger score—performed by conventional instruments such as flute, oboe, and piano—for the first sections of the dance, which represented the degradation of modern Western civilization. In contrast, she used Varèse's scores for drums, sirens, cymbals, tambourines, West Indian bongos, Cuban sticks of hardwood, gourds, Chinese blocks, and maracas for “Assurance,” the section she subtitled “a world primal again.” Varèse's score reminded listeners of the sounds of urban industrial life, so it was not a representation of some primitive past, but an avant-garde imagining of a new kind of future that was at once urban and “primal.” In this way, Holm—like many of her contemporaries—conflated the “ultra-primitive” with the “ultra-modern.”

Trend made evident Holm's continuing investment in the myth of *Gemeinschaft*—the dream of a unified, natural community that would rise out of the ashes of the devastation of modern, Western civilization. At the same time, the circumstances of *Trend*'s production at Bennington College reinforced Holm's membership in American modern dance; with *Trend* and its critical success, Holm became a full-fledged member of the American modern dance leadership.

Dance of Work and Play

Dance of Work and Play (1938) visualized the same themes as *Trend* in a lighter manner. A celebration of local, natural working forms of work and play was set against the physical alienation of rationalized production. Critic Henry Gilfond called *Dance of Work and Play* a “plea . . . for a recapturing of what was once the joyousness of work.”⁵³

George Beiswanger declared:

Hanya Holm has caught the American folk in its moments of pure excitement, exuberance and animal joy. Her dance is master of the mode of the ‘sheer’: sheer pleasure, sheer good spirits, sheer dread, sheer anything you might choose to mention, provided it is all simple and direct and naïve.⁵⁴

The movement style of *Dance of Work and Play* was athletic and individualized.

Photographs of the work show that each dancer did the movement in her own way.

Metropolitan Daily

Metropolitan Daily (1938) was one of Holm's most loved and purely entertaining dances of the 1930s. Each section of the dance portrayed a different department of a daily newspaper: “Financial Section,” “Scandal Column,” “Society Section,” “Want Ads,” “Foreign News,” “Comics,” and “Sports.” *Metropolitan Daily* evoked modern life

through a series of dramatic vignettes. The dancers demonstrated the energy of the stock exchange; the viciousness of “society ladies;” the angst of the depression years; the violence of war; the silliness, escapism, and satire of cartoons; and the competitiveness of sports. Critics found it to be inventive, satirical, poignant, and hilarious.⁵⁵ The quintessential form of modern mass media provided Holm with the perfect vehicle for her social critique.

In 1939, *Metropolitan Daily* had the distinction of being the first modern dance work to be broadcast on American television, by Channel W2XBS of New York City, a National Broadcasting Company affiliate. Unfortunately no film record exists of the live broadcast, but a series of photos from the filming were published in 1939.⁵⁶

Tragic Exodus

Perhaps Holm’s most emotionally engaging work, *Tragic Exodus* (1939) won the *Dance Magazine* Award for choreography for its “uniform excellence as a dance” and “emotional appeal and topical significance.”⁵⁷ *Tragic Exodus* was Holm’s statement about the horrors of the persecution and expulsion of the Jews from Germany, Austria, Poland, and elsewhere, built around images of desperation, suffering, and denial. The original score by Vivian Fine incorporated Jewish folk songs into a score for percussion, piano, and a male vocalist. Margaret Lloyd described it: “while the ominous boom in the percussion suggested the inescapable over-all fireworks of destruction, the singing voice . . . suggested the Semitic chant or the wailing wall.”⁵⁸ The movement material abstracted emotions such as despair and anger. In one section, dancers seemed to be driven by forces external to themselves, perhaps explosions, perhaps something less concrete. According to an unidentified critic, “there was a suggestion of victims falling before

machine gun fire that was ghastly to watch.”⁵⁹ Margaret Lloyd proposed, “The enfilade of sorrowful figures suggested the depths of homelessness that only the Jewish exile could feel. Suggested. Reminded.”⁶⁰

Holm later told Tobi Tobias in an interview that *Tragic Exodus* was more a “dance statement” than a political statement, and she reasserted her view that dance could not be politically effective.⁶¹ “[I]f you take out the drama, as that, and separate it, and try to create the drama, as such—what it means, drama, means not only the actual misery; it means the whole human being. After all, we are human beings. It is not only that we suffer alone . . .”⁶² In other words, she felt that *Tragic Exodus* was a human, dramatic statement, not a political one.

In that way, *Tragic Exodus* echoed Holm’s personal stance on Nazism as well: she empathized with those who suffered at the hands of the regime, but this did not translate into political action. By 1938, she had helped a number of German Jewish refugees in the United States by giving them employment in her school and company: Elsa Rainer worked in the office, Kurt Adler worked as an accompanist, and Irmgard Bartenieff taught classes in Labanotation. However, Holm never made any public condemnation of Nazism, nor did she participate in any anti-fascist activities. During this period, her friend, exiled religion scholar Paul Tillich, who was forced to leave Nazi Germany due to his political stance, was a very outspoken critic of the Nazi regime, and organized a refugee aid society. Holm, in contrast, lived a double life: as an American she lamented the plight of the refugees with artistic works like *Tragic Exodus*, but as a German she never confronted people like Wigman whose decisions and actions provided

support to the Nazis. For the rest of her life, Holm refused to admit that Wigman had collaborated with the Nazi regime.⁶³

Colorado as *Gemeinschaft*

It was in the western, mountain state of Colorado that Holm came the closest to creating a *Tanzgemeinschaft* in the United States. Beginning in 1941, she directed her own summer dance program at Colorado College for forty-two years, maintained a connection to the local community, and developed new audiences for modern dance. She taught courses for amateurs and professionals. Publicity photos for the program featured Holm's dancers leaping over the Rocky Mountains,⁶⁴ again conjuring up her roots in the “back to nature” impulse of *Körperkultur*. The landscape in Colorado inspired her:

What impressed me was two things; color and space. First, the color is so magnificent; it's really a colorful landscape. Then, it has an enormous amount of space because the first thing I was acquainted with were the mountains; going into the mountains, being on the mountains and looking out into the country. Because the mountains come up from a plateau and when you look out, it enormous! Space and space and space. Then, when you go and look at the mountain, that drama which there is is enormous! The weathers which change – every moment is different! The colors change every moment; it's never the same. The people are a different story; people are mixed. The people are farmers and the people are industrialists; the people are leisurely and the people are mountain-bound. But there is something which the mountains do to people: when they live there, and they like to be outside, and they like the openness. There is something which is quite different than the city person who lives within the walls of stones and limitations of canyons and streets.⁶⁵

In Colorado, she choreographed dances to nationalistic music by American composer Roy Harris. These works portrayed the American folk: *From This Earth* (1941) was based on stories of Pennsylvania miners; *Namesake* (1942) was based on Edgar Lee

Master's poems about a mid-Western small town; and *Suite of Four Dances* (1943) was based on American folk songs.⁶⁶

Broadway Musicals: American Folk

In the late-1940s, Holm's search for a genuine American folk culture took an unexpected turn when she accepted an opportunity to work in that quintessential American folk form, the Broadway musical. Holm had struggled to maintain a concert group, and Broadway eventually proved a lucrative and fulfilling creative outlet. She achieved great success with her choreography for *Kiss Me, Kate* (1949), *My Fair Lady* (1956), and *Camelot* (1960).

It is a particular irony of Holm's career that the closer she came to "Americana," the more theatrical her work became. She never did find the American folk culture she sought—Americans who would join the cultural movement of modern dance as a way to reform their everyday lives. Instead, she found that her contribution to American folk culture could be through the theater—first through the concert stage, and then through that most characteristically American form, the Broadway musical. Further, her work on Broadway provided her with the kind of collaborative working community she had wished for since leaving Germany.

Epilogue

Despite many challenges, for the rest of her life Holm maintained her fundamental beliefs in dance as a source of social communion, renewal of vital energies, and a heightened sensation of life. These beliefs rose to the surface in spontaneous

lectures she gave dancers in class or rehearsal, especially during her summer program each year in Colorado. She seemed better able to maintain her deepest values in her teaching than in her choreographies. She told Walter Sorell:

If there is anything in life I am proud of having achieved it is being a dance educator. If for no other reason than . . . that the sacrifice was too great. Who knows about the lonely road I had to take, the deep understanding I had to gather, the utter devotion with which I lived for it. If that isn't religion, then I do not know what religion is.⁶⁷

In 1977, she was asked by the National Dance Association to summarize in one page her philosophy of dance for the periodical *Focus on Dance*.⁶⁸ She used the entire space to write about the benefits of folk dance, as a way to demonstrate the essential attribute of the dancer: the ability “to be with it.” She defined “being with it” as “not letting the moving body mechanically execute the action without the motivating pulse, giving the heartbeat to the action with no pretension but with total participation.” She continued, “A heavenly awareness of being a whole and the experience of oneness gives the satisfaction of genuine presence. Believe what you do and let the doing be with honest communication.”⁶⁹ Holm then provided a list of values—communication, economy, endurance, sparsity, honesty, conviction, belief, standing up for one's actions and facing the responsibility of the chosen behavior—that, she implied, are present in folk dance and should be present in modern dance.

This short piece of writing could be dismissed as a minor divergence at a time when Holm had largely faded from view in the American modern dance community after spending decades choreographing on Broadway. However, I believe that this short credo provides evidence of Holm's unswerving philosophy and belief system. Folk dance was

an example of a communal dance experience, in which each participant senses her or his relationship to the rest of the group. Experiencing, having convictions, demonstrating responsibility to the group, and above all, being engaged and alive—moving from the heartbeat—were the dancer's most sacred tasks.

For the remainder of her long and diverse career, Holm continued to critique mechanization in American dance technique, and she never abandoned her search for joy, renewal, and authentic community rooted in an intuitive exploration of natural, fundamental sources.

NOTES

¹ Martin, *America Dancing*, 171; Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 263.

² New York Wigman School of the Dance, 1934-1935 [brochure], Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136/625, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

³ Hanya Holm, "The German Dance in the American Scene," *Modern Dance*, ed. Virginia Stewart and Merle Armitage (New York: E. Weyhe, 1935) 128.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵ Hanya Holm, "First Draft of the 'German Dance and the American Spirit,'" n.d. Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Holm, "The German Dance in the American Scene," 129.

¹⁰ Holm, "The Dance, the Artist-Teacher, and the Child," 389.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Hanya Holm, "Notes on the American Dance," Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

¹⁵ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 37-38.

¹⁶ See also Randall, "Dance and Locality: Hanya Holms Suche nach einem 'Amerikanischen Geist.'" "

¹⁷ Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, 156.

¹⁸ Dee Reynolds, "A Technique for Power: Reconfiguring Economies of Energy in Martha Graham's Early Work," *Dance Research* 20, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 15.

¹⁹ Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, 177.

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- ²⁰ Foulkes, *Modern Bodies; Dance and American Modernism From Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*, 20-26.
- ²¹ Doris Humphrey, "This Modern Dance," *Dancing Times*, no. 339 (Dec. 1938): 272.
- ²² Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.
- ²³ Reminiscences of Nancy Mason Hauser (1982), on pages 23-24, CUOHROC.
- ²⁴ Holm in Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm" (1975), 102.
- ²⁵ Reminiscences of Claudia Moore Read (1980), on page 67, CUOHROC.
- ²⁶ Franziska Boas, "Some Comments on Dance and Its Development and Some of Its Present Problems" (1948), Box 66, Folder 13, Franziska Boas Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- ²⁷ Sybil Shearer, *Without Wings the Way Is Steep: The Autobiography of Sybil Shearer*; Vol. 1: Within This Thicket (Northbrook, IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation, 2006) 22.
- ²⁸ Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 272.
- ²⁹ Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, 101.
- ³⁰ Hauser in Horwitz and Stockstad, "Voices/Interview with Nancy Hauser."
- ³¹ "Pro Musica—Miss Hanya Holm," radio transcript, Nov. 16, 1936, p. 4 (Hanya Holm Papers, (S) *MGZMD 136, JRDD, NYPL-PA.)
- ³² Martin, "The Dance: Hanya Holm; Artist and Group Make Debut in Bennington Festival."
- ³³ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 74.
- ³⁴ Martin, "The Dance: Hanya Holm; Artist and Group Make Debut in Bennington Festival."
- ³⁵ Eve Gentry, "The 'Original' Hanya Holm Company," *Choreography and Dance* 2, no. 2 (1992): 13.
- ³⁶ Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1949) 161.
- ³⁷ Martin, "The Dance: Hanya Holm; Artist and Group Make Debut in Bennington Festival."
- ³⁸ Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 76.

³⁹ Thelma Cowan, "Dance Group" [press release]. JRDD, NYPL-PA. Based on the content, I believe the press release dates to the 1938-1939 season.

⁴⁰ Holm, "The German Dance in the American Scene," 131.

⁴¹ *Trend* debuted at Bennington in August, and in expanded format in New York in December 1937. For descriptions, see John Martin, "The Dance: A Major Work," *The New York Times* (22 Aug. 1937); John Martin, "New York Debut for Hanya Holm," *The New York Times* (29 Dec. 1937); "Trend: Wherein Hanya Holm Widens Horizons for Modern Dance," *Magazine of Art* (Washington, D.C.) 31, no. 3 (March 1938): 136-143, 184-185; and Gentry, "The 'Original' Hanya Holm Company," 7-39.

⁴² Holm stated that *Trend* was about America, not Europe. (Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm," (1975).

⁴³ The programs for *Trend* are reproduced in Gentry, 27-28.

⁴⁴ Harrison Kerr, "Reproduced Music for the Dance," *Magazine of Art* 31, no. 3 (March 1938): 143, 184-185.

⁴⁵ Arch Lauterer, "Design for the Dance," *Magazine of Art* 31, no. 3 (March 1938): 137, 142-143.

⁴⁶ Lauterer 142.

⁴⁷ Lloyd, *Borzoï Book* 163.

⁴⁸ Holm in Tobias, "Interview with Hanya Holm."

⁴⁹ Holm wrote this in January 1938, in response to questions posed by Robert W. Race of the Publicity Department at Monticello College, Illinois, where Holm would soon perform with her company. Race asked her if the social upheaval of another war would deter or hasten the progress and public understanding of modern dance. (Hanya Holm Papers, Teaching Series, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)

⁵⁰ John Martin, *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1937.

⁵¹ "Hanya Through the Lens; A Portfolio by Barbara Morgan," *The Journal for Stage Directors and Choreographers* 7, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1993): 26-32.

⁵² Beatrice Seckler quoted in Kriegsman, *Modern Dance in America: The Bennington Years*, 165.

⁵³ Henry Gilfond, "Bennington Festival," *Dance Observer* 5, no. 7 (Aug./Sept. 1938): 101.

⁵⁴ George Beiswanger, "The New Theatre Dance," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 23, no. 1 (1939): 51.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 82; John Martin (20 Feb. 1939).

⁵⁶ “Dance for Television,” *Dance* (1939), Hanya Holm clipping file, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁵⁷ Lloyd, *Borzoï Book*, 166-167.

⁵⁸ Lloyd, *Borzoï Book*, 167.

⁵⁹ “Hanya Holm Program is Expressive Drama,” Hanya Holm clipping file, JRDD, NYPL-PA.

⁶⁰ Lloyd, *Borzoï Book*, 167.

⁶¹ Holm in Tobias, “Interview with Hanya Holm,” 129-130.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ In October 1961, Tillich asked Holm in a letter to clarify Wigman’s relationship to the Nazis. She responded: “I don’t know what to say, in reference to your remark as to Mary’s activities. To my knowledge I heard of no activities detrimental to anybody. Rumors have always been flying around even to differing affiliations. I know definitely there is no truth in that. Mary is very untalented in political matters. There are plenty of people who are jealous of her position as an artist and are trying to hurt her wherever they can. I have proof of that. . . Perhaps some day we may discuss reality and fiction of this problem.” (Letter from Hanya Holm to Paul Tillich, October 23, 1961, Paul Tillich Archives, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.) Her discussion of “differing affiliations” refers to Nazi accusations in 1933 that Wigman was a communist. Overall, this statement demonstrates how Holm excused Wigman’s activities under Nazism, by stating that she did not do anything “detrimental to anybody,” and by emphasizing how persecuted Wigman felt.

⁶⁴ Gitelman, *Dancing with Principle: Hanya Holm in Colorado, 1941-1983*, 94.

⁶⁵ Tobias, 154.

⁶⁶ Claudia Gitelman explains that Holm was initially urged by Colorado College President Thurston Davies to collaborate with Harris on nationalistic themes as a way to support the war effort. Claudia Gitelman, “Appropriating America: Hanya Holm and the American Dream,” Society of Dance History Scholars Conference Proceedings (1996), University of Minnesota, 36.

⁶⁷ Holm in Sorell, *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*, 177.

⁶⁸ Hanya Holm, “To Be With It,” *Focus on Dance* 8 (1977): 61.

⁶⁹ Holm, “To Be With It,” 61.

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