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Dancing on the Rim of Dreams: A Variety Show Starring Five California Dance Pioneers in Five Acts With Prelude, Sagas, Historical Asides and Finale

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Dancing On The Rim Of Dreams:
A Variety Show
Starring Five California Dance Pioneers in
Five Acts with Prelude, Sagas, Historical Asides and
Finale

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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December 2011

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University of California, Riverside

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PRELUDE

INCARNATING CALIFIA



"Queen Califia and Her Amazons"; mural in Mark Hopkins Hotel, Room of the Dons, by Maynard Dixon and Frank Von Sloun

What you are about to read is literary burlesque or vaudeville, complete with declamations, asides, set pieces and visual diversion as it tells stories of the rise of modern dance in the West. It is a document as rough and fitting as the history itself, given that modern dance rose up on the back of popular dance hall routines yet defies dance as entertainment, a tension that the art wrestles endlessly. The setting of this literary variety act is exclusively California, not only the birthplace of women-dominated modern dance but the wellspring from which a long and illustrious list of choreographers emerged. Most of these inventive dancemakers, from Isadora Duncan to Twyla Tharp, eventually left,

taking their far-reaching ideas with them to New York or Europe. Once in the arms of the “old world” they were claimed as a product of that world—places of rigid hierarchy and finely calibrated status that took the artists’ genius as their genius, complacent in the belief that it was sheltering the dancers from the uncultured wilderness out of which they had arisen, and civilizing them through the power of high culture.

But what the capitals of the old world long ignored, and still do, is that California’s wildness is fundamental to the genius of the dance it spawned: the West Coast was and remains an untamed source of physical, social and spiritual inspiration that birthed and nurtured radical inventions in movement for more than a century. New York City was and still is the cultural epicenter of U.S. dance, but the seminal founders and visionaries of modern dance—Lola Montez, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, Louis Horst, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Jose Limon, Lester Horton, Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham, Anna Halprin, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Viola Farber, May O’Donnell, Bella Lewitsky, Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, Molissa Fenley, and many others—moved there *from the West*. Collectively they developed a quintessentially American art that upturned the Puritan divide between the mind and the body, reestablished an ancient and sacred link between the physical world and the unseen, made high art out of mongrel elements, and allowed generations of modern dance women a means of self-expression that helped cement their emancipation,

with far-reaching consequences for Western culture. It is an art spawned and shaped by life on the Pacific Rim.

The list of Western dancemakers is long and deserves careful attention. For now I begin my homage by sharing stories of five of these dancer/choreographers and include, at times, my involvement with them or their work. They are artists who have California in their veins, as do I.

Oddballs Move West and Physical Freedom Enters the National Bloodstream

California entered the national bloodstream in the early days of the Gold Rush and quickly became a mythic place ripe for dreamers, religionists, bigamists, outlaws, failures, utopianists, entrepreneurs, ex-slaves and poets. Tales of the West had been flying East for years, but when word of gold spread in 1849 the stories became a siren call and the settlers heeded it in ever-growing numbers. For women, the promise of California was far more than the lure of mining enough gold for a down payment on a plot of land. For the bold who went West, California promised an unfettered world, an electrifying antidote to the physical servitude of women in the East, where lives were constricted in both concrete and intangible ways: vigorous exercise was taboo because the uterus was believed to get depleted with either too much thought or too much movement. Fresh air was looked upon as a threat to female delicacy, as though a kind of prurience lurked in the uncontrolled movement of breezes traveling unimpeded under

dresses and down necklines. And given the understanding of female physiology only a small percentage of young East Coast girls at the time were educated. In fact, girls were lucky if they learned to read and write—the unorganized and largely private school system was heavily geared toward boys. Add the physical bondage of the corset to the picture and the outlines of Victorian-era girl and womanhood in the U.S. become even clearer. Women of all classes who lived in towns and cities



regularly laced themselves into corsets. These were encasements that began above or below the breast and finished at the hips in order to create a wasp-like silhouette. But corsets were in fact a kind of organ-deforming exoskeleton often made of whalebone and so rigid that it made it difficult for even robust women to climb and descend stairs easily or sit and rise from chairs without assistance. Although we think of the heroines of 19th century novels roaming footpaths or going back and forth on city sidewalks with ease, long leisurely walks could be a trial for these weakened, penned-in bodies. Imagine a woman's 110-pound frame standing about 5' 2" tall hauling as many as 11 layers of skirts and petticoats on a waist forcibly reduced to as few as 15 inches. Tied tightly, corsets constricted women's lungs like a strap tightening a bellows, and pelvises were

weighed down with pounds and pounds of heavy fabric that collected dirt along the hem like a vast mop sweeping the floor and earth as the woman moved.

The top of a woman's costume was no better. At the neckline a band of material frequently extended four inches below the shoulders, deepening the image of a smooth continuous breast, like a demure hen's. But this collaring element, while creating an even line, made it impossible for women to raise their arms, "shackling and pinning" their limbs to their sides "like a fowl's wings trussed for the spit."¹ The reality was that Victorian fashion was a sartorial prison that gave women as erotic appeal, like a human version of the curiously hybridized and feeble canaries that Victorian-era birders were so fond of breeding.

If corsets had only imprisoned women, that would have been dire enough. But the fact was that the corsets were disfiguring and torturing them, too. Half the population was made ill by the device, and the corset forced women to retreat to their fainting couches where they reached for cheap and plentiful laudanum, a tincture of 10% opium, to numb the pain of crippled organs. In the most extreme cases, the corset broke the body: ribs punctured organs or the wasp waist squeezed intestines into reed-thin tubes. Women died having voluntarily subjected themselves to a large compression device they cinched to their bodies, a modernized, self-inflicted version of the screws used to torture suspected

witches in the 17th century. It is hardly a surprise that by late in the century a health crisis began to brew with far-reaching significance for the wellbeing of the nation.

Escaping the private prison of daily life in the East, women packed bags and began arduous journeys, climbing aboard wooden Conestoga wagons that sailed across the vast prairie lands of Kansas and Nebraska like schooners, as they were known, or traveling for 120 days or more by sea around Cape Horn to claim a land grant or meet up with a gold mining husband. If these traveling women began in corsets and petticoats or had been fans of tight lacing, these ornaments of the “civilized” East would be abandoned along the trail like so much dangerous baggage. Soon, from a world where their bodies were tightly harnessed, these women entered an unshackled landscape rife with physical challenge, potent sensation and awe-inspiring beauty where to navigate the terrain it was essential to have a free and robust body at your disposal. When they reached the West and were able to exercise in fresh air, California girls and women eagerly strode hills, climbed mountains, opened their arms to the wind, rode fast horses and danced brazenly on ocean beaches, embodying the ancient mythical figures of the Amazon Queen Califia and her consorts of the Island of California.

Movement was a liberator. It had an ethical dimension that Walt Whitman captured when he wrote: “A heroic person walks at his ease through and out of the

custom or precedent or authority that suits him not....”² The rebel as hero moved beyond the chains that bound him and on into the wilderness where authority had no claim. It meant material freedom, too, as gears whirred, paddles turned, bicycles flew, threshers circled, and pictures themselves began to move. It meant liberation from the past through migration, physicalized by the wagon and horse and then by the train. It was given voice by Horace Greeley’s “Go west, young man.” And it was politicized by Manifest Destiny, which made travel West divinely ordained and essential to expanding control over the continent.

Movement as a grand freedom was nowhere as core to a place as it was and is in the West, where the Gold Rush made it seem as though, overnight, a traveling circus of charming oddballs had arrived and set up a vast anarchic show, soon followed by a devoted audience who rushed to join the spectacle. Western movement was technological as well as human, philosophical as well as practical, signaling an embrace of modernity in a drive toward the new as well as a return to nature—heading for the distant hills.³ It was synonymous with progress and dreams of the future but it also embodied a yearning for a return to freedoms of the recent past, when Native peoples were not only unencumbered by modernity but at one with the trees, the water, the animals and the earth. The Golden State’s temperate climate made the landscape an open-air stage on which the new Californians performed as the Ohlone and Coast Miwok had, and women, identifying with the untamed and kinetic environment, used that stage to speak through

the moving body. As they did they began to claim a power, sensuality and autonomy long associated with the iconic Califia, and it led to what we today know as modern dance.

A 120 Years Later

One hundred and twenty years after the initial settling of the West my own first yearnings for freedom consciously kicked in. I was about 10 when I began to plot my North Beach, California beatnik look, and at 11 I tried to emulate a surfer girl on my skateboard. By 14 I was a hippie, and without knowing that thousands of girls and women had taken this course before me, I began to cook up a vague scheme to escape my East Coast fate and run away to California. It would take another decade to materialize, and then, suddenly, the idea stood before me fully formed. The plan asked me to leap and I leapt.

When I boarded a plane at JFK, not a train or wagon as my predecessors once had, it was mid-March and I was alone and 19, heading to Los Angeles. I was scared, electrified, and clarified by my daring, and I lurched into the sky with no solid schedule and not a single place to stay, only a couple of phone numbers, two over-packed canvas bags, and a desperate determination to “check it out”. I had never traveled further west than North Carolina. Even Pennsylvania, once the western perimeter of the United States, was foreign to me. Now I would jump three time zones in six hours.

How my nervous, conservative parents let me go still baffles me. Maybe because my brother had climbed into his panel truck to go to Idaho to do Sierra Club research a

year earlier, they knew I was unstoppable. He and I were the longhairs—he a highly politicized farmer-in-the-making—and I a wannabe dancer/feminist, who'd tossed off my cone-cupped bra at 14 and made Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* my bible at 15, then dressed in overalls and work boots for the next 10 years. Maybe they knew that at least two of their haunted four children were no longer rooted in Connecticut and would move away to pioneer new lives far from a cracked-up family inside Edith Wharton's blue blood New England. Within six months, following de Beauvoir's logic, as so many young feminists did, I took off. I would be living in Southern California and in 9 months in San Francisco, where I found myself in a humane and human-scale city that had the beauty of a European hill town, the melancholic shadows of New York, a strong Japanese ink wash look and a forward impulse, as though the city were the true prow of the massive continent. For the first time, I felt at home.

Strangely, only a few years later, I remembered almost nothing of that first flight to Los Angeles, of landing in California, or the airport, or how I decided to get myself north to Santa Barbara, where my brother's friend Billy, whom I'd known since the playgrounds of New York, went to school. But I can still conjure that first sense of an immense flat expanse of shadowy land and a disarmingly wide-lens sky. Like a movie in early Technicolor, the world was newly, vividly horizontal, and this openness had an

unbuttoned, tie-less quality that can still unsettle the New Englander in me.



New England granite

I had been a late-blooming dancer and thought I was leaving dance behind; I was sure that important dance existed only on the East Coast. In my early days as an East Coast refugee I was still certain that New York was the source, the alpha and the omega of dance and of culture, and those of us on the West were cast offs and has-beens. I looked on the dance scene in California as a pale simulacrum of New York, the way Easterners thought of West Coast painting and music, even though revolutions in all the arts were occurring out West. As time passed and I began to see how much dance actually took place in the San Francisco Bay Area, and across the West in general, I shifted my position a few degrees, but just a few, because still I saw West Coast innovations in light of East Coast supremacy—there was talent but it was Eastern talent that had drifted West. I knew Isadora Duncan, the reputed mother of modern dance, was born in San Francisco and grew up in Oakland, but I told myself that she, like most

Western dancers, left and that that, not her origins, was the important information. The West was a footnote, little more.

But as evidence piled itself at my feet year after year, as I became a West Coaster myself, not a visitor, I finally had an overwhelming shift in perception that was seismic and marked my induction into the honorary Californian club: I saw that the vast majority of modern dance innovators grew up in or had seminal experiences in California, Washington or Oregon. Time passed, and as I began to study some of the dancers' histories and visited their towns, I came to grasp that without the physical freedom, the resplendent nature, the instability of identity, the new freedom for women, the echo of Native American culture and colonial Spain and the utopian vision of a new Eden that lured dancers' families or the dancers themselves West, there would be no contemporary dance as we today know it. In the land of the mythic Amazonian Califia, Queen of the Island of California, women realized their physical freedom, expressed it bodily, and seeded that ancient form of liberation and communication through the dancing body—now in Western form—around the country and then the world.

I also came to see that dreaming and place have central roles in this tale—these choreographers all dreamed of a new way to make the body speak and to bridge the seen and unseen. In order to trace the threads of their dreams and to get a sense of their places, I sought out where the dancers worked or grew up and in some cases, visited those locations, scoured the shelves of libraries and archives, conducted oral histories, and participated in dance events, from workshops to seminars. I set out to celebrate the West as the place where dancers and choreographers have been able to conceive of and

embody ideas of self, space, time, culture and spirit that renew the vision of Califia and her mythic island.

This is what I discovered: modern dance came into being in San Francisco in the heat of deep and broad social upheaval. These upheavals included abolition, suffrage, the Chinese Exclusion Act, not to mention shifting identities of who, exactly, counted as “American”. It entailed wave upon wave of immigration, booms and busts, war and the slippery terrain of who was white and who wasn’t. Shaking up all my Eastern bias, I would learn that the new dance bloomed in cities and it bloomed in relative backwaters, where surprising numbers of homegrown theatricals, operas and music performances, burlesque, skirt dancing and declamations of Shakespearean sonnets were performed. I would have thought that California’s roughneck frontier culture would stick to drinking and whoring and keep its distance from dance and drama. But the gold miners were a motley lot that enjoyed a good performance. In fact, between 1849 and 1851, there were more than 1,000 performances in the region. Actors, dancers and musicians quickly followed the 49ers into the gold mines and the silver lodes, down into the saloons of the Barbary Coast, out onto the farms in Sonoma and Grass Valley, and up into the mountains.⁴ It was not that different from how I was following the countercultural dream.

I also began to understand that as much as the story of the West is rife with violence, wanton cruelty and blindness, it is also a tale of hope and daring, which endures across the decades in many novel forms. The early settlers were those starved for land and a new life, with thousands of people fleeing the crowded and costly East or an

equally crowded Europe, where property was tied up either by the elite or laws of primogeniture. Later newcomers sought other dreams. As the Gold Rush hastened Western expansion, the U.S. government pushed harder to decimate Native Americans population and control the continent, a program cinched when the transcontinental railroad opened in 1869. Supported by the notion of divinely ordained “Manifest Destiny,” which rang with the same righteous certainty as Puritan John Winthrop’s City On A Hill, this territorial imperative gave the still fledgling country the power to harness and assert its international might while taking control over mineral reserves, potential farmland, rivers, and coast line, part of a political calculus to pack the country with non-slave states that would break economic reliance on the South. But something luminous and utopian drove the opening of the West, too--Enlightenment ideals of human rights, inalienable freedoms and common good. Shaped by the confluence of expansion, abolition and women’s suffrage, the seemingly innocent yet wild land of California became a place of radical social experimentation that profoundly altered the 20th century.

From the perspective of the settlers, the West was a relatively blank slate dotted with Catholic Missions and divided into Mexican ranchos that were soon broken up into smaller land holdings. Relations to class, race and ethnicity were fluid, and this freed people to reinvent themselves, or to explore a broader range of possibilities than would have been permissible in the socially fixed East or mid-West. And because women were so outnumbered by men, they were, as David Lavender writes, “independent and readily

divorced their husbands when better replacements appeared.⁵ While it is arguably less fluid than it was even 50 years ago, and migration to California has declined, a sense of possibility still hangs over the land. Its sheer size means that one can move further north, or head east into the desert, or set out to explore unknown environments, something far more difficult to do in the well-settled East. The Mediterranean climate puts the body on the map, demanding that people interact with the elements and be of them, allowing life to move smoothly from indoors to out, with gardens acting as rooms, and, today, decks extending the square footage of kitchens and living areas. Even in rain-soaked Oregon and Washington this physicality is one of the West's greatest treasures. When it pours in the Pacific Northwest, hikers take to the hills or fishermen and women to the rivers to participate in nature's spectacle of green, brown and silver that speaks to our inner bear or deer. Nature has rarely seemed more sentient or more fertile.

In this sentient world, women were suddenly far freer to dance out ideas, feelings, and spiritual yearnings in the hillsides or in the sand dunes with a sensual freedom that had been taboo for centuries. They were no longer necessarily whores if they wanted to move their bodies. And they were no longer necessarily whores with degrees if they wanted to make art out of those movements. The long-divided body and mind were thrust back into deep conversation, mirroring the relationship of the physical and spiritual of the Native peoples the pioneers supplanted. And by reuniting the body, dance gave women a means to redefine female intellect, sensuality and desire and to challenge conventional views of the relationship between the physical and immaterial. The effect was

contagious--the celebration of female expressiveness and physical prowess spread to the streets and homes of women through the mid-Western plains to the New England hills, across the ocean to Europe and east to Russia. East Coast women donned tunics and took lessons in “rhythmic gymnastics” that connected emotion and breath. Russians took up “barefoot dancing” pioneered by Bay Area dance pioneer Isadora Duncan. Physical culture became the rage, and as it did it entered college programs as various dance forms and became a means of cultivating young girls’ self-esteem, health and well being.

The history of dance in two minutes

The cultures of Northern Europe and the U.S. are not dance friendly, so we have forgotten that dancing is so fundamental to human activity that it predates language. To Hindus, the world itself was danced into being by the god Shiva in his incarnation as the Cosmic Dancer, and everything in the universe not only dances—the stars, the seas, the sands, the trees and each alive thing on the planet and beyond—but every animate element has a unique rhythm particular to its physical structure identifying it in this great dance or creation and destruction. This suggests that rhythmically patterned movement has the capacity to leapfrog language and link us to something more fundamental—the vibrations of the universe, whether the forces of the air and spirit or those of the earth and sex, birth and death. Yet it was just such sensual pantheism that the Protestant revolution attempted to eradicate in Europe, and that Puritan settlers to the New World forbade. The early generations of New World immigrants in their mournful black clothes vigorously repressed dance as sexually provocative, especially any dance between men and women. Dancing around the Maypole was forbidden and even music that had no religious purpose

was censured. The underlying target was pleasure, in general, because, they were certain, it was through sensual delight that the devil lured good men and women away from purity and grace and into sin.

Inevitably, though, dance is irrepressible and behaves as a kind of fire that surfaces, like lava, and is too hot and necessary to be extinguished. The Shaking Quakers who veered from their Puritan brethren on many counts took up the vibrational movements used by shamans around the world where the spirit enters the body, moves it in frenzy, and takes possession of the celebrant. When the indentured Irish arrived to work the plantations alongside African slaves, they brought their reels and jigs and mingled them with the circle dances of the Yorubans, Congolese and Ashanti, who carried in their bodies a host of rich dances of contest, initiation, propitiation and play. Even though slave owners ardently repressed African dances as wild and lewd, and drums were outlawed because they could “talk”—their rhythms equal to what scientists liken to an early telegraph system. African’s culture seeped deeply and irrevocably into white society to become American culture. It arrived through plantation celebrations, like the Corn Husking, where slaves entertained whites through the dance called the Chalk Line, later known as the Cake Walk (where the winner “took the cake” as a prize, an old Irish dance contest tradition). In these and other mandatory entertainments slaves, seriously and in parody, modified white music by injecting a swinging or multi-tempoed rhythm. Over time African’s dances morphed into sultry barefooted shuffles, high-steps on one leg, and subdued obeisance to the earth, taking form as the counter-clockwise Ring Shout, as tap dance, the Black Bottom, the Lindy, the Big Apple, the Shag, the

Buzzard and all their descendants and cousins. The ingenious and ever-creative adaptations, and the example of Native American chanting and barefooted, ritual footfalls, became a deep river of earth-bound dance that mingled with waltzes, reels, jigs and polkas to evolve into distinctly American forms.

The history of the Barbary Coast in two more minutes

The West quickly evolved into a cauldron of cultural, racial and also aesthetic mixing. In San Francisco by 1870 one could find polkas, jigs, reels, mazurka, and the waltz, along with burlesque forms like the French Can-Can—a hybrid of the polka and a quadrille--and various Latin forms like the fandango. People from the prairies brought their barn dances while newcomers from Russia brought their hopaks, the Italians their tarantellas and the Mexicans their Huapangos. San Francisco overnight became a booming metropolis that was in a constant state of radical evolution. Before the Gold Rush the metropolitan population numbered 850 people. By 1850 it was at more than 25,000.⁶ In another decade it would boast the largest port in the U.S. and more than 56,000 inhabitants. The population would have been even greater had not thousands died of cholera en route to Eden.

The riverfront area of San Francisco—the Barbary Coast—was a wild, dangerous and often ingenious neighborhood of crime and entertainment. The bay itself by 1849 had only a single wharf and was clogged with hundreds of ships that were stranded for lack of crew, because everyone was panning for gold. As sailors disembarked from one ship they were frequently drugged and hauled aboard an outgoing ship, awaking only long past the

Golden Gate. A year after the first invasion of dreamers, San Francisco had about 25,000 mostly male residents in what Herbert Ashbury calls a “municipal mushroom” that had few streets and, during the rainy season, those that existed became veritable sinkholes that swallowed up carts and animals and came close to consuming the drunkest of the many drunken men. The mud at Clay and Kearny streets, in the heart of the town, at length became so deep and thick that a way posted this sign: ‘THIS STREET IS IMPASSABLE; NOT EVEN JACKASSABLE.’”⁷

Lodging houses were often little more than dormitories with bunks attached to walls, and for the pleasure of such meager comfort, men paid as much as \$15 a night. Private lodgings, to be prepaid, cost \$200-300 a week. A pail of water was \$1 and a quart of whiskey \$40.⁸ I compare that to the \$40 a month I paid in the Haight for a large, bay-fronted room with a fireplace, free water and an indoor toilet. In addition, these places were infested with lice, flies and other insects, and the rats began to vie for dominance, attacking not only dogs of similar size but sleeping 49ers, going after noses, ears and cheeks. A far cry from Eden.

John Williamson Palmer in 1892 captured the multicultural free-for-all when he listed who, exactly, inhabited this miserable dreamscape. It was, he wrote,

...mostly men, young or of middle age...British subjects, Frenchman, Germans, and Dutch, Italians, Spaniards, Norwegians, Swedes and Swiss, Jews, Turks, Chinese, Kanakas⁹, New Zealanders,

Malays, and Negroes, Parthians¹⁰, Medes¹¹, and Elamites¹², Cretes, Arabians, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia and Cappodadocia,¹³ in Boston and New Orleans, Chicago and Peoria, Hoboken and Hackensack.” Judge Peter H. Burnett declared that the discovery of gold in California “produced a singular state of things in this community, unparalleled, perhaps, in the annals of mankind. We have here in our midst a mixed mass of human beings from every part of the wide earth, of different habits, manners, customs, and opinions, all, however, impelled onward by the same feverish desire of fortune-making. But perfectly anomalous as may be the state of our government is still more unprecedented and alarming. *We are in fact without government*,--a commercial, civilized, and wealthy people, without law, order or system.¹⁴

It quickly became a state made up mostly of men, leaping the phase of “territory” altogether. Delegates to a constitutional convention in Monterey, who were predominantly miners, people of substance—which meant the mostly Mexican ranchero class, including Northern California Mexican military commander Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo—an Irishman, a Scot and a Frenchman, and quite a few who spoke no English. Johann Sutter was also there.

When the convention concluded on October 13, the delegates had addressed a number of issues, including slavery (California would be a free state), suffrage (the vote would be given only to white males, although Indians or their descendants could be granted the right by special acts of the legislature), the eastern boundary (the border would not extend into Utah, women's property (married women could hold property separate from their husbands—a holdover from Mexican law) and dueling (it would be outlawed in California).¹⁵

This didn't mean that there weren't abuses leveled against Mexican and Chinese miners—there were. A “foreigners” tax was imposed on non-English speaking miners, for example, and plenty of miners were bigoted or resented the imperturbable ways of the hard-working, frugal Chinese miners. Yet because California stood outside the North/South dispute about slavery, it made it virtually a new country. It was already a multicultural, albeit predominantly male, land and by being accorded property rights, married women had a rare degree of social power from the outset. When California was admitted into the Union it happened with spirited iconoclasm, and reflected the cheeky upstart nature of the burgeoning West Coast. This spirit has defined California ever since.



Mens' dance

One of the effects of the early expanding, varied and improvisatory single sex society was that, for the first time for most, men had to do women's labor as well their own, and this may have helped create in these pioneers a new appreciation for women's toil. Another outcome, as Mel Brook's American lampoon of the West *Blazing Saddles* so hilariously spoofs, was that the miners organized dances together, with one half the men taking the role of women by draping their heads in kerchiefs. When an actual woman appeared on the scene she became the belle of the place, whether or not she would draw attention elsewhere. While Mexican men brought along their families to the mining camps, the majority of the first women to arrive in the region were the prostitutes who followed the men's trail like hounds pursuing pheasants, leading to this once well-known limerick:

The miners came in forty-nine

The whores in fifty-one

And when they got together

They produced a native son.¹⁶

Next came the women who would be the barmaids and cooks, and in no time, concert saloons, saloons, gambling parlors, bagnios, dancehalls, and melodeons (they had small reed organs) sprouted like another form of mushroom. Women made a fortune doing laundry, cooking and caring for the miners, and this gave them the option to remain independent and prosper if they chose. The encampment at the Yerba Buena cove, originally referred to as Sydney-town, began as "a straggling line of tents, slab shanties,

and adobe huts... a horseshoe-shaped indentation in the western shore of the Bay of San Francisco....”¹⁷ It offered every form of mayhem and revelry, which grew more varied when the women poured. Women paraded their wares, brawled, drank and worked hard to separate men from their money.

The places called melodeons allowed no women customers inside in part because the shows were made up of bawdy singing and dancing and occasionally “obscene posing” by “finely formed females,” but also to ensure that the women on show were the only attraction for the paying customers.¹⁸ The Can-Can—a titillating mashup of a quadrille and the polka based on circling leg kicks made naughty by raised and swishing skirts—was the dance *du jour* in many dancehalls. In competing halls you might find the fandango in one of the Mexico owned “fandango houses” where a musician played a guitar and dancers riffed on sultry gypsy dance. In one dive, the dancers’ costumes consisted of red jackets, garters and slippers, a state of dishabille that caused pandemonium when overexcited patrons besieged the dive. The Dionysian power of the environment channeled itself through their bodies, and even as the city settled and a more conservative structure of families and civic government settled over it, eros still pulsed in the air, the sea and the ever-shifting earth.

Most of the time, the rowdy, leggy and prurient brand of dance in booming San Francisco was little more than sinuous stripping and the line between sex and dance was a fairly thin one. In the more respectable establishments, dancers performed skirt dancing, which was a confection of ballet-inspired steps, jigs, hops and poses with skirts

flying. Before long, in between the strip show and the ballet, another form began to emerge, and an Irish femme fatale posing as a fallen Spanish aristocrat would lead the way.

ACT ONE

LOLA MONTEZ, THE WOMAN WITH A CIGAR, A BEAR AND A SPIDER

DANCE



One of the most renowned purveyors of this new form was Lola Montez. Montez was one of the great dancer/courtesans of the 19th century who created a theatrical bridge between movement entertainments on the one hand and the future “concert dances” that emerged a few decades later. She did it through a pastiche of the tarantella and the fandango blended with a tempestuous Irish temper, as though embodying a suppressed Anglo yearning for fiery passion and wild emotional displays. Once she survived the trip through Panama’s malarial jungles to reach Northern California, she spun out her renowned Spider Dance to audiences in San Francisco, Sacramento, Nevada City and Grass Valley. Dancing a re-imagined self in a wild land still being given definition and shape, Lola helped lay the ground for artistic innovations to come.

Born Eliza Rosana Gilbert in Sligo, Ireland in 1821, she found a way to push non-classical dance out of the brothel or the dancehall and toward the legitimate and the artistic. But she needed a nom-de-plume, an alibi, and fierce drive to carve out territory in the narrow borderlines that stood between respectability and prostitution. As was true for so many women who took to the stage, necessity drove Eliza into dance. By the age of 21 she passed herself off as the daughter of exiled Spanish aristocrats, and with what is described as an almost tigress-like appeal she fashioned a stage name for herself that would signal exotic romance and respectability. It was the magic that let her live with Amazonian impunity outside the restrictions imposed on women yet a long way from the gutter. Although she formulated her dance in England she is a vital archeological link to modern dance, and in Northern California she found a world of compatriots, people like herself who had refashioned their identities and lives, tried to get rich, tried harder to hold on to those riches, always scheming as well as dreaming. She was a schemer par excellence, but more important she embodied the free, successful woman who danced on stage without shame. She found fertile ground in Northern California, and the newly rich paid handsomely to see her perform. They saw a fabricated woman whose great discipline and fearlessness, intuitive genius and creative deception allowed her to escape the fate of a bourgeois, obedient wife with neither voice nor independent means. The body, like the West itself, became a fresh landscape on which she, like the ticket holders who came to see her, could write new scripts for repurposed lives.

Born to an ensign in the army and a mother who was the illegitimate daughter of a notable Anglo family of Cork, Ireland, Eliza experienced a relatively privileged if brief

childhood in colonial India until her father died. 'I always went barefoot...my mind had never concerned itself with anything other than the strange and surprising spectacle that met the eye at every step in East India.'¹⁹ Surrounded by a luxuriant world of plants, humans and animal life in Calcutta, she had a physical freedom unheard of for a Western girl of the middle class, and this period of physical freedom and natural spectacle seemed key to her expressive freedom as a dancer. But this edenic period ended when her father suddenly died of cholera and her mother swiftly remarried. With a new husband, Eliza's mother decided to ship the inconvenient 5-year-old back to England, and she went to live with her stepfather's kind conservative relatives whose job it was to make sure that Lola received a decent English education. For 10 years she attended the all-girls school called the Aldridge Academy, in the famous Georgian Roman spa town of Bath, with its elegant Georgian buildings, where she spent the longest period of time she was to spend in any single place. There she not only learned to dance, play the piano, sew and draw as all respectable middle class girls were to do, but she studied French and Latin. During the week, the girls were required to speak French and were only allowed to talk in English on the weekend.

When Eliza's mother returned after a decade of total neglect, she landed in Bath to tell her young daughter that she had arranged for her to marry a man in his 60s, presumably in exchange for a large sum of money. Feeling doomed, Eliza took cover in the protection of 30-year-old Lieutenant James, a paternal figure who had sailed from India on the same ship as Lola's mother—and had possibly been the mother's lover. If so,

James zeroed in on the young beauty, and fled to Ireland with Eliza. Absconding with a minor was crime, though, and respectable James realized he had no choice but to marry the wild young girl or face social, legal and economic ruin.

The marriage foundered almost immediately. James was not only boring but a brute, and everything unraveled when the couple went back to India together and Eliza's mother refused to offer her daughter shelter or protection. As the walls of social constraints closed in on her, the teenager found herself left with two desperate choices: a desolate life as the staid wife of an older abusive and banal man, or the dangerous freedoms of a free, sensual woman. As a rebellious, strong-willed girl, she chose danger, left India for England, and en route blatantly cavorted on board with another lieutenant, a man named Lennox. She was soon sued for divorce, the first in a mythic life of scandal and fame.

For a woman in Victorian England, scandal could easily reduce a woman to prostitution or suicide, a theme of the era that crops up in novel after novel. For Eliza, scandal meant being a teacher or becoming a governess were no longer options for a woman of her dubious moral standing, even if she were cut out for such a life, and she wasn't. Scrambling for a means to support herself, her first dream was to go on stage as an actress, but she had a thin voice that had no power to carry in a theater, so she was told to go into dance instead. Had dance been her only calling card history might have swallowed her up, since all descriptions of her Spanish/Italian inventions portray a thin concoction that derived its power from her stage persona more than the actual movement. But she had other skills that made her artistry sizzle and these opened doors of all kinds.

She was “the nail that stands above the others” that the world tries to hammer down, but Lola was an Amazonian she-cat as adept with a pistol as a whip, as well as an able horsewoman, willing to take on any man who challenged her own authority.”²⁰

She had an Amazon’s sense of power, independence, and entitlement, and unabashedly presented herself as men’s equal, if not their superior. While she knew how to flatter men’s vanity, and was a master at manipulating them with her charms, it was always to serve herself and to do it well, with style and preferably nice jewels and good accommodations. It meant that she had the audacity to write the rules as far as was possible for a beautiful, well-educated woman in the depths of Victorian society. Besides, her sense of theater was uncanny: like a 21st century actress, she understood that scandal was publicity, and publicity meant audiences, and they would have to pay well for the privilege of watching her perform.

With the dancing bug in her head Lola traveled to Spain at 22, and after only four months of Spanish dance training she had formulated a persona, a set of dances, and a story that would be embodied by the “Spider Dance” she brought back to England: no longer Eliza Rosana Gilbert she was Maria Dolores de Porrís y Montez, aka Lola, the proud and impoverished daughter of Spanish aristocrats ruined by a civil war that had forced them into exile. With her abundant black hair, pale skin, sharp blue eyes, beautiful teeth and fiery temperament, she was accepted as the romantic Spanish heroine, despite the fact that pictures and illustrations reveal a pretty Celtic face, handsome, but no prettier than Isadora Duncan’s. But like Isadora, Lola is described by all who saw her as

bewitching, and if all the facts didn't quite match up about her pedigree, it didn't matter to the majority of her public. The untamed femme fatale with a keen and wily mind was fearless. She chastised crowds when they doubted her authenticity or behaved rudely, and in her "real life" confrontations with her audiences, she created a kind of 19th century version of a reality show, adding illusions of accessibility and authenticity to her repertoire. While she and all the other women doing their versions of the Spider Dance or other "foreign" dances belonged to the burlesque tradition, Lola pushed the form out of the realm of the "skirt dancing" and nudged it toward art dance by using it as a means of self-expression. To complete the transformation of the form, though, it would require the aesthetic and kinesthetic innovations of Isadora Duncan 40 years later.

As a performer Lola cannily sidestepped what she lacked—technique, the hallmark of classical ballet—and steered clear of the tricks that skirt dancers used, which was to either reveal a great deal of flesh or make tantalizing pretense of doing so. Lola suggested sex, and clouded it in aristocratic exoticism, balancing the difficult act of being both titillating and decorous. One reviewer found the Spider Dance to be the essence of the inflamed soul of the Spaniard:

...The variety of passion which it embodies—the languor, the abandon, the love, the pride, the scorn—one of the steps which is called death to the tarantula and is a favorite *pas* [italics mine] of the country, is the very poetry of avenging contempt—cannot be surpassed. The head lifted and thrown back, the flashing eye, the fierce and protruded foot which crushed the insect, make a subject for the painter which would scarcely be easy to forget.²¹

She infused her stage performance with drama and spirit, action as well as feeling, with large quantities of well-timed passionate posturing. This allowed her access to respectable, sometimes even hallowed, concert halls as opposed to burlesque or tawdry establishments, a move Isadora Duncan would insistently follow. And while it is difficult to assess her dance now—the mostly purple-hued accounts of her performances give the reader little palpable description of what she did but instead praise or rail against her authenticity—one critic wrote of a concert in London: “Her gesture is little more than a gesture and attitude, but every gesture and attitude seems to be the impulse of passion acting on the proud and haughty mind of a beautiful Spaniard....Her dancing is what we have always understood Spanish dancing to be—a kind of monodrama—a representation of various emotions succeeding each other with great rapidity, but with coherence and consistency.”²²

These “monodramas” of Lola’s—monologues of the body—are also the first signs of the new, shocking art form, modern dance, that would emerge a few decades later, first as a solo art and only later as an ensemble form. Lola began the process of launching this hybrid dance by transforming the exotic into an expressive interpretation that mixed Spanish and Italian styles with her own improvisation. Rather than a condescending travelogue of foreign places, as so much “ethnic” dance was and still can be, Lola used the story of a downtrodden Spanish aristocrat ousted from home by disaster to channel her own veiled story—she the illegitimate granddaughter of a wealthy Irishman, the abandoned child and wife abused by the military husband, forced to fend for herself.

With great passion and sufficient persuasion she was able to convincingly refurbish her own hardships, and despite limited skill she helped carve out a new niche between the realm of sheer entertainment and the more lasting realm of art. Her instinctive genius was to know how to ride that border as successfully as she rode the gender edge. While it would be another 40 years before Isadora completed the task of creating a wholly modern dance, Lola made some necessary pioneering steps.

She also accumulated an Olympian list of men as lovers as she progressed across Europe, a lineup that included Franz Liszt, Alexander Dumas père, and King Ludwig of Bavaria, where she became the woman behind the throne, in place of Ludwig's wife. Ludwig, in particular, adored Montez, finding compassionate intellectual companionship more than erotic satisfaction in their relationship, and he named her Countess of Landsfield to give her the social standing she so yearned for yet scorned. Eventually he even ceded his crown after she incited insurrection as the libertine power behind the Bavarian throne, hated by conservative Bavarians. But she also broke Ludwig's heart, being a fickle, and ultimately untrustworthy and gold-digging lover. This made her a perfect West Coast Argonaut, because on the West Coast she found herself among a world of aliases, fakes, fictions, dreamers and schemers, and was, on a real level, finally among a whole small nation of like-minded outsiders scrabbling for a piece of dream. Despite some racial discrimination, she found that

California was close to being a classless society, or at least a society in which an individual's status depended on little beyond demonstrated abilities and available cash... Whether she arrived with the

idea of becoming a part of this world—in which all men were equal and women were respected as partners and not playthings—she had been in California for less than a month when the newspapers reported on her plans to settle in there.²³

One of her first acts was to approach the dashing Irish-American Joseph Duncan, auctioneer of fine art wares, literary man, publisher, and future father of Isadora Duncan. Montez needed to sell some of her extraordinary jewelry, and in the process is rumored to have had an affair with Duncan—she seems to have found charming, good-looking and accomplished men fairly irresistible. Given that they were both charismatic gadabouts the rumor not only is credible but has poetic resonance, since Isadora would become heir to Lola's self-invention and fearless purpose.

If selling her jewelry meant that Lola needed money, cash came quickly: although she had nothing preplanned, she booked the American Theater, one of the city's finest at the time with a capacity then of 3,000 people (now called American Conservatory Theater and in the Geary Theater near Isadora's first San Francisco first home). Since everything from beer to brooms cost a small fortune in the city, so did theater tickets: Lola's audiences paid \$5 a head (about \$120 in 2011 dollars), and with three different programs she tried to ensure that the same people would feel compelled to return. In her first week alone she brought in \$16,000. Nothing if not a savvy programmer, she began with a play, moved on to the "Spider Dance," and concluded with an autobiographical tale of her time as Ludwig's lover, *Lola Montez in Bavaria*. One reviewer suggested that

the “Spider Dance” might be unsuitable for respectable ladies, since Lola scrambled around in search of “the spider” “rather higher than was proper in so public a place.”²⁴ But no one seemed very shocked by either the woman or the theatricals she put on. Her stomping, thrashing, body-searching and haughtily coiling arms reflected back the social layer cake being made in Northern California—trappings of wealth laid on top of a salty, wild, messy and uncensored ground. San Franciscans were already accustomed to a parade of outlandish characters, so that Lola, even on a walk down Market Street with her leashed pet bear, one of an already endangered species, fit in well—San Francisco was a place where goats were put on stage and bears were lashed to poles outside dancehalls. Wild nature and pleasure went hand in hand.

Soon Lola headed out on the “theater circuit,” going north, first to the flat stretches of Sacramento, where she was poorly received, then to the mining town of Grass Valley where the Sierra air infects the foothill town with a crisp brilliance and sun shines with glittering ferocity. Despite the endless clamor of the ore-crushing machines, Lola decided to stay. She had a small cottage, two pet bears, an abundant garden, and plenty of successful and eccentric friends. Although she was there only for two years, it was the first time in her adult life that she got to live the life of relatively ordinary woman. She used her talents to help train the next generation: she coached dancer Lotta Crabtree, who would become “Miss Lotta, the San Francisco Favorite” and share Lola’s love of cigars. Lotta, a generation younger, was an even bigger success than her predecessor.

Montez as a self-created artist became a living dare to others—can women of intelligence, courage, charm, artistry, drive and enormous will succeed far beyond the constricted role conventionally allowed to them? She continually defied scorn and ridicule to achieve success on her own terms as a dancer, actress, lecturer and author. While she never called herself a suffragette and never seemed to care overtly about other women’s plight until the end of her life when she helped rescue “fallen” women, she exhorted everyone, women as well as men, to dare to live their dreams when she wrote in her how-to book, *The Arts of Beauty: or, secrets of a lady’s toilet: with hints to gentlemen*:

TO
ALL MEN AND WOMEN
OF EVERY LAND
WHO ARE NOT AFRAID OF *THEMSELVES*
WHO TRUST SO MUCH IN THEIR OWN SOULS THAT
THEY DARE TO STAND UP IN THE MIGHT OF THEIR
OWN *INDIVIDUALITY*
TO MEET THE TIDAL CURRENTS OF THE WORLD
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
BY THE AUTHOR²⁵

ACT TWO

ISADORA DUNCAN, THE BAREFOOT DANCER OF OAKLAND

If my art is symbolic, it is symbolic of the freedom of women.

—Isadora Duncan



As I comb
Library Archives, scan
paintings available
archive, and witness a
and promising frontier
paths Lola might have
the 1880s, San
transformed from the
settlement of Lola's
to resemble an Italian

through the Bancroft
the pictures and
through the online
vision of a beautiful
unfold I look for the
traveled. Already by
Francisco has
rough makeshift
era to a city beginning
hill city—a tiny Rome

with anywhere from 11 to 42 hills, depending on the definition of a hill—while the East Bay of Berkeley and Oakland were a contrapuntal play of open expanse and coastal mountain range. From nearly every small rise in San Francisco or the East Bay you can spy the bay stretching out like an ink wash or a 50's painting by Richard Diebenkorn in a

still plane of elegant celadon, some days a rich chalky green and others a bewitching but calm blue with echoes of emerald and black.

If, as people often say, San Francisco is jewel-like, compactly vertical and European, then the East Bay is best described as horizontal and Asian—a broad stretch of flatlands with undulant rises leading to the curving accent of the Berkeley and Oakland wing of the Coast Range, the ever-shifting product of the Hayward Fault at their base. Between them is the bay. “As a geologic feature, the bay is the youngest thing in sight— younger than the rivers that feed it,” John McPhee writes, and that is because the Bay is the consequence of retreating Ice Age.²⁶ And as the ice pulled back, the sea rose, and mountaintops turned into islands-- Alcatraz, Angel, Yerba Buena and the Farallons, and the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers that once emptied into the ocean 50 miles further out now are “drowned” together at the mouth of the Golden Gate where the Bay meets the ocean.

Today the 47 square mile San Francisco metropolis of predominantly low-rise neighborhoods is sophisticated, provincial, radical, self-impressed, youthful, idealistic and wild. The East Bay is a contradictory mix of easy going, violent, brainy, gritty, reactionary, hard working, poor, green, international, homey, sanctimonious and visionary. Viewed from a topographical map, San Francisco is a spit of land that angles east like the long curved head of a dinosaur, while the East Bay is the opened lower jaw holding the San Francisco Bay in its mouth. Both landmasses are part of the same geological province, but the San Francisco ripples with hills and is often enshrouded with

fog that snakes around its highest peaks then cloaks the avenues below. Although it is a mere eight miles away, the East Bay is warmer often by 10 degrees, but it is also protected from the blistering heat of the suburbs by the steep spine of hills, which snares the fog, locks it into El Cerrito, Berkeley and Oakland, and ensures cool nights and cloudy mornings. San Francisco is frequently suspended in cold mist while the sun shines to the east, and ocean air penetrates its many nooks and crannies. These seemingly minor local distinctions produce the kind of city-state loyalties that one still finds in Italy's medieval towns like Sienna and Parma, where, for the locals, the cities have almost nation-like individuality and distinction while for everyone else they are variations on a single theme. In California, quite a few of these nearby variations arise from the welter of microclimates that define the land. Patterns of wind and convection keep alive the constant flux of hot and cold air, and sunny and cloudy days, and the physical depressions and hilly undulations either protect or expose those zones.

Newcomers in the 1800s planted the East Bay hills with an array of non-local but perfectly compatible specimens that led the region to resemble the landscape of the Sierra foothills more than the original sweeping grasslands of the Ohlone peoples. Today the cityscape of the East Bay is a jumble of houses, apartments, vegetation, phone poles and lines and streetlights. The area's oddball individualism and communitarianism, and the ebbs and flows of development, are visible everywhere. Unlike in San Francisco, where Victorian bayfront design can impinge on the plans of even the most avant-garde architects, the East Bay's aesthetic is freewheeling, even though it imagines itself having a unified style--when you glance down almost any street this idea is made laughable. On

a single residential road a Cape Cod-style house sits next to a brown shingle next to a stucco bungalow beside a glass and steel Corbusier-inspired box. Nostalgia for Europe or the East Coast, hybrid styles, follies, cheesy apartment blocks and futuristic experiments scramble together to make a visually chaotic and always fascinating plurality. Such pluralism offers a feeling of uniformity in the absence of uniformity—whatever your preferences are, they’re okay—until, that is, someone tries to build something that isn’t familiar. Then the taste police sweep in and protest. The population is Asian, white, Native, black, Latin, Southeast Asian, African, South American—the East Bay seems a magnet for an international assembly of peoples as diverse as you would find in a city of millions. This was true in microcosm when Isadora Duncan was a child.

Isadora Duncan was born Angelica Isadora Duncan on the steep down slope of Taylor Street at Geary in the Nob Hill section of San Francisco in 1877. It was the year before the city’s renowned California Street cable car opened for business, and that same year the Gilded Age, as Mark Twain dubbed it--on the surface it dazzled but below was base metal--officially began. Almost overnight San Francisco had become a booming, low-slung, treeless, rich and anarchic outpost of empire constructed largely of wood and brick, with the glistening bay visible from most parts of the hilly city. Streets were set with cobblestones, sidewalks were elevated slightly above the street, and in the commercial districts the eye was bombarded by a chaos of hand-painted signs announcing the offerings within—rooms for 50cents, Boots and Shoes, Bargains on Watches and Diamonds. During the year before Isadora arrived, the dancer’s family lived

on the hill in a posh mansion close to the main thoroughfare, Market Street. While the neighborhood was handsome, it was many blocks from South Park, one of the rises near the Bay where the richest San Francisco families lived around an idyllic oval park, reminiscent of a Greenwich Village enclave. Before Isadora was old enough to taste fortune, though, her father was wanted for embezzlement and the family was in tatters. Alone, her mother would move the children to the less expensive town of Oakland.

It is late afternoon on a Sunday, with a sky a mix of bruised blues and salmon pinks, and fog hovers out by the Golden Gate, behind which the dark hills of Marin loom. While the Duncans would have been able to see the inky Mount Tamalpais from this spot in 1877, now towering apartments obstruct the scene. I head north on Taylor, deep into the Nob Hill neighborhood, then realize that I made a wrong turn. I head downhill and find that the Duncans lived along the southerly tail of Taylor at the corner of Geary in what, today, is the edge of the sleazy Tenderloin and the lip of the theater district. The Duncan's house is long gone and supplanted by a bland, tan brick residential hotel with San Francisco's requisite bay windows. I scour the building for clues, try to make out who lives there now, and wonder if any of the residents know that a single-family house where a radical dancers was born haunts their apartment block. I wander back north a bit and discover that the dark little alley is Isadora Duncan Lane, and on the building a plaque reads:

Isadora Duncan

1875-1927

Daughter of California Pioneers

America's Genius of the Dance

Was born on this site.

She created a new art form,
Liberating the dance as an expression
Of life. She believed and taught that
“No education is complete without the
dance” since “movements are as
eloquent as words.” “The dancer of
the future...shall dance the freedom
of woman...the highest intelligence
in the freest body”...”the Dance
will not belong to a nation but to
all humanity.”

Tucked at the end of the dark, Victorian street is the Adelaide Hostel and Hotel from which no one enters or leaves. I assume its youthful travelers are still out for the day, hiking the Golden Gate Bridge or combing some of the edenic 1,017 acres of Golden Gate Park that William Hammond Hall designed in 1871, against the advice of Central Park’s designer and noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Across the street, with strange irony, stands the Paris Massage and Sauna Parlor. I can almost hear Isadora laugh in a complex mix of pleasure and indignation, for there, in the window of the establishment, are two Grecian plasters of softly shaped, nubile young women, one clutching a drape to her rounded breasts, the other having covered her hips so she can reach for her foot without revealing her genitals, as though she had recently finished bathing. These are precisely the kind of supple strong figures that Isadora sought out in Paris at the Louvre when she arrived in 1900, then at the British Museum in London. And behind the statues is a deep red velvet curtain, and this recalls the simple theater drapery that Isadora used as a theatrical innovation. In contrast to the emancipated dancer who was as infamous for her out of wedlock children and many lovers as she was for her luscious naturalism on stage, the massage parlor tableau is as funny as it is depressing. It

certainly revels in the images of sensual classicism that Isadora embodied, yet the massage parlor uses those very images with sentimentality to reinforce women's place as handmaidens and sexual servants, mocking what Isadora championed—physical freedom for free women and the beauty of the draped body as a conduit of liberated sensuality, not servile or exhibitionistic sexuality.

San Francisco's theater row is now at the family's former doorstep, a change in the neighborhood that Isadora would probably appreciate. Had it not been for theatrical directors like Augustin Daly, in whose Shakespeare company Isadora performed, she might never have made it to Europe, where an enthusiastic public embraced her dancing and made a career possible. She might also have found it ironic that now the city elite is ensconced not in South Park but nearby her family's old house at the top of the hill, having shifted to Nob Hill once the cable car was installed, which let them get building materials and goods to the peak. Before, not even mules could safely make the climb. Today little of Victorian Nob Hill still stands—what wasn't razed by the 1906 quake was swept away that same night by a fire that blazed across the city. Yet it seems that it is just these kinds of calamitous absences, and the new structures created to fill those empty spaces, that Isadora's remarkable story is rooted.

Later that day I click on Youtube and find this marvelous fragment: Long ago, in a wooded area of Paris, an elegant woman is dancing.²⁷ The film clip is brief and choppy but it shows the mover wearing a dark dress draped with a long diaphanous white scarf, one that crosses both at the front and the back and seems to make the air froth as she

moves. This woman glides before a cluster of suited men, her body strong and effortless, her arms opening wide with poised and generous ease as her swan-necked form dips and turns. This is the only extant film of Isadora Duncan dancing, and the image is as haunting as a phantom exuding a sweetness we can't completely grasp. I find myself yearning to see more--how this elegant woman glided across a large stage, held her audiences spellbound. I watch the clip again and feel that her absence mysteriously amplifies her presence. From a mere 5 seconds she communicates a potent, naturalistic but elusive magic: we see a charismatic figure who floats as Botticelli's Venus might, an image that her mother hung in the house and that became a motivating image throughout Duncan's childhood—a Renaissance woman modeled after the Greek and Roman goddess of love and as strong-bodied as the goddess Aphrodite, held up by the winds of passion. We grasp the power Isadora holds over a circle of Victorian suited men who have casually gathered in a grove as part of some larger event. We see her utter assuredness as she does a turn about for their behalf. And we feel how she gives nothing away as they admire her, how wholly in command of her art and self she is. This moment offers a window into the artistic and existential power of Isadora, a woman not only at home in her body and on stage but deeply confident in a world of men.

While there is no other cinematic record of her dancing—she wanted only photographs and drawings to be made of her--Isadora is far from lost to history. Not only are there rich descriptions of her mysterious, fearless power by people like Gordon Craig, the visionary theater director, son of the great actress Ellen Terry, and one of the great passions of Isadora's life who understood the depth and breadth of her genius. There are

beautiful sketches by the sculptor Auguste Rodin as well as testaments by myriad artists in Russia whose ideas of dance were revolutionized when they saw the “amerikanskaya bozonzhka”—the American barefoot dancer—perform in the St. Petersburg Hall of Nobles before a packed house.²⁸ This included the great impresario Sergei Diaghilev, dancer/choreographers Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky and his sister Bronislava Nijinska, and Anna Pavlova, who is thought to have said: “She came to Russia and brought freedom to us all.” There is her own romanticized autobiography, *Isadora Duncan, My Life*, and the even more penetrating biography by Peter Kurth, who captures the artist in a vivid, thorough and admiring story, and Ann Daly’s deeply considered class and culture analysis. As a child Isadora was already a radical. As she writes in her autobiography,

Most of the novels I read ended in marriage and a blissfully happy state of which there was no more reason to write. But in some of these books, notably George Elliot’s *Adam Bede*, there is a girl who does not marry, a child that comes unwanted, and the terrible disgrace which falls upon the poor mother. I was deeply impressed by the injustice of this state of things for women, and putting it together with the story of my mother and my father, I decided then and there, that I would live to fight against marriage and for the emancipation of women and for the right for every woman to have a child or children as it pleased her, and to uphold her right and her virtue...I enquired into the marriage laws and was indignant to learn of the slavish condition of women. I began to look enquiringly at the faces of the married women friends of my mother, and I felt that on each was the mark of the green-eyed monster and the stigmata of the slave. I made a vow then and there that I would never lower myself to this degrading state. This vow I always kept, even when it cost me the estrangement of my mother and the miscomprehension of the world.²⁹

As I set out on my San Francisco and Oakland treks, I realized I knew so much but so little about Isadora. I had seen 3rd generation companies do her marches, her waltzes, and seen chiffon tunics fluttering and bare feet frolicking with scarves arcing overhead. But only one solo dancer, Annabelle Gamson, approximated the elemental power that I assumed Isadora conveyed, endowing the vocabulary of skips and waltz steps with robust sensuality and drive. But none of the purveyors of Isadora's dance do her justice and, ironically, her real heir is Mark Morris, the iconoclastic choreographer from Seattle who challenges gender norms and whose body is eerily similar to hers in its soft strength. He is also among the most musical modern dancers alive. Morris himself seems to understand the relationship, but he wasn't going to help me penetrate Duncan the way I needed. And the documentaries and homages weren't sufficient either. That's when I had a sudden inspiration—I would invite Linda Elkin, a poet, and a one-time Duncan dancer to present and teach a dance to my history class early in the semester. Little did I know that she hadn't danced in over 20 years or that she met my request as a gift to return to her greatest passion.

Linda began studying as a girl in New York City with two of Duncan's adopted daughters, Irma (originally Irma Erich-Grimm of Hamburg) and Anna Duncan (originally Anna Denzler of Switzerland). These were women who as children in Germany had been screened by the great dance pioneer and accepted into the Isadora Duncan School of Dance in Berlin, where the group of poor children would be housed and fed, educated and taught the "new" dance of the liberated American. When she attended the audition with her widowed mother, Isadora, Irma wrote: "...stepped forward to greet me, in bare

feet and ankle-length white tunic....With childish pleasure I noticed the white ribbon she wore in her light brown hair. I had never seen anyone so lovely and angelic-looking or anyone dressed that way. Beside mother's long black dress made in the Victorian fashion, Isadora's simple attire gave her the appearance of a creature from another planet." ³⁰

Linda had been lured west from New York City by Mignon Garland who trained with Duncan and had a Duncan dance company of her own. Bohemian Berkeley met Linda immediately: a fellow Duncan dancer gave her a place to stay in the Berkeley hills, astonishing the New Yorker by the local culture of openness and spontaneity. Quickly it became apparent that Garland was no longer well enough to lead a company. Undaunted, Linda and the other dancers joined forces, found a studio in San Francisco, and continued the work. As we talked about our dance pasts, we quickly discovered that we danced in the same San Francisco studio: my own teacher, Brynar Mehl, rented the studio from the Duncan dancers. Linda and I had likely passed one another in the hall in the Army Street lofts dozens of times decades ago. We talked further. I discovered that Brynar was also Linda's coach. She said he understood Duncan dance better than many of its practitioners. Once again, kindred spirits found each other wandering the same corridors and paths.

Linda pulled herself out of storage to come to my class. It had been 20 years since she had danced and was thrilled, but also honored, to be invited in. When my Dance History class arrived at Hass Pavilion's upstairs studio, a space with a wall of windows overlooking a meadow, an angled roof and opposite the windows, a wall of mirrors, she

was already in the studio and in costume, warming up. She wore a facsimile of what the Greeks call a chiton---a hot pink scarf that gathered at one shoulder, draped along the torso, stopped just above the knee, then wrapped across back of the body to meet the shoulder from the other side. At first I found the sight shockingly quaint. My brain flooded with dance world condescension toward Duncan romanticism, deeming it schmaltz, but just as quickly another set of far more engaged and curious feelings arose as I watched Linda hold the studio space with graceful composure and observed the 20 young women assembling themselves. In that confrontation of the 21st century with 20th century ideals I understood physically the radicalism of the Duncan dress style—the body revealed and made sensually alluring through flowing fabric, not exposed then dispossessed by being reduced to sex. The fabric moved, even in the breezeless room, already echoing the soft but strong contours of the natural world rather than the hard angular shapes of a machine-ruled one. If Duncan can be faulted for her utopian naturalism, she has to be revered for the genius that allowed her to forge an art form designed to liberate the female body, the self, and the spirit. I was soon to understand in my own body the simple audacity of the lesson about to take place.

Linda is a petite woman with a quiet self-possessed presence and soon communicated the unpretentious power of this first method of modern dance. I found myself confronting history with my entire body, and my admiration and wonder grew. As the demonstration began and the class followed Linda's simple instructions, everyone seemed to feel the absence of affectation in Duncan's exercises. We were to learn a waltz set to Brahms's Hungarian Waltz #15 in A flat, its steps consisted of a simple catch step

consisting of a shift to the other foot, moves so basic that I saw how easy it would be for a trained dancer to dismiss it as kind of sentimental noodling in a Greek tunic. When Linda demonstrated the arms, Duncan's purposes became even clearer. First we had to understand how the arms moved. She instructed us to shift our shoulders in a series of fluid figure eights. This, she explained, is the wave-like action of the upper body as it moves side to side. We lifted the arms without affectation, the antithesis of ballet's highly formalized, rounded port-au-bras. We held our hands up in the direction of the ceiling, our fingers slightly curled, gently clutching the invisible rose petals we would be holding on stage. Linda taught us how one leads with weight into each step, and how the viscera not the bones move the body in undulant patterns, whether in a $\frac{3}{4}$ waltz or in the $\frac{4}{4}$ meter of tragic pavane. The body was strong but also like air, and it seemed to let energy flow through the solar plexus—what Isadora called the engine of dance--unimpeded. This was westward motion transformed into art.

It was clear that Isadora's supple back, long neck and exquisite musicality gave such moves a magic that made her both magnetic and poignant. None of us were that, but even so, everyone managed by the end to float like an easy breeze through the room. "The great and the only principle on which I feel myself justified in leaning is a constant, absolute and universal unity between form and movement... a rhythmic unity that runs through all the manifestations of nature."³¹ And while no one in the room quite fixed that unity, either, we saw the aim of it in the steps, the breath and the combination of weightiness and lightness. She used gravity to rise upward, and I had an intense sense of

the body as one of the myriad things of the earth that was rooted but growing toward the air.

The echoes of Isadora's dance are in the landscape where she grew up, although when people write about the dancer these echoes are often slighted as mere metaphors of a Transcendental Romanticism that displaces divinity into nature. Emersonian and Whitmanesque pantheism was the language of the day among bohemians, and it was Duncan's route to defining the body as both an expression of the environment and a mirror of nature—it was a “natural” body that, like the ocean, flowed with organic energy thanks to the breath, which rose and fell with the rhythm of the waves. Even though she was exploring the forces of nature she was no mystic Luddite who repudiated science and modernity. In Europe she would become friends with the evolutionary biologist Ernst Haeckel and read Darwin, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

In fact, like best choreographers, she was an explorer and intuitive scientist who was looking for the fleshly equivalent of the combustion engine:

I spent long days and nights in the studio seeking that dance which might be the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body's movement. For hours I would stand quite still my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus...I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movement are born, the mirror of vision for the creation of the dance.³²

From the breath to the solar plexus to the patterns of nature—the physical was her material, and the Bay Area her wellspring that would infuse the rest of the country with its life force. Prefiguring the radical dancers of the 1960s, she acknowledged the ever-

shifting cycles of the natural world by allowing for dance improvisation within a preordained structure. This brought her back to what was enduring:

If we seek the real source of the dance, if we go to nature, we find that the dance of the future is the dance of the past, the dance of eternity, and has been and will always be the same.³³

This was not self-indulgent enviro-romance, either, some sort of Wordsworthian dreaming or other form of poetic license. In the Bay Area, the forces of nature are potently physical and demanding, whether it is the energetic rolling of the Pacific's waves, the electric breeze in the golden grasses, the incessant flux of clouds and fog, or the pelting rain and jolting earthquakes that nudge hill streets down toward the bay. Isadora's language may be flowery, but reality was bracing. She studied it and observed her world closely.

She was a thoroughly modern woman, fearlessly self-expressive, curious, creative and experimental. These were part of Isadora's birthright. She was born into a culture of Bay Area bohemianism that was a potent force among both the elite and artist class. It combined a quest for the good and the beautiful through Greek revivalism that merged with a Whitmanesque love of nature. It supported women's dress reform and enfranchisement, health reform and simple living. Bohemianism became the trademark of the fatherless family, and 30-year-old Mary Dora helmed her brood with seeming fearlessness, hosting Shakespearean salons where the children would dance, and educating her brood in the radical agnosticism of the nation's most famous orator, abolitionist, suffragettist and best friend of Walt Whitman, Robert Ingersoll. Ingersoll did

for ethics, politics and national discourse what Mark Twain did for literature, humor and culture—he seized it by the collar and shook sense into it with audacity that made him one of the most celebrated men in the nation. In his essay “Men, Women, and God” from 1885, we hear the clarion call that Mary Dora and then Isadora followed:

The ages of muscle and miracle -- of fists and faith -- are passing away. Minerva occupies at last a higher niche than Hercules. Now a word is stronger than a blow. At last we see women who depend upon themselves -- who stand, self poised, the shocks of this sad world, without leaning for support against a church -- who do not go to the literature of barbarism for consolation, or use the falsehoods and mistakes of the past for the foundation of their hope—women brave enough and tender enough to meet and bear the facts and fortunes of this world.⁵⁴

His bracing image of self-sufficient women at a time when women were still prisoners of family and society spoke to a small but growing group of iconoclastic souls, and the Duncans were among them. This hardly rid Isadora of a need to embellish her family’s story, already dramatic and brave, though downwardly mobile, and maybe heightened it. As she famously claimed, “If people ask me when I began to dance, I reply, 'In my mother's womb, probably as a result of oysters and champagne.’”³⁵ This was “the food of Aphrodite,” and implicitly in their minds predestined Isadora to greatness. In the spirit of family mythology, Isadora was not above creating multiple origin stories of her dance or apocryphal tales, such as her grandparents’ daunting overland trek West when, in fact, they arrived by boat. Yet even when she exaggerated or muddied the facts, she remained true to structural truths that facts alone missed. “I suppose it was due to our Irish blood that we children were always in revolt against...Puritanical tyranny,” she

writes in her autobiography, and the example came from above. In addition to Mary Dora, there was their drama-loving Aunt Augusta who played “Hamlet” in elegant velvet shorts—she a talented beauty with a great voice crushed by what American Puritanism. Then there was her grandmother, Maggie Gorman Gray, who taught the children Irish dancing and a healthy disregard for authority. Gray embodied a wildness feminine freedom in her dance, reminiscent of that other Irishwoman, Lola Montez and clearly passed on its spirit to her granddaughter. It is a spirit that, in Isadora’s exaggerated description, is already a hybrid of American influences: “...I fancy that into these Irish jigs had crept some of the heroic spirit of the pioneer and the battle with the redskins—...All this grandmother danced in the Irish jig, and I learned it from her and put it into my aspiration of Young America, and finally my great spiritual realization of life from the lines of Walt Whitman. And that is the origin of the so-called Greek dance with which I have flooded the world.”³⁶ Like America itself, her dance was a mongrel with lofty ideas about itself, fueled by aspirations of greatness.

Today, the old Duncan Oakland neighborhood is now girded by a redeveloped mess of freeway overpasses, with humble neighborhoods separated from stores and commerce by enormous boulevards that are impossible to cross during the time allotted by the crossing signal. If you visit any of the various streets where Mary Dora took her family-- 8th, 10th and 4th—you see a rather desolate urban scape. For those familiar with contemporary Bay Area, the less populous and untrammled places up the coast today or in Big Sur to the south offer a truer image of how nature once dominated the sparsely

populated landscape of the East Bay with its largely brown hills covered in native grasslands. While the East Bay can still seem mythically beautiful and grand, and nature's has an ever-present erotic pull, it now vies with a hard and dreary industrialization, from Chevron's odious plant in Richmond to the north to the noxious, poorly regulated light industries that rim the bayfront. So I find myself squinting to edge out the ugliness and focus on the big things, and glimpse late 19th century Oakland stretching out in broad geometries of gold, green and blue.

It was in this physical splendor, and as part of the West Coast utopianism that shifted from material riches to spiritual and aesthetic ones as the decades passed, that the Bay Area intelligentsia supported a form of naturalism that was both a radical ethos and aesthetic. It involved long hikes in nature, open-air sleeping, flowing clothes, as well as curious dietary practices. The Duncan family shared in this vision of a cultured, free society where women were closer to equal participants in life than to chattel, even if at the time the images of free women tended toward glorified notions of the emancipated Mother. While oratory had long been important for young men, it expanded to include theatricals that women played in. As women's dress reform and health movement grew, movement instruction for women spread around the country. At nearby Mills College in East Oakland, then a pastoral part of the East Bay, rhythmic gymnastics, one of the important ingredients that would help form modern dance, was required of all undergraduates as early as 1872.

In this spirit Mary Dora sent her children to such gymnastics classes and also arranged private dance lessons for her children, including ballet and the social dances of

the era, taught by a dance instructor in San Francisco. (“For the gymnast, the movement and the culture of the body are an end in themselves, but for the dance they are only the means,” she wrote years later.)³⁷ After Mary Dora and the teacher fought over piano tempos, the Duncans took over the teaching themselves. They were precocious teachers. From the age of 6 Isadora corralled the babies of the neighborhood to instruct them on how to wave their arms. By the time she was 11 she says she began work on a dance expression of her own—what she called a new system of body culture and dancing. With time she would fuse the idealized naturalism of California with Delsartism, a system of movement named for its founder, French musician and teacher François Delsarte, which was as popular then as aerobics was in the 1980s, which hoped to unite the spirit and the body through “natural” movements motivated by the breath. The breath, for Isadora, became one with the movement of nature. Add dress reform and suffrage, her grandmother’s dance and iconoclasm, and overlay it with elements of Greek revivalism that viewed Athens as the lost utopia, and Berkeley as “the Athens of the West,” and you have the basic ingredients of the original modern dance.

While there are no plaques to her or streets named in her honor in the East Bay, there are still traces of her in Berkeley and Oakland. Less than two miles from where she spent her youth, the Temple of the Wings in the Berkeley sits atop the Berkeley Coast Range like an architectural invocation of Isadora’s vision and inspired by her dance. Built by Isadora’s childhood best friend and fellow dancer, Florence Treadwell Boynton and her husband Charles, the Temple is a stunning sight at the end of Buena Vista Road north

of the University. Modeled after a Greek temple, the original was first sketched by the pioneering architect of the region, Bernard Maybeck, but completed by A. Randolph Monroe in 1914. The original burned in the voracious 1923 Berkeley fire but the Treadwells had it rebuilt in the same spot with greater practicality second time around. The first incarnation was a Greek-inspired porch for living shut off from the elements only by canvas curtains. The second was fashioned into two distinct dwellings, one in each wing, with a courtyard in the center and a dance studio in a continuous space below. It is still an astonishing and provocative sight that is part movie set, part folly, part serious bow to an ancient Greek temple—at once nostalgic yet forward thinking:

The dance teacher wanted a Greek temple to live in... The end result was two huge domes for a roof, held up by thirty-two Corinthian columns that reached the equivalent of two stories above the hard floor. No walls enclosed the living spaces, leaving the family in communion with the outdoors at all times. It was as if the sleeping porches had taken over the entire house.³⁸

This was only one of many forms that Bay Area bohemianism took. In its devotion to literature, drama and oratory, bohemian California could shape and animate the region's wide-open spaces. By mirroring aspects of Greek culture, artists and forward thinkers embodied the belief that here, on the Pacific Rim, they were giving rise to new Athenians. In unveiling the "natural" body lying beneath heavy Victorian draping—inspired by Whitman as much as by dress reformers—they sought the divine in the ordinary magic of nature, from leaves of grass to the strong shape of a woman's torso. Isadora's dance was weighted, muscular but soft, her sensuousness both physical and intellectual. It arose out of a deep belief in eros as the engine of the cosmic choreography

and the human body planted on the earth as the vehicle through which life force and inspiration poured.

Unlike Lola, Isadora never had to play a double game, and never married. Bathed in the late 19th century's countercultural world, with an iconoclastic mother in an artistic and intellectually progressive environment, she was able to be stalwart about her emancipated choices and held fast to a youthful promise to herself to remain single. She gave birth to a son and a daughter fathered by two different married men—Gordon Craig and the sewing machine heir Paris Singer. These were hard choices that led often to her being reviled by towns and nations. Her marriage to Russian Sergei Yesenin and her evolving politics in support of the downtrodden drove the U.S. government to revoke her American passport. She remained in Europe until her death.

Her life was filled with tragedies—the death of her two children by drowning in a car, death of another child soon after birth, death of lovers, the failure of her expensive boarding schools. Her own death was bizarre—she was nearly decapitated by one of her signature scarves. The scarf, hand-painted by the Russian-born artist Roman Chatov, caught in the wheel of the sleek Amistar roadster as the engine revved and lurched forward, then wrapped itself around the axle, throwing the 50-year-old dancer from her seat. It was as though she, this bright beacon to artists like Auguste Rodin, Anna Pavlova, Stanislavsky, and Russia's great industrialist and cultural organizer, Savva Mamontov, had been strangled by a modernism she both rejected and embraced.

She once said “You were once wild here. Don't let them tame you,” and it seemed even in her death that she remained an exalted untamed creature, snared but not

conquered. Through a life of disciplined rebellion and visionary Amazonian courage, she made dance a refined road back to our sublime, untamed selves open to anyone wanting to travel it.

ACT THREE

THE BODY NEVER LIES: ANNA HALPRIN, DANCING SHAMAN



...the day darkened down
the ocean rim,
the sunset purple slipped
from Tamalpais.
And bay and sky were
bright with
sudden stars.

--Ina Coolbrith

In a moment of unbounded optimism, I promised my Mills graduate students that I would try to finagle a date with Anna Halprin, now 91, the woman often called “the mother of post-modern dance,” a title she eschews but one she rightfully owns, continuing the revolution Isadora Duncan had begun. Her influence still reverberates like subtle temblors throughout the Western dance world.

By arranging to visit Anna it wasn't only a dance experience that I was after--that was ambitious enough, given how frenetic the late period of her life has become. I was after an experience—however it worked out—on Anna's famous dance deck perched on the side of Mount Tamalpais in the town of Kentfield, Marin County, on the north side of the Golden Gate Bridge opposite San Francisco. This is an outdoor deck for dancing that her husband Larry built for her, merging the Greek outdoor theater, Bernard Maybeck's experiments in open-air living, and modernist efforts to create an organic flow between indoors and out, the domestic and the wild.

I began knocking online, but no one at Anna's foundation, the Tamalpais Institute, answered my emails. So I asked my friend and colleague Shinichi Iova-Koga, a butoh-style dancemaker, to put in a word for me. He had been working with Anna for some months and had a direct line to this anti-goddess goddess, a woman whose body is as fit as a 40-year-old and has helped remake late 20th century dance, a woman propelling herself into the last phase of life with the fiery and gritty verve of a dyed-in-the-wool humanist. Shinichi and I went back and forth until a plan emerged and Anna invited us to attend the dress rehearsal of a program to honor Larry, who died in late October of 2009. In the program, Shinichi and his gently pregnant wife and fellow dancer Dana would embody the figures of the young Larry and Anna and bring to life a series of erotic drawings. These drawings, which Halprin had made on board the USS Morris during WW II, were uncovered in Halprin's office only after the architect had died.

Anna lives up on the side of Mount Tamalpais, locally known as Mt. Tam. As a young married woman, this maverick from the Mid-West planted herself with her

husband there, with money from the GI Bill. She and Larry found a five-acre site and homesteaded among the redwoods and live oaks on the still rather unpopulated mountainside. It was a place where they could do their work, raise a family, and be part of the bohemian society nearby while remaining deeply tied to the land.

Mt. Tam is visible from almost every point along the bay, and it rises in a beautiful uneven triangle to create a dark mauve silhouette against the broad drama of the Western sky. The 2,604 foot peak springs up from the wetlands below with seeming suddenness, and the specter of it is always surprising. It appears rugged, mythic and unapproachable from 10 miles off—and because of its geometric abstraction and its soft darkness it seems more like a totem or a symbol than a mass of upswelling earth. It was created over a 100,000,000 year process from volcanic outpourings that molted, folded and accumulated into a complex amalgam of sedimentary bedrock, serpentine, and ancient quartz tourmaline with no young sediment in its composition. Older and above sea level longer than any other hill in the region, it supports a rich and ancient ecosystem. It is often referred to as the Sleeping Princess, because from the south it resembles a prone female form, although this is believed to derive from Aztec lore, not the local indigenous Miwok. Other times it is called the face of a woman, whose body is submerged in the land itself. But most strangely of all, the mountain seems unfixed and alive. If you approach from the east, the looming mound rises beyond the maximum security penitentiary of San Quentin, which spreads out like a rosy perversion of a Spanish castle down to the edge of the Bay. There in the near distance Mt Tam, as it is known, hovers, chimerically, as though it arrived in that space only an instant before and

will move again once you are out of sight. And indeed, curving the highway further north toward San Rafael, the mountain seems to travel up the coast as well. This may be, in part, a result of its unusual placement. Unlike the surrounding Coastal Range, which meanders “like an animated pie crust,” as writer Sharon Skolnick so wonderfully describes it, this particular hill stands alone at a right angle to the rest and extends east to west rather than north-south as the other peaks range. Between its geological age and its geographic singularity, it is little wonder the Miwok understood it as the place of creation itself.

The school year had ended a few days before our trek, and even though some students had already scattered, a small cadre caravanned across the bay to find Anna’s sanctuary at the end of one of the steep winding roads, now a millionaire’s paradise but still resonant with echoes of the beautiful wilderness it once was. This is part of the county north of the city where adventurous working class families once came from San Francisco in the summer, when the city is inevitably thick with fog due to an atmospheric marine layer that accumulates on the ocean surface and can materialize as operatic surges of mist and cloud. In the late 19th and early 20th century families would hike for the day or camp for weeks in the Marin Headlands, a tradition started by German immigrants who, back home, had liberated the Alps for hiking and brought the same zeal with them to the U.S. When a single gauge train was finished in 1896, sometimes as many as 10,000 San Franciscans in a day would take the ferry and hike up to the haunting old growth redwood forest above the town of Mill Valley. Others would camp out on the side of Mount Tam.

Rising above downtown Kentfield it was considered sacred to the once-resident Miwok—so sacred no dwellings could be built there. Little authentic details of the Miwok survived white incursions into the Marin region, but it is known that this smoke-colored mass was where Coyote the trickster god first created the world by shaking his “walik” or blanket of sedge in the four directions. The great water evaporated, and the mountain appeared. In another telling, Coyote sailed up on his reed raft to a small mound of earth, which was the top of the mountain, made the waters subside, then set down the raft, which became the shape of the Miwok world. Or in yet another, Silver Fox was lonely, and before long, Coyote appeared and they agreed to create the world together by singing and dancing it into being. To the indigenous dwellers, Mt. Tamalpais was rich with magic and power, and its top represented the First Place and center of all things. Runners traveled along animal paths closer to the base to hunt or to get to the ocean, and the people who lived there, or to communicate with distant tribes.

For most of her career Anna’s contribution to 20th century dance has been presented as a footnote to the more renowned stories of those who visited and worked on her dance deck in the Marin redwoods then went East—such dance notables as Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti and Lucas Hoving, the composer LaMonte Young and conceptual artist Robert Morris or the rock critic John Rockwell. But like water in a stream, to understand its power you have to go to the source.



When the Halprins moved into their retreat in 1945, they settled into the temperate wilderness and carved out a life in which the landscape gave rise to a house, fashioned as a series of rustic rooms with access out at almost every turn, and the house gave rise to a life in which family, work, art and friendship freely and serendipitously intermingled. The land determined how they sited the house and how they formed paths through the woods, and it was the land that gave birth to the idea of a dance deck. Larry Halprin designed the cluster-like ranch dwelling with renowned architect and friend Bill Wurster, protégé of Bernard Maybeck, full of post-War homages to the great early 20th architect, especially its new, reinvigorated focus on indoor-outdoor living. And Halprin and theater designer Arch Lauterer together designed the outdoor stage.

I had heard stories about the deck for decades, and realized as I neared the house that I had accumulated a Dada-like mental collage of the space, an image that was partly culled from actual photos and in part from mental efforts at decoding what, exactly, a deck for dancing might be. Among my cinematic ideas was that the deck was L shaped, with the shaft lunging into the trees like a Kabuki hanimichi bridge, a theatrical highway

traveling indefinitely into the forest. That was quite mistaken, since the deck is sensibly broad like a stage, and neither narrow nor inappropriately deep. What I didn't know at all and had never even speculated upon is whether this dance deck had redwood planks, as the best California decks had. How did one dance on a surface made up of boards with gaps to allow for rain to pass and expansion in the summer, without catching a toe or twisting an ankle? Was it a wooden platform taking the place of grass where people would congregate in chaises lounges when the dancing stopped? Or was it like a ship's deck made for promenading?

Our small group felt blindly along the Halprin's gate to find entry and discovered a wooden door cut almost invisibly into the face. We pushed and it opened onto a stone patio. For a moment I felt confused about the era, the place, the moment. Three instances of time seemed to perceptibly coexist: in a single minute I heard the haunting quarter tones of ancient Middle East chanting and dense sensual drumming, the neo-tribal celebrations of the 1960s, and a ritual practice of the present with more authentic non-Western music. It seemed like a disorienting, if lovely, delusion, but I later realized that through Anna's collective acts of sorcery she had fused these three times into a single event.

Scattered about, women from around the country and the world, women with brown skin and white skin and foreign accents and American accents, and a few men—tall men, and old men, and timeless looking men--stood draped in colorful full-length gowns. We were standing on a formal area outside a modernist wooden house yet we were back stage to a ritual. My confusion intensified. Had we stumbled into one of the

Halprin's Tamalpa Institute's classes? Was a strange Middle Eastern looking choir about to give a performance somewhere in this compound? Anna, Shinichi and Dana were nowhere in view.

I spoke in a normal voice, which caused a young woman with a halo of brown curls to shush me with religious authority—a ceremony was in progress. I could feel an ancient East Coast cynicism vie for a moment with wide-eyed Western openness. “We are looking for Shinichi and Dana,” I said in a stage whisper. The young woman was beautifully dressed in deep orange, red and black embroidered gown that I would later learn was an antique Palestinian garment, one of a dozen that Anna was given during a joint Israeli-Palestinian workshop about the territories. She next directed us down a steep set of stairs. Ten paces on, I stopped cold. Below me about 50 feet and fanning out to my right while stretching back toward the eastward segment of the Bay was a stunning open-air performance space where performers were already in action. Downstage center a tall robust man with white hair and a fisherman's canvas vest leaned into the air while reading from a text, and two movers behind him huddled in a clench. I took it in slowly--I had to. I was still bewildered by the moment, and by how much more exceptional, ingenious, generous and artistically right this space was than I had been able to imagine. It was rustic yet sleek, improvised yet wholly planned. Some Miwok magic seemed to be afoot.

Of course, it was a far cry from the Miwok's first known encounter with the white man over 400 years ago, when Sir Francis Drake and his sailors reached the Marin coast. It was 1579, and Drake was circumnavigating the globe to prove that the oceans were

contiguous and to challenge Spanish dominion over the new world and its gold, looting Spanish galleons as he sailed. It is believed that Drake pulled his ship the Golden Hind into what is now called Drakes Bay to try to restock and repair the vessel, and one of Drake's men rowed to shore for provisions.



There he was met with

the residents and received a circular headdress of black feathers and a basket of rush filled with tobacco, the peace symbols of the Miwok. The English, including Drake, made their next contact proffering a gift of a black hat, which, to the Miwok, showed no understanding of the symbolic and its implicit codes, and therefore spelled their culture's doom. Grief overcame them; they knew that the end of their world was on the horizon, and although it would take another 200 years for the full brunt of European colonization to end their way of life, they were right.

When Europeans finally had enough shared language to verbally communicate with the Miwok the native peoples explained that they were "Sata-ko": we are humans

that belong to this place, this sata; they and the place were one. The philosophical depth of such a claim was lost on the British and the Spanish missionaries who followed, for whom land was currency and power, not spirit and unity with all creation. This divide spelled the end of a earth-centered relationship to the planet on two continents and the long and continuous degradation of the planet that today jeopardizes thousands of animal species, as well as our own.

Nevertheless, by the logic of conquest and in Drake's estimation, the land he and his men reached was from that point on England's, and to prove it they erected a pillar with a plate, proved after much struggle to be fake, that resides at the Bancroft Library on the UC Berkeley campus. While its forgery took several major research institutions and high-tech equipment to prove, it has value as an artifact, giving us an imaginative rendering of what might have been there. It reads:

BEE IT KNOWN VNTO ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS.

IVNE. 17. 1579

BY THE GRACE OF GOD AND IN THE NAME OF HERR
MAIESTY QVEEN ELIZABETH OF ENGLAND AND HERR
SVCESSORS FOREVER. I TAKE POSSESSION OF THIS
KINGDOME WHOSE KING AND PEOPLE FREELY RESIGNE
THEIR RIGHT AND TITLE IN THE WHOLE LAND VNTO HERR
MAIESTIES KEEPEING. NOW NAMED BY ME AN TO BEE
KNOWNE V(N)TO ALL MEN AS NOVA ALBION

CC FRANCIS DRAKE

In the territory of the Coastal Miwok, which extended from the coastal edge of Mt. Tamalpais to the waters of the bay, the native peoples hunted and gathered in a system called a “complex collector pattern.” This included sustainable land management, and allowed their community to expand and contract with the seasons, moving into larger assemblies in winter, and smaller, clan-based groups in summer. Dance, as writer Sharon Skolnick explains in her chronicle of Mount Tam, was central to their way of life: “Headmen and headwomen, respected for their judgment, generosity and popularity, would advise the people and organize elaborate costumed dances. Some of these dances were performed to a foot drum percussion by members of a secret society. At other times a dancer would whirl a bullroarer around his head, echoing the sound of thunder.”³⁹ Both men and women practiced shamanism, calling forth the spirits, provoking the rains, leading the people in ritual and healing. There were elites and commoners, religious experts and craftspeople, secret societies and money in the form of shells. There was a woman—a member of the Bird Cult—who led the way in the Acorn Dance, who protected and organized other dances, and there was another woman who saw to it that the dancehouse got built or rebuilt as needed, and these women kept the vital heartbeat of ritual, song, prayer, dance, fasting and healing alive so central to the culture of the Coastal peoples.

While the Miwok saw their end, it came slowly by a thousand cuts: in 1835 the land was divided into land grants with the native population nominally controlled by General Vallejo, who used promises as tactics of delay to trick the natives. By 1850, 2,000 longhorn cattle freely roamed the hillsides and water was shipped from the mountain to San Francisco. By 1878 gold and silver miners established mines at the peak, and the precious ore was pulled from the rock, filling the streams with mercury used in the leeching process. The Miwok were dispersed, and the abundant fish in the streams, and fox, bear, elk, cougar, deer, antelope and wolf, as well as hawks, eagles and condors in the skies began to dwindle.

Today that ancient world seems almost as remote as the 4,000 year-old prehistoric one still thriving when the Miwok ancestors are thought to have arrived across the Bering Strait, a world that supported mastodon and woolly mammoths and birds with vast wing spans. But traces of the Miwok world remain. The lithe bodies of foxes still slip into the manzanita scrub on the western slope of the Coast Range, and mountain lions occasionally wander the hillsides of Marin, sometimes meandering into suburban neighborhoods where they snap up families' prized pets like candy. Elk and wolf are gone from the mountain, as are most of the condors and eagles, but hawks still ride the thermal plumes with an air of lordly dominion over the sky. While this is a pale remnant of the natives' world, the power of the coast range, of the sweeping grass laden valleys at its feet, the quixotic fog and sunshine, and the magnificent blues, greys and celadons of sky and sea all continue to create powerful enchantments. And so does a deep peaceful quiet behind the rustling wind, a sound that seems older than time itself.

That quiet hung below my mental clutter during my visit to Halprin's deck, and as the confusion fell away I suddenly came to see that Anna's performance space is a dancer's tree house—a space made of wide Douglas fir boards, a platform for an artist who refuses to separate herself from nature and in this way walks in the Miwok's path.



The deck has the dimensions of a medium-sized stage and reaches into the trees just below their current canopy. A Pacific madrone ranges up from a side apron of the deck as well as through the narrowing

rear of the stage. A modest amount of raked bleacher seating scales the hill at the downstage edge of the stage, enough to accommodate about 150 people. Rougher seating can be fashioned out of the steps, or the hillside when the poison oak subsides. The deck is a remarkably flexible space—a Western bohemian answer to the Greek amphitheater merged with the ritual clearing of the Miwok, and it communicates its own distinct set of dreams and ideals responding to the dictates of the landscape, the climate, the moment in time. It is at once anti-nostalgic yet profoundly aware of its antecedents, and it is resolutely unsentimental. As a clearing that allows for the reenactment of artistic creation again and again, process is made the soul of art. As Larry Halprin wrote:

The form of the deck responds to the site—it meanders to avoid trees clumps, it reaches out to open spaces—it elongates to include trees as anchor points and finally it returns to the hill. The deck is a level platform floating above the ground where it almost touches the earth. It is half a foot from ground level—at its highest point it stand 30 feet above the sloping ground.⁴⁰

Suddenly I understood: Anna Halprin has worked high on Mount Tamalpais for 60 years not in an act of hippie romanticism but in a rugged effort to discover a route into what she regards as the natural and the real. Such an encounter, for her, is as spiritual as it was for Duncan, and as transcendent. And like Duncan, she understands the solar plexus as the radiant center from which life force emanates. While Duncan imagined a motor force driving the body from this vulnerable spot between the navel and the diaphragm, paralleling the new engines of the 20th century, including the automobile that killed her, Halprin looks at Vitruvian Man, Michelangelo's elegant drawing of a naked man with limbs outstretched in an X formation, around whom a circle and square is drawn. He is the emblem of action and enlightened balance. The solar plexus is the body's midpoint, the architectural fulcrum around which the body moves.

With this radiant source as the body's pivot point, Anna evolved training out of improvisation in the 1950s, and the improvisation drew on the anatomically driven work of her mentor, Margaret H'Doubler from the University of Wisconsin. It also exploited the ideas of Jungian play therapy that employed movement, imagery and language to spawn unconscious material that held our psyches' secrets, truths and insights often out of reach of the conscious mind. In addition, she began to employ the gestalt ideas of

German-born psychotherapist Fritz Perls, with whom she trained at Esalen (named for that coastal tribe) beginning 1963. His therapeutic practices, aligning with the ideas of early American and German modern dance, were based on the belief that feelings revealed themselves in the way the body moved. Martha Graham, daughter of an “alienist” or early psychotherapist, quoted her father when he told her “the body never lies”. Perls developed this into a therapeutic method, and Anna integrated the idea into her dance practice, perceiving external presence as a reflection of internal states, the internal, in turn, reciprocally shaping the external.

In 1954 a group of young movers and musicians came to work with her on the deck, becoming laboratory creatures on whom she experimented. Over the next six or so years, more young artists came. They, in turn, went out into the world to become the next generation of avant-garde prophets. Some of them set up shop in the basement gym in a Greenwich Village church—the Judson Memorial Church, which was a center of social activism—and launched a revolution in dance that is still rumbling through the field. Others such as Young, joined forces with music renegades like Yoko Ono in post-industrial Soho when it was still a wasteland colonized by artists and junkies.

To encounter Anna today is to meet a slightly more wizened version of her younger self with none of the startling loss of height many women in their 80s suffer and no downward plunge of the breasts and belly into soft folds that transform many older women into pillowy gnomes. In fact, this small lithe woman remains strong, erect, fit and determined, like one of the statuesque fire-scarred redwoods that populate the hillside. She is unabashed, unsentimental and although utterly certain of herself, without either the

vainglory or the grandiloquence one might expect from a woman who is a legend that spawned many artist offspring. When she talks to a group of dancers and mentions in passing that she's now credited with giving birth to post-modern dance she scoffs in a tough no-nonsense tone: "I didn't give birth to anything; I just do my work." She scorns neat post-mortems or romantic summaries of a reality that is messy and far from romantic. She remains in the present, pressing against its outer limit to reach the next moment where something approximating a truth might be found. It is this kind of attitude that made it possible for her to turn her back on the mecca of New York City, and ignore its judgment—to set up camp first in San Francisco with artistic partner Welland Lathrop, in their Dancers Workshop, and then on the mountain. In a very real sense, Anna became the mountain itself and left it to others to come to her.

Anna's life could have moved in a traditional direction. She had been offered a place in the company of one of the seminal figures of modern dance Doris Humphrey, but was under pressure from her parents to go to college. The big four of dance—Humphrey, Martha Graham, Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm—taught in the summers at Bennington, and so the young dancer decided that Bennington was the place for her. But in one of the fortunate misfortunes of history, Bennington rejected her application, and Anna defaulted to the University of Wisconsin. There she encountered the pioneering teaching of H'Doubler and learned "about the true nature of movement as applied to the human body." As Anna writes:

She encouraged us to take the biological, factual knowledge she had and explore it on our own terms as we explored all the possibilities a movement could yield. This self-discovery evoked qualities, feelings, and images. Out of these responses we would then create our own dance

experience. She helped us infuse our movement with our own creativity. This understanding of the relationship of the objective and the subjective aspects of movement was a road map which has been essential to me in my work.⁴¹

Anna combined this analytical understanding of the body's physical capacities with a freewheeling commitment to the creative impulse. This meant a pragmatic grounding in the body—its mechanical as well as biological function and its kinesthetic properties—and a fearless approach to experimentalism. But this explains only one part of the key to Anna's revolutionary methods. Another vital bit of serendipity is that her husband, who received his MS in biology at Wisconsin, was always drawing, and this provoked Anna to say to him one day: You don't want to be a biologist; you want to draw. Halprin had to confess his unrequited love for art and soon found a solution that fused science and drawing: Landscape architecture and a spot in Harvard's design program. The great Walter Gropius, father of the German Bauhaus school in Weimar, Germany, closed down by the Nazis for its "decadence," was the head of the department. Mies van der Rohe, one of the great modernist architects of the 20th century, was on faculty. I.M. Pei and Philip Johnson were classmates. This Bauhaus-in-exile world would become Anna's environment for the next four years.

Landing in the Bay Area for the Halprins was another accident of history. San Francisco was the major transit point on the West Coast for WW II, with embarkation and disembarkation occurring on Treasure Island, a flat windswept expanse of land that juts into the Bay like a badly formed pancake from Yerba Buena Island. And there they found themselves, far from New York, where Larry grew up and dance had critical mass. The

Bay Area seemed to call to them after the impersonal and personal horrors of World War II, in which Larry's destroyer, the USS Morris, was torpedoed in two by a kamikaze attack in which hundreds of sailors burned to death. On the mountain by the Pacific Anna and Larry believed they could commit themselves to their life project of binding themselves to terrain and the landscape that would hold and support them.

As part of their life partnership they developed a set of aesthetic values that would nurture their art as well as their politics, and they dedicated themselves to a cultural ecosystem that would include a young family. This was not so much a thought experiment but a project for living and creating that combined the Bauhaus ethos with a native sensibility. Larry Halprin as a designer of land and Anna as a shaper of bodies believed that "... Modernism is not just a matter of cubist space but of a whole appreciation of environmental design as a holistic approach to the matter of making spaces for people to live." For both husband and wife it "... includes and is based on the vital archetypal needs of human being as individuals as well as social groups." With such a plan, it was critical that daily life and creativity converge. This modernism would rest on the idea that improvisation, or process, was essential to pragmatic humanism, taking up where Isadora left off.⁴²

In the late 50s when the young exploring artists visited Anna's deck, the experiments began in earnest. Trisha Brown danced with a broom and catapulted across the deck in the air. Simone Forti discovered a link between place and work. And Yvonne

Rainer, the child of anarchists, was given the license to focus on process, not outcome, with the result that an several genres of dance have devoted themselves to process, from zen-like experiments to contact improvisation to happenings where each element of the action is in response to place. This is where the Bauhaus met the Beat generation and helped shape the countercultural revolution that was to upend the arts. Anna, who had young children, stayed close to home during this time and her one trip back East, when she was tapped to perform two solos by Martha Graham for a shared concert in New York, reinforced Halprin's disinterest in the quasi-religious world of East Coast modern dance, where dictatorial choreographers were followed by a parade of followers that looked and acted like their leaders. Anna saw little individuality, and this not only bored

her, she believed it distanced the art from humanism that lay at its core.

Anna shattered the religious orderliness of the East Coast



it from lay at East

establishment in 1967 with the premiere of her radical *Parades and Changes*, which involves a group of mostly young dancers in white shirts and black pants undressing and dressing in beautiful slow motion to a composition by composer Morton Sobotnick that

includes radio play of Petula Clark's chart-topping song "Downtown." The debut was at Hunter College in New York City, and when word got out about the nudity a buzz flew about that the city police were going to shut Anna down if the dancers disrobed. Lenny Bruce had already been busted for violating New York's Penal Code 1140-A, which prohibited "obscene, indecent, immoral, and impure dram, play, exhibition, and entertainment...which would tend to the corruption of the morals of youth and others." Although no men in blue stopped Anna's show as they did Bruce's three years earlier at the Village spot, Café Au Go Go, there was, apparently, a warrant out for Anna's arrest. Unflappable, Anna pressed on, fully aware that she was celebrating not only the body but the very foundations of our humanity—our collective vulnerability, our collective bond, and our sometimes daunting solitude made visible in the unique, naked form of each dancer.

My investigation of Anna began a few months before I visited her deck when I finally got up the nerve to take a workshop with in her old haunt in San Francisco. It was a day-long exploration that felt deeply familiar, and I realized, even though it was my first time working with Anna, that I trained with various dancers who had studied directly with her or worked with those that had. Now several generations have broadly absorbed her ideas into dance practice, and anyone who has explored movement improvisation in the last 40 years has been exposed to some if not many of the ideas that Anna propagated on her deck. The Western dance body has become, in part, a Halprin body.

This return to ones rather than practicing a me, a little like returning to York playground. The workshop was the 50th building that had housed the listener-sponsored radio Francisco Tape Music composers Morton Sender, and the Dancers



own source as a mover codified technique was, for arts and crafts in the New occasion for this particular anniversary of the historic nation's first Pacifica station, KPFA, the San Center, launched by Sobotnick and Ramon Workshop operated by

Anna, then known as Ann, and her colleague Welland Lathrop. 321 Divisadero is, in a sense, ground zero of the post-war artistic revolution in the Bay Area, which nurtured progressive journalism, new music and experimental dance, and had strong ties to the jazz community that spilled out from Filmore Street to the north and to the Beat community that gathered further east in North Beach. Today the site is the Victorian gated home of

dozens such yoga

As I Divisadero St. on moments of attention. When I



the Yoga Studio, one of many centers in San Francisco. approached the building on a cold grey day, different history seemed to spar for first moved to San Francisco I

lived on the northern Haight Ashbury side of the Golden Gate Panhandle, and while I

didn't roam Divisadero Street much, I knew the area. Beneath the signs of gentrification it still bore indications of the limbo into which it was thrust as working class San Francisco stalled, black San Francisco was edged out and money had not yet flooded the region from the tech industry. By 2011 it was reinvigorated, at least superficially, made hip by young professionals priced out of Pacific Heights or the Haight, or positioning themselves close to the hospital empire of Mt. Zion and University of California at San Francisco. Yet I could still sense the air of disappointment and resignation that had burrowed into the Victorian moldings and the once-dying shops—an acquiescence to bleak facts that fresh paint and chic goods couldn't eradicate. Years of neglect, of low-level misery seeped out of the foundations, showed through the make-shift beautification. Along the street front I saw zealous paint jobs done only half-well; buildings seemed to bulge with old lacquer under the new, like a poor man loading up on threadbare clothes to stay warm. The downtrodden past and the affluent present seemed to occupy the terrain, and this made me feel a little confused, unsure which reality to respond to, caught between histories, trying to make sense of now.

As I climbed the precipitously steep steps of the Victorian building (so strangely steep to accommodate 12 foot ceilings on the ground floor, I wondered?), I also felt the ghosts of those who had communed in the building 30 and 40 years ago, and they whirled together, not so much vying for the same space but filling the space with ethereal echoes. The living, too, came with their rich echoes of the past—Wayne, for instance, whom I've known for over 20 years as a dancer, administrator and writer, and who took over the publication *In Dance* I started in the 1980s, along with his friend Mercy, who danced

with Margaret Jenkins before heading north to live. Wayne, I was stunned to discover, was taking his first workshop with Anna, too, despite having collaborated with her on projects for years. I realized that there may be many older dancers who, as much as they admire Anna, have never plunged into her experiments.

The studio space was large and bright, with beautiful, thin 8-foot windows that gave the room a quiet elegance. The group of about 50 was motley, ranging from agile young movers to white-haired scientists who wanted to re-experience Anna's work after a gap of 25 years.

We began:

Make a self portrait

Write words

Find three words/images/feeling states/concepts

Write a sentence using these words.

Find a partner

Partner holds picture to side. Artist dances picture saying the words/sentence and eventually, possibly, moving into sound, not words.

Reverse.

We sat and shared our experiences when this exercise was done, and I was again startled by how aptly my own picture, and then my interpretation in movement of the picture, reflected elements of my internal state that I thought were out of sight. That my picture told secrets was all the more uncanny because I had missed the assignment instructions about what to draw, and so intuited, looking around at the other participants,

that we were to draw something in the room. I had only a few minutes and took to creating shapes out of the seated huddled bodies, and when I was done I thought they looked like floating islands in a Japanese inkwash. They seemed serene and lovely to me, but my partner saw something quite different. She saw isolation and melancholy in the bodies. Then I had to dance the three words I had written: solitude, safety, space.

My partner observed my 3-minute dance. I moved in figure eights and circles, and made rounded actions with my arms, never leaving the ground but changing levels without dropping or leaping. Then she reported what she saw. She observed melancholic detachment, sadness, maternalism. Oy, I thought. Really? After all these years did I still give off the lonely granite landscape of New England? What about the lush warmth of the West Coast? And if I was mothering, did this mean amplitude and abundance or subservience? Was it because of my age, or was I protecting the air I encircled, tending to the space? I realized it would take more dance/drawing to answer that. When I stopped being defensive, I let the reflection sink in. I acknowledged how difficult life was at the moment and how little it took to make the sorrow surface, how the difficulties had an umbilical cord reaching back decades. I breathed and told myself that being in the workshop was part of a long deep process of continually leeching New England from my veins.

Meanwhile, my partner depicted herself on paper as a volcano about to blow. I had no doubt about that. To my astonishment, for her this mountain on fire symbolized a tree, and when she had to dance her drawing, she performed a bound, furious, imploded series of movements that struggled to move upward. I witnessed internal frustration,

fierce will, an anger that possibly fueled it, and the longing for extension and growth that a tree offers and symbolizes. As she and I worked together she softened and I became more present, less aloof. I marveled that something as innocuous as a depiction of a room in a moment of time could become a lens into the psyche of the artist. The brilliance of the exercise is that it created a visual and kinesthetic feedback loop in which the images we make on paper and in space reveal inner assumptions, and by freeing our perceptions we free our bodies, and by pushing our bodies into heightened awareness, we free our minds.

As my partner and I worked together I began to feel in my body that every act has this same packed quality as the drawings but we are usually blind to the ways in which our own stories unfold in everything we say and do. I took note, too, of how other peoples, like the Yoruba of southern Nigeria, have long understood the body as a mirror to the soul but rather than pretending this link doesn't exist, as Westerners tend to do, they culturally deepened and refined the connection, admiring most the mirrors that shine the clearest.

When this segment ended we were warmed up in every way—receptive psychically and physically, and Anna moved on to duet movements.

Partners do hand exercise.

One hands below—leader/. Follower above. Up and down

With one hand.

Through space with eyes closed (follower).

Move through negative space—i.e. through environment

Move as group to tribal beat

This was the most joyous aspect of the day, where we were part of and witnessed the group of individuals become a mass that repeatedly broke apart and recombined in an at time biologically apt fashion, at others, with someone willfully pulling the group apart, the naughty delight shimmering visibly in the person's eyes as she ruptured the unity. I was reminded of being on the playground in New York when one kid could change the dynamic in an instant and how tumultuous and raw child's play is as a result. In echo of that, the rest of us, feeling the disruption, coalesced again into two smaller groups. This flow between the individual and the group is the ground of Anna's work and combines Native, post-war California, Naturalistic, New Age, Jungian, and German-in-exile theater influences into a seemingly simple yet radical aesthetic and ethical practice. At its core it is a form of organic democratic play in action that strives for self-aware freedom.

Months later, I carried the memories of the workshop in my body as I wended up the mountain to watch the dress rehearsal of "Song of Songs." And they were there again two days later when I returned to Anna's deck for the performance. I brought Sasha with me, my 21-year-old son who came along to dance classes with me in utero, then, within months of his birth, slept through dozens of concerts in the first year. He sat through hours of Balanchine at 4, and was held in thrall during long evenings of native dances at 8. Although he claims to have no love for staged dance, he understands and observes it with preternatural keenness. He was the perfect companion that bright day.

When we arrived at the house, worrying we were late, we discovered that the performance would be held up because Wayne, whose paths and mine were crossing

again, was arriving from San Francisco but stopped dead in parade traffic in the city. We were invited to wander the site, enter the indoor studio and examine the drawings Larry Halprin had made. Anna's helpers had set out pastel crayons and paper so that visitors could do the first part of the exercise she had assigned us in the Yoga Room. Anna appeared, and I introduced her to Sasha who captivated the 90-year-old maverick. I backed away slowly, then disappeared. My son's charisma was in synch with Anna's.

The waiting grew restiveness of her audience gave a mini-workshop. by side, and I became her demonstrate the principles seen the famous image of the man with his arms and



long, and Anna, sensing the gathered us into a circle and Somehow, she and I ended side guinea pig on whom she would of Vitruvian man. "You've all Michelangelo's—the one with legs spread out in an X? Well,

that's Vitruvian man. And where is the intersection of that X? That's right, it's in the solar plexus. That is the center of our bodies. And we know that we're connected to our centers when we extend our arms and legs and someone tries to lift you or knock you down. If they can't move you, then you're grounded. Find a partner and let's all try it." Anna came behind me as I stretched my arms to the side and planted my feet solidly on the deck, and the tiny but strong woman attempted to lift me. If I were suitably wedded to the earth, she would find it impossible to budge my body. If my legs were tense, she would be able to pry me from the ground. She couldn't lift me. This took another form as she tried to knock me off balance. I stood as planted as a redwood tree. Suddenly, as if by

an act of conjuring, Wayne arrived, and the show could begin. More Miwok magic. Without effort, Anna had transformed the crowd's restiveness into a participatory opportunity for play and exploration. We were together without much of a plan. The masks that we all wear in public seemed to drop, and an enchanted ease came over the assembled.

That magic and power to transform a moment through imagination is what the Halprins sought from the beginning. Larry Halprin, for instance, had been a varsity baseball pitcher in college before the war and his keen arm served him in an unexpected way. Longing for his young wife as his ship barreled toward the Pacific theater, he drew erotic drawings based on the biblical Song of Songs and devised a scheme so outlandish that it almost seems apocryphal, but when Anna tells it, you know it's not. He had an impeccable pitching arm, so he figured that if he rolled the drawing up tightly, put them in a canister, then lobbed them to outbound ship as it passed, a man on the other deck would collect them and get them to Anna. They were visual love letters for Halprin's wife. He threw the canister, they were retrieved, and once back in San Francisco, the sailor mailed them to Anna. The only problem was that Anna had left San Francisco to stay in New York with her in-laws. The drawings only caught up with her when they were pulled from Larry's desk after his death. She was awed, moved, and knew that this testament to her husband and their young love had to be transformed for the stage, that she had to make them come to life in dance. Dana and Shinichi appeared, the apt couple for the task.

By Sunday Friday's dress rehearsal had morphed in the two days into a far more fleshed out and cohesive whole. There was unity between the dancers, the musician and the narrator, and Dana and Shinichi made their entwined space seem big and momentous, and with Dana's slightly bulging belly, the symbolic lovemaking became mythic. This was performance as the culmination of a process, not a static work of art, and each day for an infinity of days would be a different performance. Sunday was splashed with sun, and all my new York-fueled irritation at Marin's New Age hokum morphed into a deep admiration for how we lost men and women of the Western world are, in our disparate ways, trying to find our way back to the deep knowledge of being that the body, moving in time, offers us. As Anna has said, we have "to see the whole picture — the flying bird, the laughing child — because all of life is a dance."⁴³

ACT FOUR

TWYLA THARP , THE HIGHWAY IN HER

VEINS



*The San Bernadino
only an hour east of
by the San Bernadino
it is in certain ways an
not the coastal
the subtropical
the soft westerlies of*

*but a harsher California, haunted by the Mojave just beyond the mountains, devastated
by the hot dry Santa Ana wind that comes down through the passes at 100 miles an hour
and works on the nerves."⁴⁴*

*Valley lies
Los Angeles
Freeway but
alien place:
California of
twilights and
the Pacific*

Today I go in search of Twyla Tharp's California roots, and begin by traveling in the shadow of the 28 million-year-old San Andreas Fault, the sliding boundary between

the North American and Pacific Plates that runs like a scar through the length of California. It is an arid 110 degrees, even though the sun is still a few hours from high noon. I pass Ballard's Saddles, Tack, and Western Wear and notice the curled-up remnants of a half-dozen recent blow-outs that warn: don't dally; this road is boiling. I quickly pick up my speed and merge onto Route 10 to head west toward Tharp's hometown of Rialto, a small city lodged between the San Jacinto Fault to the north and the smaller Rialto-Colton Fault line to the

Route 10, a swathe of 2,460-mile the country's southernmost transcontinental interstate, extending from Jacksonville, to Santa Monica, California. It runs through Houston, San Antonio and El Paso, and for of its last 100 miles it hugs the Little San Bernardino Mountains. Then it enters the Gorgonio Pass, one of the deepest



south.
road, is
Florida
Mobile,
about 40
San
mountain

passes in the country. Here a wind farm eerily catches the endless draughts that course through the gap, resembling a flock of giant white herons whirling like Catherine Wheels—a pinwheel or an instrument of torture that is the title of one of Tharp's dances from 1981, created in collaboration with David Byrne that plays off the deadly nature of both the nuclear family and the nuclear weapons facilities of Edwards Air Force base to the north, about 50 miles from her childhood home. This is also where trucks and cars

begin to dash nervously, pushing against the heat at 80 mph or higher, racing through a blistering landscape of low-growing acacia, Sonoran creosote bush and desert scrub.

It is June, and air conditioning only calms the burn of the fiery heat, and sunglasses merely dull the fierce white glare. I blink hard, and feel all my senses pulse. My pitiful little Chevy rental works so hard that the cloying stink of chemical air freshener is miraculously digested and spewed outside. I glance to my left and watch as young Marines, heads shaved like the desert with a bit of growth on top, sit high in the cabs of their trucks and muscle into the thick atmosphere. They are probably rushing to the Indian casino, or back to base.

As I leave the pass behind and the freeway rises slowly into the foothills, the Little San Bernardino Range becomes the San Bernardino Range, a far more formidable and elegant upthrust of granitic and metamorphic stone. This is composed of what geologists call basement rocks that are between 900 million and a billion years old. The beautiful ochre desert basin morphs into a lush zone of flowering tress, grasses and succulents. The radical shift in landscape works on me like a drug, making reality seem to slip and double. This is mimicked by a billboard that reads “Prevent Truth Decay,” and then a building that announces “Pawn” on one side and “Donuts” on the other. As I wonder if the sun has begun to alter my perceptions, I become entranced by the quicksilver action of light on the spray of jacaranda flowers and overshoot Rialto.

I take the next exit, drive south, then turn east and decide to travel an auxiliary road. The frenzy of the freeway drops away and I slow down, taking the time to look to either side. On my right I see California shingle houses, pickups in the driveways at an

angle, yards stretching out, alternating with light industry, then a house again. I can see no farms or gardens here, despite the fact that there is plenty of open space. This prompts me to wonder what San Bernardino County might have looked like 60 years ago. I visualize modest scratch farms stretched into relentless summer stillness. I picture an occasional 1950 Ford pickup and an otherwise empty road where the quiet is so deep the air trembles.

Now the rural, industrial and the suburban lurch up against each other uneasily. The rural and all it signifies is losing. What will win is unclear. Finally I come to a freeway overpass and grab the opportunity to turn around and head west again. I'm trying to stay on Twyla's trail.

... [W]e finally made it into Rialto, a community stuck along Route 66, somewhere between Fontana and San Bernardino, California, a one-story, pastel-colored, standard Old West town with a single main street, a stand of eucalyptus trees, three civic buildings ... only orange groves, their filthy smudge pots burning to keep the trees from freezing....⁴⁵

Back on Route 10, I choose Exit 68 and decide to feel my way to Rialto by driving toward the mountains. High before me are the startling rugged peaks of the San Bernardino Range, and were I to continue driving north I would leave behind the hot dry foothills and find myself amid an array of ecosystems, each with its own flora. The dry regions of the range would be cloaked in deep-rooted chaparral. The canyons would hold sycamore, live oak, big-leaf maple and white alder, and, under them, ferns, willow and herbs. On the mountain rim, where hardy plants thrive, I would discover that the forest contains ponderosa, Jeffrey and sugar pine, incense cedar, dogwood, black oak, lodge

pole and twisted limber pine. On the other side of the range is the infamous Mohave Desert, home of Death Valley. In the summer temperatures there reach 130°.

While the name conjures up the Rialto Bridge of Venice, Italy, Tharp's Rialto I soon discover bears no resemblance to Venice or the manicured hill towns of Northern Italy, no matter how many Muscat grapes once grew in this eerie Southern California foothill outpost. California's Rialto is bunkered low against the alluvial soil sifting up from the Rialto-Colton fault, and it squats against ferocious wind, heat and quaking earth. Strapped between active fault zones, close to 11,000 foot mountain peaks and two scorching deserts, Tharps's town, which once promised a Mediterranean-style life, seems like an echo of an Italian fantasy that has long been drowned by ubiquitous chain retailers and fragile well-being, a place that seems once upon a time to have longed for sophistication and prosperity and now merely hopes for survival. With no river and no literal or even metaphorical bridge in sight, its claim to be the "bridge to progress" is adds to the disconcerting air of the place.

Now firmly in Rialto, I wander up Riverside Avenue, which seems to be the main drag, and as I head north I watch a nondescript Southern California sprawl materialize that looks shabby in the hard, dazzling light, but also stoic and persevering. Casually draping itself along the upslope of the foothills, the blocks seems to communicate a welter of subtle distinctions, from variations in class status and ethnicity to history or its absence, and these signals flash from one side of the street to the other, from one block to another. The better-tended tracts are given upscale names, like Lilac Park, while directly across the street houses that share the same zip code seem to hang on with the biting

smell of fear and hunger: windows are barred, lawns are partly tended, and foreclosure signs dig into yards.

This pattern is briefly ruptured by a small stretch of far older buildings. Sixty years ago, when Tharp was still a girl, this patch of run-down, sturdy houses was the center of town. Now they are rented out to chiropractors, doctors and novelty stores. The most impressive structure of the group is the wooden First Christian Church, built in 1906 or 07, which currently houses the local historical society. According to John Anthony Adams, historian of the society and a former skeptic with a PhD in soil science, ghosts populate the old church, especially the spirit of 11-year-old Kristina Hendrickson who died of leukemia and whose ashes were stored in the building's basement. Her father, Dr. Merlin Hendrickson, saved the church structure from demolition in 1963—the year Tharp graduated from Barnard College in New York City—and converted it to a museum. When Kristina died four years later, he placed her ashes and some of her most beloved possessions in the basement of the former church. Since then sightings of ghosts have been numerous—four Rialto cops responding to a burglar alarm in the middle of the night encountered the apparition of a Victorian woman standing at the base of a stairway. She was, all four say, finely detailed but transparent and missing her feet. Adams says she and the other ghosts arrive at the Church through a portal in the kitchen.

In the harsh daylight I see no ghosts but as I walk the block of tired buildings, admiring the wide boulevard, wondering if a tram ran down its center to the train station below, I can feel the past. The leafy arcade of maple trees rustles and shimmies in the stillness, as though to rattle time's cage and whisper to me of what lies lost and forgotten

here. The dull yellow-pink-brown haze that hangs in the air smog accentuates the uncertain status of a place that was once a vast rancho and is now home to a predominantly Latin population struggling in single-family, cheaply built tract housing, and dependent on the fortunes of the Goodrich Tire Company, Black and Decker, the military, and nearby aerospace industries. I search around for some trace of the Serrano Indians, who are believed to have migrated to the foothills 2500 years ago; of the successful Mexican ranchers, the Lugos; of the first grape and orange growers who came in the mid-1900s; and of migrants from the Midwest, like the Tharps, but these histories have all but been erased by development and change, migrations and erosion.

Dancing Strange

I was still in high school when one Sunday morning on WNEW, the New York Public Television station, I saw a strange dance, danced by four women to music by composer Bix Biederbecke. The scene was silkily off kilter, like four solos done each done in a dream, inflected with some jazzy elements I knew from tap dance, some muscular arms from jazz. I would later learn that this was Twyla Tharp's dance and some of the dancers who performed often with her. The camera seemed to hover above them at a 60-degree angle at a distance of 20 feet. The women wore a neat uniform of what resembled street clothes but wasn't quite that accidental and they wore soft shoes. Although we only had a black and white television, I remember dusky tones—khaki, taupe, grey and off-white. Each of the four had her own dance spot on the floor, and each seemed to look down and in, decidedly introspective, moving her feet in odd, even mysterious, echoes of American Bandstand dances—the Mashed Potato, the Frug—even

though I knew it wasn't that but something else, something closer to talking to oneself. Their arms moved independently, and I recall a distinct sense that their limbs were in a bizarre conversation with their feet, like two people in one body sparring, together but separate. And this together-apart quality was repeated among the quartet who never seemed to communicate directly with one another but indirectly by the mere fact of dancing the same moves, or similar ones, and by being on the same stage floor; this put them inevitably in conversation. I found it disturbingly lonely but I also understood something, and it seized me with fascination.

This was dance like I'd never seen, and I had seen whatever a girl could see that was available on television, including the gothic dramas of modern dancer Jose Limon that felt like high mass in Catholic church, and the new ballet of George Balanchine, which bored me at the time with its mess of flailing limbs. Twyla Tharp was up to something so alien and true that I can still picture the dancer's feet in their soft shoes, and how the camera moved in on the individuals to highlight their funky-cool legwork. I still see the biggest woman of them all and her long hair flowing as she twisted her lower body and coolly angled her arms and torso in syncopation. It was another Californian—Margaret Jenkins, who grew up in San Francisco in a leftist working class/bohemian family. The other dancers were Sara Rudner, now head of dance at Sarah Lawrence, and Wendy Perron, my former colleague and senior editor at Dance Magazine.

It would be decades before I had the background and even the language to decode Tharp's movement innovation, her remarkable blending of jazz and ballet influences, and understand the alien dissonance and sexual uneasiness that threads through almost all her

work. But even after I knew these things, it was in Rialto that I grasped the heart of the contradictory reality of Twyla's early life and how it manifests in dance that straddles show business and concert dance, entertainment and something more sublime, the highway and the stage, giving form to the essence of California itself.

It was 1949 when Tharp's family, farmers and Quakers on both sides, left Indiana. Tharp was eight and would soon be scheduled from dawn to bedtime by her mother, who had given her eldest child Twila Thornburg's first name—Thornburg was the 89th Pig Princess of the Muncie, Indiana State Fair. Thinking of the future, Lecile replaced the "i" with a "y" for marquee appeal: her daughter would be a star, and by arming her with a military regimen of lessons—piano before she was two and violin, piano and drums, along with baton lesson with a world champion—the chances of Twyla's future success would be exponentially improved. The 6,000 square foot mansion Tharp's father built by his own hands in the Southern California foothill town included a practice room with a tap dance floor, ballet barres, costumes and castanets.⁴⁶

I canvassed Route 66 to the west and found myself in Fontana by mistake, so turned east and searched the street signs. After passing a dozen streets named after a flower or vegetable, Acacia appeared and I pulled into one of the slew of shopping malls that lined the way, located a patch of shade, parked and walked 50 yards to the corner of Route 66 and Acacia. Confronted by two barely distinguishable malls on the south sides of the street, I snapped cell phone photos of all four corners.

Route 66, locally known as Foothill Boulevard, is the transcontinental highway that opened in 1926 running from Chicago to California. It was designed to connect small-town America, from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Coast, like a string that could tie together the disparate pieces of the enormous land. Ironically, it became a channel of desperate exodus, delivering tens of thousands of bankrupt and destitute farmers out of the prairie lands of the American plains destroyed by the “black blizzards” of the Dust Bowl, emptying large swathes of the country’s center. By 1946 the highway was repurposed. “Get Your Kicks On Route 66” composed by songwriter Bobby Troup became an anthem of the post-war generation, a hip beboppers response to Woody Guthrie’s pre-war “This Land is Your Land.”

If you ever plan to motor west,
Travel my way, take the highway that is best.
Get your kicks on route sixty-six.

It winds from Chicago to LA,
More than two thousand miles all the way.
Get your kicks on route sixty-six.

Now you go through Saint Looney
Joplin, Missouri,
And Oklahoma city is mighty pretty.
You see Amarillo,
Gallup, New Mexico,
Flagstaff, Arizona.
Don't forget Winona,
Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino.

Won't you get hip to this timely tip:
When you make that California trip
Get your kicks on route sixty-six.

Won't you get hip to this timely tip:
When you make that California trip

Get your kicks on route sixty-six.
Get your kicks on route sixty-six.
Get your kicks on route sixty-six.

The song typified a footloose post-WWII spirit, and was to be immortalized in the television series called, simply, “Route 66”. As the Civil Rights movement gained steam, the hard rock despair that drove the farm migrants was digested and reconstituted as a political and existential quest for freedom and meaning. A trip down Route 66 was destined to be filled with nomadic discovery, cowboy virtue re-imagined by youth seeking an alternative to consumerism, injustice and war. Rather than a banged-up jalopy, the drivers would drive into the sunset at the wheel of a Corvette, the name of which was derived from a fast, lightly-armed warship. Or the Mustang, named for the fleet wild horse, also might do. To live in a town along the corridor of Route 66 was, to Tharp, at heart a footloose, impermanent thing:

We fit perfectly into Rialto. The town was made for the homeless. You didn’t live there, setting down roots, but used it up and drifted on, leaving the place to become one more ghost town. My parents built their new home in Quail Canyon, a wild, unsettled area directly over the San Andreas Fault and so near the foothills that my mother remained perpetually terrified of the brush fires that singed the dry mountains every fall. She kept all her important papers packed in boxes, ready to be moved at a moment’s notice. California encouraged impermanence.⁴⁷

As I stood on the sidewalk, again trying to see into the past, an old man trudged by, bedecked head to foot like some modern-day Tuareg in sun-protective clothing, his skin bleached here and there by what looked like surgical scars. It was only when he had reached the corner that a thought ballooned cartoonishly in my mind: “Look—he’s rather

old. He was possibly here then. He might know something!” I dashed in his direction and nearly jumped him. “Excuse me, sir, would you happen to know where the old drive-in was? It was owned by the family of a famous choreographer.” He turned a sour face to me and said, pointing to the southeasterly site, “Over there. The old man had his Oldsmobile dealership on that corner.” Then he abruptly turned and pressed on. How ingenious, I thought. Sell a car at the corner and usher the new owner in to your drive-in. Now I snapped the button on my phone in earnest. As a teenager, Twyla’s job was to help her mother police the cars, shining her flashlight into steamy windows to embarrass young lovers, which she did only often enough not to keep her job, while Lecile checked for stowaways in trunks and cheats whose tires indicated they had snuck in without paying. Her past-time, though, was to absorb and digest the contradictions of family and society—Quaker parents that wouldn’t touch in front of their children and insisted on arms being covered, although legs could be scantily clad, steamy movies of great romance and passion, and Hollywood’s censorship laws. As Tharp says, “...I experienced the drive-in as one large piece of pop art, a three-dimensional enactment of the world’s great erotic traditions....”⁴⁸

And what keener icon of modernity in the early 1950s than the drive-in, where

life was
transferred
to a small
metal
enclosure
sealed
from the
world like
ones own
box at the



theater, where eating, entertainment and sex could all occur singly or together, a serious if often ridiculous mash up of life outside? What finer key to Tharp’s aesthetic—her love of the romantic and trashy, the low brow and the high, craft and art? And Route 66 was the getaway—literally her road out of town.

Across the street from the former business life of the Tharp family stood a Goodyear tire store in a stone building that might have dated from the 40s. Was this part of the inspiration for Tharps’ dance “Route 66?” I crossed the broad road and ducked in. The coolness was a relief, and two men, smiling ironically—a customer! An easy touch—a woman! Maybe we can sell her four brand new ones!—pulled themselves to attention. What could they do for me? Well, I said, how old is this building?—it looks like it’s been here awhile. No, said the older guy. This building replaced the one that had

burned down several years ago, and he couldn't remember when the boss had opened, but it hadn't been that long. Maybe 10 years....There wasn't much more they could tell me, but they liked the idea that tires had been the inspiration of a dance. They liked it a lot, and gave me the president's phone number.

Despite my Sunday baptism into Tharp's aesthetic mystery, I only grasped that she was part of the modern firmament with the premiere of "Deuce Coupe" for American Ballet Theater in 1973. I went with Barbara, the Metropolitan Opera School-trained ballerina who shared the renowned Margaret Craske's withering opinion of most American classical dance as sloppy, if not trashy. I was still in the midst of trying to have an opinion of my own and, in what was my first experience of engaging in dance criticism, spent the night in hot debate with myself.

At the Metropolitan Opera House that night the audience seemed as divided as opposing fans at a sports arena, and a fractured excitement tinged with fear sent anxious sparks through the audience. Ballet, Beach Boys and modern dancers!! Psychedelic lighting and drug references visually and sonically!! The culture wars had come to the opera house. I have an acute memory of the experience of being as impressed as I was disappointed. Tharp had stormed the Bastille, perhaps, but as a reformer. The climax came when the down and dirty dancers, who were really fairly tame ballerinas and ballet men, slurped and bumped across the stage with slinky Broadway aplomb, as an iconic ballerina rotated like a sun in a light all her own. This seemed far less radical than I had imagined and probably hoped—more Broadway-meets-ballet than revolution-comes-to-fight the pointe shoes.

But that, I later realized, was a perfect window into Tharp's genius. She is Route 66 and impeccable Russian ballet via a protégé of Anna Pavlova (whose teacher was the great Enrico Cecchetti, mentor to Margaret Craske); she is the kid slinking around in the hot dark night at the drive in with cheeky sneakiness, which runs through so much of her work; she is the smartest kid in class, clear from her diabolical structures and vicious timing; she is the plebe who loves modern pop culture pioneered by Southern California and the princess who wants to transcend it. Dances like "Nine Sinatra Songs" are pure Tharpian synthesis, where women wear gowns, men are elegant in tuxes, and they collide and two step, fusing 1950s Rat Pack Hollywood romance with the lush style of ballet, a combination now, because of her, equally at home at the opera house as on television. Like her dances for "Hair" she embodies the vernacular of the street through a mix of wild, fast invention and slick showmanship, and the smell of new cars and the speed of the Southern California highway are in her dance's veins. And when the war of culture and family fall away, her works take on a diamond-like structure made blinding, at times, by the speed with which they materialize, performed by jointless fluid bodies. That is when she seems to be the pioneer of a sly new hybrid dance that blends Africa-American rhythms and forms with opera house style.

The place of the movie theater and the spectacle of the drive in frame her as does the desert. As she writes in her autobiography, *Push Comes to Shove*,

From our arrival in Rialto until my departure for college, I worked nightly at the theatre in the summer and every weekend during the school year....When business at the box office or snack bar was slow, I watched the movies and cartoons, learning in the process what an audience likes or

doesn't, because when they were bored we'd have a rush at the snack bar....⁴⁹

Its antipode was the nearby desert, where Twyla went to be alone and build miniature Mayan cities out of remnants of her father's construction—bricks, blobs of dried paint, wire and mud. She felt liberated in the desert. "The body, outside the mind's control, moves intuitively as though in a barroom brawl. The first time I experienced this sense of liberation is still vivid. One morning...reading in my private place...I heard the sound of a rattler very close by."⁵⁰ The rattler was a fat one, and wily, with seven rattles on its tail, and on that day she used her intuitive body in a new way. She carefully moved her cat off her lap, slowly rose, picked up the hoe she used for her Mayan civilization and then charged. She knocked the snake out cold then draped it around the branch of an olive tree, myth seeming to spring from the desert floor. Soon her father appeared to chop off the rattler's head and she knew she was changed. "...I remained high from the physical exhilaration: the fright, the battle, the victor, all made my adrenaline surge. I had tapped directly into the primitive drive that celebrates brave physical conquest, good over evil, through ceremonial performances. I had created my first dance."⁵¹

She got to New York on the back of the crazy logic of her mother's Puritanism, which nevertheless channeled enormous ambition for her daughter. When Twyla left home to go to college she went to Pomona College a bit north from Rialto where she fell in with Peter Young, a young bohemian who would expose her to modern art and women

who read de Beauvoir, had diaphragms and discussed abortion. The summer after her freshman year, her mother found her an apartment on Hollywood Boulevard so she could study with notable modern dancers who had been colleagues of Alvin Ailey. Young was in Santa Monica and came by often, and after a year of vigilant virginity, the couple had sex. That fall they were discovered making out in the chapel by a custodian, reported and faced with expulsion. Lecile's solution was to pack her daughter off to New York, to Barnard. Lecile must have figured that, being at a woman's college, Twyla would be safer from the temptations of the flesh. In fact, as it has for many dancers, New York allowed her thoroughgoing freedom. She had her boyfriend and she got to roll all her years of California training into a fast hot form of her own and take off in it.

She took dancers into Central Park, she created a complex mash up of work, some successful, some experiments that failed. Some of them reveal a struggle to stuff those endless hours of tap, baton twirling, shorthand, French, ballet, and gymnastics into a clarified form. Others let us peak inside her hidden conservative romanticism—a love of strong men and beautiful women. But her work is even more complex. She liked the experimentation of the downtown scene where dance-as-process was taken to the next stage following Anna Halprin's deck experiments. But Twyla wanted to embed her braininess in her dancing and not the other way around. She also smashed the aceticism of the downtown crowd and second-generation modern dancers, for whom poverty and renunciation were part of the calling, and evolved into a businesswoman every bit as astute as Lola Montez. From the beginning she played with form in wild ways, exploring the sensual desert animal body as well as the road—the hot ribbon of Route 66—which

she mirrored in endless unspooling movement. She brought California iconoclasm East, blended highway and stage, and fearlessly insinuated loose-limbed syncopations into the staid domain of the Opera House.

ACT FIVE

WALKING WITH MOLISSA FENLEY



Molissa Fenley in “94 Feathers”

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.....

Martha Graham⁵²

Two summers ago I was in New York City to pour over Molissa Fenley’s video archives at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts. After half a day in front of one of the library’s video monitor, I’d head down below Canal Street and meet Molissa for

several hours at her office inside the offices of Lovely Music. These were hot breezy July days where the sun laid itself like a fat spatula against the skin, and the summer air was already dense and sticky. Molissa had been the “bad girl” of the downtown scene in the 1980s for her unabashedly fierce, energetic dances and her refusal, like Halprin and Duncan before her, to mold herself to dance of the era. Now she has taken on a heroic dimension, still fiercely dancing at 57 and creating ample work each year.

She and I met at the old 1896 American Thread Building, once home of the Wool Exchange, where hardworking well-known performing artists have offices on the ground floor and plush millionaires live above in swank apartments. This is the place that shelters Molissa’s non-profit Momenta Foundation, which she established in 1985, momenta being the plural of “momentum,” a force essential to even glacial movement. It is a title that captures her love of forward linear propulsion and bodies moving along clear vectors. It also impishly making a play on her nickname, Mo.

I entered the last door in the hall and encountered an L-shaped space with a separate office at the end. The narrow wall fronted the street and the long wall looked on to the alley that grew shadowier the further it was from the Broadway. The far room was Mimi Johnson’s, the visionary arts administrator who shepherds Momenta, and, over the years, has managed the careers of such avant-garde composers as John Cage, David Tudor, Robert Ashley, Alvin Lucier, Phillip Glass and Gordon Mumma, among others. While she once had a stable of performing artists to complement the musicians, she shed all but Molissa and avant-garde theater director Richard Foreman.

I looked around. CDs were stacked high on an army of metal bookshelves, the air conditioner groaned ineffectively, and through a couple of large windows in Mimi's office I saw New Yorkers swim by as in a cloudy fishbowl. Molissa was already at work. As I settled in I noticed that Molissa seemed visually bound to the computer terminal, her body unmoving. This lasted for about an hour as she kept hard at various tasks. I sat at a round table nearby and began going through old newspaper clippings to find out what New York critics said at the beginning of her career. I was fidgety while Molissa sat with zen poise until suddenly, like canon shot, she bolted out of her chair. "Let's go for a coffee," she said, already in action, her large black traveler's wallet in her hand. I followed in her wake and dashed with her across the street for iced coffee at the Italian bakery where authentic Italian baked goods were sold in an atmosphere of a youthful idealism. But we didn't linger. Five minutes later we were back in the office for another round of work, she hammering out a grant proposal, me scouring through old reviews, but the stint was briefer this time: Less than an hour passed before Molissa needed to move again. She was in earnest. We would take a walk.

Molissa, who is 5'5", 100 pounds, and as lithe and muscular as a woman from some distant highland, has a potent need to move, and so we began an excursion heading west, toward the Hudson River. She planned to show me where her tall, equally lithe husband Roy had seen the fireworks the night before. We headed to the esplanade built along the river before the downtown attacks of 9/11.

We set out at a clip. I soon realized this was no ordinary walk.

Soho below Canal called to mind historic aspects of 18th century New York, before the canals were filled in or covered over. I examined the cobbles as we dashed past, wondered the age of the large stone buildings, and made mental notes to look up the location of the various streams that had coursed through this part of the island. But there was really no time to ponder. It was all I could do to keep up with Molissa's athletic stride, since our progression was less a walk than a running walk. And soon I could feel the canvas of my black Chuck T's rubbing against my bare heels with every step; the wounds that were forming began to weep. I wondered how long this excursion would last. More critically, I thought, would I?

I'm not unathletic. I danced for 20 years, and I love to move but I love it in bursts. When Molissa moves, by contrast, she moves without let up, her pace never slackening. She walks for long distances, and when you walk with her you get to experience the world at a breathless pace that can make your soles burn and muscles cramp. As I worked to keep up with her, a delicate sheen of sweat coated my skin, which made me think of a slick of water glistening on a San Francisco seal, though I knew that I shared none of the seal's damp glory. I looked over at her as she dodged a slow-poke pedestrian: Molissa appeared to push forward, her feet winged. Her cotton blouse billowed in a wind created by her speed, and she shimmered and vibrated, cool and unruffled. I knew from the great pleasure on her face as she met each new volume of air that space itself was thrilling to her. Abundant energy seemed to swell out and fill the region around her, charging the atmosphere. This created the sense that she was projecting herself forward into time, like a musician playing at the front edge of a note, transforming energy into momentum and

momentum into action in a kind of physics of the spirit. Once Frieda Lawrence said about her husband, writer DH Lawrence, that “his bond with everything in creation is so amazing, no preconceived ideas, just a meeting between him and a creature, a tree, a cloud, anything....I call it love, but it is something else...’saying yes’.” As Molissa was enlivening her surroundings on that sultry day, open to “a creature, a tree, a cloud,” I suddenly understood that she meets the world with a similar emphatic ‘yes’ and transmits into the environment what French philosopher Henri Bergson calls *élan vital* or creative life force, and what Yorubans call “*ashe*”. It manifests as power, intelligence, and an awakened and laser-like focus. I noted that most of the rest of us seemed to be slogging along in a hazy dream.

In 1961, when Molissa was 6, her father made a decision to move the whole family to Nigeria. He was a professor of agriculture at Cornell University at the time, but Molissa’s mother, Eileen, suffered from multiple sclerosis, and the disease was progressing rapidly. Doctors recommended that the family should move somewhere warm, which the medical profession believed at the time would retard the disease. This was during the early days of President Kennedy’s administration which had recently instituted the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, and being adventurous and socially motivated—Molissa’s father was from the high-desert farming community of Hemet outside Riverside, California, and her mother’s family migrated to Canada when Eileen was young--the parents joined the governmental ranks in Africa. There Professor Fenley would teach what were understood to be best farming practices to Nigerian farmers in the bush.

While the transition for Molissa as the youngest in the family of three children was abrupt and frightening, she adapted swiftly. The beauty of Ibadan, a bustling third world city of improvised buildings, markets and constant celebrations, the extensive physical freedom in nature that she suddenly had, and the rigorous international British-run school she attended connected her to the bliss she felt looking up at the sky in Ithaca—a still point of enchantment. Heightened by the intensity of the environment in her new surroundings, this sense of joy became a dominant aspect of living in West Africa. Nature was prolific, captivating, and engaging. Outside of school she ran about without shirt or shoes, free to roam the bush paths and jungle. She spent her non-school hours largely alone, or exploring the countryside with her brother Rick, where they learned to see nature with great acuity. She was soon able to swear in and speak pidgin Yoruba and became a fearless young Amazon, who couldn't be warned off her adventures by threats of parasites or poisonous snakes. The bush became her country.

The bush paths, she says, ran through

deep rainforest... there'[re] roots everywhere, there's rain everywhere, there's mud everywhere, and vines....It was really jungle [with] beautiful palm trees, all sorts of animals--not big-game animals--but all sorts of birds and snakes and lizards, beautiful sounds, strange insects [that propel you]... into a heightened auditory sense. [There is] sunshine, always sunshine.... It's just a little bit above the equator, so it's pretty hot and it's ... humid. Wide open spaces. Also very enclosed spaces because of the denseness of the jungle, and yet huge meadows that would open....expanses of land, and water everywhere.

You[r senses] become very heightened ... listening for something, something that's out of the ordinary, like a hissing of a snake ... There were these green mambos that would hang down from the tree boughs and just...be there, and obviously you would not walk beneath them. That would be very problematic. You'd just become aware that things had...a

... way of being, and when that way of being was in some way disrupted, then you had to watch out....

I remember...feeling very proprietary about the whole place... it was a land that I really loved....So many beautiful things happened to me in that environment. There were so many moments of bliss...of seeing beautiful relationships of tree boughs against the sky, against tall grass, against vines, and against the beautiful red earth....It was geometrically very beautiful too.⁵³

Nigeria was colonized by the British in 1900, while missionaries had populated the countryside since the 15th century and the arrival of the Portuguese. By the 1960s oil was a great colonial magnet and drew governments from around the world to the petroleum trade or the ancillary activities of national development and political brokering. Children of international governmental and non-governmental workers filled the Senior Staff School in Ibadan, a city 73 miles inland from the Gulf of Guinea, or at the International School in Lagos, the capital, which sits on the coast.

Whenever possible, Molissa accompanied her father on trips into the countryside. They had their favorite rest stops, and inevitably at one of the clearings, with an air of magic, they would go from being the only people on the road to suddenly, as Molissa puts it, being surrounded by “twenty people...selling pineapples....It was like a constant beautiful circus ... and I don’t mean that frivolously. I mean that life was teeming and colorful.” And daily life meant dance and music were everywhere. Molissa remembered that

often in town there’d be these huge celebrations of some sort—someone would be coming into town—the visiting chief or something--and everyone’s out and playing and beautiful dance, and bright lovely colors and that intense singing with that voice that’s striated.” [June NYPL interview] men, women dancing with women, sometimes together. [there

was] ways... a great band playing. It was very beautiful and loud and rhythmic, and I always wanted to join in.⁵⁴

Frequently she and Rick would stumble upon ceremonies during their wanderings and spy “some ritual...taking place that we would watch from afar ...there was something extraordinarily beautiful about these rituals,” she said. While she yearned to interact, and felt it wasn’t enough just to watch, these rituals were private and off bounds. Where the ceremonies were public, Molissa witnessed dancing that often lasted hours, dances that had strict forms and layers, but also seemed improvisatory, communal while remaining highly individual. Space and time were conceived as sufficiently elastic that witnesses were able to come and go, abiding by rules that in the West we would apply to play or party rather than to fixed performance. This relation to time, to group and individual, and to the ability of observers to dip in and out would become an important poetic influence on Molissa’s form.

Southwestern Nigeria is home to the ancient kingdom of Yorubaland, which includes areas of Benin and Togo to the west. At the heart of Yoruban philosophy is the concept of balance, and balance or its absence is revealed in the body’s degree of symmetry and control. Rather than disciplining the body as we do in the West, the Yoruban’s train the body to be poised, and ones amount of poise becomes a barometer of a person’s moral and spiritual state. The modern dance dictum that “the body doesn’t lie” arises out of a similar understanding of inner and outer worlds as aspects of a larger unity, where the visible elements—the posture, the facial expressions, the gait—tell stories about those aspects that are hidden. This is not a Puritanical “rightness” that the

Yorubans or modern dancers are after but a clarity in the body that goes far beyond athleticism and enters the domain of the psyche, where the mind, or “inner head” as the Yorubans call it—is disciplined and gives clarity, beauty and moral rigor to the body. The clear and beautiful body, in turn, loops back and refines the mind. Sweeping the body/mind’s channels free of clutter means the dancer can transmit life force, or *ashe*, the same force that Isadora and Anna discovered emanating from their solar plexus. But for the Yoruba, the ultimate test comes when a dancer maintains her inner balance during extreme physical challenge and exertion and onlookers see not duress but external poise. This is beauty, and its fruits are defined as “presence.” On stage and off, Molissa has it in abundance.

In 1971 Molissa returned to the U.S. to attend Mills College. She found the comfort of an all-women’s school appealing, had her older sister nearby in Monterey, and her relatives in Riverside County. She was 16, and intent on being a dance therapist—she liked to dance, and she knew she wanted to help people, although, in truth, she had no idea what Western concert dance was, and wasn’t sure what a dance therapist did. Still she signed up for modern dance class, and following the instructions in the department catalogue to wear proper attire, she appeared in the studio dressed, appropriately she thought, in a painter’s smock. By the second class she had commandeered a leotard and tights, and for the next four years, costumed in the regulation uniform, she joined every dance course, often repeating it in a subsequent semester, and appeared in as many classes as her schedule permitted. She trained in the technique of Martha Graham and Los Angeles-raised Jose Limon and learned the theories of San Francisco’s Louis Horst

and the Hungarian Rudolph von Laban, absorbed herself in music, and set to work right away making dances that her teacher, emerita professor Rebecca Fuller, said were inspired and inventive from the outset. Doris Dennison, collaborator of John Cage in the 1930s and 40s, was the department's music director, and students danced not only to Bach but to the experimental sounds of the composers housed across the street in the sprawling music building, where Molissa was introduced to avant-garde music, particularly to minimalism. It became the perfect artistic storm for Molissa: she would acquire Western dance and music structures in California to channel West African sensibility. While she was busy at work, some of the minimalists were turning from Europe to Africa or India and returning with revolutionary syntheses.

New Music was spawned in the Bay Area by LaMonte Young, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich, and it owed its tonality, continuous drones, and polyrhythms first to American jazz and eventually to the young composers' direct study of African or Indian rhythmic forms. Reich, who got his masters from Mills in 1963, went to Ghana to apprentice himself to master drummers. Riley and Young became devotees of the world-renowned north Indian vocalist Pandit Pran Nath. For Reich, rhythm, competing downbeats, unrelenting repetition, and loosely scored playing exemplified by Riley's groundbreaking work "In C," led to "a ritualistic activity that subjugated personal expression to communal process."⁵⁵ While he adapted Ghanaese musical structures he learned in Accra, his point was to transmute his Western forms, not to create imitations of African music.

Imitating the sound of non-Western music leads to exotic music; what used to be called Chinoiserie. Alternatively, one can create a music with one's own sound that is constructed in light of one's knowledge of non-Western structures... This brings about the interesting situation of the non-Western influence being there in thinking, but not in sound... [this] is likely to produce something genuinely new.⁵⁶

In a sense, the exotic culture for Molissa was the U.S., and she looked to Western modern dance for ideas that ragas gave to Philip Glass and Ghanese rhythmic irregularities presented to Reich. Once she had these ideas in place Molissa, in the lushness of a 135-acre campus populated by an edenic array of flora, and the visionary architecture of Bernard Maybeck, his brilliant protege Julia Morgan and other architectural gems, could apply the African cultural forms that had schooled her in spirit celebration, ritual and non-verbal communication. Like her music counterparts, she found a way into group engagement and complex perceptual states that were radical and new, Western but non-Western, and relevant in an age of globalism. California made this synthesis possible.

Before reaching Oakland she had little exposure to Western modern dance traditions, and this gave her the advantage that she didn't have to unburden herself of years of modern dance or ballet to find a new voice, as her peers did. She had few of the physical or psychological impediments to keep her from creating a basic movement vocabulary of runs, skips, hops and leaps. These are movements that are not only highly legible and universally identifiable. They are Isadora's language, and the basis of Lola and Anna's dances. They are also extremely adaptable to complex rhythmic patterns in a way that fussier steps are not, and this meant that by the time she got to New York at 21,

Molissa who loved to power walk along the path that edges the Mills campus and goes up brown hills, down into wooded walnut groves and out into redwood glades, had learned to craft these seemingly simple basics into waves of orchestrated motion. As her aesthetic evolved, she held fast to the self-expressive ideals of Isadora and Martha Graham, and took inspiration from the fact that these revolutionary choreographers forged an idiosyncratic language from movements they believed were part of a shared human kinetic and place-driven vocabulary, one that had the power to reverberate in all viewers. She became a cross-cultural mover and dance maker who was a West Coast hybrid, finding a synthesis in the capacious space of Northern California and the sensory memories of Nigeria. And when she put her distillations on stage she shook up dance categories and confounded expectations. She also upset critics.

Molissa arrived in New York City in 1975, a fearless 21-year-old with a sensuous, chiseled face, a long sinuous torso and single-minded purpose. In 1977 she formed a company, Molissa Fenley and Dancers and began to make her presence felt with *Planets* and *The Willies*. She then thoroughly woke up the downtown New York scene with the premiere of a 50-minute rhythmic bash called *Mix* (1979). Here she employed three dancers and herself moving with maracas, sand blocks and ankle bells with all bodies on deck for the duration of the work. Throughout, the group made quick, simple patterns in 4/4 time that grew wild as they moved in counterpoint to their raucous and exuberant clapping and stamping. It was a work that combined solos, circles and cross patterns, and it led to an ingenious and remarkably fresh, open, even joyous celebration that allowed

audiences to see in its full glory the growing dishevelment that such prolonged effort brings. Augmented by a miked floor the dance unfurled like a complex moving and aural tapestry and is reported to have evoked in viewers a sense of both elation and exhaustion, like a folk dance of dos-y-dos on steroids. Joy, especially joy combined with grueling exertion, was not a well-known commodity in the brainy and ultra-cool downtown dance world in 1979. And what buoyed and energized this particular joy, what made it strange for audiences, were forces that merged two distinct terrains and sets of values.

Critic and dance scholar Sally Banes admiringly and sympathetically has called Molissa twice “an outsider,” but it might be more apt to say that she holds citizenship in two worlds—post-colonial Nigeria and the U.S. She is the first to say that she was never absorbed into black Nigeria, and yet inevitably she experienced herself as a Nigerian girl. And although she is a U.S. citizen with roots in Northern California, where she learned dance, and Southern California, where she visited her grandparents, she stands apart from the Americans whose childhoods were shaped by the political and cultural tumult of the 60s from sit-ins to political assassinations to liberation movements to the counterculture. When it came to her relation to the human form, and the complex role of the body on the land, though, she saw herself as a citizen of the earth, always in motion across its face, schooled in the beauty of Africa and Africans but emboldened by a California woman’s sense of physical and existential freedom. At the same time she admired and identified with the disciplined freedoms of the Nigerian body, the way, perhaps, Lola Montez identified with the expressive Indian bodies that teemed in her own unrestrained Indian childhood. To Molissa the human body was

...this absolute gorgeous means of transport. This transport doesn't just transport you—it transports everything that we do while carrying a baby, and laughing.... I remember once seeing a guy on a bicycle with 10 mattresses on his head.... And beautiful bodies, beautiful necks and gorgeous strength. That was absolutely exquisite to watch—to be in a world where the body was just so in balance, always in balance. You just couldn't believe it. They carried water on their head and not spill a drop.⁵⁷

Despite Banes' sensitivity to Molissa's status, in the early years of her career, a significant number of dance writers, seeing only a whirr of rapid-fire movement, interpreted Molissa's fierce output as a sign of contamination by a raging new cultural phenomenon: the aerobic dance craze and the emergence of jogging as the physical pursuit of the time. Arlene Croce of the *New Yorker* believed the work was more closely allied to American physical culture than to dance, and in one review compared a solo by Molissa to a naked "sports event"—the kind of dance that is done at half-times and was common on music videos—while dismissing other of her choreography as belonging in the category of "regulated material—literally sports and game."⁵⁸ Critic and scholar Lynn Garofalo, confessing in 1985 to disliking Molissa's dance, wrote in the *Berkshire Gazette* that: "Her non-stop aerobics bruised my senses, leaving me by the end of one her marathons like a runner exhausted at the finish line."⁵⁹ Advancing this theme to the next step, another critic described her as the "Fonda of postmodern dance". One particularly snide pan of three works written by Clive Barnes says that, at best, Molissa's work "has more in common with calisthenics than dance."⁶⁰

Molissa was even compared, sometimes lovingly, other times less so, to the Energizer Bunny, the 1989 Energizer Holdings company mascot that moved in robotic perpetuity.

Clearly, anxiety was in the cultural air. Aerobics was storming the country, covering bodies in brightly colored high-legged spandex, with Jane Fonda its leading doyenne. Joggers in tracksuits with terry cloth sweatbands were taking to dusty roadsides, Europeans were laughing at Americans who took their obsessions abroad with them, jogging around the Tuileries, Hyde Park or the Ringstrasse. The man behind this new craze was Dr. Kenneth Cooper, a colonel with the U.S. Air Force, who had been assigned to prepare astronauts for space. Later known as “the father of the modern fitness movement,” Cooper began gathering data that proved that aerobic exercise could prevent heart disease and other illnesses associated with affluent, sedentary living. These data were rolled into Cooper’s 1968 best seller “Aerobics,” a book that changed the late 20th century approach to fitness. Soon an Air Force nurse, Jackie Sorenson, approached him with the idea of a workout routine to music, which she would call dance aerobics. Cooper urged her on and a woman-centered fitness boom soon swept the country. Although it was easy to ridicule at the time, Aerobics was a real threat to dance, and not only on aesthetic grounds. Suddenly dance-like work outs that promised toned, sleek bodies in an atmosphere of pop music and self-absorption were siphoning off dance studio clientele who wanted the joy of moving to music without the pressure of meeting vaulted standards of performance, or of joining a priesthood of the arts. Besides, the costumes were a whole lot sexier.

Molissa didn't participate in dance aerobics, but she was introduced to cardiovascular training at Mills, and it influenced her approach to her daily regimen. As part of a new appreciation for heart/lung health, the Mills Dance Department brought in trainer Patrice Griffin in the early 1970s to work with the department's dancers, since a study found that dancers, to everyone's surprise, lacked cardiovascular stamina. Molissa already had a life-long love of running—her childhood was filled with swift flight over African bush paths—so she not only took to the new training regimen (it entailed running around the dance building), but she soon incorporated endurance into her choreography. She loped daily on the campus' fitness trail, California bringing her into deeper alliance with West African dance that could last for hours and required extreme stamina on the part of the participants, and planted her in the fitness regimes that came out of the Rockies, a synthesis that also reflected her willingness to transgress hi-low dance boundaries. Cardiovascular workouts became vital to her when, two years after arriving in New York, she ditched the historic training method of attending daily dance class, and struck out on her own to condition her body. She knew that in order to make a new kind of dance, she had to find a different way of preparing her own instrument, and so, like the West Coast iconoclasts before her, she pioneered an idiosyncratic approach to conditioning. Hers combined cardiovascular and strength workouts with modern dance technique classes that she administered to herself every day in a dance studio, the same training she still practices.

She had a number of champions, among them Sally Banes, Ann Daly, and John Gruen, but Anna Kisselgoff, the lead dance critic for the New York Times, was the most

visible and vocal among them. She seemed to understand the import of Molissa's physical vibrancy:

We have seen the dance of the future and it works. In "Energizer," a new piece seen Sunday afternoon at the American Theater Laboratory, a very young experimental choreographer named Molissa Fenley creates a tremendously exciting work that blasts her audience into a new, and brave, world of dance.... What is stunning about "Energizer" is...its appeal to a kinetic response. ...To concentrate on the formal organization of the piece is to miss its impact.⁶¹

Energizer communicates even in its title Molissa's goal to fashion a dance as a fierce source of physical power. Kisselgoff underscores this fundamental aspect of Molissa's early dance: the dancer's intense kinetic output creates an equally keen kinesthetic response in the viewer. Other work, like *Hemispheres*, create a similar response, but so, too, do her more recent, quieter pieces, such as the homage "Bardo" for visual artist Keith Haring and dancer/choreographer Arnie Zane, who each died of AIDS, or her 2010-11 *Prop Dances*, which have a decidedly introspective cast. But neither Kisselgoff nor any of Molissa's other admirers truly plumbed the contours of that energetic body or what, precisely, made it so communicative.

While the aerobics tag was misplaced, Molissa's development of an Olympian body was inspired, in part, by the athletic training for women of the 1970s and 80s, which itself echoed the late 19th century health movement that had supported the first wave of modern dance. But what Molissa found in the radicalized physical culture of her time was far more than superficial fitness, just as Duncan and Ruth St. Denis took much more than physical comfort from the dress reforms of the 19th century. Molissa discovered feminism in bodily form and this gave her a means back to the physical values of her childhood, a

Yoruban philosophy of the physical that is neither industrial nor military but rather expresses complex ideals of physical presence, moral balance and beauty through male and female strength and endurance. Her childhood experience imbued Molissa with a noble concept of the moving body, while her physical freedom at the time endowed her with a sense of her own human capacity. At Mills and then in New York, she made use of these ideas to challenge the genteel boundaries of female physicality in the U.S., joyously reformulating those parameters with new notions of beauty, elegance, moral clarity and gender identity. While Duncan merged images of graceful strong female Greek bodies, Emerson's pantheism and Ingersoll's liberatory pragmatism, Molissa created a radical synthesis of her own by combining 70s U.S. physical culture, the archetypal structures of Martha Graham, the movement structures of Louis Horst, and African rhythmic phase patterns in the service of ritual and community.

In Molissa's tour de force, *State of Darkness*, her solo set to Igor Stravinsky's 35-minute "Rite Of Spring," written between 1912 and 13 for Ballets Russes' wunderkind, Vaslav Nijinsky, the dancer/choreographer goes for broke. The score, which remains This remains a throbbing and beautifully cacophonous piece of music, was set to Nijinsky's "primitivist" ballet and ignited a brawl at the Champs-Elysees Theatre in Paris in 1913. "State of Darkness" for Molissa became the apotheosis of her new solo career, which was perceived as foolhardy, while taking on the iconic score, which was slammed as arrogant. Who did she think she was to put herself on par with Nijinsky, to take on Stravinsky? Molissa knew precisely: she was the African-raised, American trained hybrid dancer

choreographer who each day felt Stravinsky and Nijinsky watch over her daunting efforts in the studio.

Dancing the full 35-minutes alone, her lean androgynous form dressed only in black tights, rib case at times fluttering bird-like with the rapid bellow action of her lungs, with her only companions being David Moodey's haunting atmosphere of light and dark and the riotous score, Molissa enacted a ritual of death and rebirth. In it she meets trial upon trial and overcomes them. Like Psyche before the impossible tasks set by Aphrodite, Molissa performed her missions as though her life depended upon it. She shapeshifted—from masculine to feminine, from human to animal, from quotidian to mythic, taking the seed that Lola planted and developing it as Anna did to its shamanistic conclusion but using energy and duration rather than improvisation as her tools. And throughout she danced with relentless fervency until the audience was nearly undone by exhaustion on her behalf and she stepped into the light. She made us witness to an ancient-seeming modernist ritual of far-reaching depth leading not to the sacrifice of the woman, as in the original, but to her liberation.

Far from constituting a “naked sports event,” her effort allied itself with the Yoruban ideal of exertion as proof of the equanimity in the face of great trial. “Despite the fact that the body is in a state of perpetual strenuous or energetic movements [sic], the dancer must always maintain a balanced state of calm serenity....”⁶² Molissa captured the paradox by juxtaposing stillness and motion, in creating stillness at the center of fierce action and great action at the center of stillness. “State of Darkness” exemplified

the former, while “Mass Balance,” which she still performs, is a beautiful illustration of the great exertion necessary to communicate a state of near-motionlessness.

Walking that day by the river made me newly aware of Molissa’s relationship to space, time and energy, in and out of the theater. Whether it’s the Joyce Soho or an area of crowded city street, space seems to be an arena of sleeping potential for her. For over 30 years Molissa has worked hard to wake up that potential by transmitting life force in highly patterned, repetitive, enigmatic and evocative form, inviting the audience into a relationship that nearly pulses. In California, Molissa found female freedom to match the physical largesse of the state and this became her laboratory where inner and outer, Nigeria and California met happily. Her dances exist in a series of what she calls overlapping worlds, offering us a portrait of our minds amid a weave of past time and space with the present. She evokes the archaic forms of Egypt and Japan, the freeform movement of Isadora Duncan, the fearlessness of Lola Montez and the pantheism of the Yoruba in the knowledge that the body is a divining as well as a lightening rod that must remain keenly attuned to the mystery and power of the natural world and the energy that we both draw from it and give back.

FINALE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2008 I was at a garden party hosted by Janet Holmgren, a Napoleon-sized woman who was President of Mills College for 20 years. That weekend she was to give actress Rita Moreno, now a resident of Oakland, an honorary doctoral degree. Moreno, Puerto Rican born, who moved to New York City in 1936 and became a budding actress, scored the role of Anita, queen of the Sharks in the film version of *West Side Story*, a role that blew out the competition and won her the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in 1961.

On the patio that Wednesday, Holmgren had gathered two-dozen women from various areas of the college to honor the actress, and after we milled around she brought us into a circle to introduce ourselves. I stood mid-way on the circuit from the actress, directly across from then-trustee Lois DeDomenico, creator of the rice/macaroni dish in a box, Rice-A-Roni with her husband Tom. After I said my name I looked at DeDomenico and said: “Lois, it is thanks to Rice-A-Roni that I’m here. It was the company commercial with the San Francisco cable car that lured me West.”

Everyone laughed. It may have been funny but it was also true.

Or at least part of the truth. The story, like all stories, is more complicated. To Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys I would have to say it’s because of you, Brian, that I bought a skateboard in 6th grade and tore down hills like a surfer girl on a wave,

imagined myself in a landscape of infinite light and white sand, where my hair would be sun-streaked and I, too, would look like a California girl in a bikini. It's thanks to you I set out West.

To be honest, I would have to delve further back. To Shirley Temple Black I would say: it is because of you that I'm in California and a dancer and writer. On Sunday mornings I became you tapping down polished wooden stairs with Bill Robinson in "The Little Colonel" defying curmudgeonly Lionel Barrymore, a white girl dancing with a kindly and elegant black man who mentored and entertained. In those moments I was the child who danced like an adult, talked with preternatural articulateness, and was a curly-headed orphan who could tell truth to power and create happy endings. Most of all I was the dancing girl who found equality through tapping.

To Henry Miller I'd say thanks for the sensuous depiction of Big Sur. You lured me West, made rawness transcendental and the bond of California's land with eros both inevitable and elegantly Dionysian.

I'd tell Steinbeck, you incised my imagination with vivid images of the hope and tears that drew the Dust Bowlers West, the smells and sights of the orange grove, and power of the downtrodden to claim justice in an unjust world.

To Kerouac I'd give the nod for his crazed song of the open road and thank him for my faith in geography's ability to alter destiny.

I'd tell Alan Watts, with his vision, his humor, his erudition, and his intransigent spirit, that he made California seem to be the stage that made reincarnation possible. To Suzuki Roshi: the mystic seed you planted had potent allure. California has something brighter than light and quieter than open space.

I also came to California because of Chas, the first boy I kissed, whose family pulled him away from stuffy Connecticut to California after 7th grade. And I came because of Californian Muffy, with her long kinky grapefruit colored hair and open-air spirit who brightened our dour shores in 9th grade like fearless sunlight. She was a New England antidote shipped in from the Pacific. I credit my dear friend and fellow seeker Kitty and her sister Linda who joined an ashram in Santa Barbara. They were my echolocators when I took the plunge into the immense void of the horizontal land of the Pacific. I bow to Billy, whom I'd known since our childhoods in New York and Connecticut. Wild Billy who got booted out of Georgetown and settled in the lotus land of Isla Vista, later evolving into one of the most dogged activist lawyers on the West Coast. I owe California to Danny, a failed first love who was in school in Oregon. I choose California sun over Oregon rain, independence over fraying ties. And I owe California to Michael, scion of the dry high Eastern mesas of Pendleton, where the Umatilla and the Okies still uneasily coexist, who schooled me in the moral code of Chief Joseph and the hardscrabble life of the tuberculosis-prone woolen mill workers and families.

It is equally important to list some of the reasons I didn't come to California.

I didn't come to California because of the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, or the Jefferson Starship. I didn't come to California because of hippies in the Haight, free music in the Golden Gate Panhandle, abundant sex or good drugs. I didn't come to California to be famous, join the movie industry, go into the wild, or grow pot in a state park. I didn't come to California to be a beach bum or a ski bum or an environmentalist. I didn't come to California to join a cult or even to have fun.

I came to California to find temperate weather and to battle East Coast intolerance. I came to California to hear the ocean pound. I came to California to find the heart of still-forming truth. I came to California to find kindred spirits. I came to California in the spirit of Henry Miller. I came to California on the path of my three maternal ancestors who divided from their siblings and ventured West during the Gold Rush. I came to California to patch together a life of dance and reflection, politics and personal freedom fused with social purpose, and to flee East Coast blue blood's stranglehold on meaning and justice. I came to California as a last ditch effort. I came to California to learn, to somehow dance or to give up dance, to be the beatnik I wanted to be as a 7-year-old, to be thin and taller, to let myself be smart. I came to California to be a feminist. I came to California to not go crazy and end up institutionalized. I came here to get in the face of my fears and stare them down. I came to California for something older, deeper, and more iconic. I came to California to escape my East Coast fate. I came to California to flee my family. I came to California to shock myself into self-recognition. I came to California to start a new life. And here, in California, I got to make dance the

center of my life—to dance, to write and now to teach in one of the oldest dance programs in the country.

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