

## Editors' Note: Speculations on the Queerness of Dance Modernism

In our editors' note to this special issue of *Dance Research Journal*, we invoke the spirit of a person whom we have encountered as Betty Baaron Samoa in the archival records, yet we do not know if this was the name she would like to be invoked by. Her likeness has been with us, but we did not notice her for a long time. She appears in a series of photographs of Rudolf Laban's dance workshops on the Monte Verità, Ascona. Laban had commissioned the photographer Johann Adam Meisenbach to document his early experiments in free dance in the summer of 1914, shortly before the outbreak of a war that would change the face of Europe. There she is, sometimes eerily smiling at us, sometimes coyly looking away, alone or with others, dressed and in the nude, framed by the mountains and trees of the Ticino region. Betty Baaron Samoa has always been with us. Laban scholars noticed her, but did not write her into their research. We encountered her many times in Meisenbach's pictures, for instance in the second edition of Hans Brandenburg's seminal volume *Der Moderne Tanz (Modern Dance)* whose appendix of black-and-white photographs constitutes the core visual repository of early dance modernism in Germany. She appears in the second edition of this volume (ca. 1917), but not in the third edition that was published in 1921.<sup>1</sup> The black-and-white reproductions hardly distinguish the tone of her skin from that of the other dancers (see [photo 1](#)). This changed when new color prints of the original autochrome plates started to circulate after the death of Laban associate Suzanne Perrottet, whose estate was donated to Kunsthau Zürich (Schwab 2003; Prange 2014) (see cover image). Betty Baaron Samoa was a woman of color.

Who was Betty Baaron Samoa? When working on this editors' note, we were wondering whether we had missed information. There are some traces of her. However, the few instances in which her name is mentioned barely constitute viable archival material, especially compared to the extensive holdings on many of Laban's other collaborators. Her last name, "Samoa," as it is listed in the catalog of Kunsthau Zürich, carries an uncanny reference to German colonial history: from 1900 to 1919, German-Samoa or Deutsch-Samoa was a German protectorate under the reign of Emperor Wilhelm II. Thus we refer to her as Betty, as we would have liked to call her.

The picture that we have chosen for the cover shows Betty hand in hand with Katja Wulff and a dancer who went by the name of "Totimo," standing in a circular formation typical of Laban-style early modern dance and its community-building aspirations, with Betty's body in contrapposto, her face in the shadow. Three interwoven bodies, more than a couple but not quite a group, are closely related by touch and movement—a queer bunch, maybe not so far from the nearly contemporaneous "representation of non-normative sexual acts" (Järvinen 2009, 202) that Vaclav Nijinsky put on stage in *Jeux* (1913). They are an assemblage of apprentices in front of the "pedagogical landscape" (Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit 1980, 5) of the Lago Maggiore and its surrounding mountains, where life was going to be reformed in all aspects, including sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Dance was but one of the few practices aimed at reconciling the body with its environment, propped up by concepts such as nature or the natural at the center of the ideology of life reform.



Photo 1: “Labanschule.” From left to right: Isabelle Adderly and Totimo (?) in the background, Maja Lederer, Betty Baaron Samoa, and Katja Wulff in the front. (Brandenburg 1917, 70). Photo: Johann Adam Meisenbach, courtesy of Barbara Zimmermann.

In Laban’s edited letters, Betty—without any last name—is evoked twice, as part of his traveling entourage in 1913/1914, with Laban calling her in one letter “mein N\*kind” (my n\*child) (Laban [1913] 2013b, 69). A more recent study refers to her as a nanny for his children (Schwab 2003, 188). She thus seems to have been a member of Laban’s chosen family, in which the term “child” must lead to speculation: Was she an adopted child, a caretaker for his children, or part of his polyamorous network? She may have been a dancer in his ensemble, a creative presence in her own right next to Laban’s many collaborators; Evelyn Doerr lists her among the names of Laban’s “assistants and students” (2008, 33). Perhaps Betty was all of the above; perhaps she fulfilled only some of these roles. When Laban presented his new methods for the first time in Munich in 1914, she might have traveled with him, participating in one of the founding moments of modern dance in Germany. In photo 1, taken from Brandenburg’s book, we see *her*, and not Laban, holding the gong. Did she inspire Mary Wigman, next to Laban the other major time beater of the movement? What might the future of this movement have looked like if Betty had taken on Wigman’s position?

We know little about the sexual history of dance modernism, as much as sexuality was constantly discussed, from Isadora Duncan’s reproductive politics to a common genealogy of dance as a sublimation of sexuality (Duncan [1902] 2013, 167; Brandenburg 1917, 9; Toepfer 1997, 11; Brandstetter 2015, 89–198). In the beginning of 1913, shortly before Betty appears in the Meisenbach photographs, Laban is engaged in a ménage à trois with Maja Lederer and Suzanne Perrottet, and sexuality is (at least then) a core concern of his artistic exploration, as he explains in a letter to Perrottet:

My little love affairs are dying down—that means mental recovery. I hope this does not interest you very much. In my current work, i.e. in the current phase of my

work a new view of the solution of the question of sexuality is emerging. Outwardly polygamy—sometimes polyandry . . .—inwardly—rest—love of the “idea”—and its representative—unapproachable for the crowd.—And your concerns, my angel, my love, my soul, my flower—my God! (Laban [ca. 1913] 2013a, 64; our translation).<sup>3</sup>

Betty's appearance in the historical photographs and letters not only raises questions about her implication in the “little love affairs” that Laban conducted next to his primary relationships with Lederer and Perrottet. They also draw more general attention to the family constellations of modern dance: to its early genealogies, its family trees and hereditary lines with those who danced and those who played the drum; to the invisible relations between the bodies that practiced in remote Ascona and those who became artists and dancers in the European and North American metropolises, those that did not make it through the war, and those who survived in the background, as caretakers, spouses or lovers; to those who fit into the white ideology of the new natural and national body, and those who complicated it. However, even though that which we know about Betty as yet does not enable us to lift her out of the shadow, she holds a power of appeal that urges us to reconsider dance modernism from the perspectives suggested by her presence. This includes a queering of what Paisid Aramphongphan calls the sexual and racial “straightening devices” (2021, 153) of dance historiography.

## Intersectionally Queer

Laban's reference toward both heterosexual and homosexual love affairs, and Betty's unknown status within the group of dancers and lovers that would have been involved, are among the numerous examples that show a strong connection between sexuality and modern dance—and the speculative forms of queerness that this relation evokes. If modernism at large has become nearly synonymous with queerness, as Heather Love (2009) suggested already more than a decade ago, this special issue of *Dance Research Journal* adds (more) dance to the equations of modernist studies and their tenets and turns. Clare Croft argues that “queer dance challenges a narrative that overly celebrates written text,” making a case for queerness that “emerged in action,” whether “in protests” or “on stages” (2017, 13). In a similar vein, we seek to (re-) activate the critical potential of incorporated modernist archives by shedding light on queerness as methodological pathway in the broadest sense: as nonnormative gesture that has the potential to destabilize the territorializing force of (canonical readings of) modernist dance. One of the central challenges of these movements and acts of remembering consists in the fact that many modernist performances of gender and sexuality—whether under the guise of the “natural” body, such as on our cover photo, or under the guise of less naturalized stagings—were at the same time corporeal representations of race—and vice versa.

In order to engage with the overdetermined questions engendered by this situation, we take part in a conversation that began before and goes beyond the scope of our project. In particular, we are keen to acknowledge the recent special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, “Outing Archives, Archives Outing,” edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli, Bryce Lease, and Royona Mitra (2021). The present contributions complement the latter's forms of decolonial “outing” with an expansive and experimental use of speculative intersectional queering. Their non-identitarian theoretical endeavors and creative journeys into archival material are based on dance historical research that recognizes the pitfalls of any anachronistic application of twenty-first-century queer sensibilities to early (and later) twentieth-century performance. If “queer modernist performance,” as Penny Farfan maintains, “anticipated, and was in a sense foundational to, the insights of contemporary queer modernist studies,” it did so by way of tactics and strategies that do not necessarily match today's political agendas (2017, 1).

With this in mind, we agree with Croft's observation that “much more work needs to be done to examine queer dance within global migration and translation (2017, 6),” and we add to this work

from our position as European dance historians and dance theorists. As an editorial collective that is culturally and academically socialized in (former West) Germany and in the UK, we bring together our respective stakes in the field of queer modernism. Mariama Diagne spent a decade on deciphering the personal, professional, and public ties that were connected to Pina Bausch and her early works as choreographer and dancer. Questioning the myth about the predominantly German modernist aspect in Bausch's aesthetic, her book on the notion of "gravitas" in Bausch's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (Diagne 2019) reveals the importance of the American balletic lineage in the work of the choreographer. From there, Diagne began to inquire how much this white Western perspective was also defining body concepts within the Wuppertaler Tanztheater more generally. The stories of Black and queer company members living in Germany during the 1990s—a violent phase with many attacks carried out by neo-fascists—did not make it into Bausch's pieces, which stylized the everyday life of the dancers and the so-called battle of the sexes in a manner detached from political realities. Diagne currently turns to rereading dance history and repositioning herself as dancer and dance scholar of color, to collectively articulate new, queer approaches to contemporary performance theory. Lucia Ruprecht, after finishing her book *Gestural Imaginaries: Dance and Cultural Theory in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ruprecht 2019), saw a need to expand her initial work on queering the modernist archive, not least because the material in this book on the gestural and ethnic drag of Alexander and Clotilde Sakharoff opened promising theoretical perspectives for a revisionist historiography of modern dance (Ruprecht 2022a, 2022b). Eike Wittrock has been engaged with queer performance histories in Germany, in both curatorial and historiographic work on dancers such as Julius Hans Spiegel and Joachim von Seewitz, figuring out how to engage with the rich queerness of performance archives and their unexplored relationship to colonial, exoticist as well as sexological discourses (Wittrock 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

Following Love's statement, "queer modernism has an air of inevitability about it" (2009, 745), and Croft's, "queer does (rather than is)" (2017, 2), might we not claim that all modernist dance, and all modernist dancers, were—to some extent—queer? The list of homosexual and queer performers is scintillating and substantial: Loïe Fuller, Anita Berber, Tilly Losch, Alexander Sakharoff, Itō Michio, Harald Kreutzberg, Kurt Jooss, Sigurd Leeder, Julius Hans Spiegel, Vaslav Nijinsky, Baruch Agadati, José Limón, Ted Shawn, Carmen Tórtola Valencia, Gret Palucca, Mary Wigman, Berthe Trümpy, Hedwig Nottbohm—to name but a few.<sup>4</sup> Modernist dance was largely antinomian, and it self-defined in contradistinction to the aesthetic norms of the danse d'école. Ranging from absolute movement to mime, futurism to primitivism, the expressionist solo to new forms of (non)narrative group choreography, and encompassing political agendas from left-wing emancipation to right-wing reaction, modernism in dance was indeed "slippery" and "shapeshifting;" it was "messy, heterogeneous" and certainly "contradictory," all of which are markers of dance's general queer potential (Croft 2017, 10).<sup>5</sup> However, we would like to single out the undisputable contribution that sexually dissident modernist performances and performers made to dance's more generally queer creative energy, and argue for the transforming power in this contribution of an aesthetic that was racially dissident, too. There is a need for writing dancers like Nyota Inyoka and Baruch Agadati, as addressed in two of the following articles, into the discourse of dance studies, to acknowledge how dance modernism's often unilateral association with the norms of white Western universality must be complicated, and how these norms were sometimes rendered undecidable already at the moment of their inception. There is a need, then, for analytically attending to the "excesses of meaning" (Sedgwick 1993, 8) that emerged on the transnational continuum between creative adaptation, knowledge transfer, and cultural appropriation.

Scholars like Nikita Dhawan (2014), Stuart Hall (2019), and Rolando Vázquez (2020) question the innocence of modernity as a historical concept of liberation for the arts, stressing the entanglement of modernist culture with notions of Western superiority (Valls 2005). As editors, we seek to navigate the double bind of the rich history of modernist dance and its colonial and therefore racist contexts. Looted human and natural resources from the colonies underpinned Europe's financial capital and thereby enabled the endeavors of art. Our cover photograph, including the Black dancer

Betty, whose name bears testimony to the colonialist situation, constitutes a gesture of shared privacy. How much imagination and speculation are adequate for entering the historical time of the artistic and private lives of those who have been excluded from historiography? The photographed nakedness of the three dancers intimates a series of questions: What role did the human body in stillness and motion—with its bone structure and posture, its physiognomy, and its skin color—play in dance modernism in terms of queering hegemonic imaginations of sexual identity? Who are those that remain invisible in the archives or in existing historiography? How can they be brought to light carefully, without exposure, and by whom?

The contributions to this special issue engage with history and historical material in manifold ways, showing how artists employed queer tactics and techniques to either create transhistorical queer communities or complex forms of expression in which gender, sexuality, race, nation, and religion do not signify monolithically. The authors are searching for the “possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances” (Sedgwick 1993, 8) in identity formations, investigating how dance (and dancers) have been working with and/or against the “social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity” (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 1). “Queerness is often transmitted covertly,” writes José E. Muñoz:

This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. (1996, 6)

The articles trace the complex, and in each new installment singular, forms in which modernist practices were (sexually and racially) queer, or demand queer methodologies of reading. By doing so, they go beyond a preoccupation with the sexual biographies of their protagonists, to give attention to the queer aesthetic of their performances or the queer inflection of their teaching method. The responses to our call for contributions focus on Western practice, but they also add nuance to our understanding of the latter, when turning to Bessarabian-born Israeli choreographer Baruch Agadati and to the undecidable ethnic origin of choreographer Nyota Inyoka.<sup>6</sup> They revisit research on “the raced and gendered nature” (Kraut 2011, 7) of the formation of North American and European modernist dance, and they tease out implications and complications of the fact that the universal subject of modernist choreography—as it was proclaimed by critics like John Martin and subsequently in the “standard literature on twentieth-century theater dance”—had to be an “elite white subject” (Manning 2004, ix; Foster 2011, 52).

Sandra Chatterjee, Franz Anton Cramer, and Nicole Haitzinger’s contribution, “Remembering Nyota Inyoka: Queering Narratives of Dance, Archive, and Biography,” makes explicit a methodological commitment to perspectives that go beyond those that can be provided by constellations of ones or twos. Chatterjee, Cramer, and Haitzinger’s explorations of theoretical, archival, and choreographic attitudes that help us to remember the fragmented traces of the Parisian choreographer of (uncertain) color conjure up Inyoka’s voice as a tentative fourth agent in their scholarly discourse. The resulting meshwork of their text casts doubt on any clear-cut readability of whiteness/non-whiteness, using the concept of creolization to acknowledge the inevitable inequality and hierarchization that came with Inyoka’s hybrid practices of appropriation and self-fashioning.

In “Queering the Skeleton in Dance’s Closet,” Janice Ross shows that North American dance pioneer and pedagogue Margaret H’Doubler’s use of the white bone structure of the skeleton in her teaching practice as a “seemingly unmarked and innocuous” anatomical tool was in fact “overwritten with the cultural, gender, and racial conflicts of the time” (2022, 33). Speculating about H’Doubler’s preference for an ostensibly neutral bodily model in the classroom, Ross’s inquiry



adds yet another layer to modern dance's association with (closeted lesbian)<sup>7</sup> white female empowerment that was founded on terms that were either explicitly or implicitly racist.

Alexander Schwan also engages with a dancer whose homosexuality remained closeted for a long time: Israeli dance pioneer and choreographer Baruch Agadati. In "Queering Jewish Dance: Baruch Agadati," Schwan tackles a wide range of documentary material. By showing how Agadati put on stage the constructions of gender as well as cultural, national, and religious identity, the contribution argues for Agadati's version of Hebrew Dance as an inherently queer phenomenon. Schwan carefully traces how Agadati employs various forms of orientalism to covertly express homosexuality as well as foster an "allegedly more original Jewishness" (2022, 60).

In "Modernist Continuities. Queer Jewish Dances, the Holocaust, and the AIDS Crisis," Hannah Kosstrin extends the temporal and conceptual remit of modernism to the 1980s by looking at three choreographers who mobilized their Jewish queerness as activism within their work during the peak of the AIDS epidemic. Kosstrin explores how Meredith Monk, David Dorfman, and Arnie Zane used modernist compositional tactics to create queer Jewish temporalities and communities that formed an imaginary of embodied peoplehood, situating the contemporary crisis within transhistorical pain.

The urgency of queer rereadings of Western dance history is also evidenced in the reviews section. The reviewed books range across a variety of locations, institutions, and styles of dance, such as Erick Mattsson's engagement with queer life within the dance company Ballets Suédois in *Dancers, Artists, Lovers: Ballets Suédois 1920–1925*, or Paisid Aramphongphan's recontextualization of Judson works with queer visual art practices in *Horizontal Together: Art, Dance, and Queer Embodiment in 1960s New York*. The reviews themselves also powerfully testify to queer methodology in the nuanced approaches of their authors, when Irvin Manuel Gonzalez makes transparent his own queer perspective and his current situatedness while discussing the edited volume *Queer Nightlife*, or when Alyssa Stover thinks about the impressions left on her by Lynn Sally's self-positioning in her book *Neo-Burlesque: Striptease as Transformation*.

Together, the articles and reviews in this special issue unfold a pluriverse of queer intersections. Our thanks go to everyone who added yet another dimension to it: the contributors, the peer reviewers, and the editorial team at *Dance Research Journal*.

Mariama Diagne, Lucia Ruprecht, and Eike Wittrock

## Notes

1. A small version of one of the photographs also appears in the catalog of the exhibition about the Monte Verità by Harald Szeemann (Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit 1980).

2. Harald Szeemann's Monte Verità exhibition is subtitled *The Breasts of Truth (Le mammelle della verità/Die Brüste der Wahrheit)*; the catalog contains an entire section on "sexual revolution" (Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit 1980, 107–119).

3. "Meine kleinen Liebeleien sind im Abklingen – das heißt geistige Gesundung. Ich hoffe, das interessiert dich nicht sehr. In meinem momentanen Werk, d.h. in der momentanen Phase meines Werks entsteht eine neue Sicht der Lösung der Frage der Sexualität. Äußerlich die Polygamie - manchmal die Polyandrie (Vielmännerei) - inwendig - Ruhe - Liebe der "Idee" - und seines Vertreters - unnahbar für die Menge. - Und deine Angelegenheiten, mein Engel, meine Liebe, meine Seele, meine Blume - mein Gott!"

4. See Wesley Lim (2022, 174), who quotes from the diary that dancer Yvonne Georgi wrote during one of her tours to the United States with Harald Kreutzberg, commenting on the performance world there: "Everyone's gay in New York" (our translation).

5. Compare Love's claim with regard to literature: "What makes queer and modernism such a good fit is that the indeterminacy of queer seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production" (2009, 745). Given that modernist novels, such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), forge an "aesthetic of queerness" by imagining "a space where the body and sex (in the biological sense) are completely malleable" (Kahan 2013, 356, 358), and movement (whether of the performing or the journeying body) is eroticized, dance was predestined to play a prominent part in imagining the ambiguously gendered self in new ways. See also Caserio (2010). On sexological discourse and modernist dance, see Linge (2022).

6. In this sense, the articles on Agadati and Inyoka contribute to the emerging historiography of global dance modernisms, see Manning (2019, 2021).

7. On Mary Wigman and lesbianism, see Manning (2006, xvi–xix) and Müller (1999).

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