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# Martha Graham, 'An American, A kosmos': Border-crossing in Martha Graham's early works

Adeline CHEVRIER-BOSSEAU

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- 1 Martha Graham was not a stranger to border crossing: in her autobiography, *Blood Memory*, she recalls the nine-day journey from Pittsburgh to Santa Barbara that took her and her family across the country when she was fourteen:

When I would stand at the end of the last car, the East was the home I was leaving, though of course now hundreds if not thousands of miles away. And when I'd run to the front car I'd watch the West unroll before me; it really was a frontier. [...] The train was taking us from our past, through the vehicle of the present, to our future. Tracks in front of me, how they gleamed whether we went straight ahead or through a newly carved-out mountain. It was these tracks that hugged the land, and became a living part of my memory. Parallel lines whose meaning was inexhaustible, whose purpose was infinite. This was, for me, the beginning of my ballet *Frontier*. (Graham 1992, 43-44)

- 2 This major episode of her life, the crossing of state boundaries and heading to the unknown, to the Frontier, appears as a defining moment for the future choreographer and pioneer of modern dance. It combines her engagement with American mythology (the Frontier, the opposition between the Puritan East and the "wild" West as a symbol of the future of America), her relation to the American landscape, as well as her modernist artistic quest, visible here in the correlation between human movement – fourteen-year-old Graham running back and forth in the train – and the movement and rhythm of the machine (here, the train) with the American landscape as an ever-evolving backdrop.
- 3 Crossing boundaries – in time, space, style, genre and gender – is constitutive of Graham's artistic project: as a dancer and a choreographer, she perpetually strove to "make it new", to create a new, modern way of dancing, unfettered by the weight of conventions originating in Europe and resolutely attuned to the indigenous rhythm and vitality of America. As she writes in the "Affirmations" collected by Merle

Armitage, “like the modern painters and architects, we have stripped our medium of decorative unessentials. Just as fancy trimmings are no longer seen on buildings, so dancing is no longer padded. It is not “pretty” but it is much more real” (Armitage, 97): true art has to spring from real life, not an imitation of it, otherwise it becomes, as she puts it “decadent” (Armitage, 99). For Graham, modern American dance is organically connected to the American territory and its indigenous physicality and rhythm:

The modern American dance is characterized, like the true dance of any period of world history, by a simplicity of idea, an economy of means, a focus directly upon movement, and behind and above and around all, an awareness, a direct relationship to the blood flow of the time and country that nourishes it. To have an American dance we must take these characteristics as a starting point, then from a cognizance of old forms we shall build a new order (Armitage, 100-101)

- 4 This paper explores the connection between modern dance and the American landscape, and examines the correlation between Graham’s forays into the American territory and the American past, as well as her border-crossing and boundary-breaking in her pioneering choreographic work – notably through the way she associates primitivism and modernism in her early works and through her lifelong dialogue with literature. Like all the other great dance pioneers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Graham was hugely influenced by literary pioneers such as Walt Whitman, who literally became the poster-artist for all modern dance pioneers; for these pioneers, Whitman was the first “modern” American poet, and they echoed his plea for indigenous American art, his admiration for the immense vitality of America, and, in the case of Graham – as we will see – his conception of body and gender. Among the many literary influences that left a mark on Graham’s choreographic style and philosophy, Whitman occupies a special place, and therefore this paper will also highlight the Whitmanian influence on Graham’s conception of the West, her relationship to the American territory, her association of primitivism and modernity and her quest for the “truth” of the American body and its expression through true, natural movement.

## 1. “O you daughters of the West”: the American West, pioneering choreography and the Whitmanian relationship to the American territory

- 5 In the opening quotation from Graham’s autobiography, the West is identified as the future of America, whereas the Puritan East stands for the past. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the West was indeed where the future of modern dance originated from, with dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, as Graham herself asserts in her “Affirmations” (Armitage, 109<sup>1</sup>). Indeed, Duncan also recalls the founding episode of her family’s journey across America in her autobiography:

I was still a product of American Puritanism—whether due to the blood of my pioneer grandfather and grandmother, who crossed the Plains in a covered wagon in '49, cutting their road through virgin forests over the Rocky Mountains and across the burning plains, sternly keeping off or battling with the hordes of hostile Indians, or my Scottish blood on my father's side, or whatever it was—the land of America had fashioned me as it does most of its youth,—a Puritan, a mystic and a striver after the heroic expression rather than any sensual expression whatever, and I believe that most American artists are of the same mould. (Duncan, 63)

- 6 Like Graham, Duncan stresses the organic link between her identity as a woman and as an artist and the American territory, and like Graham, she highlights the double identity of pioneer American artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, torn between a Puritan core and this western revolutionary driving force within them. Duncan repeatedly represented the West as the soil from which modern dance sprang<sup>2</sup>:

And this dancing, that has been called 'Greek.' It has sprung from America, it is the dance of the America of the future. All these movements—where have they come from? They have sprung from the great Nature of America, from the Sierra Nevada, from the Pacific Ocean, as it washes the coast of California; from the great spaces of the Rocky Mountains—from the Yosemite Valley—from the Niagara Falls. (Duncan, 223)

- 7 Just as Graham would do later with her steady exploration of the Puritan roots of the American psyche, which are always confronted to a Frontier-oriented liberating future in ballets like *American Provincials* (1934), *Frontier* (1935), *American Document* (1938), *Letter to the World* (1940), *Salem Shore* (1943) or *Appalachian Spring* (1944), Duncan conflates past, present and future in her artistic quest. This wide temporal and geographical exploration of America is highly indebted to the poetry of Walt Whitman, who appears as a spiritual father for the dance pioneers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. As in Walt Whitman's representations of the West, the American West in Graham and Duncan's depictions stands for the past, present and future of America altogether: it is the locus of American primitivism, the present source of life revitalizing the country engaged in a deep process of mutation, as well as its future, where pioneering artists originate. In his poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!", Whitman – like Duncan and Graham in their autobiographies – presents the West as the future, and the movement westward as an act of "leav[ing] the past behind": "All the past we leave behind, / We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world, / Fresh and strong the world we seize" (Whitman, 192). But for Whitman, the westward quest of the "pioneers" is also an excavation of the past, which will allow the construction of the future:

We primeval forests felling,  
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,  
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,  
Pioneers! O pioneers! (Whitman, 192)

- 8 Here again, the West stands for the past, the present and the future at the same time: the destruction ("felling") of the past (the "primeval forests"), the exploration and excavation of the soil ("piercing deep the mines within", "the virgin soil upheaving"), coincide with the promise of a future – the "virgin soil" freshly upturned being the blank page on which the future of America will be written. In classic Whitmanian fashion, Graham also crosses these temporal boundaries in her quest for new movement. Analyzing Graham's early works, Mark Franko notes that "in 1926, Graham's choreographic project seemed motivated by a quest for the primitive. As she declared: 'We must first determine what is for us the Primitive – that expression of its [America's] psyche only possible to a supremely cultured and integrated people'<sup>4</sup>" (Franko 1995, 51). For Graham, building the future of American dance first means exploring its past – its "two forms of indigenous dance, the Negro and Indian", which she establishes as the "primitive sources" of American dance:

These are primitive sources which, though they may be basically foreign to us, are, nevertheless, akin to the forces which are at work in our life. For we, as a nation, are primitive also – primitive in the sense that we are forming a new culture. We are weaving a new fabric, and while it is true that we are weaving it from the

threads of many old cultures, the whole cloth will be entirely indigenous. [...] Their [the dancers of America] dancing will contain a heritage from all other nations, but it will be transfigured by the rhythm, and dominated by the psyche of this new land. Instead of one school of technique ever becoming known as the American dance, a certain quality of movement will come to be recognized as American. (Armitage, 100)

- 9 The sartorial metaphor Graham uses (“We are weaving a new fabric, and while it is true that we are weaving it from the threads of many old cultures, the whole cloth will be entirely indigenous”) explicitly combines the old and the new, the primitive and the modern, in her artistic project. The transnational dimension (“a heritage from all other nations”) is also important, since building the future of American dance requires the crossing of temporal boundaries, but also of geographical boundaries. This combination of primitive and modern, as well as the transnational dimension, are first apparent in the role that Native American culture takes in her choreographic research; in her own admission, Graham was always fascinated with Native American culture:

The American Indian dances remained with me always, just like those haunting moments before sunrise in the pueblos, or my first view of the Hopi women in their squash blossom hair arrangements that I was to use in *Appalachian Spring*. [...] Although I have been greatly exposed to the Native American tribes, I have never done an Indian dance. I've never done an ethnic dance. I've received an excitement and a blessing and a wonderment from the Indians. (Graham 1992, 176)

- 10 Even if she “never (did) an Indian dance”, Graham integrated indigenous movement and references to Native Americans in her ballets – like *Appalachian Spring*, mentioned above, *Primitive Mysteries*, *American Document* (which features an entire sequence on the Native American heritage and a group dance, “Lament to the Land”, interspersed with fragments extracted from a letter by Red Jacket) or *El Penitente*, which is inspired by the rituals of the Native Americans of the American southwest as well as by medieval mysteries – in another transnational primitivist conflation, searching for the roots of American spirituality. As Franko notes, Graham's transnationalism in her quest for American primitivism is limited to the American continent and isn't transatlantic – as it was for European modernists:

In her search for the primitive, Graham traveled closer to home than her European counterparts. She looked instead to the Indian culture of the American southwest and Mexico. The primitive other that contained secrets masked by western civilization was to be discovered in non-European cultures. Graham sought primitiveness within the geographical boundaries of the American continent, and even within America itself. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she attempted to identify her otherness as American rather than her otherness from the American. [...] The “other” primitive space was an esoteric or uncanny space structuring a physical environment called “America” that awaited theatrical discovery. (Franko 1995, 52)

- 11 Martha Graham didn't actually need to look elsewhere for primitivism, since, as she explains in the affirmation quoted above, “we, as a nation, are primitive also” (Armitage, 100). Whenever Graham mentions the European tradition of dance, she represents it as a stifling model, limiting indigenous American creativity. In fact, one could argue that her plea for the advent of an indigenous American dance much resembles the quest of the authors of the American Renaissance, as expressed in Emerson's “Self-Reliance” for example. As she explains:

Interest from America in the dance as an art is new – even to dancers themselves, fettered as they have been to things European. [...] Granted that rhythm be the sum

total of one's experience, then the dance form of America will necessarily differ greatly from that of any other country. So far the dance derived or transplanted has retarded our creative growth, in spite of the fact that there are thousands of ardent dance pupils in this country. It is not to establish *something American* that we are striving, but to create a form and expression that will have for us integrity and creative force. (Armitage, 97-98)

- 12 Graham rejects the idea of producing “something American”, an art which might seem exotic to European audiences, for the sake of being different from European art and “typical” of the United States. As Franko puts it, she explores the notion of otherness within the American identity, not “otherness as American” – meaning identifying the American as “other” for the European. Her conception of Americana is therefore very different from Balanchine's, who on the contrary often resorted to the “popular” kind of Americana, the “different-from-Europe” kind, inspired by the American popular culture that was becoming increasingly popular in Europe – the culture of jazz and glamorous movie stars<sup>5</sup>. Graham's search for indigenous American movement is a search for the truth of the American body, a desire to be true to the American soul, to take into account its history, its many shades and rhythms. In her exploration of primitive cultures, Graham strove not to imitate Native American dance, to “do an Indian dance” for the sake of folklore, but to integrate the vital primitive energy she found in these dances.

## 2. Native American dance and the search for the truth of the American body

- 13 In the American tradition of representing Indian dance, Native American dancing is routinely associated to an absence of restrictions or constraints to the dancer's body: in Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, the unrestrained physical expression of the dancing Indians is incomprehensible, illegible and terrifying to the captive Puritan<sup>6</sup>. In Walt Whitman's poetry, Native American dance is equated – in a more positive approach – to the pure expression of the body, to the truth of the human body. The “Red Squaw” in “The Sleepers” is the embodiment of physical health and fitness, the incarnation of the truth of the body in her unrestrained, free and unaffected movement: “Her step was free and elastic, and her voice sounded exquisitely as she spoke. / My mother look'd in delight and amazement at the stranger, / She look'd at the freshness of her tall-borne face and full and pliant limbs” (Whitman, 361). Many studies have investigated Whitman's fascination for the body, for its physical, kinetic expression and his conception of what a “healthy” body is<sup>7</sup>; for Jimmie Killingsworth, “Whitman's physicality implies a new understanding of beauty based on the health and vigor of the body” (Killingsworth, 14). In his poems or in his prose works (we can think for example of the “Manly Health and Training” series or articles published in *The New York Atlas* in the middle of the nineteenth century), Whitman praises the body's unaffected beauty, rejects anything that can restrain it, prevent it from moving freely, and argues in favor of wholesome physical exercise (preferably outdoors)<sup>8</sup>. Whitman rejects bourgeois and Old World affectations that degrade the body: his vision for the true American body of the future is that of a healthy, active body, whose vigor is a match for the vigor of the new nation to be invented. What Killingsworth calls Whitman's “physical morality” recalls the principles of Delsarte – which were increasingly popular in the 1870's<sup>9</sup> – as well as Duncan's own quest for the soundness

and morality of the healthy, unrestrained body<sup>10</sup>, and Martha Graham's famous maxim "Movement is the one speech which cannot lie" (Armitage, 99)<sup>11</sup>. Like Whitman's, Graham's fascination for Native American unrestrained physicality is akin to a desire to revert to what Susan Jones calls "a pre-civilized, liberated body" (Jones, 160).

- 14 The liberation and free expression of emotions through the body is at the core of the Graham technique: as Mark Franko explains, "rather than imposing emotional typologies on the body, Graham saw the dancer as the producer of autonomous action that is open, in equal yet separate measure, to technical refinement and emotional inflection" (Franko 1995, 62). Graham rejects imitative dance and pantomime (one of the pillars of the European ballet tradition) in favor of the search for true movement, that doesn't imitate but actualizes emotion in the here and now of the performance. Her famous contraction and release technique, which provokes a hunching of the torso and a thrusting forward of the pelvis, forces dancers to experience emotion through the body, not in stylized gestures. Dance critic Edwin Denby thus contrasted ballet's obsession with lightness and elevation to the Graham technique:

Miss Graham, beginning with modernism, made of heaviness and oddity a complete system of her own. Brilliance in heaviness and oddity became her expressive idiom. This is one way of explaining why much of her style looks like ballet intentionally done against the grain, or why she has used lightness and ease not as fundamental elements but for their value as contrast. (Denby, 127-128)

- 15 Much as Whitman's speaker in "Song of Myself" "sound[ed] [his] barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world", Graham explores 'barbaric' movement, using flexed feet, off-center or hunched torsos, non-classical *port de bras*, which are all anathema to the classical ballet tradition. Like Duncan before her<sup>12</sup>, Graham also advocated dancing barefoot to feel the organic connection to the floor<sup>13</sup>. Eschewing dance shoes and pointe shoes is part of the overall liberation of the body, as well as a grounding gesture. Again, Graham adopts here a Whitmanian "barbarian" posture; in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman also frequently represents subjects or speakers walking barefoot in moments of communion with nature, as in the opening lines of "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking":

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,  
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,  
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,  
Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child  
leaving his bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot. (Whitman, 206)

- 16 The image proposed here is that of the body in a state of purity and original innocence, as if fresh from the womb. The return to childhood, to this original state of the body's purity and freedom, appears several times in the poem: "I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair, / Listen'd long and long" (Whitman, 208), "The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the/ atmosphere dallying" (Whitman, 210)<sup>14</sup>. In these passages, the bare feet allow the body to be grounded in the surrounding nature, to connect more deeply to the elements and to free the body - now open to all sensations. In his article "Hair, Feet, and Connectedness in 'Song of Myself'", Taylor Hagood writes that

One key to understanding Whitman's complicated presentation of "individuality versus democracy" lies in his depiction and positioning of body in "Song of Myself". Particularly important is his alignment of the human body along horizontal and vertical axes. Whitman portrays the head and the feet as the body's extreme connection points. (Hagood, 25)

- 17 In her autobiography, Graham evokes a similar circulation of energy in the body, and also posits the head and the feet as “the body’s extreme connection points”: “the awakening starts in the feet and goes up. Through the torso, the neck, up, up, through the head, all the while releasing energy” (Graham, 122). The Nietzschean opposition between Apollo and Dionysus, between the high and the low connection points that Hagood identifies in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, stands for the poet’s conception of the American democratic ideal, the verticalness of American individuality and the horizontalness of democracy (Hagood, 26-27). One reason Franko and Graff put forward to explain the criticism addressed to Graham’s choreography by the workers’ dance movement is that her early work focused too much on the individual, or on the opposition of the individual versus the group<sup>15</sup>. In *Primitive Mysteries* or *American Provincials* (1931 and 1934), the female soloist is opposed to the group, but later works like *American Document* (1938) offer a Whitman-inspired vision of American democracy. Graham integrated fragments of poems from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in the piece, along with Lincoln’s Gettysburg address and passages from the Declaration of Independence. Built like a big American pageant, *American Document* unfolds in sections, or episodes, from “Declaration” (centered around the Declaration of Independence), to “Occupation” (focusing on Native American history and legacy), “The Puritan” (a section in which passages from canonical Puritan texts are read, like the sermons of John Edwards or the works of Cotton Mather), “Emancipation” (with passages from *Leaves of Grass* and the Gettysburg address), to the fifth and final episode “Hold your Hold” in which soloists speak for the group, their voices uniting a million voices – a plural American voice that has become one. The pageant-like structure cannot fail to echo the very structure of *Leaves of Grass*, the sweeping movement across the land, Whitman’s famous enumerations, that play on the same dynamics of individual versus collective: Whitman gives a face and a body to many individuals occupying various functions in society who stand for the group they represent (the workers, the mothers, the children, the rich, the poor, the white and non-white) – and therefore become both individual and collective. The lyric voice in *Leaves of Grass* is both personal and impersonal, thanks to its fluidity of identification. Similarly, as Ellen Graff notes, “in *American Document* Graham stood not just for herself, but for America, for all people in all times, the oppressed and the repressed, the enslaved and the liberated, the beggars, the workers, the fighters, the idealists” (Graff, 130).

### 3. A universal modern American body?

- 18 As Mark Niemeyer writes in his article on the representation of Native Americans in *Leaves of Grass*, “the [...] surprisingly frequent appearance of Indians can be seen, in fact, as a natural part of Whitman’s nationalistic project to make his work distinctively American” (Derail & Roudeau, 70). Yet, Niemeyer continues, “in *Leaves of Grass* the presence of Indians is ghostly; they are seemingly there and not there at the same time” (Derail & Roudeau, 70). Similarly, Indians are everywhere and nowhere at the same time in Graham’s work; a good example of the use of the “vanishing Indian” trope in Graham’s work is the disappearance of the character of the “Indian Girl” in *Appalachian Spring*. In the script for the ballet, Graham writes:

But America is forever peopled with certain characters who walk with many of us at certain times in a very real way. [...] This is why I have introduced the Indian Girl. There is no reason in one sense for her to be there and yet she is always there... in

the names of our cities, states, rivers, and in the play of all of us as children. We can never escape the sense of her having been here and of her continued existence as a supreme spectator to all of our happenings. She is the symbolic figure of the land, the Eve of this Genesis. (Graham 1943, 2)

- 19 Like Whitman before her, Graham adopts an ambiguous posture here, between the classic white American acknowledgement that Native Americans have indeed disappeared and are now relegated to a ghostly presence, and a desire to integrate Native Americans in a “great American epic”, as “pieces of a unified, national whole” (Derail & Roudeau, 81). As Jacqueline Shea Murphy delineates in her chapter on Graham and Indians, Graham also integrated Native American movement in her technique:

Dancers from the early 1930s note the influence this exposure to Southwest American Indian land and culture had on Graham’s class work and choreography. Dancer Marie Marchowsky writes of “the contraction and release principle,” described as the “fundamental source” of Graham’s early course work: “The exercises were primitive: legs and feet parallel, hands cupped, feet flexed as if rooted into the earth. The movement was influenced by American Indian dances—a source of inspiration to Martha.” (Murphy, 151)

- 20 Sally Banes and Brenda Dixon Gottschild identify that type of movement – “frequent pelvic thrusts, crouches, bent legs, flexed ankles, and flat feet” – as “African-Americanisms” (Banes, 63); if we think of the example of *American Document*, Native American and African-American inspirations are indeed conflated in this piece. The structure of the ballet is modeled on minstrel shows, and the movement is clearly inspired from both African-American and Native-American traditions, which, combined with references to American history and many signifiers of Americanness, aim at creating what Clare Croft calls “a universal American subject”:

In *American Document*, one white female body, or a group of white female bodies, signified American identity as a composite of all racial, ethnic, and gender identities. An abstract *mise en scène* offered little suggestion of a specific location or time, a choreographic dislocation that made the work’s textual references to specific events in American history mere frames. (Croft, 111)

- 21 In Graham’s ballets, the white female body appears as the universal American body, capable of fluid racial and gender identification. In the context of the rise of totalitarianism in Europe, Graham took a stance against Nazism and Fascism by celebrating democratic, pluri-ethnic America; her representation of Americanness is therefore far from a folkloric depiction of America as exotic and “other” compared to Europe. On the contrary, Graham opposed American primitivism to the European troubled political context to celebrate a universality of human experience, in which the pioneer, courageous American woman – always the lead role in her ballets – appears as the embodiment of the future. The crossing of temporal and geographical boundaries in Graham’s quest for the universal American body also entails a crossing of the boundaries of gender. In her 1930 essay “Seeking an American Art of Dance”, Graham identified the American creative urge as masculine: “Although she may not yet know it, America is cradling an art that is destined to be a ruler, in that its urge is masculine and creative rather than imitative” (Graham 1930, 249). The complex Grahamian gendering process is already visible in this passage, in which America is seen as female (through the use of the pronoun “she” and the representation of motherhood, America “cradling” the art of dance) but engendering a strong masculine force. This representation is echoed in the conception of her female roles, strong women who do

not “act feminine”, whose power and strength is their main feature, and who are driven by a “masculine” force and willpower. For Mark Franko, Graham’s feminist quest to choreograph dance for the modern woman led to the creation of her particular brand of “feminine masculinity”:

Graham’s revolt against the classical tradition seemed to be a revolt against an artificial “feminine” in the name of an essential “masculine”. Yet her rhetoric allows a third term to show through in which the feminine is recuperated: an imaginary feminine masculinity; there is this a double consciousness through which Graham articulates her own experience in male terms, but also reintroduces the feminine. (Franko 1995, 56)

22 The notion of Graham’s “double consciousness” is central to her work in many respects: it is both the consciousness of possessing masculine and feminine traits, and a form of double consciousness of being both a white American woman and essentially “other”. In her autobiography, Graham recalls being mistaken for a woman of Chinese descent while eating in a New York Chinese restaurant<sup>16</sup>; the waiter’s amusing conclusion “You come from San Francisco. You are Chinese” and Graham’s acceptance of his conclusion reflect how she had integrated racial otherness as part of her identity. She was not just a white puritan from Pennsylvania, but a Californian who had integrated Native, Hispanic and Chinese features within her identity. Although Graham has been charged with cultural appropriation by several critics (Graff, Croft, Murphy), my contention is that even if Graham’s double consciousness cannot be equated to W. E. B. DuBois’s concept and experience as an African-American, in defense of Graham, there is at least in her artistic project and construction of identity an acknowledgement of the essential otherness of American identity, of a constitutive otherness within the American identity, integrating its Native American and African-American streaks deep within (and indissociable from) the white American identity.

23 In this respect, she is again very similar to Walt Whitman’s cosmopolitan Americanness: like Whitman, she did not need to travel outside the United States<sup>17</sup> to find cosmopolitanism within the American identity, and like Whitman in “Song of Myself”, she defines herself as “An American, A kosmos”. Her conception of individuality vs democracy, her fluid gender identification as well as her all-encompassing vision of American identity are all reflected in Whitman’s “One’s-self I sing”:

One’s self I sing—a simple, separate Person;  
 Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse.  
 Of Physiology from top to toe I sing;  
 Not physiognomy alone, nor brain alone, is worthy for  
 the muse—I say the Form complete is worthier far;  
 The Female equally with the male I sing.  
 Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,  
 Cheerful—for freest action form’d, under the laws divine,  
 The Modern Man I sing. (Whitman, 3)

24 Like Whitman’s, Graham’s modernity is embodied, physical, one and all at the same time. “There was never any more inception than there is now, / Nor any more youth or age than there is now”, writes Whitman in “Song of Myself” (Whitman, 27): for Whitman as for Graham, exploring otherness in the American identity, crossing temporal, geographical, racial and gender borders is not akin to reverting to a primitive past, but entails embracing the primitive principle of inchoation, of always beginning afresh. For T. S. Eliot, “to be an American modernist artist is not to be in the

vanguard of history but to be permanently at the beginning of history, to be prehistoric – to be new, to be first rather than last – to be the primitive” (Eliot, 118); Graham was indeed “permanently at the beginning”, preferring the term “contemporary” – “of its time”, anchored in the present and forever renewing itself – to the term “modern” (Graham 1992, 236). In many respects, Martha Graham’s universal American self, white and non-white, male and female, resembles the portrait made by Jean-Michel Maulpoix of the modern lyrical self as “a complex chimerical creatures with random features torn by contrary impulses and aspirations”<sup>18</sup> – a representation of modern selfhood as mercurial, plural, perpetually renewing itself and crossing boundaries.

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## NOTES

1. "The modern dance of the present time began in America, strangely enough, particularly on the West Coast with Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis." (Armitage, 109)
2. "I bring you the dance. I bring you the idea that is going to revolutionise our entire epoch. Where have I discovered it? By the Pacific Ocean, by the waving pine-forests of Sierra Nevada. I have seen the ideal figure of youthful America dancing over the top of the Rockies" (Duncan, 21).
3. Duncan mentions her Whitmanian filiation several times in her autobiography: "The supreme poet of our country is Walt Whitman. [...] I am indeed the spiritual daughter of Walt Whitman" (Duncan, 21), "are we not all the spiritual offspring of Walt Whitman?" (Duncan, 223). In his manifesto *The American Ballet*, Ted Shawn (the cofounder of the Denishawn school with Ruth St. Denis), also named Whitman as a tutelary figure for modern American dance:  
The dance of America will be as seemingly formless as the poetry of Walt Whitman, and yet like *Leaves of Grass* it will be so big that it will encompass all forms. Its organization will be democratic, its fundamental principles, freedom & progress; its manifestation an institution of

art expression through rhythmic, beautiful bodily movement, broader and more elastic than has ever yet been known" (Shawn, foreword).

4. The Graham quotation is from "Seeking an American Art of the Dance" published in *Revolt in the Arts: A Survey of the Creation, Distribution and Appreciation of Art in America*, ed. Oliver M. Sayler (NY: Brentano, 1930, 249-255), 253.

5. This is also a conception of Americana Lincoln Kirstein evokes in his essay "Blast at Ballet, A Corrective for the American Audience":

American style springs or should spring from our own training and environment, which was not in an Imperial School or a Parisian imitation of it. Ours is a style bred also from basket-ball courts, track and swimming meets and junior-proms. Our style springs from the personal atmosphere of recognizable American types as exemplified by the behavior of movie-stars like Ginger Rogers, Carole Lombard, or the late Jean Harlow. It is frank, open, fresh and friendly (Kirstein, 45).

6. "Oh the roaring, and singing and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell" (First remove, Rowlandson, 8), "they had sung and danced about her (in their hellish manner)" (Fourth remove, Rowlandson, 15).

7. See H. Aspiz, *Whitman and the Body Beautiful*, Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1980; M. Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991; T. Nathanson, *Whitman's Presence: Body, Voice and Writing in Leaves of Grass*, New York: New York University Press, 1992; J. Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body; Sexuality, Politics, and the Text*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

8. See also Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau, "Dance in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: Haptic Connectedness and Lyric Choreography", *Whitman, feuille à feuille*, eds. Agnès Derail and Cécile Roudeau, Paris: Éditions Rue D'Ulm, Presses de l'ENS, 2019, 21-38.

9. Steele MacKaye gave lectures in the 1870s popularizing Delsarte's theories among the American public; Duncan and Graham, along with all the pioneers of American dance, read Delsarte and incorporated his theory on the concordance between mind and body into their technique. See Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism*, Westport, CT, & London, Greenwood Press, 1999. Ruyter notes that Longfellow and Edwin Forrest, whom Whitman much admired, were among the artists that were drawn to Delsartism, so it is very likely that Whitman would have been familiar with Delsartism (Ruyter, 17-29).

10. In "The Dance of the Future", Isadora Duncan also praises the natural beauty of the primitive body and condemns the artificiality of "civilized" dance training:

The movements of the savage, who lived in freedom in constant touch with Nature, were unrestricted, natural and beautiful. Only the movements of the naked body can be perfectly natural. (...) The school of the ballet today, vainly striving against the natural laws of gravitation or the natural will of the individual, and working in discord in its form and movement with the form and movement of nature, produces a sterile movement which gives birth to no future movements but dies as it is made" (Copeland and Cohen, 263).

11. Also reiterated in her autobiography: "Movement never lies" (Graham 1992, 122).

12. Duncan's "The dance of the Future" opens on an anecdote in which a woman asks her why she always dances barefoot, to which Duncan replies "Madame, I believe in the religion of the beauty of the human foot" (Copeland and Marshall, 262).

13. In her autobiography, she explicitly connects her habit of walking barefoot to the discovery of her vocation as a dancer (Graham 1992, 58) and relates an amusing episode when – as she was invited to dance at the White House, in 1937 – she had to tell a concerned aide that she did not intend to be barefoot the whole time she was at the White House (Graham 1992, 153).

14. In "Starting from Paumanok", the first-person speaker, the American bard, is also barefoot: "Splashing my bare feet in the edge of the summer ripples on Paumanok's sands" (Whitman, 23).

15. Graham was also criticized for her primitivist penchants; in her 1934 article published in *New Theatre*, Edna Ocko blames Graham for dwelling too much on “past periods, lost civilizations, and ancient or medieval forms”.

16. Graham 1992, 101-102.

17. In the *Companion to Walt Whitman*, Eldrid Herrington notes that “Whitman’s cosmopolitan vision seems to be at odds with his biography: he only traveled outside the States when he went to Canada; he lived in New York and in Camden, across the river from Philadelphia, ranging from the northeastern United States.” (*A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald D. Kummings, Oxford and Malden: Wiley & Blackwell, 2009, 132).

18. Jean Michel Maulpoix, « La Quatrième personne du singulier, esquisse de portrait du sujet lyrique moderne », in Dominique Rabaté (ed.), *Figures du sujet lyrique*, Paris: PUF, 1996, 147.

## ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the connection between crossing borders (state limits, borders between America and Mexico or America and Europe, and temporal borders) and pushing choreographical boundaries in dance pioneer Martha Graham’s ballets created in the 1930’s and the early 1940’s. Danced only by women, *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) was inspired by Graham’s travels in New Mexico, and explores the rituals of the Native Americans of the Southern States of the United States; nine years later, Graham would explore this theme further with *El Penitente*, which also draws from the Medieval tradition of mystery plays. *Frontier* (1935), one of Graham’s most famous soli, clearly connects the American Frontier to the construction of female identity, as do *American Document* (1938) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944). Graham pioneered a new way for women to dance, to express their femininity and their power: her works, inspired by Native American traditions, Mexican folklore, Greek mythology and literature from both sides of the Atlantic, depict strong women who are not afraid of pushing boundaries.

Creating an American choreographic tradition also meant exploring its literary legacy for Martha Graham: this paper therefore also delves into the way the Whitmanian intertext emerges in Graham’s choreographic writing, in her conception of Americanness, modernity, the body and gender.

Cet article examine la corrélation entre la traversée des frontières géographiques (entre les états, entre les États-Unis et le Mexique, les États-Unis et l’Europe), temporelles et chorégraphiques dans les ballets créés par Martha Graham dans les années 1930.

*Primitive Mysteries* (1931), un ballet créé pour 17 danseuses, s’inspire des voyages de Graham au Nouveau-Mexique, et explore les rituels sacrés des Indiens du sud des États-Unis ; neuf ans plus tard, Graham poursuit sa traversée des frontières temporelles et géographiques et son exploration du mouvement féminin avec *El Penitente*, qui s’inspire en outre de la tradition des mystères médiévaux. L’un de ses soli les plus connus, *Frontier* (1935), établit clairement un lien entre cette traversée des frontières – ou plutôt, de La Frontière – et la construction d’une identité féminine, tout comme ses ballets suivants, *American Document* (1938) ou plus tard *Appalachian Spring* (1944). Pionnière de la danse américaine, Graham a toute sa vie œuvré pour créer une nouvelle manière de danser pour les danseuses longtemps soumises aux rôles genrés de la tradition classique et à une technique qui les voue à un registre prédéfini. Ses travaux, inspirés des traditions des Indiens, du folklore mexicain, de la mythologie grecque ou de la littérature

produite des deux côtés de l'Atlantique, n'hésitent jamais à aller au-delà des limites, des frontières, et à remettre en question les notions de genre (genre et *gender*) pour proposer une manière de danser qui réinvente la féminité en danse en insistant sur le pouvoir des femmes. Pour Graham, créer une tradition chorégraphique américaine signifie aussi explorer l'héritage littéraire américain, aussi on s'intéressera à la manière dont l'intertexte Whitmanien émerge bien souvent dans son écriture chorégraphique, et sous-tend sa conception de l'américanité, de la modernité, du genre et du corps.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Martha Graham, dance, border-crossing, women, primitivism, modernism, Isadora Duncan, Walt Whitman

**Mots-clés:** Martha Graham, danse, frontières, limites génériques, femmes auteures et chorégraphes, danse américaine et littérature, primitivisme, modernisme, Isadora Duncan, Walt Whitman

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