

2016-05-09

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*Dancing Westwards: Depictions of the American West in the
Mid-Twentieth Century Ballets of Balanchine and de Mille*

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Submitted to the Department of American Studies
of Smith College
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Steve M. Waksman, Honors Project Advisor

May 9, 2016

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Acknowledgements:

There are many people who made this project possible. I'd like to begin by thanking my pre-major, major, and honors project advisor Steve Waksman for his kindness, patience, careful editing, and guidance throughout the course of this project. Also, thank you for laughing at my jokes at every meeting. To the entire American studies department, thank you for your enthusiasm, community, and four years of interdisciplinary joy. To the staffs of the Sophia Smith Collection, College Archives, Mortimer Rare Book Room, and the faculty of the archives concentration, thank you for teaching me to appreciate the beauty of archival research and "touching the stuff." Thank you to Lester Tomé for graciously agreeing to be my second reader for this project and for providing valuable insights early on in my research process.

A special thanks to Diane Martire for having the forethought to live less than ten minutes from Lincoln Center and for hosting me during research trips. Thank you to Candice Salyers for welcoming me into my dance education at Smith with open arms and to Paula K. Gale for inspiring and encouraging a lifelong love of dance. Thank you to all of my friends for listening to me talk about dancing cowboys for the entire year, especially the incredible Abby Ellis for her willingness to read any draft: no matter how rough. Finally, thank you to my family for their unwavering love and support as I pursued this research that has long been of interest to me. Yes Mom, my "paper" is finally finished!

It was not an easy birth, the creation of American ballet, but the new child of the American theater thrived. And as it grew, it took in the characteristics of those who attended its birth and its nurturing. Its ancestors were European--creators of ballet from Italy, France, Scandinavia, Russia--but it came to take on the specific movement rhythms and accents and colorings of a new land. The creating of ballets on American themes was a part of the process of building an American ballet, but another part was the development of choreographers who instinctively incorporated American idioms into whatever they did and yet another part was the training of American dancers.

Walter Terry, *The Dance in America*, 169.

Home, Home on the Stage:

The history of ballet in the United States is incredibly complicated, made more so by multiple definitions of “ballet” and “Americanness” deployed strategically and simultaneously. Just as the term “American” is without one clear, distinct meaning, the dances collected under the category of ballet are incredibly diverse. Thus, to analyze this history is to consider how these terms function both individually and in tandem. To create a ballet legibly “American” on stage, choreographers needed to draw on the existing notions and ideologies of “Americanness,” as well as simultaneously redefining what Americanness could be. It was in the mid-twentieth century that ballets on American themes gained attention and acclaim and their use contributed to the construction of a cultural infrastructure to support an American ballet. For some, the notion of an “American” aesthetic of ballet was not attainable, for ballet was believed to be an inherently European form and any attempts to create an American ballet were thought to be to no avail. Not limited to choreographers and dancers alone, the shaping of ballet in the United States also required the participation and engagement of patrons, critics, and audiences. It is only with the participation of all of these roles that ballet could become a lasting cultural institution in the United States.

Critics and commentators have been thinking about the history and implications of ballet in the United States for decades. In 1949, George Amberg published *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art*. In his introduction, Amberg describes the necessity for such a history, given the rise in ballet’s popularity during this time. What had begun as a reference text for the newly minted American audience quickly became a

“... discussion of a new art and a new aesthetic.”¹ The argument of Amberg’s text is simple: “... its basic premise is that the ballet has become American.”² As Amberg’s title suggests, he was writing this history at the end of a highly influential decade of creative output. While there are many significant moments and trends in the history of ballet in the United States, the 1940s represents a noteworthy turning point. Dance scholars Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick write: “By the 1940s two American styles were taking on definition: George Balanchine’s ‘American classicism,’ a rethinking, heightening, and streamlining of the academic vocabulary; and a new language of vernacular gestures developed in very different ways by Anthony Tudor, Eugene Loring, Agnes de Mille, and Jerome Robbins.”³ The latter category is what critic Clive Barnes referred to as the “...Americana-ization of American ballet.”⁴ For many scholars, George Balanchine was *the* defining force in creating an American ballet. With Lincoln Kirstein, he created the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, after each suffered many false starts trying to found American ballet companies both as a unit and on their own. The School opened in 1934 and the debut of the New York City Ballet followed in 1948. Together, the two institutions provided Balanchine with a very specific type of dancers, trained to best embody the specific aesthetics of his choreography: a quality of movement that has become deeply associated with American ballet. Dance critic Deborah Jowitt writes:

¹ George Amberg, *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art*. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949),vii.

² Ibid.

³ Malcolm McCormick and Nancy Reynolds, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the 20th Century*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003),106.

⁴ Clive Barnes, “Americana: Then and Now” *Dance Magazine*, August 1996.

Now people in the United States proudly proclaim that the look of the New York City Ballet dancers is “American.” We appropriate their lean, racy, long-legged look as an American ideal; we like to think of their boldness, their frankness, their speed, their cool absorption in music and dancing, their unselfconscious dignity and courtesy as attributes of American character at its best.⁵

Ballet Theatre, the company now known as American Ballet Theatre, was founded in 1940. While the New York City Ballet would take many years to become fully realized, Ballet Theatre did not face the same difficulties. Unlike the American ballet companies struggling to find and finance their way, Ballet Theatre was a much more solidified institution.⁶ Lucia Chase funded the company, but she was careful to make sure that this information was not widely known, as Chase was also a dancer in the company. Ballet Theatre understood itself as an institution that would support multiple genres and choreographers. Agnes de Mille made many works for Ballet Theatre and had previously toured internationally as a solo performer. After struggling to find an audience for her narrative driven ballets, de Mille would find great success and would ultimately be credited for revolutionizing the role of dance in the Broadway musical, most notably through her dance for the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!* As Joan Acocella states in her introduction to the 2015 edition of de Mille’s 1951 autobiography *Dance to the Piper*: “By the end of the 1940s she was the best-known choreographer in America.”⁷

Previously, American audiences had been primarily exposed to ballet primarily as a foreign phenomenon. The earliest roots of an American relationship to ballet can be traced back centuries. A 1735 performance in South Carolina by Englishman Henry Holt

⁵ Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1988), 274.

⁶ McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points*, 271.

⁷ Joan Acocella, “Forward” to *Dance to the Piper*, (New York: New York Book Review Classics, 2015), vii.

is often cited as the first ballet performance in the United States. Throughout the next two centuries, ballet made appearances in the American art scene, but never as a domestic form. Also in the 1830s, the French dancer and choreographer Marius Petipa toured the United States. Mary Ann Lee was the first American ballerina to achieve success as a ballerina on an international scale, after receiving her training at the Paris Opera in the 1840s. It would be another one hundred years before a ballerina trained in the United States would reach similar fame and prestige. The commonly held belief that Balanchine marked the beginning of ballet in the United States is one that scholar Laura Katz Rizzo is working to disrupt, drawing attention to the foundational work of female dancers and administrators like Catherine Littlefield, who trained in Europe and returned to the United States to teach and founded companies of their own.⁸

In her analysis of the relationship between dance and American art, Sharyn R. Udall places great significance on the role of space in the formation of American identity. She suggests that the navigation of space and claims towards ownership has run throughout many different forms of dance in the United States.⁹ One space that has long been a source of fascination in the mythology of the United States is the American West. Both Balanchine and de Mille choreographed dances inspired by a wide range of “American” themes and one point of overlap between the bodies of work of the two is the use of the American West. While western themes in many ways defined de Mille as choreographer, the same cannot be said for Balanchine. George Balanchine would become famous for his “leotard ballets,” ballets all about the form of the dancing body

⁸ Laura Katz Rizzo, *Dancing the Fairy Tale: Producing and Performing The Sleeping Beauty*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 22.

⁹ Sharyn R. Udall, *American Art and Dance: A Long Embrace*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 11.

and the creation of dynamic shapes, while Agnes de Mille was praised for her ability to portray diverse, detailed characters through dance. Balanchine and de Mille were not the first choreographers to make ballets on western themes. Lincoln Kirstein commissioned Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid* for his company Ballet Caravan in 1938. About the ballet, Kirstein writes:

Billy the Kid is not the hero of this ballet, but rather are the times in which he lived... Loring starts his ballet, not with Billy, but rather with the empty prairie set with the bare silhouette of cactus columns. To a swelling march, the people who came across our plains move across our stage. Cowboys, a gold-prospector, women in work clothes, indicate a persistent, blocked recoiling yet forward motion.¹⁰

Dance critic Marcia B. Siegel describes the work as “the first great American storytelling ballet” and compares the ballet to a Western film. Loring’s interest in film, she notes, makes the ballet both “very odd and very interesting.”¹¹

For the generation of choreographers working in the mid twentieth century, the ballet vocabulary proved to be a flexible and fruitful medium. Edited and embellished, ballet stage in the United States became a location of new styles and themes, of both looking forwards and looking back as sources of inspiration. As Megan Pugh writes in her introduction to her analysis of dance in the United States throughout the 20th century: “American dance, critics have maintained, should embody freedom, democracy, individualism, and community. It should be welcoming, strong, beautiful, and free.”¹² There are countless examples of American dance that exemplify many of these qualities,

¹⁰ Lincoln Kirstein, “About *Billy the Kid*,” in *Ballet: Belief and Bias: Three Pamphlets Collected and Other Dance Writings of Lincoln Kirstein*, (New York, Dance Horizons: 1983), 74.

¹¹ Marcia B. Siegel, “Americana Ballet” in *The Shapes of Change* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 118-119.

¹² Megan Pugh, *America Dancing: From the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015),3.

and as Pugh illustrates, they often are the results of borrowing and exchange across not only genres, but across lines of race and class as well.¹³

It is not only the work itself that is of importance in considering the emergence of American ballet. Because both choreographers were well received during their lifetimes and created work that remained in the repertoires of major ballet companies, it is also worth considering how each “performed” their identities as public figures. In addition to their ballets that are still performed today, their creative ideas and impulses have informed many generations of dancers, choreographers, and audiences. As an immigrant to the United States, George Balanchine had a complicated relationship to the United States and how his identity as an American choreographer was negotiated. Agnes de Mille, born in California, had an extensive performing career in Europe, where she presented solo works on American themes. The role of gender is also important consider, how it is constructed both onstage and off. Balanchine was very publicly married to many of his ballerinas, suggesting a somewhat porous boundary between personal and creative pursuits. Dance critics like Marcia B. Siegel have critiqued the ways that de Mille depicted gender onstage through her heroines, suggesting that all of de Mille’s ballets were coming of age stories: women struggling to find their place within society.¹⁴

While both Balanchine and de Mille choreographed across mediums, including for both Broadway and film, the focus of this analysis will be on impact of each choreographer with in the canon of American ballet. Of the four ballets at the center of this analysis, two are still readily performed and remembered, de Mille’s *Rodeo* and Balanchine’s *Agon*, while de Mille’s *Black Ritual* was never revived after its premiere.

¹³ Pugh, *America Dancing*, 6.

¹⁴ Siegel, “Americana Ballet,” 128.

Balanchine's *Western Symphony* remains in the repertory of many ballet companies, yet in the mass of Balanchine's artistic output, it is often not deemed as significant as some of his other ballets. Taken together to illustrate this moment in the history of American ballet, these four works demonstrate the immense breadth of ballet as a performing art form, as well as the significance of what gets named as ballet and what is legible as such on the concert dance stage. Agnes de Mille's ballet *Black Ritual*, choreographed for Ballet Theatre, raised these very questions, encountered through the racial tensions that run throughout the ballet. The performances of these ballets, both over half a century ago and today, demonstrate the ways that American ballet created its own history and mythology, retracing the past to then bound forward.

In multiple ways, dance can serve as artifact, as art object, and perhaps even as monument: as a location created by the dancers and choreographers to then be inhabited first by the dancers and then by the audience.¹⁵ But dance also has a unique relationship to the passage of time, memory, and history as well.

¹⁵ Carol-Lynne Moore and Kaoru Yamamoto. *Beyond Words: Movement Observation and Analysis*. (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 8.

Relationship(s) Between Dance and Time:

The allure of time travel mirrors that of reincarnation. That the past should be irrevocably lost seems unbearable. We crave its recovery. Is there no way to recapture, re-experience, relive it? Some agency, some mechanism, some faith must let us know, see, sense the past.

David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*, 55.

The ephemeral nature of movement has made it difficult to study. Consider dance. It is a visual art, tracing lines in space and creating two- and three- dimensional forms, analogous to the spatial designs created by other visual arts. Yet, in architecture, sculpture, and painting, the artists' drawing and shaping actions remain embedded in the material object they have created, and the trace lines and forms of these objects endure.

Carol-Lynne Moore and Kaoru Yamamoto,
Beyond Words: Movement Observation and Analysis, 7.

The records of ballet are vague and fragmentary. Even where modern means of recording—dance script, photography, and film—have been used, the result is, at best, an approximation. Our ballets are precariously preserved in the memory of executants and witnesses. Subject to unconscious errors and failings and the changing tastes of times. While future historians may speak with great authority, they will also be reduced to second-hand information and information.

George Amberg, *Ballet in America*, xiii.

The relationship between dance and temporality, considering how dance as an art form exists in space and time, has been addressed from a variety of different perspectives. Dance scholars have pointed to the ways that dance not only exists in time and space, but also serves as a means of *creating* space as well—that is inhabited by the dancers themselves as well as the audience. Dance is often regarded as a highly ephemeral form, given the difficulties of “fixing” a dance into historical records, dance relates to time in

other, complex and interconnected ways.¹⁶ In the introduction to her analysis of American dance in the 20th century, drawing from examples across genres and forms, Megan Pugh describes this notion succinctly, stating: “Dance is a notoriously slippery art.” She continues on: “That slipperiness is one of the reasons dance can help us think about national identity: Americans have discovered themselves, in part, by pretending to be other people.”¹⁷ To choreograph an “American” ballet is to distill ideas about American identity to their most concentrated form. It is to place emphasis on the qualities that have traditionally been regarded as defining American character at its best.

As this analysis places the quality of the movement itself in conversation with their historical contexts and contentions, the issue of temporality can be considered alongside other questions related to time. The relationship between dance and time is further complicated by the specificity of time and place in many of the ballets addressed in this analysis. The concept of nostalgia is one that has been addressed by multiple historians. David Lowenthal has written extensively about the past in relation to space as well as how understandings of the past relate to how one considers their location in history. His text, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, illustrates the complicated nature of this relationship. Lowenthal writes: “The past is everywhere. All around us lie features with more or less familiar antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience. Most past traces ultimately perish, and all that remain are altered. But they are collectively enduring.”¹⁸ Lowenthal’s points about the alteration of history and its mutual

¹⁶ Susan Leigh Foster, “Worlding Dance – An Introduction,” in *Worlding Dance*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 6.

¹⁷ Pugh, *America Dancing*, 6.

¹⁸ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

experience have special resonance in the consideration of these historically themed ballets. Balanchine's *Western Symphony* and de Mille's *Rodeo* both reproduce and reinforce the mythology of the American West. As American dance was treading foreign territory through creating an "Americanized" ballet, and worked to define itself as an artistic entity to be taken seriously, the form turned to a location that had long been associated with American authenticity and expansion.

This line of argument is not to say that these questions regarding the depiction of the past in the performing arts are unique to ballet or even to dance. Rather, my intention is to consider the significance of evoking "historical" themes—specifically the use of the American West—within the moment of established a ballet tradition of a national scope. For both de Mille's *Rodeo* and Balanchine's *Western Symphony*, the "pastness" of each ballet has been a part of each work since their initial creation. Both ballets were conceived as acts of nostalgia, informed by another particular moment in American history. Arthur P. Dudden's essay "Nostalgia and the American" considers how ideas about nostalgia most often run alongside those about progress. He writes:

There was no appreciation for the omnipresent preference for stability, the familiar human desire to recapture fleeting conditions and former circumstances. To express it otherwise, there lay adjacent to the idea of progress a deep running tide of *nostalgia*. Throughout this history of the American people in fact, the seeker for clues to the essence of their past can discover a deep-seated, heartfelt, romantic longing for the yesterday that is gone but is never to be forgotten.¹⁹

These two modes of an American ballet aesthetic as articulated by the work of de Mille and Balanchine are similar to these parallel impulses described by Dudden. Made in close succession, these ballets gesture both towards the past and towards an imagined

¹⁹ Arthur P. Dudden, "Nostalgia and the American." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961): 516. doi:10.2307/2708028.

future. Dudden's framework thus is a helpful way to consider how these ballets were part of the larger context of ballet in the United States.²⁰

While the American West is undoubtedly tinged with nostalgia, always located firmly as a mythology of the past, the appeal of the American West is also infused with forward movement. Most often associated with expansion, the American West is imagined as a location ripe with possibilities. In *Making the White Man's West*, Jason E. Pierce describes how the American West has long be associated with possibilities:

From the moment the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the frontier, always just out there to the west, seemed redolent with possibility. To be sure, it could be a scary and dangerous place, but if one possessed strength, intellect, fearlessness, and individualism (all soon considered "American" traits), then one could be successful in this new World.²¹

Pierce also situates the West as a location in which one can *become* American.²² This is a particularly compelling strain of thought to pursue within the creation of an American ballet tradition. The American West is not only a location where the "American spirit" resides, but a location where one can learn to perform this identity successfully.

Taken together, the four ballets at the center of this analysis—*Agon*, *Black Ritual*, *Rodeo*, and *Western Symphony*—provide a framework through which not only to think about the creation of multiple aesthetics of an "American ballet," but also to consider how time is operating in these ballets. While *Black Ritual* is charged with racialized notions about an imagined "primitive" past, *Rodeo* and *Western Symphony* are tinged

²⁰ Laura Katz Rizzo makes a similar argument in her text *Dancing the Fairy Tale*, suggesting that ballet in the United States has long been engaged in a careful negotiation between the past and moving forward.

²¹ Jason E. Pierce, "Introduction: Whiteness and the Making of the American West," In *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013), 10.

²² Pierce, "Introduction: Whiteness and the Making of the American West," 11.

with a particular sort of nostalgia. Balanchine's *Agon* then exists as a ballet without an intrinsic sense of time and space. Some critics have suggested that the ballet has a continual sense of modernity, a sleekness that fits well in a twenty-first century context. Thus, contained within these four ballets are gestures towards an imagined future as well as a mythologized past. In many ways, these ballets on "historical" themes, adapting American histories for the stage, are establishing a legacy of American ballet. These cultural imaginaries, of past and future, were informed by certain understandings of American history and identity as well as act as shaping forces in and of themselves. Through this analysis, my intent is to examine the content of these ballets as works of art alongside the social, cultural, and historical conditions that informed their creation and continue to inform their reception. By placing *Black Ritual* and *Agon* alongside *Rodeo* and *Western Symphony*, my desire is to examine how notions of time, space, and location operate within each of these ballets and to illustrate the particularity of remaking the American West on the ballet stage in this time period as well for the consideration the ideological implications of the American West as they operate within each work.

**“Don’t plier, sit on your horse:”
Agnes de Mille’s Americana Inspirations, Interpretations, and *Rodeo* (1942)**

Agnes de Mille insists that productions should be about something and that dancers are people.

John Martin, “She Brings the Ballet Down to Earth,”
New York Times, December 19, 1943

American choreographer Agnes de Mille is perhaps best described as a storyteller. Her ballets were deeply character driven, rooted in a specific time and place. The daughter of a film director and the niece of a playwright, it perhaps does not come as a surprise that de Mille would be involved in entertainment as well. Yet, de Mille’s father was adamant that his daughter would not be involved in the world of dance. Telling stories through another means, de Mille was also a prolific writer. She wrote extensively not only about her own life and creative process, but about other notable American choreographers as well, including modern dance pioneer Martha Graham. De Mille, with her work straddling both ballet and Broadway, was committed to translating American history to the stage and a history of American dance to the page. Further, through her acts of autobiography de Mille created a vibrant record of her creative process as well as the experiences and ideologies informing her work. Given the highly ephemeral nature of dance, difficult to preserve even when captured on film, de Mille’s own writing is an important source for placing the creation of dance itself into its larger context of her own creative career and life.

One of de Mille's most well known ballets is her ode to the American West, *Rodeo*. For some critics, de Mille's work embodied a certain humanity and "down-to-earth" quality, a marked departure from the etherealness that defines the classical ballet form.²³ Drawing from American traditional and folk dances, de Mille's work was inspired by a wide range of source materials to create ballets that reflected American life. De Mille's career gained popularity during this period, when "American dance was about working men and women, not dying swans."²⁴ Whether choreographing for the ballet or Broadway stage, de Mille's choreography was driven by character. *Rodeo* is one example of de Mille's work that epitomizes this style of dancing. The ballet is also credited as the first on an American theme to be met with widespread critical and popular success.²⁵ The ballet was a turning point in de Mille's career, as she had previously faced difficulty finding work as a choreographer, in part, some suggest, because of her intense and uncompromising artistic versions.²⁶ Following *Rodeo*, the demand for de Mille grew, finding work choreographing for Broadway with shows like *Oklahoma!*

For Agnes de Mille, choreographer and storyteller were one and the same. Across genres, at times with the aid of dialogue and at times without, de Mille's movement was always in the service of communicating a larger narrative. Writing about her early character studies she performed as a soloist, de Mille reveals, "I aimed to do character studies where the dancing was a natural incident in the episode and a revelation of

²³ Robert Sullivan, "Her Human Touch Injects New Life Into the Ballet," April 30, 1944.

²⁴ Megan Pugh, "Square Dance: Agnes de Mille's Beloved Community," *Boston Review*, July 1, 2011.

²⁵ McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points*, 288.

²⁶ Barbara Barker, "Agnes de Mille, Liberated Expatriate, and the American Suite, 1938," *Dance Chronicle*, 19 (1996): 120.

personality, using dance like costuming.”²⁷ First and foremost, de Mille was a storyteller, using dance as her medium. In this way, de Mille’s work was in marked contrast to the work of a choreographer like George Balanchine, who once said: “Put a man and a girl on stage and there is already a story; a man and two girls, there's already a plot.”²⁸ While Balanchine considered male and female bodies moving through an often bare stage in minimalistic leotards and tights, de Mille’s ballets encounter gender in a very different way. A woman in one of de Mille’s ballets is not any woman, but rather is someone specific. The Cowgirl at the center of *Rodeo* is but one example of de Mille’s representation of women on stage. Many have written about how de Mille portrayed women on stage. Pioneering dance critic Marcia B. Siegel wrote about de Mille’s heroines as a collected group, while scholar Barbra Barker referred to de Mille’s “... portrait gallery of heroines, when describing the diverse range of female characters portrayed by de Mille as a solo performer.”²⁹ Barker goes on to explore how de Mille’s female characters were always richly drawn and developed, no matter where they were found: the subject of a solo concert performed by de Mille during her time spent abroad or carrying the plot of a full length ballet.³⁰ In her ballet *Fall River Legend*, de Mille took on one of the most infamous and oft mythologized women in American history, the story of Lizzie Borden. In the plot of the ballet, de Mille changed the course of history, choosing to find Borden guilty. While any of de Mille’s ballets would arguably provide a rich location of analysis regarding questions of gender, the ballet *Rodeo* is a fertile ground for discussion regarding how questions of gender are embedded within the larger

²⁷ de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 107.

²⁸ Judith Mackrell, *Reading Dance* (London, Michael Joseph Ltd: 1997), 4.

²⁹ Barker, “Agnes de Mille, Liberated Expatriate, and the American Suite, 1938,” 118.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

questions which dominated American ballet: especially those regarding notions of authenticity, identity, and individualism. Placed alongside another example of de Mille's work, these larger questions can be considered both within the specific contexts of the ballet's initial creation and first performances, as well as the space they occupy in the scope of dance and American history alike.

While *Rodeo* is by far de Mille's most well-known ballet, *Black Ritual* has a reputation on a vastly different scale. After the ballet's premiere in 1940 it was never revived, yet it raises important questions about which histories are realized on the ballet stage and how these histories are considered and conveyed on stage. Made by de Mille for a cast of sixteen African American dancers, the ballet's reception was neither clear nor simple. And as scholar Erin Maher acknowledges, because the work does not fit clearly into the established histories of American ballet or African American dance, it is often excluded from these histories altogether.³¹

Through these two examples, as well as a consideration of de Mille's career and creative process, notions of individualism, authenticity, and identity within ballet in the United States at this time period can be explored. By grappling with these larger themes that are often considered paramount to understanding notions of "Americanness" through the lenses of gender and race, a richer representation of what American ballet can, did, and might mean can be considered.

³¹ Erin K. Maher, "Ballet, Race, and Agnes de Mille's *Black Ritual*," *Musical Quarterly* 97 (2014), 391.

Rodeo (1942) and The American West:

The beauty and genuineness of Rodeo reside precisely in the apparent casualness of its American expression, in the deliberate lightness of touch, in the humorous understatement of emotional undercurrents. Yet it is all planned and timed with masterly accuracy. Miss de Mille makes her points with pith precision, with admirable restraint and economy and with never an effort or an effect wasted.

George Amberg, *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art*, 49.

There is about it the authentic blend of drawling ease and trigger quickness that makes Texans, for instances, unlike any other people in the world. It can move from crackling tap dance to a sudden, almost frozen, poetry, so that one instant it is an actual ballet being danced before your eyes, and the next it has the bland nostalgia of some dream remembered. For that reason, it has a timeless brilliance that will keep it alive in the repertory.

Claudia Cassidy, "Ballet Russe's 'Rodeo' Dance Wins Acclaim,"
Chicago Daily Tribune, December 26, 1942

Rodeo opens with a stage filled with men. Some stand, some crouch. They shade their eyes and look out into the audience as if scanning the horizon. In the cluster of men stands a lone woman, dressed like one of the boys: pants, a button down shirt, complete with boots and a hat. She is the Cowgirl. All of the named characters in the ballet are identified this way, by a defining characteristic of their role in this community as a whole. Yet while the male characters are named with the skills they possess, such as the Head Wrangler or the Champion Roper, the female characters are named in a way that emphasizes their gender. In addition to the Cowgirl, the only other female character named in such an explicit way is the Ranch Owner's Daughter. Further, the latter is defined solely in relation to a man, her father, and is also depicted primarily as the Head Wrangler's love interest.

All of the men turn and look back at the Cowgirl as she tries to follow them. One tips his hat and she sarcastically responds with a hat tip of her own. She begins to ride her horse, extremely confident in her abilities, but then loses control of her imagined horse and falls to the ground. Not easily deterred, the Cowgirl quickly begins to ride again. Throughout the ballet, the Cowgirl character is constantly falling. First confidently riding on an imagined horse, she is bucked wildly and flung to the floor. When she sees the Head Wrangler, the object of her unrequited affection, she collapses to the ground. Yet, nearly every time she falls, she gets right back up again. The determination of the Cowgirl character runs throughout the ballet as a whole. The repeated falling action thus serves to establish both the Western setting of the ballet and the depth of the Cowgirl's emotional state as well. It also represents the Cowgirl as a woman controlled by her emotions, literally falling "head over heels" for the Head Wrangler. Throughout the ballet, the Cowgirl character breaks the fourth wall, to directly clue the audience in on her thoughts and feelings; shrugging her shoulders or raising a wry eyebrow.

The story of *Rodeo* is centered on the character of the Cowgirl and her infatuation with a man known as the Head Wrangler. A ballet told in five sections, the Cowgirl's affection and advances are ignored, as the Head Wrangler is smitten with the Ranch Owner's Daughter. To try and attract the attention of the man she desires, the Cowgirl acts like she is one of the boys and is then mocked by the other women in the ballet. The Cowgirl is encouraged by the Champion Roper, as he literally picks her up and brushes her off when she falls down, in a gesture that feels more brotherly than romantic. Once the Cowgirl ditches her hat and boots and exchanges them for a dress, she finds herself with not only the affections of her desired Head Wrangler but the Champion Roper as

well. The Champion Roper finally wins the Cowgirl's affections with a tap solo. The Cowgirl crouches to the ground, watching wide-eyed and clearly smitten with his rapidly moving feet. By the ballet's close, the Cowgirl has adopted a more feminine presentation and has finally found a romantic partner, although not the one she originally intended.

Not only is Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo* a love story set in the American West, it also can be considered as a love story *of* the American West. De Mille's ballet offers insight into how the American West has long been imagined in popular culture, as a location of freedom and discovery. While the American West has been imagined as a location of freedom and of pushing against boundaries, the characters of *Rodeo* engage in a complicated mixture of pushing convention and embracing it.³² *Rodeo* premiered on October 16, 1942, with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo primarily toured the United States following the beginning of World War II.

Yet her ballet was not the first to be made on American themes. Four years earlier, Aaron Copland had written the score for Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid* and was initially hesitant to make another ballet about the American West. Copland and de Mille worked closely to shape the ballet, with de Mille providing Copland with a thorough outline of the ballet before he began his composition.³³ Copland had also previously collaborated with modern dance pioneer Martha Graham, for the piece *Appalachian Spring*. In her autobiography, de Mille relays an early conversation with Copland. After relaying the plot of the ballet to the composer, he responds with laughter. De Mille continues: "—but it can have what Martha Graham calls 'an aura of race memory.'" To this, de Mille claims that Copland responded with a fit of laughter and quipped: "Couldn't

³² Pugh, *America Dancing*, 155.

³³ Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life & Work of an Uncommon Man*, 367.

we do a ballet about Ellis Island?”³⁴ This seems to be a reference to Copland’s own background and heritage, in a joking manner. The point that de Mille attributes to Martha Graham highlights the belief the American West was an important location in forming American identity and that within the West an innate “Americanness” could be found. De Mille’s description of the comments made by both Graham and Copland demonstrate the types of “Americanness” that are used to represent the United States and how the nation considers and recreates its own origin stories through works of art.

As a female choreographer de Mille’s *Rodeo* is also an ideal context through which to examine how issues of gender, more specifically depictions of women, function in these dance works. As the character of the Cowgirl dances alongside the men, it is impossible to ignore how gender conventions are illustrated throughout the work and its primary romantic arc.³⁵ Her choreography required that many of the essential balletic elements be disregarded, so that the dancers’ movements could be directly situated in the universe in which it was set. Of teaching the choreography to her dancers, de Mille writes: “I broke them technically, which was where they lived and worshiped.”³⁶ *Rodeo* mandated a departure from nearly all conventions embodied by the classical ballet aesthetic. Yet, de Mille stresses that her choreography, and its depiction of the American West was something separate from the world it was intended to depict, stating: “The riding movements were neither realistic nor imitative.”³⁷ In rehearsal, she told her dancers: “‘Don’t plier, sit on your horse,’ I implored. ‘There’s a difference.’ But the strain was too much and they relaxed back into bad second position where they felt

³⁴ De Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 271.

³⁵ McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century*, 288.

³⁶ de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 280-281.

³⁷ de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 280-281.

eminently at home.”³⁸ This straying from classical ballet technique also meant that many of the typical markers of virtuosity were surrendered, placing value on a quality of movement completely foreign to classically trained dancers.³⁹ While the movement was foreign for the classically trained ballet dancers de Mille was working with, the source material itself was unfamiliar to some as well. Frederic Franklin, the British born dancer who originated the role of the Champion Roper, recalled learning the ballet in 2012, in celebration of *Rodeo*'s 70th anniversary. Franklin, speaking about himself and some of the Russian born dancers in the company, states: “... We had no idea what a ‘rodeo’ really was.”⁴⁰

There are other elements to *Rodeo* that are in marked departure from the conventions of classical ballet. The use of tap dancing repeats throughout the ballet and it is through a tap dance solo that the Champion Roper finally wins the affections of the Cowgirl. She crouches on the ground, mesmerized, by his fast moving feet. Other percussive elements, including clapping and thigh slapping, appear throughout the ballet as well, layered upon Copland's score. In one of the ballet's middle sections, there is a rowdy square dance. The dance features a caller, a voice layered over the music directing the action of the dance. In this moment, the dancing shifts from being the vocabulary through which social interactions are represented on stage. As square dancing is a traditional form of an American social dance, it is a means of courtship and social engagement that exists onstage and off. It is dancing not as a depiction of other activities, but dancing as an activity in and of itself.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points*, 288.

⁴⁰ “Freddie Franklin Rodeo at 70,” YouTube video, 3:58, posted by “JohnBenceVideos,” September 12, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsfux66HSJg>.

When the ballet premiered, de Mille danced the role of the Cowgirl herself. In her autobiography, de Mille offers further insight into her process of teaching the choreography: “I took a deep breath. ‘We are going to begin,’ I said in a scarily audible treble, ‘with men riding horses in a rodeo. For instance, if you were riding a bucking horse and were thrown, it would look like this! And I rode a bucking horse and was thrown the length of the room on my head.’”⁴¹ As de Mille demonstrates in her account of how she taught her dancers the choreography, the resulting ballet does not look very much like a traditional ballet at all. The resulting ballet is athletic and lively, a vibrant and energetic ode to the American West. As one critic described it: “This is authentic, irresistible Americana.”⁴²

The relationship between the American West and notions of authenticity is a complicated one. In their introduction to *True West: Authenticity and the American West*, William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis explore not only the popular cultural fascination with the American West, but how the American West has been used as a tool of shaping ideas about Americanness: “And for popular interpreters of American experience in the West, the West has often been the legitimating source and sanctifying ground of American Authenticity.”⁴³

The massive success of *Rodeo* was quickly followed by de Mille’s choreography for the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, *Oklahoma!* While these two works would in many ways cement de Mille’s legacy, some questioned de Mille’s abilities to make work outside of these themes: “Skeptics said to wait and see. Only the season before Miss de

⁴¹ de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 280-281.

⁴² Claudia Cassidy, “Ballet Russe's 'Rodeo' Dance Wins Acclaim,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*. December 26, 1942.

⁴³ Handley & Lewis, “Introduction” in *True West: Authenticity and the American West*, 2.

Mille had staged for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo a highly successful Western ballet called ‘Rodeo’: ‘Oklahoma!’ they maintained, was just a repeat. Wait until she had to do a ballet without any cowboys.”⁴⁴ While dance critic John Martin’s offers a somewhat curt response to these works, the American West has long captured the attention of Americans through popular culture, often as a location of possibility and expansion.

The American West has represented many different things throughout history as well as symbolizing multiple ideologies simultaneously. Richard Aquila writes: “The West evokes numerous images in the American mind. Foremost is the image of the mythic West as a Garden of Eden.”⁴⁵ This type of romanticization of the western landscape held increased significance given the historical moment in which the ballet was made. Numerous scholars have pointed to the significance of the American West during times of strain in American history, including World War II.⁴⁶ As the leading lady of the ballet, the Cowgirl character is central to the analysis of this work and the character represents a complicated figure, both in terms of how she interacts with the other characters of the ballet as well as the dancing of the role itself. As a dance role, the Cowgirl presented unique challenges. Beginning in 1950, de Mille gave American Ballet Theatre sole performance rights to the ballet, with the caveat that all casting would need to meet her approval, at times resulting the casting of a Broadway dancer for the lead

⁴⁴ John Martin, “She Brings the Ballet Down to Earth,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1943.

⁴⁵ Richard Aquila, “Introduction” in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Aquila, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 2.

⁴⁶ Megan Pugh, *America Dancing*, 237.

female role.⁴⁷ The Cowgirl character requires the dancer to commit fully to physical comedy, requiring a set of skills that is not often cultivated in a classical ballet education.

Much of the choreography of *Rodeo* is characterized by hyper masculine and hyper feminine movements and the contrast between these two movement vocabularies are made all the more apparent through the Cowgirl's deviation from traditionally feminine behavior and dress. In her biography *Dance to the Piper*, de Mille describes the demands that she placed on her male dancers to achieve the aesthetic result she desired: "Alas, although big boys, they had been trained to move like wind-blown petals."⁴⁸ Dance critic Marcia B. Siegel has written about the heroines of de Mille's ballets and how they drive the narratives of her works. The Cowgirl character of *Rodeo* is one such example of these heroines. How she at first confronts and then conforms to gender norms is an important aspect both within the ballet itself and in its analysis. While the ballet begins with the Cowgirl very clearly and intentionally acting outside of the bounds of prescribed gender norms, the negotiation between individual identity and desirability is a theme that runs throughout the ballet. While de Mille states that the Cowgirl character's mode of behavior and dress are in the pursuit of male affection, this is not clearly apparent in the narrative of the ballet itself. Without the context, the Cowgirl character might be read as simply more comfortable portraying more masculine activities. This can allow for questions regarding individuality and femininity to be considered as well.⁴⁹

While the Cowgirl rides around like one of the boys, there is no ambiguity about where her desires lay. In one moment, all of the men face the cluster of women who have

⁴⁷ Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life & Work of an Uncommon Man*, 373.

⁴⁸ de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 280-281.

⁴⁹ Pugh, *America Dances*, 155.

just made their flirtatious entrance to the stage. The Cowgirl stands in the same position as the men, posed similarly, and her gaze is fixed squarely back at them. Her sight line clearly demonstrates that while her physical position is with the men, and her desires are clearly and undoubtedly heterosexual. The choreographer herself has commented on the intentions of the Cowgirl through her actions: to attract attention of the boys, not to be one of them herself.⁵⁰

Writing about the American Western Myth, Janice Rushing identifies the two female archetypes imagined to be found in the American West: “The brothel or dance hall is inhabited by the ‘bad girl:’ her counterpart, the ‘good girl’ is stereotypically the schoolmarm or the rancher’s daughter.” Rushing continues on: “Rarely are those opposing qualities present in any one woman.”⁵¹ In considering these two types, it seems clear that the Cowgirl character disrupts these two categories. It could perhaps be argued that the Cowgirl fails in her attempts to be the “good girl” solely because of her initial rejection of traditional femininity and thus is reinforcing the stability of these two categories of female identity. There are only two available options and any deviation from them will not be met with success. As dance critic Marcia B. Siegel illustrates in her review of the ballet:

I don’t know why Rodeo hasn’t been denounced and picketed by women’s liberationists. The heroine doesn’t want to be a woman – God knows, the women in her community are simpering fools – but she shares their one ambition in life, to get that man... The Cowgirl is the worst sort of misfit, a sexual misfit, and in a highly conformist society she must be shunned until she gives up her peculiar notions.⁵²

⁵⁰ de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 271.

⁵¹ Janice Hocker Rushing, “The Rhetoric of The American Myth,” *Communication Monographs* 50 (1983), 17.

⁵² Siegel, “Americana Ballet,” 127 – 128.

Yet, even as the Cowgirl character is giving up her “peculiar notions,” her physicality still does not exactly match the “feminine” posture held by the other female characters in the ballet. That this transformation is still marked by a certain awkwardness could be read as a point of resistance to the total conformity that might otherwise be suggested by the conclusion of the ballet.

From Rushing’s more broad analysis and the specific reading of gender throughout *Rodeo*, it can be put forward that while the American West has been imagined as a location of freedom, the same freedoms afforded to men are not afforded to women. Rushing describes the tension in the American Western Myth between individualism and community. Regarding the larger ideological meanings underpinning the narrative of the ballet, Siegel writes: “De Mille’s community, on the other hand, is entirely homogenous. In fact, the moral purpose of her ballet is to show the error in being nonconformist.”⁵³ These notions of conformity are particularly relevant to consider in this moment of the Americanization of ballet, during which what an American ballet could, or rather should, look like was being actively negotiated and navigated.

⁵³ Ibid.

Agnes de Mille, American Ballet Theatre, and *Black Ritual* (1940):

... *The most ambitious 'Living Museum' of dance without state support: Ballet Theatre, founded and directed by Americans, with eighty-five dancers, eleven choreographers, and an entire 'wing' devoted to American works, made its debut in New York on January 11, 1940.*

Malcolm McCormick & Nancy Reynolds,
No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century,

While *Rodeo* was originally performed by the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo, de Mille also made work for and was a charter member of a company known as Ballet Theatre. Ballet Theatre, later and now known as American Ballet Theatre, played an important role in this moment of America's ballet history. The New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre were, and remain, two very different institutions. While the New York City Ballet primarily performed works choreographed by Balanchine, Ballet Theatre performed works by a more diverse range of choreographers. Initially, Ballet Theatre had been conceived as an institution that would not limit their performances to one dance technique, to encompass forms beyond ballet in the breadth of their repertory. While this belief would fall away, there were marked differences that would endure between American Ballet Theatre and George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein's collaboration, the New York City Ballet. McCormack and Reynolds write: "The notion of the company as home to many forms of dance—impractical from a marketing point of view—soon fell by the wayside, and Ballet Theatre was revealed as being decisively in the business of ballet. But the analogue to the original idea never changed: Ballet Theatre

remained a company without a chief choreographer to determine its artistic course.”⁵⁴ In the history of ballet in the United States, many of the same dancers, choreographers, and patrons were involved with multiple institutions, with paths intersecting and diverging frequently. De Mille made many ballets for the company and her first ballet for the company, produced in the company’s debut season, can shift the conversation towards issues of race in the history of ballet in the United States. By delving into this fraught history, and placing *Black Ritual* in close comparison to the wildly successful and well remembered *Rodeo*, the discussion moves towards a larger consideration of de Mille’s use of ideas about the past and the embodiment of different histories on stage.

While Balanchine’s relationship to black vernacular dance will be explored in the following chapter, de Mille’s *Black Ritual* is another point of access through which to consider these questions. At the time of the ballet’s premiere, on January 22, 1940, Ballet Theatre included what was known as the “Negro Unit.” Given that the ballet was the first and last ballet produced by the unit before it was dissolved, it is often given little attention. As Erin K. Maher explores in her analysis of *Black Ritual* and its reception by dance critics of the era, the ballet disrupts the canonized histories of both ballet and African American concert dance and thus is often overlooked in these accounts. Maher writes: “Although there had been a number of concert-dance productions by black performers in the 1930s, this was the first time African American dancers appeared in a production of an otherwise all-white New York ballet company.”⁵⁵ At the core of Maher’s argument are the implications of *Black Ritual* association with an American ballet company.

⁵⁴ McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points*, 272.

⁵⁵ Maher, “Ballet, Race, and Agnes de Mille’s *Black Ritual*,” 390.

Through the analysis of the reception of the ballet, Maher uncovers the ways that American ballet was understood within the bounds of popular culture and the performing arts. While space has been considered in terms of the imagined space of the American West, space can also be considered within the terms of the popular cultural space ballet occupied in the United States. The desire to create institutions that could serve as repositories of American ballet was one shared by many and was pursued through many different venues. Throughout its history, American Ballet Theatre would navigate the space between a national and international reputation as a company, through its dancers, choreographers, patrons, and administrators. The identity of Ballet Theatre is one that would shift over time, exploring at its beginnings the possibilities beyond the tradition of Russian ballet.⁵⁶ The rhetoric surrounding the ballet, its dancers, and its development is another way to consider the ballet alongside *Rodeo*. Especially with regards to how each ballet engages with issues of the past. While *Rodeo* operates within the realm of nostalgia, Maher importantly points to how notions of the “primitive” were operating not only in de Mille’s conception and choreography of the ballet, from which she drew on *The Rite of Spring* as a source of inspiration, but considering the reception of the ballet itself as well. Maher writes, in her analysis of the text included in the *Black Ritual* program: “‘Primitive’ here does not necessarily indicate temporal distance between the scenario and the audience, but rather a cultural distance. In this historicist view of time, in which present-day cultures perceived to be less ‘advanced’ are seen as equivalent to the Western past, the distinction between temporal and cultural difference collapses.”⁵⁷ To consider *Black Ritual* alongside *Rodeo* is to consider how some ideas about the past are

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 394.

celebrated as an ideal to which to aspire, while others are treated with a problematic understanding of cultures deemed as “other,” located forever in an imagined past.

Remembering and Reimagining:

Copland's score and de Mille's ballet continue to have a presence in the American ballet of the 21st century. *Rodeo* has entered the repertory of many ballet companies across the United States. That the ballet was popular in its time and that it continues to attract audiences says much about the space that the American West occupies not only in the scope of American ballet but in American popular culture as well. Justin Peck, resident choreographer and soloist with the New York City Ballet, premiered a new ballet set to Copland's score in early 2015. Entitled *Rodeo: Four Dance Episodes*, the ballet features a cast of fifteen men and one woman and is completely rid of any narrative content.⁵⁸ Peck describes his process: "I thought that perhaps there could be two completely different interpretations of the same music that can exist side by side."⁵⁹ While Peck's 21st century *Rodeo* does not have the same emphasis on narrative and setting as de Mille's midcentury hit, the iconic "Americanness" of Copland's score comes through in a very specific, perhaps inescapable way. Because of the influences that informed Copland's composition, images of the American West will be bound with any dance set to it.

In a promotional video for the company, Peck describes how the ballet becomes a means of highlighting the diverse range of male dancers that comprise the company. It is noteworthy then to consider how the new ballet, made to the same score and considered a companion piece to de Mille's ballet, becomes a venue through which to consider broad

⁵⁸ "NYC Ballet's Justin Peck and Taylor Stanley on Peck's 'Rōdēō: Four Dance Episodes,'" YouTube Video, 4:11, posted by "newyorkcityballet," September 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqPDiyXjTbc>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

definitions of masculinity while the original ballet ultimately asserts a very narrow definition of acceptable femininity.⁶⁰ As a dancer trained at the School of American Ballet and currently dancing with the New York City Ballet, Peck is embedded in the legacy of Balanchine. Dance critic Alastair Macaulay compared Peck's *Rodeo: Four Dance Episodes* to Balanchine's first ballet made in the United States, *Serenade*.⁶¹

Macaulay writes:

What's more, as if to counterbalance "Serenade," these men are all we see for the ballet's first episode. They come and go; as in the start of "Serenade," it's as if we were watching a kaleidoscope. Just as Balanchine plays all kinds of number games with his women (we see four quartets, three rows of five, and more), so does Mr. Peck with his men. And, as in "Serenade," there are fleeting incidents in which we get to know individual dancers.⁶²

Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo* is an example of how the ballet stage can exist as an important location of storytelling. Through the characters of the ballet, especially the Cowgirl, she renders a portrait of American life that dramatizes the process of creating one's identity. By placing *Rodeo* alongside *Black Ritual*, imaginaries of the past that have been forgotten can be considered alongside those that continue to inform how Americans understand their own positions and identities. The two ballets represent two different understandings of history, informed by issues of race and gender, that extend past the bounds of the ballet stage.

⁶⁰ Siegel, "Americana Ballet," 128.

⁶¹ Alastair Macaulay, "Lesson for New York City Ballet: The Past Is Always Present Critic's Notebook," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2015.

⁶² *Ibid.*

**Making an American Man, Making an American Ballet:
George Balanchine's Americana and American Influences**

When George Balanchine enters a room you have two immediate impressions: first, that that springy well-balanced walk could belong only to a dancer; second, that the bright, alert eyes and sensitive mouth could only make a poet. But when he begins to talk he talks like a musician and after that, as a perfectly logical sequence, a dancer and choreographer.

Albert Goldberg, "The Sounding Board Balanchine, Ballet, and Stravinsky Again."
Los Angeles Times, January 4, 1948.

*'To me Balanchine is like Picasso,' observes Danilova,
'He never stays in the same place. He is always doing something different.'*

Alexandra Danilova, as quoted in "Apostle of the Pure Ballet: George Balanchine has little patience..." by Emily Coleman, *New York Times*, December 1, 1957.

For many, the name George Balanchine is synonymous with ballet in the United States. As the creative force behind the New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet, Balanchine is often cited as the choreographer who established what ballet in the United States could, or rather should, look like. Balanchine was a prolific choreographer, creating ballets that covered a wide range of themes and drew from a wide range of source materials. His work was also not isolated to classical ballet alone, as Balanchine choreographed work for the Broadway stage and Hollywood films.⁶³ With his career spanning the better part of the 20th century, Balanchine is significant in this narrative of ballet in the United States in two important ways: both for the work itself that he created; and for how Balanchine, the man, was constructed and treated as a maker of

⁶³ Robert Gottlieb, *George Balanchine: The Dance Maker*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 91.

dance that was explicitly American yet not American born. As ballet became an important part of the larger arts discourse and culture in the United States throughout the 20th century, considering not only the art itself but also the mythology of its creators became a crucial way to engage with this legacy of ballet as an American art form. This chapter will explore how Balanchine's dance making was informed by his participation in other modes of American cultural production. In this history, Lincoln Kirstein is another key figure. It was upon his invitation that Balanchine first arrived in the United States and he was a pivotal player in the project of creating an American ballet aesthetic and tradition.

This chapter will also explore how Balanchine actively constructed and considered "American" elements of his own identity, as well as how his image was shaped in popular media. These are all questions furthered complicated by race relations in the United States, especially in the mid-twentieth century. It is at the convergence of all of these factors that Balanchine's contributions to American ballet can begin to be understood. Attention will be paid to how Balanchine choreographed "Americanness" both onstage and off: for himself as well as his dancers, with attention paid to how questions of race and gender are inscribed within this identity making as well.

In the specific discussion of depictions of the American West on the ballet stage, Balanchine's *Western Symphony* is an important example to consider. Balanchine's voyage into the American West premiered in 1954. With a score full of allusions and borrowing to and from traditional American folk songs, the ballet is full of energy and wit. The dancers smile wide, flip up their skirts, fan themselves with their hats, and slap the ground. Overall, it evokes a celebratory tone. In contrast, Balanchine's *Agon*, which

premiered in 1957, is a study in angular bodies and the many ways they fit together. The ballet, and its original cast, provides another valuable means through which to consider questions of race and gender, as well as a distinctive sense of timelessness that runs throughout the work. These two ballets, considered alongside Balanchine's biography, provide insight into Balanchine's participation in the Americanization of ballet in the mid-twentieth century as well as how his legacy continues to be deeply bound to this history.

Balanchine's Identity and Influences:

Balanchine's life story is one that has undergone a certain degree of mythologizing, often at the hand of Balanchine himself. Balanchine's biographers have noted Balanchine's own impulse to fictionalize the events of life, often crafting stories about his early life in Russia during the Revolution to increase their sense of drama and create emotional resonance.⁶⁴ Balanchine began his ballet training as a young boy, when his older sister was taken to audition for a place in the Imperial School of Ballet and Theater.⁶⁵ Balanchine's love of the United States, beginning in his early life, is referenced continuously in the existing Balanchine scholarship. As dance critic and scholar Sally Banes notes: "It is well known that Balanchine loved things American, from Western movies to jazz music."⁶⁶ Banes acknowledges that Balanchine's engagement and interest in American culture, specifically black American culture, began long before his arrival in the United States.⁶⁷ Thus, it becomes important to consider the ways that this complicates Balanchine's relationship to American images and culture. Balanchine drew from a wide range of inspirations, from many different locations within the American cultural landscape. Writing about Balanchine's relationship to African American culture, specifically on the influences of jazz on the physicality of Balanchine's work, Banes observes:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁶ Sally Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 55.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

To be sure, African-American dance was not the only source of the technical and choreographic style Balanchine developed. He was fascinated with African-American dancing; he was also fascinated with popular images of the “Wild West,” with white square dancing, with baroque European rhythms and postures, with romantic style, with the waltz, with both the classical ballet idiom and the stylized representation of folk dancing in Russian nineteenth-century ballet, with Shakespeare, with parades and military drills, and with much else besides.⁶⁸

Banes draws attention to the seemingly endless list of locations from which Balanchine drew his inspiration in the creation of an American ballet aesthetic. She alludes to the many positions that Balanchine occupied as both a cultural consumer and producer and her analysis explores how Balanchine might have synthesized and incorporated these sources into his work. Banes’ chapter suggests that Balanchine saw the broader American cultural milieu as rife with possibility.

While there was little scholarship written about Balanchine’s relationship to African American dance traditions when Banes’s piece “Balanchine and Black Dance” was published in 1993, this is no longer the case.⁶⁹ Scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild dedicates an entire chapter of her study on the Africanist influence in the American performing arts to Balanchine’s work in the United States and the importance of these influences on the creation of this so named “American Ballet.” Like Banes, Gottschild’s chapter “Stripping the Emperor: George Balanchine and the Americanization of Ballet” endeavors to draw attention to the ways that elements of African American culture that Balanchine was exposed to both abroad and in the United States informed his dance making, producing what Gottschild names as “still ballet, but with a new accent.”⁷⁰ Both

⁶⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁰ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “Stripping the Emperor: George Balanchine and the Americanization of Ballet,” in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 60.

Banes and Gottschild note the ways that Balanchine's work destabilized notions of high and low culture. Gottschild suggests that the example of Balanchine's work and influences disrupt the notion that the flow of cultural influences is a "one-way street" in which influences from "low" culture never travel in the direction of "high" culture.⁷¹ To say that Balanchine's relationship to race was complicated would be a great, and perhaps generous, understatement and it is a crucial component of this analysis with regards to "Americanness." Banes acknowledges that many African American dancers in Balanchine's ballets were cast in roles based upon racist tropes and clichés.⁷² Further, in some of Balanchine's ballets, white dancers appeared in blackface, including Balanchine appearing in blackface himself.⁷³ Blackface, the practice of a nonblack person applying makeup to portray a black character on stage, demonstrates Balanchine's complicated relationship to issues of race.

In considering these questions of race and their impact on Balanchine's dance making, it is also crucial to consider how Balanchine was constructed his own identity as an "American" choreographer as well as an American citizen. Balanchine became a citizen of the United States in 1939, nearly a decade before the New York City Ballet made its official debut. Caroline Joan S. Picart uses Balanchine as a case study in her analysis of dance copyright through the lens of critical race theory. Like Banes and Gottschild, she acknowledges the multitude of ways that Balanchine was engaging issues of African American culture within the making of American ballet. In considering how race figures into Balanchine's dance making, Picart's analysis also focuses heavily on the

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," 69.

⁷³ Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," 58.

ways through which white femininity specifically was constructed, featured, and foregrounded in Balanchine's ballets. As Picart is quick, and right, to note, Balanchine had many romantic relationships with his ballet dancers and further suggests that the boundaries between Balanchine's creative and romantic pursuits were not clearly defined.⁷⁴ One of Balanchine's wives was Maria Tallchief, the dancer often named as the first American-born ballerina to gain international recognition and fame as such. As dance historian Rebekah Kowal has explored, Tallchief's identity as such is further complicated by her Osage Indian heritage. Kowal's analysis looks to how Tallchief's "Americanness" was constructed in popular media sources, examining sources such as a *Newsweek* magazine cover story touting Tallchief as "Native Dancer," and a *Time* magazine article from 1951 that described her as "as American as wampum and apple pie."⁷⁵ Kowal posits Tallchief, and how she was portrayed in popular media, as key forces driving the "Americanization" of ballet. She writes: "Coming of age as a woman and an artist during these years, with her autobiography, regal yet familiar good looks, star quality, and work ethic, Tallchief played a central role in the gradual process by which audiences warmed to the idea of a native ballet tradition."⁷⁶

The years to which Kowal refers was a transitional time in the history of American ballet, after World War II, away from the Americana ballets towards the non-narrative.⁷⁷ Thus, it becomes apparent that Balanchine and Tallchief's marriage is

⁷⁴ Caroline Joan S. Picart, "George Balanchine, 'Genius of American Dance': Whiteness, Choreography, Copyrightability in American Dance" in *Critical Race Theory and Copyright in American Dance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 69.

⁷⁵ Rebekah J. Kowal, "'Indian Ballerinas Toe Up': Maria Tallchief and Making Ballet 'American' in the Tribal Termination Era," *Dance Research Journal* 46 (2014): 73-74.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

significant not only as biographical detail, but also as an important factor in further understanding how ballet became part of the American performing arts. In addition to the public space of the ballet stage, Balanchine was a public personality and this cannot be overlooked in the analysis of the process of American ballet making, making claims to an “authentically American” identity through a variety of means. The relationship between Tallchief and Balanchine is also discussed in Picart’s analysis, from the perspective of how Tallchief’s identity related to the construction of Balanchine’s own. Picart writes: “. . . Balanchine, at 41, married the 21-year-old Maria Tallchief, whose exotic dark looks made her resemble a Mayan princess; he said he was charmed by her Indian heritage, and even remarked that by marrying her, he was becoming truly American, reminiscent of how John Smith married Pocahontas.”⁷⁸ While a cringe worthy comparison, given the details of the history Balanchine alludes to, this anecdote none the less sheds light on how Balanchine was constructing himself through multiple narratives of “Americanness,” a quality to be accessed through a variety of means.

⁷⁸ Picart, “George Balanchine, ‘Genius of American Dance’: Whiteness, Choreography, Copyrightability in American Dance,” 69.

Balanchine, Kirstein, and Finding an Audience:

In addition to how Balanchine considered his own “Americanness,” it is also important to consider the locations in which he was making work, especially those works that are found outside of the canon of his ballet. Upon arriving to the United States, Balanchine found work in a variety of different dance genres, first choreographing for film and musical theatre. As scholars such as Gottschild have pointed out, it was through Balanchine’s work in these mediums that he encountered many of the Black dance forms and dancers that would prove to be so influential in his work.⁷⁹ Yet this aspect of Balanchine’s artistic past is often overlooked. New York City Ballet co-founder Lincoln Kirstein addressed this in his extensive pamphlet on ballet in the United States, “Blast at Ballet.” He writes: “In spite of Balanchine’s phenomenal American success in the popular genre of musical-comedy, he has tended to remain in the minds of the serious dance public as at best a choreographer’s choreographer, and at worst as a perverse and mysterious presence.”⁸⁰ Kirstein’s quote draws attention to how even relatively early in the span of Balanchine’s career and the creation of American ballet, Balanchine’s involvement in other genres of dance was being erased and further, how he was considered as not only a choreographer but as a man as well. In recent years, scholars have endeavored to draw more attention to Balanchine’s work outside that of classical ballet, for the stage and screen, through an initiative called The Popular Balanchine Project. It is a project that serves to restore the elements of Balanchine’s creative history

⁷⁹ Gottschild, “Stripping the Emperor,” 60.

⁸⁰ Lincoln Kirstein, “Blast at Ballet,” (New York, Dance Horizons: 1983), 178.

that Kirstein identifies as forgotten. Camille Hardy summarizes Balanchine's participation in commercial theatre:

Balanchine came to the United States during the Great Depression, at a time when ballet was viewed as foreign and local practitioners were few. He achieved his ultimate vision: to establish a world-class American company and repertory that reshaped the balletic profile, projecting an entirely new dimension and dynamics. But it took a long time, and his work in the commercial theater contributed significantly to his overall aim while enabling him to earn a living.⁸¹

While ballet's location in the cultural hierarchy is firmly established from a twenty-first century vantage point, this was not the case in this particular moment. Ballet was often presented with other forms of entertainment in this moment of the great depression: when the desire was for entertainment of all sorts as a form of escapism.⁸²

Yet Balanchine's legacy is not his choreography alone, but also the creation of a specific technique, training his dancers' bodies so that they could best execute his demanding and precise choreography. Critic Robert Gottlieb has referred to the training of dancers in this specific mode of ballet technique as the making of "basic material" with which Balanchine's ballets could then be made.⁸³ Balanchine's aesthetic has often been named as the epitome of neoclassical ballet, drawing and deviating from the traditional ballet vocabulary simultaneously.⁸⁴ Lincoln Kirstein, Balanchine's partner in founding the New York City Ballet and perhaps biggest champion of his work, describes how Balanchine's choreography at times deviates from the norms of classical ballet: "Balanchine utilizes no ordinary academic pantomime. Instead he amplifies and broadens ordinary conversational gestures from our familiar lives to connect and correlate the

⁸¹ Camille Hardy, "Bringing Bourrées to Broadway: George Balanchine's Career in the Commercial Theater," *World Literature Today* 80 (2006): 18.

⁸² Katz Rizzo, *Dancing the Fairytale*, 54.

⁸³ Gottlieb, *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker*, 76.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

specifically danced portions of his design.”⁸⁵ This notion of the familiar reoccurs throughout discussions of the Americanization of ballet. It is through the use of the familiar that ballet could be transformed from an art form that was foreign and fully European in nature to one with a homegrown American presence.⁸⁶ It demonstrates the ways that ballet in the United States required not only a company or performances, but larger ideological shifts as well.

Any conversation of George Balanchine’s work and influence cannot, and should not, be separated from a discussion of Lincoln Kirstein and his work. Kirstein was a driving force behind the founding of the New York City Ballet and was incredibly passionate about the creation of American ballet, tackling themes with an explicitly American focus.⁸⁷ While Kirstein was not a choreographer or dancer, his large and lasting influence on ballet in the United States cannot be understated. Born into a wealthy family, Kirstein was well educated in many subjects, including dance, and wrote extensively to gain support for his American ballet projects, including his “Blast at Ballet,” subtitled “A Corrective for American Audiences.” It is clear that Kirstein realized the creation of an American ballet aesthetic would not only rely on choreographers creating works on American themes, but that it was also crucial that there be an audience for these works. As the subtitle of his pamphlet suggests, Kirstein’s opinions about how ballet should look but also how it should be seen were very strong. In 1933, Lincoln Kirstein encouraged Balanchine to come to the United States after seeing his work in Europe. While the arrival of Balanchine did not signal the arrival of ballet in

⁸⁵ Lincoln Kirstein, “Blast at Ballet,” 179.

⁸⁶ Kowal, ““Indian Ballerinas Toe,”” 76.

⁸⁷ James Steichen, “The American Ballet’s Ballet Caravan,” *Dance Research Journal* 47 (2015): 69.

the United States, as it had already enjoyed popularity, nor was Balanchine the first choreographer that Kirstein had encouraged to explore American themes, the partnership between these two men is indispensable in the history of ballet in the United States.⁸⁸

Balanchine's first work on an American theme was entitled *Alma Mater*. This ballet tells the story of a college football game, specifically the Harvard Yale game; a youthful expression of life in the United States.⁸⁹ As Gottlieb notes: "Both the name and the fact that one of these ballets had a popular American theme reflected the current interest in Americana."⁹⁰ While *Alma Mater* did not enter into the enduring Balanchine canon, there is another ballet from this early period that is still performed today: *Serenade*. An abstract ballet for seventeen women, it is notable for being the only ballet from Balanchine's earliest days in the United States which endures today, and as such is treated with a certain degree of reverence. Reynolds and McCormick describe some of the fascination which surrounds the ballet: "Although probably created in a spirit of pragmatism—as a learning exercise for student dancers—over the years *Serenade* has come to be invested with a profoundly symbolic significance."⁹¹ Thus, the ballet has come to represent an early example of the stylistic elements that would define Balanchine's "American" style.⁹²

For Balanchine, the creation of "American" ballet took on many forms, and while there are many choreographic features that are emblematic of the Balanchine style, his work embodies a wide range of topics and themes. As critic Clive Barnes once wrote: "It

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Gottlieb, *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker*, 80-81.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points*, 268.

⁹² Ibid.

sometimes seems that New York City Ballet has six or seven choreographers working for it. And they are all called Balanchine.”⁹³ From his sparse, abstract “leotard ballets” to works that fit more comfortably within the realm of classical and narrative driven ballet, Balanchine’s choreography pushed the boundaries of ballet in multiple directions.

⁹³ Clive Barnes, “THE DANCE: The Versatile Mr. Balanchine.”
New York Times October 6, 1965.

Americana and *Agon*:

This new ballet is Balanchine's classical, and very amused, commentary on cowboy American, made without simulated bouncing in saddles or pantomime giddyap. No Buck Balanchine, he, for the sake of convenient press agency. First and foremost is dance, and America appreciates the compliments.

Seymour Raven on *Western Symphony*, "A 'Western' Dance Fires Ballet Fans," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 8, 1955.

To cast a black man in a leading role and as an intimate partner for a white woman in the fifties and sixties, as Balanchine did many times over with Mitchell, was a radical political statement on the ballet stage.

Sally Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," 69.

How does Balanchine work and what is the nature of his unorthodoxy? First, most of the company's ballets, devised by Balanchine, tell no story, and many of them are unadorned by the lavish costumes and settings traditionally associated with ballet. Nor is it always possible to sit back and relax while watching the company dance, for frequently the music is hard on the ears and the dance patterns equally perplexing to the eye. Balanchine believes that ballet should exist for the sake of music and dancing alone, and that nothing like story of scenery or spectacle should get in the way of the pure expression of simple, uncluttered beauty.

Emily Coleman, "How Balanchine & Co. Changed the Ballet," *New York Times*, November 30, 1958.

Scholar Evan Alderson writes: "When we are moved by the beauty of something, it is difficult to see it also expressing a specific social interest. In particular, classic works of art that have a continuing presence in our culture seem to escape any ideological entrapments of their moment of creation."⁹⁴ While Alderson is writing about *Giselle*, a ballet with a clear narrative fixed in a specific time and place, this line of analysis can also be applied to a ballet in which time and place are not as clear: Balanchine's 1957

⁹⁴ Evan Alderson, "Ballet as Ideology, *Giselle* Act 2," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, edited by Jane C. Desmond. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 122.

ballet *Agon*. One critic offers a fitting description of the ballet's dancing to this end (emphasis mine):

Agon (1957), in the meantime, harkens back to the Renaissance with galliards, sarabandes, bransles doubles, and bransles gais, while vibrating with the dawn of the space age and the anxious noon of its time's nuclear paranoia; *nevertheless, it feels as though it has always been with us and always will.*⁹⁵

While Balanchine's leotard ballets are clearly in a different vein from the ballets set in the American West, it is also significant to acknowledge the ways that these ballets were also informed by black vernacular dance traditions as well as how they relate to questions of time and space. As Banes writes: "In his abstract works, Balanchine was by no means trying to create jazz ballets, as he had, for instance, in *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* or *Modern Jazz: Variants*. Rather, he was transforming and adapting material that undoubtedly attracted him for many reasons."⁹⁶ And as Banes importantly notes, Balanchine was forthcoming about the influences from which he was drawing to create his work, making reference to them as he was teaching his choreography of his dancers.⁹⁷ Balanchine's 1957 ballet, *Agon*, is one such example of how these influences were being used. For many, the ballet was groundbreaking both in its choreography and in its original cast. The ballet was made for Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams and Mitchell has been forthright about how Balanchine used his and his partner's skin tones as an element of the choreography in and of itself.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Jay Rogoff, "The Avant-Garde as Tradition at the New York City Ballet," *The Hopkins Review* 8 (2015): 434.

⁹⁶ Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," 68.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹⁸ Clare Croft, *Dancers As Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange*, (New York, Oxford University Press: 2015), 79.

While *Agon* draws attention to perhaps the more “revolutionary” elements of Balanchine’s dance making, Mitchell made his debut with the New York City Ballet in one Balanchine’s Americana ballets, *Western Symphony*. To place *Agon* alongside a ballet like *Western Symphony* is to see the contrast between two of the choreographers named Balanchine that Barnes described. It is also to put into conversation the different ways Balanchine was using elements of American culture in his dance making, both in ways highly visible and much less overt.⁹⁹ While *Western Symphony* is indisputably located in a specific sense in time and space, albeit in a highly romanticized way, the same cannot be said about *Agon*. With flexed feet, swinging hips, and angular partnering, it is an example of Balanchine taking influences out of their original context rather than establishing a specific, contextualized location through the movement.¹⁰⁰

Western Symphony is Balanchine’s interpretation of the American West, set to a score by the composer Hershy Kay. The set design of *Western Symphony* features a painted backdrop of a saloon exterior; the setting is never established past that of the imagined “West.”¹⁰¹ The men are dressed in the typical cowboy style, complete with hats. The women are dressed as if they just emerged from the imagined saloon painted behind them. Their dresses are shiny satin, in bright pinks and greens and their long legs are clad in black tights and black pointe shoes. Their hair is twisted up, adorned with a matching

⁹⁹ Barnes, “Balanchine and Black Dance,” 63.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Balanchine’s *Square Dance* (1957) is another ballet in which American folk dance is utilized as a source of inspiration. While removed from the ballet when it was reset in 1976, the ballet originally included a caller as a part of the performance, much like how steps are traditionally called in square dancing. Set to a score by European composers and performed in sparse costumes, the ballet does not evoke the same and explicit sense of “place” as *Western Symphony* and thus does not use the American West in same ways as these examples from both Balanchine and de Mille.

accessory. Yet even without the signaling of the set and costumes, the choreography alone is enough to establish the western sensibility, in a somewhat subdued and stylized manner.¹⁰² The men walk with their legs spread, exhibiting the swagger of men who spend most of their time on horseback. Their hands rest on their hips, as they stride forward with confidence to approach the female dancers. The hats seem to bridge the boundary between costume piece and prop, as the male dancers remove them to fan themselves or slap the ground. The women dance in an overtly feminine manner. Their hip movements are over-exaggerated as they walk forward en pointe, their movements further highlighted by their short, flouncing skirts. While the skirts do not need to be lifted, the women do anyways, swishing them flirtatiously. Some of the movements seem reminiscent of cancan dancers, their legs swirling in fan kicks high in the air. Their hips bounce on time with the music, with their toe placed in a forced arch with their hands on their hips as they exchange knowing looks with one another. Again, the interactions with their costumes become an important way for the dancers to signal their characters and their relationships to each other. Through their costumes and the quality of their movements, there is little question about who the women of *Western Symphony* are.

While writing about Western films, Philip French describes the two modes of feminine presentation available:

In the model traditional western there are two kinds of women. On the one hand there is the unsullied pioneer heroine: virtuous wife, rancher's virginal daughter, schoolteacher, etc.; on the other hand there is the saloon girl with her entourage of dancers. The former are in short supply, to be treated with respect and protected. The latter are reasonably plentiful, sexually available and community property.¹⁰³

¹⁰² McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points*, 306.

¹⁰³ Philip French, *Carcenet Film: Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre*. (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2005), 38.

While it is very clear which of these archetypes the women of *Western Symphony* are embodying, there is no “unsullied pioneer heroine” to serve as a foil. The plotless *Western Symphony* features men and women changing partners freely and presents a single mode of femininity on stage. This is in stark comparison to *Rodeo*'s Cowgirl and her pursuit of romantic love and the differences between the two ballets will be explored in depth later in this chapter.

While the ballet does not tell a clear story, this is not to say that interpersonal relationships are ignored throughout the ballet. Without telling one love story, the ballet explores and alludes to courtship throughout. The male dancers unabashedly watch the female dancers, blowing them kisses, just to be rejected repeatedly. The women jump into the arms of their male partners. Pairs dance together in movements that clearly resemble social dances associated with the American West. Some patterns resemble a do-si-do pattern. The male and female dancers run to and from their partners. Given the differences in color of the women's costumes, it is not difficult to tell when the partners have changed. In this way, the movement alludes to social dances, as men and women come together in a variety of flirtatious combinations. However, there are other instances in which the ballerinas inhabit another role entirely. In one humorous moment, the women stop portraying women at all, and become horses instead. A male dancer stands behind and cracks an imagined whip. The ballet ends with the full cast, all fourteen men and women, dancing in unison, completing a seemingly endless series of pirouettes. The curtain closes before the movement ends, suggesting that even without the gaze of the audience, the entertainment and the energy of the ballet will continue on.

Seeing the West in Different Ways:

Balanchine's *Western Symphony* engages with themes of the American West in an arguably very different way from de Mille's *Rodeo*, especially when issues of gender are brought to the forefront. In *Western Symphony*, the moment in which the female dancers are transformed into horses cannot be ignored. In this instance, the women are subjugated to a role that exists only to serve a man. Further, coyly positioned in neat rows, this moment portrays a very particular form of highly controlled femininity. Marcia B. Siegel has described all of de Mille's ballets as "coming of age" stories, in which the heroines are struggling to find who they are and where they belong in the world.¹⁰⁴ While the women of *Western Symphony* participate in the labor of femininity without issue, the Cowgirl character of *Rodeo* makes this labor visible. While Balanchine's saloon girls strut *en pointe*, de Mille's women wear flat ballet slippers, save for the Cowgirl, who runs and jumps like the boys in her boots. While both *Western Symphony* and *Rodeo* are about women and men dancing together, *Rodeo* is more concerned with how one particular woman relates to one particular man. The centrality of finding romantic love, and presumably marriage, suggests that for a young woman like the Cowgirl, the ultimate success is to find acceptance in a man.

The legibility of the "Western-ness" of both *Rodeo* and *Western Symphony* is another significant consideration in the analysis of these ballets. While Balanchine used the American West as an embellishment to a balletic vocabulary, de Mille nearly abandoned that vocabulary entirely. Writing about *Western Symphony*, Reynolds and

¹⁰⁴ Siegel, "Americana Ballet," 127 – 128.

McCormick describe Balanchine's choreography: "He gave the men a bit of guitar strumming and the women a few struts on pointe with flourishes for lace-clad derrières; but he did without the 'cowboy steps' found in *Rodeo* or *Billy the Kid*..."¹⁰⁵ In the creation of the American West on the ballet stage, each choreographer needed to find their own way to balance the demands of the form with the demands of the subject matter.

While Balanchine was not American ballet singular, his artistic vision, or rather visions played an important role in the history of American ballet. Within the incredible breadth of his body of work, he addressed a wide range of subject matter. By considering Balanchine's engagement with Western themes alongside with the inspirations from other sources within American popular culture, the sense of space, time, and particular "Americanness" of the American West can be considered. Taken together, *Western Symphony* and *Agon* illustrate two different modes of American ballet making within the canon of one influential choreographer and two different relationships to place and time.

¹⁰⁵ McCormick & Reynolds, *No Fixed Points*, 306.

Dancing Westwards... & Eastwards Too:

“Fancy Free” is utterly colloquial, but it would be a serious mistake to consider it for that reason as merely vaudeville high-jinks. Though it employs jazz idioms at will, scorns nothing in the way of sidewalk gesture and dance-hall practice, and utilizes the techniques of the popular theater in terms of timing, takes and all the rest of it, it is nevertheless an artistic entity and a modern ballet in the best sense of the phrase.

John Martin, “The Dance: ‘Fancy Free’ Does It.”
The New York Times, April 23, 1944

“Fancy Free” is the season’s hit, as “Rodeo” was a couple of years ago for the Ballet Russe. A rowdy bout with musical comedy, concocted by Mr. Robbins with the aid of Leonard Bernstein’s aware and amused score [with now and then a memory of Copland], it is staged in sharp focus against Oliver Smith’s bar and bemused lamp post thrust against the backdrop of a city by night.

Claudia Cassidy, “Ballet Is Off to Fast Start on ‘Fancy Free’.”
Chicago Tribune, November 25, 1944

In 1944, American choreographer Jerome Robbins’ ballet *Fancy Free* premiered. The first ballet made by Robbins, *Fancy Free* told the story of three sailors on shore leave. Full of athletic jumps and sly smiles, the ballet focuses both on the friendship between the three men and their budding affections for three women they meet at a bar. Dancing their way through New York City, the sailors of *Fancy Free* are inhabitants of a very different display of an “American ballet.” One way that *Fancy Free* was set apart from works like *Rodeo* and *Western Symphony* was that it was in the present time of the United States at War. About *Fancy Free*, critic Marcia B. Siegel writes: “What Robbins did was to create a reflection of the time, and so sure and unified was his personal imprint that his use of all these devices seems incidental. It was wartime; his characters were sailors, which automatically linked them to their audiences.”¹⁰⁶ Whether connected by the

¹⁰⁶ Siegel, “Americana Ballet” in *The Shapes of Change*, 132.

sense of immediacy of an actual shared cultural experience or one shared through mutual cultural memory, these ballets on American themes offer the experience of seeing American ideals and values reflected onstage. For contemporary viewers from a 21st century vantage point, *Fancy Free* has the same sense of nostalgic gloss as *Rodeo* or *Western Symphony*. The continued performances and interpretations of these ballets, as the dances are re-embodied and restaged, contribute to the ongoing project of American ballet.

Like both de Mille and Balanchine, Robbins participated in both the worlds of ballet and Broadway. The ballet that began as *Fancy Free* would later evolve into the musical *On The Town*. Involved with both American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet, Robbins was another key player in this early history of ballet in the United States as it was defining itself as a form. With the premieres of the ballets separated by only two years, Siegel puts *Fancy Free* and *Rodeo* in conversation: “Jerome Robbins’ *Fancy Free* was probably the greatest of Ballet Theater’s ventures into Americana. If de Mille represents one kind of classical American success story, Robbins personifies another.”¹⁰⁷ While the American West served as an important location in the creation of ballet in the United States, ideas about “nostalgia” and “authenticity” can be found at many points and places in this history. By gesturing towards *Fancy Free*, my desire is to demonstrate the multiplicity of American narratives told on the ballet stage. This is not to say that American ballet was, or is, an all-encompassing form. Far too often, “Americanness” is taken to mean “whiteness” and American identity is messy concept that could never possibly speak to one singular understanding. Further complicated by

¹⁰⁷ Siegel, “Americana Ballet” in *The Shapes of Change*, 131.

questions of gender and race, the narratives presented in the ballets of this analysis do not represent a universal experience, but rather are grounded in larger ideologies and mythologies that have long informed how the United States conceives of itself. When *Fancy Free* premiered the ballet felt immediate, a marked contrast to the acts of remembering which ran throughout works based in the American West. Yet, when Americans reflect upon the history of ballet in the United States, we see these cowboys and sailors in the same sort of nostalgic glow. In this way, the gesture towards the “pastness” of the American West creates the sensation of a much longer tradition of ballets on American themes and thus a much longer history of ballet in the United States.

As the work of both Agnes de Mille and George Balanchine demonstrates, there were—and continue to be—many ways to choreograph, define, and dance “American ballet.” *Rodeo* and *Western Symphony* are but two examples of how notions of “Americanness” were created on stage. Within the articulation of an American aesthetic of ballet, the American West served as an important thematic framework. As a location of prospect, independence, and transformation, placing the narrative of the American West on the ballet stage was a significant turn in this long and complicated history. As the American West occupies a unique position in popular culture, located firmly in the past as well as holding deep associations with forward motion, it is an important part of how Americans imagine a national history and see themselves as a part of it.¹⁰⁸

The close examination of *Rodeo* and *Western Symphony* both through the artistic content of each work and the conditions which informed their creation and reception sheds light on how the American West was conveyed on the ballet stage. By contrasting

¹⁰⁸ Pierce, “Introduction: Whiteness and the Making of the American West,” 11.

each of these works with another ballet by each choreographer, my intent was to deepen the considerations of time and space as they function within these ballets set in the American West. While de Mille's *Rodeo* is set in a specific, romanticized version of the American West, *Black Ritual* is based upon troublesome notions about "primitive" cultures and acts of ritual. Through *Rodeo*, issues of individualism and community are addressed through the Cowgirl's experience. As two examples of Balanchine's non-narrative ballets, *Western Symphony* and *Agon* feel worlds apart, yet both are vivid examples of how Balanchine mined American culture for material for his ballets.¹⁰⁹

The analysis of *Rodeo* and *Western Symphony* is but one way to understand and grapple with how American choreographers understood American identity and placed it upon the ballet stage. That both ballets continue to be performed suggests that the American West continues to be a useful way to articulate and understand aspects of American identities, values, and ideologies. For choreographers, dancers, and audiences, putting these ideas in motion through ballet creates a sense of re-embodiment within acts of remembering, a glance to the past to understand who we are today.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," 56.

¹¹⁰ Foster, "Introduction" to *Worlding Dance*, 8.

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