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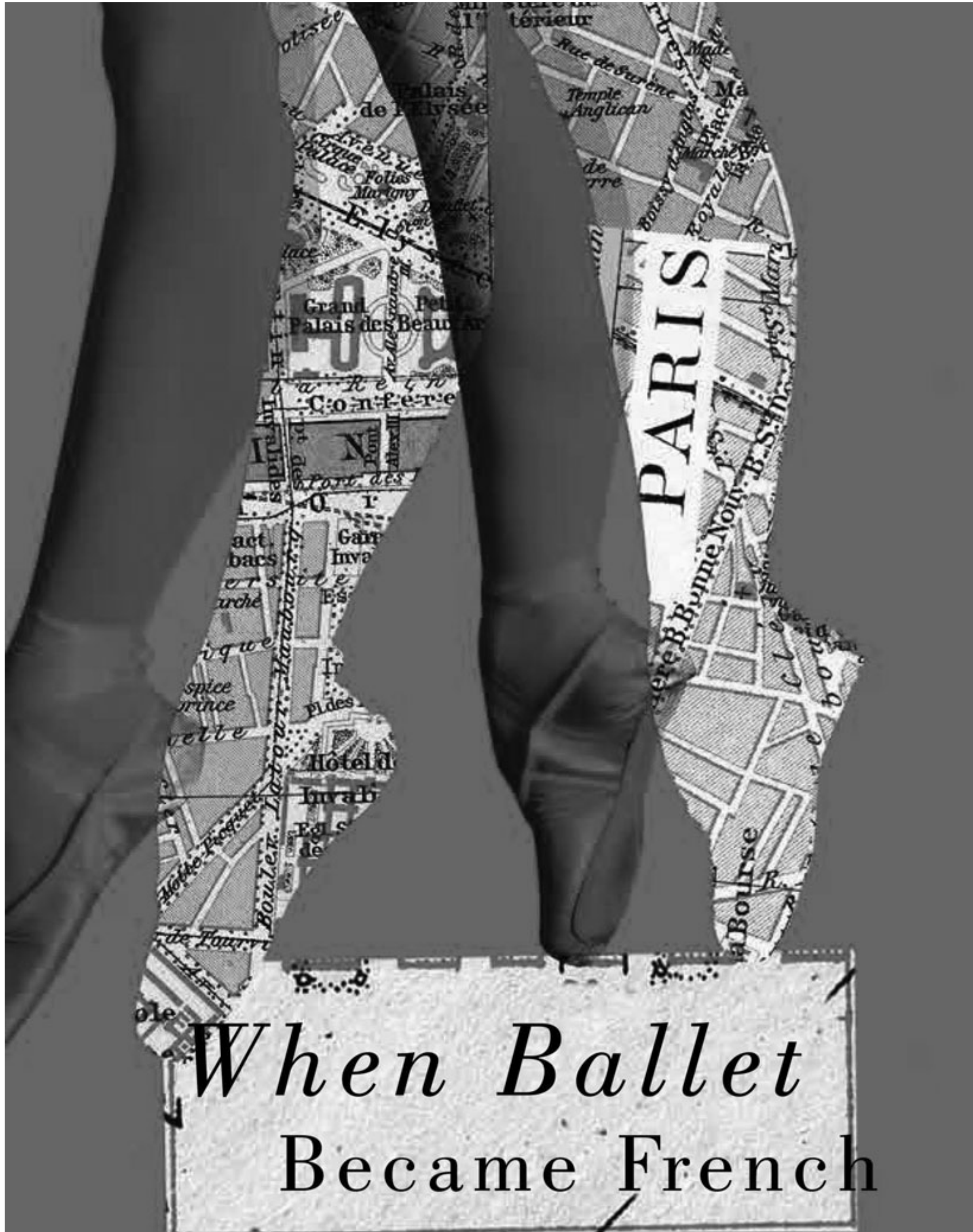

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French Interwar Dance Theory

When Ballet Became French: Modern Ballet and the Cultural Politics of France, 1909–1939

by Ilyana Karthas. 2015. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press. 352 pages, 14 images. $44.95 CAD & $39.95 USD cloth. ISBN: 978-0-7735-4605-9.

In aller Freiheit: Tanzkultur in Frankreich zwischen 1930 und 1950 [At Liberty: Dance Culture in France Between 1920 and 1950]

by Franz Anton Cramer. 2008. Berlin: Parodos. 276 pages. ISBN: 978-3-938880-18-0.
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Interwar French dance and the critical discourses responding to it have until recently been an underdeveloped research area in Anglo-American dance studies. Despite common patterns during the first half of the twentieth century that may be observed between the dance capitals of Berlin, Paris, and New York, some noteworthy differences set the French dance world apart from that of Germany or North America. Whereas in Germany and the United States modern dance asserted itself incontrovertibly in the persons of two key figures—Mary Wigman and Martha Graham, respectively—no such iconic nativist modernist dancer or choreographer emerged in France. Ilyana Karthas's *When Ballet Became French* indicates the predominance of ballet in France, and this would seem an inevitable consequence of the failure of modern dance to take hold there through at least one dominant figure. Franz-Anton Cramer's *In aller Freiheit* adopts a more multidimensional view of interwar French dance culture by examining discourse that moves outside the confines of ballet. A variety of dance forms were encouraged in the milieu of the *Archives Internationales de la Danse*—an archive, publishing venture, and presenting organization—that Rolf de Maré founded in Paris in 1931. This far-reaching and open-minded initiative was unfortunately cut short by the German occupation (1940–1944). As Cramer points out: "The history of modern dance in Europe is imprinted with the caesura of totalitarianism" (13). Although we are somewhat familiar with the story of modern dance in Germany, we know very little about it in France.

Cramer does indicate that in France the place of the missing French dance modernist was attributed throughout the 1930s and 1940s to Isadora Duncan whose influence continued to be evoked even after her death in 1927. The conjunction between so-called natural movement and Hellenism that Duncan was well known for determined an idea of dance modernity that gained increased currency through influential books such as Louis Séchan's *La danse grecque antique* [*Dance in Ancient Greece* (1930)]. Indeed, Cramer sees Séchan as deriving from Duncan's dance an archaeological impulse definitive for interwar French dance discourse as an anthropological and philosophical inquiry into the nature of dancing itself.[1] The anthropological perception that ancient dance played a role in religion and ritual of antiquity combined with Duncan's quest for so-called natural movement contributed to a conviction that eternal principles were at work in dance. This "naturalism" lent itself, however, not only to individualism, as Cramer points out, but also to a biological and hence racial basis for national identity that undergirded totalitarian world views (21). Hence, for Cramer, the debates within interwar French dance discourse revolve around dance and freedom—or dance as freedom.

The idea of universal essences and freedom from the contingencies of history were basic to aesthetic modernism, and from this point of view Cramer does not clarify what makes these ideas particular to the French interwar discourse. It seems, however, that the freedom to which Cramer refers is a

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philosophical freedom attributed to dance itself as an activity virtually impossible to pin down in discursive terms. That is, the orientation of French dance criticism in the interwar period was fundamentally philosophical because it elaborated on dance's freedom from objectification. Cramer explores the work of critics, scholars, and writers Fernand Divoire, Paul Valéry, Roger Lannes, and Pierre Tugal among others. Karthas, for her part, focuses uniquely on French journalism about the Ballets Russes seasons in Paris beginning in 1909 in order to develop an understanding of how this writing helped ballet, based on the Russian model, to become "French." Ultimately, her focus is on the Paris Opéra Ballet of the 1930s under the direction of Serge Lifar, an alumnus of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. For Karthas, criticism enabled ballet to become a genre that reinforced a sense of national self-consciousness in the face of an identity crisis stemming from the late nineteenth century. The view of the Ballets Russes as promoting exoticism and avant-garde experimentation that is notably hostile to the bourgeoisie, or even to Russian nationalism, is completely left aside by Karthas as is also the early period of aesthetic modernism in France before its turn to neoclassicism in the early 1920s.

Cramer's project thus stands out as vastly different from that of Karthas who writes of classical ballet during this period: "It was in the development of a new modern and distinctly French dance aesthetic that the French could reassert a hegemonic French identity" (145). Although Karthas' subject, like Cramer's, is dance writing rather than dancing itself, dance for her—specifically, ballet—is defined as a tool of hegemony. Comparing these two books raises the question of whether it is feasible to discuss the ideological force of ballet with respect to national identity during the interwar period, in particular, without raising the specter of ballet's other: modern dance. Although the wars of ballet and modern dance might seem to be an exhausted topic in the United States, Cramer breathes new life into the meaning of that conflict, one that is more than purely stylistic, but that concerns a philosophical reflection on the human. Karthas, on the other hand, is more concerned with a chapter in the history of classical ballet in France.

Karthas takes us back to the first Diaghilev season in Paris in 1909. This permits her to focus on the journalistic and critical discourse that brought ballet again to the forefront of public consciousness in the wake of the immense success of the Parisian Ballets Russes seasons before World War I. While Diaghilev's offerings to the Parisian public were at first characterized by Russian folkloric sources (think of the Stravinsky/Nijinsky/Roerich *Rite of Spring* in 1913), after World War I Diaghilev specialized in collaborations with French artists (one important example being the Cocteau/Satie/Picasso/Massine *Parade* in 1917). Karthas's study stems from the prewar influence of the Russian ballet on the Parisian scene, but it remains riveted on the Paris Opéra as the site in which ballet modernized as neoclassicism throughout the 1930s (despite a few lengthy forays into French dance history that are neither essential to her argument nor very adept as dance scholarship). Her narrative stops short at 1939, thus narrowly avoiding World War II and the effects of the Occupation on French culture and artistic practice. This is problematic because it assumes that the Occupation had no lasting effect on French dance and that the Opéra Ballet, once having achieved its hegemonic nationalist goals by the end of the thirties, continued blithely on its hegemonic way in the postwar era.

This is not the place to expound upon why I believe this is a historically flawed concept, but suffice it to say in this connection that the idea itself is made possible only by a particular reading of the career of Serge Lifar (Franko 2016a, 2016b). The fact that Lifar led the ballet throughout the Occupation and survived the war to continue in this capacity until his retirement in 1958 presents a misleading image of continuity. During the dark years of the Occupation, some say, Lifar saved French dance, whereas others argue he sold it out. Karthas sidesteps this debate to focus primarily on his earlier role during the 1930s. In her conclusion, she states: "The allegation of collaborationism, however, does not cast into doubt the sincerity of Lifar's attempts to make French ballet compatible with Republican values before the war" (306). This claim is historically irresponsible because, in the first place, no evidence is offered to support it. Yet, curiously, in speaking of the dance critic André Levinson and Serge Lifar, Karthas also states: "It would be inaccurate to

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represent these [Russian] émigrés as committed to specific political forms (Republican or otherwise)" (128). The mark of sincerity in defense of republican values, Karthas implies, is a lack of commitment: this creates something of a conundrum to puzzle over. Perhaps one needs to examine the works themselves? Unfortunately, if you want to know how values were manifested in the ballets created at the Opéra, this book offers no insight because it does not even address them.

The crisis in French identity that Karthas evokes revolves around defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870) and the Dreyfus affair (1894). Jane F. Fulcher (1999, 2005), whose work Karthas references, has shown that these events led to the politicization of culture in turn-of-the-century French music, a politicization that extended well into the interwar period. Indeed, the musicologist's work demonstrates how attention to the musical heritage of France served particular nationalistic agendas on both the left and the right. In brief, the musical right emphasized the heritage of the French seventeenth century and stressed the conservative values of the homeland, whereas the musical left honored the republican values of the French Revolution and a nonexclusivist view of musical influence: the first led to xenophobia, the second to cosmopolitanism. The politicization of early twentieth-century French culture since the Dreyfus affair, World War I, and in the postwar period needs to be studied in dance historical terms. Karthas does not identify the left or the right at work in the interpretation of dance: instead, she envisages Lifar's ballet as an embodiment of French national identity *tout court*, an identity achieved, as it were, without conflict. Despite a nod to the crisis in French national identity, there is no right-wing force in ballet to challenge Lifar's presumed republicanism. This is where it is instructive to note that the *Archives Internationales de la danse* is entirely absent from her account. Furthermore, French dance and dance criticism in Karthas's account seem to have been oblivious to the culture wars that had engulfed music since 1894. The simplification of seeing ballet as hegemonic and closing your eyes to the concomitant politics as well as to different possible aesthetics of the body and therefore of dance that were clearly known, discussed, used, and seen undermines her thesis. "This study . . . does not attempt to 'fit' culture into too narrow political categories," she writes (20). Karthas sees French identity in terms of dance as a kind of aesthetic absolute on the order of neoclassical ballet itself.

I am duty-bound to mention factual errors—for example, the claim that Thoinot Arbeau codified the five ballet positions of the feet or that Mia Slavenska was a student of Lifar's at the Opéra. The book also shows a certain conceptual naiveté, for example, in the confusion between *l'art pour l'art* and autonomy (see Bürger 1984, 37). Most of the evidence Karthas offers for ballet's embodiment of republicanism presents itself as sociological and derives from a discussion of Lifar's reforms of ballet at the Opéra as well as from contemporary ballet criticism.[2] What is lacking is an analysis of the Opéra in relation to the dualism of left bank and right bank and what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would call "the structure of the field of cultural production" ([1983] 1993). To see how a field is structured is to see what struggles are played out within it. Lifar worked exclusively for the Opéra yet also collaborated with illustrious modernists such as Cocteau and Picasso. Where did his work fall in the economy of avant-garde/bourgeois throughout the 1930s? The institutional and cultural status of ballet is regrettably not subject to analysis.

Cramer, on the other hand, while declining to research dance under the Occupation as such, attributes to Lifar a totalitarian ideological role by virtue of his vision of ballet's aesthetics. In discussing Lifar's book *La Danse: Les grands courants de la danse académique* (1938), Cramer notes the choreographer's "totalitarian view of normative art that solicited much resistance in France" ["*totalitär grundierte Art der Normativität, die in Frankreich Widerspruch herausfordert*"] (100). In their aesthetic opposition, Lifar and Duncan embody for Cramer the ideological split within interwar French dance itself. Whereas in Karthas there is no danced alternative to republican ideology, Cramer takes the conflict between modern dance and ballet prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century quite seriously. He draws out of the idea of this conflict the very notion of freedom that he finds at work in the imaginary of French dance as testified to by the writings of a large variety of commentators. It needs to be taken into account, however, that some of these commentators

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in reflecting on dance's freedom use Lifar dancing as their prime example. With Karthas, there is no question of freedom: all identity crises are solved by conformity. Another advantage of Cramer's book is to show how the ballet–modern wars in France were conducted over the meaning of neoclassicism: did it refer to speculation over ancient Greek sources or was it a return to the French seventeenth-century roots of ballet?[3]

Although Karthas's account, like Cramer's, is based on critical writing, she concentrates on a small number of commentators, leaving out most of the protagonists of Cramer's book. Her history becomes a triumphalist one in which the ballet dancer's body is *instrumentalized* as the "republican" body (a body that emblematizes the Third Republic). The hallmarks of this ideologically determined ballet body are professionalism, discipline, skill, and clear-cut gender distinctions. This has more of a fascist than a republican ring, and one wonders how clear-cut gender roles in particular are republican. The problem Karthas confronts is her continued tendency to deny that one can discuss the Paris Opéra without making it synonymous with Lifar: she actually claims the Ukrainian-born Lifar (whose surname was Serdkin) was "of French descent" (320n94) but offers no evidence to support this claim.[4]

It is the French encounters with the Ballets Russes beginning in 1909, however, that provide Karthas with her strongest argument. She shows that what the Russian ballet inspired in the French was a realization that ballet had originated in France and that the way ballet could be reinvigorated for the twentieth century was undertaken in critical discourse through which the dance expert emerged, the intellectual able to describe precisely and evaluate judiciously the act of dancing itself. This was the accomplishment of Russian émigré dance critic André Levinson. Of course, more than talking about dance was required; it took another Russian émigré, Lifar himself, to retool the technique and artistry of classical dancers who had until then been trained by Carlotta Zambelli. Overall, for Karthas, such modernization would undergird the increasing respectability of dance as an art—one worthy of sophisticated specialist critical commentary—and remove the former opprobrium of professional dance by the bourgeois male and female performer who, in the late nineteenth century, had become emblems of social degeneration. Ballet was to be a respected professional endeavor demanding a career of study and devotion.

What is less clear is how the professionalization of the ballet dancer leads us to ballet as a showcase for a normative republican body. How, in other terms, do we progress from the modernization of ballet to the "image" of national identity as Frenchness that ballet is said to project at each and every moment, regardless of what ballet is being performed and by whom? This was, for Karthas, the role of the neoclassical style, which she defines as: "linear design, classical themes, symmetry, and the beauty and perfection of the human form" (300). The problem with this is that it is not a description of neoclassical ballet, but of classical ballet. One has only to think of the caricatures of Lifar's neoclassical innovations to realize this. Take for example dance historian Pierre Tugal's comments: "Since [Lifar] is Neo-classical he deforms the dancers' bodies to such a point that their pointes are broken, their muscles sagging and collapsed. His star is fading and even the most tenacious 'Lifarists' find that something is wrong . . ." (Tugal 1948).[5] Despite the caricature, these remarks point to ballet neoclassicism as more modernist than classicist. This caveat aside, the French were able to rehabilitate a royalist form and transform it into an image of the Third Republic by replacing its presumed political content with aestheticism.

For Cramer, on the other hand, this sort of definition of neoclassicism is a rhetorical construction that freezes all the potential directions movement may take and the evolving meanings it may suggest, wrapping them instead into a representation that proclaims its own aesthetic hegemony (25–26). What most impressed French dance theorists was the "becoming" and "disappearing" quality of movement and the tension that existed between the dancer and the work by virtue of the fact that one could not distinguish one from the other. It is in this connection that for Cramer the notion of freedom becomes determinant for French interwar dance theory; theorists felt dance escaped every

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attempt at definition because it existed between movement and stillness, change and fixity, action and contemplation. In the words of Roger Lannes, poet, novelist, and dance critic, "dance destroys what it was in order to arrive at what it may be" (Lannes cited in Cramer, 101). For Cramer this position—not hegemonic nationalism—was definitive of French interwar dance discourse. Again the rub is that this language applies to Lifar.

There are further historical problems with Karthas's definition of neoclassicism. If Lifar's ballets were abstract, how were their themes "classical"? Did Lifar look back to Petipa, as did Balanchine? If the beauty and perfection of the human form was uppermost in Lifar's ballets, how was ballet's modernity projected in and through this so-called perfection? We know that both Lifar and Balanchine inflected and distorted the classical line of the dancer to suggest a modern style or, indeed, to suggest modernity itself as style. It is actually through such stylistic inflection that different versions of neoclassicism internationally came *after* classicism. Despite her emphasis on classicism, Karthas still weds neoclassicism in ballet to modernist abstraction, an idea that was first enunciated by someone Karthas does not mention: Russian dance critic Akim Volynsky (2008). Neoclassicism, for Karthas, is realized as a national style in "the idea of dance as a pure art (choreographic autonomy) [which] could establish a distinctly French modern ballet" (199). Aesthetic autonomy in dance modernism usually refers to the rejection of narrative, but for Karthas the importance of formal qualities in ballet is rather to be found in the emphasis on technique in and for itself; for Karthas, this emphasis renders the ballet body abstract. Technical "perfection" in itself does not necessarily indicate that technique has become the subject matter of ballet. It is not clear to me from her account how technical virtuosity equals "Frenchness" (184). Moreover, the vast majority of Lifar's creations were not neoclassical in the sense of "a new abstract representation of the body" (261); they were narrative.[6] Karthas concludes that French ballet's new focus on corporeality understood as both aesthetic perfection and choreographic autonomy rendered the new ballet body fully normative and thus enabled it to embody republican values. For Karthas, republican values seem indistinguishable from principles of bourgeois conformity at the levels of race, class, and gender combined with the Weberian work ethic. "Serge Lifar," writes Karthas, "while adorning the male dancer with a new centrality and athleticism in ballet, also presented ballets that reinforced conventional notions of gender complementarity and difference" (260). Despite Lifar's devotion to training dancers, the male dancer at the Paris Opéra in the 1930s and 1940s was Lifar himself (he barely tolerated Serge Peretti as another principal dancer in the company, for he danced most of the lead roles himself). The image Lifar put forth was hardly one of a sexually normative virility, but instead one of flamboyant and narcissistic sensuousness (Cocteau said his soul bled on stage), albeit also a kind of heroism. Lifar being a sexually ambiguous figure, his dancing is unlikely to have "reinforced gender difference" in the sense Karthas means this (259). It is, therefore, difficult to imagine Lifar the dancer as an exemplar of republican masculinity. One wonders, moreover, how such values as conveyed by dance could be reconciled with Cramer's claim that modern dance commentary in France during the interwar period witnessed a philosophical discussion of liberty and freedom. Toward the end of his book (204), Cramer concludes that dance took a place in France at the forefront of intellectual thought: aesthetics and movement were keywords of the new knowledge formation in which liberty and freedom were reconceptualized as highly relativizing for conceptual philosophical knowledge; this is a far cry from dance as emblematic of bourgeois hegemony.

A focus on the aesthetic dimensions of movement could have been useful to Karthas in delineating what she refers to as the creation of a "distinct French style of ballet" (132–133) since she does express the reservation that political analysis is too narrow (21). If politics is too narrow a lens with which to examine dance, then presumably aesthetics comes to the fore.[7] The famous *lifarismes*—Lifar's movement neologisms—are however never mentioned. It could have been helpful to see what sort of modern body Lifar envisioned as proper to or emanating from the ballet tradition. Lifar worked toward a greater mobility of the hips for both female and male dancers. This mobility was part of his experimentation with the displacement of the dancer's vertical axis into the horizontal dimension (*l'axe délié*). The males assume poses that are half turned in and half turned

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out, with the arms in a kind of classical pose. The sixth and seventh positions for the feet—particularly dramatic in plié on a forced arch because it dips the hips under and creates a slinky curve to the entire body—constitute a compromise between the classical positions and the parallel feet and legs. But this also permits quite a few choreographic permutations in partnering. Surely, the changes Lifar wrought in classical technique all lent what was perceived to be a French stylization to classicism that was also distinctly modern. This kind of analysis of what Karthas simply calls corporeality might have helped to flesh out what the national body looked like in neoclassical ballet, but the concept remains somewhat wooden when it lacks descriptive backing. In Karthas's account, the nationalization of French ballet (read: the Paris Opéra) was complete by 1939.

Cramer, on the other hand, examines writing on dance in France between 1930 and 1950, and his approach is more analytic and philosophical as he tries to understand how dance animated an idea of freedom in the French imagination and how dance was taken up by sociology, aesthetics, and anthropology. This idea of dance as freedom thrived in the intellectually stimulating milieu of the *Archives Internationales de la Danse* (International Dance Archives) until that institution—at once a museum and archive of world dance, a presenting organization, and a publishing venture—was fatally dispersed under the Occupation. The Archives have received considerable attention of late in French dance scholarship (Andus L'Hotellier 2012; Baxmann, Rousier, and Veroli 2006). Throughout the Occupation, as Cramer points out, there was no French dance apart from that of Serge Lifar. (He does not account for Vichy's folkloric dance spectacles.) The interest of the International Dance Archives in every form of world dance as well as in folklore—the goals set by the archives for both research into and practice of dance as a complex and multiform object—served, in Cramer's view, as a bulwark against the totalitarian tendencies hovering ominously over Lifar's neoclassicism (49). Thus, Cramer identifies the struggle between the followers of Duncan and Lifar as exemplary, in the final analysis, of a culture war, the particular (and quite momentous) form the war of ballet versus modern dance took in interwar France. For Cramer, Lifar was a formidable opponent of the vision of Duncan and of the International Archives (84). Although Karthas explores the dialogue between dance and criticism in the French ballet world during the Diaghilev era, she does not connect it in more than a summary way to the ideological undercurrents that pervaded early twentieth-century French culture. The fact remains that both authors deal with discourses of dance, and one can see in both the potential for discourse analysis the interwar period provides as a way to initiate a larger discussion about French dance in the twentieth century.

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Notes

1. See also Gabriele Brandstetter's (2015) discussion of Maurice Emmanuel, another French classicist concerned with dance.

2. Karthas does not acknowledge that Lifar himself was a dance critic nor does she seem aware of Patrizia Veroli's scholarship (2014) concerning the questionable authorship of Lifar's own writings.

3. For a discussion of Duncan's version of neoclassicism, see Fensham and Carter (2011).

4. Although Lifar first came to France in 1923, he never became a citizen. Lifar was granted a "droit d'asile" (right of residency) of an "Etranger sans nationalité" (foreigner without nationality) by the Préfet de Police on May 6, 1940; he carried a Nansen passport.

5. Letter of Pierre Tugal to Rolf de Maré, May 27, 1948. Dance Museum (Stockholm), Rolf de Maré file in A.I.D. collection. "… Comme il [Lifar] est Néo-classique il déforme à un tel point le

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corps de ses danseuses et danseurs, que nous voyons les danseuses avec les pointes cassées, les muscles tombants et le corps affaisé. Sa gloire commence à ternir, car même les "lifaristes" acharnés trouve que ce n'est plus cela. . . ."

6. For a good example of neoclassicism in the sense Karthas describes it one might want rather to look at George Balanchine who, by 1941, had choreographed *Concerto Barocco*, a signature neoclassical statement. But Balanchine was in New York. The national characteristics of neoclassicism have to be sought in particularities of style rather than in a general position on aestheticism that leads to "abstraction."

7. Of course, this begs the question of whether we can really have one without the other.

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