

## American Modernism: Reimagining Martha Graham's Lost *Imperial Gesture* (1935)

Kim Jones

There is probably no audience member alive today who witnessed Graham perform *Imperial Gesture*, which premiered on November 10, 1935 at the Guild Theater in New York City, and that she last performed in 1938. Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, Janet Eilber, invited me to reconstruct *Imperial Gesture* in 2010. My research is one of a few “reconstructions” to be completed after Graham’s death and added to the Martha Graham Dance Company’s repertory without the choreographer’s explicit approval (Graham died in 1991).<sup>1</sup> With neither notation score, musical score, nor living witness, it became clear that I would have to negotiate dance history in a manner that was unprecedented in the Graham Company. Such an honor carries with it accountability; therefore my methodology needed to be thorough and rigorous. In this article, I discuss the process of reimagining Graham’s solo *Imperial Gesture*, which is based on my situating Graham’s piece as a politically motivated response to her experience as an artist and citizen in the turbulent 1930s. Additionally, I discuss her shifting aesthetic practice in the 1930s with reference to her critics and their observations. Most importantly, I discuss her collaboration with Barbara Morgan, whose thirty-two photographs of Graham from *Imperial Gesture* were my best source of information.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I describe the intra-disciplinary approach used to research and reimagine the work—a collaboration of several artists, points of views, and specializations.

What follows is a brief review of how I have situated the dance, the past, and my own contemporary experience of Graham technique and choreography. In 2006, dance scholar Mark Franko noted the difficulty of researching a past dance using a political lens, and stated that such areas of inquiry are underinvestigated in dance studies. He pointed to a fragmentation of methods at the time when he asked: “Must the social and political entailments of dance, the history of movements within the dance community, and of the sensibility to movement itself, be rigorously segregated within dance studies?” (Franko 2006, 10). Franko further stated that “the methodological challenge we face is to articulate awareness of the traffic between bodies and ideologies acquired by virtue of all that has happened both in dance and in dance studies with the close analysis of how dancing itself actually works” (10). My reimagining process is an attempt to articulate the traffic between bodies in overlapping generations of Graham dancers. Additionally, the process attempts to articulate the ideologies that reconstructions acquired by virtue of all that has happened in the

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Photo 1. Dancer Kim Jones performing *Imperial Gesture* (1935, 2013), Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC. Photograph by David Bazzle, 2014.

transmission processes that perpetuate a work, as well as how Graham's legacy specifically continues to unfold. In this kind of articulation, I specifically consider how dancing in a reconstruction process itself actually works for the dancer/scholar. As a choreographer, I am also conducting a close analysis of *Imperial Gesture* while staying sensitive to the opinions and experiences of other scholars as well as my collaborators.

### Situating Graham and Her "Great Stiff Skirt"

There are several areas of investigation that helped me to situate Graham's creation of *Imperial Gesture* within, as Franko suggests, an intradisciplinary frame of historical, political, social, and cultural ideologies that surrounded the work then and still surround it now. The political, social, and economic factors from the past that affected Graham in 1935 included The Great Depression as a global phenomenon, the rise of Fascism in Europe, worker's rights, the emergence of American expressive dance, and Bennington College's School of The Dance Summer program, where Graham continued to codify her technique through her dance making. *Imperial Gesture* is one of several choreographic works in her repertoire that stands out as overtly political, and it is the first solo to be choreographed and publicly perceived as such.

I did not conduct archival research first and then choreograph; rather the process was integrated. For example Morgan's photos revealed stilled moments that my own experience could animate. Rehearsing Graham's *Sketches from Chronicle* (1936) in spring 2002 became an indelible experience for me. Graham's 1936 choreography contains movement that expresses the extreme devastation of war, yet unity and strength, within the masses. This was potent and transformative for me as I flowed through her movements in 2002, months after my experience of 9/11 in New York City. Feeling how Graham's movement allowed intense emotion to emerge helped to shape my methodology for reimagining *Imperial Gesture*. I understand that the depth of Graham's movement material and the unique manner in which she organized her gestures can be experienced and valued across time as politically nuanced.

For example, the reconstruction of *Sketches from Chronicle* (1936) included three out of five original sections: *Spectre-1914*, *Steps in the Streets*, and *Prelude to Action*.<sup>3</sup> The latter, *Prelude to Action*, was reconstructed in 1994 by original 1930s Graham dancer Sophie Maslow and assisted by principal dancer Terese Capucilli, rehearsal director Carol Fried (Cowen), and Associate Artistic Director

Diane Gray using film from Julien Bryan and photographs by Morgan. Primarily, Capucilli reconstructed the Graham solo in this section and the group reconstruction was led by Maslow. *Steps in the Street* was reconstructed by Yuriko Kikuchi, known professionally as Yuriko, former principal dancer with the Martha Graham Company (1944–1967) (Capucilli, e-mail message to author, May 10, 2015). Bryan, a photographer and documentary filmmaker, was a colleague of Willard and Barbara Morgan who introduced the Morgans to Martha Graham. Bryan filmed some of Graham's rehearsals in 1935. It is these films that were used in future reconstructions.

Repertory in the Graham Company is transmitted through the memory of its former dancers who step into the role of archivists. When coaching current dancers, former dancers provide an invaluable perspective on the past and past dancing, e.g., movement motivation, personal intention, or previous admonitions from Graham or other dancers/coaches. Seasoned dancers from differing generations of the Graham Company coached me through *Chronicle* in 2002 and other reconstructions, such as *Heretic* (1929), *Panorama* (1935), and *Deep Song* (1937). Additionally, I reconstructed the men's section of *Secular Games* (1962) for Millennium Dance 2000 in London in 2004 with the assistance of original cast member Dudley Williams. At that time, it was a different version than the company's reconstruction. As a Graham régisseur, I am in frequent contact with the current company and many of its previous members.

Because my frequent, yet intermittent, trips to New York City to research, consult, and rehearse all coincided with sessions of *doing* the dancing, there was a constant flow of new information and questions. New questions required me to collect ethnographic data from dancers who were active in the 1940s and 1950s. Altogether, the various modes of research and resulting knowledges helped create a cycle that allowed new movement knowledge to emerge based on, and returning to, the photographs of Barbara Morgan. I assumed Graham was political, but wished to know exactly how her politics colored her choreography and technique, particularly *Imperial Gesture*.

Franko clarifies Graham's participation in political art making when he says that because "abstraction was considered of value to the anti-Fascist cause, Graham felt it safe to align herself politically" with "Leftist" organizations and events, as well as perform in venues and with producers who were otherwise unaccustomed to presenting dance (2012, 15). Graham performed for organizations such as the International Labor Defense and Workers' Training School and eventually became an active member with American Artists Congress (1935–1937). Both Graham and Morgan were signing members of the Congress' declaration, which condemned Nazi repression and censorship, and campaigned for federal arts funding (Franko 2012, 14–17). Graham and Morgan were artists who were also concerned citizens. Each had a vested interest in continuing her work unfettered by the threat of Fascism.<sup>4</sup>

Graham's focus was on form and movement before content or narrative. Program notes from 1930 state that for Graham, "There is existing in America today what many call the 'Left-Wing' of the Dance—a group that has brought to the dance an added freedom as to technique, thematic material and choreography" (program notes, Metropolitan Theatre, June 2, 1930). The notes qualify that "Left-Wing" "... symbolizes the trend of the times in its revolt from old forms and, when necessary or desirable, its free use of old forms" (program notes, Metropolitan Theatre, June 2, 1930). It is Franko who explains that Graham lived "in a progressive, if not radical, political culture" and that "[a]lthough unequivocal political meaning is not found in Graham's statements, she did court a left-wing audience" (1995, 63). It is a personal politics of art making that is of interest to Graham. Graham's intent in her new form was to liberate movement from its context of entertainment to a state of "independence from interpretation" so that it could be valued for its own sake (Franko 1995, 63). It is her attunement with the state of the world, including the insidious spread of fascism within an otherwise cultured European populace, that informed her developing aesthetic sensibility and emotional expression.



Photo 2. (Left) Martha Graham photographed by Barbara Morgan (1935), *Barbara and Willard Photographs and Papers*. UCLA Library Special Collections. (Right) Blakeley White-McGuire photographed by Jeff Cravotta (2013).

Graham does not wish to control how her work is perceived. She is as interested in crystallizing her movement and finding a congruence of form and content in performance as she is in staying true to her worldview and personal beliefs about that world. Now, having worked on *Imperial Gesture* and having discovered its political context I realize that the political quality present in this work is enmeshed in the artistic and formal quality that held Graham's full attention. Graham's political awareness signaled a turn in her creative interests, but her awareness did not cause her to relinquish her interest in or commitment to form. We need only consider the next works in her repertory to see that a political turn is present in her work from *Imperial Gesture* to *Chronicle* (1936), *Deep Song* (1937), and *American Document* (1938).

A chronology of Graham's repertory, and also a sampling of critical reviews from the period, reveal a particular pattern of themes that illustrates Graham's personal aesthetic and political positioning. In this grouping of dances, the thematic structure of the works includes themes such as revolt, grief, piety, ritual, reverence, intolerance, suffering, and finding an American identity. There comes a distinct moment in 1935 in which Martha Graham as soloist is not an oppressed, challenged, or grieving individual but an arrogant despot: this is *Imperial Gesture*. The human emotion poured into this dance takes form in a new point of view—one that demonstrates the source of agitation rather than the result of it. Graff states that "Martha Graham emerged as a political choreographer, first [with] *Chronicle* (1936), then *Immediate Tragedy* (1937), and *Deep Song* (1937)" (1997, 113). My research suggests that Graham emerged as a political choreographer with the premier of *Imperial Gesture*.

From the creation of *Imperial Gesture* through *American Document*, Graham exhibits a new relationship with the world—one that reflects real world events and attitudes that are specific to 1935–1938. In these works, Graham is dancing a personal politics centered in her belief that all

people have the right to individual expression. Graham did not articulate her personal motivation for developing the solo character in *Imperial Gesture*, but it was perceived as political commentary and even labeled as a “primer in economics” by Stanley Burnshaw, editor and writer for the Leftist publication *The Masses*. The solo specifically caught the attention of Stanley Burnshaw, editor and writer for the Leftist publication *The Masses*. Burnshaw, in late 1935, illustrates how *Imperial Gesture* was understood by some of Graham’s political critics and peers. He describes *Imperial Gesture* this way:

... reducing the sequence to its basic truth, Graham presents the story through a single figure of arrogance. In its avidity for seizure, the figure spreads wide like a giant bird, stamps upon its prey and gathers more and more, until finally bulging with deformity, it collapses under the burden of gluttony. . . like a primer in economics, it must be made clear that this dance is a realized work of art. And it is this organic fusion which fills it with immediacy and conviction. For Graham is not parroting Marxism; she is illuminating by her art one of the central facts of contemporary civilization—and with biting clarity that cannot be forgotten. (Burnshaw 1935)

Martha Graham and her group opened the concert in which *Imperial Gesture* made its third appearance to the public. Her work, along with works by Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Helen Tamiris, and their groups, filled a program for a December 15, 1935, benefit performance for the New York District International Labor Defense that concluded with the Dance Unit of New Dance League, directed by Anna Sokolow. “Among the Graham contributions,” Ellen Graff, scholar and former Graham dancer reminds us, “were compositions . . . singled out as socially conscious; despite their formal values,” that also “earned the tentative approval of left-wing ideologues” (Graff 1997, 113).

Elizabeth McCausland was a critic whose writing was “at the intersection of genre conventions [and] communism” and who succeeded in “redefining art criticism” and making room “in the politically engaged discourse of the 1930s” for women artists in particular (Platt 1998, 84). McCausland believed Graham to be a beacon for how art serves humanity specifically through modern dance’s political verve and intensity. For McCausland, *Imperial Gesture* was a tool for social change. She says:

But “Imperial Gesture” moves the form of criticism one step further: the spiritual arrogance of imperialism is implicit (if not in the dance itself) in the choice of a title for the dance. That is, if one approves of imperialism, one calls it by other names, like “westward the course of empire” or other high-sounding phrases. So, tacitly at least, Graham puts herself on the side of those who see the historic ravages of imperialist policy and who dread to see the history repeated. (McCausland, Springfield Union, 1936)

While Burnshaw wrote for a decidedly leftist publication, McCausland’s reviews helped to direct public opinion of Graham’s work away from association with leftist and anti-Fascist causes and toward McCausland’s cause: art in the service of social justice and the mobilization of the American public to end inequity (Platt 1998, 90–91). McCausland provides readers then, and now, with an opinion about Graham’s shifting politics and aesthetics. Her ideas combine to indicate a work of significant importance in *Imperial Gesture*. McCausland writes:

Two years ago Graham, we believe, would have argued (in company with many other worthy creative workers) for the type of creative effort which has been called “abstract,” for art divorced from utilitarian or social content. There are indications today that such is no longer her position (and this is being written from no special personal knowledge, but from examination of the internal evidence of her dances). . . . But

titles like “Frontier” and “Imperial Gesture” cannot pretend to be devoid of literary and association content; whatever the characteristics of the dances they name, the titles speak for themselves. Or it may be that they speak for Graham’s new conception of the function of the dance. That, at least, is one’s theory. (McCausland 1936)

McCausland describes her theory of Graham’s shifting artistic growth as centrifugal. That is to say it was an outward growth that moved away from abstraction and “away from a personal and isolated concern with problems of form” toward more social and external concerns, which, for McCausland, like Burnshaw, are apparent in the titles of Graham’s new dances.<sup>5</sup> An outward focus was important to McCausland because she believed that it is within a wider, diverse audience that “history as the component of complex human factors is to be studied” (McCausland 1936). While Burnshaw adroitly describes the dance’s political currency, McCausland goes on to explain how the dance marks an aesthetic shift in Graham’s artistic development:

Imperial Gesture is a step further, not because the spiritual essence of the imperial gesture is more admirable but because there is in this dance a sardonic suggestion that the imperial gesture is indeed an unadmirable and nono-creative thing. It is to be wished that this suggestion were more heavily underlined, but still the nuance of social criticism is here, which is certainly a great step forward from the mystical and contemplative moods of former dances, no matter how perfect esthetically they were. (McCausland 1936)

McCausland is not the only critic to watch Graham actively shift her work and hone her personal political and aesthetic expression from one performance to the next. Dance critic for *The New York Times*, John Martin, viewed the debut of *Imperial Gesture* on November 10, 1935, and again on November 18. Martin notes on November 11 that:

“Imperial Gesture,” with music by Lehman Engel, is not altogether successful in spite of some excellent passages and copious cheering from the house. It is something of a study in arrogance whose ending in collapse and defeat lacks conviction except from the standpoint of left-wing wishful thinking. It belongs to the type of thing Miss Graham can be surpassingly well, however, and no doubt one or two more performance will find it transformed into something more completely authentic. (Martin, November 11, 1935)

His second review is more favorable, noting a shift in Graham’s performance quality. He states, “‘Imperial Gesture,’ the other new composition which had its second performance, was danced with much more sting in its satire than it previously contained” (Martin November 18, 1935). In these reviews we have opinions from three different critics: a leftist writer keen on political content (Burnshaw), a dance critic (Martin), and an art critic (McCausland) who “called for modern art to be immersed in society” (Platt 1998, 83). Graham’s organizational memberships, speeches, and presence in news reports seem to support these opinions and cast Graham as an artist and activist.

Graham gained national attention when she declined to participate in the 1936 Olympic Games. Her famous letter to Rudolf von Laban was widely published. Then in 1937 Graham gave a speech titled “Nazi Destruction of the Arts” for the Nazi War Over Europe Symposium. This event was for the American Committee for Anti-Nazi Literature in New York City. Here she “spoke on the manner in which art and education in Nazi Germany have been turned to imperialistic uses, not through changing the structure of the education system, or changing, say, the movement in dancing but by changing the entire basic philosophy from which these things are taught and applied” (author unknown, *Dance Observer*, March 1937). Graham’s sentiment at the time was “that dancers be watchful of their world and sincere in their art” because “the very real and terrible developments

taking place in the world leave no one unaffected” (author unknown, *Dance Observer*, March 1937). As I reimagined *Imperial Gesture*, I often asked myself what it means to be sincere in one’s art.

## Collaboration: A Tool for Recovering What Is “Lost”

When a dance becomes “lost,” it ceases to be performed and therefore witnessed, reviewed, remembered, recorded, or notated. Graham explains how dance is lost when she says that, “When [the artist] perishes his art perishes” (Graham quoted in Morgan 1980). However, Graham also asserted that, “The only record of a dancer’s art lies in the other arts” (Graham quoted in Morgan 1980). She understood the value of collaborative relationships with visual artists, costumers, and musicians. Indeed when reimagining *Imperial Gesture*, I too relied on the products of visual artists—photographer Barbara Morgan, set designer and theater professor Arch Lauterer, and poet John Malcolm Brinnin—to begin to understand the lost work. Reimagining *Imperial Gesture* also relied on the knowledge of living dancers who worked with Graham, and contemporary artists: dancers, composer, costumer, lighting designer, and dramaturg, as each reflected on specific artifacts. Because of Graham’s consistent collaboration with other arts in the past, I felt necessary to collaborate in the present. This was also a way for me to fulfill Graham’s request to be sincere in my art. I chose to work with artists from the “Graham family” to be sure that diverse individuals in the larger, collective community of artists would check my singular interpretation.

By 2012, I assembled a team of artists/collaborators that included current Martha Graham Dance Company principal dancer Blakeley White-McGuire, costume designer Karen Young, composer Pat Daugherty, lighting designer Judith Daitsman, and dramaturg Jeanmarie Higgins, all of whom worked with me at various entry points to produce Graham’s choreography as reimagined in our collective and contemporary experience. The reconstruction premiered in January 2013 at the Knight Theater at Levine Center for the Arts, Charlotte, NC. It had its New York City premiere at the Joyce Theater, February 2013, and is now part of the permanent repertory of the Martha Graham Dance Company.

I retained permission from the Willard and Barbara Morgan archive to research materials on *Imperial Gesture*. Morgan’s grandson Nils Morgan was able to supply thirty-two unpublished photo negatives from the original contact prints in 1935. The photographs revealed Martha Graham in a studio session wearing a large skirt. Morgan’s photographs, as a visual record, were the most complete and salient artifacts remaining of the dance. Dance critic Jennifer Dunning believes that Morgan’s “dance photographs were never intended for publicity or documentation. Instead, [Morgan] said in a 1980 interview, they were metaphors, created to catch the symbolic image that epitomized the dance or dancer” (Dunning 1992). While re-imagining *Imperial Gesture*, these photographs—the distilled gestures complete with a sense of arrested weight, angularity, and tension—provided cues from which I might begin to move. The images Morgan took of Graham in *Imperial Gesture* reveal that these artists captured a visual and emotional peak in the political turmoil of 1935–1938. Their collaboration arrested a moment of impending tyranny that motivated the dance’s creation and its intensity.

Because I value the stories, experiences, and training of seasoned former Graham dancers who coach, I sought out Ethel Winter, now deceased, and Linda Hodes for assistance. I met with them at Winter’s apartment in New York City, December 2010. Both Winter and Hodes danced with Graham in the 1940s and 1950s, respectively. I chose these dancers because they were my teachers and had often coached me in class and in rehearsal with the Graham Company. Unfortunately, Pearl Lang, who was my primary teacher and mentor, died a year before Eilber asked me to reconstruct *Imperial Gesture*. It felt appropriate for me to connect with elders in the Graham community for support and advice about the dance. Collecting their experiences and direct knowledge of Graham’s creative process for new work is as valuable as learning how she performed



Photo 3. (Left) Martha Graham in *Imperial Gesture* (1935) photographed by Barbara Morgan (1935), *Barbara and Willard Photographs and Papers*. UCLA Library Special Collections. (Right) Blakeley White-McGuire in *Imperial Gesture* at the Knight Theater, Charlotte, North Carolina (2013). Photographed by Jeff Cravotta.

her own solos. Hodes and Winter provided me with the confidence to trust the depth and detail of my movement choices for the solo. Together we created a list of movement gestures and sequences that existed in Graham's technique and repertory as it developed through the 1940s and 1950s. This helped me discern which movements belonged to which decade within the chronological history of Graham's technique as whole. Most importantly, they provided key information on how to use the breath and shift the weight of the body in order to find transitions between movements (Linda Hodes and Ethel Winter in discussion with the author, December 2010).

After our meeting, Winter and Hodes approved of my research methods. In our working sessions and interviews, they helped me delimit the scope of movement choices. While in the company, I danced several works from the 1930s; therefore the vocabulary and intention behind the movement remains in my body as prescribed and directed by Terese Capucilli, for example. The aesthetic, kinesthetic, and technical knowledge of Graham repertory is contained in, and transmitted through, movement and oral tradition. These nondiscursive forms of transmission are large parts of the reconstruction process as conducted by my predecessors in the Graham Company. Experiencing other Graham reconstructions allowed me to understand what, from my own movement experiences, I might use to create transitions between the crystallized moments of Graham's actions stilled within Morgan's photographs.

Conversely, the process of reimagining *Imperial Gesture* changed the visual history of Graham's legacy. The reconstruction of the solo section in *Sketches from Chronicle, Spectre—1914* utilized a well-known Morgan image of Graham extending one leg supporting a large skirt.<sup>6</sup> As I researched *Imperial Gesture*, I revisited my dance journal from 1992–1995 and found a Morgan image in my notes labeled *Spectre—1914*. I realized that the image I had pasted into my journal actually was not from *Spectre—1914* but from *Imperial Gesture*. It was the release of images from the Morgan archive that helped me discern the difference between choreographies and costumes, thus allowing me to realign the iconic image of Graham with the correct choreography.





Photo 4. Costumer designer Karen Young (lower left) with dancers Blakeley White-McGuire (center) and Kim Jones, author (right). Martha Graham Studios, Westbeth, NYC, December 2, 2012. Photograph by Pia Vinson.

My experience as a soloist dancing *Deep Song* (1937) revealed that costumes and sets were critical to Graham's realization of her choreographic ideas. One of the first collaborators I hired was costume designer Karen Young. She worked for the Martha Graham Dance Company for well over twenty years, and has been involved in the replication and reconstruction of a wide variety of costumes representing the breadth of Graham's artistic legacy.

Morgan's photographs are studio shots in black and white. A reviewer of Graham's performances from the 1930s mentioned an apricot color in particular for the over-skirt. Dramaturg Jeanmarie Higgins found articles from *The New Masses* that provided additional costume details. Young, lighting designer Judith Daitsman, and I decided on the color of the current skirt—a burnt orange on the outside and black on the inside. Graham's iconic headband was another challenge for us, and Higgins questioned how to make "a headband that read 'royal' in a transhistorical way," while also accommodating the current dancer's hair (Higgins 2015). She states that choices grounded in practicality "flew in the face of the available iconic evidence," and that some details could not be replicated (Higgins 2015, 16).

Like Higgins's practical realizations about the headband, Young created two prototype costumes for use in the design and rehearsal process. However, neither prototype was stiff enough to create the

drape effect visible in Morgan's photos. Young attended nearly five months of rehearsals, and the costume went through a series of changes as she refined the cut and construction of the costume while trying to capture all of the shapes in the Barbara Morgan photos.

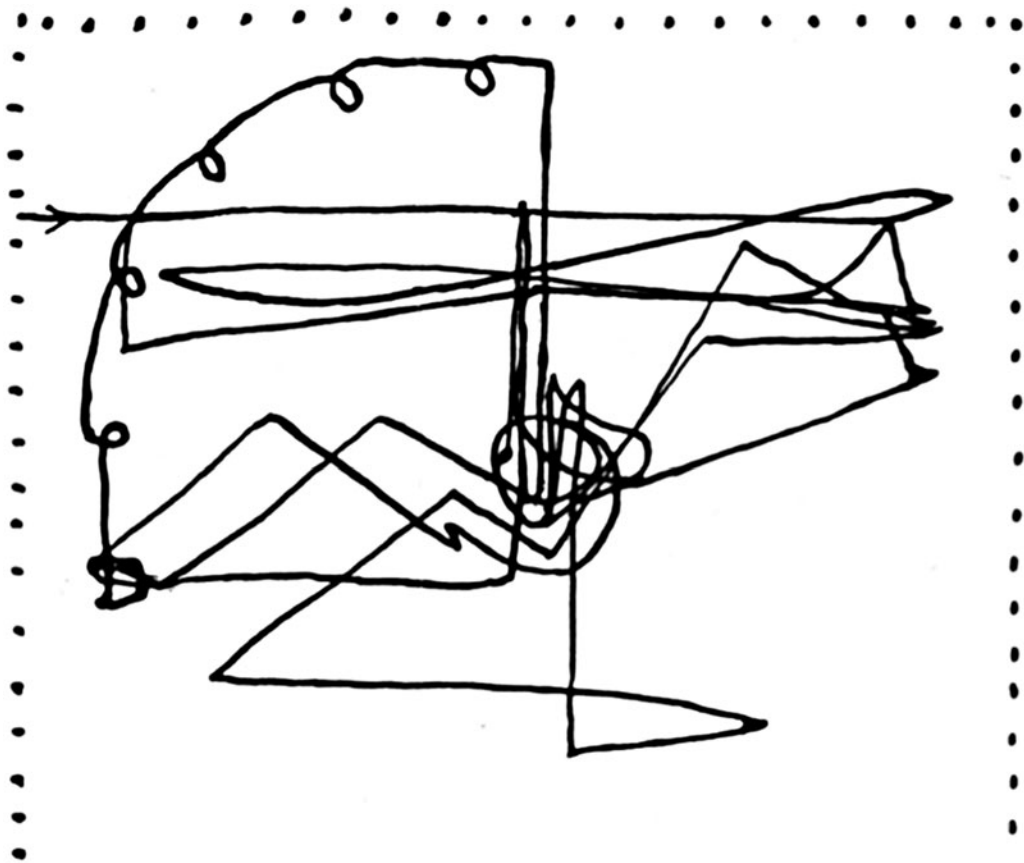
At first, Young added weights inside the hem to define the shape of the skirt as it moved. We discovered that this was unsafe for the dancer and quite noisy as it hit the floor. The final skirt includes horsehair sewn four to five inches from the bottom hem and around the circumference. This gives the skirt volume and stiffness, and allows it to hold its shape like a piece of sculpture. Young details her process when she shares:

There is a black dress worn under the large sculptural skirt. It has a top of wool jersey, as was typical for Graham during that time. The skirt of the underdress is a black faille, the same fabric used to line the large skirt, which gives an emphasis to the exterior color of the skirt and the large sculptural regal shapes that the dancer makes with it. (Karen Young in discussion with the author, May 2015)

In rehearsal, Young would give notes about the timing of movements in the developing choreography. She might say: "Move slower; the costume needs to complete the movement before you

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Photo 5. Space diagram for Martha Graham's *Imperial Gesture* (1935), Arch Lauterer (*Armitage* 1937, 44).



**IMPERIAL GESTURE**

move to the next gesture.” These kinds of contributions were invaluable to the project and helped White-McGuire and I to achieve the overall design of the dance/character.

My research uncovered an additional critical piece of visual evidence in addition to Morgan’s photographs. Merle Armitage’s 1937 book, *Martha Graham*, contained an illustration by Arch Lauterer for *Imperial Gesture* (Photo 5). Lauterer was a theater professor and set designer at Bennington College and became a collaborator with Graham. The illustration is, as Lauterer called it, a “space diagram” for the dance. It identifies the starting and ending points of the dance but looks like an abstract drawing (Armitage 1937, 108). In Armitage’s book, Graham is quoted regarding her process for dance making and performance. Amazingly, her notes read like an instruction manual for *Imperial Gesture*. Her words led me to hold the large skirt with two fingers, for example, helped me work through transitions, and detailed how to move the fabric in order to accommodate various gestures. Her statement also provided insight about how she attended to form as a means to discover content. The quotation also tells us that Graham believed form and content combine in performance so deeply that it is difficult to remember one from the other. Graham states:

I allow the form of the dance to give me back the certain emotional quality which goes with it. I do not put myself consciously into that mood before the dance. I strive at all times to let the thing happen to me. I remain as free as possible from any forced or extraneous prompting. But I must be very sure of all my movements. If my hand goes in one place one day it must go exactly the same place the next day. If in *Imperial Gesture* I lifted my skirt with two fingers in one performance, I must use the same two fingers in all succeeding performances. There is no varying of pattern. The pattern of the dance is as formal as the music. One remembers such movements with one’s body muscularly. The thing has gone so deep within one that it is hard to say how one remembers. (Graham quoted in Armitage 1937, 108)

As I moved the gestures from Morgan’s photographs, in the manner directed by Lauterer’s space diagram, it became clear that I would need to rely on my own bodily memory of Graham’s work and technique to create transitions from one still image to another. Clearly, Graham’s formalist sensibility served me. I did as she had done; I used the dance as a pattern and let “the thing”—the emotion, character, and quality—emerge from the movement.

After my sharing the Morgan images with Hodes and Winter and gathering notes about movement, it was time to experiment with movement using Arch Lauterer’s space diagram. The gestures and floor plan were an excellent place to begin the process. Lauterer’s part in the original documentation of Graham’s work was noted by theater scholar Edith J. R. Isaacs, who witnessed him working at Bennington College while Graham was rehearsing *Imperial Gesture*. Isaacs recalls Lauterer making the stage diagram in this way:

Up at Bennington on the open floor of the Armory—with the bondage of stage space removed—Arch Lauterer this summer followed the lines of some of Martha Graham’s best-known dances and of the newest dance, “Immediate Tragedy.” The sketches were made in half darkness and while Mr. Lauterer was watching the dance, without the opportunity to check his line against the dancer’s movement. Yet even in this way, they make a portrait both of the dancer and of the dance that is clear and free and modern. They point the way ahead. (Isaacs quoted in Armitage 1937, 48)

My student assistant at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Lindsey Herring, color-coded the various lines of Lauterer’s diagram and transcribed these onto clear plastic sheets. We layered them like a flip chart in order to see the entire illustration. Lauterer’s space diagram was like a map of energy lines. It became a guide for directional movements in space. During the first few months,



Photo 6. Dancers Kim Jones, author (left) and Blakeley White-McGuire (right) in rehearsal for *Imperial Gesture* (1935). Martha Graham Studios, Westbeth, NYC, November 2012. Photograph by Pia Vinson.

I spent time alone working in the studio with Morgan's photos spread out on the floor. Without the score, it seemed fitting that the timing and phrasing of the gestures and movements be generated out of my body in silence. I organized the sheets of Lauterer's diagram in an order that indicated the start of the dance to the finish. This helped me to establish a pathway for each of the movement phrases.

In order to learn how I might animate Lauterer's space diagram, I needed a dancer who could shift ideas into Graham-informed actions. In December 2011, Martha Graham Dance Company's principal dancer Blakeley White-McGuire agreed to collaborate as movement artist for this research. She allowed me to create, shape, and direct choreographed material on her as soloist. Her intimate knowledge of Graham's technique and solo choreography was invaluable to the creation and arrangement of movement sequences, transitions, and gestures. White-McGuire describes my invitation as "an unusual opportunity" to participate in a project "as a practitioner of embodied dance history . . . to put my knowledge and artistry into a realm of experimentation relative to the philosophy, technique, and movement sensibility of Graham's theater" (Blakeley White-McGuire, e-mail message to author, May 9, 2015). White-McGuire considers her work a transmission of legacy and describes her artistic process this way:

Having danced many of the roles which Martha Graham created for herself, I had become accustomed to trying to step into Graham's mindset; imaging for myself her interiority and relationship to these dances while finding my own relationship to them as well. In these dances which are set in terms of actual choreography, it had been my experience that only through "doing" the dances, being inside of her dance language was I able to receive particular feelings, sensations and even thought forms which were very difficult to articulate with the written word. I learned what I needed in the activity of dancing her steps, her rhythms, her gestures – all of these gave me enough information to bring the character and the dance as a whole to life. (Blakeley White-McGuire, e-mail message to author, May 9, 2015)

However, White-McGuire found that her experience with *Imperial Gesture* did differ in significant ways to those former Graham solos she embodied and performed while in the Martha Graham Dance Company. She notes the difference:

With *Imperial Gesture* the process was reversed, but I had my years of accumulated knowledge to lead me towards movements, rhythms, patterns which made sense within Graham's canon. Whether working in silence with Kim or sculpting the score with composer Pat Daugherty we all relied on our personal embodied experiences to point us in a direction, we listened intently for those urges which might lead us in the direction of our desired destination . . . bringing to life some new iteration of *Imperial Gesture* that would resonate and reveal itself to be a vital, contemporary expression of Graham's modernist dance theater. (White-McGuire, e-mail message to author, May 9, 2015)

Together we tested the various movement phrases, editing as we moved each along the pathways of each color-coded space diagrams. We discovered the dramatic flow of the dance by repeating and editing phrases and pathways against the various floor patterns. We continued to build movement sequences from phrases that moved through space.

At times, we rearranged the dance sequences to better match them to the color-coded mapping of the diagram. As we rehearsed, movements began to change. We rearranged movement phrases as we found a rhythm in the dance and in various sections of the space diagram. As possibilities and intuitive experiments gave way to decisions, our process became less archival and more kinesthetic. White-McGuire would rehearse three to four hours straight without a break, working with me intensely to find transitions and deepen movement quality. We searched for immediate and intuitive sensations that registered as Graham technique in our bodies.

The evocative language of American poet and literary critic John Malcolm Brinnin aided intuition and imagination. Brinnin published a poem entitled "Imperial Gesture for Martha Graham" in his collection of poems, *The Garden Is Political* (1942).<sup>7</sup> The book received enthusiastic reviews. The poem's narrative provided specific imagery for space, environment, and character description that we used to further develop our movement phrases and refine the rhythm of the dance.<sup>8</sup> For example, the first line in Brinnin's poem reads: "Clear the courtyard circle of its chalky dust" (Brinnin 1942). I used these action words in rehearsal, wearing the great stiff skirt, as I embodied one of the Graham's gestures as seen in Morgan's images. I reflected on the experience in this way:

The skirt is split in front of my body; as I open it, I place my arms inside. I spread my arms laterally expanding the dress, breaking at the elbows creating angular shapes. My fingertips are touching, creating extreme tension with about six inches of space between my mouth and hands. I stand in silence, embodying the gesture in the photo. I feel tension; this character is not revealing her full self in this moment. The drape of the fabric creates a circle with the great arcs of the skirt. I move swiftly downstage, air rushes under the skirt creating volume around my body. The skirt literally moves anything in its way, papers flutter nearby, and dust rises up from the ground. We decided this sweeping movement across the floor creates a powerful opening image. The dance begins upstage in darkness and stillness; after the first chord of Pat's score, I rise and recreate an image of a Queen moving with arrogance through her courtyard, commanding space and knocking anything out of her way. Blakeley, Karen, and I worked on this opening image, making sure the achieved drape effect matched the photo. (Kim Jones, personal journal, November 2013)

Now, as I dance the solo, the skirt seems to insist that I am ancient, regal, and formal before descending into arrogance, fear, and defeat. The skirt, cinching my waist, makes my back stand tall. Its weight and volume dictate the timing of my movement. The skirt wraps around my waistline with a piece that reminds me of an obi from a kimono. It is securely fastened, taut and unyielding. For me, the skirt is a character in the drama of the dance. The skirt enables me to hide, feel powerful, and

propel myself into and out of movements and through space. The skirt obscures my body, and can cocoon me. It reshapes my body and reshapes the space; it announces the dancer and is at once like a cloak, a cape, or a formal dress. Winter emphatically stated in our interview that in the solo *Imperial Gesture*, the skirt is the dancer's partner. She was right. It moves with the dancer, and sometimes against her. Because of its weight and volume, the dancer often has to change tempo as she moves in and out of sculptural shapes.

Moving from photograph to photograph, I discovered when a movement had stillness, tension, or a sweeping moment to get into or out of another Morgan image. The most exciting part was finding the "lost" transitions between the images. Winter, Hodes, White-McGuire, and I experimented with these transitions, reorganizing the pictures to find a "Graham flow." It was amazing how much we intuitively understood about the sequence of Morgan's images by studying, dancing, and performing Graham's dances. This knowledge has been transmitted literally from body to body across decades and generations of dancers. Graham's modernist art has moved through time despite her belief that when she perished, her art would also perish. While the archival evidence provided images, data about how it feels to perform Graham's work became the project's greatest resource.

I believe the reimagined work adds depth to modernist art history in its doubled story of collaboration; then Morgan, Graham, Lauterer, and Engel, and now myself, White-McGuire, Young, Daugherty, Higgins, Daitsman, Winter, and Hodes. Without the found negatives, space diagram, 1930s mainstream and leftist reviews, a poem inspired by the dance, or the collaboration between Morgan and Graham, as well as the contemporary artists, this process of reimagining *Imperial Gesture* could not have been realized. I shared copies of my research findings with my artistic team, including Morgan's images. This way each of us could interpret the historical background, leftist views of the solo in a turbulent political climate, and reflect on or search for additional clues about either Morgan or Graham's intentions. My research materials became a starting point for these contemporary artists to continue their own investigations, and form ideas and opinions about the work in progress.

By summer 2012, I had a structure for the dance from start to finish. I invited the Martha Graham Dance Company artistic director, Janet Eilber, and executive director, LaRue Allen, to a rehearsal. With their approval, and at Eilber's suggestion, I proceeded to invite composer Pat Daugherty into the project. He enthusiastically agreed to work with me. The original score by Lehman Engel, like any notation for the choreography, remains lost. Just as Young's skirt became like a partner for me in my process to discover movement, composer Pat Daugherty created relationships with past compositions that became companions to his new score. I found Engel's autobiography, *This Bright Day: An Autobiography*, at the Strand bookstore for Daugherty, and Engel's short score, *For Martha* (given to me by Aaron Sherber, the current musical director of the Graham company), and shared these with Daugherty to help get him started. Most importantly, I invited Daugherty to rehearsal and listened to his feedback.

Daugherty researched other works by Engel and discovered that the composer was interested in polytonal choirs and the work of American modernist composer Charles Ives. Additionally, Daugherty utilized chromaticism and polyrhythm—techniques popular at the time and used by Ives—that Engel would have likely written his score for *Imperial Gesture* (Pat Daugherty, e-mail message to author, January 27, 2013). For Daugherty, however, the rehearsal process and collaboration between dance and music proved to be the most successful tool for creating his score. In the following passage, he speaks about his process and how collaboration helped shape the final score:

I knew right off the bat that a piece entitled *Imperial Gesture* should begin with a fanfare, a musical gesture that historically announced the arrival of royalty. The 2012 summer Olympic Games had just concluded in London, and there were plenty of fanfare moments dancing in my head . . . I wanted to repeat the fanfare at the



Photo 7. Composer Pat Daugherty with dancer Blakeley White-McGuire in rehearsal for *Imperial Gesture* (1935). Martha Graham Studios, Westbeth, NYC, October 6, 2012. Not pictured, dramaturg Jeanmarie Higgins. Photograph by Pia Vinson.

beginning but then have it interrupted; a sign that something was potentially amiss. Much to my surprise this music fit perfectly with the beginning of the choreography that Kim and Blakeley showed me at the first rehearsal: and we were off! (Pat Daugherty, e-mail message to author, January 27, 2013)

Daugherty's research included archival reviews of the original performance that mention Engel's score. He mentions this in his choice of techniques for composition in the following quotation:

I decided to construct a polytonal chord structure with a persistent dissonance in it, which has been alluded to in one of the first reviews of *Imperial Gesture* . . . . As would happen many times in the reanimation of this work, Kim and Blakeley would suggest something about the music; "Could this be faster?" "Could this be higher or lower on the piano?" "Maybe some other music might work better here?" This kind of give and take was invaluable for me as a composer and resulted in a much more interesting composition than had I just written the music by myself. At one point I was playing some very genteel music that seemed to work well but then Blakeley changed from a soft to a hard quality and I abruptly changed what I had planned to play. That became my favorite part of the piece. Later on as I tried to play this genteel music again the choreography swerved in a different



Photo 8. Final rehearsal with artistic team, from left to right, costumer Karen Young, author Kim Jones, composer Pat Daugherty, principal dancer Blakeley White-McGuire, Martha Graham artistic director Janet Eilber, and lighting designer Judith Daitsman. Martha Graham Studios, NYC, December 31, 2012.

direction and another interesting music change resulted. This was real collaboration!  
(Pat Daugherty, e-mail message to author, January 27, 2013)

Daugherty's music seemed to refine all that had transpired in the studio prior to his participation. His comments about the series of falls in the final section of the solo explain how the dancer/composer relationship yielded an appropriate mood, complementary to the work's general intention. He explains:

Kim suggested that maybe each fall could be shorter in length than the previous one, which helped give the music an unpredictable feel that adds dramatic tension towards the end. I was able to repeat some earlier material for the final descent of the dance that left a question in the air. We used the rehearsal process to refine many nuances of the music's relation to the dance that added to the sensual quality of the work. (Pat Daugherty, e-mail message to author, January 27, 2013)

For the designers, the collaboration process was crucial to their creative output. Like Graham's own process of creating movement first, I too layered costumes, music, and lighting only after the choreography became set.

Professional lighting designer Judith Daitsman joined the collaboration soon after Daugherty. In the following passage, Daitsman expresses her expectations for collaboration. Daitsman also details how this team of artists found success. She says, "Collaboration of such richness is, unfortunately, rare now," and she goes on to affirm that, "The *Imperial Gesture* that Kim Jones reimagined is one that Martha Graham would certainly recognize and appreciate" (Daitsman, email to the author, May 9, 2015). Daitsman calls the collaboration a "journey" and describes the process in detail in this passage:

The journey that Kim Jones led with the reimagining Martha Graham's *Imperial Gesture* was one of the most satisfying artistic experiences I've had. We began the project in the standard way. We assumed she would provide our vision and path. The rest of us would follow and support her on her journey. As the lighting designer, I would come in near the end of the process to put the final polish on the environment. Kim abandoned this conceit at once. She invited us all to be present for



rehearsals. She welcomed all of our insight and comments on all elements of the piece. We were invited to discuss historical reference, atmosphere, environment, music, hairstyle, and costume (silhouette, fabric, and color), as they related to the intent of the work. While we recognized and respected that each of us had a specialty, we celebrated one another's artistic experience, offering opinions and hearing one another. We built an environment in which we nourished each other's creativity in the service of the work. (Judith Daitsman, e-mail message to author, May 9, 2015)

## Final Thoughts

For my part, I feel honored to have had the opportunity to live in Graham's legacy and to share in this productive collaboration. It is also a pleasure to openly note the extraordinary contributions by theater artists and designers, so often lost when a dance ceases to be performed. For this reason, I write this acknowledgment and emphasize the imaginations and creativity of the individuals who were part of the collaboration.

Graham's work focused on the human condition, including the inhumane behavior of fascist despots, ugliness, greed, and cruelty of arrogance. The content of her choreography shifted as her world changed. In her art, she worked to create and then codify movement that, for her, became a container for her passion, her emotion, her experiences. I feel I am the container of her experience of fascism in 1935, for when I dance *Imperial Gesture* while activating Graham's technique, I command attention and take up space with my large skirt before descending into the weight of my own gluttony. Graham felt that her movements in and of themselves engendered ideas, many of which were political in profound ways. For example, Graham herself said, "*Chronicle* does not attempt to show the actualities of war; rather, by evoking war's images, it sets forth the fateful prelude to war, portrays the devastation of spirit which it leaves in its wake, and suggests an answer" (Graham, quoted in program for BAM performance, 1994). She hoped to inspire change in the world, to make us reflect, think, and transform as she did in her choreography. She wanted us to breathe and turn inward so as to reflect on what it means to be fully human.

This is the vein of Graham philosophy that animated the twenty-first century collaborative process. As collaborators, we chose to trust our lived experience of Graham in action; her significant impact on each individual in the collaboration. My goal was to breathe into the images and gestures figuratively, to move along the floor pattern, to experience the great stiff skirt and celebrate exactly how Graham's technique, philosophy, and legacy are present in my creativity today.

I did as Graham technique has commanded I do for my entire career: center myself in the moment, focus on executing movements precisely, then feel deeply how my emotions emerge from my body. Just as Graham and Morgan collaborated and documented a shift in Graham's choreography, our parallel collaboration moves through personal memory and experience. It affirms how Graham and Morgan modeled a path toward the uncovering of essence, distillation toward abstraction, creation of gestures at once of the individual yet part of common humanity. These paths and possibilities were meant to present the human condition as a shared experience beyond the specific incident during a specific time period.

*Imperial Gesture* is a solo about arrogance as a source of agitation, and Graham demonstrates this in her performances from 1935 to 1938. As I perform *Imperial Gesture* now, I perform it for myself and for my current audience. The process of reimagining results in a contemporary work that breathes through the decades to reveal the reality of a human frailty. As I dance *Imperial Gesture*, I dance the ugly consequence of greed, gluttony, arrogance, and sycophancy that both Graham and Morgan identified and recorded for us in 1935 as imperialism.

## Notes

1. Janet Eilber provided a list of works reconstructed after Graham's death. These include: two sections of *Sketches from Chronicle, Spectre–1914* and *Prelude to Action*, and *Satyric Festival Song* (Janet Eilber, personal communication, August 19, 2015).
2. Nils Morgan shared the 32 unpublished photos with me as I began my project. Since that time, an archive for the works of both Willard and Barbara Morgan has been established. Please see the Willard and Barbara Morgan Archive, Special Collections, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.
3. The reconstructed works premiered in 1994 as *Sketches from Chronicle* for the Brooklyn Academy of Music's *Next Wave Festival* program entitled *Radical Graham*, in honor of Martha Graham's centennial celebration in New York City.
4. See also Manning 2004.
5. See "Modern Dance Forms," *New Theatre*, November 1935, Paul Douglas and Irving Ignatin, "'Revolutionary' Dance Forms," *New Theatre*, December 1935.
6. Notes from the 1994 Brooklyn Academy of Music program, *Radical Graham*, featured several reconstructions. These notes indicate key artists and evidence involved in the process: "*Spectre–1914* researched and reconstructed by Carol Fried (Cowen) and Terese Capucilli from film clips and Barbara Morgan photographs. *Steps in the Street* reconstructed by Martha Graham and Yuriko from the Julien Bryan film. *Prelude to Action* reconstructed by Sophie Maslow assisted by Terese Capucilli, Carol Fried, Diane Gray, and Ron Protas from film clips and Barbara Morgan photographs" (*Radical Graham* 1994). My research indicates that Yuriko worked closely with Graham's principal conductor, Stanley Sussman, on this reconstruction. According to Miki Orihara, Graham Company principal dancer, Yuriko, "watched [Julien Bryan's] film and used some movement, quality, [and] formation but changed [the dance] with her own creativity. She modified movements from the film" (Miki Orihara, e-mail message to author, May 9, 2015). There are two controversial notes to Yuriko's reconstruction of *Steps in the Street*: the original Wallingford Riegger score was not found; rather another Riegger score, composed for Doris Humphrey's piece, *New Dance* (1935), was utilized. Martha Graham was not part of the rehearsal and reconstruction process of the work; however, she did approved the final version (Hodes, e-mail message to author, May 10, 2015; Susan Kikuchi, e-mail message to author, May 7, 2015).
7. Reviewer M.S.C. (1942) wrote about Brinnin's *The Garden Is Political* for *World Affairs*. S/he said, "Here is a collection of short poems written by a young poet, sensitive to the voice of the times. They express the pity, the sense of tragedy and dread that creeps over youth today."
8. Additionally, I was able to create a character arc and anchor movements and phrases into the developing choreography based on articles and other literature from the 1930s.

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