

Introduction

Who owns a culture? Who inherits it? . . . Nobody, of course. For when one inherits, one inherits a global collective web, a web not concentric or symmetrical, but connected in all its parts . . . , a web which one is meant, indeed bound, to reweave. . . . [C]ultural representations . . . can be borrowed without anyone missing them or attempting to retrieve them at gunpoint; they have the grace (like human beings) to be fruitful and multiply . . . , and they have the good sense (also like human beings) to transform themselves in the process.

(JULIE STONE PETERS 1995, 210–11)

The subject of this book is La Meri, an international dance artist whose work represents the kind of cultural borrowing and integration that Peters defends. La Meri built her career on the practice of dance from many world cultures before issues such as appropriation, commodification, orientalism, voyeurism, and the like became concerns within academic studies. During La Meri's extensive international touring from 1926 to 1939, she would study with teachers of local dance genres, acquire recordings of the music and traditional costumes, and add the new works to her concert repertoire. Eventually her programs consisted solely of traditional dances from various world cultures and, later, also original works she created using one or another of those dance languages. La Meri performed her repertoire in Latin America, Europe, Asia, the Pacific area, and the United States. She also taught in Europe and the United States, and her writings set forth her conceptions, un-

derstandings, goals, and methodology. This book is both a biography of La Meri and an analysis of her work, including her performance, choreography, writings, and teaching. What is her legacy and significance in the contexts of dance as an art form, dance studies, and dance theory?

In the twenty-first century, people in urban centers have access to a rich variety of world art forms. One can view Japanese Kabuki in Paris, Bolivian theater in Cádiz, Mexican art in New York City, Western contemporary dance in Beijing—and the list goes on. Dance companies specializing in theatrical adaptations of traditional folk, social, or ritual dance from their own cultures tour extensively, and artists from an array of traditions perform and teach internationally. Dance genres originating in one culture have come to be practiced all over the world—for example, Western ballet, modern dance, and jazz; Spanish flamenco; Bharatanatyam and other forms from India; and Latin American social dances. Through books and articles, films, television, audio recordings, and the internet—not to mention actual as well as virtual travel—one can choose to explore the myriad forms of expression across the globe. Not only does this provide the opportunity for people to become acquainted with more or less traditional practices from many cultures but also with the development of various kinds of adaptations and fusions. The latter have included the mixing of elements from two or more traditions to create new forms such as Indo-jazz or Bulgarian hip hop or works such as innovative theater director Peter Brook's controversial 1985 production of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. Inevitably, there is also a growing body of literature—both pro and con—on such phenomena (see, for example, Balme 2007, Foster 2009, Gainor 1995, Lengel 2005, Marranca and Dasgupta 1991, and Pavis 1996).

La Meri's work represents one stage in the progression of interculturalism in Western dance that can be traced back several centuries. In Europe, at least from the Renaissance on, and in the Western Hemisphere from the early days of colonization, there has been a history of intercultural appropriation, sharing and/or imposition. Typically, the exchange has been between more powerful and less powerful political or social entities.

In dance, intercultural manifestations in Europe can be seen from the early Renaissance dance treatises written to serve an international court culture that shared social dances and entertainment forms. The pan-European social dance repertoire included the pavan (Italy, Spain, and France,

sixteenth–seventeenth centuries), the sarabande (Spain and Latin America, sixteenth century, and then throughout Europe), the minuet (seventeenth–nineteenth centuries), and the allemande (fifteenth–nineteenth centuries). Such dances were taught and spread by members of an increasing cadre of professional and often itinerant dance masters. The early social dances were incorporated into court ballets, masques, and other entertainments and began to develop into what eventually became the ballet tradition. A crucial event in the internationalization of performance forms was the 1533 marriage of Catherine de Medici (1519–1589), from the prominent Italian family, to the French prince who would become King Henry II in 1547. Catherine brought Italian performing and plastic arts to the French court, where they became established. As the power of France increased, French culture, including the elements that had developed from borrowed or appropriated practices, influenced court cultures throughout Europe (see, for example, Kant 2007; McGowan 2008; Sorell 1986).

Western interest in other cultures and in the appropriation of selected elements from them for incorporation into hegemonic art forms such as opera and ballet continued into the Baroque era and beyond. Dance historian Deborah Jowitt writes of the “decorative Orientalism of the eighteenth century: the nobility-in-turbans dances—as in Jean Philippe Rameau’s *Les Indes Galantes*—or cavorting Siamese ‘grotesques’ or the porcelain figures come to life in Jean Georges Noverre’s *Les Fêtes Chinoises*” (49). In referring to these manifestations and others from the later Romantic era, she notes that “Authenticity was never an issue,” that, for the most part, the term “‘The Orient’ has designated a pleasure garden for the imagination—an Orient restructured to fire European longings and justify European conquest” (50). In addition to the Middle East and Asia (usually conflated under the term “Orient”), librettists and choreographers also drew from the Western Hemisphere (the so-called New World) and the Pacific area; and there was a range of borrowing—from merely decorative elements to actual dances, dance styles, and dance movements.

European interest in the actual dances of various cultures can be documented from the eighteenth century. Dance historians Lisa C. Arkin and Marian Smith note that “many ballet theoreticians of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries expressed a keen interest in the authentic, ‘true’ and ‘natural’ folk expressions of various nations” (30), and cite as evidence trea-

tises by Giovanni-Andrea Gallini (1772), Gennaro Magri (1779), and Carlo Blasis (1820, 1828, 1847) (30–34). They also write of choreographers such as August Bournonville and dancers such as Fanny Elssler seeking instruction in dances outside their own ballet traditions (34–35), although any such material would have been adapted for the ballet stage (35–45). One might investigate how the process of such nineteenth-century ballet practitioners differed (if it did) from that of Igor Moiseyev or Amalia Hernández in their adaptations of Russian or Mexican folk dances for twentieth-century “folk ballet” performances, or from that of La Meri in her presentation of world dance traditions on the concert stage.

Interest in the exotic “other” continued into the twentieth century. Pioneering nonballetic dance artists such as Maud Allan (1873–1956) and Loie Fuller (1862–1928) borrowed themes from the Middle East in exotic depictions of, for example, the biblical dance of Salome, a favorite theme on both sides of the Atlantic (Cherniavsky 1991, 141; Garelick 1995, 85; see also Albright 2007 and Garelick 2007). They developed their choreography on popular images and conceptions of the “Orient” rather than on any kind of historical or ethnographic research. Loie Fuller, best known for her innovations in theatrical lighting effects in combination with voluminous swirling silk fabrics, stepped into the exotic East with *Dance of the Seven Veils* (first performed 1895 and then enormously successful at the 1900 Paris Exposition) and with her presentation of the Japanese dancer Sada Yakko, also at the 1900 Exposition (Current and Current 1997, 80–85, 141–44). In the field of ballet, the Ballets Russes of Diaghilev had explored various exotic themes, and some of the solo works of the incomparable ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881–1931) incorporated actual movements as well as images and themes from Mexican, East Indian, and other cultures (Lazzarini 1980, 1998; La Meri 1977a, 67).

Two innovative and highly influential dance artists, Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968) and Ted Shawn (1891–1972), researched to some extent the elements of foreign cultures that interested them. They studied art works and texts to understand spiritual concepts as they developed their dance vocabularies, choreography, costuming, and stage design, and they did learn some actual dances during their tour of Asia in 1925–26 (see Shelton 1981; Ruyter 1979, 64–65, and 2000b, 25–26). For the most part, however, St. Denis and Shawn were not attempting to either learn or present actual

dances or dance languages from other cultures. Allan, Fuller, and St. Denis, who had begun their lives and careers twenty to thirty years earlier than La Meri, became established professionally during the orientalist mania of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that raged on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ St. Denis, Allan, and others sought to capture a Westernized concept of some mysterious oriental “essence” in their dancing, or as expressed by the dance historian Susan Manning, they presented “Western stereotypes of the East” (161).

While La Meri was the first twentieth-century American dancer to actually pursue the study of foreign dance languages—their movements, choreographic forms, styles, and cultural components—she developed that interest and commitment only gradually. In the early years of her training and her performance, her repertoire was an eclectic mix of ballet, proto-modern (or interpretive) dance, and impressions (*à la* Denishawn) of the dances of non-Western cultures, accompanied by Western piano or orchestral music. It was her extensive international touring in the 1920s and 1930s that brought her into contact with a wide variety of traditional world dance forms. Beginning with her first foreign engagement in Mexico, she became interested in learning some of the dances and movement techniques that were native to the culture she was visiting. While in the course of her life, she became most knowledgeable about the dance arts of Spain and India, she also learned, performed, and wrote about dances from other parts of Asia, from the Pacific area, and from Latin America.

Chapters 1 through 8 are devoted to La Meri’s biography from her childhood to her last years, covering her development as a performing artist, choreographer, teacher, and writer—and her personal relationships. Chapter 9 focuses on her writings, and chapter 10 on the significance of her work in general and in relation to theoretical and ethical issues that have become important in academic studies in recent years.