Nervous Salomes: New York Salomania and the Neurological Condition of Modernité

Margaret K. Araneo

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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NEUROLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF MODERNITY

by

MARGARET ARANEO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Nervous Salomes: New York Salomania and the Neurological Condition of Modernité

by

Margaret Araneo

Advisor: Professor Jean Graham-Jones

In January 1907, New York City had its first major encounter with the figure of Salome. Appearing on three large stages in the city simultaneously, the archetype of the dancing girl quickly became an object of controversy. Her appearance at the Metropolitan Opera House in its staging of Strauss’s *Salome* resulted in public debate and the ultimate closure of the performance by the Met’s Board of Directors. The event brought attention to the Salome archetype’s already contested character. Salome arrived in the United States from Europe where she had been the subject of a quarter century of debates about how aesthetic representations of the dancing girl were indulging the decadent and neurologically degenerate nature of modernist culture. Within the context of New York, Salome quickly became a vehicle by which U.S. culture could negotiate its own relationship to the modern experience.

In the three years following the Met’s closure of its production of Strauss’s opera, the figure of Salome would appear on variety stages around the city in increasing numbers. These performances, using many of the European representations of the dancing girl as their model, embodied, I argue, a significant number of the neuropathological traits that were proving so threatening to western culture. This dissertation examines this explosion of Salome performances in New York from 1907 to 1909. It looks to how in their performative celebration of the archetype of the dancing girl they engaged new medical models of neurological impairment circulating at the time.
The chapters in this dissertation illuminate what I see as the process by which the archetype of Salome became increasing neuropathologized. In chapter one, I position the dancing girl inside a modernist landscape where neurological concepts were freely circulating. I do so by examining how changes to individual experiences with the physical and social environments of modern life coincided with the rise of neurology as a medical sub-discipline. In chapter two, I provide a preliminary discussion of the Salome phenomenon in New York, what has come to be known as the city’s period of Salomania. This is followed by an explication of how the modernist archetype that became so popular in the city gained its neuropathological character. To do so, I look to the archetype’s fin de siècle past in Europe. The final chapter examines more closely the dynamics of New York’s Salomania. It considers how the popular performances embodied the neurological nature of modernist culture through their representation of neuropathological conditions. The chapter concludes with two case studies. I first examine the performance style of Gertrude Hoffmann, a successful vaudeville performer who was one of the first to present a Salome act at a major variety venue. I study her work for how it embodies traits associated with the neurological condition of generalized hysteria. Next I examine the contortionist/dancer La Sylphe for how her iteration of Salome corresponded with behaviors and gestures associated with the neurological condition of epilepsy.
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Introduction

A young woman of an unspecified age dances before a king. The nature of the dance is unknown; only its effects are clear: ecstasy, desire, desperation, and revenge. The enraptured king makes an oath. He promises to give the dancing girl whatever she desires, “unto the half of [his] kingdom.”¹ Her response is swift. She asks for the head of the imprisoned prophet, John the Baptist, to be brought to her in a charger. The request is granted, the prophet decapitated, and the first Christian martyr is made.

The earliest accounts of the above narrative appear in the first-century Christian gospels of Mark and Matthew.² Though a modest story in terms of its details and characterization (the dancing girl is never even named), the narrative will have a lasting influence on western culture. While it will obviously be an essential element in the structuring of a long-standing Christian theology of sacrifice and salvation—John the Baptist being the messianic forerunner of Jesus Christ—it will also serve as fertile source material for secular artists and commentators in the centuries that follow.³ The figure from the Biblical accounts with arguably the most significant and far-reaching impact on secular western culture is the dancing girl. Identified as Salome by Flavius Josephus in 96 C.E., she will emerge over time as a powerful vehicle for artists in a variety of contexts to address the dynamics of their respective cultures.⁴

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¹ Mark 6:23 (New King James Version).
As Polina Dimova explains, the sensorially “austere” portrait of Salome presented in the gospels generated “a rich, intricately layered and resonant history of interartistic endeavors.”⁵ Representations of Salome appear in illuminated medieval manuscripts, Renaissance and Baroque paintings, as well as modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary drama, music, dance, and film. These numerous, often intertextual explorations of Salome form what Megan Becker-Leckrone calls a “textual corpus” of the dancing girl. Within the corpus’s borders, “character and plot, woman and text” coalesce to form a historically “fetishized” archetype of Salome.⁶ From this perspective, representations of Salome, as iterations of the archetype, are always acting both as transhistorical sites of exchange and as specific cultural locations within unique historicized landscapes.

In this dissertation, I examine variety performances of the Salome archetype in New York City from 1907 through 1909 for how they serve as sites of disclosure for perceiving the dynamics of western modernist culture. Specifically, I look to how the popular variety acts that featured the dancing girl reveal a uniquely modernist perspective marked by contradiction, paradox, and disjuncture. Recognizing the fractured nature of the modern condition through this historical encounter with the New York Salomes presents, I argue, a starting point for deeper investigations into the legacies of modernist culture’s most ardent ideologies around normative subjectivity and corporeal difference. Turning to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of potentiality in which the disclosure of contradictions opens up new narratives for considering a culture’s

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trajectory, I read the Salome acts with their embodiment of paradoxes as historical locations for reimagining the direction of modernity and its relationship to neurological difference.

New Yorkers’ unprecedented interest in the dancing girl during the first decade of the twentieth century stretched across the city’s many communities. Men and women of all backgrounds flocked to vaudeville and variety venues to see modern dancers, female impersonators, singers, comics, and acrobats take on the mantle of Salome. The Salome acts appealed to audiences across class, race, ethnicity, and gender. The archetype appeared in venues as luxurious as the Jardin de Paris Theatre, the first home of the Ziegfeld Follies, and as pedestrian as the ad hoc stages of the Coney Island Amusement Park. The collection of performers who tackled the archetype in this genre was equally as diverse. Eva Tanquay, Julian Eltinge, Aida Overton Walker, Gertrude Hoffmann, Isadora Duncan, and Sarah Bernhardt: all contributed their New York iterations of the dancing girl to the textual corpus of Salome.7

This exceptional popularity of Salome—a phenomenon an unnamed New York Times columnist in 1908 coined Salomania—suggests a correspondence between aspects of the archetype and the culture of early-twentieth-century modernist New York.8 This dissertation probes that correlation. It does so with an understanding that the relationship is one of mutual exchange, with the performances both reflecting and helping to generate the cultural condition in

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8 The first print reference to the Salome phenomenon in New York as Salomania appears in “The Call of Salome: Rumors that Salomania Will Have a Free Hand This Season,” New York Times, August 16, 1908, 4.
which they occurred. The cultural field of early-twentieth-century New York, as part of a larger territory of western modernist culture, was, of course, complex. There was a multiplicity of forces at play within its borders that the performances of the Salome archetype could be seen as actively engaging. While changes to western culture had certainly been underway in the early nineteenth century, the transformations to the landscapes of Europe and North America from the fin de siècle through the turn of the twentieth century were unmatched. These included massive industrialization, urbanization, intense periods of mass immigration, advancements in transportation and communication, and rapid population growth. To distinguish this period in western culture from others within the larger framework of the modern, Ben Singer has described it as “modernity at full throttle.”

New York Salomania, I contend, as both a result of and contributor to this throttle and its influence warrants examination.

My focus in this dissertation will be on the Salome performances’ relationship to the medical sciences, specifically the subdiscipline of neurology, which by the early twentieth century had effectively integrated many of its models of neuropathology into the modernist landscape. Performances of the Salome archetype in New York variety entertainments in the first decade of the twentieth century, I argue, through both their form and content participated in the generation of a neurological dynamic within modernist culture. They did so by incorporating the physical gestures and psychological behaviors associated with certain neuropathologized conditions, most notably hysteria and epilepsy, into their performances. When examined closely, these New York Salome acts through their representations of various neuropathologized traits disclose an inherently contradictory experience of modernist culture that can be linked to issues of neurological difference. The disclosure of these particular contradictions and tensions not only

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deepens our understanding of the “nervous” dynamics of the modern but also creates important opportunities for probing the effects of modernist models of normative and non-normative human neuropsychology.

In the nineteenth century, an exceptional number of discoveries in scientific fields ranging from microbiology to obstetrics resulted in a proliferation of medical diagnoses that organized difference in accordance with newly identifiable “pathological” conditions. This was most apparent in the neurosciences, where medical research into the brain and its complex neurological system resulted in a taxonomy of non-normative conditions, including Tourette’s syndrome, Parkinson’s disease, hystero-epilepsy, and neurasthenia. These discoveries, combined with a rapid institutionalization of medical treatment through the increase in the number of hospitals and rehabilitation programs, helped to create a collection of identities grounded in disabling neuropathologies. These bodies, as Pasi Valiäho describes, with their “pathological movement, tics, spasmodic jerks, mannerisms, etc. proliferated and became visible under the thousands of minute and quantifying observations performed in clinics of nervous disorders.” They took center stage at such events as the Parisian neurologist Jean Martin

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11 Michel Foucault’s interrogation of the changes to the medical landscape of modernity in the late nineteenth century must, of course, be acknowledged. Foucault’s poststructuralist study of institutionalized medicine generated a body of subsequent work devoted to examining the relationship between medical discourse and the construction of paradigms of identity and difference. See Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Tavistock Publication Limited (Abingdon: Routledge, 1989); *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); and *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). While I appreciate these poststructural approaches, this project will not engage directly with such theories. Instead, it will look to more phenomenological frameworks for its investigation into the relationship between the history of modernity and performance.

Charcot’s famous Tuesday soirées, in which members of the medical community and invited “guests” watched as the disabled body of a diagnosed hysterical passed through the various stages of a hystero-epileptic seizure.¹³ Photographed, commented on, and aestheticized, Valiäho explains, these bodies with their pathologized gestures eventually moved beyond the clinics. Their “generalized” presence was woven into the broader culture through newspapers and magazines, popular entertainment, and eventually film.¹⁴

The Salomania phenomenon in New York emerged within the neurological cultural context described above. It was part of a larger landscape where the relationship between normativity and non-normativity were regularly negotiated in and out of medical arenas. As Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell explain, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were peppered with “arsenals that sought to make myriad forms of abnormality visible through the development of disciplines and professions that depend[ed] on discovering increasing degrees of human deviance.”¹⁵ Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the combined work of doctors, scientists, social theorists, and statisticians created many workable models of the “normal” that rested on constant references to a “healthy” body’s “pathologized” Other.¹⁶ Displaying this juxtaposition in both medical and non-medical cultural spheres, from the theatres at the Salpêtrière Hospital to “freak” shows in dime museums of the late nineteenth and

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¹⁴ Valiäho.
¹⁶ For more information on how professionalized scientific and mathematic disciplines together constructed paradigms of normativity in the late nineteenth century, see Lennard Davis, Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body (London and New York: Verso, 1995).
early twentieth centuries, corporeal difference was being simultaneously contained and exhibited to construct a very particular modernist identity.\textsuperscript{17}

When considered within the context of the medicalized western culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the performances of the Salome archetypes in New York City from 1907 through 1909 become active sites of disclosure. They are cultural locations where the complex dynamic between ideologies of normativity and the celebration of experiences of embodied difference in modernist culture can come into view. In this dissertation, I focus attention specifically on the neurological strains within this medicalized culture. I do not read this normative–non-normative dynamic, however, in a unidirectional way where the Salome acts are investigated only for how they provided sites of reinscription for medical models of neurological difference. Instead, I examine it for how the Salome acts presented possibilities for reimagining the pathological through their aestheticization of bodily difference. I look to how the embodiment of certain “signs” of neurological impairment in these performances—e.g., jerking limbs, states of psychic disassociation, extreme backbends, uncontainable bursts of sexual expression—worked in a mutually generative way with the medical models circulating in the broader modernist culture. Reinscription happened, I argue, alongside the celebratory expression of individual encounters with non-normative behavior. This intersection of medical models of neurological normativity with creative explorations of neuropsychological difference generated a

set of paradoxical experiences within late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century modernist culture. In contrast to narratives of modernity that have tended to repress these contradictions in their advancement of ideologies that privilege models of normativity, my analysis of the Salome phenomenon foregrounds the tensions around neurological difference. Locating the paradoxes inside the performative archetype of the dancing girl and examining the cultural discourse surrounding the figure’s popularity in theatrical entertainments, I draw attention to how the conflicting historical responses to neuropsychological diversity enable a rethinking of modernity’s legacy with respect to the politics of human corporeality.

My framework for approaching the New York Salome performances as simultaneously sites of reinscription and reimagination draws much from cultural models of disability. In such frameworks, impairments are historicized within different cultural landscapes to show how individual experiences with embodied difference interact with medical models, thereby, giving disability a flexible identity. Disability scholars such as Susan Snyder and David Mitchell, who employ the cultural model of disability, see in historical investigations of embodied difference the chance to understand a more complex function of impairment within cultures. Looking for instances of “human variation encountering environmental obstacles and socially mediated difference,” Snyder and Mitchell assert, adds a “phenomenological perspective” to the

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18 As the field of disability studies has coalesced, different models for interrogating the category of disability have circulated. Beginning in the 1980s, the dominant model was the social model. In this paradigm, as Carol Thomson explains, disability “is not caused by impairment but results from the social restrictions imposed upon people with impairment.” Carol Thomas, *Sociologies of Disability and Illness* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 57. The social model counters medical and individual models of disability that focus on biological “defects,” diagnosed by medical experts, which then become the source of personal struggle for those managing the impairment. In the social model, impairments only “disable” an individual’s participation in a society insofar as social conditions and institutionalized relationships prohibit individuals from engaging in the social arena on equal ground with the non-impaired.
conversation about impairment and disability. Medical models are not abandoned. Instead, the phenomenology of impairment and medical paradigms “inform each other.” From this perspective, the relationship between impairment and medical discourse does not simply become a “discriminatory encounter.” We read the relationship rather as a dialogue between impaired bodies and the medical models that attempt to diagnose and “treat” them. Examination of these dialogues inside their respective historical contexts reveals a dialectical process in which representations of impairment emerge as both critical and generative forces within the culture.

Snyder and Mitchell’s commitment to retaining the “phenomenological perspective” in cultural studies of disability provides an important point of view for scholars engaging any historical framework rich with discourse related to impairments. The inclusion of a phenomenological perspective into the study of such cultures often requires a rearticulation of a discipline’s dominant frameworks for defining the historical period under review. With respect to this dissertation, if Salome performances are to be understood as sites of disclosure for understanding the dynamics of neurological normativity within modernist culture, then it is important to consider current articulations of the parameters of the modern to determine if they effectively allow for this type of investigation.

In an effort to articulate more clearly how I will be defining modernist culture, I turn to a valuable, albeit underused, phenomenological paradigm for engaging the different phases of modernity. Using Charles Baudelaire’s concept of modernité as a model (the meaning of which I will explain in more detail below), the framework I employ for engaging late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century culture will rely on more than just the current geographical and temporal boundaries of many of the dominant paradigms of the modern in circulation today. My definition

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19 Snyder and Mitchell, 10.
of modernist culture will incorporate a phenomenological perspective, one that provides a deeper understanding of how individuals experience their physical and social environments. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century culture will not, therefore, be defined merely by the presence of rapidly changing social and economic conditions but with the particular “mode of perception” these conditions produce.

Examples of phenomenological approaches to the study of modernist culture, notes David Frisby, can be located in the early-twentieth-century theories of George Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer. These theorists build upon Baudelaire’s idea of modernité. Specifically, they apply it to the study of modernist aesthetics. They link their objects of study to the new mode of perception generated within the landscape of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European and North American culture. These examinations, because of their focus on a modern mode of perception rather than on a list of formal attributes associated with aesthetic works of the period, allow for the inclusion of popular and mass forms of entertainment, such as those being examined in this dissertation. They, therefore, provide an effective entryway into my study of the New York Salome performances that were popular between 1907 and the close of 1909. Because of how essential the paradigm of modernité is to my investigation, I use the next section of this introduction to present a deeper explanation of the modernité model and its value to this study.

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21 Susan Stanford Friedman offers, in her essay “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modernity/Modern/Modernism,” an insightful analysis of the various frameworks scholars have used in their discussions of the parameters of modernity. In it, the modernité model emerges as a powerful antidote to the restrictive categorization that has become associated with certain aesthetic models of modernism. Susan Stanford Friedman, “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modernity/Modern/Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* vol. 8, no. 3 (2001): 493–513.
Engaging Modernist Culture through the Framework of Modernité

Charles Baudelaire writes, in his 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” that he can find no other word than modernité to describe “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” experience of the artist in the mid nineteenth century. Modernité cannot be reduced to a simple temporal frame or an aesthetic category or movement; it is instead a “quality,” derived from a unique artistic engagement with an emerging urban reality. “Every age,” writes Baudelaire, “has its own carriage, its expression, its gestures.”

Crowds, commerce, and an almost pathological infatuation with the “new” generate fresh perspectives on a fast-changing world. The flâneur emerges as one of the century's most infamous cultural characters. With his understatedly bourgeois exterior, he scans his city's streets for material evidence of his uniquely modern experience and becomes the embodiment of Baudelaire's modernité: he is a metonym for a historical mode of perception whose influence is still being debated.

Michel Décaudin notes how the French usage of modernité has no firm correspondence in English. While it is routinely translated as modernity or modernism, these words do not appropriately capture the relational component of the original French. Décaudin explains: “[T]here is no abstract general category of modernité but several modernities experienced successively and simultaneously. A critique of modernité, therefore, will not consist in the identification of distinctive features that would enable us to constitute its concept, in order to submit later artists and works to it. It will rather disclose the particularities of groups or of individuals in their relationship with their time in order ultimately to characterize an era.”

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For Baudelaire, it is through the artists’ relationships to the era in which they live that modernité as a mode of experience is made tangible to those that lack the artists’ acute skills of perception. Baudelaire humbly disavows his own artistic constitution when he writes: “For most of us and particularly for men of affairs for whom nature has no existence save by reference to utility, the fantastic reality of life has become singularly diluted.”\textsuperscript{24} The artist with “childlike perceptiveness,” however, observes the transitory circumstances around him, eventually combining memory and imagination to give form to his unique impressions of what has come to be understood as modern life. Baudelaire, for the most part, connects these impressions to a particular set of cultural forces, which include the rush of the cities and their driving crowds, the pulse of fashion, and the rhythm of commerce.

The modernité model described above provides an effective framework for introducing a perspective that seeks to include non-normative neurological experiences into conversations about modernist performance. Its value lies in the fact that such a model requires not only a recognition of but an investigation into the embodied experiences of a diverse group of performers and spectators involved in the creation of theatrical events. Understanding how modes of perception are constructed and used in the generation of cultural artifacts cannot be dissociated from the unique experiences of all the bodies involved in the production of a culture.

When experiences with impairment enter into our discussions of modernity through the modernité framework, fundamental modernist concepts that have been widely critiqued because of their relationship to dominant ideologies of modernity can be opened up and re-imagined. From this perspective, impairment (one form of bodily difference) does not become grounds for

\textsuperscript{24} Baudelaire, 15.
exclusion; it instead offers the possibility for making more complex and nuanced our understanding of the unique modern perspective that has shaped our concepts of modernity.

Employing the modernité model also allows us to move away from strict definitions of what forms of theatre and performance can be incorporated into the modernism/modernity conversation. Narrow definitions of modernism, in particular, have led to the exclusion of significant performance practices, artists, and events from modernist conversations. The criteria for a modernist work that many theories of modernism have formalized, particularly since the postwar period (e.g., text based and autonomous), leave little room for the embodied experiences of performance that often occur within very public spheres. Martin Puchner points to those “theoretical practices that helped institutionalize literary modernism—New Criticism, formalism, structuralism, and deconstruction,” arguing that they have regularly chosen “to neglect the category of the theater.”

Work by Julia Walker on the history of theatre studies in the United States suggests this disavowal stemmed from the desire by scholars within theatre studies to be included in the academy’s larger framework of modernist studies, a discipline that disparaged body-centered experimentation and practice. By retaining corporeal experience as a term in the discussion of the modern, in fact making it essential to the conversation, modernité challenges

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26 Julia Walker, “Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 150. Walker attributes western theatre studies’ preoccupation with its literary texts at the expense of its performance histories to an ideological shift in the academy that began just at the turn of the twentieth century. Using as her example the U.S. university system (modeled after the German), Walker explains how the call by reformists to create “more ‘scientific’ modes of knowledge” in the academy resulted in certain disciplines—those “found to be lacking in intellectual rigor”—to be devalued. To preserve its identity as a field worthy of study, theatre scholars had to disavow performance and attach themselves to more “distinguished” disciplines, such as literature and poetry.
this text-based approach. It, therefore, opens the study of modernist performance to a range of new practices and cultural contexts.

Applying the framework of modernité to the study of early-twentieth-century New York Salomania facilitates the kind of critical and performance inclusivity I propose. In approaching the aesthetics of modernity through an examination of modern modes of perception, I am able to group together a variety of diverse cultural artifacts. The complex of experiences emerging out of engagement with these artifacts becomes the means by which a history of modernity can be interrogated. As a result, theatre and performance practices previously marginalized (or excluded) from many modernist frameworks because of their supposedly anti-modernist traits, such as popular variety and vaudeville entertainments, can be read as significant objects of study.27

Using the framework of modernité to approach the phenomenon of New York Salomania not only contributes to the landscape of modernist studies, particularly with respect to theatre and performance; it also opens up new possibilities for contemporary scholarship focused on the notorious Biblical figure of the dancing girl. It is especially useful for those discussions centered on how the archetype functioned within a U.S. modernist context. While scholarly literature on Salome during the European fin de siècle is fairly extensive, the archetype’s presence in U.S. culture has been examined to a much lesser degree.28 The scholarly projects centered on Salome

27 Mary Gluck, in her most recent work on nineteenth-century bohemian culture in Paris, offers a model for how consciously employing a framework of modernité can be used to confront existing ideologies of modernism and modernity that have limited our perspectives on modernist aesthetics. She uses experiences within Parisian bohemian culture to challenge a long-standing narrative of the modernist artist as social exile or “outcast.” Mary Gluck, Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005).
28 Scholarly material on European cultural explorations of the figure of Salome is quite numerous given how the archetype flourished in so many forms of media during the fin de siècle. Studies
performances in the United States currently circulating tend to focus on the two major themes of U.S. Orientalism and gender. This dissertation, therefore, provides two opportunities: it helps to expand the field of literature on U.S. Salomania and provides an alternative perspective on how the Salome archetype contributed to the generation of U.S. modernist culture. Instead of approaching the Salome acts as performative locations for the construction of the exotic feminized Other, I provide a framework by which she can be read as an essential part of modernité’s phenomenology and its engagement with embodiment. My approach in no way disparages the existing and important perspectives on Salome’s marginality. It simply presents a new vantage point from which to see her participation in the construct that is modernist U.S. culture.

Chapter Breakdown:

I have organized the chapters of this dissertation in a way that provides first a large-scale perspective on the cultural condition of modernité with respect to its neurological dynamic and emerging out of art history, literature, musicology, and dance studies offer myriad perspectives on the European phenomenon. A few studies, however, based on my observation of their frequent appearance in studies of U.S. Salomania, appear to have become foundational to field. These include Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Anthony Pym, “The Importance of Salomé: Approaches to a Fin de Siècle Theme,” *French Forum* vol. 14, no. 3 (September 1989): 311–22; Udo Kultermann, “The ‘Dance of the Seven Veils.’ Salome and Erotic Culture around 1900,” *Artibus et Historiae* vol. 27, no. 53 (2006): 187–215.

then a more focused examination of how that condition manifested in particular iterations of the Salome archetype. Since my argument rests largely on how the Salome performances in New York represent a distinct dynamic related to neuropathology inside modernité, it is necessary to understand the landscape within which that dynamic exists. The Salome archetype that emerged out of the condition of modernité was not limited to the United States. Given that New York’s engagement with the figure of the dancing girl followed Salome’s popularity in Europe, it is necessary to present a clear portrait of how that modernist archetype coalesced. It was during this European phase that many of the neurological traits were woven into the figure of the dancing girl. Narrowing focus from a broad discussion of modernité’s neurological nature to Salome’s European past provides the necessary foundation for understanding how that archetype functioned within the cultural landscape of early-twentieth-century New York.

In chapter one, I examine Salome’s relationship to the neurological landscape of western culture from the fin de siècle to the early twentieth century. Beginning with an account of the aesthetic potential of neurological impairments, I turn to a discussion of the ways in which various forms of theatrical performance, not just the Salome acts, expressed many of the neuropathologized conditions that were circulating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To link those representations of neurological difference to the condition of modernité, in the following section of the chapter, I track the ways in which changes to the physical and social landscapes of Europe and North America produced new modes of perception that would become identified with neurological impairment. These changes corresponded, I explain, with the emergence of the new medical subdiscipline of neurology. This specialty provided, I argue, a host of medical models of impairment that would ultimately be incorporated into the larger culture. As a result of these transformations to western culture, modernité took on a distinctively
neurological nature. This new nervous condition of the modern would ultimately be expressed in the iterations of the Salome archetype under examination in subsequent chapters. This first chapter concludes with a preliminary study of why the Salome archetype, specifically as it was represented in the variety venues of New York City, was such a suitable vehicle for disclosing modernité’s neurological aspects. In this final section, I draw heavily upon Giorgio Agamben’s concepts of “the collapse of gestures” and “potentiality” and his discussion of modernist culture’s preoccupation with the fragmented and dispersed human body. Agamben’s theory provides a valuable model for framing the New York Salome acts as cultural locations rich with possibilities for challenging totalizing modernist ideologies about normative corporeality.

In chapter two, I consider the genealogy of the modernist Salome archetype that New York audiences first encountered in January 1907. After providing an account of Salome’s sudden and controversial arrival on the New York stage, I look to how the modernist paradigm of the dancing girl coalesced in Europe in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Building on Megan Becker-Leckrone’s idea of the textual corpus of Salome as a site of constant growth and change, I examine how European preoccupations with the dancing girl during the fin de siècle endowed the archetype with a collection of neuropathologized traits. I link the archetype’s transformation to the circulation of scientific discourse on neurological degeneration in the late nineteenth century. In this discussion, Salome’s dance emerges as an essential element in the construction of the girl’s neuropathological identity. Referred to by Oscar Wilde in his 1891 play Salomé as “The Dance of the Seven Veils,” I explain how European artists, eager to interpret the role, incorporated Wilde’s reading of the dance into a range of performances that regularly celebrated irrationality, uncontainability, and other traits identified with neuropathologized conditions. The popularity of these acts and the performers who headlined them led to the dance
quickly becoming one of the archetype’s most defining traits. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Salome’s 1907 journey across the Atlantic to New York City where her dance would become enormously popular, rivaling its successes in Europe.

In chapter three, I turn attention directly to Salome’s place in the cultural landscape of New York City 1907–1909. I examine how the archetype’s appearance coincided with deeper tensions in the United States and New York culture around progress and social degeneration. I begin by first looking at individual artists’ reactions to the Salome archetype upon her arrival in 1907. Performers’ agitation over her decadent past and in some cases a disavowal of her non-normative character serve as indications of Salome’s disruptive potential. After establishing the Salome archetype’s initial impact, I provide an account of her emergence as a popular figure on the variety stage. Addressing existing historiographies of New York Salomania, I offer an alternative reading of the pace and rhythm of the phenomenon’s growth. In my discussion of the rise of the Salome act, I consider the cultural response to its popularity. I look specifically to criticisms that invoked medical models of non-normativity to condemn individual performances as well as the cultural mania over the dancing girl as a whole. I end my discussion with two case studies. I look at the performances of Gertrude Hoffmann and La Sylphe for how these acts represented the neurological impairments of generalized hysteria and epilepsy. I use the work of the two performers as examples of how iterations of the archetype can be approached as sites of disclosure for understanding modernité’s complex neurological nature.

The conclusion of this dissertation serves two functions. First it brings together the many aspects of this investigation in support of the project’s overall argument. I demonstrate how an examination of modernité’s neurological nature, an account of the modern Salome archetype’s emergence in fin de siècle Europe, and an interrogation of its many iterations in early-twentieth-
century New York position the dancing girl well as a site of disclosure for identifying modernist culture’s many contradictions around normative and non-normative models of human neurology. In the remainder of the conclusion I look to how this understanding of Salome as a cultural location for understanding the neurological landscape of modernité can be applied to future interdisciplinary projects. Specifically, I examine how using historiographies of medicine to study theatrical practices can be integrated with contemporary work in the field of disability performance studies. Disability studies with its focus on experiences with impairment has had a complex and often tense relationship with histories of medicine. The strong and justifiable critiques disability scholars have made against medical models of normativity have resulted in deep fault lines between the two disciplines. Recent research, however, suggests there is much to be gained by healing this divide. This project concludes with a brief discussion of how a productive dialogue between these separate but still related fields of study can be facilitated and what role performance can play in that exchange.

The Salome performances provide powerful locations where modernist culture’s complex and contradictory relationship to neurological normativity can be examined. In the ways in which they represented aspects of the neuropathological conditions, they opened the way for new investigations in the field of modernist studies as well as the scholarly disciplines of theatre and performance studies. The nervous Salomes’ presence in New York culture of the early twentieth century provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the condition of modernité in which they circulated. These performances, as this dissertation discloses, are therefore valuable not only for what they can tell us about variety entertainments in the early twentieth century, but for how such entertainments engaged paradigms of normativity and non-normativity still pervasive in western culture.
Chapter One

The Neurological Landscape of Modernité and the Performance of Pathologized Gestures

When André Breton and Louis Aragon published in the March 15, 1928 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* a manifesto celebrating what they declared to be hysteria’s fiftieth anniversary, they did more than just advance a metaphor for grasping the apparent irrationality of their Surrealist aesthetics. By proclaiming hysteria “the greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century,” they linked their twentieth-century modernist experimentation to a tangled historical narrative of modern medicine, psychology, and humanist philosophy.¹ From their early participation in the frenzied and irrational performance events of the Parisian Dadaists to Breton’s celebration of the “convulsive beauty” of the dislocated modern subject in his novella *Nadjia*, the Surrealists’ project sustained a preoccupation with the manic rhythm and unpredictability of the “hysterical” body.²

While by the mid-1920s hysteria had become significantly de-medicalized, being treated primarily as a psychological rather than somatic phenomenon, the Surrealists in their manifesto turned back to the condition’s medical past to praise its aesthetic possibilities.³ For Aragon and Louis Aragon, “Le Cinquantenaire de l’hystérie: 1878–1928,” *La Révolution surréaliste* no. 11 (March 15, 1928): 20–22. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.


³ By the mid-1920s, Freud’s theories on psychoanalysis had gained a significant amount of acceptance in professional circles and were being celebrated in Western popular culture. Though educated and trained professionally in the field of neurology, Freud eventually promoted psychotherapy’s detachment from the medical sciences. In a very public debate in 1926 over the issue of whether laypersons should be permitted to practice psychoanalysis, Freud wrote: “I have assumed as axiom something that is still violently disputed in the discussion. I have assumed . . . that psycho-analysis is not a specialized branch of medicine. I cannot see how it is possible to dispute this.” See Sigmund Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis,” trans. J. Strachey, *The
Breton, the nineteenth-century hospital was a key cultural location in the construction of the new modernist artist they envisioned, one who challenged existing cultural standards regarding subjective expression. Hospitals, specifically Paris’s Salpêtrière, were for the Surrealists points of contact where non-normative bodies rich with creative possibilities met the pioneers of a burgeoning scientific discipline focused on the human nervous system. Together they created a unique hospital culture centered on signature neuropathologized conditions, most notably hysteria, that would have lasting effects on a host of cultural arenas long after much of its medical discourse had been effectively debunked.

While certainly intrigued by the scientific discoveries of the Salpêtrière’s infamous team of neurologists, most notably its chef médecin Jean Martin Charcot, Aragon and Breton ultimately find their strongest inspiration in the figure of the nineteenth-century hysteric. Her experience of neurological impairment is pivotal to their genealogy of the modernist artist. The manifesto privileges the patient, not the doctor, as the Salpêtrière’s greatest cultural ambassador in the twentieth century. This is evidenced by the inclusion in the manifesto of six large images of one of the Salpêtrière’s most renowned patients: Louise “Augustine” Gleizes (see Figure 1).4 The photographs feature the young woman alone on a bed, hair loose, wearing a flowing, white night dress: each image one moment in the unfolding of a classic hystero-epileptic episode as

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4 Louise Augustine Gleizes, referred to simply as Augustine, was born in Paris on August 21, 1861 to working-class parents. Exhibiting seizure-like symptoms and partial paralysis, she was admitted to the Salpêtrière at the age of fourteen. Research into Augustine’s life prior to hospitalization reveals a complicated history, which included frequent extended separations from her immediate family, physical abuse by teachers and caretakers, and rape at the age of thirteen by her mother’s employer (and lover). See Asti Hustvedt, Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).
described by Charcot. Aragon and Breton use these static representations of ecstasy, grotesque laughter, reverie, asphyxiation, seduction, and repose to form a literal frame around the all-caps text of the manifesto. The images’ placement and size overpower the narrative of young doctors tending to the residents of the Salpêtrière. As a result, the neurologists’ presumed authority is disrupted, Augustine is stripped of her pathological status, and hysteria is declared a “supreme form of expression” well suited for the new century’s rising avant-garde.

I open this chapter with a discussion of Aragon and Breton’s manifesto as a way to frame my own relationship to the representation of neurological impairment in early-twentieth-century variety performances of the Salome archetype. The Surrealists’ manifesto is an attractive model for approaching these performances because of how it recognizes the cultural significance of neurological impairments inside the cultural condition of modernité. By assigning Augustine such a prominent role in their visual and textual narrative of the Salpêtrière, they draw attention to the complex dynamic between neurological impairment and models of normativity at play in modernité. While Augustine’s image reflects a power-laden medical model for a pathologized neurological condition, it also suggests the culturally generative power of her experience with impairment. This generative power of Augustine’s experience is evidenced in the Surrealists’

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5 These images of Augustine were first published in 1878 in Paul Regnard and Desiré-Magloire Bourneville’s Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière, vol. 2 (Paris: Aux bureaux du Progrès Médical, 1878). Regnard, then a medical student at the Salpêtrière, took the photographs and Bourneville, an attending neurologist at the hospital who worked with Augustine, wrote the clinical history that accompanied the images.

6 Charcot and his work at the Salpêtrière have been heavily criticized for the ways in which his patients, most of whom were women, were objectified and pathologized through his male medical gaze. For examples of such feminist critiques see: Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady (New York: Pantheon, 1985) and Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media (New York: Columbia University, 1997); Dianne Hunter, ed., The Makings of Dr. Charcot’s Hysteria Shows: Research Through Performance (Queenstown: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998); Elizabeth Bronfen, The Knotted Subject (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014); Yannick Ripa,
response to representations of her hystero-epileptic episode. They see in her experience a model for their own modernist project; she offers a form of psychic-expression they believe their interwar culture was demanding.

I approach the “nervous” performances of Salome in early-twentieth-century New York in a way similar to how the Surrealists encountered the nineteenth-century images of Augustine. I look to the Salome acts as cultural locations where the neurological landscape of modernité can be brought into view. The popular figure of the dancing girl presented performative sites where audiences confronted paradoxical experiences with neuropsychological normativity and difference. These fractured and dispersed forms of New York variety entertainments reflect the power of the modern Salome archetype to draw attention to modernité’s complex dynamic. They establish the figure of the dancing girl as an effective vehicle through which the oppositional forces within modernist culture could be disclosed and through their disclosure new possibilities for the trajectory of modernity’s totalizing narratives realized.

In order for the process of disclosure I describe above to unfold, it is necessary to have a clearer understanding of the cultural landscape in which the Salome performances appeared. This chapter achieves this objective. In it, I first establish a general relationship between late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theatrical performances and several neurological conditions being pathologized through medical discourse of the period. Next, I consider how these performances can be positioned within the larger cultural context of modernité. My discussion of modernité focuses specifically on what I see as its neurological nature. Arguing modernité’s nervous qualities result from the combination of changing physical and social

conditions and the rise of neurology as a medical discipline, I examine both of these phenomena. With modernité established as a neurological condition, I turn my attention to the form and structure of the Salome variety entertainments. I read them in two ways. First, I examine them for how they individually express the neurological dynamic of modernité with its interplay of normative and non-normative concepts of human neurology. Second, I look to how the structure of the variety formats that featured the Salome acts, which are defined by their systems of fragmentation and dispersal, also reflect the nervous mode of perception that was modernité.

The Nervous Landscape of Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Theatrical Entertainments

The Augustine Aragon and Breton celebrate, with her heightened physical and emotional expression, was hardly an isolated figure during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She had, in fact, many kin who appeared in magazine ads and newspapers, decadent novels and short stories, and on the large and small stages of Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Characters representative of what were considered neuropsychological impairments, specifically those embodying the condition of hysteria, could be found regularly on the dramatic stage. Many of these appeared, as Elin Diamond and Gail Finney have suggested, in the works of European playwrights now identified with the Realist and Naturalist movements.\(^7\)

Diamond reads what she calls the genre of “Ibsenite Realism” as a cultural location where “the symptoms and etiology of the hysterical” are legitimized and made subject to inquiry.\(^8\)

\(^8\) Diamond, 4.
Finney supports Diamond’s assertion with her analysis of the character of Hedda Gabler. Finney writes: “[Hedda’s] extreme nervousness . . . is difficult to overlook: she is constantly pacing the floor, crossing the room needlessly, drumming her fingers, clenching her fists ‘as if in a frenzy.’” The neuropathological conditions represented in Ibsenite Realism are certainly not limited to female hysteria. In Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, syphilis is quickly robbing Oswald of his sanity, degrading his brain and nervous system. Syphilis is, of course, in Ibsen’s play and in much of the medical discourse of the period wrongly understood as a hereditary disease. Ibsen’s use of the illness as a dramatic device in *Ghosts*, however, draws attention to contemporary social responses to neurological illness and diseases in which serious questions were being raised as to how such conditions should be “managed” socially. 

August Strindberg offers another example of a modernist dramatist incorporating into his work concepts related to neurological impairment. In his Preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg states clearly his characters’ relationship to the neuropathological atmosphere of the period. He writes: “As modern characters, living in an age of transition more compulsively hysterical than the one that preceded it at least, I have depicted my people as more vacillating and disintegrating than their predecessors.” Strindberg’s assessment of the hysterical nature of his characters corresponds with neurological hierarchies the celebrity neurologist Charcot articulated in his

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9 Finney, 159.
10 As Kirsten Shepherd-Barr points out, the treatment of Oswald’s disease cannot be separated from the rise of eugenic philosophies in the second of the nineteenth century, which culminated in full-scale eugenics movements in the twentieth century. See Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 87.
writings on hypnosis and suggestion. Charcot was a figure whom Strindberg deeply admired and whose works, particularly those related to hypnosis, he regularly studied.\textsuperscript{12}

For Charcot, a person’s susceptibility to suggestion was in direct relationship to her level of emotional weakness and instability. Hysterics were thought to have some of the frailest emotional apparatuses since they were among the easiest of the Salpêtrière patients to hypnotize. Charcot’s late-career work on hypnosis supplied Strindberg with a paradigm for identifying and ranking the weak in relationship to those he considered strong. The most powerful members of society were, according to Strindberg, those who communicated ideas across cultural spheres in creative and powerful ways. These included actors, painters, orators, politicians, and priests. In his essay, “Battle of the Brains,” Strindberg reveals the influence of Charcot’s theories on his thinking. He writes, “Although no expert or authority on the subject, my experiments have led me to conclude that suggestion is only the stronger brain’s struggle with, and victory over, a weaker mind, and that this procedure is applied unconsciously in daily life.”\textsuperscript{13} Strindberg advanced this hierarchical model of neurological difference in his realist and symbolist dramas as well as his autobiographical writings and reflective essays. His writings, therefore, can be seen as playing a significant role in positioning European modernist drama firmly inside the neurological condition of modernité.

The dramatic theatres were not the only locations where western audiences engaged neuropathologized conditions. As Rae Beth Gordon observes, the popular variety venues of Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries regularly featured acts that represented


\textsuperscript{13} August Strindberg, “The Battle of the Brains,” in \textit{August Strindberg, Selected Essays}, 25.
neurological impairments, most notably epilepsy and hysteria. Gordon points to the celebrity singer-dancer Paulus as one of the earliest examples of a performer drawing material from medical models of neurological difference. As early as the 1870s, Paulus incorporated seizure-like ticks and jerks into his performances at café-concerts across Paris. His “epileptic” gestures, Gordon suggests, became a model for other café-concerts and cabaret performers, including the popular epileptiques gommeuses: a collection of female performers, dressed eccentrically in distorted costumes (oversized skirts and hats), who danced and sang in a style of nervous agitation—twists, jerks, grimaces. The appearance of neuropathological conditions in Parisian performance practices could also be found in the avant-garde spaces of the artistic cabarets. The Chat Noir’s Maurice Rollinat (himself a diagnosed hysterical) intrigued his decadent fans in the 1880s with music and poetry celebrating shattered nerves, fugue states, and various forms of paralysis and ataxia.

Across the ocean, in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, performers working in small-form entertainments such as minstrel shows, music halls, and vaudeville could be seen exhibiting similar neuropathologized traits to those represented in the popular entertainments of Paris. Though not as clearly identified with specific medicalized

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14 Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). Gordon’s book was instrumental in the development of my idea for this dissertation for two reasons. First, she focused her study on popular, variety forms of entertainment rather than drama. Second, the neurological models she considered were those articulated inside the field of neurology where focus was placed on the somatic roots of non-normative behaviors. This distinguishes her work from those projects that tend to use Freudian models for their analyses of theatrical representations of hysteria and psychological difference.

conditions as the epileptiques gommeuses described by Gordon, a collection of popular U.S. performers displaying extreme gestures contributed to the landscape of entertainments that aestheticized non-normative behaviors. Some of the more well-known of these acts were the “eccentric dancers” that gained popularity at the turn of the twentieth century. As Frank Cullen describes the phenomenon, “Eccentric dancing employed the entire body in ways that carried the dancers across the stage and encouraged them toward both floor work and leaps. Stylistically, it demanded that a dancer be original in his combinations even to the point of the grotesque.”¹⁶ The dancing style could be adapted for comedy and clown routines that employed physical bits. Violent prat falls, flips, and contortions often combined with witty monologues or comic exchanges to create a wild, unpredictable form of entertainment. The eccentric entertainers transcended expectations regarding normative and socially appropriate behavior.¹⁷

While U.S. eccentric dance and comedy routines can be included alongside other theatrical forms that explored the creative possibilities of neuropathological gestures, I argue in this dissertation that no entertainment in New York City during this period embodied the neuropathological style more than the variety performances of Salome. Both the form and content of these acts, which tended to focus on Salome’s notorious “dance of the seven veils,” reflected some of the most salient symptoms of neurological conditions. Usually presented as short solo pieces within longer programs of variety acts, the performances provided condensed

¹⁷ The legacy of the eccentric dance could be felt well into the 1920s as dance and Jazz intertwined celebrating improvisational performance and individualized expression. For more on the relationship between eccentric dancing and Jazz, see Marshall Winslow Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994).
versions of Salome’s dramatic journey from a seductive dancer tempting a king to an uncontainable woman, overtaken with sexual desire for the Baptist. Expressions of Salome’s lust for the prophet usually extended past his execution, with his severed head becoming a fetishized object of desire. The formal aspects of these dances, the style of the dancers’ movements, I argue, aestheticized those behaviors, physical gestures, and psychological states identified with neuropathologized conditions.

In venues like the Jardin de Paris and Keith and Proctor’s Theatre at 125th Street, New York audiences encountered through the various iterations of the Salome archetype gestures similar to those exhibited by hysterical and epileptic patients at the Salpêtrière and described by European and North American neurologists. Many of these conditions were discussed not only in professional journals but in lay publications of the period, making it easier for them to circulate among the public. Taken together, these performances, like Augustine’s instances of expressivity, do more than just represent their culture’s preoccupation with the pathological effects of modern life. As affective events, they reveal how the phenomenological aspects of neurological impairment functioned performatively within the condition of modernité. Contorted limbs, shrieking laughter, and grimaces mixed with the normative experiences of everyday life in a changing urban landscape. Together they shaped a new mode of perception that would give rise to a host of fresh cultural forms. The aesthetic and popular products and practices born out of modernité in turn generated new experiences in and between artists, spectators, and cultural producers and consumers of many kinds. The effects of these new encounters fed back into the atmosphere of modernité, fueling and modifying the condition that would go on to produce ever-new forms of cultural expression.
The Salome-themed performance events under review in this dissertation participated in this feedback loop of modernité. The representations and embodiments of neurological impairments the Salome artists performed both emerged out of and contributed to the powerful current running through modernist culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They added a collection of experiences of impairment into an already widening neurological landscape, peppering it with all the friction and internal conflicts such experiences contain. Revealing the complexity and paradoxical nature of modernité, they danced on the border between able-bodiedness and disability: sometimes re-inscribing contemporary medical models of neurological impairment while other times celebrating the unique embodied experiences those non-normative conditions facilitated.

The Neurological Condition of Modernité

To fully understand the ways in which the Salome performers negotiated the tension between reinscription and resistance in their variety performances, it is important first to acknowledge the relationship modernité as a mode of perception had to the culture of neurology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Understanding that modernité was imbued with neurological concepts and principles helps us to track the various directions these narratives about normativity took in the broad landscape of modernist culture. Neurology’s many traces can be located in the various cultural forms the condition of modernité produced during this period. It is in these traces that the internal contradictions of the neurological principles come to light.

The expansion of cities in Europe and North America over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has long been seen as an essential part of modernity’s protracted and complicated history. The very concept of the modern became inextricably linked during this
period to a new urban mindset. Industrialized capitalism came to largely define this new urban perspective growing inside modernist culture. It promised economic opportunity and unfettered social mobility through the expansion of machine-based manufacturing and the wide-reaching and quick transport of goods.\textsuperscript{18} Population sizes and territories of individual cities grew at unprecedented rates. Areas once considered rural underwent rapid industrialization that transformed their landscapes and demographics. Modern systems of transportation facilitated faster and easier movement both inside urban centers and between regions and cities, which opened up new possibilities for commerce and exchange.\textsuperscript{19}

As masses of people migrated to locations that supported new industries such as textiles manufacturing, iron production, and coal mining, municipalities became congested centers of exchange. The increasing numbers of temporary and permanent residents forced many cities to reorganize and expand. Boundaries were redrawn, resulting in the overturning of neighborhoods often from one economic class to another, the surfacing of new leisure and entertainment districts that served a spectrum of audiences, and the coalescing of new centers for finance and commerce, among other topographical changes. Organized around the capitalist principles of profit and expenditure, modern cities grew increasingly commodified—their cultures built

\textsuperscript{18} Lewis Mumford, \textit{The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects} (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), 410. Mumford’s text, a foundational book in the field of urban history, links all of the defining characteristics of the nineteenth-century city back to the industrial capitalist system. These characteristics, which he saw as outgrowths of this economic system, including overcrowding, the commodification of culture, and innovations in transportation systems, among others, become essential elements in a paradigm repeatedly used by subsequent historians and social theorists in their studies of urban life in modernity.

\textsuperscript{19} Between 1800 and 1910 the percentage of people living in cities (meaning municipalities with more than 5,000 people) in Europe increased threefold from 14.5\% to 43.8\%. \textit{The Oxford Handbook of World Cities}, ed. Peter Clark (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20. In the United States, only 6.1\% of the population was living in urban centers in 1800. By 1910, that percentage would increase to 31.9\%. U.S. Census Bureau, “Population: 1790 to 1990,” Table 4, https://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/table-4.pdf.
around the consumption of goods and services. Leisure activities involved some form of spending at places like department stores, dime museums, and amusement parks.

Cities strained to sustain the dynamics of motion and energy created by the throngs of people living working, buying, and selling within its expanding limits. Municipalities responded by laying the groundwork for new forms of transportation, digging new water and sewage systems, and illuminating streets with gas to ultimately electric lights. These, as well as other innovations, would allow the cities to move with greater ease and speed. Such changes redefined the city as a network of resources and communication. This seemingly endless drive toward the modern, in turn, attracted even greater numbers of people seeking opportunities. Their arrival only further intensified the already charged and often frantic urban environment.

To live, work, be entertained, and socialize in the modern city meant, therefore, navigating an intense ebb and flow of energy from swelling crowds, factory machines, streetlights, sensationalist newspapers, and vibrant entertainments. The space of the city can best be described, according to Ben Singer, as one of “hyperstimulus,” an environment of agitation generated by modernist culture’s unrelenting assault on the senses. It was an atmosphere of “shocks” and “bodily perils” that charged the nerves of people rarely able to escape its influence.20

The effects of this hyperstimulation on the cities’ residents only intensified as their lives became increasingly more “public.” As Justus Nieland explains, working and housing conditions forced residents to spend greater and greater time in collective spaces. Factory work often involved laboring alongside large numbers of people. The crowded world of the tenements as well as the relatively confining residencies of many of the middle class compelled people to

enjoy their leisure time outside of their homes in city parks, commercial centers, and spaces reserved for theatrical and variety entertainment. This intensified sense of “publicness” required individuals to negotiate on a regular basis “new sensory and perceptual regimes, new structures of feeling and modes of embodied knowledge, new technologies for the emotional organization of everyday life.”21 Constant encounters with stimuli generated, in turn, a host of “eccentric feelings,” which only served to further charge the shared urban space with new levels of emotion.

Since hyperstimulation was a sensory condition, its effects were thought to be felt most keenly in the nerves and nervous systems of those who encountered it regularly. George Simmel, part of a new breed of social theorists that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, writes in his 1903 essay, “The Metropolis and Modern Life,” of a “metropolitan type of individuality” resulting from the “intensification of nervous stimulation.” 22 A new city dweller was emerging out of the modern metropolis, defined by a heightened sense of awareness of her conditions and a sensitivity to the pace and intensity of modern life. Walter Benjamin, writing from the outer borders of this intense period of urban expansion in the early 1920s, describes a “bodily, collective innervation” percolating in modernist culture. The “mastery of nature” that the urban city epitomized was part of a larger “revolutionary tension” that defined modernist culture of the long nineteenth century.23 If, as Victoria Schwartz explains, to be modern was to

be urban during this period, and to be urban, according to Simmel, Benjamin, and Singer, was to be in some sense “nervous,” then the condition of the modern—what I am calling modernité—can effectively be understood as a neurological state of being.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a new medical language had emerged that understood and explained the modern experience in terms of nerves and nervous systems. The nature of these experiences, when they proved too extreme, too far from the normative so to prevent an individual’s full participation in the social sphere, took on the mantle of the neuropathological. Lay “diagnoses” of neurological impairments, referring to individuals as “neurotic,” “hysterical,” or “neurasthenic,” corresponded directly with medical models of neuropathologized conditions being generated by the new field of medicine known as neurology. This new discipline focused on expanding medical knowledge of the human nervous system through the anatomical study and the clinical care of normative and impaired brains, spines, and nerves.

In general, medicine before the start of the long nineteenth century was not considered a modern science, and doctors, as a result, were not granted the esteemed status they would come to know in subsequent centuries. Working primarily within a classical Hippocratic-Galenic tradition, doctors focused on an elusive system of humors that affected human experiences and behavior in imprecise and often mysterious ways. It is, however, through the emergence of such fields as anatomy and physiology in the late eighteenth century where scientific methods and philosophies were applied to the biological study of the human body that western medicine journeyed into the privileged domain of science. Physicians began to receive standardized training in medical schools that would include courses in biological sciences as well as clinical

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procedures. Doctors’ status greatly improved as a result of this shift toward the scientific since the changes were in accordance with many of the Enlightenment values of reason and observation that modernity privileged.²⁵

As medicine became more and more professionalized throughout the nineteenth century, subfields began to emerge where physicians with specialized knowledge could focus their attention on research related to particular diseases and organ systems as well on the clinical care of patients. It was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that neurology as a specialty centered specifically on the brain and nervous system would receive general acceptance.²⁶ After a somewhat bumpy beginning in which early neurologists worked diligently to distinguish their efforts from those of the alienists, neurology became one of the most prestigious fields of medicine as it tried to explain and treat a host of non-normative social and physical behaviors.²⁷ Rejecting simple mind-body binaries that separated human behavior from corporeality, neurology sought somatic causes for conditions, such as hysteria, melancholia, and neurasthenia, that appeared to be proliferating as western culture inched closer to the fin de siècle.

²⁵ For a general discussion of how the social and professional status of western medical doctors changed over the long nineteenth century, see W.F. Bynum, *Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
²⁷ It was the neurologists’ focus on brain and nervous system impairments as the foundation for “pathological” behaviors, like those exhibited by the hysteric, that separated neurology from the domain of the alienists. This was a process that coalesced over the course of the nineteenth century. For a detailed description of how this unfolded in the United States see David G. Schuster, *Neurasthenic Nation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011). For a review of a similar struggle inside France, see Christopher G. Goetz, Michel Bonduelle, and Toby Gelfand, *Charcot: Constructing Neurology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
The rise of medical models of neurological impairment in the late nineteenth century is inextricably linked to the rise of neurology as a recognized field within western medicine. As Stanley Finger explains, “During the first half of the nineteenth century, most neurological diseases were categorized on the basis of a single feature . . . these broad categories were not based on specific anatomical changes to the nervous system.” As a result, unrelated impairments would be grouped together in a completely useless category. In the 1860s, however, “[l]abeling and classifying neurological diseases took on a different more modern form . . . when observable clinical signs were tied to underlying pathological changes.”

28 The field of neurology essentially coalesced around the articulation of these nosologies. Individual researchers identifying and then classifying particular impairments, therefore, contributed significantly to the construction of the field. In France, for instance, Charcot’s study of neuromotor disorders in the 1860s led to the identification of conditions such as Multiple Sclerosis, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), and Parkinson’s Disease. These earlier discoveries helped to establish him as a leader in the field of modern neurology, with the French Parliament in the 1880s naming Charcot the first “Chair in diseases of the nervous system.”

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With neurology becoming more accepted and esteemed in the general field of medicine—neurologists being given their own departments in major hospitals and forming respected professional organizations that published their own journals—an increasing number of the medical models of neurological impairment that had been articulated began to circulate. These medical models of neurological impairment that had been articulated began to circulate.


30 Christopher Goetz, Teresa Chmura, and Douglas Lanska provide an excellent overview of the rise of professional associations for neurologists in the United States. Such membership organizations as the American Neurological Association, founded in 1875, had significant
helped to produce a fertile vocabulary of pathologizing concepts and terms that would be used by medical as well as non-medical communities to explain the varied responses individuals were having to the hyperstimulating conditions of modern life.

Medical models of neurological impairments soon became accessible to the general public as neurologists increasingly made their research available to lay audiences. Charcot’s weekly open lectures were attended by performers such as Sarah Bernhardt and Jane Avril as well as writers and critics that included Ivan Turgenev, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, and Gustave LeBon. The public nature of his work enabled his ideas to move beyond the walls of the Salpêtrière into an array of cultural arenas. As Georges Didi-Huberman reveals in his comprehensive book *Invention of Hysteria*, photography was a powerful vehicle for this transmission of the hospital’s neurological culture. For Charcot, Didi-Huberman writes, “hysteria was covertly identified with something like an art, close to theatre or painting.” Charcot wanted his artistry accessible to the public. Photographs capturing moments of crafted spectacle, therefore, rather than being documentation of scientific research were always intended for public consumption.

In the United States, one of the nation’s pioneers in neurology, George M. Beard, in addition to having his work printed extensively in medical journals and lecturing on his research, adapted his professional writings for a lay audience. Beard’s research on the condition of

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influence in establishing neurology as a recognized field. Members were invited to join and, in the beginning, the group was limited to only 50 practicing neurologists. See Christopher Goetz, et. al., “Part I: The History of 19th Century Neurology and the American Neurological Association,” *Annals of Neurology* vol. 53, supplement 4 (2003): S2–S26.

31 Elaine Showalter, foreword to *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* by Anna Furse (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), xv.

neurasthenia significantly shaped U.S. neurology.  

His first use of the term neurasthenia appears in 1869 in a lecture published in The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal. In it, he describes neurasthenia as a condition of nervous exhaustion most likely to affect those living in more “advanced” western societies. Not speaking metaphorically, Beard argued that overstimulating environments, excessively taxing intellectual labor, and lack of physical activity drained individuals’ nerves of their vital energy. It took nearly a decade for neurasthenia as a neuropathological paradigm to take hold. In 1880, Beard published his first full-length scientific work on the topic of neurasthenia, titled A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion. After expressing his ideas to the professional medical community, he decided to adapt his text for lay audiences. His original treatise was revised and issued a year later as a supplement under the title American Nervousness. This second iteration of Beard’s full-length work on neurasthenia reached a wide audience. With doctors already incorporating models of neurasthenia into their diagnoses and clinical care of patients, USonians also had a frame by which to assess their own experiences with the hyperstimulating, labor-intensive U.S. culture.

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34 George M. Beard “Neurasthenia or Nervous Exhaustion,” The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 3 (1869): 217–21.
37 Beard in much of the historiographical discourse on neurasthenia is credited with coining the name of the disease and with articulating the characteristics of the condition. There is, however, some debate on this. As David Schuster has noted, just before Beard printed for the first time on the topic, a publication by an alienist Edwin H. Van Deusen appeared that also invoked the term. Van Deusen’s occupation as an alienist may have something to do with why he has not received proper credit. See Schuster, 18.
As a result of this circulation of ideas relating to the brain and nervous system, by the end of the nineteenth century a constellation of popular and mass cultural forms had incorporated neurological language and concepts into their content. Advertisements offered tonics to charge the depleted nerves of a rising U.S. middle class. Novels, plays, and short stories celebrated the aesthetics of degenerating minds and nervous systems. Popular performance spots and the stages of the legitimate theatre featured “lunatics,” hysterics, neurasthenics, and the occasional epileptic in their nightly repertoire. Neurology, explains Laura Salisbury and Andrew Shail, by the late nineteenth century had taken on an “uncontrollable cultural life”—its major concepts and ideas having spread beyond the walls of hospitals, doctors’ offices, and lecture halls to inform the ways individuals conceived of themselves and their relationships to others.  

The cultural life of neurology that imbued the condition of modernité was perhaps nowhere more “uncontrollable” than in the city of New York—a location in which the pace, density, and excitement of daily life was so intense as to make it an exemplar of the modern metropolis. The New York that would become the epicenter for Salome performances in 1907 was a metropolis that had over the previous forty years transformed itself from a city embracing its potential as a manufacturing and financial center to an undisputed global urban capital. While New York had significant growth in the 1840s and 1850s, it was in the period from the close of the Civil War to the start of the new century that the city would lay the foundation to become, as David Ward and Oliver Zunz describe it, the “largest manufacturing center and entrepôt in the United States.” During these decades of teeming growth and development, rapid and at times

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39 David Ward and Oliver Zunz, introduction to The Landscape of Modernity: New York City, 1900-1940 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 3.
unpredictable changes to its demographics, shifting political hierarchies, and changing topography, New York was transformed into a hyperstimulating and contradictory cultural landscape.

As in Europe during the fin de siècle, New York City by the turn of the twentieth century was a site of significant contradiction and fragmentation. Waves of immigration from first northern, then eastern and southern Europe produced not only sharp spikes in population but also contributed to a larger trend of cultural compartmentalization and fragmentation. The influx of new immigrants led to the reorganization of residential neighborhoods. Irish and German immigrant groups that had previously occupied sections of lower Manhattan began migrating northwest and northeast respectively. In addition, middle- and upper-class multi-generational “native-born” New Yorkers moved increasingly north and west as they embraced the new paradigm of apartment living.

As residential areas, centers of employment, and leisure and entertainment districts moved upward and outward, New York was in greater need than ever of an expansive and efficient public transit system. After transporting New Yorkers across the city on elevated trains since the 1880s, the city opened its first subway line in 1904. George Lankevich provides some

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40 The 1880s marked the first major wave of immigration in the United States since the mid-century influx of people from Ireland and Germany. The decade saw twice as much immigration than any prior ten-year period. The explosion in population of those occupying the lowest economic classes of the city prompted the establishment of charitable organizations. In response to the flow of immigrants into the city, Castle Garden, the main immigration center to the city from 1855 to 1890, was replaced to accommodate the unprecedented numbers of arrivals in 1892 by Ellis Island. The period, however, of the greatest immigration was between 1905 and 1907, when over 5,000 immigrants were arriving to Ellis Island per day. In 1907, the year the Salomes first started appearing on the New York stage, the city saw the greatest number of immigrants in its history with close to 1.28 million people entering the country through Ellis Island. See Peter M. Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In their Own Words* (New York: Facts on File, 1997).

perspective on how quickly subway ridership grew: “On the first day [October 27, 1904] 110,000 citizens bought tickets to ride . . . By October 29, daily ridership had reached 350,000.”42 New York, though increasingly fragmented culturally and economically, was simultaneously being transformed into an electrified network of exchange.43 By the first decade of the twentieth century the city was building upward, racing with other urban centers, most notably Chicago, to have the highest skyscrapers. Tall buildings across New York housed not only office spaces but sweatshops, hotels, and luxury apartments.44

Concurrent with the environmental and cultural changes to New York during the long nineteenth century was the emergence of the city as a center for neurological research. New York stood along Paris, Berlin, London, and Vienna in a matrix of western cities advancing the burgeoning new field of neurology. With clinical care an important aspect of neurology’s efforts to legitimize itself as a medical discipline, what constituted the neuropathological became an important aspect of determining the boundaries of the field. The treatment of patients with neurological impairments, in turn, attracted younger doctors who were eager to learn about the new discipline. As a result, New York became a center for medical training in neurology, where renowned institutions like New York Hospital served also as educational institutions. They attracted the brightest students and most influential teachers, which only served to further the city’s reputation as a premiere location for the advancement of medical knowledge.

43 For more information on the larger phenomenon of the networking of urban centers in the early twentieth century, see Joel A. Tarr and Gabriel Dupey, eds., *Technology and the Rise of the Networked City in Europe and America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
The professional landscape of neurology in New York functioned somewhat differently than it did in Europe. Instead of large hospitals and institutions, such as the Salpêtrière, supporting research teams along with providing clinical care for patients, in the United States, and New York in particular, the system was more individualistic. New York’s culture of neurology sustained a collection of independent young doctors focused largely on treating a middle-class clientele anxious not to be identified as mentally “unfit” and, therefore, in need of an alienist’s care. The privatized and individualistic culture of neurology in New York gave a certain amount of respectability to conditions that often came with significant stigma.⁴⁵

The fact that New York sustained such constantly changing and hyperstimulating physical and social environments as well as served as a center for the advancement of the burgeoning field of neurology establishes it as a fertile location for nurturing modernité’s definitively neurological nature. The arrival of Salome entertainments in the first decade of the twentieth century, as I argue in the following section, furthered this “nervous” environment through the fragmented format of the variety and vaudeville entertainments in which they appeared. The Salomes entertaining New Yorkers with their stimulating, intense, and irrational energy fed back into the condition of modernité gestures akin to those pathologized by the medical models of neurological impairment circulating at the time. In addition, the variety and vaudeville formats in which they appeared only further supported the nervous nature they embodied, since they were themselves structured on intense experiences of fragmentation and disjuncture. Their short skits and popular song, dance, and comedy routines provided the kind of

entertainment of diversions that seemed necessary to sustain the attention, satisfy the tastes, and match the energy of the city’s varied and hyperstimulated audiences.

The Salome acts presented in the fragmented context of variety forms are, as I argue in this dissertation, ideal cultural locations for encountering the neurological nature of modernité as expressed in New York City at the start of the twentieth century. They embodied what can be considered the new neurological language and logic of modernité in the ways in which they challenged previous modes of perception. Where rationality, wholeness, and containment had been the paradigm for the ideal individual of modernity, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought with them new experiences and discourse that called many of those frameworks into question.

In the following and final section of this chapter, I use Giorgio Agamben’s theory of gestures to discuss how the Salome performances within the context of the variety entertainment format expressed modernité’s new, more dispersed, and fragmented mode of perception. Employing Agamben’s theory of gesture and his concept of “means without ends,” I establish the Salome variety entertainments as cultural sites where the sublimated internal contradictions of modernist ideologies about neuropsychological normativity and impairment are disclosed. Looking generally at the variety format of the Salome acts and the similar ways in which they celebrated physicalities and social behaviors pathologized in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century neurological and social scientific discourse, New York Salomania emerges as an important historical phenomenon. Through its ability to disclose modernist paradoxes with respect to human corporeality, it presents opportunities for rethinking existing narratives of modernity and the often discriminating systems of belief they advance.
Nervous Gestures: Salome as a “Means without Ends”

Giorgio Agamben, in his essay “Notes on Gesture,” addresses directly this relationship between modernist cultural expression and the language of neurology. Drawing attention to the work of neurologists in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, Agamben advances a preliminary model for understanding how modernité’s neurological nature affected phenomenological experiences of modern subjectivity. Unlike projects that focus on the circulation of concepts, ideas, and tropes of the neurological, as Shail and Salisbury’s Neurology and Modernity does, Agamben’s investigation begins with the relationship between patients and doctors as well as the methodological approaches employed by the early neurologists. Attention to these experiences and processes leads Agamben to recognize an important moment of change inside modernist culture at the turn of the twentieth century, one that could have lasting effects on the legacy of modernity, such as the modern subject’s political, cultural, and social possibilities.

Agamben’s essay opens with a description of a late-nineteenth-century medical phenomenon in which hospitals and clinics, beginning in the 1880s, report a sharp increase in the number of patients presenting with neuro-motor impairments. In response to this influx of cases, modern neurologists, such as Gilles de la Tourette (a student of Charcot), employed new techniques for scientifically observing the slew of fragmented and convulsive gestures being exhibited. Believing the greatest amount of knowledge about neuro-motor impairment could be

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46 Giorgio, Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in Means without Ends, translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000).
47 Agamben begins his essay by citing two studies by Gilles de la Tourette—his 1885 investigation into the nervous conditions of coprolalia and echolia and his 1886 research on the normative human gait. The 1885 study focused on the unique shrieks and outbursts of profanity exhibited by a patient at the Salpêtrière. (These vocal gestures would be included in the list of symptoms identified with what would later be known as Gilles de la Tourette’s Syndrome.) The
obtained by studying a pathological gesture’s smallest unit of movement, doctors often relied on the technology of still photography and moving images to meet their objectives. This process served to illuminate the complexity of the field of human gestures, both normative and non-normative, in turn supplying a new mode of understanding the human nervous system and its propensity for impairment.

The new methodological approaches to neuromotor impairments and the experiences with non-normative gestures in patients the neurologists encountered provide a foundation for Agamben’s investigation into what he sees as a larger transformation in the modern condition in the wake of these phenomena. “What is most extraordinary,” Agamben reports, “is that these disorders after having been observed in thousands of cases since 1885 practically cease to be recorded in the first years of the twentieth century.”48 The tics, grimaces, and ataxia that once required close medical attention by a team of neurologists were within a few decades no longer the object of so much curiosity and study. It was as if the movements had become so ubiquitous in modernist culture, “everybody . . . walking and gesticulating frantically,” that they had, in effect, become the norm.49

For Agamben such a marvelous occurrence indicates a significant shift in the trajectory of modernity: it can be seen as a moment in which modernist culture as a whole underwent a crucial change with respect to how it conceived of human corporeality and movement. The “generalized catastrophe” of fragmentation and disunity experienced by individual patients at

1886 project attempted to break down the general action of walking by isolating the movement into micro gestures. This was achieved by coating the soles of a subject’s feet with iron sesquioxide powder, directing him to walk across a long sheet of white paper, and then analyzing the individual impressions. Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 49.
48 Ibid., 51.
49 Ibid.
hospitals and clinics of the late nineteenth century became a cultural phenomenon inside the modern that had lasting effects on the phenomenology of modern subjectivity. It was, according to Agamben, the point in modernity’s history when the west effectively “lost its gestures”—a moment with which subsequent generations would continue to wrestle.

To understand what Agamben means by the loss of gestures, it is important to investigate his use of the word *gestures*. (Agamben’s adoption of the plural form of *gesture* is significant here: there is more than just a quantitative difference that distinguishes the plural from the singular.) As Alex Murray explains, the term *gestures* refers to western culture’s “previously held sense of cohesion in human motion and movement,” an experience of human corporeality that has infused dominant paradigms of the unified subject inside modernity. An awareness of the disunity of the body and its essential fractured nature corresponds with this collapse in the modernist sense of corporeal cohesion. Murray explains that to take Agamben’s description of the early twentieth century as a period in which there was a literal “outburst of strange walking patterns,” with people seizing and gesticulating violently in the streets of modern cities, is to misunderstand the larger sociopolitical implications of this moment in modernity. When the field of gestures collapses on a cultural level, there is, as Deborah Levitt explains, a common “shift in the way of knowing the body,” a shared change in perspective that contributes to the production of a new mode of experience, an alternative modern condition.

When we examine the Salome archetypes in performance alongside the transformation of New York into a space of hyperstimulus and site of exchange of neurological discourse, we can

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50 Alex Murray, *Giorgio Agamben* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 78.
see how the variety acts of the dancing girl embodied the distinctively fragmented and nervous language of modernité that Agamben is identifying as a collapse of gestures. In their form and content, performance events trafficked ideas about the human nervous system by representing its “pathological” possibilities. Their influence on the language of neurology, however, should not be limited to the concepts about impairment and disability they helped circulate through their images, spoken text, song, and movement. As part of the construction of a language, these performances participated in the production of a grammar system, a structure and logic of thought that helped shape the ways in which those living inside the framework of modernist culture reflected on their own experiences. How these performers communicated specific neuropathologized conditions such as hysteria and epilepsy—the way they played with form through fragmentation, explosive gesture, and discontinuity of movement—presented alternative models for encountering the human body and the modern subject that a normative subject was supposed to contain.

The variety theatres as products of and contributors to modernité are exemplary locations in which to explore this shift in perspective that unfolded beginning in the late nineteenth century. The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century variety entertainments, with their fragmentation and dislocation, exhibited on a formal level the kind of neurological logic that Agamben associates with western culture’s loss of gestures. The variety genre is by definition an eclectic, fractured, and dispersed entertainment that has historically appealed to audiences living and working in the fast-paced, hyperstimulating environments of modern cities. Organized
around a collection of “attractions, ‘turns’ or ‘numbers,’ unconnected by any theme,” variety
“seeks to engage limited attention spans with a diversity of skills.”

The various forms of variety entertainments in New York beginning in the 1840s worked
with the form’s general idea of fragmentation and dispersal, adding specific content and
modification of form when necessary to appeal to their particular audiences. Variety
entertainments in New York in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offered experiences
of fragmentation and dislocation. A genealogy of New York variety entertainments from the
early ensemble minstrel shows of the 1840s through the successful vaudeville theatres of the
1890s and early decades of the 1900s reveals the emergence of a genre of U.S. entertainment
seeking to meet the eclectic tastes and changing demographics of one of the United States’s most
charged and innervating cities. The basic structure of the minstrel show—with its multiple acts;
use of song, dance, and comic bits; and presentational style—became a profitable model for
other entertainments that aimed to attract working-class audiences in search of distraction and
camaraderie. The concert saloons, circuses, dime museums, and local variety houses that popped
up in the subsequent decades all made use of a similar format of diverse, disconnected short
performance acts to entertain their audiences. The mix of music, dance, comedy, and short
dramatic sketches created an atmosphere of diversion that provided a stark alternative to the
narrative-driven shows of the so-called legitimate theatre.

The pioneers of vaudeville at the close of the nineteenth century, recognizing full well the
profitability of the variety structure, modeled their daily offerings on the fractured format of

52 “variety,” in Cambridge Guide to Theatre (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,
2000),
https://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/cupthea
/variety/0?institutionId=577
these local amusements. Offering a line-up of “eight or more ‘turns’ . . . presented twice each day,” they presented an eclectic mix of musical numbers, comic sketches and monologues, dramatic playlets, and acrobatic routines.\(^{53}\) Vaudeville entrepreneurs such as Tony Pastor, B.F. Keith, and E.F. Albee, seeking to attract middle-class and female spectators without losing traditional working-class, male audiences, created highly regulated and strategically structured programs. As Alison Kibler explains, vaudeville managers recognized that “men and women and members of different classes liked different acts and congregated in separate sections of the theatre”; they “frequently observed that parts of a bill or even sections of individual acts appealed to particular groups.”\(^{54}\) Rather than seeing this “compartmentalization” as a hindrance to their objective of creating a mass U.S. entertainment, it became the underlying logic of the “smorgasbord” format of the “vaudeville bill.”\(^{55}\) This would prove incredibly popular on a national level. Centralizing their administration in the early twentieth century, vaudeville producers took their programs beyond the entertainment arenas of northeast cities such as New York and Boston. In doing so, they brought the fragmented entertainment format to locales across the United States thereby exporting the urban experience of what Nieland describes as “modernity’s disintegrated social world” to a changing U.S. landscape.\(^{56}\)

The Salome performances I study in this dissertation furthered the variety entertainments’ general logic of fragmentation and fracturing by applying it to the form and content of individual acts within already decentralized programs. The physical explorations of the Salome archetype

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Nieland, 13.
that many variety performances engaged in represented the type of corporeal disunity that Agamben associates with modernist culture’s collapse of gestures. The choreography of many of these popular Salome acts included twisting bodies, wildly extended limbs, and facial grimaces. Gertrude Hoffmann shook and quivered her way through the dance while Eva Tanguay employed her signature explosive gestures that bordered on the grotesque to create her shocking, albeit comical, portrait of the dancing girl. The entertainers’ performative gestures expanded upon the already extreme physical and emotional states that had come to be identified with the archetype of Salome during the fin de siècle when European artists, such as Moreau, Flaubert, Rosengrasse, and Oscar Wilde made her the subject of their work.

Building on Agamben’s observations of western modernist culture’s changing perspective on corporeality, I argue the performances of Salome found in the variety entertainments contributed to the coalescence of this new mode of perception by disrupting paradigms of a contained, rational, and neuropsychologically normative subject that western modernist cultures had long privileged. The popularity of the Salomes with New York audiences, the “mania” over the dancing girl that unfolded in the city from 1907 through 1909, reveal the culture’s preoccupation with the fractured and destabilizing experience of the modern that it purportedly feared.

“An age that has lost its gestures,” Agamben explains, “is, for this reason, obsessed by them.”57 As a result of this obsession, aesthetic projects and cultural forms of expression emerged that attempted to negotiate these new set of circumstances—sometimes struggling to reclaim what had been lost, other times indulging in a metaphysical resignation of the inevitability of the collapse. There is, however, for Agamben, an alternative, one that avoids the

57 Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 52.
sense of inevitability and creates opportunities to recognize a condition of what he calls “potentiality” at work inside the culture. It has the ability to redirect the fractured subject to a new set of circumstances and thereby open it up to a previously unrecognized trajectory. I argue this potentiality Agamben identifies can be located in the Salome performances that were so popular in New York City at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Recognizing a condition of potentiality in the New York Salome acts serves to establish them as powerful sites for confronting modernist culture’s ideological contradictions around normative and non-normative bodies.

In the following pages, I will explain in more detail Agamben’s theory of potentiality and its relationship to the changing mode of perception around corporeality and gesture that he sees emerging in the late nineteenth century. With Agamben’s paradigm established, I will then discuss how the New York Salome phenomenon works within this potentiality construct to illuminate important aspects of modernité as a cultural condition. From this analysis, the Salome acts will emerge not merely as individual New York performance events that curiously trafficked in neuropathological concepts, but as dynamic sites of culturally productive exchange and promising locations for historical disclosure.

Potentiality, for Agamen, as Leland Durante explains, is a condition, a “mode of existence”; it is one in which the possibility and impossibility of actualization are always experienced in relation to each other. Unlike a teleological model of potentiality grounded in a process of becoming with potentiality limited to that which will ultimately be actualized, Agamben returns potentiality to a dynamic suspension of what is and what is not. For something

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“to be potential,” according to Agamben, it must always simultaneously “be [its] own lack.”

Without this tension between being and not being and action and inaction, potentiality would already fall inside the domain of the actual and thereby negate itself as a condition separate from but in proximity to what has not yet been realized. All potentiality is, therefore, always also, for Agamben, impotentiality. It is from this aporia that aesthetic works can be put in conversation with other works in ways that allow for the re-imagination of both what has been and what will be.

Agamben looks to the aesthetics of mass culture, specifically the art of cinema, for those forms of expression most suited to disclose the potentiality of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century modernity. From the array of mass entertainments available to westerners during this period, it is film that offers Agamben the most significant paradigm for addressing the sense of crisis and disorientation produced by modernist culture’s collapse of gestures. Cinema is by nature a fragmented form; it exists as a collection of parts that are threaded together mechanically at incredible speed to create the illusion of wholeness. From this perspective, cinema’s fragments—its frames—function as means in the production of an identifiable and predetermined end. They act, in this way, like the uncontainable movements of the hysteric prior to her arrival at the Salpêtrière, before her individual jerks and twitches are separated out by the neurologist and his technology’s medical stare. When film is approached not for the way it creates an experience of wholeness from its parts but for how its parts function simultaneously separate from and with the whole, the medium reveals itself as a site of potentiality for reimagining the ethical and political possibilities of modernity.

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The communicative power of the fragmented image in cinema rests, in Agamben’s paradigm, in the functionary place it occupies between part and whole. It is not a means moving toward a prescribed end, nor is it a means to its own end. The fragment in film acts instead as a “means without end”; it is a condition of “pure and endless mediality” that rather than connecting collapses the distance between the doing and the done. No longer required to “produce,” it simply “endures” in a state of in-between and in the endurance transcends its position as image and takes on the form of what Agamben calls pure gesture.

Gesture is, for Agamben, an “exhibition” or demonstration of mediality itself; it is, he explicates, “the process of making a means visible as such.”60 It is, then, a unit of communication that exposes the parts that make the whole without resolving them into completion. In this way the singular gesture acts in opposition to the plural gestures that Agamben connected to modernity’s collapsed field of meaning. As a “demonstration of mediality,” Murray writes in his unpacking of Agamben’s theory, gesture exists “in opposition to the false unity that underscores gestures.”61 The mediality that gesture communicates, therefore, stands as a direct threat to the illusions of unity that the field of gestures so desperately tried to maintain.

Gesture’s threat to the field of gestures lies in the fact that when means are made “visible as such,” the internal contradictions of any narrative, concept, or ideology are disclosed. Means of any end are always a collection of contradictions that in the process of meaning-making are sublimated. Gesture by exposing the means as means brings to light these constellations of opposites, suspending them in time and space in the act of communication. In this suspension, the gesture acts a site of potentiality. It presents itself as a location of multiplicity, of tensions

60 Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 58.
61 Murray, 77.
where the possible and the impossible, the action and in-action, the being and non-being of any concept, principle, or idea is opened up for redirection. In this way, the gesture becomes political: politics being, according to Agamben, “the sphere of pure means”; the space “of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings.”

The Salome variety performances were gaining popularity just as the cinema as a form of entertainment was emerging in U.S. culture. The Salome phenomenon shares many similarities with the type of fractured expression rich with potentiality that Agamben locates in the medium of cinema. The acts, like the frames within a reel of film, were fragments inside the larger event of the variety show. Variety theatre as a genre, as previously discussed, is defined to a large extent by its refusal to mask its parts. While a loose sense of wholeness exists in the variety format, the entertainment value often rests on the quick shifts between unrelated, concentrated acts of showmanship. In this way, the variety entertainment epitomizes the means-without-end concept Agamben advances as a key element in identifying an aesthetic work’s capacity for disclosing potentiality. Each act in the fractured way it relates to those units of entertainment that precede and follow it performs the means without end’s principal function of demonstrating the form’s mediality. The Salome performances, as already noted, thrived within the variety genre. These successes, I argue, helped to establish the modern archetype of the dancing girl as a unit of communication well suited to disclose the potentiality of the early-twentieth-century culture in which it was being circulated.

When we add the neurological aspects of modernité to this discussion of the Salome archetype’s capacity for disclosing modernist culture’s potentiality, a clearer picture of what such a potentiality might be comes into view. The performers’ inclusion of forms of physical and

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psychological fragmentation associated with neuropathologized conditions in their acts reveals the Salome archetype to be a collection of vibrating parts crudely knitted together to form a character or persona. The threads linking the parts together, however, are routinely breaking as they do in the neurologically impaired body. In this way, each of the gestures of the Salome dancers—those associated with normative as well as non-normative corporeality—become its own means without end that exposes the mediality of the archetype and the performer’s body representing it. These micro-communications of mediality reveal the potentiality of modernité as a mode of perception within the larger historical construct of modernity.

Multiple aspects of modernité’s potentiality can be brought into view when the Salome variety phenomenon is approached using the framework of Agamben’s concepts of gesture and means without ends. The nature of modernité’s potentiality, the set of possibilities and impossibilities it is seen to contain, depends largely on what facets of the modern experience a particular analysis foregrounds. This dissertation with its focus on modernité’s neurological nature discloses potentiality through the elucidation of modernist culture’s paradoxical relationship to neuropsychological difference. In treating the Salome entertainments as cultural locations where contradictory notions about corporeal difference and normative social behavior are revealed, the changes in modernist culture’s physical and social environments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries take on new significance. The multiple experiences and perspectives these transformations generated, rather than being the basis for a singular set of meanings or ideology with respect to neuropsychological normativity, are the starting point for multiple narratives about bodily difference.

In the following chapter, I examine the culturally generative relationship that existed between the modern Salome archetype and modernité’s complex web of contradictions around
corporeality. I explicate how many of modernist culture’s deepest tensions, specifically those relating to progress and degeneration, rationality and irrationality, and normativity and impairment, became located in the Salome figure. I begin by looking broadly at the coalescence of the modern Salome archetype in Europe during the fin de siècle, reading the dancing girl’s new iteration in relationship to emerging medical and sociological discourse centered on neuropathologies. In my analysis, I focus attention on Salome’s dance, since it was this single action that most intrigued late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century artists. After looking at the various ways in which novelists, poets, painters, dramatists, and other artists explored the dance’s aesthetic possibilities, I chronicle the archetype’s journey across the Atlantic to the United States, where it becomes a popular vehicle for variety entertainers in the country’s largest and arguably most modern metropolis.
Chapter Two

New York’s January 1907 Salomes and the Emergence of the Modernist Archetype of the Degenerate Dancing Girl

The unique cultural condition of modernité that Baudelaire identified in the mid-nineteenth century was, as discussed in the previous chapter, a direct result of the rush of new stimuli generated by rapidly changing European and North American landscapes. The constellation of intense sensorial experiences produced by shifting social and physical conditions shaped the perceptions of those living and working in western cities small and large. In the decades following Baudelaire’s articulation of this new condition, the experiential aspects of modernité would only intensify. Cities proliferated; populations grew in size and concentration, creating large gaps between the rich and poor; communication and transportation systems expanded, opening up new modes of social interaction; and innovations in technology and rabid industrialization generated new charged spaces and paradigms for work and leisure.\(^1\) As the late nineteenth century rushed toward the twentieth, modernity was definitely “at full throttle,” leading to significant transformations in how people processed, represented, and engaged their culture.

Some of the most intense locations for experiencing this “throttle” of modernity were in the growing number of performance and amusement spaces that rapidly redefined the landscapes of western cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Legitimate theatres were increasingly competing with an influx of cabarets, dime museums, variety houses, vaudeville stages, and amusement parks, among other sites. These more populist and diverse

performance settings that aimed to fill the leisure time of the working, immigrant, and middle classes created richly sensual atmospheres. The fragmenting of performance events into short, intermedial acts resulted in intense and concentrated theatrical experiences. Bursts of music, dance, and physical comedy offered potent moments of pleasure to spectators and performers. In many ways, these formats reflected the phenomenological experiences of theatregoers and makers outside of performance spaces: the homes, workplaces, elevated train cars, and crowded streets where they regularly negotiated highly stimulating and energized environments.

By the turn of the twentieth century, some of the most popular and titillating entertainments presented in variety venues featured the figure of Salome. First in Europe, then in North America, the archetype of the dancing girl represented and contributed to the dynamo that was modernist culture. With their hysterical gestures, uncontainable sexuality, and eccentric content, these Salome performances became cultural locations where modernité’s greatest contradictions and tensions danced. The acts embodied and celebrated the rationality and irrationality of the modern—its moralism and decadence, its potential for progress and susceptibility to self-inflicted decline.

Feverish and popular energy around the Salome-themed entertainments often exploded into manic cultural infatuations. “Salomanias” swept across cities such as London, Paris, and, as this dissertation examines, New York. New York City’s own bout of Salomania would begin in 1907, when audiences began clamoring to see the upcoming premiere of Strauss’s Salome at the Metropolitan Opera. New York’s official diagnosis of Salomania, however, did not come until 1908, when the New York Times used the term for the first time in a headline that read: “Rumors
that Salomania Will Have a Free Hand This Season.” By mid 1908, Salomes could be found in entertainment spaces across the city: from Zeigfeld’s Jardin de Paris atop the New York Theater, to the auditorium of the Lincoln Square Variety Theater, and to the small stages of Brooklyn’s Coney Island Amusement Park. It would not be until the early 1910s that the fever would die down, though interest in the character of Salome would continue, noticeably in film, well into the 1920s.

Salome’s popularity in a city epitomizing the modern condition with its intensity, speed, and sense of constant disjunction makes the variety performances that featured the dancing girl ideal sites for examining the dynamics of modernité, particularly its neurological tendencies and the contradiction such inclinations yielded. Within the paradoxical landscape of the modern, the Salomes emerge as cultural locations where paradigms of normativity are challenged by lived, embodied experiences of neuropsychological difference. These experiences, regularly associated with the intensifying social and physical environments in which people circulated, manifested in the Salome performances through the fragmented forms and highly sensorial and provocative content of the acts. Explosive gestures, dissociated emotional states, and uncontainable movements both represented a modernist culture in a state of constant motion and disruption and a generative force within that culture, fueling its contradictions and tensions.

The Salome acts contributed to the construction of a new albeit unstable field of meaning where conflicting experiences with medical and social models of neuropsychological normativity danced together without resolving into each other. The interplay of rationality and irrationality, morality and decadence, progress and decline that the Salome phenomenon negotiated reveal

modernité’s deepest tensions around issues of normative social behavior and physiological impairment. The contradictory nature of modernité is inextricably linked to the increasing cultural presence of the sciences and medicine over the course of the nineteenth century. These disciplines generated a field of authoritative discourse directed at managing the relationship between social change and biological difference. Neurologists and psychiatrists, in particular, sought to explain many of modernité’s cultural paradoxes by way of medical models that identified “deviant” and “degenerate” brains and nervous systems. The figure of Salome as expressed within various modernist European and North American cultures, in turn, reflected many of these neuropathologized traits. Rather than continue to marginalize non-normative conditions, however, Salome—as evidenced by the archetype’s extreme popularity—seemed to make them more desirable reflecting an essential contradiction within modernist ideologies of corporeal difference.

New York’s Salomania was not unlike the phenomena that gripped other cities. Its Salomes also acted as cultural locations where modernité’s tensions and conflicts around normative neurological bodies could be encountered. But cities had their own iterations of modernité as well as their own performance cultures. These would, therefore, produce unique sets of Salome performances that reflected the complexity of their individual contexts. It is important, however, to note that Salome arrived in New York as a European “import.” New York received a modernist archetype that by 1907 had been infused with the creative gestures of European artists intrigued by very particular aspects of the dancing girl’s character. The figure of Salome that was introduced in the first century B.C.E. in the books of Matthew and Mark was very different than the archetype of the dancing girl that European artists developed and circulated in the second half of the nineteenth century. Among other traits, the fin de siècle
artists, as this chapter will reveal, infused the Salome archetype with a neuropathologized nature. This corresponded with contemporary scientific and medical discourse that attempted to address modernité’s internal paradoxes through medical models of non-normative social behaviors and neurological difference.

A comprehensive study of Salomania in New York requires a historical understanding of how the New York Salome acts incorporated the contradictory experience of modernité, specifically its paradoxical relationship to conditions of neurological difference, into their form and content. The New York Salome phenomenon exploded around a modernist archetype that had been significantly shaped by the experimentation of European fin-de-siècle artists. Salome arrived in New York City already “nervous.” To appreciate the neurological complexity of the New York Salome acts and their particular power for disclosure requires, therefore, an understanding of the relationship the archetype of Salome had to Europe’s own neurological condition of modernité.

This chapter provides a necessary genealogy of the nervous Salome archetype by examining in detail the relationship early iterations of the dancing girl in New York had to European expressions of the figure across media during the fin de siècle and early twentieth century. It does so by first marking New York’s ur-moment of Salomania in January 1907 through a discussion of the widespread anticipation of and excitement over the arrival of the archetype in the United States. Next, it places New York’s early encounter with Salome in relationship to the coalescence of the modernist archetype of the Biblical dancing girl in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. This historical narrative, which receives significant attention in this chapter, discusses how western ideas around progress, degeneration, and neuropsychological pathologies influenced artists’ and audiences’ perspectives on Salome,
specifically their concentration on her seductive dance. It examines how an increase in focus on the dance during the fin de siècle served to ground the archetype in a single dynamic action and mode of expression. Representations of the dance often foregrounded Salome’s irrationality, sexual uncontainability, and erraticism. These qualities, as this chapter discloses, had clear correspondences with many of modernité’s most contentious aspects, particularly those related to modern experiences and perspectives pathologized in theories of degeneration and neuropsychological impairment. The dance, then, becomes essential to fully understanding how the Salome archetype emerges as a cultural location for disclosing modernité’s paradoxes with respect to neuropsychological normativity and difference. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the Salome figure’s journey into variety entertainments and her voyage across the Atlantic to New York where the dancing girl would be reimagined and rearticulated by a new set of modernist performers, spectators, and critics.

New York, January 1907: The Arrival of Salome

“New York will have plenty of Salome next week,” wrote George Payne in the January 19, 1907 issue of New York’s Evening Telegram. Payne’s statement, appearing with the headline “The Dancing Salome in Drama and Opera Next Week,” referenced three theatrical productions scheduled to open in the city within days of each other. The first to premiere on January 19, Salomy Jane, played the most freely with the well-known Biblical account of the Jewish princess who danced for Herod in exchange for the head of John the Baptist. Transposing the story to a small town in the American West, the play transforms the narrative of Christian martyrdom into a romantic melodrama about a young woman who saves a noble vigilante from

execution by kissing him moments before he is to hang.\(^4\) The New Testament narrative was explored more directly in the remaining two productions: Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome* (based on Oscar Wilde’s drama) at the Metropolitan Opera and Hermann Sudermann’s *John the Baptist*, presented by and starring the celebrity actors E.H. Sothern and Julia Marlowe at the Lyric Theatre. Both set the story in its original context, and both focused attention on Salome’s unrequited desire for the Baptist. Salome’s dance—the means by which she seduces her stepfather into beheading the Baptist—was the high point of both productions.

*Salomy Jane* was certainly the most commercially successful of the three projects opening that January. It ran a total of 155 performances at the Liberty Theater: 122 of them between January and May, and another thirty-three when it was revived in September that same year.\(^5\) In contrast, Sothern and Marlowe’s interpretation of the Salome story appears to have made little impact on audiences or critics in 1907 despite the significant publicity campaign around *John the Baptist*’s opening. The title of the *New York Times* review, “Salome and the Baptist as Seen by Sudermann: An Uninspired Play of Little Acting Value,” which ran almost six days after the show’s opening, gives some indication of the production’s lack of success.\(^6\)

Neither *Salomy Jane*’s popularity nor *John the Baptist*’s critical failure would garner much attention from future historiographers of early-twentieth-century performance in the

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\(^4\) *Salomy Jane* opened on January 19, 1907 at the Liberty Theater. A stage adaption of Bret Harte’s short story “Salomy Jane’s Kiss,” the play was written by Paul Armstrong and featured Eleanor Robson in the title role.


\(^6\) The reviewer’s indictment of the production rests largely on its failure to fully explore the provocative nature of the source material. The play was, according to the reviewer, without “any poignant and overpowering appeal,” and the audience was left with a production that was “throughout vague, indefinite [sic], halting, and unsatisfying.” See “Five Theatrical Novelties Invite the Playgoers,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1907: X2.
United States. It was instead the Met’s production of Strauss’s opera, with its sudden and controversial closing after only one official performance, that would prove the most memorable of the three productions. The excitement and moral debate that surrounded this short run of the opera in New York point to the cultural power of the modern archetype of the dancing girl. It reveals Salome’s potentiality for disclosing modernité’s fissures and illuminating modernist culture’s internal contradictions.

A spirit of great anticipation surrounded the debut of Strauss’s Salome in New York in 1907. The opera had had a series of notorious openings in various cities across Europe following its world premiere at Dresden’s Royal Opera House on December 9, 1905. While the opera played in over fifty European houses in just two years, it still met resistance in many cultural hubs, including the cities of London and Vienna, where local censors barred performances. Outrage over the opera and Wilde’s play upon which it was based only generated more interest in the work. U.S. audiences an ocean away from the European excitement and outrage reportedly wanted their own encounters with Strauss’s bi-tonality, “cacophonous” layering of unorthodox instrumentation, and the libretto’s erotic narrative.

In the weeks building up to the U.S. premiere of Salome, excitement peaked. One New York Times reporter, reflecting in 1909 on this pre-Salome climate, explained: “[O]n every hand there were ‘Salome’ conversations, ‘Salome’ articles, ‘Salome’ lectures.” There was even a

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7 The Metropolitan Opera’s production of Salomé featured Olive Fremstad in the title role, Carl Burrian as Herod, Marion Weed as Herodias, and Anton Van Rooy as Jochanaan. Alfred Hertz conducted and Anton Schertel directed the production.
8 Conducted by Ernst von Schuch, the production featured Marie Wittich as Salomé, Karel Burian as Herod, Karl Perron as Jochanann, and Irene von Chavanne as Herodias.
guidebook to *Salome* circulating: Lawrence Gilman’s *Strauss’ “Salome”: A Guide to the Opera with Musical Illustrations*.\(^{11}\) Gilman’s publication proved a valuable resource to New York audiences relatively inexperienced in the kind of modernist experimentation Strauss’s work embodied. It supplied a reference point for understanding what this new archetype might contain both on the level of its content and its musical form.

With interest in Strauss’s opera at such a pitch, the Met’s management had reasonably high expectations that its January production of *Salome* would draw significant audiences. *Salome* promised to be the highpoint of the 1906–07 season, rivaling anything that the Met’s new competitor, Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera Company, would be presenting that year. Hammerstein’s company aimed to cultivate a more economically diverse New York opera audience and, as a result, quickly gained a more populist reputation that posed a significant financial threat to the Met. *Salome* had the potential to mitigate such a threat by drawing in larger than usual audiences that might ultimately expand the company’s subscriber base.\(^{12}\)

The Met’s expectations regarding *Salome*’s success appeared more than reasonable when an open dress rehearsal/benefit concert of the opera on January 19 drew an audience of over one thousand. The company’s management quickly scheduled three more non-subscription performances for January 31, February 5, and February 12 to follow the already scheduled

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\(^{12}\) George Dorris describes this rivalry between the newly formed Manhattan Opera Company and the Metropolitan Opera as an all-out “opera war.” During this period, “it was possible,” Dorris writes, “for opera to be a moneymaking enterprise,” and the Met was not interested in sharing its profits with a new competitor. The conflict between the Metropolitan Opera and Hammerstein “eventually cost both antagonists hundreds of thousands of dollars before the Met and several of its wealthiest supporters bought out Hammerstein for $1,200,000.” The buy-out required, however, that Hammerstein not produce a single opera in the city for the next ten years. See George Dorris, “Dance and the New York Opera War, 1906–1912,” *Dance Chronicle* vol. 32, no. 2 (2009): 195.
January 22 opening. All of these performances would sell out almost immediately. Passionate reviews quickly followed the opera’s opening. An unidentified *The New York Times* reviewer wrote, “It need only be said now that Strauss has in this work carried the modern art of the orchestra to another and still more advanced stage.” W.J. Henderson in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* declared, “Nothing in all music creates a greater atmosphere of horror and suspense.” Such reviews only further ignited popular interest in the production. *Salome* was, it appeared, well on its way to becoming in the United States the phenomenon it had shown itself to be in Europe.

Unfortunately for the Met, the forward trajectory of Strauss’s *Salome* would soon be thwarted just two days after the production’s opening when the company’s board of directors requested the opera be closed. In a telegram to the company’s Artistic Director, Heinrich Conried, the board stated:

> The Directors of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company consider that the performance of Salome [sic] is objectionable and detrimental to the best interests of the Metropolitan Opera House. They therefore protest against any repetition of this opera.  
> (Signed) By order FRANK N. DODD Secretary.

Newspapers across the city speculated on what or whom had pressured the board to make its request. *The Evening Telegram* reported that an organization of influential New York ministers outraged by the distortion of the Baptist story forced the board’s hand. This account, however, was overshadowed by the popular rumor that the pressure was coming

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16 “‘Salome’ Forbidden by Directors of Opera House at Clergy’s Say,” *The Evening Telegram*, January 26, 1907.
from within the board itself, specifically from one of its most influential members: J.P. Morgan. *The New York Times* reported: “The meeting was held behind closed doors, but it is understood that Mr. Morgan declared that he was willing to pay the expense of the production of ‘Salome’ out of his own pocket rather than have it given again.”¹⁷ Given the dynamics of the Progressive Era New York, with its moralism and struggles against corporate power, either explanation is plausible, though it is the Morgan narrative that will gain the most traction in historiographies of the Met’s censorship of *Salome*.

Heinrich Conried and his allies tried to avoid the opera’s closure by detailing for the board all of the work’s artistic merits. When this failed, they proposed a compromise, offering adjustments to the libretto and staging, so the material would be less provocative. Both of these gestures failed. Ultimately, Conried was forced to cancel all the remaining performances of the opera at the Met. Since the board only controlled the use of the theatrical space, Conried’s coalition attempted to transfer the project to another venue. While there were reports the New Amsterdam was interested in presenting it, the venture was never realized.¹⁸ The production closed and Strauss’s *Salome* would not be staged again at the Metropolitan Opera House until 1934.¹⁹

I detail the arrival of the January 1907 Salomes to establish a theatrical context for New York City’s reception of the dancing girl. New Yorkers had had little contact with the Salome archetype before 1907. The amateur Progressive Stage Society had performed Wilde’s play

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¹⁸ “‘Salome’ Will be Sung: Drama to Go to New Amsterdam if Opera House Is Closed to It,” *New York Tribune*, January 30, 1907.
¹⁹ *Salome* returned to the Met on January 13, 1934 in a production directed by Wilhelm von Wyymetal Jr. It featured Göta Ljungberg as Salome, Max Lorenz as Herod, Friedrich Schorr as Jochanaan, and Drothee Maski as Herodias. See https://archives.metroperafamily.org/archives/frame.htm.
Salomé in 1905, but the production was met with little acclaim (or even much rebuke). The following year the Astor Theatre presented its own professional production of Wilde’s tragedy. It received a hearty dose of condemnation from reviewers at two New York papers: The Sun and the New York Daily Tribune. The former called it “bloodily degenerate,” the latter “repulsive” and decadent.” Beyond these responses, the production made little impact.

Generally, as the previous section reveals, New Yorkers lacked any real engagement with Salome as a theatrical figure until 1907. The European fascination with the dancing girl evidenced in the significant amount of art and literature focused on Salome in the late nineteenth century had, theretofore, no significant correspondences in New York culture. This meant the city largely came to know Salome through the transmission of a European archetype—one replete with the continent’s most vibrant modernist discourses and debates. In the following section, I offer an account of the coalescence of this modern Salome archetype. It is this iteration of the dancing girl that U.S. audiences would enthusiastically receive in 1907. Examining the different iterations of Salome from the first century c.e. to the late nineteenth century establishes the figure of the dancing girl as a location of dynamic cultural exchange. Rather than a stable figure, she emerges as a flexible site through which the interplay of cultural forces can be disclosed.

**Genealogy of the Modern Salome Archetype**

By the time The Evening Telegram announced the arrival of the January 1907 Salomes, interest in the dancing girl had already reached an unprecedented pitch in Europe. Salome-inspired paintings, poems, plays, operas, dances, posters, advertisements, and other ephemera

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had been proliferating across the continent and Great Britain since the start of the fin de siècle.  

By the turn of the twentieth century, bouts of Salomania had already gripped the metropolises of London and Paris, where modern dancers such as Maud Allan and Loïe Fuller performed their sensual interpretations of Salome’s dance in popular variety venues. This intersection of high, middle, and popular forms created an intermedial landscape of entertainment around a figure capable of disclosing modernité’s deepest contradictions and, therefore, its greatest potentialities.

Representations of Salome were, of course, in circulation prior to the fin de siècle. While the character of Salome was painted in only very broad strokes in the Biblical texts of Matthew and Mark, she received more detailed consideration in decorated books, religious architecture, mosaics, and sculptures of the medieval period. Particular attention during the Middle Ages was given to Salome’s erotic physicality, which stood in direct contrast to the Baptist’s disembodied spirituality. The tympanum at the western entrance to the Rouen Cathedral provides a strong example of this perspective. Salome is presented dancing on her hands in the style of a medieval acrobat while far to the right the Baptist prays on his knees in anticipation of his decapitation.

[See Figure 2.] This distinction between the dancing girl and the Baptist, according to Barbara

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21 Anthony Pym puts the number of times the Salome trope appears in European artistic works between 1860 and 1920 at close to four hundred. Pym’s count, however, is based only on what he calls “literary and pictorial versions” of the Salome theme. See Anthony Pym, “The Importance of Salomé: Approaches to a ‘Fin de Siècle’ Theme,” *French Forum* vol. 14, no. 3 (September 1989): 311-22. Charles Bernheimer, T. Jefferson Kline, and Naomi Schor, in contrast, consider a much broader cultural landscape of “poems, stories, plays, paintings, posters, sculptures, decorative objects, dance, and opera.” In their estimation “well over a thousand versions of the Judean princess” circulated in European culture during relatively the same period. See Charles Bernheimer, T. Jefferson Kline, and Naomi Schor, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 104. While Bernheimer, Kline, and Schor’s count is substantially higher than Pym’s, both sets of numbers support the idea that the figure of Salome became something of a modernist phenomenon in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
Wright, corresponded with the “dichotomy between the life of the spirit and the world of the flesh” that dominated medieval Christian ideology.\textsuperscript{22}

Depictions of Salome from the European Renaissance are notably less erotic than what was presented in the Middle Ages. Beauty and reflection replace carnal desire and temptations. As Polina Dimova explains, by the sixteenth century, “Italian, Flemish, and German artists [had] created a rich iconic tradition of Salome paintings” that depicted the dancing girl as a “graceful, dignified princess . . . or alternatively [as] a pensive girl gazing at John’s head.”\textsuperscript{23} These representations were consistent with the early modern period’s humanist focus on individual experience and rational reflection. Caravaggio’s early-seventeenth-century Salome con la testa del Battista (ca. 1607–1609) offers a strong example of this early modern perspective as applied to Salome. [See Figure 3.] Salome is shown carrying a charger upon which rests the Baptist’s severed head. She is, however, unable to look at it. The eroticism she once embodied is replaced by a condition of grief, confoundment, and the possibility of regret. For Caravaggio and other European artists of the period, Salome served, according to Helena Zagona, as “an ideal subject for depicting the human form with all of its complexities and contradictions.”\textsuperscript{24}

The eighteenth century brought a sharp decline in the number of Salome-themed works produced in Europe. Nanette Rodney credits “the capricious, pleasure-seeking . . . aristocratic patrons of the period” for this turn away from the dancing girl.\textsuperscript{25} European art and literature did

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\textsuperscript{24} Helena Zagona, The Legend of Salome and the Principle of Art for Art’s Sake, cited in Gayle A. Levy, Refiguring the Muse (New York: Peter Lang International, 1999), 39.
\end{flushleft}
not reflect any significant interest in Salome until the mid to late nineteenth century, when visual, literary, and performing artists increasingly turned to her as an object of study. As more and more artists during the fin de siècle looked to the figure of Salome to express their individual experiences with modernist culture, Salome took on new and multifarious aspects. Salome like modernité itself was a mix of extreme physical and psychological conditions. An uncontainable swirl of irrationality, sensuality, and irrepressible expression, the archetype of the dancing girl would come to challenge that Cartesian divide between mind and body that had underpinned modernist ideologies of normative subjectivity.

The collapsing of an array of often conflicting traits and behaviors into a single uncontainable figure established Salome as an ideal site for artists celebrating the fractured and unpredictable landscape of modernist culture. For others, however, those same aspects of modernité contained in the Salome archetype were an indication of contemporary European culture’s most degenerate and threatening tendencies. The figure of the dancing girl, in this way, expressed modernité’s profoundly contradictory nature. Performing conditions of dispersal, fragmentation, and dissociation, representations of Salome in the fin de siècle presented opportunities for exploring the effects of modernist culture’s hyperstimulating physical and social environments. The social value assigned to these effects, however, remained up for debate. As doctors and sociologists garnered greater and greater degrees of respect across modernist culture, medical and social scientific models for assessing these new modes of experience emerged. Difference became increasingly pathologized as the trajectory of western modernist culture was litigated in research hospitals, laboratories, lecture halls, and doctor’s offices.

As the remainder of this chapter will disclose, the figure of Salome occupied an exciting place on the tense border between the normative and the non-normative. Possessing many of the
neuropathologized traits of modernité identified by a new generation of doctors focused on the brain and nervous system, the modern Salome archetype became a contested cultural location where reason and irrationality, progress and degeneration, and order and uncontainability danced together. Salome, as she would ultimately appear in various iterations on the small and large New York variety stages, was a site of cultural reflection and production. She was a location where medical discourse on neurological impairment wrestled with a spectrum of popular tastes and desires born out of the transformative, hyperstimulating landscape of modern urban life. Never fully rejecting the medical models of impairment, the Salome entertainments reflected aspects of the new scientific discourse while also resisting it through the celebration of the very forms of neurological difference such discourse attempted to pathologize.

The unique place the Salomes occupied in the landscape of early-twentieth-century New York culture makes them valuable sites for interrogating persistent modernist ideologies of neuropsychological normativity. The Salome acts examined from a historical perspective complicate singular modernist narratives that privilege rationality, containment, and unified subjectivity. They do so by drawing attention to the contradictory aspects of the modern, the conflicts that inevitably result from the interplay of categorizing medical discourse and embodied experience. Disclosing the paradoxes of modernist culture through the fragmented performance genre of variety, the Salome entertainments illuminate through their form and content the modern condition’s inherent paradoxes, bringing to light in the theatrical event modernité’s oppositional forces. In so doing, the mediality of the Salome archetype comes into view and its role in disclosing the potentiality of modernity is exposed.

To adequately understand how the New York Salome acts of the early twentieth century disclosed modernité’s paradoxes with respect to neurological normativity and difference, it is
necessary to first trace how this neuropathologizing discourse emerged and then discuss the ways in which it was absorbed into the figure of Salome. The following two sections of this chapter are focused on accomplishing these objectives. I begin first with a discussion of the rise of degeneration theory in the nineteenth century, explaining how scientists seized upon cultural tensions over western progress to advance medical paradigms aimed at identifying and regulating neuropsychological impairment. This overview of degeneration theory is followed by a historiography of the coalescence of the modern Salome archetype during the fin de siècle. This section focuses specifically on how artists in articulating the new modernist version of the archetype incorporated into the frame of the dancing girl many of the neuropathologized traits being circulated in contemporary medical models of impairment.

While this dissertation is concerned primarily with the phenomenon of Salomania in the United States, specifically in New York, my discussions of degeneration theory and the coalescence of the modern Salome archetype focus principally on a European context. This is appropriate given the fact that, as stated above, the version of Salome most New York audiences and artists encountered for the first time in 1907 was shaped primarily by European influences. In the final section of this chapter I will link the development of the modern Salome archetype in Europe to its iteration in New York by discussing the ways in which the figure of the dancing girl was trafficked across the Atlantic to the United States where she would be passionately received.

Degeneration, Decadence, and Neuropathologization of Modernité

Debates over western culture’s potential for both progress and degeneration were well under way by the time the Salome archetype reemerged in European art and literature in the mid-nineteenth century. The European Enlightenment, with its multipronged pursuit of a new
“science of man,” had produced a modernist landscape of contradictory ideas about humanity’s place and status in the universe. The Enlightenment project epitomized the human potential for rational self-reflection. For thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume, George Berkeley, Voltaire, and Denis Diderot, human beings possessed the ability to comprehend nature’s most complex systems and laws through reason and empirical thought. This afforded humanity a unique position in the cosmos and enabled it to assert power over the material world as well as advance secular ideas about their own nature. This capacity for self-reflection led to, however, what Peter Gay describes as an Enlightenment anthropology marked by “unappeasable conflict.”

It raised questions regarding how supposedly rational human behavior related to regularly volatile political, social, and economic systems.

As discussed in the previous chapter, by the 1840s advances in industry, technology, communication and transportation systems, science, and medicine born out of the Enlightenment project had produced a new set of social, political, and economic conditions. Over the course of the long nineteenth century these would only expand and deepen. There were certainly many who saw the benefits of this unprecedented period of growth as they profited from increased production, trade, and social mobility. Great numbers of others, however, were forced to manage conditions of great inequality and oppression. As William Greenslade writes, “[T]here was a paradox to be explained, and it was in simple terms, the growing sense of a lack of synchrony between the rhetoric of progress, the confident prediction by the apostles of laissez-faire of ever-increasing prosperity and wealth, and the facts on the ground, the evidence in front of people’s eyes of poverty, degradation at the heart of ever rich empires.”

The encounters with modernity

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27 Greenslade, 15.
were not monolithic, and the consequences of progress hardly predictable. This diversity of experience and instability would find its way into the cultural products of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

These contrasting visions of modernist culture circulating in Europe in the mid to late nineteenth century produced a palpable anxiety over the future of western civilization, what Henry Winthrop describes as a “crisis mentality.” Questions reigned as to whether these tensions were the inevitable growing pains of an ever-advancing society or the “death throes” of a culture coded for its own “dissolution.” The answers for many would lie in the newly defined arenas of the medical and social sciences, such as neurology and sociology, where positivistic methods were yielding new paradigms to address persistent problems. The discourse produced would quickly spread into an array of cultural spaces—from newspapers and magazines to art galleries and music halls—with the figure of Salome, I argue, being one of its most visible and contradictory ambassadors.

The Enlightenment had privileged the application of scientific perspectives to social and political contexts. This legacy combined with the increased professionalization of scientific disciplines in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries gave the voices of those in fields such as biology and medicine a new legitimacy in the public sphere. As David Pick explains, what emerged in the mid nineteenth century was “an impossible endeavor to ‘scientise,’ objectify and cast off whole underworlds of political and social anxiety.” Systems

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of identification, classification, and diagnosis became the means to creating a self-regulating society. These paradigms would migrate well beyond the borders of science and medicine to influence discussions on an array of non-scientific and cultural arenas.

Much of this discourse rested on an “evolutionary” logic that had its origins in the fields of paleontology and geology during the late eighteenth century. By the turn of the nineteenth century such theories of progress had entered the discourse of the early Naturalists, who turned their attention to how environmental changes influenced species variation. Jean-Baptiste Chevalier Lamarck (1744–1829) would prove the most influential of these Naturalists. His theory of transmutation asserted that biological changes in species were the result of a progressive process of inheritance. In it individual traits that organisms acquire in an effort to adapt to changes in their environment passed on to subsequent generations. Lamarck cited the long necks of giraffes as one of the clearest examples of species transmutation. Giraffes, Lamarck argued, acquired their long necks as a result of having to reach for food that could only be found on increasingly higher tree branches. Enough repeated reaching in a lifetime would extend a giraffe’s neck; this physiological change would then be transmitted to its offspring.31 While many of Lamarck’s contemporaries argued strongly against his idea of transmutation, his paradigm of biological adaptation would significantly shape western socio-scientific narratives of progress over the next century. Even as the figure of Charles Darwin ascended within scientific and popular cultures, becoming for many the “face” of evolutionary theory, the

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Lamarckian model remained the dominant paradigm, shaping, as I will discuss below, a range of theories on cultural progress and degeneration.\(^{32}\)

As modernist theories of evolution gained popularity both inside scientific disciplines and with the general public, questions remained as to how human beings fit into this complex, linear process of natural change. The acknowledgment that the human species was subject to the same processes of advancement and evolution as other organisms called into question human beings’ privileged status in nature. Denying (or disavowing) human beings’ place in the biological evolutionary process, however, created, for some, an equally troubling sense of uncertainty and discomfort. As Stephen Downes explains, a modernist culture increasingly detached from any “natural” ground of being,” driven instead by a zealous pursuit of the new and the allure of “high artifice,” was a precarious location.\(^{33}\)

Conditions and forces of change in modern life often brought with them challenges to the social hierarchies, belief systems, and behaviors associated with maintaining order in the midst of progress. Without identifiable structures in place to insure the positive trajectory of modernity, the culture risked becoming unmoored, perched for disaster, chaos, and imminent collapse. The result of this uncertainty was a deep sense of cultural crisis in which tradition and order wrestled

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\(^{32}\) Darwin’s celebrity in the nineteenth century and the popular success of his 1857 *On Origin of Species* should not blur the fact that it would not be until the 1920s that Darwin’s particular model of natural selection would become widely accepted by the scientific community, specifically those working in the emerging field of genetics. While Darwin can certainly be credited with introducing scientific ideas on evolution to the general public, historian Peter Bowler (borrowing the language of evolutionary biologist John Huxley) has noted that the period from 1880 to 1920 saw a general “eclipse of Darwinism.” During these decades, Darwin’s status as a celebrity scientist diminished as those proposing more Lamarckian-based frameworks for explaining both organic and social evolution gained prestige. See Peter J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolutionary Theories in Decades around 1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

with unbridled creativity and a lust for the new. This dynamic found expression in a variety of cultural forms from popular magazines and newspapers to literary, visual, and performing arts. The modern iteration of the Salome archetype emerged out of this conflicted landscape. The figure of the dancing girl took into its frame the tensions, instabilities, and paradoxes that had come to define the modern condition. Modernité’s complexities would be seen quite clearly in the gestures and expressive movements of the variety performers who represented the dancing princess on stages across Europe and North America. Because of this association with modernity’s more troublesome aspects, Salome, despite her widespread popular appeal, fell victim to marginalizing narratives of medical professionals and social critics seeking to tame what was increasingly considered modernist culture’s more “degenerate” impulses.

The need to reconcile models of organic evolution with the real, often troubling and contradictory experiences of modernist western culture generated a landscape of medical scientific discourse that regularly blurred the line between biological and sociological inquiry. Modernity was proving a pulsating paradox where the supposed evidence of human evolution—“civilization, science, and economic progress”—was being simultaneously read as the “catalyst” for social deterioration.34 Was human progress, as the U.S. sociologist F.H. Giddings observed it, “like every other form of motion in the universe,” designed to “start reactions against itself?”35 If so, what was the underlying logic for progress’s tendency toward self-sabotaging? And how could it be stopped?

34 Pick, 11.
For many, the answers to the above questions lay in the relationship between human beings’ biology and their particular status as social animals. Naturalists had distinguished the human species from other animals largely on the basis of their complex brains and sophisticated nervous systems. “Advanced” human societies, which usually bigotedly referred to primarily Western cultures, were considered by-products of this neurological privilege. If the mental and neurological traits that distinguished human beings from “lower” animals were being compromised in some way, weakened and corrupted by the social environment they had created, then the societies they built were equally vulnerable to decline. Evolution and degradation were, therefore, potentially part of the same bio-social system.

The inherent contradictions of progress that fueled much of the mid-nineteenth-century cultural anxiety around the modern provided a starting point for a variety of studies aimed at identifying biological causes for non-normative social behaviors. Many of these projects drew upon or resonated with the French medical concept of dégénérescence that had in the mid-nineteenth century become a popular scientific framework for investigating the relationship between biology and contemporary social problems. Dégénérescence, translated into English as degeneration, was a far-from-stable term. Generally, it referred to an ongoing social-scientific process where western culture’s apparent decline was tied to the generation of an expanding set of pathologized human traits. Such traits were thought to be acquired (in a Lamarckian way) through the complex, reciprocal relationship human beings had with their physical and social environments.

The Austrian-born, French psychiatrist Augustin Benedict Morel (1809-1873) supplied one of the earliest models of neurological degeneration in his 1857 Traité des dégénérescences
Grounded on a Lamarkian model of heredity, Morel’s theory explicated a dystopic process of human variation. In it, “morbid deviations” in the human species located primarily in the brain resulted from certain corrosive conditions of modern life. These included, Kelly Hurly writes, “industrial wastes . . . tainted foods . . . poor diet, hazardous occupations.”

According to Morel, a minor variation in the structure of the brain caused by an environmental factor could corrupt the neurological and psychiatric states of future generations. For instance, a brain lesion in a father resulting from toxins encountered in the workplace might manifest as a collection of anti-social conditions, most commonly alcoholism, in his children. The degenerate offspring’s impairments were only exacerbated by further exposure to the damaging aspects of modern life. With each generation, degenerate traits would intensify and increase in number. The process would only ultimately end when the reproductive system of individuals became so degraded as to make them sterile, thereby ending the family line.

Morel’s work offered a “scientific” model for addressing the contradictions of human progress and the cultural and social anxieties they produced. As Hurley explains: “Within the larger etiology of degeneration constructed after Morel, the social organism was as vulnerable as the individual organism to degenerative disease . . . In a vicious circle of causes and effects a poisonous society . . . infected the individual, the individual passed the infection to its offspring, and the degenerate offspring reinfected society.”

Morel’s work provided a paradigm by which a taxonomy of pathologized organic traits rooted in the brain could be used to explain, regulate,
and potentially eradicate non-normative social behaviors. While the basis for many of these theories would prove scientifically questionable, to say the least, together they formed a discourse that connected non-normative behaviors to pathologized neurological difference.

Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) presented one of the crudest nineteenth-century applications of Morel’s theory of degeneration, but one that had significant effect on popular discussions of pathologized neurological conditions and their relationship to social order. As a medical doctor and criminologist, he focused his research on identifying the physiological and psychological traits of those members of society who embodied what he considered “regressive” states of human evolution. These included: “born criminals,” “insane” and epileptic delinquents, and “criminaloid” geniuses. Physical characteristics such as head size, jaw structure, skin color, sharpness of vision; psychological traits that included remorselessness, insensitivity, impulsivity; and various forms of artistic expression provided the terms by which individuals could be categorized based on presumed neurological difference and their potential threat to society assessed. With the appropriate taxonomical system, Lombroso believed, social degeneration could be stemmed and human progress left to advance unfettered.  

While Lombroso’s ideas in particular were widely dismissed and at times ridiculed by his contemporaries, degeneration theory in general had a vibrant life during the fin de siècle, influencing an array of cultural arenas. It found traction inside medical culture primarily through the emerging fields of neurology and modern psychiatry. Discourse produced from these fields soon stretched beyond the arenas of medicine and science into popular culture as celebrity doctors made their research and theories accessible to the general public through lectures and

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publications. Degeneration theory resonated strongly with many fin-de-siècle artists who found inspiration in notions of physical and social decline. The Salome archetype would prove an ideal vehicle for such work. The figure of the dancing girl showed a capacity for unbridled expression that could be used to push cultural boundaries. Salome as a result held a complicated position in western modernist culture as she was simultaneously pathologized and celebrated for the ways in which she destabilized social order. As a result, iterations of the Salome archetype in the late nineteenth and then early-twentieth centuries emerge as ideal cultural locations for examining the western culture’s contentious relationship to neuropsychological normativity and difference.

Pioneering researchers in neuropsychiatry incorporated degeneration theories into their medical models of neurological difference. Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, for instance, used models of neurological degeneration to explain sexual “deviances,” linking marginalized sexual behaviors to “cerebral neuroses.” George M. Beard, as discussed in the previous chapter, infused U.S. neurology with a social agenda when he identified the nervous condition of neurasthenia and linked it to life in fast-paced, stressful, urban environments and the “brain labor” of middle and upper-middle workers. Perhaps the most renowned figure to imbue medical discourse with aspects of degeneration theory was the renowned Charcot. The logic of nineteenth-century degeneration theory significantly influenced Charcot’s methodology, known as his méthode anatomo-clinique. The relationship between theory and practice is related to the fact that many of Charcot’s patients spent significant portions of their adult lives at his hospital. They often died in its wards after years of confinement. This long-term model of “care” gave Charcot the opportunity to observe and track patients’ neuropathologized behaviors for extended

periods of time. Upon their deaths, he could then immediately examine their brains and nervous systems to locate the presumed physiological causes of their impairments.41

The link between Charcot’s methodology and degeneration is not to reductively delegitimize Charcot’s practice or those of other researchers and clinicians who used paradigms of degeneration in constructing nosologies. Degeneration theory was woven into some of the fin de siècle’s most preeminent medical discourse on the brain and nervous system. Charcot’s methodology significantly shaped modern neurology in ways that have led to important diagnoses. As Pick explains, “[T]here were always ‘actual,’ material referents at issue in the pronouncement degeneration. To see the mythological dimensions of this language should not blind us to the reality of many of the social problems and human sufferings with which it engaged.”42 The difficulties with the field, however, lie in its persistent ambiguities that allowed for systemic forms of exclusion and Othering. As Steven Karschay writes, “Despite the positivistic orientation of nineteenth-century experts on degeneration—with their relentless accumulation of data, their insistence on empirical methods, and their strong taxonomical drive—degeneration was to a large degree characterized by principles of exclusion and destabilized by a subtle mechanism of self-deconstruction.”43 It had no stable nosology and instead relied on a flawed and fluid categorization of symptoms to diagnose a potpourri of conditions ranging from epilepsy to alcoholism to “criminal insanity.”

42 Pick, 16.
The equivocalness of many of degeneration theory’s medical models produced what Greenslade calls “discourses of sometimes crude differentiation: between the normal and the abnormal, the healthy and the morbid, the ‘fit’ and the ‘unfit,’ the civilized and the primitive.” The value and application of such models increased “when the social order was under particular pressure.” If there was cultural instability, “the pathological element in the discourse of social panic was pressed into service to undermine the intentionality of the oppositional voice, by rendering it as irrational or ‘sick.’” The variability of degeneration as a medical concept allowed it, therefore, to become a blunt tool for creating dubious hierarchies that would have effects on modernist culture and its various forms of self-reflection. These hierarchies would extend to an array of cultural arenas, including those related to the visual, literary, and performing arts.

During the fin de siècle, cultural critics began to apply principles of degeneration theory to critiques and analyses of artistic expression. They used theories of neurological impairment and “deviancy” to explain and indict modernist artists’ penchant for taboo material that celebrated sexuality, criminality, and mental illnesses, among other “degenerate” conditions. In this way, forms of cultural criticism mirrored Charcot’s méthode anatomo-clinique: the artistic work of an individual could be dissected and studied as a means of “diagnosing” the degenerate condition of the artist. The most iconic of these critiques was Max Nordau’s 1892 Entartung [Degeneration]. Published first in German, then translated into various languages and

44 Greenslade, 2.
45 Degeneration theory’s link to the Eugenics movements in Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stands out as one of the most vivid examples of such misuse and misapplication.
46 Max Nordau, Entartung (Berlin: C. Duncker, 1892). For an early English translation of Entartung by a U.S. publisher, which is based on the second German edition, see Max Nordau, Degeneration (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895).
distributed across Europe and North America, *Entartung* offered a scathing critique of the fin de siècle’s artistic impulses. Nordau’s belabored study of modernity’s decline was far-reaching in its attacks. He indicted the likes of Henrik Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Maurice Maeterlinck. Nordau’s argument rested on the idea that the negative conditions of modern life—the crowded cities, economic instability, increased crime rates, decline in religious practice—were producing a generation of artists preoccupied with undermining western culture’s traditional moral framework.

A medical doctor and former student of Lombroso, Nordau was particularly intrigued by theories of hysteria and neurasthenia. Daniel Pick explains, “Nordau was obsessed by the relation between fin-de-siècle culture and hysteria. He found massive obfuscation and disorders of speech in famous writers and painters.” Nervous “fatigue” and “exhaustion” produced artists, according to Nordau, who perceived the world through a deviant lens and in turn represented their perceptions in the form of degenerate art. Such work when consumed by the broader public served to further weaken and exhaust the culture, leading it deeper and deeper into decline. George Bernard Shaw’s response to Nordau’s project illuminates the pathologizing logic of *Entartung*. Shaw writes: “I have read Max Nordau’s Degeneration . . . two hundred and sixty thousand mortal words saying the same thing over and over again . . . His message to the world is that all our characteristically modern works of art are symptoms of disease in the artists, and that these diseased artists are themselves symptoms of the nervous exhaustion of the race by overwork.”

In subsequent pages, Shaw rebukes Nordau’s portrait of the modern artist as

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47 Pick, 24.
diseased and sick, claiming instead that those associated with such movements as Naturalism, Wagnerism, and Impressionist movements offer alternative perspectives. When engaged appropriately, according to Shaw, they can illuminate western culture’s potential for growth.

To denounce Nordau’s charges in *Entartung*, however, did not mean one had to completely reject, as Shaw did, his portrait of a pathologized modernist culture and the modern artists representing it. One could accept Nordau’s claim regarding the culture’s and the artists’ degenerate and diseased traits but reject the value he assigned to such conditions. Rather than reading artistic representations of degeneration as symptomatic of individual and social ills in need of cure, artists could celebrate the multiplicity of experience with all of its impairments. Physiological and psychological contradictions and non-normative traits and behaviors represented in art could be seen, therefore, as expressions of the condition of modernité that Baudelaire himself had taught artists to so vigorously explore. In this way, the slippery diagnosis of degeneration could find new form in a loose, fin-de-siècle genre of decadence.

Paul Bourget, in his 1881 “Essai de psychologie contemporaine: Charles Baudelaire,” offered one of the earliest explications of decadence as an aesthetic category.⁴⁹ Henri Dorra writes, “In analyzing the pessimism and morbidity of much of Baudelaire’s poetry . . . Bourget wrote to what amounts to the first manifesto of decadence.” In it, Dorra explains, Bourget asserted that “social decadence was by no means incompatible with artistic achievement: it could indeed lead to the creation of masterpieces.”⁵⁰ Bourget begins his essay with a general definition of *decadence*: a “word . . . [that] frequently refers to the state of a society that produces too many

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individuals ill-suited to the work of the community.”\textsuperscript{51} While many claim “citizens in a time of decadence are inferior,” Bourget argues that the very qualities that mark them as decadent are what creates the “virtuosi of voluptuousness and suffering” of modernité. The decadent artist must, like Baudelaire, play in the world of “sensations” and “paradoxes”; he must be willing to push his “nervous mechanism to the point of hallucination” and accept the irreconciliation of “his intense disdain for the vulgar” with his attraction to “the phosphorescence of decay.”\textsuperscript{52} In short, modernist artists must embrace the very neurological traits and social actions pathologized by modern socio-scientific discourse in order to represent fully the condition of modernité out of which they were born.

It is inside this neuropathologized dynamic of decadence where the modernist archetype of Salome in Europe will coalesce. That archetype will ultimately be trafficked to a collection of North American cities, most notably New York, where it will find new iterations with each location’s own neurological landscape of modernité. Many of the artists whom Nordau would indict and who would ultimately be identified as “decadents” (whether they accepted that label or not) were drawn to the figure of Salome. Oscar Wilde and Joris-Karl Huysmans, two of Nordau’s most popular targets, would achieve great notoriety for how they played with the Salome archetype in their work. Huysmans focused significant attention on the image of Salome in his notoriously decadent novel \textit{À rebours}.\textsuperscript{53} The novel is a meditation on the eccentric life of a reclusive aesthete Duke Jean des Esseintes. Nordau in \textit{Entartung} describes Huysmans’s main character as the “‘superman’ of whom Baudelaire and his disciples dream, and whom they wish to resemble: physically, sick and feeble; morally, an arrant scoundrel; intellectually, an

\textsuperscript{51} Paul Bourget, “Baudelaire and the Decadent Movement (1881),” 128.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 130–31.
unspeakable idiot.” Huysmans devotes half a chapter of *À rebours* to a discussion of two Salome-themed works that are part of Esseintes eclectic art collection: Gustave Moreau’s *Salomé dansant devant Herod* and *L’Apparition*. Through Huysmans’ detailed description of the prints, the reader can infer Esseintes’s decadent character.

Oscar Wilde, like other decadent artists, was significantly influenced by Huysmans’ *À rebours*. He incorporated the novel into the plot of his 1890 *Picture of Dorian Gray*. (Dorian receives a copy of a decadent novel that though not named is understood to be *À rebours*.) Like Huysmans, Wilde turned to the archetype of the dancing girl as source material for one of his signature decadent works: his 1891 drama *Salomé*. A figure driven by “pathological” obsession for John the Baptist, Wilde’s version of Salome is psychologically and physically extreme; her language and those around her, especially the lustful Herod, embody a neurotic self-destructiveness. A review of the Washington Square Players production of Wilde’s play in 1918 pointed out the staying power of Wilde’s relationship to Nordau and how *Salomé* exemplified Nordau’s characterization of decadent art. The reviewer writes, “In ‘Salome’ Max Nordau could find all his testimonies to prove mental degeneracy against the author. None but a mind so affected could find joy in such close and loving depiction of the tendencies and happenings that make up this story of the tragedy. Abnormality in different phases of colors [sic] every scene to the point where, in the climax, it revolts Herod himself to tragic command.”

Salome had by the end of the nineteenth century become an icon of decadent culture. Her appearance in a wide collection of fin-de-siècle artistic expressions—from paintings to poetry to the performing arts of opera, dance, and theatre—secured the flexibility of the archetype of the

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55 “The Little Theatres Looming Up,” *Life*, vol. 61, no. 1853 (May 2, 1918).
dancing girl to speak to modernité’s many pathologized aspects. Modernist artists were reimaging the Biblical character of the dancing girl. Where in the gospels she appears primarily as a device in an exercise of tyrannical power, in the fin de siècle, she is celebrated as a figure embodying the non-normative neurological and psychological traits socio-scientific degeneration theory was pathologizing.

This transformation of the Salome archetype, I argue, rested in large part on the increased attention artists in an array of media gave to Salome’s dance during the fin de siècle. When Salome reemerges in the mid nineteenth century after her long period of dormancy, she is not yet defined primarily by her dance. Her decadent and pathologized traits are located in an array of behaviors, uncontainable forms of expressions, and linguistic collapses. During the fin de siècle, however, focus will shift, and the dance will increasingly become the primary location where Salome’s decadence and non-normativity will be found. Her performance before Herod will become the locus of her non-normative, decadent, and neurologically “degenerate” character.

Recognizing this change in focus onto the dance will be important to ultimately understanding the New York Salome performances’ place inside the new, more fractured, neuropathological mode of perception that Agamben attributes to the condition of modernité. Identifying the figure of Salome primarily with the dance and rooting that dance deeply inside the fragmenting and destabilizing experiences of modernist culture establishes the archetype as an effective point of access for investigating the contradictory neurological nature of modernité. Depictions of Salome’s dance during the fin de siècle and into the early twentieth century increasingly depict her in states of psychological disassociation with irrational, hyper-sexualized, and uncontainable movements. These characteristics, which will be used to titillate and entertain audiences, gesture toward the inherent cracks in modernist ideologies that privilege corporeal
and psychological unity. The dance as it is increasingly identified with the archetype becomes, in this way, an example of Agamben’s “means without ends.” It provides a dynamic location where the “constellation of opposites” at play within modernist discourse about neuropsychological normativity can come into view.

Discovering Salome’s Dance

Heinrich Heine’s 1841 mythic poem Atta Troll is widely cited as one of the earliest nineteenth-century European iterations of the modernist Salome archetype. A political satire composed in the spirit of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale, Heine’s story about the quest for a runaway bear includes a chapter recounting the escapades of the character Herodias. In New Testament literature, Herodias is the name given to the wife of Herod and mother of Salome. Herodias in the Gospel of Mark is a key player in the Baptist drama, since she is reported to have directed Salome to ask Herod for John’s head in exchange for her dance. Heine in his poem collapses the archetype of the vengeful mother and the seductive daughter into a single, eccentric figure: Herodias. In love with the Baptist, Herodias is described as carrying John’s severed head around with her wherever she travels, kissing it zealously.

The maniacal lustfulness that Heine gave to the Salome archetype through his character of Herodias would influence artists of the fin de siècle largely through its popular 1847 French translation. As Kyle Mox explains, “After its . . . publication in French, Heine’s capricious revision of the basic Salome plot not only rescued it from relative obscurity but also established Salome as the muse of the new type of . . . artist . . . . Salome had become not only a symbol of

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idealized beauty, but a figure that is both politically and sexually subversive.” Her eroticism, playful irrationality, and necrophilic desire for the Baptist undermined nineteenth-century, bourgeois paradigms of gender, normative sexuality, and rational subjectivity. Pursuing the archetype beyond the borders of the religious narrative, Heine freed Salome of her moral function. He makes her, instead, a secular site where modernité’s contradictions could be creatively explored.

Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Hériodade*, started in 1868, presents one of the earliest post-*Atta-Troll* examples of a concentrated study of the Salome archetype as representative of the contradictory and pathologized condition of modernité. He worked on the poem for over thirty years, considering it still unfinished at the time of his death. A poetic investigation into the Salome-Baptist narrative, *Hériodade* focuses on character rather than plot. Divided into three sections, the poem uses soliloquies and obtuse dialogue to explore the sensual and psychological conditions of the figures of Hérodiadé (as in *Atta Troll*, a version of Salome), Hérodiade’s nurse, and John the Baptist.

Mallarmé’s own account of his work on the poem gives some indication of the potential he saw in the archetype of Salome for expressing the unique condition of modernité. In an 1868 letter, Mallarmé writes, “I’ve finally begun my *Hérodiade*. With terror because I am inventing a language which must necessarily arise from a new poetics, which I could define in these words: to paint not the thing but the effect that it produces.” Mallarmé’s *Hériodade* is more than just a fresh, nineteenth-century perspective on an existing archetype; it is an unchartered terrain for

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realizing the “new poetics” of modernité. The acute experientiality of the modern condition requires, Mallarmé writes, a new aesthetic form, a “verse . . . not composed of words, but of intentions . . . all language . . . erased in the face of feelings.”

By restricting Hérodiade to a dressing table where she engages her own reflection in a mirror, Mallarmé transforms the archetype from a broadly sketched character performing a set of extreme actions to a psychophysiological state of being to be observed and experienced.

Mallarmé’s Symbolist move to forgo an action-based version of Salome for one that expresses an intense state of being and set of feelings endows the archetype with an emotional uncontainability that breaks through the limits of the linear narrative out of which it was born. Mallarmé discloses the archetype’s potential for irrepresible expression through an aesthetic form that privileges linguistic containment and efficiency. Mallarmé’s poetic dialogue forces Salome into a new frame. It is one in which the rationality of language, its linearity and syntax, cannot be sustained. We are left instead with deep spaces, caesura. Words when spoken are not fueled by thoughts but by sensorial experiences. Plot is suspended in favor of dislocated conditions that can only find expression in spaces of linguistic disunity and lack. The concept of a unified system of language is lost. Like Agamben’s field of gestures, meaning is dispersed as the individual units of communication are privileged over cohesion and wholeness.

As the fin de siècle unfolds and artists working in an array of media turn to the dancing girl, the fractured psychological state of Salome Mallarmé explores in Hérodiade begins to find expression in new forms and locations. The dislocated interiority is externalized, translated into a physical state of being as artists take Salome’s linguistic fragmentation into the body. They do

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this most notably by concentrating their attention primarily on the dance. Descriptions or
depictions of an erratic, uncontainable, and charged dance, come to define Salome; she is
identified by a vocabulary of movement not words.

While the dance is certainly included in pre-late-nineteenth-century representations of the
Salome-Baptist narrative (the aforementioned tympanum at the Rouen Cathedral is an example),
in such instances the dance’s significance lies primarily in its causal relationship to the climactic
beheading of the prophet. It is an essential dramatic event that advances the plot. In the fin de
siècle, however, we begin to see the dance explored less in terms of its narrative function and
more for how it expresses the powerful pathologized psychophysiological condition of modernité
that Baudelaire described.

Some of the earliest examples of this shift in perspective with respect to representations
of Salome and the dance can be found in the visual arts. In the 1870s, most notably with the
work of Gustave Moreau, Salome’s performance emerges as the essential, defining event in the
narrative. Her dance increasingly becomes the subject of the work, relegating the Baptist and his
martyrdom to a secondary (or even tertiary) position in the narrative. Gustave Moreau’s oil
painting *Salome dansant devant Herod* and his watercolor *L’Apparition*, which were featured in
Huysmans *À rebours*, provide two early and iconic examples of the fin de siècle’s turn toward
the dance in its exploration and celebration of the Salome archetype. [See Figures 4 and 5.]

Presented at the 1876 Paris Salon, both works shocked and captivated critics for how they
diverged from traditional representations of the Salome-Baptist story. As Peter Cooke explains,
Moreau’s decision to focus solely on the erotic dance rather than on other aspects of the narrative
set his work apart from other nineteenth-century artists who had explored the Salome theme.
Cook writes: “Whereas Puvis de Chavannes had represented John the Baptist’s execution
observed by Salome, Henri Leopold Levy had shown Salome presenting the Saint’s head to Herod, and Henri Regnault had depicted Salome sitting with the sword and the platter to be used for the beheading, Moreau chose to represent the much rarer subject of Salome dancing before Herod.” Both of Moreau’s paintings depict Salome in the midst of her dance. Herod, an executioner, a musician, and an unidentified woman (perhaps Herodias) appear in both scenes. They are, however, represented in soft focus and relegated to the periphery of the paintings’ central action: the dance.

Focusing attention on the dance, Moreau excerpts from the narrative a moment rich with corporeal, sensual, and, in the case of L’Apparition, psychic potentialities. Salome’s figure in both paintings emits a subtle glow that breaks through the shadows of the hall. Her balletic gestures, frozen in time, point to a deep strength and muscularity in her feminized body. Her costume of precious stones and ornate embroidery embody a sumptuous decadence. In L’Apparition the heightened experience of the dance is extended into the realm of the psyche through Moreau’s addition of the floating illuminated head of the Baptist. With the possible exception of the woman seated to the right of Herod (perhaps Herodias), the other figures in the scene do not appear to register the apparition upon which Salome is so fixated. The vision of the head establishes the dance as not just a form of physical expression, but psychophysiological condition.

Moreau’s shift in focus to Salome’s dance in the two paintings exhibited in Paris in 1876 (as well as in the host of sketches he did of the dancing girl) was followed by a similar change in perspective in the work of other European visual artists exploring the Salome archetype. Georges

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Rochegrosse’s “Salome Dancing Before King Herod” (1887) incorporates many of the same gestures and architecture of Moreau’s paintings. [See Figure 6.] Like Moreau, Rochegrosse makes the center of the action Salome’s dance. While there are many more guests in attendance at the banquet than are shown in Moreau’s works, all of their gazes are still fixed on Salome—from Herod to the child musician seated on the floor. Even Salome’s gesture mirrors the one in Moreau’s L’Apparition—her left arm extended, tilted upward. Rochegrosse does not, however, include any reference to the Baptist. The vision of his floating, severed head is implied but not represented. This serves to further distance Salome’s performance from the larger Baptist story, giving the archetype of the dancing girl a certain independence. Odilon Redon’s 1883 charcoal and chalk drawing Apparition frames the scene of Salome’s dance more narrowly. [See Figure 7.] Redon does not establish the larger context of the banquet, but instead focuses attention only on the dancing Salome and her apparition. She has no audience but herself. Through this narrowing of focus, the archetype represents more a collection of gestures linked to a psychophysiological condition than an action of a character within a linear narrative.

Visual artists were not the only artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose approaches to Salome’s dance helped to redefine the archetype of the dancing girl. As Mallarmé reworked his Hérodiade over the course of the fin de siècle, so too did an increasing number of other literary artists explore the Salome theme in their novels, short stories, poetry, and dramas. Within a year of Moreau’s exhibition of his Salomes at the Paris Salon, Gustave Flaubert made a significant contribution to the modernist archetype of the dancing girl with his short story “Hérodias.” Published in a collection titled Trois contes, “Hérodias” is a fictional
account of the events leading to the execution of John the Baptist. Focused primarily on Herod Antipas and his wife Hérodias (mother of Salomé), the story offers vivid portraits of political intrigues and individual psycho-social conditions. The Baptist’s popularity and repudiation of her marriage to Herod Antipas threaten her husband’s power and his relationship to the Roman establishment. Hungry for power, disillusioned by her husband’s lack of resolve, she devises a plan to have John the Baptist beheaded.

Early in the narrative, we learn that Hérodias abandoned her daughter Salomé when she left her first husband to marry his brother. Hérodias has not, presumably, had any relationship with her daughter for most of the child’s life. As a result, Salomé is a stranger to her stepfather, Herod Antipas. This general absence of Salomé serves to temporarily distance the girl from the central action of the story and makes her arrival during Herod’s banquet that much more disruptive and powerful. While Salomé haunts the first two sections of the story—Flaubert suggests that she is the young woman in the marketplace whom Herod spots from his balcony and quietly desires—she is never fully present or an active force in the narrative until just pages before the story ends.

Salomé’s arrival is the work of Herodias, who angry for having been cursed and humiliated by the Baptist wants Herod to order his execution. Executing the Baptist will also, in her eyes, put Herod’s power on display for the Romans. Knowing that the Tetrarch will never willingly give the command, since he is cowered by Iaokanaan’s status as a potential prophet, she devises a plan that will use her husband’s lust against him. Salomé is the tool by which she will do this. As the guests are celebrating raucously, crying “Hail Caesar” as they eat and drink,
the young woman enters unannounced. Soon after entering, she steps on to the dais, takes off her veil, and begins her performance.

Flaubert devotes several paragraphs to the dance’s description. At first her gestures are soft, circular, “like a wandering spirit . . . on the point of flying away.” But quickly the dance changes as she breaks into a series of twisting, quivering movements. This is followed by another more extreme transformation:

She bent over in every direction, like a flower tossed by the storm. The jewels in her ears leaped about, the silk on her back shimmered, from her arms, her feet, her clothes invisible sparks shot out, firing the men with excitement. A harp sang; the throng responded with applause. Opening wide her legs, without bending her knees, she bowed so low that her chin brushed the floor.” The passion this arouses in Herod leads him to cry out: “Come! Come! . . . You can have Capernauum! The plain of Tiberias! My citadels! Half my Kingdom!”

Herod acts just as Herodias predicted. Salomé’s response is childlike. Her first and only utterance in the story is a rehearsed, albeit halting statement: “‘I want you to give me on a dish the head . . .’ She had forgotten the name, but then went on with a smile, ‘Iokanann’s head!’”

Herod, devastated by her request, has no real choice but to grant it.

The event of the dance exists as though somehow separate from the rest of the action. The event and the character, which act as one, function as kind of divertimento from the larger more cerebral unfolding of events. Salomé’s detachment from any of the other characters, her cold almost mechanical execution of her performance seems to divest her from the rest of the story despite the fact the dance is a key plot point in the story. Through Salome’s dance, the narrative’s reversal is set in motion. Herod orders Iaokanaan’s execution; quickly the command

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62 Ibid., 121.
is carried out and the head brought back to the banquet on a platter. Flaubert offers no
description of Salomé accepting her “gift.”

Flaubert’s treatment of Salomé’s dance presents a powerful paradigm for how the dance
can be excerpted from the rest of the larger story to create an independent aesthetic experience
endowed with decadence and degeneration. This excerpting process is, I argue, central to how
the Salome archetype will gain popularity in the early twentieth century. Once effectively
bracketed off from the larger narrative of Salome and the Baptist and endowed with many of
modernité’s most neurotic and paradoxical qualities, the dance comes to define the modern
Salome archetype. It will be this version of the dancing girl that will garner the greatest interest
and have the most prolific life on variety stage across Europe and North America. The starting
point for most of these dances, however, will not be Flaubert’s Hérodias but the drama he
significantly influenced: Oscar Wilde’s aforementioned 1892 Salomé.

Written in French, Wilde’s Salomé includes all of the traditional plot points of the
Salome-Baptist story: Herod’s desire for his stepdaughter; his request for her to dance; her
refusal; Herod’s offer to give Salome whatever she desires in exchange for dance; Salome’s
acceptance; the dance; Salome’s request for the Baptist’s head to be brought to her on a silver
platter; and the Baptist’s ultimate execution. Wilde, however, in his tragedy expands the story
and thickens the intrigue. Salomé is in her opening scene gripped by a violent lust for the Baptist,
Jokanaan, which ignited in the opening scene. Their subsequent exchanges are fiery and at times
cruel. Jokanaan rejects her, which sparks in her a hunger for revenge. In contrast to Salomé’s
lust for Jokanaan, Wilde’s treatment of Herod’s desire for Salomé is almost comical. The
Tetrarch embodies decadence with his ostentatious love of beauty and artifice which he locates
in his stepdaughter. Herodias is tortured by her husband’s lust for her daughter. Herod’s initial
refusal to honor Salomé’s request involves a series of protracted decadent monologues. After Herod ultimately agrees to decapitate Jokanaan and give Salomé his head, Wilde makes his most notable addition to the story. It is an act that will infuse the modern Salome archetype with some of its most degenerate traits. Borrowing from Heine, Wilde calls for Salomé, after receiving her gift, to crisscross the stage in a state of hysteric lust, kissing Jokanaan’s severed head. This necrophilic exhibition is deemed too extreme, too deviant for Herod and, as a result, he orders her to be executed.

The play was scheduled to premiere in London at the Palace Theatre in 1892 in a production starring Sarah Bernhardt as Salomé. The Lord Chamberlain’s office, however, refused to license the play for production, citing an archaic law forbidding the representation of Biblical figures on the English stage. In response to the act of censorship, Wilde made what was at the time the relatively uncommon choice to have the play published. He did so first with a French edition in 1893. This was followed by an English version in 1894 that contained illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley. Given Wilde’s Salomé was first circulated through these publications, any consideration of his role in redefining the archetype through his treatment of the dance requires a textual examination of the play. In the way the dance is treated on the printed page, Wilde provides a paradigm for the decadent dance that will have life on variety stages for decades to come.

A long repetitious set of exchanges between Herod, Hérodias, and Salomé (with occasional outbursts from Jokanaan, who is still imprisoned in the cistern) precedes Salomé's performance. Herod requests over and over that Salomé dance for him: “Dance for me, Salomé.”

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63 Oscar Wilde Salomé: drame en un acte (Paris: Librairie de L’art Indépendent, 1893).
64 Oscar Wilde, Salome: A Tragedy in One Act, Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde, Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894).
Hérodiá makes clear several times throughout the conversation that she does not want her
daughter to dance: “I will not have her dance.” Salomé refuses Herod’s request twice. Herod,
desperate to watch her perform, makes his notorious offer: “Dance for me, Salomé, I beseech
you. If you dance for me you may ask of me what you will, and I will give it you, even unto the
half of my kingdom.”65 The opportunity for Salome to exact revenge on the Baptist opens.
Salome accepts the offer. She requests slaves bring her her perfumes along with seven veils. She
commands them to remove her sandals, so she can dance barefooted (an erotic choice). They do
all she asks. After a tense series of exchanges between Herod, Hérodiá, and Jokanaan, Salomé
begins her performance. The stage direction simply reads: “Salomé dances the dance of the seven
veils.”66

With this simple sentence, Wilde accomplishes much with respect to creating a modernist
articulation of the Salome archetype. It is in the simple way he presents the dance that its greatest
potential lies. The first edition’s use of brackets and italics for the stage direction and the
placement of it on its own line serves to set the dance apart visually on the page. This is, of
course, not unique to Salomé, but since Wilde uses so few stage directions in the play, its
appearance is striking. Wilde, however, makes his most significant contribution to the
construction of the modern archetype of Salome rooted in the dance when in his stage direction
he gives her act, for the first time, a name. Prior to the publication of Wilde’s text, Salome’s
performance had only been referred to generally as a dance. In referring to her act as “the dance
of the seven veils,” Wilde attaches a name to her performance. The use of the definite article
suggests that this is an existing form that Salomé at that moment decides to present. Salomé’s

65 Ibid., 48.
66 Ibid., 54.
action now has an identity that subsequent performers will invoke as they circulate their interpretations of the dance in various high, middle, and lowbrow entertainments.

The play would not actually be staged until 1896 when the French director Lugné-Poë produced it in Paris at the Théâtre Libre with Lina Muntz in the title role. By the time this first production opened, however, Wilde was already imprisoned in Reading Gaol, having been convicted of “gross indecencies” by the English Judicial system in 1895. Wilde’s play, despite or perhaps because of the controversies around it and him, would help give rise to a collection of theatrical representations of Salome—both large and small—across Europe and North America. Many of these would incorporate Wilde’s nomenclature into their presentation of the dance. This was done through a variety of elements that included a performer or producer’s choice of title for a given act, stage directions used in a libretto or playscripts, costume choices, programs, and posters.

Strauss’s opera presents very clear examples of how Wilde’s treatment of Salome’s performance influenced the extraction of the dance from the rest of the narrative in various entertainments and how it became a productive cultural location for exploring the modernist archetype’s deep neuropathological nature. Strauss’s approach to the dance in his compositional process offers a primary example of how even musically the event had a distinct life from the rest of the stage action. Strauss reportedly wrote the music for the dance only after completing the other sections of the work. Derrick Puffett writes: “It is well known that Strauss composed the ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’ after he had finished the rest of the opera. The score bears the
date 20 June 1905, but the ‘Dance’ was not written until August (when it was apparently sketched and orchestrated in a fortnight).”

The libretto offers another example of the dance’s potential to be lifted out of the whole and become a vehicle by which the archetype could circulate through a variety of modernist contexts. Using Wilde’s drama as the basis for the libretto (referencing it as a poem, however, rather than a play), Strauss titles Salome’s performance and, in doing so, distinguishes the event of the dance from the rest of the dramatic action. Strauss then furthers Wilde’s impulse to frame the dance as something both inside and separate from the whole in the layout of the detailed stage directions that appear on the printed page. A clearer understanding of the aforementioned efforts by Strauss to establish the dance as a separate action from the rest of the opera can be found by examining the original German text that appeared in the 1905 libretto. I have included the relevant excerpt below. A contemporary English translation follows the German:

Salome tanzen.

Die Musikanten beginnen einen wilden Tanz. Salome, zuerst noch bewegungslos, richtet sich hoch auf und gibt den Musikanten ein Zeichen, worauf der wilde Rhythmus sofort abgedämpft wird und in eine saft wiegende Weise überleitet. Salome tanzt sodann den »Tanz der sieben Schleier«.

Sie scheint einen Augenblick zu ermatten, jetzt rafft sie sich wie neubeschwingt auf. Sie verweilt einen Augenblick in visionärer Haltung an der Cisterne, in der Jochanaan gefangen gehalten wird; dann stürzt sie vor und zu Herodes' Füßen.  

Salome’s Dance

The musicians begin a wild dance. Salome stands motionless. Salome rises to her full height and makes a sign to the musicians. They subdue the wild rhythm instantly and lead on to a soft and swaying tune. Salome dances the Dance of the Seven Veils.

68 Richard Strauss, Hedwig Lachmann, and Oscar Wilde, Salome: Drama in 1 Aufzuge nach Oskar Wilde’s gleichmagier Dichtung, (Berlin: Adolph Fürstner, 1905).
At the climax of the dance Salome seems to faint for a moment, then she pulls herself together as if with new strength. Salome remains for an instant in a visionary attitude near the cistern where Jokanaan is kept prisoner, then she throws herself at Herod’s feet.69

As we can see, Strauss decides to place the phrase “Salome tanzen” on its own line separate and above the rest of the stage directions. The dance becomes, in this way, a “play within a play”. The description of Salome’s dance that follows the title provide a detailed description of the performance, something Wilde refused to do. The text lays out a general choreography and style of Salome’s performance before Herod and his guests. This likely was Strauss’s way of ensuring the dancer’s gestures corresponded clearly with the musical changes. The overall content and metatheatrical presentation of Salome’s dance creates a clear, self-contained dramatic arc for Salome’s performance. It is a paradigm that entertainers will use in their small form variety acts in the years following the premiere of the opera.

Beyond simply excerpting the dance from the larger text and in doing so providing a paradigm for subsequent performances, Strauss also imbues the choreography with certain modernist traits that will be picked up by subsequent artists in the various iterations of the Salome archetype that will appear first in Europe and then in North America. These particular characteristics link Salome’s theatricality to modernité, specifically its neuropathologized tendencies. The extreme and uncontainable qualities of the dance have clear correspondences to the medical and social scientific discourse of the period that sought to contain or eliminate behaviors and characteristics it deemed most threatening to the trajectory of western culture.

Strauss indicates the uncontainable energy of Salome’s performance right at the beginning of his stage directions. Immediately following the title, the text reads: “The musicians begin a wild dance.” The piece starts with a feverish musical energy, which Salome, calculating the best way to manipulate Herod’s desire, quickly reigns in with a single gesture. The dance is to build slowly, becoming increasingly chaotic and “wild” again as it journeys toward collapse. As the music rises in speed, density, and volume, the audience begins to witness Salome’s body’s own destabilizing and destructive potential. The music that supports her performance echoes this self-deconstruction. In the final minute and a half of the piece, fast-paced, frenetic tones are dispersed among different parts of the orchestra leading to a profound sense of disorientation and anxiety. Salome’s consciousness begins to falter in this final segment of the performance; she appears to be slipping into a delusional state—all while the music intensifies. In the final moment, Salome cannot sustain the energy coursing through her and the music. The dance concludes dynamically with Salome collapsing at the feet of the King.

The discordant nature of Strauss’s music when intertwined with Salome’s collapsing physicality on stage have clear correspondences to modernité’s own unstable and fracturing aspects. Salome’s performance and the music that accompanies it are in many ways aesthetic manifestations of the modern experience with its fragmentation, over-stimulation, and excess. The traits exhibited on stage and echoed in the world beyond the theatre stand in strong contrast to the rationality, containment, and moderation that modernist culture supposedly privileges. In this way, Salome’s dance, with its increasingly erratic gestures and rhythms, presents itself as a collection of threatening forces. Her final collapse is the culmination of this unfolding chaos; her disintegration, like the collapse of gestures inside the modern that Agamben describes, fractures a field of meaning that had long created a repressive illusion of wholeness.
The fracturing and discordant potentiality of the Salome dance was not only apparent in Strauss’s composition but also in the early performances of his work. In the Dresden opening, as well as in premieres in other cities, including the New York production at the Met, the artist singing the part of Salome regularly stepped out of the role at the point of the dance. The singer would be replaced by a trained dancer. When the dancer was finished performing, she would surreptitiously slip out of the role and the performer who was credited with the performance would resume the character. This choice was, in many respects, a practical one: few opera singers at the time due to their size and lack of physical training were skilled enough to execute the dance as it was imagined. Directors found innovative ways to swap the performers. These production choices served to further set the dance off from the rest of the narrative. Not only did the action have to pause in some way for the switch to occur, but once the dance began, the audience would likely be struck by how markedly different the body of the dancing Salome must have been from the one that had moved across the stage up until that point and would return later.

The New York premiere of Strauss’s *Salome* reveals one of the most direct examples of how this doubling of Salome in performance helped to create solo acts on the variety stage. In the first Metropolitan Opera production, Olive Frensted sung the title role. The dance, however, was performed by Bianca Froelich, a prima ballerina with the company. It would, ironically, be Froelich’s dancing that would be the only aspect of the original production to survive. After the board closed the production and all efforts to move the project elsewhere failed, Froelich negotiated contracts with several variety spaces, most notably the Lincoln Square Variety Theatre, to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils as a solo piece. Her connection to Strauss’s
production was actually part of her appeal and the theatre’s used the connection in their marketing.70

In taking her seven veils dance to the variety circuit, Froelich became one of many performers in the early 1900s who explored the archetype in solo performances largely centered on the dance. Together they created the landscape by which many spectators would encounter the archetype of the dancing girl often for the first time. The nature of these performances would, therefore, speak to the way the archetype could be used to express a contemporary condition in a popular format. They were concentrated cultural locations where audiences could engage the complexities of modernist cultures on a visceral and sensorial level.

European artists offered U.S. entertainers paradigms for how Salome could be presented in small-form solo performances that integrated many of the contradictions of modernité Wilde and Strauss had expressed in their longer works. The Paris-based U.S. dancer Loïë Fuller made one of the first attempts at representing Salome’s dance in a solo performance in March 1895 at the Comédie-Parisienne. Since Fuller’s project preceded both Strauss’s opera and the premiere of Wilde’s play in Paris, it cannot be directly tied to these longer works. She, in fact, relied more on the Biblical sources. Described as a “pantomime lyrique,” the piece appeared to avoid the kind of uncontainability and hysteria identified with later movement-based performances of Salome and her dance. Fuller’s 1905 representation of Salome was not a success. Davina Caddy described it as a “benign” precursor to her much more ostentatious and “demonic” performance twelve years later at the Théâtre des Arts. This second performance, titled La Trágédie de Salomé, reflected more aspects of what the archetype had become in its modernist form. With original music

composed by Florent Schmitt, Caddy explains, “the score dazzled with fortissimos, jarring themes, scalic runs, harp arpeggiations, trills and turns. ‘Phantasmagorical’ certainly.” Fuller performed her dance in a costume adorned with over 4,000 feathers and employed hundreds of lamps and projectors. Salome’s dance that had for Fuller once been a lyrical expression of spiritual struggle became a location for exposing the electric atmosphere and uncontainability of modern life. While this second Salome-themed production was also not critically successful, it does reveal the way in which the Salome archetype changed and how modern solo performers adapted their work to her transformation.

The Canadian-born, London-based performer Maud Allan stands as one of the most popular and influential Salome performers of the early twentieth century. In 1906, just one year after Strauss’s opera premiered, she began touring her *The Vision of Salome* across Europe. A solo performance, Maud included in Salome’s dance of the seven veils the gesture of Salome kissing the Baptist’s decapitated head, which Heine and Wilde had included in their modernist representations of Salome. (The head was made with papier mâché.) As Caddy explains, Allan’s act contained a level of titillating “depravity.” Her “full lips, dark hair, blue-green eyes, pale skin and shapely figure” as well as the “unbridled sexuality” she embodied came to define the archetype. This was especially true as other performers, desiring a similar level of success, copied Allan technique and the act’s basic structure and design. Allan’s influence on New York variety theatre, in particular, would come largely through the efforts of U.S. performer Gertrude Hoffmann, who traveled to London to essentially “learn” Allan’s act. I will discuss in detail in

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72 Caddy, 52.
the following chapter Hoffmann’s interpretation of Allan’s act and the influence it had on New York Salomania and the neurological culture of modernité.

The success and nature of Maud Allan’s act reveals much about what the Salome archetype had become by the turn of the twentieth century. While still broadly defined by her Biblical past and the martyrdom of the Baptist, Salome had become by the time she arrived in New York inextricably linked to an expressive, highly sexualized, “maniacal” dance. The archetype was by 1907 concentrated in a form that was easily circulated to an array of locations. Given the dance’s separation from the original narrative, artists were granted significant freedom to take the general framework of the dancing girl in new and often extreme directions. These aesthetic choices corresponded with the intense cultural condition in which performers and spectators found themselves.

Modernist culture’s deep contradictions, the way its narratives of social and physiological normativity hit against celebrations of neurological difference in a U.S. urban culture, can be found in the many New York Salome performances of the early twentieth century. A study of Salomania in New York from 1907–1909 discloses a performative landscape where entertainments intersected with medical models that pathologized neuropsychological difference. The Salomes that regularly appeared on variety stages across the city in keeping with Agamben’s concept of the collapse of gestures fractured a field of meaning that once privileged unity, rationality, and containment. The New York Salome phenomenon in this way extended the work of European fin-de-siècle artists, who had by the close of the nineteenth century significantly reimagined the archetype of the Biblical dancing girl for a throttling modernist culture.

In the following chapter, I will examine the iterations of the Salome archetype found in New York variety entertainments in the early twentieth century. I study this phenomenon of New
York Salomania in light of the city’s own struggles with national ideas about progress and
degeneration, rationality and irrationality, health and impairment. Weaving together a variety of
responses to the Salome figure from performers, critics, and audiences, I disclose the power of
the dancing girl archetype to illuminate modernité’s deep contradictions, specifically those
relating to questions of corporeal difference. Two artists receive particular attention in the final
two sections of the chapter: the dancers Gertrude Hoffmann and La Sylphe. In these sections, I
connect the two dancers’ performances of Salome to two specific neuropathologized conditions:
hysteria and epilepsy. I intersect the work of these Salome entertainers with models of distinct
neurological impairments with the objective of exposing new pathways for rethinking modernist
narratives that privilege neuropsychological normativity.
Chapter Three

New York Salomania 1907–1909: From Disavowal to Disclosure

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I provided a detailed portrait of modernité’s neurological nature, explaining how the Salome archetype’s expression in variety entertainments worked within that mode of perception. Introducing Agamben’s concepts of gesture and potentiality, I advanced a framework for approaching the Salome performances that highlighted their capacity for disclosing modernité’s paradoxical relationships to still-lingering paradigms of neuropsychological normativity and difference. This approach served to position the Salome entertainments as key locations in investigating modernist ideologies and their legacies. With this political potential of the Salome acts effectively established, in the second chapter I traced the historical conditions and cultural processes that contributed to the construction of the nervous and distinctively modern Salome archetype. I began by explaining how the iteration of Salome that ultimately appeared on the New York stages beginning in 1907 assumed its neuropathological traits. Looking to nineteenth-century degeneration theory and fin-de-siècle cultural critiques of decadence, I considered how modernist socio-scientific and aesthetic discourse imbued the Salome archetype with certain non-normative neuropsychological attributes. With Salome’s neuropathologized nature established, I concluded the chapter by discussing the archetype’s European circulation at the turn of the twentieth century and its ultimate transmission to the United States.

The preceding chapters provide a necessary foundation for conducting an analysis of New York iterations of the Salome archetype for how they disclose modernité’s neurological paradoxes and, in turn, its capacity for rethinking modernist ideologies around normativity and difference. In this third and final chapter I perform this analysis by looking to how the Salome
acts presented modernité’s contradictions inside the unique context of early-twentieth-century New York variety and vaudeville theatre events. Diverse and fast-moving arenas of sensational entertainments, the vaudeville and variety houses across New York City provided spaces for the Salome entertainers to explore the United States’s particular version of the neurological condition of modernité. New York Salome performers along with the popular and critical responses they prompted provide sites for interrogating a modernist urban culture preoccupied with neurological impairment. The many physical and emotional gestures they performed in the Salome entertainments mirrored the concentrated sensorial and fragmented responses of individuals to the intense conditions of modern life. These performance events when examined as part of a single historical phenomenon of Salomania can be approached, therefore, for the ways they illuminate a broader cultural terrain. By disclosing the modern landscape, exposing its cracks and tensions, the Salome performance can contribute to the destabilization of ideologies that have long privileged paradigms of normativity. In this way, they can serve as entry points in a longer process of rethinking modernity’s narratives about impairment, disability, and corporeal difference.

Similar to my analysis of the European roots of the Salome archetype’s paradoxical relationship to neurological difference, in this chapter I focus attention on cultural debates around progress and degeneration that were circulating in the United States at the start of the twentieth century. Highlighting the medical and sociological responses to questions regarding the trajectory of western modernity, the New York iterations of Salome in variety entertainment act as cultural locations where the nature of these contentious conversations and their possibilities for rethinking narratives of modernist culture can be engaged. I begin the chapter with a portrait of one way in which the progress-degeneration debate was functioning on a national level and
the role the medical sciences played in attempts at its resolution. I then turn to the Salome phenomenon in New York to examine how contradictory narratives about neuropathology generated by this national discourse manifested in popular variety performance. My analysis of New York Salomania focuses first on the general responses to the dancing girl—providing a chronicle of her growing popularity in the city—and then turns to specific instances of Salome performers whom I see exemplifying contradictory neurological traits. The performers I examine are arguably two of the most successful of the U.S. Salome dancers: Gertrude Hoffmann and La Sylphe. My analysis of Hoffmann focuses on her engagement with the medical model of hysteria in her Salome act “A Vision of Salome” while my study of La Sylphe examines for how the “contortionist” dancer embodied symptoms of the neurological condition of epilepsy in her piece “Remorse of Salome.”

Disavowing Salome and the Paradoxes of Progress

Before beginning my analysis of the New York Salome phenomenon, I turn to an essay by James Bryce, “What Is Progress?”, that appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in August 1907, just six months after the Metropolitan Opera closed its production of Strauss’s Salomé. While Bryce, a New-York-born engineer and inventor, at no point engages the Salome archetype in his piece, his words are valuable for the insight they provide into the paradoxical cultural landscape of the United States at the point in which the modern Salome archetype was making its first major appearance. The question Bryce engages and the contradictions he confronts have a direct correspondence to the progress-degeneration dynamic that helped to define European modernité in the fin de siècle. I use Bryce’s observations to move the discussion about modernité’s nervous internal contradictions to the context of an early-twentieth-century urban center in the United States, specifically to New York City where, as discussed in previous chapters, iterations of
Salome would find particular popularity from 1907–1909. While New York City in the early twentieth century certainly shared many of the cultural conditions of fin de siècle European cities such as Paris and London, its status as the largest U.S. metropolis that was at times barely containing unprecedented surges in industry, technology, consumerism, and immigration demands a discussion of its unique dynamics of modernité. Bryce’s essay provides an entryway into that discussion.

Bryce uses the opportunity of his essay to address what he sees as one of the most complex and pressing questions of the contemporary moment. He begins by citing what he sees as the culture’s then century-old “belief in human progress,” which had presumptuously relied upon the west’s “rapid growth of population, [its] establishment of free government . . . and above all [its] unprecedentedly swift march of scientific discovery” as evidence of some collective journey forward. Bryce questions the soundness of such a monolithic faith in the trajectory of progress because of what he essentially sees as the argument’s lack of “scientific character.” Darwin’s “doctrine of advance through the survival of the fittest,” Bryce explains, has given people a false sense of a scientific basis for their ideologies. In this process, the “pessimists,” who recognize the contradictions in the progress narrative, have become a “dispirited minority.” In that marginalization, the real debate on the nature of progress is lost.¹

In response to this unresolved tension regarding the direction of western culture, Bryce dares to undertake a “humbler and more limited investigation.” He seeks in his essay to identify “the meaning and contents of the idea of Progress itself, and of the relations of each kind of Progress to other kinds.”² Bryce maintains that the only viable conversation about Progress is

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² Ibid, 147.
one that considers a network of perspectives. His project then is not an answer to the question posed in his essay’s title, but rather an interrogation of it.

Bryce’s examination of contemporary theories of progress requires a confrontation with several of the existing self-proclaimed scientific paradigms, which he groups into two major categories: those focusing on the physical sciences and those looking to social or material conditions. Bryce does, for the most part, effectively achieve his objective in laying out the many routes that have been taken either to justify or to condemn progress through these different approaches. He successfully shows where they cross over and where they diverge, in the process leading the reader not to any opinion on the different routes taken, but indicating how they can be more effectively grounded in a practice of the scientific inquiry that the culture claims to privilege.

While, as stated above, Bryce does not necessarily advocate a single scientific approach, he does end his essay with a deep focus on the contemporary disciplines of science that look at how human physiology intersects with social conditions. The long excerpt from the conclusion of Bryce’s essay that I have included below provides a clear explanation of this link between the scientific and the sociological, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, was an essential thread in modernist conversations about western progress and degeneration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bryce writes:

Some physiologists tell us that the conditions of modern life in the most highly civilized communities create a strain upon the nervous system which makes people fretful, capricious, restless, or perhaps despondent. They point to the increase of lunacy, to the increase of divorce, and to the increase of suicide as evidencing the results of this nervous strain. These ominous symptoms will not appear to most of us to outweigh the general impression we have that the sum of enjoyment and cheerfulness is slightly greater now than it was a century ago, or even in our own boyhood. Still, they are symptoms to be noted, and the fact that science puts its finger on phenomena in modern life which are new and which
may, if they go on increasing, affect the physical and moral constitution of man, suggests the reflection that we may still have much to learn upon the subject.\(^3\)

The “symptoms” of this intense relationship between human physiology—in particular its neurological make up—and changing social conditions in the first decade of the twentieth century were, for Bryce, something “to be noted.”

Even a brief introduction to Bryce’s essay, when examined in light of the previous chapter’s discussion of the European construction of the modern archetype of Salome and its capacity for disclosing modernité’s potentiality, suggests that the questions USonians were asking themselves regarding the consequences and benefits of western progress were not starkly different from those being posed by European medical and social scientists a few decades earlier. As Robin Schultz explains, the United States was a “latecomer” to the decline-progress conversation: “[H]aving only recently joined the ranks of the urban industrial prosperity, white upper- and middle-class Americans were loath to consider the fruits of their progress as anything but salutary.”\(^4\) The New York arrival of Salome, a figure replete with contradictions around neurological differences and modernité, forced those that encountered her to engage with such ideas. The ways in which they did so would certainly change as her presence in U.S. culture increased. As the archetype permeated more and more performative spaces in New York City from 1907–1909, it became an increasingly active force in the generation of the already neurological culture out of which it was emerging. Understanding the ways in which the Salome archetype incorporated U.S. modernist culture’s nervous paradoxes into its frame is essential to

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\(^3\) Bryce, 155 (emphasis mine).

fully appreciating the role these historical Salome acts can play in disclosing modernité’s potentiality for rethinking paradigms of neurological normativity and difference.

To begin my discussion of the U.S. Salome phenomenon and its capacity to disclose modernité’s potentiality, I return to the *Evening Telegram*’s January 19, 1907 page of dancing Salomes discussed in the previous chapter. Salome’s capacity for disclosing the contradictions within U.S. modernité around questions of progress and decline comes into view through an examination of the page’s layout. When the *Evening Telegram* dedicated an entire page to the upcoming Salome productions, it could not have known which of the three would prove the most commercially successful (i.e., *Salomy Jane* at the Liberty Theatre) or the most historically compelling (i.e., Strauss’s *Salome* at the Metropolitan Opera). Ironically, the paper’s layout foregrounded the production that would prove the least remarkable of the Salome-themed shows opening that month: Marlowe and Sothern’s staging of Sudermann’s *John the Baptist*. It did so by essentially organizing the page around the words and images of Julia Marlowe, who played Salome in the New-York premiere of Sudermann’s play. Marlowe’s essay, titled “Why Is Jeanne d’Arc Like John the Baptist,” occupies the center of the page along with two photos of her: one in her then-current role as Salome; and the other, a smaller professional portrait out of character. [See Figure 8.]

Marlowe’s essay is an essentially dry and hollow comparison of the two historical figures of John the Baptist and Joan of Arc. (Both characters were the subjects of dramas in the repertoire that Marlowe and Sothern were touring that season.)

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5 The *Evening Telegram* lists the full Marlowe/Sothern repertoire as the following: Hermann Sudermann’s *John the Baptist*; Percy MacKaye’s *Jeanne d’Arc*; Gabriele d’Annunzio’s *The Daughter of Jorio* as well as his *Francesca da Rimini*; H.W. Boynton’s *Guenevere*; Gerhardt Hauptmann’s *The Sunken Bell*; Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Joizelle*; and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night, As You Like It*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. 
consider the two religious figures as fanatical siblings, bonded by their shared roles as agents of spiritual delivery and “forerunners of national freedom.” The Baptist’s journey, however, is for Marlowe the one worthiest of her nation’s attention. It is through his place at the “crossroads of human events,” explains the actress, that “civilization’s” potential for moral advancement can be seen most clearly.\(^6\) For Marlowe, John’s vision of the coming Messiah reveals the necessary path to progress. Through an understanding of the Baptist’s bravery in resisting Roman oppression, the United States can, according to the actress, come to understand its necessary trajectory and the responsibilities it has to the general advancement of western culture.

The photo of Marlowe that appears as an inset to the essay underscores the seriousness of her argument. It is a professional portrait of the actress, in which she stands tall, formally dressed, without a smile, looking slightly away from the camera. The fact she is represented out of character supports the idea that these are her words; it is her voice that is speaking through the text. The reader should not confuse her with the characters she represents, since such figures may or may not may not support the ideologies she espouses.

Though Marlowe stresses the importance of the Baptist and his narrative of martyrdom to her own vision of national progress, at no point in the piece does Marlowe reference the figure of Salome. Indeed, the dancing girl is conspicuously missing from her text despite the key role the character plays in the story of John’s execution. Salome’s absence from the essay is even more striking when we consider the fact that Marlowe was rehearsing Salome for her and Sothern’s upcoming production. From this perspective, the actress’s exclusion of Salome in her narrative

disavows her own artistic contribution to the theatrical project the *Evening Telegram* is for all intents and purposes promoting through its inclusion of Marlowe’s essay.

The *Evening Telegram* never allows Marlowe, however, to effectively erase Salome from her argument. Marlowe’s account of the Baptist story is juxtaposed by a large image of the actress in the role of Salome. The outsized photograph overshadowing the smaller portrait embedded in the article sits just above the essay’s title. Wearing a gauzy, loose-fitting dress, adorned with necklaces and bracelets, Marlowe is shown dancing on toe, her hands raised above her head. Her face is turned slightly to her left, eyes half closed. The photo captures the actress in a moment of heightened physical expressivity. The sensuality and eroticism represented in the image belie the cerebral and moral voice she uses to advance her essay’s argument.

In many respects the image of Marlowe resembles the European visual explorations of Salome we see emerging during the fin de siècle, as I discussed in the previous chapter. She, like Salome in Moreau’s paintings and drawings, is captured in the midst of her erotic dance; her arms extended freely; eyes in soft focus directed at no distinct object. There is an uncontainability to her expression that gestures toward some alluring irrational interiority. This image, like the work of the decadent artists themselves, challenges that narrative of western progress tying a vision of an advancing culture to a telos of Christian morality and Enlightenment rationalism. Marlowe must omit this Salome from her discussion, because to include her, to recognize her power and influence in the Baptist story, would be to disclose the cracks in her progress narrative and illuminate modernity’s internal threats and potential for decline.

The *Evening Telegram*’s treatment of Marlowe’s essay on its Salome page serves to highlight an important moment in this preliminary phase of New York Salomania: it shows the
Biblical dancing girl’s potentially disruptive power. At this point in 1907, the Met controversy had not yet unfolded; it was still days away. Salome was not yet filling the stages of variety and vaudeville houses, which themselves had become sites of potential disruption for the way they challenged the aesthetics of the legitimate stage and democratized entertainments. The historical encounter with the *Evening Telegram*’s Salome page illuminates what Marlowe refused to acknowledge. It reveals through juxtapostition the archetype’s capacity for holding within its frame contradictory impulses with respect to notions of progress and decline. The paper’s treatment of the January Salome performances, therefore, serves as a point of access for understanding the important role the dancing girl can play in investigating the dynamics of modernité.

In the following section, I will provide a genealogy of the emergence of the popular modern Salome entertainments in early-twentieth-century New York, placing particular focus on how the phenomenon of the dancing girl reflected and contributed to cultural tensions surrounding neuropsychological impairment and disease. This shift toward the pathological is, as explicated in the previous chapter, an outgrowth of the broader progress-degeneration paradox made visible in Marlowe’s response to Salome. Looking to discourse that condemned Salome variety performances because of their apparent celebration of pathologized neurological and psychological behaviors alongside commentary that celebrated her multiplicity and corporeal non-normativity reveals the deep contradictions in the culture. My description of a contested modernist landscape preoccupied with issues of neuropsychological difference provides the basis for a more detailed discussion at the conclusion of this chapter of individual Salome entertainers, specifically Gertrude Hoffmann and La Sylphe, who embodied these conflicts within their performances.
Salome Steps on the Variety Stage

The previous chapter closed with a brief discussion of how European theatrical explorations of Salome circulated across the continent and Great Britain before ultimately being imported to the United States by performers and managers anxious to capitalize on the dancing girl’s disruptive power. In the following section, I will investigate how various components of New York Salomania used the paradigm of the nervous and degenerate Salome. I will consider the ways this affected a U.S. urban landscape steeped in its own narrative of neurological difference and modernité. I will provide first a brief overview of the emergence of Salomania in New York following the Met’s closure of Strauss’s *Salome*. This is followed by a discussion of the more vibrant year of 1908, when Salomania was, by all accounts, officially “diagnosed” first by the *New York Times* and then subsequently by other papers across the country, all of whom employed the term regularly to characterize the unprecedented U.S. interest in Salome.

In early 1907, when Salome first appeared on Broadway stages, Oscar Wilde and his “degenerate” persona were still strongly associated with the archetype of the Biblical dancing girl. As a result, the figure of Salome, as discussed in the previous chapter, had woven within it the culture of European decadence and neuro-psychological degeneration. The early performers of Salome in New York, such as Marlowe and the Metropolitan Opera’s Olive Fremstad, when asked to explain their relationship to Wilde’s text and his construction of Salome, used a familiar language of illness and disease to describe their revulsion to the playwright and his character. Admitting to having never seen the play performed, only reading it once in French “four years ago,” Marlowe describes Wilde’s Salome as a “morbid abnormal creature” (emphasis mine). In contrast, the Salome in Sudermann’s play, Marlowe assures audiences, has nothing to do with
the aberration Wilde created. “Sudermann’s Salome,” Marlowe states, “is the biblical Salome.”

In this simple statement, Marlowe roots a paradigm for female health and normativity in Christian scripture. By extension, by placing the scripture in sharp contrast to the Irish dramatist and his text, she endeavors to discredit and de-legitimize the decadent perspective.

Fremstad even more aggressively identifies Wilde and his Salome with disease and dysfunction. She explicitly refers to Salome as “a degenerate,” confessing that “[w]hen she first saw ‘Salome’ in Cologne it nauseated” her. She was “absolutely sickened by it. It was horrible, disgusting.” Her statement is punctuated with an expressive “Ugh!”

Fremstad does not, however, even mention the Biblical text, thereby removing any reference to Christian morality from the conversation. The discussion remains centered on her own personal, visceral response to the work that, as the following paragraph will explain, she must essentially overcome to effectively perform the role.

While Marlowe feels compelled to detach her Salome from Wilde’s, based on the fact she was performing in Sudermann’s not Wilde’s play, Fremstad cannot do the same. Since she is playing the title role in Strauss’s opera, whose libretto is directly based on Wilde’s text, she must reconcile her willingness to embody this “degenerate” character with her indictment of the source material upon which it based. For Fremstad, it is Strauss’s music that redeems the diseased and corrupt aspects of the play; it “justifies the performance.” While in Fremstad’s words, Wilde’s play is “small, always harping on the sensational and the ugly,” the opera, in contrast, “soars on the wings of poetry.”

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
music, the corrupted, degenerate body-mind of Salome transcends its baseness to reach a higher spiritual level. This representation of Salome demands, Fremstad remarks, a particular kind of performer, one who possesses “the strength of a woman, the tricks of a sire, the agility of an Oriental and the naivete [sic] of a child.”

Based on Fremstad’s set of standards, the performer assuming the role must have characteristics at odds with those with which Wilde endows his Salome. Controlled power, physical dexterity, and the purity of youth contrast with the uncontainability and lust of the dancing girl. Fremstad’s views on Salome, and the difficult task she has taken on in representing her in Strauss’s opera, reveal how the contradictions inherent in the Salome archetype extend to the performer-character relationship. When Salome moves to the variety stage, this paradox will take on new meaning, since in this popular context the intersection of the performer’s persona with the character becomes an essential part of the entertainment.

Marlowe’s and Fremstad’s views on Wilde and the European archetype of Salome he helped construct reveal how deeply the narrative of disease and degeneracy had penetrated the modern archetype of the dancing girl by the time she arrived in New York in 1907. In the months and years that follow, as Salome acts spread across the city and were adjusted to meet the tastes and desires of New Yorkers, however, the archetype would take on new contours and attributes while never leaving behind its degenerate past. The neuropathologized traits that had come to identify Salome with modernité’s complex and contradictory nature within the context of fin de siècle Europe found continued life in New York’s variety houses and the city’s own culture of decadence and neuropsychological degeneration.

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10 Ibid.
The infatuation with Salome that would define New York Salomania did not arrive immediately in the wake of the Metropolitan Opera’s controversial closure of Strauss’s opera. Instead, over the course of 1907, small attempts to capitalize on the controversy were made, but nothing that could appropriately be identified as a clear spark for the incredible phenomenon of popular interest in the dancing girl that unfolded? While in Europe Maud Allan was redefining the landscape of Salome with a well-crafted, commercially successful, and aesthetic “vision” of the Salome archetype, in the States the efforts to perform Salome and her dance were smaller and tailored to the audiences of variety entertainments aimed at burlesquing the politics and culture of the city. As Toni Bentley explains, the “light-weight tongue-and-cheek tone” of these U.S. entertainments and their audiences suited a very “American” exploration of the Salome archetype. The Biblical dancing girl, set free from the high-brow entertainments of opera and drama, was by 1907 “a free agent,” who would become in the following year a vehicle for a range of performers and the spectrum of audiences they would entertain.11

Several historical narratives of Salomania in New York have suggested that Bianca Froelich, the Met’s première danseuse who performed the “Dance of the Seven Veils” for Olive Fremstad, began repeating her excerpt from the opera at vaudeville houses around the city directly after the Met closed its production. Mary Simonson maintains that, in the wake of the Met Salome controversy, “audiences were forced to look for their Salome elsewhere.” Fortunately, she writes, “They quickly found her. Bianca Froelich . . . immediately began performing her opera choreography at the Lincoln Square Variety Theater before wildly

enthusiastic audiences.”¹² Bentley offers a similar narrative, albeit with some different shading in her characterization of audiences’ reaction to the opera’s closing. She writes: “After decades of literary prudery, America was unprepared for the salacious, unrepentant Salome of Wilde and Strauss. Froelich, however, was not about to waste her hard work. Banned from the legitimate stage, she simply took her show to Lincoln Square Variety Theatre and thus initiated the craze of ‘Salomania.’”¹³ Identifying Froelich’s quick exit from the Met to perform the Salome dance on a vaudeville stage as the spark for New York Salomania is echoed in George Dorris’s historiography. He writes, “[F]ollowing the sensational production of Richard Strauss’s Salome given a single performance at the Met in 1907, Bianca Froehlich, its ballerina, presented her ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’ at a New York variety theater, leading to a rush of Salome dancers.”¹⁴ Dorris goes on to cite a collection of performers, including Gertrude Hoffman, Isadora Duncan, and Bessie Clayton, who he suggests followed Froelich’s lead in performing the Dance of the Seven Veils in high-, middle-, and lowbrow venues across New York City.¹⁵

While there would certainly be strong arguments for why Froelich should have begun presenting her work shortly after the controversy unfolded—she had the opportunity to immediately capitalize on the scandal—there is no primary-source evidence to support the above claims. All indications suggest, instead, that Froelich did not begin performing the dance excerpted from the opera until fall 1908, after many of the now well-known Salome performers—including Gertrude Hoffmann and La Sylphe—had already stirred popular interest

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¹³ Bentley, 28.
¹⁵ Ibid.
in the form. The first announcement in the *New York Times* of Froelich’s appearance in a variety theatre does not come until August of 1908. Acknowledging her long-time affiliation with the Met, the paper reports, “From Norwalk, Conn., comes the news that yet another Salome is to appear before the audience of New York. Salome No. 17 as [sic] is to be Bianca Froelich, for five years première danseuse of the Metropolitan Opera House.” Further evidence that Froelich delayed moving her version of the dance to a variety stage until 1908 exists in the fact that the dancer was regularly employed by the Metropolitan Opera through April 1908, consistently performing in its productions in New York as well as across the country. The Met archives indicate from late January 1907, when Strauss’s *Salome* closed, until April 18, 1908, Froelich appeared in fifty-one performances that included Bizet’s *Carmen*, Verdi’s *Aida*, Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine*, and Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* in cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee.17

Beyond the need for historical accuracy in our accounts of Salomania in order to have as clear a picture as possible of the events that comprised it, misrepresenting Froelich’s place in the timeline skews our understanding of the rhythm by which Salomania in New York took hold. Rather than a proliferation of Salomes after the dramatic closing of the Met production, we see instead in 1907 only a gradual unfolding of interest in the dancing girl. While the popularity of the “cooch” dances that emerged after the World’s Fair has been tied to the Salomania phenomenon (as discussed in the dissertation’s introduction), in 1907 this was still a distinct form from the Salome performances that will eventually explode in popularity in 1908.

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While Froelich may not have been performing her dance on variety stages in 1907, there were other performers and managers clearly making efforts to profit from the Met controversy very soon after it occurred. One of the earliest post-Metropolitan-Opera, Salome-themed acts was reportedly presented at the Murray Hill Theatre on January 27, 1907, as part of Rush and Weber’s “Dainty Duchess” burlesque show. It added a Salome component just five days after Strauss’s opera was shut down. While reviewers did not supply a clear description of the performance, we do know it was a short solo act that focused specifically on the Dance of the Seven Veils. Described as “hurriedly” put together, it was added to a list of variety pieces that included songs from comic operas, a skit involving a “prop dog,” and an acrobatic routine.\(^{18}\) The Salome act was reportedly given just two hours of rehearsal by Rush, and the dancer hired to perform it—identified only as Spiria—was replaced after the first night.\(^{19}\)

The same week Weber and Rush quickly added a Dance of the Seven Veils act to their “Dainty Duchess” show, Keith and Proctor’s Fifth Avenue Theater featured another Salome performance: a duo act showcasing the pantomimist Pilar-Moran and the singer Baroness von Elsner. Mirroring the staging of previous productions of the opera, Pilar-Moran and von Elsner split the role of Salome between them, with Pilar-Moran performing the veil dance and von Elsner singing. The act must have experienced some popularity as Keith and Proctor announced in Variety that it would be extended for a second week.\(^{20}\)

During the months of 1907, Salome’s popularity began stretching beyond Manhattan, extending across the bridge to Brooklyn, where she became the subject of an act at Coney Island. Washington Post reporter Franklin Fyles, attending one performance, observed that at last “Oscar

\(^{18}\) “Dainty Duchess,” Variety, February 2, 1907: 12.

\(^{19}\) “Staged Dance in Two Hours,” Variety, February 2, 1907: 2.

\(^{20}\) Advertisement, Variety, February 2, 1907: 10.
Wilde’s play is free for anyone to use.” In this arena, audiences from across the city could see for themselves “Herod on His Throne” and Salome in the throes of her “dance of the seven denuding veils.” Recounting an exchange with a fellow spectator, Fyles points out with humor the populist appeal of the performance. He writes: “Next to me sat a man from the country. ‘What do you think of her?’ he asked. ‘Well,’ I replied, evasively, ‘she certainly is a sinuous creature.’ ‘Sinnerous!’” he exclaimed. ‘Gosh, I think she’s blamed wicked.’”

The Salome act of 1907 most cited by historians for its influence on the Salomania phenomenon was undoubtedly Mlle. Dazie’s Salome dance in Ziegfeld’s first Follies show at the Jardin de Paris. A revue organized around an imagined journey of John Smith and Pocahontas, the Follies of 1907 featured a collection of musical skits that burlesqued contemporary events and entertainments. Mlle. Dazie (a.k.a. Daisy Peterkin) performed three individual dances, one of which was a burlesqued version of Salome’s Dance of the Seven Veils. Similar to the Pilar-Milan and Baroness von Elsner act, Mlle. Dazie appeared with the singer Emma Carus. Described by Ethan Mordden as “a belter built like a valkyrie,” Carus peformed “a coon version of ‘(Come Down) Salomy Jane,’” after which Dazie entered “wearing the same costume as Carus.” Dazie then, flocked by a small chorus dressed in peacock-feathered dresses, performed her version of the Dance of the Seven Veils. To boost the theatricality of Mlle. Dazie’s performance even more, Ziegfeld added a humorous bit to the end. As Mordden describes the event, a man purportedly “ran down the aisle to shout that the cops were raiding the joint.”

squad subsequently appeared in response to the call before revealing they were part of the show. They then climbed onto the stage and accompanied Dazie for the end of the act.

The popularity of Ziegfeld’s first Follies certainly helped to establish Mlle. Dazie as one of the leading 1907 Salome performers of the variety stage. The Follies of 1907 played over seventy times in New York City before touring to Washington D.C., Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Mlle. Dazie’s greatest impact on the Salome phenomenon, however, would come not through her individual performance in the Follies but through the school she would open a year later with her husband/manager. In classes held on the rooftop of the Jardin de Paris, Mlle. Dazie trained young dancers in the art of her Salome dance. Her “school for Salomes” was reportedly so successful that by late summer of 1908, when Salomania was truly taking hold, she was producing on average 150 Salome dancers per month.  

The interest New York audiences showed in Salome in 1907 did not come close to the infatuation they would have for the dancing girl by the middle of the following year. The acts performed in 1907 are, however, still extremely significant to the construction of the New York Salomania narrative. Their importance lies in the fact that during this time we see the groundwork being laid not only for the full-throated phenomenon that would follow but also for the transformation of the modern Salome archetype from a primarily European construction to one born out of and reflective of the unique conditions of an urban, U.S. cultural landscape. Salome, through her various but not yet prosperous appearances on variety stages in the city in 1907, established herself as an attractive vehicle for engaging with the vagaries of modernité. She presented herself in large-scale revues that appealed to audiences’ desire for spectacle that

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the relatively new arena of Broadway very much tried to satisfy. Likewise, she found life on
stages in the new world of U.S. popular amusements. These were entertainments that sought
audiences from a complicated network of classes and ethnicities. The diversity of their
spectatorship was a direct result of the changing social conditions of the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries. In New York in 1907, Salome was an active force in the creation of new
cultural spaces. She brought to each of these locations opportunities for engaging the
complexities of the modernist landscape.

Percival Pollard, writing in the *New York Times* in 1908, noted the Salome archetype’s
potentiality to transform New York culture as it had done in previous European contexts. A new
cultural environment meant a new life for Salome and new conversations about how her presence
might shape the landscape in which she danced. Pollard writes:

> To such of us as, like the old Athenians, are eternally looking for some new thing
> wherewith to be entertained, nothing in this present decade has been more
> interesting than the successive waves of The Dance that have swept over Europe
> and America. Some of these waves receding on the one continent, encroached
> upon the other; to watch that recession and that approach has been unfailing
> fascinating.\(^{24}\)

For Pollard, the United States celebrated a form of expression that was “long since exhausted
elsewhere,” and yet he understood that this did not in any way diminish the impact it would
have.\(^{25}\) Writing just as Salomania was taking hold of the city, Pollard acknowledged Salome’s
past and announced with anticipation her future. In September 1908, the words of an unidentified
New York chorus girl offer a similar albeit more concise characterization of the potential impact

23, 1908.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
of Salome. The dancer states: “Salome dances has [sic] put everything on a different footing now,” she said. “What do you know about that?”  

Interest in Salome-themed entertainments surged in the summer and fall of 1908. Across gender, race, ethnicity, and class, entertainers were attracted to the potentiality of the Salome archetype to disrupt expectations and shock audiences. As Andrew Erdman explains, Salome performers across the city “cooked up their own variations on a common theme: a wild gyrating interpretive dance number based on the Biblical story of the young woman who dances for King Herod, its rendering by Oscar Wilde, its operatic iteration, or some creative combination thereof.” The archetype was by 1908 an intermedial cultural framework through which entertainers could express themselves in music, dance, short dramatic sketches, and comedy routines, among other forms. While sharing some of the basic traits of the archetype, Erdman asserts, “Salome dancers added various touches to personalize and differentiate their routines.”

The pervasiveness of New York Salomania from the late summer of 1908 and into the fall cannot be understated. The intensity of Salome’s popularity is perhaps best conveyed by referencing a satirical report by an unnamed New York Times writer. Giving a preview of the upcoming New York season, the writer heralds:

> It is announced on a good authority that the management [at the New Amsterdam] has been exceptionally active in guarding against the outbreaks of Salomania among members of its [“Merry Widow”] company. As soon as any chorus girl shows the very first symptoms of the disease she is at once enveloped in a fur coat—the most efficacious safeguard known against the Salome dance—and hurriedly isolated.

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27 Erdman, 108.
28 Ibid.
29 “The Call of Salome: Rumors that Salomania Will Have a Free Hand This Season,” The New York Times, August 16, 1908.
Through humor the writer reveals the apparently high expectations New Yorkers had that Salome would be dominating the stages in the coming months. This unbridled hunger for the dancing girl by audiences and performers is characterized, albeit for humorous effect, as a sickness, a “disease” that is highly contagious. The writer calls attention to how the seemingly insatiable desire for all-things-Salome threatened to hijack productions across the spectrum—from highbrow dramatic works to popular revues. The writer jokes: “‘That tarantella in “A Doll’s House,”’ remarked a leading actress recently, ‘was unquestionably put in by Ibsen to give “Salome” dancers a chance. I intend next year to have the whole play revolve around it.’”

Similarly, the author satirizes the management of Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera House, writing: “It is rumored that Oscar Hammerstein will introduce the ‘Salome’ dance into every opera to be given by him.” While the writer certainly imagines the effects of Salomania on New York audiences in the extreme, the fact is many managers were indeed adding elements of the Salome dance to productions that would otherwise not call for them, and in doing so, Salome began claiming greater and greater cultural territory across the city.

This sudden and intense interest in an archetype tied so closely to the contradictions and degenerative traits of modernité raised concerns in those more conservative arenas of the city regarding the community’s health and well-being. There was the general issue of decency, which successive police commissioners would deem worthy of patrolling. The Salome performer La Sylphe (whom I will discuss in more detail below) was infamously confronted by the police during her appearances at the 125th Street theatre for reportedly not wearing tights. This

30 Ibid.
immediately heightened her appeal.³¹ A year later, in 1909, Gertrude Hoffmann would actually be arrested, taken to the station, and brought before a judge for the indecent exposure of her legs and feet.³² Though there is speculation this may have been part of a publicity stunt by Hoffmann’s manager,³³ Salome was attached from the beginning to a certain kind of criminality and uncontainability that could be associated with a larger degeneration of U.S. culture in general and New York society in particular.

One of the grandest indictments of Salomania came from the actress Mary Cahill. A proud representative of the “legit” stage, Cahill scorned the loose morality and indecency of the popular variety formats. Even before the outbreak of Salomania, in 1906, she had publicly condemned managers for the indiscrete costumes (short skirts and tights) they required their chorus girls to wear. Her prudish reputation only deepened when in late August 1908, and only a few months into the first real explosion of Salome acts, she wrote letters to the chairmen of each of the New York state political conventions requesting that the issue of Salomania be incorporated into their respective parties’ platforms. She begins her letter with a blunt characterization of the popular stage, writing:

Dear Sir: In the hope that it may serve to call to the attention of yourself and your committee the lamentable tendency of the stage, and especially the vaudeville section of it, to become more and more vulgar and indecent, and that you may see fit to take some action which will result in legislation that will put a stop to this willful poisoning of that great teaching institution, the drama, I have the honor to suggest the incorporating in the platform to be adopted by the State Convention a plank favoring the

³¹ Charles Darnton recounting the controversy explains that though the show “opened to poor business” after the controversy, “the house was packed.” See Charles Darnton, “The Visitation of Salome,” The Evening World, August 8, 1908.
establishment in the State of New York of a commission with powers of censorship over the dramatic stage.\textsuperscript{34}

Vaudeville was particularly threatening to Cahill since it had, from her perspective, become the only affordable entertainment for a generation of young people “who cannot go to school because they must work.” She calls out the threat that existed particularly for young immigrant women who were denied in great numbers access to education. In her indictment and call for action, Cahill cites specifically the popularity of Salome as evidence of the threatening moral decay of the stage. She writes:

Is it not, therefore, the duty of the true citizen to protect the young from the contamination of such theatrical offerings as clothe pernicious subjects of the “Salome” kind in a boasted artistic atmosphere, but which are really only an excuse for the most vulgar exhibition that this country has ever been called on to tolerate.\textsuperscript{35}

Cahill’s language of “contamination” fits with contemporary associations that link Salomania to a disease that corrupts the minds of spectators through exposure to an uncontainable, corrupt female body.

The characterization of Salomania as a social contagion transmitted through the performing body was not just a charge launched by an eccentric, moralistic actress. In October 1908, the reputable literary journal \textit{Current Literature} published a scathing assessment of the Salome phenomenon. Referencing the “twenty-four vaudeville dancers in New York” at the time, the anonymous author described the interest in Salome as an “epidemic” that was “spreading over the rest of the country.” The disgust expressed was not aimed at the broad archetype of the dancing girl, but instead at the way she had been corrupted by “music-hall dancers.” Their “vulgarization of Salome” was, in the eyes of the writer, a form of “poetic

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
vengeance which the fates have granted to the spurned composer and dead poet.”36 The artistic value of the Salome archetype was being exploited for the benefit of entertainment. Once Salome was let loose from the highbrow stages of opera, drama, and artistic dance, she became the property of music-hall managers, untrained performers, and even “cartoonists” whose representations of Salome in newspapers and journals allowed the “spectacular lady” to “invade” the public’s “homes.”37

By 1908, Salome in New York was more than an interesting character in a collection of variety acts; she was a force to be reckoned with. The archetype within the context of variety theatre spoke to those contemporary tensions and debates around modernist terms of neuropsychological normativity and impairment. Since performers working in variety were restricted to only short periods of time with which to engage their audiences, the figure appeared primarily in very concentrated forms. Subjecting the archetype to this kind of containment intensified her potentiality for disruption. The dances needed to be faster, more explosive; and the narratives, if there were any, needed to have clear, simple, and direct events. They were vehicles best suited to represent certain conditions, and states of being, that could be accessible to audiences.

As discussed in the introduction, Baudelaire’s original definition of modernité linked the condition directly to a set of “nervous” reactions to the changing conditions of modernist culture. It was visceral and charged, and it produced new perspectives and ways of engaging with social and physical environments. The Salome archetype’s successful journey into the concentrated and fragmented form of New York variety entertainment indicates the figure’s capacity to not only

37 Ibid, 438.
adapt to modernist culture’s new condition but to help direct its trajectory. As modernity collapsed into further fragmentation and disunity—a result of radical shifts in perspective facilitated by new forms of technology, intense industrialization and mechanization, and innovative medical practices, among other forces—Salome was reimagined as a fractured and pulsating figure. The Salomes danced inside the collapsing landscape of the modern, slicing through with their gestures cultural narratives that privileged corporeal unity, rationality, containment, and psychological wholeness. Historical encounters with these iterations of the dancing girl disclose the co-generative relationship they maintained with modernité. Their form and content reflected modernité’s deepest struggles while also fueling its internal divisions. They used this state of fragmentation, frenzy, and instability to create sensorial experiences that titillated and challenged spectators, nurturing in them desires, tastes, and behaviors pathologized by contemporary medical and social models of normativity.

Discussing broadly the Salome phenomenon’s preoccupation with the neuropathological provides an important understanding of a rich cultural climate engaged in intense debates over medical and social narratives of western progress and models of normativity. This portrait of New York Salomania, however, is only one aspect of a larger investigation into the neurological condition of modernité and its relationship to disclosing the potentiality of the modern. Our knowledge of this cultural process is deepened when the aesthetics of individual Salome performers and their acts are interrogated for how they embody the pathologized traits of neurological difference. Linking the form and content of an individual act to a specific impairment or set of behaviors pathologized by medical models grounds the performance’s “nervous” gestures inside a particular field of meaning with ties to specific modernist ideologies.
Only when the field is recognized can its collapse be fully appreciated and the potentiality such a collapse discloses probed.

In the final section of this chapter I turn to two successful, early-twentieth-century Salome performers, Gertrude Hoffmann and La Sylphe. I examine the aesthetics of each performer’s act in relationship to a particular neurological “condition” as defined in popular discourse emerging out of the relatively new discipline of neurology. While there were certainly many influential artists in the Salome movement that would warrant study, including Eva Tanguay, Lotta Faust, and Julian Eltinge, I focus specifically on Hoffman and La Sylphe, for two reasons. First, each held a significant place in the chronology and landscape of New York Salomania—Gertrude Hoffmann for the way she introduced a very distinct and popular form of the Salome story and dance to the public and La Sylphe for her unparalleled success at the box office. Second, the expressions of Salome that Hoffmann and La Sylphe offer each have very clear links to two specific neuropathological conditions: generalized hysteria and epilepsy respectively. Their popularity and specificity, therefore, make their work ideal cultural locations for interrogating modernité’s neurological complexity and its disruptive potentiality.

**Gertrude Hoffmann and La Sylphe: Dancing Hysteria and Epilepsy**

Gertrude Hoffmann opened her “A Vision of Salome” on July 13, 1908 at Hammerstein’s Victoria Theatre on Forty-Second Street. A matinee performance was given first in the main theatre with an evening show presented hours later on the Victoria’s popular rooftop stage. Just twenty minutes in length, Hoffmann’s act was an unapologetic imitation of Maud Allan’s successful “The Vision of Salome.” As discussed in the previous chapter, Hoffmann’s trip to London with Willy Hammerstein and her husband Max Hoffmann enabled her to observe and record in detail many of the defining elements of Allan’s act. She “borrowed” the essential
design of Allan’s Salome costume. Both women wore pearls that draped loosely over their exposed midriffs and flowed downward onto their long gauzy skirts. They both adorned Orientalized headpieces decorated with tassels. The most striking costume element they shared, however, was a halter top marked by circular, beaded plates that covered their breasts, [See Figures 9 and 10.]

Hoffmann’s performance followed the same dramaturgical structure used in Allan’s piece. She divided the act into four parts, beginning with Salome’s seductive dance before Herod, who does not appear on stage. This was followed by Salome’s discovery in a well of the Baptist’s severed head on a charger, which she subsequently places on the floor center stage. The third section of the piece involves Salome dancing “wildly” around the head, building herself to such a fervor that she collapses to the ground in exhaustion—a gesture similar to that described by Strauss in his opera’s stage directions. The final sequence of events involved Salome crawling to the Baptist’s head, kissing it, before hurling it back into the well from which it came.38

The replication of Allan’s piece by Hoffmann rather than being an indication of the vaudeville dancer’s lack of originality or individual creativity became instead the show’s main selling point. Advertisements the Hammersteins ran in the New York papers promoted Hoffmann’s ability to perform the same Salome dance that had “set all London talking.” The draw of Hoffmann lay in how she “accurately and cleverly reproduced” for upper-middle-class vaudeville audiences Maud Allan’s “celebrated and artistic vision of the dancing girl.”39 [See Figure 11.] The marketing strategy proved successful. The audience in attendance at the opening

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38 “A Salome Dance by Miss Hoffmann,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1908. The unnamed author of this New York Times review offers one of the clearest accounts of the plot of Hoffmann’s “Vision of Salome,” particularly its four-part structure, which corresponds directly to Allan’s narrative.

was the largest the theatre had seen that summer. By August 1, 1908, reported *Variety*,
Hoffmann had “in her ‘Salome dance . . . smashed several Hammerstein records to
smithereens.”

Gertrude Hoffmann’s ability to imitate the gestures and performance styles of her
contemporaries had by 1908 already earned her a certain level of notoriety. Born in 1886 in San
Francisco as Kitty Hayes, Hoffmann began her career dancing in opera with small companies
near her home town. Soon after appearing on the professional stage, she headed east and inserted
herself into the vibrant world of New York vaudeville, eventually becoming, as Susan Glenn
explains, “one of the most important female choreographers of the vaudeville and review
stage.” It would be her talent for imitating, however, that would ultimately distinguish
Hoffmann from the hundreds of other dancers that filled variety stages across the city in the early
twentieth century. Her skill at mimicry became quite apparent during Hoffmann’s successful turn
in Ziegfeld’s Broadway revue *The Parisian Model*, which featured Anna Held. Hoffmann in
addition to dancing in the corps performed a ribald impersonation of the star, dressing in a
burlesqued version of Held’s costume as the two danced together. This performance in *The
Parisian Model* advanced her career significantly, so by the time Hoffmann took on the role of
Salome in 1908, she was, as the Chicago reviewer Burns Mantle writes, hailed already as
“something of an imitatrix.”

Given the ephemeral nature of vaudeville performances and the fact few received many
extensive or detailed reviews, descriptions of Gertrude Hoffmann’s “A Vision of Salome” act are

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40 *Variety*, August 1, 1908, 7.
41 Susan Glenn, “Give and Invitation of Me”: Vaudeville Mimics and the Play of the Self,”
42 Burns Mantle, “Naught Boy and Girl Play Diversions of the Week,” *Chicago Tribune*,
September 13, 1908.
limited. Much of what we learn from the style of her performance comes from the comparisons critics made between Hoffmann’s and Allan’s versions of Salome. *A New York Times* reviewer begins a discussion of Hoffmann’s opening at the Roof Garden by immediately referencing her notoriety as a mimic, describing her as: “a variety performer who has been amusing audiences with her pleasing mimicry.”43 What follows is a less-than-positive review that roots what is considered a “disappointing” performance largely in its failure to truly capture Allan’s form and energy. Unlike Allan, the reviewer writes, “Hoffmann’s exhibition is not sensational either in movement or gesture.” This was not to suggest it was not entertaining to audiences, who, the critic writes, “in the summer time . . . [are] usually permitted to be the arbiter of such spectacles.”44 Beyond this comparison to Allan, the act’s running time, the size of the orchestra, and its roots in the Biblical story of John the Baptist, we learn nothing of Hoffmann’s aesthetic.

In the same edition of the *New York Times* another brief review of Hoffmann’s “Vision of Salome” appeared. The link to Allan is made clear by the critic right from the start, the first line being: “Gertrude Hoffmann gave her first imitation of Maud Allan’s dance, ‘A Vision of Salome’ at Hammerstein’s Theatre yesterday.” The remainder of the paragraph focuses exclusively on the relationship between Hoffmann and Allan, with the critic’s evaluation again resting on the distance between Hoffmann’s representation of Salome and Allan’s. This time, however, the review is more favorable with the reviewer complimenting Hoffmann for “amply fulfill[ing] her promise to give a ‘life-like impersonation’ of Miss Allan’s dance.” The “brevity”

44 Ibid.
of Hoffmann’s costume becomes a focus of attention in the review, but even that aspect of the
performance is tied to Allan as it is praised for its “unmistakeable exactness” to the original.45
Given the inextricable link between Hoffmann’s and Allan’s iterations of Salome and the limited
material describing Hoffmann’s style, it is useful to turn to descriptions of Allan’s interpretation
of the dance for how Hoffmann may have incorporated neuropathological traits into her act.
Allan’s performance was deemed remarkable (and dangerous) in part because of the “hysterical”
qualities it contained. These neuropathologized traits were, according to critics of Allan’s work,
largely connected to the sexual nature of the performance and the uncontainability of the dancer’s
physical actions. Both of these characteristics were, I argue, markers of forms of hysteria
articulated in the dominant European and U.S. medical models of the condition circulating in the
late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The unnamed author of “The “Vulgarization of Salome” declares “[Gertrude Hoffman’s]
performances are an exact imitation of the art of Maud Allan” and then cites examples of the
hysterical qualities of Allan’s Salome. From the author’s perspective, Allan’s partial nudity and
bare legs and feet are what help to establish her as a pathological sexual object. Her desire for the
Baptist leads her into a dissociative state in which her body’s gestures become uncontainable. As
one critic described her final set of actions:

Again she rises, this time slowly. Her whole nude figure quivers. She
writhes and worms her way across the stage. She wreathes fantastic
figures with her arms, her legs, her gleaming body. She staggers, she reels,
she falls, a shining mass in the pallid moonlight. The curtain descends.
The opera glasses also descend. The Vision of Salome is over.46

45 “‘Salome’ Dance by Miss Hoffmann: Two Performances in a Brevity of Costume Given at
46 Quoted in “Vulgarization of Salome,” 438.
Hoffmann seized on many of the qualities described above in Allan’s act and presented them to New York audiences ready to receive a quaking, “degenerate” sexuality within the context of their own cultural environment.

The traits of dissociation and hyper-sexuality performed by Allan and pathologized by neuropsychologists can be found in the aforementioned dramaturgy of Hoffmann’s “A Vision of Salome,” copied from Allan. The narrative of the act in its simplicity helps to establish each of these neuropsychological traits. The opening section recounts Salome’s dance for Herod and his guests. This is followed by her retrieving of the Baptist’s head from the well. The solo dance then transitions into a macabre duet with what is left of the object of her desire. (The stage prop of the severed head was made from paper-mâché and soon became a popular device in subsequent Salome performances.) This dismembered presence of the Baptist only intensifies her original desire for him.

Through her engagement with the head, Hoffmann’s Salome appears to sever her connection to a material reality just as the hysteric is described as disconnecting herself from her given circumstances in the midst of a hysterical episode. Placing the head on the floor, Hoffmann circles it, ultimately lowering herself to the ground to be close to it. In these gestures, her bare legs writhing, her sexual desire crescendos. The climax of this dance comes in the moment that she finally kisses the Baptist’s dead lips. This last aberrant act is followed only by her discarding of the head back into the well. Sexually satisfied, the dramatic action is complete.

Once Hoffmann moves from arousal to consummation of her desire through the kiss, her hyper-sexuality becomes what feels like a genuinely “deviant” form of desire: what would be categorized within neuropsychological models of degeneration as necrophilia. She has danced out of that vague and shifting medical model of hysteria onto more solid pathological ground.
Through the journey of the dance, audiences find entertainment in the disclosure of a neuropathologized condition. The concentrated nature of the form intensifies the effect. Salome becomes another shock in the already electrified and neurotic landscape of modernité.

Since there is, as stated above, a scarcity of evidence regarding the specifics of Gertrude Hoffmann’s New York performances, I end my analysis of Hoffmann’s act by turning to images of the dancer in circulation during the performer’s successful run as Salome in 1908. I study these images for how they further illuminate the ways in which Hoffmann showcased the archetype’s modernist neuropathological tendencies. I begin with an examination of an illustration of Hoffmann that appeared along with drawings of other popular Salomes of the day in *The Evening World* on August 8, 1908. This is followed by an analysis of a photographic postcard that featured Hoffmann as Salome gazing upon the severed head of the Baptist.

While illustrations and postcards are not locations of “liveness” where the embodied expressions of the performer can be engaged, they do provide at least a frame for comprehending an artist’s conception of a role and the cultural context in which it was performed. In addition, they are, in their own way, active sites of exchange where the dynamics of a unique cultural condition can come into view. As Peggy Farfan writes with respect to photographic postcards, their popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer scholars opportunities “to support recent reconceptualizations of the field of modernist studies and of the centrality of theatre and performance within modernist cultural production.” The popularity of postcards, particularly those featuring dancers, became, as Farfan writes, their own “form of popular entertainment as individuals around the world engaged in correspondence, collection, and exchange.” They offered the “owner of a photographic postcard of a ‘star’ . . . physical contact
with the star’s being,” albeit one facilitated through the “chemical processes” of photography. A similar logic of approaching images of performances as forms of popular entertainment can be extended, I argue, to illustrations and photographs presented in popular newspapers, such as those that appeared in the August 8, 1908 *Evening World*. The piece, which I will examine in greater detail below, rather than being a hard-hitting journalistic article was at its core a salute to the celebrity dancers who were popularizing the Salome role at the time. Such illustrations contributed to the circulation of Salome as a popular icon and in so doing helped position her as a co-generative force in the production of early-twentieth-century modernist culture.

The illustration of Hoffmann in the role of the dancing princess that appeared in *The Evening World* on August 8, 1908 was part of a feature article about four Salome dancers performing in the city that month: Hoffmann, La Sylphe, Eva Tanguay, and Lotte Faust. It was less than one month after her premiere of her Salome act at the Victoria. (I have supplied here the complete illustration that includes representations of all the Salomes [see Figure 12] as well as an excerpted close-up of just Hoffmann [see Figure 13]). In the illustration Hoffmann is depicted in the moment just before her lips touch that of the decapitated Baptist. The genre of the illustration is closer to a cartoon than an attempt at a realist representation. This cartoonish quality serves to accentuate certain aspects of both Hoffmann and the Baptist’s faces. Hoffmann’s expression with eyes closed and poised to kiss is almost normalized as though she might be kissing a living person. This disjuncture contributes to a reading of Hoffmann’s dance as one marked by dissociation. There is a lack of contact with the reality of the situation that the magazine’s illustrator appears to exaggerate for humor. Despite her apparently neutral

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expression, the “deviancy” of her kiss is undeniable. There is no doubt she is holding a severed head. This aberrance is accentuated even more by the fact that the Baptist’s head is animal-like. His face is covered with hair so that his features are almost indistinguishable.

Necrophilia in the illustration now seems to fuse with bestiality to create an even more deviant archetype. And yet, the form and costuming of Hoffmann as Salome are sleek: her legs are smooth and her body, fully extended, is soft; her hips are gracefully covered by a wrap. The aberrance of her kiss is disrupted, therefore, by the suggested beauty of her body. The illustration in this way captures the complexity of the Salome archetype as performed by Hoffmann. Her epitomization of a neuropathologized condition is in contrast to a body that exemplifies a contemporary standard of Orientalized beauty. Arousal and disgust dance together with no desire for their apparent contradictions to be resolved.

Similar to the illustration in the Evening World, an image of Hoffmann as Salome featured on a collectible postcard offers additional insight into how her representation of the dancing girl reflected the tensions that existed in modernist culture between models of neuropsychological normativity and tantalizing experiences of pathologization. In the photograph, Hoffmann is depicted lying on the floor. Except for the outstretched arm, her body does not appear active or engaged. She is not in the throes of the type of hysterical episode that critics associated with her performance of Salome’s infamous dance. Rather than appearing to act on any uncontrollable sexual desire, she seems instead to be experiencing a “post-coital” moment, the one that may have followed her violent, pathological kissing of the decapitated Baptist’s lips.

When we follow Hoffmann’s gaze in the photograph, we see her eyes are fixed on the head of the Baptist. The brutal remains of her pathological behavior hit up against her soft,
relaxed body. Salome’s embodiment of an exoticized beauty and power is juxtaposed by the effects of her erraticism, irrationality, and dissociation from reality. The composition of the still photo, with Hoffmann positioned on the left and the Baptist’s grizzly head on the right, highlights her modernist tendencies for both rationality and irrationality, order and chaos, normativity and impairment. Her gestures and her spatial relationship to the head disclose a neuropsychological contradiction at the center of the modern Salome archetype. Salome’s capacity for quiet repose and rational control exists alongside her equally powerful aptitude for irrational violence and ferocious excess.

Through the technology of photography that Agamben linked so closely to the modernist perspective, Hoffmann’s dynamic portrayal of Salome is brought to a pause, its opposing parts exposed. In this caesura, the archetype presents itself as a “means without ends” within the dynamic condition of modernité. In doing so, it threatens to collapse the field of meaning produced by modernist medico-social paradigms of neuropsychological normativity. It is in this possibility of collapse that the potentiality of the modern comes into view and opportunities for rethinking the normative and non-normative subject emerge. Rather than reinscribing a model of human behavior and expression that privileges psychological wholeness, reason, and containment, the image of Hoffmann and the paper-mâché head celebrates the fragility of such paradigms. It intentionally walks the line between what “should” and “should not” be with respect to modern social and psychological norms, favoring multiplicity over singularity, diversity over uniformity, and experience over doctrine.

Gertrude Hoffmann’s “A Vision of Salome” proves a valuable cultural location for exploring how through in the historical encounter the Salome archetype can disclose modernité’s paradoxical relationship to neuropsychological difference. Hoffmann’s performance of the
conditions and behaviors pathologized by the period’s medical models both represented and contributed to a modernist landscape marked by contradiction and tension. From a historical perspective, therefore, accounts of her performance and images of her as Salome serve as sites of disclosure for understanding the paradoxical cultural process of constructing the modern. Representations of the esteemed mimic provide concentrated spaces where larger claims about modernité and its potentiality for disrupting modernist narratives are engaged.

I will now turn to another Salome performer who gained widespread popularity in New York from 1907–1909, La Sylphe, for how her approach to the dancing girl further illuminates our understanding of the modernité’s contradictions. As I did in my analysis of Hoffmann, I consider newspaper articles and reviews as well as visual representations of the dancer for evidence of her unique neurological representation of the dancing girl. Rather than examining La Sylphe, however, for how she engaged medical models of hysteria, I approach her iteration of Salome through the lens of the neurological impairment of epilepsy. I do so based on two factors: La Sylphe’s particular “contortionist” aesthetic and the responses of critics and spectators to her popular act “The Remorse of Salome.”

The same month that Gertrude Hoffmann opened her “A Vision of Salome” at the Hammerstein Victoria Theatre the former dancer of the Parisian Folies Bergère and now U.S. vaudeville performer La Sylphe (a.k.a. Edith Lambell) opened her own interpretation of Salome at Keith and Proctor’s 125th Street Theatre in Harlem. While already established on the vaudeville circuit by the summer of 1908, La Sylphe did not have the same status and commercial appeal as Hoffmann. Her Salome performance, however, would change that. As Erdman explains, La Sylphe “of all the Salome dancers would become perhaps the best known.” After success at Keith and Proctor’s Harlem theatre, she would soon move further downtown to
their Fifth Avenue venue, where she received great acclaim. Sadly, while La Sylphe established herself as one of the leading Salomes of the period, her career, Erdman explains, would be the one that “withered most lamentably after the fad was over.”\(^{48}\) The loss of star status La Sylphe experienced with the decline of the Salome phenomenon, while disappointing, does serve, however, to illuminate how much her performance style resonated with the modernist Salome archetype in the United States at the time, thereby justifying her inclusion as a case study.

La Sylphe’s Salome act did not follow the same condensed dramatic narrative that Hoffmann made popular. She did not take audiences on a journey of a sexual desire that would crescendo until it transformed into a type of sexual “deviancy.” La Sylphe’s act, titled “The Remorse of Salome,” represented a Salome who finds herself filled with regret and self-hatred as she realizes her role in the grizzly fate of what had been the object of her affection. *The New York Times*, in its brief review, quickly points out La Sylphe’s departure from Hoffmann’s model: “La Sylphe . . . moved to the Fifth Avenue Theatre yesterday with a new Salome dance, entitled ‘The Remorse of Salome.’ The performance was not only strikingly different from the dance in which Miss Hoffmann is appearing at Hammerstein’s, but the dance itself is of a different order.” One key element that distinguishes La Sylphe’s dance from Hoffmann’s is the complete absence of the Baptist. The unnamed reviewer explains: “The head of John the Baptist for once, does not figure in the pantomime.” Instead of being set near the location of the Baptist’s execution, the action takes place before a monolith that is positioned in the middle of desert. It is nighttime, incense burns, and Salome, “overcome with remorse,” has come to perform a “‘soul’ sacrifice’ and things of that sort.”\(^{49}\)

\(^{48}\) Erdman, 112.

By removing any traces of the Baptist and setting the action in a remote, sacred spot in the desert, “The Remorse of Salome” created a much different theatrical space within which to explore the Salome archetype. Salome, through the body of La Sylphe, danced on the border between the symbolic and the literal, and, in doing so, her signature, uncontainable desire was fused with a spiritual longing for forgiveness achievable only through extreme self-sacrifice. The fact that La Sylphe’s act created such a transcendent and spiritual space does not, however, mean that her dance lacked the extreme physicality that was such an attractive aspect of the Salome acts.

La Sylphe was an intensely physical performer, whose infamous flexibility and strength enabled her to create exotic and titillating images. Regularly characterized as a “contortionist” dancer, her fame was grounded in large part in her ability to perform the most serpentine movements. A review in Variety, written after her move to Keith and Proctor’s Fifth Avenue Theatre, explains how, despite the changes in tone, La Sylphe still brought to Salome her signature gestures. “La Sylphe as ‘Salome’ is a contortional ‘cooch’ dancer. Two of her most liked ‘steps,’ if they may be so termed are familiar movements of female contortionists, one, the finale, where she revolves her body rapidly while remaining crouched in the same position.”

This integration of La Sylphe’s established contortionist aesthetic into the ethereal atmosphere of the setting offers an entry way into the particular form of neuropathology presented by the performer. While certainly the attributes of hysteria applied to the study of Hoffmann could be attached here as well to La Sylphe’s performance, I choose instead to look at La Sylphe’s work through the lens of the neurological impairment of epilepsy. La Sylphe’s removal of the necrophilic actions of Salome in her act, in my view, serves to detach the

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archetype from the trait of pathologized sexuality more readily associated with hysteria. Without that sexualization of the gestures, the extreme movements—what we can consider “contorted” poses—are better aligned with a more de-sexualized epileptic condition of non-normative physical expression.

The event of the epileptic seizure was by the late nineteenth century assumed to have a clear physiological basis, specifically a lesion or some form of alteration to the brain matter.\textsuperscript{51} This was at odds with the hysterical episode that lacked a clear physiological root and became increasingly identified with a disembodied, psychological “dis-order.” The visible effects of these impairments—the size and intensity of the physical gestures as well as the consciousness (or lack thereof) of the individual during the episode—would vary. Epileptic seizures thus had strong correspondences to an array of images of the contorted body. By a “contorted” body, I mean a body that transgresses (or transcends) what is deemed by an authorial gaze to be a neutral set of gestures or physical behaviors. It is from this idea of the “contorted” epileptic body that I will approach La Sylphe’s portrayal of Salome in her “Remorse of Salome.”

La Sylphe’s approach to Salome was for some the most artistic of the Salome dancers and for others the most aberrant. Charles Darnton from the \textit{Evening World} uses effusive language to describe her gestures: “[T]his tall, slender, young woman, swaying and bending like a willow in a storm fascinates you with dancing that makes you wonder what she has done with her bones. In all her remarkable movements she steers clear of sensationalism and step by step wins your unqualified admiration.”\textsuperscript{52} In contrast, another reviewer describes La Sylphe as “[t]he most bizarre Salome . . . She, in the words of the dancing master, represents what might be called


\textsuperscript{52} Charles Darnton, “Visitation of Salome.”
‘getting the bends’ in dancing.” Interestingly, though the reviewers put their own value on the quality of La Sylphe’s dance, both draw attention to one of her key gestures: the back bend. It is this bend, I argue, that will help position her work within a medical model of epilepsy, since the form corresponds with the physicality exhibited during a generalized seizure.

A publicity photograph of La Sylphe as Salome performing her back-bend gesture provides a visual reference for the kind of movement both reviewers describe. [See Figure 14.] Her back arched so that her arms and head are almost touching the floor, La Sylphe’s eyes are closed, her one foot flexed and arms extended. The aestheticized “contorted” form suggests an individual without consciousness. Despite this apparent absence of awareness, the body appears still to be able to move in extreme ways on its own accord.

The non-normative nature of La Sylphe’s back-bend gesture as Salome is satirized in the illustration of her that appeared alongside the cartoon of Gertrude Hoffman in the Evening World on August 8, 1908. [See Figure 15.] In this representation we see a grotesque arching of the back. While, by all accounts, the representation shows an impossible gesture, the choice to depict the performer in this pose reveals first how much she was identified with the form and second how outside the realm of normative movement her gestures were seen to be. The non-normativity of La Sylphe’s extreme gestures carries a perceived threat, as evidenced in the following response to her performance style:

Sarah J. MacNutt, M.D., a woman physician, condemns the contortiou[sic] dance as being injurious to the spine, and as a practice that eventually carries the performer to the surgeon’s table. Moreover, she asserts the intense abnormal passion simulated by the dancers must reach across the footlights and take hold of the nervous system of hysterical women in the audience.54

53 “Vulgarization of Salome,” 439.
54 Ibid., 438.
While La Sylphe’s physical uncontainability is not sexualized, it is still potentially threatening, particularly to women in the audience. Suggesting the nervous systems of the performer and the female spectators are equally vulnerable to impairment, La Sylphe’s non-normative gestures should be contained.

I conclude my examination of La Sylphe’s representation of Salome and its relationship to the neurological impairment of epilepsy by turning to a satirical piece by Charles L. Cullen that appeared in the *Evening World* on August 5, 1908. Loaded with contemporary slang and written in a broad, comedic style, the article directly links the Salome performances popular at the time to the condition of epilepsy. It, in turn, then places La Sylphe at the center of the epileptic Salome phenomenon.

Cullen begins his piece with an indictment of the contemporary Salome performers, mocking them for the artless, ridiculous gestures they exhibit nightly. He writes: “The Salomes that are doing it now hop around in circles till they get tired and then they flop around to take a rest and wriggle around in misery on the oilcloth.” Within a few lines, Cullen picks up on his own imagery of the dancers flopping around and begins to associate Salome performers with the crew of street people who feign epileptic seizures to receive charity from the city. He writes:

Talking about flopping down; how do you know that this Salome doll wasn’t a flopper? You get flopper don’t you? That’s the charity cops’ name for the fit-throwers that pull the epileptic wallow to entice the coin of the sympathetic pajamas. There are a lot of them in this town that can frame up a dough-snagging flop any time they nudge into a crowd that looks producey. And they do it just like Salome does.

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56 Ibid.
Cullen establishes a clear link between the gestures of the Salome dancers and those that would be identified with an epileptic seizure. The relationship, however, is tarnished by the fact that instead of comparing the dancers to individuals actually experiencing seizures, he connects them to charlatans, individuals who performed disability as a way of exploiting people. The neurological impairment, in this context, becomes a vehicle of manipulation.

La Sylphe is for Cullen the quintessential “flopper,” not only because of her gestures but because of how he feels she similarly swindled him out of his money by enticing him through word of her eccentric movements to see her show. Reportedly spending $3.50 to see her “Remorse of Salome” the night before (a significant amount of money for the time), Cullen feels he has been taken. Having fought through a “mob” just to see “Salome get the soles of her bare tootsies smudged up with stage dust until they look like she’d been taking the Kneipp cure in coal yard” was clearly, for the author, not worth the price of admission. In the end, and admittedly not understanding any of the “symbols” or “cymbals” in the performance, he concludes. “I wish I had my three and half back.”

Through this satire, the epileptic traits of La Sylphe’s Salome come into full view. Cullen’s piece reveals not only how easy it is to mistake such gestures for neurological impairment, but how suspicious we must be of them.

The relationship between La Sylphe’s iteration of Salome and the neurological condition of modernité differs significantly from that of Hoffmann’s. While both explore the archetype by aestheticizing its neurological tendencies, La Sylphe’s “Remorse of Salome” diverges from Hoffmann’s act in the way it depended upon the solo performer’s unique corporeality to communicate the dancing girl’s pathological traits. As discussed above, Hoffmann’s Salome was from the very beginning a representation of Maud Allan’s version of the princess. Capturing

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57 Ibid.
Allan’s movements and “hysterical” energy, Hoffmann’s body acted primarily as a vehicle of transmission. Rather than creating a new and distinct Salome, she generated a very effective metatheatrical copy for New York audiences to consume. It was in the act of skillful mimicking that much of the entertainment lay. Hoffmann/Allan’s “Vision of Salome,” in turn, became a template for other performers wishing to represent the princess in her moments of acute hysteria. The originality of La Sylphe’s depiction of Salome stood in sharp contrast to Hoffmann’s mimicry. It distinguished itself both in the inventiveness of its content and the exceptionalism of its formal elements. As discussed, La Sylphe’s act was unique in the way it told the experience of a penitent Salome, a woman suffering intensely upon realizing the consequences of her actions. This anguish expressed itself formally in extreme pathologized gestures made possible on the stage only because of the performer’s distinctive corporeality.

I have already discussed the “epileptic” qualities of La Sylphe’s choreography and provided evidence of how audiences and critics viewed her movement style as representative of neurological impairment. What has not been discussed is the way in which La Sylphe as a performer was herself “medicalized” because of her unique physicality. Fueled in part by the circulation of photographs capturing La Sylphe in her contortionist poses, her body’s unusual plasticity, particularly the flexibility of her back, generated a popular interest in her atypical anatomy. Photos which foregrounded La Sylphe’s capacity to defy expectations with respect to human movement served to establish the dancer as a subject worthy of scientific or medical inquiry. Such images advanced a popular form of the medical gaze that would come to define La Sylphe the performer separate and apart from the characters she represented on the stage.

To demonstrate how La Sylphe’s body became medicalized in the way I have described I turn to a feature article on the dancer that ran in the Los Angeles Herald on March 29, 1908,
several months before her Salome act gained popularity in New York. The publication of the article corresponded with her appearance at LA’s Orpheum Theatre. La Sylphe’s performances on the west coast followed an “around the world dancing tour,” which took her to locations across western and eastern Europe, as well as spots in Northern Africa, the Middle East, and Australia. The Herald piece focused primarily on the persona and physicality of La Sylphe. It made no reference to what she would be presenting at the Orpheum and made only brief mention of the repertoire she performed on tour, which included her version of the Salome dance. Two aspects of the article stand out for the ways they position La Sylphe within the purview of a popularized medical gaze: the opening paragraphs that discuss instances where she is photographed and the collection of images that accompany the text. Together these elements establish the objectifying lens through which the reader will encounter the dancer’s biography and to a smaller degree her aesthetics in the rest of the article.

The introduction to the piece starts with a short narrative of a photo shoot La Sylphe participated in during a visit to Paris. Privileging the perspective of the photographer over that of the dancer, the writer explains how the young La Sylphe, accompanied by her mother, posed for the camera, writing: “In Paris, a few months ago, La Sylphe went to the ateller [sic] of a fashionable photographer where she posed for a series of pictures illustrative of her dances.” Immediately we are given an image of a passive La Sylphe being dressed and positioned by her mother to meet the gaze of the photographer. When he is “not satisfied,” he requests she be readjusted and padding be added beneath her dress so to create more of a curve around her hips—a popular style in Parisian fashion at the time. “Zen it would be parfait” the photographer is quoted as saying, “ah ravissement!” La Sylphe assures him the padding is not “at all necessary,” as she quickly manipulates her body to create the curve he wanted in a way that
reportedly “amazed” the photographer. Under the gaze of a professional to whom the author has assigned the power to assess her form, La Sylphe’s non-normative body is put on display, recognition of her astonishing corporeal Otherness providing a frame for the rest of the article.\(^{58}\)

The narrative of La Sylphe’s encounter with the fashion photographer is immediately followed by a report of the dancer posing for a radiograph—an image produced through a process of radiation, most commonly used in medical examinations. While we are not told why she was subjected to this clinical observation, the reader does learn from the author that it ultimately “prov[ed] that La Sylphe actually has bones, despite external evidence to the contrary.” The writer goes on to say that “the picture is the first ever made of a human vertebrae [sic] so remarkably contorted.”\(^{59}\) The veracity of this statement is certainly suspect, but regardless of whether the radiograph is the first or the one hundredth of its kind, it clearly creates a powerful medical framework for seeing La Sylphe’s body as a corporeal anomaly: she is a medical subject before she is a performer.\(^{60}\)

Shortly after establishing La Sylphe’s corporeal Otherness through the medical gaze, the writer assures the reader that “in her private life La Sylphe is merely a healthy normal American girl” (emphasis mine).\(^{61}\) Using the word healthy to describe the performer immediately after a discussion of a clinical observation employed to disclose her remarkable contortedness illuminates a contradiction at play within the public persona of La Sylphe, a tension that seems an integral part of her appeal. Normativity and non-normativity coexist within the young dancer, who will ultimately reach her greatest success in the role of the aberrant figure of Salome. This


\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) The writer is quick to point out La Sylphe’s discomfort with being observed in this ways; she is described as a “somewhat fearful” participant, but one who “finally consented to pose.”

contradiction is highlighted in the layout of the article where stories describing the creative and intelligent ways in which La Sylphe engaged other cultures during her world tour are juxtaposed by four images of the performer displaying her “contortions.” While three of the photographs included apparently show La Sylphe in the act of performing, the final image is the radiograph discussed above. [See Figure 16.] The radiograph is notably detached from the other photos by an illustration of an uncoiling snake.

Through this collection of images, the reader encounters La Sylphe’s corporeality both in a theatrical and clinical way: her role as entertainer is connected visually to a real bodily difference that remains part of her identity off the stage. This difference, however, is not free from suspicion. The snake while logically included as a means of underscoring La Sylphe’s serpentine aesthetic also serves to link the young woman to the biblical archetype of Eve, whose own “flaw” in many religious narratives is credited with introducing the possibility of sin into the human experience. Medicalized difference through this visual composition is subtly linked to potential corruption, La Sylphe’s contradictions tied to an observable capacity for degeneracy.

Whether through La Sylphe’s original “epileptic” take on Salome rooted in her own corporeal difference or Hoffmann’s version of the hysterical dancing girl born out of her talents as a mimic, representations of the princess circulating during the height of New York Salomania disclose a deeper contradictory neurological dynamic within modernité. Their iterations of the Salome archetype present opportunities for observing the modern condition as an active mode of perception where conflicting experiences with normativity and impairment are constantly at play. With the dynamics of modernité made visible in the form and content of the individual Salome acts as well as in the phenomenon of Salomania more broadly, possibilities for the trajectory of the modern open. Where artists such as Julia Marlowe read the Salome archetype as a vehicle for
understanding modernist culture’s internal threats, performers like Hoffmann and La Sylphe unapologetically explored the archetype as a valuable tool in negotiating the boundaries between the rational and irrational, restraint and uncontainability, progress and degeneration. Through their disclosure of these competing aspects of the modern, alternative trajectories for the culture surface.

The brief but intense period of the Salome phenomenon in New York with its representations of the dancing girl that aestheticized neurological impairment present to the historian an opportunity for more complex and multifaceted readings of modernist culture. Such readings have the capacity to de-privilege the normative neuropsychological traits that have contained our definitions of modern subjectivity. In the conclusion that follows this chapter, I will consider how in opening up our narratives of modernist culture we can expand our understanding of the role of impairment and corporeal difference within the fields of performance and theatre studies. I will argue that studies such as the one undertaken in this dissertation offer us more than just new perspectives on the history of theatre; they, perhaps more importantly, indicate how non-normative experiences can be integrated into our narratives of performance, helping to reshape the methodologies and paradigms we use as we study theatre’s role in the construction of culture.
Conclusion

From medieval sculptures to Renaissance oil paintings to the modernist variety performances considered in this dissertation, representations of Salome have served as rich discursive locations where systems of cultural meaning could be challenged and negotiated. Out of the simple sketches of the Jewish dancing girl that appeared in the first century gospels of Mark and Matthew, generations of artists, critics, and scholars have created iterations of Salome that reflect the unique conditions and questions of their particular cultural contexts. They have woven into their frameworks of the dancing princess an array of characteristics that reveal the archetype’s flexibility and its capacity for illuminating the multitude of contradictions and paradoxes a culture sustains.

The late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century interpretations of Salome examined in the previous chapters reveal the archetype’s particular potential for elucidating modernité’s contradictory relationship to models of neuropsychological normativity. The modernist figure of the dancing girl that began to coalesce during the fin de siècle was inextricably linked to the unique, intensely sensorial experiences of modern life: a world, as Baudelaire described it, defined by all that is “transient,” “fleeting,” and “contingent”; a cultural space where the nervous “convalescent” became the “spiritual” prototype for artistic genius.¹ Modernist representations of Salome existed inside a medicalized social landscape that fractured modes of perception as it pathologized corporeal and behavioral difference.

Exemplifying the neurological tendencies of the modern condition in the first decade of the twentieth century, New York Salomania emerges through this dissertation as an important

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part of what Megan Becker-Leckrone calls the “labyrinthine genealogy” of the Biblical dancing-girl narrative.\(^2\) The entertainers, spectators, critics, and other forces that together generated the 1907–1909 Salome craze in New York City form an intricate web of performance events and experiences that mark a key moment in the development of the archetype. As the narrative first articulated in sacred texts found currency in distinctly non-religious performance spaces inside modernist culture, the Salome figure proved an increasingly contested site where modernity’s unresolved tensions could be brought into view. With each iteration of Salome providing an opportunity for disclosing modernity’s potentiality, the archetype of the dancing girl became a proliferating cultural space where the trajectory of the modern could be debated and evaluated.

Becker-Leckrone characterizes this construction of the Salome legacy through interpretive processes of “telling and retelling” the dancing girl narrative as a form of “secular midrash,” a concept she borrows from Frank Kermode and his writings on originality and intertextuality in New Testament narratives.\(^3\) Within its original religious context, the term *midrash* refers broadly to the practice of oral or written rabbinical exegesis of Hebrew scripture. As a narrative mode, the midrash’s primary function is to communicate meaning as discerned by the exegete to a listener or reader. Its effectiveness, explains David Stern, lies in the ways in which its two essential properties, “hermeneutical fidelity” and “exegetical playfulness,” are

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woven together.\textsuperscript{4} This interplay of faithfulness to text and freedom of expression creates spaces around sacred narratives, so they can be reimagined to suit the cultural contexts in which they are communicated. Becker-Leckrone maintains that in keeping with the midrash model, the Salome story, as it is told and retold in religious and non-religious contexts, has participated in a process of constant reinterpretation with adjustments and commentary added to meet the desires and needs of new audiences. Given the amount and diverse nature of Salome-related material produced since the story first appeared in the first century C.E., the narrative has proven itself to be extremely flexible. It finds expression in a range of aesthetic projects across media as well as in what has become a rich body of critical and scholarly work on the dancing girl.

My study of early-twentieth-century New York Salomania can, based on Becker-Leckrone’s hermeneutic framework, be read as a continuation of the dancing girl secular midrash. This project is, as all historiographies necessarily are, interpretive. Foregrounding paradigms of neuropsychological difference in my analysis, I present a particular perspective on the Salome narrative that speaks to contemporary systems of inequality and oppression related to impairment and disability. In directing attention toward the ways Salome entertainers performed modernité’s neuropathologized traits and the unprecedented reception such performances received, this dissertation positions neuropsychological non-normativity at the center of a scholarly discussion of modernist performance. In doing so, it retrieves impairment from modernity’s margins. No longer in the periphery, impairment is able to be read as a key term in the generation of culture.

Privileging impairment in such a way, this dissertation offers a paradigm to theatre and performance scholars interested in transcending able-bodied privilege in their work. Combatting ableism, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “discrimination in favor of able-bodied people,” does not simply mean advocating for greater inclusivity with respect to corporeal difference. It requires that lived experiences of impairment be fully integrated into our discussions of performance history and practice. Impairment generates alternative phenomenological perspectives that, when embraced, can challenge and expand existing approaches to aesthetic practices. The work of disability performance scholar Carrie Sandahl has done a great deal to illuminate the importance of integrating the phenomenology of impairment into theatre and performance studies. Looking specifically at contemporary performance practice and pedagogy, Sandahl argues that including embodied experiences of disability into our discussions of theatre-making and training creates opportunities for expanding the spatial and proprioceptive ways in which we engage the art form.

In the 2002 essay, “Considering Disability: Disability Phenomenology’s Role in Revolutionizing Theatrical Space,” Sandahl demonstrates how disability can give artists across the able-bodied–disabled spectrum new paradigms for approaching how they use performance spaces. Bringing disability perspectives into the theatrical locations where we develop and present our work requires artists (directors, designers, actors, etc.) as well as spectators to reimagine how those spaces can be employed for performance events. This is not about accommodation but rather about creating opportunities for the generation of new ideas. In her

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2005 essay, “Tyranny of the Neutral,” Sandahl applies a similar perspective to the topic of acting training. Here she confronts pedagogical systems that require students to pursue some idealized form of physical “neutrality” in their work in order to allow for full creative expression. Not only does this approach, Sandahl argues, alienate disabled students who may not physically be able to attain the desired, able-bodied “neutrality” dictated by the system, it also limits our understanding of how theatrical expression is nurtured. Rethinking the “neutral” for disabled bodies requires instructors to consider how this concept may limit the horizons and expectations of all bodies engaged in training. It draws attention to the fact there is in fact no “neutral” and, in doing so, liberates how all emerging artists explore their own corporeal possibilities. Sandahl’s work discloses the value in pursuing alternative approaches to impairment and disability, ones that rethink the way in which corporeal difference can perform a generative function within theatre and performance studies.

The move to foreground impairment in our theoretical, historiographical, and practical studies of theatre and performance corresponds with what I read as a general shift in the field of disability studies away from the center-margin framework that had for decades defined the disability experience. Disability studies as an academic field emerged in the wake of strong international disability civil rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Situating itself within a politically charged identity-politics framework, the discipline focused largely on interrogating medical models that through the othering of impairment relegated bodies of difference to the cultural margins. As a means of claiming a disability identity that did not rely on medical systems of diagnosis, “treatment,” and “cure,” disability theorists proposed new frameworks for

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considering the disability experience, the most notable of these being the “social model” discussed in my introduction. The center-margin approach to disability has been productive in the way it has identified the processes by which minority identities have historically been constructed and subsequently delegitimized. Some disability scholars argue, however, that the identity politics framework may no longer be the most effective way to discuss disability in the twenty-first century.

Writing at the start of the new millennium, Lennard Davis offers one of the strongest early critiques of the efficacy of the center-margin model. In his 2002 book *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*, Davis contends that we have entered a new “dismodern era,” one that embraces “the concept that difference is what all of us have in common.” In the wake of late-twentieth-century poststructural theory, identity, Davis explains, is now understood to be “malleable.” What has become important in this new cultural terrain is not our “individual independence” but rather our interdependence, which is largely facilitated and experienced through technology. Disability takes on new significance in this context: “it becomes the identity that links other identities.” As life spans increase and medical technology continues to advance, more people are living with impairments than ever before. The trait that once defined the disability identity has become, to some degree, universalized. In addition, the borders of the normative body continue to change as individuals have become progressively more dependent on various external devices. Disability, particularly with respect to physical impairments and prosthetics, have long challenged the traditional

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boundaries of corporeality. The same logic is now being applied, Davis argues, to our current understandings of the borders of normative bodies.

For Davis, disability in the twenty-first century “signals a new kind of universalism and cosmopolitanism” that can, if approached mindfully, become the basis for a “new ethics.” It is one that uses our shared experiences with corporeal difference as the basis for articulating the rights and protections of our global citizenry. As Peggy Phelan explains, in Davis’s model, disability rather than being the by-product of a normative social structure becomes a performative concept around which cultural and social values are organized. This shift in perspective regarding disability’s relationship to a global culture extends the framework I advanced in this dissertation. While I narrowly used specifically neuropsychological impairments as the organizing principle for understanding the condition of modernité in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Davis employs a multifaceted understanding of the disability experience in his engagement with a still transforming twenty-first century world. In this way, I feel my project presents an opportunity for considering how theatre and performance studies can stay active in conversations about disability and impairment across disciplines.

Tobin Siebers, in his 2010 work Disability Aesthetics while not directly engaging Davis’s dismodernism model, offers what I see as an example of how scholars can use a disability-centered perspective to discuss the generative role the arts play in culture. Siebers focuses attention on the emergence of a modern aesthetics, which includes for him artistic works from the late-nineteenth century onwards. As modern art “refuses harmony, body integrity, and perfect health.” disability becomes the basis for aesthetic representation. Siebers rejects the idea that

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9 Peggy Phelan, “Reconsidering Identity Politics, Essentialism, and Dismodernism: An Afterword” in Bodies in Commotion.
10 Tobin Siebers, Disability Aesthetics (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010), 5.
an idealized concept of the human form determines the value of aesthetic projects. Instead, he asserts, disability has become “integral to modern aesthetics and that the influence of disability on art has grown, not dwindled over the course of time.”

Siebers work, I argue, reflects disability studies’ twenty-first century trajectory—one away from minority identity politics that advances a center-margins paradigm toward one that recognizes disabilities centrality in culture.

It is important to note that Lennard Davis’s most recent work on the concept of bioculture, while still advancing aspects of his framework of dismodernism and the universality of the disability experience, recognizes the political consequences of this new mode of approaching impairment. Bioculture refers to a twenty-first-century cultural condition in which medical sciences, technology, as well as new social frameworks for understanding identity have redefined our concepts of the human. With disability dissolving as a minority identity, unique experiences with impairment risk disappearing from public discourse even though inequality and oppression around such bodily differences still exists. Drawing upon Giorgio Agamben’s concepts of zoë and bios, Davis recognizes that certain disabilities, particularly those that prevent citizens from fully participating in a neoliberal system of consumption, have found a new marginal status that must be addressed.

The categories of bios and zoë in Agamben’s theory refer to the different ways in which human life is categorized within culture. Bios refers to what Agamben calls “bare life,” meaning a life that is granted only the most basic conditions for existence. Such a view of life is

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11 Ibid., 10.
12 For a more comprehensive explanation of Davis’s biocultural model, see Lennard Davis, The End of Normal (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2014).
limited primarily to the sustaining of simple biological functions. No agency or civic rights are
guaranteed to the individual; only the right to bare survival is acknowledged and even that
cannot be guaranteed. Zoe, in contrast, refers to a life that has full value, one that has been
granted the privilege to participate fully in the social and political sphere. Such a life is defined
largely by the civil rights it enjoys.

Davis sees the bios-zoe framework Agamben offers as an effective way to address the
ongoing inequality individuals with disabilities are facing in the twenty-first century. While a
certain view of disability has been universalized with the recent privileging of diversity, the
modernist project of “creat[ing] docile, compliant bodies” still exists. Davis points to what he
sees as a new “dichotomy” of social control. It is one in which two forms of subjectivity exist:
one “implied by diversity,” which sees the subject as “malleable, mobile . . . complex, socially
constructed, and [having] a strong element of free play and choice,” and another that is tied to a
particular construct of disability rooted in certain bodies’ inability to participate fully in a
neoliberal culture. These two subjectivities correspond to Agambens zoe and bios categories:
the former to the full civic life of zoe and the latter to the bare life of bios. Dissolving this divide,
for Davis, should be the guiding objective of twenty-first-century disability studies.

This dissertation while not directly engaging Davis’s recent biocultural model of
disability can certainly be placed in conversation with his key ideas. By examining the
relationship between the history of medicine and experiences with impairment, I recognize the
roots of the biocultural condition in modernist culture. In doing so, I necessarily realize how the
implications of this condition as well as the possibilities for its reimagination can be located in

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14 Davis, *The End of Normal*, 5.
15 Ibid.
historical investigations of modernist performance. My engagement with the concept of modernité where I probe the conditions for its internal contradictions around neuropsychological difference is the means by which I begin meeting this objective. Through the lens of modernité, as I have argued, modernity’s potentiality for collapsing its ideological privileging of normative corporeality can be disclosed.

Disclosing the tension in the modern and highlighting its multiple possibilities suggests that the terms of a twenty-first bioculture are not fixed. This project is, however, only a preliminary move in that direction, since it considers such a narrow aspect of modernist culture. It does, however, offer a template for investigating other performance practices and movements within the modern for how they might also illuminate modernity’s potentiality. Given, for instance, the historical avant-garde’s preoccupation with hysteria and neurological difference, evidenced in the writings of the Surrealists and Antonin Artaud, the early twentieth century, particularly the interwar period, offers rich possibilities for applying the dissertation’s theoretical framework to other cultural contexts. Such work will not only deepen our understanding of the role of impairment in the history of theatre and performance, but it will also help to situate those fields more firmly in the current landscape of disability studies.
Figure 1: Louis Aragon and André Breton, “Le Cinquantenaire de l’ hystérie: 1878–1928,” *La Révolution surréaliste* no. 11 (March 15, 1928): 20–1.
Figure 2: Rouen Cathedral, tympanum from the façade portal of St. John the Baptist. 13\textsuperscript{th} century. Plaster cast from stone. The Bridgeman Art Library. From: https://www.bridgemanimages.com.
Figure 3: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. *Salome Receives the Head of John the Baptist.* 1609-10. Oil on canvas. 91.5 x 106.7 c.m. National Gallery, London.
Figure 4: Gustave Moreau. *Salome Dances Before Herod*. 1876. Oil on panel. 144 x 103.5 c.m. Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles.
Figure 5: Gustave Moreau. *The Apparition*. 1876. Oil on canvas, 55.9 x 46.7 c.m. Fogg Art Museum.
Figure 6: Georges Rochevrosse. *Salome Dancing Before King Herod*. 1887. Oil on canvas. 104.14 x 165.1 cm. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE.
Figure 7: Odilon Redon, *Apparition*, 1883. Charcoal with white gouache highlights on chamois paper. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux.
Figure 8: “The Dancing Salome in Drama and Opera Next Week.” *Evening Telegram*—New York, January 19, 1907.

Figure 10: "Gertrude Hoffmann, Salome dance, no. 1," Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library.
Figure 11: Advertisement, New York Times, July 12, 1908.
Figure 12: “Visitation of Salome,” Evening World, August 8, 1908.
Figure 13: “Visitation of Salome,” Evening World, August 8, 1908.
Figure 14: “Gertrude Hoffmann, Salome dance, no. 7,” Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library.
Figure 15: “La Sylphe,” Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.
Figure 16: “Visitation of Salome,” *Evening World*, August 8, 1908.
Figure 17: “La Sylphe, Danseuse at the Orpheum, in Several Unique Poses,” *Los Angeles Herald*, March 29, 1908, Part II, 7.
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