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# **Acts of recognition: Gesture and national identity in Agnes de Mille's 'Civil War Ballet'**

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## **Abstract**

Through both her dances and writings Agnes de Mille explored what it means to be American. I argue that, in addition to the explicitly America-themed material de Mille chose, her choreography performs national identity through its use of gesture – informed by de Mille's interest in folk dance and the collective unconscious. When looking at much of de Mille's choreography, one is visually struck by its Americanness. It is this act of recognition that begins this enquiry: how does one see de Mille's choreography and recognize its intrinsic Americanness? How did de Mille's choreographic process allow for the expression of national identity through gesture? These questions are explored through an analysis of de Mille's 'Civil War Ballet' from *Bloomer Girl* (1944).

## **Keywords:**

Agnes de Mille

national identity

theatre dance

*Bloomer Girl*

Civil War Ballet

gesture

On the television programme *Eye on Dance* (Ipiotis, 1988) Agnes de Mille once said, ‘I am very interested in human gesture. Gestures don’t lie, you know, they tell the truth. And you can know all about a person from the way he uses hands or feet or head or what’. For de Mille, gesture was at the root of her choreographic expression and exploration of American identity. Among twentieth-century choreographers, Agnes de Mille stands out for her singular use of American subjects and folk forms. While other dance-makers (notably Martha Graham and Paul Taylor) created dances using America as their subject, the breadth of de Mille’s dances and writings exploring what it means to be American places her at the forefront of the discourse. Indeed, de Mille initially achieved a measure of fame with her 1942 Wild West-set ballet *Rodeo*, which was the first success in a string of America-themed ballets and Broadway musicals she would choreograph from the 1940s through the 1990s.

The explicitly American strain in de Mille’s work makes it a natural place to think about national identity in dance. De Mille scholar Barbara Barker argues that ‘throughout her life [...] and in the dances that followed, de Mille searched for the intrinsic American’ (Barker 1996: 142). Yet in addition to the explicitly America-themed material she chose, her choreography performs national identity through its use of gesture – informed by de Mille’s interest in folk dance and the collective unconscious. In an interview on the television programme “*Day at Night*” (1973–1974), de Mille describes the ineffably American quality within her work:

I had a certain quality and John Martin, who was then the critic of *The New York Times*, said ‘I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry but it makes me choke up because it reminds me of things that happened before I was born’. And so that was nice. Oh! And the best criticism I ever had was from Jacob Javits, who saw me do this, and he said ‘when you crossed the stage and do this’ [she salutes her temple with her right index finger], he said ‘ know why I’m an American’. (cunytv75 2011)

It is this act of recognition that interests me. How does one see de Mille’s choreography and recognize its intrinsic Americanness? How did de Mille’s choreographic process allow for the expression of national identity through gesture? Focusing on the ‘Civil War Ballet’ from *Bloomer Girl* (1944),<sup>i</sup> I will explore these questions.

In de Mille’s work it is possible to locate the cultural production of national identity. Drawing upon dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster’s theory of ‘bodily writing’ allows one to see how the body *writes* national identity through gesture and how national identity is written upon the body by the choreography (1995: 15). Apart from the ‘bodily writing’ of de Mille’s choreography, her prolific writings reveal the depth of her interest in identity. *Bloomer Girl* was created in wartime America, and compelling parallels exist between the World War II context of the show’s creation and de Mille’s choreographic methodology.

The ‘Civil War Ballet’ dramatizes the life of women on the home front during war. De Mille herself was acutely aware of the personal toll that war takes; her husband Walter was in Europe fighting in World War II while she was choreographing *Bloomer*

*Girl*. She sought to express the reality of what was happening at home in contrast with the optimistic sense of unity projected by the government and media. ‘We were told that what we who were left at home could do in the name of shared suffering was to live the best possible common-sense lives, tell the truth, mind our business, and keep ourselves in order for the weary ones’, she wrote in her memoir *And Promenade Home*. ‘But we woke in the night frightened. We woke so frightened we were amazed. We stopped in the day and bit our lips with anger and helplessness’ (de Mille 1956: 146).

De Mille’s honest depiction of her wartime experience contrasts with how she felt she and other Americans were expected to behave. Musicologist Raymond Knapp’s work on national identity elucidates the ways that American musical theatre acted upon the audience to (re-)enforce American national identity through mythologizing. Knapp writes, ‘the idealistic tone of nationalism has proven irresistible to Americans, who tend to see nationalism as a kind of super-charged patriotism, and who have, accordingly, enthusiastically produced and embraced their own mythologies’ (2005: 121). Knapp further explains that World War II itself was a catalyst for the production of American mythologies in the musical theatre. While Knapp focuses on the mythological aspect of national identity, John Bush Jones explores the production of national identity spurred by the US government during World War II. Jones describes the ways that the government’s promotion of the war and the ubiquity of war stories in the media ‘create[d] among virtually all Americans a sense of national unity stronger than ever before in the country’s history’ (2003: 124).

*Bloomer Girl* was right in line with governmental wartime propaganda in its portrayal of an American progress narrative about which the audience could feel good. The ‘Civil

War Ballet', in all of its earnest glory, fits somewhat uneasily inside the standard issue musical comedy that surrounds it. The plot revolves around a familial conflict between a hoopskirt manufacturer and his sister-in-law, who advocates bloomers for women instead of hoopskirts. Add in a romance for the ingénue, the glorious music and lyrics of Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg, and de Mille's dances and you have yourself a hit formula.

While *Bloomer Girl* was not an unqualified critical success, audiences responded and the show played for 654 performances and was revived at City Center nine months after the original production closed. The show was revived in a revised concert version as part of the 2001 City Center Encores! series as well.

Yet de Mille was not primarily interested merely in hit status. Revealing her true motivation for agreeing to work on *Bloomer Girl*, she wrote, 'I took this show in order to do a ballet about women in war – and we don't find the war funny. A frivolous ending would not be true to what everyone in the whole world is feeling' (de Mille 1956: 194–95). De Mille viewed herself as a patriot, yet one who was well aware of the human cost of war. In *And Promenade Home*, she explains her view of war's social function in defining identity:

The emotional release of war has been by no means restricted to the individual; war uses the whole community, binding individual to group as our life does not often permit. [...] For we must have periodic Dionysian release, and if we cannot come by this through regular channels, we will have it through gang adventure, lynchings, witch hunts, revival meetings and, most cathartic of all, large-scale slaughter. (de Mille 1956: 208)

De Mille's thoughts on the purpose of war as a binding agent help contextualize her choreography during the war. Her theory that war helps build community is perhaps most notably realized in her depiction of the relationship between the individual and the group in the 'Civil War Ballet'. Her view of war as a societal 'Dionysian release' expresses her belief in ritual, and in the subconscious forces that inform our lives.

De Mille's dances, then, become a site for expressing and disseminating a new American national identity. Among her contemporaries whose dances also expressed American national identity the choreographer that springs to mind first is Jerome Robbins, although I would argue that his work expresses an especially urban identity (in musicals from *On the Town* to *West Side Story*) as opposed to de Mille's seemingly rural, almost heartland one. Her choreography is able to effectively produce national identity because of its incorporation of folk dance forms. Folk dance and social dance are vital to the study of how dance imparts national identity, as they spring from specific historical contexts. Anthropologist and dance scholar Jane C. Desmond exhorts that '[b]y enlarging our studies of bodily "texts" to include [...] social dance, theatrical performance, and ritualized movement – we can further our understandings of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement' (1993–1994: 34). De Mille's choreography certainly contains elements of social dance, theatrical performance and ritual.

De Mille biographer Carol Easton explains that 'folk dancing was considered too common to be taken seriously by artists [...], Agnes was intrigued by the history and the possibilities of dances that were created and performed by ordinary people who had kept

them alive' (1996: 54). De Mille used folk dances as a starting point because of their implicit embodiment of national identity. For example, on the 1959 musical *Juno*, she worked with an expert in Irish dancing to learn the traditional Irish dances that shaped her choreography. Historical accuracy and slavish devotion to original form were not necessarily de Mille's purpose in turning to folk and social dance; the folk forms were part of her meticulous research methods. Part of what made de Mille's work unique was that she knew not just from where and when to borrow, but how to bend these borrowed forms to her particular vision – which itself was a melting pot of influences much like America itself.

De Mille was concerned with the process of making dances by manipulating the collective unconscious. 'The individual as a personality, then, has his own code in space and rhythm', she wrote. 'It is evolved from his life history and from his race memory or, as Jung calls it, the collective unconscious. It is just the manipulation of these suggestions through time-space that is the material of choreography' (de Mille and Aloff 2011: 151). Viewed in this light, it becomes difficult to separate de Mille's choreography from its sociocultural roots, or from the ways that the dancing body (re)presents national and social identity. Everyday gesture becomes a basis for dance movement. De Mille was concerned with the semantics of gesture, writing, 'We were adding gestures and rhythms we had grown up with [...]. This is not a triviality; it is the seed and base of the whole choreographic organization. If dance gesture means anything, it means the life behind the movement' (Easton 1996: 138).

For de Mille and other expressionist choreographers in the early part of the twentieth century, the 'life behind the movement' was found within. Foster notes that

these dance-makers ‘attributed this corporeal reality to a manifestation of the psyche. Thus, the body attained a new autonomous existence as a collection of physical facts, even as this physicality was seen as resulting [...] from the political and economic forces shaping the individual’ (1995: 13). The choreographic process becomes a way to externalize the internal, to make the unseen visible. The invisible forces that construct social and national identity take root in the unconscious and are revealed in our everyday movements and gestures. The dancing body heightens these everyday gestures and provides a new way of looking at movements otherwise taken for granted. Recognizing the fact that de Mille was working within the musical theatre, dance historian and choreographer Liza Gennaro posits that ‘De Mille was able to employ the non-verbal communication of dance to express an unspoken aspect of the libretto’ (n.d.).

The ‘Civil War Ballet’ in *Bloomer Girl* begins with the announcement that Fort Sumter has been fired upon. The men embrace the women and disperse. Staccato chords and militaristic drum beats fill the air. In one of the ballet’s signature gestures, a soldier whirls his jacket above his head in a call to arms. To his left, women repeatedly contract and release their torsos in motions of mourning as if they are trying to expel the news that the war has come to their lives. Their repeated contractions embody the tensions many women felt, in being implored to be strong for their husbands and yet experiencing private anxiety and fear; again, this reflects de Mille’s own experiences during the war. The repeated rise and fall of their torsos implies that these women will bend but not break.

De Mille’s *mise en scène* transmits a sense of resoluteness and moral duty to the nation. The men proudly go to war without hesitation, illustrating an inherent strength of

the mid-century American character. There is an air of urgency, fear and anticipation to the movement. The last soldier exits as the women stand and stare in his direction. They perform waving gestures as a phrase from ‘Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!’ is heard. In the ballet, movement springs forth from character and situation rather than existing for its own sake.

The dance continues with one woman pacing in opposition to the stillness of the rest. The tense, fretful walking surely resonated with wartime audiences, many of whom were similarly pacing around their homes, waiting for their loved ones to return. Small groups of dancers do legato balletic square dances in the background, doing slowed down versions of curtseys, do-si-dos, and promenades. These perform the necessary function of distraction from the war and illustrate the ways that the community comes together during wartime. De Mille wrote that in her dances ‘the tension and controls were balletic even when national folk dances were incorporated into the choreography’ (de Mille and Aloff 2011: 138). A solo dancer comes forward on her knees with movements recalling de Mille’s idol, Martha Graham, her hands cupped in a pleading gesture before turning into clenched fists. The dancer’s focus ascends heavenward before she collapses and pounds the earth with her fists. She rises and spins back into the group that is doing folk dances in the back. This moment dramatizes the despair that de Mille and others experienced while going about their daily lives during the war. Suddenly, there is a moment of stillness during which the women reveal the despair underneath their seemingly happy exteriors. They freeze in moments of distress: one dancer raises her left hand in a gesture that implores whatever or whoever is approaching to stop, and covers

her mouth with her right hand. One woman kneels and hides her face in the skirt of another who looks up to the heavens as if for divine intervention.

This momentary stillness is followed by pedestrian walking patterns that are interrupted by a dancer I refer to hereafter as the woman in black. She performs a brief gestural solo, holding both hands behind her head, trying to free herself of some terrible thought before sinking to the ground as if in defeat. After two brief solos by other women, the woman in black is seen clutching at her abdomen, then clasping and unclasping her hands before reaching down to grasp at the earth for stability. Another woman comes forward with pleading arms, and circles upstage before doing an attitude turn to the ground with anguish. She rises and gestures to the far-off distance, miming the motion of caressing her absent soldier's face.

Church bells start to ring, indicating the soldier's homecoming. The women dance an exuberant dance of joy, with their arms in a V-shape above their heads, repeating the same arabesque turns from the mournful middle section of the dance. Everyone joins except the woman in black, who remains collapsed on the ground in grief. Another woman rushes over to her, helps her up and carries her upstage. There is a moment where the women expectantly look stage left in the direction of the approaching soldiers, hoping that they have all returned. The soldiers enter in silence and go to their partners. The woman in black frantically rushes from couple to couple in search of her man, who has not returned.

One reunited couple begins a slowly accelerating dance that reflects the gradual return to normalcy after the war. The dance becomes more joyful as the whole group joins in, while on the side the woman in black kneels alone. De Mille's use of traditional

Anglo-American country dance forms here (including visible elements of the cakewalk, the sailor's hornpipe, traditional square dance and the Virginia reel) reflects the sense of national identity expressed by folk dance and the surge of pride that the characters surely felt after winning the war and being reunited. They turn to folk dance when exulting in their new sense of American identity. Gennaro argues that de Mille's choice of the country dance 'is notable since by the 1860s country-dance in America had been replaced by the polka, the mazurka, and the waltz as popular social dances' (2011: 54). Exact historical accuracy is not what de Mille is after in this moment; rather, she expresses American identity by gathering anachronistic dance forms and melding them into something evocative of a collective past.

A woman repeats the gesture of the soldier from the dance's beginning, waving her arm wildly overhead, this time in celebration rather than as a call to arms. The group begins to take up this step as one woman joyously dances up to the woman in black. The woman in black slowly rises as the rest of the dancers perform exultant leaps and wild celebratory gestures with their upper bodies and arms, in stark contrast with her stillness. She remains alone in the centre while the group dances about her. She finally joins the group of dancers as they take up a gesture with arms overhead, which she turns into fists railing at the sky. Before kneeling back to gently touch the ground this time, the woman in black rises and flings her right arm overhead twice, recalling the soldier's motion that began the dance. She leans into a backbend, and raises both arms overhead as if in victory. Two women come to either side, grasp her hands, and then pump their arms towards the sky as the ballet ends.

De Mille's interest in the interplay between individual and group is clearly expressed through the woman in black and her isolation. She acknowledged this technique, writing that 'I use a still figure, usually female, waiting on the stage [...] with modifying groups revolving about, always somehow suggesting the passing of time and life experience' (de Mille and Aloff 2011: 149). De Mille is as interested in the individual as she is in the group; both are important parts of the whole. The woman in black's eventual re-entry to the group illustrates Knapp's notion of 'a specifically American strain of inclusiveness and reconciliation' (2005: 122). The grieving woman in black must be accepted back into the community in order to preserve the American ideal of inclusiveness.

De Mille simultaneously subverts and reifies notions of national identity in the 'Civil War Ballet'. Her decision to portray the suffering of women on the home front while men are off fighting war was controversial to the other members of the production team (who tried to force changes to the ballet's concept): 'The staff knew that my lack of humor in the war ballet was deliberate and stubborn. They kept clamoring for the exultant side of war' (de Mille 1956: 198). The placement of the ballet late in the musical's second act fits nicely with the plot, although the ballet's tone and seriousness is at odds with the ebullience of the rest of the show. The sudden shift from musical comedy to de Mille's dance drama explains the pressure on her to change the ballet. However, she was determined to tell a story that contradicted the prevalent, sanctioned one: 'This is not the way the history books will tell the war story, but this is the way we knew it' (de Mille 1956: 145). Despite her insistence upon showing the true cost of war, de Mille also allowed that 'the ideas of freedom, patriotism and brotherhood might be considered and

even mentioned, albeit, indirectly', which made her ballet more compatible with accepted notions of national identity of the time (1956: 193).

De Mille gets a lot of mileage out of a fairly limited movement vocabulary in the 'Civil War Ballet'. The choreography's reliance on gesture, stillness, walking and folk dance means that there is very little technical dance movement within its structure. The few dance movements that de Mille uses stand out for the expressionistic quality they demonstrate. Through the use of repetition, she is able to produce different emotional effects with the same dance step or gesture. This is particularly evident in the soldier's gesture that opens the second section of the ballet, which is repeated first by one woman, then the woman in black, and finally by the entire group at the ballet's end. The gesture first signals a call to arms, then becomes a tragic movement, before finally evolving into a celebratory one. The progression of this one gesture encapsulates the broader emotional development of the dance.

In this ballet, gesture becomes more important than traditional dance movement to express the emotional life of the characters. Foster, writing about solo dance artists of the early twentieth century such as de Mille, argued that 'all these dances focused on the danced character's internal experience. Rather than define the character, dance movement manifested an interior process undergone by the character during performance' (Foster 1986: 149). De Mille's use of gesture thus becomes an examination of deep impulses.

She explains:

When I, as an artist, am moved, I must respond in my own instinctive way; and because I am a choreographer, I respond through my instinctive gestures [...].

Somehow, as in the grooves in a gramophone record, the cutting edge of my emotion follows a track played deep into the subconscious. (de Mille and Aloff 2011: 153)

Gesture was a constant in de Mille's choreographic vocabulary, and was often the structure upon which she built her dances. Her interest in the collective unconscious and its connection to everyday gesture informed her choreographic methodology. Of course, not every moment or gesture performs national identity in this ballet; certain gestures, as well as the emotions expressed within the ballet, can indeed be read as universally human. Nonetheless, it is possible to see American identity expressed in the movement throughout, certainly due to de Mille's strategic employment of folk dance and authentic gesture.

De Mille's modernist, expressionistic methods of choreographic composition allowed her to theatricalize everyday gestures in ways that may seem dated to contemporary audiences more accustomed to the gymnastic displays so common in theatrical dance today. Her interest in Americana, folk dance and gesture coalesce into a body of work, both written and choreographic, that investigates the very nature of America and American identity. Indeed, the title of one of her memoirs, *And Promenade Home*, is the name of a step in American square dancing. She joined the pantheon of American myth-makers with her iconic dream ballet in *Oklahoma!*, although within her work there are compelling statements about America that question accepted national identity. With the 'Civil War Ballet', de Mille demanded that America recognize all parts of itself – not only the men away at war, but also the myriad domestic stories of loss that

were not being told. National identity itself is multifaceted, and de Mille was intent upon realizing this onstage. She achieved this through her careful interpolation of authentic, recognizably American gestures.

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Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This analysis is based upon the 1956 television version of *Bloomer Girl*, for which Agnes de Mille recreated her dances.