Dancing with Deleuze: Modernism and the Imperceptible Animal
Carrie Rohman

Deleuze often frames his attraction to modernist writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Franz Kafka through the lens of exceptional talent. For instance, when discussing Lawrence’s “becoming-tortoise,” Deleuze and Guattari note, “Lawrence is another of the writers who leave us troubled and filled with admiration because they were able to tie their writing to real and unheard-of becomings.”¹ But this Deleuzian attraction to modernists can be explained not by the radical “genius” of these individual artists, but more productively by the eruption of animality in a post-Darwinian era and the particular becomings-animal that era cultivates. As I have outlined in earlier work, modernist literature exhibits humanism’s intensified engagement with the discourse of species partly in response to the crises that Darwin’s and Freud’s theories set in motion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² Thus Deleuze’s attentions to modernist becomings are owed in some measure to the particularities of modernism’s heightened attunement to the species axis. When Deleuze and Guattari single out Lawrence’s “becoming-tortoise” as exemplary of affective deterritorialization, we recognize the centrality of modernist literature’s becomings-animal in Deleuze’s broad theoretical framework.³ What has been less recognized in discussions of Deleuzian modernism is the coincidence of dancing with moments of inhuman becoming. Dance as a practice of visceral, embodied transformation might be understood as particularly creaturely or inhuman among the arts. If dance is the most “animal” aesthetic form, and if Deleuze views the arts as being haunted by animality, then moments of inhuman dancerly
becomings in modernist literature can be considered charged minoritarian zones of metamorphosis.

Dancing remains one of the more interesting yet critically under-examined elements of D. H. Lawrence’s writing, despite the recurrence of dancing as a variation or refrain in modernist becomings. The relation between dancing and becoming highlights questions of movement, perception, the bodily, and the improvisational that put pressure on the species boundary and render it more porous. A Deleuzian understanding of art as having its roots in inhuman forces allows us to make sense of the well-known, yet under-theorized, moments in *Women in Love* when both Gudrun and Birkin dance. Gudrun’s scene in particular, where she dances with a herd of cattle, calls for a careful parsing through a Deleuzian lens. Rather than some “expressive” or symbolic activity, these moments in Lawrence’s novel should be understood as becomings-imperceptible/animal that link creativity to an inhuman sexuality, and that access a vibratory energy connecting living beings with cosmic capacities. Lawrence’s Deleuzian dancing is a “lapsing out” or line of flight into the inhuman; it also parallels modern dance’s emergent experimentations with the possibilities of the body in terms of invention or innovation in the early twentieth century. Dancing in Lawrence, as in Nietzsche, has a strong affiliation with philosophy in that both writers seem to emphasize the relinquishing of outmoded, humanist templates and to enact what William Connolly might call the “teleosearching” for new concepts, concepts in Deleuze’s sense. Thus dance as a minoritarian art form should occupy a more pivotal status in critical discussions of Deleuzian modernism.
In scholarly analyses of Lawrence’s work, moderate attention has been given to Anna’s dance while pregnant in *The Rainbow*, but a number of critics have also treated the question of dance in *Women in Love*. It is also interesting to note Gerald Doherty’s highly self-conscious, almost performative use of the trope of dance in his introduction to *Theorizing Lawrence*. He suggests dance is a metaphor for the kind of thinking that he himself enacts in the book, and also that the ideal reader of the book’s contents will approach it as through a dance. Doherty seems to trade on the role of dance in Lawrence’s work here, which might implicitly signal the importance of the way dance actually functions in much of Lawrence’s writing.

One of the first major attentions to dance in *Women in Love* occurs in the Breadalby section, where Hermione convinces Ursula, Gudrun and another woman to join her in making “a little ballet, in the style of the Russian Ballet of Pavlova and Nijinsky.” While the reference to dance revolutionary Nijinsky might lead the reader to anticipate something unconventional, the little ballet that the women enact appears rather clichéd and representational, despite a few scenes that move the male onlookers. After the formal “ballet,” when the group of friends begin to dance socially, Lawrence provides the novel’s first deterritorializing movement through Birkin, who “when he could get free from the weight of the people present, whom he disliked, danced rapidly and with real gaiety. And how Hermione hated him for this irresponsible gaiety” (92). The contessa, who had been the ballet’s fourth dancer, watches Birkin and replies, “He is not a man, he is a chameleon, a creature of change” (92). This brief scene already sets up a difference between “traditional” or imitative dance (majoritarian) and an improvisational, excessive movement that is characterized by creaturely becomings, and thus a certain minor
unpredictability and “schizo” refusal of the Oedipalized (hu)man. Hermione silently mimicks the charge, “He is not a man, he is treacherous, not one of us” (92). Birkin’s inhuman, rhizomatic coming-to-life in his own capricious dance destroys her, in part because “of his power to escape, to exist, other than she did, because he was not consistent, not a man, less than a man” (92).

As Lawrence leads up to the extended dancing scene in “Water-Party,” he emphasizes Gudrun’s desire for “life.” When Gudrun sits beneath the trees and listens to Ursula singing a German folk song, she has “the yearning come into her heart” (165). In contrast to Ursula who “seemed so peaceful and sufficient unto herself, sitting there unconsciously crooning her song, strong and unquestioned at the centre of her own universe,” Gudrun feels herself “outside” (165). She not only feels external to Ursula’s attentions, however. More pointedly, the text describes her as a non-participant in the living: “Always this desolating, agonized feeling, that she was outside life, an onlooker, whilst Ursula was a partaker, caused Gudrun to suffer from a sense of her own negation” (165). Gudrun interrupts her sister to suggest that she “do Dalcroze” while Ursula sings a different tune. Gudrun’s difficulty in making this suggestion is emphasized by her “curious muted tone” and by the fact that Ursula doesn’t hear her properly (165). Having to repeat the request reinforces how difficult the movement toward a minor form or experience really is.

Lawrence’s reference to Dalcroze not only indicates his awareness of various dance forms that were in circulation in the early part of the century, but it also confirms the negotiation with animality in Gudrun’s cattle dance that I will elaborate shortly. Elgin Mellown catalogues Lawrence’s grasp of various developments in early twentieth-
century music and dance, and reminds us that Hermione Roddice’s character is based on Lady Ottoline Morrell, who was a London patron for Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes. Mellown suggests that Lawrence “must have known that the motions which Emile Jacques-Dalcroze had evolved to teach music were based on natural gestures rather than the artificial positions of the ballet vocabulary” (56-7). He goes on to call the “version” of Gudrun depicted with the Highland cattle “a creature of primitive instincts” (57).

Both Mellown and Mark Kinkead-Weekes note the Isadora Duncan-like movements of this scene. While Lawrence’s actual exposure to Duncan’s performances is unverified, Mellown suggests that he was influenced by his wife Freida’s own “fluid, expressive movements” that were inspired by the experiments in movement taking place at this time (57). Moreover, Kinkead-Weekes describes the transition in this scene from rhythmic, “harmonious” movements to something more rhapsodic—and thus more natural or animal—“like Isadora Duncan, perhaps in Nietzschean/ Dionysiac mood.”

We do well to unpack for a moment Duncan’s own engagements with the inhuman and with a Deleuzian emphasis on the vibrational.

In her linking of Darwinian and Deleuzian concepts of sexual selection, the refrain, aesthetic display and spectacle, Elizabeth Grosz returns again and again to the vibratory. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari note, “Sensation is excitation itself, not insofar as it is gradually prolonged and passes into the reaction but insofar as it is preserved or preserves its vibrations.” When speculating that sexuality itself is best understood in terms of pleasure rather than heteronormative reproduction, Grosz asserts, “Vibrations, waves, oscillations, resonances affect living bodies, not for any higher purpose but for pleasure alone. Living beings are vibratory beings: vibration is their mode of
differentiation, the way they enhance and enjoy the forces of the earth itself.” Duncan, whose theories about dance are often overlooked because of the “sensational” life she lived, addresses the vibratory again and again in her essays, collected in *The Art of the Dance*. For instance, in her section “Movement is Life,” Duncan writes, “When asked for the pedagogic program of my school, I reply: ‘Let us first teach little children to breathe, *to vibrate*, to feel, and to become one with the general harmony and movement of nature’” (my emphasis). When Grosz delineates the tendency of living entities to intensify themselves, we can understand Duncan’s claims about children vibrating within a Deleuzian aesthetic register: “What music and the arts indicate is that (sexual) taste and erotic appeal are not reducible to the pragmatic world of survival, although of course subject to its broad principle as a limit: they indicate that those living beings that ‘really live,’ that intensify life—for its own sake, for the sake of intens[e] or sensation—bring something new to the world, create something that has no other purpose than to intensify, to experience itself” (*Chaos* 39). Vibration in Duncan’s writings correlates with a Deleuzian marshaling of inhuman and cosmic intensities. Duncan writes at another point in that essay: “Man has not invented the harmony of music. It is one of the underlying principles of life. Neither could the harmony of movement be invented: it is essential to draw one’s conception of it from Nature herself, and to seek the rhythm of human movement from the rhythm of water in motion, from the blowing of the winds on the world, in all the earth’s movements, in the motions of animals, fish, birds, reptiles, and even in primitive man, whose body still moved in harmony with nature” (78). This statement evokes the Deleuzian claim that human art is haunted by the animal.
Lawrence evokes a Duncan-esque, intensifying experience through Gudrun’s rhapsodic dancing, and we can read the rhythmic opening of this scene as performing just this kind of Deleuzian transfer of forces:

Gudrun, looking as if some invisible chain weighed on her hands and feet, began slowly to dance in the eurythmic manner, pulsing and fluttering rhythmically with her feet, making slower, regular gestures with her hands and arms, now spreading her arms wide, now raising them above her head, now flinging them softly apart, and lifting her face, her feet all the time beating and running to the measure of the song, as if it were some strange incantation, her white, rapt form drifting here and there in a strange impulsive rhapsody, seeming to be lifted on a breeze of incantation, shuddering with strange little runs. (166)

Lawrence’s first image exaggerates, through the evocation of chains, the weight of the body, and the body’s connection to the earth. In contrast to the ethereal and gravity-defying aesthetic of traditional ballet, Duncan’s “modern” dance emphasized the weightiness of the body and eschewed more rigid poses such as the arabesque, which she felt contorted the “natural” body. Carrie Preston has also pointed out that Duncan’s exposed and full thighs themselves ushered in a new way to experience and represent women’s bodies within a dance and political aesthetic at this time.\(^{15}\) Given other scenes in *Women in Love*—such as Birkin’s somewhat masochistic “becoming-plant” episode after Hermione smashes him over the head with a lapis-lazuli stone—it is useful to recall that modern dance has a specific relationship to the earth. As Elizabeth Dempster puts it, “Modern dance has often been termed ‘terrestrial.’”\(^{16}\) Therefore, the way in which
Lawrence emphasizes the feet just slightly more than the gestures of arms and hands in this segment also contributes to Gudrun’s earth-bound, vibrational method. Her feet pulse, flutter, beat, run, and make her body shudder.

Lawrence’s evocation of a barefooted, Duncan-like rhythmic stampeding thus highlights the sense of a Deleuzian transmission of earthly forces to human shudderings. As I have noted elsewhere, Grosz theorizes the Deleuzian role of vibration for the artistic as a kind of invitation to the creative. We inevitably partake in the tremor of the rhythmic and the territorial in Deleuze’s terms, to be sure, but the vibratory also functions as an incitement to become more vibratory:

Vibration is the common thread or rhythm running through the universe from its chaotic inorganic interminability to its most intimate forces of inscription on living bodies of all kinds and back again. It is vibration that constitutes the harmony of the universe with all its living components, enabling them to find a vibratory comfort level – neither too slow or too fast – not only to survive but above all to generate excess, further vibratory forces, more effects, useless effects, qualities that can’t be directly capitalized. (Chaos 54)

Gudrun’s becoming-inhuman at this initial moment is most clearly registered through Lawrence’s rhythmic invocation of a “rapt form drifting here and there” on “a breeze of incantation.” Later, when the cattle arrive, those animals will clarify Gudrun’s inhuman becoming-artistic. Here, the drift of pulsation, excess and display works from earth and wind to Gudrun’s activations of a strange kind of rapture. So too Ursula’s singing intensifies the invitation to the vibrational, and she notices “some of the unconscious
ritualistic suggestion of the complex shuddering and waving and drifting of her sister’s white form” (166). Waving and drifting evoke not only the experimentations in bodily practice that marked the emergence of modern dance, but also the sort of philosophical “teleosearching” for new concepts that Birkin inhabits throughout the novel.

The “unconscious ritualistic suggestion” that Ursula observes is made all the more Deleuzian and Groszian when we investigate the details of Ursula’s switch from a German folk song to a spontaneous American tune for Gudrun’s “performance.” When Ursula finally understands that Gudrun wants to “do Dalcroze,” she can’t “for her life think of anything to sing” (166). Then Ursula suddenly begins “in a laughing, teasing voice: ‘My love——is a high-born lady——’” (166). The Cambridge edition notes for *Women in Love* provide us with the extraordinary information that this chorus comes from the American song “My Gal is a High Born Lady,” which was “advertised as ‘The best high-class Coon song of the day’” (550). In addition to a trading on perceived black or inter-racial “suggestiveness” that we might want to trouble here, Lawrence’s choice includes an especially animal element of seduction. The editors’ notes continue by providing the following excerpt from this popular song: “‘My gal is a high born lady, / She’s black, but not to[o] shady, / Feathered like a peacock, just as gay, / She is not colored, she was born that way’” (550).

Again, there would be much more to say about the particular calibration of racial and class discourses here, but for the purposes of this discussion, I want to point out that the peacock brings us squarely into an analysis of the aesthetic workings of sexual selection. The peacock is one of nature’s most evident examples of the way in which extreme or excessive bodily extravagance attends the dynamics of sexual dimorphism
and attraction. The peacock, then, is an especially keen example of the way that sexuality itself requires creativity: “sexuality needs to harness excessiveness and invention to function at all” (Chaos 64).

Grosz has refined her understanding of art’s connections to sexual selection in her most recent book Becoming Undone. She emphasizes the bodily and affective nature of artistic experience via Deleuze and insists upon Darwin’s assertion that animals have the power of discrimination or taste that is central to aesthetic appeal and choice. “Music, painting, dance, and the other arts,” she explains, “are only possible because the power to appeal and enhance seems to reside in regular ways in [animals’] use of colors, sounds, and shapes for the purposes of resonance and intensification. Art is the formal structuring or framing of these intensified bodily organs and processes which stimulate the receptive organs of observers and coparticipants” (Undone 135). On some level, therefore, Gudrun’s dance with the cattle is already prefigured in Ursula’s choice of tunes. Being compared to one feathered like a peacock reinforces the superfluous qualities of an aesthetic engagement that is “suggestive,” extravagant, and at least partly outside the human.

Lawrence’s initial portrayal of the Highland cattle might best be described as emphasizing their aesthetic properties and their phenomenological potential, no matter how “diminished” that potential may have been considered by the author. The cattle are “vividly coloured and fleecy in the evening light, their horns branching into the sky, pushing forward their muzzles inquisitively, to know what it was all about. Their eyes glittered through their tangle of hair, their naked nostrils were full of shadow” (167). As mentioned above, vivid coloring is an essential element of animals’ bodily excess within
the lexicon of sexual selection. Moreover, the image of horns “branching into the sky” emphasizes the aesthetic nature of secondary sexual characteristics in their precise sexual role within the dynamics of enticement. In other words, the horns are, evolutionarily speaking, a good example of Grosz’s idea that sexuality must be creative to be itself. This, coupled with the image of inquisitive muzzles and glittering eyes, sets us up to read the cattle as an audience who attempt to discern or distinguish the aesthetic power of Gudrun’s performance.

When Gudrun suggests that the cattle are “charming,” therefore, the charm is not merely sexual. Or rather, it is sexual in a much richer register than we typically assert in critical discussions of Lawrence and sexuality. The cattle are not only or even primarily metaphorical stand-ins for men or male sexuality. Rather, they are charming because they invite Gudrun into an embodiment of a “mating” dance that is not only about sexuality, to be sure, but also is as much about the becoming-artistic of the human through vibrational excess and a Deleuzian harnessing of inhuman forces. Gudrun’s desire to perform a Deleuzian dance with cattle is clearly linked to all the characters’ experiments in living and in being, to their attempts to experience themselves as self-overcoming, to use a Nietzschean phrase. When Lawrence writes of Gudrun that it was “evident that she had a strange passion to dance before the sturdy, handsome cattle,” the phrase “strange passion” would seem even more relevant than the descriptors “sturdy, handsome” (167). This strange passion parallels Birkin’s own variations on the “grotesque step-dance” (168) that I will discuss shortly.

Another way of thinking about this would have us emphasizing the “strangeness” of the very peacockian excess that all creatures inhabit when becoming-intense,
becoming-other, and becoming-artistic. Thus, I would want to elaborate upon one of my earlier claims about Lawrence, the claim that we ought to read sexuality in his work as an important component of a larger recuperation of animality for the human subject in modernism. Inhuman becomings in Lawrence also exhibit vibrational shudderings of the creative, which open us to the emergence of difference or the new. These becomings privilege movement or change, which not only signals the significance of dance in Lawrence’s thematics, but also helps to clarify Birkin’s search for new concepts and his distaste for static or clichéd mores or ideas. Thus Gudrun’s “strange” dance in the novel functions as a kind of template for the inhuman becoming-excessive that Deleuze and Grosz locate as foundational for aesthetic intensities and that Lawrence makes central to so many of his literary-philosophical explorations.

The role of inhuman forces in Gudrun’s “becoming” cattle is registered in part by Lawrence through the power of electric currents. The second major description of Gudrun’s dancing is more Duncanesque than the first, incorporating the terms “unconscious sensation,” “uncanny,” “fluctuations,” “hypnotised” (167-68). Central to this second description is the line, “She could feel them just in front of her, it was as if she had the electric pulse from their breasts running into her hands. Soon she would touch them, actually touch them” (168). Andrew Harrison discusses the linguistic and thematic role of electricity in the novel as it relates to Lawrence’s entanglements with Futurism. He analyses the way that Women in Love “places the overwhelming emphasis not on strict chronological verisimilitude but on the psychological shifts which accompanied electrical modernization.” Harrison notes that the connection between Gerald and Gudrun is dangerously “magnetic” throughout the text (Women in Love 120)
and that in relationships with Gerald the “violent electrical vocabulary does not work up to a new awareness of impersonality, opening up new insights and new forms of symbolism, as it had for Ursula in the final pages of The Rainbow. Instead it recounts a form of destructive discharge that there is no getting beyond” (18). In contrast, Harrison suggests, Birkin and Ursula are distinguished by “their ability to ‘earth’ or ‘ground’ the current through their polarity” (19). Moreover, for them, “an articulate channeling of electrical energies results in a creative kind of closed circuit” (19).

For Gudrun it is the cattle, it is animality that is “grounding” her own “electric” energies, enabling a circuit that is specifically trans-species or inter-species. I want to read electricity in this moment as a force that enables Gudrun’s “communicative or contagious” becoming (Thousand Plateaus 238). Electricity functions in Lawrence’s scene as the conduit of inhuman or cross-creaturely forces. When re-examining the details of Deleuze and Guattari’s language in the opening of “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible” in A Thousand Plateaus, their introduction of the concept becoming-animal trades on electric capacities: “there is a circulation of impersonal affects, an alternate current that disrupts signifying projects as well as subjective feelings, and constitutes a nonhuman sexuality” (233, my emphasis). To parrot Deleuze and Guattari’s own discussion of the 1972 film Willard: in the Lawrence scene, “it’s all there.” Gudrun’s becoming does not “proceed by resemblance” because she is ultimately inventing her own dance with the cattle, improvising her line of flight from the human (233). Moreover, the herd of cattle instantiates precisely the multiplicity, proliferation or pack that Deleuze and Guattari, perhaps problematically, install at the heart of such alliances (233). Gudrun’s “electric” becoming also “forestalls attempts at
professional, conjugal, or Oedipal reterritorialization” (233), which is what makes Gerald’s interference in her experience so traumatic and violent. Because Gudrun, if we are to believe Deleuze and Guattari, is partaking in “involution,” which is specifically not regression, and which is specifically creative: “Becoming is involutionary, involution is creative” (238). Thus Gerald’s interdiction obstructs what can be seen as a core modality of Gudrun’s creative, or we might say “energetic” living or being.

We ought to see this sort of involution in the works of modernists such as Lawrence, Woolf, and Kafka as native to that era because of the post-Darwinian specificity of humanism’s crisis vis-à-vis the animal. This helps to explain why modernist writers occupy a block, a peopling, a band of intensity in Deleuze’s own writing. The heightened awareness of our deep historico-evolutionary connection to other animals in the early twentieth century produces precisely the kind of “very special becomings-animal” that Deleuze and Guattari locate in the vampire block from the 1700s (237). What’s surprising is that they don’t overtly identify their own theorizing of the modernist block of becomings-animal, but tend to frame it through the veneration of individual authors. That tendency is a rather ironic valorization of the personal, what might be described as a sort of slippage into arborescent thinking about individual “genius,” rather than a recognition of the particular assemblage of human animalities in the modernist moment.

Returning to the scene, the fact that Gerald puts a halt to Gudrun’s “communion” with the cattle has always called readers’ attention to the importance of her “strange” dance with the cattle. That dance is clearly a valuable experience of becoming-other and becoming-imperceptible that Gerald cuts off, and it seems that Gudrun is never able to
recapture this kind of redemptive “grounding” in the inhuman. It is true that one can read certain moments in Gudrun’s dance as potentially aggressive or even destructive, as when “[a] terrible shiver of fear and pleasure went through her” (168). But I would argue for seeing this scene as, at the very least, fluctuating for Gudrun, and therefore more productively as perhaps the only moment when she approaches the kind of grounded, creative balance that Birkin and Ursula are able to achieve more regularly. Not only is the experience of becoming one that profoundly dislocates our normative sense of self, but creative sexuality also involves “dangerous” excesses of the body and of identity that can unsettle and disrupt. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, “love itself is a war machine endowed with strange and somewhat terrifying powers” (*Thousand Plateaus* 278). That said, the critical tendency, as evidenced in Ken Russell’s 1969 film adaptation of the novel, is to highlight a sadistic strain in Gudrun’s relation to the cattle. But it is only after Gerald stops her that she turns decidedly aggressive with these animals, rushing “sheer upon the long-horned bullocks” who snort in “terror” and run off (169-70). Not long afterwards she strikes Gerald, in the first violent moment of their relationship.

I want to examine a few additional details of Gudrun’s “rapt trance” (167) before moving on to a discussion of Birkin. A slightly longer quotation of Lawrence’s second major description of the dance will help here:

[She] went in a strange, palpitating dance towards the cattle, lifting her body towards them as if in a spell, her feet pulsing as if in some little frenzy of unconscious sensation, her arms, her wrists, her hands stretching and heaving and falling and reaching and reaching and falling, her breasts lifted and shaken towards the cattle, her throat exposed as in some
voluptuous ecstasy towards them, whilst she drifted imperceptibly nearer,
an uncanny white figure carried away in its own rapt trance, ebbing in
strange fluctuations upon the cattle. (168)

The above discussion of creative sexuality sheds light on a reading of Gudrun’s lifted and
shaking breasts. Again, the “mating dance” here is about more than just mating. It is
also inherently about excess, display, taste and discernment in Gudrun’s becoming-cow
as creative involution. This scene also reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari’s admonition
that becomings-molecular in sexuality are becomings-animal but have “no need for
bestialism” as such (Thousand Plateaus 279). And in this case, we see the discernible
wading toward the indiscernible, as Gudrun drifts “imperceptibly nearer” the cattle.

Deleuze and Guattari continue to explain that the rites of sexuality are “not so much a
question of making love with animals. Becomings-animal are basically of another power,
since their reality resides not in an animal one imitates or to which one corresponds, but
in themselves, in that which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become—a proximity,
an indiscernibility that extracts a shared element from the animal far more effectively
than any domestication, utilization, or imitation could” (279). Thus the contrast between
Gudrun’s erotic and inventive “cowing” and Gerald’s protective fears and claim to
ownership, “they’re my cattle” (170), is all the more pronounced here, as is the troubling
of domestication on both the gender and species fronts.

Moreover, Lawrence’s phrase “drifted imperceptibly nearer” not only emphasizes
the “approach” of human to animal, but also draws attention to the specificity of dance
practice in his text’s working out of deterritorializing lapses. In their discussion of
becomings intense, animal, and woman, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that all these
transformations are “rushing” towards “becomings-imperceptible. The imperceptible is the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula” (279). They continue to outline the linked “three virtues” of imperceptibility, indiscernibility, and impersonality, elaborating how one can slip between and grow in the midst of things (280). Movement becomes central to this set of questions: “Movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible; it is by nature imperceptible. Perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form. Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception” (281). While the dancing body is not equivalent to pure affects, we can nonetheless extract valuable insights from the claim that movement has “an essential relation” to the imperceptible. If perception cannot grasp movement “in itself,” to some degree, if perception can only register the mutations of forms that themselves are constantly shifting and reassembling, then dancing ought to be understood as a privileged modality for becomings. Gudrun’s becoming-cattle vis-à-vis dance delineates a becoming-imperceptible/animal that— given modern dance’s “grounding” of dance practice in the bodily and earthly, and the heightened negotiation with animality in this period— is precisely to be understood as a modernist becoming that moves beyond the threshold of humanism’s “perception.”

One of the potentially gendered ironies of the novel is that Birkin, rather than Gudrun, more reliably models the kind of dancerly becomings-imperceptible that produce a certain privileging of the rhizomatic across Lawrence’s text. The way that Birkin mirrors Gudrun, to some respect, in the “Water-Party” scene, after he and Gerald come upon the two women in their “reverie,” might be read as partly departing from what
Mellown describes as a stylistic differential between a feminine and masculine way of moving in the unpublished novel, *Mr. Noon*. There, Lawrence seems to associate the feminine with the fluid and “soft,” the masculine with a jerky and “rigid” comportment. Birkin’s movements, however, are repeatedly described as “loose” in this scene. Moreover, Lawrence explicitly evokes the vibratory in his calibration of Birkin’s dancing, as seen through Ursula’s perspective: “Yet somewhere inside her she was fascinated by the sight of his loose, vibrating body, perfectly abandoned to its own dropping and swinging, and by the pallid, sardonic-smiling face above” (169). What further unites their movement styles can be described as an irreverence toward the major or molar, an attendant “madness,” and a surfing of inhuman sexuality that reemerges later in the novel. Here, as Birkin moves in and out of his abandonment, his “grotesque step-dance” in which “his body seemed to hang all loose and quaking in between, like a shadow” (168-69), he responds to Ursula’s assertion that “we’ve all gone mad” with “[p]ity we aren’t madder,” and a sudden kissing of her fingers (169). He puts his face near hers here, and would have kissed her again a few moments later “had she not started back” (169). There’s a way in which Birkin seems able to recapitulate, or at least emulate the “animal” mating dance here *with* Ursula, whereas Gudrun seems only able to perform it with the cattle.

Similar entanglements between animality, inhuman sexuality, and what Lawrence understands as the impersonal characterize one of the more critically noteworthy scenes between Birkin and Ursula near the novel’s conclusion. In the “Snow” chapter, when both couples dance energetically with the German travellers at their inn, Gerald’s “powers” are construed as destructively violent, while Birkin’s frightening provocations
are ultimately entertained and engaged by Ursula. Moreover, Gerald’s animal dancing is treated metaphorically; the young girl he partners with is “in his power, as if she were a palpitating bird, a fluttering, flushing bewildered creature” (412). When describing Birkin, Lawrence moves away from proper metaphor and toward the metamorphic that Deleuze associates with the minor and with becomings. Birkin the dancer is described through Ursula’s perspective this way: “Clear, before her eyes, as in a vision, she could see the sardonic, licentious mockery of his eyes, he moved towards her with subtle, animal, indifferent approach” (412). The proximity of animality and indifference, or impersonality, in Birkin’s dancing marks an opening onto immanence in Birkin and Ursula’s subsequent sexual engagement that exceeds both Oedipalized subjectivity and the parameters of a socially locatable Act. Ursula muses afterwards:

She winced.—But after all, why not? She exulted as well. Why not be bestial, and go the whole round of experience? She exulted in it. She was bestial, How good it was to be really shameful! There would be no shameful thing she had not experienced.—Yes she was unabashed, she was herself. Why not?—She was free, when she knew everything, and no dark shameful things were denied her. (413)

The vacillations between “bestial” “herself” and “free” tend to trouble the human/animal divide, just as the challenging of the concept “shameful” in this segment contests notions of the civilized or proper. When articulating his views on immanence, Deleuze identifies those near death and small children, but his description seems to resonate with Ursula’s freedoms above: “The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is,
from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a ‘Homo tantum’ with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil.” It is Birkin’s “animal” dancing, his impersonal anti-metaphorical becoming-imperceptible, that functions as an opening for Ursula’s moment of immanence.

Dancing demarcates the improvisation of the human animal in Lawrence, where becoming-imperceptible, movement and change, and “electric” self-overcomings are privileged as templates of creative living and as precursors for the emergence of new concepts and new ways of being. Gudrun’s becoming-cow stages an inhuman aesthetic mating dance that registers all the “classic” markers of Deleuze’s becomings, and all the intensities of Grosz’s vibratory emergences: it therefore wildly exceeds a “symbolic” battle of the sexes and should be read as privileging the becoming-excessive located at the heart of aesthetic intensities. Similarly, Birkin’s slack and ridiculous jigging prefigures his own “beastly” becomings with Ursula, where their enactment of an inhuman sexuality moves early twentieth-century codes of the “human” outside of that which is discernibly human. Such moments call our attention not primarily to the “admirable” radicality of Lawrence’s individual genius, but rather to the intense assemblage of human animalities in modernism.

References


4 Lawrence’s phrase “lapsing out” has been variously associated with his concept of “blood-consciousness” and a relaxing of mental cognition or mindlessness. It is usefully aligned with Deleuze’s notion of becoming as both involve the dissolution of an Oedipal or centralized subjectivity. In *Women in Love*, Birkin claims, “You’ve got to lapse out before you can know what sensual reality is, lapse into unknowingness, and give up your


8 Dalcroze was developed by the Swiss composer Émile Jacques-Dalcroze. A system of musical training that used movement, it was associated with “eurythmics” or self-expression.


11 The role of vibration is prominent in a number of recent theoretical articulations related to new materialism and other emergent discourses about process philosophy and ecological politics. See for instance Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), which articulates a political ecology of the other-than-human, and the fourth chapter of William Connolly’s The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), where he links concepts of excess and force in Nietzsche to Whitehead’s theories of creativity and novelty.


18 Grosz’s own view of race, which she elaborates in *Becoming Undone*, follows Darwin’s view, that “Racial differences . . . are those differences produced not by the direct effects of the environment (as sociobiology suggests), but through the operations of ideals of beauty and taste.” See Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 137.

19 See Chapter 4 in Rohman, *Stalking the Subject*.

20 Many critics have corrected the view of Duncan as “purely” spontaneous by noting that her performances were highly crafted. She often choreographed into her works a “reaction” to musical cues that involved a few seconds’ delay, creating a greater “illusion” of improvisation or spontaneity. Nonetheless, Duncan worked to develop movements that were less traditionally constrained and more connected to the body’s own morphology, and to certain natural or material forces or rhythms. Thus, in my view, Duncan’s association with the “unconscious” is not naïve or unjustified, if understood within a Deleuzian or even posthumanist theoretical register.


22 It is crucial to mention Nicole Shukin’s incisive work on animal “magnetism” here. Shukin theorizes the “fantasy of ‘painless transmission’” within electric transference that has been central to ideas about animal electricity since Galvani’s work in the 1700s (Shukin, 133). Shukin also insists upon a historical understanding of electricity that sees animal sacrifice at its core, reading the electrocution of Topsy the elephant in 1903 as a “founding symbolic and material gesture of early electrical and cinematic culture” (152).
While I do not have space to elaborate a number of Shukin’s questions here, it would be worth asking whether the disquiet of Gudrun (and Ursula’s) experience constitutes a “painful transmission” that acknowledges, rather than elides, the Serrean “noise” of Gudrun’s trans-species becoming.

23 We ought to remain somewhat skeptical of the tendency in Deleuze to associate animality proper with a form of packness, and to thus reinforce the notion that animals are not “individuals” or do not experience a form of self or “subjectivity.” The implication that our Oedipalizing of them is purely a phantasm tends to reinforce what Bataille also assumed about animal experience, that “every animal is in the world like water in water” (19), and that “there is nothing in animal life that introduces the relation of the master to the one he commands, nothing that might establish autonomy on one side and dependence on the other” (18). While becomings obviously disrupt certain subjective singularities, they may not be exclusively human. See Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989).
