

Dancing Between Empires: Japanese Diaspora and American Modern Dance

Abstract

Building on Tara Rodman's analysis of empire and Pan-Asianism in Michio Ito's career, this article places Ito, Ailes Gilmour, Yuriko Amemiya Kikuchi, and Isamu Noguchi within a shared chronology to examine how connections to Japan shaped artistic identity. Ito transformed Japaneseness into an artistic resource; Gilmour pursued modern and leftist dance without foregrounding it; Yuriko established herself through Graham technique after wartime incarceration; and Isamu reveals another practice of belonging. Their contrasting trajectories show how identity emerged through interactions between artistic choice and external classifications of nationality, ancestry, and race.

Keywords: Michio Ito; Ailes Gilmour; Yuriko Kikuchi; Isamu Noguchi; Japanese diaspora; imperialism; American modern dance; incarceration

Introduction: Japanese and Japanese American Identity in Dance History

For Japanese and Japanese American artists working in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, connections to Japan did not carry a single meaning. Being Japanese, having Japanese ancestry, or drawing on Japanese culture in artistic expression could be an artistic resource that individuals chose for themselves. At the same time, audiences, critics, artistic institutions, and the state assigned meanings to those connections from outside. This article examines the relationship between personal choice and external perception through a comparison of Michio Ito, Ailes Gilmour, Yuriko Amemiya Kikuchi, and Isamu Noguchi.

Several studies have already examined the relationship between Ito's Japanese identity and his artistic practice. Mary-Jean Cowell and Satoru Shimazaki identify a discrepancy between Ito's pursuit of a universal art transcending ethnicity and critics' attempts to understand him as a "Japanese dancer" (Cowell and Shimazaki 1994, 19–20). Midori Takeishi traces how Ito, who was influenced by Japonisme, gradually moved away from presenting an overtly Japanese appearance to develop his own expression and distinctive modern dance (Takeishi 2024, 120–21).

Tara Rodman further situates Ito's representations of Japanese culture within American race relations and international politics. In her account, his presentation of Japanese art was also an attempt to demonstrate that Japan was a "civilized" nation equal to the Western powers, a strategy shared by Japanese immigrant communities abroad (Rodman 2024, 101). Rodman also identifies two sides of the Pan-Asianism toward which Ito later gravitated: its potential to resist

Western hegemony and colonization, and its association, by the 1930s, with discourses legitimizing Japanese imperial expansion (Rodman 2024, 198–200).

Existing scholarship has thus examined Ito's Japaneseness, self-representation, and internationalism, together with their political and social conditions, from several perspectives. Rather than considering his identity in isolation once again, this article shifts attention to his relationships with other Japanese and Japanese American artists and to comparisons among them. Taking the relationship between Ito and Isamu Noguchi as one point of connection, it examines how these four artists, including Ailes Gilmour and Yuriko Kikuchi, each translated their connections to Japan into artistic choices, and how others interpreted those choices.

The article does not bring these four lives together into a single narrative of Japanese diasporic identity. Instead, it treats identity as a dynamic process formed at the intersection of artistic choices, relationships among artists, recognition by audiences and artistic institutions, and state classifications. The comparison shows why Japanese and Japanese American artists cannot be explained through a single historical or racial category: they pursued their work by choosing, rejecting, or transforming their connections to Japan in different ways.

Analytical Framework: Choice and Expression, Perception and Consequences

The “two empires” in this article refer to the Japanese Empire and the United States. This framework does not treat them as symmetrical. Japan's imperial expansion in Asia and the racial exclusion, detention, and incarceration of Japanese and Japanese American people in the United States were distinct historical phenomena. The article examines how the power of each state and

its political circumstances shaped the conditions under which these four artists worked and the meanings attached to their connections to Japan.

Rather than treating their identities as fixed ethnic attributes, I examine how connections to Japan were formed and interpreted through artistic practice along two axes. The first runs from personal choice to artistic practice: how individuals understood their connections to Japan and brought them into subject matter, technique, bodily expression, and collaboration. The second runs from external perception to material consequences: how audiences, critics, arts organizations, society, and the state understood an individual's ethnicity, nationality, ancestry, and political background, and how those perceptions affected evaluation, employment, detention, incarceration, and the ability to continue working.

Of particular interest are moments when these two axes did not align. Birthplace, family, nationality, and experience of living in Japan are not treated as causes of artistic expression in themselves. What matters is how individuals engaged with those backgrounds and what they chose to make into art, how others interpreted their choices, and what consequences followed from those interpretations.

Within this framework, I consider how Ito used his connections to Japan in dance and theatrical expression; how Gilmour handled her Japanese background in her professional and artistic life; how Yuriko's dance experience in Japan related to her practice in the United States; and how Isamu positioned his connections to Japan within his art and social activities. I also compare how others perceived each artist and how those perceptions affected the actual conditions of their work, including during wartime.

1903–1939: Claiming Japan and Living as a Dancer

Yone Noguchi, Yeats, and Ito: Japan as an Artistic Resource

Isamu Noguchi's father, Yone Noguchi, actively connected being Japanese to his work in the English-speaking world before Michio Ito entered London's artistic circles. In his 1903 poetry collection *From the Eastern Sea*, he identified himself as "Yone Noguchi (Japanese)" (Hoshino 2018, 7). In "Mr. Yeats and the No," published in 1907, he discussed Noh in relation to W. B. Yeats's theatrical ideals (Y. Noguchi 1907, 6). During his stay in London in 1913–14, he also exchanged ideas about Japan with Ezra Pound (Rodman 2024, 81). Yone was not the sole source of Yeats's or Pound's interest in Japan. Yet it matters that he had already presented "Japan" as an artistic resource in the English-speaking world before Ito entered this network.

Ito, by contrast, had not traveled abroad to transmit traditional Japanese performing arts to the West. He left Japan in 1912, studied Dalcroze Eurhythmics at Hellerau, and moved to London following the outbreak of World War I (Cowell and Shimazaki 1994, 12–13). Through his exchanges with Pound, Yeats, and others, he brought Japanese culture into his stage work anew. In the 1916 production of *At the Hawk's Well*, he did not simply reproduce Noh but transformed it into a new form of bodily expression through collaboration with Yeats and others (Rodman 2024, 76–77; Takeishi 2024, 118–19). As Rodman argues, the "Japan" Ito developed during this period took shape at the intersection of his memories and discourses about Japan with the Orientalist projections of European collaborators and audiences (Rodman 2024, 83).

After moving to New York, Ito developed his own modern dance using Western music as well as works with Japanese or other Asian subjects. While he pursued his own dance, audiences and critics read the "Orient" through his body even in works without ethnic subject matter

(Cowell and Shimazaki 1994, 19–20; Takeishi 2024, 120–21). For Ito, “Japan” was therefore both an artistic resource that he could choose and remake and a category that others read into his body.

New York: Isamu Chooses His Name Anew

While Yone actively presented himself as a Japanese poet in the English-speaking world, his son Isamu’s connections to Japan were more complicated. Isamu was born in Los Angeles in 1904 to the Japanese poet Yone Noguchi and the American writer and editor Leonie Gilmour. Yone returned to Japan before Isamu’s birth, and in 1907 Leonie moved there with her young son. Yone, however, already had another family in Japan, and Isamu spent his childhood at a distance from his father. In 1918, at thirteen, he left his mother and traveled alone to the United States, living in Indiana under the name Sam Gilmour (Noguchi Museum n.d., entries for 1904, 1907, and 1918). For him, “Noguchi” signified not simply Japanese ancestry but both his childhood in Japan and his complicated relationship with his father.

After moving to New York, Isamu met Michio Ito in the 1920s. Ito encouraged him, then known as Sam Gilmour, to resume using the name Isamu Noguchi. The Smithsonian’s account explains that a name associated with paternal rejection could be reconsidered in New York as something of value to an artist (Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center n.d.). Taking up the name again did not mean accepting his relationship with his father unchanged. It can instead be understood as choosing the inherited name anew and giving it a different meaning through his own artistic work.

Ito’s relationship with Isamu extended beyond advice about his name. In 1926, Isamu made a mask for Ito’s production of *At the Hawk’s Well* (Jerome Robbins Dance Division 1979,

interview 1, 5:30–5:50). The mask shows how the relationships traced in the preceding section developed into the work of another generation. Yone had exchanged ideas about Japanese art with Yeats and others before Ito arrived in London; the subsequent collaboration between Yeats and Ito produced *At the Hawk's Well*. About a decade later, Yone's son Isamu joined an Ito production of the work as a mask maker. Here, "Japan" did not pass unchanged from father to son as a fixed cultural identity. Encounters with different artists transformed it into distinct practices in poetry, theater, dance, and sculpture.

Ailes: A Dancer and Maker, Not Merely an Intermediary

Adding Isamu's maternal half sister, Ailes Gilmour, to these relationships reveals another way of connecting a Japanese background to artistic work. Gilmour was born in Yokohama in 1912 to Leonie Gilmour, an American, and a Japanese father. His identity has not been disclosed, but he is understood not to have been Isamu's father, Yone Noguchi. Sharing the same mother, Ailes and Isamu both had Japanese and American parentage (Horosko 1991, 21; Noguchi Museum n.d., entry for 1912). Gilmour spent her early childhood in Japan with her mother and moved to the United States in 1920. In 1929 she studied at New York's Neighborhood Playhouse and joined Graham's early company (Horosko 1991, 21). At this time Graham did not want her students to train in classical ballet or other modern dance forms. As Johanna Heil observes, "Graham did not want her students to be exposed to classical training, or any other modern dance training for that matter" (Heil 2016, 147). It cannot be established that Gilmour had no prior dance training. Yet her youth and the early stage of her training and career may have suited Graham's interest in dancers not strongly shaped by an established dance style.

In her recollections, Gilmour describes both the pleasure of participating in the creation of a new dance form and the daily labor that sustained it. The dancers made costumes from old jersey fabric and rehearsed late into the night without pay. She remembers these experiences not only as difficult living conditions but also as an exciting time when new forms of expression were emerging (Horosko 1991, 21–23). At least in this account, her position as an artist takes shape through whom she danced with and how they made work, rather than through Japaneseness.

Gilmour recalled introducing Isamu to Graham in 1929 (Horosko 1991, 22). In his 1979 interview, however, Isamu described meeting Graham through Ito (Jerome Robbins Dance Division 1979, interview 1, 1:30–2:00). It is not possible to establish who first introduced them. Yet the fact that their meeting was remembered through both Ito and Gilmour places Ito, Gilmour, Isamu, and Graham within overlapping artistic networks.

The costume for Ruth Page's *The Expanding Universe* in 1932 is documented as a collaboration between Isamu and Gilmour (Noguchi Museum n.d., entry for 1932). Their relationship thus extended beyond family ties and introductions to concrete theatrical production. An account of Isamu's stage work centered solely on his later, celebrated collaboration with Graham makes Gilmour's earlier work as a dancer and costume collaborator harder to see. Recognizing her as a dancer and a participant in making performances, rather than merely an intermediary, places Isamu's connections to the performing arts within a broader set of relationships.

In 1935 Isamu designed the set for Graham's *Frontier*, beginning their long collaboration (Noguchi Museum n.d., entry for 1935). Gilmour's own work, meanwhile, was not confined to Graham. She participated in the Workers' Dance League and its successor, the New Dance League, and performed with Bill Matons (Horosko 1991, 21). In 1939 she appeared in *Adelante*, a Broadway production choreographed by Helen Tamiris under the WPA's Federal Theatre Project (Broadway League n.d.). These records show participation across several theatrical fields, including American modern dance and Broadway, rather than a career presenting Japanese culture. Whereas Ito sought his own expression while presenting Japaneseness, Gilmour's artistic career did not depend on foregrounding it as her professional identity.

The Justice Proposal: What Could Japan Ask of America?

The question of how to use connections to Japan also emerges in Ito's reunion with Isamu around 1935. In a text tentatively dated to 1942, Isamu recalled Ito's enthusiastic welcome during a visit to the West Coast seven years earlier. Ito proposed collecting a donation of two sen from each Japanese schoolchild to erect a monumental statue called *Justice* in San Francisco Bay. He envisioned it as a silent protest against New York's Statue of Liberty (I. Noguchi ca. 1942, 1).

Japan appears here not simply as a theatrical subject but as the party calling on America to answer for "justice." The proposal to make Japanese children its donors suggests an effort to connect individual artistic work to a collective Japanese declaration. Isamu, however, believed that such an act would provoke resentment rather than goodwill and serve as a reminder of injustice (I. Noguchi ca. 1942, 1).

This recollection does not directly explain what Ito meant by the name *Justice*. Yet Japanese immigrants had been excluded under the Immigration Act of 1924 (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian n.d.). Against that background, placing *Justice* in San Francisco Bay on the West Coast as a counterpart to the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of freedom and the welcome extended to immigrants, can be understood as questioning the contradiction between America's professed freedom and its treatment of Japanese people. The proposal also accords with what Rodman identifies as Ito's effort to demonstrate Japan's civilization and equality with the West through art (Rodman 2024, 101).

Ito's and Isamu's differing judgments can be read not only as differences in personal political outlook but also as perspectives arising from their distinct positions between Japan and the United States. Ito's proposal would collect funds from Japanese schoolchildren and make Japan the agent demanding "justice" from America. Isamu was concerned with how American society would receive that act. Their exchange over *Justice* brought together a demand for equality directed from Japan toward the West and the perspective of someone connected to Japan who would face the response from within American society.

As Rodman argues, Pan-Asianism had the potential to oppose Western hegemony and colonialism, but from the 1930s it also became associated with a logic that positioned Japan as Asia's leader and justified its imperial expansion (Rodman 2024, 198–99). Ito gravitated toward this Pan-Asianism during the war, and his 1945 notes include a plan for a "Greater East Asia Stage Arts Research Institute" (Rodman 2024, 200). His later position does not justify retrospectively labeling *Justice* an imperialist project. Nevertheless, at least as it appears in

Isamu's recollection, the proposal suggests an effort to turn resistance to Japanese exclusion in America into a symbolic act through which Japan would confront the West.

1941–1945: The Effects of War

Ito: From International Artist to Enemy Alien

In the early hours of December 8, 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI arrested Michio Ito at his Los Angeles home and detained him as an “enemy alien.” Drawing on Riordan’s analysis, Rodman observes that Ito’s very profession as a dancer and international artist was used to support suspicions that he was a dangerous foreigner. She also emphasizes that, at his hearing, Ito described his activities as serving friendship and peace among the peoples of the world. Rodman interprets his contacts with Japanese military officials in relation to his own vision of achieving world peace through art. A gulf thus separated the meanings Ito gave his activities as international exchange and efforts toward peace from the state’s interpretation of them as evidence of enemy status (Rodman 2024, 187).

Ito was moved among several detention facilities and, after approximately two years in custody, was permitted to return to Japan. He reunited with his wife Tsuyako at the Santa Fe facility in June 1943. On September 2 of that year, they boarded the exchange ship *Gripsholm* in New York (Rodman 2024, 192–93). His departure interrupted a career built over more than twenty years in the United States and geographically separated him from family and collaborators who remained there.

Isamu: Voluntary Entry and Restricted Departure

As a New York resident, Isamu was not directly subject to the mass exclusion imposed on the West Coast. Nevertheless, he voluntarily entered the Poston incarceration camp in May 1942, seeking solidarity with the Japanese American community and hoping to improve conditions for those confined there. He planned to transform the camp through parks, gardens, and artistic activities. Although he had entered voluntarily, he subsequently found that he could not leave at will (Noguchi Museum n.d., entry for 1942).

Whereas the state classified Ito as dangerous and detained him, Isamu entered the camp to take responsibility for his connection to other people of Japanese descent. Their citizenship and the circumstances leading to their confinement were different. Once within the incarceration system, however, both Ito, a Japanese national, and Isamu, an American citizen not subject to West Coast mass exclusion, had their freedom restricted through the category “Japanese,” regardless of differences in citizenship, self-understanding, or previous careers.

After returning to New York, Isamu continued his involvement with the Japanese American community. In 1944, he joined painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi, architect Minoru Yamasaki, and others in organizing the Arts Council of Japanese Americans for Democracy. JACD, with which the council was associated, protested racial discrimination, supported Japanese and Japanese American people, and opposed Japanese militarism (LaM 2023; Digital Museum of the History of Japanese in NY n.d.). Solidarity with people of Japanese descent did not, in this instance, mean supporting the policies of the Japanese state.

Ailes: Precarious Work and the Possibility of Remaining in New York

In a letter to Isamu tentatively dated to 1942, Gilmour wrote that projects that might have led to performance work were not moving forward and that she had no work. She was also considering employment outside the theater and vocational training. The letter shows her searching for another opportunity amid uncertain prospects for work and income (Gilmour ca. 1942, MS_COR_418_014).

The letter does not, however, say that she was denied a role because of her connections to Japan. Unlike Ito, who was forcibly deprived of his working base as a Japanese person, Gilmour retained the possibility of staying in New York and seeking other employment or training. Yet wartime uncertainty over whether shows would take place left her unable to obtain theatrical work. The subsequent documents examined here do not establish further activity as a dancer; her career later changed alongside marriage and family care (Gilmour 1945; 1957, 1–2; 1962, 1).

Art Education under Incarceration

People deprived of their freedom in the camps nevertheless created places to teach and study art under constrained conditions. After his transfer to the Tanforan Assembly Center, Chiura Obata organized the Tanforan Art School with other artists. Its curriculum, taught by sixteen instructors, offered twenty-three subjects, including figure drawing, watercolor, oil painting, and ink painting, as well as sculpture, design, architectural drafting, and commercial art (Hill 2000, 35–43).

Ruth Asawa likewise learned drawing at the Santa Anita Assembly Center from artists who had worked at Walt Disney Studios and continued making art after her transfer to Rohwer. After leaving the camp, she enrolled at Milwaukee State Teachers College, intending to become

an art teacher. Because she was Japanese, however, she could not secure a student-teaching placement and was unable to complete her degree (Blakinger 2022, 69). In 1946 she moved to Black Mountain College, where she studied in an environment that brought different arts into contact and attended summer classes taught by Merce Cunningham and John Cage. Her experiences of movement and improvisation there also appear in her drawings (Ridgway 2022, 33). During a visit to Mexico in 1947, she learned a wire technique used to make baskets and later developed it into the wire sculptures for which she became known (Blakinger 2022, 59; “Ruth Asawa 1926–2013” 2022, 185).

Asawa later described herself as “a citizen of the universe.” Her choice of these words offers a way to consider the discrepancy between ethnic classifications imposed from outside and the affiliations individuals choose for themselves (Ridgway 2022, 22).

In 1990 she also participated in the making of a dance work, creating masks used onstage in Japanese American choreographer June Watanabe’s *The Tower Collection* (Museum of Performance + Design 1990; 2021).

George Nakashima, too, learned traditional Japanese woodworking from the Japanese carpenter Gentaro Hikogawa in the Minidoka incarceration camp and carried that experience into his furniture making after the war (George Nakashima Woodworkers 2020). Asawa and Nakashima are now recognized, alongside Noguchi, as important Japanese and Japanese American artists in the history of postwar American art and design. Their experiences show that, while the state confined people collectively under the racial category “Japanese,” artistic knowledge and techniques continued to pass from person to person even within that violent

environment. After the war, these developed into different practices through contact with different places and cultures.

Yuriko Amemiya, later Yuriko Kikuchi, makes it possible to examine those differences through the dancing body itself, rather than through material objects.

Yuriko: Racial Classification and Artistic Choice

Yuriko Kikuchi is known as a leading dancer in the Martha Graham Dance Company. Her life, however, reveals a process of identity formation that cannot be fully understood through the national or racial categories of Japanese and American. Moving between Japan and the United States from childhood, Yuriko used dance as an important means of forming a sense of self across two cultures. Her wartime incarceration and subsequent encounter with Martha Graham further changed that relationship.

Formation between Japan and the United States

Yuriko was born in California in 1920. After influenza claimed her father and both her older and younger sisters in her early childhood, she traveled to Japan with her mother, Chiyo. Chiyo then chose to work in the United States to support her daughter financially, while Yuriko lived with relatives in Japan for approximately three years (Tokunaga 2008, 4–5).

When Yuriko began dancing after returning to the United States, Chiyo became dissatisfied with the instruction available locally. Around this time, the modern dancer Baku Ishii and his partner Konami Ishii stayed at Chiyo's hospital on their way to perform in San Francisco. Asked about Yuriko's dance education, Konami suggested that Chiyo contact her when they returned to Japan (Tokunaga 2008, 8). Baku Ishii belonged to the same generation of Japanese

modern dancers as Michio Ito, and their relationship dated to their time at the Imperial Theatre. Rodman describes Ishii as Ito's "close friend" (Rodman 2024, 10, 33), and Ito helped support Baku and Konami's American tour (Manning 2025, 256). The dance lineage in which Yuriko would later train was thus already indirectly connected to Ito's artistic network.

By the time Yuriko returned to Japan in 1929, Baku and Konami had separated, and Konami had established her own company. Yuriko lived and trained with her as an *uchideshi*, a live-in apprentice who trained under and lived with her teacher, while her mother returned to the United States to pay for her living expenses and lessons (Tokunaga 2008, 10–11). Under Konami, Yuriko studied Western musical meter, bodily coordination, and the rapid memorization of movement (Tokunaga 2008, 14). At school she also learned sewing, embroidery, weaving, and cooking, and encountered Japanese dance and martial arts (Tokunaga 2008, 17, 21).

Yet being educated in Japan and embodying its everyday and dance cultures did not simply make Yuriko identify as Japanese. She recalled privately maintaining a sense of being American throughout her years in Japan from 1929 to 1937 (Tokunaga 2008, 17). To reaffirm that feeling, she ate steak, pork chops, and ice cream at least once a month, finding comfort and a sense of identity in these foods (Tokunaga 2008, 18). Her body absorbed Japanese education and culture while her sense of self retained an American affiliation.

In 1937, at seventeen, Yuriko left Japan and returned to the United States. She remembered this move as closing the door on her life in Japan and opening one onto a new life in America (Tokunaga 2008, 19). On her return, she studied with Dorothy Lyndall and encountered a different approach to dance education from Konami's. According to Yuriko, Lyndall did more

than teach steps: she taught her the confidence to occupy space and extend beyond the boundaries of her body, drawing out her own expression (Tokunaga 2008, 20).

Tokunaga summarizes these experiences as an inheritance of Baku Ishii's philosophy through Konami in Japan, where Yuriko studied Western musical meter, improvisation, and structure, followed by the confidence and means to express her own voice that she gained from Lyndall in America (Tokunaga 2008, 28). Yuriko's identity as a dancer did not develop through a choice between Japan and the United States. The bodily education acquired in Japan, her sense of being American, and the new expressive possibilities she found after returning came together within a single body.

Dance Practice under Incarceration

The Pacific War abruptly interrupted the dance career Yuriko was beginning to establish in California. In 1942, the forced removal of people of Japanese ancestry under Executive Order 9066 led to her incarceration at the Gila River Relocation Center in Arizona (Tokunaga 2008, 30–32).

Conditions at Gila River were harsh. Yuriko recalled summer temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, frequent dust storms, and widespread illness. She herself called it a “concentration camp” (Tokunaga 2008, 33). Mentally and physically exhausted, she once lost consciousness and spent several days recuperating in the hospital. Through this experience she recognized that her life and dance were inseparable and that, whatever her circumstances, she was responsible for her own “spirit” (Tokunaga 2008, 33).

Yuriko subsequently established a dance school in the camp as a means of surviving and contributing to the community. More than 100 students enrolled, and she taught classes for

children and adults (Tokunaga 2008, 34–35). The embodied knowledge she had developed in both Japan and the United States passed to others within the Japanese American community under conditions that restricted her movement.

Her time at Gila River therefore cannot be understood solely as an interruption of her dance career. While incarceration deprived her of freedom as a person of Japanese ancestry, dance became a practice through which she sustained her spirit and formed relationships with other incarcerated people.

Meeting Graham

In September 1943, Yuriko left the camp and moved to New York. Seeking to resume her dance training, she visited Graham's studio and met Martha herself.

Yuriko introduced herself: "My name is Yuriko and I came from an Arizona Concentration Camp, where I spent almost 18 months" (Tokunaga 2008, 47).

Graham immediately asked her to dance and invited her to attend her class the following day. For Yuriko, who had been educated in Japan, entering the master's class without knowing the fundamentals of the technique was unthinkable. When she asked to be referred to another teacher, Graham recommended Sophie Maslow and Jane Dudley. As Yuriko was about to leave, Graham called her back and said:

Yuriko, be sure you are very good, you will be accepted by everyone and will be successful, like Isamu Noguchi (sculptor) and Sono Osato (ballet and Broadway dancer). They are both Japanese-Americans. Good luck to you! (Tokunaga 2008, 47)

Deeply moved by Graham's encouragement, Yuriko walked from Fourteenth Street to her home on Fifty-Sixth Street in tears. She later recalled, "I don't know why I sobbed or how I walked to my door. I just did. I suppose I needed to clear my head and digest the event that just took place" (Tokunaga 2008, 48). According to Tokunaga, Yuriko understood Graham's words as encouragement that success could be achieved through hard work, the pursuit of excellence, and creative talent. Yuriko also felt that Graham understood the plight of Japanese people in America and what a meeting of Eastern and Western aesthetics could bring to art. She felt she had finally encountered "someone who spoke the same language" (Tokunaga 2008, 48).

Graham already had relationships and collaborations with Japanese and Japanese American artists, including Michio Ito, Isamu Noguchi, and Ailes Gilmour. Yuriko can therefore be understood as appearing to her not as an isolated Japanese dancer but in relation to artists who had already made their mark on American dance and theater. Graham's invocation of Noguchi and Osato suggests that the success of earlier Japanese American artists had helped prepare the conditions for Yuriko's acceptance.

Japanese and Japanese Americans on the East Coast

Within the sources examined for this study, I have found evidence of Yuriko's contact with people close to Michio Ito, including Baku Ishii, but no account establishing that she met Ito himself. The October 28, 1941, issue of *Kashū Mainichi*, however, records her activity with the company of Teiko Ito, the wife of Michio's brother Yuji. The article presents Yuriko, Michiko Iseri, and Teiko Ito in an interview as the Teiko Ito Dance Company (*Kashū Mainichi* 1941, 5).

Teiko also participated in Michio's artistic work. According to Rodman, she collaborated with him during his Japanese performances, including dancing the Hawk in *At the Hawk's Well* (Rodman 2024, 181).

Furthermore, Michiko Iseri, who appears alongside Teiko and Yuriko in the newspaper article, had studied dance with Teiko, as had Yuriko. After the war, Michiko appeared alongside Yuriko in *The King and I* and also instructed the dancers as the production's "Consultant on Oriental Dancing" (Jowitt 2004, 181).

June Watanabe, who later collaborated with Ruth Asawa, also appeared in the film version of *The King and I* and studied Graham technique with Yuriko during filming (Museum of Performance + Design 2021). Michio's brother Yuji Ito contributed masks to the stage production as well (Tajiri 1964, 3). Michio's repatriation to Japan thus did not erase the relationships among his family members, including Teiko and Yuji, and the dancers around them. Following their subsequent activities through Yuriko reveals both the continuation of relationships formed around Ito before the war within postwar American theater and dance, and new connections to a younger generation of Japanese American dancers, including Watanabe.

According to the New York Public Library's description of its Teiko Ito collection, Teiko dropped "Ito" during the war and performed as "Tei Ko" or "Tei-Ko," continuing her career by passing as Korean (New York Public Library n.d.).

A similar issue appears in the career of Sono Osato, the Japanese American dancer whom Graham named as an example of success. Like Ito, Osato's father was a Japanese national, rather than an American of Japanese ancestry, and he was detained in Chicago. Osato herself,

meanwhile, continued performing in New York. At Ballet Theatre, she was asked to avoid her Japanese surname and use her mother's maiden name, performing as "Sono Fitzpatrick" (Hetrick 2018). Even within one family, connections to Japan could have sharply different consequences: the father's movement was restricted while the daughter achieved success on the New York stage.

These cases also matter for understanding the differences between Gilmour and Isamu discussed earlier. Whereas Isamu used his father's surname, Noguchi, Gilmour's use of her mother's surname and her base on the East Coast may have made her Japanese paternity less socially visible. Comparison with Teiko's removal of "Ito" and Osato's temporary use of "Fitzpatrick" suggests that names could help shape how others perceived a connection to Japan. Isamu had earlier chosen the Japanese surname "Noguchi" anew as part of forming himself as an artist. During the war, avoiding a name that signaled Japaneseness could instead serve as a means of self-protection.

Postwar Reconnections and a New Generation

After the war, the circumstances of these artists' lives changed considerably. Ito pursued theatrical production and teaching in Japan, separated from the working base he had built in the United States. Gilmour gradually moved away from dancing toward a life supporting her family (Gilmour 1957, 1–2; 1962, 1). Yuriko, meanwhile, shifted her base from the West Coast to New York and became a leading dancer in Graham's company.

Even as they moved in different directions, Isamu maintained connections with several of them. He continued making sets for Graham and collaborated with Yuriko. Photographs in the

Isamu Noguchi Archive also establish that he remained in contact with Ito after the latter's return to Japan.

In record 09413.3, Ito stands at the far right of a group gathered around a horse in Japan; Isamu is identified as the photographer. Records 09415.4 and 09415.5 show Ito holding *bugaku* masks and are likewise cataloged as photographs taken by Isamu (The Isamu Noguchi Archive n.d., records 09413.3, 09415.4, and 09415.5).

The public records for 09415.4 and 09415.5 do not specify a year. On the same filmstrip, however, 09415.1 records *Wakai Hito*, made in 1950, while 09415.6 shows a *gagaku* ensemble. Isamu also made his first postwar visit to Japan from May to September 1950. Taken together, these details suggest that 09415.4 and 09415.5, showing Ito with the *bugaku* masks, were likely taken during that visit (The Isamu Noguchi Archive n.d., records 09415.1–09415.6; Noguchi Museum n.d., entry for 1950).

The photographs show that, even after the war separated their places of work, Ito's and Isamu's relationship was not lost. It resumed in another location, Japan.

Interview with Mira Nakashima

I also interviewed Mira Nakashima, George Nakashima's daughter and the current head of George Nakashima Woodworkers. Within the sources examined for this study, I have not established any direct collaboration between George and dancers. Mira, however, had connections to dance in the next generation. She studied dance at Connecticut College, taking it seriously enough to serve as dance captain in her fourth year. During this period, she also had contact with Merce Cunningham and John Cage. She remembered both Martha Graham and Cunningham as frightening (Mira Nakashima, interview by author, September 3, 2026).

When I asked whether, as with Asawa, her dance experience had influenced her later work in the visual arts, Mira said that she had not particularly considered such a relationship. After graduating, she went to Japan to study architecture at Waseda University. Having to learn Japanese alongside architecture left her little time to think about dance, she recalled (Mira Nakashima, interview by author, September 3, 2026). Her dance experience therefore cannot be directly linked to her later architecture or furniture making.

During that stay in Japan, Mira also encountered an unexpected connection to Michio Ito. According to her, a woman named Takayo, whom she identified as Ito's wife, lived in a room her aunt rented out. Takayo frequently spoke proudly of Michio. At the time, however, Mira did not know who he was and could not yet understand Japanese well enough to remember the substance of those conversations (Mira Nakashima, interview by author, September 3, 2026). In the sources I have examined to date, I have found no record of Ito's relationships with women after Tsuyako and no documentation corroborating a relationship with Takayo. If Mira's memory is accurate, however, Ito must have remarried after Tsuyako following his return to Japan.

During the interview, we also discussed the possibility of collaborating on a sculpture for one of my dance works, along the lines of Isamu's work for Graham. Mira quoted a production cost of approximately \$50,000. Raising that amount from a working dance company's production budget for a sculpture used in a single stage work would be far beyond reach. The discussion made tangible the substantial economic barrier to realizing such a collaboration.

Reconsidered through this experience, the relationship between Graham and Isamu, now celebrated as a defining collaboration in American dance and art history, did not begin with two

fully established masters meeting one another. As this article has shown, their connections involved people including Ito and Gilmour, and they met relatively early in their careers. That encounter led to *Frontier* in 1935 and developed into decades of collaboration. What can appear inevitable in retrospect depended on concrete circumstances: when and where people met, and whether collaboration was possible at that moment.

The Continuing Effects of Diaspora in Dance

The survival of Isamu's sculptures, Nakashima's furniture, and Asawa's sculptures makes it possible to trace continuity and change in their work. A dancer's body, by contrast, is not preserved as an artwork. Photographs, films, programs, and oral histories can document a career, but the body that danced onstage disappears with the time of its performance.

Yet artworks are not all that remain. The relationships, reputations, techniques, and opportunities for practice established by earlier artists also pass to later generations. Graham's encouragement of Yuriko in 1943 through the names of Isamu Noguchi and Sono Osato offers one example (Tokunaga 2008, 47). Yuriko did not produce the same forms of expression as these artists or share an identical identity. Nevertheless, the presence and reputations earlier Japanese and Japanese American artists had established in American artistic life became part of the social foundation on which she could build her career.

From this perspective, the effects of the Japanese diaspora examined here do not reside only in the transmission of the same culture or forms of expression across generations. They can also be found in the relationships, techniques, reputations, and possibilities for practice that Japanese and Japanese American artists created in different ways at different times and left,

directly or indirectly, to those who followed. Attending an art such as dance, whose works do not survive as material objects, makes it possible to recognize these effects of diaspora as they pass from person to person.

Conclusion

By comparing the experiences of Michio Ito, Ailes Gilmour, Isamu Noguchi, and Yuriko, this article has shown that Japaneseness was not a fixed cultural attribute. Its meanings varied through the relationship between personal choices, external perceptions, and their material consequences. The same connection to Japan could become an artistic resource when foregrounded or make its avoidance a means of self-protection that allowed a career to continue.

These individual choices also intersect with the two orientations of imperialism and Pan-Asianism introduced at the beginning of the article. The choices of states and individuals cannot be equated. Yet they share an effort to secure possibilities for action and survival by changing one's position within an externally imposed order. What matters is that such choices did not run in only one direction. Both emphasizing and avoiding Japaneseness could, under different circumstances, become ways of securing a position.

"Between empires" therefore refers here to more than a space between the two nations of Japan and the United States. It names multiple tensions: between imperialism and Pan-Asianism, between displaying and avoiding Japaneseness, and between chosen and externally assigned identities. Ito, Gilmour, Isamu, and Yuriko did not choose the same answer within these tensions. Following their different choices and the relationships that continued to intersect reveals the

complexity of the Japanese diaspora in American dance history in the first half of the twentieth century.

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