



Red Carnations

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To cite this article: Victoria Phillips (2018): Red Carnations, American Communist History, DOI: [10.1080/14743892.2018.1429705](https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2018.1429705)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2018.1429705>



Published online: 26 Feb 2018.



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I met Dan Leab on a balmy March evening in New York, a year and a half after I had been accepted as a doctoral candidate in the History Department at Columbia University, during the reception celebrating the donation of the CPUSA archives to NYU. With one member of my Ph.D. cohort just out of college, I served as the other bookend at forty-seven years old. While I had been raised a New York radical in the 1960s and pursued modern dance, my last job had been on Wall Street as a portfolio manager and “vulture capitalist.” Reclaiming my roots, I devoted my research for my M.A. thesis to uncovering the interwar communist underpinnings of American modern dance.

Although I had been hired in France by its government to curate an exhibit based on my thesis, in the United States institutions shunned exhibition and publication proposals as though the Cold War were still on. “Couldn’t you just call them leftists?” I was asked. No, I couldn’t. Some were, but some had cards. Many had thick FBI reports in which spies labeled T-1 and T-11 sat at family dinner tables and even read their mail. Some dancers were still alive and had granted me interviews; their fidelity to the party during the interwar period was a vital underpinning of their work and, I argued, deeply influenced the development of American modern dance. They had followed the 1932 Workers Cultural Federation Moscow-inspired mantra “Art is a Weapon” to declare “Dance is a Weapon.” It was exactly because they were communists that their influence had been silenced by critics, and even the dancers themselves, during the Cold War. They were being protected and protecting themselves, even as they worked, wrote articles, travelled to Cuba to support a new revolutionary dance, and were being followed by the United States government. Fellow travelers and leftist-leaning choreographers had been offered the American mantle. Recovering the communists was the point.

Despite my obstinance about alliances, I remained slightly nervous at the NYU event with the Bush administration and the suppression of the Dixie Chicks who had criticized the president and thus been boycotted as “communists.” It was still a catchphrase for free speech deemed an Un-American activity that held currency to destroy lives and careers.

Victoria Phillips is an Adjunct Lecturer in History at the European Institute and Associated Faculty at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, where she graduated with a Ph.D. in 2013. She specializes in cold war history, United States cultural diplomacy, and international relations. Her book with Oxford University Press (forthcoming 2018) *Martha Graham’s Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy*, explores the export of modern dance as cultural diplomacy to over twenty-five nations between 1955 and 1989. Her articles have appeared in publications from the *New York Times* and *American Communist History*, to *Ballet News* and *Dance Research Journal*. In 2006 she curated “Dance is a Weapon” in Paris and it toured France for two years. At the Library of Congress she co-curated “Politics and the Dancing Body” as well as an exhibit commemorating the 75th anniversary of American Ballet Theatre. Phillips has lectured both in the United States and abroad, and will be teaching at the London School of Economics in 2018-2019. Her papers are held at the Library of Congress.

Nonetheless, I sat in the front row with a man who had served in the Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, and an elderly woman who engaged me as she sang communist ballads from her youth. As we put our faces together to smell a red carnation, cameras popped. Although old in my own eyes, the movement was passing to a new generation. As I listened to the talks, I became ever more resolute that the interwar vitality of direct involvement in Communist Party activities was vital to American cultural development.

Yet during the reception, I stood by the door, unsure. Dan Leab walked up to me, introduced himself, and asked about my work. I told him about my thesis, and he responded immediately, "I want to publish you." My first assumption was that he must be an impulsive academic, but I set him my thesis anyway. I had never been published in an academic journal and had been rejected by curators, and *American Communist History* seemed ideal with its advisory board of strange bedfellows who might not speak except from opposite sides of the table: left met right. With my background, this seemed perfect. We were off. Dan worked with me for months, patiently helping me to mold an academic document into a readable article. His encouragement and belief in my work never waned, even when I had lost complete confidence in myself and my writing abilities. What was a proof? What about that comma? He became a mentor and friend. We shared holiday parties. His wonderful unfolded paper cards decorate my tree to this day.

After a party celebrating the French exhibit and a concurrent season of political dance at the Joyce Theater that celebrated two subjects of my research and their choreography, he and John Haynes shared a cab home, joking that they would both certainly survive. A few years later, Dan asked me to interview John and published it in ACH to celebrate his legacy. I remain as proud of this work as any I have done in the field of oral history, and it was all inspired by Dan.

More recently, I had the honor of assigning Dan's *Orwell Subverted* after being offered a part-time position at Columbia teaching culture and the Cold War. His book and the study of *Animal Farm* became a favorite class in the semester-long course for students over the years. Recently I hosted the Chief Historian of the Central Intelligence Agency in my class, and I got him to promise to read the book. As the vital importance of the CIA in Cold War cultural diplomacy gains more attention as our own State Department falls into disarray, and millions of CIA documents are published online, I remain hopeful that Dan's legacy of pushing for open archives will begin to be realized and new information to support his work will surface.

Although no private institution would feature my communists in any exhibit, under George W. Bush, the Library of Congress staged the exhibit. My publication record gave us credibility, thanks to Dan. The only surviving dance institution to have been seeded in the communist movement gave the Library of Congress its collection, including hundreds of boxes and even the lost-and-found suitcase from the dressing room. To the surprise and wonder of me and my co-curator, newspapers on the left and the right celebrated our work. Inspired by Dan's sense of creativity, I took the exhibit on the academic road: we reconstructed one of the lost works, and I traveled with dancers to universities and colleges to show dance as a vital part of history. They danced; I lectured. Inspired by political protest in the interwar era, dance students improvised and choreographed at their home institutions; others wrote new studies. Dan taught me the power of telling the story, gave me the opportunity to call it as I saw it based on the archives and documents, and showed me how to write so that archival explorations could influence cultural production, public history, and a new

generation of scholars and artists. Without him, I would remain a wallflower gazing at the red carnation. With him, I can serve as a conduit to the next generation that will study in the archives and explore not just spies and intrigue, but the power of culture to inspire change and social reform. With Dan Leab's legacy in our historical bones, some may take to the streets, the internet, museums, and even the publishing houses if we're lucky, using "Art as a Weapon."

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.