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DANCING RACE DURING THE RAGTIME AND JAZZ ERAS

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To Jeff

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PREFACE

This book did not begin on a dance floor or in an archive, but in my childhood Sunday school teacher's home outside Nashville, Tennessee. Miss Reba was a wonderful storyteller who loved to talk about her youth, which was spent in the segregated American South of the early twentieth century. During one of our many afternoons together, she told me how, as a child, she spent hours practicing ballroom dancing—partnered only by her family's giant hall mirror. She waited until she was alone to put on records, one after the other.

What struck me was that Miss Reba didn't put on a show for an imaginary audience, as I had done during my early dancing days—choreographing to the *Grease* soundtrack and other popular recordings. Rather, she embraced an imaginary partner: When she closed her eyes, the mirror was transformed into a dashing young man. I left her bright yellow kitchen fascinated, as I had never danced with a partner before, just with a group of girls in my local dance studio. From her description of the magic created between two dancers, I was sure I hadn't felt anything like it before, but I knew I wanted to desperately.

Several years later, even after Alzheimer's disease had fractured her memories, Miss Reba could still remember with clarity her dancing days. In addition to retelling stories of her ballroom dancing afternoons at home, she would sometimes chat about going out dancing with friends as a young woman in downtown Nashville. There was both pride and mock embarrassment in her graveled voice as she described going to clubs where she wasn't supposed to be.

Only on one occasion, though, did she tell me why her family would have objected to those dance clubs. With one hand resting on my knee and one perched on my shoulder, she leaned in and giggled the word "colored" in my ear—even though we were the only ones sitting in her living room at the assisted-care facility. Having grown up in recently desegregated Nashville, I knew that word and what it meant, although I had never before heard it from Miss Reba's lips. For several moments, I sat there with my mouth open

trying to imagine this proper octogenarian sneaking around segregated dance clubs. Unfortunately, we were not able to discuss her cross-cultural dance adventures further that day or any other. The window to that particular memory closed shortly thereafter.

Because of her disease, Miss Reba was often mentally living in the 1920s and '30s throughout most of the 1990s. And yet the similarities between her life experiences and mine were striking. She whispered "colored" to me in the same hushed tones that some white folks still used in Nashville during my childhood when talking about any racially charged issue. Her family wouldn't have approved of her going to a social space where African Americans congregated any more than mine would have—be it a dance club, a neighborhood, or even a university. Implicit danger signs cordoned off my world into black and white, just as they did hers.

What surprised me the most, however, was my own reaction to her transgressive dancing. I was absolutely stunned, as I had assumed that nobody in Nashville, the South, or even the U.S. was moving across racial lines that early in the twentieth century, either in terms of social space or social practice—especially not white middle-class girls. If my Nashville world was still segregated (in practice, not law) in the late twentieth century, hers had to be even more so, I had assumed.

Miss Reba's story shattered my understanding of American dance history, which was rooted in my own lived experience of suburban dance studios, as well as my reading of dance history, both of which demarcated dancing into black and white categories. Indeed, the ways in which scholars have typically historicized social dancing in America give the impression that *white* people only did *white* dancing and *black* people only did *black* dancing—at least until the swing era, the twist, or disco, depending on which book you read. Yet, Miss Reba's dance experiences suggest that we have left out an important part of the story.

That day, in her living room, she offered me only a quick glimpse of something that would fascinate me in the years to come: how social dancing has provided a means of cross-cultural exploration, connection, exploitation, contestation, and confusion throughout the twentieth century in North America. Whether dancers are simply trying on another culture's dance moves, going to an "other" dance venue, or actually dancing with people who are culturally different from themselves, social dancing can create a powerful space for body-based articulations of identities. Such physical encounters and expressions of self and other, however, are not always utopian in mission—modeling a world in which all people can interact free from oppression or stereotypes. Hegemonic values are often just as present in cross-cultural dance encounters as in other kinds, if not more so, and

rendered all the more powerful as they are manifested in seemingly harmless quotidian practices.

Miss Reba's story reminded me that even when segregation might be the law or social expectation, dancing and dancers did not always obey. North American dancers of all kinds had observed each other's movement practices since colonization, which eventually led to movements being borrowed, taken, or used as creative resources. For example, the cakewalk demonstrates that African and African American slaves sometimes watched their masters' formal balls on plantations, just as ragtime dancing confirms that European American people at times visited "colored" dance spaces. Such cross-cultural dance exploration, long before social integration was fully possible, is a key part of our dance history that is just beginning to be written.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When my mother dropped me off at Miss Becky's Dance Studio at the age of four, neither she nor Miss Becky could imagine where the lessons in ballet, tap, jazz, modern, acrobatics, and clogging might lead. I was there to learn lady-like behavior and self-control as a counterpoint to the sports I loved to play. I thank Miss Becky for fostering over fourteen years of lessons a life-long love of dancing that continues to this day.

It was not until I was at university that I began to think critically about my own dancing. By chance, I attended a lecture on historical images of women in dance at the Blair School of Music, as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt. On that life-changing day, Professor Maureen Needham introduced me to the possibility of researching dance and doing so for a living. At the time, my dancing life consisted of performing an athleticized version of hip hop on the football field and basketball court at halftime while wearing a rhinestone-studded bathing suit and heels. Professor Needham quickly took me under her wing despite this and taught me not only how to engage in rigorous historical research, but also how to think, read, and write academically. I am so grateful for her early mentorship.

My intellectual training was soon thereafter taken up by Susan Manning at Northwestern University. We shared a love of dance history and cultural politics from the beginning. In our short time together, she taught me that scholars had a responsibility to query the dancing we loved most and not to shy away from issues of race, even if we grew up in a white world. Her passion for primary sources and uncovering their secrets rubbed off on me as well. These lessons were continued with Ann Daly at the University of Texas at Austin. Her deep respect for writing and her insistence that academic prose be written accessibly, but elegantly, were tremendous influences. Thanks to her mentorship, I still challenge myself to write for the widest audience possible.

I always tell my graduate students that if their academic training has not completely transformed them, they have not gotten their money's worth. This truism comes from my experiences with a host of faculty members

at the University of California, Riverside—inside and outside the dance department. From Susan Foster, I acquired a determination to bolster the new discipline of critical dance studies through a commitment to innovating it from within, with each class I taught, conference presentation I gave, and work I published. Marta Savigliano helped me see and feel the power of white privilege, forever changing my thinking about the lived experience of race and ethnicity. Still to this day, it is Linda Tomko's voice that I hear when I am crafting an argument or engaging with primary sources. I carry her impeccable standards with me and endeavor to impart them to my graduate students.

Of course, my dissertation committee made the strongest imprint on me and my thinking. Although she arrived at Riverside near the end of my doctoral study, Anthea Kraut's encouragement and keen insights were invaluable in the home stretch. Sterling Stuckey generously shared his favorite primary sources and reminded me over and over again that what matters most is the rigor of my research and depth of my knowledge. I learned over the years from Deborah Wong that intellectual ferocity and a big heart could come in the same package. From my first day of doctoral coursework to my dissertation defense to the present day, Sally Ness modeled for me that being a good mentor means letting students follow their own paths while pushing them to the limits of what they can do. Her humility, generosity, grace, and brilliance are an inspiration to all who have had the pleasure of working closely with her.

My graduate school years were filled with many amazing colleagues who changed my thinking, encouraged my progress, and entertained me when the work became too intense. Two, in particular, left a lasting impact. Roxane Fenton taught me to get up off the mat—many, many times—and to find and then trust my inner wisdom. Juliet McMains rekindled my love of ballroom dancing, pushed me to think beyond the conventional, and showed me that *im*patience can also be a great virtue. I have loved every minute of our numerous collaborations over the last two decades—here's to the next twenty years!

At the heart of this research project is my dance reconstruction work. Early on, Cheryl Stafford in Washington, D.C. partnered with me in this endeavor. She shared with me her extensive knowledge of nineteenth-century social dances (which served as a crucial foundation for my early twentieth-century research) with tremendous generosity and was willing to listen patiently to my emerging theories about ragtime dancing and its many iterations. I still miss our mornings dancing together and wish that we lived closer and could have continued our dancing partnership.

In recent years, I have had the good fortune of connecting with scholars working in similar areas who have been willing to share their research with me and/or comment on my own. I still have yet to meet some of them in person. Nonetheless, they deserve my heartfelt thanks. Theresa Buckland, Celia Cain, Susan Cook, Sherril Dodds, Mark Franko, Tera Hunter, Julie Malnig, Kristen McGee, Clare Parfitt-Brown, Kathy Peiss, and Sally Sommer have all been incredibly helpful at key moments along the way when the research needed their unique and valuable insights. Katrina Hazzard, in particular, took the time to talk with me at length about my research on multiple occasions for which I will always be grateful.

At York University, I have been blessed with several generous colleagues and inspiring students. In particular, I would like to thank Barbara Sellers-Young and Sky Fairchild-Waller for helping me carve out precious writing time when I needed it most. For their exquisite research and proofreading skills, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Jennifer Taylor, Samantha Mehra, and especially Boké Saisi.

Archival work is mainly a solitary task, of course. Nonetheless, it is made so much more productive and pleasurable by archivists, librarians, and copy room staff who go out of their way to assist researchers. For their investments in the success of this project, I sincerely thank the staff members at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, the New York Historical Society, the New York City Municipal Archives, the New York Public Library Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the NYU Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, the Smithsonian Institution Archive, the New York Public Library for Science, Industry, and Business, and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Now that the trend is toward online engagements with primary source materials, I fear the next generation of scholars will miss out on the valuable contributions that archival staff can make to projects while they are still in development.

As you just read in the preface, Miss Reba—my first Sunday school teacher and surrogate grandmother—provided the spark for this project through her storytelling. This was further kindled by my husband's great-aunt Lillian who told me stories of her immigration to New York as a young Jewish refugee and the dancing that filled her evenings. The stories of these two spirited, independent women propelled my research and writing early on.

I am lucky enough to have two families now—one I inherited with my husband and the other I was born with. Without the timely, generous,

and unquestioning support of these two groups of people as I pursued the unlikely career of a dance scholar, this book would never have come to fruition. Thank you so much for never asking why in the world someone would want to pursue a Ph.D. in dance, much less write about social dancing.

It gives me tremendous pleasure finally to be able to thank my husband, ethnomusicologist Jeff Packman, for his contributions to this project, which have been manifold and longstanding. For talking through my first insights as they emerged from the archive, cheering me on as I tried to corral them into scholarly prose, editing the first drafts with both compassion and brutality, never letting me give up on this book when teaching and service filled days and nights, and for not once begrudging the time away from him required for the manuscript's completion—I will always be grateful. Normally there are not many benefits to marrying within academia, especially when looking for work. In Jeff, though, I was fortunate to have found a rare colleague and collaborator who is generous, supportive, brilliant, hardworking, and understanding. I dedicate this book to him as a small recognition of his huge influence on this book and my career.

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Modern Moves

Introduction

Dancing Race, Modernity, and History

Growing up in the recently desegregated South and dancing in a suburban dance studio, I came to see dance as racially marked at an early age: All of my experiences led me to accept unquestioningly that ballet was white, tap was black, modern was white, and jazz was (mostly) black. Being primarily of European descent myself, and certainly being taught to regard myself as white, I felt entitled to learn and perform all these dances. Like most middle-class American girls, appropriation was part of what I did for fun every afternoon after school, an activity to which I did not give a second thought for many years. It was not until I happened to hear a research presentation by a dance scholar at Vanderbilt University—where I happily performed as part of the Danceline during halftime at football and basketball games—that I caught a glimpse of the politics behind my cross-cultural dancing, which by that point had come to also include Latin ballroom dances and even hip hop. Eventually, I came to ask a tangled web of questions: Why could I adopt any dance I liked, while African Americans were so often expected to dance "black"? What did dancing "black" even mean? How was that meaning entangled with stereotypes? Had dancing always been racialized in America? When did Americans begin crossing racial boundaries through their dancing? In the following pages, I try to answer some of these questions, at least in part as a way of understanding the historical roots of the interconnected dancing and race thinking I was taught as a child and many children continue to be taught today.

This book aspires to be a desegregated history of modern American social dancing of the early twentieth century that looks critically at the appropriation of expressive culture without reducing it simply to stealing, although sometimes this was certainly what it was. It focuses instead on the kinds of cultural work accomplished by dancers drawing inspiration from one another's moves. It explores: What ideas relating to self and other were constructed through cross-cultural dancing? What stereotypes were mobilized? What social aspirations and desires were expressed? What professions were enabled?

Nonetheless, this is not a study of black *or* white dancing, though they were and often are imagined as distinct categories, but of *race relations* embodied in dancing. Most people, including scholars, would consider the dancing discussed here—blues and jazz dancing especially—to be black or African American in nature. However, these practices can all be productively understood as hybrid in origin and practice—which of course doesn't make them any less racially marked or politically complex, as is made clear in the following chapters. I do not trace dance lineages or racially organize dance steps. Instead, I pursue how these dance forms can help us understand the interrelationships between racial thinking and social practices of the early twentieth century.

And yet, to focus on race exclusively would leave out at least half of the story. Understandings of race then were as deeply entangled with notions of class as they are today. Among those who self-identified as white (or aspired to this marker of social status), dancing movement understood as black could be a statement of modernity, American citizenship, or civilization, more so than of admiration or affiliation with African Americans. In a similar fashion, African Americans performing dance movements borrowed from European dance traditions might proclaim their education, cosmopolitanism, urbanity, or elite status. By dancing cross-culturally in these ways, dancers certainly enjoyed a night out on the town—these dances were highly entertaining to do. At the same time, dancers could seize the opportunity to work toward their own sense of empowerment through the implicit performance of their social aspirations. For these reasons, this study addresses the nexus between class and race concerns, as they were articulated in social dancing.[1]

The partner dancing of the early twentieth century also helped empower those who made social dance teaching and performing a new profession and built a new dance industry. Over time, these dance professionals of many racial and ethnic backgrounds transformed community dancing into dance products that could be more easily sold and consumed on a mass scale. Their authority as professionals rested on their ability to convince