

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: HOW THE WALTZ HAS WON: TOWARDS A
 WALTZ AESTHETIC

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This dissertation examines the development of ballroom dancing aesthetics between 1860 and 1915, focusing on the appropriation, neutralization, and commodification of African American somatic performance by various European American agents/actors. The study suggests that the waltz, a dance form that was in decline at the beginning of the twentieth century, became a vital component of European American strategies to safely encapsulate certain elements of African American aesthetics while eliminating others. This negotiation of African American aesthetics into European American performance is presented as a part of a broader discourse concerned with the maintenance of white hegemony during this period.

The work is grounded in the field theory best articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, and the critical race theories of Michal Omi and Howard Winant. From Bourdieu the work draws upon three key terms: *habitus*, *codes of perception*, and *hexis*. Taken

together these terms provide the structure for contextualizing the choices made by dancers, dancing teachers, and social reformers who were concerned with modifying ballroom dance forms that had been influenced by African American aesthetics. Omi and Winant's work provide a matrix for understanding the choices of these diverse individuals and organizations as a *racial project* embedded in a discourse of white hegemony that, even at its most progressive, sought to maintain the hegemony of white, European American culture.

HOW THE WALTZ HAS WON: TOWARDS A WALTZ AESTHETIC

By

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Dedication

For Mary. Without whose love and support none of this would have been possible.

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I must begin by thanking Ellen Gainor, who persuaded me that an itinerant ballroom dancing teacher might be able to make the transition to academia. I am deeply thankful for the time you gave so generously to a complete stranger, as well as of your continued interest in and support of my work.

My family has been tremendously supportive of my academic work, and I cannot thank them enough. Despite upheavals and trauma, you have always been there for me. My mother, Dolores Tremewan Martin, has been an inspiration and a pillar of strength. My wife, Mary, and son, Jesse, have been both patient and understanding of the travails that accompany the path to the Ph.D. I love you all.

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I have learned about the history and practice of ballroom dancing from more teachers than I can count. Two people, however, gave me opportunities to learn and grow without which I certainly would not have begun this project. The first was Gwenethe Walshe, who gave me a job in London in 1990, when I was a baby ballroom teacher. Gwenethe was a legend in the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance, and helped to shape the way in which Latin dancing was performed and taught. Gwenethe passed away in 2006, but her kind spirit and love of dance and music lives on in the countless lives she touched. The second was Diane Lachtrupp, who gave me a job in New York City in 1996. Another wonderful teacher, dancer, and mentor, Diane founded Stepping Out Studios, where I spent many years as a teacher and manager. Diane believed that good dancing and good business could go hand in hand, and that you did not have to sacrifice one for the other.

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Introduction

In the fall semester of 1988 I was approached by one of my fellow students in the dance department at the University of Nebraska. Explaining that she had just started a job as a ballroom dancing teacher at the local *Fred Astaire's Dance Studio*, she asked if I would be interested in helping her practice the sales scripts she was memorizing. I was interested, and soon I was not only helping her with her sales pitch, but I was also helping her practice the dance steps she was learning. Before the winter came I had been offered a job by the studio. At the time I did not suspect how becoming a ballroom dancing teacher would change everything about my life to follow. *How the Waltz Has Won: Towards a Waltz Aesthetic* developed out of my experiences as a professional ballroom dancer who entered the academy in search of answers.

The “Waltz Aesthetic” is a term I have coined to help theorize what I see as the fundamental similarity of ballroom dances in performance, regardless of their regional, ethnic, or cultural origins. Over the course of twenty years as a professional teacher, judge, competitor, and performer, I became familiar with dozens of different types and styles of ballroom dancing. I began my training in what is known as “American Style” which includes Foxtrot, Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, Rumba, Cha-Cha, Mambo, East Coast Swing, and Samba. I also learned Polka, Lambada, and Meringue, though they were not on any official syllabus. After I moved to London I began studying “International Style” which consists of Foxtrot, Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, Quickstep, Rumba, Cha-cha, Samba, Jive, and Paso Doble. Later, in

New York City, I became familiar with Argentine Tango (Tango, Milonga, and Tango Waltz), West Coast Swing, Salsa (“on 1,” “on 2,” “Eddie Torres on 2,” and “on 3”), Lindy Hop, and Country Two-Step. While in Tallahassee pursuing my Masters degree, I learned Salsa Rueda and Bachata. Clearly, there are major differences between, say, International Style Viennese Waltz and Lindy Hop. What strikes me about all of the dances I have named, however, is how many similarities they share – especially as they are taught by dance professionals.¹

These similarities emerge primarily in the manner in which dancers are trained to embody the various dances. Almost without exception, when looking at individual dancers I see an uprightness of the torso, a “T” shape of the arms in relation to the body, stillness in the upper body, and a focus on movement from the knees down. In the relationships of the partners to each other I note a strict adherence to specific spatial relations (the distance between and alignment of the partners has some variance, but only within a narrow range), as well as a formal quality that is difficult to transcribe, but amounts to the denial of any sexual connotations inherent in the proximity of two bodies. I have learned to describe these qualities in a scholarly manner – that is to say, one that strives to be free of problematic generalization in favor of clear specificity – but the point I am trying to make is

¹ The most significant exceptions that I have seen to the model of the Waltz Aesthetic were performed by dancers with no professional training, people who learned to dance by dancing, rather than through formal study.

perhaps better articulated in the non-scholarly (and certainly more problematic) language I used before I entered the academy. Ballroom dancing is very *White*.²

Samba is from Brazil, Tango from Argentina (or Uruguay, if you listen to certain partisans), and Lindy Hop is an African American dance form. Rumba, Chacha, Mambo, Salsa, and Meringue all have significantly different Afro-Caribbean roots. Despite this diversity of geography and ethnicity, these dances are taught in fundamentally the same manner in studios across the United States. Perhaps more to the point, the manner in which these dances are taught in U.S. dance studios has very little to do with the manner that these dances are performed in their native countries and/or original cultural communities. I am relatively unconcerned here with issues of “authenticity” despite the fact that, for example, Samba is not a partner dance as performed in Brazil.³ I am more intrigued by the way that each of these dances has been modified for inclusion into the European American cannon. Why do studios teach a uniform hip action for all “Latin” dances, why is that hip action different in American Style and International Style, and why does neither manage to capture the quality of hip movement of “real” dancers?⁴ Such inconsistencies abound within my experience of ballroom dancing. Does the failure of dance studios to capture the

² Richard Dyer points to this in his introduction to *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), discussing his experience in a “Soul Train” dance line. “For all my love of dancing and funk, I have never felt more white than when I danced down between those lines. I know it was stereotypes in my head . . . All I can say is that at that moment, the black guys all looked loose and I felt tight.” 6.

³ At least once a year, occasionally more often, Brazilians would come to the studio in New York City and ask about our Samba classes. On seeing what we were teaching, their reactions ranged from confused, to amused, to disgusted.

⁴ “*Real*” is a problematic term. “Real” dancers in this case refers to dancers who learned to dance as a part of their socialization and cultural heritage, rather than by taking classes. Though I do not, in this study, use theoretical models of simulacra, such an approach might prove useful to future scholars in working to better understand these questions. See also note 1.

“real” have anything to do with treating ballroom dancing as something that can be bought and sold, rather than as an art?

W.T. Lhamon asks some important questions about movement as a commodity in *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*:

Who owned what? The way these men cocked a knee and raised the opposite hand came to stand for other people, too, and this is the heart of the matter here. Why choose *those* gestures? When a gesture comes to stand for someone other than its apparent originator, what is the meaning? How does it happen? Why? Once paid for, wasn't a gesture owned, then, by the buyer? Maybe a gesture could be sold and retained, too. Maybe marketing of gestures exhibited this complexity of cultural property: that it was saleable but never exclusive property. You could buy it and you could sell it, but you could not own it. Maybe the step took over the stepper, an inversion analogous to the tail wagging the dog.”⁵

The Waltz Aesthetic was a means to control those “gestures that stand for someone other than its apparent originator,” and as such represents an important step towards a better theorization of ballroom dancing as a contributing factor to the development of U.S. culture during the twentieth century. Ballroom dancing instruction was, by and large, funded by a system of patronage until changing circumstances led to its commercialization in the late nineteenth century.⁶ How did this happen? How did this change affect the cultural capital of ballroom dancing in the late twentieth century? “You could buy it and you could sell it, but you could not own it,” observes Lhamon, but for certain subjects of my study this was not, perhaps, accepted. What gestures were important to the dancers in my study – why were some a threat, and others to be cherished?

⁵ W.T. Lhamon, Jr. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 15.

⁶ Which I discuss in Chapter Two.

My academic pursuit to understand such questions led me first to a broad examination of the history of ballroom dancing. I then narrowed my focus to look at a moment when ballroom dancing changed from “set” dances such as quadrilles and minuets to “round” dances such as waltz and polka. Further research then suggested that a critical juncture in the development of contemporary ballroom dancing occurred as the U.S. moved from the Victorian (1837 – 1901) to the Progressive era (1880 – 1920). A rupture occurred in the field of ballroom dancing as both the form and the function of ballroom dancing shifted. Consequently, new dancers, new dances, and new modes of instruction provoked diverse responses among the dominant players in the cultural milieu of the United States. In the chapters that follow I will investigate this upheaval, and explore how certain choices were made that resulted in homogenous performances that can still be observed today, like ripples on a pond, long after the rock has sunk to the bottom.

During the Victorian era ballroom dances were largely derived from European sources, and possessed a lineage that could be traced through the court of Louis XIV to roots in the city-states of northern Italy in the 1500s.⁷ During the Progressive era African American cultural aesthetics began to enter the ballroom. My study focuses on the rupture to the field of ballroom dancing caused by this infusion of non-European aesthetics. My subjects include dances, dancers, and dance teachers; minstrel performers and social reformers. While the center of my attention is on the

⁷ Which is not to say that no European dances arose from sources outside of the courts, but rather that the dances performed during the Victorian era were typically transmitted through the courts. This has made it difficult for dance scholars to precisely identify moments of cultural transfer between high and low in pre-1700 Europe. My bibliography contains several sources that speak to this discourse.

European Americans who sought to retain control of their cultural milieu, I cast light on the African American aesthetics whose presence threatened the status quo.

Given my claim that the introduction of African American aesthetics led to a fundamental shift in the field of ballroom dancing, I ask several questions to better understand the nature and consequences of this rupture. Can the somatic changes affected by the influence of African American aesthetics be determined, and if so, what about those aesthetics was problematic for European American cultural arbiters? What were the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable movement in European American dancing before, during, and after the rupture caused by the adoption of African American aesthetics in the ballroom? What was at stake for professional dance teachers when the desires of the dancing public changed? How did those dancing teachers adapt to the changes in the field? Why did social reformers interested in promoting the welfare of single working women enter the field of ballroom dancing? What strategies did these social reformers use to regulate dancing bodies, and did they work? Why or why not?

Field theory, grounded in the models articulated by French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, is central to my work.⁸ As a theorist who sought to problematize binary assumptions within his own field, Bourdieu's work on culture has been immensely useful in unpacking complicated and sometimes paradoxical layers of meaning within my study. Bourdieu suggested that individuals (agents) are neither imbued with unrestrained free will nor trapped within loops of feedback-response wherein they

⁸ Gay Morris was among the first to suggest that Bourdieu would be useful in the analysis of dance in "Bourdieu, the Body, and Graham's Post-War Dance" (*Dance Research* 19, 2, Winter 2001).

have no agency. Instead, he complicated structuralist Marxist theories and argued that the material conditions of societies generate *habitus*, limitations that guide but do not determine the range of actions available to individual agents. Agents in a social matrix will find their choices limited by the conditions of their material existence – these structures of available choices are what constitute at the simplest level *habitus*.

These limitations are

Systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules.⁹

In other words, material conditions of existence tend to produce predictable patterns of behavior due to the limited choices with which they present agents existing inside them. This should not be understood as a system of rules – which require adherence – but rather as a “feel for the game,” a sense of knowing how to “work the system,” and a predilection among agents from similar material conditions towards a particular matrix of choices.

[Habitus,] understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems.¹⁰

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

Thus, one might expect that agents from similar material backgrounds, experiencing a new phenomenon for the first time, would have a range of responses to that phenomenon that, while not identical, were not vastly disparate from their peers.

Habitus acknowledges the impact/influence of structural elements such as language, economy, and geography experienced by individual agents, providing an explanatory matrix for these behaviors without resorting to anything as nebulous as a “collective unconscious,” an occult force like an “ether” or “plenum” that invisibly connects individual agents.¹¹ Significantly, the dispositions generated by habitus tend to be self-regenerating, “structures predisposed to functioning as structuring structures.” The tendency for agents to make similar choices leads to the replication of those choices in other agents. While tending to minimize the impact of individual agents on any given system, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus provides a useful model for the analysis of larger systems of cultural interaction. Bourdieu has illustrated this model through cross-generational conflict, where the experiences and material conditions of a younger generation are conditions of existence which, “in imposing different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probably, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another

¹¹ Field theory has an interesting background in the physical sciences, where terms like “ether” and “plenum” were invoked to explain observations that appeared to represent action (force) that operated at a distance, without any measurable influence on the intervening space. Gravity is one such phenomenon, magnetism another that have been theorized as operating through an “occult” medium that has the ability to penetrate any object while remaining undetected. See John Levi Martin, “What is Field Theory?” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 109, 1 (July 2003).

group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa.”¹² This model has a great deal of resonance with the agents in my own study.

Bourdieu characterized habitus as “embodied history – internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history,” which strikes me as a particularly apt lens for my own study of dancing.¹³ However, Bourdieu is not actually focused on the body as such, but rather on the embodied nature of knowledge, the manner in which the body and mind are complicit rather than separate in their experience of the world.

Knowledge is not understood to simply reside in some disembodied intellect, but rather is acquired and retained in the material bodies of agents. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Goffman and Mauss, Bourdieu articulates the term “*hexis*,” that knowledge held and expressed most unconsciously at the level of the body.¹⁴ *Hexis* is the practical mastery of somatic performance, developed through lived experience within distinct material conditions, which marks an agent’s place within their society. “Body *hexis* speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools, and charged with a host of social meanings and values.”¹⁵ *Hexis* can be likened to the particular manner in which an individual speaks a language, an accent – although there is nothing about any given system of spoken language that predisposes it to a particular group of people, it is very difficult

¹² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.

¹³ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press (1990), 56.

¹⁴ Gay Morris notes that “Mauss, in ‘Techniques of the Body’ suggested that the kinds of every day movement, such as walking or shoveling, that are assumed to be natural, are in fact socially constructed, while Goffman demonstrated in what he called ‘bodily presentation’ that bodies constantly give cues that communicate meaning to others.” 56.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 87.

for adult speakers to perform new language systems without traces of their native tongue. Hexis is a powerful tool for unpacking layers of meaning in dance, which is itself a highly structured and regulated mode of somatic performance. If an individual dances well their position improves; if they dance poorly their position worsens. But who decides what dancing “well” or “poorly” means? How do individual agents within a field develop a preference for one set of cultural standards over another?

To better theorize the manner in which agents learn to value a particular system of cultural production, Bourdieu built upon the concept of habitus. He suggests that artistic appreciation is developed through the lived experience of material conditions into *codes of perception*. “The repeated perception of works of a certain style [of art] encourages the unconscious internalization of the rules that govern the production of these works. . . . The unconscious mastery of the instruments of appropriation which are the basis of familiarity with cultural works is acquired by slow familiarization.”¹⁶ Through familiarity acquired over time at an almost unconscious level agents gain the skills with which to make sense of cultural products. As with habitus and hexis, codes of perception are generated by the material conditions of agents; only works of art that are available to be consumed can inculcate the understanding of “the rules” of those works of art. Likewise not every agent responds to such stimulus in exactly the same way, each one bringing a distinct set of experiences to the encounter. And as with habitus and hexis, agents sharing

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception,” in *The Field of Cultural Production*, Randal Johnson, Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 228.

similar positions within a given field are likely to possess similar codes of perception. This theory suggests that agents with backgrounds in similar material conditions will tend to favor similar cultural fare, and further, that agents will be confronted with cognitive dissonance when presented with cultural productions generated outside of their field.

Bourdieu contends that, imbued with an understanding of a particular set of codes, agents find themselves unable to understand alternative frameworks (works of art, cultural products) developed under or based upon different rules. “Uninitiated perception, reduced to the grasping of primary significations, is a mutilated perception.”¹⁷ Artistic products originating from outside the unconsciously mastered codes of a given individual will, then, be understood through the rules inculcated into any given agent, inevitably resulting in profound misunderstandings, “[s]ince the information presented by the works exhibited exceeds the deciphering capabilities of the beholder, he perceives them as devoid of signification.”¹⁸ Even cursory examinations of early European American writings on African American performance resonate with this sensibility; the European American writers simply did not possess the means to apprehend the value in African American performance.

In using Bourdieu’s field theory to analyze ballroom dancing as it changed between the years 1880 – 1915, the evidence began to point to a startling conclusion: that the Waltz Aesthetic is more than a description of a set of movement preferences exhibited by certain groups of ballroom dancers. Instead, it functions as a kind of

¹⁷ Ibid., 218.

¹⁸ Ibid.

habitus, as a social institution that works to replicate itself often without the conscious cooperation of the bodies within which it resides. This seemed almost paradoxical, as this formulation seems to imbue the Waltz Aesthetic with agency while at the same time taking it away from the agents who were the subject of my study. However, through the lens of field theory, the Waltz Aesthetic instead can be seen as a multivalent operator on the agents within the field of ballroom dancing: it functions as habitus, hexis, *and* a code of perception. Thus the Waltz Aesthetic becomes like an ether or plenum that permeates the field, it “does not depend on individual wills and consciousnesses and forces itself upon individuals, often without their knowledge, defining the distinctions they can make and those which escape them.”¹⁹

The first level at which the Waltz Aesthetic operates is as a hexis. Ballroom dances in the European court tradition have long been highly structured affairs, with specific somatic vocabulary that shifts very slightly over time. The Waltz Aesthetic operates as a hexis inasmuch as it represents a particular value system that is applied to any given dance, be it polka, or tango, or waltz. The hexis of the Waltz Aesthetic determines at what distance the partners should stand from each other, in what manner they should hold onto each other, how they should move through space and what parts of their body should (or should not) be moving. Actually, “determines” is far too strong a word, as it implies there is no choice on the part of the individual agents. Instead, I should say that the Waltz Aesthetic presents an acceptable range of choices regarding these dance elements. Consider, for example, the distance one

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 222.

stands from one's partner. Certainly, two partners can dance with one another at a wide range of distances, with full body contact or several feet apart. The Waltz Aesthetic in a particular time and at a particular location might incline agents to understand that somewhere between two and four inches apart was appropriate. Standing an inch apart might be considered "edgy" while dancing with full body contact "vulgar." In a different time and place, the Waltz Aesthetic might suggest that dancing with full body contact was appropriate, and dancing an inch away from your partner was "sloppy."²⁰ As a hexis, the Waltz Aesthetic is not a monolithic construct that has no ability to change over time, but instead serves as a stabilizing, "structuring structure" that works to conserve a particular European American understanding of acceptable kinesthetic behavior that includes uprightness of the torso, a "T" shape of the arms in relation to the body, stillness in the upper body, and a focus on movement from the knees down.

Slightly less obvious is the manner in which the principles underlying the Waltz Aesthetic function as a code of perception. Professional ballroom dancers are trained by ballroom dancers who in turn were trained by other ballroom dancers (etc.), all of whom are thus inculcated with the values of European American performance over long periods of time through habitual familiarization.²¹ Through

²⁰ I have encountered both of these proscriptions in my years of teaching dance; the point is that within each group of dancers there *was* a standard, even if they would have been unable to articulate what it was.

²¹ Perhaps an example will help to better illustrate my point. While in New York City I worked with Angel Figueroa and Maria Torres, who were at that time competing in the American Style Professional Rhythm division. Over the course of two years they advanced through the field, regularly placing between 4th and 6th in national competitions. When they sought feedback as to the reason they were not breaking into the top three, they were (repeatedly, and by different judges) told that their dancing was "too street," and that it would need to be "cleaned up" if they wanted to win. Both Angel and

this lineage of instruction, ballroom dancers gain an understanding of the way ballroom dancing is “supposed to” work, and it is this code that is then utilized in the apprehension of other forms of kinesthetic activity.²² On this level, the Waltz Aesthetic might thus be thought of as “rose colored glasses,” lending shades of meaning to whatever is seen through them. Consider the constellations of meanings expressed in adjectival vocabularies often applied to dance, such as “graceful,” “elegant,” and “refined”:²³

Graceful (1420): Possessed of pleasing or attractive qualities. Now in more restricted sense (cf. GRACE *n.* 1): Elegant in form, proportions, movement, expression, or action. Of actions: esp. acts of courtesy, concessions, and the like: Felicitously well-timed or becoming.

Elegant (1485): Characterized by refined grace of form (usually as the result of art or culture); tastefully ornamental. Of physical movements: Graceful, free from awkwardness.

Refined (1582): Polished; not crude or vulgar.

Of language, speech, etc.: cultivated, polished, elegant.

Characterized by refinement, or the possession or affectation of refinement;

(esp. of a person) elegant and cultured in appearance, manner, or taste.

Maria grew up dancing before entering into studio training, and felt strongly that their versions of the dances were “more authentic” than those of the other competitors. Judges, however, who perhaps only knew the dances from the world of the studio, judged their performances as inferior.

²² This phenomenon can be observed in many examples of physical, artistic training (“schools” of ballet or fencing, for example). For my study, this is important to note because it so profoundly influenced the European American encounter with African American cultural production.

²³ All definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary, accessed online on January 23, 2010.

Free from rudeness or vulgarity; devoid of crude, rough, or uncouth elements;
that befits a person of refinement.

These are the kind of purely arbitrary descriptions that tend to go unexamined, particularly by hegemonic groups whose nature is to assume that their definitions are the ones that count. What, exactly, does “possessed of pleasing or attractive qualities” mean? Note how the terms all point towards each other, so that the definition of each hinges on an understanding of the others. The reader is expected to *know* the difference between crude, rough, or uncouth elements and elements which are cultivated or polished. While I do not propose to go into a lengthy discussion into the manner in which language functions as a code of perception, I do want to note that the Waltz Aesthetic draws upon exactly these kinds of circular systems of meaning-making to establish what is and what is not considered appropriate performance on the dance floor.

The most contentious hypothesis which I lay out is that the Waltz Aesthetic functions as a habitus, that is, a system for structuring meaning, as “principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules.”²⁴ I suspect that the Waltz Aesthetic, developed as a response to the rupture in the field of European American ballroom dancing caused by the introduction of African American aesthetics, has become a means for altering dance forms from subaltern communities ever since. Unfortunately, the breadth of this argument is

²⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

beyond the scope of this work; to convincingly substantiate my claim would require several book-length works that examine the diverse manner in which dance practices from African American, Hispanic, Latin, and Afro-Caribbean communities have been commodified and commercialized for consumption by European Americans. I look forward to pursuing this topic further in the future.

While Bourdieu's field theory is the primary lens through which I have approached my data, I am not unaware that this approach has problematic aspects. I feel that one of the weaknesses of the paradigm of field theory is the manner in which race, gender, and ethnicity are minimized. While such factors can be accounted for as vectors that affect an agent's ability to acquire or retain status within a field, there is a tendency for such elements to drop out of what is fundamentally an analysis grounded in Marxist understandings of power, distributed along lines that relate to the production of capital. Bourdieu was cognizant of this weakness in structuralist Marxism, and attempted to account for these factors through the consideration of forms of capital other than economic: social and cultural.²⁵

Social capital represents the network of individuals and institutions a given agent can draw upon for support; cultural capital reflects an agent's ability to understand and decode cultural products. Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital might have been useful when attempting to grapple with questions of race in my study; for example, consider James Reese Europe, an African American

²⁵ Although these concepts were developed over the course of his career, they are well defined in: Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990), *The Logic of Practice*, and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Richard Nice, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

bandleader and composer who (very) briefly appears in Chapter Five of this study. Europe gained economic capital when he received royalties for the sales of his songs, cultural capital when he took violin lessons from Enrico Hurlei (assistant director of the United States Marine Band), and he received social capital when he became the director of the Tempo club, a de-facto union for African American musicians in New York City.²⁶ However useful social/cultural capital might have been as a frame, they are not well suited to dealing with other factors such as the reduced royalties that Europe received because he was black, or the reasons that African American children were being taught violin lessons by white musicians, or how the “legitimate” musicians’ union refused to allow black members to join until the Tempo Club became the most popular resource for ragtime music in New York City.²⁷ My conviction that racial considerations in the U.S. are irreducible to forms of capital has led me to incorporate the works of Michal Omi and Howard Winant.

I have drawn principally on the second edition of Omi and Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* as a model for analyzing the impact of race upon the subjects of my study. In laying the groundwork for their understanding of racial formation, they note that the other major theoretical perspectives on race “neglect the specificity of race as an autonomous field of social

²⁶ In my initial conception of this dissertation Jim Europe played a far more significant role. As the work progressed, however, it became clear that as important and interesting as he was his relationship to the development of the Waltz Aesthetic was mostly tangential. I anticipate returning to James Reese Europe in future work.

²⁷ For much more on James Reese Europe see Reid Badger, *A Life in Ragtime: A Biography of James Reese Europe*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning.”²⁸ They suggest that class-based approaches to understanding race, such as Bourdieu’s, fail because they locate the roots of racial conflict and inequality as an outcome of market-driven forces. Omi and Winant instead understand race as the central axis of social relations, and locate race as a “pre-eminently *sociohistorical* concept.”²⁹

Thus, meanings of race are fluid, dependent upon the specific historical and geographical contexts, and contested discursively through both collective and individual action. Consequently, racial categories are ever in a state of flux, being re-imagined as circumstances warrant. Omi and Winant “use the term *racial formation* to refer to the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings.”³⁰ Omi and Winant’s theories dovetail nicely with Bourdieu in the sense that racial sensibilities are seen as being “quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation.”³¹ Despite Omi and Winant’s dissatisfaction with class-based models of race, their understanding of the manner in which race is constructed within society parallels Bourdieu’s theory of habitus in several significant manners. For my project, the most useful concept that distinguishes Omi and Winant’s work from Bourdieu lies in what Omi and Winant call “racial projects.”

²⁸ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from 1960 – 1990* (Second Edition) (New York: Routledge, 1994), 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

Racial projects mediate between “the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized on the other.”³² Racial projects vary in scope and effect, including “large-scale public action, state activities, and interpretations of racial conditions in artistic, journalistic, or academic fora, as well as the seemingly infinite number of racial judgments and practices we carry out at the level of individual experience.”³³ I suggest that the Waltz Aesthetic can be seen as a kind of racial project, using dance as a means for restricting African American agency and legitimacy in cultural production. I further suggest that the Waltz Aesthetic’s ideological core is one of European American cultural supremacy, and that it works to maintain hegemony by eliding and erasing African American aesthetics and artists.

Parameters

In grappling with the many different ways in which I might approach this project, many options had to be set aside; when making a choice to focus on particular issues, additional angles of inquiry inevitably received less attention. Thus, a brief word about the scope of the work to follow would seem to be in order. As someone wise once told me, “your dissertation is supposed to be the beginning of your work, not the end.”³⁴

I am primarily interested in the manner in which European Americans appropriated and commodified African American dance forms. Thus, while I do lay

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 60 – 61.

³⁴ Thanks, Mom.

out the current thinking on African movement retentions in early African American communities, I do not attempt to shed any special light upon the way in which African American artists began Turkey Trotting, Grizzly Bearing, or Texas Tommying. Instead I concern myself with what the European American dancers, dance teachers especially, saw when these forms were performed, and the manner in which African American aesthetics moved into European American ballrooms. Consequently, although I spend some time working with African American primary sources (particularly when looking at the Cakewalk as a model of cycles of appropriation), this focus shifts almost entirely to the European Americans who worked to develop and implement the Waltz Aesthetic.

Another consideration which did not make its way into this project was the contribution of other immigrant populations – Irish, Italian, Eastern European, South American, Asian, etc. – on the social dance aesthetic. This decision risks placing my work within a reductionist understanding of social dynamics in the *fin de siècle* U.S., positing a Black/White axis that blithely assumes that other factors were not relevant to the discussion. Clearly, this is not the case, and much work remains to be done to more fully understand the impact of the diverse immigrant population of New York City on social dance during this time period. However, I chose to maintain my focus on the European American/African American interactions for several reasons. Initially, I took this course because a multitude of secondary sources addressed this binary when reflecting on the rapid changes in social dance that took place in social dances that took place in the first decades of the twentieth century. Then, upon conducting my primary research in the popular media – newspapers, magazines, films

– the sources I encountered spoke almost exclusively to this dynamic, rather than presenting a broader account of ethnic influences upon ballroom dancing. Tango, and the Latin American influence on the ballroom at this time, was the notable exception to this focus on African American/European American aesthetics. In the end, I decided that a serious treatment of the Tango was beyond the scope of this project, not because it was not important to the formation of the Waltz Aesthetic, but instead because it appears that the Tango was caught up in the movement to modify and “rehabilitate” ragtime dance. Rather than develop the material I discovered on the Tango, which I suspected would provide little insight into the development of the Waltz Aesthetic, I chose to leave that project for another time.

Likewise, I have not gone into a great deal of depth on the issue of class within my study, focusing primarily on either those individuals at (or near) the top of their profession. In the case of the dancing teachers, this corresponded with those who had a great deal of social capital, in the case of Vernon and Irene Castle, or those at the top of the economic ladder (as in the case of the social reformers). This choice was in large part dictated by the information I discovered in my research. When looking at who was involved in censoring and reimagining ragtime dances, these were the agents/actors who emerged. I hope that future scholars can build upon this framework to look at the individuals who took up ragtime dances, those who challenged the codes of perception of the elite and defied the prescriptions and bans placed upon them by those whose interest lay in maintaining a somatic status quo. Such a work would likely provide valuable insights into the changing importance of social dancing on the lives of U.S. citizens during the years before WWI.

When dealing with ballroom dancing, the temptation to look at the manner in which it acts as a heteronormalizing, patriarchal discourse is always present; such concerns ultimately seemed to be outside of the scope of this study. I drew this conclusion from observing that the challenges ragtime dances presented to previous models of performance did not manifest along these lines – there was nothing radically empowering or oppressive in terms of gender or sexuality about the ragtime dances, nor were alternate modes of sexuality offered as valid expressions by these dances.³⁵

My time frame is, broadly, from the Civil War to the beginning of WWI, though I draw special focus to the years between 1911 and 1915. Geographically, I have focused (albeit not exclusively) on New York City as the location where most of the principal subjects of my study kept their residence. As they ventured abroad or were influenced by events from beyond the five boroughs, so have I spread my focus. The Waltz Aesthetic appears to have initially been developed by U.S. agents/actors in response to challenges presented by the popular adoption of African American cultural products, and as such I have not included much in the way of an examination, for example, of how ragtime dances impacted European ballrooms. The five chapters that follow lay out my argument for understanding the Waltz Aesthetic and its development in American social dance.

³⁵ This is not to say that anxiety about, for example, changing understandings of female sexuality were not a part of the concern of social reformers; instead, I suggest that the sexual dynamics within the dancing remained within the same man=leader /woman=follower paradigm.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One, “A Constellation of Cakewalks,” looks at the manner in which European American and African American social dance became entangled in the years following the Civil War. Many scholars have become aware of the existence of cakewalking as a performance practice in the minstrel shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through David Krasner’s *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre 1895-1910*. I take a closer look at the origins of the cakewalk on the plantations where enslaved Africans altered European set dances to suit their own aesthetics. Cakewalk was a fusion of cultural forms from its inception on the southern plantations where enslaved Africans transformed the promenades and marches they observed in white ballrooms. Tracing the manner in which the movement of the Cakewalk shifted throughout the late nineteenth century provides excellent opportunities for examining the habitus, codes of perception, and hexis of both black and white Americans, laying the theoretical groundwork for my examination of the field of ballroom dancing.

Chapter Two, “The Most Curious Organization We Ever Heard Of,” examines the field of ballroom dancing as the Victorian era was drawing to a close and the Progressive Era was beginning. Allen Dodworth, one of the last great American dancing masters, first published *Dancing and its Relations to Education and Social Life* in 1885. The book, one of the definitive documents on ballroom dancing in the nineteenth century U.S., offers Dodworth’s expert opinion on the function of dance instruction and the proper place of dancing in society. Dodworth’s insights provide valuable context for understanding the hexis, codes of perception, and habitus of the

American Society of Professors of Dancing (the first professional organization of dancing teachers in the U.S.). Members of this organization deployed strategies developed by earlier dancing masters when ragtime dances offered a significant challenge to the ideological roots of their profession.

Chapter Three, “The Doom of the Two Step,” fills in several blank spaces in the scholarship on ballroom dances at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Additionally, this work provides valuable evidence as I develop a clearer understanding of what, exactly, was going on in American ballrooms between the years of 1900 and 1911. Examining early film clips of partnered dancing for clues to the dance practices of the time leads me back to the American Society of Professors of Dancing and their increasingly futile battle to contain the spread of African American aesthetics in white ballrooms. The years in question were tremendously influential in determining what somatic standards would emerge as indispensable to dancing teachers in the fight to regulate movement. I detail the manner in which the waltz, which saw its popularity in decline during the last years of the nineteenth century, emerged as the *sine qua non* of European American social dance.

Chapter Four, “The Waltz Aesthetic Emergent” focuses on the social reform movement that entered the field of ballroom dancing in the years when the ragtime dancing craze spiked in popularity. So-called “animal” dances such as the Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear, and Bunny Hug were both wildly popular and intensely criticized, as cultural arbiters in the U.S. and Europe responded to the threat implied by the normalization of African American movement aesthetics. Social reformers’ hexis was aligned with the dancing teachers who advocated the Waltz Aesthetic, and they

initially applied similar strategies in their attempt to contain the spread of ragtime dance. One social reformer who played a prominent role in the successful reformation of ballroom dancing was Elisabeth Marbury, and I introduce her connection to the field as well as her “chosen weapon” in the fight to regulate dancing: Vernon and Irene Castle.

The final chapter, “The Waltz Aesthetic Ascendant,” examines the means by which the Castles and Marbury encouraged European American performance back toward the elite white hexis from which it had strayed. The Waltz Aesthetic’s more ideological function of eliding African Americans from the historiography of ballroom dancing is then examined, tracing the manner in which the Castles’ work was remembered in order to promote a European American-centric understanding of the development of modern ballroom dancing.

Taken together these chapters present a case for understanding ballroom dancing as the product of cycles of appropriation, a discursive creation of black and white artists whose habitus prevented a complete understanding of each others’ cultural work.³⁶ The dominant paradigm of white superiority in which all participants were immersed played a powerful but not incontestable role in the formation of somatic vocabularies, as demonstrated by the dance craze of 1911 – 1913. While suggesting that the Waltz Aesthetic emerged as a structuring model for ballroom dance instructors throughout the twentieth century, I want to highlight the manner in

³⁶ Although I contend that both black and white Americans misunderstood each other’s cultural codes, clearly African Americans were far more steeped in European American culture than vice-versa, especially at the turn of the century.

which it operated to preserve and promote European American cultural aesthetics when their hegemony was threatened by ragtime dancing.

Chapter 1: A Constellation of Cakewalks

Cornel West has noted that aesthetic considerations were central to the modes of discourse that resulted in an ideology of white supremacy.³⁷ West's analysis focuses on painters and writers; I suggest that dancers were no less important in reifying hegemonic discourse. But why the cakewalk? Why does my study not begin with the white dances and dance instructors of the turn of the twentieth century? Perhaps it is because I always want to look back another step, to see what factors drove the phenomena in question. In looking at performances that crossed racial boundaries in the first years of the twentieth century, one of the first forms to arise is the cakewalk. Although it lacks an obvious connection to the waltz as such, the cakewalk was a fusion of cultural forms from its inception on the southern plantations where enslaved Africans transformed the promenades and marches they observed in white ballrooms. Initially a mode of celebration and resistance for enslaved persons, the cakewalk was later used as a tool to propagate white hegemony. The process through which this transformation was enacted provides a useful case study in the larger consideration of the Waltz Aesthetic.

And why a “constellation of cakewalks?” Objectively, the stars in a constellation may be hundreds of light years apart, but the subjective observer detects patterns in the arrangement of lights in the night sky. Similarly, “to cakewalk” has meant very different things in many times and places, but looking over the scope of material covered in this chapter— some of which is not, strictly speaking, even about

³⁷ Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2000), 70.

the cakewalk – I see patterns, a “cakewalk constellation.” Thus the metaphor of the constellation seems an apt way to frame this chapter, because the cakewalk is no one thing. Rather (and ultimately perhaps this should be unsurprising), it is fluid, changing in temperament and form depending on the different times, places, and performers who took up the dance. While this does speak to my larger point regarding the shifting nature of movement systems, what has emerged from my research is not a chapter about the cakewalk, but rather one about a “constellation of cakewalks.”

Accordingly, the cakewalk has found a place at the beginning of my study, not because of a direct, causal link between cakewalks and ballroom dances, but because in its fusion of black and white aesthetics it speaks to the complex, cyclical nature of cultural production. I contend that the Waltz Aesthetic emerged as a means for white dancers to negotiate transformations of non-white movement systems into white performance, and my examination of such negotiations in the cakewalk provides an opportunity to consider how black and white codes of perception informed the hexis of their communities.³⁸ This reading of the cakewalk offers a window into how nineteenth-century black and white Americans perceived each other at the level of the body, and provides insight into the shifting lines drawn between acceptable and unacceptable movement in white performance. These perceptions and shifts were central to the development of the Waltz Aesthetic at the turn of the twentieth century.

³⁸ As discussed in the introduction, “habitus,” “codes of perception,” and “hexis” are terms drawn from field theory and the work of Pierre Bourdieu that I have developed to further my study. Briefly, codes of perception are a matrix of learned values through which an agent makes sense of the world he sees; hexis refers to bodily dispositions – ways of moving - generated by, among other things, codes of perception.

Thus, changes made to the cakewalk model and prefigure the changes that would be made to other dance forms, from ragtime to mambo. In this chapter I argue for an understanding of the cakewalk as a discursively contested site. Over time cakewalks worked to blur racially segregated lines of acceptable movement as the conflicting hexis of black and white Americans played out on stages and in ballrooms. My reading of these cakewalks uncovers “significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, (and) heavily nuanced conflicts,” thereby offering insight into the shifting lines drawn between acceptable and unacceptable movement in white performance.³⁹ Toni Morrison has suggested that the literature of America “necessitated coded language and purposeful restrictions” to deal with the problem of race.⁴⁰ I argue that the cakewalk can be seen as a case study for the manner in which dance has served similar ideological purposes.

In the first section below I trace the several “stars” in the “cakewalk constellation,” providing an overview of the different modes in which cakewalking manifested from its origins to the early years of the twentieth century. I then review current understandings of early African American movement aesthetics, and highlight the manner in which these aesthetics were at odds with those of early European Americans.⁴¹ Through the examination of visual representations of African and

³⁹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid. For more on the roots of white discourse concerning African Americans in the U.S., see Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), 1968.

⁴¹ It is important to remember that understandings of early African American aesthetics have been generated by contemporary scholarship, rather than any contemporaneous understanding held by African American performers at the time.

European Americans dancing together I argue that there was no room in the white imaginary for any understanding of African American aesthetics as valid or valuable. Turning to the performance of cakewalks in minstrel shows, I look at how the dichotomous standards of white and black kinesthetic aesthetics promoted the cakewalk as a site where ideologies of white supremacy could be reified. Finally, I argue that the cakewalk's brief re-emergence as an elite white social dance at the turn of the twentieth century can best be understood in terms of the Waltz Aesthetic, which reproduces European American value systems at the level of the body.

“Everyone take their places, and . . . Cakewalk!”

In the twenty-first century, cakewalking has become something almost, but not entirely, disconnected from its historical origins. To illustrate this, I would like to offer a brief, personal anecdote:

Rain has put a damper on the 2008 Fourth of July celebration at Lake Anna, Virginia. Many of the celebrants from the local community – mostly middle class, both black and white – have moved inside a recreation building. Tinny music emanates from a portable CD player as I watch a handful of children walk around a circle with a triple-dozen numbers taped to the floor. A woman takes a number from a basket, and stops the music. “Twenty-eight? Is anyone on twenty-eight?” My son is on twenty-seven, and I give him a nudge – but he misses the hint. “No? No winner? Right, then, let's go again. Everyone . . . Cakewalk!” The next time the music stops, my son is nowhere near the winning number. I look at the prizes. There are still several good looking cakes left. I buy another ticket, so he can enter the next cakewalk.

When my son entered the cakewalk, the contestants circled counter-clockwise to music, and there was the prize of a cake, but the “contest” was one of chance, the combination of a roulette wheel and a bingo basket, with the lucky child winning a cake donated as a community fundraiser. Where did this tradition start? How is the

cakewalk performed by my son at an Independence Day celebration in the twenty-first century connected to the performance of enslaved African Americans and the parades of the minstrel shows?

The idea of giving a cake as a prize dates from an era where sweets were an uncommon pleasure normally reserved for privileged classes. Certainly giving away cakes was not something exclusive to dancing competitions, as evidenced by the following advertisement for a theatrical production in mid-nineteenth century Worcester, MA:

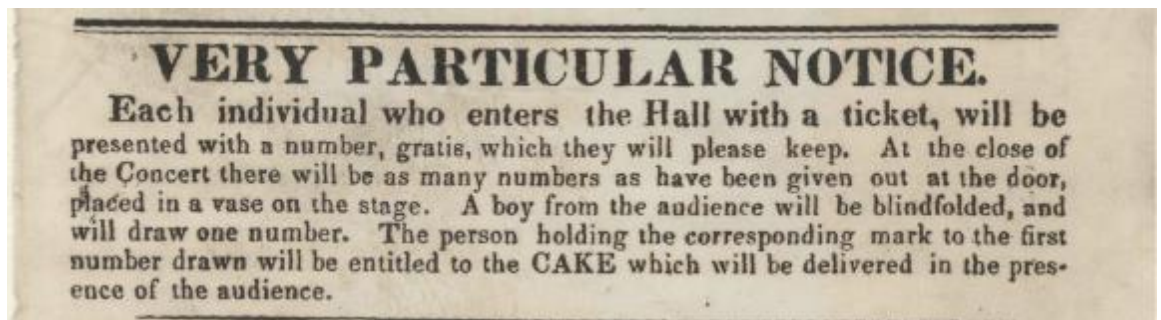


Figure 1: Broadside advertising a performance at the Portsmouth, MA Temple. 22 September 1852. Image courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

This advertisement offers evidence that winning a cake was not always part of a competition, but was (at least sometimes) a random drawing.

The origins of cakewalking as a performative endeavor have been traced to the plantations of the U.S. south, where enslaved Africans took up the dances they saw performed by European Americans.

[T]he slaves both young and old would dress up in hand-me-down finery to do a high-kicking, prancing walk-around. They did a take off on the high manners of the white folks in the 'big-house,' but their masters, who gathered

around to watch the fun, missed the point. It's supposed to be that the custom of the prize started with the master giving a cake to the couple that did the proudest movement.⁴²

This quote sums up the current understandings of the origins of cakewalking. Dance was a crucial element of enslaved Africans' culture, and competition was a common to both European American and enslaved African society; hence dance competitions. Note the idea that white observers "missed the point," or were unable to apprehend the entire meaning of the performances, indicative of broken codes of perception. Other accounts speak to this gap between black and white ideas of what was going on in the cakewalks.

Us slaves watched white folks' parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we'd do it too, but we used to mock em, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it, I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better.⁴³

The roots of the cakewalk, then, are understood to lie in the performances of enslaved African Americans, as a parody of the "Grand Marches" and "Promenades" performed by European Americans. These two quotes point to the twinned idea that black performance deliberately mocked white manners and European Americans interpreted such performance as a failure or inability to accurately reproduce those manners. This difference in intent and apprehension is crucial to an appreciation of

⁴² Quoted in Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, (New York, 1950), 96.

⁴³ Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964), 22.

the manner in which the Waltz Aesthetic emerged to mediate between black and white performance at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, aspects of enslaved African culture – particularly fungible elements such as song and dance – were incorporated into European American popular entertainments. Despite (or perhaps because of) their lack of authenticity, such performances became increasingly popular. “It was at this epoch that Mr. T. D. Rice made his debut in a dramatic sketch entitled ‘Jim Crow,’ and from that moment everybody was ‘doing just so,’ and continued ‘doing just so’ for months, and even years afterword.”⁴⁴ During this same period the cakewalk became a regular feature of the minstrel show.⁴⁵

Just about ten years after the end of slavery, at the Centennial of American Independence at Philadelphia in 1876, one of the features was a large plantation scene with a great many ex-slaves, and free-born Colored people . . . The added attraction was the “Cakewalk” . . . It was done in the minstrel shows by all men, some of them putting on dresses and makeup and wigs to act as walking partners for the others, because minstrel shows were all men in the beginning. . . . [the addition of women to the shows] made possible all sorts of improvisations in the Walk, and the original was soon changed into a grotesque dance. Furthermore, with women traveling with the companies, each couple began to work out its own original routines.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ New York Tribune, 1855, quoted in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

⁴⁵ W. T. Lhamon Jr.’s *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) contains an excellent discussion of the manner in which African American elements were incorporated into European American theatrical performance.

⁴⁶ Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business: The Tom Fletcher Story* (New York: Burdge, 1954), 103.



Figure 2: Primrose and West's Big Minstrels

Between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century cakewalking expanded from its roots as a social dance performed by enslaved Africans to a performative dance, executed in minstrel shows by European Americans and African Americans for white audiences eager to be entertained by “authentic” representations of life in the antebellum south.



Figure 3: Uncle Tom's Cabin Cakewalk

This is not to say that cakewalking as a social dance was no longer a part of African American culture. Set at the turn of the century, Zora Neal Hurston's *Color Struck* (1925) begins with John and Emmaline, along with many of their friends and neighbors, taking a train from Jacksonville to St. Augustine to compete in a cakewalk. Hurston sets the second and third scenes at a dance hall, where members of the black communities of northern Florida have gathered to celebrate through competition. The most talented dancers from the surrounding areas parade and strut; the (on-stage) audience joins in the action with stomping feet and clapping hands. The prize is a huge chocolate cake, "Ten dozen eggs – ten pounds of flour – ten pounds of butter – and so on and so forth."⁴⁷ Hurston's dramatic presentation of the social event of the cakewalk suggests that the form continued to be popular among black communities into the twentieth century.⁴⁸

Around the first years of the twentieth century elite northern whites took up cakewalking as a social dance, aided and abetted by prominent African American performers such as Tom Fletcher and Aida Overton Walker. Changes in the dance were made to accommodate white tastes, and Walker observed that

[T]he present Cakewalk has been developed by the younger generation. It has less of the old-time dignity and stiffness and more of grace and suppleness. It is devoid of the extravagant features of the earlier period. . . . The flourishing of handkerchiefs and that kind of coquetry is no longer popular with those who have developed the modern Cakewalk."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Zora Neal Hurston, *Color Struck*, in *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays* Jean Lee Cole & Charles Mitchell, eds. (Piscataway, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 42.

⁴⁸ Hurston's training as an anthropologist makes *Color Struck* a potent indicator of the social dance practice in north Floridian African American communities at the turn of the twentieth century, despite its putatively fictional nature.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895 – 1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 91.

African American performers such as Fletcher and Walker were much sought after by white socialites eager to get a taste of “authentic” African American culture. The following description of a Chicago society ball is an early example, from 1898.

The most novel society event of the season was the “cake walk” given on January 31 by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Waller. . . . Society men and women entered with zest into the spirit of the affair. Negro doll babies, water melons and other incidents characteristic of the south abounded. A quartet of plantation darkies sang appropriate melodies.⁵⁰

As a mode of elite white social dancing, however, the cakewalk was short lived. I have not discovered any reports of the cakewalk in European American social dance settings after 1906. Likely the cakewalk was supplanted by ragtime dances, which also satisfied the desire for a taste of African American culture, and were already circulating in white ballrooms.⁵¹

Cakewalking moved from enslaved Africans who based their performance on elite whites dancing in plantation balls, to European American minstrel performers, to African American minstrel performers. Finally the dance returned to elite whites, no longer in plantation houses, but in metropolitan ballrooms. By the time my son took his place in the cakewalk, the form had changed even further, becoming a barely recognizable iteration of how it was practiced a century ago. In each place, for each group, cakewalking meant something different, and those meanings were expressed in

⁵⁰ Melvin Ballou Gilbert, *The Director* (April 1898. Reprinted: Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1976?), 151.

⁵¹ It also seems likely that cakewalking’s similarities to the quadrilles and grand promenades of the early/mid- nineteenth century reduced its appeal to a broad population of white performers.

the somatic and kinesthetic changes made as the dance migrated between nineteenth century Americans.

Towards an Early African American Aesthetic

In looking to understand the manner in which enslaved Africans might have perceived European American ballroom dancing, I discovered that there has been a lot of scholarly work done to recapture the movement practices of Africans in the early Americas.⁵² Melville Herskovits observed that “dance itself has in characteristic form carried over to the New World to a greater degree than almost any other trait of African culture.”⁵³ In fact, many scholars of African American history have noted that much of the African culture that was preserved in the New World was knowledge held in the body. “Dance movements and body language embedded in the muscle memory of captives from western and central Africa provide a deep and enduring wellspring of creativity for black Americans.”⁵⁴ Even oral traditions were at risk when diverse tribal groups were intermingled, leaving embodied knowledge as the most powerful form of cultural memory. Although there is a significant amount of scholarship that theorizes the importance of the body to the retention of African culture, embodied knowledge has not had an easy time finding a way into traditional archives. Looking to printed documents for signs of African traditions offers little assistance to the scholar; when records do mention African performance in early

⁵² See the work of, for example, Katherine Dunham, Robert Ferris Thompson, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Jean and Marshal Stearns, and Jacqui Malone.

⁵³ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 76.

⁵⁴ Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1996), 25.

America, such observations are almost inevitably those of Europeans or European Americans and as Roger Abrahams notes in *Singing the Master*, “interpretation gets a little more slippery when the meaning of the event is not shared by all involved.”⁵⁵ Accordingly, much effort in dance scholarship has been directed at attempting to identify what Lynne Emery refers to as “survivals of African dance” and others have referred to as “African(ist) retentions.”⁵⁶ In attempting to articulate a pre-middle passage West African hexis, dance scholars have noted that there is far more homogeneity in West African movement vocabularies than in their various oral languages.

Accordingly, researchers attempting to re-construct some of the movement qualities and aesthetics that would have been prevalent in the enslaved populations of early America have focused on analyzing West African dance practices. Numerous reports were collated by scholars who travelled throughout West Africa, such as the following example by R. F. Thompson:

Beginning, the dancer enters flexed and attentive, body inflected, usually into two or more expressions according to the multi-metric structure of the music. Then as he improvises, he further divides his frame. He can get down in a crouch, he can move his head and arms to staggered patterns, he can, with inimitable hauteur, make his muscles shine with brilliant motions set against his facial calm. The end of the dance, sharp, dynamically precise, establishes a clear boundary between one improvisation and the next.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.), xvi.

⁵⁶ Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today* (Princeton: Dance Horizons, 1988.), 93.

⁵⁷ Robert F. Thomson, *African Art In Motion: Icon and Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press and The National Gallery of Art, 1974), 9.

This example generally captures the tone and content of the majority of similar observations. The only absence in Thompson's report to which I would draw attention is that interaction between the performers and the audience is generally considered integral, as dances are community events wherein the choices made by all participants have an effect on their relative standing and perception in the community. The observations of Thompson and others provide a window into some of the kinesthetic elements of early African American performance. Dance scholars have identified several factors as likely present in early African American populations.⁵⁸ While there was no single value system in place in such a diverse population, it seems reasonable that improvisation, hauteur, multi-metered performance in both the rhythms of the body and the angularity of the limbs, a low-to-the-ground movement, and the marking of boundaries between the sections of the dance would have been valued.⁵⁹

Improvisation in this context involves seeing what someone else does, being able to instantly transform within one's own body into something subtly different; to master someone else's movement and make it your own.⁶⁰ Hauteur – sometimes referred to by other scholars as a sense of “cool” – is a sense of facial calm in the

⁵⁸ While the dances observed by researchers in African dance were all performed in the twentieth century, it has been taken as a matter of faith that the qualities therein have persisted in the communities where the dances originated for, literally, centuries. I find this unspoken assumption a bit problematic, but it appears to A) be the best information that the field has to go on, and B) fit the facts as we find them.

⁵⁹ For a more on the relationship between African and African American dance aesthetics, I recommend Jacqui Malone's *Steppin' on the Blues* and Jurretta Jordan Hecksher's *Our National Poetry: The Afro-Chesapeake Inventions of American Dance* in Julie Malnig, ed., *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

⁶⁰ Improvisation might also be understood as a kind of kinesthetic “signifyin’,” as described by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

midst of strenuous performance. Multi-meter performance involves presenting different rhythms in the body simultaneously; syncopations, complex layering of patterns that do not always align in a symmetrical fashion – arms and legs, feet and head, upper and lower torso working in different rhythms. Low-to-the-ground movements are those that leave the vertical, with bending of the knees, ankles, and torso. Boundaries between sections of dances are typically created through moments of sustained stillness, a sense of “coming to rest” in the body prior to continuing.

The above description of early African American somatic aesthetics offers an excellent example of the manner in which European American codes of perception might color reportage. A term I am inclined to use to describe an aspect of multi-meter performance is “dissonant.” However, dissonance has negative connotations associated with an opposition to resonance, and really only makes sense in the context of the musical sensibilities of elite European Americans. A salient point, I think, is that while “dissonant” does describe some aspects of multi-metered performance to *me*, I only recognize them as such due to being inculcated in a habitus that places greater emphasis on symmetry than on asymmetry.

Enslaved Africans’ kinesthetic choices reflected the way in which they understood the world, and these “codes of perceptions” informed their understanding of the dances performed in European American ballrooms. The somatic differences between minuets and quadrilles as performed by European- and African-American dancers can, then, best be understood as the reflection of their different value systems. When enslaved peoples took the dances of European Americans back to their quarters, the figures were transformed into a hybrid form, similar and yet different.

This points to “broken” or imperfect understanding; while black observers keenly perceived the physicality of quadrilles, waltzes, and country dances, they lacked the habitus to apprehend the purposes these dances served in white society.⁶¹ Thus, African American performance of European American forms struck white observers as both fascinating and discordant because the cakewalk both was and was not an imitation of white dance; transposing the physicality of a dance onto another value system resulted in very different performance.

African American performers were improvising and commenting on the performance of the European Americans, however, white observers lacked the “codes” to perceive black performances in that light. For them, the cakewalks’ imitation of their marches and promenades was like a mirror, slightly skewed. White observers’ codes of perception led them to assume that African Americans were pursuing similar goals: imitation of, and association with, a culture and society (i.e. European aristocracy) higher than their own. The disjuncture between the functions of dance in the habitus of the two societies worked to create an initial state of schism, where both groups misunderstood why the other danced the way that they did. This misunderstanding was one reason dance became a powerful symbol of perceived differences between white and black Americans.

⁶¹ This is not to suggest that enslaved Africans were somehow unable to perform in the manner or mode of European Americans. Rather, the dances were understood through codes of perception, leading to different movement choices in performance.

The intersection of African American and European American culture in the cakewalk was informed by the inability of both groups to fully understand the other.⁶² For European Americans this misunderstanding positioned African Americans as unable to perform the physicality of civilization. This buttressed ideologies of white supremacy that reified European Americans' position in the power dynamic, even (especially) in the face of the sweeping social change of emancipation. In the next section, I will examine two political cartoons that imagined African Americans participating in white social life in order to highlight the manner in which African American aesthetics were perceived as being both inferior and antithetical to those of European Americans.

Visual Representations

Despite many whites' abhorrence of slavery, few could imagine enslaved Africans' full participation in U.S. social life. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln observed that

[T]here is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.⁶³

⁶² On the part of many European Americans, there was clearly no interest in achieving any such an understanding.

⁶³ Lincoln's fourth debate with Douglas, 18 September 1858.
<http://www.nps.gov/liho/historyculture/debate4.htm>

These remarks were made in the context of a series of debates between Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas during the campaign for the Illinois senate seat (a race which Douglas won), in which Lincoln was regularly targeted by Douglas as favoring black equality and supporting the intermarriage of blacks and whites. Such concerns were common in the United States at the time, and white anxiety over the possibility of emancipation in America was often expressed in pictures that imagined black bodies participating in white social life. In images such as “An Amalgamation Waltz,” and “The Miscegenation Ball,” white artists, using the medium of elite social dance, imagined difficulties in living up to the rhetoric of emancipation.

Why did artists choose images of interracial dancing as the medium for a message that sought to question the consequences of emancipation? While there were doubtless several reasons why dance suited the message of these artists (and by no means was social dance the only situation chosen for such representations), the juxtaposition of black bodies with costumes and settings associated with elite whites created a dissonant image. White anxiety over the possibility of miscegenation at that time was considerable, even amongst abolitionists; images of black and white dancers would have worked on those fears. White viewers’ codes of perception could not reconcile African Americans, a subaltern population, in the roles accorded to the leaders of European American society.⁶⁴ I contend that dance spoke powerfully to the

⁶⁴ Other images portrayed women taking the men’s role as “leader” in the dances as an expression of anxiety regarding the challenges of women’s rights in the 1840s. White, male-leading / female-following partner dancing was the standard against which such representations suggested dangerous deviations.

imagination of white viewers, for whom the markers of elite status and certain modes of social dance were closely entwined.



Figure 4: An Amalgamation Waltz
(Image courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA).

Clues to the codes of perception of European Americans, and the manner in which those codes shaped their relationship to African Americans, can be discerned in Figure 4, “An Amalgamation Waltz.”⁶⁵ The only white men in the image are musicians in the balcony, where otherwise one might expect black musicians to be playing. This speaks to white sexual anxiety regarding black men and white women, with the white men unable to do anything but watch as their rightful place is taken by

⁶⁵ Edward Williams Clay, *An Amalgamation Waltz* (New York: J. Childs, 119, Fulton St., c.1839).

the black dancers. The black men are represented in various degrees of caricature, most prominently the center figure with his mouth open, full of teeth. I note that none of the black dancers has straight legs; straight limbs being a hallmark of European American performance, this subtly positions African Americans as unable to properly perform their designated role in the picture. However, there are not the grotesque exaggerations of feet, posture, or position that might otherwise be expected given examples from contemporaneous work in this vein. This is an *almost* straightforward transposition of black bodies into white costumes and a white setting, and the effect is intended to be ridiculous – even absent the stereotypical markers of African American inferiority commonly presented by white artists. The picture asks the reader if this is the kind of consequence they are prepared to accept if they support amalgamation and emancipation.

Consider, then, “The Miscegenation Ball”:



Figure 5: Kimmel & Forster, “The Miscegenation Ball” (New York, 1864). Courtesy of the Harry T. Peters 'America on Stone' Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Here is a scene similar to “An Amalgamation Waltz,” but with the genders of the dancers reversed. This cartoon, part of a series critiquing Republican Party rhetoric regarding emancipation (note the reference to Lincoln on the banner, and his portrait at the rear of the hall), also imagines African Americans in white social life, and again, cannot but make the suggestion ridiculous. Note that there are a few African American men present in the room (presumably members of the Black Republican Party referenced in the caption below the picture), but none dancing. On the far right of the picture are several couples engaging in compromising behavior, an image presenting sexually available African American women. There is a wide spectrum of dance styles going on, from the closed hold waltzing on the left side of the picture to the jig or quadrille-like open position dancing on the far right. The African American dancers in “The Miscegenation Ball” do not appear to have any difficulty fitting into their role. Most of the African Americans do not appear in grotesque caricature, with the notable exception of two women on the right who are drawn in the style of “mammies.” Although the white dancers are depicted with upright torsos, three of the six have extremely high knees; such high-stepping would have been uncommon in white social dance at that time. In this image, then, it would appear that the influence of the African Americans has led to a failure or corruption of the European American hexis. This, in conjunction with the sexual hi-jinx going on, could be read as evidence of the negative influence, reflected in both the moral and physical realm, of association with African Americans.

These images are indicative of European American attitudes and understandings of African American status at the time of the Civil War, and illustrate

the ground state for the conflict over representation that would take place in the years to come. With emancipation came heightened white anxieties over the status of African Americans, and a pressing need to entrench a hierarchy that maintained white supremacy. Just as satiric images of African Americans performing white dance served to reify ideologies of white supremacy before the Civil War, the cakewalk was presented in the minstrel show as an example of African American buffoonery and inherent inferiority.

Cakewalks in the Minstrel Show

After the Civil War, performances of the cakewalk skewed by the perceptual misunderstandings noted above entered the larger European American public consciousness. This was primarily accomplished through artistic representations – calendars, cigar boxes, post cards, cookie tins – and performances on the minstrel stage. In “Cakewalk: a Study in Stereotype and Reality,” Brooke Baldwin lists dozens of craft items from the 1870’s and 80s that portrayed the Zip-Coon image of cakewalking African Americans and argues that “the purpose of the Cakewalk was to portray Cakewalking blacks as buffoons who could never take that final step, no matter how high-kicking, into white culture and high society.”⁶⁶ Klan terror and Jim-Crow legislation were the ugly, most evident aspects of the massive efforts undertaken to deal with the heightened racial anxiety in the postbellum United States. Denigrating representation was one of the secondary strategies of whites who aimed

⁶⁶ Brooke Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” *Journal of Social History* 15, 2 (1981), 207.

to ensure that the African American, though he might be free, would never aspire to equality.

“Black America,” a Minstrel extravaganza staged in the summer of 1895, advertised itself as a “Grand Picturesque Out-door Spectacle of Plantation Life in the Sunny South.” The second part of the show concluded with a cakewalk which introduced “an array of renowned Southern Experts, both male and female, all prize winners in many stubbornly contested trials.” Included in the program was a history of the cakewalk.

The cake walk [*sic*] originated in the poverty of the Southern negro. It was the custom on holidays, as a form of amusement, to offer a prize for the most graceful or the most grotesque walk adopted by the individual couples. Being very poor, the negroes could not offer anything very substantial as a prize, and it was the custom for the women of the plantation to bake a cake, which was given to the successful couple as a reward of merit. The people contesting were dressed in the cast-off finery of their masters and mistresses and many humorous features were thus introduced.⁶⁷

The show presented the cakewalk as a creation of the African American experience, as a competitive event, and as operating within a larger community setting. However, consider the historiography – the negroes were not enslaved, they were “very poor.” Prizes were awarded for walks that were “graceful or grotesque.” African Americans wore the cast-off clothing of their masters and mistresses and

⁶⁷ Program from “Black America: Grand Picturesque Out-door Spectacle of Plantation Life in the Sunny South,” no date. This program appears to be from the Huntington Avenue Grounds, in Boston.

“many humorous features were thus introduced” – another example of the clash between African American and European American codes of perception.⁶⁸

This campaign to de-humanize blacks, assuage white guilt over the savage truths of slavery, and promote a new societal order in which blacks would remain in the lowest social strata found a useful tool in the cakewalk. For the cakewalk did, in fact, (re)present cultural work created by the enslaved persons while in bondage, and hegemonic interests succeeded in presenting only that much of the story, while conveniently ignoring the larger context. The minstrel cakewalk, presented by blacked-up white performers as a demonstration of African American clowning, reinforced the image of the cheerful darky who laughed and played on the plantation, never more pleased than on those happy, frequent occasions when he could dance and play his banjo.⁶⁹ Clearly, the larger presentation of the world of the enslaved African American in “Black America” was a plantation imaginary, described by Robert Toll as the “ultimate in white fantasies about the Southern Negro.”⁷⁰

Through the last quarter of the nineteenth century, cakewalks in minstrel shows helped to establish/maintain a perception of African American culture and performance as inferior to that of European American performance. As Baldwin noted, one effect of this was to delimit the perceived abilities of African Americans.

⁶⁸ For a more detailed discussion of African aesthetics in terms of color, line, shape, and pattern, see R. F. Thompson, *African Art In Motion: Icon and Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press and The National Gallery of Art, 1974).

⁶⁹ Barbara Webb argues that popular black performance forms such as Cakewalks and Barbershop Quartets need to be rethought in light of post-modern formulations of authenticity. Her argument regarding modern understandings of fin de siècle African American performance is compelling but somewhat tangential to my consideration of white perception. “Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s,” *Theatre Journal* 56, 1 (March 2004).

⁷⁰ Robert Toll, *Blackening Up, The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 272.

This perception can be found even amongst those most sympathetic to the integration of African Americans into American society. To help illustrate this I would like to examine a block of text published in 1896 along with an image of African Americans dancing (Figure 6). The picture is entitled “New Year's Day Contraband Ball at Vicksburg, Miss., During the Siege.”



Figure 6: New Year’s Contraband Ball at Vicksburg, Miss., During the Siege

The negroes [*sic*] preserve all their African fondness for music and dancing, and in the modified form which they have assumed here have given rise to negro dancing and melodies in our theatres, a form of amusement which has enriched many. But the colored people should be seen in one of their own balls to enjoy the reality. The character of the music and the dance, the strange gradation of colors, from the sooty black of the pure breed to those creatures, fair and beautiful, whose position among their darker brethren shows the brutal cruelty of their male ancestors for generations, who begot them to degrade them, and who had thus for years been putting white blood into slavery. There is in these balls one thing which cannot fail to impress any observer. Coming as they all do from a degraded and oppressed class, the negroes assume nevertheless, in their intercourse with each other, as far as

they can, the manners and language of the best classes in society. There is often a grotesque exaggeration, indeed, but there is an appreciation of refinement and an endeavor to attain it which we seldom see in the same class of whites.⁷¹

The text speaks eloquently to the assumption that African Americans are attempting to imitate European American culture, an understanding that had been circulating for nearly a century. No less importantly, it understands that they are incapable (“as far as they can”) of succeeding in doing so. I contend that the “grotesque exaggeration” described here is a misperception of a performance with a radically different aesthetic. The white observer, possessing European American codes of perception, cannot see the dances of African Americans as a valid expression of a different somatic aesthetic. They could interpret elements where value systems overlapped – the sense of facial calm during performance, virtuosity, clean breaks between sections of the dance – as efforts by the black dancers to perform in the manner of whites. Where the black dancer’s aesthetic did not match white expectations – movements that might leave the plane of the vertical, isolations of the torso, and additional rhythmic flourishes in the creation of a new, individual performance – the white observer might have seen an inability to maintain a disciplined focus, unseemly movement of body parts normally off-limits for polite company, and disturbingly asymmetrical positions. The observer frames the dances and dress of the African American performers within the context of “an appreciation of refinement and an endeavor to attain it.” This, of course, is one of the underlying reasons why white

⁷¹ Frank Leslie, *Famous Leaders and Battle Scenes of the Civil War* (New York: Mrs. Frank Leslie, 1896), 348.

Americans performed the dances of Europe; however, black Americans would have had a different constellation of meanings associated with the concept of “refinement.”

As Cornel West has observed in his writings on the genealogy of racism, aesthetics play a powerful role in the maintenance of the ideology of white supremacy. Within the context of the minstrel show the disjuncture between black and white hexis – predispositions towards particular kinesthetic choices – was put to work in the interests of white hegemony. The presentation of African American aesthetics as seen through the lens of European American codes of perception to largely white, largely northern audiences implicitly acted to shore up structures of white domination threatened by the collapse of slavery and the subsequent re-location in the north of large numbers of African American during the Great Migration. By highlighting elements that did not align with European American hexis such as multi-metered rhythms, angular limbs, and isolations of the torso and hips, minstrel cakewalk performances recreated and re-inscribed visual support for the identification of African Americans with lower social status and inferior cognitive abilities. In its most widespread form at the turn of the century, the minstrel images of cakewalking reinforced the dominant representation of African Americans after Reconstruction as caricatures who wanted nothing more than to go back to the plantation.

One of the most troubling aspects of the minstrel show era was the participation of black artists who lent authenticity to stereotypical representations of African Americans through the presence of their black bodies. Although modern scholarship has uncovered nuanced ways to understand black participation in minstrel theater as resistant to white hegemony, negative consequences of African American

complicity were not lost upon the black community of the time. A writer to the African American newspaper the *Indianapolis Freeman* observed,

As a representative of the colored race I desire to enter my protest against the “Cakewalk” which is now becoming a fad among some colored people, encouraged by the whites. . . . The whites go to these exhibitions of buffoonery to laugh at and ridicule the monkefied contortions of the principal actors. . . . I insist that the Cakewalk is beneath the dignity of the better class of “the race” and that it brings them into ridicule and contempt . . . and so should be frowned on by the better class of colored people.⁷²

Notwithstanding arguments that the African American performers were likely aware of the mocking, double-edged nature of the cakewalk, this observer points to the deeply problematic nature of African American participation in an aesthetic form that propagated hegemonic tropes. Note, however, the division implicit within the writer’s opposition – it is the “better class of colored people” who ought to be opposed to cakewalks, rather than all African Americans.⁷³ Considering that assimilation was the dominant model for black participation in American society at this time, it seems to me unsurprising to find cakewalks described as “exhibitions of buffoonery” and “monkefied contortions.” Descriptions such as those offered by the author of the “Contraband Ball” in Figure 6 and the objections offered by the black critic of the cakewalk in the *Indianapolis Freeman* evidence the racist nature of the racial project inherent in the discourse of minstrel-show cakewalks. The echoes of

⁷² No title, *Indianapolis Freeman*, 2 February 1898.

⁷³ This reinforces the importance of a dynamic understanding of constructions such as habitus when considering broad communities; there is no single habitus that can adequately describe a group as broad as African Americans. As with many macro-models of social life, variations within a group often are larger than between groups.

slavery seen in these cakewalks reinforced hierarchies of racial stratification that ensconced African Americans as third-class citizens.

Although perceived as dehumanizing in its representation of African Americans, the cakewalk also served as a breeding ground for African American performers, music, and dance that would eventually create broader opportunities for African Americans. Through minstrel shows and cakewalks, African Americans gained a foothold in legitimate theater which allowed them to combat, from within, negative stereotypes across a larger spectrum. Langston Hughes said of the cakewalk in Cook and Dunbar's musical, *Clorindy and the Origin of the Cakewalk*, that "performed by handsome couples, the women gorgeously gowned, and nobody in blackface, the dance was a joy."⁷⁴ Hughes suggests a somatic difference between the performance of the cakewalk he saw in *Clorindy* and those on the minstrel stage, pointing to the mutable nature of the cakewalk. In addition to presenting a less caricatured portrait of African Americans, the visibility of African American performers and performance styles meant that African American aesthetics were increasingly accessible for consumption and appropriation by European Americans.

Cakewalking Elites

White fascination with African American performance, authentic or otherwise, intensified at the turn of the twentieth century. Ragtime music and dance were being performed in white ballrooms at the turn of the century, and it was at this time that the cakewalk was taken up by elite whites as a social dance. Several

⁷⁴ Quoted in Emery, 210.

scholars have drawn attention to the cakewalk's move from minstrelsy to elite white social dance; Baldwin cites the tiff between white socialite George Vanderbilt and African American entertainers Bert Williams and George Walker, when the duo accused Vanderbilt's cakewalking of drawing attention from them.⁷⁵ Aida (Ada) Overton Walker, dancer, choreographer, and wife of George Walker, acted as a legitimizing vessel for the transmission of "authentic" black culture to wealthy whites, including British royalty, while on tour in England. Walker taught them to perform with grace, refinement, and always a smile, to "keep thinking of moonlit nights and pine knots and tallow dips and of lives untouched by the hardness of toil, for I tell you that there was sunshine in the hearts of those who first danced the cakewalk."⁷⁶ David Krasner observes that it is very unlikely that Walker truly subscribed to such sentimentality, but that such soothing words were likely useful in fulfilling her role as a non-threatening vehicle of black culture.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Baldwin, 215.

⁷⁶ Quoted in David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*, 90.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*



Figure 7: Cake Walk. Allied Printing (Chicago: F.W. Brenckle & Co., c.1898).

When elite whites such as the Vanderbilts and Windsors took up the cakewalk, they lent their cachet and offered tacit permission for other, lower status European Americans to partake of African American cultural work. The timing of this movement, contemporaneous with the rise of Ragtime music, suggests a broader pattern of aesthetic hybridization that presented a challenge to the hexis of European Americans, a challenge that could be met by articulating the acceptable standards of movement for polite society. In considering the development of a Waltz Aesthetic in early twentieth-century evolutions of the cakewalk, I would like to turn to two film clips of cakewalking from 1903.⁷⁸

I want to consider these two films as indicative of the differences one might have observed between cakewalk as minstrel performance (“Comedy Cakewalk”), and as a social dance (“Cakewalk”). There are several elements in these short films

⁷⁸ You can view these films online at: Cakewalk: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKWEODiv2ok> and Comedy Cakewalk: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jXJcw_ORP8

that suggest that they could productively be read in this manner. First, the very different tone between the two films suggests to me that the “Comedy Cakewalk” is intended as a re-creation of a humorous moment from the stage, while the “Cakewalk” is far less calculatedly performative. Second, there is the difference in the costuming. “Comedy Cakewalk” has elements of costuming drawn from tropes of minstrel performance, including the oversized tuxedo of the gentleman on the far right and the calf-high dresses with exposed petticoats of the ladies. Costuming in “Cakewalk” lacks these performative elements; the dancers are in formal evening wear. Finally, there are significant differences in content. “Comedy Cakewalk” begins with the leading gentleman performing a “crazy-legs” walk and includes humorous moments such as a woman hitching up her dress to scratch at her ankle and a gag-handkerchief on a string. In “Cakewalk” there are none of these shenanigans, although the first two gentlemen do present some virtuosic improvisation. A reading of these clips as indicative of differences between minstrel performances of cakewalks and cakewalk as a social dance might provide some insight into the manner in which the Waltz Aesthetic worked in modifying kinesthetic choices, setting limitations for movements that were and were not available to individual actors.

In “Cakewalk,” it appears to me as though the final gentleman to promenade exhibits a different performance aesthetic than the other male performers. Consider the manner in which he begins his cakewalk; he presents none of the animation or individual virtuosity of the other two gentlemen. The first and the second gentlemen begin with a moment of flair, a variation from the simple walking steps that otherwise

characterize the dance. Why not the third gentleman? Consider the difference between the leg work in the second and third gentlemen's performance; the second man has noticeably higher knees than the third. To my eyes, the third couple's performance would not be out of place in a quadrille performed in the 1850s. These significant differences in performance suggest to me that this performer is operating under a different set of rules. This could be an example of the Waltz Aesthetic at work; in any case his limits of acceptable behavior seem to be more constrained than the first two gentlemen.

I also note the carriage of the upper body in all the performers – even in the virtuosic first moments, the upper body remains largely erect, held from the waist to the head. There is very little movement of the arms or torso throughout. The ladies' role in this performance is extremely limited, with none of the moments of individuality that mark the women in "Comedy Cakewalk." Their performance seems instead to emphasize the held carriage of the upper body and a smooth, gliding walk. This suggests some intriguing questions as to the imagined role of the women in a society cakewalk – black or white. Certainly expectations for men and women were different in both black and white society; this performance suggests another example of the manner in which African American women lacked even the limited agency of African American men.

Looking at these clips side by side in this manner suggests that there were definite modifications made from the stage – where black aesthetics were (mis)represented – to the milieu of white social dancing. Given that the minstrel cakewalks were a European American (mis)reading of an African American

(mis)reading of a European American dance form, it is perhaps surprising how closely the performance in “Cakewalk” resembles the promenades and marches upon which the dance was originally based.⁷⁹ This speaks to the complex, cyclical manner in which the hexis of African and European Americans was shifting at the turn of the century. As I shall discuss in subsequent chapters, the transmission of culturally patterned movement between white and black Americans presented threats and opportunities, ruptures and negotiations, reflecting the changing habitus of Americans at the turn of the century.

The Power of Hegemonic Performance

I want to end this chapter on the cakewalk constellation with an image presented at the 1904 Worlds’ Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. Consider the manner in which the Waltz Aesthetic might be seen at work in this image, where a white woman is teaching the cakewalk to an Igorot boy, a native of the Philippines.

⁷⁹ Recall Bourdieu’s contention that “Uninitiated perception, reduced to the grasping of primary significations, is a mutilated perception” (*Field of Cultural Production*, 218). Lacking the proper codes of perception to decode a particular cultural artifact, there is no other possibility but a mis-reading. This of course cuts both ways, with African and European Americans unable to correctly apprehend the nature of each other’s cultural production. I do not mean to suggest that European Americans and enslaved Africans had equivalent access to each other’s culture.



Figure 8: Mrs. Wilkins Teaching an Igorot Boy the Cakewalk

Though open to many readings, I see Figure 8 as a testament to the power wielded by whites in the discourse of cultural production.⁸⁰ Perhaps the most powerful rationalization created for negotiating different systems of performance was the idea that virtually no performance was, in and of itself uncivilized – or uncivilizable – when “properly” performed. This was a common argument presented in the defense of dancing throughout the modern era, but found a new force at the turn of the twentieth century.⁸¹ Previously fielded as a defense against charges of immorality

⁸⁰ No artist listed, *Mrs. Wilkins Teaching an Igorot Boy the Cakewalk*, image presented at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, MO. Image courtesy of Artstor, <http://tinyurl.com/ya43ofo>, accessed 30 January 2010.

⁸¹ Many of the broader social issues regarding the perception of social dance during the period 1900 – 1915 can be inferred by the appellation “modern dance.” A sense that this dancing was something new, vibrant, and slightly exotic tapped into the zeitgeist of the period. I have avoided using the term

leveled by religious authority, proper performance practice became the rallying cry around which dancing teachers and social reformers justified the acceptance of popular dance forms taken from non-white populations (when “properly” modified).

Perhaps this hearkens back to the philosophical underpinning of the relationship between the outer body and inner worth common to Western thought; perhaps it was more simply a reflection of a mind-set so convinced of white supremacy that it was forced to rationalize white performance of non-white hexis. In any case, the sense that dance – any dance – could be considered not only moral but morally uplifting if performed according to certain tenets can be found in rhetoric across the spectrum of social and concert dance at the turn of the century.⁸² In the image above, the cakewalk has been transformed from a black minstrel form that reflected a perceived inability of African Americans to fully perform European American hexis into a form *so* white that it can be used as a civilizing force, a means of uplifting a subaltern population.

The contrasts between the Mrs. Wilkins and the Igorot boy could hardly be more striking. Her pulchritude is matched by his lean muscle, her white body hidden by a full-body dress, his dark skin exposed by a loincloth, her high heels with his bare feet. Here is the power of whiteness at work abroad, bringing the light of civilization to a people who are (the image suggests) child-like and so clearly backwards that they need the white (wo)man’s help to bring them into the modern world. To white

“modernism” to describe this phenomenon because it is more commonly associated with the broader sweep of modern history since the Enlightenment.

⁸² Though not terribly pertinent to this study, there is a great deal of this rhetoric by the advocates of Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan in the early modern dance movement. See Mary Fleischer, *Embodied Texts: Symbolist Playwright-Dancer Collaborations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

observers the contrasts between the dancers would have been obvious and reified both a belief in white supremacy and nascent American power on the world stage. More subtly, the image pointed back to the United States and the population of African Americans who were still seen by many as little more civilized than the boy in the picture.

The picture represents the cakewalk as the thing that brings the white woman and native boy together, a medium where they can meet and communicate in a language that needs no words. The native is as pleased to be the recipient of instruction as the teacher is proud of her pupil. In many ways the cakewalk was the ideal vehicle for this message of white supremacy, as it demonstrates how the white teacher can extract from the savage performance (of African Americans) that which is innocent and moral, subtract the profane and vulgar, and thereby uplift another savage (the Philippino) in a language that the uncivilized boy would understand – dance. Thus dancing becomes a purely human activity, and white observers could appreciate the similarity of the impulse to dance while remaining secure in their superior position in the hierarchy of civilization. The imperial impulse is feminized, represented as a desire to protect and enlighten, rather than to exploit and dominate. This is the Waltz Aesthetic at work; transforming a subaltern performance into something acceptable for white performance; eliding the subaltern aesthetic by stripping away layers of physicality and replacing them with the hexis of European Americans.

Before the late nineteenth century, the movement systems of European American performance were generally handed down by elites, emerging from the

habitus of European aristocracy and radiating through social systems whose members looked up for guidance in proper modes of performance. At the very end of the nineteenth century, however, African American performance styles – increasingly visible through mediums such as the rising popularity of the minstrel stage – began to exert greater influence over the movement choices of white dancers. As Elizabeth Aldrich notes, dancing had become a less “manly” activity in white society during the years after the Civil War, leading to fewer men in dancing classes.⁸³ As I discuss in Chapter 2, dancing masters of the nineteenth century were as (if not more) concerned with instilling proper codes of perception in their students as they were in teaching dances; absent this indoctrination, a new generation of dancers was likely more willing to experiment with modes of performance outside of its previous experience.

At the turn of the twentieth century, European Americans, particularly the middle classes, enthusiastically took up social dances that contained African American somatic vocabularies and aesthetics. What somatic changes did white cultural arbiters such as dancing masters and social reformers make to the dances to stabilize their meaning within European American codes of perception? How did they negotiate the misperceptions and disconnects between European American and African American hexis? How did a European American habitus lead to the fuller articulation of a Waltz Aesthetic? The following chapters will investigate these questions in more detail.

⁸³ Elizabeth Aldrich, “The Civilizing of Americas Ballrooms: The Revolutionary War to 1890,” in Ed. Julie Malnig, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*,” 52.

Chapter 2: The Most Curious Organization We Ever Heard Of

In order to better appreciate how the Waltz Aesthetic emerged as the standard for European American partner dancing in the twentieth century, I now examine the field of dancing teachers as it changed from the end of the Victorian to the beginning of the Progressive Era. Professional dance teachers, despite diverse geographical and economic backgrounds, shared assumptions regarding intangible qualities such as “propriety” and “grace” that predisposed them towards certain strategies for negotiating changing fashions in dance. In the years before 1899, teachers of dance in the United States were faced with the continuing decline of set dances such as quadrilles, lancers, and Germans in favor of round dances such as waltz, polka, and two-step.⁸⁴ They lamented the decline in the quality of dancing as a result of the ease with which these dances could be learned; students no longer needed months of tutelage in order to acquire the skills for round dances. In the years after 1899, dancing teachers faced a far different challenge – ragtime.⁸⁵ The influx of African American aesthetics was indecipherable to these terpsichorean professionals. In Bourdieu’s terms, they lacked the proper codes of perception to apprehend the new

⁸⁴ I define “set” dances as those with a specified choreography that is understood by all participants. “round” dances are those where the individual couples determine the choreography independently of one another.

⁸⁵ There has been a lot of ink spilled trying to determine exactly when “ragtime” developed. I base my claim that the form blossomed into popular awareness in or around 1899 on the newspaper accounts of social dancing which arise during that year. Ragtime music, which is to say the application of African American harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic sensibilities to European American music, was being played earlier – likely *much* earlier – but it was not until 1899 that white dancing teachers and the press began to take notice.

dances. In this chapter, I argue that this disjuncture between the dancing teachers' models for "proper" dancing and the actual performance of the ragtime dances led the dancing teachers to apply the Waltz Aesthetic to the hexis of ragtime dances, both to bring them in line with their codes of perception and as a means of negotiating their declining relevance to social dancing.

Situated at the beginning of this period are the writings of Allen Dodworth, a dancing master who served New York City's elite. In 1885 Dodworth recorded his observations of the changes in the field of social dance in *Dancing and its Relations to Education and Social Life*. The insights offered by Dodworth point towards the shifts in social dance and the manner in which dance teachers worked to negotiate these changes in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. My study of Dodworth leads to the American Society for Professors of Dancing, who formally incorporated in 1883 and met annually until at least 1918.⁸⁶ Initially a small group of dancing teachers, the American Society rapidly expanded its membership to include teachers from across the northeastern United States. I have found a copy of the recorded minutes of the meetings of the American Society, a document that I believe has not previously been analyzed. This document, in addition to reports of the society's annual meetings in the major newspapers of the day, provides insider/outsider perspectives of the American Society of Professors of Dancing, and paints a vibrant picture of a profession desperate to retain relevance in the face of rapidly shifting material conditions. In turn this suggests that the changing habitus, codes of

⁸⁶ At times the Society met more frequently, as often as monthly in the early years of the organization. In 1922 the organization re-appears as the American Society of Teachers of Dancing; at present I have found no record of the organization between 1918 and 1922.

perception, and hexis of the dancing teachers had profound implications for the development of a Waltz Aesthetic in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Allen Dodworth and the Nineteenth Century Dancing Master

Allen C. Dodworth epitomized the nineteenth century dancing master. Born into a musical family, Dodworth grew up playing instruments ranging from the piccolo to the flageolet to the violin.⁸⁷ A founding member of the New York Philharmonic, he combined teaching dancing with his instrumental work before turning entirely to the instruction of dancing. Entrusted to teach the children of elite New York City socialites, Dodworth took seriously the task of teaching not just skill at particular dances, but more importantly the ability to move with poise in polite society.

From the commencement of my career it has been my belief that instruction to children, in the dancing school, should have for its objects – Strength, Agility, Gracefulness of Motion, Ease of Manner and Politeness; not alone the ability to dance those dances in fashion at the present time, but to move in the presence of others with composure and gracefulness.⁸⁸

This focus on deportment and social grace reflected the class consciousness of the nineteenth century dancing master, an artist not merely concerned with the instruction of dances *as such*, but with creating the discipline and control of the body that was so crucial to the successful presentation of the elite body.

This was a primary factor in the habitus of the dancing masters of the period. Habitus engenders a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating

⁸⁷ A flageolet is a woodwind instrument and a member of the fipple flute family.

⁸⁸ Allen Dodworth, *Assistant for A. Dodworth's Pupils* (New York: Nesbitt & Co., 1878), 4.

past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems.”⁸⁹ Dodworth and other dancing masters of his era associated with, but were not “of,” the elite. Drawing much of their financial support as teachers of the children of the wealthy, their success hinged upon correctly apprehending the values and behaviors of their clients, and passing these along to their heirs. Dancing masters needed to have a keen sense of what was and was not appropriate behavior for the very rich; I contend that this sense hinged upon two factors: fashion and respectability. A dancing master who could not instruct and demonstrate the latest dances would not long retain the business of those whose status depended upon their ability to remain up-to-date with changes in fashion; similarly, a dancing master who advocated kinesthetic choices outside the boundaries of accepted practice would be shunned and repudiated. The habitus of dancing masters guided their negotiation of these often conflicting factors – fashionable dancing often pushed the borders of respectability.⁹⁰

The later years of Dodworth’s career occurred during a transformative period in social dance in the United States. In *Dancing and its Relations to Education and Social Life*, Dodworth noted

⁸⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 82.

⁹⁰ Bourdieu theorizes habitus as extant within discreet populations who share material circumstances; I am extending this concept to a group who share professional circumstances. While not entirely consonant with Bourdieu, the many shared conditions and concerns of dancing teachers seems to support this reading, despite the range of material circumstances among the group.

With the introduction of the waltz, gallop [*sic*], polka, and other round dances, a complete revolution in social dancing took place. These were so easily learned that education in motion was deemed unnecessary; simply to make the motions required was quite sufficient, manner becoming entirely secondary. . . . And as it is true that many of our choice plants and flowers, when left without continued cultivation, return to their simple forms – so it is with human beings; the grotesque is the original form of pleasure given by motion; and so to the grotesque we naturally return, unless sustained by education.⁹¹

The importance of what Dodworth terms “manner” – opposed to the simple “making of the motions” – is at the heart of the disjuncture that appears in American social dance at this time.⁹² This quote illustrates a key element underpinning the aesthetic that Dodworth and his disciples promoted. They believed in the need for instruction to achieve grace and avoid devolving to the ground state of pleasurable movement, which Dodworth termed “grotesque.”

Dodworth traced his lineage to dancing masters from the royal courts of Europe, to the time before the professionalization of ballet and the split between performative and social dance. His ethos was based upon the assumption that grace in movement reflected inner worth, a hallmark of the day when physical training (whether fencing, dancing, or horseback riding) was the province of those whose elite status granted them the privilege of leisure time. There is nothing to suggest that Dodworth was in any way referring to African Americans when he described as

⁹¹ Allen Dodworth, *Dancing and its Relations to Education and Social Life, Second edition* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1900), 15. Dodworth keenly understood the changes that were brought about by the increasing popularity of round dances, and as far as his analysis went, he was not incorrect – social dancing had long been moving towards simpler forms, a process which continued well into the twentieth century.

⁹² Questions regarding class and dance during this period – particularly the manner in which the burgeoning middle classes took up ballroom dancing – deserve further study. My focus on dance instruction has provided valuable clues as to the changing nature of the clientele of dancing teachers, but has not provided sufficient data upon which to base claims.

grotesque the “original form of pleasure given by motion.”⁹³ However, it is no accident that the term “grotesque” was often applied at that time to refer to African Americans. A popular perception held by many European Americans was that African Americans were more primitive, or closer to nature.

Dodworth begins his instruction of dances with five positions of the feet, a convention that today is closely associated with ballet, rather than social dance. “Since dancing became an art, these (the five positions of the feet) have formed the basis of all motion,” he notes, and continues with the following directions:

The upper part of the body should be slightly inclined forward, the hips backward--the forward inclination just enough to cause a tendency in the heels to rise from the floor; the head erect, legs straight, arms hanging by the sides, elbows very slightly turned outward, so that the arms will present gently curved lines to the front.

This necessary inclination forward was at one time exaggerated into what was known as the "Grecian Bend;" the phrase had reference to the fact, that in all Grecian statuary, where gracefulness is intended, this beautiful curved line is always present. This may be termed the normal attitude, which should be maintained at all times.⁹⁴

These directions prepared for the execution of finely controlled movements that were best described through changes in foot position; this convention dates back to the conflation of social dance and balletic movements in European courts nearly a century before Dodworth’s manual was published. The set dances (such as quadrilles) in which these conventions developed were fundamentally intricate

⁹³ Examples of this use of language abound in periodicals and dancing manuals from the period. See, for instance, “There is often a grotesque exaggeration” in the description of figure 6 above, or “These dances may be called Grotesque, but they are not to be taken grotesquely with the body, but the feet.” In J. S. Hopkins, *The Tango and Other Up To Date Dances* (Chicago: The Saalfield Publishing Company, 1914), 16.

⁹⁴ Dodworth, *Dancing . . .*, 23.

variations on themes that had changed little in the previous hundred years.⁹⁵ Notice here the emphasis on a held posture, poised on the balls of the feet, particularly the instruction that this attitude “should be maintained at all times.” Implicit here is the assumption that the majority of the dance is going to be conducted from the knees down, while the upper body remains placid. Later, this convention becomes integral to the Waltz Aesthetic, and one of the major objections to African American hexis was the manner in which the hips and upper body move with syncopation, independent of the rhythms of the feet.

The primary challenge perceived by dancing masters in Dodworth’s time, as noted above, was that round dances such as waltz and polka did not really lend themselves to the same techniques as set dances.⁹⁶ Dodworth’s solution was to understand the round dances in the same terms as set dances. In his manual he describes six “radical motions,” and observes that

Every dance now in use is composed of two or more of these radical motions. . . . Many persons will have difficulty in believing that the waltz and polka, as now danced, are composed of precisely the same three motions; but the fact is easily demonstrated.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Arguably, set dances changed a great deal in the nineteenth century. Many authors such as Dodworth complained that the public’s ability to execute complex choreography was on the decline, leading set dances to become far simpler than they had been in the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the basic forms remained remarkably similar.

⁹⁶ The increasing popularity of round dances seems to have taken place across the social spectrum within the metropolitan U.S. The decline of set dances is often referred to by authors in dancing manuals and the popular press. While doing research at the American Antiquarian Society, I worked with a collection of ephemera from balls held in Worcester from 1859 – 1893, including dance cards that listed the sequence of dances. Over this period there is a marked shift from quadrilles and lancers to waltzes, polkas, and schottisches.

⁹⁷ Allen Dodworth, *Dancing . . .*, 30.

The codes of perception that Dodworth brought to the increasingly popular round dances led him to understand them in terms of the set dances with which he was more intimately familiar, rather than on their own merits.⁹⁸ This had profound ramifications for the development of social dancing. For example, Dodworth's instructional method emphasizes the individual learning to dance without a partner, noting "Must not two persons separately learn to sing before joining in a duet? Truly, nine parts may be learned alone, a partner is only necessary for the tenth; nor can any one dance well with a partner until he can dance well alone."⁹⁹ Again, I note that this model of instruction is built upon the conventions of set dances, which utilize less physical contact and a more open dance position.¹⁰⁰ Dodworth was far from alone in using methods developed to teach set dances in the instruction of round dances; numerous examples of this can be found throughout dancing manuals in the nineteenth century.¹⁰¹ I argue that this habitus – this system (drawn from past experience) for negotiating unfamiliar experiences – is a key to the manner in which the Waltz Aesthetic developed.

A useful insight into the ideology underlying the hexis of Dodworth and his contemporaries can be found in the hierarchy which he assigns to the mastery of any given dance. Each round dance, he notes, consists of six elements.

1. *Attitude* in each dancer should be such as to show familiarity with the requirements of good taste.

⁹⁸ In this Dodworth serves as an exemplar for the many other dancing masters of the day.

⁹⁹ Dodworth, *Dancing* . . . , 32.

¹⁰⁰ In turn, these conventions were the same as those underlying ballet as it was danced before the professionalization of European court dance.

¹⁰¹ Literally dozens of examples of this can be found at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/dihome.html>

2. *Grouping* of the two must accord with the dictates of modesty and propriety.
3. *Precision* should exhibit perfect knowledge of the motions belonging to the dance.
4. *Flexibility* is an important part in gracefulness.
5. *Accent* must be at all times correct.
6. *Expertness* is that familiarity with every possible turn and angle which enables dancers to avoid collision.¹⁰²

Dodworth quite consciously foregrounds good taste, modesty, and propriety as the leading elements in the successful execution of a dance. Indeed, he accuses many dancers of being “without good taste in attitude, immodest in grouping, not precise in motion, not flexible, and incorrect in accent, yet very expert. This last it is which is so often mistaken for good waltzing, even where there is not one element of good taste.”¹⁰³ What is lacking in these dancers, he suggests, are elements that can only be learned from a dancing master. The dancing master provides instruction in the manner of performance that separates mere execution of physical patterns from proper dancing; indeed, for Dodworth there can be no proper dancing without propriety.¹⁰⁴

Consider the following four images, taken from Dodworth’s dancing manual. They offer insight into the challenges that Dodworth perceived in the ballroom of his day.

¹⁰² Dodworth, *Dancing . . .*, 34.

¹⁰³ Ibid. I read the “very expert” here as sarcastic, a comment on the dancer’s perceived skill as opposed to their ability as assessed by Dodworth.

¹⁰⁴ This remains a pressing concern of dancing teachers to this very day – dance steps are so easy to learn, it remains important to sell the value of technique and “proper” dancing.



Figure 9: The Proper Way

Figure 9 illustrates the dance position advocated by Dodworth. Note the lowered hands, with the lady's hand palm-down. The gentleman's right hand is loosely placed on the lady's back with contact through the wrist rather than the palm and fingers. Both dancers are poised over the balls of their feet, prepared to move in any direction. This poise naturally brings their weight towards each other, and each dancer therefore must exercise control to maintain proper distance. Their feet are very slightly turned out; this is accomplished very high in the legs, at the hip joint. This convention is common to the round dances of the day, and helped to determine the manner in which dancers would move around each other in round dances like the waltz. Turned out legs make forward movement through one's partner's space more

difficult than moving around them.¹⁰⁵ Note also that while the partner's feet are directly opposite each other, the lady is inclining her head to the left, presumably to clear the gentleman's field of vision.



Figure 10: The extended arms

As evidenced in Figure 10, Dodworth objects to “the extended arms, and the lady’s grasping the gentleman’s arm.” This position, he suggests, is not in good taste. Interestingly, the extended arms will become fundamental to the Waltz Aesthetic, and

¹⁰⁵ This is difficult to put into words. If the feet were parallel, it would be easier to go directly forward/backward without any rotation. This is a major factor, 60 years later, to the British system of dance notation terming right turns “natural” and left turns “reverse,” despite the fact that turnout is eventually dropped from “round” dances such as the waltz. Indeed, one of the major changes to ballroom dancing that developed out of the ragtime era was the change from turned out to parallel feet.

the position of the lady's left hand on the gentleman's arm is very similar to what will eventually develop as well. This position, similar in so many ways to "the proper way," is likely one that was increasingly popular in ballrooms during Dodworth's time. "Not in good taste" is a fairly mild condemnation but, as we shall see, Dodworth is pointing to the first step down what he sees as a slippery slope.



Figure 11: The lady's head too close

Figure 11 reveals another step down the slope: the lady is now resting her head on the gentleman's shoulder. In addition to the extended arm, the leader is now cocking his hand forward at the wrist, resulting in the protestation, "bad attitude of hand very objectionable." Both figure 10 and 11 speak to practices that were likely

occurring on the ballroom floors of New York City. There would be little point in objecting to the behavior, otherwise.

Figures 10 and 11 represent deviations from Dodworth's understanding of acceptable, respectable hexis. The changes from figure 9 to 10, and 10 to 11, seem slight; but Dodworth suggests a sequence of increasingly disreputable choices that he saw encroaching on the ballroom floor. In his writing Dodworth appears to have been uninterested in any practical reasons for the modifications; there is no hint that these adjustments might be in some way a means of negotiating practical difficulties of the waltz. Instead, they are condemned in terms of their social reception – in poor taste, or very objectionable. He reserved his strongest objections for the following illustration:

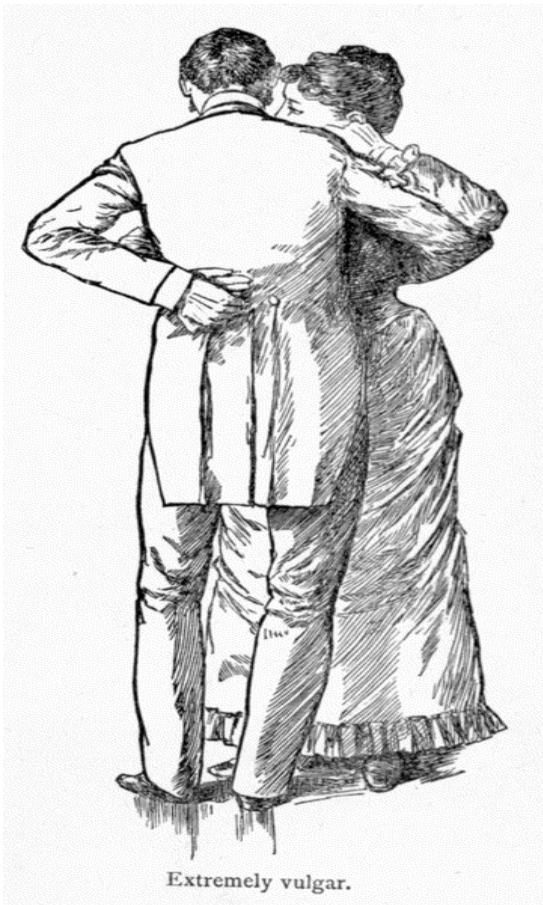


Figure 12: Extremely vulgar.

This, for Dodworth, likely represented the worst kind of practice he saw in the ballrooms of New York City.¹⁰⁶ The couple appears to be in full-body contact from the knees to the shoulders. The hands clasped behind the leader's back are more than merely suggestive of an embrace, and with the woman's head rested against the man's shoulder, they are touching at very nearly every point that they would if they

¹⁰⁶ This image is also remarkably suggestive of a dance position used during an early silent film, *Tough Dance*, which I analyze in Chapter Three. The declining technical demands of ballroom dancing from the middle of the eighteenth century throughout the nineteenth century were doubtless a factor in the behaviors Dodworth notes. See Kate Van Winkle Keller, *Dance and Its Music in America, 1528 – 1789* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007), as well as Ruth Katz, "The Egalitarian Waltz" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, 3 (Jun 1973).

were laying down instead of standing up. Vulgar – Extremely Vulgar. This illustration represents dancing as a sensual experience, far removed from the refinement of movement, carriage, and interaction championed by the dancing master. Although rarely mentioned in dancing manuals, the sexual aspect of dance was of course a concern of the day – one does not have to look far to find condemnations of social dance’s role in the seduction of innocent females – and figure 12 is an illustration of the behavior that could well have triggered such critiques.¹⁰⁷

For Dodworth the ballroom was a place for the expression of genteel refinement; the movement from dancing as a means of inculcating noble bearing and towards dancing as recreation threatened the habitus of the dancing master. Unlike set dances, where the focus was on group performance, round dances reduced the focus of the dancers to the space immediately around them, as the need to negotiate traffic patterns in the deregulated ballroom became increasingly important. The emphasis on the couple’s experience while dancing round dances such as waltz presented individual dancers with more opportunities to choose *how* they would dance. No doubt individual dancers took advantage of their anonymity from scrutiny, leading to “extremely vulgar” dancing and condemnation by dancing masters such as Dodworth.

¹⁰⁷ Ann Wagner’s *Adversaries of the Dance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) contains multiple examples of this.

Dodworth's injunctions against impropriety strongly suggest that the youngest generation of dancers were eschewing the wisdom of the dancing master.¹⁰⁸

Repeatedly, commentators from the period observed that students who enrolled for a full quarter of instruction only bothered to attend the first three or four lessons. This, combined with shifts away from the hexis of set dances advocated by dance masters such as Dodworth, suggests a serious problem looming for the profession of dance instruction; if dancing is so accessible as to eliminate the need for professional instruction, and if students do not care to be inculcated with the intangible benefits of grace, modesty, and propriety that only a master of dancing can impart, then what call is there for the job of dancing master? Perhaps the job could just as well be performed by a mere *teacher* of dance? Dodworth had a great deal to say about the low standards of the new generation of dance teachers.

To teach dancing is generally supposed to be so simple a matter that any one who can dance the waltz, lancers, and a few other dances may adopt teaching as an occupation. Girls just out of school, unsuccessful men from various trades and occupations assume the function of teaching without information or preparation beyond these simple accomplishments . . . Two courses are open to those who are desirous of following this occupation: one makes it a trade, the other a profession. The first deals simply with dancing, the other with all that relates to graceful motion, or, rather, let us say educated motion, not only while dancing, but at all times, with due regard to the higher duty of teaching the morality of motion in its connection with good manners and social intercourse, forming a system of physical and moral instruction which has influences far beyond the walls of a dancing-school.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Bourdieu calls attention to the generational slippage of habitus in *The Field of Cultural Production*, noting that there is nothing as pernicious as the assumption that inherited capital or habitus are deterministic of position taking (65). Rather, much of the point of field theory is to provide an explanatory model for the manner in which changes to the environment result in changes in strategy by individual agents. In speculating that the hexis of younger generations was changing I am relying on a reading of the negative space around the proscriptions issued by authority figures that were invested in the maintenance of the status quo.

¹⁰⁹ Dodworth, *Dancing . . .*, 263 & 267.

Dodworth was not simply indulging in the disdain of the older professional for the changes of a younger generation. There was, indeed, a movement to make the teaching of dance into a trade.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century brought diverse social, political, and economic changes to the United States, changes that, while far too complicated to go into here, nonetheless had a tremendous impact upon the role of dancing in U.S. society. Dodworth, the most respected and prominent member of his profession in New York City at that time, was in a good position to comment upon the changing state of dance instruction in his community. Clearly, he took his responsibility to instruct the children of the elite seriously, and viewed studying dance as much (if not more) a tool towards the acquisition of refinement in everyday life as a system for movement. This emphasis on refinement and propriety, I contend, was a major element of his habitus, the matrix which guided Dodworth and his kind as they made decisions about new dances, fashions, and modes of instruction engendered by changes in the larger society. I now turn to the next generation of dance teachers, inculcated in the habitus of Dodworth's era, who negotiated even greater changes in their field. Refinement, propriety, and modesty – ideologies drawn from Dodworth's generation – were key underpinnings of the Waltz Aesthetic advocated by the American Society of Professors of Dance.

The American Society of Professors of Dance

At roughly the same time that Dodworth was publishing his *Dancing and its Relations to Education and Social Life*, a small group of men formed the first professional organization devoted to the teaching of social dance in the United States. At the urging of John Trenor “The Society of Professors of Dancing, New York” had its first meeting on 19 January 1879. Attending were Trenor, Lawrence DeGarmo Brooks, Mieczyslaw Hlasko, Robert S. Manuel, William. B. DeGarmo, C.H. Rivers, John T. Uris, and Joseph T. Martin. At this first meeting, “harmony in action was agreed upon, and a platform adopted having for its principal objects advancement in the art of dancing, an identical method of instruction, the correction of existing abuses, and social intercourse among the members”¹¹⁰ No details were offered regarding the reasons behind their desire for identical methods for instruction, nor what exactly were the existing abuses.¹¹¹ They envisioned three classes of membership: resident, non-resident, and honorary. The minutes from the first meeting note that “all members must be professors of acknowledged ability and good standing. Honorary members are limited to professors of the art who have distinguished themselves in foreign countries, and to eminent retired professors of America.”¹¹² The initiation fee was \$10, and the annual dues merely \$6.

At the group’s second meeting on 2 February, the Society considered the problem regarding “the proper technical name for the combination dance, now

¹¹⁰ *Report of the American Society of Professors of Dancing from January 19, 1879 to September 8, 1893* (Amsterdam, NY: The Morning Sentinel, 1894), 13.

¹¹¹ I will, however, speculate as to their reasons and what they perceived as the perils, see below.

¹¹² *Report of the American Society*, 14.

fashionable, variously called ‘The New Step’ ‘The Society Waltz,’ ‘The Assembly,’ ‘The Knickerbocker,’ etc.’¹¹³ They settled upon the name “*The Redowa-Glissade*,” and this was the sort of matter that concerned the members in the first months of their association. As stated in their initial meeting, “identical methods of instruction” were deemed to be sufficiently important that whatever advantage might be gained from an individual member having the prestige of a particular dance attached to their name (a common practice at the time) was outweighed by getting everyone on the same page. At their fourth meeting, the members voted to place an advertisement in the New York *Herald* and *New York Times* that featured the Redowa-Glissade. Strikingly, the advertisement called attention to the unity of the dancing masters who were, in fact, in competition with each other for business.

DANCING.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by WM. B. DeGARMO, member of the society,
No. 578 5th-av.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by M. HLASKO, member of the society, No.
1,478 Broadway.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by R. S. MANUEL, member of the society,
No. 320 East 79th-st.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by J. H. TRENOR, member of the society,
Broadway and 32d-st.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by L. DeG. BROOKES, member of the society,
No. 361 Broome-st.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by J. T. URIB, member of the society, No. 611
Fulton-st., Brooklyn.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by J. T. MARTIN, member of the society, cor-
ner Fulton-st. and Gallatin-place, Brooklyn.

THE REDOWA-GLISSADE
AND POLKA-BOHEMIAN,
Introduced by Society Professors of Dancing, New-York.
Taught by C. H. RIVERS, member of the society, cor-
ner State and Court sts., Brooklyn.

ALLEN DODWORTH'S SCHOOL
FOR DANCING AND DEPORTMENT,
No. 681 Fifth-avenue.
NOW OPEN. FOR TERMS, SEND FOR CIRCULAR.

¹¹³ Ibid., 15.

Figure 13: Advertisements of the Society of Professors of Dancing, New York.

Note Allen Dodworth's advertisement at the bottom of the page; his is the only one to connect dancing to deportment. The location of his adjacent advertisement was a result of the newspaper's format, rather than any collaboration with the other teachers.¹¹⁴

An examination of newspaper advertisements of this period shows this to be a remarkable display of unity from the dancing teachers, and it likely caught the attention of the dancing public. By pooling their resources, the dancing masters were attempting to create an authority that none of them could claim independently, and indeed, less than a month later the Society found the need to place an ad in the *Home Journal* calling out "a number of unprincipled persons representing themselves as members, and mutilating its new dances. . . . all members of the Society have certificates of membership signed by the President and the Secretary. All persons claiming to be members and unable to show such a document are impostors."¹¹⁵ Over the next twenty years the minutes of the society reveal several instances where teachers falsely claimed membership the organization.¹¹⁶ Presumably these impostors

¹¹⁴ Neither Allen, nor his nephew Frank (who took up the dancing business after Allen retired to California) ever joined the American Society of Professors of Dancing. However, they were both frequent guests of the society. My research suggests that the Dodworths were the instructors of the elite, while members of the American Society taught those who aspired to raise their social station.

¹¹⁵ Report of the American Society, 20,21.

¹¹⁶ Typically these reports came from cities geographically distant from New York City, where the American Society of Professors of Dancing had little power influence over the dancing community. The minutes show that the members took this threat seriously, at least to the extent of authorizing funding for advertisements that denounced the impostors in local newspapers. Additionally, the American Society instituted a policy whereby new members had to be vouched for by current members who examined the applicant's skills in person. Anxiety over the damage to the profession caused by unqualified teachers was a driving force in the American Society of Professors of Dancing.

did so for the social capital gained through association with a national body of dancing teachers. So beneficial was the perceived benefit of such an association that dancing teachers from as far abroad as Australia petitioned to join the society.

In the Society's first year the members took steps to promote their meetings in the press as well as regulate both dances and their instructors. Numbering nineteen members from locations such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Saint Louis, Milwaukee, Boston, and Providence and with \$157.72 in the bank by the end of 1880, the Society of Professors of Dancing, New York had taken its first steps towards becoming a national organization. By January of 1882, membership numbered twenty nine, and in that year they changed their name to the American Society of Professors of Dancing. They immediately codified the proscriptive measures that would govern their membership, and among the restrictions were the following:

1. All members must agree not to take instruction from non-members.
2. All members must agree not to make features in their course of instruction of dances that are specialties of non-members, and which are not recognized by the fashionable world.
3. All members must agree not to advertise, in any form, any dance whose name is preceded or followed by that of the professed author, without sanction by a two-third vote of the Executive Committee.¹¹⁷

Tactics such as these ensured that the American Society would gather power to itself, as the more successful it became the more essential it would be for non-members to join.¹¹⁸ They also agreed to deny membership to female teachers who were not

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹¹⁸ These efforts were not entirely successful, and the minutes of the American Society reveal a great deal of frustration at the cavalier attitude many dancing teachers took toward following the organizations' bylaws.

relatives of current members, and to censure members who taught using language or patterns not approved by the Society.

By 1883, the American Society had elected a board of trustees and incorporated as a business in the State of New York. The incorporation of a society to promote dancing did not go unremarked, the *Albany Law Journal* reported on 10 November 1883 that

The most curious corporation we ever heard of is the American Society of Professors of Dancing, organized to secure the advancement of the art of dancing, to correct and remedy certain abuses, to compose dances and publish them, and to promote the social intercourse of members, which filed its certificate of incorporation last week. What these “abuses” in question are we do not know, but we hope the corporation will take measures to eliminate hugging from the waltz, and if it could render it unfashionable for women to go to balls in a degree of undress which they would shriek at being caught in by a man in private, they would do a good thing.¹¹⁹

As alluded to above, the association of dancing teachers was not universally accepted as a perfectly legitimate enterprise. An 1884 newspaper observed that “the American Society of Professors of Dance held its annual meeting last week in Philadelphia, and decided what dances people should dance for the coming year. This sounds like a joke, and a silly one at that, but it was a sober, sincere, and earnest fact.”¹²⁰ The American Society took this challenge seriously and moved rapidly to bolster its legitimacy, creating strict guidelines designed to limit the membership to established teachers of dancing, “of at least five years experience, capable and worthy, proposed by a member of this Society . . . who will appoint a committee of investigation to

¹¹⁹ No Title. *Albany Law Journal*, 10 November 1883.

¹²⁰ “Fact and Rumor.” *Christian Union*, 3 January 1884.

consist of three members . . . each of whom shall make a careful investigation as to the character and qualifications of the candidate.”¹²¹ Their agenda remained “to secure advancement in the art of dancing, an identical method of instruction, to correct and remedy existing abuses, modify, compose, arrange, and publish dances with suitable music, and the promotion of social intercourse among its members.”¹²² They increased in membership and influence over the next forty years; accepting both male and female dance teachers from major metropolitan areas as well as smaller, developing communities in the middle-west.¹²³

For the first decade of its existence, the American Society of Professors of Dancing was controlled by the New York members, with the more distant members’ participation limited to attendance at a yearly convention. The control exercised from New York chafed on some, but was defended as a natural result of those teachers’ proximity to the world where fashion was determined: high society.

These facts must not be lost sight of: France does not give fashions to Paris; England does not give fashions to London; America does not give fashions to New York. It is impossible for a nation to give fashions to its metropolis. . . . Society is the stronger factor in fashion, and teachers must respect its dictum. If society will not accept a novelty, no matter how great its merit, such a novelty is poor stock in trade.¹²⁴

Over the course of the thirty-five years from 1883 – 1918, the American Society met at least annually to determine which dances would be acceptable for

¹²¹ Application for membership to the American Society of Professors of Dance, in Gilbert, *The Director*, 138.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ In 1888, with no explanation as to the change, women were again admitted to the American Society. *Report of the American Society*, 111.

¹²⁴ *Report of the American Society*, 64 – 65.

polite society in the coming year. Examining the minutes (available through 1900) and newspaper reports of these meetings, it becomes clear that the American Society was a fundamentally conservative entity, continually fighting a rear-guard action against changes in social dancing. They agreed in 1883 that “new dances should not be encouraged but the old dances should be improved.”¹²⁵ Again in 1884, they decided that it was “inexpedient at the present time to introduce more new dances.”¹²⁶ That year, William DeGarmo, then president, observed that

Novices innovate beyond the comprehension of masters. The latter cater to the former, and it is extremely difficult at times to prevent technical perversion; so it was deemed wise . . . to form a society to counteract false tendencies. Standard dances are universal, not local. They belong to all civilized nations, and local innovations are only admissible when they do not clash with the standard forms.¹²⁷

This aptly captures the general arc and tenor of the work of the American Society of Professors of Dancing during the years of my study.¹²⁸ That the maintenance of the old order and resistance to new trends should be the official position of the Society reflects their understanding of where their interests lay. As noted by Dodworth, round dances required far less instruction to acquire than set dances.

The annual meeting of 1885 was representative of many of the American Society’s gatherings. Various members spoke to two of their main concerns: standardization of performance and resistance to new dances. Oskar Duenweg, of

¹²⁵ “Opposed to New Dances.” *New York Times*, 23 December 1883.

¹²⁶ *Report of the American Society*, 62.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ In 1922 the Society re-appears as the American Society of Teachers of Dancing; I have found no reference to American Society of Professors of Dancing between 1918 and 1922; perhaps the members felt the need to re-organize and modernize, see Chapter 3 p. 144 below.

Terre Haute, Indiana, presented a “new system of dancing, which he hopes will be universally adopted.”¹²⁹ They had been attempting to compile a vocabulary of step names in an effort to advance uniform standards of instruction, and eventually adopted then-president William DeGarmo’s dancing manual *The Dance of Society* as their bible. Mr. Asher, of Philadelphia, observed that they had gathered “to seek uniformity, so that if one gentleman learns from our friend in Philadelphia he can be equally at home in a New York ballroom. Before we formed this society it was every man pulling his own string.”¹³⁰ This drive towards uniformity seems to have been a reaction to the difficulties (noted by Dodworth, among others) presented to dancing masters by the movement in social dancing away from complicated dances such as quadrilles to simpler dances such as the waltz and two-step.¹³¹

To acquire many dances in the shortest possible time seems to be the prevailing conception that many persons have of the dancing lesson. This wide spread opinion is radically wrong. A better and more deserving object should be attained; every step, all bodily movements, should be regulated and refined, so they will present a pleasing picture to the looker on. It is unnecessary to mention that, under proper instructions, the whole body acquires an agreeable carriage, moving with increased gracefulness and freedom – the arms and shoulders well back – chest uplifted – while the feet take that character in walking which may be termed surefooted – steady.¹³²

The dancing teachers clung to the conviction that actually learning to dance was a secondary benefit of dancing lessons. Despite this, observers commonly noted

¹²⁹ “In and About the City.” *New York Times*, 9 September 1885.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ “New” quadrilles – variations on popular set dances – could be released every season, requiring some instruction to learn. Not so with round dances, although one could see in the proliferation of different round dances in the latter half of the nineteenth century an attempt to accomplish the same goal.

¹³² Oskar Duenweg, “The Aim and Usefulness of Dancing.” In the *Annual Reports of the American Society*, 10-14.

that these dances were so easy to learn that dancers were picking them up from their friends, rather than attending dancing academies. No longer able to sustain their business through the instruction of whatever new dance might be in fashion, dancing teachers needed to create another *raison d'être* for their profession. Standardization, arguably an answer to this dilemma, was to become a watchword for dancing teachers from this point forward. If the dancing teacher was no longer to be the interlocutor between the newer dances and the society dancer, then he could be the arbiter of proper dancing, and spend hours instructing the student the proper manner of performance, as agreed upon by members of the American Society.

Resistance to new dances was another common refrain in the reports of the American Society of Professors of Dancing, often followed one or two years later with an unspoken retraction – presented as a new and proper method of dancing the form that had previously been condemned as unfit for polite performance. Again and again, members of the American Society reported that the newest dance was a mere fad, a passing fancy that would collapse as soon as the dancing public realized how little substance it contained.¹³³ Soon, they averred, the public would return to the waltz. As one member observed, “I think that it is a great mistake to introduce new dances. What we want to do is improve the old measures. We’ve got enough work there. We must conform to society. We cannot lead it.”¹³⁴ This attitude reflects the dependence of dancing teachers upon a clientele drawn towards two poles: fashion and respectability. With the advent of new, simpler dances fashion and respectability

¹³³ This was their initial response to the two-step, as well as to the various ragtime dances.

¹³⁴ “In and About the City,” *New York Times*, 9 September 1885.

were often in conflict with each other, and in this conflict the American Society of Professors of Dancing almost always chose to favor respectability.

The Waltz Hold: Changes and Challenges

As an example of the kind of aesthetic battles fought by the American Society of Professors of Dancing, consider the organization's concern over the proper dance hold for the waltz. Earlier in the century, dance teachers and instruction manuals differed about the specifics of the proper dance hold for round dances such as the Waltz. Given their drive towards uniformity of instruction, the American Society would have been remiss to allow that multiple interpretations of a proper dance hold could be correct. In 1887, they issued the following instruction:

The gentleman places his right arm around the lady's waist and his hand against her back. The lady's hand will rest against the gentleman's shoulder, the fingers closed and curved, and the tips resting on the right shoulder. The lady's right hand should be closed and placed in the left palm of the gentleman, with the knuckles uppermost, instead of down as heretofore.¹³⁵

This was to be the sole dance position used amongst the members of the American Society of Professors of Dancing.¹³⁶ Note that these instructions contain an implicit

¹³⁵ "The Position in Waltzing." *New York Times*, 15 September 1887.

¹³⁶ In the Society's test for potential members, the applicant is asked "Please describe the Waltz Position, including the position of the body, arms and head, and how the hands should be joined and held." The correct answer (as supplied for the benefit of the examiner) is quite detailed, and worth noting, if only for the excruciating and egregious abuse of the comma: "The gentleman will place himself in front of the lady, a little to her right, so as each can look over the other's right shoulder, he will encircle her waist with his right arm, placing his hand flat on the lady's back, a little above her waist, with the fingers close together, supporting her gently, yet firmly, the gentleman will take the lady's right hand with his left, and extend the arms downward to an angle of about forty-five degrees, the inner side of the gentleman's fingers touching the inner side of the lady's fingers, the gentleman's thumb extending alongside his forefinger, the palms of both hands towards the floor, the lady's left hand should be laid flat on the gentleman's right arm, between his elbow and his shoulder, the fingers pointing inward, incline the head and body a little forward, and assume just sufficient distance to admit

acceptance of changing fashion, in the instructions for the placement of the ladies hand, “with the knuckles uppermost, instead of down as heretofore.”¹³⁷ This handhold served the American Society for the next ten years. Eventually, however, fashion changed, and once again they responded.

The American Society was back in the news in 1897 with concerns over the manner in which Waltz was being performed. This time, the ire of the Society had been aroused by the increasingly popular practice among gentlemen of holding the lady’s right hand inappropriately. Instead of maintaining a straight, extended arm, gentlemen were bending their arms at the elbow, with the result being that “in some cases [they are] nestling the woman’s hand up and along side [their] neck.”¹³⁸ In response to this offense, the American Society issued an edict announcing that they were prepared to “battle, so that the Waltz shall stand pre-eminent, a position which it justly deserves.”¹³⁹

The discussion of proper dance hold was one example of the battles the American Society waged in an attempt to regulate the bodies of the American dancing public. To this end, they explicitly took up the task of preserving the integrity of the waltz against the “tendency towards degeneration.”¹⁴⁰ In an attempt

of perfect freedom in every movement.” *Report of the Twentieth Annual Conference of the American Society of Professors of Dancing September 7 – September 10, Boston, MA, 10 – 16. In Report of the American Society.*

¹³⁷ See Figures 9 and 10 above.

¹³⁸ “Faults of the Waltz.” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 1897.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The use of the term “degeneration” suggests that the author may have been familiar with the work of Max Nordau. Nordau’s *Degeneration* was published in Germany in 1892, and was translated into English in 1895. Nordau was primarily concerned with the avant-garde movement in European arts, but his ideas were taken up by others with a broader agenda. For more, see Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University

to clarify what exactly was meant by the “degeneration” of dancing, the President of the Society, Melvin Gilbert, wrote a letter to the *New York Times* maintaining that no such thing had happened, “except in the position in which it is danced by a certain class of people. This is the class who are guilty of affectation in dancing.”¹⁴¹ Gilbert espoused the philosophy that the only proper and thus acceptable manner of dancing was the one taught by the American Society. By taking this stand, maintaining the standards of past performance practices became part of the American Society of Professors of Dancing’s agenda – limiting their ability to adapt to new fashions, but strengthening their claim as arbiters of respectability. This marked an important change in the role that dancing teachers saw for themselves at the end of the nineteenth century. Rather than being the medium through which new dances would be transferred to dancers, they sought to become the arbiters of propriety in dancing. The *New York Times* astutely noted that this was a radical stance for dancing teachers to take. “The dancing masters of the country, who to a great extent control what is known as the fashion, have always been interpreters of the waltz as the public has wanted it. Now it will be seen that they have set a standard of their own, and propose to flourish or fall with it.”¹⁴² In this new mode as arbiters of culture and aesthetics, the American Society of Professors of Dance would have a profound impact on the development of the Waltz Aesthetic.

Press), 1985, and William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880 – 1940* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press), 1994.

¹⁴¹ “Faults of the Waltz.” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 1897.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

The American Society did not ascend to the role of cultural arbiter without conflict, however. The main obstacle was their inability to move nimbly with changes in fashion, committed as they were to maintaining respectability. Regarding the dance hold condemned by Gilbert, the *New York Times* noted that the hand position had been in practice for several years, and was “perhaps the most popular in any dance of the day.” In fact, in the most fashionable dancing halls of New York City, the position was being taught to the “future belles of the four hundred.” This suggests that the American Society of Professors of Dance remained at some remove from the most elite dancing teachers of the day.¹⁴³ The reporter notes that several debutantes (when informed of the Society’s objections) doubted that they would change the way that they danced, as many of them had learned to dance that way and they saw nothing improper about the position. That said it is worth noting that the reporter from the *New York Times* does not dismiss the American Society’s critique out of hand, noting that “Dame Fashion bows to the dancing master . . . it is quite likely that Prof. Gilbert’s attack means the change that he says must take place in the waltz before it is really good form.”¹⁴⁴

In framing his critique of the changes in dance frame being performed by, as he called them, “those guilty of affectation in the dance” Gilbert placed the blame squarely in one place. “This position is frequently accompanied by an upward and downward vibration of the hands, which grew out of the extended use of the two-step. . . . This inelegant and improper movement of the hand, when once acquired,

¹⁴³ Dodworth’s failure to join the Society also points in this direction – clearly, they did not offer him anything that he needed, though it seems he had no ill-will towards the Society.

¹⁴⁴ “Faults of the Waltz.” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 1897.

naturally appeared in other round dances, hence its appearance in the waltz.”¹⁴⁵ He also places the blame for another “false position” on the two-step, much to the surprise of the reporter. “It is singular, indeed, that the two-step, which obtained popularity almost in a night, and was advocated by dancing masters everywhere, should now be pilloried as the real cause of the objectionable methods and position of the waltz as it exists today.”¹⁴⁶ While the two-step was, in fact, promoted by dancing teachers in the previous several years, the increasing popularity of the dance directly impacted the dancing teacher’s business.

With the *New York Times* reporting that the two-step was being played at a four-to-one ratio in dances, this was bad news for dancing teachers committed to the pre-eminence of the waltz. Indeed, not two years later the American Society of Professors of Dancing was lamenting the death of the waltz at the hands of bandleader and composer John Phillip Sousa. The March-King, they announced, had inadvertently done away with the waltz through his popularization of the two-step.

When asked about the two-step, Prof. Judson Sause of this city, who has written extensively on the art of dancing and its history, said yesterday that he is of the opinion that the two-step is so easy to learn that it will soon kill itself, and that the waltz will again reign supreme as the international round dance. He regards the two-step merely as a fad, which is very bad for the instructors, and of which the pupils will soon grow tired and drop for the more intricate waltz.¹⁴⁷

Sause could not have been more wrong about the desire to return to the waltz, but marches and two-steps would soon be the least of the Society’s problems. Ragtime

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ “Decadence of the Waltz.” *New York Times*, 10 September 1899.

music and dance began to sweep the country; leaving dancing teachers longing for the days when all they had to worry about was a gentleman bringing his partner's hand to neck for a little light nuzzling. In the first years of the new century the American Society of Professors of Dancing was forced to acknowledge that ragtime dancing, which had been increasing in popularity in the last years of the nineteenth century, was not simply going to go away.

Nevertheless, the American Society of Professors of Dancing maintained its staunchly conservative position, and chose not to embrace ragtime:

The American Society of Professors of Dance was in annual session at Saratoga recently. The first action taken by the professors assembled at Saratoga was one of disapproval against rag-time music and rag-time dancing. The dancing teachers entered their protest to the popular music of this country on the argument that it is too jerky and lacks the grace necessary for dance music. The hopping which is now done in the ballroom is, they say, not at all in keeping with good taste. There are none of the graceful, easy motions of the waltz, none of the gliding, sweeping motions of the old two-step in the popular dance step of today. In plain, the dancing masters have said there can be no graceful dancing with rag-time, and to righten this evil they have set themselves to the task of retiring rag-time music from the ballroom. Just what they will put in its place they have not determined, or at least have not announced.¹⁴⁸

Implicit in the descriptive adjectives chosen by the American Society are the values inherent to its codes of perception. Despite being from diverse geographical locations, spread widely across the United States, the members of the American Society shared a hexis. Ragtime dancing – “jerky” and “hopping – lacks “grace.” They expressed their desire for “graceful, easy” and “gliding, sweeping” motions. I wonder at the degree of hyperbole involved in casting ragtime as “evil;” certainly this

¹⁴⁸ “Ban on Ragtime Music.” *The Washington Post*, From the *Chicago Chronicle*, 30 September 1900.

could be simply a turn of phrase intended to highlight the religious fervor that the dancing teachers were bringing to their battle. On the other hand, considering that ragtime was African American music, perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to consider that these movements were tapping into the same anxious undercurrents regarding the corruption of whiteness that were more explicitly expressed in concerns about the cakewalk. Other descriptors applied to ragtime dance include “boisterous,” “ridiculous,” “grotesque,” and repeated again and again, “ungraceful.”

American sources seem uniformly reluctant to acknowledge African American influence on social dancing.¹⁴⁹ When mentioned at all, almost without exception, allusions to African Americans were criticisms couched in terms of “certain classes of people,” or “those for whom any kind of dancing at all is likely to be improper.” Reading between the lines for racial context in documents over one hundred years old is, of course, problematic; and yet, certain patterns emerge. Adjectives such as those above were not used to describe dancing before the popularity of ragtime, but suddenly find increased currency after ragtime music and dance took off with the public. More explicit concerns were expressed by sources in England. A newspaper report observed the popularity of the waltz with the Queen, whom, it said, “has resolutely set her face against the newest ideas in dance, more especially those that appear to be of negro origin.”¹⁵⁰ An obituary of Edward Scott, a very influential dancing master in England at the time of my study, remarked that “his articles on the Old Time Waltz, on the minuet and on the dynamics of dancing were

¹⁴⁹ This trend continues throughout the research I have done in twentieth century dancing manuals.

¹⁵⁰ “Joins Ban on Tango.” Special Cable to *The Washington Post*, 13 December 1913.

invaluable, but he was always bitterly opposed to what he called the ‘negroid influence’ in the ballroom.”¹⁵¹ Concluding that opposition similar to that explicitly voiced in England would exist in the United States seems obvious; to these self-appointed arbiters of taste and fashion, ragtime dancing – African American dancing – was not really dancing at all.

Ragtime dancing and music were foreign to the habitus of American Society members.¹⁵² Lacking the necessary exposure to previous models which would provide tools to decode ragtime, they understood it as nonsensical. The white clientele of the dancing teachers had historically aligned themselves with the elite social classes of Europe. Dancing teachers would often note their proficiency in European fashions, and pronouncements such as “we keep an eye on the fashions in European capitals, so that now a well-tutored person from New York can keep step with a Parisian” were commonplace.¹⁵³ The syncopations and rhythms of ragtime clashed with the structured harmonies of both the European music of the waltz and Sousa’s American marches for the two-step. So, when a spokesman for the American Society of Professors of Dancing opined that “most of the music today is ragtime or some other form of terpsichorean inspiration music. Any one who understands music will tell you that there is as much difference between syncopation and ragtime as

¹⁵¹ “The Late Mr. Edward Scott,” *The Dancing Times*, June 1937, 347. Quoted in Theresa Jill Buckland, “Edward Scott: The Last of the English Dancing Masters.” *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 21 (Winter, 2003), 25.

¹⁵² Before 1910 there was no single nomenclature for dances performed to ragtime music. I read most references to “two-step” before 1900 as referring to the European American form done to march music such as that of Sousa, and references after 1900 as referring to ragtime dancing. See Chapter Three for a more detailed reading of the somatic changes taking place in the ballroom from 1900 – 1910.

¹⁵³ “Between a Hop and a Glide.” *New York Times*, 11 September 1888.

there is between music and ragtime,” it seems clear that they have failed to perceive the value in African American musical aesthetics.¹⁵⁴

At the turn of the century the American Society of Professors of Dancing chose to hold on to the respectable modes of round dances as they had been performed before the fashionable introduction of African American aesthetics. They continued to promote a hexis that hewed to the Waltz Aesthetic, only reluctantly accepting whatever popular dance might have caught the fancy of the dancing public. Absent their efforts, the waltz would likely not have emerged from the Progressive Era as *the* touchstone for high-status ballroom dancing. Particularly considering the decline that the waltz had been suffering in the years immediately before the advent of ragtime, waltz could well have suffered the same fate as the schottische, polka, and quadrille, and been relegated to the realm of folk-dances and historical performance societies. Instead, the twentieth century saw the waltz, and the Waltz Aesthetic, emerge as one of the main standards for white social dancing.

¹⁵⁴ “Doom of the Two Step.” *The Washington Post*, 25 November 1904.

Chapter 3: Ragtime: The “Doom of the Two Step”

The first decade of the twentieth century was, in many senses, a calm period before the stormy season of 1911 when, as diverse scholars have noted, all hell broke loose on the dance floor.¹⁵⁵ In the years leading to this rupture, dancing teachers grappled with an increasingly fractious dancing public, struggling to contain the manner in which social dance was being performed.¹⁵⁶ The education of children of the elite that so concerned Allen Dodworth’s generation – while still perceived by many as an important part of the work of the dancing teacher – ceased to be the ground upon which most dancing teachers’ business was based. Instead an aspirant middle class swelled the ranks of dancing students, creating a demand for instruction that looked beyond established dancing instructors to meet their needs.

There were three important consequences of this shift in dancing clientele that were not immediately apparent, but that would nevertheless have a tremendous impact on the development of U.S. social dance. First, these new students came to the study of dancing with a hexis and codes of perception that were fundamentally different from those of the elite dancers of previous generations. Having gained the financial security to pursue culturally advantageous behavior (such as dancing like

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, Julie Malnig, *Dancing Till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dancing*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*.

¹⁵⁶ As cited in Footnote #152, at the turn of the century there was no codified nomenclature for ragtime dances. European American reporters seem to have generally labeled dances based on the basic footwork performed, regardless of other factors. Thus, in this chapter, you will read about the “two-step” which refers both to the European American marching dance of Sousa and African American ragtime variations. Similarly, “one-step” and “tango” are used as labels for dances that likely varied wildly in performance.

the upper classes), but lacking the elite student's embodied knowledge (gained through generations of habituated somatic repetition), middle class dancers made performative choices that diverged in important ways from those of previous generations. Second, many of the new students likely pursued dance lessons without the understanding that dancing lessons would provide them with grace and manners; rather, they sought to learn the steps of the dances.¹⁵⁷

The fact that many of the new dances are merely combinations of old dances makes it an easy matter for a good dancer to acquire them, and a new dance or combination must be easy to catch or society will not take it up. Very few persons care to return to dancing school to learn new dances, preferring to depend on "picking them up" by seeing others who are attending school dance them at parties and balls. If a dance is too difficult to pick up it usually dies of neglect, as few persons will make an extra effort to learn it.¹⁵⁸

This report points to both the changing agenda on the part of the dancing student and the manner in which dances were becoming progressively simpler, as dances that were "too difficult to pick up" failed to catch on. Third, students' changing desires in dance education led to the rise of self-taught dancing teachers. With students wanting only to know how to perform "steps," teachers who lacked formal training as a teacher but who excelled at dancing were able to successfully compete in the market.

¹⁵⁷ This suggests another level of broken codes of perception; some middle class whites who attempted to advance their position by adopting elite dances may have grasped that the dances were important, but failed to understand that for elites, ballroom dancing was a means to an end, rather than an end unto itself.

¹⁵⁸ "Round Dancing." *Detroit Free Press*, 14 December 1891.

In addition, by the turn of the century, financial remuneration for dancing instruction reached a point sufficient to overcome the (decreasing) social stigma against dance.¹⁵⁹

Helen Durnin pounded the keys of a typewriter in a Washington office at \$7 a week for a good many months. In the evenings she went to dances with her very best beau, doing the tango, the Wilson Glide, the Mashall dip, the Garrison canter, the diplomatic dodge, and all the rest of them. Now she's teaching dances in San Francisco at \$10 an hour.¹⁶⁰

As in this example, many new teachers' abilities were gained through time spent on the dancing floor rather than at the feet of a seasoned dancing professional. Consequently, they lacked an understanding of the history and development of the social dances. Focused on the financial rewards to be reaped in teaching new dances, this new generation of teachers was more concerned with the newest dances than with preserving any particular culture of dancing.¹⁶¹

The combination of these factors with an increasing presence of African American aesthetics in American entertainment worked to bring incremental changes to social dancing over the first decade of the century. Beginning in the 1890s African American artists were stretching the conventions of minstrelsy with shows such as *The Creole Show* (1891), *The Octoroons* (1895), and *Oriental America* (1896). 1898 saw two productions, *A Trip to Coontown* and *Clorindy – the Origin of the Cakewalk*,

¹⁵⁹ Dancing manuals and other print media which advocate for dancing are replete with defenses against the perceived antagonism towards dance. My research suggests that anti-dance sentiment was at a low ebb at the turn of the century.

¹⁶⁰ "Typist Earning \$10 an Hour." *The Washington Post* 25 September 1913. Having found no other references to the dances (other than the tango) listed in the article I assume they were intended as a humorous Washington spin on the modern dances invented by a non-dancer.

¹⁶¹ Hence many of the prescriptions aimed at newer dancing teachers by professional associations such as the American Society of Professors of Dancing.

that made extensive use of ragtime music.¹⁶² Will Marion Cook's orchestrations for *Clorindy* were among the first to popularize the syncopated rhythms that characterized ragtime for a white audience. "[Cook's] choruses and finales, complete novelties as they were, sung by a lusty chorus, were simply breath-taking. Broadway had something entirely new."¹⁶³ The *New York Times* observed in 1903 that "It took a long time for the colored folk to break into the theatres, but there is no more popular feature now than the negro song and dance teams. For a long time three or four couples had a monopoly of this line. But new-comers are plentiful, and some of them are very clever."¹⁶⁴ By 1905 African American musical groups such as the Memphis Students were in demand both in New York City and Europe, and ragtime music was common on the musical stage.¹⁶⁵

Three factors – an increasingly visible African American aesthetic on stage, the popularity of African American ragtime music, and the adoption of African American styles for social performance – precipitated the controversy regarding the adoption of elements of African American music into European American performance. An African American performance community continued to develop during the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly in New York City.¹⁶⁶

This raised the visibility of African American performance styles, and included

¹⁶² There does not seem to be a single agreed title for *Clorindy*. The Library of Congress lists it as *Clorindy (Origin of the cake walk)*, James Weldon Johnson as *Clorindy – the Origin of the Cakewalk*, and David Krasner as *Clorindy, or, The Origin of the Cakewalk*.

¹⁶³ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930), 102 – 103.

¹⁶⁴ "Some Vaudeville Turns." *New York Times*, 11 September 1903.

¹⁶⁵ Members of the Memphis Students included Ford Dabney and James Reese Europe, who would become central to African American music in New York City in the following decade. See Badger, *A Life in Ragtime*.

¹⁶⁶ See David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*.

displays of African American hexis – habits of bodily movement that differed strikingly from those of white audiences. This increased visibility of African American aesthetics likely contributed to the rise of cakewalking as a dance fad amongst white elite (see Chapter One) as well as other manifestations of African American aesthetics in the European American ballroom dances.

The increasing popularity of ragtime dancing and the embodiment by white dancers of non-European American somatic elements did not occur unremarked or uncontested. For many whites, the elevation of African American aesthetic elements flew in the face of established racial hierarchies, and the un-ironic performance by white dancers of movements marked as “black” smacked of miscegenation. Even among many whites who could be characterized as progressive or liberal in terms of racial ideology, there remained a distinct awareness of the distance yet to be travelled towards social equality, and a sense that the appropriate movement was from black towards white, rather than vice versa. The body was the site of many reform efforts (based both in class and race) during the Progressive era, and the battle to regulate the dancing body has raged throughout the last hundred years. I contend that the Waltz Aesthetic was one of the most effective tools for controlling subaltern movement vocabularies.

In the face of the increasing irrelevance of established dancing teachers’ ideology, the rise of alternate movement vocabularies that challenged understandings of social hierarchies, and mounting pressure to regulate working class ‘leisure time,’ the Waltz Aesthetic began to emerge as codified behavior. During the first decade of the twentieth century the waltz emerged as the *sine qua non* for dancing teachers

determined to maintain their position as arbiters of social performance. This chapter charts the changes developing in social dance from 1895 – 1910, the period immediately before the ragtime dance craze. To this end, I first analyze films from the period that contain examples of social dance. While cinematic evidence of social dancing presents challenges for interpretation, it remains a valuable source of information regarding the somatic repertoire at the beginning of the century. I then contrast my analysis of these short films with a reading of primary sources that speak to dancing during these years.¹⁶⁷

Social Dance on Film, 1895 – 1907: Part I

Charles Musser, in his introduction to *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880-1910*, observed that “Theatergoers not only evaluated a given performance in relationship to other performances but also exercised intertextual judgments across cultural forms in different media.”¹⁶⁸ Musser pointed to the fashionable practice of *tableaux vivants* or “living pictures” in the 1890s as a reference point for understanding how many audiences and artists might have understood the new media of moving pictures. During this decade Thomas Edison’s kinetoscope had its commercial debut and Oscar Hammerstein was displaying living pictures based upon European art works; common to both was the convention of a canvas surrounded by a frame. “As newspaper illustrations and posters make evident,

¹⁶⁷ All five films analyzed can be accessed at the following website:
http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=5DB812DECE08E0FF

¹⁶⁸ Charles Musser, in Nancy Mowl Matthews *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880-1910* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 6.

films were often projected within an elaborate picture frame to make the point that moving pictures were like paintings, only they moved.”¹⁶⁹

While early motion picture artists may have begun by reproducing painterly works, dynamic movement soon emerged as a powerful theme in motion pictures. Images of charging horses and trains thundering past fixed camera positions became staples of early cinema. Dance in early film drew on the power of dynamic motion and allowed the audience familiar with staged work to compare a performance on film with one they might have seen in person. “Those who were captivated with Cissy Fitzgerald’s kick and wink during her engagement at a city theatre the past season will have an opportunity of passing judgment on the Vitascope’s reproduction of the same, it is said to be capital.”¹⁷⁰ Dancing in early film was often performed by vaudevillians such as Fitzgerald, and frequently featured women doing skirt and serpentine dances.¹⁷¹ Shown alongside other short films that recorded the most banal and ordinary human activity, such as eating lunch or sneezing, dance films were situated within a discourse that strove to present the world as it existed at the time, from the racing machines of the steam age to a man getting a shave.

I have chosen five examples of dancing on film from the period that, in diverse ways, are illustrative of dance practices during this time. Some of the clips

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷⁰ “Keith’s New Theatre.” *Boston Herald*, 24 May 1896.

¹⁷¹ For more on solo female dance on film, see Ellery Foutch’s chapter, “Tough Girls,” in *Moving Pictures*. Parallels between skirt and serpentine dances and the performances of Loie Fuller in Paris are well documented. See Sally R. Sommers, *Loie Fuller: From the Theater of Popular Entertainment to the Parisian Avant-Garde*, (New York: New York University Press, 1979), and more recently Rhonda K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007).

appear to be a presentation of a theatrical performance, based upon rehearsed routines. Other clips may be an expression of more spontaneous, improvisational dancing. I examine each of the clips individually, and then consider them within the context of the Waltz Aesthetic. When viewing the following film clips it serves us well to remember that filmmakers were drawing on material from the everyday world, and audiences would have compared on-screen dancing with performances that they had seen on stage.¹⁷²

Dickson Experimental Sound Film

The earliest recording of partner dancing on film that I have discovered comes from the Edison studios, and was filmed in 1895. The film, “Dickson Experimental Sound Film,” presents an (apparently) unchoreographed example of waltzing. The film lasts twenty seconds and shows a violinist (W.K.L. Dickson?) playing into a large horn while, in the foreground, two men are waltzing. The film is slightly slowed down, as evidenced by the man walking into frame in the last moments of the clip. No sound currently accompanies this film, although Edison intended for recorded sound from his phonograph to accompany his kinetiscope.

The two men waltz in time to a violin, completing four full revolutions to the right in eighteen measures, three steps to the measure. They maintain body contact from the knees to the lower ribs throughout the dance, and are slightly offset from

¹⁷² Over the course of the films I have chosen one can see (in miniature) an arc in the practice of film itself, as filmmakers explored the possibilities inherent in the form. For example, there is an increasing tendency towards narrative over presentation clearly in play by the fifth film I examine.

each other allowing for sagittal movement through the space between their partner's feet.¹⁷³ The dance hold is relaxed, with both men having their right hands on the small of their partner's back, and the left holding behind their partner's elbow. Both dancers exhibit an erect posture, and maintain their focus over the right shoulder of their partner.

Considering that the waltz being executed in this clip is entirely symmetrical (that is, both partners use the same dance hold and are executing the same movements – the forward half and the backward half are identical – offset by one measure, with one partner doing the forward steps while the other does the backward steps, then vice versa) who is leading and who is following is not immediately clear.¹⁷⁴

However, several cues point to the taller of the two men taking the leader's role. First, it appears that he initiates the forward movement on the downbeat of the first full bar of music. Second, at one point the couple makes an adjustment to the direction of their rotation, and it appears that the taller partner is reacting to a misplaced step on the part of the shorter dancer; this seems to be the result of the shorter dancer not following the taller dancers' lead in the previous measure. Finally, the shorter dancer seems to be paying more attention to the environment, suggesting that he is less focused on directing the partnership's movement.

¹⁷³ Note that their legs are parallel, which is to say the men do not turn out at the hips, a change from the position advocated by Dodworth in Figure 9.

¹⁷⁴ Ballroom dancing conventions demand that one partner lead, and the other follow. While not an obviously useful point of analysis in this instance, determining who is leading and who is following in a same-sex partnership is one that I engage in on an almost automatic level. In opposite-sex couples the assumption is that the man is leading, although there is nothing obvious about having a penis which makes an individual better qualified to lead (except, perhaps, familiarity with the activity of going where you are facing).

Considered as a waltz, this film clip is almost entirely unremarkable. It is not hard to imagine that someone felt that there had to be *something* moving in the frame besides the violin player, and two assistants at Edison's Black Maria Studio were pressed into duty to step before the camera.¹⁷⁵ This in itself is interesting, as the dancers are executing at a fairly rapid pace with only one slight bobble in the flow of movement, while maintaining a tight circle, a standard of performance that is not easy for inexperienced dancers. One challenge in dance performance is making the execution of choreography look effortless; in this short clip the waltzing looks as though it is done with casual ease. My experience as a dancer and teacher tells me, however, that the manner in which this waltz is performed is not as easy as it appears. If nothing else, maintaining close body contact while rotating in such tight circles at a reasonable clip requires more than a little practice and experience. The plain, unadorned performance of these dancers suggests more to me about the actual aesthetic of the day than a more theatricalized performance might. In the uprightness of the torso, the relaxed line of the shoulders, and the simplicity of the footwork I recognize a style of dancing that would not appear out of place in a twenty-first century ballroom. To my eye the Waltz Aesthetic that has shaped European American ballroom dancing is clearly embodied in these dancers.

Tough Dance

¹⁷⁵ What to make of the fact that this is a same-sex partnership? Very little, I believe. Same-gender practice as preparation to dance with members of the opposite sex was common at the time.

Of all the visual evidence that I have examined regarding partner dancing at the beginning of the twentieth century, this clip presented the most challenges in interpretation. There are several layers of the performance that need to be unpacked, and previous scholarship on the dance has left a muddled and confusing trail.¹⁷⁶ Kemp Niver identifies the performers as “Kid Foley” and “Sailor Lil,” and suggests that they “claimed to be the champion performers of this popular Bowery dance.”¹⁷⁷ Niver also suggests that the couple are imitating the French Apache, a problematic suggestion given that the French Apache did not come to the United States until six to eight years after this dance was filmed. The Apache, or French Apache, was a theatricalized dance, centered on a violent romantic narrative of lust and betrayal. The dance’s origins were likely in the romanticization of the Argentine Tango, which first spread to Europe via Parisian stages circa 1908. “Tough Dancing” as represented in this clip does share some similarities with Apache in terms of theme; however, this seems more suggestive to me of a fascination with lower-class culture present on both sides of the Atlantic than any causal connection between the two dances.

I want to examine the dance as performed, to look for elements that do and do not correspond to the hexis of dancing masters. While this is a theatricalized representation, and it would be a mistake to make too much of the value of this source as a reproduction of social practice, it would likewise be a mistake to dismiss this as

¹⁷⁶ It seems likely, for example, that the influence of other ethnic dance practices present in New York City at that time (Irish, Polish, Italian) are present in this performance. Future research may shed more light on the nature of such practices.

¹⁷⁷ Kemp Niver, *Early Motion Pictures: The Paper Collection in the Library of Congress* (Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, 1985), 331.

having *no* connection to the practice of the day. The dance demonstrates several connections to popular social practice and, as with the “Bowery Waltz” below, the heightened/exaggerated elements may be instructive as to debates over proper performance at the time.

The first element that I notice is the footwork, or the rhythmic patterns with which the partners travel around the floor. They chasse in a triple-rhythm, “one-a-two” that could, in a different context, be taken as a polka.¹⁷⁸ Though they generally rotate to the right while moving in a counterclockwise direction, they do occasionally travel without rotation, another feature common to the polka family of dances. This progression is interrupted several times, at which point the footwork seems to become disconnected from the music as the couple perform other aspects of the dance.

The second element is the dance hold.¹⁷⁹ This would appear to be an exemplary demonstration of a “bear hug” dance hold. Gone is the upright carriage advocated by the dancing masters, with the gentleman lightly holding the lady around the waist on the one side and offering her a place to rest her hand on the other. Instead, the partners appear to grapple with each other, the lady’s hands on the man’s shoulders while the man has his hands around the lady’s waist, occasionally so low as to appear to be grasping her buttocks. There is not much by way of uprightness to their carriage, though I do note that while they remain in the dance hold, there is no articulation of the arms, torso, or pelvis. As with most European-American dances,

¹⁷⁸ This suggests that the music is in 2/4 or 4/4 time, and not a variation of waltz (3/4) time.

¹⁷⁹ Ellery Foutch draws attention to the similarity in dance holds between this clip and Figure 10, (above) as well as an image from British dancing master Edward Scott’s *Dancing as an Art and Pastime* (1892) labeled “low class style.” *Moving Pictures*, 136.

the focus remains largely on the footwork, except for the breakaway moments when the lady is spun away from the man.

These “breakaways” constitute the most surprising element of the dance, as the breakaway element is generally considered by dance scholars to be an element of African American dance that is first associated with the Ragtime dances of the *following* decade. Consequently, 1902 seems to be an extraordinarily early moment to see a European American couple performing such a movement. At one moment the leader places the follower’s right hand behind her back, so that he can spin her an extra half turn with his right hand (rather than the single turn they perform when in left-to-right handhold); this movement today is popularly known as a “Texas Tommy,” a reference to a ragtime dance that first made its appearance in New York City no earlier than 1910.¹⁸⁰

In hindsight, however, these breakaways should perhaps not be so surprising. By 1902 African American dance had been on New York City stages for nearly a decade, and cakewalking as an elite social dance was on the rise. The popular consensus of dance scholars is that breakaways, where the dancers separate from each other in a manner that breaks the steady progression of travel around the ballroom, were an element of African American performance practice. If this is correct, then the incorporation within a theatrical performance of dance elements that have been primarily identified with later African American dances supports my observations

¹⁸⁰ See Rebecca Strickland, “The Texas Tommy, its History, Controversies, and Influence on American Vernacular Dance.” MA Thesis, Florida State University, 2005.

regarding cross-cultural diffusion of performance elements, albeit at a slightly earlier time for this particular element than had been previously observed.

The narrative elements of “Tough Dance” are of little interest to this study, as it seems likely that they grew out of theatricalized representations of then-popular stereotypes of lower-class Bowery life. Still, perhaps there is something to be gleaned from the conflation of violence, non-European American postures/dance holds, and African American breakaway elements. Certainly stereotypes of violence were a common element of both lower-class white and African American communities. Perhaps this overlap in perception reduced some of the tension or anxiety created by the performance of non-European American hexis through a kind of transference?

Given that the elite white dancers were performing cakewalks, it seems likely that middle and lower-class white dancers would be experimenting with other elements of African American hexis. While there is no evidence that breakaway movements such as those depicted in “Tough Dance” were being performed in social dance settings as early as 1902, such movements were likely a part of the “animal” dances of the next ten years.

Bowery Waltz

In “Bowery Waltz” vaudeville performers James T. Kelly and Dorothy Kent of Waite's Comedy Company present a short section of what is likely a longer stage routine. There are a number of clues that can be gleaned from this performance,

despite its comedic and staged nature. With the incorporation of acrobatics, mincing steps, and greatly exaggerated leg movements, the Bowery Waltz cannot be taken as an uncomplicated performance of social dance. However, in examining what was exaggerated, and why, some clues that point towards the popular aesthetic of the day might emerge. I assume that much of the comedy herein derives from the exaggeration of elements that would be recognizable to the audience.

The first and perhaps most obvious exaggeration here is the dance hold. With their head and shoulders pressed closely together, hips and feet far apart, the couple are clearly violating several of the proscriptions of the American Society of Professors of Dancing. Of course, proscriptions are not put into place except as a corrective to offensive behavior. Here in the Bowery Waltz, Kelly and Kent present a likely-overblown performance of the dance hold that was deemed objectionable. Despite this, notice that Kelly's left arm remains extended and slightly bent, in what is ostensibly good form for social dancing, through the first section of the routine. While his right arm is "inappropriately" extended all the way around Kent's waist, the left presents an innocuous dance hold – and the juxtaposition of the 'wrong' with the 'right' likely aided the comic presentation. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the dance hold presented in the first section of this film is how closely it resembles the manner in which Tango developed in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Second, and less obvious, is the performance of class. The characters portrayed in the film do not appear to be elite; the clothing and dress of both performers fall between the rags and tatters of the characters in the "Tough Dance" film (above) and the formal wear of the characters in the film "Charity Ball" (below).

Thus this costuming and the performer's carriage speak to a more working/middle class identity. This choice, in addition to naming the performance after a lower-class section of New York City famously associated with the working class, points to the adoption of social dances across a broad financial spectrum. Perhaps some of the comedy in the routine results from the juxtaposition of the rough and tumble world of the Bowery with a dance more regularly associated with the elite spectrum of society.

Charity Ball

James T. Kelly and Dorothy Kent of Waite's Comedy Company (the featured dancers in the "Bowery Waltz" clip) also present what may be a section of a larger dance routine in "Charity Ball." In "Charity Ball" Kelly and Kent are dressed in formal wear – Kelly in white tie and tails, Kent in a long white dress – and the catalog description categorizes them as portraying "social elites."¹⁸¹ Their choreography consists of several sequences, each performed over five or six measures, during which Kent first moves from Kelly's right to his left and back again, after which they exchange places with each other. The rhythm of their choreography appears to mostly be moving in duple time, "1 & 2 &," reproducing "one of the figures of the german [*sic*], as danced at the famous Charity Ball, which is given each year by the

¹⁸¹ F.Z. Maguire & Co., *Catalogue*, March 1898, 42. In Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 330.

400.”¹⁸² Kelly and Kent dance in a skater’s hold, and appear to have modified a travelling dance to make it stationary (suitable for filming by a still camera?).

Notable features of this choreography are the upright carriage of the torso, the emphasis on footwork and the interaction between the gentleman and the lady. The upright nature of the dancing is characteristic of elite European American dancing, and as such is unsurprising. Similarly, the concentration of intricate movement below the level of the knees is typical of dances of this sort from this time period. Regarding the position of the partners, the lady’s frequent shifting from the gentleman’s right to left side reflects the continuing influence of set dances – quadrilles and lancers – whose popularity as social dances had largely waned. If one considers the elements present in the film clip “Tough Dance” there are several turns that are of a similar nature, though in “Charity Ball” they are not executed from the tightly closed dance position as they are in “Tough Dance.” The man’s leap and the choreography’s finish, with the lady seated on the gentleman’s knee, are also suggestive of the presentational set dances that preceded round dances such as waltz and polka in the ballroom.

Several observations of dancing pundits of the period note that social dancers were tending to get their fancy steps from staged performances, which were, of course, designed for theatrical spectacle rather than the practical needs of the ballroom. The ending flourish of this performance might be indicative of the kind of exaggerated movement that was moving from the stage to the dance floor. The

¹⁸² Ibid.

presence of somatic elements from the social dances of earlier times is a useful reminder that while the new steps and patterns were wildly popular amongst the younger set, many older dancers likely remained committed to the aesthetics of their youth.

“Fights of Nations: Sunny Africa, Eighth Avenue, New York”

The final film clip I examine in this chapter is from the three-reel feature “Fights of Nations.” The American Biograph and Mutoscope Company produced this film in 1907, claiming “[o]ur latest production, under six titles, represents various types and nationalities, with tragedy and comedy intermingled. Every scene is beautifully staged, and each nationality well represented.”¹⁸³ This film segment, depicting urban African Americans in a manner that is markedly different from stereotypes of the minstrel show, has received a fair amount of scholarly attention from academics interested in early representations of African Americans on film. Some scholars focus on the manner in which African Americans are situated in the mix of Scottish, Irish, Jewish, and Hispanic stereotypes but not included in the final tableaux representing “America.”¹⁸⁴ Jacqueline Stewart notes that the Harlem setting is significant because “it references a visibly diverse Black urban community that is not only becoming well known for its nightlife and entertainment but also becoming

¹⁸³ “Biograph Bulletin #94,” in Kemp Niver, *Biograph Bulletins 1896-1908* (Los Angeles: Locare Research Group), 290. For “each nationality well represented” I read “each type and nationality well represented.”

¹⁸⁴ Though I note for the record that *none* of the minority groups are clearly represented in the final tableaux, which would seem to be worth further exploration.

potentially threatening in its changing relation to whiteness.”¹⁸⁵ I focus my analysis on the twenty-one seconds of partner dancing at the beginning of the clip, where three couples dance to the accompaniment of a piano player.

This sequence, though brief, contains complex layers of information. Dancing to the same music (performed by a piano player in the back of the scene), all three couples perform with individual idiosyncrasies that are suggestive of the different emphasis placed upon improvisation in European American and African American cultures. Taken as a group, then, the performance challenges the European American ideal of a predictable group performance that reproduces specific movement elements that are tied to specific musical forms (see Chapter Two). Additionally, each individual couple’s performance represents a rupture in a European American aesthetic of movement, though not in the same manner. I would like to briefly analyze each of the three couple’s performance, and then move to consider what seems to be the central question regarding race relations and dancing at this time – why was a ragtime performance such as this considered a threat to white culture, and how did the self-appointed guardians of white culture go about meeting this threat?

The first couple begins dancing immediately, on the far left side of the frame. The couple’s footwork initially is a brisk triple-step, “one-a-two, one-a-two” with the rhythmic emphasis on the second beat. This rhythm is further reinforced when the gentleman changes his footwork to a kick-step, kick-step, “one-**and**, two-**and**,” while

¹⁸⁵ Jacqueline Najima Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2005), 60. Stewart draws particular attention to the range of skin tones presented in the film, noting that this was extremely unusual and lends the scene some degree of authenticity.

the lady retains the triple-step footwork. Although there is nothing in either of these step patterns or rhythms that is out of the ordinary for social dancing at the time of this film clip, the emphasis on the back-beat (the second rather than the first beat of the measure) is indicative of the syncopations common to ragtime music. This is distinctive, as march music (such as Sousa's) which emphasizes the down-beat was the norm in European American versions of two-step. The gentleman's kicks are swung loosely from the knees, with uninflected feet, and directed to the outside of the partnership (rather than forward, through the plane of his partner). After several bars of music performing the kick-step pattern, the gentleman returns to triple-steps.

This couple further expresses the rhythm through their upper body, particularly through the arms, in a kind of sympathetic bouncing motion. The couple maintains a tightly connected dance hold throughout the sequence, with several notable qualities. They use a shortened version of a classic ballroom frame, where the gentleman's right hand is loosely on the lady's upper-middle back, his left hand relaxed on/near the lady's right elbow. The lady is holding the train of her dress in her left hand, sometimes close in, sometimes further away from the body, and her right hand is relaxed on/near the gentleman's left elbow. The lady's shoulders/upper torso is held closely against the leader's chest, with the effect that in both cases the heads are extended over their partner's shoulders. From this closest point at the top of the bodies, the couple maintains a position slightly farther apart lower in the body, with the greatest distance between the couple being at the feet. This dance position

is evocative of many of the concerns expressed by the American Society of Professors of Dancing (noted in Chapter Two).¹⁸⁶

The couple moves in a generally counterclockwise direction, though not exclusively, and it is noteworthy that all three couples move in their own individual spheres, rather than sharing the entire dance floor. Perhaps this was a concession to the proscenium-esque nature of the film, as most dances of this nature were performed with the entire company moving counterclockwise around the room together.

The second couple, in the foreground on the right side of the frame, begins with a triple-step (one-a-two) similar to the first couple. At the same point where the first couple changes their footwork to a kick-step, the second couple also changes their energy, pivoting rapidly in a double rhythm, “one-and-two-and-one-and-two-and.” Although the length of the lady’s dress makes it difficult to be certain, it appears that she also changes her footwork to match the gentleman. After two full revolutions they return to the triple-step rhythm for the remainder of the dance.

The second couple has a slightly different dance hold than the first, with the gentleman holding the lady’s right hand in his left in a low, extended position for most of the dance. His right hand is held closer to the middle of the lady’s back, and the lady’s left hand is loosely held on his shoulder. The dancers’ bodies are pressed together at the shoulder level, with their bodies sloping quickly away from each other to the hips, which are noticeably hyper-extended. The dance frame (shoulders and

¹⁸⁶ Variations on this dance hold remain commonplace today, whenever the dance floor is sufficiently crowded to make the more preferred, wider dance frame inadvisable.

arms) is generally held still, except during the pivots, when the extended arms pump sympathetically with the rotation.

The third couple, in the background, is generally obscured by the other dancers, but two noteworthy items can be ascertained. First, although they use a dance frame in which the gentleman's left and lady's right arms hold at the elbow (much like the first couple), they are not pressed together at the level of the shoulders. Likely this is due to the difference in height between them, as the lady is significantly taller. Whatever the reason, this couple maintains a greater distance between them than either of the others, with no significant body contact whatsoever. Second, the footwork (such as can be seen) of the gentleman seems to be primarily kick-steps, with a rhythm of one-**and** two-**and**. The lady's footwork is harder to make out – with her feet almost completely obscured, the best guide to her rhythm that I can discern is from the sympathetic movement of her upper body – but she seems to be moving in the same rhythm, a bouncy one-and two-and.

In considering how this film clip might reflect differences between black dancers and white dancers in the first decade of the twentieth century, I want to look beyond the individual performances of the couples. Taken individually, each couple in this clip is performing a ragtime dance with some degree of variation from the ideals expressed by the American Society of Professors of Dancing. On the one hand it seems likely that any one of the individual elements of the dances seen in this clip (dance hold, changing rhythm mid-dance, sympathetic movement of the upper body/arms) might have been embodied by white dancers at the time. On the other hand it seems unlikely that any white dancers were incorporating all of these elements

at the same time. Again, *individually*, there is nothing particularly exceptional about the performances, which is to say these performers execute no movements that strike me as extremely virtuosic or wildly out of what appears to be the mainstream of white dancing of the day. This is especially true when one looks to dancing-teachers' complaints regarding the behavior of their students as a guide to popular white dancing practice.

However, taken *as a group*, there are remarkable differences. I do not want to put too much importance on any single piece of evidence, but this film clip seems tremendously evocative of the cultural difference black and white dancers placed on individual improvisation. In this clip, each dancer performs in a markedly different style, with different basic rhythms, different dance holds, and different variations within the dance. At the moment when the gentlemen in the first and second couple make a change in their dancing, it seems likely that they are responding to a change in the music – of course there is no way to know that for certain. Regardless, in my analysis the most striking element of this clip is the degree to which each couple executes its own performance, simultaneously and independently of the others.

The white film makers included this scene in a larger project that presented some of the diverse ethnicities that made up New York City. Given that the context of the brief performance was to set up a stereotypical, even comic, African American bar-room brawl complete with flashing razors, it seems unlikely that this dance sequence was heavily choreographed. Jacqueline Stewart speculates that the light-skinned characters in the clip “signal the dangers of blurring of the social and

biological lines between whiteness and Blackness.”¹⁸⁷ I suggest that the menace in the dancing stemmed from exactly this fear of miscegenation, as ragtime dancing was taken up by the European American public.¹⁸⁸

Social Dance on Film 1895 – 1907: Part II

Before continuing I want to take a brief moment to draw together some of the observations that I have made regarding the film clips I have analyzed, and speculate about the nature of the field of ballroom dancing performance in New York City during this period. Taken as a group, these five film clips are suggestive of a simmering pot that is just about to boil over. The fecund nature of dance in this period is particularly striking when contrasted with the picture I draw from the complaints of dancing masters and teachers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Then, a gentleman nuzzling his partner’s hand or a lady resting her head on her partner’s shoulder was a serious challenge. These films evidence both the presence of and departures from the hexis of European American ballroom dancing.

In the “Dickson Experimental Sound Film” the two men dancing the waltz suggest an unremarkable expression of typical dance practice that likely would have been approved of by members of the American Society of Professors of Dancing. Although the dancing appears effortless, it likely was the result of years of dance experience, something that would have been common for young men at the time. Not

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹⁸⁸ Although I do not draw on post-colonial theory for my analysis, some of the theoretical framework outlined by Homi K. Bhabha on the ambivalence of mimicry might prove a productive lens for future analysis. *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 123 – 131.

that they necessarily took dancing classes; rather, social dancing would likely have been a regular part of their recreational activity. The comedic nature of “Tough Dance” and “Bowery Waltz” point to a perceived threat in the presence of lower-class white dancers taking up ballroom dancing as a recreational activity, drinking too much and behaving in the rowdy and carnal manner stereotypically expected of that group. In “Charity Ball” I see a window into the more theatrical end of elite social dance practice; even the most virtuosic of the choreography could have been seen in eighteenth century minuets, and while the set dances of the nineteenth century were by all accounts more sedate, the enthusiastic finish of this dance might well have been the sort of move employed by the more rambunctious children of the elite.

In “Sunny Africa” I see several ways in which European American partnered dance forms were being modified by African American aesthetics. There are similarities in form: both the two foreground couples and the performers in the couple in “Tough Dance” use very similar rhythmic patterns when executing triple steps, for example, and the “hugging” dance hold seems to have been a regular part of both white and black dance performance at this time. The individuality of the choreographic choices made by the different couples is a striking distinction, and again I wonder if the presentational nature of the film led the couples to move within their own space rather than circle the floor counter-clockwise as would have been typical practice in European American ballrooms at the time.

One element present in “Sunny Africa” that is conspicuously absent from European American dance practice as I have come to understand it is the variation between the gentleman and ladies’ footwork. European American dance teachers

seem to consider the mirror-symmetry of footwork between partners to be such a crucial element to partnered dancing that only rarely (I can think of two specific instances out of hundreds of examples) is it suggested that the leader and the follower's footwork should differ.¹⁸⁹ Most striking to me is the syncopation, the emphasis on the back-beat, in all three of the dancing couples.

These film clips offer some small insight into the social dancing practices of black and white Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, but of course they are also problematic sources upon which to base broad conclusions regarding dance practice. I want to place them in the context of a developing Waltz Aesthetic, and below I consider how the kinesthetic choices embodied by the dancers – as seen in these clips, and described in newspapers and magazines of the day – might have interacted. The concerns expressed by dancing professionals regarding the movement away from the set dances of the nineteenth century not only reflected the increasing pace of change in the social dancing world, but a growing pressure to regulate and control the dancing body as a part of a racial project to maintain white cultural superiority.

Clearly, both black and white Americans were dancing to ragtime music, and they were dancing differently. Given the overwhelming popularity of ragtime music at the time (a form that was openly acknowledged as African American) and the contested nature of African Americans within white society, concerns about dances

¹⁸⁹ Interestingly, non-mirrored footwork is a fundamental element of Argentine tango, both historically and as it is danced today. Many of the changes made to incorporate tango into popular performance during this period involved simplifying the footwork so that it was more in line with dances (such as the waltz) that utilized identical footwork for the leader and the follower.

performed by European Americans to ragtime music would inevitably include racial concerns. While an observer from the twenty-first century might have difficulty perceiving the dancing performed in “Sunny Africa” as a threat to European American hegemony, the possibility that African American aesthetics would be transmitted to European American sons and daughters was a serious concern at the time. As noted in Chapter Two, I rarely found any specific reference to African Americans in the discussion of ragtime dance.¹⁹⁰ Where I did find them, allusions were couched in coded language, such as “among a rude and dissolute people dancing may perhaps degenerate into something worthy of condemnation,”¹⁹¹ or “as a rule, coarse people will dance coarsely.”¹⁹²

Such comments might have been directed at the working class dancers entering into the field of ballroom dancing at the turn of the century. However, the conclusion that these allusions were aimed at African Americans seems to me a more plausible explanation, as the adoption of African American dance styles by whites presented an intractable problem for the dancing teachers who sought to regulate movement.¹⁹³ Many European Americans had similar concerns regarding the popularity of ragtime music among white audiences, and it was in researching

¹⁹⁰ The lack of recorded credit for African American influence on ragtime dances, particularly contrasted against the credit given for ragtime music, is somewhat puzzling. Two explanations seem plausible. First, the ability of African American musicians to sell sheet music provided them with a tangible record of their work, making any disavowal of African American involvement with ragtime music problematic (although, consider the long-contested origins of jazz). Second, music lacks the embodied component of dancing, and thus it may have been that African American dance contained a perceived threat of black sexuality that African American music lacked.

¹⁹¹ Prof. Hinman, “Longevity in the Dizzy Waltz.” *San Francisco Call*, 10 September 1905. Again, note the reference to degeneration, and the conjunction of decay and un-named “groups of people.”

¹⁹² “Serious Dancers.” *New York Tribune*, 9 September 1906.

¹⁹³ This might also reflect concerns of regarding racial hierarchy; perhaps white people who performed in such a manner were considered to be “blackened” by the experience.

ragtime music that I have found the most productive discussions of the concerns regarding African American aesthetics.

Ragtime Music as American Music

A brief discussion to further contextualize the complex relationship between ragtime music and dance is perhaps appropriate at this juncture, especially since they moved into the popular American consciousness at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lawrence Levine argues that “the crusade for culture in America, then, was to a significant extent a struggle to bring into fruition on a new continent what the crusaders considered the traditional civilization from which the earliest Americans sprang and to which all Americans were heir.”¹⁹⁴ African American musical forms had been present in the European American vocabulary for decades, in the form of songs drawn from minstrel shows, but were never considered as acceptable material for high art. That African American music received any favorable attention amongst U.S. musical elites was largely due to Antonin Dvorak, the renowned Czech composer and conductor who came to the United States in 1893 to direct the National Conservatory of Music of America. Dvorak challenged Americans who looked to European models for great American compositions when he opined that “the true American music is Ragtime.”¹⁹⁵

Dvorak’s emphasis on folk-music models for composition referenced European antecedents (Haydn, Brahms, Liszt, Smetana, etc.), and suggested that folk

¹⁹⁴ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 221.

¹⁹⁵ Badger, *A Life in Ragtime*, 50.

aesthetics (i.e. African American, Indian) were worthy of pursuit in and of themselves. Previously, advocates of African American uplift had largely believed that only through adopting and conforming to Euro-American standards of taste could African Americans fully participate in American society. Anglo-African composer Coleridge-Taylor, for example, decried ragtime as “[T]he worst sort of rot. In the first place there is no melody and in the second place there is no real Negro character or sentiment.”¹⁹⁶ Coleridge-Taylor’s opinion reflected an elitist view that felt that music made for popular dancing was not to be taken seriously. Much of the disdain for ragtime as a musical form arose from the perception that it was a low-art form.

An article regarding the origins and development of African American music in the *New York Times* argued that the conditions (slavery) in which African American music developed were well known, and regarding the characteristics of Negro music observed by Dvorak,

[I]t seems certain that some of them have been derived from contact with whites. It is equally certain that there are African characteristics in them, as of rhythm and of intervals in the scale on which some of them are based. But that they are easily intelligible and highly sympathetic to the white race needs not argument to prove. One indication of it is the craze for “ragtime” that caused a flood of weak and bastard stuff from the watery brains of the Tenderloin school of composers, now happily subsiding.¹⁹⁷

The above quote nicely captures the nature of the controversy surrounding ragtime as a musical form. On the one hand, it was clearly African American, and artistic creativity was one of the few avenues in which African Americans were able to

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ “Indian and Negro Music.” *New York Times*, 26 February 1906.

achieve acclaim. On the other hand, the most popular ragtime music was not high-art music, but music for dancing, “weak and bastard stuff,” and thus not truly artistic.

Later, one music critic summed up the shortsightedness and pedantic vagueness of the whole theoretical debate over the “new music” and black folk traditions:

Those who have endeavored to follow the kindly advice of Doctor Dvorak and make the folk-music of the negro the basis of their compositions have failed to conquer the public because that public declined to embrace slave music when dressed in the unbecoming robes of Teutonic tone poems. The arts do not descend upon the people, but rise from them.¹⁹⁸

Indeed it was ragtime, the populist musical form that had the greatest impact on American cultural life, rather than any of the high-art compositions that were based in African American aesthetics at the time.¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the conflict between the perceptions by cultural elites of African American music as a positive development on the one hand, alongside the rejection of the accompanying African American dance aesthetics as uncivilized on the other, was a source of tremendous tension at the time.

Ragtime Dance Develops

Secondary sources regarding social dancing at the beginning of the century are surprisingly difficult to come by, and typically speak in vague generalizations

¹⁹⁸ W.J. Henderson, “Ragtime, Jazz, and High Art,” *Scribner’s*, LXXVII (February 1925), 204, quoted in William Schafer and Johannes Riedel, *The Art of Ragtime*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 44.

¹⁹⁹ David Savran’s work on Jazz in the 1920s contains similar claims regarding this later iteration of African American aesthetics. “The demand for a bowdlerized version of jazz is symptomatic of a profound uneasiness that many European Americans felt about certain forms of black music that they considered too sexualized, primitivized, and frankly lowbrow.” *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 33. See also his “The Search for America’s Soul: Theatre in the Jazz Age,” in *Theatre Journal* 58 (2006), 459–476.

about “animal” dances such as the turkey trot, bunny hug, etc., as being performed in the years between 1900 and 1910. This periodization appears to be a bit of a misconception, based upon my research of primary source material of the time. Evidently, this portrait has been painted as a result of dance manuals, interviews, and newspaper articles published between 1912 and 1915 that observed that such dances are “no longer fashionable” or “not being danced that way any longer.”²⁰⁰

Tracking down the origins of “animal” dances has proven moderately difficult. Fairly common are comments such as those of T. George Dodworth (Allen Dodworth’s nephew, who continued his uncle’s profession), who observed that “the turkey trot, by the very low origin from which it sprung and the very ugliness of its shoulder and waist wriggles, has already been abandoned for the less unsightly one-step in most circles.”²⁰¹ Such observations become more frequent in 1914 and 1915, the years when the celebrity of the dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle peaked.

An article from 1898 reports that “hugging while waltzing is under the ban. The degree has gone forth from the men who teach waltzing that no more hard pressure shall be permitted during the process of the fascinating whirl.”²⁰² While evocative of the physicality that was ascribed to animal dances, this report would simply seem to confirm the movement in the ballrooms to a closer dance hold than that advocated by dancing masters. Only after the increased presence of African

²⁰⁰ See Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, 177, ; J.W.E. “Modern Dances Not So Bad,” *New York Times* 11 January 1914,; “New Dances That Have Smoothness As Keynote,” *New York Times*, 1 November 1914, ; etc.

²⁰¹ “Mothers in Society Oppose the Tango,” *New York Times* 11 January 1914.

²⁰² “No More Hugging in the Dance.” *Salt Lake Herald*, 11 September 1898.

American aesthetics in the first years of the century have I found “animalistic” terms used; consider this clipping from Baltimore in 1904:

A Society for reforming the present styles of dancing was organized here to-day by the leading dancing masters. ‘We propose’ they announce, ‘to cut out this bear-hug fashion of dancing.’²⁰³

This is the earliest mention I have been able to find of “bear-hug” regarding social dance, and I presume it refers to a dance frame similar to that exhibited in the film clips “Tough Dance,” “Bowery Waltz,” and by the first two couples in “Sunny Africa;” that is, body contact at the level of the shoulders but hips held far apart.

An intriguing reference to ragtime dancing appears even earlier, in the *Chicago Chronicle*, in the context of a ban on ragtime music proposed by the American Society of Professors of Dancing:

The dancing teachers entered their protest to the popular music of this country on the argument that it is too jerky and lacks the grace necessary for dance music. The hopping which is now done in the ballroom is, they say, not at all in keeping with good taste. There are none of the graceful, easy motions of the waltz, none of the gliding, sweeping motions of the old two-step in the popular dance step of today. In plain, the dancing masters have said there can be no graceful dancing with ragtime . . . It is hard to remember when any one danced anything more elaborate than a two-step. The rag-time has possessed the American people during these last two years, they have been completely bewitched by it . . . there has been rag-time at the circus, rag-time at all the dances of society, rag-time for hymns at many Sunday-schools.²⁰⁴

The most remarkable thing about this article is perhaps the year in which it was published: 1900. Not only does the article suggest that ragtime music and dancing had been popular in Chicago for the last two years; the article goes on to suggest that

²⁰³ “To Stop Bear Hug Dancing.” Special to the *New York Times*, 8 October 1904.

²⁰⁴ “Ban on Ragtime Music.” *Chicago Chronicle*, 30 September 1900.

the musical style was first picked up by the Salvation Army for use in their “street-corner services” six years earlier.

The article from the *Chicago Chronicle* represents an early outlier for the contention that the blame for the decline in social dancing lies with ragtime (read black) music, a contention that would occasionally surface over the next decade. The article suggested a continuing decline of interest in the more complicated dances of the nineteenth century, and further that the style of dancing was moving towards an aesthetic that incorporates African American elements – though it does require some reading between the lines to see that in the above quote. Perhaps it is the juxtaposition of the condemnation of the music as “too jerky” and lacking grace with the description of dancing as “hopping” and without the qualities of earlier dance styles that points in that direction.

The dearth of reportage on social dancing in this first decade of the twentieth century is frustrating; certainly there was no shortage of dancing going on. The attention of journals and newspapers seems to have turned elsewhere during this time, with the few articles that attended to the dancing scene tending to focus on the efforts of dance societies to hold the line against what they considered to be devolving standards of performance. The following exchange between a spokesman from the American Society of Professors of Dancing and a reporter from the *Washington Post* was related in an article titled “The Doom of the Two-Step.”

“The public has run wild over that ungraceful, boisterous dance, and our convention has unqualifiedly condemned it. That is we have condemned it as it is danced, for few people dance the two-step.”

“What do they dance?”

“They do not dance at all. When a man and a woman get out on the floor and do a collection of bewildering, ungraceful figures, tire themselves out, and make themselves generally ridiculous, I do not call it dancing.”²⁰⁵

As noted in Chapter Two, dancing teachers lacked the codes of perception to apprehend ragtime. The choice of words in the above quote is revealing – the people who are dancing ragtime are not, as far as the Society is concerned, *really* dancing at all. The figures being danced are “bewildering,” and “ungraceful.” Ragtime dancing and music were outside of dancing teachers’ habitus, and its aesthetic value beyond their ability to decode. Contributing to this confusion is the failure of the Society to apprehend the aesthetic of ragtime music. “One reason why the two-step is not danced correctly is because the popular music is not the proper music.”²⁰⁶ Proper, in this context, meaning “white.”

The inability of dancing masters to decode ragtime dancing can also be seen in the ways in which they attempted to cope with the continuing popularity of (ragtime) two-step. Beholden as they were to paying clientele, dancing masters could not categorically excommunicate all those who chose to dance ragtime. Facing serious competition from amateur instructors in New York City, where advertisements for dance instruction – evidence of a powerful desire on the part of the dancing public for instruction in the new fashions – mushroomed, the American Society continued to try to draw students back into the mold of dancing as performed before the turn of the century.

²⁰⁵ “The Doom of the Two Step.” *The Washington Post* 25 November 1904.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Various new dances, in which the waltz or other graceful movement predominates were introduced . . . Bonny Glide – two-step in form, but includes the waltz movement, and is much slower than the regular two-step . . . Minuet figures – involving waltz movement, and calculated to aid in ease and grace in quadrille dancing.²⁰⁷

In 1903 the American Society reported that “they did not believe the two-step could be forced from the dance programmes, but the intention is to keep it in its proper place and not have it usurp the waltz time and favor.”²⁰⁸ In 1904, “We cannot refuse to teach the two-step, but we can show a preference for other movements.”²⁰⁹ Again, in 1905, “The modern dance is a romp, and a degrading romp at that. There is only once dance and one movement in these days, and that is a conglomeration of the two-step.”²¹⁰ Year after year, the same concerns were expressed by the members of the American Society, whose attempts to draw the dancing public back to their world, to “increase the popularity of the waltz,” perhaps more than anything else show how badly they had missed the zeitgeist.

Perhaps the concerns of the dancing teachers regarding their students’ inclination towards African American aesthetics can be understood more fully in the context of the European American attitude towards individual improvisation. Notwithstanding the commercial difficulties inherent in attempting to market and sell dancing based upon individual improvisation (as discussed in Chapter Two), one of the fundamental premises of European American social dancing was the unity of group performance. While virtuosity was a praiseworthy quality in both black and

²⁰⁷ “Doom of the Two Step.” *The Washington Post*, 25 November 1904.

²⁰⁸ “Dancing Masters Do Not Like the Two-Step.” *San Francisco Call*, 6 September 1903.

²⁰⁹ “Doom of the Two Step.” *The Washington Post*, 25 November 1904.

²¹⁰ “Teachers Condemn Two Step.” *New York Tribune*. 7 September 1905.

white dancing, in white dancing there was far less emphasis placed on individual variation and more focus placed on the ability to blend in with the movements of the community. At the institutional level, some dancing teachers put the blame on college students, who were

responsible in a greater degree for the utter demoralization of the time honored waltz on account of the eagerness of different colleges to institute a peculiarity which might be all their own. There is the Harvard glide, the Yale dip, the Cornell swing and many other departures from the true waltz. If a person is refined, has a love for the pure and beautiful, a perfect knowledge of the art of waltzing there is no more occasion for immodesty than in taking one's arm in walking; yet the fact remains that many who dance have never learned the true art of waltzing.²¹¹

The desire for any peculiarity that differentiated the dance as done in one school, as opposed to another, is offered here as an explanation of some of the demoralization of the waltz. The underlying philosophy here appears to be that there exists a kind of platonic ideal of the waltz, to which those who have properly studied the art of waltzing have access. Waltzing that strays from this ideal presents increasing moral peril, and is especially dangerous to those who disregard the serious nature of the art.

At the individual level, Melvin Gilbert offered a trenchant complaint regarding dancers who take it upon themselves to try to stand out of the crowd:

We often see those who consider themselves *au fait* making themselves conspicuous by distorting their bodies, stiffening their arms, and twisting their legs, until they have the appearance of being afflicted with some terrible deformity, from which they are suffering intense pain. They carve the air with their arms, they shuffle about with an unheard-of combination of movements, collide with everybody and everything within their reach and all the while labor under the delusion that they are being observed by admiring eyes.²¹²

²¹¹ "Longevity in the Dizzy Waltz." *San Francisco Call*, 10 September 1905.

²¹² Melvin Gilbert, *Round Dancing* (Portland, ME: M. B. Gilbert, 1890), 33,4.

Gilbert here employs the terms distorting, twisting, and stiffening, descriptors that point to a lack of bodily control, or, seen another way, using too much of the body. The conclusion that a good deal of the problem in these “combination of movements” is that they are “unheard-of” is a clear indicator that what Gilbert values is the repetition of previously established performances, rather than individuals striking out and trying new ideas in the pursuit of creativity. Sixteen years later Oscar Duenweg, President of the American Society of Professors of Dancing, said much the same thing, albeit more plainly:

The diseases which afflict social dancing today are the result of indifference as to execution, and a desire to be original, from which arise the outlandish mannerisms grafted on the beautiful old dances. As a rule, coarse people will dance coarsely, and refined people will dance in a refined way. . . . Social dancing expresses the grade of intelligence of the individual.²¹³

Duenweg squarely places blame on a “desire to be original,” and goes further to suggest that dancing reflects the inner character of the dancer. This theme in this context suggests to me a racial undertone, along the same coded lines as mentioned above. Again, it is problematic to draw too clear a conclusion from phrases such as “coarse people will dance coarsely,” but the reference to “outlandish mannerisms” in this context does seem to point to a hexis outside the European American experience. The Waltz Aesthetic, a specific code of movement intended to regulate somatic performance, was not intended as a tool for the uplift of African American or immigrant Americans; instead it was a measure intended to safeguard elite white

²¹³ “Serious Dancers.” *New York Tribune*, 9 September 1906.

dancers against the perils of embodying those lower classes.²¹⁴ In the above quote, these perils are presented as a “disease which afflicts social dancing.” The metaphor of African American aesthetics as illness became increasingly common as the century continued.²¹⁵

“They Fell Over Their Own Feet!”

In the next chapter I will consider what somatic requirements became instituted as a “Waltz Aesthetic,” and the manner in which they were initially applied. Before turning to that, however, it is important to note that dancing teachers had essentially lost the battle to police aesthetics by 1910. There were many reasons for this, not least of which was the failure of organizing bodies such as the American Society of Professors of Dancing to move with the fashions of the public. Interviewed at the American Society of Professors of Dancing’s 1906 convention, Henry Doring reported that

I went to Coney Island and watched the dancing in the pavilions. Among all the couples I saw just one pair who really danced. The others romped, they jumped, they slid, they fell over their own feet! And it’s not much better in the more fashionable gatherings. A few teachers striving to uphold their art can’t control the crowd of modern dancers.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ There is much more to be said about the influence of, for example, European immigrant dancing and its influence on popular culture at this time. Addressing the impact of lower-class “white” dancing on ballroom is beyond the scope of this study. See Kathy Peiss, *Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1986), and Linda Tomko, *Dancing Class*.

²¹⁵ For an interesting spin on this phenomenon see “Calls Dance Mania Psychic Epidemic,” *New York Times*, 26 April 1914.

²¹⁶ “Serious Dancers.” *New York Tribune*, 9 September 1906.

Oscar Duenweg suggested that “people will return to the good old ways . . . the graceful hop waltz is coming into vogue.” But another professor argued “What kind of a hop waltz? The true hop waltz includes a graceful little leap like that of the agile gazelle, but most dancers nowadays take it as if they were trying to jump a five-barred gate.”²¹⁷

In the first decade of the twentieth century, despite their failure to move with the times, the American Society found an audience for its teachings through promoting a hexis that hewed to the standards of the nineteenth century, only gradually and grudgingly giving ground to whatever popular dance caught the fancy of the dancing public. For those white elites who subscribed to the model of the dancing master, the American Society of Professors of Dancing were still guardians of the nineteenth century European American aesthetics in dance. If the professors were increasingly distant from the interests of the general public (more interested in pursuing pleasure than the propriety of dance), there remained a body of elites who saw the dancing teachers as pursuing a worthy cause.

In the following years the American Society of Professors of Dancing’s position in the field continued to decline. As an organization they lacked the flexibility to accept ragtime music and dances, they failed to capture the attention and imagination of a public that looked to be entertained as much as educated, and they were seen by many as mired in the aesthetics of a by-gone, pre-modern age. By 1918

²¹⁷ Ibid.

they were considered by some to be little more than an outdated joke, as revealed in this trenchant report on their annual conference.

The American Society of Professors of Dance met during the past week to determine just what steps will be available during the coming season for the very young and the very old dancer. The vast majority of the dancing men of America have changed their pumps and silk hose for hobbled shoes and puttees, but for those who remain the American Society is preparing to speak with authority. As for the Jazz, respectable teachers scorn it. "Jazz?" echoed the chairman, who hails from Milwaukee, had this to say: "Why, every respectable dancing teacher is opposed to jazz music, and this association absolutely refuses to have anything to do with it."²¹⁸

The American Society of Professors of Dancing were unable to sustain the influence that they had exerted over the dancing in the years between 1890 and 1910, and by the end of WWI their insistence on clinging to pre-modern forms of dress and behavior increasingly limited their relevance.²¹⁹ Consider that the codes of perception of dancing teachers, grounded in European American performance traditions, had difficulties reconciling the popularity of Sousa's two-step when it was challenging the popularity of the waltz. How much more difficult it would have been for them to apprehend the value in ragtime dances?

Ultimately, dancing teachers were unable to bring about the changes they advocated. Instead, social elites concerned with unlicensed dance halls where single urban women took their leisure became the unlikely source of somatic change.²²⁰

²¹⁸ "Glimpses of Washingtonians in the Metropolis." *The Washington Post*, 9 September 1918.

²¹⁹ In the 1920s they reinvented themselves and, while never again attaining the pervasive influence they exerted at the end of the nineteenth century, emerged as a powerful force in American ballroom dancing instruction.

²²⁰ For more information on the dance hall reform movement, see Tomko, *Dancing Class*; Perry, "'The General Motherhood of the Commonwealth': Dance Hall Reform in the Progressive Era,"

This “reform movement” would be the direction from which the Waltz Aesthetic emerged, albeit in an indirect and unwitting manner. Because it was Elizabeth Marbury, feminist and advocate for the reform and modernization of American women, who discovered and promoted the couple who would transform the Waltz Aesthetic from the outmoded performance of old-world dances into a sexy, madly popular and oh-so modern dances of the new century: Vernon and Irene Castle.

Chapter 4: The Waltz Aesthetic Emergent

In Chapters Two and Three I observed the manner in which dancing teachers dealt with a rapidly shifting field. I argued that the popularity of ragtime dancing presented a challenge that traditional guardians of respectable dancing (such as the members of the American Society of Professors of Dancing) were unable to overcome. Part of the difficulty facing dancing teachers was the introduction of racially coded movement, a new factor in European American social dance, whose popularity rapidly outstripped dancing teachers’ ability to maintain the previous expectations of decorum in the ballroom. Early in the twentieth century, at the juncture when dancing teachers were throwing up their hands at the dancing public’s unwillingness to perform within traditionally acceptable somatic templates, a new group took up the mantle of regulating dance: social reformers.

Social reformers during the Progressive era were first and foremost interested in promoting the well-being of the working class; those who decided to engage with popular dancing did so primarily because it was one of a group of leisure activities being pursued by urban workers.²²¹ These social reformers were concerned with the broader context in which women – particularly single, working women – faced moral peril rather than with the specific manner in which people danced. This is not to say that they were sanguine regarding the manner in which people were dancing – but rather that this was seen as a symptom of a larger problem, rather than significant in and of itself. Accordingly, social reformers initially focused their attention not on dancing, but on dance halls.

Illustrative of this focus was a report, “Popular Recreation and Public Morality,” issued by the American Academy of Political and Social Science in 1909.

New York has also about 200 dance halls, nearly all of them connected with saloons. Now, dancing in itself is a thoroughly wholesome form of recreation and exercise. But the moral environment of these places of amusement is such that it is not pleasant to think that a large proportion of the future mothers of American children has to resort to them in order to satisfy perfectly wholesome and natural cravings for play and companionship. . . . The 200,000 young people who frequent the dance halls of New York, if they dance at all, are compelled to take this exhilarating exercise under conditions which are frequently vicious in their moral influence. . . . With increasing leisure the ennobling ideals which spring from play will wax stronger in the human soul. If we can but get everybody to play their own natures will do the rest.²²²

²²¹ An excellent resource for information regarding the social reform movement in dance is Tompko’s *Dancing Class*.

²²² Luther H. Gulick, “Popular Recreation and Public Morality.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 34, 1, Race Improvement in the United States (July 1909), 35.

The author of this study neatly encapsulates the broad debate over the effects of dancing as an increasingly popular activity for urban-dwellers. Dancing itself was considered by most to be “a wholesome form of recreation and exercise,” but the businesses which had developed to satisfy the burgeoning demand for dancing were “frequently vicious in their moral influence,” largely due to the pernicious influence of the demon alcohol.

The movement to reform leisure activities such as dancing gained momentum as the first decade of the twentieth century came to a close. Dancing was understood as a recreational practice akin to roller skating or the new moving picture shows that, while potentially wholesome and fulfilling, took place in environments rife with peril. Thus, the initial focus of the social reform movement was on the environment in which dancing took place. To this end, progressives supported legislation that regulated dance halls, opened “dry” venues for dance, and initiated ambitious educational efforts designed to inculcate proper moral values in dancers through a “lead-by-example” model. Although uplifting dance was largely a secondary aspect of a broader reform agenda, the social reform movement counted among its members the wives and daughters of some of the most prominent, wealthiest men in the U.S. who were able to leverage their position as elite arbiters of fashion and exert tremendous influence over the performance of ballroom dance.

This chapter illuminates the connection between the social reform movement and ragtime dancing. Elite social reformers sympathized with dancing teachers’ goal of regulating acceptable movement in the ballroom, and the agenda of the dancing teachers informed that of the social reform movement. Where the two groups

diverged was in their assessment of ragtime. Dancing teachers, committed to Victorian standards of respectability, could not accept ragtime music or dancing. Social elites, embedded in the fashionable and committed to reform, did not see ragtime as something that must be eliminated. Despite this difference, social reformers' interest in ameliorating the conditions that had led European Americans to behave in a manner unbecoming to their race aligned with the dancing masters' desire to regulate dancers' bodies.

I focus on the social circle of one reformer, Elisabeth Marbury. A wealthy socialite, theatrical agent, and an active promoter of women's rights, Marbury transformed Vernon and Irene Castle from penniless vaudevillians supported by the gambling success of their African American servant to the most famous dancing couple of the early twentieth century. Subsequently, the Castles' immense popularity helped to codify and concretize the Waltz Aesthetic. Vernon and Irene Castle's meteoric rise and brief career has lately received deserved attention, but the manner in which their performance of ragtime dances served the broader needs of social reformers – Marbury's bosom associates – has yet to be sufficiently articulated.²²³ In this chapter I argue that the social reform movement produced the conditions that allowed Marbury, through the influence of her elite social circle, to position the Castles as the ideal vehicle for modifying ragtime dances. I then lay out in greater detail how the Waltz Aesthetic worked in this effort, further explicating the manner in

²²³ See, for example, Eve Gordon's *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007). Meticulously researched and uncovering material long obscured by Irene Castle's auto-biographies, Gordon's work brings to light details about the end of the Castles' relationship at which my own research had only hinted. However, Gordon does not place the Castles in the broader historical context of either race or class relations.

which it operates as a *habitus* for the encapsulation of subordinate cultures' social dances by bringing acceptable elements into European American performance and modifying everything else.

Turkey Trotting, Bunny Hugging, and Grizzly Bearing

The following quote, describing social dancing in a saloon in New York City, offers some insight into how the ragtime dances were seen by social reformers:

The dancing was tough. Men and women held each other in a tight grasp, the women putting their arms right around men. Almost all walked the two step in a combination bunny hug and nigger [*sic*]. Several couples danced the shivers and some of the dipping varieties . . . One couple had a distinct houchi couchi movement.²²⁴

Many of the movement elements associated with ragtime dancing that I have discussed in earlier chapters are present here: the African American aesthetic of syncopation and articulation of the torso and hips (“shiver” and “houchi couchi movement”), the modified dance hold (“held each other in a tight grasp”), and the basic form of a walking, partnered dance (“walked the two step”). If social reformers considered dances like these mildly problematic when performed by African Americans, and slightly more so when performed by lower class European Americans, they were completely unacceptable for the elite.

²²⁴ Report of the Committee of Fourteen, 9 November 1912. Quoted in Robinson, “Race in Motion: Reconstructing the Practice, Profession, and Politics of Social Dance in New York City, 1900 – 1930.” Robinson notes that the Committee of Fourteen was “a citizen watchdog group that began its work just after the turn of the century out of concern for prostitution . . . [and] a broad array of social vices [such as] alcohol consumption and sale, “immorality” among women and children, and even racial mixture.” 68.

When ragtime dances spread from the dockside bars of the Barbary Coast of San Francisco and variations on the Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug, Grizzly Bear, and Texas Tommy swept into the salons of New York, London, and Paris, elite cultural arbiters began to take notice.²²⁵ The first instances of the appearance of “animal” dances in white ballrooms did not seem to attract undue attention, barely meriting mention in the newspapers. Here is a typical example, from January of 1911:

Society, unless its middle-class, is at present amusing itself with a new dance. At Delmonico’s and Sherry’s it is called the “Long Boston.” When the Coney Island version is being performed, you are told that the dancers are going through the “Turkey Trot.” The middle class people are sticking to the Waltz and the two-step, with the occasional barn-dance thrown in.²²⁶

Throughout 1911 ragtime dancing became increasingly popular, and many elite whites in America and Europe became concerned with the consequences of their peers’ behavior. The initial success of the animal dances in white dance halls led to a backlash which brought dancing, mostly a footnote in the pages of the popular press during the first decade of the century, back into the headlines.

The Turkey Trot has invaded Philadelphia’s most exclusive dancing circles. It may not be the most dignified of steps, and there is no doubt that the innovation was frowned upon by this city’s conservative matrons, but it has won its way at last, and is the rage at all the Winter’s dances.²²⁷

²²⁵ The Barbary Coast was the slang name for a group of dockside bars/ dance halls in San Francisco at the turn of the century, as well as a reference to middle and western coastal regions of North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya), and would have evoked the perceived lawlessness and licentiousness of the African pirates and slave traders who preyed on Mediterranean shipping.

²²⁶ “Have You Tried The ‘Long Boston’ Dance? At Coney Island It Is Called ‘The Turkey Trot,’ And In Other Places It Is Variouslly Named.” *New York Times*, 29 January 1911. The reporter’s contention that there was a class-based difference in dance choices is likely spot on, as the new ragtime dances moved from their origins in African American dance halls to the variety stage and from the stage to the ballrooms of elite European Americans. The middle-classes likely waited to adopt new forms until they received the stamp of approval from elites.

²²⁷ “Approve The Turkey Trot: Philadelphia Society Leaders Are Taking Lessons In Latest Dance.” Special to the *New York Times*, 22 December 1911.

Not three weeks later the following retraction was offered:

The Turkey Trot and Grizzly Bear will no longer be tolerated in Society here. . . . It is more than probable that Philadelphia has seen the last of the Turkey Trot and the Grizzly Bear, and that society will return to staid dances. . . . It is understood that the two dances have all but caused several scandals in some of Philadelphia's best families.²²⁸

This kind of quick turnaround was common in the press of the day, with reports of the approval and adoption of ragtime dances followed with a retraction – sometimes less than a week later.

On occasion animal dances were the subject of preemptive bans, issued in response to a growing public concern rather than to any specific incident:

Orders to stop public dances at which either the Grizzly Bear or the Turkey Trot are performed were issued today by Police Chief Cowles, who said he would grant no more licenses for dances unless assured that the two dances were not inserted in the programme.²²⁹

This represents the most common initial attempt to control the spread of ragtime aesthetics in high society, the quarantine.²³⁰ As discussed in Chapter Three, the presence of African American influence on European American dancing had been seen as a problem by some since the turn of the century. However, the media largely ignored the problem until the ragtime dances entered the ballrooms of the social elite. Given the manner in which American media looked to the Old World for fashion, the

²²⁸ “Philadelphia Bans The Trot.” Special to the *New York Times*, 5 Jan 1912.

²²⁹ “Ban ‘Grizzly Bear’ At Yale.” Special to the *New York Times*, 21 January 1912.

²³⁰ Other scholars have noted the connection between the language of disease and that of dance – see Ann Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) for numerous examples.

decision of United States media to begin giving ragtime dances ink might have been spurred by the speed with which the European media responded to the intrusion of ragtime dances.

If they reacted more swiftly to the influx of African American aesthetics, European dancing masters responded no differently than their American cousins. The “Ten Commandments” published by Parisian dancing masters were demonstrative of negative continental responses to ragtime dancing:

- 1 – Have beautiful movements and you have noble thoughts.
- 2 – Correctness of carriage gives correctness of mind.
- 3 – The drawing room dance should be a silent expression of courtesy and not a series of unseemly movements without order or taste.
- 4 – The mental effect of dancing should be a feeling of gentleness, politeness, and respect, and not coarseness.
- 5 – A coarse gesture is more harmful to the mind and often inspires more bad thoughts than vulgar speech.
- 6 – Discipline your muscles and always maintain correct attitudes toward intimate friends.
- 7 – Young man, hold the lady by the waist. Do not press her, but hold her respectfully. Young woman, do not rest altogether on your partner in dancing. Keep a pleasing, gracious, but correct attitude and you will be respected.
- 8 – Let your intelligence, goodness, and politeness be known by your movements.
- 9 – Physiology should always correspond closely with psychology.
- 10 – Dance like a civilized being and not like a savage.²³¹

Given the implicit understandings of racial difference of the time, with light skin supposedly a marker of inherent superiority, this list suggests in subtle ways a

²³¹ “A Paris Decalogue to Guide Dancers.” Special to the *New York Times*, 11 February 1912. The intention of the French dancing masters in issuing this proclamation was to have it placed in the ballrooms and dance studios of the United States, where it was thought it would do the most good. My research indicates that a few American dancing masters may have displayed the commandments briefly, probably those members of the American Society of Professors of Dancing who were also members of the French Society of Dancing Masters. I have been unable to locate a copy of this French; accordingly I have quoted the *New York Times*’ translation.

pervasive racial anxiety. This anxiety regarding miscegenation and the increasing visibility of African American aesthetic production lies at the root of the dilemma faced by dance reformers. The tenth commandment references the African American origin of the new dances fairly explicitly. Upon examination, many of the other commandments may also express a concern over racialized movement.

Consider the manner in which mental life and physical life are conjoined in this list. Commandments one, two, three, five, eight, and nine to a greater or lesser degree conflate outward appearance with inward truth, an important tenet of white supremacy. “Beautiful movements” are, of course, movements that meet the standards of a European American code of perception and fit within that hexis. “Correct carriage” is the carriage of elite Europeans, inculcated over generations of repetitive training. “Unseemly movements without order or taste” clearly refers to movements and choreographic choices that fall outside the codes of perception and hexis of elite whites. The only explicit instruction offered to the dancer who wants to know what to do, in a physical sense, comes in commandment seven, regarding the dance hold (a target for dance instructors for over fifty years, see Chapter Two). Muscles are to be disciplined, and movements should be seemly, within the bounds of “order” and “taste,” terms that the presumably enlightened reader ought to already understand. Coarseness, above all, is to be avoided (commandments four and five). Commandment nine is somewhat more difficult to parse, perhaps indicating no more than that the performance of the body should reflect the mind; this could also be read as a tacit acceptance of the philosophical position that different peoples (races, nationalities) can and should move differently, and that for one group to take on the

movement of another is somehow a violation of decorous behavior.²³² Given that Paris was the cultural center of European (and, consequently, much of European American) life, it does not seem too great a leap to expect that many elites in America felt much the same sentiments as those expressed by these Parisians. The failure of the dancers who violate these commandments would appear to be largely a moral failure, a lapse in upholding the covenant that placed elite white culture at the apex of civilization.²³³

In the United States, ragtime dances' popularity with white dancers grew over a period of years, perhaps cushioning the shock as elements of African American somatics moved by degrees into European American performance. In Europe, however, the spread of ragtime dances took place over the course of no more than two seasons, as performances incorporating ragtime dances by Vaudeville performers moved from the stage to the social dance floor.²³⁴ In both Paris and London, condemnation of dances imported from the United States struck a nerve with citizens, leading to spirited dialogues in the newspapers.²³⁵

²³² Though presumably this would only operate when moving down the "hierarchy of races," inasmuch as white aesthetics represented the pinnacle of civilization. See Dyer, *White*.

²³³ Certainly there are Judeo-Christian overtones to these injunctions, and I get the sense that French dancing masters were operating under an explicit ideology of biological essentialism (again, see Dyer). However, without further examination of the field of European ballroom dancing I am reluctant to speculate on the motives and agenda of the authors, preferring to restrict my observations to the impact this document might have had upon the field of U.S. dancing.

²³⁴ The Cakewalk, which might give the exception to this, appears instead to have had a brief tenure in European ballrooms, disappearing from European performance by 1906. Perhaps this encouraged the perception (voiced by many) that the ragtime dances were merely a fad that would pass as soon as the public interest waned.

²³⁵ There is a particularly vitriolic exchange during this period in the London papers which, sadly, is outside of the scope of this dissertation. See "Lady Middleton, 'Peeress,' and Others Write Letters Against the Invasion of So-Called American Dances," *New York Times*, 24 August 1913, for a good summary of the feud.

The importation of the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, and other freak dances from America has produced a strong reaction in the more orthodox dancing circles here, and the Academy of Dancing masters has drawn up a set of rules called the “Ten Commandments of Dancers,” calculated to counteract the frivolous influences which have lately invaded society ballrooms.²³⁶

While the younger set, always ready to welcome new sensations, are doing their best to popularize the turkey trot, bunny hug, and other freak dances, the soberer elements of London society are holding up their hands in horror and raising an indignation protest [*sic*] against the idea of these American importations being allowed to oust the waltz from its place on the ballroom programme.²³⁷

Newspaper reports make clear that the rapid spike in popularity of ragtime dance in high society was met with approbation from both European and American cultural arbiters appalled at the manner in which these dances were performed. The initial strategies of condemnation and outrage deployed by these elites to address the challenges of ragtime dancing had no more success than the efforts of dancing teachers in curtailing the dances’ popularity.

A major difficulty facing reformers (both dancing teachers and socialites) who were opposed to the new dances was the possibility that ragtime dances *could* be performed without impropriety. This was at the heart of the different approaches between the social reformers and the dancing masters towards the form, a disagreement neatly summed up at a conference convened in New York City by the Committee on Amusement and Vacation Reform for Working Girls.

[T]he point brought out seemed to be that while the dance variations might be very prettily and properly performed, they were distinguished only by a series of imperceptible gradations from their origins on the Barbary Coast of San

²³⁶ “A Paris Decalogue to Guide Dancers.” Special to the *New York Times*, 11 February 1912.

²³⁷ “Abused Turkey Trot Spreads in London.” Special to the *New York Times*, 18 February 1912.

Francisco, and that for the dances to develop toward their uglier extremes was so easy as to be inevitable. Closer and closer the partners dance, and more and more perceptible becomes the tremor that keeps time with the ragging of the orchestra.²³⁸

The committee acknowledged that the dances had their origins in African American performance – “on the Barbary Coast of San Francisco” – and that the African American hexis was unacceptable for European American performance – “develop towards their uglier extremes.” The conundrum facing the reformers was that the offensive dances were a hybrid form, a grafting of European American and African American dance aesthetics only distinguished by “a series of imperceptible gradations.” This presented a thorny problem for those reformers who, unlike the dancing masters, were not particularly invested in maintaining the old order of ballroom dances. Many social elites were caught up in the zeitgeist, snapping their fingers and tapping their toes to the syncopated rhythms of ragtime music.²³⁹ On the other hand, the superiority of European Americans (whites) was unquestioned, and while many social reformers were advocates of African American integration and uplift, the idea of white sons and daughters moving their bodies in ways that heretofore were only associated with (supposedly inferior) African Americans was abhorrent.

²³⁸ “Social Workers See Real Turkey Trots.” *New York Times*, 27 January 1912.

²³⁹ About which much has been written, see Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), and *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Contrast a description of proper dancing from the Castles' dance manual, published in 1914, with six characteristics that Marshal and Jean Stearns' *Jazz Dance*, published in 1964, distinguished as markers of African dance:

In the modern dances the dancer stands with lithe grace and ease, but very erect, and dances with her feet, not with her whole body. . . . Flouncing elbows, pumping arms, fantastic dips, and whirlwind turns all detract not only from the grace of the dance, but from the charm of the dancer. . . . Remember that you are dancing, and not doing acrobatic exercises; and your partner is there to dance with, not to hang yourself on in grotesque attitudes and poses to music.²⁴⁰

African dance is danced with bare feet upon the earth – steps tend to be shuffling, dragging, gliding and flat-footed, and are frequently performed in a crouch. African dances tend to depict animals in realistic detail. African dance places importance on improvisation, satirical and otherwise. African dance is centrifugal, exploding outward from the hips, and is performed to a propulsive rhythm, which gives it a swinging quality.²⁴¹

I juxtapose the Stearns' analysis with the Castles' assertions to reinforce the different codes of perception that informed the hexis of African and European Americans.

Given the very different cultural assumptions behind African and European American movement aesthetics, a negative perception of black movement styles by whites seems inevitable. African American bodies were, in this view, revealed as being less civilized by literally every move that they made. Freedom of physical expression, read by whites as a lack of bodily control, was a movement away from the perceived enlightened civilization of white society. However compelling or fascinating African American dances may have been the performance of movements in that style by

²⁴⁰ Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1914), 135 – 136.

²⁴¹ Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 15 – 16.

whites was rife with moral dilemma. European Americans concerned with maintaining cultural standards would therefore be obligated to oppose any integration of African American hexis into the white vocabulary. The Castles' suggestions can be read as a direct response to the presence of African American aesthetics in the ballroom.²⁴²

As time passed there was increasing agreement amongst U.S. cultural reformers with the sentiment that African American aesthetics needed to be controlled. However, at some point they realized that the strategies of the dancing teachers (self-entrusted with upholding the somatic order) were insufficient to the challenge presented by ragtime dancing. While Oscar Duryea, president of the American Society of Professors of Dancing, maintained that

[T]here was no safety in retaining anything that departed from the "correct position," as in the impeccable waltz where the man has his right arm about the girl's waist, and her right hand rests in his left, which must be extended. Only last Wednesday, he said, he dropped in for observation in Terrace Garden and saw a policeman in the middle of the floor busy barring a Turkey Trot, and he did it by two gestures, one to indicate that the man's left arm must be extended, and one that the languorous half-walk must not be substituted for the good old fashioned twirl. These simple rules, born of the bluecoat's own experience in suppression, cannot be improved upon.²⁴³

Others who shared Duryea's concerns looked for strategies that did not rely upon uniformed officers being present in dance halls to suppress the Turkey Trot and enforce propriety.

²⁴² Again, note the use of the term "grotesque" as a descriptor of movements that are outside the understanding of European Americans.

²⁴³ Oscar Duryea, quoted in "Social Workers See Real Turkey Trots." *New York Times*, 27 January 1912.

Duryea made the above observations at a conference organized by Mrs. Charles Israels, head of the Committee on Amusement and Vacation Reform for Working Girls. This gathering, held in January of 1912, included not only dancing professionals and reformers but Broadway performers Al Jolson and Florence Cable (then appearing at the Winter Garden) and religious leaders including Rev. Percy Stickney Grant. Nearly all of those represented disagreed with Duryea in some greater or lesser regard as to their preferred solution to the challenge presented by ragtime dance, when indeed they felt there was a problem at all. In stark contrast to the frock-coated president of the American Society of Professors of Dancing was Al Jolson, described as resplendent in patent-leather-and-spats as he demonstrated the dances as they were done in his native San Francisco.

It's all the same dance, he said, call it Turkey Trot or Bunny Hug as you will. Stripped of the variations, despoiled of the precautions, all the new variants drop off insensibly into the one thing. There in those fifteen or twenty dance halls, thriving as they did in his day on the patronage of the half-drunken sailors welcomed at that port, the dances were born. The unsteady tar could only half-skate around the floor to begin with.

“And then,” said the graphic Jolson, “the orchestra would hit it up, and they would rag it a bit, and then strike out on the minors that are more seductive, I guess – and get closer and closer, and snap their fingers, and – and I guess I've said enough.” He was thunderously applauded as he and Miss Cable showed how it was done.²⁴⁴

Jolson's contention that the animal dances were all really just variations on a “one-step” would become a common rhetorical weapon in the arsenal of those who sought to reform the dances. The applause tendered to Jolson and Cable was another aspect

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

that should not be overlooked in the reform movement: the approval of ragtime dances that might otherwise be considered vulgar when performed as theater. This distinction between performance-as-entertainment and performance-for-pleasure likely had its roots in pre-nineteenth century European American dance (see Chapter One). The penchant among elites for theatrical performances that incorporated African American aesthetics (whether by white or black performers) was an obstacle to socialites' goal of maintaining the performance of European American aesthetics in the ballroom.

Also disagreeing with Duryea, the Reverend Grant flatly objected to the idea of censorship:

I fear me that I take the undergraduate point of view on dancing, and still look on it as a complicated athletic exercise. I believe that when the young man has successfully piloted his partner through a crowded hall with the possible injection of a remark or two, his mind and emotions are pretty well taken up. It is dangerous for older people to delve in the psychology of the young, and I am one of those who believe that the workers are simpler in their attitude toward sex than we of sophisticated society. I am absolutely no censor of any kind of dancing, but I am champion of Mrs. Israel's committee, and know that up to a year ago, of all the dance halls in the city, there were not three that were fit for a girl to enter. One great trouble can be wiped out when we fully realize that in the interests of the younger folk of the city drinking and dancing simply must be divorced.²⁴⁵

Rev. Grant's paternalistic attitude towards "workers" suggests the general attitude of many of the reformers interested in ragtime dancing, who believed that changing the environment of the working class would result in changed behavior. At that time a great deal of effort was being spent on attempts to legislate the separation of dance

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

halls from saloons. That movement drew support from prohibition reformers, but the loudest voices raised against ragtime dances came from the pulpits.

Between 1910 and 1919 there were eighteen books published against dancing by sixteen different authors. The focus of these books shifted somewhat from Victorian tracts of the same nature. In anti-dance tracts published before 1900, the question was “are any amusements allowable under Christianity?” In the twentieth century the question was *which* amusements were acceptable, with dancing, gambling, theater and the movies being largely singled out for disapproval.²⁴⁶ Given the number of clergy who were flat out opposed to dancing, the Reverend Grant was likely invited to the conference as much for his atypical support of dancing as for his commitment to reform.

The main concern of Mrs. Israels regarding ragtime dancing was her perception that “this form of the dance, particularly in conjunction with liquor drinking, has become the principal means through which girls are now being led astray in the dance halls.”²⁴⁷ Previously, she was on record as being entirely against ragtime dances, whose practice, she explained to the *New York Times*,

[I]s simply a degradation of the public standards in the matter of decency. The remedy is the spreading of an understanding of the real nature and the origin of these dances. . . . We need your cooperation in our efforts to suppress tough dancing, commonly designated as the “slow rag” “lover’s two step” “bunny hug” turkey trot” and “walk back” which are in reality modified varieties and conventional adaptations of a dance which had its origin in questionable places, whence it spread first to the dives and Tenderloin dance halls and thence to a large number of dance halls in the city. . . . We urge the importance of recognizing the distinction between legitimate dancing and this

²⁴⁶ Wagner, 261.

²⁴⁷ “Movement begins to ban Turkey Trot & Grizzly Bear.” *New York Times*, 5 January 1912.

hideous perversion, which generally speaking, is not dancing at all, but a series of indecent antics to the accompaniment of music.²⁴⁸

Israels here echoes the sentiment expressed by dancing masters that ragtime dancing “is not dancing at all.” The values of ragtime dancing fell outside her codes of perception, and she contended that if people understood that these dances originated in African American dives, they would refrain from lowering themselves to such indecent antics. Other scholars of the movement to uplift dancing have noted this same inability on the part of reformers to apprehend the motives of the dancers. Robinson notes that “although the Committee of Fourteen writers did not necessarily use the word ‘irrational’ it is clear after reading several boxes of their reports that they viewed ragtime dancing and dancers as irrational – meaning out of control, lacking discipline.”²⁴⁹ Mrs. Israels, then, would have seemed likely to support the dancing teachers’ agenda to wholly suppress ragtime dances.

However, after seeing the performances of the Duryeas and Jolson and Cable, she permitted that “the innocent Turkey Trot may well be preserved, if re-christened, lest the dancers of the poor be misled into thinking there is a high sanction for the Turkey Trot as they see it in the ill-supervised halls that are their only refuge from dark and dismal homes.”²⁵⁰ Israels expressed here a common assumption among members of her class: that members of the lower classes would be unable to distinguish between proper and improper dances if they shared the same name. So instead of simply reforming the manner in which the Turkey Trot was danced, it

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Robinson, “Race in Motion,” footnote to 128.

²⁵⁰ “Social Workers See Real Turkey Trots.” *New York Times*, 27 January 1912.

would be better to also give the dance an entirely new name. This tactic, of protecting the working classes for their own benefit while preserving the ability of the upper classes to engage in behavior that would (among those less socially refined) devolve into vulgarity, reflected an underlying ideology or paternalism that held that different groups of people needed different rules and regulations. One strategy that emerged from this was the re-naming of dances, eliding the animalistic nomenclature that pointed towards African American origins in favor of titles that referenced elite society or their avatars, i.e. the Castle Walk, The Walton Aeroplane Glide, or the Fish Walk.²⁵¹

Another tactic used by the social reformers to accomplish the modification of certain African American aesthetic elements for incorporation into white culture was an obfuscation of the origins of ragtime dances.

In a recent address by the poet Jean Richepin before the members of the French Academy the evolution of modern dances was convincingly traced from the tombs of Thebes, from Orient to Occident, and down through ancient Rome. M. Richepin protested against the vulgarization of these dances when performed by inartistic and ignorant exponents, but argued that centers should promptly be established in every capital of the world where the grace and beauty and classic rhythm to which the modern dance so naturally lends itself should be developed and emphasized.²⁵²

Richepin was a French author and poet, and his extension of the history of “modern” dances into the distant past allowed those who urged their acceptance to call on a rich tradition of history to counter objections to ragtime dances; they also neatly displaced modern African Americans as part of the process. Although ancient Egypt (the tombs

²⁵¹ The Castles initially attempted to attach the name “Fish Walk” to the dance that ultimately became known as the Foxtrot, after Mr. and Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish.

²⁵² Elisabeth Marbury, in Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, 19.

of Thebes) was an African empire, it was distant in time and, whites could argue, more Mediterranean than African, factors that allowed it to mediate the incorporation of Africanist modes of “grace, beauty, and classic rhythm” that had heretofore been absent from European-derived culture. Considered in this light, the above paragraph can be seen as illuminating some of the underlying motives of those who wanted to rehabilitate ragtime dances. They traced ragtime dances to non-American sources in order to distance those dances from their African American origins. The success of this endeavor was so complete that, when Irene Castle published her second autobiography in 1958, she claimed that she and her husband had created the “Grizzly Bear or Texas Tommy” dance that won them fame and fortune based on reading newspaper clippings.²⁵³ The absence of African Americans from Irene Castle’s narrative is a striking example of the manner in which white histories sought to shape the narrative of social dance’s development.²⁵⁴ Re-naming dances and creative historiography were strategies employed to uplift ragtime dances. Such attempts to distance modern dancing from its African American roots can be seen as part of the racial project to reimagine ragtime dances.

When social reformers first began their campaign to uplift ragtime, they employed tactics such as censorship by proclamation and regulation of dance halls via proctors. These tactics had been unsuccessfully tried by dancing teachers, and social reformer’s efforts met with just as little success. What these reformers needed (although they did not know it) was a figurehead, an example they could hold up to

²⁵³ Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 54 – 55.

²⁵⁴ I will return to the issue of Irene Castles’ selective memory below.

persuade people that the correct way to dance was to eschew African American aesthetics and return to the hexis of elite European Americans. One woman was ideally placed to identify and promote a young dance couple from obscurity to the kind of stardom that would serve as a platform for regulating movement through fashion rather than regulation: Elisabeth Marbury.

Elisabeth Marbury

Elisabeth Marbury is perhaps best known to theater scholars for her involvement in creating the “Princess Theater” musicals, considered the forerunner of “Book” musicals.²⁵⁵ Among the first women producers working professionally in American theater, Marbury is also credited with “virtually inventing the profession of literary and theatrical agent,” and discovering Cole Porter.²⁵⁶ Among Marbury’s social circle were the wives and daughters of some of the wealthiest and most successful businessmen in the United States, including Anne Morgan, Anne Vanderbilt, Laura Rockefeller, and Marion Fish, as well as Marbury’s long-time companion, Elsie de Wolfe.²⁵⁷ These women knew “almost every woman of significance during the hundred years that spanned their lives.”²⁵⁸ Marbury’s inner circle consisted of de Wolfe, “the most celebrated interior decorator in America,”

²⁵⁵ “Elizabeth Marbury suggested producing small, low-budget musicals as alternatives to the lavish songfests then dominant on Broadway. Comstock and Marbury joined forces, hired Jerome Kern and librettist Guy Bolton, limited production expenses to \$7,500, and launched a series now referred to as The Princess Theatre Musical.” John Kenrick, “History of The Musical Stage 1910-1919: Part I,” *Musicals 101.com: The Cyber Encyclopedia of Musical Theatre, TV and Film*, accessed 7 October 2009.

²⁵⁶ Marbury’s clients included Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Edith Wharton, Eugene O’Neill, Jerome Kern, and P.G. Wodehouse, among others. Gordon, 47.

²⁵⁷ Wolfe and Marbury lived together for nearly twenty years, and consequently have been claimed as early lesbian icons.

²⁵⁸ Alfred Allan Lewis, *Ladies and Not-So-Gentle Women* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), xvi.

Anne Morgan, “J.P. Morgan's powerful and well-meaning but naive daughter,” and Anne Vanderbilt, the daughter of Railroad Tycoon Oliver Harriman, “whose blessing signified social arrival.”²⁵⁹ In *Ladies and Not-So-Gentle Women*, Alfred Lewis observes that these four women

(D)id not find prominent places in the posthumous histories of their times but were much better known and more influential during them than many who did. Their likenesses and opinion were on the front pages of the nation's newspapers. In an era when print was the only medium of communication, they were profiled, quoted, and photographed, often writing articles explaining themselves in the leading periodicals of the day.²⁶⁰

These women had different levels of interest in the reform movements of the day, but consistently supported each other in their respective ventures. For example, when the women working at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory went on strike in 1909 to protest their working conditions, organizers in the Women's Trade Union League quickly received support from Anne Morgan and Elizabeth Marbury.²⁶¹ Morgan and Marbury arranged for the leaders of the WTUL to speak at a meeting of the Colony Club, a women's social association whose members “were linked by family and intimate friendship to the most influential people in America.”²⁶² In addition to raising money to back the strike, members of what were derisively called the “Mink Brigade” helped to organize a rally at Carnegie Hall to raise awareness of the conditions of the Jewish and Irish workers. Collaborations such as this were likely a part of the complex negotiations of social hierarchy between the members of the “Four Hundred” as much

²⁵⁹ Charlotte Curtis, “A Decorative Collaboration.” *New York Times*, 20 June 1982.

²⁶⁰ Lewis, xii.

²⁶¹ The same Triangle Shirtwaist Factory that burned to the ground, killing 147 workers not 14 months after the strike.

²⁶² Lewis, 257.

as they represented simple altruism or a genuine concern for the plight of the working class. In *Dancing Class*, Linda Tomko argues that “Society competition may be seen as a vehicle for class inscription and contest within a mythos and scenario of long-term Knickerbocker decline.”²⁶³ Marbury, an expert at creating and trading favors, working connections, and promotion, likely joined in efforts to reform ragtime dancing as part of the interwoven net of obligations that was very much a part of her life.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Marbury and Elsie de Wolfe generally spent six months of the year living in France. Sometime in 1913 (while Marbury was on a trip to Italy) de Wolfe saw a performance by Vernon and Irene Castle in a Parisian café, and in August the *New York Times* reported that “Miss Elsie de Wolfe, who is in Versailles at her villa with Miss Anne Morgan and Miss Elisabeth Marbury, has been attracted by the new extraordinary dances which were the craze of the Paris season. She is practicing them now with Vernon Castle, who goes to Versailles daily.”²⁶⁴

Elsie de Wolfe subsequently arranged for the Castles to perform at a private party at the residence she and Marbury shared near Versailles. The Castles were a smashing success; Marbury described Irene as having a “body lithe and graceful, her swanlike neck suggested the highest distinction, her features and coloring beautiful. Her limbs, ankles, and feet were perfect,” while noting that it was “Vernon, however,

²⁶³ Tomko, 63.

²⁶⁴ “Tourists Plentiful In Paris This Year.” Special to the *New York Times*, 3 August 1913.

who had the talent as a dancer.”²⁶⁵ By the year’s end Marbury had become the Castles’ theatrical manager. In order to better appreciate how the Castles came to embody the Waltz Aesthetic in the service of Marbury and the social reform movement, a brief biographical aside will be useful.

Vernon and Irene Castle

Vernon Castle was born Vernon Blythe in 1877 in Norwich, England, the only son in a family with four older daughters. Vernon trained at Birmingham University as an engineer, and might have gone on to a very different career if he had not decided to accompany his father and sister on a vacation to the United States.²⁶⁶ His sister Coralie had been cast in Lew Fields’ *The Orchid*, and Vernon and their father sailed with her to America. The senior Mr. Blythe did not find New York to his liking and sailed back to England after a week, but Vernon stayed in the city, hanging around rehearsals, eventually taking a small part in the show. Between 1906 and 1911 Vernon played comic roles in several of Lew Fields’ productions; the lanky, eccentric Englishman acting as a foil to Fields’ portly German immigrant. Vernon performed his first professional dance number in *The Midnight Sons* (1909) with Lotta Faust, the star singer of “Sammy” from the Broadway production of *The Wizard of Oz*. Vernon was 5’11”, 118 pounds, and his rail-thin frame reportedly made him a humorous

²⁶⁵ Marbury, *My Crystal Ball* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 244.

²⁶⁶ Several accounts of Vernon’s life mention that he received a degree in engineering from Birmingham University (U.K.) in 1907, although in 1906 he is listed in the program of the Broadway show *About Town*. *About Town* opened 30 August 1906, and evidently Vernon performed in the show when it went on the road.

figure in the dance. In the summer of 1910, Vernon met Irene Foote, the young daughter of a Long Island physician.²⁶⁷

Irene was fascinated by the theater, taking dancing lessons and performing in local theatrical productions. In her autobiographies she reports that she did not think much of Vernon at first, but upon discovering that he was an actor working with the impresario Fields, her interest was piqued. She later recalled: “If Lew Fields could be persuaded to take one look at my dancing, my career would be on its way.” Vernon and Irene were engaged in March of 1911, and married that May. Soon after this they auditioned as a dance team for Fields, and although he was on good terms with Vernon, Fields refused to allow them to dance together in his shows, apocryphally asking, “Who is going to pay money to watch a man dance with his wife?”²⁶⁸

During the fall 1911 tour of Lew Fields’ production, *The Hen-Pecks*, a French producer approached Vernon and asked him to come to Paris and re-create a comic sketch from the show in which Vernon, playing the part of a pompous Lothario, was roundly abused by Fields in a comic, slapstick fashion.²⁶⁹ Fields generously granted the Castles complete rights to the scene and, as Irene put it, “We didn’t know exactly what we were going to do nor how we would go about it. Had anyone urged us not to

²⁶⁷ There is some discrepancy as to the details of their initial acquaintance. Irene clearly states that Vernon was performing in *The Hen-Pecks* when she met him (*My Husband*, 11). Yet, the League of American Theater Producers’ website lists the opening date for the show as being 4 February 1911. In Reid Badger’s biography of James Reese Europe, Badger reports that they met while Vernon was performing in *The Summer Widowers (A Life In Ragtime)*, 78). In *Castles in the Air*, Irene says that Vernon was in *The Summer Widowers* when they met (33). Certainly the reported dates for the shows make a better case for *The Summer Widowers*.

²⁶⁸ Apocryphal, as noted. The quote appears in RKO’s *The Vernon and Irene Castle Story*, 1939.

²⁶⁹ The scene was reproduced in RKO’s *The Vernon and Irene Castle Story*. As a young vaudevillian Astaire saw Vernon perform several times.

go, in all probability the trip would have been called off. . . . So, since we had no reason to refuse – less, even, than we had for going – we decided to set sail.”²⁷⁰

Arriving in Paris, the Castles discovered that the opening of the production, *Finally . . . A Review!*, had been postponed. They had arrived with very little money, expecting in the naiveté of youth that they would be drawing a salary immediately. Almost six weeks went by before the show was ready to open.²⁷¹ According to Irene’s reports, the show was not good, and Vernon’s performance ill-received. His French was barely passable, and consequently the comic dialogue did not play well with Parisian audiences. The only things Irene enjoyed about the show were the two dance numbers Vernon choreographed and convinced the producers to allow them to perform. One told the fable of the tin soldier and the paper doll, and the other was a ragtime dance. Irene describes the way the ragtime dance came about in two very different ways in her two memoirs. First, in her 1918 memoir, *My Husband*, Irene recalls that her “stage idol,” Blossom Seeley, had been imported to Broadway from San Francisco’s Barbary Coast to appear in *The Hen-Pecks*. Seeley was a “coon shouter,” a white performer who sang African American songs in blackface. In *From the Bowery to Broadway*, Lew Fields’ biographers Armond and L. Marc Fields describe Seeley’s performance:

'Henella, an aspiring chorus girl, ponders whether to be a first-class actress or a happy wife. She opts for the former: "I'm going to stick right where I belong - close to the music cues," and then climbs up on a table and belts out "Toddlin' the Todalo" in a brassy voice. The exuberant singer was San Francisco-born Blossom Seeley familiar to the Western vaudeville circuits as

²⁷⁰ Irene Castle, *My Husband*, 21 – 22.

²⁷¹ It was during this time that they reportedly lived on the gambling winnings of their African American servant, Walter Ash. Irene Castle, *My Husband*, 26.

the Queen of Syncopation, but hitherto unknown to Broadway audiences. Fields had her dance on the table to show off her shapely legs, and she used the platform to launch a dance craze. As an encore to the Todalo, she performed the Texas Tommy, a dance originated by black vaudevillians in San Francisco's Barbary Coast.²⁷²

Irene recalled that it was Blossom Seeley's performance that had inspired their Parisian success: "This dance and song, or what we remembered of it, came to our rescue in Paris."²⁷³

In the last act of the Revue we sang *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. We followed this with a sort of grizzly-bear dance. It was very rough, more so than any dance we ever did over here. . . It was a sort of Texas Tommy dance. As this was entirely from memory of what we had seen Blossom Seeley do in *The Hen-Pecks*. It was quite unusual. Then too, Blossom Seeley had danced alone, and we were trying, both of us, to imitate her Frisco style.²⁷⁴

This is a fairly straightforward account – the Castles were bringing something fairly recent to the Paris stage, inspired by a performance they knew from a show they were in. Irene's second, very different account appeared in *Castles in the Air* (1958):

My mother had been sending us clippings describing the new dance rage which was sweeping across America, a syncopated Ragtime rough and tumble called the "Grizzly Bear" or Texas Tommy. We decided, as a finale for the show, to introduce French audiences to the latest American dance furor. Unfortunately, we had not seen the latest American dances and had only the vague newspaper descriptions to go by. Vernon decided, however, that if we hadn't seen the Grizzly Bear, the French hadn't either, so they wouldn't know whether we were doing it right or not. Reading between the lines of the newspaper stories, he evolved a close approximation of the Grizzly Bear and the Texas Tommy to the tune of *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. If the American version was rough, ours was even rougher, full of so many acrobatic variations that I was in the air much more often than I was on the ground. The

²⁷² Armond Fields and L. Marc Fields, *From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 284 – 285.

²⁷³ Irene Castle, *My Husband*, 21.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

French audience was enthusiastic . . . They stood up at the end of the number and cried out “greezly bahr” [*sic*] until we appeared again.²⁷⁵

Why Irene chose to elide Seeley in her later memoir is a bit puzzling. Perhaps she wanted to take sole credit for the dance, or perhaps she also (and this is my suspicion) was participating in the pervasive, culturally-induced racial project that distanced ragtime dancing from its origins in African American aesthetics. Certainly there is no easy way to reconcile the two versions of her story.²⁷⁶

The Castles left *Finally . . . A Review!* as soon as they had repaid the money that the theater had advanced them. They scraped by until they secured an audition at the Café de Paris, one of Paris’ most prestigious nightclubs. The evening before their scheduled audition, the Castles spent the last of their savings at the Café in order to get a feel for the space and the atmosphere. Later that night a Russian noble recognized them from the Revue at the Olympia, and had the Maître d’ ask them to perform. Reluctantly, they stood up from the table, as though they were simply another couple there socially, and began to dance. To their great surprise, they were a success. Vernon recalled: “We were terrible, really. Somehow, our dance pleased some Russian prince, an awfully rich fellow, and he sent 2,000 francs over to us as a gift.”²⁷⁷ The Café offered them a regular table, and free dinners every night, if they would just come and dance. The pretense that they were simply another couple who

²⁷⁵ Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 54 – 55.

²⁷⁶ Discrepancies of this sort make Irene a very suspect source for much of the information about her partnership with her first husband. Before Eve Gordon’s excellent work, scholars attempting to acquire an accurate picture of the Castles were forced to rely largely upon Irene’s biographies.

²⁷⁷ Vernon Castle, “How the Castles Began to Dance.” Philadelphia *Ledger*, undated clipping, Castle Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library.

happened to get up and perform was a conceit that became their signature. The Maître d' sat them at the same table every evening, and at some point they would get up and perform. Soon, they were invited to dance at private parties all over France, Germany, and England, and went from depending on their servant's gambling ability to champagne, caviar, and weekends in Monte Carlo. Upon their return to the United States, the Castles parlayed their European success into a contract for \$300 a week to dance at the Café de l'Opera in Times Square.

Marbury and the Castles

In her autobiography Marbury situated her desire to direct the Castles within an impulse for business rather than reform.

I happened to be lunching in the Ritz when looking across the street I noticed that the large double house which had been at one time reconstructed for a fashionable dressmaker stood idle. The thought of making it into a smart dancing center flashed upon my mind and simultaneously the personalities of Vernon and Irene Castle, whom I had already seen in Paris as an attraction in a restaurant. I visualized the trade mark 'Castle House' provided I could persuade this couple to leave Chicago where they were earning about four hundred dollars a week . . . With me during the first season their worst earnings averaged two thousand per week.²⁷⁸

Business was always important to Marbury (and the Castles as well); while concerned with social reform, Marbury was one of the foremost theatrical producers/managers of her generation. If she could become the Castles' manager, she would be able to bring together her instinct for a quick profit with her desire to improve the condition

²⁷⁸ Marbury, *My Crystal Ball*, 243. I note that Marbury and de Wolfe have different memories regarding their first encounter with the Castles. My research suggests that de Wolfe likely has the right of it.

of working women by selling the public on the Castles as a role model for proper dancing.

As one observer noted, “Miss Elizabeth Marbury [*sic*], a social settlement worker, ‘well known in New York society,’ has become so intensely stirred over the way the tango is danced that she is bent upon uplifting it. Consequently, she chooses the Castles.”²⁷⁹ The Castles, though not apparently interested at that point in their career in uplifting social dancing, knew a good deal when they saw one and engaged Marbury as their theatrical agent. In order for the Castles to serve as Marbury’s agents of change, however, they first needed to be raised to a level of celebrity greater than that of any other dance team. Marbury achieved this through cunning management. To begin with, Vernon was placed in a leading role in *The Sunshine Girl* on Broadway, opposite Julia Sanderson, with whom he danced a Tango. The show was a success, running for 181 shows from February to June. After the summer, when many Broadway houses were closed due to the heat, it briefly re-opened for the month of September.²⁸⁰ Irene had a minor number with Vernon in the show, but evidently was not a strong enough performer to warrant a larger role.

To raise Irene’s profile, Marbury took a different tack. Recognizing that Irene was not as skilled as her husband, Marbury made her famous for her style and appearance.

That she was so good-looking and wore clothes so well proved a great advantage in lining up the best photographers to take pictures of her. Bessy bombarded editors with these photographs and made picture cards to be sold

²⁷⁹ “Castles Uplifting Tango; Yes, Press Agent Says So.” *St Paul Press*, April 1914.

²⁸⁰ The Internet Broadway Database. <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=7575>. Accessed 14 October 2009.

to fans at newsstands. In assembling a newsworthy wardrobe, the women were fortunate. Elsie's (de Wolfe) good friend Mme Lucille (Lady Duff Gordon) had opened salons in London, New York, and Paris, and become the first international English fashion designer since Charles Frederick Worth. Bessy persuaded her to design a few dresses for the dancer. The result is described by Caroline Rennolds Milbank in her encyclopedic book, *Couture*: 'The combination of Lucille's airy dance frocks and Irene's lithe body and charismatic beauty exerted tremendous fashion influence on both sides of the Atlantic.' Bessy followed the dresses by leasing Irene's name to a long series of products ranging from cigarettes to automobiles. . . . She made her client the most famous dancer in America before anybody knew whether she could do more than follow her husband in an unmemorable number inserted into a show starring somebody else.²⁸¹

These strategies worked in raising the Castles' public profile, and they also danced at private parties for Marbury's friends, making connections and charming people with their good looks and clean-cut dancing. Castle House, the trademark dancing school and salon envisioned by Marbury, opened and was a smashing success.

Castle House was a sort of combination of a modern-day dance studio and nightclub, located at 26 East 46th Street in Manhattan. One of the keys to the venture's success is evidenced in the dedication of Castle's dance manual, *Modern Dancing*: "Dedicated to those who dance, those who may dance, and to the PATRONESSES OF CASTLE HOUSE."²⁸² The patronesses of Castle House were twelve of the wealthiest women in New York society, among them Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, Mrs. Rockefeller, and Mrs. Gary. Figure 14 (below) shows an artist's illustration of high society at Castle House. Watching the dancing are such notables as Mrs. Rhineland, Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, Mrs. Norman Hapgood, Mrs. Charles De

²⁸¹ Lewis, 292. Lewis uses 'Bessy' for Elisabeth Marbury throughout, while noting that others use 'Bessie.'

²⁸² Castles, *Modern Dancing*. Frontispiece. Caps original.

L. Oelrichs, Mrs. Norman De R. Whitehouse, Miss Elsie de Wolf, as well as Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. Some of the women listed who might not be familiar today (such as Mrs. Oelrichs and Mrs. Whitehouse) were notable leaders of the social reform movement, and are perhaps best remembered for their work towards women's suffrage in the years before 1919.



Figure 14: New York Society Leaders Sketched at a Castle Tango Tea

The patronesses were part of Marbury's social circle, and they brought to the Castles – and through them to the sanitized ragtime dance they advocated – the considerable legitimacy of their social status. This image positions the elites of society watching over the dancing, providing the proper supervision to ensure that nothing that occurs on the dance floor will be in the slightest bit improper. I note the absence of James Reese Europe and his musicians (replaced in this image by the suggestion that music is coming from a Victrola) as another example of the reluctance of European Americans to include African Americans in the record as contributors to ragtime dancing, or present them in anything like a favorable light.²⁸³ Recognizing that Marbury and her associates were a driving force behind the success of the Castles is important to understanding the direction of the Castles' work from 1913 to 1915, as the Castles catered to Marbury and her social circle by advocating altered ragtime forms that were stripped of their African American aesthetics and origins.²⁸⁴

At Castle House, it was Marbury who “selected able assistants and instructors.”²⁸⁵ Lewis suggests that these teachers, “in addition to being able to dance all of the latest steps, had to be clean-cut, personable, well-dressed, and with good

²⁸³ Later generations would have no difficulty seeing African American musicians as appropriate, but my research indicates that at this juncture in history the profession of musician was considered to be above the station of all but the most tamed of African Americans. It was not until the 1920s that rhetoric adjusted enough to account for the presence of African American musicians through such tropes as their supposed natural affinity to music, which they would play without study or ability to read music. Such memes were present before 1910, but not widespread.

²⁸⁴ My contention that the Castles were presenting the kind of dancing desired by their patrons is perhaps on some level obvious – the artist who is free from the obligation to satisfy those who finance their art is a rare one. However, a great deal of scholarship has laid much of the credit for popularizing ragtime dances with white cabaret dancers. Further, the blame for removing African American elements from the dances has been attributed to the Castles without considering how they accomplished this or why they might have chosen to do so.

²⁸⁵ Marbury, *My Crystal Ball*, 243.

enough manners to pass for ladies and gentlemen.”²⁸⁶ Marbury also arranged for the African American composer and conductor James Reese Europe to provide the music for Castle House. “I arranged with Jim Europe, the great conductor of Jazz, so that I had him furnish the music. . . . We opened with a list of the most prominent women as patronesses. Mrs. John Corbin presided at the tea table.”²⁸⁷ Through Marbury and her connections, the Castles were able to achieve the fame that positioned them to be the face of the Waltz Aesthetic.

In a project aimed at the uplift of ragtime dance environments, Marbury collaborated with de Wolfe, Morgan, and Vanderbilt to open the Strand Roof Garden, a dance hall where only soft drinks would be served. The Strand was opened several months after Marbury began managing the Castles, at a time when afternoon tea dances had become popular locations for single young women to meet members of the opposite sex. The Strand was initially successful, but the absence of alcohol proved to be the venture’s downfall. Marbury recalled that

Despite the fact that in the beginning people crowded in hundreds to be served corned beef hash and apple pie by volunteers of distinction, despite the fact that we had a splendid jazz band, a fine floor, moderate prices and attractive diversions, it was not long before the crowds became familiar with our conditions, and before long we were deserted for similar resorts where real beer was served instead of lemonade.²⁸⁸

Her desire was to create a “respectable dance hall,” and like many in her social circle, Marbury felt that the combination of alcohol with recreation was the downfall of the lower classes. Despite the failure of this venture, Marbury was well aware that the

²⁸⁶ Lewis, 293.

²⁸⁷ Marbury, *My Crystal Ball*, 243. The use of the term “jazz” is anachronistic in this context.

²⁸⁸ Marbury, *My Crystal Ball*, 252.

dance craze provided opportunities, if they could be taken advantage of before the public's interest fizzled. "I had sensed the approach of the dancing madness. . . . Time was essential as the craze might die out. The cream had to be quickly skimmed from the pail."²⁸⁹ She noted that the failed dance hall, after it was taken over by less scrupulous management and liquor returned to the bar, was a smashing success. It seems odd that Marbury would misread the public's desire to combine drinking and dancing so fundamentally. Perhaps Marbury's experience managing Vernon and Irene Castle, and the success of Castle House as a non-alcoholic venue for dancing, led her to suggest a similar venture to her friends. Absent both liquor and the celebrity of the Castles, however, the Strand could not sustain public interest.

Marbury, Castles, and the Waltz Aesthetic

My contention that the Waltz Aesthetic was promulgated through the popularity of the Castles strives to look beyond the issue of how the dances were modified to consider the motivations behind such changes. The Waltz Aesthetic consists of principles that structure and regulate the manner in which any kind of dancing can be made acceptable for consumption by European Americans. When I say that the Waltz Aesthetic functions as a habitus I concede that I am using the term somewhat broadly, but "understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions," the term seems particularly apt for the

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 242,3.

manner in which the subaltern dances have been commodified and commercialized in the twentieth century.²⁹⁰ I argue that the Waltz Aesthetic was more fully articulated at this time as a consequence of the failure of the unspoken agreements that had regulated bodily practices prior to the diffusion of African American somatic vocabularies into European American hexis. Specific rules, typically spelled out in negative instructions of what not to do delimit *acceptable* movements without specifically requiring any *particular* movement. Characteristic of the Waltz Aesthetic are the upright carriage of the torso, an inflexible, held, framed connection between the partners, and emphasis on the movements of the feet rather than the torso or limbs. These are all aspects of European derived partner dancing that can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and the development of the waltz as a fashionable practice in the courts.²⁹¹ The result of the application of the Waltz Aesthetic is that any dance, regardless of its origins or original practice, can be made to sufficiently resemble the waltz as to be unobjectionable to European American sensibilities.²⁹²

In the foreword to their dancing manual, *Modern Dancing*, the Castles aimed not only to explain the fundamentals of ragtime dancing, but also to show that

Dancing, properly executed, is neither vulgar nor immodest, but, on the contrary, the personification of refinement, grace, and modesty. Our aim is to uplift dancing, to purify it, and place it before the public in its proper light. When this has been done, we feel that no objection can possibly be urged against it on the grounds of impropriety.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 82.

²⁹¹ This is markedly different than the aesthetic that applied to the partnered folk dances that were performed away from court, such as polkas or schottisches, although these dances were also brought into line with the elite hexis when performed by “polite” society.

²⁹² This has required some fairly ridiculous contortions to carry out. For example, the Samba has long been billed as the “Brazilian Waltz,” despite the fact that it is not a partner dance as practiced in Brazil.

²⁹³ Castles, *Modern Dancing*, Foreword.

The Castles, following the line of the social reformers rather than the dancing teachers, maintained that there was nothing improper with ragtime dances as long as they were danced “correctly.” Ragtime dancing, as it was popularly performed, was vulgar, immodest, impure and in need of uplift – a racially loaded term that suggested that African American aesthetics were at the root of the problem. The Castles’ argument was that through “proper execution” ragtime dances could be the “personification of refinement, grace, and modesty.” These are all terms that depend upon a shared code of perception to create meaning, an understanding that elite European American hexis was the “true” or “highest” hexis to which everyone who wanted to be civilized should aspire.

The Waltz Aesthetic, as advocated by the Castles, spelled out the manner in which those aspirants should perform. Consider the following list of instructions from the Castles’ dancing manual:

- Do not wiggle the shoulders
- Do not shake the hips
- Do not twist the body
- Do not flounce the elbows
- Do not pump the arms
- Do not hop; glide instead
- Avoid low, fantastic, and acrobatic dips.²⁹⁴

These prescriptions addressed elements of African American hexis that were entering European American performance, such as the syncopation of the upper body and the incorporation of the hips. I suggest that the Castle’s “do not’s” were racially

²⁹⁴ Castles, *Modern Dancing*, 177.

motivated proscriptions applied to ragtime dances. Was there a class-based element to these proscriptions as well? That is less easy to articulate. My research suggests that the social reformers did not really care how African Americans danced, so long as European Americans did not imitate their performance. These movement elements certainly attempt to shift white hexis back towards the bodily practices of elite European Americans; however, in and of themselves the proscriptions do not seem to be directed at a particular social class of white dancers.

The Castles' "do not's" articulate an aesthetic that served as a model for the integration of non-white cultural products into white performance over the course of the twentieth century. Through explicitly marking specific movements as taboo, the Castles limit the range of available body movement and made ragtime dances more acceptable to white audiences while retaining the black, ragtime music. While embracing ragtime *music*, the Castles rejected the hexis of the black body.

Perhaps the Castles personally saw nothing improper about the performance of African American movements – especially when performed by African Americans. Indeed, they chose to present images of both whites and blacks performing ragtime dances in their semi-autobiographical film *The Whirl of Life*, under the caption 'Everybody's Doin It.' Ragtime music, which the Castles certainly did advocate, lacked any 'body' that might offend. In advocating the superiority of African American music and the inferiority of African American movement, the Castles seem to be bound in a paradox. One way of resolving this dissonance might be found in the reform agenda that Elisabeth Marbury and other white elites advanced through the Castles. Marbury argued that the Castles' one step "bears no relation or resemblance

to the once popular Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug, or Grizzly Bear. . . . The much misunderstood Tango becomes an evolution of the eighteenth-century Minuet.²⁹⁵ Marbury's comparison of the minuet and the tango seems ridiculous on the surface, yet it is through the connection to the Old World that Marbury invokes a lineage of respectability that erases the African American origins of the dances and legitimized behavior that was already taking place.²⁹⁶ As discussed above, the displacement of African American influences on the ragtime dances was a crucial strategy for rendering them safe for performance by whites.

Fashionable society has done what neither the church nor police could do. The new dancing began by being obscenely primitive. Fashionable society says that it shall be civilized, refined, and as round dances go, modest. . . . Let it never be said hereafter that American leaders of society have never done anything of social value.²⁹⁷

Marbury and her peers, through agents such as the Castles, articulated the boundaries of what was acceptable in polite (white) society, and in such company, there was no place for the black body.

²⁹⁵ Elisabeth Marbury, in Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, 20.

²⁹⁶ It is also worth considering that some in Marbury's intended audience might not have any idea what a minuet actually looked like, and so might be induced to accept the correlation between the minuet and the tango.

²⁹⁷ Newspaper clipping found in the Castle Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Archive of the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts, c.1914, no attribution.

Chapter 5: The Waltz Aesthetic Ascendant

In the previous four chapters I have sought to provide a framework for understanding the motives and the goals of those who sought to remove African American somatic elements from ragtime dancing in the years between the turn of the century and the start of WWI. Gaining a better understanding of why certain groups – whether dancing teachers, social reformers, or vaudeville performers – chose ballroom dancing as the target for reform seems to me to be an important step towards unpacking the consequences of that decision. I have argued that Vernon and Irene Castle were the thin edge of a very large wedge, one that aimed to encapsulate and incorporate certain elements of an African American aesthetic even as they neutralized and eliminated others.

This chapter more fully explores the manner in which the Castles' work stabilized and perpetuated, via modes of consent, European American dance practices. How were printed materials such as dancing manuals or magazine articles used to promote the Waltz Aesthetic? To what extent did the Castles' performances change after they came to work for Marbury and the social reformers, and how did these changes promote the Waltz Aesthetic? And how has the memory of the Castles' work been used to advance the Waltz Aesthetic?

I begin by taking a closer look at *Modern Dancing*, the dance manual published by the Castles in 1914, in order to lay out the terms by which the Castles sought to be understood during this period. I contend that several sections of the dancing manual were ghost-written by Marbury, and can be understood as a kind of

manifesto for the social reform movement's agenda. Then I turn to the Castles' performances, beginning with the national tour organized by Marbury in which the Castles appeared in 35 cities, from Boston to Omaha, over 24 days. The Castles' "Whirlwind Tour" presented the Castles as agents of the east-coast social elite, complete with six young men and women of high society who traveled with the Castles and performed in the show. Part theatrical performance, part lecture, and part dance contest, the Whirlwind Tour was a tremendous success, and garnered a great deal of attention from the popular press. One fascinating conundrum which I examine is the seeming contradiction between how the Castles *said* people should dance, and how they actually performed on stage.

In the final section of this chapter, I look at the Castles' career as a *lieu de mémoire* constructed to promote the Waltz Aesthetic. Pierre Nora, in "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," laments the passing of "real environments of memory," and observes that "far from being synonymous, [history and memory] appear now to be in fundamental opposition."²⁹⁸ This opposition can be seen in the historiography of the Castles: the erasure of African American culture inscribed by the Castles' bodies was allowed to disappear from memory, while Elisabeth Marbury's vision of the Castles as the embodiment of refinement and grace became enshrined in a sentimental history of ballroom dancing.

²⁹⁸ Pierre Nora, in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 285.

Modern Dancing

As powerful as the Castles' performance was when they appeared on stage or screen, their reach in service of the reform of ragtime dancing was increased exponentially with the publication of *Modern Dancing* in 1914. The idea that a book about how to dance might have a disproportionately larger effect on the behavior of dancers may seem counterintuitive.²⁹⁹ However, to this very day students and teachers of ballroom dance continue to look to dancing manuals as a guide for the proper means for the execution of their craft. While an exploration of the long history of the dancing manual as a means for transferring information from generation to generation is beyond the scope of this project, suffice it to say that since the fifteenth century dancers have relied upon the handbooks of dancing masters to guide their performance.³⁰⁰ Consequently, the Castles' dancing manual places them squarely in the tradition of these masters, a fact of which Elisabeth Marbury, who ghost-authored an etiquette manual in 1888, was no doubt aware.³⁰¹

Modern Dancing's foreword succinctly establishes the double purpose of the book: first, to "explain in a clear and simple manner the fundamentals of modern dancing," and second, to show that "dancing, properly executed, is neither vulgar nor immodest, but, on the contrary, the personification of refinement, grace, and

²⁹⁹ Neither ballet nor modern dancers (for example) would be likely to refer to a book when puzzled by a particular step.

³⁰⁰ Early manuals include Ebreo Guglielmo's *On the Practice or Art of Dancing*, (Barbara Sparti, Trans. Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1463] 1993), and Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchesography* (Mary Stewart Evans, Trans. New York: Dover Publications, [1588] 1961).

³⁰¹ Elisabeth Marbury, *Manners: A Handbook of Social Customs* (New York: Cassell & Co., Ltd., 1888). This volume was originally published anonymously.

modesty.”³⁰² I contend that the phrase “properly executed” is the key to understanding the manual. The social reformers for whom the Castles were speaking saw a vast disconnect between the manner in which the dances were being performed and the way they ought to be performed. On one level, the enthusiasm with which the younger members of the elite class had taken up ragtime dancing foreclosed the possibility of simple condemnation. On another, dancing teachers’ inability to regulate the new dances demonstrated the failure of traditional means of policing movement. Social reformers’ patronage of the Castles can be seen as a new means towards the end of regulating the bodies of dancers. Elites deployed many strategies to accomplish reform, including elevating the Castles to fame, backing their endeavors through financial and promotional support, and publishing a dancing manual in the Castles’ name. Thus elite reformers sought to harness the power of fashion to do that which dancing teachers had conceded they could not do – modify the performance of ragtime dances.

Recall that while the Castles were well known within a certain theatre crowd upon their return from Europe, to most they were simply vaudevillians. Perhaps to help familiarize readers with the Castles, *Modern Dancing* contains a wide range of visual images. The first image in the book is a picture of the Castles in a skater’s hold, with Irene wearing her signature “Dutch cap” and Vernon in white tie and tails. The second image, on the page preceding the table of contents, is a picture of the front of Castle House, accompanied by a list of twelve “patronesses.” Among those

³⁰² Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, foreword.

named are Mrs. W.G. Rockefeller, Mrs. Elbert H. Gary, and Mrs. T.J. Oakley Rhineland – all instantly recognizable to readers of the day as among the wealthiest women in the U.S. The Castles' manual is thus immediately imbued with the authority of these women. There are 30 full page photographs of Vernon and Irene in dance poses as well as ten filmstrips (sequential stills) of the Castles dancing. Additionally, five pictures of Irene accompany the sections of advice on fashion and etiquette.³⁰³ The dancing poses and particularly the filmstrips provide the reader with a sense of the sequence of movements described, and represent a step forward in the technology of the dancing manual.³⁰⁴ The images conform to the ideals of the Waltz Aesthetic, offering the reader a template upon which to base their own performance. Thus the pictures serve as a visual touchstone for the reader who might have heard of the Castles, but was unsure as to their social rank or authority.

Modern Dancing devotes 70 pages to the instruction of four dances: One Step, Hesitation Waltz, Tango Argentia, and Maxixe.³⁰⁵ The other 100 pages situate these dances in a context that extends beyond the book's utility as a guide to learning patterns. Instead, the chapters on manners, fashion, and health seek to frame the modern dances as part of a guide for proper public conduct. In this regard, the Castles' manual hews closely to the guidebooks of nineteenth century dancing masters who were more concerned with dancing as a means towards developing

³⁰³ These images were likely included to support Irene's credibility to dispense advice on matters of fashion and entertaining.

³⁰⁴ Again, a discussion of the evolution of the dancing manual is beyond the scope of this study.

³⁰⁵ The chapters of dance instruction are presented with Vernon as the narrator, while the chapters on fashion, grace, health, etc., are either attributed to Irene or simply presented without an author credited. I read those unattributed chapters as being entirely in Marbury's voice.

personal character than with the execution of steps (as discussed in Chapter Two). This should be fairly unsurprising, given that the Castles had few qualifications for authoring a dancing manual. They were not experienced dance teachers – Vernon had at most a year’s experience teaching dance at Castle House when *Modern Dancing* was published, and Irene flatly despised teaching.³⁰⁶ Nor were they qualified to dispense advice on the proper conduct in fashionable society, Vernon being the son of an innkeeper, and Irene the daughter of a middle-class doctor. Consequently, much of the book likely reflects the views and agenda of Marbury and her peers.

An early passage in the Castles’ manual says that “[o]ur aim is to uplift dancing, purify it, and place it before the public in its proper light.”³⁰⁷ “Uplift” was a common term used to describe efforts to integrate African Americans into European American society, with the problem being the need to purge or purify the race before they would be acceptable to white society. This choice of language, then, may have been obliquely directed at the African American origins of ragtime dancing. This language also suggests to me a deep uneasiness regarding the dances themselves: what will remain once they have been purified? Something, I contend, that looked a great deal like waltz. I read terms such as “uplift” and “purify” as contextual justifications for the removal of those elements of African American hexis that European American social arbiters found objectionable.

³⁰⁶ In Irene’s words, “I myself never possessed either the knack or patience for teaching.” *Modern Dancing*, 56, and “I decided to become a dancing teacher myself and swell our income. It was a miserable failure. I lacked the necessary patience. . . . I was never anxious or amenable to dancing with the customers. I had to do a lot of it and it was seldom a pleasure. *Castles in the Air*, 89.

³⁰⁷ Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, foreword.

Before continuing with the analysis of *Modern Dancing*, I want to say a few words regarding the racial project at the heart of the move to reform ragtime dancing. Erasing a record of African Americans' influence on ragtime dancing was, I contend, a necessary and important part of the reform agenda. Examples of this move to "whiten" the dances include changing the names of the dances (as discussed in Chapter Four) away from animalistic descriptors like "Turkey Trot" into neutral descriptors like "One Step;" rebranding "rag dancing" – which contained a clear reference to African American aesthetics – to "modern dancing;" and altering the hexis of the dances so that they were more in line with European American aesthetics. While these changes were not explicitly framed in terms of race, neither was the bias against African American aesthetics far from the surface. As the *New York Times* noted,

[T]he "rag" or turkey trot that one saw last Spring at Caesar's, the Cliff House, and the other places where the lights of the Golden Gate gleam brightest of an evening, is not what is now danced in New York. True it is that the turkey trot, as it was danced hereabout two years ago, when it started as a craze, smacked strongly of the Dahomey-Bowery-Barbary Coast form of revelry, but since then it has been trimmed, expurgated and spruced up until now it is quite a different thing. Gone are the wriggly wabbles [*sic*], with shoulders bobbing up and down . . . and the hoochee coochee contortions which, it must be recalled, formerly caused so much prejudice amongst the modestly inclined. . . . In the one-step, as it is now most widely termed, one moves slowly and regularly, and if he has any sense of rhythm and can put the correct foot forward at the beat of the music, even the most awkward man may create an illusion of gracefulness.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ "All New York Now Madly Whirling in the Tango." *New York Times*, 4 January 1914. The inclusion of the Bowery in this iteration of the Turkey Trot's African lineage makes suggests an intriguing spin on the "Bowery Waltz" in Chapter Three. The African American quarter of New York City at the time was known as the Tenderloin (midtown Manhattan from 23rd Street to 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue to Seventh Avenue), well north of the Bowery, but perhaps there was some overlap?

This article was printed just weeks after Castle House was opened, and reads in places like a press release for the brand of dancing advocated by the Castles. Newspaper articles of this nature were likely orchestrated by Marbury and her peers as a part of the larger crusade to effect a change in the dancing community. This campaign depended upon persuading dancers that their current performance of the dances, with the inclusion of “wriggly wabbles” and “hoochee coochee contortions,” had ceased being fashionable. The Castles, and their dancing manual, were an important part of this campaign.

In the conclusion to her introduction to *Modern Dancing*, Marbury writes that

Many prominent citizens and some of our clergy have recently denounced modern dancing, believing in all sincerity that certain vulgar dances which they have witnessed are the models upon which general dancing must be based. Unfortunately this is a case of the innocent suffering for the guilty . . . Let us, therefore, co-operate with our guardians of civic decency and aid them constructively in the elimination of the coarse, the uncouth, the vulgar, and the vicious. Let us establish once and for all a standard of modern dancing that will demonstrate that these dances can be made graceful, artistic, charming, and above all, *refined*.³⁰⁹

Again, Marbury’s language posits that the dances as they are popularly performed are coarse, vulgar, uncouth, and vicious. They can be changed, however, into things of grace and refinement, to which no guardian of civic decency could object.

The first two chapters of *Modern Dancing*, “Dancing as an Art” and “The Tango of Today,” continue to roll out the themes introduced by Marbury in her

³⁰⁹ Elisabeth Marbury, in Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, 28 – 29.

introduction while making the case for a new understanding of social dancing.³¹⁰ As explained by Vernon, dancing moved from slow (minuets, quadrilles) to increasingly rapid dances (polkas, schottisches) until reaching their apotheosis in rag dances such as the turkey trot. This trend towards faster dancing, argued Vernon, had nothing to do with a penchant for the vulgar – indeed, he noted that anything can be done in a vulgar manner, be it walking across a room or sitting in a chair – but rather that the modern businessman “would probably fall fast asleep while dancing the minuet.”³¹¹ In these chapters Vernon characterized the current trend in dancing as being back towards the more stately and refined minuet, though he never supposes that a real minuet will actually be danced again.

One interesting strategy employed in these chapters is to aggregate the dances of the previous decades together – to read the ragtime dances as part of the natural evolution of dancing from minuet to waltz to polka to two step to turkey trot. “The hoydenish romping of the Two Step, the swift rush of the Polka and the contortions of the Turkey Trot, have died a natural death because something finer has taken their place.”³¹² I only draw attention to this because of the larger agenda that sought to eliminate African American influences from the record of social dancing – this is a slight example, but the reader who did not already know that the Turkey Trot was initially performed by African Americans would have no reason to consider their involvement in the progression of dancing as suggested here.

³¹⁰ One of the other aspects addressed in the manual is the argument that dancing is good for one’s health. I would have been remiss not to mention it, but as this aspect is tangential to my study, I shall not mention it again.

³¹¹ Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, 32.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

Working to eliminate the African American hexis in ragtime dances, these chapters present the argument that “shuffles and twists and wiggles and jumps are no longer words to be used in connection with dancing.”³¹³ Rambunctious dancing was ascribed to “a certain element of the younger set who like to romp” like children. Vernon conceded that there will likely always be such people in the ballroom, but contended that the trend was towards more sedate dancing where “the slower the steps, the more intricate the measures, and the more subtly dignified the tempo of the music . . . the more graceful one can use one’s body.”³¹⁴ Grace, of course, being understood as the embodiment of the hexis of elite European Americans.

Chapters Three through Six specify the steps of the various dances, and contain practical suggestions as to how to execute the dances properly. One of the most-quoted sections of the manual is contained here: “People can say what they like about rag-time,” observed Vernon. “The Waltz is beautiful, the Tango is graceful, the Brazilian Maxixe is unique. One can sit quietly and listen with pleasure to them all; but when a good orchestra plays a “rag” one has simply *got* to move. The One Step is the dance for rag-time music.”³¹⁵ Perhaps this quote has been referenced so frequently because Vernon has neatly encapsulated the thrill and the threat of ragtime music for social arbiters of the day – it challenged their self-control.

Much of the advice presented in the manual is reminiscent of the instructions of older dancing manuals (see Chapter Two) and a reiteration of material I have already presented as a *précis* of the Waltz Aesthetic. I mention it again only to

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 43.

demonstrate the continuity of the aesthetic as it developed from the dancing masters such as Allen Dodworth, through professional dancing teachers such as the members of the American Society of Professors of Dancing, to the Castles. To begin dancing, readers are instructed to:

stand directly in front of each other, the lady's right hand in the gentleman's left. The elbows should be slightly bent . . . The gentleman's right hand should be a little above the lady's waist-line, more or less over her left shoulder-blade. . . . The lady's left hand should rest lightly on the gentleman's right shoulder. She should not curl her arm tightly around his.³¹⁶

This position describes a classic waltz frame as advocated by earlier dancing teachers, with the lone exception of the dancers directly facing one another rather than standing slightly offset. When beginning to move, the dancers are given strict instructions to simply walk. "Bear in mind this one important point: When I say *walk*, that is all it is. Do not shuffle, do not bob up and down or trot. Simply *walk* as softly and smoothly as possible."³¹⁷ Moving one step per beat of music, regardless of the figure danced, "will make the dance comparatively simple even for those who have never tried it."³¹⁸ These instructions, contrasting the descriptors "shuffle" and "smoothly," continue to reinforce the proscription against elements of African American hexis.

Chapters dealing with two Latin American dances, the Tango Argentina and the Brazilian Maxixe, include advice for finding a teacher: preferably one who has danced professionally in Paris, as "there are so many good dancers there that anyone

³¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 45

who can dance the Tango (and get paid for it) must really be a good dancer.”³¹⁹

Regarding the dances, readers are instructed to remember that “it is a slow dance, and that it should be simple, and not full of jerky and complicated steps. . . . The shoulders must not go up and down, the body must glide along all the time without any stops.”³²⁰ In the Maxixe, Vernon is adamant that plain and simple dancing will give the best results, as “this dance, with all the bends and swaying, will make a woman appear very attractive or very ridiculous. Done simply, it is like the Tango, or the Two Step, or any other good dance.”³²¹ The last words of advice Vernon offers on the Maxixe are to “let your steps be as even and gliding as possible. . . . don’t bend or twist unless you are sure you look graceful.”³²²

With the explanation of the dances concluded, the manual turns to “Grace and Etiquette.”³²³ This chapter is short; a mere three pages, but contains revealing explanations of the rationale behind the reform movement’s decision to target dancing. Within the three pages are passages regarding standards of grace, an ontology of vulgarity, and the differences between modern and ragtime dances. “Grace of manner and grace of mind must be the forerunners of all kinds of grace, and most certainly must lie back of the grace of dancing.”³²⁴ Grace is understood as a moral characteristic, a formulation that understands outward behavior as a reflection of inner worth. This ideology resonates with the Parisian dancing masters’ “Ten

³¹⁹ Ibid., 86. While I have not dealt extensively with the Tango in this study, the changes suggested by the Castles to the dance were largely the same as those made to ragtime dances.

³²⁰ Ibid., 88,9. Again, note the opposition of simplicity to “jerky and complicated.”

³²¹ Ibid., 108.

³²² Ibid., 130.

³²³ This chapter is one of those whose author is unattributed.

³²⁴ Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, 134.

commandments” for dancing that had been published two years earlier (see Chapter Four). In both cases, the failure to perform according to previously established patterns of behavior reflected an inner ugliness or failing.

The explanation of vulgarity in dancing flows from the same rationale: “The vulgarity of a dance lies always as much in the mind of the dancer as in the steps, and a suggestive dance is inevitably the outcome of an evil thought, or a lack of knowledge of the finer and better way to dance.”³²⁵ The invocation of “evil” here is telling, as it implicitly accepts the context of dancing as a ground of moral behavior, rather than simple physical exercise. The rationale also allows an excuse for those who simply do not know better than to dance the way they do – all they need is to be educated.

On the original ragtime dances,

So much has been said about the vulgarity of the Bunny Hug that nothing need be added here except that many men attempt this sort of ‘strangle hold’ when they are dancing. . . . it is unpleasant for the lady and draws much adverse criticism from onlookers. Moreover, grace of movement is impossible under such circumstances. The two partners should dance in unison, lightly and easily, keeping together by perfection of step and perfect time rather than the clutch of the man upon the lady’s hand.³²⁶

This argument positions men who dance in the (previously popular) animalistic manner as vulgar, unattractive to women, and likely to draw the approbation of their peers. Graceful dancing is light, easy, and attained through rehearsal, “perfection of step and time” being things that must be practiced, rather than improvised. These

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid., 135.

things make “the difference between a good dancer and a poor one, between the gentleman and the roisterer.”³²⁷

The manual offers a clear description of the difference between the “modern” dances as opposed to the “ragtime” dances. This difference is, again, the difference between the ragtime dances as they used to be danced, and how they ought to be danced after they have been reformed. “In the modern dances the dancer stands with lithe grace and ease, but very erect, and dances with her feet, not with her whole body. . . . Flouncing elbows, pumping arms, fantastic dips, and whirlwind turns all detract not only from the grace of the dance, but from the charm of the dancer.”³²⁸ *Modern Dancing* is nothing if not diligent in its repetition of the standards it sets for correct form. Dancing, properly done, is a matter of moving from the feet, not the entire body. The isolations and syncopations associated with African American hexis are unacceptable for European American performance, detracting as they do from the grace and charm of the dancer and the dance. Finally, the chapter on “Grace and Etiquette” admonishes the reader to “remember that you are dancing, not doing acrobatic exercises; and your partner is there to dance with, not to hang yourself on in grotesque attitudes and poses to the music.”³²⁹ The language is coded but clearly contains markers which point to contemporaneous understandings of racial difference; as discussed earlier, “grotesque” is a term that often used in the context of African American movement at that time.

³²⁷ Ibid., 136.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

The remaining chapters of the book deal with matters of fashion, the relative merits of dancing as beautifier and healthy exercise, how to give a dancing party, and an argument for the righteousness of dancing thinly disguised as a history. The chapter on proper music for dancing is summed up with the following caveat: “I might, of course, give you a long list of the music of to-day which I consider best for dancing, but in a month or two the list would be *passé*.”³³⁰ Although certainly of interest to a scholar of the rapidly changing fashions and mores of the years before WWI, these chapters have little bearing on my study. At the end of the manual, however, is a list of “suggestions for correct dancing” that I consider central to an understanding of the Waltz Aesthetic.

³³⁰ Ibid., 162.

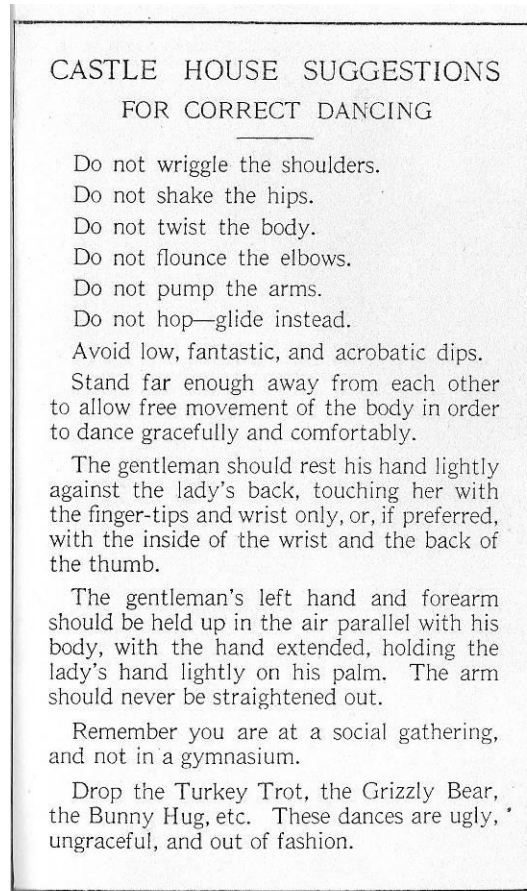


Figure 15: Castle House Suggestions for Correct Dancing

As I have discussed the majority of these prescriptions previously (see Chapter Four), I will simply address the final two suggestions. The admonition to recall the difference between a social gathering and a gymnasium has roots in the rise of physical culture at this time; the most likely reference here would be to the rowdy, boisterous behavior associated with the collegiate-age and younger dancers who disdained their elders' staid and musty formalities. The next instructions call for the need to drop the animal dances for three reasons: they are "ugly, ungraceful, and out of fashion." This desired shift from "animal" to "modern" dances speaks to the social reformers' underlying conception of the problem: a lack of class, education and

understanding among the (white) people who were dancing incorrectly. The Castles performed extensively, both in New York City and around the country, in order to better educate people regarding the proper modes of ragtime dancing.

Castles' Performance and the Waltz Aesthetic

As discussed in Chapter Four, when the Castles began dancing professionally in Paris they created a ragtime dance based on performances they had seen in New York City. Irene recalled that it was “a sort of grizzly-bear dance. It was very rough, more so than any dance we ever did over here.”³³¹ She also recalls that the other routine they worked out was “a rough-and-tumble number to ragtime.”³³² These routines must have been a far cry from the more proper choreography that the Castles performed once they were engaged by Elisabeth Marbury. Thus, choreographic changes made by the Castles when they began to work with Marbury were likely motivated by Marbury’s agenda of social reform. Irene Castle noted the changes when she recalled that “Vernon would throw me around and down through his legs and Paris thought it was great,”³³³ but “in later years we tried to get away as much as possible from the acrobatic style of dancing, but just at this period it was most popular .”³³⁴

Eve Golden suggests that the Castles “had already moved away from the wild stomping frotage of the turkey trot and the bunny hug,” when they began working

³³¹ Irene Castle, *My Husband*, 36.

³³² *Ibid.*, 38.

³³³ *Photoplay*, November 1917, 100.

³³⁴ Irene Castle, *My Husband*, 36.

with Marbury, but given the recollections of Irene above this seems unlikely. The Castles performed in New York City and toured through the Vaudeville circuit after returning from Paris, and it seems more reasonable to assume that they continued to present the routines that brought them success in Europe. A likelier scenario is that they made significant choreographic changes in their dancing later, after being engaged by Marbury to be the face of Castle House, which opened on December 15, 1913. The *New York Times* reported that

the fashionable dressmaking establishment started by the late Mrs. Josefa Osborn on Forty-seventh Street opposite what is now the Ritz-Carlton, has been taken over by several leading society women and will be remodeled into “an ultra-social tea room and dance hall,” to be known as “Castle House.” . . . Among those said to be interested are Mrs. Hermann Oelrichs, Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, Mrs. William Rockefeller, Mrs. Bourke Cockran, Miss Elsie de Wolfe, and Mrs. Elisabeth Marbury. The place will be open only from 4 to 6:30 each afternoon for ultra-social teas and dances, and never in the mornings or evenings. Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle, professional dancers, will teach the tea-drinkers and dancers the new dances.³³⁵

While the Castles were able dancers and entertainers, there is little question that it was their association with Elisabeth Marbury that allowed their work to have the profound and lasting effects that it did. *Vanity Fair* observed that “No mere commercial manager could have succeeded with these dancers as [Marbury has] done. . . . Especially [any other manager] would have lacked the appeal which [Marbury] was able to make to the confidence and co-operation of people in New York society.”³³⁶ In order to illustrate the degree to which the Castles’ fortunes were changed by their connection to Elisabeth Marbury, I offer two brief anecdotes. The

³³⁵ “Ultra-social Tea Room,” *New York Times*, 6 December 1913.

³³⁶ Arthur Williams, *Vanity Fair*, August 1914, 45.

first takes place at some unspecified date between their return from Europe and the beginning of their relationship with Marbury.

While engaged at Louis Martin's Café de l'Opera (a supper club in New York City) the Castles were hired to perform at a wealthy gentleman's dinner party on Long Island. They agreed, with the caveat that they needed to return to Manhattan for their midnight show. As Irene tells the story in *Castles in the Air*, the warm and personable treatment they had received as guests at French soirees led her to anticipate that the engagement would entail a pleasant winter evening hobnobbing with New York City's socialites. However, after arriving in Long Island, they were peremptorily escorted to a coat closet, where hours passed while they waited for their scheduled performance. Afterwards, they had to cajole the hosts into providing transportation, in the now-driving snow, to the station where they could catch the last train back to the city. They were dropped off outside the closed station in the middle of a snowstorm, to wait for the train, which of course was late.³³⁷ The Castles, despite being the toast of Paris the season before, were at this point considered merely entertainers, due no more respect or consideration than any other vaudevillians that might be hired at an hourly rate to brighten a society evening.

The second incident took place after Marbury had begun promoting the Castles, and, similarly, the Castles were engaged to perform for a dinner party thrown by the social elite. Irene relates that this performance was for a well-publicized ball

³³⁷ Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 68-70.

thrown by Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, who pulled them aside just before they were to go onstage.

“You will now do the new dance you have created for my evening,” [Mrs. Fish] said.

“What new dance?” [Irene] said, thoroughly startled. “Whoever told you we’d create a dance for your particular party?”

“Why, Miss Marbury did.” Mrs. Fish said.

“We’ve introduced three new dances in the past three months,” I said. “If they’re not good enough for the guests you have here tonight, then we’ll just go home. They wouldn’t remember them anyway.”

“Miss Marbury said . . .” she started, firmly.

“Miss Marbury said nothing to us about it,” I interrupted. “And if its going to upset you that we haven’t created a new dance, we’ll just go home. Come on, Vernon.”³³⁸

After Irene made it clear that they really would leave, Mrs. Fish acquiesced, requesting that as she had already announced the new dance in all the newspapers anyway, perhaps Vernon would be so kind as to lead her in some new steps. The Castles performed their choreography without any changes, and nothing more was ever said of it – except the newspapers, who faithfully reported the new dance that the Castles had created for Mrs. Fish’s party. The Castles were no longer mere hourly employees who could be ordered to perform upon demand, but celebrities in their own right, with the ability to face down one of the most prominent women in the four hundred without fear of the consequences.

The Castles also performed at fundraisers, functions and other social events. They danced to raise money for organizations such as the Beth-El Sisterhood, who did outreach work with the poor in New York City, and the New York Association

³³⁸ Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 114 – 115.

for the Blind.³³⁹ One function for which they performed is worthy of closer attention: a benefit concert for James Reese Europe's Tempo Club, at the Casino in Harlem. In fact, the Castles performed at least twice at benefits for the Tempo Club, and in anticipation of the concert advertisements proclaimed the "positive appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle, the World's Greatest Dancers."

³³⁹ "Big Audiences Show Increasing Interest in Women's Clubs." *New York Times*, 8 February 1914, and "Novel Dancing Fete in April for the Blind." *New York Times*, 22 March 1914. The announcement for the second of these benefits suggests a similar passage from Marbury's introduction to the Castles' dancing manual: "Tracing the history of the dance from Greece and Rome, through Babylonia, Turkey, Arabia, and Egypt, through half-savage, half-civilized nations, down to the dances of the present day . . ." Marbury's introduction includes "the evolution of modern dances was convincingly traced from the tombs of Thebes, from Orient to Occident, and down through ancient Rome." Not identical, but interestingly resonant.

FUN ! FROLIC !! FESTIVITY !!!

THE SMASHING TRIUMPH OF 1914

James Reese Europe, Pres.
Wm. H. Tyros, Treas.

Ford T. Dabney, Vice-Pres.
E. Warrick Cheeseeman, Sec'y.
John E. Nail, Charg 'd Affairs

THE TEMPO CLUB

! POSITIVE APPEARANCE OF

MR. AND MRS. VERNON CASTLE

The World's Greatest Dancers

SPECIAL FEATURE

The Castle Cups

Awarded to the the best Amateur performers of the Modern Dances
The One-Step and the Hesitation Waltz

DANCING! DANCING! DANCING!

Added Attraction!

EUROPE'S SOCIETY ORCHESTRA

For the First Time Will Play for the General Dancing

Manhattan Casino Tue. Eve. Oct. 13th

GENERAL ADMISSION 50c. RESERVED SEATS \$1.00

Tickets on Sale at the Tempo Club, 119 W. 136th St.

Figure 16: Advertisement for The Tempo Club

As special guests at the event, the Castles presented Europe with a token of their appreciation for his services: a bronze statue of themselves in a "characteristic

dancing pose.”³⁴⁰ A major feature of the event – which otherwise consisted of music played by the various organizations of the Tempo Club – was the Castles’ performance of their signature dances. This was followed by a dancing competition, with Vernon and Irene Castle as the judges. Two large silver loving cups had been on display for weeks in a shop window in Harlem, to be awarded to the best One Step and Hesitation Waltz performances. “More than twenty couples entered for the hesitation waltz . . . the one-step contest brought out a half-hundred couples.”³⁴¹ Although Vernon admitted that “the decision would represent their opinion only, and that others might differ,” the Tempo Club affair serves as an excellent example of the method by which the Castles’ work was used to affect changes in dancing behavior.³⁴²

There were three elements involved in this process. First, the Castles were billed as exemplars of superior dancing, as well as of refinement and taste. Heralded before their arrival as the “best dancers in the world,” the Castles’ audiences were predisposed to see them as authorities on the proper execution of dancing. Second, upon their arrival on stage, the Castles were sufficiently charismatic and virtuosic that these high expectations were not, generally, disappointed. Finally, the Castles presided over a dancing competition, which allowed them to further solidify their position as authorities and arbiters of skill, marking out the dancers who best embodied the Waltz Aesthetic as their chosen representatives. While Vernon did make a point at the Tempo Club to acknowledge that other opinions might differ from

³⁴⁰ “Europe and the Castles and Tempo Club Affair.” *New York Age*, 16 October 1914.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² *Ibid.*

theirs, the power of the position which the Castles inhabited provided sufficient authority to make their assessment the one that ultimately mattered.

The Castles came to Harlem with a mixed message regarding the perceived value of African American culture. On the one hand, the Castles praised James Reese Europe and his orchestra, maintaining that only his band was capable of accompanying their performances; extolling the virtues of African American music, musicians, and musicality. On the other hand, the Castles embodied a version of ragtime dancing that virtually eliminated the African American hexis, replacing it with the Waltz Aesthetic derived from European American courtly hexis. While the Castles were well received within the African American community for their support of Europe and the African American musicians he employed, it is difficult to imagine that the Waltz Aesthetic they promoted was received with equal enthusiasm. The Castles' performance of modified ragtime dances in front of a largely (if not entirely) black audience speaks to the extent to which the Waltz Aesthetic was working to change the manner in which dance performance was understood.³⁴³

The formula of 1) pre-arrival press, 2) theatrical demonstration, and 3) adjudication of a competition was also used by the Castles when they went on their "Whirlwind Tour" in April and May of 1914. For twenty-four days the Castles gave performances in thirty-five cities from Boston to Omaha. They travelled in a three-car private train that they hired for the tour, bringing with them their manager, six "student" dancers from Castle House, and James Reese Europe and eighteen

³⁴³ This aspect of the performance also resonates with the power of white hegemony demonstrated in Figure 8, "Mrs. Wilkins teaches an Igorot Boy to Cakewalk."

musicians.³⁴⁴ A demonstration of dancing do's and do not's was incorporated into the show, further reinforcing the hexis advocated by the Castles. Wherever they went, newspapers devoted ample space to their anticipated arrival and then to reportage of the event, making the tour one of the best documented events in the Castles career. Eve Gordon's biography of the Castles provides an excellent summary of the Whirlwind Tour, and rather than duplicate her effort here I will focus on the elements of the tour that relate to the Waltz Aesthetic.³⁴⁵

The Whirlwind Tour

“The Castles are Coming!” read the byline of a *Washington Post* article, and indeed these exact words were the most common manner in which the Whirlwind Tour was announced in local newspapers. The *Washington Post*'s coverage is a good example of the kind of press that Marbury generated in advance of the Castles' arrival, serving both to present the Castles as authorities on dancing and emissaries of New York City's elite social circles. The Castles were “unquestionably the most talked of terpsichorean artists in the world,” whose work “has aroused nothing less than a furore in New York during the past season, and has elicited the highest praise from even the most conservative authorities.”³⁴⁶

The dancing of Mr. and Mrs. Castle, it should be explained, shows modern dancing as it should be danced. There is nothing in their dancing of the tango or the maxixe which could possibly arouse criticism. In fact, their work is so artistic that it might be described as the very essence of refined dancing. Miss

³⁴⁴ The tour avoided issues of integrated housing and eating facilities by taking meals and sleeping on the train.

³⁴⁵ Gordon, *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution*. Her discussion of the Whirlwind Tour is in chapter 19, pages 106 – 115.

³⁴⁶ “The Castles are Coming.” *The Washington Post*, 12 April 1914.

Anne Morgan, the sister of J. Pierpont Morgan, has publicly endorsed the dancing of the Castles, and is, in fact, one of the patronesses of the famous “Castle House,” the rendezvous of polite New York society, opened especially by the Castles so that those who appreciate exclusiveness could tango and trot to their hearts content.³⁴⁷

Here it is possible to see the special effort that was exerted to place the Castles above the typical run of vaudeville performers. They are both modern and the very essence of refinement, endorsed by the highest and most exclusive levels of society. Clearly, the Castles were meant to represent the most fashionable and ultimately imitate-able kind of performers. Their every move was intended to be studied by those who wished to be seen as likewise respectable.³⁴⁸

Accompanying the Castles was a corps of student dancers, “young society couples who have danced at Castle House and have become so expert that they will be taken on tour.”³⁴⁹ This aspect of the tour has been overlooked by most researchers, but I believe that the presence of the sons and daughters of elite citizens carried a great deal of weight in convincing those members of the public who aspired to the world of the Four Hundred that the Castles were not simply another dance team who had managed to secure a wealthy sponsor. These couples helped to demonstrate the do’s and do not’s of dancing during Vernon’s lecture, as well as perform routines

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Susan Cook, in “Passionless Dancing and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle.” (*The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, and Sexuality*, William Washabaugh, Ed. New York: Berg, 1998), has argued that the presence of African American musicians on the tour provided the Castles with a kind of authenticity when it came to proscribing the “proper” manner of dancing the ragtime dances. “Through James Reese Europe the Castles had direct access to African American culture which they subsequently repackaged and reworked for their white middle- and upper-class clientele” (146). While there is certainly some truth to this, I believe the situation was a bit more complicated than Cook suggests. Unfortunately, this discussion falls outside the scope of my current project.

³⁴⁹ “The Castles are Coming.” *The Washington Post*, 12 April 1914.

that showcased dances that were not on the Castles' bill, such as the Polka, Furlana, and the Lula Fado.

During the first half of the show, Vernon and Irene performed their theatricalized versions of the popular modern dances, rather than provide simple demonstrations. This was the cause of some consternation to certain spectators, who had perhaps expected the Castles' stage performance to be more in line with the rules they advocated for social dancing. After extolling the beauty and thinness of the Castles, the Baltimore *Sun* observed "But none of the dances that were given will ever be danced on a ballroom floor by the average ballroom gathering as they were danced by the Castles. They were far too complicated."³⁵⁰ The local dancing teacher who arranged for the amateur competition, A.V. Tuttle, put it this way:

Most of us went to see the Castles with the expectation of seeing an exhibition of refined ballroom dancing and of seeing steps that could be adopted for ballroom dancing here. But we saw an exhibition of dancing entirely unfitted for the ballroom and suited only to the stage. The dances were too extreme and too complicated to ever meet with general adoption in parlors or ballrooms here or anywhere else, in my opinion.³⁵¹

Despite the disappointed tone of the above comments, they came from a review that was friendly to the Castles, and generally believed that their performance would have a positive effect on the dancing in Baltimore. A reviewer with a less friendly attitude described the matter somewhat more bluntly.

Vernon Castle has lifted his slender wife into the air on his knee. She trails there for a fraction of a second in a horizontal position, and then gravity asserts itself and she floats gracefully down to earth, like a feather . . . Could

³⁵⁰ "Throng Sees Castles." Baltimore *Sun*, 30 April 1914.

³⁵¹ "Affects Dancing Code." Baltimore *Sun*, 1 May 1914.

this be achieved in the ballroom if there were other dancers? I wot not. But why discuss it, since it could not be achieved by any others but the Castles. There are none others so thin as to achieve the stunt. . . . Vernon Castle was operating his legs like one of those pasteboard marionettes which wiggle when you pull the strings attached to their backs. His wife had leaped nimbly onto his crooked knee, but was off again with a celerity which relieved the situation of its vulgarity. The Castles are not vulgar. Perish the thought!³⁵²

This reviewer hits onto the key of the Castles' claim to innocence and propriety in their routines – it was not vulgar because it could not possibly be vulgar when performed by them.

The tension between what the Castles said about their dancing and what they actually did revolved around their understanding of the different requirements of the stage and the social dance floor. Vernon was quite open about the difference in approach required:

There has been such a tremendous amount of misunderstanding about the modern dances that we just decided to make this trip for the purpose of 'demonstrating' what ballroom dances really are, how they differ from exhibition dances, and the kind of dancing that primarily belongs in a ballroom. You know there is a great deal of beautiful dancing that is perfectly all right in itself, but which has no place except on the stage, because the first consideration in all good dancing – presupposing a rhythmic sense on the part of the dancers – is selflessness. I mean by that that any couple that interferes in any way with his neighbor has no place on a ballroom floor. For this reason any steps, no matter how artistic they may be, that make for figures that take up space on the floor and so crowd other dancers are taboo.³⁵³

Most observers, however, did not appear to appreciate the distinction. The virtuosity of the Castles performance allowed many to overlook any disconnect between their calls to simplify dance and their performance of complicated and theatrical routines.

³⁵² E. K. McD, "Castles in the Air -- \$6,000 at Feet of Tango Royalty." *Baltimore Sun*, 3 May 1914.

³⁵³ "They Chat of Dancing." *Baltimore Sun*, 30 April 1914.

[S]ome of the movements in the dances as given by the Castles were really improper, not to say indecent, but they were lost in the maze of twists and turns, and they passed unnoticed except by a few who went to study rather than be amused. Such for instance as the tossing of the women, as in the maxixe, and that movement in the barcarole, in which the woman throws herself backward, bending from the hips until her head almost touches the floor and is saved from falling only by a quick catch by the man.³⁵⁴

The conclusion that seems clear is that in the first section of their performance the Castles' objective was entertaining their audience rather than educating them. Perhaps the difference between social and theatrical dancing was something that was addressed in the "do's and do not's" section of the show; however, if that was the case then the absence of such information from the interviews of dancing teachers who had seen the performance is odd.

Despite what some reviewers felt were problematic elements of the Castles' performance, note that the Castles are not recorded as performing the kinds of movements that were associated with African American ragtime dances – the shimmies, the shakes, isolations or contortions or animal-like dances. Instead, even negative reviewers commonly refer to them as wonderful dancers, graceful, and elegant. There is some chance that the absence of such critiques was due to the Castles being white dancers who would not be read through the same lens as African American dancers. However, it seems more likely that the overall manner in which the Castles performed hewed close to the Waltz Aesthetic, even if occasionally violating the precepts for theatrical effect. Reviewers noted that the society couples who accompanied the tour gave performances of more traditional dances such as the

³⁵⁴ "Affects Dancing Code." *Baltimore Sun*, 1 May 1914.

“old-fashioned polka” and hesitation waltz during the intervals when Irene left the stage to change costumes.³⁵⁵ Given both the pedigree of these dancers and the stated intent to reform and uplift ragtime dancing, it seems safe to assume that the overall image presented by the dancing during the Whirlwind Tour conformed to the Waltz Aesthetic.

In the second half of the show, the Waltz Aesthetic was articulated more explicitly. With the aid of his “students” Vernon stood on stage and explained to the audience the difference between the proper and improper way of performing the dances. Many of the reviews, whether favorable or unfavorable, make a point of recording this portion of the evening. “Mr. Castle speaks – through his nose. He indulges in a little light badinage – through his nose. The *piece de resistance* of the evening is to be presented. Baltimore is to be shown the correct and the incorrect way of dancing.”³⁵⁶ This reviewer uses Vernon’s accent to highlight his negative opinion of the performance, framing Vernon as an outsider with no connection to the real world of Baltimore dancing.³⁵⁷ “Perhaps the most entertaining part of the program was the lecture in which Mr. Castle dispensed some of the instruction for which he asks and gets \$25 an hour in New York City. As he talked, the rest of the company demonstrated the correct and incorrect methods of doing the steps.”³⁵⁸ I contend that this part of the program, explicitly set aside as a teaching moment, was a

³⁵⁵ “Throng Sees Castles.” *Baltimore Sun*, 30 April 1914.

³⁵⁶ E. K. McD, “Castles in the Air -- \$6,000 at Feet of Tango Royalty.” *Baltimore Sun*, 3 May 1914.

³⁵⁷ The negative tone of the review is wittily executed throughout. The Vernon’s thinness is a popular theme: “[Vernon] has the concave appearance of a man who has gone to the Adirondacks, but hasn’t much hope.”

³⁵⁸ “Castles Conquer in New Society Dance.” *Milwaukee Journal*, no date. Castle Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library.

large part of the powerful impact that the Castles had on the development of partner dancing in the United States.

Consider that for at least thirty years professional dancing teachers had been clamoring to standardize dances so that students from Omaha to Boston would be able to dance with each other with, by their own admission, little evidence of success. Ultimately elite society, not dancing teachers, became the arbiters who set the terms by which dancing would be performed. The Castles, as agents of elite society, made the Waltz Aesthetic fashionable again. The moment in the show when they instructed their audience on the dos and do not's of ragtime dancing was an obvious method by which they could spread their message; however, this message was made even more powerful by the strategy of having a dancing contest over which the Castles would preside immediately following the lecture.

The dance competition which concluded each evening allowed the Castles to place their stamp of approval upon the couple who best exemplified the Waltz Aesthetic in their performance. This resulted in the Castles' performance having a long term impact upon each community they visited, a continuing presence that would both linger long after they had moved on to the next town and affect the performance habits of people who had not even been in the theater to see their performance. By endowing a local dancing couple with the Castles' seal of approval they publicly raised up a champion who would be able to expound, through every dancing move they made, the Waltz Aesthetic. Dance communities, in my experience, tend to follow the lead of whoever is perceived as being the most skilled or proficient dancer within the group. The individual (or in the case of ragtime

dancing, the couple) who sets the style is the one who is perceived as being the most virtuosic, charismatic, etc.³⁵⁹ With the blessing of the Castles, the winners of the dance competition would either be endowed with the status of top-level dancers or, if they were already considered the best dancers in town, have that status confirmed. Thus, when others in the community looked for examples to model their performance, the obvious choice would be the couple with the Castles' cachet.

Throughout the pages of their dancing manual, the Castles promoted the Waltz Aesthetic advocated by social reformers of dance. In live performances, whether at Castle House, on stage during the Whirlwind Tour, or simply as guests at society dinners, the Castles embodied the modes of performance advocated by social reformers. Even when they seemed to violate those rules through theatrical tricks, their mastery of the form and impeccable pedigree encouraged audiences to see in them the ideal of what social dancing ought to be – elegant, refined, and controlled.

The Castles worked hard to present themselves in the same manner – elegant, refined, and controlled. In interviews, particularly during the Whirlwind Tour, the Castles were often put on the spot by reporters, and some of these interviews show the Castles leaving the carefully scripted materials prepared for them by Marbury. More often than not, however, the Castles were consistent advocates of the uplift and reform of ragtime dancing, presenting the public with a picture of a young, stylish, married couple who loved to dance for the joy of the dancing, and whose dancing was without question beyond reproach.

³⁵⁹ Often, but not always, these trend-setters are dancing teachers.

An interview given in Toronto found Vernon reinforcing the messages he had given on stage. “You notice we are not wrestling with our partners this season. . . . Kicks, dips, and twitches are wrong.”³⁶⁰ In the Minneapolis *Tribune* Vernon said “Just let critics of the dancing craze remember this, low heel shoes, loose corsets and plenty of muscular exercise is giving us a race of better women. Twenty five years from now the nation will consider the Castle Walk blest.”³⁶¹ This was the end of a two page spread on the Castles in which the list of Castle House Suggestions for Correct Dancing was reprinted verbatim. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* written in the weeks immediately after Castle House opened, Vernon took issue with the condemnation of modern dances by those who had never actually seen them, and went on to say that

It is, of course, possible to vulgarize anything, even dancing; . . . Does not one see on the American stage burlesques of the old dances so dear to the hearts of our people? And these burlesques, in many cases, are distinctly gross and vulgar. . . . with the new dances, just as the old, they can be performed in a thoroughly vulgar and suggestive manner, or they can be danced in a refined and graceful manner, as they are meant to be.³⁶²

The bulk of the direct quotations attributed to the Castles falls into this pattern of repeating the talking points that were at the heart of the agenda of Marbury and her friends.

³⁶⁰ “Castles in the Air.” Undated article [May 1914], Castle Scrapbooks at the Billy Rose collection of the NYPL.

³⁶¹ “Did You Ever See A Castle Walk?” *Minneapolis Tribune*, 10 May 1914.

³⁶² “Defends Modern Dances.” *New York Times*, 5 January 1914. The idea that vulgarity was intrinsic to the performer and not the performance was often cited by advocates of the ragtime dances, see Chapter Three.

After the Whirlwind Tour was over, Vernon was cited as calling for the United States to adopt a National Dance. During an interview that was a part of the press build-up for the Castles appearing in the Broadway musical *Watch Your Step*, Vernon observed that

There is no characteristic American dance. The cakewalk, the nearest approach to it, is a racial contortion. It is amusing and enlivening, but lacks in dignity and grace. Every other country of importance has a national dance – the hornpipe, Highland fling, etc. Each name suggests a nationality, each dance is characteristic of it. Would not an American dance, one that could be easily done and the public performance of which would seem the carrying out of a patriotic idea, be welcome?³⁶³

This observation places squarely in perspective one of the primary challenges faced by Americans concerned with the country's cultural status throughout the nineteenth century – the question of what kind of art was distinctly “American.” As discussed in Chapter Four, by the end of the nineteenth century some European elites were expressing the opinion that it was African Americans who were making a distinctly American contribution to the arts. Vernon suggests that modern dancing might be the means by which America could negotiate an identity on the world stage, absent “racial contortions” that “lack dignity and grace.” This quote is too slight a hook on which to hang too much meaning, but the manner in which the uplift of modern dancing involved co-opting the creative endeavors of African Americans and reimagining them through the lens of European American codes of perception seems plain.

³⁶³ Untitled, undated clipping. Castle Scrapbooks at the Billy Rose collection of the New York Public Library.

Memory, the Castles, and the Waltz Aesthetic

After the Whirlwind tour, the Castles went back onstage in the musical *Watch Your Step*, notable for being the first show with music by Irving Berlin. Vernon left the show in the middle of the national tour, getting his pilot's license and joining the RAF. The Castles' public life after that time was limited to brief moments when they appeared at dances, and as Eve Gordon has noted, they were on the verge of divorce.³⁶⁴

Vernon died in a plane crash on 18 February 1918, while training pilots near Fort Worth, Texas. His death resulted in his enshrinement as a war hero by the public, as pundits who had laughed at the idea of a dancing man going to war against the Kaiser found Vernon rehabilitated after his death in the service.³⁶⁵ After Vernon's funeral the Castles moved from the world of celebrity to memory, and in some ways his tragic death cemented their legend.³⁶⁶ Irene continued to perform in film and on stage, and as the public had very little knowledge of the Castles' marital troubles, their legacy remained untarnished.

Memory is, of course, a complicated construct, whether in an individual or in a culture. In the years after Vernon Castle's death the dance team became a *lieu de mémoire*, crystallized in history in such a way as to normalize the Waltz Aesthetic as

³⁶⁴ During my initial research on the Castles I discovered hints and traces of the possibility that their relationship was on the rocks – it did not really make sense that Vernon left the tour of *Watch Your Step* mid-run, or that Irene re-married so quickly after his death. Not until Gordon's biography of the Castles, nearly a century later, were the details of their last years together made public. They were very thoroughly stage managed.

³⁶⁵ The rehabilitation of Vernon Castle as a "man" after his death is a subject worthy of future study – nearly an entire scrapbook in the Castle collection at Billy Rose is dedicated to Vernon's obituaries.

³⁶⁶ James Reese Europe, the Castles' band leader, also died soon after valorous service in the war. See Reid Badger, *A Life in Ragtime*.

the standard for European American partner dancing. The Castles were situated “at a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past [was] bound up with the sense that memory has been torn.”³⁶⁷ Having done the necessary work of erasing African American aesthetics from the ballroom, white cultural historians recast the Castles in such a manner as to conceal even the presence of a rupture in European American aesthetics. I turn now to three major works that evidence this change: the autobiographies of Irene Castle, the RKO motion picture *The Vernon and Irene Castle Story*, and an article from *Scribner’s* magazine, published in 1937.

Irene Castle published her memoirs at two separate points in her life. *My Husband* was published just thirteen months after Vernon’s death, and in this book Irene laid out the narrative of their career that remained definitive for nearly a century.³⁶⁸ She detailed their meeting, their discovery in Paris, and their rise to fame. The second half of the book consists of reproductions of letters Vernon wrote during WWI that provide by far the most detailed insight available into his character and personality.³⁶⁹ Mentions of the social agenda of their dancing are few and far between, as Irene’s focus is on Vernon’s life, and her experience as his wife and partner.

The only real mention of their dancing agenda comes when Irene is remembering the Whirlwind tour. She remembers that “Vernon gave a talk on dancing, urging our constant cry, ‘simplification!’ . . . Vernon always begged them to

³⁶⁷ Pierre Nora, 284.

³⁶⁸ Until the publication of Eve Gordon’s *Vernon and Irene Castle’s Ragtime Revolution* in 2007.

³⁶⁹ A bit of a sad story, actually. Although Vernon and Irene were estranged, and their marriage was falling apart, the letters make clear that he was not comfortable with the dissolution of their union and hoped to win back her favor.

leave out all fancy steps and tricks.”³⁷⁰ This was the moment in the Whirlwind Tour when the difference between the staged performances of the Castles and the ideals of social dancing were explained. In nearly one hundred pages, this is all Irene has to say about their mission to uplift ballroom dancing.³⁷¹

In 1958 Irene published another autobiography, *Castles in the Air*. The book considerably revises and expands upon the materials covered in *My Husband* (as discussed in Chapter Four), and offers a few more details about the Castles’ role in the battle over the morality of dancing. Chapter Eight begins

By the fall of 1913 America had gone absolutely dance-mad. The whole nation seemed to be divided into two equal forces, those who were for it and those who were against it, and even the champions of the cause had to compromise to stay in business. . . . A list of the popular dances of the time reads like a table of contents for a zoo, with the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug, the Camel Walk and the Lame Duck.³⁷²

and goes on to detail the battles that were carried out in the newspapers and the courts. In hindsight, Irene was surprised that she and Vernon never came under personal attack for their dancing. “I think now it was because both sides regarded us as their champions. We were clean-cut; we were married and when we danced there was nothing suggestive about it. We made dancing look like the fun it was and so gradually we became a middle ground both sides could accept.”³⁷³ If this over-states the case a bit (many adversaries of the dance never accepted any form of

³⁷⁰ Irene Castle, *My Husband*, 61.

³⁷¹ It is interesting to note that Irene became a very conservative judge of new dancing trends, speaking out against African American aesthetics in dances such as the Charleston and the Shimmy in the 1920s.

³⁷² Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 85.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 86.

compromise, regardless of how marginalized they became in mainstream opinion), it does capture the manner in which the Castles worked to change the dances from their original, vulgar performance into refined products that were acceptable to polite society.

Irene also used this chapter to frame their dancing through the eyes of a critic with whom she particularly agreed. The following description of the Castles was published five years after Vernon's death, and Irene says that "it describes the way it was, or at least the way I felt when we danced."³⁷⁴

They were decisive characters, like Boileau in French poetry and Berlin in ragtime; for they understood, absorbed, and transformed everything known of dancing up to that time and out of it made something beautiful and new. . . . It was not – it seemed not to be – intelligent dancing; however trained, it was still intuitive. She danced from the shoulders down, the straight scapular supports of her head were at the same time the balances on which her exquisitely poised body rested. There were no steps, no tricks, no stunts. There was only dancing, and it was all that one every dreamed of flight, with wings poised, and swooping gently down to rest.³⁷⁵

This review positions the Castles as artists that changed the manner in which dancing was understood – the parallel to Berlin may be more apt than the reviewer intended.³⁷⁶ From the past, something beautiful and new was created by the Castles – a rather florid way of saying they adapted others' material and made it suit the public tastes. But the description of Irene's dancing is an excellent indicator of what spectators found so pleasurable in the Castles' dancing – straight lines and balanced

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 87.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 86,7.

³⁷⁶ The memory of Berlin's contribution to ragtime music was constructed in much the same way as the Castles' for ragtime dancing – that he cleaned it up so it could be better appreciated by polite society. Being white, he was an acceptable recipient for the appreciation of European Americans in the years to come.

symmetry – and what was remembered was the ease with which they danced together, rather than tricks, stunts, or fancy steps. The revisionist historiography rewrote the context in which the Castles performed. In hindsight, the focus was shifted from the Castles' role in a battle over racialized aesthetics to the manner in which they captured the popular (white) imagination.

What is difficult to sum up in Irene Castle's biographies is the absence of the historical context in which the Castles' work took place. While a careful examination of the primary sources of the day presents the researcher with a richly detailed picture of the deep divides between race and class in the years before WWI, the situation as presented in *My Husband* and *Castles in the Air* is almost devoid of these divisions. The history as written by Mrs. Castle placed very little emphasis on the transformation of the ragtime dances from their African American sources into modes acceptable for European American consumption. Rather, the elision of African Americans in nearly every context precludes the possibility of their presence at the origins of the ragtime dancing craze that brought the Castles fame and fortune.³⁷⁷ Irene Castle's autobiographies presented the definitive history of their career for nearly a century, and the manner in which ragtime dancing moved from African American to European American performance is entirely overlooked. The possibility exists that Irene Castle considered this common knowledge, and thus did not mention it. Some critics have made similar charges regarding the short shrift she gives to

³⁷⁷ To be fair, Irene does include references to James Reese Europe and his musicians as being an important element of the musical aspects of their performance. My research suggests that Vernon formed far closer relationships with the African American musicians with whom the Castles associated than Irene, and Vernon was far more willing to give credit to African Americans as originators of ragtime dancing.

popular dance music in *Modern Dancing*, when she suggests that the fashions change too swiftly for any suggestions she makes to be relevant by the time the book is published. I feel, however, that it is more likely that she was participating in the collective erasure of African American culture from the history of ballroom dancing, rather than simply taking it for granted that everyone already understood where the dances came from.

The Castles are unquestionably best remembered today because of the Rogers and Astaire film *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, which, although not considered the pinnacle of their work, has taken its place in the mythology of the Astaire/Rogers partnership. In the foreword to the second edition of *Castles in the Air*, Ginger Rogers highlighted qualities embodied by the Castles that struck her as important for the film: “we saw the two famous dancers . . . with their characteristic style and class. Yes, they were the epitome of class! That quality came blazing forth from the silent screen. Grace, style, dignity, and class!”³⁷⁸ These descriptive qualities have also been attributed to Astaire and Rogers, and the conflation of the most famous film dancers of the twentieth century with the first celebrity dancing couple of the twentieth century cemented the Castles’ legacy as icons of early ballroom dancing.

The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle contains several dance scenes, most relatively brief (compared to the larger production numbers common to the Astaire/Rogers cannon). As a young vaudevillian, Astaire had seen the Castles on

³⁷⁸ Ginger Rogers, introduction to *Castles in the Air*, 6.

stage, and the sequence in which the Castles audition for Lew Fields feels as though it accurately captures the early manner in which the Castles might have performed. The dance is not sedate, fastidious, or quiet – instead, there are sections reminiscent of the “tough dancing” film (see Chapter Three) where Fred spins Ginger out and back again, some high kicks and a walk-over trick step near the end. There is an unlikely emphasis on the rhythmic elements of the dancing that is more in the signature style of Astaire/Rogers than the Castles, but by and large the routine captures the flavor of what the early changes the Castles made to ragtime dancing might have resembled. How much of this, however, is a result of the persuasive power of the Astaire/Rogers’ charisma? There is no way to be certain, but my analysis of early ragtime dance, from both reports in the press and what few film clips exist, suggest that this portrayal is not too far from the mark.

When considering the dance routines in the film as a whole, the Castles are presented as moving from slightly “rough and tumble” performers to the epitome of elegance and grace that typified the Astaire/Rogers aesthetic. If the Castles are remembered as the originators of modern ballroom dancing, “Fred and Ginger” are considered the masters of it, the embodiment of the height of the form. What the Castles began, Astaire and Rogers perfected, making them the ideal performers to embody the Castles.

As with nearly all of the other works that deal with the memory of the Castles, there is no mention of African Americans in connection with the dancing. The film even eliminated the role of Walter Ash, the African American servant who traveled with the Castles to Paris. The character was re-cast as Caucasian, due to a need to

“satisfy southern exhibitors, who, [film producers] said, might object to having a Negro with us.”³⁷⁹ Elisabeth Marbury’s name was changed, and no mention is made of the campaign to uplift ragtime dancing, or of any perceived threat of ragtime’s African American hexis to European American society. Not even James Reese Europe (who was by their own admission crucial to their performances) is mentioned in the film. The only (brief) appearance of black actors in the film are extras in menial professions. This erasure of African Americans, both in terms of aesthetic influence or even presence on screen, was certainly par for the course in Hollywood at that time; nevertheless it seems worth mentioning that the work that has done the most to enshrine the Castles’ memory consciously participated in the project to strip African American presence from the dancing.

The retrospective of the Castles’ career published in *Scribner’s* in September of 1937 goes even further to obscure the presence of African Americans at the genesis of ragtime dancing.³⁸⁰ “When America Learned to Dance” describes how waltz and two-step had been the popular dance forms in the years before 1910, and details how two different kinds of waltz (“old-fashioned” and “Boston”) varied in popularity depending on how far from the East Coast one travelled. The Victorian/ Puritan code of morality is presented as a context for the manner in which the sexes interacted in the years before the dancing craze. Here, in detailing the dances of the early years, the magazine enumerates the usual suspects – the Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug, Grizzly

³⁷⁹ Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 247.

³⁸⁰ And (again) ragtime music, as Irving Berlin is credited with the musical craze following the publication of *Alexander’s Ragtime Band*. Frederick Lewis Allen, “When America Learned to Dance.” *Scribner’s*, September 1937, 13.

Bear, etc. – but places them within the context of dancing to the music of Irving Berlin. The popularity of the dances is simply ascribed to their simplicity.

In essence these dances were simple: the partners walked a sort of rocking, swooping walk, swaying outward with each step. . . . At first [they were] regarded somewhat as the vogue of the Charleston was regarded in the nineteen-twenties – as a mere passing novelty: the dances were stunts, vulgar but amusing. But they were so ridiculously easy to learn, even for the uninitiated, they were so agreeably un strenuous, the fury of moral indignation which they aroused among the custodians of morality so advertised them, and a generation ready for liberation so reveled in their rowdiness, that they began to make their way into widespread use.³⁸¹

Nowhere is any direct mention made of African American aesthetics or the rise of ragtime in the African American musical community. Instead, the objections to the dancing are framed as a result of the clumsiness of the inept: “As novices performed it – hugging grotesquely, rocking, ambling heavily – it looked like a peripatetic wrestling match.”³⁸² By invoking the racially coded term “grotesque,” this language presents the reader with the subtle inference of African American presence, but simultaneously the report offers another, more acceptable, history of why the dances became popular and were also considered unsuitable. The dances were “so ridiculously easy to learn” that they were taken up by a “generation ready for liberation.” The “moral indignation which they aroused” is noted, without offering a direct explanation as to what about them caused such indignation, beyond the suggestion that they were “rowdy.”

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid., 14.

The Castles enter the picture as the couple who give the dances style and distinction. They accomplished this by modifying the dances rather than performing “the rough-and-tumble performances that were then in vogue.”³⁸³ In this version of the story, the dances were modified during their breakout performance at the Café de Paris because Irene was in her wedding dress (with a train, no less), rather than in an appropriate costume. “From that moment, their success was meteoric.”³⁸⁴ Nowhere is Marbury or the campaign to uplift dancing mentioned, eliding the social reform movement from the context of the Castles’ popularity. Castle House is referenced as being patronized by high society, absent any reform agenda. Although “the Castle House Orchestra was in fashionable demand,” nowhere does the article mention that the musicians were African American.

This *lieu de mémoire* was not one that included the conflict between African American and European American movement practices, but rather one situated at a transitional moment in European American aesthetics.

For the truth is that the reason the Castles became so successful was not simply that Irene was exquisitely slender and lovely, that Vernon was lithely authoritative, and that their dances were ingeniously devised and dashingy executed, but also that they brought to the awkward and vulgar-looking dance forms of the current mode a combination of easy gayety and almost patrician fastidiousness. They sublimated the dance craze, thus appeasing the moralists and entrancing every beholder who had an eye for beauty in motion.³⁸⁵

Again, only in coded language such as “awkward” and “vulgar-looking” is there even an oblique suggestion of the presence of African Americans in the history of ragtime

³⁸³ Ibid., 14.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 15.

dancing. The article notes that the new dances were supposedly brought to upper society from “the dives of New York,” and that the dancing was condemned for being too passionate, with “lascivious orgies going on in so-called respectable dance halls.” The reader who lacked the ability to decode these phrases as a reference to African Americans and African American aesthetics would have no reason to suspect that any black artists were present.

This was the goal of the Waltz Aesthetic, and how the waltz has won the battle for ballroom dancing. The social reformers who used the Castles’ work to contain and restructure the popularity of ragtime dancing neutralized (for the moment) the presence of a subaltern movement aesthetic on the dance floors of the United States. The removal of African American hexis from the ballroom, and from the historical record of the ballroom, was a crucial fight for the maintenance of European American cultural hegemony, which was threatened by the surging popularity of African American artistry.

Conclusion: The Waltz Aesthetic: A Racial Project

My examination of the modern origins of ballroom dancing has taken me to unexpected places. When I was a professional dancer, I never suspected that minstrel shows or social reform in the Progressive era had connections to the dances I studied and, in turn, taught to my students. Over the twenty years I was a professional dancer I learned that there were fundamental differences between the dances as they were taught in the studio and as they were performed in public – what we called “the street.” But it was not until I had completed several years of graduate work and countless hours of archival research that I was able draw an unpleasant conclusion regarding the development of American ballroom dancing: it was inexorably entwined with the United States’ history of racism.

That should, perhaps, not have been such a surprise. One hundred years ago, the U.S. was a thoroughly racist nation, and any popular art form whose roots can be traced to the late nineteenth century likely had as its proponents individuals and groups whose agenda included the maintenance of white hegemony. One of the reasons why I feel that my work is important is in the way it helps to bring to light the racist nature of the racial project that was intrinsic to the movement to “reform” and “uplift” ragtime dances. Omi and Winant note that “a racial project can be defined as *racist* if and only if it *creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race.*”³⁸⁶ This definition underscores the problematic nature of the Waltz Aesthetic, which works to organize “human bodies and social

³⁸⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, 71. Italics original.

structures.”³⁸⁷ The Waltz Aesthetic’s work as a racial project can best be understood through the work of Pierre Bourdieu on modes of artistic appreciation.

The Waltz Aesthetic works as a racial project by replacing elements of African American (or other subaltern) hexis with movements drawn from European American hexis. White cultural hegemony is stabilized through the bodily inscription of movements that reinforce understandings of white superiority. In ballroom dancing this has been accomplished so successfully that, in my professional experience, the racist practices that were fundamental to ballroom dancing’s development pass almost without question. More than simply a system of movement substitutions, the Waltz Aesthetic has at its core an ideological function, the promotion of European American aesthetics as superior to all others.³⁸⁸

At the beginning of the Progressive era white performers had been blacking up and presenting their versions of African American performance in minstrel shows for nearly fifty years. By the end of the nineteenth century, European American and African American minstrel performers were engaged in a complex cycle of representation and adaptation. This led some African American performers to lay claim to “authenticity” in representing African American culture to advance their reputation on the stage. While for some the exaggerated and stereotypical performances on the minstrel stage represented a betrayal of the project of African American uplift by contributing to a demeaning portrait of African American culture,

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 56.

³⁸⁸ See Juliet McMains’ *Glamour Addiction*: (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006) for an analysis that deals with ballroom dancing aesthetics from a contemporary perspective.

most audiences – especially white, northern audiences – seem to have accepted the shows at something like face value.³⁸⁹

Generations of Americans had become accustomed to seeing these performances, and white audiences were increasingly engaged with African American aesthetic productions on the vaudeville stage in the years before the emergence of ragtime dancing. It seems possible that the increased visibility of African American aesthetics on the vaudeville stage may have been connected to the adoption of elements of African American hexis by white dancers at the turn of the century. Indeed, there may well have been pockets where European American ballroom dance forms were being fused with African American aesthetics much earlier, say, in San Francisco or in New Orleans. Currently, no records of such hybrid forms have come to light. Perhaps it took the end of Reconstruction and twenty years of re-entrenched white dominance in the U.S. for elite whites to feel sufficiently confident in their hegemony to imitate dances from the minstrel stage in their social performances.

My research suggests that divides between social dance and theatrical dance were still minimal in the U.S. during the Progressive era.³⁹⁰ The dances popular on the U.S. stages were either larger choreographic spectacles or theatricalized versions

³⁸⁹ See Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre 1895-1910*.

³⁹⁰ More work needs to be done in this area, but it is worth remembering that the concert dance tradition in the U.S. was in its infancy. Ballet never caught on in the U.S., and the careers of Ruth St. Denis, Loie Fuller, and Isadora Duncan were just beginning in Europe. These three artists, so often conflated in terms of their foundational work on “modern” dance, actually spanned a considerable period of time, with Fuller being the earliest, mostly working in Paris between 1885 and 1900. Interestingly, Ruth St. Denis originally hired Ted Shawn (another individual cited as a pioneer of modern dance) to perform ragtime numbers that were then so popular that she felt she had to include them in her shows. Duncan recalls that she began teaching ballroom dances in California before she took up concert dance.

of the dances then popular on the social dance floor. This phenomenon is exemplified in the film *The Vernon and Irene Castle Story*. After the Castles' first performance of ragtime dancing at the Café de Paris, the camera cuts to a shot of the dance floor. The floor is now full of the former audience members, all trying out the “new” moves the Castles had just performed. Newspaper and journal reports of the dancing scene in the early years of the twentieth century suggest that this scenario is not at all far-fetched – by all accounts, audiences in the café performances possessed sufficient expertise at dancing and attempted to imitate ragtime performances as soon as they saw them.

The brief emergence of the cakewalk as a social dance for white elites further suggests this conflation of the stage with the social dance floor. Popular African American vaudevillians were hired to teach cakewalking to high society, and even the Prince of Wales learned the dance. In the years following these signs of approval by white elites, African American aesthetics began to emerge in more middle-class iterations of European American social dance. This altered the field of ballroom dance – and ballroom dance instruction – in ways that were fundamentally different from, for example, the increasing popularity of round dances in the middle of the nineteenth century.

When members of the American Society of Professors of Dancing confronted the challenge presented by round dances such as waltz, polka, and two-step, they were not directly engaging in a racial project – the challenge was to their business model, not to European American modes of performance. Changes in popular dance forms (driven by social forces such as urbanization and the broadening middle-class's

access to leisure time) presented dancing teachers with a fundamental challenge to their existence as a profession. Despite an increase in the popularity of social dancing, the new dances were sufficiently easy to learn as to cause a decrease in the need for lengthy instruction. Dancing teachers framed their relevance to the new dances in terms of acceptable and unacceptable movements – consider the lengths to which they debated the proper dance hold for the waltz, or the image presented by Allen Dodworth as “Vulgar. Very Vulgar.”³⁹¹ “Standardization” became the rallying cry, and a generation of dancing teachers concerned themselves with detailing the “proper” manner of performance. These same strategies would be deployed by dancing teachers when confronted with ragtime dances.³⁹²

Ragtime dances, however, presented a different obstacle to regulation than round dances. The entire suite of what has been generally called “ragtime dances” involved African American adaptations of round dances such as two-step and polka. These dances seem to have developed in a similar manner to the cakewalk: European American dance forms modified to suit African American aesthetic tastes. Notable

³⁹¹ See Figure 12.

³⁹² One tantalizing possibility for future research is the idea that “standardization” was brought into the discourse of ballroom dancing at the same time the industrial revolution is really hitting its stride. Did the members of the American Society of Professors of Dancing, who became a professional organization to essentially modernize their profession, see standardization as another means of “moving with the times?” The rhetoric of standardization is predicated on the idea that as travel between distant locales becomes more commonplace it is increasingly important that dancers are able to interact with their counterparts regardless of the distance travelled, a situation that was largely irrelevant before the advent of railroads and steam engines. There also might be connections to the changing role of physical culture, which I briefly touch upon in Chapter Two, as the ability to *move* like an aristocrat becomes increasingly available to the lower classes, it becomes a less valuable marker of status for the upper classes. In the transition from dancing “masters” to dancing “teachers,” the role of ballroom dancing becomes something that carries a more primary utility – the ability to execute patterns – whereas previously it inculcated habits of movement that were readily adapted to whatever movement patterns happened to be popular at the time. As I say, these are interesting avenues for future work.

characteristics included syncopation, isolation of body parts, and the imitation of various animals (hence Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear, etc.). Recent research suggests that these dances developed in the “Barbary Coast” district of San Francisco and then moved east with the performances of touring vaudeville dancers.³⁹³ I do not want to suggest that white dancers immediately and all at once took up the dance styles of African Americans; working towards a clearer understanding of the transmission of culturally mediated movement forms has been a large part of this project.

As noted above, the adoption of ragtime by white dancers was not a sudden change in behavior, but rather the result of more than a decade of cultural exchange.³⁹⁴ Scholars such as Edward Said and John Tchen have suggested that one of the driving qualities of modernism in Europe and the U.S. was a brand of Orientalism, or the fascination with the “other” that manifested in such cultural projects as World’s Fairs and exhibitions.³⁹⁵ Scholars such as Eric Lott have argued that African Americans were the “other” and that the erotic and sensual appeal of African American culture derived from their simultaneous proximity and distance.³⁹⁶ Proximal in that black citizens lived and worked in the same cities as the whites who sought to consume their cultural products; distant in that it was considered inconceivable that black culture could be equal to that of whites.

³⁹³ See Strickland, “The Texas Tommy, its History, Controversies, and Influence on American Vernacular Dance.”

³⁹⁴ “Exchange” in perhaps the loosest possible meaning of the term; although both parties gave and both received, I do not mean to suggest any measure of equality in the discourse.

³⁹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

³⁹⁶ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 148.

One of the principal contentions of my research is that there was a widening difference between dancing teachers' and the dancing public's codes of perception. Bourdieu argues that codes of perception change over time, through repeated exposure. Dancing teachers, grounded in the values and traditions of social dancing that predated the rise of ragtime, were unable to perceive any value in the hexis of African Americans. However, the dancing public seems to have been increasingly made up of individuals that grew up without the inculcation of movement values grounded in elite white hexis.

I draw this conclusion based on three factors. First, the observations of professional dancing teachers that their students were no longer interested in mastery of form, but instead only stayed in class long enough to learn basic steps. Second, reports from professional teachers and the popular press that point to the rise of amateur dance teachers whose credentials were based upon dancing ability rather than a lineage of apprenticeship with established teachers. Third, the surge in the popularity of dancing halls as a medium of public leisure among both the middle and working classes in New York City suggests that many of those who took up ragtime dance were not raised in an environment steeped in elite movement values. These dancers, exposed to African American performance aesthetics on the minstrel stage and through the increasingly popular ragtime music, likely did not possess the same codes of perception of the dancing teachers. Consequently, barriers to the performance of African American hexis would likely have been lower. As I note above, the individuals who constituted a "dancing public" were not the subject of my study. I only speculate about their approach to and adoption of ragtime dancing

based upon the shadows and echoes they cast upon my work, in order to better articulate the field in which dancing teachers were situated. What is beyond question was that ragtime dancing was taken up in increasingly large numbers throughout the first decade of the twentieth century.

A principal strategy adopted by dancing teachers to combat the adoption of African American aesthetics by the dancing public was the elevation of the waltz as the standard for excellence. This was a major shift from previous understandings of the dance. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the waltz was simply one of a group of popular round dances; dancing teachers encouraged students to perform these dances according to standards ultimately drawn from models rooted in the courtly dances of Europe.³⁹⁷ By the closing years of the century the waltz was in decline, displaced from the ballroom by two-step, which was seen as a “degeneration” of the waltz.

The task of stamping out the tendency to degeneration in the waltz is not an easy one. We feel that united action on the part of legitimate teachers of dancing is necessary, and to that end all members of the American society are resolved to battle, so that the Waltz shall stand pre-eminent, a position which it justly deserves.³⁹⁸

The rise of ragtime dancing in the first years of the twentieth century and the increasing irrelevance of professional dance teachers only increased their desire for a return to the waltz. By 1904, it was the bastion around which dancing teachers rallied.

³⁹⁷ This is an oversimplification, but I believe a useful one. See Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the development of ballroom aesthetics in the nineteenth century.

³⁹⁸ Gilbert, “The Faults of the Waltz.” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 1897.

We can also cultivate in our pupils a taste for the other dances by introducing more popular forms into these movements. To this end our society has expressed itself as devoted to the waltz. To increase the popularity of the Waltz various new dances, in which the waltz or other graceful movement predominates, were introduced.³⁹⁹

Soon after this, elite socialites engaged in improving the lives of working women in New York City turned their attention to dance halls. Initially social reformers were only tangentially interested in regulating the dancing body, being far more concerned with the manner in which dancing halls acted as gateways to prostitution.

Wholesome dancing was not considered objectionable to these reformers; however the dancing halls attended by many single working women were considered anything but wholesome environments. Simply put, it was the conflation of alcohol with dancing that was thought to present the greatest danger. When efforts to divide alcohol from dance halls failed, reformers sought to improve morality among their target demographic through advocating physical changes to dances. Although this might seem an odd direction from which to approach moral reform, the conviction that one's appearance reflected one's virtue was a common one at the time.

Reading their published materials, I conclude that many elite social reformers subscribed to an ideology that considered an individual's behavior a reflection of their moral fiber. It then followed that improving the behavior of individuals would have the effect of changing their character, leading them to make better choices and steer clear of the pitfalls of disreputable environments. Beyond being seen as a key to reducing the risk to single working women, this ideological construct points to what

³⁹⁹ "Doom of the Two Step." *The Washington Post*, 25 November 1904.

may have been a powerful reason for concern about African American aesthetics in the ballroom. Though many of the reformers likely considered themselves liberal in terms of racial politics, virtually no one from that time believed that African American and European American values were equivalent. Thus, the performance of African American aesthetics by European Americans reflected a kind of cultural miscegenation. Popular white conceptions of African Americans as a group were largely negative, and consequently the adoption of African American hexis among white dancers would have been seen as extremely threatening to hierarchies of status. The reasoning seems to have been that if dancers would learn to behave “properly” on the dance floor, they would then be that much more likely to behave “properly” in their everyday lives. Simultaneously, those who behaved in an “improper” manner on the dance floor were likely doing so because they lacked sufficient education or inclination to behave “properly” in their daily lives.

I have argued that Elisabeth Marbury’s tactic of using a charismatic dancing couple as the front for the reform movement ultimately succeeded where other attempts at reform failed. The careers of Vernon and Irene Castle changed from up-and-coming vaudevillians to overnight celebrities, and it was through the power of celebrity that reform in the ballroom was achieved. Many scholars have observed that the Castles’ presentation as young, married, wholesome performers were tremendous assets in the project to modify ragtime dances. “Passionless Dancing, Passionate Reform” is the title of an article that details how the Castles’ work helped to separate the sensual elements of ragtime dancing from the more cerebral and

therefore acceptable ragtime music.⁴⁰⁰ An oft-cited quote from Irene Castle's *Castles in the Air* has helped to bolster a perception of asexuality in their performance: "If Vernon had ever looked into my eyes with smoldering passion during the tango, we would have both burst out laughing!"⁴⁰¹ As important as the Castles were to the successful regulation of ragtime dancing, they did not have a tremendous amount of agency in their performance.

Rather, I contend that the Castles' performances (after the beginning of their association with Marbury in late 1913) were almost entirely stage managed to serve the social reform agenda. Marbury used her formidable skills as an agent and her impeccable connections amongst New York elite society to create the Castles as a vehicle for the reform of ragtime dancing. Prior to their association the Castles were moderately successful entertainers and had expressed no interest in promoting an agenda of dance reform. Social reform mattered so little to Irene that her autobiographies make almost no mention of the cause that brought them fame.

Vernon and Irene Castle have, to a certain extent, been romanticized as the couple who originated modern ballroom dancing. While they certainly played a successful role in changing ragtime dancing, a more nuanced understanding of the social forces at work during the years of their celebrity argues for understanding them as the agents of interests within a broader agenda. This, in turn, is important because

⁴⁰⁰ Susan Cook, "Passionless Dancing and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle," in William Washabaugh, ed., *The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York: Berg, 1998).

⁴⁰¹ Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air*, 87.

it helps to illuminate another aspect of the systemic erasure of African Americans – their aesthetics, their creative work, their very presence – from U.S. history.

This is not to imply some sinister Aryan plot on the part of social reformers. Rather, the underlying racism at the heart of white self-identity prevented them from being able to value the cultural work of African Americans as valid contributions to U.S. society. A dominant thread in the discursive construction of whiteness during the Progressive era was that whites were almost obligated to spread the light of their civilization to the less fortunate corners of the globe, a sentiment sometimes referred to as “The White Man’s Burden” (see figure 17).



Figure 17: Thomas May, “The White Man’s Burden.” *Detroit Journal* 18 February 1899 (reprinted in Frank A. Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

Scholars who have written about Marbury have argued that she was racially progressive for her time – driven, they argue, by twin desires for reform and for profit. Too savvy a businesswoman to pass up the opportunity to engage the ragtime

dancing craze, by investing in the Castles, she was able to satisfy both her passion for uplift and her concern for the bottom line.

In her own writings Marbury presents herself as harboring some reservations about the manner in which African Americans were considered second-class citizens, while at the same time implicitly accepting that “our negroes” were – or ought by nature to be – inferior to whites.⁴⁰² Although she may have had reservations about the manner in which African American citizens were treated in the U.S., there is nothing in this ambivalence to indicate that she did not share the deep-seated racial prejudices common to her time and social status. As with the dancing teachers who considered ragtime dancing “not dancing at all,” Marbury’s habitus led her to conclude that erasing African American aesthetics from dance would result in the improvement of the condition and inner value of the dancers themselves. Her brilliance was manifested in the manner in which she enabled the Castles to succeed.

Through diverse means the Castles promoted the agenda of the social reformers, and did what dancing teachers could not do – persuade people to abandon the African American hexis for the Waltz Aesthetic. Vernon and Irene Castle were in the right place at the right time, and presented the right image to the U.S. public. Backed by a massive publicity campaign, the Castles became the hot item of the 1914 season. Castle House served as a base from which the Castles’ bona fides were established. The Castles were able to parlay the blessing of the best families of New York into the authority to dictate dancing style to the U.S. public. This connection to

⁴⁰² Marbury shares two anecdotes from her time in France at the end of WWI that are illustrative of this double standard, see *My Crystal Ball*, 313- 315.

high society helped to differentiate the Castles from the other dancing teams of the day – performers who were arguably more experienced or initially better known, but who ultimately lacked the connection Marbury provided with those willing to invest their cultural capital.

The publication of *Modern Dancing* further served to establish the Castles as authorities on dance, as well as advance the agenda of dance reform. Marbury's connections as a literary agent and experience in writing an etiquette manual allowed the Castles entry into the realm of publishing, a step that other dance teams were simply unable to take. As images of the Castles appeared in newspapers and magazines, attached to advertisements for everything from shoes to the new Victrola record-player, the publication of a dancing manual allowed the Castles to reach audiences that would otherwise dismiss entertainers as legitimate cultural arbiters. The printed word carried their message to locations beyond their ability to reach as performers, and offered those who wished to dance properly but felt they lacked proper role models a guide to proper dance performance.

More than this, the Castles brought their message to the people. Rather than confine themselves to New York City or appear for twenty minutes as a part of an evening of vaudeville entertainment, the Castles' Whirlwind Tour put the message of reform in front of audiences across the country. These audiences, from Boston to Omaha, were eager to consume what the Castles were selling. Billed as "the greatest dancing couple" of the day and backed by the most respectable names in U.S. high society, the Castles brought with them legitimacy and authority. They were dancers, not stuffy dance professors; they were fashionably modern, not tied to the dances of

yesterday. They embraced ragtime music, demanding that African American musicians accompany them wherever they performed. Vernon took lessons from Buddy Gilmore, the drummer for Europe's Society Orchestra, and played the drums during the Whirlwind Tour.⁴⁰³ While they were clearly modern and fashionable, the Castles' message was deceptively old-fashioned: chic, stylish dancing required eliminating excessive movements.

The dancing public took this advice to heart. As Elsie Janis, a well-known Broadway performer and contemporary of the Castles, wrote: "O, believe me when wiggling was good I was right there in the midst of it, wiggling busily; but I have learned better."⁴⁰⁴ Janis wrote a series of columns for *The Washington Post* in the winter of 1913/14 that advocated many of the same qualities promoted by the Castles. Her tone was sassy and modern, and likely appealed to the working class women that social reformers felt needed guidance.⁴⁰⁵ Bombarded with press reports that claimed "Tango may be danced propitiously, but the Turkey Trot, never!"⁴⁰⁶ and presented with chic proponents of a style deemed more elegant, dancers did indeed cease shimmying, shaking, and flapping about.

⁴⁰³ Vernon's antics on the drums during the Whirlwind Tour were often remarked upon by the local press.

⁴⁰⁴ Elsie Janis, "How to Dance the New Steps." *The Washington Post*, 2 November 1913.

⁴⁰⁵ Although I have been unable to definitively link Elsie Janis to Elisabeth Marbury's reform agenda, her name appeared several times as I was researching Marbury and the Castles. The possibility that the Castles were not the only performer that Marbury was backing with an eye towards the reform agenda is an intriguing one that merits further investigation. A more in-depth study of the several dance couples who were performing in the years before and after the Castles, modeled perhaps upon Julie Malnig's *Dancing Till Dawn*, could usefully build upon my current work.

⁴⁰⁶ "Authority for the Tango." Special to the *New York Times*, 17 June 1913.

Advancing the Waltz Aesthetic

The research questions that drove my study to focus on the modern origins of ballroom dancing arose from my observations during twenty years as a professional dancer, teacher, competitor, and judge. When I began my career in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1988, I was hired by the *Fred Astaire Dance Studios* to teach beginning students the fundamentals of ballroom dancing. I received approximately three weeks of basic training before I began to teach, and the continued training (which usually consisted of 45 minutes during the afternoon, before most students arrived) enabled me to remain just a little bit ahead of my more advanced students. Certainly Allen Dodworth must have rolled over in his grave when, after a year of this level of experience, I went to London and sought work as a dancing teacher.

Although it was immediately clear that the English dancing schools had higher standards for their teachers, I was lucky in that the years 1989-1990 were busy ones for dancing studios, and there were enough absolute beginners and wedding couples that I was able to make ends meet. One of the most vivid memories I have of this time was of watching a social dance, and thinking to myself, “Why are they dancing the foxtrot so fast?” When I asked the studio owner this question, she laughed, and answered “That isn’t foxtrot, its quickstep.” I have forgotten exactly what my response was at that moment, but I imagine it was along the lines of “aside from dancing faster, is there a difference?”

There are, of course, differences between American-style foxtrot and quickstep beyond the preferred speed of the music. However, to my eye – familiar with foxtrot but never before having seen quickstep – what was most apparent were

the similarities. The dance frame is the same. The basic rhythm of the patterns is the same. The same strategies of navigation in a crowded ballroom apply to both dances. Today, knowing far more about the dances than I did twenty years ago, I would argue that the differences are less important than the similarities; quickstep was one of the “International Style” dances that was easiest for me to learn because of the tremendous overlap with foxtrot.⁴⁰⁷ During the six months I studied in London I absorbed a great deal of knowledge regarding standards of movement, far more than I was able to articulate at the time.

Ten years later I was teaching in New York City, working as the Director of Pedagogy for *Stepping Out Studios*, one of the largest independent ballroom schools in the U.S. *Stepping Out* taught just about every kind of partner dancing, including Argentine tango and several different flavors of salsa and swing. Instruction was offered to all levels of dancers, from crash-course wedding survival skills to beginning social dance to advanced competition technique and every level in between. As dance director I was responsible for being the substitute teacher for every group class we had on our schedule; regardless of the level or style, I was expected to be able to step in and take over if a teacher was unavailable. Consequently, I was in an excellent position to compare and contrast the different somatic elements of the dances, though I would not have used the word “somatic”

⁴⁰⁷ There are levels of complexity in Foxtrot as well – International Style foxtrot does not look anything like quickstep, nor does “advanced” American Style foxtrot. Quickstep was codified in England between 1925-1927, in response to the decline of the One-Step and the popularity of the Charleston.

before coming to graduate school. Upon entering the academy, I began to consider my experiences in terms of a historiographic context.

How did American and International “style” dances develop such that they presented competing versions of the same dance – International and American foxtrot, waltz, cha-cha, etc.? How did tango end up with three major variations (especially considering that within the realm of “Argentine Tango” there were several different sub-dances)? Why were Salsa and Mambo – ostensibly very similar dances – performed so differently? Some dances were considered “street” dances, and others “studio” dances – what was the difference? As I began to consider the field of partner dancing through the various lenses afforded by my academic training, patterns began to emerge from my embodied knowledge. My work towards a Waltz Aesthetic is a small first step in which I have attempted to make sense of these patterns.

In the future, I want to explore how popular dances such as Swing, Rumba, Samba, and Salsa were all successfully brought into popular white performance during the twentieth century. As with ragtime, these dances were moved from the “street” into the “studio” and broken down into component elements for commodification. I suspect that in the process of interpreting dances so that they could be taught to paying customers, dance teachers reimagined the dances through their own understanding of “correct” or “proper” movements. Thus, elements of subaltern hexis that did not line up with their codes of perception were altered or eliminated. I hope to use my understanding of the Waltz Aesthetic to better comprehend the changes made to these dances. As dances were taken from the repertoire of dancers unconcerned with posterity to the archive of businesses

concerned with the ability to teach patterns without variation from New York to Johannesburg to Singapore, it seems likely that the Waltz Aesthetic was at work.

The Waltz Aesthetic won the battle for European American movement during the second decade of the twentieth century, and it seems likely that this has had long-lasting repercussions for social dance in the U.S. One step that would further trace the development of social dancing in the twentieth century would be to look at the work of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, the first professional organization of dancing teachers in England. This would broaden the scope of my work and speak to the important influence teachers in Imperial Britain had on the development of ballroom dancing in the twentieth century. It seems likely that the Waltz Aesthetic can be related to the legacy of imperialism and colonialism in the former Empire. Some work has already been done in this field. Teresa Buckland has published several articles on the early years of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, including “Edward Scott: The Last of the English Dancing Masters” and “Crompton’s Campaign: The Professionalization of Dance Pedagogy in Late Victorian England.”⁴⁰⁸ Alison Jean Abra’s dissertation, “On with the Dance: Nation, Culture, and Popular Dancing in Britain, 1918-1945,” argues that a “national dance culture” developed in Britain during this time.⁴⁰⁹ I see my work as being part of an exciting new project which reimagines the historiography of popular dance as an integral part of negotiations between dominant and subaltern populations.

⁴⁰⁸ Teresa Buckland, “Edward Scott: The Last of the English Dancing Masters” (*Dance Research* 21, 2003), and “Crompton’s Campaign: The Professionalization of Dance Pedagogy in Late Victorian England” (*Dance Research* 25, 2007).

⁴⁰⁹ Alison Jean Abra, “On with the Dance: Nation, Culture, and Popular Dancing in Britain, 1918-1945” (Doctoral Diss., University of Michigan, 2009).

In the 1880s dancing teachers were faced with a professional crisis as styles of performance changed. However, at the end of the twentieth century, partner dancing *itself* was increasingly irrelevant to the lives of U.S. citizens. As in the last years of the nineteenth century, larger changes in the social landscape led to a marginalization of ballroom dancing teachers. Today, business models are increasingly driven by the need to encourage students to dance not for social, but for competitive reasons.⁴¹⁰ In many ways this strategy mirrors that of nineteenth century dancing teachers who adapted to a clientele uninterested in the lengthy study required to master deportment through emphasizing standardization. Competition implies standards against which dancers can be judged, and if there are standards, then students will pay for instruction to master the necessary techniques. As Juliet McMains details in *Glamour Addiction*, the number of hours that any given student will spend learning a dance is inconsequential when compared to the number of hours (and consequently, dollars) that a student will spend preparing to compete.

In many ways it seems as though the Waltz Aesthetic remains at the heart of the contemporary ballroom dancing industry. The same somatic elements that were emphasized by the American Society of Professors of Dancing a hundred years ago remain as the centerpiece of the aesthetics of competitive dance. The list of “do not’s” at the back of the Castles’ dancing manual would not seem out of line with the majority of dances performed today, with the notable exception of the dances in which “shaking the hips” is required – but only if you shake the hips in a very

⁴¹⁰ See McMains, *Glamour Addiction*.

specific way.⁴¹¹ Instruction focuses on the movement of the body from the knees down, and if dancers are instructed to hold each other in a fashion that Allen Dodworth would probably have described as “not in good taste,” he would at least have recognized the dance hold as something he saw in the ballrooms of his day.



Figure 18: Not in Good Taste

Subsequent research may complicate or problematize an understanding of the manner in which race influenced the development of social dance in the U.S. Much work remains to be done to understand, for example, the role that franchising had in successfully standardizing dances in the twentieth century, as well as the complex

⁴¹¹ As discussed in the Introduction, lengthy passages can be found in technique manuals for the proper performance of what is called “Cuban motion.” They all boil down to the observation that the side-to-side movement of the hips commonly observed in “latin” dancing is the result of alternately bending and straightening the legs, rather than isolated hip movements. Consequently technique manuals focus on the placement of weight on the feet (toe/ball/heel of the foot) and the timing of the flexion of the knees. This is easy to demonstrate, far less so to transcribe.

interaction of British, U.S., and Eastern European competitive dance at the end of the twentieth century. Arthur Murray, once a student teacher at Castle House, founded one of the most successful business empires of the twentieth century based on standardized instruction; his contribution to U.S. social standards remains under-researched and un-theorized. A once-popular song proclaimed that “Arthur Murray taught me dancing in a hurry.”⁴¹² Understanding exactly what it was that he taught will take longer, and it is my hope that the Waltz Aesthetic will serve as a useful tool for unpacking the ways in which social dance forms have affected – and continue to affect – culture.

⁴¹² Johnny Mercer and Victor Schertzinger, “Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing in a Hurry” (1941).

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