American Movement: In the Steps of a National Style of Dance

by

Megan Livingston Pugh

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Bryan Wagner, Chair
Greil Marcus
Professor Scott Saul
Professor Linda Williams

Spring 2012
Abstract

American Movement: In the Steps of a National Style of Dance

by

Megan Livingston Pugh

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Bryan Wagner, Chair

“American Movement” is an investigation of national identity in dance. “Americanness” may be an impossible conceit, but it’s also a way people have made sense of the nation. It’s a mantle artists claim for themselves, and a quality audiences recognize. I focus on a cast of performers who have been celebrated for embodying an American style of movement, and who were ambitious enough to try to create one: tap dance virtuoso “Bojangles” Bill Robinson, silver screen idols Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and ballet-to-Broadway choreographer Agnes de Mille. What made their claims of Americanness convincing? Sometimes, it was explicit: plots that dealt with national myths, stances these artists and their fans took against Europe, or publicity materials that trumpeted their patriotism. But at other times, a sense of Americanness emerged from their movements. Tracing the hidden histories of particular dance steps and styles across lines of race and class, I show how artists of wildly different cultural milieus have learned from, imitated, admired and parodied one another. Chiefly, this is a project about artists who set out to embody the nation, and about the nation that produced them. But “American Movement” is also an argument, by example, for how we might study dance: as both an artistic creation of its own right, and as an embodiment of histories that are often more varied than a single performance, at surface level, can accommodate.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ii

1. America’s First National Dance. 1

2. Bill Robinson Dreaming 10

3. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Pick Themselves Up 33

4. Agnes de Mille’s Square Dance 52

Epilogue: Dickson, Tennessee 75

Notes 77

Works Cited 93
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the U.C. Berkeley English Department, Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Foundation, and U.C. Berkeley Center for Race and Gender Studies for providing financial support as I researched and wrote. Thanks also to the staff at the New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Dance Collection, for bringing me box after box of manuscripts, letters, and films, and to Jonathan Prude, for permission to quote from Agnes de Mille’s papers.

Bryan Wagner provided support and guidance from before this dissertation was even a hunch and on through countless drafts. He’s been this project’s closest reader, and is a model of intellectual generosity. Scott Saul, also around from the start, was always ready with words of encouragement and advice, as was Linda Williams. I’m especially grateful to Greil Marcus, for pointing me in new directions, for sharing so much time and knowledge, and for teaching me to see myself as a writer.

W. T. Lhamon, Eric Lott, John Rockwell, and Laura Shapiro all had helpful input at various stages of this project. Alex Benson, Lyn Hejinian, Laura Horak, Monica Huerta and Ben Urwand provided sympathy, support, and suggestions. Gillian Osborne and RJ Leland were, and remain, dear friends and sounding boards. Elise and Preston Lauterbach provided endless moral support. So did Andy Horowitz, my favorite co-conspirator, editor, and lover of America. This project arose largely from our shared enthusiasms.

My husband, Eliot Rose, entered my life mid-way through this project, listened to my excited updates about the latest archival news stories, cooked me dinner so I could keep writing, and took me on adventures so I’d stop. I also owe an enormous debt to my parents, Robert and Dorothy Pugh, who taught me that everyone matters, and so does art. My mother, who founded and directs Ballet Memphis, has been an inspiration. A tireless and visionary advocate for dance, she’s improved the lives of her students, dancers, and employees, as well as her city and her family. This project is for her.
Early in December 1884, a group of Philadelphians realized, with alarm, that America had no national dance. They were planning a fundraiser for the local museum, to culminate in a “March of Nations” featuring a French minuet, a Dutch chain dance, girls in Spanish mantillas clacking castanets, and a crew of ladies in sensuous Gypsy dresses, rattling tambourines. But when it came to performing their own traditions, these do-gooders were stumped. America was just over a hundred years old, and everyone who lived in it—save for Native Americans, whose cultural traditions the U.S. Government was busily effacing in the name of assimilation—had come from somewhere else.1

What would a truly American dance even look like? One anonymous wag, responding to the Philadelphia shocker for The New York Times, suggested turning to a value at the core of the nation’s identity: financial greed. The male dancer could play a plumber, the female, a housekeeper driven mad by his shockingly large bill. She’d die from agony, and he’d sell her corpse to a medical school for extra cash. The writer didn’t go into much detail about how that would translate into steps for a folk dance, but he did outline an alternate scenario: a male shop clerk would sell a female customer a coat, and they’d “fall into each other’s arms and execute a wild pas de deux expressive of complete satisfaction and happiness.”2

Needless to say, neither scenario sparked a nationwide craze. Nor did an American dance that an elite Philadelphia instructor, Professor Asher, promised to create within a year.3 But outside America’s swankiest ballrooms, a new dance was gaining ground. It fused highbrow and popular, European and African-American culture, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, it had become a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic: the cakewalk.

In 1908, when the first International Conference of Dancing Masters hosted their own, March of Nations-style performance in Berlin, they chose the cakewalk to represent America.4 Some of the American dance teachers who’d travelled across the ocean for the occasion grumbled that this was a poor choice—too clumsy, too goofy, too undignified, and probably, though they didn’t say it outright, at least not in print, too black.5 But those qualities were all part of what made the dance appealing. The evidence was clear. “The cakewalk is not much of a dance,” explained one New York instructor, “but, at least, it was born in this country.”6

What, aside from provenance, makes a dance American? It’s a question people have been asking for over a century. And it’s a question that belies a longing for wholeness, for the idea that the nation, and consequently its art, share some set of essential characteristics. People have been quick to suggest what those values might be—freedom, democracy, individualism, inventiveness, community, or, in the case of our New York wag, greed—but none of these words, on their own, tell you much about how an American style of dance might look. Instead, they’re part of what Ralph Ellison calls “Adamic wordplay,” attempts, “in the interest of a futuristic dream, to impose unity upon an experience that changes too rapidly for linguistic or political exactitude.”7 You may think you know it, but it’s recombining beneath your feet.

“Americanness” may be an impossible conceit, but it’s one that has inspired ideals toward which people strive. It’s also a way to make sense of home, a mantle artists claim for themselves, and a quality audiences recognize. It’s a quality that people have been eager to define in dance, as they seek to discover—or invent—truths about the nation that seem to emerge, bare and essential, from bodies in motion. How we move, the thinking goes, should show us who we are.
In the following chapters, I focus on a cast of performers who have been celebrated for embodying an American style of dance, and who were ambitious enough to try to create one: the tap dance virtuoso “Bojangles” Bill Robinson; the silver screen idols Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers; and the ballet-to-Broadway choreographer Agnes de Mille. Between them, these artists performed in just about every possible public milieu for dance in the twentieth century: touring spectacles, vaudeville acts, Broadway shows, cabarets, nightclubs, and elite opera houses; all-black movies, all-white movies, and integrated movies; World’s Fairs, stadium shows, TV specials, and parades. Each performer drew on a distinctive mix of sources and training, and each danced in a style different from the rest. Yet they all imagined an audience composed of the entire nation, and they spoke to that audience, reflected it, and seemed, in some elusive way, of it.

In each chapter, I explore what made these artists’ claims of Americanness convincing. Sometimes it has to do with the narratives framing their work. For example, Agnes de Mille set her 1942 ballet Rodeo in the Old West, site of so many of the nation’s fundamental myths. In film after film, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers poke fun at effete Europeans with wit and verve that seem, in contrast, distinctively American—fresh and brash, elegant and on the move. When Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple dance together in the The Littlest Rebel and The Little Colonel (both 1935), set during and after the Civil War, they charm both Yankees and Confederates, in an attempt to unify a nation torn asunder.

An American style also emerges from movement itself: Rodeo’s cowboys leap off-center, their backs crooked, their legs askance; Fred Astaire syncopates his way into ballet’s entrechat-trois, a series of humming-bird like beats of the feet; Bill Robinson unleashes a clatter of furious taps on his way up a set of stairs while keeping his upper body almost completely still. To understand why these types of steps feel American, I trace the recurrence of particular gestures both within individual pieces of choreography and across different times, places, and performances, revealing the ways dancers of different races and classes have imitated, assimilated, borrowed, stolen, learned from, parodied, and admired one another. Revealing a repertoire of movements that have dancers have drawn from, consciously or not, is a way of recovering hidden histories about national identity in the making.

Scholars have been investigating questions of national identity since the country was founded, yet by and large, they’ve paid dance little heed. Their neglect may reflect an enduring intellectual prejudice for the records of the mind over the records of the body, but it has even more to do with the problems of records themselves. Ephemeral and nonverbal, dance can be hard to historicize. Especially when filmed footage of a performance doesn’t exist, dance historians must piece together clues about what a performance looked like based on scattered archives of reviews, memoirs, interviews, photographs, and, with a little luck, the choreographic notes with which artists recorded their plans.

Even when these archives are available, dance occupies a different status than text, music, film, and visual art, all of which can be apprehended as discrete objects. Gestures are more slippery. To answer an oft-quoted question from W. B. Yeats, we can’t tell the dancer from the dance. Dances don’t exist without bodies to do them. Move a certain way, and that movement becomes you. But the movement isn’t yours, at least, not in the sense that a poem or a piece of Tupperware could be yours. At any moment, someone else might imitate your steps.

That slipperiness is one of the reasons dance can help us think about national identity: identity is something that’s performed, in part, by pretending to be someone else. Dance possesses you, and simultaneously lets you possess yourself. We can see that dynamic in the way dance steps
hop lines of class, race, gender and region, as Americans have lived with, looked at, and learned from one another. We can see it when Fred Astaire blacks up to imitate Bill Robinson. We can see it when Bill Robinson aspires, like a danseur in old Europe, to perform with a whole symphony orchestra. And we can see it when Agnes de Mille, accompanied by a symphony, imagines herself as a rough-and-tumble pioneer domesticating the Old West, among a whole host of pioneers, some of whom do steps that originated in black social dance. These are stories not just of borrowing and self-invention, but also of love, condescension, and longing for a mobility that can come from assuming someone else’s character, from inhabiting his body, from pounding the floor with impossible speed and leaping as if to defy gravity.11

Until relatively recently, the sheer hybridity of American dance hasn’t received its due. It’s an odd fact, given how long critics of literature, theatrical performance, and music have chronicled the perpetual give and take between high and low, black and white. Dance writers, however, have tended to focus on the distinct contributions of particular artists, or on the development of a single tradition, such as ballet, jazz, or modern dance.12 The reality is more porous. For example, you might not know, watching the choreographer George Balanchine’s 1946 ballet The Four Temperaments, that the Russian-trained classicist had taken cues from the Lindy Hop. Yet when people celebrate Balanchine’s Americanness, they’re responding to qualities he borrowed from African American social dance: syncopated rhythms, an off-centered stance, and athletic, acrobatic lifts in which men, instead of supporting women on a vertical axis, fling their partners about with control that can look like abandon.13 Watching The Four Temperaments in 1946 must have been an exercise in defamiliarization. What seemed old and European—classical technique, and the medieval notion, driving the piece, that four humors determine human temperaments—was inflected by the experiences of modern Americans. Those experiences are never explicit in the ballet, but they resonate. And even though they’re buried beneath program notes on medieval medicine, beneath easy vision, possibly beneath the experiences of the dancers themselves, they matter. They’re the reason Balanchine is called the father of American ballet.

In addition to a set of stories about a group of artists searching for a national style, my dissertation is an argument, by example, for how we might think about dance: as both an artistic creation, existing in its own time, and as an embodiment of histories that are more various and vexed than a single performance can seem to accommodate.14 These histories are often hiding in plain sight. The tapping of a foot can be the rapping of a séance table, Morse code from the past.

The cakewalk embodied the tensions between unconscious associations and explicit intention on a national scale. It spread from the Antebellum South to the post-Civil War North and across the Atlantic Ocean, criss-crossing lines of race and class in performances shot through with aspiration and parody, longing and disdain. To the American dancing masters who travelled to Berlin in 1908, the cakewalk seemed distasteful, and it probably wasn’t what our 1884 Philadelphians, choreographing their March of Nations, would have predicted as the future representative of their homeland. Yet it’s precisely in the flouting of cultural hierarchies that the cakewalk found its power and appeal. What’s more, its tangled histories—black, white, high, and low—give it an unconscious power, directing us toward the meanings that underlie its motions: oppression, mockery, and the desire for liberation.

You may know the cakewalk from the vaudevillian alien in Space Balls (1987) who comes tearing out of a human’s stomach and cakewalks across an intergalactic diner counter, complete with cane and boater, or from the movie Oklahoma! (1955), where choreographer Agnes de Mille has
cowboy Will Parker cakewalk atop a train after singing about the metropolitan wonders of Kansas City, or from Judy Garland and Margaret O’Brien’s cakewalk finale to “Under the Bamboo Tree” in Meet Me in St. Louis (1944), or from Bill Robinson’s awkward cakewalk with Lena Horne when they fall in love at a nightclub early in Stormy Weather (1943). These vestiges are testaments to the enduring significance of the cakewalk, decades after its heyday at the turn of the twentieth century.

Footage of this era’s cakewalks, when motion picture technology was just getting on its feet, is scarce. We’re lucky that two short films, both among the earliest recordings of African American performance, have survived: Cakewalk and Comedy Cakewalk. The credits don’t tell us much—just that the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company made the films on May 11, 1903—but the five, anonymous dancers, two couples and a solitary man, perform fascinatingly different variations on the same form.

In Cakewalk, the performers start out in a line, facing the camera and marching in place. The men wear dignified tuxes; the women, modest gowns that stretch from wrist to wrist and neck to feet. With their hair pulled into orderly buns, they’re emblems of respectability. To start things off, the single man tips his top hat, leaps forward, twirls his cane like a marching band baton, and throws himself off-center, swinging one leg out to the side and pivoting wildly around it. With a satisfied grin, his hat still raised, he circles back to the others. Another man does a quick tap break and pivots speedily around himself, and everyone’s off. One couple links arms, and one joins hands, as they promenade in a circle, then return to their original places in line. All in all, it’s a very orderly parade.

Cakewalk gives us the dance’s basic steps. Tilt your torso back, kick your legs forward, often in a high, exaggerated march, and set off, often in a circle. The scenario leaves room for endless embellishment, some of it virtuosic, like those tap breaks and speedy turns, and some of it, as Comedy Cakewalk shows us, humorous.

The dancers in Comedy Cakewalk follow the same pattern of line to solo to march to line, but with considerable more flamboyance. The women’s skirts are shorter, and they’ve donned large hats. One of the men wears not a tasteful tux, but a light-colored suit that, while it’s hard to tell in black and white, might even be gold—in any case, it comes with an ankle-length coat. Instead of a quick turn, the soloist does a full rubber-legs routine, crouching low to the ground and wiggling his knees in and out, in and out, in a proto-Charleston wing step.15 Rather than clasp hands or linking arms, the couples use their hands to emphasize their own individual bodies: one man raises his hat for the entire circular march, while his partner lifts her skirts and leans over to scratch her ankle; the other woman tosses her handkerchief to the ground so that her partner, with exaggerated decorum, can stop his frenetic baton-twirling to pick it up and return it to her. The whole thing is a garish performance of vanity.16

Each of these films lasts just under thirty seconds, but they reveal a good deal about the different ways the cakewalk could be performed: with respectability or comedy, as a sign of social aspiration or a mockery of those aspirations. Interpretation gets even thornier when you take into account another, crucial difference between the two films: in Comedy Cakewalk, the lighter-skinned dancers appear to have darkened their faces. Their dancing gets tied up with stereotypes of exaggerated blackness, inherited from the blackface minstrel stage. Those stereotypes would have registered differently with different audiences: what white audiences might accept as a fact of blackness could seem, to black audiences, like a mockery of blackface minstrelsy, or a mockery of white pretension from behind the mask. Theater reviewers in the 1890s noted that at all-black shows, black audiences, segregated in the balcony, sometimes laughed while white audiences, down below, were completely silent. As the historian Karen Sotiropoulos puts it, these black jokes “went
literally and figuratively above the heads of their white audiences.”

Whatever audiences may have taken away from it, Comedy Cakewalk demonstrates what countless newspaper articles confirmed: racialized performance is at the heart of the cakewalk. Some folks believed that the dance came from darkest, primitive Africa. The Boston Globe reported in 1892 that the cakewalk was “an old savage custom... that ended in fanatic frenzy and all-night orgies.” After a 1907 research trip, the University of Chicago Professor Frederick Starr concurred: “I am certain the cakewalk is original with the people of Central Africa. The American negro has borrowed it from his brother of the Dark Continent.” The thrill of the cakewalk’s supposed primitivism accounted for some its popularity—just as it would for the jazz craze it helped inaugurate—but the dance also appealed to white anxieties about black aspirations. To many white Americans, black cakewalkers looked like the minstrel show archetype Zip Coon, a pretentious dandy who aped high society and failed to measure up.

Black cakewalkers, in this formulation, dressed too garishly and moved too grotesquely to be taken seriously. They offered comedic comfort to whites who worried that their national dominance might start to flag. That spirit is preserved in another origin story, this one reprinted in a 1903 Arizona newspaper: “At a dinner given by a wealthy plantation owner a rich negro and his wife were guests. The black pair were so inflated with pride at being there, and walked with so much studied ‘air’ that they attracted much attention. When the black couple had retired the host offered a prize of the cake to the man and woman giving the best imitation of the black pair’s walk. Everybody wanted to win the prize. Men and women did their best to produce the pose and step of the high-nosed negroes, and that was the first cakewalk.”

In fact, the reverse was true. Decades before the dance became a nationwide craze, African American slaves invented the cakewalk to ridicule their white masters. Slave dancers would puff up their chests, point their noses in the air, and prance about with mincing steps, pillorying the pretensions of a society based on brutal exploitation. “The dance,” explained Proctor Knott, an African-American champion cakewalker, “was a cross between a shamble and a strut, but it was original with the negro and exceedingly funny. Once a while [sic] one of the darkies would try to emulate the white dandy by walking across the floor, with head erect and chest expanded.” Knott, speaking to a newspaper reporter, avoided overt racial animosity, but a former slave, talking to a younger black friend in 1901, was more frank. “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 meting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center too. 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.”

At some of these plantation celebrations, the most talented cakewalkers won prize cakes—made of stored-up provisions like cornmeal, baked in ashes—and occasionally, curious white onlookers placed bets about who would win. Dancers performed alone or in couples, and blended their impressions of white performance with dance forms they had carried over from so-called “Dark Continent,” like the ring shout, percussive steps done in a circle. Sometimes, the cakewalk included incredible stunts, like performing a percussive, proto-tap breakdown, or balancing a jug of water on one’s hand while dancing. It’s hard not to see that kind of feat as a sign for the incredible care oppressed people must take, with regulations weighing heavy upon them, and for the ways they can manage to improvise and excel, even in confinement.

By the 1870s, newly emancipated blacks were doing some of those stunts up north. The African-American waiter Tony Brown was esteemed for walking while carrying twenty cups of
coke. When one his rivals waxed the floor, the story goes, Brown slipped, sent a dozen water
glasses flying, and was so humiliated he never showed his face in New York City again. After that,
he disappears from the archive. A host of better-known black cakewalkers soon took his place,
bringing the cakewalk from restaurants, barns and recreational halls to the popular stage. Blackface
minstrels had set the precedent with the walk-around, an elaborate, circular dance that seems to have
been a variation on the cakewalk. But in the 1890s, black performers like Ernest Hogan, Bert
Williams, George Walker, and Walker’s wife, Aida Overton Walker, made the cakewalk a much-
hyped centerpiece of their performances. A full third of the wildly successful 1898 all-black New
York show Clorindy, or, the Origins of the Cakewalk was devoted to its titular dance.

These artists all broke from the minstrel show structure that had dominated popular
entertainment for decades, in favor of more modern productions. The Williams and Walker
Company, in particular, worked to give cakewalking an air of respectability. Aida Overton Walker,
hired by white society ladies for cakewalking instruction, spoke about the cakewalk’s “grace and
suppleness.” She noted that comic, “extravagant features”—such as men pretending to tie their
partners’ shoes, or, in the manner of Comedy Cakewalk, women brandishing handkerchiefs—should
be avoided. But when those white ladies did the cakewalk on their own, all-white dance floors, they
probably weren’t after respectability. Instead, they were venturing into the hazy terrain where
respectability seemed to end, as white became black, and high became low.

Some amateur white
cakewalkers even donned blackface for their racial masquerade—a sign that wearing the mask,
whether literal or figurative, was central to their enjoyment.

It’s in this era, the 1890s, that stories of the cakewalk’s popularity began to proliferate in a
dizzying whirl, as it crossed presumed social boundaries to become the first national dance. All over
the country, hundreds of black churches and social clubs organized cakewalks as fundraisers; whites
hired blacks to cakewalk at their own parties and give an air of legitimacy; and giant cakewalking
competitions took place annually at Madison Square Garden. After white millionaire William K.
Vanderbilt won a cakewalk competition at a friend’s party, Bert Williams and George Walker
challenged him to a cakewalking match, betting $50 that they’d beat him. Walter Gray, an African
American cakewalk champion from Kansas, went for even higher stakes: a group of businessmen
agreed to back “their saddle-colored champion” against Vanderbilt to the tune of $5,000. As Eric
Sundquist points out, these challenges were, in essence, demands for Vanderbilt “to give back that
which he had taken” from black culture. Vanderbilt didn’t take the bait, but a few years later, he
attended a cakewalk at the swanky Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach Florida, where black waiters
regaled the elite audience with their ragtime songs and dances. Admiral George Dewey, fresh from
victory in the Spanish-American War and a failed presidential run, had the honors of awarding the
prize cake.

By 1901, English society was abuzz with news of the foreign fad. The Duchess of
Marlborough, for one, was talking, and when Mrs. George Keppler—friend of King Edward, and
brother to Lord Albemarle—travelled to the states, she knew her trip wouldn’t be complete without
witnessing that most American of novelties, cakewalk. A rich New York pal threw her a cakewalk
party at a local steakhouse. As six black couples—including the victor of a recent Madison Square
Garden cakewalk competition—marched about in a circle, white guests joined in from the sidelines.
Men from New York’s smart set “stood on their chairs and waved top hats and led the hilarious
chorus” of a coon song—a popular ragtime ditty about the supposed habits of black folks—while
their female companions, only slightly more demure, “joined in the barbaric swing of the tune,
alternately laughing and applauding until they broke the seams” of their fine kid gloves.
In 1903, Bert Williams, George Walker, and Aida Overton Walker took their version of the cakewalk to England, as part of their blockbuster production *In Dahomey*. It ran for seven months. Immediately after watching it, a wealthy white American expat, Mrs. Frank Avery, hired some of the cast members to give a one a.m. cakewalk at a party in her house on Grosvenor Square. Two curious princesses got wind of this surprise beforehand, and donned disguises so they could watch the American import without risking impropriety. Other members of the royal family weren’t so concerned with appearances: on that same trip, the cast of *In Dahomey* gave a command performance in the garden at Buckingham Palace. What had been a titillating diversion among London society became a veritable craze. By July, King Edward had attended at least six parties with cakewalking, and was asking every American woman he met if she knew how to cakewalk.

That same year, French film wizard George Melies made a short film about the cakewalk’s devilishly seductive qualities. It took place in hell, and featured a pair of uncredited black dancers who may have been touring Americans. At one point, Melies uses visual trickery to separate a dancer’s arms and legs from his torso, literalizing descriptions of body parts taking on lives of their own. Eventually, this frenzy is too much for even Satan to handle, and he banishes the dancers in a burst of smoke. The scene at Paris’s Academie Julien wasn’t so different: at their annual party in 1903, Frances’s most acclaimed artists, along with fifty artists’ models, fueled by champagne and rhythm, cakewalked through the night and into the dawn. Some of them dressed as “Apaches” in war-paint and feathers—a costume that suggests a jumbled conception of American primitivism, salaciousness, and power. In the eighteenth century, a popular figure for America abroad had been a white woman in an Indian headdress, a blend of America’s colonial culture and its native inhabitants. By the turn of the twentieth century, that figure was changing to the black cakewalker, sign of a wild motion that could possess its dancers, and that pointed, whether social dancers knew it or not, back to the days of slavery. From noble savage to slaves lampooning their masters: American identity had undergone a dramatic shift.

In the face of all this crossing of race, class, and regional boundaries, it’s hard not to experience what the critic Michael Taussig has called “mimetic vertigo.” Amateur white European cakewalkers were imitating professional black American cakewalkers who were imitating white minstrel cakewalkers imitating black slaves imitating their masters, who were clueless of the fact that they were being mocked. In each move back and forth—the puffed up chest of the imagined dandy, the circular procession of society on parade—layers of admiration and satire pile on top of each other like sediments from different eras, or like layers of a cake.

The cakewalk parodically stages the opposition between black and white, between elite and the working class Americans, but it’s also where the cultures of those different groups meet and merge. In the cakewalk, plantation owners and slaves watched one another and laugh; old World royalty mingled with vaudeville stars; and black aspiration shared terrain with white fantasies of black primitivism. Or rather, their steps shared terrain; steps were more promiscuous than steppers. For while the dance was transgressive, it was also a product of a segregated America.

In the 1890s, when the cakewalk rose to prominence, white racial anxiety consumed the nation. It played out in halls of “Redeemed” legislatures; in the race riots of Wilmington (1898), New Orleans and New York (1900); in the lynchings of over 110 black Americans, on average, each year; and in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court decision establishing the doctrine of “separate but equal.” It infused the circling movements of black cakewalkers, the image of America abroad, and the wheeling turns of “Jim Crow,” the minstrel character who became the name for a new segregation at home.
The cakewalk is haunted by white brutality. That’s why Charles Chesnutt, in his 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, has the white villain Tom Delamere steal his black servant Sandy’s clothes, black up, and perform a cakewalk for visiting Yankees. Later in the novel, Tom wears the same clothes, and blacks up again, this time to rob his aunt—an action that eventually contributes to her death. In both scenarios, Tom steals Sandy’s identity, redefines it, and uses it against him. It’s no coincidence that Chesnutt sets this critique of performance against the growing viciousness of white society working to disenfranchise freed blacks, culminating in a violent race riot.

The cakewalk is haunted by white brutality, but also by the ingenuity of African Americans, slaves who—in time they stole and satires their masters missed—mocked their oppressors. And that history, buried, tangled, and submerged, added a substrata to Chesnutt’s critique in *The Marrow of Tradition*, reared its head in the Vanderbilts’ ballrooms, and was welcomed into the British court. All that makes it a counterintuitive candidate for the country’s first national dance—something that should, presumably, make you feel good about America. But the cakewalk gets at deeper truths, and deeper patterns, all the way down to the question of who counts, who deserves respect, and who can claim the nation as his own.

Ralph Ellison, in his 1969 essay “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday,” calls the mockery of cakewalking slaves—a mockery of “our double standards, hypocerties, and pretensions”—the catalyst for a national style of art. Plantation owners, “amused at the incongruity of tattered blacks dancing courtly steps,” missed “completely the fact that before their eyes a European cultural form was becoming Americanized.” The idea that the Americaness of American art comes from cultural blending, from masking, and from mockery, is central to Ellison’s writing. His essays are often explicitly about American music, or American novels, but the dynamics he discusses apply just as much to dance—and, more broadly, to national feeling writ large.

“Everyone played the appropriation game,” he explains in another essay, and that “everyone” implicates the entire nation, from its very beginnings: Boston tea partiers donning feathered headdresses; white Southerners adopting black speech patterns; Duke Ellington quoting from Chopin’s funeral march; Elvis Presley singing like Arthur Crudup; Shirley Temple learning to dance from Bill Robinson; Agnes de Mille turning to tennis for ballet steps; Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers joining vaudeville gags with ballet. The appropriation game doesn’t have to be ugly, and it doesn’t have to be a form of theft. When, as a young boy at an all-black school in the Midwest, Ellison was taught European-American folk dances, he didn’t feel that his own, African-American cultural heritage was being erased. Rather, the dance lessons reflected Americans’ freedom “to broaden our personal culture by absorbing the culture of others.” Similarly, when a white choral group sings black spirituals, it can make for a weird scene, but the singers aren’t necessarily to be faulted for swiping black cultural forms:

In this country it is in the nature of cultural styles to become detached from their places of origin, so it is possible that in their frenzy the kids don’t even realize that they are sounding like Baptists. As Americans who are influenced by the vernacular, it is natural for them to seek out those styles which provide them with a feeling of being most in harmony with undefined aspects of American experience. In other words, they’re seeking the homeness of home.

The “homeness of home” may also be what Balanchine fans feel, watching jazz-inflected ballet, or
part of what amateur American cakewalkers in the late nineteenth century, stepping high in the ritual circle, were after. But where the cakewalk makes imitation obvious, finding homeness in a house built of racial imitation and parodies of class difference, Balanchine submerges that dynamic, so that you don’t always see the raw materials. The artists in the chapters that follow do both: sometimes, they make masking a trope in their performances, but at other times, they bury it, and—like dexterous sleepwalkers—may not even realize what they’re up to.

Whether we’re conscious of it or not, Ellison asserts, vernacular forms are forever recombining, and are “naming, defining, and creating a consciousness of who and what we have come to be.” The vernacular is thus “a gesture toward perfection,” the perfection of a national whole. Ellison is quick to acknowledge that this whole doesn’t, and won’t, exist. He’s not arguing for essentialism, but for an understanding of American culture as a dynamic process, a constant shift. It’s the same merge performed by the nation’s unofficial motto, *É Pluribus Unum*. An ideal, unified one—the *Unum*—is impossible to reach. But the many keep moving toward it, whether they know it or not, improvising their way toward an ever-deferred horizon.47

The artists who are the subjects of the following chapters—Bill Robinson, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and Agnes de Mille—do the same. They combine dance forms and styles from radically different cultural milieus in an attempt to conjure up the spirit of the nation, a spirit that their audiences recognized as the homeness of home. But digging up the sources of homeness can change how home looks. And that’s because of another dynamic, to which Ellison is equally attuned: histories don’t just get detached; they get repressed. “By pushing significant details of our experience into the underground of unwritten history, we not only overlook much which is positive, but we blur our conceptions of where and who we are,” he writes. “It is as though we dread to acknowledge the complex, pluralistic nature of our society, and as a result we find ourselves stumbling upon our true national identity under circumstances in which we least expect to do so.”48

This dissertation is an attempt to make us stumble. What else can we do when we encounter, as late as 1947, a ballet called *Blackface* choreographed by William Christensen, based on minstrel shows, which premiered on the same bill as *The Seasons*, a Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Isamu Noguchi collaboration? In one version of history, we know who came out on top of this clash of old and new, nostalgic and avant-garde: Cunningham dominated the postmodern dance scene until his death in 2009, while *Blackface*, despite getting some praise for its “thin line of commentary on racial intolerance,” was a critical bomb. And yet, just four years after that failure, New York City Ballet recycled *Blackface*’s sets and costumes for another piece, which celebrated minstrelsy: Ruthanna Boris’s *Cakewalk*.49 *Cakewalk* later became staple in the Joffrey Ballet’s repertoire well into the 1980s, part of their commitment to programming dance in an American style.

In the kind of layered parodies that characterize the cakewalk itself, Boris’s ballet includes a minstrel show mockery of ballet, in which “Hortense, Queen of the Swamp Lillies” is a send-up of the classic romantic ballet *Giselle*. *Cakewalk* also features a magic show, part of its general recasting of minstrelsy as a set of vaudeville sketches, rather than an elaborate ritual by which the nation understood race and class.50 But *Cakewalk’s* most magical feat may have been making the issue of race, the dark and parodic heart of the cakewalk, disappear altogether. Not that it’s every truly gone. It’s just elided, waiting to trip us up, with a sly, outstretched leg.
In 1934, Al Jolson blacked his face and went to heaven. In overalls and an old straw hat—a familiar costume for the man famous for his sleight-of-skin Mammy songs—he rode a mule all the way to the pearly gates. You can watch him go there in the movie Wonder Bar, in a floorshow that quickly enlarges to impossible dimensions. A blackface St. Peter, blackface Angel Gabriel, and a chorus of blackface pickaninny cherubs welcome Jolson to a paradise where porkchops grow on trees, where possum pies and watermelons are free for the taking, and where a machine pops out perfectly cooked whole chickens in less than a minute. Old Black Joe plays his banjo. Uncle Tom parades through town to promote his minstrel show. At the Big Dipper Cabaret, blackface chorus girls open a giant watermelon into human-sized slices, and out comes rubber-legs Hal Leroy, in blackface, for a tap routine. Jolson wins Emperor Jones’s military sash and epaulettes in a game of dice, and after dusting off his new regalia, he looks up right into the eyes of his dear Missouri mule. They’ve been reunited in the afterlife. A chorus of blackface angels, a multitude of blackface heavenly hosts, bows before him, waving their arms and singing about Jolson’s good fortune with all the solemnity of true believers. The whole scene is supposed to be a big joke, and—to state the obvious—it’s ugly and unimaginative. You almost get the feeling that the director Busby Berkeley, renowned for his technologically innovative musical sequences, stumbled across an old storeroom of racist stereotypes and decided it would save him a lot of time and energy to use them instead of coming up with something new. Except those stereotypes are supposed to be spectacular and modern, and the storeroom is America. But “Goin’ to Heaven on a Mule” isn’t just an offensive relic on par with the black lawn jockeys or Mammy salt and pepper shakers you might stumble across with discomfort at an antique store. “Goin’ to Heaven on a Mule,” in a contorted way, is about transcendence.

Jolson plays a mere Parisian nightclub owner in Wonder Bar, but when he paints his face, he sheds earthly constraints and goes to the big black nightclub in the sky. At one point, he rides a trolley that goes from the Milky Way to Lenox Avenue, a route that sounds an awful lot like the journey white New Yorkers used to take to go slumming at Harlem jazz clubs. Except Jolson isn’t just a tourist: now that his skin is black, he belongs here. Not that he gives up his old white life entirely. When Jolson goes to a barbershop in heaven, he reads a Yiddish newspaper, and in a startlingly close shot, puts the paper down and looks straight into the camera, signaling to the audience that he knows what they know: he’s still the Jewish comedian they’ve loved for years, the one who headlined vaudeville shows across the country, starred in the first full-length talkie, and married cutie-pie film star Ruby Keeler. In short, he gets to have it all. Transcendence didn’t go both ways. Four years after Wonder Bar came out, the black tap-dancing virtuoso “Bojangles” Bill Robinson wore overalls and an old straw hat too, in Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. So does Shirley Temple, who sings about the pleasures of their matching outfits, “Just let me roam around, laughing at big city blues/ With an old straw hat, a suit of overalls and a worn-out pair of shoes.” For Temple’s character, who grew up in New York City, overalls are a costume, a sign of charming rusticity. For Robinson’s character, a domestic servant in a small town, overalls are everyday clothes. Never mind that in real life, Bill Robinson lived in Harlem, toured the country regaling audiences with his dancing, and knew more about big city blues than Temple ever could. In the movies, he plays loyal servants and loving slaves who dance on command, have no life outside domestic service, and are delighted with their lot. That’s why, as early as 1936, black critics
called him an Uncle Tom. Shirley Temple, his most famous mistress, was Little Eva, and even played her, in the Tom-show-within-a-show in *Dimples* (1936).²

Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple made four films together, and today, we tend to remember them as a duo. They were, writes the critic Donald Bogle, “cinema’s perfect interracial love match”—perfect because, given the age difference between them, their partnership evaded the perceived sexual threat that would normally keep a black man from dancing with a white woman.³ Even Temple, who should have known Robinson’s artistic powers better than anyone, had a hard time imagining him succeeding without her. In her autobiography, written decades later, she calls herself Robinson’s “‘professional salvation,’” as if his career would have tanked without her.⁴

But Bill Robinson didn’t need Shirley Temple to save him. By the time he started teaching her to dance, he was already the most famous tap dancer in America. His stage career spanned two centuries, from the lavish plantation shows of the 1890s through the rise and fall of vaudeville and into the golden age of the Hollywood musical. During those years, Robinson didn’t just watch American entertainment change. He helped change it.

At a time when Jim Crow was the law of the land, Robinson seemed like a citizen of another, dreamed America: one where a black man could earn the respect of his peers, and his audiences, on both sides of the color line. In this other, juster nation, white baseball players and politicians and even cops respected him; white performers scrambled to learn from him, bragged about doing it, and called him their better; and when white racists provoked him, he could tell them off with impunity. But he was also, always, navigating the country in a present that could be painfully real: restaurants refused to serve him; critics attributed his artistry to primitive instinct, rather than talent; some of the same folks who learned his steps wore blackface to do them, as if race, not art, was central to the dancing; and in the movies, Robinson had to don a version of the minstrel mask that elsewhere, he’d endeavored to jettison.

Robinson changed America by elevating tap, both figuratively and literally. Instead of perpetuating the minstrel show stereotype of the flat-footed, shuffling darky, he danced up on his toes, speedy and swinging. By the twenties, he’d become the highest-paid solo black entertainer in the country, thanks to a routine that America couldn’t seem to get enough of: the stair dance.⁵ Robinson would tap up and down a custom-made stilte—two sets of four or five steps each, placed back to back—and use them like a drum set, banging out impossible rhythms with his feet. Keeping his upper body almost completely still, he oozed coolness and class, and there weren’t any overalls to get in the way: onstage, Robinson favored natty suits, polished shoes, gold and diamond rings. Occasionally, he looked down at his feet, as if amazed by their speed, and audiences learned to follow, and repeat, his delighted gaze.⁶ Thanks to Robinson, the country began to recognize tap dance as a distinctively American form of modern art. And this meant recognizing not just that black Americans could embody Americanness, but also that Americanness itself was part black.

On the surface, Robinson’s movies with Temple seem to staunch that lesson. Take *The Little Colonel* (1935), in which he plays a butler to Temple’s sweet young mistress in a post-Civil War South—a South that, anything but war-torn, is filled with jovial black servants, stately plantations, picturesque baptisms accompanied by gospel singing, and beautiful white ladies in hoop skirts.

There’s just one problem. Shirley’s curmudgeonly grandfather refuses to speak to his daughter because she eloped with a Yankee, whose last name, in case you need any more hints about regional bitterness, is Sherman. Now that said daughter and her family have come back to the old neighborhood, her father won’t acknowledge her existence. Temple’s job is to bring the clan together, unifying north and south, by endearing herself to her grandfather. Robinson’s friendship
helps her do it. The New York Times called The Little Colonel a piece of “magnolia whimsy,” but when you think about Robinson’s character—a former slave, still loyal to a master who longs for the days of slavery—those blossoms give off a rotten stench.7

The Little Colonel’s most famous scene takes place on the polished, wooden staircase of Temple’s grandfather’s palatial home. As Temple leans sulkily against the balusters—she doesn’t want to go to bed—Robinson does a version of the vaudeville routine that made him famous. He starts out small, each tap clear and quick, though his feet barely seem to move. Suddenly he swings one leg four steps high, knocking each step loudly as he brings that leg back down, and after pattering on the floor a bit more, he dances upstairs, perfectly poised, backwards. There’s no instrumentation—only Robinson’s syncopated feet and a melody he buzzes out through pursed lips like a kazoo—but that’s music enough, catchy and complex. Soon he’s bounding up the stairs two at a time, in straightforward movements that seem enormous and free, a sign that while he’s been using the ground, he isn’t bound to it.

In scenes like these, when Robinson dances—not just when he holds Temple’s hand and does steps she can follow, but when he really and truly dances—he transcends film narratives, at least for a few minutes, to become the biggest, most breathtaking thing on screen. In a movie about regional reconciliation after the Civil War, one of the most significant problems in American history, Robinson seems like the sign of a better, future America. If Jolson relies on the blackface mask to get to heaven, Robinson, stuck beneath, breaks through. Watching him dance in The Little Colonel is like stumbling across an Andrew Marvell poem wedged in the pages of a cheap romance novel. That tension, between what’s possible and what’s allowed, between what plots tell us and what movement makes us feel, is central to Robinson’s career, and to the history of American culture. The tension surfaces the problem of performing for popular audiences, of conforming to expectations on the one hand, and moving beyond them on the other. Robinson danced between those two poles, amongst the competing dream worlds of popular culture and personal longing, in the shifty spaces of real life, conformity, and subversion. And while he was navigating that terrain, a host of performers were dancing out their own visions of America, inspired, in part, by Bill Robinson.

“Another Bert Williams”: Bill Robinson Steps Out

Bill Robinson started dancing for change as a boy in the streets of Richmond, Virginia, in the 1880s. Richmond, to put it mildly, wasn’t an easy place to be black. Federal troops had been protecting black citizens in the former Confederate capital since the end of the Civil War, but when they pulled out with the end of Reconstruction in 1877, lynch law ruled supreme. Robinson set his sights on getting out. By 1900, he had made his way to New York.8

Legend has it that Bill Robinson got to the big city itching to prove himself as a dancer. That meant heading to a performance of Charles T. Dazey’s In Old Kentucky, which had been playing to packed houses for the last seven years. Dazey had written it as a drama for white actors. There was a love triangle between an innocent mountain girl, a moonshiner, and a debonair gentleman, along with supporting roles for an endearing old Colonel and a faithful Negro. The story climaxed with a stirring horse race in Lexington, but In Old Kentucky’s real attraction was its “pickaninny band,” a group of black, juvenile musicians—all under 5’4”, according to an advertisement for new recruits—who played with syncopated pep. Audiences loved them, and would stop the show with their cheers,
demanding repeat performances. There were other attractions, too: during one scene, reported The New York Times, “two little darkies” on the sidelines played a mysterious game that the Times saw fit to explain at length to its no-doubt befuddled readers: Craps. And, center stage, there was the dancing—buck dancing, a flat-footed form of early tap in which soloists showed off their rhythmic virtuosity, and soft shoe, a more delicate variation. At some point, the producers realized they could make this scene even more engaging by opening it up to audience participation. Once a week, the buck-dancing scene in Act II became a contest between new entrants and the show’s cast. And that’s where Bill Robinson enters the picture, beating In Old Kentucky’s star dancer Harry Swinton, and presumably making a reputation for himself in the world of New York entertainment.

There don’t seem to be any reliable first-hand accounts of the Robinson-Swinton showdown, but spirits at these contests always ran high. At a 1904 performance, the judges picked a winner with whom audiences were so unhappy that they began to hurl vegetables at the stage, causing such a ruckus that the curtain had to be held for a half-hour. It’s tempting to imagine that Robinson’s defeat of Swinton inspired the same volume of excitement—and even more tempting to see it as heroic triumph over a crass, commercial picture of Southern life, with our hero the Great Artist showing the pickaninny band a thing or two. But the fact is, Robinson had been able to leave Richmond because of a gig that wasn’t all that different than In Old Kentucky: he played a pickaninny himself, in the 1892 touring production of The South Before the War.

The South Before the War was one of the first successful plantation shows—”plant shows” in showbiz parlance—elaborate productions that portrayed antebellum slavery as a happy, pastoral life with plenty of time for singing, dancing, and horsing around. That had been a common fiction in blackface minstrel productions for decades, but The South Before the War was different. Aside from two white stars in blackface, almost all the performers were black, including buck dancers, cakewalkers, multiple vocal quartets, and the pickaninny band. What’s more, the show helped bring the rhythms of ragtime to the masses. All that gave it a modern edge, even as advertisements noted that its “genuine colored people” would shuffle “their enormous feet on sanded floors,” performing “comical acts of niggerdom.”

Robinson probably picked up some steps from the show’s leading buck dancers and cakewalkers, and it’s possible that a fellow performer known to history only as “Ferry,” or “the Frogman,” inspired some of Robinson’s vocal tricks, like those buzzes and twangs with which he accompanies his stair dance in The Little Colonel. But whatever Robinson took from The South Before the War, the show was a way for him to get out of the South, by pretending that it was a wonderful place to be.

That was the paradox of being a black entertainer when Bill Robinson came of age: you had to traffic in stereotypes and nostalgia, at least in part, to try and escape them. In the 1890s, a generation after the Civil War, whites on both sides of the Mason Dixon Line found common cause in staunching black freedom. The promises of Reconstruction had been broken; lynchings were on the rise; and the most popular musical compositions were “coon songs,” whose lyrics portrayed black Americans as sensuous beings with enormous appetites, quick to dance, fight with razors, and steal chickens—in short, people wholly unfit for citizenship. Yet the rhythms of coon songs came from black ragtime musicians’ parodic take on white compositions: at the piano, one hand “rags,” or syncopates, on the other, turning an even 2-4 or 4-4 march (hello, John Philip Sousa) into something that swings (enter, Scott Joplin). Like the cakewalk, ragtime music itself was a form of parody. And even while singing the lyrics of coon songs, bringing white stereotypes of blackness to life, black artists, with the understanding of black audiences, found ways to separate themselves from the
mask. They said yes, and they meant no.

The American Studies scholar W. T. Lhamon calls this the “fire hydrant theory,” noting that fire hydrants only put out fires 1% of the time; the other 99% of the time, dogs use them to communicate secretly. Comparing black entertainers to pissing pets may not seem terribly complimentary, but unruliness is part of Lhamon’s point. Black artists found ways—if not to openly resist, then to quietly, smartly, subvert. And perhaps no one did this more successfully than Bert Williams, the subject of Lhamon’s analysis, the popularizer of the cakewalk, the first crossover pop star, and, when Bill Robinson was coming of age, the black entertainer to emulate.  

Williams and his partner George Walker worked their way up from seedy clubs in San Francisco’s Barbary Coast to traveling medicine shows to the black vaudeville circuit—and when, in 1897, they added a cakewalk to their routine, good reviews turned to raves. Soon they were mounting full-length, all-black musical spectacles for both black and white audiences, and touring on both sides of the Atlantic. Williams played the stock, shuffling darkly of old-time minstrelsy to Walker’s elegant, modern dandy, but his career outlasted his partner’s. After Walker became too sick to perform—he died in 1911—Williams integrated Florenz Ziegfeld’s Follies, appeared in short films, and recorded dozens of wax cylinders of his songs and comic monologues. He was beloved by audiences and revered as the cleverest “low comedian on our stage today,” “one of the greatest comedians America has ever bred,” and the flat-out “world’s greatest living comedian.” He won this acclaim not just for his comedy, but for his pathos—like Charlie Chaplin (who probably modeled his tramp persona after Williams), Williams played down characters who appealed to audiences’ fears and sorrows, inspiring sympathy as well as laughter.

The comedian W. C. Fields famously called Williams “the funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew,” and the theater critic Percy Hammond went even further. “Every time I see Mr. Bert Williams,” Hammond wrote, “I wonder if he is not the patient repository of a secret sadness. In the midst of his decorous and explicit capers in the Follies I think that sorrow concealed, ‘like an oven stopped,’ must burn his heart to cinders.” It’s easy to speculate about possible sources of this sadness: Williams was a Bahamian immigrant in exile and a black man in a racist nation; in the August 1900 New York race riots, angry white mobs beat up his partner George Walker and their friend Ernest Hogan. And though countless people on both sides of the color line recognized his dramatic talent, he always performed in blackface.

George Walker didn’t, and neither did any other members of their company, which helped throw Williams’s mask into relief: there was no mistaking it for anything but artifice. For Williams, this was useful: “It was not until I was able to see myself as another person that my sense of humor developed,” he explained. If that sounds close to the way W. E. B. Dubois describes double consciousness, the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” it’s because it is. When Williams blacked up, he made double consciousness visible, smearing white stereotypes about blackness onto his body. He accepted those stereotypes, because, as a matter of course, he had to. But he also, to use Lhamon’s analogy, turned them to fire hydrants, and did his business. Take “Nobody,” Williams’s most famous song, a litany of instances in which he’s been left to fend for himself in difficult and dangerous times. The chorus concludes with defiant inertia: “Until I get something from somebody, sometime/ I’ll never do nothing for nobody, no time.” He might as well be flipping the country the bird. Or there’s “Borrow from Me,” in which Williams’s character, asked to play a “bleedhound” in a production of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, responds with this demand: “Bring me the czar of Russia, just have him come on over here, and blacken up and play Uncle Tom’s Part.” Othello can play a lawyer, “provided, of course, we can find a brother that doesn’t come too dark.”
The Statue of Liberty will play Little Eva. It’s a ridiculous set of propositions, with stock characters running wild, and that’s the point: since blackface substitutes signs for reality, Williams proposes an impossible performance composed purely, hyperbolically, of signs. And if that can happen, then sure, he’ll consent to playing a hound, and, though he doesn’t say it, because everyone knows the plot of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and everyone knows what bloodhounds do—sure, he’ll play a dog and hunt down runaway slaves.24

Williams and Walker’s decision to bill themselves on vaudeville as “Two Real Coons” reflects a similar impulse to pry up the sides of the mask, even if they couldn’t remove it altogether. They accepted demeaning white slang and used it to promote themselves, asserting the authenticity of their blackness over their blacked-up white rivals. But considering that Williams appeared in blackface and Walker didn’t, both of these men couldn’t be “real.”25 This wasn’t revolutionary, but it was disorderly. And at the same time, it was a way to survive. What’s more, as Bert Williams amassed enormous audiences, he helped make unruly double-speak into a kind of collective stance toward the world.26

Bill Robinson admired Williams, and borrowed his techniques.27 In fact, the first records we have of Bill Robinson, the entertainer—when he left his anonymous stints with the plant show and made enough of a splash on vaudeville to get his name in the paper—is as one-half of a comic duo patterned after Bert Williams and George Walker. George Cooper played the straight man to Bill Robinson’s clown, and audiences picked up on the resemblances right away. “Two colored comedians, Cooper and Robinson, are the big hit of the bill,” reported a Seattle paper in 1909. “They occupy twenty minutes or so with a Williams and Walker ‘stunt’ which is a perpetual roar.”28 They were one of a handful of black acts to make it onto the otherwise white Keith-Albee and Orpheum circuits, but it’s hard to know what their skits looked like.29 For while newspapers printed their touring dates—everywhere from Duluth to London—there are no detailed accounts of Cooper and Robinson performances.30

But there are clues, which suggest that even early in his career, Robinson was defiantly commenting on racial and ethnic stereotypes. In one sketch, Robinson wore a tutu over long pants—a costume audiences would have recognized as Bert Williams’s.31 In another, the straight-laced Cooper fretted about Robinson’s “ungentlemanly behavior at a social function.” Robinson’s defense had audiences howling with “heart-aching laughter,” laughter that might have come at the pleasure of his acting-out.32 There are hints of rebellion, too, in an act that black vaudeville veteran Tom Fletcher recalled years after the fact. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a low point for “racially obnoxious” acts, Cooper and Robinson “made up like it had been customary to do in impersonating Jews and put on a heavy burlesque of the supposedly Jewish accent” to sing the song “Yoi Yoi Yoi Yoi, Mary Ann.” Given Robinson’s “shrewdness in meeting and overcoming the problem of racial and religious prejudice,” Fletcher wrote, folks suspected that Cooper and Robinson’s Jewface was a satirical provocation, meant to protest the ugliness of the “racially obnoxious” acts that were so pervasive.33 It may also have been a sly commentary on the practice of white comedians—Al Jolson’s forbearers—to black up. If other actors could change races, why not black comedians?

Robinson and Cooper were goofy, but as one reviewer put it, they “appreciate[d] the difference between comedy and buffoonery,” and always erred on the side of good taste—that is, they found ways to distance themselves from the mask.34 According to another review, “the dark complected gentleman,” Robinson, “manipulates facial contortion and vocal oddities, succeeding admirably to entertain.”35 In those “vocal oddities,” Robinson could imitate a mosquito, a banjo,
and—in a crowd favorite—a fly landing first on sugar, then on Limburger cheese. This was silly, but it wasn’t offensive. What’s more, Robinson and Cooper never wore literal blackface. It helped that Williams and Walker, Ernest Hogan, and other performers—along with Civil Rights activists—had paved the way; now, Robinson and Cooper could bill themselves not as “coons,” but as “Two real negroes” or, simpler still, as “colored comedians.”

Robinson, wrote the critic for the black _Indianapolis Freeman_, joked “without the slightest strain or overdoing himself. You laugh at him, heartily, but not because he does contortion acts with his lips or has any slap-stick methods to offer, but because of the naturalness of his humor.” Other black acts would benefit by taking a lesson from the pair “in the point of cleanness, originality, cleverness and up-to-dateness.”

As a team, Cooper and Robinson, like Williams and Walker, focused on getting laughs. Sure, there was a smattering of soft-shoe, and Robinson’s “fantastic footwork” was praised for “approaching perfection.” But it wasn’t until Robinson left Cooper to perform on his own, in the late teens, that critics truly began to see his feet. Perhaps his dancing had improved steadily over the years, or perhaps he just had more opportunity to show it off. Whatever the case, when Bert Williams died in 1922, Robinson danced in to fill the void.

In the months after Williams’s death, Bill Robinson was performing in five shows a day, and making such a splash that, the _L.A. Times_ speculated, he had “a good chance ending up as another Bert Williams.” The _Chicago Defender_ reported that Robinson “pantomimes the Negro in a comic vein that is often as deft and subtle as were the characterizations of the late Bert Williams.” It’s worth noting that neither of these comparisons—one about Robinson’s success, and another about the deftness of his figurative blackface—have to do with dancing. Bert Williams was a great mover, but not a great dancer. He thrived on small, subtle gestures, and kept his limbs close to his body, playing up his character’s clumsiness and fear. It was George and Aida Overton Walker who performed refined, classy cakewalks; Williams’s version was comically grotesque. And this is where Robinson becomes a very different sort of star: grace and command were central to his dancing, and they helped get him to the top of the pack. A decade after Williams began singing “Nobody,” Robinson was very clearly somebody. He controlled his own body, and instructed his educated feet. Audiences appreciated his “Negro comedy,” but they clamored for the drama of his dancing. Monologues and vocal oddities were mere build-up for the time when Robinson would leave language behind, and—in a routine that went nowhere and everywhere at once—dance up and down the stairs.

**New Negro Rhythms: Harlem is Heaven**

We don’t have any footage of Bill Robinson’s stair dance on vaudeville, but a scene in the 1932 race film _Harlem is Heaven_ comes close. Robinson plays himself—or at least, he plays a dancer named Bill Robinson—and while there’s a thin plot about an evil racketeer-impresario and a pretty young dancer who’s fresh from the South (wide-eyed Anise Boyer), the story is largely a way to fill time between Robinson’s stage routines. As a reviewer for the _Chicago Defender_ suggested, the film might have been more accurately titled “Bill Robinson.”

But the film wasn’t just selling Robinson. It was also selling Harlem, and, by implication, black urbanity and success. Harlem, according to the film’s prologue, “is the largest and greatest Negro community in the world,” a “super-symphony” of “roaring subways, rumbling street-cars,
rankling milk-wagons and the rat-a-tat of machine guns,” where “intellectuals mingle with illiterates” to create “the most interesting city of modern times.” To its residents, the prologue asserts in thunderous capital letters, “HARLEM IS HEAVEN.”

It certainly seemed that way to many black Americans. The film came out near the end of the Great Migration, when over a million Southern blacks moved to the urban North to find better jobs and escape the threat of racial violence. Between 1900 and 1930, the black population in the North tripled, and the percentage of black Americans living in cities across Americas doubled. Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Indianapolis became thriving black cultural centers, but nowhere seemed as glamorous as the teeming black capital of Harlem, home to over one-hundred nightclubs, vaudeville palaces, and theaters, to the country’s most popular artists and entertainers as well as the leaders of the black intelligentsia.  

Today, those intellectuals are the neighborhood’s best-remembered residents—writers and scholars like Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Countee Cullen, and a host of others who led the flowering of black arts now known as the Harlem Renaissance. They documented the era and promoted the use of art as a sign of black advancement: if blacks could produce fine art, white America would begin to understand that blacks could think and feel just as well as their oppressors, and deserved not just respect, but political equality. But for the people these highbrow artists were trying to uplift, popular performers like Jimmie Lunceford, Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, Butterbeans and Susie, Earl “Snakehips” Tucker, and Bill Robinson were the biggest stars.

These artists made Harlem their home base, but many of them also toured the country performing for African American audiences on the new black vaudeville circuit, T.O.B.A. (formally the Theater Owners Booking Association, but popularly known as “Tough On Black Asses”). Now that blacks lived in dense urban areas, rather than in isolated hamlets in the rural South, they constituted a new market for black entertainment—both on screen, in films like Harlem is Heaven that played to black audiences, and on stage. Not surprisingly, black audiences didn’t want the same stereotypes that played to whites.

When Robinson and his peers went on tour, they served as unofficial cultural ambassadors from the center of black success—and no one seemed more successful than Robinson. In a variation on the stair dance in 1929, Robinson performed with a dozen “brownskin beauties.” The show was called “Bojangles’ Revels,” and during the twenties and thirties, black newspapers eagerly chronicled his off-stage revels too. They ran stories about Robinson’s impressive income, about the expensive dinner parties rich white politicians and movie stars threw in his honor, about his attendance at a lunch of Harlem leaders gathered to welcome the President of Haiti, about his $16,000 Duesenberg limousine and his diamond-studded watch. Robinson’s career epitomized the hopes and dreams of the generation of the Great Migration. Raised in Richmond by his grandmother, a former slave, he seemed to have left oppression behind. Despite his propensity to appear nostalgic for his old home when playing to white audiences, he assured a reporter for The New York Amsterdam News that he was not looking back. “The fact of the matter is,” Robinson said, “that the North has been pretty good to the colored folks migrating here from the South, and that most of them have little or no reason to regret the move from the sleepy, sluggish confines of their birthplace to the more wide-awake, progressive and prosperous cities. This is particularly true of the colored entertainer, whose earning capacity increases the farther he gets from Dixie. My idea of real loneliness would be to find myself separated from New York City.”
In these early years of his success, Robinson was praised for uplifting the race and fighting whites’ prejudice, sometimes merely by winning them over. When Jack George, a white comedian who performed in blackface, became too sick to perform at a San Francisco vaudeville theater, Robinson—then a headliner—essentially demoted himself to take George’s place as the opening act. What’s more, Robinson did it on the condition that he earn no money and George earn his full salary. We don’t know if George’s act changed, but his attitude did. “I was born in the South,” he told the Oakland Tribune, “and I must confess to my shame that I had all the lack of respect for the Negro as a unit that the southerners have. I say ‘had’ for Bill Robinson has unconsciously taught me a lesson.” That same year, at a performance below the Mason-Dixon line, three middle-aged white women hissed loudly during Robinson’s act. He ignored them at first, but after the ushers had escorted the ladies out of the house, Variety reported, Robinson told the audience that “in thirty years in the show business such a thing had never happened to him before, and that he had been taught that, should it ever happen, to ignore it. He did, and won his house by the neat way he turned the tide.”

A few years later, Robinson was no longer ignoring insults. At a performance of Blackbirds of 1929, a drunkard in the front row waved a wad of cash at the chorus line and hollered, “Get hot there, Colored gals. This is for the first one that meets me after the show. Don’t kill yourselves in the rush.” Robinson paused his act and addressed the troublemakers directly, calling them “the lowest men I have ever played before.” Over a steady tap-tapping of his feet, he said, “What you men have done tonight is a disgrace to your race.” If Robinson treated women the same way, he said, “I’d be mobbed. If I did a thing like that I’d deserve whatever punishment I received.” As the men got up and left the theater, the rest of the audience didn’t mob them, but they did cheer. The story of Robinson’s speech was picked up by periodicals across the country, as a sign that blacks were no longer mere entertainers, subject to the whims of white audiences. They deserved—even demanded—respect.

All these developments suffuse the stair dance Robinson does in Harlem is Heaven. Over the course of his career, he did this routine to a variety of musical accompaniments, or sometimes to none at all; here he dances to a ragged piano version of Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.” Foster wrote it for the Christy Minstrels in 1851, from the perspective of a black man who tells his fellow “darkies” that his “heart grows weary” with “longing for de old plantation.” The song was a hit—its catchy lines on the Sewanee River are even credited with starting the tourist industry in Florida, where it’s still the state song—and though Foster, a white Northerner, had not traveled South (he’d go there the following year, on a honeymoon), “Old Folks at Home” was ubiquitous enough that W. E. B. Dubois considered it an “authentic song of the negro race.” By 1932, the tune had become an American standard, and though it was still associated with blackness, Robinson’s performance has no signs of longing for the old plantation. The lyrics are gone, chased off by Robinson’s feet, which hammer out a competing anthem about the grace, urbanity, and power of black Americans.

In a tailored, three-piece suit with a boutonniere and bowler, Robinson epitomizes what Alain Locke called the New Negro—a member of a generation of black Americans intent on ascent. He taps his way from the wings to a pair of stairs, each five steps high, yoked together to form a stile. Stopping in front of them, he keeps his feet jokily moving, like a wind-up toy that has run against a wall. But Robinson knows exactly what he’s doing, and so does his audience. He gives his hat a gentlemanly little tug, glides backwards as if he’s revving up for a running start, and hops onto the first stair, then the second, for a series of quick taps. Instead of going all the way up, he
taps backwards to the floor. After another rev backward, he hops his left foot onto the bottom step, then swings his entire right leg four steps high and brings it clattering down. When ballerinas or novelty dancers lift their legs this high, it’s par for the course. When Robinson does it, it’s breathtaking.

Robinson slaps and kicks his way up and down that first set of stairs several times, milking audiences’ expectations: will he ever make it to the top? When he does, he’s created such tension that you half-expect something enormous to happen, as when, summiting a mountain, you see the land on the other side, stretching out before you, new, resplendent, and still. But of course, the second set of steps is the same as the first. And this is where the stair dance begins to seem symbolically rich. You can tap all you want, but you never really go anywhere. It’s motion for the sake of motion, movement set within a frame. It’s the drama of rhythm against constraints. Like a ragtime piano player, syncopating an even march, or like a jazz soloist, bringing a melody to the edges of recognizability, Robinson turns a normal, regular form into something new. The architecture of everyday life is pitted against itself, and turned into a world in which he can excel.

Throughout the routine, Robinson is always in full and thoughtful control. Even at the end, when you might expect a big finish, he keeps his cool. The final drama comes from mastery, not hucksterdom: he ascends and descends seven times in the last thirty seconds, changing heights speedily and of his own accord, before prancing offstage, kicking his knees high in front of him.

That final step is a variation on the cakewalk, the old, American dance that originated with slaves mocking whites, that whites picked up, in part, to mock blacks, that Bet Williams and George Walker helped popularize at home and abroad. But Robinson’s variation is new. His knees are bent, throwing the whole picture askew, and instead of circling around, waiting for judgment, he rushes off. It’s almost as if he’s leaving the past behind.

For a while, that was the way it seemed. In July of 1926, Robinson did the stair dance at London’s Holburn Theater; across town, at the Victoria Palace, the blackface comedy duo Jones and Jones did a routine that included, wrote the Chicago Defender, the “mispronunciation of big words and rich dialect of the levee and cotton fields.” Jones and Jones fell flat, but Robinson stopped the show. It had taken some seventy-five years, Robinson told a reporter, “for the Negro actor to emerge from what is known in the parlance of the theatre as a ‘freak attraction’ to the real artist that he is considered today.” In some ways, this America, the one that recognized black artistry, was still in Robinson’s imagination, and he admitted that there was plenty of progress left to make—black and white performers still weren’t appearing in integrated productions. And yet, it’s true that both black and white Americans recognized something more than novelty in Robinson’s dancing—they saw an artist, one who rivaled and even trounced the best of what highbrow performers, at home or abroad, had to offer.

Robinson, asserted the Chicago Defender, was “just about 50 times as ‘artistic’ as most of the much-talked about European celebrities who bring us terpsichorean Art with a capital ‘A.’” Indeed, said another critic, “no member of the Ballet Russe,” the famed European troupe who had toured America for years, “could grant the human body more upstanding respect.” Robinson’s posture alone merited comparisons to “the singing prose of Hemingway or Faulkner.” “Just lead Bill Robinson to a flight of stairs,” wrote another critic, “and he will extract as much drama from them with his toes as Sarah Bernhardt could out of the tears of Camille.” His three-minute stair dance did more for art than a five-hour performance of Mourning Becomes Electra. A nationally-syndicated columnist admitted that he “would rather execute one of [Bill Robinson’s] tap dances than paint a Mona Lisa.” The New York Times film critic wrote that “the sole of Bill’s shoe is as much an artistic
instrument as the fiddle of Paganini.\textsuperscript{60}

In 1931 Robinson taught at a summer dance program with Ted Shawn, then the most famous male modern dancer in the country. Robinson was paid twice as much.\textsuperscript{61} At the 1938 World’s Fair, Robinson starred in \textit{The Hot Mikado}, which played for two seasons, with three performances a day. In contrast, Martha Graham’s \textit{A Tribute to Peace}—also on the docket at the World’s Fair—played once.\textsuperscript{62} It would be easy to write off these successes with the assumption that popular art, by definition, is more popular than highbrow art, were it not for the fact that highbrow artists were watching and celebrating Robinson themselves. Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini, visiting New York in 1938, went to the Cotton Club to see Robinson perform, and loved what he saw.\textsuperscript{63} George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein recruited Robinson for a 1942 Russian War Relief Benefit concert that featured the stars of ballet and modern dance.\textsuperscript{64} Even the terpsichorean capital—A Artists of the Ballet Russe came to watch him, when their Los Angeles tour overlapped with one of Robinson’s performances. “Nijinsky,” Robinson recalled years later, one great paying homage to another, “there was a genius.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{Robinson’s Imitators}

The legendary hoofer King Rastus Brown complained that he was the real inventor of the stair dance, and that Robinson stole it from him. Robinson never discussed this accusation, perhaps, some of his peers conjectured, because it was true. But long before King Rastus, vaudevillians had danced on steps, including the Whitney Brothers, Mack and Williams, Paul Morton and Naomi Glass, and—all the way back in the 1880s—Al Leach and his Rosebuds.\textsuperscript{66} In 1929, a reporter for the \textit{Washington Post}, dismissive of the “popular impression” that “dancing up and down a flight of steps is a new terpsichorean wrinkle,” recalled that Leach and his back-up dancers “did the same thing with simulated touches of inebriation that the present crop of dancers can not even approach.”\textsuperscript{67}

But Robinson’s predecessors have ended up on the margins of history, because he did something new with those stairs, something that stuck in the minds of his audiences and the bodies of his imitators, all across the country. Robinson did the stair dance in vaudeville theaters from one coast to the next; at the opening of the Keith Albee Circuit’s five million dollar Brooklyn theater; in Lew Leslie’s all-black Broadway revue \textit{Blackbirds of 1928}; in full-length black Broadway shows like \textit{Brown Buddies} and \textit{The Hot Mikado}; in his own touring revues like \textit{Hot from Harlem} and \textit{Bojangles’ Revels}; in black films like \textit{Harlem is Heaven} and integrated movies like \textit{The Little Colonel}.\textsuperscript{68} At a 1934 Chicago pageant depicting the progress of blacks from Africa to America, Robinson’s stair dance, representing the pinnacle of contemporary black achievement, closed the show.\textsuperscript{69}

A host of performers, both amateur and professional, imitated Robinson’s performances, sometimes to apprentice themselves to the master, and sometimes to capitalize on his popularity for their own advancement. The 1929 black musical \textit{Bomboola} included a scene for men and women performing “on steps arranged across the stage” in what the \textit{Wall Street Journal} described as “an elaborate development of Bill Robinson’s stair dance.”\textsuperscript{70} That same year, at the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles, a black dancer remembered to history simply as “Frank” tried to recreate Robinson’s steps, and in theaters from Seattle to New York, the black vaudeville team of Harris and Radcliffe brought in Radcliffe’s little brother to perform the stair dance. Radcliffe the younger got good reviews, but when two hucksters tried to do the stair dance at the Palace in New York the following year, the \textit{New York Times} reported that they only “succeed[ed] in making Mr. Robinson seem even
better.” Sunshine Sammy Morrison toured the nation doing Robinson’s stair dance for at least two years, and in the 1931 production of *Rhapsody in Black*, the *Chicago Defender* reported, Blue McAlister “tap danced up and down a set of drums arranged as steps, imitative of Bill Robinson’s step dance.” A young black dancer performing for a graduating class of nurses in Harlem was called a “small edition of Bill Robinson,” and the Texas dancer Virginia Self did a “miniature stair dance.” Helene Justa’s imitation of Robinson’s stair dance was good enough to land her a tour with her own revue in New York State.

At the 1930 national convention of dancing masters, *The New York Times* reported, “an elderly soul with glasses was imitating Bill Robinson on the marble stairs” of the hotel. (At the convention the following year, Robinson demonstrated his tap routines for the attendees himself.) “So many people stole Bill Robinson’s famous stair dance,” reported the *Afro American* in 1930, “that he gave up hope of tracking them down.” According to *The American Dancer*, Robinson’s attitude toward his imitators was “the more, the merrier.” But that wasn’t entirely true.

When Lew Leslie took *Blackbirds* on tour to Europe, with Eddie Rector performing Robinson’s stair dance, Robinson sent Leslie two furious telegrams, considered suing, and ultimately took out a full-page ad in *Variety* explaining that Leslie and Rector were taking his routine without his permission. (There’s no record of whether Robinson felt any vindication when Rector went to jail in 1934 for illegal possession of a gun, but by then, the fellow hoofers may have made up. A 1932 newspaper article describes a stair dance-stealing dancer who sounds an awful lot like Rector asking Robinson for help paying his sister’s funeral expenses, and says that Robinson—a model of benevolence—oblige.) And when the novelty string virtuoso Roy Smeck played Robinson’s stair dance on the banjo on the Rudy Valee Show, after Robinson expressly asked him not to, Robinson threatened to sue. Robinson even tried, unsuccessfully, to patent the dance.

In the 1938 Cotton Club Parade, Robinson marched down Broadway leading fifty chorus girls who wore rubber masks of his face. The thinking behind this bizarre stunt may have just been that fifty-one Bill Robinsons were better than one, but it was also a reminder of the incredible number of imitators he inspired, and of the way his image seemed to be everywhere: in cabarets, advertisements, on film screens, and even, oddly, grafted onto the faces of other people who, instead of just copying Robinson’s steps, donned the minstrel mask to do so.

Robinson’s imitators could be found all over—not just on black vaudeville, but on white musical stages, in Hollywood films, and even in the birth of what critics were calling a new, distinctively American form of ballet. Embedded in those claims for Americaness are the strange pathways of steps both divorced from, and associated with, the original stepper. In the case of Robinson, often billed as the “Dark Cloud of Joy” on vaudeville, this meant that people linked his movement to the color of his skin.

In the first part of the twentieth century, it was common enough for white dancers, essaying tap and jazz, to imagine they were black. Tapping like a black person, the thinking went, meant loosening up your gait, gaining a sense of rhythm, power, and syncopation—a set of associations that reveals both admiration for black artistry and condescension toward supposed black primitivism. Tap dance seemed like the provenance of black men like Bill Robinson, even though, in fact, it was decidedly hybrid: Robinson was vocal about his admiration for the dancer George Primrose, a white man whose blackface minstrel company performed in Richmond when Robinson was a boy.

Tap dance synthesized of Irish and African dance steps, with influences from the French, British, and Scottish. We can trace it back as far as seventeenth-century Caribbean plantations,
where the upright jigs of Irish indentured servants met the percussive, polyrhythmic dances of African slaves.85 A hundred years later, the steps had become muddled enough that slaves in the American South pounding out music with their feet were said to be doing “jigs.”86 In the nineteenth-century North, black freedmen and Irish laborers watched each other dance in marketplaces and streets, and white men under the burnt cork mask—many of whom were Irish—presented so-called “authentic” black dances at minstrel shows. The minstrel show’s origins were muddled too. Minstrel bands included Irish bones and tambourines alongside African American banjos; minstrel jokes combined black folklore with tall tales from the frontier; and minstrel dances yoked together Irish and African, Scottish and British steps—sometimes duplicated, sometimes downplayed, sometimes torqued to grotesque extreme.87 Even these steps weren’t pure; long before they entered the minstrel mix, they had soaked up influences from other sources, “making all cultural labeling,” writes the scholar Eric Lott, “a provisional matter.”88

Authenticity, in culture, is always a false god. But to the extent that the minstrel show and the dance form it helped birth, tap, are authentically anything, they’re authentically American—born on American soil, products of American cultural clashes, fruits of Americans admiring and parodying and imagining one another as long as, and even before, the country even existed. All those tensions coalesced behind the blackface mask, but not everyone recognized it as a mask. They confused the performance of blackness with the real thing, and then tried to perform it themselves.

Take Shirley Temple, Bill Robinson’s most famous pupil. In routine after routine, Temple learns to perform Robinson’s steps in miniature, whether they’re tapping up the stairs in The Little Colonel, rhapsodizing about the pleasures of straw hats and overalls in Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, or cavorting so loudly with the servants in the basement of a luxury apartment building in Just Around the Corner that the building manager comes down and tells them to be quiet. (Black dance in the underground—literally beneath polite society—is a familiar trope: Fred Astaire joins black dancers in the belly of the boat in Shall We Dance (1937), and Michael Jackson goes down a set of stairs to stomp out a furious Black Panther dance after the supposed color-blindness of his video “Black or White.” Or as Agnes de Mille put it, in a discussion of the difference between black and white social dancing in the nineteenth century, “That was all going on downstairs,” while upstairs, “they continued to ape Europe.”)89 Even when she isn’t dancing next to Robinson, Temple channels popular conceptions of blackness. Dimples culminates in a minstrel show, supposedly imported straight from the South, in which Temple, in a vaguely male military uniform, sings and dances alongside a chorus of black men in blackface. She doesn’t literally black up in that scene, but she does in The Littlest Rebel, when she tries to hide from the Yankees by smearing face with shoe polish and tying her hair up in a rag like a little Mammy.90

Temple’s mimicry of Robinson prompted the Chicago Defender to run a photo of the two trucking—a swing move that involves shaking one finger in the air—with the headline “Shirley Goes Harlem.” The implication isn’t that she’s visiting the capital of black America (“going to Harlem”) but rather that she’s becoming black (“going native”).91 The Defender, a black paper, wasn’t condemning Temple for this dancing, perhaps because it was so clear that she was taking cues from Robinson, the master of the form. In fact, the Defender called The Littlest Rebel, from which that trucking still came, a “great new picture,” praising Robinson for his “great naturalness.” The final scene, where Robinson and Temple meet Abraham Lincoln, “is worth what you pay to get in.”92 Robinson’s performance could be a sign of increasing black power and freedom, in both politics and art.

Even so, it’s uncomfortable, today, to watch Temple and Robinson perform, because while
their films acknowledge the influence of black culture, they also seem to erase it, letting Temple take the lead once Robinson has served his benevolent, instructional purpose. Robinson teaches Temple to tap on the stairs in The Little Colonel, but in The Littlest Rebel, released later in the same year, he just makes buzzing noises in the background while Temple does a modified stair dance of her own. That’s why, in the 1995 musical Bring in da Noise, Bring in da Funk, a Robinson figure (played by Savion Glover) dances to the “Uncle Huck-a-Buck Song” with a three-foot tall blonde doll strapped to his feet. Robinson animates Temple, the scene implies, and yet, the dialogue points out, she makes more money.93 You can call this overly simplistic, but that doesn’t keep it from being an important critique. In the Littlest Rebel, even the Civil War gets co-opted, so that it becomes a narrative of rich white Southerners, not black Americans, struggling for freedom. When Temple’s character asks Robinson’s “What does ‘free the slaves’ mean?” Robinson says he doesn’t know. Temple, not Robinson and his fellow slaves, must flee from Confederate territory to find safety up North. And at the end of the movie, when Temple makes it to D.C. and sits beguilingly on Abraham Lincoln’s lap, she convinces the Great Liberator to free two white men, her father and his Yankee friend. The Littlest Rebel rewrites American history to put white, rather than black liberation at the heart of the story.

Will Rogers also copied Robinson’s dance moves by donning blackface—at least, that’s one of the subplots of In Old Kentucky, a 1935 film about a family feud playing out on a horse-racing track. The plot departs substantially from Charles Dazey’s old play of the same name, but in this version, Robinson makes more than a brief appearance. He plays Rogers’s butler, cook, and stable boy. His name is Wash, presumably because that’s what he does, dancing joyfully as he cleans up the kitchen. He also dances while making biscuits and serving the table, riffing on the rhythms of work but still getting his job done.

Rogers asks Robinson for some lessons, and stumbles through the new tap steps comically, unable to perform them. That is, until he blacks up. Rogers’s enemies have had him thrown in jail, and when Robinson visits him—carrying, conveniently, some cork and a match—master and servant switch places. It’s a strange situation: the servant, standing in for the master, is imprisoned; the master, feigning servitude, goes free. Except he’s only partly free: one of the cops, who has heard about Wash’s dancing abilities, orders the blackfaced Rogers to perform. “You’ll either dance or I’ll put you in a cell.” Here, the scene has a tutelary edge. Rogers isn’t just learning from black culture; he’s learning about black oppression, too. Yet while the film raises that interpretation, the thrust of the scene is comical: Rogers can tap better than ever before, as if his new “blackness” is helping him out. Even their characters’ names imply that this was meant to be—where Robinson plays “Wash,” Rogers is “Steven Tapley.”94

But there are other moments in In Old Kentucky where the film seems, again, to point outside itself. “Do you like good dancing?” Rogers asks a visitor. “Well, I’ve got a boy here that’s absolutely the best in the world.” The irony, of course, is that he was—and in real life, it’s hard to imagine Will Rogers referring to Bill Robinson as “boy.” This oddness was going on in the films with Temple, too; what was charming about her partnership with Robinson wasn’t just that a benevolent elderly black man was teaching her, the way the movies framed it. Rather, audiences at the time would have known they were seeing an elderly star, a man of incredible power and renown, who was kind enough to help out the country’s dimpled darling.

Hollywood stars were quick to voice their respect for Robinson. Eleanor Powell, the most famous white female tap dancer of the twentieth century, reportedly studied with Robinson for five years, and the press made much of their connection. Robinson was quick to note—and it’s hard to
know if this was truth or graciousness—that “Eleanor Powell could dance before she even met me.” At a 1935 dinner party hosted by the New Jersey governor in Robinson’s honor (“you don’t have to be told that the people in Bill’s party were the only race folks present,” reported The Chicago Defender), Eleanor Powell send along these well wishes: “To Bill Robinson, the king of them all, and my only inspiration.”

Yet Powell, too, blacked up. In Honolulu, she plays a dancer who falls in love with a movie star disguised as a pineapple plantation owner on a cruise to Hawaii. At a costume party on the ship, everyone comes dressed as a movie star: there’s a faux Mae West, Clark Gable, W. C. Fields, Greta Garbo, and two Groucho Marxes. Powell comes as Bill Robinson, complete with bow tie, a bowler hat, a blazer, and burnt cork. She performs a fairly straight cover of the stair dance, and, like Robinson, she keeps her upper body still while her feet steal the show. But she lacks his energy, his sense of surprise, and when, at the end of her performance, she gives a big, exaggerated grin, it doesn’t feel genuine. The real surprise is the set: Powell’s steps, instead of being set up for her like Robinson’s stile, pop out of the stage, one after another. It’s as if she’s coaxing them from the ground, or willing them into existence—which is the same thing she’s doing with Robinson, in a way. She conjures him up to authenticate her own tap-dancing, proving that, though she’s a white woman, she can do all the steps associated with black masculinity.

One of Powell’s most famous dance routines turns that appropriation into narrative: “Fascinatin’ Rhythm,” from the 1941 film Lady Be Good. The scene opens with a remarkable performance by the African American trio the Berry Brothers. In black top hats and tails, they tap, flip, pitch canes into the air and catch them mid-spin, and fly over one another’s heads, propelled by the music of a full swing band. But the music fades as they scoot off stage, in understated heel-toe pivots, and in comes Powell, to rev things back up. She wears the same outfit—top hat and tails—but hers is white. Powell taps through a maze of moving curtains that slide open, to reveal one black musician after another, each one in a black suit, each one playing a black piano, each one smiling and nodding, as if to signal that they’re delighted with her dancing. This happens six times, until, when the curtains move one final time, Powell dances in front an all-white band, in all-white suits, on a gleaming, all-white bandstand. She extends her arms in triumph, rushes to the center of the dance floor, and performs with a crowd of white men banging their canes on the ground like lesser versions of the Berry Brothers. And then—as if now that Powell’s proved her ability to dance like a black person, she can focus on dancing like a man—the men form a tunnel of two facing lines and send Powell flopping down it, head over toes, toes over head, her whole body erect. Even the wariest of Freudians couldn’t miss what’s going on here.

The workings of Fred Astaire’s 1936 “Bojangles of Harlem” routine, in Swing Time, are harder to parse; viewers still debate whether the blackface routine is racist, a compliment to Bill Robinson, or a racist compliment to Bill Robinson we can write off as a product of its time. Relativism aside, it’s far too weird to ignore. The number opens with a surreal set of oversized lips, quickly revealed to be oversized shoes connected to oversized legs connected to Astaire. Those legs get carted offstage quickly, leaving Astaire to dance on his own. The critic Elizabeth Abel interprets this bizarre amputation as a symbolic castration of the supposedly hypersexual black man; it may also just be ill-conceived set design. But soon enough, Astaire is performing with long lines of chorus girls, in a display of masculinity that may owe something to the long lines of chorus girls with whom Robinson danced in his stage performances.

Some viewers have pointed to the dissimilarity between Astaire and Robinson’s styles to
argue that Astaire didn’t actually admire Robinson. Where Robinson was primarily a rhythm tapper, dancing erect, Astaire merges tap with ballroom and ballet, using his upper body in ways Robinson never attempted. But in the 1930s, the two men kept paying one another decorous lip service. In 1934, when someone told Astaire that he was the greatest dancer in America, Astaire replied, “I appreciate your kind word, and I want to thank you, but it isn’t true. The greatest dancer who ever came to Hollywood is over at the Fox studio right now. His name is Bill Robinson.” Among the numerous framed, autographed photos of stars on Robinsons’ apartment walls was one of Fred Astaire, signed to Robinson, “the greatest dancer the world, you or I have ever seen.” In a guest piece for Ed Sullivan’s syndicated column, “Looking at Hollywood,” about people who possessed both “rhythm and humor,” Astaire wrote glowingly of Robinson: “The man’s a walking jam session. He’s nature’s interpreter of starting out together and finishing together.”

Robinson had a harder time navigating the politics of naming his favorite dancers, but the admiration went both ways. In a 1931 interview, he listed Astaire and his sister Adele, as well as James Barton and Buster West. Robinson had a separate category for his favorite black dancers: Bubbles was at the top, but he also praised Eddie Rector, the Berry Brothers, and Pops Whitman. In another interview, Robinson was wary of naming “the world’s greatest tap dancer,” explaining, “If I should answer that question, I’d an [sic] awful lot of enemies and cause a lot of hard feelings. I would have to say Fred Astaire and can’t nobody beat Eleanor Powell... and the Nickolas Brothers [sic].” But then he regretted saying even that, and asked the reporter to “cross out all those names.” A year later, Robinson named Powell and Astaire as his favorites in the New York Times. And after seeing Astaire’s “Bojangles of Harlem” routine, Robinson called Astaire to thank him. The International News Service ran a photograph of Robinson, his mouth open, one leg raised as if he couldn’t keep himself still, on a telephone as he looked excitedly at a photograph of Fred Astaire. “Bojangles’ Praises Astaire,” the headline read, and the caption explained that Robinson phoned Astaire all the way in London, where he was vacationing. “You always tell me that I’m No. 1 dancing man,” the paper quoted Robinson, “but after seeing you do ‘me’ you’re the head man, sure enough.” Swapping compliments was good publicity, and it must have been, at least partly, sincere: why wouldn’t two artists of such incredible caliber admire one another? And yet, in the cadence of this quote—the missing “the” before “No. 1 dancing man” and the final “sure enough”—there are hints of the old minstrel mask. It’s Robinson who must voice his gratitude, and Astaire who gets the freedom of shifting identities.

**Representing Black America**

Fred Astaire’s “Bojangles of Harlem” name-checked Robinson, but it was also a way for Astaire to signal his debt to black dance, with Robinson standing in for that wide field of cultural innovation. Astaire wasn’t the only one making this collapse: all over, white critics, endeavoring to define what was distinctly American about American dance, turned to Robinson as the best-known representative of jazz writ large.

Tango star La Argentina and modernist pioneer Martha Graham agreed that the dance of America, still being formed, would owe a debt to Native American and black dance, whose rhythms, they said, were native to the land. Lincoln Kirstein, the arts impresario who brought George Balanchine to America and helped found New York City Ballet, agreed, at least partway. “Indian dances somehow did not theatricalize easily,” Kirstein wrote, but the “American stage character par
excellence was the negro minstrel,” a type who “look[ed] forward to tap masters like Fred Astaire, Paul Draper, and greatest of them all, the born blackface Bill Robinson.”

“Born blackface” is an odd phrase, collapsing performer and mask, but then, that’s just what Kirstein does, in his abbreviated history of black influence on the stage: “the negro minstrel,” it seems, is negro. (Kirstein also encouraged Balanchine to do a ballet version of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and described the “dark continent” of Harlem as the source of “the only authentic elegance in America.”)

In a 1930 essay, the set designer Robert Edmond Jones opined that the “Spirit of America” was best expressed not by modernist pioneers like Martha Graham or Isadora Duncan, but “in the typical American dance, on the revue stage, the dance of Ann Pennington or James Barton or Jack Donahue, with another strange impetus from the dance of the Negro, from Bill Robinson, which suggests something deeper.”

Nearly half a century later, in a lecture on the development of an American style of dance, Agnes de Mille went through the history of tap and minstrelsy without a single proper name, until citing Bill Robinson as the first great tap soloist.

Even John Martin, the influential dance critic for The New York Times who was skeptical of the “strange notion” that “in the field of jazz dancing lay the solution of the problem of finding the real American dance,” praised Robinson’s genius.

The 1943 black movie musical Stormy Weather used Robinson’s career as a stand-in for the history of black entertainment in America. Robinson plays Bill Williamson—a name that links him to Bert Williams—and in the opening scene, a neighborhood kid brings him a copy of the glossy Theatre World magazine. “SPECIAL EDITION,” reads the cover. “CELEBRATING THE MAGNIFICENT CONTRIBUTION OF THE COLORED RACE TO THE ENTERTAINMENT OF THE WORLD DURING THE PAST TWENTY FIVE YEARS.” Underneath, there’s a headshot of Robinson, representing the entire “colored race.”

The movie begins with a parade that the historian David Levering Lewis has called the start of the Harlem Renaissance, when the all-black 369th regiment returned from World War I victorious and marched north through Manhattan to the strains of James Reese Europe and his Hellfighter band. Robinson plays a drum major, which may account for the mistaken perception that he actually fought in World War I with the 369th. The film takes plenty of liberties with Robinson’s career, inserting Lena Horne as a love interest and skipping over Robinson’s Hollywood film career altogether. On the one hand, this lets Robinson be a star—he never plays second fiddle to whites, they way he had to in integrated movies. On the other, it hides the pervasiveness of his influence, which extended far beyond a black popular entertainment tradition, extending all the way to elite opera stages. And, by turning a story of the “colored race” into the story of Bill Robinson, it masks the contributions of black performers writ large, at home and abroad.

Take the Ballet Russe. Ballerina Bronislava Nijinska, brother to Vaslav, wrote that they received their first dance lessons from two African American tap dancers, Jackson and Johnson, whom their parents had befriended while working at a café that hosted variety shows. “They brought a small plank to our home one day,” she wrote, “spread sand on it, and taught me how to tap dance on the plank.” Vaslav soon joined in. Perhaps Nijinska had Jackson and Johnson in mind when she choreographed heavy-footed, percussive works like Les Noces. Whatever the case, in the years to come, as jazz music and dance became increasingly popular in Europe, members of the Ballet Russe, like so many highbrow artists, followed suit. Leonide Massine’s Crescendo included tap dancing, as did his Union Pacific. Nijinska had ballerinas do the Charleston in her choreography for Impressions de Music Hall and for Le Train Bleu, and she even donned blackface to perform Jazz for her own ballet company in 1925. And, back in America, ballet dancers and modern dancers were
plumbing similar sources, in an effort to define themselves against Europeans.

The dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild has written persuasively about the way modernists from George Balanchine to Martha Graham adopted African traditions like dancing in bare feet, valuing improvisation and syncopation, holding the body’s weight closer to the earth than in European dance, and centering that weight in the pelvis. What Gottschild doesn’t point out, though, is that choreographers often used African-American forms as part of a conscious efforts to Americanize concert dance. “We didn’t want to be European,” Ruth Page said about the landmark work she and Bentley Stone choreographed for the WPA Federal Dance Theater project in 1938, *Frankie and Johnny*. Men at the saloon where Frankie went looking for Johnny jigged cartoonishly, Frankie did a Charleston, and—in a coup de grace that Page said made audiences in Paris boo and hiss at the profanation inflicted upon their native ballet (a story we may want to take with a grain of salt, given all the jazz in the Ballet Russe’s repertoire)—Johnny’s pall-bearers tap-danced. In ballets of this era, the tap dancing Robinson had helped popularize was everywhere. Agnes de Mille used tap-dancing in *Rodeo* and *American Suite*; Lew Christensen included an acrobatic hoofer in *Filling Station*; and Balanchine used tap in *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, a piece he choreographed for a Broadway show that eventually made it into the New York City Ballet repertoire.

Balletomanes tend to think of Balanchine as a master of the abstract who merged the high art of aristocratic Europe with American athleticism. What most people overlook, though, is where some of Balanchine’s athleticism comes from: not just from America writ large, but from specific dancers, experiences, and feelings. He admired Fred Astaire, choreographed for Broadway as well as concert dance stages, and danced alongside people like Lew Christensen who had cut their teeth in vaudeville. For a 1926 performance of *The Triumph of Neptune* in London, he darkened his face to play a black American named—prepare yourself for some noisy irony—”Snowball.” We don’t have a film of this piece, but Cyril Beaumont wrote that Balanchine’s solo was “full of subtly contrasted rhythms, strutting walks, mincing steps and surging backwards bendings of the body,” all inspired by black vernacular dance, and probably the cakewalk in particular. Even when blackness wasn’t a theme, though, Balanchine’s work was influenced by black dancers.

Take his masterpiece *Agon*, an abstract, narrative-less study in angles and contrasts. Race must have been on Balanchine’s mind: he choreographed it for Diana Adams, who was white, and Arthur Mitchell, who was black, in 1957, when showing an interracial couple was still daring. The name of the piece means “conflict,” and according to Alistair Macauley, “Accounts of rehearsal suggest that he was especially interested in the precise juxtaposition of white and black skin tones, just where a hand held a wrist or an ankle.” Mitchell knew tap and jazz as well as ballet, and Balanchine sometimes asked him to demonstrate jazz steps for the rest of the company. Perhaps, working with Mitchell reminded Balanchine of his other experiences with black dancers, like the Nicholas Brothers, whom Robinson had named as some of his favorite dancers, and with whom Balanchine worked on Broadway in 1937, as choreographer for *Babes in Arms*. One of the Nicholas Brothers’ signature moves was an electrifying slide into the splits, from which they’d lift themselves up, effortlessly and without hands, all in the space of two seconds. In *Agon*, Mitchell assisted Adams in a variation of that step, holding her arms as she slid down to the floor, her legs split, and immediately hoisting her up, quick as the Nicholas Brothers, again and again and again. “Ballet is woman,” Balanchine famously remarked—and here, a black man leads that woman through a new kind of step, daring, athletic, and heart-stopping.

For those brief moments in Mitchell and Adam’s pas de deux, *Agon* almost seems like a remake of Anton Dolin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, which the Ballet Russe premiered in Paris in 1928, back
when Balanchine was still on their staff. *Rhapsody in Blue* starred a ballerina as classical music and a male dancer as jazz, competing to see who could best represent the modern era. In Dolin’s scenario, jazz won.123 In Balanchine’s, ballet both subsumes and depends on jazz.

Fayard and Harold Nicholas may have inspired Balanchine, but Robinson inspired the Nicholas Brothers. Their version of his stair dance, in *Stormy Weather*, has just as much drama as *Agon*, albeit of a different sort. The Nicholas Brothers take Robinson’s traditional style and blow it up, dancing on two giant white sets of stairs, as if dwarfed by Robinson’s legacy. But it’s quickly apparent that they’re more than capable of filling his shoes: accompanied by Cab Calloway’s orchestra, Fayard and Harold Nicholas are triumphant, leaping atop a grand piano and pausing, masterfully, before they go bounding into the bandstand. “They bring the dance to the music and then they dance right inside the music,” Gregory Hines has pointed out—and he means more than the fact that the Nicholas Brothers physically join the musicians’ territory.124 Where Robinson tapped on top of “Old Folks at Home,” modernizing the minstrel song in *Harlem is Heaven*, the Nicholas Brothers take over this music—they’ve thrown their whole bodies into it, and now they can wear it, move it, power it. They bound up the staircase and descend in what should be an impossible feat, quicker than description: Fayard springs up and lands on a step in the splits (Bam!), Harold jumps over Fayard’s head and lands, on the next step down, in the splits (Bam!), Fayard slides out of the splits without using his hands, as if yanked up by some invisible force, jumps over Harold’s head and lands on the next step down in the splits again (Bam!), Harold slides out of the splits without using his hands, jumps over Fayard’s head and lands on the next step down in the splits again (Bam!) and all the way down the steps, till they’re both back up on their toes, running, gleeful, taking their bows.

The Nicholas Brothers honor Robinson, but they also emerge, in this scene, as the greatest tap dancers of their generation. Robinson, in contrast, begins to seem like a relic from the past. He’s out of place beside Cab Calloway and his hep cats in zoot suits. By the late thirties, that’s just how some members of the black press had begun to see him.

In 1937, the Associated Negro Press reported that Robinson “can frequently be found in the center of a group of whites, regaling them with his inimitable stories usually portraying some Senegambian in a humorous role.”125 Others complained that Robinson should not give spontaneous free performances in public—this was old-fashioned clowning, liable to make whites think that the “million-dollar artist” is “just a grinning pickaninny dancing on the street corners for pennies.”126 A headline in the *Afro American* shortly after Robinson’s death read, “Uncle Tom Role Pleased: Bo More Popular Among White Persons.” The article faulted him for telling “derogatory colored jokes... never dropped his ‘yes sir’ when speaking to white people.” A Kentucky principal even turned down Robinson’s offer to appear “during school exercises” because “he had become disgusted with the dancer’s jokes on the theatre stage and with his ‘Uncle Tom’ antics.”127 The black columnist Porter Roberts chided Robinson for his response when a radio announcer called him the “world’s greatest tap dancer.” No, Robinson corrected him, that title belonged to Fred Astaire. “Bill has shown that he really believes in the old saying, ‘To be white is to be right,’” Roberts wrote.128 “Bill Robinson’s case seems hopeless,” Roberts wrote in another column, and urged readers to boycott his films.129

These criticisms came to a head when news broke that Robinson would be dancing in a big-budget Hollywood movie with a white woman, Geneva Sawyer, who would be wearing blackface. Worse still, the stories said, he had chosen this partner on his own. The film, *Café Metropole* (1937) was to include a cameo by Robinson performing two numbers at a white nightclub. The first was
quite dignified: Robinson soloed in a top hat, white tie, and tails, doing the kind of routine that, while fairly common in his stage shows, was more elegant than his typical Hollywood appearances. But in the second scene, Robinson dresses as a sailor, and Sawyer, in a gypsy blouse and a shiny skirt with a long slit up the side, tries to get his attention by lying on the ground and waving her arms, sultry and beseeching. He pays her no mind, and—frustrated—she caresses, then bites, his leg. Robinson whips out a razor, drags her up by the neck, and then, oddly, they tap dance together happily before he sends her flying with a kick on the rump and uses the razor to slit his own throat. Then, wiping his neck, he grins at the audience, assuring them it’s all been fun and games.130

Watching the footage today, it’s hard to tell what kind of makeup Sawyer had on—she has dark hair and dark skin, but it looks more tan-colored than traditional burnt cork. Still, commentators—who had heard about the scene, but not seen it—were not pleased. The Associated Negro Press reported that Robinson had even interceded on Sawyer’s behalf, going “to considerable lengths to have her cast opposite him,” so that Fox would “overlook the fact that a white woman will be dancing with a Negro actor, the fact that she will be black face providing a mitigating factor.”131 The Plaidealer ran an angry letter from Detroit resident James Spencer, who wrote, “We on the other side of the veil know that colored women are tops in taps, just as are colored men in the same field. Why did Bill Robinson select a white girl, when there are so many deserving colored girls? Has Bojangles lost his faith in the ability of his race?”132

Not everyone was angry. Gamewell Valentine, writing for the Atlanta Daily World, defended Robinson from what he called “certain clannish, chauvanistic [sic] Aframerican critics,” explaining, “Bojangles considers himself an American first, and not a Negro.” Robinson, Valentine wrote, was simply trying to further his career—and he “would be crazy if he did not take every opportunity” to do so.133 Adam C. Powell, Jr, writing for the New York Amsterdam News, blamed the reporter for the ANP, whose story had neglected the facts. In truth, Powell wrote, the studio “contacted eleven different girls in the Los Angeles Black Belt,” all of whom either couldn’t make it or didn’t show for their appointments. Frustrated, Fox “up and blackfaced one of its dancing teachers.” But the ANP journalist had “distorted the whole story,” and “such a hue and cry was raised that when ‘Cafe Metropole’ had been taken from the cutting room Bill Robinson had been completely deleted from the cast.”134

Robinson’s scene was cut, but probably not because of protests from black Americans alone. According to the ANP’s subsequent coverage, “Bojangles was to throw his white partner to the floor and also come in intimate contact with her,” something that does, in fact, happen in the footage that survives. “This, according to the story, was more than Nordic prejudice could tolerate.”135 In integrated movies, Robinson couldn’t perform with the same freedom afforded him on all-black stages.

Hollywood kept Robinson in a position of servitude, but it would be a mistake to see his career as a straightforward rise and fall—up the steps in vaudeville, and back down them in motion pictures. In fact, to continue the analogy, we can see Robinson riffing on his positions throughout his career, not just in the way he goes up and down and up and down the stairs, dozens of times in a single routine, but also in the way he dealt with stereotypes directly, in his performance of primitivism.
“Primal Freshness” Meets the King

In 1926, The Nation ran a page-long appreciation of Robinson’s genius by Mary Austin. Austin argued that black art, free “from the critical oddments of the long European fumble toward cultural expression,” could provide “a point of departure for new adventures” in modern art. Robinson, master of rhythm, was her case study. “The modern American artist,” she wrote—and here she meant the white modern American artist—”would give one of his eyes” to access Robinson’s knowledge. Austin attributed Robinson’s genius not to training or smarts, but to his closeness with primitive sources, sources that he isn’t even “intellectually” aware he’s close to. Presumably, it takes Austin’s anthropological, white eye to point out that in Africa, “the buck and wing was a dance for the increase of spiritual power,” a power that Robinson’s dancing harnesses. Robinson’s dancing “restore[s], for his audience, the primal freshness of their own lost rhythmic powers,” offering “a clean, short cut to areas of enjoyment long closed to us by the accumulated rubbish of the cultural route.”136 It’s a disappointing formulation, but given the pervasive association between blackness, jazz, and primitivism, it’s not surprising.

Robinson worked within that stereotype, but he also turned it on its head. In Stormy Weather, that reversal turns him into a star. Robinson, sixty-five and shirtless, with vaguely tribal squiggles painted on his chest, is one of over a dozen drummers backing Chick Bailey—Robinson’s boss, and his rival for Lena Horne’s affections—in an operatic setting of Langston Hughes’s poem “Danse Africaine.” Hughes’s incantatory poem, published in his 1926 collection The Weary Blues, takes “The low beating of the tom-toms/The slow beating of the tom-toms” as both subject and rhythmic form, and in Bailey’s performance, the words seem to reflect a kind of sanitized and exoticizing fascination with blackness, playing straight to audiences’ expectations.

Robinson flouts those expectations. As Bailey croons downstage, Robinson climbs atop his drum and taps out syncopated riffs over the song’s predictable, steady beats. Soon he’s hopping from drum to drum, so that they become both staircase and percussion. The audience applauds him, Lena Horne adores him, and Bailey, threatened, fires him. There’s no question, in this context, that tap represents the modern, the new, and the defiant.

Robinson may have been doing something similar two years later when, at a Carnegie Hall program of “African Dances and Modern Rhythms,” he tapped to accompaniment of seven African drums and, reported the New York Times, “spoke a spurious African tongue to the delight of the crowd.”137 The performance was intended to show the link between Africa and the African American experience, but Robinson’s fake language could have been a way to mock the idea of direct, primitive, cultural inheritance.

There was precedent for this kind of mockery, in the spate of back-to-Africa musicals popular at the turn of the twentieth century, Bert Williams and George Walker’s In Dahomey chief among them. In Dahomey told the story of a syndicate hoping to colonize part of West Africa for black American expats. When they get to Africa, it’s not what they imagine, and the scheme goes kaput.138 Other black musicals had similar themes: The Star of Zanzibar, performed by the Southern Smart Set in 1909, told the story of a black American campaigning for colonization as a solution to American racial unease; when he gets to Africa, cannibals mistake him for a king, which is all that saves him from being eaten.139

These performances may have influenced Robinson’s fake African patter, and his stance toward primitivism, directly; they also resonated, on a lower frequency, in his performance at the 1939 New York City World’s Fair Mardi Gras Swing Parade. Robinson led the procession from the
Battery up Broadway, sometimes waving from his seat in a convertible and sometimes jumping down to tap-dance in the streets. When the parade reached City Hall, it turned into a full-on party, with local jitterbuggers hopping and twirling to the strains of Glen Gray and Eddie Duchin’s bands. Robinson took a solo, and it was a far cry from the lindy hop. In an enormous feathered and horned headdress, backed by a three-piece African band with leopard skins about their waists and spears and drums in their arms, he did a performance that—in the brief few seconds that made it to film—is markedly different from his usual style. He keeps his normally erect body low to the ground, shifting his weight quickly from one side to the other. It’s an impression of primitive Africa, of course, but it’s also Robinson’s version of the New Orleans Zulu.

Zulu is one of New Orleans’s most perplexing institutions: a black social aid and pleasure club whose members, come Mardi Gras, wear feathered headdresses and grass skirts, black their faces, and toss painted coconuts to the crowd. In the sixties, progressive activists pressured Zulu to disband, accusing them of perpetuating racist stereotypes. And at face value, that’s exactly what they’re doing—until you look hard at their faces. Under that layer of black paint, there’s one that’s bright white, a sign that instead of mocking themselves, the club’s members are mocking white versions of black primitivism. They’re also mocking white versions of kingship: King Zulu is an insurgent answer to Rex, the elite white krewe of the local power-brokers, who, every year, crown a powerful old man and nubile young woman their divine rulers.

Zulu developed from a black social club known as the Tramps, who decided to change their costumes from Bert Williams-style tattered outfits to impressions of old Africa after seeing the Smart Set’s performance of The Star of Zanzibar in 1909. When Bill Robinson put on the Zulu headdress thirty years later, he claimed a kingship that was simultaneously primitive and sophisticated. He imitated regular folk who were imitating performers like himself, who were themselves, mocking the white idea of a direct link from African primitivism to black American art.

Robinson’s Zulu dance stands in marked contrast to his appearance in the 1930 musical Dixiana, an antebellum romance that climaxes with the crowning of white Mardi Gras royalty. His character has no relationship to the plot: he appears in the final few minutes, just as the movie switches from black and white to color film, for Mardi Gras and, one suspects, for the famous Bill Robinson in his cameo.

Robinson plays a slave in tattered clothes, using a feather duster to tidy up the empty thrones of Rex and his queen. They’re located, conveniently, atop a giant set of stairs, which the camera keeps panning down—first five, no, six, no twenty!—as if to amp up audience excitement about seeing Robinson’s most famous routine. Robinson tosses his feather duster off-screen and starts dancing. When he hears the cheers of a crowd, he smiles, fancying that they’re for him. But a cutaway shot shows that it’s just a parade on its normal route, paying him no mind. The joke is on him. But there’s another joke afoot, not quite fully formed, about the fact that if Bill Robinson were doing this performance in public, everyone would be cheering. What’s more, he has: the movie audience has been watching all along.

Robinson taps down the stairs in Dixiana, his dreams of recognition dashed. But when he first imagined the stair dance, it was in reverse. His biographers say that it originated spontaneously, when, at a performance at the Palace, he tapped down the steps on the side of the stage to greet some friends in the audience. But here’s how Robinson explained it to interviewers: “I dreamed I was getting to be a knight, and I danced up to the throne, got my badge, and danced right down again.”

It’s quite an image. At the height of Jim Crow, Robinson imagines dancing out of the
country altogether, and finding recognition under a completely different system of government. In some accounts of the story, he specified that the King and Queen of England would do the knighting. That idea puts him in a long lineage of black American Anglophilia that stretches back a hundred years, when monarchical Britain, which abolished slavery in 1833, seemed like a liberating alternative to a supposedly democratic America.\textsuperscript{144}

But Bill Robinson’s dream doesn’t just continue a tradition; it speaks to his present-day relationship with official power. In the dream, Robinson is getting a badge, which he can carry around and produce at any moment, proving his status to anyone who doubts it. In real life, Robinson carried a golden badge, in a diamond-encrusted case. It was a gift from the New York County Police department naming him Special Deputy Sheriff.\textsuperscript{145} Robinson’s affection for cops was well-documented: when he arrived in a new town on tour, his first stop was the police station, and his wife often sent the local police chief free tickets to one of Robinson’s show.\textsuperscript{146} Newspapers spun this as a show of his love for law enforcement, but given that Robinson frequented gambling dens, and that he was an easy target for discrimination and racial profiling, making nice to cops was probably a move for his own safety, too. Even then, Robinson didn’t count on law enforcement to be there to protect him at all times: he also carried around a gold-plated revolver, another gift from the N.Y.P.D.

In 1930, Robinson pulled out that gun while chasing a black man who had snatched a white woman’s purse. A police officer assumed that Robinson was the criminal and shot him in the arm.\textsuperscript{147} Nine years later, a New York cop booked Robinson for disorderly conduct because he was standing around in Times Square for too long. Robinson was looking up at a neon sign of himself, dancing, an advertisement for his current show, \textit{The Hot Mikado}. “Why should I move on? Why don’t you chase white people?” the officer claimed Robinson said. “Whether Bill said just that is something we don’t know,” the Associated Negro Press reported with relish. “What we do know is that BILL SAID SOMETHING FOR ONLY LOCKJAW WOULD CONTRIVE TO SO PREVENT.” Whatever transpired, the judge dismissed the charges, and set the famous dancer free.\textsuperscript{148}

The story highlights the strangeness of Robinson’s condition: on the ground, he was just another black man, subject to racial profiling and outright harassment. But eyes trained upward saw an image that was larger than life. This Bill Robinson was big enough to talk back to cops, to stand for black striving and dignity and success, and to dream of knighthood, imagining a nation that could recognize his genius for what it is—not innate primitivism, but a profoundly noble talent.

There’s an odd moment, in \textit{Dixiana}, where the young white hero tells his father how much his slaves, serenading their master as they labor, love him. “You’re always freeing some one of them,” the son notes. “That’s right,” his father replies casually. “As a matter of fact, I think I’ll go free a couple of those tenors right now.” Nothing comes of this suggestion; it’s an odd, throwaway moment, the result of bad screenwriting that can’t quite cope with America’s great sin, but tries to. But at the end of the movie, when the predictable love plot draws to a close, in comes Bill Robinson, cast as a slave, and for a few, glorious minutes, while dancing, he seems to free himself.
3. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Pick Themselves Up

When Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers start dancing together for the first time in the 1936 movie *Swing Time*, Ginger doesn’t know what she’s in for.¹ As far as she can tell, Fred has appeared out of nowhere—a well-dressed man who asks her to make change on a street corner, steals twenty-five cents, and follows her to work. But in the kind of coincidence that makes the wheels of romantic comedies go round, work is a dancing academy, with the didactic slogan, “To know how to dance is to know how to control oneself.” Inside, there’s another: “Our young ladies are sweet-tempered, patient and understanding.” When Fred signs up for a lesson with Ginger, she proves them both wrong.

Ginger has reason to be furious. But as Fred feigns two left feet and keeps toppling over himself, she can’t help but be charmed, and in spite of herself, she sings him an encouraging, go-get-em anthem, “Pick Yourself Up.” Revived, Fred tries again. This time, when he falls, he takes Ginger down with him. He insists that he has learned a great deal, and unleashes a clattering of taps to prove it. Ginger catches on, and they’re off, launching into a masterful routine as casually as the rest of us might tie our shoelaces. By the end, they’re leaping over the low dance floor fences with the freedom of mythic cowboys headed for more open country. Instead of going west, they’re headed up: to a rooftop nightclub, where Blore arranges for them to have an audition.

What Ginger doesn’t know, though audiences do, is that Fred is a vaudevillian and gambler who’s lost his money, left his fiancée back home, and hopped a train to New York, where he will soon play cards for a new suit and end up losing his own clothes. And when Ginger gets mad a second time around, Fred and his buddy Pop will make picket signs and go on strike outside her front door.

Hoboes, unemployment, poverty, protests: *Swing Time* refracts the social unrest of the thirties into a kind of comedic shadow-world, where the dominant appearance, social station be damned, is classiness. It’s a world where anyone could burst forth with incredible talent at any time—a klutz on the dole is really an under-employed, graceful professional. And it’s a world where dancing is heroic, possessed of an ability to set things right, revealing deeper, truer feelings than dialogue can get across. Watching Fred and Ginger dance, you know that George Metaxa, the Latin bandleader trying to win Ginger’s affections, doesn’t stand a chance.

At the height of the Depression, when class conflict was at the heart of American culture, Fred and Ginger displayed an elegant mobility not just on the dance floor, but also in society at large. Astaire’s characters weren’t wealthy, but he out-classed the aristocracy he both mocked and mingled with. Ginger—arch, brassy, and sometimes downright rude—was impossibly chic. The couple maintains shifting allegiances, or no allegiances at all; if anything, they’re fighting for themselves. For in lieu of class conflict, the films focus on personal squabbles: Fred and Ginger bicker in fine screwball form.² When they give up speech and start moving to music, they become their truest selves, wordless bodies, wooing each other through dance.

In the movies, their union is presented not just the logical outcome of a love plot, but also as emblematic of a national character. Again and again, Astaire and Rogers play the down-to-earth counters to foreign pretense, whether they’re up against effeminate Italians, effeminate Latins,
effeminate Brits, or conniving Russians, none of whom are very good dancers. The American
couple, with their American music and American dancing, always triumphs. These light-hearted
battles between Americans and outsiders can seem like screens to hide the country’s real, internal
struggles: conflicts about race and class that were playing out beneath the plots, and beyond the
borders of the screen, but that resonated in the dances themselves.

People commonly talk about movies from the 1930s as “escapist,” but that adjective barely
gestures toward the power of the nine films Astaire and Rogers made for RKO. Instead of reflecting
the fractious nation, these movies were melting pot art, burying contradictions and conflicts within
beautiful creations—all the more beautiful, perhaps, for being imaginary. The duo’s dance steps
came from wildly different locales: lily white ballrooms and smoky cabarets, black Beale street,
impressions of Latin America, ballet studios and vaudeville stages. The dance style Astaire and
Rogers developed, heralded the world over as the best in America, and for that matter, the most
American, inspired both highbrow choreographers and popular audiences, who imitated their idols
in dance clubs and classes. “If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures,” F. Scott
Fitzgerald wrote about his hero Jay Gatsby, “then there was something gorgeous about him, some
heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.” When Astaire and Rogers danced together, they
promised what Gatsby believed: if you performed properly, you could invent your own, graceful
world.

**Freedom and the Dance Floor**

Near the end of *The Gay Divorcée* (1934), Fred and Ginger break out of a European hotel
room and make a run for the dance floor. They’re escaping from a fey Italian whom Ginger’s lawyer
has hired to act as her lover, in the hope that, when her boorish husband appears and catches her in
a negligé with a concertina-playing lothario, he’ll grant her a divorce. Now that she’s fallen in love
with Fred, she needs that divorce more than ever. But she also needs to feel his arms around her,
and it wouldn’t be proper for that to happen in a hotel room while she’s still married, especially in
Dance Sensation, ‘The Continental,’” as movie posters, trailers, and scads of newspaper articles had
promised audiences. So they dupe their jailer by replacing themselves with backlit paper dolls and, all
flesh and blood, rush downstairs to the dance floor.

Fred and Ginger slip into the well-heeled crowd doing the Continental, a modified foxtrot
with alternating fast and slow speeds that *The Gay Divorcée*’s dance director, Dave Gould, proclaimed
would become “an overnight ballroom sensation among nonprofessional dancers.” RKO certainly
hoped so: they released an instructional film to show audiences the dance steps, and provided
newspapers across the country with a series of eight photographs to demonstrate the basic moves.
Some screenings of the film even featured live Continental demonstrations by local dancers, and
instructors, ready to meet the demands of eager pupils, took note.

The Continental’s defining feature, according to the lyrics, is that “You kiss while you’re
dancing,” Fred and Ginger, never big on P.D.A., and aware that Ginger’s still legally wed to another,
don’t bother, though at one point he does give her a quick peck on the hand. They do a balletic tour
jeté here, a series of spinning hops there, and at one point, he claps his hands off to the side while
she saunters around him in a playful impression of Spanish flamenco. A second later, they’re both
tap-dancing, combining continental dance with homegrown American movements. This is
complicated stuff, a far cry from those steps in the newspapers. The other dancers move aside to gawk admiringly at their betters, mumbling something that sounds vaguely French. But the couple is so wrapped up in the pleasure of being together that they don’t even notice they’re alone on the dance floor—that is, not until, after the music stops and Fred winds Ginger into his arms, hundreds of admirers begin to cheer.

Surprised and bashful, the pair flee up a wide set of stairs. Instead of making an easy exit, they’re nearly plowed over by an oncoming army of couples in outlandish costumes—each girl wears a total of four puffy fur armbands like some rare species from Dr. Seuss—streaming through five revolving doors. Those revolving doors signal the beginning of an orderly but dizzying modernism, one that whirls individuals around and spits them out in straight lines. It’s the inverse of Fred and Ginger’s closing move, when he spins her into his arms for a moment of intimacy. Faced with this impersonal mass, the couple scampers fearfully off to the side, and the chorus commences a dreary routine.

It wasn’t supposed to be dreary. The chorus’s experience had been so romantic, according to one newspaper story, that during just three weeks of filming, “seven young couples who were engaged for the musical numbers” got engaged to be married. The movie trailer had promised “half the beauties in Hollywood.” Close-ups of grinning chorus girls, pressed inside revolving doors like goods in a department-store display case, mimic Busby Berkeley’s kaleidoscopic commodification of bodies in movies like Gold Diggers of 1933. But the directors didn’t bother copying Berkeley’s fluid camerawork, and every few seconds there’s a cut to some new, giant formation: lines of dancers pivot around a central point. One woman after the next dives into her partner’s arms. Unlike Fred and Ginger, these couples do kiss while they’re dancing. But there’s nothing romantic about dozens of kisses happening at once, like a military display. Love has been sucked into the machine. The whole scene leaves you pining for Astaire and Rogers, who move as individuals, mapping out their own course as they take it, telling their own story with their own steps.

Finally, after seven unending minutes of watching people who aren’t Fred and Ginger, we get to see them again. They dance up and down the stairs, ballroom Bill Robinsons who add tango and waltz to their tapping. But their closing moves are more hectic sport than polite dance: they sprint up the steps two by two and, without a bow or sign of goodbye, flee through a revolving door. The camera lingers for long enough that you can see them on the other side, still running. Modernity has not sapped the spunk from these two.

It’s hard not to see the Continental as an accidental fable for the way Astaire changed musicals: he fled from the spectacles of Busby Berkeley and, earlier, Florenz Zeigfeld, substituting personal freedom for mechanization. “Either the camera will dance, or I will,” Astaire said soon after getting to Hollywood, knowing he would choose man over machine. Unlike Berkeley, Astaire had his dances filmed continuously, often in a single shot, to showcase his incredible skill. There were no zooms from on high, and very few close-ups, which would have cut the dancer into pieces like a cinematic blazon, effectively dissecting the same body the sonneteer—or cameramen—wants to praise. Plenty of these cuts interrupt the group sequences in the Continental, but Astaire and Rogers reframe attention onto their entire bodies, flung into action with emotional and narrative power.

These days, critics and fans tend to agree that “Night and Day,” not “The Continental,” is The Gay Divorcee’s masterpiece. “Night and Day” certainly has better choreography, with more tenderness and more dramatic tension—it’s the dance that makes Ginger fall in love with Fred, and that, by extension, makes all women long to be Ginger. But “The Continental” shows us a different
part of the team’s appeal: the way they encapsulated audiences’ desires to move with poise, freedom, and pleasure. Modern times got you down? Feel like just another member of the masses? the Continental, by virtue of its lousy group sections, seems to ask. Well, take a cue from these two, because they’ve figured out how to transcend all that machine-age monotony. And if you step lightly, you might too.

The Continental wasn’t Astaire and Roger’s only named dance: Flying Down to Rio popularized the Carioca, Top Hat pushed the Picollino, and Carefree promoted the Yam. These dances— unlike most of the numbers in Fred and Ginger movies—never influence the plot. “Cheek to Cheek” exists because Fred needs to woo Ginger, who mistakenly believes he’s an adulterous jerk. “Isn’t This a Lovely Day to be Caught in the Rain” needs to happen so that Fred can realize that, even though he hasn’t been able to ditch his fiancée back home just yet, it’s Ginger he truly loves. But in the named dances, Astaire and Rogers play a more generic role: the ballroom dance team popularizing new steps, showing audiences what they, too, might do, or how they, too, might feel, as they reel around together with what the dance critic Arlene Croce calls a “democratic right to elegance.”

Ballroom dance teams began proliferating in the nineteen-teens, when they performed as hired acts in cabarets, a novel form of public amusement that combined eating, drinking, and dancing. That may not sound like a revolutionary combination today, but when the Folies Bergere cabaret opened in New York in 1911, a reporter from the New York Times called it “an experiment,” and felt it necessary to explain, at some length, that patrons sat on movable chairs at movable tables. (Each table at the Folies Bergere also boasted a red button you could press to summon a waiter at any moment. Customers joked that they were sending “distress signals”; sometimes, you really need a drink.) Some cabarets featured elaborate, choreographed routines, with chorus girls trotting out from backstage, but ballroom teams were visible throughout the evening. They sat together at a table like any other members of the audience—and this was the cabaret’s real innovation. At an appointed time, the team would rise up and take to the floor, fancifying the latest dances with their own skillful flourishes. Even though audiences knew this was a choreographed performance, it had the illusion of spontaneity. When the team finished, audience members could leave their tables, find space on the floor, and start moving. They might not dance as well as the stars they’d just watched, but they could try, and they could add their own improvisations. Now they, too, were performers, entertaining the other guests still lingering at their tables, sipping champagne.

Americans had been dancing socially for years before the cabaret opened. But at the turn of the twentieth century, the upper and middle-clases were generally stuck in formal ballrooms, dutifully partnering whomever had signed the appropriate space on their dance cards. All this changing of partners left little time for romance to develop. (This wasn’t enough protection for everyone: Thomas Faulkner’s panicky 1894 book From the Ballroom to Hell warned against the “rapture of sin in its intensity,” when a woman’s “body thrills with amorous contact.”) No one bothered with dance cards at cabarets—if you wanted, you could have the same partner all night. And you could hold each other as close as you liked: the popular, ragtime dances sweeping the nation in the teens allowed for more physical contact than the waltzes and polkas of old.

Ragtime dances had evolved from the cakewalk’s high steps to a spate of quick two-steps, and while some had origins in the rural South, ragtime was a decidedly urban form, popularized on theatrical stages and spread in public dance halls. Most contemporary observers traced the ragtime dance craze to San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, a seedy string of saloons and dance halls catering to both underworld types and thrill-seeking slummers. Even distinguished visitors to San Francisco
took guided tours of the Barbary Coast—located more or less in today’s Tenderloin—and some clubs reserved seats for curious, tittering tourists. At the Thalia, one of the biggest, tourists watched from a balcony while the working classes lived it up below. Scantily clad women performed back-bending Salome dances, asked male customers to buy them drinks (and most likely solicited them for other, more salacious services), and paired up with customers for vigorous ragtime dances, one-steps done with such energy and sexuality that even their names were animalistic: the Turkey-Trot, the Bunny Hug, and The Grizzly Bear. Soon enough, those well-heeled observers would do the same dances on their own turf, for ragtime was travelling east with the ferocity of empire. At least, that’s the way some reformers seemed to view it: in their eyes, the dances colonized and impoverished Americans’ very bodies.

Anyone could be a victim. The urge to dance struck all classes and races, leading them out of their mansions, their apartments, their immigrant tenement ghettos and into the clubs. Doing the same steps together, writes the historian David Nasaw, gave people the sense “that they were part of a larger social whole, a new public of pleasure seekers that cut across all social divisions.” Not that such rosininess lasted, or was even entirely rosy: with the exception of a few “black-and-tan” clubs, dance halls were strictly segregated. But the music, and the steps, spread across lines of class and race, sometimes in ugly parodies. One ragtime dance was known as “The Nigger.”

All this cultural miscegenation and sexual energy had the old folks—and some young folks, for that matter—alarmed. The battle over popular dances reflected a fear that rigid cultural hierarchies, of both class and race, would dissolve. The former president of the medical school at the University of Missouri asserted that one-tenth of the insane population in the country “have lost their minds on account of troubles which may commonly be traced to modern”—which is to say, ragtime—“dances.” Dancing was particularly dangerous for women, since it could lead them to move with such abandon that they would be taken advantage of or, worse still, start working as prostitutes in dance halls. The authorities tried to crack down. According to one historian, fifteen female employees were fired from their job at a Philadelphia Publishing Company “for dancing the turkey trot during the lunch break.” Another woman was charged with disturbing the peace for doing the Turkey Trot on the sidewalk while singing “Everybody’s Doing It.” She was found not guilty, perhaps because she explained to the jury that the pop hit was so catchy, she couldn’t stop herself from singing and dancing.

Ragtime, like the jazz music and dance it spawned, was infectious. That’s why, in his fabulously satiric novel Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed portrays it as a national epidemic that whites, anxious about cultural miscegenation, tried desperately to staunch.

Reformers also went after the institutions where ragtime flourished. In 1911, Louis Martin, owner of the eponymous New York City cabaret, was taken to court for giving public entertainment without a license. The policeman who brought charges against Martin wouldn’t tell reporters “what he thought of the performance,” but apparently, he’d seen the ubiquitous Turkey Trot as well as fiery French routine titled, appropriately enough, “la danse des detectives.” The judge dropped the charges, but two years later, New York City made a new attempt to put the brakes on the cabaret craze, requiring that they close by 2:00 a.m. Businessmen dodged the authorities by opening “private clubs” that could stay open all night. Indeed, as David Nasaw points out, there was no way, economically or tactically, “to police the dance floors properly. Nor could there have been. How many inspectors would it have taken to police the 49 dance halls in Kansas City and watch over the shoulders of 16,500 dancers, 80 percent of them under 25 years old, who patronized them weekly? Or to supervise the 12,000 to 13,000 dancers who spent Saturday nights in Milwaukee’s dance halls and academies? In cities like New York and San Francisco, those numbers must have been even
more staggering. That didn’t stop one band of New York City policemen from launching a sting operation that could have come straight from a 1980s comedy: the “Tango Cops.” According to the New York Herald Tribune, this band of terpsichorean tough guys originated when a police commissioner chewed out his troops for not managing to bring more charges against those pesky cabarets. “Why did you fail?” he demanded. “The man who had not been struck dumb by the glare of the deputy’s eye managed to say, ‘It is, it is.... Well, none of the girls will dance with us.’” Unless the cops knew the latest steps, they couldn’t head out on the dance floor with the whores who, presumably, would eventually proposition them. The commissioner, who “saw the justice of the explanation,” had them take lessons. Soon, they cracked open a prostitution ring.

The Herald Tribune didn’t quote any cops who admitted to enjoying their skills, but the subtext was clear: even law enforcement was getting sucked into the dance craze. The combination of these two worlds, of regulation and pleasure, had perennial appeal, showing up in both highbrow and lowbrow entertainment. In 1927, Vitaphone released “The Night Court,” a short soundie about performers brought in for a variety of charges, including “murdering the Black Bottom,” the racy, rump-shaking jazz dance. The judge has them recreate their routines in court, and is so impressed that, instead of sending them to jail, he requests a reservation for the floorshow. By 1934, the association between public dancing and criminality was widespread enough that Ruth Page, a pioneer of American ballet, choreographed a piece about it. Hear Ye, Hear Ye also brought jazz dance into the court, this time to reenact a murder as various witnesses told their own versions of what they had seen at a nightclub.

If the cabaret seemed morally suspicious, haven to sinful movement that would lead to the downfall of young Americans, at least one couple did their best to make it respectable: Vernon and Irene Castle, the most popular ballroom team of the nineteen-teens. The Castles helped popularize and sanitize social dancing, publicly rejecting the Bunny Hug, Turkey Trot, and other ragtime crazes. As their manager Elisabeth Marbury explained, the pair’s dancing “eliminates all hoppings, all contortions of the body, all flouncing of the elbows, all twisting of the arms, and above everything else, all fantastic dips”—in which women, supported by their partners, leaned back into a sensuous arc, displaying their bosoms and no doubt rapturous faces. The Castles were graceful, dignified, and married—a symbol not of lusty energy, but of lasting, institutionalized romance.

For a few years, the Castles were everywhere. After making their names as cabaret dancers in Paris, they returned to America, where they performed in Broadway shows, as paid entertainers at high society parties, on vaudeville stages across the country, and in a slew of clubs and cabarets, transforming dance floors into spaces of aspiration. (That aspiration wasn’t just for the high-muckety-mucks: the lowlife would-be partners of the New York City Tango cops demanded “the Castle stuff” too.) The Castles taught America the syncopated Hesitation Waltz, the cleaned-up Latin Maxixe, and their own wholesome Castle Walk. More importantly, they showed that dance could be a civilizing force. Their names seemed tailor-made to be emblematic of classiness, but it was their movement, not their gestures, that made them seem aristocratic. They invented themselves through gesture.

Vernon was the better dancer, but Irene was a beautiful mover herself, following her husband with one jaunty shoulder a bit higher than the other—a stance Ginger Rogers picked up a decade and a half later. Irene was also a fashion icon, inspiring thousands of American women to shed their flashy jewels and heavy dresses in favor of simpler, dance-friendly styles, to don headbands and little lace caps, and, most famously, to bob their hair. She and Vernon also endorsed a small empire of merchandise, including Castle bands (to keep those wispy bobs in place while you
waltzed), Castle cigars, Castle shoes, and Castle hats. Irene even promoted a Castle Corset in the pages of the dance instruction manual she and Vernon published in 1914. That manual, *Modern Dancing*, included a list of “Suggestions for Correct Dancing,” chief among them: “Drop the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug, etc. These dances are ugly, ungraceful, and out of fashion.” The couple also noted that, for “freedom of movement,” a man should not grip his partner too tightly: “his arms should encircle her lightly, and he should barely rest his hand against her back, touching her only with his finger-tips and wrist.”

Not that the Castles were everything an anti-dance crusader would have hoped: after the 1913 cabaret curfew went into effect, the Castles lent their name and their appearance to both Castles in the Air, a rooftop café open until 2:00 a.m., and the Castle Club, which stayed open until dawn in the basement of the same building. They also opened a basement cabaret in Times Square, Sans Souci, and frequently appeared at Castles by the Sea, overlooking the Coney Island shore at Luna Park. But their most successful venture was also their most dignified: the Castle House, home to afternoon thé dansants. For a few dollars, and the approval of whomever was taking admission, customers could mingle with high-society patronesses like Mrs. Stuyvesant-Fish, Mrs. W. G. Rockefeller, and Mrs. T. J. Oakley Rhinelander. Between éclairs, lemonade, tea and cake, guests practiced their moves, getting lessons from the Castles’ staff or—if they were lucky—from Vernon or Irene themselves.

Dancing, the Castles maintained, need not be illicit. In fact, wrote their manager Elisabeth Marbury, young folks would be better off going to a supervised dance hall than “reading with avidity the latest erotic novel or story” or encountering lord knows what horrors in “the darkness of a sensational moving picture show.” But underneath all this respectability, they were having it both ways. The Castle House may have banned animal dances, but many of the steps the Castles taught were based on those very steps: one-step hops to syncopated music. Their debts weren’t just to ragtime, but, more specifically, to black artists. Vernon improved his sense of rhythm with drum lessons from the African-American drummer Buddy Gilmore. According to W. C. Handy, the black bandleader James Reese Europe—who took the Castles to Harlem nightspots where they could pick up new dance moves—was the real inventor of Vernon and Irene’s famous “Castle Walk.”

Europe’s band toured with the Castles and had a steady gig at the Castle House, though the architecture laid a pretty clear color line: go up one staircase, and you could dance to Jim Europe’s ragged tunes. If that seemed a might too edgy, you could go up another staircase for the sweet strains of white pianist Henry Lodge. (Not sure whom you would have chosen? Here’s something to keep in mind: Lodge was famous for composing the Turkey Trot spin-off “Oh! You Turkey!” Europe and his Hellfighter band went on to buoy the spirits of World War I soldiers in Europe, becoming a hero for black America.)

After Vernon died in a World War I flying accident, Irene called on one of America’s other favorite dancing duos for help: Adele Astaire and her little brother, Fred. Fred and Adele had worked their way up from vaudeville to Broadway, learning a good deal from the Castles along the way—they watched the Castles in their musical *The Sunshine Girl* nine times. The Astaires admired the Castles not just for their dance moves, but also for their classiness—they had danced their way to a higher social standing. Solo again, Irene must have realized that the Astaires were following a similar path, but with a twist. Like the Castles, the Astaires did fancy versions of social dances, but instead of rising from a dinner table to wow audiences, they appeared in musical comedies, where their dancers appeared as choreographed interludes in a narrative plot.

Several years after that run-in, Adele later left the stage to marry a British nobleman, while
Fred became the closest thing America has to royalty, a Hollywood star. There’s a story Astaire fans love to quote, about an anonymous schmuck whom we can all feel smarter than, because he wrote this memo to David Selznick after Fred Astaire’s first screen test: “Can’t act. Slightly bald. Also dances.”

But by that time, most people in the know were making more informed evaluations—the Astaires had been getting rave reviews on both sides of the Atlantic for years. “Colombus may have danced with joy at discovering America,” wrote the London Times, “but how he would have cavorted he had also discovered Fred and Adele Astaire!”

Watch this dance team, and you’d want to move too.

When Astaire went to Hollywood, he teamed up with Ginger Rogers, and they quickly became the most famous dancing duo in American history, the cultural offspring of the Castles. The Castles had become celebrities for doing what everyone was already doing—going out on the town and dancing. They brought sophistication to social dance, and made a form of public amusement seem glamorous. Astaire and Rogers did the same thing—except that, judging from what films of the Castles exist, this new pair was even more talented and more inventive. RKO linked the two dance teams firmly in the public imagination in 1939, when they cast Astaire and Rogers as leads in The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle, the last film the pair made together during their glorious run. But the resemblances had been on display since their first appearance together, in Flying Down to Rio, when they did the Carioca at a Brazilian nightclub. In fact, all Astaire and Rogers’s named dances—the Carioca, the Continental, the Picollino, and the Yam—were attempts to spark new fads that, like the Castle Walk nearly twenty years earlier, would get the country moving.

Astaire and Rogers performed in a vastly different culture than the Castles. In the years after the stock market crash, the country seemed to be teetering on the edge of economic collapse. Jazz rhythms still propelled the nation, but the wild abandon of the jazz age—which looked even wilder, and rosier, with nostalgia—seemed to be a thing of the past. A spate of musicals, Astaire and Rogers’s chief among them, sought to recapture an earlier, imagined innocence.

For all the obliging newspaper articles about how the public would embrace these dances, and for all the dance instructors who dutifully prepared themselves for onslaughts of students wanting to learn the new steps, only one of Astaire and Rogers’s named dances really caught on: the Carioca. Fred and Ginger “discover” the Carioca in Flying Down to Rio, the first film they made together. It’s essentially a Samba, with the added gimmick, courtesy of Hermes Pan, that partners touch foreheads as they dance. Pan didn’t invent the idea of touching foreheads—dancers had long been pressing their foreheads together, and for that matter, their torsos and their legs, in sultry versions of the Samba and the Maxixe. But in Pan’s rendition, touching foreheads can be as goofily flirtatious as the orange-passing relays teenage summer campers use as an excuse to nuzzle each other in public. At the same time, the dance has the charge of foreign novelty. And unlike the ballroom steps the Castles popularized—which concealed their debt to black and working class cultures—the Carioca plays up that debt.

Fred and Ginger learn about the Carioca at a cabaret, where they watch a crowd of well-dressed Brazilians touching foreheads on the dance floor. Like a good exhibition ballroom team, the couple rises from their table to perform their own version, complete, as is their usual style, with tap breaks. The audience claps enthusiastically, showing their approval of this American adaptation.

Then the floor show begins: two light-skinned singers in evening gowns sing the Carioca from balconies, while a chorus of light-skinned couples in trussed-up traditional dress dance the Carioca below. They do some sexy hip swivels and embrace each other closely, but for much of the time they do the Carioca with enormous grins, as if it’s the most wholesome thing in the world. Suddenly,
the camera pans left, deserting this batch of dancers, and everything changes.

The African-American singer Etta Moten saunters out in front of some tropical plants, wearing oversized jewelry and a basket of fruit on her head. Her costume marks her as lower class, and she’s literally lower to the ground than those first two singers: earthier, the staging implies, and more exotic. In Gold Diggers of 1933, Moten had a cameo as the token black woman in the “Forgotten Man” number, where she seemed to serve as the emotional consciousness of the Depression, belting out lyrics with more feeling than the movie’s peppy white stars. Here, she serves a similar purpose, playing a native informant who’s showing the audience the heart and soul of the Carioca. After a few verses, the camera cuts to a chorus of black dancers, who combine Latin rhythms and forehead fondles with moves straight out of the Cotton Club: they truck, charleston, wiggle their heads, and open their eyes so wide you’d be forgiven for the uncomfortable feeling that you’re watching a crew of up-tempo Stepin Fetchits. Still, these dancers are talented movers, pulling off harder and more interesting steps than their white counterparts. They’ve got more individuality, too: one couple takes a lengthy solo, something that their mechanized white predecessors never got a chance to do.

Black Americans embraced the Carioca, or “the tete-a-tete tango,” with enthusiasm and pride. Even though publicity materials called Astaire and Rogers “The King and Queen of ‘Carioca,’” the black press focused more on Etta Moten, “The Carioca girl,” who was feted, at one of her performances, with both a gala reception and an honorary brunch. According to one black newspaper, “Since the showing of ‘Flying Down to Rio,’ which featured, so far as we are concerned, Etta Moten singing the ‘Carioca’ number, dance halls, private dancing studios, frat parties, cabarets and whatnots have gone daft over the new wiggle that’s not a fox trot or polka” (emphasis mine). To paraphrase the contagious ragtime song, everyone was doing it. Over two hundred guests showed up for the Carioca Fiesta at the Rose Bud Studio in Harlem, and the Savoy, Harlem’s swankiest ballroom, hosted the National Carioca Dance Championships. Even the Ladies Board of Trustees at a black New York church spiced up their big annual fundraiser with a Carioca performance. High school students in Memphis did the Carioca at their annual festival; Baltimore couples danced it at a costume ball; and Carioca contests took place from Pittsburgh to Kansas City. White America caught Carioca fever too. Dance teachers learned the step at conventions and advertised it at their studios. Ballroom teams performed their own renditions at clubs and variety shows. An Atlanta menswear store advertised white tuxedo jackets as the most appropriate garb for dancing the Carioca. And in 1936, The Boston Globe published a recipe for a “Carioca Cake” so popular that it reappeared in 1948 and again in 1954. Not surprisingly, it was chocolate.

Hermes Pan may have come up with the Carioca’s most notable gesture, but Flying Down to Rio takes pains to present the dance as an Afro-Brazilian creation. After Fred and Ginger watched the light-skinned Brazilians dance, Ginger proclaimed that they’d “show them a thing or three.” They took the stage and, in a clattering of taps, earned the respect of their Brazilian audience. But after Etta Moten begins singing and the black dancers shimmy and shake across the floor, Fred and Ginger are truly impressed. “Kinda hot,” Fred says. “Let’s try a little of that, Babe.” Like well-to-do slummers at a Barbary Coast or Harlem club, they’ve found their inspiration. When they do the Carioca a second time around, they’re up on the same stage they took to before, but now it rotates beneath them like an amusement park funhouse. And they’re surrounded by the white chorus, a line of couples who—more statue than human—barely move. In contrast to these mechanical trappings, Fred and Ginger are all action and ingenuity—traits that, in the narrative the sequence sets out, they’ve adapted from black culture. While they never share the screen with the black chorus, Fred
and Ginger do swipe, and tone down, some of their moves: like those sanitizing Castles, they reject the shimmy, but they’re stomping and wiggling a lot more than in their first-go-round.

After their dance together, the camera returns to the black chorus, effectively folding Fred and Ginger into an Afro-Brazilian context. But the scene ends by emphasizing racial difference, not cultural blending. The white chorus is piled together motionless on the rotating stage, the awkward offspring of cheerleaders and a sculpture garden. Down below, the black chorus keeps dancing: raw, unstoppable energy, figured, spatially, as being closer to the earth. Whatever talents they have, the film implies, just come naturally. There’s an awkward camera fade, implying—intentionally or not—that this pattern will last long after we’ve stopped watching.

The Carioca is the only scene in *Flying Down to Rio* that hints at the country’s internal racial divisions: the separation in that final shot continues the pattern of segregation, still law in 1933. It’s a brief spectacle in a plot that’s otherwise focused on conflicts between whole nations, played out in a love triangle. A blonde American bandleader (Gene Raymond) and a sultry Brazilian aristocrat (Dolores del Rio) fall in love, but she’s already engaged to another Brazilian aristocrat (Raul Roulien). After much frustration, Roulien gives up tradition and lets del Rio make her own decisions. Surprise surprise, she chooses America, land of strength and freedom. But America makes up to Roulien, too. He’s trying to open a swanky hotel in Rio, and has hired Raymond, Astaire, Rogers and their band, assuming that American entertainment will beat the native offerings of his rivals. Alas, those rivals are in cahoots with the local government, who forbid Roulien’s hotel from having any live entertainment on the premises. The Americans come up with a daredevil workaround that involves tying dozens of dancing girls to the wings of airplanes that zoom around the hotel in a thrilling, vaguely militant display of cultural might. Americans are happy to learn Brazilian dance moves, but when the going gets tough, they win on their own inventive terms.

*Flying Down to Rio* has a throwaway plot, contrived, stagey, and poorly acted. Rogers and Astaire, stuck in fourth and fifth billing, steal the show. But the movie’s predictability should give us pause: of course America wins. America would win any time it came into conflict with another country in any movie Astaire and Rogers would make together. America would win (so the storylines went) because foreigners were elite, weak, corrupt, silly, and stodgy, while Americans were strong, athletic, clever, and free. And America would win because Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers danced better than anyone else.

**Forging an American Style**

By the time Astaire and Rogers starred in *Shall We Dance*, their seventh film, they were big enough box office draws that you can imagine the whole country seeing the film’s title and answering with a resounding “Yes.” Maybe that’s why RKO didn’t bother with a question mark. Of course the most famous dancing team in America was going to dance. But the movie opens with a tease: a roomful of dancers, not one of whom is Fred or Ginger. Instead, we’re stuck watching a ballet class, chandeliers twinkling above two-dozen ladies in white tutus, doing turn after anemic turn. They bang their pointe-shoed toes on the ground a little too loudly, their arms splayed above their shoulders in awkward Vs. Their ballet masters walk back and forth waving their arms in what seems to be a wholly ineffectual gesture, like children pretending to conduct a symphony. Everyone is taking him or herself way too seriously, and it doesn’t make you eager to sign up for a lesson.

The camera follows a uniformed errand boy through the ballroom and out into the hall,
where—perhaps because it’s all more pretension than he can stand—he draws a goofy pencil mustache onto a portrait of the character actor Edward Everett Horton. Horton enters the room and catches the boy in the act, but instead of chewing out the little vandal, he gets chewed out himself. The boy rattles off some French insults to the effect that the moustache is appropriate because Horton resembles a camel, and off he goes. Horton, flustered, hasn’t understood a word.

Horton’s up to his old tricks, reviving the rich, bumbling manchild he had played in The Gay Divorcee and Top Hat. But now he’s bumbling about amidst that most elite of European art forms, ballet, and though he’s the owner of the company, his employees don’t respect him. He’s only playing at sophistication. When Horton enters the classroom, his ballerinas have moved on to imitating waves, and his ballet masters refuse to speak with him. Once he reminds them that he’s the one who pays the bills, they point him begrudgingly toward the room where the company’s premier danseur, the great Petrov, is supposed to be practicing his “grand leap.” Horton opens a door. Finally, a familiar sight: Fred Astaire, tap-dancing to a jazz record.

Horton is enraged. Petrov, we learn, is a regular American guy who Russified his name to make it in ballet. This was a fairly common practice in the first half of the twentieth century, when audiences tended to believe that the Russians were the greatest dancers in the world. Marcel Leplat, of Seattle, WA, became Marc Platoff when he joined the Ballet Russe. (When he danced for Agnes de Mille in Oklahoma a decade later, Marcel would take on a name that sounded even more American than his own: Marc Platt.) When the Ballet Russe hired Betty Marie Tall Chief, she combined her Native American surnames and became Maria Tallchief, which had a decidedly Russian flavor. British dancers swapped nominal nationality too: Alicia Markova began life as Lillian Alice Marks, Vera Fredowa’s parents knew her as Winifred Edwards, and Anton Dolin was Sydney Francis Patrick Chippendall Healey-Key. He had plenty of names to choose from, but none were sufficiently exotic.

Remaking yourself to reject your homeland may sound pretentious, but Shall We Dance doesn’t let you believe for a minute that Fred Astaire actually wants to be Russian. He’s just using his showbiz smarts, the same way that, in Roberta (1935), Ginger dupes the toniest Parisian audiences into thinking she’s a Polish Countess turned jazz singer. (Astaire, recognizing her from their shared childhood in the Midwest, introduces himself as the “Marquis de Indiana.”) Europeans may be fooled by Ginger’s theatrics or Fred’s grand leap (not, incidentally, a real ballet step) but film audiences have the pleasure of knowing better. And no amount of funny accents or classical dance can hide what the plots present as Astaire and Rogers’s uniquely American style of movement. In fact, their disguises serve as foils for their American-ness.

In Roberta, Ginger sings “I’ll Be Hard to Handle” in Polish-face, then sits down to flirt with Fred. They reminisce about their days in the American heartland, teasing each other with schtick that could have come straight from the vaudeville stage, where both Astaire and Rogers began their careers. Realizing that they’re in love, they need to dance together, and a Polish folk dance or Russian ballet won’t do the trick. It’s tap they turn to—first to punctuate their jokes, like a comic’s “badoom-ching,” then to one-up each another, and, finally, to keep things from getting mushy when they wrap their arms around each other and step in romantic unison. Ginger grins with delight, her corkscrew curls jiggling like Shirley Temple’s, and every so often, she and Astaire catch each other’s eyes with the joy of co-conspirators. When the piece ends, they turn giddily around the floor and collapse onto a pair of chairs. It turns out they’ve unwittingly performed for the club’s janitorial and bartending staff, who clap happily. In a gesture that’s both gracious, self-mocking, and poking fun at the hoi-poli, Fred and Ginger stand up and bow with exaggerated formality.
At least Countess Ginger gets to sing American jazz as part of her disguise. When Horton catches Fred tapping in *Shall We Dance*, he rips the needle off the jazz record and proclaims, “The great Petrov doesn’t dance for fun!” But Fred is fed up with being “the great Petrov,” and insists that he’s still Pete Peters from Philadelphia PA. As if to prove that his hometown is ingrained in his body, he taps out the rhythm of “Philadelphia P-A.” Bored by the classical orthodoxy, he-longs to “combine the technique of ballet with the warmth and passion of this other mood”—jazz dance. So he’s been sneaking away to practice tap, combining it with ballet steps like the *entrechat-trois*, a jump where you beat your ankles together—first left in front of right, then right in front of left, then left in front of right—all before you hit the ground. When Horton sees this fusion, he’s charmed, but he won’t admit it. “Lovely! Beauti—I forbid that! That’s not art!” Pete Peters may have changed his name, but Horton’s the one who’s trying to be European, slavishly following highbrow rules despite his initial reflexes. Pete Peters, on the other hand, hasn’t lost touch with real America. He’s in love with a jazz dancer, and even though he hasn’t met her, he has visions of marrying her, so that together, they can give birth to a new kind of dance, the intermingling of their two styles.

*Shall We Dance* provides a love plot for the style everyone already recognized as Astaire’s: the union of jazz, tap, ballroom, and ballet. Ballet had been Astaire’s entrée into the world of dance. At the age of four, Astaire wrote in his biography, he went with his mother to pick up his big sister Adele at her dance class and, out of boredom, put on a pair of slippers he found lying around and walked around on the tips of his toes. Soon he was performing in toe shoes alongside Adele on vaudeville. In their first big routine, they danced down a giant wedding cake, dressed as a bride and groom, then ran offstage for a costume change and reappeared as, respectively, a glass of champagne and a lobster. (Two decades later, when Salvador Dali designed the sets and costumes for the Ballet Russe’s *Bachannale*, one dancer came out in a pink fish head and red lobsters adorned the thighs of the male corps, He probably didn’t have the Astaires in mind, but vaudeville extravagance shows up in strange places.) Fred and Adele’s first teacher, Claude Alvienne, was married to a famous “toe dancer,” La Neva, and the kids saw the Danish ballerina Adeline Genee twenty-eight times. But Astaire talked about ballet as a kind of arbitrarily repressive form. “I always resented being told that I couldn’t point my toe in,” he said, and soon enough, he shifted his attention, as *Life* put it, from “effete ballet” to “the manly art of tap.” Astaire, as we know, excelled in that manly art, but he didn’t truly give up that effete form. Rhythm tappers like Bill Robinson tended to hammer out patterns at ground level, while Astaire used his entire body, with an elevation and fluidity that came straight from ballet.

When the Castles captured the nation’s imagination, Astaire and his sister learned ballroom dance too. In the twenties, they even had a brief stint as cabaret dancers at the Trocadero nightclub in New York. But Astaire didn’t come into his own as a choreographer until he moved to Hollywood, where he had the time and ability to perfect his dances, yoking together so many styles—sometimes seamlessly, like that tap-danced *entrechat-trois*, and sometimes with violent, exciting breaks—as when he and Ginger, swirling elegantly in the Carioca, leave one another’s arms and suddenly hammer out tap steps.

It’s appropriate that, in *Shall We Dance*, Ginger plays the straight jazz dancer, while Astaire’s the great amalgamator. Rogers had no formal dance training, and no experience with ballet. She got her start on vaudeville, after winning a Texas-wide Charleston contest, and worked her way up the showbiz ladder. (As the critic John Rockwell puts it, she attended the “school of Fred Astaire and Hermes Pan.”) *Shall We Dance* frames the pair’s partnership as a union of high and low. Ginger, the vernacular artist, resents what she takes to be Fred’s snootiness (when he first calls on her, he does a
parody of a Russian prima donna which she fails to see through). But after she learns that he’s actually a regular American guy, their relationship begins to change, and by the end of the movie—once they’ve worked through some gossip-fueled spats and misunderstandings—they’re a happy pair, on the dance floor and off it.

Everyone knows that Fred woos Ginger with dance, and part of what makes her his best partner is that we get to watch her fall in love while that happens. Rogers may not have been as technically proficient as Cyd Charisse or Leslie Caron, two of Astaire’s partners in later films, but she’s a better foil to Astaire’s elegance. As Pauline Kael put it, “What makes Ginger Rogers so unsettling, so alive, on the screen is the element of insensitivity and the happy, wide streak of commonness in a person of so much talent. Maybe it’s her greatest asset that she always seems to have a wad of gum in her mouth.” Even when she’s staying in some sleek dream of a swanky hotel, Ginger seems like a no-nonsense working girl, quick with a snide remark. And when Fred takes her into his arms, you can watch her start to soften. But in Shall We Dance, it’s tap, not ballroom, that Fred uses to seduce Ginger, to show her that he’s no hoity-toity danseur noble, but rather, a manly American. In fact, he has three tap solos before they even dance together: twice in his private studio, and a third time in the belly of an ocean liner. Petrov may be a ballet dancer, but he’s got a funny way of showing it.

While the dainty ballerinas practice up on deck, Pete Peters goes below, where a group of muscular black laborers play jazz and do their work. Down here, the film implies, he finds his real, American roots. Fred sits in with the band for a verse of “Slap that Bass,” then does a dynamite tap dance routine that lets him exorcise the lingering effete spirits of ballet. Early on, he notices that his fingers are too stiff, and quickly loosens them up. Seconds later, his arms drift into first position, a ballet cornerstone, so he flings them to one side with an annoyed shake. There’s a staircase to a balcony above, and though Fred’s headed that way, he has no time for civilities: he vaults up some machinery and hoists himself over the railing instead. That railing is threateningly similar to the barre in a ballet class, and he lands in perfect plié. The music stops, and Fred turns his attention to the machines around him—they provide the regular rhythm against which he makes his own, syncopated taps. He spins into third arabesque, one leg behind him, two arms at different heights out front, but as soon as he gets there he frowns in self-disgust and taps off in the other direction. When he finishes, the black men down below cheer and applaud, to signal their approval of his co-option—and, his physical position implies, his elevation. Just as those Brazilians in Flying Down to Rio clapped for Fred and Ginger’s adaptation of the Carioca, the black workers in Shall We Dance seem pleased as punch that Fred Astaire comes to steal their show. And by aligning himself with working-class black men—who, according to stereotype, are sexual powerhouses—Fred gets to be manlier than pasty-white ballet could ever allow.

The next time that Fred and Ginger see each other, they’re walking dogs on the deck, and Astaire, having been anointed with black male sexuality, makes a move. Ginger is dismissive at first, but eventually they start spending hours together. It’s not unlike the scene that precedes Astaire’s “Bojangles of Harlem” routine in Swing Time. In that confluence of black masculinity, dance, and sex appeal, Ginger kisses Fred, leaving an enormous lipstick smear. It may have been red in real life, but on black and white film, it’s the same color as the makeup he smears across his face just moments later for his “tribute” to Bill Robinson. Ginger’s affections begin that transition. In the dance routine that follows, Fred’s in full blackface, partnering a long row of chorus girls at once. Offscreen, Astaire and Hermes Pan did turn to black sources for inspiration. Touring vaudeville in the nineteen-teens, Fred and Adele Astaire appeared on a few of the same tickets as Bill
Robinson, who traded compliments, and possibly steps, with Fred. Fred also hung out in the alleys near the theaters, picking up moves from black street performers. In the twenties, Fred and Adele had lessons—and Adele, at least, had some choreographic help—from the black choreographer Buddy Bradley, who worked at a New York City studio that specialized in teaching white customers popular black dance moves. (“Oh, Buddy has taught me such marvelous, new, dirty steps,” Adele told a friend after one of her lessons.) Bradley helped choreograph a number of Broadway shows for which he was never credited, and today, few people remember his name.

Hermes Pan’s first teacher is even less well-known. Pan, who grew up in Tennessee, said that he learned rhythm tap “from a black boy, a bit older than I was who worked for my family.” Most interviews didn’t even mention this dancer’s name, but one black newspaper did: Sam Clark. As a result of Clark’s influences, Pan said, “my rhythms became strictly black.” Years later, when Pan had teamed up with Astaire, he took a research trip to the South, where he hoped to pick up some new moves from black dancers on Beale Street, the main thoroughfare of black Memphis, as well as rural areas nearby. One newspaper summarized Pan’s beliefs like this: “Colored people are America’s greatest dancers,” and “an unobtrusive study of them in their home environment by one who knows and understands them will be productive of a wealth of ideas for screen presentation.”

It’s not clear what specific steps, if any, Pan discovered and adapted. The choreography he and Astaire did after his return to Hollywood wasn’t stylistically different from what they’d done before. But if Pan’s trip South wasn’t artistically fruitful, his experiences with black vernacular dancing did have narrative importance: they authenticated his creations. The story of Pan’s “strictly black” rhythms puts him in line with T. D. Rice, the minstrel sensation who supposedly learned to “Jump Jim Crow” from a lame black stable hand in the late 1820s. Rice may not have even told that story on himself; the first print source for it seems to be an Atlantic Monthly article in 1867, written a few years after Rice had died. True or not, the story was retold again and again, so ubiquitous that it eventually became, as Robert Christgau puts it, minstrelsy’s “foundation myth.” The story works because it tells us something everyone already suspects: that white Americans are learning from black Americans. But the myth has other meanings, too, implying that Rice’s performances were legitimate, if rebellious, transgressions. Pan’s story falls into this familiar pattern, giving black performers backhanded credit, while giving himself credit for his intrepid, cross-racial exploration.

“Slap that Bass,” the scene in the belly of the boat, and “Bojangles of Harlem,” where Astaire blacks up to channel Bill Robinson, frame tap as a black cultural form, giving black artists some version of their due—strange, uncomfortable, and stereotypical as those dues were. But in most of the scenes in Astaire and Rogers’ films, race isn’t an explicit theme, and tap just stands for a more general form of power and freedom, a form that stands not for blackness, but for Americanness. In Flying Down to Rio, tap lets Fred and Ginger take ownership of the Brazilian Carioca. In Roberta, tap lets Ginger sheds her Polish disguise. In Shall We Dance, tap lets Fred choose American art over European elitism. And in Top Hat, Astaire releases a battery of taps in a stuffy British men’s club, flouting their rules with his racket. It’s an eerie echo of what happened when Dan Emmett formed New York’s first minstrel band in the mid-nineteenth century. After Emmett and his boys secured a gig at a Bowery theater, they stormed into the reading room of the North American Hotel and “resumed their ‘horrible noise.’”

Though Astaire takes plenty of tap solos in the first half of Shall We Dance, the film starts to seem rather tentatively titled when you consider that he and Rogers don’t actually dance together until minute fifty-three. And when they do, they don’t unify styles so much as choose tap over ballet. She’s planning to retire from the stage to marry a boring rich guy, and her manager—eager to keep
his most valuable client—puts her on the spot by announcing, to a crowded nightclub, that she and the great Petrov have agreed to dance together. Fred comes vaulting onto the dance floor to a flurry of classical strings. His ballet moves seem to consist mostly of flinging his arms beseechingly off to one side while his torso leans in the other direction, just ridiculous enough to seem serious and European. It’s the first time Ginger has seen him dance, and she stands off to the side, awkwardly, until she decides to go with what she knows: tap dance. After she unleashes some healthy clatters, Fred does a few more swooshy steps, then lands a pirouette with a defiant stomp that leads into a clatter of taps of his own. Ginger grins with recognition. Now, he’s moving in a way that she recognizes, and—just as importantly—in a way that will allow him to assume his rightful, manly position as her partner. And though they do some ballroom steps together, tap dominates: even when Fred spins her around and around, he keeps tapping. When the song ends, they’re both sitting on a piano, swinging their legs with the same kind of casual pleasure they take at the end of “I’ll Be Hard to Handle” in Roberta—the other piece where, despite a fake foreign identity, tap lets Americans love each other without pretense. It’s a mass cultural form the country shares, uniting male and female, black and white, rich and poor.

The director of Shall We Dance, Mark Sandrich, wanted to hire Leonide Massine to choreograph a closing ballet for the movie. Massine, the celebrated in-house choreographer for the Ballet Russe, was a logical choice, but instead, Harry Losee got the job. Losee was fresh from making ice dances for Sonja Henie, and his work has all the empty flash of today’s tackiest skating routines. Harriet Hoctor, the guest ballerina, was more circus stuntwoman than artist. “People thought I was meant to be a dancer when I was a child,” Hoctor once explained, “because I could take hair ribbons off with my feet.” Her gimmick, painfully overused in this final scene, was that she could flutter around doing bourées on pointe while bending over backwards. Fortunately, Ginger steps into the chorus to replace Hoctor, rescue Astaire away from this rubbish, and confirm their love. They’ve managed to find each other, despite a lot of misunderstanding and the efforts of a conniving foreign ballerina who wants to claim Astaire for herself—and, presumably, for European ballet. Instead, Shall We Dance implies, ballet will marry jazz. And despite what goes on in the belly of ocean liners, the result will be both approachable and debonair.

Lincoln Kirstein, ballet impresario and Fred Astaire fan, must have been relieved. Kirstein is most famous for bringing the Russian master George Balanchine to America and for helping start New York City Ballet, but he was no Edward Everett Horton, blindly dedicated to the art forms of other nations. In fact, Kirstein railed against the “Great Conspiracy” of “Russianballet,” a force he found so monolithic that he strung it into an overbearing compound word. “Can the appropriation and Russification by flattery and pigeon-holing of our best young Americans proceed?” Kirstein wrote in his manifesto Blast and Ballet, which came out a year after Shall We Dance. He might as well have told the story of Pete Peters becoming Petrov. For too many Americans, Kirstein wrote, ballet was synonymous with “Russianballet.” The most successful dance company in America was the Ballet Russe, whose very name emphasized its foreign origins. Worse still, those origins were royalist: the Parisian courts and the Imperial school of Russia. The fact that France no longer had a king and that Russia had gone Communist was little solace. The point was, Europe had colonized American stages, and it was time to declare artistic independence. Americans needed dance that would provide a “legitimate reflection of a Democracy,” showing faith in the “political or economic system [that] has the best bet in America.” So what would Democratic American ballet look like? Turns out, a lot like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.
“American style,” Kirstein wrote, “springs or should spring form our own training and environment,” which didn’t just come from classical schooling. “Ours is a style bred also from basket-ball courts, track and swimming meets and junior proms.” American style had to do with recreation, with sport, with fun—and, crucially for Kirstein, with a sense of “direct connection, approaching personal intimacy or its theatrical equivalent,” between audience and performer. The American style “is frank, open, fresh and friendly,” embodied in the “behavior of movie stars like Ginger Rogers, Carole Lombard, or the late Jean Harlow.” The American dancer isn’t a distant performer, but rather, like the vaudevillian Paul Draper, is simultaneously “artist-guest and host.” That description could apply just as easily to cabaret dancers, who demonstrate the very dances they’re encouraging you to try on your own—like Fred and Ginger in Flying Down to Rio or The Gay Divorcee. Indeed, Kirstein drops Astaire’s name just a few paragraphs after Rogers. “The Russians keep their audience at arms’ length. We almost invite ours to dance with us. Anyone of us would like to know Fred Astaire, since we have known other nice, clever, happy but unassuming boys like him.”

Kirstein may have tried to claim Astaire as typically American, but Balanchine, who knew Astaire was exceptional, called him “the most interesting, the most inventive, the most elegant dancer of our times.” In fact, Balanchine told Kirstein he’d come to America because, as one critic paraphrases him, “it was the country that had produced Ginger Rogers.” In 1935, freshly hired to partner with the Metropolitan Opera, Balanchine was the subject of a New Yorker profile that emphasized his interest for all things American. He had recently return from a coast-to-coast roadtrip that included a bizarre little performance of American-ness: “In Arizona, Balanchine knotted a red handkerchief around his head, talked Russian to the Indians, and gave them the idea that he was a brave from a distant tribe.” What’s more, Balanchine is “an open-mouthed admirer of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.” Not only that, he “considers tap dancing can be used in a serious ballet, and has vague plans in the back of his head involving Fred Astaire.”

Shall We Dance turns those vague plans into film reality: when Edward Everett Horton finds Astaire tap-dancing in secret, Horton tells him they need to hurry up and sail for the states, because the Metropolitan was anxious to have Petrov perform. Balanchine’s name doesn’t come up, but when the movie came out, he was still setting work at the Met. In 1941, Life reported that “Not long ago Astaire was seriously mentioned for the post of soloist with the Metropolitan Opera ballet.” That rumor doesn’t seem to have been very widespread—at least, not in print—and the writer may have been confusing film with fact.

Some years later, Balanchine did try to hire Hermes Pan, Astaire’s co-choreographer, to create a work for New York City Ballet. “You represent to me the typical American choreographer,” Pan recalled Balanchine telling him—a sign that the dancing of Astaire and Rogers had replaced black jazz dance, as the sign of Americanness, and, before that, black cakewalkers. Pan was game, but couldn’t get out of his MGM contract, so the collaboration never came to be. Perhaps that’s why Jerome Robbins—also acclaimed for his typically American ballets—ended up choreographing I’m Old Fashioned for NYCB in 1983. The piece opened with a clip of Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth dancing together in You Were Never Louvelier. That must have been a hard act to follow. The piece didn’t get stellar reviews, and didn’t become part of NYCB’s repertoire. One that has, though, was supposed to be for Astaire: Balanchine’s Slaughter on Tenth Avenue, a ballet that originally appeared in the 1936 musical On Your Toes.

Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart wrote On Your Toes with Astaire in mind. It told the story, as Rogers put it, “of a hoofer mixed up with the Russian ballet,” and they showed it to Pandro
Berman, who had produced a number of Astaire and Rogers films. Berman liked the idea, but RKO rejected it. Rumor had it that they couldn’t abide a film in which Astaire didn’t have “the opportunity to appear in a high hat.” Instead of going straight to Hollywood, On Your Toes opened on Broadway in 1936, and Balanchine did the choreography—not for Astaire, but for Ray Bolger, he of the “rubbery legs and resilient knees,” as one critic put it. Bolger was a sensation, and reportedly had autobiographical reason to excel in his role as an American dancer trying to get close-minded foreigners to perform a jazz ballet. As a youngster at a Russian ballet studio, he showed off some of his unique legwork and was banished from the premises. 

On Your Toes was such a success that, according to Hollywood scuttlebutt, RKO considered buying it for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, even though they’d passed it up before. That never happened. Instead, Warner Brothers bought the rights and produced a mediocre film version, while RKO settled on another Russian-ballet-meets-American-jazz fable: Shall We Dance. The original title, if you needed more convincing that the movie was a spin-off, was Watch Your Step.

On Your Toes, of course, was a little different. It told the story of an American hoofer, trained in vaudeville, who convinces a Russian ballet company to perform a jazz ballet. Initially, the director refuses, but when his American patron threatens to pull away her funding, he caves. The company will put on a jazz ballet titled Slaughter on Tenth Avenue, with the hoofer as the star. He plays opposite a Russian ballerina, whose Russian lover is so jealous—without cause, it’s important to add—that he hires a thug to shoot the hoofer in the ballet’s closing moments. But, in good slapstick form, the hoofer, having gotten wind of this plot from the stagehand, won’t stop dancing, so as the orchestra plays the same bars over and over again, he frantically comes up with new moves, biding his time until the cops arrive and arrest the evil schemers. It’s a goofy, joyous ending, where a little innovation—dare we say American ingenuity—lets our vernacular artist come out ahead.

That final joke is also a product of vaudeville: the broken record gag. A variation on it shows up in Follow the Fleet (1936), as part of “All My Eggs in One Basket.” As Hermes Pan put it, this was part of an attempt to cram “every old vaudeville trick in the world in one number.” Astaire plays a worldly, gum-smacking sailor who used to be Ginger’s partner in a dance team known, we learn from an old promotional photo, for their “High-Class Patter and GENTEEL DANCING.” While Fred’s on leave, he and Ginger plan a benefit show to raise money for Ginger’s sister to restore their father’s boat. But Ginger is worried: her sister, lovesick for a sailor who used to be Ginger’s partner in a dance team, is going to leave town after the show, and when Fred goes back to the boat, Ginger will be completely alone. “Look, let’s not worry about it,” Fred tells Ginger. “We oughtta run through that new number.” They haven’t finished the choreography yet, but Fred knows Ginger needs distracting. “All My Eggs in One Basket” is his attempt to cheer her up.

Fred starts singing to Ginger about his love, but instead of wooing her romantically, he’s rattling off clever little lyrics. At first we can barely see how she reacts: her back is to the camera, emphasizing the fact that’s still inside herself, waiting to be pulled out of her funk. Eventually he grabs her arm and pulls her toward the stage, where—her performing instincts kicking in—she starts singing too. He pulls her arm again, this time, leading her all the way onto the stage. They start tapping in a circle, like Popeye: their feet move, while they make a sprightly angle with their still upper bodies. Fred changes steps, but Ginger, beaming, is still stuck in the old one, like a broken record. The gag keeps on for the rest of the number. Fred claps his hand to shake Ginger out of her groove, but every time he moves onto something new, she doesn’t bother following him. Eventually, her allegiance to the old results in physical injury: Fred accidentally runs into her arm, then her whole body. Later, when they do a little highbrow ballroom turn, he accidentally drops her. They
can’t even figure out how to bow in unison. It’s the goofiest the two ever appear together, and it’s delightful.

It’s also a kind of exaltation of the showbiz world in which Astaire and Rogers both came of age—the one that attracted working-class patrons for exhibitions as varied as black rhythm tap, faux-Russian ballet, contortions, comedy duos. In *Follow the Fleet*, they aligned themselves with a popular American art form, and they weren’t the only ones to do so.

Two years later, in 1938, Lew Christensen choreographed *Filling Station* for Ballet Caravan, the company Lincoln Kirstein founded. Christensen was one of the company’s star dancers, but he’d begun his career on vaudeville, back in 1927. When he started out, Fred and Adele Astaire had recently graduated from the circuit to musical theater, and Ginger Rogers—fresh from her Charleston contest triumph in Texas—was still making the rounds, singing and dancing and, in one of her acts, pumping herself across the stage on a giant rope swing. Lew and his brother William went for a more highbrow approach. Though they had grown up in Utah, taking dance lessons from their uncle and occasionally from a visiting Italian teacher, they pretended to be Russian ballet dancers. The pull of what Kirstein called “Russification” was strong—as was the appeal of Europe more generally. Within a few years, they were no longer hiding their heritage as “Christensen Brothers and Company,” but even then they did a Venetian Carnival act, complete with capes, tri-corned hats, and women in long, feathery tutus.

On vaudeville, the Christensens learned to be showmen, combining classical ballet with stuntsmen-like leaps and maneuvering their female partners with the speed and strength of professional acrobats. They were diplomatic about the similarities between mass culture and high art. On the circuit, Lew later recalled, “I worked with artists. Each of those acts—from clowns, comedians, to jugglers had worked to perfect their performances.” Eventually, though, the Christensens left vaudeville to study with George Balanchine at the school he opened with Lincoln Kirstein. By the late thirties, Lew was drawing on his training both there and on vaudeville, choreographing and dancing for Kirstein’s Ballet Caravan, and, eventually, working with his brothers to head up San Francisco Ballet.

*Filling Station* is a valentine to American popular culture, from comic strips and silent comedians to gangster films and the glamorous musicals that were Astaire and Rogers’s bread and butter. Its hero, Mac, is a gas station attendant who combines virtuosic classical technique with folksy jigs. He follows his *sauté de basques*—in which he throws one leg around from back to front, where, in a split-second, it becomes the new central axis for his jumping turns—with a series of looser, wide open barrel turns that are no less virtuosic. Mac also arm-wrestles two truck drivers, joins them in some vaudevillian tumbling, and waits on a delightfully annoying middle-class family whose daughter, in the original choreography, does a quick tap dance routine, probably in attempt to imitate Shirley Temple. Her father, explained William Christensen, who first played him, was “a cross between W. C. Fields and Caspar Milquetoast,” hero of the comic strip *The Timid Soul*. A cop and a robber make key appearances too. But *Filling Station*’s centerpiece is a comic pas de deux between a rich, elegantly dressed couple who stagger around like a drunken Fred and Ginger. In one gag, she barely manages to balance on one leg, the other extended in an arabesque, while he lifts her skirt, squats below, and comes up on the other side. This is no Continental.

Inept dance parodies weren’t uncommon on vaudeville. Christensen’s clearest predecessors may have been Jane Moore and Billy Revel, who kept audiences in stitches with their clumsy partnering. In 1934, these “royal jesters of the dance,” as they billed themselves, endeared themselves to the public with an impressively sloppy Carioca. A year later, they rolled out a
burlesque Piccolino, the dance Astaire and Rogers debuted in *Top Hat*. “The eye of the lay spectator follows with difficulty the intricacies of most our better ballroom dancers—at best his feeling for them is one of awe,” wrote one reviewer. “But in the hilarious stepping and misstepping of Jane Moore and Billy Revel he sees himself, and the ‘audience identification,’ which showmen hold to be so essential to the success of stage people, is made complete.” Bringing the virtuosic down to earth is like denying the divine right of kings. Put another way, slapstick is the great equalizer.

In *Filling Station*, Christensen wasn’t just burlesquing ballroom pretensions—he was poking fun at the conventions of ballet, with its stately pas-de-deux, at the upper-classes, with their wealth and privilege, and even more generally, at seriousness of any sort. Near the end of the ballet, the stage goes dark save for some frenetic flashlight beams, and when the lights turn back on, the rich woman is slumped across her date’s body. The truck drivers help hoist her offstage, lying on her back, her arms out as if she’s crucified. But just before they enter the wings, she pokes up her head, winks, and waves goodbye. It’s a charming little disruption, giving you the sense that you’re getting underneath the surface of what is, after all, only a performance. And in that space of real life, everything’s good fun. You and the performer are on the same team, hoping for entertainment.

Astaire and Rogers may have drawn on ballet technique while defining themselves against highbrow art, but in ballets like *Filling Station*, even highbrow art was defining itself against highbrow art, reaching across the proscenium to connect with audiences. This connection became a hallmark of the American Style, as imagined by critics and choreographers alike. According to George Amberg, curator of the dance archives at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the American style that developed in the 30s “was infinitely more intimate than the detached Russian manner; it eliminated the footlights, as it were, and spectators in every American audience delighted in the experience of recognition and participation.” Writing about a Ballet Caravan show that featured *Filling Station*, the critic Edwin Denby asserted that “an American kind of ballet is growing up, different from the nervous Franco-Russian style... [it] has an easier, simpler, character, a kind of American straightforwardness, that is thoroughly agreeable.”

We can trace that straightforwardness and openness straight back to Fred Astaire. It was a quality that came, in part, from his stage persona—but it also came from the way he held himself, and the fact that he when he danced, he did a version of what everyday Americans imagined themselves doing when they went out. In his named ballroom dances with Rogers, Astaire gave audiences the homeness of home. That sense of home also came from his sources: black and white, high and low, which merged into one beautiful routine after the next. It was as if, if you just muddled the genres enough, you could unite the whole, fractious country. Astaire and Rogers united dance traditions in a way that American ballet was just beginning to understand. And Agnes de Mille was watching.
It was just before 10 p.m. on October 16, 1942. The audience at the old Metropolitan Opera House on Broadway sat beneath Spanish friezes and baroque murals, waiting for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo—then home to the biggest names in classical dance—to perform their final piece. But when the golden curtain rose, there were no men in jeweled tunics and no ladies in feathery tutus. Instead, audiences saw a crowd of cowboys, motionless against a red sky. One of them raised his arm to wipe the sweat off his brow and onto his shirtsleeve, and Rodeo began. The cowboys leapt about, barely in control of their imaginary bucking horses. Soon they were joined by a spunky tomboy in dungarees and a button-down shirt. The Girl—played by choreographer Agnes de Mille—tried to impress her crush, the Head Wrangler, with her equestrian prowess. But in a bit of slapstick with enough pathos to rival Charlie Chaplin, she went tumbling across the stage, bucked from her invisible steed. The Wrangler didn’t even notice.

Classical ballet originated in the courts of Europe, but Agnes de Mille set out to democratize it. In pieces like Rodeo, she combined ballet steps with everyday gestures, modern dance, and vernacular forms like tap, jazz, and folk dancing, creating a new idiom of movement. And she coached her dancers to perform not as untouchable beauties or distant royals, but as real people who leapt and stumbled, sweated and soared. Audiences responded enthusiastically: two minutes into that first performance of Rodeo, they were laughing out loud, and at the end—the Girl had donned a dress and become the belle of the hoe-down with a new and deserving beau—they cheered through 22 curtain calls. When de Mille took her bows, she received a red, white, and blue-beribboned bouquet of corn.

Before de Mille settled on the title of Rodeo; Or, the Courting at Burnt Ranch, she called her piece American Ballet. She was consciously trying to embody national character, and not surprisingly, her vision of the country was hopeful, valiant, tender, and beautiful. After all, America was at war. Even the highbrow world of classical dance wasn’t impervious to surging patriotism and its underlying anxieties. De Mille’s own beloved had been drafted, and when the Ballet Russe toured the nation by train, they saw carloads of frightened soldiers leaving home. But the effort to nationalize dance had begun decades before, when the first generation of modern dancers, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, championed motion that came from within the individual, rather than having been handed down from an outside tradition, like European ballet. By the nineteen-thirties, when de Mille came of age as a choreographer, an entire generation of dance makers and critics were calling for an American style of dance, one that would set the art form apart from its European forbears.

Fueled in part by the values of the Popular Front, but also by the more general vogue for all things folk, choreographers depicted working men and women, not princesses and dying swans. For inspiration, they turned to the nation’s barns and dance halls, its vaudeville stages and musical comedies. Ruth Page and Bentley Stone collaborated on a retelling of the folksong “Frankie and Johnny,” complete with tap-dancing pallbearers. Helen Tamiris found inspiration in black spirituals for How Long Brethren? and Martha Graham used a minstrel show as the guiding structure for American Document. Jerome Robbins’s Fancy Free followed three soldiers on a jazzy, booze-fueled night ashore, and Lew Christensen made a gas station attendant into a hero. As a fictional ballet director explained to a young bunhead in the 1940 movie Dance Girl Dance, “Your interpretation of a
bluebird was lovely. But who do you think cares? Have you never heard of telephones, factories, cafeterias?

Even the Ballet Russe, which Lincoln Kirstein ridiculed as a “charming dotard” in his manifesto Blast at Ballet, tried to jump on the Americana bandwagon. In 1934, resident choreographer Leonide Massine created Union Pacific, about the construction of the Transatlantic Railway. Union Pacific closed with a reenactment of the commemorative photograph taken when the final, golden spike was hammered into the track—the moment when, as John Ford put it in his film The Iron Horse, released a decade before, “the last link in the girdle of the continent” was forged. It’s a celebratory picture of national unity, but up until that point, Massine’s West has been decidedly fractured: Irish and Chinese workers squabbled, Mexican girls and whores danced with gamblers at a saloon, and when a brawl broke out, chairs, tables, and bottles went flying.

American tastemakers were not impressed. John Martin, writing for the New York Times, panned the piece as “not even remotely” “recognizably native in flavor,” for it lacked an American “point of view.” No matter that the American poet Archibald Macleish had written the libretto, that the score incorporated snippets of American folk songs, and that some of the steps, like a cakewalk and tap dance, originated in America. “In the last analysis,” George Amberg wrote, “the ballet was American enough in theme, locale and names, but nowhere was there a forceful assertion of native feeling, implied in or derived from the subjects.” The Ballet Russe’s next effort to capture the national spirit, Marc Platoff’s 1939 Ghost Town, fared little better. Platoff—a Pasadena native who, you may recall, Russianized his name like Fred Astaire’s Petrov—turned history into a kind of pageant that included everyone from Comstock to Jenny Lind. According to John Martin, Platoff covered the “rip-snorting, sweaty, raucous days” of the old West with “an aura of daintiness that would almost make one believe that the region of the Comstock Lode was where Cinderella and Prince Charming spent their honeymoon.” No native point of view there—at least, not unless you were a confused little American girl play-acting in your favorite pink tutu after reading your big brother’s dime novels.

So what, for these patriots, would have counted as a ballet imbued with “native feeling”? The answers were idealistic, but vague. Russia had already become communist, and the French Revolution was old news, but in the critics’ eyes, European ballet still had close ties to the royals who had birthed and nurtured the form. That wasn’t appropriate for America’s anti-authoritarian mindset, or for its democratic spirit. The critics didn’t exactly say what American dances should look like, but they championed work that was lively, athletic, and dramatic, often exalting either the individual spirit or the charm of community. After two flops, the Ballet Russe impresario Sergei Denham caught on. Looking for a piece that would fit the changing zeitgeist, Denham turned away from his company’s rank and file, and hired a Californian who had been working at New York’s American Ballet Theater: Agnes de Mille.

With Rodeo, de Mille gave the people—and the critics—what they wanted. John Martin called it “heartwarming piece full of flavor, effortless, and extraordinarily well composed.” Others proclaimed Rodeo both “a fine work of art” and “an American ballet with authority,” for “the motion of real cowboys, a cowgirl and some feminine tenderfeet has been stylized and made danceable but not Russianized,” as audiences of the predominantly European company might expect. The piece, asserted another critic, “does not need any waving of flags at the finale to prove its citizenship,” for it is “as American as Mark Twain.” Sergei Denham was thrilled. For just $500, he’d gotten the Ballet Russe their “ham and eggs,” a piece they could count on to stir excitement and boost ticket sales. But Rodeo was bigger than that. It seemed to mark the triumph of an American style of ballet
for which critics and dancers had been searching for two decades, in part because it showed audiences a vision of their country they identified with and wanted to believe in.

*Rodeo*’s plot intertwines romantic conquest with the conquest of the West. Or, as de Mille put it with characteristic charm—she was an accomplished writer as well as a choreographer—it deals “with the problem that has confronted the American woman from earliest pioneer times and which has never ceased to occupy them throughout the history of the building of our country: how to get a suitable man.” In the opening scene, the Girl moons over the Head Wrangler, the broad-shouldered John Wayne of ballet. But he’s courting the Rancher’s Daughter, a demure, simpering creature accompanied by a group of friends from Kansas City who mince about like limber-necked bobble-heads. The Girl is too despondent to join the party that night, at least, until her friend the Champion Roper convinces her to buck up. She takes his advice, puts on a dress, and becomes the belle of the hoedown. When she and the Roper dance together, they’re a down-home Fred and Ginger. The crowd parts around them, and she realizes he’s the man for her. Dancing helps everyone find their proper social place: the couple kisses, and the crowd moves together with a beautiful vigor, forming, essentially, a more perfect union.

It’s not hard to see what elements of Western history *Rodeo* paves over. Presumably, the Girl and the Roper will settle down on land free for the taking, and there’s no sign that whites massacred Indians to get it. And while an early scenario featured a “homesick elderly Mexican” who sympathizes with the Girl’s alienation and urges her to join the party, de Mille wrote him out of the story for the sake of a tidier love plot. *Rodeo* doesn’t just avoid ethnic tensions—it shows a West without any ethnic minorities at all, and certainly without the whoring and barroom brawls of Massine’s *Union Pacific*.

As Henry Nash Smith wrote a few years after *Rodeo* premiered, “the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward” has been central to America’s mythic understanding of itself. The dance world latched onto the myth too. Dozens of dances, especially in the thirties, took place in the West, including not just the offerings of the Ballet Russe, but also Martha Graham’s *Frontier*, Eugene Loring’s *Billy the Kid*, and Sophie Maslow’s *Folksay*. Modern choreographers imagined themselves as pioneers in the wilderness, setting work on an empty stage—a conception that was particular empowering for women like Graham, Doris Humphrey, and de Mille.

“This new dance of action,” Humphrey wrote about the American Style, “comes inevitably from the people who had to subdue a continent, to make a thousand paths through forest and plain... The American dance is born of this new world, new life and new vigor.” De Mille agreed. “It is no accident,” she wrote, “that California produced our greatest dancers, Duncan and Graham, and fostered the work of St. Denis, Doris Humphrey, Maracei and Collins. The Eastern states sit in their folded scenery, tamed and remembering, but in California the earth and sky clash, and space is dynamic.” The hills of California, she wrote, gave her a sense of space, “the finding of earth-footage, the embracing and struggle with the fundamental ground.” De Mille opened her first memoir, *Dance to the Piper* (she wrote five) with the story of her parents’ decision to move from New York to California, implying that this westward move was fundamental to her identity. “This is the story of an American dancer,” the book begins.

De Mille’s vision of America had an appealing plot, but her other innovations were stylistic. She embedded American history into *Rodeo*’s very steps, and those histories were more tangled and complex than any myth. In some respects, de Mille aimed for historical accuracy. “It must be remembered that the period is 1900 and the country rock and spurious costume that is associated
with this has nothing to do with historic fact,” she wrote to the production staff. (It’s not clear, in her archived correspondence, what performance this warning preceded.) She promised to send them photographs of real cowboys so that the costume designer could see “the way they knotted their handkerchiefs and the way they set their hats and what their hats were like.” She tried to imagine the way cowboys moved, squinting in the sun, sore from long days in the saddle. She also studied the history of folk dancing. In the middle of the ballet, Aaron Copland’s rousing score breaks off for a square dance, set to silence. It almost feels like an anthropological specimen, plopped into the opera house.

But other movements didn’t come from the turn-of-the-century West, and they certainly wouldn’t have been typical for happy white cowboys. De Mille’s dancers did ragtime steps straight from the urban nineteen-teens, along with movements from modern dance, classical ballet, and the tennis court. Her choreography drew on the physical comedy of silent film and the ebullient choruses of Broadway musicals. And at the ballet’s pivotal moment, when the Roper does a tap solo that charms the girl into shifting her affections and choosing him over the burly Wrangler, de Mille coached at least one of her leading dancers to imagine that he was black. These moments of imitation and adaptation, both conscious and unconscious, mark Rodeo as an American ballet.

De Mille’s stylistic mixing may sound like the inevitable result of living in a pluralistic society, the integration of traditions that makes America itself. That does seem to have been her approach. She treated history like a grab bag, snatching whatever movements felt right for the moment. But the result is more mysterious, and more meaningful, than a melting-pot conception of culture lets on. De Mille picked movements because they held different associations, and audience picked up on those feelings too. For example, square dancing felt like tradition and community, associated with the Anglo-Saxon folk, while tap dancing felt like masculine freedom, associated with blackness. That’s not just a story about cultural melding—it’s also about the ways people see each other, consciously or not. And while de Mille publicly acknowledged some sources, others didn’t make it into her account of the ballet’s creation.

While anyone could perform dance steps—and they did, swiping them from their neighbors, learning them from teachers, stealing them from dancers they watched from afar—people couldn’t be as promiscuous as the movements they did. When de Mille choreographed Rodeo, the Ballet Russe had no black performers. Jim Crow was still law. And across the West, supposed land of freedom and open spaces, over 100,000 Japanese-Americans were relocated to internment camps. Onstage, we get a different picture of America—a pastoral romance where setters link arms and create something beautiful. The success of that myth depends on movements the myth can’t accommodate, histories carried forward in sashaying bodies and shuffling feet.

**Ballet and the Lively Arts**

Agnes de Mille framed her work with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo as a nationalist crusade. “Into their stronghold of tradition enforced by an almost Prussian discipline I entered to break down all their cherished habits, to awake instincts curbed and warped by inflexible techniques, to disturb the balance of power, to question their authorities, authorities which had brought them international success, champagne suppers, and glamour,” she wrote in her memoirs. Like Rodeo’s cross-dressing heroine, she styled herself as a cowboy. Unlike the Girl, she was successful, taming the “great, muscled brutes” of male dancers to do her bidding. “For two hours,” she wrote, “I rolled
on the floor with them, lurched, contorted, jack-knifed, hung suspended and ground my teeth... I broke them to my handling.”

That sounds pretty tough, but de Mille made sure to let her readers know that she was nervous. Otherwise, her story wouldn’t have the same patriotic, feminist drama. Just before de Mille entered the studio for that first rehearsal, Maria Bekefi, who owned the building, gave her a cup of “coffee for courage” and ordered some lollygagging dancers out of de Mille’s way. A few weeks before, de Mille had kvetched with her friend Martha Graham about how, as a short American woman, she could gain the Russians’ respect. “You be arrogant,” Graham said. “You’re every bit the artist any one of them is. This they won’t know because they don’t know art from a split kick, but they will recognize arrogance, and for your sake, for our sakes”—and by “our” Graham may have meant women, Americans, or both—“show them what it is like to be on the receiving end.”

So de Mille stood her ground. She may have enhanced the story of her fiery strength for the purposes of autobiography, but it does jibe with the memories of dancers who worked with her. She often whacked the stones of her wedding ring against the mirror to get everyone’s attention. When too many people were practicing on the sidelines of the studio in which she was running rehearsal, she threatened to break the legs of a pirouetting dancer. “She talked more loudly than anyone I’ve ever known,” another dancer fondly recalled. De Mille was caustic and funny and demanding, and her voice comes through forcefully in her memoirs, where she ridicules the men of the Ballet Russe for their effeminacy. Only the British dancer Frederick Franklin, who played the Roper, escapes her emasculating wit. The other would-be cowboys “had been trained to move like wind-blown petals,” and when they raised their arms, “up came the delicate wrists and the curled fingers of the eighteenth-century dandy.”

Like Fred Astaire’s character in Shall We Dance, de Mille wanted to inject European ballet with the rhythms of real life, and for that matter, with manliness. She found inspiration from all over, but one of the sources she liked to name in interviews and lectures was tennis, at which she had excelled as a girl. (She let you know it, too: she often bragged about her ability to beat talented male players.) Riding their imaginary horses, the cowboys had to jump off center with wide, arcing arms, as if they were leaning out to reach a ball whose motion they hadn’t initiated. De Mille combined that athletic stance with the posture of Martha Graham dancers, centered in the solar plexus, and with the motions of horses themselves. The men were used to jumping in classical ballet’s erect posture, with their hips beneath their shoulders and their torsos perpendicular to the stage. But de Mille made them leap about unevenly, as if jostled by their steeds. They had to move like centaurs, their legs galloping and pawing the earth, their top halves moving as if in separate reaction.

The men didn’t just need to do stunts at the rodeo. They also had to act like regular people, people who probably would never have heard of ballet and who certainly wouldn’t have seen one. To coach them, de Mille took inspiration from the era of silent film, when performers, like ballet dancers, communicated without speech. She had grown up in Hollywood, niece to the pioneering director Cecil DeMille, and her mother sometimes took young Agnes and her sister out of school to watch the movies getting made. The family would perch on a hill, having a picnic while battles raged and film rolled. De Mille responded viscerally to these scenes, even though she knew they were acted. Witnessing a beating in Anton the Terrible made her feel faint, and she sought refuge on an empty sound set. After she saw Joan of Arc burned at the stake, she was too worked up to sleep. Her father, a playwright who’d become a film scenario writer, hoped that she would follow in his footsteps and become a writer herself, but she was infected with the ballet bug at an early age. She
did end up writing—her first memoir was a bestseller—but by then, she had already made her mark as a dance-dramatist. After *Rodeo*, she was hired to the dances for *Oklahoma!*, becoming the best-known choreographer in the country. Even before then, though, she had experimented with uniting choreography and plot. Her early works were really character studies, half-pantomime and half-dancing. When she began a new piece, she wrote, she would imagine how a character “walks and stands,” in “the basic rhythms of his natural gesture.” As one of her dancers explained, she coached them to “trust the non-movement movements.”

In *Rodeo*, those non-movement movements signal the triumph of the American West over Europe. “Don’t plié,” de Mille told the male dancers, referring to the fundamental ballet step in which the knees bend out while the shoulders, hips, and toes remain perfectly aligned. “Sit your horse.” The men had to squat, pulling their knees forward and their rumps back. They learned to stride across the stage with their feet hitting the floor heel-first, rather than extending their toes like a precious offering. They learned to push up the brims of their hats brusquely, to crouch low, lean against a fence, and hook their fingers into their belt-loops. “We worked for four hours,” de Mille writes, “on a boy kissing a girl at a dance.” De Mille writes that she “broke” the dancers, and she did so in part by whittling down their numbers. When the Europeans protested that they weren’t dancing, she banished them from the studio and cut them from the cast. Those that remained were “mostly English and American,” including Freddy Franklin, playing the Roper who won the Girl’s heart. Even the casting seems like a nationalist fable played out in the casting, too: the Russian dancer Casimir Kokitch, who played the Head Wrangler, doesn’t get the Girl.

De Mille was by no means the first American choreographer to take lessons from what the critic Gilbert Seldes called “the lively arts.” Writing in the early 1920s, Seldes exalted popular entertainers like Charlie Chaplin and Fanny Bryce, musicians like Irving Berlin and Gilbert and Sullivan, and comic strips like *Krazy Kat* (subject of a 1922 ballet by John Carpenter, an early attempt at democratizing ballet that doesn’t seem to have gone over too well; Seldes, for one, found it forced). De Mille, apart from, say, Lew Christensen’s use of comic strip characters lurking behind the characters of *Filling Station*, or from the way black vernacular dance acrobatics filtered into George Balanchine’s movement vocabulary, is de Mille’s utterly tenderhearted.

The best slapstick—whether it’s Bert Williams, flummoxed and defiant, or Charlie Chaplin, clumsy and small, reminding us of how fragile our holds on our own bodies can be—tells us that humiliation can happen at any instant. That sensibility is part of what makes *Rodeo*’s heroine so endearing. The Girl must do all the steps the men do, but more clumsily. To achieve this effect, she must dance with secret virtuosity—throwing herself off the balance she has spent years cultivating, and shaking and hopping across the stage to feign loss of control over a horse that doesn’t even exist. She needs Chaplin’s hammy confidence (when she follows the men at a distance and hopes to join them, she puffs up her chest) and his despair (when they look back and shake their heads, indicating that she can’t join them, she seems to shrink a few inches).

There may have been an even more direct antecedent. In 1919, the comedienne Fay Tincher starred in *Rowdy Ann*, a silent film about a spunky cowgirl. Ann is a manlier cross-dresser than the Girl: she wears a floppy hat, a button-down plaid shirt, pants, and enormous fur chaps. She stands with her legs wide apart, her hands on her hips, and her chest tilted up, as if she’s trying to take up as much space in the world as she can. She strides across the screen and swings her arms with an aw-shucks bravura. When her father shirks his duties at the ranch to go out drinking, she gallops into town, lassoes him, and drags him away from the saloon. “Ann helped raise cattle,” reads one intertitle, “but her sideline was raising... CAIN.” She wields her pistol like a toy, gleefully shooting
off volleys of bullets whenever anyone annoys her. And when she’s bothered by an unwanted suitor, she punches him off his horse and into the river. Later, she challenges him to a boxing match in which she repeatedly stamps on his foot and jabs him in the face with so much force that he falls to the ground.

Like the Girl in Rodeo, Ann must eventually learn to be a lady, so her parents send her to college to civilize her. Her first lesson is in dancing. A crowd of young maidens, barefoot and in Grecian robes like Isadora Duncan, hop about in arabesques—one leg lifted behind, the other pointed toward the ground. In Rodeo, just changing into a dress helps the Girl become the belle of the ball, but not so for Ann. She shows up late, her face shaded by her hat, her boots poking out from under her toga, her holster strapped to her hip. Uneasy with her new, highfalutin’ surroundings, she punches her classmates and brandishes her gun. Gradually, though, college smooths out at least some of her rough edges, and eventually, she wears a long dress. Not that she’s fully demure: when one of her classmates reads a book in an armchair, Ann sits cavalierly on its arm, her own arm draped about her female friend’s shoulders.

Unlike de Mille’s Girl, Ann doesn’t care about finding a man for herself. She’s more interested in preserving the bonds between women. When she realizes that a man she had caught cheating at cards earlier in the story plans to marry one of her classmates, ripping her away from the idyllic girl’s school, Ann leaps into action. Perched on a fire escape, she lassoes the villain while he’s driving, detaining him until the police can come make an arrest for other, never fully-explained wrong-doings. His now-former fiancé thanks Ann and returns to school, where the girls share a bedroom. In the final scene, Ann, still rowdy, starts a pillow fight.

It’s not clear that de Mille watched Rowdy Ann, but she easily could have. In Rodeo’s opening scene, the Girl offers the same transgressive pleasures Ann does, with the same wide stance, the same exaggerated arm swings and swelling chest. The Girl is a little less capable, of course—that’s where the slapstick comes in—and her romance with the Roper means she can’t be the kind of proto-buch heroine Ann is. But she’s still a frisky loner, demonstrating, by means of actions instead of language, her character—longings, foibles, and all.

The Girl’s most obvious precedent, though, is a character in de Mille’s “Western Dance.” “Western Dance” was part of American Suite, a collection of pieces de Mille worked on in the 1930s, when she was dancing in London and, far from home, working out a sense of her national identity.33 The women in “Western Dance” gallop across the stage on invisible horses, executing the same movements de Mille would teach the Ballet Russe’s male dancers for the opening of Rodeo. There are no film recordings of this early dance, but de Mille’s choreographic notes—notebooks and binders filled with scribbled pages about the steps and patterns she intended to have her dancers perform—are still around. Choreographic notes can be revealingly idiosyncratic, for while there is a standard method for recording dance, Labanotation, few people have learned it. Until video became widespread, most choreographers, de Mille included, would use normal language to jot down their ideas, putting movement into language, and language into movement. We can’t say, for certain, what the movements looked like, or even if choreographers ended up using the same steps they jotted down on the page. But choreographic notes still provide clues about how dances may have looked, and—crucially—how choreographers thought about their movements. Lucky for us, de Mille, a talented writer, was unusually descriptive.

According to her notes, “Western Dance” began with a group of girls enter the stage, “running, skipping, & galloping,” and even rolling their heads like frisky horses. Other movements suggest the influence of Irish jigs and black tap dancing: “shuffling,” “tapping,” and “clicking of
heels.” The girls’ movements also owe something to Broadway chorus lines: the girls who enter first do so in a line that “pivots” in unison. After a “tap break,” the “line changes direction,” still in unison, save for a girl at the end who “leaps and frisks out of bounds.” It’s the kind of individualism that might have made Busby Berkeley cringe, and that would have added some welcome relief to those tedious choruses in *The Gay Divorcee*. It was also part of a showbiz tradition, the unruly chorine.

In the 1914 all-black revue *Darktown Follies*, Ethel Williams distinguished herself from her fellow chorus girls by improvising a breakdown. Some of her peers claimed she did so out of necessity, not desire, because she couldn’t keep up, but they were probably just jealous. Williams chalked it up to her superior talent: she kicked her legs higher than everyone else, and couldn’t be tied down to their more sedate steps. Seven years later, in the all-black Broadway hit *Shuffle Along*, Josephine Baker followed Williams’s lead. Baker clowned around at the end of the chorus line, and her insouciance delighted audiences. Though a chorus girl, she was soon paid like a star, and within a few years, she had become an international sensation, charming audiences at home and in Paris, and wedding a Italian count.

De Mille used a variation of their roles in “Western Dance,” making the girl who couldn’t keep up into a standout performer. The attraction may have been partly autobiographical: short and stocky, de Mille didn’t have a ballerina’s body. As a young girl taking lessons in Russian Ballet—from a former member of Diaghilev’s Ballet Russe, no less—she struggled to turn herself into a lithe ballerina, practicing along in her mother’s bathroom every night, and dreaming of becoming the next Anna Pavlova. Lucky for us, she finally embraced what she had: not the long, frail arms of a dying swan, but muscular legs made her excel at frisky hops and jumps, and a personality alternately sharp and self-deprecating. One of her earliest solos, *Stage Fright*, was a comic piece about an awkward ballerina.

When de Mille turned “Western Dance” into *Rodeo*, she shed the chorus line but kept that confused chorine, remaking her into the Girl. She also kept another section of *American Suite*: the running set, or square dance. In fact, the square dance would become a leitmotif for de Mille, in both her choreography and writing, for decades to come. For if chorus lines, slapstick, silent film acting, and sport provided the immediately likable qualities of *Rodeo*—qualities that audiences could recognize as the homeness of home—then folk dance was the ballet’s vulnerable heart.

**Square Dancing and the Dream of Purity**

Midway through *Rodeo*, the music stops for a square dance. Accompaniment, even a simple fiddle, might have shrunk this section. The movements would have seemed to belong with a particular song, to a particular place and time. Instead, the dance is iconic, stripped to its essentials. All you hear are stomping feet, clapping hands, occasional “Yee-haws,” and the Caller’s twang: “A runnin’ up the river in Injun style, Ladies in the lead and the Gents plum wild.” “Ladies to the center and the gents bow under. Away we go and we go like thunder!”

The caller makes the rules, but they’re more like suggestions than laws, setting up a benevolent order of movements the dancers whiz through, joining and loosening hands with their neighbors, secure in the knowledge that everyone’s in this together. De Mille returned to this vision throughout her career: in *American Suite*, in *Rodeo*, in the title of her 1958 autobiography *And Promenade Home*, and in her 1978 lecture-demonstration *Conversations about the Dance*, where square
dancing served as an antidote to the solitary, formless, postwar social dances de Mille took as a symptom of all that was wrong with modern life.

For de Mille, the square dance symbolized the best of America, a place where individuals come together to form a collective, where sashaying bodies do the rousing but respectful dances of their forefathers, honoring one another while they honor their history. But whose history was it? Early twentieth century folklorists, busily documenting the country’s cultural roots, were often searching for evidence of an unbroken Anglo-Saxon lineage. Square dancing, then, could seem like a sign of unadulterated whiteness, straight from the mother country. That’s why some conservatives were square dance boosters. If jazz was the product of urban life and black Americans, square dancing seemed pure. At the same time, artists in the Popular Front, committed to a multicultural vision of the country, were also embracing folk dance. After all, the folk were the original working class. And at a more general level, square dancing was just popular, with a lot of people who weren’t necessarily interested in its political valences.37

Square dancing descends from English country dances and French contredanse, seventeenth and eighteenth century forms that emphasize the patterns groups of bodies can make, rather than the specific steps individuals can execute. Couples move across the floor as imagined from above, creating changing figures in a kind of human kaleidoscope. Everyone must do his part to contribute to this impression; the dance depends upon cooperation. French contredanse gave rise to the square dance’s clearest ancestor, the quadrille, a dance in which four couples make the sides of a square, switching partners and walking about in new formations before returning to where they began.38 In square dancing, this is the “promenade home,” a victorious close of returning to where you belong—like rounding the field in baseball, or settling down in your hometown. It’s a fitting finale to a dance that, in Rodeo, is a sign of tradition itself, a ritual where you repeat the same steps as early Americans.

The persistence of Anglo-Saxon forms like the square dance fascinated America’s early folklorists. In the late nineteenth century, Frances James Child, one of the fathers of modern folklore, published collections of British ballads that he claimed predated the printing press. The next generation of American folklorists triumphantly found Child’s ballads surviving in Appalachia, which soon became a hotbed for collectors in search of regions untainted by modernism and industrialization. In the nineteen-teens, Cecil Sharp even claimed that he had found authentic English peasants living in the American mountains—a perception he seems to have willed into being by deliberately avoiding mountain-dwellers in clean houses, whom he assumed would know too much about modern culture, and the 13% of the Appalachian population who were black.39

Sharp is most famous for his work collecting ballads, but he also published books on dance, turning back to John Playford’s 1651 manual The English Dancing Master for guidance. Sharp and his cowriter, identified as “Jenny Pluck Pears,” updated Playford’s descriptions for a modern audience, sometimes updating the steps as well. Sharp wanted to revive these forms, so he sought to make them more buoyant, lively, and simple.40 They caught on quickly. By the time Rodeo was performed, you could go folk dancing at a different New York City venue every night of the week, and while you’d have the opportunity to learn Italian, Greek, and Scottish dances, American Square dancing was by far the most popular.41

Square dancing flourished amidst a wider nostalgia for rural culture—a nostalgia that sprang up as thousands of American moved from the country to the city. While “race” records by black artist were wildly popular, so were white “hillbilly” records, with nasal balladeers and fast-paced string bands. For people who had grown up in the country, hillbilly music sounded like home; for
city-dwellers, it offered a glimpse into a culture that seemed to be vanishing, if it hadn’t vanished already—the old, pastoral America, before the days of recording, back when people made their own music.

Country people were supposed to be closer to the earth, and whether they were driving cattle across the West or farming in the mountains of Virginia, they were seen as the heart of the republic. Americans exalted this past, and they also mimicked it, sometimes in loving homage, sometimes with an element of slumming. In 1941, 700 members of Palm Beach’s elite Everglades Club donned gingham dresses and overalls to attend a “Back to the Farm” ball complete with animals from Ringing Brothers’ Circus, a North Carolina hillbilly band, and a caller to lead the guests in square dancing. If that sounds like a crowd, try cramming seven thousand under one roof—that’s how many servicemen were expected to attend the largest square dance to date in 1941. (The organizers stocked 10,000 servings of ice cream, 20,000 sandwiches, and 24,000 bottles of beer.)

Dude ranches shot up in the Adirondacks, the Catskills, the Berkshires, and Long Island so that urban Yankees could get a taste of rural fun the weekends. “From now until late in the fall scarcely an office in Eastern cities will be without at least one bad case of Monday morning muscular pains,” reported the New York Times in 1941. “The office boy, the red-haired stenographer, the sad-faced accountant... even the boss himself—any one of these may be the next victim of the dude-ranch crape.” Ranch guests transformed themselves into rugged individuals. They ate meals from a chuckwagon. They watched rodeos, went on late-night hayrides, and had sing-a-ongs in the cowboy tradition—or at least the tradition of Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. In their loudest shirts and brightest bandanas, they attended rollicking barn dances, complete with live bands and square dance callers.

De Mille found square dancing infectious too. Watching one at a Colorado ranch in 1935, she was overcome by the desire to join in, and improvised a hoedown. According to one of her friends, a man jumped in from the crowd to partner her, swinging her so far into the air that her body was parallel with the ground. Never mind that such a move might’ve come straight from the Lindy Hop—de Mille, like so many Americans, was hooked. Judging from the reaction of Rodeo’s first audiences, ballet-goers had joined the throngs: after de Mille’s dancers began the music-less running set in Rodeo, knowing audiences clapped out a beat to accompany them.

De Mille’s interest in the lives of the folk extended beyond the square dance, and she devoted most of American Suite to exploring folk themes. One section, “Dust,” dramatized the Okie disposition that John Steinbeck and Dorothea Lange also brought to the national stage, and seems to have been similarly sympathetic and ennobling. According de Mille’s notes, “Dust” featured a small group of women, crouching low and shielding their eyes from the storms. “Dust—walking, walking into wind,” read her choreographic notes, along with “carry oil lamps—forward into dust & wind.” In 1941, the leftist choreographer Sophie Maslow picked up on the same theme, using Woody Guthrie’s Dustbowl Ballads as a score. Guthrie later performed onstage with Earl Robinson for Maslow’s 1942 piece Folksay. The worlds of the rural songster and the modern dancer weren’t so far apart: Guthrie married Marjorie Mazia, a dancer in Martha Graham’s company.

“Dust” was right in line with the values of the Popular Front, the coalition of leftist artists dedicated to raising awareness about the sufferings of working-class Americans. But not all of de Mille’s folk were patient martyrs. “Mountain White,” another section of American Suite, takes place in the supposed wild primitivism of white Appalachia. Here’s an illustrative chunk of de Mille’s program notes: “Cut off from surrounding civilization by geographical barriers, they are lazy, chiefly through lack of incentive to anything else.” She slips quickly from anthropological distance to
dilemma: “Their occupation beyond the bare supplying of vital needs seems to the casual observer to be moonshinin’ (the illicit distilling of corn whisky), shootin’ revenue officers, observin’ family feuds, singin’ and fiddlin’.”\textsuperscript{51} In those omissions of the letter “g,” de Mille seems to be taking pleasure in her identification with the other—the kind of pleasure city-dwellers might have masquerading as hillbillies for a Saturday night barn dance, a pleasure that moves from thought into speech, and from word into body.

With “Mountain White,” de Mille made her subjects’ race part of the title, and she did the same in another piece from \textit{American Suite}, “Georgia Cracker.” “Georgia Cracker” was a solo for a drunken, white sharecropper, but according to de Mille’s notes, it featured a number of steps associated with black jazz dance, like a “shimmy,” “continuous tap pulse,” and “charleston.” Plenty of white dancers tapped and charlestoned too, but the “zulu walk,” whether it referred to New Orleans Mardi Gras or darkest Africa, was clearly associated with blackness.

De Mille may have brought urban jazz dance into the world of the Georgia Cracker because she didn’t know what other steps to associate with drunken abandon. Whatever her motivation, his spirited jazz soon gives way to dismay. The farmer swoons and sleeps in the sun, and in the program notes, begins to seem as grotesque as an Erskine Caldwell character: an exaggerated type who comes to such a miserable end that you can’t help but sympathize with him. For in addition to the jazz steps, the notes call for “continuous falls and spasms to the earth,” as well as much caressing of the ground, implying that the farmer loves the very land that has betrayed him. In a particularly strange and touching sequence of notes, de Mille moves from popular schtick to an awareness of death. “6. Buck and wing with great floppiness,” she writes, referring to the old minstrel step. “7. Off to Buffalo,” she writes next, alluding to Busby Berkley’s “Shuffle Off to Buffalo” tap number. “8. Stand still and shake” could be frisky shake dancing, but it crumbles into a cryptic ending that makes it sound like it’s the shaking that comes from sobbing, instead: “9. examine hand (mortality).”\textsuperscript{52}

When de Mille choreographed \textit{American Suite}, jazz dance was everywhere. Despite the surge of interest in folklore, folk music, and folk dancing, most social dancers from the twenties to forties weren’t do-si-doing. They were flinging their legs forward and back in the Charleston, shaking their hips in the Jitterbug, and swinging across dance floors with acrobatic breaks in the Lindy Hop, continuing a craze that had begun with the ragtime syncopation that got America cakewalking. So even in 1926, it may have come as a surprise to readers of the \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} to find that the dance teacher Thomas Birchler believed that “the Charleston was never as popular as most people thought,” for “it is too dangerous a dance, requires too much skill, time and study to be popular and it takes up too much space in the ballroom.”\textsuperscript{53}

Birchler was attending the convention of the United Dancing Masters of America, who convened, reported the \textit{Tribune}, “with the avowed purpose of popularizing American folk dances and sounding the death knell of the Charleston.” In the years to come, the Dancing Masters grumbled about the Lindy Hop, too, declaring that urban clubs were just too crowded for “acrobatic hoppers.”\textsuperscript{54} We would do better to return to what one American tastemaker called “the formal movements, the studied steps, the graceful figures” of the square dance.\textsuperscript{55}

That American was Henry Ford. We tend to think of Ford as the man who sped up America by inventing the assembly line, mechanizing labor, and collapsing distances with his model T. Ford may have been America’s great modernizer, but he also tried to slow things down. An anti-Semitic isolationist, Ford wanted America to stick to what he saw as its healthy, Anglo-Saxon roots. He worked to preserve an earlier time in American history in Greenfield Village, the museum of historic buildings he started in Dearborn, Michigan, where he aspired to collect an example of every tool
Americans had ever used. But Ford didn’t want the past to be just a destination. He wanted to keep it alive. Square dances, he believed, could teach people to be as graceful and responsible as Americans seemed to have been in the imagined past. Square dances, said Ford, bring back a time that was less hurried and more neighborly. People lived further apart, but knew each other better. They worked harder, but had more leisurely recreations. They weren’t pushed by a mania for speed. There was a community of interest, of work, of pleasure. Farmers, folks who are supposed to be rough and ready people, had an innate gentleness of manner that is rare today. The square dances had much to do with that. A man was taught how to approach a lady for a dance. It was formal, respectful, part and parcel of the environment that was building American tradition. Perhaps progress means speed. I don’t think civilization does.

In 1923, Ford hired the dancing master Benjamin Lovett as an instructor and caller for square dance parties. Ford would invite friends and employees to dance, but he was just as much of an authority figure as he was a gracious host. If his guests weren’t up to snuff on the dance floor, he’d make them take lessons with Lovett. In 1926, Ford and his wife Clara published Good Morning, a manual of old-fashioned dances, most of which was probably written by Lovett. It became one of the most popular square dancing manuals in the nation, and stayed in print for the next two decades.

In Good Morning, Ford lamented the “one-on-one quality” of contemporary dances, where a single couple dances alone. “The group spirit of fun and comradeship are absent.” Dancing, Ford implied, shouldn’t just be a chance for couples to cuddle up publicly, with their hips shaking in the Black Bottom, or their torsos pressed together in the Slow Drag. Square dancing was ideal, in part, because bodies made minimal contact. According to Good Morning, “A gentleman should be able to guide his partner through a dance without embracing her as if he were her lover or her rescuer.” Under this guideline, even Vernon and Irene Castle would be too salacious. The Fords even suggested that men and women press handkerchiefs between their palms instead of allowing their hands to touch. When a man had to guide a woman by pressing one hand on her back, Good Morning suggested, he should use another handkerchief to protect her gown. This would keep both parties clean, germ-free, and minimally tempted by the pleasures of the flesh.

Ford launched a successful campaign to make square dancing a part of public school physical education, beginning in Dearborn and expanding to Detroit. Eventually, Lovett and his assistants were teaching over 20,000 students a week. By the 1940s, at least 378 cities offered square dance classes, and in Chicago and New York, it wasn’t unusual for some 6,000 dancers to show up for square dances in public parks. A Chicago woman wrote a letter to the editor in support of the park’s square dancing program, contrasting it with the “antics of the ‘jitterbugs,’” which made her nervous. The Jitterbug, a speedy swing dance that originated in black clubs and quickly became a national fad, calls for bent knees so that the solar plexus is closer to the ground than usual; with this low center of gravity, dancers can more easily twist their hips and leap into flips and turns. The concerned citizen continued, “This jumping, stamping, twisting, and wriggling that goes on to the tunes [?]”—and in that bracketed question mark, she tried to tear down all of American jazz—“may be all right in the depths of the jungle, but it’s a trifle weird and a good deal barbaric among supposedly dignified, cultured Americans.”

The jungle, of course, is the supposed primitive origin of black culture; the writer preferred an America that was bleached white and clothed in gingham. But no amount of paranoid nostalgia
could keep dance forms apart. Square dancing and jazz dancing had already joined forces in a new
dance craze. And despite the insistence of highbrow tastemakers, black and white dance forms were
mixing on concert stages, as well—even in the seemingly all-white, Western dream world of *Rodeo*.

**Cultural Mixing and Disavowal**

The conflict between jazz dance, a historically black form, and folk dance, generally
perceived as white, played out on concert stages, too, as choreographers and critics searched for
appropriately American inspirations for a new American style. Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis
had injected dance with the spirit of individual freedom, but what of America’s traditions and
history? Ted Shawn, St. Denis’s husband and the co-founder of their Denishawn company, opened
his 1926 book *American Ballet* with the assertion that “The dance of America” would “encompass all
forms. Its organization will be democratic, its fundamental principles, freedom and progress; its
manifestation an institution of art expression through rhythmic, beautiful bodily movement, broader
and more elastic than has ever yet been known.” Shawn’s claim sounds extraordinarily open, but he
had very clear forms in mind, and went on to cite English folk dancing, the waltz, and the polka as
possible inspirations for American choreographers. While he valued Native American dance, he
asserts that no white man could ever duplicate it, rendering it moot. Black dancing is off-limits too,
for while watching its “innocently sensual” movements can be pleasing, they can’t be imitated—and
presumably, the new American dance would be performed by whites. “When one sees a white man
do these dances, it is disgusting, because the negro mental and emotional conditions cannot be
translated into the white man. The white man performs these movements with a conscious
sophistication which changes their entire import.” At least in some ways, the critic John Martin
agreed, insisting on fundamental differences between the races. Martin’s 1936 book *America Dancing*
asserted that black and Native American art was not “our art. Next we shall be hearing of the fine
British rafter carvings of the Maoris, and the fascinating French sculptures of the African.” Martin
is right that, like Britain and France, America has acted as an imperial power, conquering Native
Americans and enslaving Africans. But his implication is that cultures should remain unchanged,
that assimilation shouldn’t happen.

Martin and Shawn were repeating a milder version of the Nativist politics that were so
popular in the twenties, the decade when The Ku Klux Klan reached its peak in popularity, and
when Henry Ford published anti-Semitic articles in the *Dearborn Independent*. In 1921, Congress
passed restrictive immigration laws over President Wilson’s veto; by 1927, only 150,000 immigrants
a year—none of them Asian—were allowed to enter in America. Writers like Lothrop Stoddard and
Madison Grant popularized eugenics, counseling the white Americans remain pure from foreign
influence, no matter what the “sentimentalists” who wanted America to accept the world’s poor and
downtrodden said. Stoddard lamented the decline of American’s good colonial stock, when only the
most “racially fit” made the journey to the New World. A recent wave of immigrant was changing
the country’s genetic makeup, Stoddard argued, and America needed time and isolation to “stabilize
her ethnic being.” Ted Shawn seems to have agreed, calling New York City “the most un-
American of any spot in the whole United States,” because its “huge foreign population... intends to
remain foreign.”

Martin’s objections to modernity were more benign than Shawn’s, and by the 1940s, he had
become far more open-minded, writing that the Lindy Hop, which had been invented by black
dancers, was a national folk dance that deserved as much esteem as square dancing. But in the early years, both he and Shawn seem to have been torn between their conservatism, on the one hand, and their desire to recognize and praise great art, on the other. Even Martin, after all, couldn’t help but acknowledge the genius of Bill Robinson. Shawn, only a few sentences after writing off after writing off white adaptations of black dance, writes that we could “study negro dancing with great profit as a source of production, and certain phases of it for the art dance of America.” It’s not clear what “phases” would have passed his judgment. He admits that the “Creoles of New Orleans, a fusion of French with Spanish and (some whisper) a touch of negro” could provide inspiration for American ballet, and that “refining” black folk forms, “we will be able some day to produce a negro ballet which will be a real art production.”

But Shawn can’t bring himself to make room for jazz dance, which he says should have no part in the American style. “There is no movement in jazz dancing but what exists in the dances of savage peoples,” Shawn wrote. “It is, therefore, not progress in any sense of the word but absolute retrogression, and I do not believe that an art can go forward by going back.” Somewhat contradictorily, Shawn also associated jazz dance with modern cities, where people were darting about so quickly in such crowded spaces that they had no inspiration, or space, to do anything but wiggle. Jazz was the “doggerel” of current society, and America needed to get back to its roots. This meant returning to an earlier way of life, and to the social dances of America’s British ancestors. And so Shawn congratulates Henry Ford for teaching his employees dances from America’s Anglo-Saxon roots, “accompanied by music which has just as vital a rhythm as jazz, but with no smell of decay.” Shawn even takes some credit for Ford’s success, because his own early American piece Boston Family met with great success in Detroit.

A few years after writing American Ballet, Ted Shawn founded Jacob’s Pillow, an annual summer dance festival in the Berkshires that continues today. In 1942, the same year Rodeo premiered, the Pillow presented a week of programming on “the American folk dance and its adaptation to theatrical usage.” Locals performed square dances; Ted Shawn composed four pieces based on square dances; and Agnes de Mille presented Hell on Wheels, which included a square dance.

When de Mille choreographed new work, she often used pieces of other dances she had already made; Rodeo’s unaccompanied square dance came straight from Hell on Wheels. Hell on Wheels, named for the portable brothels and saloons that followed workers during the construction of the transcontinental railroad, may have had an earlier source, too: the train piece de Mille composed for American Suite, “Daybreak Express.” This was anything but Ted Shawn’s dream of the unadulterated Anglo-Saxon folk. In “Daybreak Express,” de Mille put ballet’s pas-de-bourées, in which the toes move ever so closely together, alongside tap-danced “rail clicks” and “train rhythms.” De Mille was choreographing at a time when big bands commonly performed train songs, and when tap dancers like Bill Robinson were famous for their ability to imitate trains. She must have had all this in mind, for her choreographic notes also called for the “steady vibrations” of a “shoulder shiver,” and for the “jungle and jitter” of jungle jazz and the jitterbug. The folksy past buts up against the urban present, and for de Mille, it’s all fair game.

De Mille’s mingling of black and white, urban and rural styles is reflective of the way American culture itself has long worked. Even before the cakewalk became a national craze, slave and master watched one another in the Chesapeake, creating the Virginia Jig. According to Juretta Jordan Hecksher, eighteenth-century slaves modified competitive African ring dances, in which an individual dances in the center of a circle, to include couples. Couples were common in European
dance, where they reflected a monogamous society, but this was a departure for American blacks, whose African ancestors had come from polygamous societies. (Hereafter, almost all black dances were set for couples.) From about 1800 to 1820, white slave-owners would dance the Virginia jig, as well as another presumably black dance called the “Congo minuet” at their own fancy dress balls.74

Even the square dance, that supposedly pure Anglo-Saxon form, was not immune to influence. Some young square dance enthusiasts modernized calls, swapping the old-fashioned “Duck for the oyster” and “Spanish cavalier” for the up-to-date “Dive for the subway” and “Honolulu Baby.” According to a 1942 Los Angeles Times story, “When a call like ‘squeeze your honey, and swing like thunder’ echoes at a high school prom, the result is something more akin to Harlem than Kentucky.”75

In 1936 or ’37, a group of white students from the University of South Carolina went slumming at an abandoned synagogue-turned-black-nightclub, the Big Apple. Watching from the balcony, the students observed the dancers making elaborate circles and patterns as they danced to jazz records—possibly reproducing the form of the same family of African ring dances that spawned the Virginia jig and the cakewalk. But these shapes seem to have reminded the white students of a form they knew better: square dancing. For when the students imitated what they had seen—in a dance they named after the nightclub, the Big Apple—they added a caller who would holler out the steps the group should be doing in unison. These steps were part swing, part country dance.76 By the end of 1937, the Big Apple had become popular across the country. In Los Angeles, they were dancing in the street, infiltrating a Shriner parade to do the Big Apple, and six young men in Brooklyn were accused of stealing fifty cars to finance their Big Apple habit in New York dance halls.77 Some schools, including Washington and Lee, banned the dance, but that didn’t stop it from being performed at debutante balls and country clubs.78 President Roosevelt permitted it at the White House, where, as major newspapers around the country reported with excitement, the guests at his son’s engagement party danced the Big Apple late into the night.79 (At a press conference the next day, FDR joked that he thought the Big Apple lacked rhythm; this may have been a dig at the square-dancing half of it.)80 Even Winston Churchill learned the Big Apple, thanks to an American ballroom dancer who told reporters, “Not once did he step on my feet.”81

At least one newspaper writer asserted that the Big Apple originated with “Gullah Negroes” of South Carolina, but most reporters focused on the origin store above, which proved that the Big Apple was more than just another dance from Harlem—its origins were white as well as black.82 This set it apart from the way folks had pictured jazz dance in the past. As Bosley Crowther put it in the New York Times, the Big Apple was a “newfangled barn dance clipped by modern jazz.” He continued, “Amazing is the fact that, for all the individuality of swing, this latest creation should hark back over the years and join hands in a Virginia Reel with the amiable spirit of the Nineties. Can it be that a circle has been described—that the modern youth is coming down to earth?” Crowther praised the dance’s “exuberance and exercise,” and University of Southern California dance instructor Jane Hungerford agreed. She emphasized that the Big Apple was a variation on the square dance, which helped people socialize with one another.83

The dance begins with two to twelve couples in a ring, doing the Charleston to get the beat of the music, but when the caller cried out to “swing high” or “swing low,” they trade partners; callers might also holler for the Suzy Q, which involves pivoting on one heel and pumping your arms, or Truckin’, in which you shuffle your feet while wiggling your index finger back and forth.84 But unlike in couple dances, where each pair operates as a unit and can hang onto one another all night, the group of Big Apple dancers steps in unison.
Not everyone was happy about the melding of dance traditions they imagined as distinctly black or white. In an exhibition of folk dancing in Central Park in 1942, one-hundred dancers performed for an audience of thousands. According to a *New York Times* reporter, “there was a semblance of jiterbugging” in the grand finale, the “Paw Paw Patch.” The headlines were as alarmist as Pete Seeger when Bob Dylan went electric: “CAMOUFLAGED JIVE INVADES FOLK FETE.”  One wonders what the attitude would have been if all of Agnes de Mille’s sources were laid bare. For though de Mille never talked about in racial terms, “camouflaged jive” invaded *Rodeo,* too. Its movements come not just from country-western, square dance or even ballet, but also from jazz dance, in steps that de Mille herself imagined as distinctly black.

After the near-silent square dance, Copland’s score resumes for a Saturday night dance party at the Ranch House. The Girl, still in her dungarees, sits demurely on a bench, watching the Champion Roper enjoy himself at the party. He does a tap shuffle—the kind Bill Robinson would have learned watching nineteenth-century minstrels—and prances around in a circle, clicking his heels, “rather,” de Mille’s choreographic notes say, “like Schnozzle Durante.” Jimmy Durante was an enthusiastic, big-nosed Italian-American goof whose gruff voice charmed the nation in the 1930s, when his song “Inka Dinka Doo” became a hit. “Ink, a inka dink, a inka dinka dinka”—Durante would sing, before breaking into a piercingly off-key high note—“dooooooo.” “That note was given to me by Bing Crosby,” he’d say, “and was he glad to get rid of it.” The Roper is similarly playful, ready to be the center of attention, even it means making of an ass of himself.

As the Roper stamps his feet and flexes his muscles, other couples whirl around in ragtime steps that are more recent than the scene de Mille has set, at the turn of the twentieth century: the Bunny Hug and the Turkey Trot, dances that originated in the ragtime craze of the nineteen-teens, almost cartoonish in their speedy staccato hops. But the action really gets started once the Girl, who has disappeared, reenters the party in a new dress. Everyone freezes with shock. The Roper walks across from her, claps his hands, and snaps his fingers. The hoedown begins.

The Roper and the Girl face each other from opposite corners of the stage and begin to do the patterned movements of a country dance. They meet at the center of the stage, bob their heads, and retreat to their corners. Then they approach one another again, grabbing hands as if to shake a how-do-you-do. (The Roper—in a move that would have made Henry Ford cringe—wipes his hands on his trousers first.) But instead of greeting one another, they keep their hands clasped and spin around in a circle—all with a civilized distance between their bodies, leaving room for the Holy Ghost.

That formality doesn’t last for long. The Roper and the Girl begin to tap and stamp their feet so much that they seem less like Westerners and more like Fred and Ginger in a challenge dance, each one-upping the other in assertive freedom. The Roper, as Fred, leads the Girl, as Ginger, in a frenzy of fancy footwork, but she’s perfectly able to keep up. They’re attracted to each other, and the tension builds. The Girl takes one step, then two, then three, then four toward the Roper, rustling her skirt suggestively. De Mille’s choreographic notes call this a way of “saying ‘shoo-shoo-shoo,’” a phrase the Andrew Sisters would bring to mainstream America the following year in “Shoo shoo shoo shboogie.” But de Mille already knew it as a way of talking about flirtatious, jazzy steps. The Roper takes the bait. Every time the Girl comes closer, he inclines further towards her, making fanning motions with his hands—she’s become that hot! And here—in the moment where the Girl shifts her affections to a new object, one who’s actually worthy of her love, when we begin to see her for who she really is—not a misfit, but a star—when Copland’s score reaches its most rousing notes, and when the dance breaks into an ever freer and more frenzied
state—de Mille writes in her choreographic notes that the Roper’s steps should be “very negroid in character.”

De Mille did more than write that the group dances should, like jazz music played by both whites and blacks, be “syncopated,” or that the partygoers should, like both white and black jazz dancers, “strut.” She imagined these movements as black. We can see her falling into an old pattern, a masquerade white Americans have been performing for as long as they’ve had theaters. But blackface minstrelsy really took off in the North in the eighteen-thirties and forties, when there was a large enough urban population to support it. Working-class white men blacked up—and watched one another black up—to indulge their fantasies of becoming as dangerously hyper-masculine as they imagined black men to be. Minstrel characters like T. D. Rice’s transatlantic pop sensation “Jump Jim Crow” wheeled and turned and thumbed their noses at the upper classes; they were insurrectionary tricksters with whom white audiences could identify—albeit at a distance. Minstrel troupes toured the country and found permanent homes in the “Ethiopian Opera Houses” of New York’s Bowery.

The Bowery B’hoys who packed these theaters were notoriously rowdy—these were the same men who rioted at the Astor Place Opera House in 1849 to protest the British Shakespearian William Macready, whose high-toned acting they found a poor substitute for the growls and rippling muscles of their own American star, Edwin Forrest. Watching T. D. Rice perform in 1832, they stormed the stage and made him repeat his “Jump Jim Crow” song and dance some twenty times. They pelted orchestras with fruit and demanded music that wasn’t slated for performance. For the working class audiences who were the primary consumers of blackface, Eric Lott has explained, amusement and revolt seemed virtually inseparable.

Rodeo has a trace of early minstrelsy’s sense of transgression: by pretending to be black, the dancer playing the Roper escapes his sense of self and assumes a persona that, according to stereotype, is fun-loving, high-stepping, and given to easy abandon. Jump Jim Crow is the Roper’s ancestor; now, though, his freewheeling stands not for class conflict, but for a more general sense of freedom. It’s a freedom that leads to order, rather than chaos: when everyone lets loose, they end up performing their roles with more convincing feeling. The steps provide a structure for liberation, a way to guide the Roper and the Girl into the love that, in the America de Mille imagines, knits the nation together.

But this freedom depends on a sense of racial difference, on the assumption that blacks and whites feel and move in distinct ways. Nearly a hundred years after minstrelsy’s heyday, de Mille seems to have coaxed Freddy Franklin into freedom of movement by way of stereotype, admiring as that stereotype may have been. Her instructions would not have been unusual. Anne Schley Duggan’s 1932 manual Tap Dances, which was so popular it was reprinted into the nineteen-forties, shows a picture of two white people in blackface. The caption reads: “Dancers should feel characteristic rhythmic movements of the American negro.” Short films on popular jazz dances like the Black Bottom and the Jitterbug showed black children doing the same steps as white adults, providing origin stories for these movements within a version of black culture that was relatively innocent and non-threatening. Whites understood that jazz dancing was historically black, and this was part of its appeal. Of course, the appeal also came from the nature of the dance itself, which did feel freer than waltzes or country dances. Jazz dancing is innovative, athletic, and quick.

So quick, in fact, that critics grew alarmed. One psychologist explained that swing music was popular because its tempo was faster than the human heartbeat; this gave it a “dangerously hypnotic influence,” heightening young people’s emotions and leading to a “mental epidemic” of “moral
weakness.” Researchers played waltz music for a couple in an empty room, and the two spoke kindly to one another, but when swing music played, the couple became “much bolder, both of them”—even the woman shifted (horror of horrors!) from passivity to pursuit.93

Critics likened swing dance to a kind of primitive, spiritual ecstasy. “Swing cultists,” wrote one critic, were gripped in a “mass convulsion.”94 Listening to Gene Krupa’s drum break in Benny Goodman’s “Sing Sing Sing,” another critic felt transported “into a desert encampment in North Africa, where 500 dervishes danced and wailed to the beating of the tom tom. The religious frenzy to which those fanatics were stirred by the pulsating rhythms of the drum has its counterpart in the mad gyrations of the jitterbug on the modern dance floor.”95 Paul Whiteman, one of the most popular bandleaders of his day, made a public plea for more polite dancing. Whiteman, famous for orchestral arrangements that today’s jazz fans—if they acknowledge Whiteman at all—tend to see as bland pap, beseeched the queen of American etiquette, Emily Post, for guidance. “Personally I don’t blame the kids,” Whiteman wrote, but they needed some instruction in good conduct, because “No one has drilled into them the idea that the dance floor is not a rodeo arena.” (Little did he know that, three years later, De Mille would make this confusion deliberately.) Post agreed with him, and counseled the young dancers to observe temperance. For while some jitterbugs were perfectly polite, others indulged in “swing orgies.” “Apparently punch-drunk with the rhythm and blare and siren-shriek of the music...[they] behave like people possessed.”96

Critics tend to think of de Mille as the choreographer who brought the virtues of wholesome, rural America to concert stages, and she did; however, she was also fascinated by the idea of bodily possession. After all, possession is the essence of the choreographic process, in which dancers devote themselves to performing movements someone else has composed. But like so many critics of jazz dance, de Mille associated bodily possession with drugs, jazz, and blackness. In 1932, she choreographed a scene called “Smokin’ Reefer” for the all-black women’s chorus of the Broadway revue _Flying Colors_. The chorus girls’ movements are blatantly sexual: according to de Mille’s choreographic notes, they shoot their hips forward and back, forward and back again. They stamp their feet, lean to one side, and shimmy toward the audience, low and deep. Then a group of women, seated with their legs curled seductively to the side in a kind of tortured, aroused, and primitive state of intoxication lean forward, bang their fists on the floor, sit up, and bang their fists on their chests. They point their forearms forward from their chests while making “the evil eye,” and use their thumbs to make devilish horns on the side of their head. Other movements in “Smokin’ Reefer” are even more explicit about drugs’ hypnotic effects. A woman comes onstage in a trance, her head supported by one attendant, her arms by two others who lean forward like animals. In the meantime, the chorus girls lean forward and watched her, “motionless,” say de Mille’s notes, “until the word ‘marawanna.’” Drugs have taken control of their bodies, for “On that word they accent by rolling up the back from the waistline and stepping forward.”97

Many of the same steps recurred in a scenario de Mille wrote for a never-produced short film, _Voodoo_, which she hoped would star Duke Ellington. _Voodoo_ would take place at a crowded club “in the native section of a town in Cuba or the Barbados.” A pair of vacationing white American couples look on approvingly as Ellington, the distinguished guest from Harlem, plays piano. When a native girl is surrounded by the crowd and pushed off into a curtained room, screaming in protest, “an enormous black leans over the top of the upright” and tells Ellington to keep playing. He does. The whites grow alarmed. The youngest white woman wants to linger and see what will happen next, but the rest of her party forces her to leave. Back in the club—now shuttered, dark, and mysterious—the camera, de Mille writes, zooms in for a close-up on Ellington’s
concerned face. “He does not dare really to look up and he does not dare to stop,” de Mille writes, for the “black brute” still leans over his piano. Until this point in the scenario, the camera, standing in for the audience, has been linked with the white patrons: they are the spectators of the local scene. But when they vanish, Ellington serves as their substitute. He too is an unwilling American onlooker who wishes he could escape whatever the natives have planned.

When the woman screeches again, a cornet takes up her cry. “The instruments of the orchestra join in,” de Mille writes, and Ellington shifts from observer to participant: “Ellington amazed and fascinated falls in with the rhythm they have set.” That rhythm propels the crowd to “fall to the floor” and “drag themselves up” in sensational movements that recall the chorus girls in Flying Colors. “Their hips lurch and contort. Their shoulders hunch. Their fingers stiffen and relax. They breathe heavily but not with exertion. Their skins glisten. Their wooly hair has risen on their heads in electric vitality.”

The woman enters from behind the curtain, walking “in a hypnotic trance” in precisely the same way as the woman in Flying Colors. “Her head is supported by a young woman. Her hands rest on the backs of the two others bent over like animals.” The woman and the crowd begin to move as one. Their motions are “transmitted” back and forth via “sympathetic rhythm,” so that “her body has become the token of their bodily joy.” She performs “the meaning and not the fact of lust,” a “phallic dance” whose power eventually levitates all the other dancers above her. “They are surrounded, uplifted and floated on air,” writes de Mille, but this saps the life-force from the girl, who crumbles to the floor, dead.98 Ellington is horrified, but he’s also to blame, for his music has provided the hypnotic beat. The distance from Harlem dance floors to tropical religious rites, de Mille implies, is not so far.

Much of America felt the same way. Ellington may have been the most sophisticated bandleader of all time, poised and immaculately dressed, but was most famous for playing “jungle jazz” at New York’s Cotton Club. His brass musicians used mutes to make their instruments growl suggestively while audiences watched rows of leggy chorus girls strut and shake. Lena Horne, who performed in the chorus in the 1930s, recalled that the floor shows had a “primitive, naked quality that was supposed to make a civilized audience lose its inhibitions.”99 In one performance, wrote jazz historian Marshall Stearns, “a light-skinned and magnificently muscled Negro burst through a papier-maché jungle onto the dance floor” in “darkest Africa” and, with a bull whip, rescued a “‘white’ goddess” from the dark-skinned natives who worshipped her.100 The quote marks around “white” indicate that the woman, like all the performers at the Cotton Club, was black; she and the aviator were merely light-skinned. But in an all-black setting, they—like Ellington in de Mille’s Voodoo—were stand-ins for white audiences, who saw a fantasy of their own experience playing out onstage. They, too, were surrounded by blacks they saw as “primitives,” and as the scene culminated in an “erotic dance” between the aviator and his new love, audiences felt their own sexual mores loosened.

A similar story would play out on movie screens across America in 1936, when Ray Milland rescued the sexy, sarong-clad Dorothy Lamour from angry African natives in Jungle Princess. A musical sequence in the film showed Ellington and has band performing “Sophisticated Lady,” “Solitude,” and “Mood Indigo;” two dance teams added to the excitement.101 De Mille wrote Voodoo that same year, and even though her film was never made, some of her ideas filtered into her choreography of Obeah, or Black Ritual, the first major all-black ballet.

De Mille choreographed Obeah for American Ballet Theater in 1940 with a cast of sixteen black women, many of whom lacked not only formal dance training, but enough money to stay
warm and fed; de Mille gave them bread and soup at rehearsals, she said, to keep them from fainting. According to the program notes, the piece, like Voodoo, depicted a ritual human sacrifice “somewhere in the West Indies.” But the music was American—or at least, American-influenced—a jazz symphony by the French emigré Darius Milhaud. With only three performances, Obeah was not a success, and de Mille must have kicked herself for turning away Katherine Dunham, who had offered to dance the lead. Dunham would have been far more capable than the rest of de Mille’s cast. A pioneering black dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist, she had studied ritual dance in the Caribbean and used what she had learned as the basis for her own innovative technique. But perhaps that’s why de Mille turned Dunham away: de Mille couldn’t stand to have her own less-informed vision questioned. Dunham prided herself on ethnographic accuracy; de Mille stuck with exotic fancy.

On the surface, de Mille’s fascination with blackness and bodily possession ended with Black Ritual, but we can see similar dynamics at play in Rodeo. When the Roper abandons his own sense of self to move in a “Negroid” fashion, he becomes virile and free, and the Girl follows his lead. Jazz dance’s wild energy meets the orderly lines of the Virginia Reel in ballet’s own Big Apple. Rodeo may be about the Old West, but it’s a modern, pulsing piece, a fable of unity that brings together not just man and woman, but also—in its movement—black and white, urban and rural, old and new.

Conversations about the Dance

After the success of Rodeo, Agnes de Mille became one of the most sought-after choreographers in the country, making new dances for American Ballet Theater and more than a dozen Broadway musicals, including Oklahoma!, Carousel, Paint Your Wagon, and Brigadoon. Today, she’s best known for her work in musicals, and is credited both with making dance an essential part of a musical's plot and with bringing ballet to the masses. She set quite a precedent: in the first few years after Oklahoma came out, more than half of the new musicals produced in New York included ballet. John Martin proclaimed a new era: the “de Millenium.”

If de Mille brought ballet to popular culture, she also brought popular culture to ballet, blending highbrow and lively to create an American dance idiom. Even as she worked on Broadway, she continued to set work on American Ballet Theater, and later in life, she became something of an ambassador for American dance. She wrote editorials and gave speeches calling for increased government funding for the arts. In 1973, She founded the Heritage Dance Theater at the North Carolina School of the Arts, with the goals of celebrating and preserving American dance, and giving it a place to thrive outside the reverse-parochial art world of New York. Two years later, at age seventy, she had a stroke; instead of slowing down, she sped up her writing, publishing a book-length study of Martha Graham (Martha, 1991), an essay collection (Portrait Gallery, 1990), two more memoirs (Where the Wings Grow, 1978; and Reprieve, 1981), and America Dances (1980), a lively popular history that had first taken form in her lecture-demonstration Conversations about the Dance.

The 1977 performance of Conversations about the Dance was de Mille’s first public appearance after her stroke. Joffrey Ballet dancers and other guests, including the tap legend Honi Cole, performed living illustrations of the dance history she recounted from a chair on the side of the stage at City Center. Her doctors knew that sitting and reading aloud for two hours would be a challenge, and they were standing by in case she needed them. But de Mille seemed to draw her energy from the history she recounted, and in 1978 recording of Conversations, she’s just as animated...
as the dancers who take center stage. In *Reprieve*, her memoir about recovering from the stroke, she writes that she found her real support in the audience. “They were with me. They were ahead of me. They intended that I succeed,” she writes. “With that collaboration from the audience I knew I could not show weakness or uncertainty. They expected me to be excellent, and so I obliged them. We did it together.” When the program ended, de Mille moved both of her arms for the first time in two years. She flung them out to her audience.¹⁰⁸

That sense of collaboration, of art as something created by and for a community, is central to de Mille’s sense of what’s American about American dance. In *Conversations about the Dance*, she doesn’t bombard you with big names, or present a straight survey of notable achievements in the world of concert dance. She includes famous and anonymous, high and low, and black and white dancers. Fanny Elssler, Isadora Duncan, and Martha Graham all make appearances, but so do Vernon and Irene Castle, Bill Robinson, and a host of anonymous social dancers, from Renaissance courtesans to Harlem lindy-hoppers.

Not all these sources are supposed to make us feel good. As an African dancer performs a traditional dance onstage, bare-chested and low to the ground, de Mille says, with urgency and woe, “Ten million Africans were brought as slaves to the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries. 4 million died in passage. Out of this hopeless, lost, demoralized, forlorn group, without future and what is as sad, without past, came our first native music, our first native dancing, came our first—O Agony—came our first theater.” Enter a group of dancers in red, white, and blue Uncle Sam outfits, doing a spirited cakewalk.¹¹⁰

This is where *Conversations about the Dance* gets slippery. The dancers are meant to represent a minstrel show, but the defining characteristic of blackface minstrelsy is erased. These dancers don’t wear blackface. They’re black.¹¹¹ De Mille probably figured that literal blackface would be too incendiary to show onstage, and she had good reason to think so. Yet as she collapsed blackface with blackness, she unwittingly reproduced a confusion minstrel audiences have had since the form began, when performers marketed themselves as “original Negroes,” and when some audience members mistook the counterfeit for the real thing.¹¹² Minstrelsy did not arise organically from African dancers; it was a form of the urban, white north.

De Mille is explicit about more palatable forms of cultural blending: for example, the way that black Americans sped up and synchronized the Irish jig to create tap, or the way American ballet owes a debt to Martha Graham. But blackface is another matter. It gets us to what Ralph Ellison calls “the deep dark bottom of the melting pot,” where “the white man’s relish is apt to be the black man’s gall.”¹¹³

This may not be the stuff of polite conversation, but it’s at deep, dark bottom of de Mille’s work, too, in the place where a hodge-podge of influences combine to form an American vernacular so familiar we tend to accept it without question. Watching *Rodeo*, you don’t see the Roper and think of him as a blackface minstrel; he just seems talented and free. The Girl doesn’t seem like a film star or a tennis player; she just seems charming, spunky, and lovelorn. But within each gesture, whether it’s from classical ballet or a New York dance hall, there are histories.

The gestures de Mille uses tell a story that’s bigger than the stories in any of her works. It’s a story of Europeans, Africans, and Americans, of nativists and progressives, of actors, minstrels, cowboys and sports players, colonial settlers and jazz babies. By stylistically collapsing the many into the one, she helps us feel Ellison’s “homeness of home,” that endless, combinatory urge of the vernacular.

She enacts a similar collapse at the level of plot, and it sets her apart from her predecessors.
Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, the first generation of moderns, made dances about the power of the individual, and in this, they weren’t so different from prima ballerinas like Anna Pavlova or Adeline Genée. De Mille enlarged their mission to show us individuals in society, coming together in ritual, be it a voodoo rite or a hoedown. For dance is a ritual: a way to unite bodies in an orderly pattern, a pattern that repeats every time a man and a woman kick their legs out in a Charleston, every time couples find their corners in a square dance, every time a dance company performs Rodeo—even every time someone snaps her finger sassily back and forth, gets a pie in the face, or pokes fun at a sad story by miming the playing of a violin. When we repeat these gestures, our bodies are bearers of tradition, referring to something that’s come before.

“Conversations about the Dance” ends with the conviction that movement can help knit the country together. In the last few minutes of her lecture, de Mille bemoaned the state of social dancing since the Cold War. “The boys and girls didn’t dance with one another,” she says. “They danced in spite of one another. Our discotheques became an exercise in mass loneliness.” In these undisciplined dances “there was no sense whatever of mutual participation or trust.” As she spoke, a cluster of dancers thrashed about and eventually collapsed to the floor, as if the apocalypse had arrived. But in a bit of stage magic, the dancers stood back up, ran into formation, and did a joyous square dance. “We’ll survive with gallantry,” de Mille asserted. “Our parents taught us how.”

In a way, this was a slipshod ending, the sign of a forced and nostalgic idealism. But in Rodeo that same square dance, grounded in a plot but set away from its everyday dramas and slapstick gags, feels profound. De Mille had an enduring faith in the way dance could allow people to perform a more perfect and graceful union, whether at a party or on the two sides of a golden proscenium. Right movement, she believed, would lead to right society.

It’s a theme that also shows up in Oklahoma!, too. Set in 1906, when the 46th state entered the Union, Oklahoma!, like Rodeo, is a pastoral romance. This time, a cowboy settles down with the woman he loves to start a farm: love, not Indian Massacres, domesticates the West. But before we can arrive at this happy ending, Oklahoma! must work through the conflict between freedom-loving cowboys and fence-loving farmers. They keep tussling at a fundraising dance, and the town’s elders and ladies try to make everyone behave with song: “The Farmer and the cowman should be friends” and “Territory folks should stick together,” they sing. The crowd clasps arms for some amiable dosi-does, but soon a full-on brawl breaks out on the dance floor. A few girls try to sing through it, but they fail.

Suddenly, Aunt Ellert, a brassy, outspoken spinster, fires a gun. “Ain’t nobody here gonna slug out anything,” she hollers. “This here’s a party.” She brandishes her weapon wildly above her head and gives orders that turn the title of Benny Goodman’s standard into dictatorial exhortation: “Sing! Sing! Sing!” The crowd obliges, and when the dancing starts up again, it’s beautiful, a performance of a community that has room for both domestication and recklessness, where strong young men partner beautiful young women and everyone behaves. Except you know, now, that this peacefulness is a performance. The dancers are escaping a threat.

Oklahoma! is famous for being the first integrated musical, meaning that its songs and dances were seamless parts of it plot. In some ways, this is a dancer’s life, and a dancer’s dream. Bill Robinson taps up the stairs to meet the King. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers glide onto the dance floor, and the rest of the world disappears, graciously making room for their love. When the Champion Roper taps up to the Girl, she realizes she’s been lusting after the wrong guy all along.

Agnes Mille imagined a nation where people solve problems with movement, and where physical exuberance is a part of everyday life. But what’s most American about her work may not be
what de Mille intended—a pastoral dream where noble cowboys link arms with happy girls—but the way that dream’s aesthetic power depends upon sources more various than the dream, at face value, reveals.
In 1907, the *Washington Post* printed a ghost story. It went like this. After the Confederates at Fort Donelson surrendered to General Grant’s Union Troops in 1862, black Union soldiers stuck around to occupy the nearby town of Dickson, Tennessee. Many were “old men who had been enticed away from good homes where hardships were unknown,” former slaves who now encountered “the worst of servitude.” Every one of them died of smallpox, and they were “buried helter skelter, never over three feet deep in the earth, and in rude pine coffins furnished by the Federal government.” The largest makeshift cemetery “was a low, marshy ground where the union depot now stands.” In this terrain, the old South, imagined as kindlier than its Yankee oppressors, butted up against the new.

Once a year, in the middle of the night, a great light would fall over the marsh. “Hideous and grinning skeletons of more than a score of human beings” would rise up and “take their positions as in the old-time country dance practiced during the civil war [sic].” Two skeletons, off to the side, rapped bones together to provide music, which propelled the other ghosts to move with “elasticity and apparent delight,” with “protruding knee caps, crooked thigh bones, glaring shoulder blades, and V-shaped shins.”

Those bone-rapping musicians? They’re straight from blackface minstrel shows, whose endmen played bones and tambourines. And that dance, making even rigid bones move in impossibly fluid ways? According to the headline in the *Washington Post*, the ghosts were performing “A Cakewalk.”

The story, about the haunting of a Tennessee town, and of America itself, by the racial and regional clashes that came to a head during the Civil War, is itself haunted. It’s haunted by popular conceptions of black performance, which are tired, inextricably, to those national dramas. And it’s haunted by the layered parodies of the cakewalk itself, which would’ve had those slaves-turned-soldiers mocking their former masters, or dancing out their own, temporary liberation.

For one or two decades, the cakewalk seemed to represent the nation, and in the century that followed its rise to prominence, Americans continued to work out a national identity in dance. That identity would be embodied in the virtuosic tapping of Bill Robinson, who lifted himself out of minstrel stereotypes and danced debonairly up the stairs to imagined knighthood, even as, on the ground, he and the rest of black America suffered under Jim Crow. It would find a form in the blending of tap, ballet, ballroom, and social dance that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers presented as a homegrown vernacular, the many forming a one, even as, outside the film screens, an economically depressed nation struggled with class and racial conflicts. It would rest in the square dances that Henry Ford hoped would teach a mixed-race America to revere purer, whiter times, and that Agnes de Mille wished could restore hope to the nervous youth of the Atomic Age. It would burst forth from the acrobatics of the Jitterbug and the Lindy Hop, and make its way onto the country’s most elite stages, as de Mille, George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Lew Christensen, and a host of other choreographers loosened the mores of ballet. It would emerge as the dark underside of athletic pep and beauty in Paul Taylor’s modern dances of the seventies, would mingle with love and camp in the work of Twyla Tharp, and would be taken up as a mantle by artists as different as Robert Joffrey, Bill T. Jones, and Michael Jackson.

American identity is performed, and it’s improvised. It changes according to circumstance, time, and need, as artists both invent and take from one another. The history of American dance is,
in part, a history of recombination: ragtime steps from low-class dives make their way to lily-white ballrooms; ballet subsumes tap acrobatics; MTV music videos draw on the heyday of Hollywood musicals. The past gets buried in new steps, under new choreography. It’s paved over. Someone builds a railroad station on top. And sometimes, ghosts dance right out of their graves.
NOTES

1. Introduction: America’s First National Dance


3. “No American National Dance.”


9. The absence of American Studies scholarship on dance is surprising, given the discipline’s interest, since its beginnings in the Cold War, in defining a national identity. There are some exceptions, though. Ellen Graff’s Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942 is an excellent cultural history of Popular Front dance (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997). Joel Dinerstein’s Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars provides a fine account of how African American jazz dance, along with other African American cultural forms, synapsed the orderly rhythms of the machine age (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). Jacqueline Murphy’s The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories deftly explains the ways that modern dancers like Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, Jose Limon, and Lester Horton engaged with Native American dance traditions, both real and imagined. Most dance books, though, focus on a single genre or artist, failing to explore dance’s intersections with other artistic forms or with the broader culture. Jennifer Homans’s recent award-winning Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet is an impressive work, but focuses so much on Balanchine that other American dancers seem scarcely to have existed (New York, NY: Random House, 2010).


11. For more on the performance of self via the performance of an other, see Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); W. T. Lhamon, Jr., Raising Cain: Blackface Performance From Jim Crow to Hip Hop (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Lott has been instrumental to my thinking not just about racial imitation and class, but also about the protean nature of American culture itself, a terrain too shifty to ever fully pin down. More recently, scholars have begun to investigate the ways black Americans performed within, or in spite of, the mask. See, for example, Daphne Brooks, Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race & Freedom, 1850-1910; Jayna Brown, Babygirl: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern; and Arthur Knight, Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performances and American Musical Film (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

12. Dance scholars have taken up this issue relatively recently. Brenda Dixon Gottschald was among the first and most influential, with provocative arguments about the way Africanaist art animates American modern dance and ballet in ways that are not acknowledged. See Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996). For a related discussion of the way white modern dancers like Ruth St. Denis, Doris Humphrey, and Helen Tamiris drew on the dance stagings of Zora Neale Hurston, see Anthea Kraut, Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

14. In this approach, I’m following the lead of Joe Roach, who discusses performative genealogies across time and place in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996). W. T. Lhamon’s ability to trace the way forms flicker and repeat across time and space has also been inspirational. In *Raising Cain*, for example, he shows how M.C. Hammer duplicates the same dance steps for which the blackface minstrel T. D. “Jim Crow” Rice was famed, a century and a half before.


16. Contemporary newspaper accounts of the cakewalk reveal that these performances were fairly typical. In 1904, the *Boston Globe* reported on an “authentic” Southern cakewalk which included the mock tying of a lady’s shoe by her gentleman partner, a “figure,” the writer noted, popular in both the North and the South. “Cakewalk: Dance as Practiced in the South,” *Boston Daily Globe*, July 17, 1904.


24. “Before ‘De War’.”

25. The closest film example we have of this sort of cakewalk is from 1903, in the Edison Company’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Little Eva, Uncle Tom, and a number of St. Clare’s slaves (in disconcertingly fancy clothes) perform a boisterous cakewalk that seemingly has nothing to do with the plot, but everything to do with the standards of black performance at the time.


29. For an account of how white society in St. Louis blacked up to perform a cakewalk “for the sake of sweet charity,” see “Spirits Attended the Cake Walk of the Fifth Avenue Club,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 17, 1898. The performers walked “with such grace and elasticity” that people suggested spirits were guiding them.

30. For example, the Ne Plus Ultra club in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, threw a cakewalk in 1891 that raised $115 toward the
$30,000 A.M.E. Church they hoped to build. The most graceful couple won a two-tiered cake. A.J.R., “Great Cakewalk,” Freeman, May 30, 1891. The Baltimore Elks, a white club, hired 6 African-American couples from D.C. to participate in a cakewalk at their 1892 reunion, attracting some 2,500 spectators. The winning couple chose a gold medal rather than the 6-foot diameter cake, festooned with an elk’s head, which went to those in second place. “A Six-Foot Cake,” The Sun, August 3, 1892. For more on the Madison Square Garden cakewalks, see “Walking for a Cake: Eleven Couples Competed,” New York Times, February 7, 1897.

34. “Dewey Gave the Cake,” The Sun, January 26, 1902.
35. “Leader of England’s Court Set as the Guest of Perry Belmont Enjoys a Real Negro Cakewalk,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 15, 1901.
36. “Leader of England’s Court Set as the Guest of Perry Belmont Enjoys a Real Negro Cakewalk.”
39. Le Cakewalk Infernal. 1903. See also Melies’s 1901 film L’Omnibus des toqués blancs et noirs, typically translated as the rather benign “Off to Bloomingdale’s Asylum,” which proceeds on a gag of whites transforming to blacks and back again.
40. C.L.B., “America Has Lent France a New Amusement, Which is Driving Out the Cancan and Danse Du Ventre”, New York Tribune, March 22, 1903. This performance shouldn’t be confused with the French “Apache dance,” which rose to prominence in the nineteen-teens, and made its way to America as a variation on the tango. That dance, which dramatizes the violence a pimp inflicts on his dependent prostitute, was so-called because of its savagery.
41. qt. in Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910, 82.
42. For an excellent analysis of how Tom’s performance fits into Chesnutt’s novel, see Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature, 271-293.
44. Ibid., 511.
45. Ibid., 605
46. Ibid., 611
47. Ibid., 609. These observations come from “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” an essay that might, at face value, seem to be an argument for American essentialism but is, as Hortense Spiller has pointed out, an argument for an understanding of culture as “dynamic, even restless, over and against closed or poised. See Spillers, “‘The Little Man At Chehaw Station’ Today,” boundary 2 30, no. 2 (2003): 5-19, 15.

2. Bill Robinson Dreaming

1. Michael Rogin argues that, in scenes like these, white ethnics like Jolson were using to define themselves as American, joining “the melting pot by keeping racial groups out”(12). In an ugly paradox, “national culture rooted itself,” Rogin writes, “in the nationally dispossessed. American national culture created national identity from the subjugation of its folk”(47). Michael Rogin, Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (Berkeley: University of


4. Shirley Temple Black, *Child Star: An Autobiography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988): 11. Temple notes that while she was in her earliest dance class, Robinson was performing “at New York’s Paramount Theatre... with no clear vision of what lay ahead... No one, least of all Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson, would have suspected that his professional salvation lay in the babble and confusion created by a bunch of babies at Mrs. Meglin’s.”


12. “Angry Gallery Gods Stop a Harlem Show,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1904. The winner was William Pennell, but the audience wanted the medal to go to a street performer named “Rags.”


15. The references to the “Frogman” come from Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1905*, 364-365. The only concrete description of his actions are from a *New York Clipper* review from January 21, 1893, which note that in the second act, conducted at a camp meeting, “Ferry, the frog man, performed a number of feats of contortion.”

16. For more on the way whites on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line found common cause in staunching black


24. Both of these examples are from Lhamon, “Whittling on Dynamite: The Difference Bert Williams Makes,” though the reading of signs running wild, and of what it would mean to play a bloodhound in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, are my own.


27. A decade after Williams’s death, Robinson wrote that “it was always a pleasure to work” with Bert Williams, but wasn’t clear about where this work took place. See “Bill Robinson Looks Back Half-Century,” *The Hartford Courant*, January 2, 1935. The two certainly rubbed shoulders in the world of Harlem entertainment; according to Tom Fletcher’s memoirs, Robinson played on *The Black Rats*, a baseball team of black vaudeville performers, which beat the Williams and Walker company team; Bert Williams played first base. See Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*, 293. I haven’t found evidence that they shared a stage at the same time, but they did appear on the same bill, at least once, as part of a suite of evening entertainment organized by the Frogs, the black theatrical society that Williams helped found. Interestingly, Robinson—still part of Cooper and Robinson—appeared on his own. “Bert Williams to Star a Big Company,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 2, 1913.


29. In an interview, Cooper noted that there was at least one other black comedy duo on the white vaudeville circuit, Fiddler and Shelton, as well as an act with six black performers, whom he didn’t name. “At the Orpheum. Gets a Fair Deal,” *Duluth News Tribune*, February 16, 1912.
31. Haskins and Mingang, Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson.
33. Fletcher, 100 Years of the Negro in Show Business, 296-297.
36. “A California Easter Ball,” The Freeman, March 29, 1905; “Vaudeville Houses Offer Good Attractions.” As for Williams and Walker, the Duluth News Tribune noted that Cooper and Robinson were “two real negroes, not blackface entertainers.” See “Amusements,” Duluth News Tribune, February 12, 1912.
37. Marshall, “Cooper and Robinson Arouse NP Things At Keith’s.”
38. Marshall, “Cooper and Robinson Arouse NP Things At Keith’s.”; “At the Orpheum.”
41. Even though Robinson modeled himself after Williams when performing with Cooper, he admired and learned from George Walker, too. In 1926, he headed up a benefit for Walker’s mother, and raised $2,075. See “Bill Robinson Writes,” The Chicago Defender, July 3, 1926.
42. “Harlem is Heaven’ Almost Has Plot, But Not Quite, Not Quite,” The Chicago Defender, July 2, 1932. Some reviewers were more charitable: the Pittsburgh Courier called Harlem is Heaven “The Best All-Negro Film Ever Produced.” See Floyd G. Snelson, The Pittsburgh Courier, June 18, 1932.
44. For more on early “race” films, see Thomas Cripps, Show Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Jacqueline Stewart, Migrating to the Movies, and Henry T. Sampson, Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1995). Much of my thinking on this subject is indebted to conversations with Preston Lauterbach, whose history of the Chitlin’ Circuit makes it clear that black entertainers on tour, especially to rural areas, were signs of the promise of success elsewhere. See The Chitlin’ Circuit and the Road to Rock and Roll (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
51. Foster would go South the following year, on a honeymoon down the Mississippi. See “Old Folks at Home,” Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh. <http://www.pitt.edu/~amerimus/ofah.htm>
53. “Bill Robinson Writes.”
55. “Bojangles’ a Knockout.”
56. Ashton Stevens, “Maybe Bill Robinson is No Tap Dancer At All—He’s So Different Says Evening American Critic,” New Journal and Guide, March 31, 1934.
57. “Bojangles’ a Knockout.”
60. John Martin, America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of Modern Dance (New York: Dodge Publishing Company,


74. “Girl Uses Steps of Bill Robinson and Attains Real Fame,” *The Oregonian*, May 27, 1933.


78. Haney, “Analyzing Bill Robinson and His Dancing.”


82. “Bill Robinson Masks,” *Afro-American*, January 1, 1938. This performance may have been inspired by the final number of *Shall We Dance* (1937), in which Fred Astaire dances with a chorus of women wearing Ginger Rogers masks.


89. Agnes de Mille, *Conversations About the Dance*, dir. Charles S. Durbin, aired 1979, KCET Community Television of Southern California. VHS.

90. Lori Merish argues that Temple inherits her cuteness from popular representations of black culture, such as the
“large round heads and eyes” and “chubby limbs” of advertising mascots the Gold Dust Twins and Pears Soap children. It’s not easy to see, because Temple sheds the “grotesque or the threatening” traits attributed to black culture, but when she opens her mouth, purses her lips up puffed, and widens her eyes, Merish writes, Temple “mimics, even while [she] tames, the exaggerated painted grin of minstrelsy.” See “Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics,” in Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996): 198.

91. “Shirley Goes Harlem—Learns to Truck,” The Chicago Defender, January 11, 1936.
94. This scene bears a striking resemblance to one that Robinson’s childhood friend Lemuel Eggleston cited as the origin of the stair dance. In Eggleston’s memory, the two boys got arrested in Richmond. Robinson danced down the steps to distract the cops, and the friends made a quick getaway. See Haskins and Mitgang, Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson, 36.
96. “Bill Robinson is Mayor of Harlem; Hero of Broadway.”
97. Constance Valis Hill makes sure to include female tap dancers in her new history of the form, but notes that traditionally, it’s been seen as a man’s game. See Hill, Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History.
99. Ibid.
102. “Bill Robinson is Mayor of Harlem; Hero of Broadway.”
106. Crisler, “Film Gossip of the Week: Dr. Bill Robinson, Tapster—A Delegation From Dublin—Miss Allan Returns.”
112. De Mille, “Conversations About the Dance.”
114. Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue. Lewis puts Robinson at the scene, but I’ve been unable to track down a source confirming Robinson’s presence. What’s more, in countless interviews about his career, Robinson never claims to have fought in France—something he’d surely be proud of, especially considering that he claimed to have war injuries from the Spanish American war, a claim that his biographers approach dubiously.
also Gottschald, Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance, 73.


122. Gottschald, Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance, 77.


126. “Can Bill Robinson Cut the Fool as Much as He Pleases?,” Afro-American, September 14, 1935.


130. Robinson and Sawyer were performing a version of the Apache dance, a tango variant that had been popular in American cabarets from the nineteen-teens on. So while Robinson looks declassé, he’s firmly in the tradition, here, of white exhibition dancers, substituting tap for tango—just one more example of the way dance forms could cut across divisions of race and class.

131. “Bill Robinson Selects White Girl as Dancing Partner in New Film.”


137. John Martin, “African Festival At Carnegie Hall,” New York Times, April 5, 1945. The first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, was in the audience, and the program also included more faithful representatives of African performance, like Asadata Dafora, who presented “Festival at Battalakor,” “set in West Africa in the seventeenth century.” Robinson’s parody probably looked even more parodic next to Dafora’s esteemed productions. It may have been the same “patter: he performed for an audience of black soldiers at a 1918 “African act” at the Palace, which also, surely, had an edge: these were men who had fought for their country but, because of racial prejudice, were still not granted the rights of full citizens. “Soldiers See Fine New Bill At Palace,” Republic, July 12, 1918.

138. Daphne Brooks argues that we read the close of In Dahomey as structurally defiant, too: the African scene stages a “flamboyant lack of closure,” in which people become animals and sets at once. It’s a much stranger scene than standard primitivism. See Brooks, Bodies in Dissent, 208-9. In another instance of careful management of the blackface mask, In Dahomey begins with a Will Marion Cook song “Swing Along,” that, while in dialect, is about black survival. Its lyrics encourage black Americans to “swing along” even when “white folks a watchin’ and seein’ what you do/White folks jealous when you’re walkin’ two by two.” See Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910, 69; and Sotiropoulos, Stepping Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America, 10.


141. The Zulu history is fairly well documented; for the official story from the club itself, see http://www.kreweofzulu.com/history. For a savvy explanation of what’s at stake in all their masking, see Joe Roach, Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (New York: Columbia UP, 1996): 18-24

142. Haskins and Mitgang, Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson, 99. Haskins and Mitgang place this spontaneous event in 1918, though it took some six years for him to get his stile built and integrate the stair dance in his normal routines.


146. Haskins and Mitgang, Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson, 164.

3. Astaire and Rogers Pick Themselves Up

1. Throughout this chapter, I refer to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as “Astaire” or “Rogers” when discussing them as real people moving in the real world. I call them “Fred” and “Ginger” when discussing their characters in the movies, both because their screen personas seemed linked, across all their films together, and because, since I skip from film to film, it’s easiest to have these consistent referents.
5. “‘The Continental,’ a Kiss Dance—How it is Done,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1934; “[No Headline],” *La Prensa*, November 4, 1934; StreetSwing.com.
11. For a convincing argument that Astaire was the first to create truly integrated musicals—a distinction usually given to Agnes de Mille for *Oklahoma!*—see John Mueller, “Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical,” *Cinema Journal* 24, No. 1 (1984): 28-40. Bradley Rogers argues that musicals have more possibilities for political resistance when they aren’t so seemingly seamless, or integrated, in “The Interpellations of Interpolation; Or, the Disintegrating Female Musical Body,” *Camera Obscura* 23, No. 1 (2008): 89-111.
50. “[Display Ad—No Title],” The Atlanta Constitution, April 21, 1934.
52. RKO did drum up some real Brazilian musicians for the occasion: Edwin Schallert, “Film Sponsors Carioca Dance,” Los Angeles Times, May 31, 1933.
54. Ibid., 19-25.
57. Barnett, “Fred Astaire: He is the No. 1 Exponent of America’s Only Native and Original Dance Form”; Stearns and Stearns, Jazz Dance, 220-228.
61. See Joel Dinerstein’s analysis of this scene in Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars, 245.
64. qt. in Stearns and Stearns, Jazz Dance, 164.
71. According to Balanchine’s biographer Bernard Taper, some members of the dance world, including New York Times critic John Martin (who later changed his tune), believed that “Balanchine was not American enough to be entrusted with nurturing a truly American school” and dance company. Kirstein even encouraged Balanchine to make ballets on folkloric themes, but Balanchine refused, drawing his inspiration, instead, from the way Americans moved. See Balanchine: A Biography (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984): 162.
73. Ibid.
76. Barnett, “Fred Astaire: He is the No. 1 Exponent of America’s Only Native and Original Dance Form.”
83. qt. in Croce, The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book, 88.

88
4. Agnes de Mille’s Square Dance

1. Portions of this chapter appeared, in slightly different versions, in an article I wrote for Boston Review: “Square Dance: Agnes de Mille’s Beloved Community,” Boston Review, July/August 2011. I thank the editors for allowing me to reprint it here.

2. Agnes de Mille, Choreographic Notes for Rodeo, Agnes de Mille Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.


4. Dance Girl Dance, directed by Dorothy Arzner, 1940.

5. For more on the effort of modern choreographers to create an American style, see chapter one of Julia L. Foulkes, Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism From Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).


15. De Mille, Dance to the Piper, 231.

16. Agnes de Mille, Choreographic Notes for Rodeo, Agnes de Mille Correspondence and Writings, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Note that these choreographic notes are separate from those in the Agnes de Mille collection, cited in n. 2.

17. Agnes de Mille, Choreographic Notes, Agnes de Mille Collection. De Mille wasn’t the only one thinking of making a debt visible, then hiding it. Martha Graham originally intended to have an Indian maiden in her now-canonical piece Appalachian Spring, but opted, instead, to have the maiden’s “spirit” imbue the work. See Jacqueline Shea Murphy, The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).


22. Agnes de Mille, n.d., *Agnes de Mille Correspondence and Writings*.
27. Agnes de Mille Collection.
28. For a good description, see Martin, *America Dancing*, 265.
29. Victor Barbee and others, “Agnes De Mille and American Ballet Theatre.”
31. Ibid., 218
34. Choreographic Notes for *American Suite*, Agnes de Mille Collection.
36. Choreographic Notes for Rodeo, Agnes de Mille Collection.
40. Van Winkle and Keller, “Playford’s ‘English Dancing Master’ (1651) and Country Dancing in America.”
44. “7,000 Service Men to Dance Tonight,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1941.
46. Easton, *No Intermisions: The Life of Agnes De Mille*, 149.
49. Agnes de Mille, Choreographic Notes for *American Suite*, Agnes de Mille Collection.
52. Agnes de Mille, Choreographic Notes for *American Suite*, Agnes de Mille Collection.
55. Rose C. Feld, “Ford Revives the Old Dances. He Explains That, With Time At Last for Recreation, He Has Turned to the Statelier Life and to the Manners of Another Generation—But He is Not a Critic of the Modern Dance,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1925.
57. Feld, “Ford Revives the Old Dances.”
59. Ibid., 86.
60. Ibid., 93
70. Ibid., 46-53
73. De Mille, Choreographic Notes for *American Suite*, Agnes de Mille Collection.
75. Oppenheim, “Swing Your Partners!”
84. Crowther, “From the ‘Turkey Trot’ to the ‘Big Apple’.”
86. De Mille, Choreographic Notes for Rodeo, Agnes de Mille Collection.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
94. Crowther, “From the ‘Turkey Trot’ to the ‘Big Apple’.”
97. Agnes de Mille, Choreographic Notes to “Smokin’ Reefer” in Flying Colors, 1932, Agnes de Mille Correspondence and Writing.
98. Agnes de Mille, “Voodoo,” March 15, 1936, Agnes de Mille Correspondence and Writing.
104. De Mille, Dance to the Piper, 196.
105. Later in life, de Mille wrote and spoke movingly about Dunham’s contributions to American art, both in Portrait Gallery (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) and in her lecture demonstration Conversations about the Dance.
106. According to Richard Kislan’s count, “In the year following Oklahoma!, twelve of the twenty-one musicals produced on Broadway contained a ballet or some reasonable facsimile thereof... Of the seventy-two musicals produced during the next three and a half years, forty-six included ballet, and twenty-one offered dream ballets.” See Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing (London: Simon and Schuster, 1987): 75. De Mille hadn’t invented the idea of putting a ballet in a musical, but “Laurie Makes Up Her Mind,” in Oklahoma! was successful enough to set the precedent.
107. Agnes de Mille Collection.
110. For a history of the development of the long-tailed-blue outfit, from its origins as the symbol of a white Yankee to the costumes of white men in blackface, see Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (New York City: New York Review of Books, 1931).
111. Agnes de Mille, Conversations About the Dance, dir. Charles S. Durbin, aired 1979, KCET Community Television of Southern California (VHS).
114. Agnes de Mille, Conversations About the Dance, dir. Charles S. Durbin, aired 1979, KCET Community Television of Southern California (VHS).

Epilogue: Dickson, Tennessee

WORKS CITED

Archival Sources

Agnes de Mille Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
Agnes de Mille Correspondence and Writing, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Films and Videos

*Cakewalk.* American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1903.
*Le Cakewalk Infernal.* Directed by George Melies. 1903.
*Comedy Cakewalk.* American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1903.
*De Mille, Agnes. Conversations about the Dance.* VHS. Produced by KCET Community Television of Southern California, 1978.
———. *Rodeo.* Film. Originally broadcast for *Omnibus* on CBS-TV, December 21, 1952.
*Dixiana.* DVD. Directed by Luther Reed. 1930. AFA Entertainment, 2011.
*Harlem is Heaven.* Directed by Irwin Franklin. 1932.
Entertainment, 2002.

Historical Newspapers and Magazines

Afro-American
Atlanta Constitution
Atlanta Daily World
American Dancer
Arizona Republican
Boston Daily Globe
Capital Plaindealer
The Chicago Defender
Christian Science Monitor
Dallas Morning News
Detroit Free Press
Duluth News Tribune
The Freeman
The Hartford Courant
The L.A. Times
The Nation
Negro Star
New Journal and Guide
New Orleans Times Picayune
New York Amsterdam News
The New Yorker
New York Herald Tribune
New York Times
New York Tribune
The Oregonian
Philadelphia Inquirer
Pittsburgh Courier
Plaindealer
La Prensa
San Francisco Chronicle
Seattle Daily News
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
The Sun
Time Magazine
The Times of India
The Wall Street Journal

Books and Journal Articles

Castle, Mr. and Mrs. Vernon. Modern Dancing. New York: World Syndicate Co., 1914.


Kraut, Anthea. Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston. Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2008.