

American Social History through Dance: A New Course at Vanderbilt University

In American Studies 100W at Vanderbilt University, students study American history -- not through battles or infamous uprisings, presidents or political speeches -- but through the dances danced on American soil and those who danced them, as well as those who opposed them. From Native American tribal dances, replete with spiritual significance, to the muscular in-your-face exuberance of the locking and popping of today's hip hop street performers in South Central LA, dance can explain a great deal about America.

Dance is the focal point of the course, but by no means the exclusive concern. Inherently interdisciplinary, the course combines history, sociology, anthropology, literature, religion and film. Dance ends up being a very fruitful critical object, allowing students to understand how the movements of dance, the music that accompanies it, the fashions spawned by it, are borne of a particular historical moment. For instance, once they get past their initial revulsion (or fascination) for polyester leisure suits, platform shoes, and throbbing base lines and falsetto melodies, students come to understand that disco is the entry point for a discussion of homophobia, race relations and gender wars in the 1970s, linked in part to a desperate economic crisis, particularly acute in places like New York City. Similarly, the rise of Modern Western Square dancing post World War II is far from a celebration of rugged cowboy individuality. Instead, it offered its participants a comforting sense of conformity, with each dancer a frilly-dressed cog in a stylized set of movements, overseen by an omnipotent caller. Such an aesthetic naturally emerged from the conservatism of 1950s America, a period characterized by a desire for stability seen in the rise of suburbia and the retreat of women back into the domestic sphere.

The interdisciplinary nature of the subject appeals to students with a wide array of interests and backgrounds. However, most students who sign up for the course are not dancers, though I have had a few "retired" ballerinas, a good smattering of waltz experts who honed their skills practicing for debutante balls, and even one student who auditioned for "So You Think You Can Dance?" But most of them sign up for the course to fulfill the college's writing requirement, without realizing that American Studies 100W (Intro to American Studies) will focus on dance. I therefore make it clear on the first day that one of the requirements is to dance, and to do so cheerfully, despite understandable inhibitions. My speech has the effect of scaring off a few students, but their places are eventually filled by others willing to dance in the spirit of a truly experiential kind of learning. Being a wallflower just won't work. And so, five



times during the semester, we leave the safe confines of the traditional classroom, to Alumni Hall, one of the oldest buildings on campus, with a ballroom on the second

floor, complete with a beautiful parquet floor, stained glass windows and two fireplaces. In an age when most academic buildings sport nothing but carpeted floors, this space is a treasure, evoking times when dance played a more prominent role in the lives of Americans. (Ironically, the newly constructed “ballroom” in the Student Life Building is carpeted!) The various workshops are Colonial Dances, African Dance, Jazz Dances and the Lindy Hop, and New England Contra Dancing.

Methodology

As the German musicologist Curt Sachs said of dance, “it needs no onlooker, not even a single witness. Nevertheless, in spite of its ecstatic and liturgical character, there early appears the germ of that great process of change which has gradually transformed the dance from an involuntary motor discharge, and a ceremonial rite, into a work of art conscious of and intended for observation” (qtd. in Highwater 39). In a tidy paragraph, Sachs shows the evolution of dance from an all inclusive community act, to an exclusive art, relegating most of us to our chairs, with only professional dancers on stage. He rightly laments the disappearance of dance in most cultures, as it equates to a loss of connection to each other and a disconnect from the spiritual. Approaches to education can be seen in similar terms. The thing studied is often something kept at arms length: we read about a topic, but remain in our seats, the subject matter, distant and abstract. In this course, however, students are actual participants, the makers of the dance, even if what they produce isn’t artful. For them to really understand the message behind the words they read and images they view, they need to dance. The aim is not to become an expert dancer, but rather to attempt through their bodies to understand, for example, how the figures in a square dance say something about agrarian ideals of cooperation and conformity. Or how the movements of West African dances resurface on Vanderbilt’s Rand Terrace when Black fraternity and sorority members gather to step.

Admittedly, students are also observers, with dance serving as an object of critical inquiry in traditional ways. They read about it, view footage of dances, ask questions about it and write papers and deliver oral presentations on some aspect of dance in the Americas. With this tandem approach, they both witness and validate the power of dance.

From the vantage point of the early 21st century, we gaze back on several hundred years of American history (and its international sources, like West African and a variety of European colonial dances) and the view can be dizzying. Despite the common instrument of the body, the variety of dances and the purposes – ritualistic or just plain fun – provides us with an amazing amount of material to ponder. To try to reign in the sheer volume of material, the focus of the course is on social dance rather than dance as performance, though to be sure, often what was done on stage eventually trickled down to the general population. The transfer could certainly worked in the opposite direction, as well. Therefore, it is instructive to watch footage of dance performances, like the

Ziegfeld Follies Chorus Lines or big screen tap dance performances by the likes of Bill Bojangles Robinson or Shirley Temple to illustrate how the migration of traditional and ethnic dances into more spectacular stage dances, like tap dancing. For example, the roots of tap dancing come from a variety of sources, like [Appalachian flat-footing](#), [English clog dances](#), [Irish step dancing](#) and the body percussion inherent in African dances practiced by slaves, preserved today in the [hambone](#).

Course Overview

The course is organized chronologically, to allow for an unfurling of dance traditions that borrow from one tradition, build on it, reject certain aspects and eventually become something new. But before launching into this chronological study of social dance in America, the first few sessions are meant to get students to think about the meaning and purposes of dance and to draw on their own dance memories to inform their definitions. For their first assignment, I ask them to describe a personal memory of dancing. Some describe harrowing early encounters with dance – the required ballroom dance lessons taught by a humorless, aging woman, well dressed, well preserved, and hell bent on making pre-adolescents into graceful, cultured ones. Some of the stories are touching – I recall one student’s account of a father daughter dance in junior high school, and how proud she felt to have the best partner in the room. Another student, of Native American descent, described participating in tribal dances at a pow-wow and how the experience got her in touch with her heritage. This first assignment not only gives me a writing sample from each student, but it serves as a kind of ice breaker, as students read their accounts to each other in small groups.

Next, we turn to defining dance, with a reading from British psychologist Havelock Ellis’s, *The Dance of Life* (1923). Ellis’s book shows convincingly how dance is in many ways our attempt to harmonize with nature’s movements, be it through religious dance or in dances of love. His musings are at once poetic and philosophical, the perfect starting place as we explore the many faces of American dance, asking what common ground is shared between whirling dervishes, Shakers, and ballroom dancers.

Ellis reminds us that life on this planet is about rhythm, be it in sounds of waves striking the shore, a beating heart, the rise and fall of our own breath, the cyclical transition of day into night or the passage from one season to the next.¹ His book speaks to the universality of dance, not just amongst humans, but in the animal kingdom, as well. I show the class clips of avian mating dances, such as the extraordinary and almost comical bird of paradise. In preparation for his performance, the male bird prepares its “stage,” clearing out a smooth display area and ridding it of any detritus. The dance itself involves a good deal of hopping about, followed by a dramatic plumage display that looks almost exactly like an elongated smiley face, the aqua plumage looking like the mouth and eyes, against the midnight black plumage (clip: [Birds of Paradise Mating Dances from Planet Earth](#).) The students’ reaction is one of mild disbelief that

such a creature could exist and would go to such lengths to charm a mate. But this example is proof that for the Bird of Paradise, the Blue Footed Booby of the Galapagos, and humans, too, “the season of love is a time which the nubile of each sex devote to dancing in each other’s presence... in the frantic effort to display all the force and energy, the skill and endurance, the beauty and grace, which at this moment are yearning within them to be poured into the stream of the race’s life” (Ellis 45-46). I explain to them the origins of prom, from



Figure 2. Students learning a West African Dance.

“promenade”, a reminder of the once important emphasis of dancing at this high school rite of passage, which still takes place in the spring, and even today, mark a moment of maturation, where teenagers, dressed

like adults, driven about in limos, participate in a kind of rehearsal for their

own wedding.

This point about dancing being linked to the season of love is driven home during one of the required dance workshops on African Dance. One of the dances taught is the “Dununba,” or “dance of the Strong Men” an acrobatic dance from Guinea performed by young men ([Dance performance from Guinea](#), to show the betrothed and the important people of the village their vitality and bravery. Turning in front of the assembly, they strike their bodies with riding crops made from animal muscle while performing risky somersaults and jumps” (Cultural Context). The girls learn a harvest dance, which clearly shows the traditional role of women as gatherers and nurturers, while at the same time allowing them to exhibit their vitality.

The chronological portion of the class begins with a discussion of Native American dance, followed by colonial dance, religious opposition to dance, the waltz, ragtime dances and Jazz age, the Lindy Hop, Square Dancing, Rock and Roll Dancing and the end of couple dancing, The Contra Dance Revival amongst Back to the Land hippies in the 60s, Disco, Break Dancing and Hip Hop.

Although I began this article with the assertion that the course does not concern itself with topics in more traditional American history classes, it actually does prompt discussion of battles, uprisings, presidents and political speeches, although discussion of these topics happens in more oblique ways. Presidents and political leaders, for instance, have their place in this course. Thomas

Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin both saw the virtues of their daughters learning to dance, for it “confer[red] graces and dignity of carriage upon the female sex” (Marks 33). They believed that a “well-bred woman should learn to dance, sing, recite, and draw...to make them good daughters, good wives, good mistresses, good members of society and god Christians” (Marks 47). Our first president, George Washington – remembered by many as a stalwart figure crossing the icy waters of the Potomac -- possessed the equally impressive ability to navigate his way across the ballroom. He allegedly danced the fussy minuet with such grace that French officers in attendance at a ball in 1840, remarked that his dancing could not have been improved by a Parisian education.” (Keller 14).²

In no time, dancing went from a sign of prestige to an expression of sheer rebellion. For instance, footage of [ragtime era dances](#), like the aptly Grizzly Bear or the Bunny Hop, may at first elicit giggles, but coupled with readings such as Kathy Peiss’s *Cheap Amusements*, a study of work and leisure amongst young women in New York City between 1890-1920, they become artifacts worth examining. What do the simplicity and raunchiness of the dances of this era say about societal changes? How has the music changed from the waltzes of the previous generation? Are the ubiquitous bare legs and daring hemlines simply a response to a need for more freedom of movement or are underlying societal changes also at play? From a simple and silly dance, more weighty discussion emerges on topics such as the two World Wars, Prohibition, Women’s suffrage, the Great Flu Epidemic of 1917, racial segregation, European mass immigration to America.

Course Materials

The materials for the course include books, articles, film, video clips, and works of fiction describing dance. Youtube has proven a treasure trove for clips from everything from colonial dance reenactments to dance sequences from last week’s Grammy’s. It has simplified for me the work of harvesting film clips and organizing them for lectures.

Each student also works on an independent research project related to dance that becomes part of a class colloquium at the end of the semester. Students organize themselves into panels with two other students, and present their research on the same day. Topics have included the Contemporary Ballroom Dance Craze, Dances of Universal Peace, African American Dance and Minstrelsy, and Cajun Dance, to name just a few. Every semester, I come away having learned something new. For instance, one student did a presentation on DDR (Dance, Dance Revolution) – a video based dance form, developed in Japan in 1998, which involves moving to visual prompts on a mini-dance platform. Another student looked at the tradition of the first dance at weddings, including the latest trend at weddings for couples to choreograph elaborate dances, which they perform for their wedding guests.

Dance Workshops

These dance sessions are led by guest teachers, experts in a particular kind of dance. At our first “dance” class, I teach them a few simple English Country Dances. ([Think Jane Austen films](#): a line of bright faced young women across from their dapper male counterparts, vigorously capering about to the sound of violins.) The session begins with students predictably glued to their seats. Forced to surrender the security of immobility, they chose partners, and within a few minutes are smiling and cracking up, with the requisite clowning around that Austen herself would have enjoyed. They experience first hand how the dance floor would have allowed prospective mates in the 18th century the only unchaperoned place to speak freely and touch. And I also try to convey how these seemingly innocent dances, with great potential for flirtation, would have provoked the ire of conservative colonial leaders, such as Increase Mather, prompting him to write his grandiloquently named pamphlet, “An Arrow against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of Scripture.”

Another of the dance sessions on West African dance follows a lecture, “African Dance on American Soil.” The instructor and her percussionist let students try out different rhythms, using drumsticks and body percussion. Next, she teaches them a few relatively simple dances, asking them to think about their readings on African based dance and how it differs from European dances. With the memory of the dance still in their bodies, they remark on the rhythmic complexity of the dances, noting the presence of polyrhythms, something absent in the English Country dances they had tried a few weeks before. They also pick up on the profoundly symbolic nature of these dances, which imitate movements meant to recall harvests, planting, and the like. This session is one we return to throughout the semester as they recall how West African dance, with its emphasis on community and its full use of the body finds echoes in more contemporary dances, like break dancing and even the Lindy Hop.

The Jazz Dance/Swing Dance session is often the most popular, owing in part to the current Swing Dance revival. In addition, the readings and film connected to this session work beautifully to illustrate how jazz dances changed forever the look of popular dance in America, making it more exuberant than anything that had come before. The primary readings draw from Joel Dinerstein’s *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars*. Dinerstein posits that dance’s widespread popularity between the two world wars stemmed from “the transformation from agrarian to industrial work [which] brought forth a need for dynamic physiological engagement and cultural resistance – taking one’s body back from machines (14). In other words, machines (cars, planes, trains, the assembly line) were both inspiration for the ramped up dances made popular in the first part of the 20th century ([tap dancing](#), [swing dancing](#), [chorus lines](#) and [showy and elaborate dance kaleidoscopes seen in Busby Berkeley films](#)) as well as being responsible for enslaving the worker. These dances successfully combine machine aesthetics with human movement, resulting in dances with machine like

precision *and* individual improvisation and personality, perhaps best exemplified in one of the most jaw-dropping tap dancing performances ever caught on film, [the Nicholas Brothers dancing](#) to Cab Calloway and his orchestra in the 1943 film, “Stormy Weather.”

The potential for interdisciplinary thinking is fully exploited in this unit, with wide ranging topics, such as urban architecture, the Great Migration, jazz, as well as the more obvious discussion of various forms of jazz based dances. We watch scenes from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, to exemplify Dinerstein’s claim that modern life and the modern factory, in particular, threatened to de-humanize the worker, reduced to a mere cog in service of industrial production. We see this in the famous scene in which Chaplin is quite literally ingested into the inner workings of the factory, transported along an assembly line conveyor belt into the gears of the factory, all along performing a kind of prone ballet dance unable to stop his hands from their constant work of turning a wrench. Whilst this example may seem fanciful as an example of the melding of man, machine and dance, a real life example can be found in footage from the opening of Chrysler building in 1930, featuring female dancers, dressed as space-age machines performing a chorus line on steel girders, high above the streets of Manhattan³.

The square dance session – accompanied by live music of fiddle and guitar (we are in Music City, after all) – is a return to the familiar for many students, who likely square danced at summer camp or in elementary school. Despite the relative simplicity of these dances, I ask them to think about the meaning of the figures they dance, how they speak to a kind of rural ideal of the small, close-knit community. In the following session, students see how square dancing has moved from the farm to find itself in cities, not only in this country, but around the world. Most of them can’t suppress giggles when watching [Japanese square dancers clad in crinoline skirts and string ties dance to “Jingle Bells.”](#) And perhaps most surprising of all is the knowledge that square dancing, with its roots in traditional, conservative values, with specific gender roles, has great appeal in the gay community, with gay square dancing one of the more vibrant branches in today’s Modern Western Square dance movement.

Dancing also has a number of benefits that go beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge gained in more sedentary ways, like reading and watching film. When students have to ask each other to dance, agree to dance, or touch each other, wonderful side effects occur. They learn each other’s names. Some strike up friendships. The risks involved – stepping on someone’s toe, stiffly attempting a swing dance move – lead to an openness which carries over into the traditional classroom, with students regularly referencing each other by name in class, treating each other’s writing with respect and candor during peer review, and bringing very personal insights and anecdotes to the table.

There’s no guarantee that any of my students will go on and become great dancers. But that’s not the point. What I want them to take from the class is an ability to think critically about the world they inhabit, to see dance (or fashion or

architecture or music) as more than just something in the background, but as cultural productions arising from a response to particular historical moment. And with any luck, this unconventional “hands-on” approach will convince them that the most meaningful learning comes by rolling up your sleeves (or kicking up your heels!)

Works Cited

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¹ I usually begin this class by playing a tune with a good beat, even as the students find their seats. Instinctively, some of them begin to tap their foot, something I point out to them as prelude to our discussion of Daniel Levitin’s *New York Times* Op-Ed, “Dancing in the Seats.” Levitin, a professor of Electronic Communication at McGill University, calls for a return to an age when music and dance were indivisible, when music and dancing were “something everyone participated in.” He argues, “the thought of a musical concert in which a class of professionals performed for a quiet audience was virtually unknown throughout our species’ history” (Levitin). His research on the motor cortex and cerebellum “the parts of the brain responsible for initiating and coordinating movements – are active during music listening... Singing and dancing have been shown to modulate brain chemistry, specifically levels of dopamine, the “feel good” neurotransmitter (Levitin) This usually leads to a sometimes heated discussion of the pros and cons of allowing people to move in their seats at a classical music performance with tickets costing upwards of \$50. Will allowing the audience to move to the music detract from the experience? Does such a philosophy privilege rhythm over other aspects of the music (harmony, melody, arrangement)?

² Modern presidents, too, come under scrutiny for their dancing abilities. In 2009, our discussion of colonial dances coincided perfectly with Barack Obama’s Presidential Inauguration, prompting students to conclude that physical grace is apparently no longer a prerequisite for being elected president, after witnessing [Barack and Michelle Obama somewhat awkward and self-conscious first dance](#).

³ Exceptional footage of this event can be found on the BBC Documentary, “American Visions,” Episode 6: “Streamlines and Breadlines.”