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# *The Contested Landscape of Ballroom Dance*

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*Culture, Gender, Race,  
Class, and Nationality in Performance*

## OVERALL CONTEXT AND FRAMEWORK

Two things prompt the writing of this book. First, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of ballroom dancing, as evidenced in the rapid incorporation of ballroom classes into physical education programs and the development of college scholarships; its incorporation into a boom of commercial films, such as the Australian *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), the Japanese *Shall We Dance?* (1996), the American *Dance with Me* (1998), the Spanish-Argentinean *Tango* (1998), and *Tango Lesson* (1997–1998), which involved a collaboration between the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Argentina; the incorporation of numerous regional, national, and international competitions into ubiquitous television entertainment; and the resurgence of ballroom dancing in nightclubs and ballroom studios as a valuable social asset. Second, there is increasing international anxiety over how (and whether) to transform ballroom into an Olympic sport, given that the change of status from being either a pastime or art into a serious sport also means an increase in commercial viability and prestige. Ballroom, and its sportier equivalent, DanceSport, are important to map because these constitute crucial sites upon which negotiations on how to package bodies as racialized, sexualized, nationalized, and classed are staged, reflective of larger social, political, and cultural tensions. More importantly, as ballroom/DanceSport continue to evolve in their choreography, costuming, and genre (such as the inclusion of more overtly balletic and gymnastic forms, exemplified in the cabaret or theatrical variety), these theatrical productions are aestheticized and constructed so as to encourage

commercial appeal, using the narrative frame of the competitive melodrama to heighten audience interest.

Despite the plethora of how-to books on ballroom and a few theses on the topic (Carrie Stern's "Shall We Dance?: The Participant as Performer/Spectator in Ballroom Dancing" and Mary Lyn Ball's "An Analysis of the Current Judging Methods Used in Competitive Ballroom, Including Comparisons to Competitive Pairs Figure Skating and Ice Dancing"),<sup>1</sup> few critical manuscripts on ballroom have been published.<sup>2</sup>

Among the published books on ballroom dance and culture, Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*<sup>3</sup> examines the social, racial, and artistic climate for African American performers from the late 1920s to the 1940s. While this book is valuable and instructive, it limits the notion of racial representation along the lines of an American black/white divide—something this book aims to problematize. Particularly with the growing international popularity of ballroom, the issue of race in relation to the politico-aesthetics of an evolving dance form is a complex phenomenon. Race, in this context, does not simply refer to American categorizations of blackness and whiteness, but also intersects with the notion of national identity, particularly as many of DanceSport's leading competitors and judges, even if they have emigrated to the United States, are not American by birth.

Gerald Jonas's *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power and Art of Movement*,<sup>4</sup> views dance as a bodily language that expresses not only emotions or insights, but power as well. Its approach is mainly historical and ethnographic, and its use of vivid and well-placed photographs is effective for conveying the rich sociocultural underpinnings of these dances. It is, however, still very much a coffee table book and is meant as a general survey, moving across various African, Asian, Indian, and European dances. It has two chapters with sections on ballroom. Chapter 4, "Social Dance," deals with the rise of partner dancing and the cinematic success of the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers team; chapter 6, "New Worlds of Dance," focuses on the rise of the studio systems through the entrepreneurship of Vernon and Irene Castle and Arthur Murray, and the lindy hop and big band craze that fused the emphasis on pair dancing with the imperative to improvise or embellish a basic step with virtuoso improvisations. Though the book does draw from some autobiographical observations or reflections by the author, these sections are brought in anecdotally, rather than as part of the theoretical apparatus of the book. In addition, ballroom is simply one among many dances of which the book attempts to draw a historical outline.

Julie Malnig's *Dancing Till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Dance*<sup>5</sup> is principally a historical sketch of the increasing prestige of exhibition ballroom dancing from its heyday in the 1910s through the 1960s. It also uses

primary sources such as promotional materials and print reviews, and is illustrated with original photographs. *From Ballroom to DanceSport*<sup>6</sup> would update this material and locate ballroom within a larger cultural context by drawing connections between the staging of ballroom as a potential Olympic sport, the return of its popularity as a social activity, and its ubiquity as a cinematic backdrop.

John Lawrence Reynolds's *Ballroom Dancing: The Romance, Rhythm and Style*<sup>7</sup> is informative in terms of its descriptions of ballroom's current status and its competition rules concerning steps and attire. Its use of colorful photographs reflective of current competitions enhances the book. However, it lacks a critical dimension and is more of a coffee table book than a critical text.

Dorothy A. Truex's *The Twenty Million Dollar Give-Away: An Expose of Competitive Ballroom Dancing*<sup>8</sup> is an expose of the seamier economic aspects of ballroom. What it does not do is provide a critical account that explains the appeal of ballroom, in spite of the huge financial costs it exacts from its enthusiasts; an analysis of its aesthetics and the elements of fantasy that motivate its practitioners reveals not only gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized aspects of the body, but also a sharp dichotomy between the aging body and the youthful body, and ties that in with similar issues within a broader politicocultural and economic context.

In general, each of these published academic books on ballroom have one or more of the following weaknesses that this manuscript seeks to avoid:

1. Some limit themselves to earlier periods of ballroom without addressing its more contemporary forms or its evolving contemporary significations. For example, Julie Malnig's *Dancing Till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dance*, despite its many virtues, limits itself to an examination of the rise to prominence of exhibition ballroom dancing from 1890 through 1960.
2. Some, despite the wealth of contemporary information they provide, do not systematically critique the phenomenon. For example, John Lawrence Reynolds's *Ballroom Dancing: The Romance, Rhythm and Style* provides insightful descriptions of the two main styles of DanceSport, the American versus the English or European, along with their subdivisions, such as the standard and Latin dances, or the smooth and rhythm dances. Drawing from interviews with various contestants, displaying a practical knowledge of what judges value in competitions, and using photographs posed for the cameras during competitions or within photographic studios, the book provides a concrete and colorful glimpse into the world of ballroom.

However, it is mainly marketed as a coffee table edition, and as such, is descriptive rather than analytic.

3. Some focus on only one aspect of ballroom, without attempting to locate that aspect in relation to a larger, more complex terrain. One example is Dorothy A. Truex's *The Twenty Million Dollar Give-Away: An Expose of Competitive Ballroom Dancing*, which deals with the seamier side of ballroom as a business that encourages particularly older clientele to spend money beyond their means. Yet the critical analysis of the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of this phenomenon, which intersects with the enduring media popularity of ballroom, and its promotion of gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized ideals is not adequately developed.
4. Some deal with the racialized aspects of ballroom, but do so in a very limited way. For example, Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* focuses on the social, racial, and artistic milieu within which African American performers worked during the swing era, from the 1920s to the 1940s. While this work is of immense scholarly value, it does not deal with more contemporary settings, and its reduction of racial issues to African American representation alone does not reflect ballroom's/DanceSport's cosmopolitan appeal or its transnationality as both a social and athletic phenomenon.

In contrast, the following are a few distinctive features of this book:

1. It draws from what Bruno Latour calls the "hot" sites within which ballroom's image is being rhetorically shaped. These include corporately sponsored ballroom magazines such as *DanceSport Magazine*; magazine-newsletters run by amateur associations such as the United States Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association's *Amateur Dancers*; websites run by both professional and amateur associations and individuals; local, national, and international televised competitions; and fashion magazines and websites that peddle ballroom apparel, jewelry, shoes, and other items.
2. It examines ballroom's current international popularity as a mise-en-scène upon which cinematic stories about gender, race, class, sexuality, power, and identity are forged.
3. As part of the examination of media and cinematic images of ballroom, it integrates relevant frame grabs or camera-ready photographs from competitions, fashion ads, professional announcements, and films.

4. It incorporates contemporary interviews with actual competitors, social dancers, teachers, and judges.
5. Parts of it will employ an autoethnographic or autobiographical format, which draws from my own experiences as a competitor and student of ballroom. I was initially trained in ballet, Hawaiian, and Philippine folk dance in the Philippines and then moved on to being trained in the English ballroom style at Cambridge, England, in 1990. I have been retrained in the American ballroom style since 1997.
6. Unlike other books that often limit themselves to one approach, which is usually historical in nature, this manuscript draws from an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating not only a strictly historical timeline, but also sociological, ethnographic, rhetorical, feminist, and critical and cultural studies frameworks.

The emphasis of the book is principally rhetorical, which means its key focus is on arguments being made, whether explicitly, in the form of outright verbal pronouncements or press releases, or implicitly, in the way bodies are clothed or framed or shot. The fulcrum of the book is how ballroom dancing is symbolically constructed and understood by different audiences. Both the symbolic construction and how audiences understand symbolic constructions constitute the realm of rhetoric.<sup>9</sup> Ballroom dance, and its competitive Olympic equivalent, does and should have multiple meanings to the multiple audiences I study (which include self, significant others, experts, competitors, viewers of films, and sports fans, among others). The Olympic exigence calls for a careful analysis of the emerging global presence of ballroom dancing and the attempt by some to transform it into a sport, which is dominated by heterosexual, agonistic assumptions. In addition to examining the Olympic conundrum, I also explore several experimental breaks with the drive toward the dream of Olympic inclusion as a full sport (with its underpinning global capitalist structures). Ultimately, a major aim is to chart the ambivalent gains—the dangers and potentials of transforming ballroom dance into a sport, and the power of alternative and inventive modes of dance that are currently underexplored. The Olympic controversy is the final topic the book deals with, but it is but one of several strands that flow from the central argument concerning the multiple meanings generated by dance performance. The “art versus sport” question thus serves as a central touchstone designed to illustrate the global importance of the topics this book is concerned with, but would not diminish the importance of more autobiographically rooted and local insider insights.

Thus, in the last chapters of the book, though some attention is paid to the time line in the official progress toward the achievement of Olympic status, such as in the minutes or press releases produced by the United States Amateur Ballroom Dance Association or the International Olympic Committee, this book goes beyond these often drab and sometimes legalistic documents. Before then, however, to understand how ballroom has become successfully poised to metamorphose into its competitive, athletic form, DanceSport, one must chart some of the larger cultural phenomena influencing and enabling this transformation. To do that, one must sketch, to the extent possible, the outlines of how ballroom dance has now become part club dance and part gym substitute, and, as depicted in movies, music, and advertising, a glamorous activity. Ballroom dance thus becomes the template for values concerning masculinity and femininity, whiteness and nonwhiteness, heterosexuality and homosexuality, nationalism and xenophobia, among others. The look of what is properly sporty or arty involves a complex set of negotiations in which these traditional binary dichotomies are both reinforced, but also rendered more fluid. Thus, men who dance ballroom are often overdetermined as “men” in their costuming, but they are also required to look graceful; women are similarly hyperfeminized in their modes of dress and make-up, but are required to hold their own in terms of physical stamina and power. It is these complex rhetorical “dances” that this book charts, rather than simple time lines. Even more fundamentally, the book also flows from my perspective as an “insider-outsider” to ballroom dance—as both one of its practitioners, but also one of its critics—and it is important to begin there.

WATCHER AND WATCHED: INSIDENESS AND OUTSIDENESS  
IN LIVING, WRITING, AND THEORIZING  
THE BALLROOM DANCER'S BODY

Paul Stoller, in *Sensuous Scholarship*, wrote of the need to “reawaken profoundly the scholar’s body by demonstrating how the fusion of the intelligible and the sensible can be applied to scholarly practices and representations.”<sup>10</sup> This chapter follows that ethnographic aim, focusing on the movement across the realms of private and public bodies, of the intellectual and the physical, of the watcher and watched—which are crucial to the apprenticeship and practice of ballroom dance. Thus, this chapter is an attempt to document the larger social backdrop within which DanceSport’s bid to be an Olympic sport is grounded.

A crucial dimension of the approach I take in this chapter is the concept of the insider-outsider because dance does entail movement across different layers of “insiderness” and “outsiderness.”<sup>11</sup> The concept of being an

insider-outsider is derived from Maria Lugones's vision of the "new mestiza consciousness," which in turn is born from the complex interplay between oppression and resistance, where resistance is understood as a social and collective activity. *Mestizaje*, as she characterizes it, is marked by "the development of tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity, by the transgression of rigid conceptual boundaries, and by the creative breaking of a unitary aspect of new and old paradigms."<sup>12</sup> In Lugones's reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*,<sup>13</sup> which deals with the psychology of oppression, she imagines a consciousness that resists dualistic thinking, and acknowledges the need for racial, ideological, cultural, and biological "cross-pollination" in order for Chicanas and other women of color to remain self-critical and self-animated pluralities rather than "hyphenated being[s], . . . dual [personalities] enacted from the outside, without the ability to fashion [their] own responses."<sup>14</sup>

Lugones's terminology is instructive because it gets at the politico-cultural chiaroscuro of inside-outsideness I live. I occupy the liminal realm of the mestiza and the metaphorical cyborg materially. I am Filipino by birth, but my family is of mixed ancestry: my father has French American roots, and my mother, a hint of Spanish Chinese blood. But I also inhabit this in-between space professionally as a trained molecular embryologist and philosopher, and semiprofessional visual artist and ballroom dancer.

Though I have been a student of several dance forms (ballet, Philippine folk dance, Hawaiian dancing as filtered through a Filipino lens, and the Korean dance of exorcism known as *salpuri*), what follows is a montage of reflections on the nature of gendered and embodied interaction principally focused on ballroom dances, seen through different narrative lenses, allowing, once again, a fluctuation across insider and outsider perspectives. The focus on ballroom is crucial because it provides a prism through which issues of what differentiates studio culture from social opportunities for dancing may be filtered. Furthermore, ballroom, as a popular pastime now evolving into a potential Olympic medaled event, DanceSport, is voracious in its assimilation of stylized cultural and bodily habits. Thus, it provides a useful locus through which one may plot, for example, the bodily imprints of other dances, such as ballet (which has its own studio culture), and its more ethnic counterparts, such as the Tango of Argentina or the Samba of Brazil. Thus, whenever an analogy or a comparison between the various ballroom dances and these other dances I have studied proves useful for illustrating a point, I juxtapose these different realms of bodies and meanings. Nevertheless, for the purpose of creating a more readily readable text, I have chosen to keep the main focus on ballroom dance. As I show, issues of femininity and masculinity, being subject-objects of the aesthetic gaze, and issues of freedom and constraint are paramount

to the exploration of what it means to do ballroom as both a competitive event and an art form.<sup>15</sup> Being someone who has apprenticed and competed in, and yet continues to be a student of ballroom dance, once again provides me with multiple perspectives. As someone who both leads (that is, steps into the traditionally masculine role) and follows (steps into the traditionally feminine role) both in social and performative contexts, I am able to explore or experiment with what it means to create masculine or feminine lines. Thus, I am particularly interested in what it means to communicate clear bodily cues, such that the person I am dancing with can adjust easily to these (which leading entails), or to be sensitively attuned, every muscle and nerve alert, for the slightest cue, so that two separate bodies may move in unison (which following requires). As someone who is part of ballroom studio culture, and as someone who dances in purely social contexts, I move across a host of varying cultural expectations, because studio dancing and social dancing have very different rules, just as dancing the waltz with a country dancer is very different from dancing the waltz with a ballroom dancer.

I examine how ballroom dance is created and taught, and how the highly codified steps and styles are integrated with the need to constantly recreate the structure of each dance performed. I wondered how different bodies, levels of skill, and styles adapt to each other. I was also curious about the process by which everyday people became performers in the context of the social hall, club, or ballroom studio, and wondered what motivated people to dance, both socially and competitively. I found myself intrigued by the etiquette of the dance floor and how it is affected by social interactions off that floor. I found myself fascinated by the role of dancing in the development of an actual romance, as well as the aesthetic romance of dancing. I asked how watchers judge what they see. With these questions, I have explored the unusual way in which all ballroom dancers occupy both the watcher and the dancer roles, and their methods for smoothly switching across these roles.

The physical knowledge I gained as I began to participate helped me interpret other dancers' views through data gathered both in interviews and from articles about ballroom dancing. Experience helped me discuss dancing comfortably and authoritatively with practitioners, and helped me to structure questions that caused dancers to think about their kinesthetic experiences. At times the information gained in these ways affirmed my experience and observations; equally as often it caused me to rethink and reexamine them. In a sense, other bodies clarified, expanded, confirmed, and questioned the knowledge my own body was gathering. This project, then, reflects the kinesthetic experiences of many bodies, my own and those of the people I interviewed, watched, and read about, privileging



both what was said or reported, and what was seen and felt. The “field notes” for this book include interviews with other participants, both students and teachers, with whom I shared various points of convergence—as an advanced student who also teaches part-time. Extended conversations with me—or written interviews responded to in depth—provided some dancers with an opportunity to reflect on things they often took for granted. My questions, though carefully choreographed, once asked often set up a discussion that ricocheted far from my original intent, and I have rearranged the material to allow the flow of the dancers’ voices to correspond with my own phenomenological reflections on my dance biography—how different types of dances have impressed themselves into my bodily memory, leaving imprints, once again gifting me with an insider-outsider perspective, which can be both illuminating and debilitating.

Thus, the method I used in my interviews intersects with Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s imperative regarding participant/researcher dialogue that context, being fluid, should suggest an adaptable methodology.<sup>16</sup> Thus, I welcomed all responses and encouraged informants involved in this research project to disagree with me, when they could. More often than not, the participants who disagreed tended to be older white men, though one Hispanic man in his twenties expressed similar views concerning the politics of gender in ballroom. Often they pointed out or explained aspects of performance or of society that they felt I had misunderstood. Some used that opportunity to express their own philosophies and theories about dancing in general, and ballroom dancing in particular.

Writers from several disciplines have helped me forge a vocabulary and set of theoretical frames concerning the social and performance aspects of the ballroom event. Sociologist Elizabeth Burns’s *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*<sup>17</sup> helped to formulate issues of stagelike behavior in a social performance. The work of sociologist Erving Goffman<sup>18</sup> has been useful in my examination of the social aspects of ballroom society. Yet perhaps the most crucial has been the return to the physical body of the researcher, advocated emphatically by particularly movement scholars, from many fields. Among those whose work helped in my formulation of the insider-outsider position in ballroom dance include Barbara Browning, Jane Cowan, Diane Freedman, Sally Ann Ness, and Cynthia Cohen Bull, who are all movement scholars employing different methodologies.<sup>19</sup> In addition, two anthropologists, James Clifford and Michael Jackson, were also influential in their convergence with the phenomenological stress on the importance of lived experience.<sup>20</sup> All these methodologies combine to buttress the autoethnographic exploration of the insider-outsider position in relation to ballroom dance that I enact in this chapter.

MEMOIR OF A DANCER:  
THE PHILIPPINES AND SOUTH KOREA

I began ballroom dancing in 1991, desiring to get away from the intellectual intensity of working on a PhD in molecular embryology, and the emotional exhaustion of having broken up with the first man I had ever conceived of marrying—a young Belgian with perennial health problems and a burning ambition to be a diplomat, both of which proved incompatible with the fifteen-hour days I tended to spend at the laboratory and my own professional aspirations. Cambridge University certainly did not lack for social outlets, and I decided I needed to return to the main physical activity that had sustained me in my younger years: dance.

My love affair with dance began when I was about four years old. My mother had hired a nun at a nearby convent as a piano teacher for myself and my brother; she found that we took to piano instruction better (that is, in a more docile, obedient fashion) if we took lessons from someone else. Yet the nuns who ran the convent were quite ambitious, and every time they had their yearly recitals, they required that the students do more than play the piano. We were also required to recite poetry and to perform dances ranging from ballet to Hawaiian hula dances. I remember, in particular, one ballet dance number that required five young girls in formation, and I ended up being the soloist at a crucial point of the dance. We were all required to wear white dresses and crowns, to give the dance its required ethereal character. I remember being so nervous during the piano duet I played with my mother before the dance number that my hands were icy and shaking; she gave my hands the usual gentle squeeze, and somehow I survived the ordeal. I sailed through the dance number in a dreamlike haze. My mother proudly told me I did very well, and then remarked thoughtfully that it was time I stopped wearing those dark brown shorts underneath my skirt. It turns out that at the crucial point of the solo routine, as I lifted my arms in the arabesque position, my skirt lifted to reveal my tomboyish shorts (that is, the shorts with which I could scale trees and play war games with my brother and his friends), to the amusement of the audience.

As I stepped into the large gym in which the ballroom classes were held, I remember being a little nervous. Most people taking the classes were undergraduates; though I could pass as an undergraduate (thus making me an insider of sorts), very few international students were there. There were a handful of Indians or Pakistanis, but the majority were British and seemed to have the standard cliques. But once the dancing started, these divisions seemed to melt in the absorption of learning steps, moving in time to the music, and coordinating our movements with vari-

ous partners. I found that Austrian and Spanish men seemed much more at ease with partner dancing, partly because dancing was an active part of their cultures. British men, on the other hand, seemed almost afraid of partner contact and were a little more stiff if they were beginners. Spanish men were famous for and much desired for their “Latin hips;” Austrian men were masterful, particularly with the Viennese waltz, with its numerous turns, and especially as many of them did not see dancing the waltz as a threat to their masculinity, but in fact, enhanced it.

I had my first dance competition in December 1990. I remember the excitement of preparing for the event; in some ways, it was like a throw-back to high school. Once again, there was a lot of excitement and anxiety over finding the right partner. I sensed that for many of the younger people, finding the right partner also meant hopefully dating them afterward. Since I had begun dancing with the I-don’t-want-to-complicate-my-life attitude, I had a relatively easier time. The dance teachers simply paired off single men and women randomly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, I ended up with a young Indian man as a dance partner.

The contest in itself was instructive. It commenced with the beginners, and my partner and I excitedly joined the crowded floor. Numbers were pinned to the men’s backs so that couples could be easily identified. The only criterion that I remember being cited was keeping time with the music. My partner and I were doing quite well on the cha-cha and had our friends cheering when he missed one beat, and we were rapidly marched off the floor. He apologized profusely; I simply smiled, and proceeded to watch, with great interest, as the more advanced dancers took the floor. I remember being particularly struck with how diaphanous and revealing the Latin dance women’s costumes were, and wondered if I would ever be comfortable wearing those costumes.

#### SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

FEBRUARY 1993

“No, no beautiful!” Miss Yon, my *salpuri* dance instructor, half moans and half giggles at the same time.<sup>21</sup> (*Salpuri* is a traditional Korean dance, originally performed as a dance of exorcism by priests, who are traditionally male. It consists of a powerful, yet lyrical series of motions in which the dancer at times seems to float or tread upon invisible water.)

“Look me,” she commands as she takes slow mincing steps in front of the single mirror in the room. Her feet alternately rise on the rounded parts of her toes (not on the tips, as ballerinas do) and slide back to rest upon slightly elevated ankles.

I stare and frown.

“See, no water,” she says, mimicking what I have just done: rising to the tips of my toes in the characteristic balletic fashion and neatly taking rapid, sharply pointed steps. “Look, water.” Holding me with her eyes, she again executes the same rocking, lingering, semielevated steps that make her look as if she is treading upon the surface of water.

Learning a new dance is like stepping into a new body, I think as I study her movements. Suddenly, it is no longer a matter of course to rise on one’s toes and to plié, knees spread outward forming mirror images of each other. So much of dance entails doing violence to certain habits that clothe and contour one’s body and the way one moves. Each dance form simply requires a different sense of physicality.

I have no choice but to try to break down fluid motion into a series of incremental movements. It is as if I were trying, mentally, to construct a cartoon version of a movement in real life. My body reflects that jerky, celluloid mimicry of the real that fluctuates between the funny, the awkward, the clumsy, and what has been called “charming” by kinder souls. I shake my head. Steeling myself, I try to execute the movements in a more fluid and less self-conscious manner.

“Good.” Miss Yon’s dark eyes sparkle. “Next learn.”

She takes a silk scarf and grabs one end. Measuring about a foot from the edge, she inserts the cloth between the second and third fingers of her right hand, moves along the cloth till she reaches the other end, estimates what is approximately the same distance from that end and lets the section of the cloth hang between her thumb and second finger, returns to the first cloth border and brings it over her third and fourth fingers to lie between her fourth and fifth fingers. I immediately follow suit with little difficulty.

Learning to use it, though, is no simple matter.

“No, pfinger only.” Miss Yon immediately catches an error. “No move!” She grasps my arms firmly. “Pfinger only.” She pauses for a moment. “And no hip move. Body, no hip.” I realize, with a sinking feeling, that even my training in Hawaiian and Latin American dancing will have to be held in check. The free and subtly sensual wavelike motions of the arms and hips, too, would have to be carefully suppressed, albeit momentarily. Each dance form has its own cultural identity, and imprints itself onto the flesh of the dancer who dares to attempt to master it, and eventually, be mastered by it. To me, the ultimate act for a dancer is one of surrender. A true dancer allows a dance form to dance itself out, using every trembling muscle or screaming nerve; every rise and fall of the breast; every tilt of the head or movement of the eye.

At first I hold my arms and hips stiffly, as if they are enclosed in girdles of iron. Then, as I watch Miss Yon, I realize that in place of the swaying of the arms, a subtle movement of the shoulders and the torso

creates a similar, but more restrained visual effect: in place of the swaying hip movement, a slightly rotating upper torso combined with the semielevated steps of the feet enable one to achieve different forms of bodily alignment. This, too, creates an image of fluidity and achieves a different form of beauty.

“Kay,” Miss Yon’s voice is gentle. “Respire. Deep breath. One, two. Three, four. One, two. Three, four.”

As I breathe deeply in unison with her, I realize that this cadence and degree of inhaling and exhaling allows me not only to enter more spontaneously into the rhythm of this dance form, but also to assume its various positions and movements.

### MOVING INTO THE U.S.

After Korea, finding outlets for dancing ballroom proved challenging. At Penn State University, I was invited to be part of an elite group of lead dancers at the university ballroom club, but once again, finding a partner with whom to dance regularly proved challenging. Men who liked to dance and were good at it were often already paired with women who, understandably, guarded that alliance jealously. During our courtship days, my husband Davis took one ballroom class with me at a small studio close to campus, but it became clear to both of us that this was not an activity he spontaneously enjoyed. When I moved to the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire in 1997, I immediately took part in the activities of the UWEC Ballroom Club, and was soon thereafter recruited as an advisor. 1997–98 proved to be a period of great popularity for ballroom on campus. Every semester, on the first day the organization convened, five hundred students showed up, causing the student instructors to have to harness another nearby room, which was not always the best for dancing; that other room often proved to be the location where martial arts and gymnastics classes were held, and consequently, its floors were padded. But because there seemed to be a great demand for swing and its acrobatics, that turned out to be a good safety measure. Hardly an environment for polishing technique, but most students were out there simply to expend energy and to move vigorously to music. Apparently, the Gap khaki commercials, with their catchy music and breathtaking, energetic lifts, had helped spark a craze, and for the two years that I was there, everything from male gigolo outfits with their long gold chains to swing polka-dotted balloon skirts flourished. Since the Twin Cities, Minneapolis–St. Paul, were only about an hour and a half away (depending on the snowfall and other weather conditions), a small group would occasionally carpool for a weekend in order to get to various swing clubs, dance vigorously until the clubs shut

down at about one o'clock in the morning (unlike Latin clubs, which would go on all night), proceed to an all-night breakfast place, wolf down what seemed like an enormous amount of food, head for the hotel, shower, and then crash in shared rooms in order to cut on costs. I was the only professor who came along during these stints, but because of my slight stature, I tended to camouflage quite well. I found that having that insider-outsider position (passing as an undergraduate while being a professor on a first-name basis with chosen students) often buffered a lot of potentially awkward situations—undergraduates knew I was there to dance and to share in the physical expenditure and exhilaration of that experience, and treated me with a unique blend of deference and camaraderie. Though many of them called me “Kay,” perhaps it was the “Minnesota niceness” that kept the lines clear.

I continued to take lessons at a small eclectic dance studio, whose dances ranged from ballet, modern, and tap, to ballroom, and continued to go social dancing in groups at several affairs held by the local Elks' Club, with a few stints to “the cities” for United States Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association (USABDA) affairs. I also started performing ballroom numbers with my teacher, Jerry, at local dance concerts and at the university, enjoying the rigor of collaborating on choreographing routines and the slight tension that came with performing. At such times, I came to realize the enormity of the responsibility of leading, because when Jerry failed to remember a series of steps, I would have to surrender to his lead and simply wait until he remembered where to pick up the choreographed sequence. Since I tended to remember the sequence more, we developed the survival tactic of whispering code words to each other (with me thus verbally taking over the lead, while appearing not to), through clenched, smiling teeth, of what steps followed next, while performing, in order to keep unpredictabilities to a minimum.

In January 1998 I finally caved in to curiosity and walked into my first Arthur Murray studio as a student, taking advantage of their advertised first free lesson. My principal motivation for doing so was simply the desire to get better, particularly in terms of technique. I had seen other studio-trained dancers dominate the floor during various social occasions in the cities, and I wanted to learn how to move like that. I found out very quickly that the community at the studio and its ethos were very different from the other dance circles in which I concurrently participated. Most of the people taking ballroom lessons at Arthur Murray tended to be young professionals (often in their thirties and older) who belonged to a certain economic class and level of education, as evidenced in their dress and demeanor. The university ballroom club, hardly surprisingly, tended to attract predominantly undergraduates, with only a handful of faculty or staff members. The other

studio in which I now cotaught tended to attract people in their thirties as well, but they, unlike the Arthur Murray crowd, were more heterogenous in dress and manner of interaction.

Other ballroom dance students have told me interesting stories about why they first stepped into the Arthur Murray studio for the first time. Leonard Elzie, a fifty-eight-year-old economist, humorously recounted, "I asked a girl to dance. About two or three measures into the song, she stopped and looked at me and said, 'You really can't dance, can you?' So the next day, I went to Arthur Murray to learn how. That was about 15 years ago."<sup>22</sup> Sara Hurst, a forty-nine-year-old veterinary office manager and former medical technologist, said: "After being divorced, another friend and I were looking for a safe, smoke-free environment to meet people. . . . I was hooked immediately."<sup>23</sup>

My first lesson involved meeting my teacher-to-be, John Speros, who also turned out to be the owner of the studio, and explaining my dance history. We then proceeded into introductory steps in a number of dances, ranging from the foxtrot and waltz to the cha-cha and the swing. Since John saw that I knew a fair bit and could instinctively follow, he began stressing foxtrot technique on the very first day. The first thing I learned was to take a "heel lead" and "peel off" the front part of my foot as I walked backwards in closed dance position. Never had walking seemed so complicated. Through all of this, John kept a steady stream of conversation going, and I quickly learned that to survive in this setting, particularly during practice parties, one had to learn how to converse and dance at the same time, while also navigating the flow of human bodies moving across a crowded dance floor—and hopefully never stopping, missing a step, or crashing into someone.

Old-world etiquette was an integral part of studio culture. During group classes, we were always encouraged to clap our hands in appreciation of our partners, regardless of whether or not the step was accomplished correctly and with perfect precision, before we rotated on to the next partner. At parties, though both sexes could freely mingle and seek out partners as the next piece of music would be announced, gentlemen were expected particularly to thank their partners and escort them back to their seats, and ladies to be gracious about having been asked to dance. Unlike club dancing, where some men took advantage of the situation for inappropriate intimate contact, decorum strictly demanded that no such exploitative behavior occur, particularly between teachers and students. If a newcomer looked like he was being predatory towards women, often a male teacher would cut in. Women, regardless of the level of expertise of the men, were expected to follow the man's lead, even if the man was dancing completely off-beat, which often happened with the mambo, since "breaking" or moving on the second beat was not easy.

## STUDIO LIFE

When I asked several students at the studio at which I took lessons to reflect on the gender politics of leading and following, I got a broad range of responses. Fred Roberson, a database administrator, laconically replied that he did not reflect much on this at all. His wife, Anna, a teacher and school counselor, confessed that occasionally, “when the leader doesn’t feel the music, I want to lead.” Ann Mock, a receptionist, diplomatically replied that she thought “both roles [leading and following] are equally important,” but her husband, David Mock, a history instructor, had a lot more to say: “The fact that the man leads is NOT gender politics. Someone has to lead. . . . It has nothing to do with ‘gender politics.’ And do I think of it? Of course not. I’m too concerned about keeping my partner from being creamed by someone who is going against the line of dance or who is going to do some snazzy step that takes four times the amount of available room.”<sup>24</sup> Irene Padavic, a professor, delivered a rebuttal to David Mock’s sharp rejoinder: “I think about it all right, and I find it anachronistic and annoying. It’s one reason I prefer international folk dance. By the way, dancers in that genre simply quietly did away with the male-dominated elements when this style became popular in the 1970s (it need not be a man at the head of the line now, both sexes dance in lines that were single-sex in the old country, etc.). I don’t know why they survive intact in the ballroom community.”<sup>25</sup>

A number of women, including Pat Erdman, a seventy-nine-year-old retired judicial assistant to the Florida Supreme Court, interpreted the question to be asking whether she minded dancing with women instructors (since statistically, women, both as instructors and students, still outnumber the men, about four to one) and replied, “Women instructors are very good and I don’t mind dancing with them informally.”<sup>26</sup> Eloise Harbeson, a seventy-six-year-old retired director of library services at Tallahassee Community College, echoed Pat’s remarks and added that she thought of ballroom as a sport and therefore thought that everyone, as part of a team, had a part to play. Ron Hancock, a sixty-six-year-old civil engineer, replied, “In our society, it is easier if the man leads and the woman follows. Each is quite difficult and necessary for ballroom.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet trading places, for most people, is not an easy thing to do. It is not simply a matter of committing, to muscle memory more than cognitive memory, the timing and the oppositional correlatives of the patterns of steps of the various dances. More than that, it entails, in effect, an entire personality change. Most leaders become accustomed to occupying the role of being the brain or the general of the operation—planning ahead, taking the initiative, being decisive. Most followers acclimate to the



“mirror-imaging” condition—remaining open and sensitively attuned, responding only when prompted, resisting the urge to think that one knows exactly which step is coming next before the cue comes.

Interestingly, questions concerning possible racial and class depictions implicit in the different dances, or the histories of the dances, did not raise an animated set of responses. Most students who came to the studio tended to be pragmatists and remarked that they had never really thought much about these, or that though the histories were interesting, they were essentially irrelevant to learning how to dance. Their responses tended to mark me as an outsider—perhaps even one who threatened to lessen the amount of enjoyment they derived from ballroom by raising questions concerning its depictions of race and class. Tricia Kiser remarked, “To me, dancing is an interpretive art form in which you perform a role. You act snobby and snooty for the Tango, formal and aristocratic for the Waltz and so on, but I don’t see it as a commentary on a particular race or class.”<sup>28</sup> The irrepressible David Mock effectively turned the question on its head by responding, “What *are* the ‘implicit depictions of race and class in ballroom’? That most blacks and most poor people don’t like ballroom dancing? . . . There’s nothing that keeps anyone from ballroom dancing. There are lessons at FSU [Florida State University] that are \$5 a semester, but the racial and socio-economic picture is the same there as at Arthur Murray’s or the American Legion on Tuesday nights. What about *ageism*? Most of the people who ballroom dance are old.”<sup>29</sup> Irene Padavic gave as balanced and empirical a response as possible, given her background as a sociologist: “In Tallahassee, the majority of ballroom dancers are working- or lower-middle class, in my observation. So there seems to be no sense here that it’s for elites. As for race, I think I have never seen a non-white man. Non-white women are somewhat more common, although the two times I have seen black women at my regular ballroom dance they never returned.”<sup>30</sup>



One of the first things I learned about studio culture at Eau Claire was that one had to be very careful, particularly in negotiating that student–teacher relationship. Despite the no fraternization rule within the Arthur Murray system, I was told that older single women, in particular, tended to fall in love with their instructors, and jealously guarded their “territory.” A male instructor who became a friend told me how, in the past, all instructors were required to have studio names (as opposed to their real names) in order to prevent students from finding out where they lived and in effect stalking them. He also confided that there was once an older woman who had written a formal letter to the studio owner, requesting that he be

allowed to take her home after a party. I asked him why taking her home would present such a problem; he laughed and said taking her home was a euphemism for something more.

When I asked students at the Tallahassee Arthur Murray studio to reflect on the challenge of maintaining friendships and professional relationships in spite of the intimacy of continually working together and possible attractions, hardly surprisingly, the married couples had no problems with maintaining that border, while singles admitted to having to work harder at it. Sarah Hurst, a divorcee, formerly married to a nondancer, replied candidly, "This is a tough one. It is very easy to let emotions get a free rein when you are working hard in an intimate posture with full body contact. . . . Keeping conversations on a light and jovial level is my best means of maintaining a friendly yet professional relationship. . . . Although sometimes when one of those little moments of ecstasy occurs, it's hard not to fall in love with your partner for a minute."<sup>31</sup>

The issue of harnessing one's emotions to appropriately express them within a context of professionalism brings up the related issues of whether one needs to feel something for the person one is dancing with in order to dance well, and whether acting out a role or simulating a virtual emotion in order to interpret the mood of the dance is necessary. The majority of the respondents replied that one needed genuinely to feel something but each interpreted what that feeling was differently. Fred and Anna Roberson replied that respect was the most important but that it was a big bonus when "your partner has a feel—and a flair—for the music—its dynamics, its rhythm, its mood. It is less enjoyable to dance with a wooden or milk toast partner."<sup>32</sup> Pat Erdman replied that what was most important for her was that her partner remain "thoughtful, tactful, never hurt[ful of] my feelings."<sup>33</sup> Sarah Hurst spoke of feeling "comfortable as a prerequisite to not dancing stiffly," Ann Mock, of the need to like someone, and Ron Hock, of "feel[ing] the music and the excitement and enjoyment of your partner" as an imperative to dancing well.<sup>34</sup> Only Eloise Harbeson, a gold-level dancer who is a veteran at competitions (and thus the art and sport of competitive performance) replied, "You need to have confidence in the partner's ability. If you mean 'feel something' to be like a sexual feeling, it is not necessary. One may need to give the appearance of a relationship in competitions and exhibitions."<sup>35</sup>



Ballroom studio culture is a highly stable one. Every month, a schedule of group classes, ranging from beginners, to bronze level, to silver and gold levels, is announced. The dances range from the smooth dances (foxtrot,

waltz, tango, Viennese waltz), to rhythm dances (rumba, chacha, mambo, samba, East Coast single and triple time swing, merengue), to country dances (polka, country waltz, two-step, West Coast swing), to more unusual repertoires, like the Argentine tango or the Lindy Hop, and occasionally, an international style of ballroom (as opposed to the American style), like the quickstep. The stability extends to the decorum of these classes: men are asked to line up on one side of the room, women on the other side. The leaders' (men's) parts are first broken down and demonstrated, and then the followers' (women's) steps are analyzed and shown. Then a couple demonstrate the steps in tandem, where either two teachers dance, or a student is selected to perform the step with the instructor teaching the class. Men and women pair up, trying the steps in keeping with the instructor's counting, first without music, then with music. Rotation occurs, ideally, with military precision, with women moving in a clockwise motion to the next men, who stay stable—the anchors who maintain the order of who is supposed to dance with whom next. The goals of these group classes include the practice of well-known patterns for the more experienced dancers and the introduction of new patterns for both veterans and newcomers alike, for possible further refinement in private lessons with studio teachers.

Private lessons, which are scheduled in consultation between student and teacher, occur depending on which package the student purchases; in general, meetings range from as many as two or three times a week to once in about a fortnight. Private lessons or coaching lessons are really what are expensive about doing ballroom (usually costing between about \$80 and \$125 for forty-five minutes), but it is usually through such lessons that one improves dramatically in technique and develops competitive routines. Every week as well, usually during Friday evenings, the studio sponsors practice parties, and students get a chance not only to practice as many dances as they would like, but to dance with as varied a number of partners as they can find. The ratio of women to men is usually not quite equal (roughly about two or three women for every man), but men and teachers (who function as male, whether they happen to be men or women), out of courtesy, attempt to rotate partners, though some couples choose to dance only with each other. After a certain number of lessons, students test out of a certain level by showing that they know both the names (or figure titles) of a sequence of steps and the steps themselves by demonstrating them in front of an instructor who is not their teacher. Just like any ordered school curriculum, the ideal is to advance from one level to the next (beginner, associate bronze, full bronze, associate silver, full silver, gold star, gold bar) in an orderly and thorough manner.

When I asked the students to talk about why they continued dancing, their answers were similar. Sarah Hurst replied that her motivations

included “exercise, social contact, and mental health.”<sup>36</sup> Ann Mock spoke of an “addiction” to the enjoyment of dancing, which Fred and Anna Roberson seconded, speaking of themselves as “hooked.”<sup>37</sup> Patricia Erdman replied that her primary doctor always asks whether she is still dancing because this keeps her happy and healthy, and Ron Hock spoke of the “challenge to improve” as one of his primary motivations.<sup>38</sup> Yet the reason for this enjoyment remained vague until I posed the question of what they found to be the most rewarding and frustrating aspects of being part of the studio system. It turned out that several pointed to the security that the studio system enables. Eloise Harbeson spoke of the rewards that “dancing with excellent dancers . . . and wonderful friends . . . in a safe environment” presented.<sup>39</sup> Leonard Elzie added, “It’s a good atmosphere because everyone is always upbeat and supportive. Most frustrating—cost of lessons limits how much I take. Other frustration is that I can’t remember the figures after the class is over—but that is me.”<sup>40</sup> Sarah Hurst echoed a few of Leonard’s insights: “The most rewarding are the quality of the instructors and the consistency of the music and surroundings. The most frustrating aspect is the requirement to complete a certain number of private lessons in order to advance through the levels of competence.”<sup>41</sup> Irene Padavic was the only one to actively critique the economic structure behind the lessons, revealing that most clientele prefer not to see these “natural”-seeming substructures that she addresses head on: “The most rewarding for me is having such competent instructors. I care a great deal about technique and feel that I learn a huge amount in each lesson. I don’t like being pressured to increase my participation into the realm of showcases and competitions, however. I realize that the instructor/student interaction is a market-based relationship, but I have indicated the services I’m willing to purchase and not purchase, and resent attempts to sell me on more.”<sup>42</sup>

There is something about the studio that creates an insulated and secure environment. All men are implicitly expected to treat all women with gallantry and courtesy and to lead with gentleness and firmness, thus keeping at bay the ever-lurking cultural presumption that men who dance are not masculine enough. All women, regardless of their age, physical appearance, or weight, fulfill, during that brief moment of communion through dancing, their fantasies of beauty and grace. A young-looking and slim grandmother in her fifties once confided that she thought the reason why so many women like ballroom dancing is because pairs dancing allows one to come close to being “hugged” while dancing. Unlike Latin club dancing, where a man can often take dancing the merengue as a license to slap his pelvic area close to a woman whose name he does not even know, or swing dancing, where a man can presumptively think dancing swing well means manhandling women into doing stunts (a potential peril

I often faced as a five-foot-one-inch tall woman of slight stature), studio dancing provides a safe space, both in terms of etiquette and the physical expenditure of energy.

Yet another draw to the studio appears to be an element of prestige. Studio dancing is associated with discipline and technique; in comparison, “street” or “club” dancing is associated with spontaneity of expression and movement (along with smoke and alcohol). The outspoken David Mock replied with his blunt wit, “Ballroom is unique because it is orderly, mannered, refined. An illiterate and uncoordinated ape can do club dancing.”<sup>43</sup> As I dance in several circles, once again, my insider-outsider perspective is instructive. At the Tallahassee American Legion Monday night dances, the crowd is highly varied in more ways than one: college students who belong to the Florida State University ballroom club come, as do ballroom aficionados of various types, whether studio trained or trained by independents, and country western dancers. Although there is a bar, unlike all-night clubs, no one shows any discernible signs of inebriation or does uncouth things like fling ice water or alcohol on the dance floor while laughing hysterically. College students usually dominate the floor during fast-paced swings, experimenting with lifts and stunts. Country western dancers enthusiastically take the floor with their acrobatic multiple turns when West Coast swings or two-steps are played. When music that can be interpreted in different ways, such as a waltz or a cha-cha, is played, numerous styles are showcased, ranging from the ballroom style, with its big top and elegant, long lines for the waltz, or its sensual Latin hip motion, for the cha-cha; or the country style, with its agile footwork and quick turns.

Yet despite the coexistence of different styles on the dance floor, one finds very few people who can move across the different communities. It is not simply an age difference, or the fact that people run in different social circles; neither is it simply not knowing enough common steps, though that is part of it. It is also the fact that different dances have different body languages, and translating across these bodily vocabularies is extremely difficult, and at times, unsettling. Ballroom dancers, particularly studio-trained ones, lead, oftentimes, from the chest or upper body, and often dance in closed position (that is, with the abdomen and hips in contact); those trained in a different tradition tend to lead from the hands and legs. These differences in styles of leading often render the points of communication between bodies incommensurable. Studio-trained dancers who advance beyond the basic level are trained to pay attention to the subtlest nuances—for example, whether it is a toe or heel lead; where the head has to be angled; how one styles one’s hands. Dancers trained in a different tradition tend to be more concerned with moving to music in a rhythmical sense, maximizing their enjoyment of the movement in

conjunction with the music. Country western dancers often use what seem to ballroom dancers like a dizzying number of turns, and swing dancers often incorporate aerials that ballroom dancers find dangerous, particularly when dancing with someone whom they do not particularly trust. Whenever I dance with someone who comes from a different dance tradition, whether male or female, it is of utmost importance to me that I remain sensitive to that person's level of comfort. Often, I half-jokingly beg the men to be gentle, particularly if they have a penchant for leading multiple turns; if they seem intimidated and constantly apologize for making a mistake while leading, I engage in lighthearted conversation. With a woman, I tend to lead simply the basics first and progress upward only if I sense that she is comfortable and confident. With other competitive female dancers, I attempt to lead more complicated and obscure moves, such as the *maxixe* in Samba, or several variations of the foxtrot twinkle, or the Tango *la puerta*. Moving across the leaders' and followers' parts, in addition to knowing formal patterns, and being flung into occasions where I have only my instincts to fall back on makes me appreciate the different skills that effectively leading and following necessitate.

I know that some women are uncomfortable with dancing with other women in social settings, and if I am aware that that is a problem, I simply do not ask them. But if men are not comfortable with a woman leading another woman perfectly willing to dance with a woman, there is nothing I can do about that. One of my tall female friends once whispered to me as we poised our bodies to begin a tango while we danced at the American Legion, "Do you know how many rednecks around here are uncomfortable with two women dancing together?" This was the first time I had heard of this, and I could only return a shocked look. "Ah," she said, throwing her nose humorously in the air with the exaggerated flair characteristic of the international style of the tango, "but we are secure enough in our femininities not to worry." And off we went. A few more dances down the line, a man invited me to dance with the words, "You do dance with men, too, right?" I grinned and accepted. Yet another young man, who was also a former trainee at the Arthur Murray studio, playfully remarked as he led me to the dance floor, "This time, you'll follow for a change."



I joined the Tallahassee Arthur Murray studio as a trainee in August 2000. What principally attracted me to the training program was the potential for improving my dancing and advancing through the levels at a faster rate than a regular student program would. I had already been teaching ball-

room informally for a number of years: as an advisor to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Ballroom Club, as a coteacher and demonstrator at a small studio at Eau Claire, as a dance consultant for several student groups at St. Lawrence University, and as an instructor of ballroom at the State University of New York in Potsdam. The instructors at the Arthur Murray studios at Eau Claire and Ottawa half-jokingly called me their “ex-officio” instructor because I often ended up leading at parties and group classes because of an imbalance in the gender ratio, and because new students tended to ask me to teach them a few very basic steps, which I willingly did.

I found, though, that being part of the studio system as a trainee (that is, a volunteer under training without pay, a choice I made as I did not want to jeopardize my duties as a university professor) changed a number of things. Particularly as a trainee (once again, another insider-outsider position: not quite a paid instructor, not quite a student), earning no money, but spending a lot of time at the studio, assisting with demonstrations and basic classes, there were a lot more demands on my time and energy. There was also the requirement of fitting into the cultural milieu of the studio, which I found very different, particularly from the Ottawa studio—the Tallahassee studio is a much more relaxed and social atmosphere, and so there is a greater stress on “goofing off” and having fun. Unlike the Ottawa studio, which often had elegant themes for its festivals, the Tallahassee studio, as its first theme party when I became part of its staff, had an “inside-out, outside-in” motif. I came wearing a shirt turned inside out, but was amazed to find the rest of the staff had gone well over the required limit: underwear worn over jeans; panties slung over heads like hats; teeth colored to resemble decaying cavities. I knew then that I had entered a different cultural milieu.

I sometimes felt that the analogy to being on call was an accurate depiction of the arrangement as a trainee. As someone at the bottom of the proverbial totem pole, I had to make myself as available as possible or run the risk that someone else could get assigned; at any time, an appointment with a potential student could be scheduled or cancelled. I found that the most important skills to being an instructor, particularly at the beginning level, were more business oriented rather than dance oriented. Even though one might be tired or stressed or discouraged, one had to force oneself to be supremely cheerful, perky, and outgoing, joking with students, or being attentive to their every need or anxiety. The usual ritual involved giving the studio tour and then beginning the basics of the general package, which usually included the foxtrot, waltz, rumba, and swing, although occasional deviations, if the student was particularly interested only in Latin dances, were allowed. We had a basic vocabulary to employ in teaching

steps, including walking steps (whether forward or back), side (or “excuse me”) steps, box steps (a composite of the walking and side steps in the figure of a box), rocking steps (shifting weight alternately from a front foot to a foot placed behind), and triple steps (tiny, shuffling steps done in triples, quick time). Thus, the basic of the foxtrot involved (for the man) two forward walking steps, executed as two “slows,” and two “excuse-me” steps to the left, done in quick time. The waltz involved two half boxes, done to three-quarter time. The rumba, also composed of two half boxes, was taught to a slow-quick-quick time. The triple swing involved a rock step and two triple steps. The triple steps were often the hardest to teach because they involved quick, coordinated movement, in time to a fairly fast beat, which not everyone could do quickly. If a student was having difficulty with a triple step, then we were instructed to shift to a “single” swing, substituting a simple weight change for a triple step, thus preventing the peril of frustrating the student.

When I attended a training seminar in Atlanta in October 2000, I was struck by the rhetoric employed to discuss the business and art of teaching ballroom. One of the lecturers gave a long talk on the differences between a university professor (who, in his caricature, disinterestedly went on and on without audience contact) and a ballroom instructor (who, in his model, was perfectly attuned to every single need his students had—both in terms of dance and emotional and psychoanalytic terms). It became clear to me that the main distinction (in terms of institutional arrangements and cultural characterizations) is that whereas university professors have the “leisure” of teaching required classes, and society in general values education as a means to a practical end, ballroom instructors have to cultivate a *need* for continuing to dance, and ballroom lessons are considered a luxury, rather than a necessity to being successful in one’s chosen professional career. Thus, the burden of proving that ballroom classes are essential and worth their price tags lies squarely upon the ballroom instructor’s shoulders. Ballroom lessons within a franchised studio system easily cost thousands of dollars per package (though various payment schemes are allowable)—and this is not counting the cost of doing competitions, with their five-star hotel accommodations, custom-made costumes, jewelry and shoes, and preparatory coaching lessons. Ballroom is the heady stuff of dreams and fantasy, but it requires quite a financial lining to continue living the dream.

If one were to be an effective part of the franchise, one had to learn how to sell as many lessons as one could, and as effectively as possible. Though I greatly enjoyed the individualized coaching and group dance lessons that came with the seminar, perhaps a crucial factor that made me decide that teaching ballroom within the studio system was not for me was



another short lecture on how to use touch to establish trust with one's students. I suddenly wondered whether my past teachers, with whom I thought I had established friendships, had thought of me as simply another number in the grand competitive push for earning the maximum number of lessons. When I discussed this matter with a friend and fellow teacher, Hope Cantrell, she replied candidly that though one could never neglect the business end of things, friendships, when they blossomed, were often genuine. Gaspar Van Der Ree, perhaps one of the gentlest human beings I have ever met, who was also a business manager at the Tallahassee studio, shrugged resignedly and said, "It is a business. One can never forget that."

When I asked ballroom instructors at the Tallahassee studio to reflect on what they found as the most rewarding, frustrating, and challenging aspects of teaching ballroom within the studio system, then-twenty-five-year-old Hope Cantrell, one of the veterans who had taught at the studio for three years, replied, "Very rewarding is the sense of camaraderie and belonging. Rather like a church group. Being part of a large franchised studio, like Arthur Murray, also affords us the opportunity to attend workshops and conventions, and have coaches visit. Frustrating are the rules. Any system has them, yet everyone has at least one that they don't see a need for."<sup>44</sup>

I was curious to find out whether teachers would respond differently from students in reflecting on the implicit gendered, racial, and class dynamics in ballroom, and was not too surprised to find a more homogenous response. Maurice Smith, a fifty-one-year-old US Coast Guard-licensed captain and then very new instructor at the studio, replied, "Over the centuries, the roles of men and women have varied, and probably will in the future."<sup>45</sup> Regarding race and class, he replied, "Now, race and class seem minimal."<sup>46</sup> Tillman Kasper, then a nineteen-year-old but already a senior teacher, saw any racial or class depictions in ballroom as "subjective" and no longer relevant.<sup>47</sup> Allison Drake, then a twenty-year-old trainee and part-time bartender, replied, "Honestly, I think it is nice; it is a bit old fashioned but it does work, and men do need one place they can be in charge."<sup>48</sup> Allison had an interesting anecdote to share regarding racial presuppositions and particularly Latin dancing: "My boyfriend is Latin, so his response when I ask him to take lessons with me is: 'I don't need to; it is in my blood.'"<sup>49</sup> In slight contrast, Hope Cantrell's reply wavered in between gender neutrality and a hint of biological and sociological determinism: "The lead/follow issue seems awfully sexist, but it doesn't bother me. . . . Someone had to lead and in most male/female cases, the female is better equipped to follow. I have only met a few men who could truly learn to follow. Whether it is socialization or something biological, it is something I have observed fairly consistently."<sup>50</sup>

Julie Taylor, in *Paper Tangos*, recalled some of her Argentine tango classes in which the “natural” gender arrangement was experimentally and temporarily loosened:

We had thought we were close to something new when in a few classes the women had been told to lead the men. . . . What was interesting was the idea of the exchange of energy. If one dancer felt moved by the interaction or by the setting or by the music to launch a movement, she could smoothly take her partner into the embrace usually reserved for the man, and lead. . . . *But once we stopped, possibilities closed down. The instructor asked the men for their reactions and commented merely that now they would know the male role better.* A bit taken aback, one of the women, who had not been asked for her opinion, inquired, “And wouldn’t this also offer a choreographic possibility?” No, the response came back. *This had only served to enhance the men’s lead.*<sup>51</sup>

It is possible that this potential fluidity is unique to the Argentine tango, in which there are perhaps two basic patterns. One pattern is the “*crusada*” (where the woman ends up with her legs crossed and on tiptoe, with most of her weight concentrated on the front left foot—which allows the man to play with weight changes; the figure transitions into the next through “*fans*” {where the man shifts the woman’s weight using his upper torso and arms, moving her as if she were a cape and causing her to fan her legs out alternately}, and leg flicks). The second figure is the “*salida*” (the “*exit*,” which resembles a waltz box figure). The rest appears to rely on bodily communication and interpretation. Arthur Murray studios have an Argentine tango syllabus that has a stylized set of steps, but this differs sharply from the other types of tango training I have received, in which hours were literally spent simply walking backward or forward or shifting weight, with different partners, in order to gain the appropriate bodily vocabulary and sensitive attunement to give and receive directions.

As trainees, men and women were supposed to shift regularly from leader to follower positions, and within the context of practicing or training, this happened fairly frequently, though with pairs always remaining heterosexual. I never saw a male teacher experimenting with leading or following another male. Within the context of practice parties or group classes, the male instructors, who were often in great demand as leaders, remained in the leadership role, whereas females tended to cross gender lines more consistently, due to the imbalance in gender ratio. A former Arthur Murray instructor turned psychology professor at St. Lawrence University, Loraina Ghiraldi, divulged that in some studios,

whenever the instructors see two women (particularly students) dancing, there is an imperative immediately to get them paired with men, and male instructors in particular are asked to cut in. Sometimes a male instructor, to fulfill competing duties, would dance half of the musical number with one woman and then apologetically excuse himself to dance with another woman.

The only times I have seen a woman actively and legitimately lead a male instructor in a studio setting is if the woman is a coach and needs a male partner in order to experiment with choreographic possibilities. Shirley Johnson, one of the most influential judges of the Arthur Murray circuit, and three-time undefeated Latin champion, often came to the Tallahassee studio for coaching sessions. It was very instructive to watch her shift fluidly and seamlessly from leader to follower roles, but even more interesting to watch her remain in the role of the feminine follower while obviously being the shaper of the movement. Male instructors good humoredly joked about this dominance, either simulating puppylike obedience or military compliance.

Regarding racial and class depictions, Hope's comments evaded the issue to some extent, but then arrived at a crucial insight: "I've never reflected on any race depictions. But one of the things I've always loved about dancing is that anyone can do it, and thanks to the play-acting part of it, any woman can be Cinderella for a while and any man can be in charge for a while."<sup>52</sup>

While I was listening to Hope, I realized that a large part of the power of fantasy in ballroom lies in its ability to obliterate, or at least render invisible, such categories as race and class and to render traditional heterosexual gender distinctions, in some ways, as not only inevitable but also highly desirable. Both the rhetoric and the practice of studio life demand this in order for the magic of ballroom to work. To begin to destabilize those categories is to deform the aesthetic, and with that, its boundaries of comfort and familiarity. Speaking as someone who continues to study ballroom, this insight does not necessarily detract from the beauty, enjoyment, and power of ballroom dance, but it does give me reason to pause when I reflect on how the genealogy of a dance usually differs radically from its professionalized, competitive form. For example, the tango, originally a dance of the bordellos, a dance mourning faithless love, a dance born in intense poverty and unhappiness, through the alchemy of choreographed ballroom dance becomes a glamorous, dramatic dance, often dissociated from its less genteel roots. Yet it is this polished look that becomes classified as more authentic looking somehow in the realm of professional ballroom dance, as well as in the public eye, which now avidly consumes public television broadcasts of DanceSport competitions.

## AN OVERALL SCHEMA

The architecture of this book is as follows. Chapter 1, "The Contested Landscape of Ballroom Dance: Culture, Gender, Race, Class, and Nationality in Performance" is principally an explanation of the scope of the book and the various methodologies it employs. A subsection of this chapter, "Watcher and Watched: Insiderness and Outsiderness in Living, Writing, and Theorizing the Ballroom Dancer's Body," examines the rich continuum of social and studio dancing, using field notes and interviews with participant-performers. A crucial dimension of the approach I use is grounded in my own experiences, not only as racially hybridized, but also drawing from different dance traditions and communities. This, together with Chapter 2, establishes my point of entry into the topic as an insider-outsider or practitioner-critic of ballroom. Chapter 2, "Dancing through Different Worlds: An Autoethnography of the Interactive Body and Virtual Emotions in Ballroom Dance," employs autobiographical, phenomenological and autoethnographic methods in describing and analyzing the dynamics of competing in ballroom within a franchise studio format. Chapter 3, "Ballroom and the Movies," examines the complex cinematic heritage of continuity and disruption between Astaire-Rogers musicals and contemporary films that use a ballroom or DanceSport motif, and as such disseminate DanceSport's glamour in popular culture, and informally strengthens its bid for the Olympics. Chapters 1–3 describe the vast array of cultural landscapes within which the debates on whether ballroom dance should be packaged as an art rather than a sport are rooted using a variety of approaches. Chapter 4, "Paving the Road to the Olympics: Staging and Financing the Olympic Dream," covers the rhetorical arguments mounted by advocates and detractors of the proposal to transform ballroom into its Olympic competitive version, DanceSport. Such rhetorical arguments are ultimately tied up with material economic and business-related structures and considerations. Since this chapter references a great variety of dance-related organizations, a list of these groups, together with their contact information and websites, when these are available, are provided at the end of the book. Chapter 5, "Packaging Fantasy and Morality," focuses on depictions of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nationality in DanceSport and examines the aesthetic, political, and rhetorical dimensions of staging ballroom as an international competitive sport. Chapter 6, "Quo Vadis?," includes new directions that could be further explored, such as choreographic experiments in showdance competitions, films, and stage productions. The appendix is a selected filmography of movies that use the ballroom or DanceSport motif from the 1980s onward as earlier periods have been covered by other scholars. Finally, this book also includes photographs by Carson Zullinger and Cecil Greek.