“A Skillful Breaking of Expectations”:
Embodied Knowledge, Communication, and Connection in West Coast Swing Dance

Sociology/Anthropology Thesis
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Abstract:

West Coast Swing dancers use an embodied language to create a space in which definitions of social relationships and cultural norms are redefined. What results, is a network of individuals who feel a particular connection to their fellow Swing dancers both within their local community and globally. This thesis places embodied experience at the center of human interactions to ask the question: what are the characteristics of West Coast Swing that allow people to transcend traditional social boundaries and create community? Through ethnographic research conducted at West Coast Swing dances, classes, competitions, and events, I explore the ways in which the body is a key feature in the mediation of human relationships on and around the dance floor, and the thematic and structural elements of West Coast Swing that allow it to accept a multitude of social and cultural identities, while providing a platform of commonality. I focus on the roles of bodily learning, embodied communication, and improvisational play, in creating bonds between individuals within the West Coast Swing community, and locate this current trend within the larger historical context of Swing dance traditions.
Chapter 1

Introduction: The World of West Coast Swing

Imagine that in front of you is a large rectangular room with light brown, smooth wooden floors. Mirrors line a long wall, and chairs are scattered about the edges with several small round tables. For now, the room is brightly lit. Music plays as background noise: a salsa, a waltz, a tango, big band jazz, the latest top 40 hits. One couple walks slowly through the steps of a foxtrot, as an instructor watches from a few feet away. This ballroom, for one evening each week, is an escape into the world of West Coast Swing for social dancers from California's San Francisco Bay Area. Dancers at these events come from as far south as Santa Cruz and Aptos, and as far north as Santa Rosa and Napa.

West Coast Swing is a social lead-follow dance that evolved from Lindy Hop in the late 1940's. It is a rhythm dance, but danced with a smooth style and characterized by its syncopated rhythm, linear motion, 'swinging' feel, improvisation, and focus on musicality. The cultural, racial, and age distribution at West Coast Swing events such as classes, dances, and competitions generally reflect the wider community in which they are situated. The style of the dance itself is a reflection of contemporary culture; and as a result, the music, dress, and styling that overlays the structure of West Coast Swing is determined by time as well as place.

Let's go back to the empty ballroom for a moment and fill the space. What do you hear? As the dance begins, sound amplifies and a West Coast Swing song fills the room; loud enough to lose yourself in, quiet enough to hear your own voice. What is playing? It might be your favorite song. Over the course of the night you will hear contemporary top forty hits and songs from the 1940's. You'll hear country, blues, swing, hip-hop, soft rock, pop and more. As people fill the room some go straight to the dance floor, some stand around the edges conversing, and
still others sit to watch dancers moving about the floor. Most are dressed nicely. Some come in jeans and others in nice slacks. Most men are wearing short sleeved collared shirts while women come in nice blouses, many sleeveless for the warm California summer. Some dancers have come from work and are dressed business casual. The men wear black dance shoes that vary in style from ballroom shoes to jazz sneakers to boots with a slight heel that adds a western flair to their appearance. The women wear dance shoes with a short thick heal, some are open toed and reminiscent of a toned down ballroom shoe while others match the men's black shoe style.

As you look around you will see one of the most diverse social scenes in today's contemporary society. In this one room there are representatives of many cultural, racial, and national backgrounds, as well as an array of personalities, ages, heights, and body types. There are kids as young as thirteen and adults in their eighties, all moving to the same music and doing the same dance. In fact, the two people dancing to your left are a man of twenty-two and a woman of seventy-six. The couple dancing to your right is a Filipino man and a Caucasian woman. A biker with multiple tattoos, piercings and a skull on his shirt is laughing with a young woman in a pink polo and pearls. A beginning dancer from Texas swaps dance stories with a professional dancer from California. Where did these conversations start? On the dance floor.

If you walk closer to the center of the room, you'll see couples dancing. The follows move back and forth over an imaginary line called the slot as the couple spins, dips, glides, and plays with the music, all the while moving their feet in syncopated rhythmic patterns. On the dance floor forty couples all move in parallel direction, yet each creates a distinctly different

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1 The multicultural setting I observed in northern California is in part a factor of the mix of cultures in the area. Although some events around the country are more homogeneous in cultural makeup, swing events seem to mirror communities in such a way as to suggest that the dance can be taken on by a wide range of people.

2 It takes two roles to dance West Coast Swing. One partner in the couple fills the role of lead, while the other fills the role of follow. Although traditionally women fill the role of follow, and men the role as lead, dancers—especially skilled dancers—will often break out of these gender roles. I will further discuss these roles in the functioning of the dance later in this chapter.
picture with their bodies. Each couple paints a story using the music as their outline, and using West Coast Swing technique as their vocabulary.

The song ends. Dancers on the floor thank their partners and walk toward the perimeter of the room as other dancers filter on. Some will find a new partner and return for the next song, while others take time to rest, to converse, to catch up verbally with the friends they have made through weeks, months, or years of nonverbal communication on the dance floor. After a few hours some begin to leave. The host stops the music, and once again the ballroom goes quiet. The dancers drive home. Some leave with friends they met dancing years ago, or even weeks ago, while others have come and gone on their own. Each goes their own way after sharing moments when the connection between music, movement, and partners align perfectly for a song or even just a few seconds.

This is the scene at a typical West Coast Swing dance held every Monday night at a ballroom studio in the heart of California's Silicon Valley; however, if you travel several hours, across the country, or across the Atlantic Ocean and walk into a West Coast Swing dance, the scene is likely to look quite similar. Often the dance floor is the first place strangers will speak, yet without using words. Over the course of a three minute song, friendships can form, trust can be built, and information can be transferred. There is a recognition of strangers as people who speak the same language, as members of the West Coast Swing community, and as people with

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3 Although I focused most of my participant observation in Northern California, I also attended Swing dance events in Houston, Texas; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Media and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Washington D.C. I also reviewed videos of dance events around the country as well as overseas, interviewed two dancers with international experience attending swing dance events, interacted with dancers from France, the UK, Italy, Switzerland, and Hong Kong, and heard accounts of overseas events from US based teachers who travel abroad to participate in West Coast Swing events abroad.

4 Swing dancers themselves often use the word “community” to describe both the local network of Swing dancers they interact with and the connection they feel to Swing dancers around the world. This connection is based on a common set of embodied experiences gained through participation in the dance event. I am therefore using the term community not in the academic sense, but in the popular sense, to capture the depth of these feelings.
whom they share some common ground; all without uttering a word.

How do dancers know how to communicate on the dance floor? How is it that they are able to talk to someone, be understood by someone, who is sometimes a complete stranger, without using words? Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty wrote, “It is through my body that I understand other people; just as it is through my body that I perceive ‘things’ “ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 186). It is because these dancers know a language that has been ingrained in their bodies through formal instruction as well as informal participation in a common movement language that they are able to communicate; however, this language is altered by the dancers' own individual backgrounds and previous experiences. With this knowledge, the dancers are able to both understand their partner and create a dance together with the music that reflects their own individual view of the world.

Danced Interactions

There are many forms of swing dance, each born through incorporation of various people and cultures across the United States into the dance form itself. Swing is a social partner dance that appeared on the floor of African-American dance halls in New York city in the early 19th century. The practice of this dance quickly spread around the United States and was picked up by dancers from a wide range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to explain the convoluted history of Swing dance in America, it is important to consider the role of embodied identity performance in the context of US social history. In the 1930's and 40's, Swing dance allowed for a point of commonality between blacks and whites in a once segregated society. At

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5 There are many African-American vernacular dances that came before Lindy Hop Swing and contributed to its existence. Although it is recognized that the current form of Lindy Hop was invented in the early 1930's, scholars argue over which African-American vernacular dance qualify as the first swing dance form.
the same time, the creation of several swing variations can be explained as a deliberate separation of “blackness” from the dance in order to create a pastime that would be accepted by the upper and middle classes.\textsuperscript{6} Swing became so prolific that in the 1940's its practice spread around the world as a prominent form of youth culture in Europe as well as the United States (Savage 2007).

West Coast Swing dancers use a specific movement structure to communicate with their partner. The prime components of this structure consist of footwork patterns, rhythmic structures, frame, and lead-follow connection. These elements make up the basis of all social partner lead-follow improvisational dances. Variations in the specifics of these components are what distinguish one social dance from another. In order for partners to communicate, both must have an embodied knowledge of the specifics of the dance structure; yet the extent to which dancers have freedom to ‘play’ and improvise within the structure of West Coast Swing set it apart from other lead follow dances and allows for flexibility in the dance. Dancers use this structure as common ground, while still expressing their own individual identity through play. These qualities contribute to the widely multicultural social setting of Swing dances, yet one with its own set of values and practices that is defined by knowledge of a common body language. Scholars agree that the emphasis on improvisation, polyrhythms, connection to the ground, and swinging movement is culturally rooted in African dance traditions (Malone 1996, Malnig 2009, Stearns and Stearns 1968, Gottschild 1996, Glass 2006, Emery 1988, DeFrantz 2002, Caponi-Tabery 2008). In this way, swing shares several social qualities with dances such as hip-hop which have become popular worldwide because of their capacity to incorporate many different

\textsuperscript{6} Juliet McMains writes about the influence of ballroom giant Arthur Murray and Fred Astaire in creating East Coast Swing, a version of Lindy Hop (precursor to West Coast Swing) considered more appropriate and refined for upper to middle-class ballroom culture of 1930s America.
cultural understandings of movement and meaning through improvisational play. At West Coast Swing Dances, cross-cultural exchange through play allows the dance to reflect the makeup of the society in which it is situated (Kear 2011b).

West Coast Swing partners communicate through nonverbal signals. The dance places an emphasis on improvisation, in which the couple together creates the next movement, spontaneously using a shared movement understanding. Because of this, there are fewer set predictable responses than in partner dances or even in lead-follow dances that place more emphasis on structure. It then becomes increasingly important that partners be able to communicate through bodily language. Although the dance is improvised, the movements used in this improvisation belong to certain movement vocabulary and set of cultural norms. Embodied and nonverbal communication are essential components of Swing, both in the execution of this dance and in understanding the social interaction and cultural norms at swing dance events. Dancers acquire a base of embodied knowledge of Swing through classes and immersion in the social Swing world that is necessary to translate the cues of their dance partner. Interaction between people of different cultural perspectives and backgrounds is a global reality of everyday life. Swing events showcase a multicultural community successfully operating on a base of embodied communication and understanding. To this end, my thesis explores the implications of nonverbal languages and embodied knowledge in cross-cultural communication, understanding, and interaction, and investigates the elements of Swing dance that appeal to dancers across racial and cultural divides, class boundaries, and national borders.

Some partner dances are executed using physical contact with a partner, but the movements of the dance are pre-choreographed for both partners. The dancers have previously learned and memorized the movement sequence are not waiting for their partner to initiate or create the next movement. In contrast, lead-follow partner dances do not have a set sequence of movements prior to the onset of the song, and partners must communicate in the moment to create the form of the dance. (Kear 2011a)
Research Methodology

The research for this thesis began with a very different project in mind: to connect cultural background to gestural language in various dance forms. I soon realized, however, that an understanding of embodied communication goes beyond the motion of hands and eyes, and requires observation of the entire body in relation to the way it moves and is understood in specific movement contexts. To this end, I spent the past summer conducting an ethnographic study of swing dance in Northern California and researching the social history of Swing across the United States.

My thesis draws on four core research methods: participant observation, formal interviews, video recording/viewing, and literature review. In addition to these traditional methods, my research is also informed by sixteen years of dance training and over three years as a Lindy Hop dancer.

Participant observation was vital to an ethnographic understanding of the importance of embodied communication among swing dancers. Over the course of three months this past summer, I spent about fourteen hours a week doing participant observation at both Lindy Hop and West Coast Swing events. Because the topic of my thesis is more focused on West Coast Swing than Lindy Hop, I will limit my discussion here to West Coast observations. I did participant observation at several types of West Coast swing events: weekly classes, weekend workshops with professional dancers, weekly and monthly dances, competitions, and annual weekend conventions. The weekly classes and social dances I observed took place at four different ballroom studios in and around California's Silicon Valley. For three months I attended Richard Kear's Monday night intermediate level West Coast Swing class at Dance Boulevard in
San Jose, CA and the weekly dance that followed. I also often observed parts of the beginner lesson Kear teaches at the same studio before the intermediate class. In July, I began attending a class and dance hosted by Miguel de Sousa at Dance Spectrum ballroom studio in Campbell, CA. I also attended classes, dances, and workshops at Two Left Feet Ballroom Dance studio farther north in Danville, CA, and on occasion attended Richard Kear’s Thursday Night class and dance at Cheryl Burke Dance Studio in Mountain View, CA. Many of the same dancers attended events at each of these studios and would drop in here or there. Following this pattern I also tried classes and dances held at several other studios in the area over the course of the summer. Most events were held in the evening (except for one weekend of workshops held during the day). The lessons usually took place first, starting between 7:00 pm and 8:30 pm with the social dance directly following and ending between 11:30 pm and 2:00 am depending on the venue.

I also attended a large monthly West Coast Swing social dance held by the largest most highly respected West Coast Swing club in the area, the Next Generation Swing Club. This dance also holds a popular informal Jack and Jill competition each month and is responsible for putting on one of the world’s largest annual West Coast Swing conferences each October. My understanding of the local northern California West Coast Swing community in the context of the larger network of West Coast Swing dancers and events was supplemented by participant observation at two annual weekend West Coast Swing dance conventions in October and March 2011, held in San Francisco and Washington D.C. respectively. Both events drew over a thousand dancers from around the world and were eye-opening experiences in terms of how a

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8 In “Jack and Jill” competitions leads and follows are matched at random. The couples do not know who their partner will be before they are called to dance, and do not know what song they will be dancing to until they are on the dance floor ready to begin. Competitions recognized by the World Swing Dance Council and several other governing bodies award points to dancers based on their placement in these competitions. More informal competitions are sometimes held at dances to give dancers the experience of competing outside the framework of an official competition.
wider network of West Coast Swing functions. The official competition and conference side of my observations was done at Boogie by the Bay, a large annual West Coast Swing conference and competition that brings some of the best dancers from around the world to teach, compete, and dance from Thursday through Sunday at the Airport Marriott in San Francisco, California. I observed three days of this four-day event, taking classes, watching and participating in competitions, and accumulating about 42 hours of research over the course of the weekend. These observations added considerably to my understanding of the contrast and connection between the culture of West Coast Swing in a purely social setting, and among dancers who compete and frequently attend these weekend conferences. MadJam (Mid-Atlantic Dance Jam), a similar event held in Reston, Virginia afforded further insights into this framework of how local dance relationships extend to a wider network through these events. I also attended the first annual Philadelphia Freedom Swing Dance Challenge, a smaller weekend convention, in January 2012.

All of my participatory experiences were essential to an understanding of both the dance and human social interactions on the dance floor. It was only through my own participation in the dance that I was able to understand body language at work, and therefore understand the nuances in the embodied language and how it differs across various geographical, temporal, and stylistic groupings. The differences in swing dance styling are tied to cultural history just as they are to social interactions today.

Along with many informal interviews, correspondence, and conversations with swing dancers at dance events, I also conducted four formal interviews. Together, these interviews gave me valuable insights into the different perspectives on Swing dance and interactions at social swing dance events, all informed by factors such as age, experience, cultural background, and
personality. No two people will have the exact same sensory perception of an embodied experience, and no two people look at the world in exactly the same way. Because of this, my personal understanding of West Coast Swing through observation and participation is limited to my own body's history, so it was important that I interview people with a variety of different engagements with West Coast Swing.

The dancers I interviewed had a variety of experiences with swing dance and at the time of the interviews had been dancing anywhere from a few months to twenty years. My body is neither new to dance experiences, nor does it have twenty years of experience in the West Coast Swing community. In feeling my own embodied experience of West Coast Swing changing rapidly over three months of practice, I began to understand that bodily perception of a dance experience is something that is not universal, nor is it static. A person with no previous experience with dance will understand West Coast in a way I never will, just as someone with more experience in the dance than myself will have a different bodily experience in the dance than my own.

For this reason, I gathered information from beginner dancers as well as those who have been dancing for years. All names have been changed, except when informants gave permission to use their real name, or in the case of high profile professionals speaking in public settings. One interview was with a nineteen year old all-star swing dancer and competitor from Oregon, who also dances Blues, Lindy Hop, and Tango. This interview brought to life the glamor and excitement of a young West Coast Swing competitor's social world. A dancer since the age of fifteen, Alice is very much involved in the weekend competition convention scene. I also

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9 In competition, dancers are grouped into categories based on the number of “points” they have won at previous competitions. The order is as follows: Newcomer, Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, All-Star, Champion (usually professional dancers)
interviewed a Malaysian man in his late twenties who had been dancing at Dance Boulevard and Dance Spectrum for five months prior to our interview, and had danced salsa socially for a year before starting swing. His mostly beginner status as a dancer and position as a young engineer who dances as a hobby gives him a different perspective on the dance community and different motivations for dancing. My third and forth interviews were both with Richard Kear, a West Coast Swing instructor and champion dancer who has won numerous competitions in the past twenty years, including the 1995 United Country Western Dance Council Circuit (UCWDC) World Grand Champions, and now devotes his life to teaching others to dance. Richard has spent years thinking deeply about both the state of West Coast Swing in the world today, and the way people learn and use movement. He is also in the process of co-authoring a book about the way an embodied understanding of swing has affected his perception of the world, and the way this has influenced his life and relationships to others. Our conversations about the past, present, and future of Swing dance never failed to open doors to new ways of thinking about dance, and provide ideas and knowledge that became essential to my research.

Reviews of video material and literature complete my research methods. I took video recordings at several swing classes in order to examine in depth what is being taught as the salient features of swing in the class setting in comparison to what appears on the social dance floor. I also screened video material from various swing competitions in order to get a sense of how the embodied language of swing changes as it travels from the social dance floor to the competition floor, from the bodies of intermediate level dancers to the bodies of champion dancers, and across regional and temporal differences. Finally, I conducted a literature review of books and articles on swing dance itself, as well as sources offering a more general analysis of embodied movement and meanings and implications of dance as a form of communication. This
research enabled me to locate my research findings in the larger theoretical context of studies of embodiment, nonverbal communication, and dance, especially with respect to situations of cross-cultural interaction. My historical research of West Coast Swing and social dance trajectories also clarified my observations by giving reason and background to observed trends.

The Moving Researcher

In order to conduct an ethnographic study, a researcher must be able to communicate with their informants. Because my research asks questions about the connections between people at dance events, the language I'm concerned with here is not only verbal (English), but also embodied. Just as it takes years to become fluent in spoken language, it also takes years to train the body to be able to receive and transmit nonverbal messages. Furthermore, when studying what is transmitted through a dance form, which uses the body as its medium, key information is packed into movement nuances only perceptible to someone with an embodied understanding of the specific dance.

So how do I as a researcher enter the dancer's space in such a way as to be able to understand these movement nuances? According to John Martin (1936), those without a strong kinesthetic sense "would have difficulty comprehending dance's power and message. The best way to awaken a deadened kinesthetic sense was to undertake the study of dance itself" (Foster 2011:113). In order to understand what was going on at West Coast Swing events, I had to train

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10 Susan Foster writes: "typically, a dancer spends anywhere from two to six hours per day, six to seven days per week for eight to ten years creating a dancing body" (Foster 1997:236). Although few social dancers spend this much concentrated time cultivating their dancing body, the amount of time that accumulates over years of practice creates a body with an innate understanding of embodied language and its uses. In an interview with Richard Kear he told me that: "If you've done anything for 10,000 hours there's something in your brain that just clicks and then you're a master at it... [It takes about] 7 to 15 years, and I actually remember after about 15 years of doing this dance I felt like I knew what was going on finally" (Kear 2011a).
my own body and senses in the movement vocabulary of the dancers, and become a West Coast Swing dancer.

Being a dancer affects my perception as a researcher in several ways. Eighteen years of dance training previous to West Coast Swing has given me important tools to understand the sensuality of the dancing body that make up movement languages for the dancers themselves. My own training has been in Ballet, Jazz, Kathak and Lindy Hop Swing, with each of these contributing to an understanding of a different kind of movement vocabulary.\(^{11}\) Specifically, I came into my research with three years as a Lindy Hop Swing\(^{12}\) dancer and very little knowledge of West Coast Swing. Entering the West Coast Swing world led me to recognize that my experience as a dancer both aids in a deeper understanding of bodily movement (thus quickening my entry and acceptance into the community), and at the same time somewhat clouds my perception of the beginner's sensory experience in the learning process.

Years of dancing allowed me to better understand how bodies in motion interact with the world. Explaining the feeling of movement to someone who has never moved is akin to explaining color to someone who has never seen it. They may be able to grasp the concept, but never be able to conjure the internal feeling of leaping into the air or spinning in circles. My years of dance experience contributed to a common ground between myself and the Swing dancers of Northern California from which we were able to begin and build our conversations (both verbal and danced). In this thesis, while recognizing the limitations of objectifying a fluid

\(^{11}\) Movement vocabulary is a phrase commonly used by dance practitioners to describe or refer to a particular type of movement training. The phrase recognizes that the communicative languages and tools necessary to execute and understand a dance varies from form to form.

\(^{12}\) Although West Coast Swing derives from Lindy Hop and shares a similar footwork pattern, there are several important differences between these dance forms that alter the way it is executed. Lindy Hop is a bouncier dance than West Coast Swing, and dancers move in a linear rather than circular manner. It also often faster, and utilizes a stronger physical connection between partners that leads to a different understanding and execution of nonverbal signals between dancers. I will describe Lindy Hop and West Coast Swing in more detail in Chapter 2.
and complex bodily and sensual knowledge, I attempt to relay through words the embodied language and understanding that builds the movement connections between West Coast Swing dancers.

I entered the West Coast experience as an outsider to the dance form, but not as an outsider to dance movement. Balancing on one foot, turning my legs slightly outward, keeping good posture, following movements led by a partner, syncopated rhythm, turning quickly and many times, moving with rhythm and melody, all of these things were familiar to me as I began my research and experience with West Coast Swing. They are not, however, characteristics that are second nature to individuals starting to learn West Coast Swing with no dance experience. Because I have no living memory of coming into a new dance experience without a bodily awareness based on dance training, my experience walking into a new dance form will always be different from someone who has never before thought about the intricacies of bodily movement for artistic or communicative purposes. There were many aspects of West Coast Swing that I picked up faster than the other beginners because although I was a beginner to that form of dance, I was a veteran in executing the movements that comprise this dance; for example, triple-step footwork and lead-follow partner communication of Lindy Hop, carriage of Ballet, and the movement style of Jazz. Therefore, to learn about a beginner's experience entering this community, I tried as much as possible to talk with other beginners about their experiences as they began to learn the technique and became integrated into the social circle of Bay Area dancers.

There were certainly moments, however, when I was able to tune into the beginner’s experience of West Coast Swing. New to me was the use of the head in west coast swing. In most of the dances I’ve practiced, the head usually stays completely perpendicular to the
shoulders and upright. In West Coast Swing however, there are many stylistic “head whips” as well as movements in which the follow’s head ducks down under the lead's arm. It took many bumps to the nose before I learned to duck my head in these moves, but these instances served as a reminder of the clumsy feeling of not knowing how to move, a feeling I sometimes forget when in a more familiar movement situation.

Learning to lead also brought me closer to the beginner experience, as the embodied knowledge necessary for leading and following are quite different. This experience has been much more foreign to me as a dancer who has always filled the following role, as the follow learns how to interpret and occasionally send signals, but not in the same way as the lead who learns to begin each move and send that signal to their partner. However, even in the follow position there were things about West Coast Swing that were new to me. For example, in West Coast Swing the follow can decide for herself whether or not to follow the move as directed by the lead. When a follow ignores or takes over a lead in this way, it's called “hijacking” or an “embellishment”. This was a new concept for me and I am still working on understanding how this forms a conversation between the traditional lead and follow.

The unique opportunity for conversation, instead of following direction, as a follow is one of the things that intrigued me about West Coast Swing. Many follows I talked to over the course of my research said that they were drawn to West Coast Swing because they had a greater say in the course of a dance than in many other dance forms. I personally was also drawn in by this. In Lindy Hop the follow executed the move directly as the lead directs it (with some room for stylistic variability). What I found intriguing about West Coast Swing is that I could not turn off my conscious mind and follow blindly using the set conditioned bodily responses. Every moment was an intellectual and embodied challenge for the follow as much as for the lead.
because the follow is constantly negotiating the multiple ways in which she can interpret the signal given, to “skillfully break expectations” (Kear 2011a), in accordance with her interpretation of the music and storyline of the dance. A skilled follow is an equal partner to the lead in determining the direction of the dance.

**Theorizing the Moving Body in Swing**

In my thesis I ask and attempt to answer the question: how does the embodied language of Swing dance allow people to communicate across many traditional divides of difference such as generation, race, nationality, and even spoken language? Several disciplines provide useful theoretical insight into the experience of the moving body in cultural context as well as human perception and experience of the external or other's moving body. I will draw on theorists from performance studies, dance studies, cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology to complete the larger picture of the individual's experience at West Coast Swing events and the process of learning and using an embodied language.

Dance scholars have largely studied dance in the visual, with a few exceptions. Scholars John Martin, and more recently Susan Leigh Foster have focused on the role of kinesthesia, the body's sensory perception of movement, in dance (a concept also studied by anthropologist Deidre Sklar (2007, 2008). While academic studies of dance usually focuses on either fine art or “ethnic” dance, western social and popular forms of dance are generally given very little attention. Dance scholar Sherril Dodds, however, has focused much of her research on popular

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13 I will further discuss the concept of kinesthesia and its various applications later in this chapter.

14 In using the term “ethnic” dance, I purposely invoke the problematic category of ethnic non-western dance to refer to the common way of referring to and focusing on non-western dance with a particular lens as dance as cultural artifact rather than art in non-western society. In her article “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance”, Jean Kealiinohomoku problematizes this non-western focus by studying the cultural basis of dance. While “ethnic” dance forms are often given cultural meaning, western art aesthetics are often considered “universal” or without a specific cultural base. Kealiinohomoku demonstrates that all forms of dance have a cultural basis, including western forms.
and social dance forms that are often marginalized.\footnote{Hip hop is an exception to this trend. Several scholars such as Marc Perry (2008), and Halifu Osumaree (2002) have studied the origins, rise, and practice of Hip Hop in recent years as a social indicator. More on this topic and its connection to African American based social and popular dance will be explored in the History section of this thesis.} Her most recent book *Dancing on the Cannon* (2011) explores several questions which are relevant to my research. Dodds explores the possible reasons social dance has traditionally held a lower standing in academia.

Sociology has also looked at the body in research, yet again it is only a recent phenomenon. Sociologist Chris Shilling notes that the explosion in attention to the body in academia began as a result of several societal factors. One influence was the rise of technology in medicine and attention to how medicalization effects the body. Another reasoning considers consumer culture, and how the body becomes a project that is strongly linked to the consumption of products, discourses, and images. Both sociologists and anthropologists (Shilling 2003, Turner 2008, Hanna 1979) argue that the Cartesian mind body dualism was one main reason for ignoring the body in academia: “Having been influenced profoundly by Cartesian thought, sociology has followed a longstanding tradition in philosophy by accepting a mind/body dichotomy and focusing on the minds as that which defines humans as social beings” (Shilling 2003:8). Although the body had been present for decades in sociological theory, it had always been studied as a means to another topic, and absent as the focus of theorization. Over the past two decades many sociological studies have aimed to look at the relationship between the body and society as well as the experience of the body, including: Michel Foucault (1984) Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Bryan Turner (2008), Chris Shilling (2008), Nick Crossley (2007), Brian Lane (2007), and Erin O’Connor (2007).

Explicit focus on the body has been more fully present in Anthropology than in Sociology. It is the body that is at the center of ethnographic research, but traditionally
anthropologists considered vocalization the key to understanding culture (Hanna 1979). Mary Douglas (2003) and Marcell Mauss (1979) are early examples of anthropologists who consider the body in their work.

Until recently scholarship on the body has traditionally focused on the static body, not the body in action (Williams 1995). Movement on the dance floor is imbued with cultural meaning on many different levels. To this end, I have turned to anthropologists who have in recent years begun to study the moving (and often the dancing) body in particular. Deidre Sklar (1991), Brenda Farnell (1999), and Drid Williams (1995) are key figures in this discussion along with Judith Lynne Hanna (1979), and most recently and relevant to the subject of West Coast Swing, Juliet McMains (2006). Each of these anthropologists, through their research and careful consideration of the moving body, contribute to new and better understandings of how dance relates to social structure and embodiment of culture.

According to Anya Peterson Roye (2004), the recognition of corporeal intelligence in anthropology is also a relatively recent phenomenon. It was anthropologist Yvonne Daniel who first referred to dance as an “embodied knowledge” that is imbued with cultural meaning. Since then, several scholars have argued that there is cultural knowledge that can only be accessed through the body; including Yvonne Daniel (1995), Barbara Browning (1995), Julie Taylor (1998), and Marta Savigliano (1995) (Royce 2004).

In order to explore how the nature of the West Coast Swing network, dance events, and the dance itself are based on an embodied knowledge – and more specifically how this nonverbal, somatic and visual knowledge creates a common language that allows communication across lines of difference, yet leaves space for individual cultural expression – I will focus on four areas of theory: embodiment, social dance history, communication, and play and
Improvisation. Utilizing theories of somatic experience, I will first explore the ways in which the moving body relates to itself and its surroundings, the implication of this for both myself as a researcher and for the interactions between dancers. I then focus on authors who trace the social history of Swing dance in order to connect this to West Coast Swing’s trajectory today. I will next move to theory that treats the communicative elements of this question including theory explaining identity performance, and finally explore what theorists have to say about the effects of play and improvisation on interaction in and trajectory of Swing.

**Embodiment and Kinesthesia in Relation to Perception**

The way the brain and senses will respond to viewed movement is dependent on an individual's own movement experience. John Martin wrote in 1936 that the connection between dancer and audience manifests in each audience member feeling what the dancer feels while in motion (Martin 1936). While Martin uses the term “Kinesthetic sympathy” to describe this phenomenon, Deidre Skar uses the term “Kinesthetic empathy” (Sklar 1994). Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines sympathy as “an affinity, association, or relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other” (Merriam-Webster 2012) and empathy as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another” (Merriam-Webster 2012). The elevation of sympathetic connection to an empathetic experiencing of somatic sensation suggests an even deeper connection between bodies that informs our perception in an context in which others are present.

Susan Foster (1998, 2011) uses similar language in her discussions of the body's sensory perception. She defines empathy to be a “bodily understanding of the other” (Foster 1998) and
explains that kinesthesia comes from a Greek root and refers to "the muscular sense of body's movement" (Foster 2011:74). Martin (1936) also defines Kinesthesia as the 6th sense, a muscle sense of "movement perception". In these ways, the body is an instrument thorough which we mediate our interactions with the world around us, not only with other people, but with the entirety of our surroundings:

Martin proposed that the kinesthetic sense was what enables familiarity with objects and actions, even when viewing them from afar. We know ball is round and eggshell fragile based on the history of our "neuromuscular coordinations" from previous contact with these objects...it was this reservoir of experience built up from all kinds of physical interactions and kinesthetic memory that informs how a viewer sees a dance (Foster 2011:112-113)

In order to understand somatically what they see, the researcher needs experience with that particular physicalized movement. Deidre Sklar tells the story of her research in Guadalupe and explains that she did not actually understand the feeling that people described at the festivals for the Virgin Mary until she herself physically knelt by the virgin and felt the tingling in her spine that she was told about. Only then was she able to understand this ritual and what it meant to the people who practice it (Sklar 1991).

Although Foster, Martin, and Sklar look mostly at performance dance, their research is useful in understanding people's perceptions of movement even beyond the stage. Susan Foster argues that someone who practices analysis of body movement, starting with their own, has a better understanding of others' bodily movement and is more apt to notice movement nuances in everyday life as well as in the dance studio. This sensitivity results from the training of the body to pay attention to certain somatic details; similar to the way a photographer may be attuned to nuances in lighting, or an artist to the texture of a painting.

Scholars and artists in the humanities and social sciences are not the only ones to have
been engaged by the topic of embodied connections. Cognitive scientists have explored and further clarified the connection between bodily perception and bodily experience. Several recent studies prove the existence of “mirror neurons” in the human brain. Using software that measures the amount of neuron activity in the brain, scientists have found that when someone watches a dancer dancing in a movement style they are also trained in, there is more brain activity than if they are watching a dancer perform in a movement style they are less familiar with (Calvo-Merino et al 2005, Calvo-Merino 2010). This research adds evidence to the earlier assertions of Martin (1936), Sklar (1994) and Foster (1998, 2011), and also clarifies the details of how this connection functions in the brain.

When a person is familiar with the movement quality and has previously experienced it in their own body, the same sections of the brain light up in both the viewer and the dancer. Although the viewer is not moving, their brain is working through the experience of that physicality (Calvo-Merino et al 2005, Calvo-Merino 2010). Beatriz Calvo-Merino and Emily S. Cross discuss the differences in perception between dancers and non-dancers in *The Neurocognition of Dance: Mind, Movement, and Motor Skills* (2010). According to their research the "kinesthetic empathy" Foster talks about in her article is actually a neurological difference in the brain function of dancers compared to non-dancers while viewing another body moving. Foster writes: "dancers, more than those who do not dance, strongly sense what other persons' bodily movement feels like... They register the characteristic posture and gait of passers-by... They sense the slouch, strain, and gesticulation of others" (Foster 1997:240). One who has spent time engaged in analysis of the body in motion will have trained their brain to pay attention to the details of bodily movement. While the non-dancer sees the movement as they would any other scene, the dancer is seeing this while at the same time noticing the exact positioning of
hands, legs, joints, head, and eyes, and experiencing it in their own body. The result is two very
different understandings of movement in which the dancer walks away from the performance
with a bodily understanding of the movement, while the non-dancer walks away with a visual
experience.

The link between theories of movement perception between dancer and observer comes
into play in social dance when we consider communication between partners that depends on
their bodily awareness and perception of their partner's movement to communicate and execute
danced steps. Juliet McMains writes “The way a physical connection looks to an outside viewer
and the way it feels to participants can differ radically, influencing the kinds of choices that are
made in different contexts” (McMains 2006: 96). This is relevant to conducting research, in that
the researcher must have more than just a visual understanding of the dance. This concept tells us
that the dancers themselves are experiencing something more in the dance than just visual or
verbal communication, or simply absorbing information. The body is actively interpreting the
information it receives and making choices about the information and signals it transmits.
Because the body is of prime importance, I will now turn to the ways in which specific theorists
contribute to the discussion of the experience, capability, and perception of the body.

Embodiment in Dance

Previously, I discussed theories of kinesthesia in relation to the viewers perception of the
dancer; however, kinesthesia also effects how the dancers themselves experience their own body
and relate to other dancers. What I am interested in here, is how kinesthetic feeling forms the
knowledge base on which social dance operates. Such knowledge is what makes up embodied
communication skills learned in social dance settings.
Bourdieu presents his model of habitus to help us understand the ways in which these bodily movements become habitualized, to the point that they almost seem to be a part of naturalized body movement. Bourdieu (1972) defines habitus as: “a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” (Bourdieu 1972:86). The body in West Coast Swing is continually habitualized through classes and social interaction on the dance floor, until dancers share in the same embodied language, internalized in the body, which influences their kinesthetic perception of others and the world around them. The language of the dance works through this shared understanding of movement.

Two concepts that are essential to an understanding of the body are Edward T. Hall's concept of proxemics and Birdwhistell's concept of kinesics. Hall (1968) defines proxemics as “the study of man's perception and use of space” (Hall 1968:83) with the body being one of the key mediators of this space. A body's sense of space is dependent on their prior cultural conditioning, and in this case, their West Coast Swing habitus. Birdwhistell (1970) argues that “body motion is a learned form of communication, which is patterned within a culture” (Birdwhistell 1970:xi) and presents a system of analysis for this body movement, kinesics. This definition places movement, and by extension danced movement, in the realm of learned communication that can be analyzed to have meaning within a specific cultural framework. Many anthropologists (Hanna 1979, Royce 2004, Blacking 1977) note that it is necessary to use the theories of both proxemics and kinesics together in order to create a full picture of the body's experience as a culturally informed experiencing and communicating entity. Blacking (1977) further explains that we can use the moving body as the subject of an anthropological study.
because it is inscribed with cultural and social meanings, and can tell us about the larger cultural situation in which the body is situated. In the case of West Coast Swing events, this information can both inform on the specific dance context, as well as the cultural situation of the dancer outside the walls of the ballroom.

Careful attention to the body's movement and the intention behind that movement is the base of what anthropologists use to study culture through dance. Deidre Skar writes: “to examine dance as a form of ethnographic perspective, then, is to focus on dance as a kind of cultural knowledge. Dance ethnography depends on the postulate that cultural knowledge is embodied in movement, especially the highly stylized and codified movement we call dance” (Sklar1991:6)

Several Anthropologists consider the sensory experience of the dancing body (Chakravorty 2008, Stoller 1997). Many anthropologists studying the body in this way (Hanna 1979, Blacking 1977) refer to the writings of phenomenologist Merleu Ponty (1962) in order to better understand the experience of the body. These theorists illuminate meaning present in the sensory elements of dance, which manifests in West Coast Swing as mode of communication between dancers that in turn creates common understanding and connection.

Communication

Dance Scholar Susan Foster conceives of dance as a “physicalized discourse” (Foster 2011): a physical language, manner of communication, and form of speech. West Coast Swing dancers use this kind of physicalized discourse to communicate with one another. In doing so, the partnership creates a dance that itself becomes a form of expression towards each other and possibly a larger audience. Anthropologist Brenda Farnell writes that the body has a language like any spoken language (Farnell 1995). This goes for both the visual body (the body as it is
seen by others) and the sensory body (the sensory body as it is experienced by the self). The body sends and receives information in both ways. Dancers interpreting a song are sending visual messages while dancing, and at the same time using a physical sensory language in communication with their partner in order to do so.

Linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) argues that the body's language is able to capture more nuanced meaning than spoken language in that “we are more apt to make a grasping gesture when we speak of grasping an elusive idea, than when we speak of grasping a door knob” (Farnell 1999: 350). In some ways this implies that our body language and communication skills are in fact more sophisticated than our verbal skills. This bodily ability even among non-dancers allows for the possibility of complicated information being transferred on the dance floor.

In an analysis of communication on the dance floor, it is also useful to consider theories of communication not directly focused on the body. Larry Gross and Sol Worth (1981) present a model of communication through the use of symbolic systems. According to this model, individuals communicate with a particular intent, and the symbols they use create “meaning situations” that define how the symbols are to be received (1981). Thinking about danced communication as a series of symbols, Gross and Worth contribute to the discussion of how dancers send and receive messages, and the way they choose to respond. This theory can be applied not only to communication between dancers, but also in consideration of the symbolic meaning of the resulting dance in terms of a performed identity.

Danced Presentation of Identity

Goffman (1959) is another theorist who assists in our understanding of communication in
the Swing dancer's relationships with their partner; and by extension, an understanding of the social structure of the Swing dance event as a whole. His theory of teams applies to Swing dance partners in that individuals must cooperate as members of one unit in order to create a dance. They develop a trust of their fellow teammate, and present a united performance to the rest of the ballroom. In the duration of any one Swing dance event, dancers form cooperative “teams” with many different partners over the course of the night. It is through these teams that relationship networks form in the West Coast Swing world and individuals find their place in the social structure. West Coast Swing places an emphasis on individual style within the structure of the dance. Not only does the couple present an identity as a team, but the two individuals within that couple may simultaneously perform unique identities as well.

The moving body on the dance floor is constantly presenting itself. The body's presentation depends on both the individual's background and personality, as well as the way they choose to perform their identity in that moment. No two West Coast Swing dancers look exactly alike. Unlike a dance such as ballet where one strives to be the generic single picture of perfection, West Coast Swing dancers have the freedom to present themselves as individuals within the dance's form. Goffman analyzes the way in which people present themselves while "front stage" or on the dance floor. Individuals actively dancing may take on a particular persona to perform while on the dance floor, performing an individual identity. What complicates Goffman's (1959) notion stages is that when the individuals steps off the floor at a social Swing event they have not gone "backstage", but rather entered a different front stage—one of social interaction.

Several other scholars take the idea of danced identity performance few steps further to analyze how the way people move and present their bodies is culturally linked. For
example, a dancer with a Latin background might tend to use their hips more in their dance, while a dancer trained in ballet may dance as if floating. Sherril Dodds (2011) explores the “embodiment of value” in social dance forms, which is integral to understanding any dance form and is especially important to my discussion of identity performance in West Coast Swing. Juliet McMains (2006) explores a host of identity issues embedded in the dancing body; among these being notions of exoticism and class difference. Dance, she argues, “foregrounds the unstable process of identity formation because it is both representation and materiality at once” (McMains 2006:11). In her ethnographic research Farnell also takes this concept outside the realm of dance to explain how something as simple as a handshake can immediately tell the corporally knowledgeable person several important features about the other's identity.

**Embodied Knowledge**

In order to dance West Coast Swing an individual must be able to communicate with one's partner by interpreting and producing danced movements. Dancers learn these skills through a process of learning, in which they acquire the bodily and social knowledge necessary to be a member of the West Coast Swing Community. Callahan is one of the few scholars who have focused on West Coast Swing specifically. His writing constructs the West Coast Swing community as a “community of practice” based on “informal and incidental learning” (Callahan 2005). By this, he means that the individuals are socialized into the West Coast Swing community through a combination of West Coast Swing classes and learning technique, etiquette, and social information about their surroundings and the people around them on the dance floor at social events. His theories are useful in constructing the ways in which West Coast Swing dancers learn not only the technical skills needed to communicate within the dance, but
also the social cues that bond these people together around the dance floor as well as on it.

Csordas' (2002) and Mauss (1950,1979) theories on the body broaden our understanding of in bodily learning and its results. Marcel Mauss' concept of “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1950,1979) explains that through training the body gains a certain “technique” or way of moving that eventually becomes subconscious. For a West Coast Swing dancer, so many movement decisions are made in an instant that skilled dancers must be able to produce movement without thinking over each detail. When dancers get to the point at which some body movements have become subconscious techniques of the body, they are able to focus their mental attention on completing more complicated movements in the dance. Thomas J. Csordas's theory of “somatic modes of attention” (Csordas 2002) explains the link between learning to dance and the above point by Susan Foster than dancers notice somatic details that non-dancers may not. Csordas argues that a person's somatic mode of attention, how they experience their body, and what details they are particularly attuned to, are trained. A West Coast Swing dancer, therefore, must learn a very particular somatic mode of attention to be able to understand the somatic clues being sent to them by their partner. Once a dancer has these two key pieces of embodied knowledge, a cultivated technique of the body and somatic mode of attention, they can focus their attention past mere functional movement, and begin to play.

Play and Improvisation

The idea of play in Swing dance can be traced back to Yourban roots (Drewal 1992). There is lots of literature on the African roots of play and improvisation in swing dance that I will later explore, but there are also groups of dance scholars and anthropologists who have explored the nature of improvisation in general. In her book about Richard Bull, Susan Foster
Cox 33

(2002) explores the improvisational structure of his dances. Foster writes about the prevalence of improvisation in African American diasporic art forms, in which practitioners place a high value on the communication between musicians and dancers. This communication manifests in a call and response pattern. Improvisation in dance can be compared with improvisation in musical forms such as jazz (Foster 2002). Improvisation is built upon structures and a specific knowledge base. Improvisation in Swing dance is not a free-for-all on the dance floor; but rather, the skillful play of dance practitioners within a structured dance vocabulary (Kear 2011a).

Improvisation has not always been recognized as a skill based on knowledge however. Anthropologists Puri and Hart-Johnson write about the choreography/improvisation dichotomy in dance and explain that although choreography in western culture is usually considered a higher form of art than improvisation, this should not be the case as it is built upon the assumption that improvisation is child’s play and not built upon constant instantaneous use of a trained skill set that is based upon a set of rules. West Coast Swing is a dance in which this kind of improvisation is privileged. Most dances are done improvisationally and the social dance scene it based upon improvised play within the West Coast Swing style. What I observed during my fieldwork about the global west coast swing community is something also talked about by Susan Foster, who writes that:

Improvisation served repeatedly as a site where difference could be acknowledged and accepted. Implemented in diverse artistic contexts, improvisation broke through standardized social regiments by revealing deeply embedded assumptions about status and protocol, unmasking organizations or power and assisting in the instantiation of an alternative, more egalitarian model of social relations. Improvisation also embraced a vision of democracy as an egalitarian, collective struggle to acknowledge difference—racial, gendered, sexual, and class-based—even if it did not always articulate a means for reconciling with, or sorting through these differences. (Foster 2002:64)

It is through improvisation that west coast swing has both the freedom to allow access to people
from vastly different backgrounds, yet the structural strength to allow coherent communication across these different divides. This pattern can be traced in the social context of Swing throughout its history, and is ever-present today in the form of West Coast Swing.

My own theoretical argument in this thesis will bring each of these separate areas of theory (kinesthetic perception, embodiment, communication, identity performance, somatic knowledge, and play) into conversation with one another. Each are essential to an understanding of the social climate of West Coast Swing events; and further, essential to an understanding of the type of network the dance creates between individuals. West Coast Swing dancers consider themselves to be a part of a unique community and culture. Dancers I talked to throughout the course of my research often important this “dance community” was in their lives. My thesis contributes to an understanding of how the body itself is essential to the formation of such a community by tracing the body's central involvement in West Coast Swing, from the functioning of the dance itself, to the formation of social relationships.

**West Coast Swing Connections**

According to Julie Malnig, among dancers “a sense of community often derives less from preexisting social groups brought together by a shared social and cultural interest than from a community created as a result of the dancing” (Malnig 2009:4). This is very much true of the way West Coast Swing dancers relate to one another both on and off the dance floor. This thesis places embodied experience at the center of human interactions to ask the question: what are the characteristics of West Coast Swing that allow individuals to transcend traditional social boundaries and create community? In the next chapter, I trace the history of Swing Dance forms back to roots in African aesthetics, and explain how the appearance of these values allows Swing
dance forms to create a community across traditional social separations. Chapter three traces the process of learning the embodied language of West Coast Swing, and explores the connections this process creates. In chapter four, I focus on the communicational elements of West Coast Swing, and the ways in which an embodied knowledge and understanding of one's partner creates bonds between dancers. Chapter five focuses specifically on “play” as the element that allows West Coast Swing to accommodate many cultural expressions while allowing individuals from different cultural backgrounds and social groups to come into conversation with one another. Finally, in the conclusion, I bring all of these elements into conversation with one another, and explore the ways in which these aspects of West Coast Swing create a unique network of dancers who relate to one another through a common embodied experience.
Chapter 2

America's Vernacular Dances: A Timeline of Transformation and Cultural Exchange

It is rare to find a part of American culture that can be defined as truly vernacular. Julie Malnig defines vernacular dance as dances that “spring from the lifeblood of communities and subcultures and are generally learned informally, through cultural and social networks” (Malnig 2009:4). This is true of West Coast Swing in a unique way. The history of Swing dance in America is a convoluted pathway of radial mixing and cultural transmission that follows the evolving mindset of America throughout history. On this subject Jane Desmond writes: “Whether Negros borrowed from Whites, or Whites from Negros, in this or any other aspect of culture, it must always be remembered that the borrowing was never achieved without resultant change in whatever was borrowed, and, in addition, without incorporating elements which originated in the new habit that, as much as anything else, give the new form its distinctive quality” (Desmond 1997:36).

The politics of representation present in the history of Swing speak as much to the mobility of this dance form through history as it does to the social power inequalities in American society. Despite the tendency for popular thought to attribute swing dance to poodle skirts, diners and white America, the important works of several authors have given voice to Swing dance's original practitioners, the black dancers of Harlem. Stearns and Stearns' canonical text Jazz Dance (1968) was one of the first to give credit to these dancers for their role in creating the precursors to West Coast Swing such as Charleston, Ragtime and Lindy Hop. Since then other authors have filled in the gaps in Stearns and Stearns' research, and attempted to correct where they went wrong (Hazzard-Gordon1990, Emery 1988), slowly unpacking the convoluted social history of Swing. Other authors (Malone 1996,1998, Malnig 2009, Joanna
Bossee 2007) have taken this information and further theorized the trajectory and meaning of Swing dance in society. Still others have more generally theorized the black dancing bodies who created these dances, and traced the African elements that are characteristics of these dances (De Frantz 2002, Thompson 1966, 1998, Caponi-Tabery 2008). Finally, we are lucky enough to have several firsthand accounts of Lindy Hop from original practitioners of the dance, including autobiographies by famous Lindy Hoppers Frankie Manning (1997) and Norma Miller (1996).

West Coast Swing itself is a relatively young dance form, and still evolving. The earliest creation of West Coast Swing as a form of dance separate from its predecessor occurred in the late 1940s, and it is only in recent years that the dance has gained international notoriety. The cultural makeup of West Coast Swing is complex. Jane Desmond reminds us that: “every dance exists in a complex network of relationships to other dances and other non-dance ways of using the body and can be analyzed along these two concurrent axes” (Desmond 1997: 31). This is certainly true of West Coast Swing which is influenced by dances from the many cultures present in California, where West Coast Swing first appeared. West Coast Swing derives mainly from Lindy Hop Swing, while Lindy Hop, in turn, came from dances like the Charleston and the Texas Tommy among other African American vernacular dances created between the 1890's and 1920's. These dances showcase a mixture of slave culture and western influences and can be traced back to specific African dances and African aesthetic characteristics.

The emphasis on play and improvisation, that carry over to West Coast Swing are known to be characteristics of African dance movement. Margaret Drewal and Brenda Dixon Gottschild identify Yoruban culture as the root of play and improvisation focus in African American rooted dance styles. In a later chapter I will elaborate on the role of play and improvisation on the social atmosphere of West Coast Swing events. Here, I will begin to explore the history of West Coast
Swing dance by describing some key African influences, which are vital to an understanding of the culture and quality of West Coast Swing communities today both socially and aesthetically.

**African Roots**

West Coast Swing follows from a long line of Swing and Jazz dances that date back to the 1800s, yet its trajectory is too complicated to be captured in a simple time line. In order to fully describe the rich history that sets the tone of the West Coast Swing experience, it is important to consider the African influences in the history of Swing and Jazz Dance that most directly relate to West Coast Swing today.

Not all of the main characteristics of African dance traditions that pervade Lindy Hop Swing remained in West Coast Swing, yet several main characteristics of West Coast Swing still derive from African dance concepts. By referencing “African Dance”, I will follow the lead of Thomas Defrantz (2002) in stressing that in any discussion of African dance, one must recognize that there are many varied African Dance forms. The umbrella term “African dance” is therefore not adequate to define them all; however, in referring to “African Dances” I follow the precedent set by scholars such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996) and Robert Farris Thompson (1966) in trying to describe a general African aesthetic that is clearly present in American vernacular dance. This aesthetic is comprised of commonalities among Africans of Western Africa, where most slaves brought to North America originated. It is this West African cultural aesthetic that contributes key elements to Swing, as its original practitioners were descendants of the West African people. In her book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (1996), Brenda Dixon Gottschild illuminates the many aspects of American culture influenced by what she calls the “Africanist aesthetic”. She defines Africanist as a term
used to “signify African and African American resonances and presences, trends, and phenomena. It indicates that African influence, past and present, on those forms and forces that arose as products of the African diaspora, including traditions and genres such as blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip hop” (Gottschild 1996:xiv).¹⁶ Swing dance as a part of jazz dance is also firmly based in the Africanist aesthetic.

Play and dance are central features of the Yoruba culture of West Africa. In dance, play manifests in the form of improvisation, or the playing with musicality, rhythms, and movement within a structural frame. Almost all Yoruba rituals involve improvisation, or “play” in which the dancers are expected to come up with sequences of dance steps spontaneously. Dancers also often take this idea of improvisation and turn it into competition (Cox 2009). In the Yoruba culture, competition in play occurs frequently between dancers, and even sometimes in dialogue between dancers and musicians (Malone 1996). This central element of play is one that will come up again and again throughout the history of Swing dance forms, and is one of the principal reasons why Swing dance forms spread and are continuing to spread so rapidly across different groups of people and around the world.

The relationship between dancer and musician in African Dance is strong. This legacy has left its mark on West Coast Swing in the way the dancers place primary importance on interpretation of the music. A central component of African music is the use of polyrhythms and multiple meter (Thompson 1998). In dance, the Africanist aesthetic of “multi-meter” manifests in the way the dancers punctuate the music with their bodies: “In the west African world, it is one of the dancer’s aims to make every rhythmic subtlety of the music visible” (Thompson 1966:75).

¹⁶ Gottschild uses the term “Africanist” to describe traits rooted in African cultural tradition and the term Europeanist to refer to practices and traits rooted in both the European and Western cultural traditions (Gottschild 1996)
Dancers and drummers feed off each other's energy and creativity as drums build off of body rhythms and bodies build off rhythms, creating a cycle of mutual improvisation. This particular element of connection and challenge is known in dance scholarship as “call and response”. The dancers do this by attaching a different rhythm to various body parts. The hips might keep the rhythm of the downbeat, while the arms wave to a syncopated rhythm. Another aspect of the African aesthetic is the use of oppositional motion within the same body. For example, smooth arms and sharp legs, circular versus angular movement, or sudden transitions between energy levels or emotions that exclude any gradual transition between the two (Thompson 1966).

The cool aesthetic is another part of the African aesthetic that has fed into American culture and is readily visible in Swing forms. The 'cool aesthetic' described by Thompson(1966), Gottschild (1996), and Malone (1996), among others, is based on an element of control and clarity. “It is an attitude... that combines composure with vitality. It's prime components are aesthetic visibility and lucidity (dancing movements with clarity, presenting the self with clarity), and luminosity, or brilliance. The picture is completed by facial composure, the actualized “mask of cool” (Gottschild 1996:16). In Lindy Hop, this cool aesthetic manifests in fast, sometimes wild movements executed with complete control and composure. In West Coast Swing the aesthetic of cool appears in the way the dancers hold themselves, and seemingly glide across the floor. Often, there is a certain strut associated with West Coast Swing dancers that exudes a sense of luminosity. The cool aesthetic also appears in specific fashion trends among West Coast Swing dancers. For women, feather earrings, hair streaked with color, sequins, and floaty tops are all popular fashion choices that convey a laid back but glittery sense of cool.
Pre-Lindy Hop Vernacular Dances

Once in the Americas, African slaves did not lose their culture, nor did they stop dancing. In fact, it was during the time of slavery that African Americans in the south began dancing in a manner that would soon form the basis of American vernacular dance:

African American vernacular dance, like jazz music, mirrors the values and worldview of its creators. Even in the face of tremendous adversity, it evinces an affirmation and celebration of life. Furthermore, African-American dance serves some of the same purposes as traditional dances in western and central African cultures: on both continents black dance is a source of energy, joy and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression (Malone 1998:230).

The American Vernacular dances have a movement quality that is at once skilled and expressive, but with a propensity towards a silliness that exudes a joy for life (Caponi-Tabery 2008). The Animal dances, Charleston, Lindy Hop, and West Coast Swing all follow in this line of dance that celebrate the vitality of life.

Jacqui Malone also presents six characteristics of African American vernacular dance: rhythm, improvisation, control, angularity, asymmetry, and dynamism. (Malone 1998). In a comparison to Gottchild's description of the 5 characteristics of African dance (based in Thompson 1966), we see many similarities. Gottchild's five characteristics are: embracing conflict and opposites, polycentrism and polyrhythm, “high affect juxtaposition”, ephebism, and “the aesthetic of cool” (Gottschild 1996). The African American practitioners who created American vernacular dance used their African aesthetic roots as the core of these dances, while at

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17 The exception to this joyful temperament is the more serious Blues dance.
18 Gottschild defines the key characteristic of high affect juxtaposition as “Mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links” (Gottschild 1996:14). These movements placed next to one another are often quite oppositional; for example a dancer moving in a fast and sharp manner may suddenly switch to a smooth and slow movement without a smooth transition in between. These movements might even overlap in the body, the legs engaged with one movement quality while the arms move with a distinctly different quality.
19 Ephebism is a feeling, affect, and energy of youthful vitality. It is not dependent on age; but rather, is a quality of the dance form. Swing dancers of all ages step onto the dance floor with this youthful energy that pervades the dance.
the same time borrowing from the Europeanist aesthetic. Their dances mixed African aesthetics with imitation (often in the form of mockery) of their masters. One such widely recognized dance was the Cakewalk in which dancers moved to African drum rhythms why mocking the dress, posture, and dance forms of early 1800's upper class southern society (Stearns and Stearns 1968). 20

A major difference between African dance styles and African American vernacular dance styles is the entry of touch. In African dances to touch another while dancing was considered not only aesthetically limiting (the dancers did not have a full range of motion to express themselves) but also inappropriate, especially for a man and woman (Malone 1996). The breakaway in the Texas Tommy and Lindy Hop, and eventually West Coast Swing brings back a separation in coupling so that dancers can have moments of individual expression uninhibited by their partner. In the Cakewalk, dancers moved, physically connected to a partner, in a circular manner (Stearns and Stearns 1968, Dehn 2008). This dance was followed by many dances that also incorporated Europeanist aesthetics of upright posture and partnering with African dance aesthetics and cultural norms.

The history of American Vernacular dances is not well documented before about 1920. Scholars do recognize that dances resembling the Lindy Hop and other earlier vernacular dances appeared decades before they reached public dance halls or national attention. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon (1990) explains that most of the early African American vernacular dance forms began (in some form) in the African American “jook joints” or private block parties. The original practitioners of these dances had already been dancing for decades before the rest of America began practicing these dances. As a result, many of these dance forms had the chance to develop

20 Some of these dance forms included the Minuet, Grand March, in which dancers paraded around the room in various formations.
in the informal backstage setting of jook joints before being codified in the public eye and
officially documented (Hazzard-Gordon 1990). The Lindy Hop contains markers of many of
these dances; however, which dance in particular was most influential in its creation is disputed.
Although not every movement from these dances translated to West Coast Swing, the
atmosphere and attitude of these dances, especially in regard to play and understanding across
societal boundaries, is very much alive today.

The next notable American dance craze was the ragtime dances which included the one-
step, two-step, and Texas Tommy, as well as a collection of “animal dances” including the turkey
trot, grizzly bear, and bunny hug. The Texas Tommy is sometimes thought to be the parent dance
to the other animal dances and some suggest that it was danced by southern dancers as early as
forty years before the rest of the animal dances were introduced in San Francisco around 1909
(Knowles 2009 quoting Texas Tommy sheet music). Each animal dance incorporates an element
of the Texas Tommy, such as step hop or the one step rhythm.

The Animal Dances carry many traits of African dance forms such as improvisation, hip
movements, and sliding steps. These dances are descendants of plantation slave dances such as
the buzzard loop, and as such they carry with them African roots (Knowles 2009). The original
Animal dances came from the southern United States. Around 1909, a man named Johnny Peters
along with several other African American dancers moved to San Francisco from the south,
bringing with them a set of dances we now think of as the dances of the Ragtime era. Along with
his partners Ethel Williams and Mary Dewson, Peters performed and popularized these dances in
lower class dance halls of San Francisco’s Barbary Coast in California. Famous for the hundreds
of dance halls along its streets, tourists, celebrities, and local dancers alike flocked to the Barbary
Coast to participate in the new ragtime dances or go “slumming”, a term used by the upper
classes for visiting dance halls to watch ragtime dancers from balconies above the dance floor (Knowles 2009). Although the popularity of the Animal dances began on the dance floors of San Francisco, they quickly evolved into the dance styles that became popular around the country and across social lines.

The Castles were a Caucasian couple who helped to spread the popularity of the ragtime dances and take away some of the stigma associated with its lower class roots. Vernon and Irene Castle learned the ragtime dances from their original practitioners, changed the posture and added more control to the dances and marketed them to White America (Desmond 1997). Juliet McMains explains that as:

> ragtime dances from African American social dance gained in popularity among White dancers, their White practitioners minimized such critical characteristics as improvisation, torso isolations, and angular patterns...In fact, the erasure of its African heritage was so successful that by the 1930’s ballroom dance was unequivocally recognized as a White form (McMains 2006:72)

The animal dances eventually came to be considered a scandalous but iconic part of youth culture leading up to the early 1920’s (Savage 2007). This trend continued with the Lindy Hop nearly two decades later when a dance created in a Harlem ballroom spread across social classes and around the world.

The success of the turkey trot in Europe, especially in France and Germany was to foreshadow the popularity of Lindy Hop and West Coast Swing in the same countries (Savage 2007). The Turkey Trot involved both partners flapping their arms like a turkey while either trotting across the floor or in a circle or doing a sequence of step hops going back and forth from leg to leg. The Texas Tommy incorporated first break away in vernacular dance. Dancers of the time agree that the Texas Tommy was essentially the Lindy Hop, but with slightly different footwork: “It was the Lindy,” Ethel Williams agrees, “but there were two basic steps- a kick and
hop three times on each foot, and then add whatever you want” (Williams in Stearns and Stearns 1968:129).

The Charleston, an American icon of the 1920s, is another dance in which African aesthetics mixed with European couple dancing to create an American dance form. This dance also rose to popularity quickly in the US and around the world (especially Europe). The Charleston’s significance was in the revolutionary ability for partners to dance together or separate. The basic footwork of this dance is thought to come from an African dance, yet scholars dispute the exact people of origin (Koritz 2008, Stearns and Stearns 1968, Emery 1998, Malone 1996, Knowles 2009). In later years, the high kicks of Charleston were incorporated into the Lindy Hop, and some dancers argue that the Lindy evolved directly from the Charleston. The Charleston’s swivel kick footwork transformed into high kicks over a decade of dance practice, and it is this later form that is used in Lindy Hop.

**Bright Lights of the Savoy Ballroom: The Lindy Hop**

Lindy Hop Swing first began to catch the public eye in the late 1920s at the Savoy ballroom of Harlem, New York. In the next several years several other dance halls would become known as centers of Swing, among them New York's Renaissance Ballroom and Cotton Club, but none succeed in rivaling the prestige, popularity, and fame of the Savoy Ballroom. The Savoy opened on March 12th, 1926 to a crowd of over 5,000 people (Malone 1996). The Savoy Ballroom was one of the first large racially integrated social spaces in the country. At a time when Blacks and Whites were not allowed to interact socially, the Savoy ballroom was a place where interracial boundaries were tested and transgressed. Each night of the week at the Savoy ballroom had a particular theme. Saturday night in particular was “Squares Night”, a time when
masses from the general public, both White and black, came to dance and to watch the best
dancers in the world. (Malnig 2009, Stearns and Stearns 1968). Dancers of the highest skill level
danced in the northeast corner of the ballroom, a section which later earned the name “Cat's
Corner”. The trend for the better dancers on the floor to migrate to a corner or side of the room
is echoed at West Coast Swing functions today.

Some say that the Lindy received its name from the manager of the Savoy ballroom
Charles Buchannan when he asked the dancers if they were trying to hop the Atlantic with their
daring feats. Others say it was Shorty George Snowden who when asked what he was doing
answered “the Lindy”, also in reference to Lindenburg's flight across the Atlantic. The term
“Swing dance” in general came about in 1931 with the rise of Duke Ellington's song “It Don't
Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)”. Throughout its history, Swing dance and jazz music
have evolved together, and dancers and musicians had essential working relationships. Dancers
inspired the musicians, and musicians provided the music that inspired the dancers to move:

Dancers know their Jazz, especially the music of their own times, better than
most jazz critics. They have to. The musicians furnish the accompaniment that
can often make or break them. They live and work with jazzmen, tailoring their
dancing to the most subtle nuances of the music. Frequently they help to put
together the very arrangements to which they dance (Stearns and Stearns 1968: 348)

Several world renowned dancers were pivotal in creating the Lindy Hop. Shorty George
Snowden, Frankie Manning, and Herbert “Whitey” White, Norma Miller and “Big” Bea just to
name a few. The famous Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were known for their fast flying circular
dancing to big band, jazz, and swing music.

Over time, Swing transformed into many variations of the original Lindy Hop, some
based on geography, and others based on musicality. However the original “Lindy Hop was a
smooth flowing rotating spot dance that stayed low to the ground” (Giordano 2006: 88). The basic pattern of Lindy Hop is “rock step, triple step, step step, triple step” on which a limitless number of variations in syncopated footwork are layered. The dance is often fast paced, and the “swinging” feel comes from both the sway in the dancers' bodies as they rock right and left, and the circular swinging of dancer’s weight in a dance filled with circles (Cox 2011). The distinctive feature of the dance was the breakaway that allowed the dancer to improvise steps that “swung” to the music” (Giordano 89). There is an ever-present sense of play in swing which manifests as both the traditional use of the word play (implying fun and frivolity), as well as the Yoruba sense (a more serious strategic manipulation of structures). It was only later in its evolution that Frankie Manning began adding the famous aerials, lifts and throws that have become a part of the dance. The first of these was the “Frankie Ariel”: a back to back flip that could be done by either male or female dancers (Manning 2007, Malone 1996). One unusual characteristic of swing was that partner dancing was done both between genders and with partners of the same gender, promoting an idea of equality.

Katrina Hazzard Gordon (1990) notes that the proliferation of dance steps often happened through the observing of other dancers during competitions, especially at the less formal private block parties. Although competitive drive was strong among some Lindy Hoppers, many dancers trained together and shared dance moves with their peers. Through this process, many rivals became lifetime friends (Manning 2007). The informal playful competition of Lindy Hop continues today, and has been a part of African American vernacular dances from the start, “It was customary for at least one unscheduled dancing contest to “break out” during the course of a block party” (Gordon 1990:158).

Lindy Hop in its “original” form (or close to it) is still danced today, and groups of Lindy
Hoppers gather in cities all over the United States and all over the world to continue the Swing dance tradition. Although Lindy Hop was the original “Swing dance”, over the years many different forms of swing have emerged, each claiming the name “Swing”. The Swing danced by Lindy Hoppers today, and the East Coast Swing danced in ballroom studios and competitions are completely different dance forms. Lindy Hop is danced low to the ground, with a relaxed frame, and mixes six and eight count patterns (and sometimes deviates from these counts altogether). East Coast Swing is danced in a stiffer, more upright manner, and simplifies the rhythm and footwork of the dance by sticking mainly to the six count rhythm. As Swing Dance began to spread in popularity to White society, it began to transform. Most of the movements and the general feel of the dance remained the same. If you look at Harlem Swing from the 1920’s and Swing at a White high school in the 1950’s, you will see many of the same moves. The major difference lies in the music and in the dancers themselves. Instead of using the swing and jazz music swing dance was based on, this new generation of dancers took the steps and put them to the music that was popular in their own society: Rock & Roll. In principal, because the very basis of Swing was a response to a new kind of music, one would think that this would change the very nature of the dance; however, if you compare the two dance scenes, it becomes clear that the two dance forms are in fact one and the same. They have the same basic steps, the same play with rhythms, and the same “swinging” feel in the partner work, even if they are danced to different music. The alteration allowed the dance to become an emblem of “American Values” in the 1950’s White youth society to the extent that it is now remembered as one of the defining characteristics of youth culture in that era (Savage 2007); however, this transformation also occurred in-line with the racial tensions of the time. The original dance was erased of its African

21 I will further explain the rhythmical patterns, posture, and frame used in Swing in Chapters 3 and 4.
American roots in the dominant historical memory of popular culture.

Crossing the Country

There are several competing histories of the trajectory from Lindy Hop Swing to West Coast Swing. Some say that the dance came through Hollywood; others say it was through the ballroom; and still others stress its country western influences. Many historians of the dance conceded that the real history is somewhere in the middle of each of these interpretations.

In 1936 a tapper and Swing dancer by the name of Dean Collins moved from New York to Los Angeles, bringing with him Savoy style Lindy Hop. Collins had been a contest winning dancer at the Savoy ballroom, yet his style was smooth and distinctly different from the jumpy style of most Lindy dancers at the time. Collins quickly earned success and notoriety as a Hollywood dancer and choreographer. In order to be captured on film, Lindy Hop needed to be danced linearly instead of circularly. With this change, Collins created a new kind of Swing: Hollywood style Lindy. Dancer and historian Skippy Blair notes that some people mistakenly assume that Hollywood style Lindy and West Coast Swing are the same dance styles. Although Hollywood Style Lindy and West Coast Swing are different, the influence of the camera in turning the circular Lindy into a slotted dance and Collin's influence in smoothing the dance out are two striking similarities along the time line from Lindy Hop to west coast swing. Collins insisted that there was “absolutely no difference in the basic count between East Coast and West Coast Swing”, and that he was not the one who invented western swing (as it was called until the 1960's); in fact, he didn't even like western swing. (Collins in Moody 2008: 1-2)

Another historical trajectory from Lindy to West Coast Swing says that when jitterbugs (Lindy dancers) in New York and Northern California were banned from dancing in their wild
circular manner in increasingly crowded dance halls, the dance became slotted and calmer in order to accommodate the crowds and comply with the new rules set by dance hall owners to make the dance seem more sophisticated. Yet another widely accepted story about the creation of West Coast Swing is related to the Dean Collins trajectory. One piece of West Coast Swing history that is clear is that it was Dean Collins who notably introduced Lindy Hop to the West Coast. Ballroom giant Arthur Murray began teaching a style of swing he called western swing in the late 1940s. Murray had taken lessons from Collins, and was using a written syllabus for this new style of swing in the late 1940s. This style of swing was a smooth slotted style that took out the rock step of the Lindy Hop, and added two walks instead (although on a different count), and the rest of the footwork stayed the same.

**West Coast Swing since 1950**

West Coast Swing uses the counts and basic rhythms of Lindy Hop, but with a completely different style, as it was created for the culture in which it existed. The forms of Swing dance created in the latter half of the 20th century originated in very localized contexts, forming a set of dances that are at once very similar, but with small variations. Some of these stylistic variations have separate names, while others are just recognized as regional differences in the dance.

California, the birthplace of West Coast Swing has a large Hispanic population, as well as sections of Country Western culture. As a result of these influences, West Coast Swing mixes Lindy Hop with various Latin and Country Western dances such as salsa and Country Two-Step. West Coast Swing is a true hybrid form, adding stylistic elements from different classes, races, and cultures: “What’s fascinating is that it incorporates so many other forms—hip hop, jazz, and even ballet” (Knodel 2004:74) among many other traditional ballroom forms. Because of this,
the West Coast Swing today both inside and outside of a ballroom setting has the smooth elements of many ballroom dances, the posture created by heels, the playfulness and beats of Lindy Hop, and some of the construction and hips of salsa. Unlike many other forms, West Coast Swing has kept the emphasis on improvisation and musicality both inside and outside of the ballroom.

Someone looking at West Coast Swing for the first time wouldn’t necessarily connect it with either Lindy Hop, Salsa, Hustle, or Country two-step, yet it is heavily influenced by all of these, and an example of the way in which dances are being brought together according to the prior cultural knowledge (including knowledge of other dance forms) of its dancers. West Coast Swing has incorporated pieces of the cultural makeup of California. There are Latin influences in West Coast Swing (with some moves directly from salsa) as well as hustle, Carolina shag, and blues influences that strongly influence this dance. West Coast Swing, also known as Western Swing, was an important part of the country western circuit. With the cultural revival of country western influence in popular culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s, West Coast Swing also enjoyed its time in the spotlight as an integral part of the dance scene at popular country western clubs and bars in California (Blair 2009, Kear 2011).

The 1980’s and 90’s were considered the Golden age of West Coast Swing, a time when the dance form was just coming into its own and growing nationally in popularity. Richard Kear explains how West Coast Swing has been constantly changing even between the 1980’s and today:

When I learned west coast swing it was 1990 and back then it was more like East Coast Swing in terms of its dynamics. It was more rhythmic and it was more vertical and more linear and now 20 years later its more flowing, it's longer, it's wider, it's smoother. It's more of a smooth dance than a rhythm dance (Kear 2011).
West Coast Swing is anything but static. As a relatively new social dance form, West Coast Swing is still in its definitional process.22 Although the dance has general guidelines such as what music it should be danced to, the styling details are still being negotiated on the dance floor by dancers around the world. West Coast Swing dancers who have been dancing for the ten years or more often spoke of changes in dance trends and style over time. Individuals would on occasion point out to me a fellow dancer who had a “classic” style, embodying a version of the dance as it existed at some point in the past. Although innovation is valued in this style of dance, so is reference to the dancers and dance styles that came before.

**Conclusion**

In the early 21st century the US explosion of West Coast Swing has declined slightly, but it is still a popular dance form, especially in California, Texas and other West Coast states. It also has a following both in the Midwest and in the eastern part of the United States; however, sometimes under different names (such as hand dance in DC). The current movement in West Coast Swing is twofold. West Coast Swing is rapidly gaining popularity overseas, especially in Europe. Its presence on the global stage is thanks to open sharing of thousands of West Coast Swing videos over YouTube and other media sharing sites. At the same time, American contemporary music and culture has a huge influence on stylistic changes in West Coast Swing. Like the Lindy Hop before it, West Coast Swing is beginning to reflect popular culture, and it's

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22 No dance form is completely static in its practice across time and place; however, many established dances have general defining guidelines that are accepted by a majority of its practitioners. Although West Coast Swing has a few of these, such as it is danced in a line, the defining features of what makes a dance West Coast Swing or not West Coast Swing are still being debated and altered by practitioners.
practice is crossing national borders through contemporary forms of global communication. It may not yet have the visibility of Lindy Hop or the widespread popularity, but this smaller community still has quite a global presence that is representative of American popular culture today, from fashion, to music, to the representation of social relationships.

In any history of cultural exchange it is important to remember that there are numerous influences, all of which are essential to understanding what comes out of that exchange. There are several elements of the transformation from African dance roots to West Coast Swing which are essential to understanding the culture of West Coast Swing communities. Perhaps the most central of these is the understanding that American Vernacular dance (including West Coast Swing) has spanned a history of decades, social and racial barriers, and cultural sharing. The element of American Vernacular dance that allows for the kind of understanding necessary to bring these people together across so many divides throughout history, is play. These interactions are facilitated through a dance whose functioning is dependent on an embodied communication between individuals.

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23 Popularity of Swing dance and music spread internationally in the 1940s through a combination of print media, radio, and US soldiers abroad.
Chapter 3

Creating a Dancer, Creating Community

Every dancer at a West Coast Swing event has obtained a different level of skill, and all began dancing at different times in their lives. What brings them together into the same space is a mutual interest in the language of West Coast Swing, whatever their level of understanding may be. The way an individual moves on the dance floor is informed by their own personal background and experiences. When dancers are able to move with another simultaneously using a common framework, the dance embraces difference while allowing these differences to come into communication with one another. In order to execute this dance one must first learn the rules with which they will be able to connect. According to Jamie L. Callahan, this learning process in itself forms a community (2005), complete with its own set of social structures. Some learn to dance as small children, others in their teens, and still others as adults or elderly. The multiple ways of learning employed by the West Coast Swing community allow for the learning of different elements of the dance, from technique to social skills, codes of conduct to how to listen and respond to the embodied messages from one’s partner.

West Coast Swing is an “educated dance”, meaning that both lead and follow must know the rules in order to participate (Blair 1998, 2011). Unless one has grown up surrounded by West Coast Swing, there will always be elements of this dance that need to be specifically learned. Because the knowledge necessary to dance West Coast Swing, communicate with one’s partner, and be a part of the community is physical as well as mental and social, the learning process must encompass all three elements. Jamie Callahan (2005) discusses West Coast Swing dances as a “community of practice” that is formed through three systems of learning: non-formal, informal, and incidental. Each of these methods of learning West Coast Swing teach a different
element necessary to participate in this community. Callahan stresses that “a characteristic of a community of practice is that they are marked by the need to engage in learning in order to practice within the community” (Callahan 2005: 5). This comes also from viewing communities of practice as consisting “of musical engagement in a joint enterprise while making use of a shared repertoire” (Wenger quoted in Callahan 2005:5). This is a structure I saw echoed in my own observation of the West Coast Swing community.

It takes years to learn West Coast Swing. Several of the champion level dancers of today have been competing at this level for the past 15 years. In an interview, Richard Kear told me that it also took him over a year of dancing everyday before he felt comfortable, and years more to become really comfortable dancing socially instead of using set steps (Kear 2011b). Sociologist Chris Shilling describes three levels of knowledge which he applies to the practice of sports that can also be applied to the levels of bodily knowledge that inform proficiency in West Coast Swing: imitative, motor competence, and autonomous proficiency. These different levels engage and mix on the social dance floor and in the social context of the West Coast Swing community. Other useful theories in understanding the processes at work in learning West Coast Swing can be gleaned from Marcel Mauss' theory on “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1950/1979) and Thomas J. Csordas's theory of “somatic modes of attention” (Csordas 2002) as explained in Chapter 1.

**Technique: Building Blocks of West Coast Swing**

West Coast Swing is a dance that is constantly changing (Blair 2002, Kear 2011b). As such, there are many ways and systems of teaching the dance, mostly dependent on personal preference. Although in recent years some have tried to codify the dance and set a specific
learning progression (Kear 2011b), this is by no means used at all studios or even in the majority of classes. Instead, teachers teach the elements of Swing they find most important to them personally. According to Kear, the conversation of these different points of view on the dance floor is the strength of the dance (Kear 2011b). I will first pull out some of the important elements of West Coast Swing taught by most teachers, and then list some of the basic social etiquette that is expected of dancers in the West Coast Swing community both on and around the dance floor.

The Basic Step and Anchoring: The basic step of West Coast Swing is composed of single rhythm steps and triple rhythm “triple steps”. An “anchor” ends every pattern, which is first taught as the last triple step of a pattern. The basic is one of the first things someone must learn in order to dance West Coast Swing. The basic step (aka push break, or sugar push) is usually described as “step, step, triple step, triple step” or “1, 2, 3&4, 5&6” and the connection between partners goes from extension (partners pull away), to compression (partners lean into one another), and back to extension. The anchor completes the tension in the connection which allows the next lead to be communicated. It is also a place where the follow settles her weight over her center.

Connection: One of the most difficult things to learn in social partner dances is how to

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24 Skippy Blair and the World Swing Dance Council published a teaching order for West Coast Swing teachers. “In an effort to preserve the fundamentals and characteristics of Classic West Coast Swing” (WSDC). Although the 14 basics they present as basic steps are generally considered the basics, the specific teaching order they present was never followed in my observations.

25 According to the World Swing Dance Council however, this should not be the first pattern a dancer learns because the concept of compression, essential to this pattern, is too advanced for most dancers. Nonetheless this is almost always the first step instructors teach.
communicate with one's partner through “connection”. For the follow position (traditionally women) this means understanding the nuances in connection formed by both visual and physical attention to your partner's body. For leads (traditionally the male role) they must learn how to manipulate a body that is not their own. In doing so, they are not just moving the follow's body where it needs to be for a particular movement, leading and following is more complicated than this. A good lead “suggests” that his follow move in a particular way. The line between not giving a clear lead and being too forceful in a lead is thin and it takes time to learn. Because follows have the ability to move beyond the lead, their partner has given them, in West Coast Swing both leads and follows must learn to understand their partner as an extension of their own movement.

In classes working on connection, students will often be put through exercises that work on the communication passing between lead and follow. One such exercise involves lead and follow standing in a connected position (open or closed). The follow must close their eyes, and the lead should be able to lead them smoothly around the room. Another exercise involves the follow closing their eyes in a connected position, the lead then shifts his weight back and forth between his feet, the goal being that the partners are in tune with each other to such a degree that the follow also knows to shift her weight with her partner.

In these examples, leaders are learning how to lead, and follows learn how to understand those signals, yet it is equally important that the lead knows both how to give a good connection and be in tune with his partner enough to follow her lead in movements as well as in style of dancing, and following potential hijacks/embellishments as well. Richard Kear spent one of his classes solely focused on the lead's and follow's ability to tune into their partner, rather than simply the follow's ability to follow, and lead's ability to lead. If we consider the traditional
gender roles associated with leading and following in social dances, West Coast Swing is one of the few dances that reflects today's western moral and social attitudes (Blair 2002) in which the power differential between men and women is decreasing. This is evident in Kear’s classes. He constantly stresses the conversation between lead and follow, between genders, instead of the hierarchical model of man leads woman follows. The individual also must learn to be aware of their own body in relation to the other's body:

at first you do learn stillness, you do learn how to hold your body firm and toned so you can get a perspective of a body map where you are, therefore know where you are just for your own benefit but also so you know where your partner wants you to go...and that's through the static map of OK this is where my arms go, this is where my feet go, but after a while it's the movement that makes you recognize where to go...and that's something that's intuitive and I think just happens on its own naturally (Kear 2011a).

*The basics:* There are a set of basics that are considered the foundation of West Coast Swing. It is this set of movements that constitute the required knowledge base for a dancer to move from a beginning level to an intermediate level class. They are: the sugar push/push break, left side pass, under arm turn, whip, basket whip, outside turn, and tuck across the slot, and starter step. The sugar push (as described above) is considered the basic step of West Coast Swing and involves the follow moving towards the lead on counts 1-3 and away from the lead on counts 4-6. In this 6 count move lead and follow stand facing one another connected by either 1 or 2 hands. According to champion dancer and teacher Sarah Van Drake, most of these patterns are named for what the follow does. For example, the follow passes the lead on the left, the follow turns across the slot under the leads arm, the follow is whipped around, the follow is whipped around and her arms form a basket around her, the follow turns to her outside, the follow tucks in

26 Most dancers learn to West Coast Swing through some type of formal instruction, whether that be group classes or occasionally private lessons with instructors. I will discuss where learning occurs in a later section of this chapter.
before turning out. Some of these are 6 count moves, (step, step, triple step, triple step) while others are 8 count basics (step, step, triple step, step, step, triple step).

**Alteration of the basics:** After dancers learn these basics, it is said that all other combinations are an alteration of one of these basics. In reality, while most other movements are alterations of these, whether or not all possible combinations are an alteration of a basic depends on how far you are willing to stretch the definition of the step. Alterations rarely have specific names of their own other than “that whip spinny thingy” etc., but there are certainly sets of alterations that are more commonly known and taught than others to the extent that some seem to become pseudo basics.

**Musicality and play:** Musicality is an essential part of West Coast Swing once dancers know and understand the basic step. West Coast Swing allows freedom in its steps through alteration and extension to cater to the specific music that’s being played, whether that be a ballad or the latest hip hop song. Dancers can be smooth or choppy, fast or slow, depending on the song. Some classes are focused specifically on various methods of dancing to the music, instead of sticking strictly to the timing of straight count basics. I will talk more about how play is taught and thought about in play section of this chapter.

**Etiquette:** Dancers must also learn a set of social etiquette for the West Coast Swing dance event, some of which is similar to contemporary western values, and some which differ considerably. These social rules cover personal hygiene, how to accept a dance, when it is acceptable to refuse a dance, the polite protocol after refusing a dance, how to behave in class settings, appropriate
conversation, and networking between dancers. Dancers are expected to come to events clean, having used deodorant (which was even repeated by several teachers in beginner classes), and have an ample supply of gum or breath mints. Dancers switch partners for each dance, and the unspoken etiquette is to ask the same person to dance no more than twice in one evening (unless the dancers are close friends, the event is too small to avoid repeat partners, or both partners exceedingly enjoyed previous dances). It is acceptable for both genders to ask a partner to dance, and dancers are taught that it is impolite when asking a prospective partner to either make eye-contact from across the room (as is common practice at Tango dances) or to extend their hand before asking verbally for a dance and receiving consent. At this point it is common for the lead to extend their hand, the follow to take it, and for the lead to escort the follow to the dance floor. “Would you like to dance” is the accepted script for asking a partner to dance, to which the appropriate response is, in almost all cases, an enthusiastic acceptance of “yes”, “yeah”, “sure!”, “I’d love to!”, “let’s do it!” etc.

Dancers are taught that there are only two circumstances in which it is acceptable to refuse a request for a dance: either for reasons of safety and extreme discomfort, or if the individual has chosen to rest, and sit out the song. In either case, the refuser must sit out the rest of the song and not accept an invitation from another partner. If sitting out the dance for reason of rest, it is good etiquette for the refuser to dance with the person who had previously asked them in the next song they do dance. Conversation between dancers off the dance floor is common, sometimes brief exchanges also happen on the dance floor. Dancers do get close over months and years of attending dances together, yet from my experience entering several dance scenes (in California and Philadelphia), the relationship between dancers changes after a dancer cements themselves in the local scene as a West Coast Swing dancer in the area. After several
weeks, which usually is just 3-5 meetings if attending weekly classes, dancers start to network.

This becomes the basis for many friendships but also serves a practical purpose. Dancers extend offers to carpool, invite to other social dances in the area, and even go as far as discussing hotel room sharing at the next large convention coming up (in which as many as 6 dancers may cram into a room, sharing beds, sleeping in chairs and on floors, with their fellow dancers). This connection and trust between people usually takes months if not years to form, yet between swing dancers it can happen within 2-3 meetings and intentions behind these conversations and actions (which would usually be questioned in the larger society), are seen as normative and platonic when occurring within this space.

**Structures of Learning**

Almost all West Coast Swing dancers at some point will need to learn from a teacher the basics of the dance. Dancers learn in group classes, workshops, friends, and private lessons, as well as from instructional YouTube, or pro videos. These learning experiences take place in a variety of contexts. Classes and dances take place at weekly and monthly dance events as well as annual conventions held around the US and increasingly around the world. Dancers also learn from videos of dancing posted online\(^{27}\), or DVDs bought from professional dancers. Information also travels in the form of blogs and various websites about West Coast Swing. Social learning also happens in a variety of different contexts. Although the most common avenue to learning the social context and etiquette of West Coast Swing happens on or around the dance floor itself through observation and experience, some teachers also mention etiquette at the end of beginner

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\(^{27}\) The most commonly watched West Coast Swing videos on Youtube.com are of champion level dance competitions. These videos often accumulate view counts in the tens and hundreds of thousands, with the most popular videos earning over a million views.
classes. There are also written lists of social etiquette by pros and social dancers alike floating around the internet as well as dance conventions. In these ways, structured, informal, and incidental learning structures interact in order to inform a dancer's embodied and social knowledge.²⁸

Structured learning “is any type of organized learning experience, with identifiable objectives, that occurs beyond the boundaries of the formal [academic] educational system” (Callahan 2005: 6). West Coast Swing classes provide a non-formal learning experience whose objective is to teach students a particular technical element of the dance which will allow the dancer to physically communicate with a partner and imbue them with a particular body technique (to use Mauss’ (1979) terminology). The most common elements of West Coast Swing taught in classes observed in my field notes concerned execution of the dance: connection and relationship to partner, basic patterns, alteration of the basics and improvisation, musicality and play, and hijacking and embellishment.

Yet classes play a larger role in integrating an individual into the local West Coast Swing scene than to simply teach the physically engaged language of dance. Several dancers advised me (advice I would now perpetuate) to always take the lesson preceding the dance (as long as the lesson will not be above your level) before attending a new dance event. The reason for this is not to learn something new, even a beginner lesson would do, but rather to introduce yourself to that community. During a West Coast Swing lesson participants usually stand with their partner in two lines or a circle around the room, and either the leads or the follows rotate around that circle every three to ten minutes (depending on the lesson and teacher). Upon arriving at a new

²⁸ Jamie Callahan (2005) uses the term ‘formal’ to describe learning within the academic educational system, and ‘non-formal’ to describe learning that goes on in classes outside of the academic educational system. To avoid confusion, I will use the term ‘structured’ where Callahan would use non-formal, to describe the learning that goes on in West Coast Swing class settings that lie outside of the formal academic realm.
partner, it is polite to exchange a greeting, even if it is just a head nod and smile of acknowledgment. Usually, however, there is a more formal quick greeting at every rotation. If partners do not know each other, they introduce themselves, while older friends and acquaintances, greet with a “Hi, How are you” and sometimes a quick comment about their day, week, the weather, how nice it is to be there, etc. These introductions I once heard likened to speed dating in that it's the best way to get to know everyone of the opposite dance role in the room (lead/follow). However, these classes rarely serve to introduce follows to one another, or leads to one another, unless a dancer is switching roles for the class. As I found out after arriving to a familiar Thursday Night dance event without taking the lesson, the lesson acts as an introduction not just to new faces, but also to old ones as well. Even for those who are not new to the dance scene at a particular venue, the lesson is a chance to both find out who is there that week, and solidify your own presence. In the times I attended a usual event, but did not take the lesson, it took much longer for other dancers to realize I was there, and many said as much “Nicole! When did you get here? I didn't see you at the lesson”. Thus, classes play two roles in the West Coast Swing community, to teach the technical language necessary to participate in the dance, and to initiate dancers into the community by providing a platform for visibility.

Callahan describes informal learning as contexts in which: “an individual acquire skills, knowledge, values or understandings through experience in any given environment... More specifically, informal learning emerges from the process of making sense of one's environment... Natural interaction within a social context” (Callahan 2005:6). This is the kind of learning that happens on and around the dance floor. Although sometimes technique is taught through incidental learning, it is most often the less tangible elements of the dance such as bodily deportment and style, as well as etiquette and social norms that are internalized in this way. One
may pick up on social cues through informal learning by watching others as they participate in
the community, dancing, talking, and interacting. One way in which informal learning happens
for many of the dancers I talked to was through watching and internalizing the manner of
movement of other dancers on the floor. From my own dancing experience, I found that I always
moved more like a “West Coast Swing dancer” (gliding, chest lifted, performing confidence)
after watching a good dancer dance in front of me. There was something about watching the
dancing body that engrained the movement in my own body. The immediacy of witnessing the
dance in front of me, allowed me to move in a way that using my memory alone could not. One
way to think about this might be a comparison to reading music. Once the instrumentalist has
memorized the piece, they can play from memory. Before this point they must look at the music
to remember what notes to play. The dancer must intellectually as well as physically memorize
how to move. Until they have mastered this, watching other moving bodies serves as a reminder
of the movement details of the dance style.

Another form of informal learning is instruction from other dancers at the dance event.
Often, more experienced dancers will offer advice to newer dancers, and even friends of the
same level share patterns among one another on the social dance floor when they are not actively
engaged in a dance. This does not necessarily mean that instruction on the dance floor is always
helpful or positive. In fact, according to some teachers it is never appropriate to critique another
dancer; possibly because some dancers take this too far beyond the social etiquette of the social
dance floor. On several occasions as a beginner dancer I received long lectures about technique,
annoyed comments or looks from leads for not following correctly. Although this was certainly
not common, there are always a few who take it upon themselves to judge others. One dancer
names this type of person the “Nissy” (Eastvold 2011) defined as: those who have a high opinion
of their own dancing, and are on the dance floor to make themselves look as good as possible. These dancers tend to become annoyed while dancing with a lower level dancer, rather than playing with their mistakes, gently teaching, or continuing to dance in a pleasant manner.

Callahan's third category is incidental learning: "serendipitous acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, or abilities" (Callahan 2005: 6). Although this kind of learning is not directly relevant to West Coast Swing dancing by definition, it is an important part of why the people I interviewed enjoyed dancing and continued to dance. Dancers learned skills in this social dance community that helped them with other aspects of their lives. Often dancers referred to social skills, interacting with a wide variety of people and strangers, being more confident, and coordinated:

"you build confidence. To go out and do stuff and no worry about people watching, also social skills. It's like having a conversation but without talking so I mean whatever situation you're in...even if you're on a date. I feel like you're trying to perform whatever conversation. You've got to be funny, you've got to be this. So it helps to build your social skills I guess, confidence (Steven 2011)."

One dancer considered learning to dance a part of his growing up process, while another dancer talked to me about the level of maturity it takes to be able to really communicate with a partner, because it takes a level of listening and understanding as well as the ability to negotiate and sometimes give up your own plan to your partner's: It helps your maturity. It's a more mature train of thinking, more mature communication to be adaptable. To be able to complement someone you have to pay more attention versus saying. "You go there. You go there" (Kear 2011b). These are not skills most dancers set out to learn on the dance floor; rather, skills dancing taught them that they were able to apply in a larger context.


Stages of learning

Both Chris Shilling (2008) and Jamie Callahan (2005) present a three-stage model of learning to use the body. Both relate directly to the progressive way dancers connect to, and understand West Coast Swing as they gain experience. In Shilling's model these stages are the imitative, motor competence, and autonomous proficiency stages, while Callahan refers to the joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire stages.

The beginner dancer, learning the basics, is at the imitative or joint enterprise stage. According to Callahan, at this stage the dancer learns mostly in structured class modes. The lesson is most helpful to this dancer because he or she is simply learning the correct movement pieces and how to apply them to the dance. They are unable to recognize more complicated patterns and nuances on the social dance floor in order to learn from them. Shilling defines this stage as the imitative stage, characterized by the beginner that “applies existing competencies to new tasks— even if their actions are usually only ‘jerkey, uncertain and poorly timed to the external environment’ (Schmidt, 1991) – in order to gain a ‘feel’ for the activities, the technologies, and the environments” (Shilling 2008: 51). Formal classes will be most helpful for this dancer in understanding how to place the pieces of the dance in their correct order, and train their bodies to become “competent” at doing so. Many West Coast Swing instructors aim to teach using concepts the student will connect to, and recognize that at some level, every student will find familiar a different approach to the dance (Kear 2011a). The students can then apply movement they already know, for example, the sugar push may be likened to walking forward and backwards, just in a different rhythm.

After a certain amount of experience, the West Coast Swing dancer reaches the motor competence, mutual engagement stage. At this stage the dancer is more familiar with the
movement patterns necessary to execute the dance, and can begin to turn their attention elsewhere both in class and on the social dance floor. The motor competence stage is defined by Shilling as the point at which the dancer “presupposes the basic physical, emotional and cognitive familiarity with a competence, and works towards building effective movement patterns that habitualize routines and allow attention to begin to be focused on the acquisition of higher and more complicated skills” (Shilling 2005:51). In the case of West Coast Swing, what habitualization allows the dancer to now recognize are both technical and social. The dancer is able to pick up more difficult patterns and use what they know with more fluidity, but they are also able to engage more with the community on and around the social dance floor. This stage Callahan recognizes as the mutual engagement stage because the dancers can now turn some of their attention outwards to the other dancers in the room. In doing so they begin to learn the norms of the community, they begin to make friends. Although some of this may occur in a non-formal learning setting, their learning is now primarily informal, in the social setting.

The third and final defined stage of learning is that of autonomous proficiency and shared repertoire. It is at this stage that dancers become mentors to other social dancers on the floor, changing their role in the community hierarchy. These dancers have fully internalized the “secret” language of embodied communication and share a common frame of reference with their fellow West Coast Swing dancers; it is this level of proficiency at which the dancer can really “play” with the dance. Shilling defines this stage as the autonomous proficiency stage, which is characterized by “the ability to acquire process and respond highly efficiently to exteroceptive information … and proprioceptive or kinaesthetic information” (Shilling 2005:52). The high level of efficiency in processing all of the technical information necessary to dance West Coast Swing now allows the dancer to fully focus on musicality and play with the structure
of the dance. The dancer's body now almost seems to be able to dance almost effortlessly, a similar example is provided by Shilling in which, “Musicians have talked of reaching a stage when they no longer struggled to perform a skill, but suddenly found themselves accomplished and at ease in what they were doing in a manner that was akin to becoming 'the instrument through which music flows' (James as quoted in Shilling 2008:20). Dancers in other forms have also recognized this level of proficiency necessary to fully engage in their dance. Beatriz Dujovne writes:

To know what the tango was, I had to overcome this stage of combining steps like words in a sentence... the mechanics of the dance would have to become part of me. But even with that taken care of, there would be a further complexity to master: becoming a mind-reader of sorts, and understanding the intentions of the movements – whether minute or large – that the man constantly proposed to me. I had to become deft at answering clearly and holding up my end of the dialogue, the splendid skill of “talking” through subtle body cues and intuition – of having a conversation without words (Dujovne 2011:79-80).

This level of quick embodied skill and instantaneous coordination between mind and body is made possible through training a bodily habitus that makes these skills second nature. This allows the dancers to engage completely with their partner, and not simply concentrate on the steps. What results is a more fluid communication and connection between partners on the dance floor.

**Conclusion**

Dancers become part of a local and global West Coast Swing community through a process of learning. Attending classes with the same group of dancers, socializing and dancing at dance events, and “playing” according to their localized culture situates the dancer firmly in an (often) tight knit local community with its own style of West Coast Swing. At the same time,
learning the structure of this dance, conversing with other dancers about West Coast Swing happenings around the world, and watching dance events from anywhere on you-tube, all situate the dancer in a global network West Coast Swing dancers.

In classes teaching West Coast Swing as well as many other dance forms I have noticed the teacher can more efficiently communicate to students by physically moving, than by explaining the movement in words. Much of West Coast Swing learning happens by observing other dancers on the dance floor, and physically moving through the steps. Is there something then, about embodied communication, the transmission of information through the medium of the body, that eludes words? Farnell uses the words of Benjamin Worf (1956) to explain that we have the tendency to use a physicalized gesture when we are at a loss for words, that movement can communicate where words spoken language fails us. This of course depends on the relationship between speech and gesture that varies from culture to culture, but as a whole, the idea that movement is used to communicate ideas too complicated for language relates to West Coast in that movement communication has the ability to transmit ideas between partners that would be more difficult to explain.
Chapter 3
The Language of West Coast Swing

"the meaningfulness that dancers find in WCS is associated with communication – the freedom of expression, that increased sensitivity in listening to others, and so on. Dancers believe that communication is a vital element to the practice of dance and, in gaining competence in the dance, they improve their ability to communicate with others on many levels and in many contexts" (Callahan 2005: 19)

A hand extended, a hand taken. The first guitar chords ring out as one dancer is led by another to an open space on the crowded Monday night dance floor. He slips his right arm around her back, palm landing open just center of her shoulder blade. She raises her left arm to sit lightly on his shoulder, connecting their arms. If he offers his left hand low, curved, bent at the knuckles, she fits hers on top, the same shape, palm down to fit his.

They stand face to face, half a foot apart, and begin to move as one unit. From this point on, the steps may be familiar, but their order, how they are done, the number of counts, and how they fit into the music varies from partner to partner, song to song, and day to day. The couple sways side to side, feeling their new partner, taking note of all the little pieces of information that cannot be seen yet will become so important in the next three minutes: Is she a light or heavy follow? Does he have a strong lead or give subtle clues? What's her connection like? How does he relate to the music? Is the tempo fast or slow? Are her movements smooth and calm, or sharp and energetic? Is he silly? Is she serious? It only takes about three seconds to gather this information and the many other answers partners will need to communicate and create a dance together. Then three steps to the side, three steps that lead the follow back into the lead's slightly extended arm, and the effect is like a human slingshot. As she propels forward the dance begins:

swing dancing is an 'intimate conversation' between two people. It is a mini-drama, where the audience gets an inside peek at the interaction between two people playing a fascinating game with music. He tries something – she tries something – each reacting to the others' creativity. They laugh between
themselves. We laugh with them. We are caught up in the interplay. We appreciate this connection between the music and these two people as they play their game. (Skippy Blair quoted by Callahan 2005:3)

During a West Coast Swing dance there are at least two types of communication at work: that between partners that allows the dancers to function as a coherent unit, and that of the dancers to an outside audience. In this chapter, I will focus mostly on the communication between partners. This embodied communication is nonverbal and includes visual as well as kinesthetic communication that forges connections between individuals, and eventually communities.

Theories and Studies of Communication

Communication in West Coast Swing is danced by and through the body. As discussed in Chapter 1, Susan Foster defines dance in general as a “physicalized discourse” (Foster 2011). This definition is particularly appropriate for social lead-follow dances because their very execution depends on a physical dialogue between partners in which the body is the medium of communication. The body, according to anthropologist Brenda Farnell (1995) has a language like any spoken language, and in fact this language is more intuitive to us than spoken language. Anthropologist Adrienne L. Kaeppler (1995) defined dance as a socially and historically constructed communication process:

Communication involves decoding or making sense out of the process or product of cultural forms that manipulate human bodies in time and space according to the cultural conventions and aesthetic systems of a specific group of people at a specific time in specific contexts. An individual decodes the message according to his or her individual background and understanding (Kaeppler 1995: 42).

To move with a partner and create a dance and dialogue that is specifically West Coast Swing, both dancers must embody the specific technique of the dance, its “cultural form”, and “aesthetic
system” that is indeed specific to this dance; but as we will see in a later chapter, specific to time, place, and context. This definition of the body in danced communication sets the framework for what follows in this chapter, as I lay out the principles of communication, the conventions and systems that both inform communication between partners and with a wider audience.

Drid Williams (1995) influenced by the writing of Charles Varela, implores us as scholars to learn to talk from the body. In learning to send and receive messages from and with the body as opposed to simple observation of the body, the anthropologist learns the ways in which other communication theory applies not just to verbal language, but to movement as well. There are several theorists who shed light on the issue of communication in a way that can help us in our understanding of communication in West Coast Swing. Using Larry Gross and Sol Worth’s discussion of “Symbolic Strategies” (1981), we can analyze the concrete aspects of West Coast Swing communication between partners as a conversation in which messages are directly transmitted and received. Gross and Worth (1981) define communication as “a social process, within a context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived, and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred [emphasis in original]” (Worth and Gross 1981: 137). In West Coast Swing embodied communication between dancers forms a social space on the dance floor. The meaning inferred from the symbolic signs the dancers transmit with their bodies form the basis of this communication. Looking at back Erving Goffman's analysis of human interaction (1959) as discussed in Chapter 1 allows us to abstract the notion of verbal signals, from verbal language with specific meaning and intentional usage, to the sensory and visual embodied signs being transmitted between partners (members of a team), or between dancers and audience, that form the basis of communication.

By looking at the past work of dance scholars and anthropologists who study various
forms of nonverbal communication, we can glean an understanding of the body's ability to send and transmit messages. Studying the way the body interprets, understands, and learns dance provides a lens into the way the body facilitates interaction. Scholars John Blacking (1977) and Juliet McMains (2006) provide useful insight to analyze these issues. McMains (2006) looks specifically at Ballroom and Social dancers to discuss the various social discourses that are imprinted on and perpetuated by these dancing bodies. Blacking (1977) presents bodily motion as a medium of expression that creates a “fellow-feeling”, or feeling of commonality, between individuals engaged in nonverbal interaction. Connecting these two ideas to the dancing body of the West Coast Swing dancer illuminates the complexities of communication between dance partners and with an audience outside the partnership.

Finally, looking at ethnographic works of other dance forms, which nonetheless have connections to West Coast Swing, assists in making sense of the West Coast Swing experience. Sherril Dodd's (2011) book on popular social dances explains that values of a society are communicated through popular dance forms (like West Coast Swing), because their practitioners embody their lived everyday experience informed by cultural values. Many connections can also be made between the international tango community described by Beatriz Djuvone (2011) and the growing international West Coast Swing community. Because Tango is also a social lead-follow dance, many of the principles of communication through which the dance is constructed, such as a strong frame, physical connection between partners, and existence of a basic footwork, and lead-follow communication, are similar to West Coast Swing. Although the emotional presence of West Coast Swing and Tango is very different (Tango being a much more serious and intimate dance), there are actually many similarities in the way partners communicate in the dance itself, and what passes back and forth between partners.
Basic Principles of Physical Communication: Connection and Frame

West Coast Swing is a social lead-follow partner dance. For the dance to materialize, two partners, enacting specific roles, must be in constant communication with one another. Conceptually, West Coast Swing exists in two overlapping realms, that of social dance and competitive performative dance. Here I will focus mostly on West Coast Swing as a social dance; however, it is also important to consider how the performance and competition side of West Coast Swing informs the dancing of the typical social dancer. Weekend competition conventions are one of the highlights of the year for a local West Coast Swing community. Some of the main attractions of these events are the Champion dancer's competitions that set a standard of dancing that the rest of the community strives towards. The everyday social dancer also often watches such competitions and performances on YouTube. The best of these competition videos then become a common topic of conversation among dancers at many local social dances I attended during my research.

Communication between partners in a social dance is based on a set of principles and guidelines that control how the partners relate to one another, and allow the dance vocabulary of specific signals to be layered on top. Communication with any language is based on prerequisite abilities and structures. The prerequisite for a verbal language is the ability to speak and hear. Even if one is using sign language, there are underlying principles of movement and vision. The prerequisite for communication in West Coast Swing is a connection between bodies and knowledge of basic lead-follow principles. In social lead-follow dances, the dancers must be connected in some way, usually physically. When West Coast Swing dancers talk about connection, what they are talking about is the physical touch between dancers through which signals are sent. Dancers “share weight” by both leaning slightly into their partner. For example,
in closed position (explained below) the follow leans slightly into the lead's hand on her back, as
the lead leans back against the follow's weight in his hand/arm. This provides the counter balance
called "connection". According to which swing instructor you ask, there should be three to eight
pounds of weight shared between partners. The result is that "A good connection will feel more
like a spring or a rubber band, expanding or contracting when needed" (Cantrell 2010:1). This is
what creates the "swing" element of West Coast Swing, the partners being "swung" back and
forth in this elastic manner.²⁹

The most common positions in West Coast Swing are open position and closed position.
In open position, partners stand facing one another connected by one or two hands. The partner's
hands are the physical connection between partners through which all bodily signals are sent.
One article on West Coast Swing form advises: “The main connection point may be your hands
but the power behind the hands should flow from your center through your arm and elbow to the
hand” (Cantrell 2010:1). In closed position, partners stand in a modified ballroom hold with the
lead's right arm around the follow's back, his right hand on her left shoulder-blade, his left hand
offered low. The follow drapes her left arm over the lead's right, with her hand on top of his
shoulder or slightly farther down his bicep. She places her right arm low on his so their arms
together form a U shape. Although these are the two basic holds, the dance moves in and out of
many positions over the course of a given song, yet in each position the partners share a small bit
of weight which is what allows information to travel between the two of them.

In “Symbolic Strategies”, Worth and Gross (1981) discuss a theory of symbolic
communication. They argue that social code tells us what signs are communicative. The

²⁹ To use another example, some also describe this feeling as being rocked in a cradle (Kear 2011). The exact
quality of the motion is dependent on the partnership as well as the quality of the music.
recognition of these signs is learned through a process of socialization\(^{30}\): “The interpretation of the meaning of a symbolic event... is embodied in our recognition of its structure — that is, in our recognition of its possible communication significance in order to recognize the structure which defines a communication event” (Worth and Gross 1981:134). Extending their discussion to the symbolic language used by West Coast Swing partners implies that the way they understand one another is based on a set of social codes specific to the Swing context, and learned through classes as well as participation in the West Coast Swing dance community\(^{31}\) (Callahan 2010, Kear 2011a). Gross breaks up his theory of communication into three “meaning situations”: existential, ambiguous, and communicational. Existential meaning situations have no symbolic meaning, ambiguous meaning situations are those which could possibly have meaning significance, and communicational meaning situations are those which use direct symbolic code and are known to be symbolic and communicative (Worth and Gross 1981). West Coast Swing uses a combination of communicational and ambiguous meaning situations to create an improvisational dance based on a symbolic structure. This structure forms a bodily knowledge based participation in a very specific dance discourse, social situatedness, and cultural understanding. Below, I will explain in detail how and what each of these meaning situations contributes the West Coast Swing experience.

**Direct Communication and Communicational Meaning Situations**

30 Here I use the term socialization to define knowledge learned through involvement in a community. The signs needed for West Coast Swing communication are both specific to the discourse of the dance form (communicational) as well as the larger cultural context in which the dancers are situated (ambiguous).

31 I use “participation in the community” to refer to a wide variety of activities that bond West Coast Swing dancers into a coherent unit. These dancers are likely to spend time even outside of the dance event watching YouTube videos of West Coast Swing, reading about west coast swing and following the lives of fellow dancers. These activities, in addition to attending dance events and classes, give West Coast Swing dancers a common vocabulary and set of knowledge of West Coast Swing dance world (which nonetheless contains regional differences).
We left the Monday night dance partners on the dance floor, about to start their dance. Three steps to the side, then three shuffles to increase the space between them, and the rubber band effect sends our follow away from her partner and turns her around 180 degrees until lead and follow stand face to face, slightly less than two arms lengths apart, connected at the hand in open position. Just before the down beat the lead begins to lean slightly backwards so both he and the follow take their first step on “one”. They walk rhythmically to the pattern, “one, two, three and four, five and six” (aka step step, triple step, triple step). He starts this on his left foot, she her right. Both alternate feet with each step. His steps move back only slightly as she travels towards him, clasping now both of his hands. As they reach the center on count three, both lean in to one another slightly, a phenomenon known as compression, off of which the follow springs back, continuing her pattern backwards until she reaches the end of the “rope” formed by their arms. The dance continues from this “sugar push” (the basic step of West Coast Swing). He then may lead a left side pass, a tuck turn, an underarm turn, a whip, a tuck across the slot, and a basket whip. Each of these patterns has a prescribed embodied symbol to alert the follow of its emergence, to which there is a standard way for the follow to finish the move. Both partners know the vocabulary, yet in West Coast Swing the grammar is constantly changing. I will explain this element of the communication in a moment. For now, I will focus on the use of the straight vocabulary of West Coast Swing and then move on to how the rules of usage are broken in the next chapter.

Communicational meaning situations are defined by Gross and Worth (1981) as situations that are known to be communicative, and make use of known symbolic codes. If a West Coast Swing follow is pulled forward and she is heading straight towards her lead head on, she knows the move is going to be a “sugar push”. If a lead lifts his left hand to a “stop position” with the
follow's hand mirroring his, she knows to turn to the outside. And if the follow puts two hands on
the lead where usually there is only one, the lead knows she is going to deviate from the normal
pattern. These are all symbolic codes used in West Coast Swing that are part of the set
vocabulary used to intentionally communicate with one's partner.

In a social dance, the primary focus is on social interaction. The primary interaction in
West Coast Swing on the social dance floor is between a lead and a follow. In order to fully
understand what this implies, I will take a moment to explain the lead-follow relationship in West
Coast Swing as it differs from many other popular social dance forms. A lead-follow social dance
does not follow a string of previously set steps. In West Coast Swing, the dance forms as the
couple move through the song. In most lead-follow social dances, the lead is the one to decide
which move comes next, how long it will last, and how it will be done; however, in West Coast
Swing, although the lead still begins the move, the follow has a much greater responsibility for
the dance in that she can herself change a move or finish it in a different way than the lead
intended, "hi-jacking" the move. As a result, West Coast Swing is often referred to as a two sided
conversation, rather than a one sided lecture, giving more agency to the traditionally female role
of the follow (McMains 2006).32

Sol Worth and Gross (1981) argue that communication is marked by a “responsibility for
intentionality” of communicative signs. Sometimes partners intentionally lead a set pattern and
have planned each step from start to finish. However, it is also possible that a dancer would
begin a move as a set pattern, and their partner changes it mid pattern. The new negotiation may
turn this move into something that has not been intentionally set up, but rather relies on the
dancer's intuition and trained bodily knowledge of ways to move in this dance form. At this point
the communication between partners becomes indirect, an ambiguous meaning situation (Worth

32 I will further explain this “play” between partners in the next chapter.
The Use of Embodied Knowledge

According to Gross and Worth (1981), in ambiguous meaning situations symbolic meaning is not paired with a codified response. The appropriate response to an ambiguous signal is not set and defined. In such cases, the dancer must rely on their own interpretation of the situation, song, and the signal itself in order to continue communicating with their partner. These are also the moments when we see the most difference between dancers, as it is when bodies move outside of the prescribed structure of the dance that individuals present themselves in a way that can tell us more about who they are as a person. A dancer can practice and perfect choreography that overrides their cultural habitus (in the context of a particular danced movement); but without a pre-set structure, the dancer's personal movement choices now showcase more directly what cultural norms outside of the Swing world are set in their bodies and have informed their movement understandings of particular emotions, rhythms, dialogues, and relationships.

Eventually the vocabulary of West Coast Swing becomes almost automatic for proficient dancers. In defining this stage I will borrow from Bourdieu (1977) who said that there is a point in learning a physical skill where most of the movement and movement interpretation becomes unconscious. The West Coast Swing dancers and teachers I talked to and observed often call transition to this stage breaking out of “pattern world”. A beginner/intermediate dancer resides mentally in a space called “pattern world” where they must count every step, and every motion is prescribed by a set pattern that they have learned in class or from a peer. The only way to escape “pattern world” is to dance enough to be able to communicate and dance with a partner without
thinking about the specific pattern, being led, or using counts to define the dance. Thus, a dancer not in 'pattern world' will be able to mix and match patterns, create new ones, alter old ones, and most importantly will let the music and their partner's positioning dictate what they do, rather than assigning rigid numbers to the beats of a pattern. John Blacking goes as far as to argue that “the ultimate aim of dancing is to be able to move *without* thinking” (Blacking 1977:23) Steven, a beginner-intermediate dancer described the struggle to break out of 'pattern world' this way: “when you look at good leads they look like they're not thinking. And then you try to do that and it's terrible. So you say, "OK, I gotta think about it". But the goal is to not think too far ahead, just one step ahead. At least that's my goal...Spontaneous” (Steven 2011). Another West Coast Swing dancer, who has been dancing for over twenty years professionally described the mental process of communication this way: “You realize it's not about where is she supposed to be. It's where is she this time?... It's a more mature train of thinking, a more mature communication, to be adaptable. To be able to complement someone you have to pay attention versus saying you go there, you go there“(Kear 2011b). Richard Kear's twenty years of experience shows a different mental process of communication than the dancers with three months of West Coast Swing experience. Whereas Steven is just beginning to realize that communication with one's partner is about a moment to moment communication, Kear's years of dancing experience has given him the ability to recognize that communication between partners happens in the moment. Just as a verbal conversation is based off of what the other participant has said last, West Coast Swing communication depends on the immediacy of the last signal transmitted and received by one's partner. A fully engrained embodied knowledge and understanding of West Coast Swing is necessary for this level of communication.
Thematic Embodied Communication

If embodied knowledge forms the communicative base that allows for the underlying structure of a West Coast Swing dance, there are also several kinds of non-verbal communication at work between West Coast Swing partners that adds to the emotional, theatrical, and stylistic elements of the dance. These are also more likely to be variable and culturally based, as I will explore further in a later chapter. Communication of performative emotions, stories, and themes, as well as sensory clues, are ever present in dances and quite often are one of the most important elements of the dance.

One can best recognize the importance of emotional performance between dance partners while observing the difference in emotive feeling from song to song, or when looking at competition performance pieces. While not all dancers perform emotion in their dances, I observed that it is not uncommon, especially if the song playing is one the dancer particularly likes or has a very strong emotional connection to, or if a routine has been designed to fit a piece of music with a very specific emotion, that the dancers will attempt through their dance to portray that emotion or story line. It should be noted that the emotions the dancers portray depend on an emotional language comprised of culturally specific signs. Usually when observing the West Coast Swing dancers in Northern California, these emotional portrayals were based in western notions of what is anger, sadness, joy, sweetness, longing etc. A sharp movement of the arm might connote anger, a more bouncy feel and a big smile might connote happiness, and a slow lingering touch might indicate love or passion.

Although once in a while the feelings conveyed are genuinely felt off the dance floor and outside the temporal and spatial constraints of a particular song, most are constructions for the dance floor and the emotion of the song. As Richard Kear explains, “I'm dancing now and it
doesn't have to mean anything beyond that we're comfortable there and we find joy in that, ya know, and there's almost like a safe environment to flirt. Like safe flirting so to speak" (Kear 2011b). What is important about what Kear says here is that the dance itself can become a safe place to “make believe” or “play pretend”, and to some degree, this make-believe game has nothing to do with who the two people on the floor are: their age, race, backgrounds, familiarity etc. Both are committed to dancing a song together, and their identities become wound up in the song, its lyrics, and its feeling. Flirtation could be one, but is certainly not the only emotion expressed on the dance floor. A dark song may lead the partners to enact a devastating fight, another song may encourage the dancers to dance portrayals of family, love won and lost, or just having fun on a Friday night (regardless of what night of the week it may be). This becomes a safe space to be whomever the music dictates, or whoever the dancer wants to be for those three minutes, and that identity - unless it goes to extremes- will not follow them off of the dance floor. If any impression does follow them, it is their ability to play with the music, with story and as a fun dancer, almost regardless of the character they chose to portray.33

Touch is a very physical form of communication that has its own set of theories to describe what may go back and forth in the sensory touch between two people. Although I will not go too deeply into the theory and the research surrounding the complications of touch here, I will note what some dancers have to say about the feelings and emotions portrayed through the touch connections of West Coast Swing dancers.

I have heard many dancers assert the view that dances have a different comfort level and

33 The West Coast Swing world like any other open society is venerable to its fair share of people who arrive with less than honest intentions. Although this is uncommon, there are on occasion older men on the dance floor who the younger girls feel do not create a safe space for them to express any identity. As a result, the entirety of the dance floor is not always perceived as a safe space; yet, because this is not the larger experience of a West Coast Swing event, I will not describe these anomalies in my descriptions.
trust when it comes to touch than people who are not conditioned through dance experience to have an platonic intimate working relationship with their own as well as others' bodies. This belief was echoed by Richard Kear in our interview. I argue later that it is through touch, this embodied connection, that dancers learn to trust their fellow dancers on, and eventually even off of the dance floor. There is research to show that moving together bonds people faster than conversation alone (Kear 2011a). This is the reason why many icebreakers have a movement component. When we take this a step further, dancers are not only moving together, but depending on each other for movement. They bond through a process of safe physical contact. This can be a powerful force in binding together a community. This same principle is sometimes capable of breaking across formidable social barriers to forge connection between individuals who would not normally come into contact.

One reason this may be is that emotion and feeling can be sometimes read through physical contact. Someone who is uncomfortable with physical contact may stiffen when hugged by another, an unmistakable yet involuntary physical reaction to their feelings (Stryker 2010). Richard Kear notes that “As a social dancer I can kinda tell how comfortable people are, how much they like me just by touch” (Kear 2011b). From my own experience, I also believe we can often tell emotion through touch, and this belief has been echoed by other dancers. One dance instructor in a class explained that a rough and excessively controlling leader (assuming they are not a beginner and know better) is likely to have little regard for his follow's feelings and comfort in the dance. Also, from my observations and participatory research, the dancer who is

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34 Rachael Stryker (2010) writes about the reaction of children diagnosed with attachment disorder to the loving touch of their parents. Although “attachment disorder” as a diagnosis is controversial, what we can take away from .s writings is that the children do stiffen in their parents embrace, physically demonstrating their discomfort with this show of emotion.

35 Though I have not researched the opinion of those who do not dance on this, I am led to wonder if perhaps a danced engagement with the body informs a particular sensitivity to the meaning behind physical connections.
uncomfortable with their leader will give that lead less of her weight than she would a lead she trusts. This is not, of course, a foolproof method for telling feelings. There are lots of other things to consider like skill level, movement patterns from other dances and cultures, and simple variability in how individuals express emotion; however, this is not to say that emotional touch is not one level of often unconscious communication going on during a West Coast Swing dance. One dancer I interviewed is so certain that true emotions can be read through a West Coast Swing dance that he and another dancer decided to write a book on the subject. However, as they dug deeper into research, they realized that even though West Coast Swing provides a fairly reliable platform for reading emotion in many cases, this phenomenon is so varied, and so complicated (as human emotions are) that it would be exceedingly difficult to wrap up this subject in a clear definition of how to read the emotion communicated through a West Coast Swing dance (Kear 2011b). Communication between partners in West Coast Swing is also more than just physical, it also involves the visual.

**Visual Communication**

The “language” of West Coast Swing uses visual as well as sensory clues. A purely physical lead is one which can be followed and led even if both partners have their eyes closed. One example of this is the starter step described earlier in the chapter. Another example is “ochos”, in which the follow is led to swing around one leg and then the other in semi-circles on the floor forming a figure eight.\(^{36}\) This is led by the feeling of the lead's hand on the follow’s back that rotates her body in a swivel formation. In many of these motions that do not require any visual communication, partners are very close to one another. However, in the vast majority of West Coast Swing movements and signals,\(^{36}\) “Ochos” are also an example of the Latin influence in West Coast Swing.
the visual is used in some way. I will break this up into two segments: First, moves for which the visual is necessary because the pattern depends on the positioning of bodies not in constant physical contact; Second, movements that use a visual cue in conjunction with a physical contact. Although movements in the first category do depend on a physical signal, these moves often require the lead and follow to connect up again after breaking apart momentarily. Because a follow or a lead will not necessarily always land these moves in exactly the same position, it is important for the dancers to be able to see their partner’s body and be paying attention to it even if this means using their peripheral vision. Good leads will:

actually pay attention to the way the woman is moving and time the way they lead her change in direction in reference to the way she’s currently moving. So they understand transition not only in their own bodies, but in the woman’s body. And then the woman also if they understand transition they can control their motion based on the guy's signal...because you’re tracking their movement you can be aware of when it changes so you’re aware of transition and now through tracking movement and transition you’re really channeling each other and maybe some inspiration comes from somewhere (Kear 2011b).

The other way visual communication is used to supplement physical communication in this dance is in direct visual cues to the lead or follow. These visual cues have direct, specific meanings attached to them. For example, a lead might lift the arm not connected to their partner to invite her to walk underneath it.

The importance of these visual cues in West Coast Swing became very apparent to me while doing my fieldwork and learning the dance myself. As a dancer used to the intense physicality of connection between leads and follows in Lindy Hop, where the follow is given strong physical and visual cues, it was difficult for me to pick up the more subtle, smaller visual cues that could not be felt, but had to be seen. For example, there is one visual cue in which the
leader tilts his elbow up a bit for the follow to duck her head underneath. If the follow does not see this visual lead, it feels to her like an entirely different move which does not involve moving the head. If the follow goes with just the physical lead and does not duck her head down and forward, she will run face first into the lead's arm. However, if she does catch the visually communicative sign and responds accordingly, the dance goes on without a hitch. Richard Kear (2011) teaches his students: “when I do a pattern I monitor how we move away from each other, as well as how we rotate away from each other as well as maybe a height change from each other”. The split second decision making in a West Coast Swing dance is informed by a vast array of communicative symbols. A combination of all these communications: communicative direct physical vocabulary, ambiguous indirect cues, emotion information in touch, and visual tracking are all necessary for successful communication between partners.

**Directing and Receiving Visual Attention**

Dancers experience West Coast Swing in a variety of ways. I argue that this shifting experience has to do largely with the gaze, and whose gaze the dancer is most aware of. For example, in most cases on the social dance floor, the dancer is most aware of the gaze of their partner, in which case the West Coast Swing dance is largely about the communication between partners, and partners perform for one another. Callahan quotes one West Coast Swing dancer as saying “It's like there's nothing in the world but my partner, the music, and me” (Callahan 2005: 17).

One dancer, Alice, talked to me about how she deals with the intensity of visual attention necessary in the dance, and the difficulty of becoming comfortable with a prolonged “looking” at one's partner necessary to pick up on physical visual cues: “I'm shy, so I'd look at my partner and
go oh, and look at the ground the whole time. I just look right here now [motioning to chest]. That's all I do is find a place chest level.” (Alice 2011). This tendency, to focus the gaze shoulder or chest level, I heard echoed by follows several times in my fieldwork; usually by follows whose eye-level corresponded to one of these points. I observed at classes and social dances that new dancers (both men and women) often have a tendency to look at the ground while dancing, often watching their feet as they move in foreign patterns, or because they have not yet built up the confidence to look their partner in the eye. In fact, a common correction to hear at beginner classes is “don't look at your feet”.

Each dancer finds a different way to deal with visual attention in their dancing, juggling the importance of watching their partner intently, with societal norms telling the dancers it is impolite and uncomfortable to stare at their partner for the duration of the dance. Dancers find many ways to do this, and instructors teach different methods. Some instructors teach dancers to “track their partner’s shoulders” (Kear 2011). In doing so, they avoid constant eye contact with their partner yet still are able to pay attention to their partners bodily movement with their partner's face in peripheral view. Another instructor I took classes from simply advocated for purposefully looking away from one's partner at strategic and planned moments, in order to use direction of the eyes as an element of styling in the dance. This instructor teaches that it is a stylistic faux pas to stare constantly at one's partner because it does not portray the complexity of emotion the partners may be trying to act out in that particular song, and is “just plain creepy”.

Of the many explanations I have heard for the correct visual focus in West Coast Swing, its role in practice was perhaps put best by Robert and Ricola Royston teaching a workshop at

37 Also mentioned in “Mark's Top 15 West Coast Swing No-No’s List “, Van Schuyver (2012)
When asked by a student in their workshop how to use their eyes, they told the participants to think of the dance as a conversation. In a normal verbal communication you are in general looking the other person in the eye, yet every once in a while might look away for any number of reasons. One might look away for a moment to gather their thoughts and then look back at their conversation partner, or one may not be looking at the person they are talking to and then turn towards them as they talk to give more attention to the conversation. A conversationalist may also avert their eyes briefly at a distraction, brush something off their pants, think, take a breath, roll their eyes, laugh, sneeze etc. Their point was that West Coast Swing is a conversation, but a nonverbal one, and the convention for visual attention in the dance should follow the conversational conventions of the broader culture. In this conversation, the eyes play the same role they would in a verbal conversation: to pay attention.

Partners do in practice look at one another for most of the dance. Eye contact is important because it acts as yet another window into their partner’s thinking, and according to the Roystons, may signal a change in what is going to happen next. However, this does not mean that direct eye contact should be held for the whole three minutes of the song. By alluding to a “natural flow” of attention, the Roystons also unknowingly bring in cultural norms. How dancers use their eyes in West Coast Swing is based off of the western conversational habits, gender distinctions, norms, and manners. However, one thing to consider is how visual attention and direction of the eyes might act differently for someone of a non-western culture, where this pattern of attention with occasional eye contact is not the unquestioned norm.

38 “Freedom Swing” is a dance convention and competition held for the first time in January 2012 in Philadelphia. Such conventions have been occurring all over the world for over two decades and usually reoccur annually.

39 Over the course of my research I had just a few opportunities to dance with partners from oversees (mostly from European countries), and did not notice a major difference in the pattern of visual attention on these occasions. In an interview with Richard Kear he mentioned that some of the Asian women who came to his Swing events were shy and did not look him directly in the eye very often, however I also observed many Asian women whose eye-
The meaning and awareness of the gaze changes from dancer to dancer, and from partnership to partnership. For Alice, the direct gaze and the return of a direct gaze are uncomfortable and embarrassing. For others, the visual attention is a tool of success on the dance floor and a comforting assurance of oneness with one's partner. Whatever the effect may be, the meaning of the partner's gaze may depend on the skill level of the dancers involved as well as outside social factors. One young man I interviewed told me that he likes to practice without a follow because “without a follow there's no pressure” (Steven 2011). He is also more comfortable dancing with follows below his skill level than those at or above his skill level. These sentiments were not just held by beginner/intermediate dancers; however, even one advanced leader admitted that there was an extra pressure to dancing with advanced follows than enjoying a dance with a lower level follow that does not know to judge mistakes. Although some of this judgment comes from the body's experience of the dance, it also carries over in its expression on the face of one's partner. It is also interesting that both of the above dancers I interviewed were men, the less experienced of the two also often talked about societal pressures to perform and impress women both on and off of the dance floor (Steven 2011). Their comments about partner relationships within the dance itself reflect a larger societal expectation of the gender relationships. Many dancers, both men and women, have expressed having similar situations to these in which they can feel that their partner is not happy dancing with them by analyzing their partner's facial expressions and gauging the level of judgment, joy, interest, or boredom on their partner's face and in their body language.

I myself experienced a rapid shift in awareness of gaze while on the dance floor of a Dance Convention in Philadelphia. Before this point, I had been an advocate of the argument that contact with their partner followed typical West Coast Swing patterning. Knowing the specific backgrounds of these women, as well as some of my other dance partners who did not follow the general eye contact norms in their dance, would give a clearer answer to the question I pose above.
although there are several different gazes at work on a West Coast Swing dancer, the one that was strongest was that of the partner. However, one incident made me wonder who is it West Coast Swing dancers dance for? Who do dancers communicate with both consciously and unconsciously? On a Sunday afternoon after a long weekend of dancing, I was asked for the seventh or eighth time to dance by the same older man, who was not a very good lead and difficult to dance with. Although I was enjoying the song, I grudgingly admit I wished initially for it to end sooner rather than later. Situated in the back corner of the dance floor, I saw out of the corner of my eye a door crack open. Looking through the half open door was a man I had seen walk quickly through the ballroom just a few times over the weekend. A hotel chef, in uniform, peering out from behind the door watching us dance. All of a sudden, I was dancing for someone other than myself and my partner. This new gaze seemed to give me purpose. I had overheard this man talking with other hotel staff earlier in the weekend about how overloaded they were with how much these dancers were eating. As we had been dancing the nights away having a grand time, he had been working and was now taking a few minutes to become part of what was going on by watching us. Could I share with him the joy in the room? Could I bring him into our experience? Could I communicate? Could I transmit the best of this dance through my own movements and connection to my partner? Could I at the very least entertain, at best invigorate excite and inspire? Could I share my own joy through dance? Although I was still aware of my partner's observation and our communication, I was also aware of the chef's gaze and therefore also concerned with the outward external performance my partner and I put on for

40 According to West Coast Swing etiquette, a dancer should ask a stranger to dance no more than twice in an evening, and should wait a considerate amount of time before asking for a second dance (at least roughly half an hour). The only exceptions to this rule are if 1.) The dancers are already good friends, 2.) The first dance lasted less than a minute before the song ended, or 3.) It is exceedingly clear that both partners thought the dance was an extraordinary experience worthy of repeat several more times in an evening, or 4) the event is not large enough to fill an evening of dancing without repeating partners several times.
him as a team.

A third way in which West Coast Swing may be experienced is in competition and performance for a larger audience, in a specific performance setting. In these spaces, like the social dance floor with a specific outside observer, the dancers may still be concerned with the gaze of their partner; but in this case specifically, the partners are working as a team under the watchful gaze of the audience. What makes this situation even more complicated is the awareness of judgment. The presence of judges sets up a power structure that for the most part is not present on the dance floor, in which the dancers feel pressure to perform well in front of their audience.⁴¹

One young female competitor mentioned in her interview with me her discomfort in performing and competing that has taken her years to begin to overcome. She is not nervous when dancing on the social dance floor or dancing in a large group, but in performing or competing in a setting where just she, or she and her partner are the prime focus, she becomes nervous to the point of shaking. It is the prospect of that level of judgment by both a set of judges and a large audience that transforms the primary gaze, and therefore experience of the dance for this dancer (Alice 2011).

Formation of Social Connections

The relationship between West Coast Swing partners can be described by Goffman's theory of teams, which he refers to as, “any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine” (Goffman 1959:79). Partners are looking at and receiving visual attention with their partner as individuals, but they are also presenting a coherent performance to those who may be

⁴¹ An exception to this is when a dancer feels self-conscious about their level of dance in relation to higher level dancers on the floor, or when onlookers gather to watch a particularly good couple on the social dance floor.
watching from outside of the partnership, and in this way they are performing as a team:

"Among teammates, the privilege of familiarity...need not be something of an organic kind, slowly developing with the passage of time spend together, but rather a formal relationship that is automatically extended and received as soon as the individuals take a place on the team" (Goffman 1959:83). This is one of the reasons bonding happens so quickly, and so strongly at West Coast Swing events, where individuals form new pairs every 2-4 minutes. In doing so, they have the "teammate experience" with a number of dancers in one night. The feeling that one intimately knows everyone in the room thus generates quickly as these teammate relationships act as further introduction into various circles of friendship. In the social realm then, the communication between teammates is one of the primary facilitators of group bonding and sense of belonging.

According to Richard Kear, even in West Coast Swing's competitive structure, it is the social form of the dance that is being judged. In the ideal West Coast couple, judges:

see this interaction. They see this play. They see this organic-ness. They see this warmth. They see this conversation happening, and it's moving to you. It's entertaining, and there's a humanity behind it...It's communication skills. It's the way people can improvise and the way they can adapt. And their savyness is what appeals to me and when you talk to people who are really deep into that frame of mind it even reflects in the way they carry themselves and the way they talk and who they talk about and the way they gossip and their friends (Kear 2011b).

The many ways that people interact on the dance floor ultimately not only forms a dance but forms a network of people built upon embodied communication and understanding of one another through a nonverbal language. Yet this visual and physical language builds relationships that continue into the verbal realm: socialization off the dance floor at West Coast Swing events, classes, posting of videos and online commentary, and the keeping of blogs, among many other forms of communication. This movement oriented language is one reason the West Coast Swing
community is able to include such an array of people from around the United States and recently from around the world. All who learn this embodied language are able to connect on a platform of the dance.

Partially because West Coast Swing communication is not verbal, it allows people to communicate who may not speak the same verbal language. At “Boogie by the Bay”, I competed in a West Coast competition and my randomly chosen partner was a man from France who spoke very little English. I do not speak or understand French; yet, in the dance we were able to communicate because we did share a common language, a nonverbal one. Many other swing dancers have similar memories of connections and communications between themselves and individuals they would normally never have the chance to interact with. Dancers said repeatedly that one of the reasons they dance is the sense of connection with their partner, and through these dances the larger community. Julia Ericksen (2011) calls this sensation “instant intimacy”.

Beatriz Dujovne, writing about the tango, echoes the sentiments of many swing dancers in saying “I can only define as 'transcendent' the moment when the dance becomes a connection of two strangers in a feeling of oneness” (Dujovne 2011:16). This sentiment was echoed (in their own manner) by several other West Coast Swing dancers I talked to in the course of my research (Steven 2011, Kear 2011). An embodied understanding of fellow dancers, along with the freedom to “play” allows West Coast Swing dancers to transcend many common barriers to connection because of social difference.
Chapter 4

Learning to Play

The notion of “play” is essential to the understanding of West Coast Swing’s social structure for several reasons. First, because it allows West Coast Swing events to be a site of interaction across traditional sociological categories of difference such as age, race, and nationality; and second, because play allows individuals to express their own cultural framework within the context of the dance, facilitating a dance that can be reclaimed by various groups as their own. Play and improvisation within the structure of dance are the key elements which allow for the trajectory of Swing dance across time, place, and culture. Several theorists write on the role of play in various contexts. In describing play here, I will not define play as the playing of a role; but rather, the strategic, improvisational manipulation of structures. Goffman defines play as “the process of move-taking through which a given play is initiated and eventually completed” (Goffman 1961: 35). Here I will use this theory of play, as well as that presented by Drewal in her book Yoruba Ritual, to describe the ways in which play informs West Coast Swing as a dance, effects the ways dancers relate to one another on the dance floor, and contributes to the overall trajectory of West Coast Swing around the country and around the world.

Yoruba Roots

The concept of play that is so prevalent in West Coast Swing can be traced back through Swing history, to roots in African dance forms. According to Drewal, for the Yoruba people of Africa, play is a vital part of everyday life. Play is central to their culture, and informs both how they perceive the world, and how they interact with others. Their definition of play is not a frivolous definition, but rather “play in the Yoruba sense is an interactive exploration of the inner
heads (ori inu) of the players, a creative engaging, ongoing strategy for testing the stuff opponents are made of” (Drewal 1992:19). Play is the intellectual manipulation of people, situations, music, dance, ritual, and other aspects of life (Drewal 1992). In Yoruba culture, everyone must be able to play, and those who do not are considered inferior and deserving of whatever tricks are thrown their way.

The matching of wits present in Yoruban culture is reflected in Yoruban dance forms. In dance, play manifests in the form of improvisation, or the playing with musicality, rhythms, and movement. Almost all Yoruba rituals involve improvisation, or “play” in which the dancers are expected to come up with sequences of dance steps spontaneously. Dancers also often take this idea of improvisation and turn it into competition. In the Yoruba culture competition in play occurs frequently between dancers, and even sometimes between dancers and musicians (Drewal 1992).

Characteristics of Yoruba dance and culture are especially prevalent in several dance forms that grew out of the African American community. Both Hip Hop and Swing share Yoruba values of play and competition as main parts of their structure. Just as play allows Yoruba dancers to comment on their own world in an unbounded form, play allows people from many different backgrounds to pick up these forms and improvise, adding in their own experiences. By doing this, individuals make the dance their own by adding in their own life experiences, and work within the framework of the original dance (Cox 2009).

Susan Foster (2002) and Cheryl Dodds (2011) discuss improvisation in both popular dance forms and choreography. According to these scholars, to improvise, to “play”, one must have prior knowledge of a structure to play with. Improvisation can be taken as a type of play in that while improvising the dancer uses prior knowledge of a dance to spontaneously come up
with something new, “play” with the forms in the moment. Improvisation is not defined by a lack of structure, but a manipulation of structure. Foster (2002) even goes as far as to suggest that it takes more skill to be able to play, to manipulate structure in the instance, than to choreograph, in which one is allowed more time with which to work with the structure. The play of West Coast Swing as a social dance is indeed an instantaneous improvisational experience in which the dancer uses a structure to create a dance, an aesthetic, a story, an emotion. Yet within this structure there are almost infinite possibilities. The ability of a dancer to insert their own culturally informed movement understanding into this structure is what has allowed Swing dance as a form to spread to many parts of the country and around the world. Through play, dancers are able to insert their own individualized selves and worldviews into the dance while remaining in communication with others: “play forms an active communication between two or more players in any kind of ‘move’ within the play needs to be understood by another ‘player’ who is cognizant of the rules in order to further the play” (Dodds 2011: 106). This sense of agency allows communities to make the dance their own, while still being in conversation with the wider West Coast Swing dancers from other communities.

Place of Play in West Cost Swing

West Coast Swing is “not about the steps, it's about the bodily expression of the music” (Callahan 2005: 17). Another dancer states, “I find that West Coast Swing dancing is not about exactness or perfection. It's about improvisation and it's about context. It's about exploration, freedom, creativity (Kear 2011b). The play between music and movement is an essential part of this dance. For one dancer I interviewed, the newness or “novelty” of each dance is the most important feature of the dance. After dancing for 21 years and counting he told me, “I still do it
because there is constant novelty for me” (Kear 2011a). The spontaneous nature of improvisation is what creates this novelty for dancers time and time again. No matter how long they have been dancing, there is no limit to the number of patterns and alterations one can create with their partner through play. Juliet McMains writes: “Not being able to predict exactly the next moves of the musicians or of one’s partner makes each decision that brings all three into harmony deliciously rewarding. The best salsa and swing dancers not only are skilled at responding to a human partner, but know equally well how to partner the music” (McMains 2006:97). There is a set structure that the dancers follow in order to communicate with each other, yet the music is of primary importance once a dancer has reached a level of competency at which they can background the technicalities and foreground musical interpretation and communication between partners. Richard Kear taught repeatedly in his classes that what creates this novelty, is the “skillful breaking of expectations”, a sentiment I have heard other instructors echo in various forms over the course of my research.

West Coast Swing allows the dancers to act out the music through gestural motions where appropriate, to the extent that I’ve seen a lead go down to bended knee when the song playing is about a proposal. Even in competition, judges score highly those dancers who can: “spontaneously 'create a picture' of these randomly selected songs through their mutual movement of initiation and response” (Callahan 2005: 8). This harkens back to the African notions of creating an illustration of the music through dance. The most common form of West Coast Swing competition is called a Jack and Jill, in which each dancer is placed with random partners, and with that partner must dance to 1-3 random songs. Judges score based on timing, teamwork, and technique (Alice 2011, Kear 2011a), and how the dancers combine these elements to interpret the song in a creative way (Kear 2011).
Learning to Play

I often observed West Coast Swing teachers advising their students that the first rule of improvisation in West Coast Swing is to “Never say no, always say yes”. They often qualified the statement by adding that it is by no means a universal statement, but one that applies to (socially acceptable and safe) play between partners on the dance floor. Dancers first must learn the basics of the dance before they can step into learning to play. Play and improvisational techniques were never taught in any of the beginner classes I observed or participated in, these themes were always reserved for the intermediate or advanced classes. One reason for this may be that beginner dancers are not yet skilled enough to be able to play and still successfully communicate with their partner: “initially you want something to refer to. That's why we learn the basics. We learn that structure. As the organizing principal we learn the box. And the stronger we have that box, the more novel it is when someone breaks out of it skillfully” (Kear 2011a).

The importance of play in West Coast Swing is evident in the amount of time that is dedicated to the teaching of how to be creative, musical, and improvise with one’s partner. Of the over forty classes I observed during my research, about a third focused some time on exercises meant to help the student become comfortable with play. Specific skills taught included breaking out of the set patterns, to fit the music, pausing, increasing/decreasing speed, hijacks/embellishments, and general communication with a partner outside of a set pattern.

One common element of West Coast Swing dance taught in classes that I did not mention earlier is hijacks/embellishments for the follows. When I was first learning West Coast Swing in the summer of 2011 in the Bay Area, “Hijacks” were actively taught to follows as alterations of lead signals. The general idea was that lead begins the move, and the follow finishes it in any
manner they deem appropriate (after first being able to demonstrate they know the basics)
providing a “skillful breaking of the rules” (Kear 2011a). Follow “stylings” on the other hand did
not change the course of the move, and were also taught as improvisational options. Hijacks were
taught as part of what made West Coast Swing desirable and different from other dances in the
way they level the playing field for leads and follows.

However, when I attended workshops at Freedom Swing in February 2012 in Philadelphia
and the MadJam convention in March 2012 in Washington DC, Hijacks were taught in
workshops to be fundamentally bad etiquette. The professional dancer, many from the west coast,
taught that the follow does what the follow is told by the lead and should not hijack. My shock
at the quick reversal of stance on this fundamental part of West Coast Swing lasted until the last
workshop taught at MadJam, instructors and professional dancers Patty Vo and Barry Jones
clarified my confusion. Although I cannot say if the difference is part of the rapidly changing
course of West Coast Swing, a regional difference, or weekly social dances versus convention
workshops, the way the word “hijack” was being used changed. The same concept was now
being called an embellishment. A hijack was now defined as when the lead initiates a move in
one direction and the follow completely ignores the lead, for example the lead initiates a move
right and the follow goes left of her own volition. Instead, the old concept of hijack as a part of
the conversation between lead and follow had been turned into the term embellishment. An
“embellishment” still allows the follows the freedom to transform and alter moves according to
musicality that a hijack once did, except for the clearer definition that the follow is adding onto a
lead, embellishing it, rather than Hijacking, or completely overtaking the movement. The new
definition gives both lead and follow a role, instead of giving all power over to the follow. At the
same time, the new use of the word has an increased connotation of follow as decoration than
does the word hijack, a decrease in follow's power in the partner relationship.

**Culturally Informed Play**

There are many forms of Swing dance: Lindy Hop, Blues, West Coast Swing, Shag, Night Club Two Step, Country Two Step, Hand Dance, the Imperial, Dallas Push, and Houston Whip, just to name a few. Yet even within these categories there are various styles. West Coast Swing itself exists as several different dance forms across the country. One may ask: why are there so many forms of the “same dance”, especially when some are unrecognizable as similar to the dance they came from? From my research, I have come to believe that this comes mostly from the fact that Swing dancers, through play, have the option of adding their own flair to the dance, while still being able to dance with most partners.

There are several conflicting theories regarding the history of West Coast Swing. Perhaps this is a feature of its simultaneously lateral and vertical trajectory in spread and development. We established in Chapter 2 that West Coast Swing has roots in Lindy Hop. Somewhere between the 1940s and today, West Coast Swing in different areas in the country became slightly different dances, yet with enough similarities to be recognized as Swing, if not West Coast itself. Out of the African American community of Washington DC came Hand Dance, a “funky” version of West Coast Swing that allows for even more attention and focus on musicality. This dance is also danced in a box rather than a slot (although West Coast Swing also allows for the occasional 90 degree angle). In the Midwest, West Coast Swing is known as the Imperial and is danced both circularly and linearly. In Texas there are two different forms, the Dallas Push, and the Houston Whip, often put together as push whip. The only difference between the Texas versions of Swing and West Coast Swing is a double resistance in which the follow “joggles” at the end of her
anchor (Kear 2011b), stretching out to the end of connection, then coming back in towards the lead slightly, before settling back into tension.

Beyond these recognized and named differences in form, there are also regional differences in style. According to Richard Kear, an experienced dancer can tell where their partner is from and what their dance background is within the first few bars of a song by the way they follow/lead, move, play, and approach the dance. How a dancer receives these differences may depend on their skill level, confidence, or simply personality. While an experienced dancer may be settled enough in the embodied language to make the necessary alterations to dance with a partner of a slightly different style, a beginner may find differences in style frustrating if they are not skilled enough communicate smoothly in this new manner. I also ran across a few dancers who believed their style of West Coast Swing to be the only true style; however, this attitude was rare. Although dancers sometimes expressed personal preferences in the style of a dance partner, in general dancers embraced differences in style as one of the unique qualities of West Coast Swing.

Differences in style often correspond to region. In Southern California where Lindy Hop is popular, physical lead/follow connection is also stronger, as West Coast Swing dancers from southern California tend to share more weight between partners. Swing dancers from Northern California use the lightest connection between partners, which causes their dance to be more internal and more nuanced than the dancers who use a strong connection to dance with larger body movements (Kear 2011b). Also, dancers from Texas will tend to spin more than dancers from the rest of the country because of the influence of other Texas dances such as Country Two-Step which involve lots of turns in rapid succession. These dancers will even interpret the same lead in a different way than would a California dancer, both are correct, yet are slightly different
in language. The unexpected part is that both result in West Coast Swing.

These variations are a result of dancers' playing with West Coast Swing in their own way. When you have enough dancers styling in the same way because of an outside cultural influence on body techniques and all convene to dance in one area for a concentrated time period, what results is a different style (or even a different dance form by name) that still falls under the West Coast Swing umbrella. Sometimes there are enough differences between these dance forms that it becomes something completely different, yet often dancers from different styles can still communicate and dance together with some somatic negotiation of the bodily understandings they have in common. West Coast Swing itself has two sides. Some argue that the dance of twenty years ago is different enough from the West Coast Swing of today that it should be a dance form of its own, called by a different name. The Swing of the 1980s and 1990s was more structured, more rhythmical, than today's free flowing smoother variation with even more room for play than the original. The boundaries here are fuzzy, but this is not an unusual trait among swing dances. This fuzziness is caused by play, and allows people to make this dance their own, which in turn makes it more palpable to a larger group of people and facilitates its spread.

Global Spread

In the 1930s and 1940s Swing spread in popularity all over the world, and especially in Europe. In Germany, groups of young swing dancers who called themselves “Swing Kids” created a counter culture to Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. Swing Kids were largely 14-18 year old upper and middle class youth. Their interest in African American music, and openness to any fellow swing dancers regardless of religion or ethnicity was not looked upon kindly by the Nazi regime, but they allowed the music and dance form until 1942. Eventually,
the Swing Kids used their dance community to actively protest against Nazism. They are famous for greeting each other with the phrase “Swing Heil” to mock the Nazi “Sieg Heil.” In the early 1940s after a festival of over 500 Swing Kids caused alarm in the Nazi regime, causing Hitler to order Swing leaders be put in concentration camps. The 1993 movie Swing Kids is a fairly accurate depiction of history, and illustrates how important this movement was for these German youth who used swing dance as their protest outlet (Cox 2009).

Although West Coast Swing is not being used in this way today, the Swing Kids example illustrates the historical ability for Swing dances to become popular beyond US soil, and the tendency for dancers to take the form of Swing, imbue it with their own meaning, and claim it as their own. Following in the footsteps of Lindy Hop, play in West Coast Swing today allows dancers to claim the dance, and in this ownership create a community that is at once local and global in scale.

Lindy Hop initially spread to Europe mainly through US sailors abroad (Savage 2007). The global spread of West Coast Swing dancing today is in large part due to the prevalence of the internet in our everyday lives. West Coast Swing first began to spread abroad though popular YouTube videos of professional dancers as well as instructors across the country, who post video re-caps of their classes. Dancers in Europe, Asia and South America (just to name a few), have learned this dance in the past ten years mostly though these online videos. This form of learning dance through video is so prevalent that Arjay Centeno and Jennifer Deluca dedicated an entire workshop at Boogie by the Bay 2011 to teaching the manner in which dancers overseas began learning West Coast Swing from videos.

It is only in the past few years that professional dancers and teachers from the US began traveling abroad to teach these dances. According to the World Swing Dance Council's Member
registry events page, in 2003 only 1 of 42 registered weekend West Coast Swing competition conventions occurred outside the United States (Canada). In 2011, the organization registered a total of 90 events, 14 of which were hosted outside the United States (in Hungary, Australia, England, Canada, Russia, and France). One factor to consider is that these numbers only include events officially sponsored by the U.S. based World Swing Dance Council. There are even more West Coast Swing conventions are held all over the world every year, that do not apply for membership in this organization.

**Playing with Social and Cultural Norms**

The importance of play in analyzing the social structure of West Coast Swing is that it explains the ability for West Coast Swing to simultaneously create and maintain global and local communities, and the dancer's ability to belong to both: “Improvisation served repeatedly as a site where difference could be acknowledged and accepted. Implemented in diverse artistic contexts, improvisation broke through standardized social regiments by... assisting in the instantiation of an alternative, more egalitarian model of social relations” (Foster, 2002: 64). This is particularly clear in the ways dancers maintain membership to their local West Coast Swing community, with its specific cultural leanings, while being part of a larger global community of dancers connected by an embodied knowledge of the dance. But play also works to break out of local cultural norms within the space of the West Coast Swing event. One example of this negotiation is in the handling of gender norms on the dance floor.

The role of lead and follow in West Coast Swing is deeply entrenched in a western conception gender roles. It is true here that “Every dance says something about the history of the people who created it, but every dance is also a reinvention” (Grau 1998:200). The relationship
between lead and follow in the execution of the dance in many ways reflects gender norms in American society historically and their slow transformation in today's social debate. These norms place the male lead in a position of power as the decision maker, and the female follow in a 'weaker' role as the compliant receiver of direction: “The male leader initiates movement and the female follower reacts, mirroring and recreating the active-passive binary traditionally associated with male and female behaviors” (McMains 2006:30). West Coast Swing complicates these binaries as I will explain below, but this does not mean that they are not present in altered form. There is still role of leader and follower in the dance, and though there is some switching of gender roles on the social dance floor, the question of gender norms within West Coast Swing is transforming at a rate comparable to the rest of society. Despite some effort to change this policy, in competition rules the World Swing Dance Council defines the lead as a male role, and follows as female. Although dancers may be allowed to compete in the opposite gender role, dancers told me that any points they may earn will not be counted towards eligibility for a higher level.

Expectations of adherence to gender roles reflect the larger social shift in gender roles in the U.S. in recent years, as it (slowly) becomes increasingly acceptable for men and women to cross the line between traditionally male or female roles. There are several West Coast Swing events held across the country that recognize non-normative gender pairings in West Coast Swing partnerships; however, these events are still not recognized by the World Swing Dance Council. From my observations at West Coast Swing dances and events I would agree with one dancer who states that the issue of same-sex dance partners, or switching of gender roles in the dance, is an issue that encompasses the experience of most dancers regardless of their sexual orientation (Harvey). Most dancers at some point choose to learn the opposite gender role

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42 Philadelphia's Liberty Dance Challenge is one such event hosted specifically for same-sex couples. This event, held for a wide array of Ballroom and social dances, includes West Coast Swing as a part of its country dances Division.
(although usually they first learn their assigned gender role), and often you will see experienced follows leading, and experienced leads following. I would argue that as experienced dancers they are further entrenched in West Coast Swing norms in which both men and women lead, and both men and women follow. For these dancers the gender regulations of the larger society that encompasses the dance become inferior to the culture of the West Coast Swing in the dance space.

Conclusion

West Coast Swing, according to Patty Vo, is a conversation, an invitational, in which partners invite one another to play. In this chapter I have referred to the process of improvisation in West Coast Swing as play. The meaning inscribed by dancers in a West Coast Swing dance reflects the experiences and culture of the individual dancers, yet allows them to stay in conversation with one another. An older gentleman with a background in smooth ballroom can dance with a teenage Hip Hop dancer. Each can insert their own identities into the dance: the ballroom dancer can still move in a smooth, upright, floaty style and the teenager can add in sharp Hip Hop flairs. As long as both play within the structure of West Coast Swing, they will be able to create a dance together. It is this play that allows the dancers to make the dance their own, and allows the dance to travel around the world and stay up to date with the current culture of its dancers. It is also the combination of play and embodied connections that creates a space with a culture and community of its own, in which inclusion is based upon an individual’s desire to dance.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Embodied Connections, Real and Imagined

It's about 11:00pm on a Monday night in December 2011 and I'm dancing with an older Asian man near the edge of the dance floor, close to the chair he sits in between dances. Here at Dance Boulevard, he and his friends meet each week to catch each other up on their lives and families, talk about the news, watch what's happening on the dance floor, and every few dances getting up to find a partner and dance.

“I wasn't going to come tonight,” he says.

“No?” I ask.

“No.” he replies. “My foot was hurting, and I was tired from dancing last night, but then Bill called me. [nods] Yeah, and he told me you were in town. [nods] He saw you. So I took a nap with my foot up, and then I came here. I came to dance with you.”

“Aww, I'm so happy I got the chance to see you!” I replied.

“Yes, you see my foot doesn't hurt now...” We finished the dance and as the song faded out he asked, “When are you coming back?”

“I don't know this time,” I responded, “but I'll be back eventually.”

“Ok, well you have my email right? Yes, you do. Do you remember? It's really easy. Let me know when you come back. Send me an e-mail. Keep in touch. I don't want to miss you.”

What transpires in the setting of a West Coast Swing dance that motivates a man over 80 years old to forget his ailments and leave the house to dance two songs with a friend he has only known for a few months, has seen on about 15 occasions, is of a different generation, gender, and ethnicity, and who comes from completely different life experiences? Swing dance has a history of transgressing social boundaries, from Lindy Hop crossing socioeconomic and racial
boundaries in the 1940s to West Coast Swing crossing boundaries of age, race, class, nationality, and language today. West Coast Swing brings people together into a unique space that is both informed by outside social and cultural factors, and exists outside of them. To say that this space is a culture, a community, a network, or simply a group, ignores the complexities and extent of the connections between Swing dancers both locally and around the world; yet, many dancers refer to what they are a part of as a “dance culture”43 and as a community.

So far, I have discussed embodied elements of West Coast Swing, and the various ways in which the body is used to create connection and interaction between dancers. These connections form a heterogeneous network of individuals with one thing in common: an understanding of the same embodied language. The body plays such an important role in facilitating relationships between dancers in the sensory world of dance because:

(the living body) is first and foremost the center of a tactile-kinesthetic world that, unlike the visual world, rubs up directly against things outside it and reverberated directly with their sense. The tactile-kinesthetic body is a body that is always in touch, always resounding with an intimate and immediate knowledge of the world about it (Sheets-Johnstone 1990:16)

Through this embodied language, dancers connect quickly and on an intimate level, and a great trust is built. Now, in conclusion, I will explore the role of the body in the question posed above. Does West Coast Swing have its own culture? Its own community? What is it, specifically, that embodied connections in West Coast Swing allow individuals to belong to, and how is this informed by cultures and communities outside the dance space?

Swinging Across Time, Swinging Across Borders

West Coast Swing is the product of a very specific cultural context. The precursor to West

43 According to one Swing dancer “It’s not just a kind of dance, it’s a whole culture” (cite)
Coast Swing, Lindy Hop, served as an international symbol of American culture. Swing dancing and Swing music was a major cultural export in the 1940s, and especially during World War II. At Boogie by the Bay, a convention that included both Lindy Hop and West Coast Swing, both forms were presented as truly American dance forms; Lindy Hop being the ancestral root of West Coast Swing. Skippy Blair also describes West Coast Swing as a truly “All-American” dance (Blair 2011). With this label comes a whole host of social and cultural discourses, deportments, and guidelines that inform this dance world. Jane Desmond writes, “Not only is 'the body' an object of knowledge and of discourse, it is also a lived entity whose practices and perceptions are culturally shaped and shaping. Therefore, a close examination of dance practices can reveal the dialogic process of enactment and constitution of social subjectivities” (Desmond 1997:15).

Though various specific cultural values are imprinted on the habitus of any given West Coast Swing dancer, so is a common embodied knowledge of a movement language. A key feature of West Coast Swing is that it allows both identities to live visibly, experientially, and sensorially in the same body.

While West Coast Swing does reflect the values of the wider community, it also allows for a space in which social norms can be suspended, and a method to do so. Juliet McMains argues that “The sheer joy of dancing often drives people to ignore the multiple social structures and histories in which a dance practice is embedded, and the politics and cultural models it nourishes and repeats” (McMains 2006:9). This is true of West Coast Swing, as dancers forget differences in age, race, culture, religion, political and sexual orientation, and other factors that often act as social barriers for the 'fun' of a dance. This pull can be strong enough to break through barriers that seem to be insurmountable. In the face of racial separation of the 1930's,

44 “West Coast Swing is an American dance which is done to American music. It originated in California and is danced in competition nationally and internationally” (SENATE BILL (S.B). NO. 2460).
Swing brought people together: “For the first time in history, the status quo in America was challenged. At last there was a beautiful ballroom with no segregation. Black people and white people danced on the same floor, they sat and ate across from one another in the booths; everyone's money was the same at Savoy” (Miller and Jensen 1996:28). This legacy continues at West Coast Swing dances today. The 1988 bill to make West Coast Swing the Official State Dance of California states “devotees of this art come from every conceivable ethnic, religious, racial, and economic background. Age is no factor, nor is gender. Among the ranks of swing dancers, one can find judges, school teachers, lawyers, waitresses, salesman, doctors, students, and so on” (SENATE BILL (S.B). NO. 2460 RAD, 6 March 2003).

It is the element of embodied play in the dance that allows for this breaking down of boundaries created by larger social norms. Although these dancers may not share much in the way of common culture outside the West Coast Swing space, within it they build an embodied understanding of the “other” which often leads into a connection to other Swing dancers outside the bounds of the dance floor. The embodied language serves here as the tool that allows the dancer to play with others, building an understanding that is based on the common structure they both know, not focusing on the social differences between people.

The Imagined Community of West Coast Swing

West Coast Swing dancers feel a strong connection to one another; to the dancers in their local area as well as to those they have never met. Because the dancers do not interact on a daily basis, belong to the same cultural group, share the same day to day experiences, or have even seen everyone who belongs to this group; to qualify this group of very different people as a coherent community erases the very set of differences and complications that make this group of
people so unique. Instead, I would like to suggest that Swing dancers form an “imagined community” as defined by Benedict Anderson (1991). Although Anderson applies this term to the formation of nations, the reasoning behind this term very much applies to the conditions of West Coast Swing dancers as well. Anderson states that the community is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1991:6).

In order to explain how and why West Coast Swing dancers consider themselves members of a unique community, I will focus here on the role of danced embodied connections in forming these bonds. Edward T. Hall wrote in 1979 that, “the future depends on man’s transcending the limits of individual cultures. To do so, however, he must first recognize and accept the multiple hidden dimensions of the nonverbal side of life” (Hall 1976:2). Dancers cross many traditional barriers of difference to become a part of this imagined community through a process of learning an embodied language specific to West Coast Swing. This imagined community has an aesthetic, a language, a set of practices- one might argue a culture; yet not culture in the same sense as a culture that is lived and experienced constantly in daily life: one that is specific to the dance space and informed by the outside culture as well as practices specific to West Coast Swing. Judith Lynne Hanna defines culture in this sense as “the values, beliefs, attitudes, and learned behavior the group shares” (Hanna 1979:319). Dancers become a part of this culture through “enculturation” (Biswas and Bhattacharjee 2010), through a process

45 Sherril Dodds (2011) also borrow the term “imagined community” from Benedict Arnold in order to define the relationship between individuals involved in various popular dance forms.

46 “culture is obtained through the process called enculturation, that is, the process of social interaction through which people learn and acquire their culture. Human Beings acquire their culture both consciously through formal learning and unconsciously through informal interaction. Culture consists of the shared practices and understanding within a society” (Biswas and Bhattacharjee 2010:41).
of communication, social interaction, and learning (in this case of an embodied knowledge).
Specifically, “culture develops as people relate to each other and build common understandings
and traditions” (Fraleigh 1998:143). A set of common embodied understandings span the West
Coast Swing community and allow people from a vast range of backgrounds and cultures to
relate to one another in the dance. These danced communications then pave the way for
understandings of others as familiar outside the dance event.

At the center of these relationships is the body. The body dancing, the body moving,
communicating through the body, understanding through the body. For Swing dancers for whom
this embodied language is fully engrained: “You feel free to do what you want and you can’t get
lost, because you can always come in, you can dance with abandon but still you are encased
within the beat. That is the heart of dancing” (Berry as quoted in Malone 1998:231). Almost
every week at a Swing event there is an out-of-towner whom the local dancers welcome with
open arms. Dancers know that wherever they go, if there is a West Coast Swing dance, they have
a very real community to turn to.
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