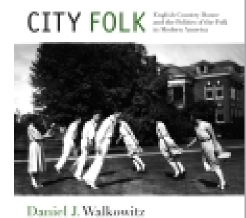
8 Modern English Country Danceand the Culture of Liberalism



Published by

Walkowitz, Daniel J.
City Folk: English Country Dance and the Politics of the Folk in Modern America.
NYU Press, 2010.
Project MUSE. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/11141.

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[148.135.83.86] Project MUSE (2024-12-18 04:23 GMT)

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Modern English Country Dance and the Culture of Liberalism

> [There is an] alarming trend in the Dance Community; that is, the trend of everyone getting old. By "old," I mean, the fact that we regard anyone with more than two body piercings with suspicion; commercials featuring oat bran and medicinal sports crèmes suddenly fascinate us.
>
> —Alice La Pierre, Bay Area dancer, 1998

> [In their] sartorial choices . . . nerds . . . deny themselves an aura of normality . . . [and become] "hyperwhite" . . . [in their] rebellion against "cool white kids" and their use of black culture.
>
> —Benjamin Nugent, "Who's a Nerd, Anyway?"

Modern English Country Dance (MECD) blossomed after 1990 and transported its participants. In interviews, dancers repeatedly testified—and the religious meaning of the word resonated in their remarks—to how ECD took them to another social and emotional space. Thom Yarnal, a New York dancer who had moved to Wisconsin to manage a regional theater, well articulated this view. He loved ECD for its "otherworldly" quality. "It doesn't have anything to do with the 20th century, as far as I'm concerned. It takes you to a different place and it takes you mentally and physically."[1] Similarly, Glenn Fulbright, a retired professor of music from Kentucky, waxed over the music as the "most transporting experience I have." He characterized his typical feeling after doing a dance as "like I've been to church."[2] Invoking its access to a sacred place, such attitudes suggest how the music associated with highbrow culture—tunes by Corelli, Purcell, and other classical and Baroque composers—functioned as a signifier of this particular class fraction's "distinctiveness" and its status.[3]

The dance and music transported participants to what they repeatedly referred to as a "safe" social space as well. The heyday of the counterculture

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was past, but the CDSS community still served for many dancers as an alternative social space, a respite from a "speed-and-greed" dominant culture in which they thrived as affluent professional, technical and cultural workers, yet whose values they found alienating. Yarnal pointed out that people on the ECD dance floor could express themselves in ways that would be ridiculed elsewhere: "The kind of gestures that we do in dancing, you just don't do on the street." The dance might be "modern," but he appreciated that people were "not answering cell phones and running around." As Gene Murrow explained it, doing "English country dancing to beautiful acoustic music in a beautiful setting with people we feel comfortable with" made the ECD dance community "a haven" from "the hurly-burly of the 21st century American speed-and-greed culture."[4]

In their sense of the dance world as a safe haven, these overwhelmingly urbane and urban/suburban dancers repeated again and again the antimodern theme that could have been expressed thirty years earlier by countercultural back-to-the-land communitarians. According to Murrow, ECD was a refuge "from what many of us would agree is an increasingly depersonalized, stressful, high-speed world."[5] Sharon Green, a sixty-year-old leader of the Country Dance * New York community, saw the haven as a return to the "innocence and simplicity of childhood." And for Mary Alison (pseudonym), a forty-nine-year-old southern-based writer, "This is a refuge from the rest of the world. . . . People here are among their tribe, and out in the real world, you often are not. You're trying to find your way among a lot of people with different values, and people that don't necessarily share your interests and share your common history. . . . [Here] they're entering into a community that's accepting of them and that basically wants them here."[6]

Of course, "community" is a historically contingent experience, and by the 1990s its meaning had left behind some of the communitarian values of its countercultural expression in important ways. The musician and folklorist John Bealle describes this new sense of "community" in his insightful ethnography of the changing Cincinnati country dance scene from the late 1960s to the 1990s. In the beginning, the dance community was rooted in the counterculture. Dance was integral to the alternative cultural and political project of that age, and musicians and dancers organized local events organically. There was little planning; local dancers arrived and everyone pitched in to help set up; teaching and music was played at an open mike; someone passed the hat for rent. The groups' boundaries were informal, fraternal, and flexible—in a word, communitarian. By the '80s, Bealle, who was a participant-observer, bemoans how private family lives made dance a recreational rather

than oppositional space. The Cincinnati dance became bureaucratized; fees were collected, a committee organized responsibilities and scheduled bands, including those from out of town. Dancers still felt a part of a community, but Bealle suggests that the loss of the communitarian democratic ethos created an individualized, contained, and commodified sense of community that befit the "me generation" in neoliberal America.[7] To be sure, Cincinnati's experience may have been more like that of the newer dance communities to organize then rather than the older centers in places such as New York and Boston. And even with the shift that Bealle describes, dance communities could sustain the considerable panoply of social associations seen in the Princeton dance community at the time. Still, Bealle's analysis accounts for a new supralocal geographic locus to community and new commercial (and impersonal) bonds of association: thus, by the 1990s, one could experience community by listening to a CD, join an exotic international and national dance vacation, or dance at fancy dress balls scattered about the land.

But as important as were the changed meanings of "community," its invocation also celebrated a bonding and coherence that often blurred the exclusionary social boundaries of the group. For community was as much about excluding as belonging. Murrow and other interviewees agreed with what survey data confirmed: they were elite or middle-class professionals with a sense of themselves as outsiders in a fast-paced urban world. Their average household income was about eighty thousand dollars, twice the U.S. average. They were a relative elite, however, neither upper crust nor independently wealthy. Fewer than one in ten (8.9 percent), as Murrow observed, were managers, and most of these were white-collar managers rather than corporate executives; rather, most were a peculiar social cut below. Part bohemian, part bourgeois—they resembled the "bobos" caricatured by the journalist-social critic David Brooks.[8] With one foot—perhaps only a large toe—back in the counterculture, they were those, as dancer and anthropologist Jennifer Beer observes, "who've dropped out of the achievement races and just want to hang out and dance and make music."[9]

The future of this haven, however, also gave the community pause, as many also worried about the ability of the community to re-create itself. The profile of the Princeton dance community in the preceding chapter illustrated the social network that enriched and sustained its members, but the ease of the dance especially attracted older people with spare time and money, and many people worried about the aging of the community. The second folk revival and the contra boom had brought young people such as Brad Foster and Jim Morrison into CDSS in the 1970s; yet one had only to look around the dance

White ethnics dancing a "hey" to music by Bare Necessities at the 2007 CD*NY Yuletide Cotillion. The women in their center are both Jewish. (Photo courtesy of Efraim Kohn)

floor two decades later to see that the process had not been replicated. Photographs of people at dance events confirmed ethnographic and survey data: the core of the Modern ECD community consisted of middle-aged postwar baby boomers entering their "golden" years. The extracurricular folk dance program at Swarthmore College, and that at other colleges such as Oberlin, perhaps because of their strong music conservatories, continued to bring college youth into ECD, but these programs were the college exception, not the rule. By the end of the century, the Anglo dominance of school cultural forms waned with the changing school demography. The nostalgia for Englishness held less appeal to African American and Hispanic students and the rainbow of ethnics in urban schools and college classes who were more likely to embrace Latin and ballroom dance than ECD.[10]

One source of younger newcomers—some twenty- and thirty-somethings—was the popularity of the television and film dramatizations of Jane Austen novels in which English Country Dance featured. Austen's independent women protagonists had long been a favorite of college women, and dramatizations created a boomlet that soon became a "revival." Films of *Per-*

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suasion (1995), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), and *Emma* (1996)—each with country dance scenes—appeared in rapid succession. But it was the award-winning 1996 coproduction by the British Broadcasting Company and the Arts and Entertainment channel (United States) of *Pride and Prejudice* that most captivated viewers. The impact of the Austen revival had perhaps its most dramatic impact in New York, after a CD*NY member and freelance reporter, Linda Wolfe, published a prominent article on the front page of the Weekend Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times* highlighting where readers could go in New York to dance like Gwyneth Paltrow in *Emma.* The next weekly ECD dance found Duane Hall packed with several hundred newcomers, who found themselves at home amid a group that shared their social profile; all were well-educated professionals (and white). Not all returned another week, but a couple dozen found a new leisure-time hobby and became active members of CD*NY. Unfortunately, Austen-revival newcomers to ECD during the modern era did little to lower the age of the dance community. Two-thirds of the dancers surveyed remained age fifty or over, and only 20 of 171 were under forty.[11]

Dancers may have found the community "withering," but equally of concern to many members was what Shakespeare found "staling" Cleopatra: the lack of "infinite variety." To be sure, modern Americans typically segment themselves into associations of like-minded peers, and against this insular tendency, it is notable that the community *had* broadened its ethnic base. Those who found themselves at home in this Anglo-American tradition, however, conformed to those groups that historians have noted "became white." For the changing history of the ECD community is yet another lesson in the history of whiteness in the twentieth-century United States. Recall that until midcentury the ECD community had never been especially welcoming to such ethnics, even if only in the subtle demeanor and attitudes of its members. But since the Sixties, second- and third-generation ethnic folks such as Gene Murrow, Pat Ruggiero, Sharon Weiner Green (and myself) had become integral members of the community.[12] A cursory review of 2008 CDSS membership lists or enrollees at Pinewoods discloses the prevalence of ethnic Italian and Jewish names in the dance community, members who seemingly have little ancestral connection to England. Survey data from early in the new millennium confirmed this impression: only 36.9 percent of respondents claimed British ancestry; Jews, who were largely absent half a century earlier, now made up 27.5 percent of the group.[13]

This diversity did not mask, at least to some dancers, the class and racial homogeneity of the community: members were still overwhelmingly profes-

Weekend

The New York Times

C1

FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 1997

Howard Stern in 'Private Parts' (Film Review, C3)

In Step With Austen: English Country Dancing

By LINDA WOLFE

FOR many filmgoers and television watchers, the stately dancing in the recent spate of Jane Austen dramatizations stirred a touch of culture envy: a longing for a presumably lost Eden of elegance, for forms of social intercourse less brash and brazen than our own. But for several thousand Americans across the country, such dancing is not something that has vanished, but an activity in which they engage regularly. The dances performed in the Austen adaptations and, indeed, hundreds of similar dances, some dating to a century before the time of that great limner of English country life, are known as English country dances.

In Manhattan, you can learn them and dance them — they are every bit as much fun as they appear to be on film — any Tuesday night at the Metropolitan-Duane United Methodist Church on West 13th Street. And tonight, under the tutelage of an expert in early-19th-century dancing, there will be a special learn-as-you-dance event at the church devoted exclusively to the dances of Austen's period. Accompanied by live music, Beverly Francis will teach experienced hoofers and the two-left-footed alike to dance A Trip to Tunbridge, named after a spa Austen mentioned in several of her novels; Prince William of Glo'ster's Waltz, named for a nephew of George III with whom a sister of Austen once supped, and dozens of others known to Austen, who herself excelled at the form.

I've been an English country dancer for years. I take part in other kinds of dancing, including swing and Latin, but I've never found a form as lifting to the spirit, let alone the feet, as English country. Partly it's because of the exquisite music. Think Purcell: he wrote many of the tunes that later English

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Where to go English country dancing, C32.
Austen on video, B15.

Gwyneth Paltrow and Jeremy Northam in "Emma," above, and English country dancers following their lead at the Metropolitan-Duane United Methodist Church in the West Village.

"In Step with Austen: English Country Dance." Gwyneth Paltrow as Emma Woodhouse and Jeremy Northam as Mr. Knightly dance in *Emma* before an insert of June Fine and the author dancing at CD*NY's weekly Tuesday-night dance in New York, February 1997. (From the *New York Times*, March 7, 1997, C1; used with permission)

sional and technical workers—and white. Aside from a few African Americans and people of East Asian descent, everyone at dances was white.[14] Of course, the meaning of whiteness had changed over the course of the century, as northern and eastern European ethnics had, as Mathew Jacobson has demonstrated, become white in postwar American culture and immigration policy.[15]

In addition, although the class background of dancers had broadened somewhat since Cecil Sharp's visit, it had not changed profoundly. The ethnic and more middle-class base of the community did make the dance commu-

nity a somewhat more democratic and less elite space. Indeed, CDSS affiliates generally ended graded classes in early 1990s, albeit as much to hold new members as from some democratic impulse. But if the class composition had become a tad less elite, it remained preeminently bourgeois and urbane, from affluent suburbs and urban areas. In the survey, most "folk" were professional-technical workers or in the arts—the majority (56.3 percent) were (and are today) professors, teachers, librarians, social workers, nurses, and doctors, but there was also a fair representation (14.3 percent) of crafts, theatrical and musical people. In a reflection of the changing character of work in the late twentieth century, a substantial number (10.1 percent) worked in the computer world. Not surprisingly, this professional-technical group was older, well established and highly educated. As noted earlier, the average dancer reported a comfortable household income nearly twice the national average, virtually all were college educated (88.3 percent), and more than half (60.2 percent) had graduate degrees.[16]

The class fraction represented in the dance community was also a cultural slice defined by age in important ways: for if youth was to be served, it was not by ECD. As noted, the ease of the dance partially explained the attraction of older people to ECD. But the ECD community also embraced a "distinctive" culture with class signifiers that stood in opposition to central elements of a more lusty cross-class and intraethnic alternative youth culture. Part of the answer as to why this may have been so lies in the emergence of a transcontinental Modern English Country Dance and the liberal body carriage that its music and style promulgated.

Transcontinental MECD

In the last decade of the twentieth century, MECD became a robust transcontinental and transatlantic leisure activity of postwar baby boomers. Although the typical English Country Dancer was aging, CDSS could nonetheless take pleasure in their increasing numbers. CDSS membership rose to nearly three thousand early in the new century. Approximately three hundred of the memberships were held by dance groups, but nearly six hundred more groups listed themselves in the annual CDSS directory. The list included sword and morris teams, contra groups, and the occasional swing, Cajun, or folk song group, although a few of these groups also did English Country Dance. Formal membership in CDSS represented only a small fraction, however—perhaps a quarter—of the numbers who did English or one of its fraternal forms of country dance. MECD during this era became a con-

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tinental movement, both in its geographic stretch and in its development of a mobile transcontinental and transatlantic community with shared passions and a shared emergent new dance practice. As discussed earlier, MECD was as much a new spirit, tempo, and style of dancing as it was a corpus of newly written dances that advanced that spirit.[17]

Pat Shaw died in 1978, and his approximately one hundred new dances were but the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The warm reception that many of his dances received encouraged more than a dozen others on both sides of the Atlantic (including Belgium as well as the United Kingdom) to compose, by dance historian and musician-caller Allison Thompson's count in 2006, over nineteen hundred new dances since the mid-1970s. Thompson uncovered at least twelve people who had composed more than fifty each, of whom Americans best knew Fried de Metz Herman and Gary Roodman in the United States and Colin Hume, Pat Shaw, and Charles Bolton in England.[18]

The playfulness, challenge, and innovation in Pat Shaw's new dances excited dancers. New MECD choreographers often similarly invented new steps and patterns that drew on patterns in the historical tradition but often, as Thompson notes, included "quirky or novelty" formations and music that could as likely be by Scott Joplin as by Handel. Moreover, the new compositions, appealing to the late twentieth century's diminished attention span, avoided choreography in which some couples were occasionally passive (which had been welcome interludes for flirting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), in favor of creating complex dance "puzzles" that kept all dancers moving at once. These were modern dances for a modern temperament.[19]

But, significantly, the emergent modern style was often applied as well to older dances previously done at a much faster tempo and, accordingly, with the forward-leaning "running step." Variations in any dance existed from community to community, of course, and local teachers, having learned their new folklore lessons, would justify the differences to queries from outlanders as "our village's variation." But the new MECD style persisted across the variants and across the nation, as the community no longer consisted of isolated villages.

The new modern form spread as MECD took root across North America. Many U.S. dance groups continued to congregate in the urban metropoles of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco, but they had numerous suburban branches. By 2005, for example, the New York area had lively ECD groups in Manhattan, Westchester, Princeton/Lambertville, North Jersey, Round Hill (Connecticut), and New Haven, as well as newer groups on Staten Island and Long Island. But groups could be found in virtually every state in the Union and several Canadian provinces, and some,

in places such as Little Rock, Durham, Chicago, Portland, and Amherst, had leaders who also often taught at summer dance camps and served on various CDSS committees. A tabulation of some seventy local dances in 2007 (contacts at another twenty-three did not respond to the call for information) showed that some groups struggled to sustain a weekly or bimonthly dance and often had to rely on recorded music, but groups averaged twenty to thirty people at a dance, and large groups had live music.[20] In truth, a dancer could visit almost any metropolitan area and find a country dance on one of several nights of the week.

Live music was one of the features that attracted newcomers to MECD, and the popular bands in the modern era reflected as much as created a modern tempo and sound. Of course, live music was not entirely new. Kimber had played for Sharp in 1899, and Sharp himself played the piano or hired musicians when he taught. But, as in the earlier era in particular, many groups had neither the local musical talent nor the money to support live music and relied on recordings. Sharp had early recognized this situation and had taken care to oversee early recordings. In midcentury, Phil Merrill, as CDSS musical director, had worked to nurture country dance musicians. But the new generation of musicians that came into the dance community starting in the 1960s, most notably Marshall Barron and Eric Leber, quickened the appreciation for live music. By the 1970s, Gene Murrow, Jacqueline Schwab, Chuck Ward, and Peter Barnes, among many others, had made live music the new standard at events. Barnes's publication of a compilation of ECD dance tunes facilitated the new standard, soon becoming the required manual for musicians across the land.

Some groups and, in the era of the "personal listening device," many individuals, continued to rely on recordings, however. Like the recordings Sharp had produced, cassettes and, later, CDs gave a transportable uniformity to dance tempi and orchestration, both for group and individual listeners. Whereas Sharp's recordings initially had to rely on bands organized by the record companies, in the last third of the century several bands organized to perform professionally at dance events for fees. The most influential of the bands was Bare Necessities (BN), a renowned quartet consisting of Jacqueline Schwab (piano), Peter Barnes (flute and whistles), Earl Gaddis (violin), and Mary Lea (viola) that formed in 1978 (see fig. 8.3). Taking its name from a Pat Shaw dance, the band was one of several to copy the MECD repertoire onto CDs. Princeton's Hold the Mustard and the Assembly Players, a British group, were two notable others. But BN, by dint of its output (by 2008, the band had recorded music for 177 English Country Dances on twelve CDs), its popularity at regional events,

Bare Necessities. Left to right: Peter Barnes, Jacqueline Schwab, Mary Lea, and Earl Gaddis. (Photo courtesy of Peter Barnes and Bare Necessities)

and its success at reflecting the MECD spirit, had enormous influence. CDSS distributed the CDs through its online store and catalogue.[21]

BN, as noted earlier, recorded dances at what had become the new MECD standard of 104 beats per minute, 25 percent slower than Sharp had recorded them eighty years earlier. The recordings also became music as much for listening to as for dancing, with playful switching of chords and lead instruments. BN's prodigious output, distribution, and popularity had the effect of authorizing a modern repertoire that alongside the Playford dances gave equal place to recent compositions disproportionately in triple time with tunes characterized more by elegance than by liveliness.[22] The band's tempi and the lyrical melodic register in which it recorded, however, had the tendency to transform both the older and newer compositions into MECD. BN's power to standardize all dances to their tempi was not lost on the prominent English caller and choreographer Colin Hume, and he asked that BN not record one of his dances. He was convinced the group would play it too fast or change his chords, and its version would "become the de facto standard."[23] In truth, cultural change and transmission is more complicated and dialec-

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tical, and BN reflected the tempi and melodic style that dancers loved as much as it shaped them. But Hume's concern spoke to the increasing musical hegemony evidenced in BN's many recordings and widespread appeal. In the year 2004 alone, in addition to BN's performing up and down the East Coast and at dance camps, Peter Barnes remembered that the band played for local and regional dance events or for dance tour groups in Sweden, Austria, Italy, Hungary, Peru, Hawaii, England (for two weeks), California, and Wisconsin (on three successive weekends).[24]

The transcontinental and transatlantic circulation of dance paraphernalia—recordings, bands, callers, and book compilations of new choreographers' dances—and, as important, of dancers, helped standardize MECD. Dance paraphernalia—costumes and the collectibles—reflected the growing commodification of country dance as a saleable leisure-time activity that one could literally wear on one's sleeve. And a round of dress-up balls provided the occasion to do so. The local New York group had held a festive ball as early as 1917, and Sharp had held summer and Christmas dance camps as early as 1911. But with more disposable income and time, the professional, semiprofessional, and technical people who populated each local dance community began to run annual Playford balls and sponsor dance weekends in the 1970s and 1980s, not unlike those held by the Princeton Country Dancers. By the 1990s, dance enthusiasts could attend a Playford ball or a special dance weekend event in one city or another on virtually any weekend of the fall, winter, or spring. The summer afforded dancers even more extended opportunities for dance vacations. They could, for instance, attend a Family Week at CDSS's Ogontz Camp in New Hampshire, an English Week at Pinewoods, and an American Week at Mendocino, California. If they were not sated, dancers could also enroll for a dancing tour in England or for a week in St. Croix or Hawaii. There they would mix beach, barbeque, and country dance. After a day at the beach or shopping in town, they would gather with friends for an evening of country dance to a group such as Bare Necessities, which toured to play for these events.[25]

The perambulations of dancers were central to the geographic reach of this national community. Dance "gypsies" traveled from one dance event to another. For instance, there were few opportunities to dance in Glenn Fulbright's Kentucky community, but as a retired Kentucky music professor, he had time and the means to travel, especially as he could often stay with friends from around the country. In an interview, he spoke of travel that many others undoubtedly did in smaller doses:

> I prefer to call myself a trapsichorean traveler, but dance gypsy is sort of the equivalent. In Western Kentucky, where I'm now living, there are no local dance groups. So if I want to dance, I do have to travel. And becoming acquainted with the various centers of dancing through meeting people at Pinewoods camp has given me access to a much wider range of city contacts, so that I've been able to go from Portland, Oregon to Vermont and all the places in between. And down to the Christmas Dance School in Berea, and also to the John C. Campbell School, where the dance tradition is well-preserved.[26]

Dance gypsies reinforced the spread of the MECD repertoire and style, but so too did dancers and callers who moved and resettled from one dance group to another. Typically, late-twentieth-century Americans moved every few years, following new jobs or personal relationships, and this was especially true of professional and technical workers. Dancers, most of whom held stable professional jobs, may have been an exception, but they did their share of moving, and the migratory patterns of the American Country Dancer enhanced the dance community's transcontinental character. Brad Foster and Carl Wittman migrated from the West Coast eastward; others, such as Jody McGeen, Lise Dykeman, and Sharon Green, all of whom apprenticed as ECD teachers in New York, moved westward and became callers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Bruce Hamilton traveled from his Bay Area home to run teacher workshops on the East Coast; Gene Murrow reversed the pattern to lead weekends on the West Coast. Both men had careers in the computer industry. And as Pat Shaw had come to the United States in 1974, so Fried Herman, a teacher by profession, made four trips to England starting in the 1990s to teach her Modern ECD dances and encourage a style that she, ironically, found lacking in the tradition's home country.

By the end of the twentieth century, then, a transnational community of dancers had gained increased coherence as part of a commodified leisure-time dance industry. The dance form they expressed in their music and dance merged elements of the antimodern with modern sensibilities: the fetish for the new and dances that often resembled challenging mathematical puzzles. MECD—both its music and its dance—also encouraged certain bodily expressions that dancers thought appropriate to the form. For these bourgeois, urbane, antimodern dancers, the sounds and body carriages contrasted with urban sounds and bodies and exposed a racial and classist underbelly in the culture of liberalism that bedeviled many in the community.

Imaginings and the MECD Dancing Body

The commodification of MECD changed the experience of the dancer and the dancing body. A revival of ballroom dance and afternoon "tea dances" at hotels in the 1990s nurtured an increased love for the waltzes and triple—time dances that became one hallmark of MECD. Dancers also migrated into CDSS from Scandinavian dance, a coupled dance form that included a good deal of waltzing and that had a revival in the 1980s as an "international" dance done by people of diverse backgrounds.[27] By the 1990s, many country dance evenings often ended with one or another dances from these traditions: CD*NY traditionally ended both its middance break and evening with waltzes; contra dance bands around the country often played a Swedish hambo during the break; and Beginners' Night at Cecil Sharp House in London ended with a polka.[28]

It was the Austen revival in film and video, however, that many dancers cited as having excited their imaginings of the dance the most. In interviews, two respondents reflected how the 1996 BBC/A&E version of *Pride and Prejudice* served as a popular reference point for newcomers and how such productions shaped the way some dancers imagined themselves dancing English Country Dance. Bob Archer, a British caller visiting Pinewoods, found the Austen films "very useful because [he] can say it's the dancing that was done in the Jane Austen films. An awful lot of people saw the *Pride and Prejudice* films and enjoyed it thoroughly and in fact, there was a lot of interest in the dancing after that."[29] But equally telling was how Pat Ruggiero, a fifty-three-year-old book indexer from Palmyra, Virginia, modeled her dancing on media representations: "The little that I've picked up from novels of the period, from TV mini-series, like the George Washington mini-series or the Jane Austen movies, or from workshops, the sense that I get from that is something that I've tried to use to affect the way I move through space."[30]

The imaginings gleaned from the Jane Austen dramatizations were but one of twin roots of the ECD tradition on which dancers drew, however. Austen's novels depicted gentry dances set in the manor houses of early-eighteenth-century England, and this representation stood alongside older imaginings of a "peasant" past inherited from Cecil Sharp and the legacy of traditional folklore studies. These two foundational roots of the English Country Dance—in the medieval village circle dances and the gentry dances of the eighteenth century (with their own roots in Renaissance dance)—allowed modern dancers to develop different stories about the folk they emulated and express those stories in their dancing body.[31]

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Thom Yarnal, for instance, expressed the attraction of each "history" well. Asked who he thought he was emulating when he danced, Yarnal opined, "I think more of the country bumpkin than I do of the aristocrats just because that's the kind of egalitarian spirit I like to think I embody. But I know that it was mostly an activity for the rich, and I know that I'm a very privileged person in my current society, so maybe I'm just kidding myself to say this is a country activity. But I think of the country manor house and the people in the kitchen; not the people in the front parlor." As a person interested in community theater, Yarnal wanted the dance to express the folk "downstairs"; when pressed, however, he reluctantly identified ECD as an "upstairs" style "more like the aristocrats, definitely more like the aristocrats."[32]

At least one other dancer did not think Yarnal "kidded himself" by seeing his connection to the agrarian past. Mary Alison, drawing on the medieval strain in the tradition, picks up some of the themes that had animated Gene Murrow in the 1960s. She puts garlands in her hair and imagines herself as "a middle class girl being a peasant maiden." Alison sees dancers "connecting with an agrarian past that probably doesn't exist anymore." The dances "speak" to her as she sees fellow dancers "becoming plowmen and shepherds, shepherdesses, threshers."[33]

But in practice, the traditional rants, reels, and hornpipes that were fast disappearing from U.S. English dance programs gave "peasant" imaginings little traction; it was the Austen imaginings that more matched the flow, tempi, and style of MECD. Thus, Ruggiero agreed with Yarnal's recognition that it was the aristocrats and not the country bumpkins that the "privileged" class of dancers today reflected. And Ruggiero's view, which coincided with popular media representations of the dance as a gentry and aristocratic activity that shaped her sense of the ECD, came closest to expressing the MECD dancing body.[34]

In Ruggiero's thinking about how she moved through space—how she embodied the dance tradition—she invoked a traditional older understanding of the folk as a rural peasantry. Such "folk" did country, line, and circle dances, "simple" dances that, presumably expressing the "natural" life of these people, did not have to be taught. However, she distinguished these from the dances "we do" that were and are taught by dancing masters—these "were done by, in the eighteenth century, by the middle class, and in the seventeenth century, just by the gentry and aristocracy." And it was these latter folks who shaped how Ruggiero "moved through space": her "sense of their having a social reticence in their interactions, an erect carriage, a dignified carriage, an economy of motion."[35]

In Ruggiero's interview with me, she candidly detailed the constrained sexual narrative in ECD dancing that made it a safe place for her in an imagined earlier time:

> I start with a dignified demeanor, arms quiet at the side, economy of motion, move through the space without any flailing of arms, without any embellishment to the figures, without any unnecessary gestures. Oh, and in body motion, I try to eliminate from my own motion, dancing or not, a lot of 20th century ways of conducting ourselves that I no longer care for. Either [the] smarmy sort of gliding across the floor, or jiggles or thrusts, or little coy affectations of the head, and I try to eliminate all of those so I don't look like a 20th century person dancing. I don't like it.
>
> Q: *Why? What don't you like about it?*
>
> . . . It's very overtly physical, and I prefer a reticence in my interactions with people. And so rather than thrust some limb or do some coy or flirtatious thing that would draw someone toward me—that's not what I want in my interactions, so I want to be honest in my interactions with people, and I prefer a certain aloofness, a certain reticence—so I keep my body tight. So I hold my body in reticence.[36]

In interviews, then, dancers expressed a range of voices with multiple referents, and most were less explicit than Ruggiero about the style and its sexual meanings. But as I observed them dance as a participant and as a part of the Smithsonian Folklife and Cultural Heritage Center's Video Documentation Project, they spoke a remarkably uniform language with their bodies. On the dance floor, Ruggiero's dignified carriage was the predominant body language. To be sure, dances and dancers differed in tempo, stepping, exuberance, carriage, and more. Some dances were sappy waltzes; others were exuberant—even aerobic—with chase patterns, reels, and ranting steps. But as Ruggiero's concern for holding her "body in reticence" suggests, as they "moved through space," MECD dancers' bodies told a gendered class story.

The class and gender signifiers of this story could be seen and heard in dress, carriage, and music. The music, drawn from highbrow, classical composers, may have been the most overt signifier of class: that of the northern European, white bourgeoisie and court. The dress was also more bourgeois and formal than "country." Some women did wear garlands in their hair, but they accompanied ball dresses or designer "peasant" dresses à la Laura Ashley. Although most men at balls simply wore white, ruffled shirts with knickers, some put on tuxedos or elaborate eighteenth-century aristocratic costumes.

Finally, while the dance form, especially in the United States, where eye contact has been stressed, encouraged sociability and flirtation, the unwritten rules of the dance culture and its music sent structured messages that spoke more to propriety than tussles in the country hay. The dance form, as noted earlier, limited physical contact, but—and this was especially the case in the United States—there were explicit expectations that dancers not prebook dances and that they change partners after every dance. Indeed, dancing with any partner more than once an evening (except perhaps for the final waltz) was frowned upon. Marriages within the dance community were not uncommon, but coupling was expressed in community sociability and the intimacy of eye contact, and less so from intimate physical contact on the dance floor. In MECD, except for the final waltz, the couple generally danced at arms' length.

One dancer was unusually articulate and vocal about the related sexual and class meanings of the dance. Jennifer Beer, drawing on her professional background as an anthropologist, described Ruggiero's views on styling as "gendered whiteness."[37] Beer also placed the body language in a class context: "There's a certain containment in the way you handle your body all the time that is definitely a class mark. . . . It's a structure that allows sexuality, but in a very middle class, contained kind of way, a safe way." Then in a particularly revealing comment, she added, "You don't show off your butt or your breasts the way you might in, say, in some African dances, where you let it all hang out."[38]

Beer's observations also highlight the heterosexual character of this professional class, and she notes how gender roles (in this class) can be exhibited on the dance floor. Attitudes, she reminds us, have evolved over time, of course, and more men and women play with the conventions now then before. Still, she notes that heterosexual conventions concerning appropriate feminine and masculine behavior persist in overt and subtle ways. First, the coupled nature of the dance form structures the dance. Many people who attend the dance are single, but as you cannot get on the dance floor until you have a partner, the subtle message is that the goal of the dance is to be coupled. Second, the tradition of women wearing flowing skirts rather than trousers (or jeans) affects how they move—how they twirl their hips to make their skirt swing out. As one woman told Beer, "I feel like I don't dance correctly unless I have a dress on." Third, body language is deeply gendered. As Beer thought about how she and her lesbian friend related to male partners—the small nuances in how each moved on the floor—she characterized it as a "moment of awakening": "Wow, I really am deeply heterosexual in the way I move my

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body in this dance form. . . . The thing I notice the most is the smiling and the tilt of the head on the part of women, myself in particular. I think smiling obviously is a wonderful thing, but it is also an act of submission, as is a tilted head. And the tilted head is in the older Cecil Sharp dance style. If you look at the photographs, almost every woman is like this [she tilts her head]."[39]

The influence of second-wave feminism on dancers, however, led some in the dance community, such as Carl Wittman and his protégés, to seek to break gender stereotypes and create a more inclusive dance. Although the percentage was lower for men than for women, almost all respondents I surveyed (82.5 percent) described themselves as moderately or strongly influenced by feminism. (As one person wrote, "It has shaped my life experience in how people relate to one another.") Indeed, the previous chapter described how, coincident with the rise of second-wave feminism and the gay liberation movement, the last few decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of gender-free dances in a few locations. And at least three communities held regular gender-free dances at the end of the twentieth century, but of course, that meant about a hundred more did not. In fact, in bending gender, ECD remained below the curve; many American cities had gay square dance and gay contra dance groups.[40] In MECD, the traditional coupled country dance form continued to rely on a heterosexual community. Some gay men and women were undoubtedly closeted, but the community has always been mostly heterosexual (93.3 percent surveyed identified themselves as heterosexual, and about two-thirds listed themselves as partnered). Still, some form of gender balance persisted in admission to special dance events such as balls and dance weekends that required advance registration. While gender-blind admission was a subject of great debate, gender-balance admission policies began to wane only in the 1990s. There was an increasing willingness to break with gender roles, but it was mostly among the women (who also tended to be in extra numbers). Men have always been less comfortable partnering with other men, although in the new millennium attitudes loosened, and a few men could be seen dancing with other men as partners.[41]

Some dancers may have felt more comfortable playing with gendered roles in the dance, but Beer insightfully suggests how their efforts could bump up against the limits of gender and the nuances of class within the liberal imaginary. One of the things that draws her to English dance is the relatively egalitarian roles of men and women in the coupled dance form: "You're mostly doing parallel or mirror image movement that doesn't have to be led by one person or another." Beer's experience, however, is that on a less visible microlevel, "men do most of the leading." Beer finds men leading with

subtle signals that she hypothesizes video might detect: men determine the precise timing of when hands touch, of the angle of a two-hand turn, of how you do the swing, and so forth. My own experience confirms Beer's impression that men "get irritated with women who are taking initiative too often, or not doing it the way they're comfortable doing it." Beer notes, with irony, that in this relatively enlightened feminist community, some women tell her, "You know I can't say this in public, but I really love being a follower." Beer's problem is the reverse: "My problem is I really love being a leader! And I would say I probably follow about 80 percent of the time, and I'm considered aggressive on the dance floor. So my guess is that most women are following most of the time, but not consciously so. But unconsciously, the man sets the shape and tone of the interaction that happens between the two. . . . I would love to actually test that out with some real video sample."[42]

Expressions of feminism and gender-inclusiveness are evident in other displays of the dancing body, however. Some men have been known to wear skirts at dances, and gay male dancers delight in wearing kilts. Women customarily wear flowing dresses, so lesbian dancers occasionally adorn themselves in pants or tuxedos. Often it is hard to read whether the dress is carnivalesque, an expression of identity, or a merging of the two. But the prominent married male musician Peter Barnes regularly cross-dresses at dances as a personal expression of his other identity as "Kate," which was his grandmother's name. As Kate, Barnes often dances the woman's role, and usually with female partners as men, for on the whole, women seem more comfortable dancing with Kate than men do. One of those partners is sometimes his wife, who also dances and has always been comfortable with this part of his life. To Beer, as a beloved member of the community, Kate has had a "pivotal role in broadening people's willingness to play with gender on the dance floor."[43]

Feminism has many meanings, of course, and the testimony of a gay dance leader suggests some of the limits to its expression on the dance floor, limits that Beer had suspected were quite evident to gay men and women. In a 2004 interview, Allan Troxler, Wittman's former lover, who continued to promote gender-neutral teaching, ruefully notes that gay men and women remain woefully absent or invisible in the dance community. Acknowledging that some men wear dresses at contra dances and that, of course, Scottish dances have men in kilts, he sees no one "political savvy" enough "to take things to the next place." "We're still inhabiting different worlds."[44]

Put together, Troxler's and Beer's comments illustrate how the dance floor has remained gendered, racialized, and classed. Dancers may be responsive to feminism and may be from diverse ethnic backgrounds, but on the dance

Kate (with decades-long traveling companion Hamish Monk) before a dance event at Blair Castle, Scotland, July 16, 2007. (Used with permission of Peter Barnes)

floor the legacy of traditional gender roles and Anglo-Saxonism could be seen in the contours of this heterosexual professional class fraction as it performed gender, propriety, and whiteness in the Anglo-American way.[45]

Race and the Liberal Dancing Body

Race, as many historians have emphasized, has been a core problem for liberalism in the twentieth-century United States, and as if on cue, in interviews, many people in the country dance community addressed the lack of diversity in the community.[46] Thus, as Gene Murrow reflected at the turn of the new century, the inability of the dance community to attract others concerned and perplexed him: "Why are there no, in today's terms, why are there no six figure high-powered corporate executives among us, and why are there no plumber's assistants among us?" Others emphasized the particular lack of racial diversity, noting the absence of black and Hispanic faces at

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the dances. The answer for many was that these folks had their "own interests"; they averred that ECD/MECD was a cultural expression of a particular social group. This obvious answer, however, belied the fact that the social profile of the community had changed dramatically in the past thirty years and that newcomers had been made to feel welcome: white ethnics, whose parents earlier had not encountered the Anglo-American dance community or found it an appropriate or welcome place, now embraced the tradition. Doing "other people's" dances in the international tradition changed how some felt; the changing character of "whiteness" made others feel more "American"; and the new generation of CDSS leaders, many from the Sixties, made others feel more welcome. Still, neither executives nor working-class people graced the country dance floor in the 1990s or afterward.[47]

The lack of racial minorities, however, was the more self-evident problem. The problem was especially vexing to many in the MECD community who came out of the counterculture and held progressive political views on race and class. Dance communities consistently welcomed African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics—on the few occasions when any of them did appear at a dance. But few who came made a return appearance. Reflecting on why they do not come back, Pat Ruggiero candidly admitted, "I don't think much about it." And although others do think about it, Bourdieu's lessons on the potential for class dominance in cultural forms are lost on them. Jenny Beer notes, "It's pretty esoteric, what we do." And Gene Murrow follows this logic in noting, "I don't think it speaks to them [black people]," to which Mary Alison adds, "I guess this kind of dancing is not part of their particular tradition."[48]

But we have seen how the Anglo-American tradition had expanded to incorporate Jews and other white ethnics.[49] Their inclusion had changed the meaning of the "tradition"; the expansion of whiteness to include ethnic Americans coincided with a changed sense of the folk in MECD. The folk early in the last century were part of the imagining of a national (Anglo-American) identity; at the end of the century, the imagining had come to define the identity of white, heterosexual, and (reluctantly) modern urbane and urban denizens. True, a preponderance of the dancers at the end of the century may have lived in suburbs, but it is important to remember that these suburbs had themselves been constructed as white spaces in relation to cities. Not surprisingly, MECD was white dancing in white spaces.[50]

Vestiges of the radical political impulses from the 1930s and 1960s folk traditions can be seen in the twenty-first-century MECD community, especially in its role as a haven for those who reject the dominant cultural rhythms—the "speed-and-greed" culture. The more contemporary move-

ment was also a countercultural form, but as a site, not as a political or cultural movement. Thus, the social spaces provided by CDSS offered dancers a comfortable alternative to mainstream culture, most especially in the years of Reagan-Thatcherism, but with a fundamental difference from how such spaces served counterculture and New Left folkies two decades earlier. In the Sixties, the social spaces of folk song and dance were alternative and oppositional political spaces; in the modern era of Reagan-Thatcherism and its later neoliberal expressions, country dance spaces were alternative but not oppositional. In fact, in another commentary on the changed meaning of community, MECD dancers built and celebrated community, but they did so in private, white spaces.

The CDSS community thrived in increasingly commodified "safe spaces" as expressions of the culture of liberalism. Folk seeking antiurban spiritual renewal while engaged in urbanity, these urbane, educated urban professional MECD dancers were an elite distancing themselves from, not engaging with, the city, by creating dance spaces as antimodern places of respite from black urban youth hip-hop culture, whose constituency the liberal MECD community could not attract or hold at its dances. Computer geeks, Birkenstock-clad and vegetarian bohemians, countercultural refugees, or simply iconoclasts, MECD dancers did not always feel they "fit in" with the dominant culture. Many could appreciate the appeal of MECD to dancemates such as Jacqueline Schwab, who explained her embrace of the community as a "really shy, part nerdy high school kid." But as one recent cultural critic points out, in creating a hyperwhite "safe" space, "nerds" rejected black hip-hop music and dress. According to the same logic, MECD as a respite from modern urban America was a hyperwhite Anglo-American liberal rejection of the urban culture informed by the popular music forms of the late twentieth century.[51] Thus, MECD music, as several dancers were quick to note, contrasted with the driving beat of popular music often rooted in working-class and minority cultures, and their comments suggested how sexual and class subtexts underlie their response to the music as much as race does. For Pat Ruggiero, "Popular music has a very strong beat underneath, and a lot of sexual overtones. And, you know, [MECD] is not hip-hop." Similarly, Thom Yarnal compared MECD movements and music with that of the more aerobic popular music: "The [popular] music is way too loud, number one. And the movements tend to be really violent; it's very staccato kind of stuff. And our, you know, the kind of dancing we do here is aerobic, but it doesn't have that kind of jarring. I think it's more centered on a heartbeat than the driving rhythms of a machine, which is what I think drives modern music."[52]

Conclusion

Beer's comparison of MECD with some forms of African dance, where "you let it ["breasts and butts"] all hang out," though not meant to be about race per se, highlights a fundamental element of the MECD community's sense of itself in the new millennium as it relates to race: its class identity. All interviewees agreed that the dance community was "middle class," but most were also more specific. Ruggiero's and Yarnal's appraisals are typical: "We're just educated professionals," notes Ruggiero, and "Caucasian heterosexuals"; Yarnal simply adds, "We're a pretty affluent group of people, [and] we're pretty white." As Murrow succinctly puts it, "We are a group of lily-white, middle-class, urbanized Americans."[53]

For these white folk, the MECD community is at once reminiscent of what Christopher Lasch has called the search for a haven in a heartless world and the search for an alternative to feared licentiousness of "rough dancing" and music hall culture at the turn of the last century.[54] There are some important immediate differences though: contemporary antimodernists have neither the cultural capital of the founding generation nor their sense of agency and mission. They do not use their movement to retrain the working class or to invoke a nationalizing folk, and the MECD community might better be characterized as a haven in an overly wrought world.

But the MECD community is not so much antimodern as reluctantly modern—these dancers are not technophobes; actually, as noted earlier, there are disproportionate numbers of computer programmers and scientists in the community.[55] While some of the more intricately patterned dances seem to appeal to those who are mathematically inclined, others such as Harvard biochemistry professor George Whitesides find that MECD "serves to provide some humanity in the overall [scientific] enterprise" that is his professional life.[56] Some, however, find the "humanity" in imagining the pastness of the present. And in this way, the ECD community's imagining of itself as a gentry "folk" may be another commentary on the crisis of modern liberalism, one that is not so removed from Sharp's Fabian worldview (though the late-twentieth-century community was not committed to Sharp's imperial-national vision). As has been noted, the more contemporary MECD movement remained Anglo-American, but with lots of second- and third-generation ethnic Americans—at least Jewish, eastern European, and Italian Americans—who had become "white." That this urban folk identity had no blacks or Hispanics should not be so surprising. The MECD community was in conscious escape from the music and rhythms of the culture—

even if only as a metaphor for fast-paced modern life. In so doing, it appears that the political culture or racial urban liberalism in which the MECD community was embedded at the turn of the century had unintended political consequences for its future growth and any alternative polity its members might seek to advance.

In sum, white, heterosexual, and isolated from the culture of working people and racial minorities who make up the urban majority of U.S. cities, relatively affluent MECD dancers inhabited a countercultural space that echoed with the contradictions of liberalism. They remained antimaterialist. A majority of respondents claimed no religious affiliation, but a surprising number went out of their way to add how "spiritual" they were. Hobbies focused disproportionately on crafts and gardening; rather than competitive sports or working-class activities such as bowling, preferred sports activities were hiking and biking, both distinct class signifiers. What passed for social activism was a kind of civic associational environmentalism—membership in the Sierra Club, for example, a largely white, middle-income advocacy group with class markers congenial to those of the MECD community. Feminists, environmentalists, "spiritual" folk, these left-liberals inhabited a distinctive class sector, affluent yet not elite, alternative but also bourgeois. The world of the MECD dancer likely had little resonance with the working class or racial minorities whose absence on the dance floor they lamented. Ultimately, one can only speculate on the reasons for their absence, but the dances were held in spaces marked as white and middle class to which these others did not necessarily have easy access or in which they did not feel comfortable. In fact, the cultural messages in the space and the dancers' bodies signified to those they missed how much these others did not fit. In such ways, the history of the modern folkies of Modern English Country Dance suggests the extent to which exclusionary messages of modern liberal culture undermined the liberal political project to lessen inequity and injustice.