

established around the patently, and very urgently, current issues which these chapters recurrently suggest.

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ALLISON ABRA. *Dancing in the English Style: Consumption, Americanisation and National Identity in Britain, 1918–50*. Studies in Popular Culture. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. Pp. 304. \$135.00 (cloth).  
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Allison Abra begins her story of twentieth-century dance in Britain with a tourist tale from British dance instructor Alan Mackenzie's Paris holiday. The anecdote reveals the importance of national imaginaries, even when we are at play. Observing the enthusiastic response of French dancers to a group of Americans dancing the foxtrot, Mackenzie makes an unflattering comparison between French "cosmopolitanism" and English taste: "In London this could not have happened," he notes with pride. "Here," he adds, "the dancing is an absolutely national development, extremely characteristic of the national temperament, and very suited to it" (1). The discerning taste of the British here is rooted in the vitality of its "native" dance culture.

What Mackenzie overlooks—that the culture he claims with pride was a recent construct fabricated in large part by dance instructors like himself—provides the topic of Allison Abra's discerning study. Mackenzie was not just an observer, but a privileged one; the comments quoted above were published in the *Dancing Times*, the British dance profession's premier periodical. Alongside the managers and promoters of the new dance palaces catering to middle-class audiences that cropped up all over England in the wake of the First World War, professionals like Mackenzie helped shape the dance culture that he regarded as second nature to Britons.

Abra's account begins with the dance boom of the early 1920s in Britain, a time when "war-weary men and women of all classes took to the dance floor in an effort to celebrate their victory and forget their traumas" (2). The new dance fever was sparked by wildly popular foreign imports such as the foxtrot and tango: sensual dances that caused a moral panic among authorities. Abra's starting point is a "moment of transformation and disorder"; her focus, however, is on the two groups who emerged in the 1920s who tried to stem the "chaos" by promoting their specialized notions of proper English dance (3). As Abra details, professional dance instructors and dance hall managers did their utmost to "seize control of and restore order to the new dancing juggernaut" (3).

Abra sees British dance culture in the early twentieth century as the product of an often-turbulent negotiation between these professional groups and the consumers who constituted the dancing public. As Abra observes, popular interest in the tango and foxtrot "boosted enrolments in dancing schools and kept people interested in an evening out at the palais" (3). At the same time, dance professionals defined dance as disciplined movement rather than spontaneous expression. In the process, they created a brand: an "English style" of ballroom dancing that incorporated—and subtly modified—the exuberance of the foxtrot and tango. English ballroom was a hybrid dance form, occupying a middle ground between Victorian decorum and the liberated movements of modern dance.

*Dancing in the English Style* breaks new ground in many areas. Much of the current scholarship on dance focuses on gendered performance or integrates the topic into the sociology of youth culture. While specialized scholars will find much of interest in Abra's treatment of

the gender controversies surrounding the figure of the “dancing girl” in the 1920s, her real subject is the struggle between amateur and professional efforts to define modern dance. Her approach is best seen in her chapter on novelty dances of the 1930s, the most successful effort of dance professionals to engineer public opinion. The Mecca Dance Chain’s marketing campaign for “the Lambeth Walk” and the “Handsome Territorial” stressed both the simplicity of the new dances and, as the names suggest, their essential Englishness. The formula worked, but as Abra notes, audiences quickly moved on. The dance crazes of 1930s marked the apex of the professional class’s hegemony over English dance: but the victory was short-lived. In time, the success or failure of a dance became an aesthetic matter, not a declaration of patriotism.

Abra also challenges the consensus idea that British popular culture was playing perpetual catch up with America throughout the twentieth century. Still, for all of her ingenuity, Abra cannot completely escape the “Americanization” thesis. In her last chapter she details the English reception of the American “jitterbug,” a popular dance associated with swing music, in the 1940s. In this case both dance professionals and dancehall promoters changed their usual tactics in regard to foreign imports and embraced the dance in a “toned down Anglicised form” (9). The presence of American troops in Britain transformed how this particular foreign dance was received. Consumers now possessed a revolutionary new criterion for judging dance: authenticity. With the jitterbug, the question was now whether the dance as performed remained true to the frenetic movement of the American original. As Abra notes, there was now “a growing number of people in the popular music and dance hall industries, dance profession and dancing public, who acknowledged the perceived blackness of the dance in a manner that sought not to suppress, but rather to highlight or endorse it” (250). Sadly, appreciating “blackness” often meant substituting one set of racial prejudices for another. Abra cites a spectacular example of this ambiguous acclaim from two self-styled jitterbug experts: “We practice with the coloured people. They learned it (the dance) from birth. They were never taught nothing. They just dance” (251).

The new discourse of authenticity did not resolve the race question, but it did mark the decline of public interest in the practice of “proper English dance.” Dance in the “authentic” American style was free and expressive, the opposite of what one newspaper of the day describes as the “smooth flowing unhurried style that is typically English” (258). The improvised dances and solo performance style that prevailed in America would become the new norm for British youth as well.

*Dancing in the English Style* is a detailed, well-written, and comprehensive account of its subject. Although performance is not a central focus of the study, dance scholars will find many important insights here on the cultural contexts of dance, as well as a rich archive of information. Abra positions her work as part of the growing field of transnational studies; hence the careful attention she pays throughout to dance as a national and global happening. Scholars in this field will doubtless hail Abra’s book as exemplary work. I would also highly recommend the book to scholars interested in “New Modernist” studies. Abra writes with knowledge and authority on the relation between popular culture and modernity, and is particularly astute on how race impacts both subjects.

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