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Author(s): DANIELLE ROBINSON
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The Ugly Duckling: The Refinement of Ragtime Dancing and the Mass Production and Marketing of Modern Social Dance

DANIELLE ROBINSON

The focus of this article is the transformation of ragtime dancing into modern social dance by hundreds of teachers, writers and performers working in an emerging dance industry, rooted in New York City. Based on dance manuals and magazines of the period, I argue that dance professionals worked collectively to create new products (i.e. dances) that could more easily be mass-produced and marketed. Importantly, they called their efforts a ‘refinement’ of ragtime and justified their work through discourses of artistry and morality. Upon closer examination, however, the changes they made to the dances indicate that artistry and morality were actually achieved by removing the black associations of ragtime dancing and instead, using modern social dance to construct an idealized white racial identity.

Of the original [ragtime] ‘trot’ nothing remains but the basic step. The elements that drew denunciation upon it have gone from the abiding-places of politeness… it prefers to be known as the [modern] One-Step. And in the desire for a new appellation it is justified, since no history ever so vividly recalled the fable of the ugly duckling.¹

Troy and Margaret West Kinney (1914)
Social Dancing of To-Day

In Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytale from 1843, the ugly duckling was deemed unattractive, at least in part, because of its colour. By the time its happy ending arrives, however, the little brown duckling is transformed into a beautiful white swan. In their 1914 dance manual, the famous American dance writers and illustrators, Troy and Margaret West Kinney, use this fairytale as a metaphor for the transformations occurring in social dance of the early twentieth century in U.S. urban centres. While dance writers of the period might attribute such changes to natural aesthetic progression, I will suggest that they, like the

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particular notion of beauty suggested by the ugly duckling story, were deeply connected with aesthetic values that were distinctly racialized. But this is only half the story; I also argue that innovative mass marketing and production strategies of the 1910s worked together with contemporary conceptualizations of race to facilitate the birth of modern social dance and its supporting dance industry.²

In the following sections, I begin with clarification of how I am using the terms ragtime and modern dance, as twentieth and twenty-first century dance writers rarely agree on their definitions. Following this, for non-specialists, I provide a detailed description of the differences between ragtime and modern social dance practices (as I have reconstructed them through engagement with a wide range of primary sources) to better understand the refinement process in detail. The remainder of the article explores the impact of both commercialization and 1910s racial discourses on the creation of modern dance – as I contend that it was, in fact, a partnership between commodification and racialization that transformed ragtime dancing into modern dance, not simply one or the other.

RAGTIME DANCING AND MODERN DANCE

The ragtime dancing that is the focus of this study is a complex of movement practices that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the time, it was also known as tough dancing, animal dancing, new dancing, half-time dancing, and even 'nigger' [sic] dancing because of its associations with African Americans. Ragtime dancing was the social dancing that accompanied ragtime music in homes, dance halls, and on street corners prior to World War I.³ It was widely practiced among many different culture groups and was especially popular among the working classes.

Between 1890 and World War I, many ragtime dances went in and out of favour. The Cakewalk was the first ragtime dance to cross over into mainstream European American dance practices in the 1890s. It was followed by the animal dances (Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug, and so forth) between the 1900s and 1910s. A spirit of invention pervaded ragtime dancing during this period, empowering dancers to make up their own steps and christen them with playful names. In addition to the various specifically named dances, there was also a general movement style that was considered to be unique to ragtime. I will discuss this at length below.

While ragtime dancing grew out of community practices, what came to be known as modern social dance (hereafter denoted simply as 'modern' dance) was crafted from existing ragtime movement practices by 1910s social dance professionals.¹ Modern dance coalesced in urban cabarets, dance academies, and publishing houses of New York City during the mid-1910s. It was designed for and was largely practiced by that city's European American middle and upper classes before being exported across the United States and Europe, where it flourished in urban centres until jazz dancing took hold in the early twenties. Through modern dance's popularity, many social dance partners – for example,
Vernon and Irene Castle and Maurice Mouvet and Florence Walton – achieved national and even international fame with the assistance of media coverage, dance manuals, sheet music, films, and touring musical theatre shows.

Even though it was far more formalised than ragtime dancing, modern dance never became a single, codified technique. In practice, it included a range of related movements and styles – all of which shared a commitment to ‘refinement.’ Several ‘new’ dances and dance steps contributed to its lexicon. The One Step and Fox Trot are perhaps the best-known modern dances. The Tango, Maxixe, Half & Half, Apache, Boston, and Hesitation were also quite popular, particularly among performers.

RAGTIME DANCING AND MODERN DANCE COMPARED

Comparing ragtime and modern dancing practices at the level of bodily techniques provides dance researchers with crucial evidence of exactly what was added, altered, and/or removed during the refinement process and thus a means of better understanding this moment in dance and cultural history. It is true that modern and ragtime dancing superficially shared a similar improvisation
structure, likely because modern was derived from ragtime. Both utilised basic steps in a closed couple hold that consisted of simple walking movements. Both enlivened their basic steps with variations that invoked a sense of play and created a space in which dancers could feel they were being creative. Modern and ragtime dancing’s variations provided contrast in terms of level, spatial path, speed, and rhythm. In both of these practices, rhythmic play was a distinguishing feature.

That said, modern dancing and ragtime differed in many ways. Indeed, ragtime embodied an aesthetic of play, angularity, casualness, inventiveness, and abruptness. Generally speaking, it had six key features: partners 1) held onto one another in intimate ways; 2) could both improvise; 3) made frequent use of gesture; 4) used boisterous movement qualities; 5) deployed angular body lines; and 6) engaged in a high degree of rhythmic play. In contrast, modern was defined by an almost opposite approach to each of these six distinct features.

The differences between modern and ragtime dancing, thus, were much more pronounced than the similarities in terms of aesthetics, body part usage, partnering, and use of variations. Ragtime mobilized an aesthetic of rupture, whereas modern celebrated one of restraint. The former was a celebration of...
change, difference, discontinuity, and disruption. Even though a rather intimate version of a closed dance position was deployed as dancers traversed the floor, ragtime dancers frequently broke apart to solo dance. As dancers did so, they divided their torsos into discrete parts, such as shoulders, waist, and hips. In addition, the use of accented movement frequently departed from ragtime music’s steadily rocking bass line. Finally, angular body lines proliferated as limbs jabbed into space. In contrast, modern dancing valued control, containment, organization, rules, and inhibition. Couples danced in a united way, as a single unit and with the rhythmic structure of the music. Together, dancers governed their collaborative bodily movement in service to smooth, graceful lines of the body and through space. Their variations were brief and few and therefore did little to disturb the self-control they exuded.

Ragtime dancing encouraged dancers to use their entire body—by mobilizing their shoulders and hips and animating their faces and limbs. This activation of multiple body parts meant that ragtime was more weighted and effortful than modern. Ragtime freed the torso and limbs to express sexual pleasure and desire; while, modern dancing’s aesthetic of restraint inhibited the torso and suppressed sexuality. Modern dancing imbued participants with

Fig. 3. Ragtime Sheet Music Cover. Luckyth Roberts, The Junk Man Rag (New York: Joseph W. Stern & Co., 1914). Digital Image from the University of Colorado Digital Sheet Music Collection. Courtesy of the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado. (Public Domain)
the appearance of innocent playfulness—which may have, nonetheless, felt subversive, as they were adults embodying childlike behaviour.

When dancing together, ragtime dancers grabbed each other around the neck, hips, and waist, and they pressed their torsos together and pushed apart for solo improvisations. Thus, they moved with greater physical connection between partners than modern dancers and, as a result, they directed much more energy toward one another. Importantly, owing to this flexible couple formation, followers could insert their own variations into ragtime’s basic steps and choose their own solo movements when those opportunities came about. Both partners then could invent their own steps while on the ragtime dance floor. In contrast, modern dance’s discourse insisted that followers submit to leaders and that students learn ‘correct’ dancing from dance professionals. This meant that teachers and performers, not dancers, were privileged to be creators of dances and dance steps. It also meant that modern dance re-asserted a male-centrism on the social dance floor—even though, or perhaps because, teaching dance during the early twentieth century had the potential to ‘empower... women to claim a new professional identity’ and dancing in public spaces ‘afforded women a certain autonomy.’66
Compared with modern dance, then, the variations within ragtime were much more disruptive in nature and integrated throughout the dancing experience, despite their shared improvisational structure. Its timing changes were much more uneven and sudden, floor patterns more unruly, and level changes more pronounced. In addition to periods of solo dancing by both dancers, some of ragtime’s smaller variations, such as single hops, kicks, or stamps, could be added by either the leader or follower to any basic step, which added yet another layer of rhythmic complexity to a couple’s dancing.

As a result of this multi-levelled deployment of variations, ragtime’s improvisations did not reinforce dichotomies between restraint and rupture, control and freedom. Instead, owing to its mixture of these concepts, ragtime celebrated the possibility of varied movement and individual expression throughout the dancing experience. Modern, on the other hand, offered pleasure in control through its clear demarcations of order and disorder, sexuality and propriety, and male and female roles as well as pleasure in brief escape and transgression from these roles. Such transgressions were tightly managed, however, and limited to brief and very specific moments, immediately followed by a return to restraint. In these ways, these two related dance forms theorized radically different values and relationships between the body, pleasure, and society.

In short, what had been full-bodied dancing became restricted to the lower limbs; what had celebrated pleasure and sexuality became reserved playfulness; what had emphasised invention, difference, and individuality came to emphasise uniformity. Post-refinement, the spirit of ragtime could be found only in modern dance’s brief variations, which interrupted its repetitive patterns and provided dancers with a momentary break from perpetual restraint. For a dance historian, the variations within modern dance are like sediments that testify to this dance form’s process of creation.

SELLING DANCING

The transformation of ragtime into modern dance was influenced by far more than aesthetics, despite the frequent references to beauty and artistry in contemporary modern dance publications. I want to suggest that the radical changes made to ragtime were grounded in both commercial interests and race politics, which I will discuss shortly. In this section, I will focus on how dance professionals drew upon innovative mass production and marketing strategies of the early twentieth century to reformulate ragtime dancing into a product that could be more easily sold to a wider, and wealthier, American public, that envisaged itself as ‘refined’. In particular, I locate Taylorist mass production principles within modern dance practices and teaching modes.

Unlike a watch, car, book, or even a piece of music, social dancing as an improvised bodily practice does not lend itself to mass production or broad marketing, at least beyond a local scale. However, if ‘a dance’ is defined by its choreographic design, then that dance can conceivably be sold. Such codification
has historically been central to the commodification of dancing. Furthermore, such commodification requires a detailed and accessible textual representation of the dance, someone to teach the choreography, or both. Even so, social dancing, more than most theatrical dancing, poses additional challenges to commodification efforts. While it might be possible to learn a few dance steps by rote, developing an understanding of how those steps fit together—i.e. their improvisational structure—is much more difficult. Such knowledge has to be gained through practice, with teachers or partners. In this way, the learning of social dance actually requires human contact and ongoing participation to be successful.

The ephemeral and improvisatory nature of social dancing did not stop 1910s dance professionals from trying to mass-produce and market it to the American public. Their efforts in this regard transformed ragtime dancing practices into a modern dance product that was much easier to teach, learn, and sell en masse. As I have described, earlier iterations of ragtime dancing required extensive improvisation and embodied creativity—skills that are not easily learned other than through shared bodily experience. Thus, even more than the average social dance practice, ragtime dancing was a difficult ‘product’ to construct. Its central skills could not be easily taught to large classes of students and its improvisational structure could not be adequately explained in quick and easy how-to-dance manuals. Indeed, ragtime dancing needed to be radically changed in order to become saleable to more than a few consumers at a time. Moreover, for this experiment to work, its entire ethos had to be altered from one that valued individuality to one that insisted upon conformity.

At the time of the rising popularity of modern dance, mass production was a preoccupation in a number of industries. Approaches to optimizing industrialisation were being theorized most notably by Frederick Taylor, who championed hierarchical knowledge management, re-training of workers, and rational control of all aspects of production processes in his publications. In these three ways, he sought to transform existing production methods into a scientifically streamlined and efficient model.

Applications of Taylor’s principles can be located to varying degrees in modern dance and its burgeoning industry. Moreover, they account for some of the key differences between ragtime and modern dancing. I am not suggesting, however, that modern dance teachers necessarily read Taylor’s books and articles, but that these men and women participated in a cultural climate that was absorbing and adapting his ideas as part of a broader modernization process. Indeed, the Western world was becoming increasing modular in its structures and thinking during the 1910s.

Taylor’s Scientific Management system emphasized hierarchical knowledge management as the basis of efficient control of product production. His system dismantled open, flexible workspaces in which artisanal workers were highly skilled, largely self-managed, and educated through apprenticeships; in their place, he advocated for rigid, ordered and stratified workspaces in which managers controlled workers who carried out very specific tasks. In this scheme, the worker is to a certain degree ‘deskilled’ and re-trained to carry out a
single step in the production process. According to Taylor's logic, the resulting commercial product would be more predictable and reliable in its quality.

Prior to the modern dance industry, ragtime dancers were in a sense self-taught and self-managed creative agents. With the advent of modern dance, dance knowledge came to be managed by teachers. In the process, dancers surrendered much of their creativity and choice making to a fixed lexicon of dance steps to be learned in a piece-meal fashion—much like artisans who went to work on an assembly line would have.11

Taylor's scientific management method required the retraining of all workers, according to the new rules and standards of production. Surviving 1910s dance manuals certainly suggest that modern dance teachers insisted that dancers be retrained, leaving behind their old ways of dancing in order to learn the new, 'correct' way to dance—which was defined by the author's principles and rules. For example, the Kinneys wrote,

To the beginner, the diagrams and text will serve as a grammar, by whose guidance the steps can be put into practice. . . . Also, if [the student] wishes to dance with distinguished grace and style, he should put himself for a term under the eye of a capable teacher. . . . All need at least the occasional oversight of a skilled eye; and a teacher's experience in detecting the causes of imperfections enables him to cure them in a minimum of time.12

It was very common for 1910s dance manuals to assert strongly one way of dancing and deem all others incorrect at best, or diseased and amoral at worst.

The best-known aspect of Taylor's work is his emphasis on control over all phases of the production process. For him, maximum efficiency can be achieved only with clear rules and precise standards so that all actions are regulated and planned. He therefore sought to find the 'one best method' for doing a particular task by watching workers and analyzing their movements in order to break down the process and compartmentalise the actions involved.

Similarly, modern dance professionals pursued the standardization of ragtime dancing by making the dances simpler in structure and fewer in number in order to make their teaching more efficient. Articles and manuals repeatedly heralded modern dance teachers' standardization of social dancing. A manual from 1918, written by Vivian Persis Dewey from Kenosha, Wisconsin, offers an example,

After a stormy and chaotic period of dance revolution, and constant changing, dancing has once more become settled. The one-step and fox-trot have become standardised, and the steps are now sane and practical. . . . The good dancers in all parts of the nation are dancing certain definite steps.13

Compared with both late nineteenth-century round dancing and early twentieth-century ragtime dancing, modern dancing used just a few basic step patterns that were remarkably simple. Modern dance's One Step and Fox Trot consisted of stiff walking directly on the beat. Even more 'complex' dances, such the Hesitation and Boston, only added pauses to this pert walking. Over the course of the 1910s, moreover, the number of dances in circulation dropped dramatically. For instance, manuals written in 1919 tend to contain half as many dances and dance steps as those published in 1914.14
It was during this same period that the use of replaceable components came to be typical in manufacturing production. This allowed for assembly line construction, use of the same parts in several products, and easy component replacement. For modern dance professionals, I would argue the variation served as a kind of replaceable part that could be simply inserted into basic steps at the whim of the leader. Moreover, it could be inserted into a number of dances, not just one. Maurice wrote in 1915, 

Most of the Tango steps are easily applied to the Fox Trot...the Cortex, the Promenade, and the Scissors can all be done with good effect. For that matter, many people use some of the Maxixe figures very well...truly it does not matter much what actual steps one uses...\textsuperscript{15}

Variations were not only easily incorporated; they were also seen as interchangeable. In a way, they became yet another dance commodity to be packaged and sold.

Taylor's emphases on hierarchical knowledge management, retraining, and rational control also empowered 'managers.' In the dance industry, dance teachers assumed this gate-keeping role. Importantly, this happened at a time, when the necessity of dance lessons and teachers might actually have been questioned on the basis of ragtime dancing's affirmation of social dancers as independent creators. A Taylor-like emphasis on control, however, enabled modern dance teachers to exert greater influence over social dancing practices through a strategic highlighting of 'correct' technique and a de-emphasis on independent choice making by dancers. A St. Louis, Missouri dance academy owner, Frank Leslie Clendenden, writes, 'Insist your pupils take the correct position, which is graceful; they will like it in time...Control is the greatest point to consider in all our new dances.'\textsuperscript{16} Although this statement could be interpreted as stressing a dancer's control over his or her own movement, I view it as underscoring the necessity for teachers, as managers, to regulate their students' dancing practice, both in terms of their physical movements and their meanings and values.

In these ways modern dance professionals redesigned ragtime dancing to suit America's burgeoning consumer culture. They codified dance steps, reduced the number of dances, developed interchangeable variations, lessened opportunities for improvisation, and fostered uniformity and order by augmenting teacher control. In so doing, they diminished the degree to which modern dance embodied ragtime's self-expression, spontaneity, and individuality. Nonetheless, and ironically, these were the very qualities—repackaged as freedom, fun, and personality—that dance professionals used to market modern dance to the American public.

RACE PURITY AND REFINEMENT

Although the commodification of ragtime through Taylorist principles is compelling on its own, to stop here would leave out half the story. Ragtime's
transformation into a commercial product would not have been complete without defusing its racial threat. Ragtime’s mixed heritage and perceived blackness rendered it extremely problematic for an American public that valued homogeneity, white hegemony, and neat racial categories. As a result, the refinement process also had to remove ragtime’s references to blackness by eradicating its exuberant physicality and sexuality, among other aspects.

Although such changes had little to do with ease of mass production per se, I would argue they had everything to do with the difficulty of mass marketing a product with black associations during the 1910s. Ragtime dancing was strongly influenced by African American social dancing practices of the late nineteenth century; it was often danced by African American dancers, and the music was typically played by African American musicians, even in segregated ‘white’ settings. Ragtime dancing does not appear to be simply an appropriation of African American dancing by European American dancers. There does not seem to be outright stealing of steps. Instead, it was the result of an integration of dance traditions created by working-class people of different cultural backgrounds—including European immigrants and African Americans—occasionally dancing and socializing together in cities across the United States. In this way, I suggest that ragtime dancing was uniquely ‘American’ and working-class in origin.

For this reason, ragtime was perceived as black, owing to the ‘one drop’ rule for black racial identity that operated during this period. The refinement process, then, involved the removal of ragtime’s blackness in part because ‘black’ was not yet marketable in American culture, as it would become in limited ways in the 1920s. This problematic marketability, I would argue, can be linked to ragtime’s implied miscegenation and thus, its threat to dominant ideologies of race purity and the idealization of American national identity as ‘white’.

Ragtime in many ways alluded to miscegenation by mixing ‘black’ movement with ‘white’ bodies. As mentioned, ragtime was regarded as ‘black’ because of its overt African American influences. When European Americans practiced such dancing, it created a cross-cultural bodily experience for those dancing and those watching. Despite being marked as black, it is important to note that ragtime dancing was, in fact, an amalgamation of African American and European American movement traditions. For those accustomed to the representations of blackness on minstrel stages and Europeanist couple dancing (most U.S. urban dwellers), ragtime would also be recognizable as a hybrid dance form. Its practice would have signalled a co-mingling of black and white cultures.

Indeed, at this time in U.S. history, miscegenation was of great concern, affecting people’s lives at both individual and national levels. Race purity was idealized, and it was an accepted truth that the ‘races’ had to remain separate for social order to be preserved. Boundaries between cultures had to appear to be clear, fixed, and unbroken. Cultural theorist Richard Dyer, in his book *White*, writes, ‘if races are conceptualised as pure (with concomitant qualities of character, including the capacity to hold sway over other races), then miscegenation threatens that purity.’ Within this paradigm, miscegenation in
any and all manifestations must be prevented in order for race-based hierarchies (and hence, white racial dominance) to continue.

Over the course of the first few decades of the twentieth century, thousands of black men and women crowded into American north-eastern urban centres where city life brought people of all classes and races into much closer proximity. As a result, migration by African Americans also heightened concerns related to miscegenation. The physical presence of African American people provided a very visible reminder of America’s lack of racial homogeneity at a national level.

In a similar fashion, ragtime dancing practices might also have provided a powerful reminder of increasing diversity and decreasing white racial dominance. In addition to its improvisational complexity, the ‘blackness’ of ragtime in this specific socio-cultural context presented a challenge to dance professionals who wished to create a dance form that could be more easily mass marketed to a white majority that feared the loss of its dominant status. The miscegenation associated with ragtime would only have heightened broad social fears relating to white ‘race suicide’ through its multi-layered enactments of racial mixing between black and white cultures. Visible reminders of miscegenation had to be eliminated, which was most easily accomplished by erasing ragtime’s blackness through the removal of its embodied ‘black’ markers, such as hip movement, sexual innuendo[s], and animal imitations (see below). In this way, dance professionals’ use of the word ‘refinement’ harks the word’s connotation of the removal of contaminants and purification. It also reveals how deeply connected social dance practices were with early twentieth-century concerns relating to race purity.

REFINEMENT’S WHITENESS

In a climate where race purity resonated with national identity on multiple levels, it is not difficult to understand why ragtime dancing might have been tough to market. In order to be saleable to the general public, the dancing not only had to be codified, but also whitened. However, when describing the changes they made to ragtime, dance professionals did not explicitly discuss race. Their word choices, nevertheless communicated racial connotations in indirect ways. Furthermore, dance writers often relied upon origin stories and explanations of the refinement process at once to convey the whiteness of modern dance and to distance it from ragtime’s black linkages. The 1910s publications of Troy and Margaret West Kinney in particular provide excellent examples of this subtle writing.

Dance professionals embraced refinement as a pathway towards enhancing one’s artistry, morality, and health. It was a means of improving one’s self and establishing one’s class. Charles J. Coll and Gabrielle Rosiere’s 1922 dance manual declared in its introduction,

Dancing … promotes social morality and when properly administered the community is socialized, humanized … The manifold advantages derived from dancing as an exercise, the great delight it affords as a recreation, its refining influence on manners, are becoming
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each year more fully recognized. Parents should be anxious to give young people an opportunity to become accomplished in the graceful art… To be aesthetic, to love what is beautiful, is to perceive through the senses… Dancing is a form of expression and an exquisite one…

As much as dance steps and technique, dance teachers were selling social mobility through their representation of modern dance as ‘refined’. Whereas direct discussions of race were rare, class was openly referred to in dance manuals. Here, cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s assertion that, ‘race is thus, also, the modality in which class is “lived,”’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and “fought through,”’ is salient. In numerous instances, race and class are often expressed and experienced through one another. Through their rhetorical engagement with class concerns, then, dance discourses in early twentieth-century America were used to police racial boundaries in indirect ways.

Besides marketing ‘refined’ aesthetic values, another way in which race was subtly communicated in the literature of modern dance was through narratives of origin – which were almost always found in the opening pages of dance manuals and peppered throughout articles about social dancing in the mainstream press. Such stories explicitly elevated modern dance by connecting it with a ‘white’ origin of some kind and/or implicitly denigrated ragtime dancing by attributing it to racially questionable roots. One example is a lengthy article published in Century Magazine by Troy Kinney. There he traces the history of modern social dance all the way back to ancient Greece and Rome, by way of Renaissance Europe, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, and Isadora Duncan. In an unfavourable contrast, Kinney links ragtime dancing with the untamed American West. This author’s correlation between ragtime dancing and the American West was not uncommon. Other dance writers pointed more specifically to San Francisco’s Barbary Coast as ragtime’s site of origin. In their manual the Kinneys told readers ‘The Turkey Trot (name to delight to posterity) raced eastward from San Francisco in a form to which the word “dancing” could be applied only by exercise of courtesy.’ Although not as racially loaded a locale as the American south, San Francisco nonetheless had potent racial associations during the 1910s, owing to Asian immigrants and African American migrants.

Indeed, this location signified to dance readers a crossroads where eastern and western cultures precariously converged into a gallimaufry of racial and ethnic groups – African American, Chinese, Native American, Mexican, and European American. Modern Dance Magazine’s H.E. Cooper wrote of this far western city: ‘Before it was legislated into sobriety, the turbulent Barbary Coast was a colorful nightmare… It set a wicked tempo to tempt the adventurous.’

Read through the lens of early twentieth-century racial discourses, ‘colorful nightmare’ suggests dangerous racial mixing and ‘wicked tempo’ indicated the presence of African Americans specifically. Consequently, when dance writers linked ragtime dancing with San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, they attributed it to an ‘other’ racial space, perhaps to a specifically black one.
Modern dance writers also obliquely indicated modern dance’s whiteness and ragtime’s non-whiteness through the ways in which they described ragtime’s transformation into modern dance. When talking about the refinement process, for instance, the Kinneys in their 1914 manual reference a children’s story, *The Ugly Duckling*, which venerates a whitening process, as mentioned in the introduction. The ugly duckling, according to its traditional telling, begins life brown and therefore ugly. The story ends with the duckling reaching maturity and finally becoming white and beautiful. By linking the refinement of ragtime dancing with this fairy tale, the Kinneys allude to the white ideal to which modern dance held itself and also indicate that ragtime was not to be understood as white. In effect, they marked ragtime as modern’s ‘other’ through this metaphor.

Thus, dance professionals seem to have been arguing two contradictory points—that modern dance was a refinement of ragtime and that it had different origins. While it is possible that they strategically used the concept of refinement to link themselves and their product with ragtime and its illicit allure, a critical comparison of ragtime and modern dancing practice supports their familial relationship. For example, in addition to sharing much of the same music, as mentioned prior, ragtime’s grand solos are reborn as subtle variations within modern. Furthermore, modern’s teachers, dancers, and writers acknowledged ragtime as their ‘other’ as they policed the boundaries of ‘proper’ dancing. In this way, their language suggests a linkage between the two rather than ragtime being simply a separate but competing form. For example, the Castle’s manual ends with: ‘Drop the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug, etc. These dances are ugly, ungraceful, and out of fashion (my emphasis).’ By choosing the word ‘drop,’ these famous dancers acknowledge that social dancers were, in fact, doing ragtime, and perhaps even preferring it. Certainly modern dance professionals wanted to assert a clear separation between ragtime and modern in order to sell their product, but their fervent efforts and the language they deployed actually testify to an intimate relationship between the two.

**EMBODIED DISCOURSES OF RACE IN MODERN DANCE**

Despite such thinly veiled discursive clues to refinement’s racial implications, its whitening agenda is most evident upon closer examination of the differences between the movement practices of ragtime and modern dancing. Indeed, an analysis of the technical changes made to ragtime in order to create modern dance reveals that the refinement process was working towards race purity by removing black movement references, even as it was also attempting to commodify a dance practice in order to improve its marketability.

As indicated by 1910s dance manuals, ragtime dancing’s black associations were demonstrated through movements of the whole body, especially the buttocks and shoulders. In particular, vertical axis dips, sequential rolls through the torso, and angular movements of the limbs activated the body as a whole.
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Two dance manuals published in New York toward the end of ragtime dancing’s popularity illustrate this clearly. Edward Scott’s *The New Dancing As It Should Be* boldly stated, ‘there was also a good deal of talk about the TURKEY TROT, with its degenerate negroid *mouvement des hanches.*’ Likewise, A. M. Cree’s *Handbook of Ball-Room Dancing* admonished readers to ‘avoid dipping the shoulders, rolling the body, and pump-handle action with the arms; such Negroid actions are very unseemly.’ Here, Scott and Cree specify movements that constituted 1910s black dancing, at least from the perspective of white dance professionals of the period.

Crucially, these depictions of ‘black’ movement coincide precisely with what modern dance industry professionals removed from ragtime in order to transform it into modern dance – its animation of the whole body through a loosening of the torso and freeing of the limbs. Time and time again, 1910s dance writings admonished readers:

Don’t sway your body from side to side.
Don’t sway your hips from side to side.
Don’t throw your shoulders from side to side.
Don’t rag – don’t wiggle.
Don’t bend your knees or hold them stiffly.
Don’t poke your head over your partner’s shoulders.

Through such instructions, teachers effectively instruct dancers not to dance ragtime, remove black dancing from their bodies, and instead perform a white racial identity. Modern dance constructed the standards for a white dancing body through a performed absence of blackness and, through this process, reinforced existing associations between blackness and primitivism or, in other words, anti-modernity.

In a similar way, dancers were expressly told to dance ‘modern’ through an aesthetic of bodily restraint largely culled from late nineteenth-century European round dancing, a dance form that epitomised whiteness in America at that time. A 1914 dance manual by Philadelphia dance school impresario Albert W. Newman conveys this aesthetic succinctly:

The style of dancing to-day is a smooth gliding step, using the ankles and the knees moderately… Any oscillation of the body is considered vulgar… Remember that although one may use the feet accurately, unless the general bearing is graceful he or she cannot be considered an accomplished dancer.

This language is startlingly similar to dance manuals printed twenty years earlier, from a time prior to the influx of non-Northern European immigrants and African American migrants. I would suggest that modern dance was in fact designed to be reminiscent of social dancing that was seemingly free of non-white influences. Ironically, modern dancers – a name that suggests an embracing of the contemporary – in many ways embodied a nostalgic view of America at a more homogeneous, seemingly simpler time.

When modern dance professionals instructed dancers in what to do and not to do in these ways, they also communicated how to dance white and how not to
dance black. By dancing according to these particular values – by restraining the torso and limbs – modern dancers in effect embodied a construction of a pure white racial identity. In their effort to express modernity in movement practice, dancers in effect embodied the incommensurability of black and white and reified the black-white binary that dominated racial thinking of the time.

Consequently, dance professionals helped define the socially constructed physical markers of racial difference – even though their language only directly addressed questions of modernity and class. Their labours provided dancers with a means of performing an elevated social status each time they entered the dance floor. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued:

If, among all these fields of possibles, none is more obviously predisposed to express social differences than the world of luxury goods, and, more particularly, cultural goods, this is because the relationship of distinction is objectively inscribed within it, and is reactivated, intentionally or not, in each act of consumption, through the instruments of economic and cultural appropriation which it requires.12

Modern dance then, as a cultural product, established a new field of distinction that articulated dominant aesthetic values for socially mobile consumers. Importantly, these dominant aesthetic values were rooted in Western European understandings of beauty. Thus, the very pursuit of class status, defined in these terms, means modern dancers and dance professionals helped define a new and subtle means of reinforcing white hegemony.

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that modern social dancers in early twentieth-century America could perform whiteness and re-inscribe the value of racial purity by avoiding movement associated with African Americans – such as shoulder-shaking, kneelifting, or hip-wiggling. This was necessary, I suggest, because ragtime’s merging of ‘black’ dancing and ‘white’ bodies alluded to threatening miscegenation at a time when increasing heterogeneity was feared. For this reason, ragtime dancing could not be sold with its blackness intact; it had to be whitened and indeed controlled through simplification and codification before it could be mass marketed as modern dance. Such changes became even more crucial if this dance form was to be embraced as a means for performing an elevated social status. In this way, early twentieth-century paranoia related to white ‘race suicide,’ coupled with concerns over modern American identity, helped shape social dance practice and an emerging ballroom industry – at a time when a radical re-visioning of American cultural values and commercial enterprise was taking place.

These race-based concerns worked in concert with emerging mass production processes, which dictated that ragtime’s improvisations should be diminished. Indeed, such commodification reduced its repertoire, homogenised its variations, eliminated solos, and sharply reduced physical contact between dancers. For this reason, modern dance, as the refined version of ragtime
dancing, provides researchers with a valuable case study for how racial subjugation is central to the economic and industrial ‘development’ that often defines modernity.

That said, perhaps modern dance professionals did not mass produce and market dances so much as the allure of modern dance. Social dance professionals did not find an efficient way to commodify dances until they developed studio franchises, like The Arthur Murray School of Dancing, during the 1930s. Their 1910s instructional materials rarely provide precise enough information for a novice to learn how to do modern dance. Teachers were, however, exceptionally successful at selling ideas about what modern dance should be. This boosted attendance at their schools and performances and drove sales of their manuals and magazines. In this way, they were able to fuel a dance craze and bolster their new industry – thereby enabling and promoting their own professionalization.

It is important to note that this is not the end of ragtime’s story. Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff has argued that commodities have a type of ‘cultural biography’ in which, over time, they shift in and out of being a commodity, sometimes in incomplete ways. Similarly, modern and ragtime dancing might best be viewed as iterations of one another (rather than as sequential) and therefore understood as part of a much larger narrative of African American community dance practices influencing European American mainstream social dance forms.

Ragtime and modern dancing coexisted during the 1910s. The latter did not replace the former, despite dance professionals’ efforts. In fact, I would argue that most social dancers moved between these two practices quite fluidly depending on context – more upright, graceful, and contained at a dressy affair and more playful, angular, and individualized late at night in a downtown club. Modern dance professionals created an alternative to ragtime, but in the end, they were not able to control social dance practices, even among their consumers/students. Instead, early twentieth-century social dancers made use of both of these dance forms, combining them at times, to their own social advantage and pleasure.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that while the modern dance industry was taking shape, capitalizing on the appeal of ‘black’ dancing, African Americans were still social dancing in private and public entertainment spaces. They were even adopting some of the modern dances, according to New York journalist Jervis Anderson.

Among the masses of Harlem the tango [modern dancing] was more of a fad – a fashionable diversion, or classy respite…[They] took to the tango partly because it was new, partly because they liked its association with high society, partly because they realized that black musicians had contributed something to its development and popularity, and partly, no doubt, because they wished to show that they, too, were capable of meeting its demand for controlled and elegant movements at a quick tempo.

But, modern dance did not replace ragtime dancing or any other dance form in African American communities. In fact, African American professional dancers eventually found ways to benefit from white interest in black dancing, for
example, by launching their own dance studios where white performers came to learn the latest ‘black’ dances during the 1920s. They were also able to represent ‘black’ dancing to the American public through musicals, one of the most notable of which was Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle’s 1921 *Shuffle Along*.

Nonetheless, African American dance professionals did not truly gain full artistic and financial independence until much later in the twentieth century. The mass marketing of African-influenced dance by and for white bodies established a longstanding tradition of appropriation, which ultimately had a revolutionary impact on dance history, African American history, and indeed U.S. history itself. Ragtime may be an ugly duckling, in the eyes of modern dance professionals and their adherents, but its transformation into the white swan of modern social dance provides a dynamic case study for American race relations, culture industries, and even modernization.

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**NOTES**

3. Jazz musician and educator Mark C. Gridley has defined ragtime music in the following way: ‘The word “rag” refers to a kind of music that was put together like a military march and had rhythms borrowed from Afro-American banjo music. You could tell ragtime music because many of the loud accents fell in between the beats.’ See Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, 6th edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 35.


8. Stage performances might have provided additional models, but their ephemeral nature meant that observers could likely grasp at most a few steps, but again, not the improvisational structure needed.


10. For example, it is entirely possible that some dancers and budding dance professionals, especially in New York City, were also working in production environments, such as the garment district, where Taylor’s ideas were being implemented.

11. In a dance-specific adaptation of Taylor’s ideas, interestingly, the dancer/workers is also the consumer. In this way, the consumer helps bring the dance product into being and thus, production and consumption happen simultaneously within a dance industry.


19. Linda Mizewski has likewise argued that efforts to emphasize the Ziegfeld Girl’s whiteness were a response to the perceived threats of immigration and migration. This author, in fact, links the construction of whiteness by these performances with the discourses of eugenics and nativism, which aimed to protect the whiteness of America through selective breeding and protective legislation. Linda Mizewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999).

20. This 1910s term refers to the loss of white racial dominance as a result of over-population by non-whites caused by intermarriage between ‘Nordics’ and everyone else, and by the production of their resulting ‘non-white’ offspring.


28. Edward Scott, The New Dancing As It Should Be... (London and New York: E.P. Dutton and Routledge, 1919), p. 125. Scott's emphasis. While it is true that Scott is British, his dance manual was also published in New York City and is therefore relevant to this study.


30. Clendenen, Dance Mad, p. 13. See also Castle, Modern Dancing, p. 177.


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