In 1930 the writer, photographer, and dance critic Carl Van Vechten observed that every decade or so, an anonymous black dancer creates a new step that so excites the African American dancing public that “it spreads like water over blotting paper” and quickly becomes observable at levees, jook joints, urban dance halls and even on street corners. After two years or so, a Euro-American dancer or dance director, witness to the excitement generated by the new dance believes he or she can cross it over for “white consumption” and “introduces it, frequently with the announcement that he has invented it.” As this was the history of “the Cake-Walk, the Bunny Hug, the Turkey Trot, the Charleston, and the Black Bottom,” Van Vechten predicted “it will probably be the history of the Lindy Hop.” He was right on all counts.

Then only three years old, the lindy hop had already been approved as a must-see “Harlem” dance by New York City’s theatrical critics and gossip columnists, and the dance helped make the Savoy Ballroom a major tourist attraction. Throughout the 1930s, white tourists flocked to the Savoy; in 1935 the Savoy’s best dancers, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, thrilled a sold-out Madison Square Garden crowd in sweeping the lindy division of the first annual Harvest Moon Ball. Sixteen years after its creation, the lindy hop reached a certain pinnacle of mainstream recognition. On the cover of the August 23, 1943, issue of Life, a teenaged white couple leaned against each other with bizarre lascivious looks on their faces along the bottom edge of the cover ran the words “The Lindy Hop.” A twelve-page photo spread was half devoted to the young white couple and half to a pair of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers. The headline inside the issue read simply: “A True National Folk Dance Has Been Born in the U.S.A.”
Van Vechten was unable to understand the moves of the lindy hop, as he lacked knowledge of African American dance aesthetics. He described the dance as “[a] certain dislocation of the rhythm of the Fox Trot, followed by leaps and quivers, hops and jumps, eccentric flinging about of arms and legs, and contortions of the torso only fittingly to be described by the word epileptic.” Van Vechten didn’t know a swing-out move from a turn-over Charleston, and there was then no awareness of African dance systems, whether Kongo-derived hip movements or Yoruba-derived head-and-shoulder movements (as in the shimmy). Dance criticism was itself in its infancy, and the swift swoops and sharp tempo shifts of black culture—its accelerative and explosive qualities—were then unidentified.

Yet despite the limitations of his gaze, Van Vechten honored the lindy hop’s artistic qualities by comparing it favorably to European artistic technique. Individual dancers “embroidered” the traditional measures with startling variation, as a coloratura singer . . . would embellish the score of a Bellini opera with roulades, runs and shakes.” The dance was so fast, rhythmic, and new to the eye that “it could be danced, quite reasonably, and without alteration of tempo, to many passages in the Sacre du Printemps of Stravinsky.” Van Vechten believed the dance was a new synthesis that captured the tempo of the time; Marshall Stearns claimed that “the Lindy caused a general revolution in the popular dance of the United States.”

Van Vechten identified the lindy’s revolutionary features: fluidity and perpetual motion; a noticeable lack of sensuality; startling dynamic shifts; and the importance of individual expression through improvisation. It was “a rite . . . [of] glorification of self,” he suggested, an honor rarely (if ever) accorded to black dance. To distinguish the lindy from the assumed primitive sensuality and “natural” rhythmic ability of blacks represented a major breakthrough in the white gaze. “The dance is not of sexual derivation, nor does it incline its hierophants towards pleasures of the flesh . . . these couples barely touch each other, bodily speaking . . . and each may dance alone, if he feels the urge . . . It is Dionysian, if you like . . . but it is not erotic” [emphasis added]. Apparently dancing the lindy, or even watching lindy hoppers, could reenergize Machine Age human bodies. “To observe the Lindy Hop being performed at first induces goosflesh, and second, intense excitement, akin to religious mania.”

Pagan rites and religious fervor were Van Vechten’s only benchmarks for intense energetic display, but the dance’s very name unified machine
technology and survival technology. The lindy was supposedly named after Charles Lindbergh, whose solo “hop” across the Atlantic was one of the heroic achievements of the 1920s. Recent research casts serious doubt on this myth, which was first promulgated by dancer Shorty Snowden; still the connection reflects a self-awareness of the technologic on the part of African American dancers about the individual breakthroughs of applied science and their inscribing on the body.

The historian William McNeill has theorized that “keeping together in time” through such activities as dancing creates and maintains social cohesion in ways that go deeper than language. What he calls “muscular bonding” breaks down the boundaries of subject and object, and is a method of group cohesion “far older than language. . . . [T]he emotion it arouses constitutes an indefinitely expansible basis for social cohesion . . . moving big muscles together and chanting, singing, or shouting rhythmically.”

McNeill extrapolated this theory from his own experience with close-order drill in the army, but he perceived similar unifying rituals in village dancing. Because participants share the “euphoric fellow feeling that prolonged and rhythmic muscular movement arouses,” he maintains that village dancing may be as “political” as army maneuvers: it “smooths out frictions and consolidates fellow-feeling among the participants.”

McNeill asserts that rhythmic stimuli—listened to or danced to—can cause “boundary loss, the submergence of self to the flow.” Until quite recently, there could be no more serious threat to the individual rational mind of the Enlightenment traditions than loss of self to the flow. Western scholars have been so focused on language there is as yet little research on “emotional response to rhythmic muscular movement in groups, nor even to choral singing.”

But if the lindy hop (or jitterbug) was the national folk dance, perhaps it contributed toward putting at least a younger generation together “in time”—in their bodies, in their minds, in their bones. I am suggesting the lindy acted as an agent of biosocial bonding during the swing era.

The excitement of the lindy hop for the younger generation of the swing era is comprehensible only in context. Arguably, dance of all kinds—tap, ballroom, social, commercial, folk—was more important to mainstream Euro-American culture between 1910 and 1945 than at any other time in American history. Only in this period were dance halls such as the Savoy Ballroom or cabarets such as the Cotton Club major tourist destinations and celebrity haunts. Only in the 1930s could an
nual ballroom dance competition (the Harvest Moon Ball) sell out Madison Square Garden every year within hours of putting tickets on sale, while another five thousand people stood around outside listening on the PA system. Only in the 1930s were there as many dancers among the top Hollywood box-office draws (Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Jimmy Cagney and Ruby Keeler) as archetypal self-reliant tough loners (Clark Gable or Gary Cooper) or blonde bombshells (Jean Harlow). Only in the 1930s would a leading dance authority embark on a cross-country trip to investigate regional dance styles and conclude that “the social dance is . . . thoroughly established as the national pastime.”

In the 1930s dance helped unify a large industrial nation in a period of existential crisis brought on by machine worship and technological unemployment. When Life crowned the lindy hop the national folk dance, it was specifically acknowledging the enthusiasm that greeted Betty Grable every night as she ended her USO show lindyhopping with a different soldier (of varied ethnicity). “A white movie star Lindy Hopping on a public stage with a black serviceman without, apparently, any innuendo—the dance was now much more than a hot and exciting black vernacular dance; it had become a symbol of America, the great melting pot.” Yet if dance symbolized melting-pot ideals, the history of its success reveals the tensions of the time as well. Havelock Ellis traced the outpouring of emotional energy after World War I to a hundred years of overproduction of material goods at the expense of biological needs. At seventeen, Ellis recalled thinking the world was itself a machine, “a sort of factory filled by an inextricable web of wheels and looms and flying shuttles, in a deafening din. That . . . was the world as the most competent scientific authorities declared it to be made.” Ellis’s interest in dance came from a personal rebellion against an overly repressive society, he embraced dance as joyous movement that enabled him to regain an aesthetic sense of beauty. Americans used dance to reclaim the human body as a site of joy and human power, of athletic and aesthetic display.

Dance was already a culture-shaping social art form in the 1920s; if that decade had a national folk dance, it was the Charleston. According to the dance scholar Sally Sommer, the Charleston liberated American social dance from European styles “once and for all.” In the place of statuesque postures and a focus on the upper body (from European culture) came an African American aesthetic featuring twisting hips.
shimmying shoulders, the bumping, slapping, and sticking out of the buttocks, the undulating torso, the “rambunctious swinging of oppositional limbs,” and other playful physical gestures such as rubber-logging. The Charleston’s spirited syncopation and irregular rhythmic accents helped create a symbiotic relationship between musicians and dancers that owed more to West African dance aesthetics than to court, ballroom, or peasant dancing. Brought to the Broadway stage by the Harlem stride pianist and composer James P. Johnson in Runnin’ Wild (1923), the Charleston was a dance rhythm he learned from blacks recently emigrated from the Carolinas; they stomped out the rhythm for him in a basement dance club and he used it as a basis for the hit songs in the show.\textsuperscript{15}

The Charleston represented a turning point in American social dance: suddenly new Broadway dances were seen less as artistic spectacles than as new cultural forms for participation. Nor was there a “correct” way to perform the dance, so it allowed for individual interpretation. The Charleston became a hallmark of the Jazz Age, and its emphasis on the undulating torso and the lower body continued the American rebellion against the erect, rigid torso of European ballet and folk dance, suggesting a cultural desire for torsion, dynamic movement, and whole-body involvement. The Charleston also split the body into separate planes. The focus of the dance was from the waist down—on the pelvis, hips, knees, and ankles—and depended upon constant motion across the body: hands across knees, legs moving back and forth, high kicks into the air. The dance “shattered the body into separate limbs, swinging like a human mobile into a multiplicity of simultaneous but diverse rhythms.”\textsuperscript{14} All of these shifts predate the rock-and-roll revolution of the Twist and various animal dances, and continued the Africanization of American movement.

Unlike the Charleston, however, the lindy had no immediate southern antecedents. It was not derived from the African tradition of animal dances, nor did it contain the flat-footed shuffle of blues dances and the “slow drag.” Without these features, the lindy calls attention to itself as something new in the black vernacular. According to the arranger and bandleader Jesse Stone, the lindy hop was not especially popular among African Americans in the South.\textsuperscript{15}

In all West African cultures, and consequently in Afro diasporic ones, the centrality of dance to group identity, self-expression, and moral instruction can only be compared to literature and philosophy in the
Western tradition. Equal parts oral tradition and embodied philosophy, West African dance always contains the possibility of individual expression within the group's circle. In the African diaspora, dance has functioned as a social structure that helps maintain African American humanity in the face of white domination and spiritual assault. Albert Murray refers to African Americans as culturally a "dance-beat oriented people," and emphasizes the affirmation of survival, joy, and individuality in the secular ritual of what he calls the "Saturday Night Function." The hallmarks of vernacular black dance are "improvisation and spontaneity, propulsive rhythm, call-and-response patterns, self-expression, elegance, and control." All of these qualities are present in tap and the lindy.  

The story of the development of the lindy hop has been outlined thoroughly by Marshall and Jean Stearns in their definitive *Jazz Dance.* My intention here is twofold: to analyze the lindy's machine aesthetics and its reception among Euro-Americans. Danced to propulsive rhythms by partners across class and race, the lindy's fast, fluid steps demanded improvisation and precise motion. As it evolved, the articulation of moves became more efficient and precise, and the dance sped up. When Frankie Manning brought "air steps" into the lindy in 1936—and dancers threw their partners in the air and they landed, in step, back in the dance—he broke the plane of the floor and made good on the dance's aspirations to be airborne. The lindy hop integrated the relentless power of machines by mixing speed, precision, and flow with human stamina and self-expression to display the partnered expression of dynamic control.

To review the lindy's reception, I first analyze eyewitness reports by three well-known cultural observers present at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, and then focus on the role of the lindy at the annual Harvest Moon Ball in Madison Square Garden. Something of a dance olympics, the Harvest Moon Ball attracted huge sell-out crowds every year from 1935 to 1950, and the *New York Daily News* often gave it front-page coverage. Why would a dance olympics be front page news? The philosophy professor and lindy scholar Robert Crease might respond to the question this way: "How we dance, as Nietzsche knew and Plato suspected, has a lot to do with who we are. And every time we experience that smooth feeling that accompanies moving in synch with jazz music—that swing... the Lindy has exerted its power over us."
White Culture’s Need for Black Dance

Between 1910 and 1940, millions of blacks left the South for the promise of better treatment, better jobs, and social equality. What I have elsewhere called the “swing hopes” of the black migration were manifested and expressed in big-band swing and the lindy—more for blacks than whites in the early years of the Depression—and embodied by conductors of the big-band swing train such as Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and Jimmie Lunceford. Stearns called the lindy “choreographed swing music,” and it should be seen as a northern innovation expressing African American optimism in a new land. Black dancers at northern dance halls registered the new soundscape in their language, bodies, feelings, and physical gestures. Created at the Savoy by African Americans in transition, the lindy expressed in dance an adjustment to a potentially liberating environment. The dance crossed over to Euro-American popularity in the mid-1930s when African American swing hopes fueled the rejuvenation of a younger white generation emerging from the dog years of the Depression. As Richard Wright observed in 1941, “Where we cannot go, our tunes, songs, slang, and jokes go.”

The new temples of dance built in the black neighborhoods of northern cities during a period of sustained migration might be usefully understood as southern “jook joints” raised up with white (often Jewish) capital. Zora Neale Hurston declared that “musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America”; it was the place where new dances were born, evolved, perfected, and then diffused into international popularity. Hurston named the Charleston, the Black Bottom, and the “slow and sensuous” grind as characteristic “[southern] Negro social dance[s]” that influenced physical motion around the world. The jook joint became the urban dance hall, and the petri dish for creating new dances reflective of modern life.

Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, the renowned Swiss physical culture theorist and creator of the eurythmics method of dance training, echoed Hurston’s observation in 1925. Surprised at the more sophisticated rhythmic fluidity of a younger generation of European children, he attributed their new agility and plasticity to the influence of African American dance: “Negro rhythms have had a salutary influence upon the development of our [European] sense of rhythm. Twenty years ago . . . our children were incapable of singing syncopations in the right time. . . . The freedom of jazz band rhythms, the extraordinary vivacity and variety of their cadences, their picturesque turns and twists, their wealth of
accentuation and fanciful counterpoint: all these have certainly infused new blood into musical rhythm.”

Modifications of tempo “come about gradually and quite naturally throughout the ages,” Dalroze wrote, and the new American tempo was carried by songs “cross[ing] the frontiers and . . . heard everywhere.” Even at two removes from the source of jazz and jazz dance, syncopation changed the kinesics of European children.

Dalroze’s method of “musico-calisthenics” is still widely used to teach dance and physical movement. To call his perceptions “primitivist” or “essentialist,” as contemporary scholars might, would admit a refusal to process the content of these statements, which are quite simple. Exposure to offbeat rhythms, creative rhythmic phrasing, sudden turns and shifts in tempo, and improvisational embellishment expanded the physiological skills and fluidity of European children. To dance to a music filled with rhythmic surprise (kinesthetically speaking, that is), the body must be alert and prepared to adjust to musical shifts, stops, and breaks. In European-derived patterned dances such as the waltz and minuet (and even in ballet), the body follows the music; in jazz dance, the body participates and interacts.

As with all black vernacular dance, the lindy hop requires close attention to the music by the dancers. Robert Crease belonged to the New York Swing Society in the early 1980s, and he had an epiphany about swing dance when Al Minns, of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, gave the members a lesson. Minns instructed them to listen to the music first and move their body to the music before doing any steps. Crease immediately realized this was a philosophical shift in the use of his body: to focus attention on the music rather than on the correct execution of the moves. “Suddenly we could see what dancing was all about . . . it had nothing to do with repeating patterns correctly, but with throwing your body into the music.”

The lindy hop as generally performed at the Savoy was an eight-count box step syncopated on the offbeat, where the couple followed a circular path around a shared central axis. It began with an initial move called the “jig walk,” where the couple connects by first walking toward each other, grasping each other’s waists, and then spinning quickly in place, creating a torqued-like motion across the hips. The “swing-out” move that follows involves the leader letting the partner out and away by extending the hand. At that point, either or both dancers can improvise. During this “break-away” step, partners literally break away to improvise steps of their own, or remain attached to their partner by a light touch.
The dance utilizes centrifugal force, torque, and momentum to keep the partners spinning smoothly; professional dancers could do this at a furious tempo. Good dancers then interpolate moves from other dances such as the Charleston, trucking, or the Suzi-Q. Some improvise spins, ecstatic solo leaps, and the fast, high kicks of African American “flash” dancing. To dance the lindy professionally required fast, constant side-to-side foot movement, the ability to follow your partner almost intuitively, and being comfortable with leaving your feet.26

The most artistic lindy hopper of all time, Frankie Manning, describes the dance as extremely horizontal and one that requires a certain “buoyancy.” One needed to crouch to move quickly and smoothly across the floor; controlled sliding and gliding accentuated the fast, liquid flow. Yet the dance allowed for pauses to provide drama and self-expression. Manning claimed the dance evolved out of a step called the Collegiate in the late 1920s, a faster version of the Charleston but lacking a break-away step. As opposed to ballroom forms, the lindy had no “correct step,” was danced to a 4/4 rhythm, and had the excitement of allowing dancers to be “together in the spirit” of the music yet “relating to the music on your own.”27

What elements in the lindy appealed to all dancers of the Depression? The lindy hop represented a synthesis of European social dance traditions and the West African dance tradition of self-expression. European social dance contributed the pattern and the idea of couples dancing; from West African dance came the fast tempos, the use of the whole body, improvisation, and a lowered center of gravity (in the hips and thighs). Like big-band swing, it was a cultural form which displayed a dialogue between individual self-expression and collective drive (both from the music and from a partner). A white male dancer from Rhode Island recalled that the lindy “gave you that sharpness, that edge . . . that you had to say I am. It was the only dance that you could use the power of self-expression in. You personify it.” Another contemporary lindy hopper recalled “the freedom . . . the marvelous freedom the Lindy Hop introduced into dance.” As for the collective drive, white dancers were just as aware as black dancers that musicians and dancers were “artistic compatriots” who fed off each other’s energy and rhythms. “We danced for them and they played for us,” one white woman recalled.28

Now let’s go to the Savoy to see what cultural observers made of the dance and the ballroom. In the 1930s, Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom was a unique model of a public integrated space, arguably the only desegre-
gated national institution. The *New York Amsterdam News* commented on the occasion of Greta Garbo's 1939 visit, "Perhaps no other spot in this great country is so symbolic of the American ideal. The Savoy is truly a melting pot—a cross-section of American life... [where] every night in the week, every race and nationality under the sun, the high and the low, meet and color lines melt away under the influence of the rhythms of America's foremost sepia bands." The Savoy drew capacity crowds of three to five thousand over the course of a given evening for Guy Lombardo as well as Duke Ellington, and many were turned away for the famous Benny Goodman–Chick Webb "battle of the bands" of May 11, 1937. Its main attractions were "ten-cent beer, twenty-cent wine, a reasonable entrance fee, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, lovely congenial hostesses, and the best of swing music." Actress Lana Turner pinned the nickname "The Home of Happy Feet" on the Savoy to honor the spiritual uplift of its mood and dancing, a slogan repeated nightly on live remote nationwide broadcasts.39

For all the Savoy's popularity, the white primitivist gaze at black culture stubbornly remained. In 1939 the Jewish novelist and humorist Leo Rosten went to the Savoy for the first time and left a depiction of the dancing that reveals the same combination of awe, primitivist viewpoint, and lack of vocabulary expressed by Van Vechten. Rosten cautioned readers about his shocking experience, warning them that "if the pale but desperate prose which follows seems impossible to believe, don't blame me. Just try the Savoy yourself once. Stronger men have been carried out of the place, babbling." First he was assaulted by the waves of musical power that greeted him upon entrance, "a battery of brasses blaring [the hit song] 'Flat Foot Floogie with the Floy Floy'," and then mesmerized by the sights on the dance floor. "Men... lifting women way up, throwing them down, flinging them over their shoulders, tossing them over their heads, hurling them to arm's length, yanking them back, shaking them like wet mops... Hands flew out in all directions—waving, flaying, stabbing the air. It was a surrealist's nightmare."31

Rosten too used the rhetoric of religious fervor to express the emotive power, focused intensity, and circulation of energy in the room. "Frenzy ruled that ballroom," he wrote, noting the shouts of joy in the midst of improvisation. Rosten accurately identified the factors that made the Savoy Ballroom "the nation's leading ballroom" and a distinctive cultural institution.32 There was the section of African American dancers who would "base" the best lindy hoppers with hand-clapping
and shouts of encouragement, adding vocal and percussive layers to the big band’s steady rhythm. There was the group of white “swing-addicts” who stood next to the bandstand listening to the music as if “in a coma.” There were the circulating group of Savoy hostesses who provided men with three dances for a quarter, “gorgeous creatures ... [who] carried themselves regally.” There were several interracial couples, a sight that still enraged many white men even in New York.

At the height of an up-tempo tune, Rosten compared standing near the dancers to “being at the center of a particularly violent tornado.” He was amazed at the dancers’ self-control when, “at a [seemingly] secret signal and with marvelous precision, they slid into a slow-motion step, so slow it was hard to believe.” Not thirty seconds later, they “went [back] into an acrobatic furor.”

When one band ended its set, a collective sigh of disappointment went up, but a second band started up and “then someone yelled — and hell broke loose all over again. A man seized a woman . . . and [they] began to swirl as if he believed in perpetual motion.” He swore he heard the band hurl a “long ecstatic ‘YeaaahHH!’” at the dancers, who responded with their “answering ‘OooohHH!’, ” and again “hundreds of bodies twirled and leapt and spun.” He concluded with a prayer for the forces at play on the Savoy dance floor: “I had a premonition that if any of it stopped, for a single instant, the whole world would fall to pieces.” His sentiment echoes the dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon’s apt phrase for the goal of all Afrodisporic secular dance: “dancing to rebalance the universe.”

Otis Ferguson, the unofficial jazz critic of the New Republic, wrote a more dramatic (and better-known) description of the Savoy’s dancing. Ferguson compared being at the Savoy to being inside a drum: “When the band gets pretty well into it, the whole enclosure, with all its people, beats like a drum and rises in steady time, like a ground swell.” He identified several overlapping layers of energy, a dense mosaic of speech, dance and music, and advised visitors to simply let all these waves of information wash over them. “You cannot see everything at once but you can feel everything at once, a sort of unifying outflow of energy, [and] you can almost see it burn.”

For Ferguson, a “good dancer” was one who simultaneously kept the tempo of the song with one part of the body while improvising to a second rhythm (again, a West African-derived practice). Watching a black dancer off by himself swinging to the jukebox, Ferguson observed “the