DANCE FLOOR DEMOCRACY

THE SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF MEMORY AT THE HOLLYWOOD CANTEEN

SHERRIE TUCKER
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There Is No Color Line at This Coast Canteen
—CHICAGO DEFEND (JANUARY 30, 1943)

What does it mean to have a body that provides an institution with diversity?
—SARA AHMED, ON BEING INCLUDED (2012)

Democracy! That’s what it means, Slim! Everybody equal. Like tonight! All them big shots, listening to little shots like me, and being friendly!
—A SERGEANT BROOKLYN NOLAN, HOLLYWOOD CANTEEN (1944)

This is a long book about a small place, a military recreation spot operated for three years by motion picture industry workers in Hollywood (October 3, 1942–November 22, 1945).1 There are larger rooms with longer (earthly) life spans. But this one’s fame extends beyond walls and years. Even so, this long book does not deliver a comprehensive history of the Hollywood Canteen—there are far more detailed accounts of the nuts and bolts of its operation. A reader seeking such a resource would do well to consult Lisa Mitchell and Bruce Torrence’s book The Hollywood Canteen: Where the Greatest Generation Danced with the Most Beautiful Girls in the World (2012).

At the same time, this is a small book about a large topic. I began by interviewing people about their memories of dancing in this particular patriotic swing station, and I wound up rethinking my position on enduring linkages between democracy, war, and swing. I push off from the Hollywood Canteen to ask broader questions about relationships between big band music, jitterbug, and U.S. nostalgia for World War II. You might say I write less about the dance floor than on it, approaching it from many routes. I wrestle with it,
cruise it, and squeeze through the crowd. I dance in the archives and sit on people’s sofas. I meet some former Canteen-goers through the papers they left for posterity and interact with others in a shared moment when we ask one another questions, compare interpretations, and push back. I hope this book bears traces of embodied transmissions with different implications and outcomes. This is a dance floor that means something to people: those who remember it and those who recognize its nostalgic style. I approach with respect and suspicion. I spy on it, screen it, and experiment with its pressures.

Before we take off, I offer a few questions to set the ground. First, what was the Hollywood Canteen and why go there now? What does it tell us about 1940s swing culture and the continuation of romantic attachments to World War II in the United States? Finally, why study a dance floor in the past if the object of study is the lingering power of swing culture to move U.S. Americans to think fondly of World War II in the present?

What Is This Place?

The Hollywood Canteen was a uso-like nightclub that was operated by volunteers drawn mostly from the guilds and unions of the motion picture industry. Patterned after New York’s Stage Door Canteen, the Hollywood Canteen opened on October 3, 1942. During the three years of its existence, volunteers entertained drafted and enlisted members and soldiers of the army, navy, Marines, Coast Guard, and Allied nations. Bette Davis was the president. John Garfield was vice president. The Hollywood Canteen became a powerful backdrop for publicity photos of movie stars performing patriotism through dancing with soldiers, feeding them, signing autographs, and generally being friendly and generous with their time, beauty, and fame during a relatively “popular” war. Volunteers were drawn from across the ranks of motion picture industry workers and supplemented with others. Publicity images leave the impression that all of the volunteers were movie stars and everyone socializing on the dance floor was white.

Yet, the Hollywood Canteen was also the site of brouhahas that broke out when Canteen board members fought over whether or not people could dance across race lines. When challenged by members and volunteers less keen on integration, Bette Davis and John Garfield, along with the segregated locals of the Los Angeles musicians unions, threatened to pull their support, and the color line purportedly was broken. Stories about these civil rights battles appeared in the national black press, popular front press, and the music magazine *DownBeat*, if not the mainstream press. It is the story that dominates the FBI files and morphs into happy multiculturalism (among the extras) in the 1944 feature film about the Canteen. Later on, this angle resurfaced as
something to be proud of in biographies and autobiographies of celebrities and other film industry personnel and as evidence of racial tension (with varying degrees of resolution) in excellent histories of jazz and swing, World War II, and Los Angeles.²

Nonetheless, the lasting image that circulates in national memory is the jitterbugging white starlet and soldier. Sometimes a photograph is juxtaposed that shows a black entertainer on the stage and bears a caption that celebrates the club for its racial integration.³ By national memory, I do not mean to imply that everyone in the nation shares the same memory, nor that this form of memory bears traces of every national subject. National memory is not social memory in the sense of being co-created by members of a community remembering together.⁴ What I mean by national memory is a multisensory look and feel, a story and a soundtrack, a pallet of colors, a style of commemoration of imagined coherence that is stirring enough to bring the nation to the nation-state. So dominant is such a national memory that all who claim positions as national subjects must grapple with it from time to time, one way or another, whether they see themselves reflected in it or not.

Photographs and newsreel footage of the white starlet-and-soldier couple recur in documentaries about the wartime home front and Hollywood’s patriotic service in World War II. In recurring nostalgic production, the recycled and reenacted white jitterbugging man in uniform and actress volunteer instantly evoke the friendly nation at war. In this book, I ask: what is the connection between the integrated dance floor as a symbol of democracy and the white dancing couples that provide so much of the readymade stock footage of swing culture—in its incarnation as the national memory of the “Greatest Generation” in the “Good War”? What is this gap between the iconic photos of white starlets and soldiers in Hollywood and the disappearing/reappearing “battles” over mixed-race dancing?

There is something about this contradiction that looms larger than the Hollywood Canteen and, in fact, resembles the conundrums surrounding the way democracy is typically conceived in the United States and in swing and jazz history. Indeed, the more deeply drawn I was into the research, the more I was convinced that this small place could be a window onto bigger questions of swing, democracy, race, gender, war, and national memory.

The typical Hollywood Canteen story goes something like this: selfless movie stars roll up their sleeves and boost morale. The servicemen are bashful boys in uniform who want nothing more than a glass of milk, an autograph to send home, and a spin around the dance floor with a modest (yet pretty) starlet-hostess to the energetic sounds of swing music, heard as optimistic, youthful, and utterly “American.” Lists of donations figure prominently in
the telling, the thousands of pounds of butter donated, the numbers served, and the sweet things gis uttered when Hollywood personalities treated them as though they were important. Often the soldiers are depicted as adorably shy and homespun, country bumpkins in the court of the rich and famous. A typical story in *Screenland* tells of a “husky Marine [who] keeps dancing with [glamorous movie star] Alexis Smith until she suggests he meet some of the other girls. ‘Oh no,’ he says, ‘I’d be scared stiff to dance with a glamorous movie star. I like a regular girl, like you.’” In telling after telling, the Hollywood Canteen unfolds as a utopian tale of national unity and innocence, its characters exemplars of “towering achievement and modest demeanor,” to borrow from Tom Brokaw’s consecration of an entire generation.

The narrative was already in place on the club’s opening night, when Colonel Harold E. Shannon, commander of the Midway forces of the Marines, claimed to speak for “every leatherneck, gob, and buck private” when he told the overflow crowd and radio audience: “these boys here tonight will be going out to our battle fronts and in the tough moments that may come they will have a memory of the warm friendliness that is being shown by you folks.”

This tone carried over in the self-congratulatory status-reversals that would become characteristic of Hollywood Canteen–style democracy. Celebrities performed humility from the grandstands by cheering the “real stars”—the gis—as they filed in to dance with movie stars, including Ann Sheridan, Rita Hayworth, Hedy Lamarr, and Deanna Durbin, to the big bands of Duke Ellington, Jimmy Dorsey, and Kay Kyser.

The basic narrative is typical of patriotic World War II musical films. In fact, Warner Brothers made one of those features about the Hollywood Canteen during the run of the club, featuring many of its actual volunteers. In *Hollywood Canteen* (1944), Sergeant Brooklyn Nolan (Dane Clark) delivers a soliloquy on the topic of democracy. He is speaking to his buddy, Corporal Slim Green (Robert Hutton), after an exhilarating night of dancing with Ida Lupino and Janice Paige.

“You know, I don’t want to get sloppy about this, but it kind of got me, all them famous people being friendly and democratic.” Sgt. Nolan surprises himself with the word. He says it again. “Democracy.” (And again!) “Democracy! That’s what it means, Slim! Everybody equal. Like tonight! All them big shots, listening to little shots like me, and being friendly.” Suddenly, his thoughts turn to his body, injured in battle. It turns out that democracy-as-friendliness not only feels great, it has tremendous healing properties for the individual, the military, and the nation. Sergeant Nolan leaps from his bunk with a bodily epiphany: “I DANCED TONIGHT! LOOK! I don’t need my cane no more!”
As contemporary political theorists, philosophers, and activists continue to point out, the very definition of U.S. democracy uttered by the fictitious Sergeant Brooklyn Nolan was a common one in the World War II era and remains so in the present. When presidents, pundits, and politicians bother to define “democracy” at all, they characterize it vaguely. It is still *not that unusual* to find liberal institutions in the United States that profess democracy without defining it or define it as “big shots” being friendly to “little shots.” How often is an undefined, but emotionally charged evocation of democracy hailed as *proof* of America’s friendly intentions toward “little shot” nations? How often is America’s performance of friendliness taken as *proof* of its democratic spirit? How often does one hear the call to war as protecting “democracy” from her “enemies” without a definition of “democracy” (and sometimes without a clear definition of “enemies” except as “enemies of democracy”)?

Like a large budget studio feature film, the Hollywood Canteen was produced, performed, advertised, represented, filmed, written about, and documented in ways intended to stimulate larger-than-life and certainly larger-than-local experiences, memories, and identifications. Indeed, the usual story seems to know no temporal bounds. The image of the (white) jitterbugging starlet and (white) GI at the Hollywood Canteen assumed a place in contemporary World War II national identity and never seemed to go away, and never seems to lose its ability to evoke a sense of familiarity to new viewers, whether as retro-style in Christina Aguilera’s video “Candyman” of 2007 or as misty amateur evocations of the United States home front of World War II in countless reunions, reenactments, and commemorations or as historical and educational materials. As narrator of a 1988 documentary on Hollywood and World War II, actor Van Johnson, historicized the Hollywood Canteen as “a real fairy tale of democracy.”

**Why Go There Now? Swing Culture as War Memory**

When I began this project in the summer of 2000, the history of the Hollywood Canteen felt historical. The pairing of civilian women with military men on a swing dance floor, as an expression of national consensus for going to war, seemed a quaint artifact of another era, pitched to a naïve population that I thought had been replaced by the far more sophisticated audience celebrated by cultural studies. Sure, I had noticed the connection between 1940s pop culture and war when the swing revival accompanied the seemingly endless fifty-year anniversary commemorations of World War II and coincided with the supposedly one-year-long Gulf War in the early 1990s. Somehow this memory didn’t prevent me from being stunned anew post–September
11, 2001, when World War II popular culture once again demonstrated its efficacy to mobilize Americans for national love and war.

Eerily, the style and content of the network news quickly resembled the propaganda of the 1940s that I was studying as part of my research on World War II popular culture. Barely two months after September 11, while researching the government censorship of popular culture enacted by the Office of War Information in the 1940s, newspapers reported on meetings between the federal government and Hollywood producers about how to combine forces to create the kinds of images and narratives Americans need during difficult times. A page 1 editorial in the *New York Times* used the subheading “Firing Up the Hollywood Canteen” to tell us that “Karl Rove, a senior Bush adviser, is to meet today with senior Hollywood executives to see how they might contribute to the war effort, possibly with public service spots and documentaries on terrorism.” To this reminder of Hollywood’s cooperation with the Office of War Information and the cascade of patriotic films of the 1940s, the editorialist, Clyde Hyberman, connected other developments that harkened back to World War II, including George Bush’s sudden shift from “lone cowboy” to “born-again nation-builder and multilateralist” and the Pentagon’s blockage of “access to independent information about the war.”

To conduct any kind of research about World War II history and culture during these years was to dance with the past and the present. My interactions with former Canteen-goers were shaped by the high level of “wartime consciousness” afoot—that is, the World War II memory that Torgovnick tells us lies dormant but is ready to spring into action at times of national crisis, often through 1940s-style national rhetoric and popular culture. The years in which I conducted these interviews are certainly not the first time that popular artifacts of the World War II era resurfaced as national culture, but the effects were difficult to miss. Who could fail to notice, for example, the relentless references to the bombing of Pearl Harbor following the attacks of September 11, 2001, or the recirculation of iconic World War II images in the months that followed, such as the reworkings of the Norman Rockwell Four Freedoms series of illustrations in the *New York Times*? Searching the web for “The Hollywood Canteen” in November 2001, I learned that Los Angeles had caught “forties fever,” according to a review about a popular night spot called the Hollywood Canteen at a location mere blocks away from the original (demolished in 1962). Only this one charged for food and operated in reverse: instead of military personnel being served by celebrity volunteers, celebrity customers were served by waitstaff dressed as World War II military personnel and pinups. By 2004, the Bob Hope uso Club at Los Angeles
International Airport had tripled in size. Its connections to World War II also expanded, with the addition of a library named after General Doolittle, a snack bar called the “Hollywood Canteen,” and a TV lounge named after Johnny Grant, honorary mayor of Hollywood and one of my interviewees.16

In short, my research of the Hollywood Canteen ceased to feel like a social and cultural history of race and gender relations during the 1940s and morphed irrevocably into a history of the present, specifically focused on contemporary production of memories about World War II. My study retained its emphasis on contradictory connections between race, gender, democracy, and swing on that 1940s dance floor that was configured, more than any other, as the dance floor of the nation—but that emphasis became a way to study the relationship between the various ways World War II is remembered and memorialized in the United States and the ways official memories are recruited to justify national actions globally.

It may sound naïve to say that I did not realize that this exploration of skirmishes over democracy on the dance floor at the Hollywood Canteen would also be about national memory and embodiment in the present. Nonetheless, I found myself a subject who, like Canteen hostess Jane Lockwood, “danced as never before.” For me, this entailed revisiting swing historiography and stepping into scholarly spaces I had not yet explored—fields of memory studies and dance studies—in search of new ways to approach, in the present, multiple perspectives on swing culture of the past. It has been crucial to this project not only to study cultural struggles historically on one dance floor in the 1940s but also to explore what happens to diverse social memories, and ways of telling those memories, when a dominant strain manages to masquerade as everybody’s memory of the “dance floor of the nation.”

The management of whiteness and multiculturalism in the representations of the Hollywood Canteen in revivals displays a striking continuity of 1940s images and current revivals. Although the photographs, the newsreels, and the feature film of the 1940s occasionally include people of color, they are presented almost as scenery, with the focus clinging to the white jitterbugging couples. The absence of people of color presented as subjects of the narrative of “inclusion” has changed little in the revival images I have tracked throughout the years of writing this book. In 2007, Christina Aguilera’s video “Candyman” includes nonwhite soldiers and hostesses in the Hollywood Canteen—inspired background, but Aguilera’s uncanny trio performance with herself as an Andrews Sisters knockoff (spectacularly in three hair colors), and the jitterbug scene are presented as white.17 World War II nostalgia production—from immediately after the war to this day—has issued many re-enactors of the Andrews Sisters, as well as bandleader Glenn Miller, including the “In
the Mood Singers and Dancers” and “String of Pearls Orchestra,” who played the string of World War II anniversaries that accompanied the Good War Memory Boom and continue to tour. Their advertising promises that they are as “authentic as it gets.” Not all “white” nostalgic reenactments are performed by white people. They don’t need to be. Tracy McMullen argues that the Glenn Miller reenactment band at Yale managed to enshrine a memory of World War II swing culture as an all-white, all-male orchestra in spite of its inclusion of people of color and white women.

As I worked on this research, my own workplace, the University of Kansas, repeatedly hosted events that enacted connections between World War II commemoration and wars of the present. The Dole Institute of Politics broke ground the month after September 11, 2001, and finally opened four months after the launching of “Operation Iraqi Freedom” with the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. The opening started the Institute off with a bang: a four-day celebration that included the Glenn Miller Orchestra (the “ghost orchestra,” that is, to use the chilling term for bands that played on, replacing original members as mortality rotated them out), a “uso show,” a World War II–era air show, and World War II military reenactments. The grand opening of the institute building itself, with its “World’s Largest Stained Glass American Flag,” concretizes the associations between World War II with the very different wars of the present. At the end of a display of artifacts from Senator Bob Dole’s military career in World War II stands a pair of glass-encased steel fragments from the fallen towers of the World Trade Center. A plaque explains they are there to “remind us that each generation faces its own call to service.”

As an especially beloved artifact of World War II swing culture nostalgia, the Hollywood Canteen fits squarely into the cultural repository that Marianna Torgovnick calls “the War Complex,” or the particular ways that national memory of the World War II continues to express, for many Americans, “how we like to think of ourselves and to present ourselves to the world, even at those times when, the United States has been a belligerent and not-much-loved nation.” Stories of uncomplicated American goodness during the World War II have played, and continue to play, a powerful role in constructing national memory and recruiting national identity, even for those too young to remember that war. A Hollywood Canteen memory of volunteer movieland hostesses jitterbugging with wholesome boys in uniform is a powerful backdrop for narrations of a controversial nation that inscribe the national “we” as innocent, benevolent, and united. This book is about that vision, but it is also about the visions that are forgotten when that one is the only one that is remembered.
Why Dance in the Past?

There are many routes one could take to explore the complex cultural work of the Hollywood Canteen. A history of the club might have told us more about the place behind the memory—but this presumes that the “place” and the “memory” might be disentangled, that one is literally the referent for the other. This didn’t seem to get at the questions I wanted to ask, although I did indeed conduct extensive archival research on the club and other sites of soldier entertainment in Los Angeles during the 1940s. At the other end of the spectrum would be a cultural study of reenactments of the Hollywood Canteen, along with other swing culture performances of World War. Indeed, I collected evidence of nostalgic afterlife and read with great interest other scholarship on World War II nostalgia performance, reenactment, and stimulation of particular forms of national memory. But I wanted to do something slightly different. I wanted to better understand my own fascination with, and fear of, World War II nostalgia, particularly as it travels in swing culture, and I wanted to do it in conversation with people who had attended the Hollywood Canteen.

Some white former Canteen-goers talked about racial tensions but most narrated the dance floor as completely integrated, friendly, and uncontroversial. One after another insisted that it was a “wonderful” place where “everyone was together” and “there was no prejudice.” However, when asked if they had ever danced with a person of a race other than their own or saw people of other races dancing, many replied “I don’t remember,” followed by “but I’m absolutely sure it was integrated. I would have noticed if it wasn’t.” One white man told me, “Those problems hadn’t started yet.”

Canteen-goers of color more often narrated a segregated or at least partially segregated environment. When I asked Mel Bryant, an African-American veteran, about the extent to which the dance floor was integrated, he replied, “Don’t you believe it.” He added that it was “a different thing, a wonderful thing to have a place where soldiers could go, but it wasn’t integrated in an equal way.”

Most of those who had been civilian volunteers at the club remembered both military men and women as being welcome there. However, women veterans most often narrated the club as a place where they were shunned or sent upstairs. Navy veteran Lorraine (Mitchell) Bear recalled being turned away from the door when she and her fellow waves (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) traveled from Port Hueneme for a night on the town. Other servicewomen remembered being allowed in the building but barred from the dance floor.
Whether the interviews happened before or after September 11, 2001, profoundly affected them. While I agree utterly with Marianna Torgovnick that the words “After 9/11” have “become a cliché that can set the teeth on edge, identifying powerful memories, potent emotions, and a political code,” it also seems necessary to comment on the presence in my interview sample of emotional and rhetorical distinctions between those that occurred in the months following 9/11.24 In October 2001, a white starlet, Andrea King, told me this about the Canteen:

It’s one of the earliest instances I can remember when a night club was racially mixed. And I’m proud to say I never personally heard anyone complain about it. There were much greater concerns of the day. Just like what’s happening now, with the tragedy of the Trade Towers attack, everyone comes together for a single cause. For a while at least, other prejudices are put aside.25

King’s perception that World War II promoted racial integration in the United States and that this was an uncomplicated policy eagerly supported by all is paralleled by her perception that prejudices were now set aside and responses unified in the United States post–9/11. There is ample evidence to the contrary in both cases, yet my aim is not to produce a historical study that would prove her incorrect but to listen in relation to many versions. Narrated memories of people who attended the Hollywood Canteen cannot be taken as an accurate map of social relations sixty years ago. Nonetheless, they can offer insights into a “struggle over memory,” in the very serious sense in that Alessandro Portelli develops in his groundbreaking work.26 For Portelli, oral historians must work “on both the factual and narrative planes.” It doesn’t matter, then, whether memory is true or false. “When an incorrect reconstruction of history becomes popular belief, we are not called on only to rectify the facts but also to interrogate ourselves on how and why this common sense took shape and on its meanings and uses.”27

Listening for struggles over memory, I conducted oral histories, interviews, conversations, and corresponded with over sixty people who had visited the Hollywood Canteen. For simplicity’s sake, I will use the terms “interviewee” and “narrator” interchangeably. However, I do mean by “oral history” something different from “interview.” I define “oral history” as a narrator-led interpretation of the past in the present in which the oral historian listens and tries to follow (and follow up) wherever the teller leads. Both participants still may ask and answer questions, and both impact the interaction, but there is a looser sense of time, place, and story, and the details and events selected as important may not be at all what the researcher anticipated. The
“interview” is also a dynamic interaction but one that is structured around a specific object of inquiry and unfolds in a more contained question-and-answer-driven pattern, even when those questions are open-ended. Though the parameters are tighter, surprising answers do occur, stories do get told, and the lead and follow may switch off. My preference is the former, but I was also happy to lead the Q&A when my partner preferred to dance within more structured guidelines. In my experience of both forms of exchange, there is nearly always slippage between them. What is important is that the parameters are discussed and mutually agreed on before the session begins.

In listening to many struggles over memory, I trained my ear to notice instances of critical commotion, by which I mean moments in which the speaker seems to narrate ways of being that are both in and out of sync with the dominant “official” version. The significance of the Hollywood Canteen interviews is not in what they can reveal about “what really happened” but in the ways people remember and narrate themselves in relation to such a narrow and persistent available framework. Often, narrators and interviewees identified with the familiar version yet in some way or another also identified limitations in the democratic fairy tale. In this way, in remembering and describing their own bodies as moving both with and against the official national narrative, tellers situated themselves as particular kinds of national subjects.

When narrators told how their bodies were embraced or rejected by the social geography of race, gender, class, sexuality, and American-ness, they shared ways of remembering and telling that were shaped not only by that night sixty years ago when they attended the Hollywood Canteen, but by national historical events and official stories told about those events both at the time and in the present. Because I see these memories as socially constituted, as embodied, I am interested in how people place themselves in an imagined landscape that represents a kind of dance-floor-of-the-nation. To what extent do narrators identify with the Canteen of national memory? To what other community memories (neighborhood, familial, ethnic, racialized, occupational, political, etc.), do they connect their re-membered visits to the Canteen? Narrative theory helps me to listen to how people make order from the disorder that is opened up when I ask, and they begin to respond, to the question “What do you remember about the Hollywood Canteen?” We covered lots of territory. But it was the focus on the small place—the club grounded in time and place—that allowed us to do this, even when it catapulted us to other times and places.

The research for this book has felt like walking slowly and respectfully through a roomful of people at the end of their lives who are all talking at
once. I hear them talking about the same thing and different things simultaneously. From this perspective, it is difficult to make out more than one person's words at a time. I hear each person's story when we are briefly face-to-face but always remain aware of the dissonant surround-sound of other voices, living and dead. Reveries of nostalgia suddenly spring bolt upright as conversation shifts from distant memory to diverse responses to the evening news: “... just like what’s happening now ...”28 “We’re at war, but I don’t think the people realize we’re at war.”29 Because my own feelings of rage, terror, and fear of U.S. militarism are so great during this research period, I cannot bracket my feelings about current wars as we talk about the past—and neither do my interviewees. I step on their feet, and they step on mine. I am one of the embodied participants, partnering in brief but intense conversations about a distant past that urgently matters. They tell me what they hope I will write. I feel the weight, knowing that my own perspective more closely mirrors those of some interviewees than others; I feel the weight of wanting to democratically represent not just one point of view but the tangle.

Therefore, I have attempted to write this book as though it is a dance floor of memory. I am one of the dancers. As a reader, you are another. Sometimes I take the liberty of referring to us as we, though I know we are not the same. Previous jitterbug experience is neither a plus nor a minus—this is a dance floor famous for its stated commitment to democracy and tolerance for dancers of all levels, novice to pro. As I shall elaborate in the introduction, I worked to write in such a way as to represent my interactions with people connected with the Hollywood Canteen as accurately as I could, while leaving space for questions I didn’t ask, people I didn’t meet, and various possible interpretations, including yours. I want to get at the crowdedness of this dance floor as it moves with and against the trademark simplicity of representations of World War II swing memory, and the jitterbugging starlet hostesses and gis at the Hollywood Canteen, that have been invested with national nostalgia.

In the introduction, I walk through my writing strategies for dancing in a small place in order to explore large questions. I stretch out on the peculiarities of writing connections among swing culture, democracy, and war memory. I conclude with a map of the approaches that make up the remainder of this long book, a foray occasioned by a small—and very crowded—space.
Introduction

Writing on a Crowded Dance Floor

I have come to believe that improvised dance involves literally giving
shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady
landscape.
—DANIELLE GOLDMAN

What we manage to do each time we win a victory is not so much to
secure change once and for all, but rather to create new terrains for
struggle.
—ANGELA Y. DAVIS

What would history look like if it were to acknowledge the fact of
improvisation?
—SUSAN LEIGH FOSTER

Writing from the Tangle

How does one write on a crowded dance floor—any crowded dance floor—
ever mind a famous crowded dance floor that existed over sixty years ago?
The writer can interview people who were there, read what others have written,
and sift the archives for photos, ephemera, and newspaper clippings, but she
cannot actually perch in the rafters and record the interactions below. Nor
can her interviewees actually recreate their points of view from the dance
floor. Even if total recall was an option, eyewitnesses could never identify all
of the bodies that affected their experiences and memories. They wouldn't
have been able to see beyond the heads and shoulders of those with whom
they danced any more than I can see beyond those with whom I spoke. Nor
would our interactions be the same on a different day. Oral history, like dance,
is dynamic, interactive, and shaped by embodied knowledge of participants.
So is writing, though it doesn’t usually feel that way. To write on a crowded dance floor is to practice intentional awareness of contingencies among ourselves and those we face, as well as those of unknown bodies and perspectives that jostle the social geography on which we move.

To add another layer of crowdedness—how does one write meaningfully about a *famous* dance floor that has been relentlessly depicted in particular ways in newspapers and newsreels, movie magazines, radio broadcasts, and elsewhere throughout, beyond, and even *before* its earthly existence? Truly, this dance floor was saturated with all of the ingredients of national nostalgia before the opening night crowds were so thick that Bette Davis had to crawl through the bathroom window to deliver the welcome speech,² Betty Grable danced with forty soldiers, sailors, and Marines in ten minutes,³ and the paparazzi discovered the simple poignancy of Marlene Dietrich sweeping the floor between stampedes. A sturdy patriotic narrative about this dance floor had been erected before the first three thousand hostess-soldier couples shook the foundations of the old barn, even before the paint dried on its immediately legendary murals. People who shared their stories noted the difficulty of distinguishing between their own memories of the dance floor and
what they remember from the feature film *Hollywood Canteen* (1944), other people’s memories, or any number of newsreels, Hollywood biographies, histories, and documentaries, most of which repeat the nostalgic presentation of wartime publicity. How does one write through this thick sea of narrative in which public relations storytelling cannot be separated from personal memories? How does one balance, in writing, memories shared by people who danced at the Hollywood Canteen once or twice a week for three years, with those who danced (or tried to) once or twice period? How should the writing balance the striking similarity of some people’s memories to official Canteen narratives—with the equally striking differences of others?

To write about swing dancing at the Hollywood Canteen demanded, unavoidably, that I tangle with one of the many potent sites of America’s nostalgia for itself as innocent, heroic, and virtuous during World War II. My use of “tangle” as a methodological verb is deliberate. I do not hope to “untangle” the various layers of significance wrapped up in the Hollywood Canteen, in other words, but to “tangle with” cultural memory as “a field of contested meanings,” drawing from Marita Sturken’s conception of the relationship between personal and cultural memory and history as “entangled.” Diverse memories and narratives jostle and bounce one another around the room when they take to this crowded iconic space, yet in doing so are somehow never completely free from a simple “coherent” national version. Writing—even historical writing—is embodied. Dancing—even social dancing—inscribes subjects, democratically or otherwise. And remembering one’s body in motion is different from remembering “what happened.” In the sections of the interviews when people narrated their bodies moving across the crowded dance floor of the Hollywood Canteen, the vantage point tended to shift from a “big picture” of “it was like this” to the type of bumpy, idiosyncratic view one might expect from the revealing limits of a handheld movie camera that cannot see above the heads of others. In discussing the challenges of filming the Lindy Hop, and its mainstreamed doppelgänger the jitterbug, Robert Crease noted that neither the proscenium view nor the cutting from one close-up to the next is able to render the sense that “the performer of vernacular dance is always alongside others in an organic and multiperspectival event.” In this way, oral history may be better suited than film to represent these fleeting perspectives.

But people are not cameras, and even a cinema verité–style personal narrative of flying, bouncing, looking at others looking at me and you is not a record of what happened but what is fashioned in the act of re-calling one time, space, and performance into another and performing it via the narrative possibilities of an interview, which is also a dynamic social interaction.
that occurs in time and space. Nonetheless, it was in these complex moments when narrators spoke from a sense of being embodied, of relating fleeting focal points limited and facilitated by flesh and matter, that I learned what this book would be about—struggles over democracy at the dance floor memory level—and knew it would be tricky to write. Like the dance theorists who contributed to Susan Leigh Foster’s *Corporealities*, I became convinced that I must somehow turn myself “(in)to writing to dance with this figure,” which for me is the nostalgic hold of World War II swing culture on U.S. nationalism at a moment when those who could help us to factor in social and political difference, improvisation, tension, injury, and torque were becoming scarce.\(^6\)

Democratic writing on a crowded dance floor must acknowledge bodies of interviewees, as well as the interviewer, as more than the vehicles for heads full of memories, analyses, and meaning. How can one write in such a way that the historian is also embodied, thinking of the past in the present, and trying to “think together” with one narrator at a time, sometimes briefly once, and sometimes in repeat performances? Dance scholars are far ahead of the game in developing methods for embodied writing. Dance theorist Marta Savigliano has coined the term “choreocritic” in her search for an embodied writing position suitable for analyzing dance and “the sociohistorical conditions it expresses and produces.”\(^7\) Picture me a dizzier, untrained (though enthusiastic) social-dance version of the “choreocritic”; not so spectacularly qualified as dance scholars in this business of writing about bodies but perhaps well matched to partner with many of the amateur dancers who visited the Canteen and sharing Savigliano’s interest in trying to “imagine stories about people who move for and against each other, articulating webs of power.”\(^8\) I want to write as an embodied narrator grappling with constraints, making palpable the “weight” of my “presence” and “present” as storyteller—an aspect Savigliano accurately notes is often the part we forget to tell, so fascinated are we “by the past we are enticed to imagine.”\(^9\)

My writing goal, then, has been to find a textual practice crowded with different bodies and voices, positions, and experiences, suitable for narrating the “break-aways” as well as the basic steps. While asking people to share memories of the Hollywood Canteen was not exactly the same as channel-surfing the reruns of national memory, it sometimes had that feel. The Hollywood Canteen—though crowded, divergently remembered and narrated in interviews, and slippery in meaning, especially in the “break-aways” of embodied memory—retains an uncanny ability to adhere to its own special nostalgic gloss. Dancing with these narratives and their relationships, I have tried to write in a way that accommodates narratives that critique and nar-
narratives that prove the ready-made story about a “democratic night club.” I’ve tried to write the power of the tangle without throwing out the power of the gloss: the story of friendly volunteers from the motion picture industry dancing new social relations with soldiers, sailors, and Marines; rendering chaos of war, of mass migration, of racism, of overcrowding, of uncertainty, of separation of loved ones into a national memory as harmonious as the Andrews Sisters.

Benedict Anderson used the term “unisonance” to refer to the effects of singing together with strangers a national anthem on a national holiday as “the echoed physicalization of the imagined community.” This “remembering-together” of the Hollywood Canteen as the benevolent, uncomplicated “dance floor of the nation” also seems to have this effect when narrated as personal memory. Over the telephone or in person, in isolation or within earshot of spouses, family, friends, or nurses, or others, participation in what Anderson might call the “simultaneity” of Canteen narrative seems a ready-made inducement for interviewees to place themselves in a larger context of national belonging. As Anderson put it, “How selfless this unisonance feels!”

At the same time, many interviewees who were familiar with the dominant mode of Canteen memory voiced narrative dissonance even as they reprised the consonant strain. To a greater and lesser extent, narrators troubled particular aspects of the national memory, relating anecdotes and interpretations that criticized the exclusions intrinsic to that selfless “We” of national sing-along. It is tempting to view the “dissonance” as individual memory versus “unisonance” as national memory, but I will argue that dissonance is also achieved through “remembering together.” In other words, dissonance is not just an accidental result of “not fitting” but the powerful “out of tuneness” that Ajay Heble compares so fruitfully to other kinds of critical practice. Francesca Cappelletto argues that “community itself is built on narrative acts.” Dissonant narrativity builds critical communities, in which members sustain important differences, building on practices of sounding and listening that resist resolution.

The Writing That Drew Me to This Dance

There is nothing like an archive to reveal the unsteady ground of a story you think you know. It was, in fact, the dissonant range of perspectives on “dance floor democracy” evident in the writing of contemporary observers that drew me to this project. The Hollywood Canteen first tugged at my attention as a particularly intriguing site of national memory while I was conducting newspaper research for my first book, Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s. While perusing microfilm evidence of the hundreds of all-woman bands...
that had been omitted from jazz and swing historiography (but included in women-in-jazz historiography), I kept noticing, from the corner of my eye, claims about the Hollywood Canteen for its inclusive democracy. This surprised me, as I would have considered the Canteen part of the nostalgic bundle of overrepresented swing narratives that eclipsed critical counternarratives. Nonetheless, the black press, the Communist and Popular Front press, and the mainstream newspapers all praised the Hollywood Canteen. In story after story, it was depicted as both typifying a nation that was jumping with soldier-hostess dance spots and at the same time, for many different and contradictory reasons, hailed as utterly unique—the very pinnacle of democracy.

Refractions of this theme stemmed from a variety of values and positions, each of which identified a special form of democracy at the Hollywood Canteen. “Democracy” adhered to a variety of visions of inclusiveness, even in ways that were atypical of the nation. Such claims were usually supported by gestures toward a boundary-breaking dance floor. This basic narrative was repeated, with different stakes by very different sources addressing different constituencies, including the black press, Hearst papers, entertainment guild and union publications (including the Overture, the official paper of white Local 47 of the segregated musicians union in Los Angeles), and the Popular Front press (including the Communist paper the Daily Worker). Stories in these papers claimed the dance floor of the Hollywood Canteen as a space where lines of social division could be crossed in the name of American democracy. Somehow, by enabling the crossing of lines that typically served as barriers to U.S. democracy, the Hollywood Canteen accrued status as simultaneously unusual within the nation and representative of the nation.

For the mainstream press, the list of social barriers broken at the Canteen usually highlighted the crossing of the great gulf that lay between movie stars and regular folk, as when the Los Angeles Times praised the Hollywood Canteen as a place “where Joe Dogface can dance with Hedy Lamarr.”14 This is Sergeant Nolan’s definition of democracy as “big shots being friendly to little shots.”15 Repeatedly, in the mainstream newspapers, movie magazines, and newsreels the Hollywood Canteen was constructed as a great leveler of class hierarchy through narratives that equated screen careers with elite status. Stars were not capable of run-of-the-mill volunteerism (which was seen as civilian obligation); their friendliness was magnanimous. But these stories of Hollywood royalty who conferred national belonging to the “common people” were not the only awkward proofs of democracy.

Other divisions bridged through Canteen stories in the mainstream press included national boundaries between the Allied nations. The Los Angeles Examiner once referred to the Canteen as “the bright crossroads of the
world” where “uniforms from Great Britain, France, Greece, the Netherlands, China, Belgium, Russia, Brazil and other lands blend happily with olive drab from Nome and Key West.”¹⁶ Such happy blendings, for the black press, were located across race lines, with the Canteen as a place where, according to the Chicago Defender, “the sepia boy in uniform is as welcome as the fairest Caucasian, and where sepia hostesses dance with both nationalities.”¹⁷ Though the civil rights story later made its way into Canteen historiography, in the 1940s the possibility of racial mixing went mostly unmentioned in the mainstream press, but was an achievement the black press emphasized throughout the war.

Other papers that sometimes emphasized racial mixing were the socialist, liberal, and labor papers. The Daily Worker, which also advocated integration of baseball, described the integrated Canteen as “an example of community solidarity behind the war effort,” going on to explain that inclusiveness would strengthen “the bond between the fighting forces of democracy and the people.”¹⁸ Numerous stories in the black press, the socialist press, and labor publications repeated the same quotation from what must have been an early press release about the Canteen: “military men and women regardless of race or creed, wearing the uniform of any one of the United Nations will be admitted to the canteen.”¹⁹

These claims would pique the curiosity of anyone who knows a thing or two about U.S. social history during World War II. How did a racially integrated dance floor in the United States in the 1940s express democracy for such differently situated groups? This was, after all, a country that was busy fighting fascism with a segregated army, segregated Red Cross blood supply, and legal mandatory segregation in many states; a country with a Congress unable to pass an antilynching bill, a defense industry that had to be forced by presidential executive order to hire nonwhite workers during a labor shortage, and an administration that rounded up and interned people of Japanese descent by another executive order? And how was the Hollywood Canteen able to symbolize a space of comfort and belonging and support not only for military men but for military women in the newly formed women’s branches of the armed forces, against stereotypes of servicewomen as deviant women—either heterosexually “loose” or lesbian?²⁰ How could diversity represent patriotism in a nation plagued by race riots, especially in 1943? Los Angeles loomed large in the violence, while its mainstream press, police department, and city government fanned the flames. How could integration symbolize the democratic spirit as white sailors in uniform enacted their patriotism by beating up racialized young people in zoot suits, primarily Mexican Americans but other nonwhite youth as well—African Americans and Filipinos?
Guided by these questions, I began seeking people to interview who had attended the Hollywood Canteen between 1942 and 1945. What was the Hollywood Canteen, why did they go, how did they get there, what happened inside, who was there, who danced with whom, and what did it all mean? Sometimes in person, sometimes over the phone, sometimes in letters, sometimes via email or even cassette tape exchanges, sixty members of what Tom Brokaw has called the “Greatest Generation” responded to my request for memories about a crowded dance floor on which they had moved or gazed, weekly or once, well over half a century ago. One by one or in pairs, and sometimes in consultation with memorabilia, media, family, and friends, my small sample of respondents in their late seventies, eighties, and nineties narrated their youthful bodies in motion, crowding with other bodies through the Canteen’s wooden entrances—the back for volunteers, the front for service personnel—in wartime Los Angeles.

On some general narrative points, these embodied memories moved together: the dance floor was small and crowded, the Canteen was run by the guilds and unions of the Motion Picture Industry, the soldiers, sailors, and Marines were young and preparing to risk their lives, sandwiches were served, there was always a stage show of some kind.

On other points, memories swing out in wildly different directions: it was racially integrated, it was racially segregated; military women were welcome equally with military men, military women were not allowed to dance; it was a hotbed of political difference, it was a place where politics were set aside for a greater good.

Many interviewees warned me that my request for Canteen memories was impossible to fulfill; sixty or sixty-five years seemed too long to reach back for a clear picture (if that is ever possible, even of yesterday). From limited vantage points that swayed in and out of focus, narratives emerged nonetheless. Disclaimers of blurriness often gave way to sudden convictions of certainty about one thing or another. Such moments of surety most often staked claims not only about what remains to be said about the Hollywood Canteen but also about what the Hollywood Canteen might tell future generations about democracy, war, race and gender, the United States and its own people, and the United States in the world.

The fact that these conversations took place during the war years of 2000–2010 accelerated the usual past/present double-time of oral history interaction. Across vast differences in times, wars, and cultural sensibilities, narrators frequently compared their Hollywood Canteen memories to the national “present”—which encompassed, in the course of our conversations, such events as the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September
11, 2001, the vaguely defined U.S. “war on terror,” wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Libya. In speaking of the World War II period, my interviewees and I often spoke about at least two wars at once (what some scholars refer to as “war memory”), even when we thought we were talking about dancing in the past. Our equilibrium was affected by our inevitable guessing at each other’s political leanings in the present. My interviewees held political stances all over the map. Nonetheless, they all seemed to agree that the Hollywood Canteen could tell people in the present something about democracy in America (and sometimes, its limits).

Swinging War Memory

“Without music for dancing we would have had no canteen,” proclaimed Bette Davis, thanking the musicians union for contributing the bands. To that I would add: without swing music and dance, the Hollywood Canteen could not have become a site of war memory that continues to inspire visions of democracy.

Swing was not the only music performed at the Hollywood Canteen, nor was jitterbug the only dance. Other forms abounded—fox-trot, waltz, even square dance—inviting other subject positions and social relations. Nonetheless, it was the jitterbug that narrators tended to describe, and it is swing, coded as “American,” that lives on in Canteen and other nostalgia about World War II. Maurice Halbwachs has written of music as a particularly evocative form of memory. As the dominant soundtrack of national memory of the United States during World War II, swing memory demands a careful listening station for writers tackling the “democratic dance floor,” past and present.

As Perry Hall and others have argued, the ability of swing to represent American identity tends to be theorized at one end or the other of two poles: (1) swing was an unusually integrated cultural formation, expressing populism and multiethnic, multicultural, and interracial mixing as particularly American, or (2) swing represented a blatant example of white American appropriation of black American culture. Rather than arguing one side or the other, I am interested in swing’s capacity to slip between these poles. If, as Inderpal Grewal argues, “America” continues to be imagined as simultaneously multicultural and white, both within the United States and about the United States in other nations, then the easy slide between swing as multicultural populism or white domination defines its symbolic potency. How neatly the popular national narratives about swing musicians as pioneers who integrated a segregated industry, and patriotic jitterbug dancers as integrating the dance floor, fit what Nikhil Pal Singh has called “civic myths about the
triumph over racial injustice” that have become “central to the resuscitation
of a vigorous and strident form of American exceptionalism.”

When swing is presented as America’s “triumph over racial injustice,” this
narrative drowns out critical opportunities for examining continuing in-
equalities. In his remarkable study of a predominantly white neo-swing sub-
culture in late 1990s Southern California, Eric Usner has pondered identity
formation through a dancing nostalgia that emerged in tandem with white
youth anxieties about multiculturalism. Through articulations of historical
reenactments of dance, dress, and style with values presumed “authentic” to
the 1930s and 1940, the neo-swingsters claimed identities “akin to ethnicity,”
which they also conceived as “mono-cultural,” or at least as a joyful and dis-
trinctly “American” blend in which cultural difference was irrelevant.

Similar strains are audible in the narratives collected for this book, both in sing-along
form and in counter-points of contention. Perhaps it is precisely swing’s his-
tory as musical melting pot and crime scene of appropriation that positions it
to acquire such a seductive national memory as “universally” American and
democratic. In other words, perhaps swing excels as a “national” music not
in spite of but because of its ability to mean different things to many people
while instantly signaling a unified wartime “America.” Listening to former
Canteen-goers remembering their young swing-dancing bodies helps draw
connections between the smooth surface of a nostalgic “dance floor demo-
cracy” and the noisy commotion of a “dance floor democracy” of different
dancers with varied perspectives, experiences, and memories, thus offering a
way to explore in swing memory the tensions of “America” as the many and
the one.

While I admit that I am most drawn to the diverse, complex, and oft
often critical swing dancing narratives of the members of a generation that is oft
often celebrated as unified, I agree with Portelli that the point of oral history is not
to replace “previous truths with alternative ones” or to choose between his-
torical “fidelity” and “subjectivity” (as a historically contingent, ongoing pro-
cess of becoming)—but to listen to them together, for the way “each provides
the standard against which the other is recognized and defined.”

Listening to the oral narratives, in relation to one another, to the official story, and to
archival documents, I am not sifting evidence for a preferable version of the
past to write. Instead, I listen for, and try to write, relationships—coming
together while leaning away, gathering momentum, releasing without let-
ting go—as I try to better understand the persistence and performativity of
swing culture in animating Americans’ thoughts and feelings about democ-

racy, the nation, and past and present wars.
When swing scholarship shifts from music to dance, the analytic center tends to pivot from time to torque. The verb “to swing,” defined by jazz and swing scholars who focus primarily on music, tends to apply to conjugation of rhythm, tempo, pulse, and the forward motion that is often, but not always, achieved in the activated second and fourth beats of the 4/4 rhythm. Kevin Whitehead describes swing as a “headlong, but relaxed sense of propulsion, as if the music was skipping down the sidewalk. It often relies on small surges and hesitations, on placing a note or accent just in front of or behind where a metronome or tapping foot would put it.” However, he adds, “Count Basie’s bassist Walter Page could place his notes squarely on the beat and swing like crazy.”

When dance scholars talk about swing, however, we enter a world of physics, the “centrifugal force, torque, and momentum” that “keep the partners spinning smoothly,” writes Joel Dinerstein. Lewis Erenberg emphasizes the role of the “intimate communication” of the “dance’s hand clasp,” necessary in order to ensure “that the couple could survive the centrifugal force and the obstacles of the dance” while “the rooted quality of the beat balanced flight.”

Howard Spring argues that the new musical approaches to swing, in rhythm and timbre, responded to new ways of dancing that were more physical and involved more parts of the body and more movements per measure (four instead of two). Dancers increasingly required music with more rhythmic drive, noisier textures, and momentum than earlier styles. Changes in music and dance occurred within a close, mutually inspirational relationship between the fast, flowing, forward-moving big band swing surge and the energetic yet smooth horizontal swing of the lindy dancers.

Many scholars highlight the “break-away” as the defining property of the lindy and jitterbug, representing the integration of individual and community, improvised solo and ensemble—the dance version of what has been celebrated as the democratic principle of jazz. “In most couple dances (the waltz and the fox-trot, for instance),” writes Robert Crease, “the partners hold each other closely enough so that they generally need to do identical footwork with reverse parity lest they tread on each other’s feet.” What was radically new in the lindy, then, was the “development of the break-away,” which “made possible a flexible couple dance with room for improvisation. Partners could do markedly different steps—even ones unknown to and unanticipated by one’s partner—as long as the basic rhythm was preserved.” Dinerstein breaks down the requirements: the “fast, fluid steps demanded improvisation and precise motion.” Prior to the break-away,
the couple connects by first walking toward each other, grasping each others’ waists, and then spinning quickly in place, creating a torque-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.34

To onlookers, swing dancing may look like a back-and-forth, in-and-out motion. But to dancers, to “swing” is less like the sway of a pendulum and more like what would happen if you could “swing” that pendulum at the end of a string around and around over your head.35 The heavy end becomes
airborne and seems almost weightless only when you achieve the optimum combination of force, rotation, and distance. Swing it too placidly, and it doesn’t get off the ground. Swing it too hard, and the string slips out of your hand and the pendulum flies through the neighbor’s window. But swing it just right, just fast enough, with just enough bend to the arm to adjust the speed for the weight—torque it accurately—and you and the pendulum—or better yet, you and your dance partner—achieve a heightened level of turning power that neither could achieve alone.

In their book, *Physics and the Art of Dance: Understanding Movement*, physicist Kenneth Laws and dance pedagogue Arleen Sugano, define torque as “a kind of force that causes a rotation, like the hand turning a screwdriver or two hands turning a T-shaped wrench to tighten bolts on a car wheel.”36 For solo dancers, torque is applied to the floor through the feet, one pushing one way and one the other. In partner dance, the floor and feet still do this work but in relation to the torque dancers apply to one another. Like a physicist, the experienced swing dancer appears to defy gravity, not by fighting it but by knowing its rules; and using this knowledge to accurately apply the laws of turning power, weight, velocity, distance, and shape. The swing, then, for the lindy or jitterbug, is not all in the rhythm, the tempo, or even the steps. Swing is in the crouch, bend, lean, weight, speed, balance—torque. Music that swings, for experienced swing dancers, is music conducive to the achievement of torque—music that supports embodied knowledge that may achieve instant, kinetic adjustments of power, weight, and speed.

Dinerstein locates the torque of the lindy in a cultural history of survival technologies developed in African American culture. While white dancers in the 1930s were drawn to the lindy, he writes, they tended to embrace it as a “hopping vertical motion,” whereas “black dancers tended to dance in the crouch, low to the ground, and smooth,” working “with, not against, the laws of gravity.” For white dancers, socialized in a culture that constructed blackness as “primitive,” undisciplined, and prone to sexual abandon, the swing-out was about letting go of all control, missing altogether what was new in the lindy for black dancers.37 By the 1940s, the lindy’s cross-over to the more mainstream jitterbug obscured its origins in black culture for some white Americans, for whom the dance craze connoted “youth” culture. Nonetheless, the jitterbug retained “primitivist” attractions for many white dancers who saw it as pulling out all the stops rather than as a communicative partnership between a lead and follow that sought flight through balance. At a democratically conceived patriotic dance spot like the Hollywood Canteen, all kinds of approaches, skill levels, expectations, cultural associations, and experiences with the jitterbug were brought to the floor. If a space opened on the floor,
and the crowd sensed excitement and edged out of the way, an inexperienced lead might fling his partner around like a rag doll, or a pair of complementary dancers might achieve torque.

It was possible in the jitterbug, as with the lindy, to connect with another through touch and feel, find the point of connection in which bodies move one another, improvising across shared or different orientations (including degrees of resistance, centers of gravity, mass) and strike a balanced pattern of tension and release that maintained “I” and “we,” the individual and the collective—what one might call the physics of swing democracy. The break-away didn’t facilitate this on its own. Neither did the couple steps. The swing is in the torque, without which the break-away and coupling have no connection. Torque, then, is the turn that facilitates the democracy that so many attribute to swing cultural formations. As such, dance floor democracy, even at a famous soldier-hostess World War II canteen, is collaborative and physical and not guaranteed.

What difference would it make for students, consumers, and participants of World War II nostalgia to rearticulate democracy and swing culture in the “torque” and not in the reassuring (for whom?) rocking motion of the pendulum swing or in the patterned opportunities for relative freedom (individualism?) in the break-away? Is there a way to store past torque for the future, in self-narrative, for example, in stories of improvised moves on the dance floor? Nostalgia, as a longing for a past that never was, is emptied of torque. However, some ways of remembering and telling find footholds that aid in turning nostalgia into something else, through tone and gesture, humor, and critique. How do people apply turning power to narrative performances of memory? Sometimes the torque is in the telling.

Torquing Back

I have mentioned that I hear the “official” memory of the Hollywood Canteen in virtually every interview; sometimes in unison with it, and sometimes in dissonant relationship to it, and sometimes a little of each. In some, I hear swing culture as mutual, easy, and “friendly.” In others, I hear the connection with nostalgia through rebuttal. In most interviews, there is some point when I hear the familiar tune “torqued” in the telling; a moment when the teller moves with the official memory, while leaning away from it, and applies a bit of pressure that changes its direction or meaning.

One dancer narrates her body dancing in an unexpected way: perhaps she breaks the rules, dances across race. Somehow this breach creates an even more democratic dance floor than the one in the movies. Another would-be dancer describes the impact of rejection on the “inclusive” dance floor, maps
what it should have been like as a vision of democracy. Another compares the Hollywood Canteen with another even more democratic dance floor. Another ascribes the democratic achievement of the Hollywood Canteen to the radicals on the staff rather than the naïvete of a simpler generation.

National nostalgia about the Hollywood Canteen is an unsteady landscape, navigated differently by different narrators. Sometimes its most forceful currents take narrators to a happy place in the national body. Sometimes the nostalgia is invoked as a constraint and danced against. The official story often opens the interview as an anchor of alignment, which the personal account may affirm or deny—usually a little of each. In this way, the narratives of Canteen memory resemble the various ways people danced the jitterbug in crowded social space. A connection between moving in sync and releasing apart is built into the structure of the dance, but what happens in each instance is open to variables affecting the kinetic relationships of the “we” of the couple and the “me” of the individual in the break-away, feet pounding the floors among the “we” of the other couples.

My accumulation of personal accounts people shared with me form another “we,” not a complete one (for it is never complete) and not a unified one (for it is never unified) but one that enables me to explore one remembered negotiation of the possibilities and constraints of the dance floor, and then another, and then another. From my own dance as an interviewer, researcher, scholar, and writer, with a variety of “I”s narrating the possibilities and constraints of a variety of interpretations of the national “we”s of the jitterbugging soldier-hostess dyads of the Hollywood Canteen, I try to learn different kinds of critical engagements with swing culture as war memory. I consider Canteen-goers’ narratives as they tell me about the club’s interior, as well as the social, geographical, and historical ground navigated on their way to the building, their travels after exiting the premises, all the way up to the present moment of the interview. I listen carefully to which memories are connected to each of the narrator’s Canteen stories. I ask for the dance, then try to follow—though I am, of course, active throughout the process, initiating the event, operating recording equipment, asking questions, reflecting intended and unintended responses as a listening body that my interviewees interpret as they decide to what to tell me, knowing that I will try to write about it—and, of course, I do. Through all of this, I try to follow interviewees, wherever they go, in their navigations of a past in the present, what I think of as a “social geography of memory.” These narratives, taken one at a time and in relation to one another, help me think about a different kind of critical engagement with swing memory as war memory, one that I call “dance floor democracy.”
In the prologue, I noted that politicians and pundits have appealed to “democracy” as worth defending but not defining. As I close this introduction, I admit that jazz and swing scholars, including myself, have often invested hopes of democracy, resistance, and freedom into jazz and swing history and practice in ways that tend to fall short of defining what we mean by democracy, resistance, and freedom. Danielle Goldman makes this point powerfully in the opening pages of her book on “improvised dance as a practice of freedom.” Nonetheless, she also argues that no single definition of any of these terms is capable of fitting the desires and needs of all subjects and to presume so actually diminishes one’s understanding of the social potential of improvisation. Assumptions of “sameness” in dance experience blocks one’s ability to appreciate the political power of dancers’ interactions within constraints and therefore of “the possibility for meaningful exchange.”

Addressing social dancing at New York’s Palladium in the 1950s, Goldman writes that although this dance hall was unique for its racial integration, it was still “not a ‘free’ space where everyone was equal and anything was possible.” Rather than interpreting contradictions as evidence of failure (a move that often accompanies the “appropriation” pole of swing scholarship), she emphasizes the importance of attending to multidirectional desires—and interpretations. In her analysis of improvised dance as a “practice of freedom,” she acknowledges that a “variety of constraints imposed by racism, sexism, and physical training shaped how people moved” and that individual dancers’ experiences of a powerful moment, however meaningful, “were neither shared by, nor identical for the dance hall’s many patrons.”

The Hollywood Canteen in 1940s Los Angeles was a different kind of social dance space from the 1950s New York Palladium, with different constraints, but I approach the Hollywood Canteen with an ear for difference, negotiation, and “moments of resistance” and do not presume that these will match or add up to a “one-interpretation-fits-all” conclusion. I listen for “torque” and “torque potential” as requisite components of a democratic dance floor. It is those moments of telling in which dancers reorder the “official story” from the perspectives of their re-membered orientations to the nation, where history might “acknowledge the fact of improvisation.” To reconfigure World War II home front memory as an “unsteady landscape” is not to dispense with the potency of swing memory but to break up the old patterns and improvise on “a new terrain of struggle.” If one can think of the democratic dance floor of the nation as a site of constraints and possibility, rather than a magical past where “big shots are friendly to little shots,” one might even discover useful inclusive democratic dance floor strategies for the present, by
listening more closely to the volunteers and military guests who attended the Hollywood Canteen in World War II.

Stepping onto the Dance Floor . . .

The place of the Hollywood Canteen, then, in this book, is not so much a site of history as it is a hub of memory, where competing identities, histories, and definitions of democracy converged and clashed from interview to interview. In this introduction, I have discussed some of the research and writing challenges posed by this dance. I have outlined some of the “moves” I brought from my previous work in oral history, swing historiography, and jazz studies, as well as some of the new “ways-of-working-a-room” I tried to pick up along the way from dance studies, theories of embodiment, and memory studies, all while scrambling to meet the demands of writing on such a crowded dance floor. Some of my techniques were transmitted by one-on-one encounters with interviewees, some from careful listening to the archival records, some from transformative interactions with archivists, librarians, fellow researchers, and dancers.

Working with the concept of “torque” has helped me to rethink linkages of swing, democracy, social change, and writing. I feel that the radical potential of swing culture resides in torque. Nostalgia masks the balanced pulling away that creates the productive tension that gets people to move and change. In writing this book, I’ve tried to cultivate a practice of feeling for pulls from various corners of the room—in archives, in interviews, in narrative—to develop a sensitivity to other bodies in motion that may be headed in directions I hadn’t imagined, and to my own responses, impulses, and habits. Like the narrated memories of the Canteen visitors and volunteers with whom I spoke, this book draws toward and leans away from its own mixed impulses to deny narrative authority and to inscribe “what really happened” (or “what else really happened”) in the barn-like structure that once stood at Cahuenga and Sunset Boulevards (now the site of the CNN parking structure). “It’s a long time ago” and “I only went there once or twice” give way to “I’m absolutely sure it was like this . . .” Between my own disclaimers of “I am interested in what is remembered today, not in what happened back then” spill traces that betray my own inevitable guesses at what may have been. In this way, I remind myself (and readers) of my presence in the cultural tangle of interviewing people in time and space and writing a book. I also keep visible the spurious sense of time I often share with my informants: never quite isolating the World War II years from the kinetic present yet never quite getting them in sync—and never giving up the idea that sharing memories of a
crowded dance floor that closed over sixty-five years ago might yield insights into a usable past.

**Organization of the Book**

Although this book is more about the various ways people narrated their memories between 2000 and 2010 than about “what really happened” in the 1940s, I also take as significant the specificity of the social geography of 1940s Los Angeles when listening to people narrate their memories of traveling to, and moving across, that “crowded dance floor.” The Hollywood of the 1940s was not only a dreamscape but a highly demarcated place in which race, nationality, ethnicity, politics, economics, gender, and sexuality differentiated experience. Different bodies traveled in different ways to and through the geographical vastness of Los Angeles long before they arrived at the “crowded dance floor,” and these travels are remembered in different ways by people whose bodies traveled differently since. Therefore, the chapters in part I wrestle this star-studded nightclub to the map, grounding it in the social and cultural geography of its particular neighborhood in wartime Los Angeles. I argue that Hollywood’s localism, as well as its unparalleled ability to defy geography and history, together contributed to the Hollywood Canteen’s ability to become such a potent symbol of American exceptionalism. Through a comparison with other self-consciously constructed “democratic dance floors” in Los Angeles during the World War II years, this chapter observes that what happened at the Hollywood Canteen was not identical to, or isolated from, the ways such experiments could and did happen elsewhere in Los Angeles. The place of the Hollywood film industry in Los Angeles ensured that the reach of the vision of democratic dancing that was possible at this particular “local” spot would exceed its “city limits” in special ways that would soon be exported to national and global audiences. In addition, the transhistorical travels of the Hollywood Canteen, through the feature film about it, as well as reenactments, and its reliable presence in documentaries about the U.S. home front, has ensured that its Westside-centric “city limits” (to play on the title of Josh Sides’s excellent Los Angeles history) have maintained dominance in World War II nostalgia. Place, in other words, affected how the swing dancing nation could be imagined and enacted locally, nationally, and internationally and continues to affect the vision transmitted as effective war memory, not just about Hollywood but about the U.S. home front spirit during World War II.

The next two parts focus on dance floor narratives gathered from archival sources and interviews that I conducted between 2000 and 2010, in which I employ a self-consciously imposed embodied approach to explore a variety
of personal orientations to the democratic dance floor. Part II engages the memories and narratives of enlisted men and young civilian women who volunteered as junior hostesses. In this part, I listen carefully to the narratives constructed by individuals who once occupied a position in (or near) the jitterbugging couple that has since become an icon in the national imaginary of the United States in World War II. Though I keep in play the figure of the ideal soldier-hostess dyad, I overlay, often in tension with the ubiquitous ideal, narrators’ self-animations of Canteen dancing, stories that often included other events. I include whatever else they seem to connect in significant ways to their memories of traveling to, from, in, and through this famous Hollywood night spot. To what other improvisations and constraints are their memories mapped in individual Canteen memories? What social memories are activated in these narratives? How did these travels inform the expectations and experiences of Canteen-goers, and how did these and subsequent travels shape and reshape interviewees’ memories and narrative strategies in relaying them? The existence (or not) of a dance floor color line, and the possibility of dancing across it (or not) produces much, though not all, of the narrative tensions—the pull between unisonance and dissonance—(sometimes achieving torque) for differently positioned military men and civilian hostesses.

Part III focuses again on military guests and civilian volunteers who were, like those in part II, members of what became known as the “Greatest Generation.” However, the two groups visited in part III were not incorporated into the national body in the same ways. The chapters in part III explore narratives of military women and draft-age civilian men who were present at the Hollywood Canteen, though usually not as dancers. Some military women remembered not being allowed through the door at all, a smaller number remembered dancing, and most with whom I spoke remembered being admitted to the Canteen but restricted from the dance floor. Draft-aged civilian men told different kinds of stories that similarly took them to marginal places and that usually did not include dancing. The color line is one of many barriers to full inclusion, it turns out. Military women and draft-aged civilian men of all races were met with an unpredictable, questioning public, one that was heightened at sites of military recreation.

The color line is the focal point once again in part IV, in which I follow the special agent(s) who spied on the Canteen and filed regular FBI reports on it (which were then forwarded to the Departments of the Army and the Navy). The FBI asserted that its concern with the Canteen, as well as with other people, places, and organizations in Hollywood and elsewhere, was the possible presence of Communists. Indeed, though there were not as many
Communists as the FBI seemed to think there were, some of the volunteers (and possibly visitors) were members of the Communist Party—not an illegal activity. The possibility of racially integrated dancing, even as an unsettled debate, and the strong showing of Jewish executives and workers (particularly writers) in the film industry were reason enough for the FBI to view the Hollywood Canteen as a hotbed of Communism and therefore as dangerous enough to warrant expenditure of taxpayer dollars for FBI surveillance throughout the war. In addition to studying the FBI files on the Canteen, I draw from narratives—archival and oral history—of Hollywood leftists who were followed by the FBI and were involved in the Canteen’s struggle over the integrated dance floor. In both chapters 10 and 11, I consider the relationship of state memory and national memory in the swing dancing nation-state. By state memory, I draw from David Theo Goldberg’s analysis of the way the modern state is constitutively “racial” and often racist yet represents itself as instrumental or uninterested in social categories such as race. By national memory, I mean a dominant articulation of remembrance and amnesia that invites national identity without claiming the baggage (like racism, conquest, and colonialism).

Chapter 11 revisits the most widely circulating vehicle for the “official story” of the Hollywood Canteen as national memory: the 1944 Warner Brothers feature film directed by Delmar Daves. I return, in other words, to the film with which I opened this introduction, in which Sergeant Brooklyn Nolan defines “democracy” as “big shots” being friendly to “little shots.” Rather than limiting my reading to what lives on within the frame, I sneak backstage and rummage through early scripts and treatments, company memos, and other archival holdings in search of evidence of struggles that will tell us more about what it was that writers, directors, and other individuals representing interests ranging from the studios to the unions and to the state wanted from this film. How did these various players navigate the shifting landscape of film production about a site where many of them volunteered? What were the tensions at work in the collaborative and embattled process of the creation of this film—not just the tensions at work in the creation of any film but specifically the tensions that produced this lasting edifice of swing memory as war memory? I see this chapter as dancing closely with chapter 10. While the FBI files show the way the state collected and classified information about attempts at intentional integration at the Hollywood Canteen, the studio files on the making of the war musical show how the people who were under surveillance balanced notions of democracy and difference as patriotic moviemaking. As a result, much of what the FBI classified as “suspect” in state memory was respun in the national memory that lives on in the film as color-blind multiculturalism in
the casting of extras. Studio documents make it possible to track the multiple levels of memory management of the kinds of inequities, exclusions, and diverse navigations of socially loaded space that were blatantly promoted by the state in the FBI files and Shore Patrol documents that I consulted. The torque often winds up on the cutting room floor, in rejected scripts, memos, lawsuits, labor struggles, or, sometimes, small on-screen traces left from larger tugs and pulls. This chapter also continues to incorporate the dissonant social memories that are made audible through oral history in order to understand how conflicting memories comprise crucial ingredients in the “makings” of compelling national unity, even when directed to the background or cut from the frame. Difference is not only different from but is justification for the unified vision.

Cecelia O’Leary illuminates the fact that even such ubiquitous symbols of U.S. patriotism as the Pledge of Allegiance, Memorial Day, and “The Star-Spangled Banner” are relatively recent inventions and “emerged, not from a harmonious, national consensus, but rather out of fiercely contested debates.”46 Not a national symbol in quite the same way as, say, the Pledge of Allegiance or even the Statue of Liberty or the Lincoln Memorial, the Hollywood Canteen nonetheless has accrued national memory with which I and my interviewees have contended. It is remembered as a popular site of a particular time—famous, but not timeless. Its hold on national imagination is ephemeral; not on the tip of everyone’s tongue but somehow familiar and unsurprising when it shows up in nostalgic evocations of World War II. The Hollywood Canteen is recalled as singular (the only place like it ever in history) and generic (typical of the American spirit in World War II). It is lauded as wholly unlike other sites of soldier comfort at the time—distinguished by celebrity volunteerism yet also the most representative of patriotic dance floors, its movie industry hosts and hostesses interpreted simultaneously as royalty and regular folk and peculiarly “American” in this achievement. Imagined as unique and typically national at the same time, the Hollywood Canteen assumes its place in national memory through its exceptional performance of American exceptionalism, in much the same way that swing assumes its ability to represent the nation.

While this book is critical of some representations of the World War II generation, it is not meant as a criticism of the generation itself. In fact, my critique of the most reductive evocations of the “Greatest Generation”—so frequently celebrated during the time in which I wrote this book—is driven by my own admiration for members of this generation with whom I have spent a great deal of time. This book is, perhaps, even a bit of a love letter to the complexity and diversity within a generation too often celebrated as simple, unified, and uncritical.
“Greatest” or not, the World War II generation is dying. And in spite of all the increasingly critical scholarship on the diversity within this generation, it is in danger of being remembered as a heroically unified one. To speak of its complexity and contradiction and to engage the intellectual and political variety within it is itself in danger of counting as national disrespect in times when World War II is invoked as national consensus. But national memory is dangerous when it becomes a national monument that obstructs the memories of multiple publics—the Third Reich is a tragic example, however no nation is immune. In the eloquent words of Phil Melling, “to challenge the role of memory is not to destroy or defile, but to invigorate. When memory is beyond reproach it is deadened and emptied of all responsibility, deprived of the sustenance of legitimate enquiry.”

This book moves from the conviction that the struggles and thoughts of the generation that remembers World War must not be reduced to the unified feel-good version that still so effectively mobilizes support for military actions. As the last members of the World War II generation exit the dance floor of the living, this book is an attempt to amplify their diverse perspectives on war, culture, and democracy—their dissent and struggles—in order that they may invigorate perspectives of those who remain. Too often, the critical insights of the World War II generation have been conscripted into service of national unification. By listening to this generation’s multivocal complexity squarely on a site of memory that more often stands in as a symbol of its simplicity, this book is an attempt to listen to, dance amid, and remember the critical commotion of democratic struggle. I hope that readers enjoy, as I did, picking up the various tips passed along by dancers about the democratic potential of swing culture beyond nostalgia for national friendliness. Friendliness can be pleasant on the dance floor but proves a poor substitute for torque.
Notes

PROLOGUE

1. The epigraphs to this chapter are from “There Is No Color Line at This Coast Canteen,” Chicago Defender, January 30, 1943, 19; Ahmed, On Being Included, 49; the film Hollywood Canteen (1944).

2. See, for example, Stowe, Swing Changes, 162; Starr, Embattled Dreams, 159–182; Bogle, Bright Boulevards, 232–234; Tyler, Harlem to Hollywood, 144, 151–152.

3. This juxtaposition shows up in many places, but one example was the sequence of photographs and museum cards that I saw in the hallway leading up to the American Sector restaurant in the National World War II Museum, New Orleans, on January 6, 2013.

4. See, for example, Cappelletto, Memory and World War II, 9.


8. Brooklyn’s speech resounds with the “pragmatic tolerance” model that Jane Mummery criticizes in Richard Rorty’s formulation of democratic process as an ongoing conversation that “leads to increased understanding and inclusiveness.” For Mummery, the flaw is Rorty’s failure to define the already included “we” or the eventually included “they.” Mummery, “Rethinking the Democratic Project: Rorty, Mouffe, Derrida, and Democracy to Come.” Borderlands 4, no. 1 (2005), available at www.borderlands.net.au/v014n01_2005/mummery_rethinking.htm, accessed December 2, 2006. For analysis of continuing prevalence of this model, see Ahmed, Being Included (from which the epigraph in this chapter from Ahmed has been taken), 9.
9. Mummery, “Rethinking the Democratic.”
10. Schlossberg, Going Hollywood (dvd).
13. Torgovnick, War Complex, xi.
14. Emily Rosenberg points out that the “infamy framework” of Roosevelt’s famous speech of December 8, 1941, was itself drawn from national memory of “America’s most celebrated frontier legends: Custer’s Last Stand and the Alamo.” Soon after this framework was used to recruit popular support for U.S. entry into World War II, it began a new career as rallying cry in service to the aims of the U.S. military-industrial complex. Rosenberg, Date Which Will Live, 12, 28–33.
20. “Service before Self,” World Trade Center Memorial, Hansen Hall, Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence.
24. Torgovnick, War Complex, ix. In addition, I share the concern of authors whose work was published in a collection on the marketing of 9/11 at the way the “four plane crashes” and “thousands of lives lost” have been “exploited for profit” politically, militarily, and commercially, and I worry about scholars’ complicity in this exploitation, when some of us rushed to make our work relevant by tying it to this single event. Heller, Selling of 9/11, 2–5.
26. Portelli, Order Has Been Carried Out, 15–16.
27. Ibid.

INTRODUCTION

1. The epigraphs to this chapter are from Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready*, 5; Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 20; Foster, “Taken by Surprise,” 4.
8. Ibid., 199.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 257.
35. For the ethnomusicologist and dancer Christopher Wells, the difference between what looks linear from the outside and what he experiences as a dancer is the “tension and release feel,” in which even the slotted send-out associated with West Coast style is hardly linear but is built from the gathering and sending of energy—the send-out may look like two bodies separating along a straight line but is felt as an accelerated circular “whipping out,” propelled by the prior gathering of energy; the torque won’t work if the velocity is steady. I thank Chris for the personal conversation and demonstration in the hallway at the Society for American Music, Charlotte, North Carolina, April 2012.
39. Ibid., 54.
40. Ibid., 22.
44. Sides, *L.A. City Limits*.
47. Melling, “War and Memory,” 257.

**CHAPTER 1: WRESTLING HOLLYWOOD TO THE MAP**

2. See, for example, Monaghan, “’Stompin’ at the Savoy,” 36–37; Stowe, *Swing Changes*; Townsend, *Pearl Harbor Jazz*; Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream*.
9. See, for example, Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood*.
12. Ibid., 249–250.
13. Ibid.