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LIVING CULTURE EMBODIED: CONSTRUCTING MEANING
IN THE CONTRA DANCE COMMUNITY

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Kathryn E. Young

August 2011

Advisor: Dr. Christina F. Kreps

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Title: LIVING CULTURE EMBODIED: CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN THE
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Abstract

In light of both the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the efforts of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in producing the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, it has become clear that work with intangible cultural heritage in museums necessitates staff to carry out ethnographic fieldwork among heritage communities. In order to illustrate this methodology, an ethnographic study was conducted in the Denver contra dance community to better explore conceptions of value and meaning related to the community by its members. Further, the contra dance findings point to certain issues related to defining the terms of community and sustainability, which relate to concepts illustrated by the 2003 UNESCO Convention. The different key elements of the project - museums, intangible cultural heritage, and contra dance - become linked together by considering each instance of expressive performance as the enactment of culture in the moment. The project research and paper contribute to the literature of contra dance, ethnographic dance studies, performance, museum studies, and the exhibition of intangible culture.

Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROJECT

As I approach the Denver Masonic Temple from the parking lot on a Friday evening around 8:00p.m., I can hear a fiddle faintly singing as it plays a jig inside the hall. From the outside, the windows reveal a faint glow from the lights that hang with drapery inside. Upon entering the hall, I see an elderly couple perched by the entrance and they greet me with their two smiling faces. After selling me my student ticket, they comment on the number of students at the event that night, either with a "you're the first student tonight!" or "lots of students here tonight, you know." I enter the hall and set my things down on one of the chairs lining the dance floor. As I slip on my dancing shoes, I am quickly asked to dance by an older man who waits on the sideline nearby. Within minutes, the chill of the frosty evening has left my hands and I am being transported through the lines of couples and organized chaos that is a contra dance.

An Introduction

Artistic expression is vital to every human culture in one way or another. This expression takes place when individuals navigate their internal emotions, thoughts, and interpretations of life through manifestations of various art forms. Most of the time, artistic traditions are associated with a tangible outcome – a painting, a ceramic bowl, or a piece of clothing. However, many forms of art exist that stand alone as an expressive piece without a material product; some of these include the performance of a dance, a

song, or a story. These cultural artifacts cannot always be seen in a direct, physical way due to their innate ephemeral quality. Living cultural traditions must, therefore, be experienced during that fleeting moment when they are performed. After a performance is over, the evidence of that event lives on as a remnant within the mind of an individual, as a memory of that particular process.

A majority of museums continue to struggle with developing the means to present and educate the public about living cultural heritage like crafts, music, oral traditions and dance. In an exhibit, it becomes much more difficult to represent living culture than material objects. While some museum institutions have stepped up to the challenge of incorporating intangible forms of artistic expression into programming and exhibitions, dance is under-represented in the museum due to its exceptionally transitory quality.

Very few museums exist which are dedicated solely to dance. One institution, The National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame in Saratoga Springs, New York, blends participatory programs, classes, events, and exhibits to present dance to the public. The mission of this museum is as follows:

To cultivate, promote, foster and develop amongst its members and the community at large, the appreciation, understanding, taste and love of dance and its history, and to provide the means for popular instruction and enjoyment thereof; to collect, classify, preserve and protect records, articles and subjects of historic interest; to select, annually, one or more individuals, corporations, dance companies, associations or other institutions as honorees to be named in the National Museum of Dance Hall of Fame. [National Museum of Dance 2006]

While this institution makes a commendable effort in promoting dance and dance events, it also has a long way to go in its exhibitions. After having toured the museum's

permanent exhibitions in February 2010, I noticed that classical dance history was the most comprehensive component of the exhibitions. In addition, the museum featured ballet, jazz, tap, and modern dance and less so community oriented or traditional folk dance.

The “living” part of the National Museum of Dance is the School, which offers classes, programs, and workshops. The different branches of the institution including the School, the Museum, the Archives, and the Hall of Fame, work in concert to serve as a tool for education and a space for dance production. Each element compliments another element; for example, the living studios make the exhibitions relevant and interesting; dancers and teachers from the School utilize the archives as inspiration and as a point of reference; and exhibitions help to contextualize the Hall of Fame. In this structure, no one component of the Museum is enough alone to fully and actively engage a public audience.

While photographs and videos of dance are the most common form of presentation within the institutional setting, these forms of documentation do not fully convey the experience or context in which the dance form flourishes. Ethnography, performance, experiential learning, and embodiment are techniques through which dance may be understood within different contexts. These approaches towards representation have been executed more so only to a limited extent by anthropologists and artists (Wright 2010:68). These techniques are more easily employed by festivals, which are fertile sites for heritage production.

This research study has sought to uncover the intricate connections between the physical realm and the intangible realm by interpreting different layers of meaning within

the form of expressive culture known as contra dance. Contra dance stands as both a meaningful practice that stems from American heritage while at the same time continuing to evolve and change alongside contemporary American culture. Because contra dance straddles the definition of a “traditional”¹ folk dance and a modern form of a community dance, it carries different meanings for the people who are active within the community. At a contra dance event, all of the various forms of contact and interaction become significant connections and ties in the community.

Questions surrounding the term community commonly arise in both the museum world as well as the realm of living culture; how is a community defined? What does community mean for a museum? What are the differences between “the museum community”, a “community museum”, and “museums and communities”? In her book, *The Participatory Museum* (2010), Nina Simon explains how “many people visit museums in social groups to spend time with people they like in the context of something bigger” (2010:18). All in all, collective experiences make for the most engaging and lasting experiences for people who participate in museum activities.

¹ Traditions happen everyday among all different groups of people. While some more conventional conceptualizations of tradition may include simply the idea of something that is passed down from generation to generation, traditions can be anything related to the shared knowledge and identity of a group which has a continuity throughout time (Sims and Stephens 2005: 64). Sims and Stephens also point out that traditions occur for the purpose of perpetuating those elements that maintain group identity within modern society (2005:65).

If traditions are known to be the continuous practices vital to a group of people, then traditional, as a concept and adjective, relates to an activity that a specific group practices as a tradition. Traditional, as a descriptive word, has commonly been used to indicate something that is out of touch with modern society, as the way something was done in the past, or the characteristic behavior of an isolated cultural group. According to the definition, however, something that is traditional is theoretically any practice, behavior or occurrence that is repeated or perpetuated by a group of people in order express group identity, values or beliefs within and outside of the group.

Museum scholars have especially grappled with questions of community alongside the development of the new museological theory. Elizabeth Croke, in describing community, dispels stereotypes and explains how:

[c]ommunity is not only about the past or nurturing communal living[...]community is not necessarily tied to a single place; it is not always about association with a certain village or landscape; it can be geographically spread but linked by an agreed interest. The idea of community can be nurtured between people by a whole range of characteristics. [Croke 2007:172-3]

Croke also explains that individuals' ties to a community may be both "thick" or "thin," meaning people may have more or less of the characteristics that bind them to a certain community. Essentially, her description elucidates the broad and diverse ways that a community may be defined, and indicates that boundaries of communities are more fluid than commonly assumed.

In order to discuss the contra dance community, the question of "What makes community?" must to be addressed. Community can be defined in many ways based on a range of factors and characteristics. Continued participation in dance events, physical location, proximity, common interest, philosophy, and lifestyle are a few of the binding qualities of community in the dance world. A number of these elements are investigated later in Chapter Six, particularly through the findings from interviews with contra dancers.

This project also seeks to better understand intangible cultural heritage as an expressive phenomenon and to investigate the means through which it may be more effectively incorporated into museum practice. In order to address this goal and to comprehend the difficulties associated with it, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork

in the contra dance community to serve as a case study of methodology in heritage work for museum professionals. I also attempt in this effort to better understand the challenges and benefits of working directly with communities of living culture on projects that are relevant to museums. This work has the potential to enlighten the avenues of collaboration between communities of expressive culture and cultural institutions or national museums.

My Place in the Dance Community

Self-reflexive thinking and writing allows an ethnographer to contemplate fieldwork experiences based on observations while at the same time considering her personal experiences, which may have led to certain conclusions or emphasis on aspects of the research. While this bias is not intentional, it is almost unavoidable in cultural fieldwork. In light of this perspective, I brought awareness and reflexivity to my own place within the contra dance community. Reflection became especially important during the analysis phase of research, as this was when my interpretations worked to translate raw data into a composed literary product.

Interpretations like these have the potential to create a lasting impact on certain communities as well as disciplinary research, for better or for worse. Theresa J. Buckland explains how “reflexivity permits the revelation of power relationships, values and ethics in field relations, which in classic ethnographic texts lay unexcavated – hidden, but now to be judged as incomplete representation at best, or deception at worst” (1999:7). To avoid incomplete representations or wrongful accounts, I have aimed to be transparent in

describing the methodological process and research paradigms, and have allowed for reflexivity throughout the process.

During the study I worked towards negotiating a balance between my roles as researcher and dancer. Various factors influenced my own reflexivity and interpretations of the project due to my prior experiences, history, and places in the dance community. I started contra dancing seven years ago at the 2004 Dance Flurry Festival in Saratoga Springs, New York, long before I started my anthropological studies. I was initially drawn to the community by the positive atmosphere of the large-scale festival event, and later, became fascinated with the exuberant, lively, and welcoming connection I found with the other contra dancers. Since my first contra dance experience, contra dancing has been a great passion of mine and, as a result, I have gone in and out phases of involvement with the community over the years. With this in mind, it is difficult for me completely separate myself from the mindset of a contra dancer.

Another important event of note, occurring approximately half way through the research process, was a knee injury and subsequent surgery that I sustained as the result of an accident². This injury made it impossible for me to dance for over seven months, influencing not only my participant observation within the dance community but also my initiative to engage with the project itself. While I was injured, I found it extremely difficult to attend dances. Therefore, I only observed a handful of dances during this time. I did, however, attend the 2010 Dance Flurry Festival during this phase, which allowed me to act strictly as an observer without physically participating in the dance (something that rarely happened when I was able-bodied). This perspective allowed me to see the

² The knee injury did not happen while contra dancing.

community in a different way. I realized that one of the most crucial ways to connect with dancers is through the act of dancing. With an injured leg, I found it difficult to foster meaningful interactions and I felt that without being able to dance I felt out of touch, literally and figuratively. At the Dance Flurry, I felt elated by the high-spirited atmosphere that surrounded me, nostalgic about past dances, and disappointed that I could not participant, all at the same time. These conflicting feelings reflected on my experience of the event and how I perceived and approached my research project after that point. In this way, I altered and reworked some aspects of the research methods in order to accommodate certain external situations. As my injury started to improve and I was able to participant in physical activities once again, I noticed that my motivation to work on the project improved.

My place in the dance community was also influenced by the fact that when I began my anthropological research, I was fortunate to connect with a niche of contra dance scholars. Most of these scholars are dancers themselves, and in fact, they were dancers before they decided to study contra dance (not unlike myself). Through interviews and conversations, I was able to gain perspectives on the opinions of dancers, musicians, and callers, but also other dance researchers.

The dance scholars approached the interpretation and study of contra dance from many different points - some historical and others from a theoretical perspective. A number of the researchers focus their studies on the historic components of contra dance, particularly through historic documents. While this would be useful for a history paper, it is not an effective mode of interpretation for an anthropological work. Other contra dance researchers have worked towards creating more holistic studies of the dance. One in

particular, David Millstone, has put his energy into making ethnographic-style films. Millstone's documentary film, "What's not to like? A Community Contra Dance" (2002), is a visual and audio representation of a contra dance community that is, in his opinion, attuned to the characteristics of affect and heightened moments within the dance, which is represented through interviews with the dancers and dance footage.

My contra dance past allowed me a deepened sense of the larger, over-arching contra dance community prior to beginning the research for this project. This background also made it easy to quickly familiarize myself with different dance communities for my research³. In fact, I often felt part of a community even if I had never danced there before. This sense of camaraderie among contra dancers exists around the world, and as Beverly, a dancer and organizer, states:

When you get to more of an international level...in terms of the dance camp I organize in Costa Rica, it's really kind of a nice feeling that you can travel all over places around the world - people are offering dance camps on the Nile and dance camps all over the world - and have this bond with people knowing that, "oh, contra dancer," and they like to travel, too, and explore. Contra dancing is something that brings that group together, during that exploration; so again, it's an interesting tie that joins people. I think that there's a kind of security. [Beverly, Interview, August 25, 2009]

In the Fall of 2009, I began to regularly attend the Denver contra dance for participant observation. Eventually, I extended my participation to dances in Boulder, Colorado, which alternates on opposite weeks with the Denver contra dance. Other short-term participant observation experiences took place in Glen Echo Park, Maryland; Falcon Ridge Folk Festival in Hillsdale, New York; and San Francisco, California (see Appendix

³ For example, I was well-versed in dance search engines online and had already heard of many of the more widely-known dance locations and festivals around the United States.

A for dates and locations). Within this broad timeframe, I moved to Washington, D.C. in June 2009 for a two-month summer internship at the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (the Center). As an intern at the Center, I was able to experience and participate first-hand in the process of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (hereafter, the Festival). One main purpose of the Festival is to make intangible cultural heritage accessible to the public at the local, national, and international levels. While at times caught up in my day-to-day duties as an intern, I was nevertheless in awe of this collaborative heritage project, which serves as an exemplary model for how cultural institutions may utilize methodological processes, implement theoretical strategies, and negotiate issues dealing with intangible cultural heritage.

Lastly, as a Master's thesis, this study was conducted under conditions of limited time, resources, and funding. The ethnographic research design, therefore, is compressed. Compressed ethnographic work is often employed when resources are scarce and when the researcher already has an extensive knowledge of the field, context, and participants; at times, the field site may also be the researcher's home community (LeCompte and Schensul 1999a:88). At the start of this project, I had prior knowledge and experience with the contra dance community and would have considered myself an "insider". Due to the compressed nature of my work, I conducted in-depth interviews most often with key informants, rather than a large pool of people with varying levels of cultural knowledge (LeCompte and Schensul 1999a:89). A significant portion of the consultants for this project were callers, musicians, or dance organizers; as a result, many of my informants possessed a significant degree of interpretive or historical insight related to the cultural or social milieu. For many museums and cultural institutions seeking to implement

ethnographic work to supplement exhibitions or programs, a compressed ethnography is the only option; therefore, this approach was not too removed from a realistic situation within a cultural institution.

Structure of the Thesis

The following three chapters put in place the setting, history, and theoretical perspectives for the project. Chapter Two: Designing a Multi-disciplinary Methodology outlines the research questions and goals, introduces the methods, and explicates the research design. Specifically, this chapter will summarize the disciplinary approaches of ethnography, folklore studies, and dance research according to their relevance to the methodology of the project.

Chapter Three: Background and Theoretical Frameworks includes a literature review of the prominent scholars, writings, and disciplinary trends as they relate to the theoretical frameworks and themes of the project. More specifically, Chapter Three elaborates on the term intangible cultural heritage, which in the most basic sense means non-material cultural artifacts. In order to further explore the idea of expressive culture as it is manifested and utilized in the festival setting, I will present the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The Festival serves to enlighten the fieldwork as an example of model institutional work with intangible cultural heritage. While I did not conduct formal ethnographic research at the Festival, I was immersed in the process before, during, and after as an intern and carried out in-depth source research on the subject after the internship. Lastly, this chapter will explore the theoretical frameworks vital to the study including the anthropology of dance, performance theory, and the new museology.

Chapter Four: Case Study Background and Literature Review serves to introduce the contra dance community through a cultural and historical summary, which demonstrates both how it once existed as well as how it exists in the United States today. This chapter will include a literature review of dance studies and ethnographies. Many of the topics and themes explored by contra dance researchers, as well as those of other forms of dance and movement, relate to the project by introducing some of the key ideas and issues in dance and heritage studies.

The last three chapters all deal with reviewing, analyzing, and interpreting the findings from the ethnographic fieldwork. Chapter Five: The Contra Dance Event demonstrates a creative effort towards interpreting the findings while simultaneously placing the reader into the contra dance context through an in-depth description of the event. Clifford Geertz, in his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, writes that “anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third ones to boot[...]They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’” (1973:15). By emphasizing the creative and constructed nature of ethnographic writing, Geertz makes it clear that while anthropology is an approach requiring extensive research and experience, it is still an expression of a writer’s mind.

The bulk of the ethnographic findings are reviewed in Chapter Six - Contra Dancing and Community: Making Meaning Out of Experience. This chapter presents snapshots from interviews with contra dancers, which are organized according to the major themes that emerged from the data. The three main sections include Tradition and Change, Behavior and Expression, and Values and Meaning. Within these main themes

are more specific topics dealing with defining the community and its boundaries, issues of sustainability, globalization, social interaction, and aesthetic preferences.

Chapter Seven - Intangible Heritage Production: Field, Festival, and Museum serves as an integrated piece where the findings, theoretical frameworks, case studies, and discourse meet to address the research questions and the greater discipline of anthropology, dance studies, and performance studies. In order to reveal some of the key components of cultural heritage work in museums, Chapter Seven explores the methods employed by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. These methods, while essential for the Festival and the Center, prove to be a challenge for museum institutions with more traditional approaches towards exhibition and programming. Ultimately, the characteristics that shape effective work and experiences with heritage revolve around sending out museum staff to do ethnographic research and building a sense of community for the museum.

CHAPTER TWO: DESIGNING A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY

Goals and Research Questions

The goals of this study include exploring different museum approaches for the representation, production, and preservation of intangible cultural heritage, specifically dance, and creating a better understanding of contra dance as a form of living culture through anthropological and ethnographic study. In order to achieve these two broad and expansive goals, the research project integrated ethnography, performance studies, new museology, and heritage studies to form a multidisciplinary approach. Practically, the project investigates the contra dance community in Denver, Colorado, in comparison to other contra dance communities, in order to explore the current and potential means of presentation, transmission, reproduction, and preservation of dance and as well as other forms of living heritage. In light of these goals, I have addressed three main research questions:

- 1) Within their own respective dance communities, what do contra dancers value and make meaningful related to both their experiences at dance events as well as how they interact with other contra dancers?
- 2) As characterized by UNESCO's Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), how is the contra dance community similar to, or different from, other defined communities of living heritage and expressive culture?

3) What is the value of studying intangible cultural heritage? How can living culture be incorporated most effectively into the museum environment and what are the challenges associated with doing so? Conversely, what can museums learn from working with communities of intangible cultural heritage?

As a contra dancer, I had my own ideas about what kind of value contra dancers placed on their contra-related experiences. I assumed, at first, that many contra dancers valued being part of an event where they could connect with other people on a physical and personal level. I thought that the interactive nature of eye contact, smile, and touch were appealing elements of a dance event and would be meaningful to dancers. I had also believed that contra dancing was a significant facet of many dancers' identities and was part of the reason they returned to dances week after week. Later on, after conducting more research and interviews, I began to discover that in addition to identity, a sense of community is a major component of the contra dance subculture. While contra dancers did not express in their interviews explicitly that dance was key to their identity, they did emphasize the importance of community. These conceptions of community, however, while being significant, are also a contentious subject that I am still in the process of uncovering. Through interviews and fieldwork, I have been able to see many different levels of meaning surrounding community as it relates to the contra dance world.

Prior to conducting the research, I also had other assumptions related to the idea of contra dance as intangible cultural heritage. I began my research from the perspective that contra dance was a form of intangible cultural heritage, no question, and should be treated that way uniformly across the spectrum of communities, however diverse.

Conversely, after learning more about the definitions surrounding intangible cultural heritage as set out by UNESCO, I realized that contra dance communities appear along a continuum of intangible cultural heritage; meaning that some communities align more with the definition than others, depending on the characteristics they possess and exhibit. In this way, the second and third research questions provide for a unique discussion at the end of Chapter Seven, where I will present the ways that the findings enlighten how contra dance may qualify, varying from community to community, as a form of intangible cultural heritage, particularly as heritage in need of safeguarding.

Research Design

Research design in anthropology is a delicate and deliberate combination of the ways that a project is conceptualized and, subsequently, executed. This process involves the planning and implementation of methods, the integration of theoretical frameworks, and the significant ordering of those various steps. Key to the study was interpreting the ways museums have worked toward integrating intangible cultural heritage and living culture into their institutions for various means - education, collaboration, audience engagement, national/international partnerships, to name a few. The primary institution I investigate is the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The means and methods employed by the Center, as well as other cultural heritage-oriented institutions, relate back to one seminal method: ethnography.

In order to demonstrate the application of ethnographic methods within living cultural groups, this project serves as a case study of prospective methodologies for

museum projects with intangible cultural heritage. This study focuses primarily on the fieldwork component and the interpretation of its findings, with some suggestions for future research and applied uses.

The Ethnographic Method

One way for a researcher to gain an understanding of a different culture is for that individual to become familiar with the activities, behavior, norms, and beliefs of a group through continued involvement and interaction and later, through the analysis and interpretation of those findings. Ethnography is most commonly associated with an individual becoming extremely familiar with a specific localized cultural group through an intense immersion for an extended period of time (LeCompte and Schensul 1999a:4-5). In doing ethnography, a researcher attempts to observe, participate, and take note of different perspectives present in a situation rather than solely from a single point of view.

Like many of the anthropological sub-fields, dance ethnography utilizes the same overarching approaches as ethnography; however, it applies the unique tools that are best suited for effective work within the dance community. Dance ethnography requires building an extensive knowledge of the cultural participants, while at the same time fine-tuning a focus of the dance form itself. Theresa J. Buckland describes how “[f]or the dance ethnographer, her or his usual territory is that of the field, where source materials are created through the researcher’s systematic description of the transient actions and words of people dancing in the present” (2006:3). While the dance ethnographer maintains a sense of “the field” like that of other ethnographers, the difference lies in the

fact that a dance ethnographer's work must specifically focus on the movement and interactions of dancers.

The findings of dance ethnography research all contribute to the anthropology of dance, which is a focused perspective that uncovers “the sociocultural system in which movement systems are embedded,” (Kaepler 1999:17). In this process, an anthropologist's goal becomes to unpack different elements of a dance form in order to learn more about the context that surrounds it as well as that greater cultural complex. By applying ethnography for this project, I sought to address a number of goals and questions, including to better understand the role that contra dance plays in the lives of dancers, to investigate the ways that contra dance is viewed and interpreted by dancers, to learn about the cultural characteristics specific to this form of dance, and to find out what distinguishes this subculture from others. These goals align with the research approach as structured by the interpretive paradigm, in which interpretivists suppose that what “people know and believe to be true about the world is constructed - or made up - as people interact with one another over time in specific social settings;” these same researchers seek to uncover the “social construction of reality” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999a:48). In this way, the research design and methodology merge to enlighten how individuals piece together their experiences within the contra dance community.

By learning about the cultural qualities of the contra dance community through ethnographic fieldwork, the project arrives at a better understanding of how dancers and members of the contra dance community create value and meaning from the dance.

Kaepler indicates this when she writes about how:

[a]nthropologists are interested in understanding how meaning is derived from movement, how the frame of an event must be understood in order to derive meaning from it, how intention and cultural evaluation can be derived from the framing of the event, the necessity of understanding the activities that generate movement systems and how and by whom the movements are judged. [Kaepler 1999:19]

Studies of dance are distinctly valuable because of the insight they provide into society and human behavior through the physical realm of the body and movement. With this in mind, Cynthia J. Novack stresses the tendency of researchers to dismiss the connections between the mind and body rather than acknowledge the idea that the two are working in concert as a form of expression. Many researchers, according to Novack, see the body and its behavior as extraneous, subsequently missing “the role or significance of either in human events; such omissions are common in accounts of cultural history and anthropology” (1990:4). This project, then, becomes significant for ethnographic studies because of the fact that the connection between the bodily senses and the mind has been formerly neglected in qualitative research. Along with ethnography, the contextual approach in folklore also enlightens and frames research on another level.

The contextual approach, fundamental to both the disciplines of anthropology and folklore, has now become a structuring mechanism in fieldwork that aims to create an holistic understanding of culture; this approach “demand[s] of all folklorists today[...that]they all take contextual evidence into consideration as a standard obligation” (Toelken 1996:6). In highlighting the importance of context for cultural interpretations and research, it becomes necessary to define the parameters of context.

Theresa J. Buckland sheds light on some of the issues related to defining context when she points out that contexts, in being built by the researcher, are fluid and dynamic according to the need, approach, or circumstance:

The problem with all contexts, of course, is that they are ‘constructed for specific purposes and thus always negotiable, which makes futile any attempts at defining contexts substantively.’ This means that it is imperative for researchers and readers to make public the circumstances of their choice and to identify as far as possible ensuing implications for their interpretation of dance. [Buckland 2006:8]

Therefore, in defining the scope of contexts for this research study, it is necessary to be cognizant of why and how these contexts have been formed.

For the case study on contra dance, context is constituted on different levels including the social and physical domain of the dancers, callers, musicians, and organizers from the greater Denver area, the historical background of contra dance in America, and the broader setting of American traditional music and dance. The diversity of contexts contributes to the concept of an overarching contra dance community in America. The nested spheres of field sites, both large and small, demonstrate a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus 1989:52). While the primary observations and data are centered on the Denver area, information collected from dancers in other contra dance communities becomes relevant for comparison.

In his methodological and theoretical approaches to fieldwork in anthropology, Clifford Geertz utilized what he called “thick description” as a way of relaying the means through which individuals construct meaning in culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz alludes to the performative and intangible nature of cultural events at a time when performance studies had barely hit the scene. He explains that in writing up

cultural research, “the ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted” (1973:19). His statement reflects the power held by authors of culture and how these passing moments of performance become embedded in written accounts. In order to properly outline the context and create an overview of the setting for the case study on contra dance in this project, Chapter Five applies the idea of a detailed description to a contra dance event.

A significant portion of this study aims to expand upon the research surrounding potential and effective methods for presentation, education, and representation of living cultural heritage in the museum. With that being said, the findings from this project may work to enlighten the greater field and discipline of heritage studies from a curatorial and museological sense. The new museological theory, a critical part of the methodology for this project, addresses contemporary issues in museums by exploring how to accomplish lasting educational and experiential interactions for audiences within the museum setting. Sharon MacDonald, museum theorist and sociologist, writes about how new museological studies today acknowledge and address “the multiplicity and complexity of museums, and call for a correspondingly rich and multi-faceted range of perspectives and approaches to comprehend and provoke museums themselves” (2007:2). This critical approach addresses the purpose of museums, investigates perspective and representation, and considers the role of the public with relation to museums.

Ethnography and Museums: Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

One museum institution successfully implementing the ethnographic approach towards non-material traditions is the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The Center demonstrates how cultural institutions may both work with and incorporate intangible cultural heritage into programming and exhibition. In this way, the Center and the Festival serve as an applied example of expressive culture in the museum setting.

Every year, the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage produces the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which presents two to three different cultures or cultural themes/topics, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The Festival is summarized in an excerpt from its mission:

[A] national and international model of a research-based presentation of contemporary living cultural traditions. Over the years, it has brought more than 23,000 musicians, artists, performers, craftspeople, workers, cooks, storytellers, and others to the National Mall to demonstrate the skills, knowledge, and aesthetics that embody the creative vitality of community-based traditions.

These traditions, called programs, are selected by curators, researched extensively, and then explored through ethnography in the country or area by local specialists and staff. After watching a process in situ, a curator collaborates with the practitioners to recreate that environment on site at the National Mall, which later provides a space for tradition bearers to present their tradition at the Festival. It became clear to me during my internship that in order for the public to learn about a tradition in an engaging way, they need to see it in action. [Smithsonian Institution 2009]

In the context of a cultural institution, a tradition bearer presents his or her knowledge through enactment, which allows a tradition to be more tied to a living population today. After seeing a cultural process live, a museum visitor may connect that

process with objects held in a museum collection, as opposed to viewing a stagnant artifact in a glass case. A museum then becomes less a repository for history and its artifacts and rather begins telling an object's stories through contemporary ethnography and demonstration, which subsequently allows us to move beyond "the material" and into a more holistic interpretation of culture. The processes and approaches from the Festival context, along with the theoretical bases of anthropology and museology, combine to frame the methodology of this project. The methods, described below, are the applied and "on the ground" manifestation of this process.

Methods

The research design for this study involved implementing the ethnographic approaches of participant observation, interviews, and survey. In order to carry out and complete the study in both the field as well as during the analysis phase, I conceptualized the research from both emic and etic perspectives.⁴ On the one hand, I actively observed the social and cultural scene as an ethnographer, which makes my perspective etic-slanted. From this point of view, I tried to contextualize what I observed with information from source research and interviews. On the other hand, I worked from an emic perspective because I procured meaning based, in part, from my past experiences in the contra dance community and invested myself physically, emotionally, and intellectually during the process. The etic and emic perspectives combine to form a comprehensive

⁴ In the anthropological discipline, etic refers to "outsider's knowledge" or non-native perspective and emic refers to "insider's knowledge" or a native perspective.

understanding of the ways that the community functions and coheres, both from the outside and from within.

The foundation for these methods began with background research from scholarly sources. Most of these resources were secondary library sources in the form of books, electronic articles, and some archives/special collections materials. The key subjects and search terms utilized during this stage were the anthropology of dance, dance ethnography, dance studies, performance studies, museum studies, heritage studies, and contra dance.

Part of learning about the history of contra dancing and creating a literature review for this project involved a trip to New Hampshire to the University of New Hampshire (Durham) Special Collections. These Collections and Archives house the New Hampshire Library of Traditional Music and Dance along with the Ralph Page and Dance Gypsy Collections. This research experience allowed me to contextualize my observations and interview data within published materials and written accounts. I took detailed notes on the sources and took photographs of the important pieces that I found in the collection. During this process, I found a number of different dance organization newsletters that repeatedly debated the same points within various communities. These points of conflict aligned with some of the interview findings and will be addressed later in Chapter Six. On this trip I was also able to conduct interviews with experienced dance researchers in the field. All of these interactions provided context for my later research in Denver.

The participant observation phase of the research took place primarily at the Denver contra dance, as this was the dance that the closest to where I lived and was the most convenient for me to attend on a regular, bi-weekly basis. Before I conducted official research, I attended the Denver contra dance a few times a month starting in January 2009 as reconnaissance for the study. This portion of the research process allowed me to survey the potential research community and introduce myself to dancers before I was cleared by the Institutional Review Board and before I began executing my research for my thesis. The first early observations of the community shed light on the fact that the dance crowd was overwhelmingly middle-aged to later-aged, with a few anomalies here and there. Also, like many other contra dance communities I visited before, the group was warm, welcoming, and enthusiastic about their special community. They were, and continue to be, encouraging attendees to bring new people to the dances. In fact, these dancers gave special attention to young dancers, especially when it involved talking about recruiting new friends to the dance (Field notes, Denver, Colorado, December 11, 2009).

During my internship at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, I was able to balance a wide range of projects related to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival along with dance research. On the one hand, I observed the Folklife Center's institutional and theoretical approach for presenting living heritage at the Festival and worked towards the applied result of this perspective. On the other hand, I was conveniently located near one of the largest weekly contra dances in the nation: the Glen Echo Park Friday Night Dance in Glen Echo, Maryland, where I first conducted

participant observation. I was also fortunate to coordinate a few interviews with people from this community during this time. Luckily for me, my internship supervisor and her partner were well-known faces at the Glen Echo dance scene, which meant that I had an “in” at this dance. Despite the fact that I was slightly hesitant and nervous to be actively conducting fieldwork at that point, the situation threw me into the thick of fieldwork because I was immediately introduced as “Kat, who is doing her Master’s thesis on contra dancing”. Having such connections at the dance was invaluable to getting the word out about my research to the community. This short-term experience was also great preparation for my fieldwork in Denver, Colorado.

My observations at the Glen Echo Park dances were supplemented by short-term participant observation at the Falcon Ridge Folk Festival in Hillsdale, New York, for a long weekend (July 23-26, 2009). I attended this festival as a volunteer, which became a quick and easy way for me to get to know a number of avid contra dancers and festival attendees. At Falcon Ridge, I documented the dance through photography and field notes. The observations and experiences at this festival were extraordinary in that they emerged from what was an intensive, four-day long event where the dancing never really stops. As a result, people were completely immersed in this culture and their interactions, attitudes towards dancing, and expressions revolved primarily around dancing and connecting with others for four days with minimal “outside” distractions.

Upon returning to Denver in September 2009, I immediately commenced participant observation at the Denver and Boulder contra dances. Throughout this process I became connected with people by word of mouth. Many of the people I met became key

informants for my research and interviews. Some of those figures had been mentioned to me in prior interviews with dancers on the East Coast, which suggests that certain individuals were quite well known in the contra dance world.

In order to extend this research project to better explore the body-mind connection beyond the means of my own observation, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews. These interviews with members of the contra dance community bolstered the insight of individual value and meaning in this study. The interviewing style I employed for this project is what I call a semi-structured/unstructured hybrid approach.

Unstructured interview methodology is primarily utilized in research so that a researcher may explore concepts at the early stages of a study in order to verify ideas and allow for flexibility during the process of the interview (LeCompte et. al 1999:148). Although the method is deemed “unstructured,” by its title, it nevertheless requires extensive planning: “effective exploratory interviewing and observation are guided by the design of the research and the primary research questions, the formative research model, and some general questions that the researcher has about the specific topic to be explored” (LeCompte et al. 1999:146). In semi-structured interviews, however, questions are used to assist in further defining the factors, domains, hypotheses, and explanations from prior exploratory studies. While semi-structured interviews also allow for flexibility in terms of interaction and how the interview is guided, they are more geared towards enlightening certain concepts and questions than unstructured interviews. One key difference between the two styles of interviewing is related to the stage of the research when the interviews are conducted; unstructured interviews lend better to projects that are less concrete and in

the beginning stages and semi-structured interviews are more fitting in situations where the research design, framework, and hypotheses are in place and the researcher needs to obtain findings to support his or her ideas. Regardless of the stage, however, both methods require that interview questions are prepared prior to the interview, that researcher biases are avoided, and that the researcher more or less frames the conversation around major topics or subjects.

Framing is key to the interview process, because without it, an interview has the potential to stray away from an initial question or veer off-topic. If a basic framework is in place, a researcher has the questions and key words in his or her mental tool kit to effectively lead the discussion back to the original topic. However, straying away from an original question has the potential, in some cases, to reveal new and relevant information to the researcher. In this way, interviews require a keen sense for observation, cues, and language on the part of the researcher.

The interview styles allowed me to both explore topics that were less familiar to me and to pose deliberately ordered questions related to the research questions. In doing so, the consultants had some freedom to develop the conversation in areas that were important to them, while at the same time I was able to address some other relevant topics for the project. The themes or areas stressed by a consultant most likely revealed that a certain topic was important to him or her; thus, the interview process derived what contra dancing meant to each person as well as the degree of this meaning. The semi-structured nature of the interviewing process was evident in the way that I formulated the questions (based around the research questions of the project) and ordered the questions

(simple to complex, early events to recent events). However, the interview process was unstructured in that I often listened to consultants' narratives/stories even if I didn't immediately see it as an "answer" to my question. I also did not presuppose any responses to my questions. In this way, consultants brought up new points they thought were noteworthy or explanatory to elaborate on their own responses to questions. Some interviews took on the characteristics of one interview style over another, depending on the consultant. Most of the unstructured interviews were in-depth and took place with a key informant, like a caller or dance researcher, and the semi-structured interviews were more often held with a consultant who participated in the dance but did not stray outside the dancer role in the community.

The data collected from the interviews were attitudinal and relational, meaning that the consultants gave information based on attitudes and opinions of their surroundings as well as the way in which they relate to their world. The interviews began with a question related to how the individual learned about or got involved with contra dance. This question created a context for meaning in the research and was also a way for me to get to know the person if I didn't already know him or her. Later, I posed questions dealing with the concept of community and identity, which I stated indirectly. Instead of asking: "How do you think your identity is affected by contra dancing?," I asked about how he or she expressed him/herself and behaved within the contra dance environment. I would then ask whether this behavior was similar to, or different from, the "outside," or non-contra, environment (See Appendix B for the full list of official interview questions). Discovering what was meaningful to the dancers allowed me to conceptualize the

diversity of views and conflicts within the community. Chapter Six presents these findings organized and structured according to the local, or culturally defined, categories of meaning.

The interviewing process usually began at dances through simply meeting someone who seemed as though they might want to talk about contra dancing with me outside of the dance venue. I met a majority of the consultants at contra dance events or was given their contact information through another person in the community. Further arrangements and details were made over the telephone or email after having spoken with them in person. In the majority of cases, I had already established some sort of a contact with that person before I asked him or her to meet for an interview. Usually if I talked with someone at a dance that didn't want to be interviewed, that person would point me towards someone else.

I began interviewing dancers from Glen Echo Park dances and I continued throughout the summer of 2009 in Saratoga Springs, New York, and around the state of New Hampshire. Later on, after commencing fieldwork in Denver, it became clear that many of my key informants were going to be dance organizers or callers. What I realized about this tendency was that the calling community possessed a level of knowledge about contra dances that went beyond simply knowing how to dance them. This is due to a number of reasons; within an event, callers are active observers of the dances and the music, they possess extensive knowledge of the maneuvers in each dance, and they have the ability to watch how people dance and interact with one another. The callers often had knowledge of contra dance history more so than the average dancer. This added insight,

from a folklore perspective, elucidated the process of knowledge transmission within the community. This was beneficial in that I could more easily talk with these consultants about the issues in my thesis. However, this choice ended up limiting the time I had to spend with dancers who did not filter their responses through prior research or interpretation.

Another method implemented for the project was a new dancer survey. For this survey, I created a list of questions related to observations, feelings, feedback, and impressions geared towards people who had recently experienced the contra dance scene (within the past two years). I sent out the survey electronically to dancers that I knew and six participants chose to participate (the survey questions are included as Appendix C). While I acknowledge that sending the survey to people I know is not a representative sample, I chose to conduct the survey, nevertheless, because the insight was valuable. In the findings section, some of the responses from this survey will inform the research; I have chosen to leave a number of these participants anonymous, therefore, I have given them pseudonyms.

The case study on the Denver contra dance community revolves around the first two research questions in this study. Specifically, I was able to find out how participants have made their own contra dance experiences meaningful and how they value being a part of such a community. On a larger scale, by learning about the Denver community through interviews, observations, and background research, I was able to shed light on greater issues that arise in the realm of living cultural heritage. These findings, in

combination with research related to festivals and museums, work to address the third research question.

Ethical Considerations

As with almost all social scientific studies involving human subjects, a number of ethical precautions and considerations were required for the project. First, the project was submitted for approval through the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB). This required me to become knowledgeable on ethical guidelines prior to submitting my proposal by enrolling in the Human Research Protections Education, an online program. After completing the education training, I proposed the completed online application electronically to the Institutional Review Board. Along with the application I attached the informed consent statement form, the interview questions, and the survey questions (see Appendix D for the informed consent statement form).

After being approved by the IRB, I made sure to comprehensively gain informed consent from consultants. Once an individual decided to participate in an interview, informed consent was obtained by providing the informed consent statement form for the participant to read and sign. I made it clear to the participant during the interview that he/she was free to ask any questions he/she may need answered, that he/she could refrain from answering any questions that made him/her feel uncomfortable, and that he/she could discontinue the interview at any time should he/she feel it necessary.

Another ethical question that I needed to address was: what risks are posed by this study? Due to the nature of the study and the fact that the population is not an at-risk

group, only minimal potential risk was present. One risk that I noted in the IRB application involved a potential situation when certain opinions or value-laden statements stated by an individual could become published at a later date in the thesis. If a person's name was published, they would be made public and it is possible that another person with a contrasting viewpoint could read his or her opinion. The implications for such a situation are primarily restricted to risks of social well-being. This would not have been a serious problem and the degree of social impact would have been minimal, as most people with opinions in the contra dance community have already made their attitude public in some way or another. Due to the low-risk nature of this study, I have chosen to refer to my informants simply by their first name.

Along with the formal ethical considerations of this project, I also had to confront the more indirect forms of ethical dilemmas. Although the ethnographic approach aims to be an objective, non-value laden form of research, even the most carefully thought-out interview processes, questions, and supposedly unbiased participant observation are not completely objective or free of opinions/predispositions. I had to address this issue during my fieldwork, as I have numerous previous experiences within the contra dance community that influenced my research in some way or another. One way I dealt with this challenge was by exploring the different ways in which my preconceived notions, past experiences, and prior knowledge all influenced my time in the field. One effective process to investigate these influences is through becoming reflexive in the process of fieldwork, through field notes, presentation of findings, and interpretation of those findings.

CHAPTER THREE: BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The word “museum,” for many, brings to mind images of old dusty artifacts, dead things, and stagnant, still objects. This tendency may stem from the fact that many museum institutions stake their origins in “cabinets of curiosities” and treasures behind glass cases, a tradition that has evolved through the last few centuries (Newhouse 1998:14; Svašek 2007:125)). As James Clifford states, “[a]ll such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self” (1988:218). In some instances, those collections represented, and still represent, various ideologies, some of which include perspectives from the academic disciplines of anthropology, history, art, and biology. In this way, museums’ collections may exemplify certain beliefs, taxonomies of value, or cultural constraints (Stocking 1985:5; Svašek 2007:128).

Innovative museums today have moved beyond solely collecting material and have worked toward incorporating the culturally intangible into their missions, programs, and exhibitions; for example, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Efforts like these work to sustain living heritage and promote its vitality within source communities, rather than simply to preserve. By examining the manifestations and work with intangible heritage in museum institutions, as well as studying heritage production within communities, scholars may reach a better understanding of heritage and culture.

In order to expand upon studies of living heritage in the museum, this project utilizes a multi-sited investigation into different areas of cultural heritage. This chapter

review will survey the history, pertinent definitions, and backgrounds of different manifestations of intangible cultural heritage as they relate to performance, dance, museums, and festivals. The anthropology of dance, performance theory, and critical museum theory, or the “new museological theory,” will provide a theoretical basis for the project.

Intangible Cultural Heritage

The term, intangible cultural heritage, is a key idea at the base of this research. In order to better understand the role it plays in this study, the next section will review intangible cultural heritage through a series of questions; these questions include “what is intangible cultural heritage?,” “why is intangible cultural heritage important when studying and understanding cultures?,” and “how is dance related to intangible cultural heritage?” After introducing this series of questions, I will briefly overview a case study of intangible cultural heritage at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

What is intangible cultural heritage?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), one of the major organizations spearheading the movement in heritage management, has put into action a number of programs, conventions, initiatives, and recommendations meant to safeguard heritage. The initial steps towards promoting and preserving heritage began with material culture, tangible objects, and places

(Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Over the last few decades, however, UNESCO has started to emphasize the exigency of safeguarding those aspects of culture that are non-material and has subsequently created programs and efforts to sustain endangered intangible traditions and practices. This step was a necessary one; as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, the approaches used to work with and preserve tangible heritage do not always align with the intangible, as the former approaches aim to preserve an object in an original or pristine state, “untouched by time” (2006:182). Living culture however, is intricately tied to people who are continually changing, thus, it requires alternative approaches and methods for preservation, safeguarding, and documentation.

In 1989 UNESCO put forth the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, which paved the way for further examinations, suggestions, assessments, and analyses of intangible cultural heritage at the local, national, and international level around the globe (Smithsonian Institution and UNESCO 1989:278-9). This recommendation preceded the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is arguably the most pivotal action made by UNESCO for living culture around the world. As defined in Article 2, Paragraph 1 of the convention text, intangible cultural heritage means:

[t]he practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.
[UNESCO 2003:2]

Museums have traditionally over-emphasized the importance of material collections and under-represented living and intangible knowledge. In light of this trend, intangible cultural heritage becomes particularly relevant to the steps that museums and cultural institutions take in promoting, sustaining, and educating the public about cultures. The General Provisions of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage mention the great value and importance of “[c]onsidering the deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage” (UNESCO 2003:1). This inseparable connection in heritage is crucial to understanding how museums today may work towards more effectively approaching all forms of heritage.

Today, the overwhelming number of objects in collections that sit in storage, without stories and without practitioners, emphasizes the relevance and urgency of extended work with intangible cultural heritage. With this in mind, museums must be cognizant of the importance that cultural knowledge has with regard to material culture. Contemporary preservation and heritage management, then, must emphasize the “ability to use the object” rather than the object itself. The museum’s role becomes “to facilitate this use rather than to protect the material qualities of the object” (Gorman and Shep 2006:45). This ability is featured through the knowledge of those who practice a tradition.

Richard Kurin, former Smithsonian Folklife Festival Director, has been pivotal in spearheading the intangible cultural heritage movement both within the Center as well as at numerous UNESCO meetings on heritage (Kurin 2007:11). He also has written

extensive publications on intangible cultural heritage and how it relates to museums and communities worldwide (Kurin 1994; Kurin 1997; Kurin 1998; Kurin 2001; Kurin 2004a; Kurin 2004b; Kurin 2007). Kurin explains how intangible cultural heritage “is by definition living, vital and embedded in ongoing social relationships” (2004b:7). In using song as an example, intangible cultural heritage constitutes not only the song objects but also “the singing of the songs by the members of the very community who regard those songs as theirs, and indicative of their identity as a cultural group” (2007:12). Both performance and ownership represent significant parts of intangible cultural heritage.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, anthropologist and cultural theorist, has also published comprehensive works related to heritage, museums, and culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006). With regard to the 2003 UNESCO Convention, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explores concepts of sustainability related to recent models of safeguarding intangible heritage, which aim “to sustain a living, if endangered, tradition by supporting the conditions necessary for cultural reproduction[...].the task, then, is to sustain the whole system as a living entity and not just to collect ‘intangible artifacts’” (2006:164). This approach involves preserving a piece of heritage while sustaining and assisting those who perform, produce, and master those traditions in their lives.

Why is intangible cultural heritage important when studying and understanding cultures?

Culture can be broken down into two subcategories: the material and the intangible. Anthropologists have often emphasized material culture studies, especially

with regard to the foundations of museology. While material culture is useful to a certain extent, its study can only go so far to explain the ways that material objects are used, the role they play in a cultural context, and the purpose they serve. In light of these limitations, Richard Bauman put forth the idea that material remains, and text for that matter, can be understood as only the sediment of culture, rather than the culture itself, and that culture can only truly be created in the moment, through people's actions and behaviors (Bauman 1984:47-48). Cultural events, interactions, and performances are painted through elaboration of each motion, through the environment surrounding an event, and the nuances of performance, which help to convey significance and meaning within a culture (Schieffelin 1985:722). By observing living, performed, and ephemeral events, people may experience culture embodied in a single instant before it disappears. Observing and/or participating in living cultural traditions, then, becomes vital to understanding a culture to its full extent. In order to more holistically learn about a culture, researchers need to combine studies of both the material remains with living heritage and performance.

Many seminal anthropological works have, in some way, documented and studied the expressive components of culture. Ethnographers have often observed and documented forms of cultural expression in ceremonies, rites, or rituals performed by the people in their culture of study. Until recently, these interpretations of expressive events were based on a more limited analysis that read the dance like a text; this model was carried out by documenting, in writing, what was spoken or what movements had transpired. For the most part, these observations were woven into the greater story of a

culture, with little attention to how the event was enacted or performed at a particular point in time. This sort of perspective did not address other meaningful facets of an event, such as how the words were spoken or the physical/social context surrounding the event (Bauman 1977:8). More contemporary studies of folklore, culture, and museum anthropology have begun to execute studies of expression and non-material culture from the framework of performance theory (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Gergen and Picart 2004; Hast 1993; Hewitt 2005; Feld 1988; Feld 1990; Jewett 2008; Novack 1990; Schieffelin 1985). This perspective provides for a more holistic and all-encompassing look at cultural expression.

How is dance related to intangible cultural heritage?

Dance, as a performing art and as a physical manifestation of culture, is listed as a form of intangible cultural heritage in Article 2, Paragraph 2 of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage General Provisions (UNESCO 2003:2). With great potential to reveal the ways people think, process information, and view the world, dance and more broadly, movement, is a fleeting form of cultural expression; one that emerges from cultural groups from around the world. Dance can manifest itself in many different forms and settings – professional stage performance, individual/couple improvisation at a club, and rural community gatherings, to name a few. In research, making distinctions between these variations allows scholars to narrow down the scope of a cultural study.

Helen Thomas, dance and culture theorist, writes that “dance, as performance art, unlike fine art or literature, does not leave behind it material objects, which remain ‘relatively’ stable in the sense that they can be touched, felt or looked at in their extant context” (2004:33). In part due to its ephemeral nature, dance, as a result, is lacking from the scope of museums. In order to better understand the disconnect between dance and the museum, this chapter provides a literature review that explores the ways that dance relates to intangible cultural heritage, how dance serves to enlighten behavior and interaction, and how dance has been incorporated into cultural institutions thus far. The next section will address some of these issues by examining the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as an exemplary model of working with intangible cultural heritage in the institution.

Intangible Heritage in the Museum: A Case Study at the Smithsonian

The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, an educational and research sector of the Smithsonian Institution, is a forbearer of integrating intangible cultural heritage into the museum setting. Situated between the roles of a research facility, a recording studio, and a museum, the Center serves many different functions. According to its mission statement, the Center dedicates itself “to the collaborative research, presentation, conservation, and continuity of traditional knowledge and artistry with diverse contemporary cultural communities in the United States and around the world” (CFCH 2010). At the heart of the Center’s duties is the organization and production of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. From the platform of a festival, the Center simulates an

experience of cultural submersion for visitors, incorporating both tangible and intangible forms of heritage into the context.

The Festival was founded in 1967 and has become exemplary in its approaches to cultural research, documentation, and preservation (Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2010). At the Festival, programs feature and elaborate upon different cultures, regions, and issues through various themes. Curatorial staff at the Folklife Center researches three to four programs to be featured at the Festival. Throughout the process of observation and knowledge acquisition, with regard to the various traditions within that culture, a researcher becomes engaged with program participants in a continual collaborative relationship (Kurin 1997:13). The collaborative relationship entails an equal and reciprocal exchange of ideas and knowledge about a particular tradition. While the staff members will inevitably inform the observations with their own knowledge of folklore, anthropology, ethnomusicology, and theory, participants also provide an insider's, or emic, perspective into a tradition; this process of give and take, exchange, and interaction results in a cohesive Festival program or theme.

The Festival takes place on the site of the National Mall, or "the Mall," which spans an open plot of land in front of the United States Capitol, sitting in between the National Museums. The Mall serves as both a place and a space for cultural interaction.

Richard Kurin portrays the Festival site as creating (1994:8):

[i]ts own space on the Mall, a sometimes jarring presence in the midst of official, neat space. It creates a kind of face-to-face type of community in the shadows of inanimate official buildings and the institutions of the state.

Kurin also mentions the “semiotic proximity” of the Festival in relation to the museums surrounding it and the National Mall as a “symbolically potent space” in his description of the Festival in his book, *Reflections of a Culture Broker* (1997:122). Although Kurin deems the surrounding buildings “inanimate,” the spaces of the national museums and the government institutions likely hold more power than can be perceived from their subtle exteriors. Robert Cantwell discusses this possibility through his perspective of the implications of the Mall site, which insulates visitors from the world outside of the Smithsonian:

In the same way that the shopping mall insulates the “retail drama” from the many complex kinds of social and economic negotiations taking place outside its walls – the textural metaphor is appropriate here, too – so does the museum establish spatial and temporal boundaries within which the visitor is temporarily confined and outside of which lies the resources over which, consequently, the museum alone can exercise its power. [Cantwell 1993:64]

Cantwell explains how a subtle hegemonic power is imposed on the visitors to the National Mall. In this way, the place setting of the National Mall influences the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and the experiences of the visitors. To what extent the Mall impresses its values and influence over visitors, however, is debatable. While for Cantwell the institutional buildings impose an insinuating power and influence, according to the scene that Kurin lays out, the site situates the Festival as a cultural oasis amidst drab and dull government buildings. In 2008, the Festival had over one million visitors; perhaps the significant number of attendees works to counteract the hegemonic nature of the Festival’s setting to a certain degree.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival became critically discussed in the scholarly literature in the 1990s (Cantwell 1991; Cantwell 1993; Bauman and Sawin 1991; Karp and Lavine 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Kurin 1997). These publications address issues of representation, authenticity, agency and power surrounding exhibition of living culture. These issues and buzzwords were ripe in the 1990s, and though they still have a significant presence in the museological literature today, the situation has evolved with regard to the rhetorical focus of the literature.

Representation is a primary issue in the Festival literature. This is not unexpected when dealing with live demonstrations by people. Bauman and Sawin present the concept of “framing devices” as a means for participants and staff to negotiate representation (1991:301). Lastly, the logic and the means through which Festival staff choose program themes and participants will always inevitably leave someone out. Exclusion, though subtle, will continue to be embedded in the nature of the Festival.

The engaging atmosphere of the Festival is in many ways a contrast to traditional museum settings, where visitors are often more reserved, contemplative, and restrained. The Festival, in this way, is more conducive to providing for living, active cultural experiences. The methodological gap between these two cultural environments leads to the question: can the Smithsonian Folklife Festival truly be considered a living museum⁵? If so, how can museums alter their programming, exhibitions, and practices to cater more effectively to living culture, like at the Festival or in the Center. These concepts and

⁵ Richard Kurin explores this idea in his book *Reflections of a Culture Broker* in the chapter entitled “The Festival on the Mall”

questions will be later explored in Chapter Seven to better understand various cultural institutional methodologies.

Theoretical Frameworks

Anthropology of Dance

Dance anthropology, which draws its insights from social and cultural anthropology, has routinely adopted ethnographic methods to examine dance within the context of a culture (Kaepler 1978; Novack 1990; Royce 1977:13; Spencer 1985; Thomas 2003:66; Ness 1998). The anthropological study of dance began in the late 1960's as an outgrowth of cultural and social anthropological research. While the areas of dance research span a wide range of cultures and disciplines, each type of inquiry uniquely addresses methods and problems to applying anthropological methods to dance performance.

All humans become enculturated into the society that they are born or adopted into, which means that throughout their development they acquire the skills and behaviors appropriate for that specific culture. Just as these cultural codes and behaviors must be learned and perfected by an individual over time, Gabriele Klein points out how:

[d]ance knowledge is developed within social practice and, accordingly, can only be examined within this field of reference, which may be termed 'cultural knowledge'. Hence, dance as knowledge of culture means the practices of validating, disseminating and making use of dance knowledge. [Klein 2007:26]

Dance research is an extensive field. Before dance became a formally studied phenomenon in the 1960's, Franz Boas emphasized the importance of dance by

presenting dance as culturally specific, rather than universal (Kaepler 1978: 32-33). Soon after, Gertrude Kurath, dancer and ethnomusicologist, pioneered dance ethnology by developing a system of “glyph notation,” which made it easy to record movements by hand (Kaepler 1978:37). Kurath wrote numerous articles on anthropological dance research, one of her most all-encompassing and summative works being *Panorama of Dance Ethnology* (1960).

Joann Keali’inohomoku problematizes the application of western standards of critique to non-western forms of dance. She points out that often in dance study the non-Western dancers become anonymous, while dancers from the West are known by name: “[u]nless the non-Western performer has made a ‘hit’ on our stages, we seldom bother to give him a name in the captions, even though he might be considered a fine artist among his peers” (Keali’inohomoku 1980: 20). Although this argument may be true to some extent, it arises from a period in dance research approximately thirty years ago. Today, more efforts have been made in art and anthropology to give credit to artists as well as to collaborate with the source communities.

In terms of where dance ethnography stands today, some dance scholars are striving to produce more creative and alternative explorations of dance within academia. Caroline Joan S. Picart and Kenneth Gergen have produced an unconventional interpretation of dance in their article “Dharma Dancing: Ballroom Dancing and Relational Order” (2004). Rather than restricting themselves to the written, scholarly word, they incorporate a variety of expressive mediums which gives an artistic and open-ended interpretation of dance: “by creating a relationship between multiple media

(photography and videography) and modes of human communication (poetry, prose, dance, visual art), the article brings forth possibilities not contained in any one alone” (Gergen and Picart 2004:836). This investigation is structured around dance ethnography and the expanding realm of qualitative research. The work defies conventionality and, at times, it reads more like a piece of art than a scholarly publication. The introduction to the piece provides the only direct interpretation or goal for the research, which reflects the trend in contemporary art to leave the interpretation up to the observer. Picart and Gergen state: “as ethnography, our hope that the use of a theatrical/poetic/staged format enables us to get beyond the ‘embalmed transcribed speech’ often characteristic of conventional ethnographies” (2004:837). Anthropologists often become confined by the expectations of academia, therefore, the results are presented formally in an article or book, which may or may not truly capture the essence of a culture or art. While no form of interpretation or dissemination can ever completely represent a culture, it can be very helpful and interesting for researchers to provide an alternative to straight text.

Dance research framed by anthropology is a diverse and broad field of study. Scholars in this field have both tackled research topics from straightforward and unconventional approaches, which have been exhibited by the examples above. Research in dance has also been framed by performance theory, which posits that culture is created in the moment, through people’s actions and interactions with others. Performance studies aid in the understanding of cultural meaning in ephemeral events because they create awareness surrounding “the act of performance as situated behavior, situated within and rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts” (Bauman 1984:27).

These contextual descriptions become vital to a study, particularly when related to dance performances.

Performance Theory

Cultural values and beliefs are enmeshed in the social matrix of everyday life. In order to understand and decode aspects of culture, an ethnographer must become an active observer and participant in the daily activities and rituals. Similarly, “[t]his performative – as opposed to informative – ethnography is based on the recognition that much practical as opposed to discursive cultural knowledge can be illuminated only through enactment and performance” (Hertzfeld 2001: 284). This approach aligns with participant observation, which allows a researcher to be enlightened through enactment. In considering dance as a form of cultural production, the participants play out the coded cultural behavior within the group. This idea has not always been tangible or accepted in cultural studies, as dance knowledge has often been thought of as non-classifiable, transient, of the Other, or difficult to order, based on the physical nature of the dance (Klein 2007: 28-29).

The nuances of performance, such as style, breakthroughs and conclusions to performance, artistry, and how the audience interacts with the performer all may be interpreted to better understand a group or event. Sims and Stephens explain that “[f]olklorists pay attention to the performed act of expressive, artistic communication, the when, where, with whom, how, and why people communicate with each other” (2005:134).

Performance theory is vital for interpreting meaning within a group; thus, this framework acts a primary device for the section on findings in this study. Of particular interest is the way that the performer/audience relationship is negotiated within a community. In most cases, different players pass in and out of the roles of performer and audience during the course of an evening, as opposed to having one set of defined roles on either side.

When approaching the analysis of expressive events through a performative lens, it is often customary to break up a performance into three different categories: context, text, and texture. The text involves what the dancer does; this includes the movements and their specific order. The text of a performance is important to understanding the event; however, it cannot be the sole interpretive feature. The texture, or the way that a dancer performs the maneuvers, as well as the context, or the social, physical, and cultural environment that surrounds an event, are crucial to understanding the construction of meaning. The scholarly study of “[d]ance, then is not simply another object onto which text-based ‘reading’ strategies can be projected; it is a motif, a challenge internal or the operation of textuality” (Hewitt 2005:10). Therefore, the combination of text, texture, and context creates a more holistic picture of a dance event. Performance theorist Edward Schieffelin might argue that no conclusive portrayals of performance can be made through writing with a symbolic interpretation, because such an analysis would be reducing performance to text (1998:194). This approach argues that thorough observations and participation in an event in real time, an ethnographer can

produce a comprehensive cultural study. He argues that researchers must move beyond simple textual interpretations of meaning in cultural situations by seeing an event:

[a]s an emergent social construction. The reality evoked in the performance does not derive directly from its following a coherent ritual structure (though it does follow one), but from the process of dialogic interaction between the medium and the participants. What renders the performance compelling is not primarily the meanings embodied in symbolic materials themselves[...]but the way the symbolic material emerges in the interaction. [Schieffelin 1985:721]

While he is correct that writing can only capture one facet of a performance, writing about cultural events is not a futile effort; in fact, it is one of many possible interpretations of an event or performance. In his statement above, Schieffelin is simply elucidating the limitedness of writing without a performative lens, and emphasizing that it is not only the text of a performance that is important, but also the context and texture.

An expressive event, then, becomes meaningful through interpreting the unique and emergent qualities of a performance in its multi-contextual environment. A performance communicates different layers of significance to not only the observing audience but also creates an interchange between time, place, and culture. The communicative interaction built by a performance is the artistic process that embodies culture.

In early studies of folklore, scholars documented and collected what was considered “traditional” cultural behavior. These traditions existed among groups of people that were deemed uncivilized, rural, backward, and primitive by the so-called advanced, developed, Western peoples (Dundes 1980:4). Folklorists were motivated to study such traditions because they believed that over time these ways of life would

disappear. As Maruška Svašek explains, it was believed that folk culture had “the qualities which modern urban culture had lost” (Svašek 2007:139). A “fear that the traditional world was disappearing” (Toelken 1996:31) and would eventually be tainted by dominant Western culture was an impending issue in the world of folklore. Beliefs of this sort lead to salvage efforts on the part of researchers.

A significant portion of folklorists’ salvage projects dealt with collecting narratives, most often folktales. The tales were recorded by simply writing down the words; this approach subsequently omitted the social, political, artistic, or cultural background for that particular event. The mass accumulation of gathered stories was used for a number of purposes, namely, to compare the tales. Through comparison, folklorists attempted to find a “pure” or “original” source that could be pinpointed geographically. However, the lack of contextual information hinders the interpretation as well as the ability to fully understand the meaning behind a narrative. As Oring explains in his piece on folk narratives:

There are four major contexts which have regularly served as the backgrounds for the understanding of folk narratives: the cultural context, the social context, the individual context, and the comparative context. [1989:135]

In the past, narratives were only interpreted based on the collected text of a specific tale or narrative, severely limiting future insight. When this approach is transferred to the interpretation of dance, the information gathered is be limited to dancer formations and a list of movements. In order to explicate the limitedness provided by a simple text-centered analysis, I will review a short example of oral narrative and performance below.

Oral narrative is rooted in the fleeting and ephemeral act of performance, which relies heavily on the speaker and how he or she carries on during a performance. Many aspects of the narrative experience, including the very meaning of the words, can be lost in a bare-bones translation from aural to literary comprehension. Performance theorist and folklorist Richard Bauman, contributes to this argument in favor of performance study as an interpretive lens in his work, *Verbal Art as Performance* (1984). According to Bauman, a text-centered interpretation “places severe constraints on the development of a meaningful framework for the understanding of verbal art as performance, as a species of situated human communication, a way of speaking” (1984:8). Bauman challenges the text-centered frame of verbal art analysis through presenting an approach that frames verbal art as a performative event. This performance-based analysis centers around the communicative interactions of participants involved in an event, encompassing the audience, the performer, displays of competence and/or insider’s knowledge through the effective use of content, execution, and skill (Bauman 1984:22). Central to this interaction is the passing on of information, or transmission of cultural knowledge. This approach involves the interplay of many disciplines including anthropology, ethnography, folklore, sociolinguistics, and literary studies.

Framing, another component of performance, indicates the parameters of a performer’s actions and behavior to the group. According to Bauman, “performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the

literal” (1984:9). In this way, participants understand that specific types of communication and interaction will take place in a specific environment.

Those who study expressive events through the lens of performance theory know that occasions of performance occur without being officially deemed “performances” in the way it is defined in art or theatre. Bauman acknowledges this difficulty when he states:

[t]he most challenging job that faces the student of performance is establishing the continuity between the noticeable and public performance of cultural performances, and the spontaneous, unscheduled, optional performance contexts of everyday life. [Bauman1984:28]

A number of these barriers are addressed in Barre Toelken’s book, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1996). He discusses the difficulties that researchers experience in breaking down an event into its components; depending on the cultural framework that a researcher is working from, they will denote importance to certain events within a performance by the way they “inventory” the items. An expressive event can be inventoried based on the following criteria: context, occasion, framework, participants and their roles, sequence of events, the overlapping of events, and the weight and dimension of events (Toelken 1996:163). In the case of certain points, specifically framework, sequence, and weight/dimension, the researcher will need to describe both the esoteric and apparent dimensions of the event. The term esoteric implies the emic point of view, or insider’s knowledge, and on the other hand, the apparent dimension references general observational knowledge, or the etic perspective.

Performance is also a multi-sensory experience. As Deborah Kapchan eloquently explains, “[p]erformance is so inextricably bound up with the nonverbal attributes of

sound, taste, shape, color, and weight that it cannot be verbally mapped – only alluded to, only invoked” (2003:121-2); therefore, much is at stake in a written account of performance. Sensory anthropology has become a contemporary approach towards reflexivity and experience in fieldwork (Wynne 2010:50). This approach seeks to enlighten research based on the ways that the senses influence the interpretation of an event.

While his research is not specifically geared towards dance, Steven Feld writes about this connection through a qualitative interpretation of how senses, performance, and cultural systems overlap in culture. In his book, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (1982), Feld unpacks the configuration of cultural ritual within the Kaluli tribe by expanding his own investigations into the natural world surrounding a Kaluli village. In his study, he sought to “probe the essential unity of natural history and symbolism, to approach Kaluli feelings about birds as a complex and many-layered cultural configuration that intersected with other areas of thought and action” (Feld 1982:45). By breaking down some of the divisions between conceptions of nature and culture, sounds versus spoken conversation, Feld was able to gain a clearer picture of the ways that myth, performances of myth, and the zoological components of Kaluli life intersect. One way that Feld realized how his own cultural categories were being imposed upon the research was when, while in the forest listening to bird sounds, was told by a Kaluli man: “to you they are birds, to me they are voices in the forest” (1982:45). This became an enlightening moment for him with regard to reflexivity and insight into emic cultural constructs.

Feld also writes about musical and performative stylistics in Kaluli culture and relates them to various part of Kaluli life in *Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, or 'Lift-up-over Sounding': Getting into the Kaluli Groove* (1988) and *Aesthetics and Synesthesia in Kaluli Ceremonial Dance* (1990). He discusses a musical style called “Lift-up-over sounding” which is a culturally distinct musical and vocal technique implemented in traditional Kaluli music and conversation. In the first article (1988), Feld interprets the concept through an emic lens by giving examples from musical stylistics, songs, and ethnomusicological analyses, then further relates “Lift-up-over sounding” to conversational modes of talking within various social relations and the ways they play out in the community. While someone from one culture would consider their conversations to be full of interruptions, the Kaluli, according to Feld, consider simultaneous speech to be normal, if not encouraged as “children develop patterned prelexical vocal contours that echo, interlock, or alternate with the talk around/to them.” (1988:85).

In the second piece, Steven Feld (1990) interprets dance and performance from the *gisalo* ceremony, once again as it employs the “Lift-up-over sounding” technique but also how the various elements of the ceremony play out synesthetically. The different sounds, sights, colors, and textures of the performance echo the rainforest, which carries much meaning for the Kaluli people. The interplay of the senses connotes various emotions of the dead and those who passed on through cultural associations with forest birds. The ceremony evokes quite powerful emotions which Feld explains happens “metaphorically and hence sensorily and emotionally integrated[...]experience

reverberates through the senses and is emotionally and cognitively united there” (1990:14). Through these performative and ethnomusicological interpretations, Feld is able to uncover significance in the social interactions, rituals, and life of the Kaluli, as well as interpret the various ways that Kaluli identity is expressed through these mediums.

In the context of performance-based studies, an expressive event becomes meaningful through interpretation by the unique emergent quality of a performance in its multi-contextual environment. A performance, then, communicates different layers of significance to not only to an observing audience but also creates an interchange between time, place, and culture. The communicative interaction built by a performance is the process that embodies culture.

New Museological Theory

According to the 2007 International Council of Museums (ICOM) Statutes, a museum is defined as:

a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. [ICOM 2010]

This definition illustrates the versatility of museums today. Not only do museum institutions work to acquire and conserve material objects but they also strive to promote connections between the public and intangible heritage.

As Sharon MacDonald points out, “any museum or exhibition is, in effect, a statement of purpose” (1996:14); she has also summed up the museum theorizing in three words: “context, contest and content” (1996:13). This critique of the museum continued when museum theorists began to write about the importance of re-evaluating the purpose and emphasis of the museum by moving away from analyzing the methods implemented in the museum toward understanding “the meanings of museum objects as situated and contextual rather than inherent” (MacDonald 2007:2). This re-assessment, or critique, has evolved into what is known as the new museological theory.

Peter Davis outlines some key points of the new museological theory in his book *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place* (2011). According to Davis, the new museology is “the radical reassessment of the roles of museums within society’ ” (2011:61). This approach emphasizes the social role of museums. At the core of this perspective is casting a critical gaze upon the themes and topics explored in museum exhibitions, in addition to re-framing and evaluating the ways museums approach exhibitions and education. One of the primary goals of re-orienting the traditional approaches in museum is to create new audiences and to subsequently engage communities (Davis 2011:63). By creating a more inclusive and open space, a museum becomes more relevant to society today.

Museum staff, by heightening their awareness of museum audiences and their behavior, acquires improved understandings of the perspectives and experiences of visitors. In addition, by framing a museum experience from the point of view of the visitor, museum staff may more holistically address the educational, aesthetic, and logistical components of a museum and its exhibitions. As Davis points out, one of “the

primary concern[s] of new museology is [to develop] new theories and techniques to enable museums to communicate more effectively with their visitors” (2011:61). Museums, in addition to learning more about individual visitor experiences, have re-evaluated exactly what a museum’s mission should relay to its visitors and community. This leads to questions related to democratizing the museum. In this way, the “democratization of museums not only means extending access to a wider range of people, but also entails the obligation to work to make the people come” (Ames 1992:24). Ivan Karp explores this issue in his concept of public culture, which refers to a combination of the cultural manifestations from both popular culture and institutional culture (1992:32).

Another critical question circulating around the museum world is what does “community” mean to a museum? For some museums, the museum community represents their target audience or museum-going visitors. For other museums, a community is a group of people they may be working with, collaborating with, or seeking to represent through an exhibition. In this case, the “politics of museum-community relations involves the politics of asserting and legitimizing claims to identity” (Karp 1992:12). This concept of identity, both of the individual and community, is vital to the existence of a community itself.

Some museum workers have collaborated with social and/or cultural groups for various museums projects; for example, the Anacostia Community Museum, also considered a “neighborhood museum” (Davis 2011:57). In instances such as these, projects culminate in the creation of exhibition serving the surrounding community. In

some cases, the projects between museums and communities may be extended to what is called a community museum. This established place for community goes beyond presenting educational materials, and may provide valuable resources and services for people in the surrounding area. In addition to providing services for a community, a community museum is a venue for empowerment and ownership (Svašek 2007:145). Moira Simpson writes, “the activities of these new [community] museums go beyond this and deal with issues of social, political and economic importance to the community” (1996:75). By allowing museums to function as more than just a place for exhibitions, but for community relations, conversations, and civic engagement, they become significant stakeholders in the surrounding areas.

As Stephen Weil states in *Making Museums Matter*, museums must shift “from being about something to being for somebody” (2002:28). In order to do so, museums must make inclusivity a central part of their missions. One of the ways to become more inclusive is by telling the story of more than one person or group. By presenting multiple voices – especially those of the underrepresented peoples, museums may expand upon traditional audiences.

The new museological theory also aids in shifting the emphasis from objects to experience. As Kreps states with reference to Fuller’s work (1992):

[t]he new museum is an educational institution directed toward making a population aware of its identity, strengthening that identity, and instilling confidence in a population’s potential for development. [Kreps 2003:10]

From this perspective, the museum becomes a platform for community ownership and empowerment. By becoming involved with a museum and its objects, the people of a

community may become more aware of their cultural history and heritage, and in the process gain the tools to perpetuate and transmit that knowledge to others.

In considering how the American museum has continued to evolve and change since the time of its inception, it has become evident that with each new generation, museums must adjust to take on different roles within society and among the public community. According to Stephen Weil, the responsibility of the contemporary museum is to be an interactive forum and venue for the surrounding community: “[a]s part of the worldwide museum community, the American museum is under pressure to make public service its principal concern” (2002:40). Today’s museum has the responsibility to serve as more than just a place for education and object interpretation. With that being said, museums can utilize a simplified model for community collaboration to create meaningful programs, activities, and exhibits through new approaches in museum theory. By doing so, narratives weave together to produce a multi-vocal product filled with local voices.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill classifies a museum along this path of modernization as a “post-museum.” Post-museums foster “complex relationships between culture, communication, learning, and identity that will support a new approach to museum audiences” and “reproduce and constitute self-identities and that this entails a sense of social and ethical responsibility” (Hooper-Greenhill 2007:1). Realizations of identity, dialogue, and engagement occur through not only internal contemplation but may also be facilitated through conversations and communications with others, sometimes long after a

museum visit. Museum educators must consider these factors when planning and coordinating museum education and programming.

Nina Simon also explores participation and visitor engagement within museums.

Simon elaborates upon these concepts in an explanation of participation:

Supporting participation means trusting visitors' abilities as creators, remixers, and redistributors of content. It means being open to the possibility that a project can grow and change post-launch beyond the institution's original intent. Participatory projects make relationships among staff members, visitors, community participants, and stakeholders more fluid and equitable. They open up new ways for diverse people to express themselves and engage with institutional practice. [Simon 2010:3]

Simon also utilizes social media, one example being YouTube, as a point for analysis of participatory models. She explains how Youtube's headline, "Broadcast Yourself" plays an important role in defining the participatory behavior and setting a creative stage for those involved with the site. Simon also points out that while the designers of YouTube know that not everyone will upload a video themselves, "the participation of those creators drives the content and the experience of everyone else who visits the site" (2010:10). In addition to simply viewing the videos, visitors may have the opportunity to respond to videos via comment, tag, rating, "Tweeting," or "Facebooking" the data. Simon's Youtube example reveals how creating a feedback loop of ideas, creativity, and visitor-driven content could be a useful concept in museum participatory models.

Initiatives in new museological approaches become relative to this research project when dealing with the ways that intangible cultural heritage can be more effectively implemented into museums. The first step towards creating a holistic understanding of living culture for museum audiences is for staff to conduct ethnographic

research. Integrating ethnography into the process of curatorial research allows for more contact with the source community, more collaboration, and joint approaches to representations. In doing so, peoples from different communities will be more empowered to control their own representation and tell their own stories.

CHAPTER FOUR: CASE STUDY BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

REVIEW

Serving as a platform for understanding the research design and methodology, this chapter presents an overview of the cultural and historical background of contra dance. This review includes an outline of the historical circumstances that formed the current place of the dance within the United States, an introduction to previous studies on contra dance, and a summary of relevant dance ethnographies that have been published to date.

Historical and Cultural Review of Contra Dance

Contra dance originated and developed in New England and is now widespread across the United States today as a recreational activity. Dances often meet weekly, biweekly, or monthly at churches, granges, and town halls in various cities across America. The dance is arranged in set formation; this means that partners face across from each other in two lines down the hall. Alternating couples are named “active” or “inactive” and progress either towards the band or away from the band, respectively. The accompanying music is typically a jig or reel of Scottish or Irish origin. This musical influence was introduced with the mass immigration of people from Ireland to the East Coast of the United States (Parkes 1992:17). Some dance and folk festivals offer contra

dancing, which in these settings can be much more rigorous than an ordinary bi-weekly contra dance, and usually caters to a more advanced level of dancing.

Contra dance was established as a unique entity in New England at the end of the 18th century. The dance takes root from two older forms of European dance: English country dance and French contredanse. Before the period when contra dancing was its own distinct form, it was simply known as English country dance's American country dance cousin. (Hast 1993:22; Parkes 1992:16; Walkowitz 2006:784). Today's contra dance maintains certain qualities, particularly with regard to steps and formation, from its two dance parents. However, contra dance has continued to evolve through a number of eras since it came into being. One example of this change being the shift from "proper" to "improper" formation at the end of the 19th century (Parkes 1992:17). Proper sets are organized with women on one side and men on the other, while improper mixes the men and women with each other in both lines. The transition from proper to improper sets is one example of the ever-changing nature of the dance.

The popularity of contra dance has fluctuated throughout the centuries. During the late 18th century to the early 19th century, contra dance was fairly common in many areas of New England. However, towards the middle of the 1800's, contra dance declined in popularity with the shift of traditional dance from the urban scene to rural areas (Hast 1993:22; Parkes 1992: 17). The first revival came about with Henry Ford's promotion of old time fiddle and country tunes and square dancing in the 1920's. Ford thought that the "moral fabric" of America was wasting away, thus, his effort was in part an attempt at controlling American leisure activities (Hast 1995:80). The increased popularity of

square dancing in turn gave contra dancing more attention. Contra dance slowly began to regain a foothold in the urban dance scene after this point, but did not reach its height of popularity until the second revival of the 1960's (Hast 1992: 22; Parkes 1992:19).

A major change came about for the contra dance scene with the folk revival of the 1960's and '70's. During this time, square dancing was more prevalent in the world of participatory social dance; however, the back-to-the-land crowd, or group of young adults who would also be known as "hippies"/ "granola eaters" / "tree-huggers," began to rediscover contra dancing and brought it into a whole new light (Interview, Paul, May 10, 2005⁶). This alternative group valued being different from society, defying the norms, being nature conscious, and rejecting "plastic society." As Paul Rosenberg, a caller from upstate New York, stated: "square dances were popular then, but the hippies didn't want to square dance, they didn't want to be 'square'" (Interview, Paul, May 10, 2005). Although squares and contras are very similar with regard to music and dance style, the young and hip still chose to contra dance instead of square dance, perhaps believing that it was more aligned with their social ideals.

Since the 1960's and 1970's, all subsequent manifestations of contra dance have been referred to as part of the "contemporary era" (from the 1980's to the present) in the literature. Therefore, the contra dance of the 1980's and 90's is not often mentioned in detail as it is labeled "modern". Most of what is written about dancing during these two decades of dancing deals with the changes in choreography and the dance's popularity as a hobby. Parkes also discusses how the topic of equality among the inactive and active

⁶ This interview took place when I was an undergraduate at SUNY Geneseo for an ethnomusicology research paper.

couples, the more complicated maneuvers, and the standardized terminology are all characteristics of the modern, or post 1980's, contra dance scene (1992:20).

Some debate exists as to whether the name, contra, comes from the English country or the French contre (Hast 1995: 28-9). The linguistic origin of the word contra comes from the French word for "against." With this in mind, contra dancing could have also developed its name in part from the style of set progression whereby couples move in progression against each other up and down the sets. Perhaps the lure of contra during the 1960's and '70s was that in being defined linguistically as "against," contra became a mantra expressed not only in words of protest but in body movements and behavior. Contra dancing emphasizes ideals such as group cooperativeness and the importance of the whole within society, therefore, it often attracts people in line with the commune movement and other similar values. According to Hast:

Many had similar social values stemming from opposition to the Vietnam War, a belief in living an alternative, communal, and country-based life, and a desire to explore both traditional and new expressive forms crossing cultural boundaries. Contra dance, as an accessible, ensemble-oriented, participatory dance and music form, provided a link between an old New England "tradition," popular mediated "folk" music, and "counterculture" values. [Hast1993:22]

Contemporary contra dance communities conduct dances similarly across the United States. Many dancers who travel may notice the common trends among dance communities in different regions. The pace, energy, and cumulative ability or experience level of the dancers at a contra dance event, however, depends on a number of factors, including whether it is urban or rural area, monthly or weekly dance, the number of attendees at the dance, the caller, the band, and at a festival.

The Denver contra dance is run by a group called Colorado Friends of Old Time Music and Dance, referred to most often as CFOOTMAD. This group organizes and provides information on traditional dance in the Denver, Boulder, and the Front Range region of Colorado (CFOOTMAD 2009). Dancers from the area have the option of joining this group by paying a yearly fee of twenty dollars. The perks of joining include discounts on entry fees and a subscription to the CFOOTMAD newsletter mailing. CFOOTMAD is made up of a Board of Directors and a more specific Coordinating Committee for each dance location. Besides the organizers, the group takes on volunteers from each of its local dances. Some people are designated to different crews such as the table/door greeters, while others organize and set up refreshments, clean up, and run sound. Many contra dance communities around the nation and developed organizations similar to CFOOTMAD.

A contra dance event, for a new dancer, might be slightly intimidating at first as the rhythm and steps coordinated in time with the music can take some getting used to. This process usually becomes easier by the end of a night of dancing. Many newcomers will be met with smiling faces and helpful tips from the more advanced dancers. In some cases, however, advanced dancers may become somewhat agitated if a beginner does not follow the right step, or if the line is subsequently thrown out of whack (Parkes 1992:21). This sort of agitation and frustration is a departure from some of the core values and positive qualities of the community – the acceptance, generosity, and enthusiasm of the people. For many communities, making concerted efforts at being welcoming, nonjudgmental, and understanding towards newcomers is part of the effort to sustain the

community's vitality. According to Hast, "[c]allers know that newcomers must be welcomed into the group if the dance is to grow. By soliciting help from dancers and other callers, these leaders are attempting to educate and reinforce 'inherited' notions of community and individual responsibility" (1995:144). This issue, of community growth versus stagnation, or sustainability, is a key part of the discussion in the findings from the ethnographic research.

Literature Review: Relevant Ethnographies

The most prevalent type of contra dance publications are informational dance handbooks, "how-to's," and booklets filled with written out calls, tunes and steps (CDSS 1993; Gunzenhauser 1996; Harris et al. 1994; Jennings et al. 2001; Laufman 2009; Nevell 1977; Parkes 1992; Sharp 1972). These publications are for the most part written by callers and musicians who have experienced contra dance through participation in one way or another. The goals of many publications like these are to educate people about the dance form and to help potential dancers and callers learn more about conducting dances of their own. The instructional contra dance literature is quite extensive; however, the scholarly-based literature is lacking somewhat and does not contain many ethnographies or qualitative research of contra dance. The next section will explore the contra dance-specific literature as well as relevant publications and writing in dance and movement research.

The major gap in the contra dance literature stems from the lack of publications after the late 1990's. Few sources come up from the 21st century, which possibly

indicates that the prevalence of contra dancing has declined, that a lack of interest in the subject exists today, or that because contra dance events tend to draw in a middle-aged to older crowd, few up-and-coming social scientists have decided to focus on contra dance as a topic of study. While contra dance specific publications are not prevalent in the literature, more research and theory on performance and heritage is beginning to emerge in the form of multidisciplinary studies. The following section will detail some of this literature by first introducing two contra dance ethnographies, followed by qualitative works on dance and movement, and lastly, contemporary and innovative approaches towards writing about dance research.

Dorothea E. Hast, prominent researcher in contra dance, pursued the topic of contra dance and community for her dissertation and has also written a number of articles on the same subject. She approaches her study from ethnomusicological, folkloric, and performance interpretations. While Hast does not mention her own participation in the dance, only observations and the opinions of others, she does focus on how contra dance creates an environment for dancers that builds community and support, which makes much of her research relevant to this study. In her dissertation, entitled *Music, Dance, and Community: Contra Dance in New England* (1995), Hast includes an historical timeline of the evolution of contra dance with subsequent chapters outlining different characteristics of the dance from the perspectives of performance, the transformative qualities of dance, and the ways it serves as a community to those involved. Through the investigation of identity, social and community structures, and aesthetics, Hast attempts to uncover the greater significance of contra dance, and what it means to its participants.

Hast's article on the same subject, entitled "Performance, Transformation, and Community: Contra Dance in New England" (1993), takes the same themes mentioned above with particular emphasis on performance. As she mentions in the first paragraph, she seeks to assess various thematic elements within a contra dance event to investigate "how the processes of performance create multiple dimensions of meaning for those involved – processes that lead to the formation of community" (Hast 1993:21). Through her writing, Hast explains how the repetition of movement, actions, and processes at an event, in combination with the embodied and sensory experiences, creates a concept of community within that environment. The emphasis on both the contra dance community as well as performance in Hast's work makes it similar in many ways to this project, and in that way her work has been exemplary and acted as a guide.

Mary McNab Dart's *Contra Dance Choreography: A Reflection of Social Change* (1995) serves as an explicit ethnographic study of contra dance. Within the dance literature, this book examines the steps and choreography of contra dance during the 1990's as it relates to modern life. For example, the upbeat tempo, equally distributed movement between all the dancers, and complex sequences in modern contra dance reflect the way that American society is caught in a snowballing effect of quick-paced lifestyle, technology, and globalization. This interpretation is symbolic, with each movement and interaction representing another aspect of life. In her book, Dart states that she utilizes the anthropology of dance and ethnography as frameworks for her research (Dart 1995:x). As part of her exploration of choreography, Dart investigates the concept of aesthetics, which plays a key role in evolving and driving the movement within the

contra dance community. While many aspects of Dart's background correlates with this research project, the two differ in that her emphasis is on choreography as a point of focus, rather than a performance theory perspective.

Aesthetic value is based around the ability of an art piece to elicit a response and appeal to the senses of an observer. Morphy and Perkins define aesthetics as "the effect(s) that form (broadly defined to include shape, texture, light and shade, taste and smell and so on) has on the senses" (2006: 239). Aesthetics, as an element embedded in a culture, has the power to control and drive the production of art according to what is desired and or what viewers want to get from a piece. In a general sense, the aesthetic scale incorporates a number of elements including symmetry and asymmetry, technical skill, creativity and innovation, and the process of creation. While these particular elements may be associated with art objects or tangible works, they can also apply to the performing arts. In this way, the aesthetics in movement or dance may steer the particular maneuvers, styles, or interactions involved in a group. Assessing the aesthetic quality of dance, however, can be problematic at times because of the variety of perspectives, emotional responses, and lack of a unified system of notation for dance. In essence, assessment brings with it judgment and evaluation. Therefore, when dealing with dance and aesthetics in cultural research, it is more fruitful to recognize and describe the range of values, rather than judge them.

Mary Dart dedicates an entire chapter in her dissertation to interpreting aesthetics in contra dancing. While she incorporates some basic and foundational texts about aesthetics in the chapter, the majority of substance in her work comes from the materials

she obtained through interviewing key informants. Dart focuses a significant portion of her analysis on the aesthetic appeal of dances as objects. She mentions the two ways in which a dance can be viewed: through the perspective of an “objective” observer and from the inside as a contra dancer performing the dance but also subjectively appreciating it for aesthetic appeal (Dart 1995:93); Dart focuses her analysis on the insider/subjective viewpoint. These two perspectives are noted throughout the anthropology of dance, because “in the aesthetic perception of the body in movement the performer does not experience the separation between the body as viewed externally and the body as subjectively lived” (Fetters 1980: 9). While she provides an explanation that delves into how a single dance can have aesthetic value, she also describes aesthetics brought out by the different orders and combinations of dances in a night at a dance event, which are controlled by the caller’s and musician’s decisions. The different orders can create a certain atmosphere and affect the flow of an event; along with determining how tired or interested the dancers are throughout the night.

Dance theorist Andrew Hewitt explores concepts of aesthetics in dance through the frame of social choreography in his book *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (2005). Dance, or culture in motion, according to Hewitt, may be conceptualized as being both constructed and experienced by the body. Through this framework he aims to:

[r]econnect to a more radical sense of the aesthetic as something rooted in bodily experience, [using] the category of social choreography as a way of examining how the aesthetic is not purely super structural or purely ideological. Social choreography is an attempt to think about the aesthetic as it operates at the very base of social experience. [Hewitt 2005: 2]

To social choreographers, understanding the ways that movement connects to the patterns of society conveys valuable messages about the world around us.

In the ethnohistorical study of contact improvisation, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990), researcher Cynthia J. Novack utilizes an anthropological lens to gain perspective on American society through investigating the contact improvisation community. Contact improvisation is an interactive and improvised exchange of movement between two individuals, involving exchanges of weight, balance, and acrobatics. By framing the research through the concept of embodiment, Novack's writing depicts the world of contact improvisation as a place where the participants interpret and represent the world through movement when performing their craft.

Novack also explains how dance research, or more broadly, a heightened awareness surrounding people's interactive movements, can reveal the ways in which people reinforce and create culture:

To the degree that we can grasp the nature of our experience of movement, both the movement itself and the contexts in which it occurs, we learn more about who we are and about the possibilities for knowingly shaping our lives. [Novack 1990:8]

This perspective reinforces the concept that people can actively shape and form meaning in culture through their movements.

Laura M. Jewett's book, *A Delicate Dance: Autoethnography, Curriculum, and the Semblance of Intimacy* (2008), presents dance ethnography in the form of contemporary autoethnography. This model for multidisciplinary studies in anthropology is constructed through a culmination of dance research, ethnography, education, and the

concept of intimacy related to the self and other. One of the central features of the study is Jewett's own reflexivity and use of autoethnography.

Jewett describes autoethnography as ethnography with a postmodern twist, in which the research process creates interplay between a researcher's own experiences, past and present, and the experiences of those people in the research to holistically inform a study. The constant bringing together and pulling apart of these different experiences creates a dialectic that "expresses itself in the reflexive relationship between fieldwork and analysis[...].a pattern of movement across diverse locales of interpretation – dancing, research, and curriculum" (Jewett 2008:8). Jewett emphasizes the importance of embodied experiences in both framing her methodology and informing her research findings.

Another contemporary, unconventional, and highly innovative work in dance research is *Paper Tangos* (1998), by dancer and researcher Julie Taylor. In her approach to studying tango, Taylor explores many different facets of Argentinean life, including history, in order to better understand tango from a multi-contextual perspective. To start, each page of the book has a small photograph of a couple dancing on the lower right corner. When the reader flips through the book quickly, she may see that the pictures form a moving picture when viewed in sequence. These images are frames from the film "Tango: The Exile of Gardel," by Fernando "Pino" Solanas. Taylor explains her choice to include this visual component as she struggled with the issue of her writing and text as a medium. She "sought to find words that would transmit the bodily knowledge of a dance form, knowledge that includes the reflections and associations with other experiences that

the tango as genre demands” (Taylor 1998:xv). This effect adds to the intrigue of the dance as it is viewed in slow, disjointed motion. The book’s title, *Paper Tangos*, also alludes to the interplay between text and dance.

Taylor incorporates literary works through the use of quotations, in part relating the emotionally detrimental historical events occurring throughout the 20th century in Argentina to certain cues and signals in the tango. These excerpts shed light on some of the stretches of reflexive narrative that Taylor tactfully weaves into her ethnographic writing. Lastly, through the incorporation of poems in Spanish, only occasionally with the accompanying English translation, Taylor adds a deepened connection to the tango experience for those readers who are fluent in Spanish, but creates mystery and confusion for those who are not. A number of Spanish words from these excerpts, in fact, are impossible to truly and fully translate to English. In addition, many of the poems in the book are actually lyrics from tangos (meant to be set to music), which convey the complicated series of sentiments surrounding the dance and its rhetoric. Taylor’s piece represents a contemporary approach towards dance ethnography that combines her own experience, the history of tango and Argentina, and conveys what it is like to participate in and embody the tango. Works such as these elicit value in their ability to connect, through text, a variety of contexts, disciplines, and experiences related to dance, which enlightens the field of cultural studies.

Through the above examples of dance publications, it becomes clearer how dance provides insight into culture and experience. Unfortunately, the majority of qualitative research in dance is reflected in the form of text from books and articles. These texts,

while invaluable, must be converted into embodied and lived experiences in order to truly touch broader public audience. One place to start the movement towards living experience is from museums and cultural institutions. Richard Kurin illustrates a few of the limitations posed by such institutions in his book, *Reflections of a Culture Broker* (1997). He states, “though we increasingly offer more technological interaction, museums are painfully lacking in human sensibility. We don’t do much with touch, we do little with sound, virtually nothing with taste, and except for the zoo, nothing with smell” (Kurin 1997:59). Chapter Seven will investigate and interpret challenges and efforts of this nature. The next chapter will provide in-depth, contextual descriptions of the settings in which the dance occurs, in the same vein as much of Edward Schieffelin’s article “Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality” (1985), in which he writes about ritual and performance among the Kaluli.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CONTRA DANCE EVENT

Ethnographer's Vignette

The Physical Setting

The Denver contra dance takes place in the basement of the Masonic Lodge on Federal Boulevard in the Highlands neighborhood. The dance hall is quite large, holding one hundred and fifty dancers comfortably. With wood floors and a stage, the room provides a welcome environment for the dance. This room has at least eight large windows, each decorated with white Christmas lights and purple drapes to create ambience. This ambience is an effort to combat the unfavorable industrial ceiling lights that cast a yellow glow on the entire room. Chairs are lined up along the perimeter of the room so that people can sit down if they don't want to dance. People also leave their belongings on top of or under these chairs while they dance.

The stage is opposite from the main doors and provides a space for the band members, their instruments, chairs, music stands, and the caller. There are two short sets of stairs that lead up to the stage on both sides. On either side of the stage are doors that open to the adjoining kitchen, fully equipped for social events requiring food preparation. On one side of the stage is water in two large coolers and a coffee station set up on a long rectangular table. Plastic cups with names written in permanent marker are strewn

haphazardly around the table after being hastily set there in between the last two dances.

The other side of the stage has empty tables that hold the snack platters for the break.

The room is usually chilly at the beginning of the night, most likely in anticipation of the rising heat to come. Towards the end of the night the room gets warm from the active bodies in motion. At the start of the evening, fans are turned on and windows are opened for ventilation and cooling.

Most newcomers will attest to the smells at a dance. The dancers emit a distinct smell of body odor that cannot be ignored. However, I will admit that while I used to notice the smell in my early contra dancing days, I barely notice it anymore. The smell of musk, patchouli, and active bodies create an odd mix of earthy and sweaty scents.

The sounds that circulate throughout the room during the night include people's voices in conversation, contra dance music, and various announcements over the microphone. The caller also takes approximately 5 to 7 minutes before each dance begins to do a "walk-through" of the dance⁷.

The Social Setting

On a typical night at the Denver contra dance, approximately one hundred dancers will attend the event. Generally, this includes a 75% population of middle aged to older participants, and a 25% population of participants who are 35 years or younger. The proportion of males to females is 50/50, except for some nights when one gender may outnumber the other by only a handful. The attendees are predominantly white and

⁷ A walkthrough is when a caller tells the dancers what moves to do without accompanying music and the dancers walk through the motions in slow motion.

middle class, with a high proportion of teachers, computer science techs, and engineers. It has often been said (among the contra dancers) that engineers flock to contra dances because dancing allows them to enact the patterns that go on inside their heads all day (this could be an entire research project of its own).

The participants' relationships to one another vary on a scale that is multi-layered. Some individuals come in and out in of the community in a night without connecting with people on a deeper level, simply because they come to dance and not socialize. Other individuals embrace the community as part of their lifestyle and become more involved through volunteering and or acting on the board of directors. For some, this may become a primary social network. Some couples meet at the dances and might eventually become married, and later, possibly divorced. Issues of "contra dance break-ups" are a whole other issue, which can create unique dynamics for interactions at the dance.

People are physically placed in a number of different locations within the context of a contra dance event. This physical placement influences social dynamics. People can be on the dance floor in the line formations, they can be sitting on a chair, in the doorway, in the entry hall, in the kitchen, or in the bathroom lounge. Although a few people will be spread out into these various areas, the majority of individuals will be dancing.

The participants dress in a variety of different ways, but most of the styles involve comfort of some kind. The typical female style of clothing is a flowing dress of either ankle or knee length. Many female dancers embrace the skirt as a way both to create an aesthetic twirl or flourish as they spin and to functionally cool off their body as they

dance. Men typically wear a t-shirt with jeans or slacks. Both females and males tend to wear some sort of dance-specific footwear, usually with a sole that is conducive to moving on a wood floor. In some circumstances a man will wear a skirt, usually for the same reason as a woman, or in other cases, simply because he can.

Generally, the appearance of the dancers can be described as "folky" and eclectic, with long hair and some beards. While some people may use contra dance as an occasion to dress "folky," the clothing worn at a dance is also based off of comfort, practicality, and function. As Horton and Jordan-Smith note, contra dance dress is nothing out of the ordinary; however, certain items of clothing become more or less functional within the context of the dance, lending to a preferred style. In fact, for the contra dancer, it may not seem necessary to express the contra style outside of the contra dance context: "contra dancers, while using their mode of dress to identify themselves as dancers when among other dancers, generally have no interest in proclaiming this identity to nondancers" (Horton 2004:435). If a dancer is among nondancers, the nondancer will most likely not even recognize what a contra dance style looks like in the first place.

Interaction Between Participants

In an evening, people participate on many different levels; this participation frames their interactions. Some people are geared towards welcoming the newcomers, some come just to dance and do very little socializing, some are so dedicated to their volunteer position that they hardly dance at all. A few of the various roles played by participants at a dance include dancer, greeter/organizer, volunteer (tickets, food, sound,

clean up), newcomer (who dances for the most part but may sit out significantly), the young crowd (who socialize among themselves for the most part), musician, caller. There are also a number of interactions that take place on different levels. Some of these include: partner/partner, couple/couple, group of 4, dancer with other dancers in the line, individuals/caller, entire group of dancers/caller, and musicians/caller. Interactions between participants include the roles that people assume while they are at the contra dance event. For some, dancing gives a renewed sense of enthusiasm or uninhibited-ness that allows them to transcend their conventional persona. For others, they may always have an unconventional attitude towards life, which is part of the reason they are drawn to the community in the first place.

The dancers also interact with the caller and the musicians. In most cases, at the end of a song, great enthusiasm and applause will meet the caller and musicians in thanks for a great experience. It is customary for the dancers to applaud after they finish a dancer, regardless of whether they had a good time or if the music or calling was successful or not. Most frustrations will be exhibited while the dance is going on rather than at the end of the dance.

Performance

While it may be straightforward to describe the physical and social setting, the issue of delineating the performance at a contra dance event becomes slightly more challenging. The event (the entire evening) itself can be considered a performance, however, within an evening are numerous other emergent performances. I consider the

evening in its sequence of events to be a performance, as well as a contra dance on a singular level starting with "choose your partner" and ending with "thank your partner."

The evening begins with the purchase of a ticket. After this the dancer usually hangs up his or her jacket and enters the dance hall. When a dance begins, each person finds a partner and lines up in horizontal lines facing one another. The process of lining up usually lasts a few minutes, as it takes a while to get people organized and sometimes the caller likes to give people time to socialize and talk with their partners. The individual dances begin after the caller has done a walkthrough. If a walkthrough is ineffective, then the dancers will be sure to let the caller know. I was dancing with a man once who, after the caller said "alright how about some music?" the man yelled out, "how about a walkthrough?!" in response to a poorly completed walkthrough. When the dance begins, people express themselves in various ways. Some dancers are exuberant, lively, jovial, and effervescent, while others may be stoic and expressionless (I find that this is not typically the case).

The repetition of movements often allows for a mindless movement that brings some to a "transcendent" or heightened experience. This feeling includes a connection between people, emotions, music, and movement that becomes a significant appeal of the dance. The dance concludes after about ten minutes, with a "thank your partner," and then the whole process is repeated again. Usually after about five dances a waltz is played, allowing the dancers to cool down. The next in the series of events is the break for food and socializing. Some people dance the hambo and/or act out an improvised

interpretive number. The second half of the night repeats another series of five dances, a closing waltz, followed by clean-up and more socializing/farewells.

With respect to the entire dance event as performance, the event is keyed by walking into the dance venue. All of the actions that take place between this point and the closing to performance (leaving the venue) are considered performance. With regard to the individual dance as a performance, the keying starts when the walk through begins. The act of dancing to the music, including the musicians playing, the caller calling, and the observers watching, is the performance and the closing is when the caller says for the dancers to “thank your partners.”

Time and Duration

The dance event takes place on the 2nd and 4th Fridays in Denver from 8:00p.m.-11:00p.m. The first dance starts around 8:00p.m., after which approximately four to five dances are performed for 10-13 minutes until 9:40p.m., when there is a break. The break begins with a waltz, followed by snacks, socializing, and informal couple dancing. Occasionally, the organizers will play the swing dance music and the participants will break into swing. The contra dances continue at around 10:00p.m., when another 4-5 dances will be danced. The night is concluded with a final waltz. People socialize afterwards, help clean up, and take their time in leaving the venue. Oftentimes participants will go to an alternative location to continue the socializing into the night - this happens particularly in the young dancer community.

Sentiments Expressed

Participants display a wide range of sentiments throughout the night. In a general sense, the sentiments expressed are jovial, fun-loving, open, friendly, welcoming with an overwhelming sense of excitement. Many people treasure this night as they get to spend time with friends they do not see during the week. As a result, the participants often catch up on the status of their lives, whether it be health, activities, jobs, and hobbies.

A few occasions warrant statements of approval or disapproval from the dancers. In some cases, a certain contra dance will be slightly confusing for the dancers, or the caller will be inexperienced and unable to effectively convey the directions, in which case, some dancers will be vocal about their impatience to dance. They will shout comments like, "let's dance already!" or "we're spending forever on this walkthrough!" Many of the dancers shout this not with anger, but in jest, probably because they know the caller personally and know that they can get away with it. This does not mean they aren't frustrated, however. A similar behavior can be noted when a dance is going on and it is going haywire, which may occur because the caller is not saying the calls at the right time or they said the wrong call. Dancers will either subtly comment within their group about this or they will shout some sort of frustration like, "well we could do it if you called it right!" People rarely talk about aesthetics during the act of dancing. With an accumulation of dancing experience, however, comes the knowledge, which allows an individual to say, whether or not certain qualities are favorable in a partner.

The Observer

As an ethnographer and observer of the contra dance event, I have always made sure to be an active participant in the community. I volunteer to assist with clean up when I can, I chat with other dancers before, during, and after the event, and I make sure to convey my deep interest for the dance through engagement. While I may not always be in the best of spirits when I walk into a dance on a Friday night, I am almost always enthused and rejuvenated when I leave the event.

CHAPTER SIX: CONTRA DANCING AND COMMUNITY: MAKING MEANING OUT OF EXPERIENCE

Introduction

Almost all of the components for a joyful life are present in a contra dance. You have exercise, you have friends, you have meeting new people, you have touching people; at these dances, you have food, you have good music, and sometimes a little bit of sexual/flirtatious tension, and a space to learn, a space to be challenged, a space to give and to teach, and on-going relationships with people[...]I feel more alive when I am at a good contra dance than almost any other time in my life and certainly, more than any other regular activity in my life. [Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

At a cultural event, performative elements allow for a deepened understanding of the associated values within that cultural context. These values lend meaning, which pertain to the significance participants glean from a certain event or tradition. Through fieldwork, interviews, surveys, and source research, this project gathered the results that are presented in this chapter in three main sections: tradition and change, expression and behavior, and value and meaning. Each section has sub-categories that emerged from the research process, which will eventually work to construct a more holistic picture of meaning in the contra dance community.

The results are presented through divided sections in order to make sense of the data through a thematic sorting mechanism. However, sectional themes can also be problematic because each category, while separate, is at the same time intricately tied to

the others. Therefore, it should be noted that while the thematic divisions have been made, in part for organization, they are not separate entities that are removed from one another's influence – all are linked and reliant on each other to create a holistic system.

Tradition and Change

As discussed in Chapter Three, early folklorists aimed to “collect” different forms of folk culture including tales, songs, dances, and rituals in their most “pristine” forms. These massive collections of recorded folkloric artifacts, often in text-form, were salvage attempts at cultural preservation. In many ways, this mindset and methodological approach has disappeared, or at least lessened significantly, within the disciplines of anthropology and folklore as a result of new theoretical frameworks and the evolving nature of research; however, within communities actively performing and producing culture today, some of the practitioners' mindsets have remained antiquated with regard to the concept of “traditional”. The term continues to be used by many communities to describe their own folklife practices despite being contested among folklorists today. In other words, while the theoretical and academic discourses have started moving towards a more performance-based interpretation of folk events, some individuals producing the cultural heritage continue to attach labels to practices and categorize folk events and traditions as “authentic”/“inauthentic” or “traditional”/“nontraditional.”

Throughout the ethnographic research process, particularly during interviews with participants of contra dance groups, a major point of contention centered around how the dance events should be carried out on a given night. Often, this point of contention

manifested itself under the guise of dance organization logistics; namely, what was ideal or appropriate at an event, how a caller should frame an evening with the ways that he or she approached teaching and selected dances, and what types of music that should be played by the band. In other cases, a more distinct dichotomy emerged between conceptions of traditional ideals of the dance form versus innovations or changes within the over-arching contra dance community. Predominantly, this related to the distinction between “traditional community dances” and “modern urban contra dances” (MUCD). These two types of dance communities, though simultaneously producing the same overarching dance form, have critical differences, particularly those related to perceived accessibility and community.

Caller David Millstone first introduced me to the concept of a MUCD dance, although he referred to them as “MUCky dances.” In talking to him, I realized that up until that point (mid-2009), my research had focused on the style of contra dance known as “modern urban contra” and was not completely representing all of the other styles, namely smaller, traditional community dances. As he mentioned:

There's also a different feeling in the smaller dances[...]in the smaller towns of northern New England, which is where contras have their deepest roots, you'll find people who already know each other and have connections with each other outside of the dance hall; it's a different kind of social interaction than in the large halls where people see each other at the dance and only at the dance. [E-mail, David, July 30, 2009]

I will explore the concept of MUCD dances later on in the chapter along with contributions from other dancers and callers on the topic.

The concept of tradition and change in contra dance brings up a number of other issues that will be discussed in this chapter. Square dancing, a very close relative of

contra dancing, is often met with mixed reviews within certain sectors of the contra dance community. Later in this section, I will explore some of the reasons why it is either loved or hated by contra dancers. Historically, square dancing experienced an evolution that created homogenization and leveled out the regional differences in form, maneuvers, and style. In many ways, contra dancing has progressed, and continues to move, through similar stages of change, which has led many practitioners and dance researchers to worry about the sustainability of the contra dance form.

Contra dance sustainability is an issue that many of the consultants mentioned in our conversations. Because many contra dancers have such a love for the dance, they would hate to see it disappear as a result of a shrinking pool of community members. Therefore, many contra dance groups and communities have made a concerted effort to welcome new dancers and foster a warm, open, and friendly atmosphere. These efforts are not limited to the community-level; in fact, some individual dancers have also made it clear that they take their own personal steps towards reaching out to new members – doing their own sort of “contra dance missionary work.” In discussing how communities welcome new dancers, or more curtly “outsiders,” the boundaries of the community become apparent. This section will include feedback not only from members of the dance communities but from the new dancers themselves, who are now either regularly attending contra dances or who have chosen not to return for various reasons.

“Traditional” Community Dances vs. Modern Urban Contras

In the folk dancing tradition, a participant does not need to be professionally trained in a particular style of dance in order to join in, nor does it demand that a participant slowly improves his or her craft over time. As part of its original function, or purpose, folk dance is meant for celebrations and ceremonies; in this setting it does not include any formal judging or require a particular skill-level for entry. At the center of many folk dance groups is community: a group of people from a certain area congregating on a given night or day to celebrate by dancing together in a particular style or manner.

For communities in New England prior to the contemporary revival, contra dance followed a similar pattern. Over time, this tradition became more widespread and popular, leading to its similar, yet different, counterpart: modern urban contra dance. The traditional community dances and the MUCDs continue to share the same formal characteristics; yet a subtle difference in atmosphere, philosophy, interaction, and culture divides these two communities. According to some dancers and callers, this change has brought along with it some exclusivity that restricts open participation:

Folk culture that becomes intensified like that starts to lose some of its appeal and I think one of the principle appeals of the community dance is that you don't need to be professional dancer, you don't need to have so many lessons, you don't need to know much. You just show up and you can have a great time. But that becomes less so when you have something like the so-called “zesty contra” where they really expect everyone to be an experienced dancer before you show up there. Well that is almost by definition not a community event. And I always come down on the side of: dances should not be restricted to a group of people. But what's happening at dances all around the country is that they are becoming a little less welcoming to new people. [Interview, Chris, December 1, 2009]

The aforementioned “zesty contras” are the extreme version of MUCD gatherings.⁸ Often a condition for entry is that the dancer has achieved a desired level, which can mean that they know a certain grouping of maneuvers or they have been dancing for a certain length of time.

Some dancers’ tastes imply a clear preference for which sort of dance event they would rather attend, for example, they may say how much they enjoy a fast paced dance with all contra dances (indicating a MUCD style) or they might like a night that includes many different forms of traditional dance with some slower dances in the mix (traditional community style dance). In most cases, these individuals do not apply specific terms like “modern urban contra dance” or “traditional community dance” to these preferences; these are something that dance scholars apply to these phenomena. Typically, the individuals who utilize these specific terms have carried out extensive historical or social research on square dancing and contra dancing. In order to clarify this issue, I will begin by explaining the main differences between a traditional community dance and a modern urban contra dance.

One caller describes a few dances that characterize what he considers to be true community dances:

⁸ Chris Kermiet wrote an “Open Letter to the Denver Organizers of the Zesty Series” regarding the issue of zesty contras. At the end of his letter he wrote, “My intention is to point out the problems inherent in having an advanced contra dance. And this is an open letter to the dance community, because it’s not a local problem. These forces and tendencies are nationwide. The danger is that we may go too far in the direction of the modern square dance, with too many figures, unnecessary complicated dances, lessons, beginners classes, and an “in group” or “club” atmosphere, as opposed to the traditional open community dance, where all are welcome, no lessons are needed, and no partner or special costume is required” (Kermiet 1995).

[A]t the big Halloween dance, the whole town comes out and they parade around in costumes and then everyone comes into the community center. [The organizer] would basically say to callers, “No contra dances in this,” and she loves contra dances, she grew up dancing in NH, but she said, “No, this is something different, this is *community* dance.” She said to the callers, “I want simple dances. I don’t want a lot of teaching. I don’t want you to spend ten minutes teaching a dance that will take five minutes to dance.” So Lyons is very cool. Small, community dance. The first time I was there, the mayor of the town [came] in to observe [...] And [Westminister] became, now, more community led. And it’s a great little dance, it’s in a little grange hall. Colorado Springs is a nice little dance. Those are community dances, and by that what I mean is: everyone’s welcome. [Interview, Larry, Nov. 10, 2009]

In the above descriptions, Larry mentions a few key elements present at a community dance. To begin with, a significant portion of the community is involved in the event. He also emphasizes that these events are “little”. In the example from the Lyons dance, even the mayor makes an appearance during the evening. Second, the dance is organized in such a way that it is approachable and the dances chosen for the night are simple and require no prior knowledge. The primary focus is on the people-to-people connection that dancing fosters at a gathering. For other larger, urban dance events, this is not always the case. In many instances, the focus is first on the dance experience and second on the interaction between participants. Lastly, Larry points out in his example that the dance organizer deliberately left out contra dances in the schedule of dances. While some simple contras do exist, the organizer made this decision in part to provide a more inviting and less intimidating atmosphere. This is most likely because in some contra dance circles, most often at MUCD events, the emphasis on a “contra only” approach has made dances more intense and restricted.

Larry also emphasizes this point when he talks about his philosophy of openness:

[w]hat was important to me was whoever came could do it. Another way of saying it: “it is not for those who can but for those who will.” And that’s always just ran true to me [...]and contra dancing had become, well its starting to become for those who can do it. They were faster, everyone was active, and that started weeding out older folks and weeding out those who had never done it before. [Interview, Larry, Nov. 10, 2009]

Here he points to the idea that dance events should not restrict their attendance by raising the difficulty of the dances – even if potential participants don’t know how to dance or if they cannot do something they should still be welcomed.

Modern urban contra dance events are typically more biased towards an evening featuring, for the most part, contra dances, whereas the traditional community dances are open to different types of country dance like rounds, squares, and line dances. MUCD events often exclude dances other than contras. At these events the emphasis on having an exciting, well-executed, and fulfilling dance becomes more important than connecting with a partner, in some cases.

Typically a MUCD draws its participants from a broad geographical range. For example, at a Denver contra dance participants will come from not only Denver and its surrounding metro-area (which is significantly large) but also from Colorado Springs, Fort Collins, Boulder, and even some smaller neighboring Foothills communities. Because dancers come from such a wide area, the dance venue is the primary location for interaction and some may only see fellow contra dancers at these events. As a result, many dancers will not interact with other contra dancers in their day-to-day life. On the other hand, at a local, small town community dance, it is more likely that one dancer will run into another dancer at the library, at a restaurant, or on the street. In this way, the

interactions at a local community dance have the potential to be more personal and more grounded in sustained and continuous relationships.

“Contra-centric” Thinking: Limiting Perspectives

Historically, a night of “traditional” country dancing might include a variety of dances: rounds, contras, squares, and waltzes, to name a few. As mentioned previously, in some dance communities, contra dance has become preferred over other forms of dance. While square dancing used to be intertwined into a night of dancing, just as a contra dance would be, squares have developed a subtle stigma among certain circles of contra dancers [Field Notes, Denver, Colorado, October 10, 2009]

Chris, a long time caller, explains some of the responses he has received when calling square dances at an evening of country dancing:

Well, a lot of the hard core “contra-holics” kind of put [squares] down. And all the new people have a great time. The hard-core groups think everything should be “all contra, all the time” and they always resent having to do something else or having the caller bring some. But all the new dancers have a great time with them. One of the problems with the experienced dancers is they have done so few squares, because so few callers are doing them these days, that you can’t do anything very complicated or nobody can do it. You have to do something easy, and the experienced dancers will say “That’s so easy, blah, blah blah,” that kind of thing. So as a caller you have to do easier dances to make it as fun for everyone as possible. And you hope they like ‘em, and when they don’t like ‘em you just have to ignore them. But I still like doing a program with a mix of stuff. [Interview, Chris, December 1, 2009]

In some instances, a caller’s intentions conflict with the expectations of the dancers, which can create some disconnect at a dance.

Globalization

You go to a contra dance in California, its not going to be much different from a contra dance in New York - its going to be pretty much the same. There are a couple of small communities in New England that still persist in some of their local traditions. One of them does a balance on the other foot, you know, we always do the right then left, even that has been replaced by the scootch together, scootch back balance[...]There are very few regional differences anymore. I'm hard pressed to think of any.
[Interview, Chris, December 1, 2009]

Many contra dance events (especially MUCDs) have become, to some extent, standardized nation-wide, and in some cases, internationally. Like square dancing, contra dancing is widespread and prevalent across many regions and cities in the United States. A person could contra dance a night in Greenfield, Massachusetts, drive to Glen Echo, Maryland, for a contra dance the next night, then fly to San Francisco the next week and easily have very similar experiences at each contra dance event. He or she could probably do this without feeling like he or she had to learn anything outrageously new or different. In essence, the only two things to change would be the physical venue and the people.

Contra dance, along with other American folk dances, at one time maintained regional distinctions (though subtle) from contra dances in other areas around the United States. Today, with the dances spread far and wide, to cities and small towns, it has become informally standardized. Dancers and researches have both despised and appreciated the homogeneous quality of the dance for various reasons.

According to Chris, the reason for this trend in contra dance is simply that dance is following the national and international inclination towards globalization:

People travel around and the whole country is becoming more homogenized. Now you can find a bloody McDonalds anywhere. What's really hard is to find a local home-grown diner. You know, the little Mom

and Pop diner, they are going out of business. And that's part of, I guess, of bigness and become part of a homogenized country. Even you used to be able to find regional speech - you can't find much of that anymore. There are still some places you'll find regionalism where you'll hear weird pronunciations, but part of it's the news media, everybody talks like they're a newscaster now. [Interview, Chris, December 1, 2009]

Another caller points out that, to him, finding out the origins of where a dance came from is a vital part of the learning process. He said, "it was important that I knew where I got it from and that I knew where it was from. I wanted to know if this was a New England dance, was it a Western dance, was it a Southern dance, you know, where in the country did it come from" (Interview, Larry, Nov. 10, 2009).

In his interview, Larry explained his own theory on why contra dances have become not only so homogenous, but also why community participation is stunted. In his opinion, the emphasis on learning from the elders, or those who have been practicing callers for decades, has been lost. In many cases today, callers learn from various means, often which do not involve an apprenticeship role with a caller elder. He explains this phenomenon as "near peer-ism":

The people I really respected - musicians and callers - all were attracted to the elders and made the pains to learn from the elders. I realized that what I wasn't attracted to were the people who, from what I think, have been the death of modern contra dancing[...]people were learning from "near peers." So what was happening was someone in their 30s, maybe someone who was 25, was learning calling from someone who was 27, who was only doing it for 2 years longer than they were. And so what was happening there was[...]they were learning from other novices who had slightly more skill, but no more wisdom or knowledge of where the dances came from. [What was] getting lost was historical perspective [and] I think, values. I'd run into these callers that I'd have worlds of respect for and just: "Man, I love what they do," and it was people who weren't satisfied just at face value with it, they wanted to know about it, they wanted to study it, they wanted to poke it, they wanted to figure out the meaning of it. [Interview, Larry, Nov. 10, 2009]

The center of this “near peer-ism” interpretation is the concept of transmission. Some members of the contra dance community value one of the more “traditional” methods of transmission, coming from the elders in their cultural group. In Larry’s case, he learned from an elder and now considers it to be a valuable facet of his own experience. Other contra dance callers, however, may learn from near-peers, manuals, books, or the Internet, and have no reservations. Transmission is a critical aspect of intangible cultural heritage that is mentioned in its definition. If transmission is not taking place from generation to generation, and rather from peer to peer, does this qualify certain contra dance communities more as intangible cultural heritage than others?

The popularity of contra dance is another variation that changes based on region, community, and age:

I just think that it’s so interesting that each region or sub-region has its own characteristics and flavor, and [Greenfield] is a really interesting situation because its very popular there, the most vibrant, I think about it as the world epicenter of contra dancing. And like, different people “own” dances [...] one of them is the first Saturday, or the first Sunday, and different people run them kind of like “private enterprise” in a way. Whereas, here, its run by committees or organizations like the Dance Flurry or Old Songs, and if you consider, you know, when I try and tell the Dance Flurry board, we should really go to these different places where the social makeup is completely different in different places, what’s the history of it, why is it come to be like that? [...]. But why is it kind of dying out in some places and really strong in others? [Interview, Peter, August 25, 2009]

The evolving national, and sometimes global, nature of contra dance has its perks for some dancers – they can travel across the U.S., attend a dance, and know what to expect; in particular, they know that they will probably have the skills set to participate to their fullest extent. Contrarily, many community members liken the trend in homogeneity to

the earlier, yet similar, development that occurred within the modern western square dance movement throughout the second half of the 20th century.

The Community and its Boundaries

Throughout the interview process, a significant number of dancers mentioned the issue of welcoming newcomers into the dance community. To some, this was as simple as asking a new person to dance for a song or two. For others, this involves an approach or philosophy, centered on openness and community extension through actions that can be likened to outreach. In some communities, “dancer outreach”, though not actually referred to with this language, is taken through steps like having “dance buddy” pins and new dancer lessons at the beginning of an evening. This process becomes a delicate balance; while it is helpful for new dancers to have some guidance, many newcomers arrive with friends they do not want to be separate from. Experienced dancers too, have their own priorities that take precedence in an evening (although many experienced dancers may acknowledge that they want to reach out to new dancers). In order to better understand the main concerns of both the experienced dancers as well as the new dancers, the next section will take a look into both the perspectives of experienced dancers and beginner dances.

Varying Levels on the Dance Floor

At many contra dance events, the dances have gradually become more difficult and require more skill, intentionally or unintentionally, and with this change have come

the dawning of an informal status: “experienced dancer”. Being an experienced dancer has its perks. Some look to her as a calm and collected dance partner who offers security, level-headedness, and skill in a multi-sensory environment. For others, an experienced dancer may instill nervous feelings in his partner because of his vigorous approach towards the dance, energetically dragging his partner across the dance floor for ten minutes. On the other hand, an experienced dancer may be the ideal partner for another experienced dancer, who craves a challenge or matched expertise in a dance. Along with the emergence of an experienced dancer status is the position of “beginner dancer” status.

New dancers, or beginners, often deal with a range of sentiments during the course of their first few nights of dancing. The scene of a contra dance event can be somewhat overwhelming and over stimulating with quick music, close contact with new people, fast-paced movement, and calling instructions to follow. For some new dancers, the unfamiliar dance style, the close physical contact, and forthrightness of the social interactions might make them feel self-conscious and nervous. For other beginners, the atmosphere of a contra dance might be immediately welcoming and they may feel comfortable with no effort. Dancers like these feel at home in the open and free environment and seek to engage with this scene as much as possible. Personality, lifestyle, and values often play a critical role in whether or not a new dancer feels welcome or at home in this environment. Either way, new dancers experience a wide range of emotions, sensations, and social circumstances when they begin contra dancing for the first time, which makes for a multi-sensory experience.

The Highs and Lows: New Dancer Experiences

The following results represent a compilation of some of the reactions, feelings, emotions, and observations that new dancers have had while attending a contra dance for the first time. These perspectives provide insight into what it is like to participate in this subculture, from individuals who were recently exposed to it for the first time. In many ways, this viewpoint provides an “etic” perspective because not only are these individuals acting as participants, but they also have a keen sense for observation as it is their first time in the new environment.

New Dancer 1, age 26, reveals her feelings from the first time she danced:

My first impression was, "This is incredibly awkward and uncomfortable." I noticed that just about everyone was older and "folksier" than me. I observed that everyone was dressed kind of like a hippie and I was not. There seemed to be a lot of creative types. My first impression was that although it looked like fun, I was never going to be able to keep up, and I was never going to fit in. I found it pretty intimidating.

I kept on saying for days after that I was not sure if I loved it or hated it. I had a lot of fun, but was on edge the entire time. Everyone was trying to reassure me and help me feel comfortable, but I felt embarrassed when I made a mistake and awkward making eye contact. However, when I started to feel like I knew what I was doing I started to have some fun. I felt less like an outsider and more "one of them." This was an awesome feeling, and why I keep going back. And physically...I was exhausted, sore, and blistered, but felt like a million sweaty bucks! [Survey, New Dancer 1, Dec. 10, 2010]

First impressions can change, however, and this same dancer expressed how, with a little familiarity, she began to be more comfortable and feel more like herself after attending a different dance more regularly in her home town:

I think at first I expressed myself by being very apologetic and shy. Now I think I express myself differently. I am less afraid to throw in my own little moves and have fun with it; I strike up conversations with the people I am dancing with. I think this is easier for me in Vermont, where I am from, than in Denver, where I lived when I did my first contra dance, because I am familiar with the community. We can talk about where we are from, events and festivals we have been to, etc. [Survey, New Dancer 1, Dec. 10, 2010]

This dancer indicates that because she is from the location where she attends dances now, she can be freer to “join in” the community. She achieved a greater sense of belonging in a more familiar place amongst a local crowd. She recognizes this transition in her own words:

I think it is interesting how you can see a person new to contra transition from "outsider" to "insider" status in just one dance, and you can see how this affects their attitude and the fun they are having. Maybe this is why it is so attractive to people who may be considered, or who may consider themselves "outside" the mainstream... [Survey, New Dancer 1, Dec. 10, 2010]

In contrast to New Dancer 1, the next dancer, Kaye, age 24, had a much less intimidating first-time experience at a contra dance. She describes the dance atmosphere as being open, accepting, and community-oriented:

The dancers were multigenerational and all very warm and welcoming, lots of fun, and it really didn't seem to matter how old you were. I loved the open and warm moments between dances when everyone would mingle and ask strangers for the next dance. I also like the acceptance of newcomers to the group – everyone was pretty willing to teach. Definitely a “community feel”. [Survey, Kaye, Dec. 7, 2010]

Below are Kaye’s reflections on her first time experience:

Emotionally, I was excited and happy, and I felt "fancy free". It seemed that the physical dance – the closeness and flowing nature of the contra – was an expression of emotions itself. I felt free and danced free. Intellectually, I was certainly challenged to keep up with the steps and remember what each "move" was called but once the dance began and you

just trusted those around you, and let yourself flow, I think I was humming on all levels and just groovin' with the music. [Survey, Kaye, Dec. 7, 2010]

Some new dancers express that they felt a range of emotions while attending their first dance. New Dancer 2, male, age 25, reveals how it is different, at times, for males at their first dance compared to females:

My first impression was that it was mostly older people [...] It seemed easier for girls to learn because guys were happy to teach them. As a boy, I felt less benefit of the doubt in getting past this learning curve. To clarify, this wasn't from most people, just a handful. I felt good, though I felt a bit of pressure to find a dance partner that I don't think my female friends felt. As a newbie, I was a little embarrassed to ask girls to dance. Once I got the hang of a dance, it was fun to add in extra fun hand moves. I liked the welcoming atmosphere and the food. A minor dislike was the pressure I felt at not being proficient from a few of the more experienced dancers. [Survey, New Dancer 2, Jan. 3, 2011]

New Dancer 3, age 25, expresses her slight discomfort in the environment:

I felt very involved physically; my entire being was focused on dancing. Dancing does make me very happy. However, I was uncomfortable emotionally, because people expected me to know things I did not know. [Survey, New Dancer 3, Dec. 12, 2010]

New Dancer 4 felt intimidated by the experienced dancers and their "showy" maneuvers at the start of a dance:

I remember feeling a little embarrassed at first, [there was] one couple warming up who were stomping all over the place. But after I started dancing and learning the steps, I realized how easy it was and that I had nothing to worry about. So I just ignored the intense couple [that] didn't smile often. Everyone was there to dance and have fun with friends. I felt awkward with [my] own clumsiness, but the encouragement from those around me helped calm me down a little. [Survey, New Dancer 4, Dec. 11, 2010]

As a participant observer in the dance community, I found it intriguing to see how flustered people became when doing a dance or movements that they were unfamiliar

with. During the introductory lesson at a Glen Echo dance one evening, my dance partner (a new dancer) started to panic when she didn't know what to do, despite the fact that I was right there beside her to help guide her into the next movement (I made this clear to her). She expressed this discomfort through mumbling things under her breath and nervously saying how bad she was at dancing.

In contemporary North American society, cultural subgroups play an important role in the lives of people. Many individuals choose to participate in gatherings, clubs, associations, and other activities that revolve around a particular practice, ritual, or tradition (some of these include yoga, sports teams, bowling leagues, running clubs, or swing dance clubs). Such a tradition, however, might not have a direct connection with the primary culture in which an individual was raised. In the field of folklore this sort of "part-time" folk group is characterized by voluntary participation in a community. These activities are part of a personal choice in recreation and leisure. Dorothea Hast describes this facet of the contra dance:

In many ways, a contra dance is a good example of an instant community which fosters intimate anonymity. At a contra dance event, for example, it is possible to be physically close to many people and to share the experience of dancing together, but in actuality, to have no further commitment to them outside the dance and, indeed, to not even know their names. [Hast 1993:26]

The event of a contra dance, therefore, is so amorphous that when you leave the dance venue it is gone temporarily from your world. These glimpses of the first timer experience at a contra dance event provide unique insight into the boundaries of the community. Many members of different dance communities have made concerted efforts

at keeping the boundaries fluid and open; these efforts are made apparent through the attempts at welcoming new dancers at dance events.

Expanding the Community: Welcoming New Dancers

I think if you are an experienced dancer it's very easy to go into a new dance community and be accepted. I think it's a little more challenging if you're new to dancing. [Interview, Stephanie, July 31, 2009]

During interviews with contra dancers, the question of community sustainability emerged as an issue within the greater category of “community.” In other words, many dancers feared that the overall community would die out as a result of lack of interest in the dance events or from not having enough new participants. From their perspective, unless the current dancers start to bring in new dancers to the community, or unless the community can create more enticing ways to attract new dancers, the contra dance population will continue to age and the subculture will slowly trickle out. This focus relates loosely to the way that dancers continue to emphasize the importance of the concepts “authenticity” and “traditional.”

Welcoming new dancers to a dance community can be a bit of delicate balance. Creating an inviting atmosphere for new dancers, while at the same time engaging the experienced dancers, is challenging for many communities. Some dance groups have developed a type of new dancer outreach.

At large weekly dances like at Glen Echo, Maryland, the community has developed a “Dance Buddy” button system, where experienced dancers can don a button indicating that they are a potential partner that is open to helping these newbies. This

system allows new dancers to be aware of whom they could ask questions to or ask to dance and receive warm and inviting responses. The dance organizers also offer “New Dancer” buttons, which indicate the beginners to the other dancers. Aside from helping the experienced dancers and regulars to see who was new, another implied purpose of the buttons was to ease tension. I found that if one experienced dancer met a confused and frazzled new dancer in line, it was more likely that the experienced dancer could be aware of the situation and deal with it a little more calmly, rather than with frustration or confusion. At a dance as large as Glen Echo, with hundreds of dancers on the floor in one night, these buttons can also be a useful tool for interaction and fun way to “break the ice.”

One dancer, Stan, expresses his opinion on beginner’s lessons, another form of dancer outreach, and how they can be most effective:

And when you start teaching you are getting them to listen and they are moving at the same time. They are subtly learning to trust their body. [Y]ou teach them to be observant. I’d be in the circle with them and I’d be talking, “Ok, now we’re going to circle right, gonna circle left,” and then I’d walk into the center without sayin’ anything. Well, anyone who is nervous is gonna be looking quick because they don’t want to be seen as not doing it so everybody’s going to go to the center. They go in, I go back out again, then just lean to the left and the energy in the hands will just pull everyone back around. So, there were my little subtle ways to get people to turn their brains off and trust their bodies to instinctually go the right way when you’re learning the dance. [Interview, Stan, Aug. 3, 2009]

Jack, now a Denver dancer, reflects on his own experience learning to dance in Greenfield, Massachusetts, where many people come traveling through in a given week to dance but may not return repeatedly:

There is also an extent to which [Greenfield] is not that welcoming because so many people come through. If you are a regular dancer, you

know your core of regular dancers that you see every week, and then there are all these other people and it's easy to get detached from the new faces because you know you aren't necessarily going to see them again, or they're not good dancers yet. If they are not dancing regularly, then they're probably not dancing at the highest level, which affects some people more than others. There are definitely people there who danced with me when I was new there or not coming regularly, but there were also a lot of people who didn't really notice me or weren't super friendly. Not that they were jerks, just I recognized them, I knew their name, and they didn't really notice me. [Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

Dancer and organizer Beverly explains some of her own thoughts on approaches to welcoming new dancers into communities:

Some communities really reach out to get new people, dancers to join and offer level one training before the dances, other communities are of more masters variety where they don't really pay much attention to that and may be more insulated. New people might stand away because they don't feel as invited. But communities that have contra dances as part of their wedding celebrations or memorial services or birthday parties or anniversaries, they integrate that as being part of the event, [which is] another way to introduce people that wouldn't normally come. They are there for a different reason so I think there are a lot of factors that keep a community integrated and nourished with new life. [Interview, Beverly, August 25, 2009]

New dancers are very important to the vitality and sustainability of the community long-term. The perspectives of these new dancers provides valuable insight that may assist in not only understanding the community boundaries and its potential sustainability but also reveals from these snap shots an etic perspective of the ways that contra dancers engage, through various behaviors and forms of expression, with a contra dance event. The next section will utilize both emic and etic viewpoints as evidence for the various ways that contra dancers express themselves and perform their culture within this setting. These performances provide insight into how dancers conceptualize the dance form as well as their own identity within the contra dance environment.

Behavior and Expression

Behavior and expression involve the dynamics of social interaction within a social space, including the norms, non-verbal cues, and informal rules of interaction implied at an event or within a culture. A contra dance event has its own unique range of physical boundaries; a range that is perhaps closer than that in day-to-day American society. This is not surprising considering the nature of contra dance as a form of movement and physical interaction. In this setting, dancers may also feel free to express themselves and connect with others through more non-traditional means – perhaps a dancer will not speak a word to his partner for fifteen minutes but will communicate through eye contact and facial expressions. Gender markers and sexual flirtation also become a unique way of creating a set of contra-norms in this environment, as well as offsetting more traditional assumptions. Lastly, the ways that people express themselves is often related to what feels good, looks good, and is enjoyable. Aesthetics in contra dancing becomes important to behavior and expression because the ways that a dancer chooses to move or interact based on taste and enjoyment, or aesthetics, is one marker of how he or she interprets his or her place in the subculture.

Social Interaction at a Contra Dance Event

The world of contra dance lends to a culture of its own, a subculture in which the norms of behavior and expression differentiate themselves from those in other realms of society. In a way, the contra dance environment creates a rhetorical situation for

interaction that requires some level of “literacy” or “fluency” in order to participate. From a performance studies framework, the ability to process and react to the cues of interaction reveals an individual’s level of competency within a specific cultural setting.

All of the excerpts below are from dancers who explain how they, from their perspective, act and carry on at a contra dance; often this leads to whether they feel as like they become a different person while dancing, or not (as opposed to in everyday life). Some dancers feel free to express themselves without worrying about overstepping social boundaries or being met with judgment. Jack’s words below indicate that while his core identity does not change while at a contra dance, he does sense less boundaries imposed upon him:

I don’t feel like I am a different person but[...]I am more able to express myself without being concerned about being misunderstood, in terms of my body language. At a contra dance, than at most other social contexts, I can hug someone and nobody thinks twice about it, whereas if I were to hug someone at my workplace, that would be weird. I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that. It’s not that I wouldn’t feel comfortable for my own sake, but partly it’s projecting that they would be uncomfortable with it, which is so often not true. But it’s not done and I’m not necessarily willing to be the one to push that change, coming from the position that I do, from being a large, sometimes imposing, male-bodied person.
[Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

The dissolution of physical boundaries is in part because physical touch is vital to contra dance, and requires that a dancer be simultaneously engaged with his or her partner, the set, the band, and the caller.

Dancers have also indicated that they feel very accepted while contra dance and that this lends to feelings of joy:

At first, I felt like I kind of became a different person because I felt so, suddenly, very liberated. Because everyone is so happy, everyone is so

joyful and accepting. And that was something I wasn't used to...just, in general because, I mean, I was still a teenager when I started, so of course, there's all that awkward "teenager-ness" of a normal teenage dance, and then suddenly you're at a dance and everyone's ready to help you, everyone is excited that you're there, and...that was really exciting. And now I would have to say I'm more excited by the process – of just getting through it gracefully without too many missteps. That's the exciting part now, not having to feel like I don't know what's going to happen next. [Interview, Jeanine, July 26, 2009]

Another dancer, Stephanie, mentioned that she was more extroverted while dancing based on her own expertise and confidence in the dance:

I consider myself, and I am typed as, an introvert and I find that I feel much more extroverted at a dance, and its partly because I feel very competent in my dancing, and I know that I'm a good dancer and that people enjoy dancing with me, so that is very satisfying - that I have a lot of confidence when I go. I feel very empowered to ask other people to dance. I think a lot of new dancers are sometimes intimidated by that whole process, and "Oh, do I ask a guy to dance if I'm a girl?" and I enjoy being in a space where I feel very competent and have the ability to help other people. [Interview, Stephanie, July 31, 2009]

Beverly conceptualizes her own dancer identity in part based on her interactions with other dancers. Her behavior and feelings towards experience is dependent on the person she is with at a particular moment:

I change as a dancer depending on whom I'm dancing with. Some dances are more generic so you are kind of dancing with the whole group and you're not with you partner as much, and some dances are really with your partner. When I'm dancing with someone who, it could be a man or a woman, is just really able to move me, and I them, it's really wonderful. It's just a high experience. I feel like I moved up notches in terms of my dance, I feel like capabilities in terms of dance, in some ways, I change depending on who I dance with. [Interview, Beverly, August 25, 2009]

The findings indicate that while many people notice their own distinct dancer identity or dancer characteristics, everyone is different. Dancers interpret their expression and

performance at a dance in different ways and may, or may not, conceptualize that as change in their core identity.

“Gender Bending”: Experiments in Non-traditional Gender Roles

The various levels that a dancer either defies or abides by gender markers at a contra dance is another one of the ways to explore behavior and expression. At a contra dance event, many dancers reject traditional gender roles put forth by mainstream society in the United States by performing gendering swapping play in contra dance. This performance can be spontaneous or planned before a dance begins. For example, if a man and a woman played with gender swapping, the man would dance the “lady” and the woman would dance the “gent” - this might also be referred to as “following” and “leading”, respectively. Most commonly, the assumption is that a woman follows and a man leads. However this changes depending on if a dance is deliberately “gender free”⁹ or if it is out of necessity due to uneven gender ratios at an event.

Gender play removes dancers from the normal flow of things; this applies an abnormal roughness on the social sensibility of the set, which adds to a heightened experience. Beverly Stoeltje writes about similar phenomena occurring in the setting of festivals, often referred to as transformation “principles of reversal, repetition, juxtaposition, condensation, and excess flourish, leading to communication and behavior that contrasts with everyday life” (1992:268). When other couples encounter a couple

⁹ “Gender free” or “gender neutral” dance events are fairly common and they are featured as events where the dance does not lead dancers through moves which would place them in a certain gendered role.

that is gender swapping in the line, they may react in a manner that is confused, surprised, disgusted, and disapproving or on the contrary, with big smiles. This sort of performance is framed by the social atmosphere of a contra dance – a place that maintains a general acceptance of slight deviations from the norm, but nevertheless, many conventional expectations of gender roles remain. As a result, people provide a wide range of reactions to this behavior.

Below, in an excerpt from my field notes, I wrote about a few occasions where I danced with partners who were also female. These notes provide some insight into what it is like to experience non-traditional gender dynamics at a contra dance:

She added spins and twirls, and seemed intensely focused. She even commented to me while we were dancing, “I don’t know why some women just don’t get dancing with another woman – what do you expect when there are more women than men at a dance!” Her intensity and drive also lead me to believe that her intentions and motivations lie in having a good dance, without errors and done well, more than meeting people and being social. Sometimes dancing with a woman is refreshing – they are more your weight, often there is less tension, and they are usually less forceful than a man!

The reversal of gender roles is quite notable, with two young men dancing as a couple, or two young women dancing as a couple, and reversing the roles throughout the dance. I experienced this when a young woman asked to dance with me and she said, “Would you like to stay the lady or would you like to switch throughout the dance?” [Fieldnotes, Boulder, Colorado, October 3, 2009]

Dancing with the same gender allows two people who wouldn’t normally be able to connect as partners to do so and become closer because of it. In this way, it can be advantageous to dance with a partner who is your same gender.

In some instances when a couple participates in gender bending they are met with confusion from surrounding dancers. Often if two women are partners with each other,

then other male dancers will approach a lady without realizing she is the “gent”, which leads to confusion as a result of being tripped up that his neighbor is not the typical gender for the “gent” role.

Jeanine expresses her thoughts on gender dynamics in contra dancing:

I guess it was a shock to me [...] I think one reason that a lot of people are scared by it at first is this whole idea of gender bending, which I think is becoming more and more normal in our world today. I think gender roles as we define them are a bit extreme and confining. And so, one way people express themselves is, of course, we have a lot the guys in kilts or skirts. I know for me it’s always a very specific decision whether I wear pants or I wear a skirt to a dance. It depends on how I feel, and sometimes I want to be dancing in the role of the gent. I like how they specifically don’t say “man.” They say gent, which is very nice: the lady and the gent. Its not quite so harsh (chuckle) – WOMAN/MAN. [Interview, Jeanine, July 26, 2009]

Most often, however, I would predominantly observe the male cross-dressing phenomenon at large dance festivals, namely the Falcon Ridge Folk Festival and the Dance Flurry. I infer from this influx of gender bending that some individuals feel more comfortable stretching the boundaries of gender when in a more insulated and intense dance environment.

Sexuality and Physicality

Some individuals use contra dance as an outlet for socially appropriate flirtation and human contact. In most cases this is subtle, through joking, playful nudges, and references. Sometimes this manifests in a more overtly sexual way as a result of the open and accepting environment. Through participant observation I became aware of the flirtatious nature of the contra dance environment:

At this dance it was hard for me not to notice the discrete sexual undertones in all my dance partners' comments as well as in the little phrases thrown into the calling by the big name, out of town caller. He seemed very comfortable and open while calling in front of a large group, probably due to the band's popularity. As a result, he felt at liberty to make the crowd laugh every now and then through sexualized comments and jokes. Two times he did this when referring to male and female contact – the first, after a series of tension building maneuvers, and then shouting out to “do what you know you want to do,” or “do what feels right,” which implies a partner swing. The second instance was a neighbor allemande prior to a neighbor swing and he said “you can try before you buy.” This got some chuckles, but also many of the women were rolling their eyes a bit, some cringing. These references were done during the walkthrough of the dance while people were interacting through more verbal means. [Field notes, Boulder, Colorado, September 20, 2009]

One very notable quality of these jokes was that while in the setting of a contra dance they clearly seem to be flirtatious, from an outside perspective they may sound completely innocent. This is one facet of cultural fluency. For a dancer to recognize that when a caller says, “Do what feels right”, which could be taken in many different ways, they really mean to do a partner swing, indicates that he or she has enough cultural knowledge to put the concepts together. This excerpt from my field notes below reflects some of my feelings around the subject of boundaries, physicality, and subtleties at a dance:

Due to the nature of the dance: physical interaction, communication and touch – I have a suspicion that this influences the protocol for interaction and body space within the community. I have experienced at least a few instances at every dance when a partner will touch me in a way that goes past my level of comfort. This is not to say that I feel violated by any means, however, I do feel myself slink away or get tense when a partner will linger holding me, stroke my hand, or put his arm around my waist, etc. For the most part, these uncomfortable feelings are brought out when it is someone who is not in my generational age group. If someone does this to me who I am familiar with, friends with, and they also happen to be of approximately the same age range, then I do not feel as uneasy. [Field notes, Boulder, Colorado, January 8, 2010]

While some physical contact could be interpreted as sexual advances, I know that in other cases it was merely an extension of the physical nature of the dance.

Value and Meaning Production

While some associate values systems with the idea of family values or a more political concept like “conservative values,” values can also stand for, at a basic level, what is meaningful to people in their lives. These values often stem from the core elements of humanity: family, friends, love, faith, independence, or purpose. In contra dance, each attendee at an event constructs meaning in a different way; this varies from person to person. Values encompass what is socially, emotionally, culturally, spiritually, and physically important to people.

The investigation of meaning within the contra dance community is complex and multi-layered. What makes a dancer give meaning to a certain form of dance? What makes some people give meaning to dance, and others none at all? For some, social networks, physical exercise, heritage, career paths all influences the way a person makes dancing meaningful. More specifically, the ways that aesthetics are constructed within the dance are highly revealing as to the placement of value and meaning. As a result, ethnographic examination of a dance event becomes one of the means to understand the varying levels meaning within the contra dance culture.

Personal identity and the expression of thoughts, feelings, and experience are also closely tied with conceptions of values and meaning. Each one of these elements contributes to the many facets of a person’s unique cultural experience. In order for

something to be meaningful, often that event should also relate to the values a person holds within his or her own values system.

For those who are committed to participating in a contra dance, community becomes very important. Community is a term that may be defined in very specific ways but also might be difficult to verbalize. Many chose to describe community in their interviews through a sense of belonging. While everyone might not agree with what makes “community,” it nevertheless is a very crucial part of the discussion on what is found to be meaningful in contra dancing.

Defining Community

In this research study, the ways that contra dancers define their own contra dance community becomes significant. While some consider their particular dance community crucial to their personal relationships, others do not consider certain dance groups a community at all, or themselves a part of that group. Other dancers define the contra dance community in part because they can rely on seeing a group of people on a regular basis, which fosters a sense of mutual dependence. They may rely on those people for companionship, conversation, and a common interest in contra dance. Also, many dancers brought up in their interviews that contra dance communities are open, welcoming, and accepting places for people.

Building a Vibrant Community

In terms of the community building: “dance community versus community dance,” I think that in a certain locale, people recognize each other over

and over again at the dances. It does become kind of a more familiar place - people keep going, staying, [and] become known to each other. But it's an atmosphere where strangers can come in and also be part of it. Different [people with] diverse backgrounds and disabilities... I've [...] found that community is something that they can participate in [...] I think that a lot of people had loners reach out to [them who think], "Gee, this is something I can do to feel a part of something." And I'm glad for that. I find that it does serve a purpose in the community - have a place where you can be together, be part of dancing together. [Interview, Beverly, August 25, 2009]

During a number of interviews, many dancers described the contra dance community as being a place where they could feel close to other people while having familiarity with the environment. They also mentioned that within the community they had a core group of dancers that they could depend on when they were in need. Stephanie explains how her dance community acts as her family and support network:

I think one of the big features of contra dance, and I would also say English dance, is the community. And in my case, I don't have any close family, and the dance community is my family and I think that you would probably get that response from a lot of people. If you have problems or, you know...it's a really interesting thing... you often don't know what people do for their day jobs, but when you are in hard times, or something happens, whatever, often I think about talking to other dancers. And I think that you would probably get that same kind of response from other people. [Interview, Stephanie, July 31, 2009]

Below, Kaye mentions how she enjoyed meeting friendly people who were open. The philosophy of "openness" is a re-occurring theme surrounding community and the contra dance atmosphere throughout many of the interviews:

I loved the open nature of the experience – and the intergenerational pull. It seemed like everyone was being themselves – a very accepting place. I loved how people mingled and danced with each other, not just sticking to their social groups. This is completely refreshing in current day society. [Survey, Kaye, Jan, --, 2011]

In a way, Kaye's opinion reveals that she perceives a disconnect between the way contemporary society functions on a social level and the way that interactions occur at a contra dance. In pointing this out, she implies a longing for an alternative form of social interaction; that of nostalgia for the past and ways that people related to each other before the onslaught of technology and global communication.

Another vital element of community in contra dance intergenerational interaction:

What I like about dance from a social sense is its one of the few places where you have vertical integration on the dance floor, age-wise, chronological-wise, whereas most of society, if you look around, everybody tends to stay in their same age groups, especially kids. Even more so that they are all into the same homogenized type of music or dress. Whereas if you watch the dances, in the swing dances, you'll see it from teens all the way up to octogenarians. And it sort of just touched my heart to see, I knew this old guy, and some teenagers came up and said "hey can you just show us that move you just did." How often do you get that happening anywhere? You have teens going up asking some old guy to show 'em how to do some old trick that he learned in the '40's. So that's part of the nice community, and the sense of teaching social skills. [Interview, Stan, Aug. 3, 2009]

During the process of my participant observation in various contra dance communities, age was one of the factors that constantly fluctuated. Being multigenerational activity, the contra dance community includes people with a variety of life experiences and approaches to living. Many value having a wide range of ages within a dance community, which in their opinions create a rich environment with a breadth of experiences, conversations, and interactions. During my fieldwork it became clear that the age factor impacted the overall experience of the dance significantly each night.

While dancing at the Denver contra dances I noticed a clear distinction between dancing with an intergenerational group as opposed to a group with only one, or perhaps

two, generations present at a dance.¹⁰ One of my immediate reactions to dancing with young people in the Denver context was that it is an entirely whole different experience; it's more raw, unnerving, exciting, and intense. Some of the younger dancers also exhibit notable qualities like intensity and dramatic flair that gives off an air of theatrics. While some older dancers partake in this kind of expression, the youth tend to do it with much more vigor and frequency. Most of the young (returning) dancers are experienced, thus, they enjoy partaking in gender play and other more experimental activities while they contra dance, keeping everyone around them on their toes.

One young dancer elaborates his feelings about the multigenerational quality of the Denver contra dance community:

I'm really glad there is the age diversity [in Denver/Boulder]. I've been at events that are almost all young people and I really like that too, but as a community, I think there is a lot value in that age difference [...] and its nice to be able to talk for a few minutes before the next dance with people who are 40 or 50 years older than I am and its also inspiring to see people who are 80 or 90 and still dancing. It's a great joy to see little kids dancing. It totally breaks my stride when I come across a four year old in line, and I'm totally thrilled when I do, because I love children and I also think it's really important for them to have this and I am so willing to support that. I think it's really beautiful when I'm dancing, and I'm in hands of 4, and I'm dancing with a 6 month old baby strapped to a parent's chest, and my two neighbors are like, a 9 year old girl and a 90 yr old man. I think that's just such a beautiful thing. [Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

The intergenerational nature of a dance community is a significant part of what makes the group "alive." Beverly indicates that age-integration is one piece of making a community vibrant:

¹⁰ For the purposes of this project, a "younger" dancer is someone who is younger than 35 years old and an "older" dancer is someone 35 years and older.

Well, you know, I think what the city has in social organization you can take a look at factors that maintain its vibrancy. And are there youth involved, is it age-integrated? Is it-, are they spirited at the dances and do they get spirited callers? There callers that are, some are much better than others and some really can weave kind of a web. [Interview, Beverly, August 25, 2009]

Stephanie alludes to the fact that the dance community, while being welcoming to those who may be outside the mainstream, is also rich in life experience because it includes many different generations:

It's an intergenerational community, which is really nourishing, and it's a very accepting community. As a result it often incorporates some people who are not really, who are not always in the mainstream, so sometimes it introduces social behaviors that can be problematic, but it is very interesting that they come and feel welcome, and in many cases its very helpful to people...[pause]...so that's common. [Interview, Stephanie, July 31, 2009]

In this way, the dance community becomes more than a support network and extends into a form of therapy for some. Part of the appeal in this is the human connection aspect of the dance.

The social interaction at a contra dance allows for a variety of different points of contact; this includes contact between the individual and the larger group of contra dancers, individual to individual (couple), couple to couple, and couple to set. During the dance, these unique points of interaction combine for a delicate equilibrium of meeting the needs of the individual as well as the group.

The dance allows for people to simultaneously express his or her individuality in a unique way while still being part of a larger social unit. This environment can serve as an alternate/escape niche for people who want to behave outside the societal norms or

even just in their own distinctive way. Jeanine points out this balance and explains how everyone has their own role during a dance:

You sort of give up your individual decisions about what you are going to do next, but at the same time everybody maintains their own expressive qualities so it's a little bit like playing in an orchestra. Because everybody has a role and you all kind of feed off of each other, and there's a conductor – the caller would be the conductor. Just a group activity where everyone kind of knows the boundaries and they know how to gracefully step outside of the boundaries, and come back to them, and some people are more comfortable in some ways, and everybody seems to be expressive in a different way whether it's more restrained or more flamboyant. [Interview, Jeanine, July 26, 2009]

Jack enumerates the value of this back and forth between the individual and the group:

The beautiful thing about contra [...] is that the people who are next to you don't really impinge much on how you dance. Except for the few seconds that you are in a swing together or something. You can be next to them the whole time and they can be doing their thing in a style that works for them and you can do your thing in a style that works for you and they don't have to be the same style and they are totally mutually compatible. You know, something like a waltz or a tango or something, you have to be on the same page as your partner and everyone else is irrelevant. Unless they're, like, in your way. In contra you can still have that bond, of being neighbors and being connected with each other, with those people, without having to compromise much on how you want to dance. [Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

The nature of the social interactions at a contra dance, both being oriented towards the individual as well as the group, creates a dynamic that emphasizes both collective and individual growth. These are qualities that deepen the experience of those involved with the community, and keep them coming back.

Support through Physicality

For me, this whole idea of touch and movement and music, and some of these primal, primitive actions that you want to do as human beings, I

think that they're included in [contra dancing]. [Interview, Beverly, August 25, 2009]

Every single dance at a contra dance commences with the words “Hands four from the top.” With that being said, at the foundation of every interaction is physical connection through hands connected in a circular unit. As a basic need and desire for most people, physical contact with other human beings is an essential part of meaning making. The contra dance community, like other dance subcultures, maintains a physicality that emphasizes the human touch, which can unite people in common purpose and intention, as well as provide support. This experience allows dancers to be involved with their own individual experience but also that of the other people in the room. As Burt Feintuch explains, in reference to a expressive event, “the crowd becomes one body and one voice becomes more than the sum of its parts. The strength of the individual is identified with the strength of the whole” (2003:30). In this way, the physical support provided by people’s hands during the act of dancing is metaphorically extended to the emotional and social support that a community provides.

The physicality of being moved by the music and the people around you can bring dancers to both a physical and mental place that can be very meaningful:

But that includes the connection with other people, that making all this eye contact, smiling, everyone there is happy, and that you’re spending time with people and building a connection, and touching, and making eye contact and so on, and you don’t have to have a conversation. I think lots of getting to know people has an awkward, “we have to talk right now” because we can’t just stand by each other and not talk feel. And that’s not an issue at contra dancing. You can talk while you’re dancing, you can talk while you’re waiting for the dance to start or whatever, but its not awkward if you don’t. Which relieves some pressure, which lets you just be present with the other person. There’s an element to the human touch part of it that’s rewarding. [Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

Sometimes the physical nature of it takes away the need for any conversation:

Even if I'm not always dancing, even why I can still just watch and enjoy it, nearly as much, is you just see everybody really joining in and being moved by music – like literally being moved, like in the eight counts, or whatever the beat is, and having, kind of, learning inherently that sense of rhythm and sense of just going into the process. [Interview, Jeanine, July 26, 2009]

Satisfaction can also come from a sense of balance, flow, and proper weight distribution in group interactions. Flow can be defined as how well a dance allows for progression, transitions to new maneuvers and successfully creates a series of steps for the dancers (Dart 1995: 96). On the other hand, a dancer herself can have a sense of flow by the way that she moves and executes different moves, as well as interacts with other dancers.

The giving and taking of weight is important in many forms of dance. In contra dance, this mainly pertains to maneuvers like the allemande, balance, swing, and petronella turns. All of these steps involve one dancer interacting with another dancer through hand-to-hand contact. An ideal give and take of weight occurs in this interaction, wherein the exchange should be equal. If one dancer completely overpowers another dancer, or conversely, if no pressure is applied at all, the interaction is not propelled into the next step and can oftentimes feel unfulfilling. One dancer explains how improper weight distribution can lead to pain:

Like leads who have never been a follow and they don't know what it's like to be yanked around; and follows who give lopsided weight and pull back in a way that I have to hold them up when I'm dancing and that strains my body [...] if they're giving a lot of weight there, that hurts, especially if they are using their finger tips. [Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

In relating values to the sense of flow and weight in contra dance, the exchange between two dancers represents the importance of community support. Within a dance community, members often rely on the group for support during certain times in their lives. This is a process that is constantly in flux, which is why a giving and taking of this “weight” is necessary. For example, the Denver contra dance community provided small gestures of positive thoughts, best wishes and a big card to someone from the group who just recently went through surgery.

Aesthetics

According to Diane Amans, aesthetics in community dance is formed according to the values present within that particular group; however, generating an overarching system of values for a community has been a challenge within the discipline of dance research because of the effort to avoid generalization (2008:14). Thus, the aesthetics-values system becomes more complicated because not only do aesthetics lead to values, but values also mold aesthetics. Along with the complexity of the aesthetics-values system itself, the concept of values is also conceptualized in different layers.

Some scholars debate whether or not aesthetics within dance is a credible concept. David Best warns against defining aesthetics in dance because “[a]esthetic meaning and the aesthetic quality of movement are what each performer or spectator feels about it. It is such a personal, subjective matter that there is little or nothing that can or should be said about it” (1975:12). This argument is postmodern in nature, with the writer arguing against stating value judgments purely because they would be subjective statements. This

brings up the question: should the fact that dance, or movement, is a “personal” matter stop aesthetic analysis altogether? Is interpretation based on aesthetics a null argument? Graham McFee believes the answer should be no, in fact, he sees value in making judgments:

[J]udgments of art—in our case, of dance—are not bound to be subjective judgments. That is to say, it is a mistake to regard such judgments as necessarily subjective. A proper understanding of objectivity makes it plain that, in any interesting sense, such aesthetic judgments can be perfectly objective, at least if they are ‘done’ properly. [McFee 2003:13]

McFee’s interpretation of aesthetic judgment is centered on the concept of a pre-ordained set of characteristics in a particular dance from which other dances can be judged. This form of dance judgment lacks a holistic interpretation and relativistic approach, which is crucial in anthropological research. Aesthetic judgment within the environment of community dance should be based less on an observer’s critique of the movements based on standards and more oriented towards the participants’ own interpretations of what best creates the experience they are striving for.

The caller plays a very important role in creating an aesthetic experience for the dancers, not only by leading them through each dance but also in choosing which dances to do in specific orders.

And I think there really ought to be a balance and that for me, its interesting, those chestnut old dances aren’t necessarily the ones I think are horrible, I mean some of the old dances are wonderful and they just flow and you know, you’re just at a place where having that kind of dance feels absolutely right for midnight (chuckles). But I mean, its usual for me when I go to a dance that I’ll dance just about every dance, and you know, it’s nice when there’s that diversity. Where there’s some real fast-paced, you know where you’re twirling and then there’s just some really slow movements where you have time to breathe. [Interview, Beverly, August 25, 2009]

The ways that a caller works through this process, if successful, creates an aesthetically pleasing evening of dancing for the participants. On the other hand, if the structure of a night's dances is not chosen tactfully, then the evening could potentially be unpleasant.

On one particular evening of contra dance, I noticed during my participant observation that the dance was not working. People became frustrated, muttering mildly offensive comments about the caller, and rolling their eyes at every turn. Some of the qualities that made this particular calling ineffective included poor timing, a long "walkthrough" or period of instructions without music (it is typical for a walk through to go through a dance once, maybe twice, but this caller did three), and misspoken or omitted calls. However, it was not entirely the caller's fault. At times, the old-time music made it difficult to keep time and the band did not keep a consistent tempo. In fact, the band would often start very slow and speed up quickly in the middle of the dance. The combination of the calling and the band made for a confusing and unfulfilling dance for me.

Contra dance can also boost aesthetic value for a dancer in the way that it creates a trance-like, transformative experience. The length of a contra dance lasts anywhere from ten minutes to fifteen minutes. In this period of time, a series of maneuvers are repeated at least a dozen times. A dancer interacts with a number of different couples within in this period, which allows for variety; however, the moves and music remain relatively the same. Many dancers become locked into this repetition, becoming entranced by the dance so that they feel like they have become part of something larger. The mass amount of energy can get extremely high, especially at a dance festival where

five hundred people are contra dancing in close proximity to one another in a small ballroom.

While the aesthetic appeal of a dance or dance event as a whole is crucial to the aesthetics of contra dance, the dancer as an individual can also have an aesthetically pleasing performance by means of the characteristics of his or her personal qualities in dance. A dancer's partner can also have a significant impact on the aesthetic experience. Based on the style, technique, consistency, enthusiasm and unique character of certain maneuvers, such as the swing, twirls or accents, a dancer can have a positive aesthetic appeal. Often a big smile can be comforting enough to allow for a positive experience for other dancers. These values can socially result in other dancers' appreciation and praise, and they might be sought out by others as a dance partner or have increased respect as an experienced dancer.

Clothing can also become a part of the aesthetic experience. In contra dance, dancers often wear long flowing skirts, some of which are made of bright or multi-colored fabrics. The aesthetic purpose of this trend is for a number of reasons, many of which I have learned firsthand through dancing at festivals. The flowing skirt will not only move with ease during spinning maneuvers and create a visually pleasing sight, but will also feel great for the dancer because it allows the body to cool and for air to circulate. In most cases these dancers are women; however, at larger dance festivals it is not uncommon for a male dancer to wear a skirt or sarong so that they too may have the enjoyment of wearing flowing fabric during a swing or twirl. For a non-dancing onlooker, the scene of twirling multi-colored skirts and dresses is beautiful, as the

patterns of color and shapes synchronize and flow with the music on the dance floor. The wide range of aesthetics that can be associated with contra dance reflects the many ways that different individuals attribute value and meaning to the dance.

Lastly, unique and innovative accents create a valuable aesthetic in contra dance. Some dancers may utilize special clogging skills, others may hoot, holler or whistle, some may add in jumps at the end of the set, and a rare few may approach the stage with his partner to bow to the musicians as a form of gratitude. These accents add excitement to the dance and create a fun environment for the other dancers. Aesthetically, maneuvers like these elicit an emotional response, usually excitement or joy, from the other dancers or a dance partner.

Within a contra dance event, dancers often feel free to express themselves in ways they might not normally feel comfortable outside the community. Contributing to this sense of individuality is clothing choice, which not only allows for an aesthetic sensual experience but also distinguishes different dancers on the dance floor. Perhaps someone wore a neon green skirt – it would not be difficult to spot this individual in a crowd; this spotting could lead to someone asking him or her to dance. In this sense, the value of individual uniqueness, aesthetic qualities, and community all connect with one another.

Dance possesses an aesthetic power according to what is valued as “good” dancing, various levels of virtuosity, how enjoyable a person is to dance with, and how it makes each individual feel. The intricacies between the relationship of values, aesthetics and dance performance can be deconstructed through the analysis of aesthetics in choreography, expression, and behavior in a dance community. With this approach, a

better understanding of dance can be gained along with the social norms, values, and order within a community.

Conclusion

I'm pretty much my own, same, self in most contexts. I'm probably marginally more extroverted at contra dances than at other times, probably because it's explicitly a social event and the way I express my extroversion is more acceptable. But I would certainly feel comfortable saying that I wish more of my interactions were the kinds of interactions I could have at a contra dance. [Interview, Jack, December 8, 2010]

The variations of expression in contra dance exemplify how the contra dance community is made up of many different types of people, just like any other cultural group. Many people maintain certain similar values, but everyone varies in lifestyle, hobby, personality, and motivation for going to contra dances. From what I have gathered by talking to other dancers informally as a participant observer at contra dance events, people attend dances for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons include: they have been doing it for decades and it has become a part of their lifestyle; they like the dance as a form of exercise; they made friends in the community and like it as a social scene; they like to connect with other people in a non-verbal way; they participate in other forms of dance and enjoy contra too; they are single and like dancing with other single people; or they like the patterns and mind puzzles that the dance poses.

Contra dance provides a meaningful experience for those who participate, while also serving as a unique niche for the interplay between values, aesthetics, and dance. Through interpreting this dance's specific aesthetics system, perceptions of the term

“community” and first-hand conceptualizations of experiences, the project arrives at a more thorough understanding of values and meaning within this community.

The contra dance research presented in this chapter functions to present case study findings in living cultural heritage and ethnographic fieldwork. The next chapter seeks to answer the research questions as well as provide suggestions for further initiatives in intangible cultural heritage work. Combining the research from contra dance ethnography, intangible cultural heritage, cultural festivals, community, and new museology, Chapter Seven will attempt to meaningfully connect ideas and methods for further research.

CHAPTER SEVEN: INTANGIBLE HERITAGE PRODUCTION: MUSEUM, FESTIVAL, AND FIELD

In this final chapter I present the interpretations of my research findings.

LeCompte and Schensul explain that:

[i]nterpreting, or giving meaning to, data involves figuring out what the crunched data mean, or what they say about the people, groups, or programs that the ethnographer has been studying. This involves attaching meaning and significance to the patterns, themes, and connections that the researcher identified during analysis. [1999b:5]

First, a discussion of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival explores the diverse range of interactions and dynamics within the festival setting, which involves various means of cultural production. Defining the Festival's genre as a "non-museum" museum illustrates how the Festival negotiates the production of intangible cultural heritage through programming, exhibitions, and methods that are not always seen as germane to traditional museum institutions. In addition to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, I consider the world of dance festivals, with particular focus on how these events pertain to performing and producing culture. While the characteristics between dance festivals and small-scale community events are similar in many ways, one primary difference relates to social exchange and interaction at those sites. More specifically, dance festivals are structurally formed and deliberately designed with underlying themes, categories, and goals in mind; a structural feature that frames not only the events but the participants' experiences. With

these concepts in mind, this chapter aims to address the dynamics and interchanges at these various sites for intangible cultural heritage production.

In the final section, I examine some of the theoretical and practical implications of the research and make recommendations for how the methodological approaches and principles of the folklife festival might be applied to museums and their work in representing and supporting intangible, living cultural expression such as dance.

Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Representing Heritage

Framing

The festival setting presents living culture in sometimes isolating and de-contextualizing ways, which in a sense objectifies cultural practitioners. According to Cantwell, this style of exhibition may or may not align with cultural stereotypes, affecting the perception of experience:

In a 'living museum' exhibition such as the Festival of American Folklife, such a sense of exclusion, which is an important psychological ingredient in the event, suggests that the expectation and desire aroused by stereotypes become, in cultural performances framed by theatrical devices, an anxiety about the framework itself that dilates into all the boundaries, differentiations, and imbalances that describe the structure of power and advantage in our society. [Cantwell 1993:155]

Different representational framing devices at the Festival, including performance, presentation, and demonstration, are crucial to the ways in which visitors relate to and understand what is going on during the event. Likewise, these frames affect the experience of both the participants as well as the audience. The performance frame and the demonstration frame provide for the greatest contrast (Bauman and Sawin 1991:301).

Musicians and dancers participate for the most part through the performance frame. In this case, a Smithsonian staff member called a “presenter” mediates the performance. Presenters, like cultural translators, will knowingly or unknowingly impose their own interpretations on a performance while mediating the performers’ enactment of cultural traditions. Demonstrators, on the other hand, will continually work on their craft in a small tent and answer questions from visitors throughout the day without the use of a “presenter.” Bauman and Sawin write about how some demonstrator participants, when met with a constant stream of questioning from visitors, retreated to their work to take a mental brake (Bauman and Sawin 1991:299). This break from interaction, in which the participant works on a craft while visitors stand by observing, could be perceived by some as putting the participant on display. These demonstrations have been perceived in both a positive and negative light, as shown by Bauman and Sawin in their ethnography of Folklife Festival participants (Bauman et al. 1992).

Ivan Karp addressed one of the facets of interaction between the Festival participants and the visitors, or audience, when he wrote about how “members of the audience were very concerned about how some of the displays ‘museumified’ craftspeople doing essentially every day, nonperformance activities. They were distressed at observing live persons put on display as if they were objects” (Karp 1991:285).

Perhaps some of the discomfort visitors felt can be attributed to the how some demonstrators do not perform in a way that performance is traditionally understood. When considered from a performance studies perspective, all of the cultural enactments at the Festival are performances, whether or not they are presented in a conventional or

traditional way. In some cases, Festival visitors watch and observe demonstrations without commentary, and in other cases, the visitors have hour-long conversations with the demonstrators. The conversations are especially meaningful when a member of the visiting public possesses a similar occupation or trade, in which case, the interaction involves an exchange of knowledge, experience, and cultural beliefs.

In order to avoid objectification, participants are urged to wear the clothes they wear at home, rather than costumes that might reinforce stereotypes or preconceived notions held by the visitors. Such precautions are taken to avoid “the suggestion of ‘theater’ and attempt to achieve the quality of pure presence, of a slice of life” as the former characteristics cater to the “touristic kitsch” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:74). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also mentions that participants are discouraged from choreography adapted for stage and concert-like performances. At the 2009 Festival and as part of the “Las Americas” program, a number of bands had members who danced along with their music on stage. This indicates that perhaps some of the practices within the Festival have changed since Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s publication in 1998. In fact, a number of the performers from the “Las Americas” program in 2009 make their living as performers, therefore, who is to say that they should alter or minimize their performances for the Festival?

Critiques

Many critiques of the Festival deal with power relationships and authenticity as they relate to representation and display. David Harvey theorized place according to

similar characteristics, revealing that place is always an exercise of power. Place, then, results from the act of social processes. Tim Cresswell explains that within this framework, places create “elaborate traditions [which] are invented in order to bolster these stories. Museums display these histories” (Cresswell 2004:73). On the one hand, the place of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival builds a unique culture of its own. On the other hand, the Festival site features small niches, which are intended to represent other places around the world or subsets of culture, that do not necessary correlate with the physical place of the National Mall.

Scholarly critiques of the Festival have dwindled somewhat since the 1990’s when several anthropologists and folklorists were critically examining issues of power and representation surrounding the Festival (Bauman and Sawin 1991; Cantwell 1991; Cantwell 1993; Karp 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Kurin 1997; MacDonald 2007:3; Stoeltje 1992). This has largely changed, however, as much of the current literature on the Festival lacks serious critique. Heather Diamond, who explores the Smithsonian Folklife Festival through an in-depth case study of the 1989 Hawai’i Program in her book, *American Aloha* (2008), is an exception Today, many publications about the Festival and the Folklife Center come from within the Smithsonian Institution; these writings often focus on the collaborative efforts made by staff to promote and preserve world traditions. This shift of emphasis in the literature reflects some of the changes in contemporary museological theories and approaches, as well as conceptions of heritage.

New Perspectives

Today, rather than being interpreted as “museumification,” Folklife demonstrations have been understood as a way to see a tradition live, in action, and as process-oriented cultural production, in the same vein as performance theory. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is critical of certain aspects of the Festival while also touching on frameworks that correlate to contemporary approaches to performance and new museology. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s theoretical writing, therefore, holds a unique place in the discourse. She describes the phenomena of exhibitions in this way:

[i]n contrast with conventional exhibitions in museums, which tend to reduce the sensory complexity of the events they represent and to offer them up for visual delectation alone, indigenous modes of display, particularly the festival, present an important alternative. [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:57]

With a tradition bearer or crafts person presenting his or her knowledge through enactment, the tradition can then be connected in the minds of the visitors to a living population today. This connection makes the learning experience more relevant, enduring, and significant. As Heather Diamond states, “[s]ince its inception in 1967, the SFF has problematized static notions of tradition and heritage by defining folklife as dynamic, inclusive, and contemporary” (2008:2), indicating not only that the Festival works towards redefining folklife and heritage but that its programming counteracts antiquated ideologies of culture.

Critics utilized the popular phrase, “cultural conservation,” during the early 1990’s as a way to legitimize and orient the Festival within the broader spectrum of cultural heritage. Festival staff and non-Festival scholars used the term alike, in

defending the Festival through its purpose of promoting the continuity of cultural traditions (Cantwell 1991). Today, the concept of cultural conservation is discussed in a similar way, but through a change in semantics. Termed the “safeguarding”, UNESCO urges the protection of intangible heritage through facilitating the environment and means for the production of that heritage (UNESCO 2003:3).

The Center’s deep connection with intangible heritage differentiates the Center from conventional museum institutions, which are more focused on material culture. The incorporation of living culture into museums and museum-like institutions allows for its relevancy in the lives the public and sparks the potential to support tradition bearers in their endeavors, crafts, or pursuits. At the 2009 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, for example, Welsh basket weavers actively produced baskets on the National Mall while simultaneously teaching visitors how to weave. Later, some of these baskets were exhibited as well as sold to visitors in the Festival marketplace. While other museum institutions might have approached the same subject through an exhibit of the baskets in glass cases solely, the Center presented the process and activity of making baskets.

Performance and the Festival

The Festival produces visual culture actively through live performance. Some might argue that cultural knowledge, or in a more basic sense culture, cannot exist without these informed, enlightened interactions. As Edward Schieffelin states, “[c]arried to the extreme, it would not be too much to say that without living human bodily expressivity, conversation and social presence, there would be no culture and no society”

(1998:195). While this point of view is a realist and reductionist interpretation, it has merit when dealing with performative events. These performances construct meaning related to the importance of witnessing an artistic act or piece of living heritage in the moment. The way that dance and other performances are framed, then, emphasizes the processual nature of art rather than featuring it as solely a final product. At the Festival, an audience acquires cultural knowledge through observing and interacting with different forms of presentation: demonstration, performance, and hands-on guidance by the participants.

The ephemeral qualities of performance are intricately tied to the actors, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains:

[t]he centrality of human actors in performance and the inseparability of process and product are what distinguish performances from things. While an artifact may be viewed as a record of the process of its manufacture, as an indexical sign – process is there in material traces – performance is all process. [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:64]

Presenting visitors with the opportunity to see a traditional art live, they are able to connect this process with ideas and existing knowledge, and even possibly with objects that are on display within a museum collection. A museum in this context, then, becomes less a repository for history and history's artifacts and rather tells the objects' stories through current ethnography and living people. In order to make strides in living culture work, museums must make efforts to foster ties with local, national, and international communities of culture.

Collaborative Work

The Festival mission statement reflects a progressive attitude towards this idea, with participant agency and self-representation at its core:

[a]n exercise in cultural democracy, in which cultural practitioners speak for themselves, with each other, and to the public. The Festival encourages visitors to participate—to learn, sing, dance, eat traditional foods, and converse with people presented in the Festival program. [Smithsonian 2010b]

At the Folklife Center, staff members make significant efforts throughout the process of Festival production to collaborate and co-curate the themes, topics, and means through which culture will be presented. In this way, the Center and the Festival both work towards connecting with communities of heritage. In taking these steps, the Festival itself, as a site and concept, also serves as a unique venue for building community. This sense of community is nested in different layers. On the participants' side, the Festival facilitates bonds between participants from the same cultures as well as with other participants from different parts of the world. Community is also constructed between the staff and volunteers at the Festival as they work towards a common goal. Lastly, the community atmosphere on the National Mall is constructed through all the individuals involved or attending, whether they are from Washington, D.C. or across the county. Participants and staff facilitate bonds between visitors and participants with interactive teaching/participation tents, demonstrations, question and answer sessions, showing the process of creating an art piece, performances, and workshops. Through observation at the Festival, I found it amazing to watch, in a period of a few hours, anything from a

Colombian vallenato dance party to a Welsh blacksmith working on an elaborate iron sculpture to a spoken word poetry slam.

These conceptions of community and collaboration highlight the Folklife Festival's importance as a tool to unite and support people from many different cultures and lifestyles in working towards a common goal of sustaining heritage. Efforts of this sort constitute the collaborative work at the Center. The goal, as set out by the Center, is to promote "the understanding and continuity of diverse, contemporary grassroots cultures in the United States and around the world" (CFCH 2009).

Cultural Pluralism and Place

Doreen Massey positions place as constructed by social relations, interactions, and set in many different contexts. According to Massey, place occurs through the real-time creation of relations and exchanges between people; "in this interpretation, what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellations of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (Massey 2004:69). Massey portrays a culturally diverse neighborhood in "A Global Sense of Place" and creates "a celebration of diversity and hybridity. Her portrait is an evocative mix of people of multiple ethnicities living and working side by side" (Cresswell 2004:74). In this way, Massey's interpretation of place as constructed through everyday interactions, as well as the particulars that make people and cultures unique, is crucial to the contemporary theories and approaches in performance. Edward Schieffelin reinforces this perspective through writing that

"[p]erformance deals with actions more than text, with habits of the body more than structures of symbols, with illocutionary rather than propositional force, with the social construction of reality rather than its representation" (Schieffelen 1998:194).

Another facet of Doreen Massey's argument regards place as the repetition of everyday life. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reinforces Massey's ideas by emphasizing that the Festival is made up of the "arts of everyday life".

The very act of bracketing them for public presentation makes them 'performances' of a special kind. They depend for their 'reality effect' on a presentational mode low in theatricality and high in information. To avoid degenerating into casual exoticism, events like the Festival of American Folklife place a premium on intelligibility and on reflecting the perspective of those who are performing. [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:216]

Contemporary perspectives as such emphasize the importance of constructing meaning in the moment and less with defining authenticity according to a set of standards. Part of this interpretation avoids authenticity all together, because the answer to "what is authentic?" depends on the definition of authenticity. Therefore, significance lies in how practitioners interpret their craft and how they make meaning, rather than what definitions are imposed upon them.

Although early criticisms of the Folklife Festival centered on issues of representation and power, more contemporary interpretations align with Doreen Massey's multi-faceted, heterogeneous, and pluralistic view of place. This interpretation of place can be translated to the ways that conceptions of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival have changed through time. The early debates surrounding representation and authenticity at the Festival signify an important turn in museological and anthropological discourse.

Today, these issues have transformed into different, yet related, processes of collaborative work and co-curated exhibitions. In the field of museums and heritage, the contemporary emphasis on artists' agency and cultural practitioners' self-representations has evolved from the original literature that evaluated, critiqued, and problematized issues of representation and display. In this way, the more contemporary literature interprets and focuses on the nuances of collaboration and community projects as opposed to simply critiquing them.

The Festival-Museum Model

By implementing logistical, collaborative, and theoretical processes with living culture during the production of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Center serves as a model for other institutions now and in the future. The Center's non-material, processual approach might lead some people to question whether or not the Smithsonian Folklife Festival may be considered a museum. But the Center's approach through the festival genre gives it the ability to more easily work with intangible heritage subject matter. This is one of the key characteristics and methods that make the Festival and the Center successful. Ultimately, it is not the Center's or Festival's defined genre or title that carries the most weight but these approaches, models, and activities that are vital to future work in heritage.

Critiques of the Festival often begin with an explanation of the differences between museum exhibitions versus festival exhibitions. Traditional museum venues often create situations where "sensory atrophy is coupled with close focus and sustained

attention” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:57). The counter to this sensory isolation is the festival setting, which presents a multi-vocal narrative and multitude of happenings. The visitor is left to decide what he or she should focus on in an environment where the senses have a tendency to be hyper stimulated (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:57). This is still the case at the Festival, where hundreds of tents are presenting a gamut of offerings; it becomes virtually impossible to see everything in one day. As Kurin states, “the Festival offers the ability, indeed the desirability for people – visitors, staff, participants – to chart their own experiential routes through it” (Kurin 1994:10). Visitors choose what activities they want to spend time experiencing in order to navigate through their own experience and make it meaningful.

According to Heather Diamond, the Festival was created as an “addition and alternative to the national museums” but was nevertheless “constructed and operated according to museum precepts” (2008:2). In this way, the Festival works under the same structure of a museum approach but is intended to be a new and different experience from that of the other national museums. Along the lines of the ICOM definition of a museum¹¹, both the Center and the Festival are in the service of society, open to the public at some point or another (though Center requires appointments for its visits) and exhibit tangible and intangible heritage through both online means as well as for the duration of the Festival. However, this “exhibition” is not used in the traditional sense; some might even contest the Festival’s exhibition practices as informal in that they take place in a non-traditional context and the objects on display are in most cases produced

¹¹ Refer to page 68 for the full definition of a museum according to ICOM.

on site with little to no “history” associated with each specific object. The history, however, lies in the traditional process that was used to produce the object, not in that specific object’s historical lineage. This process, or individuals performing culture, may also be considered an “object” on display at the Festival.

For the Folklife Center staff, conceptualizing one theme or program alone is like curating a considerably large-scale exhibit. The programs involve coordinating people, instruments, tools, historical/cultural interpretation displayed on large banners, and some site-specific design elements. In this way, the production of a Festival program has many similarities to an exhibition. Merging three programs together on the National Mall, with people rather than objects at the core of the exhibit, leads to an incredibly complex operation - not to mention chaotic with an influx of tourists at the scene. Despite being complex and frenzied at times, the Festival provides a setting to build its own community while promoting heritage from other communities.

Community building is expressed through long-term projects, open conversations/exchanges, and active participation. Festival participants and staff facilitate connections and promote learning with interactive teaching and participation tents, demonstrations, and question and answer sessions. Participants often demonstrate the process of creating an art piece in a tent, through performances, and in workshops. Part of what makes the process so fascinating is the plethora of interactions taking place at once between visitors and participants, participants and other participants, staff and participants, volunteers and visitors, the list can go on and on. One unique venue that further solidifies Festival community building, which as an intern I was allowed to

partake in, are the post-festival “socials”. At these gatherings, all the performers, staff, interns, and volunteers would meet at the main hotel (where everyone was stationed) and everyone would talk, sing, dance and most interestingly, perform for each other. Although not officially a part of the Festival, these “after hour” gatherings allowed for further relationship-building and cultural interchange.

This sense of community is valuable not only to the Festival but to cultural communities as well. Through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in the contra dance community, it is evident that many of the contra dancers value their experiences because they enjoy both giving and receiving support within their dance community. This common link of community indicates possible outlets for linking the two sites for cultural production. In order for museums to make more lasting strides with intangible cultural heritage in their institutions, they must foster a sense of community and connection between their staff, volunteers, visitors, as well as those people they are working with in order to learn more about living heritage culture.

In my own experience with the Festival, I primarily dealt with participants and staff at the Festival, with much less direct interaction with the visitors. I often wondered to myself what kind of an experience the Festival provides for the visitors; do visitors sense the same feeling of community when they attend the festival as those who work to produce it? While it is clear that for those active in developing and producing the event the Festival is a valuable tool for cultural collaboration, knowledge exchange, and education, it is less obvious what the visitors glean from their experiences at the Festival. I observed that for some visitors, communicating with Festival participants allowed them

to learn about new crafts or pursuits or further their knowledge of a craft that they already practiced. For others, visiting the Festival might have simply meant that they could observe activities and learn some new pieces of information.

Former Deputy Director of the Center, Richard Kennedy, explains in the Center's "Talk Story" newsletter that while the visitor surveys from 2008 reveal that over 1,022,049 visitors to the Festival indicated that they had an "extremely positive experience," quantifying and qualifying the success of the programs is actually a very difficult task (Kennedy 2008:2). Many museums face similar issues in evaluation and strive to improve their work by developing effective methods for interpreting and evaluating visitor experiences and learning outcomes through more qualitative means.

Sites for Evolving Traditions

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is not the only type of festival that provides insights into cultural heritage production and representation. Within the dance community, festivals and dance weekends become overlapping sites in many ways. Many communities merge to temporarily form one large dance community, even if only for a weekend. These events are venues for open participation; in buying a ticket, volunteering, and attending, a participant is making an effort to become involved in that subculture. While knowing how to dance would most surely heighten the experience for a visitor, it is not necessary.

The Dance Flurry Festival of Traditional Dancing and Music is held every February in Saratoga Springs, New York. While contra dance is the most prevalent dance

form at the event, many other styles of dance are featured in workshops, lessons, and dance parties with everything from belly dancing to lindy hop. Below is an excerpt from my field notes to help paint a picture of the event:

At around 9pm I entered the Rosenberg Ballroom to watch an evening contra dance party called by Lisa Greenleaf with music by Nightingale. It was amazing to see the pulsing movements of the crowd on such a massive scale. At times I focused in on watching couples and individual dancers on a particular level then I would broaden my scope and observe the crowd as a single entity. As an approximate guess I would say there were about 550 people dancing with 30-45 people watching on the sides. When I walked in the room at 9:00PM the temperature was cool and crisp, but by around 9:45PM I noticed that the humidity and heat from the dancers became palpable, influencing the physical atmosphere of the room.

I found the synchronization of the body movements and seeing different people's expressions changing according to the different style or theme of a song to be exquisite. Some sections would be slow and passionate, which warranted a more intimate dance style, others were more traditional which lead to a more formal and jovial atmosphere, then some songs become jazzy or funky which lead to more loose body movements and hip swinging.

I noticed different callers and musicians dancing with the group and I think it is cool that contra dancing is such a small community that is one of the few activities where the biggest name musicians and callers can dance with the group as an average person. [Field notes, Saratoga Springs, New York, February 12, 2010]

The line between practitioner/expert and visitor/novice is subtly present though dissolved at the Dance Flurry. At the event, expert dance callers or professional tango dancers lead workshops or perform at a dance party, but nevertheless participate in their "off time" in similar capacities to other dancers who attend the festival. In other words, while an expert of a specific tradition is not teaching or leading a session, he is most likely participating as if he were a visitor to the Festival. Tradition bearers and recreational dancers all produce culture side by side at these events and in this way a dance festival is less

formalized than a museum event. Oftentimes, museums present distinctions and divisions between art produced by formal artists and art produced by museum visitors. On the other hand, at dance festivals, making a dance becomes a process where all may contribute and work towards a common goal. Interpreting the different ways that museums, festivals, and heritage communities produce culture enlightens the fact that, in some instances, museums might learn a thing or two from modeling their programming or methods from other places.

Implications of the Research

After assessing the contra dance community and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as sites for intangible cultural heritage production, I conclude that museum institutions could benefit from training museum professionals in ethnographic fieldwork as well as creating programming that involves active participation on the part of their visitors. In this paper, I have shown how museums can extend their activities to include living forms of cultural heritage, such as dance. I have also been concerned with how the museum community could serve the contra dance community and vice versa. Again, by training staff in ethnographic field methods and ethnography, cultural institutions can broaden their connections with communities outside the museum and expand their research strategies; Museums historically have been concerned foremost with objects and material culture and therefore have not been set up for live, interactive, and participatory experiences or the living cultural context in which ethnographers are generally engaged. Thus, part of the challenge is creating the kind of settings within and outside the museum

that allows for immersion and experience in cultural production and performance (Wright 2010:72). Wright explains that by focusing solely on context of cultural material in museums, it “often happens at the expense of qualities of immersion and experience” (Wright 2010:72).

Richard Kurin states, “museums are generally poor institutions for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage—the only problem is that there is probably no better institution to do so” (2004b:8). Thus, despite their limitations, museums hold great potential for promoting and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, or living cultural expressions such as dance. Recent trends in the museum world are moving us in this direction.

As noted earlier, Nina Simon writes about a number of these issues in her discussion on visitor participation as a central feature to the concept of the new evolving museum. In fact, she put into action real participation and collaboration by working with other museum professionals (via her blog) to produce much of the content in her book, *The Participatory Museum*, a living document in itself. Nina Simon explains how museums and visitors interact with one another, both for the better and for the worse:

Watching a performance or passively walking through an exhibition does not give people this kind of social, active fulfillment. Especially for adult visitors, museums rarely offer challenges that encourage participants to work hard and demonstrate their creative, physical, or cognitive ability. [Simon 2010:18]

Developing programming that most effectively reaches out to and engages adult visitors is no easy task. Simon discusses ways to “scaffold” experiences within the museum so that visitors can easily approach an activity in a structured way; to scaffold the program

means to allow a visitor to be creative in a way that is controlled, with definite goals, tasks, or prompts (2010:22). Many of the steps Simon describes involve efforts made from inside the walls of the museum, for example, programming, exhibitions, education, etc. However, taking steps outside of the museum is also important for the new museum.

In fostering connections and collaborations with communities of living heritage, museum staff might assume that part of their job is to assist in presenting information about/for these communities through programs or exhibitions. This would certainly be one avenue from which museums could collaborate. Due to the nature of many dance communities, however, physical or static exhibitions may not be as relevant as digital exhibitions. Active dance communities, particularly those of the Denver contra dance, utilize online websites, social networking sites like Facebook, and announcements at dances to keep the community updated on what is going on in the local contra dance scene. The CFOOTMAD Facebook group page, for example, provides a place for dancers to post relevant articles about contra dance on the page for its members to view and read. Many dancers reference the online scheduling and dance organization sites to find out about when dances are and what bands/callers will be present on a certain night. Perhaps sites such as these could be places for digital exhibitions and historical information about a dance form. If this sort of project were to be initiated and completed, participants of the dance community could visit a site, gain the information they are looking for, and acquire some knowledge about the details of a dance's history. The digital world, in this way, acts as a fertile platform for collaboration.

Museums could also assist with creating exhibitions that are not digital and, if available, utilize a dance venue as a site for an exhibition. This brings up a few questions related to location and venue. Often, dances are held at multi-use facilities (i.e. churches, granges, town halls), making it difficult to install exhibitions that might potentially obstruct the normal flow of events. Would exhibitions in these spaces be an option? Depending on the space, it might be. At the Denver Masonic Temple, many other events and activities besides contra dancing take place on the site; however, text panels up on the wall for a few months might not be an inconvenience for the other inhabitants of the venue. In fact, a small exhibition on contra dance might provide for an educational experience as well as a pleasant atmosphere that might be welcomed by other groups. Another option would be for a museum institution to offer space for an exhibition, opening up the dance community and the museum to a new crowd.

The contra dance case study raises a number of questions surrounding the ways that the museum community might extend its scope to active communities of cultural heritage. One outlet for this connection would be for museums to facilitate working relationships between their institutions and source communities. While a source community might be able to offer topics, information, and examples of heritage on a certain subject, a museum might alternatively be able to assist in tasks or efforts for that community. For instance, a cultural institution may be able to provide assistance documenting and/or preserving dance forms, providing tools or educating people about the history of those forms, and promoting the vitality of the community.

As my findings reveal, a main concern for some contra dancers today is the sustainability of the community. Many communities have made efforts to promote sustainability by making their dances more appealing to outsiders and by attempting to recruit more young dancers. If museums assisted dance communities in presenting their own history, facilitated research, promoted events through the museum's public relations and marketing connections, and helped foster exchanges with other dance communities, dancers might be able to get the word out about their events more effectively.

Arriving at the idea of the new museum requires re-routing the traditional conceptions and experiences surrounding museums so that they encompass a wider breadth of functions, services, and purposes. As Simon explains in the last chapter of her book:

The final result may not resemble today's museums. It may look more like a coffee shop or a community arts center. It may function with models found today in a co-working space or a sewing lounge. It might feature content based on democratic rather than top-down processes. [Simon 2010:350]

In "Remapping the Museum," Kratz and Rassoul explain that the new approaches, interactions, and processes taking place in and around the museum will involve multi-vocal, multi-modal, and multi-disciplinary approaches (Kratz and Rassoul 2006:350). The options for new museums are endless; the hurdle that remains is creating inviting, community-oriented, collective experiences that make lasting memories for the participants.

Future Research

After conducting fieldwork in the contra dance community, I have learned that contra dance is connected to intangible cultural heritage and its definition in a number of ways. This connection stems from the fact that many forms of intangible cultural heritage are complexly interwoven into practitioners' lives. Heritage, as Richard Kurin states, "is not something that can easily be isolated from a larger constellation of lifestyles, nor de-articulated from a broader world of ecological, economic, political, and geographic interactions" (Kurin 2007:12), indicating that living culture is a vital part of tradition bearers' lives. Many contra dancers have become deeply enmeshed in the world of contra dance and it is relevant in their daily lives. For some contra dance communities, the dance represents a significant aspect of the history and culture of a surrounding physical place. Other communities or groups, however, are very part-time. Dancers might attend a dance once a week, or less, and have little to no interaction with the community or its dancers in other realms of their life. These communities have built their own subculture based, in some cases, on the adopted heritage from other places. These various degrees of dance participation make up a continuum; on one end are the dancers who live and breathe contra dance and on the other end are those dancers who consider contra dance to be one hobby out of a number of other recreational choices.

The continuum of participation also helps to enlighten the various conceptions of and attitudes towards the idea of "community". As demonstrated in the findings, many contra dancers maintain a strong opinion of what defines "community" in the contra dance world. These opinions do not always align with each other and as a result, some

ambivalence and conflict of opinion surrounds the term. This was a surprising element of the research because prior to conducting fieldwork I had assumed that all contra dance groups were deemed communities whether they met certain unofficial criteria or not.

Some dancers express that community is something strictly tied to local surroundings and people; in many cases this refers to rural communities. These characteristics qualify, according to some, a group of contra dancers as a “community” rather than simply a congregation of people once a week. Other dancers consider their dance to be a community simply because it makes them feel appreciated, supported, and connected to those around them. In this way, it is difficult to say who is “right” or “wrong” but rather, each community is held together by different characteristics, meaningful interactions, and qualities.

In some places, contra dancing is part-time, short-lived, and a recreational activity. In other communities, contra dance is a relevant and culturally embedded facet of life. If the dance is perceived to “dying out” by some members, is it truly at risk? These are relevant questions that might be explored in future research; not only for the contra dance community but for any community of living heritage that manifests itself along a similar continuum of community with participation, relevancy to everyday life, and longevity of practice key factors in defining a group.

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APPENDIX A: CONTRA DANCE LOCATIONS AND DATES

Monthly/Weekly/Bi-weekly Dances Attended:

February 2004-August 2004 Saratoga Springs, New York

September 2004 – May 2008 Rochester, New York

June 2009 – August 2009 Glen Echo, Maryland

August 2009 San Francisco, California

January 2009 – December 2010 Denver, Colorado

4-Day Festival Attendance by Year:

2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010 Dance Flurry Festival, Saratoga Springs, New York

2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009 Falcon Ridge Folk Festival, Hillsdale, New York

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General

- 1) How long have you been contra dancing or involved in the contra dance community?
- 2) How did you learn about, get involved with or begin contra dancing?
- 3) Where did you start contra dancing? Was this at a weekly/biweekly dance or at a festival/dance camp?
- 4 a) What is your role in the contra dance community (dancer, musician, caller, organizer, etc)?
- 4 b) What do you consider to be your level of involvement in the community?
- 5 a) Explain how you felt at your first contra dance
- 5 b) How is this similar or different from how you feel at a contra dance now?
- 6) As you have become more active in the contra dance community, how has your perspective and experience changed from when you first began?
- 7) How often do you contra dance?
- 8) What draws you to contra dancing?
- 9) How do you feel when you are at a contra dance and when you are dancing?
- 10) Do you express yourself or behave in specific ways at a contra dance? / Are those different or similar to daily life? / Do you feel like you are a different person when you dance, or do you remain the same?
- 11) Do you participate in any other activities that have similar qualities (social, community) to contra dance?
- 12) What kind of impact has contra dancing had on your life (in terms of your activities, social life, sense of community, behaviors, interests, etc)?
- 13) Are there any distinct moments or memories that you remember from a contra dance event?
- 14) What are the ways that people express their individuality at a dance?

For the Contra Dance Researchers:

15) What is your particular research interest in contra dance?

16) What are your takes on the differences between a modern urban contra dance and a more rural, tight-knit community dance?

17) Where do you think contra dance is going in the future?

18) Have you any experiences with contra dance outside of New England? What are your thoughts? –OR- How does contra dancing in Colorado differ from other parts of the US, specifically New England, if at all?

APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONS AND CONSENT

Questions:

1. *Where* did you attend your first contra dance? *Why* did you attend this event?
2. Did you continue to attend this dance or any other contra dance events elsewhere? Why or why not?
3. What were your first impressions of the contra dance event? Please include any relevant observations, personal reactions, etc.
4. Explain how you felt at your first contra dance event (emotionally, physically, intellectually).
5. How did you express yourself at the contra dance?
6. Was there anything you particularly liked/disliked about the contra dance experience?
7. Do you participate in any other activities that have similar qualities to contra dance? (for example: the social aspect, community-oriented)
8. Do you have any other comments?

Informed Consent:

PLEASE READ BELOW *PRIOR* TO RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS (Regarding confidentiality and IRB concerns):

By replying to this email you acknowledge and agree to the following points:

- I agree to take part in this interview and understand that my participation is voluntary
- I understand the study that has been explained to me by the interviewer through the paragraph below (see below *Project Explanation)
- I understand that I may not answer questions if I do not feel comfortable
- Any comments that I make might be included in a published master's thesis at the University of Denver
- I understand that my responses will remain confidential and anonymous (unless I, the participant, specify otherwise)
- I know that I will not receive monetary compensation for this interview

*Project Explanation:

The study will investigate the relationship between contra dancing, values and identity – both within and outside of the dance community. An ethnographic study of the Denver

contra dance scene will be conducted through participant observation, interviews, and survey. During the fieldwork process, contra dance will also be interpreted as a form of intangible cultural heritage, or non-material form of cultural expression. By looking at contra dance through the lens of intangible cultural heritage, the effective methods for interpretation, perpetuation and presentation of the dance will be explored through investigating innovative approaches in museum case studies. The project will both contribute to the literature of contra dance, ethnographic dance studies and exhibiting intangible material.

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study for the Master's project *Ethnography of Contra Dance: Balancing Meaning and Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Museum*.¹²

This project consists of a research project culminating in a Master's thesis through the University of Denver. The study is being conducted by Kathryn Young. The project is supervised by her academic advisor, Dr. Bonnie Clark, Assistant Professor in Anthropology, University of Denver.

The study will investigate the relationship between contra dancing, values and identity – both within and outside of the dance community. An ethnographic study of the Denver contra dance scene will be conducted through participant observation, interviews, and survey. During the fieldwork process, contra dance will also be interpreted as a form of intangible cultural heritage, or non-material form of cultural expression. By looking at contra dance through the lens of intangible cultural heritage, the effective methods for interpretation, perpetuation and presentation of the dance will be explored through investigating innovative approaches in museum case studies. The project will both contribute to the literature of contra dance, ethnographic dance studies and exhibiting intangible material.

The interview process will involve a series of questions dealing with the participant's experiences and opinions related to contra dancing. The duration of the interview will range from 30-60 minutes. The participant has the right to discontinue the interview or refrain from answering any question if they feel uncomfortable, with no penalty. The

¹² This title was eventually changed to *Living Culture Embodied: Constructing Meaning in the Contra Dance Community*.

researcher will treat all information received as confidential, however, you will have the option to disclose your name if desired.

I am required to inform you that there are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. If information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

The benefits of participating in this research involve contributing to the knowledge of contra dance and anthropological research. Through this research project, the academic literature on contra dance, museum studies and dance research will be expanded. If you would like a copy of the results from this study, the researcher will provide one.

The researcher does not see any potential risks or concerns with this research. However, if you have any concerns or complaints about treatment during the research session, you may contact Dr. Dennis Wittmer, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at (303) 871-2431, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Sponsored Programs at (303) 871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

Participant agreement:

- I agree to take part in this interview and understand that my participation is voluntary
- I understand the study that has been explained to me by the interviewer
- I understand that I may stop the interview at anytime, skip, or not answer questions
- Any comments that I make might be included in a published master's thesis at the University of Denver

- I understand that if I choose for my identity to remain confidential, the researcher will honor my request
- I know that I will not receive monetary compensation for this interview

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of *Ethnography of Contra Dance: Balancing Meaning and Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Museum*. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Please date, sign and print you name on the below lines:

Print name:

Sign name:

Date:

____/____/____

_____ My name may be used in the Master's Paper

_____ I would like to remain anonymous in the Master's Paper

Sign name

Date

_____ I agree to be audio taped

_____ I do not agree to be audio taped

Sign name

Date

For any questions or comments, please contact the project researcher, Kathryn Young, B.A. Anthropology, Master's student, University of Denver 518-339-5944, Kathryn.young@du.edu, or her faculty sponsor Dr. Bonnie Clark, Assistant Professor in Anthropology, University of Denver 303-871-2875, bclark@du.edu.