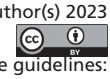
EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Cultural Studies

Article

European Journal of Cultural Studies
1–16


Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13675494231179269
journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs
Sage

When the dancing went wrong, the evening went right: An argument for ageing and changing cultural practice

Mark Ball
University of Glasgow, UK

Abstract

Inspired by a line dancing club in Stoke-on-Trent, and drawing principally on cultural theorist Raymond Williams, this article makes the case for appreciating the ways that cultural practices age and change over time. This group of line dancers held a deep, long, and collective familiarity with their practice, and through this intimacy an idiosyncratic attitude to dancing mistakes emerged. Taking these mistakes, collectively recast by dancers as 'variations', as the central empirical focus, I describe a sense of collective agency manifesting a solidaristic style of ageing together. Raymond Williams helps make this articulation political: in defending the time and space needed for such attitudes around practice to emerge, and the attitudes themselves.

Keywords

Ageing, cultural meaning, cultural practice, dance, grief, line dancing, Raymond Williams, socialism, Stoke-on-Trent

This article is an effort to bring together two things: a guiding idea borrowed from Raymond Williams, and the particularities of a line dancing club in Stoke-on-Trent. The guiding idea comes from Williams' discipline defining and much cited *Culture is Ordinary* essay (1958 [1989]) and is his commitment to new rules rather than a stiff and steady cultural norm, and the time and space this requires. This is not the most picked up thread in this much picked up essay, yet it remains useful and instructive – and as Jilly

Corresponding author:
Mark Ball, School of Culture and Creative Arts, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ, UK.
Email: mark.ball@glasgow.ac.uk

Kay (2021) suggests in this journal, is a commitment that should be read as part of a broader socialist politics.

I take Williams, figuratively, to a line dancing club in Stoke, where I will describe what new rules meant to the regular dancers. This article draws on a year's worth of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2018, where at Lynda's dance classes new rules, or so-called 'variations', were central to the meaning and value of dance in that space. Although not the case when Lynda started out, these classes were attended by an almost exclusively older crowd, and over time, the dancing changed as the dancers changed with them. It's in this setting that I want to explore, via Williams, an argument for uncertainty and unsettledness – where practices and tastes can age and change.

After some scene-setting fieldnotes, this article will begin with a longer elaboration of Williams' sense of a flourishing cultural ecology – and what new rules mean to his political project. I will introduce the research setting, and outline my methodological approach. Then, I will dive into the dancing, and centre the empirical focus of this article: that when the dancing went wrong, the evening went right. While discussing the dance classes I bring in other literature that moves the discussion along and helps illuminate the meanings of the 'variations', the dancing's *wrong-rightness*, before coming back to Williams and back to his want for 'the difficult full space, [and] the original full time' needed for meaningful cultural growth (Williams, 1989 [1958]: 16). The line dancing club, I will argue, is a powerful example of this idea – the classes revealing the slow development of a democratic and arguably more socialist cultural norm, and the significance of solidarity unfolding in practice. Important here is the age of the dancers, and line dancing as something to age with. There is much literature that espouses the value of cultural practice undertaken in later life, and this article can contribute productively to these areas of interest – and indeed unsettle some of the 'static truths' around ageing and cultural experience (Barron, 2021). I will close by sketching some questions and implications for related areas of cultural studies thinking that follow from my central argument: that cultural practices change, and should be supported to age and change.

A night at the club

[8:00pm]

The first sounds of the guitar are met with approving nods. Several who have been sitting get up and assume their places on the floor. It's a soft rock song called 'Ich mach meine Augen zu (Every Time I Close My Eyes)' by Chris Norman and Nino de Angelo. It isn't 'dance music' but the tempo suits line dancing – stepping on the beat it doesn't feel too slow like it's dragging, but not so fast that any quicker steps feel rushed. Not 'dance music' but good line dance music. Despite myself I like the song.

There's 15 or so seconds of intro before the routine starts. Some hum along dancing on the spot, settling into the mood of it. Others continue conversations from before and some get a quick drink from the side. The hall was chilly in the winter but now hot in summer. The doors at the back are open, letting a breeze in, and from my seat I can see lawn bowlers enjoying the long evenings – we aren't the only ones enjoying the working men's club facilities.[1] There are about 50 people in the class tonight, most of whom are now on the floor. Dancers adjust to make sure everyone has enough space.

As the verse starts the group weaves to the right stepping on the beat, finishing with a shuffle step to punctuate. Beginner level line dances can sometimes look quite stompy but this one doesn't – helped by the soft and (even sickly) sweet music. The dancers weave back across to the left with a quarter turn at the end. Lynda's prompts briefly interrupt the music.

Focusing on one row their movements have a lot of musicality – rising and falling as the song dips and swells, and extending everything out when it slows down. Lynda liked to joke, 'Use your hips if you've still got 'em!' On others the look of concentration is more obvious, anticipating the restart – this would be me if I weren't sitting out watching.

Restart negotiated, the dance continues into the chorus. The lyrics so far have all been in German, but as the chorus repeats Chris Norman starts up, 'Every time I close my eyes, Every time I fantasise'. Several start singing along here. 'The way that she touches me, To know that she loves me, Makes me feel like touching the skies'.

View of the dancers from the back of the hall

[9:30pm]

Quite a lot of the dancers have gone home – about half are still here. 'What do you fancy then?', Lynda asks. By this point the student-teacher artifice has all but faded. The dancers agree on a popular routine that Lynda choreographed a few years ago – lasting several weeks at the top of the most downloaded list on CopperKnob.[2] 'Ok sure, why not!'.

Lynda gets off the stage and takes off her mic – no need to remind the dancers of the steps. She joins the others on the floor and David starts the music.

Conversation peters out at the sides – those that are sitting are enjoying the spectacle. It feels more like a performance as no one is being taught. But not a performance for an audience. The dancers spread out and traverse the floor more expansively.

It is dark outside but warm in the hall. It's endlessly pleasing watching the shifts in movement (almost) match the shifts in the music. The whole thing is beautiful and hypnotic and intimate.

Viva the new rules!

Towards the end of his *Culture is Ordinary* essay (1989 [1958]), Raymond Williams helps clarify a stated political demand. There should be more investment in the arts and adult education, yes, but with three conditions. The first is that this resourcing should not fuel a logic of cultural economy – not just a tool for 'keeping up consumption' (p. 15). The second is that this funding should not continue the concentration of *great institutions* in London alone, and instead encourage a more democratic and diverse cultural landscape. The third, and my focus, is his last and more 'controversial' challenge,

> We should not seek to extend a ready-made culture to the benighted masses. We should accept, frankly, that if we extend our culture we shall change it: some that is offered will be rejected, other parts will be radically criticised. And this is as it should be, for our arts, now, are in no condition to go down to eternity unchallenged [. . .] To take our arts to new audiences is to be quite certain that in many respects those arts will be changed. I, for one, do not fear this [. . .] if we understand cultural growth, we shall know that it is a continual offering for common acceptance; that we should not, therefore, try to determine in advance what should be offered, but clear the channels and let all the offerings be made, taking care to give the difficult full space, the original full time, so that it is a real growth, and not just a wider confirmation of old rules. (p.16)

Williams is on song here: avowedly class conscious, full of compelling phrasing, clear political motivation, and fundamentally a faith in 'ordinary people' rather than any false consciousness prefiguring – and all this sounding somewhat sermon-like. Ordinary people can and should be able to shape their cultural landscapes, and when realised, this is where hope might be found,

> there, as always, is the transforming energy, and the business of the socialist intellectual is what it always was: to attack the clamps on that energy [. . .] and to work in his [sic] own field on ways in which that energy, as released, can be concentrated and fertile. (p. 18)

This sense of the transformative energy, as Williams developed in his cultural-materialist method, is key – as Jim McGuigan and Marie Moran (2014) put it, with Williams, 'culture can be a material force, and ideas grip the minds of people in the cultural field precisely because culture is not some idealized sphere but exists as *ideas made manifest in everyday practice*' (p. 177, emphasis added). So at a line dancing club in Stoke, the particularities of the practice are not the simple reflection of cultural and material circumstance, and nor are they the already-understood embodiment of meanings made elsewhere, but instead the coming together of these two senses of culture – and with transformative possibilities when 'ideas [are] made manifest'.

It's important to situate this in Williams' broader vision of a socialist culture and politics. Williams was concerned with a 'common culture' – this common culture striking against a settled idea of high culture practised by a settled few. To imagine a common culture is to speak a critique and invoke an alternative,

> a common culture is not the general extension of what a minority mean and believe, but the creation of a condition in which the people as a whole participate in the articulation of meanings

> and values, and in the consequent decisions between this meaning and that, this value and that. (Williams, 1989 [1968]: 36)

So when Williams rejects a culturally conservative 'confirmation of old rules', towards what I am referring to as, instead, *new rules*, it is to extend the rights of cultural meaning to those wrongly considered the *benighted masses*, for the cultivation of a more socialist cultural ecology. And why? – as a kind of cultural right, or because the *benighted masses*, in fact, express different and more hopeful ways of being? *Culture is Ordinary* (1989 [1958]) is filled with rich biographical accounts of place and community, as Williams contrasts a Cambridge education with his rural working-class Welsh upbringing. At home in Wales, Williams finds an ordinary sense of community and solidarity – Williams describes that when his father was dying, folk came to dig his garden, brought firewood and food, and did his washing. 'I think this way of life, with its emphases on neighbourhood, mutual obligation, and common betterment, as expressed in the great working-class political and industrial institutions, is in fact the best basis for any future English society' (Williams, 1989 [1958]: 8) – elsewhere, Williams describes this as an everyday 'democratic feeling' (Hoggart and Williams, 1960: 27). These flavours of democratic feeling form a wellspring of political possibilities, and want for time and space to flourish in a manifest common culture.

It's for these reasons that I think Williams is a good thinker to take line dancing in Stoke. Stoke-on-Trent, or 'The Potteries', is a small city made up of six towns that sits on the border of The North and The Midlands in the United Kingdom. The engine of Stoke's development was its thriving ceramics industry, and though the numbers working in the potbanks have dramatically fallen, this industrial heritage lives on in name – and more broadly a sense of place (Jayne, 2004). Stoke has been labelled a Crap Town,[3] and more recently acquired the newer label 'left behind' (for an example of this coverage, see a report by Sophy Ridge for Sky News (2017), that begins with typical mournful music and grey cityscapes). Despite efforts to challenge this narrative via an ultimately unsuccessful bid for 2021 UK City of Culture, Stoke fulfils many of the criteria of a 'cultural cold spot' (Gilmore, 2013) – but only if those criteria of *cultural* are accepted.

The line dance classes I attended took place in a working men's club – one of Williams' 'great working-class institutions', perhaps. The elected committee that managed the club kept the price of the hall cheap to keep Lynda and the dancers in action – Williams' celebrated sense of 'common betterment'. And line dancing, despite not harbouring high cultural capital, was rich in meaning and significance for the regulars. By not thinking Stoke and Stokies uncultured, and recognising the line dancers as capable cultural actors, with Williams one can consider the coming together of people and practice – and do so with a sense of possibility. It's with this grounding that my tighter focus is, back to Williams' 'controversial' challenge, this idea of 'the difficult full space, the original full time', and of new rules realised. Lynda's classes are, I will suggest, a compelling example.

Case and method

At the time of my fieldwork, Lynda had been running line dance classes in and around Stoke-on-Trent for over 20 years. Starting out at a country and western venue in the city,

Lynda then moved between different community venues with big enough rooms for the dancers. The classes I attended took place in the main hall of a working men's club, and had done so for around 15 years. The room could comfortably fit the 40 or so regular attendees, with plenty of seating at the side and a stage for Lynda to conduct the action. Many of the dancers had been with Lynda from the start, and had built a long intimacy with the dancing and each other. As well as her teaching, Lynda was a well-known line dance choreographer.

As the *night at the club* scene describes, line dancing is a formation dance set to music. Each routine consists of a looping set of steps that repeat over the course of a song. As well as the steps, line dancing often involves lots of turning – a four-wall dance, for instance, means turning to face all four walls of the room during the routine. While it is a partnerless dance, so not a style built around two people, when line dancing you are in effect partnered with the room. The explicit goal is synchronised steps, but as I will describe, the regulars at Lynda's classes did not always achieve this synchronicity.

Lynda and the dancers were clear that while most may have wanted one thing 20 years ago, they almost all wanted something different now. Ruby, who had been line dancing with Lynda for 20 years, describes this change,

> When we first started with Lynda we used to go to [a country and western club in Stoke], it had a lovely spring floor and all the flags around, and we used to go on a Saturday night and everyone used to go in their gear, all the ladies in saloon gear and stuff like that. We used to have a shoot-out [. . .] They took it really seriously, you weren't allowed to speak when you were doing it or laugh or anything.

With shootouts and full garb this suggests a strictness and subcultural flavour – and meanings much more tied to an Americana imaginary. This is in sharp contrast to a more recent weekend away to Blackpool,

> We've had different themes. The last one we did was television, and our group went as Downton Abbey [. . .] Can you remember Pavarotti, 'Nessun Dorma'?[4] We did a dance to that. It was speeded up obviously and it was also lots and lots of turns, you had to have your wits about you to do it. And Lynda came in the room with this big blow-up Pavarotti suit on, I've never forgotten it. Every time she did a turn her suit went one way and she went another [laughs], it was just so funny.

Even after the country and western venue closed, Lynda described the dancers turning up in hats and jeans and proper boots. Two decades on comfortable footwear was preferred, and hats were brought out only on special occasions. Ruby gives a glimpse of what the classes used to be like, and the new rules adopted since.

What had changed? The clothes had changed – gone, mostly, were the days of cowboy cosplay. Although Ruby doesn't describe it here, gone also was the homogenously country music – while country still featured, one popular warm-up routine was set to Samantha Jade's 'What You've Done to Me', the singalong pop quality of which would puncture any complete sense of Nashville-on-Trent. Crucially, the collective approach to dancing had changed. If 20 years ago there was no laughing, there was plenty of laughing now – and not just on weekends away in Blackpool. But I don't just want to suggest the dancers were more laidback, or the classes more fun. To make the point fully, I will focus on the

collective attitude to dancing mistakes – or as they were labelled instead, 'variations'. And this, for line dancing, is a *new rule*, because line dancing does not, at least conventionally, champion improvisation or flair like other cultural forms might – line dancing is not free jazz. Why this change, and crucially what these changes created, drives the argument I will develop.

This argument draws on participatory ethnographic methods and interviews. These methods were preferred as a means of exploring the complex and sometimes messy ways that cultural practice offers pleasure and meaning, and during fieldwork my thinking significantly shifted – as my own familiarity grew and interests sharpened, and as the dancers got more comfortable with my presence. Over one year I collected fieldnotes and recorded impromptu conversations, and more formally interviewed 13 of the regulars at the end of the 12 months. This process was greatly helped by learning to dance with the group, and beginning to share in the enthusiasm of these evenings. In *Thinking Ethnographically* (2017), Paul Atkinson describes ethnography less as a neatly bound research method than a particular approach to theory and data, 'we bring ideas *to* the field as well as drawing ideas *from* our field data and our experiences. There is a constant, iterative process between data and ideas' (p. 4, emphasis in original). This iterative process is reflected in the theory I will discuss – where a focus on embodiment and gesture, rather than being pregiven, is the result of reading and researching together. My interest in socialist-minded theorising should also be thought of similarly – as well as being a central figure in cultural studies, I have sought out Raymond Williams because he was explicitly political in his writing. But as Bev Skeggs (1997) advocates, when bringing political interests together with academic research, my aim is not to seek out 'logical coherency' so much as 'plausible explanation' (p. 32–33) – so not reducing the experiences of the line dancers to fit a particular politics, but giving shape to experience to think afresh about broader political ideals.

The last methodological note I would make is on the relative time-privilege of ethnographic methods. Some of the conversations included, particularly around grief, were prompted by what was going on at the club that evening – and not something that came up in the first few months of research. The line dancers were not, in my research experience, always effusive in their commentary on the value and meaning of this and that – though extremely warm and welcoming, not trained in a kind of cultural high-speak, and not particularly valuing it. But when something happened, they were very happy to share. Reflecting on this, I am not sure interviews alone would have helped me try and understand the value and meanings of line dancing to the regulars – like the changes in the dance classes, this research also benefitted from the difficult full space and time.

'Variations' explained

> I always say 'listen, nobody goes wrong, there's just variations!' [laughs] And it's true, many times we've been talking and dancing at the same time and everybody has turned and we're facing the wrong way and I've gone 'youse have all gone wrong!' [laughs]. (Sue)

When the line dancing went wrong, the evening went right. Sue put it neatly here, that 'nobody goes wrong, there's just variations'. As just mentioned, in a way this isn't true – line dancing, generally speaking, doesn't encourage invention, and neither did Lynda's

classes 20 years ago. But despite this there were a variety of variations at the club, and here I will describe three types. This first I am bracketing as the 'too social' variations.

The more complicated dances involved a variety of turns and steps few could manage mid-conversation, but this didn't stop people from chatting and dancing. A mistake here might mean a couple of people find themselves behind the beat or skipping a step, relatively invisible, or as Sue describes a whole row of people facing the wrong way. This always provoked lots of laughter – especially if Lynda was the one at fault. Mock tellings-off and jokes about memories fading followed these more disorganised moments, 'Oh here we go again!', 'Who hasn't been listening then?!', 'You're losing it . . . what is my name?!'. Knowing smiles and laughs exchanged those facing the wrong way slipped back in step. When it was my turn for a variation one or two were quick to quip, 'We're the ones meant to be forgetting things, not you!'

The second kind of variation I am calling 'too bad knees'. When I started attending Lynda's classes George was waiting for a knee replacement. At the time he moved gingerly on the floor, favouring his knee and avoiding any quick spins. He wouldn't stick strictly to the routine but always faced the right way and wasn't caught out by any restarts – he knew the dances well even if he couldn't perform them perfectly. When he sat out the quicker dances I took the opportunity for some private tutoring, George helping from his seat at the side.

This continued until George had the operation, after which he wasn't able to attend for a few weeks. When he returned he stuck to one or two dances a night, moving more carefully than before his operation. From his seat at the side he followed along with the steps – moving his legs like a grapevine or box step, if not actually stepping. Over the next few weeks as George's knee improved he danced later into the evening. His variations became less pronounced, and by the time my fieldwork ended he was moving happily and confidently – much to the delight of the group.

Rather than 'too social' or 'too bad knees', my last example is 'too Geoff'. In my first class, Geoff very kindly told me not to worry and to follow his lead if I got lost. Geoff's favoured spot on the floor was directly in front of me, and he was to be my lighthouse in the storm. Although his instructions were always accurate, Geoff always telling me ahead of time what steps were coming up, he enjoyed adding his own flair. If a dance had a brush step, here brushing the ball of your foot on the floor while stepping forward, this was always done with a great deal of style and commitment – so much style and commitment it didn't always look like a brush step. If a dance involved stepping for four beats, Geoff would add a spin. And when there was a pause Geoff would do some sort of skip. Despite his knowledge and warmth, I had to search for other guides on the floor. While line dancing is still not free jazz, Geoff perhaps did bring that kind of energy.

'Variations' explored

Crucial in these sketches are a series of actions and reactions: actions that break from dance form, and the collective responses of the regulars. It is important, I would argue, to read choice in this – though not always exactly purposeful, a collective attitude to ~~mistakes~~ variations is clear. Ultimately, I want to read these examples of new rules as convivial gestures – or rather, collectively recast as convivial gestures, towards a particular

convivial and solidaristic affect. It's not that the dancing didn't matter anymore, but it mattered differently. To help demonstrate, I will explore three related theoretical perspectives, and use them each as tools to unpack and clarify. These perspectives share a focus on embodiment and emergent meaning that compliment and extend Williams' thinking – on the evolving nature of culture, Williams writes in *Culture is Ordinary* (1989 [1958]) that, '[meanings] are made by living, made and remade, in ways that we cannot know in advance' (p. 8). What these complimentary theories do is help to understand the ways cultural meanings are remade, and what this remaking does. More specifically, these first two help explain *what* the variations are, and the third helps edge towards an understanding of *why*.

First, let's consider variations as actions. Following in the non-representational tradition of cultural geography, Dereck McCormack (2008) puts the focus squarely on dancing bodies – so not upper-case Line Dancing, but people dancing in lines. Rather than thinking of dance as the performance of a particular thing with a particular meaning, so thinking in terms of representation, McCormack unsettles a sense of given-ness and obvious purpose: 'the politics of dancing or moving are never given in advance [. . .] we do not yet know what bodies can do' (p. 1825). Or can't do.

McCormack uses descriptions of tango to flesh out the theory, 'tango is a mobile, travelling movement practice. As such, its cultural meaning and imagined geographies are never stable' (p. 1826). And the same is true of line dancing. *Christy Lane's Complete Book of Line Dancing* (Lane, 2000) gives a version of an uncertain history. With its roots in European folk dancing, and following the popularity of 70s disco-style formation dancing in America, the boom for line dancing came with the release of the 1992 Billy Ray Cyrus hit 'Achy Breaky Heart'. Riding on resurgent country-Americana interest through the 80s, the song came with an accompanying line dance routine – the pairing of which introduced and cemented a connection between American country music and line dancing. With interest piqued by films like *Urban Cowboy* in the 80s, the popularity of line dancing piggybacked on the success of the song – which was a hit beyond the USA.[5] This history of line dancing is also a 'mobile' and 'travelling' one, and what McCormack helps clarify is that it has travelled *here* – the dance having a geography beyond its invention, and beyond any conservatism of the (sometimes) routinised steps.

> To undertake geographical research into moving, dancing bodies is not only to think *about* these bodies: it also involves thinking with and through the spaces of which these bodies are generative. (McCormack, 2008: 1831, emphasis in original)

Here, McCormack helps us ask some important questions: What did the variations do? What space did they make? Harking back to Williams, what was their *transformative energy*? Rather than George's chair-dancing, or indeed Geoff's improvisation obscuring a proper object of interest, here they can be appreciated as vital actions in the creation of value and meaning. Taken as a whole, the variations described under the last header seem to foster an intimacy and acceptance among the dancers. But, as was clear in the shared joy at George getting back on the floor, and Lynda's sweet scoldings at chatty dancers, breaking form is only one part of the picture – there was an exchange and dialogue not fully explained by the breaks themselves. What about the variations as reactions to action, then?

Outside the world of dance, Eric Laurier and Chris Philo (2006) offer an account of a, as they find it, convivial café. Their analysis benefits from slowing down socialising, which I will borrow shortly, while paying particular attention to what they describe as 'gestures of responsibility' on the part of the patrons, 'the gestures that we make [. . .] go beyond expressing feelings and intentions [. . .] since they help to provide the place with its receptivity, indeed its conviviality' (p. 204). They refashion an Ervin Goffman-like account of performance and social environment that points towards a 'geography of kindness' worth exploring (p. 200, 206). And helpfully, they stress the importance of reaction to action – the exchanges between social actors, of acceptance or otherwise.

Slowing down a typical 'too social' variation at the club: two dancers were having a conversation while dancing. A restart was coming – the routine breaking from the established looping set of steps to match the song's transition to a bridge. Lynda said 'Restart coming' to signal this, and 'Aaand restart' on the beat. The majority of the room stayed facing the stage per Lynda's instructions, but the two dancers having a conversation did a half turn to face the back, missing the restart. They each cried out, 'Whoops!', laughing and quickly turning back to face the front. Lynda shouted, 'I saw that girls!' from the stage. The two looked and laughed at each other. Another dancer added, 'It's not a social club you know!', and the room laughed along. This wasn't said with malice – it was pantomime-ish. The dancer who shouted out smiled over at the two and they smiled back. Lynda, this time through the mic, said, 'I'll be watching youse' with a wink. Although the language is cold, this style of description helps unpack the warmth of the club – and the significance of a winking approval.

Building on McCormack (2008), 'bodies are generative' in their disharmony, and important here were the harmonising smiles and laughs and jokes. And this is a good way of thinking about the variations: a harmony being different notes that complement each other. Revisiting the 'too bad knees/hips' variations: there was a group of three dancers who occupied the space nearest the stage. All were in their 80s and picky with the routines they danced, preferring to save themselves for the familiar favourites. Like George their variations were subtle – always keeping to pace without always sticking to script. But these variations did not provoke panto-like outbursts. The accommodating gestures were, collectively, not commenting on them – 'nobody goes wrong, there's just variations' was an ethos that was performed differently.

To answer *What did the variations do?* and borrow Laurier and Philo's (2006) language, the variations reflected and manifested an 'organisation of normality' at the club (p. 195). It was normal to forget the steps; to not be able to move as freely as the routine demands; and to banter on with the teacher and each other. And though not mentioned until now, to also enjoy the dancing as a form of exercise and brain training. It was notable that during fieldwork the regulars' descriptions of the dancing often muddied aesthetic pleasures with more aerobic and cognitive concerns. Josie, a veteran of the club, only started with Lynda after struggling to manage her arthritis, when other therapeutic physical activities were causing too much pain. Line dancing became intensely valuable as a weight-bearing exercise, and this led to more classically aesthetic pleasures for Josie – who enjoyed going to different line dance events beyond Stoke. In short: the variations, and crucially the collective framing of 'variations', encouraged a variety of ways to be at the club – a variety not there 20 years prior.

The third and last theoretical help stays with an interest in gesture and meaning, but helps shade towards *why* the variations matter. In the style of both McCormack (2008) and Laurier and Philo (2006), Alan Radley (1995) wants to understand movement and meaning in an emergent sense – that is, not pregiven. Elaborating, Radley suggests, 'dance can [. . .] be considered as the fabrication of a "different world" of meaning, made with the body' (p. 12). But rather than implying some separation, Radley pulls questions of embodiment and meaning back towards the fuller experiences of the dancers,

> However, what collective performances make possible is not just the maintenance of imaginary worlds, as if these stood apart from everyday 'reality'. This sets apart the virtual from the real, when the whole point of such activities is that they can be experienced as more real, more vital than the mundane sphere. In effect, such liminoid activities, play or ritual, have their continuing significance because of the way that they mirror the remainder of life. (More precisely, because of how the remainder of life is refracted through them). (p. 14)

'How the remainder of life is refracted through them' is key, and to make the question of ageing explicit: this wasn't a time apart from ageing, but a time it might be experienced differently. To come back to Williams, the *idea made manifest* here was one of ageing together in particular ways.

'Variations', *ideas made manifest*

> The beauty about line dancing is you don't need a partner, so if you've lost your partner you can go along – there's always somebody who's going to talk to you, it's the most friendly sort of dancing I think, there's not many occard [awkward] sods! (David)

So far, I have tried to demonstrate the significance of particular changes at Lynda's line dance classes. The importance of these changes, as Williams-like new rules, is in the ways they brought new collective joy to the regulars – and a collective joy sensitive to getting older. This was a feeling in common, collectively realised over time. Line dancing is not a static activity in this account – its practising and its meanings changed, and crucially were able to change. I will close out my empirical account with a hugely important factor in this.

Katherine first tried line dancing 20 years earlier,

> There was a guy called 'The Urban Cowboy' who came to me son's school to do a demonstration. And I wasn't even going to join in, but I was watching them dance and someone said, 'Come on join in', and I got a shopping bag in one hand and my son's violin in the other and I was trying to line dance, and I thought 'Oh I like this!' [laughs].

Katherine then found out about Lynda's classes, and had been a regular attendee since, 'I've always said if I pop me clogs[6] while I'm dancing, let the dance finish and just dance round me [laughs], don't stop the dance, don't stop the dance'. At the time of our interview it was 12 months since Katherine's husband had died,

I mean to be honest, a week after my husband died, on the Wednesday me friend Sharon said, 'You're going line dancing', and I said, 'No I'm not', and they said, 'Yes you are, and if you haven't got your boots on at half past seven we're coming and dragging you out, you're coming line dancing, that's where your friends are that's where you need to be'. And if I hadn't have come that first week I probably never would have come back. And I said too, I said, 'Don't say you're *sorry*', all I want you to say to me is, 'We're glad you're here'. And I made Lynda tell everybody that, and that's what everybody did, they came and said, 'Ooh we're glad you're here', 'We're glad you've come'. Nobody said anymore, and that was good for me that.

We've got a few people here that have lost partners. An y'know they all still keep coming, because where your friends are, and your friends understand here. If I run away crying they're not going to say *what's up with me*, they're going to know. They don't judge. It's friends getting together, all these people here I didn't know any of them before I started coming here and dancing [. . .] You can walk in and go sit with anybody.

Seats at the side of the hall

For Katherine, the club became, in a new way, a tool in grief – to be accepted and held by people who understood. Like Katherine, Caroline described that after her husband died the dancing 'was the saving of me' – that it was 'something to look forward to do for me – I didn't need anybody to . . . have a partner for it'. Unlike Katherine, Caroline only started dancing with Lynda after her husband died, but again grief was folded into the meaning and value of the club. All this was made apparent when, during fieldwork, one of the partners of the regulars died. Brendan's wife used to come to the classes but hadn't for some time due to illness. Lynda made an announcement at the start of one class informing everyone and passing on funeral details, and said that Brendan wouldn't be coming for a few weeks. Lots were quick to offer help with shopping or anything else he might need.

When Brendan did come back, he didn't dance at first. He sat in his usual seat and watched, nursing a pint, and while the dancing was going on a steady trickle of regulars stopped to sit and have a quick chat, not staying too long and presumably not saying too much. Lynda didn't make an announcement saying, 'Welcome back', or anything. Brendan returning went unsaid but was certainly noticed, and the feel of his first couple of classes back was markedly different. The collective care and understanding that Katherine described was evident, in knowing what to do and what not to do, where grief was painfully familiar.

These are quick illustrations of experiences that many of the dancers shared. Writing about culture and grief, Ben Highmore (2016) describes that,

> Culture tells us how to deal with death, what rituals to perform, what ceremonies to arrange. It tells that it is alright to be sad, to cry, to be mournful [. . .] *It edges around us*, showing us how to behave, how to think, but our actuality exceeds it. Culture seeks to reabsorb our experiences within its sometimes lively, sometimes sclerotic forms, and to some extent it will always do this. But the singularity of life will always provide moments when culture falls away. (p. 136, emphasis added)

Highmore writes convincingly about death being an end and beginning for cultural meaning. Some things seem to exceed it – the shock of cooking dinner for one, and no one to debate what to watch on TV – but there is also something that 'edges around us', that maybe softens the shock or throws us into something more collective.[7] It is important here, I think, to see the dancing and these grieving experiences as of a piece: the careful conversations with Brendan and the variations part of a collective and solidaristic practice of ageing. Here grief, and changing bodies and fading memories, weren't something experienced alone – and didn't make for bad dancing. Williams advocates for *real* cultural growth, away from old rules and towards something more democratic in the shared creation of meaning, and here is an example to think with. To paraphrase from Williams' 'controversial' challenge, some parts of the dance were accepted, some parts rejected, and something else realised.

'The difficult full space, the original full time'

By way of concluding, I want to emphasise three sets of suggestions and questions emerging from the argument developed in this article. The first is the relevance and value of Williams' interest in new rules. Lynda's classes were, I have tried to show, a neat example of the significance of a *common cultural* sense of shared participation in cultural values and meanings. This is demonstrated in the ways in which the classes changed and aged with the dancers, as new meanings of solidarity in ageing emerged over time. On one hand, there is a temptation to make a hard link between line dancing and *better* ageing – and indeed there is literature that does this, noting numerous reported physical and mental health benefits (Joseph and Southcott, 2019; Nadasen, 2008). And on the other, there is an urge to marvel at the wonderful chance of this coming together of people and practice – of Americana in Stoke, with regulars finding joy and camaraderie in inventive ways. Instead, what I want to stress is a focus on the conditions of this emergent *common cultural* practice – the conditions of which point to future research. To champion new rules is, as Williams (1989 [1958]) suggested, also to demand 'the difficult full space, the original full time' (p. 16). What forms of cultural and social infrastructure support the kinds of long collective agency the dancers demonstrated? And what narratives of cultural value? Working men's clubs, and other collectively managed community venues, might be fertile sites for this, and Williams' 'common culture' a salient framing.

A second consideration is the ways Lynda's classes relate to and challenge narratives of ageing and culture. The line dancers seem to reflect a 'less familiar cultural narrative' of old age,

> stories [. . .] distinct from exhortations to stay enduringly fit and young, on the one hand, or from the blatant dread or blinkered denial of the whole situation of the frequent unmet needs, isolation and neglect of the elderly, on the other. (Segal, 2014: 18–19)

There is an abundance of work promoting the value of cultural practice for older people – generally focusing on a shared need for social interaction, meaningful continuity, mental and physical health benefits, and general quality of life (e.g. Age UK, 2018; Evans et al., 2021). But there is a tendency also to mobilise cultural practice as a somewhat crude instrument towards predefined, if often noble, goals. What is missing is a sense of experimentation, or a more relational approach that sees ageing experiences as mediated and changing (Barron, 2021). Williams is again a good interlocuter here: the *idea made manifest* at the dance classes was one of ageing together, where bad memories could be joked about, dodgy joints accommodated and powerful connections in grief manifested. Here, ageing is less a 'static truth' (Barron, 2021), than a collection of experiences that take different shapes.

My final note is a more ambivalent one. At various points I have promoted the value of long connection and long intimacy between the dancers and the practice, and I would argue this is key to the emergence of a democratically realised, solidarity motivated shift in new rules at the club. But affirming any value of *long connection* should be done with caution, and this is indeed part of Paul Gilroy's (1987) critique of Williams – the fetishism of a settled and supposed-authentic idea of class hostile to a more racially diverse framing. To be explicit, the line dance classes, and indeed the working men's club on the whole was not a racially diverse space. While the long intimacy of the dancers was essential to the quality of the practice, it is not necessarily a virtue in itself. And adding to this, the line dance classes, with their older milieu and a rich specificity built up over time, are not an example of unbounded openness – in fact such openness, with perhaps some younger dancers, might have challenged the valuable *thingness* of the club. So while I have wanted to suggest that Lynda and the regulars offer a vision of a different, and indeed more socialist cultural ecology, critical questions around the politics of collective feeling remain. Williams' 'common culture' points a way, so long as any articulation continually expands that sense of the commons. In taking Williams (1980) line dancing, my hope has been to contribute to 'the production and the practice of possibility', against any 'learned resignation' (p. 19) – and here he makes a good dance partner.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Mark Ball https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8158-7768

Notes

1. Working men's clubs are cooperative venues found mostly in formally industrial areas of the United Kingdom. Despite the name, women can be members – though this wasn't always the case, as described by Cherrington (2009). Most clubs have a bar and a larger entertainment

room. At this particular club in Stoke, as well as line dancing, the hall hosted bingo nights, music gigs, darts tournaments and yoga classes.

2. CopperKnob.co.uk is an online database of line dance step-sheets and tutorials.
3. The first edition of *Crap Towns* came out in 2003, and across three editions has documented the *crappiest* places to live in the United Kingdom. Stoke made the top 10 in 2013.
4. Downton Abbey is a popular British period drama, and 'Nessun Dorma' is a opera solo performed memorably by Luciano Pavarotti.
5. I say uncertain because this cultural-historical narrative omits what is sometimes called 'soul line dancing' – 'soul' because of the soul, R&B and hip-hop musical influences rather than country, and also line/square dancing practices in East Asia (there are videos of groups dancing Lynda's routines in Taiwan and South Korea on Youtube, for instance). I can't give a full account of these interesting geographies, but I say this to avoid a whitewashing of line dancing practices – and to suggest line dancing's Americana roots are complex.
6. 'Pop me clogs' means dying.
7. In bereavement literature, Thomas Attig (1996) describes grief as a process of 'relearning the world', after important attachments and *ways of being* are shattered. What is lost is an 'assumptive world' (2002) – these assumptions, more often taken for granted rather than self-consciously thought, are weighty with history and long-cultivated desires. To use this language, the relearning here, it seems, was shared, adaptive and ongoing. For Caroline and others, the dancing offered itself up, at an important time, for pleasure and purpose without assuming a partner.

References

Age UK (2018) Creative and cultural activities and wellbeing in later life. Available at: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/bp-assets/globalassets/oxfordshire/original-blocks/about-us/age-uk-report–creative-and-cultural-activities-and-wellbeing-in-later-life-april-2018.pdf

Atkinson P (2017) *Thinking Ethnographically*. Sage: London.

Attig T (1996) *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Attig T (2002) Questionable assumptions about assumptive worlds. In: Kauffman J (ed.) *Loss of the Assumptive World*. London: Routledge, pp.55–68.

Barron A (2021) The taking place of older age. *Cultural Geographies* 28(4): 661–674.

Cherrington R (2009) The development of working men's clubs: A case study of implicit cultural policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(2): 187–199.

Evans S, Bray J and Garabedian C (2021) Supporting creative ageing through the arts: The impacts and implementation of a creative arts programme for older people. *Working with Older People* 26(1): 22–30.

Gilmore A (2013) Cold spots, crap towns and cultural deserts: The role of place and geography in cultural participation and creative place-making. *Cultural Trends* 22(2): 86–96.

Gilroy P (1987) *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. London: Routledge.

Highmore B (2016) *Culture*. London: Routledge.

Hoggart R and Williams R (1960) Working class attitudes. *New Left Review* 1: 26–30.

Jayne M (2004) Culture that works? Creative industries development in a working-class city. *Capital & Class* 28(3): 199–210.

Joseph D and Southcott J (2019) Meanings of leisure for older people: An Australian study of line dancing. *Leisure Studies* 38(1): 74–87.

Kay J (2021) A life lasts longer than the body through which it moves: An introduction to a special. *Cultural Commons Section on Raymond Williams. European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24(4): 1009–1020.

Lane S. (2000) *Christy Lane 's Complete Book of Line Dancing*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers.

Laurier E and Philo C (2006) Cold shoulders and napkins handed: Gestures of responsibility. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31(2): 193–207.

McCormack D (2008) Geographies for moving bodies: Thinking, dancing, spaces. *Geography Compass* 2(6): 1822–1836.

McGuigan J and Moran M (2014) Raymond Williams and sociology. *The Sociological Review* 62(1): 167–188.

Nadasen K (2008) 'Life without line dancing and the other activities would be too dreadful to imagine': An increase in social activity for older women. *Journal of Women & Ageing* 20(3–4): 329–342.

Radley A (1995) The elusory body and social constructionist theory. *Body & Society* 1(2): 3–23.

Segal L (2014) *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing*. London: Verso Books.

Skeggs B (1997) *Formations of Class & Gender*. London: Sage.

Sky News (2017) #Ridge: Stoke-On-Trent by-election. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiK9wu0NKYw&ab_channel=SkyNews (accessed 21 January 2022).

Williams R (1980) Beyond actually existing socialism. *New Left Review* 120: 3–19.

Williams R (1989 [1958]) Culture is ordinary. In: Gable R (ed.) *Resources of Hope*. London: Verso Books, pp.3–18.

Williams R (1989 [1968]) The idea of a common culture. In: Gable R (ed.) *Resources of Hope*. London: Verso Books, pp.32–38.

Biographical note

Mark Ball is a Research Associate in the School of Culture and Creative Arts at University of Glasgow. His research is supported by the Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity (cusp.ac.uk), and focuses on questions of cultural value and meaning, place, and politics.