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Swing Heil: Embodied Resistance to the Third Reich

Late 1930s Germany was an environment of major political upheaval as Hitler rose to power and his malevolent anti-Semitic policies brought on tangible effects. Against this nationalist politic, a resistance movement grew. The Swing Youth, or *swingjugend*, were a group of teenagers who actively subverted the corporeal controls the Nazi regime impressed on citizens' everyday lives. As their name suggests, the Swing Youth sustained a community centered around African American vernacular jazz music and movement, and engaged in cultural activism, even at the risk of the implications of association, including facing persecution from Nazi officials, which could mean death. Rather than overt opposition to the Nazi regime and German fascist politics, the *swing youth* engaged in embodied resistance to Hitler's anti-modernist, culturally homogenizing values through an embrace of transnational music and dance, and an insistence on corporeal self-determination. This research examines the ingress of jazz culture to Germany through the fissures in Hitler's nationalism, and the use of a uniquely African-American dance form as a daring method of subversion. In doing so, I demonstrate the creation of a uniquely German dance style, grounded in transnational aesthetics and values, and thus place the German Swing Youth firmly within the global modernist movement.

In my analysis of the Swing Youth's underground cultural resistance, I employ Emily Wilcox's term "kinesthetic nationalism." In her text, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*, Emily Wilcox introduces this term to assert that an embodied aesthetic unifies members of a national culture, even through various experiences of diaspora (Wilcox 2018, 6). Extending this idea, I explain the Swing Youth's reproduction of their idea of African American jazz culture as kinesthetic fellowship, or an embodied camaraderie with one distinct

group by an external community, not only applying the artistic aesthetic, but also the political values of the community they replicate. I argue for the swing youth's embodiment of an imagined America, their sense of Americanness always developing in relation to their experience of Germanness. Because they were not interested in recreating mainstream American culture, but specifically African American jazz culture, the imagined America that the Swing Youth attempted to insert themselves into was based on envisioning a future, political by proxy of aesthetic culture; they were heralds of a new, distinctly global yet specifically German culture.

On December 1, 1936, the German government declared that all German children “shall be educated physically, intellectually, and morally in the spirit of National Socialism to serve the people and community, through the Hitler Youth” (United States, 1946). This event can also be considered the reactionary commencement of the Swing Youth; it marked a transition from a loose social affiliation rooted in a mutual interest in American Jazz culture, to an organized group held together by collective defiance of the ordinance. Their political defiance was subversive, but not revolutionary; Michael H. Kater specifies that the jazz-crazed youth participants of Germany's swing subculture considered their relationship to jazz a means of crafting their identity based on social mobility via subcultural participation. They were not unified by intentionally anti-Nazi politics, but rather aimed to assert their superiority within a culture of mandated homogeneity (Kater 2003, 108). The Swing Youth rebelled directly against Hitlerian cultural regulations, but as an act of maintaining individuality, not an act of party opposition. In fact, these teens came from predominantly wealthy families, and their behavior indicates a translation of financial and social elitism and privilege to ambivalence regarding national politics, and indifference toward the humanitarian crimes of the Nazi regime—until they became directly affected by the violence.

Prior to the 1936 declaration, the Swing Youth, especially those based in Hamburg, were a collection of individuals who knew each other as peers in their elite schools and fraternities. Their initial interest in American swing was an act of consumerism. Mary Nolan cites Germany's historical imaginary of American culture as preoccupied with "efficiency and indulgence, admirable productivism and debilitating materialism" (Nolan 2000, 6). This reflects the German National-Socialist approach to modernization, in which American production was lauded, and American consumer culture—and its emphasis on individual choice—was vilified. The Swing Youth, intentionally contradictory as part of their adolescent rebellion, were strong proponents of consumer culture, concerned with economic status, and what Michael Kater sees as their elitist snobbery (Kater 2003, 105). The Swing Youth's imagined America was an individualist, consumerist, hierarchical ladder, which, through their embodied resistance to homogeneity, they attempted to recreate and climb. These teens were not interested in jazz as an artistic form; they were not committed record collectors or aspiring musicians. Rather, they acquired jazz recordings for the sole purpose of dancing (Kater 2003, 103). As Nazi regulations on swing dance intensified, mostly by Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, this group's adolescent rebellion transitioned from an assertion of self-determination against their parents, to an assertion of self-determination against a national regime. Their ordinary teen angst led to development of a counterpublic, or, to borrow from Michael Warner, a community among strangers that use expressive corporeality to generate an intimate sense of identity-based belonging (2002, 57).

Under the rise of Hitler, groups such as the Hitler Youth were made to participate in performances of German national supremacy. These groups were made compulsory in attempt by the Nazi Party to gain popular favor through public demonstrations of nationalist pride and

embodied excellence. A propaganda reel of the 1938 German Youth Festival, a celebration of the anniversary of World War I, featured thousands of Hitler Youth, marching in linearly oriented, strictly gendered groups. While marching, the boys reach toward the crowd in the iconic Nazi salute, one arm outstretched in an upward diagonally reaching blade. The video then cuts to thousands of virile bodies organized in perfect diagonal formations, evenly punching alternating arms directly front. They bend either leg in time with their punches, directing their focus and weight, simultaneously threatening and fungible (British Pathé 1938). Appearances such as these employed uniform physicality to assert the superiority of Germany (Aryan Germany) in the wake of World War I, rallying support for contemporary war efforts. The Reich's method of demonstrating might was strength in numbers, and exalted not only German national supremacy, but the ennoblement of a uniform Aryan-German nationality, attempting to use movement as a pro-eugenic argument.

Without necessarily understanding the symbolic significance of their actions, the *swingjugend* cultivated a community based on defiance of the Reich's physical values. In their response to the formality and sterilization of the 1930s German body culture, the Swing Kids adopted a casual aesthetic as an embodiment of their "idealized America." Their style of dress opposed the Hitler Youth's beige, pressed, militaristic button-up and cuffed shorts. Boys traded in the tight Hitler Youth scarf for long trench coats, baggy pants, and fedora hats, even ostentatiously carrying umbrellas (regardless of weather), projecting a sense of nonchalance and disregard for their environment—physical and political. Girls donned heavy makeup, and knee-grazing skirts, short in comparison to the Nazi youth standard of traditional respectability. Boys wore their hair long, chin-length and loose, in contrast to the neatly combed style mandatory for Hitler Youth. In a personal correspondence, one swing kid instructs his friend "be as nonchalant

as you can; whistling and singing English songs as much as possible” (quoted in Goebel 2014). The dress the Swing Youth mimicked was not mainstream American, but rather the emergent Zoot Suit, originally attributed to the 1930s Harlem Dance Hall community. Notably, through their dress, the Swing Youth reflected allyship with the New York Jazz subculture. They did not seek a mainstream revolution, or formation of a new national aesthetic, but rather an intramural movement of resistance.

Jazz’s migration to Germany began in the 1920s period with the spread of Hollywood movies, and the lingering residue of American military occupation in the country. Uta Poiger identifies a post-War outburst of fads such as the Charleston, attributed to American influence (Poiger 2002, 13). A number of German theatrical productions such as *Jonny Spielt Auf* (“Jonny Plays,” 1927) premiered; it featured a blackface performer in a stereotypical rendering of the African American male, who leads Europeans into defeat by luring them into a dancing trance with his “degenerate” jazz music. Composer Ernst Krenek admitted that he had no personal experience with Black American culture, and developed the character exclusively based on conjecture (Lareau 2002, 50). Not all operas within this fad were intentionally racist; communist opera *Roter Kbarettabend* used the idea of jazz music and dance to theatricalize a sense of coalition between the European proletariat and African American plight featuring lyrics such as “Black and white we bear the same fetters...” (Lareau 2002, 54). Regardless of their message, the widespread popularity of such productions demonstrates the proliferation of a specifically German idea of jazz as a central part of the nation’s African American imaginary.

Singular transmission of vernacular dance is difficult to officially track due to its collective development (Kraut 2016, 128), thus exposure and migration of swing to Germany is traceable mostly via conjecture. But, development of a distinctly German form is indicated by

Stuart Nicholson's examination of the globalization of jazz culture from the perspective of Hybridization Theory. This theory postulates that culture spreads heterogeneously, where the influence of transnational culture and local culture create a hybrid form, unique to each locale (Nicholson 2014, 95). During the Weimar era, it is likely that, due to their affluence, a number of the Swing Youth were able to travel with their families to American metropolitan areas such as New York, and, given the popularity of Jazz clubs as tourist destinations, we can assume some were exposed to early 1930s styles of Lindy Hop. Additionally, they would have been familiar with the inaccurate depictions of American swing dance via 1920s theater trends. By 1934, among German popular culture, jazz had outgrown many of its negative connotations, and had become embedded in German night culture, and common on radio airwaves, though the images at the root of the negative depictions would have created a permanent imprint on the national conception of Jazz. The Swing Youth's limited access to swing dance, coupled with the ample availability of American jazz music meant that their concept of the dance form was formed in part by disembodied transmission; their practice of the dance form was based on their imaginary of the original swing, and directly tied to their imagined America.

While there are ample photographs of the *swingjugend's* street style, there are a lack of visual artifacts capturing the specificities of their movement style, presumably due to the nature of this group as a subculture under threat of persecution. However, there are a variety of written sources, oppositional media, and contextual information which suggest the aesthetics of the form. Especially present, due to the regime's fear of the defiant swing culture, are an excess of reports vibrantly describing and villainizing the dance style. In analyzing these multiple perspectives, I consider what Kate Elswit terms "archives of watching," where dance's meanings can be understood through a layering of perceptions by multiple spectator positions. Recognizing that

every audience member ascribes their own meaning to a performance based on their specific relationship to it allows for a more accurate reading of the performance as it operated in its time and place (Elswit 2014, xi). Through this lens, I can speculate as to the aesthetics of the dancing through the perspectives represented in the meager and varied sources, yet, more than most archival analyses, this is a limited endeavor. Very clearly, across each of these sources, are details which point toward the emergence of a uniquely German swing, engendered by the Swing Youth.

This German style is demonstrated in one photograph of a Swing Youth dance gathering; it displays ten teen dancers in a circular formation, all kicking inward in unison (“Swing Youth,” 1930s). They hold hands, not as partners, but as one group. The American style of Lindy Hop was almost entirely a solo and duet form; in both *The Spirit Moves* and *After Seben*, partners dance in formations that seamlessly rotate between featured couples. The alternation displays a sense of individuality, improvisation, and competition, with each set of featured dancers flaunting signature moves. Within the sequential duets, partners rarely mirror each other, instead oscillating between moments of individual exhibition. American dancers interweave and syncopate, loosely and vivaciously kicking in coordination with each other; while face to face, one dancer’s leg swings back while the other’s swings front. The German dancers adhere to the loose kicking motif, demonstrating what Brenda Dixon-Gottschild would identify as polycentrism and ephibism (Gottschild 1996, 14-15). These Africanist principles indicate the resonances of the African diaspora within the German form and demonstrate the transmission of the aesthetics to foster an African-American-Western European cultural relationship. However, unlike the American form, the Germans’ circular formation suggests a sense of unity and symmetry. Where the American form is based on personal choice and improvisational

competition, which is another significant aspect of the Africanist aesthetic, the Germans' circular formation is communal. Though looser than dominant Nazi movement values of militant uniformity, this image demonstrates an integration of Harlem Lindy Hop and clearly German militantly synchronized aesthetics.

While the bias of anti-jazz spectators of these parties are likely highly biased, by reading their accounts through Kate Elswit's archives of watching, we gain the relative truth of their perspective. Reports by *Hitlerjugend* spies, tasked with infiltrating the Swing Youth parties, cited the appearance of overt mockery within the Swing style. One cartoon printed in the *Hamburger Gaunachrichten* depicts a Swing Kid (identifiable by his long hair) swinging his arms with rounded back. The cartoon's dancer holds his fingers in a "V," a defiant gesture mimicking Winston Churchill's Victory sign (Swingstyle, 2011). They were also known to mock the Hitler Salute with this V symbol, as evidenced in photographs of the youth when on the street (Mangelsdorff, 1942). Their casual approach to defiance suggests an "aesthetic of the cool," unifying "composure with vitality" (Gottschild 1996, 16). Their appropriation of this aesthetic in both their dance and street style demonstrate the political aspects of kinesthetic fellowship, in which the youth are embodying their affiliations with a foreign subculture, knowing that subculture is unfavorable in the American social hierarchy. The communities the *swingjugend* connected themselves to were two cultural groups Hitler despised: broadly Americans, and worse, African Americans, the opposite of Hitler's ideal Aryan race.

We read another layer of the Swing Youth aesthetic through more official legislative reports. In early 1944, the Reich Ministry of Justice reported on the Flottbecker Clique, a Hamburg-based group of swing kids' dancing as "extravagant," "self-centered," and "unrestrained;" the report claims the kids "were addicted to the English beat" and "organize[d]

unlawful jamborees full of sexual mischief,” even calling them “dance orgies”

(Reichsjustizministerium Report, quoted in *Swingstyle*). This trope of swing as sexually immoral abounded in the Reich’s anti-swing, pro-nationalist propaganda. One Hitler Youth propaganda film displays an obviously exaggerated depiction of a Swing Youth house party. The girls supinate bent elbows while leaning upward, projecting a sense of imbalance before stripping off their sweaters. Couples fall into one another as they rotate: one man’s leading arm always rests below the arch of a woman’s back before he whisks her into the adjacent room with closed door. The living room’s remaining couple has a prolonged kiss at the piano bench where the man bounces and sways as he plays the keys. The kids here appear drunk and promiscuous, and the exaggerated dancing and music portray the parties as frivolous and foolish, not to be taken seriously as a legitimate cultural form. With this propaganda, Nazi cultural officials acted as ambassadors of respectable German culture by demonstrating the negative effects of its inverse, swing.

A 1940 *Hitlerjugend* report—still early in the anti-swing venture—demonstrates the multiple layers of Nazi critique of the youth Swing style. It uses a number of animated terms to capture their adverse impression. Firstly, it suggests not only heterosexual liberality, but also the presence and fear of queered gender roles: “two boys danced with one juvenile girl,” and, “you often saw boys dancing together with other boys” (*Hitlerjugend* 1940). Though the term “often” is subjective, and thus cannot convey the extent of this same-sex partnering, it does communicate the presence of homophobia, implicating one of the Nazis’ target populations by equating swing with homosexuality. Swing was thus a threat to manliness and a threat to the patriarchy, just as the corruption of juvenile girls’ sexual purity was a threat to the nation. Significantly, same-sex partnering was not a tradition in American Lindy Hop.

Secondly, this excerpt is rife with terms such as “wildly,” “sanity,” “gibberish,” and “lunatic asylum,” to equate hysteria—a word historically associated with patriarchal attempts at controlling supposed female emotional instability—and blackness (and its surrounding stereotypes). It then locates this blackness in swing, asserting that “even the most hysterical and primitive Black jungle warrior war-dance would have paled in comparison to what happened here” (Hitlerjugend 1940). Common among anti-swing propaganda was the equation of swing, blackness, and Jewishness: the notorious advertisement for the Degenerate Art Exhibition illustrates a Black saxophonist (Jonny of *Jonny Spielt Auf*) with a Jewish star on his lapel. Both of the fears expressed in the *Hitlerjugend* report, then, signify an association of the identities the Nazi party were most fearful of within swing, Jewishness, and homosexuality; and significantly, not only in the culture but in the dance itself.

The official regulations imposed on late-1930s German jazz clubs also provide another layer of spectatorship pointing toward the connection to African-American musical principles the youth embodied. Josef Skvorecky, an aspiring saxophonist living under the Nazi regime cites a sweeping set of ten rules his *Gauleiter*, or local official, instituted, including (1) foxtrot and swing rhythms were limited to 20% of a band’s catalogue; (3) “brisk” paces are strongly preferred over “so-called blues,” yet, speed “must not exceed a certain degree of allegro, commensurate with the Aryan sense of discipline and moderation. On no account will Negroid excesses in tempo (so-called hot jazz) or in solo performances be tolerated;” (6) Percussion instruments were largely banned as they “turn the noble sound of wind and brass instruments into a Jewish-Freemasonic yowl,” and drum breaks were only allowed in “stylized military marches;” and (9) vocal improvisations or “scat” were banned (Skvorecky 1980, 3). Though these were stipulations aimed toward musical control of the clubs’ music—according to a

saxophonist's recollection—they indicate the unadulterated musical accompaniment the Swing Youth were initially exposed to, the possible adjustments the bands either complied with, ignored, or rebelled against, and what the Nazi government feared within jazz music.

In these aesthetic controls lies an anti-individualist and anti-improvisational emphasis, two elements that the German government viewed as African American. Across the legislation is an association with the elements of jazz the government abhorred with African American culture (“Negroid excesses”) and evidence of conjoining anti-African American racism with anti-Jewish racism (percussion creating a “Jewish-Freemasonic yowl”). This conflation is present in other Nazi cultural legislation showing similar nationalist—code for pro-Aryan—sentiments; a September of 1934 ordinance banned use of “foreign sounding names” by musicians, and in December 1937, all recordings by Jewish or African-American artists were outlawed (Levi 1990, 179-182). The rampant qualifiers and pervasion of ambiguous language within these rules evince an inability by the *Gauleiter* to pin down exactly what was ostensibly American to them. Yet, it does demonstrate elements of their loosely imagined America, a vision antithetical to their imagined Germany. Joseph Goebbels claims that improvisation was an “unseemly display of degenerate individualism,” and that “a people’s music is an expression of their unique state of being, and to embrace the music [and the dance] is to embrace that state” (Goebbels in Snowball 2002, 161). Goebbels discouraged individualism, an American cultural characteristic. Rapid movement was discouraged, yet if that speed meant efficient militarist uniformity, it was a positive movement which propelled the German race toward global supremacy. The Swing Youth’s embrace of Lindy Hop was a direct threat to the production of an ideal Nazi Germany.

Significantly, Goebbels continued to claim that “music flows from the collective soul,” and that “to surrender to African music is to begin absorbing Africanness into the soul”

(Goebbels in Snowball 2002, 161). He, as the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, here makes a public acknowledgement suggesting fear of what I name kinesthetic fellowship developing when one “surrenders” to another culture, which for the Swing Youth was through dance. He indicates that music (and dance) both come from and foster the connectivity of a community. This echoes Clare Croft’s assertion that “through technique dancers become not individual bodies, but a community” (Croft 2015, 56). The connective technique employed by the *swingjugend* is the Africanist aesthetic, not entirely identical, yet unmistakably connected. The subculture formed a counterpublic against the backdrop of the Nazi dominant public, and through embodiment of a transnational, diasporic culture, found a place to reinforce their unity in non-conformity.

In developing and sustaining their sense of fellowship through dance, the *swingjugend*’s counterpublic became a place for reaching toward a future of self-determinacy. When analyzing modern dance in Weimar Germany, Kate Elswit describes the use of dance performance as an experiment of futuring. She claims that as an environment of hope and imagination, performance was an opportunity for audience members to explore the reach of their optimistic visions without the requirement of working toward these imaginaries in daily life (Elswit 2014, xix). I read this act of purely imaginative futuring in the Swing Youth’s early dance gatherings. They did not appropriate their imaginary of swing culture for widespread political purposes, resisting Nazism as a whole. Yet, their hybridization of German uniformity, political mockery, and American swing’s improvisatory free will envisioned a uniquely German future, in which the teens could embrace their German, and elite, heritage, while stepping into contemporary global modernist culture. Their counterpublic generated an environment for the dancers to transcend the physical reality of their fascist surroundings inside of communally supported imaginative movements.

In response to the Swing Kids' growing companionability with American culture, the German government attempted to create their own German dance form to be practiced by the Hitler Youth. The proposed style drew exclusively from traditional German folk dances, another attempt at creating a unified national body culture. A photograph of 1936 Hitler Youth recreation activities displays a group of girls dressed in pinafores with raised clasped hands. They are in the act of winding through the space created between their outstretched arms, closely resembling traditional Bavarian folk dances ("Hitler Youth Activities," 1936). This emphasis on the folk was an act of exclusively looking back, which is a stark refusal of modernism's insistence on looking forward. Hitler's government also had a clear future that they aimed to attain through embodied values of nostalgia and sterilization. Their future was based on nationalist hierarchy and global supremacy, a distinction from the Swing Youth's transnational culture.

The Nazi party's attempt to create a national dance form was a complete failure; not only did the style never completely formulate, but it hurt the anti-jazz campaign. At the time that these nationalist cultural efforts were at their peak, the Swing Youth grew in popularity, with some parties even hosting 500 teens (Kater 2003, 102). Even more insulting, many of the swing party-goers were actually members of the Hitler Youth; one arrest in March 1940 revealed that of 408 registered offenders, almost half were members of the Hitler Youth (Kater 2003, 156). The inefficacy of the government's anti-jazz regulations and reprisals demonstrate the inability of the Nazi party to control their public's body. They attempted to make a nationalist dance form centered around national uniformity, racial supremacy, and global hierarchy in direct opposition to the Swing Youth, who worked toward a Germany based on transnational exchange.

The more extreme the government's actions against the proliferation of jazz, the more extreme the Swing Youth's reactions. Defiance of the imposing legislation required that the teens

grew increasingly political, not because of any intentional politicization on their part, but because maintaining their practice became increasingly subversive and required increasingly intentional organization to insulate their parties from Hitler Youth spies. The individuals' continued involvement in the subculture, regardless of the increased risk, reinforced their commitment to self-determinant values. Following Barbara Browning's insistence that the dancing body writes its own meaning, that "participation is a matter of going through the motions, but going through the motions has effect 'upon the doer'" (2014, xxvi), the performance of swing enacted a political awareness in the dancers. Their identity as a counterpublic was ingrained in their kinesthetic sense of self, and a challenge to this individuality drew the teens into increasingly political realms. The *swingjugend's* initial ambivalence was remembered by Tommie Scheel, one member of the German Swing Youth: "We were going to tell these dumb bastards that we were different, that was all" (in Kater 2003, 157). Yet, before Hitler's defeat these dancers were no longer apathetic, but willing to risk their lives for swing.

In response to their continued defiance, government officials reprehended the teens with intensifying severity. The Hamburger Gaunachrichten cartoon demonstrates the threat of violence that accompanied participation in Swing dancing. The cartoon displays adjacent illustrations of mockery of national symbolic gestures (Sieg Heil with Churchill's victory 'V') and the physicality of the forced work of a Nazi labor camp. The second image is presumably the dancer's impending future, sweating not from the dance, but from punishment. Presented here as a public threat, imprisonment was a real prospect for the dancers. The *swingjugend's* parties were broken up by Hitler Youth officials since the initial jazz bans, but by 1940 reports of Gestapo brutality against the rebels abounded (Kater 2003, 158). This was justified by one SS

Chief saying, “Only if we move with brutality, shall we be able to prevent the dangerous spread of such Anglophilic tendencies in a period when Germany is fighting for its very existence” (in Kater 2003, 159). By 1942, Swing Youths graduated from subjects of brutality to true war criminals; many were sent to Moringen and Uckermark, Nazi forced labor camps, and more extremely, an estimated seventy of these dancers were sent to concentration camps as “political prisoners” (Kater 2003, 192). Though the entire counterpublic accepted risk in their participation, the stakes were significantly higher for Jewish and/or sexually defiant dancers. Officials targeted the notoriously promiscuous Madlung sisters and sentenced the two to Moringen. Hajo Hartwig was a half-Jewish man accused of homosexuality. Though he thwarted these accusations by constant accompaniment by a group of “swing-babies,” or young women from the culture, he was eventually brought up on charges of playing swing records in the privacy of his home (Kater 2003, 110). The Reich failed in all previous attempts at regulating the movements of these dancers, and only in resorting to forced labor, were they able to exact total bodily control.

The Nazi regime acknowledged fear of the Swing Youth—and subsequently the efficacy of their embodiment of transnational culture—through an attempt to both limit the music and dance practices of the community, and to conceive a distinctly German nationalist dance form among the Hitler Youth. Yet, the Swing Youth’s use of their bodies consistently reinforced their contraposition to Fascism and a sense of fellowship with another disenfranchised group, based on their imaginary of African American culture, which ironically, was limited to their strictly German perspective. They engaged in embodied resistance to Hitler’s anti-modernist, culturally homogenizing values through an embrace of swing music and dance, and an insistence on corporeal self-determination. Through developing a sense of kinesthetic fellowship with their

American counterparts, the Swing Youth moved toward a future Germany, firmly located within a modern, global community.

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