In 1984, 18-year-old Larry T. Ellis performed his imitation of Michael Jackson to high school students in Pittsburgh, football halftime shows, and hotel bars around the country. Ellis had never met his idol, but he told reporters, “I dance with him every night in my dreams.” He did not need to add that millions of admirers throughout the world did the very same thing.

Great dancers have often taken center stage in the United States. Their routines and their careers, freelance writer and poet Megan Pugh reminds us, often reflected our country’s cultural, social, and political ideals and realities.

In “America Dancing,” Pugh reveals the myriad ways in which dance has helped shape our national identity.

**Bojangles to Jackson**

With chapters on Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Agnes De Mille, Paul Taylor, and Michael Jackson (and sketches of Vernon and Irene Castle, Bert Williams, Hermes Pan, Martha Graham, Charles “Honi” Coles, and “Cholly” Atkins), she provides an elegant and informative chronicle of the dancers’ divergent backgrounds, the musical genres and themes on which they drew, and the degree to which they borrowed (or stole) from one another and crossed racial lines to captivate and, on occasion challenge, their audiences.

Pugh provides fascinating and at times surprising examples of the creative exchange that has characterized dance in America. Often, she writes, “the familiar stories repeat themselves: love and theft, black innovation and white assimilation.”

**Blackface era**

Dancing in an era when Jim Crow was the law of the land, Bill Robinson onstage seemed like a citizen of an America “where a black man could earn the respect of audiences on both sides of the color line.” And yet, he
Bill “Bojangles” Robinson performed on Broadway and in Hollywood. He was best known for his dancing roles with Shirley Temple in films of the 1930s.

Also had to navigate a “painful present: movies put him back in the version of the minstrel mask he’s jettisoned onstage.” And many of the entertainers who learned Robinson’s steps wore blackface, “as if race, not art, were central to the dancing.” As a young man, Pugh indicates, Fred Astaire appeared on the same bill as Robinson – and he picked up moves from Black street performers.

Agnes De Mille included “a colored jazz entrance” in “Gershwin,” a “jungle and jitter” in “Daybreak Express” and a “zulu walk” in “Georgia Cracker.” And in the expanded version of his dark indictment of American hypocrisy, “From Sea to Shining Sea,” Paul Taylor had a Klansman remove his white hat and robe – and reveal himself to be Lady Liberty.

**Stolen dance moves**

Of course, as in all forms of entertainment, dancers stole steps from just about anyone. Michael Jackson learned his “moonwalk” from, among others, Eclipse dancer Casper Candidate, French mime Marcel Marceau, and Black kids in Harlem “sliding backwards kinda like an illusion.”

The opening of Jackson’s “Beat It,” Pugh reveals, is an homage to “West Side Story,” with young men walking the streets and snapping their fingers as gangs gather for a rumble. And “Black and White” seems to offer a critique of “Singin’ in the Rain,” “and of the Hollywood musical writ large.”

And so, Pugh concludes, performers have been “haunted by a past, both acknowledged and unacknowledged,” and seek, however momentarily, to excise it; draw on the work of “vernacular and professional dancers” stretching back for decades; seek a future “unconfined by space and time and gravity,” while being constrained “both physically and metaphorically;” and embody a country that always seems on the move.

It may be no exaggeration, then, to claim that, individually and collectively, America’s dancers in all their varied forms and styles have “conjured up the spirit of the nation, a spirit that their audiences recognized as the homeness of a home.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.