Episode 16 Transcript

CROSSING NORTH 16: ON WEDNESDAYS, I'LL GO DANCE

Blue Palmer: I don't know what to say. I feel like I'm kind of here on accident. [*laughter*]

Amanda Doxtater: We're all here on accident. [*laughter*]

Blue: My name is Blue Palmer. I took one Scandinavian mythology class.

Bill Cheung-Daihe: My name is Bill Cheung-Daihe. I'm a junior studying here at UW. My connection to the Scandinavian department is through its Baltic language courses and I've taken one year of Lithuanian and I'm starting Latvian.

Fanny Mestä-Tokila: I'm Fanny Mestä-Tokila and I have been studying in the Scandinavian Studies department and in the Finnish Department, deciding whether it'll be a major or a minor.

Amanda: My name is Amanda Doxtater and I am the Barbro Osher Endowed Chair of Swedish Studies at the University of Washington and I teach a lot of courses on literature and cinema and contemporary Swedish culture.

[*Intro music starts*]

Colin Gioia Connors: Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.

[*Intro music ends*]

In the fall of 2019, assistant professor Amanda Doxtater led an independent study with three undergraduate students, Blue Palmer, Bill Cheung-Daihe, and Fanny Mestä-Tokila. The students participated in a Scandinavian folk dance class offered by the Skandia Folkdance Society of Seattle, taught by instructors Bob Hamilton and Lisa Brooks. At the end of the course, Blue, Fanny, and Bill conducted an interview with Bob and Lisa, and had planned to enroll in a second independent study to produce their own folklore project about the Skandia Folkdance Society and their experiences as students. The coronavirus pandemic, however, put an end to their spring fieldwork plans, but before they dispersed for winter break, Blue, Fanny, Bill, and Amanda and I sat down in the studio to discuss and record their thoughts about the eight week course.
Skandinavian folk dance has a long history in Seattle. The Skandia Folkdance Society was formed in Seattle in 1949 by Gordon Ekvall Tracie, who was a great lover of Scandinavian music and dance. He traveled to the Nordic countries several times throughout his life, and he made over 500 field recordings of various folk dances. His collection is now preserved by the National Nordic Museum and is a valuable resource to folklorists and community members here in Seattle and abroad in Scandinavia. Skandia preserves, vitalizes, and develops these traditional songs and dances with a diverse membership, who return week after week for the love of the dance.

Over the course of our conversation last December, two themes emerged: first, that taking a Skandia dance class is as much a social activity as a physical one; and second, that fewer younger members are participating in the dance events than in years past, no doubt in part due to increasing economic pressures on university students: Many undergraduate students today cannot afford to live on-campus, or even in the city in which they study. Some students commute 2 or more hours to attend classes, only to also work one or sometimes multiple part-time jobs. The logistic and economic difficulties, combined with students’ anxieties about their academic careers in relation to their economic futures, make students less likely to take part in extracurricular activities, which is a shame, if I may say, and makes me want things to change, especially after listening to Blue, Fanny, and Bill describe the myriad ways that this dance class was a valuable addition to their UW experience.

Assistant professor Amanda Doxtater asks the first question.

**Amanda:** How do you not get dizzy?

**Fanny:** You just gotta keep going.

**Blue:** You just get—

**Bill:** Perpetual motion. [*laughter*] Perpetual motion. And then when you finish, you suddenly feel all the dizziness and you fall over.

**Fanny:** I think they, like, jokingly, Bob and Lisa, jokingly said that if you're dizzy from spinning one way, you have to spin the other way, and I always did and I never wanted to fall over after. So I think it worked, but I don't know any physics behind that. But yeah, no, that's like the toughest part and there's always— There was somebody, I don't know how old she is, I think she's, like, in her, she's a doctorate student here, and she was in the dance class, like, for most of the time with us, and she would like always take a seat. I felt so bad for her.

**Blue:** Oh yeah.

**Fanny:** Yeah, because it was tough. Like, you could see her, like, if— because, she was also, I'm guessing, a beginner, and so, like, some people got used to the spinning and dizziness, so like, faster than others.

**Blue:** That was my favorite part. I love the spinning—

**Fanny:** I love it!

**Blue:** —and the turning. That was a lot of fun.

**Fanny:** Yeah, doing, like, the buzz-step like really fast— that's really fun.

**Blue:** Yeah. I would— after class one of my legs would always be significantly sorer—
Fanny: Sorer, yeah!

Blue: —than the other just because the buzz-step. You, like, lean on one leg so hard. Yeah.

Fanny: Yeah. What’s it like being a lead? Because we’re both just following the guys. Like, having to learn all of this as a lead is probably much more difficult than us a follow because we’re literally just being pushed around.

Bill: It’s— [*clears throat*] [*laughter*] Well, it’s good. I like it. It’s— it’s a new challenge, I guess, in the sense that I don’t feel like— I feel like folk dancing has a lot more, sort of, like, leads have to signal and make a lot more decisions. And the coolest thing about that is that you really, really work on your communication skills, and you really know if you and your partner in tune or not. So the most difficult part about being a lead, I guess, is you’re trying to signal, like maybe with your hand, “Okay, we’re gonna turn counterclockwise,” or whatnot, and then they just don’t get it. [*laughs*] Yeah, but it’s— I felt the major, I guess, the major thing about it is that you have to be really, really receptive to whether or not somebody, kind of, gets what you’re, like, what you’re trying to get them to do, or if, if they’re okay with doing it in that way.

Blue: I wanna know which one of us is worse—

Fanny: Yeah, who’s a worse follow?

Blue: —because I know, like—

Bill: Well— well if you’re gonna follow you should— you’re supposed to follow. So Fanny likes to…um… [*laughter*] like, grab you and like, “You’re gonna lead me but you’re gonna lead me this way.” [*laughter*]

Fanny: I’m a…strong follow.

Bill: Strong follow, yeah.

Fanny: So, sometimes I lead…[*long pause*] So, Blue’s better. [*laughter*]

Bill: I don’t know. You have like— I feel like you have, like, no spine [*laughs*] in the lower back, [*laughter*] I don’t know, especially turning. I feel like you’re just sort of, like, you’re there, but, like, I feel, like, any moment, like, I’m afraid that, like, your head’s gonna tip back [*laughter*] and just, like, you’re gonna be on the floor. I’m gonna be holding you, like, in the middle of the back. [*laughter*]

Fanny: Interesting, interesting.

Blue: I feel like you don’t put any pressure on my back so I never know what’s happening. [*laughter*]

Fanny: And that’s why I grab onto Bill so hard, because he’s not holding on to me. Yeah.

Amanda: There’s an interesting tension with your arm, right?

Fanny: Every dance is different with, like, the arm tension. Like, there was this one that was so frustrating to me, like, and during the last class, because it’s like you have to push down and then, like, the hold that you’re supposed to be doing is so, like, different from any other dance, but the footing is the same, and the turning is the same. It’s just, the arms are stiff and you’re supposed to, like, awkwardly hold— and I think, like, halfway through the classes they were talking about like how to be a better follow, and, like, they
were telling all these, like, terms of what they call follows. Like, was it like “hauling furniture” or something like that? If you're not, like, pulling your own weight? [*laughter*]

**Blue:** I missed that.

**Fanny:** Oh, really? Did you remember those?

**Bill:** No, I remember it, yeah.

**Fanny:** What else did they say? [*silence*] I just liked the “moving furniture” like your, if your follow is not, like, following you, it's just, like...

**Bill:** It's just dragging them around, I don't know.

**Fanny:** Yeah, dragging.

**Bill:** I don't know. “Furniture” was the one that stuck in my mind. [*laughter*]

**Fanny:** Yeah, that was funny. But I got called that a lot. [*laughter*] Like, they're like, “Can you stop being a drag? I don't like it.” “Okay.” [*laughs*]

**Amanda:** If you had to describe these dances, or the kinds of dances, or the variety of dances to someone who's never seen this, how would you describe it?

**Fanny:** I mean, to, like, for people that are watching us, it probably looks so easy and so simple, and, like, we're doing nothing, but, like, when we're, like, trying to learn it, and, like, even the simplest steps, it's like, “Oh, no, this is actually difficult,” but for, like, outsiders watching, I feel like it's like stuff that your grandma I can do and enjoy.

**Blue:** Or, like, there's a point when you're learning the dance where it, like, it doesn't make any sense, and then you start doing it, like, usually it's when we start doing it to music that, like, suddenly it's really easy and it makes sense, and you're like, “What was I doing?”

**Fanny:** It's also from watching other people, too.

**Blue:** Yeah.

**Bill:** It feels like a lot of momentum, like when you— I don't know. I feel like once you get into it, if you— if you start on beat, then it's just fine. You just do the same thing, repeat it. If you start off beat, well, [*laughs*] good luck.

**Blue:** Yeah, because so much of it is, like, pivoting and turning, and you, like, flow from one step to the next, so if you're learning the steps individually, it is really weird, and, like, mechanical. You want to keep going but then you just, like, keep stopping, yeah.

**Fanny:** I did think that that was, like, the error in, like, the teaching style for me, especially. I feel like for other people it works this way, but, like, slowing it down, like, did not work for me. Like, it was like, “You just gotta, like, show it to me and then throw me on the floor, and I'll do it.”

**Blue:** Mm-hmm.
Amanda: I have to say, just showing up to the last class, which was last week, and seeing the three of you just, like, spinning and going around the ring and, like, doing— I was so proud and impressed. [*laughs*] It was amazing! From the outside it looked like you learned a whole bunch in ten— What is it, nine weeks? Ten weeks?

Fanny: Yeah, like, eight classes.

Amanda: Eight classes?

Fanny: Yeah.

Amanda: Do you feel like you learned a lot?

Fanny: Oh, yeah, for sure.

Blue: Yeah.

Fanny: I think— I feel like I could teach somebody some of the basic steps to dances and then, like, go from it. Because it was, yeah, we, like, we were very, like, persistent with, like, the same, like, five or six dances, like, every week. So it's like, after you do it for so long, it's— you can pick it up really quickly.

Blue: Well, and part of, like, when we met up with the other beginner's basic class that first time in the Swedish Club, there was a lot of people who took the other beginner's class, and then a lot of people who just showed up to that one meeting, so it was cool then because, like, as we're dancing and we danced with an instructor, or a lot of people in my class who are more experienced, they'll sort of be like, "Oh no, do this, do this," and, like, guide you through the dance as it's happening. It was cool, a few times that I was like, "Oh! I can do this for this person that I'm dancing with," and that was really exciting.

Amanda: That's awesome.

Blue: Yeah.

Amanda: That's amazing.

Fanny: Yeah, that was a really cool experience when we went to the Swedish club for the first time, before the Scandia Ball. That room was so crowded like there were so many people that were there wanting to learn, and it was— it was really fun, but it was just, like, so crowded. And, like, I think that they were impressed with Blue and I, of like, because we knew the dances, like, at that point it was like three or four weeks in. We knew, like, the basic mixers, and so when we, like, actually knew how to do them, they were, like, surprised. But...

Blue: That— that happened this last class with, like, some of the people who had come in and weren't part of the class. Like, you do something, and they'd be like, "Oh! That was pretty good!"

Fanny: Yeah.

Blue: I think it's really amazing to see, like, the music community in Seattle. That's so surprising. Like, they were at the last class, they were talking about, like, which bands would be playing when. It was like, "Oh, my god, there's multiple bands that do this in one city?" That's really crazy.
Fanny: Yeah, the last two days in my Finnish class we've had a Finnish folk singer come by, and we had, like, an event last night where
she sang to us, and I'm like— There's like— Even outside of the folk dancing I've seen so much, like, folk music in Seattle. Apparently
it's a huge Mecca for it. So, we're in a lucky place.

Amanda: How do you feel being— because you've mentioned several times that you're sort of outnumbered with people who are of a
different generation, maybe an older generation, or two, and I know that— that there are lots of young people in the community, too.
Like, how do you think— do you think it's important that they recruit new people to get interested in this, and if so, like, how do you
think that should happen? Or is it important, or, I don't know, what do you— do you think about that?

Blue: Well, Bob and Lisa were talking last night about the fact that, like, they got involved at the same time that a lot of people got
involved, which was, like, the 70's folk revival, and so there's this whole generation of people that are, like, really interested in this type
of dance that are now old people. And so they're trying now, like, there's a very concerted effort to recruit younger people for this
dance because although there are a lot of people that do it now, there's not, like, in-between generations necessarily that are doing it.

Fanny: Yeah, I thought that was interesting, too. But I can see where they're, like, they're thinking ahead and they're noticing that
within the Skandia [Folk]dance Society that their— their numbers are all going to go away, and so— But also, with our dance class
there were like four or five people who were regular comers that were Bob and Lisa's age that had never done, like, folk dancing
before. I don't know how they found out about it, but they were there consistently and they really wanted to get in— like, involved in,
like, the community. So I thought that was really cool as well because I thought that all the people who were, like, their age were, like,
pros. [*laughter*]

Bill: I don't know, I found it really surprising that Skandia isn't just, like, a, like, a cultural or ethnic group, that it's actually, like, sort of
like a folk dancing group. Like, I would have expected that, like, Scandinavian dancing would be mostly Scandinavians [*laughs*] and
not— not quite as, I don't know, it's really, really diverse in terms of, like, a lot of, even, like, the young people, some of them, just
people, were like us, just interested in it, might not have any kind of cultural connection to it. I think that's really cool.

Fanny: Yeah, our class was super diverse, which was really fun.

Colin: What's your previous dance experience?

Fanny: In, like, the fifth grade on to, like, the eighth grade I did ballet, and that is it.

Bill: Some tango lessons, some Lithuanian folk dancing. End of story. [*laughter*]

Blue: I have nothing to say. I have no experience. Well, okay. I took, like, one swing dance class at a community center in Spokane, and
it was really weird. Well, you were talking about how the Skandia was really welcoming, which wasn't the case at the other one place
I've gone because a lot of the people there had been doing it for just a few weeks but they were still, like, really hostile and really
judgmental of me, who was very bad at swing dancing, which wasn't the case here. So that was— It made it a lot easier to, like, keep
coming and get invested.

Colin: Come on, guys. You never had one middle school dance?

Fanny: Oh, okay! [*laughter*]

Bill: Okay! [*laughter*]
Colin: Like, surely you've danced—

Fanny: Yeah, yeah.

Colin: —You can't tell me there's no previous experience.

Fanny: So a lot of my friends, especially, like, my last two years of high school, they were ballroom dancers. They were all from, like, the same company. Apparently, like, Mormons are super into ballroom dance— didn't know that and I'm Mormon. And so, just, like, all my friends from church my junior, senior year were, like, professional ballroom dancers. But they are intense, and, like, when you go out— like, I think I went to, like, to a Mormon prom with an entire group of ballroom dancers, and it was, like, crazy. Like, the amount of, like, we were just, like, all the people on the floor, and they were trying to spin me around, and I was just falling over, but it was fun to be with them. But that's, like, kind of why I was interested in mixer dancing because all my friends are, like, professionals at the tango and all types of ballroom.

Colin: Well, how does that compare to Skandia?

Fanny: Yeah, so like, with Skandia I thought that like they were gonna be really particular about dance shoes and, like, what we showed up to practice in, because I know, like, my friends in ballroom dance, they would have like $100 dance shoes with, like, leather soles or something, and I walked in there and they were like, “Ah, doesn’t matter.” It's like, “If you wear heels, you're probably gonna fall over,” but, [*laughs*] yeah. Yeah, they— they were cool about it, everything, like, there was no competitive drive to be better than anybody.

Blue: Yeah, because I think the goal is just to get more people involved, and they have to like it to be involved, [*laughter*] and so it wasn't gonna work if everybody was, like, really hostile and competitive.

Colin: I mean, is it even possible to compete at Skandia for anything?

Bill: Yeah. Speed of spinning.

Fanny: That's what's— that's what's up.

Blue: Oh, William was really— he could go fast.

Fanny: Yeah.

Blue: And Lisa was talking about how she, like, goes over to Sweden for formal training, and there's, like, an evaluation of them, and so, I forget the name that she used but there's, like a, it's like a test where they learn all these specific skills and then are tested on their, like, accuracy and authenticity, and apparently a lot of people in Seattle are, like, very good at this. And both Bob and Lisa had said that, like, Seattle is the place to learn Scandinavian dance outside of Scandinavia because they're all very formally trained and very good at it.

Fanny: Yeah, and I also want to add, like, with standard, even folk dancing— because it is, like, a cultural thing, they don't do it to, like, compete or perform, they do it as, like, a bonding— Like, it has no— Like, no one's gonna watch you do it. Like, you're gonna join in and do it yourself, and, like, that's, like, the difference between ballroom because barroom is, like, hyper critical about, like, form and everything, and there's like— I mean, I'm sure swing dancing can relate better to Scandinavian folk dancing, but like, that was also the
difference that I noticed right away, was that it's a fun activity that they want everybody to join in on, like, and dance around a Christmas tree, to not, like, to be hyper critical about form and stuff.

**Amanda:** Can I just clarify something? So you've mentioned falling over or falling down several times. Are you speaking metaphorically, or did you ever, like, wipe out?

**Fanny:** Like, running into things? Yes. Not physically falling on the ground. Other people in the class have physically fallen on the ground, but none of us have fallen on the ground.

**Bill:** Yet.

**Fanny:** *Yat?*

**Bill:** Yet.

**Blue:** Yet. We have not yet fallen on the ground.

**Fanny:** Oh! [*laughter*] I thought you said *yat*. Okay. Yeah. Just like, running into people is a big thing.

**Blue:** Yeah, in the circle dances, everybody, like, spirals towards the center, which is dangerous when the center is, like, people playing the fiddle, you know, bows and fiddles. So that's definitely a problem, but not like falling over so much because part of the dancing is that you're, like, holding on to each other in a very, like, tight, rigid sort of way. So if you fall, everybody falls.

**Fanny:** Yeah.

**Bill:** There's a lot of bunching up, though, especially when you're running around in circles, like, couples would tend to, like— it was supposed to be an evenly distributed circle, and you're all gonna be in, like, one quarter.

**Blue:** Some of us have longer legs!

**Fanny:** Mm-hmm. [*laughter*] It's hard to take smaller steps.

**Bill:** I can't relate.

**Fanny:** Yeah, with the Skandia Ball— that was *dangerous*. I was *dragging* Bill around the dance floor, and we were trying to do all of the dances that had, like, jumping and skipping, and we were not equipped to do that, but we did it, and we kicked a lot of people, and we pushed some older people, and I'm sorry, but we were blind. [*laughter*]

**Blue:** The Skandia Ball was so much fun because it was like, the dances we know, and then all these crazy complicated dances where you're, like, literally jumping around, or there's this one where the, like, the follow spins like a top and the lead, like, does this other thing, and people were cartwheeling. And most of the dances we just sort of joined in and, you know, tried our best, but definitely didn't do it correctly, but that was a lot of fun. I liked the jumping one. I wasn't good at it, but it was fun.

**Fanny:** It was fun, yeah.

**Amanda:** That's amazing.
Colin: You just said that you were leading Bill around?

Fanny: Yeah.

Colin: Was that a different dance, or was that a partner dance?

Fanny: That was a partner dance.

Bill: Yeah, I don't— I can't see properly. I'm bad with space, so... [*laughter*]

Fanny: He kept running into people! [*laughter*]

Bill: I basically used her as a human shield... [*laughter*] by accident.

Fanny: Yeah, so I got tired of him, just like, throwing us as a couple into other couples, so I was like, "You know what? Nope," like, "I am directing us." I do that with everybody I dance with to be fair, like, but if it's, like, somebody who's a good lead, I don't have to do that.

Blue: That was... shade! [*laughter*]

Colin: Is it difficult? Do you have to memorize a lot of steps, or— or can you just, kind of, turn off your brain and let the other person drive?

Blue: I turn off my brain. I don't know if you're supposed to do that, but it's just easier because if I think about it, then I do it wrong, especially, like, when there's music playing. Then if you turn off your brain the music will sort of, like, cue you in and guide you and keep you on beat, but as soon as I start thinking like, "Left, right, left, right," it just dissolves completely.

Fanny: Yeah, I agree with that. After a while you started to understand which songs, which type of songs, went with what type of dance, and when they would throw it off once, I'd be like, "What are we doing?" But yeah, it's really key to stay on the beat of the song because that's when you know when to do certain things like, I don't remember which mixer it was, but one of the mixers we did required that we, like, moved with, like, a certain, like, buzz of, like, the artists, and then, like, that's when you switched partners—

Amanda: Oh, with the drawling, the droning—

Fanny: —the droning! Droning!

Amanda: —and then you switch partners?

Fanny: Yeah! And so if you don't know that, if you don't cue that in, then you're just like... “Ah well, you forgot to switch.”

Blue: I missed it every time. [*laughter*]

Amanda: Are there a lot of dances? I mean, you talk about the sląg Polska, right? That's the most, sort of, where you have to determine how many turns and when to, you know, switch around, and it's very open within, as you're walking, going around, right? But are the— That's the most creative dance, right, where this becomes a question?

Blue: I mean, definitely over the ones we've learned, that's the one that's most open to whatever the lead wants to do. I'm curious— I
haven’t been to any of the, like, social dances other than the— the one big Skandia Ball, so I’m curious what that is like compared to the, like, stricter, more regimented classes.

**Fanny:** Yeah, that would be interesting. But I’m sure a ton of the people that go to the other dances that Skandia hosts, they’re probably, like, similarly formatted, where before you start a dance on the floor, they’ll, like, give you a brief snippet of what you’re doing, because that was the same at the Skandia Ball. They’d be like, “Oh, in case you don’t remember the *humppa* promenade, this is what you’re doing,” and like, they break it down, and I don’t think anyone was lost on what to do ever. Everyone, like, carried straight into it.

**Amanda:** I’ve been to one and it was a little bit like Wednesday night’s, sort of, class that’s like mostly dancing, but then a little bit of— I’m so glad that you brought up the Oompa Loompa dance, or the—

**Fanny, Blue, & Amanda (in unison):** The *humppa* promenade! [*laughter*]

**Amanda:** It’s one of my favorites! But I always call it the Oompa Loompa— [*laughter*] I love that one.

**Blue:** Yeah, where you’re, like, pulling against each other and then you switch. I don’t know why that’s so fun but it’s a lot of fun.

**Fanny:** Yeah.

**Amanda:** I like the ones that are mixers, too, that are less— like, you know, lots of daisy-chaining, and it’s like switching partners all the time, and... yeah.

**Blue:** Yeah. Well, and... Bob and Lisa were talking about how Seattle does a lot more mixer style dances then what happens in Sweden, where it’s like, people will come to the dance with whoever they come with and they’ll want to do just, like, partner turning dances. But because Seattle— it doesn’t have that, like, cultural background where this is just something people do, they’re trying to deliberately build a community and in order to do that you have to be open to people that come, like, as one person or a group of three, and so there’s a lot more mixers just so that they can ensure that everybody has a chance to dance and dance with different partners and that they can build, like, an inclusive community where people enjoy doing it.

**Bill:** I think one of the cool things about some of the dances, that if you spend— you spend a lot of time with, like, one partner, and then eventually you’re gonna talk to them. [*laughter*] And even the mixers, it’s really fun because you end up having like a couple sentences of a conversation then you wait around, you come back like, “Okay, what are we talking about, again?” [*laughter*] I think also, inevitably, if you’re holding someone, like, two inches from you, you’re gonna know them a little bit better. [*laughs*] Like, I think dancing— it allows you to get a lot of the ego, or the embarrassment out at the at the [*snaps fingers*] offset, per se. So like, after— after you kind of, like, vaguely spin each other into the wall, like, you’re not afraid of saying much. [*laughter*]

**Fanny:** Yeah, for sure.

**Amanda:** When you took the dance class, did they talk about the history of these dances, or the different ways that they, sort of, iterated in different places, or changed, or any— like, did you get a sense of, like, where they came from and stuff?

**Fanny:** When they would tell us about, like, the dances we would do, they did mention with the Swede-Finn mixer [the Buzz *steg* mixer] that they had, like, basically made it. Like, that was, like, their dance that they had, like, built from other folk dances, because when we were, like, talking about it, I remember Lisa saying, like, “Well, it’s, like, only six years old,” [*laughter*] and she basically, like,
added her little spin to it when she came from where she was teaching before she came to Seattle, and so I thought it was really funny that, like, they, like, are as a community are still building onto dances and making new ones, because I can tell— Like, when we talked about, like, how there's— we do more mixture styles, like, they want— they're— they're making new mixer dances. So I think it's really cool that they're not only using, like, old pieces that are from that era, they're making new ones that are fun to do.

**Amanda:** That's cool. Maybe when you come back from Argentina, you can bring your, like, Argentinian tango—

**Bill:** Tango style, yeah.

**Amanda:** —influence, and you can bring some Finnish tango influence. [*laughs*]

**Fanny:** Yeah.

**Colin:** Were there any dances that were Seattle specific?

**Blue:** No, but there's a Seattle specific start to this one.

**Fanny:** Oh, right, I don't remember the name to that one, but it was one of the, yeah, was one of, like, the circular mixers but they basically, like, added their own thing to it. They told us that, like, when they go back to Sweden and do dances that they have to remember that that's what they made up.

**Blue:** Yeah, it's like, “We start on the opposite side,” or something, and then there's this thing that happens at the beginning. I wish I remembered the name of the dance! —or any of the things that happen... But yeah, there are some Seattle specific traditions related to the dancing.

**Fanny:** Mm-hmm.

**Bill:** I think overall, I remember Bob mentioning that that there is a little bit of its own spin on it, but it's still very traditional in the sense that it, like, a lot of things that he said that even things that they do here in Seattle that aren't done anymore in Sweden, per se.

**Blue:** Well, I remember them talking about how, like, this community in Seattle was built off of that one guy...[*pauses*] um...[*loudly*] Gordon Tracie—[*laughter*]

**Colin:** Once again, with feeling!

**Blue:** [*exaggerated*] Gordon Tracie! [*laughter*] —who, like, had records of folk music in Sweden, and how Seattle, because of that, sort of, became a center for folk music and drew in a lot of people who didn't have the ethnic, like, background, of like a Scandinavian ethnic background, but who came to Seattle and were sort of, just like, enchanted by the tradition that already was there, and that's how it's been built, sort of, deliberately, there's been build up of music community in Seattle. So I suspect there are a lot of younger people that do it here because there's just, sort of, like a—

**Bill:** There is actually a group, like a fiddle group or something like a *spelmanslag*. I think, associated with the Swedish Club that is a lot of young people in part of it.

**Amanda:** Yeah, there is.
Colin: Did you three know each other before you did this class?

Fanny: No.

Bill: No.

Colin: How nervous were you on the first day of class?

Fanny: I was just, like, really awkward and I didn't, like, talk to anyone. I just, like, sat on my phone during breaks. I was like, I don't know, “I don't want to talk to people.” But yeah, the first day of class I definitely thought Blue was, like, born-and-bred Scandinavian—her mom had forced her to come, and because she was wearing, like, this swanky fit that was, like, perfect for Scandinavian dancing, and I was like, “Alright. She, like, doesn't even speak English, probably.” [*laughter*] That's what I thought. But...

Blue: I just dress weird.

Fanny: No you just— but I just, like, I don't know, I just, like, assumed walking in there, I was like, “Alright. Cool. Yeah.” [*long pause*] What do you, like... Okay, not gonna beat— Like, so, you're, like— you're Asian.

Bill: Yeah.

Fanny: And like, you're around a bunch of white people. Like, what do you think is going on, like, like, what do you— what's your take?

Bill: I gotta say, like, the— the biggest difference culturally, I think, in— just in general, even in Europe in general, with dancing, is how close you are to your partners. I think, I think in the U.S. like, we're not quite as close, but if, like, if you dance with, like, like, French people, for example— I danced with a French friend and she held me closer than I've ever been next to somebody and it is so uncomfortable. [*laughter*] But when you start— I think that's— that I feel like, I imagine, that must be a big barrier for people who grow up, like, really, really immersed in Asian culture, that that just being physically close to somebody is not, like, a thing. Because especially from, like, my heritage, it's— I'm Chinese, so lots of people everywhere, but, like, you're next to them but you're not, like, holding on to them, like, you're just trying to, like, not touch anybody. Sort of one thing I was pleasantly surprised, or rather really surprised about was that there were other Asian people who were, like, very, very involved with Scandinavian dancing, which I didn't expect, [*laughs*] but I think that speaks a lot to how Skandia really is really, really open to all kinds of people, and is really about the dance and that doesn't have any other kind of underlying sort of things, which I think is good, you know.

Fanny: Yeah, I thought that was great. And I don't know if this is like this in all the Scandinavian countries—I don't know anything about, like, Sweden or Norway—but in Finland, we're the same. We're just like, “Don't touch people.” Like, the only time you're intimate with anybody is in the sauna and so— like, [*laughter*] that's the only time you talk to people, [*laughter*] like, in a public sauna, like, that's about it. So like dancing, I didn't think that it would be so close and personal. I definitely thought it would be very formal and stern and not, like, so open and, like, in everybody's face. I thought it was going to be more like, like reclusive or something like that.

Blue: And different people will dance differently. Like, I was really surprised at the Skandia Ball how close some people held you because it was very close, and I feel like it made it harder to dance just because, like, your legs were too close. [*laughs*]

Bill: One thing I think is really interesting is that— because, you don't want to be close, but then they also don't want to move their legs away, so they're just leaning out, [*laughter*] like, you have this, like— your shoulders are like five feet apart, your feet about two
Blue: Well, I think it was just a difference between, like, in class where it was fairly comfortable and I, like, knew everybody versus when we go to the bigger functions where, like, I didn't know everybody, and also people— like, we all learned at the same time, and so learned with the same sort of style and the same sort of distance, but then when you’re mixing all these different classes and people who have been involved with it, like, since they were a child and now they’re 80 or something like that, there’s a lot of different styles, and so it was, like, sometimes difficult to adjust. But I also think it was really interesting and really fun to dance with all those different people.

Colin: What do you— what do you think it would take to get more people your age involved with this?

Bill: I think, like, showing that it’s not that intense, I guess. I feel like that’s one of the biggest things that makes you, like, really not want to dance is that it feels like I’m gonna go up and perform or something, or like there’s gonna be other people who are gonna be, like, super, like, at a high level and they’re gonna be having to deal with me. But I feel like that’s one of the good things Skandia is really good at. You never feel like people are putting up with you, necessarily.

Fanny: They’re willing to help, yeah. I think it’s like, just like, students in general, like, even when I try and get friends to come to functions for, like, the Scandinavian Studies, like, club, like, our department functions, people are always like, “Oh, I'm not in it,” like, “I don’t know,” and like with Lucia, people are like, “Well, I don’t know Swedish.” I’m like, “I don’t know any Swedish. I’m out here doing it,” and so it’s just— they’re— they, like, have, like, a preconceived— like a fear that since they haven't been, they don’t belong, but that's, like, not how this department works at all. Like, anyone will get in your face about being welcome.

Blue: This department is amazing. I, like— it’s my first quarter here, but I feel like I've done so many more things with this department just because there just, like, are things to do. And people are always talking to you about them and trying to get you to do them and that's not, you know, the case in my other classes. So it's been a lot of fun.

Fanny: Yeah. I don't think any department at this university is as unique as Scandinavian Studies. It's like, if you want, like, professors to know who you are, if you want to go to their house for Christmas parties, then this is the department. [*laughs*]

Bill: This is the only department where I actually know professors I’m not taking their classes. That's one of the things I find really incredible, like, how professors will introduce you to other professors and be like, “Hey, this person has knowledge that would be cool for you just to chat to them about.”

[*long pause*]

Colin: Amanda is saying your check is in the mail.

[*laughter*]

Amanda: [*laughing*] I didn’t pay them! I didn’t pay them!

[*laughter*]

No, but— Oh, go ahead.

Blue: Oh. I think it’s a good idea to advertise towards, like, dance students.
Fanny: Yeah, it's hard to — because there's so many things going on on this campus, it's so hard to advertise because you have no idea who has an interest. Like, I know there's so many Finnish students around this campus that don't come to any of the Finnish functions because they just don't know about them, and so it's, like, hard to reach out to 45,000 undergraduates.

Amanda: I was trying to think about what it was like when Bob and Lisa were students and got into this, and then what it's like to be a student now on campus, and whether or not there's just — I tend to think that there's so much more pressure on students now to perform academically that they don't have time to explore all the other, sort of, cultural things that go on at a university, or like extracurricular things. Do you think that— is that a fair assessment of what it's like to be a student now?

Fanny: Oh, that's so fair. I was so surprised to hear that Bob and Lisa have like PhDs in biochemistry or some of the sort that they were telling us. Like, Lisa went to Stanford. Like, they are scholar students, and like, if I went to Stanford there's, like, no time I would have time to, like, to breathe. Like, there's definitely, like, a difference in, like, the time and, like, expectations and academics, and that's probably why people don't get invested. I just feel like students at this university in general—it couldn't be the Seattle freeze that a lot of people encounter—but if you're not a part of, like, a club or something, your social life is your academics and there's nothing else for you.

Bill: I think this university is very, very big and that's— while it brings a lot of really good opportunities like you can take really random classes in really niche areas, like, you're— it's not like if you— if you don't have like— most people don't have cohorts, per se, on this campus. It's not like you have a bunch of people you always see, and like, inevitably— like, nothing I feel, nothing at this university is going to inevitably happen to you. So you really have to go look for those opportunities, which means you have to have somebody advertise them to you.

Fanny: Yeah, he's a marketing student. [*laughter*]

Bill: [*with sarcastic defiance*] I'm a finance student. Don't— Don't— Don't mix me with those— with the scourge!

[*laughter*]

Fanny: He knows, he knows, he knows.

Amanda: [*laughing*] So hard not to laugh! [*more laughter*]

What's your experience? This is your first— you said this is your first quarter on campus?

Blue: Yeah, it— it's big and there's, like, too much happening for anything to happen. Like, at the beginning and, like, orientation, they were talking about how, like, “There's over 1,000 registered clubs. You can find stuff to do,” and I was like, “Oh, no! There's over 1,000? How do you pick things to do?” So, that's why I've ended up doing things with the Scandinavian Department, because they just tell you to like, “Oh, come to this!” and like, “Okay...” and that's how I ended up at the dance class. It was just, like, Lauren mentioned in class, like, “Oh, there's this thing happening.” I was like, “Okay.”

Fanny: Yeah, we're all at very different levels at this university, like, different exp— like, duration that we've been here at least, and communities that we're involved in outside of this community. So it's interesting to see how everything, like, comes together at some point. Everyone is studying very different things from each other as well.

Amanda: Would you— Fanny, could you talk a little bit more about your— where you're coming from, or your experience here?
Fanny: Well, UW has thrown me, like everybody. Came in pre-med, changed my mind because I sucked at it. And I also, like, commuted last year. That sucked. And so I had, like, no friends on campus. Like, my friends were from church and from Scandinavian Studies. That's all I had friends in. And then this year moved onto campus, joined Greek life—still debating whether that was a good idea and... but now I have more friends, so that's a good thing... So, yeah! So and now I'm studying something else, and like, I feel like at this point in my time here I should have figured out what I'm going to, like, solidly major in, but I haven't, so... But! I was fortunate enough that during my freshman fall quarter I took SCAND 100 and FINNISH 101. And so taking two, like, Scandinavian Studies classes at once I was, like, thrown into this program, and that was like the best time for me. I wish I had more time to take more Scandinavian Studies classes because they are, like, so fun. But, I don't have time. Other than like—so, I don't know, just like, I was so surprised that, like, any department at this university was going to be run the way that, like, this department was run. So I was, like, yeah. It was a great time. It was a highlight of my year.

Bill: I think there is something unique in the Scandinavian Department, a lot of the courses, or these courses I've taken, are just people who want to be there. Like, I don't feel like there's—there's—like there's some classes—CSE 142—that are just full of people who have to take them to earn their degrees, but like, I don't feel like—but when you're in a community of people and you're studying with people who just want to know the material—that's an entirely different experience.

Blue: It literally never occurred to me that any University ever would have a Scandinavian studies department. I feel like it's just so specific that you're only there if it's interesting to you.

Amanda: And which course? You took SCAND 100 this... or?

Blue: No, I took Scandinavian Mythology... just because it sounded kind of interesting.

Fanny: Yeah, also, like, the effort that goes into this department, it, like, it still amazes me. Like, in my two person Finnish class we get guests, like, like, visitors all the time. And like in—when I took SCAND 100 we had a Latvian—was it a Latvian?—folk band. I don't know if you remember, but we had a Latvian folk band come and play for us and it was crazy. They were wearing, like, straight-up bears on their backs, [*laughter*] like, they were dressed this way. But we had just, like, so many, like, cool people come and visit us, like, all throughout the course. Guest lecturers all the time. So just like, it's—it's, like, crazy to me how much effort goes into, like, every class. I still am, like, tripping up about my class and how it's literally me and one other person, but we still get celebrities coming in through the door from Finland. I had lunch with the EU representative of Finland, and that was, like, terrifying to me. So like, I don't know how these, like, keep coming up in this department, but, like, we get, like, cool people coming all the time.

Amanda: Do you feel like—this is maybe a silly question—but do you feel like, like, participating in extracurricular things or events or dance or whatever activities, that that helps your—you be a better student? Like, that it helps your academic work, too, if you can either, I don't know, escape or complement it somehow?

Bill: I think the answer—before you said academic I was gonna say, like, “hard yes.” [*laughter*] Academics: still “yes,” but not as hard of a “yes” because, I don't know, I feel like for—as a student you're just kind of collecting skills for four years, per se, and I think at a university this large where you don't necessarily have to practice a lot of people skills, like, really, really close people skills, like dancing in particular is really good for that. You really learn—or are really forced to account for how other people feel about things, I guess.

Blue: I think it's just really important to, like, create obligations where you'll have fun, and like, force yourself to do something enjoyable, because otherwise it's easy to, like, “Well, here's the things I have to do and I hate them, and it's awful,” and then, “When I'm not doing that I'm just gonna, like, sit down and, I don't know, watch Great British Bake Off.” Actually, I fully endorse that. But it's nice to have something that you can, like, “Well, on Wednesdays, I'll go dance.”
Colin: You’re listening to Pasi Pasanen and Per-Thomas Erikson from Sweden, who performed at the 2019 Skandia Ball. The Skandia Folkdance Society has temporarily cancelled all in-person classes due to the coronavirus pandemic, but they are still holding virtual dances and sessions for musicians via Zoom. For more details, go to skandia-folkdance.org. That’s S-K-A-N-D-I-A dash folkdance dot org. Links are in the show notes or on our website.

Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today’s episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today’s music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson and Pasi Pasanen and Per-Thomas Eriksson. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more about the podcast and other exciting projects hosted by the Scandinavian Studies Department. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking a course or declaring a major. You can find complete course listings for the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at scandinavian.washington.edu. Once again, that’s scandinavian.washington.edu. Well, that does it for season two. Crossing North will be on summer break for the next few months, but we’ll return in the fall with brand new episodes. See you then.

Bill, did you study Lithuanian here?

Bill: Yeah, I studied Lithuanian and I’m studying Latvian this year. [*whispers*] Take Baltic Studies instead! [*laughter*]

Fanny: [*shouting*] What! No! It’s all in the same department! It’s all in the same department!

Bill: [*whispers again*] No, Baltic languages are better!

SHOW NOTES

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This episode was written, edited, and produced by Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Kristian Næsby.

Learn more about the Skandia Folkdance Society of Seattle.

At 29:32, Bill refers to a spelmanslag, Swedish for a “folk musician’s team.” There are two spelmanslag in Seattle: The Skandia Spelmanslag (for adults) and The Lilla Spelmanslag (for children).

At 34:20, Fanny refers to “Lucia,” the Santa Lucia Day performance put on by UW students every December at the Swedish Club. Everyone is welcome to participate. Check out: UW Scandinavian Club on Facebook or contact Amanda Doxtater or Kim Kraft for more information.

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