

BOSTON UNIVERSITY ACADEMY

VERNACULAR PERCUSSIVE DANCE: THE COLLISION OF AFRICAN AND
EUROPEAN DANCE TRADITIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

APRIL 2007

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To Tony, for his infinite patience and kindness.

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INTRODUCTION

What is tap now? Sequined pants, plastic hat and cane? Tap, when it is in the public eye, has slipped down to the level of the school-child's scheduled activities, somewhat like swimming lessons. What then of hip-hop? Of break dancing? We see hip-hop in music videos, but in no other context. If people breakdance it is for public entertainment: backup dancers in precisely synchronized routines. Teenagers and young adults have some cultural recollection and general admiration for the breaking (or break dancing, as it has been named by mainstream media) of the 1980s, but it is hardly practiced and it is certainly not practiced in the form in which it was originally created: dance battles on the streets, for "cred." Contemporary break dancers follow a strict choreography, and can only be seen in highly polished music videos. There exists an underground hip-hop culture which has managed to escape the mainstream media, but public knowledge and practice of diverse dance forms is very low. What mainstream teen or young adult can claim to know more about dance, or see more dancing in their normal lives than the backup dancers in music videos and popular dancing in clubs?

What is our current popular dance form? Teens have a strictly limited dance repertoire mostly limited to "grinding", and occasionally students will imitate the hand movements of previous generations. The lyrics of some contemporary pop songs instruct the dancer, but the songs are repetitive and motions they describe are uninteresting. No recreational hip hop dancing teen would think of the traditional roots of their popular dance. But they do exist – very strongly. Grinding, that so despised dance movement which now is getting dancers thrown out of dance halls, can be traced all the way back to traditional tribal African dances.

Within this paper, I attempted to trace this long and complicated history which begins with the slavery of Africans in America. Although the practice of slavery has stained the fabric of our community, it also allowed the

mixing of dance cultures between traditional, tribal African dance and the forms of dance practiced in some form in the United States, with predominantly Irish, English, and French influences. I do not intend to do a racial study, chasing after African-American dancers and identifying the origins of their dancing. Instead I wish to illustrate the metamorphosis of the styles of dance introduced by Africans, and to trace it forward into today.

ASPECTS OF AFRICAN DANCE

A particularly rich part of this anthropological study is the cultural interaction and reaction between black dancers and white dancers throughout time, and the interplay between these changing cultures in the form of dance. Slave hunters captured Africans from many different tribes and completely isolated cultures, but each of these African cultures exhibit dancing as an integral part of their lifestyle, and a part which helped, in its original conditions in Africa, to bond the community together. “It links one’s personal identity to that of the group; events throughout the life cycle of the individual and the community are commemorated in dance.”¹ It is not entirely surprising, then, that dance became a central way for the transplanted Africans to hold their community together. Although these slaves came from any number of different dancing traditions, there were common threads between all these communities: dance was integral to life and dance was spiritual. Not only was the slave community held together through dance, all the African dances – although seemingly wildly different from each other on African soil – were much more closely related to each other than to the dancing of their captors. It is from this connection, and the community-sustaining role of African dance, that the tradition of African-American dance arose and became an integral part of American culture.

Several authors interested in this cultural interaction have tried to distill the differences between fundamentally European dance and fundamentally African dance down into list format. While the lists may not address the entirety of the culture’s different attitude towards dance, they comprehensively address the distinct movement and the structure of the African dance. One clear list of defining attributes of African dance was written by Mark Knowles in his book *Tap Roots: the Early History of Tap Dancing*, guided by several lists in other books,

¹ Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 3.

including the Stearns' *Jazz Dance*² this collection of lists I used as a guide in creating my own:

The spirituality of African dance is very real. The dances in their original form were often used to summon a trance-like state or spiritual possession.³ Since the African Gods are a connection to an explanation of the natural world, it only makes sense that the dancing would be practiced with particular attention to imitation of and connection with nature. These emphases ended up defining much of the type of movement which in turn defines African dance.

1. African dancers wore no shoes and had a flat-footed dance style, which lead to shuffling or dragging steps.
2. Realistic animal mimicry is a large part of the African dance tradition, and the movement which comes from this tradition is more jerky and awkward then most dances of European origin.

The beat and rhythm of the music for African dancing (or, if unaccompanied, of the dancing itself) is very different from European dance music. These differences can be traced easily and therefore can be seen in many contemporary styles of music and dance.

3. African dance is syncopated. In technical detail, this means that whereas "European music usually emphasizes the first and third beats in a bar of music...the swaying motion in African dance tended to cause the accent to fall on the second and fourth beats."⁴ This completely changes the feel of the music and the dance, giving it the "rebounding or bouncy feeling of stressing the offbeat."⁵

4. The final point in Knowles' list is somewhat ambiguous. Although he is addressing outright the asymmetry of African dance in terms of complexity

² The book I am referring to is: Marshall Winslow Stearns and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979).

³ Mark Knowles, *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), 32.

⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵ Ibid.

of footwork and relaxed composure, it seems that the idea of asymmetry can cover much more in African dance. Knowles does mention in passing that there is musical asymmetry to African dance, but he doesn't dwell on it. The value placed on asymmetry in African dance culture allows there to be room, both culturally and in the music itself, for improvisation and implementation of foreign ideas which do not fit the expected musical format. It seems that this flexibility is integral to the tenacity of African dance, even when it was replanted in America under harsh and demeaning conditions, and the ability of the dance form to adapt and survive in this new environment.

The swinging movement addressed by Knowles is a product of the specific posture and types of movement noticeable in African dance and its descendant forms of dance. It is possible that a syncopated sense of rhythm caused a swinging motion and relaxed posture in African dancers, but probably it is as Knowles suggests: that a relaxed posture caused the swinging of the beat.

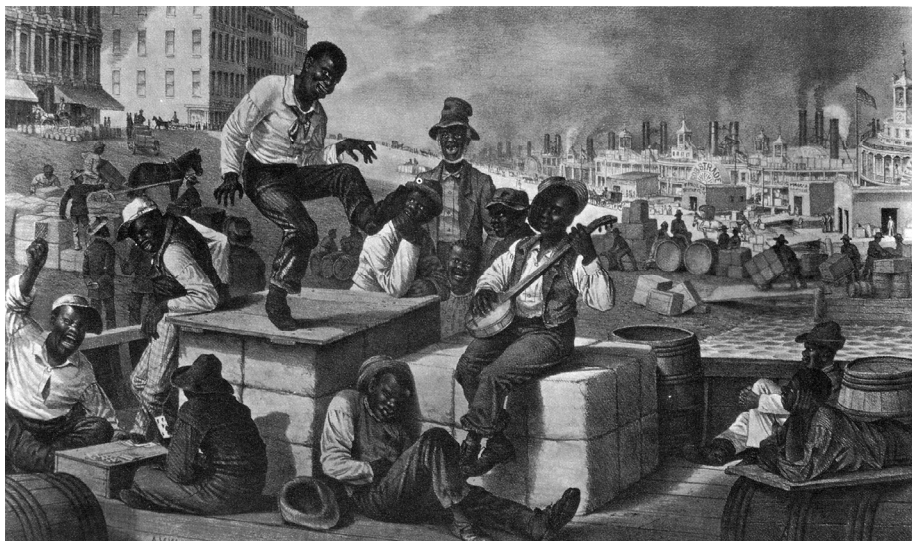


Fig. 1. A lithograph from 1878 showing dancers on the Mississippi levee. The illustration shows the bent-over posture of an African dancer. Reprinted from Edward Thorpe, *Black Dance* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1990), 37.

5. African dance is characterized by a bent or relaxed position, very unlike the upright and formal posture of dances of Irish and English origin.

English and continental European dances not only show the characteristic upright posture, but some forms of dance from these areas place great emphasis on it. (For example, competitive Irish step dancing.) Although there are some rural and peasant dance forms, such as the Irish sean-nós step dancing⁶ which is characterized by this bent-over posture, the rural dance forms in Europe would not have been the ones which carried across the ocean into America until intercontinental transit was made relatively easy and inexpensive. It is the relaxed position of the back in African-influenced dance which allows for the rest of the dancing to happen: multi-rhythmical dance (with different rhythms being created by different parts of the body), the syncopation of the music, and the flexibility of performance.

6. The most important aspect of African dance in terms of the style of movement, or “movement vocabulary” is the idea that African dancing is “centrifugal.” That is, the dance originates from the body’s center and motion moves from there outwards to the limbs. An African dancer’s hips and shoulders are separately articulated, as well as each part of the body, but the motion comes mainly from the torso. This is an important aspect of African dance and African-derived dance because it is completely different from European dancing, in which the torso is held still as one unit, and most of the motion is expressed by the limbs.

7. In African dance, even if it is not used as a tool for spirit possession, the dancer is completely taken over by the dance and the music, and is completely unselfconscious. The beauty of the African dance comes from a complete lack of inhibition.

Although the flexibility of the movement in the African-descendent dance forms allows for the flexibility of performance for this dance form, there are even more important feature of African dance which are directly involved in the tenacity of the dance form.

⁶ Sean-nós step dance is a rural, vernacular form of Irish step. It is danced in hard-shoe, or a shoe which might otherwise make noise, such as a farmer’s boot. The name means, literally, “old style,” and it is still practiced by farmers and other rural peoples of Ireland.

8. African dance is improvisational. This is a very important and defining feature of dances which can claim an African origin. Cues for dancing are taken from a dance leader (this occurs, for example, in the Circle Shout⁷) and from the rhythm and phrasing of the music. Although I first suggested this quality of the dance form on page eight, it is worth reiterating that the ability of the dance form to adapt to other influences and integrate them led to the survival of the qualities of African dance. This quality also led to the dilution and dissolution of the dance form into its current, unknown state.

9. Pantomime is also a feature of African dance. While we have already discussed imitation of animals, it is of particular note that African dancing included imitation of other people. This feature of dance allowed dance to be a way of undermining authority in their native lands, and enslaved Africans also found dance of use in subverting the authority of their white masters. Not only did the slaves by their imitation assert their personal power, but an unusual phenomenon occurred: white slave owners, having seen their slaves dancing, began imitating the slaves through their own dance form, ignorant of the fact that they were imitating dances which were imitating themselves.⁸

10. Competition between dancers is not unique to African dances, but this quality of dance for both Europeans and Africans encouraged pantomiming and improvisation and thus spurred the blending of European dance styles into African dance styles and also of African into European.

It is also important to consider, in this analysis of African dance in relation to its influence on dancing styles in the United States, the qualities of African dance which did not survive. Masked dancing, an extremely rich tradition

⁷ The Circle Shout, also known as the ring shout, is a religious dance for a group of people. It was used to practice African religion but was modified to the practice of Christianity. More information on the Circle Dance, and an exact description of its practice, can be found in the section of this paper entitled "Dancing in Slavery."

⁸ This can be seen very clearly when white dancers begin to take part in the Cakewalk, a dance form which is nothing else but imitative of white dancing. The minstrel show form of entertainment is also rich with this ironic interchange between races. White actors, dressed in blackface, imitated the dance forms of the slaves, who were often imitating the white owners, combining elements from European dance into their own dance form.

throughout Africa, was lost in slavery. These masks are elaborately carved or otherwise constructed headpieces which defined each African culture. The masked dances were performed for any or all ritual ceremonies, including fertility rites, coming-of-age ceremonies, and any ceremony invoking a spirit or involving spirit possession.⁹ In fact, nearly all dancing involving spirit possession, masked or not, disappeared from African dance when it came to America. As these styles of dancing are the most directly related to African tribal religion, and it is not difficult to see that these would be the dance forms which would be lost in slavery under predominantly Christian masters. However, some pockets of these dance forms survive. Masked dancing reappeared (in a reduced form) in Mardi Gras festivities and in the John Canoe dance of North Carolina.¹⁰ Dance leading to spirit possession came to be known as “Voodoo,” or a myriad of other similar names, and similar traditions were practiced throughout the Caribbean under different names (“Shango” in Trinidad, “Obeah” in Jamaica, and Nañigo in Cuba).¹¹ In Voodoo ritual, the drummers interrupt the regular rhythm of the music with a “break,” an unexpected “counterrhythm.” The “break” in the rhythm “propelled the dancer into a trancelike state”¹² in which the dancer would move in a manner that reflected the nature of the spirit which had possessed her.¹³ Although some aspects of break dancing or other African-derived dances may seem trancelike, such as step in African-American fraternities¹⁴, and even sometimes in break dancing, none of these descendant forms has the same direct spiritual possession. Masked or elaborately outfitted costumes which resembled god or

⁹ Barbara S. Glass, *African American Dance: an Illustrated History*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2007), 5-15.

¹⁰ Glass, *African American Dance*, 15.

¹¹ Lynn Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: from 1619 to Today*, (Princeton: Princeton Book Co., 1988), 49.

¹² Knowles, 32.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Step is a rhythmical form of movement used in the pledging ritual and marching performances of some African American fraternities and sororities, which became common in the 1940s. For more information on step, see Elizabeth C. Fine, *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

spirit figures also are clearly lacking in any contemporary form of African dance, as these qualities were lost as soon as the Africans were removed from their homeland.

TRANSFERAL TO THE UNITED STATES

Knowles in his book and Edward Thorpe in *Black Dance* both suggest that dance may have been used to lure Africans onto slave ships in the first place:

Africans were often enticed to board slave ships with the promise of rewards for performing their tribal dances for the crew's entertainment. When the dancing was over, they were taken below and given alcohol, only to find themselves at sea when they woke up from their intoxication.¹⁵

Many authors make reference to Africans after capture being forced to dance as well. This practice, called "dancing the slaves,"¹⁶ may have been developed for a number of reasons and was performed in a number of styles. Most sources say that it was to keep the slaves healthy and strong on the long trip; others say it is merely a form of public humiliation and torture ("After meals they would jump in their irons for exercise. This was so necessary for their health, that they were whipped if they refused to do it, and this jumping has been termed dancing."¹⁷), or that the slaves danced and were forced to imitate white sailor's hornpipes. Noting this forced mockery, Knowles speculates that "this could have been one of the first cross-pollinations of European and African dance styles."¹⁸

As a part of the international slave trade between African countries and early America, slave ships would stop in the West Indies and unload their human cargo there. While some slaves stayed and worked on these islands for their whole lives, most were shipped into the United States after a "seasoning period"¹⁹ of a couple of years. The attitude towards dancing was very different

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, (London: John W. Parker, West Strand, 1839), 304-5; quoted in Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin'*, 6.

¹⁸ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 26.

¹⁹ Edward Thorpe, *Black Dance* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1989), 9.

on the islands than it was on the American mainland. The West Indies were relatively open to slave dance in comparison to the conditions on the mainland of America. In effect, although the term “seasoning period” is crude and derogatory, if the situation is viewed simply in terms of dance, it did serve as a mixing palette for African dancing and foreign dancing before the dance culture went onto the mainland. It also allowed the different African dance cultures to meld themselves into a united front to carry into America. The cultural climate in the Caribbean and in the southern United States was what allowed the unification of African dance traditions to occur:

In the West Indies the African was generally considered a human being, whereas in the United States the slaves were frequently considered non-human, and Protestant denominations were more repressive than the Catholics. Wherever the Catholic Church was powerful, as, for example, in Louisiana, Mexico, and South America, Africanisms were retained in greater number.²⁰

The difference between Catholic and Protestant treatment of slaves is due to an essential difference between these two religions, in that “The Catholic church regarded every soul as a soul to be saved, as a complete and finished man except for salvation.”²¹ This view allowed Catholic masters some leniency in allowing their slaves to dance as they wished, as long the slaves’ beliefs had been converted to Christianity.

However, the slave owners tread a fine line between on the one hand repressing too much of the slaves’ native lifestyle and causing a rebellion, and on the other allowing the gathering of slaves which may lead to that rebellion. In order to quell possible rebellion, many slave owners did not think it beneficial to convert their slaves to Christianity, and some even superficially supported the native African forms of worship. “Some slave masters established ‘praise houses’ and permitted their slaves to ‘shout’ or engage in secular

²⁰ Emery, *Black Dance*, 16.

²¹ Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe; Life and Lore of the Haitian People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 6. Quoted in Emery, *Black Dance*, 16.

dancing.”²² In addition, many slave owners thought that baptism would immediately set their slaves free, and for this reason did not attempt conversion.²³ With the arrival of the Great Awakening, whites slave owners’ attitudes began to change. On one hand, their own worship began to look more like African religious practices, where “blacks and whites mingled in emotional camp meetings where there were mass conversions, ecstatic religious experiences such as cataleptic states and visions, and torchlight processions.”²⁴ On the other hand, however, this resurgence of religious spirit caused the white slave owners to question the religious liberties which they had allowed their slaves until that time. Rigorous definitions of dancing were perpetuated, in which “So long as the feet were not crossed or lifted from the floor, neither the church nor secular society regarded the movement as dance.”²⁵ One form of African-derived dancing which survived the Great Awakening, and may have in fact benefited from it, was the ring (or circle) shout.

Now that we have a good sense of what was coming into the Americas from slave ships and how it fomented in the West Indies, we can look at what this dance tradition was up against: European dance forms.

²² Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’*, 18.

²³ Glass, *African American Dance*, 38.

²⁴ Glass, *African American Dance*, 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

ASPECTS OF EUROPEAN DANCE

The European-derived dances were very different in form and vocabulary of movement, and held a different place in society. European dancing was not done outdoors or in relation to the earth at all. Most European dancing was based on cultural hierarchy and was almost entirely secular.²⁶

In many western European nations, there were two strata of dancing culture. On the one hand there is the courtly form of dance, practiced only by the nobles, and only within the confines of court. In this upper stratum, dancing was a way to formally undergo courtship rituals, advance one's political standing, and display one's wealth: "Much of European dance arose from court dance, which reflected nobility's vision of society, a context in which people interacted in an extremely organized, patterned fashion so as to showcase and enhance their status."²⁷ The lower stratum of European dancing was the folk dancing. There were also mainly couple dances so that social relations and courtships were acted out on the dance floor. These folk dances, practiced by the common people, also maintained an upright posture, but there was a lot more variation among the folk dancing, and it was not so much a political tool as a social one. An important part of this distinction from African dancing is the European emphasis on couple dancing, which allowed the courtship rituals to be acted out. European couple dances involve touch, while in African-influenced dancing, couples may dance together, but without touching. This later led to an interesting conflict: white people saw the hip movement in African dance as crude, while black people felt that couple dancing that involved touching while dancing was just as crude.

European-influenced dancing, in addition to performing a different function in culture than African dancing, also involves entirely different styles of movement. European dancing is performed with erect posture, and relatively

²⁶ This list of characteristics is derived from a list in Glass, *African American Dance*, 22-26.

²⁷ Glass, *African American Dance*, 23.

limited movement (at least compared to African dance.) Movement was limited according to very precise rules: “The torso was moved as a unit. Hips and shoulders were not articulated separately....With men in tight breeches and women in corsets, a freer dancing style was not possible.”²⁸ This style of movement is in its most extreme form in ballet, and the erect posture of the spine was intentionally upwards (in the “heavenward” direction) for religious reasons.



Fig. 2. A woodcut (c. 1900) from a drawing by Stanislaw Rejchan characteristic of elite European dance. This illustration shows dancers dancing the polonaise. Reprinted from Ian Driver, *A Century of Dance* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 13.

In addition to the constraint on the movement of the body, movement across the dance floor is also very limited in European dance. Dancers follow

²⁸ Ibid., 24.

geometric patterns across the floor, in lines of couples, groups of couples, or as a single couple.

Not all dancing from Europe is couple dancing. The most notorious exception is the Irish jig which came to the United States with Irish immigrants. “Jig” is a very unspecific term, referring to many different styles of dance depending on the time period and the region in which it is used. The Irish jig I am speaking of here was performed with either soft- or hard-soled shoes, a solo dance which is danced with an erect posture and very precise footwork, following geometric patterns. Irish jigs are danced with the beat of the music, unlike African-derived dancing (and music), which emphasizes the offbeat (syncopation). Other dances in Europe were in this percussive solo dance style, including clog dancing from England. The Irish jig and English clog were practiced by immigrants in the United States throughout the creation of the first colonies in America, the formation of the United States of America, and through to today. The jigs are also danced competitively, two aspects of the dance forms which allowed them to mix, in the 18th and 19th centuries with the solo, percussive, African-derived dancing brought to the United States by African slaves.

DANCING IN SLAVERY

Once in America, the culture that slaves in the West Indies had created had to adapt to the strict religious rules surrounding Protestantism. Drums were not allowed to accompany dancing, so the slaves used hand-clapping (called “patting”) and shuffling steps for rhythm.²⁹ The development of these two rhythmical modes of African-American dance survived very well and became very important in the later development of “step” in African-American fraternities, and of tap dancing and other percussive dance forms.

But the percussive aspect of African dance was well developed even without the mandate of Protestant slave owners. The secular percussive dance forms which arose from this percussive history were mainly performed individually and were characterized by a particular movement or dance step. These dance forms then overlapped considerably and the lines between unique dance forms become hazy for the contemporary scholar. The dancers themselves would have no problem identifying exactly which style of dance they practiced. Slaves would often be forced to perform these (mainly) percussive dances for their masters and some slave owners even forced the slaves to dance in the manner of their original passage to the Americas.³⁰ However, the general practice of dancing for the masters in the “big house” seems mutually beneficial. The slaves were allowed to perform their dance styles (those which were not considered crude or offensive) and the slave owners were entertained. The dances performed by the slave community at this time can be roughly divided into categories as follows: religious dances, dances imitative of animals, dances imitative of white people, and solo percussive dances.

The Ring Shout (or Circle Shout) is a religious dance in which a caller sings out verses while the dancers move in a circle. It is not a couple dance; instead all the dancers move together around the circle with a particular step:

²⁹ Ibid., 120.

³⁰ Ibid., 89.

“Shouters, in the slightly bent posture of African dance, slid one foot forward, drew the other up to it in a scoffing, hitching motion, and then slid the first one forward again.”³¹ (The Shout may have looked different before being constrained by Christian definitions of sinful dancing.) After religious conversion, this form of dancing was done along with the singing of psalms and within the church itself.³²

Dances performed which were imitative of animals during this period were mainly the “Buzzard Lope” and the “Pigeon Wing”. These dances looked like the animals they are named after. It is difficult to imagine a dance which manages both to look elegant and look like either a buzzard or a pigeon, but in African dance elegance seems not to be the issue. Instead the complete release of the dancer into the dance and into the music is what creates the beauty and interest of the dance. The dance is performed by four people: the first person lay on the ground, pretending to be carrion, the second (the dancer) imitated a buzzard looking for food to eat (the carrion), the third kept the rhythm by patting, and the fourth called out instructions to the dancer such as “‘March aroun’,’ ‘Get the eye,’ and ‘Look aroun’ for mo’ meat!’”³³ Although this sort of dance may seem primitive and archaic, a dancer named John Davis was performing it until at least 1964, if not later. Now that he has died, there are no longer any performers who dance the Buzzard Lope.³⁴

The Pigeon Wing is a similar dance in that the dancer imitates an animal, but doesn’t have so complicated a set up (having only one performer instead of four) although at the least a percussive instrumentalist or patter would be needed to provide the “music.” In this dance, the dancer simply imitates a pigeon or a chicken: “‘flippin’ yo’ arms an’ legs roun’ an’ holdin’ ya’ neck stiff like a bird do.’”³⁵ These are clearly related to the dances of Africa;

³¹ Ibid., 40.

³² Emery, *Black Dance*, 121.

³³ Parrish, 111. Quoted in Glass, *African American Dance*, 54.

³⁴ Hawes, quoted in Glass, *African American Dance*, 58.

³⁵ Fannie Berry, quoted in Virginia Writers’ Project, *Negro in Virginia*, 92. Quoted in Emery, *Black Dance*, 90.

there is nothing like this in European-derived dancing, as European dancers would never imitate anything naturalistic in their dancing, but instead raise their bodies as high and straight as possible in an effort to reach the heavens.

Dances of the African-American slaves which were imitative of the dances of the Europeans included most notably the Cakewalk, quadrilles, cotillions, and reels.³⁶ The Cakewalk is a couple dance which emphasizes the costumes and elegance of the dancers. The dance seems to be a sort of promenade of couples in order to display their finery. This is an obvious mockery of the dances of the white Americans (specifically “the grand march at the end of balls and cotillions”³⁷), but competitions between cakewalking couples became very popular and drew a lot of white attention and admiration. Once again, we see Americans oblivious to being made fun of by their slaves.³⁸ The name of the dance form comes from its competitive nature: the prize for the winning couple was often a cake, either provided by the slave community or by the white American family who owned the competing slaves. In fact, winning slaves would be taken around the local plantations to compete against slaves there.³⁹ Cakewalking became a national fad, and spread all the way from the southern United States to New York, where “clubs were formed and champion belts were given to the best male dancers and diamond rings to the best female dancers.”⁴⁰ Although the dance form was created during slavery, it did not become a national fad until the first and second decades of the 20th century. The earlier performances sound very much like the later minstrel dances, in which the dance competition would be preceded by a performance of idealized plantation life for slaves, while the later performances were characterized by extravagant outfits and a highly stylized way of walking – slanted backwards. It is as if this is a parody of the European body posture in relation to the bent-over African dance posture. However, by the early 20th

³⁶ Emery, *Black Dance*, 98.

³⁷ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 44.

³⁸ Ibid., 45.

³⁹ Emery, *Black Dance*, 92.

⁴⁰ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 46.

century, African-Americans might not have known that difference so distinctly, and may have been simply doing that walk without knowledge of its meaning or origin.



Fig. 3. The slanted-backwards style of walking peculiar to the cakewalk.
Reprinted from Edward Thorpe, *Black Dance* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1990), 59.

Other dances clearly adapted by the slave community from their masters dance traditions are all set dances which were simply adopted, more or less in their entirety. These were the French quadrilles and cotillions, Scottish reels, and English square dances. Slaves who worked in the house of their masters were likely those who caused this wholesale transferal of dance from one culture to another.⁴¹

⁴¹ Emery, *Black Dance*, 98.

SOLO PERCUSSIVE DANCE

The final category of dances done by African-American slaves during this time period is a group of solo percussive dances, including the buck and wing (or buck dance), the jig, and juba. These dances deserve their own category, as it was this branch of dancing which became very popular and lead to minstrel shows and other traveling dance performances of either black Americans or white Americans in blackface, and through this path lead to the creation of modern-day American tap dance. (Although I have categorized these dances as “solo” dances, keep in mind that they may not have been danced solo at all. The term simply refers to the nature of the dance, which need not be danced in reference to anyone else, as line, circle, or couple dances must.) These dances were performed on a wooden floor or a portable wooden surface called a “shingle” which allowed the sound of the dancer’s shuffles to be heard. The posture of these dances was bent and loose, in the African-derived style, except for on occasions where the body was held upright in order to support a cup of water balanced atop the dancer’s head. Although this caused the dancer’s posture to look more European, it also emphasized the impressive articulation which is a feature of African dance. Also, “acrobatic dancers from both Sierra Leone and Tunisia perform such container dances, with isolations, and we may assume African sources for it,”⁴² writes Barbara Glass. However, competitive European dances also featured water- or book-balancing stunts, so a definitive origin for these water dances cannot be determined. That does not mean that the dance form does not definitely show African roots: all other cases of these solo percussive dances, in which nothing was balanced on the dancer’s head, show the bent-over posture of African origin.

The term “juba” refers not only to one of these forms of dance, but also to the rhythmical hand-clapping or body-patting called “patting juba”. The

⁴² Glass, *African American Dance*, 102.

juba dance is an early form of solo percussive dance. It was a particularly acrobatic dance form, and in this way showed its strong connection to the freeform and improvisational movement of African dance. The most famous juba dancer actually came to be known as “Juba.” This dancer, William Henry Lane, was born a free black man in Providence, Rhode Island in 1825 and was probably taught to dance by “Uncle” Jim Lowe.⁴³ In America, he danced mainly in poor lower Manhattan in the seedy Five Points District, although he came to be quite well known by dancing against other, well-known and better-financed dancers. His performance in Almack’s “dancing cellar” in the Five Points District was famously described in Charles Dickens’ *Notes on America and Pictures from Italy* as follows:

Instantly the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is new energy in the tambourine; new laughter in the dancers; new smiles in the landlady; new confidence in the landlord; new brightness in the very candles. Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his knees in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man’s fingers on the tambourine. Dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs – all sorts of legs and no legs – what is this to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life does an ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having danced his partner off her feet, and himself, too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink, with the chuckle of a million counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound!⁴⁴

Juba’s show was a wild success in England, too, where Juba performed until his untimely death in 1852.⁴⁵

⁴³ Thorpe, *Black Dance*, 43.

⁴⁴ Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), 43. Quoted in Glass, *African American Dance*, 113.

⁴⁵ Thorpe, *Black Dance*, 44.



Fig. 4. William Henry Lane, known as “Juba.” This illustration is from the *Illustrated London News* of 1848, the year in which he traveled to and performed in London. Reprinted from Edward Thorpe, *Black Dance* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1990), 43.

The question remains: did Juba’s form of juba dance, having been formed in New York slums among Irish immigrants still resemble the original Juba dance? Was the fact that he was performing this dance on stage and with brilliant popularity force him to update his style and lose his African roots? Barbara S. Glass, author of *African American Dance*, flawlessly answers this

question by comparing Dickens' description of William Henry Lane's dance to a "Juber" dance on a plantation in 1838:

[the banjo player was] 'Tumming his banjor, grinning with ludicrous gesticulations and playing off his wild notes to the company. Before him stood two athletic blacks with open mouth, and pearl white teeth, clapping "Juber" to the notes of the banjor....[They] rested the right foot on the heel, and its clap on the floor was in perfect unison with the notes of the banjor, and palms of the hands on corresponding extremities; while the dancers were all jiggling it away in the merriest possible gaiety of heart, having the most ludicrous twists, wry jerks, and flexible contortions of the body and limbs, that any human imagination can devine.⁴⁶

Clearly these dances are similar (in fact, their descriptions are nearly identical), and we can see that Juba's dance does not seem to differ from the original juba dances, except for the fact that his was truly done solo, and on stage. The instrumentation and enjoyment of the company are also the same.

Buck dancing may have derived from animal imitation, although it is much more stylized than the pigeon wing or the buzzard lope. The name may also refer to contests of skill between young male dancers ("bucks"). The buck dance was made up of shuffling and tapping steps, and rhythmical movement was probably from the waist down, although the dance was also referred to as "buck and wing," which may have indicated that there was some arm movement associated with the step.⁴⁷ Sources differ on when exactly buck dancing began, and how unique it was from other percussive dances, but the most precise estimate puts buck dancing as an entirely separate dance from juba, practiced after the Civil War, when black performers were taking the stage in an effort to reclaim their own cultural history from the minstrel stage.⁴⁸

Buck dance was performed mainly with taps on the soles of the shoes. These taps were mainly metal, unlike the hardwood soles of the English clog or

⁴⁶ Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Book Company, 1988), 96. Quoted in Glass, *African American Dance*, 119.

⁴⁷ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 44.

⁴⁸ Glass, *African American Dance*, 120.

the Irish hardshoe. These shoes are clearly the precursors to the modern tap shoe.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 121.

SOLO PERCUSSIVE DANCE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE ON STAGE

I find here that I have gotten ahead of myself in my discussion of solo percussive dance, and have failed to mention the tradition of African-American dance on stage. Solo percussive dance of the form I was discussing were mainly (or at least originated as) vernacular dances. That is, they were the dances of the people. Not performed for huge audiences, not to make a living. Vernacular dances are dances which are danced, not performed. However, white performers started taking these vernacular dances and bringing them to the stage. These performers were enthusiastically welcomed by the white community, which was looking for a more “American” form of entertainment or cultural identity after the War of 1812.⁵⁰ They performed in blackface, a term for black makeup made with burnt cork, and also in reference to the makeup of the rest of the face – either wide reddened lips or a white space in the place of large lips. The performance was also done with a wig made of curly-haired sheep hide or mattress stuffing.⁵¹ In this manner, the white-skinned actors would imitate black-skinned slaves, and portray an idealized version of plantation life. This image of black people was so well known that after the Civil War, when black dancers started taking the stage, they also wore blackface so that their acts were recognizable, and so that they would face less discrimination. When black dancers began performing without blackface, white audiences were amazed at the variety of colors of skin.⁵² Not only did the white dancers imitating slave life make their fortunes off of these mockeries, but they also greatly reduced white people’s awareness of black people, by making the public image of a black person into a caricature.

However, African-American dance on stage (either in a mockery or in its real form, as practiced by Juba) and African-American dance in vernacular

⁵⁰ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 75.

⁵¹ Ibid., 76. See this page for a detailed description of the stage makeup called “blackface.”

⁵² Ibid., 99.

life developed together. These two histories are inextricably intertwined, and are also not precisely documented. However, the fault for this does not lie in the documenters, but instead in the form of dance and tradition itself. Dances influenced by African dancing were splintered into myriad forms and traditions all over the Southern United States. During the Civil War, soldiers from the North were exposed to more black people and to plantation life. After the Civil War, freed black people faced racism against black stage performers and also had to contend against the well established acts and reputations that blackface performers had already had the chance to form. This competition spurred the creativity and inventiveness of dancing on both sides of the racial divide.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE ON STAGE

In order to elucidate the growth of these two concepts over time, it would be best to explain the nature of the imitation of African-American culture on stage. The first recorded example of this was the white actor Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, who in the late 1830s performed a parody song and dance number between the acts of a play. He based his imitation on the dance of an old, crippled, African-American farmhand named Jim Crow:

Jim Crow’s right shoulder was drawn up high, while his left leg was gnarled with rheumatism, stiff and crooked at the knee. Rice’s dance consisted of limping, shuffling, and jiggling movements, and ended with a little jump at the end of each refrain, when he ‘set his heel-a-rickin.’⁵³

We can see that this description of Rice’s imitation is just like the other forms of solo percussive dance of the time, but not nearly as acrobatic as Juba’s dance. Rice also sang a song to accompany his dance number. The refrain of this song went as follows: “Wheel about, turn about/ Do jus’ so/ An’ ebery time I turn about/ I jump Jim Crow.”⁵⁴ The song and dance number became hugely popular both in the United States and abroad. Rice became known as “Jim Crow,” and continued to perform under this name and in his signature imitative style until a month before his death in 1860.⁵⁵ With the popularity of his dance act, legends about Jim Crow’s origin ran wild (in modern day, these would be circulated in celebrity magazines), and the name “Jim Crow” became a household name, a derogatory name for any African-American. It is through this association that the name was given to a set of racist segregation laws in the United States stood until the 1960s.⁵⁶

Soon after the world went wild over the character of Jim Crow, and Rice cemented the caricature of the dancing African-American, the minstrel

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁴ Thorpe, *Black Dance*, 40.

⁵⁵ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 85.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 84.

show developed. The format of these minstrel shows was very specific, although once contained within the rigid structure there was a lot of freedom for the performers. These shows were highly reminiscent of the ring dances of an earlier era, modified into a semicircular format. The leader of the ring dance became a master of ceremonies and Mr. Tambo and Brother Bones, the rhythmical accompaniment, sitting on either end of the semicircle. The performance was divided into three parts. The first part was made up of a comedic dialogue, “some sentimental songs...followed by a Walk-Around, a kind of grand promenade for the whole company. The second part was the Olio which included singing, dancing, and possibly verse-speaking....The final Afterpiece was performed...by the whole cast and often included a burlesque of a popular drama.”⁵⁷ These dramas were also performed in blackface (because there was no time to remove the makeup) and therefore usually portrayed a scene from idealized plantation life. It was by attending these performances that many white Americans formed their ideas about African-Americans, and this also fueled its popularity:

At least part of the public interest in the minstrel show was curiosity about black culture and a desire to see it. Many whites who had never seen any African Americans in person had nevertheless heard or read about them, and wanted to observe their arts in a nonthreatening way. Many northern whites had opinions about slavery, and had some sympathy for enslaved Africans. Most whites, however, did not want to have contact with real blacks. Being entertained by white men who said they presented authentic black song, dance, and speech was not only acceptable but also satisfying....For many audiences, the comic caricatures onstage were more than funny; they were comforting. The minstrel show made blacks less fearsome and slavery less horrific. For a mere twenty-five cents admission fee, the mysterious dark race was drained of its threat, and the plantation became a hilarious place where blacks were well treated and had leisure time to sing and dance.⁵⁸

Although this sounds very comforting for the white Americans, it was a nightmare situation for newly free, black Americans trying to make their way. It

⁵⁷ Thorpe, *Black Dance*, 45.

⁵⁸ Glass, *African American Dance*, 125-126.

also could not have helped the emancipation effort to have such a positive image of slavery broadcast across the nation. Not only did this form of performance become extremely popular, but the music was distributed as sheet music, so even those who did not make it to the theater knew the music which was purportedly African-American.⁵⁹

The first minstrel show was performed by the “Virginia Minstrels,” a group of four white men headed by Daniel Decatur Emmett. The four performers – Emmett, Francis (Frank) Marion Brower, William (Bill) Whitlock, and Richard (Dick) Ward Pelham – debuted on February 17th, 1843 at the Bowery Amphitheatre in New York City.⁶⁰ They performed in blackface, and claimed to have perfected true African culture (not African-American, for they apparently could see no difference between the two). Later forms of minstrelsy seem to be very similar to the basic structure first played out by the Virginia Minstrels in 1843, but the popularity of the dancing from minstrel shows then spun off many solo or duet dance acts.

With the success of the Virginia Minstrels, the format of the minstrel show became popular. Many more groups formed, each insisting that they portrayed true African culture, and entirely composed of white performers in blackface. Most minstrel shows served also as a showcase for a talented dancer or musician. It was in this way that this form of entertainment opened itself up to black performers. Although these black minstrel performers were by trade forced to comically imitate their own culture, in the world of entertainment, as elsewhere, racism would have otherwise kept them out of a job. Besides, the heavy makeup and uniform costuming in minstrelsy could cover the race of a performer better than in other theatrics.

William Henry Lane, or “Juba,” discussed at length above, is one of these African-Americans who made the break onto the stage (although not specifically the minstrel stage) an audience for his solo dances may have been

⁵⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁶⁰ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 93-95.

made possible by the other solo and duet dance acts which were the result of the popularity of the dancing from minstrel shows, but on the other hand his dancing came from the tradition of original solo percussive dance, not from the commercialized version which his audience may have been clamoring to see. Ironically, in dance contests Lane often faced off against white dancers in blackface, specifically a very popular and talented dancer named John Diamond (known as the “King of Diamonds”). Other famous black minstrel dancers include Billy Kersands and Ernest Hogan, who both danced in blackface. In addition to wearing blackface, Hogan changed his name to sound more Irish, as most of the white minstrel dancers were Irish immigrants. After emancipation, all-African-American minstrel troupes began forming, beginning with the Georgia Minstrels in 1865.⁶¹ This group was widely respected and later African-American minstrel groups often incorporated the name “Georgia Minstrels” within their own. But these troupes were not free to perform in their own skin. By the 1870s, nearly all African-American minstrel troupes had white booking agents or theater managers, in order to get bookings in venues where there might be a white audience.⁶²

When Broadway and specifically “black Broadway” took off with *The Black Crook* in 1866, the minstrel show started losing its audience. In response, the minstrel show began to differentiate and turned to more flamboyant acts of showmanship, away from its humble roots.⁶³ But this corruption of the performance style spelled out its end, and the age of minstrel shows fell to the age of Broadway musicals.

But much had changed in African-American dance (and in other Americans’ perception of it) once it came out of the minstrel show machine. An entirely new version of the dance style had been created, called “essence of old Virginia.” The first essence dancer was William W. Newcomb (1823-77), whose style of dance was actually called “quintessence” because he danced the essence

⁶¹ Glass, *African American Dance*, 133.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 115.

faster than others.⁶⁴ Dan Bryant (1833-75) has been credited with the creation of the essence dance itself⁶⁵, which seems to be essentially a more elegant, more theatrical form of the juba or buck dances:

The dance developed from another dance called the Negro shuffle which was basically a waltz clog slowed down and with the meter changed. The lifted knees and high steps of the popular Irish jig were replaced with the sliding motions of the African shuffle. The heels and toes rocked without much changing of the position of the legs, so that the dancer appeared to be gliding....The essence was performed in many different ways; the more elegant and graceful parts of it, done with taste and refinement, became known as 'picture dancing,' because it was considered as pretty as a picture.⁶⁶

Irish jig dancing steps had already filtered into minstrel shows, and essence dance was in a sense a return to the roots of the dance form.

After the minstrel show began to decline, many other forms of African-American influenced performance sprung up to compete with the rising popularity of African-American musicals (which also involved dancing), including, perhaps most notably, vaudeville theater, which were somewhat more burlesque than the minstrel shows. Through this form of theater, and increasingly outrageous and creative showmanship, the acrobatics of African dance returned. Dancing in vaudeville was referred to as "hoofing," "jigging," or "clogging," and when this form of dance hit the musical stage, it was referred to as "tap." Black musicals also grew in popularity, and once musicals were being filmed, it was said that no musical was complete without a tap dance sequence. That being said, these sequences were filmed so that they could be removed for film showings in racially tense areas, as many of these tap dancers were African-Americans. African-Americans continued to face harsh conditions and strong antagonism both from their audiences and from their white peers, but African-Americans with exceptional talent, as in the earlier minstrel shows, were still able to surpass these obstacles and gain worldwide fame. Here we can

⁶⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 108.

see the progression into tap dance, as it is known today, and trace its roots all the way back to the dances of African slaves.

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