Trickster Gods and Rapparees: Afro and Irish Satiric Traditions in American Tap Dance

Tap dance folklore abounds with tall tales and short stories in which tap dancers boast, ridicule, mock, threaten, slander, praise, and insult each other. For example, William Henry Lane, known as Master Juba, boasted in 1845 that after correctly imitating the dances of all the principal Ethiopian dancers in the United States, he would give an imitation of himself that no one could copy. And John Diamond threatened in 1839 that the inimitable licks of his Negro Hornpipe and Virginny Breakdown would secure him the title King of Diamonds.

It is as if verbal rap is the necessary accompaniment to the virtuosity of the taps. Bill “Bojangles” Robinson would sandwich little skating steps or jigglike crossover steps between his time steps while telling jokes and stories and mouthing imitations of a mosquito’s hum or a trombone between the perfect timing of taps. Groundhog, at the Village Gate in 1964, shouted, “I’ve been waiting to battle Chuck Green for twenty years . . . dancing is like a gang war . . . Every dancer is my enemy.” Green answered those threats not with harsh words but with slikey brushstrokes of sound. Even when there is no verbal foreplay, the clatter of the taps becomes a recitative of hardcore rap. Take Savion Glover, at the 1997 Grammy Awards, whose fury of stomps, grunts, and gesticulations, turning his mop of dreadlocks into the head of Medusa, were matched by Irish step dancer Colin Dunn, who added slashing scissor kicks calculated to miss Glover’s head only by inches. “Don’t play that noisy funk at me,” Dunn’s rapier slashes pronounced.

If we accept that tap dance evolved as a fusion of Irish and African musical and step-dancing traditions in America—not only in the nineteenth century, when Irish dancing masters popularized jigs and reels on the minstrel stage but through an almost three-century-long cultural exchange that was motivated in part by their shared legacy of slavery and indentured servitude in the New World—then it is but a leap back “over the broom” to account for the oral traditions of that cultural exchange. In other words, it was not only the jig, juba, buck-and-wing, and the shuffling, battering, drumming, and clogging steps that contributed to early forms of evolving tap dance but also the verbal swordplay of satire, wit, insult, one-upmanship, bitter derision, and humorous commentary of both New World Africans and Irish that motivated tap’s fusions and fueled the tap dance challenge.

The divine trickster figure of Yoruban mythology, Esu-Elegbara, was also a “divine linguist” who spoke all languages and was known for powers of satire, magic, and parody. The “divine poet” from ancient Gaelic manuscripts, Airhirn, was feared for destructive poems and “word magic.” Both the African and the Irish oral traditions present folk tales and songs of slander. Both shaped a tradition of verbal abuse and satire that has resounded in New World versions of the African griot and Irish rapparee—of Finn MacCool and of Man-of-Words in the West Indies—resulting in the rhythmic iterations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century tap dancers.

IRISH POETS, ENCHANTERS, MAGICIANS, AND RAPPAREES

Satire is an oral and written expression that ridicules and aims to correct aspects of human behavior, healing with morals what it hurts with wit. Irish satire developed out of a belief in magic and incantation, and it took the form of an active verb: to satirize meant to create
destructive spells of ridicule and shame. The chief activator of such satires was the tribal man of letters—the poet/medicine man who mingled freely with natural and supernatural processes in the practice of his art. Ancient Irish poets had the power to work destruction with their verse: to blemish (aimned), redden (imdergad), disgrace (aili), dishonor (ainfhiad), ridicule (cuintibid), and cut (rindad)—all reference the physical effects of the satirist’s attacks. They are classified as “crimes of the tongue,” spontaneous streams of language that were a gift from God. The legendary poet Aithirine the Importunate was so ruthless and merciless, so mighty in his powers to satirize, that he could demand the single eye of a king. His satires on the maiden Luaine, who refused to pay her king false, left three blotches on her cheeks—black Stain, red Blemish, and white Disgrace—leaving her to die of shame. Aithirine was so feared that, upon approaching the borders of County Leinster, he was offered jewels to not enter and scatter his invectives.

Irish poets could rhyme man or beast to death—“rhyming them to death in drumming tunes,” as Ben Jonson (1572–1637) wrote in the epilogue to his Poetaster, a 1601 satire on fellow playwrights. When, for example, the poet Senchen found that one of his eggs had been eaten by mice, he satirized them with his verses, and ten mice fell dead in his presence. This was not unlike Groundhog Basie pronouncing “I’m gonna put something on you!” to Chuck Green in a tap challenge at the Village Gate in 1964. The ancient hero most alive to Irish folk was the giant and notorious blowhard Finn MacCool, whose Fianna narratives go back to the twelfth century. MacCool was a great defender of his people. One of the best-known tales had him dressing like a baby and hiding in his son’s cradle to entice his great rival, the giant Cucullin; upon approaching the cradle, Cucullin stuck his magic middle finger into the mouth of the infant, and MacCool bit the giant’s finger off, jumping out of the cradle and making short work of the giant.

A counterpart to MacCool and the Irish rogue Rapparee, in tap dance lore, is the great Irish soft-shoe stylist George Delaney Primrose (1832–1919), who claimed to have begun his stage career in 1868 as “Master Georgie the Infant Clog Dancer,” to become the “Ne Plus Ultra of Song and Dance.” The stories that were repeated about the tap dancing Primrose—how he weighed just over a hundred pounds and wore dapper clothes (like the later Fred Astaire); how he smoked cigars but never drank; never raised his voice or swore; never practiced a step or perspired, on even the hottest of summer days in minstrel parades, wearing a high stiff collar that made him look up over the audience as he danced; how he had a flat stomach and beautiful legs, and a style of walking that was like reciting poetry. Those stories remain in the collective memory of tap dancers. Many have idolized him and have stolen steps from him. In all these stories of heroes and superheros, from Aithirine to Primrose, the Irish recognized that stealth, guile, and cunning were useful to people lacking the physical and financial power to overcome conquering giants.

AFRICAN GRIOTS AND TRICKSTERS

The cultural significance of satire in African societies has long been recognized in such forms as the satiric derisive song; it replaced unpleasant and dangerous face-to-face confrontations with safe, more effective, entertaining criticism in which the victim of ridicule was forced to grin and bear the allusions, while also being expected to avenge the insult. African derisive songs were used to burlesque domestic quarrels, quell neighboring disputes, and add villagers into the line of proper social conduct. Unlike Irish bombast, African verbal wit excelled at subtlety and wry indirection. It was a satire of allusion which released frustrations that would otherwise be repressed.

On the nineteenth-century African Gold Coast, improvised songs were adapted to current events and used mocking ridicule, biting sarcasm, fulsome flattery, or just the praise of men.
Among the Ashanti people, satire was institutionalized in the apo, an annual festival in which ridicule of authority was sanctioned and encouraged. For eight days at the annual festival at Axim, liberty to lampoon had free expression, scandal was exalted through song, and the villainies and frauds of superiors and inferiors were exposed without punishment or interruption. The custom of African satiric commentary is clear in the jesters of Dahomey, the satiric functions of the “amusing spirits” of the Poro of Sierra Leone, the topical songs and pantomime of the Ogo of eastern Nigeria, the work songs of praise and satire of Bashi girls in the Kiv area of the 1950s Belgian Congo, and the formal invectives of the Hausa praise singers of northern Nigeria that took the form of blackmail. It is not surprising, then, to see a continuity of that tradition in the New World during the slaving era. Slaves from western Africa improvised songs that lampooned the foibles of their masters with ridicule and derision. They sang not only against each other but also at the expense of the owner, tempering their satire with songs of flattery.

New World Afro-Irish Satiric Traditions

From the Oriki-esu, African narrative prose poems telling stories of Esu-Elegbara, the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, came Esu in Brazil, Echyu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in the pantheon of the loa (spirits) of Voudoun in Haiti, and Papa La Ba in the pantheon of the loa of hoodoo in the United States. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, the master of style, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, and the master of the elusive barrier that separated the divine from the profane—but even a partial list of qualities includes satire, parody, and magic. Esu is “the divine linguist who spoke all languages.”

Esu is variously embodied throughout the Caribbean islands. On the British isle of St. Christopher, “Negroes dressed every occurrence in rhyme, and gave it a metre, rude but well adapted to the purposes of raillery or cruel sarcasm.” For example, in British Jamaica, Europeans arriving at Port Royal were met by boats of black women selling fruits and singing prophesies: “New-comb buckra [white man], He get sick, He take fever, He be die, He be die.” In Spanish Cuba, such songs, in native dialect, were combined with dancing, as observed in 1844 when slaves ridiculed their owners before their faces and enjoyed, with much glee, the owners’ happy ignorance of the message in those songs. In North America, slaves enjoyed parodying their masters within the safe confines of a song and dance or a praise song flattering the master’s vanity. Not all masters got off easily with songs of veiled allusion. Bitter derision was sometimes plainly spoken, as in this version of “Juba,” a body-patting song and dance, the lyrics recorded by Frederick Douglass in 1882:

We raise de wheat,  
Dey gib us de corn;  
We bake de bread,  
Dey gib us de crust;  
We sif de meal,  
Dey gib us de huss;  
We peal de meat,  
Dey gib us de skin;  
And dat’s de way,  
Dey take us in...”

As an expressive medium, juba exemplifies New World rhythmic satiric commentary. Played by patting the hands on the body, juba, the 4/4 time signature of a march, with phrasing
that was syncopated, could also be played by the feet. One form was the paddle-and-roll, one of
the earliest of tap dance rhythms in 4/4 time. The juba rhythm is also related to the time step
of tap:

Single Time Step: AND Thanks for the Bug-GY Ride;
Double Time Step: AND Thank YOU for the Bug-GY Ride;
Triple Time Step: AND When WILL WE Take a Bug-GY Ride;
Double Triple Time Step: AND What 'LL I DO with the Bug-GY Ride

The oral soundings of these mnemonic devices became a kind of spoken formula, in which tap
dancers were able to replicate with their feet any combination of accents that were made with
the mouth.

Fusions and Parallel Retentions

The African and African American songs of derision never had the same form as the Irish lying
songs, also called the songs of marvels—humorous songs that were competitions in lying
intended to amaze, dumbfound, and entertain, and that did not have a word of truth in them.38
African derision also differed from the Irish wake amusements, which, far from being solemn,
were gay social functions, displaying storytelling and games of competition and skill.39 There
were, however, retentions of both satiric traditions in New World expression. New World Irish
and West Africans had much in common, as both had a shared heritage of oppression and slavery.
Africans were not the only slaves in the West Indies with a non-Christian cosmology. Like
the pagan Irish, they, too, had a polytheistic pantheon that was rooted in the Great Mother
religions, and they shared the mother symbol of the serpent and the practice of religious worship
as a bodily celebration. In the Caribbean, there is the symbolic congruence between Irish Cath-
oclic saints and Afro-Caribbean loas. There was also the shared oppression by English slavers,
who were Protestants. As Michael Ventura speculates, “The Irish Saint Patrick holding a scepter
[that] commands snakes was, as far as they were concerned, a shaman with a power stick.”40

The Trinidadian playwright Mustapha Matura’s Playboy of the West Indies (1984) was a
West Indian adaptation of the Irish playwright John Millington Synge’s Playboy of the Western
World (1904–1907). Matura transferred the action from Ireland to Trinidad and thus underscored
the parallels between the seemingly disparate Irish and Caribbean cultures, which
included a shared love of humor, superstition, and witty language. “There is a mutual love
affair, a passion for words,” said Matura, explaining that in Trinidad, wordplay and verbal one-
upmanship are arts, and children spend a great deal of time honing their insults. “If someone
could do it and do it well, it was like [the victim] being slashed with a razor. So you had to be
sharp with your words.”41 The awareness of words and their power—which is rooted in a country
where the calypso minstrels (traveling satiric songsters and musicians) and the Play Mas
Festival skeletons (colorful masters of ceremonies) duel with words and speeches—is reflected
in Matura’s play. He shows an infatuation with fantasy, exaggeration, and tall tales in which the
distinction between illusion and reality is blurred. The protagonist in Playboy of the West Indies
bears a striking resemblance to the “talking man” described by anthropologist Roger Abrahams
in his 1983 book, The Man-of-Words in the West Indies, the verbal performer in the English-
speaking Caribbean. The Man-of-Words was the good-talker type; he was a great arguer and a
virtuoso improviser, able to create an impromptu arrangement of curses, riddles, rhymes, and
insults; he had a storehouse of macaronic devices—a burlesque medley of real or coined words
from various languages jumbled into the verbal mix. The man-of-words or man-of-action, as
Abrahams called him, was best in contest with other performers, such as the “reigning beast” in a Trinidadian Carnival Devil band who was so dexterous and inventive in his dancing as to be proclaimed the best—after presenting various steps that the challenger failed to imitate. Coming together here was the challenge, the words, the music, and the dance in just one new New World tradition.

Orality and Music of the Feet

The idea of equating the man-of-words with the man-of-action and associating the oral with the aural, in which satire is re-sounded in the feet, is based on the core notion that tap dance is an oral language. It functions, as Moe Meyer so eloquently argued about Irish step dancing, as an oral poetry that shapes acoustic space, as a rhythmic language that expresses “acute Hibernian wit.” As the Irish dance historians Troy and Margaret Kinney described, such Irish step dances as the jig, reel, and hornpipe are the most highly elaborated dances of the clog and shuffle types, with passages in which the feet tap the floor seventy-five times in fifteen seconds: “Intricate combinations of keen, exact steps, the Irish dances are a series of subtle epigrams directed to the eye . . . epigrams that proceed from true wit.” As the Kinneys said about the champion Irish step dancer Thomas Hill: “The thing of greatest importance in Irish dancing is the music of the shoes . . . the development and control and variety of tones that can be produced by taps of heels and soles on the floor and against each other.”

Style in Irish step dance is necessary, as is exactness in “tricky” time, but the control of a good variety of sounds is the most difficult part of Irish dancing and, add the Kinneys, is the most important because “it is the most Irish.” The feet of a fine Irish dancer, moreover, are “drumsticks as amenable to control as the drummer’s; notes long and short, dull and sharp—he has all the drum’s variety. No resource of syncopation . . . is unknown to the Irish dances; the rhythm gets into the blood . . . every tap on the tympanum is re-informed by the same metric beating on the vision.” How interesting that this description of Irish step dancing, as a “subtle epigram” (a pithy, caustic, thought-provoking, short poem), is similar to African American musicologist Thomas Talley’s description of the shuffling steps in the Ring Shout as a “tattoo”: “The feet beat a tattoo upon the ground, answering to every word, and sometimes to every syllable of the rhyme.”

Like Irish step-dancing displays at village alehouses, when two or three men pit themselves against each other in short spells, so, too, the tap dance challenge became a dialogue of rhythm, motion, and witty repartee. That was clearly illustrated in the Green versus Groundhog tap challenge at the Village Gate in 1964: “I’m gonna put something on you,” Groundhog growled (pronouncing his rhythmic spell on Green), as he flung his arms open and skittered across the floor. Green’s return was all the more quiet (as he was a master of African indirection): trusting the even timing of his taps, the milliseconds of silence between each tap, he sprawled into a leggy, languid Charleston. “I know you can do better than that,” Groundhog spewed, as Green floated into a graceful tapping turn (in nonviolent protest of Groundhog’s noise). “Oh, you want to play show biz?” Groundhog derided, returning with a staccato of flamenco-heels that made his patent leathers skate across the stage (rhyming Green to death in drumming tunes).

An elaboration of African and Irish incarnations of satire in New World percussive expression always referenced the rhythmic sorcery of the Master Juba, William Henry Lane. His style of tap dancing was described by the nineteenth-century novelist Charles Dickens in American Notes (1842) as a variation of the seventeenth-century dramatist Ben Jonson’s descriptions of Irish poets “rhyming to death in drumming tunes”:
Single and double shuffling, cutting and cross-cutting; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning his knees to present the backs of his legs in front, spinning on his toes and heels; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs.

“There never was such a Juba,” witnesses to Lane’s “rhythmic miracles” claimed about his rhythmic wit. “You hear it like the humming sound of nature, permeating everywhere; it enters your heart . . . it creeps into your ear, and clings to it.” And “you must see to believe.”

The spirit of rapparee resounded in the Virginia Minstrels of the 1840s, which comprised Irishmen Dan Emmett, Billy Whitlock, Frank Brower, and Dick Pelham. Their breakdowns were accompanied not only with music but were punctuated with brief and pungent verbal interjections that rhythmically accented and elongated the duration of the musical phrase—and even commented on it. “Dat’s de heel dey neber told a lie,” they’d swear while dancing their minstrel jigs. So, too, were the West African jesters of Dahomey invoked in the boisterous physical style of Ernest Hogan, the star and choreographer of the all-black musical Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk (1898). Singing “Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd,” with the lyrics, “Dam de lan’, let de white folks rule it!” Hogan provoked laughter with his lyrics, in Southern Negro dialect, while commenting wryly on white rule (“I’s a-looking fo’ my pullet”)—while cocking his head, pigeon-winging, and buzzard-rippling a menagerie of rhythmic moves from the black vernacular—all the while contributing to the lexicon of tap dance.

There was as well an incarnation of the spirit of Esu in the Irish slapstick dancer James Barton (1890–1962), a blackface performer known for broadly explicit and satirical pantomime that overlay his dancing, who had the rare ability to dance any step he saw and make it his own. The critics raved: “As Negroid as Bert Williams used to be” and “Truly Nubian.” Born into an Irish theatrical family in which everyone danced jigs, clogs, and reels, Barton’s career skyrocketed when, in the musical review Dew Drop Inn (1923) on Broadway, he performed fourteen dance routines, including a strut, a grind, a knockout slide, a military drill, a dying-swan burlesque, a skate dance on a pedestal, a mad-dog act, a burlesque waltz, and a challenge dance. Barton’s expertise as an Irish step dancer and a keen observer of the rhythms and movements of African American dance were combined with his experience as a burlesque comedian (to ludicrously imitate, broadly caricature, and mocking represent), and the results were a new, shamelessly vital blend of American vernacular dance on Broadway.

From a multiple of African and Irish satiric traditions came Billy Kersands (1842–1915), a black two-hundred-pound singer, dancer, and comedian whose claim to fame was his slow-witted character with “a copiousness of mouth and breadth of tongue that no white man could rival.” One of the first African Americans to gain prominence on the minstrel stage after the Civil War, Kersands was forced to use the blackface convention invented by white minstrels, including painting over his own lips a huge red mouth. Kersands trumped the stereotype by making his own unusually large mouth one of the central features of his act. Dancing with a mouthful of billiard balls while performing his monologue, he once quipped to England’s Queen Victoria during a royal performance that if his mouth were any bigger they would have had to move his ears. The physical humor of the “mouth routines” and the literalism of the “ignorant” characters were comic devices in which audiences, black and white, could laugh down at characters worse off and more ignorant than anyone in the audience.

While audiences convulsed over the slightest curl of Kersands’s lips or the opening of that yawning chasm (just the smacking of his lips, which he played for all its grotesque contortions, made audiences howl), they swooned over his dancing. Kersands was the originator of the
Virginia Essence, the most graceful and elegant of all soft-shoe tap dances, which he performed to a slow, 4/4 time signature. In the tradition of the African derisive song that utilized symbolic indirection, the lyrics in Kersands’s verses, which he sang while dancing, contained “victories” for black characters, even if nothing more than psychological reversals. Such a verse in “Old Aunt Jemima” endorses his protest against whites’ broken promises:

My old missus promise me,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh, oh, oh [after each line]
When she died she’d set me free.
She lived so long her head got bald,
She swore she would not die at all.

With blacks and whites in the same theater at a Kersands performance (theaters in the South with only a small space in the gallery for African American customers, called “Nigger Heaven,” split the hall in half), his routines strategically conveyed a mixed message: whites heard jokes confirming the deep-seated need to believe that blacks were inferior; blacks, already sensitized to hearing surreptitious blurs, recognized and reconciled those distorted images, which exaggerated prominent Negroid features, because they saw a real diversity among blacks. Blacks were also challenged by Kersands’s satiric commentary in his famous song and dance, “Mary’s Gone with a Coon”:

He’s as black as he can be;
Now I wouldn’t care if he was only yellow . . .
My heart is torn . . .
De chile dat I bore, should tink of me no more,
Den to run away wid a big black coon.

On the surface, the lyrics seem to promote antiblack sentiments. But seen through the prism of African satiric tradition, the lyrics have a different meaning. Kersands confronted, confirmed, and challenged the racial attitudes of African Americans, for whom skin color was a marker of upward social mobility.

Billy Kersands, then, was the quintessential embodiment of African and Irish satiric traditions. He was the big clown who tap danced with extraordinary lightness and grace (like his much later white-Irish counterpart Jackie Gleason); the talking fool with the big red mouth who spoke in many tongues, disarming audiences with self-deprecating humor; the song-and-dance man with powers to praise, if only to insult. He was the New World trickster, the man-of-words and the man-of-action, who preceded such great Afro-Irish jesters of the turn of the century as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (black) and George M. Cohan (white), who continued to grace (and disgrace) laughing audiences with their dancing tongues and dancing feet.