

VERNACULAR SOCIALITY AND REGIONAL ICONICITY IN STEP DANCE

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Both in Ireland and regions of North America vernacular traditional dance includes the percussive use of feet on the floor by individual dancers that is generally called step dancing.ⁱ Performance of this widely diffused way of dancing is socially organized in many different ways. Individuals may perform step dancing singly or in groups. It may be thought of as a dance in and of itself or be found in the context of a group figure dance. Step dancing is sometimes improvised, sometimes choreographed before a performance, sometimes codified as a system and formally structured in its performance and sometimes not. Step dancing throughout its range often shares many kinetic elements, that is, the little bits of movement that make up the action of dancing: a tap of the toe, a drop of the heel, a change of weight from one foot to the other. It even shares many kinematic units, that is, natively recognizable coherent groupings of elements.ⁱⁱ These are usually called, not surprisingly, steps.

One of the most common ways of characterizing variation in this idiom is in terms of regional style. Popular literature and media publications generally treat step dancing in this way: as Cape Breton step dancing; Appalachian clogging; Ottawa Valley step dancing; and of course, Irish step dancing. In the Irish context the high profile achieved by the “nationalized” schooled step dance idiom has led to a reaction that acknowledges a wider variety of less codified regional vernacular idioms. While seldom nationalized in North America, step dancing is usually seen and presented as regional in style.

In *Close the Floor* (1985) I examined traditional dance and dance events in rural Newfoundland. That study focused on the so-called figure dances that are performed by groups in various formations rather than on the percussive stepping also found there, partly because at the time I conducted this field research (1978-80) visual documentation adequate to examination of stepping was not available nor easily made on a student budget. Later, I made recordings on a return research summer project to Newfoundland in 1989.ⁱⁱⁱ Although that video-8 system has now become obsolete, it was much better suited to my needs than the SONY PortaPac reel-to-reel machine of earlier years and significantly augmented my step dance data. For the following discussion I have pulled together a variety of other recorded step dancing that I could locate in other film projects, such as concert performances, profiles of the musicians and their communities, as well as instructional videos. In recent years, as video recording technology continued to advance, much more of such documentation became available.^{iv}

It is apparent from even such a desultory database that step dancing is a widely shared dance idiom. From a repertoire of movement resources and possibilities, some constellations crystallize and become seen as emblematic of regional identities. Some of these "styles," are widely familiar, while others such as that found among the Metis of central Canada perhaps less so (CITE Medicine Fiddle). Looking back over the 30 years during which I have been observing step dance in North America, I see evidence that the variety that is characteristic of living vernacular tradition has persisted in social dance practice, and that regional styles seem to coalesce around influential dancers who achieve prominence beyond their immediate locale, usually in concert with a surge in popular interest. Such mass popularizations are a complex phenomenon in their own right in which media attention, exposure, and commercial exploitation, interact with cultural politics and ideologies to create this effect.

A search of the web, for example (nowadays always a good place to look for a measure of popular awareness of a cultural phenomenon) reveals the example of a recent, almost sudden, burgeoning of interest in step dancing as practiced in Cape Breton (MacEachen 2003). In discussions regarding the appropriateness of the schooled Irish step-dancing to adult recreation, one finds it frequently mentioned as a possible alternative that might be better suited to provide the sociality that adult enthusiasts are looking for from their dancing. The music industry has played an important role in this most recent exposure and concomitant surge of interest (Feintuch 2004). A "maritime" regional sound has had commercial success in Canada and one iconic sound element in its mix has been the fiddle. A few younger fiddlers have been building careers in the popular world-music market and dance has been to some extent "brought along" by them to a wider popular awareness (Gurstein 1999; Mead 1999).^v Also as usual with such revivals of traditional musics, a few individuals emerge as both iconic and authoritative. In Cape Breton, fiddler Buddy MacMaster and dancer Harvey Beaton are perceived in this way. Buddy has made several commercial recordings, including a recent one from Rounder that is particularly well documented (McMaster 2003). He is also the subject of the film that includes step dance sequences (Murphy nd.). The identity discourse to which the dance is appropriated here is a powerful one of Scottish identity and the film shows Harvey teaching dance in Scotland.

It is my thesis that in this and other documented regional "styles" of step dance one sees examples of a shared dance idiom that BECOMES identified as a regional style only when particular conditions are ripe for it. This stylization is often accomplished by a selection of certain movement features based on the dancing of a very few key performers. The selectivity of regional stylization may be so unrepresentative in fact that its regional character might be said to have been "invented."

Broad characterization of any large cultural geographic regions would seem to dissolve into complexity as the focus sharpens to reveal more detail. At smaller scales of collective identification dance style is associated more with social networks such as family or immediate community. On the port-au-port peninsula of Newfoundland the Cornect brothers from Mainland were well known as a musical family, and so on to the Formangers and Benoits at the other end of the coastal region. A tendency to identify style in terms of region obscures the often quite large range of variation within that region as well as the high degree of similarity that exists across these boundaries.

My most extensive fieldwork has been in Newfoundland and I turn there now for further confirmation of this argument. A "Newfoundland step dance style" never really emerged and coalesced, although several distinctive features of individual practice vied, in a sense, for pride of place as markers of a Newfoundland dancing.

Many of the kinetic elements and larger step units documented in the preceding sources are also to be seen in Newfoundland. Such juxtaposition draws attention to the need to investigate in what dimensions of dance movement stylization is manifest. More systematic comparative analysis would help to clarify the traditional vernacular movement resources which have been molded in response to different conditions throughout North America, such as the interaction with African-American culture in the South, the development of contests and other performance settings in many regions, as well as more pervasive and underlying differences in social and economic organizations such as those I believe are represented by the Newfoundland case. A goal is I see it, however, is not stylistic identification for its own sake, not merely classification of the complexity we know is there, but rather an enrichment of our understanding of processes by which stylization occurs, shedding light on how dancers manipulate their traditional resources to make dance meaningful in terms of their experience.

Within Newfoundland there are number of vernacular regions characterized by particular historical, social, geographical and other conditions which had an impact on the practice of dance. Of particular importance have been factors influencing the available elements of dance and music repertory directly, the history of settlement, and subsequent contact and interaction with the changing world of music in dance beyond Newfoundland. Thus French Newfoundland, on the Port-au-Port Peninsula is a distinct vernacular region in itself.

Its best known fiddler, Emile Benoit, and members of his family can be seen playing and dancing at home on the Canada and the United States volume of the JVC/Smithsonian Music and Dance of the Americas video series (Benoit 1995). I also recorded him and members of his family making music and dancing together on man occasions.

The Codroy Valley area of southwest Newfoundland is also somewhat distinct, being settled largely as an extension of the more Scottish population in the neighboring maritime province of Nova Scotia. The rest of Newfoundland land is dominated by a mix of English and Irish settlers and distinguishing between their dancing is much more difficult, as the two groups have mixed and influenced one another. Characteristics of music/dance culture are more aligned to the vernacular regions formed by the different bays around which settlements are scattered than along this ethnic-religious division. It is to this English and Irish Newfoundland culture that I now direct my attention.

The complexity of factors that influence dance culture make it difficult to generalize about the whole of Newfoundland. Communities around St. John's, the provincial capital, for example, have always been more engaged by on-going developments in North American and British popular culture, than the more remote outport settlements. From some bays so-called foreign-going sailors went on schooners to Europe and the Caribbean, while others maintained highly localized in-shore fisheries. Communities located near the Second World War American military bases were strongly influenced by these contacts. Elsewhere radio introduced American music post-war styles and new roads often brought traveling performers. Beginning in the late 60s, television programs served to promulgate mainstream popular music and dance repertoire. In the years of my fieldwork there were some outport areas, however, which remained relatively removed from this mainstreaming trend. At that time in some of those communities, older musical traditions persisted. In yet other areas, such as Placentia Bay, social upheavals such as forced relocation, lead to the self-conscious revitalization of older forms. Such processes have clearly continued. Today one can find a self-consciously revived dance heritage practiced, in part, for tourists; a phenomenon barely beginning during my time there (Pigeon Inlet 2005).

Despite local differences and on-going historical changes there is however an overarching shared experience throughout much of Newfoundland that strongly shaped all of its dance traditions. This is the pattern of outport social life that developed in the context of the merchant fishing economy as practiced in this particularly harsh natural environment (Sider 1986). It is this framework that largely set the parameters for the types of dance events I have previously examined and which has fostered the patterns of meaning with which Newfoundlanders have infused their dance movement.

Step dancing in Newfoundland is performed in the context of group dances, but is also found as distinct genre. At its most formal the step dance is a solo performance for an audience within the largely social context of the dance occasion. It may also take the form of the competition between two dancers, a

freely organized group of dancers all stepping together, or a kind of couple dance depending upon the social context.

There is a pervasive contrast between male and female dance practice. In general, men take a more active role and perform energetic stepping throughout the group dances while the women may simply stand in their places.

Women seldom performed solo step dances. It was more likely to find the occasional woman who would step dance in a less formal manner, coupled with a man or in a group context, but even then it seems that women usually danced at halftime tempo and in an accompanying role. Informants expressed the attitude that while it was expected that men could dance, "it was sort of a bonus of the woman was an especially good dancer" (MUNFLA Ms. 73-89/p.109). Even those women so identified to me, however, performed more rudimentary steps compared to those of the men.

A characteristic use of the body and some aesthetic norms underlie a range of individual variation. Dancers generally perform in an upright posture with little torso movement. Movement articulation focuses almost entirely on the feet with which the dancers perform complex stepping patterns, tapping out the musical rhythms. The feet are kept directly under the body. The arms and hands hang naturally at the dancer's sides or may be slightly raised with a flexed elbow. Such arm and hand gestures are not considered a significant part of the dance.

Broadly speaking step dance structure consists of a variety of kinetic elements, primarily weight changes between the heels and balls of the feet. Gestural tap and brush movements, again with the heel or ball of the foot and a more forceful stamping of the whole foot. These may be placed around the body in various ways. The significant positions are defined in relation to the body axes: generally slightly in front, diagonally front, to the side, diagonally back behind. Some movements incorporate leg and foot rotations.

These elements are combined into step units of different lengths to incorporate one or more kinetic elements into repeatable patterns. While some dancers express an ideal of formal structuring in which "each foot is used the same," that is, each step sequence is repeated in a symmetrical mirror image, few adhere to this ideal in practice, and most dancers seem to think principally of coordinating the structure their steps to the musical phrases. The solo Step Dance, performed in a more presentational manner for an audience, is likely to tend toward the more formally structured end of the spectrum while men's stepping in set dances seems much less formalized. Particular dancers favor a smaller selection from the whole range of available elements and employ a characteristic step, often identified as their step by

name, and to which they consistently return after using a few others in a punctuating manner.

Since much of this general description is widely applicable throughout North America, Ireland and the British Isles, a closer examination of several dancers is needed to provide a finer grained image of step dancing in Newfoundland. I have documented dance traditions in several vernacular regions. Within each region particular settlements form quite distinct social groupings, which may be made up in turn of quite separate family networks. I spent nearly a month in Plate Cove West, Bonavista Bay, for example, among the Keoughs and their relations before I met families from the "other side of the harbor " in the natural course of social life, and had similar experiences elsewhere.

The communities of Plate Cove, Open Hall, Red Cliff and Tickle Cove on Bonavista Bay South constitute one such area, in which much my fieldwork was conducted. Their dancing was recorded by CBC television in 1976 for the program *Land and Sea* (MUNFLA, Videotape, 78-50/v.32). Gerald Quentin was both one of the area's dance musicians and a performer of the solo step dance. In the brief performance shown one can see that he characteristically supports his weight on the ball of his foot, keeping the heel slightly lifted. His preferred steps consist of rapid alterations of weight between the ball and/or heel of the foot, stepping directly under the body on the accented (down) beat and gesturing slightly to the front or side.

When performing, he would begin with simple steps and progress to the more complicated, which were often those which sounded more subdivisions of the beat or increased the parts of the foot used in each step, creating more movement density. In a culminating step the weight is transferred from one ball to the other while quickly striking the heel of that foot before taking the weight in rapid repetition. This requires more "lift" off the ball of the foot to sustain the weight off the ground for that short moment longer than in easier steps; something one feels as an increased energy in the dancing. None of these steps, however, are unique to Newfoundland. This dancer's distinctiveness is to be found more in a sense of control, and a "held" quality which is conveyed by his body attitude, which is slightly flexed throughout, the restriction of movement to a very small "near reach" space around the body, and a lack of release in the lower weight and foot gestures.

Lloyd Oldford, another dancer from the same community is shown in this film dancing in the Square Dance. While performing within the same broad parameters outlined above, he dances quite differently than Gerald. He tends to maintain his weight more towards the back and to gesture diagonally to the side with slightly outwardly rotated legs. He favors an energetic step, again transferring weight from one foot to the other while interpolating a gestural heel-strike of the floor, as in Gerald's duple time Step Dance above. Lloyd dances to the compound time meter generally used to accompany figure

dances using a triplet rhythm. After taking his weight quickly on the ball of his foot at the final third beat, he drops back onto the whole first foot rather than springing back as in Gerald's step. The effect is a persistent pounding of the first beat of the triplet marking the pulse of the music with an insistent impulsive drive. Other dancers in this excerpt use even simpler steps and even more forceful stamping.

The differences between these two examples reflect the shifting context, from solo Step Dance performance with its heightened focus on aesthetic valuation, to the more social figure dance in which the juxtaposition of male and female movement statements is emphasized. Some informants noted a shift from light dancing to heavier more forceful stamping between these two generations that may also be at work in this example. Surely there are individual idiosyncratic contrasts here as well.

The women dancing in this example provide a striking contrast that illustrates the general gender distinctions and made earlier. Some women simply stand in their place, at most they may shift their weight from side to side at half the tempo of the men's stepping. This is even clearer in the performance of an older couple demonstrating the Square Dance as it was performed in the Placentia Bay community of Red Island (MUNFLA, Videotape, 82-092/v. 77).

At certain points these women take a very passive role, merely providing a framework within which the men can dance "to" each other; during traveling sequences, of course, the women do participate more actively. The two men exemplify the very contained use of space and the lack of free-swinging gestures noted earlier, although their body attitude is not as flexed as that of the Plate Cove dancers.

Another vernacular region in which traditional step dancing continued is the Northern Peninsula. Its West Coast was home to Rufus Guinchard, a fiddler with whom I worked extensively, and who was the primary dance musician of his community for much of his life. At the family observance of his 90th birthday on 6 September 1989 step dancing in the couple format occurred in which the woman, while more active than in the Square Dance, "stepped" by changing supports at half the male tempo, lifted her feet higher, and supported weight on the whole foot, in a manner markedly less intense than the male stepping. .

The vernacular regions of Newfoundland represented in these illustrations were settled by both Irish and West-country English people, of both Catholic and Anglican faiths, who had interacted in mixed together while maintaining some with separate identities. It is difficult to distinguish distinct dance tradition between these two groups, although some of the stricter Protestant dominated communities, often of primarily English origin, tended to discourage dancing might employ singing games instead, while strongly Irish

settlements were often perceived as more liberal in their enjoyment of music, dance and drink. It is sometimes possible to distinguish the musical repertoire, but any particular musician is likely have a mixed repertoire.

Together with step dancing traditions throughout North America, Anglo and Irish Newfoundland shares a largely common repertoire of kinetic elements, among which a few may be characteristically emphasized within particular dance communities or by particular dancers. These units are combined with a range of structural formality depending upon the dancer and the context. What seems to distinguish most of Newfoundland in contrast to other North American regions, is a combination of features including certain tendencies to be seen the use of space, weight overall body attitude, and concomitant preferences among the wider range of kinetic components. This constellation of aesthetic values and expressive meaning is embedded in a shared cultural experience of informants. In the step dancing component of dance tradition extreme emphasis on contrast between male and female is perhaps the most striking feature of Newfoundland dance compared to other regions. Stepping seems to have become an emblem of maleness to be used for personal display as a solo dance, asserted within the context of group figure dances, or to express comradely competition.

English and Irish Newfoundland stepping is marked by its very contained quality. The limbs are kept close to the body and there is often some flexion throughout which contributes to a sense of spatial containment as well. The footwork is rarely far off the floor, movements are small and kept directly under the body. The use of weight is very controlled, seldom passive or released. The lower leg is rarely swung, as in some Appalachian clogging. Expressive intensification is communicated by increased frequency of kinetic variety within an ever smaller spatial envelope, requiring ever more control.

The importance of these features is confirmed by examination of the shared aesthetic concepts reflected in folk speech concerning dance. The most admired step dancers were those described as the "tidiest," and those who did not move all over the floor. Even in a "sidestep" in which the dancer moved quickly, or "cut" across the floor it was considered that the footwork should still be "neat" and kept under the body. In addition to neatness, "lightness," was also much admired.

These two of characteristics were often illustrated by the observation that some dancers were so light on their feet they could dance on a tin, or enamel pan, turned bottom-up on the floor (MUNFLA, Ms. 781-271/pp. 177-181). Short anecdotes of dancing on plates have been reported throughout Newfoundland. The expression "so and is so could dance on a tea plate" indicates lightness on one's feet and the ability to dance without moving from one spot (personal communication from Herbert Halpert May 1981). Another man described this ability by claiming that he could dance on a "thole pin,"

the wooden peg used as an oarlock (Story and Widdowson 1982, 571), and another informant of mine commented that his father could dance on a two-by-four if need be (MUNFLA, Ms., 81-271/p. 198).

These stories are apparently based on traditional step dancing feats performed by good dancers. The phrase "close to the floor" often used as a shout of encouragement to dancers or in a request for a step dance tune, indicates that dancers, as well as being light and neat were expected to keep their movements relatively small and subtle. The upright postural norm is implied in descriptions of comic dancing which I heard. To get a laugh dancers, often "half shot" or slightly intoxicated, would get themselves "in all kinds of shapes" and "did everything in the world" with their body (MUNFLA, Ms., 79-339/p. 55). It is the upright norm that makes such movements incorrect and humorous. (See the video illustration provided earlier).

The element of display that pervades all step dance performance seems compatible with the emphasis on individuality in style. Each dancer is expected to have their own distinctive step. Indeed in the context of mumming,^{vi} characteristic steps are used by the disguised mummers to hide their identity and by the audience to discover it (Chiaramonte 1969, 87). Music and dance performance generally in Newfoundland is one domain of social life in which an otherwise rigidly imposed egalitarianism that restricts self-assertion is suspended and within which rigid social distinctions might be challenged. The assertion of individuality through step dancing is one aspect of this social ethos that is grounded in the relationships of outport economic life. Different vernacular regions, and smaller networks based on community residential and kinship patterns, in Newfoundland displayed preferences for a particular musical repertoire, rhythms and steps. Within a dance community, however, step dance style is used primarily to express sexuality and individuality. These two domains of meaning are raised to a dominant level of significance in Newfoundland due to the conditions of social life and the expressive role of dance and music within this system.

Step dancing has not in Newfoundland become associated with an assertion of all large cultural geographic regional identity, as it has in Cape Breton. The Newfoundland example stands, I think, as illustration of the dynamics of step dancing which existed throughout North America apart from the self-conscious regionalism engendered by changing social conditions that challenge traditional patterns of life.

This situation provides an opportunity for productive comparative research. The processes of stylization can be seen particularly clearly in relation to this dance genre, which is widely dispersed among regions distinguished by differing social conditions that sharing a basic repertoire of movement resources. The distinctive profile of Newfoundland step dancing might

profitably be compared to other regions to explore the kinds of manipulation undergone by this medium in response to different social conditions and expressive issues. A thoroughgoing comparative study based on the more complete ethnographic description that is currently available offers the possibility of more fundamental generalizations about these processes.

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End Notes:

ⁱ This essay includes material modified from its original publication in *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* Volume 33, 1991 (a source which is not generally available) and draws extensively on previously unpublished material from my *Folk Dance in Rural Newfoundland*, MA Thesis, Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland 1981.

ⁱⁱ This use of "kinemic" is well established in ethnochoreology and taken from Adrienne Kaeppler's work analyzing dance structure.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks to the Research Committee of the Academic Senate of the University of California Los Angeles for their support.

^{iv} Many of these are individually produced and of limited distribution. However, three available examples illustrate the overall picture well: Bernstein *Ten Toe Percussion* 1988, Bishop 1995 *New England Dances* and Seeger *Talking Feet* (film) 1987, *Talking Feet* (book) 1992.

^v Natalie McMaster has become probably the best known of these performers, and she frequently step dances as part of her show.

^{vi} Mumming is one form of the widespread disguised Christmas house visiting custom.