

The Performance Text

edited by

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PAST THE DOCUMENTS, TO THE DANCE: THE WITNESS TO JUBA IN 1848

Stephen Johnson

Domenico Pietropaolo, in a recent talk at the Festival of Original Theatre (Toronto, Ontario 7 March 1997), drew a distinction between History and Historiography. He said that the use of the word "History" as applied to that which historians create is a confusing misnomer. "There is only one history," he said. If I remember correctly, he said that history is that which occurs during the passage of time. And that is all that it is. Everything the historian does should be called "historio-graphy," with the emphasis on the "graphic" or written character of the creation. History is the unexamined brute event, historiography the definition and interpretation of the event by an individual mind to some imposed significance. This may seem self-evident; it is the basis of post-modern historiography, and its subspecies that focuses on performance (see White, Burke, Postlewait, as general references). I find, however, that even in the halls of academe this distinction requires frequent repetition. I add that my own (no doubt) gross misinterpretation of what Professor Pietropaolo actually said is evidence of what he said — if I am even close to what he said. It is all quite postmodern.

This is not, however, the complete process of creating "historio-graphy." The brute event that is the subject of the historian's study exists in the infinitesimal present. It happens, but it does not persist, even in part. The event manifests itself, as far as the historian is concerned, only through its physical artifacts, including buildings, borders, crowns, and the dead. Such artifacts include, to my purpose, what historians usually refer to as "documents" — anything recorded through language or iconography as a result of the event ("Documents" is the term I will use in the balance of this essay). It is no secret, these are what historians use as the raw material of their creative work. They are thus once removed from their intended subject — the event.

These documents are, furthermore, the result of a human intervention that colours, interprets the event during their creation. The witnesses of and participants in the event are affected by it, and in the documents record their responses to it. In effect, what the historian

does is to read a text (the document) that is itself a translation of and commentary on another text (the event). In this sense, then, historians are twice removed from their intended subject.

Historians are even further removed, because the subject-event is manifested to us (if we are fortunate) in a wide array of documents, representing a diversity of individual accounting, interpretation, commentary and translation. The view of the source-event is diffracted through many kinds of lenses, and we as historians typically perform two actions. We interpret the documents as subjective responses to an event, in an attempt to understand the effects of the source event. And we attempt (however vain) to "get past" the documents and to "get to" the event. We do this because we want to interpret the event ourselves. We want to read it ourselves. In my case certainly, I want to have been there, as witness. To this end, historians spend a great deal of time negotiating agreement in the diversity of opinion displayed by the documents, explaining the contradictions, seeking a cohesive, unified picture of the original event. In the balance of this paper, I propose to look briefly at a single example of this attempt — my own efforts to "get to" the dance of Master Juba.

Juba was an American dancer who flourished during the 1840s in the variety houses of New York City, in a successful British tour with a minstrel troupe in 1848, and as a solo act in Britain until his (alleged) death around 1852. Why I would wish to understand how he danced is not the focus of this essay; but some context is required. Briefly, Juba was the subject of a very influential 1947 article by dance historian Marian Hannah Winter. She created out of the documents a seminal importance in the development of a distinctly American dance idiom. To Winter, Juba invented "tap" dance, and introduced "African" rhythms into western dance. She manufactured a "historio-graphy" of rising prominence, success against the odds of racism, integrity of performance based on direct links with African-American folk culture. Juba, by this re-reading and re-writing, re-appropriates for black culture what is otherwise generally seen as racist theft. Winter created an important place for Juba; such importance always begs re-examination.

Juba's dance invites other questions. He was written about far more than the usual touring act during his 1848 British tour, and one wonders why. He appears to have been the only performer of colour in the intensely racist and segregated business of negro minstrelsy, and one wonders why. The descriptions of him are at once thorough, precise, and incomprehensibly contradictory — and one wonders what it was about his performance that was indescribable. He danced in men's and in women's costume, for middle-class and saloon audiences, was "lionized" and de-

spised — and, by one report, his skeleton was on exhibition shortly after his death. One wonders why. At the center of all this wondering is the single brute event — the dance.

There is no written choreography of Juba's dance. He was not a part of a culture that would think or want to record, preserve and reproduce. He was a part of a popular culture that was oral-performative, and improvisatory. This culture did not produce its own documents, except in the form of playbills and puffery. With the exception of one graphic image, that appears to show Juba performing a jig, the records that we have of his dance are all of one kind. They are the eyewitness reports written by middle-class white British men for middle-class newspaper readers, based on their personal experience of the event. These are clear examples of the artifacts used by historians, representing as they do a physical remnant of the event, the effect of the event on the witness, and the attempted translation of the event into the written word.

Reading Individual Documents

As an historian, I read each document for the writer's attitude toward the dance, and for clues as to the character of the dance itself. I would like to briefly consider a few examples. Number one:

The effort baffles description. It is certainly original, and like nothing that we have ever seen before. It is a combination of almost every quality in art — from the graceful movement of the 'minuet' to the highest pitch of terpsichorean illustration — and something more. There is such energy, such rapidity, as is quite novel in the annals of dancing. We are impressed with the notion that he is the identical black who 'danced himself clean out of sight.' Yet all is in character, all in keeping, and in exquisite time; there is both light and shade. With a consummation of art and tack he will 'bring you jump' from his most frenzied movement to the most subdued demeanour possible, and with so much quaintness and grace that the beholder is fairly puzzled which to admire most. [*Birmingham Journal*, 16 December 1848; this part of the notice is an alleged quotation from a Brighton newspaper, unconfirmed. It is consistent with the variety of notices Juba received.]

There is nothing here that would allow us to close our eyes and see or hear Juba, or that would allow a dancer to re-create a single movement. But there is something here. There is an admission of incompetence — "the effort baffles description." There is an expression of originality — that the writer has not seen anything like this dance before. The writer appears to recognize other dances in this dance — "every quality in art" from the "minuet," and so on. Another feature is extreme speed, another

control, and another the sudden change from “frenzied” to “subdued.”

Some of this is common rhetoric; if the dance cannot be described on paper, then the reader will simply have to pay to see it. Nevertheless, I do read into this description two sets of contradictory characteristics — indescribability opposed to recognizability, frenzy opposed to control.

A second example:

His pedal execution is a thing to wonder at, if his flexibility of muscle did not confound us. He jumps, he capers, he crosses his legs, he stamps his heels, he dances on his knees, on his ankles, he ties his limbs into double knots, and untwists them as one might a skein of silk, and all these marvels are done in strict time and appropriate rhythm — each note has its corresponding step and action. Now he languishes, now burns, now love seems to sway his motions, and anon rage seems to impel his steps. Juba’s plantation dance is a sort of terpsichorean illustration of Collin’s “Ode on the Passions.” One feat which he achieves with his feet excites our especial wonder; he absolutely dances with one foot on the ground and the other one never off it. [*Sterling Journal and Advertiser*, 31 August 1849, quoting a London review from *The Morning Post*, unconfirmed. The reviewer describes Juba in similar language; the London review is quoted as corroboration.]

Some of the same characteristics are evident in this description as in the last — the variety of styles, the sudden changes (“now he languishes, now burns.”) By my reading, this writer attempts to capture a sense of the dance in the speed and rhythm of the writing — “he jumps, he capers, he crosses his legs.” There is also here a description of the impossible, and in the last line the nonsensical; although one could treat this line as a reference to the percussive “tap” element of Juba’s dance, which of course wouldn’t exist unless he had both feet on the ground.

A third example:

The dances he introduced were distinguished for eccentricity, rapidity of motion, and the accuracy of the time kept. They approximated, in some respects, to those wild dances that may be witnessed sometimes in the remoter parts of the Highlands, including the sword dance, as there known; besides having the same idea of clanking the heels, as pervades the Polka. But it is not the office of the legs alone to do all this; the head, arms, and body generally take full share of duty, and assume such extraordinary positions, that only a being possessed of the power of Proteus could calculate upon taking. [*The Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 18 October 1848]

The qualities of speed, rhythmic control, extreme gestures and frequent change are obvious. Added to this are attempts to identify features from other dances—the highland fling and the Polka. An emphasis is placed on the use of the upper body, head and arms, as if this was unusual.

Finally, I offer part of a lengthy description from Juba's first Manchester appearance:

[Manchester Guardian, 18th October 1848] FREE-TRADE HALL. — "Juba" and the Serenaders.

A party of serenaders, under the leadership of Mr. G. W. Pell, late of St. James's Theatre, gave one of their peculiar exhibitions on Monday evening in the Free-trade Hall. They are six in number, and are mostly happy in the possession of nigger-like physiognomies. The "making up" of their leader was extremely ludicrous. With literally a yard of shirt collar and frill, it was scarcely possible to witness his extravagant grimaces, without a most undignified unbending of the facial muscles, and many were the handkerchiefs employed to conceal the smothered laughter of their fair owners. The party have some good voices among them, and they harmonize well together; indeed, the melody of several of the chants, and other concerted pieces, was so pleasing to the ear, that they were loudly encored. But the great feature of the entertainment, and that which we imagine attracted the large and respectable audience present, was undoubtedly "Master Juba," the immortalized of Boz. This "phenomenon" (as the bills describe him) is a copper-coloured vatory of Terpsichore, — the Monsieur Perrot of Negro life in the southern states; and possesses the additional attaction of being a "real nigger," and not a "sham," like his vocal associates. He is apparently about eighteen years of age; about 5 feet 3 inches in height; of slender make, yet possessing great muscular activity. His head is very small, and his countenance, when at rest, has a rather mild, sedate, and far from unpleasing expression. His first performance was "Miss Lucy Long, in character." With a most bewitching bonnet and veil, a *very* pink dress, beflounced to the waist, lace-fringed trousers of the most spotless purity, and red leather boots, — the ensemble completed by the green parasol and white cambric pocket handkerchief, — Master Juba certainly looked the black demoiselle of the first ton to the greatest advantage. The playing and singing by the serenaders of a version of the well-known negro ditty, furnished the music to Juba's performance, which was after this fashion: — Promenading in a circle to the left for a few bars, till again facing the audience, he then commenced a series of steps, which altogether baffle description, from their number, oddity, and the rapidity with which they were executed. The highland fling, the sailor's hornpipe, and other European dances, seemed to have been laid under contribution, and intermixed with a number of steps which we may call "Juba's own," for surely their like was never before seen for grotesque agility, not altogether unmixed with grace. The promenade was then repeated; then more dancing; and so on, to the end of the song. His other performances were called the "marriage festival" and "plantation

dances," in which, in male costume, he illustrated the dances of his own simple people on festive occasions. They were even more extraordinary than the first, — the grotesque element, in the character of the steps, largely predominating, and the physical exertion apparently much greater. The same peculiarity, of the alternate promenade and dance, was observable in both. To us, the most interesting part of the performance was the exact time, which, even in the most complicated and difficult steps, the dancer kept to the music. He appears to be quite an enthusiast in his art, and every round of applause he received seemed to stimulate him to fresh exertion. Altogether, Master Juba's Terpsichorean performances are well worth a visit.

There are a good many statements here about the dance, its performative context, and its reception. The characters were grotesquely dressed, and excited laughter from the audience. There was some embarrassment at the extent of this laughter among the more genteel members of the audience. The performers were highly skilled harmonic singers — a contrast, it seems to me, to the grotesque costume and humour. Juba himself is described in detail; I know of no other popular performers from this period who have their height and head size divulged. The costume for his role as "Lucy Long" is described in all its mismatched colour scheme. The general structure of this dance is described — a slow promenade interrupted by fast (and indescribable) solos. There are references to recognizable dances, and Juba's "authenticity" — his colour, and the assumption that he is performing his culture.

Reading the Group of Documents

So goes the work of the historian, reading and re-reading individual documents, extrapolating and categorizing from the individual texts, in search of some agreement among the witnesses. In this case, I read the categories as a series of contradictions, as follows:

1. On the one hand, there is a unanimous emphasis on the precision of the sounds made, and the control that Juba had over that sound, which certainly argues for Juba's place in the tradition of "tap" dancing. However, by way of contradiction there is an emphasis on wild abandon in the dance, on frenzy, the extremes of speed and gesture, and on sudden and violent changes of position and tone.
2. On the one hand, there is a near-obsessive scientific detail in some of the physical description, unusual in the vagaries and puffery of popular criticism. On the other hand, there are examples of description that manifest the impossibility of his dance. Such descriptions are a kind of mockery of this other, more precise description.

3. On the one hand there are references to recognizable dances, apparently an attempt to describe by analogy. These include the highland fling, the Lancashire clog, the sailor's hornpipe, and the polka, but reference is also made to the "whirling dervish" and the "willis" of Romantic ballet [*The Era*, 18 June 1848]. And, of course, to Juba's "authentic" dance of southern plantation life. On the other hand, I note that these dances are all taken from the exotic margins of the British Isles or empire, and from folk and rural dance idioms. We have to wonder just how many of these dances the audience might have seen, especially anything from the southern plantation. The only reference to dance from the western theatre is to the "willis", a popular example of the relatively new and contentious Romantic ballet.

Such contradictions represent radically different readings of the same dance-text — different readings by the same reader, in most cases. Sometimes he (always a "he") heard a precise rhythm, sometimes saw a frenzied movement. Sometimes "he" read similarity, sometimes difference. Part of the historian's job is to assimilate, to resolve these contradictions, in that attempt to "get to" the performance text. This is the text, after all, out of which the writers of the documents (the "he") derived significance — or upon which they imposed significance. We cannot begin to understand the prejudices of the documents without struggling to get past them to the source.

Provisional Historio-graphies

I offer, by way of a very open conclusion, some possible glimpses of Juba's dance. I make no claims for finality; all "historio-graphies" are provisional.

1. There is something unusual about the precise descriptions of Juba in the accounts. I wonder if this predilection was a manifestation of race. The Science of Anthropology was quite new, and advocated theories of biologically defined races, and the evolutionary defence of racial superiority (Bolt, *passim*). There was, at the same time, a pedagogical fascination with the exhibition of exotic cultures in London, including groups of Bushmen and Kaffir Zulus (see Altick, *passim*). I suspect that Juba was in part read as an exhibition of exotica, as if in a museum or a sideshow. If so, this might explain reports of his continued exhibition, after his death.
2. I wonder if the more extreme descriptions of indescribable movements might be analogous to descriptions of the acrobatic clowns of English

pantomime, the French foire, and the commedia dell' arte. The use of the word "grotesque" indicates this, although more contextual documentation is needed. If true, then such descriptions constitute another example of description by analogy, and another kind of theatrical dance besides ballet. This strengthens the argument for Juba's use of recognizable dance idioms.

3. Marian Hannah Winter argued vehemently that the "indescribable" in Juba's dance was an "African" idiom. I understand the liberal political desire to believe this. Is there evidence? Eyewitness reference to Juba exhibiting southern plantation slave dances is certainly not evidence; what British critic could distinguish such a thing? However, the eyewitnesses describe frequent, violent changes of rhythm. I wonder if we might read into the idea of frequent change an attempt to describe the complex syncopations of the African percussive idiom. In the contortions of the upper torso, likewise, we might read the African choreographic preference for a body low to the ground, in contradistinction to the Western vertical forms. We might.
4. Scholars such as Eric Lott, in *Love and Theft*, and the musicologist Robert Winans in his work on the banjo, have emphasized the parodic imperative of the early minstrel show. Parody is an important feature of postmodern criticism; just for our present purpose, call it "imitation with difference" (Hutcheon, 37, *passim*; Rose, *passim*). It manifests itself along a continuum from the grotesque exaggeration of the subject, to a precise impersonation. This variety is manifest in the early minstrel show, which claimed precise imitation of a culture, but offered extreme stereotype, which identified the southern slave with the northern white "wage slave," but then dehumanized one group.

Juba may have been black; but he was also a minstrel and therefore a parodist, whether by choice or not. One American reference has him performing exact impersonations of all the other minstrel dancers on the New York stage (Winter, 33). Because he was a young boy at this time, his exact imitation would already be an exaggeration, a parodic imitation with difference. We might still explain the reference to the whirling dervish, the willis and the highland fling as attempts to describe by analogy; but it is also possible that Juba danced these dances accurately in imitation, based on exhibitions in London of Arab culture, British folk culture, and Romantic ballet (did Juba dance *en pointe*?). If this is true, then I wonder if we can ever determine to what extent he exaggerated the original.

This difficulty manifests itself in Juba's exercise in drag, "Lucy Long." "Wench" dancing was common in the early minstrel show; in-

deed, it was the star turn (Lott 53-5, 162-78, *passim*). But the literature of this period is contradictory concerning the portrayal of the character. In some respects, it appears to have been female impersonation. In other instances, it appears to have been an obvious grotesquerie, like the "dame" of English Panto. There is no evidence of the form Juba's impersonation took. Since his dance alternated between slow promenade and fast dance, perhaps he alternated between the two extremes of drag.

5. Finally, some historians, in this (vain) effort to "get to" the subject-event, attempt re-constructions of the performance from the documents. One class of Shakespearean scholar does this, and it is a particularly strong practice among dance historians. I have been researching this, along with a dancer, with respect to Juba, and offer, as one last provisional historio-graphy, the sight of one contemporary body imitating (reading) graphic images that are themselves imitations (readings) of another body dancing (Figures 1-8). I add that this means of "getting to" the dance is predicated on the assumption that the images are based on firsthand viewing, and the intention of accurate recording; this assumption is questionable. Does the imitation help? I cannot answer that. But as imitation with difference, it may be a kind of useful parody. At the very least, imitation with the "difference" of modern dress may draw analogies with contemporary dance styles. Such similarities may be serendipitous, the result of the limits and tendencies of the human body in motion. However, they may also manifest the legacy of an oral-performative tradition — the main tenet of which is imitation with difference.

Two Propositions

I would like to close with two propositions, one emanating from Juba's dance, and one from myself as historian.

The first concerns the initial reception of the products of popular performative culture. John Fiske, in *Understanding Popular Culture*, emphasizes how a popular audience can read a text in ways startlingly at variance with any authorized or authorial intention, and at variance with other members of the audience. The popular text/performance may appear to be closed; but the popular culture tends to be participatory, tends to read everything in an open and undisciplined manner. He postulates a "Producerly" text, one that

"does not impose laws of its own construction that readers have to decipher in order to read it on terms of its, rather than their, choosing. ... it

offers itself up to popular production; it exposes, however reluctantly, the vulnerabilities, limitations, and weaknesses of its preferred meanings; it contains, while attempting to repress them, voices that contradict the ones it prefers; it has loose ends that escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them — it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control. (103-104)

The idea of the producerly "text" helps to describe the extraordinary variance in the reception of the early minstrel show, and of Juba's dance. The form of the dance may have been quite simple in intention; but popular consumers were nevertheless encouraged to read the dance in any way they wanted. Even taken as an act of rebellion, the customer has paid. And those customers have been encouraged to bring to the performance all their own intentions, expectations, and concerns, and to "write" their own product as they watch. The historian, then, is presented with the task of assembling and interpreting a variety of documents that disagree about an event that has encouraged disagreement. By this model Juba has encouraged his own indescribability.

My second proposition is based on Fiske's source-model for the "producerly" text, Roland Barthes' *S/Z*. This model — that texts and readers can be "readerly" and "writerly," "open" and "closed" to interpretation — is now a hoary old theory. But Barthes does postulate the idea of polysemic, writerly texts that encourage the reader to produce meaning, and the idea of writerly readers who produce new meanings from old texts, whatever their intentions. The "writerly reader" does this, he says, by two means. The first is re-reading, an activity "contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society," and "tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors)...." (115-116). The second feature of his "writerly" attitude is "de-composition":

If we want to remain attentive to the plural of a text (however limited it may be), we must renounce structuring this text in large masses, as was done by classical rhetoric and by secondary-school explication: ... everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure. (11-12)

In these two terms Barthes establishes the activities most important in the art of the historian, and the resulting tensions between the parts and the whole, the intention and reception. Historians are aggressive re-readers and de-composers. The irony is that the results of their work — the "historio-graphy" — is, finally, just another artifact, like Marian Hannah Winter's work, soon to be re-read and de-composed, and added to the body of disparate texts.



Figure 1. "Boz's Juba" from *The Illustrated London News*, 5 August 1848.

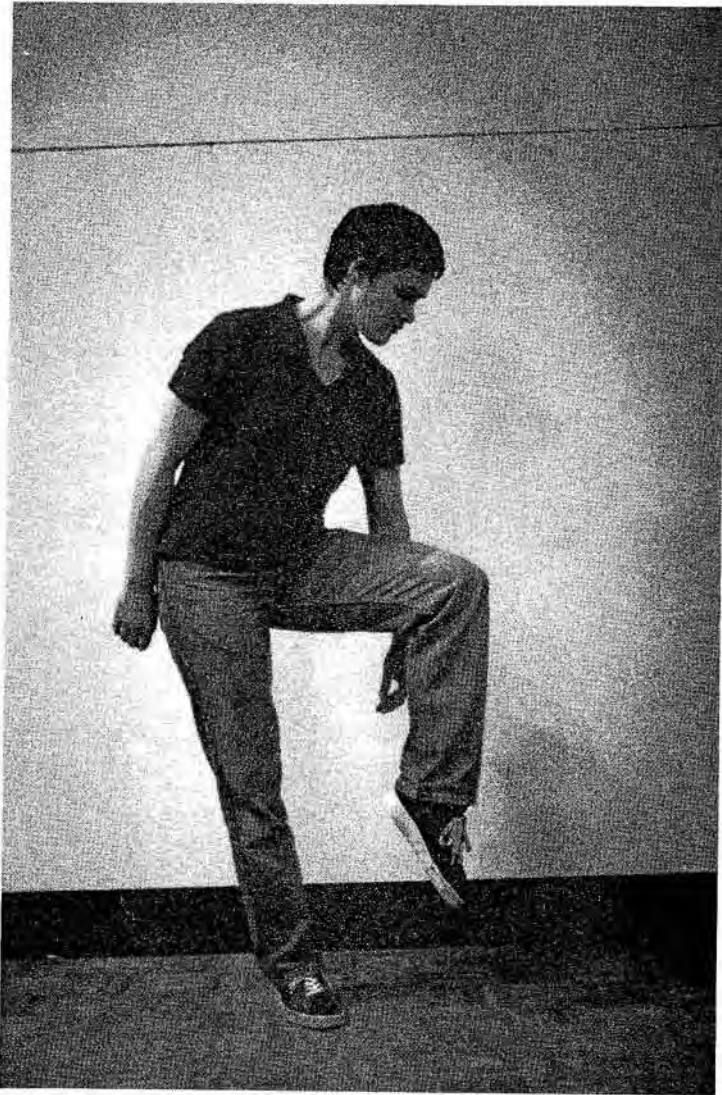


Figure 2. *Dancer Jennifer Johnson imitating Figure 1.*



Figure 3. *Dancer John N. Smith, from a sheet music cover, 1840.*

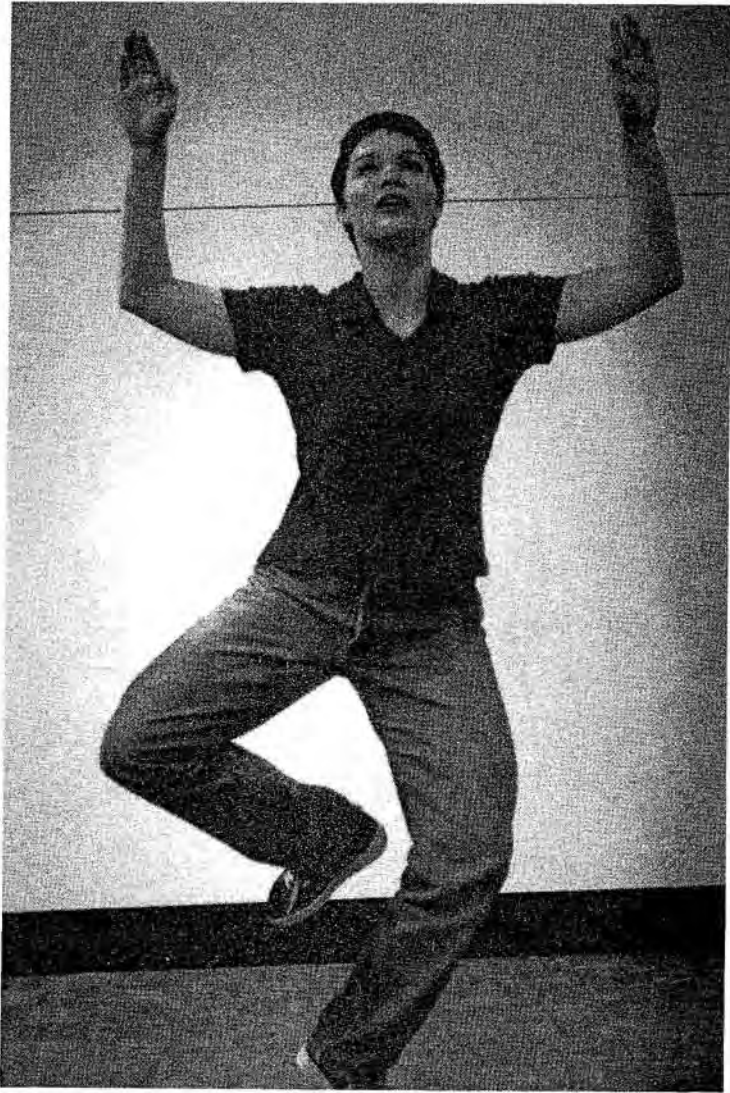


Figure 4. *Jennifer Johnson imitating Figure 3.*



Figure 5. From a sheet music cover, 1840.

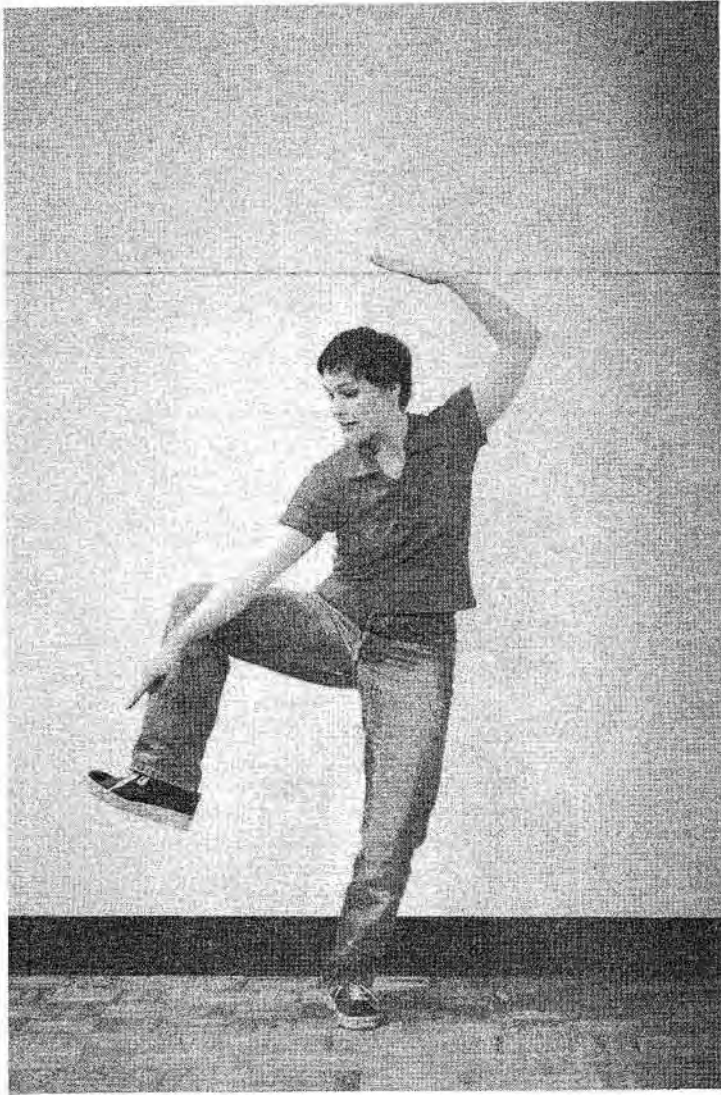


Figure 6. *Jennifer Johnson imitating Figure 5.*

NEW THEATRE.



Non de heris, si dices any man in you its not to come out.



After which
MASTER DIAMOND will introduce his original Negro Speech in Congress, Long Island BREAKDOWN and BONES-HOUSE DANCE—making the greatest display of heel and toecorns ever witnessed.

Challenge:
MASTER DIAMOND, who delineates the Ethiopian character superior to any other white person, hereby challenges any person in the world to a trial of skill at Negro Dancing, in all its varieties, for a wager of Cash \$200 to \$1000.

To be followed by the petite Comedy called, a

A Nabob for an Hour

Sam Hobbs
Mr. Frempton,
Dumpy
Emoa Leslie
Nancy Berger

r. J. S. Browne
Ewing
W Chapman
Miss Hazlett
Morgan

After which,

Master Diamond,
Ethiopian Extravaganza of
Jim-a-Long-Josey,
with new and original verses.

Figure 7. Playbill dated 1841, showing dancer John Diamond.

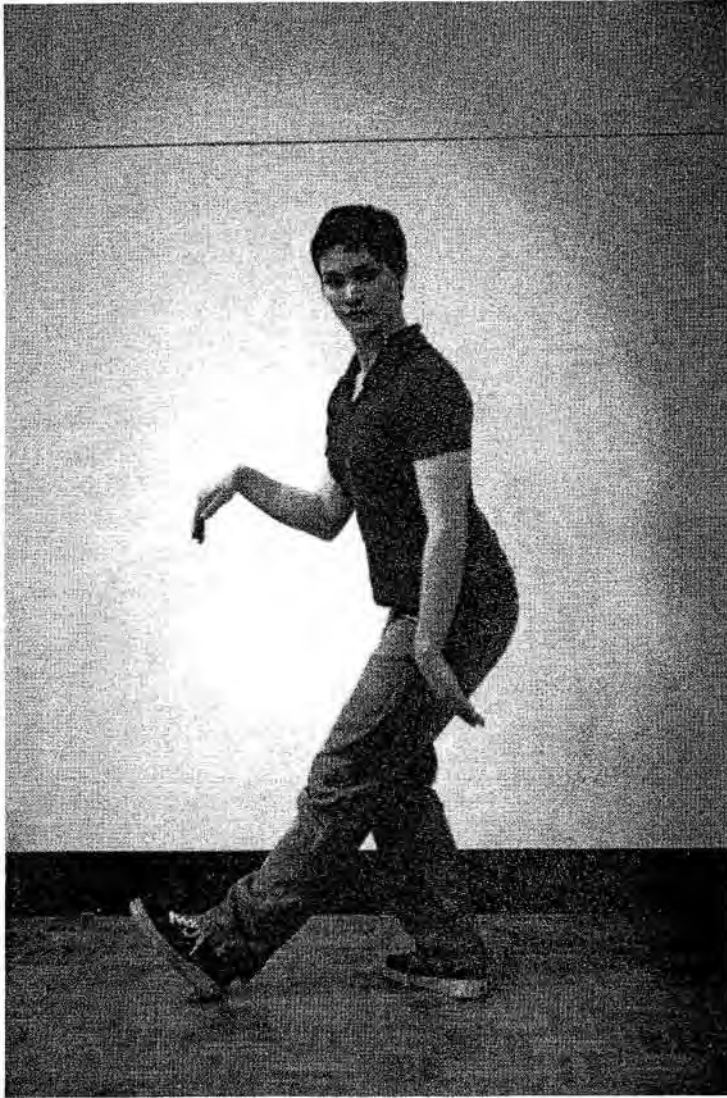


Figure 8. *Jennifer Johnson imitating Figure 7.*

Final Statement

This was a long way around to Juba's dance; but it is a long way around to Juba's dance. The documents carry a chaos of conflicting readings, both within and between. Historians nevertheless tend to insist on reading the artifacts as if they were one unified text. Or, rather, we rewrite a non-existent unity into the documents. There was a unifying feature, once. It was and is not the body of documents. It was the dancing body of Juba.

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