Parisian Cake Walks
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University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to 19th-Century Music.
My title will of course bring to mind Debussy’s “Golliwogg’s cake walk,” the finale of his 1908 piano suite Children’s Corner. Dedicated to the composer’s daughter, “avec les tendres excuses de son père pour ce qui va suivre” (with her father’s tender apologies for what follows), the movement is known for its catchy, syncopated melody—a frivolity of tone, once thought incongruous within the composer’s opus, that seems to endorse recent notions of a “pluralistic,” “polyphonous” Debussy.1 A different kind of notoriety has also arisen. “Avec une grande émotion,” the so-called Sehnsuchts-motif from Wagner’s Tristan appears four times in the middle of the movement. According to Edward Lockspeiser, this “hilariously comic caricature” portrays something of the child’s imagination of the world, a glimpse of its artificiality or pretentiousness.2 On the other hand, Robin

2Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy (1936; rpt. London: Dent, 1963), p. 154. Lockspeiser continues: “The authenticity of each of the little pieces of Children’s Corner resides precisely in the fact that they so wonderfully confront the minds of the child and the artist, discovering and tracing in the one and the other the thin, almost imperceptible borderline between reality and fantasy.”
Holloway suggests that the quotation might bear out Debussy’s journalistic impertinence: the mocking, flippant style of his columns in *La Revue blanche* and *Gil Blas* from 1901 to 1903.³

But Debussy’s is by no means the only cake walk of early-twentieth-century Paris; his movement is a response to contemporary popular entertainment.⁴ By 1908 the cake walk had enjoyed a successful stage career. Renowned for its high-stepping, back-arching postures, the dance was the star attraction of music hall and circus shows, performed by the celebrated entertainers Henri Fragson, La Belle Otero, and Marguerite Deval, to name a few. It even became a popular recreational activity; music halls sponsored “concours de cake walk” in which amateur couples competed in improvisational skill, and bourgeois salons incorporated the dance into their evening entertainment. This significant popular dimension of the dance’s Parisian history is the main focus of my article. I would like to consider several versions of the dance—in concert venues, at the circus, and on film—exploring in particular how its reception might resonate in a broader cultural sphere. What is more, I aim to suggest how this resonance might extend to Debussy, revealing a further layer of interpretation to the familiar Debussy-Wagner conundrum.

Accounts of the cake walk’s Parisian appropriation have typically focused on race: the dance’s origin in the slave quarters of southern U.S. plantations and its subsequent racial stereotyping.⁵ Jody Blake, for example, in her study of early-twentieth-century Parisian art and entertainment, argues that Parisians welcomed the arrival of the cake walk as a specifically black musical performance. White appropriative desires, she suggests, fashioned an imagined “otherness,” a reified racial presence considered primarily as primitive and grotesque: “The popular craze for African-American music and dance did not entail a rejection of racist stereotypes. On the contrary, it was because . . . the cake walk seemed to represent the capitulation of ‘civilization’ to ‘savagery’ that Parisians embraced [it].”⁶ She goes on to cite press reports, for example, that from *Le Petit Bleu de Paris* (1902), of the cake walk as “une danse de sauvages” performed to “une musique de sauvages,” noting how cartoonists of the period portrayed African Americans dancing in grass skirts, accompanied by banjos and drums.⁷ Plate 1, from *L’Illustré national* (1902), is an image reproduced by Blake. A caricature of black cake walkers in a timeless and geographically indistinct wilderness, the image depicts the dress, bare feet, and musical instruments assumed central to native life. Also shown are thatched huts, palm trees, a beast lurking in the background and, a little grisly, the head of what appears to be a white man on a stick at the food-serving counter.⁸

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⁴Richard Langham Smith implies that the “Golliwogg’s cake walk” staged the first encounter between French modernism and the popular, in that it foreshadowed the later “cavalry command” à cheval; see Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings of the Great French Composer Claude Debussy, ed. Langham Smith (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977), p. 71. [Langham Smith’s edition is a translation of François Lesure, *Monseur Croche et autres écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).] This view, however, might overlook earlier examples of musical “border-crossings” between “high” and “low,” such as Satie’s 1904 cabaret song “La Diva de l’Empire,” a “marche chantée” with syncopated rhythms. For more on Satie and popular culture, see Steven Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 269–341.

⁵Some scholars associate the dance’s origin with the etymological derivation of its name: a cake is thought to have been awarded by white masters to the best slave dancers at social gatherings; see, for example, William Barlow and Thomas L. Morgan, *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African American Popular Music from 1895 to 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Elliot and Clark, 1992), p. 26. The preface to the Schott-Universal edition of Debussy’s piece suggests a different derivation. The term “cake walk,” it is argued, was a corruption of the French cavalry command à cheval; the French influence is thought to stem from France’s governance of Louisiana, where this account assumes the dance to have originated.


⁷Ibid., pp. 19–21. The article from *Le Petit Bleu de Paris*, entitled “Le Dernier ‘Cri,’ la nouvelle danse des salons parisiens: le ‘cake-walk’” and dated 18 December 1902, is included in a collection of newspaper clippings held at the Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra [hereafter referred to as F-Po], catalogued as B pièce 347 (“Coupures de presse sur le cake-walk”).

⁸Plate 1 is also included in F-Po B pièce 347.
Blake’s argument is persuasive; the attachment of stereotyped racial signifiers to the dance characterizes a number of illustrated and written accounts. Moreover, the period in question is known for its “primitivist” vogue, a pattern of popular and artistic identification with primitive cultures (l’art nègre in particular) thought symptomatic in part of the impact of colonial

*[See, for example, “Le Cake-walk dans son pays d’origine,” L’Illustration, 10 January 1903, another artist’s rendering of the cake walk’s assumed plantation origins, and “Le cake-walk,” La Revue théatrale 2 (March 1903), 190, an article in which author Raoul Sainte-Marie describes his version of the dance’s conception: how black slaves, overcome with the memory of their lost motherland, united in music and movement to escape the hardships of labor.]*

[Both the illustration and the article are cited by Blake, Le Tumulte noir, p. 19.] The most overtly “primitivist”—if hideously racialized—feature on the dance that I have found is an illustration entitled “Le Cake-walk,” included in F-Po B piece 347 with a handwritten annotation “Le Rire, 3 February 1903.” The illustration shows three cake-walking couples in identical poses, dancing behind one another. The first couple is white and, from the look of its
activity. That, then, Parisians celebrated the dance as iconic of a purportedly “authentic” African American tradition, with its overtones of la mentalité primitive, is perhaps to be expected.

But the situation seems more complicated than this. We might consider, at base, the dance’s original racial significance. Following the testimony of former plantation slaves (interviewed by researchers of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration), scholars now argue that the cake walk was intended as a mocking imitation of the upper-class mannerisms of white society. Blending this mimicry with African dance traditions, the cake walk offered a hybrid choreography fashioned from contrasting social expressions. In the unavoidably complex arena of cultural identity, the Parisian appropriation of the dance appears to project another layer of imitation onto the cake walk’s already layered mode of representation—what one critic dubs its “mimetic vertigo.” What is more, several accounts of the dance in the Paris of the early 1900s suggest that its relation to black cultural production was neither as comfortable nor as pronounced as Blake seems to imply. This is not to deny the connotative value signaled by Blake, but merely to suggest other signifiers and modes of thought accumulating around the dance. These other—even “Other”—signifiers are what I wish to consider here. My discussion will explore how the cake walk both anticipated and inhibited a climate of modernist negrophilia, how it was variably envisaged as both “of” and “outside” l’âme noire. My starting point is the dance’s arrival in Paris in May 1900.

**Vim and Dash**

Senegalese belly-dancing, proto-“talkies,” and Loie Fuller’s dance and light effects—besides the trottoir roulant (a rolling pavement, fifty centimes a ride) and the Palais de l’Électricité—were not the only attractions of Paris’s 1900...
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Exposition Universelle. Afternoon concerts at the Esplanade des Invalides, beginning on 5 May, drew huge crowds. According to Le Figaro, “pas une chaise vacante autour du kiosque où flottaient les drapeaux américains; et gros succès, comme tous les jours” (not an empty chair around the kiosk where American flags were flying; and a great success, as every day). These audiences had turned out for band performances directed by John Philip Sousa. The programs included transcriptions of classical favorites—excerpts from Tannhäuser, Manon Lescaut, and The Blue Danube—and American marches such as The Washington Post, King Cotton, and Stars and Stripes Forever. But the band also introduced a new kind of music. Covering the performances back home, the San Francisco Call reported “the remarkable success which [the band] has met with in introducing ‘Le Temps du chiffon,’ commonly known in this country as ‘rag time.’”

Sousa’s performances at the Exposition gave Parisians their first taste of a new type of vernacular music: Kerry Mills’s At a Georgia Campmeeting and Whistling Rufus, and Abe Holzmann’s Smoky Mokes, Hunky Dory, and Bunch o’ Blackberries, all arranged by Sousa himself. Although Mills, Holzmann, and fellow American popular-music composers at the turn of the century dubbed these pieces “rag time hits,” to the French they were known as “cake walks.” Across the Atlantic, “cake walk” and “rag time” were virtually synonymous, although the former was associated more specifically with dance. This confusion might have sprung from a shared musical attribute, for both the cake walk and ragtime were characterized by syncopated melodies set against metrically regular accompaniments. It was these melodies, according to the San Francisco Call, that prompted Sousa’s triumph. One—the principal theme of Bunch o’ Blackberries, printed alongside the San Francisco Call feature—was reportedly “hummed, whistled, and played in almost every nook and corner of the French capital, seemingly having been accepted by the natives as being far and away the best thing of its kind ever heard there.”

But the cake walk was known not only for its syncopated beat. According again to the San Francisco Call, its “lively,” “peculiar” style—the “vim and dash” of the musicians—was thought “distinctly American.” The French press offered similar remarks. Although the music periodicals showed little interest in Sousa’s concerts (preferring to focus instead on the goings-on at the Premier Congrès International de Musique, held at the Exposition from 14 to 18 June, and the Exposition’s own Concerts Officiels), the dailies made frequent reference to the band, describing their music as “gaie,” “enlevée” (boisterous), and, above all, “la musique américaine.”

L’Évènement, for example, appearing to overlook the “classical” arrangements, declared Sousa’s offerings “la première musique militaire de l’Amérique”; Le Cri de Paris, similarly neglectful of Tannhäuser and co., followed suit, describing “les airs populaires” and “les inimitables ragtimes sur lesquels se dansent les cakewalks” performed by “la plus illustre des fanfares américaines.”

Even Debussy, commenting on a later performance of Sousa’s band, aligned the dance with

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1French bands, the San Francisco Call continued, even started to syncopate (“to play in rag time”) the Marseillaise.

12See Le Gaulois, 19 April 1903, p. 3 [a recollection of Sousa’s performances at the Exposition]; L’Évènement, 3 May 1900, p. 1, and Le Temps, 15 May 1900. Of all the dailies, L’Évènement appears to devote the most attention to Sousa and his musicians, going as far as to detail the time and rail station at which they arrived in Paris (2 pm on 3 May at Saint-Lazare), the embroidery on their military caps (“Sousa” in gold lettering), their movements post-Exposition [to Brussels, Berlin, and other major German cities] and how the U.S. commissioner had arranged their accommodation in hotels neighboring the Exposition site; see L’Évènement, 3 May 1900, p. 1, 4 May 1900, p. 2, and 6 May 1900, p. 2. As far as I am aware, Le Monde musicale was the only mainstream music periodical to mention Sousa: see, in particular, the editions of 15 and 30 July 1900, pp. 215 and 227.

13L’Évènement, 4 May 1900, p. 2, and Le Cri de Paris, 13 May 1900, p. 8.
an assumed nationality: “Si la musique américaine est unique à rythmer d’indicibles ‘cake-walk,’ j’avoue que pour l’instant cela me paraît sa seule supériorité sur l’autre musique . . . et M. Sousa en est incontestablement le roi” [If American music is unique for its invention of the famous ‘cake walk,’ and I must admit that for the moment that seems to be its single advantage over all other kinds of music, then M. Sousa is unquestionably its king].

The cake walk, it seems (perhaps even trailing the Tannháuser extract), was swept up into the American canon, perceived and understood, to quote L’Événement once again, as “la musique militaire américaine ‘Sousa’.” It appeared to the French in specifically American garb, and as no less a product of the American military than Stars and Stripes Forever. This “nationalization” of the dance is hardly surprising, owing to the practicalities of performance and staging, not to mention the nationality of the band members themselves. Press reports noted the star-spangled banners that decorated the pavilion, the musicians’ military headdress, the medals and decorations that hung from Sousa’s jacket, and a largely American audience. Le Cri de Paris went as far as to describe the scene as “[une] petite fête patriotique étrangère,” the national feeling of which was so intense that it offended the French General Mercier, in attendance at the première. (Plate 2 offers an impression of the pageantry that accompanied Sousa’s performances.) In addition, the cake walk’s appearance alongside well-known American marches might have helped shape its public reception. The cake walk and the march shared numerous musical characteristics: regular, accented bass lines (often comprising stepwise eighth notes or skipping quarter notes shifting between domi-

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21 L’Événement, 4 May 1900. Note that Sousa himself here becomes a generic label.
22 See, for example, Le Figaro, 10 May 1900, L’Événement, 4 May 1900, p. 2; and the Quotidien l’Exposition-Programme en 1900, Programme du Dimanche 6 Mai 1900, p. 15 (F-Pn 8-V-13707), which, incidentally, dubbed—and Anglicized—the group as “Sousa’s Band American.”
23 Le Cri de Paris, 13 May 1900, p. 8; Mercier is well known as Minister of War during the Dreyfus Affair. Even the scale of the Exposition appeared to some as specifically American: Jules Claretie described “the colossal American-style exhibitions and spectacles that leap to the eyes”; quoted in Charles Rearick, Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 145.
The cake walk, then, was primarily known—publicized, received, and in the case of Mercier, perhaps even rebuked—for its American aura. Adopted by Sousa’s civilian band and flanked by its national anthems, the dance would inevitably be read accordingly. In view, though, of the cake walk’s usual scholarly billing, this idea strikes a curious note. We are some distance from the banjos, palm trees, and grass-skirted cake walkers described by Blake, far from the dance’s supposed primitivism. The first cake walks in Paris were generic American commodities, sequestered from their black roots and from any attendant feral or ritualistic overtones. So much now seems evident—but here we might ponder the point further, pursuing one or two interrelated lines of inquiry. What, we might ask, over and above any national connotations, characterized the Parisian reception of Sousa’s cake walks? What might this reception suggest about turn-of-the-century Parisian society and the fetishism and bigotry ascribed to it by Blake? The American critic B. D. Woodward, in a 1900 article for *North American Review*, implied that the core of the Exposition was marked by the belief that “civilization” had triumphed over “savagey.” The exhibits were government-backed ideological constructions intended to promote and extend economic, technological, imperial, agrarian, and cultural wealth across the globe. Where, amid this “civilizing” work, was the place for public appropriative desires, for the welcome capitulation to Blake’s savage “Other”? A nearly contemporary article in *Le Gaulois* (21 April 1903) offers some clues. Reviewing the performances of Sousa’s band on its return to Paris in 1903 (the band appeared at the Nouveau-Théâtre from 19 April to 1 May), the article rhapsodized on Sousa’s success, offering a description of his marches and cake walks:

> Le grondement du tonnerre, le crépitement de la pluie, le train en marche qui s’approche et s’éloigne, le chant du rossignol, le galop du cheval, tous ces bruits perçus tantôt au milieu de la plus douce harmonie, tantôt parmi les soubresauts d’une musique endiablée, voilà l’orchestre de Sousa… Faut-il vous parler de Sousa, ce chef d’orchestre extraordinaire, ce “roi de la marche” que ses œuvres déjà célèbres, plus encore que son séjour à Paris au moment de l’Exposition de 1900, avaient déjà rendu populaire parmi nous? Allez l’entendre et le voir au Nouveau-Théâtre, où il donne une courte série de concerts deux fois par jour; allez applaudir le “Washington Post,” le Cake-Walk et le “Stars and Stripes,” autant de morceaux qui sont pour lui l’objet d’ovations indescriptibles. Allez le voir diriger ses exécutants avec une mimique expressive et un ensemble de gestes qui sont sa note originale et qui font de lui l’un des premiers chefs d’orchestre du monde. [Sousa] est un artiste, et l’heureuse sélection de son programme doit lui attirer, dans une ville qui de tout temps a eu le monopole de l’art, tous ceux qui aiment et honorent la “Musique.”

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24See, for example, Perloff, *Art and the Everyday*, pp. 48–49.

25It might also be argued that the performance style of Sousa’s band contributed to the dance’s Americanization. One band member—Arthur Pryor, trombone soloist, assistant conductor, and co-leader—reveals that although Sousa’s cake walks were renowned for their syncopation, the band failed to achieve a real sense of swing: “The regulation bands never got over being a little embarrassed at syncopating. The stiff-backed old fellows felt it was beneath their dignity and they couldn’t or wouldn’t give in to it” [quoted in Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime: The True Story of an American Music* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1958), pp. 74–75]. Although Pryor offers no reason for the musicians’ response, the hint of impropriety about the rhythms is evocative, particularly in light of later proclamations about syncopation as coercive, sinful and, above all, “negroid.” Consider, for example, Anne Shaw Faulkner’s well-known attack on syncopation—and jazz in general—in “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?” *Ladies Homes Journal* 38/8 (1921), 16–34, which surely helped give rise to the infamous “Who put the sin in syncopation?” Pryor’s comments here might easily take on racial significance, suggesting that the band’s straightening out of the syncopated rhythms reflected an indifferency toward black cultural production, or even a metaphorical “whitening” of the music.

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[The rumbling of thunder, the pattering of rain, the moving train which draws closer then further away, the song of the nightingale, the gallop of the horse, all these noises heard sometimes amongst the sweetest harmony, sometimes amongst the jolts of a boisterous music, here is Sousa’s orchestra. . . . Is it necessary to speak to you of Sousa, this extraordinary conductor, this “March King,” whose already famous works, more so now than during his stay in Paris at the Exposition of 1900, have made him popular among us? Go hear and see him at the Nouveau-Théâtre, where he is giving a short series of concerts twice a day; applaud the “Washington Post,” the Cake-Walk, and “Stars and Stripes,” so many pieces which are for him the object of indescribable ovations. Go and see him lead his players with expressive gesticulations and an ensemble of original gestures that make him one of the world’s foremost conductors. . . . [Sousa] is an artist, and the happy selection of his programme must attract, in a town which has always had the monopoly of art, all those who like and honour “Music.”28]

There are, I think, two points here, besides the obvious glorification of Sousa, this “March King,” and his gestural ability.29 The first concerns the opening description: the sounds—of rumbling thunder, pattering rain, a nightingale’s song, a train’s engine, and a galloping horse—heard by the reviewer during the performance. Although at first we might suppose these to be either ambient sounds drifting into the theater from outside or aural traces of the band’s outdoor Exposition arena, it soon becomes evident that they are the sounds evoked or inspired by the music itself. The reviewer’s “voilà” fastens these sounds to Sousa’s band, suggesting that they do not merely envelop or inhabit the aural scene but derive from the musicians. This attribution tallies neatly with characteristics of the music: the birdsong-like piccolo obbligato in Stars and Stripes Forever, the galloping rhythmic figures used in several of Sousa’s compositions, particularly those involving horses and riders, and the stormy weather and train sounds that might be associated with Sousa’s Looking Upward Suite. Of course it remains uncertain whether the reviewer is remarking upon these same impressions or envisaging the horses, thunder, and train via some other semantic route. We can only speculate as to the personal significance of the music; moreover, it is not known if Looking Upward was included in the program at the Nouveau-Théâtre. Nonetheless, the associations made here are worth noting. Sousa’s music is aligned with the sounds—concrete, tangible, and, in the case of the train, industrial—of the everyday. The music takes on a pictorial quality, becoming a cultural cipher of the aural realities of modern America.30

The second point is more straightforward. The reviewer acclaims Sousa as an “artist” and the cake walk (and the march) as “Music.” Implied here is a raising of aesthetic stakes that does not accord well with the debased primitivism usually cited with respect to the dance. As Blake observes, several early-twentieth-cen-

28There is also another, more covert alignment here: between America and notions of industry, civilization, and modernity. Such notions, and their attendant impressions of vigor, dynamism, energy, and creativity, recur frequently in the secondary literature on French perceptions of the U.S. at the turn of the century; see, for example, Gabriel P. Weisberg, “The French Reception of American Art at the Universal Exposition of 1900,” in Paris 1900: The “American School” at the Universal Exposition, ed. Diane P. Fischer [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999], pp. 145–80. Weisberg makes reference to several period sources that support the idea of a “modern” America, including an article in Le XIXe Siècle, 14 May 1900, describing the “ultra-modernisme” of the American exhibit. Fischer’s own chapter of the volume, “Constructing the ‘American School’ of 1900,” pp. 1–94, discusses how the American cityscapes unveiled at the Exposition offered a similar impression of modernity: images of street cars, bustling streets, and skyscrapers by artists like Childe Hassam and Charles Austin Needham portrayed America as an industrial nation, a modern metropolis for the new century [p. 88]. For more on French response to American art and culture, see Alfred Schweizer, Les États-Unis à l’Exposition Universelle de 1900 (Paris: P. Dubreuil, 1900); Jacques Portes, Une fascination réticente, Les États-Unis dans l’opinion française, 1870–1914 [Nancy: PUN, 1987]; and Hélène Trocmé, “1900: Les Américains à l’exposition universelle de Paris,” Revue française d’études américaines 59 [1994], 35–44. Interestingly, the more specific alignment of Sousa’s music and the “industrial” is endorsed by some facts of composition. It is thought that Sousa wrote Looking Upward while traveling on a train in South Dakota and that he found inspiration for the rhythms and melodies of Stars and Stripes Forever aboard the S. S. Teutonic.
tury writers considered the cake walk’s music (and the movements that went with it) to negate the qualities of art as defined by the West. Free from “rules” of rhythm and meter, the dance was regarded as some sort of spontaneous expression of “instinct,” be it sexual, animalistic, pagan, or even demonic.31 Blake cites the musicologist Jules Combarieu, writing in 1909: “Primitive music, far from meriting the term art, was foreign to aesthetic considerations.”32 However, as Le Gaulois suggests, the cake walk’s first Parisian form inspired a different view. The dance was thought to represent a cultured, codified creativity; worthy of Paris’s musical elite, it was to be revered. An article in the bimonthly Le Monde musicale (15 July 1900) offers a similar conception. Reviewing Sousa’s performances at the Exposition, the journal describes a music that is “purement civile,” “un des plus disciplinés,” and performed “avec un chic extraordinaire.”33

Civilized, controlled, and extraordinarily stylish: what are we to make of this? The standard line cannot simply be ignored; writings on the dance’s assumed primitivism are based on widely held notions concerning the origin and function of African American cultural expression. Nonetheless, these notions are not only absent in the French reviews of Sousa’s cake walks, but also seemingly inappropriate. As I have sought to show, Sousa’s music was perceived as all-American, performed and received outside of any African American impression. What remains, then, is a reading of the dance that lies, correspondingly, outside of the usual interpretative matrix.

It is tempting to overturn the matrix itself: to suggest that Parisians welcomed the arrival of the cake walk as a specifically American musical genre and, no less, that white appropriative desires fashioned the dance’s imagined “otherness” primarily as modern, military, civilized, disciplined, elegant, and chic as well as aesthetically valuable. Following this new line, we might ponder momentarily the social status of the cake walk’s black originators, portrayed by Blake as not only the central figures in the cake walk’s Parisian career but also the unwitting victims of a society determined to mine their exoticism to self-aggrandizing ends. As I have shown here, the first Parisian cake walks at the Exposition were metaphorically removed from their black originators. This removal was also physical: African Americans were given their own exhibit inside the Exposition’s Palace of Social Economy on the right bank of the Seine, some distance from the Esplanade des Invalides, at one end of a row of foreign pavilions, known as the Rue des Nations, along the Left Bank.34 Moreover, recent scholarly literature on the French encounter with black society has presented an alternative angle on the business of race relations, proposing a hospitable, sympathetic, and discrimination-free environment defined by a lack of politically endorsed exoticist-racialist thinking.35 An initial study of visual and textual sources from the early 1900s seems to support this. Consider, for example, the diary of the black Exposition-goer Gaston Bergeret, which gives an intellectual account of a wholly color-blind Parisian society,36 the displays of African American contributions to literature, industry, medicine, and law mounted by W. E. B. Du Bois at the Exposition and awarded a gold prize by Paris’s Exposition jurors;37 and [my favorite] an

31See Blake, Le Tumulte noir, pp. 21 and 26.
33Le Monde musicale, 15 July 1900, p. 215.
35See Tyler Stovall, Paris noir: African Americans in the City of Light (New York: Mariner, 1996); and William A. Shack, Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001]. Shack, for example [in chap. 1], discusses how the first African American musicians in the capital celebrated Paris’s perceived racial egalitarianism and relaxed social mores.
37Du Bois’s displays at the Exposition—and his ideal of “racial adjustment”—are well known. Of the large body of critical literature on the subject, I have found the following most useful: Critical Essays on W. E. B. Du Bois, ed.
illustration from 1903, published in *Le Rire*, of a black minstrel laughing at a line of cake-walking white policemen.\(^\text{38}\)

These sources cohere nicely, generating an image of the French public’s lack of racial prejudice—even its encouragement of racial “uplift” in professional and educational spheres\(^\text{39}\)—and of a black society happy to poke fun at its white impersonators. As persuasive as this image might appear, however, to propose its legitimacy or cultural worth over and above that of the more usual frames of reference might be to ape a simplification no less essentialist than that implicit in those usual frames themselves. Popular primitivism or a color-blind Parisian society, the cake walk *en nègre* or Sousa’s “Cake Walk American”*: the reality undoubtedly fluctuates in between. In early-twentieth-century Paris, egalitarian ideals of fraternity and integration, anticipated during the 1900 Exposition,\(^\text{40}\) existed alongside everyday racialist stereotypes.\(^\text{41}\) Descriptions of the cake walk’s chic and refinement existed alongside the send-ups of its “primitive” inventors cited by Blake.

To inquire into the dominance of the usual “primitivist” account might be to consider the quantity of sources and their tangibility in the present day. For every diary à la Bergeret (I found only one) or illustration à la *Le Rire* (I found only a couple that were similar), there are tens of caricatures of black society published throughout the early 1900s, many of which have survived into popular culture. Images of “negro” icons appear on postcards, posters, and cookie tins sold to this day by vendors along the Seine.\(^\text{42}\) Moreover, there is, I suspect, something about the usual account that is more engaging—more histrionic, certainly—than the impressions noted here. Slogans of “licentiousness,” the “primeval,” and the “demonic” tend to galvanize, even to create as much as report a sense of the dance’s cultural reality. Nonetheless, whatever the historical force this usual account has acquired, and whatever the method of acquisition, it gains, I think, from a consideration alongside its opposite number. The events, reviews, and ideas discussed here help construct, if not a repudiation of the standard line, then at least a significant counter-narrative.

It is in this spirit of incongruity that I move to my next port of call in the cake walk’s Parisian history, where issues of race and reception are marked by a similar sense of exchange. I would like now to consider the cake walk as dance, not just as music; my discussion will turn to the cake walk’s system of gestural signification. Two years after Sousa introduced the musical cake walk to Paris, a couple from the U.S. provided the missing dance moves, sparking a craze that would result in the cake walk’s adoption as France’s “danses officielles.”

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\(^\text{38}\)*Le Rire*, 14 March 1903.


\(^\text{40}\)Period sources on the Exposition’s ideal of “fraternité” include a poem by Émile Hinzelin, published in *Le Courrier français*, 10 June 1900, and articles in *Le Ménestrel* (“Le Théâtre et les spectacles à l’Exposition Universelle de 1900,” 23 Sept. 1900, p. 298) and *Le Monde musicale* (“L’Exposition de 1900,” 15 April 1900, p. 108). The latter speaks prophetically of Paris as the focal point of integration efforts: “Paris sera le point central de la terre où convergeront tous les efforts intellectuels de l’espèce humaine et où toutes les races viendront se réunir et fraterniser pour échanger leurs idées et le produit de leur commerce et de leur industrie.”

\(^\text{41}\)In his article “Beyond Le Boeuf,” Andy Fry proposes a similar idea with regard to race relations in Paris in the late teens and twenties, citing in particular the work of historian Ralph Schor on French immigration and the attitudes it engendered (see p. 139). Schor, *Histoire de l’immigration en France, de la fin du XIXè siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1996), describes both a turn-of-the-century French xenophobia and the efforts made to advance the integration process (see pp. 24–29).

\(^\text{42}\)I think particularly of the image of the Senegalese infantryman used since 1915 to advertise the popular chocolate drink Banania, a poster of which hangs to this day in my local bar in Oxford.
Mr. and Mrs. Elks, champions of the American cake walk circuit, arrived at Paris’s Nouveau Cirque in October 1902. Hired by circus director Monsieur Houcke, they were featured in a production entitled Joyeux Nègres—according to Le Figaro, “une grande pantomime américaine nautique.”43 The show comprised typical circus fare: slapstick comedy by the clowns Footitt and Chocolat44 and various sporting activities including a boxing match, a billiard game, and a swimming gala (with the arena transformed into a pool). But the Elks, who remained dry, were the star attraction. With an entourage of two young backup dancers and faux cake-walk jurors who pretended to assess their talent, they presented Parisians with the steps of the cake walk through a stylized contest [see plate 3].45 An article in Le Petit Bleu de Paris described their “eccentric” (“fantaisiste”) gestures: how they thrust their chests forward, stretched out their arms, and lifted their knees as high as possible. The article maintained: “Le cake walk est une danse de sauvages. . . Il n’y a rien qui puisse agir plus efficacement sur nos âmes tant civilisées” [The cake walk is a dance of savages. . . There is nothing that can have greater effect on our so civilized souls].46

And so on. Here again the standard “primitivist” line emerges, although, as we might now expect, not all commentaries were in accord. The character, style, and general feel of the Elks’ cake walk, not to mention its supposed racial signification, was variously interpreted as eccentric and savage (“nègre”) or graceful and stylish (“américain”). A poem in Le Journal amusant, for example, accompanied by an illustration of two female cake walkers in elegant dresses and headpieces, described how the circus had ignited the cake-walk vogue “avec quel chic.”47 A review in L’Actualité française illustrée offered a similar idea, noting how the Elks’ dance had been stripped of any burlesque quality and tailored to upper-class tastes.48 Other reports, such as those included in a special edition of popular-music journal Paris qui chante marking the one-hundredth performance of the Elks’ show, fluctuated in impression. Articles on the couple (“Les Célèbres Elks”) and their backup dancers (“Le Cake Walk des Négrillons”) oscillated between notions of the savage and the civilized. On the one hand, the journal suggested something boorish or visceral about the cake walk in performance, drawing parallels between the dancers’ movements and those of young chicks batting their wings, horses stamping their hooves, and poodles sitting up to beg. On the other hand, reports discouraged would-be cake walkers interested only in exaggerated, lop-sided postures, advising them to become acquainted with “la gentillesse” of the cake walk at the Nouveau Cirque, as performed by the Elks’ young associates.49

Another response to the Elks’ routine, though published several years later, might stimulate

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43Le Figaro, 24 October 1902.
44Footitt and Chocolat were a well-known circus double act; if they were not one of the first duos in circus history, they were certainly the first to attain a celebrity status in contemporary culture. Their onstage relationship was characterized by vaudeville-like physical and verbal violence, as Chocolat, played by the Cuban Raphaël Padilla, was continually mistreated by his white master, the English-born George Footitt. Clearly, Padilla’s pseudonym, not to mention his stage treatment, might open up further avenues in the present context of racial stereotyping.
45The sign hanging above the dancers stipulates the rules of the contest: the cake-walking couple who dance with the most eccentricity will win the cake. As implied in n. 5, an element of competition was central to the cake walk’s assumed origin as well as to its appropriation by professional and amateur circuits in the late-nineteenth-century United States. Staged cake walk contests often figured in minstrel and variety shows, while local cake-walk championships offered amateurs the opportunity to try for themselves. For more on the cake walk’s American history, see Morgan and Barlow, From Cakewalks to Concert Halls, pp. 36–57.
46“Le Dernier ‘Cri,’” Le Petit Bleu de Paris, 18 December 1902, clipping, F-Po B pièce 347.
47See Le Journal amusant, 7 March 1903; clipping, F-Po B pièce 347. The poem is unauthored.
49Paris qui chante, 31 January 1903, pp. 6–7. The animal parallels might take on particular significance in light of the trend toward animal-themed dances—for example, “La Danse des chimpanzés,” “Le Pas de l’ours,” “La Polka des marabouts,” and “La Marche des phoques”—witnessed by Parisian music halls during the teens and twenties. For more on this trend, see Henriette Regnier, La Danse moderne inspirée des gestes et attitudes des animaux (Paris: J. Peyronnet, 1925).
more salutary reflections. In his 1935 memoir, *Portraits-souvenir: 1900–1914*, Jean Cocteau recollects seeing the *Joyeux Nègres* show as a thirteen-year-old. According to Cocteau, the show surpassed all previous displays of fashion and fireworks and even featured the first dancer on roller skates.

La salle trépignait, debout, et, au milieu de cette salle en délire, M. et Mme Elks dansaient: maigres, crochus, enrubannés, constellés d'étoiles, éclaboussés de lumière blanche, le chapeau sur l'oeil et sur l'oreille, les genoux plus haut que le visage renversé en arrière, les mains agitant une canne flexible, arrachant leurs gestes d'eux-mêmes et martelant un plancher artificiel des claquettes de leurs souliers vernis. Ils dansaient, ils glissaient, ils se cabraient, ils se cassaient en deux, en trois, en quatre, ils se redressaient, ils saluaient. . . . Et derrière eux toute une ville, toute l'Europe, se mettait à danser.50

(The audience stamped its feet and, in the midst of the frenzied crowd, Mr. and Mrs. Elks danced: skinny, crooked, beribboned, star-studded, spangled with white light, hats over their eyes and ears, knees higher than their tipped-back heads, hands twirling flexible canes, wrenching their gestures from themselves and hammering the artificial floor with the taps on their patent shoes. They danced, they glided, they reared up, they broke themselves in two, three, four, then they straightened up and bowed. . . . And

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behind them the whole city, the whole of Europe, began dancing.)

“Crooked,” “wrenching,” “hammering,” “reared”: the dominant impression is of physicality. But the verbs suggest neither eccentricity nor grace, for Cocteau accentuates angularities, protrusions, asymmetry, dismemberment, aggression, the urban, and even the machine-like. This physicality, we are told, not only ensnared the spectator’s gaze; it also encouraged audience participation. An article in Le Gaulois spoke similarly of “the city dancing,” describing how, at the end of one show, members of the audience leapt out of their seats and danced the cake walk late into the night.51

This conglomeration of the physical, the spectacular, and the participatory is curious, evincing none of the Romantic primitivism we might expect, while bearing in mind the early aesthetic tendencies of Cocteau and his colleagues.52 It may be that these recollections betray the influence of Cocteau’s later abandonment of “negrophilia” as his views on African American culture hardened into dogma.53 Nonetheless, his account is worth considering on its own terms. The absence of the exotic, the savage, and la mentalité primitive in his description suggests a further negation of racial signification; the cake walk is once again detached from black cultural production.

The point, though, might run deeper. A dogged pursuit of racial identity will inevitably stumble over elusive stereotypes and alignments neither universal in their assumption nor fixed in definition. Such concepts or schemas, based on de-individualizing, socially constructed notions of identity, tend to enslave: in other words, to force a capitulation to their prophecy. In the present case, questions of race and national character seem particularly muddled. It is uncertain whether the Elks toned down any perceived “primitive” aspects of the dance (as L’Actualité française illustrée implies) or whether it was precisely these aspects that Parisians sought after.54 For the moment, it might be valuable to sidestep these issues, skirting the well-worn business of “white on/or black” in favor of new, perhaps more useful avenues. I would like to step back from the issue of race and consider Cocteau’s account further in light of its primary impression of physicality. Why might Cocteau have privileged the physical component of the dance, over and above other salient features such as staging or music? At base, what was specific to the dance’s physical form—specific enough not only to evoke impressions of “wrenching,” “rearing,” and “breaking” bodies, but also to get audiences on their feet?

We might turn first to a historical context. When the Elks stormed onto the dance circuit in 1902, hammering the floor alongside boxers, swimmers, and acrobats, French tastes for physical activity were at a peak. Interest in the physical, emergent since the late nineteenth century, had occasioned both the establishment of a sporting culture distinct from English and German models and a splurge of scholarly writings on the body.55 Trends toward audience participation juxtaposed the physical with the mental, striving to eliminate the body/mind dualism. For instance, the Manual d’Éducation Physique et de Gymnastique of the French gymnast Jean-Jacques Lambin stresses the “desirable normal development of the body,” stating that “the mind and body must make a whole out of themselves.”56 The “unity of the body and mind” was a long-standing tenet of French education, and the American Elks’ “rearing” bodies was no different.

54A similar confusion appears in studies of the dance’s presentation to and reception by white Americans at the turn of the century. Writing on the African American cake walker and pedagogue Aida Overton Walker, Krasner describes the dance’s “ambiguous and transgressive relationship to cultural identity” and shows how the cake walk was continually refuged—as at once sophisticated, stylish, and graceful, yet supposedly “authentic” in its representation of black culture—to accommodate the shifting complexities of race, gender, and class identity; see Krasner, “Rewriting the Body,” in his Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness, p. 82.

55With an initial emphasis on gymnastics (as training for military pursuit), physical activity became popular among the middle and upper classes, incorporating various team games and, notably, cycling, for more on the subject, see Eugen Weber, “Gymnastics and Sports in Fin-de-siècle France: Opium of the Classes?” American Historical Review 76/1 [1971], 70–98. Period scholarly articles on the body include Georges Chevrier’s “La Liberté de la chair” [La Revue indépendante 2/6 [1885], 271–81], which proclaimed bodily liberation, and Paul Adam’s “Les Énergies” [La Revue blanche 10 [1896], 433–41]. The two-volume exercise manual of the Swiss musician and pedagogue Emile Jacques-Daleroze also advocated bodily freedom and spontaneity, but from a more practical perspective. The manual
participation, encouraged by the Third Republic since the Bastille celebrations of July 1880, were similarly pronounced.\textsuperscript{56} Not only did local parks offer passersby the opportunity to join in various recreational games and leisure activities, particularly boules and cycling, but several entertainment establishments were founded on the “participatory” premise. The Cirque Molier, for example, established by Ernest Molier in 1880, was an amateur circus at which the Parisian upper classes, including well-known society figures and dignitaries, could attempt various sorts of equestrian acrobatics or the flying trapeze.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, we might recall the “concours de cake walk” mentioned earlier, held at Parisian music halls and circuses. Reserved for amateur participation, these contests drew considerable crowds; an advertisement in Le Gaulois for the second cake-walk contest at the Nouveau Cirque advised couples to sign up well in advance.\textsuperscript{58}

In this sporting and recreational climate, a critical response to the Elks’ cake walk emphasizing physicality and audience participation was perhaps more than fortuitous. It is easy enough to read Cocteau’s words as historically contingent: as a prosaic manifestation of a prevailing cultural interest in the physical. But such a straightforward privileging of the historical dimension overlooks the fact that all dance is about physicality and showcasing the body, about ways in which the body can move. How, then, was the cake walk’s physicality more charged or more pronounced than that of any other contemporary dance? What, to rewind to a question posed earlier, was its essential specificity of movement?

The verbs chosen by Cocteau provide a starting point. As mentioned earlier, they conjure dynamic, athletic movements, angularity, and an awkwardness or asymmetry of posture. It was precisely these qualities that were remarked upon by the period press: verbs such as “sauter” (jump), “courber” (bend), “s’embraser” (inter-twine), “zigzaguer” (zigzag), “se tordre” (twist round), “pirouetter” (pirouette), “se cambrier” (throw shoulders back), “croiser” (cross), “se plier” (fold up), “jeter” (throw) and “se lancer” (leap) appeared amid descriptions of the dancers’ “déchanchement” (lopsided walk) and images, such as plate 4, of cake walkers with arms, elbows, and wrists bent, knees bent and kicking forward, and heads thrown backward.\textsuperscript{59} The overall effect of the dance was one of crookedness or robotics, with dancers seeming like puppets, the joints of their bodies attached to invisible strings.\textsuperscript{60}

This effect was striking in its incongruity with contemporary dance styles. Dances such as the Berline, Boston, gavotte, minuet, polka, and waltz, all popular in the early 1900s, privileged smooth lines, rotations, simple forward-and-backward movements, and light gliding of the feet. Couples adopted “classical” positions and strove for regularity and symmetry in their movements.\textsuperscript{61} The cake walk, in contrast, was characterized by agitation and unrest; it not only emphasized the body’s angles, but proceeded by juts and starts. The critic for Le Petit Bleu described a consequence of this new vocabulary of movement: “Le cake-walk . . . c’est bien fatigant. Ah, à ma première leçon: mes jambes, mes cuisses, mes reins, mes bras, ma

\textsuperscript{56}See the collection of period sources at F-Po B pièce 347.

\textsuperscript{59}See the collection of period sources at F-Po B pièce 347.

\textsuperscript{60}Rae Beth Gordon draws an interesting parallel between the cake walk’s seeming roboticism and the contortions of hysteric, the latter popularized in the late nineteenth century by performing groups such as the Epileptic Singers and the Idiot Comics, both of which modeled their stage gestures on nervous pathology; see her article “Natural Rhythm: La Parisienne Dances with Darwin: 1875–1910,” Modernism/modernity 10/4 (2003), 617–56. The historical and interpretative basis for Gordon’s thesis is outlined in her book Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{61}For more on the style, steps, and techniques of these dances in their turn-of-the-century forms, see Lussan-Borel, Traité de danse avec musique contenant toutes les danses de salon (Paris: Flammarion, 1899); and E. Louis, Traité de l’art de la danse dans le monde (Paris: E. Gallet, 1901).
poitrine. Quelle courbature!" [The cake walk . . . it is very tiring. Ah, at my first lesson: my feet, my thighs, my loins, my arms, my chest. What ache!] 62

Pushing the boundaries of knowable—habitual, comfortable, perhaps even permissible—bodily movement in unfamiliar directions, the cake walk overturned contemporary gestural practice. Its athleticism and vigor prompted what one later critic described as a “revolution,” ousting the polka and Berline from Parisian salons and inspiring the creation of other energetic and boisterous dances such as the Elks’ “Kikapoo” of 1904 and the “Grizzly Bear,” popularized in Paris in 1912 by the American husband-and-wife team Irene and Vernon Castle.63 Rewinding to Cocteau, these thoughts

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62 "Le Dernier ‘Cri,’" Le Petit Bleu de Paris; clipping, F-Po B pièce 347. The article continues to propose the dance as some sort of dietary supplement: “Et puis si bon pour le santé. Une dame grosse, il faut trois semaines pour le faire maigrir. Et donne très bons bras, très bonnes jambes, très bons reins, tout très bon! Jamais malade.”

63 See Les Spectacles à travers les ages: musique, danse, ed. Claude Berton (Paris: Éditions du Cygne, 1932), p. 347. Incidentally, the cake walk’s angularity also provoked fierce hostility in some quarters. A female league sponsored by Le Gaulois proclaimed “war on the cake walk,” developing a new veil dance—gracious, elegant, and in the time of a slow waltz—to combat the asymmetrical postures; see
on the cake walk’s physicality might take on new significance. That the dance’s bent, angular style was idiosyncratic is clear; that it specifically provoked the style of Cocteau’s description should perhaps be equally so. Cocteau’s luxuriating in the physical aspect of the Elks’ routine may celebrate not so much bodily movement in general, but a distinct type of movement, a combination of asymmetrical posture and vigorous gesture that seemed to contravene the contemporary dance aesthetic.

But might other, nonphysical factors also be embroiled? It is irresistible to wonder whether the Elks’ movements were accentuated—better, brought to light—by their show’s representational apparatus. The spotlights (“les projecteurs”) installed in the circus, mentioned by Cocteau earlier in his account, offer a literal realization of this hypothesis. Illuminating the couple as they dance, the lights would clearly help “spectacularize” physical motion, directing audience attention toward the moving body parts. And what of a metaphorical—even a musical—equivalent? Might the Elks’ musical accompaniment have also endorsed the spectatorial gaze? I need to step back a few paces to explain this.

Although there is no surviving record of the music used during the Elks’ performances, several works maintain a connection with the couple, including Edmond Antréassian’s “Le Joyeux Nègre” (1903) and an anonymous piece entitled “The Elks American Cake Walk” (1907). These pieces share characteristics typical of the contemporary cake walk: a sectional structure involving a tonic-based refrain; a four-measure introduction comprising a repeated rhythmic motif, unison part-writing, and an ending on the dominant; simple harmonic movement; an oom-pah bass line; and a lively, accented, and [mainly] staccato melody.

Of the two, the Antréassian is perhaps the more useful for present purposes. Although it is likely to have been a French imitation designed for performance in salons) of the music used by the Elks, rather than the circus music itself, it provides tangible clues as to the function of cake-walk music. Of particular interest is the labeling of musical themes. As ex. 1 makes clear, each theme is assigned a dance step: “pas allongé,” “pas de Cake-Walk” [stretched step, cake-walk step], and later “pas latéraux,” “pas jeté en avant” [sideways step, step forward]. [The 1903 publication by Alphonse Leduc includes a théorie or step-by-step guide detailing how the moves are to be executed.] But the assignments are nonspecific. The same musical theme might be labeled differently each time it recurs; particular themes are not assigned particular steps. The music, it seems, is merely a structuring principle, a means of metrical and bodily coordination, rather than a pictorial or expressive surface. A remark in the accompanying théorie supports this idea, suggesting that the dancers are to be guided by

66A selection of cake walks from the period, including Edouard Jouve, “Cake-walkomanie-Le Roi du cake-walk pour piano” (1903), Georges Kick, “Le Cake-walk parisien, nouvelle danse de salon” (1903), Emmanuel Zamor, “Devant l’aioupa, cake-walk pour piano” (1903), and Maurice Gracey, “Oncle Tom, cake-walk pour piano” (1907), can be found at F-Pn.
the musical beat, marking time physically by lifting or lowering their arms.\textsuperscript{67}

Synchronizing bodies to the beat, the music becomes a kind of metronome, locking the dancers’ movements to a codified aural pattern. It might even be said to have a propelling effect, driving physical movement forward with engine-like regularity. In his study of a single year, In 1926: Living on the Edge of Time, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht suggests something similar. Discussing the European importation of African American dance, Gumbrecht describes how the coupling of the dancing body with musical meter creates the excitement of performance. The coincidence of visual and auditory beats, he implies, is a powerful machine.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{67}The reference is as follows: “Pendant qu’ils dansent et chaque fois qu’ils lèvent un pied, ils doivent marquer le rythme avec les bras qui descendent et remontent”, see Antréassian, “Le Joyeux Nègre,” F-Pn N. 912.

There might, though, be another, related angle from which to conceive of this audio-visual coupling. What, we might ask, if such coupling were not only a cue for the dancer, or even a Gumbrechtian powerhouse, but also a cue for the spectator? What if it were not only a means of bodily coordination but also of coordination of the gaze? In other words, what if music were a spotlight, directing spectatorial attention toward the synchronous visual event—in the case of the Elks, the moving limbs?

This idea seems to have a good deal to commend it. Generations of film directors and scholars have tacitly observed the hegemony of the synchronous: that an image, when synchronized to a sound or musical effect, will necessarily demand and receive audience attention. Moreover, compared to that of other contemporary dances, the cake walk’s coupling of music and movement might appear particularly charged. Whereas in the minuet, gavotte, and others the metric coordination and stability offered by a musical accompaniment is reaffirmed by a dance partner, in the cake walk there is no such doubling of structure. The partner is often relegated to a merely pictorial level, bodily contact between dancers is reduced and is certainly unnecessary for purposes of balance or guidance. The cake walk could be—and often was—danced alone. In place of the dance partner, the music might come into greater focus, taking on the role of spatial and metric guide. A new type of interaction and dependency would be set up: between body and sound rather than between body and body.

These ideas about bodies and spotlights are inevitably exploratory. Period sources, and indeed Cocteau’s account, make no reference to either the audio-visual combination or the music’s function. Moreover, claims of gestural-musical synchronization might seem inadequate to describe the cake walk’s essential specificity. Despite the potential significance of music’s role as dance partner, its principal function as a metric guide is hardly unique. Dance music has always functioned to structure and coordinate movement, be it on a beat-by-beat or measure-by-measure level. Dictionaries and theories of dance, from Charles Compan’s *Dictionnaire de danse, contenant l’histoire, les règles et les principes de cet art* (1787) to Lussan-Borel’s *Traité de danse avec musique contenant toutes les danses de salon* (1899), continually affirm the notion of a gestural dependency on music. Analyses of dance moves take musical divisions as their point of reference; steps might correspond to beats, “ternes” (sequences of steps) to measures.

But something else about the cake walk’s audio-visual synchronization might encourage us to persist with the interpretation. Perhaps the most vivid parallel between the dance’s music and gesture concerns style rather than meter, sensibility rather than structure. The music, we might recall, reflects the cake walk’s physical juts, starts, and asymmetrical postures with its own brand of offbeat accent. Remarkably, the cake walk’s accompaniment, *Le Petit Bleu* describes “le rythme d’une musique bizarre, heurtée, saccadée, inharmonique, mais entraînante” (the rhythm of a bizarre, jerky, staccato, unharmonic but rousing music). L’*Actualité française illustrée* reminds us further: “la musique est une sorte de polka-marche, très rapide, hérissée de contre-temps et de syncopés!” (the music is a sort of polka-march, very fast, bristling with offbeat rhythms and syncopations!). Here, then, is an impression of angularity that maps stylistically onto the dance itself—an aural impression that might serve to heighten the visual one, drawing attention to the bending and stretching of the body, and perhaps even contributing to the foregrounding of the physical recorded by Cocteau. Spotlit by both musical and gestural systems (not to mention the spotlights them-

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The moving body is doubly objectified. It becomes a fixation for the eye, a spectatorial fetish that teases us with a new identity, a new "otherness."

Words such as "identity" and "otherness" are familiar slogans of postcolonial theory, evoking Homi Bhabha’s vocabulary of "overdetermination," or Eric Lott’s of "love and theft," "desire and co-option." But I refer here neither to a transgression of racial boundaries nor to appropriative racial desires. The Elks’ cake walk fetishized the physical. In other words, its imagined "otherness" as fashioned by Parisian society was not primarily a racial presence, whether "negro" as Blake might suppose, or American as seemed the case with Sousa. This cake walk was envisaged outside l’âme raciale, not to mention l’âme noire. Instead, it showcased the protrusions of a moving body, prompting an excavation into the exotic world of out-stretched arms and raised knees, bent wrists and backward-thrown shoulders, hip-thrustings and gambolings.

But there is more to come. A third Parisian cake walk, situated conveniently besides that of the Elks, conjures yet another exotic world—one in which moving limbs take on new significance.

Splicing

Georges Méliès was one of the pioneers of early cinema. Having attended the first screening of the Lumière Cinematographe on 28 December 1895, he developed an interest in motion picture technology, studying cameras, projectors, printers, and processing equipment. Although his first films, straightforward cityscapes and short narratives, were modeled on the silent films of the Lumière, Méliès began to develop a personal style marked by fantasy, illusion, and the miniepic. His 1903 Le Cake Walk Infernal, created at the height of his career, is typical. The characters and location are fantastic (God, Mephisto, several little devils, a minstrel couple, and some backup dancers in bonnets all live together in hell), and the action is similarly far-fetched. The film is a sort of cake-walk jam session in which characters perform for a stationary camera, mixing cake-walk steps with jumps, somersaults, and can-can leg kicks.

Films of the dance had never been quite like this. Although a few filmmakers had released documentary-style footage of the cake walk in performance, Méliès was one of the first to incorporate the dance into a fiction film. Moreover, in terms of the dance’s connotative value, Méliès’s version is peculiar. The cake walk, it appears, has been made over, dislocated from any of the racial or physical impressions noted earlier. The dominant effect is not one of savagery, grace, or angularity of movement. Instead, what stands out is a sense of the otherworldly, for there is something weird, even uncanny, about how the characters dance.

Consider, for example, the opening scene between God, Mephisto, and the latter’s five devils-diskicks. Standing center stage in front of the jaws of Hades, God gesticulates toward the dancing devils, seeming to condemn their movements. But within a split second he has disappeared; in his place stands Mephisto, waving what appear to be God’s robes. (The robes them-

77Blake, Le Tumulte noir, notes a second film that thematizes the dance in a fictional scenario: Pathé’s The Dwarf’s Cake-walk, also of 1903 (see p. 15). Unfortunately I have been unable to locate a copy.
78This is not to deny any racial implications to Méliès’s alignment of the cake walk, the minstrel couple, and Mephisto; racial stereotyping, as is well known, characterized much early cinema. For more on the cinematic construction of racial difference in the first half of the twentieth century, see Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and James R. Nesteby, Black Images in American Films, 1896–1954: The Interplay Between Civil Rights and Film Culture (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).
selves soon disappear, replaced by a ball of fire.) Another vanishing effect occurs in a later scene in which Mephisto cake walks on top of a giant cake. While he dances, his legs and then arms disappear; dislocated from his body, they instantaneously reappear in midair, dancing of their own accord.

These effects of disappearance and dismemberment, achieved by a technique of multiple exposures known in the industry as “splicing,” are typical of Méliès’s output. A successful magician, Méliès incorporated his talent for stage magic skits into his filmmaking, creating many such “trick” episodes. In Le Cake Walk Infernal these tricks are dramatically appropriate, contributing to the eccentricity of the action and the overall sense of the otherworldly. But, more than this, they suggest an additional impression, one of the doubled self, the self as its own other. In the first of the two aforementioned scenes, the diffuse nature of Mephisto (where is he from? how does he transform himself?) seems to represent the common Gothic motif of the return of a repressed or threatening “other.” This threat is portrayed as a Doppelgänger: the immediate metamorphosis of God into Mephisto implies that they are one and the same. Some readers may recall Freud’s 1919 essay, “Das Unheimliche” (The Uncanny), the words of which on the Doppelgänger—“it becomes the . . . harbinger of death . . . a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons”—find a curious presage in Méliès’s scene. Whereas in Freud’s discussion the focus is strictly inner (the Doppelgänger is created out of the psyche as a projection of a narcissistic crisis), with Méliès the Doppelgänger becomes an outside force, a physical manifestation of a possessing spirit. After inhabiting his victim [God], Mephisto himself splits in two; in the second scene, his body breaks—his legs and arms are dismembered—while he dances on the giant cake.

This second scene unites the theme of the Doppelgänger with that of the prevailing impression of the film, the uncanny. The dismembered, dancing limbs seem to indicate the presence of that partially visible other-self, the Doppelgänger. Again, I cite Freud: dismembered limbs, he argues, “have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when . . . they prove capable of independent activity.” Here perhaps lies the nub of the issue. The activity of the dismembered limbs constitutes the dance; it is therefore the dance that incites the Doppelgänger. The impression is similar in the earlier scene in which God transforms into Mephisto. It is the dancing of the little devils that, infuriating God, provokes the repressed “other” to come to the surface. The dance, then, while contributing to the fancifulness of the scenario, becomes a vehicle of a different sort of splicing, interweaving self and “other” through bodily metamorphosis and dismemberment.

The interpretation should not end here, for the cake walk’s musical accompaniment again proves suggestive, in this case betraying another, perhaps less obvious splicing agent. To be sure, the soundtrack accompanying the film on the recent DVD compendium Méliès le Cinémagicien does not date from Méliès’s day. When screened in the early 1900s, Le Cake Walk Infernal would most likely have been accompanied by a piano improvisation. What is heard on the DVD was instead composed and performed by the silent film specialist Eric le Guen during the 1990s. Nonetheless, despite this temporal displacement and the interpretative restrictions it might impose, Le Guen’s score is evocative, seeming to reaffirm the proposed topos of the uncanny. For the most part, his music resembles a typical cake-walk refrain with a metrically

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78 The joining together of two separate pieces of film to form one piece, splicing was often used to maintain a continuity of action via the combination of different shots, as well as to create comic effects. The technique remains a staple of cinematography.


80 Ibid., p. 244.

81 Le Guen, a well-known French composer, pianist, conductor, and teacher, is music adviser for the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, as well as for the Institut lumière de Lyon and the Festival de Cannes. I have been unable to discover the exact date of his composition.
stable bass and syncopated melody. But one passage sticks out: the piece’s extended introduction, which features a forte accented bass line doubled at the octave and descending through four notes (B♭, A, A♭, and F; on repetition, A♭, F, E♭, and D). In terms of gesture, dynamics, tessitura, texture, and articulation, this bass line is reminiscent of the introduction to another, more famous example. Debussy’s “Golliwogg’s cake walk” opens with a similar descending four-note motif: forte, accented, and doubled at the octave (see ex. 2a). Moreover, the first three notes of Debussy’s motif [as heard initially] are the same as the first three notes of Le Guen’s motif [as heard on repetition]: A♭, F, E♭. What does this suggest? Debussy’s piece, needless to say, is considered the acme of the cake-walk genre; its melody—transcribed for a myriad of instrumental combinations—has become iconic in popular culture. Through allusion, Le Guen seems to attest to this, gesturing toward the canonized model. He even calls attention to the bass motif by setting it apart from the surrounding measures; immediately prior to the motif’s appearance, the bass line, previously metrically regular and marchlike, comes to a temporary halt. But the Debussy allusion also contributes to the prevailing feeling of uncanniness, implying the presence of a fixed “other.” In short, it becomes the sonic equivalent of the visual Doppelgänger, the specter of a bygone self.

The scenario, though, is more peculiar still. As is well known, the pertinent measures of Debussy’s cake walk are themselves referential, “horizontally” quoting Wagner’s Tristan chord—perhaps in preparation for the more obvious quotation of the opera’s famous motif in the middle of the movement. Le Guen, whether consciously or not, engages in a form of double-allusion: a doppel-Doppelgänger haunts his score.

**L’ARTISTE-FUNAMBULE**

Scholarly discussion of Debussy’s cake walk has paraded the Wagner quotations as the movement’s raison d’être: as examples of a lighthearted but nonetheless critical confrontation. In view of contemporary press interest in what was dubbed “le conflit franco-allemand,” epitomized by the countless Wagner caricatures published by the satirical journals Le Journal amusant, Le Sifflot, and Le Grelot, to name a few, such a focus might be expected.82 What is more, the cake walk’s central quotations might appear of particular analytical interest, prompting further observations on the Debussy-Wagner relation (see ex. 2b). As Lawrence Kramer notes in his recent study of music and modernity, “there are no true quotations here.”83 Wagner’s motif, though heard at pitch, is repeatedly stripped of its harmonic support. In the first of the four quotations, for example, the motif is underpinned not by the weighty Tristan chord—a sonority that, as mentioned earlier, has been recast “horizontally” in the piece’s opening phrase—but by a stepwise bass ascending from G♭ major (mm. 47–60 firmly establish G♭ as a tonal center through pulsed tonic pedals and cadential harmonies). Although the thin, almost two-part texture, fleeting contrary motion, and third/sixth doubling tend to obscure the music’s local harmonic underpinning, the following progression might be implied (following the G♭-major triad of m. 59 and its sustained inner D♭): a diminished seventh on A (m. 61) moving through a dominant seventh on F (m. 62) and a dominant seventh on C (m. 62) to a dominant ninth on D♭ (m. 63) as the Tristan motif is ousted by a mordent-shaped grace-note figure.

Kramer offers a persuasive reading of this quotation and suggests that its essential falsity [the substitution of a seemingly indeterminate harmonic sequence for the Tristan chord] pronounces a verdict on the redundancy of the Wagnerian impulse in the contemporary age.84 The nonquotation signals the nonappearance of Tristan; Wagnerism and its attendant symbolic essence (what Kramer, drawing on Bourdieu, calls “symbolic investiture”) are shown as obsolete. Moreover, while acknowledging the slightness of the gesture (“one really

82For a discussion of French response to Wagner, as well as reproductions of Wagner caricatures, see Martine Kahane and Nicole Wild, Wagner et la France (Paris: Herscher, 1983).
84Ibid.

Example 2

b. “Golliwogg’s cake walk,” mm. 58–82.

The refashioning of the Tristan chord as the cake-walk theme, together with the absorption of the Tristan motif into the carnivalesque sentimentality of the piece’s central section, suggests (with tongue in cheek) that conflating Wagner and the popular medium of the cake walk is precisely that: a cake walk.

\[\text{85Ibid.}\]
An additional example might be offered in support of Kramer’s argument. Returning to the first of the four central Tristan quotations: the chain of transitional sonorities that replaces the famous chord as the motif’s harmonic accompaniment might function simply as a dominant preparation—a harmonic upbeat to the dominant ninth of m. 63. (Incidentally, in the second of the four quotations this dominant chord resolves—via an augmented triad—to a tonic added-sixth chord, more or less as we would expect [m. 67].) Is Wagner’s motif, then, harmonized by a banal progression from secondary dominant to dominant to tonic, a progression used interminably in cake walk and ragtime? The same question might be asked of the opening “horizontal” quotation of the Tristan chord. The arpeggiated descent resolves in its most simple diatonic fashion: as a half-diminished chord on the supertonic to a dominant added-sixth chord, which itself resolves onto the tonic.

The implication is clear. Debussy deflates Wagner by exposing the ease with which his musical idiom can morph into something trite and common. Tristan [or is it Wagner, Wagnerism, or even “Wagnerian symbolic investiture?”] appears in fancy dress: according to Kramer, in a context of “fashionable trifles” that uncloaks its status as a fashionable trifle itself, one that, like all fashionable trifles, will eventually run its course.86 But there seems more to it than this. A first point to recognize, perhaps, is the equation of “cake walk” and “trifle,” something that, from my perspective at least, seems more than a little disturbing, teetering, as it does, on the brink of some heady questions about popular culture’s aesthetic value. Also, we might bear in mind a further, more covert equation, one that emerges from a sense of double parody haunting the score. As mentioned earlier, the cake walk originated as a parodic display with black plantation slaves taking off the mannerisms of their white masters. Debussy, then, parodies Wagner in a parody dance: his ironic quotation aligns Wagner not only with popular culture (be it a “fashionable trifle” or not), but also with “the master,” mocked and scorned by the folk.87 This idea might take on particular significance in light of Debussy’s journalistic jibes at Wagner’s ascendency: at, for example, “[le] jour où Wagner régnait décidément sur la Drame lyrique” [the day when Wagner reigned supremely over opera].88

Beyond all this, though, the dance—the generic framework on which the piece is based—might have a more complex significance than that of a mere canvas (if innately parodic) on which to poke fun at Wagner. With this in mind, I consider the music aside from the Wagner quotations—its style, execution, and general tenor. A first impression is of excess: the score is saturated with performance directions for articulation, dynamics, phrasing, and ornamentation; barely a note is without composerly command. Some of the directions are themselves excessive: a one-measure decrescendo from pianissimo [m. 9]; a note with an accent, stress mark, and slur to be played piano [m. 14]; perhaps most extreme, a crescendo to pianissimo, then a decrescendo, all in the space of one quarter-note beat [m. 49]. Many of the musical gestures, moreover, seem as overblown as these directions. At the end, for example, the piece toys with a closure that is desperately prolonged. A mix of hammering unison motifs and offbeat rhythmic tags “compete” until the thematic material disintegrates; the piece finishes with violent juxtapositions of dynamics [from piano decrescendo to fortissimo] and broken themes. The opening creates a similarly exaggerated effect (see ex. 2a). A four-note motif, the “horizontalized” Tristan chord, is repeated three times, descending through three octaves while increasing in volume. With each repetition a feeling of anticipation intensifies; the music hurtles toward the onset of the cake-walk refrain. On the final eighth-note beat of the fourth measure, though, a sforzando chord [the dominant with added sixth] juts out, tripping up the meter. The following measure of unexpected silence adds to this effect, halting the introduction’s line, disrupting the periodicity, metrically wrong-footing the pianist.

86Ibid., p. 113.
87Quoted in Lesure, Monsieur Croche et autres écrits, p. 41.
Overstated, overdramatic: the general impression is of musical theatricity, even of pantomime. The exaggerated effects of sound and silence—tearing, racing, tumbling, and disappearing—are akin to visual slapstick. Debussy, it seems, is clowning around. But what does it all mean? The impression, perhaps, is of a critical distance between Debussy and his musical material comparable to the more familiar distance between Debussy and Wagner with which we began. Kramer, in passing, notes something similar (“Debussy does not so much write a cake walk as portray one; he distances and miniaturizes it”), comparing Debussy’s compositional treatment of the cake walk (as an object of “affection”) with that of the Wagnerian mystique (handled with “cool detachment”) before turning back to his thesis of investiture. But there might be an additional interpretation that raises questions about the composer’s persona. On the face of it, Debussy, through his Wagner quotations, appears as a trickster-hero, seeking to outdo the master by means of sophisticated musical parody. But from a slightly shifted hermeneutic perspective a different persona emerges, one of Debussy as a clown who plays the fool—literally plays the cake walk—to entertain. This latter guise might seem odd, not to mention unattractive; there is, as yet, little space for buffoonery in this composer’s trajectory. However, an account by Debussy’s confidante René Peter implies that such space might be overdue.

In his book Claude Debussy: Vues prises de son intimité, Peter recalls a meeting between Debussy and the clowns Footitt and Chocolat (mentioned earlier with reference to the Elks) at the Irish-American bar “Reynolds” during the first years of the twentieth century. According to Peter, the group discussed life in the circus, the techniques of the flying trapeze, the clowns’ sugar-loaf hats, music, and philosophy. But Debussy, it seems, was in a bitter mood, complaining of his professional situation and lamenting that “glory” involved being ignored by the many and detested by the few (“La gloire, cela consiste à être ignoré de trente millions de Français . . . et détesté d’une quarantaine des confrères”). He went on to compare his position to that of the duo, drawing parallels between his and their status as artists often “kicked,” and then recited Théodore de Banville’s “Le Saut du tremplin” ([1857], a poem about a sorrowful clown who wishes to escape from his heartless admirers. In the final stanza, the clown, smeared with white, yellow, green, and red, jumps from the circus arena to find liberty in the firmament:

Enfin, de son vil échafaud,
Le clown sauta si haut, si haut,
Qu’il creva le plafond de toiles
Au son du cor et du tambour,
Et, le coeur dévoré d’amour,
Alla rouler dans les étoiles.

{Finally, from his lowly platform,
The clown jumped so high, so high,
That he burst through the canvas ceiling
To the sound of the horn and drum,
And, his heart devoured by love,
Went rolling in the stars.}

There is a curious symmetry between Banville’s verse and Debussy’s account of his artistic standing as reported to Footitt and Chocolat. Debussy and Banville’s clown, it appears, share feelings of despondency and rejection; both also imply a similar professional alienation, a sense of distance from the artistic and spectatorial masses. Moreover, there is something mysterious about the exploits of Banville’s clown—in particular, how he is suspended between the earth and the sky—that speaks to a liberty that Debussy seems to long for. Banville’s clown embodies an unearthly force, discovering wings, defying the laws of gravity; he thus seems to embody Debussy’s desires.

To follow this thread might be to propose an identification between Debussy and the clown:

91Ibid., p. 97.

89Kramer, Opera and Modern Culture, pp. 113–14.
90René Peter, Claude Debussy: Vues prises de son intimité (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), pp. 96–98.
to wonder if Debussy envisaged his artistic persona through clown-inspired imagery or if he imagined himself as a picturesque outcast at odds with society. In this he would not have been alone. Artistic identification with clowns, acrobats, and other traveling performers—known collectively as saltimbanques—has a long history in French art, originating during the 1700s with Watteau’s series of paintings inspired by the commedia dell’arte. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the theme of the artiste-funambule (literally, artist-tightrope-walker) was well established. Literary and pictorial meditations on the theme flourished, the saltimbanque having become a metaphor for the modern artist in his homelessness, humanity, and alienation. Baudelaire’s prose poem “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” (1861) offers an example. The author describes an aged saltimbanque at a street fair: “un pauvre saltimbanque voûté, caduc, décérépî, une ruine d’homme” [a pitiful acrobat, stooped, obsolete, decrepit, a human ruin]. The image holds up a mirror to Baudelaire:

Je viens de voir l’image du vieil homme de lettres qui a survécu à la génération dont il fut le brillant amuseur; du vieux poète sans amis, sans famille, sans enfants, dégradé par sa misère et par l’ingratitude publique, et dans la baraque de qui le monde oublié ne veut plus entrer! (I have just seen the image of the old writer who has survived the generation whose brilliant entertainer he was; of the old poet without friends, without family, without children, debased by his wretchedness and the public’s ingratitude, and whose booth the forgetful world no longer wants to enter!)

Daumier, a contemporary of Baudelaire known primarily for his political and social satires, might have seen a similar figure. Several of his paintings on the saltimbanque theme, including his well-known Déplacement de saltimbanques of 1847–50, show an old, forsaken, weary-looking clown with bent back.

Musically, too, the theme of the clown received emphasis in this period. The successful run of French composer Louis Ganne’s operetta Les Saltimbanques at the Théâtre de la Gaité, Paris, in December 1899 revived interest in circus performers on the theatrical stage, while the Russian theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold’s production of Alexander Blok’s The Fairground Booth ignited a similar enthusiasm for the commedia dell’arte. Indeed, the latter is thought to have influenced in design and subject matter both Carnaval and Petrouchka, ballets produced by Diaghilev’s Russian troupe. [This influence might itself attest to a broader kinship between several of the Russian artists, their aesthetic concerns, and the themes and characters of the commedia dell’arte.] Schoenberg’s 1912 Pierrot Lunaire, on texts by Albert Giraud, is also well known for its commedia dell’arte currents, as are the settings of Verlaine’s Fêtes galantes by Reynaldo Hahn (1892) and Debussy himself (1892 and 1904).

The most familiar example of this artistic trend, though, is surely Picasso’s large canvas Family of Saltimbanques (1905, see plate 5), the culmination of a series of similarly themed works. The painting shows a vagabond troupe—gens de voyage—en route from one place to another amid a desolate landscape.

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92Ibid., p. 40.
In his seminal *A Life of Picasso* (London: Pimlico, 1991), John Richardson describes a racetrack scene in the background of the most worked-up sketch for the final composition of the painting (vol. 1, p. 382). He suggests that the speeding horses might have posed a practical problem for the artist, who struggled when capturing objects in the act of moving. But might they not also have created an image much more narrative than abstract, disturbing the theme of emptiness and isolation?

The abstract spatial setting helps marginalize the figures; the empty space surrounding them registers an absence that speaks of loss, loneliness, and alienation. But, as has been observed, this is more than an iconographic study of traveling performers, for the figures are supposedly based on Picasso and his friends. Picasso can be seen on the far left, dressed as Harlequin in a patchwork suit of diamonds. Apollinaire, poet, art critic, and goad to Picasso, stands to his left; a large buffoon, he is El tío Pepe. Al-
though the other figures cannot be identified with as much certainty, some claim that the two young boys are the poets Max Jacob and André Salmon, the woman seated on the right Picasso’s mistress Fernande, and the young girl holding Harlequin’s hand an orphan that Picasso and Fernande would later adopt.\textsuperscript{101}

It seems that another identification is suggested with the \textit{saltimbanque}: an equivalence of social and professional status. As one critic writes, “Picasso and his friends were forever indulging in elaborate jokes and fantasies, forever pretending they were someone else, and they may well have identified with these \textit{saltimbanques} lingering in their never-never world, their symbolist limbo.”\textsuperscript{102} Might this limbo be extended to composerly spheres? The inclusion of Picasso’s colleagues in the scenario, affirming that such identification was pervasive, brings us full circle to Debussy and the identification with which I began. Both Picasso and Debussy, it is known, were fascinated by circus figures. Picasso regularly attended fairs and circus shows in Paris and enjoyed talking to the clowns; his chance meeting with street performers as he was walking home one day through the Esplanade des Invalides is well known.\textsuperscript{103} Debussy, according to Richard Langham Smith, betrayed an “undeniable taste” for the circus.\textsuperscript{104} Both also created works on a clown or commedia dell’arte theme: Picasso the series of “Saltimbanque” sketches and paintings, Debussy the \textit{Suite bergamasque} (1890), \textit{Fêtes galantes} (1892 and 1904, mentioned above), and Sonata for Cello and Piano (1915), subtitled “Pierrot fâché avec la lune” (Pierrot vexed with the moon). Furthermore, both seemed to empathize with these figures as artists of a marginalized reality. Akin to Debussy’s comments on the parallels between his own situation and that of the Footitt-Chocolat duo, Picasso’s self-portraiture evokes the artist as wanderer, traveling through strange lands pursuing his art.

But fascination and simple empathy might not have been the only factors to have motivated identification. As Noëlle Giret, a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des arts du spectacle, argues in a recent study, the \textit{saltimbanques} offered an elusive mental and physical liberation, an escape from personal and professional constraints. They were, Giret writes, symbols of “\textit{un ailleurs}” (an elsewhere), neither land nor sky, where reality and illusion might commingle.\textsuperscript{105} (I am reminded of Banville’s poem: how the clown, having jumped from his platform, loiters between earth and sky; how he occupies an “other” space outside the circus arena, removed from its shackles and conditions.) This “otherness,” however, might not only be spatial, not only a matter of tangible, man-made boundaries. Implied by the anecdotes above is that same duality of self discussed earlier with reference to Méliès. Here it is the clown who projects the artist’s desires, the clown who is the other-self, the alter ego or \textit{Doppelgänger}. Harlequin often serves as Picasso’s other-self, mimicking, embodying, and visualizing his artistic concerns. The hunched \textit{saltimbanque} described by Baudelaire is a similar double: a reflection of an inner self.

With Debussy the scenario is less straightforward. We have no visual representation of the artist in clown attire but merely a reported conversation with two clowns, a recitation of Banville’s poem, and a piece of seeming musical buffoonery. Clearly, the conversation’s equating of artist and clown, besides the poem’s vision of longing, goes some way toward establishing the desired identification. But might the cake walk also contribute? Considered alongside the conversation and recitation, the sense of musical pantomime is strangely appropriate. Hurtling along, rearing up, the musical gestures might depict the antics of Debussy’s proposed double; the cake walk might be the clown’s showpiece, the \textit{Doppelgänger} in action.

There is a final sting. The cake walk’s brash, flagrant, excessive theatricality seems deliber-
ately derisive. Debussy, it appears, is self-conscious, his slapstick effects intentionally mocking something or someone. What? Whom? Taking the most direct interpretative course might lead us back to Wagner and to the idea of parody invoked earlier. Debussy, one might assume, is taunting Wagner, distorting his motifs and chords with an almost icy indifference that seems to discredit their original metaphysical gravity. Alternatively, perhaps the cake walk itself is mocked. One might easily envision an argument in which Debussy cake walks through the cake walk, overplaying its signature rhythms, gestures, and harmonic progressions. But having reflected on the cake walk from the perspective of the artiste-saltimbanque, we can suppose yet another object of ridicule: Debussy himself—in particular, himself en clown. Might Debussy’s cake walk, like Picasso’s Family of Saltimbanques, offer a sort of self-portrait, one in which the artist emerges as a primary satirical target? The self-deprecating mode was indeed common in representations of the artist as saltimbanque. Since the eighteenth century, literary and pictorial texts had often been reflexively ironic or sarcastic, twisting the effects they set out to create. Moreover, irony and derision have long been considered as essential subtexts of the early modernist enterprise, the means by which the artist might dismantle contemporary experience and recombine its elements, while validating his method or agenda. Might Debussy’s self-mockery, then, be read as a critical commentary on the saltimbanque allegiance, one that disguised an inner nervousness of intent?

The implications of this question are large and would require separate discussions—indeed, a different enterprise altogether—to be fully pursued. The theoretical overtones—the business of derision and its place in the context of modernist expression—are particularly heady, necessitating a grounding in the historical realities of the contemporary culture under review. My aim here is less ambitious, more a matter of seeking a fresh perspective on Debussy and his cake walk, and one that might prompt questions that tend otherwise to be overlooked or dismissed within current hermeneutic paradigms. Yet a larger question remains. What emerges from this new interpretation of Debussy as saltimbanque and of the cake walk as his musical playground?

Certainly, there are no simple explanations that can replace the old, no swapping of Debussy-Wagnerphobe for Debussy-clown. The complexities of appropriation and agenda remain, merely ranged against a different subject. Moreover, the music under discussion is saturated with signifiers not here accounted for. As well as Wagner, the clown, and the cake walk, reference is also made to the Golliwogg [a minstrel doll that, though originally a loveable if grotesque character in the storybooks of Florence Kate Upton, became a well-known racist caricature], the child [owing to the piece’s dedication], and England [the English title seems to exoticize further]. This referential mix will predictably generate a number of interpretations of the “Golliwogg’s cake walk,” of which none might emerge as primary or causal. In other words, the Debussy-saltimbanque line is likely to be but one of several possible readings; as Kramer suggests, perhaps the piece’s semantic incongruity is the whole point. Nonetheless, and however we interpret it, the saltimbanque idea registers some provocative corollaries, offering an opportunity to confront Debussy’s cake walk from a new site of questioning, tempting us away from the standard Franco-German perspective. Moreover, the reading provides an insight into an aspect of artistic language thus far overlooked in musicology and, in particular, a new sense of composerly self. The compositeur-funambule parades his Doppelgänger through the cake walk, mocking the parade as it passes.

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106Starobinski remarks on this in his Portrait de l’artiste en saltimbanque, p. 9.
107On this subject, see Linda Hutcheon, Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony (London: Routledge, 1994).
108The English connection is particularly provocative owing to Debussy’s later handling of another cake-walk melody. When the first sixteen measures of Debussy’s other musical cake walk, “The Little Nigar” (“Danse nègre dite Danse du gâteau”), recur in his children’s ballet La Boîte à joujoux, composed in 1913 [later orchestrated by André Caplet], they are accompanied by the title “Le soldat anglais,” seeming to indicate the stage entrance of an English soldier.
109Kramer, Opera and Modern Culture, p. 113.
Looming large in my discussion, one might say, are several Doppelgängers and several parades. The “otherness” noted with respect to the cake walks of Sousa (an “otherness” of race), the Elks (one of the body), Méliès (of the world and the self), and Debussy (of the composer’s persona) might easily be construed in terms of inverse or alternate identities, supplements to the mass Parisian consciousness. The simple conclusion would be to reel off these various cases as testaments to the multifaceted “otherness” implied at the outset: to the cake walk as a versatile system of signification, fetishized on various levels. Such a wrapping-up, however, implies an essential complexity about the dance that requires its own assessment. How are these “other” readings able to commingle? What does it mean that the cake walk crossed boundaries of (African-) America and Europe, black and white, reality and illusion, this world and the next, the self and other, and that it allowed—encouraged, even—the existence of competing discourses?

These questions might seem as excessive as the cake walk itself. The complexity of impressions is surely more essential to my self-problematizing critique than to any historical reality supporting the dance’s cultural form; am I not muddying the cake walk’s 1900s reception with a predetermined hermeneutic bias? (This argument might be worth bearing in mind if only to highlight a potential consequence of scholarly preference for the convoluted.) But my case for the multiple impressions of the dance does not rest on any one preferred critical mode. The cake walk’s multipurpose connotative value emerges clearly from the visual and textual sources thus far examined. And a final source, a long-forgotten poem by Charles de Bussy (no relation, but what a nice coincidence) entitled “Le Cake-walck jugé par les danses” (1903), explicitly thematizes the dance’s versatility in a narrative predicated on how and why these “other” readings may coexist.110

De Bussy’s poem describes a ball at the Palais-Bourbon at which numerous personified dances learn of a new arrival.

> Si fières de leurs renommées,  
> Les Danses se sont alarmées,  
> Dieu! qu’est ce Cake-Walck? qu’ont-elles donc appris?  
> Un nouvel arrivant, un nègre  
> Semblant plutôt gris,  
> Dans les salons pénètre, allègre,  
> Et saute, cassant tout, plus ouistiti qu’humain,  
> Avec chapeau canne à la main.111

[So proud of their reputations,  
The Dances became alarmed,  
God! Who is this Cake-Walck? [sic] What have they learnt?  
A newcomer, a negro  
Seeming rather tipsy,  
Enter the salons, merry,  
And jumps, breaking everything, more monkey than human,  
With hat and cane in hand.]  

Jealous of the cake walk’s celebrity, the dances concoct methods of stifling it.

> Lorsque sera couchée à l’horizon la lune,  
> Demain matin, à l’heure où tout bon fêtard dort,  
> Qu’on lui coupe le cou!112

[When the moon retires to the horizon,  
Tomorrow morning, at a time when all good party-goers sleep,  
Let’s cut his throat!]

Their plans, however, are futile; the cake walk, the mob bemoans, can never be killed. Even without a head, this dance known for its energy and physical exuberance would survive. Besides, as the dances protest, the cake walk has further ammunition: his dual nationality as both “negro” and American amounts to virtual life insurance. Imprisonment at the Charenton asylum is not an option: “Il en sort! . . . Il vient d’Amérique!” Neither is death itself: “Même mort, il continuera, Puisqu’il est nègre!”113

This idea of life insurance is my main concern. In de Bussy’s account, the cake walk’s

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111 Ibid., p. 5.
112 Ibid., p. 8.
113 Ibid.
nationality and physical prowess confer upon the personified dance a resistance to oppression, a unique immortality. In other words, the dance’s characteristics appear as the necessary conditions of its survival. Might the same not be said of the characteristics gleaned from the Parisian cake walks studied in this article? Might the dance’s dialogical negotiations with race, physicality, and the self—the cultural elements described here as “others”—not appear as the conditions of its inception and appropriation? At base, might not a hybrid discourse of meanings have been a prerequisite to the dance’s box-office success?

The idea seems appealing, stirring visions of humanized cake walks à la de Bussy, armed with the necessary signification, meaning, and effect, conquering Paris. Indeed, “conquering” seems the appropriate term; this history of the cake walk’s Parisian career would reverse the direction of cultural imperialism, undoing the colonial project. *Paris qui chante* implies such an undoing: “La race noire semble vouloir—o ironique retour des choses d’ici-bas!—apporter à la race blanche les bienfaits de sa civilisation. Elle débute en essayant de rénover chez nous l’art de la danse” (The black race seems to want—an ironic reversal!—to bring to the white race the benefits of its civilization. It begins by trying to renovate among us the art of the dance). But de Bussy, I suspect, is leading us up a blind alley, whereas *Paris qui chante* is not. The significance of his account lies in an effect of poetic license—a concept of animate cake walks capable of doing and feeling—that necessarily escapes scholarly hermeneutics, however extravagant or imaginative. It goes without saying that the Parisian cake walks of this article are not human like de Bussy’s. They cannot shop for the metaphoric armaments necessary to ensure a successful reign, nor can they perform any sort of cultural work. Ideas, then, of the dance as conqueror, colonizer, civilizer, or even, according to de Bussy, King of France—despite their confluence with revisionist colonial polemics and, no less, with the present scholarly vogue for the performative—tend to overlook the more mundane and perhaps more obvious business of social intervention.

Any meaning or significance attached to the dance is surely contingent on social mediation and reception, both of which arise amid the cultural practices of turn-of-the-century Paris: in this case, amid trends favoring American chic, athleticism, the otherworldly, and the clown, as well as “primitive” art. It is, I submit, only by placing due emphasis on the role of such mediating functions—by dividing agency among performers, spectators, teachers, creators, and reviewers, not to omit institutions and more abstract ideological bodies—that we may reach the nexus of the multifaceted signification I keep turning back to. This is a signification that, beyond contesting supposedly unproblematic exhortations of race, physicality, and other sociopolitical constructs, helps define the cultural ambivalence and social flux on which the promotion of the dance as a contemporary fetish was mapped.

*Abstract.*

The popularity of the cake walk among Parisians in the early 1900s is usually attributed to the dance’s assumed racial signification. Scholars have argued that the cake walk, owing to its African American origins, was welcomed by Parisians as iconic of a racial “other,” a signifier of the primitive, uncultured, and grotesque. This article proposes an alternative reading, setting the standard scholarly line against other, more subtle impressions of the cake walk’s cultural import. A consideration of popular response to the dance—on stage, on film, and in the circus arena—reveals Parisian tastes not only for distinct styles of gesture but for American chic, athleticism, and popular participation, as well as the world of the “other.” These connotations invite us to consider afresh what is perhaps the most celebrated cake walk of the period, Debussy’s “Golliwogg’s cake walk” (1908), known particularly for its quotation of Wagner’s *Tristan*. Debussy’s piece, I argue, has a more complex significance than that of a mere canvas on which to poke fun at Wagner or a straightforward reference to a minstrel doll. By means of various cultural and aesthetic nuances, it suggests a persona shaped by buffoonery, slapstick, desperation, and irony: in short, a persona identified with that fetish of modernist art, the clown. Keywords: Debussy, cake walk, dance, popular culture, “other,” race, clown.

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