10

An Buachaillín Bán

REFLECTIONS ON ONE QUEER'S PERFORMANCE WITHIN TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC AND DANCE

Nicholas Gareiss

▶ "Lafferty's"

▶ in conversation with Nicholas Gareiss

As the first strains of the reel emerge from the pin-drop silence of the hall, I step out from the wing, crossing upstage behind the fiddler to stand next to him. Continuing the momentum of that stride, I graze the worn and swiftly-wearing soles of my shoes against the stage floor, beginning my dance with a series of hushed half-time brushes and shuffles to mark the tempo. I can feel the surface of the wooden floor through the leather soles as I lightly push the balls of my feet forward, caressing the ground twice, then twice again, and finally once more before releasing the weight of my frame through a weight-bearing footfall on a downbeat. I can feel the sounds created by my contact with the floor slip inside my collaborator's already-established tempo. I can reside here.

I begin lightly punctuating and accenting the arcs and valleys of the melody. Following the first part of the reel, about twenty seconds after I make my entrance, I sculpt my steps to imitate the melody of the tune "Big Pat's." Assembling the small one- or two-sound rudiments of trebles, hops, and tip-steps in the moment, I imitate the phrasing of the fiddler's bow by anticipating, mirroring, and dueling the back-and-forth motion of his arm with back-and-forward gestures of my knee and lower leg. Our sixteenth notes coalesce. We are now sounding together, my collaborator and I.

I have long felt the presence of a nascent queerness within traditional Irish music and dance. This queerness is and is not spoken about; it exists in rumors and in whispers, tacitly undergirding the performance conventions of the genre. Nothing could be more phantasmal, more impossible, more queer.

My fifteen years of experience performing within traditional Irish music and dance have allowed me a rare glimpse into a part of Ireland to which many Americans are not usually privy. I feel fortunate that my technical expertise and acclaim have allowed me access to an upper echelon of professional performance in this realm, even as my national identity marks me as an outsider. As both a queer-identified person, and an American working in the genre of Irish traditional music and dance, I believe my not-quite insider/not-quite outsider status has revealed fascinating contradictions of this subculture that would not otherwise become apparent. From this parallax, it is possible to illuminate heteronormative paradigms within this idiom and its corresponding social scenes. It is my humble hope that through the positionality of a queer American working in traditional Irish music and dance, I can bring to light ways of subverting these heteronormative paradigms using performance, allowing nascent queer tendencies to susurrate.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes, "You don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you."[1] As both a dancer and an anthropologist, the notion of a non-penetrative ethnographer, or indeed one who is penetrated himself by the culture, resonates with me, envisioning powerful new implications for queer work in ethnology and performance. Geertz's cultural "enmeshing" proffers the potential for queerness that is culturally specific. His idea of a culture "bodying forth" and enmeshing the ethnographer, revealing its secrets in its own time, on its own terms, offers insight into the ways cultural forms perform their nascent queerness. I have experienced this in my very enmeshed relationship with Ireland and its music and dance traditions, as well as through the enmeshing of my ethnographic training with my career as a dancer.

Traditional music scholar Helen O'Shea asserts that "Irish" and "queer" are "mutually exclusive identifications" in the discourse of both Irish nationalism and the Irish music scene.[2] In this essay, I wish to dismantle O'Shea's assertion in two ways: by revealing the "already-queerness" within the forms of Irish traditional music and dance themselves, and subverting the "mutual exclusiveness" of Irishness and queerness through my own performances in Irish traditional music and dance, onstage and off. Here I depart from my previous research as an anthropologist interviewer to explore the experience of doing ethnography as a performer and queer subject.[3] This project turns

the ethnographic gaze upon my own experience and artistic practice, the ways that I have worked corporeally in Irish traditional music and dance, in the hope of revealing both queer possibilities within these idioms and suggesting queer aesthetic interventions.

Implicated in the question of nascent queerness in Irish dance is the matter of the form's centrality to Irish culture. Michael Seaver, in "Counting Capital: The Real Value of Dance in Irish Society," writes, "It is clear that the dancing body in Ireland is firmly placed in the centre of our cultural landscape and that dancers contribute to social and cultural discourse through the ability to theorise through the moving body."[4] Even before the 1994 debut of *Riverdance* and the subsequent deluge of similar Broadway-style Irish dance shows, the long history of dance in Ireland had already created a collective psychic precedent for this genre's movement vocabulary, locomotive quality, and canonical repertoire that continues today. Due in part to the fact that many children are taught Irish dancing at elementary school in Ireland, often Irish people who do not consider themselves connected to the arts are intimately acquainted with the modalities of this corporeal tradition. In my own experience, Ireland is the only culture in which I can step into a taxi cab, inform the driver that I am a dancer, and have the driver's unseen assumptions about my work remotely resemble what I actually create. This includes the role of specific body parts (the feet, legs, ankles) in the dance, as well as the form's symbiotic relationship to the jigs, reels, and hornpipes of Irish traditional music.

Perhaps because of the cultural ubiquity of dance in Ireland, Irish music and dance have long been held as more than simply indigenous cultural forms, but somehow representational of Irish identity and seminal to its reification. For Irish citizens and visiting tourists, these practices are often cast as last vestiges of the "real Ireland," re-enacting a romanticized version of the country held a priori by Americans and, surprisingly, reified by many Irish people themselves. This romantic notion of Ireland was summarized by former Irish president Éamon De Valera, "a land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads . . . with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens . . . the home of a people living the life that God desires men should live."[5] Despite recent developments in Irish marriage equality, these heteronormative cultural associations of home, family, and nation continue to manifest within current conventions of Irish dance performance.[6] I argue that these poise the form for disruptive queer performance activism because of the cultural capital the dance genre carries within Irish society.

Despite the strong psychic precedent for Irish step dancing in Ireland, within the genre of traditional Irish music and dance performance, dance

is simultaneously a point of focus and marginal.[7] This simultaneity contributes to Irish dance's queer possibilities. In traditional music concert settings, professional Irish musicians often employ dancers for short segments of choreography—usually fast reels in 4/4 time—to punctuate the high points of the performance. A convention has developed: "roll on the dancers," the steel-shod, unwieldy team of bodies as spectacle (stroke sex symbol, stroke national icon) in the form of the red-haired *colleen* in the short black skirt or velvet trimmed, Book of Kells-spattered dress. "Just come on for the last 32 bars of the last number of the first half, the finale, and the encore," I've heard musicians say. This tokenistic use of bodies demonstrates dance in service of the entertainment aspect of the performance of Irish traditional music, and simultaneously, the performance of Irishness. During these short choreographic segments, the long line of erect dancers step in precision, arms at their sides, their upright comportment a perfect metaphor for the properness of postcolonial dignity.

Experiencing these shapes and choreographies within my own body, I realize that dancers can create tremendously effective and memorable moments as our watched bodies interact with music and with each other.[8] Further, due to both the corporeality of our art and the interplay of marginality/centrality of Irish dance in these contexts, step dancers can evoke strong statements of gender representation.[9] Within the contemporary performance conventions of Irish traditional music and dance, these statements are engineered to enforce theatrical depictions of compulsory heterosexuality and binary notions of gender, irrespective of the identities of the exponents.[10] Dancers are often tacitly directed to offset the possibility of queerness when employed by the Irish music industry's largely heterosexual roster of touring musicians. While working with an established traditional Irish band, one bandleader once asked me hopefully, "You don't do any dancing with a young girl, do you?" For him, a heterosexual *pas de deux* was the pinnacle of Irish entertainment, projecting the "correct" theatrical national sexual binary through the dance.

Compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender are also reinforced through Irish dance pedagogy. Former lead dancer in *Riverdance*, Breandán de Gallaí, related the story of an Irish dancing teacher telling their teenage male students to "butch it up a bit" when onstage. Another Irish dance teacher, choreographer, and producer I worked with will not even allow two boys to look at each other if performing together. In his shows, male dancers must look at the women onstage or at the audience. In his words, "boys have to be aggressive and hit the floor hard, they have to jump higher and wink at the ladies in the third row." Hearing such stories enforcing traditional gender roles makes me wonder if perhaps queerness could function as a site of aesthetic

destabilization of these conventions, reframing the limits of gender expression in Irish traditional dance performance.

By considering the aesthetic and morphological trappings of these traditions, I set out to create performance work in opposition to these precedents of the genre, opening it queerly as a polysemic means of cultural and personal expression.[11] To do this, I drew inspiration from the nascent queerness I sensed in Irish traditional music. Similar to Irish dancing, Irish traditional music is sometimes characterized and valued by its masculine energy in which good equals masculine. A flute player once remarked to me on a younger female musician's style, "She plays great, for a girl." However, in stark aesthetic contrast to commercial Irish dance theater, there exist quieter subgenres within the musical tradition referred to as *goltraí* and *suantraí* (sad and hushabye tunes). In the performance of "slow airs," for example, musicians are permitted to exhibit moments of sensitivity, quietness, tenderness, or remorse. Within Irish-language *sean-nós* singing, there is a custom of singers—particularly men—engaging in a rare public display of same-sex intimacy through the act of hand-holding (called "winding").[12] These conventions critiquing traditional masculinity invite a queer reading of traditional Irish music, highlighting what fiddler Martin Hayes identifies as the genre's "subversiveness."[13]

The heightened sensitivity of slow airs and *sean-nós* singing seemed fertile territory from which to garner inspiration for a queer response to Irish traditional dance. Could I physically embody these rare exhibitions of emotions less typically construed as "masculine" in Irish dance movement? I wanted to take a nod from Irish music performance practice, in which men can sing vulnerably, tenderly, or bring each other to tears with a slow quiet melody played on the flute or accordion. In effect, to be queer enough to permit myself to portray what these men might be feeling but might not have been allowed to express culturally, and to do so through movement. My synesthetic aspiration of crossing Irish musical convention into the world of Irish dance was confirmed for me when one reviewer so flatteringly put it after one of my performances: I had become an "eye-opener for the ears."[14] The queer characteristics I sensed within the musical tradition, confirmed through Hayes's admission of the medium's subversive character, inspired a queer spirit of departure for re-imagining the conventions of Irish traditional dance.

With the strong cultural precedent of a hyper-masculinized, leather-clad, male dance archetype within Irish show dancing, any suggestion of male lightness, quietness, or possibility of simpatico response could prove strikingly queer. I became curious as to the possibilities of invoking queerness, not only in the sense that I am a queer-identified man but also by embodying

a puckish suggestion utilizing the queer potentiality of the form itself. Far from a reactionary critique, I was interested in highlighting the attributes of the tradition that I had witnessed in other Irish cultural practices: the softness of traditional Irish song, the lightness of older dancers who were trained prior to the advent of commercial Irish dancing shows, and the almost amorous intimacy I had seen traditional instrumentalists embody when playing together.[15] These were aesthetic facets that I knew were present in the tradition, but my growing sense was that they were elided from contemporary Irish traditional dance performance due to heteronormative anxiety. This made me wonder what exactly a collaborative, quiet, responsive, intimate traditional Irish dance and music piece would look, sound, and feel like.

We begin trading variations on "Big Pat's," suggesting, referencing, sonically articulating notions of what might be possible within the phrases of the 32-bar tune. We repeat the form again, unfolding it further each time around. We move together downstage lock-eyed. The timbre of my sounds changes; both my skin and my ears pique with the audible and tactile sensation as I step close to the microphone downstage left. The sound causes the viewers to crane, sitting up in their seats, hoping to elucidate from where exactly the soft, sometimes gritty, scrapings are emerging. The melding sounds of the bowed strings and the leather shoes on wooden floor evoke within me a physical sensation that is both lush and invigorating. I can feel my torso release as my ankles, knees and hips busy themselves with the labor—and pleasure—of sounding out the ornaments and chassis of the melody I am playing with my onstage partner; his articulated through bow, mine with heels, toes, and the soles of my shoes. My focus remains fixed on my collaborator standing beside me, gaze alternating from his right arm drawing the bow, conjuring sinuous ghosts to underpin my scratchy trebles, drums, and toe fences, and, only a few inches higher, the musician's face, composed, and yet animated, in focused concentration.

To explore these queer aesthetic potentialities, I began experimenting with different aspects of my dance practice, beginning with footwear. Forgoing the use of fiberglass or steel taps, I began working in a pair of hard leather-soled shoes, resembling those I had seen worn by older dancers who were trained prior to the advent of standardized Irish dancing competitions and the later commercial Irish dancing shows.[16] The lack of taps on the toes and heels of the shoes expanded the palate of sonic textures I could achieve through my percussive dance movement, allowing darker tones that could blend and nearly disappear among the soundscape of fiddles, flutes, and accordions.

This facilitated a degree of audible dynamic potential that I had never experienced within Irish dance. Instead of being restricted to crisp, adroit, punctuating footwork, the leather soles granted access to a new world of queer timbres: sibilance, fricatives, shivers, scrapes, or silence. By sweeping the sole of the shoe, maintaining contact with the dance surface, I found I could imitate sustained instrumental resonance, allowing me to elongate the duration of my sounds.[17] Through a brush of the ball of the foot, very close to an onstage floor microphone, I could create barely perceptible, liminal murmurs. These new sonic components could be interwoven in footwork sequences of more conventional Irish dance choreography, or even more queerly, could make the dance fade in and out of audibility. Performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz identifies this queer propensity for near-imperceptibility, stating that queer dance is "hard to catch."[18] The change of footwear constituted a queer departure from Irish dance's current anxieties of needing to be clearly and unmistakably heard—anxieties of masculine virility and "hitting the floor hard"—allowing a once-prevalent, but now nascent, queer potentiality to literally susurrate.

In addition to reconsidering Irish dance footwear, I also began to evaluate the queer potential of working with a singular musician, rather than an ensemble. I found this changed the affective quality of my dance pieces dramatically, presenting the opportunity to highlight the onstage exchange between performers. With this simple shift came an adjustment in both positioning and proximity. Irish dancers, both soloists and ensembles often perform center stage, usually directly in front of the "accompanying" musician(s). With the reduction of the ensemble to one musician and one dancer, this spatial configuration no longer felt satisfying to me. Instead, I began to inhabit a movement space directly alongside my collaborator, often in very close proximity. This allowed both the musician and me to explore the communicative potential of gesture, mild changes in carriage, and eye contact.[19] Watching a musician's hands as he played, reading his body movement to anticipate musical ornamentation and dynamics lent a new simpatico to the experience of performing together. Rather than a hierarchical manifestation of soloist and accompanist emphasizing the virtuosity of the dance, the pieces became a responsive, same-gender *pas de deux*.

The spatial reconfiguration of dancing alongside my musician collaborator imbued the performances with a sense of legible rapport. One recurring comment from audiences was that the way we engaged visually was striking, even intimate. The notorious, "unspeakable" homosexual scandal made manifest and a rumor began circulating that my collaborator (a widely presumed heterosexual man) and I were sleeping together. I had no interest

FIGURE 10.1 Nicholas Gareiss (step dance) and Cleek Schrey (fiddle). Photo credit: Sarah Nesbitt.

in verifying or denying this. The rumor itself demonstrated that the queer potential of enacting a collaborative intimate music-dance performance had been attained. Herein was the opportunity to present a sense of queer ambiguity and possibility within the recently homophobically strictured medium of traditional Irish music and dance. A simple performative choice to look at my male collaborator, rather than "wink at the ladies in the third row," had both aroused homosexual anxiety and simultaneously released that tension through an observable creative exchange between two performers.[20]

In my enmeshed relationship as both a performer and ethnographer, I noted the feedback these subtle performance shifts elicited from audiences and collaborators. This often incorporated remarks about my personal identity as an openly homosexual man.[21] After collaborating onstage, a flute-player friend stated, "You have the chops of an Irish dancer without the restrictions of being a heterosexual male." According to this comment, there was something aesthetically constraining about traditional masculinity in Irish dance movement. In the eyes of this interlocutor, my queer performance (onstage and off) alleviated this normative restraint, thereby opening new aesthetic possibilities. Further, his comment alluded that these possibilities were unavailable to the bodies of non-queer dancers. The contrasting aesthetic of my queer movement practice allowed for a perceived expressivity, constituting a slippage of the heteronormative masculine role typically performed by male

Irish dancers. A similar experience occurred during a pre-show sound check when a male member of a well-known Irish band I was performing with nodded to me and remarked, "*an buachaillín bán.*" The term translates in Gaelic as the "fair-haired" or "light-haired boy" and, in addition to being the title of several pieces of traditional Irish folk music, is also used colloquially in Irish-speaking communities to refer to homosexual men. Being "read" and identified as *an buachaillín bán* within this context confirmed hermeneutically the power of these performance choices in excavating nascent queerness within Irish cultural forms, a queerness that is and is not spoken, in whispers and linguistic obfuscation.[22]

The experience of having my performance of queerness observed and remarked upon brought Geertz's assertion into focus, collapsing my role as ethnographer-outsider and performing-insider. I found that presenting my moving body in performance allowed me to be penetrated by the gazes of audiences and fellow collaborators, becoming further interwoven culturally, as they projected their own background upon what they witnessed. Though for a long time I considered anthropological work and performance practice as separate modi, eventually I realized that my ethnography did not cease when I stepped onto the stage. Through performance, I was researching the meaning-making surrounding Irish traditional music and dance, even as I was interrogating norms of gender and sexuality. A queer-identified American outsider looking into the genre, I refused to become the penetrative ethnographer, eschewing the narratives of masculinist power and heterosexual stricture found both in the genre and in the binary anthropological history of ethnographer/subject, colonizer/colonized. Rather, by placing myself in the gaze of those familiar with the genres of Irish traditional music and dance, I found myself very culturally enmeshed indeed.

Through this Geertzian enmeshing I found space for queer aesthetic departure. Via a process that involved allowing Irish corporeal practice to inhabit my queer American body, I looked to other Irish cultural forms for what I perceived as a nascent queerness. Drawing inspiration from Irish traditional music, song, and pre-standardized, pre-commercialized Irish dance forms, I delved into these queer potentialities, exploring the ways they could influence my choreographic work. This de-interlaced Irish dance from its recent hyper-masculinized, heteronormative model, excavating a queer potentiality that was always there, but not articulated in the form. The process allowed me, as a performer within a roots genre, to maintain a connection to the cluster of practices associated with the history and geography of traditional Irish forms, while interrogating their tropes. It is my hope that this process can make space for other creative explorations by queer-identified exponents of Irish traditional

forms, overwriting O'Shea's assertion of queer and Irish mutual exclusivity, and making the danced whispers of one *buachaillín bán* generative to this end.

The fiddler turns the tune, slipping from "Big Pat's" into "Dan Breen's Reel," arousing new rhythmical motifs within my body. There is sensuality, a physically rewarding coitus of melody, sound, and improvisational proposal. Though I am the only dancer onstage and he is the only fiddler, somehow I do not feel like a soloist, but rather his dance partner . . . and though we are playing phrases in the cadence of duple meter, we are holding each other like waltzers: lifting, bearing each other's weight, initiating sound and gesture through a reflexive, mutually-dependent process of affectual suggestion.

Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 44.
2. Helen O'Shea, "'Good man, Mary!' Women Musicians and the Fraternity of Irish Traditional Music," *Journal of Gender Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 66.
3. See Nicholas Gareiss, "Queering the *Feis*: An Examination of the Expression of Alternative Sexual Identity in Competitive Irish Step Dance in Ireland" (Master's thesis, University of Limerick, 2012).
4. Michael Seaver, "Counting Capital: The Real Value of Dance in Irish Society," *Dance Ireland*, 2012, February 10, 2013, http://www.danceireland.ie/content/pubs/Counting-Capital-The-Real-Value-of-Dance-in-Irish-Society.pdf
5. Éamon De Valera, *The Ireland That We Dreamed Of*, speech, March 17, 1943, January 12, 2012, http://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/eamon-de-valera/719124-address-by-mr-de-valera/. The fact that Irish dance is marketed to tourists (the dance form is often called to duty to represent Catholic, rural, home and hearth Ireland) perpetuates the recycling and restaging of these heteronormative conventions. This is reified through dance scholar Jane Desmond's idea of "staging the natural": "tourists attending folkloric shows see a performance of 'traditional' (i.e., 'naturally occurring') behaviors which celebrate the difference and particularity of the performing group." Jane Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xvi.
6. For many, the Irish marriage referendum of 2015 signaled a cultural shift by granting marriage rights to same-sex couples in Ireland. While my fifteen years of fieldwork that informs this essay occurred prior to the much-publicized vote, it remains to be seen how the 2015 legislation will impact conventions of Irish traditional music and dance performance. Can state-sanctioned equality penetrate the heteronormative and binary gender-enforcing performance conventions within traditional Irish dance? How will this shift in policy, enacted by popular vote, embolden queer Irish dance practitioners to explicate the nascent queerness underlying the form? Can Irish dance, so central within Irish culture, now queer the ideas of home, nation, and family it has traditionally been associated with? What other formerly unspeakable queer subjectivities will be elided from (or domesticated by) Ireland's recent same-sex equal rights agenda? I am eager to observe how the nascent queerness I sense within Irish cultural practices will be negotiated and performed in a post-referendum Ireland.
7. Folk knowledge suggests that most of the music in the Irish traditional music canon was once used for both soloistic step dancing and group social dancing. It is held as tacit among many musicians that step dance, though often currently disconnected from the traditional Irish music scene because of competitive dance contexts, still embodies an integral symbiosis with Irish traditional music.
8. I have found this to be especially true in my performances as a solo dancer. In a solo, it is possible to create tremendously expressive moments while subjecting one's body to the gazes of viewers and interacting with the audience and on-stage musicians. Within such performances, the Irish dance soloist references cultural mores and themes. Ethnochoreologist Catherine Foley argues, "when these practices are performed by step dancers in contexts appropriate to their performance, they generate meaning." For me, Foley's assertion that Irish dance performance has the ability to reify or disturb cultural norms, serves as a provocation for the performance of non-normative gender and sexuality. Catherine Foley, *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Press, 2013), 19.
9. See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-31; and the introduction to Jane Desmond's volume, *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).
10. In my Master's thesis, "Queering the *Feis*," I make the case that these depictions of binary gender and heteronormative sexuality are often choreographed on the bodies of queer dancers, stricturing the physical articulation of non-normative sexuality. I demonstrate the falsity of O'Shea's assertion of queer and Irish mutual exclusivity through the textual act of publishing ethnographic interviews of over forty LGBT Irish step dancers collected while I was living in Ireland. I aver that the Irish step dance's appropriation by nationalist institutions has imposed a heteronormative framework on the form that is subverted by the prevalence and expertise of queer practitioners within traditional Irish dance today.
11. In considering the performance conventions of these genres, I realized that the stage would be the most salient environment in which performers might legibly queer traditional forms. To quote Desmond, "the feminization of spectacle, of putting oneself on display (without the cover of sport's masculinity-authorizing

violence), feminizes male dancers." This seemed especially applicable given the role of competition in the history and pedagogy of Irish dance. Desmond, *Dancing Desires*, 19.

12. Gráinne Campion, "Performance Style and Practice in the Sean-nós Singing Tradition" (Undergraduate thesis, St. Patrick's College Dublin, 2012).
13. Jacob Blickenstaff, "The Gloaming's Unlikely Convergence: Martin Hayes and Thomas Bartlett on their Multigenerational Irish-Music Powerhouse," *Mother Jones*, August 14, 2014, http://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/07/contact-thomas-bartlett-and-martin-hayes-gloaming-interview.
14. Paul O'Connor, "Back and Forth between Tradition and Abstraction at the Cobalt Café," *Last Night's Fun* (blog), February 8, 2011, https://lastnightsfun.wordpress.com/2011/02/08/899/.
15. Catherine Foley describes such pre-standardized Irish dance practices as embodying a softer carriage and a personal expressive response to music in *Irish Traditional Step Dancing in North Kerry: A Contextual and Structural Analysis* (Listowel, Co. Kerry: Red Hen Publishing, 2012).
16. The soles of these shoes were softer than traditional fiberglass-tipped "hard" or "heavy" shoes, but still harder than "light dance" shoes. "Light shoes" are used for a non-percussive style of Irish traditional dance incorporating aerial, nearly balletic movement. While there exists repertoire within the light shoe genre danced by both men and women, in traditional dance competitions, or *feiseanna*, women alone are allowed to compete in slip-jigs, a dance tune type in 9/8 time considered graceful, light, and too effeminate for boys. The shoes themselves also illustrate a fixed gender binary: "light" soft shoes worn by girls resemble lace up slippers or *ghillies*. In contrast, light shoes worn by boys have a fiberglass heel attached, which is utilized in a series of virtuosic stamps and clicks in the male versions of contemporary light shoe steps. Another genre of Irish dance which historically utilized leather-soled shoes is *sean-nós* ("old-style" in Gaelic) dancing, a regional style found in Irish-speaking *gaeltacht* area of Connemara, West Galway. The style is known for its percussive articulation, improvisation, and corporeal release into the floor. *Sean-nós* exists in stark contrast to the lifted and often airborne Munster-originating forms of Irish dancing taught by *An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha* and other competitive Irish dancing organizations. While historically many *sean-nós* dancers wore leather-soled shoes, during my time in Ireland all of the dancers who identified themselves as such, including my teacher, wore steel taps, rather than the fiberglass "tips" worn by the *Coimisiún*-style dancers.
17. This aspect of sustained, foot-to-floor fricative sound-making facilitated exciting new mimetic connections with instrumentalists. I could now "hold" my "notes" the way a fiddler or piper would, lending a new queer intimacy to my working with musical collaborators through the often in-the-moment decisions of how long to sustain pitches.
18. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 81.
19. Pragmatically, this provided a tremendous increase in the ability to make decisions with a musician in an extemporaneous way in performance.
20. Thanks to Jill Dolan, who, after attending a presentation of an early draft of this paper and observing a video of my performance, wrote that my turning toward my collaborator onstage resisted the stricturing enforced by the prohibition of male Irish dancers never being allowed to look at each other. Simply by looking at my same-gender musician co-performer cultivated a visual regard of public intimacy, "rewriting the more frontal and heterosexual conventions of the dance." Jill Dolan, "Queer Dance at U of Michigan, " *The Feminist Spectator* (blog), February 22, 2012, http://feministspectator.princeton.edu/2012/02/22/queer-dance-at-u-of-michigan/.
21. While Ireland is distinctly noted for its "soft-pass," in contrast to American cultural hypermasculinity, there was nothing in my identity presentation that was attempting to "pass" as heterosexual.
22. In what Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls her "failed ethnography" of the rural west of Ireland, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics*, she identifies the Irish cultural predilection for "skill with words, metaphor, veiled insult," as "doublespeak," stating that she encountered conversations "laden with double-talk, obfuscations, interruptions, and non sequiturs, which make it difficult for the uninitiated outsider to follow and participate." Being "read" in this double-spoken way was a striking confirmation of the queer tendencies of Irish traditional music and dance. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1979), 158.