

**OF THE PRESENCE
OF THE BODY**

**Essays on Dance and
Performance Theory**

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4 || The Black Beat Made Visible

Hip Hop Dance and Body Power

Outside tight communities of dancers, the dancing black body routinely arouses extraordinary wariness and fascination. What drives the movements? How are similar dances known so thoroughly by dancers who have never met; who have had no cause to collaborate? How is the body able to so easily contain narratives of transcendence through dances of physical eccentricity? How are stories of sexuality linked to competition revealed in bold assertions of expertise, of resilient virtuosity, in the inscrutable realm of the nonverbal? What is the power of the body in hip hop?

Black social dances¹ contain dual transcripts of “public” and “private” meaning. These transcripts mirror constructions of outwardly entertaining and secretly derisive rhetoric articulated by black cultural theorists including W.E.B. Du Bois, whose 1903 theory of “double consciousness”—articulated as “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings . . . in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”—suggests a doubling of desire contained by the tenacity of the black body and released in dance.² Black social dances enact this duality in divergent resonances available to dancers and viewers.

Anthropologist Roger Abrahams extends Du Bois’s argument to suggest a split along lines of cultural literacy:

Performers in this tradition know that they may be playing to two audiences simultaneously—the black community and the white hipsters or weekend trippers. . . . Black performers constantly recognize that the very performance that is conventional within the black community will be seen as strange, as pleasurably exotic to the hipster. Thus they operate out of a kind of double consciousness, knowing that they are called upon to present an image which will be interpreted as exotic to the outside world and not to the blacks in the audience.³

Drawing his argument from an analysis of minstrelsy, Abrahams assumes that the audience for performance by African Americans includes whites who are not conversant with submerged layers of communication. Whether hipsters in the audience “understand” the performance of black

social dances interests me less than the presupposition of a doubled functionality encoded within the performance. Does this doubling disappear without a white audience or larger white context? Is Abrahams only talking about performances that include white audiences? Are black social dances designed to be performed *and* watched at once?

Historian Robert Hinton assumes that the dual audience for dancing black bodies stems from the construction of slave society:

Early in the slavery experience, Afro-American dance split into two basic streams. The first stream was the dance that black folk created for themselves during those few precious hours of sacred and secular celebration. This first stream was the more “African,” in part because of the movement quality and vocabulary, but also, because the dance was created for the benefit of the dancers. The experience of any observers (the audience) was secondary. The second stream was the dance that black people created for white people. This second stream was more “European,” both because of the technique and because the dance was created under differing degrees of duress for the pleasure of the audience. The experience of the performer was secondary.⁴

Labeling the first stream “dance of celebration” and the second stream “dance of performance,” Hinton draws an argument that assumes only participants in its first stream, and a politically privileged but culturally illiterate audience in its second stream. According to him the two streams do not meet until after the renaissance of African consciousness, which occurred during the Pan-Africanist movement between the world wars.⁵

In both of these essentialist configurations, “the black community” is assumed to be a coherent group of participants in dance performances holding a largely unmodulated connotation of celebration. Performances viewed by cultural outsiders are likely born of duress and discomfort; ironically, they also provide a largely unmodulated measure of pleasure for an immobile audience. The transcript of protest in social dance remains “private,” read and understood only by dancers initiated into black social dance styles. According to these writers, it is only during the twentieth century, amid burgeoning civil rights activism, that the dancing black body is allowed a self-conscious ability to celebrate and protest simultaneously. Only at this historical juncture can an immobile (white) audience adequately comprehend the transcript of protest inscribed within black social dance movement. But for their (black) performers, black social dances are constructed like verbal games of rhetoric such as toasting and signifying, which simultaneously celebrate and criticize. Although an immobile audience viewing hip hop dance forms may still misread movements of personal transcendence as erotic or simply sensational, I think that the palpable presence of physical pleasure, bound up with a racialized cultural history, makes the dances powerfully compelling. This dy-

dynamic amalgamation of pleasure and critique form the basis of power present within hip hop dance forms.

All African diaspora dance, including black social dances, may be likened to verbal language most in the dance's conspicuous employment of "call and response" with the body responding to and provoking the voice of the drum. In a *Dance Encyclopedia* entry titled "Primitive African Dance (and Its Influence on the Churches of the South)," choreographer Pearl Primus asserted African orality as a defining feature of dance performance. After conducting research in the early 1940s, Primus wrote of the linguistic features of African diasporic dance and the relationship of dance to drum: "On my trips south of the Mason and Dixon line in 1944 I discovered in the Baptist Churches the voice of the drum—not in any instrument, but in the throat of the preacher."⁶ She concludes that in "emotional impact, group reaction, rhythms, tempos, actual steps and the exact precision with which they were done, dance in the Southern Baptist Churches so closely resembles the dance in Africa as to leave no doubt in the mind that the American form emerged from the African."⁷ Her essay suggests a triangular configuration of orality, dancer, and drum as guiding precepts of African diaspora dance.

If we can accept that the dance responds to the drum, not solely in a reactive manner, but within a configuration of communicative collaboration, we can understand how dance is performative, mirroring the way in which speech may be equated with action. Dance movements convey speechlike qualities that contain meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement detailed by the body in motion. African diaspora dance conveys the same sense of performative utterance as those cited by cultural theorist Eve Sedgwick: "[they] do not merely describe, but actually perform the actions they name: 'J'accuse'; 'Be it resolved . . .'; . . . 'I apologize'; 'I dare you.'"⁸ Within black social dance constructions, dancing black bodies express actionable assertions.⁹

In general, black expressive cultures value the process of signification over the signified, the performance of spirituality over scriptural exegesis, talking *by* dancing over talking *about* dancing. As of the year 2000, the forms of black expressive culture generating the most scholarly interest are probably gospel music, the performed African American sermon, and hip hop culture (with rap music as its central focus). Within this lineage of orality, the implications of social dance as text forms an important site of entry to understanding black performativity. Following Sedgwick, I define black performativity here to be gestures of black expressive culture, including music and dance, that perform actionable assertions. In terms

of black social dance, these performative assertions do not "describe" dancing; rather, they are the physical building blocks of a system of communication we may term *corporeal orature*.

Corporeal orature aligns movement with speech to describe the ability of black social dance to incite action. In this articulation, social dance may contain performative gestures that cite contexts beyond the dance. These citations are read and acknowledged by other dancers who respond in kind with actions or decisions about, at least, the efficacy of the dance gesture. Black social dance thrives within a structure of corporeal orature that presumes the possibility of efficacious performative gesture.¹⁰ But black social dance in general, and hip hop dance in particular, resist inscription and interpretation from an exterior, immobile microanalytic perspective. Working from outside the dance accesses only a portion of its communicative ability: its visual effects. Like literary analyses, which cannot contain the physical embodiment of a performative speech act—the sensuality of releasing the action "I apologize" to a lover—theorizing the dance from the eye of an observer sidesteps the dynamism of the body that drives the form. Dance, like music of black expressive culture, can only be partially present here.

Writing about the construction of "funk," cultural theorist Cornel West articulates a linkage between physical ephemerality and corporeality: "This funk is neither a skill nor an idea, not a world view or a stance. Rather, it is an existential capacity to get in touch with forms of kinetic orality and affective physicality acquired by deep entrenchment in—or achieved by pretheoretical styles owing to socialization in—the patterns of Afro-American ways of life and struggle."¹¹ I take issue with West's argument that black expressive culture can be "pretheoretical" which, to my mind, foregrounds an intellect/practice split. For me, the capacity to embody patterns of black life is simultaneously kinetic and theoretical, and constantly negotiated by a kinetic and intellectual understanding of its formal properties.

The notion of a pretheoretical or entirely experiential understanding of African American culture contributes to the ahistorical, moorless conception of black expressive culture as an inevitable by-product of the Middle Passage.¹² Of course, theory is, and has always been, embedded within practice; on the whole, black expressive culture has been egregiously neglected by theorists. As African art scholar Robert Farris Thompson offers, black expressive culture performance practice accounts for more than fifty percent of American popular music even though African Americans are no more than twelve percent of the population.¹³ Acknowledg-

ing and exploring a theoretical dimension to black social dance performance practice might help us understand how these statistics work, and how black pleasure and black power foster hip hop dance forms.

Black expressive culture incubates social dance forms that speak to several audiences of American dancers. But dance, especially as a physical component of popular music, is viewed warily by scholars, who often seem most comfortable discussing lyrics as the literal, explicitly communicative dimension of music. Walter Hughes's essay "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco" attempts a reading of disco music as a form that "foregrounds the beat, makes it consistent, simple, repetitive," and is built on "the emptying out of language which parallels the refusal of narrative structure in the song overall."¹⁴ Hughes looks through the lens of the white male outsider—a hipster, of sorts—at the process of disco, and details links between [white] gay culture and black performance practice contained by disco music.¹⁵ Along the way, he encounters prominent Africanist features of disco music, although he doesn't identify them as such. Writing about the foregrounding of the drum in the form, he notes that "disco mystifies its authorial origins, as we see in the obscure collective names given to disco 'groups' (such as Hughes Corporation, Machine, or Black Box) or in performers such as the Village People or Shannon, who are patently the 'creations' of their producers."¹⁶ I argue that these collective origins emanate from a theoretical/kinetic Africanist assumption that dance music—music that can provoke and sustain dance—carries performative qualities like those of language. For dancers, it isn't necessary to seek authorial origins in the use of this performative language, as in the physical assertion of "I dare you." This language is not emptied of meaning; on the contrary, it is full of tangible affect. Disco music provokes and responds to the action of dance. That provocation and response are neither unmodulated nor pretheoretical.

If conversation occurs between music and its dancers, and between dancers, the subtleties of that conversation are missed in the separation of participant and observer. Still, most analyses of black social dance are designed from the perspective of an immobile observer. This follows the unfortunate colonialist construction whereby locations of being "within the dance" or "without it" operate simultaneously and autonomously. A society in which bodies can be objectified and marked as 'black' is one comfortable with watching without understanding; it is one used to observing dance without the ability to decode its communicative value. As we move from inside the dance to the audience, and movements are viewed without concern for their performative implications, meaning is indeed emptied out. Subsequent reproduction of the dances by people

looking only from the outside leads to the flat, militaristic repetition commonly viewed in the commercial music video sphere.

Interrogating Africanisms in Hip Hop Dance

Several authors have articulated an array of formal characteristics common to dances of the African diaspora, most notably Robert F. Thompson, Marshall and Jean Stearns, Delores K. Cayou, Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, Jacqui Malone, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild.¹⁷ The formal qualities of motion perceived vary slightly according to each author, but all build on the categories articulated by Thompson in 1966 to include "the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; multiple meter; apart playing and dancing; call-and-response; and, finally the songs and dances of derision."¹⁸ In 1983 Thompson expanded on these principles slightly, to include an "inner pulse control" and "suspended accentuation patterning," two principles that aid in understanding complex meter and the layering of rhythmic accent central to African diaspora dance and music.¹⁹

Building on Thompson's work, Gottschild articulates a series of intertextual "processes, tendencies, and attitudes" of Africanist performance practice.²⁰ Her work explores the intangible essence of performance through concepts that stress its theoretical hallmarks: embracing the conflict ("a precept of contrariety, or an encounter of opposites"); high-affect juxtaposition ("mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit . . . transitions and connective links"); ephebism ("power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack . . . that recognizes feeling as sensation, rather than emotion"); and the aesthetic of the cool ("an attitude . . . that combines composure with vitality").²¹

Taken together, these categories of Africanist tendencies are broad enough to accommodate several generations of music and movement styles, from nineteenth-century plantation dances to twentieth-century hip hop forms. Thompson's principles provide the formalistic "how" of dance practice, drawn from qualities that may be observed by a viewer outside the dance. Gottschild's concepts offer a sense of the conceptual "why" of dance practice, teasing out theoretical underpinnings experienced by dancers. An additional quality identified by Cayou as "functionalism—becoming what you dance—the art of real life" aligns dance movement to personal identity, a maneuver with implications for dancers and audience members.²² I argue that this quality of black social dance performance underscores all the others. A hallmark of social dance practice in the African diaspora is the communal valuation of the dancer's ability to

speak in the imperative through dance movement. Social dance is inevitably tied to the construction of personal identity, by dancers and the participating audiences who observe them.

The most prevalent theoretical assumptions concerning qualities of black social dance derive, in part, from a corpus of literary descriptions created by immobile cultural outsiders fascinated by the mysterious power of black dance. These writings draw a rich portrait of dance's potentially actionable meanings, even when those meanings are consistently misread by [white] audiences. Consider the performance of a dancer thought to be Master Juba, a champion dancer, witnessed by author Charles Dickens in 1842, and chronicled in the author's oft-cited *American Notes*: "He never leaves off making queer faces, and is the delight of all the rest, who grin from ear to ear incessantly."²³

Dances of Celebration

Dickens continued:

Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut: snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs—what is this to him?²⁴

Dances of Subversive Performance

And in what walk of life, or dance of life, does one ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having danced his partner off her feet, and himself too, he finished by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink, with the chuckle of a million counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound?²⁵

Dances of Actionable Assertion

To answer Dickens's rhetorical question, what all of this might be to Juba is an expression of musicality, a confirmation and expression of himself, and a sounding on Dickens's amazement. To be sure, Dickens wrote his *American Notes* to an abolitionist ideology condemned slavery and valorized formidable and exotic black cultural processes like Juba's dance. The description of Juba's breakdown comes in the midst of a chapter on New York, sandwiched between disagreeable visits to various public institutions: prisons, orphanages, and insane asylums. In context, Dickens intimates how Juba's dances are subversively eccentric and kinesthetically powerful—expressive qualities that Dickens does not find elsewhere in his New York adventure. And surely the dance was simultaneously cele-

bratory for the dancer as an confirming exercise in physical mastery. It is this conflation of inner and outer aspects of African diaspora dance that I interrogate as the basis of an aesthetic of body power palpable in hip hop forms.

How Hip Hop Dance Contains Power

Power in hip hop is most apparent in the aggressively layered, dynamic array of shapes assumed by the dancing body. Hip hop dances contain an assertive angularity of body posture and an insistent virtuostic rhythmicity. This is the power of what can be seen, and then inscribed, without being embodied; what Dickens saw in the dances with no legs, the 'virtual' dances performed by a mercurial black body.

How surprised Dickens might be in 1997 to see dancing white bodies moving with a directed unpredictability similar to Juba's, as suburbanites on ESPN use hip hop music and dances to confirm their mastery of imperative body talking in national cheerleading competitions. Hip hop, like much of African American expressive culture, attracts what theomusicologist Jon Michael Spencer calls "resentment listeners"; cultural outsiders who seek to invest their lives with meaning through the power of hip hop dance and music.²⁶ These listeners and dancers come, I think, to physically invest in the enactment of cool dissension; they learn the dances for the obvious associations of physical power contained within the dancing body magnified by the crucible of race. If these dances can empower impoverished black bodies of the inner city, surely they might offer dynamic celebration to young dancers in the vanilla suburbs. Power is what is seen in the form, and power is what these dancers mean to channel by their performances.

Hip hop dances also gain power from their subversive [black] stance outside the moral law of [white] America. The black body in America has long been legislated and controlled by political systems both legal and customary. In social dance, the black body achieves a freedom from traditional American strictures defining legitimate corporeality. The dancing black body, responding to and provoking the drumbeat, acts performatively against the common American law of black abjection. "Speaking well" in terms of black social dance defies—temporarily—systematized oppression.

In a seminal essay on African diaspora dance titled "An Aesthetic of the Cool," Thompson asserts that hot is always balanced by cool, and that all the aesthetic canons work toward social and artistic synthesis.²⁷

This synergistic notion may help us understand the seriousness, or “attitude” of hip hop. The cool facial mask dancers employ in hip hop is a symbolic reference to hip hop’s attitude, which reflexively claims direct descent from African aesthetics of facial masking. The inscrutable facial mask is a symbol of focused energy; an embodied creative gesture that forces attention from the mouthpiece to the whole body, which talks in the dance. The cool, hard face works with the hot, busy body; alternately, a composed, stretched body may be finished by a hot, yawning face. It is also a performance strategy that has to do with competitive strains of black expressive culture. Focused energy in the battle dictates the composed facial mask.

But notice how the separation of audience from performer across cultural and racial lines disperses the power of hip hop dance as a tool of battle. The ESPN cheerleaders smile aggressively as they work to rouse the crowd. Performing similar movements in another context, black dancers in a nightclub hold their faces seriously, dancing an impromptu battle with a focused facial mask. Dance that is designed to please or rouse an audience is different from dance of protest or personal expression. But because dancing black bodies in America are inevitably taken to be performing dances of celebration by cultural outsiders, their dances, as viewed by an immobile audience, are not necessarily actionable. Audiences may sense the submerged political transcript of hip hop dance, but what, they wonder like Dickens, what is this to them? Consider Hazzard-Donald’s assertion that “hip hop’s outwardly aggressive postures and gestures seem to contain and channel the dancer’s rage.”²⁸ To what end? Channeling rage into dance so as to disperse anger? Or to express anger? Hip hop theorist Tricia Rose suggests that “oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion.”²⁹ In this, hip hop dance prepares its black dancers to do battle with oppressive societal forces. Can it accomplish similar goals for its white dancers? Can it fulfill the competitive ambitions that arise in cheerleading competitions; ambitions beyond the physical release of movement driven by “rage”?

Sacred Dimensions—Groove Is in the Heart

Black power in social dance structures is a sacred holding, a trust of rhythmic legibility and cultural responsibility. We “represent the real” through the dance, accessing its common speech like denominators; mak-

ing phrases that can be understood by others; becoming the dance. Honesty and eloquence in body talking are linked to a purity of intention in motion. Theomusicologist Jon Michael Spencer calls this ever present spiritual quality “the untouchable rhythmicity of black music and dance [that] have always helped connect people of African spirituality with the cosmic forces that enable healing and sustenance.”³⁰ In this model, the forces that drive the dance are intangible, and power in the dance is attained by aligning ourselves with the submerged rhythmic and linguistic potentials of the beat. Working in the service of a communal conversation with others, the dancer creates dialogue by making the beat visible and shaping its accents into coherent phraseology. Ironically, the body creates the movement, but the body as a physical entity disappears in the midst of its own statements.

As Abrahams suggests, expert social dancers who enter the realm of entertainment for an integrated, but mostly white, audience become the object of a bifurcated gaze. In an essay on theatrical dance and religion, Royster discusses M. C. Hammer as a “griot with shamanic skills, whose singing and dancing show black folk how they can not merely survive but thrive in a spirit of praise.”³¹ Hammer’s short-lived but significant popularity as a dance artist spoke to a core audience of African Americans familiar with the spiritual dimension of his dance, as well as an international audience amazed by his virtuosity. The connection of spirituality and social dance is not casual, as Malone reminds us, and the best dancers in the black tradition are considered to be those who can tap into the spirituality of the dance: “African American musicians, dancers, and singers all testify to the spiritual dimension of their art.”³² In other words, serious “body talking” dancers manifest aspects of spiritual strength displayed and understood as such by their collaborating audience.³³ If spirituality is accessed by good dancing, religiosity may, then, be the unspoken subject and source of the dancer’s action, its root. Again, the dancing body disappears in the creation of motion, but here, in the service of spirituality.

The dancing body is itself considered the generative force of movement only through the act of stylization. In this process of personal invention, the dancer approaches a goal of purity, of expressing the self by manipulating basic movement utterances. This process provides the dynamic underpinnings of hip hop as “a never-ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration, always in formation, always contested, and never fully achieved.”³⁴ The social process that gives rise to black social dance will never be ended; hip hop offers only the contemporary manifestation of that cultural and political process.

Formal Aspects of Hip Hop—Jinglin' Baby

The formal characteristic most obvious to dancers and viewers of hip hop dance is the bounce. The bounce in hip hop is a recoil, a triage before the next skip. Body power draws from the illusion of physical weightiness, of neediness, of the voracious consumption of space. Physical virtuosity is also a function of the hip hop sound, present in the skill of the mixmaster's arrangement of preexisting music into an interlocking wall of beats. For dancers, weightiness and aggressive physicality—unchecked virtuosity—lead us into the beat.

Hip hop virtuosity is an alignment of physical tension [hardness] with politicized blackness unique to the post-civil rights era. This is a virtuosity of precision and attack; of finish joined to flow. The movement startles the viewer with angularity and asymmetry; with an outwardly explosive directness of precision unknown to earlier black American social dances. According to West, rap music "Africanizes African American popular music—accenting syncopated polyrhythms, kinetic orality, and sensual energy in a refined form of raw expressiveness—while its virtuosity lies not in technical facility but rather street-talk quickness and linguistic versatility."³⁵ This raises an alternative issue: is softness unwelcome in hip hop dance?

Perhaps. To dance hip hop, the body is held "tight"; that is, focused, with strong weight, and capable of an explosive suddenness. Because the body dances a complex array of interlocking rhythms, percussive accents of isolated body parts pop out in unexpected phrasing. These performed accents help to ground alternative rhythmic conceptions of the beat; to keep it fresh; to allow the dancer to reenter the same beat in many different ways. To my mind, it is the tightness of the body that speaks most to a hip hop dance aesthetic. These dances are fundamentally concerned with controlling the body, holding it taut, making it "work" in a fragmented manner that echoes the sampled layering of hip hop music. These dances look different from their predecessors, because of their unabashed hardness, their visible intimations of complex meter at work, and their palpable projection of a physical dynamism.

Hip hop dance is also fun, which offers its dancers a mechanism to express kinetic musicality with a bravado that is easily consumed by an immobile audience. Consider the strange, short-lived popularity of break dancing, an elaborate social dance form originated by teenage Latino and African American males in the South Bronx of New York City, circa 1970. Break dancing began as a form of fighting, a mixture of physically demanding movements that exploited the daredevil prowess of their per-

formers, and stylized punching and kicking movements directed at an opponent. A descendant of capoeira, the Brazilian form of martial arts disguised as dance, breaking developed as the original movement aspect of rap music when break-dancers filled the musical breaks between records mixed by disc jockeys.

The elaborate spins, balances, flips, contortions, and freezes performed by break-dancers required extreme agility and coordination. Real physical danger surrounded movements such as the "windmill," in which dancers spun quickly supported only by the shoulders, or the "suicide," in which an erect dancer would throw himself forward to land flat on his back. The competitive roots of break dancing encouraged sensational movements such as multiple spins while balanced on the head, back, or one hand. Dancing crews met on street corners, subway stations, or dance floors to battle other groups with virtuosity, style, and wit determining the winner. In these style wars there were no "judges" per se; rather, the dancers agreed on the winner at the moment of victory. In competitive strains of black social dance, there is no balloting or predetermination of the winner; victory is conferred intuitively by all the participants.

Clearly, break dancing possessed an inner logic that grew from its competitive background, and a simultaneous outer flamboyance that engendered its popularity for nonparticipating audiences. But what is lost in the shift from a social form with actionable consequences—the confirmation of victory or defeat—to a repeatable form admired by a crowd? How is the power of the body or of the dance diminished in this transference? If the audience doesn't know how to "read" the dance, can the dance speak? According to Hazzard-Donald, movement from a black social sphere to a [white] mainstream defused its expressive capacities: "Breaking's introduction to the general public by the mass media in April 1981 surely marked the beginning of its decline as a functional apparatus for competitive challenge among rival groups or individuals."³⁶ But does the commodification of the form for an audience of cultural outsiders somehow unmark break dancing as an invention of the black diaspora and a manifestation of body talking? As Rose notes, "for many cultural critics, once a black cultural practice takes a prominent place inside the commodity system, it is no longer considered a black practice—it is instead a 'popular' practice whose black cultural priorities and distinctively black approaches are either taken for granted as a 'point of origin,' an isolated 'technique,' or rendered invisible."³⁷ But what is taken for granted in the movement from the realm of expressive social dance to commodity for hip hop dance forms?³⁸

If unique, individual authorship is assumed as a component in the cre-

ation of dance style, then the amplification of hip hop style may not be possible through the simple magnification of dancing bodies moving in unison. In other words, copying steps only achieves a repetition of outward shapes, as opposed to a rearticulation of the communicative desire that drives the dance. We may repeat what is done by the body, rather than what is willed by the act of dancing—personalized speech. In this repetition, the intimations of actionable assertion may still be present, but the ability of the dance to tap into religiosity or generate action—its core power—becomes stalled in a stuttering through phrases repeated incompletely and without modulation.

Black social dances physicalize a continuity of performative oratory for Africans in diaspora. Dances offer greeting and debate; a mode of cultural identification and recognition that links African Americans in corporeal orature. Participation in the larger black culture involves the successful attainment of social dances and the invention of individual movement style as a marker of identity. According to Malone, collaborative body talking through social dance “automatically ensures a certain degree of dynamism because the demands of the audience for dynamic invention and virtuosity prevent the performer from delivering static reproductions of familiar patterns or imitations of someone else’s hard-earned style.”³⁹ The call and response mode of performance embraces an inclusionary aesthetic of creativity and invention, in that “call-and-response implies that every part of the community is important to its continuity and richness, that every one has a voice and, through it, the power to act, enact, react.”⁴⁰ For hip hop dancers, this participatory call and response mode also provides generous space for weighted male and female presence in the dance.

The basic vocabulary of hip hop dance—its stylistic mandates of taut body positions that could mirror tensely honed electronic drumbeats—emerged alongside technological developments in music. Films and music videos cemented the public vocabulary of hip hop dance quickly. In the realm of break dance, for instance, while Charlie Ahearn’s film *Wild Style* (1982) offered a window to burgeoning break-dance culture, this independently produced effort was eclipsed by a thirty-second breaking sequence in *Flashdance* (1983), which pushed the form to international attention. Other major studio releases quickly cashed in on break dancing’s sensational appeal, including *Breakin’* (1984), which starred Shabba Doo (Adolfo Quinones), an important break-dance choreographer from Chicago; and Harry Belafonte’s *Beat Street* (1984) which featured the New York City Breakers. Although these films offer predictable formulaic narratives of hip hop culture as adolescent exotica, they capture the urgency and immediacy of corporeal oratory contained by hip hop social dances.

These films also contributed to the movement of hip hop dance from the competitive, masculinized realm of ritualized battle to an integrated social space that accommodated dancing by men and women. According to Hazzard-Donald, “In its early stages, hip hop rejected the partnering ritual between men and women; at a party or dance, hip hop dance was performed between men or by a lone woman.”⁴¹ If early hip hop dancing in the social sphere “aggressively asserted male dominance,”⁴² movement of the dance into the commercial region marshaled its availability for women. The films allowed women access to hip hop’s hard edges. For example, in *Flashdance*, the heroine accomplishes her dance audition for the local ballet company by copying the break-dance moves she witnessed performed by a group of young men. The popular television dance group The Lockers, an early proponent of hip hop dance styles, included women and men among its numbers from its inception. It may be argued that all social dance contains roles for men and women defined by gender; as a solo form, however, hip hop dance generally resists this sort of gendered categorization.

The Academy Breaks

Hip hop has inspired movement beyond the dance floor, and some of the sharpest breaks and flamboyant versionings of hip hop style have occurred within the academy. This response to hip hop has been at least two-pronged: younger scholars, who typically begin their careers following a path of study set forth by their mentors, find themselves creating new points of entry to African American studies building on their experiential awareness of cultural processes in action; while established scholars of literature and cultural studies work to connect social dance and music with their larger areas of humanist inquiry. For older scholars, the powerful dancing body in hip hop appeals to the nostalgic desire for physical action; it offers a physical confirmation of cultural sustenance and generational rebirth. Younger scholars who have grown up fired by hip hop’s technology-strewn landscape embrace the physical release of the dance forms even as they migrate from house party to nightclub to television, and its music moves from turntable to radio, to magazine op-ed pages, and finally the courtroom. As Dyson notes, “Rap has almost single-handedly reignited popular and academic interest in black oral practices, spawning articles, books, journalism, conferences, and impassioned conversation across a variety of racial, sexual, ideological and class boundaries.”⁴³

Little of the scholarship referring to hip hop culture is grounded in any of the creative disciplines that give rise to its forms. Often, manifestations of hip hop culture are used by scholars to construct arguments about race. For example, literary and cultural theorist Houston Baker admits in the introduction to *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* that he initially set out to draw a history of black studies, but the imperative power of rap intervened, and large, block-styled letters spelling RAP define the cover of his book. In the text Baker uses rap as a call to arms for black studies, a call for a hybrid pedagogy for the 1990s that can enact a “black studies sounding of form.”⁴⁴ But in writing from outside of hip hop’s dances, Baker’s analysis seems to fetishize the recorded music and its agent, the disc jockey, over the dances and dancers that inspire them.

For example, Baker argues for the foregrounded presence of a performing body in hip hop: the emceeing rapper. Technological developments “produced a rap DJ who became a postmodern ritual priest of sound rather than a passive spectator in an isolated DJ booth making robots turn. . . . The high technology of advanced sound production was reclaimed by and for human ears and the human body’s innovative abilities.”⁴⁵ In some sense, then, hip hop’s disc jockey restored the primacy of live performance to black popular music. In another passage, Baker confirms the centrality of oral performance in hip hop, as “technology can create a rap disc, but only the voice dancing to wheels of steel and producing a hip hopping, responsive audience gives testimony to a full-filled *break*. You ain’t busted a move, in other words, until the audience lets you know you’re in the groove.”⁴⁶ Evoking hip hop style in his very phraseology, Baker suggests a participatory connection between music and dance that black expressive culture, in effect, demanded of hip hop.

An obvious response to hip hop’s aesthetic provocations is Jon Michael Spencer’s *The Emergence of Black and the Emergence of Rap*.⁴⁷ Essays in this groundbreaking volume focused almost exclusively, and myopically, on the lyrics of recorded raps. Still, rap music, as a component of hip hop culture, provided the impetus for a survey of the political emergency of contemporary black life. Stressing commonalities in imperative speech, Spencer’s preface acknowledged that “the black scholar cannot afford to be separated from the black rapper, and vice versa. Neither can we allow the audiences of these two ‘teachers’ to be divided, lest divided they fall.”⁴⁸ Connections between academicians and performers are key as “both the rapper and the engaged scholar seek to provide the black community with a Wisdom that can serve as the critical ingredient for empowering the black community to propel itself toward existential salva-

tion, that can overcome disempowering, genocidal, hell-bent existence.”⁴⁹ For Spencer, the distance from the rapper’s podium to the scholar’s podium is short, separated only by “differences of style and strategy: the black scholar’s ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ is carefully calculated, while the rapper’s insurgence is wholehearted and absolute.”⁵⁰

In a separate volume, Spencer revisited the connections between rap music and corporeality with an enlightened awareness of the music’s physical components: “Despite its aspect of intellectual insurgency, rap is first and foremost exhausting to the body; for it is the body, not the rational understanding, that is the absorber of rap’s rhythms.”⁵¹ Although Spencer, like West, denies a rational understanding of the body, the connection of the music to its physical provoker and respondent predicts theoretical work that aligns the components of black expressive culture. The performative aspects of music, dance, and orality in black expressive culture are intertextual, rational, and theoretical.

Conclusion

Black social dance structures offer a site of performative body talk inhabited by several audiences simultaneously. As Malone asserts, among African Americans, “the power generated by rhythmical movement has been apparent for centuries in forms of work, play, performance, and sacred expressions.”⁵² Contemporary versions of these dance structures—hip hop dances—continue this construction of actionable physical expression that belongs to the realm of art as life. While stationary audiences may sense the imperative power of hip hop dance, they often fail to interpret the movements effectively; they fail to read the dances as actionable. Without recourse to the spiritual vocabulary that inspires movement, without talking back with the body, it may be impossible to interpret and write about black social dances effectively.

Considered within a frame that includes an immobile [white] audience, the prevalent underlying action of movement in hip hop dances, is “j’accuse,” spoken by young people of color to those in power who would ignore them. These are emphatic dances of presence that belong to the realms of the lucid and the ludic. The body in these forms dances about unequal power relations, self-awareness, and kinetic fun; it creates pleasure in the personal layered statements of rhythmicity. These dances implicate all who would perform them to be in the pursuit of an efficacious corporeal orature. Their mastery can be achieved by any dancer—not

only by black bodies—willing to investigate their powerful communicative potential. Ultimately these dances generate a physical statement of pleasure, inextricably bound up with the political frames of race continually surrounding modes of black performance in America.

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