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# Flesh Dance

## *Black Women from Behind*

JASMINE ELIZABETH JOHNSON

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name.

—HORTENSE SPILLERS, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe:  
An American Grammar Book"

In her canonical essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" ([1987] 2000), literary and feminist theorist Hortense Spillers argues that the history of antiblack violence rendered black women's bodies "marked." The institution of chattel slavery depended on a black woman's kinlessness through the impermissibility of her exercising unbound and self-possessed familial care. Simultaneously, the institution capitalized on her anatomy, or womb, to produce future slave property. A physical and discursive violence sundered black bodies into maimed flesh. Slavery depended on objectifying the black enslaved; as such, black women became subject to slavery's uses *for* (rendered as "markings" on) them. These "hieroglyphics of the flesh," Spillers writes, "come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (66). Overdetermined from without, black women are understood as caricature. For Spillers, racialized tropes ("Peaches," "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire," and "Earth Mother," to evoke a few that the author herself lists) stand in for black women's identity. These "hieroglyphics," although understood by black women themselves as markings, go (mis)recognized by others as authentic. Thus, the black female body is "marked up"—signified on—while black *womanhood* evades a broader public optic. What we "see" or come to know in looking at a black woman is rarely a black woman's "truer word" (80).

"The problem before us," Spillers writes, "is deceptively simple: [terms such as "Peaches," "Brown Sugar" and so on] isolate overdetermined nominative properties. . . . [T]hey are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean" (57). If, as Spillers argues, black women struggle as agents to disembody from the

heft of overdetermination, how do dance scholars confront such “nominative properties”? What, I ask, can black feminist theories of embodiment teach dance scholars about black bodies in motion and the limits of looking? As a field that is in many ways dependent on sight, what do we do with America’s grammar of misrecognition and the unreliability of seeing black women at all, much less black women’s bodies in motion?

In this essay I draw from black feminist and social dance scholarship to consider the politics of black women’s movement through what I call *flesh dance*. I conceptualize flesh dance as a choreographic/sonic coupling through which hip hop lyrics direct black women to move in sexually mimetic ways. Flesh dance, I argue, italicizes a tension that black social dance has always embodied: it polices black intimacy and gender while extending a vehicle through which individual and communal pleasure might be instantiated. This double bind—that of potentially eroding and titillating—calls scholars of race, gender, and dance to examine embodied consent, creative labor, and black self-making. By holding this tension (of finding pleasure at the site of racial and gendered injury), we are better equipped to tackle the nuanced relationship between sex, dance, and self-articulation. Might we be able to move beyond understanding explicitly libidinal dance as derogatory (and, as such, bankrupt of feminist possibility) and toward an analytic in which pleasure is conjoined to pain—where power might be appropriated, usurped, and reigned through the execution and mastery of the flesh? This essay invites critical pause rather than prescription.

Flesh dance is a genre of instructional dance; instructional dance belongs to the broader category of social dance. Social dances convene, entertain, and concretize a community. Black social dance describes movements intended for and which in their doing produce black social worlds. It crops up, in other words, from the material conditions that structure black living. I follow Thomas DeFrantz, who (by way of Martiniquan postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon) “make[s] a gesture towards blackness as an existential and corporeal reality” (2001, 11). Like black bodies, black social dance is political, consequential, and historical. Black social dance might also be described as vernacular dance: choreographies exacted for and during social, communal occasions. As Julie Malnig writes, “The labels ‘social,’ ‘vernacular,’ and ‘popular’ are used interchangeably and often inconsistently in the social dance literature” (2009, 4). Dance scholars have examined histories of black social dance in the United States; most draw connections between social dance forms in the New World and West African cultures (Gottschild 1998; Emery 1988; Hazzard-Donald 1990; Malone 1996; Murray 1989; Stearns and Stearns [1968] 1979). They call our attention to the efficacy of movement to concretize community and carve out social spaces within political contexts that bridle black life.

Black social dance embodies the retentions and contingencies that shape(d) black culture. Scholars such as Robert Farris Thompson (1984), Kariamu Welsh-Asante (1997), Lawrence Levine (1978), and Katrina Dyonne Thompson (2014) draw our attention to the centrality of dance to African and black diasporic self-making and survival. Outlining broad themes among dances in West African cultures, through the Middle Passage, during slavery, in minstrelsy, and in band culture, Jacqui Malone, for example, argues that choreography indexes the politics of the historical moments during which certain dances emerge. How black bodies moved through the diaspora is indexical of linkages and breaks inevitable in black transatlantic history (Malone 1996, 24). Like black social dance at large, instructional dances speak to the sociopolitical climates from which they emerge.

A subset of social dance, instructional dances rehearse bodies through lyrical direction; they can be understood as choreographies rendered through verse that direct the stylization of the body. Black social dances were introduced to white audiences through instructional, or pedagogic, songs. In their article “From ‘Messin’ Around’ to ‘Funky Western Civilization’: The Rise and Fall of Dance Instruction Songs,” Sally Banes and John F. Szwed examine the 1920s and 1960s American instructional dance waves, charting their emergence, popularity, and eventual decline. They define instructional dance songs as a kind of dance notation that privileges the aural over the written and is popular rather than elite (2002, 170). Instructional dances grew in popularity through black American social instruction. Evidencing what Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1998) has described as “Africanisms,” Banes and Szwed note that the dance instructional song that emerged before World War I “is *about* the mass distribution of dance and bodily knowledge and thus has served crucial aesthetic, social, and political functions. It has played an important part in the democratization of social dancing; it has spread African American dance forms and styles throughout Euro-American culture and other subaltern cultures; and it has helped create a mass market for the work of black artists. In short, the dance instruction song has contributed to the formation of a syncretic dance culture—and bodily culture—in multicultural America” (2002, 170). Through the instructional dance song, African American dances circulated beyond the black social contexts from which they emerged. At different periods, dances like the twist, the mashed potato, the hustle, the smurf, ballin’, the jerk, and the bump, to name a few, became national dance crazes with black American origins that spread through performance mediums like minstrel shows, black vaudeville, and musicals. Reflecting this historical trend, Banes and Szwed center nonblack audiences’ tutoring in African American movement vocabularies, thus focusing

on white reception of largely black music and choreographic repertoire. For example, Banes and Szwed write that instructional songs of the early 1920s and 1960s waves “seem[ed] to indicate that the white mass audience/participants needed tutoring in all the moves, postures, and rhythms of black dance” (182). After the 1960s, artists assumed that audiences already had some dance skill and prior experience. Consequently, instructions became conveyed with less choreographic detail, and elements like exhortation and style made their way more centrally into the songs. Despite this shift, the dance instruction song functioned as a resource for white tutelage of black movement.

Generalized instructional songs and dances permeate contemporary hip hop too. Mr. C’s “Cha Slide” (2006), the 69 Boyz’ “Tootsee Roll” (1994), Ciara’s “1-2 Step” (2009), Cali Swag District’s “Teach Me How to Dougie” (2011), and Silento’s “Watch Me (Whip / Nae Nae)” (2015) represent instructional songs. Indeed, this genre of directive music is so popular that songs have now emerged that catalog a body of contemporary social dances and challenge the listener to execute a range of popular dance styles with both precision and flair. DJ Challenge’s “Hit That Bit for the Gram” (2015) and DLow’s “Bet You Can’t Do It Like Me” (2015), for example, skip detailed tutelage, asking listeners to perform a body of popular movements. Flesh dance differs from the earlier black instructional songs described by Banes and Szwed. It emerges out of hip hop culture, centers black singers/rappers addressing and instructing black dancing bodies, and features dances that simulate sex acts. It is also distinguished by its songs’ titles, which do not immediately signal specific dance moves but broadcast sexual commands. Songs like Travis Porter’s “Bring It Back” (2011), Juvenile’s “Slow Motion for Me” (2007), Jeremih’s “Put It Down on Me” (2010), and Waka Flocka’s “No Hands” (2010) instruct predominantly black female-identified bodies to move their behinds percussively in order to instantiate male pleasure. Thus black women’s moving bodies (and their attendant significations of hypersexuality) are hailed through direct lyrical commands atop an embodied rhythmic percussion that constitutes the beat.

These songs and attendant choreographies conflate dance and sex, emphasize execution and style (rather than a detailed string of choreographic directives), and shift from first to second person (from “I” or “we” to “you”). For the most part, a speaker gendered as male addresses a female-identified dancer. Flesh dance centers “ass-clapping”—that is, moving one’s backside repetitiously so that it generates the rhythmic sound of applause. Flesh dance incorporates sexualized commands into the lyrics, thereby shaping notions of black sexuality in both black social contexts and the public sphere. It asks us to consider the power of the sonic and embodied to impact meanings of race and sexuality

and reveals the complicated relationship between being “marked” as Spillers writes and being a “truer word.”

My use of *flesh* deliberately engages the complexities around black women’s agency and subjectivity that Spillers theorizes. In “Mama’s Baby” she writes that under the institution of slavery, reproduction, motherhood, pleasure, and desire were thrown into “unrelieved crisis” ([1987] 2000, 59). Black flesh became a commodity of capitalist exchange. Captive African bodies became the source of an irresistible sensuality while being simultaneously reduced to a thing. The enslaved were thus made available for being signified on: a receptacle for others’ desires, fears, and capitalist ambitions. As Brittney Cooper writes (reflecting on Spillers), “Enslavement was predicated on a dialectical doing and undoing of gender that frequently rendered the Black body a space of indeterminate gender terrain” (2017, 20). It is against this historical context that Spillers makes a distinction between the body and the flesh—a difference distinguished “between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” ([1987] 2000, 61). A black woman’s flesh was unprotected because the institution of slavery exploited her form to generate wealth; a black woman only carried gendered potential when her body increased her owner’s stock. A black woman navigated a political position of utter sexual endangerment while being refused the right to care for her kin. “In this play of paradox,” Spillers writes, “only the female stands *in the flesh* both mother and mother-dispossessed” (80). She continues, “In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down the layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function” (80). Flesh, then, indexes the relationship between discourses around black womanhood and black womanhood itself. It recognizes that black women are most often interpreted through “attenuated meanings.” “Peaches,” “Brown Sugar,” or “Sapphire”—while mapped onto her skin—tell us more about her *uses* for others rather than her “truer word.” Flesh dance, I argue, activates these attenuated meanings. I use the term both to examine the role of dance in reinscribing “property relations” and to suggest that these relations tell us more about the “collective function” of the black woman than they tell us about the ends of black women’s interiority (71). I suggest that black women’s flesh being “marked” should not be confused with black women being legible.

The lyrical and percussive repetition within the songs and lucid instructional details might make flesh dance appear legible, if not obvious, in terms of its choreographic and political operations. The movement, however, blurs the boundaries between sex and dance and between public and private acts. Within the aggressively heterosexist worlds from which flesh dance emerges, a black woman's dance aligning with a "marking" is not synonymous with her availability. Executing flesh dance does not mean consent; nor does it imply total impossibility for joy inside of sonic contempt. Ultimately, I call for a black feminist reading of these instructional dance songs to trouble the problem of black women's hypervisibility. How might being so regularly beheld actually obscure being seen?

Flesh dances index the political valences of black women's bodies in motion. Rather than landing on analyses that only understand sexually mimetic music and dance forms as regressive and, by extension, antifeminist, I describe the injurious work of flesh dance alongside its potential capacity to mobilize flesh in service of the body. Later, I consider African American studies professor Alexander Weheliye's question: "Can we conceive of a black body politic in ways that do not depend on discreteness and modesty as measures of worthwhile art and performance?" (2005, 184).

If we understand social dances as kinds of movements that, in their enactment, shape individuals' sense of group membership, then contemporary hip hop music belongs to this tradition. Dance instruction songs teach not only "the quantitative aspects of the dance (the steps, postures, and gestures) but also the qualitative aspects" (Banes and Szwed 2002, 189). As important as the choreography are the social, sexual, and classed norms that inform and contextualize the dances. Considering flesh dances as social dances reveals how, in a contemporary context, black social life is made through movement both embodied and lyrical.

Flesh dance emphasizes technique more than "new" choreographic material. This can be gleaned from the song titles alone: "No Hands," "Bring It Back," "Slow Motion for Me" all direct the stylization of the (black) female body; all are double entendres for both choreographic and sexual acts. Although the kinds of songs under discussion here may not immediately register as instructional dances in that their titles do not name a narrow dance "craze" (like Chubby Checker's "The Wah-Watusi," Sam Cooke's "Shake," or E.U.'s "Da Butt"), they belong to the same genre of dance and musical style in their calling on bodies to move in specialized ways. It is perhaps because they do not announce themselves and yet carry the same social-world shaping power that flesh dance songs are differently efficacious from their instructional dance relatives.

With very few detailed directives, flesh dance's lyrical content rests on inculcating pliant sexual flexibility. The dances themselves all figure women dropping low, splitting or clapping their backsides, bouncing up and down, and performing other sexual acrobatics. In "Bring It Back," Travis Porter instructs women to

Run and hit that pussy like a crash dummy  
 Bend it over, touch ya toes;  
 Shake that ass for me  
 Bounce that ass on the flo', bring it back up  
 Hit a split on the dick, shawty act up  
 Now bring it back. (2011)

In this song the dance shifts into sex, dissolving the line between public dance and personal intimacy. Lyrically, the voice shifts between describing the rapper's own movements and instructing the dancing woman. While the first section of the lyrics describe action to be carried out by the male rapper ("Run and hit that pussy like a crash dummy"), the lyrics pivot to describe the activity of the female dancer ("Bend it over, touch ya toes; / Shake that ass for me") (Porter 2011). Porter moves from instructing himself (or another man) to the woman's movement, to affirming her success. In so doing he underscores the evaluative and rehearsed nature of the social space. That women are routinely congratulated for "performing well" in these songs underscores the paternalism at play. The congratulation also countersignals the reality that dancers are indeed working, practicing, and thus performatively constituting their own presentation of self. Here, "going hard," meaning performing well, is proven by the woman's ability to control her butt cheeks: "Shawty goin' hard, concrete / She can shake her ass, one cheek / two cheeks, both cheeks, both cheeks" (Porter 2011).

Flesh dance songs (which I use to describe both music and movement, since they are inextricably tied) are sung predominantly by male rappers and call for women to move in sexually stylized ways. The songs thus performatively construct black masculinity despite the fact that men do little dancing during them. The rappers work as interlocutors, toggling between conducting women's bodies and anticipating subsequent social protocols. They serve as both directors and authenticators of women's movement. "Slow Motion for Me" by Juvenile (2003) demonstrates this lyrical command and attendant choreographic execution. The title itself works as a declarative rather than a question: Juvenile elects his partner to move *for*, not with, him. This rehearses a strip club dynamic in which women move with the goal of satisfying the spectator's and perhaps her own pleasure while pursuing financial procurement.



Like Porter, 50 Cent insists on and evaluates women's dance techniques as a guest artist on Jeremih's single "Down on Me." Here, club dancing and f\*cking (choreographic reality and sexual fantasy) slip into one another. He raps,

Systems thumping, party jumping, shorty, she's a perfect 10  
 She rock her hips, then roll her hips, then drop it down like it's nothing  
 She shaped just like an hour glass, she see how fast an hour passed  
 Time flies when I'm on that ass but I won't put our shit on blast

Work it like a pro, sit and watch it go  
 Do her thing all on the floor, she bounce it fast and shake it slow  
 So sexual incredible, she beautiful, she edible  
 I got her, I won't let her go, I ain't seen nothing better yo

Look at how she twurk it, the way she work it  
 Make me wanna hit it, hit it, heaven when I'm in it, in it  
 If I do not fit, I'm gonna make it  
 Girl, you can take it, don't stop, get it, get it (Jeremih 2010)

50 Cent's lyrics index the violence of heterosexism that emerges via flesh dance; the song also raises urgent questions around consent and gendered power relations within hip hop. Here, public dance is dangerously conflated with consent, and a "successful" flesh dance leads to anticipated sexual violence as 50 Cent shares that the dancer's comfort ("If I do not fit, I'm gonna make it") is of no consequence to this foreseen assault. The repetition of "I see you baby," uttered later in the song, calls attention to the illegibility of the dancing black female body. While "I see you" in black vernacular culture is often evoked to communicate that "whatever you are doing, you happen to be doing well" (a recognition of a mastery of one's own body), here "I see you" predatorily calls a woman into sight, making her dangerously available to sexual violence. Flesh dance indexes the heterosexism within black social dance spaces.

Men direct flesh dance. While they do not execute the kind of sexually mimetic choreography that women are called to do ("And no darlin' I don't dance," explains Wale), they perform other physical tasks that highlight their wealth, attractiveness, and power over women. In "Bring It Back," Porter raps:

Back that ass up like a dump truck  
 If you havin fun in the club, throw ya pumps up  
 All my ballas in the building throw ya is up  
 If you ain't throwin no money then get ya funds up (2012)

Monetary excess functions as a sign and source of masculinity. Not having cash to throw works to mobilize one's ambition to earn more. This theme runs throughout "No Hands," too. Waka Flocka explains:

Girl the way you movin' got me in a trance  
 DJ turn me up, ladies this yo jam  
 Imma sip moscato and you gon' loose them pants  
 And Imma throw this money while you do it with no hands  
 Girl drop it to the floor I love the way yo booty go  
 All I wanna do is sit back and watch you move and I'll proceed to throw this  
 cash (2010)

The sexually animated fabric of flesh dance, alongside its flagrant reification of differentiated gender power, mechanizes this genre of music and dance. Putting it directly, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting writes that "the impact of these sexually suggestive videos is undeniably regressive in terms of gender politics and young girls' and women's self-identity" (2008, 27). But other black feminists have drawn our attention to black women's nuanced mobilization of discursively harmful hip hop songs—a mobilization that appropriates and sometimes subverts the music's originally sexist operations. In writing about the Punany Poets, for example, Raquel Monroe contends that "the black feminist analysis of the dancing bodies as passive commodities and mere props of misogyny elides the dancers' physical labor, usurps their agency, and suppresses further conversations and explorations of what else this body might do and does, and the pleasures of those watching and performing" (2017, 250).

While the lyrics position women as useful insofar as they instantiate male pleasure, the dancing and its spectatorship open the possibility of the dancer's commitment to tending to the self. Here I am reminded of Karrine Steffans, a hip hop video model whose *New York Times* best-selling memoir *The Vixen Diaries* cataloged the dynamics and labor of being a woman working in the flesh dance industry. An interview with *NPR* indexes the reporter's discomfort with Steffans's unapologetic position on her life and choice to disclose sexual encounters, alongside Steffans's insistence on self-possession.

INTERVIEWER: But your financial independence, at the root of it, is men. It's either being with men, or writing about your being with men. Do you find that contradictory at all?

STEFFANS: No, because I don't write about being with men. I write about my life. I do have a personal private life. . . . I'm all the things that people hate to hear about.

INTERVIEWER: So what do you think you represent?

STEFFANS: I represent me. (Steffans 2007)

Flesh dances shape public discourse about black women (hieroglyphics, perhaps?) while concurrently shaping how black women understand their gendered, sexed (“truer”?) selves. Inside the repetition of dance is also the making of racialized and gendered meaning. As Sharpley-Whiting writes, “Just as important as the complex motivations behind young women’s suggestive performances in hip hop videos—rumps moving with the alacrity of a jackhammer, hips gyrating like a belly dancer on amphetamines, limbs akimbo, mouths agape in a perpetual state of orgasmic ‘oh’—is the repetition of particular ideals of femininity” (2008, 27).

Flesh dance music videos are rich sites for understanding the central role that black communal gatherings play in the execution of the dancing, for they accentuate the genre’s steady evocation of financial gain and dominance over women. Changing meanings of black sociality are central tropes in contemporary instructional songs. Like jook joints and rent parties, the club, lounge, or block party may be considered as a potential counterpublic in which black intimacies are exchanged. Although mired with the same political economies that complicate if not determine black people’s lives generally, these scenes also represent the singers’ staged social utopia. In addition to the club, lounges, hotel rooms, streets, and stoops are places where groups of black folk gather and dance. Rappers position these public spaces as sites of rehearsal for how to get ready for sexual encounters. In this light, the group dynamics that are applied to populated social situations are then transferred to intimate, private ones, and vice versa. For example, the distance is murky between the dance that is being “taught” on the dance floor and the sex that it promises after. In a few short bars, a dance floor transforms into a bedroom and back. The sonic power of flesh dance (and the promiscuous way music circulates) allows for a kind of traveling that supports the permeation of the dance/sex pedagogy.

In Travis Porter’s video for “Bring It Back” (2011) he maneuvers his iPad to literally rearrange the women on his screen. Watching a video of himself on the street as black women walk by, Porter puppeteers the video’s sequencing, rewinding women back into his field of vision. His community of peers laugh while Porter casts additional women into the moving image, only to pour a bucket of water onto one unsuspecting female pedestrian. The majority of the video takes place at a house party where women in body-hugging dresses sway near Porter and his friends. The men do not dance; they move from the street, to the house party, to the bedroom. Throughout, they stand with outstretched arms and clap their hands, the clap representing both the musical beat and a

woman's drilling backside, which the men demand, again and again, for her to "bring back."

In Juvenile's "Slow Motion for Me" (2006) the rapper stands perched in front of a megabus. Videos of working-class black America weave between scenes of a block party where children ride bikes, adults traipse atop broken bottles, grill-masters flip hamburgers, Juvenile kisses babies, and women churn their hips. The production is reminiscent of a pedestrian home video; this underscores the distance between the financial success implied by the tour bus (in front of which Juvenile raps) and the black working-class modesty of the house party. The distance between the song's central referent (sex) and the backdrop of the video (a family picnic) evidences the informality of the song's content and dance. Black women dance everywhere and nowhere: there is no receipt of their embodied labor from the guests at the party or from Juvenile. Even while women stir their hips, the black elders do not acknowledge the women's presence. And yet the angle from which the scenes of black women dancing are shot is from below (suggesting, perhaps, an erotic dancer/spectator field of visual relationship), as opposed to the remainder of the video, which rests at eye level.

The social arena where the dance takes place—whether the club, the family picnic, or the street—becomes a field of sexual rehearsal. On the dance floor, power relations are manifested, affirmed, corrected, or denied through dance. Waka Flocka's "No Hands" (2010) (which has over forty-one million views on YouTube) is a classic "club video": big city rooftops, glistening floors, black women evidencing a mastery of polyrhythms. Cutting scenes between the club and a hotel room, "No Hands" positions sex acts as both central to the club's sociality and promised at the end of a night. The dancers move with mouth open; their dance is slowed to half-time, elongating their smooth descent to the floor and slow levitation to standing. Waka Flocka, Wale, and Roscoe Dash fling cash, while a crowd of dancers entertain them.

Framing these performances of black sexuality as flesh dance works to keep feminist critiques of heterosexism activated while holding the possibility that a black woman's "truer word" might live as and beyond the stereotyped eroticization of her body. There is a potential for black women's enjoyment within antiblack and sexist contexts. Indeed, to understand that black women, since the event of slavery, have been "marked" is to acknowledge that there has never been a context in which black women have been, as a gendered and racial group, outside of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Spillers writes that "whether or not 'pleasure' is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either or the parties has not been settled" ([1987]

2000, 77). Flesh dance positions women as the property of men; yet this fact does not foreclose the possibility that these public and popular performances of femininity, authored by misogyny, could also be a source of subversive power.

Dance scholars have addressed the importance of resisting a “success/failure” dichotomy in evaluating movement. As Susan Manning outlines in her literature review on feminist readings of early modern dance, choreographers practiced a “double move of subverting the voyeuristic gaze while projecting essentialized notions of identity” (1997, 154). This simultaneity—of intervening and perpetuating—is a concurrence at work in flesh dance as well. Black feminists have for nearly four decades now produced nuanced work on gender and sexuality in the hip hop era (Rose 1994; Collins 2000; Durham 2014; hooks 1990, 2000; Pough 2004). These authors extend robust analyses of the workings of gender and sexuality within hip hop culture. In its indivisible coupling of the lyrical and embodied (within social contexts mired with racism, sexism, and homophobia), flesh dance extends a productive entry point through which to analyze race and gender performativity.

Building on Albert Murray (1989), Jacqui Malone argues that black social dances “[help] drive the blues away and [provide] rich opportunities to symbolically challenge societal hierarchies by offering powers and freedoms that are impossible in ordinary life” (1996, 1). Does flesh dance drive the blues away, or does it fondle them? The ritual of a party holds the potential to empower in ways that may not be available in everyday black life. Executing flesh dance in social spaces is at once proof of one’s facility with one’s own body and evidence of a pop cultural knowledge. This notion of the potentially restorative power of contemporary social dance differs from Paul Gilroy’s argument in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (2000) that “love songs” are increasingly obsolete: the body has become an end to itself as opposed to a site for spiritual transcendence, he argues. Gilroy writes about the shift in black cultural production from a space that was explicitly derived out of a state of black unfreedom to a sexually obsessed public sphere. In Gilroy’s estimation, there has been a transformation from aurality to visuality: the image usurps the musical listening. Yet I want to both extend and push back on Gilroy’s argument by proposing that dance and movement are central factors to this changing nature of black cultural production and that a consideration of flesh dance can help us understand how this shift can be both damaging and freeing.

Sexual excess dominates the black public sphere, Gilroy posits, and an addiction to specularity has usurped aurality (2000, 191). Today, “stylized tales of

sexual excess” dominate black public life and have threatened, if not completely deadened, other modes of black expressivity (178). Gilroy’s reading of contemporary black life underestimates the power of the “bump and grind” (to use his language). By investing in nostalgic notions of “real” music and black love, Gilroy forecloses the possibility of black female joy in the face of discursive impairment.

In *Phonographies: Grooves in Afrosonic Modernity* (2005) Weheliye examines sound technologies that have produced black modernity and black cultural production more broadly. Within his analysis is a counterreading of Gilroy that I extend through flesh dance. Weheliye troubles the connection Gilroy draws between the increasing pornification of black music and black folks’ presumed devaluing of spiritual transcendence. Weheliye writes that “the body Gilroy refers to gains its freedom in and not through sex, making sex an end unto itself rather than a means through which to acquire freedom” (2005, 184). Weheliye’s inquiry—“How can we conceive of black body politics in ways that do not depend on discreteness and modesty as measures of worthwhile art?”—helps us think through flesh dance (185). Flesh dance centers the body and therefore centers sex, creating contexts for both sexual policing and potential pleasure.

Flesh dance polices sex, intimacy, and expectations of kinship, yet this objectification does not entirely foreclose the potential for pleasure, self-identification, and self-possession. Black women are not inherently excellent at flesh dance; their dexterity is the result of physically repetitious work, control, and selective withholding. Indeed, as Sharpley-Whiting writes, hip hop “shower[s] [black women] with contempt,” but closing the shutters on fleshy scenes does not fully constitute a black feminist strategy for dismantling patriarchy (2008, 8). How might we effectively call out detriment (the physical and discursive objectification of black women’s bodies) without denying black women’s capacity to draw their own cartographies of self, which may or may not align with stereotype?

With regard to the aforementioned flesh dance videos, we do not have access to the dancers’ sentiments about how they interpret their own dancing. (Indeed, such an ethnography would no doubt deepen and complicate what I have heuristically laid out here.) Without access to the interiority of these flesh dance ensembles, we do have entrance to black female authors’ writing on their individual relationships to hip hop music/choreography—movement that I would argue falls into the flesh dance category. Among these authors are the Crunk Feminist Collective, a rhetorical community for hip hop generation feminists of color. In their anthology, the authors write that “Crunk feminism gives us the nerve to make our way off of the dance floor, where we were shaking our asses just a moment ago, when a song comes on that dares to suggest

that ass-shaking constitutes desire and consent. Ass-shaking is whatever we say it is, and our hip hop feminism means you will either respect that or you will learn today” (Cooper, Morris, and Bollard 2017, 170). Across the span of the volume, the contributing authors raise questions around the complicated association between pleasure, constraint, and black women’s agency to decide their own flexible relationship to hip hop. In the above excerpt, the authors privilege the meanings they make for themselves in light of lyrical content, gratification of dance, and safety of social space. Black women exercise agency through self-possessed social dance practice.

Within the broader sociocultural world of flesh dance is the possibility that racial scripts that demean blackness might also titillate and employ. Black feminists have long theorized black women’s practices of sexual contentment within political contexts that work to starve them of this erotic pleasure.<sup>1</sup> To draw from Jennifer Nash’s language in reference to the silver age of pornography, we should consider the potential agency of erotic labor and the possibility that black women may “find pleasure at the site of racial injury” (2014, 86).

What would it mean to practice black feminist dance studies? I suggest that this would first require, in some ways, loosening our fidelity to sight. If black women are, from the moment of their “invention,” a sum of uses, then surely black women in choreographic motion would invite a different set of questions around enactment, principally: What is the simultaneous play between seeing and invisibility in black women’s dance? A black feminist dance reading would also reserve the head of the analytical table for the black woman in motion. With this understanding, a black woman’s flesh dance, so regularly understood as “excessive” (as black women’s bodies in motion, fully clothed or not, are read), would be understood as the mobilization of a “mark.” Whether or not her drilling backside is her “truer word” will always be beyond us. That she mobilizes the flesh, though, is clear: it is an embodied practice of controlling a marked body. Flesh dance, in other words, forces us to understand black women’s standpoint (Collins 2000) from the back.

Flesh dance takes behindness as a productive lens through which the embodied labor of black women can be complicatedly examined. After all, black feminism has long taught us that how we are trained to see a black woman is rarely her actual image. Hypervisibility is more of a blindness than a clarity. Flesh dance asks us to consider the possibility that black female sentience might very well be unavailable in plain sight. “Let’s,” as Spillers insists, “face it.”

#### Note

1. See Brittney Cooper and Treva Lindsey’s special issue “On the Future of Black Feminism” in the *Black Scholar* (2015).

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