

CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE FIELD OF DANCE STUDIES



The Popular as the Political

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A Word from the Guest Editors

Dear Reader,

This special edition of *Conversations across the Field of Dance Studies* emerges from our discussions as members of the international research network PoP [Performances of the Popular] Moves which focuses on popular dance and performance. At one of our meetings in London we thought it urgent to address the political potential of popular dance practices. As the rise of populist nationalist sentiment takes over in countries on both sides of the equator, we are primarily interested in how popular dance, broadly conceived, emerges as a mode of communication, citizenship, and resistance.

In this publication we wanted to highlight how the inescapable connections between political ethics and aesthetics must be questioned, not only in the analysis of the practices of representation and/or creation, but also in the analytical power of dance to subvert, reaffirm and amplify ideologies, subjectivities and processes of sociality in specific contexts. Popular dance becomes an effective tool to visualize forms of social organization. It mobilizes ancestral and popular knowledges that, in difficult contexts, become invisible and tacit. Popular dances allow for ritual reconfigurations and sometimes the dance(r)s become mediators of these knowledges. This re-signification of popular knowledges opens up new ways of producing and questioning knowledge about the social in very palpable, felt and lived ways. In these essays, our contributors think about the

significance of an archive for a national dance form; they provide rich movement description and cultural analysis; they ponder the politics of identity, nation, location and gender in a variety of dance forms. All the while, they remain attentive to showcasing how dance forcefully articulates politics of affect, representation and community.

This volume features geographic and historical diversity. It also features a vibrant swath of dancers and dance practices: New Zealand – polystyrene; USA- African American second lines; Spain – flamenco; Ecuador - contemporary and Afro-Ecuadorian *bomba choteña*; Puerto Rico and its diaspora – *bomba*; Greece- hip hop; Argentina – ballet; and the UK – street dance/hip hop. Additionally, it offers a collectively authored critique of Netflix’s documentary series *We Speak Dance* (2018) in the hopes that we, as scholars (dancers, activists and educators), can help direct attention to the need for public advocacy and critical perspectives about dance beyond its associations with mass entertainment. If we consider our commitments to the political potential of critical dance studies, we must develop strategies to have broader impact. These issues go beyond the scope of our collaboration around *We Speak Dance*, but we offer that critical dialogue as a starting point for future strategic discussions on this platform or elsewhere.

As we originally stated in the call for this issue, we wonder how might the practice of popular dance become a political tool for social change and impact? For whom is the practice important? What are the pedagogies of political popular dance? How do we use popular dance as both practice, performance and pedagogy to consider new ways of knowledge production? How are these practices being instrumentalized within official discourses of art for development? Important to note is the quantity of work in this volume that centers on/around Latin/x America. While we were not explicitly looking to geographically focus this edition there, we are pleased that it was perhaps our respective politics of locations that led to this nice surprise.

Popular dance, in all of its circulations and iterations, is often *the* innovative site where so many of our everyday relationships with local, national and global politics gain visibility. In the political affinities and/or differences that intersect on dance club floors, streets, stages and dance studios what does emerge is the significance of the convergence of the popular (*lo popular*) and the massive (*lo masivo*). Here, *lo masivo* can be understood as popular culture and the modes of communication that enable its circulation, whereas the popular in this case is 'the people.' The understanding of these terms is based on the work of Argentine anthropologist Nestor García Canclini (1987) who notably questioned the false dichotomies established, within a broad Latin American context, between the popular as folkloric and its association with the people, versus the popular as popular culture and its connections to global capitalism, technological circulations and consumerism. These unproductive antagonisms no longer apply as together they mobilize cultural and relational models where *lo popular* becomes a mode from which to act, do and dance.

Historian Tim Snyder offers some advice in his *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017). "Lesson Thirteen" stands out as something that, as dance scholars, we know can offer new perspectives on how to endure, resist, and maintain resilience in the midst of political, economic and ecological uncertainty: *practice corporeal politics*. Practice... Corporeal... Politics. In many ways, this happens already in popular dance practices. Whether it is the *polyswagg* of Parris Goebel, the second line of New Orleans, or the hip hop moves of a Greek, UK or Vietnamese dance crew, the dancer as "the particular political subject that transforms spaces of circulation into spaces of freedom" (Lepecki 2013) moves through these essays.

While we recognize that embodied citizenship has tactics, strategies and risks directly associated to the particular corporeality of the citizen, we present these examples of the political *through* the popular as significant modes of sociality and citizenship.

We extend our gratitude to the members of PoP Moves for providing so many opportunities to think about and through popular dance, to the DSA Editorial Board and to Sanja Andus L'Hotellier for her patience and support. A big thank you to Bryce Lease for his copyediting destrezas (skills). Thank you to Stephanie Hazen Beltrán for her digital publication assistance. Most importantly, we extend a tremendous thank you to our contributors for their intellectual commitment and for helping materialize an idea born out of our casual Spanglish conversations.

Gracias a todxs!

**Melissa Blanco Borelli &
Anamaría Tamayo Duque**

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“The Patter of Our Feet”: Parading and Political Organizing in New Orleans

Rachel Carrico

The Africanist music and dances performed at New Orleans’s Congo Square during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been credited as a major foundation of African American culture—and thus U.S. popular culture at large.¹ The continued relevance of Louisiana’s Afro-Creole music and movement for U.S. pop culture has been made evident most recently in Beyoncé’s 2016 music video sensation, *Formation*. However, the city is less often credited for its important role in U.S. histories of activist organizing.² One may assume that the city’s image as the “Big Easy” obscures its histories of grassroots struggle, and while this is partly true, I urge readers to see New Orleanians’ play and picketing not as independent activities, but as inextricably linked pathways to freedom.

In New Orleans today, vestiges of Congo Square live on in uniquely local forms of popular music and dance, such as second line parades. These brass band-led processions gather a majority black crowd of thousands to dance through the streets nearly every Sunday afternoon. Second liners improvise syncopated footwork while moving forward over pavement and snaking between parked cars, while the most intrepid showcase their moves atop elevated structures such as rooftops. Second lines have long been (and still are) planned and financed by black voluntary organizations. Today most call themselves social aid and pleasure clubs (SAPCs), an evolution of eighteenth-century groups

that provided social aid in the form of burial and medical insurance and pleasure in the form communal celebrations.³ Second lines may look like nothing but a party, but in reality, are doing deeply political work. Nearly every Sunday, SAPCs create pleasure for themselves and onlookers gathered in public spaces, while simultaneously asserting a political statement about the value of black life. Afro-Creole parading traditions rhythmically reclaim New Orleans’s public spaces from political and economic forces of white supremacy.

The histories of New Orleanians’ cultural parades and activist demonstrations are deeply intertwined. Cultural communities such as Mardi Gras Indian tribes and second-line clubs can themselves be seen as examples of organized resistance while explicitly political organizing strategies in New Orleans have long been influenced by local cultural traditions. This interdependence expresses itself in the dual connotations that the term “marching” holds in the city: walking in protest through the streets or dancing with a brass band. Histories of marching in New Orleans embody the politics of pleasure. Here I refer to “politics” as the everyday negotiations of power that occur through human interaction and symbolic representation. As Randy Martin urges, “Politics goes nowhere without movement.”⁴ While this may be obvious in examples of protests, I argue that it can also be seen in pleasurable marches such as second line parades. The second line’s

power is located in its imaginings of a possible future, for sure, but second liners do not wait on the state to enact changes—they make a more enabling life for themselves through each moment of creating and experiencing pleasure. The notion that pleasure and politics coexist at the second line draws upon a deep intellectual tradition in African American studies. In the words of novelist and theorist Ishmael Reed, “there’s so much more to black pleasure than merely fun.”⁵ Part of that is the fact that black pleasure can be a political act. As persuasively argued by historian Stephanie Camp, dancing can be a powerful and pleasurable form of resistance for those who have encountered oppression through their bodies.⁶ Generations of African American and Afro-Creole New Orleanians have generated bodily pleasure, through collective dancing in public spaces, as a way to playfully maneuver within and against spatial, social, and structural systems of oppression. In other words, bodily pleasure is central to the second line’s political force.

Second line parades exploded in popularity during late-nineteenth century, amidst the violent end of Reconstruction, unapologetically celebrating black life as the number of lynchings rose, and defiantly occupying public spaces as legalized segregation ossified the urban landscape into a dichotomy of “white” and “colored.” As second lines began to crisscross New Orleans, one of the first southern monuments to the confederacy was unveiled in a prominent public square. In 1884, a group of powerful white New Orleanians dedicated a bronze statue of the confederate general Robert E. Lee, standing atop a sixty-foot marble column, in the center of Tivoli Circle. Lee Circle, as it came to be known, became an architectural centerpiece to the Cult of the Lost Cause and a towering symbol of white backlash against the racial equality gained during Reconstruction. As more such monuments were erected throughout the city, black dance processions continued to serve as embodied memorials to black New Orleanians’ histories and struggles, and as a counterstatement to the memorialization of white supremacy. During jazz funerals and celebratory parades, second liners march in the literal shadows of monuments glorifying the very forces that authorize their premature death. With defiantly pleasurable footwork, second liners remap the urban landscape according to black geographies, acting as “moving monuments made of flesh and blood.”⁷

Consider, for example, the Independent Aid and Social Club’s 1963 second line, accompanied by the Eureka Brass Band and documented by filmmaker Jules Cahn (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Still from Jules Cahn’s 1963 footage of the Independent Aid and Social Club’s second line, with the Robert E. Lee statue looming in the background. The Jules Cahn Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection Acc. No. 2000.78.4.7.

The footage shows dozens of African American paraders: members of the band and club (first line), dozens of dancers who follow them (second line), and one police escort. During a pause, they rest against the exterior walls of a building. Two signs hang above the door: “Athenaeum Club” and “White Only.” Next shot: second liners zigzag toward the camera, moving down the wide thoroughfare of St. Charles Avenue. Women rock side-to-side, proudly thrusting their hips behind them. Men march with high knees in springy, lilting steps. The concrete and steel structure of the elevated Pontchartrain Expressway overpass looms in the background. Next shot: a close-up of the Robert E. Lee statue that towers above the paraders as they round the traffic circle, buoyantly stepping underneath Lee’s frozen stance, indifferent to his looming presence.⁸

These brief clips, viewed in succession, reveal layers of historic, institutionalized violence through which second liners have always maneuvered. In 1963, second liners strutted through the last vestiges of legalized segregation, high-stepped in the shadow of slavery,

and grooved past urban renewal developments, such as freeway construction projects, that frequently displaced poor people of color. Still today, second liners dance through, underneath, and around brick-and-mortar manifestations of racism, capitalism, and the structural violence that upholds their articulations.

In 1963, black New Orleanians were not only dancing to survive and thrive within the trenchant racist power structures of the Jim Crow South; many were also actively working to demolish those structures. In September of that year, a group of black community leaders known as the Citizens Committee planned a large “Freedom March.” One of their demands included desegregating the white-only bars and music clubs such as those that the Independent Club members paraded past but could not enter. Then-Mayor Schiro denounced the Freedom March, declaring his opposition to unruly demonstrations. But he conceded, “anyone has a legal right to stage a parade providing he complies with the city ordinance regarding parades”—which the Citizens Committee did.⁹ Ordinances regarding parades would have been very familiar to Freedom March organizers and endorsers, many of them members of various organizations, such as Masonic lodges and social and pleasure clubs, that regularly hosted parades. Thus, protestors could leverage their familiarity with one kind of marching to organize another.

The mayor’s response illuminates complex conceptions of race, rights, and popular dance in 1963 New Orleans. Whereas the mayor could publicly defend the legal right of “anyone,” including non-white residents, to “stage a parade,” he could not as easily defend the rights demanded by Freedom March organizers, such as access to equal job opportunities and adequate housing, the right to patronize businesses of their choosing, and to serve on city boards and commissions.¹⁰ Mayor Schiro conflated the terms “march” and “parade,” and cast both against “demonstration,” thereby displacing the politically motivated march into the seemingly benign realm of popular culture. Thus, in defending the rights of black New Orleanians to participate in the city’s hallowed parading tradition, he gave the appearance of tolerance while simultaneously denying the outcomes demanded by activists. He protected the right of black citizens to move through the city’s segregated and unequal landscape in parades—as long as those parades did not seek to topple the very physical and ideological structures that framed their routes.

However, Mayor Schiro drew a false line between cultural parades (pleasure) and activist demonstrations (politics), and in so doing, underestimated the organizing power inherent in black cultural traditions, or the politics of pleasure. Attorney Revius O. Ortique, Jr., a featured speaker at the Freedom March, alluded to the inextricable links between culture and politics in Afro-Creole processions. He told the crowd of 10,000 that the Freedom March’s purpose was to “have the patter of our feet ring out to the community, to our state, to the nation and to the world, in unison, carrying out, shouting out that we wish only for that liberty and the freedom which our constitution states should be for all Americans.”¹¹ Whether second lining for pleasure or marching in protest, the patter of feet rings out wishes for freedom. Activist-led processions demand future liberties through legal action and economic changes. By contrast, second lines poetically enact those liberties and freedoms in the present time.

Generations of second liners and community organizers have literally and figuratively transformed New Orleans’s cityscape. Recent organizing efforts reveal the historic reciprocity between the city’s black popular culture and political organizing. In 2015, the black-led effort, Take ‘Em Down NOLA, successfully pressured the City Council to vote to remove four visible confederate monuments, including the Lee statue. These events are part of a nationwide outcry against public symbols that laud the confederacy and enshrine white supremacy. Before spearheading Take ‘Em Down NOLA, activist, teacher, and poet Michael “Quess” Moore organized a march with Black Youth Project 100. The march began at Lee Circle because, in Moore’s words, “That’s the symbolic epicenter of our pain in this city. And it ended at Congo Square, which was the symbolic center of our healing.”¹² The pathway he choreographed utilized the kind of symbolic mapping practices perfected by second line groups for more than a century.

The intertwined histories of marching for political gain and marching for collective healing crystallized one early morning in May 2017 during the Take ‘Em Down struggle. Opposing camps of protesters surrounded the statue of confederate general P.G.T. Beauregard as workers prepared it for removal. Around 1:15 A.M., a brass band marched up the street, surprising the crowd. In time with tuba thumps and trombone wails, a chant pealed through the anti-monument group: “Take ‘em doooooowwn, take ‘em down!” The rhythmic intervention “appeared to at least temporarily disperse a large portion of the pro-

monument crowd.”¹³ As second liners transformed the street with instruments, voice, and movement, they cleared the way for its physical transformation.

The Lee statue no longer stands in Lee Circle, but, at the time of writing, its replacement remains undetermined (see Figure 2).

The To Be Continued (TBC) Brass Band has an idea. During the winter of 2015, just a month before the City Council’s vote, legendary New Orleans pianist and composer Allen Toussaint died of a heart attack, leaving a large hole in the city’s cultural community. In the improvisatory, responsive spirit of the second line tradition, TBC added a timely chant to one of their standard hits: “We gonna name Lee Circle after Allen Toussaint.”

Take ‘Em Down NOLA and the TBC Brass Band, as recent actors in New Orleans’s long history of marching, invite further consideration of how the politics of pleasure are articulated in anti-racist protests across cities nationwide and worldwide. I write this essay four years after Ferguson, two years after Standing Rock, and one year after Charlottesville. In reflecting on these more recent events, I am inspired by groups whose organizing and dancing take cues from one another. Examples include Black Lives Matter’s use of the “Hands up! Don’t Shoot!” gesture and ACT UP inspired die-ins;¹⁴ Dancing for Justice, a network that, since 2014, has choreographed public actions in U.S. cities such as Philadelphia and New York to reenact and mourn the deaths of unarmed black men and women;¹⁵ circles of dancers and drummers who welcomed new groups of protestors each week at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota in 2016;¹⁶ and WERK for Peace, which emerged following the PULSE Orlando nightclub shootings in 2016 and most famously held a dance party outside of now-Vice President Mike Pence’s home in DC just days before the inauguration of Donald Trump.¹⁷

As we move forward (the second line demands it), how many ways can the patter of feet ring out wishes for freedom—and even more, turn those wishes into a reality? Populist governments continue to embolden nativism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia in the U.S., Europe and beyond; dance offers the possibilities of choreographed resistance and daily defiant acts of pleasure.

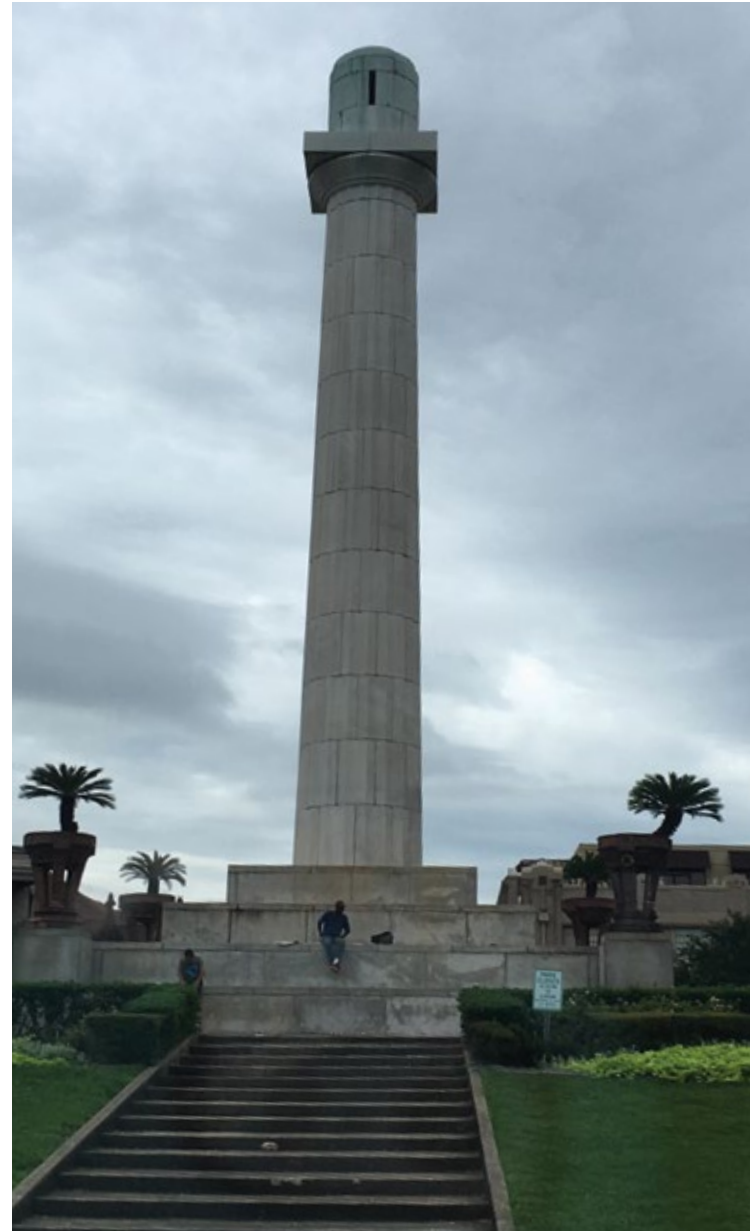


Figure 2: The pedestal that once held a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee remains empty. Photo by Rachel Carrico.

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When Ballet Became “Popular”: Dance and Politics During the 1950s Peronist Loyalty Week Festivities

Eugenia Cadus

Introduction

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Argentine cultural elite was made up of a Buenos Aires oligarchy that wanted Buenos Aires, and by extension Argentina, to be the most modern nation in Latin America. They needed a concert dance that distinguished itself from popular forms like folklore, circus, and tango (See Pasolini 1999). Consequently, dance as “elite culture” was shaped by a Eurocentric model of cultural modernity, with the Ballets Russes—in 1913—as the most representative form of the time (Tambutti 2011). However, this universalistic, elite background was challenged by the Peronist cultural policies that promoted not only a “popular/mass” culture, but also enabled working class-access to “high” culture events (Cadús 2017).

In its first two terms, the administration of President Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955) introduced a cultural project that mirrored his “welfare democratization” (Torre-Pastoriza 2002, 304) state policy, which focused on expanding social welfare programs. Through cultural diffusion, these policies promoted greater access for the working class to cultural goods and created access to areas previously established as the exclusive patrimony of middle and upper classes, such as the Teatro Colón (Colón Theater), the most prestigious opera theater in the country and one of the most prominent of the region. Thus, a new “cultural consumer” arose (Leonardi 2010, 67). During

this First Peronist period, ballet became a popular expression capable of “appropriations,” i.e., what in Ginzburg’s terms could be defined as “making one’s own what is someone else’s, what one does not hold” from what you have or know (Zubieta 2004, 45-46).

In this article, I use the term “popular” to analyze the democratization of culture and the art consumption that this policy promoted. In this context, I understand art consumption as a “second degree production” (de Certeau 2000, XLIII). That is what de Certeau (2000) named as a “use” (36) of cultural goods by the popular classes, something which constitutes the place of freedom created by the “tactics” of micro-resistance (43). In this sense, consumers cease to be passive recipients but rather develop secondary productions. In opposition to this meaning of “popular” within the context of Peronist cultural policies, I use the term “high” culture to refer to the universalistic classic culture that symbolically belonged to the elite intellectuals of the time. Peronist cultural policies aimed to democratize this elite/high culture, and as a result, educate the people. Notwithstanding, I understand that the consumption of art as a tactic of appropriation by the popular classes does not necessarily imply indoctrination by said classes.

Although the aesthetic or the agents of the Colón Theater Ballet Company did not completely change during Peronism, ballet’s reach extended over a wide and massive audience through the

implementation of the cultural policy of democratization of culture. Ballet became a populist tool used by Peronism in its attempt to democratize culture. This change was expressed in the government bulletin entitled *Cultura para el pueblo* (Culture for the People), where popular culture was defined as “to give the people everything that was once reserved for wealthy circles, and stimulate the national identity” (n.d., 33). The text continues to explain this meaning by stating the policies introduced at the Colón Theater:

World famous artists have performed in this coliseum and, around it, a pernicious climate of “elite” was built, stimulated by an aristocracy able to afford expensive season tickets. The Peronist revolution ends with these privileges, and opens the doors of the Colón Theater to the lower classes, offering special and free performances to the labor unions. This way, the valuable artistic wealth that once only a small circle could appreciate, reaches all the spirits without depending on the economic possibilities of each one. Ballets, operas, the lyrical art, and their most famous performers of this time, are finally available to the people (*Cultura para el pueblo* n.d., 47).

The Colón Ballet mirrored the dialogues and tensions between elite and popular culture and politics. Ballet still represented elite culture and the privileges of the upper class, yet in its appropriation as a populist tool by Peronism, it could achieve some democratization. One such example of this attempt can be identified in the play *Electra*.

Electra (1950)

In 1950, the Colón Ballet performed in the political and artistic event that concluded the festivities of “Loyalty Week.” These festivities commemorated the events that took place on October 17, 1945. That day, Perón was imprisoned on Martín García Island by an internal coup of the military government that had been in power since 1943. Perón had been the Vice President, Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare and Minister of War.¹ Perón pretended to be ill, and was moved to the Central Military Hospital in the capital city. Meanwhile, thousands of workers marched on the *Plaza de Mayo* to demand Perón’s release. This historical mass demonstration ended that evening with the release of Perón, a political agreement to conduct elections, and Perón’s speech from the balcony of the presidential palace reaffirming his popular leadership. October 17 became a key moment for the construction of a Peronist identity, and it was celebrated throughout this government.

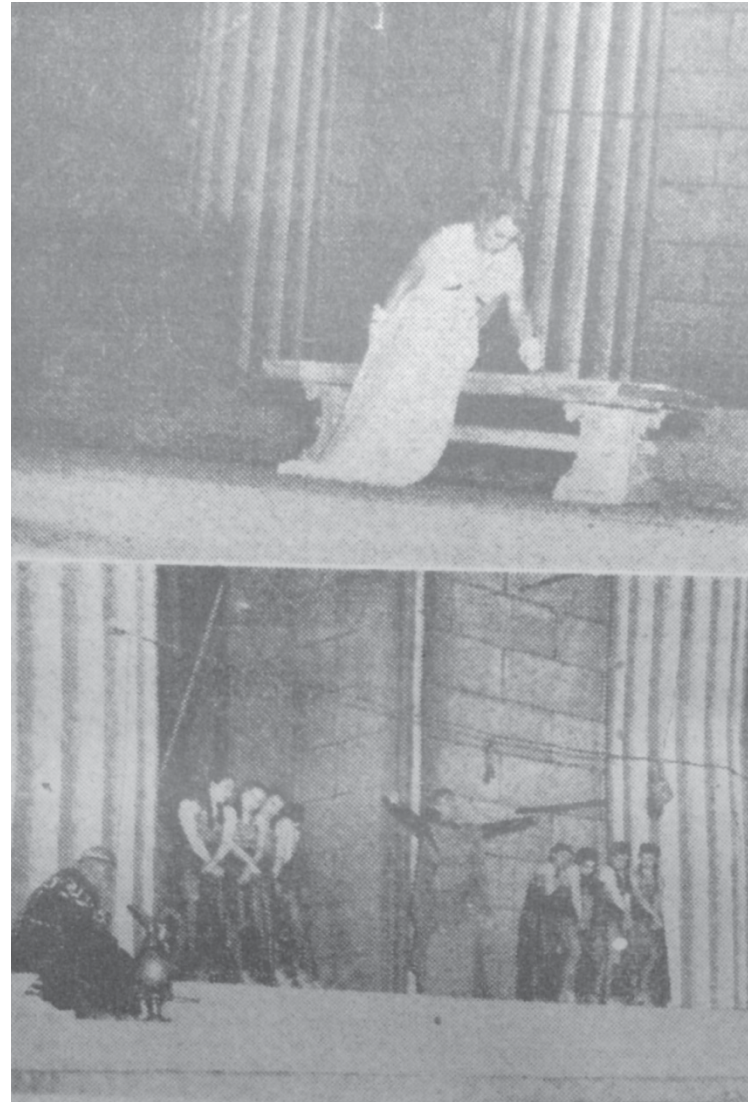


Photo 1: Published in newspaper Noticias Gráficas October 23, 1950, 12. Caption explains: “Two moments of the brilliant performance of ‘Electra’ presented last night in the atrium of the School of Law. Above: Iris Marga as the miserable Electra, who regrets her house tragedy, where her father’s murderers are in charge —the unfaithful Clytemnestra and Aegisthus the traitor. Below: Ángeles Martínez as the cruel queen who celebrates the news of her son Orestes’ death. She saw him in her dreams, get revenge on Agamemnon murder. In the photographs it can be seen the chorus’ attitude that highlights the nature of the classic tragedy situations.” Located at the Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación Argentina.



Photo 2: Georges Hirsch (Director of the Paris Opera), Juan Perón, Eva Perón, and Serge Lifar. Published in newspaper *Crítica* September 17, 1950, 11. Located at the Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación Argentina.

As political propaganda, workers' spontaneous mobilizations were transformed into annual rituals of communion between Perón and the people. This day became known as "Loyalty Day." Peronism led people to use urban public space, encouraging "a kind of *symbolic occupation* of the city and public areas previously considered inaccessible to the masses" (Ballent 2009, 51). This use of public space reaffirmed the October 17 myth: "the irruption of the masses in the city, which meant also its irruption in politics" (Ballent 2009, 51). The 1950 celebration was an impressive arts festival presented as "culture for the people" (Gené 1997, 185). The festival took place between October 14 and 21, and was based on the concepts of "national culture" that Peronism promoted. The programming included folkloric and workers' choirs as well as classical theater, symphonies, and ballets. The Colón Ballet performed in several parks and provided the closing performance of Sophocles' *Electra*. This version was an adaptation by the renowned Peronist writer and intellectual Leopoldo Marechal.² The play was directed by Eduardo Cuitiño. The musical director was Roberto

Kinsky and the stage designer, Mario Vanarelli. The cast consisted of popular actors and actresses from radio, television, and revue theater.³ There were two danced scenes: "Sunrise"⁴ and "The Furies,"⁵ both choreographed by Serge Lifar, then director of the Paris Opera Ballet.

Electra was presented on October 22, and it took place on the expansive steps in front of the School of Law and Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires. Due to its neoclassical style, the front area of the building was used as scenography (see Photo 1).

This picture reinforced two messages: the audience could imagine entering into spaces traditionally restricted for educated elite classes that the University represents, and the space of classical Europeanist culture—represented by the play (Gené 1997, 189). Therefore, the performance had at least two effects that embodied Peronist ideology. Firstly, it engaged a mass public with signifiers of high culture such as classical literature and ballet in a play with a cast of popular actors whom the audience already knew. Secondly, the event represented

a symbolic occupation of the city, with working class audiences accessing an academic place and privileged neighborhood that was normally out of reach for the populist classes. It was an act of “democratization of intellect and spirit” (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950a, 6) considering that “Culture is[was] no longer a privilege” (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950d, 5).⁶ Here, culture operated as a marker of bourgeois attainability, something the populist government sought to undo.

There exists no comprehensive information about how the dance pieces in *Electra* were performed. There is only one photograph available (see Photo 1) of a dance that shows the chorus performed by the *corps de ballet*, in which the dancers’ posture recalls Nijinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*. The titles are suggestive, invoking an abstract subject like “Dawn.” For example, the Sunrise scene was described by the newspapers as a rhythmic dance, while the mythological characters known as the Furies call to mind the irrational, tempestuous entities from other classical works of literature and ballet. In the Aeschylus tragedies *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*, the Furies constitute the dark past. They represent vengeance and retribution against human crimes against the natural order. The Furies are described as horrifying and nasty. In this sense, Furies were catalyzed to represent the dark past that changed with Peronism and the creation of a New Argentina based on social justice through the intervention of a Welfare State. Nevertheless, the use of dance to represent this could work against possible Peronist “indoctrination” as Plotkin (2007) suggests, allowing potential secondary interpretations by the audience/consumers. They could have easily read other meanings into the presence of the Furies, yet I want to stress that the use of Furies to represent Peronist social changes might not have reinforced Perón as a leader or Peronism as a “regime,” as Gené (1997) describes in her analysis of the play and the October 17, 1950 celebrations.

That Serge Lifar was the choreographer of this piece is of significance here. Lifar came to Argentina for the second time in 1950 as director of the Paris Opera Ballet, presenting *Phaedra* (1950) and *Icarus* (1935) making a great impact on the local art field. Perhaps, the dances performed in *Electra* might have had a similar style of movement to that of those plays which were created according to Lifar’s *Manifeste du chorégraphe*.⁷ His use of an all male ensemble to perform as The Furies stemmed from his development of the male dancer’s roles during his tenure at Les Ballets Russes. Given his success with performances about Greek mythology, the government chose him to

choreograph *Electra*, but as Lifar stated in the local press, he had to actually audition for the position. However, his sympathy for Perón’s government and his international fame made him a good candidate. During Lifar’s first visit to Argentina in 1934, he had a negative impression about local dancers and the status of dance in the country, which he attributed to politicians (Lifar 1987). Nevertheless, in 1950 he said to the press that he found Argentina socially transformed, with people showing “the joy of living” (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950b; 1950c). He emphasized the labor of Juan and Eva Perón and highlighted the “spiritual and intellectual” atmosphere among the Argentine audience. Moreover, in his second visit, the Paris Opera Ballet performed for the labor unions at the Colón (see Photo 2), and for the students at the República de los Niños.⁸ Additionally, the company visited various social aid institutions of the Eva Perón Foundation.

Lifar wrote: “Dance is no longer the patrimony of a selected class or of a ‘dilettante’ audience, as it used to be. Due to its universal language, it has become an essentially popular art (...) Thus (...) it became a magnificent medium to know and love at home” (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950b, 24). Lifar’s statement demonstrated his interpretation of a Peronist understanding of culture where the debate around elite and popular culture and the negotiations that were part of this debate during Perón’s first term materialized through *Electra*. That these reified cultural divisions between “high” or “popular” or “low” art were not completely deconstructed through the government’s discourse (or its appropriation of ballet) does not discount the fact that dance (regardless of its origins or style) serves as a powerful tool for enacting popular and populist sentiments.

Notes

1. While being in charge of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Perón achieved unprecedented improvements in the legal and social conditions of workers such as the creation of labor courts, paid vacations, Christmas bonus, and maternity leave.
2. *Electra*’s libretto by Marechal remains unknown, but it is possible to imagine that the play recalls relationship with his next adaptation of a Greek tragedy, *Antígona Vélez*, premiered on May 25, 1951. This play was requested by the government, and it merged the classical Greek tragedy with a religious dimension, and the nativist genre. Thus, it allowed the author to create a play that was both national and universal (Leonardi 2009).

3. Iris Marga as Electra, Silvana Roth as Chrysothemis, Pedro Maratea as Orestes, José de Angelis as Aegisthus, Ángeles Martínez as Clytemnestra, Julio Renato as the Old Man, and Italo Sportelli.
4. Ballerinas were Juana Martini, Estela Deporte and Paula Svagel.
5. Dancers were Ciro Figueroa, Wasil Tupin, Enrique Lommi, Víctor Moreno, Antonio Truyol and José Neglia.
6. It must be pointed out that the newspaper *Noticias Gráficas* was at the moment a Peronist sympathizer newspaper. Nevertheless, the play was also praised by opposing press such as *La Nación* (1950) and *La Prensa* (1950).
7. The *Manifeste du chorégraphe* was written by Lifar with the objective of proclaiming a new aesthetic that defended the independence of dance from music. He stated that musicians “must compose in collaboration with the choreographer” (Lifar 1970, 132). As I mentioned above, the Sunrise scene was described as a rhythmic dance, and I described it as abstract. Likewise, Lifar explained that he produced *Icare* without music which “would gain in power of abstraction, and would prove moreover that the Dance is able if not to do without any accompaniment, to at least create for itself the one which suits in.” (1970, 134) That is why, Honegger “accepted to orchestrate the rhythms of *Icare* for an ensemble of percussion instruments” (134).
8. The Children Republic was opened on November 26, 1951 by Perón. It was planned in 1949 by Domingo Mercante, then governor of Buenos Aires. It is the first children’s theme park of America. It was founded with a double purpose: creative leisure in a fantasy world, and to learn to exercise the rights and obligations that citizens have in every democratic country.

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The Bomba Wiki Project: A Digital Batey

Jade Power-Sotomayor

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In the hours after Hurricane Maria tore across Puerto Rico—leaving a wreckage of land, house and body that would astound the world—Puerto Ricans on and off the island desperately scrambled to survive and piece together remote semblances of a pre-Maria, pre-September 20, 2017, island life. This had, of course, already been a life framed by colonialism and austerity, struggle and precarity, an ethos of “getting by” buoyed by a culture invested in quotidian sociality.¹ In the diaspora, the *bomba* community instantaneously jumped into action organizing fundraisers that first fateful Wednesday. On the island, it was within a week that evidence of organized community *bombazos* became known. *Bomba* is our oldest extant autochthonous Caribbean dance and music form.² Once driven underground by the island’s particular—though by no means original—brand of anti-black racism and later “rescued” by the folkloric stage, new generations of varied race and class backgrounds have recently re-popularized it. They look to *bomba* as a way to *be* and *do* Afro-Puerto Rican, or simply Puerto Rican or Diasporican. They use it to produce relationality, to suspend temporal demands on racialized and gendered laboring bodies, to corporeally connect to history, to disrupt and occupy space. In those first post-Maria days, while some *bomba* elders left their drums silently mourning, many others on the island and its diaspora (from Florida to New York, Chicago to the Bay Area, Seattle to San Diego) activated *bomba* as a site of gathering and lamenting, of cathartic release and

incantation, mobilizing it as a cultural product to amass the economic capital so needed.³ Because of this, the *Bomba* Wiki project I was working on suddenly took on a new meaning.

When my project partner, José I. Fusté, an Ethnic Studies scholar and *bomba* collaborator first proposed the idea, I was deeply skeptical and reticent.⁴ The *Bomba* Wiki would be an online platform to gather existing *bomba* knowledges into a public space where individuals could upload content, a place where various complementing and contradicting versions of history could co-exist. Attending to the absence of a *bomba* archive, it would cover a vast body of knowledge and key terms including instrumentation, names of rhythms, song lyrics, historically recognized practitioners, names of groups, descriptions of *bomba* on plantation society, the stage, in the 21st century *batey*, in the diaspora. It would have hyperlinks to names and places referenced in song lyrics (*barrios*, plantations, sugar mills, Boca Chica, La Verdaguer, La Recholaise, the American sugarmill superior known for attending *bombazos*, Mister Lowe). It would serve to map the forced and voluntary migratory movement of bodies across space. It would also be 100% bilingual, disrupting both currents of power that over-privilege US institutional knowledge-making, as well as those that dismiss Diasporicans as culturally impoverished Puerto Rican knock-offs. We could challenge the masculinist and racist nationalism through which

bomba has historically been framed and include a section describing the genres from other Caribbean islands with which *bomba* shares not just aspects of nomenclature but embodied vernacular. The wiki could credit composers of songs often popularly circulated without knowledge of their origin and the content would be largely written by non-academic knowledge holders. It would center and name the work of so many important women, queer folks, ghosted in official *bomba* histories. Yet, I was still ambivalent.

I thought about the fifteen years of embodied encounters and relationships through which my still relatively limited *bomba* knowledge had been gained. The trust established, the dancing, singing, drumming, eating and drinking framed and defined the learning, something that exceeded the actual information shared. I thought about the economic means these knowledges represented for people attending or hosting workshops. I reflected on how knowledges are both shared and hoarded, and on how much of the understanding comes through noting that which is not spoken. I considered the purpose and value of having slippery protocols for traditions that are orally and aurally maintained across centuries. For instance, *bomba* is framed unequivocally as having no “religious or spiritual” valences, but song lyrics chanted in ritual repetition speak of the *loas* of the Dominican-Puerto Rican vodun derivative, Sanse, and many *bomberxs* practice some variant of an Afro-Caribbean religion. I questioned the desire to centralize knowledge, catalogue, and enshrine for posterity, problematizing the need to preserve even while acknowledging that the politics of resisting erasure and forgetting are more urgent than ever. I acknowledged the dynamics of power in terms of light-skinned privilege, class, and geography that inevitably play out in such a project. I realized that I was missing embodiment and lived experience, that words on a page would only ever be that. The *batey*, the place of dancing, needed to somehow be present, not just described.

Dance, as *bomba*'s gravitational center, distinguishes it as a practice and has fundamentally driven the growth and popularity of the genre in recent years. It is the mechanics of the music-making dance that destabilize the long-time gendering of dance (female) and music-making (male) as dancers line up to become unprecedented aural and visual protagonists. Thus, *bomba* dancing needed to define the project in some substantial way.

What eventually convinced me was the value and necessity to organize and curate a section of videos that featured the scores of exceptional dancers (as well as singers and drummers). As a diasporic *bombera* I can attest to how developments in technology (YouTube, social media and most recently Facebook Live and Instagram stories) have played an important role in accenting and extending real-time embodied exchanges in the *batey*. They have been a conduit for studying and tracing movement vocabularies as well as for creating communal links across geographies, including the island's own municipalities. The videos would bring embodied knowledges into *bomba* history in a way that attended to naming the specifics of their contributions, granting these figures improvisational authorship while attempting to track the interconnected genealogies of movement styles. Identifying tags for each video would include: the name of the featured dancer, the rhythm being danced, the name of the song, the type of space (stage, *batey*), the use of skirt work or footwork (detaching gender identity from movement), the name of the particular regional style, and if appropriate, the names of teachers whose distinct techniques are emanated.

The global circulation of *bomba* videos on social media may lend themselves to fueling anything from cultural nationalism (tinged with both Afrocentrism and anti-blackness), to sincere appreciation, to fetishistic voyeurism. The fact that *bomba* dance is inoperative without being in direct conversation with drumming, generates a layer of protection from appropriative and extractive gestures. Notably, the increased digital presence of *bomba* has come at a time when folkloric stage groups structured around the choreographic presentation of various dance styles have been outnumbered by smaller musical ensembles playing in more communal *bombazo* settings. Thus, a concurrent replication and “stealing” of choreographies has been limited. Furthermore, without an understanding of *how* the steps fit into the rhythmic and musical dynamic, simple reproduction of steps will be just that: steps, not the dance practice. Indeed, upon arriving at a *bomba* event, it is not uncommon to “hear” the dancer before seeing them, and one is often able to surmise the quality of the dancing by how it “sounds,” its rhythmic complexity as articulated by the drumming.

In its most ideal formulation, the Bomba Wiki Project, a project now well underway, will be a digital *batey*. We envision this as a site that is as capacious of information as it is of *ways of relating* to information. We

aim for the wiki to mirror the protean, call and response nature of how *bomba* is practiced and how information circulates in the communal exchanges that surround it. It is important to us that this repository be grounded in the principles that have maintained *bomba* as a living tradition through the course of centuries, distinct colonizers, and now the accelerated depopulation of Puerto Rico. As new communities and generations become interested in learning *bomba* it will be increasingly important for their practice to be grounded in *bomba*'s deep history and to honor the many who have come before them. For those already practicing in the diaspora, the wiki becomes a way to crystallize their knowledge, their mental map of how and where bodies, land and story are linked.

The *Bomba* Wiki functions as a scholarly contribution and takes great steps to rectify the dearth of information publicly available. Yet, we are clear that this is an offering for *bomberxs*, for the people who have given and will give their hours and days and future generations to *bomba*, long after FEMA has left Puerto Rico, long after we are no longer a news story, long after debts have been charged and collected and bodies have been displaced again, and then again, and then again. We are going to need *bomba* both for how it connects us to each other and how it allows us to physically work through our joy, pain, and anger. The *Bomba* Wiki is just one more way of breathing life into its centuries-long refusal to disappear.

Notes

1. Puerto Rico is the longest continuously colonized territory in the world, first by Spain from 1493-1898 and by the US since 1898. Most recently, the 2016 "Promesa bill" has created an "emergency management" board appointed by the US Congress that effectively makes dramatic fiscal austerity decisions, dissolving local democracy along with whatever vestiges of autonomy granted the island through Puerto Rico's 1952 designation as a "Free Associated State."
2. The earliest mention of *bomba* in Puerto Rico dates back to the late 17th century recounting by a Puerto Rican privateer of humble origins. For more see Pablo Luis Rivera. 2013. "Orígenes culturales y desarrollo de la *bomba* puertorriqueña." PhD diss. Centro de Estudios Avanzados Puertorriqueños. Also see José Javier Peña Aguayo. 2015. "La *bomba* puertorriqueña en la cultura musical contemporánea." PhD diss. Universitat de Valencia.

3. See Jervis, Rick. "Puerto Rican musical family helps neighbors where federal aid lags after Maria." *USA Today*. November 9, 2017. Amarilyn Ríos, the island's leading female *bomba* percussionist, shared with me how in the weeks following the hurricane her drumming classes were fuller than ever before, even though she held classes in the dark. San Juan musician and cultural worker Tito Matos held free outdoor workshops for children unused to being "unplugged" from technology. Taller Kenuati, makers of artisanal *bomba* instruments on the West Coast similarly held workshops for children while parents waited in line for food, gasoline or other supplies.
4. See José I. Fusté "Repeating Islands of Debt: Historicizing the Transcolonial Relationality of Puerto Rico's Economic Crisis," *Radical History Review*, 128 (May 2017): 91-119. Also, "Unsettling Citizenship/Circumventing Sovereignty: Reexamining the Quandries of Contemporary Anticolonialism in the United States through Black Puerto Rican Antiracist Thought," *American Quarterly*, 6, 1 (March 2014): 161-69.

Women's Performativities and Gender Politics in hip hop and street dance cultures of Greece¹

Dr Natalia Koutsougera

This essay is excerpted from an article length manuscript that examines the amalgamation of hip hop and urban dance styles in formal and informal hip hop contexts in Greece and its implication for the challenging of dominant and normative hip hop discourses. The longer essay explores the ways hybrid and contested—as to whether they belong to hip hop—styles and choreographies have been coexisting with performances of “original” hip hop dance styles in hip hop events and competitions. Alongside its treatment of hip hop authenticity and dance styles’ interplay, the longer article discusses ethnographically how regulatory, puritan and sexist discourses inside and outside hip hop are challenged and destabilized through the provocative and contested dance and non-dance performances of two female hip hop/street dancers in Thessaloniki who frequently participate in all-styles competitions. These girls fuse hip hop with urban dance styles and queer the dominant norms of the Greek male breakdance scene, introducing new embodiments, imaginaries and subjectivities.

Competitive street dance femininities

Diana (with a defiant artistic name) and Denia (with a snug artistic name) are two female street dancers and close friends, specializing in different hip hop, street and urban dance styles in Thessaloniki? Diana and Denia belong to the same street crew. What inspired them

to participate in street and hip hop culture was the search for familial belonging, group adoration and authenticity, as well as alternative ways to view and experience their bodies, and their Greek and gender identities. They sought to distance themselves from the mainstream female models of Greek society. They both have strong black and non-western male and female role models from the global hip hop dance arena and, through traveling to competitions abroad, they seek to enhance their street dance capital (Bourdieu 2002, Thornton 1994) as well as share and exchange hip hop dance knowledge with other practitioners. They both began practicing as b-girls but pretty soon Denia focused on popping and Diana on waacking, voguing and house dance. Denia and Diana also teach these styles in various dance schools in Thessaloniki, Athens and other regions in Greece.

With their crew they mix different street and funk dance styles, mainly breaking, popping, locking, hip hop party dance, krumping, waacking, voguing, house dance and they experiment and interchange these different styles in their choreographies and compositions. Their crew consists of both men and women and is constantly changing its members. Still, Diana and Denia remain the most potent and permanent female figures. Separately, as a pair or with the crew, they participate in international, national and local hip hop and street dance competitions including all-styles battles, freestyle battles, street shows and street dance theater.



Photograph author's own.

Denia specializes in popping. Popping is a street dance and one of the original funk styles that started from California during the 1960s-1970s. It is based on the technique of quickly contracting and relaxing muscles to cause a jerk in the dancer's body referred to as a pop or a hit. Denia is often practicing with male poppers while, besides her main crew, she belongs to a breakdance crew where she performs both breakdance and popping. Denia chose popping because she considers it more real,

freestyle and authentic. For her, popping represents her "badass" and "crafty" personality. She moves like a "caterpillar" full of mystery and deceit, while her favorite movements derive from the *boogaloo* style that she combines with waving and the robot. She often fuses belly dance movements with the robust movements of popping, producing a more fluid, experimental and feminine result. Denia used to be very shy when she first started dancing but as years went by she became

more offensive and competitive and learned to transform her girlish appearance into one that exudes danger. She looks really frightening and explosive in battles and she ambushes her opponents each time she stares theatrically at her own elusive moves pretending to admire her body.

She usually wears tight or baggy jeans, college and plaid t-shirts or clothes adorned with little dolls or comics. The images she mimics incorporate her fantasies of favorite fairytales, space movies, cartoon characters and gang battles in the Bronx. As she says, her childish outfit and character help her to deal with the boys especially during training, because she doesn't want to be treated as a sexual object but as an equal combatant. B-boys and male poppers also infantilize her so they won't feel very threatened by a wild sexuality. They usually call her "daughter" or "sister." This purposeful infantilization on Denia's part does not deter how some male breakers still see her as a "man" in the battle. Denia is always feeling that she has to prove her worth to the boys and earn their respect. A significant amount of b-boys respect Denia mainly because she practices popping which is considered an authentic hip hop dance style and because they feel she represents hip hop culture in a respectful way. However, despite declared equality and conditional recognition, some boys don't hesitate to exclude her from significant battles or prominent positions as a competition judge. Denia is always very disappointed by their ambivalence and irritability and most of all by their aggressiveness and exclusion, especially when she is not conforming to male uniformity and the malestream. As a consequence, her gender performativity is always relational. As she states: "boys' ambivalence instigates the ambivalence in my gender practice and attitude." Over the years she has developed coping strategies and avoids particular cliques.

In contrast, Diana practices waacking, voguing and house dance.³ These are highly contested dance forms in Greece's hip hop communities because their historical and geographical relationship to the New York origin narratives of hip hop destabilize particular beliefs. Waacking was born in the West Coast of the United States in the early 1970s and featured on the syndicated TV music show, *Soul Train* as one of the main dance styles represented on television. This dance was created by members of the Black and Spanish gay communities who danced to disco music at clubs of Los Angeles. Waacking consists of intense arm moves, typically in a movement of the arms over and behind

the shoulder. It is very popular nowadays among cisgender female street dancers, and queer people of color (Bragin 2014). Waacking expresses a hegemonic femininity (Bragin 2014) which in many ways is in juxtaposition to the hegemonic masculinity of breakdance. And, in the case of Diana we are talking about a performance of hegemonic femininity that is marginalized and unwanted inside Greek hip hop. As Diana claims, waacking and voguing help her to play out her aggressive, unconventional and dangerous femininity and find a balance between the "masculine" and the "feminine."⁴ It is really outstanding how easily she manages to jump from a femme-fatale posture and dress code to an exaggerated "masculine" or gender fluid attitude to a rough freestyle hip hop and house moves to sexy stylized and carefully placed or rigid waacking and vogue poses. Hence, Diana, by self-identifying as a hip hop dancer, which symbolically privileges masculinity in Greece, and by jumping very easily from dance styles not considered "masculine enough" which she performs in a hyperfeminine way, betrays the heteropatriarchal axioms of hip hop. She exposes the citational and illusionary status of gender norms inside hip hop.

Diana, in deference to the Greek warrior goddess, states that when she dances she feels she wants to punish those who deserve it. Her strong and quick arm movements and her painful-like facial expressions reveal her sublime affects as "jouissance" as an enjoyment in Lacanian terms "that extends beyond pleasure into pain...as pleasurable pain" (Blanco Borelli 2014: 169). She usually wears caftans, or colorful clothes, especially in house dance, that signify African spirituality or Muslim elements, or large t-shirts with black tights, especially when she wants to place emphasis on freestyle. Sometimes her dress style is very feminine and other times "very street style," as she proudly claims.

With her ambivalent, sometimes androgynous attitude, changeable style and volatile gender performativity in everyday life and street dance competitions she puzzles the male hip hop community. In her opinion, many b-boys and hip hop dancers are misogynists who are trying to intimidate her and cause trouble. As Denia says, "Diana is marginalized not just because she is doing a style that is contested but principally because this style is feminine." According to Diana, boys feel very uncomfortable, even threatened, with the performance of a wild or dangerous femininity riddled with masculine attributes instead of something that they recognize and are used to: a conventional

masculine (tomboy) or feminine performance (girly) from a b-girl/hip hop dancer. She concludes that male hip hop dancers dislike girls fusing and confusing gender dichotomies.

She believes that through her dance, whether it is waacking, house, hip hop, breaking or other, she celebrates female power in a peaceful way according to hip hop principles. Her ability to be flexible and adaptable to female and masculine positionalities and imaginaries constitutes her notion of the “right” woman and “right” femininity and can be translated as an alternative fiction about female subjectivity.⁵ Diana seems fearless. Although difficulties exist that complicate her ability to earn respect from male breakers, she celebrates being the “freak” (as she is often called) of the breakdance community. She insists that she belongs to hip hop culture because voguing, house dance and waacking, like their predecessor hip hop, emerged from marginalized communities, were performed in the same spaces, they have common ground in their kinesiology and ethical motives and are still adopted by hip hop dancers globally. For Diana, there is an ethos to belonging to hip hop culture that extends beyond practicing the dance. It is demonstrated through the respect you give and receive, the impartial way you treat others, your modest lifestyle and your open mindedness. As she proudly says “it ain’t where you are from but where you are at.”

Her interpretation of this phrase places the individual in a condition of constant orientation.⁶ And the same thing reflects on the dance styles themselves. Historical origins of each style according to Diana should be respected, however the combination of different styles in varying hip hop contexts is not prohibitive. In her words: “You have to know where each street style comes from and stand but at the same time accept that hip hop is evolving moment by moment.” Both Diana and Denia believe that Greek hip hop dancers should move beyond traditional and normative hip hop dance discourses which privilege only breakdance. “Careful” and “respectful” fusion of street dance styles is creative and this is what their crew and the two girls insist that they practice. For them, hip hop and street mentality is about being honest to the practice by representing its street ethos in everyday environments.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s analysis (1990), Denia and Diana’s performances of gender render the Greek discourses of authenticity in street/hip hop dance performance and style as vulnerable, fluid and contested. Individual authenticity is negotiated and renegotiated through constant and repetitive performativity. Denia seems to be

trying to subvert dominant norms while still occupying them; Diana is trying to subvert them through strategic rejection (Salih 2004). In both cases, but indicatively in Diana’s practices, we can recognize an agonistic politics “making room for dissent and dis-identification vis-à-vis the sedimented power structures that have authorized the norms of identification, articulation and belonging” (Athanasidou 2017: 41) in Greek hip hop.⁷

In these terms, the two girls’ agonism is “beyond active versus passive” (Athanasidou 2017: 311). Irrespective of whether Denia is more vulnerable to men’s criticism – and seemingly more bound to her resistant practices – or Diana is less susceptible thus able to be more confrontational and enjoy more creative freedom, they both try to strike the balance between normative gender discourses, intercultural exchange within hip hop, and feminist approaches. In other words they construct “elastic femininities” referring to “identities that contain open feminist claims together with traditional feminine features” (Trajtenberg 2016: 171).⁸

Through the two girls’ performances, a destabilizing and queering of hip hop is taking place in the sense of a production of non-heteronormative subjectivities that reveal the gaps of a heteronormative hip hop system.⁹ These queering processes stem from the performances of two cisgender women who go against established hip hop ontologies and authenticities. Especially the interpellation of the “freak” ascribed to Diana’s personality reflects paradoxical, monstrous and ambivalent qualities and outlines anti-conforming and non-normative subjectivities as well as countercultural politics in comparison to other denominations such as “inferior women,” “little men,” or “tomboys.” As José Estéban Muñoz (2001: 434) mentions in his essay on gesture, ephemera and queer feeling in the performance of voguing:

His gender freakiness speaks to the audiences that surround him. His is an amplified and queer body, a body in motion that rapidly deploys the signs, the gestures, of queer communication, survival and self-making.

Following this lead, one could say that this cisgenderness as intervention and queering is both exceptional in a Greek context and common in a translocal one. As many anthropologists have shown (Faubion 1993, Cowan 1990, Papagaroufali 1992, Kirtsoglou 2004, Koutsougera 2013), feminism in Greece is more a reformist (rather

than revolutionary) movement and it is not always “self-evident how feminist discourses are incorporated into various local narratives” (Kirtsoglou 2004: 160). As these contemporary Greek ethnographies indicate women seem to strive for recognition and visibility, between contradictions, resistances and accommodations through antagonistic, “egoistic” and competitive expressions.

Diana and Denia’s performances signify that hip hop as a lived experience and area of study constitutes an open-ended field of performativities, potentialities, re-institutionalisations and belongings—an agonistic battlefield of political dissidence which goes beyond gendered stereotypes and culturally constructed ontologies.

Notes

1. The term performativity as extensively used in Judith Butler’s work (1990) as repetitive stylistic performance in a framework of heteronormativity, seems ideal for the analysis of hip hop and street dance subjectivities. Gender identity in hip hop and street dance, in a similar vein to the construction of gender identity in Butler’s theory, is established through ritually stylized bodily procedures which leave open-ended potentialities of gendered subversion and reinvention among hegemonic discourses and landscapes of recognition. Notwithstanding the importance of the concepts of performance and performativity in street and hip hop dance cultures, the analytical asset of choreography (Foster 1998) is also a useful tool for the anthropological study of gender as performance and as a finitude of experience in street dance, bridging and challenging at the same time verbal and non-verbal narratives. Choreography as meaning through metaphor is fundamentally poetic and allows dancing bodies to be understood as more than they appear to be (McCarren 2013: xxxiii).
2. Diana and Denia are pseudonyms. Artistic names are usually called street names and they describe the personality of the hip hop/street practitioner or they refer to personal trajectories in the everyday (street) life. Breakdance was the first hip hop dance style introduced in Greece during the 1980s and is mainly male-dominated (as is popping). The majority of young girls – coming from working class, lower middle class, even middle class backgrounds – experiment with other street and hip hop styles such as new style hip hop, hip hop party dance and other funk, disco, house and club dance styles such as waacking, voguing, dancehall, house dance etc., all of which fall under the term “urban.” Undoubtedly, male breakers are those who hold the reins of power and recognition in street cultures as institutional forms.
3. Waacking is often compared to locking, which is considered an authentic hip hop dance style, due to its esthetic, groove and musical similarities. Voguing evolved out of the Harlem ballroom culture during the 1960s and was established as a community through the institution of “Vogue Houses” where homosexual dancers lived together and developed familial relationships (Jackson 2002, Bailey 2016). Voguing consists of feminine poses, graceful, rigid and fluid actions allocated in mainly three distinct styles: old way, new way and vogue fem. House dance is a social dance primarily danced to house music played in the clubs of Chicago and New York during the 1990s. It is highly improvised and emphasizes fast and complex footworks combined with fluid movements of the torso. It also emits gender neutrality. The first house dancers were hip hop dancers.
4. Female dangerousness is a common topic of exploration in cultural and anthropological studies of modern Greece (Campbell 1974, Du Boulay 1974, Herzfeld 1986, Cowan 1990, Koutsougera 2012, 2013, Papagaroufali 1992, Gefou-Madianou 1992, Spyridaki 1996 and Koutsougera 2018). Women’s dangerousness is usually related to the evil and Eve (Campbell 1974, Du Boulay 1974) while the practices of a “dangerous” women in Greek culture are seen as problematic and competitive (Cowan 1990, Kirtsoglou 2004, Koutsougera 2012, 2013). Women’s aggressiveness and guile are also related to Turkishness and a Romeic side of Greek identity (Herzfeld 1986).
5. Here adopting Maria Pini’s (2001: 160) analysis on club cultures and female subjectivities I use the analytical category of alternative images of subjectivity. Pini following the work of Irigaray and Derrida explores female dance subjectivities in night clubbing as formulations of alternative fictions about female subjectivities while both raving and “the Dance” comes to involve a movement beyond fixity, coherence, rationality and phallogocentrism.
6. “It ain’t where you are from it’s where you’re at” is a rhyme coming from the song of Rakim “In the Ghetto” referring to a deterritorialized hip hop subjectivity. In a phenomenological

interpretation (Csordas 1994: 5) hip hop and street subjectivity is neither essence nor unity but an indefinite ability of the subject to orient herself/himself in the world through a never ending impulsion for performativity, reinvention and self-reflection (Koutsougera 2019). Dancing hip hop is a complex bodily poetics, “both an abstraction and concrete physical appearance” (McCarren 2013: 85) that signifies simultaneously identity and disidentification, location and dislocation.

7. Athena Athanasiou (2017) exploring female mourning in the politics of the transnational feminist and antimilitaristic movement *Women in Black* expands Chantal Mouffe’s (Marxist) perspective on agonism against deliberative liberal paradigms of democracy as a negotiation between interests and consensual resolution of conflicts. In Athanasiou’s contribution, in a Foucauldian reading of agonism as constant strategic open-ended challenging instead of momentary frontal collision, female mourning emerges as an open-ended agonistic contestation at the very level of the established matrix of intelligibility.
8. The two dancers verbally position themselves as females, orient their practices as feminine and construct their identities through the notion of femininity in juxtaposition to masculinity. Even so, they experience their femininities in more gender neutral and ambivalent ways as expressed in both male and female representations. Their “elastic femininities” are relational in the sense that both feminist and traditional features are draught in relation to specific contexts. For instance, traditional gender dichotomies (wild nature of men versus sweet nature of women) or gender equalities are employed in specific moments and circumstances for their own profit, usually for the empowerment of their identities as “right” women.
9. The term queering refers to a process from a queer position, “from a position of difference and resistance to the hegemonic and normative ideologies of gender and sexuality but in general to everything normal, legitimate or hegemonic” (Yannakopoulos 2006: 32). Bragin (2014) is also referring to the queering of hip hop from waacking practices. Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón (2018) following Halberstam (1998) conceptualizes graffiti subculture through paradigms such as queer time and queer space. The kind of queering elaborated in this article is not referring to a present temporality and corporeality but in a futurity, potentiality

and contingency of possibilities, and to a wide spectrum of feminist figurations of nomadic subjects (Braidotti 1994). It refers to processes of “disidentification” (Muñoz 1999), “identities in difference”, working “for and against the system”. After all, urban and hip hop dances, is a poetics that moves beyond physical resemblance that gets beyond the bounded physical body (McCarren 2013: xxxiii).

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(Re)making difference: danced encounters in a northern barrio of Quito, Ecuador

Sofie Narbed

Our bodies lie relaxed against the floor, eyes shut, as Tamia's voice guides our attention: "Breathe, notice the natural movement of your stomach, your ribs." Hands rest comfortably on hip bones. "We're going to begin exploring - what's going to be the rhythm, the dance, of your pelvis?" Sitting now, feet square on the floor, we imagine lines running from legs to hips, moving our knees inwards and outwards. We feel our sitting bones against the floor and the hips' changing position with the rounding, straightening, and arching of our spines. After a break, we begin again. This time Luzmila leads in the Afro-Ecuadorian dance *la bomba Choteña*. The class watches as she moves in small steps, feet skimming lightly across the wooden floor, touching forwards and back, forwards and back. "*Uno, dos, uno, dos*. In Chota, in the times of slavery, *los Afros* couldn't go further than this little step because they walked in chains." As we practise, Luzmila describes the dance in its social form—how dancers nudge and drive each other through the space in playful challenge until one pins the other against the wall or bounces them to the floor. In lines we face each other, calls encouraging us to let our hips and shoulders move with our steps. "Hips, hips, free the hips! Allow the music to reach you here", she calls, touching her heart, "so that you dance with swing!"¹

Between November 2013 and June 2014 I organised, in collaboration with dance colleagues, a series of exchanges between contemporary dance and popular Afro-Ecuadorian dance in the northern

neighbourhood of Carapungo in Ecuador's capital city, Quito. I had been shuttling between the two practices over the course of a year, attending contemporary classes in spaces in the city centre and classes of Afro-Ecuadorian *bomba* in Carapungo's *Centro de Desarrollo Comunitario* (Centre for Community Development) on the northern outskirts of the city. These were practices that occupied distinct spaces and imaginaries in Quito—in terms of where practitioners generally rehearsed and performed, as well as the wider social and political geographies of their practice. Central to this were questions of race—one a predominantly white-*mestizo* practice, the other predominantly Afro-Ecuadorian—and those of class that accompanied dance's framing as a 'popular' or 'arts' practice. Emerging through conversations with dancers in both places, the exchange aimed to create a space of dialogue between the two forms; dialogues that were focused not on 'fusion' or 'mixing' but rather on an exchange of distinct danced knowledges. Many modes of conversation emerged in these danced encounters—in approaches to the body and performance, in creative process, in ideas of the popular and the contemporary, in generational dynamics.² Exchange became an interdisciplinary space (Ranganathan and Loquet 2009) where tensions and fissures—"the seams that do not come together" (Chatterjea 2013)—emerged alongside processes of adjustment and translation that sought to negotiate 'the cracks between realities' (Anzaldúa 2015) for these two dance(d) worlds. As a white European researcher, my own position within these dialogues (as organiser, as participant) was also subject

to negotiation. For the purposes of this short piece, I'd like to focus on the cultivation of bodily knowledge as a key mode of dialogue in these danced relations. Specifically, I consider the *bomba* and its relations to its contemporary dance 'other' to explore the ways danced encounter not only reveals intimate interrelations between the political and the corporeal, but also becomes the active grounds for setting the terms of the conversation.

The *bomba* is a popular Afro-Ecuadorian dance associated with the Valle del Chota-Mira, a semi-arid valley lying north of the capital in Imbabura province. In Quito, its practice has diversified from a social form of challenge and flirtation³ to become part of a contested politics of racial-ethnic, national, and urban belongings. In a city where colonial structures of subjugation continue to structure opportunity and possibility for many Afro-Ecuadorians, and where 'Andean' and 'Quiteño' imaginaries rarely intersect with blackness, its practice has become particularly key to making spaces of *afroecuatorianidad* (a collective sense of Afro-Ecuadorian subjectivity). In this piece, I want to think about how we might understand such enunciations not in isolation but through the living dialogues of danced encounter. Geographers have written about encounter as a mode of everyday relation that does not simply negotiate but actively makes and remakes 'difference' (Wilson 2017). In the case of the Carapungo exchange, then: How might the communication of bodily knowledge (re)produce particular lines of difference? How might danced encounter become the grounds for their translation, complication, or renegotiation? And, in a context where Afro-Ecuadorians are often subject to multiple marginalisations, what potential might these conversations hold for decolonial moves?

We might begin with dance as a relational practice. As feet shifted, legs extended, hips pulsed, and spines stretched in the exchange, dancing bodies and their movement came to be relationally defined in ways that saw wider social discourses folded in to the dance and, at times, worked to reiterate particular essentialised imaginaries of difference. Luzmila, leader of the *bomba* classes, describes her dream of "*Afros jumping and rolling on the floor with long flowing skirts in the plaza*"; Afro-Ecuadorian dancers request exercises to condition their bodies for the splits. A contemporary dancer describes feeling "*like I was made of wood!*" on encounter with Afro-Ecuadorian practice; others describe the dance as connecting them with 'soul', emotion, and an essential self. For one dancer: "*What it leaves me thinking is that we don't know our bodies. We 'skill' the body, we specialise the*

body, but that primordial element that moves you inside, we've lost that... This is like giving the body back to us, you know?'" In this way, encounter saw participants make sense of their danced experiences through binary discourses of the 'skilled' and the 'natural' that echoed wider racialised imaginaries: a predominantly white-*mestizo* practice becomes associated with 'skill' and 'technique', while Afro-Ecuadorian practice is understood as the domain of 'essence', the 'primordial', and 'natural' movement. Such distinctions also resonated in the ways dancers were categorised. Luzmila describes *bomba* dancers, for example, as "*bailadores not bailarines*" ('dance-makers' rather than 'dancers') as ideas of natural skill and social practice are contrasted against those of contemporary dance's formalised training and 'professional' performance. Encounter thus made difference in ways that related not only to common racialised imaginaries of bodies and their movement but also specific marginalisations shaping danced worlds in Quito, where the formalised training of contemporary dance schools and national companies typically takes place in spaces that, as *bomba* leader Luzmila expressed, "*do not correspond to us.*"

While encounter saw the reiteration of essentialised imaginaries at times, it also offered opportunities to set the terms of 'difference'. In *bomba* class, the communication of bodily knowledge became the grounds for forging particular imaginations of blackness. As Luzmila moves, she narrates danced connections to Chota as a rural 'homeland' and centre of specific Afro-Ecuadorian histories: small, grounded steps and a bowed torso embody the colonial realities of slavery on Choteño sugar cane plantations; a bottle balanced on stilled head relates an everyday practice from the valley. Beyond local geographies such moves, we are told, also enunciate a pan-African bodily heritage and 'way of doing': "*Because we are Africans in Ecuador.*" We learn to steady the bottle's weight, isolating the head from a moving torso; to ground the feet and connect their shifting step to the hips' lateral pulse. This careful communication also works to cultivate danced movement beyond the exaggerated moves of hips and buttocks articulated in popular racialised stereotypes of blackness. Encounter here becomes the basis for the embodying and reconfiguring of 'difference' along particular lines; distinctions that, in their communication through ideas of *lo nuestro* ('what is ours'), are owned as living heritage and as expressions of a politicised Afro-Ecuadorian subjectivity. These become part of forging a particular kind of space in a *mestizo*-dominant city and also, here, set the basis for dialogue with the 'other'.



Exploring pelvic movement in a contemporary class with Tamia Guayasamin. Photograph author's own.

Encounter was not just about making and remaking difference, but also about blurring and bridging these imaginaries through practice. Bodily knowledges were thus not only articulated as distinct but, also, as shared: "*Contemporary dance is part of us, you know? It's in us*", Luzmila tells me, "*Afros have the extensions that they talk about, the flexibilities... they're already there*". While seen as 'not belonging' to Afro-Ecuadorians in terms of the geographies of its practice in Quito, then, corporeal qualities and ways of doing associated with contemporary dance were articulated in ways that contested their exclusivity to the 'other'. Conversations between bodily knowledges were also actively constructed in the ways artists arranged to focus their classes. Contemporary classes bring attention to the hips. Pelvises roll and tilt against the floor, heads bend with forward scoops of the coccyx.

"How does my pelvis move?"

Bomba classes remind us of our contemporary work on balance before we reach for tall plastic bottles and place them slowly on our heads.

"Well, this is a real work of balance!"

Corporeal work not only resonates across 'difference' in this way but, at times, also comes to be reframed. Work on posture through heightened awareness of the spine and its connection to the feet in the contemporary class, for example, comes to be about a sense of racial-ethnic pride in the *bomba* session. We stand, backs erect, hands gathered in fists on our hips, chins lifted.

"Remember your work on posture with Tamia. This is elegance, respect, pride in our culture and in being Afro."

These translations and migrations of bodily knowledge did also, however, involve the negotiation of expectations and, over the course of the exchange, class material morphed. *Bomba* classes moved from directed choreography to put the choreographic process in participants' hands, learned knowledges of Chota coming into conversation with young generations' novel takes on traditional moves. Contemporary classes, having begun in corporeal exploration, were adjusted to include taught phrases and exercises for the splits. In this, then, danced encounter becomes an intercultural negotiation shaped not only by concerns for reiterating, challenging, or reconfiguring ideas of difference but also for forging dialogues in the ambiguous space between expectations and danced realities.

Attention to danced encounter makes clear the relational construction of 'difference' and its active making and remaking through practice. Thinking through these bodily conversations also allows us to recognise these constructions as fluid, ambiguous, and emergent, while remaining conscious of the societal structures, discourses, and imaginaries that fold into their practice and shape people's experiences of the city. In the exchange, the communication and experience of danced knowledge became the grounds for articulating, embodying, and renegotiating particular experiences of 'difference'. Such negotiations were shaped by the uneven terrain on which exchange took place; concerns that, in the organisation of the exchange, extended beyond bodily knowledge to the wider spatialities of their practice in Quito. In preparatory conversations, this saw Afro-Ecuadorian dance leaders move to hold the sessions in Carapungo, a *barrio popular* on Quito's northern periphery. As one leader told me: "*It's like a reversal [of power]...we don't go where people call us.*" From the beginning, then, the exchange was shaped by concerns over the coloniality of power as it mapped onto the social and professional relations between the two dance(d) worlds, shaping conversations around location and scheduling, class order and content, poster makeup and event promotion. While there is no space to elaborate upon these issues here, they reveal danced encounter as a way to think not only about the intimate interrelations between the political and the corporeal, but also about how the bodily making and remaking of these relations might resonate beyond the moment of the dance to push at, and perhaps transform, wider geographies. In this way, danced encounter comes to be not only about dialogic spaces of 'difference' but also about the opening and enacting of spaces of decolonial possibility in Ecuador.

Bibliography

1. This description is based on my fieldnotes, film materials, and memories from a contemporary class with Tamia Guayasamin and *bomba* class with Luzmila Bolaños during the exchange in Carapungo's Centro de Desarrollo Comunitario on 4th May 2014. All translations from speech are my own. The exchange had several iterations that also involved the collaboration of Tatiana Valencia, Segundo Mosquera with dancers and musicians from Fundación Afroecuatoriana Casa Ochún, and Kléver Viera with Petra Ploog and dancers from the Taller Permanente de Experimentación Escénica. Quotes presented here are taken from various preparatory conversations and exchange sessions.



Learning the *bomba* with Luzmila Bolaños in Carapungo's *Centro de Desarrollo Comunitario*. Photograph author's own.

2. See Narbed 2016 for further discussion of the exchange.
3. See María Gabriela López Yanez 2013 for more on *bomba* as a social practice.

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Collegiality and the Crew: Fixing ‘Broken Britain’ through Ashley Banjo's Big Town Dance (2014)

Laura Robinson

In 2014, Sky1 aired a six programme television series titled *Ashley Banjo's Big Town Dance (BTD)*.¹ Ashley Banjo and his Street dance crew ‘Diversity’, made famous in the U.K. from their 2009 win on *Britain's Got Talent*, took on the mission to bring community spirit back to the market town of Stockton on Tees in the North-East of England.² Filmed over two months, their effort would result in the creation of a five thousand strong crew who would perform a mass Street dance choreography in the main market square.

Made up of six episodes, the first five programmes follow a similar format: Banjo and his crew try to drum up support across the town of Stockton for the *BTD*, focusing on a different demographic of the population in each episode. Drawing across age, gender, and dance ability, these groupings include the public services crew, the education sector crew, the business crew, the entertainment and leisure crew, and finally, the retired, the unemployed and the stay at home mums crew. Each programme features an audition where residents can show off their moves, early rehearsals where Banjo tests their ability to pick up choreography, interviews with individuals about their personal journey, and the final staged performance where the audience are ‘blown away’ by the performance and are willing to be part of the main final event. In every episode, each crew succeeds in their task of inspiring the population of Stockton to become involved in the *BTD*, and the final episode charts the coming together of an entire town through street dance choreography.

Drawing upon cultural and political theorist Jeremy Gilbert's theorisations of collectivity within the U.K.'s neoliberal political climate,³ as well as post-capitalist theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of biopolitical labour (2004), this screendance analysis questions the extent to which mediated hip hop dance operates as transformative in *BTD*.⁴ What occurs when performances of collective joy and community togetherness feed into the capitalist system they aim to disarm? Rather than the terms collectivity or community, this study therefore explores the concept of corporate collegiality in the mediation and appropriation of hip hop dance.

‘A Broke Town’

Politically, the television programme frames the North-East town of Stockton on Tees as having lost its way, but never directly elaborates on the economic climate. Interviews with *BTD* participants reveal that, ‘Stockton's lost itself, Stockton used to be an absolutely amazing place to be it was full of nightlife, it was full of lovely pubs, and it died’.⁵ Another participant describes it as a ‘broke town’⁶ while an elderly gentleman states, ‘Stockton, to me, it was a beautiful place, now it's all gone it's just a concrete carbuncle, and it's just dying’.⁷ During the twentieth century, the town's major industries of ship building, heavy engineering, and steel and chemicals manufacturing declined

dramatically, along with that of the surrounding Teesside area during the economic recession between 2008-2013. This left six thousand people unemployed with little employment prospects.

Interestingly, at the same time of filming the feel-good light entertainment of Banjo's *Big Town Dance*, U.K broadcaster Channel 4 had begun filming the second series of *Benefit's Street* in Stockton; the controversial and divisive documentary where film makers capture the lives of the residents of one street who rely on government benefits to survive.⁸ The 2014 airing of *BTD* also comes towards to end of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, where Prime Minister David Cameron launched his flagship policy of the 'Big Society': a policy described by Jeremy Gilbert as 'a vague and little-understood appeal to the ideal of voluntary self-organisation' building a 'big society' that would take power away from politicians and give it to people.⁹ The unspoken reference to the fraught political and economic climate allows the mass crew construction to operate in the cosiness of light entertainment, whilst at the same time drawing from established mediated narratives of community power and Hip-Hop dance.

Despite the inclusive title of Banjo's Crew, the televised aerial images of hundreds of dancing bodies in the final *BTD* reveals the overwhelming whiteness of the population of Stockton. Other than a few Black participants that producers highlight within individual interviews and filmed crew segments, the programme inadvertently showcases the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the community of Stockton. The appropriation of black dance forms as a device to bring this majority white community together is therefore a problematic concept, which is echoed in the town's xenophobic views on immigration as demonstrated through the Brexit media coverage in 2016.¹⁰ Consequently, racialised and economic politics intersect within the commercialised construction of community togetherness.

Hip hop dance as a vehicle for social change

In every episode of *BTD*, the television programme constructs the narrative that, through teamwork and renewed community spirit, the population of Stockton has been brought back together through Street dance. In his genealogy of Hip Hop films, Thomas DeFrantz states that 'productions championed the Hollywood narrative model of upward mobility, the exploration of cultural exchange through different dance

styles, and the "underdog rising up against corporate greed"¹¹ These established tropes of Hip hop dance enabling social change can be witnessed in contemporary manifestations of the early b-boy films, such as the film *Step Up Revolution*, whose narrative centres around a local community fighting against urban development.¹² This politics of cooperation emerges through the shared labour of the performance and, via rehearsal, repetition and improvement, dancers achieve a collective synchronization in striving to construct a shared vision. Like cogs in a machine, each crew member is vital in creating the overall choreographic effect, with the group format placing emphasis on no single dancer, achieving the visually arresting images through collaboration, cooperation, and power in numbers. These 'connective marginalities', as noted by Halifu Osumare, allow young people who engage in Hip Hop dance practices to allow the construction of individuality whilst connected to a shared global practice.¹³

In the mediaspace of film and television, however, these connectivities are re-presented and glossed, with an emphasis on spectacle and virtuosic excess. Banjo employs the connective power achieved through black expressive culture, but applies it to the majority white population of Stockton to forge the illusion of togetherness. The origins of such Hip Hop collectively with its ethnically diverse global communities, however, remains invisible within the neat entertainment format of the programme, and producers appear ignorant of the racialised politics at play. With regards to the transformative possibilities of the choreography, DeFrantz notes in his edited anthology, *'Black Performance Theory'*, that dancers cannot achieve social mobility within mediated contexts due to the emphasis on 'predictable, predetermined achievement'.¹⁴ As such, the emphasis on repetition and regurgitated choreography mutes Hip hop dancers' ability to be perceived as transformative due to their framing as commercial product.

Such observations therefore raise the question that, in the heightened and constructed format of the television programme, can these images of coalition, constructed through the usurped format of the street dance crew, result in any real social change for the population of Stockton within the U.K. neoliberal political climate?

Neoliberalism and collectivity

Gilbert describes neoliberalism as advocating 'a programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens'.¹⁵ Demonstrated through the U.K.'s political eras of Thatcherism, New Labour, and the Coalition government, and spurred on by mounting state debt and the British financial crisis in 2007, the neoliberal agenda results in mass privatisation and the continued emphasis on competitive relations in the public and commercial sectors.

As a consequence to neoliberalism, the resulting rise in economic deprivation and urban development equals feelings of isolation and a breakdown of community, emphasising that essentially all relationships must be profitable. The role of community within this climate is reduced to individuals struggling against one another 'in conditions where competition is artificially imposed, and collaboration is actively repressed'.¹⁶ All creative agency and potential rationality is treated as properties of individuals rather than of groups, and communities are reduced to 'atomised, fragmented and commodified cultures'.¹⁷ The shared labour of many is devalued in comparison with the commercial success of individuals, positioning the role of community action through collectives, including crowds, mobs, masses and groups, as ineffective, irrational and unprofitable. Gilbert observes that opposition political parties under neoliberalism must always appeal to some sense of community or collectivity – hence Cameron's Big Society, because the lack of it is the most obviously negative and widely regretted feature of neoliberal culture. In practice, however, these agendas are the first to be dropped in the wake of massive cuts to public spending.

In the case of *BTD*, the producers are asking participants to invest in co-operative social relationships to make production possible. Through collective and creative capability, the programme co-opts the Black cultural product of Hip Hop dance as a political vehicle for social change in an attempt to demonstrate that isolated groups can be productive. Collective capability therefore relies on creativity as a demonstration of sociality. In their study of *Commonwealth and Capital*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri maintain that it is the creative activity of the multitude which is the most potent force in driving cultural change, and that the profitability of capital is largely dependant upon facilitating and enabling that creativity.¹⁸

Whereas neoliberalism suggest that sociality only leads to fear, paranoia, insecurity and competitive aggression, *BTD* uses the creativity of the multitude, or in this case, the crew, to construct images of joyous affect through social encounter and the embodied negotiation of Street dance choreography. It is clear that through the process of learning, repetition and execution, social change appears to have occurred through the bringing together of the atomised community of Stockton. New friends and social bonds are made, and in one case, aided by the production team, a member of the unemployed crew makes a connection with the leisure centre crew and gains employment in a gym. Through continuous rehearsals and the final performances, participants demonstrate collective joy in their ability to execute a routine, exceeding their expectations of their individual ability, and their ability to cooperate and work with relative strangers. Individual interviews emphasise the joy of dancing together: for example, one participant exclaims, 'Dancing with policeman, lollypop ladies, bus drivers, it's just amazing it's like an extension of your family'.¹⁹ Another states, 'it's the most amazing feeling ever. To be part of this crew, it's something else. We're like sisters and brothers, I love em, they're great, they're ma crew'.²⁰

These declarations of the pleasure in cooperation and teamwork mirror instances of Black collective joy experienced in the rehearsal and execution of Hip Hop dance. As DeFrantz states, 'the pleasure of repeated rehearsal as a feature of social exchange enabled by the dance gives way to the pleasure of execution...this pleasure is aligned with accuracy of performance, with the execution of aesthetic action well done'.²¹ Despite Stockton's lack of racial diversity, this powerful affective connectivity reveals the possibility of global communities through the lens of Black creativity, and therefore the potential for more inclusive communities. This politics of togetherness and its potential outside of the commercial format of the programme is referenced in dance scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli's study of gadgets, bodies and advertisements.²² She states that "the collective action of dancing together creates new communities that negotiate different ways of being autonomous in capitalism", proposing that dancing bodies have the potential to challenge the neoliberal capitalist agenda through grassroots embodied practices.²³

Biopolitical labour and Embodied Collegiality

BTD may provide opportunities to bring a town back together again through the joy of Street dance, but it is also asking its participants to engage in the creation of surplus value through immaterial labour, or, as Hardt and Negri define, 'biopolitical labour'; labour which requires a degree of affective involvement and which is geared towards the production of affects, social relationships and forms of life.²⁴ Images of repetitive rehearsal, coupled with interviews describing, 'sheer hard graft', and being 'put through their paces', all demonstrate labour work conditions where the workers perform the surplus in order to experience the joy of togetherness.²⁵ The collective joy experienced by the participants through their dancing is the key selling point to the subscription based SKY1 programme, but any financial value generated from the programme is not passed down to the dancers themselves.

Rather than completely discounting the potentiality for social change within a mediated environment, whilst also acknowledging the commodification of affective joy within a neoliberal climate of dislocation, I instead suggest that these crew performances are performing collegiality: the relationship between colleagues, united in a common purpose and who respect each other's abilities to work.²⁶ Commonly used within corporate strategies and institutional bureaucracy imposed by neoliberal cultures, the term collegiality acknowledges the ideals of coalition and partnership of the crew, but that this group structure still enforces the logic of individualisation, with its creative products captured and commodified.

While the programme's selling point is based around a community coming back together, it is essentially framed around labour relations —'public sector' crew, 'education sector' crew 'business sector crew etc. A team leader, Ashley Banjo, provides a clear set of directions and an output determined by a project deadline. Moments of creative individuality are highlighted by a few select dance members who perform solos, but the majority of the crew focus on the production of a regimented group aesthetic, where individuality is squashed due to the need for 'tight' choreography, referring to the strict unison of the crew aesthetic. Much like Fordist factory practices, Military-esque unison is framed as the ideal group structure for generating maximum productivity and surplus value in this organisational structure. Even the crew dancers are bought into this corporation structure; one participant

states, 'the success of this group lies in the unity of the team', while another states, 'it's a team effort so if we're not getting along then its not gonna work'.²⁷

In the final episode, viewers witness all six industry crews come together in mass rehearsal. Instantly, the ideals of cooperation and togetherness are misplaced, with each group trying to compete against each other, and with Banjo and his crew trying to break down the 'us and them' tension between each grouping. Despite the individual crews' coherence, the desire for competition still drives performance, and, ultimately, the groups perform the choreography to a higher standard as a result of the competition. Such undercutting of the programme's central message of collectively momentarily reveals the hidden neoliberal agenda of the television series, and the struggle to achieve cohesion within capitalism. The final *BTD* also reveals a shift from community grassroots practice to professional status in both screen aesthetic and television apparatus. Banjo walks over to a pub juke box and puts in a coin. At that moment, the stark documentary style of filming is replaced by a high colour, cinematic gloss, indicating to the viewer that the crew have reached a certain level of professionalism and proficiency to warrant the extra budget in filming. Despite the working-class backdrop of the town's streets, shops and pubs, this screendance metaphor and the slick controlled group choreography signals to the viewer that the crew have made the temporary televisual transition from amateur to professional performer through corporate collegiality.

In conclusion, while the collective joy constructed through the programme offers a glimpse of the creative potentiality of the multitude, as well as the collective joy enabled through the global transmission and embodiment of black cultural practices, this corporate collegiality is contained within the constraints of neoliberal capitalism and the commodification of biopolitical labour. While the series ends with images of celebration through collective and communal joy, this shift in community values did not result in the upsurge in the town's economic prospects. On Thursday 23rd June 2016, Stockton, as well as the majority of the North East of England, voted for 'Brexit': the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union by a majority of 23,545 votes.²⁸ The vote for 'leave' represented the hope for tighter immigration rules, tighter control of the U.K economy, increased employment prospects, and essentially less money going to Europe.

The following months, however, resulted in a large rise of racial attacks, rhetorics of 'us and them', and growing economic and political uncertainty.²⁹ Despite the voting outcome, such political ruptures and the perpetuation of neoliberal isolation brings renewed potency to new forms of group coalition and collective joy through embodied action, and to the question posed by DeFrantz, '...what might it mean if we were to all dance hip-hop?'³⁰

Notes

1. Sky TV is a pay-TV digital broadcaster in the U.K.
2. Britain's Got Talent is the U.K. version of the *Got Talent* franchise, where talent acts compete for a cash prize and performance opportunities within a reality television format.
3. Gilbert, "Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in the Age of Individualism".
4. Hardt and Negri, "Multitude".
5. Interviewee, "Big Town Dance: Episode 1".
6. Interviewee, "Big Town Dance: Episode 1".
7. Interviewee, "Big Town Dance: Episode 1".
8. Channel 4, *Benefit's Street* 2014-2015.
9. Gilbert, 162.
10. Kelly, "Race hate crime in North East soars to record levels in post Brexit period".
11. DeFrantz, "Hip-hop in Hollywood", 128.
12. *Step Up Revolution* is part of the *Step Up* film series and follows a group of flash mob dancers who try to save their Miami homes from being redeveloped into a hotel.
13. Osumare, "Global hip hop and the African diaspora", 267.
14. DeFrantz, "Black Performance Theory", 237-8.

15. Gilbert, 12.
 16. Ibid, 131.
 17. Ibid, viii.
 18. Hardt and Negri.
 19. Interviewee, "Big Town Dance: Episode 1".
 20. Interviewee, "Big Town Dance: Episode 1".
 21. DeFrantz, "Black Performance Theory", 235-236.
 22. Blanco Borelli, "Gadgets, Bodies and Screens".
 23. Ibid, 427.
 24. Hardt and Negri, 131-3.
 25. Interviewee, "Big Town Dance: Episode 5".
 26. Waters, Collegiality, Bureaucratization, and Professionalization.
 27. Interviewee, "Big Town Dance: Episode 6".
 28. ITV News, "EU Referendum: Stockton-on-Tees votes to LEAVE the EU".
 29. White, "Revealed: How Brexit will be bad for Stockton, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool".
 30. DeFrantz, "Black Performance Theory", 241.
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Dis/Orienting Place, Space, and Spectatorship: Parris Goebel's Polyswagg and the Politics of YouTube Encounters

Elena Benthaus

The name “Justin Bieber” appears in black typeset on a white screen before being pushed out of the frame to give way to the first bars of the song. A group of female dancers in colourful 90s-style clothing, sunglasses covering their eyes, and lips painted a vivid red appear, posing for the camera, with one of them, dressed in all-black and positioned in the centre of the group, holding up a sign with the words “Sorry” written on it. The word is underlined, in black typeset, on a white piece of cardboard, mirroring the very first image of the video. This is how the official music video to Justin Bieber’s single *Sorry*, released on the 22nd of October 2015, starts. The video went viral quickly¹ despite not featuring Justin Bieber at all, apart from his voice in the song. Instead the visual hook of the *Sorry* video is its 3:25 minutes dance content, choreographed by Parris Goebel, the woman holding the “Sorry” sign at the start of the video.

INSERT EMBEDDED YOUTUBE video : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRh_vgS2dFE

Parris Goebel is a dancer and choreographer of Samoan descent from South Auckland in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where she owns a dance studio called “The Palace.” The studio houses her various dance crews,² who have been competing in the World Hip-Hop Dance Championship competition since 2009, winning a total of 8 titles to date. Her screen credits include: a 2015 online dance series produced by Maori TV;

Aotearoa/NZ Hip Hop dance film *Born to Dance* (2015); *America’s Best Dance Crew Season 6* (2011); American Hip Hop dance film *Step Up: All In* (2014); and *So You Think You Can Dance Australia* Season 4 (2014). Additionally, she has choreographed music videos and live shows for Jennifer Lopez, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, and K-Pop artists BIGBANG, 2NE1, CL, Taeyang, and BLACKPINK, among others. Her visibility and dance fame has particularly increased through her work as the choreographer and director of Justin Bieber’s *Sorry* and her subsequent choreographic and directorial work for Bieber’s visual album *Purpose: The Movement* (2015), which is basically a compilation of short dance videos, mostly without the singer in the frame.

Despite the 2.9 billion views to date and the high praise for the music video and its creator, the dance content has also seen a good amount of backlash on social media, specifically in the YouTube comments section of *Sorry*. In these comments, YouTube users question the use of and pointing to the appropriation of Jamaican dance hall moves under the umbrella of “polyswagg,” usually prompting a discussion between different fan bases, a discussion that also extends into comment sections of Parris’ other videos. The comments often involve lengthy discussion threads (around 40 response comments or more) between YouTube users from a variety of different places. In the threads, these users usually self-identify as black American, Caribbean, African, or Caribbean American on the one hand, and as



Pacific Islanders, Maori, Samoan, or Polynesian on the other hand and the debates centre around the perceived local origins of the movements Parris uses. For example, YouTuber “hallaballoon” states in response to YouTuber “minaminamo” that “the entire dance is NOT “blatantly Caribbean/African”. These girls are from NZ, many with Polynesian/Maori heritage and that’s where their style of dance is drawn from.”³ YouTuber “Aubrey Young” responds to this stating that “the song is obviously dancehall, the dancing is obviously dancehall. There was nothing at all Polynesian about that routine or that song.”⁴ Or as YouTuber “missMumbleJumbo” states in the comments section of Parris video to her single *Nasty*,

*we already know the difference from polyswagg and dancehall so chill. We are not dumb to realize she takes alot of influence from Jamaican dancehall dancing style...she just incorporates and mixes it with her flavor of polyswagg and other things aswel. She never said dancehall was polyswagg.*⁵

What these comments indicate is that both fan bases are deeply invested in, and thus attuned to the dance content. So much so, that they negotiate the material form of the dance movements in the videos from their place in the world. In the process of these discussions, different (hi)stories and knowledge(s) are laid out to anyone who takes part in the debate and everyone, who is willing to listen to/see the other person’s, and by extension, the dance’s placement in the world. These

debates then revolve around the materiality of the dance content as something where instances of orientation towards the movements of the dancers and dis/orientation when it comes to the dance style(s) performed are made visible as a form of disruptive dialogue that deals with different places, knowledge(s), and (hi)stories.

Considering these initial observations, in this essay, I intend to explore this investment in Parris Goebel's dance aesthetic polyswagg in relation to the notion of fierceness as political potential. The political potential is made visible in the online debates in the comments threads underneath her videos, which center around difference as understood in different parts of the world in relation to the migration of dance style knowledge(s), debates which are facilitated via the screen and via the performance of fierceness that is inherent in polyswagg as a movement technique. This political potential, as evidenced in the comments sections, can be linked to moments of spectatorial dis/orientation, which in this essay is understood as an affective force encounter with the performance of a fierce corporeal aesthetic and a fiercely moving (sur)face, which functions as an interface between screen and spectator.

Let me dwell on the notion of dis/orientation for a moment here. In *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed argues that, "To be orientated is ... to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way. These are the objects we recognize, so that when we face them we know which way we are facing."⁶ One of the key points Ahmed makes in relation to orientation (and directionality) is that the experience of being oriented toward something is always linked to an experience of being disoriented, both of which are about the way bodies inhabit and create space through moments of dis/orientation with an encounter of other things in that space. As such dis/orientation provides the basis for an understanding that one is not, or differently, oriented toward space and the things in it at any given moment in time. Dis/orientation as a way of inhabiting space and encountering things always involves a negotiation between orientation, disorientation, and reorientation toward space and the objects in that space. Orientation, in Ahmed's sense, also has to do with power structures and the way that bodies are being orientated to face certain directions through their surrounding space and who is already (or not) included and/or (in) visible in that space, or only visible as performing in a certain manner. In this sense every disruption of orientation, every dis/orientation then, has the potential to create new spaces, new folds, and new contours.

Polyswagg, the object of this encounter, become a means of inhabiting a spectatorial body space that extends and expands how Parris and her dancers inhabit the space of the screen with their performance of fierceness, creating new spaces, folds, and contours, so to speak. As the performance of fierceness is specifically linked to Parris' movement technique, a technique that incorporates yet is differentiated from dancehall (the key point of dis/contention between different spectators), the question is, what is polyswagg? Why is polyswagg fierce? And what makes that fierceness and the accompanying dis/orientation and dis/contention political?

In an interview and feature story for TVNZ in 2012, Parris explains polyswagg the following way,

it's swag and Polynesian put together. How we dance is unique to us, because we are from New Zealand. And it's kind of our heritage and culture and the way we're brought up. It's like that strength as a woman mixed with Hip Hop that allows us to create this amazing presence on stage that people can't put their finger on.

In another interview from the same year with *Fresh TV*, another New Zealand television show, she says,

when we dance we're very crazy, and I guess our personalities are very bold. There is almost a certain power, strength, and aggression in the way that we move. When you put that Polynesian flavour mixed with Hip Hop, it kind of allows you to move in a certain way that you can't quite explain. That's why we call it Polyswagg.⁸

What Parris indicates when she talks about polyswagg are the various dance and cultural influences on her style, which merged into a particular performance aesthetic and performance mode as displayed in her choreographies. The display of female empowerment and strength is linked with being Polynesian and being from Aotearoa/NZ, both as indicators of difference and as indicators of strength/power directly associated with a specific place and local history.

In her article "Young, Gifted, and Brown," Nicola Hyland touches on Parris' performance of polyswagg in conjunction with the importance of Hip Hop for Pacific/Oceanic youth in Aotearoa/New Zealand to speak to and thus destabilize a Western, Northern, or Eastern understanding of "otherness", in order to centre experiences, histories, and art forms of Pacific/Oceanic youth within indigenous critical frames.⁹ As she

notes, “this brand of movement, which Goebel coins ‘Polyswagg’, is a distinctive form of hip-hop, which integrates gendered movement in a way that challenges tropes of sexual passivity and objectivity to empower the reigning female crew.”¹⁰ It is a sentiment that is also addressed in the comments. As YouTuber “Chanel” states in response to the *Sorry* debate, “polyswagg is actually taking the energy and power from their culture and heritage so the intensity from haka which is the tradition Maori war dance and their individual cultures and incorporating it with their dance...”¹¹ Similarly, YouTuber “taylor lee” responds to “queenhiphop1002” in the *Nasty* discussion thread, asking, if she had, “ever watched and kapa haka ... or seen someone pukana? It’s pretty fierce strong and intimidating ... that’s were parris draws fierceness from ...”¹² In this instance, “taylor lee”, who identifies as a Pacific Islander from Aotearoa/NZ, explicitly connects the fierceness of Parris’ movement aesthetic polyswagg to Maori song and dance traditions, specifically the haka and pukana, which refers to the facial expressions performed as part of the haka, which is about opening the eyes wide and dilating the pupils to emphasise particular words or phrases that are considered important for the haka that is performed.¹³

However, despite what the commenters say, in most interviews, Parris doesn’t really specify what the exact Polynesian influences on her technique are.¹⁴ She doesn’t name a specific traditional style and usually talks more broadly about the indescribability of the movement quality as a not quite explainable corporeality, indicating that it is the fluid hybridity of her style that works towards what Hyland describes as a “vessel for empowerment” that is “vital for breaking down the homogenizing binaries of Western cultural discourse.”¹⁵ Apart from an expression of excitement and awe when it comes to Parris and her dancers’ performing capabilities, the feelings they inspire through the screen interface are tied to experiencing the fierceness of polyswagg as specifically empowering for girls and women, and additionally an expression of pride in the Polynesian community, both in Aotearoa/NZ and abroad.

In response to the black and white video *New Kings*, for example, “Nana K” expresses “P#PolyPride cheeee!”¹⁶ while “Quezaun Otemai” states, “1 thing y’all have & when I say ya’ll I mean each individual in that group that no other group has, is attitude. Not all the same but equally fierce. Poly love from American Samoa! Alofa atu.”¹⁷ Similarly, “taylor lee” has noted in the *Nasty* comments thread,

*I think parris is just expressing herself and her culture not tryna be someone she’s not which makes her so authentic and different cause nz so small and far away not many people know of our Polynesian heritage which is obvious from some people’s comments...*¹⁸

Parris expresses pride in being Polynesian and being a woman outside of her dance videos as well. At the MTV Video Music Awards in 2016, Parris wore a traditional Polynesian garment, designed by Samoan/Aotearoa designer Priscilla Ale, and posted a picture of herself on the red carpet on Twitter with the tagline “Proud Polynesian on the red carpet”,¹⁹ which got 788 retweets, 1637 likes, and 18 comments, several of which expressed excitement about the representation of Poly swag and Poly pride at a big awards events like this. These instances speak back to the representation of Polynesian and Pacific Islander people on screen and in other media more broadly, because as “taylor lee” has noted, not many people seem to know about Polynesian heritage and culture.

In his chapter “Hip Hop in Hollywood”, Thomas DeFrantz speaks of popular screendance bodies and popular black social dances in terms of a “corporeal possibility for audiences, no matter the historical era or location of the viewers.”²⁰ These corporeal possibilities can be located in the way that they come to stand representative for a potential restructuring, or dis/orientation of hierarchical structures, normative screen dance corporealities, and an indication of community-based social engagement. It is about representational politics and representational politics matter. This can be tied to Hyland’s argument about the polarity of the colonial, Western gaze and the representation of Pasifika girls in the popular imagination through visual art and performance that depicts them as the alluring “Dusky Maiden,” who is both seductive and submissive.²¹ Parris and her dancers are regarded as neither, because their fierceness exceeds this polarity. For YouTuber “Uni Q” this means the following:

*Damn Female Polynesians stars are on the rise. You and Dinah Jane give me all this confidence to be a Polynesian gal. As a little girl, I didn’t have a female idol to look up to who was just like me. That’s all changing, the wait was worth it. Representation Matters.*²²

The fierce and multifaceted performance modality of polyswagg becomes the point of contact, “the corporeal possibility,” in DeFrantz words, for dancers and spectators alike. YouTuber “Victorian Hart”

notes in response to the *New Kings* video, “this is so fierce I can't get over their facials it sells out the whole entire routine. Parris I love you so much and all you girls inspire me so much to keep dancing,”²³ where the intensity of Parris' fierce performance modality becomes a corporeal possibility for this commenter to dance and feel fierce about it. Fierceness as such then can be considered as an over-performance, which deliberately takes up space and refuses to back down. This who and how of taking up space, of increasing the volume on the noise that is made – the corporeal noise Parris and her dancers make on screen and the noise in the comments threads – produce a visibility that seeks to dis/orient spectatorial viewing positions and the accompanying knowledge(s) that go along with it.

When it comes to the notion of fierceness I take my cue from Madison Moore's article “Tina Theory: Notes on Fierceness,” in which Madison defines fierceness as “a spectacular way of being in the world – a transgressive over-performance of the self through aesthetics.”²⁴ Fierceness is an aesthetic that is not just a regular performance of the self, but an over-performance, which explicitly and force-fully spectacularizes the self so that it WOWs, awes, disrupts, and stares back. For spectators, this means being on the perceiving end of a performance, which in Madison's words seeks “to change the dynamics of the room” and “push back against limiting identity categories.”²⁵ Polyswagg as a remixing of different styles of popular performance modes, elicits a variety of viewing positions, those who celebrate her style, those who criticise it, and those who find themselves in between, clearly changing the dynamics of the comments threads and pushing back against limiting identity categories of how people see, experience, and categorise Parris, her dancers, and polyswagg. It is a disruption based on the affective response to the performance that asks to reflect on the viewing position one assumes, a politics of differential spectatorship so-to-speak.

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai argues that the consumption of mass media in a global context of migration and motion, of images and people, will produce agency, resistance, irony, parody, anger, and selectivity on behalf of spectators. Through these strategies, images will become localized.²⁶ In relation to this, he makes a case for mediascapes as one of the landscapes of global cultural flows that are the building blocks of what he calls “*imagined worlds*, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe...,”²⁷ what he further refers to as “diasporic public spheres that ... are no

longer small, marginal, or exceptional.”²⁸ Imagination is an important factor here, as it creates, in connection with mass media, what he calls a “community of sentiment”²⁹ and “spaces of contestation,”³⁰ which is due to the possibility of collective readings, criticisms, pleasures, and contestations in mass mediated circulated content, forming “sodalities of worship and charisma.”³¹ YouTube comments threads converging around the work of a specific charismatic, affective performer can be seen as a form of mass mediated sodality, in which the crisscrossing of multiple diverse local cultures, cultural forms, pleasures, and politics not simply cross each other, but are made visible through engagement with the content of the video in question and engagement with other spectators who are facing the same object, albeit from a different perspective. It is a way of facing things that might be dis/orienting. This is particularly important, when it comes to the representational politics of popular dance content that goes viral.

Which brings me back to the debates revolving around the dance content of *Sorry*, where the politics of perception, comes to bear on spectators' locality and place of perception. In 2016, YouTubers “minaminamo”, “hallaballon”, and “Aubrey Young” engaged in the following debate:

“minaminamo”: I think its more the fact that the entire dance is blatantly Caribbean/African and that there are absolutely no Caribbeans or Africans to be found. Not only that but the crazy amount of views and praise they are getting for this, while should all the girls be black, it would for sure be overlooked as nothing special.

“hallaballon”: +minaminamo the entire dance is NOT “blatantly Caribbean/African”. These girls are from NZ, many with Polynesian/Maori heritage and that's where their style of dance is drawn from... Why should there be black girls of African descent in this video when this dance isn't even remotely “African” or “Caribbean”? Poly/Maori girls dancing a Poly/Maori dance - what exactly is your problem with this???

“Aubrey Young”: +hallaballon The song is obviously dancehall, the dancing is obviously dancehall. There was nothing at all Polynesian about that routine or that song. Though I believe people should dance how they want, the argument people have is that this video will now make dancehall style “acceptable” for white people to do it, when before it was just seen in reggae/dancehall videos and clubs... That said, these ladies killed it...³²

All of these responses come from people with particular viewing positions, who come from a particular place, and comment in a way that reflects how the spectatorial body is inhabited in that place. Comments indicate both an enjoyment of the video, but also an acknowledgement of the contradictions and problems that are perceived with specifically the dancehall content under the umbrella of polswagg, as some do not perceive the dance as having Polynesian dance stylistic elements at all, while others see it as such.

In her chapter “From Oakland Turfs to Harlem’s Shake,” Naomi Bragin notes that “hood dances”, such as the Harlem shake and Oakland turf, as particularly localised sub-categories of hip hop dance, shape and at the same time obliterate political memory and social/racial identity when going viral within the structural antiblackness of participatory media and the global dance industry.³³ The local specificity, the place where a hood dance exists in its material reality, opposes viral antiblackness in its inherent connection to the sociality of life in the black neighbourhood it comes from. The political capacity and possibility of hood dances can be found, as Bragin states, in the process of “its collective formation and ongoing innovation” and the way it produces an “intramural dialogue among participants located in different times and places.”³⁴ Yet, when going viral, this specificity is obscured and erased through the appropriation of black performance codes and conventions, the who is allowed to be seen and how. The debates around polswagg are placed at this intersection of going viral/being seen and the local specificity of its performers and viewers – the politics of place and space.

The debate as a collective formation negotiates different types of erasure: what Bragin calls “viral trafficking”³⁵ and erasure of actual black materiality and black popular dance styles that polswagg seems to perpetuate as the black American/African/Caribbean/Caribbean American YouTubers have noted; the erasure of Polynesian/Maori performance influences when only considering the *Sorry* choreography under the dancehall banner as the Polynesian/Maori/Pacifica YouTubers have pointed out; and the erasure of any kind of influence under the banner of colour-blindness as several other YouTubers have interjected in the debates. The debates in these spectatorship communities, by taking up space and disrupting the flow of appreciative comments, thus dis/orienting the “colour-blind”, “dance is for all” sentiments, highlight the erasure that is performed in relation to different places and spaces. As moments of dialogic

dis/orientation, the comments threads are an intercultural exchange that contains the failure of the multicultural/intercultural aesthetic of polswagg as a localised dance style, and more generally, who gets to benefit from when dances go viral. As such, this kind of differential spectatorship is about a collective that through dis/orienting dialogue resists the erasure of different communities by disrupting the comments section of the video and push for dis/orientation through engagement with different knowledge(s) and (hi)stories. As Bragin notes with regards to turfing, “space is not a blank slate momentarily inscribed by performance but a container of collective memories”³⁶ and these collective memories become visible in the debates between the differently located spectatorship communities. Or, as YouTuber “AdvantageAS” notes in the *Nasty* thread, “I feel like im in history class reading these comments.”³⁷

Notes

1. At the time of writing the video has been watched 2.9 billion times, gotten 10 million likes, and generated over 750,000 comments on YouTube. Moreover, it is the 7th most watched YouTube video of all time as of the 14th of August 2018 (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLirAqAtl_h2r5g8xGajEwdXd3x1sZh8hC).
2. These crews include all-female crew ReQuest, founded in 2007; varsity crew Sorority, founded in 2010; junior division girl crew Bubblegum, founded in 2010; and mega-crew Royal Family, founded in 2011.
3. “hallaballoon” in December 2015 underneath: JustinBieberVevo, “Sorry,” Dir. Parris Goebel, Choreography by Parris Goebel, *YouTube*, uploaded October 22, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRh_vgS2dFE, last accessed on August 14, 2018
4. “Aubrey Young” in December 2015 underneath: JustinBieberVevo, “Sorry,” *YouTube*, last accessed on August 14, 2018
5. “missMumbleJumbo” in August 2016 underneath: PARRIS, “Nasty,” Dir. Parris Goebel, Choreography by Parris Goebel, *YouTube*, uploaded on August 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8feR-Sd4OOo>, last accessed on August 13, 2018
6. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 1

7. Parris Goebel in an interview with Erin Conroy, which was originally conducted for TVNZ, which was accessed through Erin Conroy's YouTube channel. erin conroy, "Hip Hop New Zealand – Parris Goebel," *YouTube*, uploaded on October 29, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ9MVhYCeNQ>, last accessed January 13, 2018
8. FRESH TV, "Parris Goebel – My World," *YouTube*, uploaded on February 4, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orclbYy2wL8>, last accessed January 13, 2018
9. cf. Nicole Hyland, "Young, Gifted, and Brown: the Liberation of Oceanic Youth in *The Beautiful Ones*," *New Theatre Quarterly*, Volume 32, Issue 4 (November 2016): 333-346
10. Hyland, "Young, Gifted, and Brown," 340
11. "Chanel" in December 2015 underneath: JustinBieberVevo, "Sorry," *YouTube*, last accessed on November 27, 2017
12. "taylor lee" in August 2016 underneath: PARRIS, "Nasty," *YouTube*, last accessed on August 13, 2018
13. cf. Matthews, Nathan, "The Physicality of the Maori Message – *Ko te tinana, he waka tuku korero*," *Junctures*, 3 (December 2004), 16
14. For more information on the Aotearoa/Maori performance forms that are mentioned in the comments, see: Nicola Hyland, "Beyoncé's Response (eh?): Feeling the Ihi of Spontaneous Haka Performance in Aotearoa/New Zealand," *The Drama Review*, Volume 59, Number 1 (Spring 2015): 67-82; Hiromi Sakamoto, "Researching Kapa Haka and its Educational Meanings in Today's Aotearoa/New Zealand: Weaving Methodologies, Perspectives, Decency," *The International Journal of Arts in Society*, Volume 6, Issue 3 (2011): 57-66; Nathan Matthews, "The Physicality of the Maori Message – *Ko te tinana, he waka tuku korero*," *Junctures*, 3 (December 2004): 9-18; Sharon Mazer, "Performing Maori: *Kapa Haka* on the Stage and on the Ground," *Popular Entertainment Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 1 (2011): 41-53; Aaron Taouma, "Pacific Dance in Aotearoa: A Tale of the last 20 Years," *DANZ Quarterly: New Zealand Dance*, Issue 34 (Summer 2014): 30-31, among others.
15. Hyland, Young, Gifted, and Brown," 344
16. "Nana K" in January 2016 underneath: ReQuest Dance Crew, "ReQuest Dance Crew: NEW KINGS / @nickiminaj," Dir. Parris Goebel, Choreography by Parris Goebel, *YouTube*, uploaded on June 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hy1wQgJLsh8>, last accessed on August 13, 2018
17. "Quezaun Otemai" in September 2016 underneath: ReQuest Dance Crew, "ReQuest Dance Crew: NEW KINGS / @nickiminaj," *YouTube*, last accessed on August 13, 2018
18. "taylor lee" in August 2016 underneath: PARRIS, "Nasty," *YouTube*, last accessed on August 13, 2018
19. Parris Goebel (@ParrisGoebel), *Twitter*, posted at 6:10pm on August 28, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ParrisGoebel>, last accessed on January 11, 2018
20. Thomas DeFrantz, "Hip-Hop in Hollywood: Encounter, Community, Resistance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, ed. Melissa Blanco Borelli (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press), 114
21. cf. Hyland, 338
22. "Uni Q" in 2017 underneath: PARRIS, "Nasty," *YouTube*, last accessed on August 13, 2018.
23. "Victorian Hart" in 2016 underneath: ReQuest Dance Crew, "ReQuest Dance Crew: NEW KINGS / @nickiminaj," *YouTube*, last accessed on August 13, 2018.
24. Madison Moore, "Tina Theory: Notes on Fierceness," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Vol. 24, Issue 1 (2012): 72
25. Moore, 72
26. cf. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (London; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7
27. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33
28. *Ibid.*, 10
29. *Ibid.*, 8

30. Ibid., 4
31. Ibid., 8
32. Comments Thread underneath: JustinBieberVevo, "Sorry," *YouTube*, last accessed on August 14, 2018.
33. cf. Naomi Bragin, "From Oakland Turfs to Harlem's Shake: Hood Dance on YouTube and Viral Antiracism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, ed. Douglas Rosenberg (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 538ff
34. Bragin, "From Oakland Turfs," 539
35. Bragin, "From Oakland Turfs," 539
36. Ibid., 542
37. "AdvantageAS" in 2017 underneath: PARRIS, "Nasty," *YouTube*, last accessed on August 13, 2018

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Feeling from the Outside: Intercultural Dialogue and Filmic Ethnography in Flamenco Street Performance in Seville, Spain

Konstantina Bousmpoura

In October 2007, a group of flamenco artists of different nationalities set up a self-managed *tablao flamenco* in front of Seville's cathedral. They claimed the public space as a place to exhibit and express their art. As a result of the positive reaction from the public, they decided to form their own flamenco street group baptizing it with the name *Son de Afuera* (They are not from here or They're from the outside). Their message was explicit: "We are from abroad, we are foreigners and this is our way of doing flamenco." *Son de Afuera* performed almost every day for three years converting the public space in the heart of the Andalusian capital into a democratic space of artistic expression, intercultural dialogue and social integration.

What does it mean to feel and create flamenco from "the outside" in the context of Andalusian society? How does the practice of flamenco street performance emerge as a mode of communication and pleasure that engages in intercultural dialogue with the local community? How could I, as an ethnographer, bring myself and other flamenco performers together in a kind of a genuine, intimate dialogical engagement? (Conquergood 1985). I placed these questions at the core of my ethnographic filmmaking project, which I conducted in 2006-2008 as a result of my own role as participant-observer in flamenco dance classes in Seville since 2003. After many years of researching various ways that artists from different cultures express



Danila Scarlino, "La Bambina" and Tsung-Ling Chiu, "Ana," performing in front of Seville's cathedral. Photograph author's own.



Photograph authors's own.

and perform their feelings using the art of flamenco, I felt committed to present the outcome of my research by using technology in a reflexive manner: being myself part of this process as an observer, performer and filmmaker and as an honest intercultural mediator, stretching my relationship and sharing my experiences with the people I both studied with and filmed (Jones 2002).

The result of my ethnographic dialogical engagement with flamenco art and the group *Son de Afuera* was the production of a short ethnographic film entitled *El Sentir desde afuera* or *Feeling From the Outside*.¹ The documentary was released in 2008 in Seville and since then it has participated in miscellaneous performance events and festivals aiming to "bring self and other together so that they can question, debate and challenge one another" (Conquergood 1985, 9). My contribution to this invitation that considers the intersections of the popular with the political has to do with my ethnographic considerations in documenting and filming intercultural performance fieldwork where issues of cultural authenticity, accountability, multivocality and ethics of representation take place (Jones 2002). I situate my considerations in the multicultural context of Seville, the capital of Andalusia, where thousands of foreigners flock every year to learn the art of flamenco.

My political commitment is to show that *flamenco*, although a national dance form, is not necessarily wedded to a Spanish-identified body as the culturally authentic body that can enact *flamenco*. As a dance technique, flamenco can feasibly be learned by any non-Spanish body through a physical and intellectual commitment. To put it in Marcel Mauss' words, flamenco emerges as a "body technique" that is acquired through prestigious imitation and an emotional attitude that requires effort, dedication and work (Mauss 1971, 13-42).

Firstly, I understand that the practice (and expression) of the art of flamenco (which fuses song (*canto*), dance (*baile*) and musicianship (*toque*) seamlessly) has the ability to propel foreign artists into Andalusian culture enabling them, through their lived experience and performances, to express their feelings in a unique way. In the documentary *El Sentir desde Afuera* we watch two female dancers, Danila from Italy and Tsung-Ling Chiu from Taiwan, performing in the street. For Danila, whose artistic name is "La Bambina," flamenco is a way to walk, a means to reach the deepest expression of feelings that come primarily marked "in my case by my southern Italian culture and therefore very close to the Andalusian culture." For Tsung-Ling Chiu,



Still Photo from the documentary "Feeling from the Outside". Laura, Sergio, Steven, Nacho and Danila, "La Bambina" can be seen performing.

whose Andalusian given name is "Ana," flamenco is a struggle for a reality that often exceeds her: "¿So much *zapateado* for what?" she often asks herself after having practiced hours and hours, stomping in front of a mirror with the stopwatch next to it, striving for maximum speed and good sound. These are difficult, contradictory, and conflicting moments that all students have experienced when entering the world of flamenco. It is enough to see Danila and Ana dancing to realize that they are a committed flamenco dance couple that mixes improvisational structure with more stylized movements acquired in the flamenco

"academies." The two dancers display all the technical requirements of flamenco needed to seduce an audience: strength and swaying hips, bright smiles, brave attitude and an international flamenco troupe of singers and musicians: Steven from France, Sergio from Catalonia, Shuki, from Israel; Laura, Juan and Nacho, from Andalusia.

At first, this multicultural group of artists thought that their audience would mostly be tourists attracted by the diffuse makeup of the group, they were surprised to see that it was the Andalusians who initially



Photograph by Quique Macias.

supported them in their street adventure. However, the reactions and commentaries vary and there is no shortage of those who, upon approaching and watching them dance, initially distrust their artistic capacity. Some Andalusians have a hard time believing that two women who are not Andalusians can perform flamenco dance so well and with so much artistic integrity. According to performance ethnographer Joni L. Jones, who addresses issues of performance and cultural authenticity, “the conventions of performance may remind an audience that what they are seeing is a conscious construction, but these conventions may not help an audience determine the boundaries of that construction” (Jones 2002, 13). The audience only assumes the artistic value of the flamenco performed by “Ana” and “Danila la Bambina” once they have verified (or more specifically, culturally authenticated) the performative qualities they associate with flamenco. A further interrogation of how identity is constructed, contested and is contingent is made evident when “Ana” – often problematically identified as the “Oriental girl” – is approached by and interacts with older audience members at the end of a street flamenco performance: “Lots of people from Triana and Andalucía would like to dance like them. It’s true,” says an older Andalusian lady to the camera. In localising the origins narrative of flamenco by explicitly citing/siting the neighbourhood of Triana and the province of Andalusia, this woman articulates the insider/outside status that “Ana” has as Taiwanese and as a highly skilled flamenco dancer.

This statement encourages us to think about several important issues regarding who is allowed to perform flamenco, and where to perform flamenco. While a variety of Flamenco performances in Seville usually can be seen exclusively in many private places such as *peñas*, *tablaos*, festivals and the biennial of flamenco, *Son de afuera*, claimed the street as their *tablao*-scenery or space, an open democratic public space within the reach and enjoyment of all. Furthermore, the emphasis on the insider/outside status of Anna expressed by a native Andalusian also asks us to reflect on the relationship between flamenco art and technique, *los de afuera* (“the outsiders”) who dedicate time, money, energy to learn it and interact with local society. A great part of Andalusian society totally ignores the deep connection and the systematic dedication that some of them invest in teaching, learning, professionalizing and promoting the art of flamenco both in Andalusian lands and in their countries of origin. *Son de Afuera* created a unique

artistic movement in the heartland of flamenco challenging notions of where, when and by whom performances of flamenco as a popular art form should happen.

The group lasted for three years and then dissolved due to the need of its members to return home. Three of them, Danila, Laura and Sergio, decided to settle in Seville. Moving, staying or settling is a constant decision in the highly flexible field of cultural production. In the face of the physical-geographical disintegration of the group another kind of cultural integration (or hybridization) was produced due to the existence of *Son de Afuera* and our project: artistic exchanges, residencies, screenings and hosted performances took place between Spain, Italy, France, Greece and Israel during the last ten years. Until today, thousands of videos placed on YouTube by tourists act as testimonies of the historical existence of the flamenco street group *Son de Afuera*. The echo of the intercultural audio-visual project that we decided to call *El Sentir desde Afuera* keeps alive the spirit of *Son de Afuera*. The documentary participated in numerous audio-visual and dance festivals and has even received important awards.

In December of 2018 we decided to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the creation of both flamenco street movement and the ethnographic film (2008-2018). For that reason all the members of the group *Son de Afuera*, the director of photography² and I, the Greek director, gathered in Seville and we held three major events hosted by different cultural and academic institutions in Seville.³ Situated in the frame of a dialogical performance (Conquergood 1985), we screened the documentary, performed and engaged audiences in discussions with the participation of the ten members of the project. It was a celebration of an intercultural performance dialogue with the local society and the opening of a democratic space to talk about the intersection of flamenco and cultural identity/ethnicity. In the context of the current European migration situation it allowed us to present (and perform) the embodied outcome of the cultural hybridization on Andalusian flamenco.

Notes

1. This is the original title of the short ethnographic film *Feeling from the Outside* (2008, SP/GR) that can be viewed on Vimeo here: <https://vimeo.com/57747749>.

2. The realization of the documentary *El Sentir desde fuera* wouldn't have been possible without the professional and personal commitment of the Andalusian director of photography, Antonio Rodrigo.
3. The screenings and events took place in the Documentation Center of Performative Arts of Andalucía, the University Pablo Olavide and the Don Cecilio Cultural Center. The facebook page of the project is <<https://www.facebook.com/ElSentirdesdeafuera/>>

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“I've danced my whole life, but none of that is useful at all”: Netflix’s We Speak Dance (2018), Vulnerability and Collaborative Critiques

Melissa Blanco Borelli

In Netflix's short, five-part documentary web series We Speak Dance (2018), dancer and former UN advisor Vandana Hart travels to Paris, Beirut, Lagos, Ho Chi Minh City and Bali to dance with dance artists who, according to her, are revolutionising the way dance functions in their respective countries. It created quite a stir among dance scholars, especially Meiver De la Cruz. She is the inspiration for this collective endeavor. She prompted many of us with a social media post on 9 December 2017 where she alerted us to the airing of the series, and invited dance scholar friends to view the series and then offer reflections, criticisms and discussions. Their informal comments on her Facebook page were tinged with dismay, disbelief and anger. Rather than keep our collective thoughts and feelings concentrated there, I suggested using this issue of Conversations as an opportunity to publicise some of these critiques. In other words, we wanted to make our anger public, productive and political.

I am reminded of the work on anger by black feminist scholar Audre Lorde and American philosopher Alphonso Lingis. For Lorde, anger is “loaded with information and energy” (1997, 280). In short it carries capacious potentiality that, when mobilized against racism for example, can bring about social alternatives and changes. As she explains, every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with

precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in all those assumptions underlining our lives. (280)

Lingis’ stand alone essay entitled “Anger” offers a configuration of community based on shared anger at the dramatic inequality of the world in which consumer culture, what he terms “the technocratic commercial archipelago” rests on the massive exploitation of cheap labor in the “outer zone.” (1997, 72). “Those in the archipelago are alienated from their labor and their world which is consumed in advance, while those in the “outer zone” live lives of massive exploitation and poverty.”(74) Anger offers a mode to oppose these geographic simulacra that keep us apart. It also signals how sovereign states use these simulacra of differences to prevent those on the outside from stepping in. Yet, it is only when we make contact with those in the “outer zone” does this anger arise, says Lingis. Through contact we see “the significance of their singular and communal forms of life.”(75) Lingis advocates for a type of travel voyeurism, where those from the (wealthier) global north go to the “outer zones” of the global south/east to see the possibility of a “meaningful” life outside of the consumption riddled nihilism that plagues the West. He advocates for those to “leave the television set with its images of consumer euphoria and go out to visit someone’s

village in the Isaan, in the favelas of Rio, the slums of Jakarta, the villages of Africa [to] discover the character, bravery, and the pride of singular people.” (77) Written in 1997 during the multicultural zeitgeist moment, Lingis encourages what we now know as “slum tourism.” His assumptions fail to account for how those in Isaan, Rio, Jakarta, or a Kenyan village might engage in a multi-directional consumerism of their own or even how global south/east mobilizations create new forms of commodity fetishism. Yet, Lingis’ ideas like Lorde’s enable anger to become a catalyst for mobilizing action, dialogue, discussion and social change.

As Meiver De la Cruz initially suggested, perhaps these comments below can be tied with some critical reading or a dance practice that responds to a particular episode. This could help our dance students, for example, develop their critical toolbox. On a different scale, work like this could also function as advisory material for institutions, media conglomerates, or funding entities who offer support for cultural and arts initiatives. In the spirit of dialogue, whether inspired by anger, advocacy, or both, we offer the following variety of comments to continue this important discussion of how seemingly innocuous cultural diversity projects (like this documentary purports to be) often undermine, and make more vulnerable, marginalised dancing communities of color who consistently labor to be political agents in their own self-making.

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Looking at *We Speak Dance* as a popular screen dance work, the things I noticed in both the show and the Bustle and Dance Magazine articles [which were put up on the Facebook post in comments section] is that Vandana Hart seems to depend very much on her own mobility and what I would call a type of myth-making around her dance persona and the way dance as a means of communication and political tool relates to that dance persona. It’s myth-making and mobility that is based on the privilege of whiteness and the means to be able to afford to travel and produce this screen dance product for Netflix. It is also based on the privilege of being able-bodied, conventionally pretty, conventionally trained, and charismatic, something she draws attention to in each episode throughout the season, when she dances

for the camera, alone, in each of the locations she chose. It can also be seen in the way that the camera constantly zooms in on her in the non-interview, group dance scenes, usually framing her in the middle of the group of dancers she worked with in each episode, exemplifying that her Western training makes her adaptable to all dances. It made me think of Raquel Monroe’s chapter “The White Girl in the Middle: The Performativity of Race, Class, and Gender in Step Up 2: The Streets,” in which Monroe argues that the ability of the white female dancer to perform black, and in the case of *We Speak Dance*, also brown, queer, and marginalised performativity serves to emphasise the white girl’s exceptionality more than actually overthrowing systemic oppression and making a political point, kind of contradicting what Hart says she wants to achieve with *We Speak Dance*. In this “dance as saviour” narrative, the focus comes to be on the white female dancer as saviour and I have so many questions.

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We Speak Dance combines several winning television formats to create what the New York Times called a ‘dance-and-travel’ series. The show rests on a well-established genre that articulates dance in terms of personal transformation - in this case, Hart’s ‘transformative ability’ to adapt to and adopt new dance moves. To this widely used metaphor of dance as self-transformation, the series adds another common trope of projecting onto dance fantasies of exoticism. In a mode reminiscent of *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), Vandana Hart becomes native through her ability to speak dance as she hops from one country to another. Of course, this is 2018 and, as my students assure me when reading articles written twenty years ago, people no longer appropriate other cultures, at least not as naively as back then. So, old tropes are coated by a veneer of contextual specificity and quick references to current affairs and relevant, complex issues. All of this is then seasoned by Hart’s metropolitan savvy and sleek Instagram eye, which helps her move each episode through a spectrum of dance styles, from traditional to urban.

Building on Elena Benthous’ comment, I would say that the presenter’s travels and mobility are the show’s true focus. While there is nothing wrong with that, Hart’s mobility goes unquestioned (and, as Benthous suggests, this is quite different from the series’ intent to show how ‘dance unites us’ and ‘ignites change’ and, in Hart’s words, to

'showcase the marriage of dance and politics'). The constant focus on Hart's own ability to hop from one country to another and from one dance style to another re-asserts the widely circulated narrative of the extended physical and geographical mobility of Western dancers. I have written elsewhere on how modern dance techniques often feed into this narrative through discourses that posit the centrality of travel and mobility in training and through technique's implicit promise of mastering space through the moving body (2014). *We Speak Dance* seems to rest on and further feed into these discourses.

In addition to the list of privileges that Benthaus points out, I would add that Hart's mobility also depends on linguistic privilege, in other words, on English as the assumed and unquestioned mode of communication. While the show claims dance as key to intercultural communication, the presenter continuously relies on English language to travel and communicate. English also seems to be language spoken by (and expected from) most of the presenter's main interlocutors. While English language assures Hart smooth travels and encounters, it also privileges those local dancers who have the ability to speak English. To wrap up, what the show really seems to tell us is that we have to speak English in order to dance.

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Through its flippant, logocentric and universalising title, *We Speak Dance* undoes decades of dance scholarship that has worked hard to champion dance, especially from non-Western cultures, as embodied knowledge that does not need to be spoken for, translated, explained, made accessible, rationalised, mediated and co-opted by the likes of Vandana Hart. Under the guise of altruistic claims, Hart demonstrates how dance can build, energise and heal communities by immersing herself in the learning of new dance languages across different continents, cultures and cities. In this, *We Speak Dance* resorts to classic tropes of neoliberal and neo-imperial tendencies that simultaneously commodify difference and universalise the human condition as a shared quest for what ultimately manifests as a superficial embodiment of sameness. And Hart is at the fulcrum of this search for a universal condition, who, in her own learning of and transformation through these global dance forms, claims that the world can become a better place. In reality through each episode she arrives, she dances, and she departs. The worlds Hart visits carry on as they were. Nothing changes. Nothing of course would, or indeed could.

It is Hart's dancing at the end of each episode that I find the most problematic component of this documentary-style programme. Having engaged in learning a few hours of new dance languages, Hart concludes each episode by dancing out her newly acquired skills, usually filmed against the most exquisitely stereotypical backdrop of whatever location she is in. But what does her dancing achieve, if not to emphasise her dabbling with these forms as a superficial encounter with Otherness? Why does she dance through the lush green paddy fields in Bali, against the backdrop of cityscape of Beirut, perform the 'kill the mosquito step' in malaria-prone Lagos, if not to both exoticise the art forms and reduce them to accessible bite-size chunks for her predominantly white-western voyeurs? How can Hart's dancing in these contexts change the lives of the people who live within them? If, as she claims, dancing is about communities, where and how does she figure in them? It's simple, she doesn't. As Benthaus and Brazzale signal above, the guise of the 'dance saviour narrative' ultimately operates yet again as 'the white dancer as saviour' through a reliance on inherent Hart's privileges. And it is in this shift from 'dance as community' to 'dancer as tourist' that all altruistic aims disappear, and we are left with yet another instance of co-optation of bodies of colour by whiteness.

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The notion of dance as a universal language rests on the same belief in universality of white experience as much of Western philosophical thought (thinking here of Hamid Dabeshi's critique, for example). That the generic dance style expected of the back-up chorus of an American pop music idol is staged as the universal is clear from how the camera focuses on these (re-)performances, whereas all 'traditional' forms and their performers get shot in short, often fragmentary bursts that do not allow for contemplation of step sequences or corporeality of the dancers. 'Traditional forms' are not very subtly denigrated as material for modernity's emergence in the neoliberalist body of the dancer aspiring to the whiteness of the host, who can appropriate any tradition in a matter of days. For a dance historian, this recalls early twentieth-century colonialist spectacles by Denishawn or the Ballets Russes, where 'ethnographic authenticity' of the dance was often based on a few lessons (if that) adjusted to Western concert dance idiom.

From the first episode, the hierarchy between the West and the Rest is clear: “It’s the country’s first studio that gives dancers a place to train and to work as professionals in ballet, modern dance, jazz, traditional and hip hop.” In the context of this show, Western universalism produces a focus on the generic and the imitative, rather than the presumably local and diverse practices of dancing by different kinds of bodies and ethnicities. The non-white Other is relegated into the role of the Vietnamese dancer re-performing Michael Jackson’s dance moves as “the best thing in the world” for the duration of this episode. This is neoliberalist, because the dancer’s profession is defined by their performance, which is framed as fun and something they would do regardless of the conditions surrounding them, not whether they actually get paid for their labour.

It is presumptive and colonialist to assume a few lessons in Vietnamese or Finnish would make one as fluent as a native speaker; it does a disservice to all dance to assume, as the title of this series does, that an ‘ethnic’ dance can be picked up in a few lessons; and for a dance scholar, it is obvious how the body claiming to learn refuses to do so. This is not ‘we speak dance’, it is ‘we refuse to listen’.

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I second much of what has already been said (above), especially a) Benthous’s acknowledgement of the “myth-making and mobility that is based on the privilege of whiteness”; b) Brazzale’s examination of “Hart’s ‘transformative ability’ to adapt to and adopt new dance moves”, validated by comments such as “she knows how to twerk!” and (learning tap) “she is so fast!”, and, subsequently, the “metaphor of dance as self-transformation,” where the host’s “mobility goes unquestioned”; c) Mitra’s explanation of how the series “undoes decades of dance scholarship that has worked hard to champion dance, especially from non-Western cultures, as embodied knowledge” which exempt mediation in ‘speaking for’ them (Spivak 1988), and the neoliberal/neo-imperial effort to “commodify difference and universalise the human condition as a shared quest for (...) a superficial embodiment of sameness”; and d) Järvinen’s conclusion that, ultimately, the series’ valorisation of performance, framed as “fun” despite the precarious context, both diminishes the creative/intellectual work of these artists and reaffirms their rock-bottom positionality in the hierarchical division of labour of our globalized/neoliberal economy.

At first sight, the series reminded me of *Dancing: Sex and Social Dance* (1993), a BBC2 documentary directed by Miranda Richardson, whose “World Dance” approach champions “dance as a universal human activity” across the United States, the Cook Islands and Morocco. Despite its shortcomings, the 1990s documentary advocates for social/popular dance as a lens for understanding diverse cultures and traditions, especially gendered and sexual norms, through the engagement with dance and social science scholars such as Cynthia Novack, Richard Beauvais and Kathleen Gerson. Conversely, whilst *We Speak Dance* (2018) broadcasts the power of dance as a “force for change”, it lacks the critical depth towards issues of diversity and positionality highlighted in the former. Upon closer look, it becomes clear that heteronormative whiteness, especially its worldwide mobility and accessibility, is the (real) central focus of the new series. At the end of Episode 2 (Vietnam), for instance, we hear Hart explaining that “using their traditions, Vietnamese dancers are choreographing a new conversation on gender and sexuality. It’s a conversation in perpetual motion, just like the country.” Visually, nevertheless, the voiceover is juxtaposed with an outdoors scene on a (uninhabited/romanticized) riverbank in Vietnam, whereby the host improvises a solo mash-up of Western/ingrained and non-Western/appropriated moves that amount to a choreography of coloniality. Across the five episodes, the hypervisibility of Hart’s dancing body renders the labour and heritages of cultural agents on the other side of the “Modern abyssal line” (Sousa Santos 2007) discursively invisible or otherwise irrelevant. Throughout the docuseries, the camera’s centralized focus on a white-looking, physically mobile and socio-economically enabled dancer-as-tourist seems to erase or diminish, in particular, the embodied efforts of the African peoples as well as the counter-acting power of their aesthetic and philosophical ideas, tactics and strategies cultivated across the diaspora (present in each episode), from afrobeat to tap, hip-hop styles, rapping, voguing, and MJ’s signature moves, e.g. the moonwalk.

Equally problematic is the carefully-constructed narrative treading the series, exemplified by the theses stated at the beginning of each episode. As the “former UN advisor” affirms, she is there (in Lagos) to “meet the afrobeat dancers and musicians celebrating Fela’s legacy everyday”; “meet the Vietnamese who are changing the face of their nation through dance”; “learn how the Lebanese use dance to unite a people”; “explore these Balinese traditions and their interplay with the tourism explosion affecting the island”; and, finally, “learn how Parisians elevate culture through dance”. Combined, the series’ linear trajectory

from Africa, to Asia, Middle-East, Oceania and (finally) Europe, from the precariousness of Third World slums to the apogee of high-end venues in the City of Lights, as well as its geopolitics of knowledge production, from the “meet and greet” of Other cultures to the learning about high art continue to reaffirm the “myth” of Eurocentrism and the unilateral understanding of the West as the only place, or locus of enunciation (Mignolo 2002), from which dancing may “elevate” culture.

Lastly, whilst each episode features (queer) dancing communities of colour, as Blanco Borelli points out, I find it worthwhile addressing the heteronormative sexualization of the host’s moving body across the series, through the choices of costume, makeup/grooming and camera angles (close-ups). In particular, Hart’s insistence on showing up to dance practices and events wearing pencil skirts, high heels, and/or clothes that reveal either her (bare) midriff, legs or back, or spaghetti strap blouses without a bra, seems drastically in contrast with the gender bending of the subjects she seeks to interview. Not to mention the limitations that these impractical items impose on her ability to execute a wider range of motion. At one point, one must ask: whatever happened to the exercise clothes of this “lifelong dancer”? Did the suitcase containing her sport bras and ‘yoga’ pants get extradited? Or, confirming our expectation (insightfully noted by my peers above), this is in fact a classical example of a Western/neoliberal dance-tourism enterprise centred on the (exceptionally) affluent and mobile white moving body and her never-ending quest for selfish consumption of exotic-erotic experiences of/in “dancing out there in the world” (Savigliano 2009)? Rather than wearing something that facilitates the exploration of other forms and practices, she “dresses to impress”, posing and performing for the camera (not shy of cropping and amplifying her body parts on the screen) and “celebrating” her ability to have pleasure no matter where she goes. In that sense, the final scene of the Paris episode, when the two white female dancers perform their “ballerina take over” – consisting of drinking red-coloured shots and articulating “careless” movements at a bar, and then on the streets of Paris – seems to sum it all up.

At the personal level, I can foresee the added embarrassment this series may offer to dance scholars such as myself, as we move in and out of customs checkpoints at international airports and (attempt to) explain to border control officers what it is that we do for living.

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Looking specifically at the Lagos episode, I must firstly emphasise the problematic framing of the documentary through the apt lens that Benthous has pointed out of the “white girl in the middle” (Monroe, 2014). As the issues with this frame have already been clearly articulated by Benthous and Rosa, I will not go into specific details here. I will just support this argument by adding that the continual centralisation of whiteness causes this episode to read more as a celebration of white privilege, as it is utilised to navigate ‘exotic’ black spaces, than as a legitimate investigation into those spaces and the people who live there.

Another problematic aspect of this documentary that has been raised by Järvinen and Rosa, and I wish to further highlight, is the way it attempts to minimise the labour involved in the dance. An example of this is when Hart, just five minutes into this episode, is portrayed as having ‘mastered’ Afrobeats technique. Her voiceover, “It’s my first time seeing these kinds of moves”, is edited to coincide with a close-up of her vigorously shaking her hips and performing gestures in virtuosic unison with the other dancers in the class. The scene is focused on making this first encounter appear tension-free, as Hart is pictured, almost effortlessly, performing and joyfully interacting with the other dancers. By editing out the labour that this dance requires, it perpetuates the ideology that popular dance is relatively ‘easy’ to learn, and furthermore easily commodified by the pleasure-seeking dance tourist.

The issue of Hart’s mobility, that has been discussed by Benthous, Brazzale, and Rosa is further intensified by the additional ease with which Hart seems to be able to access culturally rich dance sites and persons of interest. Just five minutes into the first episode she has already accessed movement vocabulary, teachers and sites, which others work extremely hard to access. To top this off, when she says to the dancers in the studio “I’m looking for the best dancers,” it almost sounds as though she is auditioning them, as if it is their privilege to have her there!

The closest Hart gets to self-reflexivity in this episode is when she ponders, “I wonder how my own life in the dance world would have been different without these female trailblazers [who advocated

for dance as a profession in Nigeria].” The fact that she does not contextualise the geopolitics of her positionality in relation to this statement suggests a denial of the relationship between context and identity. Her experiences as a white-looking New Yorker, although undoubtedly influenced by Africanist dance practices, cannot be positioned alongside the experiences and struggles of dancers from Lagos, without firstly recognising the differentials between these positionalities.

For this series to achieve its claimed intentions, Hart’s privileges as a global North white woman needed to be recognised and contextualised, rather than centralised through an implicit celebration of her ability to mobilise herself in order to access pleasurable experiences of embodied synchronicity with the ‘Other’.

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[I] just finished the series. Wow, [it is] troubling on so many levels, indeed. Some of the broader issues I would be interested to discuss, in addition to the unchecked mobility of whiteness, cultural "discovery"/tourism/colonialism, and self-aggrandizing that many have pointed out: the host’s brand of women’s empowerment (white, global feminism) attached to certain dance forms, i.e., cancan and pole dancing; the faux labor of her "learning" the dances, which, in most cases, presents almost instant retention of form, promoting a virtuosity, flexibility and universalizing of her "classically" trained Western body; the binaristic temporal tropes of tradition/modernization that she discursively promotes in all locations except for Paris; and [finally] this fetishistic obsession with dance as transcendence, revolution, empowerment and protest.

As Meiver De la Cruz commented to me when we were first developing this contribution, it is the validating role that Netflix, the United Nations and Vendana Hart’s white privilege endow her with that is probably the most infuriating. How can a collective of critical dance scholars hold individuals who may have the right intentions in doing dance diversity

projects (or highlighting the political potential of dance) accountable for the work they do with dancing (queer) communities (of color)? What type of labours are we expected to do as scholars and what are the limits to that labour? Is critically engaging and co-writing or collaboratively expressing our anger enough? I think about some of the established parameters for doing ethical work that incorporates dance, representation and social justice. Much of this work already exists in the thoughts, writing and practices of dance and performance scholars who are too many to name here. How do we make more accessible and visible our intellectual and political commitments? When is it not enough to get angry among ourselves?

The documentary ends with Hart participating in an ecstatic dance party in Ubud. Here, all difference is supposedly erased through the mix of dance styles under the rubric of ‘ecstatic dance.’ The entire documentary has celebrated cultural diversity yet it concludes with privileged white tourists in Indonesia who have paid to have a transcendental experience. Power relations have been made very visible without any accountability. While I do not purport to know any of Hart’s social justice commitments, I can only guess that her work with UN at some point brought to her attention the importance of becoming an ally and having solidarity with others. The impetus for the documentary makes her desire for solidarity clear. Yet, the documentary ends with her own ‘spiritual experience’ in Ubud and her pointing to some playful monkeys at a temple. I read that she hopes to make more episodes and to continue her work as a ‘dance journalist.’ I wonder what it would mean for her work to “move toward commitment rather than detachment, respect rather than selfishness, dialogue rather than exhibitionism, mutuality rather than infatuation?” (Conquergood) This would probably require a certain type of vulnerability from her. She expresses some vulnerability (and frustration) when, after struggling to learn the nuances of Balinese hand gestures, she admits “I’ve danced my whole life, but none of that is useful at all.” Well, yes. Because dance practices, no matter where they are from, require “a tireless striving for the physical details that make up cultures” (Jones, 14). No danced culture can be learned in one afternoon funded by Netflix. It requires an openness and a vulnerability to one’s own limitations among other things; a vulnerability that the Palestinian children she danced with one afternoon in Beirut know all too well.

It seems appropriate to have Meiver close our discussion as she was its intellectual instigator:

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One thing not yet addressed by my colleagues' remarks are issues of visibility and access. One of the artists interviewed in this series is my friend, artistic collaborator, and research interlocutor Alexandre Paulikevitch based in Beirut. While doing an interview with Alexandre several months after the series had been released on Netflix, he casually mentioned that he never saw it. This made me wonder how many of the artists had actually seen the footage published by Hart, and whether they could even comment on how she had edited their interviews and presented their work. This highlights the weight and power of Hart's position, and how through this power, her prior involvement with the United Nations becomes equated with a critical, political education to speak about the context and practice of global dance, *that goes on air without any checks or balances*.

I also want to invite us to think about what can this type of mediated visibility, albeit problematic, do for these artists? When the series 1st aired, Mr. Paulikevitch shared Hart's announcement on his Facebook page. He was already an internationally acclaimed and very visible artist prior to this series. In response to his public post, Hart wrote:

"Alexandre Paulikevitch you were one of the strongest dancers we featured in both movement and in mind. You are a dance leader in all the ways. I can't wait to dance with you again xo."

While likely a more than deserved compliment for my friend, I couldn't help but have a negative response to the patronizing position through which Hart allows herself to publicly rank the movement and critical thinking skills of all of the artists that she worked with across such diverse locations, circumstances, and genres.

Both of these moments clarified for me the imperative need for more public scholarship in dance studies, and the enormity of the task ahead of us in the field. But we must demand that these important conversations about power in the arts are not left to be watered down ideas filtered through white savior projects funded by multinational corporations.

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