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# Un/Natural Disaster and Dancing

Hurricane Katrina and Second Lining in New Orleans

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RACHEL CARRICO

In December of 2006, over a year after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, the Big Nine Social Aid and Pleasure Club (SAPC) held their annual parade in the Lower Ninth Ward, an African American neighborhood devastated by the Industrial Canal's levee breach. They danced through the streets with a brass band, in what is known as a "second line," following routes they had taken since the club's inception in 1995.<sup>1</sup>

Though their houses and businesses remained vacant and family members remained scattered around the country, the residents who joined the parade willed their neighborhood back to life, performing a ritual procession that has enabled New Orleanians of African descent to maneuver through crises for over a century. As they marched past National Guard soldiers, danced atop sagging porches, and grooved their way over the Industrial Canal, their movements proclaimed, in the words of Big Nine co-founder Ronald W. Lewis, "We gonna show the world that we still exist. We're not going to accept people saying that we can't function as a people in the Lower Ninth Ward anymore."<sup>2</sup>

Dance is a powerful expressive form within New Orleans' second line tradition. Nevertheless, second lining is seldom regarded as

a serious art form requiring mastery of a particular aesthetic or capable of articulating a political consciousness. Like much black vernacular dance, it is often seen as an inevitable expression of the dancers' natural ability or rhythm, attributable to their racial identity. A closer look reveals, however, that paraders' movements cannot be reduced to what comes naturally. Moreover, perpetuating a connection between blackness and naturalness in the realm of dance contributes to pernicious constructions of black people as less than human, closer to nature, and primitive. The effects of this construction were made starkly apparent during the Katrina disaster, when African American New Orleanians were treated as subhuman, savage, and disposable.

This essay places New Orleans' black dance traditions in conversation with Hurricane Katrina, investigating the ideological ground wherein diverse phenomena and events are figured as "natural." It reveals how such discourses—which frame both black dance and disaster as unmediated, inevitable, and spontaneous—work to veil the mechanizations of white supremacy, making institutionalized racism appear to be beyond anyone's control. This essay simultaneously argues that New Orleanians' self-identifications as natural dancers can, perhaps paradoxically, be a form of resistance to white supremacy: ideologies of the natural are differently inflected for different speakers, audiences, and dancers.

This essay does not propose an equivalent or causal relationship between dance and disaster. Rather, it argues that dance is an important arena in which race is constructed and contested; and that such constructions and

contestations have material effects, as was made apparent by Hurricane Katrina. Due to New Orleans' tourism economy, dance is a highly visible form of representation in (and in images of) the city. Second line performances and visual depictions of second-lining bodies are widely deployed to promote the city's culture. The currency of such images became especially evident when President Bush delivered his first post-Katrina address. Speaking from the relatively unscathed French Quarter two weeks after the levees broke, he likened the region's recovery to a jazz funeral. "Once the casket has been laid in place, the band breaks into a joyful 'second line'— symbolizing the triumph of the spirit over death. Tonight the Gulf Coast is still coming through the dirge, yet we will live to see the second line."<sup>3</sup> Bush's use of the second line to symbolize resilience attests to the powerful roles of dance and music in forming dominant images of New Orleans, especially its black residents. This essay deconstructs the discursive work of the natural subtly operating in representations of black vernacular dance, and joins broader efforts to understand the intersections of race, citizenship, and disaster ignited by Katrina's aftermath ten years ago.

### A Brief History of Second Line Parades

African American voluntary organizations, like the Big Nine SAPC, grew out of nineteenth-century benevolent societies that offered people of African descent in the Americas access to medical care, burial insurance, and social and political networks. In New Orleans, black voluntary organizations have regularly hosted brass band-led processions,

including members' funerals, since at least the late nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> As the gains of Reconstruction declined and Jim Crow laws took hold, African American and Afro-Creole musicians and dancers paraded through the very streets where lynchings occurred, defying repressive laws and a racist culture by asserting their right to move.<sup>5</sup> Over the next century, eager dancers continued to follow black brass bands across segregated spaces, reclaiming neighborhoods gripped by poverty and mourning lives lost to violence.<sup>6</sup> Throughout New Orleans' history, people of African descent have deployed processions to transform urban space, voice dissent, and build communities with music and dance.

Dozens of SAPCs remain active in the city, and almost every Sunday afternoon, one of them holds its anniversary parade in the members' home neighborhood. The hosting SAPC members and musicians, or the "main line," lead a multitude of joiners, called the "second line," through New Orleans' African American neighborhoods for four straight hours. Second liners chant, play cowbells and tambourines, rap on glass bottles, walk, and strut. Most notably, second liners *dance*. Spilling onto sidewalks and front yards, snaking between parked cars, and even scaling roofs and overpasses, paraders showcase an embodied repertoire developed by generations of black New Orleanians moving to black brass band rhythms. Second liners' movements also evoke a time before the brass band, when enslaved and free Africans and people of African descent danced and drummed on levees and plantations, on the lakefront, and in Congo Square. Contemporary second lining retains core

characteristics of these historical influences, including an emphasis on improvisation, rhythmic play with the feet, and a collective and occasionally competitive spirit. Dancers constantly incorporate popular trends and invent signature moves, but these flourishes emerge within second lining's enduring physical elements: high-knee stepping, scissor-like footwork, and "buck jumping"—a term used to describe dramatic leaps, drops, and stunts.

### Do-Watcha-Wanna

Many practitioners and admirers of second lining share a belief that it simply "comes natural" to African American New Orleanians. For example, veteran second liner Doratha "Dodie" Smith-Simmons described with a chuckle how she began second lining: "Quite easily. [...] It's something that comes natural. [...] No one teaches you how to second line, it's just something you do from the feel of the music."<sup>7</sup> Smith-Simmons' response articulates a commonly held position: that second lining is a "do-watcha-wanna" expression that requires neither specialized knowledge nor rehearsal.<sup>8</sup> And yet many second liners give detailed descriptions of learning footwork, practicing their technique, and even coaching others. Their dance labor complicates, and contradicts, popular notions of second lining as do-watcha-wanna.

Such divergent narratives illustrate a long-standing tension within discussions about black music and dance. The notion of "natural rhythm" has long provided a sense of racial belonging among African Americans (and a sense of exclusion for those who do not identify as naturally rhythmic).<sup>9</sup> Conversely,

some African Americans refute the notion that their rhythmic abilities are biologically determined, citing instead the effects of repeated study and rehearsal. The latter position has been articulated most publicly by professional artists, such as jazz musicians and choreographers, to refute racist devaluations of their skills.<sup>10</sup> This debate opens a window into the discursive operations of white supremacy, for, as Robert Farris Thompson summarizes, "The belief that African Americans have an innate ability in [music and dance] represents a stereotype that has endured throughout American history. [...] Blacks were categorized as savages who were oversexualized, immoral, and intellectually and culturally underdeveloped."<sup>11</sup> The implications of this enduring stereotype extend far beyond the realms of music and dance to include histories of colonialism, chattel slavery, legalized discrimination, and, more recently, the US government's abandonment of African American citizens who suffered in Katrina's wake.

The equation of blackness with savagery gained traction in nineteenth-century scholarly and popular discourse. In 1837, Friedrich Hegel articulated a common European view of the "African character" as the absolute alterity to the enlightened white man: "The Negro represents the Natural Man in all his *wildness and indocility*."<sup>12</sup> Following Hegel's legacy, Europeans and Euro-Americans created the "Negro" as a "dumb beast," unfit for self-rule, fit for (and benefited by) slavery and/or the civilizing social order resulting from colonization.<sup>13</sup> The ways Africans danced were occasionally offered up as evidence of their primitivity. In 1880, white author George Washington Cable published

an account of dancing at Congo Square, describing scenes of “ecstasy” and “madness” for the readers of *Century Magazine*. Cable’s similarly sensationalist writing on voodoo highlighted dancers’ “bestialized savagery.”<sup>14</sup> As Michelle Y. Gordon explains, such reports of voodoo (I would add social dances) in print media linked dance with black criminality and hypersexuality, establishing them as “fearsome ‘fact’” in the popular imagination.<sup>15</sup> Like his many contemporaries, Cable’s narratives about black dance served as unmediated proof for Hegel’s colonialist formulations of the Negro as Natural Man in all its guises: savage, criminal, primitive, and rhythmically gifted.

Such formulations extend beyond nineteenth-century New Orleans, and remain trenchant in American cultural history. From antebellum Congo Square to midcentury ballrooms to present-day nightclubs, social dance arenas have been persistently posited as “automatic, already-constituted cultural space[s]” where African Americans display innate abilities that, in turn, signify their supposed “African instinct.”<sup>16</sup> The unstated equation is that African Americans “are how they dance, and they dance how they are.”<sup>17</sup> Marya Annette McQuirter calls for further explication of the actual actions involved in learning to social dance in black communities, in order to gain “a fuller and more complex understanding of the role of dance in community and cultural formation.”<sup>18</sup> We may more fully interrogate assumptions about naturalness and blackness by tracing the connections between the seemingly benign appreciations of one’s natural gift for rhythm and the lingering white supremacist assumptions of black primitivity. This

essay takes up McQuirter’s call by detailing the actions involved in learning to second line. As the disaster of Katrina shows, the stakes are high for understanding the discourses of the natural in discussions of both dance and disaster.

### Stealing and Styling Steps

Second liners’ labor of training and rehearsing occurs in backyards, schoolyards, kitchens, barrooms, and innumerable other spaces where they buck jump to the encouragement (and criticism) of their families and peers. A few SAPCs hold practices for their members so that they will be able to perform enviable footwork in precise formations on parade day. The Young Men Olympian, Jr. Benevolent Association (YMO), which celebrated its 131st anniversary in 2015, is one such club. Retired YMO member Kenneth Washington recalls his division “go[ing] through drills a month before the parade. We’d go in the park and practice for what we going to do that Sunday.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the Lady Buckjumpers SAPC (established in 1984) convenes for a practice session every Sunday during the weeks before their November parade. They usually meet in the yard of the club’s president, Linda Porter, or her sister’s yard, and have long been distinguished by their performance of choreographed phrases. As Porter reflects, “It looks so pretty when it’s together, you know? And see, people be saying, before our parade, they be like, ‘Where y’all going?’ And we’ll be like, ‘Oh, we got to practice.’ And they think that’s a joke, because they don’t realize that we really put our own into these routines, you know, to be able to have them like we do when we parade.”<sup>20</sup> Porter’s comment

reveals that rehearsal is often considered anathema to second lining; and yet, rehearsal has earned the Lady Buckjumpers their reputation as exceptional performers. On parade day, they move into various formations and return to their designated marching positions seamlessly.

The Lady Buckjumpers are also regarded as excellent improvisers, which likewise requires rehearsal. Club practices not only allow time for them to drill choreographed formations, but also to improvise and socialize within the less formal dance party context. Practices provide a fairly private arena where members pick up footwork moves from each other and refine those moves before hitting the streets. When they break from their precise routines for a full-throttle bout of exuberant footwork and no-holds-barred buck jumping, they are prepared to wow the crowd. Hours of improvising together in Porter's yard pay off when they respond to second liners' demands: "Show me what you're working with!"

An important method second liners use to practice improvised dance is to observe others' movements, imitate them, and alter them to create their own unique styles. This kind of practice occurs at every dance event, including second-line parades. Tyree Smith, Secretary of Family Ties SAPC, remembers this process when he first started second lining at age 13. For him, it did not come naturally.

Oh my god it [second line dancing] was hard! It was real hard because at first I couldn't keep up. You know, I couldn't keep up with everybody. [...] So, I really was off beat. I wasn't really—I felt unorthodox. So I started going on the regular [...]

and I just started watching people. And I was like, "Oh, I got that move. Oh, I got that move. OK, I can do this, I can do that." So I just kind of put all that together and kind of created my own style with a little swag from this person, a little swag from that person. That's where I came from. That's what created me. From everybody else. It's always basically stealing. That's all you're doing, is stealing different moves.<sup>21</sup>

Smith's narrative suggests that second lining's set of gestures is irreducible to natural expression and details *how* these gestures are learned: by stealing moves. Stealing, however, is just the first step; the second, more crucial step is to tailor stolen steps to fit one's unique style.

Perhaps the most prized quality in second lining is originality, and second liners devote hours of practice to styling a singular oeuvre. For example, Terrinika Smith, a dedicated second liner in her mid-20s and a member of the Jazzy Ladies SAPC, does not want to be seen as a mimic but as the dancer that others try to copy. She admires those who are "not trying to be somebody else. Because if you copy off of somebody else, they going to say, 'Man, they're doing what he doing.' But if you bring your own style, they going to say, 'Man I'm going to go home and try that!'"<sup>22</sup> By going home and trying that step, Smith sharpens her improvisation skills, drawing upon an ever-increasing repertoire when she creatively structures stolen steps in the moment of performance. Making moment-to-moment artistic choices in time with the rhythm, Smith choreographs her own carefully crafted footwork style in the moment that she performs

it.<sup>23</sup> She does so with such precision, speed, and fluidity that she might appear to be simply doing what comes natural.

While stealing and styling, second liners also occasionally find mentors. Tyree Smith recalls that an older friend would give him advice: “You’re moving too fast. Pick your feet up. Slow down.” Roderick Davis, a member of Sudan SAPC, received similar advice from his uncles as a child. “They would tell me, just pace myself sometimes, I don’t have to always go fast. Stuff like that. I got all that told to me at a real early age.” Davis was hungry for the information. “I wanted to learn. [...] I was looking to see what I needed to do to make everything look like the moves were perfect.”<sup>24</sup> His dance training began with mentors at a young age, and he now mentors the next generation himself. Davis’ decades of study were recognized when he was crowned champion of the Annual Big Easy Footwork Competitions in 2014 and 2015.

As Davis’ anecdote implies, many second liners’ dance education begins at home. Kenneth Washington recalls, “I used to come up in the Magnolia [Housing] Project. My mom and them, on a Friday night, they’d get a couple of friends by the house. They’d pay us, [they’d say], ‘Come on inside and second line.’ And yeah, we’d go against each other. We’d get on the middle of the floor, and we’d jump, we’d jump! And they’d give the winner twenty, twenty-five dollars.” Such kitchen-floor battles reveal the importance of competition, which pushes second liners to improve their skills and refine their personal styles. Describing his footwork style, Washington said, “I do whatever I feel,” but “when I parade, I know

what I’m doing. It’s all in my system. [...] When I hear the music, I’m going to get in the groove. That’s just me. I was raised with that second line.” Washington’s last comment can be read as a claim to his natural ability. However, given his descriptions of group practice, at home and with his club, we can conclude that Washington knows what he is doing due to a lifetime of practice within his system of family, friend, and club networks.

From backyards to sidewalks to kitchen floors, second liners constantly practice, prepare, and perfect their dancing. Their artistic labor challenges essentializing notions of second lining as a natural expression of blackness and questions the do-watcha-wanna definition of second lining as an uncomplicated form that anyone can access effortlessly and spontaneously. Through stealing, styling, mentoring, and battling, each generation shares with the next the steps, gestures, and rhythms that have enabled them to maneuver through centuries of struggle.

## Un/Natural Discourses of Dance and Disaster

To commemorate the ten-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Lower Ninth Ward residents welcomed President Obama to their neighborhood. The president delivered a televised speech, stating that the disaster was caused by infrastructural failures with uneven effects determined by the legacies of racism and related structural inequalities.<sup>25</sup> His comments reflect an increased awareness of how natural disasters are *unnatural*, and how natural disaster rhetoric veils the institutional workings of racism.

As is now widely understood, Hurricane Katrina may have been unpredictable, but the fact that black and poor residents suffered more losses than white and wealthier residents was not. The federal, state, and local governments' systematic neglect of flood protection systems and coastal wetlands disproportionately jeopardized the Gulf Coast's poor and working-class African Americans. This was not new. Since the beginning of New Orleans' history, black residents have been forced to live on marginal land: flood-prone areas with low property values, substandard public services, and limited job opportunities.<sup>26</sup> When the Mississippi River's levees breached in 1927, the "Great Flood" disproportionately affected the poor, mostly African American laborers in the poorer parishes surrounding New Orleans.<sup>27</sup> With Hurricanes Katrina and Rita made landfall almost eighty years later, African American residents still lived on more precarious land than white residents. Many had far fewer resources to prepare for, evacuate from, and recover after the disaster due to longstanding neoliberal policies of economic disinvestment in urban communities, including governmental withdrawals from public housing, inequitable public schools, lack of affordable health care, a prison industrial complex targeting black and brown residents, and privatized social safety nets.

Discourses of the natural mask the social and structural reasons that disaster struck the Gulf Coast in 2005. Labeling Katrina a natural disaster, as federal agencies continue to do, suggests that disasters inflict equal damage upon communities without consideration of class or race. It denies the fact that

every step leading to the destruction was, in the words of political scientist Cedric Johnson, "a conscious step toward the valuing of the investor class over all life."<sup>28</sup> Katrina's aftermath cracked open the façade of natural disaster logic, and for the first time in US history, public opinion began to acknowledge that natural disasters are actually manmade.

Although ideologies of the natural and their connections to racism have been openly debated in public discourse about disaster, they remain relatively unexamined in the realm of dance. Maxine Leeds Craig suggests that dance often escapes critical inquiry due to widespread perceptions of its harmlessness, so that associations between blackness and natural rhythm continue to "naturalize broader structures of inequality, anchoring chains of signifiers between racialized bodies and moral, emotional, and intellectual capacities."<sup>29</sup> Thus, it is important for antiracist work to continue deconstructing the myth of natural rhythm. If mainstream discourses about second lining are to honor the tradition's history of resistance, they must recognize the labor, relationships, and histories that crystallize in each footwork step.

### **Do-Watcha-Wanna as Opacity**

This is not to suggest that second liners themselves discard do-watcha-wanna approaches to their practice. As hegemonic assumptions about "African instincts" can reinscribe racist oppression, dancers' self-identifications as "natural" can resist oppression. Tamara Jackson, president of the VIP Ladies and Kids SAPC, recalls "getting her footwork" as

Natural. It was just natural. It was natural. It kind of goes back to that Rebirth [Brass Band] song, “Do Watcha Wanna.” You just basically do what you want do, do what you feel. You know, second line—there’s no particular way to second line. It’s all about the individual’s expression, and just following and keeping up with the rhythm and the beat. [...] And *everything is OK*. Whatever style you choose, it’s acceptable.<sup>30</sup>

Do-watcha-wanna descriptions like Jackson’s do more than describe second lining’s aesthetic and social values: they also hold a glimpse of resistance. Second liners’ insistence on inclusivity—“everything is OK”—means that dancers of any age and physical capacity can participate in the ritual. In this aspect, do-watcha-wanna prioritizes the *why* over the *what*, valuing the dance’s historic function as a tactic for maneuvering through struggle and celebrating life—collectively. Do-watcha-wanna is a refusal to reduce second lining to *what* it is, and could be viewed as an expression of “opacity”—a term developed by the postcolonial philosopher, Édouard Glissant. To understand something in the Western sense (i.e., transparently and clearly) can operate as an act of aggression by constructing the Other as an object of knowledge. In turn, refusing to be known transparently and clearly can be a resistive tactic.<sup>31</sup>

Refusing to define bodily expression as a clear object of knowledge, do-watcha-wanna adherents keep second lining out of the realm of Western understanding. Without a codified technique, it is difficult to funnel second lining into formalized systems of knowledge transmission, like dance

classes. By espousing do-watcha-wanna, second liners ground the practice in black social-ritual spaces, maintain ownership of cultural knowledge within the community, and reinforce the importance of informal settings, from kitchen floors to neighborhood streets, where embodied knowledge is transmitted. As ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt reminds us, repudiating the notion of natural dance ability does not require the denial of black identity, but recognizes “the way black identity has been specifically constituted through experience.”<sup>32</sup> As illustrated by the stories above, the experiences that construct second liners’ identities extend well beyond each Sunday second line, and grow from connections with family, friends, and neighbors.

Do-watcha-wanna is a potent strategy to wield in the smaller, whiter, and wealthier post-Katrina city, when more tourists and white and/or new residents than ever are joining weekly second-line parades. Although it is relatively easy to locate and join a parade, learning to perform the specific repertoire of footwork and buck-jumping moves is much more opaque. When asking for tips, a newcomer might be told, “Just do what you wanna”—a powerful response. While there is political power in critiquing discourses of the natural in hegemonic domains, there is political power, too, in claiming natural dance ability and thereby a right to opacity.

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## Notes

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