

b.O.s. 7.3 / *This is America* / Thomas F. DeFrantz

August 27, 2018 Thomas F. DeFrantz



Details, top to bottom: Jeremy Love, *Bayou*, 2009; Amy Sherald, Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama, 2018; Childish Gambino, "This Is America," Directed by Hiro Murai, 2018.

Black One Shot is a series that stages brevity and precision in response to a single work of black art, contemporary and/or prescient. Using a 1000-word conceit, it references the pressures on scholars and curators to present complex discussions and formulations of blackness for public consumption, political action, and academic relevance. It disputes staid frameworks of interpretation that cannot or will not account for the speculative, ambivalent, and irreconcilable ways of black forms. It speaks to the ongoing case for black lives and art mattering. And it conjures up the necessary intimacy generated between a critic and their object.

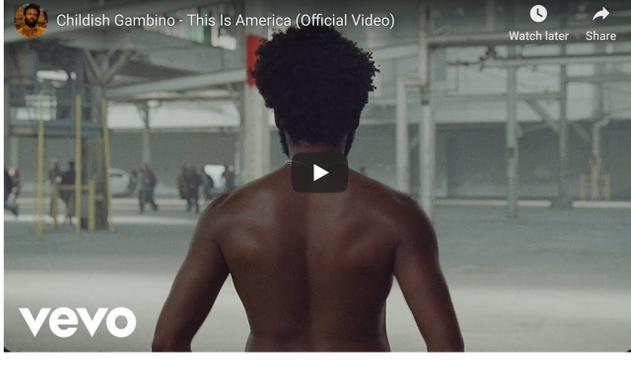
As an assembly of strategies, impulses, and circuits, these pieces conduct an historiographic and aesthetic review of how blackness and the arts demand and distend. We circulate them as a new measure of art criticism, one keyed to the channels and frequencies of blackness, pleasure, and critical contemplation. Black visual and expressive culture and all to which it is connected is better for these queries.

With 30+ contributors, b.O.s. will run the course of summertime, when the living is (un)easy. We invite you to follow and share as new work is issued every two weeks. Thanks to all the contributors and special thanks to Abram Foley, editor of ASAP/J.

This seventh transmission (8.27.18) features Jonathan Gray on Jeremy Love's *Bayou*, Rebecca Wanzo on Amy Sherald's Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama, and Thomas F. DeFrantz on Childish Gambino's "This is America" video.

- Michael Boyce Gillespie and Lisa Uddin (Editors)

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To dance America is to work through black social dance as a resource and a broad field of citational practice. Black, in this case, lines up with global aspirations of an African diaspora.¹ The dances deployed in the video for Childish Gambino's "This is America" (Hiro Murai, 2018) draw from the African continent and the black American context, with always-present references to Latin America and the Caribbean. The video includes a consistent dancing energy that underscores the ubiquity of dance in black cultures: like air and water, we refer to dance and its musics—its rhythms—daily, weekly, hourly. Childish Gambino forces dance forward to underscore the blackness of creative living as embodied actions. Unfortunately, though, "This is America" demonstrates the *doing* of some dances, but not a researching through the dancing as a capacity and possibility.

The dancing in the video acts as an ironic background for a message about "America" and its contradictions. But the dancing foregrounds assemblage and black innovation. Of course, that's the point. We have never stopped dancing in our lives as black people, no matter the social chaos that surrounds us. In the video, random assassinations demonstrate a disavowal of black life. But the liveliness of dancing and of a youthful physicality surrounding Childish confirms a "something else" that is still possible. That something else is an engaged musicality and embodied rhythmicity; the demonstration of physical information deployed intentionally to match a collective gesture. We dance alongside each other to show our willingness to move, socially, aesthetically, politically.

Musically, "This Is America" arrives as a simple song with an open rhythmic structuring. The song doesn't call for any particular dance in the ways that the best black music might always suggest a way to move with each other and the beat.² Rather, the track is an open device; a half-measure that allows Gambino to cast verbal barbs and perform his trademark ironic detachment. Through dancing, the song takes on value as an open container that can accommodate the Nae Nae, the Gwara Gwara, BlocBoy JB, and others. The names of the dances don't really matter here, as they are ways to call up physical approaches to rhythm that are shared to consecrate the present moment. We dance the Gwara Gwara rather than the Stanky Leg to claim a *Global Black 2018*. No matter that the dances are related, ancient, and also future-looking. When I dance the Gwara Gwara, I can imagine black South Africa on my body, sort of, now, if only for a moment.



Social dance made theatrical—arranged so that it can be viewed by people who are not called on to dance themselves—shifts what the dancing can mean and what it can do. Social dance might generally arrive as a sharing of achievement, a demonstration of a rhythmic discovery. Young people usually engineer these discoveries, amplifying physical gesture so that the complexities of the beat might be seen and felt. And dancing is engineering; re-conceiving possibility through weight, memory, energetic effort, and timing. Black social dance is sharing these discoveries among friends, families, and those who care to take part in our invention. Researching through rhythm, dancers confirm collective action as an embodied structuring of the potentialities of time.

But putting these dances on stages, or in front of the blankly-staring camera, removes the hand-made, bespoke subtleties that define Black social dance. Our dances are not made to be distributed in mass reproduction, not really, even if they can be and almost always are. We've made scores of social dances for the stage and the camera (and soon enough, the VR hologram). These distributed dances—on *Saturday Night Live* or YouTube—do a great violence as they become impersonal shells that anyone can just do—whether they have a connection to black life and its variegations or not.

Gambino needs black social dance to underscore his satirical point of view in the video. He isn't a great dancer, and no one in the video is allowed to actually dance beyond the frame. Watching, but disappointed by the use of dance as background, we remember that black dance thrives when it surprises itself; when the dancer moves the dancing to a place of unexpected physical innovation and embodied understanding. Gambino never arrives at this point of danced transformation. Indeed, there's no "best dancing" in "This Is America" as it matters little what dances are offered up or in what order or in what sorts of formations or arrangements. Black social dancing can do much more than what is allowed in the video.

Black social dance is shifty and fugitive; able to respond to the demands of short-term contracts in the neoliberal marketplace; precious and available. Fun, in the way that collective mobilization toward a social possibility might be joyous. Risky, because there is always a possibility of a failure, of not getting the step *right enough* to be legible. The dances are manipulations of rhythm distributed across the body and its capacities: black social dance demonstrates the inexhaustible capacities of human bodies in motion.



Social movements toward social justice and against disavowals are embedded in black social dances. We dance the knowledge that there will be revolutions led by people in motion; that the police state of America will not deprive us of our greatest resources of collective action through aesthetic gesture. America is entirely fucked now, as it has always been. The assertion "This is America" should mean *This is Black Social Dance*: the embodied resistance of a global physicality. We march, pop, dip, spin, and glide towards a shared possibility bound up in changing the beat. What could be more urgent than understanding how to shift time? Rhythm is time; dance is rhythm made manifest through intentional gesture. Change the beat; change the terms of the encounter. Work the shoulders, twirl the hips. Sashay. Waack. Demonstrate the submerged possibilities. Dance. Yes, please, dance.

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This is one of three essays from the seventh transmission of b.O.s. (Black One Shot). Read the other essays here:

- [b.O.s. 7.1 / Bayou / Jonathan Gray](#)
- [b.O.s. 7.2 / Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama / Rebecca Wanzo](#)

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About the editors:

Michael Boyce Gillespie is Associate Professor of Film at The City College of New York, CUNY. He has published on film theory, black visual and expressive culture, and contemporary art. Recent work includes co-editing (w/ Raquel Gates) the "Dimensions in Black: Perspectives on Black Film and Media" dossier for *Film Quarterly* 71.2 (Winter 2017). He is the author of *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Duke University Press, 2016). He is currently working on his next book tentatively titled *Death Grips: Film Blackness and Cinema in the Wake*. He would rather live in Oakland than Wakanda.

Lisa Uddin is Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture Studies and Paul Garrett Fellow at Whitman College. She has published widely on race, space, and human/nonhuman entanglements in modern and contemporary visual culture, and is the author of *Zoo Renewal: White Flight and the Animal Ghetto* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Her current book project, *Sunspots: Black Cosmologies of California Design*, considers black expressive practices in formations of California architecture and urbanism since the 1960s. She is mid-tone beige.

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Endnotes

- For other writings on black social dance and its capacities, please see Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Switch: Queer Social Dance, Political Leadership, and Black Popular Culture" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics* edited by Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin, Oxford University Press, 2017: 477-498; "Afrofuturist Remains: A Speculative Rendering of Social Dance Futures v2.0" in *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Philipp Rothfield, London: Palgrave, 2016: 209-222; "Improvising Social Exchange: African American Social Dance" in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1*, edited by George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016: 330-33; "Hip Hop Habitus v.2.0" in *Black Performance Theory: An Anthology of Critical Readings*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014: 223 - 242; "Unchecked Popularity: Neoliberal Circulations of Black Social Dance" in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations*, edited by Lara Nielson and Patricia Ybarra, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 128-140; "The Black Beat Made Visible: Body Power in Hip Hop Dance" in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, edited by Andre Lepecki, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004: 64-81. ↵
- Black music and dance have been long understood to be intertwined. Historian Sterling Stuckey traces the roots of a dancing black populace to the innovations of the ring shout, which embedded spiritual practice within the creation of sound and gesture. See Sterling Stuckey, "Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance" in *Dancing Many Drums*, editor Thomas F. DeFrantz, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002: 39-58. ↵

Thomas F. DeFrantz



Thomas F. DeFrantz teaches at Duke University and directs SLIPPAGE: Performance/Culture/Technology, a research group that explores emerging technology in live performance applications. DeFrantz acted as a consultant for the Smithsonian Museum of African American Life and Culture, contributing concept and a voice-over for a permanent installation on Black Social Dance that opened with the museum in 2017. Books: *Dancing Revelations Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (2004), *Black Performance Theory*, co-edited with Anita Gonzalez (2014). Creative: *Queer Theory! An Academic Travesty* commissioned by the Theater Offensive of Boston and the Flynn Center for the Arts; *fastDANCEpost*, created for the Detroit Institute for the Arts; *reVERSE:gesture-reVIEWE* commissioned by the Nasher Museum in response to the work of Kara Walker. Recent teaching: University of the Arts Mobile MFA in Dance; ImPulsTanz; New Waves Institute; faculty at Stanford, Yale, MIT, NYU. DeFrantz believes in our shared capacity to do better, and to engage our creative spirit for a collective good that is anti-racist, anti-homophobic, proto-feminist, and queer affirming.

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