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Bone-Breaking, Black Social Dance, and Queer Corporeal Orature

THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ

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The Queer Space: Where Innovation in Black Social Dance Occurs

Black performance provides privileged space for a resistant queer aesthetic in its structure: queer presence and queer gesture are foundational to the Black expressive arts. Africanist aesthetic structures of performance underpin popular forms of African American music and dance; these aesthetic structures value the unprecedented gestures of individual innovation within a movement structure recognized by the group.[1] Often, the gesture of innovation that defines excellence in these social dance forms defies common expectations of normative gender or sexual identity. In addition, many African American–derived social dances emerge from spaces of non-normative identity politic. This essay explores the resistance to gender conformity that surrounds the development and practice of certain Black social dances of the twenty-first century, and concerns itself with the engagement of queer gesture by non-queer dancers—the ways that resistant queer aesthetics are routinely embodied by African American straights and others eager to enjoy the social possibilities of queer creativity.

Black Social Dance Praxis: Language, Queer, Heteronormativity

Black social dances emerge and recede with persistent regularity within the United States, allowing microclimates of dance style to characterize time and place for varied groups along astonishingly variegated axes of expression. Where and when a dance emerges and gains popularity matters, and communities can recognize age-group and locative affiliations through the practice and witnessing of social dancing.[2]

Many of these dances explore contours of gender and sexual identity in their conception and practice. Among diverse traditions of Black social dance—including line dances, performed by the group moving in unison along the same direction; couple dances, that distinguish roles for each partner; or solo forms, offered up by individuals within a group dynamic—the creative expression of fluid gendered identity surrounds successful performance. Line dances include references to gender-specific gestures that are to be performed by all dancers. Couple forms are often learned and practiced by same-sex duos no matter the sexuality of the performers. And solo forms accommodate surprising shifts of gendered typographies in their execution, allowing male dancers to perform traditionally feminine gestures, and female dancers to engage recognizably masculine modes of physical expression.[3]

Of course, the narration of "masculine" or "feminine" gestures begs exploration; for this essay, all physical gestures are assumed to be available to any dancer, regardless of gender identity. However, normative rhetorics of gender performance operate throughout Black social dance practices, creating the spaces that certain dancers and dances push against in the creation of queer Black dance affect. A circular recoiling of weight through the hips acted against a dispersed

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energetic field might constitute a more *feminine* expression of rhythmic bounce than a blockish thrusting of weight sideward and downward, driven by a tensed torso and clenched fists that might be construed as typically *masculine*. In this essay, the *queer* space might be the space of slippage between normative presumptions surrounding gendered movement, and the fact of social dance performances that resist those presumptions.

The awkward literary descriptions of the basic *J-setting* bounce and a *Krumping* base step in the paragraph above demonstrate difficulties in writing about Black social dance. Simple dance gestures commonly understood by children and elders alike in everyday practice become difficult to characterize in literary (critical?) text. But the importance of Black social dance for demonstrating group affiliation is illustrated daily by the ubiquity of these dances that operate, emphatically, outside, or in excess, of language.

Because Black social dance doesn't rely on language for legitimacy, certain aspects of its practice can evade the stultifying restrictions of hegemonic portrayals. We don't need to be able to write about a dance, or even talk about it, for it to do its ephemeral, affective queer labor. In these dances, movements that might be considered homoerotic or gender non-normative emerge as demonstrations of physical agility and wit. Three examples will demonstrate non-normative gender portrayals taken up by straight dancers. First, young b-boys and b-girls in hip hop dance demonstrations of the 1980s often ended their physical floorwork inventions with a highly stylized feminine pose that echoed postures assumed by women fashion models. *After a spin on the back, end leaning on one elbow with legs crossed, head cast back and eyes forward, ready for your close-up*. The fleeting reference to an absent female model and her typical mode of professional display became popular among straight young men of color as a witty physical exclamation point to floorwork soloing. The feminine poses held only fleeting connotations of queer sexual identity, but offered a stable demonstration of citational wit as the dancer made reference to an impossible translocation of social identity.

B-boys and b-girls could assume the feminine postures of fashion models and be celebrated for their agility and physical flair in the portrayal because Black social dance highly values transformative physical agility. Carefully nuanced physicality drives the engine of achievement in these expressive modes. While dance surely functions outside of normative uses of language, its recognition draws on structures of form that can be likened to oratorical prowess. Dancers work through strategies of *corporeal orature* to create sequences of movement that reference materials far from the site of the dance.[4] As in other modes of Black expressive culture, the ability to reference historical events, contemporary circumstances, family affiliations, and demonstrate personal flair all contribute to the admiration accorded the performer by the group. As with emceeing, church oratory, or jazz musicianship, *individual style* matters in Black performance. In dance, these embodied intelligences demonstrate intersectionalities of expressive agility bridging metaphor, social awareness, and creative invention.[5] Style arrived for early b-boys as a queer stance—in this case, the

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practice of posing. These poses were allowed and encouraged in the masculinist spaces of b-girling and b-boying floor work because their execution confirmed healthy, creative, social flexibility that was valued by the group.

Queer Black stance also emerged in queer spaces to be eventually co-opted into heteronormative contexts. The explicitly queer modes of Black social dance waacking and voguing developed in 1970s private social spaces that supported queers of color in dance motion.[6] These forms, born and honed in mixed-race brown and Black communities, cast social dance as a competitive mode of demonstration executed by many-gendered performers. Voguing and waacking deploy a strongly accented physicality that utilizes freezing and popping gestures, with muscular tensing of the body connected by brief, flowing transition movements that might be characterized as feminine. Both of these forms linger in physical embellishment. Voguers engage stop-action movement sequences, striking ever-extending series of poses improbably connected by super-fast transition motions. Waacking explores extravagant gestures of punching and hitting, but centers on the preparation for striking rather than striking itself. When waacking, dancers can appear to be executing super-fast warmup exercises for a physical battle. But both forms exalt a decorativeness of gesture, aligning their practice with normative conceptions of femininity as decorative and embellished.

While voguing and waacking continued to be practiced by queer dancers of color well into the twenty-first century, these dances were taken up in international competitions by gender-normative, white, Asian, and Indian performers. By 2016, we can find straight white women voguing and waacking in competition and social dance settings. Heteronormative Asian men might vogue or waack as part of a dance set. These dances retain the distinctive gestural values that defined them in the 1970s, but their contemporary performance needn't be linked to queer identity politics. By now, many dancers have access to these forms, within explicitly queer contexts as well as hypercommercialized and heterosocial ones.

Black social dances that develop in heteronormative spaces survive in homosocial contexts that can easily be seen as queer. Consider that the Nae Nae and the Dougie are each performed as "shine" dances that allow a solo dancer to show off in the context of the group. The Dougie is often performed as a demonstration of physical cool and prowess, a courtship dance that allows its witnesses to appreciate the individual performer's style. The Nae Nae offers a celebratory frame for eccentric physical gestures.

These two twenty-first-century dances are regularly practiced in the same-sex contexts of athletic teams, including football and basketball. On one hand, these homosocial performances act as "practice sessions" for heterosocial contexts players will presumably enter after leaving the locker room. On the other hand, the dances contain their own visual and kinesthetic logic among their practitioners and witnesses that ground their performance in assessments of physical ability that are, if not homoerotic, at least non-normative. Video after video documents these dances performed in locker rooms and tight group huddles alongside the playing field by same-sex groups of athletes in celebration.

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These Black social dances arrive as both markers of Black difference from a white mainstream, and as homosocial renderings of danced possibilities. Dipping into the complex wellspring of Black social dance and its ability to ground group cohesion, the Nae Nae and the Dougie help college athletes recognize themselves as part of a group, and celebrate their individual movement styles. Athletes dancing these courtship dances ground themselves in the corporeal orature of Black expression, even as they show off and practice arousing desire among their same-sex peers. We smile with compassion and wonder when the women on a college basketball team perform the Nae Nae during "school spirit rallies" posted to YouTube.[7] Athletes dance these courtship dances alongside each other but toward the audience, in choreographed accord, slightly uncomfortable at the task, but willing to fulfill the queer call for celebratory Black social dance and its complex affiliations within sexually ambiguous homosocial contexts.

Queer in this articulation refers to the non-normative flashes of gender performance that contribute to unexpected renderings of social identity. Black social dance trades in this sort of queer performance at every innovative turn: in each spontaneous same-sex hand dance; each fashion model pose following b-boy floorwork; each hypermasculine, aggressive, fighting movement offered up by straight female Krumpers working through expressions of rage. The queerness of physical expression called upon by dancers in this tradition does not exceed the terms of social dance; rather, queer affect enhances explorations of dance form. Black social dance grows in volume and effect through these engagements with queer embodiment. Queer gender articulations, including those performed by non-queer dancers, drive Black social dance practices forward.

Bone-Breaking

Now we turn to bone-breaking, an almost exclusively male dance form that trades in visual illusion and physical agility. Originally developed within the very social practice of dance battling, bone-breaking casts the ability to render the body in unusual physical arrangement as its very achievement. As a demonstration form of dance, bone-breaking thrives in both video distributed by social media, and close-up, in-person settings of dance battles. Bone-breaking transforms the very possibility of a stable Black body by insisting on hyperexcessive flexibility. Its practice by young men of color raises important considerations of Black masculine stance, *queering* what might be expected in normative contexts of the contemporary US police state.

Consider the physical assumption of "hands up, don't shoot," that limns a flattened body in structural accord. Balanced and poised, the chalk-line referential image suggests submission with weighted body-presence; an opening of energy to another more powerful force. In this physical position, my hands are empty, fingers open; I confirm that there are no weapons here, and await your direction. Tell me what to do next.

The poise of the "hands up, don't shoot" posture stems from its constructed balance. The arms are to be symmetrically raised high, above the head, but nowhere near straight. With arms up too high, we seem

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too eager. With arms raised too much to one side or the other, our submission becomes fanciful. Held too low, they suggest non-compliance. I am to hold my arms up just so, where they can move to the head easily, before you handcuff me. I feel the anticipation of unknowable action; the directness of my body toward an action. The gesture of "hands up, don't shoot" begs, "what's next?"[8] If the contemporary police state constructs "hands up" as a habituated posture for young men of color, the bone-breaker's movement *beyond* it shifts the Black male body—the object of target practice—toward being a subject worthy of perusal. As the object moves, of its own volition, it authors a shifting concatenation of receptions. It winds through identities; it becomes a possible she, or as in bone-breaking, almost always a he, on the way back to the revelation of a dancing "it." Passing through a shifty vocabulary of nearly-impossible gesture, the bone-breaker confirms: assumptions of physical limitation need not always apply.

Bone-breakers overextend their shoulders to achieve the illusion of breaking their bones and realigning their musculatures. They shift far beyond "hands up, don't shoot" to difficult positions of arms contorted behind the back, and torsos twisting in apparent distress. As they dance, we can't see the pain that their movements create, but we can surely imagine its presence, be intrigued by its inevitability, and shrink from its intimation. We can't see the pain, but we know: that's gotta hurt.

Bone-breaking cites the persistent pain of Black life as a source of aesthetic ingenuity. The dance suggests: push to the breaking point, then release the joint, circle around, and realign the ligature. Demonstrate flexibility in the face of physical trauma. Self-inflicted dis-tension reconceived as artmaking. Bone-breakers practice their modular flexions; they stretch and train, gaining fluidity in the releasing maneuvers that mark the form. Many of its best dancers are extremely flexible to begin with, and enjoy an affinity with the practice of dislocating their shoulders on demand. Bone-breaking thrives on creating illusions of an impossible flexibility, and yet, much of the art is not illusion at all, but the actual demonstration of artful ability and agility.

To be Black is to demonstrate the mark of the visible pain of being other; to be visibly Othered, to be a hurt. We know this in the context of the United States, where we must tell each other that Black lives matter, entirely, of course, because that isn't the case. Some Black lives matter, and many don't seem to; worse, Black bodies offer evidence, in their very presence, of continuous mistreatment and unethical social and economic institutions. Bone-breakers extend the implication of pain our bodies always already bear toward an exquisite artfulness that confounds and disturbs.

This dance marks the dancer's production of discomfort, assumedly in his own performance, but also in its viewing by the audience. The object turns toward the creation of a subject through creative animation, the revelation of unanticipated capacity, virtuosity, wit, self-possession, and physical ability. This is an entirely *queer* form of Black social dance, in that it is gender non-normative, physically resistant, and largely confined to a small group of practitioners.

Madonna and the Archive of Black Social Dance

As Black creativity, bone-breaking arrives along with theatricalized social dance forms including krumping, waacking, and voguing. These forms emerge in local public spheres, where music and dance arise together, each driving the other to light. Some dedicated dancers practice the emerging style until a repeatable basic form solidifies with a name everyone can remember; this simplified dance travels from neighborhood to neighborhood, until landing, inevitably, in some national media orbit. After being exposed on a national stage, expert practitioners develop incalculable choreographies of the form: advanced versions of the movements that extend its expressive capacities. Meanwhile, most of us do a very simple version of the dance for a few months. Some forms become more extravagant in their theatrical capacity, though, and even more expert dancers realize even more eccentric embodied possibilities previously unknown. I say eccentric to underscore the hand-made, extravagantly detailed, expert versions of Black social dances that inevitably develop. These versions bear little resemblance to the dance that was briefly practiced by a larger population. But these physically burnished, expert demonstrations become the sedimented archive that stand for the dance in later generations. Our examples here are the *filmed* records of the Cakewalk, the Snakehips, the Lindy Hop, early b-boying and b-girling, krumping, all manner of voguing, and bone-breaking.

While each of these Black social dance forms began with simple elaborations of gesture toward artful corporeal orature, the demonstrations of them you will find in YouTube's archives will be exceptional iterations prepared after months, if not years, of practice. Like the bone-breaker's art, Black social dance in heavy circulation distends well past any an easily scalable "social." The important point here: depictions of Black social dance inevitably celebrate its most extravagant practitioners, rather than the anonymous people who gave rise to the forms. The translocation of the dance across circumstances is not without cost.

Bone-breaking bears close family resemblance to voguing, the dance of posed gestures executed competitively. The two forms trade in visible articulations of *queer* as a physical effect and as an assumption of identity politic. But these forms emerged in different eras: voguing references the cabaret stage and the catwalk, while bone-breaking embraces the camera. Voguing requires a community of participants, while bone-breaking needs only a dancer and a witness: human, analog, or digital. This variance matters greatly for how Black social dances sustain themselves across generations. Bone-breaking has generated a powerful niche collective of young people who stretch, learn to distend and sometimes dislocate their shoulders, create routines, film them, and stage their own "how-to" web tutorials. A profoundly twenty-first-century phenomenon, bone-breaking coheres in a distributed blackness by the choice of its participants; it needn't foment only from decidedly Black spaces, even as it emerges from them; it needn't depict an unassailably Black worldview, in the ways that Voguing surely did. The *queerness* of bone-breaking might feel

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as much like the ludic arrogation of youthful folly (why would anyone practice causing that aesthetic distress to their body?) as it does a dance of freakishness.

Bone-breaking is a physical technique that might be used to construct a longer solo in a larger whole; it can be an expressive demonstration form, but usually arrives in snippets of one to three minutes rather than more extended sequences. Voguing is a larger category of dance practice, and could include bone-breaking among its contents. Both forms, though, bring us back to the figure of Madonna, and the slippery nature of Black expressive culture's archive.

Cultural critic bell hooks has written about the ways in which Madonna appropriates Black cultural expression (and Black *people*) in creating quasi-transgressive, spectacle-ridden sites of white supremacy and patriarchy.[9] hooks' 1992 essay "Madonna: Plantation Sister or Soul Sister?" begins with a prescient quote from theorist Susan Bordo: "No matter how exciting the 'destabilizing' potential of texts, bodily or otherwise, whether those texts are subversive or recuperative or both or neither cannot be determined by abstraction from actual social practice."[10] While dance does not arrive as text, as it offers lively, unpredictable, shifting scenes of expression and emotion that exist outside or in excess of language, its place within social practice surely defining its varied uses and analyses.

Madonna ported voguing, krumping, and bone-breaking into her stage spectacles as demonstrations of her finger-on-the-pulse of Black expressive culture and reified Black social dance practice. In each case, her creative team needed the dances to do things beyond their purview: voguing was performed with unison sequences and without judges or a participating audience in her 1990 "Vogue" video and stage show; krumping was performed sequentially and in a predetermined narrative in Madonna's 2005 "Hung Up" video; bone-breaking was performed as group choreography, as any modern dance might be, in the 2012 "MDNA" stage tour. Moving these dances out of their foundational social circumstances varied their capacity to underscore evolving social relationships. Dancing behind Madonna onstage or in her music videos, these Black and brown dancers, and Black social dance forms, became spectacles of queer Black corporeality.

Madonna's appropriation of these Black social dance forms signals the common decontextualization that follows the revelation of excellence within their performance. Again and again, outsiders to Black cultural practices "discover" the idiosyncratic, *queer* experts in dance, and bring them to a larger public, casting themselves as arbiters of style and taste among those Othered moving bodies. But this change of venue diminishes the capacity of these dances to highlight individualized non-normative, resistant expressive modes. The dances and their dancers become dynamic spectacle, valued mostly for the novelty of unusual physical gesture.

The oppositional force of Black social dance tends to stem from its novelty; from the places where it differs from normative, habituated movement. This is both the problem and the resourcefulness of social dance. Its contents are unstable, even when bound by name or genre; its practice tends toward the crucial subject category of

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"expression." The dancing body is lively and animated, unusual in its portrayal of emotional valence tied to physical possibility. To dance, we must be able to "do": the "doing" speaks of futurity in an embodied manner, of a practice that is honed, particular, and momentarily thrilling. When it is extravagantly executed, as bone-breaking tends to be, we pause to acknowledge its particularity and complexity.

We pause and hold our breath, as the subject demonstrates other ways to physically be in the world. We hold our breath, witnesses to this self-inflicted Othering. Expressive Othering. We hold our breath. The toxic world around us produces these Othered Black bodies. We vogue, we bone-break. We dance to demonstrate our protest to the assumption of a unified subject.

The failure of *queer*, narrated with insight by José Esteban Muñoz and Judith Halberstam[11], creates resistant space in performance that refuses to finish itself according to standards of hegemonic appropriateness. *Queer failure* suggests that *queer* may be made manifest through a discarding of achievement as the result of practice. Or that *queer achievement* may manifest in a performative failure that keeps a potentiality, a horizon of social success, always beyond reach. I want to suggest here that Black social dance engages *queer potentiality* as an achievement of virtuosity, resistance, and social flexibility. The dancers of these social forms engage, briefly, in non-normative stances and non-normative physical presentation. They demonstrate an abiding presence of *queer* as a valuable and often preferred mode of expression for Black social dancers, pushing forward expansive physical possibilities for expressing Black social life regardless of sexual or gender identity.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. See Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Popular Dances of the 1920 and Early '30s: From Animal Dance Crazes to the Lindy Hop" and "Popular African American Dance of the 1950s and '60s," in *Ain't Nothing Like The Real Thing: How the Apollo Theater Shaped American Entertainment*, eds. Richard Carlin and Kinshasha Holman Conwill (Washington, DC: National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2010): 66–70 and 182–6.

2. See Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Unchecked Popularity: Neoliberal Circulations of Black Social Dance," in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations*, eds. by Lara Nielson and Patricia Ybarra (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 128–40.

3. Many of the dances referenced in this essay can be seen on YouTube.

4. See Thomas F. DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible: Body Power in Hip Hop Dance," in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, ed. Andre Lepecki (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 64–81.

5. See Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

6. See Naomi Bragin, "Techniques of Black Male Re/dress: Corporeal Drag and Kinesthetic Politics in the Rebirth of Waacking/

Punkin',” *Women & Performance* 24, no. 1 (2014): 61–78.

7. Among many videos, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47Lh1iqlMaE.

8. See Anusha Khedar, “‘Hands up! Don't shoot!': Gesture, Choreography, and Protest in Ferguson” for a different rendering of this gesture: http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/protest-in-ferguson/.

9. bell hooks, “Madonna: Plantation Sister or Soul Sister?” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992): 157–64.

10. Susan Bordo, “Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies: Review Essay,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 1 (1992): 159–75, 172, quoted in hooks.

11. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) and Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

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