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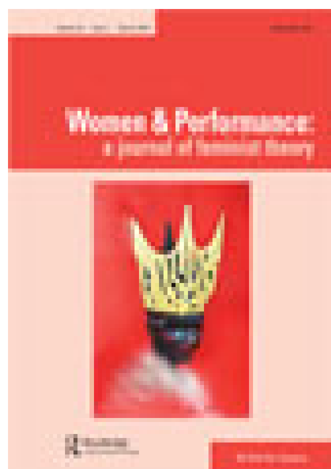

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Techniques of black male re/dress: corporeal drag and kinesthetic politics in the rebirth of Waacking/Punkin'

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Techniques of black male re/dress: corporeal drag and kinesthetic politics in the rebirth of Waacking/Punkin'

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The improvisation-based dance *Waacking/Punking* developed in gay underground disco clubs of 1970s Los Angeles and circulated transnationally via television's landmark black music/dance show *Soul Train*. With almost all male progenitors passing during the early AIDS crisis, the culture was reborn in the 2000s to the transnational hip-hop/street dance arena, now a competition style dominated by nonblack cisgender females. While seeming to promote hetero-normative gender performance, learning the dance practice potentially queers movement norms through *corporeal drag* – techniques for trying on and refashioning movement that transform kinesthetic consciousness. At the same time, the obscure structural positioning of the black male figure associated with Waacking/Punking's historical context complicates and disorients gendered notions of power and racialized sexuality in its rebirth. This trans-methodological study centers experiences of black practitioners, drawing from first-person stories of pioneer and new generation dancers, as well as native ethnography and archival research. In subtle ways, Waacking practices redress black masculinity and question performing social inclusion under terms of a white patriarchal order – terms that suture blackness-to-pathology-to-violence. The erotic practice of Waacking/Punking may be understood as an embodied re-negotiation of hegemonic demands on gender and sexuality, made possible through its transmission of a black kinesthetic politics.

Keywords: Waacking/Punking; black masculinity; corporeal drag; kinesthesia; queer hip-hop dance; black performance theory

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When nine-year-old Willow Smith, daughter of megastar hip-hop couple Jada Pinkett and Will Smith, released her 2010 chart-topping single "I Whip My Hair," the powerful physicality of the kid-friendly song and video were praised as trans-generational reclamations of black female beauty, empowerment, and celebration.[1] Deleted from most accounts was the video's momentary queering of blackness that placed Willow in line with a slew of hyper-hetero pop artists since at least 1991, all using moves from the Voguing ritual dance of Ballroom culture.[2]

Willow's video debuted flashes of the hair-whipping genius of Leiomy Maldonado, famed one year earlier as the first trans-identified woman to be centrally featured on a mass broadcast TV dance show, *America's Best Dance Crew.*[3] Securing no more than 10

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seconds of hair time, Leiomy's work in the video channels the Ball World, flickering in the interstices of MTV hip 'pop' spectacle. Seen one way, the hair-whip becomes crowning accessory for the construction of Willow's pop-industry persona. Still, Leiomy performs work for a subordinated community's survival and sustenance (Bailey 2013, 16), opening a Nickelodeon-esque kids' cypher to possibilities for an intramural engagement of "transitional bodies and public spheres" (Stallings 2013, 135). Cast in the role of Willow's hair-whipping schoolteacher, Leiomy educates the schoolchildren in the kinesthetic politics of black queer and trans sexuality.

A second, older video circulating on YouTube places Leiomy's movement style in context as she performs with her House in the Ball underground, a space where gender and sexual non-conformity are far less clearly circumscribed or tidily smoothed over.[4] Semi-nude masked black angels (or are they bats?) slither lasciviously down the catwalk – a slow motion orgy of unapologetic pelvic gyrating, masturbating, and man-on-man osculating. Next, the Mizrahis in pigtails and pastel pajamas sit in a playpen, lip-syncing remixed lyrics of Barney the Purple Dinosaur's theme song "I Love You." The Children step out one-by-one, duckwalking, twirling, dipping, hair-whipping.

House of Mizrahi's bizarre parody of girlhood affirms the same irrepressible playfulness as Willow's schoolyard romp, except it's babies up in drag as Leiomy falls out of the playpen onto her back in a Machiavelli dip, incorporating a staggering display of physical prowess intermingled with infantile gesticulations. The Mizrahis' skit is a type of play – a critical element of Ball sociality and erotic practice that suspends normative categories to enact transformations of power. The playpen figures the protected space of childhood from which the Children emerge, realizing in collective movements of Voguing who they want to be. They work the runway to enthusiastic cheers of fellow House members, affirming a mutual love and desire *for* love that sustains the Ball's non-normative kinship structure. The Mizrahi Children's world is not altogether different from Willow's: both perform childhood through dancing together to create a critique of what's proper. Yet the Children who are also "being[s] in, toward, and for futurity" (Muñoz 2007, 361) double Willow's mainstream affirmation of childhood as time of becoming, space of protection, and (for queer black folks forced to survive in a present that denies their existence) a radical underground "relationality, politics, and reality" (Allen 2009, 313).

The videos' juxtaposition hints at an intramural dialogue between Ball Community and black popular youth culture, facilitated by performances of *corporeal drag* – a process of queer play in which performers try on and refashion movement as sensory-kinesthetic material for experiencing and presenting the body anew. Corporeal drag centers material effects of movement, as well as social and structural processes that control the terms and consequences of movement play. This essay considers how corporeal drag functions in black street-dance practices.[5] These collectively produced techniques follow aesthetic principles abstracted from shared experience. Doing the technique transfers abstract meaning through kinesthesia, the "sixth sense" of movement perception.

Carrie Noland (2009) describes how sociologist Marcel Mauss' writings on body-based technique explored not only how the motor body makes meaning but also how such knowledge is kinesthetic, based in the body's ability to feel motion. Challenging his contemporaries' emphasis on the culturally constructed body, Mauss argued that body and society make meaning simultaneously:

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> The process of moving into and through postures is not the corporeal translation of a belief or idea; rather, that process is the belief or idea as it produces a certain stance toward the world, the self, and the relations linking the two. Mauss realized that in the corporeal practices of yoga, the belief is lived on the order of the body – as a form of consciousness. (Nolan, 2009, 36)

Kinesthesia produces a visceral knowledge such that "bodily habits and psychological outlook are deeply intertwined" (Geurts 2002, 76). Kinesthetic knowledge does not begin as an object outside the body but develops through a co-constitutive process of moving and making meaning.

At the same time, structural logics of race, always cohering through attendant dimensions of sexuality and gender, mediate technique in ways that are never seamlessly available to a practitioner's self-reflection.[6] An already non-normatively gendered status (Spillers 1987), blackness complicates how gender and sexuality operate in the queering of movement, mixing forms of pleasure, desire, fantasy, and violence. Considering "cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place" (Moten 2008, 177), black street dances are techniques for accessing subordinated ways of being (and knowing being).

Combining oral history, native ethnography, and archival research, I focus on black queer kinesthetics of Waacking/Punkin' style. While Vogue maintains a primary association with the Ball Scene, contemporary Waacking is most widely practiced by nonblack, cisgender females in transnational hip-hop/street-dance communities. I stretch the frame of 'hip-hop' liberally in comparison to more traditionalist views of the culture to play with normative categories of genre – in this case hip-hop versus disco dance styles with origins in gay underground club life – not in a move for re-categorization but in an attempt to think through the racial politics of crossing (genre and gender) itself.[7] I center experiences of black practitioners to consider how Waacking/Punkin' subtly redresses black masculinity, disorienting white-hetero-patriarchal notions of power and racialized sexuality through corporeal drag.

* * * * *

Waacking/Punkin' developed in gay, primarily Black and Latino underground disco clubs of 1970s Los Angeles. The improvisation-based technique originated with movement styles of a core group of dancers who frequented these clubs. Simultaneously, Waacking appeared on the first nationally syndicated black music and dance show *Soul Train* (Figure 1). The television studio provided a congregational space where socially divided cultures could dialogue. Regardless of what viewers may have thought they were seeing, *Soul Train* brought gay black dance styles to international exposure, at a time when 'black' and 'gay' were (and still widely are) imagined to be completely separate.[8] The intramural dialogue between differently categorized styles is apparent in rare footage of early Waack/Punking dancers performing with Diana Ross in 1979.[9] Their choreography blends movements of Waacking/Punkin' (disco) and Locking (funk), revealing subtle but significant correspondences.

While Waacking can refer to fast, rhythmic arm whipping that is a defining characteristic of the style, the less common term Punkin' indicates a stylized movement behavior that expands

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Figure 1. Photo and headline from *Ebony* magazine's August 1978 special issue, "The New Generation." Shot at Los Angeles nightclub Maverick's Flat, a recruiting ground for 1970s *Soul Train* dancers. Posing left to right are Kirt Washington, Tyrone Proctor, Jeffrey Daniel, Jody Watley, and Cleveland Moses. Photographer: Win Muldrow.

beyond set vocabulary, incorporating elements of large locomotion, dramatic gesture and facial expression, and narrative. Waack/Punking dancers drew inspiration from the moving images of early Hollywood stars, prompting early references to the style as "Garbo." Straight dancers would parody these movements and say they were "punking" in a derogatory sense. When pioneer dancer Tyrone Proctor taught outside the gay community, he used the term Waacking instead. Jeffrey Daniel (prominent member of R&B group Shalamar) invented the unique spelling with two As.[10] *Soul Train* dancer Ana Sanchez clarifies the tensions of translation that surface in the politics of naming Waacking/Punkin' style:

> Guys that entered the straight world, did not want to be called fags so Waacking came about … in their own world it was Punkin' … Punkin' was how they lived, how they expressed who they were.[11]

Waacking/Punkin' in the US was virtually unknown by the 1990s with the disappearance of most progenitors during the early AIDS crisis.[12] In the early 2000s, street dancers researching early *Soul Train* styles picked it up again.[13]

Textual and verbal descriptions of Waacking often obscure its queer (Punk) history, or resort to vague characterizations of the style as "feminine," perpetuating the most common slippage of assumptions about gender and sexuality. On Season Eight of FOX TV's *So You Think You Can Dance*, Sasha Mallory and Ricky Jaime danced a Waacking routine choreographed by Kumari Suraj. FOX included this photo caption in its online Dance Dictionary:

> Waacking is a style of street dance that originated in Los Angeles in the early '70 s. It takes a lot of skill, precision and control. It is typically choreographed to Disco music as the driving rhythms and defined beats compliment the quick hand and body gestures.[14]

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Not only does FOX's definition erase any direct reference to gay Black and Latino communities that created the dance, the starkly hetero-normal aesthetics of the accompanying photo frame Waacking as an appropriately heterosexual practice. Sasha's gauzy top and bell-shaped skirt reveal black bra and short shorts. Ricky dresses in button-down shirt, pants, suspenders, and fedora. She wears heels; he wears wingtips. His hand moves to her waist, eyes gazing down at her body. She faces the camera with a sultry facial expression, hip and chest flexing at exaggerated angles and knee turning inward.

This performance of properly dressed gender relations sells a narrow vision of cisgender straightness. In *SYTYCD*'s translation, Waacking is made proper by every consumer vote approving sexy girls coupled with admiring boys, striving to embody ideal norms of female femininity and male masculinity. Are these crossings celebration or violation, when the shadowy origins of the kinesthetic material transform into something more palatable? FOX sets a protocol for mass-market sexuality and sociality that requires practitioners to *disown* Waacking's queer history, especially considering *SYTYCD* contestants are not allowed to reveal their sexual orientation. Waacking's rebirth into mass-media culture is part of an appropriative process by which hegemonic power reconfigures cultural identity, wrapping transgressive relationality and queer practice in hegemonic hetero-normativity.

Yet for the Black – that status which has never been granted access to normative gender-sex subjectivity – the question turns less on compulsory cisgendering of movement than on the heightened stakes of performing social inclusion under terms of a white patriarchal order that suture blackness-to-pathology-to-violence. Black performance, understood as the site for the "re-elaboration" of dispossession, coheres outside conventional formulations of agency (Hartman and Wilderson 2003, 184). In the mass marketing of black performance, the question of cisgender display might be more critically posed in terms of *becoming* – an orientation toward process more than product. How does the everyday practice of Waacking resist ownership, and how do Waackers, in creating their practice, sidestep hegemonic productions of race, gender, and sexuality (Moten 2003)?

Might Waacking kinesthetics reorient bodies to bring a black queer consciousness into being? Cisgender female performances of Waacking may present ways to work within what appears to be a standard framework of hegemonic femininity, that expand women's bodily sensibility and expression of their sexuality – a renegotiation of hegemonic femininity within the body that a specifically black queer kinesthetics makes possible. In doing the practice, women may critically distance their bodies from movement norms and creatively refashion their perceptions of "woman," "feminine," and "female."

When I've asked what they value most about Waacking, many female interviewees have responded: "Waacking taught me how to be a woman." Putting aside the slippages already imminent in the term "woman," the prevalence of such statements marks a desire and way to break free of gendered limitations in hip-hop, even if the response, paradoxically, is abandoning a pair of Adidas Shell Toes for platform stilettos. B-girls tend to dress in unisex, less revealing clothing (track suits, caps, sneakers). Waackers often, though not always, wear tighter, "sexy" clothing and/or women's clothing and dance in heels.[15] Differences in costuming don't simply indicate a re-suturing of hegemonic femininity to female bodies. Female practitioners articulate a sense of power they understand to be part of the performance of "woman" – what battle dancer Leah "Waackeisha" McFly feels in the transformative moment of first learning the kinesthetics of Waacking:

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> Tyrone's like, "You gotta forget everybody and just zone in. Feeeel *you.*" … Closed my eyes. I started getting shivers down my spine. He'd already told me to stop. I didn't hear … I remember what it felt like to *feel* for the first time … I came alive in that moment and forgot everybody was there. Ever since then? I know how to channel my sexy. Now I don't need to close my eyes … I always felt in the terms of the dance, whether it was Popping or Dancehall … but to feel sexy? I was not *used* to sharing that with people. The Waackeisha you see now? Me dancing in underwear? Never did I dream that would be me. Maybe I needed to get to that extreme, to get out of my comfort zone.[16]

Leah differentiates kinesthesia – the feeling of moving "in the terms of" Popping versus Waacking—to mark a definitive change in her knowledge of self.[17] Importantly, her practice necessitated "extreme" estrangement, a concept theorized by Noland that I later explore in depth. Open to subordinated sensations, she escapes her own expectations of who she could be. More, "dancing in underwear" exemplifies this change. While black women's respectability insures the machinery that capitalizes on pathologizing (what under other circumstances would be) strip-club femininity, Leah undoes a certain racialized sexuality to "promote shadowy feminism that is a feminist politics" (Stallings 2013, 138). Without fully releasing the hegemonic feminine norm that strains its center (Moten 2008), practicing "Waackeisha" is a mode of self-care that changes the profit-oriented exploitation of women into the disorienting impropriety of dancing in underwear (Figure 2).

It's important to complicate the assumption that Waacking's rebirth, in transitioning from more fluid performative spaces of the disco underground to normatively inclined spaces like the Western commercial dance studio, simply reverses a gay male appropriation of what might be reductively called "feminine" ways of moving, or even that Waacking presents an opportunity for cisgender females to reclaim "femininity." What sense of

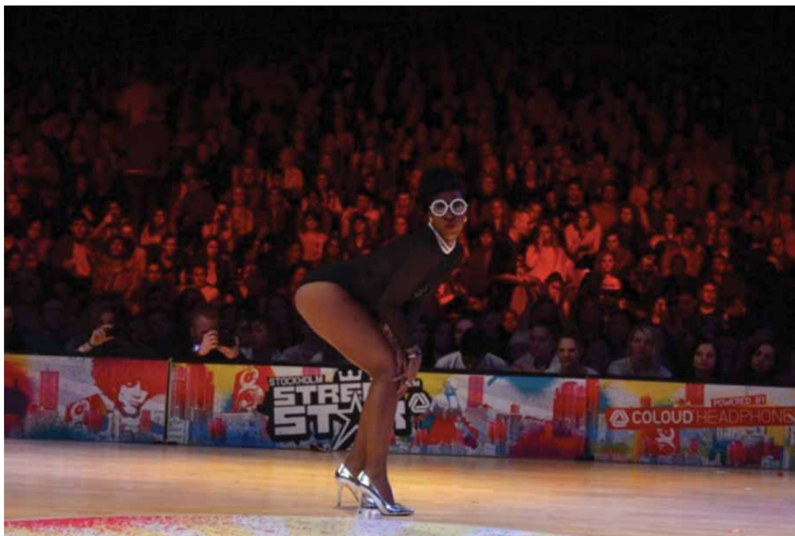

Figure 2. "Now I don't need to close my eyes." Waackeisha in battle at Streetstar 2013, Stockholm, Sweden. Photographer: Setareh Seydalzadeh.

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femininity are they reclaiming? Though Waack/Punking dancers mimicked classical Hollywood glamour actresses, their performances were less about a normative desire to be female (and white) than transforming the meaning of such identifications themselves.[18] Crossings between multiple identificatory sites constitute a complex queering of movement itself such that for the practitioner, the sense of moving "as a woman" in the body also requires a queering of the idea of "woman" held in her belief system.

Corporeal drag can then be, under certain conditions, a *queering praxis* – defined as power to create critical distance from hegemonic normativization through repeated application of movement techniques. A Waacker may shift how kinesthesia relates to consciousness of her sexuality as a process of social identification. This understanding frames conceptions of power within Waacking's aesthetic philosophy. Tyrone explains:

> This is not an easy dance. Power is most high. If you're gonna just do *uh, uh,* [*waves his arms absentmindedly*] and think this is a girly dance? You're in the wrong place. You have to learn how to apply power, attitude, and control. They're *every*thing.[19]

Tyrone's use of the term "girly" marks a distinction I'm making between girl-ness as defined by culturally enforced norms of movement that suture (white) femininity and submissiveness and a refigured sense of power that Waacking aesthetics incorporate: radiant energy, vitality, fierceness. Likewise, practitioner King Aus associates different dance styles with subtle changes in how he accesses power:

> When I Pop? I'm *very* aggressive. I'm trying to basically *destroy* … to cause some kind of a wave in the earth. For [Waacking] when I say power … a lot of people get confused thinking everything has to be powerful *physically* … I'm extending all my energy from the tips of my fingers. You feel that energy … from the next state.[20]

Aus distinguishes power as physical aggression and power as *felt presence*. Channeled through directedness of gesture, posture, and gaze, power doesn't destroy but expands.

Reggie "Prince Lavince" Seale (Figure 3) challenges judges' demands that he dance with more power:

> Breakdancers do power moves … I'm not [that] kind of power person. I am powerful. I have strength. My power comes in my connection to the music. I can hear things people will not normally hear. That's how I beat people, in that power. I'm a very flowy kind of person. My hands are like water. I'm able to express the music more when I'm softer, rather than hitting everything like a pin needle. Light like a feather.[21]

Reggie's self-evaluation insists power doesn't always require shows of athleticism. His articulation of power brings forth marginalized sensibilities – specifically enhanced aural perception manifested in a "connection to the music" and the feel of water. His references to water and flow are especially interesting, since the peculiarity of water is that it appears a gentle, completely permeable substance, yet its associated qualities of flow, slipperiness, and heaviness, enable it to be an incredibly destructive mobile force.

The difficulty of disarticulating gender expectations from understandings of power consolidates a hegemonic demand for cisgender normativity, necessarily complicating a

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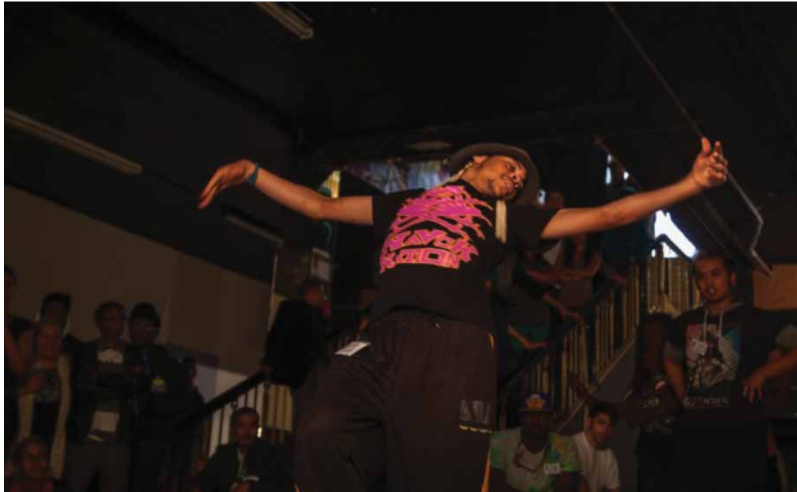

Figure 3. “Light like a feather.” Prince Lavince battles at Soul Train Ball: A Tribute to Don Cornelius, Oakland, California, 24 March 2012. Photographer: Mona Caron.

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critique of Waacking practices. Reggie compares gendered approaches to power beginning in childhood:

> Growing up I always felt weak being a gay man. I didn’t play football. I’m not a man. I don’t have any power. You’re a sissy boy. [With Waacking] I have control over the people watching me … it feels so good to walk inside the club and everybody’s just staring at you with your awesomeness and the music. Keep looking at me I don’t care.

The control Reggie affirms does not manifest as guarded defensiveness but is a working with power, understood as ability to direct the gaze of others through cultivation of presence and a sense of self-possession, of being completely comfortable in one’s own skin. Importantly, Reggie contrasts his practiced awareness of power *felt* through Waacking technique, with his childhood knowledge of power that *divides* – “man” from “sissy boy” – by enforcing hegemonic notions of masculinity (football as a manly practice and gay identity bound to effeminacy and a feeling of weakness).

Reggie’s description of entering the club dovetails with Fiona Buckland’s critique of currencies of the fabulous and fierce – a desire to look extraordinary and practice of moving through space to gain attention (Buckland 2002, 36). He transforms the hyper (in)visibility he experiences as a gay black man by manipulating technologies of visibility – practicing the power to be looked at, which is also the power to be fierce. Waacking fashions a non-normative corporeality that fits his body, mixing signifiers of race, gender, sexuality, power, and pleasure:

> I feel more empowered doing Waacking as a gay male … when I Waack I have some type of power. It’s like how when you Breakdance it makes you feel like yeah, I’m a man … I feel free and like I have some type of power …

Reggie's words search for a refiguring of power generally disallowed black men, which Darieck Scott (2010) has approached through a critique of black power as an abject status:

> I want to talk about that which is not-power according to the ego-centric (and masculine and white) "I" definitions we have of power, but which is *some kind of power*, if by power we mean only ability, the capacity for action and creation in one or several spheres, be they internal or external to the empowered. (171, emphasis mine)

The articulations of power sketched out by Scott, Reggie, Aus, and Tyrone cannot be dissociated from the obscure positioning of the black male figure in history. Considering the context of Waacking/Punkin's development in 1970s Los Angeles, mass-media framing of black power movements provided a discursive context in which normative performances of black masculinity could be compelled and transformed (Rhodes 2007). Waacking/Punkin' on *Soul Train* and in the disco underground worked boundaries of physical and representational space, distinctly expanding allowable expression for black men. The relation of funk music (hip-hop's progenitor) to disco, as the division of music and dance genres (Hip-Hop/Waacking) operates in parallel, widens the contextual frame for understanding how a politics of black manhood must figure into Waacking/Punkin' practice.[22]

The aesthetic critique of disco music across an atypical range of contemporaneous communities including white rockers, feminists, funk, soul, and R&B musicians, was that in the absence of the live band, disco flagged the death of the natural body. Described as an artificial, manufactured, highly managed sound coupled with apolitical lyrics, disco lightened the heavy tone and often overtly confrontational lyrics of funk. Disco lyrics were sparse evocations of a ritualistic dance-floor culture that consumed themes of sex, slavery, and demonic fire, with the sensory affect of heat, fever, and ecstasy.

Walter Hughes (1994), while occluding the presence of non-white gay men in his description of African-American women disco singers and their racially unmarked gay male fans, aptly shows the link between the derision of disco's aesthetics and the figuring of male homosexuality:

> Even the subtler critiques of disco implicitly echo homophobic accounts of a simultaneously emerging urban gay male minority: disco is "mindless," "repetitive," "synthetic," "technological" and "commercial," just as the men who dance to it with each other are "unnatural," "trivial," "decadent," "artificial" and "indistinguishable" "clones." (147)

Normative conceptions of sexuality similarly penetrated black power discourse, opposing the black power male (heterosexually virile, self-defending, politicized, authentic) to the abject punk/fag (emasculate, submissive, politically ineffective, and ultimately, whiteness itself). Oakland rapper Too Short's expression "disco killed the funk" concisely states the crisis to a hetero-normativized black power masculinity presented by (white) homosexuality.[23]

Disco anthems call forth a collective vocabulary that anchors Waackers' political experience of their corporeality as they improvise within the sensory-kinesthetic grammar of Waacking technique:

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Don't call a doctor/Don't call her momma/Don't call her preacher
No, I don't need it/ I don't want it
Sweet love, I love you/ Sweet love, need love
If there's a cure for this/ I don't want it/I don't want it no[24]

A Waackers' classic, "Love Hangover" tropes illness and erotic desire, employing ethical symbols of family and religion. On the dance floor these notions are made abstract and corporeal. Dominant meanings of love, kinship, health, sexuality, and morality, secured through white-hetero-patriarchy, are stripped and re-signified kinesthetically in moments of collective improvisational practice.

Tavia Nyong'o (2008) argues the threat presented by disco is its "disorganized modulation" of normative oppositional categories – a fear of same-sex desire but, also, the threat of disorganized *hetero*sexual desire. Transferred in aural-kinesthetic-affective club space, disco's "oceanic feeling-tone" summons the body, whether by acts of dancing, singing, or both. More than an essentially anti-gay stance, anti-disco sentiment in the 1970s had to do also with flipping the function of heterosexual masculinity from active to passive. The disco movement presented the idea that male bodies could be sexy and objectified, consolidating "a male demand for a return to the position of gazer rather than gazed upon" (103). Tethered to the politically fraught history of black sexuality that puts the black male body's criminal and savage nature under constant surveillance, disco was/is a predictable scapegoat.

In an era rife with "[v]icious attacks on all phases of the black movement" (Hazzard-Donald 1996, 224), politicized black manhood was/is framed to defend "blackness [against] its being violated and abject, as, in fact, the *loss* or threatened loss of bodily integrity" (Scott 2010, 111). The oceanic, positing an always-troubled relation between self/other, was the soundscape within which Waack/Punking dancers played, modulating true/false, straight as real/queer as artificial, and object-driven versus objectless love. What was rendered unthinkable as a black radical stance was/is a "willingness not only to play the abject but to risk *being* it, suggest[ing] an altogether different form of politics and social bonding: a politics that does not organize itself around a stance of defense or aggression, a politics … in favor of one's becoming immersed in, lost in what it is to *be* race, precisely as to be black means to have-been-blackened" (244–245). As an abject community, Waack/Punking dancers staged their rejection of whiteness *and* black hetero-normativity through affective-kinesthetic practice. The more generalized but often inarticulable anti-queer sentiment toward disco music was/is also a disposition "at the heart of – but that strains against – the black radicalism that strains against it" (Moten 2008, 177).[25] Fabrication, an act of invention implying deceit, suits a critique of how Waacking/Punkin' performances differently dress and redress black masculinity.

For Reggie, flowing and moving "like a feather" is who he is and how he feels most comfortable expressing himself. Aus, who has worked to bring straight men into the practice, emphasizes that dismissive reactions ("You must be gay.") point to dancers' fear of stretching gendered movement norms: "You don't have to take a feminine approach even though that's sometimes something I do … you manipulat[e] people's minds with the ways you danc[e]. I like playing with that kind of gender swap" Figure 4.

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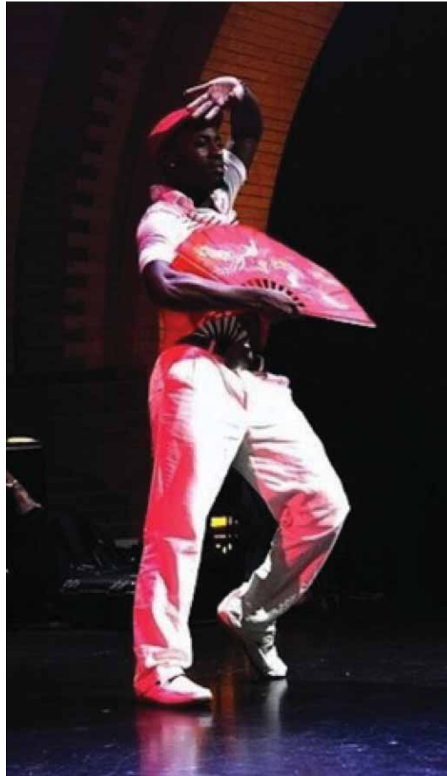

Figure 4. Aus battles at House Dance International 2008, New York City. Photographer: Vitamin Dee.

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Looking to the practice of black men is persuasive for it is from this relatively marginal position in the context of Waacking's rebirth that notions of power and racialized sexuality become conspicuous. Scott's rejoinder is helpful to hold in balance: "which is not to say that women cannot manipulate or play with abjection but that where women do so the political ramifications may more easily appear to be a confirmation of the defeat with which abjection works rather than a complication of it" (20). Reggie's moving experiences of abjection contain "the unspoken history of institutionalized sexual violence against black men [which is also] profoundly related to [the] inability to think about the history of black women, their suffering and struggling, as anything other than a secondary commentary on the status of black manhood" (Sexton 2003, 34). The ways dancers move are inextricable from relations of power structuring their performances.

In the contemporary hip-hop/street dance arena how "well" practitioners move depends on decisions of respected judges whose opinions carry weight within the community, effecting competition, training, and teaching practices. I have witnessed (and heard from other dancers) instances of male judges demanding that a male dancer Waack "like a man" or "be more masculine." No matter a judge's sexual orientation, such comments evoke anxiety over compulsory hetero-normative identification and cisgender normativity in

general. Similar to how normativity functions within the Ballroom Scene, street dancers "apply and adhere to these criteria, often conflat[ing] notions of anatomic femaleness and maleness with performance and presentation … [which] ends up re-inscribing and relying upon these same norms to view and judge each other within the community" (Bailey 2011, 380).

Cisgendering of movement secures gender boundaries to counteract an embattled history of racialized sexualities, working less to encourage wider participation than to obscure how the normative gender-sex binary always bolsters white-hetero-patriarchal power. Holding in balance the "inescapable ambivalence of desire and its precarious relation to aggression and violence" (Sexton 2003, 36), fluid identifications of race-gender-sexuality cohering in black performance indicate and cannot be separated from the permanent "structural vulnerability" (36) of black to white.[26] The erotic practice of Waacking then may be more subtly understood as an embodied re-negotiation of hegemonic demands on gender and sexuality, made possible through Waacking's transmission of a black kinesthetic politics.

Tyrone's master class spotlights the transmission process. We are performing in groups, hitting improvised freezes to a strong disco rhythm. I recognize one student – a highly trained Breaker. "B" chooses stereotypically "feminine" poses. Hand moves to hip. Hip juts out at an exaggerated angle. Foot turns coquettishly inward with bent knee. She approaches the poses stiffly, robotically trying on and rejecting a series of ill-fitting dresses. Since our exercise seems physically undemanding in comparison to Breaking, I'm curious about her unconvincing performance. Lips form a thin tight line; gaze is removed, hard to read. A rigid facial expression underscores the robotic sequencing of poses, making the face appear to float detached from its body. Watching her I feel unease. I feel awkward in my own body.

B's *dis*ease sets conventionally "feminine" postures in relief, foregrounding their constructed nature – a phenomenon that Noland argues can become an acquired skill:

> To abstract movement from its social "frame," is itself not natural, but rather a learned skill, one of the culturally elaborated "somatic modes of attention" that are designed to alert us to the qualities, not the results, of our acts. (6)

Learning a dance style estranges the practitioner's body from its habitual kinesthetics, bringing to consciousness how movement feels. Estrangement creates critical distance "to confront gesture as contingent" (214) and potentially re-evaluate socially given meanings.

Years of training incorporate a Breaker's sensibility into B's "normative gestural routine" (6), challenging her to move outside gender norms. When teaching basic Breaking, I direct girls to feel the weight shift from hips to arms and chest, since relying on hip strength is gender-normative. Proto-typical B-boy postures assume a guarded defensiveness: rounded shoulders, concave chest, rigid jaw, arms wrapped around torso. Waacking opens, expands, and extends the torso; as Tyrone directs, "Touch your head to the ceiling."

B's choice of poses reflects a common misperception of Waacking tied to stereotypically "feminine" movement conventions. The disjointed dynamic she powerfully creates through estrangement effectively reveals the *un*naturalness of positions that by and large

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are associated with the (white) female body and (white) femininity. Her performed resistance to making movement "fit" makes me feel present to my body and to a performance phenomenon we both feel and know as women.

In learning to Waack, gestures present themselves to B's consciousness, alerting her to how they feel in her body. These shifts in meaning take place not only through the body but also through language:

> It is precisely when sensations produced by holding a posture or executing a gesture become available to "introspection," or conscious awareness, that they must be mediated by language or by equally culture-specific systems of visual imagery. The intervention of culture is necessary to transform the inarticulate workings of the nervous system into the experience of a particular subject. (10)

The moment movement transitions from habit body to consciousness, the mover interprets kinesthetics through cultural systems of meaning available to her, complicating potential subversion of social norms. It is at this intersection of kinesthesia and culture that the function of discourse becomes critical to learning dance technique. After a few groups perform the exercise, Tyrone tells us to sit down and listen:

> This is not. Your. Fault. I'm going to tell you this. Because I've been teaching for a while and what I've noticed is, when I speak? People do what they *think* it is. They don't do what it actually is.

And later, when we finish the exercise:

> I just want you to realize how difficult that was. That was not easy to do. I'm taking a lot of you out of your comfort zone. You're not used to moving this way. You're not used to understanding. So to do what you're doing is beyond anything I could possibly ask for.

Tyrone articulates an estrangement he perceives to be particular to learning Waacking. It is only paradoxical that a form so often characterized as "feminine" would actually be "taking a lot of [women] out of [their] comfort zone," if one assumes femininity is bound to biologically female bodies.

The "understanding" Tyrone asks of his students is not available through cultural conventions that tie female-gendered bodies to particular norms of moving. To label Waacking a "gay" dance assumes static representations of homosexuality and effeminacy that don't recognize how "identity might best be described as process with multiple sites for becoming and being" (Halberstam 1998, 21). Describing Waacking as "feminine" results from the reciprocal shaping of cultural norms and language that can only inadequately articulate what happens when such norms become translated through non-normative gender systems.

When Tyrone instructs, "Don't do what you *think* ... do what it *is*," he indirectly asks practitioners to disarticulate cultural norm from kinesthetic knowledge incorporated in the aesthetic principles of form. Estrangement is a queering process itself, setting the practitioner at odds with a white hetero-normative gender structure. Learning to Waack has the potential to redefine the meaning of movement coded "feminine" within a normative binary gender system. In this sense, Waacking becomes a tool to access a historical context of black and abject ways of moving.

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More, Tyrone's assessment suggests thinking is limited as a way of doing Waacking. I would argue these practices resist a Western ocularcentric (Moten 2003, 174) subordination of kinesthesia as a way of knowing (Geurts 2002). For Waackeisha, Reggie, and Aus, embedded in the erotic practice of Waacking/Punkin' are aesthetic politics that produce "genuine thinking, [which] might best be conceived of as black thought" (Sexton 2012). Slipping into corporeal drag, they practice modes of self-care, using technique to feel and refashion a shared history.

Conclusion

I have focused on processes of kinesthetic transmission to provoke a deeper line of questioning with respect to the stakes involved in the complex transpositions, translations, and transmutations of dance style. What I am suggesting here are nuanced ways that culture and political practice are intertwined. Varied articulations of Waacking's kinesthetics become less or more comprehensible depending on the context of performance, and especially the bodies performing, and therefore, corporeal drag maintains an equivocal politics.

Dance is a paralinguistic modality wherein processes of identification directly connect to sensation, making a desire to know and experience the world differently the same as a desire to inhabit the body differently. Waacking, understood as a collective everyday practice, is a technique for making the body anew, disarticulating one's sense of being from ways of being dependent on "the proprietary claims of the dominant position" (Moten 2003, 262). Still, I question to what extent estrangement enables practitioners to distance themselves from normativized demands of movement, such that they might also "steal away" (305) – from a world that recognizes femininity most often as training the (white) female-gendered body to appeal to (white) male subjects – something of what Hortense Spillers (1987) calls "the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within" (80).

Reggie's experiences on the street-dance battle circuit may be compared to B's studio practice. Her refusal to easily embody postures of gender-conforming femininity marks in movement the failure of words to adequately articulate the "actually is" of Waacking – not only a series of movements but an approach to moving – a feeling that passes "the gender prerogatives of white men because [of] … a different kind of history" (Spillers et al. 2007, 304). Waacking, in this sense, might best be styled as radical black feminist practice; working to move beyond misogyny, homophobia, and hetero-patriarchy, it makes change in the realm of kinesthetic consciousness.

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Notes

1. "I Whip My Hair – Willow Smith," music video, dir. Ray Kay (Columbia and Roc Nation, 2010) http://raykay.com/video/whip-my-hair (Accessed 28 April 2013). See Veronica Miller, "Best Week Ever For Black Girls," 21 October 2010. http://www.npr.org/blogs/tellmemore/2010/10/21/130729009/the-best-week-ever-for-black-girls.
2. Jonathan David Jackson's article on Voguing explains: "The Ballroom Scene arose in the middle-to-late 1970s out of mid-twentieth century forms of New York City-based African American Drag Balls (or gender impersonation competitions)" (Jackson 2002, 26). Following Jackson, I capitalize dance styles and key Ball terms that retain culturally specific meanings. Recent video appearances of Voguing include the "Leiomy Lolly" in Britney Spears' "If U Seek Amy" and the "dip" (Machiavelli, death drop, shablam) in Chris Brown's "Kiss Kiss" and Beyoncé's "Get Me Bodied," none of which showcase the Ball Community. The commercial benefits Madonna continues to reap from her multi-award winning 1991 video "Vogue" are disproportionate, considering her silence on the untimely hospitalization and death of Voguing pioneer Willi Ninja.
3. Leiomy Maldonado is a member of Legendary House of Mizrahi (featured in 1991 documentary *Paris Is Burning*) and principal dancer for Vogue Evolution, the first self-identified gay group to perform on *ABDC*. In Ball culture, Houses are non-biological, cross-generational family structures. See *Butch Queens Up In Pumps*, Marlon Bailey's performance ethnography of Detroit Ball culture, for a comprehensive study of Ballroom's intricate gender system.
4. "$5000 House of Mizrahi," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz6KqE9O11Q (Accessed 28 April 2013).
5. I define *black street dance* to encompass a transnational range of formal techniques, based in improvisation and driven by African-derived grammars, that retain in their practice and politics a strong alliance with a discourse of "the street" – allowing them to sustain critically unstable relationships to formal, and often elite, institutions of artistic production. Black street dance is also a conceptual framework for studying dance as a sensory-kinesthetic modality through which the logic of racial blackness – and an imagination of a form of black power – remains operative, even, and perhaps more significantly, when forgotten, ignored, or denied. Throughout the 1970s, the term "street dance" signaled a general prohibition of such practices from private dance studios.
6. I draw on Wilderson's definition of structural antagonisms, paradigmatic power relations ordering the world that can be known, to distinguish particular meanings and effects of corporeal drag where black bodies are concerned (Wilderson 2010).
7. The umbrella designation "hip-hop" is misleading when applied to dances with separate geographic and cultural histories. Hip-Hop dance is a distinct style and battle category, encompassing 1980s–1990s party dances and dancing that derives from them, collectively created to hip-hop music.
8. Early *Soul Train* dancers touring internationally helped establish Japan as a key location for the evolution of hip-hop/street dance.
9. "Diana Ross with Waack Dancers." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etnptlY_4cg (Accessed 7 May 2013). Waack/Punking dancers in order of appearance are Andrew, Tinker, Billy, and Lonnie.
10. Tyrone Proctor, telephone interview by Naomi Bragin, 26 February 2012.
11. Ana Sanchez, Speakers Panel at "Punking+Posing=Whaacking," a dance festival held at Peridance Studios, New York, New York, 21 July 2011.

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12. Original Punking dancers include Tinker, Arthur Huff, Andrew Frank, Michael Angelo Harris, Billy Star, Lonnie Carbajal, China Doll, Tommy, and Viktor Manoel. Viktor now teaches internationally and is the only living member of this group. Blinky, Mickey Lord, Gary Keyes, and Lamont Peterson are key innovators of Waacking who have passed. Key contributors to contemporary Waacking/Punkin' include Tyrone Proctor, Jodi Watley, Jeffrey Daniel, Adolfo "Shabba Doo" Quiñones, Toni Basil, Ana Sanchez, Viktor Manoel, Archie Burnett, Dallace Ziegler, Angel Ceja, and Brian Green.
13. Brian "Footwork" Green taught the first Waacking classes at Manhattan's historic Fazil's Studios. Green's work to bring recognition to Waacking in contemporary street dance communities is of primary importance to the style's US rebirth.
14. "FOX Broadcasting Company – Waacking Dance Dictionary – So You Think You Can Dance on FOX - Official Site," http://www.fox.com/dance/dictionary/waacking (Accessed 6 May 2013).
15. Shell Toes are a classic sneaker style worn by Breakdancers. B-girl is a common term for girls and women who practice Breaking but may also refer to a person's sincere commitment to hip-hop culture.
16. Leah McKesey, interview by Naomi Bragin, Los Angeles, California, 30 August 2013.
17. Popping, a California-originated style contemporaneous to Waacking but danced mainly to funk and hip-hop music, is most often practiced in male hetero-oriented spaces.
18. See Muñoz (1999).
19. Tyrone Proctor, audiotape of dance class, In The Groove Studios, Oakland, California, 25 March 2012.
20. Ausben Spottedeagle, interview by Naomi Bragin, New York, New York, 26 July 2011.
21. Reginald Lavince Seale in discussion with the author, 6 May 2013.
22. Undoubtedly, these reconfigurations were also important to non-black dancers who pioneered Waacking and Punkin' cultures. Within the limitations of this critique, I focus on the meanings of Waacking practice implicated in the particular structural dynamics of blackness.
23. Too Short, "Burn Rubber," *Married to the Game*, Jive Records, 2003. Nile Rodgers, founding member/vocalist/songwriter/producer of *Chic*, one of the top disco groups of all time, was a Black Panther and tied his lyrics to a politicized experience of blackness (Easlea 2004).
24. Marilyn McLeod and Pamela Sawyer, "Love Hangover," Motown Records, 1976.
25. Marlon Ross (2002) analyzes the historically embedded trope of emasculation and divestment of (hetero-male) black power by a race rape symbolic that understands race as male and rape as done to women. Under this symbolic, black male sexuality cannot inhabit an epistemological space of the homoerotic, foreclosing acknowledgement of literal acts of rape that secure the ongoing racial and sexual domination of black men.
26. A close analysis of how street-dance battles materialize ontological relations of subjection, abjection, and black masculinity, is a critical future expansion of the material I present here. See Reggie's battle, judges' commentary, and user posts, for a telling example of these dynamics. "Top 16: Prince Lavince vs Ahyumi – Step Ya Game Up 2012 Waacking," Funk'd Up TV, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9RI4XGSfhQ (Accessed 31 Oct 2013).

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Waacking – King Aus II. Video, 5:01 minutes. 21 Aug 2008. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjhExWDqvXI&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PL526B95E4865886A5.

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