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Embodied Representation: Racial and Gender Identity in Hip-hop Choreography

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The role of dance as a facilitator of identity formation, cultural transmission, and community building is an under-theorized field in the social sciences. If we recognize identity as an active, fluid, processual construct, then the embodied nature of dance can provide distinctive analyses on individual and group self-making practices. This article examines the ways hip-hop choreography dance crews use movement and play to create utopian multicultural spaces. Their Afro-humanistic ideology espouses that any race can dance "soulfully" if they express authentic language, clothing, and class-consciousness. Many crew participants also use dance, specifically vogue, to critique hip-hop hyper-masculinity in the dance studio and on stage. Longitudinal participant observation with Dance Explosion, an Austin based choreography group, illuminates the contradictions between representation, authenticity, and caricature. Contrary to advancing the socio-political objectives of hip-hop cultural pioneers in 1970s New York City, Dance Explosion's performances tenuously liberate, essentialize, and reify racial and gendered constructs. Their quest for cultural legitimacy fixes blackness and queer identity while promoting racial ambiguity as a means to attain a multicultural crew. This work presents dance as a dynamic epistemological process that traverses various archives of knowledge.
***Keywords**: Play, identity, dance, hip-hop*

We believe in power, education in truth, freedom, justice, equality, work for the people and the upliftment of the people.

Afrika Bambaataa, from the *Beliefs of the Universal Zulu Nation*

Introduction

Hip-hop culture in the United States is a world unto itself. The founding fathers are smooth-talking blacks and Puerto Ricans who led crews of disaffected young people with the power of their wordplay. The Declaration of Independence, Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, and the Fifteenth Amendment are but precursors to what happened on 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the South Bronx. Steadfast members of this subculture believe that *true knowledge* gained through hip-hop rinses centuries of (mis)education from the minds of those yearning for truth. In the wake of this mass baptism, transcendent identities emerge that reinterpret conventional racial and gender borders. Race and gender, or the active erasure of these categories, connects disparate peoples into the cultural family of hip-hop. A large subset of this group believes race is the flawed product of manipulated history. In their view, camaraderie through hip-hop opposes social, biological, environmental, cultural, or any other construction of race that unconscious people may devise.

Equally, the global collective of hip-hop contains only kings and queens, making an intergalactic duality that produces a harmonious balance on Earth. This humanistic philosophy, created by influential hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa, powerfully shapes the fundamental ethos of the hip-hop

community. Bambaataa's belief that unity, knowledge of self, and *play* can transform society informs how many participants of this subculture define their identities. His abstract beliefs on identity push what was once an African American/Afro-Caribbean ideology into an international, multicultural movement. Like the mysterious Bambaataa himself, some of these beliefs on race and gender may seem fantastic, unbelievable even. To understand hip-hop culture, let alone this research, we must pay attention to arguments in hip-hop that apply absolutes in reasoning. From this position, we can examine how play modifies the connected tenets of race and gender in hip-hop culture.

Deejays, rappers, graffiti artists, and dancers propel hip-hop culture through constant innovation based on play. These experimental acts produce new ways to view and engage with the world. Grandmaster Flash experimented with two turntables, a mixer, and duplicate records to create a system of matching rhythms that revolutionized the creation of music. The song *Boyz in the Hood,* written by rapper Ice Cube and performed by Eazy-E*,* takes listeners on an imaginative day in South Central Los Angeles. This song ends with an allusion to Jonathan Jackson's 1970 shootout in a Marin County courthouse (Chang 2005, 304). This demonstrates how the usage of the imagination to draw upon a collective memory is a cornerstone of rap music. Likewise, for political reasons or for fame, graffiti artists continually force Americans to examine the meanings of public property. Modern graffiti in the United States evolved from simple tags to elaborate, multilayered murals propelled by experimentation. Hip-hop dancers revolutionized embodied transmission of knowledge by rejecting standardized canons of Western European dance. Playful mimicry of martial arts, religious iconography, folkloric dances, gymnastics, and popular musicians created a new, continually expanding archive of urban movement. These brief examples show how hip-hop uses play to engage with mainstream society while maintaining a semi-insular subculture.

By 1986, media commercialization altered the beliefs of hip-hop culture (Chang, 417). *Gettin' paid* became just as important as creating an egalitarian society resembling Afrika Bambaataa's utopic *Planet Rock.* Companies like Adidas and Nike reorganized their marketing campaigns to advertise to the soon-to-be-dubbed "hip-hop generation." This commercializing trend continues with the proliferation of radio-circulated songs that promote hedonistic lifestyles governed by material consumption. New York rapper Nas provocatively titled his 2006 album *Hip-Hop is Dead*. This was a declaration that the socio-cultural power that hip-hop once had is now extinct. Hip-hop is currently redefining its position as a commercial entity, subculture, social movement, entertaining pastime, and outlet for improvised play. The nature of the changing landscape of hip-hop surrounds many debates within the community. Some participants in rap, records, graffiti, and dance anxiously

strive to maintain utopian hip-hop values (related to race and gender in this instance) while seeking to make a living from their play.

Nas' pronouncement of the death of hip-hop raises the ongoing dispute over who is a "true hip-hop head." I came across a group of individuals who believe they exemplify genuine hip-hop qualities. *Dance Explosion*, the coded name for a hip-hop dance group based in Austin, Texas, confidently believes they are the custodians of true, authentic hip-hop cultural values. Specifically, their *embodied play* on and off the stage dismantles the confines of conventional identities. They strongly believe that their self-making practices continue hip-hop's legacy as a progressive social movement. This knowledge system comes from the stated principles of hip-hop pioneers such as Afrika Bambaataa, Crazy Legs, Kool Herc, and Fab Five Freddy. These social activists' ideas on hip-hop go essentially unchallenged because they *lived* hip-hop culture since the days of its inception. Contemporary hip-hop choreography dancers *know* they are maintaining hip-hop's cultural legacy since they strive to uphold the knowledge developed by its originators. This unwavering certainty gives Dance Explosion a conviction that hip-hop dance creates cohesive units where race and gender mean nothing, and representing on the dance floor is all that matters.

My introduction to Dance Explosion was like watching a musical infomercial promoting their views on identity. Bogus, a lead choreographer for the group, enjoyed announcing the racial diversity of the crew. In the minds of Dance Explosion members, this provides solid evidence of the multicultural principles inherent in the group. The idea that members from any racial group can dance "soulfully" is a fundamental tenet of hip-hop choreography crews. Gender also figures into the collage of identities that Dance Explosion seeks to advance. Bogus demonstrated a *vogue* routine with acrobatic arm gestures that turned the dance studio into a playful scene out of the movie *Fame.* Vogue is a complex dance of parody created by queer African Americans in Harlem. These initial meetings in September of 2008 appeared to substantiate the claim that hip-hop dance advanced certain hip-hop cultural values in relation to identity. On the surface, their values, structured by play, seemed to challenge static understandings of identity.

Appearances on the surface, though, can be deceiving. I wanted to know how Dance Explosion produced these seemingly liberated identities on and off the stage. This article ethnographically depicts how a hip-hop choreography crew negotiates conventional, socially constructed perimeters of identity. Dance Explosion believes they thrust the hip-hop community forward by ignoring race and gender in their performances and in the rehearsal studio. Contrary to this, I argue that Dance Explosion reproduces essentialist conceptions of race and gender. To move correctly, dancers believe they need to empathize with the black freedom struggle. They need to experience the clothes against their skin to sense intricate movements. They must be fluent

in the language to execute the final product — dance. To understand the *feeling* of the dance, crewmembers need to embody certain ideas of blackness. This pedagogy also reproduces historic essentialist views of blackness. This work suggests that embodied play, play that incorporates the body to create imaginative realities, helps produce identities understood as authentic for hip-hop dance. Embodied play creates imagined worlds of social interaction while maintaining traditional identity notions of race and gender.

Authenticity relates to a dancer's ability to personify urban African American working class culture. This work seeks to demonstrate how these authentic identities stereotype certain races while liberating others. Preeminent scholars have written about hip-hop culture's potential to transform identities and society (Kelly 1994, 1997, Reed Jr. 2000, Watkins 2005, Fernandes 2006). These inquiries often center on the music industry and rap music. This study adds to this growing body of knowledge by incorporating hip-hop dance in discourses of identity formation. I define identity as a socially interactive, performed process recognized by the individual dancer as well as crewmembers. Focusing primarily on race and gender helps us attend to the principal characteristics of identity politics in hip-hop choreography crews. Using play to interpret dance enhances our understanding of the implications of movement, embodiment, and identity.

By examining how these dancers play, I am able to decipher the implications of their performances of race and gender. Like many hip-hop choreography crews, Dance Explosion views itself as the avant-garde of hip-hop culture due to their commitment to creating authentic post-racial and post-gendered spaces in the studio. Discovering the validity of this assumption is a central tenet of this research. The centrality of strategic play in a hip-hop dancer's life provides innovative new ways to understand the social possibilities of this widely used but often misunderstood term.

The trenches are where hip-hop dance is best studied. How can a scholar study an embodied, expressive culture without being present? Participant observation supplemented with informal interviews is the main data-gathering tool of this research. Participation included learning dance movements, providing feedback on choreographed sequences, and using staging techniques learned while I was a choreographer in Los Angeles. When working with the group, I danced two to three times a week in two different studios near downtown Austin. Professional and semiprofessional dancers comprise this medium size crew of 16 active members. In total, there are 30 members with varying degrees of involvement. The racial/ethnic makeup of the crew includes African Americans, Caucasians, Cambodians, Chinese, Iranians, Laotians, Mexicans, and Puerto-Ricans. All participants were born in the United States. The three active members of South Asian descent are third-generation immigrants. The active members included in this study come from working class to lower middle class backgrounds.

Male Members' Dance Names:

Bogus, Shiolin, Jinco, Ten-1, Go, Jordan, Twix, Matter, Domino

Female Members' Dance Names:

Gem, Trinity, Vivid, K, Escapade, Dominatrix, Mary Jane

Dance Explosion specializes in hip-hop choreography. This is an amalgamation of various hip-hop dance styles. The focus of this dance style is choreographed routines rather than improvisation. This style has become the recognized face of mainstream hip-hop culture due to its accessibility to urban youth and trained dancers alike.

Section 1: Emerging Scholarship on Hip-hop and Identity

Scholarship on identity formation in hip-hop culture typically provides commentary on the dialectic relationships between formal political institutions and the hip-hop community. This work differs from other studies by focusing on the under-researched area of street dance and identity. For this reason, this review employs scholars that study the sociopolitics of hip-hop in its totality. The foundational text chronicling hip-hop culture from its initial stages is Jeff Chang's flowing narrative on the hip-hop generation in *Can't Stop Won't Stop.* He records how benign neglect from the city of New York propelled youth in the South Bronx to create ways to express themselves. Chang uses this important fact to demonstrate how participants in the hip-hop community continually negotiate their identities in relation to dominant culture. Hip-hop culture's informal engagement with institutions, combined with conservative reactionary politics against it, is a significant component in the constant negotiation of its collective identity. Chang's lineal narrative successfully demonstrates how conventional and hip-hop cultures mutually influence each other as rap artists balance the uneasy line of mainstream cultural icons and urban rebels.

Sociologist Sujatha Fernandes and media scholar S. Craig Watkins describe the ways members of the hip-hop community collectively engage with formal political institutions. A structural approach highlights their analysis on identity formation in hip-hop culture. Fernandes' study of the Cuban hip-hop scene complicates simplistic beliefs of passive heirs to the 1959 Revolution (Fernandes 2006). The arts, in particular rap music, provide spaces for Cuban youth to critique the Cuban state's practices. In response to this, the state appropriates certain sectors of hip-hop culture to secure legitimacy from certain young people. Fernandes' study records how Cuban consumption of American hip-hop challenges state domination of youth culture. This work reveals how hip-hop culture facilitates social identities that work with and against mainstream social conventions.

Similarly, Watkins' media studies approach reveals how hip-hop culture uses mainstream media to alter and transform societal norms. Subtle transformation arrives daily as television broadcasts black urban culture to

millions of Americans. Watkins complicates negative connotations of hip-hop commercialization by stating that this has the benefit of placing rap artists in positions to influence large segments of the U.S. population. Watkins asserts, "Similar to the social world from which it is produced, popular media cultures are marked by instability and change. It is, in fact, one of the main locations where the struggle for ideological hegemony is waged (2005, 51)." The negotiation in the media that Watkins refers to is a significant element in the representation of hip-hop. Following Watkins' lead, oversimplifying the messages given by mainstream hip-hop artists is a disservice to both the hip-hop community and the scholarly field of hip-hop studies. Mainstream hip-hop artists' messages move past straightforward dualities of the promotion of capitalism on one end of the spectrum and rallying calls for youth resistance on the other. Watkins does reveal that a great deal of the material broadcast on mainstream television is often an inaccurate representation of hip-hop artists' visions. An example of this is Rock Steady Crew's infamous "Hey You" music video. Media handlers advised this pioneering break dance crew to create a cheery rap video that would give them crossover success. In the DVD *Freshest Kids,* Crazy Legs mentions that the video helped their careers in the short-term but aided in the oversaturation and eventual backlash against break dancing. Meticulous analysis from Fernandes and Watkins displays the multifaceted ways that hip-hop culture negotiates its identity in response to exterior influences.

Attaching resistance to identity formation in hip-hop is a common practice amongst scholars. This study purposefully excludes the idea of resistance since I did not find instances of it in this ethnography. It is still important to provide a brief summary of how hip-hop scholars theorize resistance and why I believe Dance Explosion's actions do not display resistance. Historian Robin Kelly and political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr., disagree on the effectiveness of subcultures to create sustained societal change through resistance. Kelly uses the term *infrapolitics* to describe the "daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements (1994, 8)." Reed negates the idea of significant political action stemming from small day-to-day deviances. He explains, "At best, those who romanticize 'everyday resistance' or 'culture politics' read the evolution of political movements teleologically; they presume that those conditions necessarily, or even typically, lead to political action. They don't (2000, 4)." Reed believes the connection between everyday resistance and sustained political action is not necessarily connected. The tacit assumption in Reed's argument is that political action is circumscribed to structured groups engaged with state apparatuses. This ethnography attends to choreography crews' identity infrapolitics. Instead of resistance, the *evasive actions* documented in this work are the performances and play of identity.

Section 2: Play, the Ambiguous Term

The ambiguity of play has not diminished with its increased popularity in academia. Theories on play use numerous disciplines, from sociology to neuroscience (Huizinga 1950, Caillois 1961, Nachmanovitch 1990, Barkow, Comides, Tooby 1992, Kelly 1997). Play helps hip-hop dancers create temporary realities using their imaginations. The concise assessment of the multidisciplinary field of play is the aim of this section. It concludes with my working definition of a praxis-based theory of embodied play that addresses its larger implications.

John Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* is a classic text on the links between play and culture. He maintains, "[Play] is a *significant* function — that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play, there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something (1950, 1)." Dance Explosion plays to create new concepts for their dance choreography. Their racialized and gendered play endows their movements with meanings far beyond the physiological. Huizinga situates play as a social function informed by culture. He states that play creates solidarity, temporary cohesion, and allows players to experiment with social roles (1950, 4). Play's creation of atypical dispositions allows players to imagine possibilities outside of current realities (Huizinga, 8). Imaginary identities within the *game* have the possibility to transfer to the material world.

Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games* advances play theory by inquiry into the nature of games. Hip-hop choreography best fits Caillois' category of play/game called *agôn* (1961, 14). Agôn describes games of competition with opposing teams. Opposing hip-hop choreography crews battle at workshops, clubs, and increasingly on the Internet. Caillois' insightful analysis of game adds specificity to the elusive concept of play. Caillois' work raises important questions about the consequences of a game if there is no conclusion. This implies that identities created in the game can seep into the everyday lives of players.

Robin D.G. Kelly departs from earlier scholars by asserting that play can change the material conditions of participants. He explains that African American youth use play as a form of upward mobility to survive "economic crisis" (1996, 45). Kelly uses the Marxist definition of labor to assert, "…The pursuit of leisure, pleasure, and creative expression is *labor,* and [that] some African American urban youth have tried to turn that labor into cold hard cash (Kelly, 45). Kelly's use of play as labor helps justify the countless hours these dancers spend in the studio. Kelly's definition lacks the condition of uninhibited "free play" as Nachmanovitch describes it (1990, 46), but shows the resourceful ways youth employ play for survival. Theorization of play as a form of labor helps explore how hip-hop participants strategically use play as a tool for social mobility.

Dance Explosion's desire for social change through their actions in the studio and stage necessitates a broader definition of play that includes material benefits. Huizinga and Caillois believe that genuine play must be free of the restraints of substantial financial gain. My definition of embodied play expands these definitions by adding financial rewards to play. Choreography dancers take play very seriously, as it relates to a substantial amount of their income. Embodied play works on the hypothesis that the body influences the mind, which in collusion manifests material effects in the real world. An example I witnessed in the field will help clarify this concept. Dance Explosion members embody blackness using their bodies. These performances affect their outward authenticity, which correlates to promoters hiring them for shows. Embodied play employs the National Institute of Play's categories of social play, body play, and imaginative play.[1] Social play displays itself in crewmembers' identity modifications that support group cohesion. Body play establishes cognitive creativity as possible through improvised movement. Imaginative play challenges social and interpersonal borders by restructuring communication through games.[2] Embodied play merges these key theoretical perspectives to add gradation to Dance Explosion's complex identity-making practices facilitated by play. Analysis of both the make-believe and material worlds of play positions this concept outside of the realm of the imagination.

Section 3: Racial Economy of Dance Explosion

Examining Dance Explosion's essentialist and antiessentialist views on race provides a balanced analysis of this community's self-making practices. Dance Explosion's essentialized views of black expressive culture are consistent with historic stereotypes of blackness. Since blackness is Dance Explosion's static ideal, they view other racial/ethnic groups as dynamic entities that can progress towards this ideal. I want to portray the complexities of identity negotiation in the crew.

An exploration of race and hip-hop choreography crews must begin with an assessment of class and authenticity. For Dance Explosion, authenticity presents itself with the representation of connections with urban, working-class, African American expressive culture. Thus, the play of imagined African American cultural expressions provides this multiracial group links to the early development of hip-hop culture. The links between blackness, class, and authenticity display in living the "beautiful struggle." Dance Explosion members borrow this phrase from the album title of Brooklyn rapper Talib Kweli. Kweli's politically charged album makes frequent references to national and global injustices. Kweli's references to black freedom struggle leaders add potency to his poignant lyrics. How this phrase reveals itself through play and movement are essential points I attempt to decipher in this brief discussion of class.

Dance Explosions' play of working class blackness is not just a charade of mental slumming. Watkins cites Shor: "As the U.S. economy and the labor market continue to undergo substantive reorganization, [urban youth] are increasingly unable to provide work for some segments of the population (1998, 55)." Crewmembers carry some of the same economic dilemmas even though they do not live in the inner city. Dance Explosion is comprised of full-time and part-time dancers. Full-time dancers make at least 50% of their total income through dance performances, teaching, and the rare television commercial. The professional dancers live check-to-check.

Members' play in relation to this consists of references to ways they imagine urban African Americans fight against economic adversity. Jokes of having to get on welfare because the crew is not in performance-ready condition are common. I first believed these were allusions to the belief of the black "welfare queen." I later learned that members were referencing a daytime talk show hosted by Maury Povich. Mimicking the show's frequent African American guests receiving paternity tests, they enacted imagined connections to the [African American] beautiful struggle. Impersonation of African Americans on the Povich show takes an embodied element as crew members imitate the corporal mannerisms they see on television. Dancers' hand snaps, rolling of the eyes, and swiveling of the neck become just as over the top as though they were really on the television talk show. Crewmembers envision themselves as an authentic working class choreography crew as they mimic specific representations of blackness. As stated previously, Dance Explosion members come from working class and lower middle class backgrounds. Living in poverty is not enough to become a genuine hip-hop choreography dancer. In this instance, specific stylization of language and gesture gives the speaker the ability to place himself as a clever trickster rather than a victim. This conflation of blackness and class enhances Dance Explosion's authenticity as a group who understands economic hardship. Daytime talk shows inform these dancers' stereotypes of urban African American culture. Dancers I interviewed believe that, if they can truly comprehend the realities of economic hardships, then, logically, their stage performances will have the same raw excitement that original hip-hop dance crews possessed. Embodied play successfully allows dancers to step outside of themselves to enhance their understanding of movement. How this embodied understanding relates to the lived experiences of urban Africa Americans is questionable. Sensationalized television scenes influence their understanding of urban black culture. This contributes to stereotyped performances of blackness in the dance studio.

Specific signifiers denote identity within Dance Explosion. Crewmembers have conscious, mental checkmarks of what blackness is and is not. Like embodied play of class, dancers believe clothing and speech increase their understanding of hip-hop choreography dance. Baggy jeans, large shirts, trucker hats with bandanas, and basketball sneakers are all part of dressing like

a "true" hip-hop choreography dancer. When I began attending rehearsals, Jinco believed Jordan, a white male dancer, dressed "blacker" than I did. The crew did not view my tight-fitting slacks, snug white t-shirt, and black derby as typical black attire. Since my clothing was not hip-hop, they wondered if I had forsaken my [supposedly] God-given gift of rhythm. In regards to how I speak, my speech defies Dance Explosion's attitudes on acceptable black speech. Growing up in a neighborhood where half of the population could not speak Standard English (S.E.), I learned to speak as plainly as possible. Not speaking African American Vernacular English (AAVE) further sullied my black credentials in their eyes. Speaking "black" meant using "inner city" speech patterns. I found it interesting how respondents usually evoked blackness with its constructed opposite — whiteness.

By working within some of the parameters of acceptable black attributes, I was able to secure the dancers' respect. This was a tenuous acceptance since Dance Explosion equates African American culture with global black culture. I retained some of my "roots" by being able to dance. Even though I learned the choreography, I continually had to prove my dance ability because other key attributes of authenticity were missing. Dancers need to embody (to varying degrees) aspects of urban black expressive culture to maintain authenticity in the hip-hop dance world. Outside of Dance Explosion, many choreography dancers do not engage in the embodied play of blackness. They run the serious risk of obtaining the negative designation of a jazz dancer who "tries" to dance hip-hop. The search for natural dance ability is the force that drives play of authenticity. In not so many words, Gem said to be black was to be born with natural rhythm. She believes other races have to work hard to learn [hip-hop] dancing, but black people can naturally move.[3] To help show the crew the idea of an African Diaspora, I demonstrated technique connections between Afro-Cuban rumba, samba from Salvador da Bahia, and merengue. Members told me I was dancing "Hispanic," not black. The ethnocentric essentializing practice of Dance Explosion excludes African Diaspora communities in the Americas. This information helps refine the elusive construct of what blackness means to these dancers.

Dance Explosion bases its claims as a progressive hip-hop cultural entity based on their perceived antiessentialist constructions of race. Embodied play helps these dancers transcend race. According to Jinco, if a person has "heart," no matter what race he or she is, the person can be part of hip-hop dance culture. This idea is especially important to white and Asian members who explained to me that their racial groups lack natural rhythm. This is different from the essentialisms of blackness. If whites and Asians get in touch with their "soulful" sides, then they can excel in dance. Ten-1, a dancer of Cambodian descent, believes they first need to understand "inner grooves" that come with understanding hip-hop culture outside of the dance studio and choreography. He believes excellent dancers need to understand the "roots"

of hip-hop culture, which alludes to urban black expressive culture. Antiessentialist racial views lack development past the colorblind philosophy of Bambaataa's Universal Zulu Nation Ideology.

This section depicts how dancers explore race through play. Dance Explosion members believe the embodied movements of urban black class-consciousness, clothing, and language provide the increased ability to perform dance hip-hop choreography. These exploratory exercises through play are helpful in broadening the range of movement but offer a limited view of qualities of African Americans. Embodied play simultaneously expands race while circumscribing blackness.

Section 4: Vogue and Gender Play

Disrupting caricatures of the macho hip-hop dancer holds importance for Dance Explosion. The crew views this as an important contribution to the advancement of hip-hop's socially progressive nature. My ethnographic data suggests that Dance Explosion reproduces male and female gender constructs by dancing vogue. The deconstruction of gender through dance obviously means reading masculinity and femininity on the body. As a dancer, I understand how extending the neck, loosening the shoulders, flexing the hips, swiveling the eyes, and using the abdominal core creates more feminized movements. Similarly, certain bodily mannerisms signify masculinity in dance. While this may be culturally specific to African and African Diasporic dances, this may narrowly define femininity. I cross-reference essential constructions of gender and movement to explore the ways Dance Explosion uses gender binaries. Vogue has the capacity to move between feminine and masculine movements, often occupying the liminal space in between. Discussion within Dance Explosion ranges from the belief that vogue educates audiences to the impression that dancers make fools of themselves on stage.

Mentioned previously, hip-hop choreography is an amalgamation of several different styles of dance. Other hip-hop styles (break dance, *poppin', new jack swing, krumpin*) under the umbrella term "hip-hop dance" use mostly aggressive, masculine movements. The incorporation of vogue movements stylistically separates hip-hop choreography from these other hip-hop styles. Vogue movements add black queer expressive culture to hip-hop choreographies' heteromasculine movements. Vogue is a dance style created by gay African American males in Harlem in the 1970s and 1980s (Green 1993). *Paris is Burning,* a documentary about New York City "ball" culture, portrays this subculture in the late 1980s. Balls are social gatherings where African American and Latino lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people present themselves as living art (Livingston 1990). Performances at balls are intentionally broad. The crowd and a panel of judges evaluate performances of male, female, transgender, transsexual, straight, gay, urban, professional, military, domestic, and numerous other

categories. Vogue is a flamboyant, intense celebratory dance of urban, queer, expressive culture. Although vogue is an accepted mainstream club dance, its continued innovation lies in queer clubs in large U.S. urban centers.

Embodied play helps Dance Explosion members represent the New York style of vogue. Male members play with masculinity through body play in the rehearsal studio in order to grasp the believed essences of vogue performances. Vivid, a lead female choreographer in the crew, creates most of the vogue pieces for the group due to her advanced knowledge of this style. She places much of her attention on making the male dancers "celebrate." Vivid uses this word when she wants the males to increase the physicality of their flamboyant, androgynous, gay-male performances. She wants them to display a more playful demeanor that exemplifies the boisterous showmanship of the great vogue dancers of the 1990s. This is a difficult task, as Vivid expects perfect geometric forms accented with acrobatic falls on the rhythm accents of a song. Other female members believe that vogue is theatrically more engaging than hip-hop choreography. Female dancers welcome the chance to use a different repertoire in place of the masculinized movements of hip-hop choreography. Gem, one of the older female dancers, sees vogue as a balanced approach to dance by working feminine and masculine movements into a unified whole. Female respondents do not feel their exaggerated movements distort queer male subjectivity.

The males, all of whom identify as heterosexual, have differing views on the matter. Bogus believes it is all in fun. He believes he will not suddenly "turn gay" because he is dancing vogue. Shiolin does not have a problem with dancing vogue as long as his "female fans" know he is not gay. Twix, a former lightweight wrestler in high school, has the most difficulties performing vogue. He sees it as buffoonery that garners easy laughs from audiences. His face often grimaces as he moves his hips in figure-eight motions. I asked Twix a series of questions to ascertain other possible reasons he does not like to perform vogue on stage. In a recorded interview, he explained:

> Remember in the 90s how everyone battled? I know you know... We all grabbed the head. We played ball with the head. We juggled it. We even gave ourselves head with the head. Everyone was on that! It got played real quick. You saw a popping battle. You saw someone grab another dude's head... boring. That is the same way with this [vogue]. It's played. It's mad easy. It's givin' the crowd what they want, not what they need. A bunch of guys acting like fags for easy laughs. I ain't Sha Nay Nay.[4] [5]

Twix says that audiences do not clap for perfectly executed, geometric, Egyptian-hand-tut patterns. He explains that people cheer when the males bend over and "drop it like it's hot." Twix believes that the group should employ choreography that challenges audiences mentally. Vogue performances by heterosexual males do not do this, in his opinion.

Similarly, for understanding hip-hop choreography through race, choreography dancers use embodied play to enact their representations of the flashy vogue dancers of the 1990s. This exercise helps them study complicated movements but reifies stereotypes of gay male sensibilities. Embodied play disrupts conventional notions of gender identity in hip-hop choreography crews but also reiterates stereotypical beliefs of queer subjectivity. The imagined world that embodied play creates does not deviate from conventional beliefs of gender binaries. To be fair, the fact that Dance Explosion takes risks in playing with gender identity is a significant step in sparking much needed discussions on gender within hip-hop culture.

Conclusion

I gladly explained my research findings to members willing to listen. They were interested in what I wrote but quickly realized that my writing does not convey the intensity of dance. Bogus was the first to read my conclusions from this ethnography. He was the main advocate of hip-hop choreography crews pushing the boundaries of hip-hop culture by rejecting conventional racial and gender identities. Bogus invited me into a "brave new world" where a black, white, Asian, and Hispanic can all "chill" in harmony. I found that Dance Explosion reproduces conventional identities instead of destroying racial and gender identities. Through embodied play, racial/ethnic groups can transcend the socially constructed confines of racial categories, while blackness remains unchanging.

Dance Explosion's outwardly positive racial essentialist ideals also diametrically connect to stereotypes that are more negative. Remarks by the crew show that they envision black people as predisposed to academic deficiency, incompetent in math, and unwise in decisions pertaining to finances. "Positive" and "negative" essentialisms are two sides of the same coin. Essentialisms, benign or offensive, position blackness as an identity that is easily represented by others. Dance Explosion's outwardly positive racial essentialist ideals also diametrically connect to stereotypes that are more negative. Months of working with Dance Explosion has taught me that the difference between adoration and caricature is slim. Saidya Hartman proposes links between African American slave minstrel performances and slave masters' pleasure derived from these acts (1997). We can broaden this argument by looking at the intensive performance training of white blackface Vaudeville dancers in the 1920s (*www.jolson.org*). These white dancers had great dance ability, but genuine admiration of African American dances eroded to mere presentations of stereotypes of African American culture.

Positive and negative essentialisms might be two sides of the same coin, but the flipping of this coin is of critical importance. I am able to discuss race and gender because hip-hop choreography crews attempt to appreciate the *other* through embodied play. Sociologist Norman K. Denzin correctly

asserts that performing the other is a valuable way to comprehend differing values that written text fails to reveal (2003). The dancers engage the difficult questions on the nature of identity and authenticity. By making the uneasy effort to represent the other, their *doing* allows us to theorize identity on a much deeper level. Further research will address the relationship between audience members and authenticity to explore audiences' perceptions of Dance Explosion's performances.

Embodied play gives some Dance Explosion members a greater awareness of different gender identity constructs. Their performances of vogue bring gay, artistic innovations into hip-hop culture. Dance Explosion unwittingly urges the hip-hop community to resolve and advance some of its essentialist ideals towards gender. Vogue problematizes hip-hop choreography dances' gender binaries represented by movement. By performing queer identities, even in complete earnest, choreography dancers recreate stereotypes of queer subjectivity. This reinforces the public's impressions of extremely sexual, effeminate, flamboyant gay males parading on imaginary runways. As the locations of vogue change, so do its social and political meanings. Within the context of the ball, the celebration of non-conformity creates an intense solidarity among participants. Outside the empowered space of the ball, vogue enforces stereotypes. In conjunction with this, vogue in hip-hop choreography helps dismantle masculine posturing prevalent in this dance style.

This is an honest portrayal of dancers working it out. Instead of glorious resistance, dancers negotiate their identities within larger societal borders. After reading my conclusion, Bogus still believes choreography dance groups push the boundaries of hip-hop culture because they preserve the African American roots of hip-hop. He says Dance Explosion takes risks, while activists sit in coffee houses and talk about how others are creating a more just society. We have already discussed the shortcomings of Dance Explosions' risks. Their work should embolden all of us to expand the archive(s) of knowledge by taking chances though embodied play. These endeavors may lie outside the realm of the politically correct, but they will generate important discussions that can only be unearthed through bodily experience.

NOTES

1 For the website for the National Institute of Play, visit *http://www.nifplay.org/index.html*.
2 For more information on these types of play, *visit http://www.nifplay.org/states_play.html*.
3 Gem Vivid, 2008. Interview by author. Written notes. Austin, TX, December.
4 Twix. 2008. Interview by author. Written notes. Austin, TX, September.
5 Sha Nay Nay is the mythical female character played by Jamie Foxx from the hit 1990s comedy series, *In Living Color*.

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