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Unchecked Popularity: Neoliberal Circulations of Black Social Dance

Thomas F. DeFrantz

African American social dances are complex performances that tie social agency, communal exchange, individual creativity, and personal expression to practices that demonstrate vectors of gender, sexuality, ability, location, class, age, and place. These are dances that forward ideologies of *corporeal orature*—expressive body talking—as a productive means of group formation and social connectivity; they are embodied structures of playful musicality, understanding, and questioning cast in terms that involve active physical exploration (DeFrantz 2004). In local contexts of black communities, social dances function as essential agents of cultural expression, at once precious and freely available to those who engage their practice.

A curiosity with profound economic, social, and representational consequence places African American social dances at the corporeal center of global discourses of the popular. No matter the ethnicity, race, sexuality, class, location, disability, gender, or age of the dancers, black social dances arrive as an effective currency of exchange that allows for both individual expression and forms of group communion. How this has come to be so has escaped scrutiny, in no small part because routes of exchange for social dance are extremely difficult to map. More than this, the process of exchange—the dance—exists in relation to its practice in time, and dramatically shifts both its tangibility (presence) and value in transference from live performance to mediation. African American social dances circulate generously because their social and aesthetic underpinnings fit neatly with neoliberal discourses of freedom—so neatly, in fact, that the proliferation of markets that characterize contemporary life cannot check their popularity.

This essay offers a critique of the expansive category of popular culture built around circulations of black social dance, circulations that allow dance structures to proliferate without reference to the particular historical circumstances or connection to people who produce the dances. Global markets allow these social dances to be appropriated and repurposed as intellectual property to generate profit; in millennial terms, black social dance becomes

a way to understand presence within global economies. To underscore the neoliberal logic that feeds these contemporary circulations, I will look back to American popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s evidenced by the widely distributed television programs *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*, as well as the ideologies of dance that circulated at Motown records in this same period. I offer an exceptionalist counter-example in a consideration of funk dance and music practices as exemplary of creative black social spaces that resist commodity co-option but may still be ripe for latter-day neoliberal exploitation. I argue that neoliberal discourses of freedom encourage the spread of black social dance beyond historical markers of located communal resistance to market forces and relocate capacities of communal pleasure to a dispersed global populace of consumers.

Theoretical work in dance studies and African American dance undergirds this essay. Work by Brenda Dixon Gottschild on the “invisibilization” of Africanist aesthetics in global economies of dance, and recent writing of my own on transmissions of black culture across geographies and racial identities offer starting points to consider the inevitable encounter with black social dance that characterizes contemporary life (Gotschild, 1996, 2000; Hazzard-Gordon, 1985, 1990; DeFrantz, 2001, 2005, 2010). These authors, and others, point to circulations of ideologies of dance rooted in Africanist aesthetic practices—including call and response, high-effect juxtaposition, percussive attack, complex rhythmicity, and individuality within a group dynamic—that have affected global understandings of corporeality (Thompson, 1966; Gottschild, 2000; DeFrantz, 2002). For example, the Black Bottom, a social dance from the turn-of-the-twentieth-century American South, moved from its origin as a playful arrangement of dipping, sliding, floor-patting, and clapping gestures practiced by African Americans to become a preferred dance of interracial communities in the industrial American North in the mid-1920s, and then a headlining dance of the Harlem Apollo Theater later in that decade before enjoying an international popularity before the Great Depression (Hazzard-Gordon, 2000; DeFrantz, 2010). Contemporary African American social dances, including The Dougie, regularly travel from obscurity to status as the subject of ABC *Nightline News* or when engaged by CNN reporter Wolf Blitzer or US First Lady Michelle Obama (Miller, 2011).

The discussion of neoliberalism engaged in this essay derives its definitions and suppositions from David Harvey’s 2005 text *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Harvey discusses political developments in 1979 and 1980 that gave way to a practice of economic exchange concerned with deregulation, privatization, and the withdrawal of the state from discourses of enterprise. Noting the “grim” imperialist reach of US power to “facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital” (2005, 7). Harvey underlines “the rapid proliferation of neoliberal state forms throughout the world from the mid-1970s

onwards" (9). I contend that this expansion of economic theory and practice has directly influenced the spreadability of black dance practice. Contemporary neoliberal currents of exchange push African American social dance forms to global audiences with a forcefulness that evacuates their aesthetic imperatives of regularized, community-based physical expression, toward terms of engagement that allow it to absorb participants who have no sustained contact with the corporeal fact of black people in the world.

Neoliberal discourses of freedom

African American corporealities have been recurrently called upon to generate a danced rhetoric of freedom in terms of an easy, appealing musicality-in-motion apparently endemic to the conditions of black life (Gottschild, 1996, 2000, 2005). As the oppressed laboring bodies of modernism whose dances deny subaltern status by their creativity and joyful engagement, African Americans consistently invent social dances that confirm an apparent "outside" to market forces. Increasingly unfettered access to black social dances has emboldened a neoliberal market by now replete with mediated evidence of movements that demonstrate an unexamined concept of freedom as an ability to dance black. As Harvey repeatedly points out, the "unexamined concept" of freedom that courses through neoliberal discourse operates as one concept among those that take on a life and momentum of their own such that it proves very difficult to reverse (5). Unexamined, "freedom" appears to be desirable for all. Encouraged by late twentieth-century calls toward a freedom to move as one wants to, black dance is engaged by a global public with little understanding of its aesthetic histories or varied social contexts within black communities.

Black social dance idioms arrive in varied relationship to social circumstance and demonstrate varied capacity of contextual analysis. Narratives of exchange, mobility, social justice, gender roles, or articulations of sexuality can emerge within social dance performance (Hazzard-Gordon, 1985, 1990; DeFrantz, 2002). Social dances demonstrate histories of cultural exchange that confirm location, as in the recognizable physical articulations that confirm where a dancer matured as an expressive self. For example, based on experiences with extended family, we can determine whether dancers hail from Oakland, or Dallas, or Atlanta, or Boston, depending on how they perform the Harlem Shake. Performances of J-Setting or contemporary voguing by queer youth of color actively tease out and confirm sexual identity within a frame of social dance practice. B-girls can vibrantly make evident the ephemerality of gender presumption that can separate a masculine from a feminine in dances of wit, strength, and unabashed power. These dances also confirm narratives of age-group affiliation, as black social dances transform from generation to generation, with each new group producing attendant styles of music and dance.

Aided by technologies of mass distribution, white American mainstream access to African American social dances accelerated through the twentieth century. A thumbnail depiction of several dance idioms will underscore this trend. Developed in the swing-era ballrooms of urban African America, the Lindy Hop of the 1920s and 1930s spoke of agility in partnership and an abiding speed of motion, danced and played with a drive that confirmed the sense of unrest that accompanied burgeoning civil rights movements. Lindy Hop dances emerged in interracial social contexts—some Harlem nightclubs allowed white and black patrons to dance at the same time—and predicted the ever-quickening transmission of African American dance into the popular mainstream. Gottschild (2000) describes the rampant racism of the 1930s that made more ironic the ways that “swing-era energy created by African Americans infused the society at large and permanently changed the American identity into a swinging quotient” (34). The Lindy Hop became an international dance sensation, slowed and re-christened the Jitterbug for mainstream global audiences. By the time that twist and jerk dances of the 1960s—the bulk of which developed in African American communities—enacted both loosed sexualized social boundaries and demonstrated the power of the individual in resistance to rising police states, many white Americans enjoyed almost instantaneous access to black music and dances via television. Dances of the 1980s and the millennium were distributed by new technologies of music videos on cable television and the Internet; by 2012, black social dances had become an inevitable component of American popular culture, refracted through mass media to be available in locations far removed from the basements, school gymnasiums, social centers, family reunions, and dance clubs where they emerge.

The extreme spreadability of black social dance draws on the two-headed capacities of neoliberal discourse, as utopian project, which might expand ideologies of freedom in progressive directions, and as political project, which might “re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (Harvey, 2005: 19). These contradictory projects encourage a rhetoric of consent via grounding in “common sense” articulations of complex processes, such as “freedom,” “liberty,” “choice,” or “rights,” as in this example: “The word ‘freedom’ resonates so widely within the common-sense understanding of Americans that it becomes ‘a button that elites can press to open the door to the masses’ to justify almost anything” (Harvey 36). Following this logic, freedom to engage any available dance practice in any possible circumstance becomes a neoliberal right of access for any who would try.

Ironically, the cooption of “freedom” as a capacity of black social dance has accelerated its place as a neoliberal agent of exchange. The enlarged presence of black social dance globally points to tensions of interpretation of dance idioms. For example, taken out of context, the “stripper dance” discussed and demonstrated in the social dance documentary *Rize* confirms

easy confluences of blackness, primitivism, and sexuality (LaChappelle, 2005). While this particular social dance is named for its resemblance to movements performed by sex workers in strip clubs, the dance practiced by African American youth in family celebration settings represents a nuanced ability to articulate rhythm and physical elasticity with a smoldering, cool performance. In these contexts, the dance does not intend to degrade women or suggest a prelude to sexual acts. Within the community of dancers who developed the “stripper dance” and other African American social dances, their movements might indicate potential abilities, connections of physical resources across generations, or the dynamic release of energy to confirm presence. These latter capacities of African American social dance are diluted in the spread of these dances through distanced and mediated manifestations. Out of context, though, the “stripper dance” suggests a vapid capitulation to disposable hegemonic femininity, easily aligned to the latter-day rise of pole-dancing lessons.

American Bandstand and Soul Train

At times, though, mediated representations of black social dance gain enough critical space in the popular American imaginary for their contexts and contents to become central to discourses of social exchange. The intersecting histories of *American Bandstand* (1952–1989) and *Soul Train* (1971–2006), two widely distributed television programs each in circulation before the acceleration of neoliberal discourse of the 1980s, demonstrate this capacity. While local markets produced many television dance shows directed at an emergent youth demographic from the 1950s through the 1970s, these two programs became the best-known, longest-running programs with national syndication (Buxton, 2004). When they were both in operation, they competed for audience and market share from the same sector of youth-minded consumers. The two influential programs command a large space in the American popular culture imaginary, and have inspired academic and fan-produced studies underlining their importance for a generation and a half of Americans (Clark and Bronson, 1997; Jackson, 2005; Lehman, 2008). Each of these shows confirmed a profitable marketplace for contemporary social dance; each program featured a recurring youth-savvy host—white Dick Clark at *American Bandstand*, black Don Cornelius at *Soul Train*—who presided over a television studio set up as a generic space that could allow the free motion of cameras to capture social dance by several score of teenagers. Each program featured a semi-regular cast of (unpaid) dancers who offered preferred physical responses to music along with ideas about fashion and teenage life. Each program also assumed the context of a marketplace that could spread recordings, capacities of dance instruction, fashion trends, and the fantasy of a glamorous, fun-filled and carefully controlled space centered upon social dance and popular music.

Despite many similarities—and competitive broadcast schedules that overlapped for many years—*American Bandstand* and *Soul Train* offered strikingly different conceptions of social dance by its participants. Dancers on both the mostly white *American Bandstand* and the mostly black *Soul Train* engaged black dance forms as the main currency of performance. But the ideologies of individual expression differed. Where dancers on *American Bandstand* often practiced dances in instruction and exhibition sequences, *Soul Train* rarely offered demonstrations of individual dances. At times, the entire *American Bandstand* studio audience would engage a single dance for the duration of a song; *Soul Train* featured only the self-titled social dance, the Soul Train Line, as a fully prescribed, participatory sequence. In the Soul Train Line, two rows of dancers faced each other to meet and form couples at one end of the space and then improvise freely across the space between the dancing witnesses. This important distinction of participation underscored a differential of expectation surrounding the capacity of social dance enlivened by its agents of dancers. *Soul Train* presumed that individual innovation on the dance floor would create viable programming without interventions of dance directives beyond a signature social dance formation (the Soul Train Line); *Soul Train* dancers were thus “free” to do what they would in the studio for the capture and manipulation by live television editors. *Soul Train* built in structural reference to the Africanist aesthetic imperative to innovate in performance (DeFrantz, 2002). Its televised ideologies of social dance would fit more neatly with emergent neoliberal discourses of freedom of the 1980s and later. The fact that *Soul Train* persisted beyond the millennium could be narrated as a benefit of its presentation of “free” corporealities that fit nicely with the ascension of neoliberal rhetoric.

YouTube clips show *Soul Train* dancers appearing as a much livelier, creative, and inventive group than the dancers of *American Bandstand*. The fact that black social dances were at the root of nearly all of the movement inventions of both programs surely placed the dancers of *Soul Train* in closer proximity to the aesthetic devices that gave birth to these idioms. But *Soul Train*, on the whole, offered a space of movement freedom broadly writ that allowed young dancers expressive room to maneuver. *Soul Train*'s sustainability across shifts in black music and dance expression—from rhythm and blues through disco and hip-hop—demonstrates the usefulness of black social dances in the media marketplace; even as these dances shifted from year to year, their corporeal implications stayed central to global conceptions of the popular much longer than that.

Soul Train referred to black social dance as a component of black identity and a strategy of simultaneous creative expression and cultural mobility. Dancers on the show enjoyed the local celebrity that the media provided, but the corporeal exchange that the show provided its global cohort of viewers extended far beyond any individual's charismatic presence. The show represented contemporary black style, enacted by a group performance, in an

unequivocal manner. While some dancers on *Soul Train* surely had individual followings among weekly viewers in any era of the show's transmission, it was the physical attitudes of show participants that later became the object of neoliberal exchange. *Soul Train* offered its audiences access to the *corporeal orature* of expressive young black dancers; these refined abilities to "body talk" became a focal point of interest for viewers far removed from the Chicago and Los Angeles television studios. The program provided the means of spreadability for black social dance to land in diverse locations.

It is worth noting that Clark's *Bandstand* franchise was the seed of 2005's *So You Think You Can Dance* television program. The process of packaging dance into a competitive commodity available for global mediation follows a neoliberal logic that crowns a single winner for a "season" of dance activity, only to replace that person in a new cycle the next time around. Winners of these latter-day competitive contests receive a short-term prize for grueling labor of competitive dance that is under-valued as expression and inherently unsustainable. Social dance moved to the marketplace surely faces challenges of recognition. What terms might allow the social to circulate globally as an expressive force outside the logics of commerce? It may be that black social dance, in its originary forms, values the overlapping realms of the social much more highly than the ever-present terms of commodity and exchange.

Appropriation and intellectual property

If *Soul Train* allowed a measure of racial pride to be circulated by the obvious achievement of its social dancers into the popular imagination, neoliberal discourse could upset that circulation with claims of ownership. In the logics of neoliberal ownership, those who produce the programming and even those who watch it can make claims on its contents. In this system, authenticity loses its place as a marker of black pride. Appropriation—in this case, the re-purposing of dance to allow its entry into diverse economic markets—reconfigures black physicalities into a place of interchangeability with any who would do the dances, and allows access without concerns of situation or material circumstance of the dancer under scrutiny. But the social properties of black social dance intertwined with Africanist aesthetics resist blank capitulation to the market by virtue of their complexities. Africanist aesthetic structures bind formal, intellectual, social, spiritual, political, and sexualized aspects of movement together in music and dance through a shifting array of corporeal referents. For example, during a two-minute promenade down the Soul Train Line, these musics and dances shift between discourses of spiritual well-being, to exchanges of sexuality, to demonstrations of rhythmicity, to expressions of black pride and political location. The protean abilities of black social dance render it less available as a whole to methodologies that could create easily owned materials of commodity. Thus, *The Twist*

generated a cottage industry of affiliated merchandising only as its capacities to express spiritual wellness or queer sexualities were evacuated by and for the marketplace.

Even if some dance forms became less recognizable—flattened—in aesthetic terms as they made the transition to television, enough of their contents were available to become the material of exchange that circulated neoliberal discourses of expressive physical freedom. Viewers in the 1970s could learn a vaguely recognizable version of *The Football* or *The Penguin* from these television programs. While the social dances themselves could not be owned—as they are, by definition, social dances without single author or separable provenance—the container for these dances and the format of their circulation could be managed by television programming, which could be owned. Social dance programs such as *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train* created frames for the distribution of social dance. The rise of music television and expanded routes of distribution, encouraged by 1980s' neoliberal logics of fair trade, pushed black social dances onto a global platform. Aggressively distributed, black social dance became central to an unfettered, global market future of free physical expression.

Through capitulation to neoliberal discourses of market, black dance becomes a choice that individual consumers make, typically in response to the thrill of unfamiliar motion and without regard to the intertwined political and aesthetic foundations of these forms. Narrated in this way, black dance styles allow for the neoliberal impulse to privatize property and service; this tendency becomes evident in social dance when those dances become the domain of dance studios and mediated instruction.

Of course, studio instruction stretches the contents of the dance forms, toward something that becomes recognizable only as “inspired by” its social dance origins. For example, hip-hop taught in a dance studio, or included in some college curricula, resembles dance central to music videos and other forms of marketing (commercials, award shows). These iterations of hip-hop have little relationship to the social dimension of dance that gave them rise, called b-girling and b-boying by practitioners (Schloss, 2009). But these dances, like the earlier iterations of “jazz dance” taught in dance studios and conservatories worldwide, are their own neoliberal inventions, created to satisfy marketplace cravings for black social dance. University-sponsored hip-hop workshops and master classes align black social dance with identity formation within the state-sanctioned context of the university, a revision that dilutes the capacity of these forms to function as creative resistance to mainstream hegemonies.

Motown and market consolidation

The neoliberal state is one that redefines its ever-expanding boundaries as it tries to open markets to any who would engage economic development and

the production of wealth. Harvey points out that neoliberal theorists are “profoundly suspicious of democracy” since “governance by majority rule is seen as a potential threat to individual rights and constitutional liberties” (66). In a like manner, social dance comes under the temporary legislation of a loose coalition of self-fashioned, entrepreneurial experts, who provide authoritarian, “official” versions of dances that originally have no individual author. The tendencies of neoliberalism in its pure forms always to “conjure up its own nemesis in varieties of authoritarian populism and nationalism” (81) is echoed by the spread of dance studios and how-to manuals that intend to regulate social dance performance. Even as social dances propagate, so too do instructional narratives, encouraged by free enterprise, which intend to police the borders of these dance forms. The establishment of “official” schools of dance mimics the creation of a nation-state which can hold a “monopoly on violence to quell dissent” (151). As many dance researchers wonder aloud at the impact of television programs such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Dance Your Ass Off*, or the ill-advised *Your Mama Don't Dance* on the creative capacities of emerging artists, the state-endorsed marketplace expands to make room for these programs in a stream of revenue production.

For good and bad, these programs brought social dance into public discourse. In a like manner, mediated presence in the 1960s offered an avenue of visibility for black Americans in the era of rising civil rights activism and simultaneously encouraged rhetorics of respectability and assimilation. From the 1940s through the 1970s, how the social dance practices of black Americans were to be mediated and spread enlivened conversations around the politics of representation (DeFrantz 2010). Respectable, anti-radical, “teenage-kid next store” personae were preferred by companies invested in crossover projects that could project black American corporealities into mainstream economies. Berry Gordy’s Motown record corporation, formed in 1960, grew around carefully groomed models of young black musicality—acts that released social dance energy in carefully regulated units. Motown acts offered soulful, but palatable, performances that retained enough “black sweat” to be recognized as African American, but not so much to be radical or politicized outside of realms of mainstream entertainment (Atkins, 2003; Smith, 2000).

Motown acts received training focused on grooming, fashion, speech and decorum, and generosity of character as part of their training to become professional entertainers. Motown worked to establish preferred modes of social music and dance behavior as commodity, and a global, multi-generational audience responded by expressing a desire to emulate these carefully modulated African American styles of performance. Motown was a corporate exemplar of black social dance demonstration, and dances performed by its groups in their stage choreography quickly became dances practiced in school gymnasiums and basements around the country.

Motown managed to create a spreadable economy of black social dance and music that enlarged the applications of dance movement among a large international consumer-base. Still, Motown acts were decidedly less nuanced in their deployment of social dance movement than expert social dancers deeply embedded in the context of black cultural locations might have been. Motown acts conveyed enough of a sense of dramatic energy, rhythmicity, and individual innovation to be recognized as Africanist, but not so much as to allow for spiritual transcendence or unprecedented ruptures of energy that might be more common in other locations of black performance. Motown acts tamed the potentialities of black social dance so that its features could be more easily accessible to cultural outsiders, bounded, and exchanged. Motown's effects have remained in the markets of black social dance well into the twenty-first century; by now, pop music inevitably demonstrates its reliance on black American dance and musical structures in composition, production, performance, and music video/Internet/YouTube formatting.

The exception of funk

Certain moments in black social dance history trouble any smooth narrative of commodity circulation. For example, the emergence of funk music and its affiliated dance movements in the 1960s threatened smooth narratives of black social dance's portability. Funk arrived unwieldy and angry: soulful and rhythmic, like R&B, but aggressive and bass-heavy in an unprecedented manner for popular music. Funk offered an unvarnished intensity of blackness as a nodule of intertwined political and aesthetic imperatives of motion to its musicians and dancers.

The seriousness of funk countered the palatability of Motown and other concurrent black musical structures of the time. Funk took seriously capacities of social dance to inspire hybrid political identities. Funk artists spoke of aliens and extra-terrestrial interfaces; funk dancing encouraged group solidarity in the immediate space of the activity. Unlike pop music and dance, which emerged in collaboration with logics of mediated connectivity, funk music and dance suggested the dynamic of the present place and the harnessing of the energy of the gathered celebrants in real time. Pop musics emphasized access to an international youth group all engaged in similar versions of simple, repeatable dances like "The Twist" or "The Madison," which tended to last three minutes or so; funk musics inspired highly personalized, unmanageable physical elaborations of rhythm and harmony released in expanded time. Funk emerged as an alternative to assimilation-minded efforts of black pop music; directed explicitly to black audiences, it offered a palpable genre of playful, expressive resistance.

Funk-era dances often emerged as spasmodic-seeming, eccentric dances that echoed solo popular dance forms of the 1920s. These dances, like certain ragtime dances, built from rhythmic response that deployed body parts as

percussive instruments in space: shoulders and head motions performed like hands beating a conga or sticks hitting a snare drum. Dancing funk, people imagined themselves as complex rhythm instruments in space, keeping the beat with alternating hits to different parts of the body in insistent regularity. Funk dances—which later morphed into popular dances like *The Monkey* or *The Chicken*—demanded an intensive, unrelenting physicality; dancers in this mode always grunted and sweated as the dance continued. “Funk” accurately described the experience of its musical and corporeal provocation, as a deeply etched, full-bodied musicality that enacted the awesome energy of serious soulful style.

Surely this thumbnail description of funk dancing disappoints; the difficulty of relating the contents of social dances in general, and this practice of black dance in particular, amplifies the unstable, extra-linguistic potential of these modes of corporeal exchanges. It may be that theatrical dances are bound by structures of recognition that acknowledge the linear ordering of time and space; for example, they can accommodate semiotic or narrative readings that interpret stage events in linear systems of meaning constructed by audiences and writers. But funk dances evade these terms of translation; they offer the intertwined pleasures of creative expressivity and political engagement (since a proto-black movement was the primary ambition and effect of their production). Funk dances, then, pose a problem for commodity exchange as examples of pleasurable politicized movements that will not be easily controlled and exchanged, filmed, packaged, and resold.

Neoliberal economies turn to mediation to expand the reach of an object toward a marketplace where it can be identified, quantified, and engaged at will according to rhetorics of free choice. Funk, as a social dance process defined by its serious attitude—something more than a music genre with affiliated dances—disrupts this logic of exchange. While people engaged funk and enjoyed its expressive potentials, funk did not immediately become commodified in the ways that Motown soul or rock and roll did. James Brown’s charismatic and unique performances, which set the public standard for idealized realizations of funk, did not promote accessible versioning of funk dances that could be undertaken by diverse audiences. Brown’s huge influence and popularity as a musician and entertainer attracted vast audiences. Still, funk dancing did not yield the cottage industry of genre codification that trailed jazz dance or hip-hop, as Adrian Piper’s ironic live art investigations of the early 1980s demonstrated. Rather, funk landed first in the public imaginary as a process that could be exchanged in presence, but not easily spread via mediation. Inevitably, though, neoliberal accelerations of market-driven capitalism placed funk alongside rap, soul, and gospel musical genres, stripping the idiom of its unruly movement component. By 2012, funk may be typically accessed as a nostalgia genre; its social dances recur infrequently.

The short-term contract

Commodity exchange surrounding social dance satisfies a neoliberal tendency toward the short-term contract that predicts market activity based on the foreshortening of engagement with any one product. In one reading, the commercially motivated “dance craze” phenomenon of the 1950s and 1960s—in which Motown participated—predicted an economy of disposable songs and dances that would be made quickly obsolete, to be replaced by new songs and dances and their attendant mediated recordings and cottage industries. Fad songs such as “Mashed Potato Time” or “Twist Again (Like We Did Last Summer)” precipitated a micro-economic “bump” of brief exposure and media notoriety for their affiliated artists. Ironically, black social dances fit this model of replenishment. Because black social dances are typically defined by age-group generational assumptions, they cohere to neoliberal tendencies toward short-term investment. These musics and dances replenish each generation, in altered commodifiable form, generating media that can be marketed in various formats: from how-to videos that encourage dance studio instruction, through reality-television or documentary films, to “where-are-they-now?” nostalgia-based media that re-center artists from earlier times. The broad range of marketable media materials related to social dance encircle the dance itself.

The shift from a generalized commodity capitalism of the civil rights era to the accelerated circulations of neoliberal exchange precipitated by 1980s mandates for deregulation, privatization, and the disempowering of the political state have transformed the global capacities of black social dance. Bit by bit, YouTube video by video dance game, we lose our ability to understand these dances and their larger historical–aesthetic capacities. As in Harvey’s depiction of neoliberal discourse, this dispossession is “fragmented and particular,” and therefore “hard to oppose” (178). We forget to defend—or even comprehend—Krump dancing (southern California-derived Krump dancing) as an aesthetic site of energetic animation, and instead refer to it only as the “angry dance” of Southern California youth in crisis. We misrecognize b-girling as a platform for feminine identity emergence and see only girls acting like the boys. We lose sight of the possibility to argue toward what Harvey calls a “universalistic” rhetoric of “human rights, dignity, sustainability [...] as the basis for a unified oppositional politics” (178). We lose ourselves in the black social dance without nuance.

This may not be a problem, so long as we are willing to function within an inevitable marketplace of commodities, in which our creative corporeal actions may be exchanged at others’ will. But we might at least be aware of the terms of this exchange, so that we can, at times, disrupt the seeming inevitability of “dancing like a black American” in order to feel free: physically powerful, sexually provocative, rhythmically aggressive, and preternaturally cool.

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to Ian Condry, E. Patrick Johnson, and participants in the Performance Studies Research Luncheon at Northwestern University, and to members of the Choreography and Corporeality Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR).

Part III

Formal Economies

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9

Model Dissent: Lưu Quang Vũ and the Melodramatic Performance of Renovation in Post-War Vietnam

Khai Thu Nguyen

If one wants to make a critique of society one needs to do it within certain emotional stories... all writers and artists know this.

—Hiền, Journalist and Researcher¹

We realize that we have many shortcomings in dealing with cadres, workers, and civil servants... Your criticisms are valid... We won't try to avoid taking responsibility. I also know my responsibility. You can blame me. You can shoot me for this. I will voluntarily accept discipline—self-conscious discipline.

—Đỗ Mười, Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Speech to the Trade Union Congress, 1988

On August 29, 1988, Lưu Quang Vũ, one of the most prominent playwrights in the history of modern Vietnamese theatre, was pronounced dead after a traffic accident at Phú Lương Bridge en route from Hai Phong to Hanoi. News of the death of Lưu Quang Vũ, his wife the poet Xuân Quỳnh, and their son Lưu Quang Thơ shocked the artist community and the country at large. Referred to as the “Molière of Vietnam” (Hoche 162), Lưu Quang Vũ had become a cultural icon known to “represent the sentiments of the people,” by courageously speaking out against government and societal ills in his highly popular dramas at a time of post-war economic deprivation and ideological questioning about socialism (Hanoi residents). Critic Tất Thắng reports in a memoir, “In this whole decade, there has been no other funeral that was as big or strongly felt in the whole capital as this one” (259). Thousands joined the funeral procession, lined the streets of Hanoi to watch the casket pass, and lighted incense near the deceased’s home. At the funeral, members from all segments of society honored Vũ as a distinguished national artist and representative of the *đổi mới* (“renovation”)