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### **Switch: Queer Social Dance, Political Leadership, and Black Popular Culture**

Thomas F. DeFrantz

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*Edited by Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin*

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

Moving from the political margins toward a black mainstream, many African American social dances often emerge in queer communities of color. This chapter explores politically embodied consequences and affects of queer social dances that enjoy concentrated attention outside their originary communities. J-setting, voguing, and hand-dancing—a form of queer dance popular in the 1970s–1980s—offer sites to consider the materialization of queer black aesthetic gesture, in dances that redefine gender identities and confirm fluid political economies of social dance and motion. These queer dances simultaneously resist and reinscribe gender conformity in their aesthetic devices; they also suggest alternative histories of black social dance economies in which queer creativity might be valued as its own end. Ultimately, the chapter suggests a haunting presence of queers-of-color aesthetic imperatives within political mobilizations of black social dance, continually—and ironically—conceived as part and parcel of rhetorics of liberation and freedom of movement.

Keywords: black, voguing, J-Setting, hand-dancing, black social dance, queer dance

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MOVING from the political margins toward a Black mainstream, many African American social dances emerge in queer communities of color. For example, voguing, a demonstration social dance practice cultivated in Black and Latino queer communities of the 1980s, became a recognizable dance engaged by young artists of many ethnicities after the millennium. J-setting, a competition dance developed by gay African American men in elaboration of marching band dances performed by women in historically Black colleges and universities in the early 2000s, became celebrated in music videos created by Beyoncé. This chapter explores politically embodied consequences and affects of queer social dances that enjoy concentrated attention outside their originary communities. J-setting, voguing, and hand-dancing (a form of queer dance popular in the

1970s) offer sites to consider the materialization of queer Black aesthetic gesture, in dances that redefine gender identities and confirm fluid political economies of social dance and motion. These queer dances simultaneously resist and reinscribe gender conformity in their aesthetic devices; they also suggest alternative histories of Black social dance economies in which queer creativity might be valued as its own end, even as queer presence in mainstream articulations of Black life continues to be devalued.

When Black social dances are practiced by American political leaders, as when First Lady Michelle Obama demonstrates “the Dougie” in her “Let’s Move” anti-obesity campaign, or when Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton dances alongside others during her 2012 tour of Africa, Black social dance moves toward a central consideration as a form of embodied knowledge. This chapter also wonders at the intertwining of African American social dances and political leadership, conceived as the bodies of elected officials as well as the socially inscribed icons of popular culture, including John Travolta, Madonna, and Beyoncé.

(p. 478) Ultimately, this chapter suggests a haunting presence of queers-of-color aesthetic imperatives within political mobilizations of Black social dance, continually—and ironically—conceived as part and parcel of rhetorics of liberation and freedom of movement. As queer dances emerge in marginalized relationship to mainstream concerns of identity and gesture, and then migrate toward shifting centers of popular culture, they shimmer and *switch*, bringing possibilities of creative aesthetic social dissent.

***switch***, change it up, revisit and revise, funeralize it, flavor it, make it fresh.

surprise! not what you thought, change the joke and slip the yoke.

the yoke here will be straight time, and a hyper-heterosexualized body, one that has to fit into depictions of Black corporeality that assume a certain sort of swaggering, hypercool dancing-laughing-melodramatic mass. that certain sort of Black body needs the ***switch*** .

the ***switch*** is a physical action, an exoticized elaboration of walking that emphasizes the motion of the hips. a switch hitter. switching to his own beat, moving the pelvis to accentuate the change from this to that, either/or, neither \nor. not one or the other but both, maybe. if you want it to be. when we ***switch***, we need you to see us; that’s the fun of the transference, to make the indeterminacy palpable. maybe real men don’t ***switch***, but switching isn’t automatically bad for bros; it’s a recognizable mode of conveyance that draws attention to its contours.

the **switch** is powerful. the change it heralds underscores versatility and capacity. and like any toggle, it can be turned off.

## Vogue

By 2017, we might have thought that voguing would have died, or at least been ensconced firmly in the camp of nostalgic Black social dance forms. Like the Lindy hop before it, vogue might have enjoyed its 20 years of celebrity and popularity, to have been replaced by other emergent forms of spectacular social dance. But twenty-first-century exchanges of dance, its mediation, and social circumstance have inspired more variety and particularities that linger in a global commons of popular culture. Voguing has remained popular among pockets of dancers, especially queer dancers of color. It flourishes in dance competitions and smaller nightclub cultures, where it is engaged by young dancers of various sexual, ethnic, and gender identities.

So we go back to voguing to begin a consideration of queer manifestation and political efficacy in dance. We reconsider the form of ritual battle brought into something-like-mainstream attention by Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*.<sup>1</sup>

(p. 479) Often taught in courses considering gender, sexuality, and race in the United States, *Paris Is Burning* stands as a valuable and trusted document of a vibrant queers of color under-commons. The film deserves attention, as it creates recognizable narratives of aesthetic action by subjects who enjoy an alternative vision of performance, one that mobilizes queer choice-making as an expressive foundation for communal experience. In the film, we witness fashion, ritual performance, age group- and affiliation-based rites of passage, and the exploration of fantastical possibilities for self-representation through dance. The film delivers vibrant confirmations of fully realized cultures that surprised audiences at the time of its premiere.

A basic critique of the documentary film,<sup>2</sup> though, underscores that it casts Black creativity as pathology endured by a social underclass always already removed from any possibility of healthy existence. The subjects of the film are forced into positions as interlocutors for an assumedly uninitiated audience. The film suggests, who could actually know these queers of color? Formally, the film explains itself by way of confessional narratives offered to the camera, and omniscient section headers that emblazon titles, including "Realness," "Mother," "Shade," and "Voguing," to present the inherent pathos of its subjects. The small bit of triumph allowed these lives are found in a performative exploration of queer dress-up, ball competitions, and dance. Illusory self-presentation, patently false and imaginative, aligns with flamboyance in a dance form too

bizarre to be considered anything less than queer. And here, queer comes to be characterized as financially vulnerable, emotionally under-resourced, and sometimes delusional in its self-awareness.

Subjects in the film continually reference “the real” in a manner not unlike contemporaneous developments in 1980s hip-hop culture.<sup>3</sup> The questions of “realness” that underscore categories of ball performance become foundational ontological queries for the subjects of the film: “real” here is an ironic and urgent category of masking and approximation, executed in sharp contrast to tales of impoverishment and degradation offered up in confessional narratives throughout the film. While the film chronicles the ambitions of its subjects to succeed either as performers within the balls or as transgender citizens with lives and loves outside ball communities, its ultimate portrayal of queer lives of color is one of disillusionment and despair, with death at the hands of an unknown assailant lurking just outside the fantastical spaces of queer affirmation.<sup>4</sup>

But performance and dance sequences in the film demonstrate the liveliness of a queers-of-color commons. Walking in categories, and voguing, performers demonstrate expressivity through self-fashioning gesture and individual style. Unquestionable virtuosity arrives in these sequences—confirmation that vast resources of creative energy affirm the human potential of these queer lives. As voguers pop, dip, and spin in competition, their energetic demonstrations underline the *switch* from the physical abjections and furtive secrecies of queer life in the outside world to the physically enlightened gestural life in the competition of the balls.

Watching, though, and not dancing ourselves, after we get past our stilled amazement at the virtuosity demonstrated in this non-touching physical competition, we might notice how this performance describes community as a willingness to improvise (p. 480) together. These first-generation voguers fall into rhythm with each other; they mirror poses to “cap on” or top each other; they revel in their ability to execute this particular form of ritual dance. The dance produces expressive pleasure within competition. Even as it builds upon a certain sort of harsh posturing that arrives hard-edged in its silhouettes and its manner of physical derision, uninitiated, we can easily miss that it might be pleasurable to move in this way alongside others. This capacity of pleasure alongside the anxiety of performance and competition falls within the turn to dance that operates outside the task-based ambitions of language. Embodied knowledge that is improvisational, particular, and untranslatable matters deeply here. The fact of performing—dancing competitively—alongside each other allows a coherent community to emerge, emboldened by gestures that reveal continuities among participants. In these queer gestures, physical awareness and strategic flexibility arrive as measures of wit, determination, and innovation. The voguing of the balls is judged and valued for its unexpected revelations of individual ability within the context of the cohering group.

Voguing references a manufactured capitalist conception of preferred gender representation; dancers are fully aware that the form refers to the magazine *Vogue* and the entire high-end fashion industry. In this, voguing also signals a return to glamour as a category of extravagance and the celebration of a feminine, but an entirely ersatz feminine, ersatz glamour, and ersatz extravagance. The overdone-ness of the form and its context speak to a para-theatrical, or meta-performative, space of fantasy that is absolutely necessary as an aspect of a healthy everyday. But that fantasy arrives tied to structures of domination and patriarchy that dress people “appropriately” to their caste, profession, or stylishness.

*Switch*. The glamour that voguing approached in its first two generations, documented in the Livingston film, has not survived the transition from local underground queers-of-color commons to its status as a contemporary global-cultural dance form. By 2017, the original quest for a sharp, queer-model-cool performance mode has been replaced by a sweaty, dance-for-everyone ethic that permeates nightclub demonstrations and dance competitions involving the form. Where earlier dancers explored a performative cool detachment, which approximated the sense of relaxed allure sought by print models of the 1980s, latter-day voguers tend to emphasize spectacular stunts and tricks.

Indeed, the physical expectations of vogue practitioners continue to rise among third- and fourth-generation dancers. By now, voguers routinely execute harrowing drops and contortions that require an expertise and physical fitness not available to all those who might want it. Voguing on a global stage is an entirely virtuosic expression, loaded with ornate turns of physical phrase and predetermined gestural details. Voguing is, by now, something of an industry built around its ability to harness a competitive ferocity within an ersatz feminine, queer container. In this move toward professionalization, some of the wit of oblique understatement may surely be replaced by a desire to “do the dance” rather than engage it as an avenue of queer expression. This tension of transformation might be a challenge for any Black social dance that survives its brief moment of unencumbered social popularity before the seemingly inevitable tilt toward the marketplace.<sup>5</sup>

(p. 481) And what a *switch* we’ve seen for voguing! By now in 2017 we have a vogue studies marketplace entirely available for consumption. We see Vogue categories of dance competitions that are produced by multinational commodities—sports drinks and athletic gear, video game companies, and the like. We see voguing as life coaching available for “finding your inner ‘cuntee,’ ” if you will excuse the lingo of the trade. The website <https://radfag.wordpress.com/tag/vogue-studies/> offers a vogue studies marketplace of ways by which to live a life through voguing and discover an elusive social stability by affiliation with this particular brand of “outsider art.”<sup>6</sup>

As vogue turns from competition to demonstration and back to competition in a distributed social media format, it accommodates straights who crave a queer moment in dance. “Fierceness” and “shade” are performative attributes understood from their place in the Livingston film; there and in the twenty-first century, we are encouraged to watch the dance in amazement at the fierceness of the shade that the queens deliver in dance. Straight time overcomes the queer moment of release, and this mode of performance becomes commonplace enough to support the troupe Vogue Evolution on the 2009 television program *America’s Next Best Dance Crew*. Led by transgender dancer Leiomy Maldonado,<sup>7</sup> queers of color brought contemporary vogue to an international television audience when dancers competed alongside “straight” crews. The “outsiderness” of voguing as a process available mainly to queers of color shimmered in this exchange, and voguing became available again to a large, mediated audience.

Voguing *switched*, to become a referent to its histories, and most commonly realized in a practice of duck walks, death drops, and embellished versions of “waacking.” By 2017, overlapping and intertwined circumstances for the dance form place it within diverse contexts—on ballet stages; in music videos and popular music concerts; on sitcom television shows; and even still at contemporary balls and at queer community centers. The dance emerges in brief episodes in unlikely circumstances, as a stance or a series of gestures, confirming the global circulation of queer gesture.

### ***Vogue Against the State***<sup>8</sup>

*Micky Bradford, Black-trans-woman-activist-artist, outside the North Carolina governor’s mansion, Thursday March 24, 2016. The governor endorsed an “emergency session” of the state legislature the day before to create HB2, a weird law that somehow intended to ban transgender individuals from using public restrooms that don’t match the sex listed on their birth certificates. Bradford joined other protesters for a long vigil in the street, bringing attention to the ridiculousness born of fear and ignorance. The protesters chant, sing, play musical instruments, and call for the graciousness of a civil society that acknowledges queers of color and the possibility of love. Several police officers stand guard as the group gathers its energy into the potential for change. And then Bradford breaks out of the crowd to stand alongside the police and face the group. After a moment of preparation, her hand waving transforms into arms control; a switch, and then she is on. A spin, arms control, sinking down into a full-fledged duck walk; Bradford demonstrates aesthetic innovations that push away the authority of the State, dancing against the demons of prejudice to imagine a possibility born of queer creativity. As she finishes (p. 482) her dance black power fist in the air, the crowd cycles its chant: we love you ... we love you ... I believe*

*that we will win ... I believe that we will win ... we gon' be all right ... we gon' be all right....*

## J-Sette

Voguing, a solo form of dance, contributed parts of its zeitgeist to J-setting, a group form built around display and team-based performance strategies of competition. J-setting didn't begin as team competition, but rather as an entertainment mode of dance aligned with the pageantry of football games. Like the drum majors, whom art historian Robert Farris Thompson cites as an Africanist invention of America,<sup>9</sup> African American drum majorettes also put down their batons to dance as a group. Throughout the 1970s, J-setting style came into focus as a distinctive dance practice. Like fraternity and sorority stepping, it began as a Black performance practice, materialized exclusively in Black spaces, but grew to be recognizable to some larger audiences as it gained mainstream attention in the 1990s.

Structurally, J-setting has a much stronger proximity to a twenty-first-century "everyday" than voguing ever could. The root of the form is familiar to anyone who's seen a half-time show at a football game, and the group dynamic that calls for unison dancing allows uninitiated viewers to make determinations of ability and affect by watching the dancers casually. J-setting reinscribes state-sponsored forms of gender conformity, supporting the weird multiplicity of thin, athletic, visibly feminine bodies with long straight hair who dress and dance like copies of each other. Indeed, the form thrives as an embodiment of presence-in-information that suggests an ever-expansive Black femininity to be replenished as needed. Its phalanxes of strong, media-ready feminine bodies confirm Black sustainment through time.

J-setting grew up something like theatrical jazz dancing, with simple dance movement phrases completed by groups of dancers facing an audience. Like other forms of Black expressive culture, it developed in tandem with its musical accompaniments and vice versa; the music and dance propelled each other forward. J-setting offers large-scale movements that might be seen from a distance and that enhance the bleary sounds of marching band ensembles that struggle to produce adequate bass tones. J-setting arrives "high in the body" with an accent on a raised torso and lively hip movements rather than a "get down," low-to-the-ground gesture that might be prevalent in other forms of Black social dance.

J-setting became a competition form as it developed embedded within drum corps and marching band exercises at sporting events. Historical records point toward Jackson State University as an epicenter of the development of the form in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> But as several schools developed dance groups in the following decades, J-setting became more competitive in “shine” and showing-off moments that could rouse the stadium crowd and demonstrate the heightened ability of one school’s expressive dance abilities over another.

(p. 483) J-setting continues in the twenty-first century as a women’s form of public performance, but its broadest reach is probably found in its queer iterations. As with voguing, the queer versions of J-setting grew up in nightclubs and private spaces that allowed queers of color to congregate. Queer J-setting, practiced by male-identified dancers, features transference of the women’s form of display as a metaphorically ironic, but physically serious, appropriation of style and structure. The competitive queer form of the dance assumes a watching audience who will help encourage the dancers and determine the winners of each battle by way of their responses to the performance. Dance-offs determine community status and bragging rights for the winners; and while sporting-event versions of the dance demonstrate ability without any particular award for outcome, its competitive strains indicate a ranking and hierarchy in the assignment of winners and losers.

We note with interest that the modest mainstream celebrity afforded the form of J-setting comes only after queer men take on its physical strategies. In the first decade of the 2000s, the public spectacle of Black queer J-setting became more noteworthy than the form’s original dancing by women of color; queer titillation beat out heteronormative fantasy. In this consideration of value associated with Black social dance, male participation proves to be more important to a profitable racialized and sexualized narrative than that of female invention. J-setting arrived to confirm a subtle critique of mainstream tropes of femininity by way of overemphasized body presentation (costume and makeup). Its queer articulations expand that critique to include “preferred” public modes of Black masculinity. Queer J-setters express feminine affect through physical representation, as in wearing tight-fitting clothing and makeup, and in a leaning toward femme attitudes through dispersed energetic fields and gestures that are commonly recognized as “feminine.”

Dancing J-sette is anything but physically demure or contained. The hard bounce and recoil that define J-setting call for a certain tension/tightness and the production of unrelenting energetic production. Unlike voguing, poses in J-setting are passed through, on the way to the next hard-accent and pounce. But it is a constant bouncing through that defines the form: rhythm revealed in phrasing that allows accents to pop out as unexpected, powerful, and relentless expressions of unmitigated spotlight. “Straight” and



queer dancers attack the dance to demonstrate a toughness of weight and punch, wrapped within a sinuous, curvaceous demeanor.

By 2017, J-setting has its own television show with the *Prancing Elites*, a group picked up by mainstream media to provide a certain kind of local color to reality television programming. The television show on the Oxygen television network trades in the usual reality-TV drama, but it is heightened by narratives of challenge and trauma brought on by racialized and sexual difference from an assumed mainstream. The dancers of the *Prancing Elites* are continually “Othered” and familiarized by the gaze of the reality television camera; everyday slights and triumphs are magnified by the camera’s scrutiny so that audiences can voyeuristically imagine the capacities and limitations of these queer Black bodies in motion. Dancing on the program demonstrates a sort of super-power—an unassailably spectacular ability that the subjects engage when things get too complex (p. 484) or difficult. The J-sette in this context “saves” the subjects and allows them the agency to continue their difficult lives. Dancing here is cast as something distinctive from the tribulations of star/trans/bounce artist Big Freedia, whose television show airs on the Fuse network. Freedia faces struggles as she builds a career and manages her personal life while performing in queer nightclubs.<sup>11</sup> But where Big Freedia’s life tends to be circumscribed by queer spaces for the most part, the *Prancing Elites* made their fame dancing in public, and their television program repeatedly places them in the harm’s way of potential public disavowal. The tension of public queerness produces the reliable drama of the television program.

J-setting’s history as a form practiced by women at sporting events would not predict this attention paid to its performances. As a dance that underscores normative depictions of femininity—glamorous, made up, and heightened in a recognizable fit muscularity—J-setting could be as “everyday” as beauty pageant contestants or waitresses at Hooters. A narrative of feminine capitulation to patriarchy is slightly shifted by the presence of women of color in the context of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In the context of HBCUs, the presentation of gender intersects with tensions surrounding racialization and sexuality, allowing for nuanced and contradictory eruptions of meaning. A “sexy cheerleader” in the context of an HBCU will not necessarily translate into class mobility for a Black woman, as it might for a white woman at a Big Ten university. Race matters, and J-setting women demonstrate a flagrant Black feminine glamour widely absent from mainstream media. That said, the glamour dispensed by J-setters can easily be viewed as a passive, though subaltern, demonstration of submission to a dominating masculine gaze.

Queer men of color were always implicated in J-setting as it developed in the 1970s, but they were not allowed to participate in its public manifestations for decades. When men

began performing infrequently alongside women in the 1990s, some HBCU communities surely resisted their presence. Queer men claimed the form as their own, transformed its contents, and honed it in queer nightclubs.<sup>12</sup> As LGBTQ festivals and parties allowed public space for queer presence, queer J-setters engaged in dance-off competitions at these venues. The Prancing Elites earned their celebrity status performing in public settings. The “outdoor-ness” of their performances and those of dancers at various competitions in Atlanta<sup>13</sup> predict a certain kind of public queer: one propagated by social media to arrive as an everyday sort of natural oddity. Queer men of color in matching outfits and makeup, dancing hard in formation and following a leader, become a recognizable aspect of mediated urban life.

J-setting becomes available to any who view it because it is accessible in the media-sphere, and in that context, it seems to be quite fun. In the *Prancing Elites* program, as with all wish-fulfillment reality TV programming, every vestige of social degradation and devaluation is matched by some sort of personal triumph; the dancers rise up and over their unfortunate social condition by way of their dancing. In this, J-sette becomes part of a narrative of social possibility for queer gesture, a means toward not only social visibility, but also social enhancement by the contribution of queer dance to a mainstream hungry to consume its contents.<sup>14</sup> J-setting by girls and young women

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is marketed to the audiences of Lifetime network reality TV program *Bring It!*

Here, young African American dancers compete for their home dance studios in competition formats that value the dance practice in a social circumstance focused on itself. Where college sport or queer dance-off J-setting surely gains in importance because of its embedded social circumstance, the girls and young women of studio dancing represented in *Bring It!* J-sette toward its own end, as dance expression and activity. On this television show, queers of color constitute a sizable portion of choreographers and dance studio managers represented solidly within the spheres of influence. Indeed, twenty-first-century J-setting moves in many directions simultaneously, always somehow referencing a queers-of-color commons in background and foreground motion.

### ***Media-Distributed J-Sette in Heels***<sup>15</sup>

*Beyonce’s Single Ladies video galvanized an international zeitgeist moment of queer-trans-men dancing hard, J-sette style, in high heels.<sup>16</sup> Moving out from the pack of fantastical queer dancers who share their expertise by way of social media, white Frenchman Yanis Marshall causes quite a stir in videos he makes with friends.<sup>17</sup> Marshall’s dancing arrives entirely overwrought: perpetually positioned toward a camera and its blank, cold stare, Marshall creates heat by exaggerating the basic precepts of eroticized jazz dance and J-setting, hitting*

*accents and gyrating in slow-motion postures that suit the frame of a lens. In Marshall's short but significant career, he has toured internationally as a dance studio teacher for "heels classes," helping girls, young women and young men understand how to accentuate gestures in the feral mode of music video dance. This isn't J-setting, but it also couldn't exist without the intervention of Single Ladies as a simplified roadmap toward understanding queers-of-color style. Marshall's dance builds from the possibilities of the hard bounce and recoil performed in high heels, extending the corporeal state of J-sette dance toward a broadened participant and audience base of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, and their allies, calling them forward to dance by those names<sup>18</sup> as he teaches dance classes in London, Sao Paulo, Marrakesh, Edinburg, San Francisco, New York....*

## Hand-Dancing

The movement of vogue from private space through media to public commodity differs slightly from the movement from public space through media to theatrical recognition that surrounds J-setting. In both cases, late capitalist deployments of performance as commodity and neoliberal assumptions of access catapult the forms outward to a public that may never know its live participants. But some queer iterations of Black social dance escape the spotlight of commercial scrutiny, in part because they are less sensational than either of these latter-day forms.

To reach back further into the histories of queer Black social dance, we might want to consider the couple forms of disco and hand-dancing. These are the most everyday forms of queer social dance, surely practiced by more folks than the others—queer and (p. 486) not-so-queer—from the 1930s forward. The dances involve two people touching and then breaking away for solo flourishes or "shine" steps; these are the dances made excessively popular by the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, even as the mode of dance was already in something of a decline by that time.

Hand-dancing is a version of Lindy and swing dance that rose in popularity in the 1930s. Its elaborate working-through of the possibilities of partnership became the stuff of spectacle as expert social dancers cleared dance floors to demonstrate their synergies, and television and film became more and more willing to capture, and then screen, their expertise. Here, we might think about an even more explicit gender dynamic to consider how queer versions of hand-dancing take center stage. While intricate couple dancing usually stabilized a heterosexual unit, the most elaborate iterations of these dances—like the Argentinian tango—flourished among same-sex, male partnerships. As demonstrated

by the spectacularization of queer J-setting, innovations in social dance forms largely register among men who have been socialized to claim ownership of intellectual material like movement sequences, or particular maneuvers. Women had little space to claim creative copyright, if that was ever an intention within social dance, and traditions of male authorship of material, borrowed from most every other realm of social exchange, also apply to social dance. So the work of Leon James and Al Minn continues a tradition of queer men demonstrating the virtuosic ends of something that should, by common-sense standards, involve the presence and performance of women.

James and Minn achieved a slight popularity as leading African American exponents of swing dancing in the 1930s and 1940s as members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. Their partnership continued as they achieved some visibility on television programming in the 1950s and 1960s. *The DuPont Show of the Week* of 1961<sup>19</sup> features the duo in demonstrations of "old time" Black social dance styles. The sequence ends with a Lindy hop, allowing the intimacy and rampant physicality of hand-held partner dancing. James and Minn were filmed dancing together variously; their expertise commanded the attention of the camera and onlookers gathered around them.

Hand-dancers practice at home or on the dance floor, and become expert through their repeated engagement with the form. These are the dances of Studio 54 in the 1980s and the Paradise Garage—wildly under-documented and under-theorized, but foundational to slightly more recognizable forms like Chicago Stepping. Stepping has deep roots in African American communities as a fancy dance for two, a public/private demonstration of partnership, flexibility, and improvisational elegance. Stepping is generally known as a heteronormative sort of form, designed for men and women to dance in couples. Still, we can find a strong and persistent strain of homosocial dance in these forms.

Stepping explores the smooth passage of energy in an elevated, ever-circular exploration of space and timing. While some sequences of hand-dancing or stepping can be practiced and repeated, the form is largely spontaneous in execution, with movement sequences discovered in the activity as it proceeds. A cool demeanor is always to be demonstrated. Overriding the social pressure to perform well, coolness enlivens the public (p. 487) performance. Watching, we are invited to consider the micro-choice-making embedded within each gentle tug of leader and follower, each turn and dip, unexpected pause, and triumphant spinning-out of long, extended passages of smooth velocity.

Some expert hand-dancing queers of color attended Paradise Garage and Studio 54 regularly in the 1980s. These same-sex couples would gather in less-crowded corners of the dance club, in a manner similar to that of the "Cat's Corner" often documented in accounts of the Savoy Ballroom in the 1930s. Hand-dancers seldom achieved name recognition among those they didn't already know, but their distinctive dancing set a

standard of expertise in the social setting. Super-fast, accomplished duet improvisations emerged as casual performances, sometimes watched by other dancers, but usually acknowledged at a distance and without fanfare. Like James and Minn, these anonymous couples continued a tradition by which the best dancers stood apart from the crowd, to offer vibrant demonstration of the potentials of dance forms that others in the room practiced in simplified form. The expert same-sex dancers reminded the larger group that queer achievement through the embodied practice of dance could make a resistant aesthetic of expression manifest, even in the context of a nightclub setting.

Hand-dancing in Black social contexts continued to the end of the twentieth-century and well into the twenty-first. Chicago Steppin' became a recognizable couple form sometime in the 1980s, and grows in popularity aided by musical offerings and dance conventions dedicated to its practice. Emphatically social in its need for two touching participants, requiring physical contact in a way that neither J-setting nor voguing proscribe, Chicago Steppin' expands on the smooth construction of centripetal force by dancers gliding in intricate turning formations. Beloved by working-class and middle-class-aspirational dancers typically of middle to indeterminate age, this partnered sharing dance embraces innovations offered by its queer ancestors of Paradise Garage and couples like James and Minn.

### ***Chicago Steppin' Same-Sex Demonstration***

*DJ Rockin' Rodney Mack hosts an annual White Party for steppers from around the country.<sup>20</sup> The event runs for a weekend, like other social dance conferences, and includes workshops and panels along with competitions and demonstrations. Scores of dancers gather in the host hotel for the scheduled events, which inevitably spill into scheduled and spontaneous afterparties around town. Video from the 2010 iteration of Detroit dance includes a remarkable demonstration sequence of men dancing together. Buoyed by their status as masters who can calmly improvise the movements that need to be seen by the group, the men enjoy an intimate dance encounter in public: testing rhythms and shifts of weight; finding holds and releases that allow for flourishes and unexpected accents; riding under and over the rhythms with fanciful drops to the knees and shifting slides that cross the floor. The first couple comes to be replaced by an adventurous trio of men who move, briefly, in ever-expanding geometric patterns. By the end of the clip ten men have entered the dance space, enlivening the hugely heteronormative dance floor surrounded by men and women clad in white with the queer presence of same-sex expression.*

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## Movements to Mainstream

These queer social dance forms each have profound mainstream presences that continue to ripple outward in the twenty-first century. We've already mentioned *Saturday Night Fever* and the place of hand-dancing as public dance spectacle; John Travolta's closeted gay persona added a patina of queer attraction to his performance in the movie as the performative site of dance excellence to be emulated by all. Travolta's quasi-queer whiteness takes on the simplest versions of hand-dancing to offer a palatable form that could be approached by dancers who saw the movie and wanted to act it out themselves. While the complexities of spontaneous hand-dancing are removed for the sake of the performer and the film sequencing, the dance arrives in stunning simple choreography created by queer African American dancemaker Lester Wilson.<sup>21</sup> Watching, we witnesses are encouraged to notice only how smooth, sexy, and confident the dancers seem to be in this form.

Simplification was also crucial for the entry of voguing into the broadest mainstream, as we all know from Madonna's song and dance of 1990. Madonna wanted to try to vogue herself, as a dancer, and she performed an ultra simplistic sort-of-approximation of the form as a repeatable, prefigured sequence of gestures. Of course, voguing in context needs to be spontaneous and balanced as active, competitive gesture and display of ability; doing the dance on a stage for an audience without participating competitors removes much of the foundational ethos for the existence of the form. But we might notice Madonna's willingness to try something so very far from her own experience, and in that effort, she models our collective access to these dance gestures.

Beyoncé's work with J-setting can open a conversation about engagement with Black social dance forms and appropriation. It can be a simple correlative to designate any white presence within Black expressive culture as appropriation, with all of the negative connotations that might surround asymmetrical access to distribution and celebrity. Madonna appropriates voguing, but is that also what happens when Beyoncé J-sets in the video for her song "Single Ladies"? Various bloggers have weighed in on Beyoncé's frequent references to lesser-known forms of performance that she brings to a mainstream public by way of her concerts and music videos. Is this appropriation symmetrical to that of Madonna's?

I want to consider engagement with cultural form as a useful analytic of social exchange across difference. Appropriation might always be about the relationship among a powerful actor and a weak actor and the reification of structural asymmetries that keep each actor in their role. Appropriation seems to be already done and complete in its

execution, leaving little space for the consideration of the quality of exchange. In noting Madonna's, or Beyoncé's, engagement with these queer Black forms of dance, maybe we can begin to think about how these artists are physically invested in these practices, and the quality of their actual performance gestures within these forms. Beyoncé is a powerful performer, and can J-sette convincingly alongside, at least, the college groups and queer dance teams that produced the form. Madonna is a less experienced voguer, (p. 489) and could not survive a competition in the form, except possibly by a rank amateur. Both of these artists engage these dance forms, and, yes, **appropriate** them for stage performance and music videos. But in thinking through the performances of Madonna, Beyoncé, and Travolta, and their physical engagement in these dance forms, we might learn more about what constitutes successful deployment of these queer gestures and the quality of their character as dance.

For an obvious example of failed appropriation and poor engagement with Black social dance, we turn briefly to Miley Cyrus's performance on the Video Music Awards from 2013. Here again, many bloggers have registered harsh critiques of Cyrus's attempts to engage Black social dance.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most interesting amid the swirl of largely appropriate critique leveled against this failed performance is the presence of talented J-setters from Albany State University and Alabama State University alongside performers 2-Chains and Kendrick Lamar later in the same sequence. The presence of these dancers hugely complicates a general concern surrounding "twerking" in public. While Cyrus is gross and awkward, trashy and indistinct in her physical gestures, slightly uncomfortable, unstructured, and profoundly uncool, the J-setters who appear later in the sequence offer powerful, rhythmically sophisticated, and structurally confident renderings of their group choreography. And while the J-setting choreography is surely heteronormalized, and possibly aligned with the vague terms of "twerking" as a social dance practice, it also holds space for the agency of its dancers to bring forth undeniably potent physical statements of presence.

The dance *switches*. When Black social dance allows its participants to demonstrate their physical abilities outside normative presumptions, it inevitably draws on its queer ancestral hauntings. Travolta, Madonna, and Beyoncé each offer mainstream versions of queer dance forms. Their socially inscribed status as celebrity leaders of popular culture encourages mainstream participation in these queer gestures. (Notably, Beyoncé's introduction to J-setting came via queer-aligned male artists JaQuel Knight and Frank Gatson, affiliating the video with gay performances of the form rather than the college women performer's original instantiations.)<sup>23</sup> The queers-of-color commons that allowed for the emergence of the dance forms becomes implicated in these mainstream performances, even as the actual presence of queer people in all of our variety remains diminished. In the *switch* from queer to mainstream, heteronormative bodies—including

Travolta's closeted persona—move these dances outward, toward their larger impact on a general population of dancers.

## The Spectacle of Black Social Dance Performance and the State

So we see how vestiges of these queer dance forms arrive in mainstream iterations among entertainers, but what happens when they also show up in the movements of our (p. 490) political leaders? What happens when politicians of the United States dance? To end this chapter, we raise questions around the ways in which Black social dances are deployed to create a narrative of munificent cultural pluralism, rooted in the dances and music of a Black body politic, which are called upon to provide evidence of national progress and inclusion (a liberal horizon of inevitable self-correction), even as the Black Lives Matter movement lays bare unequal treatments in economic possibility and unequal prospects before the law for African Americans. We note that these social dances arrive whether there are Black people present or not. Disentangled from the identity politic evidenced by the queers-of-color who originated these dances, the dances do the work of suggesting physical familiarity with Black modes of expression, and the implicit rhetoric of neoliberal freedom to dance as a Black American for any who would do an electric slide or attempt to Harlem shake.

Presidential inauguration parties of the latter half of the twentieth century offer startling evidence of Black social dance and musicality deployed to stabilize narratives of cultural diversity. Ronald Reagan allowed breakdancing to arrive as “official entertainment” for his second inaugural festivities in 1985; he smiled and giggled as a group of young performers offered their best versions of popping, locking, uprocks, and floorwork.<sup>24</sup> Supporters of Presidents Reagan, both Bushes, Clinton, and Obama all performed the electric slide during inaugural celebrations. These inclusions of Black social dance drawn from opposite ends of a political spectrum confirm a usefulness of Black dance as a signal of active cultural exchange.

While the New York City Breakers' inclusion at Reagan's inauguration festivities could easily be viewed as appropriation by the state, especially in this case of cultural production as resistance to the lack of cultural opportunity offered by a political mainstream, some dancing by politicians is not depicted or received as appropriation at the level of state involvement. For example, videos from Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's tour of South Africa in 2012 capture how she engaged in the social dances of events she attended. Clinton did not shy away from the physical implications of her



movements alongside Black South African dancers and entertainers. Her willingness to engage the dancing caused a flurry of uncomfortable speculation from white American pundits who wondered that she might be “going native.”<sup>25</sup> Could the former First Lady and future presidential candidate really enjoy this potentially homoerotic physical expression of Africanist derivation? Could her dancing alongside Black African women be normalized enough to withstand critiques of its unseemliness?

More recently, Michelle Obama has modeled a dancing United States politic with her Let’s Move campaign.<sup>26</sup> Here, we might consider the terms of acceptability for Black social dance, already haunted by queer innovation, as a physical resource of White House embodiment. Obama’s dancing engages the appropriate “battle mask” that articulates excellence in some Black social dance forms. Note carefully the fleeting moment in the first video from the Let’s Move campaign demonstrates that the First Lady’s deepened engagement with the Dougie. Indeed, Obama has become something of “the dancing First Lady,” and she is gently allowing that persona to be a Black woman’s dancing self. She moves in steady progression from the Let’s Move video, where she very much protected (p. 491) her amateur dance status in order to not overwhelm a nation that tends to be suspicious of expressive physical ability, into a campy queer mode in her work with Jimmy Fallon in drag, as they demonstrated “mom dancing” in a couple of popular appearance/videos.<sup>27</sup> In these videos, we note her more confident approach to her own dancing, the references to dancing star Beyoncé’s excellence, well beyond their combined abilities, and also the end of the skit, with a narrative that privileges her deepened engagement with Black social dance by literally knocking Fallon’s character from the stage.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, we can also note Obama in full physical presence, dancing alongside Ellen DeGeneres and a group of professional dancers. Here, we witness her competence as a Black social dancer, able to make rhythmic distinctions, provide accents and emphases at her will, and a fully present status in the movements choreographed for the occasion. She becomes herself more and more, it seems, and that self is actively engaged in Black social dance.<sup>29</sup>

*Switch*. In this, the state dances Black, and it engages queer presence in the hauntings that produce its dances. Queer ancestral legacies in motion, haunting and enlivening the straight dance. Queer presence might be marginalized and spectacularized by the archive, a funny, contradictory trick that simultaneously celebrates and demeans. But as these gestures of resistant queer expression find their way onto the bodies of our shared dancing, and into the physical references offered by our political leaders, we are more and more present in unanticipated provocation; queer presence sparkles in these dance, in embodied reference to queers in the world. These fugitive placeholders of queer dance

haunt heteronormative mainstream performances, referencing hidden, forgotten, ancestral, and discarded histories of queer Black social dance. These hauntings demand our embodied attention even as they dissipate through gesture. We see it sometimes; we feel its unruly and joyous call to embodied voicing. In that moment we *switch*, and the light comes on, fugitive or not, and queers-of-color make space for physical dissidence and creative expression.

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(3.) Judith Butler describes "realness" in *Paris is Burning* as the performer's "ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect," as the result of an "embodiment of norms." The "real," in this context, hides the *switch* across gender or sexual identities. See Butler, "Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," in *Bodies That Matter On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 121–140.

(4.) Venus Xtravaganza, a subject of the film, was murdered by an unknown assailant before the film's release. Her killer has not been found.

(5.) Thomas DeFrantz, "Unchecked Popularity: Neoliberal Circulations of Black Social Dance," in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 128–142.

(6.) The radical faggot website clearly intends to promote a politically progressive, social justice-conscious method of performance practice and community engagement, particularly tilted toward a queers of color commons.

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**Thomas F. DeFrantz**

Thomas F. DeFrantz is Professor of Dance and African American Studies at Duke University. He is the director of SLIPPAGE: Performance, Culture, Technology, a research group that explores emerging technology in live performance applications, in residence at Duke University. An author, director, and performer, he co-convenes the working group Black Performance Theory, the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance, and the Choreography and Corporeality of the International Federation for Theatre Research. He acts as President of the Society of Dance History Scholars. Thomas DeFrantz is Professor of Dance and African American Studies at Duke University.

