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# African American Vernacular Dance: Investigating Embodied Identity in Hip-hop Dance Through Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

By Jennifer Meckley

## Abstract

This essay investigates the translation of identity through kinesthetic knowledge and embodied experiences in African American vernacular dance forms developed from oppression and discrimination of the Black and LGBTQIA communities. The histories, creators, and movement qualities of the hip-hop dance styles house dance, waacking, voguing, and breaking are analyzed along with the identities of the choreographer and dancers in a production entitled *Intertextuality*. This show encompassed various African American vernacular dance forms through multiple perspectives, personalities, and training backgrounds. Smaller sections of this production — “XY” and “Messe Messe” — provide the main evidence for this analysis by dissecting the choreographic choices, performers’ experiences, and the gender associations rooted in the movement qualities of these dance styles. The result of this investigation will bring awareness to the embedded and embodied experiences and stereotypes these dance forms carry through race, gender, and sexual orientation and will emphasize the necessity for the transference of these experiences through movement to accomplish a deeper understanding and unity cross-culturally.

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*Intertextuality*, a dance production presented at Ball State University (BSU) in September 2020, was led by Mya Ajanku, co-directed by Jennifer Meckley, and co-choreographed by Ryan Johnson. The dance production emphasized identity through the lens of African diasporic dance forms, local BSU dancers, and choreographers influenced by various dance styles, experiences, and backgrounds. The production *Intertextuality* was inspired by a literary term and concept “intertextuality” discussed by dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild. “It means that cultures and cultural products influence each other in a constant, dynamic flux, even when adherents of a given culture purposefully refute ‘other’ influences, subconsciously cannot face up to them, or simply are ignorant of their existence,” says Gottschild in her essay *The Diaspora Dance Boom*. This concept of “intertextuality” was a key motivator for identity development in the dances examined in this essay.

This essay will discuss the unique approaches to identity, specifically through hip hop techniques in two sections of *Intertextuality*, “Messe Messe” and “XY.” Through the lens of the choreographer, Jennifer Meckley, a white, queer woman, “Messe Messe” and “XY” address the racial stereotypes and gender associations in the styles of house dance, waacking, voguing, and breaking, and the challenges and possibilities that arise when translating identities through African American derived forms to performers with different experiences, dance training, and perspectives. Through historical investigations of these dance styles, we will understand and acknowledge the necessity and importance of African American vernacular dance techniques and their role in transferring

individuality through embodied experiences by dissecting their race and gender associations.

In this case, hip hop dance is offered as an umbrella term to identify various African American vernacular dance forms that progressed into contemporary hip hop dance styles. The styles referenced in the analyzed pieces fall under the club and street dance categories and include house dance, waacking, voguing, and breaking, all of which derive from Black culture and influence 21st Century commercial hip hop choreography and social dances. The historical origins of waacking and voguing provide insight into how embodied identities translate from one dancer to another cross-culturally and geographically.

As African American dance forms, waacking and voguing offer a particular perspective of an oppressed group of people in Los Angeles and New York City in the 1970s. They also address another layer of identity due to their origins in the underground gay male community. Waacking, originally referred to as Punking and adapted from the derogatory term “punk” that identified gay men (Suraj 00:01:51-00:02:00), is a club dance traditionally performed to Disco music and was eventually made popular by the television show *Soul Train*. In the 1980s, the popularity of this style started to decline: “With almost all male progenitors passing during the early AIDS crisis, the [Waacking] culture was reborn in the 2000s to the transnational hip-hop/street dance arena, now a competition style dominated by nonblack cisgender females” (Bragin 61). Waacking is commonly viewed as a feminine dance style due to its connection with the LGBTQIA community and the stereotypes associated with them. Punkers also referenced famous female actresses, including Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, and Norma Desmond to influence their movement, costuming, and acting choices, another reason for feminine associations. Nonetheless, other popular dramatic animated cartoons like Bugs Bunny

and Batman and Robin and Broadway musicals also contributed to the dancers' dramatic characterizations (Suraj 00:02:29-00:03:19). Movement wise, "While Waacking can refer to fast, rhythmic arm whipping that is a defining characteristic of the style, the less common term Punkin' indicates a stylized movement behavior that expands beyond set vocabulary, incorporating elements of large locomotion, dramatic gesture and facial expression, and narrative" (Bragin 64). Since its early development, waacking experienced a downfall in the 1980s during the AIDS epidemic that affected its practitioners. However, in the early 2000s, it was revived and went through physical transformations and codifications, especially when it eventually fused with the voguing style (Suraj 00:05:45-00:07:31).

Similarly, voguing developed in the underground ballroom scene in NYC and was made popular by the Black and Latino transgender communities. Vogue is connected to the gender-swapping art form Drag and, once again, was influenced by famous female models found in popular magazines of the time, such as *Vogue*, embodying their femininity. "Voguers would come to the balls imitating superstars of the showbiz world, as a mockery against, but, simultaneously, a glorification of standardized – typically Western – ideals of beauty, sexuality, and class" (Chatzipapatheodoridis 1). Dancers were inspired by other physical forms such as ballet, gymnastics, pantomime and martial arts, but the element of "throwing shade" was an opportunity for two people to settle their differences through dance (Cabilis 00:00:30-00:00:50), which is similar to the breaking style.<sup>1</sup> Over time, this form has taken on various renditions known as the old school, new school, and vogue femme styles; as they

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<sup>1</sup> Breaking was also inspired by forms such as Martial Arts and gymnastics. Through the element of battling, burning an opponent was also common and similar to "throwing shade," which is discussed later in the essay.

progressed, they became more stylized and codified. Because of their similar origins and movement aesthetics, the cross over between waacking and voguing was inevitable. Although they developed on opposite sides of the country, Tyrone Proctor, an American waacking legend, along with other waacking and voguing inventors Willie Ninja and Archie Burnett, created the dance group “Breed of Motion” (Suraj 00:05:15-00:05:45). This group combined the two forms, ultimately showing the deep connection between their embodied identities as gay, Black men regardless of their geographical origins. By analyzing the history of these two forms, we see their ability to transfer identity through movement and embodied experiences cross-culturally and geographically, whether through imitation of models and famous actresses or personal expression of the dancers’ own identity and experiences.

The development of breaking had similar yet different historical origins. Still steeped in sociopolitical discriminations of the African American community, this style exemplifies machoism and expressions of young, heterosexual, Black, and Latin American men in NYC in the late 1970s. As heterosexual men in the Bronx, their experiences were vastly different from the gay men in Los Angeles. However, as young, oppressed, Black and Latin American males during this time, their experiences and intentions for dancing were widely similar: to find a creative outlet for self-expression and protest against the sociopolitical climate. Breakers would look to their heroes for movement inspirations and characterizations, which often came from athletes, actors, martial artists, and superheroes (LaBoskey 118). Likewise, their sexual orientation and famous heroic inspirations created the actions and personas for their freestyle: “Hip hop dance has provided the arena for the expression and affirmation of masculinity. Built into this artistry is competition and domination, sexuality and libido, and hero worship” (LaBoskey 112). This form naturally turned

into a battle style due to the confrontational element of one-on-one competitions, trash-talking, and the aggressive nature of the movement: “Hip hop dance’s synonymy with competition has kept it a primarily male-dominated realm; it is the male ego on trial. Each challenge is an opportunity to gain dominance and respect or be defeated” (LaBoskey 113). As adolescents, their new found interest in sex also contributed to the sexualization and hypermasculinity of movements such as grabbing the crotch and humping the floor to intimidate their opponent (LaBoskey 114); all noticeable differences from dance battles and movement explorations of waackers and voguers. Nonetheless, waacking, voguing, and breaking all had similar intentions and historical origins regardless of their vastly different movement aesthetics.

Through these historical discoveries and personal movement explorations, Meckley discovered that certain dance styles inherently embody gender characteristics through movement qualities, energies, and performative elements. The movements of waacking, voguing, and breaking emphasize qualities and actions associated with specific gender characteristics and behaviors developed by Western perspectives. For instance, waackers and voguers incorporate actions such as flipping the wrists and hair and accentuating the curves of the body and face into their freestyle, movements that are traditionally associated with femininity. With that said, “Textual and verbal descriptions of Waacking often obscure its queer (Punk) history, or resort to vague characterizations of the style as ‘feminine,’ perpetuating the most common slippage of assumptions about gender and sexuality” (Bragin 64). While the Black, queer males who created waacking were not trying to represent a Westernized feminine ideal or attempting to *be* a woman, this style developed traditionally feminine qualities, which overtook the form after becoming popular with

white cis-female practitioners. On the other hand, breaking kept its masculine qualities even though there are many female breakers.

Breaking movements typically contain aggressive qualities, hard-hitting rhythmic accents, and physically demanding power moves. Not to mention, the term “aggressive” was already associated with masculine gender characteristics, especially Black men. “Symbolically and physically, to breakdance and compete is simply unfeminine,” therefore, this style maintained its reputation as a masculine dance style as it progressed (LaBoskey 114). Due to the opposing movement aesthetics of these three styles, people unconsciously associate them with specific genders in the studio.

While there are many complexities involved in dissecting the cross pollination of race, sexuality, and gender in these styles, discovering historical and movement commonalities between waacking, voguing, and breaking was helpful for Meckley in her choreographic process where she explored assumed masculine and feminine characteristics. Although, the embodiment of movement through kinesthetic knowledge is at the root of all African American dances and is necessary to consider in the physical practice to find a deeper connection to the history of these forms: “Kinesthetic knowledge does not begin as an object outside the body but develops through a co-constitutive process of moving and making meaning” (Bragin 63). Therefore, the combination and juxtaposition of these three styles through identity characteristics, kinesthetic knowledge, and concept of “intertextuality” influenced the creation of the dance “XY”.

As a queer woman, Meckley experienced personal challenges choreographing for the production *Intertextuality* due to societal gender expectations and challenges practicing Black dance forms as a privileged white female. These expectations ignited her interest in challenging the skills, capabilities, and assumed movement qualities of the dance styles

and dancers based on their perceived gender, sexuality, and race from an outsider's perspective. Beyond the physicality, Meckley wanted her dancers to feel a sense of empowerment and ownership that is often encouraged by the breaking, waacking, and voguing communities. Kate Laughlin, a queer, Asian American woman, discusses her experience as a dancer in "XY":

"XY" didn't try to mold the other dancers or me into any one standard; it allowed for us to use our unique strengths and embrace not only the capabilities of our physical instruments but also the essence of who we are as artists. Because of this, I felt "XY" represented all aspects of my identity loudly and unapologetically.

Considering the influences of character embodiment and movement qualities in breaking, waacking, and voguing, Meckley used movement abstraction and codified choreography from these three styles to enhance the unique identities of the "XY" cast. She began movement development by identifying the gendered movement qualities of each dance style and used structured choreography to find common ground between all of the dancers regardless of their gender, race, and sexual orientation. She referenced vogue femme for inspiration; this style is more structured than the original style of vogue with five consistent movements incorporated into a dancer's freestyle: floor performance, hand movements, duck walks, cat walks, and spins and dips. Specifically, attention was put on the hands to enhance the different executions of hand gestures in vogue, waacking, and breaking and their assumed correlation to gender and sexuality. A quote from *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism From Marth Graham to Alvin Ailey* by Julia L. Foulkes states, "Limp wrists, flamboyant dress and colors (especially a red tie), and an exaggerated walk sparked assumptions of homosexuality and also served as signals that constituted a system of divulgence and



communication among gay men” (89). While this quote references modern dance specifically, it provides insight into the societal constructs about gender and sexuality through the use of the hands.

Although vogue femme is more codified, Meckley still adapted the form to her own embodied experience as a white, queer woman. Moreover, Meckley discovered that set choreography limited the dancers’ ability to fully represent their personal identity through a particular form or culture: “Learning a dance style estranges the practitioner’s body from its habitual kinesthetics, bringing to consciousness how movement feels” (Bragin 72). Thus, finding the balance between personal movement expression to obtain a feeling and codified choreography to enhance community was the key to the success of identity representation. Three specific sections of “XY” are dissected to analyze how identity was discovered and represented through the gender expressions of these dance styles, movement abstractions, and structured choreography.

As Meckley observed the dancers execute the same choreography, little pieces of identity arose to the surface. One dancer, Robbie Weatherington, a straight, white cis-male, expressed interest in gender non-conforming ideals that allowed the juxtaposition of feminine and masculine characteristics to be highlighted and embraced through his own identity and the codified techniques of waacking and voguing. After discussing his general experience as a male in a female-driven career such as dance, Weatherington describes his experience in “XY” stating:

In the piece, I was able to wear a crop top and make-up for the first time in a way I never have before. I expressed an emotion of blatant confidence I did not know I could harness. I don’t think it was my identity that was represented through the piece. Through the piece, I was able to get a taste of the identity of those that created the style and choreography. In other words, it was not my

identity that was represented, my body was merely a vessel to showcase the voice of those that created the movement, and it was an honor to do so.

Although it is impossible to completely negate kinesthetic knowledge developed through physical embodiment, Weatherington offers a unique perspective and embraces the identities of the creators of the form inherent in the movement connecting back to Gottschild's concept of "intertextuality." Weatherington was also an essential part of the choreography process after expressing his interest in other physical hobbies, including skateboarding and cup stacking, forms that are generally perceived as more gender inclusive and exist outside of the theatrical space.

Meckley found unnoticeable links between the movement in breaking and cup stacking, such as spatial specificity of the body, rhythmic precision, and competition. However, the use of the hands in intricate ways in both cup stacking and breaking enhanced the similarities between this pairing. In the top rock portion of a freestyle foot work precedes the complex floor work and hand gestures aid the confrontational and conversational aspect of breaking, while cup stacking requires specific placement and coordination of the hands to quickly stack the cups.

This pairing developed into a breaking and cup stacking duet between Weatherington and a white cis-female, Kylah Humphress. It highlighted the hand gestures used in both forms while enhancing their competitive aesthetics. Humphress executed traditional uprocking movements, the precursor to the breaking style we know today. Since uprocking and breaking were executed by predominately male dancers, her identity as a female was already challenged; even though female breakers do exist and have taken on more prominent roles in the field (LaBoskey 114). Not to mention, Humphress was automatically subject to

stereotypes as a white woman practicing a predominately Black art form steeped in masculinity and aggression. While cup stacking is not limited to a particular gender, transposing this physical form to a dance environment creates new perspectives and interpretations. Therefore, cup stacking was viewed as a dance form in this context, especially since it was performed without cups, simply mimicking the movement through gesture. In turn, as a male performing cup stacking in this context, Weatherington was exposed to the stereotypes of men in dance because dance is commonly viewed as a female career by the general population regardless of the origins of cup stacking. It is also fair to mention that for the final performance, Weatherington's role was performed by a white cis-female. This change added another layer of identity transference since the dancer did not have any previous experience with cup stacking and was not a part of the initial creation process. It also created a different competitive dynamic between two females and resulted in a different narrative for the audience. Ultimately, this process challenged the dancers' identities because of the interpretation of these dance styles and forced them to discover their place in these complex histories.

Aside from gender expression through movement and external physical inspirations, Meckley also attempted to bring the club environment to the stage by incorporating live music and enhancing the body's natural reactions established through the organic connection between movement and music, which are significant elements in club dances. This organic relationship shows the connection between people through one universal vibe or pulse without relying solely on structured choreography. "Setting the stage as a club-like social dance scene where such styles would naturally exist made it more exciting for me as a dancer to get into character and vibe with the piece. I felt like I was genuinely in a dance battle," says Humphress. The beginning section of "XY" explored the

club atmosphere through lighting and movement abstraction, rather than using codified movement, to help discover the dancers' identities in the piece outside of, but also through, the African American diaspora. Laughlin was an essential soloist in this section and established a personal connection to the material through physical expression. She was asked to embody any character that represented an amplified version of herself while connecting to the accents and lyrics of the music and the body accentuation seen in voguing. No gender indications were given to Laughlin to avoid forced replication in hopes she would present her personal gender expression through a codified form unconsciously. Although she admitted she was reasonably new to waacking and voguing, she mentions:

Because I believe movement speaks to all of us and is such a universal act of humanity, I opened an awareness to the forms and embrace them with an open mind. To witness how my facility adapted and sat in the precision and rigor of what the movement called for was exciting, as well as growing cognizant of the histories behind the form and understanding the weight it holds within the queer community. I resonated with the movement in a way that enhanced my identity in terms of my queerness, my womanism, and my race. To access and express oneself through these forms was a true gift, and I am filled with gratitude that it is now a part of my body's movement history.

This statement is a true testament to how this movement and community can connect humans of all races, genders, and sexualities through kinesthetic knowledge and embodied experiences. Meckley took this abstracted solo and used it to inspire a codified solo later in the piece.

The codified vogue solo showed that abstraction and individual expression of a form can still be visible with solidified choreography and

well-known movement. The role required a dancer with a confident, feminine personality and a deep understanding of African American vernacular dance forms. Initial instructions for the dancer were to reflect on a powerful character and embrace femininity, whatever that meant to them. Meckley first cast the role to a Black male to challenge the perceived idea that this style is only executed by either a female with feminine qualities or a gay male with feminine qualities. After initial rehearsals and further conversations with the original soloist, Meckley recast the role to an African American female, Raven Johnson-Williams, who had previous experience in various hip hop dance techniques. She took the role to a whole new level by bringing her identity to the forefront through stylized movement and suggests, "I found that I tapped into a persona that I usually never display. It was almost as if there was an alter ego of mine that came out" (Johnson-Williams). In the final product, it was apparent she was not just replicating codified movement such as cat walks, posing, and hand gestures mentioned previously in reference to vogue femme; she was expressing her own identity as a powerful, feminine, Black woman through a form initially created by Black, gay men. Not only did Johnson-Williams connect to the movement of voguing, but she was also influenced by the overall aesthetic and stated:

I would definitely say that my identity was represented in this piece. We learned why voguing was created and that, essentially, it was a representation of gender as a performance. For me, I am very in tune and love the finer things in life. One could say I enjoy "extravagant" things, whether that is getting my hair done, a new outfit, traveling, or getting dressed up to go out with friends. Sometimes these things bring out a certain level of confidence that I love displaying.

The underground ballroom scene was a place for the Black, queer community to do just that; express their confidence in their gender and racial identities through their attire and movement choices. It is apparent that “XY” helped the dancers access those elements in a different context.

Mentioning the gender and race of these dancers in “XY” is important to acknowledge the adaptability of these forms across race and gender and to recognize that movement qualities are not exclusive to one gender and are not always reflective of a particular sexual orientation. By continuing to associate dance forms with inaccurate identity characteristics, we limit the form and enhance societal gender roles outside of the dance studio and disregard the true identities of their creators by assumption. While waacking, voguing, and breaking presumably represent a specific gender, other forms such as house are not as limiting.

Similar to waacking and voguing, house dance is also considered a club-style developed in the underground clubs of Chicago and NYC in the 1970s: “The word 'house' signifies homey feelings” while underground “signifies a way of life” and refers to the “clubs where the dancing takes place” (Sommer 289). The relationship between dance and music is essential, which ultimately determines the vibe of the space, as, “the vibe is an active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light and physical and psychic energy” (Sommer 285). To create this call and response environment in the club, the live DJ addresses the feeling of the crowd, enhancing the relationship between the music and dancer and between dancer and dancer. House music is created specifically to be danced to because the driving bassline generates vibrations felt in the body that forces the dancers to internalize the music, attributing to kinesthetic knowledge. House movement itself is ongoing and fluid,

promoting various physical qualities and energies. Dancers are expected to be present in their mind and body, allowing for this ongoing flow of energy and personal movement expression while adjusting to the surrounding dancers' needs and pulse (Sommer 286). It is said that the interactions between dancers in a house club are simple: they are there to strictly dance. There are no conversations about identity, and most dancers never know the names of the people they are dancing with (Sommer 288). Unlike the other forms, this style does not rely on performative expression and embodiment of character. Instead, it puts the music and body at the forefront for movement creation eliminating direct race and gender characteristics and qualities. Therefore, house dance is less often referred to as a feminine or masculine form compared to the other styles; it is a style that relies on other relationships and community development rather than strictly a solo expression or competition.

House dance was the main movement inspiration for the dance “Messe Messe” and was approached differently than “XY” through choreographic and performative choices. The nature of the movement techniques, music, and historical origins of house dance offer stylistic differences compared to waacking, breaking, and voguing. Group rhythmic development was a driving force for “Messe Messe.” It was strongly influenced by codified house dance movement, which mainly includes rhythmic footwork and jacking – the continued movement of the spine and torso. Keith Smith, a Black male dancer, reflects on his experience in the piece saying, “I can’t say I’ve trained in the house dance form much, but it hit close to home in terms of movement I’m comfortable with. Polyrhythms, footwork, and high energy are three of my favorite elements when it comes to movement.” In addition, the rhythmic variations of the music enhanced the internal, communal vibe of the dancers: “‘Messe Messe’ was an utterly unapologetic representation of the unique nature of

each and every individual, illustrated through spirituous choreography marked by a direct, undeviating pulse,” says Mary Meo, a white, queer female dancer in this piece. Since house dance does not heavily focus on gender expression or character, this piece did not require the dancers to dissect that side of themselves to connect to the movement or other dancers. As Sommer notes, “the goals of the house-head are to be a part of the group yet still maintain a sense of individuality” (287). Carly Lucas, a white, queer female dancer in the piece, brings forward an interesting point that connects to the initial purpose of house dance as a communal space:

The beautiful thing about the work was that it was not limited to members of any particular group; performing in it were people of different races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations, all living and breathing next to each other and sharing in the joy of dance. I didn’t feel the need to label or defend myself or my identity; I could just be. And just that act of “being,” honestly and unapologetically, was what made me feel represented.

Nonetheless, gender expression, sexual orientation, and race were all still important to accurately express the dancers’ identities through house dance movement. In terms of identity representation through gender expression, Meo reflects on her own identity in the piece mentioning:

What I think is so special about this work compared to other pieces that I have been in is that my identity did not need to be blatantly stated in a conversation for me to feel that I was properly represented. As a woman, I felt confident to take up space among my male counterparts. Similarly, I was never made to feel that I was being too bold or too “loud,” something women are often told in today’s world.



Meckley accomplished some of these aspects Lucas and Meo mentioned through freestyle and asking dancers to choreograph their own movement inspired by the form.

While there was structured choreography and codified movement, “Messe Messe” included moments of freestyle. Through freestyle, Meckley asked the dancers to create their own movement sequences in a particular rhythm and inspired by house dance footwork: “The choreography was so eclectic - moments of power, strength, and resilience ever so seamlessly fused with moments of individual creation. There was no such thing as ‘the girls’ part’ or ‘the boys’ part’” (Meo). There were also moments of direct partnering between the dancers on stage and interactions with the dancers and audience through clapping and verbal responses.<sup>2</sup> This partner and audience interaction in the piece was used as another opportunity to show how dance and music can transcend race, gender, and sexual orientation.

After analyzing several hip hop dance styles through their movement developments and histories as African American vernacular dance forms, it is safe to say that these forms paved the way for many popular dance styles recognized today. They have provided opportunities for all people to express their embodied knowledge through movement. Lucas speaks to the influence of these dance forms in her own dancing and identity, saying:

House dance and African American vernacular forms have enhanced my aforementioned identity more than they have influenced it. Studying these forms has encouraged me to acknowledge my own individuality, which has undoubtedly enhanced the way I perceive and celebrate my own identity.

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<sup>2</sup> Audience interaction, verbal responses, and rhythmic clapping are often observed in various social situations within African American and African communities and dances.

Though I wouldn't say that these forms have necessarily influenced how I identify, I would say that my identity as a white, queer woman has, without a doubt, influenced my approach to studying these techniques...I know they embrace diversity and individuality because they were developed by people whose differences were historically deemed as "lesser-than"—anyone not identifying as a white-cis-man, and in some cases, white-cis-woman.

After mentioning her limited prior experience with house dance, Lucas continues and expands on her comfort with this style in "Messe Messe," saying:

I somehow felt more accepted in that environment than I did while practicing some other forms that I have studied for much longer (ballet, for example). I think this is because house dance seems to be more progressive when it comes to accepting all bodies and identities. I found that my identity was represented in "Messe Messe" because I was allowed to play "myself" on stage as opposed to performing as a character or abstract body in space. I could exist on stage unapologetically as me, next to others who were doing the same.

Lucas's mention of ballet is pertinent to this conversation because ballet is steeped in gender roles and expectations enhanced by movement assignments and Western perspectives. For example, ballet trains male dancers specifically for high jumps and multiple turns, while female dancers train for virtuosity and flexibility (Mainwaring). Ultimately, this perspective seeps into other aspects of American society and makes it difficult for anyone identifying outside of those expectations to feel welcomed and valued. Historically, there is little deviation allowed in this strict and codified dance form. While various African and African American societies have specific roles based on gender, there is more freedom to

individually express in dance through the choice of movement due to the improvisational nature of the culture. Specifically referring to hip hop techniques, improvisation and freestyle are practices often executed in response to oppression and the need to break out of confined expectations, also experienced by the LGBTQIA community. Overall, these hip hop forms developed into safe spaces for various minority groups.

Breaking, waacking, and voguing developed in the 1970s in a time that was still heavily partaking in blatant racism and homophobia. Because the creators of these forms were dancers from the Black and queer communities, they experienced discrimination and oppression that ultimately contributed to the development of various African American vernacular dance styles. The dancers in the pieces “XY” and “Messe Messe” recognized their place in this conversation, especially those who have not had those experiences. Weathering speaks on this topic:

Given my identifying features of being a straight, white cis-man, I have felt little oppression in my life. The only oppression I have ever felt is growing up as a male dancer in the Midwest. Apart from that, I have not lived a life that has led me to have much of a misguided sense of self, or an altered self-confidence, compared to people that have differing self-identifying features.

The queer and Black communities continue to fight against oppression with dance and the forms voguing, waacking, and breaking developed in response to the continuous marginalization.

The historical origins and identities of the forms breaking, house dance, waacking, and voguing and their creators are significant to recognize to understand their movement qualities and technical progressions over time. The sociopolitical climate, continued racism, and oppression of Blacks in the 1970s largely contributed to the purpose and intention of these styles. However, their identities were passed down

through the embodiment of character, movement, culture, and social interactions while also considering kinesthetic knowledge, the concept of “intertextuality,” and perceived identity characteristics. Nevertheless, it’s not just about race; gender and sexual orientation play a prominent role in cultivating these forms, supported and suggested by the dissection of “XY” and “Messe Messe.” To fully grasp the origins of these dance styles, the physical embodiment of the dancers’ race, gender, and sexual orientation should be highlighted and experienced to accurately move the form forward in tandem with the sociopolitical climate of the time while acknowledging the stereotypes associated with them and paying respect to their histories and creators.

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