Is twerking African?
Dancing and diaspora as embodied knowledge on YouTube

Kyra D. Gaunt

The dancing body is an environment where sounds and ethnic worlds become landscapes that speak to us and through us. Ethnicity offers various concepts through which to discuss the shared and shareable culture gained from witnessing and deliberately practicing Black forms of sensational knowledge across generations for girls and women. Knowledge can appear or disappear, arise and surprise us in sacred or secular contexts of dance. How we learn to interpret their meanings depends on our ecological awareness, our social location, the structuring elements of kin and kith, that situate our local knowledge about our Selves as people of African descent as well as individual and collective dancing. Things get complicated on YouTube.

What we see and feel when dancing – the expression of something that gets turned on, shaped by a particular linguistic, social, and ecological situation or musical circumstance – may not be linked to genetics. Sound and acoustics are, after all, environments that speak to us as biological and socio-cultural beings. Music is our sonic world, and the dancing body is one of its settings. The situational negotiation of identity (individual’s self-identification with a particular group that can shift according to social location) is a crucial aspect of African and African American ethnicity (Guest 2014). The notion of DNA or “blood memory” is often used as a misnomer for what comes to mind as ancestral connection for African Americans. But, far too much blood has been spilt dehumanizing or essentializing Blacks and Africans in the name of biological determinism and eugenics.

Twerking is African?: origin myths

“See that girl shake that thang? Everybody can’t be Martin Luther King.”

~ Julian Bond.

Whatever we are inclined to think about Black girls comes automatically. We never question it as hindsight bias. We hold on to conventional wisdom that is mostly myths, stigmas, and stereotypes (what we might think about Black girls twerking on YouTube versus what Black girls – if ever asked or heard instead of merely seen – actually think or feel about the meaning behind twerking).
In 2017, while searching for twerking videos for my next book *Played: Twerking at the Intersection of Music, Technology, and Violence Against Black Girls on YouTube*, I stumbled upon a thumbnail that read “THE ORIGIN OF THE TWERK.” The video had been uploaded by hair vlogger CHIME (Hair Crush) on May 16, 2017, with the title “AMERICAN DANCES THAT ORIGINATED IN AFRICA.” Its description read:

> Ever wonder where twerking began? It all started in Africa. There are many dances within the Black community that can be linked back to the motherland besides twerking like crumping and stepping. Sometimes, we just have to explore to find those connections. The next time you see someone twerking or wanting to learn how to twerk, remember where it all began:) [smiley emoticon closes the sentence]

*(Chime 2017)*

Chime’s YouTube video essay is an attempt to historicize twerking and establish a respectable origin myth for a dance constantly under attack. An origin myth is a story told about the history of a particular group or group activity that reinforces a sense of common identity or ethnicity. Chime’s claim that twerking is African is an example of an aspect of ethnicity that sociologists call a “social fact”: a belief that positively or negatively coerces ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving (Durkheim 1982). She opens the video with this scripted narration:

> African Americans are deeply connected to Africa and many of us don’t even realize it. Many of us are attracted to certain music … because of our genetics. It’s deeply embedded in our psyche even though we’ve never been to the motherland. Many of the dances that African Americans do are exactly like the dances they’ve been doing in Africa for hundreds of years. Mapouka is a traditional dance that those in the States call twerking. [emphasis added]

It may be satisfying to equate twerking with *mapouka* – a dance practiced by young Ivoirian women that was “banned from television, judged too vulgar by the government” (Onishi 2000) – but it may perpetuate superstitious and abstract thinking about Africa, a continent of over 54 nations, and its diaspora: the World Bank estimates that there are “39 million from the African Diaspora [in North America]; 113 million in Latin America; 13.6 million in the Caribbean; and 3.5 million in Europe” (Kajunju 2013).

The video essay became a popular form of storytelling among YouTube vloggers in 2010. Creators apply video editing by giving proportional weight to the moving image, the language, as well as the sound to capture some deeper truth from the creator’s perspective (Bresland 2010).
The form blurs documentary narrative with partial truths and even “fake” news. Commenters reinforce Chime’s claim, creating filter bubbles. Users often select videos and follow subscribers who affirm what they are already inclined to think. Comments like the following add weight to Chime’s influence on other users who will like or react to the same ideas together, joining the bandwagon:

I wish everyone could watch this video AND really understand … Twerking actually originates from Africa!! Not African Americans. I noticed when I recently watched traditional west African dance.

(Chime 2017)

Chime’s description and the comment cited are examples of “social fact.” Social facts are coercive; they are thoughts and feelings shared by a group that reflect norms or values that can function to control or maintain groupthink (or the status quo). The long-held belief that the nappier your hair is, the closer you are to “Africa” suggests that less nappy hair is closer in proximity to some superior notion of beauty defined by whiteness. Xenocentrism is the belief that another culture is superior to one’s own. Like xenophobia, it can negatively affect the behavior and attitudes of people within the African diaspora, which is why name-calling like “African booty scratcher” or “A-meh-ri-can niggerrrr” continues. “Twerking is African” is a social fact that demands further inquiry.

The intention of this chapter is to help readers parse, prune, and play with the question: “Is twerking African?” In so doing, we might begin to deconstruct the deeply ingrained structures that govern the notion of a single Black or African identification; a notion that is continually mapped onto Black girls’ bodies when they twerk on YouTube, reproducing binary-thinking about a rich, nuanced, and complex spectrum of embodied performativity and expression too easily likened to twerking. When we are inclined to ask if twerking is “African,” how do we complicate the question itself?

**Dancing diaspora, dancing ancestry**

Twerking on YouTube or watching twerking on YouTube is not situated in the same local settings where one may experience popping, locking, or bouncing the booty to the beats and rhymes of a song as a dancer of bounce in New Orleans, popular and traditional forms of mapouka in Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), perreo in Puerto Rico or sandungueo in the Dominican Republic, or funk carioca in Brazil. In fact, on YouTube, there are dozens of dances, like disjointed limbs across the African diaspora, that may or may not connect Black Americans to specific populations of African people or the African, Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx diaspora. Just as twerking isn’t one thing, neither are people of African descent.

Given this complexity, cultural memory about Africa is easily distorted because memory is malleable, as anyone has witnessed in the game of telephone among kids, the misreading of an instant replay, or misidentifications from eyewitness testimony:

[T]he assumption that memory provides an accurate recording of experience, much like a video camera, is incorrect. Memory evolved to give us a personal sense of identity and to guide our actions. We are biased to notice and exaggerate some experiences and to minimize or overlook others.

(Chew 2018)
Our cultural memory about Africa is complicated not only by physical and social distancing between groups, but also by the dissonance created by disinformation about Africa by African Americans themselves. But there’s something about dance that seems different.

In 1996, I spent seven weeks studying Ewe music-making in a student ensemble run by a colleague. The drum-and-dance ensemble was co-led by a visiting lecturer, a traditional African master drummer named Fred Dunyo. Even though it was a predominately white classroom setting (and I was raised Catholic, not Pentecostal or Baptist), in the middle of a rehearsal, I inexplicably went into a trance. In 2002, I published an article about the experience: “Though I had participated in a few other West African traditions, the Ewe performance practice spoke to me as if a kindred spirit; [it] resonated with my [personal] identifications with African American musical and communal ideals” (Gaunt 2002, 122). For a fleeting moment, I thought my African ancestry was speaking through me or speaking to me.

When I finally traveled to the continent and stood before the “door of no return” (a sliver no wider than one of my thick legs), the fact that over 10 million enslaved Africans disembarked from slave forts like El Mina Castle in the former Gold Coast colony that is now Ghana struck me dumb. African women, children, and men were captured and starved for months so they could pack as much “cargo” as possible in the belly of thousands of ships that sailed between 1514 and 1866.

The immensity of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, like the true size of the continent on Mercator maps, has been an ongoing project and “product” of disinformation since then. As Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stated in a 2009 TED talk titled “The danger of a single story,” as early as 1561, Western literature portrayed Sub-Saharan Africa as “a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness” in stories that are embedded in the psyche of white supremacist thinking (Adichie 2009).

Furthermore, Black Americans’ repeated exposure to fabricated or deliberately manipulated information about our African ancestors (not to mention the disinformation mediated about us through the media) has distorted our relationship not only to African geography and populations, but also to the modern waves of Black immigration that have arrived in the United States since the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 or the United States Refugee Act of 1980.

Black Americans like me – my family goes back nine generations to Portsmouth, Virginia – live in an assumptive world about the African past, our ancestry, or even what they think is happening when search results and recommendations feed us videos of African dancing that resemble twerking on YouTube’s platform (Gaunt 2006, 2015).

The act of twerking on YouTube, of shaking your booty to the beats and rhymes of rap lyrics that often feature what Moya Bailey coined as misogynoir (anti-Black sexism) on a general-audience mobile platform, also recalls the historical misogynoir that undergirded the degradation and dehumanization of Saartjie [Sarah] Baartman. In 1810, an indigenous Khoisan woman from Southern Africa was trafficked into a European traveling freak show. She was sold like an animal, equated with an orangutan; upon her early death, her skull, skeleton, and female anatomy were dissected and displayed in a museum in Paris until 1974. Her remains would not be returned to her homeland for burial until 2002 (Parkinson 2016). Her life is often remembered by the derogatory Dutch word for Khoisan people (Hottentot), and the disinformation was perpetuated by anatomical illustrations that represented her buttocks and vulva as grotesquely oversized, as a deviation from some European norm of anatomy and sexuality (see Hobson 2003; Gilman 1985).

As an artful and sophisticated aspect of “kinetic orality,” twerking can be and likely is an antidote to the structures of dehumanization that surround Black girls and their adult counterparts.
It can re-situate even the abused girl deeply in her body, expressing a kind of freedom of expression not allowed from her voice. As Mae Henderson reminds us, “It is not that Black womxn have had nothing to say, but rather that they have had ‘no say’” (Henderson 2013, 24). I would assert that the body has been doing all the talking for Black women, and it is time we read the messages behind their kinetic orality.

Handclapping game-songs and double-dutch rope jumping, like twerking, are examples of oral-kinetic lessons or études (short musical compositions) in musical Blackness. Through the repeated practice of kinetic orality, we transmit intra- and inter-generational knowledge by word of mouth (orality) and the motion of the body (kinetics). Twerking is an oral-kinetic étude that is part of a larger network of danced diasporic expressions often practiced by womxn and girls (Gaunt 2006).

The word twerk is a contraction of “to work.” It refers to the intentional undertaking of a mentally and/or physically engaging task. In Black social dancing, it may be articulated as the ability to “work the middle” or in patois, to “werk di batty”; in other words, to control in musical ways the hips and fleshy excess that define the figure of a significant number of womxn and girls of African descent.

As you learn to twerk, you embody the roux of a music that originated in New Orleans. Just like making gumbo, the mix of flour (the percussive music-making) and fat (the fleshy parts) thickens the feel of a danced performance. Black girls’ musical games, like the cheer fig-a-louw and Down, down, baby with their calls to “do your thing,” and tween twerking videos where girls dance their behinds off to Huey’s “Pop Lock and Drop it” or Kstylis’ “Hands up, Get Low,” are Black expressions of kinetic orality among girls and womxn who broadcast themselves on YouTube.

As twerk scholar Kimari Brand states in the documentary film Twerk it Girl, “We enjoyed ourselves … exploring our body and our erotic autonomy and moving in ways that, you know, sometimes we might be afraid to expose or explore” (Garcia 2014, cue: 4:10″). Twerking is arguably a form of political speech, and videos of twerking are girls’ abolitionist steganography: the practice of concealing messages and information in plain sight through dance. It is their version of YouTube vlogging expressed by word of body through a kinship with movement and the drums of ancestral knowledge.

**Throw it back: how NOLA and Nipplegate made YouTube**

Many non-Black folks think twerking began with Miley Cyrus, since she was a finalist for Time’s Person of the Year after her white wonderland appropriation of the dance at the MTV Video Music Awards in August 2013. Yet, the music and dance that inspired twerking began at least a decade before. In fact, the same year Miley was born (1992), the word “twerk” was first heard on a New Orleans mix-tape recorded by a popular bounce music pioneer, DJ Jubilee (born Jerome Temple), on the track “Do the Jubilee All” (Fensterstock 2013).

The music and dance can be traced back to the late 1980s’ social club culture, to dancing that resembles bounce practiced throughout the 100-year history of Mardi Gras’ Treme Million Dollar Baby Dolls. The Baby Dolls marchers dressed as “innocents” done up in satin bonnets, toting booze-filled baby bottles to express their “independence and self-fulfillment,” according to Xavier University professor Kim Marie Vaz-Deville (Reckdahl 2017). Moreover, Big Freedia, the queen of bounce music in New Orleans, explains the local knowledge of the music and dance in a 2013 NPR interview a month before Miley Cyrus dropped her first twerking video on Facebook:

Bounce is based in hip-hop. It favors punchy tempos, heavy bass and call-and-response vocals. Many of the songs are structured around a handful of samples, most notably a snippet from...
“Drag Rap,” a 1986 track by the New York rap group The Showboys [aka the “Triggaman” beat]. Bounce is party music, hypersexual and made to be danced to. The more your butt is moving, the better. You’ve gotta leave room for the bass and the boom and the knock and for people to be able to just free themselves and express themselves through dance.

(NPR Staff 2013)

So how did twerking go from Mardi Gras to YouTube? In 2005, the intersection of two cataclysmic events occurred. Three former PayPal employees launched a free video-sharing platform in April, and Hurricane Katrina hit the homeland of bounce music and dance in late August. The damage from the levees breaking left thousands dead and over 400,000 people displaced: scattered throughout all 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico (Ericson et al. 2005).

When I first heard about Katrina’s diaspora, the ethnomusicologist in me thought we are gonna have Mardi Gras everywhere – because the people who came from the cultural hotbed that is the birthplace of Congo Square, jazz, Dixieland, Zydeco music, and Cajun cuisine like gumbo will take that culture wherever they land.

We didn’t get Mardi Gras.

Instead, we got twerking, as hundreds of displaced youth and newly mobile music producers began reconnecting and uploading audio and video recordings through YouTube. In 2014, a collection of over 1000 bedroom twerking videos featuring Black girls’ online play offered evidence of twerking to bounce music. As early as 2006, cis- and transgender girls uploaded videos of themselves dancing to local mix-tapes with a distinct soundmark of a one-bar drum loop called the Triggaman beat.

In 2011, the bedroom culture of twerking videos, primarily of girls and womxn, began to register as a tiny trend in Google search results (search “twerking” on the Google Trends site). By 2013, twerking reached a dramatic peak on the night Miley Cyrus performed at the MTV Video Music Awards. In my dataset of over 1000 videos, tween and teen girls, Black and Brown, were already uploading content tagged as “twerking” from the United States and Puerto Rico, the Afro- and Afro-Latinx Caribbean, from Francophone Africans in Europe and “African Americans” in Brazil, the largest population of people of African descent outside the continent.

Most YouTube users do not know that founders Chad Hurley, Steven Cehn, and Jawed Karim registered a domain name on Valentine’s Day and that their first venture was a dating site. They placed an ad on Craigslist offering $100 for female users to upload 10 videos, but they claim no one took the bait (Entis 2016).

Within the first year of their launch, teen girls began broadcasting their bedroom play for free, and the MTV marketing model of selling music with female sexuality was perpetuated by young girls with a smartphone but without a parent’s permission. YouTube has become the number one music discovery channel and archive for new and existing music around the world after 15 years as a platform.

While the presence of young girls contributed to YouTube’s new attention economy, it was actually the search for videos of the wardrobe malfunction that took place at the 2004 Super Bowl known as Nipplegate. In the 2020 Rolling Stone issue devoted to the 15th anniversary of YouTube, journalist Rob Sheffield referred to the nine-sixteenths-of-a-second moment when Janet’s breast was fully exposed to the world at the biggest event in national television by using a cringe-worthy, titillating term, “Nipple bounce,” to spark attention to what is always in fashion and never considered poor taste: misogynoir’s anti-Black sexism against women of African descent. One question still lingers: How did the brief and spectacular moment in 2004 (a whole year before YouTube launched) kickstart the platform into a meteoric rise? If we recall, in 2006, Google acquired YouTube for $1.65 billion.
The idea of a video-sharing platform instead of a dating site came during a conversation at a dinner party. The tech founders lamented how tough it was to find any footage of Nipplegate, and at the time, there was no way to store or share videos, and definitely not for free. But once they launched the beta site on April 23, 2005, YouTube’s interface had been designed to allow anyone to upload, store, and more importantly, share videos via any other platform.

Janet Jackson was shamed by the national media and lost millions of dollars in a rip off, supposedly, of family values and the massive loss of advertisers for the Super Bowl that year. She didn’t expose her own nipple. Pop singer Justin Timberlake ripped off the front of her bodice. Still, a Black woman was blamed for the spectacle-turned-freak-show within its treatment that clearly recalls the body of Sarah Baartman. Janet’s performance was dissected to the degree that she was banned from the Grammys the following month (Sheffield 2020).

On August 24, 2005, four days before levees broke during Hurricane Katrina, YouTube learned the power of outsourcing its labor where “broadcast yourself” could be done for free. Israeli YouTubers Lital Maizel and Adi Frimmerman lip-synced a cover of “Hey” by the Pixies, an alternative rock group out of Boston, uploaded directly from their bedroom in Israel. Their 2005 “Hey clip” was probably the first uploaded music content to reach a million views on the beta platform. In its first year, YouTube learned the need to find user-generated videos from a spectacle associated with a Black woman’s breast, and they also learned about the virality of women’s unpaid, affective labor. Lital and Adi made the video for a boyfriend’s birthday.

MTV washed its hands of music videos following Nipplegate, immediately programming cheaper reality TV shows. YouTube’s Content ID system was implemented within a year to track, block, and monetize music streams for copyright holders and major media conglomerates, solving the piracy problem that had begun with the rise of Napster. In 2013, Billboard and Nielsen struck a deal with Google/YouTube; music streams would partially count towards gold and platinum records in the recording industry. Lastly, Sheffield pointed out that we have Nipplegate and YouTube to thank for “Netflix and the whole stream-and-binge economy” (Sheffield 2020).

Perhaps all these innovations owe their success in music, entertainment, and technology to the shaming of a Black woman and the need to dissect the instant replay of a Super Bowl halftime show gone wrong. Thus, it is befitting to quote the words of a Black woman here: On the internet, “[w]e all drink from the well poisoned by the anti-blackness that wants everyone to forget when blackness [particularly female blackness] goes viral” (Jackson 2019). The burden of misogynoir wrought upon Black girls who twerk on YouTube, like the unintended consequences of Nipplegate and Hurricane Katrina, always feel intentional and are always more profitable for everyone but womxn and girls of African descent, online or off.

**False cognates + unfinished migrations**

Information about Black expressive dances must become a *situated knowledge*. It need not call on African memory to be expressed. Black people often shift or negotiate their bodies to the situations of music they are in. A *transactional* philosophy is steeped in the notion that human behavior is shaped by its ecological fitness or situatedness. When we dance to reggae or dancehall, we two-step or wine di batty. When the rhythm and blues of a Ruth Brown or Shimmy Shimmy Ko-Ko Bop of Harlem doo-wop plays, we do hop as apart-dancing or the *Lindy* with a partner. When funk or go-go is heard, we do The Bump or start *doin’ the Butt*, accordingly. Gizomba and samba, and we work the middle of the belly or shuffle the feet and hips.

The *situational negotiation of dance* means that Black people shift forms of dance to different occasions of music. Dozens of dances feature hip gyrations that resemble twerking. On some level, they may be “false friends” or what language teachers call “false cognates” in translating
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An idea from one language to another. Just because they look alike doesn’t automatically mean they are the same.

The same elements – hip gyrations and popping gestures that punctuate a musical phrase – do not always reflect the same conditions or contexts of meaning. Diasporic dances are not always oriented to the same metric pulse. Beats 1 and 3 may be emphasized in a Trinidadian road march, while beats 2 and 4 are syncopated to emphasize the backbeat in much of R&B, funk, and soul. Composers in Caribbean and African settings may choose major scales, especially in festival music, while composers in Mississippi Delta, Francophone musicians from the Niger-Delta basin in Mali and Niger, or hip-hop producers use pentatonic scales. The cultural contexts of our performances of dance are allowed to be different, though we share ethnic boundary markers or some sense of ancestral belonging that is not about DNA but has everything to do with spirit(s) and sensibilities. #thatsafrican

When African dances are subsumed under the label of “twerking,” it flattens possibilities for nuance. When our conversations follow YouTube’s search results, this drives algorithms to flatten what we mean by “twerking” or “bounce,” not to mention what being “African” means to general and often miseducated audiences. It also flattens how we make sense of Black womxn’s identifications and expressions on YouTube; not just to non-Black people, but more importantly, among diverse groups of Black people here in the United States and around the world.

To return to Chime’s video essay, while I found it enjoyable, what concerned me as a pragmatist was the collapse of different dances; turning them into abstractions unmoored from their rich and significant situational settings just to seemingly argue for dignity or self-empowerment. I worry that the social fact that twerking is African is actually a form of American exceptionalism that defies an Africanist philosophy of what is real, true, and/or beautiful.

African Americans have been exposed to so little concrete knowledge or experience of the communal life of being African, including little interest in attending local parties where first- or second-generation migrants from cities like Accra, Lagos, Freetown, Port of Spain, the banlieues of Paris, or the favelas of Salvador are the norm. Speaking for myself, I have felt out of place in my own country at parties where Black Americans or expected forms of Black music are not dominant in public settings (and not all the time … but it still can happen).

We far too easily take these circumstances (and their dances) for granted. We’d rather subsume their dances under what is already an abstraction of bounce. Calling mapouka, baikoko, kwassa kwassa “twerking” reveals Black Americans’ naïveté about Africans and their lived experience. This is not to shame or blame us, but to invite us to explore more than what we are inclined to think without any further study.

The plethora of dances tagged as twerking bind and unbind Black ethnicities on YouTube’s platform, which are rarely understood as complex and meaningful in ways that are sophisticated, unique, and often unknown to many Black Americans in the States. Thus, the medium of YouTube, with its collapsing and colliding contexts, blocks the path of any serious inquiry. It leaves us with what Toni Morrison called the “symbolic looting of language” that lives in the “tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties, replacing them with menace and subjugation” (Morrison 1994). We must ask why twerking needs to be African without questioning inaccurate knowledge. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves: Which Africa is it we wish to see, hear, or feel?

**Conclusion: situating ourselves and our bodies in the world**

People around the world broadcast themselves mechanically repeating, lip syncing, remixing, and parodying songs like Sir Mix-a-lot’s 1992 hit “Baby Got Back” or Nicki Minaj’s 2014...
mega-version “Anaconda.” Both versions have millions of offspring on YouTube that repeat the “Valley girls” speak of the opening montage that is as iconic as the actual song. Before the beat drops, we always hear: “Oh, my, God Becky, look at her butt. … she looks like a total prostitute … I mean GROSS! Look! She’s just so (pregnant pause) BLACK!” The virgin/prostitute trope in the Valley-girl speak of two ordinary white girls spewing oppressive lyrics usually comes from the mouths of 1990s gangsta rappers. Since the only Black women on screen are background dancers silenced by the stereotype of video vixen, the intro – where two white women speak to each other, not about men directly, but instead teaching billions of women of every color to mimic and self-objectify misogynoir – fails the minimum standard of a Bechdel-Wallace test. With YouTube streaming, the beating goes on ad infinitum. Readers may find it ironic that the woman whose voice mimicked the Valley-girl speak was Amylia Rivas, an Afro-Latina musician and voice actor (USA TODAY 2015).

I get trapped into those misogynoir lyrics by the Spotify playlists at my gym. I was even tormented by two seven-year-old white-adjacent twins singing to Becky at the breakfast table during an extended stay with friends after seeking freedom from an emotionally and financially abusive relationship. These lyrics have never introduced me to love of self. Instead, they function as a kind of gaslighting rooted in structural and intersectional inequalities. Gaslighting, according to sociologist Paige Sweet, is a type of “psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel ‘crazy,’ creating a ‘surreal’ interpersonal environment” (Sweet 2019). Repeatedly hearing others voice a mis-interpretation and abstraction of a Black female body, as if YouTubers talking about our bodies were a reward, as if rappers’ lyrics fetishizing one aspect of our Self spoke for us, is crazy. They – white women and Black men – might like big butts, but they still deny us equal access to remuneration for it and rob us of a voice situated as an authority, not as a side show.

Popular songs teach us how to perform racialized gender roles. YouTube teaches us to manipulate our bodies for attention that ain’t free. Dances like twerking, bounce, mapouka, or baikoko drive attention to the patriarchal business of music at the strip club, the night club, and in viral videos, but here’s the thing. If ladies get in free, they’re the product!

Those who portray and respond to the erotic autonomy, kinetic orality, and the sensational knowledge of Black womxn and girls often misrecognize and misrepresent twerking and its false cognates as if solely a pornographic performance, even when the dancergirl is five to seven years old. It’s as if the sole purpose of their culturally appropriated aspirational play is a for-profit operation that discloses children’s personal information and sexually grooms and exploits very young girls and their “virginal” user-generated content with a few dollar bills of attention thrown their way on YouTube (Gaunt 2018). And don’t get it twisted: making it rain is not culturally equivalent to the tradition of spraying local money, such as nairas at a Lagos wedding or cedis at a local club in Accra.

How sustainable has it been, and will it be in 2020 and beyond, to express “empowerment twerking” in the lion’s den of a corporate-controlled platform that exploits Black girls and their adult counterparts? YouTube cannot be the end-all of our aspirational pursuits, and twerking is only the beginning of reclaiming our voice and our time.

Let me end with the words of activist Makalya Gilliam-Price, a 17-year-old Black Lives Matter movement activist, who situates her reading of twerking at a 2015 Baltimore BLM protest to her locality rather than to Africa:

In Baltimore, Black womxn and Black girls have been reclaiming their femininity, … making spaces for themselves, making transient zones of freedom … for themselves. [They have been] inserting their sexuality, inserting their intersectional identities, inserting their
fluidity, creating space for ourselves to be embraced and that's what being a movement baby looks like for me in Baltimore. [Twerking] is just … a way to reclaim my identity.

(Gilliam-Price 2015)

This may not be the same meaning shared by dancers of mapouka in Ivory Coast, perreo in Puerto Rico, funk carioca in Brazil, or even twerking in different settings. But it resists essentializing who and what twerking is, it doesn’t perpetuate disinformation about Africa or the diaspora, and it is situated in a specific time and place that does not deny anyone else’s truth. Situated knowledge matters.

Bibliography


