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Social Dance in the Age of (Anti-)Social Media

Fortnite, Online Video, and the Jook at a Virtual Crossroads

By all accounts, we are again in the midst of a “dance craze,” a cultural moment when a wide swath of people—most remarkably, white middle-class youth—embrace the ability to communicate and coordinate using little loops of codified gesture. As with prior crazes, the phenomenon is inseparable from new media: the craze of the 1910s, with its scandalous “animal dances” and ragtime rhythms, was abetted by dance manuals, silent films, and a new public culture of dancing;¹ the Twist-era explosion of solo/group dances in the early 1960s spread via television programs, such as *American Bandstand*;² and the current craze of the late 2010s—promulgating such re-branded moves as the Floss, the Hype, the Swipe, and Orange Justice—is driven primarily by a networked video game, Epic Games’s *Fortnite*. The game, with its hundreds of millions of players, is arguably the largest media platform for the spread of social dance to date. Social media sites, especially video hosting applications such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, are key to the reach and impact of the “*Fortnite Dance*” phenomenon. They bear witness to, and amplify, the popularity and social performativity of such dances—i.e., to their deployment in IRL (in real life) as well as URL (online) contexts.³ While *Fortnite* may be the prominent site of origin for these dances—at least in their “secondary” circulation, since most are sourced from grassroots dance culture—the current dance craze is bigger than *Fortnite* and more broadly a product of networked media and what some call “network culture” or “networked publics” (Varnelis 2008).

At first blush *Fortnite* is just another “first-person shooter” battle royale (i.e., last player standing wins). Raking in billions of dollars in sales of “emotes” (i.e., dance animations and other social gestures), the game has quickly become a key vector for social dance—both in

1. Julie Malnig, “Apaches, Tangos, and Other Indecencies: Women, Dance, and New York Nightlife of the 1910s,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 72–92.

2. Tim Wall, “Rocking Around the Clock: Teenage Dance Fads from 1955 to 1965,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 182–98.

3. Special thanks to Brian Friedberg at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy for providing crucial perspective on the social life of *Fortnite* dances on such sites as TikTok, and particularly their use as a form of anti-social (cyber)bullying. I am deeply grateful to Brian, who not only discussed the topic with me in detail but offered generous comments on an early draft.

terms of the popularity of individual dance moves and, more broadly, an interest and investment in public dancing. *Fortnite's* fortunes have been boosted by the free advertising of young people emulating their animations in all manner of contexts—free performances that, we should note, are also monetized by the video-hosting social media platforms where they often reside—and the game has the potential to continue growing, and changing, as a massive platform for popular music and dance (perhaps with some shooting on the side). Indeed, it may even provide a glimpse at a virtual future for social dance: in February 2019, *Fortnite* hosted an in-game concert featuring a DJ set by Marshmello, during which players “danced” along (i.e., activated emotes) while millions watched. Notably, Epic disabled weapons at the event. More important for our present perspective, the *Fortnite Dance* phenomenon shows how video games have become established as profitable platforms for social dance, and in the process, how they are changing and challenging the functions, meanings, and political possibilities of dancing in public at a moment when self-published visibility has moved to the center of peer-level cultural exchange and media more generally.

Fortnite's emotes are sourced from and, in turn, circulate widely and vigorously outside the world of gameplay. In the real world, or IRL, *Fortnite Dances* demand embodied performance, whether virtuosic or ironic, rather than being triggered by a single keypress from a menu. The so-called Swipe, for instance, is *Fortnite's* version of what many people know as the Milly Rock, a dance created and popularized by rapper 2Milly. Before becoming an emote, the Milly Rock had been gaining popularity in rap videos and IRL contexts, such as clubs, house parties, and sporting events (especially if one found oneself suddenly on the jumbotron). 2Milly first came to fame with his trademark move when, in his telling, a video of him dancing on top of a jeep at a block party in Brooklyn “went viral” on Facebook in the summer of 2014. Patterned on 2Milly’s inspired but initially improvised way of “turning up” at the party, the dance can accommodate plenty of individual flair, from a subtle, circular upswing of the hand to an intense, angular slice through the air. For the legions of young people who first encountered the dance in *Fortnite* or secondarily via a *Fortnite* devotee (or their sibling), the dance is simply known as the Swipe and, in the simple, looping form learned from the game, offers an easy way to perform a little contemporary cool and/or reference the game—and, usually, the in-game context in which one would trigger such a dance: to taunt another player.

The deployment of such moves outside of the game signifies far more than celebrating a “kill,” with intentions ranging from the innocuous to the insidious, from gleeful and genuine participation to forms of “IRL shitposting” in which the embodied “triggering” of such moves is intended to figuratively “trigger” their targets. *Fortnite* players, their friends, and siblings pass the moves around as embodied scripts to activate during school, sports, and social gatherings, and such dances have quickly become common coin for young people from elementary school into young adulthood. While generally providing a platform for youthful distinction, professional athletes, entertainers, and politicians flash their best attempts at emote emulation to demonstrate cultural fluency and hipness, and the most popular *Fortnite Dances* even turn up increasingly in nightclubs, giving novices an easy, if cheesy, way to participate in contemporary dance culture. Beyond these commonplace, if anecdotal encounters, sites such as TikTok and YouTube host countless compilations and

“viral” videos, with millions and millions of views, attesting to the potency and massive popularity of *Fortnite Dances* among young people engaged in the peer-oriented production and circulation of “memes” as well as to the intense feedback loop between social media and IRL deployments of these moves. As perhaps the most highly visible, influential, and problematic context for *Fortnite Dances*, online video provides a sobering window into some of the less salutary uses and meanings of these dances at a time when mediated performances of racial and gender identities have become increasingly burdened by the resurgence of reactionary, chauvinist, and supremacist political ideologies.

While dance crazes have generally been interpreted, in their own moment and in retrospect, as embodying and advancing transgressions of race and gender norms,⁴ the *Fortnite* dance craze reveals that social dance can be put to rather antisocial uses, especially when mediated by online interactions. Complicating any easy celebration of today’s craze is the fact that violent video games and online video sites are its most prominent platforms, and these spaces are rife with toxic masculinity and white supremacy. As more and more people, young and old, perform these dances in public and private, deploying them with and against each other, a growing number of discussions and debates—not to mention lawsuits—accompany them, revolving around questions of embodiment, identity, and ownership. Given their massive popularity and multivalent character and the acrimonies of our present political moment, the so-called *Fortnite Dances* demand that we reckon with their implications for ideas about gender equality and racial justice, agency and enclosure, dance and social change. Even as dance in the age of *Fortnite* may hold promise as another turn in the long but lurching history of “democratizing” dance by lowering the bar to entry, a process led by African American musicians and dancers,⁵ it also unsettles the prevailingly optimistic narrative about the social and cultural impact of dance crazes.

EMOTING (AGAINST?) PATRIARCHY

Constituting yet another historical moment in which large numbers of people show interest in cultivating an appreciation of lines and timing, ability and agility, competence and fun, the current dance craze—as with those that preceded it—appears at first to confront prevailing, persistent ideas about gender roles and propriety. Writing about disco’s revolutionary upheaval, Tim Lawrence notes that “the history of social dance in the United States has been intertwined with the shifting yet resilient practice of patriarchal heterosexuality.”⁶ Perhaps comparable to the rise of disco or the swing era, the current moment can be described as a culture of dancing in which men feel some pressure and desire to participate. (Of course, in the disco era, this resulted in a remarkable,

4. See the volume cited variously throughout this article, edited by Julie Malnig: *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), which examines social dance from the colonial period into the era of house and techno.

5. Philip A. Jamison, “Square Dance Calling: The African American Connection,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 387–98.

6. Tim Lawrence, “Beyond the Hustle: 1970s Social Dancing, Discotheque Culture, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Club Dancer,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 200.

if ephemeral, backlash most spectacularly enacted in the notorious 1979 “Disco Demolition” event in Chicago.) Although dance crazes have often contributed to the shifting character of patriarchy by pushing at its boundaries, the fact that *Fortnite* dances have inspired young men to move their bodies in public, cheerfully inviting their peers’ gaze—and that this basic fact still invites comment—bears witness to the resilience of certain ideas about masculinity and dance. While previous crazes were crucially marked by women confronting and subverting ideas about decorum, the gender politics of *Fortnite Dances* appear to have more to do with young men’s remarkable willingness to shake a tail feather (or at least move their hips back and forth). At least from one angle, this recent (re)turn again stands in contrast to other historical moments during which men, especially white men, have receded from, rejected, and ridiculed dance as a pursuit incommensurate with masculinity.⁷

Given its resilience, one might argue that this relationship is practically foundational for American culture, having arrived with European settlers in the seventeenth century. The Puritan colonists who settled in New England considered dance an effeminate, corrupting pursuit which could cause a young man to be, in the words of Puritan writer Phillip Stubbes, “transnured into a woman, or worse,”⁸ and they worked to outlaw it accordingly as a threat to civilization (i.e., white patriarchal rule). At the end of the nineteenth century, after decades of a growing but controversial vogue for English and French ballroom dances, men again began to drift away from dance—and from socializing with women in public more generally—seeming “more and more out of place in many mixed social situations, including ballrooms.”⁹ Affirming this turn as an emergent cultural norm, etiquette writer Florence Howe Hall characterized men congregating at balls at this time as “a black-coated and dismal group, like so many crows around a doorway,” while an Italian traveler visiting New York in the 1880s observed that “in the salon the American male is a fish out of water; not one of them will deny that his true place is the office, the countinghouse, or the political meeting.”¹⁰ Even in historical moments when men *have* participated in dance culture, their participation has just as often shored up ideas about masculinity and power, including who has the power to lead. This is most clear in what Tim Lawrence refers to as the “rigorously partnered” ballroom dances that prevailed from the mid-nineteenth century Waltz until the Twist finally dethroned the ragtime-era Foxtrot.¹¹ Taking a long view on this history, dance scholars Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan argue that the swing era—which, despite the

7. The rejection of dance as unmasculine is not limited to white men, of course, as a spate of hip hop records from the early 2000s attests. To quote Fat Joe: “My [people] don’t dance / they just pull up their pants / and do the rockaway” (“Lean Back,” 2004).

8. Originally published in *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London: John Kingston for Richard Jones, 1583), as quoted in Kirsten Gibson, “Music, Melancholy, and Masculinity in Early Modern England,” in *Masculinity and Western Musical Practice*, ed. Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 64.

9. Elizabeth Aldrich, “The Civilizing of America’s Ballrooms: The Revolutionary War to 1880,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 52.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Tim Lawrence, “Beyond the Hustle: 1970s Social Dancing, Discotheque Culture, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Club Dancer,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 200.

Lindy Hop’s partnered format, presented increasing openings for women to enjoy their own ability to “lead” with playful breaks and improvisations—offers a striking departure from the historical norm: “three extraordinary decades of an unusual mass aptitude for social dancing” (2009: 142).¹² Could the same be said for the age of *Fortnite Dances*?

Because *Fortnite* is an ostensibly violent video game mainly played by boys, this would seem to make it all the more remarkable to have encouraged such exhibition of interest and investment in dancing among young men. While these investments and performances have helped the dances to pass quickly into a broader social dance culture that women and girls have been leading since at least the Twist, the forms of deployment of such dances outside of gameplay by young men call into question whether *Fortnite Dances* actually promise, as with previous ruptures, to upset dance as a form of patriarchal heterosexuality. Rather than being coded as feminine, gay, and/or black, *Fortnite Dances* are encountered and used by gamers as purchases displayed for in-game prestige, typically to humiliate other gamers rather than, say, to dance in virtual co-presence. As such, these emotes—despite their frequently having been co-opted from social dance cultures that center women, queer folk, and people of color—may be understood by their in-game adopters less as dances, even, than as scripts that are easily enough recruited into mechanisms of IRL patriarchal reinforcement, particularly around physicality.

Fortnite Dances figure prominently in online videos used to bully and denigrate young women, LGBTQ folk, and people of color and to “haze” other young white men, revealing how such moves, despite their origins, can be used to uphold and enforce repressive hierarchies and ideologies. In the thousands of videos devoted to such meta-genres as “ironic duets” and “cringe” content posted to TikTok or YouTube, and often collected and re-shared in fan-made compilations on these platforms and others, young white men deploy the most popular and recognizable *Fortnite Dances* not to transgress gender norms but to support public performances of masculine “basicness” or “ironic norminess.” While one side of the screen displays a young woman discussing depression or dysphoria or, alternately, expressing confidence in their dance, rap, or meme routines, on the other side of the split a young white man mocks them by performing *Fortnite Dances* in shockingly callous juxtaposition. (Please be warned: the videos hyperlinked here contain content that could be upsetting to some viewers.) These “celebratory” moves are both obviously out of place with teens expressing sentiments about suicide and anxiety and, by virtue of *Fortnite*’s provision and promotion of the emotes as in-game taunts, ready-made for the (cyber)bullying they now facilitate. Indeed, the video “duets” themselves are often a form of aggression, nearly always by young white men, targeted at prominent TikTok users, who are frequently young women. “To all you bullies out there, Fortnite Dance on this,” dares a bold, baiting teen captured by one such compilation ([from 7:22](#)).

Ironic TikTok compilations show how heteropatriarchy self-corrects quickly, turning dances into scripts for gender trolling and bullying as digital culture bleeds across URL and

12. Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan, “Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor: Social Dancing at the Savoy,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 142.

IRL contexts. Tellingly, while such *Fortnite Dances* as the Floss, the Shoot, and Take the L figure commonly in such videos, one of the most popular to employ in such situations is known fondly as the “Default Dance” (or simply “Dance Moves” as it is titled in *Fortnite*). It was initially sourced from a television performance by African American actor Donald Faison in an episode of *Scrubs*, clearly patterned on the Running Man and a mix of other black vernacular dance moves. In practice, however, the Default Dance helps users place ironic distance between the dancer and the act of dancing, invoking in-group gamer humor more than, say, the world of social dance. “Default dance on em” has become a phrase and a meme synonymous with this pose, as has the non-dance “T-Pose to assert dominance,” a meme-practice in which one defiantly adopts the default, unanimated state of 3D video game characters. Although many of these moves are deployed in the safety of young men’s homes, then spliced into online “duets,” there have also been increasing incidents of bringing such practices into the physical, social world. Last year, a Boston-area school barred students from doing the Take the L dance as an anti-bullying measure, while a school in England similarly banned the Floss.

Today’s social media-fueled dance craze, then, could be interpreted at once as promising—offering new, shared ground for broadly participatory dance culture in the United States and elsewhere—or as worrisome at a moment of an intensely contested reappraisal of the relationship between gender and power in the wake of #MeToo, #gamergate, and related movements. Either way, the success of *Fortnite* in becoming the arbiter of such forms draws attention to the radical potential to rewrite familiar scripts. The cultural flattening at work in the game, which presents dance moves or emotes as available to any player regardless of gender—indeed, as gender-neutral scripts (if in a game world where most players are male)—is itself a product of the game’s decontextualization of the dances from their social milieus. This decontextualization permits dances that issue from scenes and spaces where young women, queer folk, or black youth enjoy hypervisibility as producers to be redeployed in service of a white, patriarchal status quo. By obscuring if not overwriting the distinct cultural spaces and social values that have fostered such dances, *Fortnite’s* brazen commodification and rebranding of these sources undermines the transgressive possibilities of young people reaching across the lines of distance and difference to dance together.

NEW SKINS, OLD INJURIES

Similar to its ability to reinforce patriarchy, *Fortnite’s* erasure of black authorship enacts a structural form of white supremacy that enables the genuinely ironic, if also sardonically ironic, use of so-called *Fortnite Dances* in white supremacists’ own cultural products. Lest we become distracted by this particularly nefarious expression, however, it is important to see it as part of the broader, often more banal, but still quite insidious process of cultural appropriation enabled by *Fortnite’s* corporate enclosure of social dance forms that might otherwise be primarily owned, monetized, shared by and credited to individual African American creators and the communities that nurture them. A spate of recent lawsuits by individuals who claim their dance was “stolen” by *Fortnite* has called attention to the injustice of a situation that seems to read as yet another chapter in a long history of African

American dancers attempting to wrest some control over the commercial exploitation of their signature moves.¹³ But while such lawsuits have generated interest in specific questions of contested ownership, perhaps a greater point of concern is that framing the current dance craze as a *Fortnite*-led phenomenon serves, at yet another level and yet again, to obscure how African American agency, ingenuity, and individual and communal creativity continue to shape national and global popular culture—and to fail to appreciate the specific achievements of black youth working at the vanguard of such movements.

The *Fortnite*-era dance craze did not emerge from a vacuum, nor is it primarily a consequence of ingenious software design. Rather, *Fortnite*'s popular emotes capitalize on what was already an efflorescence in progress, a dance craze on its own: namely, the spectacular reach and resonance of black social dance in the age of social media, a phenomenon underway since at least Soulja Boy's "Crank Dat" (2007). This popular dance culture, primarily led by young African Americans, has been building steam in concert with YouTube, Vine, Instagram, and other media-streaming sites, giving rise to #hashtag dance challenges and other novel forms encouraging a broadly participatory and public social dance culture visibly rooted in black vernacular aesthetics, if also accompanied by the possibility of "context collapse" and appropriation enabled by the fundamental mediation of these digital platforms.¹⁴ While some individuals and collectives have still managed to garner credit, fame, and compensation for their ingenuity in this sphere, the ascent of *Fortnite* as an influential vector of social dance can be interpreted at once as a further amplification of such trends as well as a parasitic, corporate response to a grassroots, peer-driven phenomenon.

Just as the Twist "owed a notable debt to black churchgoers" even as it helped white Americans to liberate their repressed bodies,¹⁵ the *Fortnite* dance phenomenon must be understood as belonging to and emerging from a long genealogy of hip hop dances and other African American vernacular dances aesthetically and socially grounded in what scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon has dubbed "the jook continuum."¹⁶ The distinctive jook instantiation of twenty-first century black youth dance culture in Atlanta drives today's social media-propelled dance craze. Building on the cross-platform, DIY success of "Crank Dat" and the insurgent popularity of the city's trademark "trap" sound, Atlanta teens have labored over the last decade to reshape the very syntax of black popular dance, making it at once into a more standardized, simplified, and hence accessible form for mass engagement and into a vehicle that rewards the virtuosity, ingenuity, and improvisation that have long been central to jook aesthetics.¹⁷ With their irresistible and easily performed four-count inventions, in which a signature move is performed at the end of every four beat measure (e.g.,

13. Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

14. Kyra Gaunt, "YouTube, Twerking, & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 3 (2015): 244–73.

15. Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock'n'Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 214.

16. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

17. David Turner, "Inside Atlanta's Booming Hip-Hop Dance Scene," *MTV News*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2798081/inside-atlantas-booming-hip-hop-dance-scene/>; Rembert Browne, "A Note on 'Jumpman,'"

the Dab, the Whip, the Nae Nae, etc.), young black dancers from Atlanta—abetted by pop hits aiming to mainstream them, most notably Silento’s “Watch Me” (2015)—arguably initiated this latest “craze” now associated with *Fortnite*. Indeed, before young people were learning some of the so-called *Fortnite Dances* from the game, they were learning them directly from “viral” videos of other young people on YouTube—or by seeing them performed, gamely if not always gracefully, by their peers and siblings, professional athletes, politicians, and TV personalities.

The legibility and therefore “spreadability” of these dances is crucial to their appeal and, indeed, invites their appropriation—and theoretically, at least traditionally, their adaptation to local contexts and personalized expressions. This emphasis on legibility and customization was as important in the rise of “snap” music and Soulja Boy’s Crank Dat¹⁸ as it is in the age of “trap” music and BlockBoy JB’s Shoot dance (rebranded by *Fortnite* as the Hype). Notably, such attributes are also key for media scholars, such as Henry Jenkins, who argue that discourses of “virality” obscure the importance of agency and creative adaptation in online cultures (2013). We might also understand Hazzard-Gordon’s characterization of what is most valued in the jook continuum as an interplay between the legible and the personal—namely, that the mark of a good dancer has long been “the ability to embellish one’s performance with as many vernacular steps as possible.”¹⁹ This conception of value is grounded in notions of communal ownership and Afrodiasporic aesthetics that also permit, and reward, individual mastery and creativity within the circle. Such an approach has not always broadly undergirded social dance in the United States, black or otherwise, and by Hazzard-Gordon’s reading it is a formidable cultural triumph on the part of Southern, working-class African Americans, including those who settled in the cities of the North during the Great Migration. According to Hazzard-Gordon, during this period, “In jooks and after-hours joints and at rent shouts, dance became a litmus test for sociocultural identity,” and throughout that process, “The black working class carefully and sensitively guarded social dance as its province.”²⁰ That ownership and stewardship over black vernacular dance has rarely been questioned, even and perhaps especially during previous “dance crazes” when much ado was made of middle-class white youth embracing such “cross-racial” forms as the *sine qua non* of American modernity.

Capitalizing on the value of legibility while generally ignoring the pillar of adaptability, the so-called *Fortnite Dances* are, for the most part, a snap to learn. Once again droves of middle-class white Americans find themselves drawn to trying out moves that feel fun and free. Tutorials demonstrating the most popular *Fortnite Dances* proliferate on YouTube and garner millions of views. Made up of relatively few movements, repeated nearly exactly the same way, in post-*Fortnite* practice such “dances” can more closely resemble an imitation of

Grantland, 22 September 2015, <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/a-note-on-jumpman-by-metro-boomin-ft-drake-and-future/>.

18. Kevin Driscoll, “Soulja Boy and Dance Crazes,” in *Spreadable Media*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (New York: NYU Press, 2013), <http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/driscoll/#.V5uTYKuoNSX>.

19. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 116.

20. *Ibid.*, 117.

a looping animation than a generative grammar put into creative practice. In this way, the game is expanding access and interest in embodying these moves as it reshapes them in a manner that neglects such dimensions as improvisation and play—and their implication of community feedback—so integral to the black vernacular social dance complex that gave rise to the general vocabulary and syntax, and even to particular steps and gestures, that most of *Fortnite's* dance emotes reference. Abstracted from the social context of local dance scenes and real-time co-presence, *Fortnite Dances* are more like frozen improvisations, snapshots of social life decontextualized and optimized for the cut-and-paste logic and algorithmic order of social media. We might even see them as akin to “reaction GIFs” and hence in league with what Lauren Michelle Jackson calls “digital blackface” wherein “white and nonblack users seem to especially prefer GIFs with black people when it comes to emitting their most exaggerated emotions.”²¹ This serves both to diffuse and defuse an approach to dance carefully cultivated and guarded by generations of African Americans.

With *Fortnite's* lucrative emotes, we again witness communal black culture—as well as forms widely acknowledged as the product of specific creators—being commodified and nearly exclusively monetized by white actors and businessmen, a process dating back at least to the staging of plantation music and dance as the stuff of “Ethiopian” minstrelsy. Not surprisingly, this is a pattern that haunts all the major dance crazes of the last hundred years. According to Nadine Georges-Graves, the ragtime dances of the teens were part and parcel of a “disenfranchisement, exploitative commercialization, and disavowal of African American culture.”²² (2009: 63). Similarly, the dances of the Twist era were frequently developed among black high schoolers before being whitewashed for network TV, “often with the sexier movements eliminated” (Wald 2009: 214), while the *Saturday Night Fever* nadir of the disco era represented a “strutting, straight” caricature and distortion of disco’s liberatory promise, if a fleeting one eventually eclipsed by the rise of house and techno (Lawrence 2009: 199).

Copyright law in the United States does not protect social dances or the kinds of single moves or brief routines that have been commodified and massively popularized via *Fortnite*. According to the United States Copyright Office’s *Circular 52*, “Social dances, simple routines, and other uncopyrightable movements cannot be registered as separate and distinct works of authorship, even if they contain a substantial amount of creative expression.”²³ While this may make sense with regard to such collectively produced forms as social dances, which should theoretically belong to everyone, the *Fortnite* phenomenon may represent an unprecedented situation with regard to the exploitation of these forms at a moment of media turbulence. Even as it seeks to strike a balance, United States copyright law clearly

21. Lauren Michelle Jackson, “We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs,” *Teen Vogue*, 2 August 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>.

22. Nadine Georges-Graves, “Just Like Being at the Zoo’: Primitivity and Ragtime Dance,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 63.

23. For additional detail, see <https://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ52.pdf>, which also notes that “The U.S. Copyright Office cannot register short dance routines consisting of only a few movements or steps with minor linear or spatial variations, even if a routine is novel or distinctive.”

encodes a set of prejudices, drawing lines that exclude certain forms of creative genius (such as that of countless kids in Atlanta) from a system that protects longer, more “literate”—indeed, transcription is often required—choreographic forms built from them. (Notably, Soulja Boy’s Crank Dat has not been available as an unauthorized emote in *Fortnite*, as the rapper apparently succeeded in copyrighting his dance’s slightly more elaborate routine; Soulja Boy has himself teased that it may eventually appear, presumably as a licensed product that he has successfully monetized, a rare exception to *Fortnite*’s rule.²⁴) The rationale behind the copyright statute supports what dance scholar Anthea Kraut critiques as the standard, injurious position that “Western ideas of singular authorship and fixity embedded in United States copyright law are ill suited to collective black expressive forms.”²⁵ Kraut’s work recounts the ways that African American dancers resorted to various “extra-legal” measures to contest the “legal” appropriation of their work in the early and mid-twentieth century. Today, individuals claiming ownership over dances rebranded in *Fortnite*, such as 2Milly and actor Alfonso Ribeiro (whose Carlton Dance, which he popularized on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* is marketed by *Fortnite*, not very subtly, as the Fresh), have not only initiated lawsuits against Epic Games for such brazen acts of commodification and appropriation but also have endorsed and engaged in public campaigns seeking some recognition and redress.²⁶ As lawyer Jessica Meiselman argues, there may be little recourse for these influential social dance creators aside from “some clever legal argumentation,” such as claiming that *Fortnite* is infringing not on their (non-existent) copyright but on their right to publicity, given the degree of co-branding with their signature dance.²⁷

While the billion dollar sales of *Fortnite*’s emotes should raise serious questions about ownership and social dance, there is yet another layer of exploitation adding insult to injury (or perhaps injury to injury) in this story. If we follow the monetization, we are reminded that the ad-driven social media platforms hosting these dance videos—TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter—have their own parasitical relationship to the remarkable degree of youthful cultural industry driving this dance craze. Prioritizing participation and immediacy, most of the teens making use of these services—posting videos of themselves or cottage-industry compilations of others—simply accept that the cost of social mediatization is the commodification of their own affective labor and surveilled habits. In this brave new world, the so-called platforms for “broadcasting yourself” stand to benefit most from this shift of center for the culture industry. Today, the cultural products of grassroots, peer-to-peer interaction are quickly outsourced back to the “products” of the social media networks (i.e., their users, whose profiles are sold

24. Soulja Boy’s tweet of 11 November 2018 reads: “A little bug told me that Crank That Soulja Boy emote is coming soon to @FortniteGame” (<https://twitter.com/souljaboy/status/106177463636547144>).

25. Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

26. Aside from the creators themselves, prominent black voices, such as Chance the Rapper, have taken to Twitter to protest the unfairness of the situation and to advocate other ways to bring the creators into the monetization of their dances. See Ethan Gach, “What *Fortnite*’s Dance Emotes May Owe To The Black Artists Who Created Them,” *Kotaku*, 20 July 2018, <https://kotaku.com/what-fornites-dance-emotes-may-owe-to-the-black-artist-1827760523>.

27. Jessica Meiselman, “Ask a Lawyer: Can Rappers Get Paid for Creating ‘Fortnite’ Dances?” *Noisy*, 11 October 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/43e589/fortnite-shoot-dance-blocboy-jb-payment.

to clients seeking to better target them with ads): communal source code, transcoded and repackaged for in-game purchases and “free” amplification on the most prominent media platforms of the day. Did you say *craze*?

SHALL WE PLAY AGAIN OR SHALL WE DANCE?

It remains to be seen how long the present craze will last and whether “the age of *Fortnite*” will prove a short-lived chapter of the story, or if a growing interest in virtual reality and video games will turn them into some of the largest social networks and cultural platforms in world history. Facing stiffer competition in the battle royale business, *Fortnite*’s market share and cultural resonance may be waning. As of this writing, *Fortnite* continues to add new dance emotes and to foreground their in-game use as an appeal to consumers. Epic Games has even begun collaborating with young black dancers, such as YouFunnyB, adding his popular Billy Bounce dance to the game under its own name, suggesting a change in corporate practice.²⁸ While I don’t notice quite so many kids Flossing or busting into the Orange Justice during idle moments in my daughters’ soccer games, they may simply be moving onto the next thing and leaving passé emotes to the kids in grades below them. (Anecdotally, I have learned from the parents of younger children that *Fortnite Dances*, especially the Floss, have become *de rigueur* at kindergarten birthday parties; these emotes may serve better as social dance training wheels after all.) The lawsuits remain unsettled and unresolved, and they continue to grow in number. However they play out, this particular can of worms will likely continue to inspire a generation of young people to move together, with ongoing consequences for how they think about themselves and their relationship to dance, their bodies, their age cohort, and their racialized and gendered identities. Social dance in the age of social media shows no sign of slowing down, perhaps further intensifying as new technologies and forms proliferate.

As far as its historical significance, this latest dance craze, platformed by *Fortnite* but also social media, may require scholars of dance, music, and popular media to reappraise the trajectory and tendencies of social dance in the modern era. Whereas prior historical moments seemed to offer evidence of middle-class white Americans “mount[ing] their own tittering rebellions” and transgressing oppressive ideas about race, gender, and sexuality,²⁹ the uses of *Fortnite Dances* on sites like TikTok reveal how black, working-class social dance moves can be transcoded and twisted to serve the ends of white resentment and hetero-patriarchy. While such appropriations are where the power is most visible, the more banal examples show how *Fortnite Dances* can be made to prepare the ground of online (white) youth culture, where fascists see opportunities to recruit and seed ideology that seeps further into the “anti-SJW” discourses that manifest in gender trolling or racist performance. With sites like TikTok offering “safe spaces for people to mock ‘safe spaces,’”³⁰ the liberatory promise

28. Nathan Grayson, “After Swiping Lots Of Fortnite Dances From Black Artists, Epic Finally Teams Up With One,” *Kotaku*, 5 June 2019, <https://kotaku.com/after-swiping-lots-of-fortnite-dances-from-black-artist-1835285124>.

29. Megan Pugh, *America Dancing: From the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 20.

30. John Herman, “Welcome to TrumpTok, a Safe Space From Safe Spaces,” *New York Times*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/style/trump-tiktok.html>.

of the jook continuum and the disco revolution—a torch carried forward, and into the wider world, by Chicago house and Detroit techno—may stand more as a refuge for those on the social margins than a site of transformative, society-wide solidarity. Just because lots of people are doing the same dances, alas, doesn't mean we're dancing together.

While the *Fortnite* dance craze should therefore be celebrated with caution, if at all, my gut tells me that the innocent, fun, and potentially progressive and transgressive uses of these dances will ultimately prevail. The trolls are outnumbered, and history is against them. Mainstream social dance culture has slowly, almost doggedly, and certainly in twisted fits and awkward starts, continued to move toward the free, socially cohesive, body positive practices of the jook, and *Fortnite* is just the latest, distorting vector for this irrepressible movement. ■

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