A cyclical quality distinguishes African American dance from dance elsewhere in the African diaspora. That is, an African American dance appears, then goes underground or seems to die out, only to emerge twenty or so years later as a "new" dance. Consider Cuban rumba, Brazilian samba, Jamaican skank, or any number of dances that have originated in black Atlantic cultures; these dances, which have become familiar nationally and internationally, seem to have continuous rather than cyclical histories.

Rumba, the national dance and rhythm of Cuba, more than any other dance genre reflects the aesthetic sentiments and historical self-characterizations of the Cuban people. As in many New World African dances, including those appearing in the United States, rumba uses derision, polytimer, mimetic characterization, and, often, biting commentary. Cuba is rumba; its daily rhythms at work and play contribute to the rumba consciousness. In rumba various aspects of life are expressed and overlaid with a strong mimetic mating dialogue between male and female.

In Brazil the throbbing syncopations of samba have inspired samba schools and competitions in which large numbers of Brazilians actively participate. Like Cuban rumba, Brazilian samba is a genre that expresses the national character and is familiar to old and young alike.

Like many popular dances in the United States, both samba and rumba originated among working-class and lower-class members of black communities only to be adopted and often modified by the "white" and upper-strata segments of society. The dances survive, largely intact, despite the contestation and class conflict that accompany their dissemination.

In contrast, the cyclical nature of African American secular dance may reflect unique social forces; the rapidity with which the dance vocabulary is recycled and renamed in African American dance appears to be a by-product of the ever changing U.S. commodity market, which continually demands new dance material. The popular-culture market and industry are also international in scope, so that African American vernacular/popular dance—eventually shows up in places such as Cuba or Sri Lanka.

As influential as the external demands are, however, African American popular cultural creation is also driven by a desire for uniqueness and a tendency toward embellishment referred to as "the will to adorn" by anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, which provide African American youth with wide parameters for unique expressiveness. Popular creation appears to change, even if only slightly, from one generation to the next.

Shifting circumstances of class stratification and work, particularly as they impact on the changing African American national identity and character, also shaped the general movement of African American popular dance as a primarily agricultural labor force changed to one engaged in proletarian and other forms of urban labor. Immediately after Emancipation and the mass migration of rural freedmen into the cities and industries of both the South and North, African American secular social dance began to lose its rural character and take on more urban characteristics. The rural dances were marked by flat-footedness, bent or crouched postures, and group dancing rather than partner dances. In the approximately sixty years of peak migration north, dances such as shuckin' corn, pitchin' hay, and milkin' the cow gave way to dances with more upright postures, less flat-footedness, and names that reflected a new urban reality.

But even today, after more than three-quarters of a century of proletarianization, African Americans still include agrarian references in their dance and in their music, particularly the blues.

Urbanization and proletarianization also transformed partnering relationships; the group and community-oriented dancing typical of rural dancing gave way to the single couple, with emphasis on sexual coupling. Subjected to less community scrutiny and participation, partners on the urban dance floor were alone with each other and required no contact with others. This isolation of the couple was a significant departure from the traditional circle and line dances familiar in both West African culture and in the dances of the rural bondsman and freedman. Traditional West African dances and even the Euro-American forms could not proceed without the participation of a sizeable community. Even so,
the rural, community-oriented character of African American social dance was not completely obliterated. Evidence of this rural and community orientation surfaces in any group dance that does not emphasize sexual coupling. Think of dances such as the Madison, the continental, the birdland, the surplus, the bus stop, and the most recent, the electric slide—group dances with little or no partnering relationships—these are all single-line dances. Double-line dances such as the stroll and the soul train line require two lines, formed according to gender, and facing each other in a potential partnering arrangement. In both the stroll and the soul train line, dancers commonly featured a movement in which the partners move down the center between the lines; this limited partnering offered an opportunity for cooperation, but it was no means required. Other evidence of rural influence can be observed in the mimetic character of African American dances. Dances such as the chicken (and its variation, the funny chicken), the horse, the shakehips, the pony, and milking the cow refer directly to the rural environment.

At any given moment in African American cultural history the working classes have had (and today have) a working repertoire of about half a dozen up-to-date dances from which to choose, and a general repertoire of around thirty. There is no shortage of creative recycling. Each generation of African American youth, it seems, recalls demonstrating what they think is a new dance step, only to be told that their elders did that same dance twenty, thirty, forty, or more years ago. I had that experience many times as a young street dancer in Cleveland, Ohio. Like a language, the basic vocabulary of African American dance is passed along. As did many of my peers, I learned it both in my home and "in the street" with my peer group. Former Cotton Club performer Howard "Stretch" Johnson and I once compared historical and regional variations on a number of dances. I asked him if he had ever heard of a dance called the twine. Yes, he had, and as we each demonstrated the versions we had learned, we agreed that his 1920 New York version, imported from "down South," was far more flat-footed and rooted into the earth than mine. My 1960s urban, midwestern version was more upright, lighter, with less weight in the arm strokes and freer movement in the legs and feet. After comparing a number of dances and making similar observations on all of them, we jointly concluded that his bent, flat-footed version of the dances might reflect a time when upright postures in African American dance were not well tolerated by white audiences. Many whites who attended the minstrel theater in particular were not ready to see Africans in postures that suggested anything but the bent, flat-footed, crouched, lowered head of the old "buck-dancing" styles. Since there was a widespread and influential exchange of dance material between the vernacular-popular-folk dances and the black professional performance tradition, many early versions of recycled popular dances bore that stamp of theatrical and plantation subservience, particularly when performed before a white audience. This was probably true as well on the southern plantation, since slaves were often called upon to entertain their master and his guests. The cakewalk, a dance that utilized exaggerated upright postures, was the notable exception.

The cakewalk is believed to have originally ridiculed the arrogant, upright, erect postures of the slaveholding class; it was a dance of derision. The widespread change from the old Uncle Tom postures, bent and cowardly, to the more upright dancing styles appears simultaneously with the return of African American GI's from World War I and the heaviest recruitment of black male workers by northern industry. African Americans had a new national pride and self-consciousness, reflected in the phrase "the new Negro," in the theater dance style of the "class acts," and in the slogan "All tap, no Tom." Performers like Eddie Rector purged the old postures from their routines. Later in the popular-dance arena the lindy hop struck a new cord of defiance, public self-rededication, and cultural pride.

Supporting these new dance trends in both the popular theater and in the rent parties, dance halls, honky-tongs, after-hours joints, and jooks were the significant numbers of black men who were increasingly being employed in industry or jobs related to or dependent upon industrial production: in factories, steel mills, auto plants, and the post office, and on the construction crews laying the nation's roads and later the new interstate highways. Both the economy and the community offered support for forming and maintaining African American families. Black men's lives were considerably less stressful and economically insecure than those who would later become. This trend toward a positive environment for marriage and family was clearly expressed in the urban song and dance styles emerging and dominating African American popular culture between 1920 and the mid-1970s.

The themes of security, marriage, mating, sexual coupling, heartbreak, and cheating became more popular and well developed in the music and dance era of rhythm and blues. Blacks, like many other Americans, enjoyed the postwar prosperity and security of the forties, fifties, and sixties. For those who remained marginally employed, the thriving alternative economy—particularly "the numbers"—provided supplemental and, for some, occasional full-time employment. But even the alternative economy had at its foundation African American male breadwinners, for without the wealth generated by African American male labor and the income of working black men, and to a lesser extent women, "the numbers" would not have thrived. The labor of many African American women was an important supplement to that of the men. All this would change.

In the 1960s a number of economic and social changes began to transform the culture-creating environment of African American life. First, the state-sponsored educational, social, and economic programs in black communities, many of them born of the sixties, suffered large funding cuts and were phased out. The remaining jobs were privately funded for relatively short periods, affording workers little job security. Nevertheless, some of these programs served as centers of community activism as well as providing employment and economic services such as job training. The Job Corps, street academies, Model Cities, drug education and abuse treatment, Opportunities Industrialization Center, and black-culture community centers and programs became focal points for those on the bottom of society who
wanted to make it, thus providing an additional buffer to economic deprivation and instilling hope and societal concern. Many of these programs had youth orientations; most focused at least some of their energies on young people. At these focal points culture was generated, reworked, challenged, and disseminated.

Second, while racial integration brought about many positive changes, it also resulted in the demise or weakening of some traditional black economic networks and institutions. For example, the old “numbers” or “policy” games were converted into state-controlled lotteries, and specialized “race” products and services, such as those related to hair and beauty, were drawn into the mainstream. The third, and by no means least, important change was the uprooting of U.S. industry, marked by corporate flight and the move to a service-based economy. The loss of manufacturing jobs disproportionately affected black men who headed households; as the percentage of black male unemployment began a steady rise, the percentage of female-headed households began to increase dramatically.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s popular music and dance had become increasingly political as the industrial base that supported much black cultural creation eroded; the politicized forms of popular music and dance were successfully challenged by theapolitical, slick dance and music called disco. Disco gave voice to a newly empowered economic strata, the yuppie, and the middlelevel service worker. Despite the social, political, and economic accomplishments that their grandparents and parents had struggled for, African American youth inherited economically unstable and eroded ground for their hopes and dreams. Vicious attacks on all phases of the black movement deprived this generation of a viable social movement through which to work against their frustrations and for their economic needs. Where would this generation of African American youth find employment? Where would they find the working, productive male role models so necessary to the health of any community? With what material would they create their dreams? In the midst of rapidly worsening social conditions, how could this generation find meaning in their community’s traditional music and dance forms as their predecessors had? Would they create utterly new dance and music forms that spoke more directly to their unique experiences in a world without its former industrial base? In this era of African American male economic insecurity, of popular conspicuous consumption (e.g., the brazen display of designer labels and brand names), of widening gaps between rich and poor, and of a mortibund social movement for black and minority inclusion, hip hop emerged.

Why hip hop?

Hip hop is an expressive cultural genre originating among lower- and often marginalized working-class African American youth; it has West Indian influences, particularly dance hall, dub, and DJ style. The genre includes rapping and rap music, graffiti writing, particular dance styles (including breakdancing), specific attire, and a specialized language and vocabulary. Hip hop appears at the crucial juncture of postindustrial stagnation, increased family dissolution, and a weakened struggle for black economic and political rights. Might one expect the pressures of mutually antagonistic social forces such as high unemployment, heightened job competition, and expectations of conspicuous consumption to influence both the popular expressive culture and the culture-creating apparatus of a community? I say yes. It is no coincidence that many youth of the hip hop generation have never known the relative security that some of their parents and even grandparents knew.

Hip hop dance is clearly masculine in style, with postures assertive in their own right as well as in relation to a female partner. In its early stages, hip hop rejected the partnering ritual between men and women; at a party or dance, hip hop dance was performed between men or by a lone man. About 1973 or 1974 I attended a dance given by African American students at Cornell University. I took the initiative and asked a young man to dance; on refusing my invitation, he explained that he couldn’t dance with women, that the way he danced was unsuitable for dancing with women. He proceeded to give me a demonstration of how he could dance, running through several dance steps that I had seen performed by Fred “Run” Berry and the Lockers. Correctly performed, the dance did not allow for female partnering; it was a purely male expression and rarely performed by females. Particularly in early hip hop the male does not assume the easygoing, cool, confident polish characteristic of earlier popular-dance expression. Even in its early stages hip hop dancing aggressively asserted male dominance.

Waack and breakin’

Hip hop dance can be characterized in three stages; waack, breakdancing, and rap dance. Waack dancing appears about 1972. Dance moves such as locking (later known on the East Coast as pop-locking), the robot, and the spank, along with splits and rapidly revolving spins combined with unexpected freezes, were part of waack’s outrageous style. Here the fusion of theatrical expectation and outrageous showmanship occurs that would mark later hip hop styles known as breakdancing.

A staple in the vocabularies of waack, breaking, and, to a lesser degree, rap dance was the pop and lock, a movement technique that was part of the jerk in the late 1950s before that dance left black communities and crossed over to mainstream America in the mid- to late 1960s. (The mainstream version is almost unrecognizable to the dancers who performed the original.) The pop and lock is both a way of handling the body and a movement quality in which a jerking and freezing of movement takes place. In this particular style a segmented body part such as the foot or hand initiates a free-flowing, undulating movement that flows up the leg or arm and ends with a jerking and freezing in place. It can be done with almost any combination of body parts but is most often performed with the torso, arms, and legs. The pop-and-lock technique could also be observed in the
snakehips, as that dance was performed by the Cotton Club's Earl "Snakcips" Tucker in the 1920s.15 Going farther back, a dance called the snakehips was popular in the Georgia Sea Islands and throughout the antebellum plantation South, and I have no reason to doubt that it resembled the version I learned in a 1950s midwestern African American community.16

As with later stages of development, clothing was an essential part of hip hop style. Big apple hats (an oversized style cap popularized by the late Donny Hathaway and soon to be replaced by Kangol caps, then by baseball caps); knickers, or suspenders with baggy pants, or pants tucked into striped knee socks; open-laced combat boots (soon to be replaced by open-laced sneakers); sun visors—all were part of waack’s style of dress. Through mass-media exposure, particularly on the TV dance show Soul Train, the dance group the Lockers and the Outrageous Waack Dancers popularized the early hip hop dancing styles, helped along by TV sitcoms such as What’s Happening, featuring Fred “Rerun” Berry. Rerun was often allowed short solos to demonstrate the early hip hop dance and clothing style. Both the Waacks’ and Lockers’ dancing was full of jerks and staccato movement, with up-and-down motion providing the center from which flashy embellishments such as high kicks and sudden unexpected turns emanated.

Breakingdance, the second stage of hip hop dancing, draws on a traditional and familiar concept in African American music, dance, and verbal arts: competitive one-upmanship. In music, breaking appears in the cutting contests of Harlem rent-party musicians, or in the competitive dialogue between musician and dancer. Look for it in the verbal arts of toasting, signifying, burnin’, or “cutting his mouth out,” usually performed with rhyming dexterity, articulation, and style; this verbal skill is highly valued in certain contexts. The principle of competitive dialogue shows up in African American street rhyme (e.g., the Signifying Monkey, Stackolee, and Shine rhymes), in the ritual of insult known as “the dozen,” in contemporary rap music, and in sacred context in the African American sermon.17 It is not surprising that the competitive acrobatics involved in breakingdance were labeled breaking or that this traditional principle provides the form through which rappers and DJs would express themselves.

It is generally agreed that breaking as a dance style emerged around 1973 or 1974, concurrent with disco but confined to the African American youth subculture of male street associations known as crews. Breakingdance involved acrobatics that used headspins, backspins, moonwalking (a recycled version of the late 1950s, early 1960s dance the creep), waving, and the robot; it was mediated by a preparatory step known as top rockin’ and pressed into competitive virtuosity. By 1976 the Zulus, a group of African American teenagers from the Bronx (the Zulu Nation formed as an alternative to the gangs in that community), had perfected the top rockin’ footwork, backspins, and headspins. By 1978 many black youth had given up breaking and moved on to DJing, but the dance form would be rejuvenated among Puerto Rican youth, who took it up later than blacks and extended its longevity.18

Breaking’s introduction to the general public by the mass media in April

1981 surely marked the beginning of its decline as a functional apparatus for competitive challenge among rival groups or individuals. Breakdancers began re-hearsing in order to be discovered and appear in movies or for competitive street exhibition rather than practicing to compete with a rival. Far more acrobatic than either preceding or subsequent hip hop dance forms, without competition, breaking loses its thrust, its raison d’être. Movement into the mainstream negated its status as countercultural by redefining it from a subcultural form to one widely accepted and imitated, a move that inadvertently linked breakers with the society that had previously excluded them. Breaking became so popular that it was featured as entertainment in the opening extravaganza of the 1984 Olympics.

Rap dancing

The third stage of hip-hop dance, which I will label rap dance, developed as a response to the popularity and athletic requirements of breaking. Combining aspects of both breaking and waack, it is influenced and cross-fertilized by a less athletic form of popular dance, house dancing, which uses much of the traditional African American vocabulary. Further influenced by the older rhythm-and-blues dances of the 1950s and 1960s, rap dance is male oriented, even male dominated, but unlike breakdancing not exclusively male. Its movements suit male-female partnering better than those of either waack or breaking, but less well than older popular dance forms such as the lindy hop or the rhythm-and-blues dances.

Like the lindy hop, hip hop dance is often athletic, youth oriented, and competitive, but rap dancing, and hip hop dance generally, require considerably less cooperation between partners. In the era of both rhythm and blues and the lindy hop, the contingencies of African American life required and fostered a firmer cooperation and interdependence from the racial group and the extended family to an extent virtually unknown to most of today’s young hip hoppers. The lindy demonstrates a celebratory exuberance foreign to the breakdancing phase of hip hop dance and largely absent from the other two phases as well. This exuberance was fed by the celebration of the individual bound by in-group solidarity, community accountability, and cooperation.

Though I would not categorize rap dance as a dance of celebration, it does appear to celebrate male solidarity, strength, and competitiveness, themes that might be expected to emerge via the social dance in an era of high black male unemployment and of scarce jobs for which men are increasingly forced to compete with women. At the same time, the lack of commitment to the traditional partnering ritual also breaks with at least one function found in earlier African American social dancing: selecting a romantic partner. Dancers who want to couple off romantically must return to the dance styles of a previous era. Hip hop shows no trace of the male-leadership themes expressed in the lindy and its 1950s and 1960s variants (the strand, offline, jitterbug, and hand dancing), although they are still observable in the slow drag variations of what is now called slow dancing.
I was ambivalent about the hip hop phenomenon until I noticed the dancing that accompanied the rapping; it was energetic, athletic, and noticeably male dominated, using a very African movement vocabulary. It revived movements that had been out of popular use for thirty years, like splits and rapidly revolving turns (movements still employed by performers). "Splits have made a comeback," I thought. Over time I observed more of this "new" dancing and spoke with African American youth about where they got their dance steps. Many had learned them from friends, but most of the young people I spoke with in West Philadelphia also identified several dance steps with a popular hip hop artist or said that they learned the step from watching a particular performer. This indicated to me that the interplay between the popular/vernacular dance and the black commercial performer is still very strong. In observing rap dance I have seen the following traditional African American dances or dance fragments recycled and recontextualized: the black bottom, roach, Watusi, splits, boogaloo, mashed potatoes, funky butt (funky bottom, boodle green, 'da butt), chicken, four corners, worm, snakehips, and horse (old and new versions). I have also observed the use of traditional opposition or counterpoint as well as traditional characteristics such as percussive phrasing, polyrhythm, derision, mimetic play, and competition.

The rappers whose dance movements best encompass and personify the extremes in the genre of hip hop movement are Flavor Flav, of the group Public Enemy, and M.C. Hammer. Flavor Flav resembles the contemporary urban Ew-Elegba, or deity (principle) of uncertainty and unpredictability, also known as the trickster deity. M.C. Hammer's well-choreographed movements draw directly from a strong rhythm-and-blues tradition. Hammer credits James Brown, a rhythm-and-blues artist, as the most powerful influence on his dance-performance style.

Contemporary rap dances such as the pump, running man, and Roger Rabbit, as well as the dance styles from a concurrent genre, house dancing, all exhibit structural and functional continuity with previous dances. House dancing and rap dance are cross-fertilizing each other. Like most African dance styles, these exhibit angularity, asymmetry, polyrhythmic sensitivity, derision themes, segmentation and delineation of body parts, earth-centeredness, and percussive performance. To this list we can add apart dancing.

Apart dancing describes dancing in which the partners do not touch each other during the dance, yet the commitment to the partnering ritual is clear; this quality helps characterize both the traditional West African dance styles and many dance styles in African communities in the Americas. In the old rhythm-and-blues forms, apart dancing was a dominant theme, and little competition between partners emerged. Individual virtuosity often took the form of display rather than challenge as a dominant governing principle. Themes of challenge pervade both breakdancing and rap dance to a greater degree than occurs in either wack dancing or the older rhythm-and-blues dances such as the twist, the slop, or the horse. Challenge could and did emerge in these older dances, however, particularly when there was a dispute to be settled.

What hip hop dance says

The richness of gesture and motion in hip hop dance, as in numerous other forms of popular American dance styles that develop among marginalized African American, West Indian, and Puerto Rican youth, reflects the effect of social and economic marginalization on their lives.

Competitiveness in hip hop dance occurs not only against these backdrops but also with strained gender relations thrown into the mix. Since U.S. society regards young African American males as threatening, attitudes of fear and suspicion restrict their entry into the mainstream service economy as well as other areas of mainstream life. That economy thus more easily absorbs African American female workers than males; add the effects of the feminist movement on black women's attitudes toward traditional female roles, and you have raised the potential for cultural expression of rivalry and self-assertion between black men and women.

Hip hop dance permits and encourages a public (and private) male bonding that simultaneously protects the participants from and presents a challenge to the racist society that marginalized them. This dance is not necessarily observer friendly; its movements establish immediate external boundaries while enacting an aggressive self-definition. Hip hop's outwardly aggressive postures and gestures seem to contain and channel the dancer's rage.

The whole of African American dance reflects the postures and gestures that African Americans esteem. Observe today's popular dancing and note how important unpredictability is; reflected in the term "fresh" and emphasized in the new movement styles, this unpredictability has a certain logic that calls forth praise and admiration.

Hip hop dance reflects an alienation not only of young African American males from mainstream society and of African American males from females but also of one African American generation from another. Despite the many continuities and similarities to earlier dances, hip hop represents a clear demarcation between generations in ways previously unknown in African American dance culture. Because of its athletic nature, its performance in popular arenas is largely confined to those under about twenty-five years of age. This might reflect the commodity market's emphasis on youth; it certainly coincides with current marketing strategies that appeal to the "cult of youth," strategies that do not exclude African American cultural commodities. Or it might simply reflect the cultural leadership of young black men in creating African American dances.

Although hip hop dance possesses an air of defiance of authority and mainstream society that reflects a critical vision observable in earlier dances of derision, it lacks the dominant or strongly stated derision that one finds in dances such as the PeeWee Herman or the Patty Duke of the 1970s, or even the cakewalk. True, hip hop's critical vision comes out of a marginalized youth culture with its own language, its own values and symbols, its own dance and style, yet unlike a true counterculture, hip hop does not reject the mainstream materialism
of designer leisure wear, brand-name kicks, expensive cars, and (until recently) dookie gold. Perhaps this embracing or materialism by the later hip hop stylists modifies or otherwise influences the emergence of derision themes, but this connection is by no means clear-cut.

Still, as dance has done for youth in other times, hip hop dance does more than express the view of the social and economic outsider, or even of the wanna-be insider. It encompasses a highly functional system of symbols that affect individual identity development, peer-group status, and intergroup dynamics and conflict. For example, youth in New York City used the breaking form of hip hop to settle lower-level gang disputes and assert territorial dominance. A similar function for dancing was observed among gang members in Chicago in the late 1950s and early 1960s: “Dancing is even more important in Vice Lord life. Almost all Vice Lords take intense pride in their dancing ability and lose few opportunities to demonstrate it.”

Malcolm X describes the importance of dancing ability in facilitating peer-group inclusion for him: “Like hundreds of thousands of country-bred Negroes who had come to the Northern black ghetto before me, and have come since, I’d also acquired all the other fashionable ghetto adornments—the zoot suits and coot that I have described, liquor, cigarettes, then reefer—all to erase my embarrassing background. But I harbored one secret humiliation: I couldn’t dance.”

I have understood the significance of dance in negotiating peer-group inclusion since childhood. As in many African American communities, dancing was important among the young people I knew for peer-group status and acceptance. In the mid-1950s a dance known as the slip was extremely popular. I heard my peers joyfully discussing this dance that I knew nothing about, and I felt excluded. One day I asked an older girl (about twelve or thirteen years old), Thelma Workman, who lived downstairs from me, to demonstrate the dance for me. She teased me, taunted me, told me that I was too little to learn the slip. She had me crying. I begged her, “Thelma, please, please teach me how to do the slip.” I knew that dance could help me to belong with my peers and garner admiration from within my community, and it could open an entire new realm of being, self-definition, and socialization.

Just as the jokers and jitterbugs of another era were given their monikers, African American working- and lower-class youth who participate in the hip hop genre, who adopt its persona as their personal presentation style, are sometimes called b-boys, b-girls, or hip hop people. Like their forerunners, they are the product of a specific sociohistorical backdrop and time-bound cultural experience. And like the rumba with Cuban rumba and the samba with Brazilian samba, hip hop people identify with, embrace, and live the genre completely, however short-lived it may be.

The hip hop persona emphasizes converting postures that in another context would indicate alienation and defeat into postures of self-assurance in the face of unbeatable odds. For instance, holding one’s arms crossed high on the chest might be interpreted as an insecure and withdrawing posture; in hip hop dance I interpret this posture as affirming African American maleness, strength, and readiness for physical and sexual competition. It also indicates the vision of an insider who is simultaneously on the outside. “Laying in the cut,” this observer sees something invisible to most people; his bobbing head and crossed arms reaffirm this secretly observed universal truth.

Though hip hop music and dance are today enjoyed by virtually every socioeconomic segment of American society, hip hop postures and presentation of self are born of the African-derived core culture of the street, and they are still used to negotiate a place there. Fear was among the general white public’s initial reaction to the latter-day hip hop genre. I have observed young men with hip hop carriage and in hip hop attire—sneaker laces open, baseball cap, sweatshirt—listening to and carrying their beat boxes blasting rap music in the public space of the street, and I have observed whites threatened and intimidated by their presence.

**Talkin’ the talk and walkin’ the walk in the mainstream**

But the image of hip hop dance and music is changing, influenced by women’s entry into the genre, by the media, and by the adoption of hip hop by the popular-music and advertising industries. The recent entry of females into the rap recording and video industry has challenged the hard, male-dominated, often misogynist hip hop identity reflected in the themes of some rap songs. Women are talkin’ the talk of hip hop; they are dancing and creating new dance materials, as well as recycling older dances and crosscultural black dances such as the butterfly in ways that voice the moral, romantic, and political concerns, the aesthetic preferences, the needs and desires of this generation.

Since the popular market has recently embraced hip hop as a marketing strategy, movement and music once identified with African American, West Indian, and Latino male street associations are being used to sell everything from pastry to autos, and they are being incorporated into aerobics classes and exercise videos.

At the same time, widespread acceptance of hip hop music has led to modifications in the masculine, confrontive nature of the dance, resulting in less athletic new dances that can be performed to hip hop music. Hip hop songs are increasingly danceable, even using the movement of a previous era. For television and movies, in dance competitions, and in commercials, professional choreographers have adopted hip hop energy and style.

Although the wide acceptance and exploitation of hip hop in the advertising and popular-music industries has on one level robbed the dance of its original significance, hip hop still functions in the places of its origin. Most mainstream Americans will never see the subtle codes, gestures, and meanings of hip hop as they are displayed in African American communities, and that is true of much dance originating in African American culture.

Meanwhile, the aspects of hip hop that can be commercialized will affect the daily rhythms of mainstream American life, but, even watered down, hip hop’s influence will have profound and enduring effects on American culture.
Notes


3. In July 1990 I observed breakdancing in a cabaret in Havana. The crew, attired in open-laced sneakers, baseball caps, and baggy trousers or jeans, performed popping and locking, headspins, backspins, and moonwalking that rivaled any I have observed in the United States. Television, videotape, and returning relatives were sources for cultural transfer from the United States to Cuba. As far back as 1983 I was informed by Sri Lankan students at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, that breakdancing was being attempted in Sri Lanka. One male student in particular was avidly learning the new moves in order to carry them back to his homeland. For accounts of the international impact of hip hop, see "A Newcomer Abroad, Rap Speaks Up," New York Times, Arts and Leisure section, August 23, 1992, which discusses the emergence of hip hop in Russia, China, India, West Africa, Eastern Europe, Britain, France, and Mexico.


5. Renamed the toilet stool, the dance milkin' the cow appears in the urban Midwest, Cleveland, Detroit, and Gary, Indiana, in the late 1940s and early 1950s; the footwork and lateral pelvic isolation goes on to become part of a popular 1960s dance, the Watusi, and later reappears once more in the late 1970s as the rock.

6. Regional variation in this repertoire becomes less pronounced when dances have popular media exposure, and it is even less apparent generally than it was in the past. Today regional variation is short lived.


8. For accounts of the cakewalk, see Tom Fletcher, The Tom Fletcher Story—100 Years of the Negro in Show Business (New York: Burdige, 1954); see also "Cakewalk King: 81-Year-Old Charles E. Johnson Still Dreams of New Comeback with Dance Step of Gay 90s," Ebony, February 1953, 99–102, and Lynne Faulkner Emery, Black Dance from 1619 to Today, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Book Co., 1988). It is interesting to note that waack, a 1970s hip hop style of dance, used high kicks similar to those used in the cakewalk. My current research leads me to question the interpretation of the cakewalk as purely imitative of exaggerated Euro-American postures. There are numerous dances in West Africa that use the leg in high kicks or extensions. Dances such as sabor, in Senegal, use high leg raises and arched erect spines.


10. Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, Jazz Dance (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 285–297. African American performers who worked the TOBA (Theater Owners Booking Association) circuit responded to the demand for subservient postures with the phrase "All tap, no Tom," indicating that they were not willing to perform Uncle Tom postures in their dance routines. Interview with Howard "Stretch" Johnson, former Cotton Club and TOBA performer and brother-in-law of Lincoln Perry, whose stage name was Step 'n Fetchit, New Paltz, New York, December 1979.


12. That the famous Motown sound came out of Detroit, Michigan, is no coincidence. The Motor City was a midwestern industrial center that employed thousands of African American men and women in auto production. This economic base provided a sociocultural and economic backdrop for a particular type of popular-culture creation. The Motown sound found a ready market in the black communities of Detroit, Cleveland, Gary, Pittsburgh, and other centers of heavy industry with large southern first- and second-generation migrant populations.

13. The vainglorious boasting, sexual innuendo (recently labeled sexist), and mocking commentary on a wide range of topics including social issues, racism, economics, and politics have existed in Trinidadian calypso for at least sixty years. Trinidadian calypso, with its high level of improvisation and verbal dexterity requirements, was the most influential musical form in the English-speaking Caribbean until the early 1970s commercial emergence of Jamaican reggae. In the mid-1970s Jamaican bands began experimenting with and integrating calypso's verbal improvisation into their music. Jamaican DJs scattered over reggae records, intersecting with traditional African American scattering heard over transistor radios in the Caribbean. Known as "toasting" (not to be confused with the African American toast rhyme, though culturally similar), this technique was mastered, recorded, and popularized by artists like U Roy and Big Youth and can be heard today in the running rap style of Shabba Ranks. Jamaican and other West Indian immigrants to the United States brought their musical styles with them, and in the 1970s toasters could be heard on the streets of South Bronx, an economically marginalized community with significant West Indian, African American, and Puerto Rican populations. Many of the early rappers and DJs like Afrika Bambaataa had West Indian parents at home and absorbed the strong West Indian influences. See "The Forgotten Caribbean Connection," New York Times, August 23, 1992, Pop Music section.


15. Interview with Charles "Honk" Coles, Itaca, New York, March 1980. During an after-dinner chat at a mutual friend's home, Honk performed the old snakehips dance the way he had seen Earl Tucker perform it. Watching Coles perform it made me realize that the 1950s dance move known as poppin' the hips, which I learned around 1957, was an updated version of the 1920s snakehips.


17. For an excellent commentary on the importance of verbal dexterity among African Americans, both on the mainland and in the Caribbean, see Roger D. Abrahams, The

18. Steven Hager, Hip Hop (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), 81–90. I learned the moonwalk in the late 1950s or early 1960s in Cleveland, Ohio, as a dance named the creep. Michael Jackson, who popularized it as the moonwalk, was born in 1958 just as the creep was emerging and gaining popularity; he could have seen it performed or learned it in the midwestern community of Gary, Indiana, where he grew up the child of a steel-mill employee.


21. Kicks, the name given to the designer sneakers worn by the youth, is a term at least forty years old in many African American communities. Dookie gold refers to the large gold chains admired and desired by some youth.


25. The slope today is known as the George Jefferson, named for the main character in a TV sitcom, who performed it on a number of occasions.

26. For further discussion of the function of dance in African American culture, see Hazard-Gordon, Afro-American Core Culture Social Dance, 46.

27. Interview with North Philadelphia youth who participate in the hip hop genre, Philadelphia, December 1990. I found the label "hip hop people" used when no other term fit. It is used in North Philadelphia among lower- and working-class black youth only to describe those who wear the appropriate clothes, listen to rap, and immerse themselves in the genre through the verbal and nonverbal language. The appropriate terms to describe hip hop participants, formerly "b-boy" or "b-girl," seem to have changed as hip hop becomes widely accepted.