

'Go White Girl!': Hip Hop Booty Dancing and the White Female Body¹

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In the film *Charlie's Angels* (2000), it goes a little something like this. Cameron Diaz loves to dance. Her boyfriend, Luke Wilson, takes her on a date to a taping of *Soul Train*, 'the longest-running black show in television history' (Neal, 1997). Cameron is asked if she would like to dance on the stage—a rare privilege, according to Luke. Cameron's eyes light up at the chance to demonstrate her smooth moves. But as she jiggles her pert little arse to the banging beats of Sir Mix-a-Lot's *Baby Got Back*, the entirely black audience watches in disbelieving silence.² Unperturbed, Cameron continues to gyrate, and it dawns on the spectators that *she has no idea how wrong her dancing is*. They warm to Cameron, and begin to clap and chant, 'Go white girl! Go white girl!'

Of course, this fantasy does not really illuminate the real-life practice of 'booty dancing' (also called 'grinding' and 'freaking'), an overtly sexualized hip hop and R&B dance form in which women wiggle their posteriors and rub against their male partners. Cameron's blithe ignorance of racial and sexual politics is a source of comedy in *Charlie's Angels* (as she says earlier in the film, 'Feel free to stick things in my slot!'); but it glosses over the difficulties facing white women performing dances usually associated with African-American women. For white women outside the United States, booty dancing is even more problematic. If she is to bump and grind with conviction, the white Australian woman must negotiate a minefield of race, gender, subcultural and geographic essentialism.

Dance ethnographer Anna Beatrice Scott highlights some of these problems, visiting a bloco afro dance class in San Francisco to conduct research, and finding she was one of only five black people from 50-odd participants, including the drummers and teacher:

I was having a hard time controlling my proprietary and protective instincts regarding black culture. I stood amidst the collection of Anglo, Asian, and Latino participants in the room, questionnaires in hand, smile on face, and wondered to myself, 'Where are the black people?' Why did it matter to me? And why was everyone staring at me, the materialization of the adjective in bloco afro? (Quoted in Foster, 1998)

Booty dancing raises further issues surrounding sexuality and cultural ownership. It is theorized as a Black Atlantic cultural practice, with specifically black politics; and it is vital to avoid uncritically and ahistorically applying the work of American and

British writers to an Australian context. Yet current analytical paradigms for antipodean hip hop and R&B cultures leave many aspects of booty dancing unexplained. Women use it to obtain pleasure without orienting their entire lives around a subcultural formation. And their visceral experiences are no less worthy of critical attention than those of suburban b-boys.

However, this is not specifically a musicological paper. It does not examine the formal structures of the hip hop and R&B music that accompanies booty dancing; it does not critique the lyrics; nor map the body's movements onto their musical counterparts, except in a very general way. Instead, this paper is explorative. It raises three pressing problems: the epistemological problem of subculture; the political problem of white consumption of black sexuality; and the phenomenological problem of irony. When a white girl shakes her booty, is she colonizing black female bodies with her own, ironically performing both race and gender, or negotiating new spaces for her own sexuality? And what relationship does she have with the music that drives her gyrations, associated as it is with a hypermasculinized and often explicitly misogynistic strand of African-American culture?

Keepin' it Real: the Problem of Subculture

In *8 Mile* (2002), Eminem is booed by black audiences when he first 'battles' as a rap MC, but earns their respect through sheer improvisational rhyming skills. More importantly, hip hop offers liberating possibilities for Eminem because his poor, trailer-trash upbringing acts as an analogy for black oppression. Similarly, Alan Parker's *The Commitments* (1991) presents soul—a black musical form—as appropriate for white Dubliners because 'the Irish are the blacks of Europe'. As bell hooks writes about John Waters' *Hairspray* (1988),³ films like these attempt

to construct a fictive universe where white working class 'undesirables' are in solidarity with black people ... blackness becomes a metaphor for freedom, an end to boundaries. Blackness is vital not because it represents the 'primitive' but because it invites engagement in a revolutionary ethos that dares to challenge and disrupt the *status quo*. (1992, p. 37; original emphasis)

Much of the critical writing on hip hop outside the United States reveals a similar emphasis on resistance and oppositionality. This is particularly clear in Tony Mitchell's (2003) essay 'Australian hip hop as a subculture', in which he explicitly constructs Australian hip hop as a contemporary, antipodean equivalent to the British working-class youth subcultures analysed in the 1970s by the Birmingham School of cultural studies. Mitchell points to its 'underground', male-dominated status, its strong DIY ethos, its emphasis on bricolage, its appropriation of public space, and its speedy incorporation by mainstream culture industries.

Most aspects of Australian hip hop certainly bear out Mitchell's argument; but the subcultural model is singularly ill-suited to any Australian cultural activity that, like booty dancing, does not accord with the masculinist, Marxist and Althusserian ideologies of early 1970s British cultural studies. There are three particular problems

with the subcultural model: its emphasis on homology and the reification of the 'four elements'; its insistence on authenticity and resistance; and its focus on indigeneity, with an attendant neglect of the role that mainstream American and British music plays in Australia.

Homology theory, perhaps most prominent in Paul Willis' writing on working-class youth (1977), hippies and bikies (1978), describes the interdependent links between the four elements of subculture—dress, music, argot and ritual. This symbiosis is crucial to the 'resistance through rituals' thesis that defined the Birmingham School's analysis of subcultures, because homology enables members of subcultures to construct identities in opposition to a 'parent culture' that severely curtails the social roles available to them. Hip hop is also conventionally understood to have four elements—MCing, DJing, graffiti and breakdancing—and for Mitchell, 'hip hop can be usefully regarded as a global youth subculture' because these elements represent 'globally-defining, homologous activities' (2003, p. 41). He repeats the oft-advanced idea that practitioners describe hip hop 'as a "way of life", a global community and a nation' (p. 44). Mitchell also claims that those in the hip hop subculture see the four elements 'as alternative epistemologies and as important identifiers of places of origin, neighbourhood, family, community and ethnic group identity (through crews, posses etc.)' (p. 46).

The trouble is that social hip hop dance—of which booty dancing is only one variety—does not seem to be included in the four elements. Therefore, people who do not participate in the overwhelmingly male practice of breakdancing or 'b-boying' seem placeless: excluded from membership of a community, crew or posse. This thought has occurred to me more than a few times as I stood on the edge of a breaking circle, wanting just to dance but prevented by the crowd's deference to the b-boys.⁴

It isn't only in the realm of experience that homology theory fails. Within Australian hip hop scholarship there has been precious little discussion of the social, club-based dancing that Angela McRobbie and others have identified with the expression of female identities (McRobbie, 2000; Frith & McRobbie, 1990; McRobbie & Nava, 1984). Just as Sarah Thornton (1997, pp. 204–207) chose to interview cutting-edge clubbers rather than the embarrassingly mainstream 'Sharons and Tracys' dancing around their handbags, Mitchell reinforces British subcultural theory's masculine privilege by focusing on the interplay between the specialized skills of each hip hop element. It seems to be only when women adopt these masculine-coded skills that their experience in hip hop is recognized.

The second problem with viewing hip hop as a subculture is that it reproduces the Birmingham School's unfortunate fetishization of authenticity and resistance. As Mitchell notes, hip hop cultures outside the United States equate 'underground' status with authenticity, and values like 'keepin' it real', 'hardcore' and 'true style' are all markers of authenticity linked to mastery of the four elements.

Mitchell raises the idea that whiteness is an impediment to subcultural authenticity, because it limits the possibility of political resistance. Australians of Aboriginal, Maori, Pacific Island, Middle Eastern, Hispanic and other non-Anglo ancestries,

writes Mitchell, have a 'subaltern status' within Australian society that gives them valuable subcultural capital (2003, p. 45). Class is a further marker of authenticity—Ian Maxwell (2003) writes that Sydney's western suburbs, traditionally the home of industry and the working class, are the city's hip hop heartland.

Global Noise, an anthology of essays edited by Mitchell and discussing a variety of rap and hip hop cultures outside the United States, aims to bestow further authenticity on non-US hip hop cultures. The anthology's title references Tricia Rose's *Black Noise*, which has become something of a classic text in academic work on hip hop; but Mitchell and his contributors strongly reject Rose's view that hip hop is an expression of African-American culture. Rather, for Mitchell, the 'best' hip hop often comes from the form's 'margins' rather than its 'centre':

For a sense of innovation, surprise, and musical substance in hip-hop culture and rap music, it is becoming increasingly necessary to look outside the USA to countries such as France, England, Germany, Italy, and Japan, where strong local currents of hip-hop indigenization have taken place. (2003, p. 3)

Reviewing *Global Noise*, Alastair Pennycook (2003, p. 195) finds a decided 'romanticisation of resistance' among its contributors. It seems that researchers, as well as the cultures they study, are governed by cultural economies of 'respect', refusing to allow the possibility that the white bourgeoisie might ever engage 'authentically' with hip hop, or use it for cultural resistance. Just as hip hop practitioners dole out respect through compliments like 'phat' and 'dope', and disrespect through 'wack' (Mitchell, 2003, p. 45), hip hop researchers give props to underground aspects of hip hop, while dissing practices like booty dancing.⁵ Pennycook (2003, p. 195) notes that 'hip-hop researchers are often in search of a local, disenfranchised politics and only reluctantly admit to it if "their" rappers lack marginalisation'.

So, why is booty dancing so disrespected within Australian hip hop studies? Indigeneity and resistance of commercial incorporation are critical to the logic of authenticity displayed in *Global Noise*; and booty dancing takes place largely in mainstream clubs to mainstream music from the United States and United Kingdom. Mitchell views this as the ultimate in American cultural imperialism, positing Sydney clubs 'that specialise in mainstream US rap and R&B' as

examples of the commercialisation of the genre. With the saturation of mainstream music video channels and music charts with mainstream US commercial rap videos, it can be argued that authentic hip hop stands out in cities and commodified mediascapes. (2003, p. 43)

Global Noise champions the indigenization of hip hop in particular localities, and its role in forming 'alternative' racial and cultural diasporas, as an exciting way of circumventing US cultural imperialism. But for Pennycook (2003, p. 195), this is a non-reflexive critical paradigm that has become worryingly normative within the field—*Global Noise* not only suggests that 'syncretic, hybrid appropriations [of US hip hop] are preferable, but also that adoption of certain political formations over others is preferable'.

Global Noise's authors are also largely unable (or unwilling) to account for the

melodic R&B music that often accompanies booty dancing, because of its commercial distribution networks and 'bling bling' aesthetic.⁶ The cliché that 'hip hop is from the streets; R&B is from between the sheets' reveals an underlying assumption that hip hop is a more 'authentic' cultural expression. In the American context, Mark Anthony Neal (2003, p. 3) writes that this critical dichotomy stretches as far back as the 1950s, when 'jazz was seen as a more highbrow form of black expression [than R&B] and thus was given more critical esteem'. More recently, hip hop 'was seen as a window into the travails of black America, whereas R&B was simply seen as a "bunch of love songs"' (p. 3).

Given *Global Noise's* focus on indigeneity, it is ironic that a reader could surmise that there was no Australian-produced R&B at all, when in the last decade alone, Australia has produced artists like CDB, Peter Andre, Selwyn and Shakaya. And the Black Atlantic inflections of performers like Craig David and Sean Paul are also curiously unexamined, presumably because of their prominent position in the industry.

Issues of cultural imperialism versus indigenization of black musical forms, and issues of authenticity versus incorporation, are not useful ideas to apply to booty dancing. It is more important to work out how white Australian women respond to and perhaps adapt the African-American sexual politics already contained in the music.

Big Pimpin': the Problem of Consuming Black Sexuality

Since the days of slavery, writes bell hooks (1992, p. 62), American society has 'allowed whites to sexualize their world by projecting onto black bodies a narrative of sexualization disassociated from whiteness'. In particular, the female African-American body has historically given both white men and women access to forbidden or taboo forms of sexual expression. Crucial to this process was the isolation of particular black body parts as fetish objects. As a visible sign of their Otherness, black women's buttocks came to embody a range of white desires: hooks cites the case of Sarah Bartmann, the so-called 'Hottentot Venus' whose naked body was displayed for whites in 1810, and dissected after her death (p. 62).

Since the nineteenth century, the 'booty' or 'butt' has also become a fetish object in black culture, but for very different reasons. In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose (1993, p. 251) argues that a celebration of the booty 'becomes an inversion of the aesthetic hierarchy that renders black women's bodies inadequate and sexually unattractive'. Carolyn Cooper (1993) writes that a similar discourse operates in Jamaican dancehall dub and reggae, which has informed hip hop since its early days, and continues to do so through artists like Shaggy, Chaka Demus and Sean Paul.⁷

For hooks, dancing black booties are politically powerful because they

are unruly and outrageous. They are not the still bodies of the female slave made to appear as mannequin. They are not a silenced body. Displayed as a playful cultural nationalist resistance, they challenge assumptions that the black body, its skin colour and shape, is a mark of shame. (1992, p. 63)

Paul Gilroy (1997, p. 32) adds that the booty's overt sexualization aids in this political project because sex 'is more disorderly and unstable than the conventional images of black vitality that have been complicit for so long with the core of white supremacy'.

However, the uses of the black female booty within African-American patriarchy impose as many constraints as they provide opportunities for self-empowerment. As Rose (1993, p. 253) argues in *Black Noise*, 'male sexist discourse often involves naming and dominating black female sexuality and sexual behaviour'. Some African-American rappers display an enormous distrust of the booty, seeing it as a lure to manipulate men's desire for women's own purposes. In 'The Bomb', Ice Cube warns men to 'especially watch the ones with the big derriers [*sic*]', while Bell Biv DeVoe's 'Poison' cautions them not to 'trust a big butt and a smile' (Rose, 1993, p. 254).

This anxiety over being 'booty-whipped' plays out in the pimp and ho (whore) dichotomy. The figure of the pimp has a long history in black American culture, from the *macquereau* (mack) of nineteenth-century New Orleans to the ghettocentric images popularized in 1970s 'blaxploitation' films like *Superfly* (1972) and *The Mack* (1973).⁸ 'In its most simplistic (and powerful) forms', writes Mark Anthony Neal (2003, p. 153), 'pimpin' was a constant reminder of black patriarchy's role in the black community, as pimps were the visible controllers and connoisseurs of black female sexuality'.

Thanks to hip hop, pimpin' looms large in contemporary youth culture. In what Neal calls the 'neo-pimpin' discourse (2003, p. 154), terms like 'big booty ho' or 'hoochie' have come to police sexually explicit African-American femininity—whether or not it is for sale. In Notorious B.I.G.'s openly misogynist song 'Big Booty Hoes', it is a woman's willingness to perform graphic sexual acts on Biggie that makes her 'deserving' of disrespect, and therefore of the name 'ho'.

More importantly, writes Neal, it is the *imagery* of pimpin' that is being pimped in booty-dancing songs and music videos. Jay-Z can probably be described as the pre-eminent exponent of the neo-pimpin' aesthetic. In the video for his 1999 hit 'Big Pimpin'', women in bikinis shimmy aboard a luxury yacht in the Caribbean; while in 2003's 'Crazy in Love', Jay-Z plays the role of limousine-riding pimp to Beyoncé's delirious, booty-wiggling ho.

For Heather Bolejack (2003), the resurgence of pimpin', despite African-Americans' greater power in the music industry, is disappointing; proof that 'some blacks still can't get off the plantation'. Amy Alexander (2001) adds that terms like 'ghetto fabulous', used uncritically, 'ultimately come to encapsulate an aspect of black life that some of us would rather not see marketed to the masses'. But if African-Americans are the pimps and hoes, then who are the johns—the ones consuming these images? Some writers claim they are black teenagers. Males learn to normalize 'the sexual domination and humiliation of Black women' and to equate 'a good time with being drunk or high' (Rose, 2001). Females learn to accept the imagery in music videos 'as the definition of beauty' (Neal, 2003, p. 38; see also Rose, 1993, p. 250–251). Both learn to find self-worth in consumerism, writes Rose: 'Wear expensive clothing and you are valuable' (2001).

But importantly, argues Rose, roughly 70 per cent of hip hop album buyers are white, 'and an increasingly large percentage are women' (2001). In the Australian context, Jeff Apter, music editor of Australian *Rolling Stone*, says R&B is 'aspirational, but it's also fun. It's escapism ... making black music palatable for an audience that wasn't reared to appreciate it' (quoted in Eltham, 2002, p. 2). So, what are we to make of the scenes in the New York clubs described by Julia Chaplin, where DJs 'spin an endless rotation of booty hits to which revelers act out moves from the videos with studied precision' (p. 2)? What, too, are we to make of the call-and-response elements of booty music: for example, white Australian women mouthing 'You can do it, get your back into it!' and having Ice Cube remind them that they, in turn, ought to get their arses into it?

For hooks (1992, p. 23), the commodification of race and ethnicity as resources for pleasure turns black culture into 'an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over'. In this sense, bourgeois white women imagine themselves as black video chicks in order to borrow, temporarily and uncritically, the 'sexual liberation' that racist/sexist discourse construes African-American women to possess.

However, several troubling ideas flow from hooks' theory. First, while she claims that black female bodies 'serve the ends of white male desires' (p. 24), white women supposedly expressing similar desires can only fulfil them by submitting to black patriarchy's objectification and control of female sexuality. As I will argue, the problem of irony makes it difficult for any woman—white or black—to transcend the limitations of pimpin'.

Second, hooks does not consider racial performativity. Gilroy argues that blackness 'can be announced, by indicative sexual habits and bodily gestures' (1997, p. 32). For Gilroy, booty dancing's 'freaky programme of sexual play and recreation ... appears as a ludic alternative to the mechanical solidarity of race' (p. 32). Booty dancing therefore destabilizes white racism as much as, if not more than, it reinforces it: blackness does not necessarily inhere in what the body looks like, but in what it *does*.

For Thomas DeFrantz (forthcoming), blackness also inheres in what the body *says*. DeFrantz proposes a system of danced communication that he calls 'corporeal orature', in which 'social dance may contain performative gestures that cite contexts beyond the dance. These citations are read and acknowledged by other dancers who respond in kind.' DeFrantz argues that '[i]f conversation occurs between music and its dancers, and between dancers, the subtleties of that conversation are missed in the separation of participant and observer'. He compares the aggressive smiles of white competitive cheerleaders with the 'cool' facial expressions of African-American dancers; and the myriad expressive possibilities of club-based dancing with 'the flat, militaristic repetition commonly viewed in the commercial music video sphere'.

The New York booty dancing described by Chaplin is certainly prescriptive:

If the D.J. spins Mystikal's 'Danger,' the women summarily bend over, arch their backs and shake their behinds. If it's Juvenile's 'Back That Thang Up,' they bump their

backsides into their dance partners when the chorus booms. For Dr. Dre's and Snoop Dogg's 'Next Episode,' the prize move is to mime a pole dance. (2002, p. 2)

However, following DeFrantz's argument, I would argue that this is less because they are white than because their booty dancing speaks only to images of pimpin' from music videos. Equally, white women's booty dancing can speak playfully to other dancers, who respond with playful eroticism of their own. Neal likens this kind of whiteness to 'white chocolate': it maintains 'all the "flava" and texture that one would expect in the sweetest chunk of deep chocolate' (2003, p. 80).

As Susan Foster writes, it is unwise to construe dance as 'unmediated authentic expression' of any kind, certainly not of race; and I have already problematized the notion of 'authenticity'. But within a discourse that contains and objectifies women of all races, white women have a certain amount of space—'wiggle room', if you will—to negotiate and play with sexuality.

You Ain't Nothin' But a Hoochie Mama: the Problem of Irony

In many ways, white women can subject themselves to the misogynist excesses of neo-pimpin', and walk away unscathed. While they do not necessarily view black culture as a pleasure resource to be mined, ultimately they can disavow their own sexually explicit dancing. Their whiteness shields them from the assumption of sexual availability faced by black women (Neal, 2003, pp. 59–60; Rose, 2003, pp. 45–46).¹⁰ This is especially pronounced in Australia, where there is no precise equivalent to US pimpin' culture.

It is also easy for white women to find pimpish posturing funny, especially outside the United States where satires of pimpin' (look no further than Ali G) have played as much of a role in shaping white perceptions of hip hop culture as the pimpin' discourse itself. Faced with the problem of how to interpret and react to obviously offensive lyrics like 'Dirty low tramp slut bitch ho/Fuck shit/Suck my motherfucking dick', it is no surprise that a white woman would choose irony over sincerity.

However, irony in booty dancing is not so easy to identify. First, pimpin' can be invoked in various ways, so is it always wise to dance ironically to this music? Second, there is a disjuncture between performing irony and perceiving irony. You may only be a hoochie while the music is playing, but try telling that to an insistent admirer who wants to take you home! Finally, to what extent can irony actually be performed? In the process of satirizing booty dancing, do white women actually feel the pleasure from which they seek to insulate themselves?

'A hefty dose of salt is recommended' for appreciating the faster types of booty music, like Miami bass or so-called 'ghetto tek', writes Arwa Haida (2001, p. 69) in British magazine *TimeOut*. Detroit-based DJ Assault raps gleefully on tracks like 'Ass'N'Titties' and 'Big Booties, Hoes And Sluts Too'. White listeners, asserts Haida, should take an ironic approach to this music because 'Assault's rapping in fact sounds pretty camp' (p. 69). As a British female DJ tells Haida: 'Some people seem to find it disgusting, but fuck 'em if they can't take a joke!' (p. 69)

However, it is a mistake to assume that booty music has ironic intentions if it appears ridiculous or camp to the listener. While artists like DJ Assault and 2 Live Crew may be having fun with the pimpin' discourse, they are perpetuating it rather than satirizing it. In *Irony's Edge*, Linda Hutcheon (1994, p. 204) cautions against 'the valorisation of irony's subversive potential', as evident in 'much feminist, gay and lesbian, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theory and practice'. But some hip hop artists do use the musical structures of pimpin' in more subversive ways. N.E.R.D.'s 'Lapdance' begins as a conventional booty song with catchy beats, a male rapper and a sexualized chorus performed by a woman; but the verses narrate a black man's frustration within the system, and the chorus 'You can get this lapdance here for free' represents the empty promises of politicians. Similarly, Fannypack's 'Cameltoe' uses the straight-talking language and fast tempo of Miami bass, but replaces the genre's misogyny with glib fashion advice from three teens to an unfortunately dressed woman.

As I have noted, neo-pimpin's doggedly reductive images of black femininity worry critics—but they also worry other African-American artists. A counter-discourse has arisen in hip hop and R&B that critiques the video ho image and attempts to bolster black female self-esteem. It takes varying forms, from Sir Mix-a-Lot's raunchy 'Baby Got Back' ('My anaconda don't want none unless you got buns, hon') to De La Soul's gentle 'Baby Phat' ('I love what I can hold and grab on/So if you burn it off then keep the flab on/We gonna stay gettin' our collab on') and Jill Scott's damning 'The Thickness' ('She so big won't nobody even try to reach her mind/She's been degraded, exploited, not celebrated/Saturated with self-hatred').

With the belief that 'mainstream' black culture is pimping unrealistic black sexuality to white people, these and other similar songs choose to add nuances to erotic relationships between black men and black women. They aim to infuse hip hop and R&B with respect for women and for black communities. Perhaps this is why Cameron Diaz's exuberant booty dance to 'Baby Got Back' receives such a frosty reception—the onlookers assume she is taking the piss out of black people. When they realize her dancing is sincere, the cheering begins.

DeFrantz (forthcoming) speaks of 'represent[ing] the real' through dance—'Honesty and eloquence in body talking are linked to a purity of intention in motion.' Cameron's dancing indeed 'speaks' to her audience—but not in the way she intends. She believes her mastery of black dance styles like the Robot and the Running Man is being applauded. Instead, the crowd reads her incompetence as sincerity.

This is the second problem of irony in booty dancing. Can corporeal orature convey irony? Foster writes that in their video clips, female artists TLC are able to redeploy the corporeal vocabulary of pimpin' to 'mock the objectification of the female body'. They invite

the viewer toward them, gesturing the body's sensuality and desire. Masterfully, they rebuff, refocus, and reorient the gaze so as to control access to intimacy ... Slipping deftly out from under the gaze's scrutiny, they illuminate pathways of desire whose directionality and accessibility they have crafted. (Foster, 1998)

However, this may only be possible in the manipulable medium of videos. In a club environment it is more difficult to evade the gaze of others. Indeed, in this particular genre of clubbing, the pleasure of dancing lies as much in being watched, and making visual contact with others, as in the actual movement. It is also difficult for white women to avoid being perceived as hoochies, regardless of how they see their own dancing. No matter how excited or empowered they might feel with their male dance partners, the pimpin' discourse presents women as men's accessories, and values women's pleasure below that of men. No matter how studied or exaggerated these women make their gyrations, these movements still say 'ho' because they are already codified by the pimpin' discourse.

For Hutcheon (1994, p. 91), irony often 'fails' because its meaning depends on what she calls the reader's 'discursive community': a 'complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values and communicative strategies'. The booty dancers I discuss are members of multiple discursive communities: women, hip hop or R&B fans, heterosexuals, Caucasians, Australians, dancers. And because these communities sometimes conflict or at least do not overlap, audiences 'inevitably' interpret potentially ironic material in un-ironic ways (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 115).

If white women intend ironic booty dancing as a kind of self-defence mechanism, a way of avoiding implication in racism and sexism, it is not a particularly effective one. This vain striving for critical distance recalls the metaphor of the ironic orgasm.¹¹ In a story in the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, a bourgeois man buys a pornographic video for the purpose of postmodern entertainment, but finds himself having a most un-ironic orgasm several minutes into the movie. Detached enjoyment is impossible in the presence of corporeal pleasure.

This, however, should not be seen as a capitulation to the pimpin' discourse. Booty dancing 'offers a site of potential liberation for women' in which the parameters are corporeal rather than social (Brabazon, 1997, p. 110). 'In the economy of bodily exchange', notes Tara Brabazon, 'the feminine corporeality is unsettling and disordered', even though the feminine subject 'undulates through a hegemonic pleasure that is produced by unequal power relations' (p. 111).

Even within these power relations, the physical pleasure felt by white Australian women problematizes often unexamined discourses surrounding black patriarchy in the United States and subcultural hip hop in Australia. As DeFrantz (forthcoming) argues, 'This dynamic amalgamation of pleasure and critique form the basis of power present within hip hop dance forms.' These women do not mindlessly watch pimps and hoes cavort; nor do they unthinkingly replicate what they see in clubs. The music calls, and they respond—in a way that may not be convenient for researchers of Australian hip hop, but is nevertheless powerful. In a culture obsessed with 'keepin' it real', this kind of experience is about as real as you can get.

Notes

- [1] I would like to thank Tommy DeFrantz for his helpful suggestions, which proved invaluable in the writing of this paper.

- [2] This scene constitutes a reversal of white women's critical gaze at black women, which is specifically flagged in the introduction to 'Baby Got Back'. A teenage female voice says: 'She looks like one of those rap guys' girlfriends ... They only talk to her because she looks like a total *prostitute*, okay? ... She's just so—*black!*'
- [3] In a collision between life and art, *Hairspray*'s Traci, who wishes she were black, is played by Ricki Lake, now the jive-talking host of a TV talk show with mostly African-American participants and audience.
- [4] On one occasion, the breaking continued until an American MC who was touring Australia at the time actually told the crowd: 'Come on, I wanna see *everyone* gettin' down, not just the b-boys!'
- [5] In the subcultural model of Australian hip hop, respect is an economy—practitioners 'earn' respect through authenticity, and 'spend' it by complimenting or 'dissing' (disrespecting) others. The idea of receiving 'props' (proper respect) for excellent performances etc. is widespread in hip hop culture, and is perhaps most prominent in Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' ('Give me my props when you get home').
- [6] The genre I call 'R&B' in this paper is usually described within the music industry as 'contemporary R&B' or simply with the catchall term 'urban' (which encompasses a range of Afro-diasporic musics including hip hop, Jamaican dancehall and UK garage). The term R&B was originally a shortened form of 'rhythm and blues', a more upbeat, country-influenced form of blues that originated in America's South around the 1940s. Many early rock and roll songs were covers of rhythm and blues originals, and so traditional R&B is associated with an authenticity perceived to be lacking in contemporary African-American music (George, 1988). However, this paper explicitly rejects authenticity as a category of critical analysis, especially when it comes to aesthetic judgements about music's 'quality'.
- [7] For example, late-1970s hip hop pioneer DJ Cool Herc used enormous speaker stacks, which he called the 'Herculords', similar to the 'sound systems' in Jamaican dancehall.
- [8] While the pimp is a figure of black hypermasculinity, the ho has a far less empowered presence in black popular music. Some of the few feminist interventions into this discourse are Marlena Shaw's 'Street Talkin' Woman' and LaBelle's 'Lady Marmalade'. Regarding the latter, Neal argues: 'Rather than a narrative about the illicit and illegitimate culture that supports prostitution in places like New Orleans ... in the hands of LaBelle the song became an anthem of sexual assertion and empowerment' (2003, p. 98).
- [9] 'Hoochie' or 'coochie' means a sexually promiscuous woman. Closer in meaning to 'slut' than 'whore', it derives from 'hoochie coochie', a dirty dance or even a black vernacular reference to sex (e.g. Muddy Waters, 'I'm Your Hoochie-Coochie Man'). It may come to English from the French 'couchée'—the past tense of the same verb used in LaBelle's famous chorus 'Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?'
- [10] Of course, white women still face sexual harassment and double standards regarding sexual behaviour; but neo-pimpin' is a specifically black patriarchy which takes black women as its object.
- [11] I am indebted to Jonathon Oake for this concept, advanced in his unpublished paper of the same name.

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