



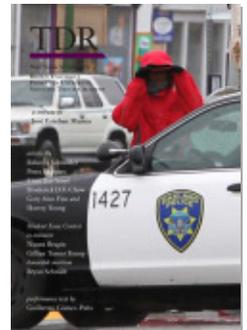
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Shot and Captured: Turf Dance, YAK Films, and the Oakland, California, R.I.P. Project

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When a group comprised primarily of African-derived “people”—yes, the scare quotes matter—gather at the intersection of performance and subjectivity, the result is often [...] a palpable structure of feeling, a shared sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture.

—Frank B. Wilderson, III (2009:119)

barred gates hem sidewalk
rain splash up on passing cars
unremarkable

two hooded figures stand by
everyday grays wash street corner clean
sweeps a cross signal tag white

R.I.P. Haunt

They haltingly disappear and reappear.¹ The camera’s jump cut pushes them abruptly in and out of place. Cut. Patrol car marked with Oakland Police insignia momentarily blocks them from view. One pulls a

1. *Turf Feinz* dancers appearing in *RIP RichD* (in order of solos) are Garion “No Noize” Morgan, Leon “Mann” Williams, Byron “T7” Sanders, and Darrell “D-Real” Armstead. Dancers and *Turf Feinz* appearing in other

keffiyah down revealing brown. Skin. Cut. Patrol car turns corner, leaving two bodies lingering amidst distended strains of synthesizer chords. Swelling soundtrack. Close focus in on two street signs marking crossroads. Pan back down on two bodies. Identified. MacArthur and 90th. Swollen chords. In time to the drumbeat's pickup, one ritually crosses himself. He performs a classic turfing move—the Busta. Arms stretch skyward. Hands grip for invisible support. Waking in mourning. Cut. A car turns the corner as he steps into the street. Disappears. Cut. Reappears. Robotically, he directs traffic. Cut.

Frozen in a deep lunge; the car maneuvers around his still silent body.

Stage: Set. **Scene:** Shot and Captured.

Black Liveness/Black Performance

The opening shots of the four-minute YouTube film *RIP RichD* (2009c) relay a recognizable scene: two young black men biding time on a street corner are subject to surveillance and sanctioning. That the film was not storyboarded in advance and the police just “happened” to show up, confirms the inevitability of the narrative. Police presence is the condition under which the young men’s evidently criminal lingering breaks into streetside performance. The removal of gloves, hood, and keffiyah to show brown skin marks the revelation and identification of black bodies under the regulatory sanction of the law—accentuated by the visual effect of the police car passing over the performers’ bodies. Blackness exists in the moment of monitored movement.

YouTube users can replay the scene in perpetuity (nearly six million views as of 11 December 2013), demonstrating the performativity of the interface itself. In the street and online, acts of repetition rehearse “an invidious ethos of excess” (Martinot and Sexton 2003:173) that constitutes the paradigm—not in any spectacular act of violence but rather “in the fact these cops were there on the street looking for this event in the first place, as a matter of routine business [...] a more inarticulable evil of banality” (171).

On the Season Two opening episode of MTV’s *World of Jenks*, dancer D-Real recalls how “we did it in one take,” the police’s parting warning—“y’all better just be dancin”—setting the hostile terms under which black males may stand on street corners (MTV 2013b). The scene simultaneously frames the demand for black performance in the existential criminality of black bodies and situates the *hood dance* of turfing in the context of everyday police violence—a traumatic reality conditioning life in East Oakland neighborhoods.² The fact that *RIP RichD* was created in the wake of yet another friend’s passing dovetails with the film’s particularly apt staging of black performance—a staging that captures the social life of turfing as an embodied expression of mourning and death.

RIP videos are Larry Alford, Eric “E-Ninja” Davis, Deondrei “Pstyles” Donyell, Danny “Bboy Silver” Fiamingo, Kashif “Bboy Phlauz” Gaines, William Latimore, Davarea McKinley, Jeremiah “Joyntz” Scott, Rayshawn “Lil Looney” Thompson, and Denzel “Chonkie” Worthington. YAK Films is Yoram Savion, Kash Gaines, and Ben Tarquin.

2. I use the term *hood dance* to define hip hop dances created in response to local histories of specific urban neighborhoods. Hood dances circulate through club, theatre, street, cyberspace, and studio, such that even unexpected spaces (home, rooftop, bus stop, YouTube) hold potential to become stages through performance. For instructional hood dance videos, see host Lenaya “Tweeie” Straker and producer Sway Calloway’s “Dances From Tha Hood” at MTV.com (MTV 2008).

Figure 1. (previous page) Capturing the scene of routine police violence. Garion “No Noize” Morgan and Leon “Mann” Williams (behind car) remove their hoods under the terms of the cops’ warning. “Y’all better just be dancin.” “TURF FEINZ RIP RichD Dancing in the Rain.” YAK Films, Oakland, CA, 2009. (Screen grab courtesy of YAK Films)

Student Essay Contest Co-Winner

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The PhD program in **Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley**, provides an interdisciplinary and individually crafted curriculum directed at advanced studies in the literatures, performances, cultural contexts, and theories of performance throughout the world. Based in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, the program affords access to a rich range of faculty drawn from across the arts, humanities, and social sciences. It at once takes advantage of Berkeley’s distinguished history in the field of drama and theatre studies, and opens out to a wider interrogation of the disciplines and methodologies of performance studies. Students in the PhD program conduct research in a diverse array of interdisciplinary methodologies and topics, and have the opportunity to engage in performance activities that complement dissertation research. The PhD program is designed as a six-year program (12 semesters). It offers core courses, but no predetermined areas of emphasis. Each student determines an individual research agenda within the broader field of performance studies, using faculty resources to develop both a clear field specialization and a sense of interdisciplinary innovation.

Sasha Torres has noted television studies scholar Jane Feuer’s description of an “ideology of liveness” that promotes “the false promise of television’s immediate access to and transmission of the real” (Torres 1998:7). Considering televisual control over “authentic” representations of black life, Torres extends the ideology of liveness to encompass what José Esteban Muñoz calls the “burden of liveness,” a demand that the minoritized subject “be only in ‘the live’ mean[ing] that one is denied history and futurity” (1999:189). Challenging celebratory imputations of performance’s radical potential, Muñoz argues that liveness is “encouraged [...] *especially* when human and civil rights disintegrate” (187). Torres adds that televisual liveness is most evidently revealed “as one of the chief mechanisms in the reproduction of racial hegemony,” in that its “depictions of ‘live’ blacks tend to proliferate just as dead black bodies are piling up” (2003:49). I would argue that in the case of blackness, the demand to perform not only “substitute[s] for historical and political representation” (Muñoz 1999:188) but moreover is a scheme for ontologically positioning blackness-as-liveness. Experiencing black performance is the same as gaining “immediate access to [...] the real.” What remains overlooked is how, within a world predicated on serving and protecting non-blackness, blackness is absolute negation.

With regard to the screening of *RIP RichD*, the demand for blackness-as-liveness ensures that conditions of black life are radically misread, securing the ontological disappearance of the black. When hood dance is screened on popular social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube, it encounters an antiblack discourse extended through its global proliferation and reception. Through the recognition of blackness as captured life, *RIP RichD*, the hood dance practice of turfing, and the collaborating artists solicit empathy for and politicized awareness of black life and lives lived. Circulating in an antiblack world, the *RIP* dances gain visibility and value on the global stage, ensured (and insured) by the turf dancers’ embodiment of captivity and death.

Hood Dance and Choreocentricity

Hood dances are an element of black street dance, which I define to encompass a transnational range of formal techniques, based in improvisation and driven by African-derived grammars that retain in their practices and politics a strong alliance with a discourse of the street, maintaining critically unstable relationships to formal, and often elite, institutions of artistic production. As importantly, black street dance is a conceptual framework for studying dance as a sensory-kinesthetic modality through which the logic of racial blackness—and the imagination of a form of black power—remains operative, even, and perhaps more significantly, when forgotten, ignored, or denied.

Based in black improvisational practices that teach hip hop aesthetics, hood dances are acts that locate movement style in the social life of black neighborhoods. In the process of its collective formation and ongoing innovation, hood dancing supports an intramural dialogue among black participants located in different times and places. This kinesthetic process follows Thomas DeFrantz's definition of *corporeal orature*, "align[ing] movement with speech [...] to incite action," communicating meaning both within and beyond the immediate performance context (2004:67).

As a mode of black thought and sociality, hood dance resists the terms of *choreocentricity*—a racialized logic that sustains a Eurocentric discourse of choreography as the standard by which to evaluate peoples and cultures that are non-Western, not completely Western, or antagonistic to Western modes of thinking and being. I distinguish the logic of choreocentricity from the concept of choreography encompassed by black social dancing, as Jonathan David Jackson argues: "[I]n African-American vernacular dancing in its original sociocultural contexts, where there is no division between improvisation and composition [...] improvisation means the creative structuring, or the choreographing, of human movement in the moment of ritual performance" (2001:44). Likewise, Anthea Kraut historicizes the concept of choreography/er, revealing its discursive functions in European classical dance and critiquing its relevance to black vernacular forms. The choreographer's elevated (in fact mythic and transcendental) status creates "a division between choreography and improvisation, with the former perceived as premeditated and intentional and the latter seen as impromptu and haphazard" (2008:56). The choreography-improvisation binary continues to enable stereotypes of "instinctive black performativity" (57).

Choreocentric logic frames hood dance as choreography's ontological opposite: nontechnical, spontaneous, disorganized, intuitive, raw, in crisis—concepts bound up in notions of blackness and black performance. Blackness-as-liveness functions within the choreocentric operation to frame hood dance as the im/mediate(d), "putatively 'natural' expressive behavior of black performers" (Kraut 2008:57), over and against the arbitration of artists trained in white Western author-choreography. Whiteness does not necessarily map onto white bodies but indexes a conceptual fusion: abstraction, development, structure, coherence, stability, maturity.

In addition, a critique of choreocentricity considers the limitations of scholars' discursive resources and the ways Western intellectualism produces the conditions of possibility by which black social life remains largely incomprehensible and ignorable, as the two factors are co-constitutive. Within dance studies, the priority of a theoretic of choreography cannot be dissociated from a historical privileging of single author, proscenium, concert stage works that follow elite and avantgarde Eurocentric tradition. Within mass culture as well, choreography tends to be the primary way people view, interpret, and evaluate dance, most evident in the judging spectacle of popular dance reality shows that promote formulaic creative practices antagonistic to the black improvisation principles that vitalize hip hop dance.³

3. Judges on MTV's *America's Best Dance Crew* consistently demand dancers be "clean," a management strategy that assimilates hip hop movement into a choreocentric commercial frame, policing total uniformity of timing and

A theory of hood dance seeks to make scholarship conversant with the discourse of hip hop practitioners, to participate in the grammar and life of hip hop culture, and to make visible the intellectual labor embedded in dance practices that maintain their own distinct and coherent theoretical systems. Hood dancing undoes a range of implicitly racialized distinctions—commercial/political, entertainment/art, sacred/secular, aural/kinesthetic. Hood dances (and black bodies) are persistently read against institutionalized forms (and unmarked bodies), making them immediately available to institutional seizure and control. When hood dance appears on YouTube, its unstable, even anti-institutional, status gets caught up in larger discourses about black people and blackness—discourses that are most effective when their immanent antiblack logic is obscured. A consideration of hood dance forms circulating in mass media foregrounds the stressful relations between blackness, liveness, embodiment, mediation, and mass reception.

Shot and Captured

East Oakland knows the mourning ritual: a hastily constructed streetside altar, flowers and teddy bears propped at signposts, heavily circulating air-brushed RIP T-shirts imprinted with images of recently passed loved ones. *RIP RichD* is a transmediation of these rituals, extending the mourning ritual from street to cyberspace.⁴ At the same time, turfing transmediates ritual tools of mourning into sensory-kinesthetic modes of commemoration.

Turfing developed in the early 1990s as people created signature dance moves representing their different neighborhoods (Neal-De-Stanton 2013).⁵ Dances like the “Brookfield” name and lay claim to turfs, emphasizing the way hood dance sustains an intramural dialogue among practitioners. Turfing cites and sites the local, performing a consciousness of history and place—the term “turf” referring to territory but also meaning ground, soil, roots. Turfing forms a lineage with styles developing in different localities of the Bay Area through the 1960s and 1970s, notably Oakland boogaloo, Richmond roboting, and San Francisco strutting.⁶

Turf movement is highly intertextual, linked to local language, rap lyrics, street culture, and fashion. First-generation turfer Rawnay defines turfing by its “unorthodox movements” based in storytelling and pantomime about “things we do in our daily life.”⁷ A playful narrative process inspires classic moves like “the auntie,” where “you got your hands out and you skippin’, acting like somebody’s auntie that’s mad,” and “the Busta,” “from the Busta Rhymes video [where] you sit down and you squat like you waking up in the morning” (in Neal-De-Stanton 2008).

movement. The judging operation effectively cleanses hip hop of its *funky* blackness—funk being hip hop’s musical predecessor and standing for everything whiteness does not—the smelly, unclean, super-bad. The recent genre *hip hop choreo* has evolved in step, marginalizing black improvisation principles of multifocal orientation, rhythmic complexity, dynamic subtlety, and collective innovation.

4. While Henry Jenkins has coined the term *transmedia* to describe fictional narratives that develop across media platforms (2006:96), I use the term to consider dance as a kinetic mode of storytelling that, in the particular instance of the *RIP* films, bridges embodied and virtual mediums of expression.
5. In the early 2000s, dancer Jeriel Bey created the acronym TURF (Taking Up Room on the Floor) to counter negative assumptions about the style (Bey 2013). After moving to Oakland from Los Angeles, Bey increased media and civic recognition of turfing as a city sport, organizing local battles and cofounding Architeckz dance crew with Demetrius Zigler.
6. To name only a few dance groups of that period: Granny and the Robotroids, Demons of the Mind, Close Encounters of the Funkiest Kind (San Francisco); The Black Resurgents, The Black Messengers aka Mechanical Devices (Oakland); Richmond Robots, Audionauts, Androids, Lady Mechanical Robots, Green Machine (Richmond); and Playboyz Inc. (San Jose).
7. René “Rawnay” Neal-De-Stanton is cofounder of the Animaniackz turf crew (Oakland) and created a move called the “stutter” walk.



Figure 2. YAK Films Director Yoram Savion captures Chonkie's solo on the set of *RIP 211*, an abandoned home on MacArthur Blvd across from Youth Uprising, made into a shrine for Kenneth "211" Ross. (Photo courtesy of YAK Films)

Deaths of black youth in Oakland have generally been excluded from the official historical record and especially from mainstream news media accounts.⁸ In contradistinction, turfing mediates local history as the body incorporates the aesthetic material of movement style, intimating a particular spatial politics. Turfing represents the local through a felt sense of motion, to build kinship, continuity, and stability. Space is not a blank slate onto which performance is momentarily inscribed but a container of local histories and collective memories. The spatial politics of turfing stand apart from site-specific dances that highlight a choreographer's choice to leave the proscenium stage and enter "nonconventional" spaces, marked as such because the concert stage is the assumed norm (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009). Turfing is a site-specific practice by definition—embedded in its techniques for moving are ways of knowing place and imbuing place with meaning and connection.

RIP RichD is one of four memorial films featuring turfing, created through a collaboration of Oakland dance collective Turf Feinz and youth production crew YAK Films. The two collectives got together in 2008 at East Oakland's Youth Uprising community center, where YAK cofounders Yoram Savion and Kash Gaines offered free video production classes. Several years

8. *Examiner.com* dance correspondents Ian Ono and Jana Monji note this fact in their online segment on *RIP 211*: "You didn't hear about this death on the news and that is what makes this memorial video more important and perhaps more socially informative—the reality is that young black men in this particular neighborhood in East Oakland die prematurely and their deaths often go unnoticed by the public" (Ono and Monji 2010). After *RIP RichD*'s viral spread, ABC News correspondent Brian Rooney recorded a nationally broadcast segment on turfing, Turf Feinz, and YAK Films, in which the deaths of 211 and RichD are noted (ABC News 2010). *RIP 211* won San Francisco arts organization Southern Exposure's 2010 juried exhibition.

after the videos' viral spread, YAK Films has established itself in the global street dance scene and travels internationally documenting local street dance cultures.

The films deploy turfing to explore the persistence of death and counter-memory in local spaces, working in tension with the transient character of their chosen sites of tribute—street corners, train stations, abandoned homes. Turfing practices use bodily movement as a citational practice to create chains of reference, establishing kinship with prior dance forms and accessing collective counter-memory. Ideas that performance is essentially ephemeral, not reproducible (Phelan 1996), or even a process of substitution (Roach 1996), do not fully address how turfing's repertoire works to contest impermanence and create kinship, with especially high stakes for groups historically subject to the exploitation, distortion, and erasure of their histories (Taylor 2003). *RIP RichD* tributes dancer D-Real's brother, Richard Davis, who died at the site of the filming on the previous day. The collaborating artists' choice to film and dance at this particular time and place grounds the film in the urgency of its creation, signaling the specifically racialized condition of death in East Oakland.

RIP RichD was filmed in 2009, a year that dawned with the highly politicized murder of 22-year-old Oscar Grant. Grant was prostrate and unarmed when BART transit police officer Johannes Mehserle, surrounded by five other officers, shot him in the back on the platform of East Oakland's Fruitvale BART train station in the early hours of the New Year. Numerous BART riders used cell phone cameras to capture and immediately disseminate footage of the murder across the web. Less than a month after Mehserle's murder trial began, a jury found him guilty of involuntary manslaughter, fueling local uprisings.⁹ Three months later, on 21 March 2009, Lovelle Mixon confronted Oakland police, fatally shooting four cops over the course of a 200-officer hunt down, ending in his murder at 73rd Avenue and MacArthur Boulevard (Winston 2011). Residents affirmed Mixon's insurrectionary act in the wake of Grant's death (Valrey 2009).

The first of the *RIP* films, *RIP June* was shot spontaneously after June's funeral and uploaded 2 May 2009. June, whose death was gun-related, was a friend of the dancers. *RIP RichD* followed that fall—uploaded 27 October 2009. *RIP 211* was uploaded 17 December 2009, in tribute to Kenneth "211" Ross, murdered by police in an alleged shootout at 64th and Bancroft Avenues on 5 December 2009. Ross, like Mixon, was a local hero. The fourth and final video, *RIP Oscar Grant*, was uploaded 31 December 2010, five months after the Mehserle verdict. *RIP Oscar Grant* was the only pre-planned filming, which YAK member Kash Gaines chose to shoot and edit on his own at the dancers' request (Savion 2011).

The *RIP* videos locate the practice of turfing within the political context of deaths of young black men in East Oakland. As a mode of witnessing, turf style supported the dancers' immediate embodied response to local events. The dancers' movements enacted and transmitted a paralinguistic record of meanings that persist in local spaces—reflecting the everyday-ness of death in their communities. The videos leave evidence of a death specific to blackness, which *RIP RichD* reproduces on multiple levels, both in terms of its representational capacities and its modes of reception, beginning with the initial scene of policing.

The interaction between police and turfing sets the scene of a performance perpetually in crisis. Risk of dispersal raises the stakes for black liveness, making the turfing bodies more captivating with the imminence of being cited, disciplined, imprisoned, removed. The crisis of the black body's ongoing erasure is metadiscursively rendered by the repetitive use of the jump cut (an increasingly signature feature of subsequent *RIP* films). The jump cut initially served

9. Mehserle was sentenced to two years minus time served and released on parole 13 June 2011. A \$50 million civil rights suit against Mehserle currently in process by the US Justice Department would override double jeopardy. BART settled with Grant's family for \$1.5 million, so that the entity could not be held responsible or sued for his death.



Figure 3. From the video *RIP June*, a neighborhood resident signs a message to June at his shrine on 77th Ave and International Blvd, where he grew up with Turf Feinz member Chonkie. (Screen grab courtesy of YAK Films)

the practical purpose of matching the turfurs' movements (performed in the street without music) to the beats of a musical score produced by local artists Yung FX, Erk tha Jerk, and COOP (Savion 2013). YAK continued to develop the "raw, no-effect look," which fit with the "raw dance experience" they intended to visualize (Savion 2011). Video and audio editing techniques function reciprocally to double the sense of erasure implicit in *RIP RichD*'s representational aesthetics.

The jump cut fragments and jolts the dancers' bodies out of their fluid execution of movement, exposing the technology of capturing the body on film/onscreen. The technique visu-

alizes the body's restricted freedom of movement at the same time that it makes bodies disappear. Drawing attention to the camera as editing tool, the jump cut provides a metacommentary on the monitoring and control of black movement, already captured onscreen in the initial confrontation between police and turfurs. The institution that sanctions black presence under threat of arrest aligns with a choreocentric logic hostile to the anti-institutional position of hood dance, demanding institutional custody of (lawless) black bodies and demanding that these black bodies compose their (wild, uncultured, free) black movement.¹⁰

As the dancers' bodies haltingly disappear and reappear across time and space, the individual body's structural integrity is threatened by edited erasure, its ephemerality made more emphatic. The dancers' ghosted bodies fray the boundary between death and life, their spectrality accented in the transient space of street corners.¹¹ The jump cut literally ruptures visual continuity, both imposing a fragmented visual experience onto the viewer and undermining a stable narrative or linear unfolding of time.

RIP RichD's post-produced soundtrack doubles the jump cut's optic erasure, creating an aural seal around the turfurs' live performance. YAK's editing techniques manipulate viewers' ability to perceive the turfurs' sensory environment, literally and meta-discursively rendering life at 90th and Mac insensible (unknowable). Voices, passing cars, falling rain, are deleted from the final cut, leaving the isolated music track audible to viewers. What remains internal to turfing's dialogue is an aural-kinesthetic consciousness of time and place, affirmed and underscored by YAK's choice to use locally produced music. Implicit in these representational aesthetics are deeper indications that even as black cultural products (hood dance and music) circulate globally, black life is persistently overlooked (Moten 2008:1745).

10. André Lepecki reads *RIP RichD* through the relational concepts of *choreopolitics* and *choreopolicing*, forming a theorization of choreography that embodies the political (Lepecki 2013). My reading differently works from my understanding of improvisation in what Fred Moten calls the black radical tradition (Moten 2003), using *choreocentricity* to critique attempted erasures of black improvisational practices.

11. This aesthetic is most pronounced in *RIP 211*.

YAK's aural and visual manipulations of the "live" figure the incapacity of the filmed image to make evident not only these dances of mourning, but also "the discursive frameworks, political and commercial interests, that ensure that some social 'targets' are rendered more visible by surveillance than others in the geopolitical space of urban cities" (Marriott 2007:xiv). Denied fluidity of motion and coherence, the dancers' bodies hobble in a flickering display of black ontological opacity—ghosted life, captured freedom, overseen erasure.

Viewers mimic the visual fragmentation of the jump cut in their own use of the YouTube interface, as they dissect the performance and scrutinize the performers' bodies—viewing practices that show a concern for the efficacy of the body's performance more than an interest in its personhood. Citing specific time counts of the video, this fragmented mode of spectatorship cognitively mimes the jump cut, so that viewers may choose to "keep replaying 2:45" (mbobskabobble) or mark the "spin at 0:33" (Butter-Butter). The grammar of technicalization has the effect of anonymizing the dancers' bodies. Consequently, the body is "RED 2:52–2:54" (Angel Fernandez) and "2:46 Bodied" (illuzeweb).¹² As the metacritical arresting of movement provoked by YAK's jump cut meets the dissection of movement by YouTube users' viewing practices, "[t]he black's individual life ceases to function as an object of epistemological, aesthetic, or moral concern" (Gordon 1997:75). Commentaries circulate in an antiblack paradigm that denies personhood to black bodies, such that YouTube's interface disables ethical political engagements.

Of 1800 comments, 2 mention "police" or "cop," 45 mention "beauty/beautiful," 60 mention "inspire/ing/atinal," and 125 mention "amaze/ing." Consciousness of black death slips away as "a racially relative form of anonymity emerges," so that "[o]ne is led to believe, for instance, that one can 'have blacks' by virtue of having that black, that anonymous black" (Gordon 1997:75). Viewers ascribe extraordinary powers to black bodies: "this is not fair...I want black people's elasticity genes" (TimUkulele). Desire to incorporate the black body stands in place of the mourned person. No longer the result of individual practice but of a "people's" existence, the black body stretches beyond bounds, endowed with a super-human status that is ultimately transcendent: "Black people are amazing. Right next to God" (ddsharper).

Because the anonymous black is both any/body and no/body, RichD's death remains undistinguished—fungible across black male bodies. The dancers' performances of mourning enact this surrogation, most potently realized in the film's initiatory scene as a car swerves to avoid hitting No Noize. Replaying the actual event of death—RichD died in a DUI car crash on the corner of MacArthur and 90th—No Noize intentionally surrogates RichD's body. His "live" performance simultaneously kinesthetizes the streetside altar and makes the living body *be* the object of mourning—the black male body in/as death.

Positioned in the crossroads, No Noize's body poses the question: Whose deaths are singular and whose are plural? In the context of structural death, RichD cannot only be grieved privately but must also represent collective trauma. His death is interchangeable across the bodies of family who dance in tribute, introducing through performance "a type of living on that survives after a type of death" (Sexton 2012). *RIP RichD* portrays the excessiveness of black death, made more notable in that the film (unlike an RIP T-shirt) shows no images of RichD. The transmediation ritual suggests the dead could be any of the performers. Death in these cases is expected—evidence of a blackened condition of criminality and violence.

Suturing violence-to-criminality-to-blackness, viewer responses implicitly link RichD's death with lawlessness. Notchback1986 comments, "Thumbs up to these guys!! Keeping them selves busy with something other than crime!! U guys r awesome keep it up." The commentary circulates antiblack logic wherein the black "does not live on the symbolic level"

12. All comments quoted are from the YouTube page (Yak Films 2009c). Throughout, comments are transcribed as written.



Figure 4. Whose deaths are singular and whose are plural? *Body positioned in the path of a passing car, No Noize's dance leaves evidence of RichD's death. "TURF FEINZ RIP RichD Dancing in the Rain."* YAK Films, Oakland, CA, 2009. (Screen grab courtesy of YAK Films)

but necessarily exists as a body "locked in the serious, material values of the real" (Gordon 1997:75). The performative force of Notchback1986's statement is explicit, mandating that blackness *be* crime. The assumption that black men are immersed in crime gives rise to the generalization of black death, refusing *RIP RichD* the specificity of its mourning.

Is it ironic or *also* by an underlying antiblack logic that out of the four *RIP* videos YAK Films broadcast between 2009 and 2011, the one drawing the most interest by far is dedicated to a young black man who did not die by gun violence? In contrast, *RIP Oscar Grant*, the most overtly political of the films, addressing a case of direct police aggression and institutionally sanctioned death, has the least views (140,341 views as of 13 December 2013). Even as Notchback1986's comment captures blackness in the real, disinterest in the politicized deaths of black people is perpetuated.

This structuring condition of blackness (blackness that inhabits death, captivity, and disappearance) underwrites the liveness that audiences overwhelmingly empathize with and celebrate: "This made me cry [...] stop the hate, stop the killing, dance on.....dance on" (Melody K). The emotionally invested tone of the commentaries is contagious, diverting attention from the initial scene of policing while upholding its logic, meaning the only response possible is to "dance on." The demand to perform, to re-enact the death tribute under the terms of a blackened condition, is the burden of liveness that buries antiblack violence.

According to choreocentric logic affiliated with romantic notions of black performance, "authentic" black movement is embedded with tropes of crisis, raw primitivity, and lively emotion. The demand for liveness appears forcefully when the performing body is imagined in a psychosomatically "raw" state. Zitz99 comments: "This is what dance is all about, passion/raw feeling expressed through movement. I give props to all youth expressing themselves in a positive way [...] keep doin what you do." Turfing is approved and encouraged when used as a non-violent coping strategy.

Within a progressive discourse of "urban youth" in crisis, the transformative power of art must be celebrated as a means of redirecting negativity. Hood dance resolves black rage as a social rather than political problem, enabling a healthy exchange of emotion between dancer and onlooker. The sublimation of rage that would otherwise threaten the destruction of a social order is required by productive, participatory socialization.

As long as black rage is represented in dance as a therapeutic modality that heals pain, prevents crime, enables empathy, and humanizes blackness, celebration discourse demands repeat performances. Calls to “keep it up,” “keep doin,” “keep your heads up,” recall the cops’ parting shot—“y’all better just be dancing”—affirming hood dance within the setup of monitored black movement. The black must continue to be “live” under conditions of disappearance and death. Black people are not premeditated targets of everyday police terror but survivors against the odds. In a social order that coheres structurally around policing blackness and concealing the violence of everyday antiblack racism, hood dance provides proof of black life most convincingly in moments of mourning black death.

Celebratory discourse imagines the dancers moving through/with their pain—“You can [see] that they danced away their feelings. Respect.” (Hipst3r5ever)—and in fact, displaying a certain lack of sentience to their own suffering. Rage is readable when bottled and silenced within the graceful twists and turns of the body harmlessly celebrating its “blackness,” over and against black rage incited by the political conditions of blackened existence.¹³ The black body is shot and captured by YouTube’s circulation of an ideology of liveness that roots for black bodies to “keep it up” but fails to politicize viewers in the global trafficking of black performance.

The power of turfing lies in its capacity, when most idealized as raw, impassioned, and unmediated, to reaffirm absolute difference. The presumed nontechnical and unrestrained nature of hood movement shows up as disorganized and unsanctioned, necessitating the supervision of institutional systems that can legitimately appropriate, conceptualize, and pattern the raw material, creating accredited artwork. Raw movement that belongs to no/body is unlicensed—subject to seizure and misattribution. Choreocentricity polices the recognition of hood movement, taken not as an act of dance but as an act of crime. The scene of policing black life aligns with the anti-institutionality of hood dance, making the *RIP* performances criminal acts in a double sense.

Consequently, the anti-institutionality of hood dance style critically challenges norms of dance. Commenter Immanuel Kant suggests: “How about give them jobs somewhere...perhaps as traffic controllers. Or, maybe dance instructors at Alice Arts? I bet we agree that they should not be forced to dance in the rain on a street corner.”¹⁴ Kant’s humanist ethic that holds hood



Figure 5: Turf Feinz dancers (from right) Darrell “D-Real” Armstead, Byron “T7” Sanders, Leon “Mann” Williams, and Garion “No Noize” Morgan. “TURF FEINZ RIP RichD Dancing in the Rain.” YAK Films, Oakland, CA, 2009. (Screen grab courtesy of YAK Films)

13. JR Valrey writes, “[W]hen we are indiscriminately killed in the streets by police, as in the cases of Oscar Grant, Terrance Mearis, Donte Story, Amadou Diallo, Annette Garcia, Adolph Grimes, Casper Banjo, Anita Gaye, Aaron Harrison, Kathryn Johnston, Sean Bell and Gary King [...] we know that no police officer is going to serve any real time” (2009).

14. Alice Arts Center, renamed the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in memory of a local Cameroonian master dancer, is a historic African-based performing arts institution in downtown Oakland and houses a theatre and dance studios.

dance institutionally suspect also determines the legitimate places where dance exists (in the studio, the choreographer's established province) and serves a choreocentric logic that must shelter hood dance (and black bodies) under proper/proprietary institutional control.

If hood dance only matters in the hermetic ontological world of private dance studios and proscenium stages, how can black deaths matter in a world that negates black existence (Ricks 2013)? What makes hood dance gain meaning and value in *RIP RichD* specifically are the black bodies that perform it under conditions of criminality and crisis. Even as it circulates onscreen, the black body is needed to raise the stakes of live performance (dance under constant threat of arrest) and to make violence meaningful—to make it readable as empowerment, rejuvenation, celebration, freedom.

Being out “in the rain on a street corner” builds a sense of the live body in crisis, revealing the particular predicament of black representation that *RIP RichD* makes visible—the need for happy black bodies, dancing and carefree at the very scene of freedom's peril. Two commenters in dialogue point out the inherent irony of this celebratory discourse:

KLAASVAAK1214: too bad I'd never dare to sit around long enough at macarthur and 90th to watch this

JOSHUA MCCLENDON: lmfao same here. I mean it's cool and everything... but you're in for way more than a dance show if you're on the corner of mcarthur and 90th

KLAASVAAK1214: more like a gun show... for realz tho

The commenters sarcastically acknowledge realities of black life on MacArthur and 90th, implying that a bourgeois humanist concept of freedom is felt and figured most powerfully when it is thrown into relief, both against the turfiers' exposure to the elemental risk of black necropolitical space, and against the dis/order that they live, fugitively, in these spaces, facing expected death. The demand for a happy performance subsequently requires a rejection of black rage as either representational strategy or political praxis: “Ahh, it's nice to be back with one of my cheer-up vids. Never gets old” (Matthew Williams); “this video is my happy place” (MsThomasin); “These guys make waiting at the red light fun!” (Starshooter689).

Turfing embodies a pain that viewers experience as pleasure: “its beautiful to see that even they are probably homeless they still laughing, dancing and having fun while other peoples are stressing about their work, fincianc problems and other stuffs :)” (Sangar Salih). The feeling that dancing provides immunity from a perilous situation is most compelling when the turfiers' bodies are completely exposed to the elements—rain, concrete, street life, speeding cars, police. Extending this logic, dancing neutralizes the threat of their homelessness, a type of “richness” guaranteed by complete dispossession.

Saidiya Hartman shows how the cultural practices of new world slaves, reliant on subjection in their performance, expressed a utopic freedom outside of bourgeois humanism (1997:13). She describes these practices as “gestures,” phantom limbs that figure freedom and its limits of possibility. In the afterlife of slavery, where no adequate institutional systems of testimony and response exist, turfing's everyday acts can be understood as incomplete forms of redress. While these attempts at recovery are necessary and not insubstantial, Hartman stresses, redress is always inadequate to slavery's originary loss, such that the “language of freedom no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation” (2003:185). These phantom limbs are enactments of absence and performances of a dislocated body that show the space of what is no longer present.

Coda: Birthdays

On 28 January 2013, MTV broadcasts the trailer for *World of Jenks*, season two.¹⁵ Jenks had encountered *RIP RichD* while surfing YouTube, moving him to document the story of RichD's brother, turfer D-Real. The trailer's introductory audio-visual mash-up of Oakland, "one of America's most violent cities," flags high murder rates, patrol cars, flashing sirens, dying black boys, mourning black mothers. Astounded, Jenks asks, "Do you feel like America knows about this?" D-Real responds emphatically, "I feel like they *do*, but I feel like they don't *care*" (MTV 2013a). D-Real's statement poses an oblique yet urgent question, underlying and threading together the ensuing episodes: In what manner and to what extent will black suffering be readable by *World of Jenks* viewers?

The show proceeds to craft D-Real's tale: a young black father battling his demons (gangs, prison, anger, guilt, depression, death) through the transformative power of dance. Yet, D-Real's earnest desire to see and make change in his community meets its ontological limit. In the cliff-hanger episode, D-Real faces off with a security guard and "loses control," articulating to Turf Feinz members his insurgent awareness of how policing functions in black neighborhoods: "Y'all seen how the security [say], 'git, git, git up outta here.' They don't really wanna help nobody. They just ready to police this thang" (MTV 2013c). He succinctly interprets his interaction with the guard as evidence of the customary state of violence to which his community is subjected, wherein "the relationship between police violence and the social institution of policing is structural, rather than incidental or contingent" (Martinot and Sexton 2003:171). Horror lodges not in spectacularized black suffering but in everyday relations of power that ensure "security" does not exist for the black.

Yet it is this paradigm that gives Jenks's world ontological coherence, such that D-Real's reaction can only be understood as irrational. Jenks:

All of a sudden like just boom, 180, it was a total shift. It went from peace and happiness to the same old routine. [*And later in the episode*] You know man it's just not cool when D-Real's promoting peace and we're filming these dance battles [...] I just wanna talk to them and understand why they reacted like that. (MTV 2013c)

In Jenks's ontological world, D-Real's power to identify the paradigm derails both the narrative's (and the full season's) smooth progress. Turning away from a humanist discourse of self-will, "peace and happiness," to rage against a social order that secures itself through the negation of black life, *World of Jenks* experiences disruption. Jenks emotes a certain disappointment, as if in response to a wayward son in need of (white) fathering.

Subsequently, a picnic table conversation is staged, providing viewers the interpretive protocol for processing this turn of events. Jenks sits opposite D-Real and Turf Feinz member Chonkie in a "conflict resolution" scene that crystallizes the antagonism. Jenks tries to bring the Feinz to see things from his perspective: their enemy is not the security guard but their (existential) anger, "a certain mindset" (2013c) that is unproductive and dangerous when (mis)directed at a system rather than sublimated through dance. More iniquitous is the ease with which Jenks brings his unruly charges under his "care," defined by a well-meaning sense of protectiveness (always white, always patriarchal) over (seeing) black manhood; a care that relies on its inability to speak the "true excessiveness" (Martinot and Sexton 2003:171) of a white supremacist order disguised as white ethical concern: "The conversation with D-Real wasn't easy but it was necessary" (2013c).

15. *World of Jenks* is an MTV reality documentary series that premiered September 2010. The show's host, NYU film school dropout Andrew Jenks, chooses three featured guests he lives with off-and-on for a year "experiencing life through their eyes" (MTV 2014).

An ontological order premised on antiblack logic positions white and black on opposite sides of the table, but the conversation is palpably strained, awkward. There is no language to speak this violence. The black must lose resistance by a logic that cannot comprehend black rage, meaning there's only one way this scenario can play out.

A parting dialogue in the season's final episode consolidates black and white positions. Jenks drives his car and D-Real sits in the passenger's seat:

JENKS: I feel like your perception of the police has changed.

D-REAL: Yeah it's changin.

JENKS: You actually gave them credit. A few months ago you would have *never* given them credit.

D-REAL: Sometimes it's just hard for us to see past that badge but...I think it's really only like that when you doin somethin wrong. (MTV 2013d)

In the crucible of Jenks's world, D-Real is born as the black non-subject par excellence. Jenks's world guides him to shoulder the burden of his crimes—incomprehensible as functions of a world order consolidated by antiblack logic, but rather resulting from the transgression of being born black. Because blackness is only interesting as cultural capital and becomes less interesting, if not threatening, as political existence, it remains eloquently tragic. While Jenks can say, "living with D-Real has been life-changing" (2013d), D-Real is fated to live in the real—outside a symbolic order that provides no real resolution for the black.

Because the black body is unable to transcend inherently criminal existence, turfing must be celebrated as a mode of temporary release from a perpetually self-induced condition. The celebratory emphasis on turf dance as social problem-solving obscures attention to structures of oppression that position blackness in negation and death. Hood dance, always linked to the anti-institutional status of blackness, gains value as a mode of self-empowerment at the same time that its ability to communicate politicized black rage directed at structural injustice is foreclosed.

RIP RichD creates a historical record where there was none (and perhaps can never be one in the conventional sense), just as turfing links the RIP dances to a necessary dialogue within the turfing neighborhoods. Yet the video's global reception reveals a more entrenched inability to articulate antiblackness—the belief that anything is better in this world than to be black.

No Noize comments: "to book for shows birthday parties school dances graduation parties etc. hit me up." His comment underscores black life lived in death, considering that the only opportunities he would have to gain some degree of financial compensation for a dance of mourning are occasions of celebration, life progress, and birth. This conjoining of life and death is a reminder that engaging black performance does not necessitate engaging the predicament of the black—the incessant refusal of personhood and life to black bodies. What the RIP Project teaches most fundamentally is that at this time, freedom in the world manifests through the shooting and capturing of black bodies. To keep moving black is to move in service of making black liberation a reality, that is, to aim at getting free.

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