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Sexualising the performance, objectifying the performer: The twerk dance in Kenya

Makau Kitata

abstract

Shifting arenas of dance performance and youths' counterculture have brought the twerk to the internet, thus exposing it to the discourse of cultural imperialism, appropriation, and cultural resistance. This has changed the symbolism of the art form: from a performance meant for celebration, to a dance of sexual rage. The media associates the dance with bottom provocation, prostitution or celebrity achievement stories – rarely celebrating the intellect, aesthetics or the expression of freedom in it. From a western point of view, twerking is overly sexualised and the performers participants in a cultural notoriety – thus, objectifying it. However, in its original context it is primarily a dance for festive celebrations. As a form of artistic expression resisting cultural destruction in Kenya, twerk is a way of re-politicising the African female body, and decolonising it from the male, western influenced gaze. Sexual expression in it is therefore a dialogue, not simply an invitation to sex.

key words

twerking, sexualising, objectifying, decolonising, counterculture

Introduction

This article attempts to evaluate whether mainstream public and media interpretation of the twerk dance is hurting the image of the art form. It seeks to situate the twerk dance amongst women in Kenya, as a serious art form and diminish the identification of the African female dancer as an individual who suggestively and erotically displays her body merely for sex.

Twerk as a dance performance involves the twisting of the waist, which is common throughout Africa. The shaking of the dancer's buttocks is the most recognisable movement. In the Ivory Coast, the dance is called *Mapouka*, a traditional dance form also known as "the dance of the behind" (White, 2016:258). In Kenya and Tanzania, its variant is the *Chakacha* (Franco, 2015), in which the dancer (usually a woman),

shakes her hips in bouncing, swaying movements resembling the Ugandan *Bakisimba* (Mabingo, 2019) and the Congolese *Soukous* (Covington-Ward, 2014) dances. Variants exist in the North, the United States (US) and Europe, and in the Caribbean, where a concentration of African descendants exists. Choreographers routinely put pelvic thrusts and grinds in the performance. These movements index a cultural celebration of joy rather than sexual provocation. As a term twerk entered the mainstream through the lyrics of Beyoncé's, *Check on It* (2009) and achieved its ubiquitous YouTube presence through Miley Cyrus (Clevver Music, 2013). Shereen Zink (2016:15) observes that, "Ultimately, twerking's political context, and Cyrus' lack of regard for said context, suggest that she is perpetuating harmful stereotypes about black women while her own white privilege

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allows her to maintain her integrity." Twerk has always been intrinsic to African dancing expression, long before its controversial global social media status.

According to Michèle Alexandre (2015), the term "twerking" is problematic because it conjures negative connotations to an old artistic body expression. In its original formulation, these dance moves used to be celebrated and understood as part of valued cultural heritage: "Unfortunately, the appropriation of the word and failure to understand it as artistic expression continues the demonization of nonconforming bodies" (Alexandre, 2015:62). In this article I turn the focus back to the South to reassert an African and Black feminist cultural perspective (Hill Collins, 2000) in resisting the appropriation of twerk and the objectification of young African women's bodies in Kenya. Patricia Hill Collins is a Black feminist who writes to the African Diaspora, while the indigenous postcolonial memory draws on colonial resistance and the postcolonial African experience. Intersections exist between these standpoints in the global context of twerk as a dance. The approach I use views the twerk dance in Kenya as a specific site of intersectionality where intersecting oppressions of Black Kenyan women meet. Hill Collins (2000) in her study of Black women reveals how sexuality constitutes one important site where heterosexism, class, race, nation, and gender as systems of oppression converge. Historically, ceding control over self-definitions of Black women's dance expressions has upheld multiple oppressions. From slavery to colonialism, to the postcolony, these systems have relied on stigmatising Black women's eroticism. This has been used as a justification for various forms of oppression built around the sexualising of Black women's performance.

As a cultural South response, a self-defined Black women's dance perception can become an important place of resistance. The perception of the twerk dance performance as erotic is important for domination of Black women who perform it. Conversely, reclaiming and self-defining the eroticism constitutes one path toward Black women's empowerment. The twerk dance in "Black feminist epistemology" is thus seen here as: "A site of mutually constructing features of social organization,

which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women" (Hill Collins, 2000:299). This approach allows us to question the content of the truth about Black women's twerk dance expression and simultaneously challenge the roots and tools of Black Women profiling. As a Black woman dance performance, I adopt Elizabeth Pérez's (2015:16) view: "Twerk should be understood properly as part of a family of Black Atlantic dances that emerged from shared histories of domination." As an art form, it provides an intersectional window for an assessment of the ways in which black women re (act) in the world. Aria Halliday (2020:1) has argued that: "Black girls' use of twerking videos to celebrate and challenge each other's self-expression provides an opportunity to enjoy their bodies and reclaim the possibilities of pleasure in blackness and girlhood/womanhood."

According to Hanna (2010:213), "Dance and sex both use the same instrument – namely, the human body – both involve the language of the body's orientation toward pleasure." Due to this association, it is challenging to separate dance and sex even when sexual expression is unintended. The pleasure in dance could be erotic, community celebration, ritual, sociopolitical storytelling or even art for art's sake. "Sexuality also featured prominently in many parts of Africa as an expression of reconciliation and peace building" (Tamale, 2004:3). In dance, sexual expression can be enacted overtly and subtly through dance metaphors, idioms, and signifiers linking the performance to broader sociopolitical discourses. With political, religious and media reification of bodies in pleasure performance, it is easy to miss its many metaphorical transfigurations.

Western influenced interlocutors frequently equate the erotic movements with sex performance. White (2008:1) argues: "Communicative orientations of interlocutors ... are conditioned by social and cultural commitments about social solidarity." In twerk, the western eye is directing attention to the interplay of social fears and the expression of otherness in shaping the meaning of the dance as a communicative encounter. Additionally, conservative Christian – colonial edicts regulating African female body expression expect that dance

should be chaste. Tamale's (2004:3) study 'Women's sexuality as a site of control and resistance' notes: "Western imperialist caricatures of African sexuality, was part of a wider plot to colonize and exploit the 'black race'." This involved the trivialising of folk reality that dance is a language expressing human experience beyond mere sex.

In Kenya, consistent mainstream media and internet focus on sexually objectifying music videos with women twerking might prompt a gaze pattern. This shifts the gaze of the audience to an objectification of the dancer. It pushes the dance discourse to off-stage behaviour. The ignorant intrusive male gaze (Van Eck, 2016) creates the ambivalence towards twerk.

Post-colonial knowledge production, acquired, organised and interpreted by the colonised, has pointed to how colonialism created the mental image of an over-sexualised black woman who needed civilizing (Prasad, 2005). The erotic-exotic other, is part of western hegemonic patriarchal representation of the African female body. The supposedly provocative dance of black women has evolved into the negative labels of the dancer. It is justification for cultural imperialism.

However, the ethnomethodology discourse's focus on how people make sense of the world in everyday interactions (Maynard, 1982) views dance as a language shaped by social contexts. In twerk, a choreographer could use different media to create the dance while audiences could use different inclinations to interpret it. Hanna's (2010:21) use of heterotopia theory (Malborg, 2016) to research dance and sexuality within 'other' cultural spaces, addresses the "conflation of sexual expression and promiscuity of gender and sexuality, of nudity and sexuality, and of dancer intention and audience interpretation", thus allowing us to perceive dance performance in more complex ways beyond sex.

In a postmodern Kenya, social media has helped to create platforms for popular culture and new forms of representation and self-representation extending to a dance counterculture, resulting in "... an assertive form of literacy that has given agency to categories that previously did not have an outlet" (Ligaga, 2016:111). Grace Musila (2007) reveals that Kenyan

print media negotiates taboo subjects in serious discourse; while Tom Odhiambo (2008) and George Ogola (2005) observe that the media is a form of popular opposition to oppressive power in Kenya. This article sees the twerk dance in Kenya as a de-colonial feminist countercultural performance form, whose representation by media is shaping the discourse about body expression.

Nationalism, ethnicity and the twerk in Kenya

Since the 19th century, dances and music have merged as symbols of ethnicity and national identity, forming the first objectification of dance as national culture. People accept association with a dance shaped identity as popular cultural ethos. However, Karin Barber (1987) notes the equivocation of the term popular culture in Africa where the new elite are defined by their proximity to westernisation, while still bound up with the local which they recoil from. Lynda Spencer *et al* (2018:9) observe that, there is a dispute around the meaning of popular culture within the dominant popular imaginary: "This contestation in itself gestures towards popular culture's inclination for ambiguity and slipperiness." The African sociocultural gaze (even by African elite) on the intended body-positive dance is lacking. Dominant groups might perpetuate alien norms that recolonise African culture. Hill Collins sees the contemporary middle-class Black women as a special group which has a choice in this cultural debate: "Will they continue to value Black solidarity with their working-class sisters ... Or will they see their newly acquired positions as theirs alone and thus perpetuate working-class Black women's subordination?" (2000:67)

The twerk dance is performed outside the spaces the society elite consider formal or desirable. These spaces where twerk is performed are subalternised and racialised. It is therefore a dance of 'the people' – also associated with female agency. As a cultural text, twerk affords participants the opportunity to experience communal solidarity and positive self-esteem. It embodies African history, culture, body geography and world view, within a postnation postcolonial cultural context. Its performance deliberately recovers meaning silenced by the pressure

of neo-colonialism. Denzin *et al* (2008:13), discussing the recovery of indigenous memory and cultural practices, speak of “dancing the body as a decolonized education”.

Kenya’s colonial administration considered dance as a threat to the colonial regime – sometimes, enforcing bans. As a collective performance, dance could be a genuine threat as empowerment resistance in an oppressed society. Susan Reed, citing Comaroff (1998:503), notes: “The suppression, prohibition and regulation of indigenous dances under colonial rule is an index of the significance of dance as a site of considerable political and moral anxiety.”

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s twerk dance expression in *A Grain of Wheat* on the eve of Kenya’s independence documents the sense of communal power at the village square. “The girls danced in the middle, thrusting out their buttocks provokingly, knowing that the men in corners were watching” (1967:189). Women played a key role in the fight for freedom of Kenya. Through dance, they performed the female body in a political context. The dancing women were participating in a discourse of liberation. In the novel, the evening dance meetings between couples in Kinenie forest is a recurrent motif signalling dance as a space for anticolonial subversions. From the outlines, the dances could pass for courtship sessions; on the contrary they were sessions of political sensitisation. Ogude and Nyairo (2007:1) write: “popular cultural and narrative forms are particularly excellent sites for understanding complex issues of power, especially in authoritarian societies where many people lack access to forums of political debate.” In the novel, the characters, Kihika and Wambuku, manage to move away into the woods, from the other dancers. A promise of a stolen erotic session becomes an opportunity for Kihika to explain to her the importance of independence (wa Thiong’o, 1967).

From the novel’s sociopolitical context, women’s dancing is an act of accomplice and a rite of passage in craving for self rule. In engaging in night dances, the women were fighting colonialism with a woman’s strength. The contest about sexuality, womanhood and nation intersects in the dance as an image whose explanation is determined by the interpreter’s gaze. In

the Indian context, the *devadasi* identity transfigured from 19th century “temple prostitute” to the 20th century emblem of the nation (Meduri, 2008). The Moroccan *Shikhat* dancers are admired but their dance language known as belly dancers in the west is seen as dishonorably shameful to their families (Philaretou, 2006). The meaning is thus a critical factor arising from the context. Colonial attitudes reconstructed, sexualised and renamed a graceful African dance expression calling it illegal and sinful. This repositioned the dance from the festivals of celebration to the less public arenas of social mobilisation. Women’s bodies represented cultural and later racial boundaries: “White women’s morality is dependent on black women’s decadence in European public discourse” (Thompson, 2012:125).

Colonial attitudes on racial identity meant a lack of gendered protection of black artistic body expression, which eventually led to the exclusion of black women from the mainstream dance arena. Observed from the fringes, black women’s reputation hinges on how they dance. By expressing herself through her body, the African woman – from an excluded position – influences the dance on the wrong side of the ethical law. Historian, Katrina Dyonne Thompson further observes:

The vibrant, polyrhythmic dance movements of the lower body among black females were the main characteristic interpreted by Europeans as lascivious and inviting to white men. Travelers’ accounts often mentioned *the bending of the knees, protruding buttocks, pelvic contractions, and snakelike movements* as examples of the *lewd* nature of these dances (2012:17) (Emphasis mine).

European travellers, missionaries and later colonists’ mind-set and sexual interpretation of African female dance still persists. It ignores seeing the dance as a possible commemoration of harvest, religious celebration, coming of age ritual, sexual flirtations between ages and even war. The sustained cultural blindness and moralising western attitude is a metaphor of colonial desire, a projection of the lascivious exploiter.

After Kenya’s independence, some dances were overlooked for sociopolitical

reasons inherited from colonialism. They were never put on formal stages but remain in rural communities and the lower-income urban populations. In an attempt to create a new history of Kenya, dances derived from regional tribal contexts were elevated without acknowledging a new-fangled multi-ethnic ethos. Andrea Deagon, (2008) notes that far from creating a national sense of belonging, these efforts simply reinforce divisive ethnic identities rather than espouse a community-based folk sensibility. In Kenyan youth culture, the twerk is an instance of de-ethnicised dance performance.

The state participates in the promotion of national dance through the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), the Kenya Music Festivals and the media. The nation appropriates rural peasant or urban lower-class dances as indicators of national cultural identity. Students compete showcasing community dances on the formal stage. While the festivals are meant to be embodiments of cultural pluralism, their competitive nature promotes dominance of one ethnic group over others. "The dancers and their valorised ethnic-nation dance become the idealised cultural emblems of the national authentic pre-colonial past, tribal and colourful." (Trienekens, 2002:281).

The festivals require that dance performance directors reconceptualise, domesticate and tame potentially sex-expressive elements. The adjudication process serves to vet overtly, and subtly castigate sexual messaging. Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) sets the theme of the festivals. Rather than encourage a talent promotion or sociopolitical artistic theme, the regulator, chooses a moral theme – *Clean Content* – "The board intends to use drama and film to inculcate moral values... among other things" (Anthony Njagi, 'KFCB signs five-year sponsorship deal with drama festival officials', *Life & Style*, 21 July 2018, *Daily Nation*). The adjudicator's marking scheme for Cultural Creative Dance stipulates: "Whereas costuming may be appropriate, relevant and effective, it must observe the rules of decency required by the social decorum" (Too, 2019: n.p. Emphasis mine). This regulating process undermines the authenticity of dance performance by using an elitist school calendar intervention to

suppress sexual expression through dance. The regulating also reflects the role of the Kenyan cultural elite who imbibe and sustain colonial attitudes towards female body expression.

The participants, especially the girls, however engage in non-competitive performance of twerk dance away from the stage as a way of challenging imposed social identities – questioning the authenticity of the traditionalist attitudes to dance as an aberrant art form. The performance acts as an expression of Black women consciousness: "Resisting by doing something that is not expected", could not have occurred without Black women's long-standing rejection of mummies, matriarchs, and other controlling images" (Hill Collins, 2002:97). In twerk performance, the girls are fighting for visibility in a society that has identified with constraining media cultures which deny young women the opportunity to perform a genuine adolescent sensibility. Ligaga notes how "Our traditions," were celebrated as sources of national pride and were dramatised through broadcast and print media... "Yet the contradictions of the Kenyan nation emerged through very specific cracks" (2016:111).

Dance is one of these crevices through which a post-nation ethos is finding expression. It is no longer feasible to enforce uniform ethnic dance movements, especially in the intensely multinational youth culture of Kenya. The Kenyan sociopolitical outlook is built on ethnic motivated social identities. But these have given birth to new inventive choreography from youth who are not bound by imposed identities, hence the twerk. Outside the stage, it represents the muted, excluded and misrepresented truth about female dance expressions. It is a sign of conflict between the adolescents and a defensive culture. The twerking girls are recreating a popular counterculture – claiming agency in a situation where self-definition is suppressed.

Twerk and the internet in Kenya

The female body as a site for artistic expression is highly regulated in Kenya. Kenya's public discourse has a characteristic fear of woman, the body and passions

borrowed directly from Biblical narratives. The femme fatale motif associated with performing erotic female sexuality is a common way of interpreting the “tragic” (Ward, 1945) story of John the Baptist (New Testament, Mark 6:17–29). Adaptations in modern literature demonstrate an enduring negative perception of women’s dance body expression. Flaubert’s (1913) story, *Herodia* and Oscar Wilde’s (1908/1967) play *Salome*, are inspired by the woman thought to be Herodias’ daughter, who danced for Herod, her step father, leading to John the Baptist’s beheading. Government authorities in Kenya have appropriated this sexualised and stereotyped perception of the female dance performer. However, the internet is an alternative outlet for suppressed dance performance needs of Kenyan youth. Outside official platforms, “The entry of the Internet has been crucial in disrupting this highly policed public space” (Ligaga, 2016:112). Though the twerk has been alive in Kenya’s public performance spaces, it has achieved a contentious quality due to its presence on social media platforms. In this section I discuss the internet as a site of popular culture and audience interaction about women’s dancing in Kenya. I highlight the tensions between the freedoms created by the platform for popular culture and post-nation control, and intersections of twerk as a cultural identity of girl performers with consumerist tendencies that profit from its commoditisation.

KFCB’s policing of public morality in the media controls female dance expressions considered aberrant for public consumption. It described Akothee, a Kenyan musician/dancer, as: “talented but filthy” (Ebru TV Kenya, 2019). Instead of recognising value in the talent – how meaning is transmitted through dance movement, the censor chose to concentrate on the costume. The dance was treated as a decorative feature. The censor demanded that the woman correct her appearance to conform to the “norms of feminine appearance” (Saul, 2003:144). The performer used the internet to assert her agency and dared the KFCB to arrest her (BTG News, 2019). Internet’s involvement with women’s dance expression has produced ambivalence: the talent and sexiness of women, manipulates men. KFCB’s response suggests attempts to save women and men from the dance itself. This is

because the internet has introduced an assertive performance presence that has accorded women agency, which meets their stifled needs for expression in a democratic society. Twerk is an artistic female dance expression ever present; seeking for an outlet. In the internet space it participates in expanded public discourses and also attracts controversy.

In a study on women’s agency on social platforms through self-representation, Ligaga (2016) notes that we should be cautious while celebrating popular culture because it sometimes colludes with power. The school girls performing twerk dance on the edges of drama and music festivals get their amateur videos posted on the internet. However, online platforms display the girls as out of the ordinary, desirable, and scandalous. The online window, though a convenient space for expressing censored or muted individual or group twerk dance expressions, also becomes problematic as the performers have little control on the design of the platforms or the responses their performance draws.

The visuals serve to create spectacle. YouTube videos of high school girls’ twerking off-stage during the Kenya music festival centre on the buttocks, the waist; pelvic and leg parting movements (Hot News Kenya, 2017). The commentary is: OMG; teachers abdicated parental responsibility. Parenting and education aspirations in a changing society are ironically made possible by the dance which now acts as a sounding board disguised as a discourse on morality. On the other hand, Loreto Limuru Girls School *Bazokizo* dance (Tasmah Online Business, 2017) received positive endorsements, as the place for girls to learn while having fun. The video frame uses a school logo, a girl in scout uniform and military style leg thumping. It is an advertising strategy. In this case, twerk (or its absence) is appropriated in a mercantile venture, masked as a call for better education and morality.

This underlies the formal conservative nature of public endorsement. The representation is not motivated by the need to portray women’s dance positively, but by a profit motive. The use of a public relations company in the counter dance video indexes the commercial appropriation of the twerk dance. Notwithstanding the negative interpretation of the dance form, the

online viewership is unfailing. Good for business discourse - *bizcourse*. The distrustful reception on digital media is chiefly because the twerk videos do not attempt to conform to sanctioned aesthetic-ethical sensibilities. They concentrate on highlighting the dance as prohibited. This has bred a battle of perceptions. Through stigmatised views, society could be complicit in creating and supporting deviance. The dancers internalise the label and act accordingly. If twerk is eroticised, reified and distasteful, dance to the tune – literally.

A YouTube video of Kenyatta University Cultural Week performance (Kiteme, 2015), shows male and female dancers doing the twerk on an outdoor stage with the audience urging them on. The online comments range from assertions that there is nothing ‘ratchet’ about the dance, to a post claiming: “Black women worldwide act ratchet”. In Black counterculture, ratchetness considers the limitations of representation of Black respectable versus nonrespectable behaviour (Glover and Glover, 2019). As a countercultural strategy, it aims to recuperate the derogatory term ‘ratchet’. As a performative strategy that Black women deploy, ratchet secures liberatory space for the performers (Glover and Glover, 2019). In Southern Black diaspora politics of resistance, ratchet is a geopolitical erotic vernacular for a counterculture of modernity. The youth in Kenya are deploying ratchetness as an opportunity to explore how ratchet performance in a university calendar event can secure them an expressive liberatory space in institutional dance economies; just like the diaspora Black women exploit it to gain space in sexual politics. As the dance expression thrives in controversial contexts, the supporters and detractors equally contribute to a growing discourse in equal measure. Bettina Love (2017) has demonstrated how “the ratchet lens” has been used to characterise Black queer youth agency and Black hip-hop cultural expression. The dance discourse rises beyond morality policing, to a metaphor of contested socio-political meanings, and a social text embodying inter-group relations.

As Achille Mbembe (2006) observes, turning an idea into a visible code transcribes it into a figure of speech. With twerk in Kenya, “The country has gone ‘ghetto’ and ‘slum’. Nairobi youth, have deconstructed the pejorative words,

owning them to their advantage” (Mose, 2013:116). It reveals the masking potential of the words as double opposing indexing in an antagonistic urban culture. First, in Kenya, trashing sexual expression in dance has become a mark of high class. On the other hand, using the same language of the detractor to talk about the dance is a way of asserting its relevance in speaking back to constraining power. The discourse of negative eroticism is subverted to a desired subaltern heroism. Ogude and Nyairo (2007) call this ‘bravado’ - characteristic defiant assertive resistance of Kenyan artistic culture. Despite the negative media mediation, ironically generated by a liberating impulse from access to the internet, a dispute about proper dance continues. Nonetheless, twerk meets the expression needs of performers and online participants in their quest to tell stories, either through mock scandal, or, in-group conversations.

Societal ambivalence on twerk in Kenya’s socialite culture

Kenya’s socialite culture has appropriated dance into the cyberspace with sexualised and objectifying consequences. The woman socialite identity has negative connotations, especially in a country as conservative as Kenya. While aware of the negative arguments made against them, Ligaga (2016) notes that their visibility through self-representation can have a meaningful contribution to a discussion on agency and gender. She refers to the Kenyan socialite, Vera Sidika, as a “neoliberal subject”. Sidika is doing business using her body within a post-feminist culture which sees the sexy body as the ultimate mark of feminine identity. Through the twerk, she could be cashing in on a neoliberal world view which does not consider eroticism as an ethical impediment in a consumer culture. Her twerk dance performance, actually denies sex. It becomes a symbolic expression which could even include romance, desire or social mobility towards a desired female actualisation – like economic independence or physical fitness. As a performed art form, Pérez, (2015:1) acknowledges the participatory role of the dance in women empowerment: “Twerk also shares various morphological and thematic similarities with Caribbean and Latin

American movement traditions promoting female sexual, economic, and political freedom.” The twerk is appropriated and given an alibi outside the narrow sexual seduction objective. Cultural theorist Roland Barthes (1983) refutes the common prejudice accorded the dance accompanying the striptease as an erotic element. On the contrary, the dance probably gets rid of the possibility.

While the body is viewed as a woman’s source of power, it is constantly under pressure for self-surveillance; monitoring and discipline (Elbert, 2004). In dance it becomes subject to media sexualisation, consumerism and commodification of difference. Aisha Durham (2012) writing on Beyoncé, ‘Southern booty’, and Black femininities in music video, notes that though Beyoncé is a hip-hop music icon, “She is known more for her voluptuous body than her body of work that crisscrosses multiple culture industries.” This underlines a global interest in the Black Woman body in public performance spaces. The body (especially the booty) becomes a site of multiple intersecting cultural discourses.

In Kenya, the media commodified difference of the woman’s body in dance performance is the buttocks. In a study intended to establish why men are captivated by the arched back of a woman, Pazhoohi *et al* (2017:158), notes: “The perception of attractiveness and visual attention to the hip region suggests that lordosis or the arching of the back might signal human females’ proceptivity or willingness to be courted.” The media in Kenya has amplified this cultural awareness (‘Bum-per harvest: Why Kenyan men are obsessed with big behinds’, *Standard Digital News*, 2016).¹ As a result, the media influenced Kenyan male imagination favours the sharply protruding buttocks against a tiny waist: an exaggerated sign of the fertile-feminine look sometimes enhanced by plastic surgery. This is captured in Kenyan Poets Lounge P Unit’s song video, *You Guy* (2012), whose theme is *nyemerearing* (desiring) and Prezzo’s *My Gal* (SnookBase.com TV, 2014). The video, *Vera Sidika in Ebeano* by KCEE, SkiiBii & Harry Song (Africurves, 2015) and Tanzania’s Harmonize X Rich Mavoko, *Show Me* (2017), idolise the persona of Vera Sidika’s bigger twerking booty. These popular artists use the socialite’s twerking image to

signal the desirable and beautiful, giving the dance an alibi for art. Online comments show a popular endorsement for the dancer as the role model for sexy femininity (Travelpost, 2019). From the socialite’s neo-liberal position, twerk is a money and fame dance. However this attitude, borrowed from Black rap music has its ambiguities: While it is seen as a creative response to racism by Black urban youth (Walcott, 1997), images of Black women as sexually available hoochies have persisted in Black music videos. This attitude treats the black woman dancer as some kind of a freak. As “freaks” (Hill Collins, 2000:85), “U.S. Black women can now be seen ‘poppin that coochie’” – another offensive term describing butt shaking, this time by 2 PAC Live Crew (Marihuampro, 2012: n.p.) – in global context.

Twerk dance is a women’s performance; occasionally men join in dancing along. Kenya’s music performance on social media shows males manipulating their crotch and grinding behind the female dancers. The women are portrayed as celebrating their shame. This plays into the historical legacy of the triad of pornography, prostitution, and the institutionalised rape of Black women (Bart and Moran, 1993). It puts the dance within a larger cultural socio-political context that has internalised the controlling images applied to Black women. This treatment of the dancing woman as a participant in pornography has strong ties to the portrayal of Black women as animals. In pornography women become non-people. It reduces the dancer to her reproductive system, open, willing, and available – not in control (McNall, 1983). When grounded on historical Western debasement of Black women, this link between dance and pornography becomes feasible. The men in the dance might believe they are simply participants in a culture that condones exhibition of sexually coded masculinity. However, their positioning in the dance exposes their culpability in fostering Black women’s objectification as pornographic objects. Unfortunately, it also reinforces a Western stereotype of the Black man as a rapist.

The women could as well be reasserting their pride and snobbery. However, Stephanie Davis (2018:2) studying the behaviour of college students on Instagram observes

that, while performing agency, the women could also be engaging in self-objectification: “Social media platforms can serve as potential sites for resistance and independence, but can still reify the objectification and sexualization of women online.” The coupling with men in the rear position reinforces the dissonance between the dancers’ intention versus audience interpretation. Media focus on this coupling conflates sexual expression with promiscuity. As the twerk performance presents nuanced symbolic ways of embodying sexuality, the audiences’ enduring consciousness sacrifices complexity to penetration sex. A homoerotic male gaze denies the expression of an autoerotic female sexuality. Though the dance videos ostensibly accord agency to the female body, their combination with an overt exotic buttock, in money making space, and the simulated rear entry male positioning on the dancing Black woman, helps to make the subjects the erotic-exotic, the ‘other’.

Conclusion: Dance as metaphor versus the pervasiveness of the erotic motif

Colonial Kenya’s European standards considered African women’s dancing as bordering on immorality, a point of focus for missionary activity on the education of the African women’s body expression. Controversy on the twerk can be viewed as a resultant cultural dispute. The sexual motif in the performance tends to overlay the dancer’s expression due to the interlocutor’s eroticised gaze and failure to contextualise the language of the art form.

New media in Kenya mediates the representation of dance in a broader discursive arena evaluating the female body’s images of self-power, agency and identity. It has decentralised meaning-making authority towards cultural phenomena and the discourse about a decolonised feminist performance. Understanding this dance requires a self-defined Black women’s standpoint – a willingness to embrace a Black feminist epistemology aware of intersectional systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation (Hill Collins, 2000).

The agentive nature of dance has often linked it to notions of resistance

and control – best played in a dance as controversial as the twerk. Interpreting the dance requires sensitivity to public culture in a decolonised feminist context. Appreciating how the environment provides meaning to twerk dance – as embodied resistance to the girls and women who do it, and its presence in the media – is a means of re (membering) background, recording it, and responding to culture.

Note

1. See www.sde.co.ke/pulse/article/2000216281/bumper-harvest-why-kenyan-men-are-obsessed-with-big-behinds, accessed 27 Mar. 2020.

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