

'Litefeet'. YouTube, Instagram and the Democratising Potential of Social Media Platforms

Slide One:

In April 2014 I took a long-planned trip to New York with my mother to celebrate my 30th Birthday and the submission of my PhD thesis. We stayed in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and took the J Train into Manhattan most days. Unexpectedly – for I had little interest before my visit in reading up on the subway system, beyond tips on how best to use it– the underground was alive with arts and performance practice. The throbbing thwack of bucket drumming and the surprising copper crocodile that emerges from a manhole cover on the L train platform at 14th st-8th Ave were more thrilling to me than the iconic cultural scene above ground. As Susie Tanenbaum articulates in her 1995 ethnography of the subway music scene – New York's subway system has long been a space in which a heterogeneous range of amateur and professional artists hone and practice their craft and seek to make a living. A space in which the social and political structures of the city are reflected in the cultures, rituals, policing, legislation and law enforcement. Although the rich music scene described by Tanenbaum still exists underground, I was moved most profoundly by the subway dance culture. Two incidents from that trip have stayed with me. The first, occurred as I changed trains at Union Square and came across a group of break-dancers setting up an amp on the mezzanine. An older gentleman, a woman and three boys, two aged somewhere in the mid-teens and one who was just three or four years old. As the music spilled out of the speakers they began dancing – mock 'battling' each-other. It quickly became clear that the small boy was the star of the show; the money-maker. He cocked his head with confident 'street' attitude and took up the b-boy stance before breaking into a routine that included a perfectly executed four-turn headspin. A large crowd gathered, filming the scene on their phones, before the group finished their routine and encouraged

the crowd to donate. I later learned this small boy was called 'kid break' and was self-taught through watching break dance videos online.

The second incident took place on the subway train itself. As we rode around – confusingly navigating a system that seemed indifferent to tourists (what is an express train? Why is there more than one station called 103rd st?), three teenage boys came aboard the train and shouted 'Showtime!', pumping out tinny, upbeat digitally enhanced hip-hop and taking it in turns to perform gymnastic dance feats; including somersaults, backflips, and aerial contortion using the safety poles. 'What is this?' I said to my mum. I was completely mesmerised by the energy, comedy and exuberance of the performance that seemed both designed for us, the tourists, and an utterly indulgent and joyous means of expression for the dancers themselves.

Slide Two.

.PLAY VIDEO.

The video you've just watched documents something like the experience I had (although it is from youtube, it isn't a recording I made myself). The dance style you can see in the video is called 'Litefeet', sometimes known as 'getting Lite'. It is an evolution of b-boy or 'breaking' that emerged on the streets of Harlem in about 2006, and has been honed and developed, primarily by Hispanic and African American men and boys living in Harlem and the Bronx. It is frequently performed on the moving subway cars of NYC, with the dancers calling 'showtime!' to draw attention to their presence and amp travellers up for a show.

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As a result of the two incidents I describe above, I became interested in the New York subway dance scene. The subway dance culture has been the catalyst for my new research project, which explores the evolution of Litefeet and maps the form on to the politics and governance of New York City. In my efforts to find out what this dance culture was and how it figured in the wider

cultural life of the City, I returned to New York, briefly in August 2014, and then for two weeks in April 2015, when I shadowed the WAFFLE Dance crew, a collective of street and subway dancers who practice Litefeet and who, in the face of a clampdown on subway dancing by New York City's police department, are attempting to monetise their practice – developing strategies to make money by legitimate means. I will return to New York for six weeks this summer to continue my research.

In what remains of this paper I will present the findings of my initial trip – offering a brief narrative overview of the emergence of the Litefeet form, and presenting an ethnographic narrative of my initial understanding of how city legislation has changed the practice of the form and forced the dancers to move 'above ground' and online in order to make their practice 'work' as part of a 'legitimate', neoliberal market that offers hope for the dancers – tantalising them with the possibility they might 'make it big' - but that also threatens to exploit them. I suggest that the use of social media has ostensibly served as a democratising process, which has enabled these dancers to position themselves as authors of the form, control the historical narrative of its emergence and remain at the forefront of its development. Nonetheless there are questions to be asked about how far the business model of social media platforms exploits the entrepreneurial spirit of these dancers, and what the limits are for democracy in the utilization of networked capitalist online platforms.

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Litefeet began in Harlem and spread through the Bronx as part of organised and spontaneous 'battles', where dancers aged from 11 or 12 up to about 30 would gather on the street or in warehouses, studios and gymnasiums, and moving away from b-boy, develop new and innovative moves in order to impress peers and, at organised battles, win money. One of the notable features of Litefeet as a form is that from its inception during street battles in New York's housing projects, to its current practice by fledgling professionals on reality television programs, commercials and in documentaries, it has been digitally documented. Indeed, the evolution of the practice runs parallel to the

rise of YouTube, where the founders of Litefeet posted videos of battles and dance sessions – some of which were ‘branded’ as individuals attempted to secure their place in history as authors of the form. Practitioners now use Instagram, snapchat, Facebook and vine to document and share their Litefeet practice. Collectives such as the WAFFLE NYC crew have garnered significant local, national and international attention through their social media activity. As Hector Postigo argues in his examination of online gaming commentary, YouTube videos serve multiple functions for their users ‘They are not only performances of expertise or gaming prowess, but they also serve as performances of identity, community conflicts and allegiances, community values, economy and creativity.’

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The video I showed a moment ago was filmed in 2012 – so some three years before I took my research trip to NY, and at the peak of subway dancing. When I returned in 2015, the dance scene was notably different than it had been the year before– there were visibly fewer dancers performer on the trains and mezzanines, and signs, like the one behind, warning dancers against performing on the trains were common.

This is because, in November 2014, The City of New York had clamped down on subway dancing. Although panhandling on moving trains had always been illegal, (it is legal to perform on mezzanines), the dancers had happily paid the fines that were the penalty up until 2006. The WAFFLE dancers explained to me that they began performing on trains to make the ten dollar fee to attend battles, but were soon earning between 100 and 150 dollars a day and contributing to their families household expenses. As most of the boys live in the projects and other low-income housing, dancing quickly became a low-risk illegal way to make cash quickly.

Now, however, due to changes in legislation targeted at subway dancers, dancers can be charged with reckless endangerment, as misdemeanour A offence that carries a penalty of up to a year in prison. In an interview with Channel 12 News, a Bronx based news station – the WAFFLE dancers

appealed to the police commissioner to meet with them and discuss the changes in the law that were affecting their lives. 'We don't want to run around getting arrested for something positive. Dance is positive.' They said, to camera, in a heartfelt appeal during which they pointed out that dance was a route away from the ready life of drug and gun crime that still exists in the Bronx. Their appeal was cut from the final edit.

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Because they don't want to be arrested, WAFFLE are searching for legitimate opportunities to exploit their practice for money. This includes performing for corporations, appearing on reality television shows, such as *America's Got Talent*, and featuring in music videos and fashion documentaries and, importantly, posting their material online and communicating with fans and supporters across the globe through online interactions. In many ways the group – and in particular the manager, Andrew Saunders, a 21 year old high school graduate – are extremely savvy; leveraging the street credibility of Litefeet and their position as 'authentic' 'hood' dwellers to appeal to brands such as TopShop who flew two of the dancers to London in June of last year to feature in a commercial for the brand, by dancing on London tube trains. During ad-hoc street performances the WAFFLE crew hand out their professional looking business cards, branded with their logo, youtube and Instagram pages to passers by – realising that artists, choreographers and advertising creatives are often drawn to this kind of spectacle, as well as tourists. They have also capitalised on the city's clampdown to develop merchandise – such as the T-shirts on the photograph behind – which offer a play on the MTA's posters warning against dancing, allowing members of the public to show support for the dancers.

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Social media platforms are an important part of this money-making strategy. Videos of early litefeet battles are grainy and shaking, taken on phones and handheld cameras. Now, however, the footage is often slick and edited. Kid the Wizz, one of the more successful WAFFLE dancers, has posted his

appearance in both the English and Spanish language versions of America's got talent online, and The WAFFLE Crew have been the subject of several documentaries, posted online, made by student and professional filmmakers. These online videos serve as both a way for the performers to (start 2.36) promote their skill to a wider audience (including industry professionals) and a way to protest the clampdown on dancers by the City. The online videos also document the evolution of the practice in terms of moves, key practitioners and evidence members of the WAFFLE crews engagement with the form since its inception. This online documentation then is another way the dancers can make claims to authenticity. In this way we might see their use of online forms as demoncratic 'resistance' against the governance that interferes with their practice.

SHOW VIDEO.

So as New York city clamps down on the practice of Subway Dancing, WAFFLE are in huge demand - documentary makers, news crews, journalists and academics such as myself record and fetish their practices in the hope these vital and energetic expressions might reveal something unknown about the city, and the marginalized cultures and people that sustain it. Particularly at a time when city space is blandified by the hyper-commercialisation of the real estate market, and where once vibrant areas turned into unrecognizable centres of commerce by the gentrification process. Even officials from the city of New York are keen to recruit subway dancers to their 'showtime programme' so that the city's sanctioned performers might learn from illegal dancers how to draw a crowd, and serve up the kind of dances that attract tourists. Some of the WAFFLE dancers are the children of important hip-hop founders – such as Kippy Dee of the Rock Steady crew, and are tied physically to the historical hip-hop culture of The Bronx and Harlem. All have an intimate embodied knowledge of the subway system, of the rhythms and practices of the city space, and of the historical performance innovations that have manifested in Litefeet dance and music culture and which are related to the historical local and global practice of Hip Hop.

In my field notes, I recorded a conversation with Arthur Aviles, founder of the Bad Bronx dance academy – and documenter of Bronx Street dance history. I'll read from the notes now:

Arthur said he was not surprised the dancers I spoke to were not formally trained. He spoke of the street as a site of innovation – he lamented the way in which the kids dancing seem to be out to 'get something'. Suggested that this desire to marketise their dance was holding them back from the full enjoyment of 'being in their bodies'. Discussed how few street dancers have been able to use their talent to break through and make a lasting impact, pointed to 'Crazy Legs' as a street dancer who has managed to have some longevity and be acknowledged and remunerated for his contribution to the field. He told me that dance innovations on the street are often taken and used by choreographers in 'industry' without proper acknowledgement. Discussed how street dancers have a really difficult time navigating the industry.'

Although the WAFFLE dancers have made money from their practices (although they are cagey about how much and from what sources), and from capitalizing on the opportunities that they have been afforded, dance is by no means a stable or steady stream of income for them, and in April 2015 some told me they were still performing on the subways, risking arrest and a criminal record for the cash they'll still make there (they also enjoy the physical challenges that the subway car offers). Despite their successes, these dancers frequently work for no money, hoping, as many arts practitioners do, that unpaid work will eventually lead to paid work. Still, I witnessed a heated conversation where the crew discussed 'professionalism', and several refused to continue with projects for which they wouldn't be paid.

In another of my field notes, I report that, as Andrew Saunders and I discussed the cultural life of New York city and the long history of dance that feeds into it, he became riled; Saunders felt that the role he and his crew played in keeping the cultural life of the city alive was undervalued and exploited.

In this climate the use of online platforms appears to be a way in which the dancers 'speak back' to the city and position themselves as owners and custodians of the litefeet form. If democracy is in part about the way in which

a group control and organise themselves, and the power they have to do so, social media has proved an important tool in enabling some agency for these dancers and some platform to 'speak back' from a marginalised position. It has also allowed them actively to participate in the 'legitimate' capitalist culture by affording them exposure to industry professionals who can pay them for their practice. It also allows them to disseminate their work beyond the 'real' spaces where they practice and - as evidenced by the 'kid break' the toddler dancer I mentioned in the opening of this paper – inspire others to participate in creative physical activity. Nonetheless, as Tizzana Terranova points out in his exploration of 'immaterial labour' 'networked environments that foster and house social interactions form the framework for harnessing social practice into the capitalist logic.' (Postigo 2016: 334). As Aviles suggested in his interview with me, the dancer's emphasis on 'monetising' their practice means that the practice itself already becomes co-opted into a capitalist logic – while I don't see the desire to make money from arts practice as inherently problematic and if the entrepreneurial spirit in which the WAFFLE dancers operate does lead them to making a living this can certainly be framed positively – what is of more concern is how their documentation of the practice is eventually co-opted by the platforms where they post it. Once something is online, control over content is lost – meaning their moves can be used without acknowledgement by other dancers and choreographers. Furthermore, as Positgo points out, on YouTube the subscriber is the currency, and no matter the revenue they received directly or indirectly from posting, 'YouTube the bettor always wins'. Thus, conceiving the use of social media platforms as unproblematically democratic risks overlooking the wider structures through which social media use operates. Thus I suggest the 'resistant' potential of online spaces for dancers and other artists is an area that deserves further research and consideration.