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# The Choreographic Inter*face*: Dancing Facial Expression in Hip-Hop and Neo-Burlesque Striptease

Sherril Dodds

## Facial Choreography in Performance

About face. Face-to-face. In your face. Game face. Blank-faced. Face-off. Lose face. Long face. Two-faced. FaceTime. Blackface. Face down. Face up to. Egg on your face. Poker face. Facebook. Pram face. Shit-faced. Baby face. Arse about face. Face the facts! As a discrete body part, the face possesses potent social and symbolic meaning. Within the expressions above, the face conveys a broad range of ideas and practices that include spatial orientations, social interactions, physical dispositions, psychological states, personality traits, sporting terminology, social standing, communications systems, and a call to action. The head in general claims physiological importance, as the brain and four of the sensory organs are located here, and, since Plato, Western philosophy has conceptualized the head to be representative of nobility, reason, and leadership (Brophy 1946; Coates 2012; Magli 1989). The face in particular acts as the primary site through which humans communicate, and it signifies a putative expression of a unique identity (Brophy 1946; Kesner 2007; McNeill 1998). It constitutes a transcendental signifier through which the inner self is purportedly revealed; hence the eye automatically goes to the face as a privileged site of meaning.

Given the Cartesian preoccupation with rational thought that has ensured a philosophical division between the head and body, dance practice and its associated scholarship have focused on the re-integration of the two. Consequently, as an isolated body part, the head is rarely addressed in dance research. In this article, however, I call upon the discipline of dance studies and its commitment to movement to conduct a study of the "dancing face." In spite of its neglect, the face participates choreographically in the realization of the aesthetic codes and embodied conventions that pertain to different dance styles and genres. Even a superficial comparison between the intricate facial motilities of a Kathakali dancer and the sexualized facial contortions of Latin American competition dance, or the huge glistening smile of a Broadway chorus girl and the solemn disposition of a Graham performer, indicates that facial expression is not left to chance. I therefore conceive facial expression in dance as "choreographic," whether set or improvised, in that it is designed and revised according to performance norms. While we expect to see a striptease artist wink, it would be jarring for a classical ballet dancer to do the same.

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Although scholars have sporadically addressed the composition of the face in performance,[1] there is neither in-depth exploration of the face within dance practice, nor consideration of the theoretical apparatuses that could elucidate "facial choreography" as a performance strategy. While this study exists as part of a larger research project, here I focus specifically on the French continental philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) and their theory of "faciality." First I examine Deleuze and Guattari's semiotic conception of the face and its application to dance practice through the smile of the Busby Berkeley chorus girl. I then consider how Deleuze and Guattari's work on the face presents a critique of universalist theorizations of facial expression, as well as how my study of facial choreography offers a revisionist understanding of the face as a haunting aporia within dance studies. I move on to develop the notion of "facial performativity" through a selection of scholars who consider the performance of identity within configurations of facial expression.

I introduce the concept of a "choreographic inter*face*" to explore how facial expression enters into a choreographic relationship with other dancing faces and bodily territories, and which acts as a site of meaning-construction. While some "facial choreography" simply mirrors other expressive traditions or masks the labor of other body parts, I suggest that the choreographic inter*face* also offers the potential to rewrite the face in relation to the body as a mode of critical commentary. With this in mind, I explore two dancing bodies that engage the face in ways that complicate existing modalities of facial expression. Notably, both are dance practices located within the popular domain. While this in part reflects my research expertise in popular dance studies, I suggest that traditions of popular entertainment have permitted striking displays of facial expression; therefore opportunities to play upon and subvert these conventions are ripe. First, I turn to a series of short improvised hip-hop performances by dancer Virgil "Lil O" Gadson (Photo 1), and second, I analyze *You Have Made Me So Very Happy George Bush!*, a number performed and choreographed by neo-burlesque striptease artist Darlinda Just Darlinda.

## The Facial Machine

Deleuze and Guattari develop the idea of "faciality" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987).[2] They conceive the face within a semiotic framework formulated through a "white wall" of *signifiance* and a "black hole" of subjectification. Although they describe a literal representation of "a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 167), this face does not constitute a singular individual (Davies 2007). Instead, they suggest that the face is bound by signifying conventions; it exists as a white screen of codified inscription, while the "black hole" conveys the dark vacuum of a subjective consciousness that can never be accessed. In stark contrast to a humanist conception of the face, they argue: "Faces are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 168). Yet this face is not fixed. Instead they conceive a tension or movement in that the face comes into being through a range of mobilizations. Although it lacks clear form and dimension, the face appears as black holes emerge on white walls or white walls move toward black holes. These disturbing manifestations of the face, which they convincingly portray as a "horror story" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 168), concern the unsettling negotiations between *signifiance* and subjectivity. For Deleuze and Guattari, this negotiation evidenced in material faces occurs through their concept of "faciality." They describe how faces are "engendered by an *abstract machine of faciality (visagéité)*, which produces them at the same time as it gives the signifier its white wall and subjectivity its black hole" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 168). Dance scholar André Lepecki (2007) suggests that, although described as an "abstract" machine, faciality should not be understood as a universal mechanism, but as an assemblage of concrete ideas, signs, and expressions that are transformed into "active powers (*pouissance*)" (121).



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*Photo 1. Hip-hop dancer "Lil O" at* Battle for Your Life*. Photograph by Brian Mengini. Used with permission.*

Film theorist Richard Rushton (2002) suggests that the coding of the abstract machine creates "faces" that are transparent and readable, and he observes how the saturation of mediated faces that surround us in print and on screen exemplify this semiotic operation: "This excess of productions from the assembly line of the facial machine—of uniform production, of commodification—is a symptom of a quest for uniform perfection and the infinite reproducibility of the human" (223).

To consider the concrete operation of faciality in dance terms, the Busby Berkeley chorus of female dancers conveys this idea well. In *Dames* (1934), the title musical sequence commences with individual close-ups of beautiful young women who have arrived to sign up for an audition ("Dames (1934)—Title Musical Sequence" n.d.). While each lingering shot appears to display a unique self, in that the women possess different shades and styles of hair and wear a range of hats, they are nevertheless unified through their charming and static Hollywood smiles. The number continues on the morning of the audition, as the women are further duplicated through scenes of unison pampering routines in the context of lines of identical beds, bath tubs, and dressing mirrors, and then through even more abstract imagery while they pose, locomote, and tap dance in elaborate geometrical formations. Both in close-up and mid-shot, the women continue to exude huge smiles, and occasionally giggle, out to the camera. Feminist film theorist Patricia Mellencamp (2002)



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describes how the Busby Berkeley chorus line creates a fetishistic, anonymous, and standardized representation of women. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the line of smiling beauties coded by the abstract machine of Western gender norms produces a legible reading of dancing women as a site of visual pleasure and passive availability. The singular iteration of the smile reassures us of a contented disposition, which serves to distract us from its de-individualizing effects and the commodification of the female dancing body.

Dance scholar Mark Franko (2002) offers another perspective of the chorus line through the concept of labor. In referencing Sigfried Kracauer's concept of the "mass ornament," which might be understood as a precursor to Deleuze and Guattari's abstract machine,[3] Franko describes how the Busby Berkeley chorus girl serves a capitalist function in that she dutifully represents a Taylorized work model through her mechanized labor and benign smile. He states: "Cheerfulness becomes a figure of pacification. The chorine's demeanor, athletic strength and collective discipline fostered a positive and entertaining image of unskilled labor under the regime of machine culture" (Franko 2002, 32). Yet a tension arises, as the face signifies both sameness and individuality. It serves a metonymical function in that the benevolent smile represents the mechanized dancing/working body; however, throughout the number, Berkeley intersperses the increasingly abstract geometric sequences with occasional close-ups of an individual face, which mollifies the loss of self and proves antithetical to the mechanical structure.[4] From Deleuze and Guattari's perspective, though, the individualized close-up forms another dimension of faciality that produces a semiotic illusion of a unique subjectivity.

Deleuze and Guattari further the idea of facialization to extend beyond the face itself, which offers a useful model for thinking about dance. They suggest that, as with the face, the body possesses similar inscriptive masses and deep cavities that are facialized through the abstract machine. To understand this operation fully, their concept of "territorialization" comes into play. For Deleuze and Guattari, a pre-existing subject never exists; rather, faciality brings it into being. They therefore describe the face as "deterritorialized" in that it remains disconnected from the notion of an essential self. Yet they also postulate that deterritorialization never occurs in isolation, but that it always engages two elements, which then serve to reterritorialize each other. Deleuze and Guattari conceive reterritorialization as a power relationship between faces and other body parts, objects, or landscapes, and I return to *Dames* to exemplify this idea in motion.

In *Dames*, the facialized feminine smile is redistributed to the mass dancing body of the Busby Berkeley chorus line. The coded inscriptions of gender, commodification, and systemized capitalist labor that produce their benign and unified smiles are reterritorialized in relation to other body parts in motion. As the women execute precision grooming routines that include gazing into mirrors, dusting their cheeks with powder puffs, and applying lipstick, these actions and objects are facialized and in combination create a legible female body. Similarly, within wider shots of multiple dancers, as their legs spread in and out in kaleidoscopic formations or the camera shows off their unison tap dance in sleek black tights, the spectator sees little of the huge facial smile, but its meanings are reterritorialized in relation to the legs, which evoke the same codes of female passivity and capitalist mechanization.

The hierarchical conceptualization of the face as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari is, not surprisingly, a racialized and gendered configuration through the "white wall" of the "White Man" (1987, 176).[5] Hence the facial machine orchestrates normativity and rejects those faces that fail to conform. For Deleuze and Guattari, facialization allows for no intrusion, deviance, or difference, and, instead, the abstract machine works to produce singular expressions that are codified through meaningful signifiers and subject choices. As they state, "A concentrated effort is made to do away with the body and corporeal coordinates through which the multi-dimensional or polyvocal semiotics operated" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 181). In many ways, their thesis constitutes a bleak



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vision of social life in that corporeality is disciplined, the face is characterized through its strong organization, and the body and its environment are facilialized.

Yet several dance scholars lay claim to dance's capacity to resist the territorializing effects of facialization, specifically within the field of "contemporary" or "postmodern dance" practice. Andre Lepecki (2007) suggests that dance proves inherently antifacial as it privileges the body; Erin Brannigan (2011) comments that the face plays no central role within contemporary dance; and Victoria Anderson Davies (2007) argues that dance can resist facialization as it negates the division between face and body. While I would agree that some dance genres present the body as an integrated whole and the face offers almost nil expressivity, others meanwhile demand spectacular facial performances that potentially bring the face into performative dialogue with the body. Indeed, a glimmer of hope arises as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note that a tic can disrupt the constitution of the face and that "knowing" the face offers a strategy to dismantle it. In response to their provocation that faciality overrides the "multidimensional" or "polyvocal" aspects of the body, I argue that the capacity for dance to articulate corporeally offers scope to destabilize the semiotic inscription of the facial machine. The mobility of dance facilitates facial motion that might conform to or resist the aesthetic and politically inscribed choreographies of the body. I therefore employ my hip-hop and neo-burlesque case study examples to illustrate how choreographic interactions between face and body can maintain, undermine, mock, overdetermine, or re-imagine the face, and my endeavor in writing this article is, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) insist, to "know" the face. Before I examine this interactive choreographic inter*face*, I consider the importance of Deleuze and Guattari's intervention against universalism and the face's intervention within dance studies.

## Facial Interventions

Deleuze and Guattari's theory of faciality, which makes claim for the social organization of the face, stands in striking contrast to universalist conceptions of facial expression that commence with Darwinism, but have continued to influence scholarship across psychology and performance studies. In his seminal publication from 1872, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1998), British scientist Charles Darwin draws upon a wealth of photographic and anecdotal examples from which he postulates that facial composition is biologically determined and universal, but can evolve as nerve pathways habitualize movement.[6] Although Darwin provides a fascinating analysis of how facial features express emotional states, his study reveals methodological limitations and political investments. For instance, in his research into nations outside Europe, he approached only one missionary in each country to provide data, and his writing perpetuates a colonialist agenda with references to "children of savages" and "civilized Europeans" (Darwin 1998, 230).[7]

The claims of universalism that characterize Darwin's study of facial expression continue with the prolific research of American psychologist Paul Ekman, which concentrates on the bio-neurology of facial expression (Mair 1975).[8] From numerous experiments that document the facial expressions of individuals across different national contexts in response to images that trigger emotions, Ekman concludes that there are six universal states: surprise, disgust, sadness, anger, fear, and happiness (1998).[9] In 1978, Ekman and his research partner, Wallace Friesen, created the Facial Action Coding System (FACS), "a comprehensive, anatomically based system for visually discernible facial movement" (Rosenberg 1997, 12). This analytical framework identifies 44 "unique action units" that convey the totality of facial expression.[10]

Ekman's work has proved influential across various disciplines[11]; however, the research most closely associated with dance emerges through Richard Schechner's studies within the fields of theater and performance.[12] In *Performance Theory* (1988), Schechner calls upon Ekman's six universal facial expressions to suggest that they are utilized within theater, although actors operate reflexively in



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that they manipulate natural expression for the purposes of theatrical artifice; thus although actors' faces seek to reveal a "truth," they are simultaneously lying. Whereas Ekman suggests that by faking the expression of an emotion, the actor begins to feel the emotion, Schechner contends that, although actors manipulate emotional expression, they do not necessarily experience the concomitant feeling (Schechner 1988).[13] Schechner argues that while all cultures employ universal expressions of emotion, they utilize them in distinct ways in their embodied performance practices, which he conceives as a "dialect of movement" (1988, 265).

In terms of the Darwinian legacy, several scholars offer vehement critiques of this paradigm, particularly in relation to Ekman's methods and findings. Theater scholar Guglielmo Schininà (2004) comments that Ekman underestimates the importance of historical, social, and cultural frameworks for their capacity to produce difference across human expression, and anthropologist Brenda Farnell (1999) argues that the observationist universalism evident in Ekman's work fails to consider how context and motivation particularize human expression. Farnell uses the example of the smile to demonstrate cross-cultural variability and localized meaning. She suggests that in Euro-American culture, the smile can signify pleasure, embarrassment, bravura, and deception, therefore she conceives it as "action" rather than "behavior," as it is shaped by "local norms of interaction and specific contexts of use" (Farnell 1999, 359). As anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserts, a wink only possesses meaning if one has knowledge of the social codes through which it occurs (Sklar 1991).

Deleuze and Guattari's theory of faciality explicitly counters the notion of an innate expressive behavior of the face. Indeed Deleuze and Guattari situate their argument in diametric opposition through the assertion that the only place of articulation for human subjects exists through preestablished facial signification. As art historian Maria Loh (2009) comments, without social codes, the face would lack meaning; in fact, she proposes that it would carry no more meaning than the loose skin on the elbow. Even if universal expressions were to exist at some very basic level, I have no desire to explore these in relation to dance. Yet I am not simply concerned with how the face is coded as a meaningful system of expressive communication. Rather I focus on how the face in dance performance might trouble the signifying mechanism of the facial machine. Notably, in spite of his universalist position, Darwin (1998) acknowledges the capacity for humans to manipulate expression through will, and in Ekman and Erika Rosenberg's co-edited volume, *What the Face Reveals* (1997), Pierre Gosselin, Gilles Kirouac, and François Y. Doré comment that human actors manage expression through exaggeration, suppression, and mimicry.[14] I will shortly come to a consideration of how dancers might conform to or re-choreograph facial expression in performance. Before doing so, I pause to make claim for the face's intervention into dance practice and into dance studies as a discipline.

Attention to the head and face has significantly shifted within dance history from one of absolute dominance through to a decentered absence. Within a broader social history, Georges Vigarello (1989) identifies how the courtly nobility of the sixteenth century was rooted in the idea of uprightness as an indicator of morality and civility. This privileging of an upright posture, with a vertical back and erect head, was cultivated through the noble activities of fencing, riding, and dancing. In her study of the face, semiotician Patrizia Magli relates the Aristotelian order of nature, by which the most superior body parts are the highest, to sixteenth century conceptualizations of the body, in which the head is aligned with the sky, "a place inhabited by the spirit and by higher intelligences" (1989, 109). This hierarchy of the body influenced Renaissance court dancing, which also valued an erect head and vertical plane to convey a high moral order (Foster 1986). Such ideals are further evident in the evolution of nineteenth century classical ballet, which privileges verticality, an upright head, and an externalized presentation of the body, which "faces" and rotates out toward the spectator (Rameau 1728; Stokes 1983; Volinsky 1983). The development of twentieth century modern dance then came as a critique of the hierarchical organization of the body in which the head and face occupy a dominant role. Indeed ballet critic and advocate Lincoln Kirstein describes



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how modern dance responds to gravity over aeriality, and its focus dwells "on and in central somatic areas of the body, rather than extension of peripheries" (1983, 240).

While twentieth-century theater dance practice and dance scholarship have sought to value the entire body, this holistic conception has prompted a neglect of the face. In reclaiming the face, I signal an intervention into dominant modes of dance practice and a revision of dance studies as a discipline. Given that my research centers on popular dance, its associations with pleasure and entertainment have conceived the face quite differently to Western art dance; the popular realm has tended to employ the face to its full expressive potential. Due to its commitment to de-center and de-hierarchize the body, dance studies has not provided the necessary intellectual lenses through which to examine the face as a choreographic site. Yet while I turn to continental philosophy as it usefully critiques the humanist tenet of a stable self, and the face as a portal to a unique identity, it struggles to deal with movement. And in the following section I look to performance, performativity, and performance studies as a means to understand the face; however, this literature typically neglects to address the dancing body. I therefore remain insistent that this study constitutes a dance studies project in that the composition and motion of the face are paramount, and I call on specific instances of dancing bodies to show how the face both produces and critiques meaning.

## Facial Performativity

I look to the concept of "performativity" developed by philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) and further elaborated by gender scholar Judith Butler (1999) as another framework for theorizing the choreography of facial expression. This intellectual lens provides an apparatus to examine constructions of identity outside the paradigm of an essential self, and can therefore be used to analyze how the face participates in these social formations. As I suggest earlier, "performance" offers opportunity for dancers to mimic, underplay, and enhance facial expression beyond the norms of quotidian interaction. Within this oft-voiced theoretical model, Austin argues that some utterances are performative, in that as we "say" them, we also "do" them; and Butler furthers this idea of performativity to suggest that gender has no original essence, therefore we construct gender through stylized iterations such as gesture, action, and expression. Although the scholars I address in this section do not specifically reference performativity, their investigations into various areas of cultural performance illustrate the way that facial composition produces the citational practices of identity, and I draw upon this idea for my case study analysis.

In a study of music performance, Phillip Auslander (2006) describes how different facial expressions construct specific performance personae according to prescribed generic contexts. For example, within the rock music idiom, he draws attention to the "guitar face" that is typically emitted during instrumental solos. He notes that, although such facial contortions are not intrinsic to the sound creation, these codified expressions demonstrate the guitarist's imagined interior state in the moment of performance: "suffering, satanic possession, surprise at the guitarist's own virtuosity, swagger, sex god status, spirituality, and stoicism" (Auslander 2006, 112). Although Auslander's reference is not specifically articulated as male, Steve Waksman (1999) observes how rock guitar performance stages expressions of heterosexual, homosocial, and masculinized identities. In terms of performativity, the "guitar face" therefore maintains the symbolic order of a heterosexualized masculinity.

Meanwhile, other scholars delineate how facial composition and gesture produce inscriptions of femininity. Abigail Feder (1994) observes how female figure skaters display an overdetermined sexuality to compensate for the distinctly unfeminine demonstration of athletic prowess: "eyes closed, mouth slightly open, arms extended as for an embrace; it looks like nothing so much as popular conceptions of female sexual climax" (68). In reference to striptease performance, Liepe-Levinson (2002) identifies how the choreography of the mouth conveys an erotic sexuality



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through the pouting, pursing, and parting of the lips. She further describes how facial expressions of shock and pleasure are reflexive in that they acknowledge the "social transgression" (Liepe-Levinson 2002, 119) of the striptease act, which signals how the face and body can co-productively generate a critical meta-commentary through their mutual engagement in performance. In a far less transgressive reading of facial expression within the context of beauty contests and exotic dance shows, Brenda Foley conceives the smile as a trope of Western femininity that signifies "availability, passivity, interest, approval, and a nonthreatening or submissive attitude" (2005, 62). From an anti-essentialist perspective, she draws attention to the performative character of the smile as a codified and expressive gesture, rather than an involuntary reflex, which operates independently of emotion and can be performed at will. Indeed, Foley (2005) notes how beauty contestants must practice smiling, as those who are not rehearsed can look inauthentic.[15]

In addition to codes of gender and sexuality, the face also mobilizes categories of race. Cushman (2005) looks to the face as a locus of racial identity and comments on how whiteness constitutes the normalizing marker against which Other racial identities are understood. In reference to Deleuze and Guattari's faciality, Cushman (2005) coins the term "superfacial" to articulate how skin color and physiognomy, such as shape and breadth of lips, nose, and eyes, produce a fixed reading of race. This "superfaciality" refuses to acknowledge racial identity as fluid, historically located, and subject to agency, but instead conceives it through structures of whiteness and Otherness, inclusion and exclusion (Cushman 2005). Closer to the arena of performance, Eric Lott (1993) observes how blackface minstrelsy operates through a matrix of class, race, and sexuality with its grotesque depictions of blackness in the excessive phallic nose and thick open lips that mark the entrance to the vaginal throat.

Several scholars point to the significance of the mouth and eyes as facial zones that are key to identity construction and frameworks of power. The mouth constitutes one of the most flexible parts of the face, and I have already commented on how the smile does not possess a singular meaning but "can only be determined in its individual, interactional, institutional, and cultural contexts and in relation to behavioral expectations" (Daly 1988, 44). McNeill (1998) describes how the "gaze" constitutes a power hierarchy within the field of social interaction and observes how the eyes reveal our intentions and desires through their capacity to signal subsequent moves. Across film and performance theory, multiple scholars have theorized the politics of the gaze,[16] although Liepe-Levinson (2002) extends this to convey a type of ocular choreography within the context of striptease performance. She identifies the active modes of staring, peeking, winking, and averting the gaze as an "eye dance" that forms a powerful framework of communication between stripper and audience.[17]

Facial expression works performatively to enunciate symbolic structures of gender, sexuality, race, and class, and facial features "choreograph" meanings that are legible only through close attention to their cultural codes, social context, historical specificity, and generic performance conventions. Attention now turns to the two case study examples through which I explore "facial choreographies" in motion and the significance of the choreographic inter*face*.

## Choreographing the Face in Hip-Hop and Neo-Burlesque Striptease

I have established that facial expression in dance performance is far from arbitrary and, for the purposes of dance analysis, I suggest that "facial choreography" should not be read as an isolated and singular form of expression, but as an embodied site of meaning construction in relationship to other dancing faces and other body parts in motion. Given the primacy of the face within this study, I refer to this corporeal intertext as a "choreographic inter*face*." As the head and body can not be divided, movement connects the two through an inter*face* of meaning. Consequently, the head/body inter*face* can establish both conjunctive and disjunctive relations, as the face



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might reflect, deny, or re-imagine technical prowess, physical labor, and the aesthetic and cultural meanings that are mobilized through other body parts. I further this idea of the choreographic inter*face* to extend to other dancing faces that reside within the historical imaginary, and to the "face-to-face" interactions that occur in performance.[18] In my hip-hop case study, this includes the facial dialogue between battling opponents, and in both hip-hop battles and neo-burlesque performance, the verbal and kinetic exchange between performers and audiences, some of which occurs through facial motion and expression, significantly contributes to these performance idioms. Audiences whoop, holler, scream, and heckle, and such facial articulations clearly exist within this broad choreographic inter*face*. While the analysis I produce for each performance is rooted in my own reading of the dance event, and in this instance I did not take note of spectators' facial expressions, my observations were certainly influenced by the tenor of audience reaction.[19]

For my analysis, I have selected two dance examples, a hip-hop battle and a neo-burlesque performance, that employ facial expression in ways that complicate movement paradigms and provide a critical commentary on normative identity positions through the choreographic inter*face*. Notably, the smile forms a common component across the two, and both performers engage it to upset the semiotic legibility of the face as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). While one employs a rapid and intermittent smile that seems to refute stable meaning, the other produces a fixed and insistent smile that overwhelms us with meaning. Both examples are taken from dance ethnographies, therefore I draw on field notes and interview material as part of my analysis, although I also refer to photographs taken at the hip-hop battle and a film recording of the neo-burlesque performance as supporting visual evidence.

My first example focuses on a freestyle hip-hop battle, which took place at *Battle for Your Life*: *Street Dance Competition* in Philadelphia on November 3, 2012. My analysis centers on one of the competitors, Virgil "Lil O" Gadson,[20] an African American male who demonstrates expertise across a range of street dance forms and whose style is fast, spectacular, and playful.[21] In terms of the relationship between facial expression and bodily movement, one of the characteristics of his battling approach could be conceived through the polyvocalism described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) that might potentially unsettle the facial machine. Within a single pose, a rush of signification conveys a disruption to and slippage of stable meaning. At one point, Lil O balances on one leg with his supporting knee bent into the ground. He quickly pulls a cartoon-like painful face, with eyebrows knotted and mouth distorted, as an experiential and pedagogic commentary on the technical complexity of this pose. Yet he dismissively flicks his hand to his opponents watching at the side, as if to suggest the movement is effortless, while briefly frowning at them both as an act of intimidation and as a sign that he has little interest in their thoughts. He swiftly follows this with a huge smile toward the audience in a moment of apparent collusion. Does his smile signal a dramatic irony as he shares with the audience his private joke concerning his facial exaggeration of the difficulty of the pose and his pretence of aggression toward his opponents? Might his charming smile form an attempt to win over audience and judges in this cash-prize competition? Or is he just happy to be dancing? This assemblage of quick-fire facial movements in relation to his pose, his opponents, and the audience produces an excess of disparate meanings that convey physical labor, the competition framework, and the playfulness of the hip-hop idiom.

Throughout the battle, Lil O creates multiple instances of disconnect and semiotic instability between facial expression and bodily action. At one moment, standing in close proximity to his opponent, he struggles to step away from his place as if his foot were somehow glued to the floor. His face conveys wide-eyed alarm with his mouth fixed open in confusion as if he possesses no control over his movement, which of course the audience knows he does (Photo 2). Moments later, he pretends to kick his opponent multiple times while grinning cheekily to the audience; his pretence is jocular, but we also witness an illicit pleasure in his imagined physical battery of his opponent. In another instance, when his opponent dances, Lil O executes a lame imitation at the side, with a knowing smile that suggests he can predict all of the moves and which comments



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*Photo 2. Hip-hop dancer "Lil O" at* Battle for Your Life*. Photograph by Brian Mengini. Used with permission.*

on a perceived lack of originality, regardless of how he evaluates his opponent in reality. Notably, in conversation, Lil O plays down the element of competition and, in line with many other dancers I have interviewed, emphasizes the positive feelings of warmth and brotherhood that circulate at a battle: "At the end of the day, it's all love. It's all ... you know, just dancing. We're not really fighting, we're not, you know, having some beef or competition."[22] African American studies scholar Halifu Osumare (2007) describes how notions of irony and double-meaning are prevalent within the battle context. Unlike the Busby Berkeley chorus girl, Lil O's smile is elusive. It appears, disappears, and reappears to different effect each time. Its mobility and uncertainty leaves the spectator and opponent unsure as to whether they co-create or exist at the butt of the joke. This instability of meaning located at the face/body/opponent/audience inter*face* appears to resist the semiotic coding of the facial machine.

For Lil O, his ability to read the opponent's face offers important bodily knowledge concerning the psychology of the battle: "Sometimes I know when I have an advantage . . . I can read it if like they're thinking about what they're gonna do next, or if they're tired. I can see all of that on my opponent's face."[23] Equally, Lil O deploys his face to communicate his understanding of their danced interactions: "When I'm dancing, when I think about my face, it's almost like I'm talking to them, but without words, they can see it on my face. It's like, 'you wanna battle me? No? I'm intimidating you?'"[24] His face therefore enunciates the battle agenda, while his body produces an arsenal of tactics through its repertoire of movement (Photo 3). It bears no surprise then that face-to-face interaction forms the symbolic and physical structure of the vernacular hip-hop battle (Dimitriadis 2012).

Not only can the face signify a play of meaning in response to movement content and through the dancer's relationship to the competition framework, but it can also elucidate the ontology of performance from the perspective of dancer and spectator. At one point, Lil O enters into a whirlwind locking phrase that includes rapid wrist rolls, points, and "muscle man" actions, and, while doing so, he pulls a "crazed face" of swirling eyes and wonky mouth, which comments on how it feels to execute the movement and instructs the audience that this dizzying spectacle is both impressive and bewildering. Although from Deleuze and Guattari's perspective, Lil O's ontology can only ever be known and articulated through the conventions of the semiotic order, his flux of facial and bodily actions situated at the choreographic inter*face* produces multiple and contradictory meanings that disturb the fixing intent of faciality. I therefore suggest that Lil O's performance reterritorializes the relationship between face and body to bring them into dialogue with each other. Through fleeting expressions, tics, and gestures in the moment of battle, Lil O resists the explicit overcoding of the



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*Photo 3. Hip-hop dancer "Lil O" at* Battle for Your Life. *Photograph by Brian Mengini. Used with permission.*

facial machine and employs a self-reflexive (dis)connection between face and body to signal the itinerant and spurious pleasures, play, and paradoxes of the hip-hop form, the battle structure, and the ontology of performance.

I further contend that this hip-hop body destabilizes the racialized normativity of the facial machine. For Lil O, as an African American male, the smile in stasis potentially signifies a problematic racial history as evidenced through blackface minstrelsy. The excessive smile of the minstrel performer masks a subjectivity defined through social and economic exclusion. Hence in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the facial machine encodes the African American smile as a trope of pleasure and entertainment, but which is deterritorialized from embodied experiences of slavery and persecution. Within the battle context, however, the mobility and polysemy of the smile trouble this racialized coding through its capacity to produce a critical commentary on the historical residues of this dancing body and through its unwillingness to conform to a fixed order of meaning. While I appreciate that the deployment of facial expression within the hip-hop battle operates to some extent within the codes and conventions of this performance genre, as an improvised practice, vernacular hip-hop facilitates endless inter*facial* reconfigurations through each face-to-face encounter.

My second example addresses a neo-burlesque act, *You Have Made Me So Very Happy George Bush!*, performed by Darlinda Just Darlinda (Darlinda Just Darlinda n.d.). I have discussed elsewhere how neo-burlesque striptease employs a "choreography of facial commentary" (Dodds 2011), but this number consciously deploys "social and political commentary" (Darlinda Just Darlinda 2013) against former U.S. president George W. Bush, and Darlinda clearly engages the face as part of this critique. She originally choreographed this striptease act for the annual Fourth of July Bush Bash at New York City's Bad Ass Burlesque, although I saw Darlinda perform it on October 26, 2007, at the Feminist Neo-Burlesque Symposium in London.[25]

Set to "You've Made Me So Very Happy" by the American jazz-rock group Blood, Sweat, and Tears, Darlinda appears on stage swathed in a red sequin evening dress, blue satin gloves, blue sparkly eye make-up, and huge blonde wig, as she emits an enormous smile and enthusiastically brandishes two American flags on sticks (Photo 4). Flashing her bright, white teeth, she represents the ultimate Republican patriot and all-American woman. Her triumphant smile signals her commitment to and affirmation of her nationalist affiliation, which is further reinforced through the prevalence of red, white, and blue and her jingoistic flag-waving. Her bodily spectacle and facial expression engender an idealized national construction of gender, race, and class as a blonde, white woman



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*Photo 4. Darlinda Just Darlinda performing* You Have Made Me So Very Happy George Bush! *Photograph by Linus Gelber. Used with permission.*

encapsulated in a socio-economic paradigm of opulence, wealth, and leisure. Yet significantly, although her smile is fixed, it does not align with the passive or benign smile of the Berkeley chorus girl or beauty pageant contestant. Instead, Darlinda works this smile as an active construction through her clenched teeth and wide-mouthed grimace. Like her spangled dress, big hair, and lashings of make-up, her smile conveys excess and exaggeration. On occasions she opens her mouth into a fuller, breathy smile, but its gushing insistence remains. This hyperbolic strategy exposes her nationalist, feminized body as a "masquerade" that calls attention to its own construction, and her overdetermined smile constitutes a site of ambiguity.[26] Its excessive citation of the patriotic feminine is both humorous and unsettling, as its persistence proves illegible within the set of gendered norms made meaningful through the facial machine.

A short way into the number, Darlinda further agitates this image of the wholesome American woman as she slowly begins to remove her clothes in the style of a saucy striptease. She slides off her gloves and unpeels her dress and, although her huge smile continues, it no longer signifies her all-American purity, but begins to evoke a sexualized pleasure in her performance of erotic spectacle. Her smile is again destabilized as her eyes begin to play against its earlier significations. While her wide-eyed enthusiasm worked in correlation with her distinctly American smile in the opening to her act, her eyes now glance sexily under her lowered lashes thus redirecting the smile as an invitation to seduction. This "same" yet "new" smile actively produces an ambiguous reading, in that considerable feminist debate has focused on whether striptease performance perpetuates a hegemonic femininity as women passively present their bodies for the purposes of a male-centered desire, or conversely offers an agency of expression and pleasure that empowers female striptease artists (Dodds 1997; Hanna 2011; Liepe-Levinson 2002). Thus, while the insistence of her hyperbolic smile remains, the choreographic inter*face* produces multiple meanings as her body movement indicates political investment, a national affiliation, economic capital, erotic desire, passive availability, and female-centered pleasure. These shifting significations ensure that her smile can never be understood from a universalist perspective. Moments later, her expression and bodily actions slowly begin to transform.

Now, down to undergarments, Darlinda's face begins to show flashes of uncertainty. She discards her bra, rips off her "pasties," and pulls off her big blonde wig, while her expression shifts uneasily between her vast smile and looks of confusion and unease.[27] She quickly removes her glamorous tasseled underpants to a state of complete nudity, which is rare on the neo-burlesque stage, as performers typically retain an element of modesty and tease through only stripping down to pasties and panties. This break with tradition is further highlighted through her facial expression, which



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looks completely ill-at-ease: her smile fades, her mouth curls up in disgust, and her eyes open in alarm. In doing so, she reaches between her legs to remove something from her vaginal area, a piece of paper folded and rolled into a small tube. Slowly, she unfolds it and her face expresses horror and disgust as she reveals a headshot picture of George W. Bush (Photo 5). Although I see this as theatricalized response, her utter repulsion forms a stark contrast with the excessive smile from moments earlier, and her body barely moves as she clutches the offending image. The pleasurable bumps and grinds of her striptease performance are now lost as this discovery renders her immobile in a state of trauma and abhorrence; she breathes heavily and looks horrified. This image calls to mind Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the grotesque, which produces an ambivalence of the body through the dual sensations of humor and disgust. We observe the stark contrast between Darlinda's exuberant and sexualized gyrations as she commences the striptease, and her naked stasis characterized through sweaty flesh, a pot belly, and sunken breasts. Furthermore, the choreographic inter*face* between her quotidian physicality, mock horror, and the smiling publicity shot of Bush works to provoke both repulsion and mirth. As the end to her act, now stripped of the artifice of American patriotism and saucy striptease, she rips the picture into shreds. She smiles warmly to the audience, who cheer wildly, as she throws the shreds of paper into the air, which flutter down around her.

*Photo 5. Darlinda Just Darlinda performing* You Have Made Me So Very Happy George Bush! *Photograph by Stacie Joy. Used with permission.*

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This number clearly contributes to a critique of George W. Bush's personal and political pro-life stance against abortion. As Darlinda states, "This act explores the thought of the government in my vagina. Why must abortion be a political issue? Why is health care not available to everyone? How really horrible it is that the government IS in my vagina!" (Darlinda Just Darlinda 2013). While in this example her facial composition generally corresponds to the actions of her body, the sustained and excessive expressions produce an unstable relationship to meaning. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the overcoding of the facial machine that assembles the facialized body of the American patriot or the female stripper is dismantled through the persistent indeterminacy of the smile. Her moving body redirects its potential meanings, and is then counterpointed with the critique of disgust and grotesque sight of the body laid bare.

## Conclusion

I clearly recognize the importance of the face in everyday social interaction; yet, I also acknowledge that dance performance offers a potential site for the face to subvert or exceed its perfunctory movement conventions. While Deleuze and Guattari offer an important intervention into the face as a mediating representation of a unique self, their concept of faciality offers a bleak vision of social existence through an abstract machine that overcodes expression with normative meaning. While I appreciate that the absolute Deleuzian thinker would argue that the multiple and ambiguous performativities produced through the facial choreographies of Lil O and Darlinda simply recreate new orders of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation, I want to make claim for the capacity of faces in motion to act as a site of meaning-production. Significantly, I do not read the face in isolation; rather I conceive the face through a choreographic inter*face*, which produces a semantic polarity at the intersection between facial expression and other faces or bodily territories. Although some forms of dance engage facial choreographies that reinforce aesthetic conventions and dominant meanings, others employ the choreographic inter*face* to allow strategies such as irony, polysemy, and hyperbole to come into play. As my two case studies reveal, the mobility and ambiguity of facial choreography opens a dialogic space through which meaning is generated and social and political critique take place.

### Notes

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1. See Auslander (2006), Brannigan (2011), Feder (1994), Foley (2005), and Liepe-Levinson (2002).

2. Deleuze also offers a complex theorization of the face through the lens of the filmic close-up in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986). See Rushton (2002) and Branningan (2011) for a useful explication of this material. Also of note here is Roland Barthes's (1973) semiotic analysis of the face of film star, Greta Garbo.

3. Kracauer (1995) describes the Tiller Girls as a de-individualized ornamental spectacle, which is organized in abstract geometric formations that are devoid of content. He then likens this rationalized mechanism to capitalist production.

4. Mark Franko speaks of another dialectic in that the chorine's smile masks her disciplined body, although its fixed disposition suggests that she is distracted and "her mind is elsewhere" (2002, 32).

5. They also formulate this as a critique of the Grand Narrative of Christianity as they liken the face to Christ.



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6. Although Darwin also took into account posture and gesture in the articulation of expression, my concern here lies in the disposition of the face.

7. In this particular discussion, Darwin comments on how the "children of savages" are more prone to sulking and pouting, and he likens this to apes who protrude their lips when surprised (Darwin 1998, 230).

8. Ekman (1989) critiques anthropologists of the mid-twentieth century, such as Margaret Mead and Ray Birdwhistell, who advocated the belief that social and cultural factors shape bodily expression rather than an innate universalism.

9. Several commentators critique Ekman's use of photographic imagery to analyze facial expression, arguing that motion significantly contributes to the articulation and interpretation of facial expression (Hejmadi, Davidson, and Rozin 2000; Mair 1975).

10. Gosselin et al. (1997) note that while FACS provides extremely detailed information about the anatomical configuration of the face, it is difficult to grasp the overall picture of the face.

11. A cluster of scholars within computer engineering employ FACS and Ekman's typology of six universal emotions to create facial animation software (Byun and Badler 2002; Pelechaud, Badler, and Steedman 1991, 1996); and psychologists Ahalya Hejmadi, Richard J. Davidson, and Paul Rozin (2000) produce a positivist study of facial expression recognition in response to images of Hindu classical dance.

12. Although I concentrate here on Schechner's (1988) engagement with Ekman's ideas, he also explores Darwin's interest in the connection between animal and human behavior, and considers how theater practice might form a continuation of "animal cultures."

13. Schechner (1988) does, however, offer the example of Kathakali dance theater performance in which the mechanical and theatricalized expression of emotion articulated through the actor's face can arouse real emotion.

14. This study seeks to analyze the differences between "authentic" and simulated facial expression by actors.

15. See Frank, Ekman, and Friesen (1997) for a research study on "fake" and "genuine" smiles.

16. See Adair (1992), Burt (1995), Caughie and Kuhn (1992), and Mulvey (1989).

17. Her emphasis on the stripper as a "seeing" individual engenders a clear critique of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1989), who considers the female film star to be a passive recipient of a "male gaze."

18. Communications scholar Warwick Mules (2010) provides a critique of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of faciality, as they fail to consider the face within the context of face-to-face encounters. Mules argues that the face-to-face experience prompts the self to respond critically to the indeterminacy or the contingency of the event itself, which facilitates opportunity for self-reflection.

19. In a forthcoming article for the *International Journal of Screen Dance*, co-authored with Colleen Hooper and titled "Faces, Choreography and Close-Ups: A Deleuzian Critique of *So You Think You Can Dance*," we examine the choreographic inter*face* between the facial expressions of a dancer, the judges, and the live audience members within a reality television dance audition.

20. For the remainder of the article, I refer to Virgil Gadson as "Lil O," which is his performance name within the hip-hop community.

21. Lil O was the eventual winner of this event.

22. Author's interview with Lil O on December 18, 2012.

23. Author's interview with Lil O on December 18, 2012.

24. Author's interview with Lil O on December 18, 2012.

25. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYoLXLt9jow.

26. I have used the idea of "masquerade," developed by Joan Riviere, in other work on neo-burlesque striptease as a way to conceive the feminine as an "exaggeration" that exposes its constructed nature (Dodds 2011).

27. Pasties are the small sequin-covered or tasseled disks used to shield the nipples.



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