YEEK!

Atlanta Hip-Hop Dance and the Subversion of Expressing "Your Energetic Explosive Klimax"

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Abstract *This chapter focuses on Atlanta's yeek community in order to elucidate historical and social linkages between yeeking, Atlanta hip hop, and subversive embodiment as a means of expressing political resistance. Yeeking is a hip-hop dance format that emerged in Atlanta during the 1980s. By the 1990s, yeeking became one of the foundational tenets of Atlanta's hip-hop aesthetics. While it began in the roller rinks as a form of coordinated skate-dancing, eventually dancers began to form (un-skated) competitive troops that would move in perfect synchronicity as they battled for prestige and belonging. Dancers on the yeek scene began producing/performing music specifically to fit their movements, ultimately leading to the formation of several Atlanta hip-hop party formats. This happened during a time when the city of Atlanta increased policing surrounding Black youth, especially in limiting when and how they were allowed to occupy public space; Black youth were pressured to remain relatively unseen and unheard in public. In response, much of Atlanta's hip-hop party music brought focus back onto Black bodies expressing catharsis, which, this chapter argues, constituted a kind of performative resistance to aggressive policing tactics that were used specifically to restrict the recreational behavior of Black youth.*

Throughout the 1990s, as the political wit and funky flows of artists like OutKast and Goodie Mob began to establish the city of Atlanta as the center of hip hop's "third coast," Atlanta's local party music expressed

political resistance by other means: by means not fully legible to the logocentric search for meaning often applied to hip-hop analysis. Atlanta bass, an offshoot of the more nationally recognized Miami bass, dominated Atlanta's party culture and the signature dance style that matched its high energy and fast pace was known as yeeking. Yeeking is arguably the corporeal catharsis that has electrified Atlanta hip-hop party aesthetics since the earliest days of the city's hip-hop scene. And yet, yeeking remains under-documented. Despite this, there is something viscerally familiar about the language and embodiment of yeeking. Yeeking is a high-energy hip-hop dance style that is performed in sync. Sometimes it's fully choreographed, and others a leader builds an emergent routine from a vocabulary of dance moves that are called out to ensure synchronicity is maintained.

Yeeking is a hip-hop dance format that formed in Atlanta during the 1980s and became one of the foundational tenets of Atlanta hip-hop aesthetics. It began in the roller rinks, as a form of coordinated skate-dancing, but eventually, dancers began to form (un-skated) competitive crews that would move in near-perfect synchronicity as they battled for prestige and belonging. This happened during a time when the city of Atlanta increased policing of Black youth, particularly to dictate the ways they were allowed to occupy public space. This chapter expands the discourse about meaning in hip-hop music and dance to encompass the subject of the identities that are overlaid onto bodies, and the meaning that is formed *between* performing bodies within shifting contexts. Yeeking became part of the embodied language of resistance as the first generation of Atlanta hip hoppers brought focus on the presence of their bodies as a means of claiming the right to congregate publicly. Dancers on the yeek scene laid the foundations for the core aesthetic elements of Atlanta's party scene, which had an impact on the sound of Atlanta hip hop overall. Consequently, much of Atlanta's hip-hop party music brought focus onto yeeking and its vocal and dynamic audience, which collectively constituted a kind of performative resistance to the confining respectability politics that sought specifically to restrict the recreational behavior of Black youth. The following offers an overview of yeeking and its sociopolitical subtext by outlining histories collected from members of Atlanta's

active yeek community in order to explore the linkages between yeeking, Atlanta hip hop, and subversive embodiment as a means of expressing political resistance.

Yeek: An Etymology

The vocalization of the audience is an important part of the experience. The name of the dance style came from these vocalizations. As the dancers did their routines, audiences would yell words like "yeek" and "yued," [1] which don't really have a specific meaning, but worked to mark skillfully performed cadential moves.

On several occasions, I asked my interlocutors to define "Yeek!" They always replied, in almost rehearsed fashion, "YEEK stands for your energetic explosive klimax" (klimax defiantly spelled with a "k"). I understood the packaged answer as a part of an effort to introduce yeeking to the world; a mnemonic device to convey to outsiders what this thing called yeek might be about. The people from the scene are constantly thinking about what it means to market the music, dance style, and the culture that it is connected to, and, for that reason, many of those with whom I spoke made sure they were on one accord with how they express their ideas, to be united as ambassadors of yeek. They have good reason to try to control the narrative surrounding yeek culture. As many of my conversations with these "yeek ambassadors" indicated, there's a sense that yeeking had already been mishandled, stolen from, or otherwise abused

1 I want to note that words like "yeek" and "yued" are, first and foremost, audible and, as such, resist being coded into written language. I have elected a spelling for "yued," though I could have spelled this word in many different ways: U-wed, you-ed, or U'ed. The centrality of orality in this scene means that the sound of the word surpasses its spelling. This is not to downplay the significance of the transcription process, especially for academic purposes, but to highlight that my choices here are less about asserting a specific spelling as definitive and more about capturing an imperfect semblance of the vocal gesture.

by outsiders who got a glimpse of it.[2] Even artists who were once steeped in yeek culture or stood at its fringes failed to introduce yeeking to the national hip-hop scene in a way that resulted in material social, cultural and economic benefits for participants.[3] And since being on one unified accord about the parameters of yeeking might literally yield material and social gains for participants, it's important for these dancers to maintain consistency in marketing.

As outlined above, the dance style known as yeeking did not have a name when it began and, according to people from the earliest era, it took years, some even say decades, before the dance style would be unified under the moniker "yeek." Even still, the term "yeek" was a defining part of the dance and its surrounding culture. The centering of this exclamation at once highlights the significance of the dynamic audience-performer engagement in defining the scene and its soundscape. Elsewhere I have argued that this vocal performance laid down the aesthetic foundations for subsequent hip-hop party music genres like Atlanta bass and crunk, both of which liberally incorporate chanted interjections (Holt 2018). And, just as those chants signify a kind of metacommunicative resistance defined more by the act of the performance than the meaning of the words, so too did the word "yeek" simultaneously resist reduction to

2 Though currently unverified, one of the oft repeated stories I came across detailed how Bobby Brown and his dancers would hide in the back of roller rinks videotaping yeek crews in order to plagiarize the moves in concerts and music videos.

3 T-Boz, a member of the 1990s girl group TLC known for her funk-adjacent contralto and pristine dance moves, was a part of the yeek scene before her musical career. The opening scene of the TLC biopic film *CrazySexyCool: The TLC Story* shows T-Boz, portrayed by Drew Sidora, yeeking at the Jellybean roller rink. The movie depicts T-Boz as an excellent dancer who is unable to find a yeek crew because of a general culture of sexism; moreover, the movie implies that this exclusion inspired T-Boz to investigate other creative outlets, eventually leading her to join TLC. Other Atlanta-based artists like Ciara, Usher, Lil Jon, and OutKast, hired yeek dancers in their music videos and, even occasionally, incorporated yeek dance moves into the lyrics of their songs. For instance the 1,2 Step, the A-Town stomp and the muscle from Ciara's "1, 2 Step" and Usher's "Yeah" all come from yeeking.

a strict definition and come to represent race, place, subcultural affiliation and, importantly, a specific syntactical and performative function. In short, to yell "YEEK!" meant something, but that meaning was more performative than semantic in nature.

It is possible that the word "yeek" has phased into the national lexicon for a younger generation without their direct knowledge of its origins in the word "yeet." In 2014, a YouTube user who went by the moniker Milik Fullilove released a video that featured Milik doing an impromptu dance, accompanied by his cameraman's syncopated utterances, among them "ooh" and "yeet" (Ritzen 2023); consistent with how Atlanta dancers used "yeek," "yeet" marks the last beat of an 8-count (GWA Liko 2014). Arguably, the word "yeet" really became anchored in youth speech when another video by user "Lil' Meatball" went viral on the platform Vine, amassing over 40 million views (Ritzen 2023). The video shows the young man dancing while walking forward on, what appears to be, a high school running track. His movements were punctuated with metered vocalizations, usually "ah"s, and on the rhythmic cadences of his improvised choreography, he made a gesture akin to throwing an invisible object and yells "YEET," or possibly "YEEK." It is difficult to parse out.

As anybody who has spent time basking in the lilting melodies of a Jawja[4] drawl, the last consonant phoneme of a word is sometimes more suggested than articulated. So, a viewer of this video hears an undeniable "Yee-" with an abrupt stop, implying a hard consonant ending, but the specifics of which consonant are somewhat elusive. Rather than associating the sound with punctuating the dance, the internet fixated on the throwing gesture. Additionally, given that social media necessitates encoding audible elements into a readable format, the spelling of "yeet" was established in the collective lexicon. There is no evidence that these dancers were part of the yeek scene. Despite the similarities in the vocables and their relationship to marked gestures in dance, the actual movements are distinct from yeeking. This does not, however, preclude the

4 A spelling of Georgia (US state) that evokes a sense of the accent with which many residents of the state pronounce its name.

possibility that yeeking and its related music indirectly seeded these viral performances. But beyond these parallels, it's possible that any definitive connection, if there is one at all, is lost to time, leaving at most the ephemeral signature of an underground pop cultural phenomenon that escaped in-depth documentation.

Since then, yeet has taken on the meaning "to discard an item at a high velocity"[5] which reflects the gesture in Lil' Meatball's viral Vine video, but its usage connoted more than that; it became a generational signifier. As is the case with most new slang, those who used the term "yeet" expressed a kind of insider knowledge that signaled to those around them their familiarity with internet culture. The term permeated internet memes and punctuated videos until eventually, it lost its novelty, as slang tends to do, but it remains part of the social media lexicon.

The popularity of the term "yeet" constituted a crisis of sorts for people on the yeeking scene. Despite there being evidence, circumstantial though it may be, that the two terms are the same, or, at the very least, that they are etymologically linked, yeek dancers worried that their decades-long tradition would be misinterpreted as an attempt to appropriate and capitalize off an internet trend. More importantly, given that the term yeet was symbolically affixed to younger millennials and Gen Zers, people on the yeek scene expressed concerns that their work in marketing yeeking to the national hip-hop scene would be derailed or dismissed by people confusing yeek for yeet. This generational distinction is important for the yeek community because yeeking represents Atlanta's hip-hop aesthetics during the 1980s-1990s, a cherished era in hip hop which offers a sense of prestige that might not be extended to more contemporary movements in hip hop, like trap and drill. During my fieldwork, these apprehensions were expressed during a yeek performance that included a short skit wherein a young actor, as a surrogate for younger hip hoppers, confidently announced that they knew all about yeet, to which an older actor/dancer responded "I'm not

5 This definition was pulled from the first result on the public web forum for slang (Urban Dictionary 2017).

talking about yeeT, I'm talking about yeeK" after which dancers took the stage to demonstrate Atlanta's hip-hop dance history beginning with yeeking and ending with more contemporary popular dances like the nae nae[6] (personal observation, 2016). The capitalization here represents an intentionally exaggerated emphasis on the closing consonant sound to highlight the velar plosive of the K, not to be confused with the alveolar plosive of the T, thereby symbolically heading off any potential misinterpretation. The message of the performance is clear: to confuse yeek with yeet is an affront to Atlanta hip-hop history.

Too Busy to Hate, but Not Too Busy to Regulate

The city of Atlanta holds a cherished symbolic space in African American history. It is one of few urban centers in the nation to consistently symbolize Black upward mobility and middle-classness, earning it the occasional moniker "Black Mecca" (Hobson 2017: 2; Hunter and Robinson 2018: 178).[7] There is good reason for Atlanta to be held in

6 The nae nae is a dance whose invention is credited to the Atlanta hip-hop group We Are Toonz and their song "Drop That #Naenae" (2013), but it is most affiliated with Silentó's song "Watch Me (Whip/Nae Nae)" (2015). The dance move is performed by putting one hand in the air and rocking the body back and forth with feet planted.

7 In the US, the term "Black Mecca" refers to a city that becomes an epicenter for migrating African Americans relocating specifically for opportunities related to socioeconomic ascension. It should be noted that this term has been used in reference to many cities, including Atlanta, Chicago, (the neighborhood of) Harlem, and others. The important assertion here is that a city referred to as a Black Mecca draws in and maintains a Black population that seeks to reproduce a middle-class experience regarding economic stability, education, property ownership, and professional opportunities. The evocation of Black Mecca here is not meant to flatten the city's complicated race and class history, but to indicate that for many, Atlanta, like all the other Black Meccas, became a symbol of African American wealth and cosmopolitanism in defiance of national trends of racial inequality.

such high esteem regarding its Black history. For over a century, Atlanta has had a stable and thriving Black middle class, bolstered in part by its unique bounty of collegiate institutions aimed at training and supporting Black professionals. Atlanta is the location of the Atlanta University Center Consortium (AUC),[8] which is the oldest and largest consortium of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This cluster of prestigious Black colleges drew in leading figures in radical Black philosophy, like W.E.B. DuBois (who taught at Atlanta University) and produced world-renowned figures in activism like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who attended Morehouse College. Additionally, the city of Atlanta has a long history of Black engagement in politics, evidenced in part by Black representation in high offices as far back as the 1960s and its consistent election of Black mayors since 1973 (Hobson 2017: 66–67). All these facets of Atlanta's relatively progressive record for Black socioeconomics are doubly unique given Atlanta's location in the American south. While racism was never an issue confined by region, the US south was notorious for its political and legislative commitment to the subjugation of Black civilians throughout most of its history. That a southern city successfully established and maintained a Black middle class during the Jim Crow era stood as both a point of pride for Atlanta and a beacon of hope for a region grappling with the long-echoing influence of chattel slavery. And Atlanta's thriving economy was referenced as a testament to the pragmatic benefits of (at least professional) integration.

Mayor Ivan Allen Jr., who was in office from 1962 to 1970, announced that Atlanta was "a city too busy to hate" as a part of his initial mayoral campaign in 1961, and he later adopted the phrase as the city's unofficial slogan. This assertion was made during a time when White supremacist terrorism was rampant across the American south in response to Civil

8 The AUC consortium currently includes Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, and Morehouse School of Medicine, but in the past has also included Morris Brown College and the Interdenominational Theological Center.

Rights organizing aimed at ensuring that equality, access, and protection would be made available to Black people. Atlanta had relatively few widely known incidents of anti-Black violence and when questioned about what the city had done differently to avoid the violence of its neighbors, Mayor Allen offered a simple reply: Atlanta is a city too busy to hate. On the surface, it was true. Atlanta was a racially diverse city with a growing economy. But the city was also cross-cut by a series of invisible barriers that could be freely permeated by White residents, but not Black ones. Black people crossing those invisible barriers could result in arrest, harassment, or worse.

Just one year after Mayor Allen first declared the city was too busy to hate, an incident reminded Atlantans of the prematurity and naïveté of the claim. In Peyton Forest, a White and at one time legally segregated neighborhood on the Westside of Atlanta, residents successfully lobbied the city to commission the building of a physical barricade, a wall, to clearly demarcate the edges of the neighborhood (Allen 1996: 137). In doing so, they hoped to create a marked boundary beyond which Black people would neither be welcome nor tolerated. Local Civil Rights activists understood the wall's erection as a hostile gesture and, one night, a group of unidentified people tore it down and threw its remnants into a nearby stream. The Peyton Forest residents responded by re-erecting the wall with trees and nearby debris. This pattern of tearing down and rebuilding persisted until the courts deemed the wall an illegal segregatory structure and ordered it be taken down in 1964, citing the passing of the Civil Rights Act as the guiding legal precedent. The incident was so profound for the city that it is sometimes referred to as "Atlanta's Berlin Wall" (Allen 1996: 137). In response to the wall's official destruction, within a year many of the homeowners in that neighborhood fled, some publicly lamenting that the court's support of the wall's destruction was an assault on their safety and their way of life, leaving the neighborhoods that they felt were most susceptible to integration (Allen 1996: 137–138). The fast drain of wealth from this community and others like it caused an abrupt shift in demographics; once wholly White middle-class suburbs were inhabited, dominated even, by poor and working-class Black

residents within three decades, creating a unique topography of Black suburban poverty.

This instance, and undoubtedly countless undocumented and less dramatic scenes like it, demonstrates a lot about the spatial politics of race that germinated in Atlanta. In fact, it has been suggested that I-20, the interstate highway that runs through Atlanta, bifurcating it into two regions, was constructed strategically to strengthen the social and topographical barrier between the mostly White neighborhoods of the northern sector of the city and the mostly Black neighborhoods in its south (Rutheiser 1996: 84). While the Peyton Forest incident hinged on the presence (or absence) of a barrier, allowing courts to focus on a specific physical entity in upholding the Civil Rights Act, in most other cases the barriers were less tangible but were no less palpable. Segregatory tactics, like the use of aggressive policing, gerrymandering, and real estate redlining, fused with civic and regional authorities' hostility to Black Atlantans and effectively limited Black residents' and sojourners' ability to safely travel through and/or occupy public space in the city.

These social trends were exacerbated for those who were socioeconomically disadvantaged. As stated earlier, Atlanta has had a robust Black middle class for quite some time, but that doesn't negate the experiences of poor and working-class Black people. Those who did not have middle-class status or whose presentation of self did not align with middle-class respectability were further subjected to having their presence interrogated or policed. Paradoxically, the presence of a Black middle class can facilitate the further marginalization of poor and working-class Black people when policymakers and other officials conflate the desires and lived experiences of the Black middle class with those of less socioeconomically advantaged Black civilians (Hunter and Robinson 2018: 180).[9] This is not to suggest that intraracial solidarity did

9 For more on this discussion, see Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. This text dedicates considerable space to arguing that the discursive emphasis on middle-class and wealthy Black individuals and communities facilitates racial inequality on the macro level because of a related and false implication that anti-Black racism can-

not exist across class lines, but simply to highlight that the discussion of racial equality in Atlanta and elsewhere necessitates critical interrogations about intersecting identities and experiences that render equality conditional, rather than innate. In short, despite its reputation as the city too busy to hate, Atlanta was never a city too busy to regulate its delicate invisible barriers, its interracial peace revolving around Black citizens reproducing respectable selves and never crossing into *de facto* White areas.[10] This tension would bubble to the surface again decades after the Peyton Forest wall came down when one of the city's darkest chapters was exacerbated, if not fully enabled, by the city's propensity to restrict and ignore its poor and working-class Black residents.

White Flight, Black Space, and the Search for a Safe Place to Play

In the year 1981, Wayne Williams was arrested for murder. While he was charged and convicted of two murders, he was publicly declared the person solely responsible for dozens of missing and murdered Black children in the city of Atlanta over the previous few years. The case of Atlanta's missing and murdered children highlighted disconnects between the city's poor and working-class Black communities and its political leadership. Dozens of children went missing and theories abounded about why. Many in the local communities suggested that White supremacist terrorist groups were responsible. Others blamed

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not coexist with Black socioeconomic stability, which then negates any discussions about systemic racism and ultimately impedes legislative and political attempts to combat racial inequality.

10 Segregation falls into two categories: *de jure*, or legally enforced segregation, and *de facto*, or socially enforced segregation. While *de jure* segregation was determined to be unconstitutional with the Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, *de facto* segregation endured. In fact, despite the many decades since the official end of legally enforced segregation, many public institutions and neighborhoods/districts remain racially segregated.

sex trafficking rings. And still others argued that it was the police themselves, either working alone or in service to one of the other theories (Hobson 2017: 127–130). At the very least, many people in those communities felt that police forces and the media were apathetic and that their responses were too light and misguided.

The parents of these children were often derided as irresponsible or negligent or the children themselves were called "runaways and hustlers" (Hobson 2017: 100). The focus of the public responses to these cases brought attention to a failure of Black children to behave and Black parents to keep their children contained. A curfew was put in place for unaccompanied youth, though it should be noted that it was essentially enforced in the poor Black neighborhoods of the inner city. This is briefly referenced in CeeLo's verse in Goodie Mob's "Cell Therapy," where he laments "you know what else they trying to do? Make a curfew especially for me and you." Parents were encouraged to drop off and pick up their children directly to and from school. This, of course, was a problem for many of these parents whose working schedules and access to transportation lacked the malleability to accompany their children to and from school. If children or teens were found in violation of curfew or were unattended in public, they could be detained by police, and their parents could be arrested or fined, a potentially devastating penalty for poor and working-class people who worked diligently and strategically to cover their family's costs of living. For my interlocutors, this moment was a huge part of their relationship to public space. Their formative memories were haunted by a sense that when they were in public, they could expect to be watched by different kinds of threatening forces with the knowledge that if they went out to play or socialize, even in the best-case scenarios, they and their parents could be arrested. And in the worst case, they could disappear.

The framing of these murders as ultimately the result of cultural pathology placed life-or-death stakes onto Black youths' recreational behavior. Said another way, the implication was that these young people falling prey to violent crime was a result of an inability or unwillingness on *their* part to be inaudible, restrained. It still took nearly two decades into the 21st century for these victims to garner much sympathy or

acknowledgment. In 2019, Mayor Keisha Bottoms announced that the case had been reopened (Dickson 2019) and at the time of writing this chapter, its reexamination is ongoing.

The impact this moment had on the Black youth who survived it remains underacknowledged; these young people who became Atlanta's first hip-hop generation were haunted by the looming shadow of a boogie man who could take them at any time. This moment is part of the reason why so many Black youth of this generation would cram into roller rinks. The rinks were one of the few semi-public spaces where Black youth had access to each other outside of school; the only place where they had a great deal of agency in defining the contours of their cultural experience. It was a literal safe space. But beyond that, it was the only place where Black youth felt free of the weaponized hyper-surveillance of the state and could react, unencumbered, to the multivalent pressure to be confined and unseen. And in that space, with time and effort, they developed the dancing and eventually the music of yeek culture.

By the 1980s, Atlanta, like many cities, had several roller rinks that catered to young people. They existed at a liminal crossroads between the playground and the nightclub. Roller rinks had DJs whose job it was to mix (and remix) dance music to keep the crowd satisfied; they also lacked an age minimum, so young people, even those younger than the legal age to attend other types of club spaces, were able to enter and enjoy, to actively evaluate and engage with new music in large gatherings. This positioned roller rinks as important nodes in Black youths' socialization in the metro-Atlanta area.[11] Roller rinks like Jellybean in Ben Hill, Cascade in the West End, and The Golden Glide in Decatur were flooded

11 Roller rinks were important for American youth culture at large and Black youth culture specifically in many places outside of Atlanta. The specificity with which the claim that roller rink culture is an important facet of Black youth experiences in 1980s Atlanta is not meant to negate the social role of the roller rink elsewhere; however, the interlocutors that helped construct this oral history spoke specifically of Atlanta roller-skating and the claims made here are bound by that.

with Black youth on weekends in the 1980s and 1990s. These were some of the few spaces in Atlanta that were defined exclusively by Black youth culture.

On weekends and over summers, school-aged Black youth would go to these rinks and stay there for hours; it was one of the few ways in which young Black people were able to create connections across school district barriers. While there were established school rivalries, particularly regarding sports and marching bands, roller rinks as a space provided a kind of interaction that was at once much broader, i.e., more tied to a local construction of "Eastside" or "Westside" of the metro-Atlanta area, and more personal. In some cases, rivalries would arise by affiliated roller rinks as attendees would argue that their preferred rink had the best music or the best skaters. Regardless, the experience of attending an Atlanta roller rink came with a kind of ubiquity: they each featured a large oblong skating rink with an elevated DJs booth on one side, standing between a gaming and dining area at one end near a small accessories shop and skate rental booth at the other. Another pervasive facet of the roller rink scene was the way the patrons related to and transformed the space, which would, eventually, become a driving force in Atlanta hip-hop aesthetics.

Dance-skating was a seminal feature of these spaces. The purpose of the rink was not simply to travel the circle en masse, but to do so with considerable style and flair; it was, in essence, a dance floor on wheels. Those who were able to skate backward, do spins, splits, and steps, who could incorporate popular dance moves in their skating, maintain balance and momentum while weaving through the crowd, had a great amount of cachet in the rink.

Throughout the 1980s in metro-Atlanta, the most skilled skaters formed competitive crews at the roller rinks. These groups, usually consisting of between two and six members, would zip around the rink in highly choreographed unison. There was little room for improvisation in this format as the prestige of the group hinged on its ability to maintain formation and to move as one. The best crews circulated through all the rinks, challenging other crews in other areas to better them in coordination, style, creativity, and athleticism. Around this time, something else

began to happen. Some of the crews began to transition their routines from skates to sneakers. While some crews zipped around the rink, others would be on the sidelines or in the center of the rink, practicing or performing routines as (un-wheeled) dance moves.

A Brief History of Yeeking

There is currently no literature on yeeking and there is very little on the roller rink culture from which it emerged. Much of my research, therefore, relies on the stories of my interlocutors to construct an account of a moment, a culture that eluded decades of documentation in an effort to restore prestige and material gains to the people who created yeeking and who keep the scene alive today. This effort to produce, perfect, and capitalize upon yeeking as the definitive Atlanta hip-hop dance style extends back to the early years of Atlanta hip-hop history. The story of yeek is bound to the story of Atlanta. The following is a composite of oral histories put forth by people from the scene.

When questioned about the history of yeeking, participants identify specific waves or eras that are affectively tied to important moments and spaces. The first wave was sometimes referred to as the roller rink era. This era, temporally assigned to the early 1980s, was defined by the first attempts to establish a dance culture in the roller rinks of Atlanta. During this wave, the first competitive skate-dancing crews were created, establishing the roller rinks as a central space for Atlanta's budding hip-hop culture. This would have also been the time that crews, after practicing their routines without their skates, began engaging in the signature coordinated dances that would later be known as yeeking.

The second wave/era, the late 1980s to early 1990s, is sometimes referred to as the talent show era. During this time, politicians and schools invested in talent showcases for Black youth to incentivize high-school-aged Black youth to refocus their leisure time on "productive" efforts; this was especially important since national conversations about social health, especially regarding recreational drug use and violent crime, placed the blame squarely on under-stimulated antisocial Black

youth as the central culprits. The sudden presence of talent showcases allowed yeek dancers to reconceptualize their routines for the stage and, importantly, raised the stakes for rivalries between competing crews and/or neighborhoods. Recordings of these showcases provide some of the earliest video evidence of yeeking.

The third wave/era encompasses the early-to-late 1990s and coincides with the peak years of Atlanta's largest Black youth party event, Freaknik. While Freaknik began in 1982 (Thompson 2007: 27), it would not emerge as one of the city's largest events until the mid-1990s, with a peak of about 200,000 attendees in 1994 (ibid.: 28). During these years, yeeking and its accompanying music, Atlanta bass, dominated the city's hip-hop party scene, which increased interest in the style. Many of the music videos and concert performances coming out of Atlanta during this era featured yeeking. There was no discussion of a fourth wave of yeeking as its popularity went into decline in the late 1990s with party culture shifting to the more mosh-oriented movements of crunk. But there is a concerted effort to revive yeeking today. Dancers from the original three waves perform and offer classes to younger people in an effort to keep the dance style alive, to highlight the ways that it is responsible for some of the elements of contemporary hip hop and to, hopefully, inspire a new generation to yeek.

As interest in the dance moves intensified, more crews emerged to compete against each other for bragging rights, each with its own name, brand, and style. Spontaneous contests would emerge in the center of rinks and, at some locations, would temporarily take over the entire rink for dance battles. Audiences gathered around these ciphers, at the center of which groups would be executing their routines with perfect synchronicity. Onlookers would cheer and chant along with the music, calling upon an emergent vocabulary of heretofore nonsensical exclamations with a particularly impressive move or sequence was executed. Dancers and watchers alike would yell "AY!", "YUED!", and "YU!" to affirm the people in the center and, most importantly "YEEK!" when a concluding move hit just right, usually on the final beat of the sequence. To get the audience to yell "YEEK!" was tantamount to a victory knell—a collective declaration of the dancers' virtuosity, if not triumph, in the

moment. So, it is fitting that later, the dancers who engaged this style would take on this word as its name.

As indicated by the name of the second era of yeeking, talent shows were another important performance site that ultimately shifted the performance format again. While schools commissioned some of these contests, it seems that others were more spontaneous or youth-organized events where the audience evaluated the talents of competitors and voiced their approval, or conversely their disapproval, with their immediate responses. This amplified the stakes for performance. While there is theoretically some cover when crews performed at the rink, with skaters circling and people there enjoying the arcade and gift shop, transitioning to a stage meant creating a kind of showcase that necessitated absolute focus. This new context brought with it a desire to amp things up, in terms of the moves, the music, the costuming, and the intensity. By the mid-1990s, yeeking was a central feature of dance showcases, public party events, Atlanta-based music videos, and nightclubs: at that point, it epitomized Atlanta hip-hop style.

The Movements of Yeek

The basic movement of yeeking is a side-to-side step. At the opening of every dance routine (whether improvised or pre-choreographed) dancers begin with the same left-to-right motion, the pendular moment of which generally continues throughout the routine. This motion is a holdover from yeek's start in roller dancing. Just as skaters propel in a zig-zag pattern as weight shifts from one leg to the other, so too does yeeking. In maintaining that central motion, even in relatively neutral positions, yeeking harkens back to its origins in the roller rinks of Atlanta.

The names of the moves and the moves themselves work somewhat syntactically, a pool of well-known fragments that can be broken apart and recombined in new sequences that insiders can perform in unison if guided by a leader calling them out. To borrow from Saussure's linguistic frame of langue and parole, yeek dancers pull from a shared "vocab-

ulary" of movements (langue) that find meaning when they are strategically and knowingly sequenced in ways that convey meaning (parole), or more importantly for their purposes, expressions of aesthetic pleasure. While most yeek competitive routines were meticulously choreographed and practiced beforehand, this ability to coordinate on the fly expedites the choreography process. Furthermore, in improvised performances, the ability to follow a leader's call and perform in unison would allow a crew to maintain formation either on the dance floor or skating around the roller rink. These calls were part of the soundscape. Almost rapped, they have a rhythm to them that fits with the music and becomes part of what is expected of the performance. Even at times when the choreography is settled upon before the performance, the dancers would interject vocalizations, not unlike those that the audience would contribute at the rink competitions, as a means of articulating their moves. In short, yeeking is a kind of dancing, but a major component of the performance is the voice, both as a communicative tool in emergent choreography and as an exclamatory punctuation. On different occasions, the established yeek dancers offered some historical context for the moves they taught, usually referencing a specific person that was known for the move. The implication is that the canon of yeek movements grows directly out of the competitive dancers' drive to put forth something new; however, as most of these histories indicate, one crew/person might have invented the move, but it was often transformed and standardized by another.

While both improvised and pre-planned routines are specific regarding the unison sequencing of movements, the music seemed to be somewhat interchangeable. I witnessed the same routine performed with different songs, even with different tempos. Sometimes, the dancers would go through several songs searching for the right tempo and feel to match their energy for the night. If the song had a 4/4 time signature, had a moderate-to-fast tempo, and a strong bass line, any yeek routine, improvisational or through-choreographed, could be performed to it.

As carefully crafted as the choreography is, and as rigidly synchronized as the dancers must be, yeeking maintains a sense of explosive spontaneity. Most of that comes from small gestural amendments each

dancer makes to the moves, enough to express a kind of individuality. These decisions, nearly imperceptible to those unfamiliar with the format, are a part of how the dancers in this scene evaluate each other. In a dance where everybody moves in unison, where every group pulls from the same pool of movements, the *how* becomes a central means of earning prestige, a method of formulating a signature. Additionally, this latitude for micro-adjustments allows for a slight imprecision that ultimately adds to the feeling that each dancer is truly expressing their "every explosive klimax!" in a way that is incapable of being fully contained.

One additional consistent component of the dance style is the big finishing move. It manifests differently each time, but usually represents some forceful gesture: a stomp, a jerk to one side, or a full body crunch. But its purpose is to punctuate the sequence. To follow our syntactical metaphor, the closing move is the exclamation point that marks the end of the sentence. This move is always accompanied by a collective vocalization by both performer and audience; a loud and full-chested "YEEK!" This exclamation preceded the official naming of the dance style; in fact, as indicated earlier, what became known as yeeking existed without a specific name for years. But the importance of this moment in the performance imbued the word "yeek" with special significance, which is how it eventually became the defining referent.

Yeek Musicality

In my interviews, dancers who were on the scene when it first emerged spoke nostalgically of songs that were played on heavy rotation at the rink. The ones that they selected for practice most frequently included "Planet Rock" by Afrika Bambaataa, "Din Daa Daa" by George Kranz, "Panic Zone" by N.W.A. and "Set It Off" by Strafe. To my surprise, the selected music only occasionally included more local, i.e., Atlanta, artists. This mix, however, makes sense for referencing the genesis of yeeking. Atlanta did not have a well-established hip-hop party sound in the first half of the 1980s and roller rink DJs would have, undoubtedly, pulled

dance records from non-local artists to establish and maintain the party. The early yeek dancers skated to this music, but as the dance style broke free of its skate-dancing origins, performers began to demand something different from the standard roller rink repertoire. According to the dancers I spoke to, the first musical shifts for yeeking occurred when some dancers complained that the tempo of most music was too slow. Since the dancers no longer had to coordinate moves with the pragmatics of skating, they were free to incorporate more acrobatics, more elaborate footwork, and, importantly, faster speeds. Crews resolved to get somebody to physically force records to play faster by pushing the record along with their fingers. The familiar hip-hop and R&B songs would become faster, hovering around 140–175 bpm, higher-pitched, and timbrally tinnier. Additionally, the acoustics and crowd noise, or more appropriately the vocal contribution of the audience and performers, combined to create the unique sound of yeek. The desire for this musical aesthetic and this tempo drove many yeek dancers to branch into music making.

Many of my interlocutors from the yeeking scene had at some point become involved in making hip-hop music, be it as singers, rappers, producers, or DJs, but the driving force behind their music always revolved around creating something to dance to. There were several music producers that started out as crew members. For example, DJ Taz and DJ Kizzy Rock, two of Atlanta's local celebrity producers, were central in forming and producing the subgenre of Atlanta bass; they credit yeeking with inspiring their composition methodologies. At a public forum on yeek's history, Atlanta hip-hop artist and producer Kizzy Rock spoke specifically of a yeek dancer who inspired the texture of one of his most successful hits, "Whatz Up Whatz Up," performed by Playa Poncho and LA Sno:

> The first record I produced… 'Whatz Up Whatz Up'… the whole concept came from yeeking and the dancers. It was about the talk. You heard what [Ted, a yeek dancer] just did? When he came out here? 'Got damn. Unh. What's up [performed with yeek-style hand gestures with a sparse rap-style vocal]… it came from that and that one lit-

> tle thing… so when Playa Poncho [the featured artist] talking about ideas and shit, he a lying muthafucka. That's some real shit… The dance-offs. That's where it came from. I got it from Ant [another yeek dancer]. That nigga talk like a muthafucka. More than anybody. He'll be like 'What's up… Ya grandmamma too… Get some… Unh!… Suck a dick nigga…' [performed as before]. I could give it to you over and over. But I got the whole concept of 'Whatz Up Whatz Up' from the dance talking. For real. (Personal observation February 2016)

Kizzy Rock's track for "Whatz Up Whatz Up" is typical of Atlanta hip-hop party music of the mid-1990s. The beats featured extended sections of chant and/or voiced interjections that mirrored the yeeking soundscape; it was part of the underlying sonic texture of Atlanta's hip-hop dance music. The incorporation of the sonic and performative features that are specific to yeeking marked the style as distinctly Atlanta hip-hop party music. The patterns of call-and-response in this song and others bring focus onto the role of the audience's performance in hearing. "Whatz Up Whatz Up" is essentially yeeking disembodied, packaged, and redistributed for hip-hop dance styles, yeeking and others, to be performed and vocalized with.

Kizzy Rock's contention that Playa Poncho is a "lying muthafucka" for claiming to be the driving force behind the song's format highlights a fundamental rift between perceptions of creation/ownership in traditional hip hop and the collaborative/democratic gestural and compositional methodologies that were most prominent on the yeek scene. As the primary rapper on the song, Playa Poncho is the one most credited with it, just as the vocalists on many mainstream hip-hop songs are often considered the "owner" or the individual most responsible for the song's gravitas. The notion that meaning and impact are most attributable to the rapper is, at least in part, due to a text-centric evaluative approach that likens hip-hop music to poetry. From this perspective, the importance of the chanted section and its connections to the scene to which it refers is diminished if not disregarded; or conversely, such a section, as is the case of "Whatz Up Whatz Up" is understood as an extension of the rapper's creativity. In asserting that the composition of the song is

based upon the sonic experience of yeeking, the vocalizations of both the dancers and the crowds, Kizzy Rock directly challenges the focus on a singular narrative-style vocal performance of the rapper. In this subtle way, Kizzy Rock articulates that Atlanta bass was about two things: a cathartic body and collective voicing.

Conclusion

Dance has always been central to discussions of meaning in hip hop. From its earliest moments, the presence of people moving acrobatically, audaciously was an important part of the establishment of hip-hop space. Accordingly, from the earliest writings that would eventually form the area of hip-hop studies, the rhythms and gestures of breaking and b-boying have been seminal inclusions to theorizations of hip hop's cultural intervention. And yet, breaking and b-boying are far from the only iterations of social dance that hip hop yields. As our theoretical scope expands ever farther beyond the hip hop that germinated in 1970s New York, so too must our frames for theorizing and historicizing hip-hop embodiment and dance.

Yeeking is a manifestation of hip hop's radical embodiment that somehow fell through the cracks; it evaded much documentation or theorization throughout the decades, despite its impact on Atlanta's hip-hop party aesthetics. That could possibly be attributed to how visually different yeeking is from breaking and b-boying. Or perhaps it is because hip-hop scenes in the US South have only recently garnered much focus in academia, and even still that focus remains primarily concentrated on rappers. Whatever the reason, the elusiveness of yeeking has not lessened its potency.

Given that yeeking has eluded being the subject of research or even much journalism, how does knowledge of yeeking contribute something useful to hip-hop discourse? The answer is threefold. First, yeeking is arguably at the core of Atlanta hip-hop party music. It was the driving force behind many Atlanta hip-hop artists' first foray into music-making and led many of them to form compositional techniques that became

signatures of Atlanta's style. Atlanta-based hip hoppers have been a major force in the market in the 21st century, so understanding contemporary hip hop necessitates delving into this movement. The second reason yeeking must be entered into discourse has to do with the investment of the people on the scene. Many of the interviews I conducted included some summation of yeek's importance to their lives or, in some cases, their survival. A recurrent theme was the extremely limited opportunities in poor and working-class Black neighborhoods for Black youths' recreational time. They each shared a sense of malignant stagnancy, a feeling that had it not been for yeeking, they might have succumbed to a more treacherous path. In a city that sought to restrict, rather than protect, Black youth during a crisis of missing and murdered children, yeeking in roller rinks and at talent showcases was one of the few activities through which the Black youth of Atlanta could express a sense of agency in defining space and cultural particularity. And the third is that yeeking offers an apt case study for entering embodiment in discussions about meaning in hip-hop music, which has implications for other subgeneric movements in hip hop.

What I offer here is not an exhaustive history, but rather a brief sketch of some of the sociopolitical phenomena that imbue yeeking with its performative resistance. Each of these moments fundamentally impacted a generation of Black Atlantans' relationship to the right to occupy public space for their own purposes. Atlanta's own Civil Rights era slogan, "a city too busy to hate," falls back on a neoliberal idea of capitalism as a meritocratic equalizer; one which notably stood in stark contrast to the lived experience of Atlanta's first generation of hip hoppers. For them, safety and freedom were leveraged against their willingness to navigate life in respectable silence, diminishing their (raced and classed) presence, and they responded by creating music and dance that was purposefully loud and grounded in the Black body expressing "Your Energetic Explosive Klimax," YEEK!

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