Waacking

In this chapter, I discuss gender performances within the style of waacking drawing on dance and performative ethnography. In *Between Theatre and Anthropology,* Richard Schechner (2000: 6) alludes to the "liminal qualities of performance," pointing to the transformative aspects of rituals, theatre, and trance dancing. Such performances result in social status changes among performers, and sometimes even among spectators. In the case of initiation rites, permanent transformations can be achieved, whereas in aesthetic theatre and trance dancing, the changes are mostly only temporary in nature – Schechner refers to such temporary changes as transportation. In what follows, I will explore the social changes realized in dance – whether permanently or ephemerally with respect to the performance of gender, as gender bending is central to the style of waacking. As DeFrantz (2016: 69) argues, queer gender articulations, even by non-queer dancers, bring the practices of black social dance to the foreground.

According to Naomi Bragin (2014: 64), "Textual and verbal descriptions of Waacking often obscure its queer[15] (Punk) history, or resort to vague characterizations of the style as 'feminine'." Such characterization of the style as feminine are based on normative gender categories, which inform the bodily practices of waacking, including its perceptions in Vietnam. In her elaboration of gender stereotypes in Vietnam, Nguyen (2019: 57) draws on Herzfeld's (2005) understanding of stereotypes. According to Herzfeld, social groups make use of metaphors to structure their self-representations. Although some individuals may contest stereotypes that inform such representations, they are nonetheless important to social actors' meaning-making,

15 In this chapter, queer mainly refers to non-normative genders and sexualities, whereas Johnson (2009) correctly points out that, in academic circles, queer has also come to be deployed in anti-essentialist discussions about non-normative expressions of race and class.

as they employ them consciously to achieve their own goals. Such stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are constantly negotiated in the Vietnamese hip hop dance community. Although this book is focused on hip hop's multipolarity and multi-referentiality (Mbaye 2014), it is particularly relevant to consider waacking's intersections with queer history in the United States.

Initially, waacking or punking evolved in queer Latino and black social spaces, such as gay underground discos in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Waacking draws on freezing and popping gestures, connecting muscular tension in different body parts with brief, transitional flowing movements that might be considered feminine (Bragin 2014; De Frantz 2016).

> "Waacking explores extravagant gestures of punching and hitting, but centers on the preparation for striking rather than striking itself. When waacking, dancers can appear to be executing super-fast warmup exercises for a physical battle. But both forms exalt a decorativeness of gesture, aligning their practice with normative conceptions of femininity as decorative and embellished." (DeFrantz 2016: 68)

Bragin (2014) differentiates between the terms waacking and punking. Waacking refers to rhythmic arm-whipping motions characteristic of the style, whereas punking "indicates a stylized movement behavior that expands beyond set vocabulary, incorporating elements of large locomotion, dramatic gesture and facial expression, and narrative" (Bragin 2014: 63-64; DeFrantz 2016). In fact, the first waacking dancers were inspired by images from early Hollywood movies, mimicking classic Hollywood glamour actresses, such as Greta Garbo, which resulted in a style referred to as "Garbo." The distinction between waacking and punking is thus important with respect to processes of marginalization, since "punk" was originally, in fact, a derogatory term for gay men. Straight dancers would use the term "punking" to parody gay men's movements. By contrast, Tyrone Proctor, one of the pioneers of punking/waacking, used the term "waacking" when teaching outside the gay community. Finally, Jeffrey Daniel, a prominent member of the R&B group, Shalamar, introduced the idiosyncratic orthography to "waacking" with the double "aa" (Bragin 2014: 64, 67). The waacking dance style gained national and international attention through the American TV-show dance, *Soul Train*, which is often referenced by Vietnamese dancers as constituting the roots of hip hop dance.

According to DeFrantz (2016), theatricalized forms of social dance, such as waacking or voguing,[16] emerge in local public spheres where music and dance evolve together, each bringing forward the other. The dance waacking/punking style is closely linked to the disco music soundscape. In contrast to funk, which is considered hip hop's progenitor and the music that accompanies many hip hop dance styles, waacking is performed to disco music. Disco music was embraced by the entertainment industry from 1974 through the end of the 1970s, as it was introduced into the main stream. However, disco quickly came to an end with the so-called "disco sucks campaign," which culminated in 1979 when DJ Steve Dahl, a DJ from Chicago, asked his listeners to bring disco records to a White Sox baseball game at Comiskey Park so that he could blow them up. Disco music was criticized as an artificial, manufactured sound due to the absence of a live band. Moreover, the lyrics of disco music appeared apolitical, particularly compared to the overtly confrontational lyrics of funk music (Bragin 2014; Buckland 2002). As Bragin writes: "Disco lyrics were sparse evocations of a ritualistic dance-floor culture that consumed themes of sex, slavery, and demonic fire, with the sensory affect of heat, fever, and ecstasy" (2014: 69). Accordingly, disco was identified with gay men and gay club culture, and is confronted with anti-queer and racist sentiment to this day (Bragin 2014; Buckland 2002).

While waacking continued to be practiced by queer dancers of colour well into the 21st century, the style was also taken up by white and Asian dancers in international competitions (DeFrantz 2016). Waacking saw a revival in the early 2000s, as street dancers began researching the dance styles of early *Soul Train*. Waacking was made compatible with mass media through the Fox-produced TV dance show, *So You Think You Can Dance*. Bragin (2014: 65) criticizes this mainstreaming of waacking as "an appropriative process by which hegemonic power reconfigures cultural identity, wrapping transgressive relationality and queer practice in hegemonic hetero-normativity." On the one hand, accordingly, the mainstreaming of waacking can be considered an appropriative process, whereby waacking was transformed into a competition style dominated by nonblack cisgender females, meanwhile obscuring its queer history. On the other hand, cisgender female waacking performances may open up possibilities for redefining hegemonic notions of "feminine,"

16 Voguing is a dance style that evolved in the 1970s and 1980s in New York City's queer ballroom scene. The dance style consists of a series of stylized poses, imitating the poses of models, thus the name voguing is a reference to the Vogue fashion magazine.

"female," and "woman" (Bragin 2014: 61, 65, 75). As Desmond (2006) reminds us, dance is a performance of cultural and social identity. Furthermore, she suggests to use the concepts of hybridity and syncretism to comprehend interactions between ideology, cultural form, and power differentials, as dance styles move from one social group to another (Desmond 2006: 34). The cultural transmission of dance styles always involves shifts in meaning. Thus, the formerly gay practice of waacking can become a performance of queer femininity. Stereotypes of what is deemed feminine or masculine are thus negotiated in the Vietnamese hip hop community of practice.

Waacking in Vietnam

Waacking was quickly taken up in Vietnam following its revival in the U.S. in the 2000s, as a young Vietnamese dancer named C2Low was among the first to perform waacking in 2011. The year 2010 marked the 40th anniversary of the TV show *Soul Train* in the U.S., and news media about music and street dance culture were quickly spreading to Vietnam, as well. By that time, a large waacking community already existed in East Asia, particularly in Japan, which evolved as a key location for the development of hip hop and street dance early on, especially due to the international travel of early *Soul Train* dancers. Today, Japan has become a major point of reference for Vietnamese popular culture generally, and especially in relation to hip hop.

Whenever I talked with people from Hanoi or Ninh Binh about waacking, they invariably referred to C2Low as the founder of waacking in Vietnam. Born in 1995, C2Low started to practice waacking in 2011, while still in high school. Like Nguyet, he had a longstanding desire to dance and was already practicing hip hop. He stumbled upon waacking via YouTube, and decided to learn this new dance style, too. Given that there were no waacking classes in Hanoi at that time, he studied waacking through YouTube videos. In 2012, he attended a waacking workshop in Singapore. He would not have normally been able to fund such travel, but he had won a dance contest in Vietnam and used the prize money to finance his trip. Upon his return, he started a free waacking class, which took place twice a week in the evenings at the Lenin Monument. Around 2013, C2Low opened his own class at Thai Tinh Street in CunCun Studio, where Mai teaches her hip hop classes. C2Low is not only a renowned waacking teacher, but also the founder and leader of the Soul Waackers Crew, founded in 2012. The crew consists of five women and two

men, including C2Low. Together, they participate in international battles and regularly practice in the cypher formation. When I met C2Low in 2018, he taught waacking classes at Wonder Dance Studio and was still the leader of the Soul Waackers Crew. He frequently travels abroad to participate in international dance battles, particularly in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Thailand) and East Asia (Korea, Japan, and China). On his return from the Royal Battle in Japan, in November 2018, he posted a video on Facebook showing him in a 2 vs. 2 battle with Miyaka. In the text accompanying the video, he writes:

> "Today I would like to share advice with fellow dancers:
> Seven years ago, I was the only one practicing waacking, with all the elder hip hop brothers saying 'you dance wrong.' It was hard in the beginning to continue in the style that I liked, but I went abroad to battle, learn, and ask. After I returned to Vietnam, I finally received recognition.
> The sensation of exerting myself to the utmost, and achieving recognition, makes me very happy. Performing dance is freedom. Let's patiently pursue the style we like, even if others may be against us.
> Hack the clip, which shows recognition from Uncle Tyrone (OG U.S. waacker) after my battle round in Japan."

On the one hand, the post clearly recalls his struggle as the only person (or, more precisely, the only man) practicing waacking at a time in Vietnam, when it was little known and hardly appreciated by others. C2Low references other male hip hop practitioners (*các anh lớn hiphop*), who told him that what he was doing was "wrong." In the quoted speech, when they said, "you dance wrong," they addressed him with the second person singular pronoun *mày*, which is only used in intimate relationships among friends who have known each other for a long time, as in *tao* (I) and *mày* (you). However, outside such intimate relationships, the use of this pronoun is derogatory. Despite such criticisms from his reference group in hip hop, C2Low continued to follow his aspirations. To develop his technique, it was important to go abroad and learn from other dancers. Thus, through exerting all of his strength (*nỗ lực*), and developing his style, he finally received recognition from his Vietnamese peers, as well. Today, he finds freedom in dancing. At the same time, his Facebook post signals appreciation and recognition from an elder of waacking, the late Tyrone Proctor, who was a dancer, choreographer, teacher and international judge in the video shared by C2Low. Tyrone was an official Soul Train Gang dancer and one of the pioneers of waacking/punking. Together with Jeffrey Daniels (Shalimar, Soul Train) and Jody Watley, Sharon Hill-Wood, Cleveland

Moses Jr., Tyrone Proctor helped to found The Outrageous Waack Dancers, which toured Canada and Japan (Street Style Lab 2019). Thus, in his post, C2Low refers to Tyrone as a waacking "OG," and was thus honoured to receive his recognition.

Nguyet also mentioned Tyrone when I asked her about the history of waacking. She learned about waacking's origins both from her teacher as well as from international dancers who came to Vietnam to lead workshops. The history of the dance style thus circulates and is exchanged within the community of practice. For Nguyet, the U.S. TV show *Soul Train* was an important reference point that marked the beginning of waacking, and she gives Tyrone credit for developing waacking into street dance.

Waacking Howl

Nguyet was the first waacker I met in Hanoi. Mai introduced me to Nguyet as a female hip hop dancer, representing funk style. We met for the first time in a small coffee shop located in a small alley that meandered along Nui Truc Street. Nui Truc Street had struck me during my first years in Hanoi, in the early 2000s, as a street with some of the few stores that sold street and hip hop apparel. I sat down with Nguyet and she began to recount the story of how she came into contact with both waacking and hip hop, as well as her ongoing participation in multiple crews.

Born in 1993, Nguyet describes herself as a waacker and uses the dance moniker "WHowl," which is short for Waacking Howl. Like most of the dancers I talked to, Nguyet chose her own dance name. As with the locker Harin, described in chapter 5, "POPPING AND LOCKING," her choice of dance name was similarly inspired by Japanese popular culture. She explains that she had come across a Japanese book called *Howl's Flying Castle*. Fascinated by the book's theme, she chose "Howl" as her dance name.[17] To indicate that she is a waacker, she added a "W" to Howl, baptizing herself WHowl. Whenever she is invited as a judge, or participates in a battle, she is referenced by her dance name. On her Facebook profile, WHowl appears beneath her real

17 The original title of the book is *Howl's Moving Castle*, written by the English author Diane Wynne Jones. In 2004, the book was adapted as a Japanese Anime film by director Hayao Miyazaki. Both the book and movie narrate the story of a young girl, who is turned into an old woman and later meets a wizard.

name in brackets. Within her community of practice, she is mostly known as WHowl.

Nguyet started waacking in 2013. Before she had already danced K-Pop. In the second year of her undergraduate studies, a friend had taken her to the Lenin Monument one evening to practice with Vietnam's famous waacker, C2Low. But that evening, her bag containing all of her personal belongings, including her motorbike keys, was stolen. She had placed the bag to the side, away from where the group was practicing, where someone must have taken it. She called her father to tell him what had happened, and he reacted by telling her to never return to the class again. Consequently, she stopped attending C2Low's class for a few months. In the meantime, she kept practicing at home by herself, watching YouTube videos, as well as dancing with another group that comprised diverse dance styles. In 2013, she joined her first battle, participating in a 2 vs. 2 battle with her friend. She met C2Low once again, who told her that he was going to teach a class in a dance studio on Thai Tinh Street, which she eventually joined. She has been waacking ever since and recently developed an interest in hip hop dance, as well. She says: "That is why I come to waacking. I think because I like that style, and I want to develop myself in that style. So even if my parents did not allow me to go there, I always want to do it a lot, do it more." Eventually, C2Low invited her to join his crew. She did not have to audition, but he merely appointed her as a member. Nguyet eventually graduated from Vietnam National University in Hanoi, holding a degree in international business studies, and she continues to dance.

Nguyet is married to Bi Max, a b-boy from Hue, whom she met at a battle in Da Nang. After the event, they stayed in contact by texting. In 2017, at the international Dance Asia festival held in Singapore, Bi Max proposed to Nguyet in the cypher. The members of New York Style Crew still recall that moment. Nguyet and Bi Max were married in January 2018. Together, they redefine gendered expectations about a married woman's mobility in Vietnam, where a wife is commonly expected to leave her parents to live with the husband's family. The reason for this is that, both in Vietnam and China, wives are commonly associated with the "outside," and thus integrated "inside" through marriage. By contrast, the husband is considered to be in charge of kin relations on the "inside" (Brandtstädter 2008; Nguyen 2019). This is partly true for Nguyet and Bi Max, since they were married in his home town in Central Vietnam. A photo of their wedding, with the caption "Welcoming the wife home," posted on Facebook shows Nguyet wearing a red *áo dài*, with tradi-

tional hair ribbons, and Bi Max wearing a modern blue suit. They are accompanied by two young boys, each carrying a red and yellow canopy above the heads of the bride and groom. The couple is accompanied by two little girls walking in front of them, who hold yellow lanterns. Although the wedding took place in her husband's home province, Nguyet did not move in with her husband. Rather, her husband left Hue and quit his job in the motor industry, and moved to live with his wife and work in Hanoi. Both are members of New York Style Crew and teach dance classes together. For them, working together is joyful. Moreover, Nguyet appreciates having a life partner who shares her lifestyle: "We understand one another, because if we want to travel to a battle or practice late, we understand each other. Because it's not just a hobby, but it's also a job. So yes, we can understand each other."

Living a dancing life often means practicing late into the evening. Most of the crews I met started practice around 8 p.m., and often even later, as most crew members return home from work, eat dinner, and take a rest before they are free for crew practice. Street dancers also frequently travel abroad. Nguyet went to Kuala Lumpur in December 2018, where she participated in a waacking battle. In January 2019, both husband and wife participated in the Juste Debout event in Bangkok. As it is expensive to travel to Japan and Europe, many Vietnamese dancers participate in large battles organized in different parts of Southeast Asia. The winners of the Juste Debout battle were invited to participate in the Paris finals in May 2019 (see chapter 5, "POPPING AND LOCKING"). While Nguyet and Max often travel together, they also make individual trips. As Max embarks on a trip to GS Dance Battle, Nguyet reminds her crew to take good care of her husband during the trip in a Facebook post, as she cannot join them in person.

In dancing, both husband and wife enjoy their own achievements. While Bi Max was the deputy of his b-boying crew back home in Hue, and is now the deputy of New York Style Crew, Nguyet is a successful waacker, having competed in various one-on-one competitions as well as jointly with the Soul Waackers Crew in international freestyle and waacking competitions. Additionally, she is frequently invited to serve as a judge at national and international battles.

Today, together with her teacher C2Low, Nguyet is the only waacking teacher in Hanoi. Overall, she teaches four classes a week, both in waacking and hip hop. These include a kid's class and a preschool class, both at a Japanese dance studio, and a kid's hip hop class that she teaches together with

her husband. She also teaches her own waacking class, named WHowl's class, twice a week.

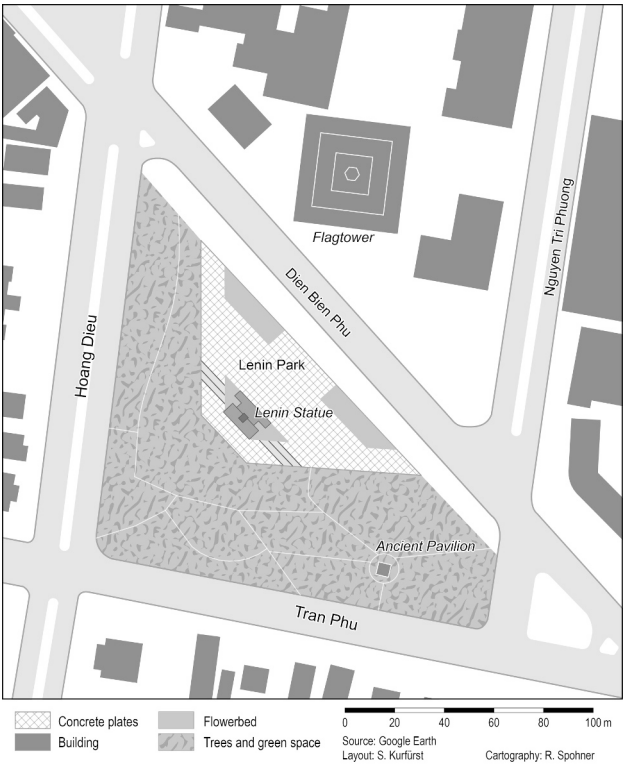
Legitimate peripheral participation in waacking

Once a week, WHowl's class takes place outdoors in the public space surrounding the Lenin Monument, starting at 8 p.m. until "the battery dies," as Bi Max explains. On the other night, the class takes place indoors in the dance studio. For this purpose, Nguyet rented a studio close to Chua Boc Street in Hanoi's Dong Da District. She deliberately chose two locations for her class to convene as she wants her students to practice both in front of a mirror to monitor their movement, as well as to learn how to move in public space. She reveals the sensory dimension to her teaching pedagogy, when she explains that dancing inside or outside feels different. In her explanation, she correlates movement and space, as the differing materiality and spatial arrangement of the studio and public square provide for varied kinesthetic senses. She says: "when you go outside (…) You can feel free to do whatever you want." Her statement recalls Sarah Pink's concept of sensory intersubjectivity, which refers to corporeality occurring in relation to a particular interactional and material environment. To Nguyet, the sensory experience of dancing inside the dance studio, in front of a mirror, differs from dancing outside due to the material infrastructure of public space.

For her outdoor class, she explicitly chose the Lenin Monument as it symbolizes hip hop in Hanoi. Fellow hip hop, popping, locking, and house dancers frequently converge on "Le-nin," as they call it, to practice together. That is why she wants to maintain the monument site as a "traditional space of hip hop," where everyone is welcome to join. By organizing her class in this place, she engages in infrastructuring work, as she continuously recreates a place where newcomers have opportunities to engage in legitimate peripheral participation.

I joined WHowl's class on a rainy evening in October 2018. As I approached the square around 8:30 p.m., coming from Dien Bien Phu Street with my family, I did not immediately see the class. The square in front of the statue was completely empty due to the rain. WHowl's class was instead gathered around the pavilion, southeast of the statue, at the intersection of Dien Bien Phu and Tran Phu Streets. Nguyet and her husband Bi Max welcomed us, and introduced me to four of her students present that evening. The students are

Spatial outline of Lenin Monument



Source: Google Earth, Layout: Sandra Kurfürst, Cartography: Regine Spohner

all female, a little bit younger than Nguyet, in their early twenties. They all wore black joggers, black or white sneakers, as well as hoodies, while one of them wore a crop top. They placed their personal belongings, drinks, and food under the pavilion, within view of the dancers, and protected from the rain. English-language disco music was playing from a mobile phone hooked to an amplifier that Bi Max and Nguyet brought along. After a little conversation, Nguyet called the girls together. The four girls assembled in a line facing the pavilion. Nguyet took her position one-step ahead of them, similarly facing the pavilion. Together, through the individual positioning of their bodies in

space, they formed a collective body. As the pavilion became their vanishing point, it seemed like an imagined mirror or at an audience for which they performed. The class began with a warm-up, as Nguyet clapped her hands to either signal a direction change or the beginning of a new movement. After the warm-up, she instructed the girls to practice in pairs of two.

Their spatial configuration again shifted as they collectively entered into a v-shaped formation: two girls standing in the back, two others positioned a step in front of them, aiming toward the apex of the v where Nguyet stood before them in the font. As waacking is primarily about torso movement, Nguyet mostly demonstrates arm and shoulder movements, while moving with her legs up and down, by bending or kneeling on the floor. She enriches her performance with verbal instructions, counting beats, instructing and advising the girls on how and when to move.

The students follow her instructions, while mimicking her bodily movements. As Gershon (2015: 6) notes in her introduction to *A World of Work*: "Many tasks can't be explained with words alone. You learn all sorts of specific ways to hold your body, to sense exactly when to start a motion and when to stop it thanks to touch, smell, hearing, and sight." Nguyet asserts the multisensory experience of learning waacking in declaring to her students that they need to get into the song. She says "I teach my students to get into the song. They need to listen and then do – listen, let [the music] into the body and spread it out."

She identifies listening and kinesthesia as key sensory processes involved in learning waacking, and she describes grooving as an unconscious bodily reaction to the music, explaining "that it is natural" to move to the music because "we feel that. We are happy to do that, not because people say us to do so." In other words, she regards movements of the body as natural responses to music based on feelings of happiness. By referring to the body's reaction as "unconscious," she distinguishes movement based on feelings and emotions from movement based on verbal instructions.

Finally, the girls reassemble in a line. Nguyet alternately moves from the front and through her students' line in order to synchronize their movements. Dance Scholar Judith Hamera (2007) again draws our attention to the importance of technique in dance. She focuses on the lexical function of technique in rendering the body in a shared and legible idiom: "In practical terms, technique provides social bedrock for imagining new ways of being together and being oneself" (Hamera 2007: 13). Thomas Csordas (1999) similarly emphasizes the moment of bodily experience and intersubjective meaning-making.

Dance technique thus evolves as a relational infrastructure, offering templates for sociality in the dance studio and public space. Technique integrates and translates individual bodies into a common communicative repertoire or vernacular among dance class participants (Hamera 2007: 32). Technique opens up conversations about the accurateness of particular moves, their critique, and evaluation. One of the girls repeatedly seeks her teacher's approval, asking if she executes the movements correctly, and how she can improve them. Hamera (2007) also points to the discursive dimension of the voice in dance. The voices of teachers and dance instructors as they count beats, offering praise and distributing advice, and the voices of students asking how to perform particular movements, all constitute the performance space. Accordingly, technique is linked to language in the way that technique as a set of protocols for reading and writing bodies facilitates interpersonal conversations about those bodies (Hamera 2007).

WHowl's class at the Lenin Monument

Source: Nils Kurfürst (2018)

Her students refer to Nguyet as *chị*, elder sister, instead of using *cô*, the honorific address for teacher. The students used to pay to participate in her regular dance class in the studio. The use of first- and second-person pronouns reveals that they have overcome the formal relationship structured of paid instruction. The social structure of the class is marked by more informal relationships, although the hierarchical ordering of master-student relation-

ships still shapes instruction. The students are advanced in the sense that they no longer attend regular dance classes in the studio, but they are not yet members of Soul Waackers, Hanoi's waacking crew. WHowl's class thus constitutes a liminal space structured by formal rules, such as regular practice twice a week, and informal social ties expressed by the fact that they regularly hang out outside of practice. While they are not members of C2Low's crew, they regularly interact with crew members. For instance, on that same October evening, some of the waacking crew members, including C2Low, a 23 year-old woman named Ty Pum, and a young man named Marc, joined them at the pavilion, as well. Yet, instead of joining the class, they practiced waacking on the other side of the pavilion. Situated between the two groups, Bi Max performed footwork on his own.

The distribution of these spatial practices turned legitimate peripheral participation upside down. The novices, the girls in WHowl's class, practice on Tuesday evening at 8 p.m. in front of the Lenin Monument. The most advanced waackers, C2Low, and members of the Soul Waacker's Crew, join the class in this space, but they remain on the periphery, practicing to the music of WHowl's class. They only come together during the small breaks to eat, drink, and chat.

This spatial separation of crew members and non-members is reproduced in the crew's regular cypher practice. C2Low invited me to join one of these cyphers on a Friday evening. Initially, the cypher was to take place at C2Low's dance studio near Ton Duc Thang Street, but as I made my way through rush hour, Nguyet contacted me to redirect me to the Foreign Trade University campus on Chua Lang Street, where the Wonder Dance Studio is located near the students' residential estate. Apart from the Soul Waackers Crew, Bi Max, the four girls from WHowl's class, and a female Malaysian waacker named Bao – whom Nguyet invited for her event Hallowaack – all waited for me outside the dance studio.

As we enter the small studio, a hip hop class was still ongoing. The class is led by Dynamic, a young popper from Hanoi. Dynamic teaches at Wonder Dance Studio and is also a member of CK Animation's Wonder Brothers Crew. Dynamic remains after the hip hop class ends, and all the students leave. Vietnamese music starts playing first, which is then followed by English pop music. The waackers warm up on their own, sometimes helping each other as they stretch. When the music turns to disco music, C2Low claps his hands several times, signalling that the others should convene in the cypher. Bao, the guest from Malaysia, is the first to enter the cypher. She does so without

Soul Waacker's Cypher

Source: Sandra Kurfürst (2018)

any verbal cues. The cypher runs counter clock-wise. Nguyet is next to enter the cypher, followed by C2Low, and then the other crew members. The four students from WHowl's class are the last to enter. Then the cypher restarts. During the first round, the first four dancers waack to Whitney Houston's *So emotional*. Compared to Nguyet and Bao, C2Low makes much more use of the cypher space, as he uses more footwork. He interacts with the cypher participants, pointing to them as Houston sings "Youuuuuuuuuu." The fourth dancer to step into the cypher is a woman, who lies on the floor, curling. While she is in the cypher, the music ends and she laughs but continues to perform, while others encourage her to continue. This fracture in flow demonstrates the necessity of having a DJ who can maintain the sonic flow. That is why, at battle events, such as Hallowaack described below, a DJ is in charge of the music.

Then music kicks in again with Boney M.'s *Sunny*. The fifth dancer replaces her. The sixth is Marc, the only male crew member apart from C2Low, whom I met also during WHowl's class at the Lenin Monument. His facial gestures correspond to his movements. Like C2Low, Marc employs much more space in the cypher than his fellow female dancers, combining wide twists of his arms above his head, alternately with foot work or kneeing down on the floor.

Marc's facial expressions correspond to his body movements, interacting with his mostly female audience. He leaves the cypher and all the others shout. The next dancer is Ty Pum, whom I met three days earlier at Lenin.

As indicated above, the cypher is a socio-spatial formation that indexes the social organization of community and social learning. Overall, the cypher has an integrating effect, as both crew members and non-members are able to join. Nonetheless, the sequencing and ordering of the cypher expresses hierarchies at work in the group. First of all, Bao is allowed to open the cypher. As a crew outsider and international guest, she occupies an exposed position. Bao is followed by her host Nguyet, who is followed by another crew leader, and the other crew members. The last sequences in the cypher are made up by the students of WHowl's class. Dancing in the cypher, they seem to enjoy themselves, showing more self-confidence than during the class held at Lenin. They receive an equal amount of time as the crew members and receive encouraging comments and gestures from other cypher participants. They are not members of the crew, yet they are allowed to join the cypher to practice with the crew. In other words, they are legitimate peripheral participants. Already in the warm-up session, the simultaneous inclusions and exclusions of peripheral participation were at play, as the students of WHowl's class occupied the left side of the studio, remaining spatially separated from the crew members, who practiced to the right close to the technical infrastructure. Consequently, the social hierarchies among veterans and neophytes, crew members and students, express themselves in the spatial positioning of individuals and groups within the collective.

However, such social orders can be negotiated and contested during battles. Battles are generally open to anyone who registers and pays a participation fee. While the reputation of the crew may be at stake, it is the performance of an individual dancer or a group of dancers that is evaluated. Nguyet organized her own event called Hallowaack at the A-Life Angelo Dance School Japan at Sakura Station, where she regularly teaches a children's hip hop and waacking class. Hallowaack featured 2 vs. 2 waacking battles as well as 1 vs.1 non-waacking battles, which were open to dancers of other styles. The event took place on Sunday, October 21, the same weekend as the postponed Red Bull Battle. As the free style Red Bull Battle had taken place the day before on Saturday, many of the Red Bull Battle participants reconvened at WHowl's Sunday waacking event. As I entered the studio, I immediately recognized the Japanese dancer Nemoto, a member of the newly founded Hanoi House Dance Crew, of which Mai is also a member. Hallowaack started at 1 p.m. CK

Animation and Ty Pum acted as MC's. C-Lock served as the DJ while Quan Ten, one of Bi Max's close friends, was in charge of video recording the whole event. Bao, who was invited by Nguyet, was the judge for the 2 vs. 2 waacking battle. C2Low judged the non-waack category, in which dancers from diverse styles, such as popping, hip hop, house, and locking, all participated. Apart from the Vietnamese dancers, a Malaysian team named Queencess, consisting of a young woman and man, also participated in the event. At Hallowaack, WHowl's students split up into different teams of two, battling with members from other crews. Building their own battle teams, the girls performed outside the hierarchical social organization of the waacking crew and class. In the 2 vs. 2 battles, they were able to perform as equal individuals and peers. Two of the students teamed up as Waackerhood, whereas another one cooperated with a renowned female dancer from Milky Way Crew. Nonetheless, they received a special thank you mention from Nguyet in her Facebook caption for the Hallowaack event, thanking her students for their support.

Dancers participating in the non-waack battle needed to form teams and register under a team name. The team names incorporated a multilingual repertoire, including English language terms connoting the dance style like Waackerhood or the Waackers, random English-language names such as Coconut or Jesus, as well as Vietnamese idioms such as "ăn chay," which literally translates as "to eat vegetarian," but also connotes "having sex." According to Nir Avieli (2014), vegetarianism in late socialist Vietnam frequently connotes a moral façade, obscuring something that is not spoken about in public.

Dancers from outside Hanoi were among the waacking battle participants. Tien, a young man from Ninh Binh City, joined Hallowaack, as he was visiting his elder sister in Hanoi and was eager to join the event. He had just started dancing the year before in his high school's dance club. The school team focuses on choreography, performing show cases for school events, such as teacher's day on November 20 or graduation day. He recalls how, after dancing for the first time, he could not stop. Tien first encountered waacking on the TV show, *Vietnam's Got Talent*, and he was fascinated by its beauty. Consequently, he chose to learn waacking for aesthetic reasons. Before Hallowaack, he had just become a student in the TiTan Crew. While there are at least two other hip hop crews in Ninh Binh Province, he chose to train with TiTan as the crew draws on 11 years of experience and meets closer to his home than the other crews. Moreover, TiTan Crew has at least two dancers who specialize in waacking; one of them, a young woman, is now Tien's teacher. In contrast with the high school dance club, the crew practices every day. When dancing,

he calls himself CÙ, using the nickname his family gave him. At Hallowaack, he encountered C2Low for the first time, having heard about and watched him a lot before.

Finally, Queencess, from Malaysia, won the waacking battle, whereas Nguyet's fellow Waackerhood crew members won second place. In the 1 vs. 1 non-waack battle, for dancers from other dance styles, mostly poppers participated on this day. CK Animation, who served also as MC during the waacking battle, won in the non-waack category. One thing that is appealing to many people about waacking is that it mingles and combines other dance styles. While there are some exclusively waacking events in Hanoi, such as Hallowaack organized by Nguyet, or the Soul Waackers Crew's anniversary event, Waack your Soul 2020, most waackers are in close and constant exchange with the dancers from other styles in Vietnam, such as popping and hip hop dance. Sometimes they are even members of the same crew. Some dance crews like Big Toe or Milky Way have waackers on their team. Moreover, intimate relationships often evolve from shared passions for dance, as some female waackers develop relationships with male poppers, house dancers, or b-boys. Thus, husbands and boyfriends were also present during the waacking event that day, bringing their peers from their respective dance styles with them. CK Animation, for example, was accompanied by his Wonder Brothers crew members. They participated in the non-waack battle, combining footwork from breaking and popping with the quickly swinging arms characteristic of waacking. Their arm movements did not suggest that they were combining such styles for the first time. As waacking can be readily combined with other styles, they seemed quite comfortable integrating waacking into their dance performance. Indeed, LionT explains that he often combines different dance styles, such as hip hop and house, with waacking.

As one waacker put it: "Waacking is an open style, they have basic moves, but you can combine these with moves from another style. You can do some hip hop moves with your legs and waacking with your hand. And it's okay, you can combine house moves with your legs and combine them with waacking." Waacking is thus recognized by the wider community of practice as part of hip hop culture. While there may be not so many dancers who specialize in waacking, many hip hop dancers integrate waacking motions into their routines.

Queering femininity and masculinity

In Vietnam, waacking is mostly practiced by young cis-gender women, and only a few young men. In dance studios that offer waacking classes, the style falls under the "girl style" category, primarily inviting female students. However, what is particularly striking is growth in the number of children's waacking classes offered at dance studios, which are attended by both male and female children. To be sure, movement vocabulary shifts as middle-class children of diverse genders learn waacking in dance studios (Desmond 2006). While certainly most parents who send their children to such classes know little about waacking's queer history, the old timers in the community of practice do. In the Vietnamese waacking community, queerness is both acknowledged and practiced, as waacking remains a dance style open to practitioners of all gender identities and sexual orientations in Vietnam. Knowledge about the cultural history of waacking is shared and exchanged within the community of practice, largely through transnational networks. C2Low indicates that he learned about waacking while attending a workshop in Singapore. On his return to Vietnam, he shared the knowledge he acquired abroad with his students. Apart from her teacher, a woman dancer claims to have gained knowledge about the history of the dance style and music from international dancers who led workshops in Vietnam. She is aware of waacking's origin in the U.S.-American gay community during the 1970s. Asked about waacking's relation to Vietnam's LGBTIQA community, she says that a lot of different people practice waacking, not just members of the LGBTIQA community. According to her, waacking is easily accessible and everyone is free to join, despite any differences of social status by gender, age, and so on. Nonetheless, she admits that there is a persistent stereotype in Vietnam according to which men who practice waacking are assumed to be gay. Comparing the different perception of boys and girls who practice waacking, she concludes that waacking appears more "normal" for girls in Vietnam. As a consequence, boys who practice waacking are considered queer, while girl waackers appear to conform with heteronormative standards. In his study of the homosexual body in Vietnam's renovation period, Richard Quang-Anh Tran (2014) explains that homosexuality in Vietnam is not so much defined by a person's sexual orientation than by a person's gender. This means that male homosexual practices, desires, and behaviours are considered to belong to a woman, rather than a man. In other words, male homosexuality is assessed against the binary of male and female.

In a similar vein, two young dancers from Ninh Binh – a man and a woman – ascribe waacking to a female gender. While the female dancer associates waacking with femininity (*nữ tính*), the male dancer characterizes waacking's aesthetics as "girly." The idea of waacking being "girly" has been contested by practitioners themselves. In one of his dance classes, Tyrone Proctor dismisses the idea that waacking is simply girly, stating: "This is not an easy dance. Power is most high. If you're gonna just do uh, uh, [waves his arms absentmindedly] and think this is a girly dance? You're in the wrong place. You have to learn how to apply power, attitude, and control. They're everything." (audiotape of dance class 25 March 2012 cited in Bragin 2014: 67). Consequently, Naomi Bragin (2014: 67) distinguishes between "girl-ness as defined by culturally enforced norms of movement that suture (white) femininity and submissiveness and a refigured sense of power that Waacking aesthetics incorporate: radiant energy, vitality, fierceness." Such radiant energy is also what the male waacker refers to when explaining why he enjoys dancing to disco music. By contrast with break beat, which is quite fast and does not affect him very much emotionally, disco music makes him feel like "acting," motivating him to incorporate a bit of drama into his performance.

Referring to all female waackers as his idols, a young Vietnamese male dancer names Lip J from France and the Korean dancer Lia Kim, in particular. He particularly likes how Lip J expresses music with her body – for many dancers, the ability to communicate the feelings of a song through the body was a defining characteristic of a good waacker. To him, Lip J's style is smooth and beautiful. Lia Kim, by contrast, combines waacking with hip hop dance. He explained that her style looks "weird," but still has a lot of beauty in it. By "weird" he refers to the shape of her body during the dance and particularly her poses. In conversation with a fellow female waacker, he refers to C2Low as Vietnam's first waacker. According to the female dancer, C2Low stands out due to his "vanguard" (*tiên phong*) style. Discussing the idiosyncrasies of his style, two waackers from Ninh Binh address the issues of femininity and masculinity. The female dancer admires C2Low exactly for his masculine style (*style Nam*), as it differs from that of female waackers. For her, one indicator that makes him stand out from other, particularly female dancers, is that his style is not sexy, an attribute she ascribes to women. Thus, the waackers' dance styles are assessed based on gendered movement norms and gendered bodily regimes (Elias 1980). In particular, the female body, as well as associated parameters of what is deemed acceptable and proper feminine movement, are highly controlled and defined by specific discourses and ide-

ologies (Desmond 2006; Wolff 2006). In Vietnam, the post-reform discourse stylizes women as providers and family caretakers, institutionalized in the form of "happy mother" and "happy family" campaigns aimed at achieving resilient and happy families. In recent years, dominant modes of representing the female body have focused on the modern middle-class woman as a caring mother and sexually desirable wife (Leshkowich 2008; Nghiem 2004). In her study on fitness culture in Ho Chi Minh City, Ann Marie Leshkowich (2008) shows that middle-class women are required to both master and embody sex. As a consequence, the sexy dress and overtly expressive gestures of waacking challenge persistent body regimes, while also adhering to demands that women – or rather wives –maintain a sexually desirable outer appearance. Naturally, the space of manoeuvre for women to act out their own sexual desires and sexuality is limited and socially sanctioned. Women's bodies remain subject to public scrutiny, as expressed in the scandal around the female model Ngoc Trinh's appearance at the Cannes Film Festival in 2019. On the Film Festival's red carpet, Ngoc Trinh wore a dress made from transparent fabric, with high slits on both sides of the hips. The Vietnamese public considered the dress too sexy. Already in 2012, a far less revealing dress worn by model Hong Que had resulted in public outcry in national and social media (VietnamNetBridge 2012).

While female bodies in the public eye have always been treated as aesthetic objects, and subject to public scrutiny, black queer kinesthetics allow for the negotiation of hegemonic femininity, as women may critically distance their bodies from gendered movement norms (Bragin 2014; Nurka 2013). As Bragin (2014: 73) writes, "Learning to Waack has the potential to redefine the meaning of movement coded 'feminine' within a normative binary gender system." Critical distancing away from movement norms, and thus hegemonic femininity, is something that is constantly practiced by Mai.

Mai, who characterizes herself as a b-boy girl, mostly practices breaking, hip hop, and house dance – all styles dominated by men. However, in her waacking video posted on social media, she wore a neckholder dress that revealed the tattoos on her arms. While dancing is one of the rare occasions that Mai actually wears a dress, as she usually fashions herself in baggy pants, sneakers and XXL t-shirts. Dancing barefoot, she performed a sequence of waacking moves to live punk music. The video posted on Facebook was titled *Bông hoa hồng trên khối bê tông*, "a rose bloom on concrete block." *Hoa hồng* not only means "rose," but is also a popular name for Vietnamese women. With her performance and video title, Mai revokes hegemonic notions of feminin-

ity, while simultaneously breaking both gender and waacking conventions. First of all, she dances barefoot, by contrast with most Vietnamese waackers, who wear high heels or sneakers. Second, waacking music is typically disco, Mai chooses to dance to punk music.

According to DeFrantz (2016), normative rhetoric about gender performance operates throughout black social dance practices, whereas the affective force of queer black dance works precisely against such normative categories:

> "A circular recoiling of weight through the hips acted against a dispersed energetic field might constitute a more *feminine* expression of rhythmic bounce than a blockish thrusting of weight sideward and downward, driven by a tensed torso and clenched fists that might be construed as typically *masculine*." (DeFrantz 2016: 66-67)

DeFrantz (2016) concludes that in African American-derived social dances, excellence is achieved through innovative gestures that resists normative gender or sexual identity expectations. Reggie, a US-waacker interviewed by Bragin, explains: "You don't have to take a feminine approach even though that's sometimes something I do… you manipulat[e] people's minds with the ways you danc[e]. I like playing with that kind of gender swap" (Bragin 2014: 70). Particularly within hip hop communities of practice, waacking appears to disrupt gendered (dance) movement norms. In Vietnam, the category of waacking allows for dancers of all gender identities and sexual orientations to creatively engage and play with the normative gender categories. It not only allows for queer creativity, but successful performance explicitly requires the "creative expression of fluid gendered identity" (DeFrantz 2016: 66). Queer gesture is often applied by straight dancers and "others eager to enjoy the social possibilities of queer creativity" (DeFrantz 2016: 66). The fluidity of gender is also required and performed in *lên đồng* rituals in Northern Vietnam. While most spiritual mediums are female, there are also male mediums. Both male and female mediums constantly transgress binary gender categories as they embody both male and female spirits in the ritual. As a result, male mediums may assume both feminine and male postures, whereas female mediums can combine "unfeminine" aspects of their personality with stereotypically feminine aspects, such as a graceful appearance. As a result, mediumship – just like waacking – requires male and female performers to act, move, and ultimately dance outside of prescribed gender conventions (Norton 2006: 68, 75).

The queer movement repertoire is accentuated by the dancers' queer clothing. While b-girls and female poppers often dress in unisex clothing, such as jump suits, XXL t-shirts, baseball caps, and sneakers, both during training and at battles, many waackers in Vietnam wear different outfits when participating in the cypher or in a battle. In the cypher, waackers wore sweat pants, baseball shirts, and sneakers, swapping them for bell-bottoms, skirts, crop tops, bell tops, and leather shoes, high heels, or sneakers at the battle. As a result, the idiosyncrasy of the waacking dance floor lies in the peculiarity of its dress. At 2 vs. 2 battles, the competing pairs often wear glamorous fitted costumes. Dancers identifying as male would wear skirts, crop tops with high heels, as well as make-up and styled hair. As battle apparel in other styles does not substantially differ from practitioners' everyday clothing, there is usually no changing room at battles. At a waacking battle, however, the ladies' room of the dance studio was transformed into a locker room. There, cis-gender female and LGBTIQA dancers mingled, helping each other finalize their hair and make-up, while changing outfits.

The idiosyncrasy of costume change and gender bending in waacking performance deserves further consideration. First of all, the frame of performance offered by the dance floor is key. Erving Goffman's (1986) frame analysis helps us determine "what is going on," and thus what is salient, in any given social interaction. Goffman deploys the frame metaphor to describe how people use frames (structure) to understand their pictures (context). Although often a physical presence, the dance floor is an ephemeral and liminal frame that is demarcated in various ways, perhaps by being slightly elevated, perhaps made of a unique material, or perhaps a different colour. In some cases, however, the dance floor is not materially differentiated from the physical space surrounding it, but it is rather produced socially by the bodies that frame it. In other words, the dance floor is brought into relief by the bodies that surround it, whether in a circle, in rows, and so on. The previously introduced metaphor of the *lingkaran*, the circular formation of players in the Minangkabau *randai*, assists in understanding the situation. According to Mahjoeddin (2016: 362), "the lingkaran is best understood as a liminal membrane that spatially defines the limits of the acting area."

The dance floor is also a space of high exposure, as well. Dancers are under constant evaluation by judges and fellow dancers, who become spectators when they are not dancing. In fact, battle participants constantly oscillate between performer and spectator, as they shift from performing on centre stage, watching or judging other dancers' performances, while continually repro-

ducing the liminal membrane around the dance floor. Theatre director and performance scholar Richard Schechner (2000) has outlined the intimate relationship among performers and spectators, suggesting that no theatre or dance performance can function without an audience. Rather than differentiating between passive and active roles, Schechner suggests a continuum of performative forms that require more or less interactions among performers and spectators. Schechner cites two broad forms of performance: First, where spaces are shared and brought to life through interactions among two or more people, as in the case of the battle dance floor. Second, performances in which spectators may initially appear passive, as in a classical concert, but their sheer presence constitutes a form of interaction, as they long to partake in the performance.

Acting on the dance floor as performers, dancers are evaluated for their technique, physical agility, and the innovative gestures that make their personal style recognizable. They may be evaluated for their gender performance, but this always occurs within the frame of dance performance. The hip hop dance community shares the same value system according to which members evaluate a good dancer. However, as DeFrantz suggested above, waacking not only allows for but even requires gender fluidity in order to achieve innovation. In this sense, the dance floor provides a space for social actions that, outside the frame of the battle, might be non-existent, unauthorized, or socially marginalized. As the dance floor is a socially constructed and thus ephemeral space produced within a performance, the dance floor vanishes as soon as the collective body constituting the liminal membrane dissolves. In terms of theatre, the battle could be compared to a scene, which is similarly liminal as it induces new social roles and conditions (Schechner 2000). Performance and theatre scholar Tracy C. Davis (2009: 3) uses the term theatre as "the institutionalized term for the performance. As a knowledge regime in its own right, theatre 'makes sense' of the reverberation along with the other staged elements in the performance and the 'given circumstances' of the historic artefact on which the event occurred." Similarly, the battle or cypher are institutionalized terms, making sense of the postures and gestures presented to the music. In the battles I attended, all the participants shared common understanding about when the performance began and ended. The rhythm produced as the dancers took turns entering and leaving the dance floor appeared as a ritualized procedure, which was repeated again and again until the winner of the final battle was determined. Organizing the ritual was the MC, who called the dancers to the floor and sometimes counted down to signal

the dancer's exit, before finally inviting the judge to declare the outcome. The intimate relationship between theatrical forms and ritual performance has been recognized by sociocultural anthropologists and theatre scholars alike.

The waacking events and practices illustrated above show that waacking fashions a non-normative corporeality (Bragin 2014). While waacking did not develop in any underground gay scene in Vietnam, its uptake by both male and female dancers permitted them to rework hegemonic standards of femininity and masculinity. Although waacking in Vietnam is associated with feminine bodily aesthetics, and although men who practiced waacking are sometimes considered gay, I argue that waacking nonetheless allows for the queering of normative gender categories. Through waacking performances, the boundaries of what is deemed "girly" or feminine and "boyish" and male are constantly blurred. Particularly striking is the performance of LGBTIQA dancers in waacking. Through their membership in hip hop crews and performance in waacking battles, they actively participate in the public sphere. They transform the hyper (in)visibility of being queer by manipulating various social technologies of visibility (Buckland 2002: 26). In the case analysed here, they make themselves visible in the highly exposed space of the dance floor. Further research might consider the intimate relationship between waacking and the LGBTIQA community in Vietnam, as waacking seems to provide a space in which queerness is acknowledged by members of the hip hop community of practice. In a similar vein, Barley Norton (2006: 72) suggests that "awareness of many followers of the Mother Goddess religion that male mediums had homosexual relationships (even if they were married and had children) would seem to suggest that *lên đồng* is one site where, even if not explicitly, a different sexual orientation is acknowledged."

Waacking in Vietnam, as in many other parts of the world, is considered queer, as waacking involves the expression of emotions as well as occasionally sexually coded movements, which deviate from moral codes of public conduct, particularly for young women in Vietnam.