

A Taste of Honey: Choreographing Mulatta in the Hollywood Dance Film
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The figure of the mulatta colours many cultural imaginaries with her specific narratives. One such narrative, the trope of the 'tragic mulatta' appears prominently, often obfuscating any other type of representation possible. As Hazel Carby writes, 'the figure of the mulatt[a] should be understood and analysed as a narrative device of mediation' (1987:88), mediating between the white and black worlds said figure straddles. Couched in Enlightenment ideologies of race, the mulatta emerges as a tragic figure in that her genesis occurs from a violent union between two races — a 'dominant white' one, and a 'subservient black' one. Werner Sollors explains the etymology of the word mulatto:

of sixteenth century Spanish origin, documented in English since 1595, and designating a child of a black and a white parent, was long considered etymologically derived from 'mule'; yet it may also come from the Arabic word muwallad (meaning "Mestizo" or mixed) (1999:128).

Even with skin that approximates 'whiteness,' the proverbial 'taint' or 'drop' of impure African blood condemns her and her value to be less than human, despite the fascination with her representation of ambiguity and varying skin colour gradations. The undervalued 'figment of [the concept of] pigment' (1998:16) as DeVere Brody calls it, conversely added to her value as a popular sexual commodity for heterosexual male desire. As a filmic presence, the mulatta first appeared in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Lydia, the mulatta mistress of the white abolitionist carpetbagger, appears independent, powerful, threatening, yet desirable. Film historian Donald Bogle attributes this connection between 'the light-skinned Negress' (2001:15) and desirability to a closer proximity to a white aesthetic ideal which gave 'cinnamon-colored gals' (2001:15) a chance at lead parts. Other films such as *Imitation of Life* (1934; 1959), *Pinky* (1949), *Shadows* (1959), and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) utilize the trope of the mulatta and render her full of regret, emotionally unfulfilled, or sad and alone due to each film's respective circumstances. As Charles Scruggs states, 'the mulatta is a visible expression of the broken taboo, a figure bearing witness to the interconnection of the races, and the "site of the hybridity of histories"' (2004:327). Fraught between desire, melancholy, and despair, the mulatta usually encounters a tragic fate, unable to escape these pre-scripted choreographies of her race. These characterizations prevent more complex representations of this racialised and gendered body primarily by constricting the notion of mulatta into narratives based on textual discursive practices. As a result, the mulatta figure suffers from rather limited representations unable to acknowledge her potentiality as something other than tragic.

In this article, I seek to vivify and corpo-realize mulatta representations by particularly focusing on films where mulattas use their bodies, specifically their hips in active mobilizations as performers, dancers, or choreographers. As I have argued elsewhere, my theory of hip(g)nosis exposes the contours of the hip as a site of cultural production, produced and deployed by historically racialized mulatta bodies in their negotiation of 'blackness,' 'whiteness,' the political economy of pleasure, and becoming. As a result, the excesses of the hip's choreography, its existence as a product that can dazzle, dodge, divert

and, of course, hip-notize locates it as/in a space where the enacting mulatta body achieves some agency through the different values imposed on it.

Thinking through and moving with the mulatta's hip, I will examine the filmic representations of the mulatta body in the Hollywood film *Honey* (2003) starring Jessica Alba. More specifically, this article aims to unravel how the Hollywood filmic apparatus engages with signifiers of raced sexuality and hierarchies of dance styles to enforce and reify mythic narratives about dance, dancing raced bodies, and dance-making. In order to frame the discussion of how the mulatta body operates through the visual economy, I will establish a genealogy of this body in a U.S. context through two other dance/performance films: *Sparkle* (1976) and *Flashdance* (1983). These juxtapositions illustrate how the mulatta subject develops from a tragic figure (in *Sparkle*) to independent and self-reliant (in *Honey*) with dance acting as the analytical framework by focusing on particular choreographed and 'improvised' dance sequences performed by each film's respective mulatta protagonist.

Sparkle

Sparkle tells the story of three sisters in late 1950s Harlem who aspire to a singing career. As the all-female group, Sister and the Sisters, the lead singer, Sister (played by Lonette McKee) becomes their corporeal calling card. It is her mulatta body that enables their first 'big time' gig. Her character's narrative lies within the trope of the 'tragic mulatta' as evidenced by her demise through drug addiction and an abusive man. Despite the corporeal vivacity she demonstrates early on, Sister's mulatta body cannot escape the tragedy pre-scripted onto it. As a result, the mulatta body rests within the confines of its familiar narrative trope, ravaged and unable to be anything but a victim.

When the film opens, an image of Jesus with his outstretched hands invites us in. We are in a church and a gospel choir sings 'Precious Lord.' As the camera pans down, *Sparkle* (Irene Cara) and *Stix* (Philip Michael Thomas) sway and clap as they sing with ebullience. Next to them stand *Delores* (Dwan King), *Levi* (Dorian Haywood) and finally, *Sister*. Bogle historically situates the character of *Sister* as such:

McKee [...] gives the 1970s definitive portrayal of the likable, haughty, 'hincty,' high-yeller black girl who thinks she's got all the answers (and who usually has more than most). Her portrait of a black woman ready to take life on without fear or foolish constraints is similar to what past actresses [...] attempted to present. She chews gum, shakes her hips, and talks trash with forceful abandon. Ambition, drive, and survival are written all over this tall, curvy, jivey, sexy, hip sister. (2001:256)

When a neighbour warns Effie, *Sister's* mother to 'keep an eye out on your oldest gal [*Sister*], she is busting at the seams,' Effie describes her as being 'high-spirited.' These descriptive monikers signal the lack of containment *Sister's* body represents. She is uncontrollable and immune to convention or discipline. A brief moment during a rehearsal illustrates this point.

One evening, the group goes over a song and dance routine for the talent competition. The camera frames *Sister* in the centre, sitting in an armchair nonchalantly flipping through a magazine. To her left and right are the out-of-focus mid-sections of *Sparkle* and *Stix*. When asked if she plans on joining the rehearsal, *Sister* does not bother to raise her face or to make eye contact. She merely replies, 'Uh-uh, I already know it' and continues looking through her magazine. Her speech act asserts her embodied knowledge. In this short exchange, *Sister's* character suggests a confidence which becomes associated with representations of the mulatta performing body. In other words, the expected rhythmic quality of its racialised connections with 'blackness' coupled with the mulatta's aesthetic appeal, render the act of rehearsal

unnecessary as she just needs to perform. The mere appearance of her mulata corporeality silently labours in this instance. Here, the embedded histories of how to interpret, watch and make legible the mulatta body assist the viewer. As Aisha D. Bastiaans asserts, 'the habituated visual and narrative logics of race [...] rely upon a viewer's careful observation of clues' (2008:224) or what I refer to as tropes of mulatta narratives. A 'literate' audience would understand Sister's refusal to rehearse since its labor of discernment would already have provided the tools to read her corporeality properly, or how her body becomes readable through its multiple deployments of raced and gendered signifiers. Thus, the notion of corporeality comes with a physically embedded movement and gestural vocabulary that enables visual-kinesthetic coherence. Even her bodily refusal to rehearse signals a rebellious corporeality, one that prefers to articulate itself outside the group's specific choreography. This next analysis attests to how Sister's mulatta corporeality demonstrates its subversive potential through her moving hips.

The Hearts (the first incarnation of the singing group) wait back stage; all of them wear red sweaters except Sister who dons a figure-enhancing black dress. Her hair hangs loose, one side pulled up and adorned with a single red flower. This outfit can be read as an aesthetic homage to Dorothy Dandridge (a mulatta film actress). In the film musical *Carmen Jones*, Dandridge wears a similar outfit (her skirt was red), also accented by a red flower she holds in her hand and later wears. As *Carmen Jones* opened in 1954 and *Sparkle* takes place in 1958, Sister's reference to the film historically coincides. Sister's style, swagger and seductive stare work as simulacrum of the filmic mulatta body. Additionally, Dorothy Dandridge's fate as a 'tragic mulatta' in both the film and her life, haunt Sister's filmic image. In this context, the 'tragic mulatta' acts as a filmic commodity, a spectral presence. Borrowing from Derrida's notion of the specter that both inhabits and haunts, Dandridge's ghost moves through and on Sister's image. However, a spectator must be present to mediate and ascertain the value of the mulatta commodity. The haunting of the mulatta flesh by itself is not what solely constructs it as a commodity for 'the commodity is even very complicated; it is blurred, tangled, paralyzing, aporetic, perhaps undecidable.' (Derrida 1994:150), yet, it provides an understanding of the cultural work film, race and gender representations do, in order to make mulatta corporeality legible.

At the talent competition, The Hearts sing and perform a synchronized choreography-their arms bend at the elbows and swing side to side, they clap to the beat, and sway left to right. Sister's interpretation, however, contains different gestural excesses or bodily flourishes. For example, she shimmies her shoulders, changes level, and bends her knees to swing her hips downwards. Eventually, Sister breaks from the line and steps forward, her arms lifted in the air, languorously moving them down her hair and resting them behind her head, looking out into the audience, purposefully seducing. She pauses, one hand behind her head, elbow cocked, while she pulses her hips subtly in place, accentuating the music's downbeat. Hers is an 'actionable assertion' (DeFrantz 2004:66) that demonstrates the relationship between body, rhythm, beat and pleasure in black social dance. She turns around with an exaggerated twirl and slowly rejoins the line. The performance continues with the camera operating as a disembodied spectator who tries to watch their performance through the moving shoulders, backs and heads of the audience. After the camera has panned across each one of them in a mid-shot, Sister returns as the main focus. Once again, she steps away from the group and improvises her solo routine- seductive arm gestures, poses, hair flipping and intimated hip swinging as the screen only displays her from her waist up. Shoulder shimmies and a hair toss, gestures of sexuality and pleasurable enjoyment lead her back to the line. When the song comes to an end, all five of them rest their arms on one another's shoulders, bouncing to the

music. Sister's refusal to rehearse has rendered her performance a solo one, distinct from the group thereby asserting how she stands out. The audience applauds vigorously, as shouts and hollers overpower the fading strains of the song. The Hearts perform a collective bow and exit the stage. Sister detaches herself from the group and remains on the stage, relishing the applause and attention. The camera is now behind Sister, facing out to the audience. Sister encourages her audience with poses, placing her hands on her hips and then opening her arms out wide. She not only invites further applause but beckons male desire into her corporeal space. Two large men begin to approach and enter the space her arms have opened up, just as Stix returns to pull her off the stage.

This scene not only constructs Sister as having 'natural' talent and improvisational skill but also solidifies her distinct corporeal presence within the group. Furthermore, the reaction to her dancing and enticing heightens the allure and aesthetic capital Sister contributes. Stix, desperate to get another music gig for the group, changes the composition of the group to just women. At the Shan Doo Club, Stix tries to convince its owner that Sister and the Sisters are worth hiring. Levi shows the owner a picture of Sister and claims 'you've never seen girls like this before.' The camera cuts to a close-up of a black and white headshot of Sister, flower in her hair, a faint, seductive smile on her lips. Stix uses her aesthetic capital further, and tempts the owner by claiming that 'they call her the ugly one.' The club owner immediately concedes and offers them one opportunity to impress him later that week. This act of witnessing and judging the beauty of the mulatta works twofold: it is both a visual labour based on historical processes, and it enables mulatta corporeality to have perceived aesthetic power and, in turn to be beautiful and adored. However, just as the visual labours and defines the 'beauty' associated with the mulatta body, I want to affirm dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz's critical disturbance of beauty. He challenges the notion of beauty "as something visually apprehended, toward 'beauty' as a performed gesture felt by a witnessing audience [. W]e must be willing to resist the primacy of sight as truth, and allow for the possibility of an aesthetic sensibility concerned with spirit" (2005: 98). In this way, Sister's image, and the idea of a hybridized and 'beautiful' body are not just visually stimulating, but require other forms of acknowledged sensation—touch, taste (in the Bourdieu sense), veneration and kinaesthesia— in order to make them significant and ultimately beautiful. This is how the mulatta body offers an understanding of the processes involved in rendering 'beauty', not as an a priori artifact, but as the culmination of historical, discursive, intellectual and sensual labours. It must perform, dance or move in order to set these nodes into play.

Now, back to the Shan Doo Club. Dim stage lights leave Sparkle, Sister, and Delores in shadows, with hints of light reflecting off of their shoulders and the red of their dresses. Sister stands in the middle, with Sparkle and Delores on either side of her. The camera captures them in a medium shot from their mid-thigh up. They face stage right and they swing their hips in unison to the music. When they turn to face the audience and the light brightens, we see them dressed in identical red gowns, with matching long red gloves, and a red flower in Sister's hair. As they continue to sing, their bodies execute choreography reminiscent of classic Motown female groups. From the waist down, they softly sway their hips back and forth, while the arms lift, bend, curve, pause, pose and move through the air, articulating a lyric through a hand gesture, or tracing the sinuous curves of their hip movements through the space. At the start of the chorus (an interrogative asking 'What can I do with this feeling?'), they angle themselves towards stage left, the up-stage arm outstretched perpendicularly to their bodies, while the down-stage arm quickly swings vertically up at the first part of the chorus lyric—'what can I do'. Two steady downbeats immediately follow these words, and their bodies articulate the two beats with two hip pulses to the side. Sister purses her lips

seductively while finishing the rest of the chorus' choreography; the hips continually swing, the elevated arm comes down, and subtly glides up the opposite arm, pausing on the shoulder. The camera cuts to Satin, a dark-skinned black man watching the performance, finger resting on his chin. His stoic expression and blink-less stare belie his desire, as his gaze serves metonymically as that of the universalised male one. Furthermore, his hip-notised stare validates the corporeal and aesthetic capital of Sister's swinging hips and appearance. A reaction shot of Levi, who had already demonstrated his desire for Sister in previous scenes, serves as further proof of the heterosexual male gaze witnessing the spectacle of Sister.

When the camera finally returns to the action on the stage, Delores and Sparkle begin switching positions behind Sister, who, through filmic devices such as the close-up, remains in (as) the centre (of attention). Although they all perform the same choreography, Sister's interpretation becomes the only one visually available. The hip swings and sways continue as do the sinewy arm movements, as the camera slowly begins its close-up of Sister. It frames her from her chest up, until towards the end of the song, just her face encapsulates the screen. With her face showing visible expressions of sensuality, self-pleasure and joy, Delores and Sparkle's bodies literally become fragmented as only their red-gloved arms or hands invade the screen in the background.

After this successful performance, Satin arrives at their dressing room and invites Sister to a party. Satin, a neighborhood gangster, possesses some accoutrements of financial success: flashy clothes, an expensive car, and gifts of fur coats for his lady friends. Sister's ambition for 'the big time' leads her to begin a relationship with him, despite his violent ways and her mother's warning that he 'will drag you down into the gutter.' She begins to arrive at performances with a bruised face and starts to use cocaine claiming, 'Sister can't fly with just one wing.' Drugs, Satin, and her brash desire to be different, exacerbate Sister's demise. As a reminder of her wasted potential but aesthetic value, the last image of Sister shows her lying in her coffin with the ubiquitous red flower in her hair. It is Sparkle who eventually obtains the successful singing career. Although Sister's proximity to 'whiteness' may have promised some mainstream success, the film celebrates Sparkle, the brown(er) girl, with the last scene taking place at her concert in New York City's prestigious Carnegie Hall. Sparkle can thus be perceived as a cautionary tale against a powerful, performing mulatta body since she will always be doomed to a tragic fate.

Flashdance

Adrian Lyne's *Flashdance* (1983) focuses on Alex, the mulatta protagonist who works as both a welder and an erotic dancer in order to save money to attend a ballet conservatory. *Flashdance* (Sparkle, and later, Honey) locates the mulatta body within a nocturnal libidinal economy. Her dancing body achieves recognition in the space of a nightclub, a site where the narrative function of the mulatta partners alongside vernacular or popular dance forms with dance vocabularies that can sustain the excesses of her hip and its corporeal utterances. These filmic nocturnal diversions clandestinely mask the issue of race in *Flashdance*, since its main character is never confirmed as mulatta. As Harryette Mullen states, 'because [Alex] lives alone, works with whites, and dates an affluent white man, the deracinated black character (or generic white American) that Jennifer Beals plays is probably presumed to be white' (1994: 86). In contrast, I suggest that the social situations, narrative devices, and the lead actress Beals's corporeality within the film enable a reading of her as not white, not ambiguously 'other,' but as specifically mulatta with its accompanying set of narratives. *Flashdance*'s mulatta narrative includes: mulatta as deracinated figure; mulatta possessing both a highly sexualized body and insatiable sexual desire; and, mulatta as recipient of white male

patronage. My reading concurs with Scruggs statement about the mulatto figure in that 'even when no 'mark' of blackness can be seen, the mulatto yet functions as hidden history' (2004:327). Alex's hidden history thus appears through these mulatta narratives. Although Alex's race suffers from narrative elision, her body is coded as 'other' through markers of class and her embodied dance practice. As no genealogical or family connections appear, we are left to read the character of Alex through the actress' ambiguously raced body, constructing that 'hidden history' that lies behind her epidermal reality.

Beals, who happens to be 'mulatta' (she is African-American and Italian-American) innocuously plays Alex 'without any racial features [...as] clearly the tan Other. [...] The film shrewdly graces her with a white mother surrogate who serves as the emotional foundation for her life, the woman who encourages her to pursue her dream of dancing' (Bogle 2001:291). Beals's mulatta corporeality tinges these narrative devices by enacting a remembrance of other historical narratives this corporeality experiences. Beals-as-Alex operates as what Joseph Roach calls 'a body possessed of its social memory' (1996: 209). In *Sparkle*, *Flashdance* and *Honey* the performance of 'mulatta' con-figures a circum-Atlantic memory. Just as Sister's sassy ways, red flower, and black dress allude to Dorothy Dandridge and stir up a re-remembering of this particular mulatta, Beals-as-Alex continues to recall the historical mulatta body for those witnessing it. Notably, their filmic presences corporealize 'mulatta-ness' demonstrating what Roach argues when he states, "the mutually interdependent performances of circum-Atlantic memory remain visible, audible, and kinesthetically palpable to those who walk in the cities along its historic rim" (1996:30). Roach's performance theory of surrogation as a process of culture's reproduction and recreation relies on the relationship between performance, memory and substitution. For Roach this process of surrogation persists; it has neither end nor beginning, but operates on a continuum needing constant substitutes to take the place of the cultural artifact so that the "thing" might exist to facilitate the circum-Atlantic memory and by default maintain the cultural memory. Film, as a cultural artifact, engages and does cultural remembrance work, using familiar narrative devices, situations and corporeal (re)iterations to reify racial and gendered ways of being, irrespective of the complex corporealities specific to multiple raced and gendered subjectivities.

Alex's relationship with her boss becomes another example of how the filmic apparatus deploys or re-inscribes mulatta narratives. Her boss, Nick first notices her when she dances and strips in the first dance sequence of the film. She performs various jerky, angular movements before she begins her disrobing. She points to a chair that has been placed on the stage, and moves towards it through a turn. She leans back into the chair, arching her back, legs outstretched; a lithe feminine silhouette against the white background. The camera closes up on her face looking out into the audience. A quick reaction shot shows Nick staring at her enraptured. The juxtaposition of these two shots establishes the connection between her performance and its fomentation of desire in him. A second act of disrobing follows and Alex now wears a small, revealing red teddy. This garment becomes further eroticized when she leans back into the chair, pulls a chain and unleashes a torrent of water onto her body. Dance scholar Sherril Dodds aptly analyses this moment as a metaphor for ejaculation (2001:39). Alex's damp, moving and gesticulating body further entices her audience by running close to the front of the stage and, with quick hand gestures, invites them into her corporeal space. At one particular moment in the choreography, she turns to face away from her audience and presents them her almost bare buttocks, hips shifting side to side, flesh jiggling and wiggling in response to her movements. Her movement vocabulary ranges from jazz spins, leg kicks to more languid poses that display the curves and arches of her body. Presumably, Alex has

created this choreography and it serves its purpose within the nightclub setting: to excite, entice and entertain the male bodies that sit around the stage and stare up at her wet moving one. Nick, like Satin in *Sparkle*, cannot take his eyes from her as she pulses to the remaining beats of the song. He looks even more satisfied when he finds out that this nearly naked, dancing body is one of his employees. A power and gender dynamic emerges from this three minute scene which affects how Alex's body and agency operate throughout the rest of the film.

By having her boss become her lover and subsequently use his connections to procure an audition spot for her at the conservatory, Alex connects with a genealogy of mulatta concubinage for the improvement of socio-economic status. New World colonial histories are rife with tales about such sexual liaisons which involved mulatta mistresses, wealthy landed aristocrats, and sentimental abolitionist love stories. In *Flashdance*'s 'post-modern' mulatta narrative, Alex's dependence on a patron ensures her future dance career and happiness. Thus, despite Alex's strong desire to, and talent for, dance, her choreographic labour as displayed in the audition scene which features a hybridised movement vocabulary ranging from ballet, jazz, breakdancing and gymnastics, and her economic self-reliance, the racialised and sexualised power dynamic serves to not only undermine her dance skills, but her own agency as well. Would she ever have had a chance to audition without having provided her white lover with, what we can assume by her sexual appetite and physical stamina, nights of frenetic love-making? One need only remember the scene when they kiss for the first time and she hungrily attacks his lips. Unfortunately, this representation of mulatta sexuality, liberated and liberating to be sure, barely moves her away from the trope of the unfulfilled mulatta. Without his help, she may have continued to dance at the erotic club, still dreaming of a ballet career.

Honey

In contrast to *Flashdance*, *Honey*'s depiction of an independent and ambitious mulatta does not specifically rely on male patronage—white or black. Like Alex, Honey longs to be a dancer, but a screen body in music videos, not a ballerina. Honey's mother (played by Lonette McKee from *Sparkle*) wants her to study ballet, but Honey prefers to dance and teach hip hop. Mary C. Beltrán reads Jessica Alba's *Honey* as 'a brash Puerto Rican dancer from the Bronx.' (2009:164). Arguably, the casting of Lonette McKee as Honey's mother undermines such a reading. Not because Puerto Ricans cannot be mulatto, but because McKee's presence and filmic history specifically for African-American audiences, clearly mark her and as a result, her screen daughter as mulattas. *Honey-as-mulatta* thus allows Lonette McKee's filmic bodily presence to labour and continue the process of surrogation and re-creating a circum-Atlantic memory of the mulatta body.

Honey demonstrates her dance skills at the nightclub where she works as a bartender. Once more, we find the mulatta dancing body primarily situated and garnering recognition in a club through vernacular dance. Sister's dancing serves as accompaniment to her group's singing and as a means to an end ('the big time'). Alex's dancing body functions as a spectacle and she, like Sister, performs onstage in a working class club. Although Honey works at an urban nightclub, she dances after her bartending shift finishes. Her dancing is for personal enjoyment, as evidenced by the first dance sequence of the film. As the film's opening credits finish, Honey closes down the bar and proceeds to the dance floor. When the DJ sees her, he changes the music and her 'improvisation' begins. She walks around a male partner, swinging her hips in an exaggerated manner. They do not necessarily partner, as hip hop dance tends to be a solo endeavour, but she uses him for quick support, one hand resting on

his shoulder as she marks a circular path around him. She walks away and stops behind a female dancer, both of them bending forcibly and pumping their bodies upwards for three pulsating counts. Honey then positions herself in the middle of two other female dancers; hands on hip, hip pop to the left, back, right, front, one arm outstretched, then hip shakes. With their legs wider than hip distance apart, they do a quick dip of the pelvis downwards and quickly propel their torsos upwards, leading with the hip. Two pronounced hip thrusts to the right and left conclude their unison routine. Their hipped enunciations make the rhythm of the music visible—a hybridized sonic landscape of Indian bhangra and hip-hop. Honey continues to dance alone inside a small circle of space opened out for her by the dancing crowd. Jumps, arm locks, torso undulations, level changes and break-dancing vocabulary combine and culminate in pirouette turns that propels her around four times to ultimately land, spread out, knees bent supine on the floor. The crowd goes wild with applause and shouts of approval while she continues to dance on her own among them. I want to consider Thomas DeFrantz's writing about how the black beat is indeed made visible through hip hop. In black social dance, orality, drum (beat or rhythm), and the body exist as a cohesive expressive unit. Furthermore, the call-and-response structure between Honey's moves and the crowd's reaction inflect her performance with an Africanist aesthetic. When Honey continues to dance on her own, to corporealize the music with her own interpretive skill she embodies DeFrantz's explanation: 'to dance hip hop, the body is held "tight"; that is, focused, with strong weight, and capable of an explosive suddenness [...] these performed accents help to ground alternative rhythmic conceptions of the beat; to keep it fresh; to allow a dancer to reenter the same beat in many different ways.' (2004:74). Like Sparkle and Flashdance, this dance sequence serves to show the mulatta's physical dexterity in a popular dance style, or more precisely a 'natural' ability to dance for pleasurable displays or inner transcendence. They appear as 'untrained' dancer bodies capable of virtuosic or mesmerising physical feats prone to induce hip-notism, spectacle, or banal desire because of their body's affiliation with notions of rhythmicity and aspects of 'blackness.'

Unknown to Honey, a video of her dancing at the club ends up in the hands of a white music video producer, Michael Ellis. He shows up at the nightclub, gives her his card and asks her to call him because he can offer her dance work in music videos. Whereas for her, dance functions as a form of physicalised self-expression, for Michael, her dancing body becomes a commodity redolent with the attributes of her racialised gender and thus, exploitable. Honey is skeptical of Michael at first, but at her friend's insistence, she calls him and gets invited to be a 'video dancing body' for the hip hop group Jadakiss. When Honey arrives at the video shoot, Michael is displeased with the existing choreography. He stops the filming and asks Honey to imagine being at the club, to just 'feel the music' and see what she physically conjures up. She closes her eyes, bounces to the music for several counts, opens her eyes and turns to one of the male dancers, calling him over with a wave of her hand. She appears to mumble something inaudible, lifts her arm to give him a brief glimpse of what she will do; he nods, theirs is an embodied choreographic exchange, and their mini-routine begins. Her up-stage arm lifts while her down-stage leg hooks itself onto his waist. She thrusts her hips up-down, up-down, quickly turns to face away from him with legs spread widely apart and bends forward, her buttocks squarely placed by his waist. She reaches down to the floor, slides across on one knee, gets up, one arm raised, and pumps her hips to the side before she undulates her torso and continues to improvise. Michael interrupts, the music stops and he states approvingly, 'That is sexy ... Everybody else, follow what she is doing.' Again, the filmic apparatus continues its process of reification as it constructs Honey's mulatta dancing body as 'sexy.' The verbal declaration inhibits Honey's labouring body from being the

different expressive bodies she physically demonstrates throughout the film: a choreographing body, hired body, video dancing body, and finally an instructional body.

In addition to becoming a screen dancing body, Honey also teaches hip hop at a community centre. During class, she breaks down the choreography into counts, goes over it slowly, adds the music, and even incorporates one of her student's accidental falls into the routine. In contrast, *Flashdance* exclusively showcases the end-result of Alex's 'maniacal' workouts. The film audience has no insight as to where she creates her solo-striptease performances. The layout of her apartment—a converted warehouse—the mirrors and ballet-barres demarcate her home as a space where danced bodily labour occurs, but other than the excerpt of her working out and stretching, her choreographic labour is absent. In Honey, however, the choreographic labour remains visible. Spared a dissection by the camera of Honey's dancing body into rippling buttocks, pounding feet, or an undulating torso (as in *Flashdance*), her body engages in repetition, rehearsal and corporeal pedagogical exchanges.

Another compositional moment occurs when Michael asks Honey to change some choreography over a lunch-time video-shoot break. She finds an isolated spot that happens to look out onto a basketball court. As she rehearses the already existing choreography she becomes increasingly frustrated; no new choreographic ideas seem to work. She happens to look over at the court across the way and begins carefully to watch the players' movements: their criss-crossing arms, wide stances, pivots and jump shots. Honey incorporates this movement vocabulary and develops a phrase to replace the old one. In this instance, I am reminded of introductory dance composition assignments where students are asked to make a dance using everyday or pedestrian movements. When she returns to show and teach the new and improved choreography, Michael approves and Honey cements her success albeit briefly.

Michael's sexual desire for Honey becomes evident in the second half of the film. He makes sexual advances towards her and expects reciprocation as gratitude for the opportunities he has offered her. Honey rejects his advances and he blacklists her in the music video industry. The mulatta narrative that sets up relationships with white male patron as being or becoming sexual ones thus appears in the film, but Honey's control over her own body and its multiple labours renders it obsolete. Ultimately, Michael's actions prove inconsequential, having no bearing on Honey's reputation, talent, or ambition. She helps raise money for her mother's dilapidated community centre through a fundraising performance featuring her dance students. The filmic apparatus erases the choreographic labour of the fundraiser by only showing the performance through slick edits, jump cuts and close-ups on virtuosic displays of hip hop dancing. Meanwhile hip hop star Missy Elliott shows up at Michael's offices demanding Honey as her choreographer and threatening to fire him. Michael's attempted sabotage clearly fails since the last shot of the film shows Missy Elliott arriving at the fundraiser and quickly scurrying in, implying Honey's successful future as a video dancer and choreographer.

Dance studies and performance theory offer ways of removing the tragedy inscribed on mulatta narratives by focusing on how the body read or coded as mulatta uses its very physicality to subvert, contest, or engage with its limited representations. Honey's choreographer, Laurie Ann Gibson, another mulatta body, has had a successful career as a dancer, film/video choreographer, and dance teacher. If Honey can be read as a case of art imitating life, then perhaps the 'tragic mulatta' will eventually be erased by an ensemble of dancing mulattas working through ways to choreograph her, once and for all, off the stage.

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