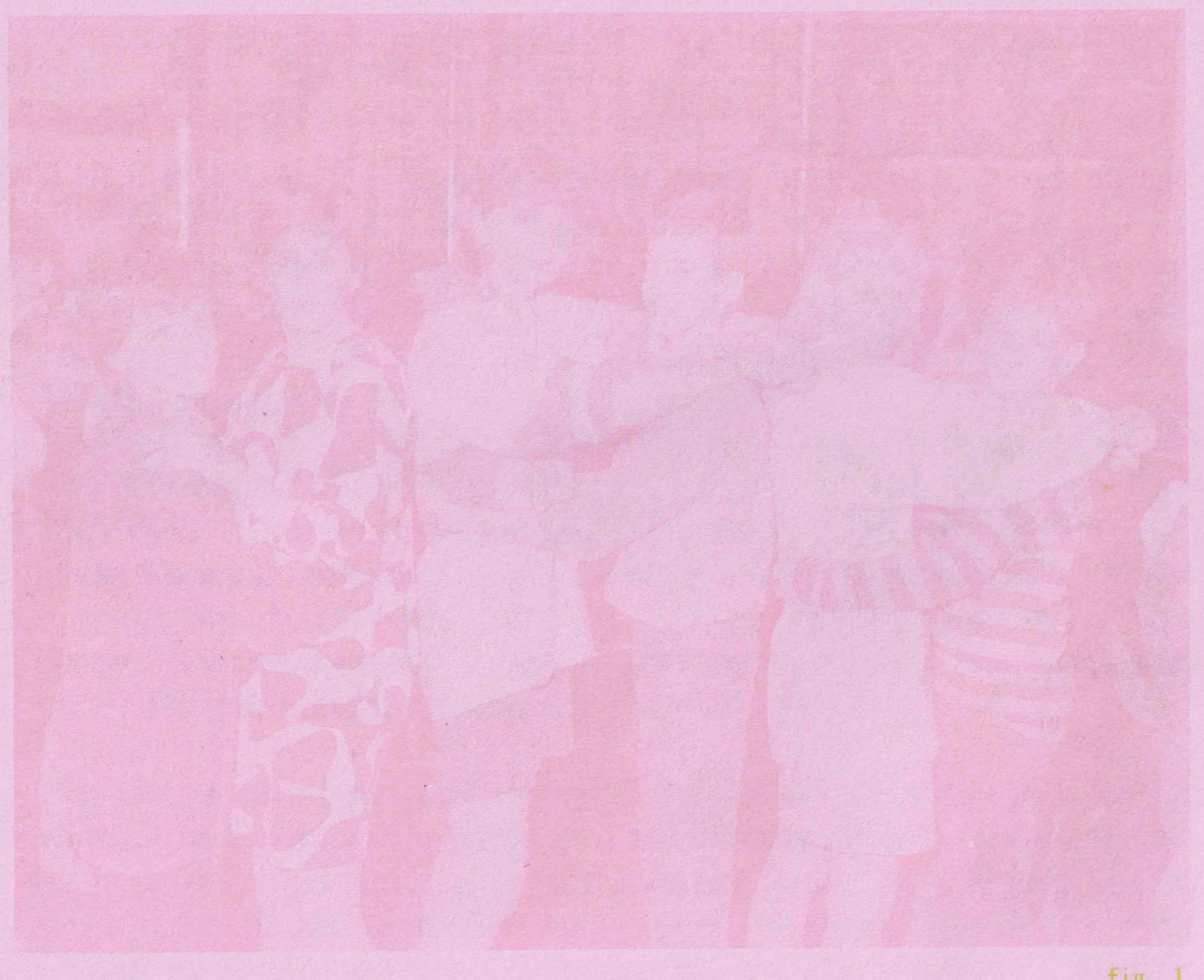
Picture Files

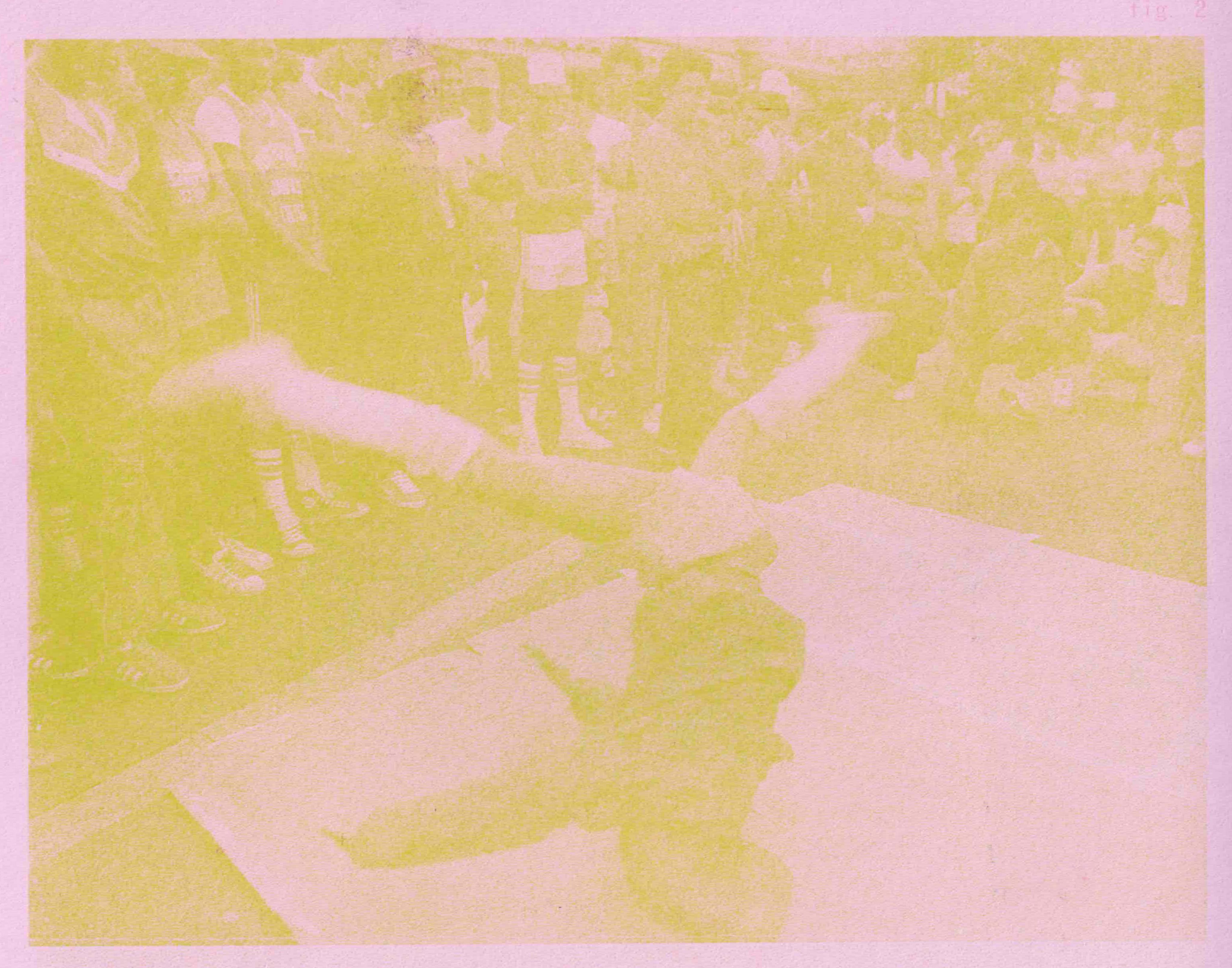
Caiti Borruso

I'm writing from Room 119 of the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman building, at 5th Avenue and 42nd Street in Manhattan. I had to push past throngs of tourists to get into this room, which is quiet and bright, the shelves around the perimeter painted in a matte gold. The grooves of the shelves look a little bit like gears. Much of the NYPL's Picture Collection is housed here. The quiet is a stark difference from the SDPL's Picture File, which isn't enclosed in its own room, and is close enough to the elevator to hear regular dings; trolley horns float up from street level to the eighth floor. Here in Manhattan, I can hear honks through the tall windows, but the collection has a door that closes. There is only one big table, which I take over for a good chunk of the day, and two narrow tables beneath the windows, too small for the kind of spreading I want to do. I go into the shelves without any real direction and take the first folder that I see: Dance - Social - 1980s.



One of the exciting things about printed material is turning it over and seeing what is on the backside. I flip over a photograph titled "Slam Dancers at the Whiskey" (fig. 3) to find a photograph I recognize from a postcard: "On the set of Hot to Trot." The titular slam dancer is suspended in midair, hands reaching, striped shirt billowing to reveal his bare chest, the rungs of his ribs. He is concentrating. His knee looks ready to crash into someone's face and leave a gap between teeth. In the foreground, someone raises a hand to protect their skull from the blow. Dancing is about a looseness of the limbs, the center of the body, all of it connected gently, without anxiety or self-consciousness. In another one of the pictures from the Dance - Social - 1980s folder, a figure breakdances atop a bed of cardboard, upside down, balanced on the head, hood billowing from windbreaker in such a way that the neck looks snapped, the limbs are flung, swinging, tube socks blurred (fig. 2).

I am envious of this looseness of limbs. The only time I feel this way is in the water, like yesterday, bobbing on my back in the Atlantic at Coney Island, or earlier this week, standing waist-deep in the glacial water that flows from Mt. Hood. There is a photograph in the file of two dancers in step, performing a zydeco dance in Lake Charles,



Breakdancing, Jamaica, Queens, 1984 (Photo & Martha Cooper City Lore)

SPECIAL DISPATCH FROM THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY PICTURE COLLECTION DANCE - SOCIAL - 1980s



fio 3

Louisiana (fig. 4). The man, dressed in neat, dark denim, stares past his partner. Their legs are locked together, and he holds her tightly with both hands — one at the small of her back, the other gripping her hand tightly to his hip. She is wearing white, the pants striped, so that their clothing echoes the stripes of the tent they dance beneath. The flash utilized among the movement turns his cowboy hat into a suggestion atop his head. Men in cowboy hats look on, hands in their pockets or clutched behind their backs, like *umarell* (older Italian men who stand with their hands clasped behind their backs, watching construction sites). Dancing with someone else requires a different sort of looseness of limbs, one that is both reactive and (responsive? generative? collaborative? I write accepting). How to feel another's body move alongside yours. How to feel movement and respond in kind.

The last picture I pull shows three couples at arm's length from one another, pre- or hardly teens at a Bat Mitzvah (fig. 1). They are lined up in a row, hips squared to one another while they all look toward the camera, heads turned in fear or glee. The three boys all smile, lips turned up at the corners. The one in the middle is smirking with his



teeth showing. The girl on the left looks surprised, her hands on the boy's shoulders; the girl in the middle slouches toward her date with something like fear, her hands clasped behind his neck. The third girl looks out from behind the shoulder of her pink sweater. They all look like they have been caught in the act of desire, the first times you line someone else's body up against yours. The thought of it terrifies me. I remember being coaxed to dance with my fifth-grade boyfriend to "A Moment Like This" by Kelly Clarkson. Beneath the fluorescent lights of the school cafeteria, we both resisted it, our bodies stiff and straight. Our relationship had mostly consisted of emails, AIM messages, and listening to CDs on my Walkman together on the bus ride home after school. I broke up with him via email for no real reason. I didn't know what to do with my body.



I'd like to visit more picture collections, but they're difficult to find out about online; searching for them often yields digitized collections. If you know of a picture collection, please write me a letter or send me an email (I would prefer a letter). Or please visit it and write to me about it. Or maybe I will come to you and we can go together.