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# Get on this Vibe: Freestyling and Being in/as Radical Togetherness

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
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by

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## Dedication

To the people who make and play the music that calls our bodies to move and groove.

And to all the movers and groovers.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Get on this Vibe: Freestyling and Being in/as Radical Togetherness

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies
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Dr. Imani Kai Johnson, Chairperson

*Get on this Vibe: Freestyling and Being in/as Radical Togetherness* is an ethnographic study that explores *vibing* (grooving with, attuning frequencies) within *freestyle* (improvisational) hip hop dance practices. Asking how bodies come to move and groove together, while also acknowledging that sharing a groove transcends a solely corporeal experience, this dissertation examines what takes place physically and metaphysically as vibratory energies intermingle on the dance floor. The project interrogates vibing's potential to refuse a white supremacist, capitalist construction of the self as violently individuated, defined by a singular metaphysical being bound within the solid, material confines of a singular body. Instead, this research contends, vibing makes knowable an alternative existence in and as radical togetherness.

In particular, the project looks at the profound and intimate relationship freestyle dancers cultivate with the music as they embody the energetic vibrations of a song's intention and the music's literal vibrations, the ways dancers read and feed off of each other in battles and cyphers, and examples of failures to vibe. Situating freestyling and

vibing as African diasporic technologies that enable modes of Black sociality, the dissertation draws on Black studies, African American studies, and African diasporic studies in addition to hip hop, dance, and performance studies in order to contextualize its findings. The research demonstrates that vibing, the practice of aligning vibratory frequencies, engages a multisensory listening, an understanding of your self existing *in relation to*, and a willingness to be literally and figuratively moved.

*Get on this Vibe* argues that our entanglements are ever-present, and that vibing is but *a* possibility for acknowledging, celebrating, and nourishing them. The work asserts that how we show up matters, and that, as a practice that enables our collective cultivation, vibing can provide a lens for thinking through how we show up beyond the dance floor as well. The project concludes by placing the practice of vibing in dialogue with the practice of co-conspiring in social justice activism.

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## Chapter 1

## Introduction: Vibing and Radical Togetherness

"[T]he most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling."
- Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, pg. 11

*I'm in rehearsal for the faculty concert with my collaborators, the dancers and my co-choreographer, Akasi Mortiga Francis-Mora. It's our second to last rehearsal, and the dancers are on another level tonight. Before now, it often seemed as though they were just going through the motions, but not tonight. Tonight, the dancers are in it, fully immersed in and moving as one with the music and the dance. The energy between them as they dance together and feed off of each other is palpable; intense and joyous, it fills the space of the giant studio we occupy. In one section of the piece, drawing on the technology of the cypher, we have invited each dancer to offer a solo freestyle and to bear witness to and honor each other's offerings. The vibration the dancers cultivate together continues to heighten as they transfer energy from one to another.*

*The last dancer to go, Chav, pulls the attention towards her as she begins to dance, her movements revealing her deep understanding of the music's intonations and intentions as she embodies the details of the singer's intricate runs and the meaning of his words. As I watch the music pouring from her body and her spirit, my own body and spirit are drawn forward towards her. As unctuous undulations flow throughout her body and exit through an arm upstretched to the ceiling, she slowly leans backwards, hinging at the knees until her back nearly lays flat on the floor but instead first catches herself with her hand. The rest of dancers, deeply invested in Chav's performance, are moved to*

*move with her and lower towards the floor as well—seated, squatting, dropping sideways, outstretched on their stomachs. I am called to respond to her vocally, my sounds flowing into the space alongside Akasi's, who is also stirred by Chav's expression. By the time her freestyle is coming to a close, I realize that, lost in her performance, I have been pulled onto the floor out of a desire to be physically closer to her.*

What happened in this moment?

What does it mean to get lost in the music, in the dance, in other folks?

What took place as these dancers fed off of and shared energy with each other?

What was happening as Chav allowed the music to pour through her body and soul?

What was it that drew me out of my seat and onto the floor towards her?

*Get on this Vibe: Freestyling and Being in/as Radical Togetherness* emerged out of moments like these, moments where music and dance flow through and between us, cultivating profound and intimate connections that challenge a construction of the self with rigid borders. This project asks how dancing bodies come to move and groove together, but it also investigates the relationships between physical bodies and metaphysical beings—souls, spirits, ancestors—acknowledging that sharing a groove transcends a solely material, corporeal experience. This dissertation is an exploration into the invisible and intangible but viscerally real entanglements between the material and the immaterial, between bodies, between beings.

As much as this project is about dance and what freestyling enables and illuminates, I am equally curious about what bodies and beings moving and grooving

together can tell us about life beyond the dance floor. Informed and inspired by Robin D. G. Kelley's claim that "the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling" (11), this research asks how the practice of vibing may enable us to see and feel differently. As the music moved Chav, the other dancers and I were moved to move in relation to her, all of us entangled in something that superseded any of us alone. This moment illuminated an interconnectedness that was more powerful than our separateness as individuals, refusing the violent individuation of a white supremacist, capitalist construction of the self. Through the study of moments like these, *Get on this Vibe* asks what vibing makes knowable about the very nature of our own existence, our own being.

As I consider the potential to encounter alternatives to the white supremacist, capitalist self, I open myself up to sensing what other possibilities there might be. With his theorization of *otherwise possibilities*, religious studies scholar Ashon Crawley speaks to the existence of such alternatives as well as how we can come to know them. He writes in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*:

> Otherwise, as a word—otherwise possibilities, as a phrase—announces the fact of infinite alternatives to what *is*. And what *is* is about being, about existence, about ontology. But if infinite alternatives exist, if otherwise possibility is a resource that is never exhausted, what *is*, what exists, is but one of many. Otherwise possibilities exist alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities. Or, otherwise possibilities exist and the register of imagination, the epistemology through which sensual detection occurs—that is, the way we think the world—has to be altered in order to get at what's there. Moving in and through us like the trillions of neutrinos that pass through each square inch of Earth every second, there but undetected until we create and utilize certain technologies in the service of harnessing that which is unseen to naked eyes. (Crawley 2, emphasis original)

Crawley argues that there are infinite ways of being and doing other than what we experience as the norm but that we must attune ourselves to recognizing their potential. This attunement, he explains, relies on our imaginations, a willingness to believe in possibilities that outlie understanding through the bodily senses alone, and an openness to (re)think the world that the dominant hegemony works tirelessly, in overt and covert ways, to socialize us into. This research's attention to entanglements that cannot be seen or touched requires imagination and an openness to believe in possibilities that cannot be proven by the dominant hegemonic epistemologies that deny their existence. In order to get at these possibilities, this dissertation turns to the practice of vibing, a technology that harnesses ever-present, invisible, intangible vibrations, which makes knowable otherwise possibilities of existence. The otherwise, Crawley contends, is not merely a possibility, it is already lived every day, and he acknowledges Blackpentecostal aesthetics as "but one enactment of alternative modes, alternative strategies, for organizing, performing and producing thought" (3). Applying Crawley's theorizations to the context of freestyle hip hop dance practices, this dissertation contends that vibing also accesses an already lived alternative.

In this project, I consider the capacity for physical bodies and metaphysical beings to converge on the same frequency, the same vibration—to get on the same vibe—and what it can mean for us to connect with each other in this way. I am interested in how (re)thinking our existence as fundamentally connected—as fundamentally *connection itself*—can reject, refute, and refuse a white supremacist, capitalist construction of the self, one in which a violently individuated metaphysical being is bound within the clearly

delineated material confines of a singular body. *Get on this Vibe* argues that vibing in freestyle dance practices offers a glimpse into an otherwise existence in and as radical togetherness.

**Hip Hop Culture, Freestyling, and Vibing**

My own ability to experience these moments of radical interconnection through dance has most often been facilitated by genres that ask dancers to be in conversation with the music[1]. This is what initially drew me, so many years ago, to hip hop's rhythms and grooves, which called my body to move in ways that allowed me to get lost in the music, in the dance, in the moment, and in the energies of those around me. Decades later, this is what led me to situate this research within the realm of hip hop dance practices.

*Hip Hop Culture*

Though not yet recognized or named as such, hip hop culture was born in the Bronx in the 1970s, the culture's origin Myth[2] pointing to a party thrown by DJ Kool Herc and his sister on August 11, 1973[3]. The culture's foundational elements, which all

[1] In my personal experience, these have all been African diasporic dance forms, from tap and jazz to salsa and bachata.

[2] I use this term with respect, acknowledging both the importance of this moment to the culture as well as the complexity in pinpointing a singular, originary moment in a social, cultural movement that was not recognized as a cohesive movement until years later, and which cannot entirely be credited to a single person. The identification of this moment as hip hop's origin is tied to the existence of a preserved flyer from this party, which cannot be disentangled from a Europeanist privileging of tangible archival materials and individual, genius artists. This origin is further complicated by the incorporation of Popping and Locking, which came out of the Bay Area and Los Angeles, respectively, and pre-dated hip hop, later being brought under the umbrella of hip hop culture. My discussion of the complexities in recognizing this moment of origin does not discount the profound importance of this party or DJ Kool Herc to the culture.

[3] This dissertation in no way attempts to provide a comprehensive history of hip hop culture or its dances. I am curious about the point at which some basic knowledge in this area can be expected of the audience. My questions about these expectations are, in part, informed by experiences at Dance Studies Association conferences, wherein panel audiences are expected to come with basic background on the pioneers of modern dance and well-known choreographers in the realms of ballet, modern, and post-modern, but

developed in relation to each other and with practitioners engaging in multiple elements, include breaking[4], DJing, MCing, graffiti, and knowledge[5]. Black and Brown youth in the Bronx (re)claimed and (re)appropriated spaces, breaking on street corners, bombing building and trains with graffiti, and throwing block parties with massive, booming speakers, infusing their hoods with creativity, innovation, life, joy, and togetherness. Emerging on the heels of the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement, hip hop reimagines African diasporic aesthetics and values, African American expressive cultural traditions, and Black sociality and Black power within the contexts and structures of urban postindustrial conditions[6] and the impacts of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's and President Richard Nixon's "benign neglect," which purposefully and drastically withdrew services from already marginalized and underserved Black and Brown communities as a solution for the race problem[7]. That hip hop's foundational elements developed in

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presenters on hip hop and other African diasporic practices are interrupted to define widely used language, explain basic tenets of Africanist aesthetics, and asked to provide extensive historical and cultural context on their topics. Scholars have been doing work on hip hop for decades, and there is a wealth of resources that can provide further background in this area, including but not limited to: Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*; Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*; *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* by Joe Schloss; Imani Kai Johnson's "Hip-hop dance" from *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* and her article "From Blues Women to B-Girls: Performing Badass Femininity"; *Black Power of Hip Hop Dance: On Kinesthetic Politics* by Naomi Bragin; Moncell Durden's *Beginning Hip-Hop Dance*; *Going Off! The Untold Story of Breaking's Birth* by Serouj Aprahamian; *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983* by Tim Lawrence; Halifu Osumare's *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip Hop: Power Moves*; *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* by Raquel Rivera; *Imani Perry's Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*; and Rosemarie Roberts's *Baring Unbearable Sensualities: Hip Hop Dance, Bodies, Race, and Power*.

[4] Breaking is also called b-boying and b-girling. Although breaking is often referred to as "breakdance," practitioners do not use this term.

[5] Afrika Bambaataa, a pioneering DJ and founder of the Universal Zulu Nation, is credited with adding the fifth element of knowledge.

[6] Please see Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* for an in-depth discussion of the relationship between postindustrialization and hip hop culture.

[7] Please see Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* for an in-depth discussion of the relationships between the Cross-Bronx Expressway, urban revitalization, "benign neglect," and the birth of hip hop.

relation to each other and within a particular sociopolitical and historical context is what later led them to be recognized as a cohesive culture.

With the recognition of hip hop as a culture, practices that emerged outside of the Bronx were also brought under the umbrella of hip hop as well. For example, popping, which came out of the Bay Area, and Locking, which came out of Los Angeles and is credited to Don "Campbellock" Campbell, and which pre-dated hip hop and were performed to funk music, are both recognized as fundamental hip hop dance practice. In her chapter on hip hop dance in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson writes:

> There is no singular place, time, or genre that constitutes 'the beginnings' of hip-hop dance. Rather there was simultaneous activity across the USA that would collectively assert itself as a shared culture *after* hip-hop came into being. One of the shared qualities of these dances lies in their adaptation of traditional African diasporic aesthetic imperatives in new ways and for contemporary contexts. (22)

Hip hop has continued to evolve and expand, incorporating new genres of music and dance practices into the fold. These dance forms, which include, to name just a handful, breaking, popping, locking, krump, jitting, jooking, and turfing, are from and informed by different locations and different eras, and each has a distinct set of embodied aesthetics and a unique subculture. While breaking, for example, emerged in the Bronx in the 1970s as dancers explored spins, freezes, and power moves on the ground, jitting was born in Detroit with rapid-fire footwork done to music inspired by the fast-paced sounds of Motor City's automotive factories, and krump originated in the 2000s with combinations of explosive and emotive stomps, arm swings, and chest pops.

Given the significant distinctions between these practices' histories, aesthetics, locations, music, and more, there is debate about exactly what should be considered part of hip hop culture and what falls outside of it. Many consider house, for example, to exist beyond the realm of hip hop but house is also often included as part of hip hop events. This debate over the boundaries of hip hop, while important, is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and this project utilizes an inclusive definition of hip hop dance practices[8]. In doing so, it is not my intention to conflate any of these genres, but rather to focus on their common practice of freestyling as it manifests across them, acknowledging shared, underlying, and overarching traits, values, and functions that are foundational across the spectrum of hip hop's dances, grounded not only in hip hop culture, but also in the traditions of the African diaspora and African American expressive cultures.

*Freestyling*

This research initially looked at both choreographed and freestyle dance; however, the focus of the project narrowed to freestyling, as it seemed the moments I was searching for were enacted most regularly when folks had the freedom to move as they felt moved to do so, rather than being constrained to pre-set choreography[9]. Freestyling has always been fundamental across the myriad genres of dance that fall under the umbrella of hip hop. Although cultural outsiders often mistake it as meaning *you are free*

[8] Given this dissertation's critique of rigidly defined borders, it seems methodologically more appropriate to allow for flexibility here.

[9] I will admit that I do have a personal love for performing choreography. I do not believe that these moments of radical connection and choreographed dance are mutually exclusive; I have both experienced and witnessed vibing in the midst of choreography. However, I suspect this may be most accessible to those who are already in the practice of engaging in this radical connection outside of choreography. This topic is deserving of its own dedicated research but lands outside the scope of this dissertation.

*to do whatever you want*, freestyling does, in fact, have structures, requiring, for example, that practitioners improvise—dancing, MCing, beatboxing, etc.—with and within rhythmic arrangements. These structures, however, rather than being strictly codified, are purposefully flexible and designed to invite creativity, allowing participants room to play and innovate while still respecting cultural values. This purposeful flexibility and rejection of codification derive from a distinctly Africanist aesthetic approach, and hip hop's freestyle falls within a lineage of improvisational African American and African diasporic dance practices, music, and art, including hip hop's predecessors in jazz, funk, and disco.

While the details of technique and aesthetics differ across genres, each African diasporic dance form highlights dancers' unique personalities through improvisation. Dance historian Jacqui Malone explains in *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* that:

> All African American social dances allow for some degree of improvisation… In this dance tradition, the idea of executing any dance exactly like someone else is usually not valued. When vocal groups perform choreographed dance movements, the audience expects each singer to bring his or her own personality to the overall movement style, thereby creating diversity within unity. Contrary to popular opinion, black idiomatic dancers always improvise with intent—they compose on the spot—with the success of the improvisations depending on the mastery of the nuances and the elements of craft called for by the idiom. (33-34)

Of particular importance for this project is the connection between improvisation's individuality[10] and the community, brought to light by Malone's statement that

[10] I want to clearly distinguish this African diasporic individual*ity* from white supremacist, capitalist violent individuation. An African diasporic approach to individuality simultaneously avoids fungibility and refuses violent individuation. In the context of freestyling, individuality, is about highlighting unique style in

improvisation creates diversity within unity, and which the following chapters will discuss in more detail. I also want to underscore Malone's use of the words *intent* and *compose* because freestyling is often dismissed by outsiders as completely random happenings, devoid of purpose, knowledge, effort, or skill. This misunderstanding derives from an upholding of the Cartesian mind-body split, which privileges the mind over the body, and which also correlates the thinking mind with white people, and non-white people with the devalued, unintelligent body.

Addressing the racialization of the separation of the mind and body, albeit within a context that is not specifically freestyle, dance scholar Jane Desmond writes in "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," "[I]t is no accident that both 'blacks' and 'Latins' are said to 'have rhythm.' This lumping together of 'race,' 'national origin,' and supposed genetic propensity for rhythmic movement rests on an implicit division between moving and thinking, mind and … the realm of the supposedly 'naturally' expressive body (48). Linking Black genetics and African diasporic practices to the devalued body within a dominant hegemony that privileges the mind is a purposeful discursive act to, by extension, devalue Black people and their expressive cultures. Situating freestyling as a thoughtless, natural ability ignores the skill, effort, and embodied knowledge it requires. As much as freestyling happens in the moment, freestyling in that moment becomes possible through training—training in movements

relation to the music, the dance form, the community, the culture; it is about being a part of, not separate from.

possibilities, in listening to the music, in responding to other dancers, and in sensing energies.

*Vibing*

This dissertation's arrival at the concept of vibing was unanticipated when the research began. When attempting to explain the often difficult to describe but nevertheless undeniable pull they can experience while freestyling, somewhere along the way, the term *vibing* often comes up for folks. Although nowadays the idea of vibing seems ubiquitous across mainstream U.S. culture, the term "vibe" overused and thrown around indiscriminately, hip hop culture holds vibing as an ideal[11]. As such, when vibing revealed itself through the research process, its amalgamation into work grounded in hip hop dance practices felt appropriate.

Vibing is a complex, multifaceted practice of tuning into attuning with and through the alignment of energetic vibrations. This practice emerges in conversation with the *vibe*, an all-encompassing, elusive, and yet ever-present energetic force, described by ethnomusicologist Kai Fikentscher in *"You Better Work": Underground dance Music in New York City* as a "collective energy that can be experienced on an individual basis as well" (81). This collective energy is comprised of the particular vibrational energies of a given environment. Fikentscher explains that the vibe is "shaped by variables such as the size of the venue, the lighting, the patrons, the time of night, the dress code—in addition to the volume, tempo, and style of the music, which may or may not change from record

[11] Dancers and DJs use this term frequently, and there are regular references to it in songs, such as Kendrick Lamar's "Bitch, Don't Kill My Vibe."

to record, from minute to minute, or from hour to hour" (80). Never static, the vibe exists in a continual state of becoming, necessarily and inherently tied to the shifts of the many energies composing it. Because of this multidimensional, dynamic character, in "Reflections on 'Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery'," philosophy scholar Renee Conroy defines the vibe as "an emergent entity whose qualitative character is not reducible to any single contribution … and supervenes on all of them" (Conroy). The vibe is often described by practitioners as living and breathing, a continuous call and response between the energies feeding into it, and in doing so, cultivating it, while they also simultaneously feed off of and are informed by it.

Vibing as a verb, then, is this collective aligning of vibrational frequencies. Invisible and intangible but with viscerally real impact, vibing simultaneously refers to something felt, like an energy or mood, and references vibrations, which themselves can't be seen by the naked eye but whose effects on material objects can be. Vibing's somewhat elusive nature and intermingling of the physical and metaphysical make it an apt lens through which to contemplate this research.

In and of itself, vibing is not dancing, but rather it is an experience that can be accessed through dancing. It is a technology that enables modes of Black sociality, ways of existing in relation to other beings—folks, ancestors, spirits, environments, etc. Discussing sociality in her study on the relationships between street dances and Black power, in *Black Power of Hip Hop Dance: On Kinesthetic Politics*, performance studies scholar Naomi Bragin writes, "A sensation of movement that does not belong to one's proper body—a feeling of movement compelled by history to flow into the space

between bodies—is a study in the sociality of being in common" (1). Sociality is a being together that eludes the confinement of the body, flowing through and between us. Vibing is but one manifestation among a long lineage and enduring trajectory of these African diasporic technologies that enable otherwise ways of togetherness. From giving dap to playing the dozens, from the Ring Shout to religious practices that invite spirits and òrìsà[12] to mount the body, from rent parties and block parties to Carnival, each technology that enables modes of Black sociality, while distinct, shares an enabling and honoring of collective relationality. Vibing enables a being in togetherness through the alignment of energetic vibrations.

I want to underscore a distinction I am making between freestyling and vibing. While freestyling is the practice of improvising within hip hop dance forms, vibing is an elusive, mysterious experience of profound interconnection through the alignment of energetic vibrations, which can sometimes be accessed through freestyling, but is never guaranteed, regardless of a dancer's skill or talent as a dancer. I will argue later in this dissertation that, unlike hip hop culture, hip hop dances, and freestyling, vibing cannot be commodified or appropriated, requiring dancers to understand, even if not explicitly or entirely consciously, themselves as existing in relation to and contributing meaningfully as parts of entities larger than their selves. Vibing, I argue, necessarily acknowledges and celebrates our ever-present entanglements, and for this reason, I explore vibing as a practice that can harness an alternative to a white supremacist, capitalist construction of the self as violently individuated. While I suggest that vibing can provide a lens for

[12] Or orishá, orichá, or orixá, depending on where you are in the diaspora.

thinking through how we can access, practice, and live this alternative existence in and as radical togetherness beyond the dance floor, I am *not* arguing that vibing on the dance floor necessarily equates in any way to dancers engaging in radical togetherness outside of dance. Instead, I ask what vibing makes knowable about existence otherwise, what it might illuminate about the importance of this alternative, and how vibing might offer insight into ways of accessing this alternative outside of dance as well.

**Violently Individuated Self**

I have made a conscious decision to focus this dissertation on the alternative rather than the ways that the dominant hegemony continuously works to oppress, repress, contain, and terminate the alternative. However, in order to situate radical togetherness as existence otherwise, I offer here an explanation of the violently individuated self.

The United States is known for its particular brand of extreme individualism, privileging, and placing a distinctly severe weight and onus on, the individual over society, touting individual freedoms and self-reliance. The trope of self-reliance enables dominant hegemonic powers to dismiss any societal responsibility for systemic and structural inequities, turning the blame instead to individual, moral failings. The right to access individual rights requires first having been deemed individual via its white supremacist, capitalist construction. Separation, individuation, is the mode of maintaining power. Violent refers to the degree that individuation is enforced as well as the white supremacist terror employed to do so.

"Individual," cultural theorist Raymond Williams writes in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, "originally meant indivisible. That now sounds like

paradox. ‘Individual’ stresses a distinction from others; ‘indivisible’ a necessary connection” (114). Citing definitions of the word as referring to something hard, that cannot be cut, and cannot be separated, he traces the term’s social constructions and evolution, explaining the European origins of contemporary notions of individual as *the* individual, “a singular noun” (116). He continues:

> [A] new mode of analysis, in logic and mathematics, postulated the individual as the substantial entity… from which other categories and especially collective categories were derived. The political thought of the Enlightenment mainly followed this model. Argument began from individuals, who had an initial and primary existence, and laws and forms of society were derived from them... In classical economics, trade was described in a model which postulated separate individuals who decided, at some starting point, to enter into economic or commercial relations. In utilitarian ethics, separate individuals calculated the consequences of this or that action which they might undertake. Liberal thought based on ‘the individual’ as starting point was criticized … from socialist positions, as most thoroughly in Marx, who attacked the opposition of the abstract categories ‘individual’ and ‘society’ and argued that the individual is a social creation, born into relationships and determined by them. (Williams 117)

There is a lot in this quote, but I’ve included this much of Williams’s text because it illustrates several important points, including noting the widespread array of structures, systems, and societies that have been designed around this construction. The individual, defined by the very nature of its own existence, is made to be self-evident, evident to itself by itself, rationalizing itself: *I think, therefore I am*. With this contention, Enlightenment era philosopher René Descartes, situates the self as wholly self-contained, writing, as translated by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach in *Philosophical Writings*:

> What then am I to say about this mind, that is, about myself? (So far, I allow of no other element in myself except mind.) What is the ‘I’ that

> seems to perceive this wax so distinctly? Surely I am aware of myself not only much more truly and certainly, but also much more distinctly and manifestly. For if I judge that wax exists from the fact that I see this wax, it is much clearer that I myself exist because of the same fact that I see it. Possibly what I see is not wax; possibly I have no eyes to see anything; but it is just not possible, when I see or (I make no distinction here) I think I see (*cogitem me videre),* that my conscious self (*ego ipse cogitans)* should not be something. Similarly, if I judge that wax exists from the fact that I touch this wax, the same result follows: I exist. If I judge this from the fact that I imagine it, or for some other reason, it is just the same. (74)

From his first sentence here, Descartes makes clear that he equates his self with his mind. His own act of thinking alone defines his existence. No relationships, no relationality, nothing outside of his mind—which is his self—is necessary for its own existence. Furthermore, he makes clear that his perception or imagining of anything outside of his self does not necessarily prove its existence; instead, his thinking about another object can only reify his own existence. Separating the individual so completely from anything beyond itself has a compartmentalizing effect on what is understood to be outside of it as well, society, for example, similarly contained as an entity unto itself, demonstrating both the individual as entity and its individuation from society. The critique from philosopher Karl Marx, discussed by Williams above, questions how "society" could somehow be constructed as an entity separate from all the people who form it through the act of their being in relation with each other.

Also of note in Williams's analysis is his identification of the individual's roots in European logics, which necessarily inform its construction, designed in the image of its specific context: European, western, white, Christian, cis, heterosexual, and male[13].

[13] In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, gender studies scholar Katherine McKittrick summarizes Wynter's findings on the (re)definition of Man over time. She writes:

Despite these particularities, the individual was treated as universal rather than contextual and disseminated and applied, via imperialism and colonialism, beyond Europe's borders. Critiquing the invisibilization of the individual's specific context, cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, in "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," explains that "our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, … overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (260) and is, thereby, in contention with humanity. Those that exist outside of the individual's defining characteristics (white, cis heterosexual, man) can never fully access the humanity it defines and are instead relegated to the human Other. Here, we see the individual not only closed off in/as itself and individuated from other self-contained individuals, but also individuated from broader categories of human and Other that further compartmentalize, contain, and separate. This categorization is not accidental. These categories make way for white supremacist hierarchies (or, the hierarchies designate the categories), which, by design, justify the subjugation of those excluded from human.

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> The human, in Wynter's writings, is representatively linked to the figure of Man1 (invented by the Renaissance's *studia humanitatis* as *homo religiousus* conception of human) that was tethered to the theological order of knowledge of pre-Renaissance Latin-Christian medieval Europe; this figure opened up a slot for Man2, a figure based on the Western bourgeoisie's model of being human that has been articulated as, since the latter half of the nineteenth century, liberal monohumanism's *homo oeconomicus*. These figures, both Man1 and Man2, are also inflected by powerful knowledge systems and origin stories that explain who/what we are. These systems and stories produce the lived and racialized categories of the rational and irrational, the selected and the dysselected, the haves and the have-nots as asymmetrical naturalized racial-sexual human groupings that are specific to time, place, and personhood yet signal the processes through which the empirical and experiential lives of all humans are increasingly subordinated to a figure that thrives on accumulation. (9-10, emphasis original)

Racializing constructions of the non-white human Other further the justification of their Othering and oppression, condoning the racist ideologies that imagined these constructions and the forms and structures these ideologies take, including the theft and enslavement of people of African descent and the US capitalism only made possible through violently dispossessing Black people of their labor. Critiquing the tendency to theorize racialization based on how bodies are externally marked, in *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital*, English scholar Eva Cherniavsky writes:

> [T]he raced subject, in general, I argue, is characterized by a missing or attenuated hold on interior personhood – by an openness to capital(ization) without the conventional protections (legal, social, political) of embodied individuals. My counterintuitive claim is that the raced subjects lack essence, except in the quite particular and paradoxical sense that they are cast as essentially lacking, and that raced bodies notably fail to bind and envelop this (missing) core (Cherniavsky xx)

She argues that racial hierarchies are tied to the interiorities of differently raced bodies, whether or not they are understood to contain subjecthood, personhood, soul, whether or not they are incorporatable. While those raced white hold the potential to own their own bodies, to own their own selves[14]—to incorporate—non-white others lack this ability and instead remain empty vessels lacking interiority. This open, unincorporated interior becomes available territory upon which incorporated people may capitalize while the racialized Other is deprived access to its own interiority. This white supremacist formulation of the self imagines the metaphysical being bound—violently individuated—

[14] Crawley writes, "Whiteness is a capacity for possession as the grounds for identity" (6).

within the rigid, impermeable container of the body[15]. The bodies of non-white human Others, in this configuration, fail to seal.

This dissertation acknowledges both that the violently individuated self is socially constructed and that this construction operates in the world as real, having real impact on people's lives. Through an exploration into the practice of vibing in freestyle hip hop dances, this research imagines otherwise possibilities of existence as open and porous rather than contained and sealed, intrinsically entangled in and as collectives, an existence in and as radical togetherness. *Get on this Vibe* asks what this alternative conceptualization of existence can offer and to whom, recognizing that the construction of the violently individuated self does not impact all of us, with different privileges and relationships to dominant hegemonic power structures, in the same ways.

**Literature Review**

With this dissertation, I humbly walk in the footsteps of an abundance of brilliant scholars. It is not possible to name everything that has informed my thinking about this research, but what follows lists some of the literature that has been most influential to this project. In order to offer some clarity, I have broken this discussion down into subsections; however, many of these works straddle multiple sections. I have neglected to include a section that specifically focuses on dance and performance studies, but scholars from these fields have been included across the subsections.

*Vibe/Vibrations*

[15] Hortense Spillers and Alexander Weheliye both contend that the very conceptualization of the body is built in the image of Man. As such, they argue, the body itself is always already politicized and raced white, further precluding non-white people from Enlightenment's individual.

This dissertation's exploration of vibing has been informed by and builds from the work of other scholars whose research has broached the topics of the vibe and/or vibrations. Sally R. Sommer's article "C'mon to My House: Underground-House Dancing" considers the role of the vibe in the underground house scene. Sommer describes the vibe as "an active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm that is created by the mix of dancing, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light, the energy" (73). The vibe, she claims, holds liberatory power that is directly tied to the practice of improvisation, though this article does not delve into an extensive theorization of what liberation means. The main focus of her article is not the vibe, instead, it centers around a description of the culture and history of house. Although our research differs in context and intention, we do both discuss the vibe as a shared, connective force comprised of an amalgamation of elements.

*You Better Work!: Underground Dance Music in New York City* by Kai Fikentscher approaches the study of underground dance music, including disco and house, through an ethnomusicological perspective. Included in his research is a discussion of the vibe as a mutually informative relationship between the music, the DJ, the dance, and the dancers, acknowledging each as a piece contributing to a larger whole, which aligns with my application of the vibe in this project. Although his analysis leans more heavily on the music side, paying attention to things like tempo and programming, he offers an important intervention into music studies by arguing that:

> [Underground dance music (UDM)] is so closely linked to dancing as a physical activity—which in turn is so directly connected and complementary to the affective force of music as sound—that the two central components, music and dance, should be understood as

> equally important halves of one single culturally specific concept. This concept is embedded in many African cultures. By extension, it also applies to African American culture, which provides the context for UDM. (5-6)

This assertion critiques a historic approach in his field that treats dance and music as entirely separate entities but that can sometimes be related. Instead, Fikentscher demonstrates that this ideological breakdown is not applicable to African diasporic contexts wherein music and dance are necessarily parts of the same concept. My work, particularly in Chapter 2, examines the relationship between freestyle dancers and music, and I similarly approach music, dance, dancers, and DJ as inherently interconnected elements of something larger than themselves.

Renee Conroy's "Reflections on 'Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery" also examines the vibe in the context of the house scene. I find her identification of the vibe as emergent, comprised of the music, via the DJ, and the dance, via the dancers, useful. Although the vibe itself is not the central focus of her article, it plays a significant role in her examination of dancers' ability to enter a different state of being. However, her analysis of dancers' experiences attempts to rationalize (read: analyze through Europeanist paradigms) their claims, stating, "philosophical aesthetics typically resists the idea that we must take practitioners at their word" (Conroy). In rationalizing and relying only on information that can be seen by the naked eye, she dismisses house's African diasporic and metaphysical contexts, relating the dancers' movements to the act of driving a car. I vigorously and strenuously disagree with Conroy's philosophical analysis, which disregards entirely otherwise possibilities.

Related to the vibe, several scholars have also attended to vibrations, and this work has informed my research as well. Performance studies scholar Joshua Chambers-Letson's *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* explores world-making, in particular for marginalized, especially queer of color, communities. In the chapter "Eiko's Entanglements," Chambers-Letson examines the importance of vibration in one of modern dance artists Eiko & Koma's performances, not only in connecting the audience and the performer but also in demonstrating the ways that we are always already entangled. He writes:

> As a practice that evades capture, while inhabiting, moving through, across, and exceeding incommensurable temporal, spatial, and bodily coordinates, performance can be a particularly rich site for minoritarian subjects to experiment with and produce new ways of being in the world and new forms of collective vibration, or resonance—a communism of incommensurability. Eiko's dance doesn't tangle people together so much as it reveals a commons of the living and dead that is already deeply entangled, vibrating yet out of joint and incommensurate. (Chambers-Letson 167)

Though the performance being examined here is decidedly outside the realm of hip hop culture, he explores the process of vibrating together as a liberating power for the minoritarian subject. Chambers-Letson's research asks questions related to those I ask in this project, questions that consider the potential for performance to enact new ways of being in the world. Within his communist critique of capitalist singularity, Chambers-Letson suggests the possibility of a *singular plural*, a being together and sharing, which has much in common with my ideas of multifaceted, rhizomatic entities. Like Chambers-Letson, I also critique capitalist ideologies; however, I do not do so from a specifically communist perspective.

*Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* was fundamental in setting me on the course to this research project. Crawley's text allowed me to identify the research interests I was still clarifying at the time as a desire to explore otherwise possibilities, providing me language with which to work and a foundation from which to build. The vibration, he explains, is foundational to otherwise possibilities, writing:

> There is a vibration, a sonic event, a sound I want to talk about, but its ongoing movement makes its apprehension both illusory and provision. Illusory because the thing itself is both given and withheld from view, from earshot. Provisional because it—the vibration, the sonic event, the sound—is not and cannot ever be stilled absolutely. It keeps going, it keeps moving, it is open-ended. It can be felt and detected but remains almost obscure, almost unnoticed. And this for its protection. And this, its gift. Giving something of itself while remaining a resource from which such force can externally return and emerge. It is a resource that is plenteous, that exists in plentitude, always available and split from itself, split from while transforming into itself. It is the gift, the concept, the inhabitation of and living into *otherwise possibilities*. (Crawley 2, emphasis original)

Crawley's research lies specifically in an exploration of the vibration of breath and sound. Although some sections of this dissertation attend to the vibrations of sound via the music freestyle dancers engage with, unlike Crawley, I am primarily concerned with energetic vibrations in the context of dancing bodies; however, breath is always already inherent to one's ability to move. This project extends Crawley's theorization of vibrations to consider otherwise possibilities enacted through the movements we make, made possible by the power of our breath's vibrations. I am drawn to his recognition of the vibration of an infinite, never-ending resource of possibility, which contributes to my interrogation of dance's potential and ephemerality. As I argue that our entanglements are ever-present and that vibing is always available to us, I build on his contention that these

possibilities already exist, and that it is up to us to attune to them. *Get on this Vibe* explores precisely this practice of attunement, or, rather, vibing as *a* practice of attuning.

I have yet to encounter scholarship that specifically addresses the practice of vibing. Some research that attends to the vibe considers dancers' relationships with it, as noted above; however, the verb, the *doing* of this this relationship, the *being in* this relationship is not fleshed out in detail.

*Hip Hop Culture*

I am privileged to have entered into my graduate studies when the foundations of hip hop studies had already been laid by the field's pioneers, and during a time in which new work on hip hop continues to multiply. My copy of Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* was already lovingly worn down and heavily marked up well before I even applied to grad school. Chang's research on the sociopolitical contexts that informed hip hop as well as the history and evolution of the culture was incredibly influential in my decision to pursue this realm of study. This work touches on hip hop's four foundational elements, but it focuses most heavily on the development of the music, while dance receives relatively little attention. Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* is a groundbreaking text in the field of hip hop studies. She argues that hip hop emerged as a product of both post-industrial structures and African diasporic traditions, and, through a feminist lens, her work examines the roles of technology, racial politics, and gender politics in the culture. Like Chang's book, dance receives little focus in Rose's work, and what little discussion of it there is includes some inaccuracies, referring, for example, to

popping and locking as aspects of "breakdance" rather than recognizing them as different genres with distinct techniques.

Several scholars have expanded the realm of hip hop studies by centering dance. *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* by Joseph Schloss offers an ethnographic and historical examination of breaking. This text provided useful definitions and descriptions of battles, allowing me to position my examples within a larger context. African American and African studies scholar Halifu Osumare's *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop* examines hip hop's global reach, predominantly through the practice of breaking. Her theorization of *connective marginalities* offers a way to think through how people with different positionalities can connect through hip hop culture via the relationships between their experiences, such as having experienced different forms of marginalization. Although our approaches to connections are different, her theorization acknowledges that connections are not formed strictly through sameness.

The field is beginning to see more scholarship on genres other than breaking, and this research includes, for example, performance studies scholar Naomi Bragin's examination of popping, waacking/punking, and turfing in *Black Power of Hip Hop Dance: On Kinesthetic Politics*. Carefully attending to the Black power of California funk styles as well as the antiblack lenses through which these dances and their practitioners are often read, her work addresses street dances as political practices. Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt's *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* looks at the influence of embodied rhythm games on hip hop music and culture, offering a feminist reading of music and movements that are often

understood as masculine. Her research has helped me interrogate the relationship between rhythm and vibing.

Scholarship on hip hop dance practices is generally genre-specific. Because freestyling is so fundamental to hip hop culture, it is usually addressed as part of the research but within the context of a particular dance form. I have broken this mold by attending to the shared practice of freestyling that exists across hip hop's dances. By doing so, I'm able to ask broader questions about what it means, existentially, to connect with the music and with other dancers through hip hop's African diasporic technologies without containing that discussion within the particular physical manifestation of a specific technique. This research seeks to offer an idea of the nature of vibing, which could be narrowed to examine its distinction manifestations within particular genres of dance and music.

*Africanist Aesthetics and African American Expressive Cultures*

There is a wealth of research that has helped me to contextualize hip hop, freestyling, and vibing as African diasporic—far too many for me to recognize them all here. One of the most influential texts for this project has been dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, which was revolutionary for the field of dance studies when it was published. Building from the work of art historian Robert Farris Thompson, Gottschild identifies and describes five Africanist aesthetics, and she analyzes their influence across a variety of American concert dance contexts. Her work recognizes the profound and pervasive impact of this Africanist presence that has historically been invisibilized due to

antiblackness. Cleis Abeni, dancer and journalist, has provided essential wisdom for understanding the function and processes of improvisation in African American social dance forms. Her research questions highlight improvisation's sociality, which is an essential focus of this dissertation. She writes:

> What creative processes—what symbolic actions and relationships—constitute improvisation in black vernacular dancing? How are such processes a reflection of identity formation (the defining of self in relation to the community), socialization (or the development of norms), social change (the evolution and problematizing of traditions), and social interaction (or the interrelationship of members within a community)? (Abeni 41)

Abeni's consideration of improvisation across Black vernacular dance has allowed me to situate hip hop's freestyling within a larger context. In addition to offering foundational findings about the aesthetics and functions of freestyling, both Gottschild's and Abeni's work demonstrate that the act of reading across genres can access important information and draw connections that could not be understood from a more narrow viewpoint. This is my intention in situating this research in the practice of freestyling rather than a singular genre.

Underscoring the importance of hip hop dance practices as African diasporic and improvisational, in "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power," dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz theorizes that these dances are inherently communicative. He argues that lack of cultural engagement can lead viewers to misread the dance, as they fail to understand its African diasporic and improvisational intentions. This discussion has provided guidance as I analyze dancers' approaches to their movement practices, underscoring the importance of elements of hip hop dances beyond

the visual spectacle. As well, DeFrantz reminds me that, as a white person, I am an outsider who will necessarily miss, misread, and fail to understand important aspects of hip hop dances, regardless of the relationship I may have cultivated with hip hop culture, and that, even as I rely on informants and scholarship to help fill in the gaps, there will always remain some level of disconnect.

My research interests have much in common with the questions explored by Imani Kai Johnson in *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop*. Though we are both interested in elements of hip hop dance practices that are simultaneously essential and invisible and immaterial, the sites of our research differ even as they overlap. Centering her work on breaking's cypher, she connects circle practices from across the diaspora in order to illuminate the African diasporic aesthetics of the cypher's circle. Although freestyling is an essential element of what happens in the cyphers, and some of my research has taken place in cyphers, cyphering and freestyling are not synonymous. This text, like the rest I've listed in this section, speaks to the importance of reading hip hop and African American dance practices in line with Africanist aesthetics and acknowledging their metaphysical purposes, as this project does.

*The Black Radical Tradition and Alternatives*

I could spend the entire length of this dissertation listing important works in this area that have provided imperative footing for this research. That this dissertation is concerned with alternatives to white supremacist, capitalist ways of being, and that it looks for them within the African diasporic practice of vibing, necessarily ties this research to the Black radical tradition. Black studies scholar Cedric Robinson discusses

the emergence of the Black radical tradition in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, writing:

> Black radicalism is a negation of Western civilization, but not in the direct sense of a simple dialectical negation. It is certain that the evolving tradition of Black radicalism owes its particular moment to the historical interdiction of African life by European agents. … This experience, though, was merely the condition for Black radicalism—its immediate reason for and object of being—but not the foundation for its nature or character. Black radicalism, consequently, cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis. It is not a variant of Western radicalism whose proponents happen to be Black. Rather, it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization… (73)

Robinson identifies the Black radical tradition as a particularly Africanist, continual and continuously evolving, radical refusal of western civilization. He is clear, however, that the Black radical tradition's refusal does not derive from a reaction against western civilization, but instead by maintaining ways of being and doing and knowing that preexisted European imperialism and colonialism. Both the alternatives that emerge through their evolving reimaginations as well as the practice itself of continuously reimagining are embedded in Africanist epistemologies. The Black radical tradition is about recognizing otherwise possibilities and continuously cultivating these alternatives.

Imagination plays an essential role in sensing and enacting otherwise possibilities. Crawley argues, "Imagination is necessary for thinking and breathing into the capacities of infinite alternatives" (3), and African American history scholar Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* examines precisely this relationship. In this text, Kelley states, "any serious motion towards freedom must begin in the mind"

(5). Before we can enact alternatives, or even begin to work towards enacting those alternatives, we have to first believe that things can be other than they currently are. The imagination allows us to access those possibilities that cannot yet be seen or touched or heard. Kelley identifies art, and especially surrealism, as essential to our ability to rethink the world, and I extend this consideration to freestyling.

Art is also central to poet and Black studies scholar Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, in which he extends Robinson's discussion of the Black radical tradition through an interrogation into jazz music. Moten examines the ways that performances of Black radicalism are rearticulated through jazz music, these histories embedded within jazz's very aesthetics. Though the contexts of jazz and hip hop are not the same, they emerge from the same Black radical lineage. Moten's arguments contribute to my understanding of what may be embedded within the music freestyle dancers embody as well as how we can listen to (music of) the Black radical tradition.

Situating freestyling as an enactment of the Black radical imagination and within the Black radical tradition identifies it as a meaningful place to look for alternatives. Doing so acknowledges that freestyling's engagement with alternatives is purposeful, and it also connects vibing's otherwise possibilities to a long history of Black refusal of white supremacist and capitalist structures. Linking freestyling to the Black radical tradition, however, begs the question: to what extent and in what ways, if any, can non-Black dancers engage in the Black radical imagination and the Black radical tradition? I want to simultaneously uplift these roots and foundations of freestyling, which should not be

invisibilized regardless of who is dancing, while also acknowledging that the relationships between freestyling and dancers shifts as the practice is appropriated from the Black communities who created it.

## Get on this Vibe: Methods, Positionality, and Chapter Overview

### *Methodology*

The research for this project has taken place over a five-year period in Southern California, though it is also informed by my many years of participation in hip hop culture and its dance practices prior to my formal work on this dissertation. Ethnographic in nature, I performed this research through participant observation at battles and cyphers, hip hop and dance festivals, performances, workshops, and clubs, sometimes dancing myself and sometimes acting as more of an audience member, though the line between audience and performer is blurred in African diasporic expressive cultures. I also conducted long-form interviews with cultural participants about their experiences with dance and hip hop.

My decision to center this project around the practice of freestyling instead of a single genre of dance owes as much to my particular interests as it does to the practical and logistical aspects of this project. The majority of the events, sessions, and battles that have served as sites for my research are not geared towards a specific genre, but instead welcome diverse freestyle dancers. As such, a house dancer may be followed in a cypher by a breaker and next by a krump dancer. Additionally, many dancers draw upon their knowledges of multiple genres as they interpret the music, so a dancer who recognizes

herself predominantly as a locker may, depending on the music and the moment, also transition into elements of Chicago footwork or waacking.

Because these events invite a diverse array of folks, both Black and non-Black dancers are included in this research. This study requires a careful balance of holding space for this heterogeneity of participants while also maintaining freestyling as an inherently Black practice because, as Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez write in *Black Performance Theory*, "black sensibilities emerge whether there are black bodies present or not; and that while black performance may certainly become manifest without black people, we might best recognize it as a circumstance enabled by black sensibilities, black expressive practices, and black people" (1). Acknowledging the presence of these Black sensibilities within freestyling regardless of who is dancing, however, does not negate that the violent erasure of Black bodies from the practice matters, and this dissertation asks what impact this erasure can have on Black dancers as well as on freestyling's relationship to the alternative.

Foregrounding freestyling as African diasporic necessitates a reading of practitioners' engagement through a lens that privileges Africanist aesthetics, values, and epistemologies. Gottschild explains that, from an Africanist perspective, "dance and the dancing body are manifestations of the mind-spirit" (10), which she differentiates from a Europeanist separation of mind from body from spirit, and she also states that "How a thing is done—the movement of the action—is as important as getting it done, the static fact of the result of the product" (11). The aesthetics and techniques of freestyling cannot be disentangled from their inherent sociality and metaphysical qualities. As such,

analyzing freestyle dancers' performances must attend to *how* they engage with these many dimensions of the practice and not simply to the moves they physicalize. In doing so, this research interrogates how diverse groups of dancers participate in freestyling, asking what their approaches can tell us about their commitments to the practice's Africanist aesthetics and values, and this can also tell us, by extension, about appropriation, white supremacy, and ways of being in community. My own positionality as a white woman researching hip hop culture is necessarily entangled within the context of this country's long history of—this country's foundation upon—theft of and from Black people while invisibilizing the profound influence of the Africanist presence in the United States[16]. While I did not seek out interviewees based on race, it was important to me that a variety of Black voices and perspectives informed and were represented in this research, and the majority of my interviewees identify as Black, and especially Black women.

Being that vibing is a way of existing, a mode of relation, which can take many shapes, providing a clear and precise definition is an impossibility. As such, my intention is not to offer a how-to instructional manual for "doing vibing." There is no codified, step-by-step process for attaining it, because there is no *it* that can be attained. As a practice—a way of knowing, doing, being—and not a product, vibing remains fugitive[17]

[16] Gottschild explains, "Racial segregation and discrimination are the culprits in the systematic denial and exploitation of [the Africanist presence's] powerful influence" (2).
[17] The definition of fugitivity I utilize is drawn from Stefano Harney's and Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Although fugitivity can connote a running *from*, this work suggests, as Jack Halberstam does in the introduction to *The Undercommons*, that we can and should rethink fugitivity as a running *to*, a conscious decision to live otherwise than what powers, systems, and structures say should—or even can—be done. Halberstam states:

in its refusal to be object-ified and captured. Although dancers often struggle to find language that can fully encapsulate their embodied knowledge, this research gives weight to the importance of these experiences, which practitioners know to be true, even without empirical proof[18]. You may feel some discomfort with this indefiniteness but rather than attempting to define something that may never be fully knowable and should not be contained, my intention is, instead, to write at examples and to explore what can be learned from them.

To do this, I employ dance studies methodologies of offering and interpreting close readings of moving bodies. Since this research engages with more than bodies and their movements, also interrogating the subjects of energy, spirit, and connections across time and space, I must attend to more than the dance's visual aesthetics. I am not the first whose research concerns the invisible, immaterial, and intangible aspects of dance; Yvonne Daniel's work examines embodied knowledge in Haitian vodou, Cuban Yorba, and Bahian Candomblé, and Johnson's work explores the dark matter of breaking's

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> Fugitivity is not only escape, 'exit' as Paolo Virno might put it, or 'exodus' in the terms offered by Hardt and Negri, fugitivity is being separate from settling. It is being in motion that has learned that 'organizations are obstacles to organising ourselves' and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned. Moten and Harney call this mode a 'being together in homelessness' which does not idealize homelessness nor merely metaphorize it. Homelessness is the state of dispossession that we seek and that we embrace… (11)

It is, as Performance Studies scholar Nadine George Graves put it in her keynote talk, "Sugar Note: Black Bodies, Trade and Desire," at the 2017 Dance Studies Association conference to "not cosign" accommodation of and assimilation to dominant hegemonic ideologies and ways of life. The fugitive, then, is an already lived alternative that is not an act of resistance, but rather the continuation of other ways of being and doing that existed prior to their repression.

[18] This research is certainly not the first to acknowledge the importance of studies that exceed empirical proof. For example, in *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop*, Johnson writes, "Though [dark matter] is non-empirical, it is central to the experience of cyphering" (84), and Victor Turner argues in The *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* that "Just because the communitas component is elusive, hard to pin down, it is not unimportant" (127).

cypher, which she describes in *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers* as a "force that we cannot see but experience as reality" (96). In order to write towards these metaphysical facets of dance, I rely on information from my interviewees about their experiences, my own auto-ethnographic experiences, research—both embodied and through text—into African American and African diasporic expressive cultures, and I lean into theorizations from Black Studies to contextualize my interpretations. I offer this work not as definitive, objective fact, but instead as *a* possibility for putting words to what so many of us have felt.

*Positionality*

As much as I might like this dissertation to not be about me, I am necessarily and inescapably written into and woven throughout these pages, and my experiences and privileges as a cis, heterosexual, white woman color my perception of the research. I am afforded some insider perspective based on my own participation in hip hop culture, socially since childhood, and more formally as dancer for and Assistant to the Founder & Artistic Director of ENVY Dance Company, a hip hop-based dance company for over a decade. However, I also recognize that, while I have clear memories of rocking the running man and the roger rabbit on the playground in elementary school, I did not grow up immersed in hip hop culture, and that my participation in and love and appreciation for it are products of appropriation. My initial interests, however, led me, over twenty years ago, to deeper investment in the culture and the community. And yet, despite now bringing decades of experience and knowledge as a cultural participant to this research, my entrance into hip hop through appropriation isn't somehow erased, and I remain a

guest in the culture. As such, I am compelled to continuously examine my relationship with and place in hip hop, interrogating how I can give back to the Black, Brown, and queer communities to whom I am forever indebted for the rhythms and grooves that, for all these years, have refused to let my body remain still.

*Chapter Overview*

The chapters that follow weave through and across discussions of distinct manifestations of vibing and the connections they illuminate. The chapter breakdown attempts to designate ideas and examples into distinct themes; however, this research is not linear and, despite where they appear on the pages that follow, the ideas flow through and across their forced divisions. The following outlines what lies within these pages.

"The Art of Becoming the Music: Vibing and/as Losing the Self" considers the relationship dancers build with the music. I contend that this process occurs through a process of both empathizing with the intentions embedded within the music as well as by embodying the music's literal vibrations. This requires equal parts receiving and offering, contributing in alignment with shared intentions. Placing this nuanced musicality in conversation with dancers' common claim of *losing themselves in the music*, I consider what it can mean to lose one's self and how the ability to do so might de/re/construct a notion of the self as part of a larger whole beyond the confines of a singular body. As I explore what is enabled through the release of the ego, I offer a critique of a violently individuated subjecthood, suggesting instead that beings are intricately and intimately entangled.

The following chapter, "Dancing in/as Radical Togetherness: Sharing Space, Sharing Spirit," shifts the focus to examine the ways dancers read and feed off each other, with music serving as a connective tissue. This chapter pays particular attention to the African diasporic technologies of the battle and the cypher, looking at the ways close physical proximity can enable the practice of vibing and cultivate communal energy. The advent of the Coronavirus global pandemic added an unanticipated dimension to this chapter, flipping the idea of physical closeness as a vehicle for energetic connection to also consider how music and energy can initiate togetherness even in physical distance. In order to understand these technologies as multifaceted wholes, this chapter draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as Édouard Glissant, and their utilization of the idea of the rhizome, a root system that rejects the singularity of a rootstalk. Centering hip hop's freestyling and Black social dances, this chapter offers a critique of the long-held belief in dance's ephemerality, a rarely challenged assumption, which tends not to be contextualized as deriving from an examination of western concert dance.

"Failure to Catch the Vibe: Misreadings, Missteps, and Missed Connections" interrogates failures in vibing, considering both energetic and physical disjunctures that interrupt and rupture the vibe. In doing so, this chapter asks what it means to be—or not be—in rhythm with. To better understand rhythm as a communal practice, I draw on Kyra D. Gaunt's *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*. Examining rhythm as a communal process, the research interrogates the appropriation and commodification of Black art in the context of antiblackness. By

looking carefully at these failures, my intention is to illuminate the distinctions between vibing's profound interconnectedness and other types of participation that only demonstrate a superficial closeness. This chapter argues that vibing is not an automatic occurrence, but rather that it requires purposeful intention, even if this process of attunement may happen subconsciously.

The conclusion, "Reflections and (Re)Envisionings: Vibing and/as Co-Conspiring," reflects on this dissertation's findings and discusses where I intend to take the research from here. This chapter takes us off the dancefloor to consider how what we can understand about the self and connection through vibing may inform the way we live with, interact with, and support each other beyond dance. In particular, I explore how vibing's equal parts receiving and contributing, attuning frequencies, and moving in alignment may offer a lens for understanding the work of co-conspiring in social justice movements.

## Chapter 2

### The Art of Becoming the Music: Vibing and/as Losing the Self

"I would define myself as the visual representation of sound."
- Moncell Durden, personal interview

What I've always loved most about dance is the connection with the music. For me, as a hardcore type-A, tightly-wound, always-overanalyzing-everything kind of person, the act of having to place all of my attention into the relationship between my physical body and what I feel in the music has served as a meditative practice. It's not that I'm not still thinking, but that I'm able to refocus my thoughts. Being present in the moment in this way offers a calming respite from the ongoing overactivity in my mind, allowing me to lose what I have been socialized to understand as my *self* in the music. Embodying the music is a way for me to let all of that shit go and just *be*.

As a spectator, while I can certainly intellectually understand, appreciate, and respect dance forms wherein the relationship between dancer and music is not a guiding principle, I have always experienced the most intensely visceral and emotional responses to witnessing others embody the music. I have long tried to understand what it is—something intangible and enigmatic, difficult to define but definitely real—that distinguishes a dancer who has lost themself in the music from one who may even demonstrate strong musicality and physical ability but on whom the dance seems to be worn on the surface, held on the exterior like a costume. There is something recognizable about a dancer lost in the music, somehow simultaneously internal and expansive, fully present and completely lost.

My desire to lose myself in the music is what initially led me to hip hop, whose rhythms and grooves, for all these decades, have continued to invite and inspire my body to move. My desire to better understand what it means to get lost in the music has led me to this research. When dancers lose themselves, lose their *selves*, in the music, what alternatives do they find?

This chapter looks at the ways freestyle dancers forge profound connections with the music, which I contend is a form of vibing. In particular, I interrogate how losing the self in the music can refuse a white supremacist, capitalist discursive construction of the self, one in which a violently individuated metaphysical being is bound within the clearly delineated material confines of a singular body. There is something transformative about getting lost, about losing the self, and this chapter is dedicated to exploring this practice, its potential, and its possibility.

**The Art of Becoming the Music**

*At a Diggs Deeper*[19] *event in North Hollywood in June 2016, before the hip hop OGs and legends panel discussion began, a handful of dancers are freestyling to the house and Afro-house music the DJ is spinning. As the DJ transitions to a new track, a tall, lanky dancer, swimming in his baggy tee and sweats, who is facing the turntables from the opposite side of the floor, calms his body and begins to feel out the new song. He starts by marking the beat, softly pressing the ball of one foot into the floor a few inches*

[19] Diggs Deeper is a community-based, non-profit organization founded by Jojo Diggs, a dancer and choreographer. As stated on the organization's website, and as is stated in person at each event, Diggs Deeper "is a ground for artists to be fully self-expressed, to surface awareness & acknowledgement to culture, and to bring individuals into leadership." The organization is committed to preserving and celebrating hip hop culture, supporting artists, and positively engaging community.

*in front of himself, bringing it back and then switching to the other foot, his upper body and head gently rocking in response to the rebound from his feet. These steps repeat back and forth as he gains familiarity with the music. His eyes aren't focused on anything in front of him; instead, it seems he is watching the music unfold in his mind. He is not disengaged from his surroundings, but internalizing them. Little by little, his movements gain energy, become bigger, and spread throughout his body. Swiftly pressing a heel and then toes into the floor, kicking and swinging his legs, hopping, and always shifting his weight, allowing his body to rebound from his last movement against the floor, he plays with and within the polyrhythms of the music. The music progresses up his body; his arms and shoulders join in, catching the song's additional accents. He is physicalizing every, single detail of the music. Suddenly, however, this progression reaches its pinnacle, as his musicality becomes so in tune and so nuanced, his movements so precisely matching the particular intention of each sound. In this moment, something shifts. This is no longer a dancer moving to the music; rather, it now appears that the music is emanating directly from his body. The dancer's various moving body parts* are *the music's various elements. There is no longer any separation between the dancer and the music, there is no distinction between the body and the beat. The dancer, the dance, the body, and the music are parts of one, multifaceted whole. Over this minute, a dancer became the music.*

*Listening to Ghosts*

This dancer was clearly a highly skilled practitioner, but what took place in this moment surpassed the impressive physical ability and strong sense of musicality that he'd

already been displaying. In this moment, boundaries between music, dancer, body, and beings became blurred. If, as ethnomusicologist Kai Fikentscher claims in *You Better Work!: Underground Dance Music in New York City*, the vibe is "an energy made possible when the music transcends the acoustic realm and becomes physical" (81-82), then I suggest that the moment of this dancer's shift, when he looked the way the music sounded, when his body moved the way the music felt, is when he was fully attuned with the music and truly vibing.

This dancer had already been gettin' down for a while but rather than continuing where he was, he took the time to reset as the DJ changed the track. While it's possible the moment of calm between songs could have been nothing more than a brief period of rest, reaching the level of musical nuance and detail that he found in his body can only develop through a practice of profound, engaged listening. As dope of a mover as this dancer is—and he's *ridiculously* good—what took place over this minute demonstrated that his movements were not solely based on his own desires but that they were instead innovated *in relation to* what he was listening to.

The assertion that freestyle dancers listen to the music (or, at least, that they *should*) is, of course, not ground-breaking. I doubt anyone would argue differently. "I would define myself as the visual representation of sound" (Durden) was the response I received from Moncell Durden, former member of Mop Top Crew, former dancer for Rennie Harris Puremovement, and current Assistant Professor of Practice at University of Southern California, when I asked him to describe his dance practice. Moncell is not

alone in understanding dance and music as being inherently entangled. Fikentscher considers the incompleteness of either music or dance on its own, writing:

> [T]he human body, through dancing, becomes the instrument sine qua non for the production, actualization, and performance of dance music as visual and physical phenomena. Unto themselves, the sonic and the kinetic spheres are incomplete parts of a form of musicking in which sound can be experienced physically, and the dancing human body acts as a musical instrument. (67)

He discusses a process in which sound becomes physical, and body, through dance, becomes musical, blurring the separations between the aural and the kinetic. Dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson's theorization of the aural kinesthetic in "Music Meant to Make You Move: Considering the Aural Kinesthetic" also speaks to the ways music and dance are entangled. She describes dance music as "music that not only called out to people to dance, but if you didn't dance you missed something essential: the inextricable ties between music and movement. One acts as a key that opens up a dimension to understanding the other" (Johnson). Her conceptualization of the aural kinesthetic speaks to an intermingling of body and sound that enables a social dance-dance music possibility more than the summation of its sonic and physical parts.

Moving independently while music also happens to be playing, an approach often undertaken by white modern and post-modern choreographers, is not the goal here. Freestyling, as an African diasporic practice, is about moving as part of the music, and dancing in a way that entangles you in/with the music is a complex process. Elaborating on how he thinks about dancing in relation to music, Moncell explains:

> I've come to believe that dancing has not been the thing that has been important. It's not about the dancing for me. It's about the music. And my approach to dancing, the part that I control, or think that I control, is about

> how to best be the physical, tangible … take the acoustic or the audible and make it visual so that when I'm dancing, if there's anything that I want people to think, it's to see how sound looks. And so, when I'm dancing, everything is to be as in-tune with the music as I possibly can, so that if the song goes up or down scale, that's why I'm jumping or that's why my movement is soft or heavy or on the ground. You know, becoming whatever instrument. Polyrhythmic movement where I assign, you know, rhythmical instruments to this part of the body, that part of the body. The mood of the music, anything that has to do with music should be reflected in my movement. And it's not about me. … People shouldn't come up to me and … compliment me. The only thing you should be saying is how dope the song is. 'Cause that's … all you should see. I should be a silhouette 'cause I'm not doing a damn thing if the music ain't on. (Durden)

For Moncell, dancing is wholly defined by the art of becoming the music. Though this process likely takes place subconsciously while in the practice, here, he discusses noticing different rhythms and instruments, but he also talks about how they play, using terms like "soft" and "heavy," as well as the music's overall mood. What he describes is more than a cursory acknowledgment of a beat or the lyrics, and dancers are expected to recognize and demonstrate their understanding of all of these musical elements and how they sound, through the ways they move. This type of careful listening, the kind that enables a dancer to become the music, the kind that, as Johnson argues, "opens up a dimension" of the music, engages more than solely the auditory senses[20]. Alongside and embedded within their particular intonations, sounds hold history and meaning, and

[20] My understanding of *listening* as referring to more than solely auditory sensing is also informed by dancer, writer, composer, and educator d. Sabela grimes's reference to "listening to spirit" during a talk via Zoom at the University of California, Riverside in May, 2020, titled "The MFA and (Non)Academic Possibilities;" activist and writer adrienne maree brown's statement, "I have been working on listening for the opportunity" (72) in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*; and house dancer Dana saying, "I think that the deeper I get into my practices, I really approach them as a listening practice" (Dana) during our interview.

understanding these aspects calls on kinesthetic and spiritual sensibilities in addition to aural.

Tracing the role of sound back through the African diaspora can offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between sound and meaning in African diasporic expressive cultures. Discussing the ways enslaved Africans utilized sound as communication, in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, philosopher Édouard Glissant writes:

> It seems that meaning and pitch went together for the uprooted individual, in the unrelenting silence of the world of slavery. It was the intensity of the sound that dictated meaning: the pitch of the sound conferred significance. … One person could make himself understood through the subtle associations of sound … Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise. (123-124)

Refusing to submit to the white supremacist terror that purposefully targeted their communication, people of African descent creatively used noise, instilling meaning into the *way* of the sound, the *how* of the sound itself, fostering new means of communication beyond language, and, in doing so, preserving and forging community. This is to say both that the sound itself merits, requires interpretation, and that sound is necessarily social. Embodying the sound, then, means understanding what is being communicated through it and responding in conversation with it.

This relationship between sound and meaning has been maintained throughout the African diaspora, and in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Fred

Moten illuminates this continued practice as part of his interrogation into jazz music. He explains:

> In the long advent of a movement called "free jazz" … Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Oscar Brown Jr. collaborated in making a recording/performance called "Protest." Lincoln hums and then screams over Roach's increasingly and insistently intense percussion, moving inexorably in a trajectory and toward a location that is remote from—if not in excess of or inaccessible to—words. You cannot help but hear the echo of Aunt Hester's scream as it bears, at the moment of articulation, a sexual overtone, an invagination constantly reconstituting the whole of the voice, the whole of the story, redoubled and intensified by the mediation of years, recitations, auditions. (Moten 22)

Moten finds Lincoln's scream to exist beyond language and he recognizes it as a reference to or rearticulation of Aunt Hester's scream, described by Frederick Douglass in a personal narrative recounting his witnessing the beating of his aunt by her enslaver. Whether or not the listener is familiar with this scene, its presence remains. History doesn't just inform but is literally embedded within the music itself; "Sound not only recall[s] memory but [is] the memory" (Crawley 153). Frederick Douglass, Aunt Hester, enslaved Africans, and Black communities who experienced and witnessed the terrors of slavery all haunt Lincoln's scream, the recording of "Protest," and those who hear it.

How does one hear a haunting? I turn to sociologist Avery Gordon's work in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* in order to think through the sensing of presences that cannot be seen—or heard explicitly—but nevertheless make themselves known. She writes:

> [H]aunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. … The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has

> happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (Gordon 8)

Gordon asserts both the fact of ghosts' presences and their real impacts on us. Because, as she explains, we come to know the presence of ghosts through their hauntings, which have affective effects, feeling is essential to our sensing of them.

If sounds are haunted, then to hear only a noise devoid of further intention, as Glissant tells us, is to mis(s)/interpret its purpose. Instead, we must listen beyond the aural in order to sense all that is embedded within the sound. For Moten, listening to music, even without active dancing, is always already an embodied practice that engages multiple senses. He writes, "you can't really listen to this music. … really listening, when it goes bone-deep into the sunken ark of bones, is something other than itself. It doesn't alternate with but *is* seeing; it's the sense that it excludes; it's the ensemble of the senses" (Moten 67, emphasis original). To truly listen is to see the song for what it is—as in *I see you*, a witnessing, acknowledging, and honoring of someone's (or some*thing*'s) full being.

The dancer in the vignette embodied the song in a way that honored its fullness. He was keenly aware of the distinct elements that cohered into this particular musical arrangement; we could see as he grew more and more familiar with the sonic landscape and began to travel the music up and throughout his body. But as I witnessed him dance, there was something more than a visual relationship between his movements and sound; watching him *felt* like what the music felt like. An emotional relationship between this dancer and the music, and my perception of it, may be explained by the role of affect in

knowing a haunting. As we each came to a transformative recognition of the music's haunting through feeling, I was able to recognize the emotion I felt in this dancer's physicalization of it. This dancer's ability to embody not only the details and qualities of the music but also, seemingly, the meanings embedded within these musical elements, placed in conversation with Glissant, Moten, and Gordon supports a reading that, on some level, though likely not consciously, he was connecting with the emotions, intentions, histories, and ancestors haunting the music, all of which exist as vibratory energies or vibes.

In order to align with these vibrations, I suggest dancers cultivate a musical empathy: tuning in to and seeing all that lies within a sound and then attuning to it, converging on that vibration. I don't presume to know exactly what this dancer was feeling in the moment he became the music. Had I been given the opportunity to ask him afterwards, I'm not sure he could have clearly articulated his emotional state or describe what feelings he may have heard in the song. I don't even know exactly what emotions *I* was experiencing in that moment because I don't think this sensing of music, of its haunting, of its vibe happens quite so explicitly or consciously. What I do know is that I was moved. In this moment, his dancing felt the same to me as the music did. Despite the skillful, musical dancing he'd already been displaying and the many other talented dancers on the floor, there was something special—or, perhaps, to borrow from Gordon, magical—about this moment. How do we account for this difference?

If the dancing was already skillful and demonstrating strong musicality prior to this dancer becoming the music, it seems, then, that the shift in this moment must have

been enabled through something other than solely the physical. It was the shift in *feeling* that led me to the idea of musical empathy. Empathy is tricky, messy, and entangled in problematic histories, as dance scholar Susan Foster explains in *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. Her work provides a detailed, historical examination of the power relations that informed the conceptualization of empathy and closely related sympathy, critiquing attempts to universalize embodied and emotional experiences that ignore a diversity of lived experiences[21]. I agree with her arguments. Rather than suggesting that I empathized with this dancer through his movements, I contend that each of us had developed an emotional connection with the music. Given freestyling's valuing of unique interpretations, I suggest that this empathic connection is not about us all finding the same relationship with the music, but rather about finding ourselves in relation to it, its vibratory energies offering the meeting ground of a shared energetic frequency.

Considering the potential for participants with divergent positionalities to engage in shared experiences, dance scholar Rosemarie Roberts theorizes a *kinesthetic empathy of difference*. Citing Foster, she writes in *Baring Unbearable Sensualities: Hip Hop Dance, Bodies, Race, and Power*:

[21] I am in agreement with Foster's arguments, and this work does not suggest that the performance of a movement makes those who witness it feel the same way as the performer or experience kinesthesis, or that watching a movement fires mirror neurons in the spectator. Drawing upon Hortense Spillers's theorizations that constructions of the human are always already designed in the image of white, Christian Man, Sylvia Wynter and Alexander Weheliye both contend that the very conceptualization of "body" is built around a white supremacist, capitalist construction of Man. As such, they argue, the body itself is always already politicized and raced white. With this argument, Wynter and Weheliye make clear that there is no pre-racialized body, no starting point at which all bodies are fundamentally equal. With this in mind, it would be absurd to think that, neurologically, movements can be experienced universally.

> Collective bodies that foster difference as the norm stretch beyond "imagin[ing] the other without presuming knowledge of the other". They produce knowledge through a kinesthetic empathy of difference that doesn't 'presume knowledge of the other,' but rather precipitates an embodied knowledge that works within collectivities of difference—difference of all kinds, including power differentials. And that embodied knowledge presumes an embodied consciousness, which by extension presumes a reflection on experience, context, and difference north of commonality. (Roberts 134)

Kinesthetic empathy of difference acknowledges a collective that's distinct from the common. In this formulation, empathy does not require sameness or an assumption that one person's experience necessarily translates to someone else's; instead, it allows a sharing through the differences of a collective. Vibing offers a way to find ourselves in relation to an energetic frequency, shared with a collective, through an empathy of difference[22].

[22] Perhaps as I move forward with this research, I'll find that empathy is not the right word. As an alternative to empathy, artist and African and African American studies scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones theorizes resonant frequencies in relation to theatrical jazz in her book *Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Àse, and the Power of the Present Moment*. She explains:

> [T]heatrical jazz hopes to achieve resonant frequencies with the audience. Audience/witnesses will connect with those moments, ideas, people, feelings, colors, sounds with which they sense a vibration, and they are not held accountable for those experiences in the production that do not resonate with them. The notion of resonance allows for an inarticulable vibrational overlapping of truths between audience/witnesses and performances; unlike empathy and identification, which seem to require conscious connection, resonant frequencies can hum in the unconscious. (187)

I appreciate this possibility for the overlapping of different truths, which falls in line with my idea of people finding themselves in relation to the vibe, as well as Jones's identification of resonant frequencies as existing outside consciousness, which I believe to also be the case with vibing; however, I do argue that it's possible for people to listen for the possibility of attunement. And, certainly, Jones and I share an attention to frequencies in our work. What gives me pause about her description is that witnesses are "not held accountable for those experiences … that do not resonate with them." This feels as though it may be in contention with my idea that, by the nature of freestyling as a social dance practice, people have a responsibility to listen for possibilities of alignment, but maybe resonant frequencies allow for the fact that no one can *make* vibing happen. I am curious what the distinction between the sites of social dance settings and staged performances means for resonant frequencies. The messiness of this footnote speaks to my ongoing debate here. I am interested to continue exploring resonant frequencies as an alternative to empathy, but for now, empathy seems to be the term that best gestures towards what I believe is taking place.

It is from this state of empathy, developed through a practice of engaged listening, that dancers are able to move as (part of) the music. Perhaps especially for dancers, moving in alignment with the vibe requires a coordination of the physical and the metaphysical. The vignette dancer's knowledge of the embodied values of house, hip hop culture, and Africanist aesthetics provided him tools with which to physicalize the empathy he had cultivated, merging his bodily movements with the emotional intention he now shared with the music. By allowing the music's vibe to enter into, flow through, and inspire the movements of his body, he was able to weave himself into the music in a way that worked beautifully in conversation with its vibe rather than functioning independently or detracting from what was taking place in that moment. Moving in alignment means contributing in a way that honors, celebrates, and amplifies the shared frequency—it's not just about the fact of participation, it's about understanding *what* to offer and *how* to offer in that moment. Doing so requires an openness, a willingness to receive the vibes of a song's haunting into your metaphysical being and the literal vibrations of the musical frequency into your physical body[23]. Vibing is about a willingness and a desire to open up the physical body and metaphysical being, inviting surrounding vibratory energies to enter, flow through, and inspire empathy. It is about a willingness and a desire to be literally and figuratively moved.

The sense of being moved by something greater than themselves was a common theme as my interviewees discussed their experiences freestyling. For Krucial the

[23] Examining house music in "'C'mon to My House": Underground-House Dancing," Sally Sommer explains, "The sound has been engineered ('equalized') so that some of the deep bass lines are not heard but felt as vibrations in the sternum, so that the dancer literally embodies the music" (73-74).

Liberator, a krump dancer, educator, and activist, music is the guiding force. She explained:

> Man, music is… it's everything. Music is the conductor. Music can, the music, especially our music, it can free you and it can bond you. Certain songs, I won't dance to because it doesn't summon me. There's certain sounds that when I, when the song, it turns on and I'm, "Oh." You know what I mean? Songs, the music guides you, and it takes you—it can take you anywhere you want to go. Anywhere you want to take other people, too. … It's definitely important in krump because the right beat, the right beat can make everything better. It can be one of the livest sessions because the song was so live, you know what I mean? It could be one emotional-ass session because this session, this song is so emotional. Music narrates the body. The music guides. It's like a spaceship. It's like ok, well if this song comes on, I'm going there, you know what I mean. It's very vital, it's very important because you can free yourself within in. Or you can stay stagnant. Even if you don't know where to go, you can still find it within the music. So although I might not find it in that kik, kik, kik, kik, kik, kik, I might find it in that bom, bom, you know what I mean? So that's what's dope, you know what I mean? That's dope! That is dope! 'Cause-- that's dope! That is dope! I'm sorry, I just, it just, when I said it, I went "ohh." But um, that's the beauty of the music. When it has different elements in it, you know what I mean? When it has a feel that takes, like you literally hear the song going on a journey, you know what I mean? (Krucial)

I debated shortening this quote, but I've included this much here because Krucial's choice of language, including "conductor," "spaceship," and "guide" as well as her being summoned, speak directly to a sense that something beyond herself is moving her. As she allows herself to be moved, the music transports her, the image of physical travel picked up in her use of the term "journey" as well as her statement that the music "can take you anywhere," and echoed by the literal movements of her body as she dances.

However, it's also possible to read this transportation as other than physical, drawing on her testimony of krump as liberating. Her evocation of Harriet Tubman through her use of the term "conductor" suggests a simultaneity of physical transport and

a shift in state of being, traveling through the Underground Railroad and in doing so entering into a liberatory state. This entanglement of physical movement and metaphysical liberation is taken up by freestyling's enabling of vibing's radical togetherness, that the act of dancing can enact alternatives.

Freedom was a connective tissue across many of my interviewees' descriptions of their experiences in freestyle. Dance artist, visual artist, choreographer, house dancer, and clubhead Dana[24] told me:

> Creative space has just always been a space of freedom for me and that's very much true when it comes to movement, which is either the reason why or the product of my approaching my work in this really, adamantly, staunchly unintentional way. … [T]o be intentional and purposeful in work but also not ego-driven and decided about what the work is supposed to be or what it's supposed to be about or what it's supposed to mean. (Dana)

The freedom Dana accesses through her creative practices (which she doesn't distinguish from one another) is enabled by her release of the ego, an act that refuses a white supremacist, capitalist defined self. As she does so, she also releases a desire for control, instead entering into creative practice with intention and purpose, but also with an openness to being moved, saying her most profound responses to art are when it's clear "There's something moving through [the artist] rather than them directing the ship" (Dana). For Dana, rather than an image of being transported, she envisions something entering into the artist to move them. Describing what this being moved can look like in her choreographic work, she said:

[24] I have elected to quote Dana extensively here because, while several of the folks I spoke with discussed similar ideas, Dana addresses this idea of being moved explicitly.

> The music suggests things. I follow that and figure it out. But I didn't decide that pattern was going to happen on stage. I don't really take a lot of credit for that, I'm grateful and humbled, and I think that, yes, I did put in the work to get this dance on stage, but I didn't really make it up. So that's fact for me and people have a really hard time swallowing that. People are so insistent that "… what are you talking about? You know it's you and it's something specific in you." And I'm like yeah, but not something I made, so I don't think that it's about me taking credit for it. I will accept the fact that I put in hard work to bring these things to life. (Dana)

For Dana, artistic practice requires humility, and she does not take full credit for patterns and movements that emerge in the work. Reading this with her following statement, helps to contextualize these ideas. She added:

> Everybody's a healer because everybody has some medicine to share with the world. Oppression and all of the things that come with it distance us from that medicine, so we look to certain people and think, 'Oh, they're amazing." And, actually, no, they've just surrendered. That's what we see in people. They've surrendered to who and what they were meant to be that's, a complicated concept when it comes to fate and control and self-directedness and self-determination and all these things that I think our ego-self clings very tightly to. (Dana)

Although she doesn't take full credit for her art, she acknowledges that she has—as all people do—something special to offer, which she refers to as "medicine." This suggests that there is something specific about her that informs the art she creates, and that the creative force moving through someone else emerges differently. I read this as a relationality, a finding of yourself in relation to the creative force, which reveals something distinct about your particular togetherness. Through this togetherness, people can access "who and what they were meant to be," becoming their truest selves when they understand themselves as existing in relation to.

There are clear resonances between Krucial's and Dana's accounts of their experiences and what I have observed about vibing. Through a purposeful willingness to be literally and figuratively moved, people can liberate their truest selves by existing in relation to, radically together.

**Losing the Self, Finding Radical Togetherness**

In the moment the dancer in the vignette became the music, boundaries between music, dancer, dance, and body became blurred as energetic vibrations converged and merged. He did not exhibit the hard, bounded edges and definite, finite, confining borders of the white supremacist, capitalist conceptualized body. His body was porous, as he invited the music, energies, intentions, vibrations, and the vibe to flow through him and as he empathically offered outwards in the same intentional frequency. As his energetic vibrations flowed outwards, his being was no longer constrained to the tangible limits of his physical body, nor were the borders of his body impenetrable to seemingly outside entities, like the music, its haunting, its vibe. Here, body, music, sound, movement, history, and present could not be distinguished, fundamentally entangled, vibrating in the same frequency, existing radically together beyond their imagined boundaries.

When dancers allow their selves to get lost, what do they find?

I invited my interviewees to share their experiences with me. At times, they struggled to find the words. However, what they did say, even in the diversity of language they utilized to do so, demonstrated important resonances across their experiences. The resounding, and vital, response to my question: they found their whole, most genuine, authentic selves.

When allowing the artistic process to move through her, Dana described herself as feeling her "most whole," a term Moncell also used to describe what freestyling, at its best, can open up for him. He said:

> [T]he way I danced in Philly allowed people… I felt comfortable enough to show people who I was. Who I *really* was, and—as I moved my body. I allowed myself to do stuff that I *felt* or, I just, 'cause I don't know how much of it, we as humans control, but I would just go wherever it just felt good, I'm just going, where I might not do that, depending on where I am. But in Philly, when we got down in circles, everybody put their whole self out there. You weren't—there's no embarrassment, there's no shying away, boom … I've never felt that anywhere else. There's no judgment. It was very spiritual. It's a conversation of everybody just uplifting the conversation. Uplifting *you*. Wanting to see who you are and celebrate that. (Durden)

Moncell expressed the ability to show his real self, fully, and to not only be accepted, but to be uplifted and celebrated for it. For him, this experience is spiritual[25]. Similarly, Krucial identified the experience as accessing her "fullest, genuine self," saying:

> [I]f I'm in session, that's me really just, let me just get it out. You know what I mean? 'Cause I don't have to hold it in or format it, it's just me being free. … It means liberating yourself. At times people always, there's a certain look to certain things, you know? Or there's a certain feeling to certain things that is like keep in this five, or this eight-count. But with

[25] House dancer Magnolia also described the experience as spiritual, stating: "I think it feels maybe like being connected to the divine" (Magnolia). She does, however, make a point to qualify that her own personal, familial, and cultural experiences outside of dance affect her ability to understand and connect with the spiritual. Magnolia adds:

> Also it's very different for me because I'm coming in context where spirits, medium, like spirit possessing the body is a practice in Hmong spirituality. I'm gonna call it Hmong spirituality as opposed to like religion or shamanism or animism or all that stuff. Hmong spirituality, there's a practice of spirits coming inside the body and, you know, and they're talking to you and you're doing, you know, whatever it is they need to do together, sprits and that. You know, so there's, I've had that practice. Um, so I think that's why I gravitate towards wanting to be in that kind of like in that pocket, in that spiritual place is because I have, in a different context, have an understanding of already desiring to be in that place. (Magnolia)

Magnolia's qualification, here, reminds us that, while entanglements are ever present, some people are more ready than others to understand them, to attune with them, and to celebrate them. Magnolia believes that having experienced that type of spirituality, that connection in other contexts enabled her to better tap into it through house and vibing.

> krump, being that it's such an emotional dance, whenever I'm really feeling any type of way, me being able to express that to my fullest potential and to my fullest, genuine self. That's what's liberating, 'cause at often times, we have to make up this face for the world and this face for society and that's just that jar, that's putting all those things in that jar and not being able to open that jar or release it. (Krucial)

I'm drawn to Krucial's imagery of the jar that society forces you into. This image almost directly suggests the white supremacist, capitalist self being contained within the rigid borders of the body. Liberation comes from letting herself out of these confining and constricting expectations. Expanding on the meaning of liberation, she said, "Liberation for me is opening the door so that other people can feel comfortable opening their doors, you know?" (Krucial), and she added, "Liberation for me is being able to operate in your truest self without caring what the result may be" (Krucial). The open door aligns with vibing's porous borders, and it recalls an opposition to the jar she mentions above, an opposition to violent individuation's containment. Liberation comes from the ability to be your true self without need for concern, and her statement also speaks to liberation as collective work, that by opening her door, she helps others open theirs. Like Moncell and Krucial, house dancer Magnolia also described freedom in the ability to just *be*, saying:

> I think it's really tied into this freedom thing that we entangle ourselves in. … [B]eing able to be full and to be yourself, you know, whatever the fuck that means. But just being comfortable, being able to be comfortable in your own skin, and just like to breathe in your own skin. Not having to worry about everyone else telling you how to be, what to do. (Magnolia)

These dancers all described a desire to be comfortable being seen as their whole self without feeling a need to conform.

That all of the folks I've quoted in this section identify as people of color and that most of them identify as women underscores why discussion of the self was so prevalent

as they described their experiences. By defining the self in the image of white, cis, heterosexual, Christian Man, the dominant hegemony excludes anyone who does not, who cannot conform to this image, denying them personhood and defining them as Other. Dominant hegemonic systems and structures built around this image of human are designed to pressure and repress people into assimilation, whether or not they hold the capacity to ever attain full incorporation, and when they cannot live up to this image of the self, Others are oppressed and marginalized. To be Othered in a white supremacist, capitalist dominant hegemony is to lack safety, to be continuously terrorized by microaggressions, policy that denies your personhood, and the looming threat of physical violence. The comfort discussed by many of the dancers I spoke with is urgent, it's about literal safety denied to those always already outside of the white supremacist, capitalist self in a society that upholds that construction.

The precarity and peril of this denied safety is absolutely more urgent for some than others. Examining the continued impacts of this country's white supremacist and capitalist foundations on Black life in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe writes, "The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on" (7). In order for United States democracy and justice to function, Black death and exclusion are requirements. Citing Saidiya Hartman, Sharpe explains that "the precarities of the afterlives of slavery ('skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment': Hartman 2007, 6); the precarities of the ongoing disaster of the

ruptures of chattel slavery" (5) continue to structure Black existence. Her work draws out the ways that Black people have been and continue to be specifically targeted by the dominant hegemony.

Dominant hegemonic violence is also disproportionately directed towards trans people, specifically trans people of color, and especially Black trans women, manifesting in the constant stream of anti-trans legislation, denied access to gender-affirming health care, and staggering numbers of murders, which receive little to no media attention. Examining the ways that trans visibility is entangled in precarity for trans communities, in "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media," micha cárdenas explains that, despite the positive association with the idea of visibility for marginalized communities, visibility in the context of a dominant hegemony that views trans people as Other creates more potential for them to be identified and harmed. Instead, visibility must be accompanied by a dismantling of the structures that allow for this dangerous othering. cárdenas writes:

> An abolitionist trans politics requires that visibility for trans people of color not be promoted in the absence of anti-prison, antipolice, and anticolonial critiques, because it is precisely this absence which allows neoliberalism to manage the termination of which trans people are acceptable (namely, those who work toward the shared ideologies of neoliberalism) and which trans people are disposable (those who reject the neoliberal ideologies of assimilation and conformity to market demands that rely for their continuation on the deaths of disposable populations). (173)

For Othered people, visibility is linked to essentialization, exclusion, and termination.

My discussion here is not meant to fully elucidate all the infinite ways that dominant hegemony activates white supremacist and capitalist terror against distinct

marginalized groups—any example of which merits a full dissertation of its own. Instead, I mean to highlight the fact that, while many people and communities fall outside the idealized construct of the self designed in the image of white, cis, heterosexual, Christian Man, and that this places all of them in some kind of peril for existing as Other, the urgency of their precarity is not equal. As such, it is most crucial for those under the most urgent threat to access alternatives to the white supremacist, capitalist self.

While holding this care for the most precarious communities, I also want to acknowledge that I don't believe this white supremacist, capitalist self is good for any of us. Certainly, those in power benefit from upholding this false personhood because it maintains their dominance over Others. However, even those who tick the boxes of white, cis, heterosexual, Christian Man are still forced into rigidly defined personhoods, constantly made to demonstrate their allegiance to this construction, rather than acknowledging and being seen for their full, genuine selves. And even white, cis, heterosexual, Christian men fall victim to white supremacist, capitalist violent individuation, their inability to ascend financially treated as individual failings or blaming those separated as Others, rather than acknowledging that the fault lies in the structures and systems were always already designed to maintain power for only a select few. Understanding ourselves as being intimately and intricately interconnected, existing in and as radical togetherness serves all of us.

To open up and allow your self to be seen within a dominant hegemony that doesn't want to see you is an act of vulnerability[26]. Your openness, read through a white supremacist, capitalist lens, could be interpreted as empty, incomplete, and an opportunity for capitalization. Not everyone is ready to consider that the construction they've been sold is a lie, and many would prefer to fortify their borders towards a socialized desire for impenetrability, while keeping an eye out for the opportunity to forcefully exploit those who have leaned into their porousness. To allow yourself to be moved is a risk. Vibing requires courage. Being open is a practice in bravery.

Vibing is safer in the presence of others who are also willing to reject the idea of these imagined borders, also willing to be vulnerable, also willing to vibe. Vibing is safer in the presence of others who desire to function in a practice of sharing rather than taking and owning. My use of the term saf*er* is purposeful. Spaces that invite freestyling are not utopic, and it is easy for them to be infiltrated by white supremacist and capitalist ideologies. A dancer may, for example, actively reject antiblackness while maintaining their grasp on beliefs embedded in misogynistic cisheteropatriarchy. Someone else may engage in feminist activism but adhere to a white feminism that is not intersectional. Others may enter the space driven by capitalist desires for fame and fortune without understanding what it means to be a real part of a community working in collective generativity. However, if those you are being vulnerable with are also willing to be

[26] I am grateful to dance scholar Rosemarie Roberts, whose question in response to my paper at the Dance Studies Association Conference in 2019 led me to think through the precarity of vibing's openness.

vulnerable, then they are more likely to move in alignment with you than to unitarily force their vibe into you.

People who are in a regular practice of listening and allowing themselves to be moved understand that everything has a vibration, so it's important to be mindful about what energies you surround yourself with. Dana explained that she is not interested in or willing to open herself up to just any vibe. In particular, here, she discusses why she is drawn to and avoids certain types of music:

> [E]verything is a vibration. … I don't listen to techno, I don't listen to EDM, I don't listen that high-pitched, fast, crazy, piercing shit. That's a vibration I don't fuck with. That's a vibration that, to me, is very aligned with our cultural vibration. That, to me, is a vibration that's very aligned with white culture. All that: I don't want. I think that's why people are tight and stiff and up and not letting gravity and not relaxing and breathing and not being in their bodies—that is not a vibration we need to be channeling into the world. And again, everything is energy so that's all we have, is the energy we lead with, the energy we decide to be around, the energy we decide to let into us. So if we're in a space, where not only the words we're listening to are incredibly grounding and affirming, the bass is grounded, it is deep and heavy and rooted, and that is where I want to be. I'm about learning from nature. Well how do trees stay standing upright? They have deep roots. I wanna be down, close to the earth, close to the ancestors. All that is where I live and where I find a lot of value. So that is a very different vibration than like the high-pitched noises of technology and like car horns and sirens. That's all shit that brings us to like a ratcheted level, and I just think that [there's] importance [in] consistent rhythm that's bass-y and grounded… [It's} why certain cities I enjoy being in, why certain sections of certain cities I enjoy being in, and why I'm just selective about humans. ... I always tell people I like babies and dogs better than I like most humans. 'Cause people have all kinds of fucked up energy I'm not interested in, and by the same token, there are people with such beautiful energy that I'm like super drawn to and love to let in. … I feel strongly about protecting my vibration, too. (Dana)

She's careful about protecting herself by only opening herself up to vibrations she understands as positive for herself and, in fact, what she actually understands as positive

for society as a whole. She makes conscious choices about what spaces she is willing to be in, and with whom and with what she is willing to share energy. Through these choices, she works to keep herself safe from the energies that may cause her harm.

For Dana, safety can be identified in particular kinds of energies that are emitted by particular genres of music. Safety is also tied to music for Moncell, but rather than differentiating musical energies from each other, he speaks to the sense of safety music offers as opposed to his struggle to sense that safety in people. He explains:

> I'm not big on performing. I'm not interested in entertaining people. None of that. So it's never about me. And the ultimate thing that creates a safe space for me is the music. What doesn't create safe space is when I'm around other people. I don't like being in crowds of people. I don't like being looked at. And then I'm not comfortable to dance the way I want to dance 'cause I don't—I'm not here for you to look at me and watch me, go do your own thing, stop worrying about what I'm doing. But I let that distract me.
>
> … For me, I think the think the thing that I negotiate is allowing myself to be vulnerable enough to share that with other people. And that's difficult for me, so that's what I'm negotiating. I get my body. I own my movement, you know, I voice my opinion—all that other stuff, I'm a hundred percent clear on that. But my part is negotiating comfort. And that comfort goes beyond dance. I'm like that walking. I don't walk without music and earphones on. Anywhere. 'Cause I feel uncomfortable. So it's nothin' to do with me dancing, it's whatever happened in my life that does not allow me to move on my own without blocking out the stuff that's, you know, that I feel is taking from me. I need to negotiate that. That sense of power, that has nothing to do with dance, you know.
>
> … And I'm with a crew of people that I'm supported by so they—they become the thing that keeps me going. Once I got away from them, then it was difficult to navigate that space. But it's very controlling because I'll hear a song that just moves my entire body and I won't dance if I'm not, if I don't feel comfortable around everybody—and inside I'm peelin' my skin off 'cause I just, I wanna get up but like I don't feel comfortable to get up. And I watch some of my other friends, they could give a damn. The song hits them, and they just go, and I hold back. And so I'm like hurting my own quality of life because I'm letting something that probably people don't even care about stop me from enjoying myself in

> that moment. I'll still enjoy the music but I won't dance, which is really weird. (Durden)

Moncell makes clear that his discomfort extends beyond the dance floor. During the interview, I tried to get at what, exactly, his discomfort is about, but he never clearly identified or articulated what it is that makes him uncomfortable in life. Though he doesn't say so explicitly, it's possible to read his discomfort with being seen in line with Black people being read as Other against the white supremacist, capitalist self. His disinterest in entertaining others recalls histories of Black people treated as commodities, consumed solely as entertainment, from enslaved people forced to perform for their enslavers, to Black performers refused at front entrances that invited their white audiences in, to Black football players allowed to play but restricted from making any political statements. Whatever else may be involved in his particular discomfort, he explains that people, other than a select few supportive friends, make him uncomfortable.

Music is what offers him a sense of safety, on the dance floor and beyond it. However, the music is often not enough to overcome the discomfort caused by people. Even when the music has entered his body, even when the music has entered his being, even when the music calls him to get up and move, he holds himself back from doing what he most wants to do, to show himself through dance, if he is not comfortable with the environment. That he restrains himself even when the music offers some safety speaks to the extreme sense of precarity he experiences simply moving through the world.

Magnolia also described experiences where, as much as she wants to dance, the environment prevents her from being comfortable enough to do so, or at least not in the

way she really wants to, as her true self. “I’m just tired of trying to be somebody that I’m not just for the sake of being a part of a community. I’m so fucking sick of it” (Magnolia), she says, and adds:

> I told myself that I definitely don’t want to go back [to a particular event] again because of the politics. … there isn’t really much space for queer and women folks to fully be themselves. So I’m not saying that they’re not there, I’m saying that the whole entire event is very male-dominated, like cis, hetero male-dominated. And you can feel that. And so that’s why, unless something changes, I don’t want to go back there because it felt really violent. That’s another thing that I feel that competition brings is that very like hetero, cis male energy that I just don’t want to have to deal with anymore. Yeah and again, not to say that there aren’t amazing women and queer folks who are going to these competitions and doing the work and still trying to, like, fully—but I know for a fact that they can’t talk about themselves and about who they are and about what they believe. And even I am afraid to ask them these questions for their own safety. (Magnolia)

Magnolia describes an infiltration of what should be her safe space by the ideal of the white supremacist, capitalist self, bringing with it its Othering, whether through homophobia, sexism, antiblackness, transphobia, etc. This dominant hegemonic presence is not always stated explicitly, and here, Magnolia describes it as energy. Not only can this energy prevent people from feeling safe enough to share themselves, but it also means they have to contend with those vibrations entering their bodies and their beings. Like Dana choosing what type of music she wants to engage with, safety also means protecting yourself from energies that don’t serve you.

In order to feel safe enough to vibe, people need to trust that the people around them are sharing energies that won’t be harmful and that they’re ready and willing to celebrate everyone for their whole selves. Magnolia adds, “what I realized for myself, is that I actually don’t trust people, and so therefore I actually have not opened myself to be

in that moment with other people" (Magnolia). Her ability to trust people is largely informed by her identity as a woman of color, specifically mentioning protecting herself from unwanted advances. Though her particular needs for a sense of safety are different than Moncell's, for example, all three of these dancers make clear that freestyling itself is not enough to enable vibing and that dance spaces are not utopic. But in those moments where the environment is safe and supportive and when the music is right, the chance to be seen in your fullness and celebrated for being your most genuine self can be liberating.

**Sensing the Otherwise**

Vibing is not something that anyone can *make* happen, but we can remain open to its possibility. Explaining the practice of sensing relationships in African American social dances, Cleis Abeni, performer and journalist, writes in "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing":

> By sensing, I mean the valorization of emotion as a path toward intelligent knowing. Sensing also signifies a heightened, in-the-moment, understanding of one's relationship to forces in the environment around the body (like gravity and the weighted pull of the ground) and the acknowledgement of psychosomatic forces that embrace unknowable, mystical forces perceivable by faith. (Abeni 43)

We can't make vibing happen, but understanding the value of sensing of our relationships can facilitate it. By engaging in a sensing of our relationships with the forces around us as we freestyle, by listening carefully to our connections, we open up the potential for our alignment, making vibing possible. As we lean into the possibilities of these relations, finding ourselves in relation to them, we are asked to release a desire for complete control and to choose to allow this relation, our particular connectedness, to move us.

Through supportive and celebratory intricate and intimate interconnections, the majority of my interviewees described the ability to just genuinely *be*. Folks are yearning to not only be their most authentic, truest, fullest, whole selves, but to be celebrated for their genuine beings. Discussing a finding of the self within an African epistemology, Robert Farris Thompson, a preeminent scholar in Africanist aesthetics, writes in *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, "As Charles Bird observes, one masters something in the Mande world by stripping away the superficial covering by discovering its inner and true nature, as in the poetic concept of *yere-wolo* (giving birth to yourself), in which a person finds his or her true self, his or her true essence" (196). Vibing, an African diasporic technology, offers a way to access this true self that preexisted the white supremacist, capitalist construction. However, not everyone who participates in freestyling understands that vibing is a possibility or that the ability to be *really* seen, and not just to have your impressive tricks lauded, is at the center of the practice.

Renown b-girl Rokafella spoke to the intention behind a dancer's participation during her interview with Imani Kai Johnson in "B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance." Rokafella related an experience she had with a young, white b-girl:

> Because I was telling her you know, "You being white, that's never gonna go away. This being a black dance, that's never gonna go away either. You have to first become well versed at acknowledging the fact that slavery or oppression of a European country on their colonies, you have to be able to acknowledge that *that* shit was wrong. So that, you know, when conversations come up, you can honestly say, 'Yes, that was wrong. *And* that has nothing to do with me." Because that isn't even your generation. It's not your mom's or your grandmother's generation. We're talking

> eons, oh my gosh, of imperialism. But for you to acknowledge it helps me perceive you as an ally. And the fact that you renounce your privilege in this society is, is… is helpful. What is *also* helpful to you is to become a soulful dancer. You have to study this dance and be good, without a doubt. And always contribute back to the people who created it, back to the people who teach you. Because you have to give back to the communities [and not just] be able to take away from it." And I explained that to her. (Johnson 184-185, emphasis original)

Rokafella explained that historical and cultural understanding is required in order to understand the dance practice, and that contribution based on this knowledge is the end goal. Her discussion underscores the importance of collectivity, that the dance is about being a part of the community and giving back to it. Vibing requires collectivity, and the most authentic, true, whole self is found through connection.

This same lack of understanding of the importance of collectivity can also inform the way scholars approach the study of hip hop dance practices. I have encountered several scholars utilizing, for example, phenomenological approaches in their analyses of these dance practices. Rather than thinking of being otherwise, however, phenomenology works with the individuated self as a given. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, a canonical text in the field of Phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

> For I am the one who brings into being for myself—and thus into being in the only sense that the word could have for me—this tradition that I choose to take up or this horizon whose distance from me would collapse were I not there to sustain it with my gaze (since this distance does not belong to the horizon as one of its properties). Scientific perspectives according to which I am a moment of the world are always naïve and hypocritical because they always imply, without mentioning it, that other perspective—the perspective of consciousness—by which a world first arranges itself around me and beings to exist for me. (xxii)

In this I-centered construction of existence, the self can only exist as individuated, and this theoretical base derives from a state fundamentally counter to the very existence of

Black folks, who have always already proven this self impossible. Imposing an outside, white, theoretical frame upon an African diasporic practice that has, since its inception, theorized itself based on its own epistemologies, will necessarily misunderstand it. To do so does the same violence as expecting Othered folks to assimilate to dominant hegemonic ideals that they can never entirely live up to. To do so creates yet another unsafe space, even through an attempt to promote the culture. To do so is to fail to listen and move from a state of profound understanding. To do so is, itself, to fail to vibe.

For their failure to acknowledge our inherent collectivity, Crawley argues against theology and philosophy as grounds from which to study and attempt to understand Black practices and Black people. He argues:

> Blackness is an abolitionist, decolonial project that resists the role of the subject and, thus, has no capacity to produce the thought of the would-be theologian, the would-be philosopher. In contradistinction to the desire for subjectivity, *Blackpentecostal Breath* elaborates upon the extra-subjective mode of being together that is the condition of occasion for envisioning, and living into such envisioning, a critique of the known—the violent, oppressive, normative—world. (Crawley 4)

Because Black people always already have existed otherwise than the white supremacist, capitalist self, Crawley moves away from the subject and instead towards ways of existing together. Togetherness, he explains, is required for envisioning and enacting the otherwise. Collectivity, whether through communing with a song's haunting or by engaging with other dancers equally willing to listen and be moved, is a requirement of vibing, and, from this collectivity, vibing then offers new ways of being together. Vibing is a way to lose the white supremacist, capitalist self and find the truest, most genuine self, a being in and as radical togetherness.

## Chapter 3

### Dancing in/as Radical Togetherness: Sharing Space, Sharing Spirit

*"All that you touch*
*You Change.*
*All that you Change*
*Changes you."*
- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, pg. 195

In the previous chapter, I examined ways in which dancers tune into and attune with the music; how they listen with care in order embody, merge, and converge with the music; how they become the music. Even when considering the freestyle of a solo physical body, vibing is always a communal act; in releasing into the openness of receiving the intentions of the music's haunting, a dancer communes with musicians, DJs, histories, and ancestors, and honors them by moving in alignment with them. One is never really dancing alone, and vibing is always social. As dancers lose the violently individuated self in the music, they find their truest, whole selves by understanding themselves as existing in relation to, radically connected.

This chapter continues to explore vibing's sociality, but, here, I turn the focus towards the ways in which dancers vibe with each other in cyphers and battles. I argue that, in the same ways dancers forge profound connections with the music, they must also open themselves up to and invite in the vibratory energies and intentions of the folks around them. Extending the previous chapter's discussion of freestyle dancers listening beyond the aural in order to vibe with the music, this chapter considers a multisensory perception of collaborative possibilities with those around them, as they also continue to align with the music's frequency. This chapter further develops my interrogation into

vibing's refusal of a violently individuated self, examining here the ways that freestyle dancers function as parts of rhizomatic wholes.

**Shifting Spirit**

Although we had not yet formed an actual cypher, from the beginning of her Street Dance Activism workshop, dance scholar, educator, and activist Shamell Bell[27] had us participating in ways that called on the cypher's collective generativity. We had already been co-creating in the spirit of communal building, witnessing and celebrating each other, and then she moved us into an actual cypher.

The cypher, an African diasporic circle technology that is foundational to hip hop culture, is about the collective cultivation of energy and creativity, and a site where freestyling takes place. Describing the nature of cyphers, Imani Kai Johnson writes in *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop*[28]:

> [C]yphering refers to the act of building collectively through the back and forth exchange in a circle. A circle is the structure within which the social act that could lead to cyphers takes place. As the energy is channeled among dancers and with spectators, circles become cyphers. The cypher is a collectivity where the spectators themselves are necessarily actively engaged in the moment, contributing their energy through their reactions and interest. This collaboration can be a gateway for psychic and even spiritual elevation. (5)

Cyphers are inherently about energetic exchange. Everyone is an essential part of the cypher—whether they are dancing, whether they are holding the space of the circle, whether they are awaiting their turn to enter, or whether they never enter to dance

[27] If you are not familiar with Shamell Bell's critical work in Street Dance Activism, please check it out: streetdanceactivism.com

[28] Johnson's *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers* offers an in-dept exploration of cyphers, and which can, in no way, be encapsulated within one quote.

themselves—because it is the exchange of energy that makes the cypher what it is. Energy flows in all directions as everyone is responsible both for contributing to the collective building and for celebrating what others are bringing to the table. Dancers inspire and motivate each other to explore further and imagine more radically as they play off of each other's embodied ideas and innovative interpretations of the music. The more energy the performer gives, the more energy the rest of the cypher gives back, which in turn hypes the performer up even more, and this cycle continues as the energy builds, spiraling throughout the cypher and serving as the potential portal for transformational experiences.

As we began to gather around her, Shamell brought out a woman, who she introduced to us as her auntie, and explained that, as our elder, she would get the cypher going. Shamell's aunt enthusiastically entered the cypher and started getting down to the trap music Shamell had selected for us. Hunched a little forward, she shifted the weight between her feet ever so slightly, sinking her hips from side to side as she punctuated her movements with her elbows. Her movements weren't explosive, or grandiose, or shocking, but she was fully invested in the dance and in the moment. She was *living*!

Now, normally in a cypher, one person enters and does their thing for a bit and then they make their way out so others can take a turn. But she just kept going. And going. And going…

That she continued dancing for *so* long suggests that she allowed herself to get lost in the moment, in the music, in our togetherness. We were in it with her, cheering her on, grooving, and laughing. As we sent our energies into the cypher, we were also moved

by the energy she was emanating. She appeared so joyous as she was gettin' it that I couldn't help but grin and giggle as I witnessed her. I felt lighter, overcome by, overwhelmed in, the jubilant vibrations she emanated throughout the cypher. As I received her energy and allowed myself to be moved by what she shared, my own spirit shifted, aligning in her frequency.

When I later sat down with Shamell for our interview, I told her about my experience in that cypher, and she replied, "we were literally manipulating energy when we were there" (Bell), affirming what I had felt. She had intentionally facilitated a space wherein her aunt's spirit could shift and lift mine—and everyone's who was a part of that cypher. Shamell's work through Street Dance Activism harnesses the sociality inherent to street dances and cyphers, with an understanding that the energy we cultivate together through these practices has the power to effect change. She explains in her TEDx talk, "We use dance to disrupt spaces and transform places from trauma to radical joy, lifting frequencies and lifting vibrations in healing" (Bell). As much as it's also about dance, Street Dance Activism is energy work. By bringing people together and facilitating their working collectively, Shamell creates environments that invite participants to share energy with each other, through street dance, in order to shift the energetic vibrations of the space and the participants. As folks cultivate joy together, they heal themselves and each other, altering the very vibrations of their beings.

Although the circle is not the cypher, the physical proximity that circles call dancers into does serve a purpose. This closeness is meant to facilitate the creative and energetic exchange of the cypher, the cypher's celebration of our entanglements, of our

radical togetherness. There is something magical, spiritual, and not fully knowable about sharing physical space, about seeing each other's embodied expressions, about breathing the same air thick with the moisture evaporating from our laboring bodies, about hearing each other's breaths grow heavier, about feeling the sweat of bodies moving and grooving together. Being near each other can enhance our capacity to engage in a multisensory listening, thus facilitating the practice of vibing.

But in the midst of writing this chapter, the world was interrupted and upended by the coronavirus global pandemic. As physical distancing became necessary for protecting the community's health, our shared communal health, we were called on to reimagine what togetherness can look like.

It is through this reimagination that Club Quarantine (CQ) was born. Discussing CQ's inception, DJ D-Nice explained during an interview with D'Shonda Brown, former contributor for *For(bes) the Culture*:

> When I first started [Club Quarantine], it was a selfish desire for me to find a way to stay connected to the world when everything shut down, but after the second day, I really did pay attention to what people were doing and realized the importance of what was happening… People used it as a safe space. People came to my live to connect and be part of a community. (Brown)

Even without physical proximity, even without an ability to see dancers on a dancefloor, D-Nice speaks to engaging a multisensory listening, "paying attention to" his crowd in the virtual space and attuning to the information they were putting out in response to what he shared. And he responded to them in kind.

That CQ became a "safe space" for people is worthy of attention. People's physical locations had not changed; CQ had no physical place for them to enter. Space,

here, was created via the vibrations—sonic and energetic—of D-Nice's music, which literally entered into people's homes (or wherever they streamed his sets), unrestrained or contained by the devices and screens through which people entered the club. Understanding the power of these vibrations to shift space, like Shamell, D-Nice purposefully engages the vibe, a term he uses frequently, to uplift and heal. He explains in the same interview that this is, in fact, precisely what drew him to music in the first place:

> The reason why I was able to play for 19 hours straight… was because music has always been a form of therapy for me… When things were going rough with George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, all I could do was play music that reflected what I was feeling. During that time, some of the music was very sad, but it was still healing. During the good times, there's nothing like playing feel good music. You need your spirits uplifted and you play a Frankie Beverly record, or you put on an old Luther Vandross song, it just gives you a different vibe. (Forbes)

I was at the club on Friday, May 29, 2020, as the country was reeling in the wake of the state-sanctioned, extra-judicial murders of Ahmad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, and now, George Floyd. The people had risen up and taken to the streets. Minneapolis was burning. As the sounds of Stevie Wonder's "Love's in Need of Love Today" began to flow from my laptop's speakers, I was moved to tears. In the chat, people were sharing their stories, stories of personal and familial encounters with the police, of the trauma from the continual experience of Black death, of how the music was making them feel, and the CQ Fam witnessed each other's testimonies, held space for each other, and wrote each other responses of support. People were in real community with each other, despite the mediation.

Building this community required a reimagination of vibing's multisensory listening in physical distance. The chat plays an important role, allowing folks to be in conversation with each other. The use of a social media chat feature may seem insignificant, but it matters that people *purposefully used it to be in dialogue*, to be in community with each other, listening for possibilities of collectivity within this space. D-Nice also engages in these collective possibilities, beyond the music he plays, through direct interaction with his crowd, which Brandy N. Kelly Pryor and Corliss Outley discuss in their article "'Last Night a DJ Saved My Life" @Dnice #ClubQuarantine: Digitally Mediating Ritualist Leisure Spaces during Isolation," saying:

> Although not the first DJ or artist to use Instagram Live to create community, D-Nice's musical sets utilize a unique dialogue with viewers to create togetherness. As some of his favorite artists enter, he openly welcomes them and appreciates that they came to the party. If he is playing a record, and a musical icon virtually enters, he mixes the record to show homage to the artist with one of their popular tunes. (Pryor)

They argue that D-Nice demonstrates a uniquely attentive approach to interacting with his audience, not only shouting people out when they arrive, but allowing their presence to shift the set.

It's not the same as being in the same room. But these reimagined modes of physically-distant togetherness, in combination with the music, make vibing possible, and attendees attest to this. Pryor and Outley cite an Instagram post from someone who was at the club, which stated:

> With virtual hearts filling the screen, he called out new people as they entered the Instagram Live room. In that moment, as if he saw me, he played to heal my grief. As he narrated the culture, my body and soul moved in ways I had not felt in weeks and I was transported. Musically traveling through the Diaspora, from the year of my birth to my coming of

> age, to years and times I had not known—I worked up a sweat and swayed in my living room—and my soul exhaled—'thank you D-Nice. (Pryor)

This person's testimony of feeling seen, of being physically and metaphysically moved, and of being transported recalls the testimonies in the previous chapter from the dancers I spoke with about getting lost in the music. Through the music he selects, D-Nice offers a frequency in which we can all meet and align. As we stream his sets from all across the globe, the same musical vibrations flow into our homes, our bodies, and our beings. This music serves as a connective tissue, inviting us to get down in a shared groove, in a collective vibration.

Both Shamell and D-Nice spoke to the healing power of vibrations. Rather than a temporary change, healing suggest that experiencing a vibrational shift forever alters your being. "Matter doesn't disappear, it transforms. Energy is the same way" (49), writer and activist adrienne maree brown reminds us. If freestyling and the technologies that engage it are about cultivating collective energetic vibrations, and if energy doesn't disappear, do these dances also remain?

The fields of dance and performance studies have widely held the long-standing belief in the ephemerality of dance and of performance more broadly. Frequently cited in this argument is feminist scholar Peggy Phelan's work in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, wherein Phelan interrogates and challenges the potential of performance to be reproduced, arguing that performance is defined by its own disappearance. Phelan writes:

> Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something

> other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance. (146, emphasis original)

She defines performance as only existing in the present, only coming into being as itself through its very disappearance, and that any reproduction after the fact transforms the performance into something that is no longer, by its nature, performance. I do not contest that dance is a form of performance; however, I think there is room to interrogate what *types* of performances dance can constitute. Dance studies as a field, founded in the study of Eurocentric and Western concert dance, has traditionally failed to recognize that what dance-as-performance means varies greatly across genres and cultural contexts.

In the midst of her critique of capitalist reproduction, Phelan's research seems to focus on performances that have been created as products for capitalist consumption—performance as object. But dance practices across the African diaspora have been understood as prayer and as community, preexisting, outlying, and refusing the realm of dance as capitalist commodity. The cypher, for example, is not about the literal, physical circle, the object, but about what coming together in that way opens up and enables. Moncell Durden, dancer, scholar, and educator, explained:

> Especially in a cypher, in a real cypher, because of the energy of the people around it and the person in it, the persons in it … their dancing allows, it opens up a portal that shifts what is ultimately a cosmogram that represents … the connection and division between the spirit world and the human world… It is the gateway to the spirit world … And so that leads people to tap into something greater than themselves… So it's spiritual all the time. (Durden)

Cyphers are defined by the energetic exchange and collective generativity they facilitate. The embodied creativity that takes place in cyphers is important for sure, but ontologically, cyphering is defined by, as Moncell put it, the spirituality of the process.

Rather than spirit, Phelan's work identifies performance's disappearance through the actions of bodies: "Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies" (148). At some point, bodies conclude the act of a performance, and this action is what disappears, thus defining the parameters of the performance product. Of course, bodies and the ways they move must be taken into consideration as we seek to understand dance, addressing the specific qualities, techniques, aesthetics, and values of particular practices is important. But what if bodies doing steps is not the *essence* of all dance forms? What if, instead of the execution of technique, we center the dance's energy in order to understand its nature? How might the conceptualization of dance be informed if we understand that a dance's movements derive *through* the energy, the spirit, rather than the reverse?

Throughout interdisciplinary artist Ni'Ja Whitson's course on the techniques and historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts of house, they reiterated to us that, while it was important to understand proper form, it was equally important to understand that the empty physicalization of embodied house aesthetics is not house. Showing the class a video of someone dancing to house music in what appeared to be a cypher, Whitson explained that the dancer was not doing a lot of moves specifically recognizable as house, but without hesitation, named this performance purely house. They explained that the dancer's spirit, as it engaged with, embodied, and empathized with the vibrations of the

house music that was playing, was absolutely and wholly everything that is house. This is not to say that Whitson was implying you can do anything and call it house, and I should note that the dancer wasn't doing anything in direct contradiction to house aesthetics. Instead, Whitson's reading of the dancer privileged the energy, intentions, and approaches over the exact movements of the body. If it's the case that, while the movements matter, we can understand the *essence* of the dance as the specific energy that the dance cultivates, and if energy doesn't disappear, then even with the disappearance of the steps, the dance remains.

The Street Dance Activism cypher was not defined by the material circle itself or even by the specific steps that occurred within it, but instead by the energetic exchange it enabled. Being a part of this cypher shifted my spirit as the joyous vibrations entered my body and altered my being. Even as the cypher's circle dissipated, the people dispersing, not disappearing, each of us took the cypher's vibratory energy with us, forever having been changed. Citing the power of the vibration to alter us, performance studies scholar Joshua Chambers-Letson, in *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, says of modern dance artist Eiko's performance:

> But if she's making a place, she's producing it *within* and *with* the station and the people surrounding her. It's this collective vibration, the resonant dimension of her dancing-with that charges her choreography with transformative, creative, world-making powers. As Candelario writes, 'Dancing-with acknowledges that not only will the dance change, but all the partners in the dance will be altered by the process, forming something together that they could not possibly become on their own. (Chambers-Letson 180, emphasis original)

Through her engagement with vibration, Eiko purposefully chose to create with those in the space, from a place of acknowledging what their being there had—what their *beings*

had—to offer. Their vibrations, simply by their presence, collectively made the space and the performance something other than they could have been otherwise, and in being a part of that collective vibration, they were all transformed.

This transformation speaks to an element of performance that cannot be contained by the object of a specific act of performance, which performance studies scholar José Estéban Muñoz recognizes as a "condition of possibility." In "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance," he argues, "Ephemera remain. They are absent and they are present, disrupting a predictable metaphysics of presence. The actual act is only a stage in the game, it is a moment, pure and simple. There is a deductive element to performance that has everything to do with its conditions of possibility, and there is much that follows" (Muñoz 423). The object of actions executed by bodies that Phelan recognizes *as* the performance itself, Muñoz argues, is only one aspect of a performance but does not and cannot define it. He contends that performances do work in the world, creating possibility, and that that work and those possibilities are as much the performance as the act. That his work examines queer performance and queer of color performers importantly informs his analysis, which adamantly makes the case for recognizing the existence and presence of that which refuses containment and capture by white supremacist and capitalist definitions, systems, and structures, always already fundamental to the survival of those existing outside of white supremacist constructions of human. Rather than disappearing, freestyling remains fugitive, continuously transforming as it refuses to be constituted and contained as object.

Shifting our understanding of what constitutes a performance invites us to reframe its relationship to disappearance and the ways that it can be allowed to transform while simultaneously remaining as itself. The vibration, Ashon Crawley argues in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, gives "something of itself while remaining a resource from which such force can externally return and emerge. It is a resource that is plenteous, that exists in plentitude, always available and split from itself, split from while transforming into itself" (Crawley 2, emphasis original). Attending to the vibrations of sound, Fred Moten considers the inevitability of a performance's reproduction, Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* contends:

> [Saidiya Hartman's] decision to not reproduce the account of Aunt Hester's beating is, in some sense, illusory. First, it is reproduced in her reference to and refusal of it; second, the beating is reproduced in every scene of subjection the book goes on to read… Indeed, Hartman's considerable, formidable, and rare brilliance is present in the space she leaves for the ongoing (re)production of that performance in all its guises and for critical awareness of how each of those guises is always already present in and disruptive of the supposed originary of that primal scene. (4)

Moten argues that the performance of Aunt Hester's beating continues to be reproduced, despite its taking different forms, including a refusal to reference it. Its presence haunts Hartman's avoidance of it, the other scenes she recounts throughout her book, as well as jazz performances Moten examines in his text. For Moten, ontologically, performance does not disappear, as Phelan argues. Instead, it is continuously rearticulated.

Whereas Moten's work derives from an examination of the Black radical tradition, Phelan's conceptualization of performance derives from white feminist theory

and draws heavily on Europe's canon of philosophers. In drawing on these imaginaries, the universal of dance in Phelan's work is, in fact, not universal, but rather signifies the unnamed white, western, concert, capitalist. Moten's analysis, for example, demonstrates an understanding of the present as being entangled with the past, while Phelan's formulation relies on a Europeanist notion of time as linear. Critiquing Phelan's reliance on this particular understanding of the present in her analysis of performance's, as she claims, inherent liveness and, therefore, ephemerality, performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider, in *Performing Remains: Art and War in times of Theatrical Reenactment*, writes:

> Is the live really only a matter of temporal immediacy, happening only in an uncomplicated now, a "transitory" present, an im-mediate moment? Is a "maniacally charged present" not punctuated by, syncopated with, indeed charged by other moments, other times? That is, is the present really so temporally straightforward or pure—devoid of a basic delay or deferral if not multiplicity and flexibility? Does it not take place or become composed in double, triple, or multiple time…? (92)

Schneider complicates the Europeanist, strictly linear notion of time that Phelan does not interrogate as a social construction with roots that are not universal, arguing that the "now" cannot be so cleanly individuated from any, or every, other time. My intention is not to dismiss Phelan's work, but rather to expose its limits and blind spots by stating explicitly its cultural, historical, and sociopolitical specificity. Although freestyling, born in the United States, is western and never existed entirely outside capitalist structures, it also derives from African diasporic epistemologies and in the lineage of the Black radical tradition. Applying Muñoz's, Schneider's, and Moten's theorizations to freestyling

underscores that the practice cannot be entirely understood through a white, western, concert, capitalist lens.

When we participate[29] in a performance, its vibrations change us. Having been changed, we bring the knowledge, expanded imagination, and understanding of possibilities from the experience with us, and this change in us informs how we move thereafter, thereby also changing the spaces we touch. As Octavia Butler teaches in *Parable of the Sower*, "All that you touch/ You Change/ All that you Change/ Changes you" (195). Dance does not disappear; it lives on through its continual, vibrational transformation.

**Battling in Togetherness**

It's easy to see separation in a battle: one side versus another side is maybe a battle's most readily apparent attribute. But battles are so much more complex than the ways they feature the *against*. In fact, I argue here that togetherness is more essential to a battle's function than the ways it can individuate. The battle calls energies together to inspire, motivate, and foster collaborative exploration of possibility, even as it highlights dancers' individuality through their freestyles. B-boy Ru describes battles' collectivity during his interview with ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss in *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York*, saying, "It's just like sharing… That person comes out and then all right, 'You know what? You did that? You shared that with me?' All right: boom. I'm gonna get down—boom boom boom—I'm gonna do what you did,

[29] I use the term "participate" flexibly. With this term, I acknowledge that someone on the outskirts of a cypher who never enters themself is still a part of the cypher. Likewise, the audience became a part of Eiko's performance. Their presence, their energy, their vibrations contribute to the creation of the performance.

and then what I'm gonna do is, I'm gonna reverse that and I'm gonna show you something that you need to respond to" (108). I appreciate b-boy Ru's use of the term "sharing," which underscores the inherently communal nature of the battle, even in the midst of its positioning one side against another. As b-boy Ru describes, a dancer's contribution to the battle offers creative inspiration to the others, something new for them to riff off of, to play with. What you share furthers the potential of the battle and the culture, as Schloss says, "battling has numerous benefits, for both the individual dancer and the culture as a whole [including] using competition to push individuals toward greater achievement (which also improves b-boying in general)" (107). As dancers are motivated to strengthen their own skills, their creative contributions continuously create new opportunities for reimagining and remixing, expanding the capacity for innovation and growing the culture as a whole. In this way, individuality is always in relation to the whole of the battle, the whole of the practice, the whole of the culture.

At the same time that battles are a space for competition and a platform for individual style, as they battle, dancers work together to cultivate something larger than themselves. Although this communal action is inherent to the battle's function, some dancers privilege the battle's togetherness more than others and are more attuned to sensing collaborative possibility. The examples that follow illuminate what can become possible when dancers lean into this collaborative generativity, when they vibe with each other.

*Sensing Possibilities for Alignment*

The Bonnie and Clyde 2 v 2 battle at the Diggs Deeper[30] 5 Year Anniversary Funk Celebration, which took place on September 8, 2018 at Creatington in Los Angeles, brought together a number of ridiculously talented, creative, and skillful dancers. At this event, there were tons of dancers demonstrating strong capacities for tuning into and attuning with others on the dance floor, but I was particularly captivated by Leah and Dread, who had teamed up for the battle. In addition to each dancer being a super dope, musically detailed, and exciting practitioner, throughout the battle, the two showed a purposeful commitment to sensing collective possibilities.

It's the last round of the finals. Leah and Dread are up against Natsuna and Lil B. It's Leah's turn to take the floor but Dread enters and circles up the space, reclaiming it for his team. He claps animatedly as he looks to the crowd and calls our attention in. He returns to his teammate's side and drops to his knee in front of her, rubbing his hands together and blowing into them to build up the energetic friction—something's about to happen! He flattens his hands in front of her, one on top of the other, and then separates them, growing the distance between them as one hand lowers towards the floor and the other raises towards the ceiling. Leah's eyes, which had been focused on Dread's hands, now recognize the portal that he has opened up for her. She stretches her right leg forward, reaching her toes through the window first, bringing her foot to the floor on the other side. She scoops her upper body under (so as to not hit the invisible top of the

[30] Diggs Deeper is a community-based, non-profit organization founded by Jojo Diggs, a dancer and choreographer. As stated on the organization's website, and as is stated in person at each event, Diggs Deeper "is a ground for artists to be fully self-expressed, to surface awareness & acknowledgement to culture, and to bring individuals into leadership." The organization is committed to preserving and celebrating hip hop culture, supporting artists, and positively engaging community.

portal's frame), taking her torso to the other side. After she brings her other leg through, Dread returns to close the portal behind her. As his hands clasp closed, Leah clasps hers next to his, pulls hers across her chest and brings the portal—and Dread's energy—with her into the battle.

It was Leah's round. She easily could have been bothered by Dread taking up her time, and she also could have elected to sidestep interacting with him and just get to her performance. But instead, she chose to honor the potential their togetherness made possible. As Dread dropped in front of her, rather than seeing solely the static shape of his body, hands located at different levels, she saw the possibility he created, a portal through which she could move physically—and perhaps also a portal to a metaphysical interconnection. Her seeing beyond the visual recalls the ways dancers must listen beyond the aural in order to sense the histories, ancestors, and intentions embedded within the music, as explored in the previous chapter. I suggest that, in the same ways dancers invite in the music's literal vibrations and its haunting to inspire the ways they move, dancers also receive each other's energies, responding to the vibrational frequencies emitted by both their movements and their energy. Like the multisensory listening dancers engage in order to align with the music's frequency, a willingness to be moved by other dancers' energies requires the same sensing. Through her careful and care-full attention to Dread and the energy and actions he shared, in that battle, in that moment, Leah was able to sense the possibility of their dancing in togetherness. As they leaned into and honored the possibilities of their togetherness, their intentions aligned and, through their dancing, they aligned their movements with this shared intention.

By allowing herself to remain open to what Dread was offering and by choosing to work in alignment with it, Leah's performance became something different than it could have been otherwise. Certainly, her entrance derived from their convergence, but that beginning also gave way to a new pathway for her performance, one that only could have developed out of what these two dancers created in their togetherness. Throughout the course of the battle, they frequently found opportunities to come together, to create together. It was not until Leah and Dread had already been crowned with first place that it was announced to the crowd that these two dancers had only met just before the battle began[31]. They don't even reside in the same state, so it's unlikely they encountered each other on a regular basis in sessions or battles. The intimacy between them could not have been built through years of working together and learning each other's tendencies and styles or have come from rehearsed choreography; it had been cultivated right then and there, in front of our eyes.

Knowing that none of this could have been pre-planned, practiced, or even drawn from familiarity with the other dancer suggests instead that these moments emerged through Leah's and Dread's commitments to understanding their battle as a collaborative effort rather than as two dancers working separately, taking turns as individuals dancing for the same team. The two dancers created together, in the moment, in togetherness, by seeing each other with care, attuning to each other's movements and energies, and

[31] This was a Bonnie and Clyde battle, a 2v2 battle with each team made up of a man and a woman. With this type of battle, people don't always show up with someone to battle with, so dancers who enter on their own get paired up with other dancers who need partners. There's a lot to critique about this type of set up's exclusion of people who identify as non-binary; however, it is also worth noting that Bonnie and Clyde battles have also played a role in improving women's representation in battles.

leaning into the new possibilities that unfolded as they worked in a shared frequency. By tuning into what each other was offering and attuning to the potential it presented, the two of them were able to create something together that neither could have known was going to happen seconds earlier. Not only did their working collaboratively create new possibilities for each of these dancers, it also created an alternate course for their opponents to respond to, allowing for the battle as a whole to become something otherwise than it would have been. This generativity inspired the dancers in the battle and the audience alike, thereby forever having altered the culture and moving those of us who witnessed it to continue altering the culture.

Leah's and Dread's approach to this battle demonstrated an understanding of the battle's communal nature, rather than seeing it solely as a series of individuated performances. This was the case for the dancers in the following example as well, despite this particular battle's irregular structure[32], which hindered the potential for collective creativity. Rather than the standard format, where a dancer from each opposing crew takes a round, in this battle, the whole crew was given a single 90-second period to utilize as a group. Whereas the majority of the crews[33] further individuated the battle by simply separating the 90 seconds between them, taking unusually short, frantic, individual turns, one group took advantage of this battle's abnormal arrangement to embrace the opportunity for more collectivity.

[32] Due to my critique of this battle's format, I have chosen not to name this event. My critical analysis is intended to consider the impact of the structure on the battle's function and not to critique those who held the event.

[33] These dancers were placed together for this battle but don't regularly dance together as a crew. However, some dancers that were grouped together were friends prior to this event and had previous experiences dancing with each other.

The four dancers begin their round huddled in a circle, holding each other around the shoulders. As the music comes in, their bodies pick it up with a bounce, and they travel from the wall towards the center of the floor, still huddled, then turn counterclockwise as the energy of their bounces intensifies. After a couple of rotations, the group releases the first dancer, Tin, to the floor, and the rest drop back to the sideline. Tin hits his first few breaking tricks and, as he continues, the other three dancers creep closer to him, pulled towards him by the energy he's giving off. Crowded around him, their engagement with Tin grows, and their bodies respond to his movements as they also groove along with the music.

Tin gets up from the ground, and just as he begins to show the slightest hint of a slide back towards his crew, Kevin recognizes the possibility here and takes the smoothest three-step turn towards the center of the floor. As he rotates, Kevin grasps his hands behind his back and then pulls his hands from side to side until they lead his body around in a circle. He stops, now inches in front of his crew, facing them with his right fist on his waist. Rebekah, who is now directly in front of Kevin, reaches through the opening Kevin's arm has created, grabs his energy, pulls it back through, and places her palm on Shantel's back, sending Kevin's energy into her as she does so.

At the very sense of Rebekah's touch, Shantel takes off! But she doesn't do so alone. Rebekah follows her, pulled by the connective tissue they have just forged. Kevin catches the momentum, spinning into formation behind Rebekah, and Tin shoots his arm out, sending energy down the line the dancers are now in. Shantel traces a line painted on the ground as though she's balancing on a tightrope as she pops. She propels her arm

forward and runs after it; it looks as though she's being pulled to—and maybe by—her group. Seeing Shantel's arm outstretched, Kevin welcomes her hand into his and partners her in a turn. She releases her hand from his and continues following where her arm, still extended straight from her shoulder, is leading her: Rebekah.

When Rebekah receives this energy from Shantel, she allows her first movements to feed off Shantel's last. She isolates her neck and then shoulders back, neck and shoulders, as though Shantel's arm has knocked her backwards. From this arched back position, Rebekah turns towards the center of the room and spirals down to the floor. Kevin hunches down also, inches away from her. Rebekah pulls herself forward, repeating a juicy, undulating, slow-motion slide on the ground. As soon as she starts to travel forward, her crewmates are right there with her, slowly and smoothly moving alongside her in a diamond formation. Rebekah speeds up and then begins to reverse her movements, and the other three dancers immediately redirect with her. She works her way off the ground as a body roll, beginning in her right foot, continues through her body and exits though her right arm to leave her standing. She thrusts her chest in double-time then quickly crosses her hands to touch them on the opposite forearms, uncrosses and brings both hands to her chest, and throws them up in the air as she tosses her head back. She steps her right leg forward and steps again, walking herself into the splits. Almost as soon as she lands, Kevin has recognized another possibility for connection. He grabs Rebekah's back foot and pulls her backwards. Rebekah, who can't even see him do this, has enough trust to release into the slide, and drops her body forward over her front leg as she is traveled towards the back of the room.

All four dancers are laughing wholeheartedly as their round ends, and the crowd is going crazy!

I've described the round in its entirety because there wasn't a single moment or two that demonstrated their collaboration; these dancers entered the round with a purposeful intention to sense collective possibility, and, throughout their turn, it was evident that this privileging of collectivity grounded their approach. When Rebekah reached through the opening that Kevin's arm created and pulled her arm through to touch Shantel's back, this could have been understood as the beginning of Rebekah's turn since she had begun to dance. However, at the sense of her touch, Shantel took over, and there appeared to be no confusion or contention about whose turn it was. Moments of interaction like this suggest that these dancers had not imagined boundaries during the 90-second round, dividing the time into separate turns, but that they instead understood this time as one whole, a shared performance that also allowed each of the dancers moments to shine.

This collective approach stood out drastically compared to the other crews, who divided the 90 seconds among their dancers, separating, compartmentalizing, individuating. The other crews attempted to plan an order in advance, whispering to each other on the sidelines before and even during their rounds. While their crewmates performed, it seemed most of them were in their own heads, trying to determine when they could enter (normally, dancers are given their own round, so there's no question), rather than being present with and invested in the dancer who was performing. Tin, Kevin, Rebekah, and Shantel were all the way in it, seeing and celebrating each other,

and remaining open to sensing possibility. By investing in each other's movements as well as each other's energies, they were able to work in a shared frequency.

As opposed to the dancers of the other crews, whose attempts to plan seemed to lead their rounds, these four dancers were driven by a willingness and a desire to be moved. Not only did they allow themselves to be moved by the collective possibilities of dancing in togetherness, but they also remained open to being literally moved by the other dancers. Normally, there's not much opportunity for physical connection in a battle; opponents might get in each other's faces, but it's generally bad form to actually touch another dancer. Sometimes crews choreograph brief interludes, and you might see a dancer boost a crewmate into a flip, for example, but there usually isn't much physical contact during dancers' freestyles. Here, though, the dancers recognized that the change in format allowed room for more interplay between them, including physically. Rebekah's touch initiated Shantel's movements, Kevin took Shantel by the hand and turned her, and when Rebekah dropped into the splits, Kevin grasped her ankle and pulled her backwards. As the physical contact reached these dancers, they leaned into what it offered, rather than avoiding where it could take them, opening up new possibilities not only for the dancer being moved, but for the entire group. Watching each other dance, they saw each other in their fullness, and they saw themselves *in relation* to each other, and in listening for the possibilities their connections offered, they worked together as parts of one unit. And yet, even as they aligned in a shared frequency, each dancer still had a moment to shine, to be seen and celebrated.

Throughout this group's short turn, there was a continuous feeling of building, of growing, and it was thrilling to watch it all unfold! I felt as though I was on the edge of my seat (or I would have been, had I been seated in a chair rather than on the floor) the whole time, and the audience's loud, animated response to this crew made it clear that I was not the only one who was particularly excited about what they were doing. We were all—including the dancers—happily surprised by what they created, but I don't think anyone was surprised when the judges unanimously selected this group as the winner of the round. We were all moved by what this group created by embracing the generative potential of freestyling's collectivity.

*Rhizomatic Whole*

The cypher and the battle emerge through the vibratory energetic contributions of its constituting components. Should any aspect change, from the time to the place or the music, or even if one person were no longer present, it would be a different cypher or a different battle. Every element matters, and these elements are entangled with each other through vibration, as performance studies scholar André Lepecki claims, "each compositional element is always and constitutively linked to all others, and all constitutively linked to a fundamental, underlying movement, called vibration" (Chambers-Letson 166). If we're in a cypher or a battle together sharing energy, and if my energy is an extension of my being and your energy is an extension of your being, where do we say I end and you begin? As our energies intermingle and flow through and between us, our beings merge and converge, refusing defined separations between us. This is radical togetherness.

Cyphers and battles, by design, bring people together to facilitate collective innovation through exchange of embodied ideas and the sharing of energy. These practices ask dancers to understand themselves as part of something larger than themselves, to understand themselves in relation to this collaborative process, to the other participants, to the music, to the environment, to the vibe. Caring for this interconnectivity, however, does not happen simply by virtue of the cypher, the battle, or the sociality of the dance form, even when that is what the technologies ask from us. There is a reason the performances I've discussed in this chapter stood out to me: the aligning of frequencies in an intention of collectivity was especially evident.

Not everyone is prepared to understand themselves as a *part of*, or willing to be moved by the whole. House dancer Magnolia discussed how challenging it can be to forge connections with those who are resistant to recognizing and valuing our interconnectivity. This was part of our exchange:

> Magnolia: It's hard to just vibe with anybody, even though people are like house dance is like a social dance, blah blah blah. No. Because sometimes people are fake, and you can sense it. And it's all about competition, about who's a better fucking dancer, and that's why it hasn't felt genuine to me in a really long time. I'm just tired of just showing off to you right now. I don't want to show off my moves. I just want to dance with you. Like is that ok? …
>
> L: I think you said, "the real thing." So for you, that's based on the connection?
>
> M: Genuine connection of being with people. The genuine connection of wanting to dance with another person. That's it. And just having a good time and just like feeling each other and dancing with the other person to house music.
>
> L: How can you tell when it's genuine and when it's not?

> M: Because they are listening to you. Because they're the same amount of attention span and listening and reciprocity and understanding. It doesn't matter if you're worse or better than me, we're listening to each other. You know… and then you're growing together and feeding off of each other. (Magnolia)

For Magnolia, more than anything, house is meant to be about real connection. This connection is made possible through vibratory, energetic exchange, as dancers listen—a multisensory, embodied, spiritual listening—to each other, as they see each other in their fullness, and as they allow themselves to be moved to move by what they witness. Vibing cannot be one-sided. It's not about you, it's about you *in relation to*. Clarifying this relationship between the individual and community in African American social dances in her article "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing," Cleis Abeni, dancer and journalist, articulates that a dancer "moves to establish a unique identity according to her or his own physical capabilities, personal style, and capacity for invention" (45) but she adds, "the work of individuation is a matter of the constant negotiation of personal style and community expectations" (46). How can what you have to offer contribute to this particular moment, with these particular folks, in this particular environment, with this particular music? How can you align your offering so that it nourishes the vibe?

Connected via both our energetic vibrations and the vibrations of our physical movements, we exist as part of the same whole. We might think of this interconnected flow in terms of communitas. Citing Martin Buber, in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, anthropologist Victor Turner writes that communitas "is the being no longer side by side … but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude,

though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*" (127, emphasis original). Like communitas, vibing is about the many working together in a communal intention, as energies are received and offered, winding through and between all participants, intertwining them. In her article "'C'mon to My House': Underground-House Dancing," dance studies scholar Sally R. Sommer describes this communal directionality as holding a "singularity of purpose" (83). She explains that, while the house club is filled with folks seemingly dancing on their own, the entire sea of dancers moves and grooves together in the same vibe, finding joy in the collectivity of working in this shared intention. As they dance together, each person contributes vibrations and simultaneously also feeds off the vibrations contributed by others, everyone's vibrations intermingling, cultivating a communal, multifaceted vibe.

The rhizome offers useful imagery for envisioning elements that are intrinsically interconnected as parts of a larger whole. In particular, I'm interested in Édouard Glissant's utilization of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's reference to the rhizome. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant explains, "In opposition to [the root] they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root" (11). The rhizomatic network is multifaceted and comprised of inextricable and intricate interconnections that, together, create one unified, boundless whole. In their extensive discussion of rhizomes in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze

and Guattari explain, "… any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (7). The rhizome is not comprised of a conglomeration of separate, contained roots, but rather, every part of the system is necessarily entangled with the rest.

In maintaining the many, the rhizome recognizes that the oneness of the entity does not equate to sameness, uniformity, or assimilation, but rather the acceptance of and reverence for the distinctiveness of each element and its unique offerings. This confluence occurs in the same way the particular rhythm from each drum converges into one, cohesive polyrhythmic arrangement. Despite the important, essential, beautiful differences among the elements, there are shared values, agreements, alignments among them, spoken and unspoken, explicit and implicit, that enable their working in and as togetherness. The wholeness of the many parts does not—cannot—erase the distinctness of its components. Caring for and care-fully attending to each of the elements and celebrating their uniqueness is how the rhizome is nurtured and nourished, and this, in turn, further cultivates this alternative to violently individuated existence.

Cyphers and battles—and the vibing they facilitate—decentered, entangled, assemblages, function as rhizomes, and I suggest that battles and cyphers, and their rhizomatic natures, are microcosms of our existence. Battles and cyphers do not make connection happen, they facilitate our energetic exchange and collective imagination, but the ability to lean into, celebrate, and care for our entanglements is always available to us. We are all already inextricably entangled in each other's existences, in our environments, in our histories, and vibrations are the force through which we are connected. Vibing is a purposeful engagement in acknowledging, celebrating, and nourishing these ever-present

entanglements. As we listen and align, receive and offer, our energetic vibrations flow beyond the confines of our bodies, forever shifting the rhizomatic existence that we are all a part of.

## Chapter 4

### Failure to Catch the Vibe: Misreadings, Missteps, and Missed Connections

"How you dance tells us who you are…"
- Imani Kai Johnson, *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop*, pg. 71

The previous two chapters have explored distinct ways that freestyle dancers defy and reject the manufactured borders of dominant hegemony's violently individuated personhood. I have discussed the profound interconnections between bodies, beings, music, and histories, still alive in the present, as dancers tune into and attune with, as vibratory energies converge and merge. Though these energetic entanglements between beings are ever-present, some people are more open to acknowledging, more receptive to receiving, and—perhaps most significantly—more willing than others to release into and allow themselves to be guided by the shared intention of the vibe. Doing so requires deep trust and vulnerability as well as a desire to move away from the capitalist ideal of ownership, functioning instead in (unspoken) communal agreements, alignments, and intentions that celebrate and build in the entanglements rather than maneuvering from the ego in an attempt to maintain sole control.

What happens when, instead of blurring boundaries, people reify and reinforce them? What happens when there's a failure to catch the vibe? By examining moments where individuals function in ways that either intentionally or unintentionally serve the self over the communal intention, over the community, I hope to illuminate the sometimes very fine distinctions between vibing's blurring of borders and moments that may, on the surface, appear to demonstrate this interconnection, but upon closer

examination, instead reveal merely a separateness-in-close-proximity. I utilize the idea of failure to help parse out these divergences not to suggest that the people in question attempted something specific and didn't succeed at it, but instead to identify something missing from or that wasn't attended to in their performances. I find the term useful for acknowledging that, despite a person's approach to participation, the culture and its practices do hold values that are meant to be appreciated; for example, hip hop dance practices are inherently social, value rhythm[34], and expect a call and response relationship between music and dancers. Discussing the expectation of musicality, philosophy scholar Renee Conroy, in "Reflections on 'Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery,'" writes:

> [Nick] Wiltsher contends that some ways of taking the floor will reveal a dancer's failure to grasp the aesthetic contours of the music, cautioning "muggles" or "civilians" (house dance neophytes), "You can dance inappropriately; you can misunderstand the music." Wiltsher's generalization is again borne out by the testimony of house insiders. For instance, one early house dancer featured in [Sally] Sommer's documentary, *Check Your Body at the Door* (2011), maintains that responding to house tracks with the aggressive, hard-hitting physicality typical of hip-hop is a failure to grasp the sensual, modulated qualities of the music, although it is appropriate to modify the style of traditional hip-

[34]In *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild explains that rhythm is ingrained in hip hop, via a discussion of rap music, and analyzes hip hop's rhythm in relation to its African diasporic and African American contexts:

> [Rap] is all about rhythm, a component that can inspire fear in a Europeanist culture that knew enough about the power of African rhythm to prohibit drumming by enslaved Africans: 'The thing that frightened people about hip hop [sic] was that they heard people enjoying rhythm for rhythm's sake. Hiphop lives in the world—not the world of music—and that's why it's so revolutionary.' So stated the great jazz percussionist, Max Roach… When composer and musician Cecil Taylor was asked what Europe will never understand about African culture, he responded with one word: "Rhythm" … There is power in rhythm—Black Power in black rhythm. (Gottschild 137)

Her acknowledgement of the Black Power of this rhythm underscores rhythm's profound importance to hip hop and African diasporic practices more broadly, and the claims of white people fearing it illuminate the white supremacist ideologies tied to its dismissal.

> hop moves to generate similar bodily patterns that exemplify fluidity and ease, rather than force and flair. (Conroy)

Although strict codification is purposefully avoided in freestyling, an Africanist value that invites dancers to explore a diversity of embodied responses to and dialogues with what they hear, as Conroy's analysis demonstrates, it is possible to dance incorrectly by misinterpreting the music. Everyone does not enter into hip hop's practices with the same goals or intentions, nor is there one correct way to do so, but these cultural values shouldn't be dismissed because a participant is unaware of or uninterested in them. Furthermore, my examination of these failures is aimed at the approaches people take, considering their impacts on the practices, not at the people themselves as personal critiques. Failure is a messy term that may, at times, imply a harsher critique than I mean, but for now, it best gets at my intention.

Although aligning vibrations may not be a fully conscious effort, and dancers cannot *make* vibing happen, they can purposefully engage in a practice of careful listening, allow themselves to be vulnerable, and remain open to the possibility of being moved to move in alignment. Simply because bodies occupy the same physical space does not mean folks have allowed themselves to vibe. This chapter considers the impacts and implications of different interruptions, disruptions, and ruptures to the vibe, initiated energetically, mentally, emotionally, and physically, intentionally or not.

**Riding or Rupturing the Rhythm**

In November 2018, I was surprised for my birthday with tickets to Snapback Long Beach, a weekly hip hop throwback night at the Federal Underground. Held in an intimate, dimly lit, downstairs venue, the event focuses primarily on new jack swing-era

hip hop from the late ‘80s and early ‘90s (think MC Hammer, New Edition, Bel Biv DeVoe). Folks diverse in age and color packed into the tight space, and the energy continued to heighten as the night drew on. I watched as two people who were not there together made eye contact, catching each other reciting the same lines. They smiled and dapped each other up as they continued rapping along with the song word for word. The club felt upbeat and positive. And yet, despite people’s close proximity and the positive energy filling the space, we were not all on the same vibe.

The room is now crammed with bodies from wall to wall. A short, dark-haired guy is standing inches in front of me with a group of five or so people, who are all smiling at each other and having fun. Despite looking far too young to have been alive during this era, short, dark-haired guy knows most of the words to a lot of the songs and enthusiastically raps along with the tracks. The girls in his group are two-stepping and dropping it low, drinks in hand. He is moving, too, mostly bouncing… but he is offbeat. He's not accenting the *wrong* beat; he’s on *no* beat. He’s so close to my body, it’s distracting. It’s messing with my flow.

Being “offbeat” is shorthand for something much more complex. Rather than a singular beat, this music is comprised of a mosaic arrangement of polyrhythms, the intricacies of which demand an understanding of the pocket[35] and how to play creatively with it, in it, and around it in ways that add to rather than distract from the whole of the

[35] The pocket acknowledges the time and space that comprises a beat. As opposed to a robotically metronomic approach to rhythm, the idea of the pocket allows for dancers and musicians to hit the top, middle, or bottom of the beat, while understanding that being just ahead or behind the even beat can still be in rhythm with the rhythmic assemblage. The pocket allows for more playful flexibility and creativity with the rhythm than a mathematically “perfect” on the grid approach, often understood as being cold or lacking soul. (A huge thank you to musician Matt Walsh for helping me find words for this description.)

sound or the rhythmic composition. So what can we learn from short, dark-haired guy's rhythmic failure? Although he was sending his own positive energy and intentions outwards, this only demonstrated one trajectory of vibing's multidirectional flow. He was able to contribute of himself, but his failure to understand the rhythmic structure, his inability to get in the pocket, demonstrated a failure to open himself up to receiving, to let the music's vibrations enter into, flow through, and inform and inspire his body's movements. Rather than the porous body that empathically invites energy, intentions, and vibrations from beyond the body inwards, his body remained rigid, refusing entrance through its borders. While it's possible he had found an empathic connection with the music's frequencies, this impenetrable existence disallowed him from aligning his physicality with that empathy. As such, short, dark-haired guy could not become the music. He could not converge on the same wavelength, in the shared purpose as those of us who had merged in the music's vibe, offered by the DJ as a site for connection.

Now, I'm not suggesting that if only short, dark-haired guy had been able to embody the rhythm, he would have discovered the key to vibing. Understanding rhythm alone is insufficient. Countless dancers are proficient in working in rhythmic relation to a song but fail to understand and empathize with anything beyond the music's basic rhythmic structure. At an event[36] I attended in San Diego, one dancer came out in the first round of the 2v2 battle and initially impressed with his roboting skills. As he returned each round, though, he presented basically the same performance, despite each new

[36] Due to my critical analysis, I have chosen not to name this event. My analysis is not meant to serve as a personal attack on the dancer or the event. Instead, I engage in this analysis in order to understand the impact of this dancer's approach on the practices of freestyling and battling, and, therefore, also on the culture.

musical selection, despite each new set of opponents. The intention should be to creatively innovate not just with movement possibilities but always in relation to the music, the other dancers, the environment, etc. His arsenal was severely lacking in variety and imagination. This gimmick quickly became old news, and I was frustrated—a sentiment also vocalized by other people in the crowd—to see the judges continue to move him forward when it seemed so clear that this dancer was just going to do what he was going to do regardless of the particularities of any given round.

This dancer was technically on beat and not doing anything that directly worked against any of the music he was given; however, he also wasn't doing anything that particularly worked *with* the music. Simply not disrupting the rhythmic flow is nowhere near equivalent to understanding and empathizing with what the music is doing, what it's asking for. This dancer was, like short, dark-haired guy, only working outwards, ego-driven in his one-directional, pre-determined vibratory flow. His movements were solely derived from his own desires, not through a collaboration between his movement practice and the music, the battle, the environment, the moment. He wanted to move and to receive recognition for his movements, but he was unwilling to *be moved*.

I'm interested in this dancer's approach not to offer a personal critique, but because we can learn about his values through his approach to the movement, a point dance studies scholar Imani Kai Johnson makes in *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop* when she writes, "How you dance tells us who you are—whom you emulate or idolize, who influences you, from whom you learn, how you feel at the moment, the role you imagine for yourself within the culture, etc." (71).

For the robot dancer, at least in this battle, demonstrating his technical prowess took precedence over engaging in a more nuanced dialogue with the music, the other dancers, the vibe.

Physical skill and what is often identified as *soul* or *spirit* are not mutually exclusive and, ideally, dancers in African diasporic practices can balance both. The debate over which to privilege is a heated one[37], and part of the contention lies in the form people's relationships with the culture can take. In "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power," dance studies scholar Thomas DeFrantz argues that "black social dance in general, and hip hop dance in particular, resist inscription and interpretation from an exterior, immobile microanalytic perspective. Working from outside the dance accesses only a portion of its communicative ability: its visual effects" (67). Without intimate knowledge cultivated through personal participation in the culture, which is more than solely having familiarity with a dance technique, the nuances and values of the dance are inaccessible, leaving only the embodied shapes to be registered by outsiders. The physical aesthetics alone, regardless of technical proficiency, without internal connection to the movements, the music, and the histories embedded within them, and without understanding of the values attached to those aesthetics, the dances loses cultural meaning.

In order to access more than the "visual effects" of the dance, practitioners must move beyond the form's physical elements and, as DeFrantz explains, "the best dancers

[37] See Imani Kai Johnson's discussion of the "old school" vs "new school" debate on pg. 63 in *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop*.

in the black tradition are considered to be those who can tap into the spirituality of the dance" (73). Spirituality also came up during my interview with dancer and educator Moncell, who said:

> Some of y'all understand from a spiritual practice or you have a different sensibility to what spiritual practice is because I know you dance, and I know you go to this kind of church, and I know you understand the relationship of what's happening. You just get down 'cause you don't go to church at all. So you think you doing the same thing they did, but you're not doing it, you're not coming from the same space. So, no. Y'all ain't, y'all are not on the s—you think you on the same level. You're doing the *movement* really well. They're coming from a whole other space of what the lived experience is. … You're not even doing it for the same reason. Some people are doing for the fame. (Durden)

Like DeFrantz, Moncell affirms that African diasporic dance forms are comprised of more than the visual images bodies can make utilizing their techniques. When dancers can't understand how what the body is doing connects to people, histories, cultures, and belief systems beyond the boundaries of their own singular, physical bodies, the dance cannot mean the same thing. Without sufficient cultural context, movements become products empty of their meaning, worn on the body like a costume. From the outside, visually-oriented approach, one is only able to take for their own benefit because they lack the proper understanding to contribute back to the culture, to the community meaningfully.

This surface-level participation demonstrated by the robot dancer lacked understanding of and empathy with the music and the vibes that haunted it. Instead, he forced his own vibe into that space, moving in alignment apparently not a guiding principle for him—at least not that day. He was driven by his own desires, perhaps for recognition, fame, or a cash prize. These are motivating factors for many dancers and are

not, in and of themselves, negative; however, when they take precedence over rather than serve as additional benefits to working communally, they inhibit the vibe from reaching the potential amplitude made possible by all elements working in alignment. And many practitioners participate specifically for this collective generativity, understanding the Black sociality foundational to freestyling. Several dancers shared this sentiment with Johnson, who writes: "As b-boy Machine suggests, some people know better than others how to channel their emotions in a productive way to help create a mutually inspiring vibe… If dancers cannot build on what is already there, they need not participate because they can weaken the circle. Thus there is a responsibility implicit in cyphering" (84). These claims underscore the profound importance of the elements of hip hop dances that exceed physical skill as well as dancers' responsibility to engage with them. Furthermore, this statement illuminates the effects that dancers who do not take the responsibility seriously can have on other dancers and the whole practice.

It seems a particularly egregious violence, unintentional though it may be, for someone to be so invested in training in the superficial aesthetics of a dance form, to reach such a high level of physical competence, but have such disregard for any investment or interest in or care for understanding the surrounding culture and its values. This investment in training may differentiate the roboting dancer's approach from short, dark-haired guy's engagement[38]. Shockingly, I did not stop short, dark-haired guy at the club to ask whether or not he was aware that he was offbeat. Though it's certainly

[38] I am grateful to Dr. Nadine George Graves, whose question in response to my paper presentation at the Dance Studies Association Conference in 2019 helped me think through this distinction.

possible that he also thinks very highly of his dance skills, it's likely he recognizes that he is not particularly adept at dancing. Let's be clear, though: one can have a working understanding of rhythm and an ability to maintain a consistent cadence without having advanced, or even minimal, dance ability.

Short, dark-haired guy's struggle to find and connect with any rhythm may demonstrate a lack of cultural immersion. Juxtaposed against his knowledge of so many lyrics, however, this may speak also to an interest solely in the music, or even solely in the lyrics, without any desire to further participate in or understand the culture. Perhaps he *is* aware of his rhythmic inadequacies and is working to improve because he does understand rhythm's cultural importance—or maybe he isn't and doesn't. It's possible that he's aware of his ineptitude and has resigned himself to the fact that rhythm's just not his thing but he's going to have fun anyway.

Do these distinctions matter?

Maybe.

They have import not as a critique of this individual's abilities but for the impact of his participation on the larger culture, and on the communities for whom this culture offers important, liberatory, life-affirming alternatives.

Attitude certainly goes a long way. Short, dark-haired guy showed up, he enthusiastically rapped along with the music, he was having a good time, and he was putting out positive energy. Attitude and intention do matter. B-girl Mel shared her perspective on this, saying:

> I've never experienced anyone who loves to dance but then goes there to criticize. You know, you'll have people in there who love it but they don't

> know how to dance well, but they love it. And that's, that's good. You know, I'd rather—It's like teaching. I don't care how good you are, if you give the good energy and if you're putting in your 110, please come back. But if you're dope but you're a [unintelligible], done, done, get outta here. So that's how I see it. As long as you're putting in good vibes for that event, please come back. (Mel)

A positive attitude coupled with an investment to learn and to put in the work to grow is vital. These skills are learned, they require training, and that means people must participate even as they are new to the practices, and this helps the culture to grow the alternative it manifests. In *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, Kyra D. Gaunt discusses her own experience with cultural exposure to rhythm:

> I have always felt and come to know myself to be a great dancer. Throughout my life, I've always had rhythm. I have even imagined I could intuitively figure out earlier styles of black dance that precede my birth just from hearing the music that might have accompanied it. I sensed a changing sameness, a sense of being connected to previous generations, through interactions with my mother, from TV and vintage films of black music-making, and from recordings of shouters and songstresses I hear that reflected the recent or distant past. I experienced the past in what I saw and what I did as a black dancer.
>
> That illusion was shattered when my mother told me that she had taught me how to dance… My mother shared her observations of my toddler years: "Your first experience (of moving to music), I could see it. It was like you were on the wrong side of the beat" (personal communication, August 11, 2001). She expressed fear upon discovering that I didn't have a good sense of rhythm on my own. "So," she told me, "I danced with you a lot." (46-47)

Gaunt's mother's fear at seeing her daughter on the "wrong side of the beat" underscores failure as a necessary part of her process; learning the practice can only derive through participation in the practice itself. This story also returns us to the fundamental importance of the collective. Her rhythm is, in fact, not just hers alone. Her rhythm is an

extension of her mother's rhythm, which extends from those who tenderly imbued the rhythm upon her. And so on. Rhythm is a connective tissue between us. Rhythm connects us. That the value of rhythm had been instilled in her mother and that she, too, took the care to instill it in her daughter illuminates the vital role that cultural value systems play in knowledge production and transmission.

If you were not lucky enough to be born into a family that carefully worked to guide you into the rhythm, if your upbringing did not surround you in practices in which rhythm is valorized, how do you seek that knowledge out for yourself? How do you demonstrate through your investment your desire not just to participate for yourself, to take only the parts you like and that benefit you, but to immerse yourself fully in honoring the values of the practices, of the culture? How do you recognize that doing so is an act of respect for the communities who created, and continue to create, the practices, the culture? Perhaps short, dark-haired guy, in all his rhythmic failure, has fully committed himself to seeking this cultural knowledge and to honoring the community. This might demonstrate a more meaningful contribution than the roboting dancer, with all his technical, physical proficiency, who thinks he already gets it but completely misses the point.

And yet…

Even with the best of intentions, even with a deep commitment to and investment in learning and growing—which all matters—short, dark-haired guy's failures still impacted the vibe. The vibe is a boundless, rhizomatic whole, comprised of the innumerable entanglements that contribute to it, to each other. The resonance of the

vibration becomes fuller the more energies that contribute to the frequency, in the frequency. As entangled elements work in different vibrations, dissonance in the frequency grows, and the vibe moves further away from its potential amplitude. These dissonant frequencies can also pull surrounding elements into their incongruous vibrations. Opened up to tuning in to my surroundings, short, dark-haired guy's discordant, arrhythmic movements removed me from my focused connection with the vibe as I struggled to converge and merge with them both simultaneously. My focus, my intention was now divided, unable to weave the two disparate vibrations into a cohesive polyrhythmic assemblage.

Having rhythm is not vibing, but the ability to get in rhythm is essential to its practice; it is the physicalization of attuning frequencies, which are, after all, rhythmic patterns. The stereotype that all Black people inherently have rhythm designates rhythm as a trait belonging to individuals, but examining the relationship between rhythm and vibing reframes rhythm as a shared process, inseparable from its sociality. By assigning rhythm to Black genetics in what Christina Sharpe identifies as the wake of antiblackness, these racial stereotypes disincentivize working towards building this skill, billed as unattainable for some and unimportant and insignificant in general, detaching rhythm's physicality from all that it can enable beyond movement. The practice of getting in rhythm with is a practice in working collaboratively and of understanding yourself as part of something larger than yourself. It is a step towards empathizing and attuning with.

Although any body can learn to be in rhythm and anyone has the potential to vibe, it matters that these two dancers are not Black. It matters that these dancers are not Black

when so much of society readily consumes Black culture but either neglects—or outright refuses—to stand and fight with Black people in ongoing struggles for equity and justice and against the terror of white supremacy. It matters that these dancers are not Black, as it speaks to the massive appropriation of hip hop, and Black expressive cultures more broadly, and the antagonistic relationship maintained through mining without purposeful contribution. It matters that these dancers are not Black *and* that they also represent very different relationships to hip hop culture. Regardless of the type of relationship, appropriation cannot be erased and it needs to be openly acknowledged, but these examples can also complicate it.

While movements may be worn on any body's surface like a costume, and music can be pumped through anyone's speakers, and even the terminology surrounding the idea of vibing may be appropriated, the actual practice of vibing evades commodification and capture, requiring purposeful engagement through understanding and meaningful, empathic contribution. Always in the fugitive state of becoming, in constant motion, existing only through the communal process of its enactment, vibing, a manifestation of Black sociality, refuses to become a finalized product, a bounded object. It is an approach, an attention, a care, it is a way of being in and with the world by honoring our connections. Rejecting capitalist object-ification, vibing implores an investment and commitment to the process, disallowing its appropriation, its use for one's self.

**Feeling or Fucking Up the Flow**

Vibing necessitates a convergence of vibratory energies. It requires an attention to sensing the vibe and a willingness to allow attunement with it, even though this may not

be done consciously. It demands an ability to recognize the shared intention in that space, in that moment, and a willingness to make a choice to contribute meaningfully to it. *Meaningfully* needs to be underscored here. In order for a contribution to offer something beneficial to the whole of the vibe, rather than simply working from one's own desires, one must listen and allow themself to be moved to move in alignment. A functional understanding of cultural values, aesthetics, and structures can facilitate this sensing, and with this recognition of the vibe, working from the shared frequency becomes a possibility.

Regardless of good intentions, without proper understanding of and careful attention to the vibe, engaged through a practice of deep listening, it is not possible to offer in alignment with it. There are consequences when the vibe is not respected, not honored. During our interview, B-Girl Mel discussed how this can play out, specifically in cypher, saying:

> One of the things I've learned about cypher etiquette is you gotta know what's going on in that particular cypher. So let's say there's like two cyphers going on. One cypher, you know, they're just grooving and chilling, they're just dancing, you know. And here, you got a power cypher, people are doing power. So the cypher etiquette is to just be mindful of what's going on and if you see it's everyone's just grooving and all of a sudden when someone from this goes in and [makes aggressive sound], they already throw off the cypher. Because it's like wait, are you mindful of what's going on, are you reading the energy? Why did you just go in and try to change the energy? And if they change it, it's either they break the cypher, like people will just walk away, or they'll just stay and see what happens. (B-Girl Mel)

I have witnessed on several occasions dancers misinterpret—or possibly outright disregard—the energy of a cypher. After continuing for a while as a generative, if intensely competitive show of one-upsmanship, a cypher can easily devolve into an

angry, bitter fight as a new dancer enters, misreads the competitive energy, and disrespectfully gets in another dancer's face. When this happens, most people tend to leave the cypher in order to join one more geared to their intentions. As people continue to disperse, the cypher unravels, the frictional frequency so dissonant that the cypher is no longer sustainable. At this point, even if people stay physically in place, without the energetic connection, the shared intention, what remains is not, in fact, a cypher anymore. "Some of y'all ain't even in a cypher, y'all in a circle" (Durden), Moncell exclaimed, speaking to the crucial nature of energetic exchange in hip hop dances. Johnson clarifies this point as well, writing:

> I do not use cyphers and circle interchangeably. A circle refers to the literal shape or structure of bodies gathered around individual performers. There are a number of different types of circles and not every circle is a cypher. In this project, cyphering refers to the act of building collectively through the back and forth exchange in the circle. A circle is the structure within which the social act that could lead to cyphers takes place. As energy is channeled among dancers and with spectators, circles become cyphers. The cypher is a collectivity where the spectator themselves are necessarily actively engaged in the moment, contributing their energy through their reactions and interest. (5)

The imperative collective energy can be interrupted or ruptured when dancers fail to listen and move in alignment, leaving the form empty of its function.

When the energetic frequency is misread, misunderstood, or ignored, its overall resonance is diminished—working from the vibe's full potential can only happen when all of the entangled, rhizomatic elements work in the same intention. When some move outside of—or in direct opposition to—the vibe, no longer working in the same frequency, the collective cultivation becomes halted, stunted, growth and possibility left

untapped. When the disjuncture is severe enough, it may fracture that vibe, in that moment, irreparably.

*The DJ as a Purveyor of the Vibe*

The following example of failures to catch the vibe took place at an event[39] in 2018, held at night in a rented studio. With a DJ booth set up in the corner opposite the entrance and the lights kept low, the space was designed to have a club feel. Although this event was meant to be a battle of sorts, with dancers arranged into makeshift crews for the evening, the structure of this battle was drastically unlike any other I've experienced. Rather than narrowing the field as the battle progressed, with crews getting knocked out of the ranks along the way, after two groups went up against each other and the judges named one a winner of the round, the two would then be combined into one larger crew. This meant that all the dancers would remain in the battle… for the entirety of the battle. The format was exhausting as it dragged on and on, and it was as confusing to the dancers as it was to the audience, seemingly antithetical to the purpose of the battle itself. One of the dancers explained to me that this decision was made by the host in order to provide increased opportunities for the participants to dance, and I wondered whether a session, jam, or cypher may have been more appropriate for that purpose[40].

[39] Due to my critical analysis of this event, I have chosen not to name it. I am interested in this analysis for the purpose of considering the impact of certain elements of this event on the collective function of the vibe and not to offer a personal attack. I do believe this event was well intentioned, and I want to give credit to the host for doing so much work to create space for folks to come together. Furthermore, it is my understanding that this was their first time putting on such an event and, understandably, there were still some kinks to be worked out. These good intentions, however, do not disqualify a critical analysis, which asks to what extent the event, in fact, served its function.

[40] It's also possible that providing extra time for the dancers to perform was done with the purpose of generating more video footage for them to use for self-promotion.

As strange as the battle structure was, the DJ's approach to her role in this event was even more perplexing, and this, I believe, was the most detrimental to the vibe. The music—by way of the DJ—plays an essential role in situating the vibe. In "Reflections on 'Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery,'" philosophy scholar Renee Conroy explains the relationship between the DJ, the music, and the vibe in the context of house, writing:

> [D]ancers do not give life to a house track by interpreting it, but by synchronizing their outputs with those of the DJ—their artistic significance is established through interaction. They are mutually inflected aspects of a nonverbal colloquy between the person in the booth and those on the floor. And when things go well, a bit of metaphysical magic occurs. The music and movement coalesce to create an emergent aesthetic object that plays a central role in house culture: the vibe. (Conroy)

The music and its vibrations offer a meeting ground, serving as a connective tissue that flows across and through the dancers, calling them to the floor to groove in this shared frequency. However, just as the dancers must honor the music, the DJ must also honor what the dancers create on the floor. Kai Fikentscher, scholar, musician, and music producer, further elucidates this call and response in *"You Better Work!": Underground Dance Music in New York City*. He writes:

> In an underground dance club, music and dance not only complement each other, they affect each other. Music, as structured in the DJ booth, travels to the dance floor as a sonic phenomenon. The dance, manifest as a phenomenon more physical that sonic, is in turn structured by each individual dancer. Collectively all dancing on the floor creates a collective energy that feeds back to the DJ booth, both on a visual as well as a nonvisual level. This look of nonverbal interaction between DJ and dancers, this type of energy exchange, is what helps shape a vibe. The vibe coming from the DJ booth may propel a dancer onto the dance floor, or may cause him or her to change the energy level of the dance. Conversely, the vibe from the dance floor may determine the programming in the DJ booth, and the way a particular record is "worked." (Fikentscher 81)

Working together, feeding off of each other, the DJ and the dancers manifest something greater than either can create on their own.

This mutually informative relationship between the music and the dancer is not only foundational to dance practices across the African diaspora, but this call and response[41] between the DJ and the dancer is fundamental to the emergence of hip hop culture. Hip hop's origin story cites a party thrown by DJ Kool Herc and his sister on August 11, 1973. Up until this point, DJs had been playing songs in their full form. Recognizing that the dancers were really only getting down to certain sections of the songs, the breaks, Kool Herc began to extend these sections of the songs by looping them, giving the dancers more of what they wanted. Jeff Chang explains in *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*:

> Herc carefully studied the dancers. 'I was smoking cigarettes and I was waiting for the records to finish. And I noticed people was waiting for certain parts of the record,' he says. … The moment when the dancers really got wild was in a song's short instrumental break, when the band would drop out the rhythm section would get elemental. Forget melody, chorus, songs—it was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going. Like a string theorist, Herc zeroed in on the fundamental vibrating loop at the heart of the record, the break. (78-79)

[41] We can see call and response, for example, in West African dance practices, where a break (a particular rhythmic pattern) from the drums signals to the dancers a shift in movement. In Puerto Rican bomba, the lead drummer responds directly to the movements of the dancer by playing sounds that mimic the specific movements the dancer makes. The music and the movement are always in dialogue. Call and response is recognized as a foundational Africanist aesthetic. In *Black Performance Theory*, Thomas DeFrantz cites Robert Farris Thompson's work on this, stating:

> Thompson's theorization of performance includes a taxonomy of four shared traits of West African music and dance: 'the dominance of a percussive concept of performance, multiple meter; apart playing and dancing; call-and-response; and, finally the songs and dances of derision.' These shared traits became the foundation for an aesthetic ideology surrounding Africanist performance as a family of practices. (4)

Hip hop, in fact, only came to be because Herc and the DJs who followed gave as much care and attention to the dancers as the dancers gave to the music. Disconcertingly, the DJ at this particular event strayed strikingly far from this mutually informative premise.

Normal practice in a battle is for the DJ to keep the music pumping pretty much nonstop. The act of maintaining a constant musical presence serves to keep the dancers and the crowd hype and the energy in continuous motion. Oddly, this DJ chose not to follow this practice, DJing in a way that I have never witnessed. After a dancer from each opposing crew took their turn to one track, the DJ completely turned off the music before playing the next song for the next two dancers.

Full stop.

No sound.

At all.

These pauses in the music did not last just a second or two, it was not just an issue of mixing into the next track; these were 10-, 15-, 20-second breaks without any music. The energy in the room was constantly being yanked from high to nearly zero with no transition in between, the momentum continuously building and then being abruptly severed. This was a rather jarring experience that not only affected the process of the battle but the overall feeling of the evening. After continuous urging from the judges, the DJ eventually started to mix songs straight into the next one, finally keeping the music playing rather than turning it off between dancers. However, the DJ's various musical disruptions that night did not stop there.

Separate from the main battle, the exhibition battle featured two invited crews, the GoodFellas vs. the FLooridians. As opposed to the main battle, these crews were not put together solely for the purpose of the event; they are well known and highly respected in the battle and freestyle scenes. By the time the GoodFellas and the FLooridians took their places in preparation for their battle, the studio was pretty packed, and the energy in the room was thick. People—including me—had been waiting in anticipation of seeing these two crews rock the floor, and we were ready and excited to experience what was about to go down. When you get two crews of this caliber, in both physical prowess and innovative creativity, together, the potential for radical, expansive, imagination[42] as they motivate and inspire each other is boundless. Regrettably, the DJ seemed to work against—or, at the very least, not in conjunction with—this communal effort.

It was nearly halfway through the exhibition battle. Hans entered for the FLooridians as Missy Elliott's "Ching-A-Ling" transitioned out and Chris Brown's "Came to Do" began to fade in. Hans grinned and let out a hearty laugh as he recognized the song. A pop R&B track, "Came to Do" is a relatively musically sparse slow jam, offering Hans little variety to work with—especially since he was only given the introduction and first chorus, which, after two lines, is literally just the same 7 words ("You know what I came to do" (Brown)) on repeat. This song is generic and formulaic. It is not particularly upbeat or the kind of song that really pumps people up—it's more designed for dancing all up on someone in the club, with a drink in your hand. It seems

[42] See my discussion of Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* in Chapter 1.

an odd choice for a battle, particularly with such skillful, talented, inventive practitioners. Not a song that is super inspiring for such an innovative dancer, Hans still had fun with it, throwing out several party moves and offering as much unique variety as the song called for, as the song allowed. While he was playful and tapped into his creativity in a way that worked well with this song, this song could not really be taken seriously, and the dancers on both sides of the battle laughed along with him and his sexually suggestive, hip-thrusting moves.

But then the next song started to mix in.

It was "Paramedic!" by SOB X RBE ft. Kendrick Lamar, from *Black Panther: The Album.* Far from the twinky pop of "Came to Do," this song is a banger. One of the hottest tracks of 2018, its beat is heavy and fast, and the song exudes the character Killmonger's aggressive, anti-hero energy. Musically, it is well crafted. The energy of the rhythm and instrumental sections match the lyric's politics, the first verse ending with the line, "One fist in the air, I ain't finna put my hands up" (SOB X RBE). It's the type of song that calls for vigorous chest contractions and forceful arm swings. Hans hit a few strong chicken-heads before he begrudgingly relinquished the floor to his opponent. His face transitioned into disappointment as he thought about how much harder he could have brought it to this song as opposed to the weak song he was given.

King Mosi (formerly King Guttah) of the GoodFellas bounded into the center of the floor, his crewmates doing the smeeze with him. Within these first moments of his turn, the energy in the room had already risen significantly and shouts were already coming from the crowd. He glided across the floor so smoothly that you could barely see

his feet move, and he did it with a quickness that matched the urgency of Kendrick Lamar's double-time cadence. As his feet kept going, his arms moved polyrhythmically in fast, sharp bursts and in direct relationship with the lyrics, which Mosi was simultaneously reciting. He, the rest of the dancers, and likely everyone in the room, knew the song well. ".22 or .23" (SOB X RBE), the rap threatened, and Mosi formed his arms as though holding a shotgun aimed at Hans, while balanced on his right toes, knees bent, and left knee lifted to his chest. "I'm heavy" (SOB X RBE) as he began to lean backwards, still managing to balance on the tip of his shoe, two hard chest pops collided with the lyrics "with the heat" (SOB X RBE) and two strong musical accents, like Mosi just fired two shots straight into Hans.

Mosi, twisting from his chest, reached his upper body so far backwards that he turned clockwise and returned to face Hans, their bodies very physically close. Mosi was up on the tips of both shoes now, arching backwards and aggressively pulling his arms across his chest, hands in fists. After some fast footwork, and as all musical elements dropped off the track except for a particularly rapid rap sequence, Mosi shifted back onto his right foot, twisting it back and forth to the speed of the lyrics, his other leg in the air, and he hopped, beginning to bend his back leg in a sustained drop to the floor, the rest of his body seemingly unaffected by his sinking. As he slowly lowered towards the floor, his arms were flexed downwards in front of his chest, hands fisted, and he popped his chest in coordination as the beat dropped back in, his left leg still off the ground.

This moment, physically challenging and unexpected, was so well crafted in coordination with the details of the music and the overall feeling of the song. His crew

and the crowd were yelling—it was almost loud enough to overpower the music. A crewmate of his was jumping behind him and a couple of the dancers in the crowd who had been seated stood up, pointing to Mosi. Hans' face read, *oh, you just did that*. Impressed and engaged, Hans moved in even tighter and gestured in recognition of the skill he was witnessing in this moment. Mosi began to krump. The energy felt thick. In the crowd, we could barely contain ourselves, and it was clear that Mosi felt this—breathing this energy in, he became even more powerful. Hans was in it, too, close enough to tap Mosi several times in the torso, sending even more energy directly to Mosi's body through this physical connection. Mosi picked up on three strong musical accents as he delivered three quick, aggressive elbow jabs down Hans' chest. Hans started yelling and nodding vigorously, and he moved in even closer—he was feeling it, too, and he continued to feed it.

The GoodFellas were riled up, and as the song reached the chorus, Mosi began jumping around again, his crewmates joining him—and all of a sudden, Mosi was standing perched on the judge's couch. About half of the audience immediately leapt to their feet, pulled from the floor, crowding towards the dance space and yelling loudly in excitement and recognition of the skill they were witnessing. The energy was the highest it had been all night. People were so pumped they couldn't even sit still—or sit at all. The room felt full and brimming with potential—anything seemed possible in that moment…

… And then, the DJ began to play "Good Form" by Nicki Minaj—a dagger right to the heart of this moment's energetic potential. Did she not see, hear, or feel where the

rest of the room was right now? This song failed to maintain, and certainly did not nourish, the vibe in this moment. Instead, it severely ruptured the flow.

Immediately, dancers from both crews threw their arms up in frustration, yelling "Come on!" and gesturing to the DJ to take the song back. Koncept of the GoodFellas spun a finger in the air, signaling to bring "Paramedic!" back. The energy had dropped drastically. We had been violently pulled out of the full, electrifying moment with Mosi. Contrary to the uplifting, generative sensation of the previous moment, the mood was now disappointment, annoyance, and dissatisfaction. It felt like the air had been sucked from the room. The potential felt emptied. The energy continued to dwindle as the dancers tried to resolve the situation, but after about ten seconds of this, the dancers eventually gave up on the DJ, and the last dancer from the FLooridians, the last dancer of this battle, took the floor.

Despite all of this turbulence and disorientation, and the unfortunate selection of music, this dancer still managed to get down. Slowly walking forward, he pressed his weight into the front foot, bringing it back before switching feet. The slightest taps of his feet as they switched positions picked up in the most subtle way on the double-time ticking in the music, and his lean into the front foot and slight dip with each step embodied a percussive accent.

But the energy in the room was no longer solely honed in on this dancer. The other dancers were only partially tuned into what he was doing because they were still reacting in frustration and anger at the DJ. For about five seconds, this dancer's movements repeated as he grew in familiarity with the nuances of the track. His

movements gained a slightly robotic tinge as he hit the dips a little deeper, leaning a little further, elbows reaching a little wider, steps lifting a little higher—his body was now fully attuned with the music, embodying it wholly; he was truly vibing with the music.

But just as he reached this moment, the DJ switched the track yet again to play Arrested Development's "People Everyday." Perhaps this seemingly random change in music was a delayed response to the dancers' request to return to "Paramedic!" but this song harshly missed the mark as well, and it was awkward that this change happened after the dancer had already started his turn and just as he started to really get down. While this hip hop classic from '92 is decidedly an excellent song, its slow groove is chill and laidback, moving even farther away from the hype energy everyone had just been in a minute earlier with Mosi.

The other dancers' faces immediately registered their confusion. They made eye contact with each other, shaking their heads and laughing in disbelief. Quickly, though, they recommitted all their attention to the dancer, who, despite this musical, energetic, vibrational rollercoaster, had not even faltered. Recognizing the DJ's failure to be meaningfully invested in this process with them, the other dancers locked their attention in on the dancer and moved in closer. They clapped, yelled, and even more attentively sent him their energy to make up for the DJ's inadequacies, taking responsibility for supporting him, for maintaining the energy in the space, for helping him build.

When the DJ started to fade the music out (less than a verse into this newest song), the FLooridians and GoodFellas ramped up their energy even more, closed in even tighter around the dancer, and offered him a rhythm so that he could keep going. But

when they didn't stop, the host cut in on the mic to interrupt, "I know, I know, I know," forcing an abrupt ending despite the building momentum, severing another high-energy moment.

Neither crew was named a winner. It was just done. The ending was anticlimactic and potential was left untapped.

These three-and-a-half-minutes presented several disjunctures, interruptions, and ruptures to the vibe, from the manner in which the DJ distributed the music to the dancers, to her non-sequitur song selections, to the host's rigidly imposed termination. These failures were initiated through either a misunderstanding of the energy cultivated by the dancers and the crowd or a refusal (or, perhaps, an inability caused by insufficient cultural knowledge?) to be influenced, moved, and guided by this energy.

Capitalist constructions of time and scarcity were certainly influential in the host's decision-making. Rather than honoring the vibe and the folks entangled with it, logistics were exalted above all else, a concern for timing guiding decisions to such an extreme degree that it impeded the event itself. In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten explain, "Logistics wants to dispense with the subject altogether" (87). At any and all costs, logistics works to remove humans, remove humanity, from consideration in the name of efficiency, just as the structure of the event was not concerned with what these dancers were cultivating. Understandably, the studio had only been rented for a set amount of time and, not having put on this type of event before, not having a good sense of how long things actually take, the host was running way behind schedule. This was definitely the impetus behind his

hurried close of the exhibition battle and rush to return to the main event. While, in the context of our capitalist society, these logistical issues needed to be taken into some consideration, they did not have to take complete precedence over everything else. A different approach could have allowed the host to transition the event in a way that more respectfully cared for the function, the purpose of the event he put together, in a way that nourished the collective creation taking place. Perhaps, as the crowd yelled "one more round" when the music began to fade, the host could have acknowledged the shared investment and offered a few additional minutes to allow the exhibition battle to come to a more satisfactory close. Or maybe he simply could have had the DJ keep the music going and allowed the dancers to continue for a little while longer and fizzle out more organically even as he began to arrange the final round of the main battle. At the very least there should have been a moment of real recognition and celebration of the skill and creativity we had just witnessed, rather than the host's mere, "That was great. Let's get into this finale, let's wrap it up." Without this moment of acknowledgment, the FLooridians and the GoodFellas were treated like commodities, just names used to promote the event. These crews' presence and their battle became merely transactionary, a box for the host to check off his list, the product of their battle completed, without any real regard for the process—what the battle is actually about.

Whatever alternate transition might have taken the moment, the energy, the vibe into more consideration, the music definitely should not have stopped. Keeping the music going in the transition from the exhibition battle to the final round of the main battle would have helped to usher the energy from the exhibition battle into the finale rather

than disassociating them as two fully separate, completely individuated events. The DJ initially turning off the music between dancers had the same individuating effect. In doing so, the DJ created energetic discord, hindering the dancers' ability to feed off the energy the previous dancers had cultivated, forcing empty pauses into the battle that normally remains in constant motion. This act violently individuated the dancers rather than recognizing that the members of a crew work together in a shared intention not as individual units, at least ideally. Although dancers each take a battle round, a format that highlights creative individual*ity*, the crew strategizes a plan of attack based on how each dancer's unique sensibilities will work best against their opponents, they build from each other's performances, and sometimes even dance briefly as a group. This was not a 1v1 battle, so separating the crew members in such a severe way harmed their ability to work together. The DJ's individuating approach also failed to acknowledge the battle as a rhizomatic whole. The battle is a technology of communal cultivation, not simply moments for individual dancers to show off. It is designed for dancers to feed off each other, to build and grow as they react to and interact with the contributions their fellow dancers are offering. When the music is halted, its literal vibrations diminish, and the dancers' energy, ideally tuned into and attuned with the music, is altered in kind. The dancers, then, must do the additional work to rebuild energy rather than building from the energy the previous dancers had cultivated.

I am unsure whether this DJ had previous experience DJing a battle, though based on her approach, I would assume that this was likely her first time (but even having *attended* any battle before would be enough to know this is not how it's done). Her

practice seemed to fail to understand the essential relationship between not only the music and the battle, but between the music and the dancer, and even between one song and the next. DJing is more than just picking good songs or providing sounds for dancers to make shapes to; "the DJ is in constant conversation with all persons in the club at all times, and the DJ's choices acquire artistic value from his or her ability to read the dancers aptly" (Conroy). This DJ's transition from "Paramedic!" to "Good Form" created a severe energetic dissonance that drastically failed to feed the dancers' work. Though the battle continued and the dancers, of course, were able to keep going, it did not feel as though, with this song selection, they were able to build from where they had just been. While freestyling and battling require dancers to be ready to work with whatever the DJ throws at them, there is also an expectation that the DJ works with and nourishes what is happening on the dance floor.

This discordant sequencing of song selections was even more detrimental to the battle because of the way the DJ distributed the music. Normally, two dancers, one from each opposing crew, are given the same song, but this DJ was inconsistent, ranging from playing a single track for anywhere from one to three dancers. Because of this abnormal structure, only the GoodFellas were given an opportunity to go in on the most hype track of the set, while the FLooridians were assigned music that was much more chill. The DJ gave the crews significantly different grounds from which to build, disparate vibratory energies with which to work, with which to converge and merge. This made the battle an inherently uneven playing field, and it separated the crews from building together in these distinct musical environments.

It's possible that the physical arrangement of the room may have impacted the way the DJ played. With the turntables set up in the corner and folks crowded around the dancers in the center of the floor, the DJ's sightline to the dancers may have been blocked. If this was the case, though, no effort was made at any point during the night to clear a pathway in the short distance from the DJ to the dance floor. Regardless of the reason, the DJ's failures had compartmentalizing effects on fundamentally communal processes between dancers, music, battle, and DJ. This example underscores the essential, foundational role of the DJ, by way of the music, as a purveyor of the vibe. Although the vibe is informed by both the DJ and the dancers, the DJ plays such a significant part in setting the tone, and determining how it should shift that if the DJ isn't committed to vibing (or doesn't understand how to), vibing for the dancers can be incredibly challenging. A single dancer, or even a subset of dancers, who is equally uncommitted to vibing can more easily be avoided and will have less of an impact on the overall vibe. Conroy similarly argues:

> The DJ, however, has greater influence over this interdependent environmental creation than do the dancers, because the house music maker sets the initial sonic parameters and controls the vibe's modulation throughout the night by reading the entire room with care. As Fikentscher argues, 'Programming is understood as an art that puts the DJ in the position of authority. The success of the ongoing interaction with the dance floor is his or her responsibility, the programming of sound and lights helping to create the vibe, which in turn *determines the quality* of a particular club experience.' This does not entail that artistic influence is not bidirectional between the floor and the booth, but it does mean the DJ's contributions are more significant in establishing the character of the vibe than are those of any single dancers. It also acknowledges that the music maker can manipulate the emergent aesthetic object to a greater degree than any other individual in the club." (Conroy)

Because the DJ's role is so important in the vibe's cultivation, the DJ's approach at this event, working from a solo vision rather than participating as part of the rhizomatic whole, rather than converging and merging with the vibe seems a fairly egregious error in judgement.

While it featured amazingly skilled and creative dancers, this event did not live up to its potential. The structure of the event in many ways worked against its purported goal of bringing people together and inspiring them through hip hop culture and dance. Without respecting the communal purpose of the battle, the function of the battle was not nourished and the culture was not honored. Instead, the culture, the technology of the battle, and the dance practices represented were treated as products, commodities utilized perhaps for profit or to increase industry prestige, rather than as living, breathing, rhizomatic entities. By creating misplaced, misguided separations, this event's togetherness was largely superficial. Bodies were brought into close proximity, but the need to foster deeper connections, to provide time and space to nourish the vibe, was largely ignored.

Despite all this event's failures, there were still great moments that night. Enough of the people present at the event had true understanding of and love for the culture, and they worked (extra hard) to cultivate moments of real community and collaborative creativity, they did their best to vibe with each other, despite so much working against this intention. Hip hop, born out of the Black radical tradition, has, by its very nature, always already built, maintained, and nurtured alternatives even as systemic structures work to constrain, restrain, and repress them. However, individuating disjunctures, like

the ones at this event, directly attack the Black sociality at the very heart of these alternatives. Furthermore, these misinformed, erroneous, and problematic presentations that purport to represent the culture but fail to understand its practices, teach people erroneous versions of hip hop, removed from the alternatives it cultivates. These flawed portrayals only serve to perpetuate and reify dominant white supremacist, capitalist hegemony through aesthetics that appear to challenge them.

**A Ripple or a Cascade?**

The examples discussed in this chapter of failing to catch the vibe show us that it matters how you, how I, how we participate. Because all of the elements that comprise the vibe are entangled as part of the vibe's rhizomatic entity, how each one interacts in the energetic exchange impacts the whole. Short, dark-haired guy's failure to get in rhythm demonstrated that, even if his attitude had attuned with the vibe, he was unable to align his physical with that energetic attention. His arhythmic movements had a ripple effect, messing with my flow and diminishing my ability to stay tuned into and attuned with the club's overall vibe. As my engagement with the vibe was altered, I may also have disturbed someone else's, and so on, and all of these changes to folks' engagement with the vibe affect its potential amplitude[43]. However, in the grand scheme of things, the disruption initiated by short, dark-haired guy's rhythmic failure was nowhere near as impactful on the whole as the DJ at the battle, whose approach caused severe ruptures to the vibe.

[43] In *"You Better Work!": Underground Dance Music in New York City*, Kai Fikentscher writes, "the most responsive and enthusiastic dancers … may in turn draw in others" (9). If it's the case that dancers can pull others into the vibe, that supports the idea that they also have the power to pull others out of it.

This DJ's failure to care for the collective creation between the music and the dancers, from one song to the next, from one dancer to another, underscores the particularly important role of the DJ in cultivating the vibe. The music offers a meeting ground for the dancers, its vibrations flowing through and between them as a connective tissue. Through musical selection, the DJ literally sets the tone for the energy, inviting the dancers to converge in its frequency. As such, the artistry of DJing derives from the ability to work in conversation with dancers, reading the work that is currently taking place on the dance floor in order to determine how best to nourish it—maybe the dancers are starting to show their exhaustion, and it's time to cool off the intensity for a bit in order to return later at full force, or maybe the dancers are hungry to go in even harder, or maybe this crowd is really getting down to the throwbacks but doesn't seem to engage as much with the new hits. The DJ's role holds so much more responsibility than just picking a good song. Unlike the small ripple caused by short, dark-haired guy, a DJ's failure to understand the complex call and response between the music and the dancers can have a cascading effect on the whole vibe.

Erratic musical selections that veer wildly, pivoting drastically without fostering the transitions from one frequency to the next, force the dancers to radically alter their energy in order to stay in tune with the vibe. Having to re-align from scratch with each new choice the DJ makes, rather than evolving collaborative as the energy shifts organically, actively undermines the collective intention of vibing and presents a significant challenge for the dancers. However, the GoodFellas and the FLooridians demonstrated that, even when faced with a DJ so extremely removed from the vibe she

was meant to purvey, those with a strong practice of vibing have the skills to work around and through these disjunctures. This is possible because vibing derived in the Black radical tradition, and as such, reimagining how to maintain it in the midst of oppressive, restrictive, and constricting structures is inherent to the practice itself. And yet, with such a significant force working against these impressive crews' intention, the creative potential was still left unfilled, the vibe far from reaching its potential amplitude.

The DJ's approach here failed to understand the cultural purpose of DJing as more than simply providing songs, just as the battle's structural failures lost its function, and the roboting dancer's approach to his performance drained the substance from the technique's physical aesthetics. Without sufficient knowledge—which doesn't necessarily have to be explicit—of cultural values and history, these practices become empty of their meaning, removed from their collective essence. Without honoring the practices' possibilities of togetherness, the aesthetics, as they did in these examples, become disassociated and dispossessed from the alternative they manifest, the safety, and joy that they offer to the most marginalized, disenfranchised, terrorized, and vulnerable in the context of what Christina Sharpe refers to as the wake of antiblackness[44], the overwhelming and engulfing subjection, death, and trauma, ancestral as well as current. It is yet another attack on Black folks, on Black life, when even the safe (or, at the very least, saf*er*) spaces are prevented from manifesting the alternatives they are meant to offer to this community.

[44] Please see my discussion of Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* in Chapter 1.

Black sociality is embedded within hip hop culture and its practices, but we are the ones responsible for honoring it. The entanglements between us, between everything, are there, but we must choose to acknowledge them, to be open to them, to celebrate them, and to nourish them. Vibing, and the alternatives it enacts, cannot manifest simply by virtue of people being in physical proximity or through a dance form's physical aesthetics. The examples in this chapter highlight that vibing does not happen automatically, even if the practice is not fully conscious; it requires meaningful engagement with the cultural values, which include a privileging of collaborative creativity and collective relationality.

# Chapter 5

## Reflections and (Re)Envisionings: Vibing and/as Co-Conspiring

"Alternatives exist—*already*—against the normative modes under which we endure. If we so choose to join up with the alternative, all the better. The work is to make apparent the fact of the resonance of alternatives, to let folks know that we are here engaging in otherwise work. And that is a beautiful thing."
- Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentcostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, pg. 31, emphasis original

### Conclusion

I don't love the idea of a conclusion. It feels too final, too completed for a project whose questions have only led me to more questions. Despite the institution requiring the finished product that is this dissertation, this work remains in-progress. *Get on this Vibe: Freestyling and Being in/as Radical Togetherness* planted a seed that still has so much room to grow. So, maybe rather than a conclusion, this is a reflection on what this research has accomplished so far and an opportunity to envision where it might continue to go from here.

This first iteration of the project has begun to uncover the nature of vibing and what comprises the practice, identifying, for example, the important components of multisensory listening—to music, to each other, to energies, to environments—and a multidirectional flow of vibrations as dancers receive and offer in alignment with the shared frequency, existing in and as radical togetherness. With this knowledge already in place (which is not to say there isn't more to learn about the nature of vibing), I have a working characterization of the practice that I can utilize and question as I delve deeper into vibing's manifestations and continue to ask what this practice makes knowable about how we come to move and groove together.

I initiated an interrogation into the ways that vibing disproves a white supremacist, capitalist construction of a violently individuated subjecthood, but there is still a lot to be explored here. Defined discursively and contextually, this conceptualization of the self was designed in the image of white, cis, heterosexual, Christian Man and never intended to be universal. Those unable to conform to this figure become designated as Other. This dissertation was particularly interested in studying the relationships between the exclusion of Black people from this conceptualization of personhood and the otherwise possibilities of existence that vibing, as an African diasporic practice, makes known. I have acknowledged some of vibing's African diasporic aesthetics, approaches, and values, but I am curious about drawing more specific connections and parallels between practices from across the diaspora. Do dance forms that invite spirits and deities to enter the body, for example, similarly theorize a radical togetherness? Or are there different conceptualizations of existence that can be gleaned from them?

Although I have acknowledged the Othering of people who fall outside of the white supremacist, capitalist construction of human, I have not attended to this definition's demarcations beyond race, and each deserves attention and care. The continuation of this research will engage with feminist, gender, and queer theories in order to address how vibing's otherwise existence may or may not refuse the particular implications of this dominant hegemonic construction of personhood on queer, trans, and non-binary communities. Additionally, the need for an intersectional approach to this investigation is underscored by the fact that some of the dance practices discussed

explicitly in this dissertation, such as house, come from queer Black and Brown communities.

I am curious as well to explore how vibing's theorizing of being in relation to may contribute to discourse surrounding our relationships with our natural environments. What might existing and moving in alignment on the dance floor share in common with existing and moving in alignment with nature? I also see potential for this research's discussion of the body's borders as porous, inviting multidirectional flow, to contribute to discourses that concern the imagined borders of nation-states and who holds and who is denied access to move across them.

*Get on this Vibe* engages a methodology that does not attempt to prove findings as hard facts, but instead seeks to listen—to listen to performances[45], to what practitioners have to say, and to my own experiences—and to offer *a* way of thinking and writing through that aligns with the information I have received. Privileging the invisible, intangible, and immaterial aspects of dance, this project champions the importance of studying and analyzing experiences that cannot be proven empirically, affirming what so many folks know to be true. These experiences, and the hip hop dance practices that enable them, do not need validation from academia. Their academic study is, however, important for pushing back against the institution's historic categorization of western thought and practices as legitimate sites of knowledge production and African diasporic epistemologies and practices, and embodied knowledges in general, as unimportant, illogical, and unsound. Vibing has so much to teach us.

[45] My use of the term "performance" includes informal, social performances.

**Standing For and Moving with Each Other**

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the practice of vibing is a way of tuning into, attuning with, and aligning in a shared frequency. By considering different types of connections freestyle dancers make, including connections with the music, with each other, and with histories, I have explored the ways that these profound connections challenge, refute, and refuse a white supremacist, capitalist construction of the self that is violently individuated. As an alternative to this construct, this dissertation has argued that vibing makes knowable an existence in and as radical togetherness, beings whose vibratory energies are inextricably entangled with the vibratory energies of other beings, of environments, and of the hauntings of histories. I have asserted that our entanglements are ever-present, and that vibing is but *a* possibility for acknowledging, celebrating, and nourishing them.

I entered into this research out of a desire to better understand what it means to share a groove, asking what takes place physically and metaphysically as we get lost in the music and in each other's performances. However, from the start of this project, I have also been curious about what these moments of profound connection might illuminate for us about life outside of dance. Throughout this dissertation, I have offered analysis of each example as I presented it as well as takeaways from each chapter, but, in these final stages of the work, as the pieces come together, reading across the chapters allows for additional analysis. Here, as I reflect on the work as a whole, I consider what vibing can illuminate about how we can show up for each other, how we can stand for and move with each other beyond the dance floor.

Let me clarify that, with what follows, I'm not suggesting a deeper commitment to hip hop culture somehow implies deeper commitment to the struggle for Black liberation. The desire to consume Black expressive cultures while simultaneously upholding antiblackness is embedded in the United States' white supremacist, capitalist foundations. And many well-known non-Black hip hop dancers are, especially in the wake of the 2020 uprisings, getting called out for their failure to speak up against—or for actively participating in—antiblackness. I *am* suggesting that how we show up matters.

As a practice that enables our collective cultivation, vibing can provide a lens for thinking through how we show up beyond the dance floor as well. I don't say this to mean *vibing is for everyone. It doesn't matter who you are!* It matters that, as a white woman, I understand myself as a guest engaging with an African diasporic technology that harnesses alternatives to a violently individuated self *and* that the need to steal away from white supremacist systems and structures is most urgent for Black and Othered folks. I am suggesting that we all have a responsibility to care for our entanglements and each other, and understanding how we exist in relation to vibing and its alternatives enables us to sense possibilities for meaningful contribution. By choosing to listen for otherwise possibilities of radical togetherness, we can enact, through our living them, liberating alternatives to a violently individuated self.

*Vibing and/as Co-Conspiring*

In May 2020, the world watched as the literal weight of white supremacy, embodied by uniformed state actors, extinguished the breath from George Floyd's body. Floyd's very breath—that which enabled him to move his Black body in and through the

world—was read as a threat, a threat to the dominant hegemony's status quo. For the breath, Ashon Crawley tells us in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, is a site of infinite potential. As a breath enters the world, the world is necessarily shifted by its vibration, which "is not and cannot ever be stilled absolutely. It keeps going, it keeps moving, it is open-ended" (2). Floyd's power to effect change through these vibrations was the danger of his breath.

Using the power of their collective breath in defense of Black people's right to breathe, massive numbers of people rose up after Floyd's state-sponsored, extrajudicial murder, across the United States and around the world, as co-conspirators. The word "conspire," which derives from the Latin *conspīrāre*, meaning *to breathe together* (*Oxford English Dictionary online*, conspire entry), speaks to the role of the collective breath in organizing. When it comes to participating in social justice movements, the terms "conspire" and "ally" do different work. To illustrate the distinctions between allies and co-conspirators, activist and scholar of abolitionist teaching Bettina Love utilizes the example of Bree Newsome, the Black woman activist who, in the wake of white supremacist Dylan Roof's terrorist attack on the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015, climbed the flagpole at the South Carolina state house and removed the confederate flag, and James Tyson, a white man activist. In a conversation for *C-Span2 BookTV*, Love points out that Newsome and Tyson did not know each other prior to organizing for this action and explains what took place, saying:

> Bree Newsome climbs up on the pole to take the flag down. Now, this is where the difference between an ally and a co-conspirator is. James Tyson, now there's a gate for the flagpole [Love draws the shape of a gate with her hands]. James Tyson isn't standing like outside the gate, ok, like

> "Bree, they comin', Bree! Hey, Bree!" No, James Tyson, he is *inside*. And then the police say, "You know what? We can get her down: tase the pole." James Tyson, because he wasn't here [Love steps outside of the gated area she has drawn with her hands], he was here [Love steps back inside the gated area], said, "Ok." He put his hand on the pole. That white man, at that moment, understood why he was there. He put his hand on the pole, and he knew that the police would not tase that pole with a white man, healthy white man right there. He saved her life.
>
> That's what it means to be an ally, [Love points to where she stood on the outside of the gated area] you can stand out there—and allies know all the language, they read all the books, they come to the meeting with all the terms. … And then after the meeting, you like, "Well, what we gonna do?" … "Oh, hey they left already? Where'd they go?" …
>
> So that's the difference between being an ally and a co-conspirator… Put something on the line for somebody. Take a risk to see how to use your whiteness. … And so, to be a co-conspirator, I try to write in [*We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*], is to take risks for somebody, to put something on the line but to use it in a way in which where you're using your privilege. *Use it*. And I'm not just talking about white folks, I'm talking about cis-gendered, use it for trans folks, use it for queer folks. Put something on the line. … And that's what we are talking about with co-conspirators. Allies, they know everything, they can say, they can talk it, but when it's time, they're not there. And if they're there, they're looking at you like, "You going?" No, *you* go. You go on the front lines. (Love)

Love's description underscores action as a defining factor in being a co-conspirator, and in particular, action that risks something and takes advantage of privilege. She identifies Tyson as a co-conspirator for not just his willingness to put his own body on the line but also for understanding *how* his privilege could be used to contribute meaningfully to the shared intention in that moment. Love differentiates the ally as someone who may be supportive of the cause but leaves the actual work to be handled by others.

As an ally, I can stand in solidarity with your cause, but I may choose to stand way over on the sidelines. Allyship leaves room for me to detach myself from your struggle, to admire the work you're doing on your own behalf without necessarily joining

in directly myself. Though I may not actively work against your movement, inaction on my part can only ever maintain the current state of affairs, and this, despite whatever good intentions I may have, is still violence. Whereas being an ally signifies support but is ambiguous about participation, being a co-conspirator *requires* purposeful engagement through collective action, through collective breath.

If to conspire is to breathe together, and if the breath is vibration, then can we also read conspiring as vibrating together—or *vibing*?

There are strong correlations between the practice of co-conspiring and this dissertation's findings about the practice of vibing, which also requires active engagement, meaningful contribution, and the risk of vulnerability. As I reflect, here, on what this research has uncovered, I'd like to put vibing in conversation with what it means to act as a co-conspirator.

"The Art of Becoming the Music: Vibing and/as Losing the Self" examines the profound relationships freestyle dancers cultivate with the music. The house dancer who became the music engaged in a practice of careful, deep, multisensory listening, cultivating an empathy with the music's sounds and the intentions and histories embedded within them. In receiving the music's literal vibrations into his physical body and the vibratory energy of the music's haunting into his metaphysical being, he utilized the embodied skills he had developed through years of training to offer in a way that aligned, both in intention and action, to the frequency he now shared with the music. I would offer that, like this dancer vibing with the music, co-conspirators must also engage in a practice of deep, multisensory listening in order to sense how they and their skills

can move in alignment with the larger cause. By listening and remaining open, Tyson aligned with the work Newsome was doing and the collective purpose in that moment.

Giving in to the porousness of his borders rather than attempting to fortify them, allowing himself to be literally and figuratively moved, this house dancer became part of a multidirectional flow of vibratory energies. By allowing his self to get lost in the music, he became an active part of the music, contributing in ways that served the music's frequency in that moment, co-conspiring to nourish the vibe. As energies comingle, merge, and converge beyond material boundaries, vibing disproves a white supremacist, capitalist construction of the self, one in which a metaphysical being is contained within the harshly separated, solidly delineated physical body. As several dancers attested to, the ability to lose this self allowed them to be what they described as their most genuine, whole selves, recounting these experiences as liberating. However, they also noted that allowing your true self to be seen in a society with systems and structures that don't want to see you is incredibly vulnerable. Doing so is to take a risk, like Love asserts is inherent to co-conspiring, and taking this risk requires co-conspirators in the vibe who are ready to see you, and a trust that they will celebrate you. If vibing is a way of co-conspiring, then this suggests that we may also find our truest selves through the practice of co-conspiring. As we vibe with each other in the work of co-conspiring, we enact liberatory alternatives through the very act of working together towards liberation.

In "Dancing in/as Radical Togetherness: Sharing Space, Sharing Spirit," I looked at the ways freestyle dancers read and feed off of each other. I argued that, in the same way these dancers engage a multisensory listening in order to understand themselves in

the relation to the music, they also listen to each other. Leah and Dread and the makeshift 4-dancer crew demonstrated an understanding of their battles as collective endeavors, sensing and attuning to possibilities for alignment. These dancers' contributions were not solely about skill and style, but about understanding *how* their talents could be utilized in the particular moment to serve the shared creation, the rhizomatic whole. It mattered that Tyson understood how he could offer something meaningful when the police decided to tase Newsome off the flagpole, not that he showed up with training as an activist. He understood himself in relation to Newsome, in relation to the police, in relation to that moment, and in relation to the movement. Rather than treating each dancer and their individual abilities as independent, even if working for the same crew, Leah's, Dread's, and the makeshift crew's choices demonstrated a commitment to dancing in togetherness, to co-conspiring in the work of the battle. This radical togetherness of leaning into existing in relation to is neither about individuation nor fungibility, but instead a hopeful imagination that trusts our cultivating together will be greater than any potential from working apart. As they remained open to being moved, not only by the music but also by each other—figuratively and literally—they co-conspired to create something that never could have been possible on their own.

Harnessing the power of this togetherness through vibrations, which are also foundational to the work of co-conspiring, the cypher in Shamell Bell's Street Dance Activism Workshop effected change, shifting the space and those of us who became a part of Shamell's auntie's joy. Centering the fundamental role of energy in dance rather than bodies' executions of movements, I interrogated dance's ephemerality, arguing that

if energy does not disappear, dance also remains, as the energetic vibrations enter into and forever alter the beings of those who witness it.

In contrast to the examples in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, the understanding of the self as part of a larger whole and a willingness to be moved to move in alignment were not evident in the approaches taken by short, dark-haired guy, the roboting dancer, or the DJ discussed in "Failure to Catch the Vibe: Misreadings, Missteps, and Missed Connections." In this chapter, I employed the concept of failure to reveal distinctions, sometimes obvious but often slight and nuanced, between the radical togetherness that vibing makes knowable and participation where action doesn't align with good intention and skills are impressive but not utilized meaningfully. In doing so, this chapter demonstrated that the practice of vibing does not happen automatically, simply by virtue of dancing or by participating in hip hop culture. Some folks are more receptive than others to listening and aligning.

Whether through lack of cultural immersion or disregard for cultural values, short, dark-haired guy was unable to get in rhythm with the music, and as such, he was unable to coordinate his action with the positive intention he seemed to have. I offered multiple readings of what this might tell us about how he understands his relationship with hip hop culture; however, regardless of the intention, his actions still had an impact on the whole, as his discordant rhythms impeded the vibe from reaching its potential amplitude. What we cultivate together becomes stronger the more people who align in that shared purpose, whether we're talking movements on the dance floor or movements for social change. We might think of short, dark-haired guy in line with the ally, as Love described, who

reads all the books and shows up to the meetings but, even with good intentions, doesn't know how to put that information into meaningful action or isn't willing to take a risk. Is it a step in the right direction? Yes. Does it get us all the way there? Not yet. Furthermore, short, dark-haired guy's rhythmic failure had a rippling effect, his arhythmic movements distracting me from my own alignment with the music's vibe, thereby also lessening my contributions to the whole.

The roboting dancer, like the dancer who became the music in Chapter 2, clearly displayed physical technique built through years of training. However, unlike the house dancer, the roboting dancer did not approach his battle with an investment in understanding himself and his skills in relation to the music, the people he was dancing with, or the rhizome of the battle. Unlike Leah and Dread and the makeshift crew in Chapter 3, a privileging of collaborative creation did not guide his freestyles. Instead, he forced his own desires into the space, seemingly without consideration or care for how they might work with or against the vibe, how they might serve a purpose larger than himself. Although he was contributing, it appeared there was a failure to listen, a failure to receive, and without this part of vibing's multidirectional flow, how can one align? The roboting dancer's superficial participation, only engaging in the aspects of the dance that he was interested in or that he may have felt served him, can be read in terms of performative allyship. Unlike co-conspirators, performative allies show up only in ways that make themselves comfortable and, instead of listening and committing to the larger cause, their participation is motivated by their own desire to get credit for "being good."

When there's a failure to align, incongruent vibratory frequencies can have varying effects on the vibe as a whole. Whereas, for example, short, dark-haired guy's failure had relatively minimal ramifications, the DJ's approach to and the host's structuring of the dysfunctional battle, which I discussed in Chapter 4, were severely detrimental to fostering collective alignment. Because these disjunctures were so extreme in their individuating effects on the battle, this example illustrated the necessity of co-conspirators in enacting the alternative of vibing, just as we need co-conspirators in enacting alternatives to the dominant hegemonic status quo. When folks not only fail to contribute to but actively interfere with or outright work against the cultivation of this alternative, this work becomes even more challenging, and inhibition and obstruction do not only come from explicit opponents, but from allies with good intentions as well. I sincerely believe the host and DJ of this battle meant well; and yet, the ways they approached their roles contradicted and largely counteracted the purpose of bringing folks together for this type of event. What this battle also showed us, however, was that, even in the face of so much working against their collective cultivation and intentions to vibe, the FLooridians and the GoodFellas showed up for each other as co-conspirators, continuously reimagining how they could engage togetherness within this particular individuating structure. Even as the dominant hegemony seeks to undermine, contain, or exterminate the alternative, we can still come together as co-conspirators to enact otherwise possibilities.

This DJ's approach also underscored the special weight that music, via the DJ, holds in cultivating the vibe. The music serves as a meeting ground, inviting dancers to

align in its frequency, and how well DJs understand this role and allow that knowledge to move them has a massive impact on the whole. This DJ's failure to feed the communal vibratory flow demonstrated a failure to listen and to sense how her role could contribute to and nourish the vibe. Vibing, like co-conspiring, requires an understanding of your part in something greater than yourself. Tyson understood that, in the moment police decided to tase the flagpole Newsome was on, his particular privileges as a white man could serve the collective work by placing his hand on the pole, and he knew that this action had a different effect for the communal intention than yelling a warning. Rather than allowing herself to be moved to offer in relation to the collective endeavor, this DJ seemed to separate herself from it.

Just as vibing refuses definitive definition, co-conspiring also manifests in myriad ways. There was not a single way for Tyson to meaningfully co-conspire with Newsome: rather than grabbing the pole, he could have leaned on it, sat against it, also started climbing it, all of which may have served the shared cause in that moment. But he did understand that some actions, like standing outside the gate and yelling, would not have meaningfully cared for and supported the purpose in that moment. Similarly, had Newsome's co-conspirator been a Black woman without Tyson's privileges as a white man, the same action from her may not have had the same effect, and a different contribution may have been more meaningful in that moment. In freestyling, there is not a sole correct movement that dancers are expected to find in order to properly embody the music's vibrations; there are infinite possibilities for dancers to move in alignment. Neither co-conspiring nor vibing are about producing codified responses, but both ask us

to understand that some ways of moving, some vibrations, contribute more meaningfully to a given vibe than others.

There is power in our collectivity, power in our communal breath, power in our aligned frequencies. Though it may not be entirely conscious, vibing is a purposeful choice to listen and lean in to celebrating, honoring, and nourishing our entanglements. Vibing is a way of being in and with the world that asks us to acknowledge that we exist *in relation to* and to celebrate the generative potential of being in and as radical togetherness.

So let's vibe.

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