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Moving Hip Hop:  
Corporeal Performance and the Struggle Over Black Masculinity

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Drama and Theatre

by

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Chair

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2014

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the young men and women who began this movement we call hip hop. And to my 엄마, Jae Hee Jun.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Moving Hip Hop:  
Corporeal Performance and the Struggle Over Black Masculinity

by

grace shinhae jun

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California, San Diego, 2014  
University of California, Irvine, 2014

Professor Nadine George, Chair

This dissertation is the study of hip hop dance and hip hop performances. In a society where Black men are racially profiled, policed, and incarcerated at disproportionate rates than whites, hip hop becomes a scapegoat for society's promotion of violence, drug use, and misogyny. Hip hop is a positive force among the younger

generation, but at the same time it often reifies stereotypes of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I critically analyze Will Power's *The Seven* (hip hop theatre), Rennie Harris' *Rome & Jewels* (hip hop concert dance), *Step Up 2: The Streets*, and *Planet B-boy* (hip hop films). By examining these hip hop performances we can see how some are deeply engaged in race, gender, and class constructions, entangling them in the definitive racial justice issues of today and how some reproduce race and gender violence. This is important because in today's "colorblind" society, race appears to not matter, yet race disparities persist and anti-black stereotypes (black men as criminals, violent, and hypersexual) live on. We will see that hip hop performance, like other popular cultural forms, has a tremendous influence and pedagogical power regarding whether we perpetuate or disrupt racial constructions. This study contributes to scholarly discussions of hip hop performances and how hip hop dance through the representation of the body is a means to understanding black masculinity.

## INTRODUCTION

“Everybody wanna be black but don’t nobody wanna *be* black”.

Junebug (Paul Mooney) *Bamboozed*

Growing up in Los Angeles and its suburbs and going to a predominantly white Christian school, my connection to hip hop was minimal. I was stuck in between conservative Korean cultural expectations and a generic white suburban mainstream. Its not like I was suffering at the time, growing up in a stable household with out much struggle, but later I would come to see how limited my environment was. On the first day of school in seventh grade, I met Dani. Like normal seventh grade girls we shared crushes, gossip, appraisals of favorite and least-favorite teachers, and listened to lots of great music. Dani introduced me to 1580 KDAY, LA’s premier hip hop and R&B AM radio station. I went from listening to Whitney Houston and Madonna, to artists like Al B. Sure, Salt-N-Pepa, Public Enemy, and N.W.A. My love of dancing began to be shaped by *Soul Train* and brand new Saturday morning music video shows, as I spent lunchtime and PE classes dancing the cabbage patch, roger rabbit, robocop, reebok, and running man. *In Living Color*’s “Fly Girls” set the new bar for my life aspirations, and I began sneaking VCR tapings, practice sessions, and adopting fashion statements to try to grasp their technique, variety, performativity, and dignity. In many profound ways, I came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the golden era of hip hop.

As a hip hop educator and performer, I regularly encounter others who find themselves at life-altering crossroads on the margins of the culture. I require my dance students to write their perceptions of hip hop culture and to explain their reasons for taking a hip hop dance class. Some students make some mention about hip hop being a

style of dance developed in the “streets” while others connect hip hop to popular culture and MTV. However some reflect on the deeper cultural meanings, relevance and the implications of the art form. They say things like:

“Hip hop is a dance type that uses rhythms and beats to express emotion and movement.”

“Hip hop at first glance one sees toughness and hard times.”

“Hip hop is a form of expression through the movement of the body.”

“Hip hop is a rebellion to conformity.”

These reflections identify the dance form as a means of communication and negotiation, as well as a way to break the body from limiting patterns. For students like these, it is more than catchy hooks and flashy looks. In fact, some go further to talk about hip hop dance rooting them in the knowledge, perspectives, and cultures of the African diaspora.

Most of youth that I come across (much like myself) find *some* connection to hip hop culture. With its power rooted in African and African American culture, hip hop has developed vernacular codes through movement, language, and style. Hip hop has become familiar, accessible, cross-cultural, and global, becoming a shared culture for youth throughout the world. Perhaps even more so than 1980s youth, today’s youth are more steeped in hip hop generally. The styles are everywhere, and nearly everyone feels okay about appropriating at least a figure of speech (e.g. “that’s the bomb!” or “you go girl”). There are innumerable points of entry and hip hop is more easily produced, packaged, and distributed in different forms for youth to consume. For example, the late 1990s saw a flourishing of hip hop dance classes offered at dance studios so that instruction came from a live interaction with a teacher and not just through a television or movie screen. A

development in technology, the mp3 format, allowed for easier music sharing. YouTube provides instant access to dance lessons, and reality television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *America's Best Dance Crew* have spawned a vast generation of youth enrolling in dance classes and joining competitive crews for television.

Hip hop has also become a reflection of society. The artists and participants are multi-racial, multi-generational, and multi-cultural. Hip hop's move into a wider mainstream has brought about new ways of producing and recycling globalized culture. Critical studies scholar Todd Boyd argues, "Hip hop transcends the boundaries of culture, race, and history while being uniquely informed by all three... Unlike previous eras when politics and ideology produced culture, hip hop stands at the forefront of contemporary culture for it seems to both reflect and produce the politics and ideology of its time" (18). As a social movement, an albeit disorganized one, hip hop does not only reflect society, but shapes mindsets, agendas, and provides spaces for many different kinds of young people in many different places to contest structures of power.

Despite these shifts and changes and the growth of hip hop as a global force, some critics, like C. Delores Tucker condemn gangsta rap as a promotion of deviant black behavior, fail to recognize hip hop's productive power. Unfortunately this deviance is mass marketed in the United States, drawing many hip hop creators into a struggle over the reproduction or interrogation of racial stereotypes and inequality. Hip hop is a positive force among the younger generation, but at the same time it often reifies stereotypes of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In addition, many listeners, practitioners, and participants are uncritical of hip hop in the same ways the critics "don't account for the complex ways that some hip-hop artists play with stereotypes to either subvert or

reverse them” (Dyson *That’s The Joint!* xii). Missing this subtlety and layered meaning, some audiences uncritically reproduce demeaning stereotypes.

This dissertation looks at alternative hip hop productions—theatre, concert stage, mainstream dance films and international dance competitions—that struggle with the problematics of race representations and the gender and class crisis at the heart of hip hop culture. Hip hop performance centers and decenters black masculinity, and as a dance educator and practitioner, I am most interested in how it does so through movement and the body. We will look at hip hop creators and the complex ways they define, represent, and appropriate black masculinity through hip hop performance. Some of them are black men who strongly represent black masculinity, modern griots of the performance stage. Others build artistically from the power of black men’s creations and push the aesthetic forms, but lose a critical cultural grounding because they are more invested in a multicultural inclusion. This is important because in today’s “colorblind” society, race appears to not matter, yet race disparities persist and anti-black stereotypes (black men as criminals, violent, and hyper-sexual) live on. We will see that hip hop performance, like other popular cultural forms, has a tremendous influence and pedagogical power regarding whether we perpetuate or disrupt racial constructions. We can easily get swept up in spectacular physical displays, but we lose disruptive power when “Everybody wanna be black,” but we are not willing to get up and get down.

### Hip Hop History And Scholarship

A response to the social conditions of the 1970’s, hip hop culture began in the urban neighborhoods of New York and developed from a long history of African

diasporic dance and musical sensibilities. While many different factors contributed to the birth of hip hop, hip hop grew from the creative practices of black youth searching for alternatives to the lack of resources available to them. Making “creative use of available materials” (Schloss 70), hip hop grew out of a collective black and brown youth culture that innovated creativity, enjoyment, and social critique through sound, body, and paint.<sup>1</sup> It began as a voice for the disenfranchised youth and despite disbelief in hip hop’s longevity, it continues to be that voice today.

Twenty some years after its birth, when cultural theorist Tricia Rose published her book in 1994, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, she argued for “the value and importance of hip hop” emphasizing the possibilities the music and the culture represented (*Hip Hop Wars* ix). Despite some critique and skepticism about rap and hip hop culture, she acknowledged the emergence of hip hop as a cultural movement and focused her attention to rap because “rap music brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society” (Rose *Black Noise* 2). A means of black youth cultural expression, rap was ripe for discussion. It was not another fad in the cycle of popular culture. Through their creativity and performance, hip hop artists brought attention to the discrimination and racist practices that continued to plague black youth despite living in a post-segregated America. They focused their attention on the decaying conditions of urban areas and the lack of public aid and employment opportunities available to people of color. Hip hop

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<sup>1</sup>Here I am referring to graffiti art.

<sup>2</sup>Phat Farm is the clothing line started by hip hop mogul Russell Simmons, most notably associated with Def Jam Records, Def Poetry, and model Kimora Lee.

<sup>3</sup>I have included a list of characters at the end of this paper.

<sup>4</sup>Usher is an R&B/Pop singer known for his dance moves. 50 cent is gangsta rapper famous for surviving multiple gun shots wounds in a drive by shooting.

was simultaneously an alternative counter culture that raised its fists against the establishment and way to party and having a good time.

While the DJ is credited to be foundational to the birth of hip hop, the dance element of hip hop culture played an important part in developing the shape of the culture. It was also at these DJ-thrown parties and dances that young people congregated to perform their dances and make names for themselves. Literally and aesthetically, b-boys and b-girls were renaming themselves and therefore “represent[ing] deep truths about their characters and personalities and their relationships to their peers” (Schloss 74). Observing African American culture in the 1940s Marya Annette McQuirter states that “social dance figured as one of the central arenas in which the process of identity formation became manifest” (81). The same can be said about the 1970s in the early stages of hip hop. Unwilling to conform to the structured group dances of the time, these dancers constantly reinvented themselves while simultaneously innovating the culture.

Since its inception, hip hop culture has crossed many geographical, racial, and cultural boundaries. With the release of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang in 1979, hip hop was popularized, packaged and spread outside of New York City proper and the commercial market for hip hop began to grow. With the development of technology, music videos, and the Internet, hip hop became more easily available and accessible to a mass audience. Even with its widespread involvement and acceptance by racially diverse youth, hip hop is identified with and continues to be associated with urban black youth. Scholars acknowledge that “despite the diversity of fans and artists on the commercial margins, the public struggle over hip hop is waged over the images, stories, and market power associated with black male and female bodies. Likewise the

language, style, and attitudes associated with hip hop are coded and understood and performed as ‘black’” (Rose *Hip Hop Wars* xii). Despite its prominent links with black youth, hip hop and black culture, became an attractive method of expression by non-black youth both nationally and globally. This attraction to hip hop is not unlike other attraction to African American art forms like Jazz and Blues. But as ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt argues, “(music) captures an ethnic identity of a group to create a context for understanding how the body represents both ethnic and gender identity through music. African Americans are stereotypically considered to be great dancers and singers, and that belief often collapses notions of race and ethnicity” (17), it is the ethnic, gender and racial formations of these diverse hip hop groups that helps us understand the central importance of black music, black culture, and hip hop.

Scholarship on hip hop has burgeoned over the past fifteen years and while most scholarship has been centered on rap music, the growing field of hip hop studies includes scholarship on dance, graffiti, and performance. In the summer 2005 special issue of *The Journal of African American History* titled “The History of Hip Hop”, guest editors Derrick P. Alridge and James B. Stewart acknowledge the range of scholars from various disciplines who engage hip hop. They state their contribution to hip hop scholarship begins with “examining the movement within the historical context of the African American experience.” Some of the special issue’s topics include: hip hop and previous social and intellectual movements, history of social and political ideas in hip hop, hip hop and gender in African American history and hip hop’s relationship to a variety of contemporary social ideas and theories. Although these articles approach hip hop from different methodologies they limit hip hop to music. Works like the special issue offer

important cultural frames of reference yet leave unexamined major areas of hip hop culture like dance and performance.

Another major text that informs my work is *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (2004). Perhaps an attempt at creating a "hip hop canon," *That's the Joint!* is a collection of essays that span history, space, gender, politics, aesthetics, and the technology of hip hop. Scholars (Forman 2000, Banes 1985, George 1993, Keyes, 2000, Bartlett 1994, Neal 1999) critically engage the impact of the hip hop movement, showing that hip hop scholarship has become less and less marginalized in academia. The texts are written by scholars and critics who profess their support of hip hop, acknowledging it as an extension of various African American traditions but at the same time scrutinize hip hop with the same critical lens as their other scholarly work. The journalistic writing included in the reader provides much of the history and environment at the time hip hop was emerging. These texts offer names, places, and topics important to the development of the culture. Particularly important is the documentation of Nelson George's interview with the three godfathers of hip hop: Kool DJ Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash. The article not only poses the question of authority on the subject of hip hop but also provides an archive of firsthand experience of hip hop's originators.

Other scholarship vital to my project are *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture* (2006), *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (2005), and *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (2006). Similar to *That's the Joint!*, these texts are a compilation of various authors. *The Vinyl Ain't Final* focuses on various global contexts of hip hop

culture and music, challenging perceptions of hip hop outside the United States in order to better understand hip hop at “home.” The scholars diffuse authenticity claims about hip hop roots but refrain from completely dismissing them in order to celebrate inclusion. *Black Cultural Traffic*, also engages a global perspective with an interdisciplinary in approach. The scholarship places hip hop in the larger context of black culture and how blackness travels globally in performance. Halifu Osumare’s concept of the “four connective marginalities” allows for an understanding of how global youth ground themselves to the origins through the “form of culture (Jamaica and Cuba), class (North African Arabs living in France), historical oppression (Native Hawai’i), and discursive construction of “youth” as a peripheral social status (Japan)” (268). Also useful to read blackness and masculinity in a hip hop context but also specifically on the body is Nicole R. Fleetwood’s article on fashion and masculinity. Her reading of a Phat Farm<sup>2</sup> clothing advertisement as invoking “an aesthetic of suburban sublime oddly in harmony with the markers of an urban, youthful, and racialized code” (336), complicates the phenomenon of hip hop dance in suburban dance studios. Fleetwood argues the transplanting of hip hop “reframes the B-boy and gang-identified tropes of visual culture and domesticates them by setting the models in the milieu of hip-hop fashion’s expanding consumer base—middle America, the suburbs” (337).

*Total Chaos*’ contribution to the scholarship of hip hop is seen through the book’s trajectory as it discusses and ponders what editor Jeff Chang calls the “hip hop arts movement” (ix). Unlike most scholarly articles and books on hip hop, *Total Chaos* is not

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<sup>2</sup>Phat Farm is the clothing line started by hip hop mogul Russell Simmons, most notably associated with Def Jam Records, Def Poetry, and model Kimora Lee.

centered on a discussion of rap music but features other elements of hip hop culture. Essays on film, journalism, and visual art bring different entry points to understanding and document the culture. Articles also include conversations and interviews with practicing artists, with articles written by the artists themselves (Jorge “Popmaster Fabel Pabon, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Danny Hoch, DJ Spooky, etc.) *Total Chaos* not only provides an example of where hip hop scholarship is headed to but also where I situate my work. As a scholar and artist, my work provides an analysis from a scholar and practitioners point of view. Importantly this overall literature on hip hop gives me a grounding to examine the relationship between culture and representation.

#### Cultural Ownership And Authenticity

Authenticity is a highly racialized and complex term in American culture. In the context of race and masculinity, authenticity imbues the subject with a mythic sense of virility, danger, and physicality; in representations of hip-hop, authenticity most often manifests itself through the body of the young black male who stands in for “the urban real (Fleetwood 327).

A major framework for understanding black masculinity in hip hop, has been the heavily loaded term “authenticity.” Arguments over authenticity and “keepin’ it real” are concepts that have risen to the surface. Some artists and practitioners are considered authentic while others are criticized for not “keepin’ it real” and selling out to mainstream culture. So what is authentic to hip hop culture? “Similar to the ways in which African-ness has often operated as an authenticating sign of blackness, “realness” becomes a crucial marker among black youth who embrace a hip-hop aesthetic” (West 169). Many will agree that hip hop’s authenticity is represented by the young black male but it often

occurs at the expense of shaping an image that is based on stereotypes of black culture. This image of authentic hip hop is most easily attached to performances of the hyper-masculine and “thugged out” artist such as 50 Cent and Ice Cube. Maintaining this “authentic” persona, rappers lyrics are misogynistic and promote violence. This image is packaged and marketed by the recording industry and bought as “authentic” hip hop.

Authenticity is also used a basis for claiming authority. Instead of accepting a received authentic definition of hip hop, artists such as KRS-One claim authority over hip hop and market themselves as the “real” hip hop. KRS-One does not embody the misogynistic thug image but rather claims authenticity through personal experience and proximity to the birth of hip hop. His messages are “real” in that they promote knowledge and critically look at the social conditions of black youth, aspects that are in line with hip hop’s conscious messages. Although KRS-One’s version presents a seemingly more positive “authentic” hip hop, his debated stance runs up against the tension of essentializing a wide spectrum of global culture. In general, discussions surrounding authenticity fail to resolve this tension. It is fundamentally an irresolvable tension.

Murray Forman analyzes hip hop culture's varied expression of the terms "ghetto," "inner-city," and "the 'hood," and how these spaces, both real and imaginary, have become social and geographic symbols that are crucial to perceptions of authenticity. Cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy notes “subsequent hemispheric or global manifestations of the same cultural forms got dismissed as inauthentic and therefore lacking in cultural or aesthetic value precisely because of their distance (supposed or actual) from a readily identifiable point of origin” (122). Erasing black

diasporic cultural links inhibits any legitimacy or authentic status for hip hop and black urban cultural productions in the United States.

A valuable contribution to the scholarship on authenticity, Robin D.G. Kelley in *Yo Mama's Disfunktional!* emphasizes the importance of culture and community as a means to discussing identity as well as creating an opportunity of ownership. One of his major critiques is the way social scientists were defining culture. By interchanging behavior and culture, their ability to understand how culture functions in black communities had been obscured and limited. Ignoring how cultural forms resonate with the practitioners, culture for these social scientists became ways of defining it as expressions of pathology, compensatory behavior, and coping mechanisms. As a result, the belief of an "authentic" black culture became the way in which the black community was defined. Kelley also frames his analysis in a political context to explain the reasons why social scientists placed so much emphasis on black masculinity to articulate "authentic Negro culture". Kelley instead emphasizes symbolic creativity, counter culture and the fluidity of cultural forms.

Such scholarship helps contextualize the reductive glorification of a particular version of black masculinity and can help understand the ongoing cultural struggle in hip hop. This scholarship has been very important to our thinking around race, power and representation yet with mainstreaming and globalization of the culture it has been more important to chart continuum reiterated racial systems and often hybridized and evolving strategies young black men employ to contest the system, than to pin down singular definitions of the authentic black man.

## Black Masculinity

Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images of that center on Black male bodies, namely, black men as inherently violent, hyper-heterosexual, and in need of discipline (Collins 158)

In 1994, Thelma Golden curated a series of representations of black men titled “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art” at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Separated into three categories: red, black, and green in reference to the black nationalist flag, Golden sought to present a range of images and interpretations of the black male and black masculinity. The exhibit was created to “explore how the changing representation of black masculinity reflects parallel changes in the ways the African-American men are viewed in this country” (Ross, David *Black Male*, 7), because “black masculinity suffers not just from overrepresentation, but oversimplification, demonization, and (at times) utter incomprehension” (19). In the exhibit, the red category included images that confronted negative stereotypes, the black category represented images of the black body, and the green presented the possibilities of different interpretations of masculinity. At the time, Golden’s curatorial exhibit received mixed reviews. Some commentators thought the images were “positive or uplifting,” yet others criticized the work for being unable to disrupt the stereotypes, for being “at once reductionist and offensive,” and for limiting the scope of black masculinity (George, Lynell).

Despite efforts like Golden's at the Whitney Museum to lessen racism and humanize black men, blackness and black masculinity continue to be narrowly defined and trapped in stereotypes. Black men continue to be racially profiled and incarcerated at disproportionate rates than whites and mainstream and commercial hip hop lift up the thug with trepidation. This is particularly resonant with the Trayvon Martin case. On February 26, 2012, 17 year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by George Zimmerman, a 29 year-old neighborhood watch captain. Although Zimmerman claims to have shot Martin in self defense, his debated statements, "Fucking punks" and "These assholes, they always get away", betray his presumptions about Martin, what critic Barbara Johnson calls "an already-read text", and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains as "the burden of being perceived through a stereotype....,the already-read text of debased-ness and animality" (*Black Male* 13). Zimmerman has since been found "not guilty" and Trayvon Martin has become another statistic of racial injustice and a young man who suffered from the consequences of the stereotype. Young black men, like Trayvon Martin carry the burden of being "already-read text". They "fit the description" because the stereotype precedes them, and efforts to defend themselves are re-read as the stereotype.

A profound yet complex moment in history, on July 18, 2013, President Obama spoke in response to the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman case, several days after the verdict was issued. The President stated that Trayvon Martin could have been his son or more specifically that Martin also could have been him thirty-five years ago. While his speech has received mixed reviews, Obama speaking *as a black man* makes his words particularly resonant. His speech acknowledges the black community's pain who are "looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away"

(“Remarks”). This history and these experiences, as Patricia Hill Collins states above, have attached and embedded images to black men and black bodies that reduce them to violent beings that need to be controlled. President Obama understands these images and stereotypes are the sources of oppression of young black males in this country. He asks, “What can we do for young black men?” because these images are not going away.

Scholar Linda Tucker also sheds light on the persistence of racial representations within popular culture that surveil and contain black men. Tucker argues:

The ongoing criminalization of black men through representation is apparent in the images that circulate in advertising, in film, and in the areas of professional basketball and hip-hop. Images from all of these realms make visible white America’s ways of seeing and managing its fear of fascination with black men. At the same time, images from these realms reveal the myriad ways that black men respond to and often resist the containment wrought by efforts to perpetuate notions that they constitute a class of criminals (4).

For Saidiya Hartman, this post-emancipation containment is enigmatic, but ubiquitous.

While racial containment and citizens having to contest it seem to be out of step with modern democracy there is actually a deeper, darker legacy of Americanism.

Although the Thirteenth Amendment abolished the institution of slavery, the vestiges of slavery still acted to constrict the scope of black freedom. It proved virtually impossible to break with the past because of the endurance of involuntary servitude and the reinscription of racial subjection. Rather, what becomes starkly apparent are the continuities of slavery and freedom as modes of domination, exploitation, and subjection (172).

Thus both in terms of representation and material oppression violent containment of black men carries the day. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, the historical distorted representations of black men coupled with newer images presents a daunting construction

of black masculinity. Even more nuanced representations like in Thelma Golden's exhibit run into the wall of these forceful constructions.

Hip hop scholars and artists particularly wrestle with the complex ways black masculinity is defined, represented, and appropriated through performance. Hip hop is an embodied site of contestation between the already-read text and physical containment on the one hand and the vitality of black expressivity and social life on the other. For instance, Bakari Kitwana points out that in the face of negative stereotypes and the proliferation of real social issues, hip hop provides, for new generations means to be educated and engaged in ways otherwise denied by the system. Scholar Todd Boyd argues that the power of hip hop is in the "embrac(ing) of contradiction as opposed to trying to make everything seem perfect, trying to make everything conform to a dominant moral idea" (151). The contradictions are historical, as in Hartman's terms, are political in terms of material disempowerment, and are scripted in conglomerated media, as in Tucker's critique of representation. At the same time, the systemic contradictions are necessarily internalized and negotiated by individuals who must cope with the hustle. At its best, these internalizations and negotiations generate transformative cultural expressions.

In this regard black masculinity is fundamental to the discussion of hip hop, performance, and the appropriation of the black male body. The expansion of hip hop to mainstream and global audiences allows us to see more why and how it has such great impact (Boyd 18). As Tricia Rose states, "We cannot truly deal with what is wrong in hip hop without facing the broader cultures of violence, sexism, and racism that deeply inform hip hop, motivating the sales associated with these images" (*Hip Hop Wars* 28).

Although participation in hip hop has been widespread, the image of the hyper-masculine black male stands as the authentic representation of the culture. Miles White in *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap and the Performance of Masculinity* argues, “The fetishism of the black male as the new antiheroic social outlaw in hardcore hip-hop is suggestive of how representations of the black male body have both been colonized for pleasure and financial gain while simultaneously enabling the rhetorical move that recodes crime as blackness” (5). This figure is desired by white males, and also stands as a hegemonic standard of authenticity of any who would seek entrance into the culture.

This historic contradictory obsession and repulsion to black bodies with the black (male) body both exoticized and feared is seen in hip hop with mass distribution and consumption of stereotypical and normative race and gender constructs. American Studies scholar George Lipsitz who has written much on hip hop music and culture, frames this obsession for blackness as a romanticism, a contradictory flattering yet extractive cultural appropriation that promotes a “possessive investment in whiteness”. “This romanticism contributes to the possessive investment in whiteness by maintaining the illusion that individual whites can appropriate aspects of African American experience for their own benefit without having to acknowledge the factors that give African Americans and European Americans widely divergent opportunities and life chances” (*Possessive* 120). This romanticization is clearly seen through white suburban youth consumption of hip hop.

Some people desire and perform the indicators of the blackness as “cool” aesthetics without really wanting to “be” black. Tricia Rose further elaborates, “Researchers have also shown that white fans of hip hop take up a color-blind approach

to the consumption of hip hop's black coded images, stories, and style as a means by which to retain the associations with progressive coolness afforded by black culture through hip hop and simultaneously avoid direct confrontation with their own racial privilege" (*Hip Hop Wars* 230). Cultural appropriators do not necessarily intend harm; often they are oblivious to the results of racial privilege and consumption. Their self-serving consumption of "cool" perpetuates an essentializing and reductive leveling of hip hop to blackness. In reduced fashion, hip hop is more marketable, distributable, and easy to consume. Here we see racial privilege in economic terms with the commodification of black culture and bodies for the benefit of white consumption, industry, and control. White desire and fantasy are fulfilled, at the cost of perpetuating these negative representations of black masculinity.

As principle creators of hip hop culture, black men have been able to innovate and exercise agency as contestation. In response to the "legacy of enforced passivity and negative identity" borne of slavery, Richard Major and Janet Mancini argue that black men have created "cool masculinity" or the "cool pose." Black men have created and used, the cool pose, a form of corporeally speaking back, as a coping mechanism to establish their identity and to counter their second-class status and positionality caused by institutionalized racism. We can center black masculinity in hip hop here as it zeroes in on the scenes where racial oppression and racial contestation play out on a very public and encompassing stage.

The Dancing Body

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, I'm interested in dance and movement. In her work on African American dance and hip hop dance, Katrina Hazzard-Gordon argues that different from other African diasporic dances, African American dances are cyclical in that they are constant revisions of dances of previous generations. (47). These dances "imbued with individual, socio-psychological, cultural, and political meaning" (55) also carry a history and mode of expression that is specific to the black experience. It is not just a body doing movement or dance. As dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild argues, "Africanist dance is symbolic movement. It may tell stories, but these stories are about the movement itself and about concepts—the body dancing its symbols" (*Black Dancing Body* 261). Both of these scholars provide a reading of black dance that centers the long history and depth behind the movement. Their work shifts the perceptions about the black body and highlights the importance of the body that performs these dances.

Katrina Hazzard-Donald also charts the ways in which hip hop dance deviates from the African American dance continuum as a male only expression and as a rejection of female partnering. It "celebrate[s] male solidarity, strength, and competitiveness" (510). Hip hop dance is one arena where males can circulate in a homosocial environment without implications of homosexuality. Dancing is not feminine but rather requires strength and skill. Male bonding can occur without questioning the sexuality of the dancer. Hazzard-Donald also argues that hip hop dance "encompasses a highly functional system of symbols that affect individual identity development, peer-group status, and intergroup dynamics and conflict" (512), all which affirm and identify black male strength and competition. A hip hop dance performance is not simply bodies in motion but is an enactment of identities, social collectivities, and interpretative

expressions that establishes a more profound role, function, and meaning of dance in hip hop culture.

Another important dance scholar, Thomas F. DeFrantz, argues that hip hop dance is a form of “corporeal orature.” Not only is hip hop dance a process of identity formation but according to DeFrantz argues, it is “tied to the construction of personal identity by dancers and the participating audiences who observe them” (70) He further argues that “social dance may contain performative gestures that cite contexts beyond the dance” and “the dancing black body, responding to and provoking the drumbeat, acts performatively against the common American law of black abjection” (71). In a struggle over presence and place, black creators through hip hop movement challenge simultaneously their discursive erasure, physical displacement, and the perpetual appropriation of their cultural lineage and labor.

Published in 2009, *Foundation: B-boys, b-girls, and Hip-hop Culture in New York* by Joseph G. Schloss is the first in-depth book on the culture of b-boys. Schloss argues that while many hip hop scholars acknowledge the importance of dance, few actually engage in discussion of the body for “fear of implying that the activity is not intellectual” (8). In contrast to other scholarship, Schloss emphasizes the necessity of understanding hip hop “*on its own terms*” (3). The problem for Schloss is the divide between scholars and hip hop’s practitioners and he places more emphasis on the physicality and the mind-body connection as the core of hip hop’s aesthetic. This text aids my work first in placing emphasis on the physicality of hip hop culture. Secondly Schloss’s work on b-boying provides a significant amount of useful detail on b-boy terminology, methodology, and process.

## Methods And Chapter Descriptions

NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival director and theatre artist Danny Hoch states “hip hop theater must fit in the realm of theatrical performance, and it must be *by, about, and for* the hip-hop generation, participants in hip-hop culture, or both” (“Toward A Hip-Hop” 356). Hip hop performance also “either employ hip-hop’s elements, comment on hip-hop culture itself, or address specific issues that affect the hip-hop generation” (357). Other practitioners like KRS-One define hip hop through claims of authenticity. With a similar approach to hip hop performance as in Hoch’s definition, for the purposes of this dissertation, I utilize a working concept of hip hop performance based on scholarship, practitioners, and my own experiences as a practitioner and teacher. Hip hop performance (1) contains one or more of the four original elements, (2) is dressed in hip hop aesthetics and vernacular style (e.g. language, fashion, battle form, and so on), (3) addresses hip hop generation themes, (4) manifests in the black male body (its literal or implied reference), and (5) grounds itself in black cultural roots, knowledge, and empowerment.

Using these five concepts in my analysis, I have chosen two stage performances and two films that include or center hip hop movement. I begin my work by centering two African American artists who are creating in theatre and dance respectively. Neither of these artists reject that deeper problems exist but rather engage and contextualize black masculinity through performance. Both present black male perspectives on black masculinity and race violence through “traditional” texts.

As one of the pioneer’s to hip hop theatre, playwright and actor Will Power’s work serves as an important contribution to the developing form. Chapter 1 analyzes his

work *The Seven*, an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. Performed at the La Jolla Playhouse in 2009, Power remixes the story of the two brothers Eteocles and Polynices using a hip hop cultural framework. Addressing themes of lineage and black on black violence, and the controversial use of the "n-word", Power offers an important critique of black masculinity and challenges stereotypes of the black male that continue to plague the representation of black masculinity in hip hop culture.

Chapter 2 also examines the representations of black masculinity in hip hop performance. Innovating hip hop dance for the concert stage, choreographer and dancer Rennie Harris addresses black masculinity by staging personal experiences. Through a combination of hip hop dance and language, Harris' staging of *Rome & Jewels* confronts demonizing stereotypes of black men. With cultural ownership and powerful movement, Harris proves that hip hop dance belongs on the concert stage and needs no watering down.

Reflecting the mainstream and globalized current trends of hip hop dance, the third and fourth chapters investigate the struggle between appropriation and countering black abjection. Chapter 3 critically looks at the (re)packaging of hip hop dance in the Hollywood dance film *Step Up 2 The Streets*. Presenting hip hop as a multi-cultural and inclusive dance culture, the film fails to deal with representations of race, class, and gender. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus primarily on *Step Up 2 The Streets* for its apparent reversal of gender dynamics as it centers a female protagonist.

Chapter 4 takes the discussion of hip hop dance, specifically b-boying, on the global stage. Looking both at the documentary *Planet B-boy* and its centering of the global competition Battle of the Year, the chapter outlines the split between the emphasis

on the aesthetics versus the cultural grounding of b-boying. Highlighting the skills of these global b-boys, both the film and competition present b-boying as universal. Many of these b-boys face discrimination and exclusion in their home countries but they rise in status as they go farther in the competition.

## **CHAPTER 1 – BLACK MASCULINIZING THE CLASSICS: WILL POWER’S *THE SEVEN***

In the opening scene of *Beyond Beats and Rhymes: A Hip-Hop Head Weighs in on Manhood in Hip-Hop Culture* (2006), filmmaker and activist Byron Hurt begins with the statement that he loves hip hop. While it may seem trivial, his affirmation for hip hop culture sets up the love/hate dichotomy in his critical approach to black masculinity. Hurt reveals what he calls “the box of manhood,” which includes qualities such as being strong and tough. Other indicators of manhood include “having” lots of girls and money, being a player or pimp, and dominating or controlling other men. To be outside of that box is to be soft or weak, or labeled as a chump, pussy, or faggot. These definitions of what it means to be a man perpetuate an impossible cycle and continue to create divisions in black male youth. Without questioning their own historical treatment or continued stereotyping, many black youth desire to be included in the box because of the appearance of power, even if that means “putting-on” a romanticized identity. Most speakers in Hurt’s documentary subscribe to this box, and either successfully or unsuccessfully perform this version of “manhood.” As the documentary continues, it is clear that male emcees and other men associated with hip hop perpetuate the existence of “the box”, drawing masculine ideas from society to avoid marginalization and being left out.

Hurt’s call to challenge hip hop’s representation of black youth is a response to the continual demonization of black males in this country. It is also a response to the Afro-Americanization of white youth, who attempt to reproduce black male styles in popular culture (West 1993, Kitwana 2002). Kitwana elaborates on this stating, “the

mainstreaming of rap music now gave Black youth more visibility and a broader platform than we had ever enjoyed before. At the same time, it gave young Blacks across the country who identified with it and were informed by it a medium through which to share a national culture. In the process, rap artists became the dominant public voice of this generation” (Kitwana, HHG 10). Despite negative associations attached to the black male body, black male entertainers were increasingly affecting the way youth fashioned themselves. The “gangsta” emcee or “thug” ball player was illustrious and emulated. Not only were young black males caught up in this specific representation of the black male, but young white males also romanticized the black male figure. And as rappers rhymed about street life and the glorification of violence, rap and hip hop became synonymous with this violence.

Central to Hurt’s discussion is the violence associated with hip hop. Among the emcees he interviews, Hurt questions Jadakiss of The LOX about lyrics of killing brothers. Jadakiss redirects the question back to Hurt asking him what kind of movies he watches, pointing out the violence not only portrayed in films, but also the culture of violence in American society. Even with attempts to redirect attention outside of hip hop culture, hip hop is continually targeted and critiqued for its hyper-masculine and violent messages. These same hyper-masculine and violent messages help sell records and attract the attention from young men. Many critiques of hip hop culture are rooted in an ignorance that is based in these commercial and commodified versions. Seeing only particular versions of hip hop, many “haters” base their complaints and arguments against hip hop from a limited perspective that glorifies negative stereotypes of black people and black culture while discrediting any positive contributions.

Rap has been attacked from all angles and scapegoated on the basis that it fosters violence, sexism, and criminality. By focusing attention on rap, opponents deflect attention away from the equally prevalent levels of violence, sexism and racism in American culture generally and in other forms of popular culture specifically. Such deflection shifts attention away from the ideologies, institutions, and practices that give rise to such problems and criminalizes the mostly black male individuals who produce rap (Tucker 132).

While hip hop culture encompasses more than these views, it is often the spectacular negativity that draws the attention of critics (and recording labels and crossover audiences) and many artists create work to shift these perceptions. One such artist is playwright and performer Will Power. A former emcee with the group *Midnight Voices*, Power has transformed his rhyming skills from rap to script. Working within the genre of hip hop, Power uses theatre and movement to explore the issues that continually plague the hip hop generation. His work, *The Seven*, an adaptation of the ancient Greek tale *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus, replaces the Greek family with a hip hop-era black family and contests the glorification of black on black violence. Rather than attributing the conflict to personal pathology and deviance, Power engages what educator Jackson Katz identifies as the systemic dimensions underpinning black on black violence and takes on the classics to challenge mainstream representations of black masculinity. I argue that Will Power offers an important but limited critique of the boundaries of black masculinity by challenging in multiple ways the distinction between black and classics, yet stopping short of answering his own fundamental question about how to end black on black violence.

*The Seven*

*The Seven* begins with the DJ introducing this modern remake of *Seven against Thebes*.<sup>3</sup> Serving as the role of the narrator or storyteller, she brings us to the urban world of two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, and how they are fated to carry out the curse of their father, Oedipus. Eteocles, the first born, is a cross between smooth-moving Usher and thugged out gangsta 50 cent.<sup>4</sup> At first, as he rises to power, the ladies swoon over him, but once in the position of power, Eteocles becomes arrogant and neglectful, becoming a fearsome ruler guarding his throne like a “gangsta holding his nine.”<sup>5</sup> On the flip side, his younger brother Polynices resembles a member of the group Boyz II Men.<sup>6</sup> More concerned with love, relationships, and balance, Polynices prefers to live a feel good life in the forest and not be troubled with relations of power. The third main character in this story is their father Oedipus. A 1970’s pimp-*slash*-James Brown, Oedipus enters the story through the top platform, flossin’70’s gear and a pimp strut. Using the sounds of blues, funk, and jazz, Oedipus reveals the curse that was prophesized on him and when banished by his sons, and proceeds to lay the curse on them, embodied in the word “nigga.” Convinced that their bond as brothers is strong enough to break the curse, the brothers agree to rule the kingdom switching from one year to one year with Eteocles taking the first year. But as the year comes to the end, Eteocles, who at this point has allowed the power of rule to take control, realizes that he enjoys being king and does

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<sup>3</sup>I have included a list of characters at the end of this paper.

<sup>4</sup>Usher is an R&B/Pop singer known for his dance moves. 50 cent is gangsta rapper famous for surviving multiple gun shots wounds in a drive by shooting.

<sup>5</sup>A nine is slang for a type of gun that uses 9-millimeter size bullets.

<sup>6</sup>Boyz II Men is a male R&B group that was popular during the 1990’s. Known for their sensitive masculinity.

not want to give up the throne. And even though Polynices would rather stay living in the forest, upon hearing of his brother's unwillingness to give up the throne, decides that he needs to return to Thebes and take his rightful place. The tension of the story increases as Eteocles calls upon psychics who reveal to him that Polynices plans to bring seven armies to fight at the seven gates of Thebes. As the battle plays out, one by one the seven are defeated with the brothers fulfilling the curse and killing each other at the end, a display of the recurrent nightmare of racial inequities and stereotypes, and a nod to the theological and biological racisms of the past/present. The DJ closes the play didactically by asking, "When are we going to flip the record? Remix it. Turn a problem to an opportunity" (Power 100).

#### Hip Hop: A Terrible Crisis

The use of the phrase "black-on-black" violence to describe violence within African American urban neighborhoods invokes images of poor and working-class Black men, not those respectable men from the Black middle class. The phrase also illustrates how the political economy of production, primarily the convergence of entertainment, news, and advertising, converge to produce a racial ideology that circulates in a global context (Collins 164).

From its birth in the Bronx during the 1970's, hip hop's beats, lyrics, and style have pervaded far beyond its New York boundaries. Hip hop has become one of the most powerful voices for the youth worldwide and hip hop culture serves as the common language. Despite hip hop culture's power and ability to transcend racial and global boundaries, critics across a broad spectrum criticize its elements of glamorized violence, crime, and misogynistic practices. This emphasis on spectacular negativity reduces a range of expressive, performative, and community building characteristics and conforms

to stereotypical images of young black males in a longer “history of association of blacks with ignorance, sexual deviance, violence, and criminality” (Rose *Hip Hop Wars* 39). Erased in this formulation is ghettoized youth throwing block parties, having fun, and fashioning creative outlets, as well as a deeper cultural lineage of black expression. Rather than praise young people for making do with their limited resources, critics focus on what they perceive as the negative impacts of hip hop. While criticism of hip hop can point to problems or areas that need attention, the criticism also reinforces discrimination against blacks and other young people of color.

For the most part, general perceptions of hip hop culture come from images and attitudes that circulate through the music. Some of hip hop’s earlier themes include depictions of life in the ghetto boasting of status and reputation, gear and fashion, and instruction on how to navigate through life.<sup>7</sup> Although a good portion of hip hop today continues to convey these messages, record company executives and artists emphasize themes centered on violence, money and sex because the image of an idealized cool “playa” is more attractive to mainstream audiences than themes that promote fighting the system.<sup>8</sup> In order to be recognized and gain record sales, emcees and performers fashion themselves to rhyme, dress and represent these ideas as act as purveyors of “authentic” hip hop culture. Evidence of hip hop’s shift to a commercial corporate-driven market, these images reinforce stereotypes of black youth and black culture. And for critics like

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<sup>7</sup>Some examples of these songs are: “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash, “My Adidas” by Run DMC, “I’m Still Number One” by Boogie Down Productions, and “Fight the Power” Public Enemy.

<sup>8</sup> The term “playa” refers to a male who claims that he is monogamous but is really sleeping around without the women knowing.

theorist Tricia Rose, this shift has brought hip hop to terrible crisis (Rose 2008, Kitwana 2002).

Many practitioners, contributors, and consumers mourn the loss of hip hop's positive message, and take up the crisis and debate around hip hop's status. Some have become disillusioned about the power of this youth culture and wait for its decline, while others continue to embrace hip hop's gold-star status as a global culture. However, both sides of the "hip hop wars" (Rose) need to recognize why those outside the culture are in control and that authenticity should be looked at with suspicion. Hip hop culture should be acknowledged for its complexity and cannot merely be analyzed in terms of its "commercial versus underground" or "industry versus of-the-people" definitions. Stuart Hall writes, "the danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas, they are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions, especially when they function in the domain of the 'popular' " (*Notes* 233). With hip hop's crisis, there are the supporters of hip hop who romanticize the power of hip hop on one hand, and on the other there are critics heavily emphasizing the violence and stereotype that it perpetuates.

Hip hop scholar Bakari Kitwana is also troubled with the effects of the crisis of commodification of hip hop culture and African American youth. Kitwana acknowledges that negative portrayals and stereotypes did not emerge from the development of hip hop culture but have been rooted in a longer history of the racialization of African Americans. These images and stereotypes, most visible in hip hop, have long circulated throughout society and "it is important to distinguish between the images of black men that circulate through rap and those that come to us through news broadcasts" (Tucker 136). Kitwana

argues, “young blacks have used this access, both in pop film and music, far too much to strengthen associations between Blackness and poverty, while celebrating anti-intellectualism, ignorance, irresponsible parenthood, and criminal lifestyles” (xxi).

Borrowing Stanley Crouch’s term “the new minstrelsy,” Kitwana points out that African American leaders perpetuate the crisis by being unwilling to criticize hip hop, afraid of alienating themselves from black youth and being called racists. And this has the effect of reinforcing “myths of Black inferiority and (insulating) the new problems in African American culture from redemptive criticism” (xxi).

Tricia Rose also examines hip hop culture’s links to “a powerful history of racial images of black people as “naturally” violent and criminal” (*Hip Hop Wars* 38) representing a “threatening black youth culture, that must be prevented from affecting society at large” (40). Similar to other scholars, Rose is not concerned with debating the origins of these issues, but rather is interested in how the portrayal of certain images negatively affects the music and the people that represent hip hop. “Historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors or promiscuity and violence” (Collins 152). These images denied Black men the power and wealth associated with the mind, associating Black men instead with the body.

Anti-violence educator Jackson Katz explains, young men growing up in this culture are bombarded with messages that “being a man means being powerful” (*Beyond Beats*). However, if one has no real power, the one thing a young man has, Katz continues, is “access to your body and your ability to present yourself physically as somebody who's worthy of respect” (*Beyond Beats*). This, he believes, is why young men

of color, as well as young working class white men, perform a hyper-masculine façade. Men that have actual financial, authoritative, and other forms of abstract power do not have to exert physical power because they exercise their power in other ways.

The means to attain power for young black males through their bodies is prevalent in hip hop. The “value attached to physical strength, sexuality, and violence becomes reconfigured” (Collins 153) and generates desire and fear. This contradictory obsession and repulsion of the black (male) body is seen both in mass distribution and consumption of stereotypical and normative race and gender constructs. And despite a broad participation in hip hop by multi-ethnic youth, the image of the hyper-masculine black male represents the authentic figure. This figure is desired by white males, and also stands as a hegemonic standard of authenticity of any who would seek entrance into the culture. While young black males struggle to exercise power through their hyper-masculine façade, white youth and other non-black youth are able to “wear” blackness without suffering the consequences of what it means to be a young black male. Black youth have to combat these fabricated images placed on them, struggling with a racial identity that creates boundaries and limits that others do not experience.

Performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson states that “blackness seems to have particular currency in popular culture, whether represented by middle-class white youths who embrace hip hop or well-intentioned liberals who, in an attempt at interracial bonding, appropriate black vernacular (e.g., “you go girl”)” (217). Blackness, as sometimes conflated with hip hop, for non-black bodies allows imagined connections across racial lines without compromising or losing the purity of their identity or place. As Junebug (Paul Mooney) in *Bamboozled* says, “Everybody wanna be black but don’t

nobody wanna *be* black”. Multi-racial hip hop youth desire and perform the indicators of the blackness as “cool” aesthetics. Tricia Rose further elaborates, “Researchers have also shown that white fans of hip hop take up a color-blind approach to the consumption of hip hop’s black coded images, stories, and style as a means by which to retain the associations with progressive coolness afforded by black culture through hip hop and simultaneously avoid direct confrontation with their own racial privilege” (*Hip Hop Wars* 230). Cultural appropriators do not necessarily intend harm, often they are oblivious to the results of racial privilege. Their self-serving consumption of “cool” perpetuates an essentializing and reductive leveling of hip hop to blackness. In reduced fashion, hip hop is more marketable, distributable, and easy to consume. As Mark Anthony Neal says, “the mass commodification of soul reduces blackness to a commodity that could be bought and sold—and this is important—without the cultural and social markers that have defined blackness” (95). Here we see racial privilege in economic terms with the commodification of black culture and bodies for the benefit of white consumption, industry, and control.

There are a lot of social problems (constructed as black inferiority) that are pinned on hip hop culture and the hip hop generation.<sup>9</sup> Hip hop often acts the part, perpetuating acidic representations of real social issues, but also has alternative and liberatory visions and knowledge. Rose suggests that hip hop critics and defenders center self-critique and sustained analysis of oppressive conditions, and also put forward healing and building visions based on “transformative love” (262). Kitwana emphasizes weakening the race

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<sup>9</sup>Bakari Kitwana credits the term “hip hop generation” developing and being used during the mid-1990s with his cohorts at *The Source* magazine. He also further defines the hip hop generation being born during the years 1965-1984.

line with more direct white audience engagement and utilization of the power and knowledge whites have to promote positive action in hip hop. Kitwana also calls artists to task to use support they receive and the positions they attain to advocate for improved structural conditions of aggrieved communities. Within their different approaches, both Rose and Kitwana agree that the stereotype of the young black male needs to be challenged and changed. Will Power takes up the crisis and offers important examples of how to make critical headway in a genre that does little to heal the disparities.

### Flipping The Script

Hip hop, from my perspective, is a vernacular style far removed from any connection to the theatre and borrowed here for some imagined jolt of vitality to a revered traditional text...In the scofflaw world of intimidation, drugs, crime, power and sexual exploitation so vividly explored in the rhythmic rhyming chants of hip hop, is there really any room for Aeschylus? Or for philosophical struggles with predestination? (Welton Jones, review of *The Seven*).

Using the classics to retell the story in a hip hop framework or placing a black narrative into a Eurocentric framework, *The Seven* by Will Power was criticized as a “(plopping of) the powerful old myth down into a contemporary urban sink where a furious, frustrated culture is devouring itself” (Jones). A self-proclaimed “old, middle-class white guy”, Jones, a reviewer for the La Jolla Playhouse’s performance, clearly places himself in opposition to hip hop and reveals his limited knowledge about hip hop, equating it to “intimidation, drugs, crimes, power and sexual exploitation”. Jones misses the connection of a culture based on orality and rhyme to that of Aeschylus’ “revered” and “traditional” text. Many classicists argue that the classics carry universal lessons and

messages that can be applied to all, however, these same classicists will be quick to disclaim that universality when it actually gets applied to black people.

Implying that *The Seven* regrettably attaches a thug mentality to the “revered” and “traditional” realm of theatre, Jones presents an utter disdain for black popular culture and the centering of young black males. “My sense of the hip hop culture, once I get past my personal repugnance for any activity so dominated with the exploitation of innocence that the pimp-whore relationship can be romanticized, is that of a magpie community, one that steals bright trinkets from more creative neighbors and arranges these in flashy patterns, then claiming substance” (Jones). Informed by extreme forms of commercial hip hop, Jones fails to see beyond the industrial surface of hip hop and it colors his ability to recognize Will Power’s artistry. Ironically, while Jones accuses hip hop for stealing, he seems to forget that the history of United States pop music is a history of white appropriation of black music and culture, as well as the original culture of violence in virtually all ancient Greek literature. And hip hop’s so-called stealing is actually a culturally rooted practice of citationality called sampling that simultaneously honors and remembers history and while innovating and adapting in the present. Jones’s continual discrediting of Power is not a mere dislike with the work and the performance but a reinforcement of broader patterns of racialized erasure that perpetuates racial violence. Dismantling Jones helps us recognize oppressive conditions at broader levels, and to appreciate Power’s unwillingness to accept a separate and less valued place to work out issues among black men.

According to Power, he chose to rewrite *Seven Against Thebes* because he saw “a story that echoed street themes of violence and brotherhood, abandoned families and

legacies of pain handed down from father to son” (Hebert). With hopes of making theater more accessible to a younger generation, a hip hop generation, he saw the opportunity to retell a story with a urban and modern revision. Using the form of hip hop for “it’s storytelling qualities, its way of creating outsized heroes and its capacity for sampling and remixing disparate elements” (Hebert), Power’s remixed and sampled version of the story is firmly established in an African American perspective. In the same didactic mode of ancient Greek classics, Power ascribes struggles and lessons to the black community and sutured it into an old history. Contextualizing the African American family within the African American cultural legacy, Power brings focus to how lineage re-establishes roots and provides a framework to understand black culture, and challenge reductive stereotypes.

Defined as “lineal descent from an ancestor; ancestry, pedigree” (*OED*), lineage provides a historical context instead of a narrow individual context where black on black violence is pitched as a result of poor personal choices. While there is no insertion of the word black or African American, such as “*black* king Oedipus,” the implications of an African American community are read through the characteristics and vernacular of Power’s Oedipus as he enters the stage. Oedipus refers to African American musical icons Robert Johnson and James Brown. In fact, during an audition at Occidental College in Winter 2011, Will Power insisted that Oedipus and his sons be performed by black actors despite the lack of black students available for casting. Amazingly, he would have changed one of the sons to a daughter if a black male actor could not be found. Inscribing the narrative with black culture through slight modifications of each character—how

Oedipus, as well as his sons, are cast, also make clear that this narrative is about the relationship between a black father and his black sons.

While maintaining Aeschylus' plot as the framework, Power establishes a black patriarchal, musical, and textual lineage. Patriarchal lineage is first established through the inclusion of Oedipus. Where Aeschylus omits Oedipus, Power asserts his presence. As a primary figure in *The Seven*, Oedipus provides historical background and context for the family curse. Power's Oedipus is overbearing, accusatory and divisive. His existence moves from the real, to dream, to a "voice" in each of his sons' heads. All the while he floats or lurks in the highest spaces on the stage. Oedipus "lives" on a platform, and his placement on the stage reinforces his dominance and the power of the curse.

This patriarchal lineage is furthered explored through an episode of Eteocles' nightmare. Retelling his nightmare to Right Hand, Eteocles explains that his father Oedipus is choking him. Unafraid of his father, he laughs off the struggle, thinking that it is between him and his father. However as the nightmare progresses, he realizes that the struggle extends through an infinite chain of forefathers.

'Cause he got some hands squeezing his neck too.  
 His Daddy Laius makin' my Daddy face turn blue  
 And Laius gettin' choked by his Daddy, and he by his Daddy  
 And all the Mack Daddys back to the beginning of time.  
 Choking each other on the family line.

Eteocles recognizes the chain of choking that has preceded him but his nightmare also identifies the choking through the following generations.

In front of me

I see

A son

-----

And all the Baby Macks stretching to the end of time

Choking each other on the family line.

By connecting to an ancestral past, Eteocles claims history and future, focusing on the connections of the male line. Power uses this dream sequence and his inclusion of Oedipus to both reinstitute a patriarchal line and to show that the legacy of violence precedes Oedipus and Eteocles and has the possibility of being passed on if not broken. The imagery of Eteocles' nightmare heavily references the legacy of slavery in which slaves were sold to different owners and taken to different plantations. Families in the slave context were broken apart, marriages were fabricated and dissolved, children were stripped from their parents, and nothing could protect black women from the whims of their masters. All of these acts of subjection had the additional, desired effect of minimizing black men's power.

Not only is lineage used in its most literal way through family line, Power establishes lineage by sampling the style and history of African American music. The chorus sings jazz, Tydeus sings the blues, the "Seven" sing gospel, and Eteocles raps his lines. This history of black popular music evident throughout *The Seven* is Power's ways of acknowledging lineage and history through musical traditions. George Lipsitz argues that popular music is a social history. An alternative to dominant history, popular music is "an archive of past and present realities and future possibilities" in one place, a place of hidden histories (*Footsteps* xv). Other scholars also argue that hip hop and rap come at

the heels of a line of black music oral tradition. Power not only utilizes the form of rap, black music's most recent form of orality but also incorporates its predecessors. "Hip-hop's continual citation of the sonic and verbal archives of rhythm and blues, jazz, and funk form and re-forms the traditions it draws upon... Hip-hop, moreover, draws not only upon African-American traditions, but upon its dense interconnections with black diasporic music, from dancehall to Afro-pop, from soca to UK funk" (Potter 26). There is an empowering history in black music and Power affirms black culture and identity by staging this musical lineage.

Power also uses sampling and referencing as well as a hip hop vernacular in his crafting of the script. A major component of hip hop music, "the practice of sampling expresses the impulse to collage that characterizes the best of black musical traditions, particularly jazz and gospel" (Dyson *That's The Joint!* 67). Sampling most commonly entails taking the bass line, the hook, or a shout from pre-existing song to be reworked into a new mix. Some argue that sampling is stealing and a form of plagiarism, however it has also been argued, particularly through hip hop's methodology, that sampling in fact celebrates its past and continues black traditions, carrying it into the future. "Sampling's flexibility gave hip hop-bred music makers the tools to create tracks that not only were in the hip hop tradition but allowed them to extend that tradition" (George *That's The Joint!* 439). Sampling allows hip hop artists to keep the circulating power of black music through its cyclical use.

In addition to sampling music, Power samples physicality and movement. His textual sampling has the characters narrate, rap, and sing bits and pieces of their black musical past, their lineage. For example, the soulful and funky Oedipus is a clear physical

sampling of James Brown's performance style. There is the use of the iconic sequence of a cape being thrown over Oedipus/James Brown as he is leaving the stage, only to flip back around and return to performance again. In addition to Oedipus, all performers reference other black cultural forms or artists. Sampling as a methodology offers an almost overpowering counter to Jones's, and the mainstream in general's relegation of hip hop to a static, pathological and inferior cultural status.

The DJ narrates the odd juxtaposition of hip hop and the classics that sampling handles so intuitively:

See I'm the one who make  
 Shakespeare jam with James Brown  
 Put Snoopy and Snoop in the same dog pound...  
 There are no two worlds  
 That I can't mix.

Power, the playwright, is the DJ, with the Greek classic on one turntable and hip hop broadly construed on the other. According to Robin Kelley, hip hop culture is "a hybrid that draws on Afro-diasporic traditions, popular culture, the vernacular of previous generations of Southern and Northern black folk, new and old technologies, and a whole lot of imagination" (42). In this spirit Power pushes his intervention through sampling. Through the script, characters, and performance, Power exposes racial hostility in the gatekeepers of classical theater, he claims Greek tragedy as source material available to black cultural producers, and establishes a base to flip the scripts of both Aeschylus and of black masculine violence in hip hop more broadly.

## Staging Institutional Violence

“The notion of violent masculinity is the heart of American identity” (Dyson *Beyond Beats*).

It is not surprising that Jones and others who know very little about hip hop continue to conflate hip hop and its practitioners with violence, criminality, and misogyny. Jones discredited Power’s play for the fact that hip hop equals “intimidation, drugs, crimes, power and sexual exploitation,” but *Seven Against Thebes* was just as violent. In Aeschylus’ version the brothers killed each other in the end, and, in Sophocles’ earlier trilogy, Oedipus killed Laius. Hip hop culture does not bear the singular distinction of depicting social pathologies like fratricide, patricide, and sexual immorality. We miss these parallels, as well as clear vision on the operation of racial scripts, when we uncritically elevate the ancient Greek and cement black people in cycles of violence and conditions of inferiority. Rather than responding to this stereotyping and segregation with a buffed-clean celebratory presentation, Will Power engages the violence in hopes of bringing the cycles to an end.

With many examples of extreme lyrics, it is easy to pigeonhole hip hop as violent. However it is important to take into account why and from where the violence stems. As stated in the epigraph, violence is a part of American society. Further elaborating, Tricia Rose argues:

The high levels of crime, police brutality, violence, drugs, and instability that define poor black urban communities are the direct result of chronic and high levels of concentrated joblessness, loss of affordable housing, community demolitions, the crack explosion, the impact of easily accessible and highly deadly weapons used to defend the lucrative drug trade, and incarceration strategies that have criminalized large swaths of the African-American population (*Hip Hop Wars* 51).

Where many “haters” cannot see past the superficial layers of hip hop, Rose points to the context of hip hop’s emergence. Young black males experience extreme and various forms of violence that often leave them with no options but to engage in that violence. And because successful hip hop is made synonymous with violence, to be “authentic” often means that one must behave and perform violently.

Power sets up the violence of masculinity in both the lineage and in the system. Oedipus represents institutional violence on the brothers, a beckoning of power to be used by each one against the other.

OEDIPUS Yo’ brother is weak!

You are strong

You gotta do this on your own

ETEOCLES

But we have peace!

OEDIPIUS Peace?

Nigga’ peace don’t make you free

It’s time to be who you supposed to be.

Despite the fact that everything is going to plan, Polynices vacating during Eteocles’ turn on the throne, Oedipus voices the difficulty people have sharing or giving up power, and the systems they create to make such gestures impracticable. At another point in the play, Oedipus appears to Polynices, disrupting his fulfilling life in the forest with insinuations that Eteocles planned to disrespect him and not give up the kingship on schedule. Reflective of the system, promised and attained power dissolves individuals’ moral

footing, families' functionality, and communities' links and ability to improve living conditions. Even in the highest seats in the land, *The Seven's* protagonists struggle as little more than crabs in a bucket.

Another character, Eteoclus is a white male cop who represents law enforcement, state violence, and institutional violence. His appearance strikingly sets him apart, immediately when he is introduced in Act 2.

Eteoclus-be-an animal breeder

As he gets near he strikes fear

Into the hearts a'men who go against him.

What is particularly interesting and also contradictory is that Power positions Eteoclus, the white cop, as one of "The Seven" and as an ally to Polynices. How can the embodiment of state violence against black people be an ally to the one he exercises his gratuitous violence towards? As he continues to rap, Eteoclus is further characterized as corrupt and unethical.

And all you got to do, is pay me well

And I'll put whoever you choose through hell

Throw 'em on the wall-spread 'em in a line

Take out my spear strike 'em 41 times

Then I'll say it was self defense because

We-can falsify evidence!

That way, you look good we look good

We be-the-protectors of the neighborhood, yo.

Eteoclus lets the viewer know that he can be persuaded by bribery to get rid of anyone even if they may be innocent. He also recognizes his ability to bypass the law and punishment because he is well aware of how the system works and how as a white cop he is not bound by the same rules and jurisdiction. Chilling is the reference to Amadou Diallo's 41 shots and the four acquitted policemen responsible for shooting him, as well as the countless incidents of police brutality that are couched under "self defense." Eteoclus, as a representative of state institutions, claims to protect the neighborhood, but in fact signals the history of racial violence.

Power also equates Eteoclus to white rap star Eminem. Using the technique of sampling style and lyrics, Eteoclus embodies Eminem emulating Eminem's high pitched and quick rattling, machine gun-like rhyming style exemplified in the highly successful single "Forgot about Dre" from *The Chronic*, 2001.

I can't wait, to get to Thebes

And be like mothafucka let me see yo' I.D. –please

Polynices, we ready to leave (Power 70).

A recognized white rapper validates Eteoclus. Eminem is one of the few white rappers who has been granted a "ghetto pass" and can claim authenticity. Power's association of Eteoclus as Eminem is a method to reverse his bad white cop status and leave the audience with images of Eminem. "His [Eminem] identity lets him have his chocolate cake and eat the vanilla frosting too: he can be white when it suits him, and not-white when that suits him" (Taylor 354). Eteoclus has to be cast as white because "only whites have the privilege of temporarily renouncing their generic identity and declaring themselves non-raced" (354). Eteoclus thus represents the forms of institutional violence

wherein whites do not have to follow the law, but remain in positions of defining and enforcing law, as well as not having to identify within the boxes and lines of racial segregation while remaining in the political and economic positions to exercise social mobility.

#### The Curse: The N-Word

“There is power in language, the power to make oppressors tremble, and more: the power to make them think” (Potter 14).

Power exemplifies the curse of black male violence through his use of the word “nigga”. A method to bring the audience into a state of awareness regarding the stakes of these two brothers, the word “nigga” is meant to signify the curse that is passed on from generation to generation. Power explains,

The word *nigger* holds so much power in our community. It is a hurtful and terrible word that offends many people. I have Oedipus shouting *niggas* at his sons to show how incredibly angry he is at that moment. In the original Greek play, Aeschylus uses a curse that was probably just as offensive to his audience at the time. That curse needs to slam home the fact that Eteocles and Polynices are doomed for their disrespect (La Jolla Playhouse).

Neal A. Lester, scholar of African American literature and culture, states that historically “negro” began as a descriptor with no value attached to it but shifted as early as the 17th century into “nigger” to be used to identify diasporic Africans in the U.S. who were confined to permanent inferior status. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “nigger” as “usually offensive, a member of any dark-skinned race, or a member of a socially disadvantaged class of persons.” Nigga, on the other hand, particularly among young black men and in hip hop culture, has come to signify “a popular term of endearment”

(Price/Lester). “*Nigga* became the dominant form with the emergence of hard-core gangster rap, as a particular expression of hip-hop around 1987” (Judy 106). Artists like NWA (Niggaz with Attitude) and the Geto Boys helped popularize the term *nigga* as a term to embrace, and reclaimed it to signify brotherhood and acknowledgment. The use of *nigga* has become a commonplace in youth culture that some claim has become a term of affection regardless of race or ethnicity. It is heavily used in lyrics of emcees and not only do non-black emcees also scatter the term in their lyrics but many non-black youth regularly include *nigga* in their daily vocabulary using it in varying degrees from the positive to the negative.

Despite a reclaiming and transforming of the word, “the poison is still there. The word is inextricably linked with violence and brutality on black psyches and derogatory aspersions cast on black bodies. No degree of appropriating can rid it of that blood-soaked history” (Lester *Teaching Tolerance* 47). While Power understands the redefinition by hip hop emcees, he also acknowledges the historical impact in society. He plays with the relationship between *nigger* and *nigga* but ultimately equates them both with the curse, aware of its power.

At first *nigga* is used as a symbol of power, Eteocles calls himself the H.N.I.C. - head *nigga* in charge<sup>10</sup>

I be the H.N.I.C.

The head *nigga* in charge

The boss, the Captain Crunch dog, the sarge

The M.O.B.B., the status - we large

---

<sup>10</sup> H.N.I.C. is the title of Prodigy’s solo album.

The guns, the drama, the love, the Mobb (Prodigy).

Here *nigga* represents status, leadership, and power. In the same manner of its use by hip hop emcees, *nigga* appears to enfranchise Eteocles reign as king.

When hardcore and thug rappers self-identify as “niggas,” there is inherent in it a sense of inverting this rhetorical pejorative; self-defining themselves by it but subverting both its meaning and spelling (from the conventional racial epithet “nigger”) converts the existential woe that induces shame and emasculation into a signifying trope of racial power, community, and resistance (White 72).

But because Power equates it with the curse, Eteocles as the H.N.I.C. eventually is doomed to fail. Eteocles redefinition does not exempt him of the destructive and damaging effects of the word.

Power also purposely has an overblown and satirical use of “nigga” and the excessive use of the word slipped from a seemingly empowering statement to disempowering, even forcing the DJ to resort to violence. The DJ says:

I swear if he say that word one more time

I’ma take off my shoe and whup’im like he stole something.

What she is responding to is Oedipus’ abuse of the word. Every time he enters stage, he shouts “Niggas!,” followed by “Do you all know who yall fuckin’ with? I’m the Original gangsta!” (Power 3). The irony here is that Oedipus is caught in the cycle. He is very commanding in his use of his word but is also rejected and refuted by the DJ.

Oedipus refers to everyone, in particular his sons, as “Niggas!” Appearing at his sons’ moments of contemplation, Oedipus manipulates them to believe that fighting and violence is necessary. He convinces Eteocles that as the older brother, he is more fit to be king and needs to continue his rule as king. For Polynices, he pressures him to be a man.

OEDIPUS. What?

Boy you ain't shit

Your people, the people of Thebes

They strugglin' Polynices

And you out here in the forest eatin' berries and shit

POLYNICES. So, I don't care how people see me

OEDIPUS. I don't either

But ya can't run from destiny

Less you a nigga

A nigga will run

But a man

A man accepts responsibility

Now which one are you, nigga? (Power 48).

Oedipus devalues Polynices' alternative choice and emphasizes his inability to change.

Oedipus' view represents society's view towards the black man. It appears that Polynices has choice but is ultimately bound by the Greek tragedy. Power creates an opportunity for choice, giving Polynices agency, but Oedipus' proposition shows that he has no agency.

He cannot be a man. He already has been and always will be a *nigga*, the ultimate already-read text.

Polynices and the Forest Are the Alternative

“You break the curse when you stay with me” (Tydeus *The Seven*)

The opportunity for choice and change is presented through Polynices, Tydeus, and the forest. An alternative life open beyond heteronormative relationships, Power's remix challenges hip hop's image of the black masculine through the inclusion of a same sex partnership. Power's lineage also challenges the gender constructions of a heteronormative patriarchal line. Polynices, for example, is the softer and more sensitive of the two brothers. Unlike Oedipus and Eteocles, he exercises an un-self-serving love to Tydeus. Power really diverges from the stereotype of the hyper-masculine and homophobic black man, especially prevalent in hip hop, by creating Polynices as a gay man who practices yoga and prefers to be in nature. "Representations of Black masculinity of the "punk," the "sissy," or the "faggot" offer up an effeminate and derogated Black masculinity....Often the representation of the gay character works to support the heterosexuality of other males" (Collins 171). Taking a different approach, Power rewrites Polynices not as the support but as another example of black men. Polynices is not the weaker brother because he is gay but is presented as another perspective on black masculinity that includes the black gay male as an equal. Polynices is just as powerful, intelligent, and attractive, if not more than Eteocles because he is able to move beyond the confinement of "hyper-masculine" and sexist black male.

For the most part, Polynices is not caught up in the lust for power as his brother, but operates through love of self and others. This characterization and acceptance of Polynices as non-heteronormative is especially important as a counter image of the black male in the context of hip hop. Vershawn Ashanti Young in *Your Average Nigga Performing Race Literacy and Masculinity*, speaks to the "burden of racial performance" to acquiring an authentic racial identity. As a gay educator with a PhD, Young takes to

task hip hop artists who denounce “faggot-gender in order to secure his nigga masculinity” (60), stressing the importance of liminality and of not essentializing performance of race, class, gender, sexuality, and education level. Power does a great service to challenging hip hop normativity by not pathologizing his representation of Polynices, and it is only when Polynices is affected by the curse, via Oedipus, that his desire for power grows and his life falls apart.

Power also attempts to disrupt gender constructions through the character of the DJ. In hip hop there are only a few well-known female DJs and Power explicitly calls for a female to play the role of the DJ. “I don’t want to generalize, but I feel there’s something about feminine energy as opposed to the masculine energy of the old, the conqueror. Also in hip-hop, there are *not* a lot of female DJs... That’s something that can be a revelation and show people new ways into hip-hop culture” (Power “Hip-Hop Visions”). Power gives voice to a woman, as the narrator, the DJ retells the story through her eyes. She controls how the story is mixed. The DJ is the ground zero of hip hop, and sets the tone through the beat. Tricia Rose reminds us how easily the beat can be manipulated to promote gender violence in the forms of misogyny and sexism, as well as how important transformative love is for abolishing violence from hip hop (262, 270). Power improves the figure of the Greek chorus with the woman DJ—the historical and cultural bearer, the archive, and the (somewhat cliché Rodney King-style) voice of peace.

## Conclusion

In his work to establish lineage and to show that violence is not an inherent component of African American culture, Power ultimately shows the limitations of the

Greek tragedy and critiques the concept of fate. The classics do not allow a way out of the cycles of black on black violence and the “curse” of the n-word. At the climax of the play the brothers kill each other because neither of them reinforce their life outside of the systems of power, and even the perfect, non-heteronormative life with Tydeus is not enough to divert Polynices from fate.

Inclusion of the female DJ opens up an opportunity but another possibility for change could have been developed through the character of Antigone. In *Seven against Thebes*, Antigone is harassed for publicly declaring that she will give her brother Polynices a proper burial. The significance in this is that unlike Eteocles, Polynices was deemed a traitor and therefore not fit for a proper burial. Antigone “not ashamed of this anarchic act of disobedience to the city,” disobeyed, fighting for what she believed unjust (Aeschylus 128). While his arguments that by including Antigone would be “getting into the next chapter of the story of their family” (NYTW) and thus making the play longer, by taking out her voice, Power removes a viable alternative ending. Antigone symbolizes choice and a way out of black on black male violence by disrupting the privileged homosocial space of patriarchy. By selectively choosing which parts to keep and which to take out, Power undermines his own desire by removing that possibility.

*The Seven* asks the viewer to make conscious choice, despite the fact that fate rules the outcome of the brothers’ deaths. It provides a window into the cycles of black on black violence by offering important ways of thinking about lineage, language, and legacies of African American culture. Power flips the record in hopes of finding solutions. While Power’s hip hop version may have not provide the ultimate solution to an ongoing legacy of disenfranchisement, he offers an important counter-mainstream

framework that centers black cultural agency. *The Seven* has significance far beyond what was criticized as an inferior self-destructive African American culture incapable of reaching the perfect “universality” of Greek classics (Jones). Like Oedipus’ family, though, Power’s black Oedipus family cannot triumph over fate. Lineage, sampling, and reciting “nigga” as the curse—all core methods of hip hop expression that give body to black masculinity—make up the core of *The Seven*, and critically re-frame black on black violence. And even though we don’t see a resolution to the fallen brothers on stage, Power’s remix form is an excellent and instructive instance of appropriation of the classics by hip hop culture.

## CHAPTER 2 – DANCING ON THE CROOKED LINE: RENNIE HARRIS CORPOREAL GRIOT

“The dance doesn’t mean something else or give another message – it *is* the message” (Gottschild *Black Dancing Body* 273).

In a San Diego Union-Tribune article on August 20, 2006, dance critic Janice Steinberg questioned the ability for hip hop to sustain its “edge” in its growth and development on the concert stage. In the article, then artistic director of ArtPower! at the University of California, San Diego, Marty Wollesen expressed concern that “in trying to appeal to theatrical audiences, hip-hop may ‘mutate’ beyond recognition. He points out that, rather than just being an issue of how hip-hop is presented, the audience also needs to grow and change” (Steinberg). This shift in hip hop that Wollensen speaks of is demonstrated in many contemporary dance companies that incorporate hip hop movement into the construction of their dances but are often unrecognizable as “hip hop”. The hip hop movements become either very abstracted or set outside of a hip hop aesthetic so that audience members have little ability to engage in the culture. Without engaging the culture and the deeper meanings layered into the expression, the stereotypes, like that of the hyper-masculine, sexualized and violent black male, prevail as a default. This critical work is some of the most important work to be done on the concert stage.

One company that engages the culture and challenges audience to evolve is Rennie Harris Puremovement. Grounded in hip hop aesthetics, movements and messages, Rennie Harris Puremovement has distinguished itself for its high energy and virtuosic hip hop choreography, its reflection on the black experience, and its dealing with themes of heritage, racism, and spirituality. In her dissertation on sampling blackness in hip hop

performance and visual art, Nicole Hodges Persley argues, “corporeal transmission in dance is much like an oral history except the body is used in corporeal histories instead of the voice” (279). Where other companies have combined hip hop with contemporary dance movement, Harris presents hip hop in its earliest forms coupled with new and emerging hip hop dances to engage in this type of corporeal transmission. With an inability to perceive hip hop beyond its reduction to rap music or spectacular moves, many observers lose the message in the movement. Hip hop dance ranges from subtleties and intricacies, to full-bodied movement, and Harris utilizes all of these layers. However, Harris’ corporeal transmission is not simply a corporeal history of hip hop dance, but through the concert stage he innovates the movement, the presentation, and the production of both hip hop and the concert stage. He defines hip hop as the expression, the voice, the continuance of resistance after the Vietnam War and Black Panther Movement. Harboring resentment for negative statements that hip hop was “not real dance”, he took on an attitude that would prove to its critics that hip hop movement and culture were relevant and connected beyond what the critics were capable of seeing (Harris, Jan. 20, 2011).

Hip hop culture values participation not a passive distant gaze. In this regard, it fits within other aspects of African American culture. Brenda Dixon Gottschild argues, “Unlike the praise dance and liturgical dance movements of today, the Ring Shout was made to be experienced, not observed” (*Black Dancing Body* 273). While there is tremendous thrill in seeing the spectacular hip hop dancers and b-boys, to be valued one must get into the cypher and demonstrate that you are a part of the community. Freestyle and call-and-response are cornerstones of this community practice with dancing by

responding to the music, to your opponent, and to your environment. This cultural performance is clearly different from the classical proscenium stage. Rennie Harris' work brings the concert stage audience one step closer to the cypher by staging the lineage of hip hop movement, by breaking the fourth wall, and by directing challenging stereotypes of black masculinity. In this chapter, I argue that Rennie Harris Puremovement's performances can help better understand the complexities of hip hop culture, black masculinity, and race and gender representations. As a corporeal griot, Rennie Harris challenges stereotypes of black masculinity through his choreography and staging of the black body.

### Hip Hop Dance

In her article "Dance in Hip-Hop Culture" (1996), dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains shifts in African American dancing in relation to migration from the rural to the urban. She argues that while the agrarian influence is still seen through the dances today, African American social dance began to take on more urban characteristics such as more "upright postures", "less flat-footedness", and dance names that "reflected a new urban reality" (506). The structure shifted from group and community circle and line dances to the single couple, with emphasis on sexual coupling" (506). Reflecting on the optimism, opportunity, and Americanization of the time, movement in the migration era evolved into more mobile, more complex, and smaller units. But as we know, the boon was temporary and "Black men's lives were considerable less stressful and economically insecure than they would later become" (507).

By the 1960s the optimism around positive social and economic conditions began to fade, challenged by major deindustrialization and an increasingly racial hostility. An “uprooting of U.S. industry, marked by corporate flight and the move to a service-based economy”, resulted in increased joblessness for many of the black migrants who had relocated pursuing a better life (508). The Civil Rights Movement failed to deliver political and economic transformation for African Americans (Lipsitz) further weakening families and communities. This climate birthed hip hop culture. Public funds were being cut and social programs were being privatized, creating an environment of urban institution and systemic hostility towards black and brown youth. If the movement of the early stages of hip hop expressed the frustration and aggression of youth, then it can be argued that there was less room for the romantic and idealized partnered dances of the earlier rhythm and blues era.

With a shift from partner dancing to solo dancing, albeit within a cypher, a significant change in early hip hop dance highlighted a gender split. The performative space became increasingly homosocial, and men could dance with each other without any stigma. “Hip hop dance permits and encourages a public (and private) male bonding that simultaneously protects the participants from and presents a challenge to the racist society that marginalized them” (Hazzard-Donald 512). The dancing became a space for young men to express themselves and a space where they could feel empowered, even if it did not help them address the gendered forms of racism that affected their communities more broadly. It was a space where they had a place and a voice.

Since the publication of Katrina Hazzard-Donald’s 1996 article, hip hop dance has evolved significantly. Often the dances emerge from different regions or

neighborhoods. Some prominent examples of these emergent hip hop dances include South Central Los Angeles clowning and krumping of the early 1990s, Chicago footworking of the late 1990s and more recent social dances like the cat daddy, the dougie, and the nae nae. With technology's more easy production and the internet's ease of distribution, this evolution of hip hop dance only promises to intensify in the future. The proliferation of these dances characterizes the lexicon, such that when a dancer samples or cites specific moves she or he can translocate. This corporeal transmission maintains a cultural and community fabric that undergirds all these changing forms.

One of hip hop's original four elements is the b-boy/b-girl. Interested in dancing to the "break" of the record, these dancers influenced DJ Kool Herc, one of the godfathers of hip hop and host of the seminal block parties in the Bronx. Herc took two copies of the same record in order to loop the break and extend it, "back-cueing a record to the beginning of the break as the other reached the end, extending a five-second breakdown into a five-minute loop of fury" (Chang *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 79) into what he dubbed "the merry-go-round". For instance at the 1:40 mark of James Brown's "Get on the Good Foot" the guitar and horns drop out and the locked drum beat grounds a groovy walking bass solo, a perfect moment to extend for energetic effect. From a dance style that was upright in its infancy, b-boying quickly dropped down and brought body parts into contact with the floor. B-boying included stylish sequences of movements of the feet with accentuating arms (toprock), movement on the floor with hand and feet (downrock/floorwork), acrobatic and full-bodied sequences (power moves), and suspending or halting of the body in unnatural ways (freezes). Even though there are b-

girls, b-boys have dominated the form ensuring it remains tied to hyper-physical masculinity.

While b-boying was being developed on the East Coast, West Coast African American youth were also creating movement styles that would later be incorporated under the umbrella of hip hop culture. Boogaloo or popping grew out of Sam “Boogaloo Sam” Solomon’s innovation in combining steps and movements that included “sharp angles, hip rotations, and the use of every part of the body” (Pabon 23). Popping’s foundational movement consists of contracting the muscles in the triceps, forearms, neck, chest, and legs. The movement is sharp, staccato, and definitive, and would often be interlaced with waving, gliding and tutting.

Locking, often mistakenly joined with popping, is credited to Don Campbell whose moment of pausing became the foundational element to the dance. This accidental pause, named the lock, was in direct correlation with the music. Primarily danced to funk music, some of the more prominent movements in locking are the points, the funky guitar, and wrist twirls. Locking was a quick paced dance that had a lighter feel in both the expression of the movement and the style of dress.

Another style of dance developing around the same time, house dance grew out of the club scene in Chicago and New York. This style of dance combined fast footwork with fluid torso that was driven by the brisker beats per minute than rap music. Many of house practitioners were drawn to the improvisatory nature and brought in elements of other existing dance styles such as voguing, waacking, and b-boying. House dance varies from focusing on the rapid movement of the feet in relation to the music, to the

contracting and flexing of the torso and is often described as more sensual and freer movement that is neither gendered male or female.

As hip hop dance was a means of expression for the youth during the 1970s, regionally the youth of hip hop were simultaneously creating and continued to develop their own dances. This form has been a crucial site of corporeal transmission for African American youth. In these four examples, it is possible to see that in the lineage of hip hop that there is no strict line that defines one dance feminine and another masculine. As we will see, hip hop dance embodies and practices black masculinity as a range of masculine and feminine.

#### Rennie Harris Puremovement

As an African American choreographer, Rennie Harris' hip hop dance work focuses on but is not limited to themes that center the black male perspective. They are a reflection of his personal experience and his "cultural lens" (Harris interview). He began as a street dancer well-versed in the style of popping, including a movement vocabulary that incorporated b-boying, house, and hip hop. Early on, Harris distinguished himself and was recognized by a group of older boys who handed him their group name, and he became the organizer of the The Scanner Boys.<sup>11</sup> The Scanner Boys had approximately fifteen members and was prominent in the battle circuit. After extensive performance opportunities, including touring with some of hip hop's greatest rap groups and MCs as

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<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Harris, he differentiated that the fellas he danced with were a group and not a crew. At the time, the label "crew" was associated to gang members.

part of the Fresh Festival, Harris began the shift to creating work with his new group Puremovement (1991). The Scanner Boys performed for the city of Philadelphia, on the concert stage, and in the streets, and this made Harris' transition to the concert stage with his company Puremovement seamless. Also due to the fact that no one was hiring poppers, lockers, and breakers as it was becoming passé, this move proved to be the next step in Harris' career. All these different factors led up the moment where he received a commission to create a 45-minute length work, a huge jump in that he was in the practice of only creating 10 minute pieces.

With the final performance of The Scanner Boys in 1992 and the birth of Puremovement, Harris "hit the ground running". At the time of the commission he did not consider himself a choreographer, as it was not separated from his identity as a dancer, but the commission offered an opportunity to delve deeper into the role of a choreographer. To Harris it was just another gig and "the best part about street dance is that no matter where you are, for us at that time, it could be done anywhere so the stage was just another place for it to be done" (personal interview). His work was initially received with skepticism from both his peers and audiences. His peers did not understand why he was given opportunities for doing the same street dance that they were. His audiences did not believe that what he was doing belonged on the concert stage. Harris followed the rules of hip hop and adapted to the environment into which he was invited, but his changes caused his peers to critique him for not doing "real hip hop".

From polarizing statements ranging from "not real hip hop" to expecting "real hip hop", the audience made assumptions about his work. Harris recounted that his audiences had difficulty dealing with "anything specifically emotional or range of emotion other

than it being celebratory and people flipping all over the place doing acrobatics” (personal interview). Audiences would walk out of his performances as, “they were coming to the circus because they heard hip hop dancers were coming” (personal interview). The preconceived ideas about Harris’ work, blurred by mainstream media relegated that hip hop as concert dance could only be presented as an acrobatic, thrilling form of entertainment. Hip hop’s contribution to concert dance was only through a spectacular display of black bodies (and other bodies) providing a cathartic form of ecstasy. With this knowledge, Harris would place his dramatic, contemplative, and deconstructed work or what he calls “out there for hip hop” work at the beginning of the show, followed by his more celebratory physical displays. He made audiences fully face his work, and challenged audiences in how they were defining hip hop. He recalls one critic saying, “If you can get through the first half, the second half is great.” For many audiences, the hip hop black male body was an already-read text that should move in a highly physical way but not be heard. The media fed the problem, presenting hip hop to general audiences so they thought they knew what it really was. This in turn “kicked him back five to ten years,” making Harris feel like he had to make very basic presentations of the culture, or dumb it down (Which he did not do!).

One difference Harris encountered in bringing hip hop to the concert stage was audience affirmation. Coming from the African-American cultural and hip hop tradition of participant verbal response, Harris was expecting this type of affirmation in his first concert stage performance. To his dismay, the audience was silent. The difference became more pronounced as the age, race and class dynamics were different from what he was use to. Through that experience he decided that his dancers would not depend on

audience participation and recognition but that they would perform for themselves while still maintaining the format of the cypher and inviting the audience members to instead be participants. The dancers' attention would be on each other and their responses to the movement, and at the same time the audience could enter and participate on its own terms.

Dance historian Suzanne Carbonneau explains:

The call-and-response structure of the dancing is the heart of hip hop, affirming the form's affinity with communality rather than with an individualized ethos. Likewise, improvisation, which is at the heart of hip hop—as it is of all African-derived dance and music forms—by its very nature puts demands on the performer to continually push the self to places that it has never been before. It is the means for journeying toward the sources of creation, exhorting the performer past the physical and toward the spiritual.

Although Harris' Puremovement have been performing for over twenty years, he feels that sometimes the audience does not make the connection, indicating that Wollesen's challenge that the audience “grow and change” has not been fully realized.

In one of his earliest solos “Endangered Species”, Harris discovered a method for his hip hop dance and theater hybrid. An autobiographical piece “Endangered Species” chronicles Harris' own precarious and violent experiences, and cemented Harris as a corporeal griot. Harris explains:

Really, honestly, this is the piece that in everything that I do, I use as my template. Because it's the one piece that marries hip-hop and theatre in a very simple way. I call it the “ED Factor”—the “Endangered Species” Factor: when people watch this, are they thinking about the choreography, or are they engulfed in the story? How can you get people not to think about the movement? 'Cause if you got them thinking about the movement, then they're not paying attention to the whole piece (Chang “The Pure Movement” 63).

The opportunity to move to the concert stage has allowed Harris to go beyond the youth centered and often hyper-masculine aspects of hip hop dance. Harris recollects the

pressures he saw around him:

A guy could not even do much on the dance floor, but just the way he did it made people just love it—he was the man. All the guys around him would want to imitate him—I mean, you see a guy who can dance, people are naturally attracted to that. So in that way, there weren't negative stereotypes about men dancing, at least not most of the time. But there's a perception about a man in the black community, that if you're still spending a lot of time dancing at a certain age, maybe after you're 18, I think you'll get questioned, like 'Why don't you have a job? You can't dance all your life (Fisher 113).

Dancing here would not be considered gender normative yet Harris consistently expands meanings of black masculinity. For instance, he centers house dance because, "Out of all hip-hop, House is probably the one dance that allows you to be feminine and masculine at the same time, and you're not considered anything less than a man, because it's such a freestyle dance, a different aesthetic" (Fisher 116). In order to be effective in conveying dramatic dance and theater, its subtlety, swings, juxtapositions, and variations, Harris draws in an appropriate range of movement from the hip hop vernacular.

To some extent this style is what Harris calls the "the crooked line". An affirmative and core African American cultural sensibility, the crooked line marks the oblique inflections always aspired to in African American expression. Harris explains:

It's like that original aesthetic of jazz. That crooked line. That fucking offbeat, that twist, that's what's the hepcats did, that lean. That walk. That's all African American... You wanna see who Black people is? That diagonal right there. We're not gonna get anything straight. Not to say that being straight is being negative. I'm saying, there's no fun in that. There's no lesson in that. Everything that we do is like walking that line of, "Damn! Do we go straight, or do I just make this left over here and figure out where I'm at and get back on path?" In Western construct, they want to glorify the structure, the line, as the guideline, and we like to look at our line as a guideline, not a god-line (Chang "The Pure Movement 66)

In the concert context Harris applies this crookedness to both the stage and to hip hop

culture. Brenda Dixon Gottschild calls his movement a combination of “the freeze-frame angularity of ‘Electric Boogie’ and the staccato, up-tempo vocabulary of house dancing with his own fluid style” (*Digging* 159). This is the corporeal transmission of lessons from the margins.

Rennie Harris is unapologetic about his work. Using the n-word and curse words in his productions, alongside really powerful messages and incredible dancing, you get all of Harris, not just a containable and “proper” concert dance Harris. His work is not limited to stereotypes of black males although often he is criticized by those definitions. “It is remarkable and paradoxical that Harris infuses the stereotypically hard-edged hip hop dance vocabulary with a sensual, embracing presence. His work defuses the Eurocentric trope of the violent, nihilistic black man and shows a range of feeling in the movement vocabulary and the individual dancers, with rage as only one of its facets. The dancers expose their human frailties while celebrating and flaunting their strengths” (Dixon Gottschild *Digging* 159). He has an approach to how culture factors in creating work but also engages his own African American male perspective. His work deals with yet exceeds many themes that taint black masculinity. In terms of his own “three laws of hip hop”, he accomplishes much: as an innovator, an individualist, and a creator, inspiring others to expand the form as he demonstrates his artistic and commanding voice.

Centering Saidiya Hartman, the concert stage could always be seen as scene of subjection. Even though Harris has an extensive liberatory and philosophical comprehension of his productions, the very fact that audiences still do not get it, shows that he is an already-read text, and is subjected to interpretations beyond his intentions.

At the same time, Harris' work functions as a form of redress and remembering that soothes Harris' and many others own subjection. In analyzing the juba songs of enslaved Africans, Hartman says, "The form of redressive action at work in juba involves using the body for pleasure and protesting the conditions of enslavement" (71). Contesting multiple subjections from outside (concert dance world) and inside (hip hop culture), Harris' template provides a rich optic onto the tokenizing objectification of his powerful cultural embedded dance.

Prior to the company's first evening-length work *Rome & Jewels*, Rennie Harris Puremovement only performed several shorter pieces and according to Harris, the presenters always requested that "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" be included in the performance. At first, for Harris, the requesting of the all male piece was not a surprise. As one of his most celebrated piece, "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" displayed high energy, group unison movement, and an incredible amount of stamina from the dancers. Originally created with women, it was not until much later Harris understood why people wanted to see it as it was performed by a shirtless, all-male cast. Instead of his company members performing hip hop dance, the performance became an objectifying display of the male members whose muscular and defined bodies were made available for consumption.

Based on the performances of "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" critics began to make assumptions that Puremovement was an all-male company and some began to accuse his work of being misogynistic. In light of mainstream stereotypes of hip hop, we can easily see how this hyper-male display could be interpreted as such, at least on the surface. For a company that has always included women all but one of its twenty-two

year existence, it is ironic that his work would be labeled misogynistic. While the inclusion of women does not automatically rule out misogyny, Harris' work is far from a degradation of women. Rather Harris is very self-critical of the male, investigating the male perspective and setting both male and female dancers to convey his messages that necessarily blur the boundaries of masculinity and femininity.

In reflecting back, Harris saw how the performances of his work like "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" and *Rome & Jewels*, categorized him as misogynistic and although his work was not gender specific, he began to create work that featured the women in company in different ways. Much of his earlier works center the black male perspective, but two of his works *Facing Mekka* (2003) and *Heaven: A B-girl Ballet* (2011) specifically feature the female members of his company. As a part of the process for *Facing Mekka*, Harris relayed that he was addressing the feminine body by delving into his understanding of weight distribution in female bodies that differed from himself as well as the men of his company. Both in his exploration and his articulation, Harris centered house dance in order to understand feminine movement in hip hop (personal interview). *Facing Mekka* reflects a cultural journey into hip hop's ancestors and *Heaven*, a flipping of the *Rite of Spring*, incorporates how women have contributed to hip hop culture. In this light his work shares more features with feminism than with misogyny. His incorporation of women, the process in which he works with them, and the space he creates for them, far belie any notions that he and his work perpetuate the misogyny in mainstream hip hop and on a bigger scale in American culture.

*Rome & Jewels* (2000)

As a teenager, the film *West Side Story* (1961) inspired Rennie Harris to create a hip hop version of the drama. It was not until much later, after the birth of Puremovement, that Harris began to make this inspiration a reality. Drawing from Jerome Robbins's film (1961), from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and from Baz Luhrmann's contemporary film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), he created his first evening length piece *Rome & Jewels* in 2000. Taking around three years to complete, *Rome & Jewels* synthesized the rhetoric of hip hop both in text and movement with an infusion of Shakespearean languages and modern day stylings. Characterizing the Caps (Capulets) as b-boys and b-girls and The Monster Qs (Montagues) as general hip hop dancers, *Rome & Jewels* centers the story on black masculinity, the camaraderie between men, and the feuding between two gangs. The performance also featured DJs and their turntables on stage and a MC character that rapped and provided narration.

As a hip hop adaptation, *Rome & Jewels* was not simply a hip hop styling of the original Shakespearean play or of Robbins' production. Rather than starting out tethered to Shakespeare's text, Harris began creating the work with what he remembered about the story and what he wanted to say about his own experiences. It was not until much later that he sampled the Shakespearean text. In his retelling, he was also more interested in relaying the story about the two families (gangs), violence, brotherhood, and how all of these define black men. In true hip hop fashion it was a remix; Harris sampled, flipped, and revised.

In speaking with Harris, he elaborated on the conception of the title *Rome & Jewels*. On the superficial level it was read as a remixing of *Romeo and Juliet*. The title

was also subtracted from the longer phrase of “roaming for jewels” (personal interview). As Harris explained, the metaphor parallels hip hop’s quest for the “jewels” or the holy grail. The double entendre, revealed in the MC Grandwizard Imperial’s opening narration, “Now Big and Pac roamed for jewels but then again don’t we all, don’t y’all know a nigga ain’t nobody until till he’s a mural on some muthafuckas wall” (self-transcription). In this one weighted line, Harris is referring to the lengths at which hip hop creators, specifically black men, go outside of themselves to find truth. Men die, men sell crack, men will do almost anything to be worthy. Taking stabs at the commercialization of hip hop, Harris calls out the corporations that raise up negative images of the black male and hip hop community and it is often only in death do these young men become somebody painted on the wall. The need for approval was not something that ever concerned Harris in his work. While critics and even hip hop creators questioned the legitimacy of Harris in the concert stage, Harris did not need to artistically change or die in order to be muralized.

Central to *Rome & Jewels* is the deconstruction of the black male. Challenging the hyper masculinity prevalent in hip hop, Harris lays out three definitions of what it means to be a black man and then proceeds to trouble them through the characters and their relationships to each other. Among these characters, the black male shows three sides: the playa, the pimp, and the hustla. The playa, referred to as Black Jesus, is open-minded and loves everybody. The pimp or Black Moses, represents the more aggressive side. He is serious and aggravated. And then there is the hustla side, the Angel of Death, who will do anything to get the job done. In presenting these three sides, one by one three performers appear in spotlights as the voiceover describes what they stand for. They then proceed to

dance in unison, performing more acrobatic movement and deconstructed gestures using the extremities. Through the three characters, Harris presents multiple competing sides to black masculinity, which is a direct revision of one-dimensional stereotypes of black men. Harris does not deny negative possibilities, but displays the problems of getting caught up in expressing the negative stereotypical side.

In centering black masculinity, Harris was criticized for the omission of Jewels. As stated before, Harris began to hear misogyny attached to his work and the choice to take out Jewels added fuel to the fire. In centering the male characters with no Jewels, critic Lewis Segal of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote “the script and staging didn’t allow his character to see Jewels as more than the ideal solution to his sexual needs”. But for Harris, it was not about removing women from his project or from the already male-dominated culture of hip hop, as women were included as parts of the feuding gangs. He explains, “This is not about unrequited love but about men conjuring women into who they want them to be for them, about men trippin’” (personal interview). It was in fact his response to the misogyny so latent in hip hop and in Harris’ experience of seeing the hatred that men have for women that he narrowed in on the masculine. By removing a physical Jewels, we are able to see the root of the misogyny that is not about a specific female but how society (and not just hip hop culture) uses women and sees them as objects that are meant to be contained.

Harris’ emphasis on the various sides of black masculinity extends from his juxtaposition of male characters, some who are one-sided and some who have a range of characteristics. Ben V (Benvolio), caught in the image of the pimp, counters the gentler and more vulnerable sides of Rome. Both his language and movement are aggressive as

he challenges Rome's masculinity. The moment the word "love" comes out of Rome's mouth, Ben V cuts him off. At one point Ben V and his boys questions where Rome was the night before:

Ben V: Well then fool, what's its about?

Rome: It's about love, respect...

Ben V (cuts off Rome): AHHHH, For real dog, what was it about?

Rather than hear about Rome's emotional depth, they want to hear about power and conquest, and the friction of the two different sides comes to the surface. While Ben V and Mercutio are pressuring Rome to be hard, Rome is comfortable expressing the side that has been swayed by love. At the end of the scene, Ben V lays out the consequences of Rome being caught up by "love" and clasps Rome's hand.

Ben V: If you're boning Tibault's girl, that little scandalous Essex skeezer Jewels.

Well homie, that's a declaration of war.

Rome (after Ben V leaves the stage): Well guess it's a good day to die Ben V.

It's a good day to day.

In this exchange, Harris challenges the stereotype of the aggressive male who pressures his boys to maintain a tough exterior. Ben V is focused on the "war" and lets Rome know that he will go to war and is ready to fight The Caps. Rome's response, too, mirrors the willingness to go to war, but his reasoning is for the love of Jewels. As pointed out by Harris, Rome was a soft-hearted and gentle man under the façade of a hard exterior, and he easily swayed by Jewels. Rome's "gift of gab" or command of convincing arguments kept his boys in line with him as opposed to Ben V, who had less ability to articulate power and who was harboring resentment towards Rome for choosing love over his boys

(personal interview). We see this softer side of Rome later as well during the death of Mercutio. Rome represents the vulnerability of black men and their relationships as he picks up Mercutio's hand and draws it to his head.

One of the pivotal scenes of *Rome & Jewels* is Rome's monologue and movement sequence. Harris layers the text with accompanying gestures and stage direction to depict the plight of the black male. At one point in the monologue, Rome directs his focus to the audience and with "gun" pointed he says "It's the conscience behind me that makes me deadly". A little later in the monologue, he repeats the statement with "gun" in hand but this time saying "It's the conscience behind me that makes *you* deadly" (emphasis added). He uses pointed language and has Rome break the fourth wall to emphasize the performativity of race. In these two statements, Harris is highlighting what Linda Tucker argues as "contemporary representations of black men as criminals constitute the legacy of ideas and beliefs that have historically generated a large base of support for violent methods of controlling, containing, and annihilating black men" (Tucker Lockstep 5-6). Through stereotypes, media representations, and history, the black man is imagined to be lethal requiring state violence to confine him. The system through its racial profiling practices, high incarceration rates, subjects black men to violence where they actually become deadly. These repeated lines as well as other parts of the monologue articulate again that the black man is an already-read text and thus maintaining the need for policing. "The ideological effects and material forms of such constructions, representations, and reproductions reinforce racial hierarchies and perpetuate racial oppression" (Tucker 6). In systemic terms this racializing is necessary, a point emphasized with a *Scarface* reference when Rome says "You need people like me so you

can point your finger and say that's the bad guy!" In utilizing "me" and then replacing it with "you" in the "deadly" lines, Rome follows with reenacting being frisked by the LAPD. While the following moments move quickly from more serious references to moments of humor, the gun pointed at the audience and referencing of you implicates the participation of the audience in the stereotyping of black men. Thus Harris places his key didactic moments in between humorous and nonsensical actions where audiences begin to chuckle at stereotypes and negative perceptions of black men.

In Harris' remixing, dance provides another means to discuss black masculinity. Throughout the work, dance and movement are used to enhance character's speech, to indicate passage of time, and to depict affinities and connections between characters. The technique, precision and control evident in the Puremovement dancers coupled with the explosive, powerful, and stylish movement demonstrate the expressive capabilities in countering the hyper masculine black male at the same time invoking that image as power. As Linda Tucker argues, "the invocation of the black brute in the form of the thug or gangsta is a key example of how rappers appropriate and exploit demonized and pathologized constructions of blackness and black men and use them to enact a form of black empowerment that operates through white America's fear" (134). Like rappers, Harris utilizes this strategy, which has the effect of displaying a righteous anger that is understandable in context and literal physicalization of the system's vision.

In the final encounter between the families, Harris houses the fight in the form of a traditional b-boy battle but reinvents its structure for the concert stage. Usually in a battle, one crew or one b-boy enters the center space one at a time. Using call and response, the crews respond to each other's movement and try to out do the performances

of each other. Harris' repurposing of the battle begins with both sides dancing simultaneously. Each side presents who they are through their movement. The Caps show off style and flair through their loosely synchronized toprock while the Monster Qs directional and repetitive movements come off as targeted assaults. Unlike the traditional b-boy battle, where the crews stay on their own side, the two intact families cross and weave through the space. As one of Harris' methods of adapting to the concert stage, the crossing of space aids in the building up of tension between the two gangs. The proximity of their bodies adds intensity, and creates a overwhelming wave of the performance of black masculinity.

Through this final movement sequence, Harris is directly engaging the concept of black on black violence and the refuting the stereotype that black men are mindless killers. Amidst the high-paced and spectacular display of skills, Harris inserts two moment of slow motion timing. The first moment occurs right before the battle is about to begin. Both sides are pointing at each other, calling each other out, with the directed movements saying "I'm coming to get you". The second slowed down moment happens right before the stabbing of Mercutio. This time the dancers are enmeshed across the stage and are slowly miming fighting gestures, ending with Tibault stabbing Mercutio in the side. The contrast of these two moments coupled with the swift movements of the dancers solos highlight the construction of violence. The electrifying movement shows these men as competing and deft artists expressing themselves, whereas the lulls in time show the mechanics of brutally harming each other to the point of death. The real time movement reads as a normal dance battle where competition was resolved without physical contact or injury, but the slow motion fight gestures reads as artificial, traumatic,

and in need of intervention. In the deaths of Mercutio and Tibault, the remaining men of the gangs all fall to the floor symbolizing the death of all black men as well as the death of hip hop as the commercial side takes over. Punctuated with the MC Grandwizard Imperial's line, "all will be cursed", with prop "jewels" falling from the ceiling, Harris ends *Rome & Jewels* forewarning the ultimate scene of subjection of black men and hip hop.

### Conclusion

In his review of *Rome & Jewels*, Lewis Segal criticized Rennie Harris for "marginalizing what he does best: choreography" ("Talk Burdens" Oct. 30, 2000). And while a hip hop *Rome & Jewels* would understandably build the expectations of more movement to be integrated throughout the work, Harris' work has much more to contribute, an excess that audiences simply do not want to hear. Pure movement it appears adds layers of context, history, and profound engagement with race gender and power. Pure movement emanates from within Harris, not the abstract individual, but the culturally rooted creator.

By bringing hip hop dance onto the concert stage, Harris insists that his audiences look past the mainstream versions of the culture. This is not done by presenting a universal and idealistic vision of hip hop but rather a presentation of complex sides of black youth experiences. He is not afraid to depict hyper-masculinity in order to both accept and critique the image, and at the same time he examines the feminine without any hang ups and without doubts. While hyper-masculine figures dominate the mainstream and sometimes are associated with his company, Harris' hip hop embodies practices that

are a range of the masculine and feminine through these African American movement traditions. His work is an already-read text, seen through a violent lens, even when his work captures the beauty and celebratory nature of his community and form. Harris' work, both on and off the stage, maintains a solid footing in the lineages of hip hop dance and African American culture and also advances the work into the future. This corporeal transmission is clearly evident in his use of b-boying, popping, locking and house dance in conversation with the more current social dances that circulate through his work.

From his earliest days with The Scanner Boys to multi-award winning choreographer, Rennie Harris continues to exceed the expectations placed before him. After presenting *Rome & Jewels*, Harris felt that people expected more Shakespeare remixes from him but he intentionally went in a different direction. In fact he began creating *Facing Mekka*, internationally themed female centered corrective to hip hop's hyper masculinity, before he was finished with *Rome & Jewels*. While *Rome & Jewels* set the ground for Harris's evening-length work, throughout his career he has followed the three laws of hip hop: Individuality, Creativity, and Innovation. And by constantly invoking his "ED factor", his potent blend of hip hop dance and theater, Harris continues to develop hip hop performance on the concert stage. In referencing Harris' *Heaven* and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, dance writer Tiffany Ashton said, "It is hard to anticipate what Mr. Harris will do next having tackled an integral piece of classical music history, but it just goes to show the versatility of the hip hop dance language when it is put into the right hands". Just when you think Harris has pushed the envelope, he takes you in a new surprising direction. His most current work is a duet with Butoh-based artist Michael Sakamoto.

In a society with a relentless appropriation of black culture, Harris' work commands ownership over hip hop and his contributions to hip hop dance theater have rippling effects. For someone who has been performing for more than three decades (and continues to), and whose company has been working for over twenty years, Harris has a well-established position. He walks the crooked line as a corporeal griot of hip hop, grounded in hip hop's roots and cultural history, in order reconfigure our hearts, minds, and bodies.

### CHAPTER 3 – GENTRIFIED HIP HOP: RACE AND RE-CONQUEST IN *STEP UP 2: THE STREETS*

“A body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing. Its habits and stance, gestures and demonstrations, every action of its various regions, areas, and parts—all these emerge out of cultural practices, verbal or not, that construct corporeal meaning” (Foster *Choreographing* 3).

Season 9 of *So You Think You Can Dance* included a dancer labeled as hip hop and krump.<sup>12</sup> Picture a young dancer aggressively moving with tension gripping through the body as the chest pops and feet stomp heavily. Arms swing violently through the air and morph into guns. All the movements are accented with a “stank” face that reeks of disgust and fury. This dance was performed by not a black male but a blond girl. Meet then 18-year old Mariah Spears from Phoenix, Arizona. By a quick glance one will not assume that she is aggressive or dances krump. In her interview before her audition, she explains why she chooses to krump.

Today you’ll see something you will never expect to see from a little blond girl. I hit hard and I attack it and you might be a little scared. The reason I connect with krump, it does make me feel powerful instead of weak. I feel dominant. It just gives me something I usually don’t have in my life, which is strength. When I’m on stage it’s definitely something inside me like at my core just trying to get out. And I almost feel like that’s like where I feel all my power is coming from. I’m gonna shock America with my krumping (self transcription).

For Mariah, krump and hip hop dance gives her the ability to perform something that she is not and what she describes that she lacks. The judges are shocked and impressed. She is not the first female krumper that has auditioned for the show but “the best one I’ve seen” (Adam Shankman, *Step Up* series producer) and “probably the most believable”

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<sup>12</sup> A subgenre of hip hop dance that developed in South Central Los Angeles. Many krump dancers trained in the style of clowning with Tommy the Clown. It is debated whether krump is an extension of clowning or its own separate form. Krump is often described as a more intense form of clowning.

(Mary Murphy). There is also an acknowledgment from the judges of how race and gender function within hip hop, krump, and dance. Sarcastically but with humor Adam Shankman says, “So that was from all your rough time on the streets”, in which she responds with a yes, smiles, nods her head while crossing her arms across her chest, taking the stance as a tough girl but drops all the toughness then giggles. Executive producer and judge, Nigel Lythgoe’s comments with, “Took me totally by surprise too. You know when people come up and say oh I’m gonna do this and I’m gonna do hip hop and it’s all very white and weak and you were stronger”.

Even though the judges have seen numerous dancers performing hip hop (Russell Ferguson a black male krumper won Season 6 in 2009), their comments emphasize the distance between Mariah’s physical appearance and her krump performance. While Mariah was able to perform a very masculine and aggressive dance audition, prior to her performance and during her feedback, her body spoke a different language. Much more feminine in demeanor, she smiled the whole time, as her body caved in slightly with her shoulders rolled forward. She no longer read powerful or dominant but rather demure and soft. Why does this “little blond girl” impress the judges with her performance of krump and garner responses such as “best” and “stronger”? Is it because her outward appearance contradicts images of hip hop? Is she in fact more successful at performing krump than the countless other white dancers that auditioned before her? Though Mariah is clearly skilled as a trained dancer and krumper, the juxtaposition of her race, gender, and class identity and hybridized krump vernacular simultaneously makes her performance both intelligible to the judges and brings about desire in the mainstream audience to see more.

According to dance scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz, for many dancers like Mariah, hip hop dance offers the ability to obtain power. “Power is what is seen in the form, and power is what these dancers mean to channel by their performances” (71). Whether the power is actualized or just usurped for performance, the desire for power is also a desire for blackness. “The desire ‘to be black’ – vividly expressed in white people’s relationship to black music and dance – may well inform the fashion for tanning, but the point about tanning is that the white person never does become black. A tanned white person is just that – a white person who has acquired a darker skin. There is not loss of prestige in this” (Dyer 49). Mariah is able to draw power from the body without losing privilege and without being lost in black masculinity. Non-black dancers can successfully perform krump dance, and simultaneously are not subjected to the stereotypes and discrimination of the black body. In Mariah’s case, her white body precedes her krump dancing before judgment is passed on her, and the judges are impressed to see the white body succeed at krump.

Drawing on the theories of W.E.B. DuBois, Roger Abrahams, and Robert Hinton, DeFrantz begins his argument by saying that hip hop dance as a form of black social dance “contain[s] dual transcripts of “public” and “private” meaning” (64). While some viewers (white) may misread hip hop dance movements, DeFrantz argues that the dances are captivating. To further his argument, I argue that when appropriated and inhabited by whites who perform for other whites, this form of hip hop dance is less authentic but in many ways preferred or seen as a more “inclusive” (mean co-optable by whites) version. This gentrified hip hop dance is much more appealing to a mainstream audience and is readily available through hip hop dance films. The question is then what do non-black

bodies communicate? The *Step Up* film series makes attempts to tap into the messages of struggle and oppression, however through an analysis of the choreographed dances, the movement reiterates the appropriation of hip hop's cultural resistance. The choreography focuses on the spectacle of fantastic movement that relies on gimmicks and tricks; aesthetics without cultural grounding. As Hollywood productions, the *Step Up* film series are examples of more commercial and mainstream forms of hip hop dance. With a mass appeal and a big budget, these films misread, misinterpret, and misuse hip hop dance movement through black cultural abjection. In this chapter, I argue that *Step Up 2 The Streets* gentrifies hip hop dance and culture through erasure, appropriation, and the replacing of black masculinity with redemptive white hetero-patriarchy in multicultural dressing.

### Gentrifying Hip Hop Dance

Hip hop dance made its contributions to the growth and spread of the culture through the medium of film and television. Programs such as *What's Happening* and *Soul Train* helped broadcast the early forms of black social dance that developed into hip hop dance, and films like *Flashdance*, *Wild Style*, and *Beat Street* featured b-boys from Rock Steady Crew and New York City Breakers, influencing a national and global culture of b-boys. But just as market influences shaped the type of music that hip hop produced, hip hop dance also became affected by its commercialization. "Movement into the mainstream negated its status as counterculture by redefining it from a sub-cultural form to one widely accepted and imitated" (Hazard-Donald 510). By creating an entrée for different ethnic communities to become consumers and practitioners, this appropriation

provided a means for a much-expanded cultural theft.

While the appropriation of hip hop culture is more visible in the element of music, the appropriation of hip hop dance is becoming more explicit and widespread. “Where the assimilation of black street culture by whites once required a degree of human contact between the races, the street is now available at the flick of a cable channel—to black and white middle class alike” (Samuels 153). This commercialization and appropriation of hip hop dance is most clearly seen through reality television shows and in films about dance where hip hop dance can be appreciated and consumed from the safe distance of a television, computer, or movie screen. Hip hop dance films are particularly interesting because they provide a narrative and an aesthetic of realism that masks constructedness. Film “purports to give a direct and ‘truthful’ view of the ‘real world’ through the presentation it provides of the characters and their environment” (Hayward 334). The films authorize and legitimize white protagonists as the real bearers of hip hop movement.

Many non-black youth interested in hip hop culture desire what hip hop and the hip hop body symbolizes and the power it evokes but fail to see that hip hop signifies an authentic blackness that is tied to a long history of discrimination and cultural theft.

These listeners and dancers come, I think, to physically invest in the enactment of cool dissension; they learn the dances for obvious associations of physical power contained within the dancing body magnified by the crucible of race. If these dances can empower impoverished black bodies of the inner city, surely they might offer dynamic celebration to young dancers in the vanilla suburbs. Power is what is seen in the form, and power is what these dancers mean to channel by their performance (DeFrantz 71).

Some take this power for personal reasons to gain individual advancement, others use the power to struggle against urban inequality and marginalization. However it is not enough to dismiss the manifestation of hip hop by non-black bodies as simply cultural appropriation. Rather it is a combination of “the politics of representation, identity, appropriation, and appreciation of the Other” (Johnson 15). These complexities are essential to understanding the hip hop body and hip hop dance. Many hip hop dancers do not engage in the culture and intentionally appropriate while failing to see the deeper implications of how race functions. Depending on where, why, or how one is dancing, practitioners (and audience members) are more or less connected to these histories of resistance. So for the majority of people who encounter hip hop dance yet who do not come from the conditions of emergence, this becomes a hybridized and nuanced problematic in their hip hop and racial identity formation. Given the power dynamics at play, their best efforts will always be some mixture of promotion, celebration and appropriation of the culture. It is within this muddled space that the *Step Up* film series, as well as other dance films, provide excellent examples that help bring to light the ways in which appropriation is hidden in a universal message of youth coming together to fight against a form of oppression. But how can non-black hip hop bodies’ participation in black culture contribute to this “rich alternative space for multicultural, male and female, culturally relevant, anti-racist community building” (Rose *Hip Hop Wars* x), when black culture has been consistently under erasure through a long history of appropriation, gentrification, and abjection? Many scholars like Bakari Kitwana believe hip hop’s cross-cultural mix “affords us a unique lens for analyzing the evolution of ideas about race in America—changes that are manifesting themselves in a new generation” (*Why White*

*Kids* xiv). The films make it appear today that the new generation has moved beyond racism.

### The New Hip Hop: Multicultural Hip Hop Dance Films

Following the popularity of dance films such as *Flashdance*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Center Stage*, television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *America's Best Dance Crew*, and hip hop dance films such as *Save the Last Dance*, *Honey*, and *You Got Served*, the *Step Up* film series, capitalizes on the commercial success of the dance craze phenomenon. Released in 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012 respectively, each of the *Step Up* dance films highlights the cross-cultural mix and youth-oriented narrative centering on a protagonist who struggles to find acceptance in the inner city. The white protagonist comes of age with a love story and some struggle against injustice, a common theme in liberal discourse about saving the poor minorities from themselves. Set in the urban areas of Maryland, *Step Up* tells the story of a delinquent white teenager Tyler, who through a 200-hour community service sentencing is provided an opportunity to dance at the prestigious Maryland School of the Arts (MSA). Also located at the Maryland School of the Arts, *Step Up 2 The Streets* is the story of Andie, a young white female dancer who transitions from being a part of the multicultural working class guerrilla street dance crew 410 to attending MSA in hopes of validating hip hop outside of "the streets". *Step Up 3D* overlaps the stories of young white men, Luke and Moose (a character from *Step Up 2*) in New York City. An aspiring filmmaker and leader of House of Pirates dance crew, Luke has opened his home, the coveted dance space called the Vault, to other dancers needing a place to go. And most recently *Step Up Revolution* centers young white Sean and his

dance group The Mob attempting to garner the most viewing hits on YouTube. Set in the outskirts of Miami, the Mob performs series of flash mob dances to win a contest but quickly shift to using the flash mob to protest the redevelopment and restructuring of their neighborhood.

At first viewing, each film tells the story of a young dancer who in the face of adversity fights for what s/he believes in and in the end is able to convince others to value their dreams and their desires. Dance is all that they have. However, a closer analysis reveals the problematic nature of the films and how the appropriation of hip hop dance is masked within an open and inclusive narrative. The trope of the white protagonists in this case, illustrates the coming together of youth in hip hop dance to rest on the notion that anyone can participate and have access to the culture—ostensibly a positive message. In addition, the films fail to address the “long and complicated history of how and why white youth use black culture that they can consume and imitate (music, fashion, slang, etc.) without having any meaningful grasp of black culture and the history of racism, especially the ways that black expressions and images have been produced, channeled, and repressed” (Rose, *Hip Hop Wars* 299). The film utilizes a “color-blind” approach to promote an urban youth culture composed of privileged multi-ethnic dancers, white male leadership, and distancing from negative racial stereotypes.

Drawing on the sympathies of the viewer and audience, all four main characters for specific reasons unknown have either no biological family or one that is fractured. Tyler (*Step Up*) lives under the care of foster parents. Andie’s (*Step Up 2*) mother’s best friend is her guardian. Luke (*Step Up 3D*) lives with cooperatively with his crew members. And Sean (*Step Up Revolution*) lives with his sister and niece. They are alone

but despite their loss of traditional nuclear family, each of the main characters has found and created “home” with other dancers and dancing provides an outlet and a way to deal with their sorrow and assumed disenfranchisement.

The films also place each protagonist in situations and environments that earn them their “street cred”,<sup>13</sup> establishing them as true natives of the ghetto and giving them access to a backdrop of black culture and hip hop culture. “The issue is *not* the color or ethnicity of the dancers and teachers, but whether or not the dance form—ballet or African dance—is learned in its indigenous cultural and aesthetic context” (Dixon Gottschild 139, emphasis original). Applying dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s argument to hip hop dance, this explains why the films situate the protagonists in urban working class neighborhoods, place them close to black culture, and “universalize” their struggle by making it a colorblind multiracial world. For example, Tyler is situated within a predominately African American neighborhood. He is poor, uneducated, and spends his time hanging out and stealing cars with brothers Mac and Skinny. He is associated with stereotypical representations of the “ghetto” but is also given the opportunities to escape the ghetto. He is allowed access to black culture through his associations with his friends but he is also afforded access to education and a way out of juvenile delinquency. Andie begins as a member of the multicultural, but predominately black and brown working class guerrilla street dance crew 410 (pronounced four-one-o). It is irrelevant what Andie does on a daily basis but similar to Tyler, Andie is offered an opportunity to get out of the ghetto by enrolling in MSA’s dance program. Luke’s “The

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<sup>13</sup> In hip hop culture “street cred” or street credibility is often valued more highly than other forms status, like wealth and education. In regards to the films, street cred establishes the protagonist as a legitimate participant in hip hop dance.

Vault” functions effectively as a New York City homeless shelter where dancers-in-need build community. Sean and his friends hangout at the local Latin nightclub, Ricky’s Club Habanero, where owner Ricky is regarded as an uncle or father figure. As a home base, the club provides Sean and The Mob with an “authentic” cultural source.

In the all the films, the “classic” boy-meets-girl and “falls in love” narrative provides an opportunity for the appropriation and gentrification of hip hop dance. The films use a seemingly inclusive strategy to portray an ethnically diverse dance community, however they depict the young white male as hip hop or “street dance” and the young white female as classical or “trained dance” (with the exception of *Step Up 2* where the roles are reversed). In this heteronormative love story between a white male and a white female, the relationships between the white leaders of the crew and the people of color, more specifically, black youth are used to provide the “street cred” that not only gives them permission to be the leaders, but also places them at the center of the narrative. As the narrative evolves, change is only possible with these particular leaders at the center. Borrowing performance theorist Susan Manning’s argument on the perceptions of bodies in modern dance, white youth must be the center of the narrative because the white body stands in as the universal body. In the 1930s, critics did not “perceive the African American body as a national body” but rather “a site of aesthetic failure” (Manning 84). However after the 1940s, black dancers were given more authority and the modern dance “black body came to figure the social identity of blackness, to signify a common history of racial oppression and racial uplift,” while the “Euro-American dancer became the newly privileged unmarked body” (84). Black bodies were able to speak for themselves but not for other bodies. This is also the case in hip hop

dance. Black bodies performing hip hop dance represent the voice of blackness while white bodies performing hip hop dance represent the voice of all youth. Therefore, in order to appeal to a broad commercial audience, the *Step Up* film series places white youth at the center of each film because its representation as unmarked. The white body represents the urban multiethnic youth while the marked black body can only represent the specificity of blackness.

### Erasure

Borrowing bell hook's concept of "eating the other," Brenda Dixon Gottschild makes an observation on singer and performer Gwen Stefani's embodiment of blackness and "white assimilation of black priorities" and how she reinvented herself in response to pop culture obsession with "black-to-African ways of moving" (146). Her observations link Stefani's dancing, use of hips, and physical size of her posterior as a non-black body proficient and accepted as performing "black." Stefani may or may not intend to "be black" but by reinventing herself, she recognizes the currency of blackness in popular culture and is given a pass. The black body is no longer needed for its authenticity and physical codes because "other" bodies can "perform" blackness just as well, if not better. What I mean is that dancers like Andie have "taken in blackness: She wasn't born with it. But anyone who stays around it long enough becomes it." (Dixon Gottschild 146).

Increasing in its popularity and globalization, hip hop dance is being studied, mastered, and performed by different ethnic groups all around the world. While the *Step Up* film series have made great efforts to include multicultural casts and have helped to bring more attention to hip hop dance nationally and internationally, it has made these

contributions at the expense of black erasure. This is a great cost of the gentrification of hip hop dance. The main figures in the film are white males (white female in *Step Up 2*) and black characters exist only to support the validity of the white protagonists.

A main theme throughout the films is the exclusion of youth or a community as a result of differing economic status. Those that have money hold power, and those struggling economically are subject to those that hold the power. Society's fight for equality places these economic differences at the heart of the problem, however often times there is very little consideration on how race functions in the economic exclusivity. As a result, the film emphasizes the negativity of economic exclusion and de-emphasizes the severity of racial erasure. "Equality" or equilibrium is achieved at the expense of black cultural erasure. Hip hop dance is taken out of its context and culturally appropriated to uplift the white protagonist.

One of the ways the exclusion perpetuates the erasure of black culture is through the erasing of black bodies—sometimes the black bodies even die or disappear. However, *Step Up 2*'s erasure is much more subtle and complex. In order to establish Andie's authenticity and credibility, she must be a valid member of the main street crew 410. The film begins with an exciting explosion and a "juvenile delinquent" dance sequence by the reigning street champions, the 410 crew. They establish their strength and claim their ownership over the streets. Shortly after Andie is seen in conversation with Tuck, the African American leader of the crew and the embodiment of black masculinity. His character is tough, angry, and authoritative amongst the crew. Against his body, her body highlights the tension between the two. Taking off his shirt, Tuck's chiseled black body is juxtaposed next to her soft white body. This scene creates a charged but uncomfortable

and almost taboo romantic connection between the two. Because of antiquated racial anxieties around miscegenation, specifically black men having access to white women, Andie cannot be partnered with Tuck. “Inter-racial heterosexuality threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body” (Dyer 25). Without the legitimacy of her white body, hip hop culture cannot be transferred or approximated for acceptance, but her white body must transcend blackness. Literally she must leave the 410 crew and the streets, distancing herself from Tuck and what he represents. Andie thus becomes the bridge for her new world to retake the streets, and replace the primal masculine power Tuck represents.

In addition to the replacing of Tuck as one of the markers of authenticity and black masculinity, Felicia, a hyper-masculinized black woman in the 410 crew must also be displaced. Felicia, like Tuck, is used to authenticate Andie’s positionality but also is a barrier. As one of her closest friends, Felicia is constantly covering up for Andie but is portrayed as a jealous and angry black woman when Andie chooses the school over the crew. This soured friendship in essence re-tells the break between first-wave and third-wave feminism, but from the perspective of celebrating white privilege. Felicia, who actually represents the ways “universal” opportunity for “women” reproduces race disparities, gets constructed as the deviant, angry black woman in opposition to Andie’s, read white privilege’s, more principled and virtuous status.

Erasure also happens within her new crew. Two of the dancers are racially black but they, like the rest of the crew, are introduced by their obscurities. Smiles is the “nicest guy you’ll meet” but his crooked teeth keeps him from being accepted. Fly is tall, which keeps her from being effective at partnering in classic forms like ballet. Smiles and Fly

are not recruited to the crew because of their blackness, but because of their ability to dance. Neither dancer is stereotypically black, but both are marked as “other” because of their “odd” features that make them marginal in the more normative conservatory cultural environment. Also by calling attention to Tuck and Felicia’s bodies as authentic black bodies, Smiles and Fly’s bodies are (de)marked as other. Smiles and Fly intentionally fail as signifiers for blackness and authenticity so that they can support Andie’s paradoxical color-blind, multi-racial position as authentic representatives of the new, re-conquered streets.

### Moving Away From The Streets

The figure of the white male or his presence often looms heavily in Hollywood movies, but *Step Up 2 The Streets* centers the white female as the main protagonist. Her gender at least in part serves as cover for her appropriation of hip hop dance and her claiming of the streets for the white male power structure. Additionally, as part of the 410 crew, Andie holds a legitimate place in the “street” dance context. And as the film narrates her departure from the 410 crew to the Maryland School of the Arts dance program, hip hop dance can only be accepted at the school through Andie. As a dancer from the street she provides legitimacy and the possibility for others to participate. Brenda Dixon Gottschild elaborates this point by using the terms appropriation, approximation, and assimilation. She argues:

What it means is that manners, behaviors, styles, trends, phrases, motifs – tropes—from a given cultural realm are appropriated by another culture but are obliged to go through a transformation in the process. They must be made to approximate a look and texture, feel and shape, that will meet

with the aesthetic approval of the appropriating culture before they can be assimilated (*The Black Dancing Body* 21).

In order for white culture (MSA's dance program) to accept hip hop dance, it has to be performed and understood through the unmarked white body (Andie). Her white body represents not only her struggle but also of her new crew and their struggle for acceptance.

This struggle is evident in the way Andie moves. At first her dancing is used as a means to validate her participation with those around her. Because Andie is a small white girl, like Mariah of *So You Think You Can Dance*, her movements must communicate a persona that perhaps she does not have. She is proficient, but not the best hip hop dancer. She has power, but not as much power as the male figures around her, including Chase, the "misguided," but talented brother of MSA Dance Program Director Blake. Andie has talent but needs to be characterized as someone who needs direction, and who needs white men to provide for her resources, opportunity, encouragement, and love.

Juxtaposed against a classically trained dancer who is also auditioning for the MSA dance program, Andie begins her audition with a kick. She puckers her lips and lowers her gaze, sexualizing herself and her movements. Shifting into holding her torso upright, she moves her extremities loosely and with fluidity around her spine. As her spine becomes more flexible, she adds intensity to her performance with sharp and direct accents coming from her arms and fists. She shifts again into curved movements with the arms and hands, finishing each phrasing with an accent or punch. The movements of her audition display the range and contradictory or complementary ways of moving in hip hop dance. In one moment an aggressive gesture is emphasized and in the next, coolness.

She performs sensuality at the same time she displays power. While the audition is used to show Andie's ability to dance hip hop movement, it is used also to show her potential and need for "technique" if given direction, an implied suggestion that hip hop dance has no technique. She performs the "other", the "hip hop dancer," displaying movements that are masculine and aggressive to catch the attention of the audition panel. "[O]nly when women adopt these masculine-coded skills that their experience in hip hop is recognized" (Campbell 499). This establishes her non-normativity, a condition of growing up in the neighborhood, and her whiteness positions her as inherently valuable and queued for the formal training necessary for her to clean up according to the standards of the elite conservatory.

Her need for instruction is further carried out when she enters the school. On her first day she is asked to improvise in front of the class. She is depicted as incapable of interpreting the softer pop music in the "proper" way. Her movements are quick sharp, and aggressive, a nod to notions of unruly, spasmodic black youth physicality. When asked to try again, she responds with more circular movements utilizing her torso and pelvis in sexual manner. Indicating her dismissive and irreverent attitude, she grabs her sweats as if she were grabbing her genitals in a masculine fashion and continues "interpreting" the love song by bouncing and shaking her posterior, a clichéd sequence of hyper-sexualization perhaps included for humor and lightness at the expense of its racist, classist, and misogynist connotations. Without classical training, her in class performance depicts her as ignorant of the different styles of dance and methods of moving. Given the opportunity to grow and learn, through instruction, her body can be controlled under formal dance training as well as her performance of gender. The scene while it offers

Andie the possibilities of growth, it also posits hip hop dance as unstructured, irreverent, and movement that is unrefined and sexual in nature. Andie, at this point representing hip hop itself, fails to meet the dance director's (Blake) expectations. What is dismissed in the scene is the ways in which "whiteness shields them [white women] from the assumption of sexual availability faced by black women" (Campbell 504), when performing sexually suggestive movement, especially one performed with the booty. Unlike a black body, for which the immoral stain can never be removed, Andie's whiteness allows her to be bleached and redeemed, at least in principle. Her performance is read playful, innocent, and even dismissive rather than degrading, raunchy, and the cause of social decay.

*Step Up 2 The Streets* represents characters as peripheral subjects. The film, both dance groups (410 and MSA) are represented by different ethnic groups. However, it is the MSA dance crew that is comprised of the peripheral students in the school. Whether it is physical or social codes, each member recruited is considered to be on the margins of the school and society but sought after by Andie and Chase, her love interest, because of their movement abilities. "[M]arginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis of Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation" (hooks 26). This sense of "marginalization" is misplaced and "reinforces dominant ideologies yet obscures this by placing them within a discourse of multiculturalism" (Grinner 200). As the ultimate argument for multiculturalism, the films include all these "marginal" characters to symbolize total inclusion, generosity and fairness.

Despite the presentation of multi-ethnic dancers, the films are locked into a black-white paradigm. And this paradigm equals the impossibility of a coming together. The antagonism perpetuates the divide between “authentic” street dancers and elitist “trained” dancers. Street dance is unrefined, has little to no structure, and is disruptive to the general public. Dance training takes place in an enclosed private space and is a rigorous art form requiring dedication and time. By setting up this binary throughout the narrative, the film provides a third space as a solution to what Stuart Hall calls a “wholly corrupt or wholly authentic” discussion of culture. The effects of this divide are difficult and challenging but the answer can be found in the merging of the two sides, a liminal space. In *Step Up 2*, as Andie moves from one dance space to another, neither provides her with complete satisfaction. No longer accepted by the 410 crew and bound and limited by MSA’s dance program, the film instead offers a liminal space as the solution for Andie, Chase, and the crew. Because of their peripheral status, they are able to negotiate the boundaries between the two distinct worlds and occupy this alternative space. They can navigate in the structures of white elitist environment of the school and as revealed in the end of the film, they can also keep up with the trends of the streets.

#### The Final Battle: You Can Have The Basement, We’ll Reclaim The Streets

The film’s climax sets up a competition between the 410 crew in its “home court”, so to speak, the underground dance club, The Dragon, and the MSA crew. In an amazing display, the 410 crew’s competition routine begins with a human tower with two dancers standing on top of the legs of two other dancers. As b-boys enter the space, they freeze upside down and hold onto the legs of the bottom dancers, completing the “tower” by

providing a wider base. A solo dancer then climbs to the top of the tower and back flips off which causes the dancers to spread out and shift formation. They create a circle, moving in towards the center and out, repeating this gesture signifying a pulsing heart. Taking the energy created in the circle, they move to another space of the warehouse, requiring the audience and other competitors to travel with them. If viewers were not impressed with their introduction, they begin to set more groundwork in their claim of ownership of the space and prove why they continue to win the competition.

Going from unison dancing to duets, the 410 crew travel, making full use of the space made available. Their movements are full and bouncy accented with punches, turns, flips, and kicks over each other. Their choreography incorporates the body vertically as well as prone and supine on the floor. The dancers move fluidly from group choreography to b-boy floorwork that includes virtuosic spins on backs, shoulders, and heads. Intricate arm and upper limb choreography is balanced with full-bodied, sweeping lower limb movements that transfer the dancers through the space. Their performance fluctuates between playful movements to choreography that insults the other crews, all which elicits visceral responses from viewers. In an interview, Hi-Hat, the choreographer for *Step Up 2*, states her objective for staging the 410 crew. It was essential that she created movement that displayed the 410 crew as the best dancers and with the tightest choreography. She also focused on garnering a kinesthetic response from the audience. “if you’re a non-dancer... stimulate you to want to dance” (*Step Up 2*). This is where the strength of the *Step Up* movies lies. Employing talented and well-known choreographers brings focus and attention to the dancing and less on the storyline. Most audience

members can look past the cliché narrative and enjoy the films for the dynamic choreography and high energy dancing.

The MSA crew, who are outsiders (if not privileged settlers) in the neighborhood, are denied the right to compete head to head and forced to take it upstairs to the streets, “where it all began.” The film casts the 410 crew as unfair and exclusive, and their effort to control their own neighborhood is one of the many pathologies to be discarded in the narrative. While the 410 crew is choreographed to be hard, ferocious, dominant, and angry, MSA crew’s choreography speaks to a broader and more inclusive feel. The movement and the choreography of the film allow the MSA crew to operate in a liminal space. In their alternative context, their movement is read as resistance to the “oppressive” structures of MSA’s dance program, to its uncompromising and egotistical director, and to the harsh, territorial rejection from the 410 crew. Since the 410 crew had to be “the crew”, the MSA crew’s choreography needed to communicate something other than dominance. Positioned as the underdog, their “speech” is more accessible, relatable, beneficent, and just, but this masks their role as gentrifiers of hip hop dance.

Outside with the streets lights turned off, they introduce their routine with mini lights attached to the fingers, emblematic of the flickering souls surrounded by darkness. Their dance begins with minimal staccato movements that are angular and sharp with limbs close to the body. Displaying a strong sense of musicality and uniformity, the dancers emulate the sounds of a record scratching. Shifting to another part of the outdoor space, the crew forms a circle leaving one dancer in the center, declaring MSA as the real masters of African forms like the cypher. Dancing to Timbaland’s “Bounce,” which emotes an industrial feel with breathy and pulsating rhythm, the solo dancer in the center

acts a puppet master by giving life to the lifeless dancers on the floor who then spread out to perform a series of floor movement. As the rain continues to pour down, yet another hackneyed visual trope, their soundtrack becomes infused with rock and their movements become more aggressive and give their performance a rebellious feel. Narrated as “the new style” through the music, the combination of rock and rain provide elemental texture to their stylistically diverse performance. The dancers make full use of the floor and the contact of their bodies with the rain soaked ground provide bursts of energy. The choreography extends beyond their bodies, making their performance bigger than it really is.

The crew then splits into the gendered groupings of their performance. The male section includes tutting<sup>14</sup> and movements that are staccato and explosive. They are sharp yet fluid, balancing precision and sequence. The females also rely on precision and fluidity. Instead of softening their movement, they perform with as much intensity as the males, inflecting with curviness and sensuousness.

For the final sequence, they return to the rock song and finish their dance grouped together with attitude and taking a strong stance. It is through the viewing of performance that the director of the MSA dance program accepts Andie. “Once again we have the familiar pattern of African Americans developing an expressive form but having it register as significant for others only when it is picked up by “genuine” artists with aesthetic know-how and non-profit integrity” (McClary 78). Andie and her crew prove to

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<sup>14</sup> Tutting is form included in hip hop dance that is performed primarily in the upper body. Fingers, arms, and hands are used to create angles, angular shapes, and box-like formations. Tutting is generally fluid and moves at a rapid pace but also incorporates staccato movements.

the director that hip hop dance has form and is of value. As her former crew, the 410, dissolve into the background, she receives the director's paternalistic nod and is redeemed. MSA crew, the MSA administration, and all of the townspeople who are not admitted into the cliquish 410 world stand triumphant, having at least symbolically retaken the streets from the poor black youth who illegitimately occupy it. Hip hop dance, the vernacular of this racial cleansing and white patriarchal supremacy narrative, has been fully and finally gentrified.

### Conclusion

“What differentiates appropriation (or, less politely, rip-off) from exchange? As I have said in earlier books and articles, I believe that it's a question of who's got the power, be it the power for the purse or the power of persuasion. Because white-skin privilege confers a degree of power up on the most well-intentioned of its carriers, a benign act of cultural borrowing can have the effect of a calculated theft.” (Dixon Gottschild 21)

The film *Step Up 2* attempts to create a multicultural city that embraces racial, class, and social diversity. However, it simply masks a demonizing of black communities and an appropriation of their space and place. While the film appears to open access to everyone invested or interested in participation, the narrative of the film actively erases things black and functions as a support for hierarchy and white male dominance cemented in the vertical relationships. The issue with commercial hip hop is not necessarily whether or not that it is multiracial but that its' erasure of black culture perpetuates stereotypes and injustices that still plague US society. Characters like Chase in *Step Up 2*, recognize the difference between his privileged dance training and those

trained on the “streets” but fail to be cognizant of the deeper messages and meanings of the “other” dance. In this sense, the gentrification of hip hop dance functions as a “commodification of difference (that) promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization” (hooks 31). The film posits Andie’s non-black performing body as an appropriate vehicle for this decontextualization and racial transfer of hip hop dance.

The *Step Up* films advance racial inclusion and the diversity of hip hop yet reinscribe problematic cultural dynamics, power dynamics and racial politics that need to be further scrutinized. *Step Up 2 The Streets* promotes a white-led multi-cultural diverse gentrifying force that displaces black and brown working-class youth as whites take over the hip hop “streets.” “Thus, even in the seeming multicultural mix, the cross-cultural embrace that such love of black cool engenders, these conditions do not necessarily produce any sort of progressive politics or promote avenues for social change and black liberation. There is often no investment in black struggle nor commitment to the particular causes and histories of black advancement” (Elam 386). Contrary to the regressive dimensions of *Step Up* films, audiences must engage in the deeper cultural meanings and history behind hip hop dance and the politics of struggle of the originators. In this way, those interested in hip hop culture can challenge racial and social inequalities. By learning and performing hip hop dance movement, these same people negotiate this boundary between appropriation and reinforcing a part of African American diasporic culture. Their desires to learn how to move like and become the hip

hop body can engage them in the struggle over the meanings of identity, of communication, and of hip hop expression to counter black abjection.

#### CHAPTER 4 – BLACK MASCULINITY, APPROPRIATION, AND THE GLOBAL IN BENSON LEE’S *PLANET B-BOY*

“Japanese, Indonesians, Brazilians, French, and Israeli rappers are evolving a hip-hop that borrows from U.S.-based hip-hop but [are not] just aping Black American culture. Rather they are embracing Black youth culture, making aspects of the subculture their own and out of that place where both cultures meet, emitting their interpretation of hip-hop” (Kitwana *Why White Kids* 126).

“Human commingling necessarily entails syncretism whereby cultures assimilate and adopt aspects of the Other. Given that, all forms of cross-cultural appropriation are not instances of colonization and subjugation. Some of these appropriations are instances of genuine dialogic performance—instances that provide fertile ground upon which to formulate new epistemologies of self and Other (Johnson 61).

On August 19, 2009, along with several of my students, I attended a b-boy workshop sponsored by the Korean Cultural Center Los Angeles and Chaos Theory Music, featuring one of Korea’s top b-boy crew Last For One. Geared toward a general audience, the workshop provided information on b-boying, the experiences of Last for One crew members, a demonstration of movement, and also included an opportunity to learn a section of the crew’s choreography. What was particularly memorable about the experience was the enthusiasm of the students. Participants, including me and my students, were crowded in a space not designed for movement instruction but rather a room geared towards lectures with a small stage for performances. Some of the participants stood on the stage with crew members and others of us spilled out onto the remaining open floor space, but nonetheless we were all engaged in perfecting the partnered b-boy choreography exercise. What struck me, amidst the fury of arms, legs, and contorted bodies is that we were learning b-boy choreography in Los Angeles from a South Korean crew. Hip hop was being taught to young Americans by Koreans who were just being born during b-boying’s initial global expansion in the 1980s. In a global city,

known for its tense relationships between African Americans and Koreans, the new horizons of b-boying had me spinning.

Last For One had been receiving a lot of attention much to the credit of their win in the Battle of the Year competition and featured spot in Benson Lee's documentary *Planet B-boy*. Their amazing performance and winning of the competition gave them bragging rights and they were just as dynamic in person as they were portrayed in the film. The crew members without a doubt have an intense amount of b-boying skill and aptitude. And like the global rappers referenced in the epigraph by Bakari Kitwana, the crew members of Last for One are interpreting hip hop in their own way, pushing the cultural meanings and significance out of the many people's sight. They are innovating on an old form of movement, pushing it to new global limits.

The innovation and reinventing of hip hop in various global contexts happened through what Halifu Osumare defines as "connective marginalities". In her essay "Global Hip-Hop and the African Diaspora", as many people consider class to be the primary or sole connector, Osumare argues that there are four categories of what she defines as the connective marginalities. She says, "Connections or resonances can take the form of culture (Jamaica and Cuba), class (North African Arabs living in France), historical oppression (Native Hawai'i), or simple the discursive construction of "youth" as a peripheral social status (Japan)" (*Black Cultural Traffic* 268). Using these four categories, it is possible to see how appropriation of hip hop does not necessarily equal subjugation of the racial Other. With Osumare's sense of the globalization of hip hop, we can examine how black masculinity develops through the b-boying of groups like Last for One.

In this chapter, I argue that such a race, class, and gender centered lens is important for understanding the documentary *Planet B-boy* in its framing of the global b-boy. As we will see, *Planet B-boy* and *Battle of the Year* present b-boying as a universally accessible, inclusive and participatory culture. Yet by centering the rise and celebration of the victors, *Planet B-boy* obscures the subjection of b-boys and of black masculine culture in its varied global iterations. The film does more to rescue the nation-state, by suggesting that b-boys represent all of these nations, than it does to validate the othering that crews experience in their formation, preparation, and performance. Ultimately I argue globalized hip hop, b-boying specifically, embodies a split between a historically grounded cultural context and an aesthetic refinement of skill one-upping through the battle. Although the film is a fascinating document of an intense competition, it invests heavily in the skill advancement side, while replacing the ongoing othering and global inequities with a universal feel-good message. Thus *Planet B-boy* participates in avoiding real engagement and discussion of existing race, class, and gender inequalities.

### The Rise Of B-boy Crews

As discussed in Chapter 2, b-boying was integral to the development of hip hop culture as well as the identities of young black and brown men in New York City proper. In a system that relegated them to bottom, these young men focused their energies on b-boying as a means to declare affirmative existence. B-boying and b-boy crews became a place to gather, hang out, and exchange. The b-boy crew created an alternative education system and a community base where knowledge and skills were passed on from one b-boy to another during a time where public funds were slashed and after school programs

became increasingly privatized. B-boys learned dance usually from an older b-boy, being mentored in crews and gaining knowledge during cypher sessions. There was no class to sign up for or YouTube tutorial video you could learn the moves from as there is today. “[T]he way the dance is taught exerts a profound influence on the way it is experienced. It affects the way individuals understand the history of the form and their own place in it, the way they express their individual and group identities, and the way they pass this knowledge on to others” (Schloss 41). The mentorship between b-boys not only emphasized developing proficiency in the form but also developing “your own individual identity in the context of the group, which necessarily entails understanding your own strengths, weaknesses, and personal history” (Schloss 67), all which play an important role while battling.<sup>15</sup> The process of crew formation strengthened community bonds and mentorship, and imprinted values such as loyalty, brotherhood, and commitment, and drove young men to desire an affiliation with a crew. Two of the earliest crews the Zulu Kings and the Herculoids, associated with hip hop pioneers Afrika Bambaataa and Kool DJ Herc respectively, traveled to the parties with the DJs. Transitioning from gang activity to b-boying, these crews resolved conflicts and encouraged peace and safety in the community through dance, battles, and expression. Other crews like the Floormasters/New York City Breakers and Rock Steady Crew, both of which were featured in the movie *Beat Street* (1984), were instrumental in spreading b-boying throughout New York City.

This spectacular and rapidly evolving dance form crept its way into mainstream

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<sup>15</sup>A battle is generally when one b-boy (or a crew of b-boys) challenges another to a dance duel. They take turns performing their “improvised” routines until it is clear that one b-boy or crew out-performs the other.

culture, gaining attention through popular films and even performances in the closing ceremony of the 1984 Olympics. But as quickly as it became popular, b-boying slipped back into a marginal status in relation to hip hop culture, specifically rap music. Rap music provided an exchangeable product whereas b-boying was an experience, an experience that required constant dedication to keep up with the constant evolution and innovation (Schloss 5). B-boying remained underground or secondary to the musical productions of hip hop culture, and in this seeming decline of b-boying in the United States, the dance form gained momentum in other parts of the world. Robin Kelley suggests:

There are historical and political reasons why the ghettos of North America and African Americans continue to loom so large in the imaginations of hip hoppers all over the globe. Black America's inner cities have been perceived by aggrieved populations as sites of resistance. Before the proliferation of images of gangsterism as authentic representations of Black urban life, African-American popular culture was embraced from Brazil to South Africa to Ghana, as a source of inspiration and liberation (*The Vinyl Ain't Final* xv).

B-boying and more broadly Hip Hop culture became adopted, learned and performed worldwide by youth that spoke different languages and had different musical and cultural traditions, and became an expression of marginal groups within their own contexts. In the same manner that hip hop offered American Black youth “a public platform in a society that previously rendered them mute” (Kitwana *Why White Kids* xiii), the youth in these other societies have claimed hip hop culture as their own. For example, b-boy Crazy Monkey from the crew Phase-T (France) said, “The most important thing to show the world that people coming from nowhere who grew up with a minimum, really a minimum can accomplish a maximum” (*Planet B-boy*). B-boy Claude also from Phase-T

(France) says of his connections to hip hop, “When I discovered this art-form, I knew it was the best outlet to satisfy my thirst for creativity” (*Planet B-boy*). For these black French b-boys, creative expression functions as resistance to racism and classism nurtured within the space of the crew.

### Battle Of The Year

Founded in 1990 in Hannover, Germany by Thomas Hergenröther as a way to bring b-boys together, Battle Of The Year (BOTY)<sup>16</sup> has drawn increasing attention. B-boy crews participate in preliminary and choreography elimination rounds for a chance to compete in the final battles. The battle is open to any crew that wants to compete and any spectator that can afford to travel to Germany. Prior to attending the BOTY competition, each country hosts a competition to determine which one crew will represent the nation. These crews that travel to Germany from all over the world are often each racially and ethnically diverse and combined represent the vast globalization of hip hop culture. BOTY is a major battle for b-boy crews to gain prestige and honor, even if awkwardly situated in unstable conceptions of orderly nations in a fair world. Hosts of BOTY claim that “Battle Of The Year is a platform for B-Boys and Hip Hop culture in general and an opportunity for all participants to express themselves in a peaceful and non-racist environment” (<http://www.battleoftheyear.de/about/philosophy.html>). The positive and inclusive competition is couched in universalist terms that reduce a wide range of particular cultural and political tensions for the sake of an Olympic-like ambience. As we

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<sup>16</sup> A Hollywood film *Battle of the Year* was released in 2013 that is based on this competition.

will see later in the case of Benson Lee's *Planet B-boy*, a documentary about BOTY 2005, these tensions reach significant heights.

The focus of BOTY is not the cash money grand prize but rather a forum for b-boy crews to exhibit their skills and gain bragging rights. Unlike MTV/Randy Jackson's "America's Best Dance Crew" where first place crew earns \$100,000, in 2005 BOTY's winners split \$3,000 between, first, second, third and best show categories. Since its first competition in 1990, where 9 crews competed with 400 spectators, BOTY has grown to include up to 20 crews with as many as 10,000 spectators in attendance.

While some battles are based on audience approval, BOTY employs world-renowned b-boys as judges and in such an international and diverse context, the skills of these b-boys are evaluated using an extensive judging system and criteria that requires each competing crew to come highly prepared. The criteria are broken down into three sections: Show Criteria (synchronicity, stage presence, theme and music, and choreography), B-boying Criteria (toprock, footwork/legwork, freeze, power move), and Battle Criteria (response, routines, strategy, attitude, voluntary touching). Knowledge (vocabulary, innovation, foundation, concept) and execution (control, expression, aesthetics, rhythm, difficulty) are also important criteria in determining the judges scores (<http://www.battleoftheyear.de/about.html>). Within this complex system of judging, racial and ethnic identities are not the determining factors. The scope and magnitude of BOTY requires skills and creativity that have turned b-boying into a highly structured art form and formalized competition. BOTY and b-boying is about the skills you have and how well you can execute and perform them.

With each year, the competition level in skill and showmanship rises but BOTY organizers call for more inclusivity and celebration of the culture. They say, “For the future the participating b-boy crews and the attending crowd should be focused more on the interactive component of the event than the competitive part” (<http://www.battleoftheyear.de/about.html>). Despite the heightening of the competitive nature through the battle, BOTY organizers boast of unity and togetherness. “Once these rival crews, once they stop dancing, then they will find it wasn’t really about competing. It was really more about being together and jam together in one place” (Storm, *Planet B-Boy*). Unlike critics who negatively stereotype hip hop culture, BOTY focuses on the positivity of youth culture that seemingly gets beyond race. This global subject without a context beyond the universal is a stark contrast to the originators of the 1970s Bronx. The BOTY b-boy is more of a showman for boosters to promote tourism, international exchange, and recognition within capital markets. Understandably, the organizers seek to promote a successful event, but the many b-boy stories not promoted carry the more profound depth of the cultural work the event entails. Of course b-boys would like to get paid, but the ideological work of BOTY organizers raises important questions about the race, class, and gender status of b-boy crews around the world.

### *Planet B-Boy*

Documenting the stories and preparation of b-boys crews from across the globe, Benson Lee’s 2007 documentary film *Planet B-Boy* focuses on the BOTY 2005 competition where 19 crews representing 18 different countries compete for the ultimate title of best b-boy crew in the world. The documentary begins with a brief segment on hip

hop history and provides background information to the BOTY competition. It then zeroes in on five finalists, Japan, France, the United States, and two from South Korea,<sup>17</sup> including segments of dance interviews, and commentaries. Various clips of the film portray the diversity of crews and their styles but as the documentary more closely follows the stories of the finalists, it also centers the storylines of strained relationships (Japan and Korea) and racism (France). The film shows how often, through their innovative styles and choreography, non-black and non-American b-boys contribute to the continually evolving form. By looking at b-boying in this global context, we can see the struggle around appropriation and black abjection. The agenda of film is to promote b-boying as a universal cultural activity that unites the least likely of subjects. B-boy pioneer Ken Swift commenting on the power of hip hop culture says, “the success in hip hop culture worldwide is that no matter what language you speak you can communicate through hip hop culture. It’s a serious way to unify youth” (*Planet B-Boy*). The film goes even as far as including a 66-year old Swedish breaker “Crazy Grandma,” who began b-boying in her late fifties, with a short appearance in the film interacting with some of the competing crews from the different countries.

All the b-boys are bound by one objective, to win BOTY. Each b-boy interviewed speaks of BOTY being the ultimate goal for a b-boy. It is the reason they train hours and hours. Director Benson Lee notes, “Spending day in and day out with the b-boys, we gained deep insight into the sacrifices they made for the dance. Most of them were

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<sup>17</sup> The winner of the prior year automatically gets to participate in the following year, which allows for the same country to send another crew. Since the Gamblerz of South Korea won BOTY 2004, both Gamblerz and Korea’s second crew Last for One were allowed to compete.

struggling to make ends meet, with some living below the poverty line, but they trained daily for the “Battle of the Year” with enthusiasm and dedication” (Lee). B-boying is not just a hobby but it is who they are and how they define themselves. These b-boys not only devote themselves to the practice but also b-boying is a part of their identity.

At one level, the film seems to present b-boying as an inclusive art form based on meritocracy not on nation, ethnicity, or race. BOTY and many other national and global hip hop events believe in the universality of hip hop culture. But at the same time, the film is invested in essentialized constructs of race, gender, class, and nation. The b-boy crews, which have particular names and stories are repeatedly referred to as “the Koreans”, “the Japanese”, “the French” and so on. This is a somewhat odd fit, the very dancers who are marginalized in their nation-states being re-deployed, at least momentarily, as the definitive representatives of national culture. *Planet B-Boy* promotes an uninterrogated universality over the marginalization of black youth in the United States as well as youth worldwide. Thus there are rich elements that expand identity categories as well as regressive elements that reify the very categories it seeks to explode.

However in this desire to bring together youth worldwide, how does a competition like BOTY or films like *Planet B-Boy* offer a deeper understanding of the history of appropriation? Both tropes of universalism and meritocracy are key to Thomas Hergenröther’s investment in using an Olympic model for competition for an outlawed cultural art form based on black youth expression. Even though crews like Last for One get some mainstream recognition, the fact is that issues of power inequity and displacement still remain unresolved in all of the crews’ home countries. The coming together of b-boys at events such as BOTY prove to be important because of the shared

marginalization that b-boys experience, usually being disregarded and seen as a disturbance. They experience marginalization either as Halifu Osumare has outlined as the four connective marginalities or the marginalization of experience versus product that Joseph Schloss identifies, but most of the time, b-boys speak of their marginalization within society based on definitions of race and or class. Such dynamics are present in *Planet B-boy*, yet not always centered.

### The *Flashdance* Effect

*Flashdance*, the 1983 romantic drama played a catalytic roll in the globalization of the b-boy and figures centrally in *Planet B-boy*. At the beginning of the documentary, a clip from *Flashdance* is included as part of b-boying history alongside interviews with several practitioners who reference the film as an integral part of their dancing if not the reason why they started. *Flashdance* introduced b-boying to the world. In 2010, b-boy pioneer Crazy Legs, spoke of what the film did for b-boying and how his performance as a dancer and as a dance double in the film made an impact. “The thing with *Flashdance*, no matter what existed before that in terms of footage with b-boys, which is predominately Rock Steady Crew, it became a doorway of interest to find out more about it. Although it wasn’t the first, it was definitely the biggest shot in the arm for hip hop dance could have ever gotten (<http://www.sceneinteractive.com/2010/11/20/crazy-legs-interview/>). *Flashdance*, like “Rapper’s Delight” by The Sugarhill Gang brought b-boying to a mainstream audience.

Is *Flashdance* the reason for the globalization of b-boying? According to writer Jennifer Hollet it is. “Indeed, it was the *Flashdance* moment that began the globalization

of b-boying, and to some extent, hip hop”. What Hollet is referring to is two-minute clip that features several b-boy pioneers from Rock Steady Crew. In this short clip, protagonist Alex Owens (Jennifer Beals) and her friend stumble upon b-boys (Crazy Legs, Ken Swift, Normski, Mr. Freeze, and Frosty Freeze) while turning a corner into an alley. This clip introduced b-boying to the globe. Storm, world renowned b-boy and BOTY judge spoke of this moment saying:

The first time that I saw breakin’ was through the movie *Flashdance*. For me it was very important because, well first of all you saw Rock Steady dancing on the street... everybody knew the movie wasn’t about breakin’ either but still all of us, all of us, after we’ve seen the previews, we only went into the movie not to see Jennifer Beals, not to see that love story or something. Everybody just went into the movies to see the clippings of Rock Steady dancing on the street. We snuck into the movies like ten times ...just to watch it again and again and again because in the days nobody had video either (*Planet B-boy* extra).

B-boys, such as Storm, all across the globe credit this particular scene as the inspiration of b-boying in their countries and more specifically crediting it to their own development as b-boys.

In the original film, it appears that the stumbling upon b-boys in the alley is simply part of a series of scenes to indicate time passing. It is later revealed that Alex is inspired by this encounter with the b-boys and uses “their” movement to nail her audition solo. Sandwiched in between a masculinized yet sexualized session of Alex and her girlfriends working out and crossing paths with a dancing traffic cop, this b-boy scene centers the appropriation of the b-boy and his easy movement into the conservatory as well as onto the screen. Without her actual participation in the b-boy cypher, Alex later miraculously displays an ability to perform an advanced hand and forearm balanced posture that whips into a long series of backspins. We never see her practice this

movement, revisit the street b-boys, or in any other way gesture toward the b-boys, yet she is suddenly proficient in its execution during her audition. The effect of this visual and narrative strategy is to mystify and enhance the spectacle, while simultaneously implying that anyone can do it (or at least pursue it); the conditions of production like practice, innovation, battle, call and response, self-empowerment and self-expression are erased and replaced with the spectator's high and shock value of seeing something she or he has never seen before.

The spectacle is seductive, yet shock value wears away with repetition. One of the b-boys in the film Ken Swift comments on how mesmerizing and significant this moment was. Swift says, "But then to actually sit in the movie theater for the premiere and see it, we were like WOW! We were like blown away completely. The power of television and film, man, it's like huge. You got millions of viewers. That's it, you know. The movie went somewhere, everybody saw it" (*Planet B-boy*). But b-boy TRAC2 notes that this surprise would eventually wear away, sacrificing a deeper engagement with the core of the dance. TRAC2 explains, "The media exposed it so much that it came passé... (The) true essence of the dance was never captured in the 80s okay. It was strictly power moves.<sup>18</sup> The true essence: the toprocking version, the floor rocking version, the individuality, the creativity, you know, the cockiness, the attitude, the battle mode" got left out (*Planet B-boy*). Ken Swift expands on the point:

I don't think the public ever understood the dance of breakin' because of

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<sup>18</sup> Power moves are those that are highly acrobatic. Power moves are generally executed by spinning, balancing, and flipping on various parts of the body. Some examples of power moves are the head spin, 1990 (spin on one hand), and the continuous backspin/windmill (turning of the body from the upper back and shoulders to the hand while the feet and legs are in the air).

the fact that every time it was shown to them, they wouldn't show the essential thing which was a person making a connection with a song and expressing how they felt when they danced... They didn't show it to where you could actually study it. They just showed one aspect of it... and then it's predominately, initially a Black and Latino thing. Maybe it was all about like 'That's not a dance, they're just angry people getting their energy off cause of where they live (*Planet B-boy*).

These b-boys clearly understood people's astonishment at their performance yet unwillingness to engage them within their social context.

Director Benson Lee was particularly affected by the "flashdance moment". His first introduction to hip hop was through a television program called "Dancing on Air" in the 80s, which led him seeing other hip hop films such as *Flashdance* and *Beat Street*. However, since he was not surrounded by a b-boy community, just as b-boying left mainstream's spotlight, it faded out of Lee's interest. After receiving a college education and spending time abroad, he re-watched *Flashdance* in the late 90s. Pondering where b-boying had gone, he found not only that it still existed but it had expanded globally. "Then I discovered the event "The Battle of the Year" and I was just floored. I had no idea [breakdancing] was still around. I was one of the people who loved it, so that led me to believe that nobody else really knew about it. Then I realized, as a filmmaker, this would make a great story" (Montero). With this insight he immediately went to work on *Planet B-boy*.

In his making of *Planet B-boy*, Lee went even further to recreate and update the "flashdance moment" as he introduced the Japanese crew Ichigeki. Fast forward 22 years, the clip centers on the narratives of the Katsu, Non-Man, and Quik that is supported by two traditionally dressed Japanese women. The same way that the Alex and her friend stop to watch in *Flashdance*, the women in *Planet B-Boy* become spectators of these b-

boys in front of them. The women witness the contorting of bodies and the defying of gravity as the b-boys twist and turn. Moving quickly and using their hands as another pair of feet, their performance is captivating and soon others join as audience in this amazing bodily display.

Focusing the moment on the b-boys, as opposed to the women, Lee and *Planet B-boy* improve upon the “flashdance moment” in many ways yet fail to discuss gender hierarchies within Japanese culture. Whereas, Alex takes this encounter with the b-boys to declare her artistic independence from the professional dance world by using several b-boy movements in her audition for the Pittsburgh Dance and Repertory Company, *Planet B-boy* presents a juxtaposition of traditional and modern elements of Japanese culture. Set to the same soundtrack, “It’s Just Begin” by The Jimmy Castor Band, Ichigeki dances and b-boys and cultural producers provide a narration. The speakers say, “Japanese education stresses homogenization which is reflected in the proverb ‘The nail that sticks out gets hammered down’”. “I think that the b-boy style that exists in Japan is related to ‘bushido’, the way of the samurai. You are not a true b-boy until it becomes more than just a hobby” (B-boy promoter Akihiko Urata). “After I started breakdancing I became more aware of my identity and new ways of thinking and open to other ways of thinking” (Non-Man). (*Planet B-boy*). In this introduction, Lee and the Japanese b-boys are honoring the past and tradition that co-existing with emergent and divergent ways of thinking. Lee is showing the ways that b-boying, a black masculine production and tradition, is taken up in Japan, where Japanese youth use it to counter and resist stifling social normativity without losing their cultural roots. Unlike *Flashdance*, it is not at all clear whether the b-boys inspire and liberate the women from the confines of the

gendered expectations in their tradition.

The gendered aspects of this echo of the *Flashdance* scene are layered and complex. Patriarchy is both buried and explicit. In *Flashdance*, patriarchy is implicit as Alex is the main figure but must have b-boy Crazy Legs perform the actual b-boy movements. It appears to be a liberatory performance for women, but a man needs to execute it. In the Japanese version, patriarchy is more explicit. There is no attempt to liberate the women from antiquity. They are dressed in kimonos and remain in the background. In the *Flashdance* performance, we also see that black masculinity always exceeds attempts to reduce and stereotype it. The film centers a mixed race woman playing a generic white woman who uses street dance which must be executed by a clean shaven, leotard wearing Crazy Legs, to debut b-boying to the world in a climatic movement of racial drag. As Crazy Legs reflects, "Being the first person in hip-hop to dress in drag -- I had to deal with that for years". It was not only dressing as Alex Owens but that "it was a lot to ask of a Puerto Rican teen from the Bronx to shave his legs, underarms, and mustache". He explains, "Especially the mustache because ... I was a young kid and I'm finally getting my little machismo thing going on. And now, I have to shave my mustache off." (meriah) All this somewhat comical race, class, and gender layering is lost on audiences that lift up yet fetishize the b-boy spectacle as shock value. *Planet B-boy* in making this reference to *Flashdance*, honors the history of the scene centering b-boys and not the film drama or protagonist.

## Korean B-Boys In Cultural Contexts

To restate global interpretations of black and brown young American men's cultural explosion is not always an aping or theft, but is always richly complex in the circulation of race, class, gender and nation constructions. In line with Osumare's connective marginalities, Koreans b-boys experience peripheral social status, yet as Jackson Katz argues, they physicalize their power through their bodies. B-boys who are often working class and marginal in their society only have access to this type of power and therefore experience a form of abjection that complicates representing their nations in the BOTY competition.

In the case of Last for One, one of the Korean crews to compete in BOTY, their manager Mr. Byun states, "Korean b-boys seem very powerful but within the structure of Korean society they are actually weak. These guys know dance as the only way to experience joy in their lives so they desperately just want to dance" (*Planet B-boy*). In the world of b-boying, Korean b-boys are praised for their aptitude and innovation but back home they are socially outcast. For working people in a capitalist society, b-boying offers little to no status and stability. For instance, B-boy Joe's father (Last for One) hopes that his son will choose to be a professor or doctor, or someone that will secure a future through his contribution to Korean society (*Planet B-boy*). Even though Last for One goes on to win BOTY 2005, the class abjection and status of b-boys in general have not been challenged. B-boying and to a larger extent hip hop culture provide for what young Korean men consider to be an effective means to express themselves in a society that places them at the lower rungs of society.

When b-boying and hip hop culture became popular in the 1990s, it was associated with youth and delinquency but gradually began to change as Korea started producing its own commercial version of hip hop. One Korean B-boy explains,

1990 년대에는 불량한 어린 아이들이 한 때 유행처럼 하는 것으로 생각을 했으나 2000 년대에 들어와서는 하나의 문화로 인정을 받으면서 힙합과 관련된 다양한 상품들 등이 꾸준히 소비가 되는 등 이제는 점점 더 대중과 소통을 하는 문화의 아이콘으로 인정을 받고 있음. They thought hip hop as a popular thing only among delinquent youth in 1990s. But in 2000s, it has been established as a culture. Consumption of merchandise associated with hip hop has been steadily rising. Now it is recognized as an icon of popular culture which has been communicated with the public (email interview).

The exposure to b-boying and hip hop culture for these global b-boys came via the media. It appears that there are few connections to b-boy origins or an understanding to why and how it began. Similar to Hergenrother and Storm, many Korean b-boys were fascinated and attempting to learn b-boying prior to their knowledge of the term and the culture. “17~18 살쯤 비보이란 말을 처음 들었던 거 같아요. 그 단어를 알때쯤엔 저는 이미 비보이였죠. I think heard the term b-boy around 17 or 18 years old. But I had been b-boying prior to learning that term” (email interview). These Korean b-boys are learning from Korean pop groups and from friends. Because their entry into b-boying is through the media or through peer groups evolving into crews, the connection to the original b-boys are understandably thin or non-existent.

Another aspect of the marginalization of Korean youth is that at age 18 they become eligible to be drafted into a mandatory military service. Many view this as ending their aspirations as b-boys. Two Gamblerz crew b-boys say, “Dancing is not allowed in the military. Period. So we’re willing to go to the extreme before we get drafted. You

lose everything you worked for when you go to the army. Like any professional athlete if you take a break, you lose all your skills” (*Planet B-boy*). All of these aspects of youth marginality connect to the original struggles around black masculinity that are at the root of hip hop cultural in the quite different cultural context of Korea today.

Like the black and brown Bronx b-boys, Korean b-boys explosively challenge their social constrictions. German b-boy Storm says, “On a technical level, there is nobody that could touch the Koreans, nobody” (*Planet B-Boy*). Not only have they developed skills in a short period of time, Korean b-boys have brought a new meaning to power moves, inventing and performing power moves that nobody has seen before. “Gamblerz, they would not be satisfied with doing moves that everybody could do. They wanted technically to be so sophisticated and so advanced, that it would at least take a regular b-boy two three years to do” (Storm *Planet B-Boy*). One Gamblerz b-boy provides an example that, “Laser has spent 5 or 6 years solely spinning on his head. That’s how he became the best head-spinner in the world. He can’t do other moves that well” (*Planet B-boy*). As argued by Kitwana in the case of non-black global youth, Korean b-boys are embracing this dance form and innovating the subculture through the dexterity, deftness, and explosiveness of power moves. In this light Korean b-boy excellence is an extension of the innovativeness of the early black and brown b-boys.

The dominant Korean crews are amazing to watch, yet their social marginality complicates the film’s efforts to present them as representatives of the nation. In fact the film’s universal, nation-state sense of the global renders it unable to handle the deeper political cultural subtexts. As b-boys the young Korean men are not viewed as contributing to society until they win. In an interview, b-boy Joe states that he is proud to

represent Korea and wants to be the face of Korea. Last for One's post-BOTY win brings them into a national spotlight, that features them in a tourism commercial. The commercial hails them "fascinating people from Korea" and frames them and their dancing in the courtyard of Gyeongbokgung Palace in the heart of Seoul. The b-boys electrify the screen against a backdrop of over 600 years of Korean history. If they are marginalized at home, in what sense do b-boys represent their home countries in the global competition based on nations?

Further *Planet B-boy* skims over tensions between the crews. As much as the organizers of BOTY emphasize unification in a "non-racist" environment, the competing crews as ambassadors of their country sometimes blur the lines between crew competition and deeper national antagonism. In this instance, the appropriation of b-boying becomes a means to play out an unresolved history of Korean oppression dating back nearly a 100 years. One of the Korean b-boys says, "When Korea and Japan face off in soccer people get really into it. If we go to the finals I want to battle Japan" (*Planet B-Boy*). He is smiling as he tells the interviewer of his wish to battle Japan, but underneath the smile, the b-boy's comment reverberates against the deeper history of Japanese imperialism in Korea. From 1910-1945, Japan ruled Korea with a plethora of oppressive policies like an oath of loyalty to the Japanese sovereign, school children bowing to the east and only speaking Japanese, military rule, bloody repression of the anti-colonial March 1<sup>st</sup> Movement, exploitation of "comfort women", name changing, and much more" (Atkins). Although it was an ambivalent experience for many Koreans, the pain and trauma of that era still resonate with many Koreans around the globe.

Reciprocally, one of the Ichigeki b-boys (Japan) wants to battle Korea. “If I could choose our opponent in the final battle, it would be Korea. They are amazing but their dance doesn’t touch my heart” (*Planet B-Boy*). This implied critique of heartless (and soulless) virtuosity cannot help but redeploy problematically Japanese attitudes, a history of cultural genocide that attempted to erase things Korean from the planet. While the Korean b-boy’s dig at the Japanese is understated, the Japanese b-boy is more direct in his criticism. They do not hate each other but the competition touches on and brings up these historical tensions. Rich subtexts bubble just beneath and even rupture through the surface of the film text, and could be highly informative of the marginality of the planet b-boy. While this tact might not play as attractively with the department of tourism, it could do more to place squarely the global figures in a continuous legacy.

#### French B-Boys In Cultural Contexts

There are two distinct moments where the film could deal with black masculinity and race, but skates right past it. One is with mixed race US crew and the other is with the predominately black, but race and gender mixed French crew, Phase-T. In the case of Phase-T problematic themes of race and nation come to the surface. As Osumare suggests, “The result is that U.S. Black American culture continues to be mired in social narratives of “blackness” that proliferate multidimensionally in the international arena, commingling with other countries’ issues of social marginality” (266). Representing Chelles, a town 25 kilometers outside of Paris, Phase-T primarily consists of young black French men. The idea that these working class black b-boys are representative of the French, elides the history of race and immigrant exclusion in France. B-boy Claude says,

“We like France for what it is but we can’t say the flag ‘blue, white, red’ really represents us. Our flag is hip-hop” (*Planet B-boy*). Osumare describes this as the powerful meaning the narratives take on in the African diaspora. “Hip-hop aesthetics, steeped in polyrhythm, antiphony, an orality of social commentary, and a vital embodiment of all of the above, is repositioned by sub-Saharan black African, Afro-Caribbean, and Brazilian youths because of their connection to the transiting black aesthetic itself” (266). The hip hop aesthetic allows the b-boys to identify disjunctures, discomforts, and disidentifications that call into question their representativeness of France within the film’s overarching universalist narrative.

Telling Phase-T’s stories, *Planet B-boy* features one particular b-boy, Lil Kev. Not only is Lil Kev much younger and smaller than the rest of the Phase-T crew, his mother points out that he is “blonde, blonde, blonde” as the rest of the crew are “6 feet tall and black, black, black” (*Planet B-Boy*). The film emphasizes that neither his size nor the color of his skin limit his participation in the crew, yet the issues are reduced to a black-white binary that does not address the multi-layered status of these b-boys. But the odd juxtaposition of skin colors and Lil Kev’s mother’s own prejudiced comments set the stage for a more rigorous critique of racism that the film fails to deliver. Missing an opportunity to identify and refute black abjection, the film defaults to individual pathology, meritocratic inclusiveness, and a universal appeal that “transcends” race. While his mom appears ridiculous, Lil Kev only sees his acceptance as a skilled b-boy. Broader racial tensions and anti-immigrant sentiments in France could have been emphasized instead to validate the comments of the black French b-boys.

## US B-Boys In Cultural Contexts

The other moment explicitly dealing with black masculinity occurs in the profile of the Knucklehead Zoo (United States). The film points out the multi-cultural diversity of the crew, as several of the b-boys are of mixed-raced heritage. The film uses this example of diversity to reiterate an all-inclusive dance form but it simultaneously reinforces an essentialist view of race and ethnicity. For example, Fonzie is half Venezuelan and half Black, and describes himself associating his ethnic identity to the quality and character of his movements. “Spanish is where I get the cool flavor. The Black is where I get a lot of the explosiveness, where I just fly through the air. I can keep it nice and cool and controlled” (*Planet B-Boy*). In crediting his layered bivalent b-boy style to his ethnic identity, Fonzie not only exhibits racial and ethnic pride, he also identifies and references the Black and Latino origins of b-boying. Through his dance style, he pays homage to the innovating b-boys of the 1970s as well as acknowledging b-boying’s historical roots in American culture. The film makes it a point to connect Fonzie’s identity claims to members of Knucklehead Zoo representing the US in BOTY. The crew members claim that b-boying “started in the Bronx,” and “that’s American culture right there.” “Everybody got a hold of it but we created this,” and “we gotta bring it back” (*Planet of B-boy*). Knucklehead Zoo feels pressure to represent and live up to the accomplishments of the originators.

The complexity lies in the split between b-boying as an ethnically and culturally contextual form and b-boying as a skill based aesthetic. The former allows for an engagement with black masculinity and the later tends to elide it or bury it. But even referencing the specific cultural roots does not guarantee that the message will not be

problematic. Fonzie references the ethnic origins of b-boys through his ethnic identity, but he also reinforces stereotypical images of “Spanish” and “Black”. The split of Spanish as flavor and Black as explosive obscures the African cultural roots that constitute Latino cultures. It becomes more difficult to engage black masculinity when it is constructed in such misleadingly narrow terms.

Regarding the skill based aesthetic, Schloss points out, “a central theme of b-boy ideology is that the culture is a meritocracy” (15). To be a successful b-boy, you need the technical skills to beat your opponent in a battle. However for Knucklehead Zoo, the cultural root plays a primary role as well. This comes across in their references to family and lineage. The crew describe themselves as more like a family, and some of their parents are heavily supportive of their b-boying. To its credit, the film sets up this emphasis on family. But the fact that Knucklehead Zoo’s narrative is not central to the film and that the crew fails to place in the final battles, renders it marginal.

## Conclusion

Battle of the Year is the preeminent forum for b-boy crews all around the world today, and Benson Lee’s *Planet B-boy* provides a rich documentary of the intense competition. Telling the stories of five crews and their journey to finals, the documentary goes into great lengths to pitch BOTY as a universal and inclusionist global forum. By smoothing over complexities of the b-boys in each cultural context and largely staying away from the politics of race and gender, the film cannot push far enough to deeply engage black masculinity and the structural equity issues that original b-boys challenged. *Planet B-boy* instead highlights the solidarity and sharing of culture that takes place after

the competition before crews return back to their home countries. B-boy crews had historically served as learning environments and community building and there is some continuity in the global context as we see crews prepare for the BOTY competition. The context of globalization challenges an authentic black masculinity in b-boying because there are so many layers of meaningful and complex engagement with the race, class, and gender otherness of the b-boy. The film gestures towards this complexity and depth of race, class, and gender but narrates a simplistic, one-world liberal vision of equality among simplified and essentialized nation states.

In the case of *Planet B-boy* and BOTY we can see a split between cultural context and skills and aesthetic. The film proposes that these b-boys represent their nations yet they are marginalized in their home countries. The French b-boys refer directly to being othered by race, Korean and Japanese b-boys are of low status, and the US b-boys are embraced through familial connections but do not enjoy the mainstream recognition of other hip hop elements like rap music.

Global youth appropriate hip hop culture to fight systems of oppression and inequality in their own contexts, yet this does not necessarily tie them to the black and brown roots of the culture. Miles White reminds us, “The deeper implications and challenges for youth who appropriate, admire, consume, and transform African American cultural expressions is to move beyond such fetishizing representations of blackness and masculinities to embrace the transformational possibilities of racial transgression” (130). In other words, the use of hip hop and b-boying for liberatory purposes is not automatically anti-racist. The fundamental question of where black masculinity figures is tricky to grasp and can easily be lost in the film’s metanarrative. Centering Halifu

Osumare's connective marginalities and having a more sustained analysis of power and inequality in global locations, we can trace the black masculine form expanding in the international race, class, and gender contexts: where it goes, how it sometimes is present, sometimes is a ghost, and in other instances is gone. *Battle of the Year* and *Planet B-boy* to some extent help us see the possibility of racial transgression, or engaging black masculinity but do little to prepare us to win that competition.

## CONCLUSION

“Within such a critical space, I argue, the tendency should not be to dismiss and to discredit black men’s representations of themselves and their cultural productions on the basis of their contradictions. On the contrary, the tendency ought to be to explore those cultural productions and their contradictions with a critical view clarified by hindsight concerning past responses to African American literary and cultural productions” (Tucker 16-17).

“Put differently, the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is a double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” (Hartman 19).

I return to Linda Tucker’s insight on the need to look at the contradictions of black male hip hop with a critical lens. As argued, productions such as *The Seven* and *Rome & Jewels* engage in these whole discussions whereas *Step Up 2: The Streets* and *Planet B-boy* in different ways center the non-black body and obliterate or elide the social construction of race. In these less successful hip hop performances, meaning great aesthetically yet lacking African American cultural grounding, the multicultural or global body displaces and replaces the black male. Taken as a whole, we can see hip hop performances deeply engaged in race, gender, and class constructions, entangling them in the definitive racial justice issues of today.

By looking at liminal sites of hip hop performance, this dissertation shows how these performances can challenge or reproduce race and gender violence. Will Power in *The Seven* offers a critique of negative portrayals of men and black on black violence but is limited by the notion of fate in the Greek classics. In *Rome & Jewels*, Rennie Harris calls black men to a higher purpose, and delivers his critical message with explosive hip

hop dance artistry. Both Power and Harris center black masculinity and embrace a critical reframing of mainstream race and gender social constructions.

*Step Up 2: The Streets* has highly entertaining dancing but ultimately puts forward a deeply harmful narrative that devalues African Americans and replaces them with “more desirable” white and multicultural bodies. This gentrification of hip hop dance gets masked in the message that hip hop is for everyone. In similar ways, but much less problematically *Planet B-boy* elides the living cultural roots of hip hop. The global b-boys innovate their dance forms and raise the pure intensity of the battle, but the event producers and filmmaker are more interested in the economic mainstreaming of b-boys around the world.

My hip hop dance students respond very well in general to class discussions delving into hip hop’s problematic stereotypes and more productive possibilities. For the most part, they are not explicitly racist but their lack of knowledge and empathy often rings in their comments. These knowledge based discussions couple well with intense movement practices allowing for multiple points of entry and forward motion in tough conversations and growth. It is my hope that this pedagogical style will better prepare young people to appreciate yet also take very seriously the significant contributions of hip hop performance creators.

By focusing on black masculinity, we come to appreciate the core roles of race and gender in hip hop and popular culture. We should celebrate the best examples of works that improve our knowledge and capacity to address injustice, rather than becoming paralyzed by the negativity in some hip hop performances,. We should sharpen our critical eye, and lift up the hip hop performances that help us do this. As golden age

hip hop group Black Sheep reminds us, “The choice is yours... You can get with this, or you can get with that. I think you’ll get with this, for this is where it’s at”.

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