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Conversations

Across the Field of Dance Studies



dance
studies
association



The Cyber-Rock Mixtape: A Virtual Hip Hop Dance Listening Cypher

Intro

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Hip hop is an American culture that grew from the innovation of Black and Brown youth in New York City (NYC). It is a way of being, a way of moving, an identity, a practice, and a theory. The movement grew from parties and social gatherings. It has always been about expression and making a name for oneself in a culture and system that continues to discriminate against and police Black and Brown bodies in the effort to uphold white supremacy culture and racial capitalism. Hip hop practices emerged as a protest, a means for social justice, and the ongoing practice of building community. In the shadows of Robert Moses' infrastructural projects, the ways that youth moved with and against neoliberalism became a standard repertory of dance-, music-, and art-making practices for people across time, space, class, and race, resisting structural and political limitations imposed upon them.

This issue of *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* centers hip hop dance practitioners' knowledge and analyses of race, ethnicity, history, appropriation, ownership, commercialization, gender, and sexuality in ways that typically remain verbally unaddressed in the dance cypher. While much has been written about hip hop in regard to the elements of graffiti, DJing, MCing,

and the culture in general,¹ as dance studies scholars, we are most dedicated to expanding the field of hip hop dance studies,² specifically. This issue also centers on the form of a dialogue as informed by academic oral history methodologies that emphasize deep listening and co-authorship.³

Method

Hip hop dance encompasses a genealogy of many social and vernacular styles of dance. There has been much discussion regarding what the hip hop dances truly are, and this issue continues the scholarly discourse about breakin' (b-boying/b-girling) and party dances as "the" hip hop dances. But if we consider the broadest formulation of "party dances," then it stands to bear that regional dance styles that emerge from young Black and Brown diasporic communities all find each other under the auspices of hip hop dance. Due to limitations of time and space, we cannot attend to *all* global participants, voices, and other dance styles categorized as underground/street/club dance forms like vogue, waacking, house, Chicago footwork, Memphis Jookin', Lite Feet,

1. See the work of Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, H. Samy Alim, Cheryl Keyes, Dan Charnas, James Spady, Manning Marable, Cornel West, Jeff Chang, Robin D. G. Kelley, George Nelson, Mark Anthony Neal, Murray Forman, William Eric Perkins, Ivor Miller, Robert Farris Thompson, Joan Morgan, and the Pleasure Ninjas collective, among others.

2. We hope to expand upon the work begun by academic scholars such as, but not limited to, Thomas DeFrantz, Sally Banes, Katrina Hazzard-Donald, Halifu Osumare, Sally Sommer, Kyra Gaunt, Raquel Z. Rivera, Joseph Schloss, Imani Kai Johnson, Mary Fogarty, Emery Petchauer, Naomi Bragin, Lorenzo Perrillo, Rachael Gunn, Freida Frost, Serouj "Midus" Aprahamian, practitioner-scholars like PopMaster Fabel, Rennie Harris, Ken Swift, Rokafella, Moncell Durden, Alieness, Storm, and the countless hip hop dance practitioners around the world who investigate and transmit hip hop dance history and culture every day. See "Suggested Reading List" in the Back Matter of this issue for specific readings.

3. For more information about academic oral history methodology, see works by Mary Marshall Clark, Ron Grele, Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli. A good text to refer to is Perks, R. and Thomson, A. (2015). *The oral history reader*. Routledge.

Hyphy, jerkin', krumping, Detroit Jit, and all of the other styles that continue to develop not just in the United States but around the world. We hope that the method we developed for this issue of *Conversations* will inspire other scholars to investigate or instigate conversations in other locations, styles, and especially other languages.

To that end, *The Cyber-Rock: A Virtual Hip Hop Dance Listening Cypher* attempts to do a number of things. First, this is an experiment in what knowledge production might look like that reflects our relationships across practice and theory, in and outside institutional spaces, and virtual and in-person connections. Second, we wanted to institutionalize the conversations already taking place within the hip hop dance community by publishing and circulating this production of knowledge. The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, which has reached new heights of mainstream consciousness in the United States following the murder of George Floyd, fundamentally changed how we lived our lives. No longer able to gather in person at practices, jams, and competitions, members of the hip hop dance community took to Zoom and other social media platforms to address the issues of racism, sexism/misogyny, history, and trauma, in the form of interviews and panel discussions. The conversations that sometimes took place off the dance floor now became the central way in which the community gathered to speak and listen to one another. Most importantly, in developing *Cyber-Rock*, we asked ourselves how we could create and present a knowledge cypher between practitioner-theorists and academic scholars who are dedicated to the field of hip hop dance studies.⁴

4. We want to acknowledge the institutional work taking place like the Dance Oral History Project and Archive at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library as well as panel discussions like *The Black Xperience in Collaboration with Battle Manifesto* at Temple University.

The Mixtape: Form and Content

The notion of the cypher and cyphering runs throughout all elements of hip hop culture. Party-goers naturally form circles to spit rhymes, exchange dance throw downs, or trade black books. The cypher, therefore, is both the physical and metaphoric place that we bear witness, and to which we contribute our own expression in an ongoing exchange of energy. In this case, we coeditors thought about what we'd want this cypher to look, sound, and feel like. As a result, this issue of *Conversations* is set up as a mixtape where we invited scholars to listen to conversations between hip hop dance practitioners to discuss a particular theme or topic. Cognizant of the fact that there are many people within the hip hop dance community that the dance studies community might have less familiarity with, our intention with this project was to introduce other voices and stories that corroborate, contest, and bear witness to hip hop dance history and culture. Curatorially, this meant that we worked "close to home." In other words, we reached out to people with whom we are in deep relationships as crewmembers, mentors, found family, colleagues, and fellow activists engaged in dance practices, crucial social justice, and/or teaching work. In having lived life with many of them, we anticipated how they might articulate themes and theories that emerge from their life experience in hip hop dance.

Each duo of conversants has a relationship with each other already: Break Easy and Mighty Mike share a history of growing up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; Buddha Stretch put Ms. Vee on in the NYC scene; big tara and Stacey Stash are members of the international b-girl crew Heartbreakerz; BuddhaCFM brought WaAaKSun in to teach Inuit youth as part of BuddhaCFM's BluePrint project; Dr. Shamell Bell and d. Sabela Grimes are friends and colleagues in Street Dance Activism (SDA). Each conversation is exactly that: a conversation. Each has its own energy and rhythm. Most conversations could have gone on for many more hours, but as editors, we did our best to try to keep each

to about an hour. We then transcribed and annotated each conversation, which conferred another layer of deep listening and consideration of what was said.

Hip hop scholars have been experimenting with formats of knowledge production that reflect hip hop aesthetics.⁵ The form of a “mixtape” as an organizing format in hip hop academia is not new. In “‘The People Keep on Going,’ A Listening Party, Vol. 1,” in *The Futures of Black Radicalism* (2017), Shana L. Redmond and Kwame M. Phillips present an annotated mixtape of songs they believe express Black radicalism through music-making. In thinking about this series of conversations as a mixtape, we extend this format to invite academic scholars from across the disciplines of dance studies, ethnomusicology, history, and ethnic studies to listen to and read the conversation afterward and provide their insights in the form of “liner notes.”

Our mixtape would not be complete without representing the other elements of hip hop. The music in the intro and outro of each video is a track titled “No Illusion” by the Anomalies Crew, featuring 427 and Zion I (RIP Zumbi). Thanks to Anomalies members big tara and DJ Kuttin’ Kandi for allowing us to feature their crew’s beats. We give big props to BazeOne STF for the graphics that got us cut hype every time we looked at the cover and logo.

A Note on “Translation”

As with writing about any culture, the representation of hip hop culture in textual form presents questions and quandaries that vex most traditional academic editors. The demand to be original in hip hop culture flows through every element. Most people hear this in the cutting and

5. Most famously, Cornel West produced “Sketches of My Culture,” a hip hop album (2001), and, most recently, A.D. Carson presented his doctoral dissertation as a rap album that subsequently went viral. <https://phd.aydeethegreat.com/>

sampling of records that DJs/producers continue to practice. In dance, we take movement and literally turn it on its head in unexpected ways. Hip hop writers (aka graffiti writers) have long practiced twisting, deconstructing, and reappropriating the visual representation of written language in their pieces. All along the way, practitioners routinely flkwt with the spelling of names and phrases.⁶ In processing this particular series of conversations, we attempted to strike a balance between making space for each contributor to express their prerogative in writing phrases like "Hip-Hop" or "Bboy/Bgirl" in their bios, while standardizing "hip hop" and "b-boy/b-girl" in the annotated transcripts. To that end, some conversants chose to represent their names differently from how they are referred to in the transcript. For example, when we noticed that Buddha Stretch set his Zoom name to "Bundaskratch," and if he'd like to change it, he replied, "Nah." Another conversant chose to share their story, but not their full identity, which we happily accommodated.

We also attempted to retain the conversational grammar in the annotated transcripts, again to push back against the academic instinct to flatten it out into colonized, heteronormative, "proper" English grammar. In some cases, how conversants refer to other people may flip between their dance monikers and their government names. We chose to have the writing reflect what and how they were recalled in the context of the storytelling. Readers will notice that some of the names mentioned in each conversation are footnoted and some are not. We asked ourselves whether or not who was mentioned had a bearing on understanding what was being discussed.

In the process of peer review, along with questions regarding the standardization of spelling and grammar, there were also requests for clarification of people, events, and places. We asked ourselves: How much do we translate in each transcript? Do we footnote or hyperlink? Should reading these conversations feel like jumping into a cypher that might be somewhat discombobulating? Are we imposing colonial

6. For more scholarship about hip hop sociolinguistics, see Alim, H.S. (2006). *Roc the mic right: The language of hip hop culture*. Routledge.

practices if we footnote passing shorthand reference to a particular jam/event? Or does it enhance and clarify the knowledge being produced in the conversations? As a middle-ground solution developed by the mindful editing board, we have included a selected glossary of terms that includes some (NYC-specific) Spanish slang and a list of breaking events/jams referred to in multiple conversations. We've also compiled a suggested reading list. Edited glossary and events lists are included at the end of each conversation. The reading list can be found in the Back Matter of this issue.

The Get-Down

The experience of getting down in a cypher can be exhilarating, overwhelming, chaotic, and a test to see how much you can maintain a sense of awareness and control in the circle. Some moves are legible to others, while some moves are obscure to viewers due to your particular innovation of how you throw your set. In a separate conversation with our good friend, b-girl and choreographer Ephrat Asherie, we discussed how watching a concert dance piece about hip hop or club culture does not mean that an audience member can, or should, walk away from that performance feeling like they "know" either scene. Similarly, we hope that the editorial decisions we've made furnish readers with the experience of both familiarity and strangeness when listening to/reading these conversations.

As with any cypher, however you decide to get down in it is entirely up to your style. If you want to sample each conversation, you might decide to read all the liner notes first. Perhaps you want to feel like you are at the edge of the cypher itself, in which case listening to/watching a conversation is more your speed. Or if reading *is* in fact the fastest way to get something into your brain, you might want to read the annotated transcripts first. There's another level of cyphering that calls for engaged analysis once you have listened to these conversants and respondents. Whatever you choose, we hope that these conversations

evoke the kind of awe, inspiration, respect, and love for each of these participants that it did for us as we hosted and continued to spend time with them as we transcribed and annotated their words. Mostly, we hope that these conversations will inspire you to listen deeply to the lived experiences of hip hop dance practitioners. We invite you to join the party and get down in these cyphers.

Author Biographies

grace shinhae jun is a mother, wife, artist, scholar, organizer, and mover who creates and educates on the traditional and unceded territory of the Kumeyaay Nation. A child of a South Korean immigrant, a North Korean refugee, and Hip Hop culture, she values a movement practice that is infused with historical and contextual education and focuses on community, compassion, and empowerment to encourage rhythm and expression. grace is a choreographer who directs bkSOUL, an award-winning performance company that merges movement, poetry, and live music. She is a founding core member of the Asian Solidarity Collective and collaborator with SDA. grace received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and a PhD through the joint doctoral program at UCSD/UCI. Her scholarship on Asian Americans and hip hop dance is forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*. grace teaches at UCSD, San Diego City College, and with transcDANCE Youth Arts Project.

MiRi "seoulsonyk" Park is a b-girl, choreographer, performer, producer, scholar, activist, teacher, and mother based in Southern California. She reps New York City, where she spent her formative adult years and learned the art of b-girling and other underground dance forms. MiRi was the associate choreographer of the 20th anniversary tour of RENT and a lecturer in the newly formed California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) Dance Studies program where she teaches dance history and hip hop dance. She is currently a doctoral student at

University of California, Los Angeles's World Arts and Cultures/Dance (UCLA WAC/D) focusing on Asian American corporealities in hip hop dance. MiRi is a recipient of the *University of California, Riverside* (UCR) Christena Lindborg Schlundt Lecture Series in Dance Studies and the CSU Faculty Innovation and Leadership Award. Her writing will appear in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*. She is a coeditor of a special issue about dance and protest for International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) and a producer/dramaturg/dancer for *This One Then*, a screendance directed by Charlotte Griffin, MA American Studies, Columbia, and BFA Dance and BA Journalism, UMass Amherst. Crews: Breaking in Style (BIS), Tru Essencia Cru (TEC), Fox Force Five (FF5).