



Asian American Activation through Hip Hop Dance

grace shinhae jun and MiRi Park

At a time when transnational capital and repressive state apparatuses hold the upper hand everywhere, cultural production plays a vital role in nurturing and sustaining self-activity on the part of aggrieved peoples. Culture enables people to rehearse identities, stances, and social relations not yet permissible in politics. But it also serves as a concrete social site, a place where social relations are constructed and enacted as well as envisioned. Popular culture does not just reflect reality, it helps constitute it.

—George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 137

Introduction

As sister-moms, scholars, activists, and hip hop dancers/lecturers, we have had the great fortune of having each other's ear before and throughout the pandemic. We've commiserated, collaborated, and co-conspired about our love and concerns about Asianness and hip hop dance. Both of us are currently investigating and interrogating Asian dance groups on university campuses in different capacities: grace's essay in the *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies* (2022) and MiRi in forthcoming dissertation research.

Initially thinking about Claire Jean Kim's theory of racial triangulation across Black, Asian, and white, we've also come to consider lyko Day's triangulation across settler-colonist, Indigenous, and alien

alongside Helen Heran Jun's concept of Black Orientalism and Asian uplift as effects of neoliberalism, as giving more space to think about how Black people and Asians are racialized with and against each other. Rooted in capitalism, Day's theory considers how Asians and Black folk arrived at Turtle Island as exploited labor. In centering neoliberal ideology, Jun frames how the post-World War II reshaping of the global economic and political world order resulted in mass inequality and thus shaped how people related to one another.

Considering George Lipsitz's sentiment in this opening epigraph, we often find ourselves thinking about the following:

- We want Asian Americans to be activated through their participation in hip hop dance (and hip hop dance derivative) practices so that they can constitute realities forged from freedom dreams (Kelley) that truly center the tenets of peace, love, unity, and having fun. We are particularly invested in hip hop dance as practitioners, but we have also borne witness to hip hop dance becoming the social movement vernacular among Asian Americans throughout the past three decades.
- We want Asian Americans to know our histories of arrival and trauma, and how they are tied to the suffering of others.
- We want Asian Americans to understand that their participation in hip hop builds community and power, but it comes at a cost when it remains insular to their own teams.

Since we ask these same questions of our students, we thought we'd share how we personally arrived at our understanding of how our collective—Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx—freedoms and liberations are tied to together. In this moment of heightened awareness of anti-Asian violence, when the Asian American community is asking "where are our supporters?", we understand that the violence stems from something deeper than just discrimination against Asian folks. We also understand that, reciprocally, people are asking where we have been in the struggle against anti-Black violence.

What follows is an edited version of a conversation we had in which we delved into our own hiphopography (Spady and Alim) and histories of arrival to both hip hop dance and activism. We discuss in particular Street Dance Activism, a collective activated by Shamell Bell in May 2020, with the intent to shift our consciousness to Black liberation through dance and movement.



Photo from grace's personal collection. grace shinhae jun and MiRi Park at the 2017 Dance Studies Association conference at Ohio State University.

The Foundations

We came up during the golden age of hip hop, the 1980s and 1990s, where discovery and innovation exploded possibilities in the culture.

We were listening to the growing roster of hip hop artists and were hip hop dancing because of school friends, *Soul Train*, the Fly Girls, and music videos.

MiRi Park 박미리: I was the Asian kid who was friends with the Black kid. We were both latchkey kids and hung out at her house because she was allowed to watch TV after school, which meant copious hours of *General Hospital*, MTV, and BET. Her mom let us watch *School Daze* (1988). . . . I watched the dance diaspora represented in that film, not fully understanding what I was seeing, even as everything resonated so deeply because I was already starting to watch Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. At that point, my friend and I were always doing the party dances. I didn't know what they were, but she would say, "Here's the latest thing that we have to do," and we made routines and went to school dances and just went off.

grace shinhae jun 전신혜: There were only a handful of Asians at my school. I was the only Asian girl in my graduating class. In seventh grade, my friend Danielle transferred in and was one of the only Black girls in my grade. She introduced me to K-DAY 1580, which was the AM radio station in LA that played hip hop and R&B. There was also my friend Robin. We were on the cheer squad together and she taught us all the things. We were learning Black culture through her and we were doing it through our cheers. My dancing also came from watching *Soul Train* and from religiously watching the Fly Girls from *In Living Color*. I think everybody tried to break in the 1980s, but because there were no classes, we were learning with each other.

MiRi Park 박미리: I mean, for me, my awareness came from two places: breakin' and my work with Nia Love. I had the great fortune of taking class from her in college, seeing her again after I moved to New York, and then living upstairs from her and receiving a parallel education about institutional racism while I was in grad

school. The artistic work that I did with Nia and the interdisciplinary group of artists she assembled was about the Middle Passage and contending with that trauma. That's actually when I read Helen Zia. In the last chapter of *Asian American Dreams: The Emergences of an American people*, Zia discusses how the slave ships were repurposed to bring coolies from China. Realizing that sort of blew my mind, like the actual physical vessels. I was not yet really fully aware of capitalism as a structure, as an economic paradigm, as being the thing that was the underlying impetus that pulls together issues of labor, both enslavement and indentured labor, that built this country.

I was only just starting to see myself as an Asian person reflected inside of this entire struggle, because prior to that I was invested in the work that Nia was doing about the Middle Passage, but it was not about me or my story necessarily until it did become about that. We were having conversations about Japan colonizing Korea—that kind of oppression. So that was happening both intellectually and artistically while I was starting to break. It was all happening at the same time.

I was so focused on the body mechanics of breakin', learning how to do the movement with a loosely assembled cohort of other newbie dancers, but then afterwards it was about chilling with them. We were also so exhausted and hungry after practice that it didn't matter that this kid was 16 and from the neighborhood, and this other kid was a 35-year-old white guy, and I was this 22-year-old Korean kid who just wanted to dance.

But at a certain point because you live hip hop, you become part of the blob that is the hip hop habitus. You are absorbed into the blob and . . . people know me and I know them, and therefore we care about each other. The bonds of caring are true and strong and so, if I were to go down from an anti-Asian attack, I know that the community, the hip hop family, is going to support me, just like when someone else in the community goes

down we're all going to fight for that person. I think that the solidarity factor really comes from the sweating together, the living together, the smelling together. When you smell somebody on a regular basis you know who they are.

grace shinhae jun 전신혜: Looking back I see how hip hop set my mind open in a particular way and I was receiving things differently. Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and then *Malcolm X* (1992) came out when I was in high school, so I was really into Lee and his films and of course Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" (1989) in *Do the Right Thing*. And I think it was because of Lee's film *Malcolm X* that I asked my English teacher if I could read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* for my book report. It wasn't on his list, but that's what I wanted to do. And then in college, I was falling more in love with hip hop because I worked at the campus radio station. I eventually became the Rap Director and was the person in contact with different labels and received all the new hip hop music that was coming out in the 1990s.

Being in LA in a very Korean space in Koreatown and in this dense city and then on the flip side being in very white spaces, my Asianness or Koreanness was really something that I thought about a lot—particularly because I didn't fit into the stereotypes of the small Asian girl. I was tall, into sports, and most people didn't think I was Korean. It was through the dancing that I began to really know who I was. I really do credit Rennie Harris and Doug Elkins for showing me what was possible. So after moving to New York, going to grad school and going to the clubs and experiencing hip hop in that way, my relationship to dance started changing. I had a partner who lived in Brooklyn, and the choreographic work that we were doing and the conversations we were having were sending me deeper into investigating and learning. And then I met Ant Black. We just vibed because we understood each other, coming from a hip hop perspective, but really feeling like we were at the margins of what we did. Him as a spoken

word poet and me as a dancer not fitting into these boxes, and we began to create with each other and out of that we have developed a lifelong friendship where our families are intertwined. Hip hop brought us together, creating brought us together, and it's like you said, we show up for each other.

Protests and Activism

MiRi Park 박미: Back in college my friend Jose and I participated in my first protest, which was about UMass cutting funding to either first-generation students or minority students. I think it was cutting minority funding. And I didn't fully understand what was going on, because I come from a place of privilege. I come from a family that was, "Your job is to go to college. We have prepared for you to go to school." I remember the protesters were trying to shut down campus, so they occupied a building. Then part of the protest was walking through the streets so that no traffic could move, creating traffic jams on campus.

I remember getting into it with the girl across the hall from me in my dorm, a white girl from central Massachusetts, a blue-collar family, who was also waitressing, I think, on the weekends. I remember debating with her and saying, "You know how many people in your high school class graduated?" And she said, "99%." I responded, "Well, imagine going to a high school where the graduation rate was 19% and a fraction of that percentage was expected to go on to college." Her point was that she was poor and needed money to go to college, so she didn't think a person of color should get more funding than her.

I didn't fully know what I was saying at the time, but I told her the sheer expectation that you would finish high school and then go on to college, even if you're struggling to pay for it, is completely different from being in a situation where you are not expected to graduate and you were sure as hell not expected

to go to college. I don't know where that came from, but realized it was at the protest where I heard those things. That's the whole point of activism, to raise and build awareness. I didn't realize what was happening at the time, I didn't realize that I was getting an education—different kinds of lessons. This is just me, my physical body being in a place, so that's another constant theme of me just saying, "I'm just going to show up. I'm gonna put my body in the place that feels like it needs to be in." I think about that as being my point of activation or social justice awakening.

Both my partner and I stopped going to protests after the Iraq invasion. There were huge protests in New York that we participated in and it didn't do shit. So both of us became disillusioned. . . . We're all going to stand up and say this and you're still going to do whatever you want to do? What's the point? But I think from that moment, I understood that the protest doesn't necessarily have to happen en masse in the streets. Much later when I started teaching hip hop, I realized that this is where this thing (protest and activism) happens, too, because I'm also talking about the things that I've learned and am trying to impart to students, as well. I began to understand that teaching is also a mode of social justice, that teaching is a mode of activism.

grace shinhae jun 전신혜: Not everybody can be frontline organizers and sustain themselves. I think about all the little seeds that have been spread out to activate and get me where I am today. One of those moments was in 2010 at UCSD [University of California, San Diego]. It was called the "Compton Cook-out," where a frat threw a party, and the invite included various stereotypes of the Black community to indicate how to come dressed, what activities they were going to do, etc. There were campus-wide protests, conversations, panels, and arts-centered performances. I remember submitting an application to perform with Ant [Black] and Jesse [Mills]. It was called "Dear

Janet," where Ant's poem was a letter to a school friend about their differences while Jesse sang "Strange Fruit" and I danced. I think it was deeply meaningful because I was eight months pregnant with Brooklyn at the time. I also had my hip hop class perform. Looking back, it was this moment of showing them how they could be involved.

Also it's interesting as Sa-I-Gu (4-2-9) is coming up. The 1992 LA Uprising where Rodney King, a Black man, was beaten by four white police officers caught on a home video. It was an experience of seeing Korean and Black churches coming together in LA and having to go to some events with my church after seeing all the businesses being burned. I look back on that and how maybe I did not necessarily understand white supremacy in the ways that I understand it now, but now I recognize the moments that educate you. And for me it was always about educating myself as an undergrad and having professors like George Lipsitz, who opened my eyes. My honors thesis ended up being on the Black-Korean conflict in LA. Through the process of researching and writing it, I was learning how Blacks and Koreans were entangled and pitted against each other. So being introduced to Claire Kim's racial triangulation theory by my partner Dr. Jesse Mills was pivotal in understanding where I stood or why I was constantly feeling like an outsider.

My connection to DJ Kuttin Kandi, which was through hip hop, brought greater knowledge of activism. So when Alfred Olango was shot and killed by the police in San Diego, all of those things led up to, "We need to do something as Asians. We Asian Americans who participate in hip hop, we need to do something" and that's how we formed Asian Solidarity Collective (ASC). It was a way to address anti-Blackness in our communities and to build solidarity in our community. We were committed to doing the work, so when Shamell made the call to gather, for me it was no question. This is what I do, this is who I am, this is where I'm going from here on out.

Street Dance Activism—Global Dance Meditation for Black Liberation

grace shinhae jun 전신혜: Looking back at our participation in hip hop, these were the values that we were learning and what it meant to be in community and to show up and to support.

MiRi Park 박미리: Right—because we’re talking about relationships. We are in relationship with folks we have learned from, we are learning with, and Street Dance Activism (SDA) was another extension of that. The folk who stayed in it were saying, “We get you, we see each other, and we are showing up for each other.” I think that’s the thing that held us together for planning and launching the 28-day Global Dance Meditation. I don’t think that the anti-Asian hate crimes were publicized at that point. I feel like they’re always happening, but like it wasn’t quite hitting the tenor until 2021 when it started to be more publicized.

grace shinhae jun 전신혜: Right. It wasn’t about anti-Asian violence necessarily, but it was a call to gather.

MiRi Park 박미리: We were answering the call to *the shift* specifically. I feel like the idea behind Shamell’s instinct was that if we get enough people around the world together to be one-minded, single-minded about this . . . with the single intention of shifting us out of this shitty time. But in order to do that there had to be all of this work, to ensure that we were actually on the same page, that we were actually in solidarity, true solidarity, with one another. In one way, you can look at it as these elite, institutionalized folks. But on the other hand, you can look at it as, these people who have spent a lot of time, focusing and thinking about and ruminating about how we could shift a consciousness through dance and movement because so many of us are dancers.

It was important that there were so many different faces who were represented, and ethnicities and nationalities and backgrounds, but I think all of us who did come together understood what it meant to be activated and what it meant to participate in activist movements.

And the Asian American folks who are involved in SDA, we were plugged into this sort of mindset before we even came together. And also plugged into the work. For you and your work with ASC, it was a natural fit. The folks who ended up not moving forward with it—it was just because it was a lot. It was moving so quickly. Pulling together the 28-day meditation was coming together so fast that if you weren't right there at the front of it, it's too big of a curve to learn.

grace shinhae jun 전신혜: Planning, arranging, organizing with not even necessarily a clear direction and balancing when to step forward and when to pull back. I remember talking to Sabela Grimes specifically about as an Asian American not trying to take up space unless it's warranted or called. And he just said, "You're here, you got to do it," like the very ways that he was called into spaces. But again it's because it's relational, right, because we had established these relationships, that trust was built.

MiRi Park 박미리: But it is connected to the fact that we are all in relation to each other, and this is where Lyko Day's triangulation is just so incredibly powerful to me because in using capitalism as her framework to account for racialized labor in this country, we can see the bigger picture of how we are in relation to one another. Black and Asian folks are so different because of the circumstances in which they've come to the country, but both under the auspices of labor. If people really understood that, just seeing that picture would help us see that actually we are in the struggle together.

That if students knew how closely in relation we are to one another, there is a potential for political mobilization that we have yet to see, that goes beyond the Rainbow Coalition, that goes beyond the Third World Solidarity movement of the 1960s. That it actually happens because of hip hop, because of dance, that we recognize we are in the struggle together.

But how do we do that? You and I got here because we lived it. How can I make that assumption that a kid is going to listen to me because I said so?

grace shinhae jun 전신혜: I think that's the hope that we have for our Asian American students and Asian Americans in general. At least I want them to be activated and jump in but again realizing that you and I are a part of the seed planting. We are the big sisters that we didn't have. But I want to say that it does happen. Not right away, but I've had students who thank me years later for having those conversations in class. We have to drop those seeds, but we also have to understand that our experience of hip hop is not tied to an institution like theirs. So we continue to re-search Asian Americanness and educate through hip hop, cypher theory, and practicing our forms of solidarity.

Looking Forward

At the time of writing these concluding thoughts, the Supreme Court of the United States has just expanded gun rights and overturned *Roe v. Wade* in the span of 48 hours. If we, our parents, our grandparents, and our families immigrated to this country for a chance at a better life, even if it was amidst the hazy illusion of "freedom," we are here now. We must understand that it is a marathon to retain human rights for all, not just a few. Participating in hip hop dance might feel like an escape and fun, and it is, but that fun is political. If we know hip hop is about *the struggle*, then we have an obligation

to know and understand how we arrived at the place of privilege to participate in this dance. It binds us to the history of those who came before us and to the diverse multitude of humanity we dance with. This conversation has been about how each of our journeys into dance and hip hop dance activated us to learn true US American history and the injustices that we still face. In this ongoing, ever shifting, and evolving conversation, we consider whether our experiences are exceptional or mundane. As we engage in this research everyday through teaching, dancing, parenting, scrolling, reading, and writing, we have hope that other Asian Americans/Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AANHPI) engaged in hip hop dance will also be activated. And as grace reminds her students and we remind each other, we must be in a daily practice. We must rehearse through the practice of hip hop dance and culture, before it becomes personal, so that we are ready.



Photo from grace's personal collection. MiRi (second from left) and grace (third from right) with collaborators Margaret Paek, Shamell Bell, Heather Castillo, Jade Power Sotomayor at the 2019 Dance Studies Conference at Northwestern University.

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. The daughter of a South Korean immigrant, a North Korean refugee, and hip hop culture, she comes from a lineage of deep love and commitment to serve the people. jun directs bkSOUL, a performance company that merges together movement, poetry, and live music. She is a founding member of Asian Solidarity Collective and co-conspires with Street Dance Activism. She graduated with honors from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), with a BA in history and a BA in choreography and dance. She received an MFA in dance from Sarah Lawrence College and her PhD in drama and theatre through the joint doctoral program at UCSD/UCI. Her scholarship is forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies* and the *International Association for the Study of Popular Music Special Issue: Dance and Protest*, in collaboration with Anthony Blacksher. She is co-editor with MiRi Park for the Dance Studies Association's *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* (2021). jun currently teaches at UCSD, San Diego City College, and with transcenDANCE Youth Arts Project.

MiRi 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 hip hop and club dance styles. Her scholarship brings to bear all aspects of her career, which spans underground dance, competitive studio dance, commercial dance, musical theater, and teaching in academic institutional spaces. Park is a lecturer at California State University Channel Islands and is currently a doctoral student in the University of California, Los Angeles's World Arts and Cultures/Dance Department, where she focuses on Asian American corporealities in hip hop dance. She is the recipient of the University of California, Riverside Christena Lindborg

Schlundt Lecture Series in Dance Studies and California State University Faculty Innovation and Leadership Awards. She also holds a BFA (dance) and a BA (journalism), University of Massachusetts Amherst, as well as an MA (American studies), Columbia University.

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