Hip-Hop Dance Is a Significant American Art Form


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"The association of words with dance has a long history that goes back to precolonial West African empires ... dance can be understood as a form of orality." —Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities*

I know hip hop dance when I see it but it cannot be touched. It can be described, sold, and transmitted; learned, choreographed and commoditized. Used. Profited from.

However, hip hop dance writes, theories, interprets, and communicates.

**The Appeal of Hip Hop Dance**

This rich, wondrous text, once written but then not theorizing, interpreting or communicating, finds distribution through television commercials and programs, commercial films, music videos, instructional videos, at concerts, in commercial dance studios, at cheerleading and marching band locales, online, in graphic and cartoon form, and in private consumption spaces. These points of intake cater to a diverse set of people who come from many divisions of life.

Hip hop dance provides something for almost everyone.

One finds housewives wanting to learn, suburban youth identifying with its misinterpreted messages and meanings, Indians, Asians, Australians, Europeans, Africans, Euro American whites, African Americans and many in between who want to too. Learning not in the streets of inner city ghettos but in suburban studios whose products include 1) every-child-gets-a-feel-good-about-him-or-herself-medal won at a hip hop dance competition even if they cannot dance and; 2) recital numbers seen by proud yet uneasy parents where the youngsters shake behinds and stand like non-threatening original gangsters they saw on JC Penney commercials for back to school clothes.

And moreover, some of those who do not overtly engage in learning the dance are themselves often intrigued at the sheer athleticism of the text. I have witnessed middle-aged white women trying out the moves behind the closed doors of empty but adjacent dance studio spaces when they think no one is looking and their children are taking class. They laughed embarrassedly when they saw me looking at them trying to do The Runnin’ Man. They said it was better than aerobics. I smiled and nodded with them in agreement.
Something for Everyone

Why the deep connect with hip hop dance? What strength does it bring? What understanding does it possess? Is it because it is inherently an African American cultural artifact that has succeeded in its export in becoming more American than African? Is it because it is cool and to be American is to be a cool cultural consumption cat? What about it being movement that Others can learn and do? In fact, from a social identity point of view, hip hop dance provides something for almost everyone. A piece of identity that is as portable as a digital game player, a BlackBerry, and a personal digital assistant. A remnant of hip hop dance resides in many around the globe, from those who actively or passively shun it to those who consume it directly or indirectly. In this way the connection between hip hop dance and consumption results from the Cabbaging of artifact and historical texts to create the quintessential Patch. It has Bounced from the characterization of the Snake described black man to the Popped Locks embodying resistance to capitalism and the notions promising you can have it your way. More Runnin’ Men (and women) have been seen in America and abroad as jobs have gone overseas and as developing geographies are exploited for labor.

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Hip hop dance itself is cool, rowdy, defiant, sexy, athletic, smooth, creative. It is also full of meaning—meaning that kind of meaning attributable to ethnographic and cultural contexts. Meanings metabolize in the distribution channel and at points of consumption, when the dance is codified and made into a commodity, used as a medium of value....

Preserving the Art Form

As hip hop dance comes across the screen no tangible named authors of the text exist. But the text is real. It is my view that the history written by the texts of hip hop dance is on the way to being lost in the commercialization, globalization, codification, and commoditization processes. Many have vested interests in these processes. Videographers, product manufacturers, sports cartels, multinational corporations, commercial choreographers, consumers, rappers, and dance studio owners represent only some of the stakeholders who benefit materially from the dissemination of dance texts devoid of meaning and author. The problem with saluting these vested interests, in my opinion, is that doing so limits recognition of hip hop dance as an art form, a written document, and cultural artifact. As it is currently being distributed around the globe, it reminds me of the mass reproduction of, for example, clay pottery art. The purpose of such production is merely for consumption and profit. Those who create the art are often powerless to effect change over the machination. While I may not be able to arrest the processes, I can set forth ideology that sees the dance as text containing historical information that can be read and communicated. These points deserve acknowledgement and preservation, regardless.

Hip hop dance is a black social dance offering texts that deliver strategic and tactical ways of being in the world and remembering worlds past. They contain metaphors and theories about existence and the life of the dancers collectively and individually, and the social fabric we are webbed with. There are macro- and micro-social, political and economic structures of Signification present in these dances begging exploration. For example, in addition to the processes I discussed above, black feminism and hip hop dance have been under-theorized and under-deployed in looking at the currents on which related tactics, metaphors, and theories travel. Moreover, hip hop dance utilizes the choreographed text of US Ebonics [African American vernacular English] for its writing. (I will refer to US Ebonics as Ebonics hereafter for convenience.) However, Ebonics is situated as a spoken language given informal recognition only when one is being a cool consumption cat as such, because now it ain't
cool to speak proper American English. Ebonics, though, is a language which nevertheless carries with it Signification. As you can see, there is a lot going on with hip hop dance, and I am just getting started....

Rap and hip hop music have received theoretical attention from many scholars. I could make a laundry list of the different scholars from the fields of cultural, ethnic, African American, and women’s studies; and ethnomusicology and anthropology. To find these, all one has to do is connect to one’s favorite search engine and type in rap, rappers, rap music, or other indexed words like them, and a plethora of material will be available at the click of a mouse. That is not so much the case with hip hop dance. And when thinking about why that is, I imagine that is because the dance has been separated from the music (language) in a feminizing, maybe trivializing, fashion.

About rap music [cultural critic bell] hooks theorized that “in contemporary black popular culture, rap music has become one of the spaces where black vernacular speech is used in a manner that invites dominant mainstream culture to listen.” By textualizing hip hop dance and what it theorizes I hope ... to reduce its trivialization and to create a space where the dance is not feminized but rather seen for the value it holds at the multifaceted and complex nexuses where cultures and markets interact.

Further Readings

Books

Periodicals
- Mariel Concepcion “David Banner: Rapper/Producer David Banner Has Become One of the Most Vocal Defenders of Hip Hop Lyrics,” *Billboard*, October 6, 2007.


• DeWayne Wickham "Black Fashion Statements Send the Wrong Message," *USA Today*, October 9, 2007.

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