

DANCE FOR WHAT?:
A DOCUMENTARY OF THE UNL HIP HOP DANCE CLUB

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Abstract

This project is a three-part documentary that observes hip hop dance practice and culture in the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The project attempts to answer three significant questions. How do different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds of the club members affect the transformation of hip hop culture? Is their practice authentic and how do members of this dance club define hip hop dance? For what purpose do the members practice hip hop dance together at the club? To answer these three questions, I conducted six oral interviews of recently active members with varying dance levels and experiences, as well as varying cultural backgrounds. Investigation of individual and club dance practice was carried out through attending and filming four weekly dance practices, one performance in the Fall 2019 semester and a collection of pictures and photos from club members. Throughout the course of this project, issues concerning authenticity and appropriation in hip hop dance emerged and there were several conclusions that I came to. The UNL Hip Hop Dance Club's dance practice both appropriates and is not completely authentic to the original form and meaning of hip hop dance beginning with break dance in the 1970s. However, the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club embodies the "spirit" of the original hip hop culture by expressing self and freedom through dance and a unified community among members.

Key Words: hip hop, dance, media, video, documentary, break dance

Dedication/Appreciation

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Introduction

This project is a three-part documentary about the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and examines how the group and its individual members practice and embody hip hop dance and culture. The documentary includes interviews of six active members and depicts their individual and group dance practice. Based on oral interviews, practice and performance observation at multiple sites in Lincoln, and extensive information about the Club that I collected in 2019, I attempt to answer three major questions. How do different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds of the club members affect the transformation of hip hop culture? Is their practice authentic and how do members of this dance club define hip hop dance? For what purpose do the members practice hip hop dance together at the club? My research about the history of hip hop and themes concerning appropriation, authenticity, and transformation within dance scholarships will be utilized to analyze the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club members' engagement with hip hop dance practice.

I position myself as a videographer, editor, researcher, hip hop dance practitioner and former member of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club for this project. When I first joined the dance club, I had the impression that there was something special about the group of people who practiced the dance together. That impression has not changed. However as I remained active in the club, I started to ask myself: is this group authentically practicing hip hop dance? This motivated me to study further about the history of the art form as

well as issues of authenticity and appropriation that mainly occurred after the intrusion of media. Overall, the goal of this project is to gain a deeper understanding of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club while thinking critically about their dance practice defined as hip hop.

Analysis of UNL Hip Hop Dance Club: Issues of Appropriation and Authenticity

My examination of the history of hip hop informs the origin of hip hop and its four main elements. Hip hop emerged in the mid 1970s among lower class Puerto-Rican and black youth living in the Bronx (Hare, Sarah and Baker 3). Hip hop culture rests on four elements: DJing, rapping, breaking and graffiti (Alridge and Stewart 190). Breaking in particular, or “b-boying” as it was called before media renamed it, was the last of the four elements to be recognized in hip hop (Banes 13). After being “discovered” by the media, break dancing was the main proponent in transforming hip hop into the globalized, multi billion industry that we recognize today (Banes 13). Before this “discovery,” break dancing was practiced among the youth, as a “...kind of serious game, a form of urban vernacular dance, a fusion of sports, dancing, and fighting whose performance had urgent social significance for the dancers” (Banes 14). Musician Afrika Bambaataa had hopes to bring peace and unity amidst gang violence and founded the Zulu Kings, one of the first b-boy crews (Fitzgerald 8-9). Early break dancers were gang members who battled with dance instead of weapons (Fitzgerald 8) and “this form of battle was called uprock, and it involved no physical contact,” (Fitzgerald 12). This was not necessarily glamorous or famous, but it was “...a public showcase...of style” (Banes 14). And because of the context of “deprivation and systematic oppression” they lived in, “...hip hop emerged as a coping

mechanism to resist and critique repressive society and as a form of enjoyment” (Hare and Baker 3).

The information of early hip hop dance and breaking brings me to the first question about the cultural and dance backgrounds of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club members. Culturally, who are they? Dance club members come not only from different cities, but from different states and countries. The backgrounds for the six interviewees are as follows: Thao Duong is from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, Martin Liu is from Taipei, Taiwan, Salah Al Raisi grew up in the three countries of Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar, Eli Brian is from Lincoln, Nebraska and finally Venessa Rodriguez and Colanda McCray both grew up in Omaha, Nebraska (Dance For What?). This same diversity is echoed in the bigger group, with other members from China and areas in the west coast region of the United States. To say the least, diverse ethnic groups other than black and Puerto-Rican youth are involved in the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club. The environment in which hip hop dance is practiced by the club members differs from the situation where the original b-boy crews practiced breaking. The dance club practices and performs on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s city campus, located in the downtown area of Lincoln, Nebraska. In other words, a highly white, upper class environment. In addition, 83% of high school graduates in the upper class versus 67% from the bottom class and 64% from the middle class are enrolling in college (Cooper). All of the members in the club may not be rich, but they also are not all coming from a similar impoverished background of black and Puerto-Rican youth living in the Bronx during the 1970s.

In short, these dance club members are college students who have different racial, ethnic and national backgrounds as well as economic class from the original hip hop

practitioners. According to Desmond, appropriation can occur when a hegemonic group takes or “borrows” from a subordinate group or when the roles are reversed (Desmond 35). This applies to the practice of hip hop, which is appropriated from its original creators, poor black and Puerto-Rican youth. I argue that cultural appropriation exists in the case of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club as these middle class college students have repurposed hip hop to enjoy their campus life. In addition, many of the members do not have an exact racial, ethnic, and national identity similar to the early dancers of hip hop. The club has a large international population, which is also reflective of the interviewees who are half domestic and half international students. Although many of the members are people of color, and a few may be from low-income families and other marginalized groups, their positionality in Lincoln, Nebraska does not necessarily provide an identical context that was the Bronx in the 1970s. These are issues of class and locality that allows appropriation to occur (Desmond 39). The representation of the club members from diverse backgrounds informs that the current hip hop culture has been transformed in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

After breaking was overtaken by a media frenzy in the early 80s, it appeared everywhere. It was featured in films like *Flashdance* and *Breakin'* in 1984, among many others (Banes 13). By then it even managed to spread its reach outside of the United States to places such as Canada, Japan and Europe (Banes 13). Due to this media intervention, break dance would no longer be the same. It changed in its form and meaning: for newer dancers, break dance was a way to get physically fit, the battles a way to gain cash prizes or be in a Hollywood movie or the style a way to embody that of the original practitioners which was now “in” (Banes 14). It became a closer resemblance

to the break dance we see today, with moves like the windmill, head spins and flares (Fitzgerald 12). Breaking was changing very quickly. It was performed on stages in front of crowds and no longer exclusively part of an underground network of crews who danced at will (Bane 19).

As time went on, other “sub-styles” such as electric boogie and locking were added as appendages to breaking and was all encompassed in a more generalized hip hop dance style (Banes 19). Katrina Hazzard Donald explains this gradual change in hip hop dance, as something that existed in three stages: waack, breakdancing, and rap dance (Donald 509). Donald designates the influences on breakdancing in the early 70s as waack, the b-boying practiced during the mid 70s to mid 80s as breakdancing, and the dance further influenced and shaped by hip hop music and popular culture as “rap dance” (Donald 509-511). This “rap dance” is what most closely represents the dance practice at the hip hop dance club. This possess the second question. Is the dance practice at the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club authentic?

If we want to compare to the original form of breakdance, then in short, it does not. Authenticity is essentially an “organic representation” of a culture (Hare and Baker 2). As evidence from the third part of the documentary shows, the dance club engages in many performances, usually with a lot of choreography, which is not very similar to the spontaneous break dance battles in the 70s and 80s (Dance For What?). Here, there is a certain level of hybridity (or cultural transmission, the strong influence of different cultures on one another) that occurs (Desmond 35). Choreography often incorporates dance styles that members have past experience in and includes subtleties from their cultures as well. For example, in the documentary Rodriguez comments on her

knowledge of 12 other styles of dance outside of hip hop (Dance For What?). These styles were added into the InvAsian 2019 performance (Dance For What?). There is often the use of fans from Chinese or Vietnamese culture for different performances as well, which was present in the Invasian 2018 performance (Dance For What?). Something else to be considered is how members bring in their perception of dance from previous dance experience. Brian and McCray tell about their past participation in show choir, which lead to a growing curiosity about dance as its own art form and practice (Dance For What?). About hip hop dance, Brian says, “‘dancing’ dancing and dancing for me really started when I joined hip hop” (Dance For What?).

Although the club’s dance practice may not look perfectly identical to that of the original hip hop dance practitioners, they do make an effort to include elements of breaking. During performances, break dancing and popping soloists are often included (Dance For What?). In addition, practices may include a lesson on break dance technique or be opened up for freestyling without choreography (Dance For What?). Break dancers and members who are not working on choreography are also welcomed to join at any time (Dance For What?). Events like The UNDERGROOVE, demonstrate this attempt as well. The dance battles, DJ, live artist and rap performer present at the event paid homage to the four elements of hip hop culture (Dance For What?). However, It should be noted that the presence of an audience and choreographed dance routines breaks from the original break dance of the mid 70s (Dance For What?). Even so, these practices illustrate a desire by the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club to authentically acknowledge and incorporate original hip hop dance.

The six interviewees broadly define hip hop dance as a way to dance freely and express themselves in the dance they create (Dance For What?). When asked this question, initially Brian and McCray confess they do not know how they would define hip hop (Dance For What?). However both go on to mention hip hop as a way to express togetherness with other dancers (Dance For What?). In contrast, Liu, Duong and Al Raisi give a substantial amount of hip hop history. “Hip hop is not only a style...it originated from the streets...from a group of people” (Dance For What?). Duong however came with the most intriguing answers, stating that, “I know so many hip hop dancers...and hip hop is their life. But they would all have a different perspective” (Dance For What?). She essentially leaves the door open for interpretation about hip hop. Finally, the shared idea among the six interviewees is the overwhelming feeling of freedom and expression. Rodriguez says, “I don’t know, there’s just something about dance that makes it feel so free. I don’t know if it’s the dancing itself or being with other people who dance or just getting away from everything and coming to dance...” (Dance For What?). What they believe hip hop dance is reflects on how they actually practice dance in the club.

Despite their insufficient understanding about hip hop, I found a commonality between the hip hop dance club and the original break dancers as self-expression and group unity. For example, when Liu mentions the “shock” value of break dancing, this is not too dissimilar from “a public showcase for the flamboyant triumph of virility, wit, and skill...” that the original practitioners aimed for (Banes 14). In addition, many of the members, such as Al Raisi, Rodriguez and McCray note a type of “personal inventiveness” that Banes suggested in her article. For example Al Raisi says, “...you can really invent your own way of dancing. You can be [as] unique as possible, there is no

such a limit that's stopping you. The sky is the limit" (Dance For What?). Nearly all the interviewees expressed the importance of having freedom within hip hop.

In addition, the concept of the dance crew is present for both groups. In the Bronx, b-boy crews held a sense of unity. Created from former gangs, they sported similar colors in dress, and were not just a group of acquaintances, but people who lived in the same neighborhood, or were family (Banes 16). For the dance club nearly all interviewees mentioned their enjoyment of being around the group and learning from each other. Specifically Duong refers to the feeling of "...being around people who treat you like family" (Dance For What?) during performances which is comparable to break dance crews who were actual family. This answers my last question: for what purpose do the members practice hip hop dance together at the club? I argue that the members gather and practice hip hop dance at the club in order to express the self, freedom as well as feel a sense of community through dance with other people.

This ethnically, racially, and nationally diverse group of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club reveals the transformation of hip hop from the original context is at work. The UNL Hip Hop Club members' dance practice presents hybrid, choreographed, refined forms which are detached from the original form of breaking. Their perception to define hip hop dance varies while some members do not fully understand the origin of hip hop. Yet, the spirit of hip hop that promoted the expression of freedom and empowerment through dance in the original context of hip hop still lingers in the practice of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club. In what follows, I present the creation background of this project in order to show why I chose a documentary as a medium to convey the story of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club.

Creation of a Three-Part Documentary: Choice, Process and Product

Film and video are incredibly powerful art forms. For this project, I chose to present my examination of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club and issues in hip hop dance through a three-part documentary. There are three main reasons that I chose a documentary as a medium of expression: hip hop dance's close affiliation with media, accessibility and the efficiency of storytelling through video.

Firstly, Video, media and hip hop dance are tightly intertwined. Because present day hip hop would not be the same without the media, it makes video a viable and great choice to use in presenting it. It was because of media that break dance gradually changed from its original form and hip hop became popular world-wide, which is a major point of my project (Banes 13). The evolution of hip hop from its original form to its more commercialized form is readily available through videos and footage. In my documentary, there is footage from the 80s, reminiscent of when hip hop first entered into the mainstream. I included dance choreography that can be considered "studio hip hop" from different choreographers and studios, such as Kinjaz Dojo and Ian Eastwood. In the beginning of part two in the documentary, I included two videos from the 1980s and 1990s which I would arguably denote as an ignorant idea of what hip hop is. Here there are many perspectives on what makes hip hop, *hip hop*, and media/video allows for a visual representation that the audience can easily grasp.

Secondly, I point out functional elements that video and film possess which makes it accessible to larger audience. Video is a visual medium that you can play, pause, rewind and play again. In comparison to a one time showing that you could never see again.

Better yet, nowadays video is extremely accessible as well. Websites like YouTube and Vimeo gives anyone access to see, share or create content.

Lastly I emphasize on the impact of storytelling through video. “When compared to regular text-based content, visual storytelling conveys a greater amount of knowledge and information in less time...video comes with three key advantages for storytelling: allows you to surprise the viewer, adds knowledge to what they already know, [and] increases engagement as the story unfolds” (Wochit Team). Creative elements such as music and specific editing styles can evoke emotion. For example, the low swelling of soft music under Rodriguez’s music during the first part of the documentary when she talks about how dance saved her life in high school gives added emotion to her already emotional story (Dance For What?). The cinematography and quality of the video also plays a huge role. For the interviews, I chose creative and visually appealing backgrounds to highlight the interviewees’ lifestyle or personality (Liu in the UNL rec center where he workouts often, Rodriguez in a dance studio, where she credits her beginnings in dance, etc.).

Those creative elements give the storyline, arguably the most important part of a film or video, a lasting impact. In the documentary, my choice of the six interviewees as a central focus not only delivers their views and perceptions about hip hop dance but also stimulates the audience to relate to personal stories with emotional journeys. The progression of the storyline begins with a foundation set on defining and describing the individuals whose opinions and point of views we will rely on throughout the film. Then we get that point of view as they talk about their perspective of dance, leading into the second part which talks about their personal definition of hip hop. Lastly all their thoughts

about hip hop and dance are put together into the context of their practice in the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of this entire project, I learned the importance of situating particular hip hop practices in a given context to understand who performs, how it is performed, and why. In the case of the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club, I argue that the dancers are practicing hip hop in an evolved way from its original form. Despite issues of authenticity and appropriation, the UNL Hip Hop Dance Club embodies the “spirit” of the original hip hop culture by expressing freedom promoting the unity of the group through dance. Overall, the club plays a role in fostering community, belonging and diversity on campus.

The depth and knowledge one can learn about hip hop culture and dance is immense. I hope my project can provoke deeper thought about issues of appropriation and authenticity in current hip hop practices. Those issues may lie in our failure to learn about the history of the art form and acknowledge the practitioners before us. As dancers who practice hip hop, we should be pro-active in educating ourselves about the history of hip hop culture and dance.

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