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Anastasia Talarico

"Pop lock and Drop it": defining Hip Hop dance and culture in the past and present

The context in which this Hip Hop dance style occurs, makes Hip Hop stand out, which could be the greatest contribution to its overwhelming popularity. Hip Hop takes place in a specific culture in which we find who belongs to the style, how it emerges, and what the culture represents. It may be that one cannot dance the style of Hip Hop without being a participant in its culture. After examining the Hip Hop culture, it becomes apparent through its popularity why this Hip Hop culture has spidered out and become a part of many societies not usually in its realm. By looking at the kinetics and break down of the dance style, and embracing the culture, one can give a solid definition of Hip Hop dance, and its role in the bigger picture, its culture.

In order to apply or understand any specific style of dance, a solid definition of dance in general becomes crucial. Presently, the form of dance with consistent and increasing popularity remains Hip Hop. Other modern and contemporary styles including Jazz, Ballet and Tap. These later examples have concrete definitions and criteria that make that style of dance distinguished from the rest. Quite clearly, Hip Hop as well is distinguished genuine among the other forms mentioned, but based on what criteria. It lacks the rigid lines of definition, or does it? It seems lacking on the surface but by looking at the following definition of dance, a definition of Hip Hop dance will emerge. According to Judith Hanna who wrote, To Dance is Human: a Theory of Nonverbal Communication, body movements can be considered dance when the following criteria are met, "Human behavior composed, from the dancer's perspective, of 1) purposeful, 2)

intentionally rhythmical, and 3) culturally patterned sequences of a 4a) nonverbal body movement other than 4b) ordinary motor activities, the 4c) motion having inherent and aesthetic value (Hanna 19)". Overall this criteria and nothing less defines an action or motion as dance according to Hanna.

Out of context these terms could be hard to understand but even in context they require some explanation. The following provides an explanation of each of these criteria Hanna gives so they can be applied to the style of Hip Hop dance. The purpose of dance is intended to communicate information to the audience or spectators. The purpose can also be referred to as the social structure in which the dance has been derived from, choreographed, or performed. Furthermore dictating the criteria for coping with that broader social structure. Intentional rhythm means the importance of creating visual designs within the dance. Intentional rhythm also refer to the orientation of time, and how sometimes time gets intentionally disrupted to create a feeling that time has been suspended during the performing dance. Culturally patterned sequences are crucial because the sequences portray the patterns and meanings within that culture. Through the culturally patterned sequences it becomes apparent that not all dance is universal. Through ones culture and that cultural influence people learn dance, so therefore not all dance will be similar and inevitably varies drastically. The nonverbal body movements are obviously a criteria, for without them it would not be much more than plain motion. Nonverbal motion represents such things as the use of space, amplitude, direction, focus, levels, shape, grouping, force and projection. Hanna gives a great explanation of the rather hard to explain aesthetic value aspect of dance. She claims aesthetic value "refers to notions of appropriateness and competency held by the dancer's reference groups

which act as a frame of reference for self-evaluation and attitude formation to guide the dancer's actions" (Hanna 19). As mentioned before, this criteria and nothing less defines an action or motion as dance according to Hanna.

Before applying the criteria of dance to the style of Hip Hop it needs to be noted that the Hip Hop style of dance be embraced much differently than the other dance styles because, "hip hop people identify with, embrace, and live the genre completely" (Hazzard-Donald 513). The style comes as a package, one that cannot be disunited from the rest of its elements. Therefore, a better understanding of the Hip Hop culture to accompany the dance style associated with it becomes important. I am going to give a brief background and history of Hip Hop from its origins, so we know in what context this Hip Hop dance style takes place. America's first taste of Hip Hop was much different than today but represents many of the same ideas. It was in an "era of African American male economic insecurity, of popular conspicuous consumption, of widening gaps between the rich and poor, and of moribund social movement for minority inclusion, that hip hop emerged" (Hazzard-Donald 508). In the early 1970's the adolescent gangs of the Bronx began "dancing" and leaving their mark in the subways and streets as a way to combat conflict among gangs in a new unconventional way (Watkins 207). Many argue that "Hip hop is an expressive cultural genre originating among lower- and often marginalized working class African American youth. The genre includes rapping, and rap music, graffiti writing, particular dance styles, specific attire, and a specialized language and vocabulary" (Hazzard-Donald 508). The specific attire refers to clothing, colors, symbols and accessories that all categorize the African American adolescent males into which group, better known as "crew" they belonged to. Their "crew" becomes

their identity, something they all want to be apparent so they can represent for themselves. Emphasis needs to be put on the word male, because the style of Hip Hop dance originated from males and was equally male dominated as it continued to be so for many years (Kalyan 242). The first identifiable dance form of this culture was "waack" dance, followed by breaking, and then rap dance before it became the style of today; an abundance of different styles fused together to make one mass and constantly changing style of dance, referred to as Hip Hop.

"Waack" dance became the first known form of Hip Hop dance and can best be characterized by an outrageous style. It emerged in 1972 and can be considered a "prebreaking" or break dancing style. Its movements are characterized as having a fusion of theatrical expectation with lots of showmanship. The theatrical presence can be interpreted as its purpose, to portray a certain type of movement and the showmanship represents purpose as well but also the culturally patterned sequence and the aesthetic value aspect of dance. Specific moves associated with this style of Hip Hop dance include locking or pop-locking, the robot, the spank and rapid spins on various body parts including a freeze element. The specific movements represent the intentional rhythm. The movement quality of pop and lock is a jerking and freezing style. A segmented body part such as a hand "initiates a free-flowing, undulating movement that flows" (Hazzard-Donald 509) up the body part and results in a jerking or freezing when it has gone all the way up the body part. This style accentuates the torso, arms and legs. Freezes are crucial and are moves where the performer literally freezes and holds the move for a period of time. The freezes are thought out ahead of time and rehearsed, but sporadically performed (Forman 15). The culturally influenced style or fashion associated with this

type includes big apple hats that would lead to Kangol caps and then baseball caps.

Knickers, baggy pants with suspenders or pants tucked into striped knee socks were typical apparel, accompanied by open-laced combat boots and later sneakers so the tongue hung out. "Waack" dancing, being the first associated with Hip Hop remains a dance of the streets, way before mainstream Hip Hop emerged and lead the way for new styles to develop.

Breaking is the second term coined with Hip Hop dancing that represents a more traditional African American dance than the outrageous style of "waack". Breaking emerges around 1973 and 1974 at Harlem rent-parties and in the subways and streets. It most widely represents "the male one-upmanship" (Hazzard-Donald 509). The very competitive style accentuates the intent of each person's performance as a way of attempting to outdo the rest. The style's movements being intentional and very fixed represents the format or intentional rhythm. The dancers, who typically call themselves a "crew", and onlookers of a different "crew" form an impromptu circle for the dancing to begin. Some equipment can be used, usually a cardboard or linoleum mat to protect the dancers for the concrete while dancing. The first dancer goes in, only for a brief ten to thirty seconds and performs a very dense dance, compact with meaning. First he, yes he, for this style is the most prominently dominated by males due to a certain demand of athleticism in the movements, starts with a basic walk to get the flow or rhythm of the music, this categorizes the entry (Kalyan 250). He proceeds by getting down on the floor, using very syncopated movements and does a movement like flares or the helicopter. Following the floor work comes a very acrobatic movement to get the dancer off the floor and back up to a vertical position. The acrobatic movement often being

referred to as the transition leads up to the final element of the dancer's performance known as the freeze. These elements create the format of breaking and are very formulaic without much diversity in order or sequence. The authenticity lies in the signature moves within the sequence. Examples of authenticity include plugging ones nose while exiting the circle to insult the opposing dancers to say they stink. More vulgar examples demonstrate that males would "grab their crotches or hump the floor for a memorable finale" (Forman 16). The strong statements made by the dancers and their competitiveness remains not just on a one on one level but "crews" compete against each other. This created a type of socialization for these people and a strong sense of loyalty among these "crews", which can be seen through their apparel and diverse styles as a group. Overall the culturally patterned sequences are characterized by going uncontrollable and crazy on the floor, done in hopes of creating a style for oneself. The aesthetic value in this style remains low for it can be very vulgar, which is a factor essentially making "breaking" a part of the Hip Hop style.

The last style of dance associated with Hip Hop is rap dance. The rap dance style combines the aspects of "waack" and breaking but with a twist. That twist means that the dancing "is influenced and cross-fertilized by a less athletic form of popular dance, house dancing" (Forman 570). Rap dance, like the other two styles, is male oriented but not exclusively male. An aspect of partnering in this style persists where a female can be involved, but not always assumedly. The partnering maintains a certain peculiarity because its foundation remains based off a lack of cooperation between the two. This may have to do with the purpose of this dance which is "fed by the celebration of the individual bound by in-group solidarity, community accountability and cooperation"

(Forman 570). Rap dance can be seen today at most house-parties where it originated, and at some club-scene in urban areas. Overall the style of Hip Hop dance with the least complexities, but like the culture of Hip Hop, every movement has its intent and is complex in itself.

"Waack", Breaking and Rap dance are the styles characterizing Hip Hop dance prior to the media's involvement. In each of these styles hidden and exposed meanings to each and every movement appear. Every aspect of every motion has a very intentional purpose which correlates beautifully with the definition of dance. The movements are all derived from cultural elements such as life in the ghetto and the streets. The styles are blunt and explosive, in your face, without hesitation of one's conscience, and it all just happens. At this point the definition of Hip Hop as a dance style consists of meeting all the criteria within dance, using unconventional techniques and being a part of the culture. The cultural aspects just mentioned are still present after the media influence arrives, as well as basic style and movements, but many of the minute details change. Since the media's involvement, some elements inevitably change within the Hip Hop style, but this media involvement lead the Hip Hop style to its expansion and debut in mainstream culture.

Around 1980, the media got wind of breaking and it soon became a part of daily life in America. The people behind the moves took a drastic change. People, who had never experienced watching breaking, could now flip through the channels and find it in many television shows and new movies (Watkins 215). Even recently, it has become the focus of many commercial advertisements. This new wave of media attention altered those who perform this style. It was no longer dominated by the b-boys and crews of the

streets. Professional dancers were now taking up the style and perfecting it. The people performing the style had consisted of adolescent boys combating gang conflict, to professional dancers looking for a way to move on with their careers. The difference in performers obviously changes the purpose of the dance in a drastic way. For the first time, the people not necessarily of the Hip Hop culture were dancing the style of that culture. Inevitably though, once professionals, as well as others mimicking the styles of Hip Hop, began doing so, the professionals became a part of that culture (Hazzard-Donald 515). The moves being performed reflect whoever performs them. Regardless if it be a suburban white girl, or a b-boy from the ghetto, these moves represent certain meaning that reflect the original moves of the "crews". They still remain vulgar, repulsive and outgoing, but they have grown with those new people performing them. They now represent those meanings and more (Kalyan 241). Hip Hop has assimilated depending on who it comes across, all as a result of the media exposing Hip Hop to more than the ghetto. The Hip Hop dance style and culture has taken and stuck to these new places it has been adopted and spidered out. As the media becomes more and more involved, there are good aspects it represents, but likely just as many bad, that in ways it gives the style a bad name.

As television stations like MTV have become so popular and similarly the music videos on that television station, a certain negative connotation has been born of Hip Hop and its style of dancing. What was once a way of expressing oneself has become a mode of degrading females and their sexuality (Watkins 215). The vulgar representation of women in the music videos associated with Hip Hop can be horrific and almost pornographic. Yes the Hip Hop style tends to have some vulgarity to it, but not in a way

that degrades members within its group, which these music videos portray.

On a positive note, a sense of Hip Hop's roots has been supported by the same television channel, MTV. With the airing of "America's Best Dance Crew", the aspects of Hip Hops history stand out with the use of the word "crew" in the name of the program (Ramirez), bringing together street Hip Hop and what is now called studio Hip Hop. The realization that studio Hip Hop dancers can be as good as street Hip Hop dancers shows how due to the media, Hip Hop has grown and become more accessible to the everyday American.

As a result, the media has presented both good and bad aspects of the dance style and culture of Hip Hop to the public. The media has the control to perceive Hip Hop whichever way they prefer and the public, who most are unaware of the actual background of Hip Hop, remain susceptible to believe what the media says about Hip Hop. Due to large names in Hip Hop at the present, people who know the dance style and culture can now represent and bring the best name to Hip Hop, by using the media. Such people as Sean "P. Diddy" Colmes, Kanye West and Jay-Z currently remain in the limelight giving the Hip Hop dance style and culture a name that the original b-boys and "crews" would be proud of (Ramirez).

The style of dance that currently reflects the Hip Hop style consists of a combination of the original three, "waack", breaking and rap dance with new flavors. Partially due to the media and also due to changes in the music associated with Hip Hop, the dance style has changed and grown to include so much more than the original three styles. Breaking has remained the most prominent dance style associated with Hip Hop in the media as it is still used in many advertisements. Rap dance as well has become

more popular because of the increasing use of the style in Hip Hop rap music videos. The style seen being taught in the studios though, remains a correlation of all three styles with the unconventional twist that they are not all males, the style is not an outlet for gang combat, and the style is not restricted to certain "crews". The studios incorporate many different styles of Hip Hop dance with the different dances they perform just as the street dancers still dance according to how they feel whatever particular day they dance. Hip Hop as a dance style will always have a freedom in the movements to explore however the body chooses to move, representing the expressions and feelings of the dancer and the society the dancer belongs to. Ultimately defining the dance style of Hip Hop as one in which the dancer delivers their feelings and intent with an explosive energy, while exploring diverse and changing styles and expressing their society through the cultural contexts of Hip Hop, all while fulfilling the criteria of dance. This definition is important in the bigger picture because it identifies a massive group of people who now belong to Hip Hop due to its expansion into America's mainstream society.

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