

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Living is Resisting: An Autoethnography and Oral History of Street Dance Activism in Los Angeles

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5ps9f8qw>

Author

Bell, Shamell Andria Janette

Publication Date

2019

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5ps9f8qw#supplemental>

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Living is Resisting:

An Autoethnography and Oral History of Street Dance Activism in Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Culture and Performance

By

Shamell Andria Janette Bell

2019

© Copyright by

Shamell Andria Janette Bell

2019

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Living is Resisting:

An Autoethnography and Oral History of Street Dance Activism in Los Angeles

by

Shamell Andria Janette Bell

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Co-chair

Professor Peter M. Sellars, Co-chair

This doctoral project is a hybrid of written text, transcript, and film. Each genre reveals different aspects of the transformative processes that can turn “choreographies of the oppressed” into “choreographies of the liberated.” With direct immersion in contemporary street dance forms from South Central Los Angeles, this work offers an autoethnographic overview of how I developed concepts and practices from my own experiences as a dancer, choreographer, and community organizer. It also provides glimpses of dance in particular social-justice performance events, recovering pathologizing narratives of “gangs” while permitting people in South Central to speak for themselves about their use of street dance and social media as tools to contest detrimental forces in their community and the dominant paradigms shaping their identities. The purpose of the film is to provide visual material and first-hand accounts that weave through, and are inspired by, the written portion of the dissertation.

The dissertation of Shamell Andria Janette Bell is approved.

Robin Davis Gibran Kelley

Bryonn Rolly Bain

Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Committee Co-chair

Peter M. Sellars, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

Table of Contents

	Page
Dedication/Acknowledgements	v
Vita/Biographical Sketch	vi
Introduction	1
Bibliography	22

DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this project to my mother, Bobbie; my brothers Anthony and Joe; my community of South Central Los Angeles and beyond; Ermias "Nipsey Hussle" Asghedom; and John Singleton.

I acknowledge my academic community who have become family: Al Roberts, Peter Sellars, Bryonn Bain and Robin Kelley, who co-choreographed this dissertation project with me and gave me the freedom to dance with whoever I wanted to on the stage. Robin DG Kelley, thank you for giving me the strength to love and to dream. Al (and Polly) Roberts you continue to teach me how to be a better teacher and parent. Bryonn, thank you for being the embodiment of art and activism, and being my anchor through the documentary portion. Peter Sellars, the heaven shined upon me when you entered my life.

Special thank you to my production team Jeff Toye, Melanie D'Andrea, Kareem Elzein, Brenda Lopez, Tara Pixley, Laura Haldane, and Ruth it literally took a village. Thank you for pushing through even as this project began with just three 10-minute short documentaries and without hesitation you helped me move it to a feature length documentary. Shout out to the Pink Dollaz for allowing me to tell a glimpse of your narrative, this is only the first step. To all of my co-choreographers who assisted in this choreographies of the liberated, I am grateful to do life alongside you. Myshell, Jade, Bernard, Sharlia, Sandy.

You are foundational to my research, Dashawn "Day Day" Blanks, you began my undergraduate research and "street dance activism with me." You are LoLo are like my first children. Over ten years ago I thought I was beginning to do research and then choreography for some Black teenagers, who knew you would change my life forever. Lauren, you are the ultimate co-choreographer and daughter.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shamell Bell is a mother, community organizer, dancer/choreographer, and doctoral candidate in Culture and Performance at UCLA's World Arts and Cultures/Dance department. Bell received her M.A. in Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego and B.A. with Honors in American Studies and Ethnicity specializing in African American Studies at the University of Southern California. Her work on what she calls, "street dance activism" situates street dance as grassroots political action from her perspectives as a scholar, dancer, and choreographer. Shamell's research examines street dance movements in South Central Los Angeles through an autoethnographic and performance studies lens. Her street dance experience includes featured roles in music videos, award shows, and tours. An original member of the #blacklivesmatter movement, beginning as a core organizer with Justice 4 Trayvon Martin Los Angeles (J4TMLA)/Black Lives Matter Los Angeles to what she now describes as an Arts & Culture liaison between several social justice organizations such as the [BLM network](#), [Blackout For Human Rights](#), [The Undercommons at UCLA](#), [Los Angeles Students Deserve](#), among others. She also consults for social justice impact in the tv, film, and music industry with credits such as "community engagement consultant" for George Tillman Jr.'s film adaptation of Angie Thomas' best selling book, "The Hate U Give". Shamell is also a member of a think tank for actor, activist, and rapper Common's philanthropic company, Think Common. She often teaches alongside her year old son, Seijani, who focuses on meditation and mindfulness. They were featured in Common's supergroup, August Greene's promo campaign for their first single, "[Be Optimistic](#)". She and her son also serve as Radical Joy Advisors to "[Contra Tiempo](#)," a role created by the Urban Latin Dance Theater Company with a focus on healing, socially astute performance and community engagement. Most recently, she spearheaded a "scholar in residence" position at UCLA that provides hands on assistance in graduate housing to help promote better retention of Black graduate students.

Education

- Ph.D. Culture and Performance
 University of California, Los Angeles June 2019
 Dissertation: "Living is Resisting: "Rize" to "Street Dance Activism" in South Central Los Angeles
 Committee:
 Co-Chair- Professor of World Arts and Culture, UC Los Angeles, Peter Sellars
 Co-Chair- Professor of World Arts and Culture, UC Los Angeles, Allen F. Roberts
 Assistant Professor of African American Studies and World Arts and Culture, Bryonn Bain
 Professor of History, UC Los Angeles, Robin D.G. Kelley
- M.A. Ethnic Studies
 University of California, San Diego 2014
- B.A. American Studies and Ethnicity (African-American Studies)
 University of Southern California 2011
 Honors Thesis: "Jerkin': Aesthetics, Identity, and Movement"

RESEARCH FIELDS

Black youth street dance	Theories of corporeality	Art-activism
Ethnographic surrealism	Ethnographic collaboration	Documentary
Cultural studies	Critical race theory	Pedagogy
African American Diaspora	Afro-Futurism	Story-telling

Theatre/Performance Studies
Black Feminist Theory
Theater of the Oppressed

Health and Wellness
Black Cultural Movements
Healing Modalities/Spirituality

Love
Social Movements
Black Religion

Research Experience

Graduate Student Researcher for Dr. Robin DG Kelley 2015
The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World (2018)
By Walter Rodney, edited by Robin DG Kelley
University of California, Los Angeles

Research Assistant for Dr. Laura Pulido 2010
A People's Guide to Los Angeles (2012)
University of Southern California

Presentations

- 2019 Dance Studies Association at Northwestern University, August 8-11, 2019
Plenary II: "Dance Work for the Commons: Actions, Interventions, Innovations"
- 2019 Otis School of Design Los Angeles, CA April 15, 2019
Street Dance Activism Workshop
- 2019 Ramapo College of New Jersey April 2-3, 2019
Panel and workshop for "!!!!PUBLIC ART Inquiries, Encounters?????"
- 2018 Boston University October 25-26, 2018
Lecture: "Co-choreographing Radical Joy in Our Movements"
Workshop: Street Dance Activism with Shamell Bell
- 2018 ATHE Conference at Westin Boston Waterfront August 1-5, 2018
Plenary II: "Revolutions in Pedagogy and Practice"
Workshop: Street Dance Activism with Shamell Bell
- 2018 TEDxUCLA "Becoming a lighthouse: co-choreographing our movements" April 2018.
- 2018 Collegium for African Diaspora Dance, Dance Black Joy: Global Affirmations and Defiance,
Duke University February 16-18, 2018
Workshop: "Living is Resisting: Street Dance Activism as a Corporeal Pedagogy"
- 2017 ATHE Conference at Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino. Las Vegas, NV. August 3-6, 2017.
Panel: "Spectacular Life: Performance, Resistance, and the Paradox of Black Agency."
"Protest as Performance: Political Bodies in Action"

INTRODUCTION

EXT. SOUTH CENTRAL STREET – SUNSET

Palm tree adorned streets of South Central Los Angeles.

The sun beams onto a group of street dance activists. “Dr. Shamell Bell,” as she is affectionately called by her community members, 30’s, Black, woman, dressed in doctoral regalia with TRIBUTES OF NIPSEY HUSSLE, guides the group into choreographies of liberation teaching popular street dance, “crip walking”.

She hands each dancer ROSES to honor the living, the roses that rose from concrete.

A NIPSEY HUSSLE CANDLE glimmers on the concrete. He is the ancestor looking over this interchange of wisdom. They give honor to his presence.

Voiceover

This project seeks to perform as a co-choreographic written and visual piece of liberation. Mind, body, and spirit dances together across time, space, dimensions, and genres. Academia never ceasing to be without performance, survival for a Black woman from South Central Los Angeles secured only through choreography, carefully weaving each moment of resistance with each breath. Finding allies in the decolonizing of the institutional confines that can corner mind, body, spirit into listless routine. After a decade of observing my feelings and sensations with my community; following my spirit...I landed on this choreography of the written and visual interpretation that makes legible to both academia and my community the way street dance, and performance, has shaped the lives of South Central youth in a similar way that gang culture has, my life experience at this crossroad.

Recovering the kinship bonds infiltrated by governmental traps, I situate this as a memoir but also an oral history and archive that provides a testimony for others in a similar journey past, present, or future to resonate with, heal and feel a bit closer to liberation. Since the death of Nipsey and John Singleton I have had even more of a fire for us to tell our stories in South Central while we are living. It is my hope to give flowers to the living...the roses that rose from concrete.

Thesis

This project uses an “autoethnographic¹” (Ellis 2004) lens to explore Krumping and Jerkin’ as popular street dance movements during the early to mid 2000s in my hometown of South Central Los Angeles. Initially, I investigated the ways that Black youth use street dance and social media to contest detrimental forces in their community and the dominant socio-political paradigms shaping their identities. These include police brutality, “gangs,” hip-hop style, and their respective conceptualizations of Black femininity and masculinity by persons and factions removed from South Central itself. Upon reflection, I have modified my previous language, and especially phrases such as “against gangs,” in recognition of the positive expressions of solidarity and respect that members of such groups feel for one another. Such qualities of group coherence have proven necessary for sanity and healing in the face of multiple forms of oppression.

After a decade of direct immersion in street dance communities engaged in co-choreographing and counter-storytelling, the passing of South Central rapper, activist, and

¹ Ellis, Carolyn. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press

Rolling 60s Crips gang member, Ermias “Nipsey Hussle” Asghedom, had a transformative impact on my doctoral project. With support from my PhD committee, I produced a documentary film to supplement my written dissertation. I chose both mediums in order to make legible to academia and my community the ways that street dance has shaped the lives of South Central youth, in ways that are not dissimilar to gang culture.

Often statistics in documentaries discuss “Black on Black crime” in a way that pathologizes Black youth and gangs. My discussion aims to combat prevailing perspectives on gang violence that blame Black youth culture rather than the structural issues that create a detrimental environment -- the preschool to prison pipeline in education, unequal access to education and employment, unfair housing practices, environmental racism, to name a few.

Through the ten-year span of research in my community I began to understand more and more the role gangs played in my life and it was Nipsey Hussle’s death that solidified my intuition that not only had “dance” saved my life, but for many of us “gangs” taught us frameworks of kinship and “hustling” that would then change our lives as well. Laina Sonterblum’s “Gang Involvement as a Means to Satisfy Basic Needs” discusses the risk factors for gang participation by using Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs (Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Love Needs, Esteem Needs), but these frameworks seek to "inform future research and policy decisions aimed at reducing youth gang membership and their impact on communities," it is my goal not to glorify or demonize gangs, but to uncover the positive effects gangs have had on Black youth culture. Detaching gangs from the narrative of violence opens up the opportunity for healing and reconciliation within the community, which is what Nipsey

Hussle was doing during his life. In messianic form, his death would be a catalyst for gang reconciliation across the United States. Gangs are not inherently the problem. It is the system failing to meet basic needs that promotes violence. Gangs often result from a desire to meet basic needs that are not met due to systems of oppression.

As a consultant for the film, “The Hate U Give,” I was struck by the overwhelming tendency to empathize with the young Black teenager (“Khalil”) killed in the movie in sharp contrast with the drug kingpin (“King”), that the neighborhood helped to send to prison. Instead, I identified with the more nuanced view of the father who argues that “the trap,” the “system” is the true culprit, not gangs. He indicts white supremacist patriarchal society for putting in place practices and policies that disadvantage and criminalize the poor and Black and Brown people.

I situate this project as a memoir as well as an oral history. My goal is to collect testimonies of others engaged in similar journeys past, present, or future that resonate with each other and move us closer to personal and community liberation. The next phase of this work will be to bring the work to libraries, museums, and other places where transactions are fostered across different communities.

To situate Krumping and Jerkin’ within larger histories of dancing toward freedom, I trace a genealogy of dance forms that address relationships between activist performance and African diasporic traditions in Black America. Three concepts emerge: the importance of *corporeal pedagogy*²; peer driven, alternative ways of knowing, thinking, and teaching through

² In my undergraduate thesis I began with the term, “corporeal education,” I joined the terms corporeal (bodily) and education after my ethnographic fieldwork uncovered different levels of lessons being taught through Jerkin’. Not only is technique learned through the body, but so too are life concepts and social mobilization dissimulated to popular culture. Corporeal education is a term also used in “A Treatise on Man: His Intellectual Faculties and his Education, Volume 2” by Helvétius (1810), in which he divided education in two parts: the corporeal and the intellectual (414). Jerks use their body to teach dance moves and life skills such as diligence, dedication, and coping mechanisms. It was when I read Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress* in graduate school that I merged both terms to speak specifically to Black youth culture.

the body specific to Black youth; and dissemination of such principles and practices through popular culture to provide practical application for lived experiences. I introduce the creation and implementation of “street dance activism” as a healing modality and form of spiritual transcendence by extending the theoretical framework of a “Theater of the Oppressed” as developed by the Brazilian theater director and activist Augusto Boal. In his later book, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors (1992)*, Boal writes, “Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build a future, rather than just waiting for it” (Boal 1979: xxxi). I use “street dance activism” to build upon such inspiration and suggest an embodied transformative process. The hope is that “Choreographies of the Oppressed” can dance their way toward “Choreographies of the Liberated³.”

Questions to be asked in these pages include: How can desires for freedom be taught and learned through one’s body? How are these liberatory needs and expressions linked to African diasporic traditions? And, how has the presence of gang culture influenced corporeal pedagogy for Black youth in South Central and other inner cities of the United States.

Elements of Autoethnography

As I became an original member and choreographer in the Black Lives Matter movement, my research took a collaborative, self-exploratory approach to what I call “street dance activism.” Street dance activism merges theory and practice rooted in co-choreographing our

³ “Choreographies of the oppressed” emerged as a response to the connection between street dance activism and my studies at the Center for Theater of the Oppressed in Brazil in December 2018. Testimonials of participants uncovered something deeper after my workshops, a next step, and with that I began to theorize around “Choreographies of the liberated”. On liberatory and related critical pedagogies, see Kincheloe 2008.

lives. By listening to and feeling through my own body and its movements across time and space alongside others, this project looks at ways that Black youth, over time, transform and make places of dignity and resolve within their communities. A corporeal pedagogy is disseminated by using dance as an embodied cultural practice that may go viral and seep into popular culture, opening up possibilities for expression of critical social-justice positions.

Building upon Daniel Widener's work in *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (2009), artistic political expression can be described as any form of cultural production that highlights the intricate connectedness between community-based aesthetics and political goals. *Black Arts West*, set in Los Angeles between the Second World War and the controversial Rodney King verdict, traces "consciously Black" art as a mechanism for change within broader struggles for liberation. Also important is Naomi Bragin's dissertation, "The Black Power of Hip-Hop Dance: On Kinesthetic Politics" (2015). She provides a hip-hop dance archive of "politicized consciousness" in Greater Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area from 1966 to 1981. My own exploration of 21st century street dance takes up where Widener and Bragin leave off, to the rise of Krump and Jerkin' first made popular in the early to mid 2000s in South Central Los Angeles.

This dissertation deliberately melds the communal and the institutional to include the presence and voices of community members in academic pursuits, as well as burgeoning movements in dance and social justice. Paying homage to the Boalian phrase a "rehearsal for the

revolution" (Boal 1979: 122) my work in the streets and in academia seeks to include all dancers (experienced or non-experienced) of all ages and races, using their embodied experiences to offer collective counternarratives for co-choreographing the struggle for personal and community liberation. Street dance activism welcomes members of historically oppressed communities and others to make a place for willing actors to join anti-racist, anti-social-class storytelling through movement practices.

Much like Lee Ann Bell's *Storytelling For Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching* (2010), street dance activists believe in a "consciously created counter-storytelling community" as key to the success of a methodology intended to confront racism. We co-choreograph movements as civil disobedience in public spaces or at institutions marred by structures of white supremacist, capitalist society. This work should not be thought of as shifting the focus away from systemic oppression toward individualized coping strategies; instead, it seeks to include the transformative qualities of interconnectedness, radical joy⁴, and love of self and community to suggest living as a specific form of resistance.

A self-witnessing and collaborative process gave rise to a theoretical framework facilitated by the work of artists and activists on the ground of the Black Lives Matter movement. What

⁴ In *Radical Joy: Awakening Your Potential for True Fulfillment* by Todd Evan Pressman, He describes radical joy as "more than the transient happiness of the world, happiness which in its can give way to loss, pain, and disappointment. Radical joy is the discovery of high Purpose, ultimate Meaning, and deep Fulfillment" (Pressman 4). A more recent book on radical joy is by Trebbe Johnson called *Radical Joy for Hard Times: Finding Meaning and Making Beauty in Earth's Broken Places* (2018, North Atlantic Books)

began to take shape was a pedagogical process as I was requested to facilitate at least monthly street dance activism workshops and offer guest lectures at various community events and institutions across the United States.

Methodological Framework

My journey with this project began in an undergraduate class at the University of Southern California (USC) when classmates presented on “Krump” dancing, a 21st century social dance phenomena with roots in South Central Los Angeles. When students in the class recognized my role in the David LaChapelle documentary, “Rize,” (Lionsgate 2005), it was suggested I begin my own research at the request of Professor Robin D. G. Kelley, who would become my mentor. Initially I resisted studying myself, so I decided to conduct fieldwork with the latest social dance movement of the time, “Jerkin’,” I did not set out to create an embodied autoethnography. What I quickly found was that my apprehension about researching my own community made me feel transactional. I needed this experience to be reciprocal to be sure that my community would gain more than just being interviewed and quoted in a college student’s research paper, so I used my experience as a dancer and choreographer to assist the Jerks, as the dancers call themselves. The first years of my work drew from my personal life experience in community organizing and dance communities, as well as my direct immersion experience in the Jerkin’ community from June 2009 to June 2012, during which time I met at least bi-weekly with

the Ranger\$ and Go Go Girl\$ as social groups in my neighborhood of South Central.

This dissertation culminates in a decade of autoethnography grounded in my own lived experience as a Black feminist and street dance activist. My project also includes a documentary aspect to foster greater legibility and a dialogue between my home community and academia. Techniques of investigation such as scholarly texts, interviews, images, and performances are merged, but the primary collection of data is derived from documenting our own stories of how dancers use embodied practice as a political tool. As an activist stance to ensure my dissertation is legible to all of my communities, episodes and chapters are complementary. Each should stand alone as partners in the choreography. The goal is for someone to be able to read the written, and get insight to the documentary; or watch the documentary, and get insight into the written.

During my undergraduate thesis work in 2009, my methodological framework included ethnographic field notes as well as direct immersion in the Jerkin' community, personal interviews, observing Jerkin' functions, and dance battles. During recorded interviews of Jerks, I asked dancers to delineate the who, what, where, why, and how of Jerkin'. My collection of survey responses varied from discussion questions by email to "mobile blogs" in which Jerks would send texts, emails, and pictures to my cell phone. Jerks also updated their Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter social networking accounts that I followed. In addition, I collected original poems and songs as well as audio journals of their experiences. The age group of the participants ranged from middle school students to young adults.

The main participants in this study, the Ranger\$ as the leading Jerk crew, were recruited by contacting them via You Tube. I also visited local high schools and malls to recruit additional participants, since such contexts constitute primary sites for Jerkin'. During this immersion, I was asked to choreograph for the Ranger\$. In my dual role as choreographer and researcher, I observed the different public spaces that Black youth reclaimed as their "places." Although I relied heavily on storytelling as a method, I used literary and media analysis to put my work into dialogue with theories of Black feminist consciousness and oppositional art practices. I built upon Alice Walker's model of "womanism," first coined in "Coming Apart" (1979), as a contemporary Black feminist political practice to theorize the Black feminist consciousness.

I chose this source, site, and time period to follow a long tradition of cultural production radicalizing Black lives, with hip-hop calling into question the power of the state. Street dance activism highlights the possibilities for freedom, living, mourning, pain and pleasure for Black bodies. By analyzing the protest choreography of street dance activism in the Black Lives Matter movement, I illustrate the ways in which dance underscores inseparable bonds between social justice struggles and hip-hop. Through hip hop dance, the possibility of new conceptualizations of liberatory choreography exists. With these street dance activism demonstrations, Black Lives Matter activists subverted and transformed spaces of control and surveillance into a liberatory space of social action and self-care. We used popular hip-hop dance crazes to engage our current

socio-political terrain – the attack on Black bodies by law enforcement and white supremacy.

My gut instinct as this work proceeded was to abandon the perception and title of “researcher,” and I welcomed the term choreographer and mentor to the Jerkin’ groups with whom I was resonating. I then shifted again to “keeper of our truths” once my dancing became directly political with Black Lives Matter which grew into our early 21st century Civil Rights movement. Linguistic anthropologist Lanita Jacobs, entitled “The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among ‘Native’ Anthropologists’ (Jacobs 1992) suggests that ethnographic fieldwork involves a way of “seeing and doing” in which researchers are increasingly expected to account for their own positionalities and ways of asking/seeing/interpreting to avoid production of “partial representations” of their engagements (ibid 796). As Jacobs continues, “ethnographic fieldwork involves appreciating ethnographic knowledge as intersubjective and born of failures and mistakes” (ibid 794). Early on in my role as an Ethnographer, I had lots of journals with jotting, cameras with tripods, and a voice recorder, but my role shifted in reflection upon Jacobs’ assertions. Due to histories of exploitation and subjugation of Black people, “native” anthropologists working in their home communities began to abandon jargon and shift their research methods, and such perspectives spoke to my hesitation to do “research” on and in my community (ibid 792).

Currently, I mostly document interactions and events through video as a participant and journalist, using my cell phone and social media to recall my experiences so I can be in the moment. Crafting one's own narrative is key to social justice work. Nellie Y. McKay writes in *"The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography"* (1998) of challenging white supremacy and hegemony. Black people "used narrative to fight their battle against chattel slavery and to engage in the search for political and psychological freedom for all black people" (ibid, 96). McKay acknowledged the various strategies Black women writers use to tell their stories through fiction, autobiography, poetry, drama, and personal essays.

She helped me to theorize around what prompted me to begin street dance activism at the LAPD headquarters. As McKay writes,

Stories that help shape Black female identity in such a way that the self, however invented, is a witness against the racism, sexism, and classism of the master text and not its absolute victim... Whatever their strategies of self-construction, active resistance to oppression of all kinds has been at the center of the history of black women's lives in this country from slavery to the present time. These narratives are as politically significant as more overt modes of protest (ibid, 104).

Ethnographer Dwight Conquergood's work would come to influence me in my graduate school journey as I shifted my training from African American studies/Ethnic Studies to Performance Studies. Conquergood's theoretical formulations cut across postcolonial and transnational narratives that contextualize and situate imaginary "locations."⁵ Conquergood intervenes with the radical nature of the crash between two different ways of knowing—theories of writing and practices of doing. It is my aim to merge Conquergood's approach with the creative work of South Central street dance and Black popular culture, to propose alternative tactics for radical social change.

As a street dancer turned professional dancer and choreographer, my specific interests elaborate on current street dance movements in South Central, home of Krump and Jerkin'. My co-choreographers are dancers currently involved in street dance movements. Although my study begins around 2000, in order to contextualize current dance movements I reach back to trace the relationships between contemporary South Central performance idioms and African diasporic traditions of dance activism.

Freirean Roots Of Street Dance Activism: 'Teaching To Transgress,' A Corporeal Pedagogy

"When education is not liberating, the dream of the oppressed is to become the oppressor"

-Paulo Freire

⁵ Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," pp. 145-146

Two Black women have shaped my understanding of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1998) and *Theater of the Oppressed* (Boal 1979): bell hooks and Barbara Santos. After my trip to Brazil during the summer of 2018 to study with long time practitioners of the Theater of the Oppressed, I was profoundly touched to gain insights from a Black woman who worked with Augusto Boal for nearly two decades.

Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* has become the Bible of performed resistance. He argues that all theatre is political because all social relations should and must be political. The co-choreographic nature of Boal's work speaks to my desire to include the audience as collaborators. During street dance activism demonstrations, all participants are asked to take on a piece of the choreography and make it their own liberation. As Boal writes, "first, the barrier between actors and spectators is destroyed: all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society. This is the process I describe in 'Experiments with the People's Theater in Peru.' Then the barrier between protagonists and choruses is destroyed: all must simultaneously chorus and protagonist—this is the 'joker' system. Thus we arrive at the poetics of the oppressed, the conquest of the means of theatrical production" (Boal 1979: x). He cites the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who first conceived of the dialectic: "War is the mother of all things; opposition unifies, for that which is separated creates the most beautiful harmony; all that happens, only happens because there is struggle.

That is to say, each thing carries within itself an antagonism which makes it move from what it is to what it is not” (Boal 1979: 3).

In his chapter entitled "Poetics of the Oppressed," Boal discusses processes of catharsis and awakening of critical consciousness. He suggests that "in order to understand this poetics of the oppressed, one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people – ‘spectators,’ passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon -- into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action" (1979: 122). Similar to the poetics of the oppressed, my focus is on liberated action. I am not arguing that street dance activism in itself is revolutionary, but as Boal says "it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution" (ibid, 122). Indeed, "the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role for the revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!" (ibid).

Paulo Freire was a close friend and mentor to Boal, and his *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a foundational text for those teaching about liberation and using education as a practice for freedom. As he holds, “the only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed. In a humanizing pedagogy the method ceases to be an instrument by which the teachers (in this instance, revolutionary leadership) can manipulate the students (in this instance, the oppressed), because it expresses the consciousness of the students themselves.”

Freire's work is foundational to my theorizations of the corporeal pedagogy of street dance activism. In *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), written posthumously, his translator Patrick Clark explains that Freire was concerned "with the positivistic overemphasis on the so-called scientific methods of analysis and absolute objectivity that informs institutions of higher education, which created a fragmentation of knowledge because of their reductionist view of the act of knowing as the "ideological act" of claiming "scientific rigor" and their claim of objectivity" (Clark: 1998: xi). Clark continues, "So many read Freire's dialogical pedagogy as a tool for student motivation and cannot recognize that for him dialogue is a content whose goal is social as much as individual change. In Freire's educational philosophy the 1st principle is that the conventional distinction between teacher as expert and learner as an empty bio-physiological shell is questioned" (ibid, 8)

Freire brings forth metaphorical "gloves and masks" to confront ideological fog that otherwise enables educators to fragment bodies of knowledge. Placing Freire's concepts in conversation with James Clifford, Clark suggests that "in fact, science cannot evolve without a healthy dose of self-criticism, skepticism, and contestation" (ibid, xii). Corporeal pedagogy, as I develop its concepts and practices, embodies many of the same objectives:

1. To explore what each knows and what they can teach each other.
2. To foster reflection on the self as actor in the world in consequence of knowing (ibid, 8)

Taking inspiration from Freirean scholar bell hooks' brilliant work *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), I aim to foster street dance activism as a pleasurable learning environment of engaged, liberatory pedagogy -- one that hooks would consider a "counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (ibid, 2). Coming from a segregated educational background, hooks' Black women high school teachers enacted what she referred to as a "revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial." She found that attending school was "pure joy" until later entering "racist, desegregated white schools" (ibid). Her foundation of knowing radical joy led her to conceptions of "engaged pedagogy," taking her influence from Paulo Freire and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

On such bases, hooks challenged the "banking system of education" and created strategies for "conscientization" with an emphasis on praxis (1994, 14). Having had the chance to study with Freire for a short time, hooks remarked that the experiences restored her faith in liberatory education, despite his shortcomings regarding sexism. Her work as a Black woman paved the way for interventions in feminist pedagogy. hooks addresses the lack of naming our pain and suffering. For if we created feminist theory that addressed the pain of neglecting Black women, there would be no gap between feminist theory and feminist practice (ibid, 75). She spoke of her struggles of "moving from object to subject," recognizing the impact of race and class that shaped her identity (ibid, 53).

Another aspect of hooks' pedagogy was her ability to discuss personal experience, and in particular, a "passion of experience" that spoke to her suffering, as she reminds us that a "particular knowledge comes from suffering" and that yearning is a way to know (1994: 91). She spoke of the simultaneous and reciprocal nature of "authentic help," and suggested a need to build relationships between teachers and students who genuinely value each other's presence and sharing of personal experiences. This reciprocal nature is found in street dance activism exercises when I ask each dancer to provide some of their own talent in the choreography to model the sharing of personal experiences. Another key aspect of bell hooks' engaged pedagogy reflected in street dance activism is the centering of "well-being," and "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (ibid, 15).

Growing from insights of Boal, Freire, hooks, and others, I find that to empower myself so that I can empower students, street dance activism fosters a Lighthouse Effect. This is a shift from any tendency to jump into fraught waters trying to save others toward the calmer waters of *ALL* of us being Lighthouses, taking inventory of our own skills and learning how to be most effective in healing ourselves, shining our light for others to see, and guiding others.

“Choreographies of the oppressed” as I am developing the concept and practice, is a process similar to *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (Boal 1994). Here Boal highlights the internalized nature of oppression and power structures with his popular analogy that “the cops are in our heads, but their headquarters are outside.” In synchronicity with this analogy, street dance activism literally began outside of the Los Angeles

Police Department Headquarters. Dancers took over the headquarters from the neutral ground of sidewalks looking into the purposefully imposing façade, stripping it of its oppressive effects and transforming the place through “choreographies of the liberated.” With street dance activism, we use dance to disrupt and transform conventional understandings of place. Traumatic encounters are turned into radical joy, lifting frequencies, lifting vibrations, so healing can begin.

Street dance activism moves dance forward from an expressive coping mechanism toward creating change in our communities and larger society. Coupling street dance activism with legislative theater provides immediate shifts in the bodies, minds, and souls of its participants, but also encourages that real work be done outside of the rehearsal for revolution. Blurring the lines between external social activism and psychoanalysis, Boal’s “Rainbow of Desire” techniques typically involve an individual’s personal emotions and thoughts, rather than portraying a character.

In “Building a Teaching Community,” bell hooks asserts that there is a necessity to “combine theory and practice in order to affirm and demonstrate pedagogical practices engaged

in creating a new language, rupturing disciplinary borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency, power, and struggle” is emphasized (1994: 129). She then confronts “difference” in “progressive circles,” and speaks to the need of genuine dialogue and “examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern with teaching practice” (ibid, 130). This desire for commonality, connection, and shared concern prompted me to contact Dashawn “Day Day” Blanks of the Ranger\$, and the dancer Myshell Tabu to help teach dance moves at #OccupyLAPD.

My intervention of “choreographies of the oppressed” welcomes embodied responses to live as an act of resistance “beyond the system,” in order to transmute it as was seen during the #OCCUPYLAPD street dance activism demonstration. Educator bell hooks’ emphasis on pleasure adds a critical intervention to the work of Freire and feminist pedagogy. Radical joy is key to my work with street dance activism. I use dance as an intervention, but more than that, I use dance to encourage all of us to use our personal missions and life purposes for social impacts greater than our personal benefit. We can become the lighthouses that show others the way and raise collective consciousness to vibrations of creativity and love. We each have a responsibility to use our individual talents for any movement for social change.

CONCLUSION

Street dance activism is a form of self-empowerment and pleasure created to counter the disempowering energy created by continuously witnessing premature Black death. Street dance activism is the flip side of what is happening on the streets where Black people are dying at the hands of state sanctioned or vigilante violence, or as reflected in the enraged responses to Black death by activists and community members. Providing a methodological and theoretical framework for my lived experiences allows me to figure out the other part of the thoughts and actions that I was unable to think about in the moments when traumatic events have happened. Understanding the urgency, but also understanding the brittleness and assigning meaning to our movements that have a long-term effect, I intend to create street dance activism as a corporeal pedagogy. I hope it will be disseminated in a manner similar to how the “Theater of the Oppressed” has been so inspiring all over the world. May choreographies of the oppressed become choreographies of the liberated. In the chapter to follow, I reveal the praxis embedded in two particular examples of Street Dance Activism: #OccupyLAPD and #OccupyLAMayor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theater of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books, 1979.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," pp. 145-146
- Ellis, Carolyn *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder. 1970.
- Jacobs, Lanita. "The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among "Native" Anthropologists." In [American Anthropologist](#) 104(3):791 – 804, September 2002.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.
- Lipsitz, George. *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988/1995.
- McKay, N.Y. "The Narrative self: Race, politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography." In S. Smith & J. Watson (Eds.), *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (pp. pp. 96-107). Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998.
- Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Widener, Daniel. *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Post War Los Angeles*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.