


2-2019

“In the Beginning was Body Language” Clowning and Krump as Spiritual Healing and Resistance

Sarah S. Ohmer
CUNY Lehman College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/le_pubs

 Part of the [Africana Studies Commons](#), [American Film Studies Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Dance Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Music Commons](#), [Performance Studies Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ohmer, Sarah S., "“In the Beginning was Body Language” Clowning and Krump as Spiritual Healing and Resistance" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/le_pubs/247

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lehman College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

“In the Beginning was Body Language” Clowning and Krump as Spiritual Healing and Resistance

Sarah Soanirina Ohmer, CUNY Lehman College

Abstract

In the neighborhood of HollyWatts in Los Angeles, dance allows a shift from existing as bodies presented as sites of threat and extinction to sources of spiritual empowerment. Clowning and Krump dancers—their subjectivity *and* their dancing bodies—negotiate survival from trauma and socioeconomic marginalization. I argue that the dancers’ performances act as embodied narratives of “re-membering in the flesh.” The performance acts as a spiritual retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory through the body. Choreography and quotes from dancers support the claim that Krump and Clowning is “re-membering in the flesh” that enacts self-worth, self-defined sexuality, and agency for and by marginalized children and young adults. Close readings of street and staged choreography and quotes establish clear connections to Africana dance history and techniques and spiritual healing. The article includes references to the representations of the dancers’ bodies and their political voices in documentary film.

“A lot of people will think ‘oh, those kids out there are just heathen, thugs...’ No, no; what we are—
are oppressed.”

-- Dragon, a Krump dancer

“They all had been choreographing a dance of protest and resistance, set in motion from the first day an enslaved man or woman set foot on the shore of Jamaica.”

-- Osha Pinnock

“Let’s turn to you, young poet. Know this: if you are a child of hip-hop, the simple truth is that in the beginning was the word, and the word was spoken in body language.”

--- Marc Bamuthi Joseph

Bodies Shifting Hip Hop and Trauma Studies

Being one of the four elements of hip-hop, dance remains the least studied form of hip hop discussed or studied. The subversive function of performance is essential to hip-hop. This article discusses hip hop dance performance that promotes self-esteem, spirituality, self-defined sexuality, and agency for and by marginalized children and young adults from Los Angeles: Krump and Clowning. The ritual of style war and art of battling makes up a central component of hip-hop's culture and its evolution as a movement, in all of four elements (DJing, MCing, graffiti writing and b-boying or b-girling).⁴³ This article stops at various intersections in HollyWatts, to look at different dances that heal children, girls, and young men and women, and help them to affirm their own voices. Clowning and Krump present strategies of witnessing to and healing from Hollywatts' and other marginalized contexts' histories, shifting the body from a site of threat of extinction to a source of empowerment, with bodies at the center in order to negotiate survival from trauma. This article brings together a discussion of hip hop choreography, connected to Africana dance history and techniques, folk and staged performance dance, spirituality and sexuality, and representations of Black dancing bodies in film, specifically *RIZE* by French director David LaChapelle.⁴⁴

I argue that Krump and Clowning dance work as “performance movements,” that is, performances attached to an ideology, a social movement, and spiritual activism that resists the State. Krump and Clowning have helped individuals work through and witness personal and communal trauma, enact community building and spiritual resistance. Krump and Clowning exemplify hip hop dance that works against discrimination and selective amnesia bound to questions of race, socio-economic marginalization, and gender. The dancers' performances act as embodied narratives of “re-membling flesh”—retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory through the body. Krump and Clowning also exemplify choreographies to speak up through body language in current cultural, socioeconomic and political contexts.

Bodies in Motion: Historical Diaspora Connections

On the birth and evolution of Krump, Dragon, one of the initial practitioners of Krump dance, shares his consciousness of the stigma that his community carries, and the contrast between that stigma and the reality that they channel through their performance: “A lot of people will think ‘oh, those kids out there are just heathen, thugs...’ No, no; what

⁴³ The four elements of hip-hop were seen as one in the 1970s. To claim turntablism, rap, graffiti, or pop blocking as separate entities where one would be considered closer to ‘true hip hop’ than another would go against the essence of hip-hop. It cannot be hip hop unless it's four elements were practiced as one. In my study of Krump/Clowning, I will keep in mind that the dance forms part of a greater movement.

⁴⁴ LaChapelle, David. Dir. *RIZE*. Lions Gate Films, 2005.

we are—are oppressed.”⁴⁵ Their dance is more than a performance; it’s a movement of resistance to the oppression, as well as a spiritual response to the current popular African American hip-hop art scene. Krump and Clowning dancers perform with the consciousness of historical actors, and the awareness of their spirituality, agency, self-definition and self-representation as voices from their community.

Dragon also explains that in his neighborhood –“there’s no after-school programs,” and the community lacks places for youth who “[do] not play basketball or football.” He has a sense of the marginalization in relation to performance arts and the opportunities of “better neighborhoods [where] you have dance schools.”⁴⁶ For Dragon, Krump dancing, which he and his friends have created, challenges the limitations that they face in their community: “This is our ghetto ballet.”⁴⁷ This is their form of expression, a corporeal and spiritual form of empowerment and agency that defines their own form of art. It is distinct from the high art of ballet, and they mark it as a clear contribution to the African diaspora.

Osha Pinnock interprets the foundational musical experience as a cultural step in the formation of a collective yet diverse diasporic African people.⁴⁸ Pinnock points out how musical performance served beyond being a strategy to survive day-to-day life in bondage. It founded not only a cultural experience, but also an ideology: “They all had been choreographing a dance of protest and resistance, set in motion from the first day an enslaved man or woman set foot on the shore of Jamaica.”⁴⁹ The past perfect tense “had been choreographing” implies an act with conscious awareness of the consequences, and consistent effort to raise consciousness over time, initiated by enslaved men and women during the first day they stepped off the slaveship. For Pinnock, dance is associated to protest, resistance, and a collective ideological movement that originated when forced immigrants from different regions of Africa’s West Coast landed in Jamaica. This musical and ideological message was one of the first symbolic steps that enslaved women and men took on the island of Jamaica as a diasporic African people. They had been choreographing to survive.

Performance, ideology and spirituality go hand in hand in Africana dance. Krump and Clowning adapt foundational choreographies and music to promote African diasporic values of self-esteem, cultural preservation, agency, resistance and spirituality as a part of African American identities. In a way, Dragon is claiming the black body as a loud voice, and a presence, undoing what Dixon Gottschild found to be an art world where “the black dancing body was the negative space around which the white dancing body was

⁴⁵ *RIZE* (Documentary, Lyons Gate Entertainment, 2005).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Unknowingly, Dragon’s remark puts him in relation to Alvin Ailey, African American ballet choreographer who strove to include African American cultural history into his choreography (Dixon Gottschild, “Black Dancing Body” 259). Dragon speaks to the same motive, but beyond the establishment of institutionalized dance.

⁴⁸ Thomas Osha Pinnock, “Rasta and Reggae,” in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: how movement shapes identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat, ed., Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002.

⁴⁹ Pinnock, “Rasta and Reggae,” 96.

configured.”⁵⁰ Krumpers and Clowners claim that their performance aesthetic fills a spiritual gap in the Hip-Hop world that, in the late 1990s, early 2000s, was beginning to lack “morals, values” (Dragon in *RIZE*). The dancing historical actors contribute their own dance to the arts of Hip-Hop that, in their opinion, has yet to emerge in the commercialized Hip-Hop scene. Clowning and Krump dancers respond to artistic scenarios that have stereotyped their identity and do not speak to their particular experiences as spiritual youth of color.

Dragon explains that Krump is “the only way [they] see fit for storytelling.” Krump, for dancers like Dragon, is a form of storytelling through performance that, I would add, opens up a connection to spiritual griots in the communities on the African continent. In a way, Krumpers act as griots to story-tell, through dance, and with spiritual awareness and political consciousness as part of their performance. Chancy defines storytelling as a means of “undo[ing] the conditions of slavery and colonialism,”⁵¹ two elements still present in HollyWatts, resisted through Krump story telling. The storytelling serves as witness to the oppression and the conditions of slavery and colonialism in the community, and makes room for spiritual empowerment through hip-hop dance.

Afrika Bambaataa, an important figure in the formation and global exportation of hip-hop, defined hip hop as made up of four elements: graffiti writing; b-boy/b-girling; DJing and MCing. The four elements made up a “superforce,” to use Harry Allen’s term, early hip hop critic and hip hop activist. Hip-hop’s participants (graffiti writers, b-boy and b-girls, DJs, MCs) were mostly from Brooklyn and Harlem. However, the West Coast in Los Angeles witnessed a parallel movement. On the U.S. West Coast, the first spoken word records were produced by The Watts poets: Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight and Nikki Giovanni, who formed part of the Black Arts movement in Los Angeles. Hip-hop dancing also witnessed parallel creations on the opposite coasts. As hip-hop became “new global forms of solidarity” among urban marginalized youths worldwide,⁵² in the early 1990s, young adults in HollyWatts were creating new dances—Clowning and Krump (1992).⁵³ Later, hypercapitalism transformed these essential components of hip hop that made it a folk culture, an ideological revolution, an avant-garde interdisciplinary art form; but Clowning and Krump dancers worked against hypercapitalism. In *Total Chaos*, Michael Chang makes a direct correlation between the birth of hip-hop and Krump dancing, describing Krump as an example that “hypercapitalism hadn’t killed the folk ways.”⁵⁴ Clowning and Krump allowed HollyWatts’ young community to connect to the Africana history of performance and Africana forms of spirituality.

⁵⁰ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle,” in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: how movement shapes identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002), 2.

⁵¹ Myriam J.A. Chancy. *Searching for Safe Space: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 183.

⁵² Sujatha Fernandes, *Close to the Edge: In Search of a Global Hip Hop Generation*. (London: Verso, 2011), 20.

⁵³ The distinction in spelling between AfroReggae the band (in one word) and Afro Reggae the association (in two capitalized words) will be respected throughout the chapters.

⁵⁴ Michael Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop* (Basic Civitas Book: New York, 2006), xiii.

In the context of 16th century forced immigration and bondage, performance, dance and music played a sociopolitical role of survival and rebellion for African men and women.⁵⁵ Music and oral traditions already made up the social net in various African nations, where the *griot*, a poet, political figure, story-teller, was a vehicle for a nation or a tribe's history and spiritual healing through music or interactive storytelling. On the slave ship, singing was a way for people to communicate among themselves, to remember their homeland, to prepare rebellious struggles and to connect with their ancestors. Singing was a form of spiritual and physical survival through nostalgia as well as a form of non-threatening communication to strategize for upheaval. Africana performance preserved cultural identity, agency and spirituality in a space of social death and bondage. Krump and Clowning will be seen in this light in the following pages.

In *Africa in Latin America*, Isabel Aretz's book chapter on "Music and Dance in Continental Latin America, with the Exception of Brazil," traces where and how African music is preserved throughout the Spanish and English speaking parts of the continent. Over four hundred years, the cultural influence has been noted from Venezuela to Cuba, from popular music to local rituals.⁵⁶ In some cases rituals retain their original imported structure, such as the *lumbalú* ritual of the dead in Cartagena, Columbia, or the cult of the Kromanti jaguar gods in Suriname.⁵⁷ In other cases European dances were transformed to create Afro-American dance, such as the contradance that became *danza*, then *danzón*, and *merengue*.⁵⁸ In yet other cases new music genres arose in Black settlements or communities of African descent, such as the *tango*, synonymous with *candomble*, a genre of farce music practiced in Uruguay and Buenos Aires in the 1800s.⁵⁹

Off of the slave ship, African forced immigrants preserved music to survive through the pain of living in bondage. In the earliest days of slavery, there were *candomblés*, drum-accompanied dances. In the late 1500s and early 1600s, communities of African descent put together *cofradías* (fellowships), *hermandades* (brotherhoods), *candomblés*, and the most common were *cabildos* (councils or chapters). Performance became associated with resistance and risk of persecution, but also with a power to soothe the ailments of life in bondage through spirituality, and as manifestations of culture mixing. As workers, whether in agriculture, mining, as porters, harvesting tobacco, sugar or cacao, herding cattle with *gauchos* and *llaneros*, music would ail hard or forced labor's wounds, and motivated the animals with whom they worked.⁶⁰ Women porters and wet nurses' work songs and lullabies produced transculturated forms of Afro-Latin American music, with Spanish words, verses originating overseas, and others expressing their emotions as

⁵⁵ Jerome Branche, *Colonialism and Race in Luso-Hispanic Literature* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 89.

⁵⁶ Isabel Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, trans. Leonor Blum, (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984).

⁵⁷ Isabel Aretz refers to an interview with Batata, the members of the San Bilsio group's chief, in 1956, to explain the ritual. They celebrate death, perceived in their group as the end to all suffering, just as they cry during childbirth since, to them, it marks the beginning of suffering (191).

⁵⁸ Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, 190.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 218.

⁶⁰ Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, 206.

Blacks in the Americas. As they entered and acquired public life, African immigrants and individuals of African descent contributed to folk culture: “as poets, singers, musicians, and dancers. They followed the processions of saints, they danced *cuecas*, *bambucos*, *tamboritors*, and *joropos*.”⁶¹ They had been occupying the streets with dance gatherings since the early 1500s, though such gatherings met restrictions from the colonial authorities, and would keep on expressing themselves through performance in the public space. Krump and Clowning can be seen as 20th century iterations of African diasporic street, staged and ritualistic performance, and evolutions of East Coast hip-hop and West Coast 1970s-80s dance.

Krump and Clowning are forms of expression, survival and rebellion at the margins of an oppressive State. The dialogical relationship between a simultaneously oppressive and neglecting State and the marginalized resisting community members in Los Angeles, as well as the chronological relationship between East Coast hip hop and Clowning/Krump, place Clowning and Krump within African diasporic cultural, political, economic and spiritual history.⁶²

Bodies in Motion: Choreographic Connections to African Diaspora

Krump/Clown dancing echoes African dance choreography. This section analyzes the Krump/Clowning choreography closely, in an effort to contribute to existing studies on Africana dance. Rather than follow Gottschild’s methodology—referring to dance productions and ritualistic Afro-centered dance rituals—I will focus on describing the characteristics of these street dance groups.

The core of Clown dancing, as Tommy the Clown taught his students, is improvisation. This is what still connects the Krump dancers to the Clown dancers. This is what they have learned from Tommy the Clown, before the Krump dancers decided to start their own aesthetic and part ways from Tommy the Clown’s aesthetic.⁶³

The premise of improvisation in dance, according to Dixon Gottschild, goes “hand in hand with the circle.”⁶⁴ The structure of the circle, a consistent form of performance and audience participation in the Krump and Clown performances, as well as improvisation, disrupt linearity and the performer-audience divide, and promote authenticity, working

⁶¹ Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, 209.

⁶² Two texts I will introduce below, João H. Costa Vargas’ comparative studies on Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles’ precarious conditions and Patricia Rose’s work on the formation of hip hop, from the United States’ East Coast to the West Coast, contextualize musical struggles in violent urban contexts, or spaces that have been left behind by State institutions and laws, which I will further compare to Giorgio Agamben’s “space of exception.”

⁶³ On improvisation:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. (Ralph Ellison 36)

⁶⁴ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle,” 9.

both on the individual level and the collective front.⁶⁵ This structure also breaks the biopolitical power that oppresses the members of the HollyWatts community, promoting another flow of energy: “When the circle rules, there is an abundance of energy, vitality, flexibility, and potential.”⁶⁶ This is partly how, although they were never meant to survive, the dancers articulate a new way of making life.

Jonathan David Jackson, in his article “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing,” explains that improvisation should be understood as a characteristic of African American vernacular dancing. He bases his analysis on the principle that “in African-American vernacular dancing improvisation *is* choreography,” which problematizes the way improvisation is perceived in literature.⁶⁷ The fact that improvisation *is* choreography in Black vernacular dancing makes African American vernacular dancing place a central value on oral communication as well as sensing.⁶⁸ Two aspects are of interest here. On the one hand, oral communication refers to the sense that the “passing on of values, aesthetics, and actual movement traditions [occurs] through experiential knowledge and ritual work.”⁶⁹ One example of this oral communication could be the “stripper dance.” As one of the Krump dancers describes it, this new style of dance they recently created, expanded on Clowning with a different improvisation style, the stripper dance is “a flow...it’s a vibe... It’s like a connection.” On the other hand, “sensing” means that the emotions serve as a path to intelligent knowing, that the improvisation choreography requires an “in-the-moment” perception of the self in tune with the environment around the body, as well as the acknowledgment of mystical forces and psychosomatic forces that may be perceived by faith.⁷⁰

With the cultural understanding of improvisation choreography and its relationship to an African diasporic dance practice in contrast to Western dance practices, the newly appropriated and created dance forms take on a new meaning. The aspects of the dance that make improvisation possible, “oral communication” and “sensing,” suggest the ways in which Krump and Clowning can heal the traumatic experiences of the youths’ lives in HollyWatts—through ritual work, with a strong sense of self in-the-moment and a connection to mystical forces. David LaChapelle’s documentary dedicates a long scene to a “Krump session” in the street. In this scene, one of the dancers gets “struck,

⁶⁵ Gottschild, “Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions” 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Jackson, Jonathan David. “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing.” *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001), 43.

⁶⁸ Improvisation is not a characteristic that only pertains to African American Vernacular dancing, on the contrary, most dances resort to this technique. What the author expresses here is the particularity of improvisation’s role in African American Vernacular Dance.

⁶⁹ Jackson, *Dance Research Journal*.

⁷⁰ Ritual “work” and “sensing” point to the importance of engaging the spirit through dance, and establish a relationship between healing and religion. The therapeutic function of religious dance is a central component of African dance cultures. For example, it is very similar to the “work” performed by Haitian Vodou performers such as Rara. For more information on the connection between spiritual “work,” engaging with the spirit world at a crossroads between the physical and spiritual realm, and the role of performance in terms of spirituality, community building and healing, see Elizabeth McAlister’s *Rara!: Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

something we *all* been waitin' for," presenting one of many instances where the performers show their faith and their connection to mystical forces.⁷¹ Their choreography illustrates both a resistance to an aesthetic of European-derived or Western dance, as well as the aesthetic of hip-hop's commodification and variations of Black vernacular dancing.⁷²

The dance techniques of Clowning and Krumping follow other Africana dance techniques that Dixon Gottschild denotes in "Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle." Firstly, Clowning/Krumping choreography uses African dance techniques of polycentrism and polyrhythm. Polycentrism is an Africanist perspective that defends that "movement may originate from any body zone, and two or more areas of the body may simultaneously serve as centers of movement."⁷³ Polycentrism and polyrhythm make up important tenets of Africana dance. "Africanist-based movement is also polyrhythmic. The feet may maintain one rhythm while torso, legs, arms dance to the beat of different drums. This democracy of body parts is demonstrable in Africanist dance forms throughout the Motherland and across the diaspora."⁷⁴ The "democracy of body parts" in Clowning and Krumping is manifested through isolated movements of the shoulders, the rib cage, in a concurrent but separate flow with the feet and legs that move to an independent rhythm below. Both of the movements, the latter being an 'evolution' of the first, also use "high-affect juxtaposition" in their choreography, which are "movement, mood, or attitude disruptions that ensue abruptly, rather than with a transition phase."⁷⁵ The dancers go from extremely fast movements to slowed-down movements to violent 'attacks,' and their projected mood changes accordingly, especially in dance-offs, from playful to aggressive.

The dancers' make-up, vibrant colors inspired from clown make-up for the clown dancers, and tribal lines inspired from African tribal masks for Krump dancers, also builds a bridge to the Africanist "aesthetic of the cool," "their faces resembling ancient African masks in stillness, calm, and self-possession, while their bodies dance beyond their quotidian potential...the two illuminate each other in a symbiotic dance that is emblematic of the full spectrum of Africanist aesthetic characteristics."⁷⁶

And the dancers' belief in a connection with a spirit though dance, as well as their occasional "being struck" (a spiritual experience where the dancer falls into a trance, loses control of their body, and faints) connects them to the "continuities between body/mind/spirit" also prevalent in Africanist performance practices."⁷⁷

As asserted by Gottschild:

⁷¹ In *Borderlands/ La frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa finds that writing also relates to ritual work and a connection with the self and spiritual forces.

⁷² Jackson, Jonathan David. "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing." *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001), 42.

⁷³ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle," 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁷ Gottschild, "Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions" 7.

Another spirit catcher is the torso articulation that is integral to all African-based movement forms. Just as in traditional Africanist religions, where cosmic forces are embodied through similar torso motifs, the articulation of shoulders, rib cage, stomach, pelvis, buttocks, and neck with rolling, undulating, shaking, circling, or rocking motions, combined with syncopated rhythms and movement repetition are known means of calling forth the spirit. There is an undeniable connection between these kinesthetic (muscular and motional) movements and their ability to generate certain affective (emotional and spiritual) states.⁷⁸

The scene of the documentary where one of the dancers is struck, she is performing this very type of choreography, with her whole body engaged in rocking motions, and when the dancer faints, the rest of the dancers who had formed a circle around her conclude that the spirit has taken her, that she has been struck.

In another part of the documentary, Miss Prissy and Dragon explain their reconnection with the church and the spirit. Their choreography in this part of the film is slower, with antithetic movements and elongated gestures. They represent central moves of “catching the spirit:”

[One] way of dancing holds exceptional possibility for spirit catching. . . the dancer, with her spine in a deep, deep arch (so that her back is nearly parallel to the floor—“laid out”—with chest and face open to the ceiling), simultaneously lifts one leg forward and stretches it so far up and out—simultaneously high and away from her body—that the pelvis and standing leg are pulled forward from her center of gravity by the force and direction of the lifted leg. It looks as though she will tumble but she doesn’t, because one or both arms are stretched overhead (meaning parallel to the floor) pulling her in the opposite direction and, thus, creating a seesaw counterbalance. This kind of dramatic movement, a reaching of every part of the body in opposite directions, is a metaphor for human longing, for aspirations beyond our means and desires beyond our condition—paradoxically, body tension implying mind/spirit release.⁷⁹

Miss Prissy’s choreography especially when she bends over, arms in their, flat back, and her leg pulled back, as the organ concludes the song, communicates this longing movement, reaching out beyond her condition as a marginalized subject both in the field of dance as well as socio-politically, as a Black woman living in Hollywood. The audience’s reaction, and the film direction here also underline her mind/spirit release, taking it to another level as other individuals begin to dance with her. Miss Prissy, a Krump dancer, as she dances in the space of religious praise, embodies the relationship between Krump and the basic praise dance, still “the most prevalent” form of African spirit dance in which “individuals who are inspired by and enthralled in the Holy Spirit simply get up and dance

⁷⁸ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York, NY, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 260.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

as the spirit moves them.”⁸⁰ For a moment, it seems, the room, the image, her body, mind and spirit stop to cherish the moment, and dance the spirit.

Finally, a recurring image is that of Miss Prissy looking up, their gaze going beyond where their body and other dancers’ bodies are around them, physically. This is another component of spiritual dance:

Yet another spirit catcher lies in the gaze. Eyes may look outward, upward, seemingly beyond the physical to the supernatural. Head and chest may follow through, lifted up and open or thrown back. The savvy dancer may luxuriate in these techniques and, like a Method actor, fill them with her subjective subtext for whatever this kinetic challenge may suggest on the affective level.⁸¹

In every dance routine represented in the film, dancers are caught with this gaze, and their energy spills onto their audience, past their dancing bodies, echoing *Vodun* or *Candomblé* as well as Africanist Pentacostal ritual spaces: “[where the ritual] event is charged by the proceedings so here, too, the stage space—not just the bodies moving in it—is charged by the energy spill taking place.”⁸² Miss Prissy’s dancing represents a form of African religious dance, an *embodied knowledge*.

Dixon Gottschild analyzes institutionalized dance forms in ballet, tap dance, and dance productions such as *Revelations* (Ailey, 1960) and *Gate Keepers* (Brown, 2000). The above quote actually comes from a West coast choreographer’s technique, Lester Horton’s technique, but I attempted to apply her analyses and concepts to Krump and Clowning’s “street” technique. Like the established choreographers that Gottschild alludes to, their dances form abstractions rather than narrative, examples of symbolic movement, in which the body dances concepts, symbols, takes on an abstract rather than narrative dance form.⁸³ In Clowning, the abstraction from a birthday party is placed in the artifice of the dancing body. In Krump, the essence of battle is expressed through a codified war dance. Both follow what Gottschild underlines to be an important component of African dance: “traditional Black dance genres place high value on technique and artifice in the service of expressiveness.”⁸⁴ This leads me to argue that Clowning and Krump, in their technique to evoke the spirit and their expressive and symbolic choreography, reformulate traditional Black dance techniques—improvisation; isolation; the circle structure, and embodying the spirit.

Stemming from hip hop culture, Clowning and Krump reject Western forms of art: “to understand or deal with rap music you must be innocent [as in] a commitment to formal Western musical priorities must be abandoned, or at the very least interrogated and revised, especially as they are articulated in the rules of sound production and

⁸⁰ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, 280.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 272.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

reproduction.”⁸⁵ They insist that this is their ‘ghetto ballet,’ meaning it is their urban Africanization of a Western aesthetic.

They also put forth a spiritual component in their reformulation of hip hop breakdancing: “It’s not about the thing-in-itself (for Africanist art forms are seldom naturalistic, which is why there is no landscape art of portraiture in traditional genres), but the reinvention of the thing *through* the self, if you will.”⁸⁶ What would be the “thing” reinvented by Krump and Clowning, in their case?

Each performance abstracts more than a birthday party or a war dance, in my opinion, they reinvent the state of exception that they live and that has affected their identity *through* their bodies, *through* dance. Dixon Gottschild states that the abstraction is based on the dramatic use of human affect, rather than the suppression of it.⁸⁷ If dance is based on the human affect, then it also allows working on the affective level of an individual’s condition. Therefore, I suggest that these dances’ choreographies work against “affective marginalization.” The emotion and expressiveness that the performers put forth present a performative struggle against “affirmative marginalization,” or against the guilt that has been imposed onto them. The performers’ choreographies enable the performers to free their bodies from affective marginalization” and to turn their criminalized bodies into sites of empowerment and agency at the crossroads between the physical and spiritual realms. The thing that is reinvented by Krump and Clowning is the context of the story that the dancers narrate, their lives, their community, their identities. By earning the agency to reinvent, Clowning and Krump performers are able to narrate and share their traumas through dance. They are able to communicate their stories to a wide audience. They make their bodies visible and integral members of a marginalized community. In these respects, they are re-membered in the flesh.

Krump and Clowning are embodied performance movements that engage bodies to reconnect with the spirit, through physical movements, and claim a sociocultural and psychological space to work through personal and collective trauma of racial discrimination and violence, with antecedents clearly found throughout African diasporic history. The beginnings, development and varied definitions of hip-hop can be found in Jeff Chang’s collection of essay, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*.⁸⁸ Nowadays, hip-hop is defined as a philosophy of *doing* rather than writing its manifesto as a cultural movement (Chang x), as a *lived* culture rather than carried over through written discourse.⁸⁹ Within hip-hop dance, Clowning and Krump are part of a discourse constantly in motion, an embodied discourse that re-members specific values in the flesh.

⁸⁵ Patricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 83.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 261.

⁸⁷ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, 261.

⁸⁸ Kool Herc’s DJaying or first public appearance seems to be the ‘beginning’ of the hip hop movement, though it must be noted that graffiti-writing predated it (Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop*, 9).

⁸⁹ Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop*, x.

Bodies, Memories and Healing: Re-membering in the Flesh

Seeing performance as trauma narratives, in this study, attempts to work through and fill analytical gaps by putting the bodies at the very center of the coping process, as loci of recovery. As each performance narrative proposes to implement therapeutic steps, dancers work through or a community copes with trauma that, in turn, triggers a more comprehensive process of resolution. Clowning and Krump performance promotes self-esteem and agency for/by marginalized young adults of color in Los Angeles. The concept of a “palpable” identity reverberates in re-membering *in the flesh*, with bodily wounds, sensual experiences and performative identities. Bodies are sites of empowerment—through performance (in Afro Reggae, Clowning, and Krump).

The dancers’ performances act as embodied narratives of re-membering—retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory, and remind us of strategies to speak up through body language in the context of oppression. Can these performances serve a therapeutic function in their social context, and if so, what do they ‘heal’? Is it ‘that easy’ to overcome marginalization through performance?

Los Angeles’ Clowning and Krump dancers promote the powers of love and self-esteem. They suggest resolutions through performative re-membering in the flesh—retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory, or re-membering trauma through performance. A traumatic memory is essentially an absent memory. It doubly functions as having a painful impact on the psyche, while at the same time being erased from the psyche in order for the psyche to cope.

In David LaChapelle’s documentary, the testimonies of Krump dancers and Clowning dancers reveal another healing function of dance as it highlights home and belonging. One scene of the documentary particularly focuses on the domestic space, with a song from pop star Cristina Aguilera playing in the background as a group of mothers, Clown dancers, and toddlers, dancing and braiding their hair. This scene aimed to translate the sentiment of home, belonging, and kinship beyond nuclear family bonds that accompanied the Clown and Krump dance movement. This type of community building indicates a growing sense of trust, which in turn has been proven to result in upward mobility. In fact, the performances themselves have allowed many children to find jobs as choreographers, dancers, band members, but also to train future generations to have professional skills such as basic technology, interpersonal communication, etc.

Testimonies from the documentary also show the Krump dancers and Clowning dancers’ sense of communal family structure.⁹⁰ One of the dancers’ mothers explains that she uses Tommy the Clown’s authority to give structure to her household; sometimes she threatens her children that they won’t get to go to the next dance competition (“dance-off”), or that

⁹⁰ They become a family, illustrating how “people acquire socially recognized kinship relations with others. Friends may be incorporated into one’s domestic circle: if they satisfy one another’s expectations, they may be called kin—cousins, sisters, brothers, daddies.” (Stack 30) Stack defines “‘family’ as the smallest, organized, durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily, providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival” (Stack 31).

she will tell Tommy they misbehaved so he withdraws them from the Clown group. Tommy feels the same way that “clown groups are in a sense like families.” And one of the Krump members, “Tight Eyez” (who now later produced his own videos), mentors a younger member of the group, “Baby Tight Eyez.” Clown and Krump dancers substantiate how dancers create belonging through performance in spaces of exception where the State and the rule of law and safety have been taken away from the community.

The dance performance in HollyWatts empowers the performers as they claim control over their own bodies, and gain freedom through dance. For Krump dancer Miss Prissy, trained in ballet, modern jazz and modern dance, to join the circle of Krump dancers instantly meant to join a space where she could be herself, and be liberated (“it was like, do *you*, and be free.”) In an MTV interview, she admits that at first she thought the Krumpers were like a “motorcycle club,” then learned about Krump dancing’s spiritual component, and felt it to be more liberating than ballet dancing. For Miss Prissy, the opportunity to liberate her self through a dance that embraced a violent rhythm and aesthetic, triggered a “letting go” of her problems, anxieties, and oppression. In *RIZE*, different Clown, Krump, and Stripper—another dance that came out of Clowning and Krump—dancers explain that in their performance, a woman’s sexuality breaks boundaries put onto them in everyday life. A male Stripper performer states:

I’ve seen some parents see little four year olds are out there poppin’ their booties, sayin’ ‘Oh, I would never let my daughter do that.’ Why? She’s out there havin’ fun she’s not doing *anything wrong*, she’s not being sexual, there’s nobody out there with her, there’s nobody touching her, she’s out there poppin’. What’s wrong with poppin’?⁹¹

Breaking free from binding forms of ballet and modern dance to embrace the aesthetic of improvisation, young girls, adolescent women and mothers turn their exoticized, objectified, and otherwise misrepresented or misread bodies into an artistic source of empowerment, that takes them far from an oppressive “here” to “out there” where they are empowered while “poppin’.”

Miss Prissy embodies the capacity of hip hop dance, reformulated to fit particular experiences and voices, to heal, and create new forms of art, while acquiring agency. Clowning, Krump, and Stripper dance offer us new ways to experience and break down hypercapitalism’s oppression. I will conclude with Miss Prissy’s words, and ask readers, scholars, and dancers, to continue to keep pushing. Because more of our stories have yet to be told, because we need to perform and self-represent “the way we love, and who we are, because there’s no one out there that’s representing that.”

Krump and Clowning are “performance movements” that adapt foundational choreographies and story-telling music to promote African diasporic values of self-esteem, cultural preservation, agency and spiritual resistance as a part of African American identities. Music and dance has played a role in fashioning an identity during

⁹¹ *RIZE*, Documentary, Lions Gate.

and after the shock of forced immigration from various parts of West Africa to the Americas. Written language served a different purpose for the individuals who had been taken away from their land, lost connections to their family as well as their social role, had little to no access to resources to write or even communicate to others who spoke their language. An intertribal language was born, through song and music. This language allowed for survival, rebellion, and spiritual and cultural rebirth. In the neighborhood of HollyWatts in Los Angeles, this language continues to grow through dance. Krump and Clowning allow a shift from existing as bodies presented as sites of threat and extinction to sources of spiritual empowerment. Clowning and Krump dancers—their subjectivity *and* their dancing bodies—negotiate survival from trauma and socioeconomic marginalization. Their performances act as embodied narratives of “re-membering in the flesh.” They enact contemporary iterations of spiritual retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory through the body and enact self-worth, self-defined sexuality, and agency for and by marginalized children and young adults.

Bibliography

- Aretz, Isabel. *Africa in Latin America*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, trans. Leonor Blum, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984.
- Branche, Jerome. *Colonialism and Race in Luso-Hispanic Literature*. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2006.
- Chang, Michael. *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop*. Basic Civitas Books: New York, 2006.
- Fernandes, Sujatha. *Close to the Edge: In Search of a Global Hip Hop Generation*. London: Verso, 2011.
- Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. "Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle," in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: how movement shapes identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002.
- Jackson, Jonathan David. "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing." *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001): 40-53.
- LaChapelle, David. Dir. *RIZE*. Lions Gate Films, 2005.
- McAlister, Elizabeth. *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001.
- Pinnock, Thomas Osha. "Rasta and Reggae," in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: how movement shapes identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat, ed. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002.
- Rose, Patricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

Sarah Ohmer is Assistant Professor in Latino Studies and Africana Studies and Fulbright Scholar. Her interdisciplinary work includes trauma studies, critical ethnic studies, literary analysis and cultural studies. She is one of 4 CUNY Graduate Center's Culture Place and Politics Faculty Fellowship, 4-year recipient of CUNY Internal Grants, Member of the Editorial Board of the Women's Studies Quarterly Journal, and Forum Executive Committee Member of Modern Language Association's Teaching Literature Committee. She has published in *Confluencia*, *Zora Neale Hurston Forum*, *Evoke*, and *La Verdad: A Reader of Hip Hop Latinidades* (OSU Press 2016) and has a forthcoming book manuscript *Keloids of Modernity: Trauma and Spirituality in Literature* (2020).