Wellbeing and Expression with Youth Dancing Hip Hop in an Urban Multiethnic Neighbourhood

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Abstract

Situated in a Canadian multiethnic urban neighbourhood, this exploratory study examines the experiences of youth dancing Hip Hop. Critical and performance ethnographic research was conducted at a drop-in Hip Hop class at a community centre using participant observation and dyadic interviews. Asking youth to reflect on their experience in dance class lead to insights into the role of dance classes in their lives. Findings are presented here in two articles. The first article addresses how youth used the concept of fun to describe their subjective wellbeing. The centre created an environment that made it possible for youth to find taking on challenges and taking risks fun. It did this by empowering the youth, fostering learning and supporting youth building relationships. The second article examines how personal and collective expression were intertwined in Hip Hop dancing at the centre. Spending time and sweat acquiring knowledge and respect for Hip Hop culture through the music, dance vocabulary gave youth the capacity to combine self expression and expression of Hip Hop culture.

Résumé

Cette étude exploratoire, située dans un arrondissement canadien multiethnique, examine des expériences des jeunes danseurs de hip-hop. J'ai mené cette recherche performative dans un cours de danse hip-hop à un centre communautaire en utilisant des entrevues en dyade et l'observation participante.

Les résultats sont présentés en deux articles. Le premier article examine comment des jeunes ont utilisé le concept de ‘s’amuser’ ou ‘fun’ pour expliquer leur bien-être subjectif. Le centre a établi un environnement ou des jeunes ont trouvé que des défis et des risques étaient amusants. Le deuxième article se concentre sur l’expression au niveau personnel et collectif, qui était entremêlé l’un avec l’autre.

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This one goes out to all of the dancers that sweat it out with me to complete this research. I learned so much from you. None of this work would have been possible without the thoughtful guidance and encouragement of my supervisor Dr. Cecile Rousseau. Finally I would like to thank the members of my writing group, Helen Bradley, Shaun Weadick, Arwen Fleming and Valerie Webber for their rigorous commitment to embodying the process of doing research for social change.

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Introduction

I am sitting down to write this introduction after coming back from a panel discussion in a university contemporary dance program that addressed the question: Is Hip Hop dance credible? I am furious. This question infuriates me because it implies that this institution is in a position to pass judgments over the credibility of other dance forms. This is a personal fury. I emerged from fourteen years of ballet training confident in the belief that the labour I had put into gaining mastery over this technique gave me the power to pass this same brand of aesthetic and artistic judgments. I was secure in the belief that my well executed pirouettes put me in a position to be an arbitrator of head spins. I am furious because of how this belief stems from a history of colonization where traditions of movement that support the colonizing and powerful group benefit from a privileged aesthetic position.

I have found traces of this history throughout my research on dance and wellbeing. I performed my research in a youth drop-in centre Hip Hop class in a multiethnic neighbourhood in Montreal. One day after class I tried to explain to a young dancer that I found Hip Hop really hard. She looked at me incredulously and said, “But you studied Ballet?” As if my ballet training were enough for me to grasp any dance technique. As if ballet were at the top of a hierarchy of dance trainings and if you had it you could master all the rest. Articles that examined the

health impacts of ballet with youth always mentioned its artistic value, articles on Hip Hop examined only its physical impacts.

Hip Hop's popularity has been widely recognized. What has been slower to arrive is recognition of its social, political, artistic and technical value. It is a basic assumption of this research that Hip Hop dancing has these dimensions.

This research is within a growing stream of research around arts and health. Within this torrent there is growing interest in examining health not as the absence of illness but as the flourishing of life. The blossoming of this research examines from this new perspective how the arts impact the lives of communities and individuals. This necessitates interdisciplinary research, not just between academic disciplines. I consider interdisciplinary to refer to academic and artistic disciplines.

I entered dance training before I ever opened a book and in turn I approached this research first as a dancer. This meant observing and performing with care the techniques of qualitative research in dialogue with the methods of artistic practice. Taking precise field notes was accompanied with fastidiously practicing the running man.

This Master's thesis in social and transcultural psychiatry is presented in two articles, each oriented towards a different aspects of my research. The first approaches the dance class as an activity. The second approaches dance as an expressive art. These two aspects are interrelated and I draw a connection between them and the fields that are involved in the promotion of health.

Both articles are in an extended form for the thesis submission to better represent the breadth and depth of my results. They follow the same format, presenting separate literature reviews and research questions based on their distinct orientations. There is some repetition between the two articles, particularly in the methods section. But I have attempted to bring forward different aspects according to their relevance in context of the arguments and ideas of each article.

Fun as Subjective Wellbeing: Investigating the experience of Youth Dancing Hip Hop in a Multiethnic Urban Neighbourhood

This exploratory research examines how Hip Hop dance might fit into the ecology of wellbeing surrounding marginalized urban youth. The youth in this study had enrolled voluntarily in Hip Hop dance classes at a Community Centre Drop-in Program in Montreal. Critical performance ethnographic methods and an intersectional theoretical approach were used to investigate their experience. This article describes how the exchange of Hip Hop dance knowledge is pursued by youth both because they find it fun in the moment and because as they learn more it can become more fun. The community centre created an environment that empowered youth, focused on the process of learning and facilitated building relationships. When these three elements were present, taking the risk of trying new steps or dancing in front of peers was fun.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dance and Wellbeing

Can dance programming promote youth's wellbeing? And if so what are some important considerations in its implementation? I undertook field research at a community centre in Montreal that had a popular and ongoing Hip Hop class

associated with the Youth Drop-in Centre. My purpose in researching at this centre was to learn from the experience of youth who were already dancing. Could some of the factors that drew them to train in this art be related to their understanding of their own wellbeing?

In their systematic review on dance and wellbeing with young people Jan Burkhardt and Cathy Brennan (2012) found that the majority of recent research in this area has focused on the physical impact of dance, in particular cardiovascular health and the Body Mass Index (BMI). They also found that the majority of studies included only female participants. This spotlight on female dancers and physical health provides a limited lens into dance and wellbeing that feeds existing assumptions about the insignificant role of rational thought in dance.

In her book on the interrelationship between dance and medical discourses in 19th century Europe, Felicia McCarren delves into the association between dance, women and hysteria. She writes, "Dance repeats in some important respects the mechanism of illness, externalizing inner states, translating ideas into the body as do psychosomatic disorders" (McCarren, 1998, 24). She argues that at this historical juncture a gap developed between popular dances that

symbolized the uncontrollable female body and elite forms, such as Ballet, that were defined by corporeal control. The latter were raised above the subrational bar. In academic literature dances that were associated with lower classes or that came from outside the West have been consistently described as wild physicality. For example, popular and recreational dances originating in the lower classes were depicted as unsanitary. These dances were so unruly that they posed a health risk (Dodd, 2010). Portrayals of dances that originated outside of Western Europe were frequently tinged with exoticism and orientalism. In particular dances originating from Africa or associated with the African Diaspora were classified as primitive. This had the effect of freezing these cultures and cultural practices in time. Primitive dances were seen as coming from a uncultivated natural origin and thus required no learning to perform (Youngerman, 1974). Traces of these historical biases can still be found in today's academic literature on dance.

In Dance/Movement Therapy there has been considerable research linking therapeutic dance to mental health and wellbeing (Vulcan, 2013). Examinations into these dimensions of recreational and popular dances is relatively rare. I argue that this scarcity of research is a legacy of the association of these dances with a pure physicality. This unexamined belief restricts researchers examining

dance as a potential health intervention to questions in the domain of cardiovascular measurements and the BMI.

Exclusively collecting data on the physical impacts of dance reduces an art form to a calisthenics routine. This myopia may effect policy and programming decisions about what kind of dance is valued and made accessible. A recent European survey of recreational dancers of all ages and many different styles found that, ‘dancing was seen as a strategy to forget daily stress as well as cope with the stress of prolonged difficult times” (Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010). This inclusion of mental health benefits was also demonstrated in high school contemporary dance programming in the United Kingdom, where participants showed improvements across physical and psychosocial domains (Connolly et al., 2010; Quin et al. 2007). A recent Randomized Controlled Trial that compared the impact of Hip Hop, physical training and figure skating on young women found that while all were comparable in providing physical benefits, there was only a marked increase in the psychosocial benefits of those dancing Hip Hop (Kim & Kim, 2007).

Examining the process of learning dance skills qualitatively may increase our understanding of these quantitative research findings that demonstrate dance

improves psychosocial as well as physical health. My hope is that choosing subjective wellbeing as a conceptual tool will open up pathways of inquiry that delve into how dance operates as both an art form and as bodily exercise.

The Role of Culture and Context in Dance

One of the benefits of qualitative inquiry into the association of dance and wellbeing is the detail it can bring to culture and socio-economic context. Recent research in the field of Dance Studies has used a postcolonial lens to ask questions of about how culture enters into dancing. Susan Foster Leigh proposes that we examine dance not as a reflection of cultural values, but as culture itself. She states, “As culture, dance is in(sinew)ated with power relations” (Foster Leigh, 2007, 7). Dance in this framework cannot be separated from culture.

The danger in not addressing culture or power relations in research on arts programming is illustrated in Matthew Atencio and Jan Wright’s qualitative study on an inner city high school dance program in the United States. These authors asked why African American students who lived close to the school were dropping out of the program at higher rates then white students who were being bused into the dance program from the suburbs. Through interviews with African American students they found that the program’s focus on Ballet reinforced the

class and race privilege of the suburban students. It promoted those able to afford private lessons. Ballet teachers transmitted the image of the thin white middle class body as the ideal form in their verbal corrections, alienating dancers who did not meet this ideal (Atencio & Wright, 2009). As bell hooks states, “many students, especially students of color, may not feel at ‘safe’ in what appears to be a neutral setting” (1994, 39). Uncritically valuing certain forms of dance can create programming decisions that further marginalize youth.

Recent works in the field of wellbeing have stressed that different cultural communities and generations have different understandings of wellbeing (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Valois, Zullig, Huebner & Drane, 2004). Examining how the arts and wellbeing interacts demands research and practice that is reflective about how certain aesthetic and cultural forms are oppressed (Sajnani, 2012). This reflections asks us to examine strategies of thriving and surviving that are created by individuals and groups within specific intersections in systems of oppression. Opening up a dialogue with youth who are marginalized can provide insight into what their strategies for thriving are (Berman et al. 2009; Khanlou, 2008).

Asking Youth

There have been two recent studies on marginalized youth in an urban environment dancing Hip Hop; one in Canada (Beaulac, 2011) and one in Australia (Harris, 2012). Both studies approach Hip Hop through two tracks. First they describe this dance form as physical activity and evaluate its physical and psychosocial health benefits. Their second focus is on Hip Hop as the choice for the youth themselves. They demonstrate that from both the perspective of health and from the perspective of the youth themselves dance was a worthy investment. Why youth choose Hip Hop is not addressed. What about this style of dance attracts youth? Pursuing this question may also lead us to how youth's own explanations of what dance brings to their lives. The aim of the current research was to examine how youth (especially youth who are marginalized) view Hip Hop dancing.

Conducting research from this perspective asks how to create programming that will not just *not* further marginalize youth who are already marginalized, but could create generative spaces of freedom and growth. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) bell hooks writes that:

> "… [t]he classroom with all its limitations remains a field of possibility. We have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades a freedom of, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond

boundaries, to transgress. This is education for the practice of freedom" (207).

This research is oriented away from programming and interventions that further oppress, and towards the possibility of a dance class being a space *for the practice of freedom.*

The Context, Culture and Commercialization of Hip Hop

Despite (or because of) its global popularity Hip Hop is highly contested cultural territory. Its opponents object to the portrayals of violence or the hyper sexualization of women. Its advocates claim that this music represents the reality of life in ghettoized America (Rose, 2008). Understanding the historical context in which Hip Hop emerged is an starting point to identifying how the music and culture are lived today. Hip Hop originated in Bronx in the early 1970's, at a time when factories had left the neighbourhood in search of cheaper foreign labour. This exodus increased unemployment and poverty. Street gangs became more common as did gun possession and gun-related violence. Hip Hop was part of the neighbourhood's response to these conditions. Dance is one of the four elements of this art form; the others are graffiti, MCing and DJing. Hip Hop draws from a diverse array of cultures, most significantly African American, Puerto Rican and Jamaican. By the 1980's Hip Hop began to gain commercial success. In dancing this turning point is archived in movies such as *Breakin'* (1980) and

Beat Street (1982). Writing about how this moment effected dance Katrina Hazzard-Donald states, “Movement into the mainstream negated its status as countercultural by redefining it from a subcultural form to one widely accepted and imitated, a move that inadvertently linked breakers with the society that previously excluded them" (1996, 227).

Youth have been central to the development and continuity of Hip Hop. As Tricia Rose states, “Hip hop culture emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment” (1992, 34). Youth took creative agency. This remains in Hip Hop culture today. Sheri Lewis a young adult organizer with an American hip hop project writes, “Being that Hip-Hop has become an influential culture it has also been used to encourage youth to actively participate in social change. Youth are able to relate to the Hip-Hop culture” (2012, 219). The original youth orientation has changed in form but remained a strong part of Hip-Hop culture in the United States. How does this translate in global context?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this article is to deepen the awareness of the experience of being a young Hip Hop dancer within the fields oriented towards health and wellbeing. This study was designed to increase our understanding of how Hip Hop dance may be integrated into the pursuit of wellbeing by youth who are located on the margins in urban environments. My research was centred on three questions:

1) How do youth living in a poor multiethnic neighbourhood experience dancing and learning to dance Hip Hop?
2) What are, if any, the connections between this experience and their subjective perception of their wellbeing?
3) Is there a relationship between how youth understand their own positions and experiences of marginality and how this is understood in Hip Hop culture?

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Neighbourhood Context

Fifty-six point eight percent of residents were born outside of Canada; in Montreal as a whole the percentage is 32.9%. The majority of newcomers were concentrated in the area immediately surrounding the community centre. Forty five percent of households are families with children (compared with 34% in the city as a whole). Out of this number 20.6% are living in rental housing with fewer

bedrooms then children, again compared with 15.5% in the city as a whole. This is an indication of an above average number of families with lower socio-economic status. Nonetheless the neighbourhood is economically diverse, most of the families with children own housing that has a number of bedrooms that corresponds to the number of children. The economic status of newcomer families resembles the economic diversity of the neighbourhood in general (Ville de Montreal, 2009). The demographics of the centre reflected the neighbourhood in which the centre was located.

Youth growing up in this context often experience systemic discrimination from public institutions. The 2011 report by the Quebec Commission on the Rights of Youth writes:

> "Racial profiling primarily affects racialized youth, and in particular, young men living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This means that there are at least four intersecting grounds for discrimination: 'race', colour, age, sex and social conditions. In addition during the months preceding the public consultation, the Commission concluded that the profiling experienced by racialized youth was only one of the forms of the systemic discrimination practiced in their dealings with public institutions and persons in situations of authority who make decisions that affect them" (13).

Discrimination of this kind can contribute to both physical and psychological health problems with lasting effects (Williams et al., 2010). For example it can

damage self esteem, a crucial factor in the mental health of youth post migration (Khanlou, 2002). While some youth who experience post-migration stresses (like discrimination based on race) are diagnosed with health and mental health problems, an equally large portion are achieve successes on a variety of different terrains (including academics, sports and the arts) (Fazel et al, 2012; Elgar, Trites & Boyce, 2010). Can dance play a role in supporting youth in this context?

Critical Performance Ethnography

This research is an exploratory study using critical performance ethnographic methods. Ethnography was chosen as a research method for its ability to examine the complexity of lived experience and its interconnections with culture. The methodology provided space to address power relations in research given marginalized position of both the youth I was researching with and their art form Hip Hop. Critical Ethnography does this because, "Ethnography informed by intersectionality offers a lens through which we can appreciate and critically examine the multilayered and interconnected relationships around race, class and gender and how those relationships are lived" (Haldeman, 2009, 222). Critical ethnography is based in field work and uses participant observation and interviewing methods. There are four elements that distinguish critical ethnography from ethnography 1) critical engagement 2) positionality of the

researcher 3) dialogue with research participants 4) use of theory in analysis (Soyini Madison, 2012). I will address how I have engaged with these elements in the description of the methods of this study below.

Performance ethnography is closely tied to the epistemological position that there is no divide between the mind and the body. Researchers choosing this methodology must make a conscious decision of how to address the embodiment of knowledge through their research methods. In so doing attempting to find a way around the Descartian dominance of the mind over the body by privileging embodied knowledge.

Critical Engagement

In critical ethnography a conscious choice must be made about how relationships of power and historical processes of oppression will be brought into data collection, analysis and writing. Intersectionality is the epistemological approach to studying and theorizing about the lived intersections of systems of oppression, including (but is not limited to) race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. It understands oppression as interconnected historical processes that create networks through which people move in distinct ways depending on their position within a particular network. This is in contrast to additive analysis – where

different oppressions are piled on top of one another (Berger & Guidroz, 2009). Reflecting on their experience writing an urban ethnography of young adults Michelle Fine & Lois Weis express, “We need to invent an intellectual stance in which structural oppression, passion, social movements, evidence of strength, health, and ‘damage’ can all be recognized without erasing essential features of the complex story that constitutes urban life in poverty” (1998, 286).

With this aim in mind I asked open questions about how youth related to the culture of Hip Hop and about barriers of access to the dance class, following up on subjects connected to these larger structural categories if and when they were raised. An important correlate to this approach is my own reflectivity about how I may contribute to essentializing the experience of those that I may perceive as different then myself (Duncan, 2002). In the research, analysis and writing phases of this paper I have attempted to find a balance where structural oppression does not completely define people or their context nor is it erased.

Youth Drop-in Centre Description

The youth drop-in centre was open September to May every year. In order to participate in activities at the centre youth paid $2 for a membership card and filled out an information sheet including their birth date and phone number. The

drop-in centre was located in a larger of a community centre that ran many other programs year-round including dance classes for youth and adults. This dance programming cost seventy dollars for ten classes. Seventeen weeks of free drop-in Hip Hop and Break (or break dancing) classes were given for free at the youth drop-in centre as part of a larger fashion show project. Through this project they were able to provide funding to hire dance teachers with recognized expertise.

Before the centre had this funding, dance classes were given by the youth worker Rocket[1]. At the time those youth workers perceived high numbers of female youth on the streets and dance classes were begun as part of an initiative to attract them. Before this the drop-in centre was used almost exclusively by boys. The classes successfully brought in female participants and had high sustained attendance for three years before this research began. Youth workers also reported noticing fewer girls on the street.

Dancers and Participants

The youth in the dance class varied in age from eighteen to twenty-three. Each class was attended by between fifteen and twenty-five students. The majority of

[1] Throughout the paper I have chosen pseudonyms for the dancers that I researched with. I have consciously chosen names that mimic names that dancers choose to be called in the street dance world.

students in the class were female and many of them had been in the dance program since it began in 2010. It was common for students to make declarative statements about their own and others racial, cultural or national identities, for example statements like: “Well I’m black so…”, wearing a jacket with the flag of the Philippines on it or saying “look at the Latina” to refer to someone while she was dancing.

From this dance class I interviewed six students, the youth worker and one of the two teachers. Four of the people I interviewed were male and four were female. The six students all volunteered after I made a general presentation on my research to the dance class. Because my sample was not representative of the gender in the class, I will not be drawing any conclusions on what role gender may have played in shaping their experience. I have chosen playful pseudonyms for the dancers that I interviewed in order to both to highlight my role in re-constructing their words and also as an homage to one of their main messages to me: Have fun!

Rocket, my main informant was a female youth worker at the centre. I also interviewed her teacher Lighter. Three of the young men self-identified primarily with the Popping street dance style, while one had only recently started to get

involved in dance and didn't identify strongly with a style yet. All of the young women I interviewed identified themselves to me as Hip Hop dancers. They all took the free Hip Hop class offered at the centre and stayed afterwards to continue dancing after class. Baker, Chip, Root and Glint also took dance class at another similar community centre that offered inexpensive classes in a variety of different Street Dance forms. Tufts had only taken classes at the community centre that we were dancing at together. Angel, out of the participants, had also taken dances in a studio dance setting. She was also the only participant who identified as white.

I chose not to question my participants directly about experiences of vulnerability or systemic discrimination but in the interviews and participant observation these were referenced. One young man, who had identified himself as Asian on another occasion, casually dropped into an interview that he feared being stopped by the police. The youth worker told me a story of the parents of one of the students coming to say thank you because she believed the dance class had prevented her child from getting into trouble at school. Leaving class one day we ended up having a conversation where youth described the feeling of being distrusted and under surveillance brought on by the prevalence of security cameras at their school and at the community centre itself. These are just some

of the examples of how experiences of vulnerability and discrimination were raised at the centre.

Positioning Myself the Researcher

I am a professionally trained contemporary dance teacher, trained in Ballet for fourteen years and in contemporary African dance for six years. In the early stages of research I conceived of this as a study where I would conduct the participant observation portion of the research through a contemporary dance class that I taught. Although there was initial interest by the youth at the centre, the enrolment numbers were too small for a formal class or this research project.

It didn't occur to me to do research into Hip Hop dance because I wanted to study dance forms of which I had a more intimate knowledge. Because of the privileged position of my family within Canadian society, this meant I had learned forms closer to Ballet than to Street dance. Because of my class privilege I was able to take formal dance classes at a young age. As a consequence of this training my movements are marked with privilege. When I dance this is visible in my straight posture or how my head whips around when I execute turns.

Because there were ongoing, successful Hip Hop dance classes at the centre, I decided to change my research plan and do my participant observation with the youth as a student taking the Hip Hop class alongside them. In this way deploying my body (already sensitized and formed by two different dance techniques) to be trained again. This represented an unanticipated role reversal. I had never taken a Hip Hop dance class and I entered into a position where I was learning not just from the dance teacher, but from all of the dancers taking the class with me as well. They were all more experienced in this dance form than I was. In that process I felt I was both an outsider and an insider at the research site. I was an outsider in the culture of Hip Hop and did not share the life experiences of marginality with the youth. My history as a dancer meant that I had insider insight into the processes of learning dance forms.

Choosing to change my research to Hip Hop was part of engaging critically in my research site. I saw myself as a mixed race but white passing person with class privilege entering a community of youth who were marginalized and racialized in different ways. In this light sticking to my plan of teaching contemporary dance when it was not a popular idea could have been imposing my aesthetics on them from a fear of stepping out of my comfort zone.

Performing Participant Observation

This research combined participant observation with six interviews conducted in dyadic pairs with youth who danced at the centre and two one on one interviews with a youth worker and the dance teacher. For five months I attended the one and a half hour weekly dance class sessions and stayed afterwards for what is known within this form as “free styling”. I took the class with the youth up to the point when the classes began to focus more on choreography for the yearly show. At this time I switched to an observer position, but continued to participate directly in the free styling period after the class. During this time I also began to download Hip Hop music and practice the moves that I learned in the class during the week.

Dialogue in Dyadic Interviews

I chose to interview the dancers in dyads in order to create an environment that would increase the opportunity for dialogue between myself and the participants. Interview dyads promoted this in two ways. First it evened the power differential between the person asking the questions and those being asked. Changing the number balance in the room created a setting where, even though I was the one with the official purpose in being there (and the accoutrements of consent forms and tape recorders) – they outnumbered me and could support each other.

Second, placing them together with someone that they had danced with in different capacities meant that not only could I hear their reflections on their dancing relationships, but I could see them at work in the interview.

Dyadic interviews are most frequently practiced with couples in research that focuses on relationships (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). But this method has also been used to empower interview participants when there is a notable power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee, for example with children (Berman, 2003) and with marginalized women (Stevens, 1993). Reflecting on this method Helene Berman writes, “In the process, they helped one another with their answers. As their friends told of incidents that were similar to their own, they then felt more open to sharing their own experiences. Through the course of the interview, they derived a sense of solidarity and support as they came to realize that they were not alone in many of their thoughts and fears" (Berman, 2003,110). In the interview process I observed a similar trend; participants built upon each other’s responses, gave one another advice and asked me why I was doing this research.

The questions for the youth interviews were created out of a meeting with the youth worker and youth programmer and from my participant observation in the

dance classes. Interviews consisted of nine core questions after which I kept the tape running and asked youth if they had any questions to ask me. They always took up this opportunity and this final question alone added between ten and twenty minutes to the total interview time. The nine core questions were:

1) Describe how you started dancing and why you decided to continue dancing?
2) Can you describe some things that make it easier or harder to come to dance class?
3) How does dance style or the music effect your choice to come to class?
4) Can you describe your strategy for learning dance steps?
5) What impact does a dance teacher have on the dance class?
6) Do you identify as a Hip Hop dancer? What does that mean to you?
7) Do you dance freestyle? How is this different from learning steps or choreography?
8) I've noticed you don't practice with mirrors and that you often turn the lights down to freestyle can you talk about why you make these choices?
9) Can you describe an experience you had dancing that was meaningful for you?

After each response I would either ask a follow up question based on something they said or disclose something about my own experience dancing that their

response reminded me of. In every interview the pair would occasionally add to their partner's response or respond to a follow up question directed at their partner.

The interviews were conducted in both French and English – alternating between the two languages throughout according to the comfort levels of myself (a native English speaker who is fluent in French) and the participants (with varying levels of English and French fluency). Transcriptions and translations of the interviews were given to participants separately to read through and make changes.

Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed two levels of thematic analysis were conducted. First, non-guided codes were developed through a close reading of the text. Second these codes were grouped together into themes. Examples of different themes are *relationships, fun, knowledge, performing, getting down, teachers, commercial Hip Hop dance* and *music.* Text that was coded with the same theme was grouped together. By examining where and how different themes overlapped in the text, theoretical relationships between the themes were developed. These relationships were then related to the works described in the literature review. It was also in this final stage of analysis that larger theoretical

debates around different forms of structural oppression were brought into the analysis.

Writing

Within Critical Ethnography writing itself is another aspect of the performance of doing research. In writing the positionality and embodiment of the author and the other participants is fore grounded wherever possible. Likewise instead of glossing over the constructed nature of the final product, attention is drawn to the construction of the writing itself.

RESULTS

Have Fun!

When asked what it means to be a Hip Hop dancer Glint responds, “It’s really about enjoying yourself and then having fun.” She positions fun at the core of her personal experience of Hip Hop culture. The teachers, youth workers and students at the community centre co-created an environment that supported the enjoyment of dance.

Youth strove to focus on dancing for themselves, not to please onlookers. This enabled the risks and challenges of learning to became part of the fun. Youth

described the value of dancing for yourself as decreasing the potential negative stress of taking risks by allowing them to focus on their own sense of what movements looked and felt good. When dancers stopped having fun they understood this to mean that they had started dancing to impress other people. Dancing Hip Hop was fun and fun did not translate into easy, or as the absence of work. Fun was created through taking on new challenges, sharing knowledge and forming relationships. Challenges took shape in both overcoming internal barriers and mastering the physical coordination and strength needed for certain movements. Going inside of a dance circle to freestyle was seen as risky because their dancing was visible from all angles by their teachers and peers. The manifestation of Hip Hop culture at the community centre made this risk fun.

In the discussion I will argue that this focus on fun did not arise accidentally but was part of the manifestation of Hip Hop culture at the community centre. In the results I will demonstrate how the community centre environment taught and sustained 'fun' through three main practices: youth empowerment, learning and relationships. The dance circle, or cipher, will be explored as an example of how these three practices initiated and nourished fun.

Empowering Youth

At the centre there was a strong emphasis placed on dancers' motivations. Dancing for yourself and for a love of the music were seen as positive reasons to dance, while dancing to gain the praise of others was viewed as negative. Glint frames the negative values stating, "In dance it's important not to dance for fame or just to show off." This value shifted the focus from external to internal goals. Lighter, one of the dance teachers at the centre, states that commercial dance is often focused on, "how you physically look and how attractive are you to be a dancer […] not just about your dance." For dancers who did not fit a commercially viable mould trying to gain external validation in dancing was frequently disheartening. Focusing on self-directed goals empowered the youth by relieving the pressure to conform to external standards.

The value of 'dancing for yourself' enabled youth to make their own decisions about the aesthetic value of their movements. They felt able to decide for themselves whether or not they thought a movement looked good or bad. Describing how he learned certain movements Chip states;

> "But at the same time feeling good is better. Because with dance you do it to feel good. You don't do it to look good. We do it because we like it - we feel good when we do it. For example I do something that really looks tight, but I hate it. Like it doesn't make me feel good. Like why would I do it? Like I'd rather do silly stuff that I really have fun doing and doesn't look good because it's for me, it's not for the other people's eyes. Cause the opinion of the other people - like they see it and think it doesn't look good - but I feel good and feel that it is good and I think it looks good. I'm fine."

Chip expresses an awareness that his opinion of what looks good and that of other's may differ. But he is clear that as he is not dancing to please others, he values his own opinion above theirs. This focus empowers him to make his own decisions about what dance moves to practice and what dance moves he enjoys.

The desire for movements to look good did not disappear and was more important for some dancers then for others. In response to Chip's comment above Baker replied,

> "But I want it to look good. But sometimes if I do something and I like it some people don't like it but I don't care because I think it looks good for me. I don't do it for the others."

Baker's strategy for navigating the external gaze on his movement differs from Chip's in that he places more emphasis on 'looking good.' But when others have a negative opinion of one of his movements and he doesn't agree, he centres himself by remembering that he is dancing for himself. Chip, by contrast, almost completely disregards the 'look' of his movements. His sole criteria for evaluating a movement is how much fun it is to execute.

Having fun is connected to the empowerment that comes out of a dancers dancing for themselves. In this quote Chip explains how he can have fun while he is challenging himself to learn new steps or dance styles.

> "Like when I practice I go in the lab. That's how we call it. You go there and you find yourself. You work it to take it to another level. But at the same time you have fun. You can struggle because it's hard to go into an uncomfortable zone but you have fun inside of it because you're doing it for yourself, you're doing it for the love of the music, for the love of dance."

Chip does not equate fun with ease. He associates fun with the struggle to overcome challenges in dance. But the fun is not experienced because of the

challenge, but because he approached the challenge for himself. Chip was empowered to work through the challenges and this contributed to his enjoyment of the hard work.

How does the experience of dancing without this type of empowerment differ? Angel describes her transition from an environment where she was not in touch with the fun and love of the dance to an environment where she was. She narrates:

> "Often people from studio's […] who are very focused on competitions are going to put a lot into [street dance] battles. I was like that at the beginning. I was really interested in dancing for dancing, but then I changed a little. Then every time I went into a battle, I said 'OK I'm going to represent my studio.' Then I'm going to do this and that and that and that. I wasn't doing it for myself, I was doing it to become good. And this killed my love of dance.
>
> But I think it's fun to have people here [at the community centre] who are grounded to bring me back to the ground. It took time to ground myself again because I had completely forgotten why I was doing it. And after this my dance has done this [raises hand up]."

Here Angel contrasts dancing for others in competitions with the home that she has found at the centre. Dancing more did not mean that Angel was having more fun. She was facing challenges, but not enjoying them. Attempting to satisfy an external opinion of her dancing drained the joy she had initially experienced. The community centre environment supported her return to enjoying dance. For

Angel, finding dancing relationships that supported her dancing returned her to the enjoyment of dancing.

Learning

When you take a class in Hip Hop what are you learning? Unlike other street dances Hip Hop does not have ‘foundations’. These movements like twist and flex or tutting in Popping create the basis for all experimentation in that style. As Rocket says,

> “In Hip Hop there are no basic movements. Let's say what we call Old School Hip Hop - those aren't basic movements of Hip Hop those were created. The basis of Hip Hop are the bounce, the groove and the rock. From there people created things to help other people understand those three basics.”

Knit one of the Hip Hop teachers at the centre used these movements to make up a choreography for the dancers. She drilled them over and over again using the Sea Walk, the Bart Simpson and the Harlem Shake (to name only a few). She used the choreography as a vehicle for teaching that would deepen the knowledge of her students of the basic moves, the bounce, the groove and the rock, while connecting it to the work of the pioneers in New York. While transmitting these basics Knit (and Lighter the other teacher at the centre)

stressed that freestyling movements (dancing without pre-planned steps) was the ultimate goal. Time was set aside after each class for dancers to work on freestyling with the steps that they had learned during the class.

This class structure created challenges for students that they experienced as fun. Baker states,

> ”When you dance and you try new stuff that you never tried it always feels good. Because I'm the type of guys that would stay in my comfort zone. So when I try to explore it's hard but I have fun.”

The process of exploring, which could include learning new steps or dancing to new music, was not easy. For these dancers extending past their comfort zones was fun. The support of the teachers and peers at the community centre enables the experimentation and expansion of individual dancers. Baker implies that if left alone he might stay in his comfort zone, despite the fact that he enjoys going outside it.

Having fun learning new dance steps and styles could lead to an increased desire to dance. Root started to dance in his garage and then moved to taking classes at a local community centre. He states,

> “Weekly yeah. Then just trying to dance every day kind of because I was really interested in dancing. Later on when I discovered more into dancing - more the choreography aspect of it I started to take class like three times

> a week. But then later on that's where I get into more freestyling. I was more interested in Freestyling then choreography. Because I think dancing is really intriguing. There's no like planning beforehand. It's just right on dancing to the music."

His interest in dancing leads him to dance more. This interest was facilitated by what he learned at the community centre. As Root describes, the more fun he had dancing the more he danced. As his knowledge increased he began to freestyle (dancing without pre-planned steps) with more confidence. Root continues to enjoy challenging himself.

The learning that took place in the dance class went beyond obtaining a mastery over steps. Tufts, the dancer with the least experience, explains,

> "Teachers that transmit a little bit of their vision allow us to get some self knowledge. Self knowledge, but also knowledge of art itself – and our environment. It's really complicated."

He describes how learning about himself, art, and the world around him are interrelated, even inextricable. Absorbing knowledge on these multiple levels is dependent on having a teacher who transmits their personal vision of the culture of Hip Hop along with the dance moves.

Baker and Chip they talk about how gaining knowledge in dance has increased their interests outside of the dancing world. They say:

> Chip: “You grow with the dance and the dance grows with you and physically, spiritually, intellectually. Yeah.”
> Baker : “For me as a dancer, you kind of get addicted to getting better, to knowing more. And it goes on with the other part of your life - for example not dancing.”
> Chip: “Yeah! You take it to the other part and you are like you want to know more - like the true knowledge of everything and just explore different stuff. Like in dancing you don't want to limit yourself to one thing, you want to explore many different things and broaden your horizons. Same thing with the other thing. You want to explore more, do new things… just enjoy life and open your eyes.”

Like Tufts, they describe how dance helped them to grow on multiple levels. They link the pleasure of tackling challenges in dance to their pursuit of growth in other areas of their lives. The fun and supported exploration in Hip Hop dance at the community centre helped empower youth to seek out similar experiences elsewhere.

Building Relationships

Peers

Dancers at the centre developed meaningful relationships with one another. Friends shared knowledge about dance with one another. For some, dancing

was their main social activity. Baker and Chip describe how their social life is connected to dancing:

> Chip: “It's fun. We do it cause we love it. We get together, we see each other…”
> Baker: “Like normal people when they call they say: 'yo you wanna chill' they go just talking, or sitting down, watching TV.“
> Slide: “Yeah they drink! They do drugs! We do that do but we dance. It's like how we chill. That's how we chill.”
> Chip: “If I wasn't a dancer I would probably be a gamer and smoking cigarettes and taking drugs and all that stuff. Consumé. If I wasn't dancing I would be a like a slave - going to school - sleep - eat - work - repeat.”

They see their choice to dance with their friends as exceptional. It replaced other recreational activities that they believe they would be engaging in if they were not dancing like drinking, doing drugs, watching TV or gambling. Their dance friendships are based mutually supporting one another to gain more knowledge and joy in dancing. Fun is central to these friendships and to this activity. They chose dance primarily because it was more fun than other activities, not because they perceived it to be healthier.

The youth at the centre were diverse. Out of the eight I interviewed, seven identified as people of colour and had experiences of racialization. Most had different backgrounds, their families had different migration trajectories that had brought them to live in the same neighbourhood. These differences were

represented to me as something that added to their enjoyment in dancing. Chip and Baker explain:

> Chip: “The people you meet - the whole dance thing - makes you think a lot about everything and the people you meet. You have conversations with them. And a lot of the people. They have different backgrounds.
>
> Baker: “We have different backgrounds.

Sharing a passion for dancing created openings for conversations that went beyond Hip Hop. This openness was described to me as part of the fun. The excitement of meeting new people and opening to new ideas was facilitated by dance.

Teachers

Dancers were choosing to dance because it was fun, as a result much importance was placed on finding the right teacher who could facilitate this. Dancers assumed that not every teacher will be the right match for their learning style. Some of them referred to previous experiences with teachers that had increased their stress. The quality of the teachers was evaluated by the students according to whether the teacher is teaching good values and how directly their knowledge of Hip Hop was connected to the New York sources. Teachers that met this criteria also emphasized exchange between teachers and students.

Sharing knowledge was at the core of these relationships. This multidirectional exchange created an environment where challenges were supported by empowering values.

After describing the importance of finding teachers who have learned their craft directly from respected teachers in New York, Rocket goes on to say,

> "I think you research the teachers that you want to go take class from. Because you're not going to randomly stumble into a school and randomly stumble into class and then hope the guy is good. To get there in the first place for me […] I've looked them up - Because I know how they work. Because I know how they dance, because I've spoken to them personally as a human being."

The initiative to find a teacher is taken by the student who pursued teachers that could they could connect with as people (as opposed to teachers chosen exclusively for their dancing skills). The most valuable teacher was described as someone who combines a depth of knowledge of Hip Hop culture with the interest and capacity to connect with their students.

Dancers stressed that one class from the right teacher can have deeper and more profound impact for a student then multiple classes with a teacher that you cannot connect with. Rocket states, "you can't underestimate the power of one single dance class." She described her first class with Lighter, who challenged

her to step outside her comfort zone while transmitting values about dancing and Hip Hop. Glint describes a teacher from another community centre class she's taken stating; "He teaches not necessarily a style, but how to be comfortable with yourself and your dancing. This helps me so much." Glint is placing an emphasis on how the teacher transmits his values around dancing to his students (for example, being comfortable with yourself). The value of being comfortable with yourself is another iteration of an internal focus that dancers find empowering.

Lighter, One of the teachers at the community centre, when asked why she teaches Hip Hop responded: "Already teaching is exchanging and it's giving of your time - of course yes you get paid and everything but I think that there's a magic in that exchange." Here she is emphasising the two-way exchange of knowledge between teacher and student. The teachers at the community centre respected and empowered their students. Themselves taking great pleasure in the process of teaching. These relationships of mutual exchange helped to support an environment of fun.

The Cipher

Thus far in this paper I have explored how fun was related to empowerment, relationships and learning at the community centre. I've argued that the value of

‘doing it for yourself’ combined with supportive peer and teacher relationships created an environment where be challenged by new steps was fun. In the final section here I’d like to explore how these ideas function together to support the risk of freestyle dancing in a cipher. First I’ll draw from my embodied experience of dancing in the class to describe how a dance cipher functions. Second, I’ll examine the idea of risk and stress in entering a cipher and finally I’ll explore the experience of fun youth described in taking this risk.

Description of Two Different Ciphers

Lighter, one of the Hip Hop teachers in the program described a cipher as a ‘circle of energy and site of exchange’. The basic form of the cipher is where the dancers gather in a circle and take turns dancing in the centre of the circle. Cipher’s occurred at every class at the centre. In the second class that I attended the teacher created exercises that taught the students to cipher. These ‘learning ciphers’ had more explicit rules, one person would be ‘it’ and the other people in the cipher (usually between three and six people) would do a movement that the person who was ‘it’ would do again modifying the movement in someway to show their own style. In another example of a learning cipher, dancers would go around the circle. The person beside you would begin a movement and then you

would take up that movement, then transition to a new movement that you would pass on to the person beside you.

Although each class was technically from six-thirty to seven-thirty in the evening, I, and most of the other students, never left the centre before nine-thirty and sometimes there was a small group of five or six dancers that stayed until the centre closed at ten. The class usually went until 8, driven by the mutual enthusiasm of the teacher and the students. Then the lights would be turned down and groups of dancers would form into ciphers. Sometimes dancers would adopt one of the models described above to conduct the cipher. More often the cipher would run on more implicit rules. There are three positions you can occupy in a dance circle. First, you can stand outside the circle, observing, but with no expectation that you will take a turn dancing in the centre. Second, you can stand in the circle, while here it is expected that you focus on what the dancer inside the circle is doing. If you like what you see you vocalize somehow to encourage the dancer. Dancers who get more vocalizations are encouraged to stay in the circle longer. Otherwise when you are in the third position, inside the circle itself, you should measure the amount of time you remain in the centre and then step out back into the ring of bodies defining the centre space, making way for another dancer. If a dancer is taking too long inside the circle you can go inside

and engage with them through dance to make it clear it is time for them to leave. Compared to the ‘learning ciphers’ described above this cipher puts more attention and fewer limits on the dance in the centre.

Risk

The special arrangement of bodies in this form makes you (the dancer) visible to the unobstructed gaze from your peers. When you dance in the centre there is no front, no back or sides. Movements you execute can be seen from all angles. This high visibility creates stress. Hiding is impossible. But the inverse of this is also true: this is a structure that facilitates recognition. Whether through vocalizations or through another dancer picking up a move that echoes your own your presence is felt and passed on to others in the circle. Angel describes her feeling of fear during her first experiences of dancing in a cipher, “I started dancing in ciphers and I was really embarrassed. It was really hard at first because I had only done choreographies. And so I was really afraid to go in.” Inside the cipher dancers were expected to freestyle their movements. The security that might come with performing a choreographed routine is also removed. As a result the recognition you receive for whatever you do inside the circle is recognition for your dancing, not for how well you can perform a choreography.

Empowerment in the cipher

We were discussing the subject of dancing in the cipher when Glint told me, “By nature I’m a shy person and in my dancing you could see that. It was a little hard to change this, but with time I figured out that if you love this the rest, the rest isn’t important. I’m still working on this, on developing my voice.” Like Angel, Glint has found a way into the cipher, a way past the initial shyness. She places importance on focusing on her love of dance, rather than the fear associated with being the centre of attention. Through this shift the cipher becomes a space to show what you know and to share what you love.

Learning in the cipher

Baker, one of the dancers described the first time he went into a cipher like this. He described going over to the house of a friend that he had met through a dance class. He says,“We went there and we were filming. I was so shy. Every time I went in it was like for 5 seconds. All I did was a wave then I went out. I was too shy. Because they were good - but intimidat[ing].” The group is getting together in their free time to dance. They do not have a teacher with them but they are still focused on learning, this is why they are filming the cipher. Baker is intimidated because these dancers are good and so while he can learn from

them, being in the centre of the cipher is stressful at first. Stress that Baker copes with by only staying in the centre of the cipher for a short time.

Relationships in the cipher

When talking about being in a cipher Rocket and the two dance teachers at the centre would emphasis again and again that inside the circle the goal was not perfection, but to sharing what you knew and where you ‘were at’ on that particular day. At the centre the cipher was a space to exchange and share with other dancers. It was understood that not all dancers would be in the same place in developing their dancing and that these differences are part of what makes dancing together fun.

After hearing Baker’s first experience in a cipher, I admitted that I had felt very shy to be ciphering with them at the centre. Baker first gave me some advice and then resumed his narrative,

> Baker: Just dance. Just dance no stressing. -- well I was really shy. Then we went back outside and he showed me something. He showed me twist and flex - FADE. Fade - it's similar to a foundation move in Popping.
>
> Chip: It's a foundational move.

Chip is chiming in to tell me that ‘Twist and Flex’, the movement that Baker had learned, was a foundational move. The cipher is a moment to exchange knowledge, participation is contingent on having the bravery to show how limited your knowledge is. In Baker’s narrative his friends support him from his first efforts in the cipher by providing guidance in what he can work on. Baker was also supporting me while describing his experience of receiving support from friends. He was reassuring me that I was dancing in a supportive environment.

When asked how she navigates the stress in dancing Glint responds, “You have to find the balance.” She is referring to making decisions about taking on the challenges and risks of dancing. Dancers at this centre made these decisions based on how much fun they were having. The risk of dancing in the centre of the cipher was balanced by the fun youth experienced or anticipated. Youth felt empowered to overcome feelings of shyness. They understood dancing in the centre as an opportunity to share what they knew and learn more. Dancers supported one another in taking risks. Importance was placed not on having the widest scope of a dance knowledge, but on a genuine interest in learning more. In the cipher self-empowerment, the desire to learn more and supportive relationships all contributed to creating a fun environment. Reinforcing the internal motivation for dancing and the communal support for the capacity of

each dancer to learn more regardless of their current skill level occured simultaneously. Fun was described not as the lack of challenge, but as challenge that is well supported by internal and external factors. Dancers chose whether or not to go inside the cipher based on their sense of how these factors were balanced in a particular moment.

DISCUSSION

Choosing to enter the cipher demonstrates how youth decide from moment to moment to dance, to have a voice and to appropriate power. Just as the choice to step inside a circle was based on how much fun a dancer is experiencing, the decision to go to a dance class in the first place was made with the same criteria. In the discussion section of this paper, I return to the dancers' subjective experience of their wellbeing. I will argue that fun is used as a descriptor that overlaps with the public health community's description of wellbeing. Hip Hop culture promoted the empowerment of youth, learning and relationships described at the centre. This culture has developed these techniques to manage some of the stresses that come from oppressions and marginalities. The ability of dancers at the community centre to have fun in class or in a cipher was supported by their translation of Hip Hop culture. By addressing this local

rendition of this global art form I examine how the culture of a dance can shape the experience of dancing.

Fun and Wellbeing

Fun was used at the community centre to describe both the experience of positive feelings and life satisfaction. Subjective wellbeing is "the question of what leads people to evaluate their lives in positive terms" (Diener, 2009,12). For something to fit into the category of subjective wellbeing it must meet three criteria: 1) it must be reside within the experience of the individual, 2) it must include positive measurements, and, 3) it must include a global assessment of a person's life (Diener, 2009). Fun as described at the community centre fits these criteria; it was used to depict fleeting, potential and supported pleasure. Youth used fun to describe the fleeting experience of positive feelings and to describe a more holistic positive state.

How was the concept of fun integrated into the lives of the youth at the community centre? I've described how ideally learning to dance was fun in and of itself and increased your capacity to have fun dancing. This model was not always achieved. Dancing was not always fun. Instead the communal and personal evaluation of fun was used as a guide to evaluate how and when to

dance. The pursuit of fun was an orienting point that enabled both individuals and the community as a whole to steer towards an empowering, supportive, challenging and thrilling environment. Youth described that having fun dancing inspired them to make new relationships and learn about different things. This suggests that the experience of 'fun' in the domain of dance was integrated into other areas of dancers' lives.

Supportive relationships with peers and adults other than their parents can contribute to the life satisfaction of adolescents (Oberle, 2011). Learning and development that takes place in extracurricular activities promote positive health (Eccles et al., 2003; Leversen, et al., 2012). Dancers were within a network of people who are also in the process of gaining knowledge about dancing. Together they exchanged knowledge that enabled them to increase their Hip Hop skills. At the community centre they supported the growth of dancers' skill by fostering their enjoyment of dance.

My research suggests that youth perceived Hip Hop dance as fun and that the experience of fun was used to describe their subjective wellbeing. Dancing for the youth at this community centre is part of how they choose to thrive. Julie Beaulac (2011) and Neil Harris, Leigh Wilks et al. (2012) found that youth in

urban neighbourhoods in both Canada and Australia wanted to take Hip Hop dance classes and experienced both physical and psychosocial benefits as a result. They describe alternative local manifestations of Hip Hop culture, but I ask how their research is connected to my results? I will begin to investigate associations between these different Hip Hop programs by considering *how Hip Hop culture may be linked to the experience of learning dance described at the community centre.*

Empowerment, Learning and Relationships in Hip Hop Culture

Dancing does not require going to class. If you move your body rhythmically to music, you are dancing. Specific forms of dance have developed in different cultures and to learn these more focused and explicit learning is required. Different forms are accompanied with different pedagogical beliefs and practices. These practices are embedded in the historical trajectory of the particular aesthetic form. Hip Hop and other street dances emerge from the experience of the oppression of African American dance in the United States (Fauley-Emery, 1989). This dance form surfaced from a complex mixture of different African Diasporic Cultures in the Bronx, New York. Since its rise to popularity in the late 1980's Hip Hop music and has spread across the globe. This paper has been an ethnographical examination of how this global culture is translated in a local

context in Montreal, a multi-ethnic bilingual French-English city in Quebec, Canada.

Hip Hop culture permeated the practices of the community centre. Youth workers, dancers and dance teachers came together in this local and attempted to translate the global culture of Hip Hop in a way that related to their local setting. Those teachers who have spent time in New York learning from the teachers who lived in the Bronx in the 1980's, like Elite Force, were viewed as having particularly valuable form of knowledge. These teachers the who could transmit the profundity of their style, because they had a direct connection to the history of the movements. Lighter, one of the teachers at the centre went to New York to learn directly from the 'pioneers' there. Rocket cited this direct knowledge pathway to explain Lighter's particular ability to transmit Hip Hop knowledge. Given the importance of the culture and history of Hip Hop at the centre what links can be drawn between the experience of learning dance and this culture?

Empowerment

Hip Hop as a culture validates the narrative and creative choices of youth (Rose, 1992). As Joseph Schloss states, "it was designed not only *for* teenagers, but *by* teenagers" (2009, 11). It is within this cultural context that the community centre

fostered an environment that empowered youth. The aesthetic decisions youth at the centre made about their own movements occurred in an artistic context that placed self-innovation at its core. The value youth expressed of 'doing it for yourself' was supported by the respect for the diversity of aesthetic expressions in Hip Hop culture.

Learning

Youth at the centre described learning as a process of gaining knowledge about themselves and the world through confronting and taking on challenges. The richness of Hip Hop as an art created challenging movements and structures. Where does the running man come from? It is a step with a past. At this community centre developing an exchange with dance teachers who can connect young dancers to this past is vital. Pursuing this link demonstrates a respect for Hip Hop that goes beyond physical fitness. Youth were equally concerned with the physical challenges as with learning more about themselves, each other and the world around them.

This pursuit of expansive knowledge is a central value in Hip Hop culture. When I asked Lighter about her perspective on teaching young students, she viewed transmitting the history and culture of Hip Hop as an essential part of her role.

She states, “I think that the more you know about the culture. The more you know about where it came about. The more comfortable. The more you can take it on, because at the end of the day knowledge is knowledge of thyself.” For Lighter obtaining a depth of knowledge about Hip Hop, lead to a deepened self understanding. This perspective is part of the larger movement in Hip Hop that can be described as “knowledge rap” or conscious hip hop. Richard Shusterman describes this branch of rap in this way, “Knowledge rap not only insists on uniting the aesthetic and the cognitive but equally stress the idea that practical functionality can be part of artistic meaning and value” (Shusterman, 2004, 463). These rappers (look up KRS-one, Lupe Fiasco and Talib Kweli) perform dizzying feats of tying sociohistorical reality to internal landscapes. The learning experience of the youth at the centre was supported by this branch of Hip Hop culture.

Relationships

The relationships at the community centre were characterized by a shared openness to one another that manifested in the exchange of knowledge. Dancers came from diverse backgrounds, but shared the experience of living together in an urban neighborhood with a low socioeconomic level. The content and history of Hip Hop deals directly with the lived experience of growing up in a diverse,

underprivileged urban environment (Rose, 1994). Individually youth at the centre related their own experience to Hip Hop culture and this created the possibility for new relationships amongst one another. Harris, Wilks et al. in their research on Hip Hop and health in Australia found that “Participants suggested that the value of the dance program centered on the way in which the culture of hip hop formed a common thread that unified individual participants” (2012, 245). This resonates with the findings of other researchers on Hip Hop in global context who have found that the youth who participated in their research related to some of the messages in the music and that this facilitated their relationships with the art form and with each other (Bennett, 2004; Osumare, 2002).

Fun and Marginality and Hip Hop

Youth empowerment, the pursuit of knowledge and openness to diversity are embedded within Hip Hop culture and applied at the community centre. The youth worker, Rocket and the teachers Knit and Lighter pass along this culture in the classes they teach and the spaces they create. Their experience of dancing at the centre was of exchange and recognition between all of the youth. This fostered their pleasure in dancing. This culture is part of a foundation that supported the subjective wellbeing/fun of the participants in this research. I will now examine how the cipher is an example of how Hip Hop creates techniques

to address marginality. Fun is an integral part of the strategy for surviving oppression proposed by Hip Hop.

Hip Hop dance forms were developed in a historical moment of overlapping oppressions. The needs of those living the urban neighbourhoods out of which Hip Hop emerged were neglected by the government. Michael Eric Dyson explores how rap lyrics and musical forms like sampling are often combined by musicians to provide a critical perspective on history (specifically black history) and society in the United States. “Rap is a form of profound musical, cultural, and social creativity. It expresses the desire of young black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair and economic depression that presently besiege the black community” (Dyson, 2004, 68). Dyson’s scholarship focuses on Hip Hop in the African American community. These insights can and do translate and transform as Hip Hop is adopted in a global context. Concerning Hip Hop produced by youth from immigrant communities in Frankfurt Andy Bennett writes, “hip hop cultures and attendant notions of authenticity are in each case a product of locality, that is to say, the particular local circumstances under which hip hop is appropriated and subsequently used as a collective form of expression” (Bennett, 2004, 197).

The cipher rose to prominence under oppressive conditions, a structure of dancing that guarantees recognition. Schloss states that, “the way hip-hop sees the world is itself a legitimate and consistent and fascinating intellectual system. And dance is a crucial part of that system” (Schloss, 2009, 4). Perfection of the steps is not a prerequisite for this recognition. Instead what is required is that you participate in the exchange – sharing what you know and giving others the space to share with you. By placing bodies one at a time in the centre of the circle we see that they are unique. Hooks argues that recognition of this kind is an essential precondition for sharing and excitement in the classroom. Respect for individuality is an essential component of Hip Hop dance (Hazard-Donald, 1996). This premise creates a radically different pedagogical environment then that described by Atencio and Wright (2009). In the ballet classes they describe young black dancers feel like their bodies are incapable of being recognized as ballet bodies no matter how well they execute the steps. In Hip Hop recognition of anyone inside the cipher is established at the most basic level.

Overall my results strongly suggest that dancing Hip Hop culture was intertwined with the subjective experience of wellbeing of the participants. Here I argue that this wellbeing emerged from challenging themselves and taking risks that were

supported by the environment created at the community centre, in turn supported by the values in Hip Hop culture.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This was a small exploratory study. The research results are site specific. Further research could examine how these concepts are understood with a larger group across several sites. The gender representation of those that were interviewed in the research did not reflect the gender spread in the dance class/dance program, consequently no conclusions could be drawn about what elements of their experience could have been related to gender differences. Only the facts that were volunteered by participants to me are accessible in this study. It is not possible to draw conclusions about how their experience dancing might connect to the experiences of poverty, migration or racism in their lives. Because interviews were undertaken in pairs the confluence of the opinions of the participants was highly emphasized. The results support the use of pair interviewing, because this technique created an environment where participants are empowered to direct the interview towards important aspects of their experience the interviewer might not ask about or be aware of.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has examined some of the ways that Hip Hop dancing is experienced by youth at this Montreal centre in the early 21st century. How can this experience translate to the integration of dancing into programming that promotes wellbeing? We saw that while there has been research that links dance to wellbeing, this research often fails to take into account how dance forms are cultural and are embedded in power networks. The risk of ignoring these relationships was demonstrated as the creation of programming that further oppresses youth where it is meant to support them. How has this research answered the challenge to create dance programming that will contribute to youth's strategies of thriving?

More research is needed into what youth are already making happen for themselves. The belief that youth are incapable of understanding their own needs can mean that their perspective on their own lives receives less weight then the perspective of the authorities around them.

Learning more about Hip Hop culture will help those planning dance interventions to create programming that works within Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop culture actively addresses marginalization, through the empowerment of youth and recognition of

individuality. This requires actively addressing assumptions about Hip Hop that reinforce oppressive practices (like the assumption that Hip Hop does not require as much skill as elite dance forms).

The community centre example could be followed in four ways:

1) Free (or almost free) dance classes should be provided. Accessible classes will remove financial barriers to coming to class and will also make it easier for youth to try out dancing if they are curious about it.
2) Asking questions about the values of dance teachers should be made part of the hiring process. Employing dance teachers who have intricate knowledge of the culture of Hip Hop, who privilege the multidirectional exchange of knowledge or who stress the importance of enjoying dance could create more open dance learning environments.
3) A centre should provide space and time outside of class for ciphering. Encouraging the exchange between peers could facilitate the creation of meaningful relationships.
4) The concept of ‘fun’ should be incorporated into the evaluation methods of any Hip Hop dance class or dance program. Asking youth what they enjoy and why could facilitate the creation of programming that they will enjoy.

From its origins in the Bronx, Hip Hop has spread. This music and culture occupies the airwaves, dominates YouTube and leaks out of earphones on public transit systems across the globe. Starting from an impulse to bob their heads to the beat, the young people at this centre learned from teachers and each other how to develop this spark into a really fun dance form.

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‘You have to sweat’: The Personal and Collective Expression of Young Hip Hop Dancers

This exploratory critical ethnography examines to how Hip Hop dance is experienced as a means expression by youth in a multiethnic neighbourhood in Canada. The objective of this work is to identify which aspects of dance programming facilitate expression. Field research was carried out at a community centre that had a free, popular and ongoing Hip Hop class. What kind of space for expression did this class create? And how might this case relate to larger debates about the potential role of the arts in health?

PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE MEANING IN THE ARTS

For individuals and communities to flourish they need art. This proposition is at the base of recent research into the connections between art and health. Art is a broad category that includes different kinds of visual art, writing, music, drama, film and dance. Opportunities to develop creative and artistic expression can play a role in social support networks, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development and culture. These are all on the World Health Organization list of social determinants of health (CSDH, 2008). In their review of arts and health in Canada Susan Cox, Darquise Lafrenière, et al. conclude, “The arts could potentially be engaged in a broad range of areas affecting physical

and mental health" (2010, 112). Dorothy Lander and John Graham-Pole go even further to argue that art itself is a determinant of health. This claim is based on the definition of health not as the absence of illness, but as the flourishing of life. By stating that art can determine health they are arguing that art can make the difference between someone thriving or surviving (2008). How might the arts create these impacts in peoples' lives?

The arts facilitate individual and community flourishing through the expression and creation of meaning (White, 2009). On the personal level creative expression can be used to cope with difficult or traumatic life experiences through the construction of meaning, structuring identity and establishing social ties (Rousseau et al., 2004). In community oriented arts programming these aspects can be extended to the creation of collective meaning making and identity over shared hardships. In Israel graffiti has been used by youth in the wake of traumatic events. The collection of personal images painted onto public walls created an anonymous space for dialogue (Kingman et al., 2000). In this example individual and collective expression are synchronous. Each graffiti image is an individual effort, but placed on a wall in the context of the work of other individuals it becomes part of a collective conversation.

This research takes place in an urban multiethnic environment where youth experience marginalization of different kinds: stemming from racism in public institutions, low socioeconomic status and difficult migration histories. All of these experiences can deeply mark lives but not necessarily in a negative way. "Negotiating the self without access to others who share similar constructions of identity is often an isolating experience. For this reason, connection to a larger social group with shared experiences is particularly important" (Wexler, DiFluvio & Burke, 2009, 568). The arts are vehicles for joining personal and collective meaning.

In the arts and health discourse questions arise around how to distinguish the affects of individual expression from this process of collective meaning making. An example of this attempt in dance research is a study by Suvi Saarkillio, Geoff Luck et al.;

> "…[i]nvestigated how individually experienced affective states, indicative of the broader approach–avoidance orientation, were reflected in dance movements to music. Sixty young adults completed the Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) and danced to 30 music excerpts while their movements were tracked with an optical motion capture system. A number of postural and kinematic features were extracted from the movement data" (Saarkillio, Luck et al., 2013, 296).

No measurement for any communal understanding of the meaning behind certain movements was included in the study. This approach assumes that the origin of

collective aesthetic norms is the independent decisions of individuals. It leaves un-interrogated the role of cultural and aesthetic learning in producing commonalities in music interpretation. What new questions and avenues of inquiry into the role of expression in supporting youth may open up if we assume that the processes of individual and collective expression cannot be separated?

THE BODY, DANCE AND EXPRESSION

Before opening the question of how individual and collective expression may operate in dance I'd like to address *what* dance is. How can dance be distinguished from other art forms? According to Judith Lynne Hanna, one of the founding scholars in the anthropology of dance; "Dance is defined as human behaviour composed, from the dancer's perspective, of purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, and culturally patterned sequences of non-verbal body movement and gesture which are not ordinary motor activities, the motion having inherent and 'aesthetic' value" (1979, 212). Dance is corporeal movement, gesture, rhythm and aesthetics. The expressive capacities of the body are central to dance. What conceptual frameworks are available to examine how these capacities are formed in the individual and collective sense?

The body and its capacities are a vital component of critical theory. In *Discipline and Punish* Michael Foucault states of the body; “power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (1977, 24). He is focused on how a particular form of punishment in a society creates a particular kind of subject (for example the decline of the public spectacle of torture and the rise of prisons in France in the 18th and 19th centuries). From here he asks a series of questions about how society shapes the possible actions of our bodies. This is relevant to the study of dance because it provides a conceptual framework to examine how the expressive choices of a particular dancer are shaped by culturally and historically specific collective norms. Foucault proposes that society operates through the enforcing and training of bodies. Accepting this, bodily expression in dance must also be subject to the shaping forces of the cultures within which they exist.

But what of resistance? What of the agency of individuals and groups? Judith Butler’s theory of performativity examines how gender is naturalized through the repetition of stylized rituals (cutting one’s hair, wearing high heels etc.). Gender is conceived of as the performance of these gender rituals. Through repetition identity is established on the body, but she argues that, “…[s]ubversive repetition

might call into question the regulatory process of identity itself" (1990, 44). A person might resist gender norms by failing to repeat them or making changes to their style of repetition. Butler's theory builds on Foucault's work to create a conceptual opening for individual agency. Butler understands individual freedom and choice as this failure to repeat norms and action and interprets this as resistance. In dance this would imply that the individual expression of a dancer was only apparent when they did not meet the cultural expectations for the performance of a movement. This would mean that every well executed pirouette (a turn on one leg in ballet) is devoid of the identity and self of the dancer.

Saba Mahmood took up Butler's analysis in her anthropological research with women in the mosque movement in Egypt. She finds this theory limits personal agency and choice to the repetitive performance of identity so the self only emerges in resistance to norms. Mahmood sought a framework for the establishment of identity in/on/through the body where agency could be exercised in the resistance to and the expression of norms. To this end she writes, "… [b]odily behaviour does not simply stand in a relationship of meaning to self and society, but it also endows the self with certain kinds of capacities that provide the substance from which the world is acted upon" (2005, 27). This implies that the expressive possibilities of the self are enabled by the norms of

society. Returning to our spinning ballerina, in this structure she is executing an expressive gesture made possible by her training in the technical norms of ballet. This gesture could be considered expressive of the cultural norms in ballet and of the ballerina's self expression simultaneously.

This paper is based on research with youth dancing Hip Hop. I use the theoretical framework that cultural norms can create bodily capacities for the expression of the self. Culture is central to expression. I engaged with the community centre as a particular site of global Hip Hop culture. This culture is a vital part of the context within which youth dance Hip Hop.

HIP HOP DANCE AND EXPRESSION

In the South Bronx, New York, in the 1970's block parties were started by DJ Kool Herc that are credited as the origin of Hip Hop's four elements: DJing, MCing, Graffiti and Breaking (the first dance style linked to Hip Hop music) (Thompson, 1996). Throughout the history of Hip Hop, and across its different genres, whether or not a song can be danced to is a consistent marker for how the music develops. Joseph Schloss in his ethnographic work with the breaking community in New York explains that, "the way hip-hop sees the world is itself a legitimate and consistent and fascinating intellectual system. And dance is a

crucial part of that system" (2009, 4). This system was created at a historical juncture when the Bronx was being de-industrialized and many residents experienced economic deprivation. Its early history was marked by the political struggles of those in these communities against the systemic discrimination of the New York government (Rose, 1994).

Hip Hop music and dancing arose out of the meshing of African Diaspora and Latino/a cultures then living in the Bronx. As Sally Banes states, 'The main source of the movement in breaking is Black dance, but like the rest of hip hop, breaking is an exuberant synthesis of popular culture that draws on everything in its path" (18, 2004). For example, the Running Man is a reinterpretation of steps that already existed in African American culture. Hip Hop from its origins is a blend of older African American styles with dancing and music that came with immigrant cultures. This mix "encompasses a highly functional system of symbols that affect individual identity and development, peer-group status, and intergroup dynamics and conflict" (Hazzard-Donald, 1996, 230).

Hip Hop culture has aesthetic values that differ drastically from European based aesthetics. Grenita Hall uses the work of Brenda Dixon-Gottschild to explain the aesthetic tension that arises around the buttocks in dance.

> “[Dixon-Gottschild] explains that the black female buttocks represent the savage-versus-civilized binary between Africanist and Europeanist movement, informing us that the vertically aligned erect spine is the first principle in Europeanist dance, while Africanist dance favours flexible, bent-legged postures articulated forward, backward, and sideward or in circles as well as in different rhythms. The extreme opposites of these two dance forms create a discourse of assumed hierarchy among the dominant group. By Europeanist standards, Africanist dance was interpreted as vulgar, lewd, hypersexual, primitive and animalistic. By Africanist dance standards, Europeanist dance is seen as movement without feeling, inflexible and sterile” (Hall, 2012,168).

Using Dixon-Gottschild’s distinction between Europeanist and Africanist aesthetics as a starting point I argue that different aesthetics can create different capacities for expression.

Today, alongside the rise of digital technologies for transmission, Hip Hop music is listened to, danced to and produced around the globe. While as Schloss states, "young adherents who live in New York cannot help but have a deep sense of history" (2009, 11), this is not necessarily true for those further from this centre. How is the culture and history of Hip Hop adopted and translated in local sites around the globe?

Writing about breaking in Hawaii, Halifu Osumare states, “Hip hop culture has come to constitute a major force in the contemporary American popular culture market, while simultaneously proliferating as an ‘underground’ international

network of loosely connected hip hop communities" (30, 2002). Frequently the transmission of Hip Hop dancing is accompanied with the racialized belief that only those associated directly with 'the street' (i.e., have lived in lower socio-economic urban areas) or within the African Diaspora can be authentic in Hip Hop performances. This belief is rarely upheld by expert Hip Hop dancers, who believed Hip Hop's capacity to appeal to people from a wide variety of backgrounds was one of its greatest strengths (Ghandoosh, 2010). Nonetheless given the history of the cultural appropriation of African American art, how or even if the history of Hip Hop is transmitted with the aesthetic forms is not evident.

Three ethnographic studies of Hip Hop cultures outside of the continental American centre have found that Hip Hop was particularly important for groups of youth that experience marginalizations; in Frankfurt with immigrant populations from North Africa and Turkey (Bennett, 1999), with Indigenous groups in Hawai'i (Osumare, 2002) and with refugee youth in Ghana (Banks, 2008). The links adherents draw to Hip Hop history indicates that in some of the loosely connected international communities described by Osumare members are attracted not only to the aesthetics but also to the politics of Hip Hop. They are able to draw parallels between their own circumstances (whether because of

being racialized, or living in an urban context or as post-colonized peoples like Hawaiians etc.) and the historical trajectory of Hip Hop.

Hip Hop music is frequently misogynistic, violent and homophobic. In her book *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008) Tricia Rose examines how this lyrical content, promoted by corporations behind the majority of music production in the United States, has contributed to the demonization of Hip Hop in broader public discourse. She states that, “What began as a form of releasing and healing has become yet another lucrative but destructive economy for young poor black men” (58). Because of these associations and the associations described above between Africanist dance aesthetics and lewdness, research into Hip Hop and youth frequently describes Hip Hop dance as a risk factor for violent or sexually promiscuous behaviour (Munoz-Laboy, Weinstein & Parker, 2007; Love, 2012). While the question of how youth negotiate the ideas transmitted through Hip Hop lyrics (particularly Gangsta rap) deserves consideration, describing Hip Hop as a risk factor gives little agency to the youth themselves in their decision making process around how to engage with the culture.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research is to investigate the emic understanding of youth dancing Hip Hop in order to contribute to the growing literature on the importance of creative expression and meaning making for youth, particularly those who experience marginalization.

This study was oriented around two research questions:

1) How do youth experience dancing Hip Hop as a means of expression?
2) What are the key elements which make expression possible?

Expression in these questions refers to both its personal and collective aspects. The objective of this research is to gather preliminary findings supporting the potential usefulness of Hip Hop dancing in the health and psychosocial intervention fields. The research was conducted with a community centre where youth had elected to attend class.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Community Centre Dance Classes

The youth Drop-in Centre was located within a larger community centre that was open September to May every year. Seventeen weeks of free drop-in Hip Hop and Break (or break dancing) classes were given for free as part of a larger fashion show project. The weekly classes were regularly attended by between

fifteen and thirty students (even on the coldest winter days). The class had two teachers, Lighter and Knit. Dance class itself would last between one and one and a half hours depending on what Knit had planned on a particular day. After class ended the majority of students would stay for between one and three hours to freestyle dance.

This centre was located in the neighbourhood with the highest percentage of inhabitants born outside of Canada. It also had an above average percentage of families and more of these families are living beneath the poverty line then elsewhere in the city (Ville de Montreal, 2009). The majority of the dancers in these classes were from first or second generation migrant families and communities that experience racialization.

Critical Performance Ethnography

Ethnography allows the examination of the experience of expression while integrating information about culture and context. The 'critical' and 'performance' qualifiers indicate two additional orientations. 'Critical' points to placing issues of oppression and marginalization at the centre of my research methods. 'Performance' speaks to the question of how to integrate embodiment into the process of researching about bodily expression. I used two complementary

methods over a six month period of data collection, dyadic interviews with young Hip Hop dancers and performing participant observation in a Hip Hop dance class.

I was researching youth who experience marginalization through difficult migration histories, systemic discrimination based on racialized and socioeconomic class as a Canadian born of mixed race, but white passing person raised as upper-middle class. I chose to address this imbalance by integrating an analysis of power relations from the beginning of the research process. Critical Ethnography "… [i]nformed by intersectionality offers a lens through which we can appreciate and critically examine the multilayered and interconnected relationships around race, class and gender and how those relationships are lived" (Haldeman, 2009, 222). The integration of an intersectional analysis with ethnographic method allowed power relations to be addressed throughout the process of doing research. One of the principle ways that Critical Ethnography addresses these questions is through privileging dialogue with research participants (Soyini Madison, 2012). I created space for dialogue by engaging the staff of the community centre in the process of writing questions for the interviews and by conducting my interviews with youth in dyads.

Judith Hamera (2007) and Löic Waquant (2004) undertook ethnographic research with dancers and boxers respectively. For both privileging the embodied knowledge of their participants meant physically engaging in training with them. Hamera states, “Performance ethnography offers the researcher a vocabulary for exploring the expressive elements of culture, a focus on embodiment as a crucial component of cultural analysis and a tool for representing scholarly engagement, and a critical, interventionist commitment to theory in/as practice” (Hamera, 2011). Wacquant theorizes this approach stating that he researched, “not only *of* the body, in the sense of object, but also *from* the body, that is, deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge” (viii). In his research he deployed his body by engaging fully in the rigors of boxing training. Hamera also engaged in training and dancing with the different urban dance communities that she studied, using this corporeal deployment to describe how different dance techniques created different senses of bodily space. I decided do my participant observation with the youth as a student taking the Hip Hop classes alongside them. In this way exercising my body (already sensitized and formed by two different dance techniques) to be trained again.

Performing Participant Observation

I am a professional choreographer and musician. I studied Ballet for fourteen years and contemporary African dance for six years. My ballet training marked my class privilege and throughout the research it set me apart. Ballet's Europeanist aesthetics were visible in my style of dancing. As I was learning the Seawalk, the Bart Simpson and the Harlem Shake my straight neck or the difficulty I had in releasing my weight would betray my ballet past. Over the weeks I began to download songs that I had liked and practice at home. Gradually my pleasure in dancing Hip Hop increased. I became less shy about freestyling with the youth, going from being pulled into the centre of a cipher (dance circle) to willingly jumping in myself.

Freestyling Hip Hop requires and creates a great deal of intimacy and trust. For the first months at the centre while I encountered openness because of my apparent musicality, training and enthusiasm – I put up a barrier to further intimacy because of my internalized homophobia. I am a queer woman and going into this research with little knowledge of Hip Hop culture I was concerned about how that the homophobic lyrics in Hip Hop songs might manifest in homophobic actions directed towards me. Eventually I opened up about my sexuality to my main informant the youth worker at the centre, Rocket, who in turn opened up conversations about homosexuality around me with the youth, demonstrating

their openness. As I came out at the centre my ability to connect with both the music and the other dancers increased. This also increased my ability to create an open dialogue with the other dancers that included my dance knowledge.

Dyadic Interviews

In designing my research methods I was wary of a method that would reinforce the dichotomy between personal and collective expression. Because asking questions about self expression requires more intimacy then a focus group allows I chose to interview the dancers in dyads. In this way I hoped to access the site where personal and collective expression meet.

This research method increased dialogue between myself and the participants. First, having two participants to one interviewer changed the power balance in the interview setting. The power inherent in my arriving with an audio recorder, consent forms and a list of questions was in part mitigated by being outnumbered. Second, interviewing two people at once that had danced with each other meant that I could see their shared beliefs at work in the interview as they were describing them. Each pair that I interviewed had a different relationship with each other that affected the kind of dialogue they would begin with one another and with me.

The questions for the youth interviews were created out of a meeting with the youth worker (Rocket) and youth programmer. The interviews remain semi-structured with opportunities for the youth to ask questions. They were conducted in both French and English – alternating between the two languages throughout the interview according to the comfort levels of myself as interviewer (a native English speaker who is fluent in French) and the participants (with varying levels of English and French fluency). Transcriptions and translations of the interviews were given to participants separately to read through and make changes.

All of the dancers I interviewed took the free Hip Hop class offered at the centre and stayed afterwards to continue dancing after class. They varied in age from eighteen to twenty-three. I have chosen playful pseudonyms for the dancers that I interviewed to highlight my role in re-constructing their words.

I performed two one-on-one interviews with Rocket, was a female youth worker at the centre and her teacher Lighter. I interviewed the dancers from the class in three pairs: Glint and Tufts, Baker and Chip, Root and Angel. Three of the young men (Baker, Chip and Root) self-identified primarily as poppers, while Tufts had only recently started to get involved in dance and didn't identify strongly with a

style yet. All of the young women I interviewed (Rocket, Lighter, Glint and Angel) identified themselves to me as Hip Hop dancers. Baker, Chip, Root and Glint also took dance class at another similar community centre that offered inexpensive classes in a variety of different Street Dance forms. Tufts had only taken classes at the community centre that we were dancing at together. Angel, out of the participants, had also taken dances in a private dance studio.

Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed two levels of thematic analysis were conducted. First, non-guided codes were developed through a close reading of the text. Second, these codes were grouped together into themes. Examples of different themes are *relationships, fun, knowledge, performing, getting down, teachers, commercial Hip Hop dance* and *music.* Text that was coded with the same theme was grouped together. These groups of themes were then used to respond to the research questions.

Writing and Reading

As I've written I've begun to see this process as a choreography. Choreography is the act of crafting movement through space. It is my work to arrange ideas, concepts and arguments in the time and space of this paper. If I were

choreographing I would be developing work onto the bodies of myself or others and immediately, palpably see the effects. In performance ethnography writing is another element of the performance of research, the embodiment of research. But as I write this I am keenly aware of you. The movement of your eyes as they trace left to write across every line. The movement of your ideas as you read. But I will not be there in the room to see your performance. Writing is then both my own embodied performance (now at a table, now on a couch, now with coffee, now with a slight back ache) but also a choreography of you, the reader's embodied performance. And as a choreographer what runs against the grain of my craft is that we are not in a studio together where I can be directly in dialogue with you about how you interpret these ideas with your movement. But imagining myself into the room with you, I invite you to take on your performance of reading about dance, to take pauses to listen (and even move to) to some of your own favourite music or research some of the Hip Hop music under discussion here.

RESULTS

Youth experienced freestyle Hip Hop dancing as a combination of musical and emotional expression free from verbal constraints. This facility was embedded in the culture of Hip Hop. The dancers choice of how to adhere to the collective aesthetics of this art form placed limits on how they interpreted the music and

expressed themselves. Learning and adopting artistic restrictions was a way to participate in the past, present and future of Hip Hop. Personal expression occurred in exchange with this larger culture. Demonstrable embodied knowledge of Hip Hop aesthetics made the self expression of dancers at once legible to others and part of group expression.

Three conditions needed to exist for this kind of expression to occur at the community centre. First, music that the dancer enjoyed was indispensable. Music pulled dancers in, asked them to dance and to shape their bodies in order to express more and more of a track's nuances. Second, dancers needed to engage in the process of building a unique dance vocabulary. This required learning one of the established street dance styles - in the case of this research primarily Hip Hop – and developing a personal interpretation of this style. Third, dancers needed to take the time for knowledge of the music and steps to work into their bodies. Sweating and drilling steps was a foundation for greater freedom within and greater respect for Hip Hop.

Inside a Dance Class

It is winter and when I come into the class at 6:20 P.M. I peel off several layers of coats, scarves, gloves, hats, sweaters and boots, bunch them up and add to a

line of similar bundles along one wall in the room we are using for dance class. Unlike a formal dance studio there are no mirrors in this room. The community centre does have these rooms but they are used for the belly dancing class that is part of the paid programming. Music is already pumping from the boom box in the corner and the air is a little damp as dancers stand alone or in groups practicing moves. The teacher, Knit, in at 6:30 and in silent agreement the students move to all face the windows on the far side of the room. Knit puts on music and then starts working through the bounce, the groove and the rock. She has us try these movements to different kinds of music. She then asks us to isolate the bounce in different parts of our body. “Just the head,” she shouts then, “your shoulders.” Then she shows us how to incorporate these into a couple of steps, the Running Man, the Sea Walk. It’s physically demanding and we are all sweating. Then she says ‘pair up!” and dancers choose a partner. The lights are turned down and we stand opposite one another taking turns “free styling” what we have just learned. While we do this Knit shouts directions, “Smile!” or “Get Down!” and asking us to relate to whatever is going on in the music. At the end of the class, Knit turns down the music and announces the class is over, it’s already 8:00 and the class is supposed to end at 7:30.

A few people start wrapping up and exchanging farewells before heading to the door, most are staying. Facing a window where she can see her reflection someone is practicing moves from the class. Clumps of dancers are forming into circles and dancing together. Dancers are continuing to freestyle. After standing on the periphery for a moment, wondering what to do with myself, I join one of the circles of dancers. Dancing doesn't stop until 10 P.M., at this point only a handful of dancers are left. We join the youth worker as she returns the boom box to the community centre security guard and then walk together to the metro.

EXPRESSION

Free from Words

Dancers valued freestyling over performing choreographed routines. Root describes how this works for himself:

> "I was more interested in Freestyling then choreography. Because I think dancing is really intriguing. There's no like planning beforehand. It's just right on dancing to the music."

What distinguishes freestyle from choreography is that steps are not planned beforehand. At the community centre a youth worker or teacher chose the music off of an iPhone so dancers also wouldn't know what music was coming next. Dancers were training in order to be able to perform movements inspired by a

certain track in the moment of dancing. While freestyling a dancer would ideally use their training to embody/feel whatever music was being played at a given moment.

The goal for these dancers was not perfect technical execution of a movement but to feel and express the music. On the subject of the technique while freestyling Glint states: “I don’t want to fixate on that. Like, I listen to the music and let go, I just try not to look in the mirrors.” Looking in the mirrors would draw Glint’s attention away from feeling the music and towards the image of her movements. Glint implies that this is negative because focusing on whether or not you are correctly executing a movement inhibits her ability to dance with musicality. At another point in the interview she describes letting go of technique as a process alongside embodying musical feeling stating: “There is a part of freestyle, like I have to dance and where you really let the music guide you, where you just let go.” Glint’s main focus while she was dancing freestyle was the music, not the proper execution of the movements. This focus enables a sort of freedom that comes from allowing yourself to be moved by the music.

The freedom of letting yourself be guided by the music was closely linked to individual’s emotional expression. At my fourth class at the centre I encountered

the concept of *getting down*. Part way through a class, Knit instructed all the students to find a partner that they would freestyle with. This was a departure from previous classes that had focused on learning specific steps or styles of movement. In my field notes from this class I wrote:

> "Knit said that she wanted to transmit the essence of hip-hop. How to feel the music and get down." (30/01/13)

Hearing this I understood that something important was being passed on. It was the first time that I had come across the term getting down. In the exercise each partner took turns dancing while the other watched, until Knit would ask us to switch partners. After a couple of turns I found myself with a partner that I hadn't danced with before. While I was dancing she repeatedly told me to 'get down' so, eager to learn, I did. I dropped my body lower to the floor. But this didn't satisfy my partner, who continued to repeat the instruction 'get down'. Thoroughly confused we were asked to switch partners again, but this time Knit turned off the music and explained what getting down meant. For her getting down meant accessing the emotional core of your movements and the music, reaching in to yourself in order to dance out your emotions. She instructed her students to go somewhere alone and get down when they were having a rough day. This is what I had been failing to do with my previous partner, my moves had been low enough, but they had lacked depth. By framing the pursuit of this depth as the essence of Hip Hop, Knit was supporting a culture that already existed at the community centre of valuing this fusion of emotions, movements and music.

I initially understood it as a descriptive word for the process of bringing out your emotions through your dance moves. While this is one component there are also are musical and social layers to how this term is used. When I asked Baker and Chip about the term they described it like this:

> Baker: Get down means...
> Chip: Getting down with the music... Getting in touch, feeling.
> Baker: Getting down. Like 'yo you want to get down man let's go' meet me at the park

Chip puts both getting in touch with the music and getting in touch with feeling inside of this same term. He links together feeling emotions and feeling the music. Getting down is a verb. The action of accessing emotions and accessing musicality are grouped together into one. I wondered if this was an indication that in the experience of dancing they are intertwined and operate together. Baker's response highlights the social dimension. Getting down is a verb and it is something that you can do either alone or with other people. In another part of the interview Baker described it to me in this way, "Get down. We're together with the music." Getting down means a fusing of the individual with the music and when many dancers are getting down together they experience a certain social coherence.

In freestyle dancers experienced freedom by letting themselves be guided by the music. The action of getting down, feeling the music and emotions running through their movements, created moments of expression. Dancers perceived these moments of expression in dance as being qualitatively different from verbal

expression. The effort of putting this non-verbal experience into words was often stressful. Chip describes it in this way:

> “I don't know how to explain it but. It is you and you're able to express yourself better than words through your dance. You express it like you feel it. You feel what you mean, you feel what you say.”

This implies that when speaking Chip can sometimes experience a disjoint between what he is feeling and how he has expressed that. When dancing he experiences complete clarity of expression.

Rocket goes further stating that words can in some cases inhibit expression. She states: **“**Whatever words can limit you to, dancing can free you from that.” In Rocket’s experience dancing gives her a sense of freedom from language itself. Dancing creates the opportunity to communicate and express outside of the structures of language. In another part of the interview she describes the experience of this extra-lingual expression:

> “But when you express yourself you're expressing your past, your present, your future. You're expressing simply the fact that you need to six step. It could be so many different things.”

There is the appearance of a contradiction between Rocket’s words and Chip’s. He states that he feels an absolute clarity of expression. She asserts that any given moment of dance expression has multiple meanings. This quote is taken from a portion of an interview after I ask her how she expresses herself in dance. She explains to me that for her dance expression came through the accumulation

of steps and skill in training. She described how in any given performance of a six step all of the previous times you had practiced or gotten down with that move were present. It is from this base that she states that ‘you’re expressing your past, your present, your future’ the step itself, the repetition of the step is what binds these different tenses together. The experience that dance can allow a dancer to express both the moment, aspirations and memories simultaneously is what is freeing.

Free to dance inside the culture of Hip Hop

The freedom the dancers describe is not a freedom from structure. Alongside the structure provided by the music there are culturally trained patterns that structure how a dancer might respond to the music and their emotions. Explaining this Rocket states:

> “You know so freestyle is freedom - but freedom with certain tools. 'Cause then it just becomes anything. And there is a style that is called freestyle that is also experimental - which is anything that you want to do so if you want to on the music bang your head on the wall you're freestyling basically. But that's not hip hop freestyle or it's not contemporary freestyle. Once you put like a thing on it like I'm going to freestyle in hip hop - then you have to use those letters and if you don't use those letters that's when you get it wrong.”

Rocket makes a distinction between untrained freestyle and trained freestyle. While untrained dancing – banging you head on the wall on the music – is not

qualified as bad, it is not within a collective creative conversation. Because trained dancing adheres to a collective aesthetic, when you embrace these rules you can gain acceptance and recognition by the collective.

Amongst the dancers that I interviewed, opinions about the role of limits and rules differed. When I interviewed Chip and Baker I asked them if they identified more as Poppers or as Hip Hop dancers. They responded that they adhered to freestyle over either of the two styles they most frequently dance in.

> Chip: “We're dancers.”
> Baker: “Freestyle - we're more freestyle then…”
> Chip: “Because if we put barriers it just limits. Like we come here we do Hip Hop we put it in our dance. Like when we dance we don't say 'ah ok this was popping' - it's just freestyle and we can incorporate this into our dance if we want to do popping we can incorporate this.”

For these dancers they claim dancing as their own, some other ever changing thing that style like Hip Hop or Popping can add to, but that cannot be contained within the limits of either of these styles. They are consciously choosing not to limit themselves to dancing within any one style. While this differs from Rocket’s views the two positions are not incompatible. By being careful about when and how they adopt the label from a style to describe their dancing, both conversations demonstrate a respect for the different dance styles and for the value of collective aesthetic.

This respect is important in a context where the depth of embodied knowledge embedded in street styles is often unseen or undervalued. A recent example of this lack of respect is the Harlem Shake dance videos that went viral on YouTube in 2012 and 2013 during a period of this research (for examples of these videos search ‘Harlem Shake’ on YouTube or copy the link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f7wj_RcqYk). These videos show people

often wearing costumes or masks shaking and jerking their bodies in settings like classrooms, fire trucks or (most commonly) offices. MSNBC Host Melissa Harris-Perry addressed this problematic trend saying:

> "The Harlem Shake has a history and a trajectory embedded in the authentic lived urban experience. It has been popular in New York since at least the 1980's. […] This is about more than proper designation of a popular dance. It's about cultural appropriation. When communities create original art they have a right to some creative control over its definition. If you enter a ballroom dancing competition, you better not cha cha during the waltz. Creative interpretation is expected to respect certain boundaries. That's what conveys the respect (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIgzzHOQWiA)."

During the same time period that the Harlem Shake were spreading over blogs and social media sites, Knit taught the Harlem Shake during class, carefully saying that she had learned it from people living in Harlem and passing around the room to correct the rhythm, emphasis and position of the dancers. Harris-Perry's analysis is instructive because she addresses the interdependency of creative boundaries and respect. By naming themselves freestyle dancers Chip and Baker are operating in a space outside of the creative boundaries of Hip Hop or Popping styles. Their caution to label themselves demonstrates a respect for those boundaries and for the knowledge embedded inside of each particular street dance style.

Often conversations about dance styles would turn to conversations about knowledge. This word was used to encompass the physical knowledge of movements, knowledge of the history of Hip Hop and knowledge about the world in a much broader sense. In response to my question on the role of knowledge in teaching Hip Hop, Lighter says:

> "If you want to dance Hip Hop you can watch the videos, you can listen to the music you can emulate it, just practice at home, watch YouTube, get all the steps, get the groove. And within a few years you might be considered a Hip Hop dancer, but you will not truly understand why that culture came about, why it is what it is today. Why it's so rich, why it's so overwhelmingly recognized now. So I think that the more you know about the culture. The more you know about where it came about. The more comfortable… the more you can take it on. Because at the end of the day knowledge is knowledge of thyself. It's knowledge of thyself. Because you need to see where do I stand in regard to that culture? How do I connect to that culture? How do I connect to that movement? Am I relevant to this movement?"

Lighter makes it clear that you can gain recognition as a Hip Hop dancer without knowledge of the origins and history of this art and culture. But she questions the ability of a dancer to express themselves fully through Hip Hop without an understanding of the 'history and trajectory' of its forms. In her view the reflective process a dancer goes through in learning about the origins of Hip Hop and asking themselves 'Am I relevant to this movement?' is what allows them to more wholly take on the style. From this perspective self expression and the collective

aesthetic are linked through the conscious participation of individuals in the present trajectory of a historical movement.

Personal and Collective Expression

In this community centre's interpretation of Hip Hop culture respect for history does not negate individual expression or creativity. Despite training the same steps, at times focusing on minute details of these steps, dancers are not expected to look identical or feel the music in the same way. Dancers explained that while training they were simultaneously building something unique to themselves and establishing a fluency in the collective aesthetic. This melding of the unique and the collective in Hip Hop is facilitated by the cultural belief that no two people share the same experiences and that this means they should not dance the same (Schloss, 2009).

Glint used the metaphor of 'vocabulary' to explain the interconnection between individual expression and the collective aesthetic in Hip Hop.

> "When I say vocabulary it's the words that you use to express yourself but if I connect that to dancer, it's how you dance. You could say that I say a sentence and Tufts says the same sentence, but he'll say it one way and me, I want to say it in another way – but we're saying the same thing. I know this is a little weird, what I'm saying. Everyone has their own way of

> expressing themselves through dance. It's different for every person, everyone dances in a different way."

Glint is describing how two dancers could execute the same steps in the same order to the same bars of music, but would not be dancing in the same *way*. What Glint also implies is that two dancers could use the same steps to the same music and still not convey the same message to an observer.

Rocket explores another layer of the vocabulary metaphor saying:

> "But when you speak of vocabulary it's mostly everything that you live through: everything your environment, where you're from, what your name is… everything about you. And then when you freestyle you're going to push your movement to fit you. And the movements that you use to get there are vocabulary specific to you."

Rocket describes how all of the lived experiences of a dancer can be embedded in the dance steps that they have learned. She implies that what a person has lived impacts not only how they dance a certain step, but also how they have learned that step in the first place. The process of learning movements in training and dancing those same movements in freestyle are both shaped by the unique experiences of each dancer. From Rocket's perspective this difference in experience contributes to the observation Glint made above, that two dancers can dance the same steps and convey a different message.

In the moment of freestyling a dancer makes decisions about what movements from their vocabulary to use. There was no one to one relationship between a piece of music and the steps that can be danced on top of this music. Rocket relates a dancer's choices to their unique lived experience. She states:

> "So let's say we're playing the exact same music and they have the exact same movements that we give them but we tell them to freestyle these three movements. They're not going to do the same things because they don't have the same experience they're not the same people. They don't come from the same places. So that's how they're going to express themselves in a different way."

Through both the choices that dancers make and the way that the execute these choices their personal expression and performance of the collective norms are combined in one expressive moment.

Self expression and expression of the collective aesthetic are often seen as mutually supportive by the dancers at this community centre. The culture of Hip Hop can be a lens through which individuals express themselves. Lighter explains it in this way: **"**When you express yourself you're looking for the true culture and you're looking for yourself through the culture." Chip's experience is consistent with Lighter's analysis. He states: "You grow with the dance and the dance grows with you and physically, spiritually, intellectually. Yeah." Here he also connects his individual growth with the growth of the dance styles that he practices. This suggests that his growth supports the growth of the culture that he is a part of. Angel described a different aspect of this phenomenon:

> “At the base it’s just expressing myself, you know? I think that everything that you understand you can express, and I like that. Like everything that’s connected to dance. I like expressing it all.”

Angel places her self expression at the centre of her experience dancing, but she also insists that her ability to express is derived from what she has learned. While dancing youth are expressing themselves within Hip Hop’s larger cultural forms of expression.

CONDITIONS FOR EXPRESSION

This form of expression - combining music with emotions to create feeling of freedom from verbal constraints, demonstrating a deep respect for history with a lust for throwing their voice into a chorus of other Hip Hop dancers - existed at the community centre because certain conditions were met. Below I will explore how music, dance style and time supported Hip Hop dance expression at the community centre.

1. Music

Sitting down with Root and Angel I asked them to describe their first forays into dance. Root described learning to Seawalk (a Hip Hop step) from YouTube. Then he went on to say, “So I learned that dance and was just dancing in the

garage - well “dancing” with quotations. Cause I wasn't even on beat.” Why is doing the Seawalk off beat “dancing” with quotation marks? Following this same logic if you were doing the same step on beat you would be dancing, dancing with no quotation marks. What Root is emphasizing is the centrality of music (and rhythm) in dancing Hip Hop.

In a separate conversation Rocket emphasizes a similar point saying:

> “Music is everything for a dancer. Music is what makes you move. […] So you need to love the music. You need to understand the music. The music would come before understanding. The music comes before even moving.”

Rocket is saying that for the dancer, movement is derived from music. But even this is not strong enough, for in this description music compels and even forces motion. Rocket draws connections between this compulsion and love. Placing the music before movement says that the type of dance that a person is drawn to is because they are drawn to the music of that style. Hip Hop dancers love Hip Hop music.

Returning to Root, I asked him why he danced. His reply returned my question to music. He states:

> “First and foremost is the music. […]I really love the music and every time I listen to hip hop, funk - anything that's danceable. I will just start like to move to the beat. Everyone will just see me as a weird person. But I just love it. Like listening to music and being like *boom ka boom boom ka*. If it was hip hop then I would just bang my head. Like a typical person that's listening to hip hop. And every time that I'm in a lonely corner and there's music I'll just start dancing full out. I didn't really care, just dancing full out that's all.”

Root places music first. He then creates a category of danceable music comprised of the kinds of music that give him the compulsion to move. To illustrate how strong this drive is he describes how needing to move to the beat overrides the fear of weirdness, that even when he might be seen as going against social convention he still enjoys himself. In describing this to me he vocalizes an embodied memory of a beat *boom ka boom boom ka*. The *boom* representing the base drum sound and the *ka* representing the snare sound, he is reproducing the beat behind popping songs. This self produced musical moment is accompanied by Root standing up and popping. Then he goes on to explain that his body responds differently to different kinds of music, in ways that correspond to what the typical response to those music genres might be. Finally he underlines again the power of this experience, with *just dancing full-out that’s all*. At the centre dancing full-out was described as dancing without holding anything back, putting aside your reservations to fully embody the music. Root is

saying that his love of the music is so strong that he can enter this state regardless of place.

I interviewed Angel alongside Root and her response to the question ‘why do you dance?’ echoed his in placing the music first. She states:

> “At the base, it’s the feeling that I get when I listen to music. This is what makes me like certain kinds of music. I’m capable of feeling a lot of things and I really like all of the different styles of music. For sure there are some that I like less than others, but I love music.”

Like Root, Angel links her desire to dance directly to her love of music. Specifically she likes the feeling that she gets when she listens to music. Later in the conversation she describes this feeling as the ‘groove’ or the part of a song that can tell you how to dance to that song. She connects her ability to experience many different emotions to her capacity to appreciate and move to many different styles of music.

This exchange between Root and Angel focuses on the feeling, the groove and the beat. There is a conspicuous silence. One of the things that Hip Hop is most known for is its lyrical content. The music that we would dance to at the centre was heavy with lyrics. But these lyrics are not the part of the music that was compelling these dancers to move this was done by the beat. This is a phenomenon also observed by Love in her research with girls listening to Hip

Hop in Atlanta (2012). In drawing attention to this I am not trying to dissect Hip Hop music. The lyrics and the beat are part of a whole. What I am pointing towards is *musicality*: how music is understood. Here the way that dancers listen to music prioritizes how the music feels running through their body. They ask how successfully the music compels them to movement and then whether it supports them in movement once they've started.

Using my own metaphor, from a dancer's perspective, a piece of music might be understood as a house that dancers enter. The rhythm of a song creates the structure, the walls, plumbing, wiring, while lyrics are the furniture – important, but they can be moved or worked around. Having the structure of a song to move around inside of was a vital condition for dancing at the community centre.

2. Vocabulary and Style

Learning a dance style

The views expressed by Angel and Root corresponded with those expressed by the teachers at the community centre. When discussing how she transmits Hip Hop knowledge to her students Lighter stated:

> "It starts with the music really. Before the dance is the music and the culture… is created following or as part of a certain socio-economic

> system or some kind of a revolution - a silent revolution in some sense. Whether it's rock and roll, jazz, the blues. Blues was all about expressing in a very subtle way… the tango… All these styles of dance, they were created under very specific social economic situations you know."

While Lighter too places music in front of dancing, she does this in order to tie dancing to the social economic situations out of which music emerges. The music is the context of dance and she believes that music is tied to social change. The reason I bring this in here is to begin to examine the particularity of being drawn to Hip Hop music. Tying the message and political implications of music only to its lyrical content is too simplistic because this leaves no room for musicality. But discussions on musicality cannot be void of the historical context from which particular music emerges or the socio-economic context where it is made, listened to and danced to. What Lighter is claiming is that the history of Hip Hop, the history of the struggle that it emerged out of, is embedded in how it is danced.

This history is transmitted from dancer to dancer through training and expression. This article foceses on Hip Hop, but this is only one of many different styles within street dance including, house, waacking, breaking and voguing. Each of these different styles corresponds to a different genre of music (Thompson,1996). Through time and sweat each very personal musical

compulsion is shaped so that it is in conversation with the collective aesthetics of Hip Hop culture.

What kind of training is required to dance in the style of Hip Hop? Rocket describes it in this way: “The basis of Hip Hop is the bounce, the groove and the rock. From there people created things to help other people understand those three basis.” At one of the first classes that I attended at the centre Lighter introduced these three elements by having us work each movement in turn for an entire song. Once we had the basic movement we were given instruction to vary the tempo or the level that we were bouncing (or grooving or rocking) at. Steps (the Seawalk, the Running Man, the Bart Simpson, the Cat Daddy, the Harlem Shake and more) were seen as small lessons in how to embody the three musical basics.

This way of transmitting knowledge is different from other street dances such as popping. This dance has foundations that underpin all possible movements in the dance. Chip: “Popping is like an umbrella and every string leads to a foundation. Like the hit. It's a foundation. Waving, tutting.” Hitting, waving and tutting are three of the foundations of popping. Waving is like it sounds, a dancer creates waves through their body. Tutting is when a dancer creates shapes with their arms and hands using ninety degree angles. Instead of practicing steps as you would in Hip Hop you practice foundations. Talking about one of his first times

getting together with friends to dance Bakers says, “You have to practice. Yeah they showed me some foundations and I started to train with them.” After learning some of the foundations of popping from his friends Baker practices them independently. This propensity for independent practice was common to all of the dancers I interviewed.

Building Vocabulary

At the centre a tension was present between absorbing the collective aesthetics of Hip Hop (or another dance style) and individual expression. This was resolved through the idea of the individual dance vocabulary. After expressing her love for music in general, Angel reflects and then adds:

> “I think that you could dance to anything. If you understand what you’re doing and also if you understand the dance style that is attached to each different music genre. And if you dance Hip Hop on Hip Hop music. Like me right now, I’m learning more and more about Hip Hop culture and Hip Hop music. At the base it’s interpretation.”

For Angel all music can be danced too. There is no music genre that is not danceable. But there is a layer of knowledge that must be obtained first before you can dance to a genre of music. In the case of Hip Hop “you dance Hip Hop on Hip Hop music.” A distinction is being made here between dancing to a particular genre of music and dancing the style of dance that corresponds to a particular genre of music. A dancer might have dance training from another dance form but it will not correspond to the collective aesthetic that has been built around a particular music genre. Partaking in that collective aesthetic was not seen as inhibiting individual expression. Angel’s use of the word *interpretation* is instructive. The dancer who is dancing Hip Hop on Hip Hop Music is interpreting

the music *and* interpreting the collective aesthetics of movement in Hip Hop culture.

The capacity to interpret the music and a collective aesthetic simultaneously is built through training. Rocket gives an example of one mechanism for this:

> “Well it's very simple things. I'm going to take waaking for example. It's a specific move. You have to learn that specific move before you can start freestyling that move. And then once you have it properly and you've drilled it enough times, even if you freestyle that move afterwards it's still clean it's still done the right way. It's still a little bit like grammar. I guess like there are certain rules”

In this example you learn to waak after repeating the same movement over and over you eventually – after a certain amount of time – attain a level with this movement where you can execute it reliably within the aesthetic margins of that movement every time you do it. Waaking is a flinging of the arm over your head, where you twirl your hand and wrist around your ear, before your arm comes to rest with your elbow pointing upwards and your hand on your shoulder. When working on this movement a dancer would focus on having their arm go straight up to the ceiling and not over to one side. This detail (and others) is embedded in the body through training. Integrating technical details allows the dancer to then execute the movement to the music in a way that adheres to the collective aesthetic norms.

In Hip Hop the integration of these aesthetic norms does not erase individual musicality and expression. Obtaining a mechanical comfort with a movement is the base from which an individual dancer creates their own style. At the community centre this was explained in terms of a dancer's vocabulary. The greater a dancer's vocabulary the more precise and versatile they could be in their expression when they were freestyle dancing. Rocket explained it in this way:

> "So let's say they did the Running Man. Then that becomes somebody's vocabulary. Because you know something more. Because you can use that and create something with that. So what makes how you create vocabulary is you. You have to know your foundations. You know your foundations and from there you're going to push."

Returning to the waak as an example, once a dancer has obtained a level of comfort with the movement they are then able to use it to achieve their own ends. Rocket places the individual at the centre of this process. Each dancer is responsible for building their own dance vocabulary. The vocabulary metaphor is also useful in terms of dance styles and genres. Learning a movement in one dance style will not help you to communicate in another dance style, just as learning a word in one language won't necessarily help you communicate in another. Like language, the more closely related two dance styles are the more inter-intelligible their movements are.

3. Time

Steps or foundations require time to integrate into the body. As Angel says it, "You have to sweat." This was discussed by Tufts and Glint, who I interviewed

together. Tufts had been dancing Hip Hop only for a month, a short time in comparison to Glint who had started to train over two years before I interviewed them. The weekend before the interview they had faced each other in a dance battle and Glint had won. Throughout the interview Glint would respond not only to my questions, but also to Tufts' responses. In the following exchange they are discussing the process of learning a new step.

> Tufts: "Sometimes it might take days and even weeks before I can do a step."
> Glint: "But I think that you have to take your time. You don't need to rush because when you are learning things, like you said, you pick them up gradually. When you do it that way it last longer. So it's better to take your time. There isn't any pressure."

Glint reassures Tufts that there isn't any pressure to learn things quickly. This reassurance is necessary. In both his comment and her response they are acknowledging that the rapid assimilation of movements is seen as positive by some part of the larger street dance community.

Why commit such considerable time and sweat to training? If you already enjoy the experience of moving your body to the music, what can be gained? By spending this time training youth gained access to both the collective aesthetic and to the knowledge of crafted musicality that is transmitted through this aesthetic. Gaining mastery over any given style takes time and gaining the

capacity to interpret takes even more. Rocket stated that, “it takes about five years per style so that you can call yourself a dancer from that style.” The actual amount of time of course may vary, but what is clear here is that commitment to learning the craft at the centre is not measured or thought of in terms of weeks or months, but in years. There is a perception of a depth of knowledge within the culture to be absorbed. Knowledge of dance is acquired on many levels; physical coordination, aesthetic sensitivity, musicality and both self and social awareness.

For the dancers I interviewed, the goal of training was not to be able to execute a perfect step. Dancers aimed to increase their capacity to dance to the music they were drawn to. Steps a dancer put time into could be used when they would get down with the music. Baker and Chip distinguished getting down and training for me:

> Baker: “Like with training I'm doing one thing - like if I do wave I train my wave. Like I'm going to try to find every possible way to wave. That's what training is for me and then getting down is enjoying the beat. Because when you train you have the mentality 'I'm going to find some better things to do' then when you get down -you show what you have trained. Everything you trained for. That's when you get down.”
>
> Chip: “Yeah like training you have a goal. Like to clean up your stuff to make it more (me: tight) yeah tight. Like you have a focus and you focus on that goal. But us for get down you just dance. You have fun. That's the difference for me. In a sense training is more voluntary and getting down is more the music. The music makes you get down. You just feel it and you become one with the music. But training it's like practice.”

Training facilitates getting down. In training dancers focus on one movement, in the case of Baker the wave. They would both drill the movement and experiment

with it. Drilling a movement entails repeating the same movement over and over with the goal of being able to execute the movement easily and cleanly. Experimenting with a movement entails trying out different ways to do the movement. For example Rocket once had us work on the bounce by moving it around to different parts of our body, using just our head, then chest, torso, shoulder etc. The aim of this work was to be able to ‘become one with the music’ as Chip states. When getting down youth describe letting go of their individual aims and letting the music guide them. This operates differently with choreographed or with freestyle dancing.

Touching on all of these levels Rocket states:

> “Because you can dance a certain thing but until you know why you're doing it and where it comes from and what it means you're not going to dance it the way it's supposed to be danced. Because you could be you be like I want to understand the movements more and I want to put emotion into it. And that's fine that's how it starts, but until you understand how those movements were created and why that kind of music was created and what you're supposed to be saying with it - you're not going to be able to express yourself fully without having the knowledge of it.”

A dancer can gain the physical coordination to execute a movement, but this is only one aspect of the movement. For Rocket the desire to express and experience emotions through a certain movement is linked to gaining an awareness of the socio-economic and political context out of which the music and movements of Hip Hop emerged. From this perspective individual expression is incomplete if the individual cannot embed their movements inside

Hip Hop's current and historical context. To achieve this (and it is an achievement) dancers need to put in time and sweat.

DISCUSSION

Expressing the self, Expressing the culture

How did the youth experience Hip Hop dancing as a means of expression? What were the key elements which made this expression possible?

In my last interview with Rocket she reflected on the research process we had been going through together stating, "it's putting words to what our bodies are trying to bring to the society." At the community centre a freestyle Hip Hop dancer was breathing in an intricate freedom, sweating out a careful presentation of the self and arranging and rearranging the elements of their culture. Their personal and collective labours and the labours of their teachers and teachers' teachers made this possible. The combination of music, style and time created the experience of being able to express clearly using no words at all.

One thing we hardly touched on in these interviews was the content of the dancer's creative expression. When Rocket states *what our bodies are trying to bring to society*, the temptation is to pursue a narrative. To ask *what* they are trying to say exactly. To ask *what* emotion they are expressing and *why* and look

for a clear articulated story to underpin it all. In focusing on the mechanics of expression this paper argues that there is a politics inherent the choice of *how* to express. That demanding a narrative may not bring more clarity to an art form that not only permits the overlapping of joy and anger, the personal and the collective but cultivates this layering.

In her work on professional and amateur dancing communities in Los Angeles Judith Hamera states that, “the work of dance exposes aesthetic spaces and practices as social and vernacular, as sites where participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporeality and irreducible difference” (Hamera, 2007, 2). What I would add to this is that different dance forms have different strategies for engaging with the forces of authority and tradition.

Youth at the centre were well aware of the history of Hip Hop culture and saw themselves as not only participating in it, but helping to create it. Neil Harris, Leigh Wilks & Donald Stewart, wrote of students in a high school Hip Hop program, “Participants suggested that the value of the dance program centred on the way in which the culture of hip hop formed a common thread that unified not only the individual participants but various year levels and schools in a shared sense of identity, purpose and meaning” (2012, 245). This embodied assimilation

of the culture of Hip Hop along with the dance moves occurred at different local sites. The question of how youth at the centre experience Hip Hop dancing as a means of expression can be reversed to interrogate how there could be similar experiences across such different local sites. It then transforms into how does Hip Hop dancing create the possibility for certain experiences of expression.

Earlier in the paper I left the question of how societal norms manifest in the body with the concept that by doing the work to acquire bodily behaviours one also acquires the correlate bodily capacities. In dance we've seen how when a dancer invests time in training she gains particular competencies in collective aesthetics. In turn this facilitates expression. But the question of resistance remains unresolved and cannot remain unaddressed when examining a culture with a history of resisting political oppression. I will argue that Hip Hop dancing creates both a personal and collective capacity for resistance.

In her own return to the question of resistance in her monograph *Politics of Piety* Mahmood states that, "Any attempt to destabilize the normative structure must also take into account the specificity of embodied practices and virtues, and the kind of work they perform on the self, recognizing that any transformation of their meaning requires an engagement with the technical and embodied armature

through which these practices are attached to the self" (2005,167). The conditions for expression at the community centre enabled this engagement with the *technical and embodied armature* through which normative practices engage with the self.

Conditions for Expression

1. Music

The capacity to enjoy music was present in all of the dancers before they began to train. Training gave them the tools to express themselves and to express the music. Self-expression and musical expression were intertwined in Hip Hop dancing. Dancers were very clear that they would not talk about self expression outside of the context of the music and its history.

Music was described as a coercive force or as a persuasive guide. It allowed dancers to let go. Understanding that pieces of music are embedded in the culture in which they are made. Particular genres of music might create historical containers for the body. These disciplined the body to particular kinds of movements. Dancers stressed again and again that certain kinds of music demanded certain kinds of dancing. Rhythm is the disciplinary measure. A dancer who has acquired the capacity to dance to a particular genre of music can

dance ‘on beat.’ Rhythm disciplines, but it is not punitive. It is the pleasure of dancing ‘on beat’ that drives dancers to become more skilled.

2. Vocabulary and Style

The pedagogical world at the community centre suggests that a dance vocabulary was something that each individual crafted for themselves. This process of crafting this musicality engaged a dancer with the history of the collective aesthetics. Learning about how you may (or may not) be relevant to this history is a thread of this training that links directly to a dancers individual expression. Hip Hop is a youth culture that "was designed not only *for* teenagers, but *by* teenagers" (Schloss, 2009, 11). This ideology empowers youth to be creative and inspires them to be respectful.

Uniform technical execution was not the goal of the Hip Hop aesthetics at the community centre. The end of training, of learning new steps or foundations to add to a dancer’s vocabulary, was to develop a personal interpretation of the collective aesthetic. This created a very different relationship to aesthetics and it meant mastery was not demonstrated through utter conformity. Obtaining a deep knowledge of Hip Hop culture and dance gave a dancer the power to transform them.

3. Time

“You have to sweat.” When Angel said these words in the interview Root, who was sitting beside her, nodded solemnly. Why were they taking sweating so seriously? At the community centre time was divided between training and freestyling. Training entailed working on specific movements in order to achieve an individual or collective goal. Freestyling was when you dance to the music without any pre-planned steps, this can be done alone, in partners or in groups. Both are focused on shaping and crafting expression. A dancer might train the wave by repeating the wave over and over, moving it around to different parts of their body, trying it out with different types of music. At another time that same dancer might freestyle the wave by using it to embody a particular sound in the music. These processes are intertwined, each one supporting the other. To integrate these processes into the body, to create new elements in his *embodied armature* a dancer invests time. Time gone through with sweating, the salty by-product of this technology of personal and group creativity.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This was a small exploratory study and research results are site specific. Further research could examine how these concepts are understood with a larger group across several sites. The gender representation of those that were interviewed in

the research did not reflect the gender spread in the dance class/dance program, consequently no conclusions could be drawn about what elements of their experience could have been related to gender differences. Interviews favoured the free expression of participants over structured expression. Only the connections drawn by participants themselves between their dance experience and other aspects of their lives were included in the study. For this reason it is not possible to draw conclusions about how their experience dancing might connect to the experiences of poverty, migration or racism in their lives, instead I have focused on balancing the context of their neighbourhood with their description of their dancing experiences. Because interviews were undertaken in pairs the confluence of the opinions of the participants was emphasized. The results support my idea that the use of pair interviewing created an environment where participants are empowered to direct the interview towards important aspects of their experience that the interviewer might not ask about or be aware of.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a growing body of literature that indicates expression is an important aspect of wellbeing (Rousseau et al, 2005; McLennan & Smith, 2007; Jonathan, 2008). This literature spans different art forms and art therapies. Harris, Wilks & Stewart discuss an important discrepancy between the perspective of the health

promoters and the youth who engaged in their dance program stating, “While health promoters would be interested in the identified outcomes around connectedness, cooperation and expression, participants’ perceived that the benefits for their well-being were incidental to the central aspect of music, dance, creativity and enjoyment” (2012, 245).

This research indicates some important pathways for using dance to support youth:

1) To dance youth must enjoy and be motivated by the music that corresponds to the dance style. Before beginning dance programming it is important to consult youth about their music preferences.
2) Different dance styles or forms created different capacities for expression. Whichever dance style is chosen it is important to transmit the history and context in which it arose and is practiced today.
3) Learning dance steps and integrating them into the body requires time. For dance programming to create the capacity for expression seen in this article it must happen regularly and be sustained over many weeks, months or even years.

I haven't included creating Hip Hop dance programming in this list because Hip Hop might not be the choice for all youth in all circumstances. Imposing Hip Hop on youth is problematic for the same reasons imposing ballet would be. It would be an imposition of rigorous technical embodied norms.

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Conclusion

I introduced this thesis with furor. The rage I felt at elitism and colonization in dance propelled me into a search for different ways to ask questions. And I found them.

One dance class, the one where Knit asked us face a partner and take turns freestyling, Knit stopped the music to talk about holding back. She encouraged all of us to risk dancing full out, to risk expressing what we had to say whether or not our partner could match our intensity, gravity or joy. By taking this risk she said we would be creating an opening. Our partner might not be able to step through immediately but they would still know it was there.

Research can be a bridge across worlds. And what is a bridge if not an opening? The intentional, careful, laborious building of a passage. Research can engage with the concerns of groups who may be, feel or believe they are isolated from one another. It can open up a space for the movement of bodies, goods and thoughts. I have attempted to add to the channel between the domains of arts and the fields of health.

As dance has techniques and trainings so does research. Techniques that ensure a bridge is sturdy. I have relied on the work of the critical race, class and feminist theorists who have elaborated theories of intersecting systems of oppression. I have relied on the Hip Hop scholars who recount and write about their culture. I have relied on the fields of subjective wellbeing for an intellectual framework that can embrace self understandings of what it means to do well. I have relied on ethnographic methods to move through the dance class with alertness and care.

I danced and spoke with youth who were profoundly passionate about their art. They described dancing as fun and fun as something you encounter in those moments when you work hard at something and feel the new strength you are building. They respected Hip Hop culture without revering it. By learning about the culture, they learned about themselves. This kind of capacity building, creativity and meaning making inspired social ties and self discovery. If the pursuit of health is defined as nurturing our capacities to flourish, not only fending off illness, then much can be learnt from these youth.

I have. This research has been transformative for me on a very personal level. My body moves differently now. I can hit a beat then let my weight rebound

without contracting my muscles. I've changed how I think about the process of choreographing dance. I am pursuing neither the perfect execution of a technical ideal nor to express myself regardless of the work that has gone before me. Going into a dance class I am looking for something different. I am looking to have fun; to challenge myself, be supported in these challenges and grow.