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African American Dance History

Hip Hop

Hip hop has often mistakenly been defined as merely "a style of popular music of US black and Hispanic origin, featuring rap with an electric backing," but actually encompasses an entire cultural genre stemming from the lower and marginalized working class African American youth.□ This expressive culture includes rapping and rap music, graffiti, dance style or more particularly break dancing, specific attire, and even a specialized language (Perkins 224).□ Hip hop became an outlet for many young blacks to express their feelings of alienation from mainstream society more freely than ever before.□ The ideas of b-boys, b-girls, and hip hop people focus on the need for self definition and provide for socialization amongst this subculture; hip hop transforms feelings of alienation and defeat to the concept of self-assurance.□ Through graffiti, "tags" express territorial domination and allow for the artist to inscribe otherwise oppressed identities on public property (Rose 22); hip hop dance takes form through battles and competitive one-upmanship allowing the dancer to move his body freely and creatively.□ The entire hip hop culture rejects the oppression of African American and Carribean history, identity, and community, by providing opportunities for many of these people to express themselves freely and openly without suffering from the psychological oppression inflicted upon them.

Hip hop dance has been shaped by many events throughout history and traces its roots all the way back to the Kongo and some of the other earliest forms of African dance.□ Dance responds to social forces seen in the progression of dance vocabulary which is a "byproduct of the US commodity mark (Perkins 221)," and thus reflects the progression of formal history.□ The Kongo involved the shuffle and double shuffle, which provides a simple basis for many hip hop dances.□ Even the lindy hop is celebrated as one of the first influences of modern day hip hop dance.□ James Brown started the soul movement in 1969 with the passion he put into performing his dance, High Energy; this spurred George Clinton and the funk movement, which then contributed to Afrika Bambaata, the Zulu Nation, and the Hip Hop Revolution (Perkins 212).□ Hip hop itself was a response to post-industrial oppression, and the music allowed for black cultural expressivity which caused hip hop dance to revolve around free movement of the body in creative and bold mannerisms (Rose 21).□ Breakdancing, the most well-known form of hip hop dance, centers around this letting go of one's body allowing him or herself to flow with the music,

breaking out of the demands of everyday life.□Many urban environments were filled with African Americans and gave birth to the stereotypical views held against inner city blacks; these blacks were sick of standing still and following orders, and hip hop finally provided a voice for them to speak out against the discrimination they had felt from media indifference and manipulation.□The progression of hip hop dance which develops primarily into breakdancing plays a huge role in displaying the importance of the hip hop culture to many minorities and other oppressed people.

Breakdance finds its roots in disco dances that focused on breaking points or extending the breaks in and between songs, and it eventually developed into a competition between dance groups known as "crews," where many oppressed inner city youth found their niche (Rose 34).□Breakdancing is a competition between dancers who each perform a series of fancy footwork and freezes, in an attempt to come up with a more creative and original pose; this reflects the themes of vogue dancing displayed in *Paris Is Burning*.□Family has been a large part in many of the styles of dance that helped form breakdance and other hip hop dances, even seen in the Nicholas Brothers and their flash act tap routines.□Breakdance crews resembled lower level gangs who spread their territorial dominance, similar to the ideas of graffiti and spreading dominance through artwork; crews provided inner city youth with individual identity development, peer-group status, and intergroup dynamics that mainstream society had denied from them (Perkins 230).□This also draws on the ideas from *Paris Is Burning*, where groups of homosexuals who had been rejected from mainstream society were able to find their place in the families they belonged to and danced with.□Identity in hip hop is rooted in a local experience and one's attachment to and status in the crew, which is that local source of identity, group affiliation, and support system (Rose 34).□The crew is a new kind of family that allows for intercultural bonds, similar to gangs, and provides support in a free environment that is the basis for many social movements.□Competition between various crews allows many young men and women to transmute violence with music and peacemaking, expressing their aggression and competitiveness in dance rather than violence (Perkins 213).□Breakdancing crews even caused street corners to turn into theatrical urban youth centers, where inner city youth could perform and gain the recognition they deserve.□Similar to hip hop dance and the concept of breakdance crews, other factors including graffiti helped African Americans gain a voice in mainstream culture as opposed to containing themselves to the hip hop subculture.□

The visual artwork associated with the hip hop culture is known as, but not limited to, graffiti.□Just like hip hop is often misdefined, the word graffiti also has the negative connotation of some sort of unlawful unauthorized writing that often offends many people, not to mention is against the law.□The truth of the matter is that graffiti, though against the law, allows these

oppressed African American people, not to mention Latinos and the other ethnic groups involved in the hip hop revolution, to make their mark on society and show their feelings by "tagging" public space.□The concept of graffiti had probably always been around, but was never recognized until the 1960s when Cornbread and Cool Earl wrote their names in public all over Philadelphia (Graffiti History @ 149st, Part 1).□With the new technology of spray painting, graffiti artists began using the urban public transportation system as their canvas while rappers and DJs displayed their work publicly on boom boxes and "ghetto blasters" (Rose 34).□Graffiti has been rejected from mainstream society because it emerged in the 1970s as an example of urban decay and juvenile delinquency.□This concern over the graffiti problem turned into massive efforts to continue the oppression of inner city youth and prevent them from expressing themselves freely through graffiti.□As reflected in the other aspects of the hip hop culture, sexism and male dominance are also a part of graffiti because female participation was frowned upon.□Graffiti was previously only an art form seen on public buildings and structures, but this visual artwork was brought to the web in 1994 with Art Crimes (Graffiti History @ 149st, Part 2).□His popular spread of graffiti and the hip hop culture in general gives people the chance to cross huge boundaries and communicate with a much wider audience.□In the same way that graffiti provides many blacks with the voice they need to express themselves freely in a society that has continuously oppressed them, rap music in its own right is possibly the most powerful part of the self expression and creativity that hip hop brings.

Rap music has often been written off because the passion that rappers display in an almost offensive manner, but is actually so much more than merely words on top of the highly rhythmic, electronically based music.□A griot is a storyteller who perpetrates the oral history and tradition of a village or family (Dictionary.com); modern day rappers and hip hop artists play this role of the modern day storyteller by expressing themselves and taking on the identity of an observer or narrator in their rhymes (Rose 2).□Rap music, thus, forms a link between early African history and modern day African American communities, as well as giving many oppressed people the voice they needed to pass down their stories; hip hop music also takes form in battle rap going along with the ideas of crews and breakdance.□Rap music, especially in the United States, has created one of the most public political controversies since the beginnings of rock 'n roll in the 1950s because it questions aesthetic value and political benefits and dangers publicly (Krimm 13).□Politically aware rappers like Ice Cube use their lyrics as a way to spread their beliefs and their message to their audience by saying lyrics like "Don't give me that shit about role model, it ain't wise to chastise and preach, just open the eyes of each (Krimm 102)."□Rap music even has its own language that allow the members of the hip hop subculture to communicate with one another in a way that brings together many of the minority groups involved, including but not limited to Puerto Ricans,

Cubans, and African Americans. Through hip hop, in 1999, Lauryn Hill even became the first female to ever be nominated for ten Grammy awards, of which she won five (Unofficial Hip Hop Timeline). Going along with all of the other various aspects of hip hop, hip hop music and dance has spread into an entire cultural movement of redefining urban youth.

The modern day hip hop revolution is an uprooting of the more traditional culture and the introduction of a taste or urban authenticity that reaches every part of the world (Perkins 258). The main elements of the hip hop culture including graffiti, dance, and rap music started off by giving New Yorkers the chance to freely express themselves in their verbal skill and art forms. Hip hop has spread to become an entire culture of people that gives many misunderstood youth a voice that had been denied from them because of the lack of attention granted by the mainstream media. Breakdance and crews provided a home for rejected and oppressed youth, while music and graffiti provided their main voice to the public. The need to express themselves more freely is seen in the way breakdancing started:

"We got tired of just stand up and catch. We started kicking side to side and hitting the ground. Jump down, bend, crouch and take a seat, all down, doing whatever moves we could, spinning top, sweep, back spin (Perkins 216)."

Even clothing brands have stemmed from this hip hop revolution in order to continue giving those involved a way of setting themselves apart from the mainstream. Though hip hop is very much underrated and looked down upon, it actually has played a huge role in providing African Americans with a new way of expressing themselves in a revolutionary way, more freely than ever before; just look at the changes from minstrelsy to rap music in order to see this unbelievable progression that we all must come to appreciate. In the words of Mos Def, "We are hip hop. Hip hop is goin' where we goin'." □

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