

Excavating the “Social” in Black Vernacular & Hip Hop-Era Dancing

About the 2016 Schlundt Lecture

By Cleis Abeni

www.cleisabeni.com

With deep appreciation to Dr. Imani Johnson and gratitude to the Critical Dance Studies community at the University of California Riverside, and in celebration of the performing artists, teachers, and researchers that will convene at UCR for the 2016 Show & Prove Conference, I would like to share the ideas that I hope to discuss in the 2016 Schlundt Lecture on Friday April 8, 2016. These are developing ideas. Feel free to contact me at CleisAbeni@gmail.com if you have questions or comments and I may be able to integrate them into the ideas that I will share during the lecture.

Let me pause for a moment and explain why I invite feedback at the outset. I hope that this brief explanation will provide insight into my approach. I try to live a compassionate, listening, mediating, and contemplative life—a life that is open to conversation, suggestion, and correction. When we gather to share and think-through ideas in our academies, we enter into a realm of human exchange that has nothing whatsoever to do with right and wrong. Rather, we aim for competitively plausible, reasonable, well-considered conclusions drawn from methodologically strong investigations.

We should never be afraid of erring in our research if we are strong about recognizing the viability of trial-and-error and addressing—and even correcting, if need be—fallibilities. Remember: People are suffering searing forms of violence, socio-economic deprivation, and harm in the United States. Sometimes our academies inculcate us to a certain extent from grave injustices of the enormous income inequalities and bigotries that make living a healthy life day-to-day difficult for most American people (and people across the world). (And, of course, injustices penetrate into our academic institutions as well, but that is another story.)

I invite you to consider the academic inquiry that I will offer in the Schlundt Lecture from a compassionate perspective that frames my words and everything that we do as performers, researchers, and writers in proportion to the realities of the ongoing harm that besets so many people in our country and the world. I say this to center us.

My approach during the lecture will be deliberately warm-hearted, informal, conversational, rhetorically “slanged” as well as rhetorically “standard,” full of laughter and storytelling as it is full of what I hope will be penetrating, methodologically-strong examinations. I am not afraid to be wrong, so please do debate kindly and warmly in gracious conversation with me. I am not afraid because I have learned that there is no such thing as perfection in our performances, our research, or our writing. Rather, we just do our very, very best.

My goal in the lecture is to provide an introduction (from my limited investigations) into the "lost knowledge" that might be found in excavating the "social" compositions of select Hip Hop-era black vernacular dancing.

I plan to focus on two field examples from the Hip Hop-era that exemplify this "lost knowledge":

1. The contested meanings of competition in the early development of voguing; and
2. The contested meanings of the erotic in the proliferation of what I call "dances of the posterior" (the family of movement variously called da' butt, freaking, grinding, and twerking).

I will share what I mean by "lost knowledge" momentarily. For now, let me pause to explain my usage of a few other keywords.

- **Hip Hop-era:** My term "Hip Hop-era" refers to a heterogeneous family of dance forms (like breaking, voguing, popping, locking, freaking, and twerking) predominately developed by black and latina/o people that arose in the post-Civil Rights era of the 1970s and that is still being developed today. This development occurs in tandem with that of other artistic forms predominately developed by black and latina/o people—musical forms like soul, R&B, rap, and house; poetic forms like spoken word, slam, MC'ing or commentating, and rap; visual art forms like graffiti; and textile arts like streetwear.
- **Indigenous:** Rather than only referring to native peoples or aborigines, I use the term "indigenous" to refer to practices originating and developing amongst a particular people in particular places at particular times.
- **Social:** By "social" I refer to predominately noncommercial contexts like the home, street, nightclub, or ballroom where dancers' primary aim in the dancing is not to make a full-time or part-time livelihood or display their art to non-dancing audiences, but, rather, to dance as a means to work through their kinship or relationships with one another. Even when money may be exchanged to support the existence of these social contexts, I contend that they are different in aim and scope from concertized or commercialized contexts in which dancing is shared to non-participating audiences who encounter it in commercial contexts like the proscenium arch stage, black box stage, film, or television (and, of course, there are always exceptions to the schema that I sketch here).

There is considerable overlap between dancing developed within "social" contexts and dancing proliferating in commercial contexts. I affirm both contexts and my ideas in the lecture should not be misconstrued as valorizing one over the other.

In the lecture I hope to emphasize that excavating how compositions embody the "social" (or, the ways that the people dance through their sometimes difficult kinship with each other) leads to a different variety of meanings and effects than those gathered through an analysis of commercialized dancing. Consequently, analyzing these meanings

and effects stand as distinct investigations from analyzing concertized or commercialized meanings (or, what the dancing might be sharing to audiences who encounter it in commercial contexts like the stage, film, or television).

Now let me turn to an explanation of what I mean by “lost knowledge.” Explaining this term requires that I share a story. James “Buster” Brown was my first tap dance teacher at Washington, D.C.’s now defunct Kennedy Street Theater and at the long-closed Upshur Street Dance Studio. Before he taught a new variation, he would frequently remark that the movement was even more rich and varied when performed within improvised competitions between dancers offstage in their “down time.” Dr. Brown, as we called him, told us that our improvised dancing at home, on the street, at parties, and at other social gatherings held just as much power as anything performed for the commercial stage.

I remember Dr. Brown bemoaning what he called the “lost knowledge” of the dancing of black people that did not gain commercial exposure on stages, films, and television, or that only gained commercial exposure in ways that exploited, distorted, or diluted the forms to make them more profitable for producers who seek to own the material, cutting out much-needed profits for indigenous creators and developers that help them thrive across their lives. Because few people were documenting this “social” dancing within indigenous, noncommercial contexts, its power constituted a frequently “lost knowledge” for Dr. Brown.

Since I studied with Dr. Brown, I have been smitten with the need to find this “lost knowledge.” I use the words “lost knowledge” advisedly because, in truth, the knowledge is only lost to those who are not pursuing it and we are fortunate that many scholars have documented the existence of black dances within indigenous “social” contexts (and dances by other people of color).

Over the years I found that I wanted to do more than document the existence of this “social” dancing. I also wanted to share what makes the dancing ingenious by discussing how it is composed and performed by originating creators—indigenous black people—and the meanings and effects embodied within such compositions and performances.

As an adolescent I began to call the dancing to which Dr. Brown referred in my kindergarten years as “black vernacular dancing.” For me, “vernacular” is interchangeable with “indigenous.” The term “black vernacular dancing” is an admittedly imperfect, catchall phrase that refers to movement forms created by predominately by black people and related kinfolk like latina/o people that is primarily developed outside of the commercial stage. The phrase refers to a heterogeneous family of dynamic, ever-evolving forms, rather than a homogenous, static tradition.

Key to the “lost” nature of black vernacular dancing is the extent to which the oppression of black people and other peoples of color plays a role within the dancing and the dancers’ proliferation and disenfranchisement. The proliferation of these black vernacular forms extends across the 500-plus years of the European-spawned, white supremacist colonization, genocide, enslavement, and ongoing socio-economic

disenfranchisement of African-descended people within every country to which our ancestors were transported and brutalized in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans.

These forms carry the heterogeneity of movement subjected to constant adaptation under oppressive conditions, and they carry the secrets of a kind of development where creators and their actions do not hold the same continuously policed controls and protections that far more socio-economically privileged forms like the many schools of European-descended classical ballet enjoy in sometimes centuries-old schools that regulate the performance and education of the dancing.

So endemic are the atrocities endured by creators and developers of black vernacular dancing that the specter of oppression is always a part of our "lived dance legacies" even when we want to only to focus on "formal" characteristics. In my analysis, there must be no separation between form and subject as we encounter hard facts and uncomfortable truths of the dancing's development.

Not all cross-fertilizations between noncommercial and commercial contexts are exploitative and the forms have developed in felicitous ways through the interpenetration of people's ideas and practices across multiple contexts. Nor am I promulgating a divide between "traditional" or "pure" black vernacular dancing and anything else. The dancing is indeed already heterogeneous by dint of its history within the transatlantic era of the European enslavement of Africans.

Yet, our learning about these forms is limited if we do not face the facts and uncomfortable truths of oppressive currents within the ongoing development of these traditions. Facing these facts means soberly addressing the systemic problems of frequent white cisgender straight male and female exploitation and profiteering from the dancing, a scourge that sometimes comes with the participation of black actors and other people of color.

Over the years, I have trained with dance teachers who said that their aim is to rid their students' bodies and minds of the "bad information" that comes from our at-home vernacular dancing so that we can become more accomplished commercial dancers. Here I do not refer to matters of healthy alignment and coordination that all dancers need regardless of genre. Rather, I refer to attempts to rid us of what I call our "lived dance legacies"—the movement that tells the stories of our past training, and or the dancing of our friends and families to which we have become most accustomed.

Discerning eyes and ears can oftentimes detect differences of training from two dancers performing similar variations because of subtly diverging inflections and departures in the manner in which, for example, a dancer transitions between major actions.

Dr. Brown adored our vernacular inflections—he thought they were the sign of high intelligence and the ingenuity of the black-created dance forms that have become the bedrock of American popular dancing for stages, film, and television.

Focusing on the composition is key for me. I am not just interested in what is said about the dancing. I am chiefly interested in what the dancing itself says to us—a knowledge that we can excavate through detailed descriptive analyses of the movement (sometimes aided by the use of notation). We can then bring such information in synch with what creators and developers say about the dancing through conversing with them, observing them, and participating in their lives.

So too can we merge these descriptive analyses, conversations, participations, and observations and bring them further in synch with an analogous examination of memorabilia, documents, and other materials that represent the historical records of how creators and developers bore witness to their dancing's meaning.

While I have examined pre-WWII forms like lindy hop variations, the post-Civil Rights era forms that I have most examined are the 52 blocks, voguing, boogaloo, popping, locking (and related forms of staccato, freeze-frame-phrased movement), house, and what I have come to call "dances of the posterior"—or, a diverse family of forms variously named with terms like da' butt, freaking, percolating, and twerking.

Lastly, I also hope to share some distinctions between my work as an ethnographic journalist who integrates approaches from long-form investigative journalism, dance criticism, movement analysis, and movement notation, and other investigations of dancing. For over 25 years, I have been a professional journalist who writes oftentimes daily for newspapers and magazines, either on staff (part-time or full-time) or freelance for print and online. One of my "beats," or the topics that I covered in my reporting, was performing arts. Dancing was one of those performing arts and I wrote hundreds (literally) of previews, reviews, and think-pieces about both concert dance and dancing performed in noncommercial settings. While my current beats are topics like gender and crime, I still report on dancing and the arts from time-to-time.

I am looking forward to sharing with you!