Sharing hip-hop dance: Rethinking taste in cross-cultural exchanges of music

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ABSTRACT

Dance practitioners who specialize in various hip-hop and funk dance styles including breaking (or b-boys/b-girls) tour internationally to perform and teach. In this paper, I explore how dancers share their musical tastes in cross-cultural exchanges. I am interested in questions of authority that emerge in the exchanges of musical values as students learn the “right” music to dance to. Whether dance expresses personal tastes (the “love of music”) or taught relationships between dance styles and musical structures, disjunctures are bound to result. Questions of identity and belonging that emerged through ethnographic field notes address the significance of friendship and mediation in cross-cultural affinities in dance practices.

KEYWORDS: hip-hop dance; education; breaking.

INTRODUCTION

In my own experience learning how to break, from informal to increasingly formal teaching environments, musical tastes have pervaded that development. In the beginning of my practice, I would often practice alone in my home (what b-boys and b-girls call “the lab”) and there I could choose whatever music I preferred. When I practiced out with other dancers, often sneaking into spaces such as malls, or appropriating space in University atriums or city sidewalks, I rarely selected the
music. If I did, I made rather different choices than I would in my own practice at home. At events, DJs would select the music.

When I began to interview dancers from Toronto and New York City for an undergraduate thesis about breaking, and then a subsequent M.A. project, a perplexing issue around musical tastes planted itself at the centre of my ethnographic investigation. In interviews I conducted, a debate over authenticity and authority emerged. Some of the dancers from New York City began to articulate opinions that the dancers from Toronto weren’t “real b-boys” because they danced to house music. In response to such claims, dancers from Toronto, who often danced to both hip-hop and house music in the local contexts of Toronto clubs in the 1990s, would respond by saying that they were fine with not calling themselves b-boys and were happy to refer to themselves as “dancers” as more broadly defined. The interviews I did around 2004-2007, revealing this tension, set me off to navigate the distinctions that could be drawn in a hip-hop dance practice between musical tastes and preferences and questions of authority in cross-cultural exchanges.

Rather than review the literature about musical tastes and identities in this limited space, I would like to propose thinking about dancers’ musical tastes in cross-cultural exchanges. I suggest that these tastes, as expressed in interviews and in the embodied performances of dance, demonstrate that the often-quipped phrase dancers utter, “it’s all about the music”, is most interesting when framed with questions of musical mediation. That is to say, how musical tastes are mediated by various local frames of reference that are subsequently shared out of context with new people to form new friendships and collaborations.

FRiENDSHIP
The first frame of reference I would like to address is friendship. This is a consideration that is crucial to cross-cultural exchanges because dancers form groups (known often as “crews”) across generations of dancers and vast geographies (Fogarty 2012). Pierre Bourdieu (1990) argues that friendships require uncertainty. The bonds and exchanges that create friendships and assert loyalty are coaxed along by the element of surprise. What we expect of others and expect others to do for us is not the foundation of friendship. Considerations of friendship also pervaded the early work of Greek philosophers including the work of Aristotle (2007). Aristotle argued that those that had the same values and affinities would have similar tastes with their friends and share common enemies. Here loyalty is bound to shared meanings and values, rather than familial or educational ties, and is notably marked by exclusions as well as bonds. What Bourdieu (ibid.) suggests, beyond the links between tastes and education formed through practice and over time (“habitus”) is that friendships require surprise and uncertainty over time in unnoticed, ordinary and routine ways. Recent developments in the sociological consideration of tastes, such as Antoine Hennion’s (2007) work comparing groups of rock climbers to people who share musical tastes, although not explicitly addressing friendship, treat tastes as an activity amongst a social group, as expressed by Greek philosophers.
In dance classes taking place at dance studios in Edinburgh and Glasgow, between 2007-2010, North American b-boys taught master class workshops in breaking to local dancers. In the classes, students would often get excited to hear new music and one of the questions that would often be asked is: “What is the name of this song?” One teacher responded bitterly by remarking to me afterwards that dancers should have their own taste in music, that they should pursue music outside of the dance class rather than parroting his preferences. Another teacher refused to share the names of some of the songs that he played in class. Students responded by using new technological devices on their phones to acquire the names of musical tracks that they enjoyed. As my research progressed, there were more examples of teachers who would offer up the names of tracks joyfully and also offer to share music with the students. Although the classroom, as formally structured, is built on the principles of money changing hands, these classes also began to involve the informal exchange of musical tastes. This musical exchange was a component not often considered to be a part of the dance class but a forum through which friendship and shared tastes could be established.

Regardless of whether the sharing of music resulted in further tensions or belonging in the cross-cultural exchanges, what became clear is that, for participants, dance is a performance of musical tastes. Issues of authenticity are often centred on performances of tastes, yet there is still the issue of musical mediation to contend with. The second area I address is the concept of “musicality”.

Musicality
Musicality is a value judgment often offered to articulate the abilities of dancers. To have “musicality” is to embody music through dance as perceived by a spectator. As Lydia Goehr (2008) has pointed out, musicality when used first as a noun in German became a value judgment meant to approve or disapprove of a literary or painterly artwork. It was closely related to the “lyrical” and the “aesthetic”, two other terms emerging around the same time.

In one round of interviews I did with Scottish dancers in 2007, many of them explained that an American b-boy who had come over to give dance workshops wasn’t a very good teacher. They explained that he spent too much time talking about the music and not enough time showing them moves. When I spoke to the American b-boy and witnessed his class myself, I was impressed by some of the advice he offered about how to predict and anticipate music in the dance circle. In his mind, musicality was an aspect that the dancers he had seen could work on and a quality that could indeed be taught. By my estimate, the b-boys that I spoke to at that time didn’t value this quality so much as the acquisition of difficult movements. Here, conflicting value judgments were exemplified.

In a related example from a different area of my field research, when American dancers toured with dancers from South Korea for a hip-hop theatre festival, some of the American dancers expressed contempt to me that the South Korean performers weren’t doing “the same dance”. And posed the question to me, “how can you
rock the beat when there is no beat?” Without getting into the important questions this raises about the ontology of dance (and its separation from music in various traditions), I suggest that this disjunctive reveals how much of belonging in dance practice is organized around musical judgments.

**Musical competences**

In my own teaching, that began at the University of East London for the Dance: Urban Practice degree, musical competences began with an ability to recognize and distinguish fragments of recorded music. In 2010, Kevin “DJ Renegade” Gopie and myself decided that our students in the dance degree should be able to distinguish various breakbeats from each other. In some of our assessments, students would have to listen to various breakbeats (without the rest of the song to offer up clues) and name the track they were from, alongside the name of the artist and the album where they appeared. In the beginning, the students struggled and one student even commented that she wouldn’t be able to do this. By the end of the term, they could name most of the breakbeats and even began to listen to more funk music than they had in the past during personal training time in the dance studio.

Often the music that we played for the students during this time reflected the origins of hip-hop dance and breaking culture as learned from dancers from New York City. I was fortunate as well to be teaching with one of the most well-known international DJs for hip-hop dance competitions, so the music also reflected what students would have the opportunity to hear when they attended current events in the city.

**Taste affinities**

Throughout the research project, I often shared the outlook of the Toronto b-boys who rejected the label of “b-boy” if it meant a restriction of their musical tastes. In my own research, I questioned the label of “b-girl” as suitable for my pursuits, even as my tastes transformed. I began to love the moment of “going off” to the instrumental break of a record specifically and gave value to the cross-cultural meanings and affinities attached to this expression. These cultural meanings had grown through my exchanges and interactions with b-boys from New York City over a longer span of time. In recent years, I have reclaimed the term “b-girl”, after an old school authority from New York City insisted on it. This insistence was explicitly linked to my knowledge of what music the dance is for. Again, questions of authority dominate the labelling processes. On returning to Canada, those that I dance with insist that my dance should be a reflection of my highly personalised musical tastes. Music, they suggest, should be the inspiration for my dancing and our friendship expresses not only shared taste, but also shared freedom to explore diverging tastes. The encouragement here involved the links between dance practice and musical inspiration as a central value that was shared.
The examples of disjunctures, as offered up in the previous sections, between musical tastes and musical acquisition in cross-cultural exchanges suggest that the shared practice of dance is often not enough. Dancers’ performances of musical tastes carry significance when thinking through social belonging and authority.

In the academic contexts of thinking through hip-hop culture as a “global” and “localised” form, the disjunctures around musical tastes for dancers reveal how cross-cultural intersections of taste are experienced. My own experiences are less interesting as an autoethnographic methodological process, and more pertinent for what they reveal about the embodied struggle over discourse in the “localised” appropriations of hip-hop culture. The way that identity is challenged and transformed over time is informed by friendship and the mediation of cultural practices. Cross-cultural friendships offer up new considerations for questions of belonging and identity as centred around musical tastes. The questions I experienced through my own practice as a dancer, through my research, and through my teaching, resulted in subtle transformations of belonging. The conflicts created by competing musical tastes were answered in my own travels not through adherence to a particular discourse but rather a negotiation over time. Dance is not only “about the music” but also how musical meanings are shaped through friendships and teachings that are navigated through time, with surprises, and negotiated through sharing space. This suggests that there is much left to be examined about the relationship between music and dance for a proper exploration of musical tastes and identities in an increasingly “globalised” discourse about mediated youth cultures. The first step is acknowledging that dancers’ musical tastes matter precisely because they change with practice.

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REFERENCES