

BARING
UNBEARABLE
SENSUALITIES

HIP HOP DANCE,
BODIES, RACE, AND
POWER

ROSEMARIE A. ROBERTS



Baring Unbearable Sensualities

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AND POWER



Rosemarie A. Roberts

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Rosemarie A. Roberts is the Dayton Professor of Dance at Connecticut College. She is the author of numerous academic articles and book chapters. Her artistic and scholarly works blend history, dance, and theater to investigate Afro-diasporic dance.

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Liam Cari Muldro, this is for you, son

Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

•

Introduction *xiii*

•

1. Conceptions of Bodies and Embodiments in Dance *1*

•

2. Ocularcentrism and Social Ghosts *31*

•

3. The Excess of Allusion *54*

•

4. If Descartes Danced *89*

•

5. Sharing Unbearable Sensualities in Mixed Company,
or The Art of Critical Engagement *127*

•

Appendix: Video Tracks *147*

•

Notes *149*

•

References *157*

•

Index *165*

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Introduction

On August 25, 1970, novelist and cultural critic James Baldwin sat down to talk with anthropologist Margaret Mead about race and society. For seven-and-a-half hours, they discussed and debated race relations, globalization, identity, belonging, and conceptions of history. Their dialogue, captured in *A Rap on Race* (1971), was intellectual, emotional, and energetic—even heated at times, as the following excerpt indicates (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 189):

Mead: No, you see, I do not accept that I have done things because I dreamt about them.

Baldwin: But I had to accept that I was on a slave boat once.

Mead: No.

Baldwin: But I was.

Mead: Wait, you were not. Look, you don't believe in reincarnation?

Baldwin: But my whole life was defined by my history. . . . my life was defined by the time I was five by the history written on my brow.

Baldwin references the ways racial history is known and embodied in a tilted head, downcast eyes, balled-up fists, and furrowed brow. These and other everyday bodily practices, assumed in communities of color, represent a shared sensibility about the body's capacity to produce knowledge and perform change.

In many ways, Baldwin's and Mead's disagreement centers on how they understand these bodies. For Mead, the "history" that is "written in the color of . . . skin" (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 190) is viewed pre-

dominantly through the lens of the individual body—the experience of slavery that lived and died with those Black bodies that were transported across the Atlantic “on a slave boat.” While Mead concedes that she benefited from white privilege, she frames Baldwin’s assertions as essentialist because she is working from an understanding of the body as an individual possession. Baldwin, however, asserts that history and culture are collective, and so too are Black bodies: they have all borne the unbearable weight and furtive presence of slavery, while simultaneously carrying and affirming legacies of resistance to traditional power relations. Who is right here? Can a body be both singular and collective at the same time?

The interaction between Baldwin and Mead brings to life the difficulty of understanding the deep-seated interfaces of bodies and race in terms that are simultaneously individual and collective. Other artists and thinkers have also grappled with the same problem. For example, twenty years before that conversation, the anthropologist, dancer, choreographer, educator, and activist Katherine Dunham was in Chile choreographing *Southland*, a dramatic ballet about the violent practice of lynching in the United States. The performance crescendos when a white dancer stands on her toes, arches her body back, forcefully thrusts her pelvis forward, and tightly wraps her long raven hair around her neck. Her body instructs onlookers to lynch a Black man for an act she knows he did not commit. Her body, unmediated by words, speaks for itself. But it can do so only because of its singular expression, which is also freighted with historical allusion. In Dunham’s choreographic and scholarly work, bodies are always situated historically and culturally. Indeed, her work on cultural and bodily practices reflects the power of a people to agitate for social change and observes how individuals intervene on behalf of a collective as members of that group and as allies in the struggle for social justice.

This book sees in and senses into Baldwin’s furrowed brow and Dunham’s choreographed arched back histories of social inequality that the body bears. It argues that such histories express themselves physically, in the body, and that this physical expression reveals the specificities of lives lived on the margins. However, academic and pop-

ular cultures have evacuated our knowledge of such histories by erasing Black and Brown bodies as producers of knowledge and agents of change. In response, my work recovers such bodies and their accumulated historical and cultural knowledge by approaching Hip Hop dance as a provocative and sentient resistance to oppressive manifestations of race and power in its audiences. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, scholarship in fields ranging from dance to anthropology has too narrowly defined the power of the body, especially with respect to collective formations. Using multiple critical readings and primary data sources (interviews, focus groups, videotaped studio dances and performances, and field notes) collected at the School at Jacob's Pillow when I was a research fellow during the 2009 Hip-Hop Continuum, I argue that the historical, cultural, and social experiences of marginalized Black and Brown bodies materialize in and through Hip Hop dance from the streets of the South Bronx and other urban centers to contemporary worldwide expressions.

The interdisciplinary nature of this book is part of the scholarly identity I've been forging since graduate school. As a student in the social personality psychology PhD program (now titled "critical social psychology") at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, dance helped me find the deepest expression of ideas, themes, and questions regarding individual and collective identity and group power dynamics. Two projects from that period stand out. *Echoes of Brown: Youth Documenting and Performing the Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education* (Fine, Roberts, and Torre 2004) examined the role of youth artistic expression in identity formation and collective action, while also investigating the legacy of racial segregation and desegregation in public educational settings. The idea of *Echoes of Brown* was to perform rather than present data. Therefore, I scripted and directed a spoken word, dance, and video performance of survey, interview, archival, and focus-group data collected and analyzed with youth researchers for an audience of academics, activists, and public school educators and administrators to help them understand the experience of public education from the perspective of young people.

As *Echoes of Brown* artistic director, I took on the task of extending the reach of social science research beyond traditional academic

outlets. Katherine Dunham's research-to-performance methodology proved crucial to my work at the intersection of youth empowerment studies, collective action, and performing arts. And in my dissertation, which I was also writing while serving as artistic director, I took a further intellectual dive into Dunham's work. I was particularly excited about the flow of the mind, body, and spirit in her interdisciplinary set of pedagogical, research, and performance activities. One of her statements from the volumes of interviews I analyzed became a mantra: "You know the expression: mind's eye. How do [I] see things with my mind's eye? How do I see things if I don't think about my body?"¹ I found myself applying Dunham's questions to psychological and anthropological considerations of group and power dynamics, as well as collectivist and individual expressions of agency and power in classrooms, dance studios, and the concert stage (Roberts 2005). By way of Baldwin's utterances and Dunham's rehearsals and enactments of dance as social protest and resistive provocation, I experienced the possibility of placing an interdisciplinary set of literatures in conversation with one another. The mix of social psychological, anthropological, and dance studies (or social science, humanities, and arts) frameworks and the ways in which I can put them into motion through dance and movement have been instrumental in grounding my ultimate objective, which is to name the complexities and richness of human experience while also understanding how lived particularities interface with social and institutional structures.

This book fully enacts my interest in how Afro-diasporic dance can bridge between the lived and particular and the social and institutional. Discerning the physical sensations provoked by Hip Hop dance helps recover the disappearing body and reveal the accumulated excesses of that which is otherwise concealed. My aim is to reevaluate the conceptual privileges historically afforded to mind, individuals, and whiteness in light of the knowledge produced by Black and Brown bodies in and through Hip Hop dance. In this work, I define *Black and Brown bodies* as peoples of African descent, African peoples, and Latinx peoples. Black and Brown bodies have long embodied the burden of troubling American histories and engaging in bodily practices that both reveal and contend with the obscured presence of these his-

tories. Hip Hop dance is no exception—the acknowledged folks on the margins are the originators and pioneers of Hip Hop dance. The terms *body* and *bodies* help me talk about the physical and emotional dimensions of individual and collective bodies, as well as what they animate. Moreover, the term *Black and Brown bodies* helps me locate the dehumanizing processes applied by white supremacist ideologies and applications such as structural racism.

These terms should not be understood as a way of distinguishing bodies as separate from persons, people, and their humanity. Instead, I am concerned with the ways in which racial histories are, in the words of James Baldwin, “written in the color of . . . skin” (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 190) and the ways in which Black and Brown bodies have borne the unbearable weight and furtive presence of troubling racialized histories, while simultaneously affirming their discontent with traditional relations of power. I argue that such histories seek physical expression, and that this expression reveals the specificities of lives lived on the margins.

These considerations extend to points of style, including capitalization. Using Black, Brown, and White as pronouns speaks to what Nell Irvin Painter calls “the asymmetry of racial identities of blackness and whiteness—and how they function differently in American history and culture.”²

I use the terms Black, Brown, Blackness, and Brownness as an extension and embodiment of Afro-diasporic histories, cultural norms, and realities of marginalization, inequalities, racialization, and related traumas. By using the terms Black, Brown, Blackness, and Brownness, I wish to make legible their importance and to elevate and value their contributions to meaning-making and knowledge construction and production.

I am mindful that Black, Brown, and white are socially constructed categories holding and exerting differential levels of power and privilege in American society. Indeed the elements of structural power and privilege have to be named. However, I wish to not only look back, but I wish to also be forward moving by using the term “white” rather than “White” as an active way to minimize the power and privilege that is held and exerted by and through white supremacy.

Where I'm quoting and/or using the work of others, I retain their spelling of these terms. Which convention to use when talking about Black, Brown, and white as racial, socio-cultural constructions is a complex and unsettled question. Moreover, we are far away from a historical moment when a white reader/viewer will be provoked to view themselves as racialized when seeing an uppercase or capital W for white. By using white and whiteness alongside Black and Brown and Brownness and Blackness, I wish to enact and exert a differential power and privilege that these social positions and the people who embody them have and continue to hold and exert in Hip Hop dance.

Using Afro-diasporic dance as a site of critical bodily practice, I place Hip Hop dance in a larger tradition of Africanist aesthetic principles (Gottschild 1996) and bodily practices (DeFrantz 2004; Bragin 2015; Jackson 1989; Johnson 2012; Martin 1990; Osumare 2007; Sklar 1994) to argue that African diasporic aesthetic and cultural imperatives have been foundational to the creation and development of Hip Hop dance. However African American, Caribbean, and Latinx aesthetic and cultural values are contested and even elided in much discourse around Hip Hop dance in favor of constructions of universal framings of dance. Specifically, I am interested in the ways that these Afro-diasporic aesthetic and cultural values are embodied and practiced, as well as how cultural insiders and outsiders recognize and negotiate them. The origin story of Hip Hop dance centers the genius of urban Black and Brown youth to create a dance form that resonates with youth worldwide. At the same time, the vehicle of videography that drives this global phenomenon often results in a surface-level understanding of Hip Hop dance, as popular media traffic in problematic representations of Black and Brown bodies. As a result, I'm interested in understanding how the School at Jacob's Pillow engages participants and audiences in a live experience of Hip Hop dance taught by pioneers of various styles who are committed to teaching the foundations, aesthetics, history, and physical practice of this dance.

The School at Jacob's Pillow characterizes its program in this way:

Develops dancers for the demands of a professional career.

Unique nationwide, programs of the school mirror how com-

panies work, and immerse participants in the Festival. Rigorous, conservatory-style training is led by legendary artist faculty and draws on the Pillow's ability to connect young artists with the international professional dance field. Five programs are offered annually: Ballet, Cultural Traditions, Contemporary Traditions, Jazz/Musical Theatre Dance, and Choreographers Lab. (Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, 2009).

And here is how the program works, again in the school's own words: "Interested, advanced level dancers, age 16 and up submit their application to the program of interest. Dancers are also recruited through Jacob's Pillow's Recruitment Tour, which features the Pillow's presence at dance festivals, conferences, and workshops, as well as a series of Jacob's Pillow artist-led Master Classes."³

In early 2009, I met J.R. Glover, the Carole & Dan Burack Director of the School at Jacob's Pillow, at a New York City dance studio where auditions were held for the 2009 Hip-Hop Continuum. A Hip Hop dance class, led by Hip Hop dance legend Jorge "Pop Master Fabel" Pabon, provided access to a diverse group of dancers who were auditioning for the program. J.R. frequently traveled to urban centers to hold auditions and recruit students from marginalized communities. If program attendance is dependent on a scholarship, dancers complete a scholarship application. Once accepted to a program, dancer participants are in the studio with faculty 9–5, six days per week; they also become fully immersed in the festival in other ways, for example, by ushering and attending performances, talks, and guest choreographer works-in-progress showings. After 10:00 p.m., the studio is often filled with bodies rehearsing and forming impromptu dance jams. At the end of each week, participants perform work choreographed by faculty on the outdoor stage.

The School at Jacob's Pillow is an elite, professional school of dance that is attended by a largely white student body and audience, with the exception of its Cultural Traditions Program. I became aware of this program when I was invited to the school to teach in 2004. I returned in 2006 to codirect a Cultural Traditions program, which changes from year to year. This program tends to attract a more di-

verse group of participants, though the audience remains largely white. Glover and her staff create the opening for forms other than modern dance while also creating points of access for young people of color and students from poor and working-class communities. In 2009, the School at Jacob's Pillow hosted a second Hip-Hop Continuum as part of its Cultural Traditions Program. My research interests in social justice arts actions by marginalized groups in the context of predominantly white institutions made the Continuum a perfect site to investigate questions of dance, race, bodies, and methodology.

The 2009 Festival program noted that "Hip-Hop is the focus of The School at Jacob's Pillow Cultural Traditions. Program this year, Directed by Rennie Harris. Rennie Harris, whose company Puremovement performs at the Festival later this summer, has brought together an acclaimed group of pioneers, innovators, and international superstars of hip-hop and funk" (Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival 2009). The INSIDE / OUT program also presented a number of bios on the faculty:

- Lorenzo "Rennie" Harris, Hip-Hop Program director and faculty, is an "award-winning choreographer and powerful spokesperson for the 'street' origins of dance who has taught workshops and classes nationwide since the age of fifteen. He founded Rennie Harris Puremovement in 1992 and established the annual Legends of Hip-Hop Dance Festival in 1997, both based in his hometown of Philadelphia. His first evening-length work, *Rome and Jewels*, performed at Jacob's Pillow in 2000, received numerous awards and is the longest touring hip hop dance theater work in U.S. history. Since 1997, Mr. Harris and his company have performed in five seasons at the Pillow, and in 2005, he directed Cultural Traditions: In the Presence of Hip-Hop at the Pillow, a revolutionary program for the field."
- Anthony DeNaro, a.k.a. BBoy Ynot, "is a member of the legendary dance troupe [sic], Rock Steady Crew. He is most known for his rhythmic approach to dance which has earned him respect from the pioneers . . . and also his peers. Through his humble nature and love of the art form, he focuses on traveling and teaching work-

shops in studios and schools across the U.S. and the world. He has toured with theatre groups, such as Rennie Harris Puremovement, and has worked with artists, such as Moby and KRS One.”

- Moncell “ill Kozby” Durden, “is a choreographer, dancer, educator, and dance historian. He performed with acts like Surface, Sweet T., Kid n’ Play, Kwamé, and MC Hammer, before joining Mop-Top in 1998. He later performed with the Lockers, the Electric Boogaloes, Buddha Stretch, and Rennie Harris Puremovement. Durden has intensively studied scholarly and popular literature of African-American vernacular dance forms and general dance studies. He has taught at Drexel University for the past six years. Until recently, he was a senior lecturer of Hip Hop dance and culture at University of the Arts and has lectured and taught master classes and workshops at Princeton, Yale, UCLA, among other institutions world-wide. Currently, Durden is filming a documentary about the deep-rooted structure and African retention presented in dance practices throughout the African Diaspora.”
- Cachet Ivey, “an independent artist, teaches and performs West African dance. She has studied and performed with Ibaji Performing Arts Ensemble, Jeanine Osayande, Youssouf Kambasa, Hodar Banks, Mouminatou Camara, and Tenefig Diabate. She has taught at University of the Arts and University of Pennsylvania, among others. Ivey was Program Coordinator for the 2008 Philly African Dance and Drum Conference, and at the 2008 Tap Dance Festival in Flint, Michigan, she led a workshop illustrating the connections among African dance, drumming and rhythm, tap and other contemporary dance forms. Her choreography credits include concerts for Griot Don! Dance Collective, African Rhythms, Troupe Da Da.”
- Marjory Smarth, who joined the ancestors in February 2015, “was born in Haiti, moving to New York City when she was five years old. Familiar with the native dances of her culture, she was exposed to many dance styles in the United States. By her pre-teen years, she was steadily victorious in many hip-hop competitions, After attending many street jams, and engaging in battles, she took her street skills to the club scene. In the late 1980s, she started dancing

professionally with various music artists, including Diana Ross, Heavy D, and CeCe Peniston. She start[ed] choreographing more frequently, which led to teaching. After many dance tours, four documentaries, and teaching internationally, she is considered a major figure in the dance community and an activist.”

- Mr. Wiggles “is a proud member of three major forces in hip-hop and funk styles culture: Rock Steady Crew, the Electric Boogaloos, and Zulu Nation. He started his career as a dancer by battling the tough streets of New York City and eventually the world. He built his reputation as a battler and took his skills to major stages in Asia, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, South America, and Broadway. [Stefan] ‘Mr. Wiggles’ [Clemente] has been credited with two important moves that helped establish hip-hop as a legitimate dance form: *Beat Street* and *Wild Style*. Mr. Wiggles is still learning his craft today and will remain a true student of the culture until the day he dies.”

Upon arriving at the Pillow, I reintroduced myself to Rennie Harris, and we talked about the research project that I would be undertaking during the two-week Cultural Traditions: Hip-Hop Continuum. We had met in the mid-1990s in New York while I was teaching dance at Eastside Community High School on the Lower East Side, and I’d invited a Puremovement company member to do a class after seeing the company perform at what was then called Performance Space 122 (now Performance Space New York). It was important to me to not only obtain informed consent from Harris and faculty members but also to address any concerns and establish a rapport. We talked about the ethics of conducting research on a topic and dance form that is fraught with misconceptions and (mis)appropriation. During meals, I sat with faculty and we got to know one another. We attended performances together. It was during these interactions outside class that I got a sense of faculty as people who were deeply dedicated to teaching Hip Hop dance. Faculty also got to know me before I attended, observed, and videotaped their classes, as well as interviewed them. At the end of every day, I wrote field notes of conversations,

interviews, and impressions of their teaching and interactions with participants.

My field notes contained reflections on the embodied experience of all my interactions across the two weeks of the Hip-Hop Continuum, which added dimensionality and texture to my understanding of Hip Hop dance. They inspired the ideas for this book and the embodied analytic scheme that I would create to reflect on and integrate my seeing and my experiencing of Hip Hop dance in the Continuum. In this way, the mode of dance ethnography that I created for this project grows from but extends beyond the initial two weeks of fieldwork. After the conclusion of the Continuum, I spent over five years viewing the videotape data hundreds of times and continued to annotate my initial field notes.

The videotape clips and field notes that constitute a substantial part of this book project are not meant to be a Hip Hop dance teaching manual. Rather, I want readers and viewers to consider the question that emerged for me during this period of analysis and reflection following the Continuum Project: What is the relationship between seeing and experiencing Hip Hop dance, especially in the context of racialized power relationships? And how are these relationships embodied and expressed in the contrast between the dance form and the site of study—in this case, Jacob’s Pillow? Put another way, I consider what it means to teach and study Hip Hop dance at a school and performance venue that was started by titans of modern dance and continues, in the main, to cultivate and support modern and postmodern dance.

In chapter 1, I examine the ways the body has been constructed narrowly in scholarship, especially in terms of historicism. I propose that the reductive analytic frames produced by social science and popular culture about Hip Hop—dancing Black and Brown bodies as “entertaining others”—undermine our understanding of the body’s capacity to produce and perform knowledge and act on dominant forms of power. I address how the body is conceptualized in social psychology, anthropology, and dance studies. In the fields of social psychology and anthropology, I follow three trends in scholarship

on the body: (1) the tendency to rely on cognition to analyze the body, (2) the tendency to use the individual as the base unit of analysis, and (3) the tendency to obscure Black and Brown bodies. I then turn to the dance studies literature to ask how bodies are treated in academic writing about the dancing body, especially the body in Hip Hop dance. I also introduce the methods I developed in undertaking this project to address how Black and Brown bodies are both seen and not seen in various literatures and empirical studies.

In chapter 2, I introduce my analytic and methodological interventions. I create a scheme (see Roberts 2005, 2013a, 2013b) that experiments with sensorial modes, which is sentient, kinesthetic, and textural (Martin 1998). This embodied analytic scheme seeks to reveal the ways in which, “social relations of domination are indeed somaticized, as Bourdieu suggests” (Sampson 1996, 621). Using a social ghosts conceptual framework (Gordon 1997), I trace the haunting presence of whiteness and its power to refract and disavow the weight of historical and experiential knowledge of racism and how these refractions lurk in the shadows of Hip Hop dance. Chapter 3 traces the Africanist aesthetic and kinesthetic practices of the Hip Hop Continuum faculty and the ways in which they labor against the refractions of whiteness revealed in chapter 2. In chapter 4, I discuss the production and implications of creating and performing a Hip Hop Dancing collective body for an audience. In keeping with the backstory of the book, I also look at the theoretical underpinnings of collective bodies in Hip Hop dance, against the considerable legacy of mind-body split and fear of group formations. I conclude in chapter 5 by returning to the major theoretical themes of the book in light of what I learned from the Hip Hop Continuum faculty.

The appendix offers a collection of illustrative video clips. In addition, chapters 3, 4, and 5 refer to clips that should conjure, animate, and extend the themes of this book when either words or images alone would limit the subject or the reader’s engagement and experience. I created those clips to offer dimensionality to the topics of this book, hoping readers will find in them a deeper understanding. Please interact with them as you read the text by carefully following the movements, postures, and gestures. Ask yourself the questions I’ve set out

previously in this introduction. If you're looking for Hip Hop dance instruction, I hope that these clips will inspire you to seek out and support the skilled instructors and dance makers profiled in this book.

You will see various formats of the term *Hip Hop* throughout this book. I have chosen to use the capitalized form. As Hip Hop scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2021) states, "*Hip Hop* is a meaningful noun on its own. Moreover, Hip Hop is a culture, a sensibility, and for many a way of life; and therefore irreducible to a genre of music or dance as 'hip hop' tends to represent." Where I'm quoting or referring to a source that writes or talks about Hip Hop culture or dance, I retain the author's format of the term.