# BLACK CULTURE WITHOUT BLACK PEOPLE:: HIP-HOP DANCE BEYOND APPROPRIATION DISCOURSE

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# CH.12 BLACK CULTURE WITHOUT BLACK PEOPLE / HIP-HOP DANCE BEYOND APPROPRIATION DISCOURSE

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Cultural appropriation is currently a prominent topic of discussion, and at any given moment there are readily available examples of it in mainstream pop culture. From such infamous examples as Rachel Dolezal and her performed blackness to predictable practices like dressing up in ethnic costuming at Halloween or at frat parties, accusations of appropriation are actually being heard and discussions are gaining traction.[1] When I first started drafting this essay, Iggy Azalea's appropriation of hip hop—from her "blackcent" to her ignorance of its history—led to demands for greater accountability to the culture and the broader community.[2] While these discussions have not been exhausted, joining these debates seems exhausting because they are so oversimplified that people end up repeating themselves to those with no stake in listening. Therein lies the struggle. In my own work on breaking (also known as b-boying or breakdancing), the appropriation

discussion is complicated by the realities of the culture itself: though born of African diasporic practices, it is a worldwide phenomenon dominated by nondiasporic practitioners whose whole lives have been shaped *by* hip-hop culture. Appropriation is not enough.

To appropriate speaks to both the fact of something being taken and to its being taken up in a certain kind of way: with the power to do so uncritically and unethically. Simply put, appropriation is colonialism at the scale of the dancing body or the sacred ritual object, its life and dynamism reduced to a thing for consumption or a costume for play. Though not exactly "theft"—and I am wary of thinking of culture through the lens of capitalist ownership—the presumption that one has the *right* to stake a claim to something and use it, buy and sell it, misrepresent it, and rewrite its history is colonial logic at work. With that said, appropriation only addresses one type of cross-cultural performance, one that perpetuates systems of power that marginalizes and excludes.

We are in a time when many millennials already know that appropriation is "problematic" or that they might get "dragged" on social media for it. Videos and articles from MTV and *Teen Vogue* distinguishing between appropriation and appreciation, while annual articles decrying black-, brown-, red-, and yellowface costumes attest to the changing terrain.[3] The clearest message in these forums is that it is wrong, and millennials appear to hear the message. What follows that acceptance though?

This question comes out of informal discussions during a lecture wherein my students already know what not to do, yet still question what it means when appropriation is not enough. I am interested in nurturing a discourse that attends to cross-cultural performances that are related to but different from appropriation, and possibly finding language that moves with, alongside, and yet away from appropriation (yes! like a dance). There is a difference between staking a claim to a culture (i.e., appropriation) and the culture's staking a claim to you, possessing you, moving you in unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable ways that become essential to a person's existence. Hip-hop dance lends itself to expanding that discourse precisely because the spectrum of cross-racial performances is embodied evidence of something else. Thus this essay is not about appropriation, but about thinking of appropriation as part of a spectrum rather than a binary.

Within and across dance forms, movement communicates and transmits knowledge that allows people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and races to speak to one another less encumbered by the limits of verbal language. This matters in hip hop because, as I have argued in other work, breaking

is fundamentally informed by Africanist aesthetics even as the faces of breaking are largely of those who are not recognized or might not identify as being of the African diaspora.[4] With particular attention on the dance circle, known as the cypher, key elements of Africanist aesthetics are organizing sensibilities.[5] In cyphers, one embodies lessons in call and response, polyrhythms, improvisation, trickster practices, and spiritual communion not merely as features of the culture but as fundamental dimensions to the practice itself. In learning how to cypher, one embodies Africanist aesthetics so much so that they may also acquire a legible understanding of aspects of other African diasporic ritual practices as well. Practitioners though identify themselves as hip hop (sometimes as hip hopppas, breakers, and the like). They recognize that with these identities come some degree of playing in and with African diasporic cultural elements, and thus blackness. Appropriation suggests that there is no cultural education in such performances. My ongoing research on breaking culture tells a different story, one that recognizes the capacity for dance to articulate a broader range of experiences than appropriation alone addresses.

While there are still places where black breakers figure prominently (cities like Philadelphia and Paris, countries like South Africa and Uganda), anxieties about claiming breaking's Africanist aesthetics comingles a dearth of black breakers with a fear of participating in a lineage of minstrelsy despite a commitment to hip hop—which still carries counter hegemonic politics despite its mainstream life. Shifting our attention to hip-hop dance means recognizing how cultural literacy and practice-based expertise are meaningful components of how bodies physically move in and through the world. If, as is the case in many communities, the manner by which you move your body demonstrates who your people are, then how does hip hop move people both literally and positionally in relation to blackness?

There are other terms that have been used (e.g., cultural exchange, cultural borrowing), yet they don't feel satisfying. "Borrowing" feels transitory, and "exchange" suggests a level playing field or equal sociopolitical standing, which is not always the case. Perhaps, though, a precise glossary of terms is not a satisfactory resolution anyway. What I am leaning toward is activating the nuance and specificity of experience through language that resists blurring the meaning of appropriation.

This essay is an exploration of dance and its discursive possibilities in understanding the convergence of race, performance, hip hop, and Africanist aesthetics practiced worldwide. I attempt to build on similar work from other scholars and bring their approaches to bear on my central questions.

What are the social politics of nondiasporic peoples embodying and circulating aesthetic sensibilities of the African diaspora? What is at stake when this happens in the absence of black bodies? This piece builds on work that attempts to move through, with, and past appropriation to look to hip hop's own cultural imperatives in order to facilitate a language that speaks to the nuanced complexity of cultural exposure, exchange, and belonging.

## When Appropriation Is Not Enough

When breaking hit mainstream America in the early 1980s, it was frequently labeled a "black dance," not because it was solely practiced by African Americans but because of the way that blackness signified in pop culture. Multiple mainstream articles introducing its audiences to hip hop consistently represented practitioners as young, male, and black, while occasionally mentioning Puerto Ricans or Hispanics as secondary or parenthetical members of a "black youth." For example, in a 1983 *Time* magazine article titled, "Chilling Out on Rap Flash," Latino and white participants are prominent in the colorful pictures spreading across the opening pages. Yet the author only refers to their blackness. This was not an oversight; the author is not referring to national identity. Blackness signified the fear and titillation captured in the article's references to gangs, violence, crime, and a new style of cool.[6] Blackness was marked by the fact that it was a street dance dominated by African diasporic youth coming out of urban, working-class neighborhoods. That it was literally practiced on the street, outside of the institutions wherein dance is "supposed" to take place, is also symbolic of its otherness.[7] Breaking traveled with an aura of blackness that signaled coolness, youth culture, and counternarratives of socioeconomic marginalization that together contextualizes much of the black cultural production evident in pop culture.

In the mid-1980s, hip-hop films helped propagate narrow notions of blackness while also buttressing a developing discourse of breaking's multiculturalism in particular. Its selling point became its diversity, which still carries a sense of social possibility. As a consequence, blackness gets discursively resituated as both a source of innovative foundation and a racializing limitation, or the straw man to the promise of multiculturalism wherein race is politically meaningless costuming, "a kind of difference that doesn't make a difference of any kind."[8] While *Wild Style* (1983) gave us a peak into a still unknown culture, the commercial success of *Flashdance* (also 1983) and its two-minute scene featuring the Rock Steady Crew inspired youth nationwide and soon

around the world. The multiracial and multiethnic group of young teenage boys dancing on cardboard in an alley surrounded by adults of different races clapping along set a precedence. Other films followed suit, depicting stories of a multicultural group of sometimes poor, ghetto kids doing good through hip hop, like *Beat Street* (1984), *Breakin'* (1984), and *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984). Minor films like *Body Rock* (1984), *Flash Forward* (1985), and *Delivery Boys* (1985) also showcased moments of breaking among either multicultural or largely white groups. Black and white racial relations played a key role in some of these works, especially in the popular *Breakin'* franchise, whose central character Kelly—a white, upper-class modern dancer—sees a streetdance circle and decides to learn in hopes of distinguishing herself from other modern dancers to further her career. With very little actual breaking in it (popping and locking are showcased primarily), *Breakin'* uses the bodies of streetdancers of color to shore up the film's authenticity and mask Kelly's lack of skills. (Versions of this formula resurface in the *Step Up* franchise [2006–17].)

Popular storylines reek of appropriation and perpetuate narratives of newly welcomed white interlocutors who happily attempt to translate a culture that they have often *just* learned about for the consumption of mainstream audiences both within the films and literally at the box office. In these narratives, white people are typically the intermediaries between the subculture and the mainstream, thereby making it clear that signifiers of blackness (e.g., poor neighborhoods, black and brown practitioners, urban styles of dress and gesture, etc.) were performative not substantive. Simply put, in pop culture representations of black culture centered on nonblack people is our erasure; it is appropriation. Beyond these fictional narratives, though, are lived experiences of exchange that complicate these stories.

For example, I presented an earlier draft of this article at Emory University in 2016, and following the Q&A I was approached by a young Chinese American b-boy from Chicago, now going to college in the South.[9] He asked me how, within this political moment of Black Lives Matter activism, he and his largely white and Asian American crew should hold themselves politically accountable while loving and practicing an art born in black and brown urban, working-class communities? Additionally, going to college in Atlanta made him hyperaware of his own lack of connection to any black community, while espousing a history that he knew came from them. This tension compelled him to stay humble, especially in the face of his own urge to judge the growing competitive collegiate hip-hop "choreo" scene.[10] That is, to him. choreo did little to acknowledge hip-hop streetdance histories or connect

to its current community-based manifestations, yet the choreo scene is also heavily Asian American in practice, forcing him to confront a version of hip-hop culture that was both an affront to his sense of cultural responsibility, and a mirror of his own anxieties about cultural appropriation.

I have worked with several students involved in choreo. A young, white, queer undergrad created a video project that paid homage to the form and expressed his love and commitment to his team and its founders. In a class I taught on global hip-hop dance documentaries, two women active in campus choreo (one black, one white) activated those experiences to engage the course materials. An indigenous woman form New Zealand was also in the class and explained that videos of an Australian hip-hop choreo team exposed her to hip-hop dance before coming to the States. I began to recognize that for women, queer, and international students choreo teams offered a place to enter and join communities of practice that supported their journeys through college life. They too understood that appropriation is bad, but nonetheless one asked, "But there's good appropriation too, right?," with a desire to understand how to account for his appreciation of and commitment to their campus teams. Appropriation does not exhaust our understanding of performances that traverse sociocultural and racial boundaries. Again, for these college practitioners, Africanist aesthetics are embodied, not costumes.

While my students helped clarify my questions, Dark Marc really embodied my struggle with appropriation. Dark Marc was a funky dancer whose musicality and soulfulness were as unexpected as his name. When I first saw him one Saturday afternoon at a dark New York City club in 2006, the then twenty-four-year old, 5′9,″ blond-haired Scandinavian man shimmied and bounced his way into the circle to James Brown's "Give It Up, Turn It Loose." He ignored the emcee's double-take when the name "Dark Marc" was announced, and his talent got spectators on his side. He nonetheless suspected that when people said that he danced well for a "white boy," it was a backhanded compliment. As far as his name was concerned, he chose it after watching *Star Wars*, alluding to "the dark side," arguing (however naïvely) that Scandinavians did not immediately associate "dark" with skin color.[11] He intended no offense; he just thought it was cool. Yet in New York, though white breakers are common, Dark Marc's whiteness stood out *because of* his name.[12] As a consequence, he became a nexus of discourses on race, national difference, hip-hop culture, and an appropriation of blackness itself—discourses that linger beneath the surface of the scene but do not often take center stage.

Ultimately, East Coast audiences appreciated his capacity to groove in synchronous harmony with the music rather than to just do a bunch of breaking moves to impress the judges without regard for the song. In an interview in 2006, Dark Marc told me how his appreciation for funk, soul, rock, and jazz music developed out of his having grown up listening to his father's record collection—some of which has since been canonized among breakers—and appreciating James Brown the most.[13] His father, a drummer, had a vast record collection, and Dark Marc got a distinct education from it. Embedded in his personal history are lessons that lent themselves to breaking. One came from learning drumming at a young age, which taught him about polyrhythms in a black music. A second lesson came from exposure to musicians jamming at parties in his home, which facilitated an understanding of improvisation, another central Africanist aesthetic. These details are neither prescriptive nor indicative of a kind of exceptionalism, but particular to Dark Marc's specific experiences with black aesthetics in music and dance before and subsequently within breaking.

In New York, though, Dark Marc activated several points of tension that could be analyzed just in reference to the "You dance good for a white boy" comment. Instead I want to pay attention to his relationship to breaking. Like other breakers around the world, Dark Marc did not just do the dance; he lived as a b-boy. He saved money to travel, he competed in battles for international respect, and he pushed himself to create and express himself within the form, while continuing to learn the dance's history because *it was his history too*. And that is what gave me initial pause. When I met him, he had traveled to New York City to learn firsthand about the roots of his adopted culture, a shared history with African diasporic, working-class American communities. He went to the South Bronx and Brooklyn to learn from first- and second-generation breakers and uprockers, these days mostly older Puerto Rican men, to teach him about his adopted culture.[14] In my interview with him, Dark Marc goes into some of those lessons, particularly around the rock dance, a battle dance born in New York (some say Brooklyn; some say the Bronx) where breaking adopts its toprock or upright dancing style.

DM: People, I think, people that know, older people that can really see if you know what you're doing, or if you just do it because you seen someone else doing it. If you know the history behind the move and you know the meaning of the move, you do it with much more . . . I don't know how to say . . . you do it much more, uhh, execution because then

you're sure of what you're doing. . . . If you know the meaning behind a lot of the thing then it's easier to also create your own style. Because that's maybe one of the most important things, also too: to learn the dance, the foundation, and then try to do it your way. And, I think a lot of new b-boys that want to try to [say], "Okay, I want to have my own style right now." And then they kind of skip the hard work with the foundation stuff. Then they're original but they don't have no good form, they have terrible form. Like, I think it's really important to know the history, know how the original move is. And then it's much more easy to make your own out of it.

IKJ: So knowing the history of the moves, does it help you innovate?

DM: Yeah. It does help me a lot when I got interested in rocking. It's, uh, let's say when they do the jerks for instance, it's seen when b-boys try to imitate it as when they go 1-2-3-and-4 and they go down on the 4 and hit on 2. That's like the milder version of rocking. And then, when I learned what the rockers described . . . that you grab the opponent and then breaking them on the hips, and then they went down to drop the remaining of the opponent. And then when I learned *that* I was like, "Hmm. That was a cool thing." Then it helps me to like, uh, try to think in different ways . . . and make it my own. . . . I think it's a good help to like open your mind.

Let me explain. Unlike breaking battles, where one person enters the circle at a time and dances in a back-and-forth exchange to breakbeats, uprockers form two facing rows and dance against the person standing opposite them to entire songs while pantomiming stories of dominating their opponent. Not unlike playing the dozens, wherein *how* you insult is more important than the fact of insulting someone, rockers dance out intricate narratives of dismemberment, beheadings, shootings, or breaking backs. The story told is as creative and expressive as a rocker's imagination. So when these moves are acquired as steps rather than individual stories, a gesture of breaking someone at the hips just becomes a squat to the ground.

When Dark Marc talks about learning that the "go down" part is not in fact just a part of a count—as if everyone should drop on the 4—his self-assigned history lesson did more than satisfy a curiosity; it changed how he understood his own practice. Moreover, it opened his mind to thinking differently. This is not to absolve Dark Marc of any responsibilities that come with adopting a culture, nor is this a fantasy of transracial progress through dance. In fact, it is really not even about him. In meeting him, it

struck me that if I take Dark Marc's and my students' depth of commitment to hip-hop dance seriously, then the culture has claimed them. This alone compels a shift in discourse because those experiences are worthy of further exploration.

## Inappropriable Discourse

In an effort to speak to the lived experiences of my interlocutors, I looked to work on cultural production (performance, fashion, theatre, ritual) to offer tools for moving the discussion forward. For example, in one case study featured in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, E. Patrick Johnson writes of an all-white Australian gospel choir—many of the singers themselves atheists. In an analysis of the choir's performance at a Harlem church, he argues that in one moment they "became black," Johnson's way of accounting for the sonic achievement of what gets read as blackness in the voices of a choir. Some members were so moved in fact that they subsequently converted to Christianity. Johnson provocatively engages the language of race to speak to what a depth of performative investment can make possible. His goal is to make the language of race and particularly blackness more porous in order to undermine notions of authenticity, an essentialist discourse that buttresses intraracial practices of exclusion, such as homophobic and heteronormative black masculinities that exclude queer-identified black men. Johnson argues for "embodiment as a way of 'knowing' . . . as a way to disrupt the notion of authentic blackness." Embodiment also becomes a precondition for intersubjectivity and intercultural exchange. Performance allows us to see ourselves in Others and "engage the Others' political, social, and cultural landscape, and contextually constituted subjectivities within contested spaces."[15] Thus, between self and Other are powerful, dynamic, and transformative liminal spaces that performance opens up.

While Johnson's is an explicit engagement with African diasporic aesthetics rather than an implicit engagement mediated by hip hop, there is something to considering what embodied practices make possible. "Becoming black" is not unlike "being hip hop," which is an understanding in hip-hop circles that is all about a deep cultural investment that is lived every day and not merely put on for show or for exploitative profit. It is achievable not in biology but in practice.

Other approaches to embodied cross-cultural performances can be found in different areas of study. For example, Minh-Ha T. Pham's discussion of

appropriation discourse in the fashion industry critiques the language's too easy collapse into binary oppositions (e.g., good/bad, respectful/not respectful, high/low culture, first/third world), which maintains existing power structures even within efforts to critique the fashion industry's repeated appropriative transgressions. Pham makes a case for "inappropriate critique," or that which cannot be appropriated while "continu[ing] to maintain the existing power structure."[16] In her primary example of a plaid design prominent among certain migrant worker groups "poached" for European runways as many critics argued, Pham brings attention to the design's seventeenth-century history left out of the appropriation discourse, which did nothing to undermine the implicit high/low cultural bifurcation that posited that the style was born in slums and elevated by innovative European designers, "obscure[ing] the actual diversity and complexity of the cultural object being copied."[17] Inappropriate critique might instead consider how statelessness and fashion industry wealth might intersect at various points of production, allowing us to ask different questions about who benefits and how. [18]

Works by historian Ivor Miller and performance anthropologist Dorinne Kondo also offer up new frameworks for consideration. Miller considers the participation of white elite Cuban practitioners of African-centered Palo Monte, expounding on the language of ritual to capture cultural identities through initiation, producing what he calls a "spiritual ethnicity" or ritual kinships in a tradition that requires years of study within a community to master an understanding.[19] Kondo centers cross-racial theatrical performances by Anna Deavere Smith and Culture Clash that interrogate the limits of racial discourses of multiculturalism and critiques of "identity politics." Kondo argues that "unfaithful" impersonations in each artists' works—the purposeful gaps between performers and the "other" that they portray—"disrupts audience complacency" by drawing attention to the performative aspects of identity and de-essentializing them.[20]

Though only Johnson and Pham explicitly unpack "appropriation," together these scholars' examinations open up alternative discourses worth exploring. In Kondo's examples, cross-racial performances employ racial signifiers in order to destabilize them, disrupting familiar racial scripts or stereotypes by demanding audiences experience the seemingly familiar differently. Breaking has its own moments of shaking up audience expectations, lending itself to potentially more nuanced discussions of appropriation, which I discuss further below. The language of initiation allows Miller to consider how deep, long-term study of communal practices offer ways to read Dark Marc's cultural adoption in earnest and studied terms. By drawing attention to

inappropriate questions, Pham implores us to reframe appropriation debates so as to not reaffirm power structures of "white Western domination . . . over everyone else." This might, for example, allow us to shift our perspective from whether Dark Marc appropriates hip hop to hip hop's seduction of him, calling to question the capacity for commercial hip-hop industries to supplant embodied hip-hop identities (and thus Africanist aesthetics) with consumer identities. Johnson's analysis makes room for these very engagements, ones that acknowledge the profound impact of performance and the creation of new subjectivities as a result.

These strategies produce their own kind of dance, where counter discourses move with, alongside, and yet away from appropriation. Performance and dance are powerful starting points to ask different kinds of questions and perhaps represent different kinds of relationships within cross-cultural performances and in relation to appropriation. For example, learning how to break necessarily involves some degree of *biting*: stealing or mimicking someone else's style as if one's own. Biting alone is not okay; by definition it is appropriation. Yet beginning breakers typically put someone else's movement onto their bodies as part of their learning process. Insofar as biting is a form of learning, it is also a kind of enactment whose antithesis speaks to how one participates. Hence the cry among breakers: "Don't bite!" To *not* bite—to abstain from the mere consumption of another's style—means that one must respectfully name one's direct and indirect teachers, those who helped to make one's movements possible. As well, hip hop's Africanist cultural logic also necessitates that one must add their own flavor to the style adopted, making for an original style. It is a problem if one fails on either or both fronts. So appropriation is mitigated by cultural imperatives that recontextualize it as learning and even innovation, all while upholding hip hop's history and foundation.

Read symbolically, biting is a couple's dance in a rhythmic negotiation. One partner is present, moving in and through an invisible partner's path. And while one can attempt to embody the style of another—making the invisible present in the dancing itself—the gap between that re-performance and the original is always evident because the originality that birthed that style (necessarily within a particular historical context) is inappropriable. It is precisely in efforts to not bite and add one's own style that shifts away from discourses of "theft" and erasure to an act that conjures up and makes ever present one who is not physically there. It becomes an act of communion and community building, adding new dimensions of style into the dance's expanding repertoire overall.

Breaking also has its own ways of disrupting audience complacency. For instance, there are moments in breaking when uprocking battles occur. Unlike traditional rocking battles structured in two facing lines, uprock face-offs in breaking happen in large groups enmeshed in cyphers. They are structured by contrapuntal exchanges while moving circularly around one's opponent, filling the surrounding space with a pantomimed story of dominating, outwitting, and out-dancing the other without ever really touching. When I first witnessed this moment at a breaking battle, I became immediately alert, somewhat confused, and thoroughly sucked into the drama. At the same time, the "go down" part that Dark Marc mentioned—when it is *not* done to a count but in the context of an individual dancer's story—the "go down" part turns the seeming chaos into rhythmic waves of up and down movement that happen at differential moments yet remain collectively in sync, perhaps enabled by a polyrhythmic enactment of the music through dance. The result is simultaneously funny, disjointed, ordered, and frenzied. Grasping the whole is impossible and watching is a potentially disorienting act. With that said, to be in sync rhythmically is community in action, which is evident in Gena Caponi's discussion of polyrhythms in the introduction to *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*: "Polyrhythmic and polymetric music creates interdependence, because it forces all participants to be aware of each other—of their place in the rhythmic field in relation to others and to the whole."[21] Simply put, it is a communal mode of interaction, and participating in it requires deep listening and bodily awareness of the whole. It necessitates recognizing the central rhythmic thread within the multiplicity, even when it is not being played. Being in sync adds to it rather than disrupts it. As a metaphor, polyrhythms might represent varying depths of cultural initiation, giving us room to talk about different frequencies of participation.

## Conclusion

Dance gives us insight into different cultural rhythms. Someone like Iggy Azalea can mimic the sound but this sonic costuming does not mean she is in sync with hip hop as a culture, despite hitting all of the beats of mainstream commercial rap music. Yet for a while she still had the influence to distort the notions of cultural responsibility. Dark Marc dances to a different rhythm, one that builds on the foundation of his adopted culture. This is a testament to the reality that how we connect to hip hop matters. Yet positionality complicates the matter.

In "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall clarifies why positionality is unstable ground: "We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities. Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification. And that is the most difficult thing about this proliferation of the field of identities and antagonisms: they are often dislocating in relation to one another."[22] Since social identities are multiple, complicated, and always shifting, a "profound subjective identification" with hip hop is always alongside other equally or more profound identifications with race, nation, sexuality, gender, and class, as each continually shift our positionality relative to others. There is no stable, static, or singular positionality from which to locate ourselves that resolves everyday and individual experiences of potentially appropriative acts once and for all. Similarly, appropriation might locate or signal "fields of identities and antagonisms" precisely because our relations to each other via particular modes of expressive cultures are too dynamic and unfixed.

Labeling appropriation on its own does not fix anything (and I mean "fix" as both to resolve and to make stable). Performances that can alter our perceptions and foster deep connections to others can shape discourses that speak to under examined dimensions of lived experiences. Regardless, if cultural exchange (rather than cultural appropriation) truly only happens when groups of people are on equal footing—as dance artist and scholar Ananya Chatterjee argued in her keynote lecture, "Of Thievings, Essences, and Strategies," presented at the 2016 Congress on Research and Dance, on "Beyond Authenticity and Appropriation"—then we have to consider the reality that the terrain of exchange is always shifting and equal footing might not be possible or last.[23] By moving away from the binary of "Is it appropriation or not?," we can consider the polyrhythmic flows of cross-cultural performances: What is inappropriate? What disrupts complacent expectations? What's achievable through sustained study of embodied practices?

It goes without saying that the political stakes of appropriation remain important. So too are approaches to interpreting cross-cultural performances beyond appropriation. Dance allows us to engage these debates differently, just as it allows practitioners like Dark Marc to move differently in relation to and in proximity with others, and to embody an identity that entails responsibilities to a larger collective. Next steps then might entail staying vigilantly attuned to shifting positionalities within larger structures of power, which opens up even more ground for expanding the discourse now couched (and erased) in appropriation discourses. That alone might not be everything,

but it can potentially move us toward a better understanding of our relations to each other.

## Notes

1 Even in such extreme cases as Rachel Dolezal, who morphed her desire to be black into identifying as a black woman, the degree of attention and debate that followed her being "outed" as white further signals how conditioned we are to accept the erasure of black people even from our own identities. Nothing is actually ours.

2 Cooper, "Iggy Azalea's Post-Racial Mess." On Twitter in December 2014, the rapper Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest took Azalea to task for her lack of awareness of hip-hop history, leading to lengthy exchanges with her label boss and fellow rapper T. I. See Williams, "Q-Tip Offers."

3 MTV's *Decoded* video "7 Myths about Cultural Appropriation DEBUNKED!" and *Teen Vogue*'s video "How to Avoid Cultural Appropriation at Coachella" are just two examples that reveal countless additions to these debates.

4 Johnson, "B-Boying and Battling."

5 See Johnson, "Dark Matter."

6 Cocks, "Chilling Out on Rap Flash."

7 Bragin, "Global Street Dance."

8 Hall, "What Is This 'Black,'" 23.

9 Johnson, "Breaking Beyond Appropriation Discourses."

10 "Collegiate hip-hop choreo" refers to campus-organized dance teams that perform choreographed shows on stage, and compete with other college teams.

11 Ironically, even though Dark Marc appropriates *Star Wars* in his name, it is still racialized because the film captures the dark side in the iconic sonic force of James Earl Jones's voice, and then displaces this black man's body with that of an old white man. Race matters.

12 While it is common for breakers to give themselves comedic or self-ethnicizing names (e.g., AsiaOne, Casper), ambiguous cross-racial names are not common.

13 Personal interview 2006; Schloss "'Like Folk Songs.'"

14 Uprocking is a battle streetdance genre from which early breakers borrowed heavily in their own upright dancing styles. Uprocking has experienced resurgence in the b-boying scene in the past decade. Joseph Schloss discusses uprocking's relationship to b-boying history at length in *Foundation*.

15 Schloss, *Foundation*, 230, 213.

16 Pham, "Fashion's Cultural-Appropriation Debate."

17 Pham, "Fashion's Cultural-Appropriation Debate."

18 Pham, "Fashion's Cultural-Appropriation Debate."

19 Miller, "The Formation."

20 Kondo, "(Re)Visions of Race."

21 Caponi, "Introduction," 10.

22 Hall, "What Is This 'Black,'" 28, 30–31.

23 Chatterjea, "Of Thievings, Essences, and Strategies."

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