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Krumpin' In North Hollywood

Public moves in private spaces

These streets are a battleground, but not of the expected kind.

—Mike Davis

The 818 Session begins with phone calls, text messages, word-of-mouth exchange, and Facebook updates. Every Wednesday around midnight, working class African American, Latino, and a few Asian-American young adults travel to a relatively empty but vast strip mall parking lot on the corner of Magnolia Boulevard and Vineland Avenue in North Hollywood. Although the majority of shops are closed, stragglers still wander into one of a number of 24-hour fast-food joints. Outside of Carl's Jr. bodies hover, despite the "No Loitering" signs and the ever-pervasive eyes and surveillance of late-night security. In front of Red Barn Pet Express, another group forms. A parked white Toyota Venza blasts music, its owner leaning on the hood. People bob their heads to the beat.

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King Charles, Worm, Miss Prissy, Manny “Xclusive”, and Outrage. PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF ST. ANDREWS.

The dancing ignites. A male krumper assertively stomps the asphalt. He snakes in and out of the Toyota’s driver side window with his upper body. His arms whip at the air and his ankles twist side to side, rolling him up to his tiptoes. His torso undulates, then his chest pops out and contracts back repeatedly, powered by the push of his hand resting lightly on his heart. The lights that surround the dancer create a leviathan outline of his shadow. He looks at the crowd with a boastful smirk and then his face morphs into an expression of anger and anguish. The groups converge tightly around him as if to keep his body warm. They push

him when he comes close, yelling, “That’s buck!” and “It’s your world!” What prompts the krumper to initiate this session? Maybe he was guided by the beat, a challenge by a fellow dancer, or a sudden rush of adrenaline.

The presence of local police and paid security, however, is a reminder of the parking lot’s status as privatized space. Circling its perimeter, they survey the session, frequently commanding the dancers to decrease the volume of their music and disperse, or risk imprisonment.

These practices—the young people gathering in an empty but private lot, the police encroaching—evoke the

general culture of domination and regulation in Los Angeles, where black and brown working class youth's mobility and use of public space is increasingly curtailed. Simultaneously, corporate takeovers of public space and the growth of outdoor performance spaces that cater mainly to monied interests have come to be the norm. Organized primarily around consumerism, these latter spaces restrict invention, expression, and community-building, practices that are quite common to youth subcultural forms of performance, play, and leisure. Such racial injustice and social marginalization, a dynamic that scholar George Lipsitz refers to as "the racialization of space and the spatialization of race," plays a fundamental role in shaping and limiting the spaces where street dancers can perform and interact.¹

This same dynamic, however, has compelled these street dancers to establish alternative locations for performance and recreation, particularly in underused and undervalued city locations. For the 818 Session's attendees, an empty suburban parking lot has been repurposed for community building and creativity. It demonstrates how racial and spatial politics not only condition people's lives, but also are brought into play by individuals and groups as means to create and exercise more liberating modes of existence and opportunities for collective exchange and awareness. In a similar vein to what scholar Joseph Schloss argues about breakdancing, "These bad conditions . . . also provided specific opportunities that creative youths exploited to create their art and their lives."² Street dancers' "claiming of space," as communication scholar Murray Forman notes, "makes existence, no matter how bleak or brutal, something with stakes, something worth fighting for."³

Krump's Origins

Contemporary dance represents individual and collaborative artistry and is about trusting the process of discovery, and letting go and letting the movement move you, rather than you trying to move the movement. . . . The head has a million points that you can lead from. The hands have energy. They are like your mouth. You can speak with your hands. Turn your feet into paintbrushes. . . . But the floor is not your only canvas; space exists behind you too. I try to train kids to be artists rather than just dancers. —William Wingfield

Krump is hybridized Hip Hop dancing that fuses West African, Latin, b-boy/b-girl and other vernacular dance forms.⁴

Krump's origins lie in another local dance style, clown dancing.

Foot stomps, chest pops, limb syncopation, arm swings and flailing, syncopated pelvic thrusts, booty-popping, and constant improvisation, among other bodily movements, characterize krump. Facial expression is also important—dancers' faces display a range of expressions and emotions. Whether it's a flirty smile or a raging scowl, every expression amplifies a mood and complements the movement.

Created circa 2002 in South Los Angeles (formerly known as South Central) and the surrounding cities of Inglewood and Compton, krump's origins lie in another local dance style, clown dancing. Thomas "Tommy the Clown" Johnson, an African American ex-convict and former drug dealer, spawned the latter in the mid-to-late 1990s after he began performing as a hired clown at neighborhood birthday parties. His dancing exaggerated standard Hip Hop moves with greater expression, explosive movement, improvisation, and outrageous performance. Donned in clown suit, multicolor Afro wig, and face-paint, Johnson was later joined by several black youth whom he mentored. Johnson's group went on to popularize the style, and other young adults began forming their own respective clown crews and competed against one another at events Johnson organized.

Krump grew from the inner sanctum of Johnson's crew. Marquisa "Miss Prissy" Gardner, Ceasare "Tight Eyez" Willis, Jo'Artis "Big Mijo" Ratti, and Christopher "Lil' C" Toler pioneered the dance form. Their clown dancing became more aggressive and high-speed, characterized by more adamant movements, most centrally chest pops and palpitations, arm flails and swings, stomps, and exuberant communication between dancers. They fused the amplified movements and performance style of clown dancing with the uninhibited sexuality and sensuality of stripper dancing, another local dance style that gave greater room for eroticism and desire. Now a guest judge on *So You Think You Can Dance*, the popular dance competition television show, Lil' C details krump's genesis. "It's a hybrid of clown dancing and stripper dancing but just an evolved form of the two, extremely raw, way more emotional, way more eternal, so

“The session is thus a kind of informal competition among individuals, but is also a collective activity.”

much more visceral, so much more ballistic, so much more organic and authentic. It’s so many things. It’s gumbo.”

Clown dancing was refashioned towards greater body-control, more forceful, provocative movement, and greater room for personalized, emotional narrative. Dancers also blend in other street dance styles such as b-boying/ b-girling (breakdancing) and the West Coast originated forms of popping and locking.⁵ It is this feature that allows street dancers to cultivate signature styles, and it is the uniqueness of each dancer’s signature style that eventually determines their individual performance identity and name, such as Flash, Unknown, or Phoolish.

Krump performances revolve around *the session*, an informal circle of onlookers and dancers where dancers take turns performing, each dancer in effect “calling” out to the other surrounding dancers and viewers through spontaneous performance. The latter group “responds” through cheers of acknowledgment, encouragement, and exclamations of amazement. This bodily communication and exchange between performer and community demonstrates the centrality of both individualist and collectivist motivations at the session where, as scholar Iain Borden explains, “The session is thus a kind of informal competition among individuals, but is also a collective activity.”⁶

Krump has thus spilled into North Hollywood’s underutilized spaces, offering black and brown street dancers a ritual gathering to collectively reshape their environment and challenge much of what constitutes shared space in Los Angeles. A neighborhood not normally identified in terms of avant-garde practices of art and the cultural expressions of racialized urban youth has become a prime location for alternative configurations of the city. Late at night on Wednesdays, the 818 Session provides an intriguing window into the juncture between marginalized young people of color, street dance, and urban environment.

The 818 and race-space configurations of Los Angeles

Ten years ago the most popular and widely attended session were the Battle Zones, annual dance competitions

organized by Tommy the Clown at the Los Angeles Western Forum. Krump also gained greater local attention after being first brought to the screen in Mark St. Juste’s 2003 documentary *Shake City 101*. And since then it has grown into a national and international phenomenon within popular culture, crossing over into music videos, on US-based dance-competition television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *America’s Next Best Dance Crew*, as well in major film productions including *Bring It On: All or Nothing* and *Step Up 3D*.

But it was *Rize*, video-director and photographer David LaChapelle’s 2005 documentary, that brought the dance style its most significant attention. Miss Prissy, one of *Rize*’s standout performers, remarks about krump’s rapid explosion after the film’s release, “It was like red ants, it happened so quick. It was so crazy.” The film’s narrative summarizes clown and krump dancing’s initial development and situates the dance styles within Afro-diasporic dance practices and within Los Angeles’s history of race-relations and black disenfranchisement. The film moreover elaborates a very particular spatial regime. South Los Angeles’s urban landscape, the film’s primary backdrop, is framed singularly throughout the narrative as a space mired down by high rates of unemployment, decreasing work opportunities, immense gang and drug activity, substandard education and social services, and coercive police repression. The neighborhood is thus made to represent the embodiment of violence (bodily, epistemic, economic, educational). Dancer and theater arts writer Ariel Ann Nereson criticizes this treatment of South Los Angeles, arguing that LaChapelle’s “presentation of gangbanging, poverty, and violence as inevitable paths and virtually natural to the environment of South Central forecloses the possibility for other realities, other experiences and interpretations of this community.” Consequently, blackness, she points out, is pathologized and objectified via space. Portraying krumping as the “the sole alternative to gang violence, prison, and what seems to be certain early death,” the film provides viewers with the director’s “vision of South Central,” a representation that disregards the plurality of black Los Angeles life



Lil' Bad Newz performing at the 818 Session. PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN CARINO.

and which “increase[s] the distance between South Central and the other metropolises of the world.”⁷

Sadly, *Rize*’s representation of South Los Angeles is in line with the neighborhood’s dominant representation in mainstream media, the 1990s’ “new urban cinema,” and some academic scholarship. Such depictions perpetrate stereotyped understandings of working class black Angeleno life, narratives that only imagine black youth subcultural play, creativity, and performance within *particular* urban contexts—the blacktop of the basketball court, the street corner, the exterior of the corner store. Over a decade ago, historian Robin D. G. Kelley criticized those portrayals as incorrect and stifling. He argued that “these very stereotypes of the ghetto as “war zone” and black youth as “criminal”” participated in “structur[ing] and contain[ing] their [black youth’s] efforts to create a counter-narrative of life in the inner city.”⁸

In addition, these discourses reproduce assumptions of extreme separation existing between Los Angeles urban and suburban communities, where “South Los Angeles is depicted as a locale unconnected to the rest of Los Angeles.”⁹ Krump’s manifestation in North Hollywood, an inner-ring suburb of Los Angeles, challenges such narrow framings. Over the last few years, several of krump’s originators have appropriated a number of North Hollywood spaces identified as private or semi-private property, and remolded them for performance, style, and play. In these contexts, space and place are aestheticized—they are

viewed and performed as embodying spirit, mind, body, architecture, sound, gender, and community all at once. Led by Miss Prissy, Lil’ C and Mijo, “the 818 Session” was established in 2005 (the session is named after its area code, which covers North Hollywood and several other neighborhoods in the San Fernando Valley).¹⁰ The crew began organizing weekly krump circles at Global Café, a Studio City restaurant and rental space. These sessions were open to anyone and basically provided street dancers a collective space to perform, share ideas, and learn new moves. However, when the increasing number of attendees posed a fire hazard, the session was relocated to several places: a church on Tujunga Avenue near Sherman Way, an abandoned movie theater parking lot on Laurel Canyon and Victory boulevards, and later, North Hollywood Park. A string of disruptive run-ins with the police and local gangs ultimately prompted the session to move to its current location, a parking lot within a complex that houses a Ralphs grocery store and several other business.

As two of the most widely known faces of krump, Lil’ C and Miss Prissy provide legitimacy and authenticity to the 818 Session. Prissy often pulls people aside for one-on-one conversations and calms the flaring tempers of agitated dancers. And Lil’ C can often be found opening the doors of his car so his stereo speakers can serve as the session’s sound system. He also monitors the amount of space within the dance circle, frequently asking people to “open it up” when the dance space shrinks.

From the onset, this gathering was framed as an “all-city session,” a label drawn from the fact that the session served as an assembly space for street dancers from all sections of greater Los Angeles. Several factors led the dancers to perceive and position North Hollywood in such a way. First was its short proximity to Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles. Its uniqueness as an area known for dance and the entertainment industry was also important. While North Hollywood is a central site for dance auditions and dance studios, which include most notably Millennium and Debbie Reynolds, major cinema studios such as Warner Brothers and Universal are also based in or near this area. The neighborhood’s general solitude during late evening hours was another significant factor. The fact that the area lacked both high gang presence and high police surveillance offered dancers the feeling that they were entering a space where their well-being was at minimal risk, where the terms and boundaries for membership were not organized along neighborhood or street ties.¹¹ “There are no gang bangers out here,” assures krump dancer Deidra “Krucial” Cooper, “There’s no real violence. It’s the 818, Valley, Hollywood, North Hollywood type of style. Everybody can meet here . . . It’s this group from Compton, this group from Inglewood, that group from Watts, this group from Hollywood. It’s the meeting ground so people can feel like they’re not on one particular side.” B-Boy also attests to this general feeling of safety. “You got kids, anybody from any type of background. We all get together. And if there is a problem, we solve it through dance and then we talk about it and then everybody’s happy. It happens. 818, it’s a really warm feeling. If you can dance, it’s like you’re at home. Whether you’re an outsider, we always accept anybody.”

Within the lexicon of Hip Hop culture, “all-city” is a term made popular among New York graffiti writers. Steven Hager explains that when a writer would get their “tag written on all the major subway lines and in every borough in the city, he has gone “all city.””¹² Hager’s comment reveals a clear distinction between the use of “all-city” by 1970s

New York graffiti writers and contemporary Los Angeles street dancers. For the former it bespoke the positioning of an artists’ tag in all sectors of the city, somewhat akin to a company’s ability to situate its brand in numerous areas. Graffiti masterpieces on subway trains were imagined as mobile advertisements. In contrast, for krump dancers “all-city” describes a space available to dancers of multiple styles representing numerous zip codes and a site that is constantly being relocated as a result of newly emergent challenges.

The differences between these two articulations owe a great deal to Los Angeles Hip Hop’s traditions relating to public space. Brian “B+” Cross, photographer and music historian, explains the impact of Los Angeles’s spatial ecology on the evolution of Hip Hop practices in the city:

Public space is different in LA. Cruisin’ in a kitted out ride (car) is a popular pastime. Graffiti are more common on the freeways than on public transport . . . Uncle Jam’s Army put on large shows and was essentially *nomadic*. Learning from the ‘Chicano Woodstocks’ (par Reuben Guevarra) that were being organized on the east side, they built *flexibility* into their events – this month they would be at the Sports Arena, next month the Convention Center. This is different from the Bronx scene where people were completely committed at first to single spots or hoods. [Emphases added]¹³

As Cross relates, ingrained in Los Angeles Hip Hop’s region-specific negotiations and navigations of space is readiness and pro-activity toward identifying alternative spaces for performance and enjoyment. This proclivity toward movement and relocation is, for one, a factor of Los Angeles car culture and the extensive layout of the city. But also, Los Angeles Hip Hop practitioners’ migration orientation aids them in dealing with and responding to ineluctable impediments such as neighborhood sound ordinances, police surveillance, and gang hostility. It does not represent a lesser attachment to or valuing of space and place than other regional Hip Hop scenes. It rather embodies a perception and practice that conceives Hip Hop space and place as

Everybody can meet here It’s this group from Compton, this group from Inglewood, that group from Watts, this group from Hollywood.

The spaces available for spontaneous and autonomous public interaction, cultural contact, and play are being eliminated.

moving space, rather than just “single spots or hoods.” For Los Angeles Hip Hop, the city’s sprawling geography has served as an interstice to be utilized and exploited.

At any rate, what connects the articulations of “all-city” by graffiti writers of 1970s New York subways and the 818 Session is that both of them attempt to redefine and reorganize what is in fact meant by “the city” and who “the city” belongs to. In a similar vein, as writers’ appropriation of the subway car as a collective canvas to articulate and challenge to what ends city space and public transportation can be used and valued, the 818 Session brings forward the problematic relationship between privatization and urban space in LA.¹⁴ More and more, the spaces available for spontaneous and autonomous public interaction, cultural contact, and play are being eliminated. In their place are commoditized spaces organized primarily around engendering commerce and regulated through technologies of surveillance, policing, and exclusion.

Architecture and urban history intellectual Margaret Crawford has written that while the displacement and criminalization of the homeless and the redevelopment of many public spaces has left historical locations such as Pershing Square unoccupied, privately run outdoor spaces of consumption have proliferated. Universal City’s Citywalk, the Grove Shopping Center in Miracle Mile, the Westfield Century City Mall, the Staple Center and LA Live plaza downtown, and the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica all come to mind. The façade of public space and guise of a walking city within these locations masks a more repressive and bourgeois reclaiming of space. Considering the decreasing number of spaces for youth interaction and public dance, Citywalk, in particular, demonstrates the most blatant contradictions of what happens when such performance spaces are controlled and regulated by private interests. On Saturday nights, in the center of this extremely panoptic shopping space one finds an illustrious and oddly empty stage where its sole body, a DJ, spins pop hit after pop hit. Patrons of the mall are encouraged to dance in front of

the stage, where a number of hidden cameras will then display their moving images on an enormous screen placed at the top of the stage. Despite the pleasure gained from the ensemble of bodies that participate, this space and staged performance merely presents the *spectacle* of spontaneity and freedom. As Crawford explains, “The management of this privately owned space has the right to exclude anyone they deem undesirable, in addition to those groups of the public already discouraged by its suburban location, six dollar parking fee, and heavily policed spaces. To many architectural and urban critics, Citywalk’s success demonstrates the total absorption of public life by private enterprise.”¹⁵

In Los Angeles, a dominant class of city developers, political officials, and transnational capital have led the way for the rise of such privately owned and operated spaces for public interaction. By corporatizing and monetizing city-wide projects revolving around urban revitalization, gentrification, and rezoning, these groups have privatized and semi-privatized numerous public spaces. Such initiatives, according to writer Mike Davis, “discipline spontaneity” in Los Angeles, and intensify racial segregation and class differentiation in the city. To curb the erosion of particular areas’ property values (as a result of working class black and brown bodies’ use of these spaces), the meeting zones of gentrification have been refashioned away from the open, unrestrained, heterogeneous nature of the street toward the synchrony, manageability, and homogeneity of the privately owned megastructure and supermall. By reducing and policing the spaces where young black and brown Angelenos are allowed access and autonomy, a new terrain of crowd control is cemented, one “intended not just to ‘kill the street’ . . . but to ‘kill the crowd,’ to eliminate that democratic mixture.”¹⁶

Other intellectuals besides Crawford and Davis have questioned Los Angeles’s racial-spatial order with particular focus on its impact on working class black and brown Angelenos. George Lipsitz asserts that such spatial projects epitomize the “white spatial imaginary”—the organization of



All eyes are on krumper Lil' Bad Newz. PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN CARINO.

space primarily along the lines of exchange value rather than use-value, and around intensive practices of racial and class exclusion, surveillance, and prohibition.” He points out, “It produces a racially-marked form of consumer citizenship” that “fuels allegiances to defensive localism and hostile privatism.”¹⁷ Laura Pulido extends this argument to interrogate the ways such practices work through racial and class segregation that differentiate and disconnect urban and suburban communities.¹⁸ Daniel Widener, on the other hand, points to the ways policing and spatial regulation have worked to stifle black cultural production and artistic institution building in Los Angeles. He cites police repression of Central Avenue’s interracial jazz scene during the interwar period, FBI surveillance of the Watts Writers Workshop and the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra during the 1960s and 1970s, and the Bureau’s harassment of rap artists such as N.W.A. and Ice-T’s heavy-metal band, Body Count, during late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁹

Getting Buck

Our tendency is to think of space as an abstract, meta-physical context, as the container for our lives rather than the structures we help create. —Kristin Ross

Amidst this oppressive regime, the 818 Session offers alternative configurations and imaginings of the city. This is animated firstly through the session’s appropriation of public and semi-private spaces – abandoned lots, parks,

churches, and currently the parking lot of a shopping center. The use of the latter, in particular, resituates the parking lot’s function away from commerce and capital-exchange. The 818 Session instead views it as neglected and unused space. Consequently, by exploiting the parking lot’s emptiness and its significant amount of unused time, the 818 Session rescripts the lot’s utility in ways that confront and counteract the property logic imbued in it. The session also transforms the parking lot’s suburban and sedate character, making full use of its very absence of social life, vehicles, and commerce during the late hours of the evening. The boisterous, energetic, and confrontational nature of the 818’s multiracial and multiethnic collective, as well as the spontaneous nature of the session, provides the parking lot, and North Hollywood in general, with an explicitly urban character.

The fact is, the parking lot makes a great performance space. Its physical structure plays a fundamental role in fostering a vibrant space for dance and performance. Its semi-bright lights and open space are somewhat reminiscent of the almost-now nonexistent brightly lit public basketball and tennis courts where kids interact and play into wee hours of the night.²⁰ With so many of the latter type of locations either eliminated or now attached to private complexes such as colleges, neighborhood associations, or club gymnasiums – sites where access is determined predominantly by membership and where authorities can regulate access – lots like that used by the 818 offer crucial alternatives. While the venue’s easy-to-find location and openness

accentuate the welcoming attitude of the 818 dancing community, the parking lot's lighting provides the performance area with a stage-like ambience where the light from streetlamps enlarges the dancers' torsos, limbs, and movements. What viewers obtain is greater scale and juxtaposition, features that heighten the performance.

The dancing is further amplified by the audio quality of the performance space. The lot's acoustics allow for high noise transmission and minimal noise suppression. The open space makes possible potentially loud volume and improved quality of sound. The audio recordings that are played and danced take on greater sonic weight and dimension – the thump of the bass, the kick of the snare, and the echo of voice and melody increase in magnitude. Lil' C, for instance, attributes dancers' theatrics to the sonic force of the music played at the session. "It is a physical interpretation of that which we were hearing," he remarks, "the hard base and the snares and the kick drums and the adlibs and the screams from Busta Rhymes to 50 Cent to Cassidy to Dip Set. People like Swizz Beatz, Pharrell, Rockwilder . . . they just motivate us to move in that sort of way." Here, Lil' C echoes a prominent scholar who describes how "space is measured by the ear," that is, the ways "space is listened for, in fact, as much as seen and heard before it comes into view."²¹ Miss Prissy agrees, adding that the emotions the dancers wear on their faces and exhibit in their movements also become more profound in the semi-brightly lit the parking lot. "You can see all of the muscle structure. There's so much power behind it," she says.

Use of the space's gadgets and technological instruments – electrical poles, fences, doorways, and most significantly, cars – also helps to heighten krump performances. Whether jumping through the window or swinging on a door or pole, a dancer can feed off the object's energy and work within and around its existence, just as the shape of a building or brightness of a neon sign might inspire her. Contorting her body into a tight line, the dancer will slip and wriggle through these spaces, conveying a message that nothing can impede her, that squeezing her way through tight spaces and difficult circumstances is a practice essential to her life. Representing what music and theater arts scholar Thomas DeFrantz describes as "movement ideology" and "compositional ideology," these kinds of dance gestures aestheticize a politics of transgression and resistance—they embody both the overcoming of immense odds and unique styles of movement and being.²²

Several dancers insist that the lot's architectural structure influences their creative process and physical movement; that is to say the lines, angles, shapes, colors, and textures of the buildings and terrain are a central part of their imaginative palette. 818 krumper Christopher "Worm" Lewis relates the importance of the session's physical surroundings to his krumping, most centrally the luminous colors projected from various businesses' awnings and signs. "You use your surroundings in krump," he explains, "I may be dancing and look right and Carl's Jr.'s red color plays into my story." He elaborates that these structures become part of his performance. Rather than experiencing them as physical objects and preconfigured edifices that contain and surround his movements, Worm situates them as formations that he both uses and reproduces in new arrangements, new compositions. He states that for him "seeing a structure" is comparable to "seeing a square [and] turning that square into a thousand other squares." For Worm, dance thus provides a portal to a different organization and assembling of physical space, one where the space of the parking lot doesn't simply exist on its own but is continuously composed and recomposed by dancers into existence. "I feel once you start to realize that it's a subconscious thing and start to move it a few rows forward in your mind you start to become more of a dancer, more emotion. That's the word that keeps coming to mind: more."

Worm's articulation encourages a consideration of how spatiality is produced and reproduced through consciousness, social being, corporeality, and embodiment. His statement relays that he treats spatiality and architecture as lived productions and lived experience integral to the formation of human subjects. Rather than approaching and experiencing architecture and space as unmovable objects and structures separate from social life processes, Worm theorizes them as processes, representations, and practices innate to what it means to be human, available for human use and reconstruction. His statements tie into what scholar Henri Lefebvre theorizes as the "spatial body," where the body represents a dynamic intersection of terrain, embodiment,

"I may be dancing and look right and Carl's Jr.'s red color plays into my story."

corporeality and social identity. “For the spatial body,” Lefebvre writes, “becoming social does not mean being inserted into some pre-existing ‘world’: this body produces and reproduces—and it perceives what it reproduces and produces.”²³ Chopper, another dancer, builds on this idea. Remarking on the impact of krump, he employs a spacial metaphor:

This style touches a different place inside me . . . *somewhere* new that you haven’t been. Krump is where not a lot of people get to go; so this allows you to go there . . . It’s *your own there*. I can’t say it’s a specific there. I can’t say that today is the there I’m going to be tomorrow or the next time I do it. Right now I’m somewhere I ain’t never been before and next week I’m going to go somewhere else . . . It just depends but you’ll feel it. It’s *there*. [Emphases added]

From this perspective, krump and street dancing offer an intriguing lens to consider racial corporeality in performance as well as how some young working class black and brown Angelenos grapple with the challenges of social life by reconstructing particular social and physical spaces with meaning and value. Krump’s warrior character and hard-hitting energy are reflective not just of the music to which dancers listen and perform, but also of the marginalization and disenfranchisement they experience. Anger and frustration produced by poverty, family trouble, limited work opportunities, and lack of access to quality educational and recreational spaces are constructively channeled. Worm details the difficult circumstances several dancers face within their homes. “We were dealing with adult issues, and things were happening, like domestic violence and molestation. We [therefore] didn’t want to always be happy. We weren’t happy. [As a result] our dance started to have more grittiness to it.” This pain can be discerned in specific dance movements. Gestures toward shooting, stabbing, hanging, kicking, and punching can illuminate the violent acts and forms of oppression inflicted on these dancers and their respective communities. But at other instances, these movements are deployed for the sake of catharsis, rehabilitation, and healing, and to represent the courage of fighting back.

Corporeality and performance therefore take on important spatial politics at the 818 Session. Street dancers are confronted with the “space of experience,” that is to say, with “what surrounds the body, the context wherein we find

ourselves,” meaning the ways physical environment, material conditions, and social discourse regulate and constrain their lives and choices.²⁴ But as Chopper and Worm assert above, street dance enables 818 participants to productively reconfigure these dilemmas—these *structures*—into new forms. Embodiment and performance thus facilitate redefinition of space and contestation of the dominant culture’s practices of assigning space. At the 818 Session street dancers *embody* space—they give expression to their identities and make visible counter-arguments about how space should be used and who can use it. According to communication scholar Murray Forman, it is through these kinds of practices, “the process of making spatial sites significant,” that people enact “the active transformation of space into place.” Forman elaborates, “It emerges as a meaningful domain through experience, perception, and the visceral contact that occurs as one interacts with the physical and social environment . . . In other words, place is produced according to rhythms of movement and patterns of use.”²⁵

That dancers of different racial, class, geographical, and dance backgrounds are able to give expression to their identities in distinct and creative ways in this site is perhaps its most important aspect. Among one another, street dancers perform and are made privy to multiple renderings of the city, multiple formulations of what Los Angeles is and represents. Frankie J, a 1980s b-boy, dance documentarian, and videographer of the 818 Session, explains, “What makes 818 amazing is that these kids come here, they’re not local kids. They don’t live just a few blocks away. [A] lot of these kids live in Long Beach. They live in South LA. They live in Compton, in Watts, Inglewood, Crenshaw District. They live in the West part of the Valley. They live in Lancaster, Los Vegas, Orange County, Long Beach . . . these kids who come consistently take trains. They bike here. They get dropped off here.” A North Hollywood parking lot thus offers these travelers an important node—a site for the intersection of different dance styles and identities. Here it is not social class, formal dance education, or racial identity that serve as these travelers’ key modes of currency, but rather performance, originality, and style.

Making Room for the Queens of Krump

The session’s celebration of style and difference, however, is not devoid of contradiction and unequal power dynamics,



Christopher "Worm" Lewis. PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF ST. ANDREWS.

particularly regarding gender. Men dominate the 818, not just in terms of the ratio of performers and attendees, but also concerning the construction of gender relations and gender roles. The common description of the session as a male-space makes it extremely difficult for female krumpers to cultivate autonomous spaces of expression, critique, and performance. Female krumpers consequently have a hard time being judged in relation to and on the same terms as their male counterparts. “You can’t be girly and be considered buck,” says Ke’Aira “Lil Daisy” Roberson, a female dancer who has been krumping since the age of 13. “You still gotta be as live as the guys to be considered a top female in krump. You’re expected to be as good as the guys but not dance like them. With the girls, it’s a certain pressure. We get compared [to each other] more than the guys. If there’s another girl that comes out, then the guys say, battle her and beat her.”

The repression of female krumpers also takes shape through Cartesian arguments and sexist claims about women. Because krump’s movements and narratives are based around and thrive off of emotional release, some dancers argue that it is a dance form more readily available to women’s dispositions and temperament. Learning and performing krump, they assert, should come “naturally” to women because women are biologically more “emotional” than men and are more prone to bodily release. Krumper Shofu Tha Beatdown asserts that contrary to what people may assume, “females have the advantage [in krump] because they are already more emotional. Their krump is more powerful.” He continues, “A lot of male krumpers are said to be sensitive because they know how to let their emotions go when they dance. They come off as weak sometimes.” As Shofu relays, the 818 community often conflates emotional release with femininity, an assertion that not only frames female dancers’ performances within an extremely narrow scope and reifies the assumed differences between the genders, but which additionally stigmatizes male dancers whose movements do not correspond with dominant constructions of heterosexual masculinity. Rigid standards about how one should perform his masculinity then become another mode of reemphasizing masculinist and heterosexual norms.

Female krumpers also struggle with being accused of mirroring the dance styles of male krumpers. Miss Prissy, for example, criticizes those who are interested in krumping

because their boyfriends are dancers, or who attend the session as a means to establish romantic relationships. “I watch girls come in. I’m observing you. I’m watching all the wrong moves you’re making, how you’re coming into the krump world. These girls that are sneaking in, having these guys train them. No guys ever trained me, ever.” Despite perhaps the validity of her critique, Miss Prissy’s narrative illuminates the imbalanced and unfair standard to which female krumpers are judged and which they must negotiate in order to obtain recognition and respect. Young males who go to the session are rarely ever accused of mimicry, not to mention of “sneaking in” and attending for the reasons Prissy attributes to some female dancers. Her remarks are thus another reminder of the session’s dominant masculinist culture. They reveal how even female dancers participate in and replicate some of the discourses that deny other female krumpers agency and authority.

Irrespective of gender, Miss Prissy is one of the most talented and respected krump dancers in the world. Her skill level alone ranks her as part of the upper echelon of both the 818 Session and the global krump community. One night she dances as if she has fallen into a trance. Her expressions alternate between pain, anger, and joy, mesmerizing all who watch with the way each shift in expression simultaneously correlates with an abrupt shift in movement. She lunges her body back and forth, knees bent, nails scratching at the asphalt. She whirls around, swinging her neck, and stumbles away from the circle exhausted, as if in meditation. Krump dancer Manny “Xclusive” Fernandez insists that Miss Prissy is the epitome of krump. He explains that what makes her especially unique is her ability to upstage male dancers while “still look[ing] like a lady,” that is, her ability to perform and play with ideas about masculinity and femininity. Miss Prissy’s tactical play challenges the session’s reductive discourses about gender because it publicly calls into question dominant arguments about the embodiment and performance of gender. Thus, Manny asserts that while Miss Prissy “has the style, character, and pizzazz to keep up with guys,” what makes her stand out is that “she can beat anybody at any session. She will go at it with guys, no problem.” In so doing, Miss Prissy challenges and outshines male dancers’ performances of masculinity sometimes on their own terms, while simultaneously conveying a unique female-based krump outlook and style. Through dance, she periodically performs what



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Marquisa "Miss Prissy" Gardner, the Queen of Krump. PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF ST. ANDREWS.

some people consider to be normative traits of masculinity (aggression, competitiveness, anger, etc.) better than the boys.

Manny states that what also distinguishes Miss Prissy from other talented krumpers is her leadership and diplomacy. Describing Miss Prissy as an ambassador of krump, he maintains that she has been a vital force in drawing younger dancers toward krump and sustaining the relations between many of the 818 Session's participants. "Ever since I've known Prissy, she's been the type of person to be more of a leader, not a follower. She creates opportunities for other dancers. A lot of people don't see what she does for the krump community. She's the queen of krump, and more than dancing comes with that title." Miss Prissy confirms that she does feel responsible for maintaining krump's authenticity and the survival of the 818 Session. She states with pride, "I'm the mother of krump; the first woman to ever embody it. It's my firstborn child. I nourish krump. I watch it grow. It's the seed I planted, and I'm trying to make sure no weeds get around it." But Miss Prissy points out that despite this mother-like image she is unwilling to silence the intensity and eroticism of her dancing; carving out a space among male krumpers does not mean she must completely surrender her femininity and sexuality to their standard and codes of gender. Use of sexual innuendo and gendered discourse aid her in expressing her femininity and sexuality simultaneously in a way that neither divorces one from the other nor adheres to the normative gender roles articulated by some male dancers. "I should have jacked off before I came here, the back of my thighs are burning," she jokes about another dancer's performance and concludes comically, "I'm having a krump orgasm." Such gestures demonstrate that her leadership does not rest on her being identified or performing within terms of asexuality, repressed sexuality, or subdued femininity.

Miss Prissy's performances of femininity are rather raw, combative, sexual, and nurturing all at once. And these elements of her dancing and leadership confront the 818 Session's discourses and practices of male dominance

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head-on. By fostering and strengthening the 818's sense of fellowship and community, and utilizing dance to challenge, break down, and accentuate the differences between male and female krumpers, she offers a transgressive model of gender roles, one which promotes the need for a more gender-equal environment. "We've always had a different fight than men," she points out, "Our fight is harder because not only are we fighting for respect, but you're also fighting to be noticed because you're the woman. Damn, what do I do? I can't be too aggressive because then I'm coming off butch. But I definitely have to represent for women and still be a strong presence. It's a heavy hat to wear." She ultimately hopes that her leadership is helping to cultivate a larger collective female standpoint within krump. "I can't bow out of krump when there are so many girls that have no presence," she says with a sigh. "My duty is not fulfilled. My whole point being in krump was to give women a presence."

Like Miss Prissy, other dancers exploit the session's dynamics as means to challenge multiple forms of oppression and inequality, including the discourses and practices of power and domination that operate among the session collective. Furthermore, because the rules of exchange and interaction are fluid and always up for grabs, the 818 Session, unlike privatized and hyper-regulated Los Angeles spaces of commerce, play, and performance, allows for more open cultural warfare. Like other current street dancing movements across the United States—whether "flexing/bone breaking" in Brooklyn, the Chicago footwork movement, "turf dancing" in the Bay Area, or "jerkin" in Los Angeles—the krump dancers of the 818 Session have cultivated a unique form of expressive culture that speaks depths of meaning about race, corporeality, and the "diverse practices that produce distinct kinds of urban spaces in America's cities."²⁶ It is therefore another pertinent example of "the way that creative works force us to confront the urban landscape."²⁷

Coda

Around 2:15 AM a police car rolls up. The officers flash the siren and beam the vehicle's lights in the direction of the circle. A young man pushes the circle open into a half moon, giving the police an unobstructed view. "Let them see we're just dancing," he says. He throws his arms to the sky, hops

“Krump means elevation,” he points out.
“It means victory. It means prosperity.
It means positivity. It means anger, emotion,
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on one knee, and bounces to his feet. “Show them how you roll, Lil’ C!” someone yells. The officers, however, appear determined. One of them shouts through a megaphone that he has received noise complaints and that the group must disperse or face arrest and citation. “They fin’ to try to break us up real quick. That’s what they do,” Lil’ C comments to no one in particular. He nonetheless doesn’t stop. He hits his elbow with his knee, swings both arms alternately through his legs, tilts forward and steps back. He plants his last foot stomp and walks off, blending into the crowd.

Disappointed, everyone slowly retreats. They stop to say goodbye and give each other dap and hugs. As the session comes to its end, Lil’ C laments over the control that the police hold over this community of street dancers. “We’re from the land of sirens. Blue and red lights flashing are nothing new to us. That’s what we see all the time,” he adamantly contends. “But what we have to impress upon them is that we understand that when you guys see a crowd of young black and mixed ethnic group of people congregating in one area you automatically think that some sort of criminal activity is going on, but there’s not . . . We’re on a different wavelength, a different frequency than that of those individuals who you would catch robbing, stealing, breaking windows, whatever the case may be.” Still, he remains hopeful that the 818 Session’s positive practices will gradually temper the North Hollywood Police Department’s supervision and regulation of the weekly gathering. Whatever the case may be, the 818 Session is not going anywhere anytime soon, even if that means relocating to another North Hollywood site. As Lil’ C relates, this collective has no aversion to movement and change. “Krump means life. Krump means elevation,” he points out. “It means victory. It means prosperity. It means positivity. It means anger, emotion, oppression, inspiration, aspiration . . . It’s life. It’s energy. It’s forever. It’s what it is. It’s buck.” **B**

Notes

- ¹ George Lipsitz, “The racialization of space and the spatialization of race,” *Landscape Journal* 26 (2007), 1–14.
- ² Joseph Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip Hop Culture in New York* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 97.
- ³ Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 8.
- ⁴ For scholarly works on Hip Hop dance and contemporary subculture dance see (though this list is not exhaustive): Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* (Princeton Book Company, 1989); Bilal Allah, “Can’t Stop the Body Rock Part Two: Hip-Hop’s Fly Choreographers,” *Rap Pages* (August 1993), 48–51; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan Press, 1994); Christina Verán, “The Rise and Fall and Rise of the B-Boy Kingdom,” in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop* edited by Alan Light, 53–60 (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999); Elizabeth C. Fine, *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006); Jorge Pabon, “Physical Graffiti: The History of Hip-Hop Dance,” in *Total Chaos* edited by Jeff Change, 18–26 (New York, NY: BasicCivitas, 2006); Schloss, *Foundation*; Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar, *Hip Hop Dance: The American Dance Floor* (Greenwood Press, 2012).
- ⁵ For a greater history of popping and locking as well as on West Coast Hip Hop and Hip Hop dance, see Pabon, “Physical Graffiti”; Gabriela Jiménez, “Something 2 Dance 2”: Electro Hop in 1980s Los Angeles and Its Afrofuturist Link,” *Black Music Research Journal* 31, Number 1 (Spring 2011): 131–144; Brian Cross, *It’s Not About a Salary . . . Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (Verso Books, 1993); Robin D. G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles,” in *Drop-pin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*,

- edited by William Eric Perkins, 117–158 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Mychal Matsamela-Ali Odom, “Dope Lyrics and Bangin’ Beats: History and Politics of Los Angeles County Hip Hop Music and Gang Proliferation during the Crack Epidemic and Beyond, 19840-present.” M.A. thesis, University of San Diego, 2004; Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005).
- ⁶ Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 124.
- ⁷ Ariel Ann Nereson, “Krump or Die: Representations of Krumping in Contemporary Film and the Processes of Assimilation, Racism, Narration and Commodification,” MA Thesis, The University at Buffalo, State University of New York, September 1, 2009, pp. 33, 22, and 52.
- ⁸ Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 118.
- ⁹ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 262.
- ¹⁰ The fact that the 818 Session appropriated various North Hollywood spaces has important implications considering California’s history of race relations and class warfare. Described as the “cradle of California’s statehood,” North Hollywood was the site of the Campo de Cahuenga, where the Treaty of Cahuenga informally ended the fighting of the Mexican-American War in 1847. Within the next three years Alta California would be formally ceded to the United States, an act that ultimately resulted in California’s statehood. And over the following decades Campo de Cahuenga and much of the surrounding territory would come to be owned and controlled first by two European immigrants, Isaac Lankershim and Isaac Newton Van Nuys, and later by Lankershim’s son, James Boon Lankershim, who established the town of Lankershim. The town was later renamed North Hollywood in 1927.
- ¹¹ Statistics indicate that North Hollywood has less violent crime and gang activity than South Los Angeles. For instance during the first three months of 2012, there were an average of 9.7 violent crimes in South Los Angeles as opposed to 6.6 in North Hollywood. Furthermore, although there are more street gangs in the San Fernando Valley compared with others sections of Los Angeles, the police divisions that patrol this area report the lowest number of gang crimes and the lowest overall crime rates in the entire city. See “Mapping L.A.” *Los Angeles Times*, <http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/> and Street Gangs Resource Center, <http://www.streetgangs.com/hispanic/cityofla/sfvalley>.
- ¹² Steven Hager, *Hip-Hop: The Illustrated History of Breakdancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 108.
- ¹³ Cross, *It’s Not About a Salary . . . Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles*, 20.
- ¹⁴ In his article, “Physical Graffiti: The History of Hip-Hop Dance,” Jorge “POPMASER FABEL” Pabon describes Hip Hop dance as “physical graffiti.”
- ¹⁵ Margaret Crawford, “Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles over Public Space in Los Angeles,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (September 1995), 4–9 (5).
- ¹⁶ Mike Davis, “Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space,” In M. Sorkin’s (ed.), *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and The End of Public Space*, pp. 154–180 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 155 & 159.
- ¹⁷ Lipsitz, “The racialization of space and the spatialization of race,” 15 & 7.
- ¹⁸ Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 90(1), 2000, 12–40.
- ¹⁹ Widener, *Black Arts West*, 258.
- ²⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley details the increasing privatization of spaces of youth leisure and play, focusing specifically on “the growing number of semipublic/private play spaces like “people’s parks” which require a key . . . and high sophisticated indoor play areas that charge admission.” See Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s DisFunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 51.
- ²¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 225 & 199–200.
- ²² Thomas DeFrantz, “Composite Bodies of Dance: The Repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater,” *Theatre Journal* 57, Number 4 (December 2005): 659–678 (665 & 667).
- ²³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 199.
- ²⁴ Roxanna Baiasu, “Bodies in Space: Transcendence and the Spatialization of Gender,” in Pamela Sue Anderson, ed., *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate* (London: Springer, 2010), 220.
- ²⁵ Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First*, 28.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ²⁷ Widener, *Black Arts West*, 287.