Climate of Commodification: Trademark as a Resistive Technology

Research Thesis

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By

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Abstract

This paper will synthesize and amalgamate information and discoveries around the histories of copyright, trademark, and ownership within the dance world. It will offer perspectives on the politics of using Labanotation for Black dance and the ways that it is necessary yet nuanced.

Methods

Archival Research

My work is heavily centered around archival research. Yet, I am troubled by the Western expectation that for something to be made historically or culturally significant it should be contained in some sort of *written* archive. In her work, Joanna Dee Das states that "Embodied memories contest the white supremacist, patriarchal structure that places greater value on written sources" (Das, 86). While there may be a lack of written evidence of African dance and music, the absence of archives is precisely the story. We must think as far as gestural and sonic codification to begin discussing the impossibility of translating embodied language onto paper. Black dancing bodies are themselves the archives.

Embodied Diversity Training

Diversity within arts spaces is critical to the ways in which we engage with and learn from one another. Much of my activist history is rooted in anti-racism work (specifically combating anti-Blackness) and its overlap with the commodification of Black popular culture. I specifically aim to nurture a racially/ethnically diverse research method, while actively acknowledging my white positionality.

My time at Ohio State has not only been highly centered around dance, but has employed a socially conscious framework through studies in Human Rights. I have had the privilege to easily access information within the Ohio State Department of Dance and have been able to embody the forms of resistance so central to the anti-racist movement itself. Participating in community hip hop labs and cyphers, the importance of the work has been both kinesthetically and emotionally emphasized for me. Ultimately, I seek to foreground the value of embodied diversity training and cross-cultural collaboration, in order to develop further conclusions around the limitations of agency and ownership within Black dance forms.

Interviews

I interviewed Doris Green, the creator of an alternative dance notation system called Greenotation. The system works to represent West African dance through the integration of drum scores. An African-American woman, she is no stranger to a lack of cultural representation, yet it is important to acknowledge that her notation work was primarily situated in Ghana. In this sense she shifted between a Black American insider and yet an outsider to a complete understanding of Ghanaian culture and life. Additionally, I engaged in an informal conversation with choreographer JaQuel Knight. Both conversations generated further insight around necessary dance notation system revisions and usages, through a contemporary lens.

Blue House Productions

As I continue to push for more equitable and robust dance archives, Blue House Productions has served as a part of my foundational philosophy into the work. Alongside my colleague Grace Koenig, creating and fully realizing this dance documentation LLC has emphasized the wide need for such services in capturing movement. Nicole R. Fleetwood speaks in her writing about " the specificity of video that makes it the exemplary medium for exploring the real in everyday culture, particularly for representing a racialized version of authenticity called 'realness'" (Fleetwood, 156). Outside of real life, video may be the space that Blackness can exist and be immortalized through archive most effectively. The nuance and intention behind movement is clearer on film. Dance documentation through film is valuable in the ways that it makes space for wider possibilities of preservation and representation, and thus should be utilized alongside written archives to establish the entire picture of a work.

Introduction

Research Questions

In our current reality of consumerism and access to social media, how do we deal with the ownership and trademark of Black dance? Who has a claim to the culture and who does not? This research project examines how we preserve the cultural integrity of Black dance forms (hip hop, West African, etc.) as modes of resistance in the current pop culture climate of commodification. In my research, I have unpacked the implications of Labanotation's lack of a percussive drum score and other overall limitations in terms of its usefulness for Black dance. Using my previous and ongoing research into alternative dance notation systems such as Doris Green's Greenotation, I would like to situate these conclusions in a modern lens through the works of choreographers such as JaQuel Knight and his reframing of Labanotation as a tool for ownership. How is trademark a form of potential resistance?

Pop Culture Framework: Hip Hop vs. White Commodification

Pop culture as a conceptual category is best defined as "the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture" (Storey, 6). A culture of the people for the people, there is a pervasive thought that pop culture lacks deep intellect. Black pop culture more specifically houses important aspects of hip hop, embracing and providing access to "the people" more generally. While perhaps dissemination is unavoidable, there exists an unintentional embrace of outsiders into a system that is so situated around boundaries and authentic preservation. This in turn leads to the detriment of cultural preservation.

In an unfaltering moment of Black political resistance to police brutality, systemic white supremacy, and general racial injustice, hip hop culture (particularly its music) serves as the soundtrack to Black resistance. Much like R&B in the Civil Rights era, hip hop has become the

heartbeat of the current movement, especially among youth culture. This usage connects to hip hop's inherent culture of resistance and utilizes it in a traditionally authentic way, but still bumps up against the cooptation of it within the dominant culture. Here we have an art form steeped in resistance that is historically marginalized, now becoming the dominant art form. Thus, does it still maintain its edge as an art of resistance once it is fully integrated into the mainstream? Hip hop dance specifically, within times of political and social unrest, poses the same question.

In order to understand the ways that our current realities fail to protect folks of color, we can look to the impossibility of defining and immortalizing the mainstream/popular culture. In fact, pop culture is "an empty conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use" (Storey, 1). It inherently goes through phases, othering those who do not contribute to the consumption patterns of the time. Hence the reason why hip hop exists largely within the confines of Black pop culture; it is a way to stray away from invisibilization. Still, once something becomes accepted into the pop culture sphere of consumerism, it allows consumers and those in power into a world that they might otherwise have no right to access.

Ownership of Black culture has systematically been handed over to whites through corporate control, thus fleshed out into a highly profitable commodity. Much of hip hop's success (yet ultimate commodification) is due in large part to the branding strategies of hip hop artists. While these promotional practices are certainly beneficial for individual Black folks both monetarily and culturally, "...just because white Americans gravitate toward products marked as cool by African American culture, that consumption has not necessarily translated into either improved cross-cultural communication or enhanced status or wealth for many African Americans" (Schur, 184). Evidently, the white commodification and inherent appropriation of Black culture does not serve those who actually contribute to its cultural outputs.

Additionally, the concept of the underground is not lost on me and is of equal importance when it comes to the lifespan of hip hop. The underground hip hop scene has historically refuted the commercial, corporational aspects of hip hop by uplifting independent artists and movements. In fact, groups like Public Enemy gained their ultimate mainstream success due to their initial involvement in the underground. Due to commercialization and marketing efforts, folks not directly involved in the scene do not and cannot understand undergroundness. Thus, the mainstream efforts tend to grasp and hold the attention of white folks in particular.

While dense, the above framework is integral to understanding the importance of my research-oriented synthesis of progressive tools of ownership.

Labanotation

In terms of Black dance (hip hop in particular) Labanotation has become a tool through which I have discovered the legal value of the written dance archive and the hierarchical structure of ownership. I was first introduced to the concept of Labanotation in a required sophomore-year Analysis course. Taught by my current advisor and Professor of Dance, Valarie Williams, we learned the skills necessary to read and recreate basic Labanotation scores. From the Dance Notation Bureau's website: "Labanotation captures movement on the page so that it can be shared in all parts of the world and with future generations. By simply reading a single

symbol on a staff, one immediately knows: the direction of the movement, the part of the body doing the movement, the level of the movement, and the length of time it takes to do the movement". This definition seems to describe an infallible system that accurately and impressively represents movement. It's true that Labanotation has historically been one of the accepted standards for notating and archiving dance and continues to serve as a tool when it comes to ownership and trademark in choreography. Yet, this accepted truth inherently leaves out dance forms that do not and cannot fit into the limiting alphabet system of notation. Thus, with my elementary understanding of the archival method, I began to ask questions in terms of the pitfalls and discrepancies associated with inconsistent interpretation of the scoring.

Why codify something so intensely when written archives cannot possibly exemplify the spirit of movement that is so central to forms with roots in Africa and Black America, for instance? Around the same time that I began asking such questions, the concept of Effort Scoring was introduced to me. Laban's additional system of scoring qualities such as light/strong, free/bound, sustained/quick, and direct/indirect opened up possibilities in terms of written movement qualities.

Excited about the potential for greater accuracy in notating, I wrote my own version of an effort score for JaQuel Knight's "Single Ladies" choreography. In focusing only on the quality and intention behind each movement, I was hoping for increased accuracy and perhaps greater solace in using a system made by white people for white people to archive Black dance. Unfortunately, my outcome was quite the opposite. While I asserted that using an effort score alongside Labanotation should be required, I knew disservices were still being done to non-white choreographies. This first encounter with Knight's work sent me down a rabbit hole of information on how he himself began utilizing Labanotation to spearhead choreographic copyright over movement. This seemingly redundant strategy stuck out to me and so I dug deeper.

JaQuel Knight and Tools of Trademark

> "A trademark certifies the authenticity of whatever it marks" (Schur, 177).

In Autumn of 2023, I had the pleasure of speaking with choreographer JaQuel Knight over a Zoom call situated within another iteration of the required Analysis course a year later. As mentioned previously, this course teaches Labanotation and effort scoring systems with an emphasis on agency and inherent imperfection. Thus, discussion around the wider impossibilities of Labanotation was rampant and so perfectly situated Knight to share his experiences with notating such choreographies as "Single Ladies". In order to participate in the copyright and trademark system, JaQuel ironically uses a system rooted in inaccessibility for Black folks. Yet, this is precisely the type of muddying of the system that is truly a form of resistance rather than assimilation.

Through this interview opportunity, I asked JaQuel about the politics of using Labanonation for the ownership of Black dance. He affirmed that such unlikely support from notation collaborators truly has led to effective preservation within the mainstream.

The rise in visualizers (including dance-oriented music videos) plays a large part in a song's success. JaQuel posits that treatment of dance artists has not yet caught up. On TikTok

for example, songs most often get their stars through viral trends centered around dance, and while they go platinum, the choreographers get nothing in terms of compensation or credit. To combat some of this unfair use of movement, JaQuel launched Knight Choreography and Music Publishing Inc. As is mentioned in a 2022 Dance Magazine article about his work: "For choreography, being captured on video is sometimes only part of the equation. A Labanotation score can provide vital additional details, but the creation of such a score is an expensive and time-consuming endeavor that requires a specialist to transcribe every gesture (and often, for video works, every camera angle)".

Hearing about and engaging in conversation around ownership and trademark in dance led me to think about what I had previously been grappling with in some of my African American and African Studies courses and my own personal practice in hip hop cyphers and labs.

There is of course a larger discussion in Black Pop Culture Studies around trademark and copyright more generally. The ways that they can support Black artists, such as JaQuel Knight himself are not discounted, and such efforts certainly raise the visibility of hip hop within the mainstream. Yet, is this for better or for worse?

Mainstream representations of hip hop culture are often the only information that folks outside of the culture get exposed to. So, such oftentimes watered-down palatable recreations of the culture are taken as fact and misconstrue the truth of Black existence. Individual Black artists may benefit from representation, but what happens to the culture as a whole and how do we give or deny ownership over it? How may it become a commodity to the masses in which we as white folks begin to engage in "everything but the burden"? We consume the products of Black culture while rejecting Black folks themselves and failing to incorporate them as citizens.

While Labanotation has worked as a tool of reclamation for JaQuel and has been integral in establishing ownership over his choreographic outputs, the exclusionary nature of the system remains. Dance scholar and ethnomusicologist Doris Green knows all too well the uselessness of Labanotation for West African dance, and so created an alternate notation system called Greenotation. This system establishes a written, integrated relationship between music and dance; a concept that is central to an understanding of West African dance and tradition. I ultimately had the pleasure of interviewing Ms. Green in order to better understand her reframing of such an evidently exclusionary system as Labanotation.

Doris Green's Greenotation

I became familiar with Doris Green's work through an independent study that I did in conversation with another one of Williams' courses: DANCE 4193 Embodied Access. Val mentioned Ms. Green's research to me, and I recognized the potential answers that could come from engaging with both her and her written, archival work. Hence, I opted to add an independent study to my schedule that would ensure the academic and financial resources necessary to generate fruitful conversation. This initial project worked to further my understanding of anti-racist thought within dance notation through archival research. I unpacked the implications of Labanotation's lack of a percussive drum score and other overall limitations in terms of its usefulness for Black dance. Thanks to the Special Collections section of Ohio State's Thompson Library, I came in contact with Green's notation of the Ghanaian dance/rhythm of Tokoe. I used the score and some available writing of Green's to develop

conclusions around the necessity for Greenotation over Labanotation in terms of West African cultural preservation. Additionally, I looked at her scoring of Makwaya, an "African-American dance created out of protest against traditionalism of female dance movements". Created during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and based around the style of the Ewe people of Ghana, it posed and began to answer questions around the parallels of the pan-Africanist ferment in Ghana and the freedom struggle in the United States. Ghana in particular was a hotbed of internationalist Black liberation strategy and thinking during the 60s and 70s. Thus, thinking about how the movements there influenced the struggle here (in everything from the Black Power to the Black Arts Movement) sparked a curiosity in me. I began outreach to Green and prepped my interview questions about not only her notation system, but the cultural landscapes she worked in and around.

In order to honor Ms. Green's responses to my interview questions, I will list three of the premeditated questions exactly as they were posed to her. I will then summarize her responses.

You discuss in your work the lack of tangible evidence of African dance and music within American academic settings. This delegitimizing of the culture within academia played a part in you creating a system that could represent percussive rhythms alongside movement in a more "academic" written format. Could you talk a bit about that experience and how you've been able to use Labanotation in conversation with African dance? In your experience, what tools were useful to authentically notate the movement of traditional African dance forms, and what was missing? Was the quality and spirit of movement lost within the written practice of notation? If so, I'm interested in if there would be a solution to this today.

In response, Ms. Green was quick to emphasize that, "The word dance does *not* exist within many African languages. African's only know the words that the colonizers taught them". What we as westerners understand as dance and music are inseparable in Africa, hence the need for a completely integrated dance and drum score. Contrary to my belief that all written dance archives are fallible, Green asserted: "The quality of the spirit is not lost because it is written, but rather enhanced", keeping African dance from being a practicum where folks (even the most experienced practitioners) come in and do whatever they want. Hence, it appears Doris feels notation (at least in terms of her updated Greenotation) is truly an authentic form of preservation and instruction.

Joanna Dee Das, a current scholar on faculty at Washington University, has done extensive research on Katherine Dunham and the African Diaspora. In a piece I recently read, she notes that, "Embodied memories contest the white supremacist, patriarchal structure that places a greater value on written sources". How do we uplift this truth while still acknowledging the need for documentation and ownership over African dance?

To this question, Green instantly brought up an important conversation around insiders and outsiders in African communities, saying: "One cannot own African dance, and no outsider can create African dance." This certainly parallels the truths of Black dance forms in the United States, while simultaneously providing a new perspective around ownership over West African dance. While I assumed those who live the dance themselves have ownership over the movement and culture more broadly, Ms. Green brought up an important distinction between

what we understand in the States versus the African understanding. Nobody at all can own African dance, as it is a way of life.

Referencing your numerous trips to Africa in general and also in Ghana, could you talk about your perception of the work that you did? Did you ever feel that the work you did to reject a Western understanding of African dance and music was misunderstood? Especially once your work was viewed in an American context by various audiences? Upon your multiple returns from Africa did you feel that the value and correct interpretation of your work steadily increased? Maybe this wasn't even a concern considering the work wasn't geared towards the west…

To this, she reflected on the ways that folks approach Africa wanting things done their way with no regard to existing culture and custom. She pointed to American scholars who intend to "bridge cultures" between the United States and Africa by asking, "How could you bridge somebody's culture when you're not part of the culture"! Green's answers all seem to link back to one main assertion: "Leave your interpretations at the door".

Walking away from my interview with Doris, I realized the true significance behind presenting African communities with the ability to preserve their own culture. The system of Greenotation works to remove the Western middle man, and while ownership may not be the intended outcome, agency over movement and culture certainly remains.

Conclusion

Through my continued work with Black Pop Culture studies and my engagement with the hierarchy of written dance archives, I have certainly observed how folks work against systems of oppression by using the tools necessary and available to them. Although JaQuel Knight, for instance, utilizes a notation system that may not accurately represent every single movement in his choreographies, the system establishes rights to his work and legal protection over recreation on popular apps such as TikTok or Instagram. Seeing a gap in Labanotation in terms of accurate representation, Doris Green turned to her own notation system to not only rectify what Laban left out, but to teach folks in Ghana how to continue scoring/preserving their cultures to more accurately divulge information and practices to outsiders within and outside of Africa itself.

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