Full Out

Choreographing Attitudes, Relations, and Careers in Hip Hop

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Darkness circling the dancers: the hip hop battle is on ©photo: Isabel Ånestad
Abstract

This thesis is based on my fieldwork that I conducted in the dance world of hip hop. I carried out a multi-sited fieldwork, starting in Oslo in January 2015 before leaving for Los Angeles a couple of months from February 2015. After my stay in L.A. I continued in Oslo. The main focus will be on the social interaction among the dancers: Who are the dancers, and what role does dancing have in their lives? How are the dancers interacting with each other? What are the recurrent themes in the classes of the two locations? In what ways does the dance world in Oslo and L.A. differ from each other?

I have been part of the Oslo dance world for some time, and therefore, I offer an insider’s insight to this field. Methodically, conducting my fieldwork in two locations made me more capable of reflecting on the Oslo dance studio’s ordinary conduct with a more distanced gaze than that of the insider, being better equipped to catch details I might have taken for granted without L.A. as a contrast. Thematically, it proved that the two locations brought up different approaches to hip hop dancing.

The first part of the dissertation will look at some of the main features hip hop dancing consists of, with an added focus on expressiveness, and on interaction in the dance studio. This first part is based on material from Oslo. Secondly, by applying my material from L.A. I continue to explore the theme of expression by looking at emotional display and the sexual explicitness often visible within this genre. Lastly, some recurrent themes in L.A. will be looked at, before comparing some aspects of the dance world in the two locations.

In Los Angeles, obtaining a career is a prominent focus among the dancers. Being closely located to the Hollywood Industry of Show business made their dream of dancing professionally seem within reach. However, as talent alone is not enough to “make it,” other strategies are applied. When whom you know matters in order to get the wheels in motion, networking becomes important, making relation management about business and getting ahead. Oslo, on the other hand, proved to be more about having a good time with the other participants in the classes while realizing that dancing might not be the most likely career path. Relations then become less instrumental, and more personal. As competition is less important in Oslo, participating in classes at the studio becomes more of a relaxed leisure activity. This difference in orientation towards dancing affects how the dancers interact and how they express themselves in each of the two locations.
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# Content

List of Illustrations ........................................................................................................ v

Chapter 1 Came from the Bottom ................................................................................. 1
  Background .................................................................................................................. 3
  Theoretical orientation ............................................................................................... 6
  Method ......................................................................................................................... 8
  Empirical Field: Hip Hop ........................................................................................... 10
  Structure of Thesis ....................................................................................................... 14

Chapter 2 Familiar Moves, Familiar Faces ................................................................. 15
  Behave Bad .................................................................................................................. 15
  Breaking it down ........................................................................................................ 18
  Part of the whole ......................................................................................................... 26

Chapter 3 Dance it out ................................................................................................. 32
  Trust your body, and dance it out ............................................................................. 34
  A sweet escape .......................................................................................................... 38
  Go off ......................................................................................................................... 39
  Dancing Desire ........................................................................................................... 41

Chapter 4 Same area code - different numbers ......................................................... 46
  Go Hard or Go Home ................................................................................................. 46
  Play on Roles ............................................................................................................. 50
  Individual numbers ................................................................................................... 51
  On stage ...................................................................................................................... 52

Chapter 5 ‘Post to be ................................................................................................. 56
  Désir de L’Autre ......................................................................................................... 58
  Getting one’s break’ .................................................................................................. 63
  The L.A. Dance World ............................................................................................... 69

Chapter 6 Contrasting elements ................................................................................. 80

References ..................................................................................................................... 87
List of Illustrations

“The Sign” .................................................................................................................. 5
Chapter 1 Came from the Bottom

It is silent in the stairway. I had just pulled off my headset and stopped the up-tempo RnB music playing from my phone. I hear my own breathing from having walked in a hurry through the snow in the city streets from the bus, and up the stairs. I stop in front of the black door decorated with posters announcing upcoming events and class schedules. My hand reaches for the doorknob and open the door carefully to not make any more noise than necessary. Of no avail, as the loud music from the inside covers any other sound, breaking the silence in the dark stairway. As the door closes behind me, it is as if I have entered a new world, small spatially but filled with excitement for us on the inside; the insistent beat. The big body movements. The tough attitude. The different sensations and emotions, often a combination of exhaustion and joy. I smile at two girls standing in the entrance of the main studio as I walked past them to get to the reception area. They smile back recognizing my presence, before turning their focus back to the class going on in the studio. I go to the reception and sign up for the classes I had planned for this evening; introduction to popping and intermediate hip hop. I put my sneakers on in the back room, and then join the two girls to watch the class.

I am not new to this environment, yet I try to take in as much as I can as if it was to be completely novel to me. I noticed the stairway on my way up, the rough concrete walls with old paint. How the bass came through the door from the class inside the smaller studio as I passed it in the hallway. The heavy, moist air compared to the sharpness of the January cold outside.

The instructor, Emma, stands in front of her class, back against the participants, facing the mirror covering one of the walls. She has a slight bend in her knees, moving up and down to the beat of the music, the class following her. She turns to face them and speaks loud so her voice can be heard over the music; “You are on to it, just try and do it more relaxed. Also focus just as much on the “up” as on going down.” She continues this movement a few more times before she heads towards the left corner to pause the music. “Okay, this is called bounce. It is a basic move of hip hop. Just listen to the music, relax and have fun. Okay?” A few of the participants nod carefully. “Now I want you all to stand in front of the mirror down there. Just follow my movements as we walk across the floor.” She smiles genuinely at her class before
turning to put the music back on, walking with them down to the mirror on the shorter wall by
the entrance. She signals to her class to watch her as she shows the first movement. She starts
moving forward towards the opposite wall by shifting her weight from one foot to the other
while she keeps her arms in front of her face out with a 90 degrees angel with her elbows, her
fists up in line with the top of her head, and a bend in her knees. All her movements are slow,
and her weight shifting seems exaggerated to mark the nuances of her moves more clearly to
her class. She spreads her arms out to the sides while keeping the angel with her elbows, as she
puts her weight on her right foot, which is now in front, and closes them as she lets her weight
fall back on her back foot, the left. She continues from the closed arm position, stretching her
arms in an outward circle. Her feet move right behind left, lifting the left foot placing it down,
and then moving the right foot out again so that she is standing with her feet as wide as her hips.
She now does the same to the other side, before she speeds up and does it one more time, in
higher tempo and more intensity in her movements. Then she turns to her students to see if they
understood her instructions. They practice this by moving across the floor in lines of three to
two, walking back and starting over again. After practicing this a few times, she shows them a
new movement to practice in the same way across the floor.

Finally, she has the class lined up in front of the longer mirror again. Emma tells them she
will now teach them a short combo using the moves they just practiced, together with some
from the warm-up in beginning of class. She advices them to make sure to keep the bounce
through all of the exercise, and if it feels too difficult they should skip moving their arms and
focus on the footwork. As this is a beginner’s class, leaving the arms for later eases the
coordination of the body movements. The footwork is usually the starting point of the
choreography because it establishes the pattern that the rest of the choreography depends. The
arm movements are secondary to the foundation laid out by the footwork.

They practice the short routine1 a few times before she puts on the music. It is a groovy track
by the female rap artist Missy Elliott. The instructor turns the music off in order to address some
adjustments; “I notice several of you are dancing with facial expressions filled with doubt. Just
smile, there’s no reason to use any effort on such doubtful expressions. Okay?” No one answers,
however, a few of the girls in class smile to themselves and look down as if they felt she had
been aiming at them with her comment. “Just decide to do it, don’t think” she advices them as
she walks back to the music device.

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1 Within the dance world, “routine” and “choreography” are used interchangeably
As Emma’s class is about to finish, the girls next to me and I prepare to enter the studio to secure good spots on the floor, which allows us to see both the instructor and the mirror. Emma thanks the participants for coming and tells them that they worked well. They respond by applauding, before rushing to collect their stuff. The snow down on street level seems far away; in this heated space were music and body movements reign.

Background

Being able to choose hip hop dancing as the main focus of my dissertation seemed like a lucky strike. However, due to my personal ties to this activity and the dancers I have met, I have also worried about whether or not I will be able to capture the essence of this dance accurately.

I have committed myself to the task of both being a dancer and a social anthropologist. My aim to provide a truthful gaze into the dance world, close to the experiences of my fellow dancers. Conducting my fieldwork partly in Oslo and in Los Angeles, I got a certain contrasting element to better capture what is at stake in both locations.

Dancing is the point of departure for my project, however, I have further aimed at giving a description of how it is to be part of such a social environment: Who are the dancers, and what role does dancing have in their lives? How are the dancers interacting with each other? What are the recurrent themes in the classes of the two locations? In what ways does the dance world in Oslo and L.A. differ from each other?

Fieldwork

I have conducted a multi-sited fieldwork, in Oslo and Los Angeles. Below I will give a short, generalized introduction to both places.
Oslo

The studio I have attended in Oslo is fairly popular. It is not the only dance studio of its kind in the city, but due to people recommending it to me, that is where I started taking classes in hip hop dancing. The other studios have great reputations as well. However, the people I met and talked to and their experiences from the studio were more influential to my decision than studios’ reputations by themselves.

During my time at the studio, I interacted with both the dancers and the instructors. The studio offers several options and classes. I chose the open pass that means one can attend any and every class during the pre-paid period, which usually lasts for four to five months. Then there is the 15- or 30-class card for those with more restrained schedules. Booking a spot in one or two classes for the whole period is also an option. Finally, paying for a drop-in is also an option. My impression is that the participants often find certain classes through their week that fit their schedules, or a few favorite instructors, around whose classes they work their schedules. While some experiment by taking other classes and instructors every now and then, this rarely happens at the expense of the already favored classes.

The participants varies in age from eight to about 30 years old. The main age group consists of people between 16 to 24 years old. The younger participants are those that most often arrive to class with a friend or two. Most classes are taught in Norwegian, though often with certain English phrases. While most are Norwegian citizens, various ethnical backgrounds are present. There are a clear majority of girls in the classes, while the instructors are more evenly male and female. The instructors varies roughly, between 23 – 30 years old. A few of them teach more than once a week, the same style at different levels, or they teach a different style.
Los Angeles

In Los Angeles, I got access to dancers outside the studios as I stayed in a hostel for dancers. In the back house of where I resided, I had a single room while the other six dancers shared a room with three bunkbeds, and closets. The front house had room for 12 persons, of which several spent time in the back. The dancers where from various locations both within the U.S., and from Europe, Japan, Latin America and Australia.

A mix of nationalities were to be found in the studios as well. However, the majority of the dancers were from the US but not necessarily from L.A. Ethnical background varied among the dancers, but the instructors were mainly black or Latin. The other dancers’ age were mostly between 19 and 23 years at the studio where I spent most of my time (while at the other studios the youngest were down to about 6-8 years old). The same age applies to the dancers I stayed with. The instructors varied in ages from early to late twenties, and some around thirty.

Three studios were frequently visited. To most of the dancers, the instructor mattered more than the location. The options for class passes in all three studios are similar to those mentioned in Oslo.

The main focus of the dancers in L.A., is to make dancing their career path. While the term “dancer” is often reserved for the professionals, I will use “dancer” and “participant” interchangeably when talking about the other attendants in class in both locations.

The Sign. ©photo: Isabel Ånestad  “Dancing is like dreaming with your feet” – Constanze Mozart
Theoretical orientation

Anthropologists have long mentioned dance in their texts, yet it was not analyzed more fully before the 1960s and 1970s when the anthropology of dance was established (Kringelbach and Skinner 2012: 2). One early exception, however, was Evans-Pritchard who in 1928 advocated for dance to be included in anthropological analysis when he himself described the Zande’s funeral beer dance in his article The Dance (1928). Dance is a social phenomenon, and by exploring the spectrum of different dance worlds, we might be able to gain a better understanding of how dance is central to the lives and cultures of numerous people. Dance points to something essentially human, captured in the title of Hanna’s book (1987): To dance is human.

This thesis is based on participant observation of interaction in closed settings. The analytical challenge has been to interpret and make sense of these encounters. Because of this, symbolic interactionism lies at the basis of my analysis. This theoretical direction is highly influenced by George Herbert Mead. Herbert Blumer was inspired by Mead in his further development of the direction, while also giving it its name (Blumer 1969: 1). John Dewey, William James and Charles H. Cooley are prominent figures in the early shaping of symbolic interactionism. William Foote Whyte is another example that was hugely influenced by this direction (1993). While the founders’ thoughts vary greatly, the way that they studied human group life is accomplished in a similar manner (Blumer 1969: 1).

The general way symbolic interactionists have viewed human group life and conduct is by insisting on human beings’ active participation in creating meaning in their lives (Blumer 1969: 3). A cardinal principle of empirical studies should, as stated by Blumer (1969: 7), “respect that human societies consists of people engaging in action”. This means that unlike other social theories, symbolic interactionism is clear on its perspective that humans form societies through their actions, and some external forces imposed onto them do not predetermine these actions (Blumer 1969: 8). Throughout my thesis, it will become apparent that I share this perspective in keeping my focus on the interaction and actions of the dancers.

People obtain meaning by interpreting their surroundings. This includes that of other people, themselves, “things” (in a wide comprehension of the word), and abstract ideas. Perspectives formed by the various referential groups of each individual influence such interpretations (Shibutani 1955: 565). Which perspective the individual chooses to act on is determined by the present situation of social interaction (Blumer 1969: 15). During social interaction human
beings act in relation to one another. They take the perspective of each other, perceive and interpret the situation (Charon 1989: 22). Cooley (1922: 168) used the expression “the looking glass-self” in describing how anticipation of other people’s view of oneself affects our own view of ourselves. This is in many ways similar to Goffman’s writings (1959), using a dramaturgical model to explain how we adapt to different roles and try to manage our impressions upon other people. The ways in which the dancers I encountered aim to form different impressions of themselves in their interactions involves an ongoing interpretation of how they think they are perceived.

Howard S. Becker is taking an interactionist perspective on the art worlds (2008). Art worlds as stated by Becker consist of the following (2008: 34):

Art worlds consist of all the people necessary to the production of the characteristic works, which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. Members of the art worlds coordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in frequently used artifacts.

This definition points to art as a joint action, not the product of a single artist. Considering art worlds along the lines of “ordinary” production allows for a social analysis of the features present in bringing forth art within distinctive fields. This definition has been influential for my understanding of hip hop dancing and for the focus of this thesis. The hip hop dance world has proven coherent in many ways throughout the two locations, yet with its local variations. These variations especially become visible when taking Geertz’ term of “deep play” (2005) into account. To understand more of what is at stake for the “deep players” in L.A., I have applied some ideas from modern and postmodern theories, among others applied the idea of the “flaneur” (Tester 1995) to our social media influenced context.

Symbolic interactionism has been criticized for having too much of a micro focus, and refusing to take into account various forces that will not bend to individual’s will—or interpretations (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 36-37). Sherry Ortner replies to the Comaroffs’ concern by underlining that not considering intentionality collapses the distinction between routine practices and agency, which is understood exactly as more intended action (Ortner 2006: 134). In Anthropology and Social Theory (2006), Ortner argues in favor of a further developed practice theory she calls serious games. This theory includes individuals’ intentionality and the impact of wider societal forces in the understanding of individuals’
agency. As mentioned, I wanted my take on the hip hop dance world to be true to the perspectives of the dancers, to give an experience-near insight into this world. The power relations that exist in this field concern the degree of social influence within the Industry. This influence run out from the relations between different peoples and their stand in the social network. This is especially apparent in the career networking of L.A., which I will take into consideration later on. A serious games perspective would then capture the forces at play in addition to individuals’ own intentions in their interactions. However, power structures as such is not what I found most compelling to look into. As a result, symbolic interactionism was the perspective I deemed most useful to my analysis.

In order to contextualize the interaction taking place at the dance studios, it has of course been relevant to describe some aspect of the dancing itself. Motivations might vary among the people I encountered. Nevertheless, the dancing is what brought them together in the first place. I will describe certain basic movements and explain in what ways they are fundamental to the dancing of hip hop. These explanations run out of my participation in classes and my own experiences in performing the movements. This brings me to the field of phenomenology and sensory ethnography (Pink 2015), in describing how certain practices are experienced through the senses. Furthermore, in order to analyze the emotional aspect and the attitudes displayed when dancing, I have included Bakhtin’s (1984) interpretation of carnival in the middle ages, and Turner’s (1986) take on liminality in performance and the subjunctive “as if”-mood. This have helped describe how we might understand the play on attitudes within the dance.

Method

Already an insider to the dance world, I easily obtained access. I relied on participant observation, both in the studios, and in the house where I stayed in L.A. Through informal conversations, I gained a lot of information about my fellow dancers, making formalized interviews redundant.

In the classes, I realized that learning the routine was taking all of my attention, trying to be self-reflective while dancing became impossible. I decided just to be in the moment, as I ordinarily would have been, storing the impressions in my body until later when I would write my notes. When the instructors gave advice I was all ears, both trying to take in the content of
the advice for my further performance in class, and memorizing the words for later. Tomie Hahn reckons the difficulty of analyzing movements can be one explanation to why dancing was not studied earlier (Hahn 2007: 5). On the other hand, she mentions her own frustration in not finding the words for how her body “knew” a movement (Hahn 2007: 13). I have encountered the same difficulty in my own writing. However, to withhold such descriptions would take away the most essential part of dancing, namely, moving bodies. In describing the movements and the sensations, I have reflected upon my own bodily sensations in class during certain movements combining it with the instructions given to why such a movement is of importance and of how it should be performed. In this way, I hope to have made how the dancing appears in a sensuous way tangible. Furthermore, I have included some notes with links to YouTube clips to give a better visual basis for understanding what this dance genre is like.

I tried to balance being a dancer and friend on the one side, while being an anthropologist conducting fieldwork on the other. My solution was to let myself be enmeshed in the conversations and activities, but making sure to remain curious and reflective. In this way, I managed to be an “outsider” to my field by focusing on how to not take too much things for granted.

In order to answer my research questions, I have found it appropriate to describe situations as they occurred in their context. Describing representative situations allows me to bring forth interpretations closely linked to the actual encounters on which I base my analysis. I include some direct phrases from conversations that reveal expressions relevant to my field, while describing encounters in detail. This is relevant as I am following a symbolic interactionist perspective, and such descriptions in turn discloses how I have arrived at certain interpretations and conclusions. In addition, I have included descriptions of the dancing itself. To capture some of its essence I have relied on the teachings in class, focusing on the movements, and some emotions and sensations attached to hip hop dancing.

Hip hop dancing proved to be a rich field for an anthropological analysis. Therefore, I had to limit myself to some prominent topics, and leave the rest in my notes. In some cases, I will point to some of these themes briefly in passing.
Ethical Considerations

In the text, all names of dancers, instructors, and the studios have been changed. In describing the persons included in the text, I have avoided too detailed descriptions of them, and in some cases changed certain features.

While conducting fieldwork, I was open about my endeavor. In Oslo, I experienced that the other dancers took more interest in my project, and had some knowledge about social anthropology. In L.A., my project usually came up early on in conversations when I explained that I was not there to “make it”. However, this was seldom explored any further. The focus soon went back to my preferred genres and styles, and to which classes I was planning to take that night.

In order to keep the identity of the dancers I describe throughout my text confidential, the YouTube videos I have chosen involve none of them.

Before proceeding to take a closer view on Oslo and Los Angeles, I will present a historical backdrop of the development of the hip hop culture from before hip hop dancing was moved into the dance studios, which is the grounds for my project.

Empirical Field: Hip Hop

The Bronx and New York have to me been synonymies with the origins for hip hop dancing from before I started attending dance classes. Some will argue that dancing in the studios is not “real” hip hop. This discussion will not be a feature of this dissertation. Because the various studios refer to the classes as “hip hop”, I will stick to their terminology. Today, hip hop has gained a global stage compared to its starting point in the inner city ghettos of New York in the 1960s and 1970s. I will outline some historical moments here, as a short introduction to the establishments of hip hop, in order to bring forth a basic understanding of the origins of the hip hop dancing we find in dance studios today.

The recession of the economy of the post war years hit the Bronx especially hard. The less fortunate residents, predominantly Blacks and Latinos, were left behind while other impoverished families arrived. Theese and other factors contributed to an urban decay of South Bronx which increased gang violence (Price III 2006: 6-7). The Bronx became “the
epitome of urban failure” (Fernando 1994, referred in Price III 2006: 4). In this environment, however, the development of a culture took form, beginning with the invention of a Bronx DJ.

Kool Herc, originally a Jamaican, had noticed as a DJ (disc-jockey) how people would get lose and reach a peak during the break of a song when it was only the drums or other rhythmic sounds, a break from the vocal and other instruments of a funk tune (Upsahl 1999)\(^2\). He focused on increasing the breakdown segment of the record, by mixing together the instrumental section of two or three songs, using two turntables, what he called “The Merry go Round”, developing the breakbeat. The breakbeat represented something new that fostered further creativity by dancers, other DJs, and the MCs (Master of Ceremonies), which led the crowd through the microphone. People started dancing and doing acrobatic moves to music played by DJs in block parties, forming what is later known as breakdance or b-boying (or -girling)\(^3\). The actual moves were not new in themselves, and was taken out of the already existing repertoire of Black and Latin dance movements. However, the ways the dancers mixed together these movements in the Bronx under the breakbeat represented something novel - freed of the systems of the dance styles from which they originated. Building on Kool Herc’s breakbeat innovation (while he might not be the only DJ to think of it at the time, he has been given the credit), each neighborhood in The Bronx soon had its own DJ and parties.

In the mid-70s one of the gang leaders, and DJ, Afrika Bambaataa, founded Universal Zulu nation, a hip hop awareness group. In the locale of Zulu Nation, people could come and enjoy DJs plate spinning and dance, creating a location where people could express themselves creatively within the movement, thereby institutionalizing hip hop. Universal Zulu Nation grew as former gang leaders joined in under the motto “Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun”. Before long, people from outside the Bronx and New York would visit Zulu Nation’s headquarter at the Bronx River Center.

The hip hop movement was a result of a cultural meeting between the Rastafari culture of Jamaica and the lives of Jamaicans and other Caribbean people, Blacks and Latinos in the Bronx in the decades after Civil Rights Movements. The Rastafari movement built on an elevated black Pan-African consciousness. The Rastafari legacy of Black pride is then an important part of the origins of hip hop culture. Another perhaps alluring feature was its focus on materialism and the hustle for the rich lifestyle, with stories circulating how someone

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\(^2\) This section is based on interviews from the movie The Hip Hop Years directed by Upsahl (1999) unless otherwise stated.

\(^3\) I will comment upon the musicality again when explaining it in accordance to the dancing in Chapter 2
“came from the bottom” but now had gained huge success. Hip hop’s focus on “struggle”, “pressure” and “hardships” forms part of this genre’s discourse, and is its art talk. Art talk occurs in all genres and each genre has its own style specific ways of expression through words and speech (Becker 2008: 34). Hip hop’s language and focus on “working hard to get from the bottom to the top” and on letting “the haters hate” is an implicit part of this culture, which message is felt by many of those familiar with it.

Members active in the movement formed crews of hip hop performers, including DJs, MCs, graffiti artists and break-dancers. Some crews started touring nationally. Hip hop had a lot of adept entrepreneurs, establishing for instance record studios. Moreover, hip hop music gained increasingly airtime on radio.

Hip hop dance styles was developing on the West Coast from early on. However, here the movie scene inspired the street dancers. Robotic movements were especially popular, which formed the beginning of popping, locking and boogaloo, dance styles still relevant within hip hop today (Price III 2006: 33 ). These dancers were featured in the TV-show Soul Train. The founding of MTV, increased television appearances of hip hop artists tremendously. The music videos, however, contributed to change the dancing. This media demanded background dancers to not overshadow the MCs/rappers, thereby adding new forms of dancing to this music. The dancers nonetheless had very strong stage presence, while calming their expression somewhat, allowing the rapper to be the focus in his video (Price III 2006: 34).

Where ma’ party people at?

It is apparent that the dancers played a central part in development of hip hop. The DJs interacted with the dancers, or “party people”. DJ Kool Herc came up with the idea of the breakbeat exactly because he noticed how the party people danced, or responded, to different parts of the tracks he was playing.

Hip hop dancing which was often used in the music videos later developed into the style of classes at dance studios. Breakdancing still relevant. However, there tends to be a separation between breakdancing and other hip hop dance styles. In addition, there is often a divide between freestylers and dancers learning routines in class within the other styles of hip hop dancing. In continuation, my focus will be on the hip hop dancing as taught in the dance studios.
One important question should be answered before we move on: How do we define dance? In her book “To Dance is Human”, Hanna suggest the following definition:

Dance can be most usefully defined as human behavior composed, from the dancer’s perspective, of (1) purposeful, (2) intentionally rhythmical, and (3) culturally patterned sequences of (4a) nonverbal body movements (4b) other than ordinary motor activities, (4c) the motion having inherent and aesthetic value (Hanna 1987: 19).

This definition by Judith Lynne Hanna (1987) contains as prerequisite that all four criteria are in place for anything to be categorized as “dance”. The movement needs to have a purpose, if only for the movement itself, while it is intentionally rhythmical with nonverbal body movements other than ordinary motor activities (Hanna 1987: 21). Rhythm means temporal patterns in the dance that are repeated in certain intervals, changing between moments of high activity and near full stop (Hanna 1987: 28). What is considered ordinary motor activities will vary with the community in question, and these movements will necessarily be culturally patterned, as all movements belong to a specific cultural frame of reference; allowing some movements and restraining others (Hanna 1987: 31, 36). This aspect also has connections to the criteria of having inherent and aesthetical value. The given culture is the framework for what is aesthetic value, and this is then a characteristic given from within the culture and not from outside perspectives (Hanna 1987: 38). Becker (2008: 134) explains how art worlds become vital in what is considered art through the forming of aesthetical principles. Hip hop dancing fits the definition proposed by Hanna as the movements are done on purpose, with intentional rhythm decided by the beat. The sequences or dance elements are culturally patterned as hip hop has its own repertoire of movements, which differs from the normal motor activities. Finally, the culturally patterned sequences are in accordance with what is recognized as having aesthetic value (or is considered dope) within hip hop.

Hip hop, as opposed to ballet or Jazz dance, is a street dance. Hip hop dancing occurred at parties as a response to the DJ’s mixings, but was also practiced in school yards and in the streets of the inner city ghettos. This makes hip hop dancing originally a social dance as opposed to performance oriented dances such as ballet and jazz. Hip hop, salsa and dancehall are today recognized as independent dance genres. The dances developed through interaction occurred spontaneously in various social settings. Martin, one of my dance instructors in Oslo, explained that the street dances (an expression today mainly used about hip hop and funk styles) were later brought from the streets and inside dance studios. He argued that the transition from the street to dance studios influenced the dancers in terms of creativity. In the
studios, the dancing are now following a recognizable system for dance instruction. This adaption has made hip hop dancing rely more on the beat than on rhythm. Choreographies are most often taught by counting the beat and adding the movements to it. Creativity and rhythmic play are still cherished aspects of hip hop dancing, but perhaps more so among freestylers than class-goers.

Structure of Thesis

Chapter 2 will look at the interaction observed in Oslo and discuss what role dancing plays in the lives of those who pursue it. Some examples will be included in order to illustrate my findings. I will throughout most of this chapter offer examples explaining what hip hop dancing is like. Chapter 3, focus will look at some of the sensations and emotions present in dancing, by mainly applying empiric examples from L.A.. Chapter 4 is about expression of attitudes, and relation management in L.A., while chapter 5 will take a closer look at career building through a postmodernist lens. Finally, in chapter 6 I will compare the recurrent themes of the two locations.
Chapter 2 Familiar Moves, Familiar Faces

This chapter will investigate the social interaction between the instructors and participants more closely, while also having a glance of how dance fits within their broader life situations. An explanation of the basics of hip hop will also be a feature of this chapter. I will not offer any written hip hop tutorial - learning by doing is the key when it comes to dancing. However, mentioning some of the basic elements of hip hop is needed in order to give a proper analyses of the subject. However, in order to capture the essence of dancing in the studio, I have decided to keep the teachings of the dancing and the interaction connected as they were in the actual situations.

Behave Bad

I nod and smile to a girl that I have seen several times in the Femme Style classes. She always does very well. At a much later occasion, I learn her name is Julie. I find a spot between her and a younger girl, named Samantha. Samantha used to go to several of the same classes as me. After rehearsing and dancing together with the class at a Christmas party at the studio, we started chatting despite our age difference.

Today’s class has a substitute teacher again, Nadia, who also had the class the preceding week. There are some new faces since last week, and Nadia says she will start slow and see if we get the time to add some more moves towards the end of what she taught last week. I assume that I am probably the oldest, except from Nadia and Julie. There is a group of girls around 14 years standing in the back close to the wall. Nadia asks them to step forward as there is enough space. They hesitate, trying to push one girl in front of them, but as she resists, they end up standing in the same spot. “Please don’t try and hide in the back there! Relax, we’re gonna have a good time” Nadia encourages them. “Besides, ‘try’ is the word – I will be able to see you in the mirror, or if necessary I’ll walk back to you later,” she adds with a shrug, leaving them to decide for themselves as she starts the warm-up.

We start by moving our hips in a circle backwards from right to left while tapping our hands towards the front of our hips. Our elbows are bowed and placed in to our sides. Placing the weight on our left foot, we lift a straight right leg up, holding it parallel with the floor. We lift
our left arm straight over our head while “hitting” our hip to the right, before sitting our weight down on our right foot. Before repeating it to the left side –this with a posing of the right arm by the side of our faces, letting it slide down our body while stepping back on our left foot, then our right.

Nadia makes us go through the first parts several times, adding a few more moves, before having us take it from the top again, with and without music. As class proceeds and the routine is getting longer, we repeat the last parts before the added steps, and then from the top.

Towards the end of the routine, there is a short segment where Nadia has placed a *whine*, a wide circular movement with the hips, and she asks us to freestyle our arm movements and make the whine “your own”. As I watch the other dancers in the mirror, I notice how some of them adds hand movements towards the neck or face, or draw a hand over their hair. “Just add something! It’s free, you decide, don’t follow me on this one!” Nadia says, having noticed how some of the participants did what she had done in the freestyle part. “Now, next few times we go through the whole thing, in that whine, I want you to play with it –add something new to it for each round. Okay? Go for it, if you go *full out* you’ll have more fun, I promise! Put your energy into it and it’s almost like that gives more energy back. At least that’s how I feel as I get bored by only, like, marking the steps. So, go all in – and freestyle!”

Nadia gets someone to record us going through the routine one last time. “Thank you so much for coming today! I will upload the video clip to the Facebook page later. Next week, Annette will be back to have this class as usual.” She tells us, as we applaud her to show our appreciation for her class.

It is common for the instructors to want to record the routine at the end of class. Either for their own benefit, or for sharing with the participants of the class, and possibly also the rest of the studio. Sometimes participants will request recordings themselves when they had a great class, or found the choreography particularly cool. Facebook groups are created for interaction outside the classes, most frequently used to ask for the name of the music used in class, or to upload recordings. The groups of each class tend to be private, however, dancers not currently participating in class may be part of it. Any “likes” and comments about the uploaded video clips tend to come from the participants in that particular class. The studio itself also has its own group and page on Facebook, which contains a lot more members. Videos are often uploaded to this group in case the class does not have its own Facebook group, or for whatever reason the instructor might find it more convenient to use this group.
During start up each August and January, the studio’s group is used to spread information about the free try-out-week and for receiving questions about the classes and levels, and so forth.

The way Nadia is urging her class to freestyle and to go all in, is similar to how Emma encouraged her beginner’s class to relax and to not look so worried. The main thing is to think less and enjoy more. This similarity is something I will come back to, as those are not the only ones pointing out the aspect of expression.

Julie and I remain in the same spots, but Samantha stands further back in this class as she arrived late from filling up her water bottle. All three of us join dancehall too, the class after Femme Style. In this class we are about 20 participants. Martin, the instructor, greets us. He then has one of his assistants, Philip, do the warm-up with us. The warm-up consists of various movements done to afro-house music, and by the end of the first song, the whole class seems to feel warm enough to start learning the routine.

I am including dancehall here too as it is part of the classes offered at the studio, and the teachings in this class are transferrable to the rest of the classes. It is a different genre from hip hop, yet the two have certain things in common stemming from their Jamaican roots. However, the focus will be on hip hop.

Martin states his class rule: “Behave bad! This means that you dance without any apology, you want to be bad, not polite and careful not to hurt anyone’s feelings or toes or whatever. Often when I teach classes, I get the sense that the students are trying to hide themselves by making their moves smaller and holding back in a way. As if they are dancing with an apology ready,” he tells us. “It doesn’t work. We can still see you. Behave bad,” He concludes, and starts to teach the routine.

To behave bad as a class rule, which means to let go of any apologetic way of performing, is a reminder to let go of over-controlling habits in emotional display. It refers to preforming without holding back –without offering any apology before any kind of movement. Caring too much about what others might think, or of making a fool of oneself, is what actually leads to a bad and overly restrained performance. If insecurity and restraint are what is communicated to the audience, then that is what will make an impact on them emotionally and will form the impression they are left with.
The choreography starts with two *reggae-walks* on the spot. Martin explains that, “when we do these *walks*, it seems like you first lift your right leg then your left. However, you should think more ‘down-down’ with your body rather than ‘up’. You’d want to keep the movement grounded, the accent is going downwards. In any move that we do, if it looks like it’s going up, you should still focus on the downward movements of your body.”

**Breaking it down**

The feeling of moving downwards in hip hop makes contact with the ground an important facet, called *grounding*. It is a natural consequence of the bounce. “Work with gravity” Martin instructed us in class, getting us to focus on accentuating the natural force of gravity. Alternatively, as a substitute instructor in popping class put it: “The floor is always there for you! It’s your friend! Keep the contact!”

Andrea was one of my first instructors when I left the Latin-style dances for her classes at the student’s gym. Since then she has taught a lot more classes, while also going through more formalized hip hop dance education. I asked her if she could explain the basics of hip hop to me in her own words in the way she would’ve explained it to a hip hop rookie. This is how she explained it:

> “The different styles have one or more characteristic grooves that makes the dance style recognizable, and are closely connected to what the music ‘says’. For instance, House dancing is light, with an upward feeling. Hip hop on the other hand is, heavier and presents a downward feeling. *Groove* is what happens when the dancers feels the music in their bodies. *Bounce* is a groove of hip hop, going down into the floor by a bend in the knees like a ball bouncing up and down, or like a car with a lot of leaf springs, to put it like that.”

The bounce, as stressed in the extract from Emma’s class in the beginning, is really part of what makes hip hop recognizable as hip hop. Emma’s encouragement to “don’t think, just decide to do it” was an effort to make her class participants feel the music and react to it without overthinking by having the groove come natural to them. The grounding further helps when moving about, as when Emma used her weight to move to her front foot, and then return

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4 For a visual (instructions in Italian): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHJHis2Un90](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHJHis2Un90) - Vittorio Sibilio *hip hop tutorial bounce*, YouTube [Internet] Published Jul 2012 [viewed: Jun 24. 2016]
on her back foot, thereby freeing any weight off her front leg preparing to make her next move with that leg. The substitute instructor advised us: “use the space around you to dance with your body, move your weight together with the steps, don’t just move your feet. That’d just look crazy!” This relates to how Emma exaggerated her weight shifts when she showed the movements. When the tempo speeds up it appears hard to get enough time for every weight shift and to bounce⁵, but skipping these parts will make the dance look rather comical at best, as the substitute instructor demonstrated to us in class, smiling broadly while doing so.

The grounding of the movements further helps the motion of the lower body; knees, thighs, hips and waist. The knees may be twisted while bent, the thighs then following naturally, and the hips making circular or shaking movements. As an asset to the downward orientation, the use of the core muscles of the abdomen and lower back helps the motion, and controls the energy. If the movements are fast, the core needs to be active and ready to release the muscle contraction fast and restrain it again. If the movements are slower, more tenacious, the restrain in the core muscle is what makes the effect. When Emma first shows the moves to her class slowly, she is restraining the movements, and releasing it when she speeds up to show it in real tempo. Often, quick, twitchy moves are combined with slow, tenacious moves within the same eight-count (I will come back to the musicality later), or is placed in various parts of the choreography, to make contrasts. Contrasts are a widely used feature of hip hop dancing: changing between quick and slow, between levels of positioning the body, high or low, and between soft and harder expressions. This play with contrasts is laid on top of the bounce, which is always there. If the contrasting element comes to a complete stop, the grounding is obviously still there, ready to go into the bounce again when movement is resumed.

In the routine after the reggae-walks Martin was teaching there is a chest movement. Martin elegantly explains that we will capture more easily if we imagine throwing up: “Move your chest up and front wise like you need to throw up, and then pull it back in to a ‘stomach cramp’. I’m sorry about this visualization, but it is the best way to explain it unless we’re going to use technical terms which you have not learned yet.”

Technical terms are not frequently applied. Overall, down to earth everyday explanations are used if further explanation of a move is called for. In this way, the movements are concretized

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⁵ Example of a hip hop routine: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qn9Ar8kVfRc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qn9Ar8kVfRc) - Amari Marshall Busta Rhymes – Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See – AMARI Choreography, YouTube [Internet] Published Apr 2015 [viewed: Jun 24. 2016]
within a mutual frame of reference, maintaining the communicativeness of the moves. Abstraction

ing them to technical figures would distance it more from the idea of using the body
to communicate along the lines of everyday (verbal) speech. In some cases, the instructor will
use musical sounds in order to mark the rhythm instead of counting it with numbers. This too
keeps it closer to an immediate experience.

No matter what tempo or intensity, the movements tend to be big. Emma’s circular arm
movement, in the introduction, starting with her arms up by her head moving outward down
towards her hips is an example of big movements. Small, tiny moves can however be used as
a contrasting element now and then, but usually hip hop favors an expansive personal space
for the dancer’s to extend their moves broadly out from their bodies. Unlike ballet, or waltz,
hip hop does not necessarily use the space of the room that much, however, it demands space
where one is situated. Martin once compared this extended personal space to that of an
embassy; “When you dance, you own your body and the space around you. If someone steps
in your zone uninvited you should reclaim that space, not making your moves smaller to make
room for the other person in your extended personal space. They will need an invitation from
you for it to be ok. In the Caribbean, we call this ‘Embassy’: it’s like if you step inside the
area of the American Embassy, you are in America. Same with this dancing space; if someone
steps too close they are in your zone: your embassy, and your rules.” Martin said this in order
to remind us to always go big in our moves, adding that of course in class we would want to
avoid hitting each other. Nevertheless, within the space we had between ourselves and the
other participants, we should move with authority and no apologies. To put it another way, if
a move is supposed to be big, it should be so without any added hesitation nor any apology for
taking up that space. Hip hop, as dancehall, is big and bold in its expressions.

Hip Hop Dance as Genre

A short comment on styles and genres: There are different styles within the hip hop genre.
Classes labelled “hip hop” is a fusion of various elements depending on the instructors taste
and inspiration.

A style belongs to the hip hop genre because it builds on the kind of hip hop dancing that
arose from breakdancing and funk in the past, or has some other connection to hip hop in how
it originated. *Waacking*’s main characteristic\(^6\), for instance, is excessive use of hand and complex arm movements. *House* is danced to house music, and its groove has an upward feel\(^7\), as opposed to the bounce of hip hop which has a downward feel. Certain moves from other genres can be applied as well, for instance salsa, which was an influence on early hip hop dancing.

Gimme more

“Yes, that’s more like it!” Talita exclaimed to her class of eight participants, “Now the energy level was closer to what I need from you! However, I do need more expressions from you. And every time I tell you to give me more and more, it is as if you are holding back all this, barely adding more.” She uses her face to accentuate her message to the class by smiling broadly and leaning her head and shoulders a bit forth, and then using her hands to pull towards herself when she talks about holding back. “You know, every time I dance out of country, and the instructor asks for more, everybody goes all the way. The energy level gets amazing! When you think you are giving me a lot, you still have so much to go on! This time I want you to show me facial expressions that are *more* by going beyond what you think is enough –because that will be closer to where I’ll be pleased by what I see” she explains, looking over the group in front of her to see if they understood the message. “You!” She points to a girl in the back. “I loved the way you went into it, freeing up your head to the movements, and giving some real feeling. More of that!” Talita nods to herself, adjusts her snapback that she accidentally hit while gesticulating as she spoke, and then walks back to the music devices by the windows and start the track anew. “Now, ready! Give me it!” She shouts as she hurries back in front of the mirror facing her class before the routine starts. As the group dances, Talita starts accentuating the beat to them loudly, using an eager body language as if to transmit higher energy to the group. “bam – BAM –pam – PAM!” she shouts to the beat, moving her body in a small groove to the music as she takes a step back and forth in her limited space in front of the mirror. Looking at the dancers, they seem focused and

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\(^6\) For an example of a Waacking routine: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TPXqEKEjRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TPXqEKEjRo) - Jee Kalua *Waacking Fusion – “Royals” – Lorde*, YouTube [Internet] Published Oct 2013 [viewed: Jun 24. 2016]

\(^7\) House routine: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFmmo2Paz_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFmmo2Paz_g) - Mamé MaMSoN DIARRA *House Dance routine by MaMSoN*, YouTube [Internet] Published Oct 2013 [viewed: Jun 24. 2016]
concentrating hard, though their movements are more energetic this time around, their facial expressions are still more to the serious and stiff side.

Dancing hip hop with a fearful expression breaks with the rough, big and intense body movements required to project a confident attitude. To my mind, I cannot imagine fear or doubt ever to be something to be intentionally expressed in this genre of dance, unless it is done a short moment as a joke or a mocking. To dance, speaking in general terms, is about interaction and communication. Being afraid to express oneself while dancing obviously disrupts the conversation, no matter how well the steps and grooves are in place. When I went to a battle between crews earlier this year, one of the judges brought this up after a performance by a duo. Their choreography was cool, and they went through it without any fumbling. However, something was definitely missing. One of the judges concluded her feedback to the duo by these words:

“I did not see any communication at all, not with the audience, not between the two of you. Dancing is not about learning some steps and doing them in the right order. It is about more. It is about communication, of bringing the audience in to your world as you dance. To me, personally, I would rather see you have fun and being expressive on stage even if the technique were off, or if you did some mistakes. Those things we can work on. But. If you doesn’t manage to deliver the message nor communicate what goes on in you when you dance… To me, that is not dance.”

The judge’s feedback relates to the definition of dance provided by Hanna (1987: 19) in the following way: the dancing is being purposeful with nonverbal body movements patterned in accordance with certain aesthetic standards. Dance is a social behavior, and as stated by Hanna, dance is a compound of symbols for communication (Hanna 1987: 4, 26). While dance may be purposeful by the function of movement itself, one of hip hop dancing’s aesthetic values lies in its expressiveness. Not being expressive nor communicating, takes away some of hip hop’s purpose. Hip hop was founded as a means to express oneself through various media in a situation where speech via ordinary forms of spoken and written utterances did not make it through to the intended recipients. This is why communication and self-expressiveness is so important to master. Hip hop is performed to an audience - in the very least, to an imaginary one. Of course, it could be said the judge referred to above was in some way affectively moved (Hanna 1987: 28), though boredom and dismay was likely not the intended response of the routine.
Have Fun to the Music

“Okay, so let’s start the choreography part. We’ll do it to this Korean artist, so it’s possible you never heard of him before. Maybe some of you, maybe none. Anyway, it is a party song, so do have fun with it!” Adam introduce his Wednesday class after the warm-up. The first time we did the first eight count to the music, the party factor was there. The choreography was cool, real fast and fun. Adam’s style is to lie almost a split moment before the beat, as opposed to dancehall and other hip hop classes that often lies a bit behind, or in other cases, directly on it. This made it necessary to respond quickly to the music, while the tempo was maintained throughout the routine. Adam made room to play with the impression at one point in the choreography where he prolonged one of the moves by slowing it down and keeping it through almost to the third beat when he was almost before it again.

“Do you understand what sounds you should be hitting?” Adam asks the class after having rehearsed the first eight counts of his routine. A few people nods. “Yes, no, yes?” Adam encourages a more consistent answer by putting his thumb up and down in front of the class. “Maybe you could explain it in more detail to us?” a girl from the back suggests. “Yes, okay. So, we are usually following an eight-count pattern, or a set of eight beats. The start of each set is marked with a downbeat, an accented drum beat that marks the beginning of each eight. Listen.” He starts the track, and counts the beat. “One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight, again…” He does this eight-counting a couple of times more. “You noticed? The stress however is placed on the 2nd and 4th” He waits, listening for the accent marking the start again, pointing his left finger in the air as the 2 and 4 appears in the music. “Sometimes we also use the rests, like when we dance on the ‘and’…” He adds, marking the beginning of a four, slowly, making extra emphasis when he move on the break. Including breaks in the routines make movements faster as the “and” makes an added move between two beats. “Clearer? Yes, no, yes?” He asks again, no thumb this time. He focus, gazing at the class seeing if someone looks doubtful. He nods to himself, “Okay then, let’s go one more time before I add to it”. He puts the music on, and the class rehearse the same eight-count as before.

In the definition by Hanna, cited earlier, she does not mention music as a defining feature, as not all dances require music. However, in hip hop dancing, music and movements are intimately related to each other. According to Adam, knowing what to listen for is crucial. In order to understand why music is so important to the dancer, we need to establish some basic
facts about the sound of hip hop music. The first important aspect is the breakbeat that makes the basis for hip hop music. The breakbeat refers to the innovation created by DJ Kool Herc. DJs and other musicians have developed this basic beat creating new beats with different syncopation and other rhythm variations laid on top. Percussion instruments dominate the sound, while rap is predominantly the vocal usage. Digital audio is most frequently used, synthesizers that mimic other instruments are also common, according to one of the instructors I spoke with about this. This makes it hard to identify and label many of the different sounds. In addition, the sampling of musical elements, as done by Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa in the beginning (Upsahl 1999), is still in use. RnB music and music closer to the Funk genre is also often used when dancing hip hop.

When Adam had taught us as much of the routine as he had intended in this week’s class, we rehearsed it several times. As the whole class did his routine together, the energy level went up and the party factor of the song got its lively expression accentuated through our moving bodies. “Great! I’m so happy to see you having fun with my routine, thanks for coming here tonight. The most important thing I want you to take with you from my classes is ‘communication’: have fun, find yourself in the dance, and express it.” David says at the end of class. “I will now let those of you who want some extra exposure go in groups of fives, we’ll do this three times. Who’s in first group?” Those who did it in the groups, did really well and most of them appeared to have a lot of fun with it, while a few seemingly got a bit self-conscious being more visible in the small group in front of the rest of class. “Why didn’t you perform in one of the groups?” Tariq, one of the instructors, asks me. I shake my head, starting to explain I messed up last time we went through it. “You should have done it. It is good to take on such challenges, it makes you advance.”

After Adam’s class, I find Cathinka in the back room sitting on the floor stretching. I sit down next to her. “The class was so much fun! Nevertheless, it was also different, as his style is new to me. You really went for it in the groups!” I tell her. “Thanks! Yes it was fun! I needed this. I’ve been teaching myself lately besides working at H&M, so I’ve missed just enjoying a dance class,” she responds. “Excited about going to L.A.? It’s closing up now, isn’t it?” She asks me. “Level in L.A. is so much higher than here! Well, don’t worry about it, you’ll keep up once you’re there. And of course, you can always take some of the beginner’s classes there if you feel like taking it slower.” Cathinka was the one to urge me to go to Los Angeles when I mentioned to her I was thinking of doing part of my fieldwork in California. She had told me that while I would of course find dance studios in other cities, if given the choice I should go
to L.A. where it all happened, and where any Californian dance instructor would go themselves for inspiration anyway. “I am a good boy…” She sings from the song used in class. “Oh, it is unfair I’m not a boy right now! They look so fresh even after work out,” she adds as she draws a hand through her hair and dries some moist from her face using her jacket. “What...?” I laugh, “where’s the logic to that?” She starts laughing: “Because of the make up!”

Muscle Memory

The instructors provides the constant drilling of smaller sections of the complete choreography, with the aim to “get the moves into the body”, often referred to as “muscle memory”. Dancers understand its meanings without hesitation, and dancers feel it.

One instructor asked us towards the end of class to “not think, just dance” as our bodies only needed to get the routine worked in. The last five minutes he had us go through it over and over without break while he watched us. Some of the times, both details and timing were off. However, after a while, I felt this trying over and over without much time to think about right or wrongs between each time, helped putting the thoughts aside and rather trust that the body already knew the moves - it was just about rehearsing. Emma too wanted her beginners to “just dance, don’t think”. This is a common phrase to hear at dance studios, in various class levels. Dancing contains a lot of mental effort; the crucial thing is to focus without overthinking the routine. With time certain moves and teachings becomes habitual freeing up mental space to take in other details. In the short term, this happen through rehearsing the same routine repeatedly, while in the long term, it coincides with the advancement as a dancer.

Hahn describes in Sensational Knowledge (2007: 7) how reading Browning’s book Samba had her vicariously move with the author even though she did not know samba herself. I am guessing this sensation arose as a result of Hahn long experience with learning movements herself. The reading of that description became a substitute for the typical visual and experiential learning, or what is Hahn’s focus in her monography; the sensational transmission. The concept of “muscle memory” seems to be of an emic origin: In a way, “muscle memory” becomes the dancers own theory of the body an experience-near explanation and understanding of where the movements are stored; in the muscles of the body itself, leaving the brain and mind out of it, as the idea is to “just dance, don’t think”.

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Part of the whole

“How was it?” Cathinka asks me as we pass each other in the hallway. We had interchanged some looks in class after having tried the choreography in tempo. “Fast!” I respond quickly. “I know! Great training for L.A., though” She replies with a wink, as she enters the studio anew to participate in the evening’s last class. I sit down to stretch before entering the winter cold outside. The instructor of the class I just participated in comes and dives down in a beanbag beside me. We start talking. It does not take long, however, before our conversation is interrupted.

Interruptions are typical of conversations at the dance studio. They are often left unfinished, or they are swift and hurried interchanges in passing. More often than not, I have found myself in the back with dancers I have not interacted directly with before, though they are familiar faces from classes. Inconsistency in interlocutors is a general tendency in my experience. Cathinka and I do not usually get the chance to sit down and chat. However, the way we will seek each other out if we see the other in the locale, and hug, proves a somewhat closer relation than with many of the other instructors and participants I interact with in the studio. From my observations of the other dancers at the studio, there seem to be that some “find each other” and form a friendship after a while of seeing one another in class, saluting, and then changing some phrases. These are examples of interaction in the studio. Other conversations revealed what role dancing plays in the lives of the other participants:

Dina is sitting next to me in another beanbag on the floor watching the class before ours. We have been chatting with lowered voice to not disturb the class. She tells me that she is only taking one class this week as she needs to focus on her upcoming exams, and she had decided that one hour dancing would be a much needed breathing space she could afford to treat herself. “I’m doing some of the exams of my bachelor degree again, as I hope to improve the grades enough that at least those will not hold me back from getting into the master’s program I want to at the University. I will have to write a real good motivation letter too. If not this year, since I have no clue about how the criteria will be given the other applicants results and so on, then hopefully next” she tells me. Our class is about to begin, so I do not get the chance for my follow up question about what she plan to focus on if she gets accepted. After class, she heads off straight away.

Dina is in no way the only one to have career plans and other obligations unrelated to dancing. In most cases, it seems to me that the dance classes is mainly a leisure activity,
something that is done for fun. Getting an education is in most cases valued. Of course, dreams and ambitions might arise and be played with. However even when followed up by action and opportunities, the dancing remains a part of a wider whole in the life of the various participants I meet at the studio in Oslo. For those who teach classes, or get other dance jobs, like Cathinka, they will usually also have another job.

Amira is sitting on the floor in the back changing her shoes before leaving. I know her mainly as an always cheerful salsa dancer, but have seen her at the studio here several times lately, though not all that consistent. “I really would like to go to more of the classes regularly, both dancehall and some of the hip hop classes. I just cannot find time on my schedule. I have salsa classes, rehearsals with the show group, and I teach classes myself. Luckily I’m ready to finally hand in my thesis,” Amira tells me. She has been studying at the University of Oslo too. She tells me she would like to focus on her dancing for a while. “Now that I have enough classes to teach, I can make it work. We’re still young,” She adds, “I’ve got enough time to figure out where to make use of my degree. Right now I just want to give myself this break and follow my passions.”

Various activities and obligations are time consuming. Dancing has to be made a priority against other options. How high on the priority list dancing appears would coincide with how “deep players” they are, to apply Geertz’ use of terms (2005: 71), or whether they are in it on a more “shallow” ground – for the thrill of an event outside the everyday routine.

All my Friends

Friendships too seems to be ordered in different ‘hubs’ of life, corresponding to the environment or activity each relation rose from (Shibutani 1955: 567).

“Having the unlimited pass is so great, not needing to think about prioritizing one class over another,” Linda says to Julie and me as we leave the studio after class. Julie hesitated: “Well, yeah it is. I just cannot always go to all the classes I want anyway. I’m supposed to have a life besides my work and dancing. Spending time with my friends. Alternatively, staying in with my boyfriend. And my dog too.” Linda passed through the doors first and waits for us to follow before answering Julie’s comment with how much she herself had scheduled these times, but concluded that even though she was busy, she had never regretted going to dance
class afterwards. “Do any of you have friends that dance?” Julie asks. Neither of us does. “I mean, I’ve made some friends while dancing,” Julie continued “but it would be so great if my friends would try it too. I’ve asked them several times to join me, though it just never happens.” Julie shrugs her shoulders. “Something always comes in the way,” Linda chimes in, rolling her eyes and smiling, while I nod in agreement.

Making friendships at the dance studio can be a challenge. Varying schedules both at the studio and on other arenas in life make communication often rushed and short, and rarely gives room for getting closer as people are often getting ready for class; someone just arrived; others are leaving.

One of the things I have observed is how communication and chat occurs in the classes, or oftentimes barely exists. The participants are great at respecting the instructors. When the instructors talk, it get quiet quickly, and except from breaks there is almost no chatting among the participants. Those who do chat usually know each other from before or even come to class together. A part from this, the communication mainly consists of interchanging looks and quick smiles. In many cases one dancer may non-verbally communicating being exhausted or confused or the like, which the recipient confirms by a smile and perhaps a nod in agreement. It is plausible that this is related to where the focus is during dance class. The need to communicate is possibly reduced by the need for using the breaks to just that; a break from concentrating on learning the steps, get the details right and listen for where to hit in the music. A lot of the communication occurs after classes, often during stretching in the back, usually starting by comments upon class or on specific moves. If several dancers are gathered close to an instructor they may start discussing something together, using this familiar person as an icebreaker between each other.

However, as I came to focus on this I decided to check what would happen if I was initiating more communication with several other dancers that I had not talked to or interacted directly with before. In one case, I started talking to a girl about 15-16 year’s old in one of the classes who seemed a bit shy. During class, I had made eye contact a few times, and smiled at her once when we both got lost at the same place in the routine. When I asked her about how she had liked the class, she responded smiling without hesitation and after a few more questions from me, the conversation started going, soon also including another girl from class.

My guess is that the wish for communication and getting to know each other is there, however, it might seem we are waiting on each other to make the first move and initiate a
conversation. On the other hand, when this waiting takes its time, the dancing itself may be a way of being together, satisfying some of the wishes and needs for interaction. Going to dance class alone can also be considered an independent endeavor: you come and enjoy your passion, talk to people you know, or to none, not depending all that much on the other participants’ decisions and plans.

Sharing the moments

Here I will offer a description of a dance off which the studio arranged a Sunday to mark the end of the spring semester. By describing conversations and interactions from this event at length, I hope to make visible how performing in front of an audience seemed to change the relations between the dancers. In the face of a novel experience, they appeared to find comfort in each other.

As I walk in the door, I hear two different songs streaming out towards me. One is coming from the smaller studio where the door is slightly open, and the other comes from the main studio. Some young dancers rehearse in each studio. I pass some parents standing in the doorway to the main studio watching their children’s rehearsal, and meet Martin in the back room. “Oh, nice to see you!” he greets me, adding: “Now I have two, no, three dancers!” I glance at him with surprise, “Not more? But there were so many at the classes, I expected more to show up!” “Well, I wrote on the Facebook group that we will be on at 3 pm, so if they plan to rehearse I would expect them to calculate the convenience of arriving now,” he exclaims half-jokingly. As I walk past him to put my bag down before taking off my jacket, Anette proclaims as she sees me: “You came! Yes! I have two dancers!” Martin asks me if it does not feel good to be greeted with this level of joy and excitement. I nod hesitantly, about to protest that I am not too happy to be one of a really few dancers for this dance off down on the street, when Dina, tells me she is to dance all alone with Adam. As Adam is a great dancer and she has told me before that she is rather new to hip hop, I understand the alarmed tone of her voice, yet she seems somewhat more excited than frightened.

Anette asks me which of the two choreographies from her classes I was most uncertain of, as I had sent her a message asking for the videos we recorded in class. I tell her that it is the choreography to “Upgrade you” I do not really remember, and she asks me if I want to try it right away. We go through the routine slowly to Anette’s musical sounds, and to my relief I quickly identify the moves in the start I could not remember at home, which made the whole
routine seem like an impossible task. We go through “Upgrade you” in tempo with music from Anette’s phone, which is difficult to hear over the music coming from the main studio. We then move on to the choreography we will perform to “Lemonade”, and go through it in the same way. Anette goes to check when we can try it in the main studio and I sit down next to Dina again. Not long after, I notice a girl from the Femme style classes arriving. I ask if she will also be participating with Anette. She tells that she will, and that she knows another girl is also coming, who, as she explains, really like these kind of dance offs.

Finally, we get to go through both the dancehall and the Femme style in the main studio. As the clock passes 3 pm with a few minutes, Anette and some other girls are asked by Tori, the owner of the studio, to carry the two great speakers down to the street level, as she would bring the stereo deck herself. I walk down the stairs behind Anette, who reacts with surprise as she sees the crowd already in front of the concrete plateau in front of a nearby shop. When I get down a few more steps I realize that even without any advertisement we will have quite an audience, mainly of parents to the children I am guessing, but also some passersby’s that join in as they notice something is about to happen. The girl coming out behind me says that seeing the crowd waiting made her feel nervous as she neither had participated outdoors before for this end of the semester dance off. We chat a bit about our worries of messing it up, and we both agree that we are happy to do the dancehall routine first as we are more people and we have had more time preparing the routine. I ask her what her name is. “I’ve seen you and many of the others so many times in class, but have no clue about any names,” I explain. “Yes, I know! I always try to listen if they go through the participant list of the class, but it’s so difficult to remember,” she responds.

We get on stage, and we are now enough people to fill the plateau. The music is turned on, a little low to begin with, but then louder as Tori adjusts the volume. We groove in individual ways to the familiar intro before starting the routine. I notice myself enjoying being on stage in front of the audience, and the smiles Martin has been asking for in class comes naturally.

After we finish we end up walking directly off stage, upon which Tori reminds us of how much more polite it would have been for us to stay in front of our audience and take a bow before leaving. We start laughing as she reminds us, as does the audience. The spirit after is light amongst us in the dancehall group.

A girl rushes up to Julie and me, asking when the Femme style is on. We tell her that it will be a while still, and she asks if we think she can dance just to “Upgrade you”. We explain to her
how the transition between the two choreographies will be and when she should join us for the last one. I dwell on the irony of how the dance off at the end of the semester seems to make us finally open up to each other, after spending several months together on the dancefloor rarely exchanging more than greetings and maybe a few more words. Perhaps dancing next to each other is a different way of being together, making conversation redundant to feel included and social. While at the dance offs, the novelty and uncertainty of performing makes us seek out each other for comforting any nervousness - seeking out familiar others before getting on stage in front of complete strangers.

Though hesitant in seeking out each other for direct communication, being together in class leads to some sense of belonging. Being familiarized to each other through the ongoing encounters at the studio increases the feelings of similarity and attraction towards one another (Moreland and Zanojec 1982: 396). This became visible in the more uncommon, and somewhat stressful, situation of being on stage in front of people whom we had not shared those moments of dancing in the studio with. This happened through direct communication as shown above, or, continuously more subtle, through flocking together in a group with persons from class while waiting for turn.

Summing up

Based on the experiences described above, it seems likely expressiveness was the focus of attention in the classes. This illustrate how expressiveness is important in dancing. On the other hand, the pronounced attention given to expressiveness is a symptom of how the participants in the classes are holding back their emotional display. Without expression, communication gets lost while the movements have less impact. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on some of the sensations of dancing, say a bit more about self-expression in dance, and then turn to emotional display by looking at sexuality and desire in hip hop dancing. The following chapters will predominantly rely on material from L.A.
Chapter 3 Dance it out

“Jason? Could you help me a tiny bit, please?” I asked him from the kitchen table where I was working on writing down notes from different classes. “Yes, I could. It just depends… Will it take effort? Like, would I have to stand up?” He answers from the coach. “No” I smile, “I’ll come over, just two sec!” I answer, bringing my notebook and pen as I sit next to him on the coach. “You see, I should try to write something about the sensational aspects of dancing, but I find it so hard to put into words. Will you try helping me with this? Considering tonight’s class with Jackson in particular. What feelings and sensations were you experiencing? It might take some mental effort, though, I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I get your difficulty. When you were talking now, I was like; I know this, no problem. Then, to actually explain to you what I felt in class… I’m lost for words actually,” Jason kept on using his hands when stating this, placing his hand on his chest when he was talking, and then pulling it out towards me with restraint. His hand gestures resonated with me just too well; it is exactly how I tend to move, even by myself, when focusing on this theme. Jason normally uses his hands when he talks, but less so when chilling on the coach like he is now. However, maybe these gestures were part of his way to engagement, as pondering this question all of a sudden made him seem more alert than when asking me if the favor I was requesting from him would involving getting up. “How did I feel?” He was asking himself aloud. “I guess I felt so into the moment I didn’t even reflect on it.” I nod as I write a few words down, to encourage him that this is a good start. I look up at him as he stares out in the living room while probably re-living parts of class in his mind, as his gaze is not fixated on anything in particular, his eyes moving from side to side and his facial muscles engaging and relaxing. “I just felt this pure joy and excitement. Living in the moments.” He then tells me. I nod again, reciprocating his excited gaze and smile as I agree with the description; “I know, me too. It’s a great feeling!” I then address my assumption of him imagining the class just before. “I did indeed! I guess I’m more of a visual thinker, I always tend to visualize when people tell me something, or when I try to remember something,” he responds. “I’m just the same,” I add. “Perhaps this has something to do with us being used to taking choreography by observing the instructor and mimicking his or her movements?” I wonder. “You know, it probably is like that. Whenever people want to teach me something and just tell me how to, I’m like, could you please show me? Without a visual, it’s so much harder,” Jason reflects. “Back to class again, do you remember anything else?” He stares out in the open again. “The happiness is the most prominent. It wasn’t really
this joyful choreography, but the movements together with the music and everybody moving together, I don’t know… I just felt elevated… Yeah, I think that is the best way to explain my feelings and sensations.” “It’s good.” I state while writing down some key words rapidly.

“Oh, girl! This just made me want to dance like right now!” Jason says as he stretches before rising. “Yeah, we should just rewind and take tonight’s exact class anew!” I suggest laughingly. “M-hmm,” Jason nods. “Just easy on the remote for now, I need to make some dinner. Pasta and 3-cheese cream sauce, again” he sighs finding his equipment for the task at hand. “Isabel, did you eat yet?” he asks me leaning out from the half wall separating the kitchen from the area with the kitchen table where I am now again seated. “I will in a few. When you’re done, I guess”. “What you having?” he asks. “Uh, something really rich, flavor-ish!” I tell him with a jokingly tone and smile; “Pasta with cheese sauce too. But! I’ll add ham and have an egg on the side though,” I tell him. “Oh, the pasta! Always! Most popular dish in this household! You gotta love the Italians!” Jason sighs from the stove just as Hugo and Shane walks in the door.

Jason, Hugo and Shane are all living in the dancer’s hostel with me, and was all there my entire stay. Jason is a boy in his early twenties. African-American from the East Coast, and gay. His embracing of his feminine side together with his great personality soon made him one of my best friends in my L.A. field.

Jason seemed to encounter the same problem as me in articulating his emotions from the dance class into words. I have myself struggled to put these sensations and emotions into words. I am with Isadora Duncan on this; “If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it.”

Jason’s eagerness to dance again after our conversation reminded him of his emotions from class, suggest that the dancing triggered something in him worth reaching anew. Resonating with both his words and his lack thereof, I think the sensation of “elevation” and “being so into the moment” are some key statements to look into in aiming at capturing the sensational and emotional aspects of dancing. By continuing to develop a sense of what hip hop dancing is like, this chapter will look more closely at both the sensations and the emotional aspects of dancing.

This aspect will get me close to touching in on the question of “why (hip-hop) dancing?” as Jason’s choice of word, “elevation”, which synonyms are; rise, boost, height and altitude, resembles the expression “dancer’s high”. A sensation of elevation during an activity, in
another word, may be described as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 2014: 136). In dancing, the movements are complex and varied, making the mastering of the movement pattern an added challenge to movement and the sensation of “flow”. When mastered however, it is possible to reach this state where you move your body through the pattern of the routine without having to think of it. On the other hand, “flow” might in fact require some mastering of a challenging task; simple routine activity might not be enough as boredom may arise (Csikszentmihalyi 2014: 146). Moreover, if, managing to enjoy that accomplishment, without losing focus, then chances are there for this heightened sensation of being in the present. As if time slowed down and there is less, if any, felt separation between your body, the movements and the music while moving in sync with the other dancers present on the floor. This then frees up space in the process of learning the routine to focus more on perfecting the nuances, or on emotional display. However, aiming at reaching this sensation makes it nearly impossible to achieve; “Flow” is about being in the present (Csikszentmihalyi 2014: 139). Then to think about how to reach it if we with each dancing step, are waiting for it to hit us is moving our focus away from the presence of the movements, which is the very core of this sensation. “Flow” is elusive in that, once we catch ourselves in the sensation itself it is lost (see Ånestad 2015).

**Trust your body, and dance it out**

Inside Victory’s Dance Studio in L.A. Nicole is warming up her evening’s class. Her warm up consists of some flowing movements into stretching positions, before she started with some quicker movements with a defined stop or “hit” at the end. These movements had me focus a lot. To keep the movements as quick as Nicole led us to move, it is necessary to control the body by contracting and releasing the muscles at the right time to make the correct “hit” at the beat of the music. After the warm up session, she tells us that these movements were supposed to be difficult in order to help us learn.

She starts instructing her routine. The choreography has a strong and tough attitude. When she shows us the first part to music, she is giving off a vibe of strength and confidence by each move. I feel excited, as it looks so cool.

We get to try it a few times with music while she does it with us, then she steps aside and everybody messes it up. She tells us that we know the movements and have to trust in ourselves and our own bodies. “What if you look at somebody else and they mess up?” She
then tells us to turn around so we face the back wall instead of the mirror. One of the boys asks if we can do it at least one more time with the mirror, upon which she replies that the whole point is making us rely less on the mirror and more on ourselves. First time around, I find myself hesitant to start with, I try to sneak peek on some of the others but without the mirror, it is difficult catching any details in that quick routine. I remember Nicole’s advice to trust our own body, and towards the end of the routine, I felt more relaxed going through the final movements. She asks us how we felt. Some are laughing nervously. “It didn’t help?” she asks. One of the boys says it was difficult. “If you only dance in front of the mirror, it will be difficult turning away from it. We are doing this exercise for you to learn how to trust your own body, also when we turn back again facing the mirror. Let’s try again”. She goes back to the corner to start the music again. Some of the other students shake their heads slowly as in doubt or as a protest to this being a good idea, while some others appear to be staring in front of them, waiting. I cannot tell for sure, being behind them. The music starts. This time I do not hesitate, I guess I even managed to put the thoughts aside and just let my body react to the music. Without the mirror I am not too certain how well it looked, but it felt good as I got caught up in the sensation of flow. It felt like time had been slowed down somehow, even though tempo was the same, as I managed to relax and enjoy the moment. Nicole asks how we felt this time. Some of the others are nodding hesitantly, while one of the boys are showing this half smile looking down and shaking his head again. Nicole lets us face the mirror as we learn the last part of the routine and rehearse this.

The classes are taught in front of a mirror. The mirror makes it easy to follow the instructor’s movements, or helps in watching someone else in class that does good when the instructor steps aside. This last part is exactly the point of the exercise above: Nicole tries to make us able to rely on ourselves and not the other dancers around us. At last, the mirror is used for watching and perfecting the dancers own movements, lines and facial expressions.

The song of the choreography is by a female rapper, which Nicole describes as one of her mentors and friends. They had been sitting down having a coffee together, Nicole told us. When her friend was explaining she was going through some tough times, Nicole had suggested she could try to write about it. Her friend had started laughing explaining the coincidence of already having started the process. This song, Nicole explains, was the result. As it deals with bad emotions and letting those go, she suggests us to think of something that has been bothering us from the past or present and put those emotions into the dance and dance them out. “You need to trust your body, and dance it out. You’d want us to trust that
what you are showing us is real, authentic to you. We will not do so if we sense that you do not feel confident in what you are doing.” Nicole decided to pick a few dancers to dance the routine alone first. Having tapped into some memory to dance out, I noticed feeling disappointed not getting to dance. The emotions were stirred up inside me, and I felt the urge to give them an outlet. Luckily, we did have the time for everyone to dance one last time. The energy level of the whole group were high as we did the rough routine to “Let it go”. When we reached the end of it, I noticed several of us lingered a bit on the floor, possibly not quite ready to leave the experience of the emotional memory and the routine, hoping she would let us go one more time. “Great!” Nicole said, “I think you felt it, right? Remember this when you take other’s classes, or mine, don’t get too caught up in perfecting it in the mirror; if you can trust in your body and be confident about what you feel, that will make the real difference. Okay?”

Keepin’ it real

The instructor of a different class mentioned the expression *keepin’ it real* several times. His name was Chief K. Having a quite distinct style himself, with various piercings in his ears and eyebrow together with his bright dyed hair, his style of choreographing too, felt to be his own in a very pronounced way. My first class with Chief K I struggled with understanding his way of moving, and could not quite adopt to his ways with my own body. However, when he at a later time started talking about making the move our own, and that he did not want us to try to copy his exact flavor of the moves, things started to ease up: “Keep it real, y’all! I dance with my body, and you with yours, right. I have my style of doing things, don’t try and copy it too much okay? I mean, you are learning my routine, so I want you to have some of my ways of doing it, that’s why you are here, right. But more important, you need to be able to tap into my style, or someone else’s, while keepin’ it real to yourself, and adopting it in a way that makes sense to your body, right.”

Chief K.’s point is central when it comes to following an instructor’s way of moving his or her body. For instance, I will naturally move my body differently than he will lead his male body. The female assistants in class with Jackson and Kendrick was helpful to look at to get a sense of a more feminine take on their routines, but using them as inspiration, not trying to copy their exact ways of leading their bodies. For instance, being a lot taller than Lady makes
it hard to follow her movements, though the differences in nuances between her and Jackson made it easier to find a place in-between them, in adopting the moves to my own body.

*Keepin it real*, as I’ve understood the expression, points to telling things as it is, or being who one really is, no pretending to be someone else. Dance is performative in one way or another. The point is to look within yourself to find the adequate emotions and ways of expressing them, as Nicole aimed to train us for in her class, as described before. Sometimes the choreographer asks for a specific expression. Other times the pattern of the movements to the music in itself conveys what “feel” would be the most suitable, allowing the emotions the routine awakens to be expressed. The realness one presents should be true and unique to the individual dancer in terms of emotional display, attitude and overall style.

On the other hand, *keepin’ it real* can also mean to remember where hip hop came from and what it represents. Within the hip hop culture the slogan “each one, teach one” has stood strong since the beginning, were it is expected that the more advanced or successful individuals help out others to achieve similar goals. *Keepin’ it real* as a reminder to the individual on the rise is to ensure that his or her experiences will be beneficial for those that are still waiting for their turn. *Keep it real* by expressing what is real to you, while at the same time keep it real by not forgetting those who contributed to and supported your success, and what you owe them.

**Breathe**

Energy and breath were the main focus of Kendrick’s classes. Kendrick was one of the other instructors in L.A. His goal was to teach: “Come and stand closer together all of you” Kendrick says. “I want you close enough for you to sense the energy I put into each movement of this part, okay?” He looks over the class through the mirror, and then waves a girl to his left closer to the rest of us. “Okay, I want you to pay attention to the energy of each movement. Remember your breath, okay? Use your breath to move your energy to the body that’s in focus. Follow me now,” Kendrick says before going through the transition between two of the moves, exaggerating his breathing through the parts. “You should always recycle your energy like this by using your inhale and exhale in accordance with the movements. This is natural, really, but some tends to focus so hard on the moves they forget to breath through it, and end up out of breath by the end of it, or even long before it. Again!” He adds the next few movements. Then starts again, but stops the movements himself to watch the class. He
nods, smiling. “You feel the difference? Did you feel how the breath follows the up-and-downs through the movements? Kinda like a butterfly” he tells us, moving his hand softly in an up-and-down waving motion following the direction of the movements in the routine.

To breathe, in other words is not just a mechanism for living; working with our breath facilitates our movements, in turn having a positive effect on the overall expression.

A sweet escape

“How come you are so sleepy? You are young and healthy! Wake up girl!” Martin jokingly pushes Victoria, a young girl in class who gave herself an extra break, sitting down while the rest of class continued. “I am so tired” She replied, adding a fake heavy breath to her words. “School?” Martin asks. “Yes, school and homework, picking up my younger brother, other chores and then coming here. I just can’t.” She admits, but gets reluctantly on her feet to join the rest of us.

Victoria is usually an active participant in the classes in Oslo. During the breaks, she will often use the mirror to make faces or pose by herself, in either a silly way, or going for a sexier attitude. Martin or his assistants often catch her in the act, which only adds to her expressiveness. She has been called a “little diva” in front of the rest of the class. This comment makes her stop her play with the mirror, yet she pretends to shrug it off. However, approaching her while waiting for class, or catch her eyes before she leaves after we are done, is another story. Martin, after class once, commented on these dissimilar behaviors of Victoria to me when the two of us talked about relaxing and letting loose while dancing. “In class she seems bold and almost ‘too much’, considering she is only 14. Then outside of class, she is actually very shy. This is probably due to her age. She is in many ways just like any ordinary, slightly insecure 14-year-old girl out there. But in class, this shyness disappears; she kind of forgets that about herself.”

I was wondering whether Victoria chose to come to dance class even though she was tired from her chores; if her “forgetfulness” in class was a token of her experience of the dance floor as a place to relax and just be. Though not as relaxed and expressive as Victoria, for me as well, dancing has been some kind of escape from the demands of everyday life. A friend of mine who prefer the Latin dances listed to me all things that was taking a toll on her time. Her
conclusion was: “...so I really need to make time for that bachata workshop next week. I need dancing so much right now!”

At a workshop in Oslo, a French instructor put these conceptions into words as a call to let loose some more: “It is not real: you can be who you want to be. After, outside, your life waits. In here, nothing is real”. She further explained how she wanted her class to focus: “Don’t think. Nothing. Not that you need water, not if you feel warm. In class many students are like: mirror!” She said, walking straight towards it, seemingly not even noticing the dancers in her way, to demonstrate. “When you at a party, you don’t think, you just enjoy. Heeey!” she added, doing some shaking moves with her hips, keeping the rhythm to an imagined music at an imaginary party scene. “You need to be in the music, not on the music. You understand what I say?”

Victor Turner (1986: 25) describes how the spaces for performances are set aside from the places used for ordinary activities, reserved for play and experimentation. This relates to the French instructor when she separates the dance space from the “outside” where everyday life will go on. Turner (1986: 25) explains how liminality breaks up the commonsense of ordinary life into fragments in order to play with them in the performative setting. He compares performance to the subjunctive mood of a verb when talking about situations dealing with desire: possibility, or hypothesis, the mode of “as if”, as opposed to the actualities of the indicative mood (Turner 1986: 25). This “liminality” exists in the instructor’s words “it’s not real”. The “liminality” allows for playing with identities and behaviors out of our ordinary ways of conduct. In a way, dancing creates an illusion where you can be anything, anything you are and want to be – removed from the demands of the everyday life (see also, Turner 1986: 59). Dance and performance allows us to experiment with other sides of ourselves that we might not dare to act out elsewhere. Hahn describes how her instructor of Japanese dance invites her to do act freely: “When you’re dancing you can be anyone” (Hahn 2007:12).

Go off

To go hard is part of the boldness of hip hop. Hip hop body language tends to favor a macho attitude and big expression. This attitude is communicated by taking up space with demand, and not hesitating to use vulgar movements, as in moving the pelvic area offensively.
Jackson showed us part of a new routine when I decided to go back to his class my second week in L.A. “Okay, so in this part I want you to get down and dirty with it.” He announces. The class cheering and whistling. “This is how we’ll do,” he continues by showing us the particular moves. He keeps a low body position bending his legs, while facing towards the mirror. He then pushes the pelvic forward with a hard “hit”, kicking his right leg slightly in front of him, stepping back on it again and placing his left foot diagonally in front⁸. Still with a low body position he lifts his left arm straight out in front of him, using his right hand to do smacking movements in the air in front of his body underneath the level of his left arm while pulling the hip/pelvic area slowly front wise and releasing again together with the motion of the right hand. “Oh-uh!” someone says aloud standing somewhere in the middle behind him, making the rest of the class laugh. We rehearse this added movement a few times, and then add on the transition with the preceding steps. The routine is overall big and bold, but some parts appear more playful, as it is not all hard hitting and firm. Other parts are about enjoying the music by grooving to it, moving the upper body like a wave to the beat makes it feel less like an attack. Jackson splits the class into two groups, one with the girls and the other with the girls. This allows us to go through the choreography with less people on the floor. The boys go through it first, and then the girls. “Boys, I made this choreo’ for you. Look at the girls, they are killing it! Why aren’t you guys dancing it like them? Now watch the girls go again, and notice how they go hard by swinging their hips and loosening up, not like this straight army walk ya’ all just were showing me” He told the boys, making a few marching steps, before loosening up again to make his point.

Hip hop dancing is fast and intense. The movements should be “tight” and strong as opposed to sloppy or untidy. However, if the movements are too tight they might feel stiff and army like as Jackson observed in some of the boys. The attitude is overall bold and “in ya face”. However, other times it can be more laid back, removed from the battle scene, and be more about enjoying the music and having a good time. The macho vulgar movements can similarly be set aside for the more feminine expression of sexiness or by slowing it down, making the movements more sensual and less explicit. These expressions can be played; however, they are never shy nor small, but always confident. In Femme Style class in Oslo, the attention is more on hip and chest movements, usually more circular and soft or playful than hard hitting. Arm movements are used for accentuating the female curves, or hand gestures pulling

⁸ this step with the legs is called a bolt change, and is often used in between steps to change the foot to step with next.
attention to for instance the face, hair, or waistline. In this case the expression is somewhat
distanced from the macho expression, but the movements and grooves remain within the
frame of hip hop dancing. Other times the more sexually explicit parts in a choreography, as
with certain parts in general, can leave open the expression for individual interpretation, to
add on some “personal flavor”. Jackson’s assistant, Lady, made this “flavor” visible in her
bold grinding and hitting with the pelvis area. Rebecca, another girl in class that usually assists
Kendrick, tended to go for the more “feminine flavor”. She will lead her hands over her chest
and abdomen making facial expressions with her eyes narrowed and smacking her lips now
and again.

Dancing Desire

There is an apparent difference between the masculine and the feminine ways of moving.
When watching Lady and Rebecca freestyle in the sexual explicit parts, it is not hard to tell
their added “personal flavors” apart in this dialectical language. Hanna (2010: 212) describes
how dance and sex is often assumed as intimately attached: the body is the main instrument of
both and in each, pleasure is sought for through the body’s movements. Even when sexual
expression is not the intention of a dance, it still can be interpreted in this way (Hanna 2010:
212). Dance is using movements in space, touch and body language to communicate, and
nonverbal cues are open for interpretation based on the viewers’ experiences (Hanna 2010:

Rebecca’s lip movement draws attention to her own body and seeming pleasure, while the
more macho pelvis hitting of Lady is a more active move towards something, rather than
towards her body. In some feminist’ writings this difference may be interpreted in terms of
male as subject, female as object. In hip hop dancing, as opposed to for instance ballet, both
genders perform the same moves with the same amount of energy and same strength in
attitude (Huntington 2007: 93). As a contrast, the ballerina is usually portrayed as fragile and
needing of male support (Huntington 2007: 93). Feminist writings on dance from other genres
might not be readily applicable to interpret females’ roles in hip hop dancing. Hanna (2010:
218) further exemplifies how exotic dance as adult entertainment is by feminists considered to
be a sexual objectification of women. On the other hand, she gives examples of how several
of the exotic dancers themselves counter such a claim.

Whatever sexuality displayed on the dancefloor, in my experience as a dancer and from my
fieldwork, is about something else entirely than oppression of women. For Rebecca, Lady and
the other dancers I have encountered, male and female, the sexual explicitness in several of
the routines is just experienced as part of the style, and also probably, as “innocent” play and
fun. Adair (1992: 62) points out that dance can always be read in a number of different ways
in it being a multilayered expression. Rather than objectification, an alternative interpretation
is that the sexual explicitness is redeeming and empowering in the sense of giving the dancers
control of their own bodies and sexualities. This parallels what Foucault (1981: 7) stated
about this, in confirming the idea that sex can be seen as a way to liberate the self, and then in
turn to talk about it, or to dance it, can be empowering as it moves the stories of sexual
experiences outside of its private sphere. This moving it out in the public might be interpreted
as enabling in while doing so, an otherwise secret side of the self is displayed, making it
possible for the individual to own up to their experiences and defining them, for themselves
and for their audience. Bakhtin’s interpretation (1984) of the carnival in Rabalais’ writings
can serve as a further means to understand this display of the private.

The Carnivalesque

The carnival images contain a sensuous character, and is set apart from everyday conduct by
its elements of play and community (Bakhtin 1984: 7, 9). Carnival brought forth a new form
of expression through for instance bodily images in a hugely exaggerated manner. The body
was perceived positively, as something universal, with its openings for food, drinks,
defecation and sexual life (Bakhtin 1984: 16-19). In degrading features of higher or spiritual
value to the sphere of the earth and the body, they become manageable, and in this lower
stratum may be conceived and given a new birth (Bakhtin 1984: 19). Carnival is the
celebration of a new world order, and especially the phallus and genital organs are
emphasized by their possibility of bringing to life a new body (Bakhtin 1984: 410, 26).

This grotesque image of the body has lasted in art and speech, and can be found today as well:
Bakhtin describes how every language has several expressions related to the genital organs,
the buttocks and anus, the belly, mouth and nose and that these are the basis of much abusive
gesticulations (Bakhtin 1984: 319). Bakhtin also notes a downward movement in Rabalais’
texts: the world is turns inside out, or “bottom up”, meaning that heaven and earth is brought
together. However, the movement’s accent is placed on the descending, not on the rising
(Bakhtin 1984: 370-371). Downward is towards the earth, the body and the underworld. By
emphasizing the movement towards earth is a way of negotiating the vertical and hierarchical
view of the world into a horizontal historic time, and the progress of mankind as the earth is fertilized by the dead: death associated with the underworld, and together with the earth and body then, is part of the forward movement (Bakhtin 1984: 404). A downward accent is, as mentioned, part of the style in hip hop dancing.

Considering the sexual explicitness in this view, while recalling hip hop’s origins, it is possible that the explicitness of many of the moves is part of a certain mockery of the existing state of affairs, in which injustice put strings on the inner ghettos’ communities abilities to participate fully in the public debate. In adopting “obscene” moves and displaying a deviant behavior through dance, it might have been a way to protest while securing self-expression in an environment where they were otherwise not heard, nor seen for who they were.

Again, Turner’s explanation of liminality is relevant. Through performance and carnival, reality is played with in an “as if”-manner; acting out of the rules of the everyday, the audience and participants gets to view how the world could have been, by holding up the elements of the ordinary for scrutiny in the performative setting (Turner 1986: 27, 169).

Bakhtin tells that in the canons of modern time, the body and is features are placed in the private realm, individualized and closed off without further connection to the collective nor the spiritual (1984: 321). When the body and its drives are shoved away from every day display, it might just make its appearance in some other form. In our present, one could however argue that we do not suffer from any lack of bodily and sexual display, as we are constantly being given such images through popular culture, advertising, and from social media. Nevertheless, it will probably vary how connected we feel to these images, perhaps we actually develop a certain “immunity” towards them, while our own sexuality and desires are still kept more private. Through performance the participants can be subjected to an exaggerated “mirroring” of their experiences, in a way displaying how things could have been, but without the threats of actual changing of the norms could bring forth (Beeman 2007: 290).

In dancing, a liminality is created, allowing the dancers to cross certain lines in what they display. The sexual explicitness can be viewed as a sexual play, with an ambiguousness of the erotic; is it there, or is it not? This play on sexuality makes it captivating, in that it apparently crosses some boundaries, playing with the limits of ordinary display. Some of the dancing moves are referring directly to their sexual equivalent, yet, what happens is not actual sex –
only dance that refers to it through play. The sexual play by the moving bodies in dance orients us to some of our natural passions and desires (Hanna 2010: 212-213).

Natural passions

“Emotion may be one of evolution’s most productive breakthroughs, constantly reminding us that we are still animals at heart, but endowed with the possibility of conscious appraisal and the enhanced control of our subjective experience that comes with it.” (Kringelbach, M. 2007: 55)

As the quote above illustrates, emotions are part of our human nature, and whether cultural or social restraint will keep them out of everyday visibility, they will still linger within us as part of who we are. The passion, desires and lusts are assumed to be universal and a place where culture, the self, and nature meet in a way in which it is impossible to tell what is these emotions true origin - most likely from this very intersection itself (Janikow 1995: 4, 6). Even is such emotions are not expressed they will not actually disappear. Being attached to some part of self-understanding, and finding a place and a mode in which to express passion and desires will probably feel liberating. By dancing, the body and desire on display contains an authentic expression, in which we can recognize ourselves in the other empathically, and through interpretation and fantasy.

In her descriptions of sabar dancing in Senegal, Kringelbach explains how dancing challenges the ordinary way women express their emotions (Kringelbach, H.N. 2007: 254). The appropriate emotional restraint is set aside for an emotional intensity in the competitive and sexual suggestive interaction displayed in the dance circle (Kringelbach, H.N. 2007: 254-255). Through the sexual suggestiveness, the women display their sexuality aiming at a selfish pleasure; they are not sexual objects, as they “toy” with the drummers through flirtatious and seductive interaction (Kringelbach, H.N. 2007: 257). This is similar to the moves displayed by Lady and Rebecca. And in the case of the instructors, like Jackson, who frequently use such moves in their routines can be a way to play with such displays, which is also in tune with the original repertoire of the genre.
On the dancefloor, the dancers are in a safe arena to reveal their sexuality in a playful and suggestive manner, while competing with the other dancers present in how far they can push their “dirtiness”. Within performances and play, displaying and exploring expressions of basic human emotions can be done in safe frames (Beeman 2007: 286). However, in dancing it is always a controlled display. In the words of Martin: “Try to look happy when you perform it. Dancing does that to you, right? It’s not just me? Thought so. Smile, and show them the joy you feel, but don’t let the happiness take over completely. Excitement and jolliness doesn’t look that good on the dancefloor. Feel it, and express it, but remain in control.”

Summing up

In this chapter, I have considered how various emotions rise and are expressed through dancing. The instructors want the dancers to look within, making the expression of emotions authentic even though dance is a performance art. It being performative, however, makes room to play with what is real, or what could have been. This makes the dance floor an escape from the routine of everyday life.
Chapter 4 Same area code - different numbers

I agreed to join Sheldon, one of the boys I lived with, to class when he encouraged me to come with him while we were preparing breakfast during my first full week in L.A. Today we were going to Victory’s Dance Studio. I walked towards the studio with him and Jason, though Jason was not joining the class. Sheldon and Jason explained Jackson’s class as **full out**. When I asked them what they meant by this expression, Jason answered: “Very big movements, totally energetic, just full out!”

In the first section some empirical examples of play on roles and attitudes. will be explored. Next, to bring forth an analysis of these records, I will apply theoretical views of interactionism and agency. Individuality is also a theme considered in the following.

**Go Hard or Go Home**

Sheldon and I signed up in the reception and waited for the class before us to end. The hallway had a carpet-covered floor, and the walls contained photos of movie stars from around the 1950’s. When they finally let us in, the studio filled up quickly despite there being room for many people. Each of the dance studios contained mirrors on one wall, a ballet bar on another wall, and a piano in the back. The music equipment was usually found by the entrance, or back by the piano. Victory’s Dance Studio had been in use for various dance styles since its opening in the late 1970s. Still today, classes in ballet, contemporary, and jazz are given, though hip hop dancing definitely holds a prominent part of its class schedule.

When everyone had found a spot on the floor, around 40 participants, Jackson came in, dimmed the lights and put on the music. Lady, Jackson’s assistant, did the warm up with us. As Jackson started teaching out the choreography, I got an inkling of what “full out” might prove to mean. He starts the routine by walking two steps to the left and then turn and walk the same two steps back again. “You want these steps to be really groovy and tough, not funky Michael Jackson. Right?” Jackson tells us, showing the difference between how he intended the walking to look like and what he meant by Michael Jackson-funky style. Jackson adds how important it is to have the groove of hip hop in place;
Without the groove you have nothing! People can talk about swag\(^9\) all they want, but if you ain’t got the grooves right, you can’t have swag. The groove is the swag ‘em all lookin’ for. It’s not about how you dress or what you do -unless you have your basis there, those things doesn’t matter! If the choreography makes you lose your groove, then you might be in the wrong level, go back to basics and make sure you can keep your groove. Or, come to grooves class on Saturdays where all we do is different grooves, y’all can get some out of it.

He adds several more moves, and then even more details as we manage to get the base in. He then puts the music on. It turned out to be “Go hard or go home” by E-40 a track I had imagined would be cool to use for choreography. Now, here I was in the middle of it. The problem was that it was moving too fast. I found it challenging to both go fast enough to hit the right parts of the music and at the same time make my movements big. “You gotta go full out!” Jackson advises us before turning the music on again. I find myself working so hard to manage to keep up with the music, but in this effort feel I lose too much of the big, hard-hitting expression. At one point, I considered taking the lyrics literally; “I just can’t go hard, I might as well go home”. However, I decided to follow through. I felt it would look too impolite both to leave the class or to be standing on the side and watch as everybody else kept on working. What is more, Jackson seemed a bit intimidating to me, and I got the feeling you did not want to get on wrong terms with him. He was a strong built Afro-American man, wearing baggy black pants and a black wide t-shirt on top of a long-sleeved top, also in black. He wore a black snapback with a logo, and a black do-rag underneath it which tying was showing in his neck. His appearance demanded respect. After class, I felt like I had just put my feet on safe ground after a wild rollercoaster ride. With the jet-lag behind me, I might be closer to being on L.A. time, but I certainly was not yet on Jackson’s timing.

I did not manage to talk to Sheldon as we walked towards the exit. I tried to lay low as I was about to pass Jackson by the door, but Sheldon stopped to thank him for the class, blocking my way. After Sheldon finished his appraisals, Jackson opened his arms towards me for a hug. I accepted hesitantly, “Thanks for class! It was… ehm… It was really full out!” I said. Jackson smiled “Thank you sweetie”. Happy I had managed to put my words together correctly if not the movements of the routine, I followed Sheldon to the reception area. “You did good in there, girl!” A woman who had been sitting in watching most of the class said as I

\(^9\) An innate coolness of attitude in accordance with the aesthetics of hip hop
was about to pass her. “Me..?” I answered in surprise placing my hand on my chest while looking slightly around me. “Yeah, I kept watching you from the corner of my eyes, girl, you did good! You keep on going like that!” Unsure whether to interpret it as mocking, pity, or an actual compliment, I decided she would not have bothered to comment if she did not mean it. Whatever she meant by it, this comment was what had me go back to Jackson’s classes, which I soon came to love attending. I pondered the possibility whether the effort I put into the challenging routine actually had paid off. Most likely, by going with the feel of the routine and giving it all I got, I accomplished giving off the hard attitude intended by Jackson. “How did it go?” Sheldon asked me. “Good, according to that woman I talked with in there just now… I don’t know… It was just so full out!” He nodded, “Jackson’s classes always are.”

This discrepancy in roles performed when teaching and after, had been the same with Michael’s class I attended at Lankershim Studios my second day. He had been talking about his expectations of the class; “You’re in L.A. now. I expect you to be good. Even if you are just visiting you should be good”. He would stop the music in disapproval to adjust details that someone he noticed had gotten wrong. “This time I want you to have it, if you allow for mistakes, it gonna cost you the job!” He shouted at one such occasion. When he divided us in groups by age to perform together, he stopped the age group 6-10 years old telling them: “I don’t wanna see you act childish when you do this particular move. Do not be a child about it and turn your head towards the front as you start. Wait.”

After class, he announced he would have some limited time to take photos before he had to take off for a meeting, and that we should do so in the back yard. Because I had seen Michael’s work in media from before, and him being a celebrity in the world of dance, I decided I wanted to ask for a photo with him to show one of my friends back home who had happen to become quite a fan of him a few weeks before I went off. Many participants from class lined up waiting to talk to him. When it came my turn, I complimented him on his work upon which he thanked me in a humble tone. Soon after, the line finished, and as I chatted some more with Michael it was as if he had left all his toughness behind in the dance studio.

I came to realize that this changing of role and attitude is not only something that is done by the instructors when they are teaching, but also when class is over. Several of the other dancers give of this strong impression in class too, but behave more relaxed in normal circumstances.
Lady is a petite girl in her early twenties, but with an attitude making up for any lack of inches above ground. She would usually wear a snap back over her red colored hair, her clothes often having this torn look, showing part of her underwear or a line of pale skin around her waist. Her lips were painted in a dark shade of red, with a ring in her bottom lip drawing some added attention and roughness. Her eyes was marked with dark eyeliner and mascara. When dancing she was not shy to go off as an example of how to “get down and dirty”. Before class, she would laugh loudly when talking to the people standing next to her, or gazing over the class through the mirror with a standoffish expression. Leading the warm up, she acted confident, taking charge with no hesitation. To sum her up in one word, “trouble” would come first to mind. On another occasion, however, I overheard her talking with someone about career plans, and she now sounded and acted in a professional way, as if being a businessperson (not to say business-lady). Perhaps in a way she is; dancing is definitely serious business among dancers in L.A. Her tone of voice and her choice of words seemed convincing and she sounded determined to work to get wherever she wanted. While, in Afro-fusion class, she struggled with part of the routine, and when she asked a second time to take it slower she laughed softly while blushing slightly, placing her hand by her lips while the instructor explained.

Dressing for Swag

Jackson made it clear that “swag” is, in his opinion, in no way related only to one’s clothing. It has at least as much to do with the way you move and take up space. This section, however, will briefly give sum up the swag of dressing oneself with style, and the display of the “real you” which is done by adding creative elements to the style.

Nearly 70 dancers is waiting for Jackson’s Grooves class to start. When looking around at the other dancers, I pay special attention to their clothing and overall style. I get the impression that the girls are using more tight fitted clothes in L.A. compared to the girls in Oslo. Often part of the skin is visible around the waist. In Oslo I remember noticing the combination of tighter clothes matched with looser items, or just looser clothing all together. However, this might be an overgeneralization. Tight clothes were the preferred style in Femme style class in Oslo, yet recently this style was now worn in other classes as well.

The boys in both places wear relaxed, loose clothing. Although the cloths are loose, the outfits are not baggy. A girl in front of me is wearing some slim boots with a leather band going up
around her ankles, the boots stopping below her knee. She is dressed in all black except from a red bandana with white pattern holding her curly black hair in place. A little more to my right, still on the line in front of me, a girl sits down stretching. She is wearing violet converse shoes, a grey shorts and a pink cropped top, and her hair is placed in a high ponytail. Several of the other dancers too are also wearing Converse. Many wear a variety of Nike, Rebook and Adidas sneakers. A few boys and one girl has put on their Timberland boots. A girl walks into the studio wearing ankle boots with heels. I reckon that would be a real surprise to see in Oslo, were sneakers are absolutely the favored kind of shoes, though Converse is popular among the dancers there as well.

The tendency for the girls in both places to tie a shirt or a sweater around their hips seems to be a style specific trend rather than just a convenient place to put it after the warm up. I also tend to do this, and have experienced how the swirling around the hips works to accentuate the movements.

Dark or bright red lipstick is definitely a trend in L.A.. In addition, the use of necklaces, earrings and other kinds of accessories is pronounced in the L.A. classes I attend. Their overall appearance strikes me as more planned and thought through than what I am used to from classes in Oslo.

The t-shirts and tops often have decorations with some text in different types of letters or a brand logo. In several of the other classes, I have seen longer tights and pants being used, and sometimes tops with long sleeves or a vest on top of a t-shirt. Since it is Grooves class, the tendency towards having on less clothing is apparent. Being 70 dancers inside the studio with the warm Californian sun heating up the locale beforehand, Jackson’s full out grooving varieties have all of us soaked in sweat within the first part of class. Shorts, cropped tops or tank tops is the recurrent items of clothing in this class. The girl to my left, however, tells me she didn’t know that wearing a sweater and pants would be such a mistake. “Next time, I’ll go in shorts and like this,” she tells, drawing a line over her abdomen to illustrate a cropped top. She smiles and winks as she again lifts up the sweater to wave in some air.

Play on Roles

The different ways Jackson behaves are striking. While he was teaching, he appeared to be in charge of the room and demanding attention. When I tried to sneak past him, he was the one
to initiate a hug, an action I never would have imagined coming from my first impression of him. The big, bold and tough instructor in front of class teaching a hard-hitting routine just did not give of any warmhearted vibe. However, it is clear that this attitude was an act. After class it was as if his performance of being this bold, “don’t mess with me”-guy, was dropped. Outside the studio he was an open and gentle person. His outer appearance of course were the same, but his attitude did no more come off as intimidating when we interacted or when he called me “sweetie”. In retrospect, thinking of the conversation Sheldon and Jackson had, if I had been observing their interaction more closely I would probably feel less urge to escape his attention.

Both Jackson and Michael put on an attitude when teaching class. They do not shy away from shouting out corrections to the dancers or to give a blistering pep talk. One of the teachers interviewed by Becker (1952: 459) uses the example of how new teachers are advised to start out tough to gain the students respect, as going in too soft would leave little chance for them to take them seriously if they tried to tighten the reins on a later occasion. This hypothesis would fit well with the behavior displayed by Jackson and Michael. It is a teaching situation where in order to deliver their knowledge they need their students attention. On the other hand, the dance studio is also a place to hang out. Being able to change attitude depending on the situation would be useful in order to communicate better with the students outside the classes. I think I would not have noticed this play on roles this clearly had I not felt so taken off guard by the roughness both in the moves to “Go hard or go home” and by Jackson himself.

Individual numbers

On one occasion, Jackson picked five participants at the end of class stating that the rest of us should watch closely how they did the routine in their own individual ways. “We all have the same area code, but with different numbers. You all learn the same choreography, but you need to make it your own when you dance,” Jackson said.

In American popular culture, the sole and unique individual hero has been cherished, being that of for instance the cowboy or the detective (Bellah et al 1986: 145). Furthermore, the self-made man’s rise from “rags to riches” against all odds holds a mythical position within the ideal of American individualism (Callero 2009: 25). The hip hop expression *came from*
the bottom together with its idealizing of the rich lifestyle, as described in the introduction, plays upon this exact imagery. Keepin’ it real is pointing to being true to our individuality, and is then fitting with the individualist view valued within hip hop. Individualism is a belief system that is considered to lie at the core of American culture (Callero 2009: 17, Bellah et al 1986: 142). Individualism places the individual rights and freedom above that of the society, emphasizing self-reliance, autonomy and independence (Callero 2009: 17). The individualism accentuated in hip hop would most likely stem from its birth within the American society, in the streets of the inner city ghettos where trust sometimes could prove fatal.

On stage

The play on roles and attitudes “on stage”, as opposed to “backstage”, to use Goffman’s terms (Goffman 1992), can be a way for the instructors to gain the respect they need to carry out their classes in a satisfying manner. To drop the role of the instructor when class is over allows for forming personal conversations and relations. This could seemingly parallel the subjunctive mood and the indicative mood applied by Turner (1986: 25). However, it is rarely that clear cut. In managing impressions of oneself, the acting individuals will contain some of the subjunctive mood in their actions even when not performing as such. On the other hand, performances plays with the real, the indicative mood. In both cases then, there will be a little of both moods, the acting, “as if”, and the actual (Turner 1986: 61).

The dance class can be seen as a particular performance where the instructors and the students carry out roles expected to their proscribed statuses (Goffman 1992: 22). When the performance is over, they can experience a new “scene” together. The difference in rank will still stand, though played down by the instructor, so that it is rather a new situation, more relaxed, but where impression control and the roles is still in play (Goffman 1992: 23).

Goffman uses a dramaturgical model for making his arguments. In the preface, he states that the model has some weaknesses (1992: 9). Describing social interaction in the way that he does makes the interaction appear unnatural, as the persons described, appears monitored and reactive (Blumer 1969: 8). The symbolic interactionist argument is that the individual is responding through interpretations in accordance with its various perspectives, and is not simply reacting to some stimulus (Blumer 1969: 8). Whereas, in Goffman’s writing the persons he describes seems to participate in their strategic actions as caused by an innate
obligation of being part of society, rather than a deliberate action made by the individual (Cohen 1994: 27).

When looking at the play on roles in the previous chapter, Lady’s different attitudes in various situations when put on paper might make it appear as she is forging parts of it, as giving of a monitored and strategic performance. However, that is not how I experienced her. Nor the two instructors. Rather, this could illustrate how people are multifaceted in their behaviors as situations demands for different role adaptations, displaying different sides of oneself. Describing motivations and strategies without reducing the individual to an automatic response to whatever collective they belong to is a challenge in the social sciences (Cohen 1994: 124). When writing about the social life of people, making certain generalizations are necessary in order to move from the unique and particular, to realize social patterns and cultural forms that are shared by the people we study and write about. In doing so, however, it often becomes less visible that these peoples will vary in how they understand these events, and how they understand themselves (Cohen 1994: 7, 142).

Individuality and society: theoretical views

Anthony Cohen in Self Consciousness (1994) is arguing for an anthropology where the complexities of the individuals we study are not diminished to overarching collective stereotypes, as shown above. He argues that we are aware of our own self-consciousness, and anthropologists would do well in not neglecting it in the people of our accounts (Cohen 1994: 4). Cohen is clear in his standpoint that the core of anthropological analysis should be society and social relations (Cohen 1994: x). We will better capture the essence of those social relations we aim to understand if we avoid reducing the individuals to the identities imposed on them by society. Rather, we should acknowledge how such collective identities are reworked by the experiences and self-consciousness of individuals (Cohen 1994: 178). The Comaroffs acknowledge such inner motivations of human beings, or their agency, however, they warn against too much weight placed on this on the expense of social processes (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 36-37). The actions performed by individuals to achieve their desires often have unintended consequences (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 37). Their point is that the complex relationship between intentionality and the actual outcome gets lost in focusing too much on the agency of the individual.
Agency within the framework of serious games refers to agents different desires, purposes and projects that are culturally formed (Ortner 2001: 79). These stem from, and also replicate, a variety of socially shaped positions and subjectivities. The games agents participate in and the projects they wish to fulfill is in accordance to their personal categories of value. However, they do not act as free agents as such. Their personal categories of value is culturally constituted, and though they may vary among different agents, values and projects are in no way deprived from wider societal forces (Ortner 2001: 86). In this way, serious games theory seeks to capture the ways in which people shapes society, and, at the same time, society shapes its people. Although serious games seemingly focus on micro-politics, the main purpose of the theory is to understand “the larger forces, formations and transformations of social life” (Ortner 2006: 130).

Focusing on the play on roles performed by Jackson, Michael and Lady, I have aimed to bring forth examples of how individuals are complex. Applying the term agency when analyzing how individuals act on their desires and serious games, captures how their actions may vary. In addition, this theoretical perspective shows how such decisions are part of a greater social scheme. Simmel (2007) describes the relationship between the individual and society in similar terms. He states that whichever can be reckoned the most prominent, individuality points to how each person experience these two sides of him or herself as an entity from which they experience their life (Simmel 2007: 67). The agency of Jackson, Michael and Lady are shaped by social processes and social conventions. In turn, they contribute to reshaping the dance world they are part of through their actions. Although I in this thesis aim at focusing on the agency of the dancers in their interaction with each other within the dance world, I think it is important to point to the relationship between the individual and wider society. The dance world of hip hop does not exist in a vacuum.

Moving from Goffman’s theatrical model on the play on roles I encountered, to including a discussion of how the theoretical designs above have tried to move past that model, I hope to have captured both the individuality of the dancers and contextualized their play on roles in the wider social web of various intentions, and outcomes. Rather than being dishonest in any of their ways of acting, their different role displays are adaptations to varying situations in which varying aims and desires are brought forth (Blumer 1969: 5). In talking about her career plans, Lady can be seen to have tapped into a discursive pattern fitting of the topic. Outside her comfort zone in a new dance style, she allowed herself to be acting more insecure along with the challenge the situation brought her. Varying situations and contexts bring forth
different sides of the self on display, as each situation will vary in what is at stake and what conduct will be convenient, or possible (Whyte 1993: 263). The area code will then stand for the cultural or societal codes to which the dancers adhere. Their individual numbers points to their individually experienced interpretation of those codes (Whyte 1993: 263). The area code and the individual numbers are both forming the ground for the dancers numerous desires and purposes they reach for within the dance world, and outside it.

The Industry of Show business is one example of larger forces outside the dance world affecting the discourse, shaping a career focus in L.A. In the next chapter, I will bring further context to the play on roles, as I will focus on social media use and the prominent attention given to dancing as career within the L.A. dance world.
Chapter 5 ‘Post to be

In this chapter, I am turning my attention to social media, and, later, to career goals. The title above is borrowed from the title of a song by Omarion (2014). “Post” is short for “supposed”. I find this fitting in the sense that to post on social media is making the image of how one is in many ways supposed to be, and in some cases; to post is to be.

Arriving in L.A. I learned that without an Instagram account, it would be hard for me to keep up with the information from the dance studios as any changes to the schedule and similar updates were posted on Instagram. Videos recorded from class are usually posted there as well. The videos were in clips of 15 seconds each, which at the time were the limit for videos on this media. YouTube videos of choreographies10 done in the studios, or concept videos made by instructors and dancers are also popular. A concept video11 is a video produced of greater quality and planning, often featuring a crew or a group put together by the choreographer for that video. This proved to be a popular activity among the dancers I lived with. They took turns choreographing and inviting each other to participate, and then uploading it to YouTube after editing. They would choose various locations for their videos like parking lots, the metro station, or simply on a spot of asphalt in front of a steel fence. Most of the locations chosen had a certain urban roughness or decay in common, most likely a choice made from inspiration of hip hop images and a way to adapt the “street quality” into one’s work. The number of views were important, as were the likes and comments on Facebook and Instagram if they posted the link there, as they usually did.

Hip hop dancing as it is performed in the dance studios is meant to be seen, and is choreographed with an audience in mind. As Kendrick once said the dancer should always be

10 Example of a class choreography to Post to be: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4VykX3-xU4 - Josh Williams Omarion ft. Chris Brown – Post To Be, YouTube [Internet] Published Jul 2015 [viewed: Jun 24. 2016]

ready to be caught on camera: “Imagine you to be posing in front of the camera. Each movement should be a picture, you know. You want them pictures to look pretty,” he told us before starting to do the transitions of the movement overly statically as if he was a model posing for the camera “Picture! – Picture! – Picture!” he exclaimed with each transition.

The concept videos put on YouTube is most likely part of a greater scheme in advertising for the dancers skills to a broader audience than the immediate danceworld or class they are in, as only a very few is ‘discovered’ through this media. According to the talk among the dancers on this topic, a network will usually be in place before a YouTube video can be part of a breakthrough.

In keeping up with “likes” and “followers” on Instagram, Jason gave me the best insight into the importance of numbers in this case. Walking with his neck tilted downward to watch his smartphone, he marched back and forth in the living room waiting for the number of likes on his most recent posts and updates on his life in L.A. to go up. “The first one isn’t doing as good as the second one… I might have to take it down if this lasts, it’s been almost twenty minutes, 70 likes just don’t suffice,” he said talking to himself, though well aware that Hugo, Caitlin, Sheldon and I would hear him. “Hey, you’re on Instagram? Did you remember to follow the one I told you about?” Hugo asked him. “No… just wait a second… What? No, I didn’t do that just yet.” Jason answered, seemingly distracted by his “likes”, or lack thereof. “Let’s see, the number I am following if I add him would make it just too close to the number of my followers, and those should be balanced in favor of me having quite the amount more followers than I am following… So, I guess I will have to wait a bit with that add. Perhaps if the second of my posts could gather a few more followers… Wait, I should take the first one down, I really should. It goes too slow and I have posted a lot recently, and it too should be comparable to the amount of followers…” Jason went on with his monologue, eyes fixated on the phone, only realizing Hugo had left the room when he finally looked up and met my puzzled expression. Caitlin focused on her computer, while Sheldon sat half-asleep on the couch. “Really, Jason? It is that important?” I asked him, perplexed and curious. “Oh girl, there are so many thing I could tell you about this, but you literally just got Instagram - how will you ever understand its importance from that?” he told me half-jokingly. “I guess being an Insta-rookie is less stressful then, at least,” I replied. Looking at me a short second, nodding his head in a backward movement and closing is eyes with a roll, he agreed.

Jason’s monologue was most likely meant for an audience and exaggerated for the cause of entertainment. Yet, the impact social media has on him, and several other people in our time,
could still be illustrated by it. While not always explicitly concerned about “followers” and “likes”, social media has a central role in many young people’s self-esteem and -image through feedback and social comparisons (Uhls and Greenfield 2012). Charles Cooley (1922: 184) use the term “looking-glass self” to describe how we base our sense of self on the idea of how other people perceive us, taking a reflexive stance on ourselves. Together with social media, this self-reflexivity is based on a new kind of feedback from others, or lack thereof: “likes” and “comments” from a great mass of closer and several quite loose connections now influence our guesses and interpretations of how we are viewed. This self-monitoring based on perceived judgements of others is similar to the work on self-presentation described by Goffman (1992). Being socially oriented by construction, and as Cooley points out: there is no real opposition between the individual and society (Cooley 1902: 37), this self-reflexivity is not a new phenomenon. However, the degree to which it is done, and on whose opinions it is based, has changed quite a lot during recent times as any activity can be used in order to achieve the desire of public recognition (Uhls and Greenfield 2012: 323). In many ways, “post to be” can be translated to a desperate: “who am I if nobody sees? If nobody saw it, did it actually happen?” This doubt in one’s own being, apart from the gaze of other people, is where I now turn in discussing some features of contemporary society.

Désir de L’Autre

Arthur Asa Berger (1998: 11) states that in contemporary America we find readily the symptoms of postmodernism. What is characteristic of postmodern society, and how is it different from its modern forerunner? In what follows I will give a brief overview of some basic traits belonging to modern and postmodern societies. This is important in order to grasp the changes in society with the new social media after the recent advances in technology. Social media influence how we communicate with each other, and shapes the ways individuals come to understand themselves. Social media is in high use among the dancers of postmodern L.A.

*Désir de L’Autre* means both to desire to possess, and at the same time, to desire to be desired by the possessed (Lacan 1977 in Malpas 2005: 68). Therefore, to understand the subject one must take into account series of exchanges with the others the subject interacts with (Malpas 2005: 68). This is similar to account for the other people surrounding the subject in the “looking-glass self” of Cooley. However, the “desire” included here points to a greater need
for the Other’s recognition, perhaps even a desperation for validation (Lasch 1971: 10). This quest for recognition and validation is apparent in Jason’s dilemmas over likes and followers on Instagram. Social media is in many ways used as a way to promote oneself, as captured by the slogan of YouTube, “broadcast yourself.”

Modernity is considered to be the epoch of the new; it is the experience of fast and unavoidable changes that shape the society. Modernity is to continually face the new, having to adapt as changes occur (Berman 1982: 48). Postmodernism is pointing at something that comes after the modern. However, the term itself reveals its reliability on modernity, making the postmodern more of a further development of modernism rather than its successor. Postmodernity is characterized by fracturing, fragmentation and plurality (Malpas 2005: 5). The term was mainly in use from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s in European and North American culture, though there are evidence of its use from before the 1950s and 1960s (Malpas 2005: 5). However, in its most recent use it has become, among other facets, known as the time when the end of history was reached (Jenkins 2001 in Malpas 2005: 89). Simon Malpas (2005: 89-90) explains it is not the end of events in themselves, but the end of our ability to make a coherent narrative from them. Too much is happening at the same time, being made publicly available to the ever increasing number of “flashing screens”, referred to by Baudrillard (1988 in Soukut 2012: 231), as the “hyperreality of simulated images”. This hypereality takes focus away from the events themselves as the multitude of sources for information through various media channels makes competing interpretations the main issue (Baudrillard 1994 in Malpas 2005: 94). Whether finding answer in the singular is worthwhile, or this multitude of sources points to the fact that several perspectives now have the chance of being heard, the point here is that this multitude takes the focus off a coherent reality to draw our identity from. In the hyperreal without a coherent narrative, individuals are also believed to be without a core of identity; the subjectivity is considered an ongoing process (Sim 2001 in Malpas 2005: 57). Clearly, however, the dancers I met do not wander around aimlessly.

How then do we understand the postmodern individual? If not from a grand narrative in society, from where do they draw an understanding of themselves and their lives?

In modern Paris, the broad arcades was the perfect location to be strolling (Tester 1995: 15). This way of strolling idleness in the arcades as a detached observer of the crowds, was coined by authors as flânerie. The flâneur was a literary figure that later was made a topic of studies in the social sciences by Walter Benjamin as part of his “The Arcades Project”. The flâneur is a man of the modern city. He uses the strolling, flânerie, as a way to avoid being at home,
while at the same time maintaining his distance from the crowd. He will not interact with anyone, looking through shop windows without ever making a purchase (Tester 1995: 35). He maintains his independence by remaining anonymous and indefinable (Tester 1995: 4). He is an observer of city life, finding meaning in his own running commentary on the people and arts he sees, in his mind making these scenes come to life (Tester 1995: 6).

Several decades later, some of the features of the flâneur could be said to been developed further together with changes in society. However, in this technologically advanced time, he is no longer the sole observer; he is there seeking out attention on a new “arcade” – available at any time, even when alone (at least in immediate physical terms). The modern day flâneur surely was aware of how he was perceived by the crowd, and his avoidance of interaction would work as a way to ensure his image as indefinable (Tester 1995: 4). This part is perhaps what is most recognizable in the flânerie of today: maintaining an image of oneself is considered of higher importance than forming relations, at least the closer attached ones. Instead of the flâneur’s imagining of his importance in making features of the city come to life (Tester 1994: 10), this is now somewhat twisted around; the crowd’s viewing of the individual is what makes him or her important and meaningful. The flâneur is caught up in an endless doing in order to “complete his otherwise incomplete identity” (Malpas 2005: 7). The flâneur needs to submerge himself by what goes on out in the city, since by himself he is empty and hollow (Tester 1995: 7). In the same way today, being someone is achieved through relentless doing; posting on social media, and the maintenance of one’s image in the gaze of others. Remaining unsatisfied with life, the flâneur is not the one in charge, but rather the sufferer of his own freedom; he does not know what is required of him, yet he must continue to make choices, to do something (Tester 1995:10). In the postmodern time - in a chaotic world full of possibilities and choices to be made - to “stay cool” is the postmodern attitude (Solomon 1998: 50). Staying cool, unaffected, by the turmoil of everyday life is what the images of society indicates, together making a silent consensus on how to handle life, or at least, how one should appear to handle it:

Whatever human reality lurks behind the image, whatever doesn’t show up on camera, is irrelevant. In fact, in the postmodern age, one often gets the impression that there is nothing behind the image (Solomon 1998: 48, italic in original)
This quote by Jack Solomon reflects Baudrillard’s idea of the hyperreal; where the image has come to stand for reality, making us less capable to distance ourselves from our experiences and reflect on them (Baudrillard 1994 in Malpas 2005: 94). What we see and what is presented to us is taken as real when we, according to Baudrillard, is denied a sense of historical perspective (Lasch 1971: 90, and Malpas 2005:94).

Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) describes how society has made a narcissistic turn. The narcissist is interested in the rich and famous, or otherwise “great”. Those who do not fit that description is seen as uninteresting, part of the mediocre crowd he does not aim to belong (Lasch 1979: 84). This resembles the flâneur’s detached style: it is him, a sovereign individual, and the crowd. The images and technologies that surrounds us makes a certain degree of fame available to everyone, generating the desire for status and recognition for any activities (Uhls and Greenfield 2012: 324). Uhls et al (2012: 315) states that there is evidence that young people have become more focused on the self, highly (and unrealistically) ambitious and aiming for material success. These attitudes not only resonates with fame and celebrity, but also with a certain narcissistic idealizing (Lasch 1979: 21, and Uhls and Greenfield 2012:324). Twenge et al (2008) in their study comment on how increase in narcissistic traits occurred before advances in technology such as social media platforms. They conclude that it is likely the increase in narcissistic traits have influenced how the new media are being used rather than the other way around.

The flâneur’s avoidance of social ties; never coming too close, remaining unattached, allows for play with identity; he could be who he wanted. Likewise today, individuals can be seen as role players wearing different kinds of social masks as the situation or audience calls for, and trying on various looks to go with his or her image or ‘brand’ (Solomon 1998: 47-48) Again, it appears that the flâneur might have been the early symptom of changes in society. However, today everyone seems to want to be a flâneur - standing out, afraid to remain unseen in the crowd. The social media sets the stage for achieving the craved for attention, where living in other people’s gaze seems ever more important.

Postmodernism’s contradiction

While Lasch is pointing to tendencies apparent in society, his argumentation for a narcissistic society seems too all encompassing. I indeed recognize some of the traits he describes in my own material and in contemporary use of social media. However, part of the basis for his
argumentation appears less grounded in real life circumstances and in real people on the ground. Lasch uses “modern man” to describe his contemporaries, probably seeing the culture of narcissism as part of a prolonged modernism. Several of the characteristics he describes echoes that of postmodern theorists: The world is in constant flux, deprived from meaning and expectations, brought forth by advances in technology. I have found good use of postmodern thoughts for understanding my own material in a wider context. Nevertheless, to my mind this prevailing confusion of scattered and history-less subjects does not seem to hold water. I have relied on postmodernist theories in analyzing my material in this part. Therefore, I find it appropriate to include a discussion of the theory’s weaknesses.

Although changes most likely have occurred in our sense of selves, and how we relate to each other, the postmodern era does not look the same everywhere nor for everyone. Herein is a contradiction of postmodernism: while underlining the scattered and incoherent society of our time, postmodernism sets itself as an epochal shift making a break with whatever came before. In this way, postmodernism resembles the very grand narratives that its theorists reject.

Different forms of engagement within society exist, giving support to the critiques of postmodernism that sees its traits as a phase of a still ongoing modernism (Gitlin 1998: 63). Capitalism is one side of modernism. In economic terms we are still talking about capitalism, though sometimes it is termed “late capitalism” (Gitlin 1998: 65). The ‘post’ in postmodernism, however, is problematic as it at the one and the same time denies modernism further existence while being so closely tied to it that one cannot understand the postmodern without the modern. For a theory that states there have been an increase of multiple voices and channels of rivalling interpretations (Gitlin 1998: 63), it is interesting how the postmodernists themselves fail to understand their own contribution as simply one possible reality among several (Weinstein and Weinstein 1991:160). If a generalization is to be made in order to understand ways of life in our time, placing it on the merging point between the extremities of modernism and postmodernism would probably better capture the actual options available to people to make sense of their lives, rather than contrasting the two as different epochs (Berger 1998: 14).

Both Lasch and the postmodern theorists appear to have a rather gloomy view of contemporary times: a people without expectations for the future and without a past, by the end of history. To ‘stay cool’ is the best we can do in order not to become burned out by the multiple demands of our time (Solomon 1998: 50). Nevertheless, my impression is that the
dancers I met in the postmodern capital, and a large number of other people, are coping quite well. They are finding creative ways to deal with this increased fragmentation, experiencing it as liberation (Weinstein and Weinstein 1991:167). The attempt to find one’s own fulfilling life will be an underlying theme in what follows, where I describe how the dancers go about to form their careers and futures.

**Getting one’s break’**

L.A. and Hollywood is known as the place where dreams come true, perhaps also the place to climb to the top on the ladder of success to secure the American Dream. However, that longstanding Dream in American society has undergone some changes as recession has affected the middle class economy. For instance, owning one’s own house is no longer considered attainable for the Middle class, at least not in L.A. as the city is experiencing shortage of available housings pushing the prices up (Aron 2015). According to the Protestant work ethic, carrying out the work God had assigned one to do would in itself bring forth a happy life (Muirhead 2004: 114). This sacred ethic became a profane one in the course of time and economical changes. The pursuit of a calling and finding a fitting job, however, still stands (Muirhead 2004: 11). A symptom of middle class aspirations more generally in our time is the desire to live one’s own personal dream: making job satisfaction equivalent of nothing less than a personal fulfilling career (Muirhead 2004: 114). It is not just work any longer it is part of a life project: to succeed in terms of living the life one has dreamt about, being the best possible self overall in life. However, it is possible to question whether it is individuals’ personal dreams that decide after what to aspire. Bourdieu, doubted the notion of “tastes” as individualistic and personal preferences of each consumer, and argued that “taste” is socially conditioned, working as a distinction towards those with inferior “tastes” (Bourdieu 1984: 499). For instance, through various social media and bloggers a major impact is created, contributing in the shaping of a normative benchmark regarding of what consists a “fulfilling life”.

The self-realization of one’s possibilities makes the focus on career, and on succeeding, a rather intense endeavor marked by a certain sense of fatalism; make it - or despair. As a result, the separation between work and leisure time have gotten smaller as the expectation of one’s career increasingly is seen as providing a sense of fulfillment, and not just financial security (Muirhead 2004: 8). This weight placed on finding work that is fitting in the ideal of
fulfilment can of course lead to as much disappointment as triumph (Muirhead 2004: 3). In the dance world of L.A. this sense of something being at stake was apparent. The idea is, at the outset, to make one’s passion for dancing one’s living. However, the passion could possibly drown in the pressure and effort put on performing and networking in order to make that career dream come true. In the Industry and the dance world, as in other work positions: Discipline in work performance is likely felt more often than the goods one’s career brings forth (Muirhead 2004: 175).

Getting picked

“Are you taking the class of Bradley tomorrow night, Isabel?” Hugo asks me while mixing his pancake batter for a late breakfast. “Possibly…” I answer, in doubt whether or not to hide my lack of knowledge when it comes to dance instructors. “I guess so, how is his style?” I add. Hugo waits a few seconds with answering as he just opened a can of “La Lechera” to put on his finished pancakes, having helped himself to a pre-taste of it. He closes his eyes to let me know this is a moment of pure enjoyment to him. “Ah, tastes like home” he says referring to his Latin American home country. “Tomorrow it will be a couple’s class. Bradley is teaching together with Justine, so it will be a hip hop/dancehall-fusion,” he tells me. “Yes, I’m in!” I answer Hugo just as Shane walks in the door. “Hey!” he salutes us, with the extra-long “e” I found to be common here, though especially among females. I look up to see Shane standing in a rather girly posture holding a broad smile. Hugo looks at him with raised eyebrows and a skeptical look before answering him with a short “Hi.” Smiling to himself over the stove were his third pancake is finishing, having gotten another win in their jokingly, not to say sarcastically, way of communicating. “So what’s up? I was thinking we should sign up for Bradley’s class like now since it will fill up pretty fast.” Shane says in his normal tone of voice and posture. “I should definitely go. I need Bradley to notice me,” Hugo says while sitting down next to Shane on the sofa. “I will never get picked if he doesn’t know me,” he adds.

To get picked refers to how the instructors pick out good dancers in class to perform in front of rest of the class and is usually filmed for Instagram, advertising for the instructor’s classes.

“I know,” Shane responds “yesterday in class I danced next to this amazing girl. I mean, she literally nailed it. I think she was some kind of European, I don’t know. However, she was not picked! Instead a girl who messed up a lot when it was girls only got called by name to dance
with five others he also knew the name of.” Hugo shakes his head: “You see that’s why Bradley has to get to know me, if not I will never get picked,” Hugo replies.

Having no intention myself to “make it” in the dance world, I was unaware of the conventions of networking strategies and how important the instructors were. Of course, I had noted how important it was to know of the various instructors and referring to their styles in conversation. Also, the somewhat taken for granted photo taking with Michael after class had me think twice over his great popularity.

Anthony walks in from the front house and sits down on the couch with us. Shane search for another video on YouTube, exclaiming: “You have got to see this one too.” Shane now sits between the two other boys. Having his computer on his lap, he turns it slightly towards Anthony. Sitting next to Hugo, it becomes impossible for me to watch the screen. I lean back in the sofa, following their conversation and comments about the dance videos. “She is amazing!” Hugo burst out as the next video is about to start and he recognizes the dancer. “I wanted to talk to her last week at the end of class, but I got scared,” Hugo states with a coy smile and a slight blush. Shane pushes his shoulder. “Who is she?” I ask. “McKenzie, from Michael’s crew” Hugo responds. “You know who I mean?” “Maybe”, I respond, “I got this girl in mind, but I don’t know if it’s her.” Hugo pulls out his cellphone to show me. “Is it her?” I ask as the girl I was thinking about is in the frame of the video Hugo started. “No, that’s Nayla. Just wait,” Hugo replies. “There she is!” He points at a blond girl. “Oh yes, I think she was there when I took Michael’s class!” I rise to get my computer to show him my video from when the crew did the routine alone. “I knew I should’ve gone to that class!” Hugo exclaims. Hugo stops his dreaming-like gaze by the sound of Shane and Anthony’s rough laughter. “You know she is under-aged, Hugo, right?” Shane grins. “She is what? Like 16, no 17. So be careful.” Hugo puts his palms together in front of his chest smiling. “And she works with Michael” Hugo adds as another quality to McKenzie’s allure. Again, getting to know an instructor is brought up as a strategy for advancement in their career.

After my first class with Kendrick, I approached him to say thanks for a great class, and to ask him of the name of the song to which we did the choreography. He kept on repeating the name to me as we left the studio so to make sure I would remember it: “Pay me, pay me, pay me…” We continued to chat as we walked through the hallway towards the reception area at Victory’s. As I continued showing up at his classes twice a week after this, we became familiar to each other, and would small talk casually every now and then after class. To me this interaction was nothing different from what I am used to with instructors back home,
however, when some of the other dancers I lived with caught me referring to something Kendrick had told me, their ears went on the stalk.

I know now that networking is everything to make it in the industry. In this “web”, the instructors become important links to the agencies - or to get a recommendation in to an audition. Jackson mentioned this in one of his pep talks:

“I know people in the industry. If you come to class and work hard, I might help you out. However, you have to work hard and deserve it.” He said once before dancing through the routine one last time at end of class. “Take this girl.” He added, pointing to a girl standing to the right in the room towards the middle. “She came to class every week. Worked real’ hard. And now, she is real good. She recently got signed” The girl nodded as he spoke, smiling humbly as the class applauded her success.

My relation to Kendrick, viewed in this light, made me a possible stepping-stone towards him. Perhaps also my “out of the blue” connection to one of the instructors made me a puzzle: how did this person seemingly uninterested in “making it”, with less talent, get an instructor’s attention? My hypothesis is that normally any networker appearing to be just that will stand out in a bad manner. However, in a city where one can assume that everybody is working out of his or her own agendas, the person who does not will be recognized as something different.

Of course one could claim that I had the agenda to make those conversations part of my anthropological project, but at the time I considered the conversations “just for fun”. However, in the field, and in writing up after, anything can of course prove to be valuable material.

They all got agendas

One evening walking in the doors of Victory’s, to my surprise, I see a familiar face from Oslo. Mira is an instructor I know from the studio and a talented dancer, recently having booked some TV jobs. Mira tells me she has relatively short time here now, and that she had to go to classes despite her jet lag. She tells me there are some instructors she loved last time she was here, but that she has refrained from going because some girls she thought she was friends with attend those classes. I ask her what she means. “Last time I was here, a year ago, we used to hang out all the time and do various stuff together, while now they barely talk to me. I thought we were friends, I don’t know, I’m just scared to go to those classes in case they
will talk about me or send me weird looks or something.” I recommend her to go to whatever class she prefers the most: “You are here to dance, so do it! Do not care about them. Next week you’re off anyway so make sure you get the most out of your stay here. Let them say or do whatever, you don’t need their approval to go to class.” I hesitate some over Mira’s reaction. My impression of her is as an outgoing, bold and confident girl. Reflecting over her unmet expectations, and my own relations in L.A., I reckon friendships might differ here from back home. In the dance studios here, it is easy to start talking to new people, though perhaps not continuing the talk over extended periods.

I cannot speak of L.A. or California in general. However, having thought some about this conversation with Mira, it appears that friendships and relations are more fluctuating in L.A. and perhaps as a result, more shallow than how she is accustomed define friendships from a Norwegian context. Attachments, in the light of networking strategies, are dangerous: conflicting loyalties might stop further advancement for one’s own career. Opportunities need to be grasped as they appear, or someone else surely will jump to action to secure their goals. In this way “friendships” is part of a greater scheme of strategies, very much in the same way as I referred to the other dancers interest in me because of Kendrick. However, network strategies and friendship does not necessarily exclude one another, at least not if considered in a shorter time span. From my own relations with dancers in L.A. and observations of their interaction among each other, I am pretty sure these relations could contain a lot of fun, conversations, and making of good memories. Not unlike the features “friendship” is normally associated with. Nevertheless, in most cases, in the end, business comes first. This way of relating is apparent in these lyrics from the debut album of RnB artist Tinashe (2014):

**Cold Sweat**

*I like being alone*

*I’m out here, spend plenty of time on your own*

*Cause the city ain’t kind*

*Other people who signed up for the judgin’ but can’t take no Complacememnt*

*This ain’t a place to be making friends they all got agendas*

*These eyes on your back, fangs in your neck*
In this song, she states, as in some other tracks on her album, of the road to her success in the music industry. The city she is singing about is obviously Los Angeles, where she resides. She points to the difficulty of relating to people as friends because everybody wants something more than just to spend time with her, so she prefers to be alone. Tinashe with her success is apparently attractive for instance to the dance instructors at the various studios, as well as the dancers. Her success with RnB music could give other people the opportunity of being a background dancer when she is on tour, choreographing for her, and appear in one of her videos, as did in fact one of Victory’s instructors. Increasing success leads to increasing demands from the people around you that are waiting for their own breakthrough, whether a rising star like Tinashe, or an instructor with artists like her on his merits list. On the other hand, a well-choreographed routine will not only give the choreographer more recognition, it helps the artist shine in the video or on stage. Likewise, if an instructor do recommend one of his dance students to an agency, any possible success on behalf of the dancer will of course shine back on the instructor’s skills in spotting talent, and in developing it (Becker 2008: 34). Tinashe’s lyrics shows the darker side of success in the industry, something akin to exploitation, however, what her lyrics also points at is that she is aware that it is business first, and that she has learned to expect people to have agendas. As had most likely she too, on her way to the spotlight.

Perhaps the dancers simply have a preference for or become adapted to the “easy come, easy go” view on relations living in a metropolitan city, making them less sure how to deal with a second round. The shorter time frame expected in the friendships at the dance studios of L.A. might allow for greater degree of self-disclosure and intimacy earlier in the development of
the relationship, making it safer to be open and honest, or to try on different ways of behaving and acting. When someone from such a relation reappears later, the security of the “deadline” of the relationship becomes disrupted, making it a possible threat towards different social roles and new relations (Goffman 1992: 55).

The L.A. Dance World

Howard S. Becker (2008) theorize about art worlds by treating art as any other kind of work, and treating artist as workers. That a dance career is about hard work definitely rings true for the dance world I encountered, both on the dancefloor, and not least off it.

A while ago, Shane posted an update to his Facebook timeline stating that it now was time to work even harder on his dance career, and that he wanted to be the best dancer he could be in the industry. After I left L.A., he started spending more time at Victory’s as well, and eventually he got the chance to become part of the studio’s faculty, a step closer to get to teach classes himself. His conclusion as how to step up the game was: “10 % dancing, 90 % business”. Anthony commented on the irony of the post, that 10 % did not sound like much for one stating to dedicate himself to his dance career. Shane replied by commenting to Jackson that Anthony apparently did not understand the process.

To use the terms “art world”, or “dance world”, is to point to the broader network of people related to the business of making one kind of art or another that the art world is known for (Becker 2008: xxiv). The “process” Shane refers to then, is about getting to know people inside the dance world’s network to further one’s own possibilities to work as a professional dancer. An important first step is to get signed by an agency. The agency will then present its pool of personnel as a possible support system for someone planning to produce something and is in the need of dancers (Becker 2008: 70). To have an agency in the back is part of a quality check of the dancers’ talent and abilities, and in most cases also a prerequisite to enter an audition (Becker 2008: 63). The dance world in L.A. is further connected to the broader entertainment industry of Hollywood, making the dancers a part of the Industry’s pool of personnel (Becker 2008: 78).

“Getting picked” and “getting signed” are the two first achievements one would want to cross of the list when aspiring to become a professional dancer. However, “getting signed” is no guarantee for further advancement; one has to deliver on the dancefloor, and networking is
still necessary in order to book jobs. On the other hand, as most dancers work as freelancers, having booked a major job is only the beginning. Dancers used, for instance, on tour with a performing artist is replaceable. As a freelancer, dancers gets booked on the basis of their reputation (Becker 2008: 86). A bad performance, or a mistake made at an audition will endanger one’s chances and may hurt a dancer’s reputation, which in turn will affect the agency or person having given an recommendation (Becker 2008: 86 – 87). Jackson once warned against going to an audition without having trained over sufficient time, as a poor performance would stand out negatively, making it harder to get auditions in the future.

Kendrick forwarded an inspirational photo on his Instagram account, which I think sums up the mentioned process pretty well:

*Your smile is your logo.*

*Your personality is your business card.*

*How you leave others feeling after an interaction becomes your trademark.*

No “after dancing”

Jason tells that he has been wondering whether to go by train or do an effort in finding a cheap flight when going to meet his family in San Francisco in a few weeks. Caitlin, who sits next to him on the couch, asks why he is going there. “A great big family reunion. I have some relatives up there, and my family is flying in from the East Coast.” He sighs. “I just know I will be questioned about what I plan to do with my life, how disappointed they are I didn’t study after high school, when will I get a career and a steady income…? Me trying to tell them I am working on my career, just before they end it with telling me how much they love me. I know the drill…” He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. Caitlin tells she knows exactly the feeling. She says her parents keep asking her about what she plans to do with her life, while she tries to explain that she is already doing something: “I’m a dancer! I do what I love the most! Then they ask me what I plan to do after being a dancer. What after? I’m not
going to quit this!” Both Jason and Caitlin fall silent for a few moments staring in front of themselves. “My dad always asks me; ‘when will you dance with Beyoncé, Caitlin?’ You see, Beyoncé is his measure of success as a dancer. I try to tell him that dancing for Beyoncé is so high up there and there are so many great dancers around, but I can still be professional without landing those kind of jobs”. Jason laughs a bit, then trying to sound like her father: “When, Caitlin! When will you ever dance with Beyoncé, Caitlin?! When, Caitlin! Caitlin!” They both laugh, but Caitlin cannot seem to help herself from adding one last complaint: “He is like, if you can’t be a dancer on tour with Beyoncé, then there is no use in being a dancer. No Beyoncé to him is like having failed.” Jason adds that it is hard to explain to the family that having success as a dancer takes time and does not happen immediately, except from a few rare cases were some people are extremely lucky. “I am proud of what I have achieved so far as a dancer” Caitlin adds, “it’s just hard to stay confident about it when it seems to never be good enough for him”. Jason mumbles “Beyoncé” and they both start laughing as Caitlin exclaims, “Don’t mock me! It’s serious, dammit!” Her smile together with her half-screaming voice as she struggles to keep from laughing while pushing Jason further down into the couch marks the end of that conversation.

Caitlin is travelling together with Ziva to L.A. from London. Both work as dancers back home. Caitlin says that she works at a nightclub, where a crew performs various shows, and she has travelled to some places in Asia with that crew. Ziva works more as a freelancer as I understand it, sometimes signed with a club for a few months, then off to the next gig. They appear to take their stay as a vacation combined with inspiration and development of their dance skills. However, when talking about Brian and Melissa, two other Londoners, they do sound a bit envious of the opportunities given to them. According to Caitlin and Ziva, Melissa has been sponsored through dance lessons from she was quite young, while they themselves have had to work part time jobs to afford dance classes. Melissa and Brian’s, outcome of greater financial support in life through dance classes and attendance to dance school, has led them to instructor jobs back home, and now green cards to try their luck in L.A. There is however a limit to their green card; they are only allowed to work as dancers. In other words, to have an income while in L.A. they have to book dancing jobs. This quest to book jobs proved itself to become of outmost urgency when Brian ran out of money. Because of this he was forced to “couch surf” for a few weeks towards the end of his stay. While undergoing his crisis in L.A., Brian’s posts on Facebook, often with a sense of gallows humor to it, spoke of fatalism, forming part of a broader discourse among the dancers: *book a job or despair.*
The American dancers, who were permitted to work, experienced it as a toll on their time. These jobs were often outside the realm of dancing, and included working as baristas or waiters. Their jobs were financing their living expenses and dance classes, but at the cost of missing out on some dance classes and chances to network (see Becker 2008: 96). Roxana, a girl I came to know in Victory’s Dance Studio, had what she considered less attractive dance jobs on the side of her “professional dance career”. She was instructing classes of Zumba at a gym, and some nights a week, she worked as a go-go dancer. According to her own view, this made her work her body all the time, preparing herself to get the stamina needed. An agency had signed with her, and a few months after I left she booked a job to tour with a rather famous performer. In between those kind of bookings, however, she would have to depend on her other two jobs.

I am aware that I am rare

One day on my way to Victory’s I am startled so see a huge crowd of people taking up the entire sidewalk, forcing me to ride my bike in the road the last 100 meters before the corner of the studio. I meet Brian by the entrance to the studio and ask him what is going on. “It’s an audition to be part of the crew of performers in Disneyland,” he told me. “I just came here, walking past the shorter line that was here at the time, just as they started handing out the numbers. My pride makes me act like that, you see, and it comes with its advantages!” he admitted, making his British accent even posher. “You’re such a diva!” Jason exclaims, having walked up to us catching Brian’s last sentence. “The line is going on forever, it’s insane! The poor people at the end will have such a terrible audition, everyone just exhausted before they get to their turn,” he adds with a laughter. “Oh well” Brian answers with an arrogant shrug, putting on a content smile. “My work here is done. I’m going to Venice with Melissa now. We’re going to chill at the beach, the sun is hot today! Enjoy your class!” He walks past the line with such a lightness and a swing to both his arms and his hips, sort of accentuating his freedom to the other dancers that would be stuck in line most of the day. “Look at him…” Jason comments with a sigh, laughing, “The arrogance is real”.

Brian is tall, slender, and considered handsome. His curly hair, darker complexion and brown eyes would probably distract the girls in line from what he was up to as he passed them, albeit he himself prefers boys. His nonchalant walk would further cover his intentions, possibly making him look confused by the whole line-up, before he got his number for audition in
hand. He knows how to behave innocent and charming, while also knowing when to act for his own benefit: Like a spider waiting in its web for an opportunity to rise, and then, strike. Again, the play on social roles and being multifaceted in one's behaviors is obvious. Brian can most definitely be called “arrogant” based on his behavior, and a “diva” is perhaps not a wrong term either. However, he is not like that on every occasion. He can be the life of the party, pulling on a comedy show all by himself, on the spot. He can certainly be fun to hang out with, entertaining, laid back and joyful. Nevertheless, he knows when it is time for play, and when to work. He is determined when it is time to strike, knowing that opportunities, like an early number for audition, must be seized.

Confidence and assertiveness are essential traits to act out if wanting to make it in the Industry, where nearly all work is on a freelance basis. In a dance genre where these traits are already explicit as part of the style, though, merely being bold will not make the cut. Talent and skills are of course just as important, as well as knowing when to act in one’s own best interest. There is a certain paradox at play: acting confident and communicating that you have something unique, yet the urgency by which it is done. This point to the competition at play and the possibility of being replaced by someone better at seizing opportunities. Competition is part of the rationale of the capitalism of our time (Weber 1978 extract in Kalberg 2005: 253). Capitalism emphasizes the individual over the collective, making the individual’s unique qualities and its reputation possible advantages in the pursuit of getting ahead (Weber 1978 extract in Kalber 2005: 252). The individual in this view is, however, no more than the quality of his or her last product or performance (Becker 2008: 86).

The competition is not just affecting individual’s dance performances, but also the products of dance, like the choreographies. Jackson’s classes was definitely full out. However, the same term can be used about several other instructors, whose routines are all recognized by a lot of big, explosive movements packed into short time frames\(^\text{12}\). Having watched several videos from classes, some instructors seems to compete in a game of getting their routines “fuller out” than the next instructor’s work. Equally important, it has to be at least as good and full out as one’s previous routine. The creativity lies in the nuances. When all is fast and big, how these moves are put together and played with become central. As a dancer, the instructor’s style is apparent, and the nuances has to be comprehended and worked into the body.

\(^{12}\) A full out routine: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZhDjDSU0oY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZhDjDSU0oY) – JoJo Gomez PASS THAT DUTCH – JOJO GOMEZ, YouTube [Internet] Published Jun 2015 [viewed: Jun 24., 2016]
Spectators less familiar with this dance world and its conventions might not notice the subtle differences. Being part of the dance world brings forth the diverse details. While it is not certain what will become popular among the mass audience, the industries of various art forms will want a great pool to choose from, selecting only some of them to actually make it to the “big stage” outside the art world (Becker 2008: 126). When something proves to become popular and “hit the masses”, there is room for more work of similar kind, making it recognizable to live up to the expectations of the broader audience. This commercialization of a dance style spirals back into the dance world itself, as the choreographers and instructors’ reputation and career depends on being available to deliver what the Industry wants and needs (Becker 2008: 128). Choreographing and performing full out routines is not the only way to be successful within the L.A. dance world at the present. Being versatile is an important feature as the winds will change in what is defined as “popular”; after a while conventions might change, as something different and new is gaining the attention of the mass audience, becoming defining for what is successfully produced (Becker 2008: 306).

Now, if ever

This urgency to make one’s career now - not later, as later could prove to be too late, is present when talking about ambitions and opportunities. I got a close up with one such possible crisis: a close up with Hugo’s tonsils that is. The dancers I lived with caught a cough, getting it in turns. However, in Hugo’s case it lasted longer, soon also giving him a sore throat. He appeared devastated by the thought that his mother might command him back home to get his tonsils removed this time, as he had suffered from swollen tonsils before. “Isabel? Can you do me a favor?” Looking up from my preparation for class: “What?” I replied him. He smiled, with his cell phone in hand, flashlight mode on. “Would you mind checking if my tonsils are as bad as they feel? I just can’t leave!” I looked at him with surprise, but jumped to the task. If not, I would run late for class if he would try talking me into doing him this favor. “Okay then, open your mouth wide, stick out your tongue –and whatever you do, do not cough on me!” I advised him as he handed me the flashlight. “Well, yeah, they are pretty swollen. They are a lot redder than I guess they should be,” I conclude. “Oh no, I feared they would! My mom doesn’t want me to stay here if I’m ill, and I shouldn’t dance with an infection, so she doesn’t see any point in me staying then. Is there anything I can do to get
better fast?” He asks me, looking defeated. “Go get some Vitamin C, drink something hot. Cool it down with some ice cream. I don’t know!” I answer, signaling I need to leave. “Ice cream.” He states. “But I don’t want to go home!” he exclaims in a jokingly close-to-crying tone of voice as I head for the door. I laugh and wink at him: “*Good bye, Hugo!*”

I found the situation a bit peculiar and funny: all of a sudden being called on as if being a house doctor. Hugo on the other hand was worried. If he went home, he said it would take some time before he could afford coming to L.A. again as saving up money would take a while. He also stressed about not having made enough connections in the dance world yet. He worried that by leaving L.A. he would waste his opportunities during this stay and would have to start over again.

Feeling that it is now or never in reaching one’s goals, may be a way to stay focused and disciplined. On the other hand, fearing that one’s efforts could go to waste might enable dancers to savor each moment and to keep the passion alive. The dance world of L.A. is packed with young, talented dancers dreaming, and working for, a career in the Industry. There is absolutely something at stake; the person next to you in class might get your shot if you do not work as hard as you can.

For most of the dancers I spoke with, as Caitlin and Jason discussed, there is no after dancing. Moreover, one could add, nothing besides dancing. Dancing is conceived as an epochal endeavor, it is all about making a career in the industry because that is the only option available for a fulfilling life. It is now or never, dancing or nothing. The discourse of the dance world is one of temporality, the idea of a rather close future—which could slip away forever if not careful. Today is the first day to the rest of your life, and possibly the last day of your life, as you know it. Talk among dancers. Pep talks from instructors. Images of celebrities in the hallways of the studios. All accentuates this promise of being close to the dream, while at the same time letting one know it is an exclusive promise, not for the ordinary person or dancer.

In order to connect the dance routine smoothly, certain moves are preparations for the next turn or jump, or the tempo change to come. In a similar vein: What one does in the now is a preparation for something soon to come. In learning a routine, the preparations and transitions are worked into the body. However, one might never do that exact routine again. The movements from various routines becomes strategies readily available in the body. Stored as *muscle memories*, movement patterns are recognized automatically. This makes room for
focusing on other elements, and advancement. Everything done in the now, could prove to be just the strategy for advancing one’s career. Thereof the urgency; one might already have what it takes. It is about proving it to the right people at the right time to get one’s breakthrough. A breakthrough that has to come. If not, what else is there to do in life? Quite a lot, actually.

Jason told us that he had tried college, but dropped out, as it was not for him. He therefore felt this option was out of the question. He mentioned working in the fashion industry as a possible career option; however, he seemed to conclude that it would take more effort to make a name for himself in that industry, than as a dancer. His career needed to be based around dancing, or else he would prove his family right; he would be a disappointment. On the other hand, Jason is 21 years old. If dancing should prove to be a modular enterprise in the case of Jason, opportunities would surely have the time to arise again over the years. Besides, home on the East Coast, he had been the manager in a department of a finer American restaurant chain, in which he hoped he could get a part time job in L.A. to support himself. Apparently, he did have skills besides dancing. Hugo and Sheldon both worked as instructors in their home countries, while having gone to school in film production. In addition, Sheldon recently started his studies in psychology. Other dancers I talked to at the studios also had instructor jobs back home, whereas most of the dancers I met were in their early twenties. For several of the dancers, the work to get a chance of a career in the Industry turns out not to be what life is all about after all.

Again, the idea of a fulfilling career and life is relevant; not everybody will make the exclusive breakthrough in Hollywood. Some might realize this as they work for their “big break”, looking for passion and fulfillment in other places as they go along. This became evident to me by listening to how they would formulate themselves about their future. Sometimes I would follow up hints in our conversations of some other plans for the future by asking them to elaborate. In the dance world, alternatives to the Industry is usually not spoken of in a direct manner. Part of the dance world’s discourse is that to make it, one has to stay focused and determined on this one career, giving it one’s all. Then you will earn your spot, while the less dedicated will fall behind.

It is apparent that individuals find various ways to navigate through the many options available, choosing which one to emphasis in each situation. It is also visible how several forms of social organization coexist: working as a freelancer is not the only option available in our (post)modern time. “Traditional” forms of employment are not outdated but rather seen
as a realistic alternative to the greater uncertainty of maintaining a dance career. On the individual level, motivations and interests may also vary, making dancing one of several ways to get to work within one's field of interest. A friend of Hugo put it like this: “I like numbers”, as an answer to why she was juggling her dance career with studies in statistics.

Age is golden

As we have seen, it is important to make it early because a deadline will eventually come. This is what drives the feeling of urgency: being above a certain age makes it less likely to happen. My rough guess is that this limit is around the age of 25-27. Getting a breakthrough around that age could come as a result of several years of networking and great talent, though to start out at that age would probably require even more effort to convince people in the Industry that one had what it takes. Starting one’s career at a higher age means investing in a shorter career span. A young face and appearance is what looks good on camera. Moreover, being a dancer requires a strong, flexible body, and the stamina to last for long periods of time working. Jackson reminded his grooves class of this when everyone was struggling to catch their breath, and exhaustion had set in: “Ya all are sweatin’ after this? It is one single hour of work! When you go on tour, you will need to last 17 hours a day, including pre-show rehearsal and then the performance”

Another of Jackson’s pep talks was about the extra pressure on this generation of aspiring dancers. According to him, the next generation was even better trained in all styles from a young age. Several of them were soon turning 18, and the spots would go to them unless we worked hard enough before that time. As a result, being in one’s early twenties is not enough to feel confident about obtaining a career.

In a world where each moment is a preparation for the next - in which the now is only but a preparation for achievements in the near future - when is life “fulfilled”? The networking fosters the focus on questions like “what should I do?” or “what do I have to do?” Always ready for business. The other dancers focus and dedication in class had me work harder too, while I took the pep talks to heart. However, when class was done, the pressure disappeared for my part. In grooves class, which to me was all about having fun, I would notice several of the other dancers use their break to try the last groove a few more times, making faces accentuating their own disapproval with their performance. Others would dance with determination and a seriousness, until the breaks allowed for a relived smile. I too was
determined to do my best and keep up with Jackson’s grooves. Their determination, however, felt even more focused on another occasion to perform and achieve. Clearly, the other dancers had fun in grooves class too, and the spirit of those classes were amazing. Despite there being no routine to learn, the class being similar to a game of “follow the leader”, it was still about being on it.

The differences of perspectives became more apparent in one of the grooves classes when a couple of Hollywood movie stars joined in. They appeared more relaxed somehow, as if they knew this was not exactly their arena of performance, but perhaps, for them, a fun way to work out. The dancers in class acted professional about their presence, only sending them stolen glances occasionally, most often using the mirror in front. One of the stars was standing next to me during class, making me notice how she messed up several times, especially when Jackson changed to a new groove. However, she did not seem to care, except from the time when one of her mistakes made her stand in the wrong spot when Jason made a turn, causing him to slap her shoulder. During the breaks, they would laugh and joke with each other and the friends they came with, in many ways seeming less exhausted than several of the others in class did. They stroke me as a contrast to the other dancers, acting more relaxed and genuine, not taking themselves too seriously.

Aging and signs of growing old is not valued in the Industry of Hollywood that worships youthfulness. Lasch (1991:210) assumes this goes together with the narcissistic values of good looks, celebrity and power, which he claims usually fades over the years. On the other hand, becoming older is also perceived as coming closer to death. To the people living for the close future, dreaming of fame and recognition, old age holds no future, only an end (Lasch 1991:210). The end of history plays another part in this dread too: less significance is given to memories made. An attitude that will do little in giving meaning and comfort when those who have learned to never look back reach old age (Lasch 1991:210).

However, having established oneself and one’s reputation thoroughly in the Industry will not discharge one completely as youth is starting to fade. Being successful comes with power. Jackson his own position as a dancer clear to us in another grooves class: “I don’t do this to get YouTube views. If you want to, it’s fine by me. I make dancers. It’s not about the views, seeing people in class make it—that gives me the high… I don’t care about it. I’m already a dancer.” He said. “Now full out, y’all,” he added as he turned to put on the music.
Having made it to the extent the movie stars in Grooves class had, would allow for some seniority in the Industry. Being established celebrities in the movie industry for several years probably made room to enjoy their achievements rather than feeling the urgency that comes with beginning career moves. No longer the youngest, their “brand” was well established and unquestionable. This was probably freeing them up to acting on “what do I want?” On the other hand, though having reached midlife, their aging with grace of course also, may have done something for their continuing popularity in the Industry and among the masses. Besides, midlife is usually considered the threshold of aging (Lasch 1991: 210). Perhaps midlife then, for a person of success in the Industry can be seen as a liminal state; the struggle to make it is past, while the time for being discharged completely is yet to arrive. Despite the worry of aging and midlife crisis, possibly recognizing the freedom that comes with this time should be celebrated for what it gives, not what it threatens to soon take away. However, again, in a culture of an ongoing urgency, reaching the “finish line” so to speak, might seem threatening as time for self-reflection will have room to arise. When “doing” is understood as “being”, who are you when the race is over?
Chapter 6 Contrasting elements

In this final chapter, I will compare how the dance world of hip hop differs in the two locations of my study. I have already made a few passing comments on this throughout the text, while my empirical examples implicitly show certain varying concerns among the dancers in each location. I will make some of these explicit, though limiting myself to the ones I experience as the most apparent.

Expressing Attitude

Attitudes and self-expressiveness is one of the most striking differences between Oslo and L.A.. To behave bad and similar encouragements to “let loose”, was obviously an ongoing theme in the Oslo classes. In L.A., on the other hand, this was one of the aspects that stroke me as something different from what I was used to. The other participants in the classes hardly needed any encouragement to “go off”. If told to freestyle certain parts, the L.A. dancers went all in. Showing off their skills and creativity was important and the energy level was consistently high. In contrast, the Oslo participants, as the example from Nadia and Talita’s classes showed, would be more reluctant in being expressive. Talita pointed to this difference explicitly when she compared to her own experiences of dancing abroad.

Jackson had, as shown, particular views on what made one have “swag” while dancing. However, this aspect was apparent also outside the classes in L.A. The dancers seemingly were quite conscious of their image, and on how their attitudes would make their own individuality visible while at the same time adhering to the overall “area code” of hip hop. The idea of “keepin’ it real” by being true to oneself came evident through self-expressiveness in clothing styles and in making the moves “one’s own” on the dancefloor.

While some of the dancers in Oslo would show creativity in their clothing or accessories, it was less pronounced, and in most cases, any expressiveness of self would be left to those few items, or perhaps a visible tattoo. The instructors in Oslo were the ones most likely to wear items or express themselves in ways that stated their individuality more strongly. Yet, my impression is that it overall remained less of a theme here.
The sexual explicitness was more pronounced in L.A., both in the routines and when asked to freestyle. Rebecca’s sexy moves stand in stark contrast to the hesitant arm gestures the participants added to Nadia’s whine after getting some inspiration from her freestyling the first round. While participants in Oslo will not object if some “dirty” moves is part of a routine, to express oneself freely in that manner seems more challenging. Martin pointed out the lack of smiles, while Talita wanted some facial expressions other than concentrated gazes. In L.A. these things were for the most part already in place. However, the instructors would call for even more expressiveness and loosening up off the bodies when going through the final rounds of practicing the routine, to make sure the dancers really went full out, and not letting exhaustion get the best of them.

Both locations influenced me, but in different ways. Coming back to the classes in Oslo after getting used to dancing in L.A., made me sense how a certain composure in the expressive style of the other participants in class had me quickly fall into the same pattern. While it at first had been a challenge to go full out and being expressive and big and bold, as I touched in on in my example from the “Go hard or go home”-routine, failing to act out at times made me feel less equipped and standing out in a negative manner. This part about standing out in a bad way could perhaps be an explanation for both places: to go off in the Oslo setting while the rest remained calm would make me differ from the crowd in one way. To not do it in L.A., on the other hand, would make me seem incompetent compared to the rest. This points to a certain conformity or adjustment of behavior in both places, yet at opposite poles in self-expressiveness. This conformity, supports the theory about how we interpret and behave according to the people around us. By taking a reflexive stance on ourselves, we adapt our actions to what we interpret as appropriate (Blumer 1969: 52).

The French instructor that had class in Oslo resembled the attitudes I observed in L.A. more closely compared to the other Norwegian instructors. The energy level was high, the instructor was not afraid to demand the dancers to work hard, while expecting a higher level of skills. Other instructors in Oslo have sometimes tried to “roughen up” their teachings by being more direct. This did not work as well as they hoped. This had me wonder how the French instructor was able to successfully change the students’ attitudes. One common feature became obvious to me; the participants in both L.A. and with the French instructor were mainly instructors or otherwise professional dancers themselves. In the regular Oslo classes, the participants were less “deep players” as the dance classes were only one segment of their lives. In other words, dancing was not their main career path.
Managing Relations

The difference in focus of dance as a leisure activity and as a career path might be underlying the differences in relation management I encountered.

In L.A. networking was more valuable than talent. As a result, it is important to get to know the right people. The right connections can take you places, the wrong ones leaves you stuck. Being outgoing and introducing yourself to as many as possible might get you connected to the right persons, or at least give you the reputation of being sociable and positive. However, being too attached creates expectations of loyalty, which could come to stand in the way of advancement. On the one hand, this might sound a bit cynical. However, because this applies to all the dancers in L.A., non-attachment is favored together with random small talk and briefer friendships. The greater turnover of dancers in L.A. by both U.S. dancers and dancers from abroad probably contributes to making brief encounters a favored way of interacting.

In Oslo, there is more consistency of the participants attending the studio and the different classes. However, while familiarity with each other increases, direct communication or small talk is definitely less frequent at first, compared to that of L.A. This could perhaps have something to do with needing to invest less energy in getting to know as many as possible, and a preference for creating lasting bonds. The dance world of the Oslo dancers is, as mentioned, part of a whole, and “advancement” only refers to progress in own dancing skills. This setting then favors getting along. Pointing to a communal aspect, while being more a recreational activity in Oslo, getting ahead is not part of the conduct. The hesitation in making the first move might have something to do with expectations and a wish to be sincere in one’s approach: if we interact now, there will be an expectation of further interaction. However, relating for the sake of relating means getting along for who we are, not what we have to offer or may achieve, making the first move felt as a personal investment. This contrasts interaction based on motives of forming networks for the sake of business. Interacting as oneself with another self, may be felt as a risky affair: Interacting personally opens up for judgments of the self, based on indications from the other, which if interpreted as less favorable could be experienced as a personal rejection (Charon 1989: 74-75). In addition, as a leisure activity, the participants in the dance world in Oslo might have different motivations for being in the studio. Some are there to enjoy dancing, or use it as a work out. Others might have entered the dance world looking for a place to belong and be part of a community while participating in an activity. Yet others are there looking for new personal friendships. Alternatively, varying
mixes of these is also plausible. Not knowing others motives, nor not necessarily one’s own, the hesitation to interact directly could be a proof of trying to read the situation before risking anything by acting (Blumer 1969: 15).

Leisure or Career: Concluding Remarks

I have pointed to the career focus, or lack thereof, as underlying the differences in focus on attitudes and relation management. Throughout the L.A. material, the focus on career is apparent through the discourse at the studio, and with the dancers in the house. The urgency in making the career now, and in focusing on the strategies necessary, are obvious a difference between the experience of the dance world in L.A. and in Oslo.

In L.A. to “make it” equals high competition for a few places in the spotlight. To get signed and later booked for a project means the possibility for an improved reputation and future income. It is necessary to go all in, not letting any opportunity slip. In order to achieve this, the L.A. dancers keeps a pragmatic focus towards their dancing, and the relations they form.

In contrast, the Oslo dancers are mostly there for the fun of it, and the communal aspect of dancing together. Being a professional dancer in Oslo or Norway is definitely not unheard of, and several dancers I have encountered here have been booked for TV appearances and similar. However, the participants in class see their dancing as one part of their lives, and focusing on getting formal education as a path to their careers. This makes the dance world a place to clear their minds from everyday stressors.

To take one’s passion and turn it into a living is the motivating factor for the dancers in L.A. Nevertheless, as I have shown earlier, many dancers have other options and passions as well. For the Oslo dancers, attending classes in the evenings becomes a way to incorporate their desire to dance into their lives as a recreational activity.

Capturing something that is of great importance to many people in our contemporary world makes future social anthropological research on hip hop dancing, and hip hop in general, worthwhile. Future studies on hip hop in different locations would make us more aware of its varying local expressions. Further, it would be useful to study the role of social media in the identity formation for young adults about to lay out their career paths. This would better inform us about their expectations, and possible disappointments. To do so using symbolic
interaction as the foundation of research will not only inform us what structures and tendencies that seems to be mainly in work, but will allow for insight into how social media usage and career planning is understood by the people who are engaging in these social settings.

Whether for fun or for making it, hip hop dancing is about expressing ourselves and our desires and passions. Varying in how “deep players” they are; the dancers of Oslo and L.A. certainly shares a profound passion for hip hop dancing, wanting it to be part of their lives, in one way or the other.
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