

‘Cross-cultural’ practices: interpreting non-African-American participation in hip-hop dance

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(First submission December 2007; First published March 2010)

Abstract

This article examines how participants interpret a cultural practice commonly associated with a race other than their own. Determining if, how and why participants experience such ‘cross-cultural’ forms in racialized terms can clarify whether these practices promote tolerance or essentialism in everyday life, and whether they enable appropriation in the field of cultural production. Through interviews and participant observation with non-African-American women learning and teaching hip-hop dance, I capture a spectrum of participant views. Most dancers see hip-hop as African American in its origins. But while novices often speak of an inherent or learned authenticity among blacks, experts rarely express racialized views of the dance’s contemporary practice. Experts’ views are shaped by personal ability, exposure to dancers whose ability is not racially patterned, and exposure to others who accept their skill. How dancers act on these interpretations challenges common associations of racialized views with tolerance, and non-racialized views with appropriation.

Keywords: Cross-cultural practices; essentialism; authenticity; hip-hop dance; race; culture.

Kelly¹ strides into her hip-hop dance class at a studio in Los Angeles, jumping around, pumping fists in the air and grabbing her crotch. Her short tank top reveals a sculpted midriff above baggy camouflaged pants. Kelly is white and so are most students in her tightly packed class. Before beginning the routine, Kelly tours the

room introducing herself, then returns to the front and asks “Wassup?!” A few students murmur “What’s up” and “Hi.” Kelly again grabs her pants, jumps and pumps her fist and shouts in a louder voice, “Wassup?!” A few more half-heartedly respond “What’s up.” The third time, the chorus is louder, with more students mimicking Kelly’s “Wassup,” rather than enunciating “What’s up.” This exchange foreshadows the dance lesson, where students learn to mimic Kelly’s bodily movements.

During our interview, Kelly explains that race does not determine a dancer’s skill or style in hip-hop. She cites herself as an example: “I’m the white girl that teaches the ‘yo, wassup,’ ghetto-style-like hip-hop,” which she picked up as one of the first women active in Los Angeles’ breakdancing scene in the early 1980s. Yet when I interview non-black students in classes like Kelly’s and those taught by African American² instructors, I find differences in their views on the relationship between race and culture. As one student put it: “Kelly looks great ... but she looks very different than a black person would.”

Introduction

Because culture often reflects and reinforces social boundaries, people who adopt cultural tastes and practices associated with another ethnic or racial group invite scrutiny. Observers of American cultural preferences have noted changes over time in how whites have responded to cultural forms associated with blacks (Jones 1993; Roy and Dowd 2010). These include shifts from parodies of African Americans (e.g., blackface minstrelsy, see Lott [1993]) to race-based segregation of musical genres (e.g., ‘race records’, see Roy [2004]) to repackaging styles developed by African Americans for white performers (e.g., rock and roll, see Redd [1985]) to mass marketing black artists to white audiences (e.g., R&B, jazz and blues, see respectively Ward [1998]; Peretti [1992]; Grazian [2003]). This trend toward whites more openly embracing forms considered ‘black culture’ – what I will call ‘cross-racial’ practices for greater accuracy, but is also known as ‘cross-cultural’ and ‘cross-over’ practices – has proved difficult to interpret. Cross-racial practices have been celebrated as signs of increasing tolerance (Bryson 1996) or, alternatively, decried as sites of exploitative cultural appropriation (Rodriquez 2006) or essentialism (Hancock 2007). These conclusions rest on conflicting accounts of whether and how participants interpret cultural practices in racialized terms. Given that participants do not always experience what are widely considered to be *their own* racial, ethnic or national cultural practices in such terms (Fox 2006), this study seeks to identify and

explain variation in participant understandings of ostensibly cross-racial practices, and apply these results to assess claims that such practices constitute tolerance, appropriation or essentialism.

Hip-hop dance is one element of a broad cultural form that is typically depicted and seen as African American (Perry 2004), even as its popularity has increased among non-blacks. Drawing on twenty-one interviews with non-African-American female students and teachers of hip-hop dance, supplemented by participant observation in dance classes over an eleven-month period, I demonstrate considerable variation in how practitioners interpret hip-hop dance. In particular, I find that expertise hampers racialized views, and explore several reasons why this might be. I then show that dancers' actions based on their interpretations challenge normative evaluations associating racialized views with tolerance, and non-racialized views with appropriation.

Hip-hop as 'black culture'

Hip-hop culture traditionally includes four creative elements: 'deejaying' (sampling and scratching records); 'emceeing' (rapping); 'breaking' (breakdancing); and 'bombing' (graffiti art) (Rose 1994; Chang 2005). Hip-hop dance is performed to hip-hop music and shares many of the roots of breakdancing (Hazzard-Donald 1996). But while breakdancing is a free-form movement involving frequent drops and spins, hip-hop dancers' hands rarely touch the floor, and dancers in hip-hop classes follow fully choreographed routines.

Because of the prominent role of blacks in developing and continuing hip-hop culture, hip-hop is often described as 'black culture', with only occasional class, age and gender qualifications – for music, see Rose (1994); Perry (2004); Hess (2005); for dance, see Huntington (2007). Yet this characterization is not unchallenged. First, the racial composition of hip-hop consumers (as opposed to producers) suggests that whites by some measures outnumber blacks in their engagement with hip-hop – see debate in Kitwana (2005, pp. 81–94). Second, historiographic accounts reveal that hip-hop art forms did not originate exclusively among African Americans. Artists of Puerto-Rican and Afro-Caribbean descent helped develop hip-hop in New York and California in the 1970s (Flores 2000; Rivera 2003). A final line of critique challenges racial classifications of culture altogether. The hybridity of American musical genres – which are cross-racial in their stylistic origins, as well as the composition of current audiences and performers – have led musicologists like Tagg (1989) to suggest abandoning musical racial classification. But rather than debunk all objective racial categorizations of culture or advance a particular objective categorization, this study asks how *participants*

arrive at racialized or non-racialized understandings – see also Radano (2003); Mann (2007); Hamilton (2008).

The gray area between whites and black culture

Studies of cross-racial involvement in cultural forms such as hip-hop, blues and lindy hop³ have tied participant interpretations to broader implications of these practices. Researchers across disciplines and beyond the academy have found conflicting evidence of whether and how these practices are experienced in racialized terms and, in turn, whether they connote tolerance, appropriation or essentialism.

As Bourdieu (1984, p. 211) has shown with respect to class differences, analysts cannot assume that what is nominally the same practice has the same meaning for different participants. But while studies of cross-racial cultural practices, viewed collectively, reveal non-uniform participant interpretations, individual studies often assume or claim that only one of three views applies. First, some authors assume that non-blacks experience hip-hop music as black culture because of the prevalence of black performers (Boyd 2003, pp. 14–16) or the genre's popularity among African Americans (Bryson 1996, p. 889). These inferences are sometimes corroborated by studies that turn directly to participants to discover their interpretations (Kitwana 2005, p. 7). For example, Grazian's (2003, p. 36) ethnography of a Chicago blues club reveals that for many white patrons 'blackness connotes an extreme sense of authenticity' based in their assumptions of uniform experience among blacks.

Other studies show a second, more extreme form of racialized view: Hancock's (2007; 2008) study of white lindy hop dancers uncovers participants who interpret cultural ability in essentialized terms, as a biological extension of race. Finally, a third way for participants to interpret cross-racial practices is as their own culture – that is, as not 'cross-racial' at all. Rodriguez's (2006, p. 663) white Massachusetts concertgoers deny that hip-hop is an 'unambiguously African American cultural form', and even Hancock's (2007, p. 116; Hancock 2008 pp. 797–8) dancers often lack an understanding of the 'African American identity of the dance'. Thus, while the first form of participant interpretation is a non-essentialist association between a cultural form and a racial group, and the second posits an essentialist link between race and culture, the third interpretation rejects any link.

A smaller number of researchers have noted this diversity in participant interpretations and made it an object of study. Juxtaposing interpretive accounts of cross-racial *fans* with those of *performers*, several studies suggest that participants' level of expertise may impact their interpretations of cross-racial practices. Expertise is clearly relevant: while fans are hardly passive receivers – they actively process

and interpret culture, inspiring the term ‘autoproduction’ (Peterson and Anand 2004, p. 324) – they also differ greatly from artists (Becker 1982). But the effect of expertise is not clear. Bennett (1999, pp. 11, 15), although emphasizing differences in location, finds that white British hip-hop fans see the form through a racialized and sometimes essentialist lens (‘black music’), while performers see it through a class-based one (not ‘a black thing’). Similarly, in Grazian’s (2003, pp. 20–5) study, casual blues fans are more likely than regulars and musicians to hold racialized conceptions of authenticity. But Kitwana (2005, p. 70; see also Jones 1988) argues the opposite, suggesting that white practitioners and deeply immersed fans are likelier than ‘free-floating’ fans to ‘understand and appreciate hip-hop as contemporary Black youth culture’. Thus, while some authors highlight expertise as a potential determinant of participant understandings, they do not agree on the *direction* of its influence. Nor have these authors focused on *why* expertise might affect participant understandings.

Whether and how cross-racial practices are experienced in racialized terms have important implications for the field of cultural production and for everyday life – consequences which I will label appropriation, tolerance and essentialism.⁴ First, some authors express concern that non-racialized understandings of cultural forms originated by blacks will lead to appropriation, that is, borrowing from black innovators without crediting them (as with rock and roll, see Boyd [2003, pp. 14–16]) and displacement of black artists by white ones (Hall 1997; for critique see Rudinow 1994; Hancock 2007). To these authors, such appropriation may be the all-too-frequent result when non-racialized cultural understandings combine with prejudice against blacks. Racialized understandings of cross-racial practices, then, may help to prevent appropriation in the professional realm.

Others argue that racialized understandings can also reflect and reinforce racial tolerance in social and political contexts.⁵ Bryson (1996, pp. 889–92) has linked whites’ willingness to share tastes with blacks to racially tolerant views endorsing greater contact with blacks,⁶ although others expect such contact to be limited and temporary (Halle 1993; Roediger 2002). Kitwana (2005, pp. 169–73) expects whites who support cultural forms they perceive as black to also support political policies favourable to blacks, although again, others expect this impact will be minimal (Bynoe 2004). Inversely, a non-racialized understanding of back cultural forms can disconnect whites from ‘the African-American experiential context that created them’ (Hall 1997, p. 37). Such non-racialized views have been tied to a new mode of racial inequality in post-Civil-Rights America, where ‘colorblind discourse’ – avoidance or oversight of relevant racial categories – conceals and reinforces racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Rodriguez 2006; Hancock 2008).

At the same time, racialized interpretations of cultural practices can also carry deleterious consequences. Essentialist views, like non-essentialist racialized understandings, could help protect black performers from appropriation, but these views also perpetuate the 'dominant racial mythology of essential racial differences that are grounded in the body' (Hancock 2007, p. 121; on essentialism see Gil-White 1999). Analysts disagree about whether non-essentialist racialized views can carry similar consequences. Grazian (2003, pp. 41–2) criticizes white Chicago blues club patrons who presume a uniformity of experience among blacks, labelling this a stereotypical view that reifies hierarchical models of race and limits the careers of both black and white performers. On the other hand, Gaunt (2006) cautions that in critiquing unfounded views tying cultural ability to *biology*, analysts should not dismiss the racialization of culture based on patterned objective differences in *lived experience*. To Gaunt (2006, p. 46, emphasis in original), such difference objectively *does* equip 'most' blacks to sing, dance, and participate in musical styles such as hip-hop. Thus, while essentialist racialized understandings are considered pernicious and represent something beyond tolerance, scholars diverge in their assessment of racialized understandings based on presumed uniformity of experience.

By treating previous studies on participant interpretations as complementary rather than competitive, participants in cross-racial practices can be expected to interpret them in at least three ways – in non-essentialist racialized terms, essentialist racialized terms and non-racialized terms. Previous studies suggest expertise as an explanatory variable for this variation, but invite a closer evaluation of the direction and mechanism of its influence. Finally, a comprehensive look at participant interpretations and behaviours may help to evaluate claims that non-racialized interpretations enable unwanted appropriation, and that racialized interpretations lead to tolerant or essentialist attitudes in everyday life.

Methods

This project began in 2006 when, during hip-hop dance classes that I was taking for respite from sociological inquiries, I grew curious about my peers' understanding of our experience. Expecting that my classmates shared my interpretation of hip-hop as black culture, I initially framed the study as an inquiry into how dancers 'legitimize their participation' in dance forms associated with another race. But when preliminary discussions and interviews revealed that many dancers did not share my understanding, I reformulated my research question to explain variation in how non-black hip-hop dancers interpret a practice commonly associated with a race other than their

own. I completed an eleven-month period of participant observation in hip-hop classes at two commercial dance studios and one gym in predominantly white, upper-middle-class neighbourhoods of Los Angeles. As a student in at least two dance classes each week – at beginner and intermediate levels – I took detailed field notes on interactions in the settings. As there was limited verbal communication during class to convey participants' interpretations of their experience, I conducted twenty-one semi-structured interviews with non-black women teaching or taking hip-hop dance classes.

The sample – recruited through contacts made in classes, posters at the sites and snowball sampling – is representative of the student population in these settings: non-African-American women primarily in their twenties. I oversampled white female instructors, as nearly half of dance instructors are black males. Respondents include fourteen white, two Asian, two Latina and three mixed-race dancers, based on self-characterizations.⁷ I chose non-African-American – rather than exclusively white – dancers to account for the perspectives of all who might consider themselves outside of the group to which hip-hop is conventionally attributed. This decision was reinforced by my interviews, where I did not find differences between views of white respondents and others – for example, Latina respondents were like others in describing hip-hop's origins as exclusively African American.

I ensured similar sample sizes in each of three experience-level categories used in the analysis: nine novices; six advanced dancers; and six instructors.⁸ 'Novices' had taken only beginner or intermediate-level classes. 'Advanced dancers' had taken at least several advanced-level hip-hop classes. The dance skills of 'instructors' are similar to advanced dancers, but I consider them separately because of their distinct roles.

Interviews covered a variety of topics before asking about race, in order to avoid artificially encouraging responses that addressed this research concern. Questions were worded to allow for talk of race or other issues: 'How would you describe hip-hop to someone who has never encountered it before and has had no exposure to American culture?' 'What do people who can dance hip-hop more easily, naturally, have in common?' At the end of the interview I would ask directed questions such as: 'Do you think there is a difference in the dancing styles of teachers of different racial backgrounds?' Previous research and my data suggest that these queries were sufficient to solicit participants' essentialist and other racialized views.⁹

A shared origin story, divergent contemporary tales

The great majority of dancers – eighteen of twenty-one – viewed hip-hop dance as originating in black communities. Many discussed hip-hop's

'street' origins, often referencing specific, historically black low-income neighbourhoods. In describing hip-hop as 'street', dancers expressed their distance from the dance's origins, but by describing it as a 'social' dance, they expressed proximity to its current practice. The most common formulation highlighted hip-hop's popularity among non-African-Americans and qualified the African American – and sometimes African – influence to its inception: 'It's uniquely American. It's got African roots and it's a mixture of different influences, and now it's got the same cultural influences and not just African American . . . It's very pop culture.' Older respondents described the form as popular among youth, and younger respondents considered it their generation's music. Hip-hop has been so prevalent in young dancers' lives that participation can be nostalgic: '[When I dance hip-hop] I feel like I am like in tune with my generation and American culture . . . I would always listen to hip-hop even when I was little.' Thus nearly all respondents held racialized views of the dance's *origins*, but rather than see its *contemporary* practice as an unfamiliar cultural form, many saw it as their own culture.

Yet for a small set of dancers, hip-hop's association with blacks was not limited to its origins. Based either on claims of a biological difference between blacks and whites or on perceived differences in lived experience, these dancers held strong racial associations with the contemporary practice. Differences in levels of experience – rather than age or race (the sample did not differ significantly in class) – proved to be most predictive of respondents' views of the contemporary practice. A look at dancers representative of novices, advanced dancers and instructors suggests a pattern in which greater expertise dispels racialized views of contemporary hip-hop dance.

Novices

Many novices – six of nine – made race a central issue during interviews.¹⁰ Two believed African Americans had an innate skill at hip-hop dance, while four felt that black dancers' shared experience gave them greater authenticity. These dancers experienced hip-hop dance classes as a journey into the 'other'.

Gena is a twenty-two-year-old white woman who had recently moved to Los Angeles to work as an architectural intern. Gena first experienced hip-hop dance in high school, when she and a friend accompanied their fathers from their Berkeley, California homes to a YMCA gym in neighbouring Oakland. While their fathers exercised, the girls took dance classes with predominantly black students and instructors. Reflecting on the experience, Gena said that Oakland was 'one of the better places you can do hip-hop, it's like pretty authentic'.

She considers it to be ‘a really amazing cultural experience to be a part of a different culture for a second’.

Gena voiced her essentialist views early in the interview:

There are absolutely people who are better at it than others ... I think that one of the most fascinating things for me is seeing how much better, or just how there’s something really innate in most African American people that I’ve seen – or not just African American people, African people, who just seem to have something inside them, a beat or a rhythm or an ability to, without seeming to put any kind of effort into, even as simple as just the way they move their body.

Without prompting, Gena expressed that there is an ‘innate’ difference in how black and white people move. Gena then raised Kelly as an example of how whites cannot reach the level of black dancers, explaining that ‘Kelly looks great ... but she looks very different than a black person would.’ Other essentialists claimed that blacks are ‘just built differently’, and possess a skill that is ‘inherent’ or ‘in the blood’.

Other novices cited differences in the lived experience of blacks and whites – rather than their biology – to explain the perceived superior skill of African Americans. Liz, a twenty-three-year-old university student, took her first hip-hop class a few years ago in her native Taiwan. When I asked her what she thought of the style of her current instructor, she said:

First of all he is ... African American, so I suppose it’s part of his culture, maybe his neighborhood or something, he grew up with it. It’s amazing, sometimes I will hear a song on the radio or somewhere, I can feel that’s hip-hop, and it’s definitely sung by an African American ... If you go to like, the Target, with a lot of black people working there, you ask them, they will know, they can tell you.

Liz attributed her black instructor’s skill to what she took to be his cultural environment, rather than to an innate trait. Liz repeated this when I asked how race figured into her choice of instructors:

Black is most desired, because as an Asian race, I would say that that’s their culture, it’s part of their daily life, so I would say black. But – and usually black people dance better in hip-hop [laughs].

While Liz’s belief in the different lived experiences of blacks and whites indicates that she does not adhere to ‘colorblind discourse’, her reference to the discount store Target suggests that she is conflating

race and class. Respondents often blurred racial and class distinctions: while they have strong class associations with hip-hop's origins, they do not state that they prefer instructors who are from low-income neighbourhoods. And when asked directly to describe instructors' class backgrounds, they admit ignorance.¹¹ Whether or not novices held class-laden assumptions about black dancers, they presumed the practice was more likely to be part of their daily lives, making black dancers' skill appear 'natural, not taught'.

When these dancers discussed their selection of instructors and experience dancing in social settings, it became apparent that strong racialized views can sometimes have the opposite effect as that expected by scholars. Racialized cultural views are anticipated to protect and boost the careers of black dance instructors (Hall 1997; Boyd 2003) and promote inter-racial contact (Bryson 1996). Such views do lead many novices to select African American instructors, making African Americans almost half of the studio's instructors. But some novices found black – especially if female – instructors intimidating, and preferred learning from and among whites. Catherine, a white classically trained ballerina in her early thirties who was new to hip-hop, conveyed discomfort about taking classes with black female instructors:

There is just more of like an intensity, maybe I do think they are better at it inherently, so I find that intimidating, that I can't move the same way they do . . . I didn't feel like my body was the same as theirs.

The same sentiment made Gena more comfortable in her current classes with predominantly white dancers in Los Angeles than in classes in Oakland, with mostly black dancers. These racial associations also led dancers to prefer dancing socially among other non-black dancers. As Sara explained: 'I probably still wouldn't drive to Compton and go to a club there. I would stand out there because I'm white.' Thus, some dancers act on racialized views in the manner expected of those with non-racialized views: they avoid African American instructors and dance settings.

I turn next to dancers who differed from novices in seeing no racial differences in skill.

Advanced dancers

Unlike novices, many advanced dancers – five of six – did *not* raise the issue of race beyond discussing hip-hop's origins. Ability in hip-hop dance is not at all racially patterned for Jennifer, a twenty-year-old Latina community college student who has been taking studio dance

classes since she was a child, and who now takes advanced-level classes. Throughout the interview, Jennifer maintained non-racialized views about hip-hop dance. To her, dancing is about lack of inhibition, not racial differences: 'There are people that are more free with their bodies . . . Some people are inhibited.' Later, when asked explicitly whether there are differences in instructors by race, Jennifer rejected the suggestion. These views were common among advanced dancers, who tended to see hip-hop skill as distributed along lines other than race.

Non-racialized views also prevailed among advanced dancers who were, or sought to be, professional performers. One of these, Chloe, was confident of her free-style dancing, but less so of her ability to learn choreography, a necessary skill for auditions. Chloe, who is twenty years old and white, learned to breakdance as a rural teenager who joined a church group in Sacramento, California. When I asked Chloe about people being naturals, she returned to the freestyle versus choreography dichotomy with which she was struggling:

You can tell the girls in class that know how to dance from the girls that don't, mainly because the girls that can dance are in there because we want to learn new material and we're paying for that, because routines are so much different than freestyle.

Race was not on Chloe's radar; rather, she was concerned with what she saw as a non-racialized ability to remember routines.

When I asked Chloe whether there are differences between instructors of different racial backgrounds, she responded that everyone dances differently and there is no racial pattern: 'It doesn't matter what size, shape, color, race, sex, whatever, that movement isn't looking exactly the same unless you're trying to make it look like that.' Chloe, like Jennifer, passed up every opportunity to discuss racial associations when discussing skill in hip-hop. To the majority of advanced dancers, ability to dance hip-hop is not related to race, but is a function of one's comfort with and control over one's body.

It is helpful to compare advanced dancers to instructors before considering the implications of these views.

Instructors

Like advanced dancers, dance instructors – five of six – did *not* see contemporary hip-hop dance as racialized, but instructors also differed in acknowledging that *others* regarded race as relevant.¹² Stacey and Kelly are white dance instructors, ages thirty and forty-four respectively, who teach all levels of classes and have extensive performance and choreography experience. Like many other hip-hop

instructors, Stacey taught herself to dance by watching MTV music videos. She later moved to Los Angeles for formal training, and became a choreographer and performer. Kelly, too, started dancing at a young age. After dancing with a group of breakdancers in Los Angeles, she performed at the 1984 Olympics Opening Ceremony, and later received formal training.

I asked Stacey what natural dancers had in common and she responded, ‘Interesting – I don’t know, because it’s always different people. The people who tend to do really good at it are the people who are really passionate about it.’ Like advanced dancers, Stacey did not use race to explain differences in capability, but related those differences to dancers’ passion and commitment. When I asked Stacey how race figured in people’s skill in hip-hop, she not only rejected the relevance of race, but also raised and rejected others’ assertions to the contrary:

People are going to prejudice and think if you’re black you’re going to be a better instructor than if you’re white, but ... hopefully it doesn’t have much to do with the way you look.

Like Stacey, Kelly did not attribute differences in dancing ability to race. When asked whether natural dancers have something in common, she contrasted her experience with conventional stereotypes:

When it comes to the most specific point, it’s rhythm, people have a natural sense of rhythm or they don’t. You can teach someone over and over and over ... And I’ve had black people in my class that do not have any rhythm, so that’s always a fun stereotype to be broken. Probably more often white people come to my classes; generic stereotype.

Kelly suggested that rhythm is innate, but not differentially distributed by race. And although most of her students are white, she does not conclude that whites struggle with hip-hop dance, but instead labels this idea a stereotype.

Kelly again referred to stereotypes when I asked her directly how dancers differed by race:

Probably sometimes but not necessarily all the time. I’m the white girl that teaches the “yo, wassup”, ghetto-style-like hip-hop sometimes. And then, at the same time, [my friend] is a black guy and he teaches like this technical jazz class. So I just think that it breaks stereotypes.

Like Stacey, in addition to giving her perspective, Kelly distinguished it from others' contrary views. Instructors were therefore like advanced dancers in their non-racialized views of hip-hop. However, they went beyond advanced dancers to raise and refute the racialized views expressed by novices.

As white hip-hop instructors, these dancers are the face of appropriation and their roles as instructors disconnects their students from 'the African-American experiential context that created' the form (Hall 1997, p. 37). Yet, just as the racialized views of some novices, discussed earlier, did not promote their contact with African Americans, the non-racialized views of advanced students and instructors *did* promote this interaction in social settings. Kelly explained: 'I'm friends with so many intercultural people because I go to clubs and I have such a mixed variety of friends in my dancing hip-hop world that I probably wouldn't normally hang out with in my regular world.' Expert dancers' non-racialized views enabled them to have cross-racial contact that some beginners who held more strongly racialized views of the practice lacked.

Explicating expertise

Participants' accounts not only reveal variation along the dimension of expertise; they also hint at which aspects of expertise, within this field, constrain some dancers' racialized understandings to the origins of the dance. I identify three distinct but overlapping features of expertise within this field – personal ability, exposure to others with various levels of ability, and exposure to others with expectations of cross-racial ability – that hamper racialized and promote non-racialized interpretations in what my experience suggests is a processual pattern.¹³ The transformation of my own views parallels the changes I will describe. When I began dancing hip-hop, I shared Liz's preference for black instructors. But as I gained skill, saw the variety of skill levels in classes, learned of the years of practice that both black and white instructors had put into their craft, and saw that advanced dancers made no assumptions about my skill level before seeing me dance, I began to question my association of skill with race. Returning to the interviews, I show how expertise shapes respondents' understanding of the dance.

For non-African-American expert dancers (that is, advanced dancers and instructors), a belief in the inherent or experiential authenticity of blacks in hip-hop dance would contradict their personal ease with the dance. While some novices compared their lack of proficiency with the skill of adept black dancers and concluded that the key difference was race, expert dancers' ability precluded this reasoning. Compare, for example, Catherine's – the novice – 'I can't

move the same way [African Americans] do' with the diametrically opposed views of Jennifer, the advanced dancer, and Kelly, the instructor:

Jennifer: Hip-hop especially has been easy and natural for me.

Kelly: Hip-hop [is] just something that comes naturally to me.

Although the feeling of naturalness with hip-hop is likely a product of years of practice (Chambliss 1988), expert dancers attributed to themselves an ability that novices only see in others. Yet confidence in their skill is not the only factor supporting their non-racialized views: also significant are the encounters with others in a field that accepts cross-racial skill.

As they gain personal ability, experts enter learning and professional environments inaccessible to novices, where they gain exposure to others who promote their non-racialized views. Witnessing awkward black dancers and adept white dancers led experts like Kelly to dismiss essentialist views as stereotypical. Similarly, Leah, a professional dancer, told me that she has seen 'examples of every single kind [of dancer]'. Because the cultural practice has become widespread, non-black expert dancers encounter many other non-black experts. Leah added that her two favourite instructors are 'this average looking white woman in her late twenties and then my forty-year-old black homosexual instructor'. If the field of hip-hop dance were bereft of expert non-black dancers, dancers would not encounter evidence that ability is not racially patterned.

Experts also encounter people who expect them to be adept hip-hop dancers, in spite of their race. This expectation is premised on the commercial viability of white hip-hop dancers as choreographers, instructors and performers. Billie, an actor and dancer who recently became an instructor, explained:

It's worthless for me to be a really trained jazz and modern dancer . . . They'll always ask you if you can do hip-hop, whether it's for commercials or if it's any kind of dance in film . . . Hip-hop is the first thing you see on a dance resume.

Professional and financial incentives motivate dancers like Billie to master hip-hop as they have done with other dance forms. These conditions are not present in all cultural fields. Whereas non-black hip-hop dance instructors can teach sometimes overflowing dance classes, strong racial associations with a genre such as ballet limits the careers of black ballerinas (see, for example, Gottschild 2003). The combination of their ability and the existence of a population willing

to accept their expertise enables these dancers to overcome occasional challenges to their cross-racial engagement.

Conclusion

Non-African-American hip-hop dancers hold differing interpretations of the practice they share. The diverse characteristics of cultural forms that inspire scholarly debates about how (Flores 2000; Rivera 2003; Perry 2004) and whether (Tagg 1989) to objectively classify culture along racial lines also sustain a multiplicity of interpretations among practitioners. Recognizing the racial difference between hip-hop dance's pioneers and its current practitioners, the majority of dancers in this study referred to hip-hop's 'street' origins, even naming particular low-income black neighbourhoods. Then in most cases they noted that hip-hop is currently a 'social' dance popular among non-African-Americans. Because hip-hop dance is now mainstream culture, most respondents identify the form as *American*, rather than *African American*. However, this did not hold for a sizable portion of novices – the group that represents the lion's share of those engaged in cross-racial cultural practices – who believe that African Americans have an inherent or learned advantage in this cultural form.

These non-uniform interpretations of cultural practices have both methodological and theoretical implications. The findings caution against objectivist analytical approaches which turn to sources other than participants to determine their associations with a genre (e.g., Bryson 1996), as well as approaches that expect uniform interpretations (e.g. Rodriguez 2006; Hancock 2007). As scholars of ethnicity have recognized, an objectivist approach – one that looks to external characteristics to surmise ethnic boundaries – is likely to tell us more about the analyst's than the subject's beliefs (Wimmer 2008).¹⁴ Meanwhile, analytical approaches that assume uniform views miss much of the variation that theorists should seek to explain (Brubaker 2004, p. 8). These lessons can be applied to participants' understanding of culture. Even a sophisticated objectivist approach like Bryson's (1996, p. 889) – which presumes that musical genres disproportionately preferred by blacks are likely to be associated with them by whites – is unlikely to paint an accurate picture of participant interpretations. Given that, by Bryson's own measure, blacks often compose less than one-quarter of the fan population of the genres attributed to them in her study, we cannot just take for granted that white fans associate a genre with blacks rather than other white fans. And when a subjectivist approach like Hancock's (2007) reveals that some participants do hold racialized views, this finding should not obscure observations that other participants do not.

Whether and how a cultural practice is experienced in racialized terms are questions that should be addressed using a subjectivist approach that turns directly to participants and seeks to capture a variety of views.

A subjectivist inquiry of participant interpretations helps assess and adjudicate between claims that cross-racial practices engender tolerance, essentialism or appropriation. The heterogeneity of participant interpretations suggests that none of these evaluations is adequate on its own. I have found support for all three assessments: dancers with racialized views eschewed colorblind ideology and recognized difference in the lived experiences of blacks and whites; some dancers held essentialist views tying skill to a biological concept of race; and dancers with non-racialized views embraced white instructors who appropriated the cultural form as their own. Cross-racial cultural engagement can therefore connote tolerance, essentialism or appropriation, but determining which of these implications best characterizes a particular case is not as straightforward as has been suggested. Existing debates link racialization with tolerance or essentialism, and non-racialization with appropriation (Bryson, 1996; Hall 1997; Boyd 2003). Whites' non-racialized interpretations of black cultural forms are expected to handicap black artists and preclude cross-racial understanding and contact. Yet, this study shows that dancers who held racialized views of the practice sometimes shunned black instructors and black-populated dance environments, while dancers who had appropriated the dance as their own culture were most likely to engage in the practice in social settings among African Americans. These findings suggest that scholars may need to incorporate exceptions and consider revisions to the theorized relationships between participant interpretations and the consequences of cross-racial practices.

The final contribution of identifying participants' heterogeneous views is to clarify the influence of expertise. My data support studies that suggest expertise impedes racialized views of culture (Bennett 1999; Grazian 2003; Kitwana 2005). Expertise consists of personal ability and – at least in this field – exposure to others whose skill or expectations promote a non-racialized interpretation of culture. The de-racializing influence of expertise may have been at work in many previous studies: for example, the non-racialized views uncovered by Rodriguez (2006) and Hancock (2007) often came from expert participants. In the right conditions, then, expertise can dispel racialized associations with cultural forms and increase cross-racial contact, at once enabling both appropriation and tolerance while impeding essentialism.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rogers Brubaker and Stefan Timmermans for their guidance throughout the project. I also thank Jed Ela, Robert Jansen, Anthony Alvarez, Rocío Rosales, Jooyoung Lee and the anonymous *Ethnic and Racial Studies* referees for their helpful comments. The University of California Institute of Industrial Relations supported this project with a Labor and Employment Research Grant.

Notes

1. All names have been changed.
2. I use 'black' and 'African American' interchangeably.
3. Lindy hop is a partnered dance that originated among African Americans in the 1920s but has experienced a recent revival among white dancers.
4. 'Cross-cultural' practices are evaluated differently depending on the hierarchical relationship between current and original practitioners. In the globalization literature, 'localized' (or 'creole', 'hybrid', or 'syncretic') interpretations and recreations of foreign culture are often celebrated as a form of resistance (Hannerz 1994), or preferred to global homogenization (Condry 2006). Appropriation can also be construed more broadly (Ziff and Rao 1997). In the scholarship of indigenous cultures, 'cross-cultural' participation – regardless of the question of participant interpretation – is most often seen as a form of appropriation causing insult and harm – see debate in Coleman (2005) and Young (2008).
5. For related discussions on whites crossing linguistic boundaries, such as the use of African American Vernacular English, see Cutler (1999) and Rampton (1995).
6. Bryson (1996) argues that those with high-status tastes discriminate against genres based on their *class* rather than *racial* associations and thus explains the unpopularity of hip-hop among adults in 1993.
7. I describe participants' commonsense racial designations to ask if, rather than assume that, race is salient for them in the practice of hip-hop.
8. Three factors support this grouping of dancers. First, dancers themselves endorsed a division of the dance world into professional and casual realms. Instructors dichotomized the world as composed of 'people' versus 'professional dancers'. Second, life experiences differed significantly. Only two of six instructors interviewed had college degrees, but almost all novices and advanced dancers did. Finally, the groups' interaction styles differed notably: while novices provided verbal responses, advanced dancers and instructors often switched back and forth between words and dance gestures as modes of responding to my questions.
9. White respondents in other studies openly conveyed negative biases (Schuman et al. 1997). The questions in my study were not about negative feelings which might be guarded: respondents who discussed race saw themselves as celebrating 'African American culture'. Participants who raised the topic discussed it at length, suggesting that aggressive self-censorship would be required to avoid the topic, with small or uncertain benefit. Finally, as a light-skinned woman of Iranian descent, respondents would consider me non-African-American. Our shared distance from the racial group to which they would most often associate hip-hop may have helped them speak more frankly about race.
10. Among the three novices who did not express racialized views about hip-hop, one was the only telephone interview of the study, with limited rapport, and the others were dancers who were advanced in Salsa and Bollywood. Their expertise in other 'cross-cultural' forms may explain why they did not hold racialized views about hip-hop.
11. The few black instructors I interviewed came from middle-class backgrounds and often described childhoods in predominantly white neighbourhoods. They also rejected views that blacks were naturally better dancers. Considering their ability as an achievement allowed

them credit for their hard work. Yet they also sensed that claiming a cultural advantage could help them compete against white instructors.

12. What *was* salient for instructors was gender. They described the form as masculine and believed that male instructors could perform the movements more naturally than women.

13. When asked to reflect on how their current views compared to their initial impressions of the dance, expert dancers did not describe previous racialized views. This can be interpreted in two ways. Expert dancers may indeed have never held these views, as they often began dancing hip-hop at a young age. On the other hand, their scorn for racialized views may distort their recollection of their own previously held views. The synchronic nature of this study cannot fully adjudicate between these possibilities.

14. While the intellectual lineage of the objectivist approach can be traced to Herder (see Wimmer 2008, pp. 970–3), the subjectivist approach derives from Weber's (1978 [1922], p. 389, emphasis added) definition of ethnic groups which pivots around 'a *subjective belief* in their common descent' and later with Barth's (1969, p. 14) emphasis on 'diacritical' cultural differences (see Brubaker 2004, p. 65).

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