

# Aesthetic Foundations & Activist Strategies of Intervention in Rickerby Hinds' *Buckworld One*

by

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**Abstract:** The aesthetic, cultural, and human terrain covered in Rickerby Hinds' *Buckworld One* illuminates diverse geographies of human existence. The elements of krumping, spoken word poetry, and video projections strategically instigate an activist charge for social justice. Moving succinctly in time and beyond it, the foundational elements of hip hop catalyze, shape, and hone these stories. Pairing the corporeal language of krump, where movement is most often responsive/improvisational (not set as in choreography) within the constructs of theater, invokes a partnership that allows for performers to competitively move with/for/against each other (and the audience) within the performative space of the theater.

**Keywords:** krumping, buck, hip hop theatre, cultural studies.

"Every generation wants to re-create their reality...Now it's our turn...Welcome to our world... Welcome to Buckworld" (*Buckworld One*).

How to effectively create transformation, whether artistic, political, socio-cultural, individual or all of the above, has yielded a great many debates, theories and practices. Performance, including dance, are but two artistic modes of social movements that have been widely recognized by a variety of scholars, including Robin D.G. Kelley, Paul Gilroy, Thomas DeFrantz, Jill Dolan, Yvonne Daniel, and others, for the important transformative work they do. Following in their footsteps, this article will focus broadly on the cultural work of krumping<sup>1</sup>, an Africanist aesthetic dance style that originated in Los Angeles in the 1990's, and how it functions, specifically, for social change within *Buckworld One*, a hip hop theatre performance, which took place in 2010, in Tempe, Arizona. I will also examine how krump intervenes in both the official and discursive realities of the American Dream and acts as a catalyst for social justice in these contexts.

As Robin D.G. Kelley's work *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* documents, there have been many social movements that have envisioned and attempted to move themselves and others toward a more just world or "planetary humanity" (Gilroy 2). *Buckworld One* is an example of such a revolutionary<sup>2</sup> work that at the least envisions, and at the best enacts a better world through/in performance. Much of the power in *Buckworld One* rests in the responsive Africanist aesthetic dance style of krump to speak to/through the body politic of contemporary USAmerica<sup>3</sup>.

## **Krumping**

"Krump" is a contemporary style of hip hop dance, characterized by an aesthetic energy of asserting bodily presence and power through the physical articulations and interactions between performers and spectators. Since its origins, just before the turn of the twenty-first century, krump/KRUMP/krumping/krump dancing/buck/BUCK/ krumpography has extended its reach from the barrios of Los Angeles to the suburbs of middle USAmerica, with stops along the way within the music videos of Missy Elliot, Madonna, and others; in various Hollywood movies, such as *Rize*; and on such television shows as the popular, "*So You Think You Can Dance*" (*SYTYCD*). It has also spread globally to Japan, Germany, South Africa and other countries, through USAmerican popular-culture media; through cyberspace on You Tube, various krumping websites and chat rooms; and via widely distributed how-to-videos. The manner in which krump's aesthetics are racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized changes with the contexts in which it is practiced, for what purposes, and by whom, as well as with who is "reading" the practice, whether they be fellow krumpers, other community members, popular culture viewers of *SYTYCD*, or consumers of music videos. Krumping, as an embodied Africanist aesthetic practice, functions uniquely in different contexts for different purposes. Originators of the style, and current practitioners of the style in the USAmerica and around the globe, register specific investments in and expressions of krump aesthetics and krump cultures.

Krump originated in Los Angeles from a dance form known as clowning<sup>4</sup>. Tommy Johnson, aka Tommy The Hip Hop Clown, created clowning in the mid 1990's, as a means to entertain and provide youth an alternative to becoming involved with gangs and violence. Some of the youth who had danced with Tommy developed krumping, a more hard hitting, spiritual, "aggressive and personal style," where dancers were able to work through difficult emotions of anger and pain in the dance circle (Zanfanga 342). Both dance styles were featured in *Rize*, a 2005 music video-style documentary film, produced by fashion photographer, David LaChapelle. Even though several other film attempts had been made to document clowning and krumping, *Rize* rocketed krump into heightened visibility in popular culture through the lens of Hollywood. The subsequent local, national, global, and re-localized evolutions of krump practices and performances forged multi-layered expressions in which the art form has functioned for social change.

In local spaces, where krump is danced within communities, it enacts social change in ways that Yvonne Daniel has described as "social medicine" (55). Daniel asserts that ritual dance practices are places where "power, authority, and community relations are affected, rearranged, or affirmed; social wounds are healed; each community member is accounted for; and the ritual community continues with strong bonds" and thus function as social medicine (55). Through dance/movement practices, Daniel suggests, both individual and social healing can take place<sup>5</sup>. Connecting to Daniel's concept of social medicine is Christina Zangfanga's apt description of how:

Krumping is simultaneously a heroic, artistic, proactive expression born out of the deplorable conditions of the inner city and an economically viable commercial endeavor, transcendent in its ability to spiritually and morally rise above oppression and literally transportive as a professional route out of the ghetto. (347)

Thus, krumping has created change on spiritual, economic, and social levels.

The ways in which krumping and clown dancing have made a difference, in the individuals and communities featured in *Rize*, can be heard from the voices of the dancers throughout the film. New communities of krump from Massachusetts to Germany and Holland have also articulated specific ways in which krumping has impacted their lives and communities; this, however, is a subject for another article. For now, I will confine my examples to *Rize* and how the art forms have impacted those who originated krumping and clowning. Due to a lack of access to arts programming and after school activities other than sports, krumpers Tight Eyez, Lil' C and Dragon, featured in *Rize*, spoke to how they "invented" krumping.

Tommy the Clown's "The Battle Zone," where opponents, krumpers and clown dancers, come together and battle through dance, created a space to negotiate conflict in a direct and creative manner not affiliated with gangs or violence. Krumpers and clown dancers also spoke to how dance groups created familial relationships that were often lacking in their lives. Miss Prissy and Dragon spoke to how krumping re-connected them to a sense of spiritual and religious practices. Now several krumpers featured in *Rize* have professional careers launched from the success of the film. There are more specific examples in *Rize* of how krumping and clown dancing have enacted social change; I have only cited a few. In addition, it is important to note that the ways in which krumping enacts social change beyond its original contexts will be specific, depending on each community and context.

Krump has also served as an instrument of social justice in specific ways that are not community bound in practice, as described above, but in a performance and popular culture settings, as well. Robert Farris Thompson detailed the aesthetic components of pan-African dance and music as "the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; multiple meter; apart playing and dancing; call-and-response; and finally the songs and dances of derision," (DeFrantz 14). Thomas DeFrantz, asserts that the last attribute - songs and dances of derision - most clearly signifies "the political dimension of 'black dance' performance. In this category, movement provokes metacommentary and suggests narratives outside the physical frame of performance" (DeFrantz 14). Following DeFrantz's assertion, krump, an Africanist aesthetic dance practice performed on theatre stages and in diverse spaces of popular culture, carries a political charge in/through its performance due to its ability to provoke "narratives outside the frame of the physical performance" (14). The political dimension of Black performance is a broad topic written about at length by Thomas DeFrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottchild, Sally Banes and others.

For purposes of example in how krumping highlights matters of social justice in performance spaces, let us consider *SYTYCD*, a mainstream television show that features such genres as fox trot, Viennese waltz, contemporary, Broadway, hip hop, rumba, krumping, and others. Although the inclusion of krumping does allow for Africanist aesthetic languages to become visible, it certainly does not signify an abandonment of aesthetic prejudice toward the upward held torso and the unbroken line of classically "Western" trained dancers. However, it does create a platform and a visual space of dialogue for narratives beyond and critical to the cultural hegemony in dance aesthetics and society. In this way, as a local practice and as a global performance, krump negotiates within and critiques the borders of the Euro-centered hegemony, even as it emerges through, what James C. Scott refers to as the "public transcripts" of popular culture (x).

Krump's aesthetic critique of social inequity and struggle is implicit and explicit in its postures and gestures of challenge and assertion. Hazzard-Donald's declarations regarding the negotiations of hip hop dance offers a means through which to understand krump's vitality as an artistic language contextually in US American society generally and in *Buckworld One* specifically. She asserts:

Hip hop dance permits and encourages a public (and private) male bonding that simultaneously protects the participants from and presents a challenge to the racist society that marginalized them. The dance is not necessarily observer friendly; its movements establish immediate external boundaries while enacting an aggressive self-definition. Hip hop's outwardly aggressive postures and gestures seem to contain and channel the dancer's rage. (Hazzard-Donald 229)

Krump's bodily aesthetics negotiate the themes of challenge and competition; however, the cultural charge depends on both the context and who is krumping. The themes of challenge and competition negotiated in krump's and hip hop's, bodily aesthetics change their charge when appropriated into the mainstream media. These negotiations reveal how krump is mobilized, by whom and toward what ends, and how it, in turn, is "read" in these new sites. In *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop-And Why It Matters*, Tricia Rose proposes that we engage the current state of hip hop as a catalyst toward thinking more about the role of Black culture in cross-racial exchanges in the mass-mediated world of today (7). In the *Buckworld One* performance, krump is mobilized as a catalyst for thinking about the negotiations and implications, which Hazzard-Donald and Rose both suggest.

## **Africanist Aesthetics**

In "Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance," Dixon-Gottschild distills five Africanist aesthetic elements, distinct yet interconnected and embedded within each other. Krump's aesthetic assertion of bodily presence and power through the physical articulations of chest pops, arms swings, footwork and character embodiment, move dancers in physical, emotional, social and sometimes spiritual ways emerge from the Africanist aesthetic principles Dixon-Gottschild outlines.

First is the principle of *contrariety*, or "embracing the conflict," that engages difference, dissonance and questioning. Dixon Gottschild asserts that this is counter to a Europeanist stance that seeks solutions and erasure of conflict. She adds that this principle is "embedded in the final principle, 'aesthetic of the cool,' in which 'coolness' results from the juxtaposition of detachment and intensity" (93). Second is the principle of *polycentrism/polyrhythm* whereby "movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centers may operate simultaneously" (94).

Third is the principle of *high-affect juxtaposition* where the contrast of mood, attitude, or movement is heightened beyond what Dixon Gottschild observes as a range of acceptable Europeanist standards and in a way that strategically omits or breaks connections and transitions (94-95). Fourth is the principle of *ephebism*, which derives its etymology from the Greek word for youth (95). Ephebism “encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack.

Attack implies speed, sharpness, and force. Intensity is also a characteristic of ephebism, but it is a kinesthetic intensity that recognizes feeling as sensation, rather than emotion” (95). Finally, as Farris Thompson articulates, “the aesthetic of cool,” deriving from the Yoruba, is an aesthetic principle that can be seen in many of Dixon Gottschild’s previously detailed aesthetics as well (95). It can be seen in “the unemotional, detached, mask-like face of a drummer or dancer whose body and energy may be working fast, hard, hot, but whose face remains cool” (95). Dixon-Gottschild further elaborates on the aesthetic of the cool and differentiates it from Europeanist valued aesthetic elements in this way:

The aloofness, sangfroid, and detachment of some styles of European academic dance are completely different from this aesthetic of cool. The European attitude suggests centeredness, control, linearity, directness; the Africanist mode suggests asymmetricality (that plays with falling off center), looseness (implying flexibility and vitality), and in indirectness of approach. ‘Hot,’ its opposite, is a necessary component of the Africanist ‘cool.’ It is in the embracing of these opposites, and in their high-affect juxtaposition, that the aesthetic of the cool exists. (95)

These Africanist aesthetic elements are at play in krump aesthetics, generally and specifically, in the hip hop theatre piece *Buckworld One*.

## **Buckworld One**

*Buckworld One* is an evocative hip hop theatre performance that explores expansive stories of the human condition, spiritual development and the state of the world through krumping, poetry, music and projected imagery. Developed in Riverside, California in 2006 by playwright Rickerby Hinds and choreographer Carrie Mikuls, the cast was comprised of local poets and dancers, ranging from 14-19 years of age, some who had no formal training in theatre or dance. Although some young female krumpers began rehearsals for *Buckworld One*, only four male krumpers remained as of show time, which created a definite masculinist presence on stage. In addition to the four male dancers there were two female poets, one female dancer and one male poet in the cast. However, *Buckworld One* has been performed in New York, California and Arizona with various constellations of cast members for short engagements.

In the development of this work Carrie Mikuls developed and choreographed sections that fused krump's Africanist aesthetics with modern dance and theatricized expression, while allowing spaces within the choreography where the krumpers could improvise. This element of responsive energy kept the energy of the show heightened.

Hip hop theatre employs one or some of hip hop's foundational elements of DJ-ing, MC-ing, graffiti art, break dancing, and knowledge as methodology to create artistic work. Throughout *Buckworld One*, the art of DJ-ing, where music is stopped/started, sped up/slowed down, cut, re-woven, reversed and/or replayed, was extrapolated to re-situate epochs of history and contemporary experiences. Invoking the Africanist aesthetic of time and polyrhythmic play, through the methodology of hip hop, allowed historic moments, hundreds or decades of years apart, to sit concurrently juxtaposed next to contemporary experiences in lively conversations. Moving in time from a theatrical exploration of the origin of the universe to the birth of the (U.S.) nation, then to the Inland Empire (IE) of California, and back to the nation and the individual, *Buckworld One* interrogates foundational questions about human purpose on earth, spirituality, ignorance, (in)justice, loss and love.

Hip hop's aesthetic of *contrariety* was present in the narrative structure of *Buckworld One*, which engaged moments of friction as evocative spaces for questioning, grieving, outrage, complicit witnessing, love and celebration in and between the poetry, dance, music and imagery. Throughout, the intensity, commitment and conviction of krump dancing's assertive and bodily charge, was the visceral voice that pushed beyond conventional boundaries of aesthetic, social conventions of theatre, evoking a sense of kinesthetic empathy from the audience. In these spaces of response, the audience was called to repeatedly consider the reverberations of our history in today's society, and how we, as individuals and USAmerican citizens, choose to live in the present.

## **The American Dream**

The spaces of contemporary USAmerican culture, in which krumping and *Buckworld One* now move, speak in many ways to disjuncture between the official political imaginary of "The American Dream," which professes inclusion, equality and opportunity, while the discursive reality of "The American Dream" maps conflicting, contested and alternate stories. In James Truslow Adams' 1931 proclamation in *The Epic of America*, he outlined the following proclamations regarding "The American Dream" stating:

that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. James Truslow Adams. (214-215)

This “dream” is counterpointed by Dr. King’s words in “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in 1963:

We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands. . . . when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. (111)

“The American Dream” is even problematic in its articulation as the United States of America stands in for all of the Americas, invisibilizing South and Central America, as well as Canada. Discursive dreams in/of America attest to a reality not in tune with itself. Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” speaks to this long fought struggle for Black freedom and equality, tenets of “The American Dream.” Contemporary official and discursive realities of this are echoed in debates around the proposition that USAmerica might now be in a “post-racial” era. Since the election of President Barack Obama, some columnists and media have cited, and others disputed, that his election affirms the existence of a “post-racial society” as proof that “The American Dream” is attainable for everyone regardless of skin color (Pitts screen 1, Schorr screen 1).

*Buckworld One*, taken as a whole, is a powerful hip hop theatre performance that invokes the vision of individual and social transformation that Dr. King called for when he proclaimed:

Our most fruitful course is to stand firm with courageous determination, move forward non-violently amid obstacles and setbacks, accept disappointments, and cling to hope. Our determined refusal not to be stopped will eventually open the door of fulfillment...To guard ourselves from bitterness, we need the vision to see in this generation’s ordeals the opportunity to transfigure both ourselves and American Society. (93)

Registering the complexity of the present, while being saturated with the historicity of USAmerica’s past, *Buckworld One* echoes Dr. King’s vision and discursively asks, how do we choose to live now? How do we make our world better?

Covering much ground within four scenes, *Buckworld One* moved from “BANG!” to “EaRTH” (sic), “NATIoN TiME THE WoRLD SEPaRaTES iNTO NATIoNS” (sic), “THE ie” (sic), and to a final “TRIBUTE,” in remembrance of an original member of the cast, Christopher “Cornbread” Jackson, who was tragically shot to death.



This work, on many levels, is, at once, very specific and overwhelmingly deeply human and translatable across differences enacted along racialized, gendered, classed sexed lines. There is a palpable pull between the cohering force of our humanity that Paul Gilroy has referred to as our “planetary humanity,” and the specificity of experience produced in US America’s highly stratified society (2). The performance context can construct potentially difficult partnerships, including staging a dance style that is for many, deeply spiritual within a secular setting.

*Buckworld One: “It’s not too late!”*

As the show opened, the sonic scape was atmospheric, ethereal, distorted and electric. Words flew onto the screen proclaiming, “Every generation wants to re-create their reality,” “Now it’s our turn,” “Welcome to our world,” and “Welcome to Buckworld.” Colorful projections of planetary bodies appeared, and then morphed and moved, expanded and contracted, thus animating the screen from the rear of the stage. Two female poets entered and stood downstage left and downstage right. They said, “In the beginning...From darkness to light/To day from night/From blindness to sight/Let us return to the beginning/To the start.” These are the opening words of “Bang! The Universe Begins,” a kaleidoscopic interrogation of “The Beginning,” contrasting biblical references, the big bang theory, the theory of relativity and the repeatedly asserted the importance of “the Word”. The female poets’ contrasting articulations of the beginnings played off each other, ideologically and sonically, as the male krump dancers responded to each statement with a resounding “Jhea” from amongst the darkness in the theatre house. Finally, the poets bowed their heads, as if saying Amen. “So we pause for the first cause.” “Word!”

The poets exited the stage as the active resonances of the poetry palpably hung in the air and then broke into an acoustic force that sounded like a jet flying overhead. Emerging from the darkness of the audience, as if catching the sonic force, were four dancers, who animated the hard-hitting bass heavy music and made their way through the audience to the stage. The sharp arm movements, stomps and assertive power movements of the krump dancers punctuated the music against the backdrop of the projected imagery, and created an expanded presence in the sold-out theatre. The dancers in this performance moved in response to the music, each other, the poetry, the space, themselves, and for some, their relationship with God. The Africanist aesthetic of call and response buoyed this impassioned dialogue on the beginnings of the universe. Although the embodied expressions moved within a defined structure, what happened within the spaces of that structure was active, responsive, and charged the theatre.

The sonic, visual and kinesthetic impressions functioned to add an etheric quality in contrast to the sharp movements of krump. The styles of each of the dancers throughout were distinct. Some relied on facial expression, footwork, the quality of being constrained and breaking free with force, or of full bodied circling back with the torso, while the feet remained firmly planted on the ground. The arm movements were quick and dynamic.

The Africanist aesthetic dynamics of *contrariety*, *polycentrism/polyrhythm*, *high-affect juxtaposition*, *ephebism*, “the aesthetic of cool” created an intervention on the stage that is generally dominated by Europeanist aesthetics of the upheld torso and unbroken line. The assertive quality of krumping within the context of “BANG! The Universe Begins” created a sense of elemental connectivity between the movement of the universe, and the specific language of krump and “dialects” of each dancer. The masculine space and force of movement quality delivered a tone of vitality and ephebism. As the dancers amped<sup>6</sup> each other up by dancing with increased intensity, poet Alex Avila entered and moved amongst them. He slowly moved to center stage and knelt facing the back of the stage. The acoustic movement abruptly cut to silence, and the dancers fell to the ground, except for the tallest and physically largest dancer who sat down facing the audience. The positioning of the two men facing opposite directions, crouched and seated, produced a temporary tableau as the words *Buckworld One* appeared in red and white on the backdrop between them. The physicality of the piece read as an articulation of universal push and pull, a magnetizing and repelling force in the universe. As Avila stood, he declared, “Planet Earth/Third from the sun/The one. One/ One/Methodically designed to give life to some/.” Rhythmically articulating layers of atmosphere, the physicality of Avila’s movement and accent of his poetry delivered the poem “EaRTH” (sic) in a lyrical way that evoked the shifting forces of creation in a grounded way. As he enunciated his final word, “krypton,” elongating the last syllable as if traversing distance, he knelt, while the dancers animated the space with movement responses to the music.

This scene played with tension through the Africanist aesthetic of *contrariety*. It could be seen in relationships of attraction and resistance, within and between dancers, in height changes of the dancers in space, utilizing a mixture of floor work and explosions to standing, and in the timing of their movements. Tension could be heard in the music as it was sped up and slowed down. Throughout this piece, the tension became palpable and seemingly elemental. Projected images moved, traversing and exploring the earth from multiple perspectives. Dancers pushed time, both accelerating and decelerating movement to collectively counterpoint attraction and/or resistance. For most of this section, the tallest dancer utilized a mixture of his height, physical mass and movement to exert a strong visibility and force from the center of the other dancers, with assertive chest pops, stomps and arm throws. The other dancers responded to him through interpretive theatrical gestures blended with rhythmic and assertive krump aesthetics, which incorporated stomps, chest pops, and arm throws. Their embodied rhythmic posturing enacted a polyrhythmic gravitational pull and resistance. The play between slow, interpretive, contemporary movements and powerfully charged, rhythmic, krump movements created an interesting and productive tension that highlighted krump as an Africanist aesthetic language with great vitality. The productive tension created a space where krumping could be seen as a vital language, both in and beyond its original context. This expanded dialogue between the world of buck and the world of the theatre created a multilingual dialogue within the theatre.

The final moments of “The Earth is formed” were punctuated through a tall, thin dancer’s slowly articulated and restrained gesture that included a mix of vulnerability and assertive presence. Moving off stage, as the music slowed, he turned and slowly opened his chest toward the sky and leaned back, with his arms outspread. Accenting the rhythm as it kicked back in, the dancer bent his knees and powerfully popped his torso with force and strength.

In “Scene 3- NATIoN TiME THE WORLD SEPArATES INTO NATIONS” (sic), the two female poets entered again and stood alternately declaring names of countries in quick succession. Video images blanketed the backdrop showing war, people charging at each other, explosions and firestorms. The final country name, instead of being declared, was posed as a question or a call, “The United States of America?” The response was heard from off-stage “Shaw SHaq-Shaw SHaq-Shaw Shaq/Cling-ling-lin ‘cock.’” (sic). The male poet entered and repeated this phrase while moving to center stage. His cadence, vocal play, and precision were deft, sonic expressions that responded to the mechanistic and contained quality of his embodied movements. The *how* of his delivery cut to the way hip hop, methodologically through its foundational elements, can create a poignant commentary on life and living. As in this moment, timing, cadence and accentuation, executed with precision and artistry, create a compelling voice that suggested commentary beyond the movement and words that allowed the audience to see and hear in new ways.

In the final lines of “Shaw shaq,” the poet declared “The world is flying high/Life begins when the world spins/The world be spinning-spinning-spinning/The world be spinning-spinning-spinning/What makes the world spin?/Maybe what we believe, what believes in us, how we worship, or praise...” (Avila). *Buckworld One* repeatedly posed this question in different ways throughout the piece, in words, embodied and aesthetic expressions and imagery, asking how we, as individuals and as a nation today, value, account for, promote, and live with reverence (or not) for the radical humanity of all people. However, it offered the flip side of the optimistic answer above too. As the final lines of the poem continued to contemplate what makes the world spin, the poet suggested, “For that cash, money, mula, dinero, green bread/With that said...I believe that’s why most of my fam bam is dead/Frustration on the rise...buck!/Anger on the sleeves...buck/Bullet proof vest on...buck/ Buck-buck-buck-buck-buck-buck” (Avila). As each sharp “buck” was heard, the response in the body was issued as a jolt delivered in an increasingly rapid succession as the hands rose into the air like guns pointing and shooting. Against the backdrop of videos of war, the effect was surreal and slightly off balancing, a poignant commentary on war and conflict.

The sonic space transformed into a military-like pounding rhythm; sirens, dancers and distorted screams and gunshots were heard from the audio track and then, “Yeah, I guess we going to war.” The four dancers entered, dressed in blue and red and invigorated each other through their movement, a commentary of high affect juxtaposition. They circled each other and took turns asserting dominance through chest pops and posturing.

The music changed repeatedly between a track with softer feminine voices and a charging rhythm, as well as sounds of a tape being rewound and played back at varying speeds. The music was mixed between rhythm and distortion as the men confronted each other. One dancer took aim with his leg as a gun; when the music exploded, they all fell back onto the ground. The dancer, seemingly charged, stood up and stepped assertively with intricate and definite footwork and hops. His arms pumped in the air as if punching at someone. He threw his hands down and then worked rhythmically intricate articulations of his hand and arm up through his shirt sleeve and back out. The segmented polycentric movement enacted a kinesthetic statement of moving through and being contained. Finally, a loud abrupt stop and then a guttural scream filled the air as the dancer faced the audience, with his legs in a wide solid stance, knees bent, as his arms hung with fists clenched, and mouth opened wide.

Throughout this segment of direct conflict, the dancers played directly off each other. Whereas, Dixon-Gottschild observes that a Europeanist stance “seeks solutions and erasure of conflict,” the Africanist stance embraces conflict as fuel (94). Control, falling off balance and recovering, kinesthetically spoke to the disorienting nature of battle and war. Finally, the men rolled like logs offstage as if being moved forward through the powerful chest movements of another dancer. Next, they appeared as silhouettes behind a red screen. Two pairs of men repeatedly shot at each other causing their heads to repeatedly fall back. Finally, all of the men fell, except for the physically largest dancer in the center who raised both hands into fists as if making muscles, and then into two guns, which he held up to his head. When the music issued a gunshot, the dancer’s head dropped, lights flooded the downstage area and the men lay scattered across the floor, as casualties of war. The scene enacted a powerful commentary on the senseless nature of violence and its use throughout history, which became more specific throughout the next scene.

In the second section of Scene 3, “Middle Passage,” audio describing the horrific passage where millions of African people died played, while projected images of a slave ship, enslaved peoples and text cycled behind four male dancers moving, bound together, across a blue lit stage. “For four hundred years tombs disguised as ships sailed from Europe to the West Coast of Africa...” The three men struggled against each other, as they remained bound, and made their way to sit in a line, as if in a ship. They swayed. As the music built, the men slowly removed the rope and one by one ran off, as if escaping, in opposite directions. One dancer remained on stage struggling with the rope around his neck. The two female poets then entered on either side, and delivered the Langston Hughes’ poem, “Let America Be America Again.” The soloist stood center stage, as the dimly lit stage was now bathed in the bright, white spotlight, as he lifted his arm holding a noose tight around his neck, head tilted to the side. He remained eerily still and silent, an effigy echoing the horrors of USAmerica’s abhorrent history of lynching Black men. The sonic reverberations permeated his image in stark bright light. Hughes’ poem, “Let America Be America again,” originally published in 1938, issues a call, then and now. The poet calls out:

...O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.  
The land that's mine—the poor man's, the Indians's, the Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again....

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath--  
America will be! (190)

“Will be,” the second poet echoes and affirms. The subsequent call(s) and response(s) ripple across time, space, and geography. The sonic reverberations and visual image of lynching implicated the audience as witnesses of this deep disparity. Hughes' poem not only enacts a historical thread and context within the performance, but also serves as an entry point for interrogating any monolithic claim of USAmerican freedom and democracy. This political act makes visible a history, which cannot be denied, but is often obscured through ruses of power. As if in response, and to clarify about whom he is speaking, Hughes issues and answers the following question:

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?  
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek-  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land! (190)

Here, Hughes speaks to the struggle for freedom and equality as a human struggle that reaches beyond and across racial and class divisions. This has been a political strategy employed in speeches of many leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Obama. When we, as individuals and a society, can identify, and, in some way, see ourselves within the performance, the speech, and the context, it engages us in a deeper way. Highlighting difference and utilizing it as a strategy of unification, however, reveals more about how our society functions in what Paul Gilroy calls an “encamped” way than it does about the humans who exist within and inevitably outside of those identities (17). Whether difference is enacted along racialized, sexualized, commodified, gendered, and/or class lines, these constructions of identity are continually deployed to serve select purposes for specific agendas. The mobilization of identities, while insidious and inevitably problematic, can be and is manipulated in a multitude of directions, including toward the process of social change. The applicability of Hughes’ poem then and now is eerie. We have only to consider the SB1070 legislation<sup>7</sup>, recently passed, among many more examples to apprehend why modes of advocacy for social justice are important.

Returning to the final resonances of Hughes poem, as “Be” punctuated the air, the poets exited the stage and dancer Alexander Brown-Hinds, dressed in a white button down shirt and tie, entered and removed the noose from around Dupree’s neck. Images from the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement flooded the screen behind the dancers, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s resonant voice was heard proclaiming, “We’ve got difficult days ahead.” Throughout the performance, Brown-Hinds’ facial expressions communicated a deep sense of conviction and depth. His performance espoused what Dixon-Gottschild describes as *high-affect juxtaposition* where the contrast of mood, attitude, or movement is greatly heightened (94-95). His rhythmic stomps and chest pumps, as he moved across the stage, articulated a sense of presence. As the music built, Kings’ statement was repeatedly played. Three male dancers somersaulted with speed onto the stage, leapt up, and began dancing with grounded and assertive movements directed toward the earth. The four dancers, in white shirts and ties, used the vocabulary of krump to punctuate Dr. King’s power and vision.

Creating a moving tableau, all four men slowly pointed off-stage in the same direction. Standing side by side, the moment called into being Dr. King’s tragic assassination. Brown-Hinds fell to the ground, as if shot. This sonic declaration and imagery then cut to Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The black and white footage of one of the most vital moments and speeches in USAmerican history played, as Dr. King’s memory and vision filled the space. Brown-Hinds rose and began to interpret the energy of Dr. King’s vision through krump’s powerful movements. The other three dancers rose and followed suit, each in their own way. Finally, “Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last” blasts loud throughout the theatre. These acoustic impressions and epochs of history were activated through the element of DJ-ing and continued to resonate across the contemporary topography of our nation, and more specifically, “THE ie” (sic), throughout Scene 4.

Moving through time and geography, the dancers, poets, music and imagery created sensorial impressions of USAmerican histories and located them in relation to each other, highlighting reverberations of beliefs, systems, choices, etc. that are operative today. Through mapping the sonic, visual, and visceral topography of specific experiences, the audience was called to confront their own positioning and response to, and experiences of, social (in)justices. Scene 4, “THE IE We Call It Home” (sic), covers much poignant ground in “We Call It Home,” “We Wear the Mask,” “The Man Who Walked Backwards,” “Routine Police checks can check ur heart (in memory of Tyisha Miller)” (sic), “Fathers, Where Art Thou,” Buck To Life” and finally, TRIBUTE.

In “The IE We Call It Home” (sic), Hinds uses the fault, many small and the grand San Andreas Fault, as a conceptual vehicle to explore how we, as individuals and a society, move for and against each other. Exploring the idea of the fault, the poet enunciates:

We build our homes on faults/We build our lives on faults/We live our lives with faults/We fight over faults/Fail over faults/Lie over faults/ Cry over faults/ Die over faults...Stress gradually builds up, ‘till it triggers...Earthquake! Sudden release of pent-up energy triggers...Earthquake!...So let’s re-configure the trigger/ Build a world that’s a little bigger/ Not founded on hate/ Big enough to handle ...Earthquake!

Throughout *Buckworld One*, there are recurrent reflections on the elemental forces that continue to catalyze battle and confrontation, through poetry, krump dancing, theatricized movement, or music as the language. Provocatively, Hinds repeatedly suggests that although confrontation is quite often inevitable, the destructive violence, which is far too often tied to confrontation, is not. In this way, *Buckworld One* speaks to Dr. King’s vision and the philosophy of nonviolence that was committed to the work of love in the face of extraordinary oppression and violence of the Civil Rights Movement (Kelley xi).

From verbally articulated meditations on earthly metaphors of living, two female poets delivered Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask.” A male poet/dancer followed and kinesthetically and vocally articulated Rickerby Hind’s “The Man Who Walked Backwards.” This poem explored a man who was “Always walking backwards/Wishing he could take back words/Trying to take back words He had spoken in haste/What a waste/See this man didn’t get it, didn’t understand/That when he spoke words it was a command Ma’at” (Hinds). This poem emphasizes the importance of time, particularly the present moment. It also highlights how the present moment is always the point of power, where we, as individuals, have some latitude of choice in what we say and do. It asks: how do you walk? Do you walk backwards to take back words? Or move towards/to(words) that create new wor(l)ds?

As the poem concluded, the krump dancers entered, wearing bandanas over their mouths. They stood still observing each other as the music marched to a steady beat. One by one, each man removed the bandana and retied it, or put it in their pockets, utilizing the krump aesthetic to animate their performative re-dressing. Then, slowly walking amongst each other, dancer/poet, Natalie Micciche, entered and all performers turned upstage, away from the audience, with their hands folded behind their backs. The poetry and embodied enactments of "Routine Police Checks Can Check Ur Heart (in Memory of Tyisha Miller)" (sic) told of the corrosive, racist ignorance that encourages racial profiling, thereby perpetuating a US prison system that disproportionately incarcerates black men. Throughout this scene, audience members were challenged to situate themselves along a spectrum of responses from profound heartbreak, anger, violence, feelings of helplessness, to belief that the world can be transformed through spreading love and knowledge. At one point, Micciche asserted, "This isn't a rant. It is a heart sighing itself to sleep" (Limar). Again, there is a struggle between dreams and realities. Here is where *Buckworld One* intervenes, and where writer/director, Hinds, presented the audience with choices. We heard a heart sighing itself to sleep over the injustices experienced by black men on a daily basis. We also heard the activist and revolutionary choice to spread more love and knowledge as the solution to racist ignorance. As Kelley reminds, "Dr. King constantly warned us that we would not be able to build a truly liberatory movement without 'the strength to love'" (x). That love is the basis for any lasting revolution that can move us, as a society, toward "an all-encompassing dream of freedom" (Kelley x).

In the "Fathers, Where Art Thou" section that followed, poet/dancer, Timothy Dupree, produced generative reflections on the impact of poverty, and the growing national epidemic of absent fathers affecting the nation's youth. He repeatedly punctuated his observations with the question, "Ma, is poppa back yet?" And, finally:

Ma, is Poppa back yet? Because Pops said he was only going to the store!  
But then again that was last month/This nation is not a father lover/  
And children feel the impact like stray dogs who get run over by mad truckers /  
Also getting stuck in the middle of gum like suckers/  
Suck up the sweet and leave the bitter/Ma, let me know when Poppa gets back,  
I'm going to bed. (Avila)

With a tone of quiet disappointment and resignation, he turned, head down, shoulders rolled forward, and walked upstage. The audience burst into applause and then, as the poet/dancer turned back toward the audience, he erupted, threw his chest back with arms powerfully opened wide to the sky. He stomped, swung his arms and articulated intense, intricate and full-bodied movements that emoted a deep barely containable pain. The level of physical commitment involved in krump/buck dancing, at this moment, evoked a visceral charge centered on moving beyond the self to embody a collective pain. This act of holding/performing pain into presence, and allowing others to witness moments such as this, pushed the audience into a sense of engaged presence.



These moments in performance are exactly how and why art and performance can and do change lives. They bring the audience into presence, into the present. They call us, as audience, performers, and/or community members, to ourselves, our community, the world, and, depending what you believe, *the Divine*. These moments in performance act as a catalyst for social justice by inciting visceral and emotional responses, critical thought, discussion and a deep sense of accountability that begins in the space of the theatre and reaches beyond.

As Dupree embodied this struggle, the other three male dancers entered, surrounded and tried to hold him as he struggled. Utilizing stomps and arm swings, each attempted to support him as he struggled to break free. One fell, and then another, and finally, Dupree swung his arms in a circle, stomped and broke free of the last arms that were supporting him. They all fell to the ground in silence and stillness. “Buck Buck Buck Buck/Buck Buck Buck Buck/Buck Buck Buck Buck Buck Buck Buck.” Dupree’s voice, sharp and punctuated, reverberated in the theatre as the men rose from the ground and kinesthetically responded to the words. The poem, “Buck to Life,” offered a meditation on violence and guns. Dupree called out:

We manufacture these guns/We make these guns/Like we make daughters and sons/Somewhere around the moon going down and the rising of the sun...we lost another one/Missiles, tanks, grenades...we lost another one/Prostitution, drugs, alcohol, AIDS...we lost another one/Man causes death to escalate/And we drive to funerals in Escalades/So We cruise to funerals in Escalades/And we escalate. (Avila)

After speaking to the breadth and sense of loss, Dupree proclaimed:

But somewhere there is hope/ There is a chance/ And the chance is in the dance/ They call Buck/ Somewhere among the rage and sadness/ The injustice and the madness/ There is Buck/ Somewhere there is hope for a future/ To escape the violence/ To escape the bullet/ To escape to Buck. Buckworld!...Its not too late/ Buckworld! One! (Avila)

This was where *Buckworld One* was supposed to end. However, this is where the crossroads of reality and dream-work all too-often intersect. “Peace (of) Cornbread” was added to pay tribute to an original member of the *Buckworld* cast, Christopher “Cornbread” Jackson, 21, who was tragically shot and killed while at a party in the summer of 2008.

In an article written by Hinds, entitled “Art Changes Lives,” he spoke of Christopher’s journey to move beyond, or, in spite of, the oppression he experienced in his daily life. Hinds points to the specific societal challenges faced disproportionately by Black men including incarceration, poverty, racism, violence and hopelessness.

Hinds also spoke to the journeys, of Christopher's and many other dancers, who are/were "driven by the fuel that is only found in the adrenaline created by the body while in artistic mode" as a way through and beyond struggles found in their daily lives (screen 1). This final tribute offers a direct commentary on why it is vital to find a means to, as Dr. King proposed, "cling to hope" (93).

## Conclusion

Krumping has effected change on spiritual, economic, artistic and social levels. The film *Rize* provides a testament to a community-prescribed pedagogy for social justice, where krumping and clowning act as alternatives to gang activity, a means for bonding a community, a place of spiritual expression and an art form in which to productively channel aggression about absent fathers and mothers and poverty. Krumping now also provides a means by which some dancers, including Lil' C and Tight Eyez, and Miss Prissy, featured in *Rize*, can make a living and/or launch careers in the dance world and the music industry. As an art form, krump has intervened in the lives of those who have originated and evolved it, as well as those who witness it. Whether on the stage, on the street in the city of Riverside, or in the highly commodified spaces of market culture, in krumping, as in other such artistic practices, we, as humans, find the vision, power, and agency to recreate the world. *Buckworld One* created a moment of possibility where we, as individuals, collected together, envisioned, and maybe for a moment experienced a better future.

Through distinct "appropriations/approximations/assimilations"<sup>8</sup> of the Africanist aesthetic dance style krumping, hope has been mobilized in unique and specific ways, to effect individual healing and social change. These practices may not always succeed in creating the changes, individual or communal, which they seek; however, without the vision, there is no hope. While the means toward social change certainly will not be to get buck or krump for everyone, it is vital that we, as individuals and as a society, continue to invest in opportunities, to move beyond ourselves and toward the horizon of a better future in the present. A performance such as *Buckworld One* makes manifest, if only for two hours, the experience of a better way to be together<sup>9</sup>. At first, this may be only a dream; however, as Kelley is wont to remind, we, as individuals and society, must continue to strive, to do the work to envision the horizon toward which we are moving lest we become "confused, rudderless, and cynical" on our journeys (xii). Art and dreaming are such vital, worthwhile and important work in moving toward a "planetary humanity;" *Buckworld One* is evidence to this work (Gilroy 2).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Krump, sometimes called buck, is a contemporary style of hip hop dance that uses intense, intricate and forceful movements. Some dancers express KRUMP as an acronym, “Kingdom Radically Uplifted Mighty Praise,” to denote its spiritual/religious identifications. Some refer to this style as BUCK, applying the acronym, Believers Uplifting Christ’s Kingdom. Krump dancing can be used in place of the term krumping when an audience may not be familiar with the dance form. When krump’s aesthetics are employed in choreography, it is often referred to as krumpography. Terminologies vary, depending on context, who is naming and for what purpose.

<sup>2</sup> Central to the idea of revolution, set forth by Kelley, is the idea that “making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us” (Kelley xii). Therefore, revolution is simultaneously both an individual and collective process.

<sup>3</sup> Gretchen Murphy, in her work *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of U.S. Empire*, specifies various socio-cultural-political transcripts and processes spun from the Monroe Doctrine, which positioned the U.S. to both dominate and express the concept “America.” Murphy illustrates how this process also developed “the hemisphere” as “a meaningful cultural and geopolitical frame for American nationalism” (4). Therefore, when I utilize the term USAmerica(n) throughout the paper, I do so to re-specify the geographic and cultural positionality of the U.S. as a part, versus centerpoint of the axes of power and control of the Americas.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Zanfanga defines clowning as: a highly versatile and varied form of black street dance that combines local styles such as G dance or gangsta boogie and stripper dancing, referring to the sexual and dynamic performance style of black strippers. It also fuses elements of popping and locking, two older forms of competitive, illusory hip-hop street dance associated with funk dance and break dancing, and Jamaican dance hall moves. (341).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Daniel examined dance practices in Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil, where racial politics function in ways unique to their histories. In USAmerica, where the reading of race is highly charged and centralized in the visible and corporeal realms (versus those of felt cultural or kinship orientations), reading notions of Afro-diasporic practices on bodies of varying ethnicity becomes a central concern in tracing the trafficking across aesthetic boundaries and notions of ownership of movement styles. As these dance practices have a strong politicized and racialized charge in USAmerican society, the potential for healing becomes more complex as they expand to encompass the charge.

<sup>6</sup>The online “krumptonary” defines amp in the following way: Amp (adj.) - Describes a high level of intensity and excitement and is also the highest of three levels of intensity through which dancers attempt to progress during a session (Krump, Buck, Amp). Amp is a state of heightened excitement and is a place where technical dance is transcended by emotion. It is the point of dance where one might have a spiritual experience as well. ‘Man, that move you did made me amped!’ (<http://www.krumpkings.com/krumptonary/amp>).

<sup>7</sup> Arizona State Bill 1070 is a highly controversial anti-immigration bill that was signed into law by Jan Brewer on April 23, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild suggests this “*APPROPRIATION leads to APPROXIMATION leads to ASSIMILATION*” as a way to understand the cultural transference of Black aesthetics (21). She observes: When manners, behaviors, styles, trends, phrases, motifs –*tropes*- from a given cultural realm are appropriated by another culture they are obliged to go through a transformation in the process. They must be made to approximate a look and texture, feel and shape, that will meet with the aesthetic approval of the appropriating culture...Cultural arenas manage to keep themselves alive and well by frequent injections of new blood from Other cultural arenas. (21)

<sup>9</sup> Jill Dolan speaks to the power of performance to affect social change in the following way: I, too, believe in this particular, local, perhaps even utopian promise of theater, in which temporary communities assemble to look at social relations, to be provoked, moved, enraged, made proud by what human beings can do when they are set in relation to one another. Performance offers us a practice that lets us rehearse new social arrangements, in ways that require visceral investments of bodies, of time, of personal and cultural history. (Dolan 16)

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