



## Intersections

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### Abstract

Hip Hop is a cultural phenomenon that is constantly evolving and has made a worldwide impact in a short time. While it continues to change Hip Hop at its core remains the same. Victor Quijada artistic director of the Rubberband Dance company posed the question of “What more could Hip Hop be”. With those words in mind the focus of this research is to examine the movement and concepts/ideologies of the breakdancing subculture of Hip Hop; to create a fusion with contemporary dance. Therefore a brand-new system of movement with its own concepts and life could be created. The dance world is continuously shifting, and different skill sets, as well as ideologies, have been valued at different times and places within the dance world. This exploration will challenge the mainstream ideals of what is currently considered “technique” and “foundation”.

*Keywords:* Hip Hop, Dance, Contemporary, Performance, fusion, breakdance

### Introduction

Physically navigating the dichotomy of Breakdancing and Contemporary dance is an arduous task. Different movement techniques at a fundamental level are interdisciplinary and thus many connections linking different dance disciplines can be made. As opposed to thinking of the different styles of movement as something separate, applying techniques found in one style to those found in another and making those connections that link them together can simplify the learning process. The body and mind will even innately make these connections without the dancer having to think about it. Actively noticing these connections raises a few questions. Can something new be created utilizing these connections extensively? Can that impact the narrative of what is typically deemed as a “critical skill/required learning” in different areas of the dance field? How can research like this add to or improve upon current pedagogies of dance education?

Being the child of Haitian immigrant parents, the expectations and pressures to choose a profession that was sure to make money were ever-present. To decide based upon monetary value and forego any sense of happiness or fulfillment did not resonate and as such middle school and high school years were dedicated to finding whatever this calling would be. It became

clear after high school graduation and attending Miami-Dade Community College. During freshman year learning breakdancing off of youtube became an obsession. This continued for about half a year until meeting one of the members of a local crew who then took over the teaching role. Practicing all that was learned from them on campus became the new routine which would eventually get the attention of the chair of the dance department Michelle-Grant Murray. Formal dance training began under her direction and it was a tremendous shift from training with the crew. Ideas and concepts of these two different techniques remained separate until getting introduced to the dance work “Empirical Quotient” (Quijada, 2014) by Montreal based dance company Rubberband Dance. The Artistic Director Victor Quijada captured the essence of Hip Hop and meshed it together with Contemporary dance effortlessly. These movements alongside a soundscore that had a Hip Hop D.J.’s take on Classical music was something that I never could have imagined on stage as a dancer at the time. This left a profound impression and was an inspiration to create something new.

### **Discussion of Resources**

This research took influence from a self-study over the years, exercises/ideas found within the Bartenieff Fundamentals, and also from choreographer Victor Quijada.

#### **Self-Study**

Throughout years of training, video documentation has been a key component in analyzing movement habits, foundation, and points of connection. This collection provided a way to synthesize new movements and foundations through deconstruction and experimentation with movements that have been practiced and ingrained. The re-inventing of these movements became the base to create work.

#### **Bartenieff Fundamentals**

“Bartenieff Fundamentals” is an approach to basic body training that deals with patterning connections in the body according to principles of efficient movement functioning within a context which encourages personal expression and full psychophysical involvement.” (Konie, 2011, p. 4). Because there is no teaching pedagogy for Breakdancing, learning techniques and movements from this dance often come with a heavy dose of trial and error. In this style, there are many movements that have a higher risk of injury due to difficulty and also the fact that the human body is not readily equipped to handle movements of the sort. Just within the realm of academia this would many problems. In times of shows, every single day of rehearsal is critical.

A more serious injury could even cause a dancer to miss out on a performance entirely while also affecting a portion of their coursework. Using the body connectivities found within the Bartenieff Fundamentals, generating a vocabulary of movement for dancers to learn safely and efficiently is an easier task. This also helps with teaching the aforementioned techniques from breakdancing in a way they are not always presented.

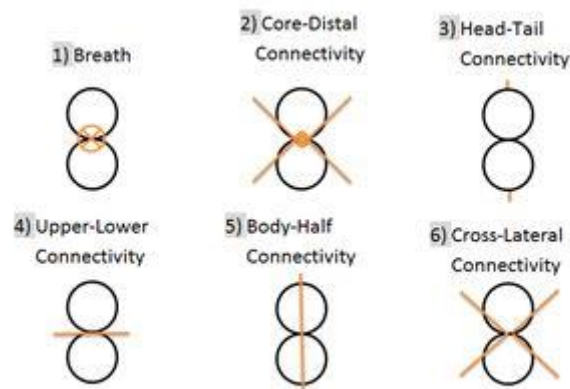


Figure 1. Bartenieff Body Connectivities (Thies, 2017)

## Victor Quijada

Victor Quijada, Artistic Director of “Rubberband Dance, serves as a major inspiration for this creative research because of the “Rubberband technique” he has created and developed. Being fortunate enough to travel and spend time taking classes from him was a great experience. Learning some of the Rubberband Method afforded clarity in a few missions that would be important to keep in mind while creating a new technique. To be able to safely and efficiently teach movement, to create something new out of something already set, and to challenge and transcend established traditions were of the utmost importance when brainstorming and watching how Victor conducted his classes.

What immediately stood out was how he took movements that a breakdancer would be accustomed to and made them easily accessible to the other dancers that did not have that form of training. The “Invert” was one of the movements he had taught and is by no means easy. Again because dance technique is interdisciplinary, the other students were able to draw upon other technical dance experiences and knowledge of their own bodies as well as Victor’s

guidance and movement deconstruction to learn the invert. By the end, of the week some students were even holding it for a few seconds.

### **Scope of Project**

The goal of this research is to create beginnings or a base for a movement technique through the combination of Hip Hop and Contemporary Dance. There are many different styles of dance today that can fall under the term “Hip Hop” and each of them has very distinct stylistic elements, different techniques, and even their own respective cultures. The focus was narrowed to Breakdancing as well as certain concepts found within Hip Hop culture as a larger entity. Things such as introducing cyphering and promoting a sense of community/unity amongst the cast of dancers that have never experienced it within their previous training. The Cyphering which refers to the circle that Breakdancers are often seen dancing in brings a different take to exploring movement than what contemporary dancers are used to and challenges them within their own box of movement and whatever they end up learning along the way. Unity and community are big pillars of the Hip Hop culture and through observation of the way things operate in dance academia, it seems that for the most part dancers lack that community or if it is present it is different than how the community is in Hip Hop. For most breakdancers people within their respective crews become family. At practice people actively help and give ideas and motivation to those at a lower level, Everyone is included and feels as if their input matters, and much more. Many peers within the dance program had different experiences and even found some of those practices out of the ordinary. On the other hand, figuring out what to draw from contemporary dance was a bit more of a difficult task because of how broad that form is. Coming up for a definition for “Contemporary Dance” within the context of how it would be used in this research was necessary. The definition used in this instance for Contemporary Dance is the concept of breaking the status quo of what the established idea or conventions of what dance is; and pushing its boundaries opening up different interpretations for what could be represented as ‘dance language’. With that, in mind breaking down the ideas of ballet and modern technique both of which are often used in contemporary dance and fusing that with concepts/movements found within Breakdancing would be the method for creating a new foundation for movement.

## Application

### Movement Generation

Before being able to teach anyone there needed to be space for self-exploration and experimentation. The process began with self-investigative research using video documentation. Anytime that was spent in the dance studio was also time spent recording sessions of improvisation. Next, there would be a review of the footage in order to observe different choices as well as certain habitual movements. There was the dissection of these moves using the body connectivities within the Bartneiff Fundamentals and beginning to work as if learning the movements for the first time. Through this process, the movements were deconstructed to their fundamentals and essential parts. This allowed for a more simple way to teach them as well as open more applications and different transitions than originally intended. These movements were separated and categorized between different levels in space to create a framework for traversing between each of them.



Figure 2. Six-Step Diagram (Pastor, 2019)

The element of footwork in breaking focuses on the dancer using both their hands and feet to support and move around the space usually in a circular pattern. Deconstructing the “Six-Step” shown in figure 2. was the framework for movement at the middle level. The six-step is a foundational footwork move which is simple to learn and has many options for movement invention on every step of the movement which adds a level of variety as well as freedom for the dancer to make their own choices.

Movement on the standing level took heavy influence from Contemporary Dance's idea of breaking away from ballet's conventions. The concept of being grounded and connected to the earth with the joints bent and ready for any split-second movement or transitions requiring the shifting of the body's weight. The bending and relaxing of the hinge joints (namely the elbows and the knees) provide easier access to using the larger muscle groups for transition into more explosive movements or for bearing the weight of the body when needing to come from the air. Some exceptions with certain moves do break this rule, but generally having the body ready for weight-bearing activity with the slight bend keeps the body safer from injury.

For floorwork, movement inspiration came from the Bartenieff floor exercise sequences as well as back-rocking from breaking. In Bartenieff the exercises are used to better create a connection between the mind and the body effectively, creating more conscious dancers. This information is especially important for floorwork because at times the body will be in positions that seem to defy gravity. Having a knowledge of things such as breath, musculature, and efficient use of the body allows for giving the illusion of weightlessness as well as providing the dancer with efficiency in transitioning from the floor to other levels of movement. This mindfulness combined with the techniques in back-rock, dancers have many options to enter and exit the floor.

### **Teaching**

During senior year, the opportunity to test some of this research became available. An eight to ten-minute dance work was a senior thesis requirement and it provided the chance to work out the skeleton of this research to see if this personal fusion of Hip Hop and Contemporary dance could truly work in application. The cast consisted of 3 other dancers, two of which did not have training in breakdancing while the last dancer had training in breakdancing, but not in contemporary dance. With this, Both ends of the spectrum of training could be effectively tested out while also checking to see if this prototype made sense through self-application at the same time. Before any choreography happened the dancers received the framework of the technique

and were introduced to the different levels of movement every few rehearsals. There was an



**Figure 3.** Dancer pictured in the middle of a cypher (*Bboy, 2014*)

emphasis on repetition so that the dancers could get used to using their bodies differently as well as establishing new neural pathways in the brain.

After that process, the creativity of these dancers was tested through cypher training. In Hip Hop the cypher is the gathering of dancers in a circle in which everyone takes turns going into the center and dancing whether it be something improvised or a set of movements that they created in a sequence. Because of Hip Hop's improvisational nature, this test was used to see



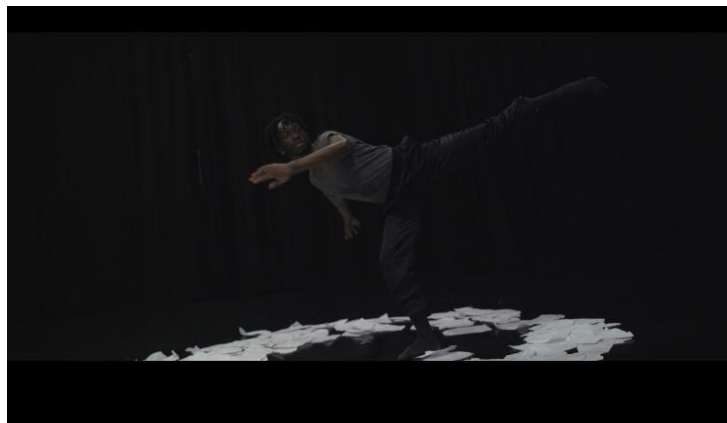
**Figure 4.** Dancers from left to right in performance (Yoshiya Kushibiki, Imani Selvon, Chadwick Gaspard, and Lindsay Jolly)

how well the cast of dancers could recall the movement they learned as well as see what kind of choices they would make in their movement stemming from information that they knew prior combined with what they were given. This was also used as a way to generate movement for the dance piece as well. The combination of repeating the movements as well as the brain exercise

from cyphering was effective in having the dancers retain the information as well as walk away from the process with new tools to use in their dance practice.

### **University Scholars project**

With the template of this technique somewhat solidified through the process of the senior thesis project, the next step was to create an improvisational score for a University Scholars video based on this research. The themes and narrative are based on the idea of nightmares and negative thoughts influencing the mindscape. The human mind is a very complex thing that isn't still fully understood. The video was a way to explore how negative thoughts and emotions can influence the subconscious mind and how that manifests. Nightmares are a way these thoughts can affect a person and the setting of the video is the representation of the mind under the stress of that as well as negative emotions and feelings such as hate, loneliness, despair, etc. The dimly lit studio draped in all black is the hypothetical "realm" of a human's psyche. This further supported by the use of paper as a prop to signify being lost in a sea of thought as well as the dynamic camera angles bringing dimension to the work. The movement was made through internalizing these feelings within the body and interpreting the theme through an improvisational score. In the video, the full application of what this research currently has amounted to is shown.



**Figure 5.** Chadwick Gaspard in performance (*Gaspard*, 2020)



### Conclusion

The end result was creating a base of movement that was used to make a ten-minute dance piece as well as an eight-minute dance film based on the research. The dancers enjoyed the experience of being able to take a step into a different way of navigating the space and they were able to pick it up and perform in a very short amount of time. The experience altered previously held notions of dance training as well as the approach to learning in the world of breakdancing. This information also brings new ways to discuss breakdancing and its movement.

Moving forward, developing this research is important because Hip Hop can bring something different to the teaching pedagogy that is found in dance academia. At the same time, it would bring in a dance technique with a wealth of history and culture that isn't valued as highly within the same space.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to my first dance professor Michelle-Grant Murray for seeing the potential in me, giving me an introduction to dance and for guiding me on my journey. I would also like to give thanks to my mentor Trent D. Williams Jr. helping me along my process. I want to also thank the cast of my senior thesis work Imani Selvon, Lindsay Jolly, and Yoshiya Kushibiki for allowing me the opportunity to set work on them and trusting me and my process. I would also like to extend gratitude to the members of the Street Masters Crew Miami chapter and the people at Catalyst Hip Hop for guiding me in the Hip Hop scene. Last, but not least I want to thank the University Scholars Program and Dr. Donnelly for the opportunity to do research within my passion.

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