

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dance as Public Humanities

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1. Introduction

Dance creates change in underserved communities. It is not just performance art; instead, dance becomes ministry.¹ In 2016, during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, I created my first site-specific dance film, *Reverse*,² set in Watts and Compton, California, and featuring students from the University of Los Angeles, California (UCLA) and The Watts Willowbrook Boys & Girls Club (WBGC) culminating in a public performance at UCLA, and catching the eye of *The New York Times*.³ As this project shows, dance films educate audiences on social justice issues, and bridge the gap between communities, cultures, and academia through the principles of public humanities: cultural empowerment, social cohesion, inclusive representation, civic engagement, and public discourse.

Reverse begins with UCLA dancers embarking on a voyage, performing choreography through the neighborhoods of Watts and Compton around 120th South Central Ave. This neighborhood is traditionally broadcasted for its violence and gang activity. The film offers a different perspective, highlighting the beauty of the community known to the natives and serving as an entry point for audiences not from these communities to see an unbiased view – similar to the experimental filmmaker Khalil Joseph's short film *Until the Quiet Comes*, which tells a story about life and death set in a Watts public housing complex named Nickerson Gardens.

The musical score for our film was Compton native Kendrick Lamar's song *i* which speaks to the act of finding self-love through trials and tribulations. The choreography leads dancers into a liquor store, where they pause to indulge in snacks like Flamin Hot Cheetos, and then they continue to dance through the isles surrounded by the vibrant colors of the store. From

To watch the *Reverse* film: <https://vimeo.com/193525661>.

¹ Ministry – a person or thing through which something is accomplished: Agency and Instrumentality.

² Robertson 2016.

³ Eligon 2016.

the liquor store, they gather at a gate where they begin performing the Milly Rock.⁴ The film then reverses our recording of the Milly Rock, leading to a shift in the film: Boys & Girls Club youth dancers enter the film by Krumping, a social dance created in South Central, Los Angeles.⁵

The presence of dancers of different body types and abilities enhanced the work. The WBGC youth brought forth messages unbounded by barriers and societal norms of what a “dancing body” should look like. Instead, the velocity and power of the youth movements combined with the nuanced choreography of the UCLA dancers to create a dynamic conversation filmed on the streets of Watts and Compton. The merging of styles, techniques, cultural dances, and location made the film feel specific to Compton and Watts, yet accessible to broad audiences. The unique learning experience for the students of UCLA and Watts Willowbrook Boys & Girls Club to do this work together allowed for a deep and intentional learning experience.

Emphasizing the graffiti art wall behind them – located in the back of the Watts Willowbrook Boys & Girls Club – the Krumping in *Reverse* highlights the necessity of dance as healing.⁶ Sarah Homer Argues that “Krump presents strategies of witnessing to and healing from Hollywatts’ and other marginalized contexts’ histories, shifting the body from a site of threat of extinction to a source of empowerment, with bodies at the center in order to negotiate survival from trauma.” Placing the Krumping scene as the pivot point of *Reverse* taught audiences that the youth, too, are negotiating through their bodies and spirits the political climate of America.

The Krumping scene introduces pictures of Donald Trump, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Sandra Bland, and a continuous list of other Black people killed by police brutality appeared on the screen. The editing intercuts dance and photography, positioning dance as a protest, echoing the negotiation happening in youth, the sociopolitical climate, and its potential impact on the Watts and Compton communities. The roots of frustration displayed in those photographs were housed inside the Krump movements.

Thus, *Reverse* brings together dancers from diverse backgrounds to participate in a cultural experience through filmmaking and dance, promoting social cohesion. Susan ⁷ definition of public humanities “moves away from the translational – the explanation of university-generated ideas to the public – and imagines the humanities as a process of discovery undertaken by collaborative groups – including university faculty, staff, and students – with communities outside the campus.” When taken out of the confines of the campus studios, dance allows students to have a reciprocal lesson from the community for the academy. Dance was not created in studios. Dance was made in the communities, in social gatherings, in clubs, and in nature – dance was created by people. Allowing students to dance, learn, and perform in the community places dance in its rightful home. Academic institutions collaborating with local communities to create dance films like *Reverse* shifts the algorithm of

⁴ Milly Rock – A social dance created by youth in Bedstuy, Brooklyn performed to Brooklyn Rapper 2 Milly’s song (Josephs 2015).

⁵ Krumping – Clown dance created by Tommy “the Clown” Johnson also known as the Godfather of Krumping originated the the dance in 1992. Kumping derives from Clowning Dance popularized in South Central LA by Ceasare “Tight Eyez” Willis, and Jo’Artis “Big Mijo” Ratti.

⁶ Sarah Ohmer 2019, 16.

⁷ Smulyan 2022, par. 4.

dance education, embraces new representation, and serves as educational models that can be shared with audiences.

When I premiered *Reverse* at UCLA in the spring of 2017, I invited the youth dancers from the Watts Willowbrook Boys & Girls Club as special guests. The pride they displayed while watching themselves, their dance, neighborhood, and culture on the screen, exuded from their bodies. I had the same reaction when I saw Camille Brown's *Black Girl Linguistics Play* for the first time at the REDCAT theater in Los Angeles. Although this was a theater production, the way Brown included African American childhood games in the choreographic scores, the scenic decorations that included chalk, the wardrobe, and intimate African American girlhood relationships. I saw my Black girl childhood on the stage and I was affirmed. At the culmination of the *Black Girl Linguistic Play*, I cheered loudly in the audience the same way the crowd cheered for the youth when they appeared on the screen of *Reverse* during the performance at UCLA.

After the film screening, audience members asked questions and learned more about the film and Black social justice issues. As observes, "Applying visual analysis to the publicness of Blackness expands the reach and impact of Public Humanities."⁸ The audience discussed social issues such as inequality, injustice, police brutality, and cultural identity with reference to the movement in the dance film. Even still, when this film is shown at festivals and colleges, the screenings become a platform for public discourse and civic engagement.

Reverse and other dance films educate audiences on social justice issues and bridge the gap between communities, cultures, and academia through principles of public humanities: The use of storytelling, symbolism, site-specific locations, and collaborative efforts between the community, academia, and choreography to convey important messages, spark dialogue, and promote understanding and awareness among diverse audiences. By leveraging the power of visual media and principles of public humanities, dance films can serve as an effective tool to inspire positive change and encourage social justice.

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⁸ Tiffany E. Barber 2021, par. 5.

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