Finding Space in a Dance Place: Exploring Vulnerability and Family at the Intersections of Race and Ethnicity

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Finding Space in a Dance Place: Exploring Vulnerability and Family at the Intersections of Race and Ethnicity

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ABSTRACT

I remember the first time I proposed this idea to my professor and she said with utmost curiosity and confusion, “but, Jesse, isn’t vulnerability a weakness?” For so long I thought so; I thought my inability to be open and sensitive and accessible was indeed a weakness. I would usually cower in the presence of my own emotions and feelings when asked to be open and giving; I was afraid of how my exposure would be consumed, manipulated—or worse—rejected. However, in the words of Brené Brown, “vulnerability is not weakness. And that myth is profoundly dangerous. Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change” (2012). To access this birthplace, I found an avenue: dance. What I could not tell in words, I could show through dance, and it was there that I could explore my vulnerability in a positive way. However, I started to deconstruct my effortless transition into being vulnerable. Was this path easily as accessible for others? Donning my Black Feminist lens, I set forth into further picking apart my journey and arrived at a concept that I originally felt uncomfortable with: that vulnerability could be a privilege. Block 1750, a dance studio located in Boulder, Colorado, was the site of this exploration into the access I have as a White, middle-class woman. Through my own personal quest for self-growth, I started to critically examine myself within the context of the space, and in turn, focused on those who also used this space in a similar manner. So when I was formulating numerous, bigger questions to my own privilege, I started to notice another theme that was not mutually exclusive from vulnerability: family. Through writing a deeply personal, deeply empathetic, deeply vulnerable piece about the access and privilege attached to vulnerability and family in the context of a Boulder studio, Block 1750, I hope to connect themes of vulnerability and family at the intersections of race and ethnicity in a way that synthesizes a large body of work across several disciplines and areas of study. This autoethnographic work will serve to not only use my self-exploration as a means to show these concepts, but as a means to relate and contrast my own experiences with privilege and access as it contrasts with others’.

Keywords: vulnerability, family, dance, autoethnography, black feminist theory, access, privilege
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John Lutz
I miss you every day, and while I know that are not gone, and while I know that you are still in my life as one of my closest friends, just know that this paper was written in part for you, alongside Ball and Pnutz, because you, just as much as them, are such an integral part of my understanding of the Block as not just a group of people who like to dance, but a group of people who are a family. I love you.

Ball and Pnutz
I miss you two every day, and think about you incessantly. Thank you for being the reason that I finished this work, and thank you for showing me what it means to love, what it means to be a family, and what it means to live a life full of passion and fun. I am so grateful that, even for the short time that we did, we got to know one another deeply.

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INTRODUCTION

Let Me Be Your Wings

I was a mover at a young age, constantly wiggling, waving my arms and throwing my hands whenever I spoke, jumping and running and playing outside whenever I got the chance. There is a family home video, famous for documenting the golden age of my youth (according to my parents), where a two-to-three-year-old Jesse climbs up on top of the coffee table by aid of the large, plush couch in anticipation for the final song of my favorite movie, Thumbelina. I would watch this film maybe four times in one day, every single day for one or two years, and I would perform the finale alongside Thumbelina and Prince Cornelius in phonetically similar jibberish and with moves that mirrored the elongated lines, twirls, and frolicking of the fairies on the screen, to all the ebbs and flows and grand gestures of the characters singing and dancing as they were paraded down the screen during their wedding scene. My pink and blue moon boots—a staple of my wardrobe for several years of my youth—glided across the table top as I transcended that living room and flew into a dimension where I was also being trumpeted among flowers and glitter by my very own fairy prince. To this day, my mother contends that seeing me dance across the living room was normal practice; that the same effervescence, she said, could be seen each and every time I was just generally happy, wiggling, gliding, and twirling in expression.

My mother, finally wrangling her small, rampant child, stuck me in dance classes at the age of six in a studio wedged in the corner of a strip mall two minutes away from my house. I enjoyed this space because I was the star of the show: I was expressive, I was outgoing, and I was willing to take center stage. At no point in my dancing career at that point in time did I ever feel discouraged, unsupported, or uncelebrated. I took solos, I took compliments, and I built a
confidence around moving that established me above the rest—I was now a dancer. I could now
tell people that I took my art seriously at the age of six. I could tell my friends at school that I
could do the splits. I could show the boys at recess a spin and expect great praise. I could put on
annual performances for my relatives that lasted far past anyone’s expectations. Not once did I
doubt my abilities and not once was I confronted by anyone questioning my new-found
confidence.

Alas, my fairy-tale ended, and my bubble of safety somewhat popped when I found out
two years later that the studio was moving to an ice rink center in the next town over. I
immediately transferred; I was not too fond of spending more time than I had to at that particular
ice rink since I had grown up with a brother who played years and years of ice hockey. I found
myself, then, at the Arvada Center. I waltzed into my first ever ballet class (as I had come from a
studio that outfitted every small girl with pom-poms and jazz shoes) wearing booty shorts and a
tight tank top. The isolation I felt was immediate. The teacher motioned for me to take place
amongst my peers and teachers: “semi-new and talented.” I made friends, I achieved the title of “good student” from the teachers, and at
the second attempt of auditioning, made the para-professional company at the Arvada Center.
Basically, this meant I was required to take this many classes and attend this many rehearsals a
week—at one point, during my sophomore year of high school, I was dancing 30-40 hours per
week. I worked hard, and people noticed. Eventually, feeling like this place had become my
second home, I danced away my years, twenty-plus hours every week, in both middle and high school—never attending more than two football games my entire high school career, and always rushing into Homecomings after Friday rehearsals. I rose to be a favorite among the company, scoring solos and features in productions and performances, and rising as a promising dancer. I had erased those early years of isolation I had experienced at this place with new memories of family, friendship, and stardom.

As soon as I graduated in the Spring of 2013, left for college, and left my beloved proscenium stage, I decided to take a break. I had done this once before my junior year of high school for two main reasons: a persistent knee injury that needed serious rest, and a loss of love and passion for dance. This time I was taking a break to explore my new identity as a college student in a new city—I re-invented myself. I partied. I ate pizza. I stayed up late. I did my homework. I created a life in which I had time to hang out with friends, to live out my freshman year fantasies, and for the first time ever, not have dance. I used this exploration as a means to see who else I was; now that I did not have dance as my main identifier, I started to realize the other facets of myself. However, that exploratory time abruptly came to an end when three-fourths of the way through the year a past dance teacher phoned me to see if I would like a position on a professional dance company in Denver, to take over the role of someone who found out that she was pregnant. I took it.

As life hands out many trials, tribulations, and obstacles, I reluctantly moved to Boulder from Denver for the Fall 2014 semester of my sophomore year. I was upset, bitter, and very much alone in those first couple of months. I felt that I had been forced to move cities and transfer schools out of financial pressure from my parents and out of self-care from a traumatic event. I said good-bye to my community, my friends, my freshman-year-me that I had loved so
much, and, as we will discuss later, my mental health. My brother, seven years my senior, agreed to move in with me in an apartment in north Boulder to mitigate my struggles in finding housing and a roommate. Regardless of the fact that half of my graduating high school class attended CU Boulder, I had close to no friends. I felt the only avenue that I could take that would alleviate my anomie was dance. I was extremely reluctant to go, as my re-introduction to dance only six months’ prior in Denver had been rough, and was nervous about entering a new dance community yet again. I was anxious to step into yet another unfamiliar setting in which I would have to present this version of myself that was broken, tired, and extremely guarded. I swallowed my shame, and as luck would have it, I discovered, nestled in a strip mall, a dance studio: Block 1750.

I still remember everything about the first time I walked into that space. People were everywhere: sprawled on couches, laughing, cuddling, joking, and talking. “MURMURATION” shone bright above the front desk, as the sign stretched across the wall in all of its light bulb, reflective sheet metal glory. Later I would find out that this was an annual show hosted by the studio that featured movers, creators, dancers, all to MC’s, poets, and live music nestled just below the Flatirons in Chautauqua Auditorium. I walked over to whisper my name and the class I was interested in taking. My eyes met with the girl at the front desk. Her soft, brunette curls framed her face, and her bright green eyes shone with joy and youth. She immediately greeted me and exclaimed that she was excited to have me here. A quiet man was sitting next to her—older, yet boyish. Without raising his chin, his eyes rose to meet mine. Without smiling, he nodded, and said, “Welcome to the Block.”

Mismatched couches and chairs revolved around a circular, cement coffee table littered with books, water bottles and iPhones. To my left I saw the tiniest kitchen, complete with a
stove, corner sink, and shelves. A large, brawny man with blonde hair was busy washing dishes and cooking. I chose not to talk to anyone, and instead stood by the piano in the opposite corner of the kitchen watching everyone and everything unfold before me. Eventually, the teacher, whom I had taken a class from previously several years before in the heydays of my high school dance fever, swung open the door to the studio and waved everyone in for class. The studio was beautiful. In the center of the floor, a square of lighter wood was framed by darker wood, later finding out that this square of lighter wood is affectionately called “the block.” The walls were painted a steel gray, with wood crawling out in various lengths across the wall, fitting a very modern, reclaimed aesthetic. Lamps littered the side of the studio like dizzy, soft orbs of light glows—I felt like I was in an elegant, modern ballroom fit for 21st-century court citizens.

Very clearly out-of-shape, I left the class in a hurry after it finished. The first one out of the studio, I jetted past the people on the couches, the staff at the front desk, and ran to my car. On the drive home, I fought to see the road through blurry eyes filled with heavy tears. I felt more upset, more bitter, and more alone than I had all the times that I sat up in my apartment alone, with nobody in near proximity to run to. I cried not because I felt like I had not danced well (which I had not, but that is beside the point)—I cried because people there were part of a community reminiscent of one that I had left back in Denver. Recalling that while I had retreated to a small corner in the “living room” of this studio, I had watched a scene that had felt so familiar: I closed my eyes and thought back to the countless nights I had spent in the common room of my dorm with my hall community laughing about our utter lack of commitment to our homework duties; the countless breaks during the six-hour Saturday dance company rehearsals at the Arvada Center that I had sat with my legs outstretched in front of me, my lunch in between my thighs, as I looked around the circles at the faces of the girls that I had spent years of my life
dancing with daily. I cried because I had been so nervous and anxious about entering that space that I could not let go. I cried because every single person in that studio was vulnerable, visible, and shameless.

Looking back, it is hard to believe that only a year and some months later that I would be sitting behind the front desk greeting people as they take their first class. It is hard to believe that only a year later I would be the one cuddling on the couch, laughing with my friends, and hanging out until two in the morning. It is hard to believe that only a year later I would be so deeply engrained in this community that I could consistently allow myself to be seen. Several of my classes during my time at CU have required me to write papers on a place that I would like to study in-depth with hours of observation, interviews, etc. Every single time, I find myself digging back in at the Block for subject matter, because every single time I want to understand more about the place that gave me friends, dance, and a community back. Therefore, I spent several hours each night of the week not only taking class, but observing from the couches, from the front desk, and from the mirror at the front of the studio, talking to and interviewing several people at the Block, and spending hours coding and combing through data to produce a work that explores two things that I fought to ignore—vulnerability and family—alongside exploring facets of Hip Hop culture. Further, when I was digging even deeper and deeper not only into the Block, but into my Ethnic Studies degree in school, I could not help but notice these themes in connection with both race and ethnicity. By focusing on these two facets of identity, I felt that I could dive into aspects of the Block that are otherwise overlooked by the majority-White demographic that frequents this Boulder studio on a daily basis. In this way, I could really question not only my positionality at Block 1750, but others’ as well as who identify as non-
White. By critically examining these individuals, I then asked a greater question: How does one’s race and ethnicity affect their access to vulnerability and family at Block 1750?

As a reminder to myself, and to the eyes that will continue to read on, know this: that this piece was both gut-wrenching and therapeutic to write, as exploring myself in this context alongside those that were equally as prepared to share their journey was an honor. Watching and learning from those I listened to, I found myself letting go of small pieces of my self-guarded defenses, and found myself finally accepting the safety in honesty and vulnerability. And so, in the words of Thumbelina and Prince Cornelius I lead with these words that resonated to a two-to-three-year-old Jesse and resonate now to a twenty-one-year-old me: “Leave behind the world you know, for another world of wondrous things, we’ll see the universe and dance on Saturn’s rings” (Manilow 1994).

METHODS

Consistent with much of the scholarship on social science research designs (Wagenaar 1998; Singleton 1999; Handwerker 2001), I used multi-methods, or multiple qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation to conduct my study. Since my research is heavily soaked in the veins of vulnerable practices, I decided to include myself in the research. Therefore, I wrote an autoethnography in the attempt of not only showing the contrast between my experience as a White, middle-class female alongside the participants of color to illuminate integral parts of my research, but also as a means to eradicate boundaries that would have existed if I had presented myself as an objective researcher. To explore the very tenets of my findings, by choosing this style of writing, I would have to have the courage to be vulnerable. For example, the writer of an autoethnography will “strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with professional title and position…to make themselves more accountable and
vulnerable to the public” (Denzin 2003:137). My findings are a marriage of my personal development with my new-found knowledge about the nature of these themes in tandem with the subjective experience of the participants within Block 1750. I will discuss my methods of choice, including what they are, how I implemented them, and the advantages they bring individually and collectively to my study of vulnerability and family at the intersections of race and ethnicity.

With my discussion of my multi-methods auto-ethnography, I will also be discussing my use of Black feminist epistemology in order to present an understanding of this research as an alternative form of knowledge—different than the typical “scholastic” literature presented to the academy. I explore how my focus on subjectivity as a method of story-telling is academic research in its ability to turn away from standard epistemologies that value positivism, or objective research, that have traditionally marginalized and dehumanized people of color (Collins 2000). In an effort to present extremely vulnerable experiences and expressions of people of color in this piece, I embrace Black feminist epistemology in its ability to present lived experiences and accompanying worldviews as a means to fully embrace my subjectivity as an academic super-power (Collins 2000). As Popovic (2013) said about subjectivity in her own work, “writing of lived experience offers glimpses in into the values, meanings, relationships, beliefs, and practices entailed in a particular culture, allowing the reader to witness an embodied, subjective interpretation with intimate details that ‘touch the readers where they live’” (2)

The study design was approved by the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB). My method of autoethnography did not require IRB approval, and the IRB decided that my participant observation was not sufficiently invasive to require IRB approval. However, I was required to complete an IRB proposal to conduct the semi-structured interviews, and this method was approved by the IRB.
Several times while writing this piece, I was questioned whether I was absolutely sure of my decision to write this autoethnographic piece. My academic integrity and my intellectual power was somewhat contested as my choice of telling stories through my vulnerable, informal language was seen as “academically weak.” Peers and professors alike were unsure of my subjective voice as true to the academy’s standards of collegiate writing; most people felt that some level of objectivity was needed in order for this piece to be taken seriously. Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought* (2002), wrote that positivism is deeply rooted in Eurocentric ideals of valid and sophisticated knowledge, and that, “because this enterprise [social institutions that legitimize knowledge] is controlled by elite White men, knowledge validation processes reflect this group’s interests” (271). However, not to state that non-positivist epistemologies and frameworks are better than positivist epistemologies and frameworks, I instead state that my intentions for writing this piece simply did not align with positivist tenets. For instance, “positivist approaches aim to create scientific descriptions of reality by producing objective generalizations” (2001:273). Since my research is rooted in ethnography, and since the aim of ethnography is to provide insight into people’s views and actions within the specific context of an ethnographic site, or specific space, that these people inhabit, that is entirely unique, no generalizations could or should be made about the findings in an ethnography, since the context in which the research is conducted is incredibly specific to that site. Therefore, I chose not to remove myself from my site in the efforts to be objective, as I had no reason to present my findings in the interest of generalizing anything that I saw, heard, or experienced at Block 1750.
The pedestal of Black feminist epistemology is, “an experiential, material base…namely, collective experiences and accompanying worldviews…this alternative epistemology uses different standards that are consistent with black women’s criteria for substantiated knowledge” (Collins 2000:274). Collins (2000) outlined the framework of this epistemology with four foundations: lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethics of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability. For the first, Collins described the historical grounding of the use of wisdom in Black women’s knowledge production. She explained that there is a distinction between knowledge and wisdom, in that Black women as the subordinate group use wisdom as a mode of survival, as a means to become aware, from the informal teachings from other Black women, of the impact that institutions and structures have on them. She stated eloquently:

This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women’s survival. In the context of intersecting oppressions, the distinction is essential. Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (276)

In this way, Collins introduced the notion that lived experiences of Black women are seen as more credible and believable since several institutions, spanning from higher education to mass media and popular culture, have produced knowledge that incriminates and devalues Black women. These shared lived experiences and subjective tales impart wisdom that helps to grow a community of “connected knowers”, or, women who felt that “the best way of understanding another person’s ideas was to develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas” (2000:277). In this way, fostering connection helps to facilitate a way of knowing that takes into account the subjectivity of both participants, since whether we choose to recognize this or not, we are all human beings that continually experience our perceived worlds, and therefore our feelings are always present no matter how objective we aim to be.
For the second, Collins explores the history of dialogue in African roots of oral tradition: call-and-response. Dialogue, or a conversation between two people, she argued, is a way in which we can foster connection and empathy, both which help to strengthen the ability of those who attempt to gain knowledge from one another, for, “in contrast to visual metaphors that scientists and philosophers typically use” (2000:281), these two skills help to create ways of sharing information and sharing knowledge that is directly rooted in the words of others. This is important to understand my use of dancer’s experiences since they are telling me personal accounts rather than abstract ideas and scenarios to provide their perspective, thoughts, and personal knowledge. For instance, Dane Frost (2015) said, “autoethnography is helpful in that it enables us to reflect from multiple perspectives” (184). With the addition of my own voice, it was easy to engage from a source of empathy, to explore multiple perspectives, much as Frost posited. Whatever my participants say I value as their absolute truths. I then build upon those truths by trying to explore how their truths may have been constructed. I gather the evidence they provide, and I situate them within the context of others’ experiences to support frameworks of knowledge, produced by other Black women and the vast majority of their collected truths.

Collins’ third foundation, the ethics of caring, relays the importance of empathy in trying to understand another person’s form of knowledge. Since my research is directly rooted within trying to understand my participants’ truths, empathy courses throughout the veins of this work. Since connected knowing is so rooted within the Black community, Collins posited that “the value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy…resembles the importance that some feminist analyses place on women’s ‘inner voice’” (2000:283). Since I am asking my participants to be extremely vulnerable with me in sharing their inner voice, their feelings, and the descriptions of their expressions, empathy is
extremely important in facilitating the safety my participants feel, since there is a level of trust that we have to engage in sharing both of our inner truths. Finally, the ethic of personal accountability is especially prevalent in the Black community, as people believe that one should be accountable for the knowledge that you produce (Collins 2000). For instance, you have a certain responsibility for arguing the validity of anything that you may claim, since whatever you may claim is a direct evaluation of who you are, what you value, and how you think. This harks back to the larger importance of subjectivity, as we must know that any forms of knowledge that are produced “derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal” (2000:284). Therefore, my use of Black feminist epistemology is empathetic, vulnerable, and extremely personal.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I chose to interview a total of seven dancers in the scene. Semi-structured interviews allowed me a certain freedom, for even though I would come prepared with a list of questions, I could allow the interview to unfold much like a casual conversation, offering the interviewee to further explore issues that they found important without feeling constricted in being firmly bound by my questions (Longhurst 2003). While I noticed gendered aspects of my data in the participant observations and interviews, I limited myself to solely look at the intersection of race and ethnicity as a way to dive more deeply into these two facets of identity, instead of producing a more general analysis on several facets. I selected my participants through a purposive sample, or a sample in which I would only study a small subset of a larger population who I could easily identify (Babbie 2013). This choice was to help the purpose of my study as my intentions were to only engage with individuals who had interacted both with Block 1750 and the Colorado dance scene at large. This small subset of people was a group that I identified who frequent the Block
on a regular basis, have a deep connection with each other and others who frequent the Block regularly, and those for whom dance is a very central and key aspect to their life and their mode of expression. By selecting people to interview, by way of their explicit consent, I was also able to garner a greater understanding of those who identified as persons of color of not. For instance, four of the participants that I interviewed identified themselves as White, while three of the participants identified as persons of color: African or Gabonian, Black, Mexican or Latino. I chose to add those voices that identified as White as to potentially show a contrast between their experiences, and to critically examine the differences that may arise.

Setting out on this expedition, I contacted two people who were at the heart of operations at the Block: John and Molly. These two individuals, alongside two others, were the official co-founders of the studio. I chose to include them in this research as a way to understand both the reasons they saw to create a space like this in Boulder, Colorado, and any possible connections between the culture of Hip Hop and what they aimed to build: a community. Lars, a self-identified Black man, is an all-styles dancer who goes to the Block every single day to hang out, train, and work on his music production. I chose to interview him because he and I train together extensively. Since I know the way he moves very well, I asked him to participate to understand the reason behind why he moves the way he moves. I felt that by already knowing the way that he moves, I could garner a greater understanding of how he expressed his feelings through his dance style. I felt that I could also gain a greater understanding of why he started to dance in the first place, and I could see if perhaps his Blackness was a source from which he drew.

For Jorge, it was during a conversation outside of my thesis work that I learned about his current family situation. For instance, I had not known that he had immigrated from Mexico at the age of seven, and continues to live in Colorado with a student visa to attend the University of
Colorado Boulder. I thought that his identity as a Latino break dancer could provide me an interesting intersection when applying theoretical concepts such as vulnerability. Identifying as a Latino male also offered me insight into how his ethnicity interacted with dance, as his style, Breaking, is associated with Hip Hop culture. I thought that his access to dance might be interesting as Hip Hop is traditionally associated with Black culture. Similarly, I chose to speak with Chase, a White man, since during another private conversation, he had professed the importance of the Block in creating a familial space for him. I thought that it might be interesting to talk with him as a means of contrasting the two participants’ experiences in the necessity of their crew, Worm Tank, in facilitating family, and to see if their construction of this space intersected with their differing racial identities.

I chose to interview Bre not only because of her involvement in the Boulder community, but in the Denver and Aurora dance scenes as well. I thought her identity has an immigrant interacting with not only Hip Hop culture in general, but with that culture in the context of Boulder, Colorado would be an interesting insight in transnational means of creating space, community, and access to vulnerability. I was interested in seeing how her Blackness would interact with American Blackness, as that distinction could potentially be different within the context about peoples’ access to cultures and expression within those cultures.

Finally, I chose to interview Hanna due to involvement within the inner community of the Block, Worm Tank Crew, and her administrative duties that she holds, making her central to operations of the studio as both a business and a community. As she identifies as a White woman, I also thought it might be interesting to contrast her experiences with and her accesses to themes such as vulnerability and family with those who identify as people of color. Her
involvement in the study also adds as a contrast to my own experiences since we identify closely in several facets of our life including gender and class.

*Participant Observation*

As part of my participant observation, in which I partake in the situations in which I am observing as a means to learn the “processes, practices, norms, values, reasoning, technologies, and so on that constitute social and cultural lifeworlds” (Longhurst 2003:170) of those around me, I spent several days at the Block sitting outside of classes to gain a greater understanding of which people were taking classes consistently, who was teaching these classes, who was at the Block to hang out, and who came to the Block for free training nights. I recorded the racial (and ethnic, if they so identified) identities of each individual in each setting by means of assumption, as not to ask randomly about how they may identify and disrupt the setting. This was to produce an analysis surrounding both the access to both the business side of the Block and the community center of the Block, and the individuals that entered either space (the studio side or the “hangout side”). I identify that assuming people’s identities could provide a possible margin of error, as I could mistake, offend, and oppress those who might identify differently than what I had guessed.

I was interested in seeing what the majority race was amongst class-takers, free training participants, and individuals who merely hung out at the Block. This was to see both what the demographics of the Block were on a macro level, and to see what I could understand about representation of a person’s race and ethnicity, and even gender and age, in each setting.

Participant observation also allowed me to record the level of comfort individuals experienced in either the class environment or the *hang-out* environment. I looked specifically for clues such as hugging, eye contact, verbal communication (such as conversation or jokes), and acknowledgement, past merely greeting people, when studying interactions between
individuals and groups of people. This helped me to investigate a connection between which individuals interacted with whom the most based on their racial and ethnic identity, and how comfortable they were in that space according to whom they were interacting with. I also watched for body language when dancing. Specifically, I looked for things such as stepping to the front of the studio, knowing the choreography (if choreography was taught in the class), and whether they were cowering or present when in the class. This allowed me to draw connections between comfortability and vulnerability, as several dancers, when comfortable and willing to share and interact with those around them, were more likely to express more and let go more.

Since I am also deeply engrained in the daily operations of the Block, I had to make sure that I was authentically representing what I saw not out of my own or other’s self-interest in what I may find. I had to try extra hard to notice the things that I would usually overlook (Clifford et al. 2016). To change my ‘natural attitude’, or the phenomenon in which, “as participants of these common cultures, [researchers] have become so familiar to us that as ordinary members of society we no longer spend time noticing what we find relevant and irrelevant in them, what our assumptions are about them and how we inhabit them” (2016:9), I had to not remove my subjective lens per se, but don one in which I considered perspectives other than my own to truly see what I could have over-looked. Empathy helped to open my mind.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an alternative form of research that features a narrative writing style, and embraces subjectivity to enhance qualitative data (Denshire 2013). It is a way of writing and research that “connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social context…[they] feature dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional
stories affected by history, social structure, and culture” (Holt 2003:1). I chose to write in this method as a way in which to blur the lines between myself and others in a way that it did not objectify or dehumanize any of the experiences of the participants, but rather wed my own experiences throughout as a means to make this piece an extremely subjective piece—an “embodied representation” (Denshire 2013:5). Miriam Shoshana Sobre-Denton, a White woman who conducted an autoethnography as a means to explore her own White privilege, explained this approach as, “[a] weaving between the visceral-experiential and the theoretical” (2012:223). In this way, autoethnography is a way in which my subjective experience, and the subjective experience of my participants can be in conversation with the theoretical. Although there are several discussions about both the validity and the “academic weight” of autoethnography, I contest my choice as a strength in representing these voices alongside my own, in a way that I performed my very theme of vulnerability through the production of this work.

I chose to include my own positionality and reflexivity, or, “a self-scrutiny on the part of the researcher” (Bourke 2014:1), to situate what I learned in the context of its significance to my own self-work and privilege. For instance, by inserting myself into this research, I was able to compare my participants’ experiences with my own experiences to contrast accesses and privileges that I have as a White woman. As Bourke said, “research represents a shared space, shaped by both research and participants…[and] as such, the identities of both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process” (2014:1). This allowed me to not only reflect on my own privileges, but to also show that race and ethnicity are instrumental when analyzing access to dance and its necessity in an individual’s life. My positionality in this piece not only reflected my access to vulnerability and family, but was a comment on the nature of
dance as a mode of expression and the crucial function it serves to those who may not have access to other avenues or spaces of expression.

As is natural with a study of purposive sampling, “native” observations, and story-telling, my research comes with its own limitations. For instance, by choosing my own participants, I left out a lot of voices that could have added several different elements to this piece (Babbie 2013). By selecting certain people based on their relationship to the Block, and to how they identify racially or ethnically, I only included those who I thought could garner me a wide array of perspectives. This is limiting, however, in the fact that perspectives that could have been valuable were excluded not by my choice, necessarily, but due to the scope of the project and the resources available. Another limitation would be my close relationship to the studio. For although I could make several arguments about the inauthenticity of objectivity in an auto-ethnography, I will save my arguments and just assert that my closeness to the subject matter, both the scene and the individuals, could impact their perspectives and what they were willing to share. Although several steps were taken to alleviate what I could to ensure answers were not being catered to what participants thought I might like to hear, I voiced this limitation as a way to merely assure that this research is wholly subjective.

Conclusion

This chapter explains the multiple methods I drew on to conduct my thesis research on vulnerability and family in dancing at a studio/community space in Boulder, Colorado. More specifically, I used semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and autoethnography in conducting this research. My study is not without limitations, but given the small amount of research on this topic, it synthesizes what is currently understood about vulnerability as a strength, as a mode of expression that has differential access to those who identify as non-White,
and dance as a means to create familial ties in a way that might be lacking in certain peoples’ lives. The following chapter will present the findings from my multi-method study, and present the experiences of those who followed me on this journey.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vulnerability

According to Merriam Webster’s Learner’s Dictionary (2008), vulnerability is typically used to describe a weakness that makes something or someone open to attack or damage in a way that it/they can be physically or emotionally wounded. Security systems and natural environments are prone to such vulnerabilities, or central weak spots, which when located are accessed and taken advantage of to harm that system. However, when I was first introduced to the concept, it was described as a strength (Brown 2007). Brené Brown, a self-classified shame researcher, has produced several ethnographic novels such as I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn’t) and Daring Greatly that follow women in their ability to be empathetic, compassionate, vulnerable, and shameless. Brown argues that “we equate vulnerability with weakness, and, in our culture, there are very few things we abhor more than weakness” (2007:77), and defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (2012:14). Throughout her research she connects vulnerability to concepts such as shame and connection. Not to be confused with embarrassment, guilt, or humiliation, shame is “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (2007:5). Shame and vulnerability are inextricably intertwined; vulnerability is the risk we take to be emotionally exposed, and shame is the response that we, as women (as Brown only interviewed women), have been taught to feel when we are vulnerable. For instance, in several instances, Brown identifies that shame is not only intrinsic to human nature and behavior, but has become
extremely intrinsic in US culture. In these moments of shame, we often experience “feelings of not being good enough, not having enough, and not belonging enough” (2007:xxiii). She identified that we become caught in this web of shame due to social-community expectations that erupt from both individual and societal protrusions. For instance, she stated,

The expectations that form the web are often based on characteristics like our race, class, sexual orientation, age or religious identity…Shame is organized by gender. The expectations that fuel shame for women are based on our culture’s perception of what is acceptable for women. In my new research on men, I’m learning that the expectations that fuel shame for men are based on our culture’s perception of masculinity—what should a man be, look like and act like. (18)

Brown (2007) eventually expanded her gendered analysis of shame and also proposed that individuals could also feel shame around their skin color. However, her analysis of race is cut short after a quick anecdote from an African-American mother explaining her shame involved in explaining her children’s beauty. Multi-racial children within a culture that does not value Black characteristics as beautiful have distorted self-perceptions around their own beauty. While this was an interesting introduction into what could have been an interesting deep analysis of shame and race constructed by larger, negative impositions that institutions create, Brown did not dig further. Therefore, an extensive analysis of intersectionality present within the larger discourse of shame was absent. I could extend her same notions of shame past her generalized analysis of the reaction being gendered, and include women of color as having even further protrusions of triggers that may cause shame. However, Brown continues to explain an action plan for evading or confronting shame by saying that having the courage to not feel shame drives us more towards compassion and empathy and connection, and allows us to not default into feeling shame every single time that we may be vulnerable.

During a free training one night, Modesty, a girl, who had recently been coming more regularly to the Block, stepped outside of the studio to throw on her coat and head home. I
followed her to the other room and asked her if she was about to leave. She answered that she thought that this would be the week that she would be able to dance with all of us in the cypher, a circle in which one enters and dances while others stand around and watch, but instead, she put herself in the corner to stretch, got too nervous, and decided to leave. I asked why she was nervous, and she replied, “You guys are all just too good.” I told her about my own trials with subjecting myself to the cypher, and how for a year I put myself in that same corner and just watched. It was not until I finally decided to be seen that I entered the cypher, lost myself, and just danced. I told her in order to get into that cypher, it meant that I had to shed any shame I had felt about my own dancing, and be extremely vulnerable to those who would stand around me in that circle to watch me. She smiled and replied, “But I like to be invisible, I’m good at it.” She thanked me for my advice and asked me to force her next week to go in the cypher, and after she left, I wondered if her being a Black woman had anything to do with her statement of liking her self-imposed invisibility.

Using this theoretical concept of vulnerability, or exposure, as a strength, author of *Sister Outsider* (1984), Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde, wrote two essays, *The Transformation of Silence into Action* and *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*, that contend that Black women are hyper-visible due to the nature of oppressive structures in the United States that promote stereotypes and tropes that are perpetuated through mass media and popular culture. The visibility of Black women inherently makes them more exposed, and therefore vulnerable, in their everyday lives. However, she warrants that this vulnerability and visibility is not a weakness, but a strength in promoting action over silence in dismantling the perpetuation of these harmful stereotypes and tropes. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), author of *Black Feminist Thought*, stated that the process in which Black women under-go to resolve the contradictions
they face in the form of controlling images, or tropes that simplify Black women’s identities to racist, untrue stereotypes, requires a great deal of inner strength. To resist, Black women must then create their own resistance outside of the framework of racist institutions and social structures in the US. She continued by exploring the power of self-definition that Black women go through as a means to create a safe space within themselves where they are actively empowering themselves by resisting dominant ideologies of US culture (male patriarchy, US racism, heteronormativity, etc.)

However, I continue to question Modesty’s desire to like invisibility, and wonder if Lorde considers that Black women’s hyper-visibility to the scrutiny of the White gaze in everyday life means that Black women, out of an attempt of control, try to make themselves invisible. In this way, perhaps Modesty was experiencing fear of being seen, as her vulnerability, as a Black woman living in Boulder, is not allowed in certain spaces, and out of a learned response, invisibility is the only way that she could control the impact of her hyper-visibility of herself. In order for spaces to be considered safe, outside of the private realm of themselves, in “her psyche” (2000:111) as Collins posited, the dominant, White gaze or surveillance must be removed, so that the she can transition more easily into being seen, with the ability to define herself. This ability to define themselves was important in creating a freeing space in which Black women could move away from victimization (Lorde 1984; Collins 2000).

Since dance is a mode in which emotions are expressed (Barwell 1986), it can be used as a vehicle of vulnerability—it is like showing people externally things that you are feeling internally. This is important to those who may need to release a large amount of pent up emotions (Cox 2015). Aimee Meredith Cox, author of *Shapeshifter: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (2015) noted a poignant moment in which one of the girls,
persistently labeled a problem child, was given an opportunity to dance in a piece in which she could express a lot of the anger that she had been feeling. This anger had been causing her to have outbursts, and consequently left her labeled as having anger issues. By way of letting her release these emotions in the form of a choreographed solo, she was able to express herself, let her emotions be seen, and was able to be vulnerable in a way that was not self-destructive. In this way, Cox explored the connection between anger that exists in the Black girls that she studied, the way in which that anger is created due to social pressures and institutional harm put upon people of color, and how dance helped to release those emotions. I wonder, though, if Cox could have explored the setting in which she was allowed to perform her anger, for it was only when the girl was granted a solo that she was given the opportunity to “let go.” Perhaps a greater look into the spaces in which these girls were allowed to relieve themselves emotionally could have been an interesting look into the expectations placed on Black youth, specifically young girls, to only be vulnerable when asked to.

With regards to space, one does not simply let go of one’s identity when entering a place. For instance, Mike Lucas (2014) explored the conception of space as a phenomenon that has been cultivated by human action. These places, “are characterized by the bringing together of material and socio-cultural phenomena” (198). Since these materials and socio-cultural phenomena are brought in by those who cultivated the space, the individuals are then inherently a part of that space. For instance, Lucas included that places are therefore not void of the characterization of those who created it, and there is, “a distinction between space as an individually perceived phenomenon and place as a collectively co-constructed one” (2014:199). Therefore, those who enter a space will construct that space by including their socio-cultural realities. Therefore, when connecting my own ability to roam about spaces freely due to my
Whiteness, author David Delaney (2002) posited that since Whiteness is seen as transparent in regards to race, in that White people, if surrounded by other White people, will never consider race and will typically “Other” race issues as being separate from them in that space in which they are the majority. This renders the effects of their privilege invisible, for if they do not consider race in its entirety, then the effects that they could consider (about the impact that their Whiteness has on those around them in that space) is forgotten. This, he continued, helps to normalize Whiteness in that space, and, “in turn, unmarkedness facilitates the misrecognition of people, places, and situations that are raced ‘not white’ as exceptional, if not abnormal” (2002:11). This normalization of Whiteness also lends White people to enjoy this privilege by having control over dominant institutions, and therefore, “occupying space within a segregated social landscape” (Kobayashi & Peake 2000:393). Contextualizing the research within the city of Boulder, I looked at Abby Hickcox’s (2007) *Green Belt, White City: Race and the Natural Landscape in Boulder, Colorado*. She expressed sentiments of local residents of color, echoing the accepted discourse on Boulder as a majority-White city: “It is not uncommon to hear residents and visitors comment on how ‘white’ Boulder is or how few black people one sees on the street. In addition, some African American residents express feelings of isolation and special attention in public places in Boulder” (2007:237). By synthesizing both the theoretical understanding of the normalization of Whiteness, the othering of people of color, and the occupation and colonization of space by White people in power, within the racial landscape of Boulder, Colorado, we understand the availability of people of color to take up space, be seen, self-define themselves outside of the White gaze, and have the courage to then be vulnerable.

Several of these authors have taken expression into account without explicitly, except for Brown (2007), saying the word vulnerability. Further, several times in Cox’s (2015) text, she
used the word to describe a detrimental point of access that was used to harm the girls—words that indicated she understood vulnerability as a point of weakness that could be taken advantage of to cause harm to an individual. Each of the other authors used vocabulary that alluded to both mine and Brown’s understanding of vulnerability as a strength, but without diving deeply into the phenomenon as a vehicle to help promote positive ways of connecting, feeling, healing, and living. In this way, both in their implicit and explicit uses of expression and vulnerability, this research promotes my understanding of dance’s use of vulnerability as a way to strengthen a dancer’s emotional expression and connection with both themselves and the people around them. Without this understanding of vulnerability as both inherent to both emotional delivery and to dance, we would not be able to understand how it is that dancers are allowed to share stories, translate sentiments, or articulate their art (Barwell 1986).

*Family*

Research suggests that creative communities are formed by like-minded individuals with similar interests and passions like art (Farrell, 2001; Houston, 2005). Farrell argues that the best creative work is produced from the collaboration of like-minded friends in smaller groups, called collaborative circles. These collaborative circles are those in which individuals reach their creative peak because “members…trust one another with their wildest ideas, use each other as sound boards and critics and develop a sense of a common mission” (2001:17). This common mission, or similar art, is the cohesion or the cultural glue that binds the group together. Deep access to the dance community, or an admittance into a tight-knit group within spaces that practice art, then has to revolve around a similar interest in dance in those who may want to enter that circle. However, for those on the periphery, who may want to join a dance community in general, may come from all walks of life and skill level in dance, as Houston contended, “[we must] acknowledge the work
that the dance community has done in welcoming participation from groups not traditionally associated with the art form” (2001:166). Since dance is a highly consumed aesthetic and production of art, it is extremely visible to several people, and so the art form is culturally available for anyone and everyone who may want to get involved outside of the realm of those who have been classically trained in such for a long period of time, as Houston echoed, “participation is for the highly trained, and for those who claim to have two left feet, and indeed for those who do not have any mobile feet” (2001:169). In the context of a larger dance community, since several people are always being introduced, we can see contrasting groups: the periphery, or the people that come to the community looking to learn how to dance with a range of skill levels, and the core, or the smaller, close-knit community built through trust and collaboration.

In the context of the Block, think of these two groups like concentric circles: the periphery on the outside consists of anyone who may enter the studio looking to take a class, and the core as the individuals at the Block who have spent ample time together in that space and have developed relationships past mere acquaintanceship. When these circles are produced in a “magnet place,” or “some other place where people value the expertise and practice the skills the prospective members hope to acquire” (2001:19), the core group of friends can start to play the role of a surrogate family (Farrell, 2001). The value placed upon these fictive kinships, or family-not-by-blood, is one that defines group lines and differentiates the network of friends from outsiders (Ibsen et al. 1972; Farrell 2001). Farrell (2001) contends that once these relationships are established, they are used as surrogates to achieve needs that are not being met by the family, and that in turn helps creativity, for, “…as they dispel the shadows of their familial relationships, the members gain increased mastery over the psychological process that block or distort their creative work” (13). For instance, he described patterns of family that may be problematic, such as pleasing a parent, grappling with
authority, or a competitive relationship with a sibling. These patterns could be extremely detrimental to the creative work of a person in that their efforts are distracted by these issues within their familial life. Therefore, he contended that this surrogate family is created by an emotional transference upon this group of familial relationships and transformed into a type of therapy group where members can practice their creative work in a more freeing environment.

Fictive kinships, or friends regarded as family, function to create informal support networks that surpass or expand upon those in actual kinships among blood families (Ibsen & Klobus 1972; Chatters et al. 1994; Muraco 2006). According to Braithwaite et al. (2010), there are four types of alternative forms of fictive kinship, or voluntary kinship: (1) voluntary kin as substitute family, (2) voluntary kin as supplementary family, (3) voluntary kin as convenience family, and (4) voluntary kin as extended family. Each of the different typologies of voluntary kin explore the different functions of friends as family, and include that these relationships can either happen in conjunction with, or exist outside of, the blood family. Therefore, specific needs are met with these extra, significant relationships mostly in the realm of emotional support rather than financial, etc. (Ibsen & Klobus 1972).

Several authors have explored the use of these ties in marginalized communities such as gay and lesbian communities (Muraco 2006) and Black, Latino, and Anglo extended families (Chatters et al. 1994). However, in the specific context of youth of color and the culture of Hip Hop, connecting these ideas with notions about “choosing” your family, Tricia Rose (1994) posited that Hip Hop crews are

> a local source of identity, group affiliation, and support system [that] appears repeatedly in all my interviews… These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment. (78)
Therefore, youth of color, especially those in Hip Hop culture, use crews as way to not only negotiate their own identities, but to use similar tactics recognized by authors such as Muraco (2006) and Braithwhite et al. (2010) to forge bonds that provide them with support against racist structures and institutions, and help them define themselves as a part of a clearly defined social group. This, in the competitive and confrontational world of Hip Hop, helps to form an act of “resistance or preparation for a hostile world which denies and denigrates young people of color” (Rose 1994:79). For, solidarity is an act of resistance, as dominant ideologies, institutions, and structures in the US consistently try to colonize and segregate people of color (Collins 2000).

Creating these intentional, voluntary, fictive kinship relationships helps us to understand the need for their construction in very specific communities. However, for instance, in the case of intentional families in gay and lesbian communities (Muraco 2006), the need for a family came about out of the resistance, neglect, or absence of support from the blood families that people were from. In the case of communities studied by Ibsen and Klobus (1972) several of the relationships studied were those that included young children’s relationships with parents’ friends as a means to expand the networks of support and care for a child. Similarly, Chatters et al. (1994) examines Black extended families, where the majority of fictive kinships explored were those of aunties, uncles, godmothers, and godfathers, and explored how they provide informal support networks that help mitigate the impact of poverty (especially in the South). The formation of fictive kinships was necessary for extra nodes of support not only based on the individuals’ lives in general, but in the case of what those individuals faced in their lives from oppressive, outside factors (Muraco 2006; Collins 2006; Chatters et al. 1994). Finding solidarity in a community through the support of these informal familial units helped to engage individuals, and teach them important lessons outside of blood-family, as hooks (2001) said, “the other place where children in particular have
the opportunity to build community and know love is in friendship” (133). Therefore, by experiencing love in a community of friends of our choosing, that act as an extension of our blood family, marginalized peoples can be introduced to redemptive love and a caring community—both concepts that may be absent in a society that continually tries to eradicate in the lives of people of color (hooks 2001).

What lacks in conversations surrounding families that you choose, instead of families that you are born with, is the occurrence of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial group that is tied to a specific space. For, even though spaces can be racialized as multi-racial (Thomas 2005), the space is usually segregated and divided in which groups are expected to perform internalized and normalized racial identities and stereotypes. This racialization of space as multi-racial is also usually policed under those that ascribe to a heavy use of the binary Black vs. White. However, Thomas (2005) considered very briefly that some multi-racial spaces may be less polarized and thus more fluid. Therefore, there is an obvious gap in the literature about those fluid multi-racial spaces, especially in the context of dance communities, Hip Hop crews, and dance studios in Boulder, Colorado.

VULNERABILITY

The Vulnerability Phenomenon

While talking with one of my professors about the themes of this paper, she stopped me mid-sentence and asked with exasperation, “Jesse, why do you keep fighting this data so much?” I cast my eyes downward and sighed heavily, “Because I know if I ask my participants to be ceaselessly vulnerable with me, that would mean that I would have to be equally as forthcoming and vulnerable.” That in itself made me want to turn away from writing this. My strong suits may include empathy and compassion and some excellent listening skills, but when the tables are
turned and I am asked to be equally as open as I was asking my participants to be, I shut down. Maybe that is why I am endlessly so fascinated with that space and those people: their ability to give and to express what they want, how they want, is a super-power that I wish I had been granted.

I just came back from an event called Diggs Deeper. This event spans across state lines, and happens every other month or so, where dancers from state dance communities are asked to perform a freestyle to a song of their choice. Couches and chairs were pulled into the studio at Block 1750, mats were laid out, and people were sprawled, yet closely knit together, to create an intimate setting where the dancer was not performing on a proscenium stage, for all to look down upon them, but at eye-level, and as Ray, the emcee for the night said, “We’re all at the same level, this ground level, because we’re all equal.” Several different people from several different crews, different areas, different families, different states, and different countries, all united in one room as the Colorado dance community watched as specific members went up, faced away from the mirror, and danced. One participant in particular, the first to perform in the second half, when asked if she wanted to say something, grabbed the mic, smiled nervously and took a second to breathe. She said, “Hey guys. I’m really nervous, you guys are all so good. (She turned away from the crowd, took a deep breath and continued.) This year has been so rough and bumpy…I got knocked down three times, and I feel like this space right here is a good way for me to just express myself and let it go.” And let it go, she did. Several other performers followed suit by exclaiming 2016 as a hard year, and then performing extremely vulnerable and emotional pieces, breathing deeply, closing their eyes as if to reach further inward, and throwing their hands out towards the audience as if presenting themselves—literally opening themselves up—in the form of open palms to the audience. In this space, crew lines were erased, and individuals were
recognized for the sole act of their expression, as Angela, whom I spoke of before had said, “here tonight, I’m just me, I’m a part of Academy of Raw/Hype 303, and usually we do choreography that is in your face, but tonight I’m just Angela.”

In this way, Angela explored something I previously had mentioned from Brené Brown: courage. By being so vulnerable, admitting her nervousness, and then having the courage to present herself as a vehicle of her own individual expression, void of choreography that is typically described as hype, or “a publicity of an extravagant or contrived kind; excellent or cool” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). This type of dancing, in which she was expressing her hard year, putting forth those emotions that she would typically maybe talk about only with close friends or family, by literally closing her eyes to focus within, pulling from that very vulnerable place, she literally showed us her feelings about her year. For instance, Judith Lynne Hanna (2010) described dance as, “purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, culturally patterned, nonverbal body movement communication in time and space” (213). Bre, one of my participants that I interviewed, described a similar phenomenon:

Some extreme, like, intense feelings are better communicated with your body than with words...if I’m looking for a certain kind of feeling... like, for example, with the eye contact, if I’m trying to be sad, there will be no eye contact, you know? It’s like, when you try and convey something sometimes, it’s like not seeing the eyes: that’s a message too. It’s like, “Oh, I’m not seeing your eyes. Why?” You know? Because usually when you dance, you want to have eye contact.

In this way, one can recognize when another is being vulnerable down to the very act of no eye contact. For instance, Suparna Banerjee (2012) recognized that, “elaborate and nuanced facial expressions are considered to be the integral part of narrative dances...[there is a] codified vocabulary of movements linked to meaning” (29). As Bre mentioned, by only revealing vaguely that it had been a hard year, Angela showed us in a matter of minutes how hard that year had
been by expressing angst, sadness, and longing through movement and her inability to look the audience in the eye, perhaps referring to a moment where she was feeling extremely internal.

Phenomenology is the experiential marriage of subjectivity and objectivity to arrive at meaning through the phenomenon of something—in this case, dance. Therefore, when we are objectively watching a dancer dance, we are also subjectively, in that moment, trying to create meaning (Fraleigh 1991). This meaning, then, is something that we try and share with that performer. In the case of the event Diggs Deeper, by establishing a space that tries and puts the performers in the intimate, but equal space of the audience, the capacity for the audience to share with the performer is a much more streamlined and reciprocal medium through with to engage in a shared meaning. For the dancer to try and express something, and to have that knowingly be shared with other people, is a way for the dancer to explore being seen in a way that is entirely vulnerable and courageous. For the audience, to watch and not only consume, but to engage with the performer, is a way to try and empathize with the performer’s expression, and find a shared meaning that is not solely the performer’s, but the audiences as well. If the individuals watching can connect whatever is being expressed with something in themselves, then the capacity for empathy and compassion is extremely high. Our ability to develop this empathy in this space allows for connection, which is one of the explicit tenets of Diggs Deeper. Authors of *Empowering Women of Color*, Lorraine Margot Gutiérrez and Edith Anne Lewis said there are two vital purposes of connection:

> The development of social support networks and the creation of power through interaction. Involvement with others in similar situations provides individuals with a means for acquiring and providing mutual aid, with the opportunity to learn new skills through role modeling, with strategies for dealing with likely institutional reprisals, and with a potential power base for future action. (10)

Therefore, by combining the instance of phenomenology to incite empathy, and for empathy to be a way to connect to others, dance not only helps to act as a mode of expression, but as a way
to connect to others in engaging in shared meanings constructed by both the performer and the audience.

**Self-Work, Authenticity, and Dance**

Every moment in my life where I was asked to be vulnerable, explicitly or implicitly, flashed before my eyes the first time I sat down to watch Brené Brown’s (2010) TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*. When she defined vulnerability as, “the core of shame, and fear and our struggle for worthiness…it’s also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love”. Not once had I put a word to *feeling exposed and raw* or associated that feeling with anything else but nausea and pain. Never again would I cower in the presence of the expectation of vulnerability and never again would I cower in shame by not meeting that expectation. However, many of my experiences in life have forced me into responses like shame when asked to be vulnerable. For instance, when I dance in front of people that I do not know for the first time, I typically feel very shameful. For when I dance, I under-go a process of showing both who I am and what I am going through. Even if I do not receive negative feedback, and may even bask in praise, I wonder if I showed *too* much of myself. I often feel like I lose control over my own power of regulating what people may know about me. For instance, I can no longer control what they know about me since I expressed something extremely personal through dance. Brown (2007) states,

> When we experience shame, it is very difficult to maintain our power. First, when we feel shame, most of us are not conscious of what we’re feeling and why we’re feeling it. Shame often produces overwhelming and painful feelings of confusion, fear, anger, judgement and/or the need to escape or hide from the situation. (27)

Eventually, our perceived loss of power leads us to feeling shame and eventually leads to feelings of disconnection. Again, the only way to move past disconnection is through practicing empathy, courage, and compassion (Brown 2007). As I operate in spaces like Block 1750, where
vulnerability is inextricably linked to dance, I constantly try to practice these concepts in order to take part in the larger community and to work on challenging my normalized response of shame.

I began to wonder, through my relentless self-work during this research process, whether my peers had to work this hard towards being courageous enough to be vulnerable. For instance, while talking with Hanna on why she danced, she said,

The goal [should] not be so focused on being accepted, and where the goal and the intention is to find your truth. And in order to find your truth, you have to sift through a lot of what you think is the truth in order to get to that vulnerable spot, which is your raw movement, your raw emotions, your raw story.

That time you spend wading through the dirt and the grime and the soot of untouched, raw emotions are the times that are equally spent tidying the area of cobwebs; it is the moment that you set forth that exploration into that part of yourself that you are tidying up for 1) you to see and, 2) for others to see. Hanna continued and said, “although that seems like a vulnerable place, it’s the most powerful place because it’s the only… I believe that it’s the only way you can access who you are”.

Brown (2007) connects vulnerability with authenticity, or the sharing of self in a true way, in the sense that those who feel shame will typically shy away from being authentic. However, by embracing the raw expression of those vulnerabilities, we are touching a more authentic part of ourselves. In being more authentic, too, this shame resilience lends to create more connections with others because it opens up the door for empathy and compassion, two tenets of connection that Brown (2007) identifies. Echoing the words Brown said, when talking about shying away from authenticity and vulnerability, Hanna said: “…because otherwise, you’re just putting on a show. You’re putting on other people’s shells. You’re putting on people’s clothes. And that’s a weakness, I think, because then you’re not gaining the lessons,
gaining the power, also, in telling your story so that someone else can relate to it.” Utilizing the force of empathy, Hanna connected that vulnerability and authenticity to power and strength.

*Hip Hop You Don’t Stop!*

My practice of authenticity and vulnerability went through many trials, however, as I was tested over and over as I walked through the doors of the studio day after day, as, for a long time, I had no courage and very little compassion for myself. However, my long, and, at times, lonely journey was guided by consistent support from several sources. There were several people at the Block that over-saw my passion through up until the moment I decided to let my vulnerabilities pour out of my dancing: there were my parents who applauded my leap back into dance, my Dad encouraged me by fueling my motivation, and my presence at the studio was never questioned on the basis of any facet of my identity. Hanna, someone who I am very close to both in my dancing style and expression, and also as a friend, identified some of the same tenets when she described how she feels as White woman in Boulder: “I feel safe. I feel encouraged. Also in queer spaces, as a queer individual, I feel embraced in Boulder at large…I feel aware that we’re missing out on a lot of cultural activity…So I do feel among the masses here”. So like Hanna in the context of Block 1750, for the most part, I was surrounded by people who looked like me, operated in the space like me, payed for class like me, talked liked me, and expressed some of the same things as me, I glided along my path to expression in a very freeing, but very narrow lens.

When talking with Lars, one of the dancers that frequents the Block daily, my original question of one’s ability to find vulnerability easy or not-so-easy continued to be preset—I felt as if there was something more that I was missing. It was not until I spoke to my friend about his relation to Hip Hop that I finally felt the release of the narrow gaze and the acceptance of one of the largest pieces I had been missing: access. When I asked Lars about what Hip Hop dance
meant to him he said, “it should be remembered that it [Hip Hop dance] was created by Black people…like you should understand the roots to understand the feeling of the dance so you understand how you can connect to music in that way”. He directly associated himself with the culture of Hip Hop, as he identifies as a Black person who engages with some aspect of the five elements of the culture: deejaying, graffiti, emceeing, b-boysing, and knowledge (Greenburg 2009). He posited that by interacting with this culture in this space, he provided the Block and the individuals within that space that do not identify as Black the opportunity to be able to learn about his subjective experience as being a Black man interacting with Hip Hop culture. He said, “you know, as much as people try to understand…like, you can understand a certain person’s culture by reading, you can listen to their experiences, but you won’t be able to truly experience it…so having that person’s input is somewhat valuable.” He found that he could contribute to the space and the people within it by providing them with the ability to possibly empathize with his experiences by showing them, through Hip Hop dance, his experiences as a person of color.

Bre, coming from a different dance community, but inserting herself into the Block scene as a close friend of the studio’s, had a different take on the Block’s use of Hip Hop culture. She started by sharing her own intimate association of Hip Hop with her identity and dancing:

> With Hip Hop, I feel like it’s more than just music. It really is, like, there’s the music, there’s the dance; there’s just people getting together and talking about it…I definitely listen to it every day, I definitely…it’s hard to explain. It’s just, it’s you. Sometimes I read excerpts of interviews and stuff, and see their views on life in general, and the world in general. It’s more than just music. For me, Hip Hop has always been so kind of like relatable…so that’s how they reached out to the masses. It’s like, Oh man, he’s speaking some real stuff right now…If it can resonate with the audience, then you know it’s going to make it far, because we can actually make a connection to what you’re saying…I feel like some people don’t really have the exact definition of Hip Hop…I mean, hey, maybe I don’t even know what it actually means to be Hip Hop…I mean, I don’t think any studio in Colorado is 100% Hip Hop.

Bre’s connection to Hip Hop, in which she sees the culture as not just music, but as a way of life harks back to the original purpose of Hip Hop. The Black youth in the Bronx in New York City
needed a way to express themselves in a way that did not involve death or destruction. Instead, they turned a negative outlet positive by trading in destruction for creation. For instance, creating music, and graffiti art, and dance movement, and rhymes was a way in which the youth could turn the anger and frustration and sadness they felt from the oppressive assailants of racist individuals and institutions towards expression (Rabaka 2012). In this way, Hip Hop was then a form of resistance (Rabaka 2013). This form of resistance still exists today within bodies that are still oppressed by racist individuals and institutions. Bre, when asked if there was a space for vulnerability in Hip Hop, said: “Definitely. You can express anything with Hip Hop...If you can speak to the masses and they can relate to you? Yeah, why not? There’s a message. Like you guys are still having communication...It’s anything you want to talk about. It can be about you having a hard life growing up; liking that boy across the street. Whatever it is.” By speaking to the ability for an individual to express something by way of Hip Hop, and for that expression to be a way of communicating, she connected back to the previous notion of dance as a phenomenon that engages two people in a shared meaning. When two people are communicating, they are arriving at the same meaning, in which they both understand what the other is saying. By understanding what the other is saying, we arrive at empathy yet again, for if we are going through a process together constructing meaning, we cannot help but to also try and understand each other. This communication, then, could not be possible without either individual shedding any walls that may exist, accept vulnerability, and then create a space in which they are open, compassionate, and willing to understand the other. In this way, we see Hip Hop dance as a vulnerable expression.

Hanna echoed this notion in her own conception of her use of Hip Hop culture:

When I found the Hip Hop community I directly identified with breakdancing and the energy of battling and proving myself, and vulnerability in a cypher, in a battle, in a community. And I needed that. I needed that so much to explore myself and to find
myself. And then once I felt like I’d found myself more…I realized that some of that wasn’t as authentic as I thought it was…I think Hip Hop comes from a disempowered group, and I haven’t felt a lot of disempowerment. And so I had a lot of questions of, ‘Where do I belong in this culture of disempowerment? And empowerment.’ I feel like I’ve lived a pretty empowered life…knowing the culture, respecting the history, respecting the culture, so that I’m not just a spectator at Hip Hop events. But I do have some, as a White woman in Boulder, Colorado, I have some disconnection there. It’s taught me peace, love, unity, and having fun…It’s taught me how the only way you’re going to be yourself is if you actually be yourself…Even within Hip Hop, if I didn’t feel like that was quite me, it still took me to where I needed to be, and lets me be there…But Hip Hop taught me to be vulnerable in dance, if that makes sense…when I discovered Hip Hop, I discovered freedom in dance, and I will defend that until the day I die.

Even though Hanna does identify her positionality as a White woman in the context of Hip Hop culture, and accepts her privilege within that space, her limitations of an authentic experience of the culture, she did still maintain that Hip Hop dance, in the very essence of its roots in freestyle, is a vulnerable practice. In contrast with choreography, or a set of moves that is learned and repeated in order to tell a story, freestyle is a phenomenon that is produced in the moment based off musicality and pure expression. In the truest sense, freestyle is a pure form of expression. Therefore, Hanna connected the culture of Hip Hop with vulnerable expression, in that anything that you want to express is available to you by way of the vehicle of Hip Hop.

*The Golden Ticket to Vulnerability: Access*

For some reason, the only image in my head when I considered my own access to vulnerability was the moment Charlie from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* picked up the golden ticket. I felt like I had won that same golden ticket when I started to explore opening myself up, and expressing my vulnerabilities. However, as time passed and my research wore on, I started to resonate more with that Charlie that walked through the masses of upset children up until the gates of the Chocolate Factory: I felt an overwhelming sense of privilege. When I critically examined my own journey to vulnerability, courage, compassion, and empathy, I noticed that my journey was entirely whatever I wanted it to be. I never felt that my journey to
that golden ticket was observed, questioned, or scrutinized. More and more I started to feel like the other snobby children: I had just been handed this golden ticket, without even considering the possible roadblocks others had in attaining theirs. For instance, in that movie, even dear Charlie barely scraped enough money from the bottom of the barrel to buy the chocolate that could have a golden ticket inside. Donning my new critical lens, and analyzing the not-so-shy-classist undertones of the golden ticket contest of this childhood movie, I realized that the hundreds or thousands of children that huddled to watch as the lucky few got to enter the gates of the chocolate factory, were barred from even participating in that contest due to outside forces. In fact, only Charlie was a working-class individual, while all the other golden-ticket-winning children were from middle-to-upper-class families. So, arriving at my point in my long-winded analogy of golden tickets to vulnerability, I knocked myself on the head for not ever really considering not just individual bars from accessing a vulnerable place, but external, institutional, and societal bars as well.

In that moment, I questioned my access to dance and, in turn, my access to vulnerability as the two had become inextricably entwined. For as a White woman from an upper-middle class background, my ability to choose when I am vulnerable and not vulnerable when dancing is a very free, fluid process. For some days when I feel like hiding in a corner of the studio, I can be extremely internal and closed-off, and nobody questions my decision to do so other than the occasional, “Are you okay?” This power lies in the fact that in a studio of other similar people, I blend in. My other White, middle-to-upper-class peers allow me to sink into a space that is homogenous, and therefore I have the ability to be a chameleon where the facets of my identity do not shine out and present themselves in that space.
The space, even though it feels racially homogenous to me, was described in a variety of different ways by some participants. For instance, Hanna said,

I think Block 1750 is about as cultural as it gets in Boulder. I think that people come here from a lot of different places and spaces to be embraced, but I also will admit that I don’t think at all times [it] is the most welcoming to people of all races and ethnicities. I do think…we’ve found more diversity, but I think in the beginning, it was more a White place, and I think it’s grown.

When I asked Lars his feelings about the space, he contended that certain people, even with the good intentions to accept a wide variety of identities and people, could lack empathy at no fault of their own:

You know, it’s a place, it’s just a space for people, and that’s what I enjoy. I feel like the Block, it was founded by people who…mean well and everything…might not necessarily understand what it’s like to come from a certain background…but to know that kind of discrimination…to know…any [of] that kind of struggle is inherent in Hip Hop and I’m not necessarily sure if they’ve experienced it….

Finally, when I asked Bre, a Black woman who lives in Aurora and visits the Block less frequently than the other two participants about how she feels about the Block, she contrasted that space with how she feels in Boulder at large. She told me that when she visits Boulder, she really only ever enters two spaces: CU Boulder and the Block, and will usually not step outside of those spaces or interact with the city at large. Within the Block, though, she identifies that, “in general, [there is] a sense of diversity compared to the rest of Boulder”. This space, through the eyes of some participants, is seen as both a diverse, yet somewhat racially-limited place. Therefore, according to the people of color that frequent the Block, this space is perhaps an okay space in negotiating and expressing their identities due to the demographics of the studio compared to the demographics of the city of Boulder.

When asked about when he is vulnerable, Lars said, “you know, when I’m dancing…I feel vulnerable every single time I dance, but I feel the most comfortable when people are watching me…I put it all out there and I don’t ever think about it…I don’t have the opportunity
to be genuine in a lot of other spaces”. He continued by stating that he did not know that he was an extrovert until he started to dance and started to feed off of other people’s energy. His use of dividing this space from other spaces he inhabited (like school, or his music production, etc.) provided a separation from the greater, outside world of either Boulder or Denver. This separation provided me a sense of how he expressed himself in other situations and places. His ability to be genuine and vulnerable in this dance studio, and his ability to be an extrovert and feed off of other people’s energy in this environment was divisively different than other environments he inhabited. Subconsciously he was providing us with both who he was in this space and who he was outside of this space. At the Block, he felt the freedom to express himself, and the effervescence to do so in such a way that he felt his expression of self was heightened by the people around him.

I questioned whether this space, then, was somewhat of a limbo where he could exist and express without the cloud of outside judgements and expectations. Especially in the context of Boulder, Lars, a self-identified Black male, is hyper visible due to the demographics of a 90.6% White city (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). His hypervisibility, then, is policed under the White-dominant Boulder gaze. His ability to operate freely might be hindered, in that his ability to blend in is futile. In the words of George Yancy (2008), “…in the case of hypervisibility, the Black body becomes excessive. Within this racially saturated field of hypervisibility, the Black body still functions as the unseen as it does in the case of its invisibility. ‘Seen invisibility’ suggests the paradoxical sense in which the Black body is a ‘seen absence’” (75-76). Since Black tropes are so piercing and present in greater US discourse, the Black body operates only as a one-dimensional figure that everyone can identify and recognize, and it relegates the Black person invisible under the shadow of the stereotypes. So for Lars to interact with those stereotypes, to
challenge them, and to approach them, face them, and then flip them by expressing several complicated facets of himself, is a direct form of resistance. The space in which he can do so, however, is extremely limited, as he identified, and the form of expression that he chose to use was dance. More specifically, he states, “Hip Hop means actual freedom to me. Because it’s like, it’s a culture that’s made from having without”.

Expressing similar emotions about her presence in Boulder, and her presence at the Block, Bre shared her thoughts about being in Boulder in general:

I don’t really explore Boulder that much. Where I go, it’s literally just CU or the Block. But in my opinion, it’s just kind of like a suburbia, you know, small town kind of? And it’s not really my scene, because I’ve done it. And I feel that when I was growing up in a suburban [sic] town, I hated it. I just couldn’t do it. It’s kind of hard when you’re like going through this ‘awkward Black girl stage’—I don’t know if you’ve heard of it; it’s this little show—and it’s like always you’re stuck between being the stereotype, and when you’re not the stereotype, it’s like, ‘Oh, what’s wrong with her?’ So, I didn’t feel like I meshed really well in that kind of environment, so I wouldn’t really say that I can identify with anything about Boulder when it comes to the town in general. So when I go, it’s like just to the Block or just to CU. That’s all I do.

In this case, Bre identifies two phenomena about being a Black person in a White space. First, she identifies that her body, as a Black woman, is hyper visible. Collins (2000) identified that controlling images placed upon Black women’s body were constructed as a means to colonize them, and control their representation and objectification of self. These myths were conducted for the purpose of creating an image that would define Black women as the “Other” in order to define what White women were not. In this sense, these extremely limited stereotypes of Black women in public spaces make them extremely visible. However, the image that is visible under the White gaze, is one in which conceals the true essence of that individual; the stereotypes are so one-dimensional, that any complexity of that individual is erased. Bre said that she had experienced a place, back in her experience of living in the suburbs, where she felt she could not be realized as a multi-faceted Black woman, and went through a process of Othering. When an
individual goes through this process where they are identified as “the ‘Others’ of society who can never really belong…they are [also] simultaneously essential for its survival because those who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries” (2000:77). She was conceived as not belonging to society because she 1) was a Black woman among those who were not like her and, 2) did not fit any, or too many, of the one-dimensional tropes. This confused those who could not possibly see Black women as complex individuals that do not, and will never, fulfill those myths. Therefore, Bre was confined only to spaces that she chose as a way to control how she was perceived in a place in which she felt comfortable. For example, in particular, she chooses to come to the Block because she feels comfortable as a Black woman there: “Identity-wise, yeah, it’s definitely fine…which is why I tend to just go there and stay…the Block in general has a sense of diversity compared to most of Boulder”.

In that moment, I remember a very poignant moment during an event the Block hosts every year: Block Party. This year, people, literally from all over the world, came to dance, battle, teach, and share. Countries such as Russia, Spain, France, Germany, and Austria were represented, and individuals from all over the U.S., from California, New York, Florida, Utah, New Mexico, and beyond flooded into a studio in a strip mall in Boulder, Colorado. It was after one of the crews, Amida, had performed, and people sitting all around the stage, that was constructed out of ply-wood and tape, stormed the stage and its performers, in which a dance party ensued. I remember a moment where I removed myself from the masses, stepped up on the strip where the judges sat elevated above the floor, and peered out across the people dancing under the large, circus-like tent. I saw African-American people, I saw Asian people, I saw Polynesian people, I saw French people, I saw Chicanx people, I saw German people, I saw Russian people, I saw African people all gathered together, dancing under the moonlight, out of
the pure expression of joy. People were hugging and cyphering and smiling, and in that moment, I saw something in Boulder that burst the bigger White bubble of Boulder. I saw a very diverse setting, one which competed with the average experience and setting that one has in Boulder. Even though this event only lasted a weekend, the diversity is still felt within the walls of the Block by those who identify as non-White, for they know that this place has the ability to break those normative White boundaries—the Block is able to facilitate individuals of varying identities in a traditionally White city.

Audre Lorde (2007) said, “That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (42). Her meaning was that her Blackness, while hyper visible in America, and also invisible by the means of racism, was her strength. Lars’s visibility was also his greatest strength when it came to his vulnerability. While I may be able to access my own vulnerability whenever I please, and while I may be able to blend in my surroundings and choose not to be visible and vulnerable, his access to expression in that space made dance that much more vital to his ability to feel safe, comfortable, and free. When asked if the Block was a sacred space, he said,

Yes… in a way… it’s definitely sacred to me because it’s a place where people can express themselves… like it’s not a place where everyone should just like feel the safest that they could possibly be because being safe and comfortable is completely… that’s different than being free… but negative emotion is accepted, it’s okay to feel bad, it’s okay to feel mad, it’s okay to feel sad, but you have to express that honestly, but not with mal intent directed… directly at someone.

In this space, he felt that it was okay to come in and express negative emotion, for those emotions are what dancers use to move. That is the piggy bank from which we draw. Here, again, dance becomes an instrumental avenue for him with which to express himself wholly: he is allowed to express these negative emotions without perpetuating stereotypes thrown upon him in this homogenous White space, like the angry Black stereotype, for instance. Lorde (1984), in a
piece describing Black women and anger says, “We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty” (P. 26).

While I must add that Lorde was specifically talking about Black women’s response to racism in the institutionalized United States structure of oppression, I use this to amplify Lars’s ability to express whatever negative emotions he may have, whether it be from racism outside (or inside) the Block, from trials of love and friendship, to whatever life may throw at him. However, this access may only exist within the dance studio, or within his bedroom where he produces music.

Thus, power structures exist even in one’s freedom to express. I have the freedom to choose whenever or however I may express my most inner self. I have the ability to blend into my background, to hide from plain sight, and to not be questioned about my intentions, or my attitudes, or how I express my badness, my angeriness, or my sadness. Lars and Bre, on the other hand, as a Black man and a Black woman, are only able to truly express themselves and let go when they are in a very specific environment where their bad, mad, sad, “negative” emotions will be read without oppressive lens and will instead be read as vulnerable expression. In this way, my vulnerability is a privilege. At first, regarding my own deep insecurities rooted within my ability to be vulnerable would have sent me spiraling into a vast hole of doubt and guilt. However, understanding the limitations and oppressions that these institutions put upon people of color, so much so that it affects each and every space they may enter, was something that I had never considered. This “shifting” that occurs, as authors Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2003) is when,

Black women are relentlessly pushed to serve and satisfy others and made to hide their true selves to placate White colleagues, Black men, and other segments of the community. They shift to accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity. From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting “White,” then shifting “Black” again, shifting “corporate,” shifting “cool.” And shifting has become such an integral part of Black women’s behavior that some adopt an alternate pose or voice as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath—
without thinking, and without realizing that the emptiness they feel and the roles they must play may be directly related. (7)

Black women feel the need to put on a mask in order to be successful in society socially, economically, politically, etc. in White spaces and Black spaces. This creates an internal rift, so much so, that they no longer know feelings of wholeness or a true sense of self (Jones & Shorter-Gooden 2003). At this point in the research, practicing my empathy became complicated. My issues in vulnerability were rooted somewhat in my gendered experiences in learning shame as an automatic response, and yet, overwhelmingly, they were produced from individual instances in toxic relationships with friends and romantic partners. I could only identify one point of empathy towards Black women and their interactions with expressing their inner self, and even then, I could not pull their woman-ness from their Black-ness and force my empathy. In this, I moved on with full-heartedly expressing my compassion. I felt that empathy was somewhat misplaced and inappropriate, since I know that I will never understand the structural barricades that are placed upon Black women in producing a literal obstruction from vulnerability in the form of a fractured sense of self and attempts at control over their own visibility and perception within a space. Exploring not only how people of color navigate a space in which they see other people experience vulnerability with ease, but why they could feel Othered in their ability to not find vulnerability so easily, has helped me to critically examine what exactly empathy, compassion, and love really are in the context of a multi-racial nation of the US and a multi-racial space like the Block, and how to spread my new understanding of compassion to the others at Block 1750.
Let me start this with a story about two incredible human beings that unknowingly have helped to define and strengthen every relationship at the Block and beyond, and every notion of resilience within a family and a community. I have decided to use their real names in an effort to memorialize and dedicate my understanding of deep, emotional bonds that could never be severed nor forgotten—a family bond greater than my initial perception—to them. Hanna and Peter, thank you for opening not only my eyes but my heart, and teaching me one of the most precious lessons about love, community, and family.

Early in the morning on June 12, two beloved members of our Block 1750 community passed away in a tragic car accident. I had just sat down in my living room with a piping hot plate of chicken, when my friend, who I had seen only twenty minutes prior, called. I answered, immediately sensed distress in her voice, and was dealt with some of the hardest, most heart-breaking news that I had ever received. My fork dropped to the floor, my body shook violently, I grabbed my keys, and ran for my car. The next five minutes, alone in my car, heading to the house where people were gathering, were some of the most lonely, harrowing moments I had ever experienced. Collecting the bits of myself that had shattered to the floor, and making sure to keep my eyes steady on the road, from fear of passing out, I arrived, ran into the arms of my friend, and broke down. There were a few of us that gathered in that spot that day, coming in and out of waves of shock and sadness and grief and disbelief. I called two people that day, and for each phone call, the words that tumbled out of my mouth seemed to be like scathing lies that I wish I could take back. At that point, there was no sort of reality that accompanied the statement: “Our friends died today.”
The week that followed is still one of the most gray, fuzzy areas of my memory. Trying to remember that week is like someone who is near-sighted squinting at the sign in a shop window: out of focus, confusing, and frustrating. What I do remember, however, are very significant moments in which I was reminded of my humanity, my vulnerability, and my connection to the people in that community and beyond. There was a moment, in the midst of a downpour, that I walked out into the rain, grabbed the shoulders of my friend, and shivered as we stood under the rain, mixing the sky’s water with our own salty tears. Seeing us two standing together, another person, rolling up the cuffs of their pants, waded out into the parking lot, and pulled us both in. One by one, several people joined us in our huddle and eventually fifteen people strong stood out in the middle of a newly-paved asphalt lot, under waves of rain, wailing out in grief as the torrents of water and the gusts of wind danced around us.

We sat around in a circle, holding hands, looking around at each other’s’ faces, huddled around candles, while we filled the studio with sounds of soft crying, hearts breaking, and noses sniffling. Dancers and non-dancers alike, from Aurora to Denver to Boulder to Texas gathered ‘round while we watched the wax crawl slowly down the candles and land inside the cups. We watched as the flame moved silently down into the mug, like a snake waving down into a basket, while we felt each other’s heart beats and we wiped each other’s tears. Someone was writing their favorite memories of Hanna and Peter in the notebooks; someone was leaving the room to get some air. We were then lying down in the main room, on the floor, bodies piled on top of each other for miles, fingers caressing the nape of the neck, and moving locks of hair out of eyes, and tucking them behind ears. We cuddled, and we held each other, no words were being spoken, only bodies expressing our sorrows.
In that week, I was shown something that I had never before experienced to such a degree: pure resilience and pure love. It did not matter if a person and I had only talked a couple of times out of courtesy at events and jams and performances, we would hug with such compassion, empathy, sympathy, and sadness, forever bonded over the loss of two people that had been such strong bridges in our communities. I saw mothers and daughters and cousins and friends all come together and grieve over the loss of their babies. I saw a community that supported one another regardless of where they came from, what crew they were on, or what people knew who better—it was the rawest form of connection I had ever witnessed, and the truest sense of family that I had ever felt.

Though we miss you both, more than I could ever express in a couple of words, know that you keep on giving, and teaching, and gifting us, all of us, from Colorado to California, to New York, Texas, Utah, Germany, Spain, and beyond, your undeniable presence, warmth, love, and compassion. Never were there another two people who could build such bridges both in life and after. While I wish you could have seen that moment in the rain, I hope you know, that under her breath, one of your dear friends whispered, “We feel you”, and that could not be more true.

Can You Kick It?

Within the Block, there are several group structures, levels, and hierarchies. At the basic level, the Block is a business. Therefore, patrons, or people who come and take classes, are at the basic level; think of these levels as concentric circles—the widest, largest circle of people being the patrons who visit the Block for the sole purpose of taking a dance class. Within that circle, there are the people who come and take classes but who also participate in community events such as Friday night “Chill”, where food is made and hangout sessions last until at least 2:00 in
the morning. Within that circle, exists Worm Tank Crew. Remembering Tricia Rose’s (1994) definition of Hip Hop crews as:

A local source of identity, group affiliation, and support system [that] appears repeatedly in all my interviews… These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment… (78)

Worm Tank is identified by several members as a family. “Worm Tank Chill” occurs every single Friday night, with a “family meal” where everyone either pitches money (if they have it), time, or effort in the form of preparing, cooking, or cleaning up. The Block then provides a space where members can either dance and train in the studio, or hang-out and talk on the couches outside.

This family was formed several years ago, (approximately seven) when some dancers came together and formed a crew in Boulder, Colorado. This crew was set up as a means to win battles, hang-out, and go on campy, rambunctious adventures like bonfires deep in the Flatirons, excavating old warehouses and abandoned barns, and rampaging throughout Boulder and beyond. Soon, several youths (ages ranging from 12 to 16) were added to the crew as the “Next Generation of Worms.” At the core, crews were historically created as a means to create connections between inner city youth, to form solidarity in hopes of forming alternative routes to violence. These crews mirrored street gangs in their close-bond, familial-type structure, but were instead used as a means to eradicate the violence of street gang culture (Chang 2005). Battles where individuals would compete against one another, in the form of emceeing or b-boying competitions, were developed as a non-violent way of fighting, and ciphers, Hip Hop circles where the community gathers around a daring individual who may enter to tell their story, were developed as a way to combine competition with community (Chang 2009). Zulu Nation, a Black street gang turned non-violent “youth organization” was formed by Hip Hop legend Afrika
Bambaataa as a means to create, as he said in an interview with the *Huffington Post*, “peace, unity, love and having fun, which helped to eliminate any old gang activity that might creep up at a party” (Orange 2013).

DJ Kool Herc (2007), another pioneer of Hip Hop culture echoed some of the same sentiments when discussing gang culture vs. crew culture in his Introduction essay in Jeff Chang’s book *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*:

> To me, hip-hop says, “Come as you are.” We are a family. It ain’t about security. It ain’t about bling-bling. It ain’t about how much your gun can shoot. It ain’t about $200 sneakers. It is not about me being better than you or you being better than me. It’s about you and me, connecting one to one. That’s why it has universal appeal. It has given young people a way to understand their world, whether they are from the suburbs or the city or whatever… But even more important, I think hip-hop has bridged the culture gap. It brings white kids together with Black kids, brown kids with yellow kids. They all have something in common that they love. It gets past the stereotypes and people hating each other because of those stereotypes. (xi)

Both echoing similar tenets of compassion (“peace…unity”), and empathy (bringing together children because of something they all have in common), both draws importance to the basis of love in building a community. In *all about love: New Visions*, bell hooks (2001) spoke to the necessity of community to human survival and the significance of genuine, loving relationships in people’s lives in general. She posited that when one is consumed in the quick gratification of greed, such as if someone were in a gang not only for the benefits of being part of a group, but for financial and patriarchal gain, in the form of heightened masculinity, as well, then, “the passion to connect can be replaced by the passion to possess” (106). However, if one moved away from patriarchal and limited conceptions of materialism, then one could embrace genuine love, and from there, build communities where we can experience, “joy…and learn to process all our issues…cope with differences and conflict while staying connected” (134). This conception of genuine love and healthy connection was the foundation of crew love vs. gang loyalty, for the
premise of Hip Hop crews was birthed from the departure of communities dependent on toxic ideas of relationships built on fatalistic loyalty instead of loving trust. Molly said:

It’s that vulnerability piece! They feel like, “Oh! You dance? I dance, I understand the struggles.” It is different. When I meet people mountain biking, or swimming, or running, we’re not best friends. I’m not going to go visit them and stay at their house. So I think there is something about being a lot more willing and accepting and open… This space was created to allow a lot of different communities to co-exist within one building, so we wanted artists, we wanted musicians, we wanted kids, we wanted dancers, we wanted not-dancers—we just wanted a space where people could come and learn and grow from each other and together.

With the emergence of Hip Hop as a peaceful, yet combative outlet for the people of color living in the concrete jungle of the Bronx, close ties resembling familial bonds in gangs were reproduced to fit the needs of those entrenched in Hip Hop culture. Since many of the youth experienced anomie in the inner city, the comradery and solidarity that one could find within a crew of like-minded people was a means of finding a group of people that helped to facilitate healthy emotional expression while providing support. Bre, when I asked about how many families she was a part of, and how those families were formed, identified her crews as this family:

I think that this ties back to what it means to be a crew, when you look at the actual definition of what a crew is. Because I don’t think they would have auditions and stuff. Crews just want to get down together. And when you’re with them for a long amount of time, when you’re always with them, always dance with them or whatever, I feel like that becomes your family. Naturally. You don’t even choose them. It’s just natural. You guys just like, bzoop! [Sound of hands clapping.] Attached. You know?

As Farrell (2001) contends, “creative people have done their most creative work while embedded in a collaborative circle…members of a collaborative circle trust one another with their wildest ideas, use each other as sounding boards and critics, and develop a sense of a common mission” (17). Some of the most creative work comes from the expression of those who are oppressed, and as Rabaka (2013) posited in *The Hip Hop Movement*, “black popular music,” or the music that was being created and spread first among Black inner-city communities and
then beyond, “often serves as a metaphor and a medium of expression for black life, culture, and struggle” (48). For those youth who found solidarity amongst their peers in the Hip Hop community, the tenets that Bambaataa identified that separated this culture from that of gangs created a means in which they could express themselves in a way that helped to promote a sense of belonging.

Finding Family

When I asked Hanna if there was any connection between this Hip Hop space, crew mentality, and family, without hesitation, she described the centrality of family at Block 1750 and the individuals within Worm Tank Crew:

Yeah. So like the Block is founded off of Worm Tank Crew, which is a family. And when I joined Worm Tank Crew in 2011, it was full of generations...the youngest kid was nine; the oldest was like 53. And we got together every Friday for dinner and to talk about our days and our weeks, and our dreams, and our hopes, and mess around, and work through the hard stuff and work through the good stuff, and that was...when I found it, it was exactly what I needed. It was a family. And I think that because Worm Tank is the root of this, of the Block, I think that it is a family space.

Hanna connected the heart of the Block with the family of this crew, and by doing so, established the space as one that was of a constructed home—it became a space where this family could come together, to cook together, and to talk together. This family is a collaborative group of people that came together through the same interest in the culture of Hip Hop, and the art of dance, in the interest of finding other people who all needed people to love and to be loved in return. When I asked her further about what this family gave her that she “needed,” she said that her Hip Hop family gave her things that her White, middle-class family could not, “…ethnicity, diversity, people who have gone through some hardships...it’s a huge group of people; there’s just pounds and buckets of lessons my parents didn’t have.”

Jorge, now 21 years old, but one of the original youth from the Next Generation of Worms, related this crew to family as well. He immigrated from Mexico to Colorado at the age
of ten and he lives in University housing (his father was a professor at CU) with his brother while his parents live back in Mexico. This family, while he is a part of another crew, Amida, located centrally in Denver, is his central familial unit within his proximate geographical space. This structure, while not a traditional, nuclear family, is functional in the sense that he receives his support and his sense of community from it. For example, Braithwaite et al. (2010) created four typologies of voluntary kinship. The second type was of voluntary kin, or “chosen” family, as a supplemental family. They identified several instances where emotional closeness was still present in the relationship between an individual and blood family, but where a deficit still remained. The researchers identified that “voluntary kin enacts a family role for geographically dispersed blood or legal kin” (400). In order to fill the absent family connection that was due to the lack of geographical closeness, individuals would then find other ways to fill that emotional void. Jorge filled this void by finding a connection with people in Worm Tank Crew. Those who were older helped to fill the role of mentors, and provided guidance and discipline to Jorge, as specific rules were created for members of the group: no drinking, no drugs, no getting in trouble, etc. This helped to maintain the structure of familial units in the sense that those who are older are seen as leaders and as mentors—think of these members as godfathers or godmothers, aunts or uncles: members of a family that help to offer structure to youths’ lives, but not to dictate them. The structure of the group as a Hip Hop crew also helped Jorge in not only providing a familial structure, but in facilitating emotional support and reinforcing expression. Lars, another member of Worm Tank Crew, echoed this sentiment:

I don’t know how they became my family…but you know when it happens. And it’s during the worst times. It’s when you’re at your lowest that you realize what people are really willing to put up with…It comes with time…and just a lot of experiences, and lots of times, where, like, things were not good. And that’s how you understand family. Because there are people who will ditch you, who are related by blood. And though you’re related by blood, you guys aren’t family; you’re just an acquaintance of that
person. But there are people who look nothing like you, who will pull you out of some shit situations. And those are family.

While Jorge was supplementing his blood kin family due to the lack in geographical space, others use this type of chosen family as a means to substitute their blood kin families. For instance, Braithwaite et al. (2010) identified the function of voluntary kin also as a means to substitute an individual’s blood kin family as a means to still have emotional needs be met that were not being fulfilled. Another crew member, Chase, identified this in his own life, as he talked about the necessity of finding this crew as it provided him with a familial structure of compassion and love that he had never known:

…before Worm Tank, I had never had a family dinner. I hadn’t really ever experienced a family in which people cared to ask about me or was invested in me like them. They helped me to define what a family was supposed to be, really. Before them, I hadn’t ever really known what a normal family was supposed to be.

In this way, Chase identified the necessity of this alternative type of family because of its ability to help him define what it meant to be a family in the first place. Both Lars and Chase identified that this crew helped them to re-envision their conceptions of family, and re-define them in terms of what they were taught, shown, and given in the form of love and compassion. In this way, crew culture both gave them and Jorge alternative forms of family that provided them access to skills (compassion, empathy, etc.) that they might not have garnered otherwise.

*Family Around the Block*

Much later in the interview, Jorge described his hesitation towards people who move from the largest “circle” in the Block structure towards hanging out around the space and the crew more—he questioned their intentions. For example, he said, “It’s more like, it’s more of my part to be the guy that holds the crew together—like the glue—I make sure we’re a crew.” He showed that, as a leader of the crew, he maintains group lines and is somewhat of a gate keeper, or a person who controls access to a social group (Saunders 2006). His mistrust of the intentions
of people wanting to enter the crew, although maybe subconsciously in the way that he may not even realize his trust issues surrounding new membership, is very telling about group lines, definitions, and family structure within the Block. For instance, questioning someone’s intentions about entering a tight-knit community or family is similar to someone in a family bringing around a girlfriend, boyfriend, or significant other to family dinners or events: it is about questioning what that person will contribute to the family, how that person will change that individual or dynamic of the family, and how the overall structure of that family will change. For if this space is one of the only ones that Jorge has family, his protectiveness of it is warranted.

At first, I was thrown off by him, due to what I perceived as hostility. I had been coming around, taking classes and hanging out, spending the majority of my Friday nights (and every night) at the Block. I am now, at the present moment, very integrated into this community. However, Jorge was the one who would quietly sit on the couches, lift his eyes up from his computer, and silently evaluate who I was and what I was doing. I felt uncomfortable. I felt unfairly judged. I felt that his “hostility” was out of place, especially in a community center that proclaims a very welcoming, open space. However, since observing his behaviors around crew members and fresh faces around the Block, I feel differently. Not knowing before about his situation with his blood family—only being able to see his parents once a year or less—I came to recognize several of my own privileges and assumptions that I had made. Coming from a two-parent household, with these parents still being married to this day, with unlimited access to their resources, love, and support within a 30-minute drive to my hometown of Arvada, I was never short of that family structure. I never had a lack of family to the extent that my parents lived in a different country, or where I was separated by the majority of my relatives by 1,800 miles.
This form of privilege birthed a whole slew of assumptions. For example, my brother dated Monique (a name I will use for this story) for close to six years throughout high school and college. When she first came to the house, I instantly fell in love with her. However, my mother held several reservations due to the fact that, “Jake was her baby boy and she [Monique] seemed very distant and unfriendly at dinner.” Of course, Monique’s nerves and anxieties might have gotten the best of her and therefore she may have put off a very removed vibe at dinner that night. For months, while I welcomed her with open arms and called her Big Sis, my mother, while polite, was still cautious of her. Thinking back, I imagine my mother like a lioness, standing atop a rock, peering below at her cubs, questioning if this younger lioness was fit enough to be the other leading lady in her young boy’s life. In this way, it is instinct to be protective of kin, no matter how others may react to that person, or even how objectively nice that person may be. Family members’ cautiousness around new faces is not unusual, especially in the context of someone being added to the inner circle. In this way, my mother was acting as the gatekeeper, as she was the most resourceful of our family, the one we went to for help and advice, and was one of the identified leaders of the household—her approval of a new member was paramount (Saunders 2006). My lack of knowledge about his circumstances, and the ways in which he interacted with his crew, much as he would as if in a pride of lions, protective and cautious of possible harm that may come to that family, revealed my own privilege in my access to family. What I saw on the surface was a group of friends. His lack of contact with me for several months pushed me to assume that he was rude. However, had I realized the nature of his situation, and the nature of the necessity of this voluntary kinship in the crew to his well-being, I would have vanquished my assumptions of his character.
Aimee Meredith Cox (2015) followed homeless, young, Black girls as they navigated dance in *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. One of the themes that was explored was using dance as a means to create spaces that felt like home. For instance, she describes Janice (one of the girls she interviewed and observed) and her ability to navigate family and the expectations she believed were essential to family,

> Janice comes to Fresh Start (homeless shelter/program) because she does not have an actual house where she can lay her head down and find a meal, but because she believes she is entitled to more than the means of survival and has the right to be protected and free from bodily, emotional, and mental harm. (74)

Even though Jorge did not identify any harm in his household currently, he suggested, although implicitly, that his crews give him the necessary support and love that he may not receive in his current household and blood-family situation, possibly due to the immense geographical space between him and his parents. Additionally, while he receives both love and support from this group of people at the Block, he also gains extremely useful lessons, skills, and opportunities—much as Hanna identified in her experience. Opportunities, such as leadership, would not be granted in any other social space that he inhabits at CU Boulder, or his living situation with his brother. The opportunities that arise, like being an identified leader of his crew, Amida, grants him the possibility to grow and to be mentored in a way that might have existed if his family situation granted him those opportunities at home.

This family and community is also functional in the sense that apart from opportunities that may arise, the individual advantages that Jorge receives are also immense. For instance, through these mentors that the crews have provided, he suggested that he went under immense self-improvement. He said,

> …in a sense that it completed me, almost. At first I didn’t know that I had something missing, but once it came into my life, it really became a part of me, of who I am today, and the lessons that I have learned through it, through the mentors that I’ve had, one of the biggest lessons is discipline through… training for what you want to become. And
you can put that same idea into your daily life…trust values, family values, and really how to be a very kind human being, and knowing what it means to be whole-hearted as opposed to being very close-minded.

He attributed his growth to those people that he met through being a part of this community and being a part of two dance “families” and crews. Without these crews, he would not have had the same self-development if it had just been him alone navigating life as a student and Latino male. Perhaps his circumstances would have been much different if he had not been introduced to both these people and dance living as a Latino, immigrant man in Boulder, Colorado.

For instance, as a Latino man, he identified that he had experienced forms of isolation in his life living in the U.S.: “they [when referring to Trump and his supporters] call every single one of us criminals and racists…I was offended, but it’s just a big mouth talking shit”. When I asked him about how that made him feel and how he navigates those feelings, he referred to Hip Hop and its effect on his ability to engage those feelings in a way that he was no longer angry. For instance, he talked about how people in a battle could call you out, talk poorly about your dancing, whoop and holler in your face, but at the end of the day, he said, “people can say so much to hurt you, but, the only the one that can hurt you is the one that you take it personally…if you’re in a battle and they talk shit and you let it get to you, you lose”. He said that he learned this skill of not taking things personally from the Hip Hop culture, and specifically from the people in his crews. However, dance, and the people that dance gave him, not only granted him with the family structure that he did not have access to as an immigrant man, but also with qualities that he learned through family values and those older “family members” or mentors.

This management of harm that he may have endured under the oppression that he faces as a Latino man in majority-White spaces like Boulder, or the US at large is a skill that he learned from a culture that teaches values of resistance against these racist institutions. For instance, as Rabaka (2013) voiced, “rap music [and speaking about Hip Hop culture in general] have helped
black ghetto youth and their multiracial allies get in touch with their feelings and organize their thoughts on a wide range of topics from social justice and sexuality to racism” (289). In speaking to the solidarity a youth of color finds in the larger culture of Hip Hop, and in nodes of crews that pledge their allegiance to the culture, one can use the different foundational elements of the culture to express themselves in both a specific setting among those who they trust in their crew, and in the larger context of those trans-nationally who also practice these tenets of Hip Hop. Connecting back to Farrell’s conception of collaborative circles with Hip Hop crews, we can speak to not only the similarity in how these groups are able to create a safe space in which one can connect with themselves and others, but how this connectedness also fosters a similarity in values and world views. For instance, Farrell (2001) spoke to the nature of “pseudo-kinship groups” in a professional realm:

For those who begin their careers in a collaborative circle, the group provides informal socialization into their discipline. Working side by side, they master new techniques. In backstage discussions, they fine-tune their understanding of concepts…They learn about the potential coalitions and animosities between important people in their field, and what should or should not be said to whom. They also learn about the social structure…Eventually, they come to know where they stand on the current issues in their discipline…Most important, the shared vision, style, or culture of the group shapes their work… (13)

Farrell elaborated about the supplemental factor that these collaborative groups play outside of blood families as a source of family, as they act to provide places in which these people can do this creative work that they have bonded over. In combining these two separate realms that Farrell identified, in tandem with Hip Hop crews, we can posit that when individuals bond over the culture of Hip Hop with the art of dance that is inherent within it, they are then socialized under the tenets of Hip Hop: peace, love, unity, and having fun (Orange 2013), socio-political awareness (Rabaka 2013), and resistance against oppressive individuals, institutions, and structures.
Jorge identified that what he was taught was a direct correlation to how he had mentors in this family as he grew up. For instance, he was in his early teens when he joined Worm Tank, and by being around those who were much older than him (anywhere from four to seven years older than him), he was socialized into learning the disciplines of not only the culture of Hip Hop within this crew, but of the group itself. By creating these close bonds with those in which mentorship is possible due to a wide range of ages, and with some individuals who may identify as racially and ethnically similar, as Gutiérrez and Lewis (1999) said about the nature of connection in empowering people of color:

Connection serves two purposes: the development of social support networks and the creation of power through interaction. Involvement with others in similar situation provides individuals with a means for acquiring and providing mutual aid, with the opportunity to learn new skills through role modeling, with strategies for dealing with likely institutional reprisals, and with a potential power base for future action. (10)

In this way, connection with this group provides a way in which one can learn various skills, can learn more about themselves by learning about the people around them, and find a solidarity that provides the basis for support and a potential grounding in how to resist.

In the context of Jorge’s use of this family as a means to find solidarity within the group, he has identified that he has found brotherhood and support in the form of a strong bond that was formed based on the ability to dance with one another and have a deep friendship. However, within the crew, there are only a few other members who identify as Latino and Chicano, and typically, they identify themselves as not being understood by some members of the crew based on the fact that the majority of the crew members are White. When attending Friday night dinners, I would notice that Jorge, Carlos, and Manuel would typically show a brotherhood that set them apart from those that they were still extremely close to. For instance, all three of them would talk Spanish to each other, not out of a necessity for saying things that they did not want others to hear, but out of comfortability with each other, their ability to speak another language,
and the safety of the space they were in that they felt they could openly identify themselves as Spanish-speakers without fear of being ostracized. These three would typically hang outside of the Block together, apart from the other crew members.

Since the Block exists in Boulder, Colorado, a majority-White space, Whiteness has become normalized (Hickcox 2007). However, even though the Block is typically a space where the majority of individuals that frequent the establishment, either on a regular basis or not, are White, the space has been racialized as multi-racial in the sense that it is “normal” if people of color walk through the doors, choose to hang out, or dance in the studio. This process is an extremely fluid process, as it maintains that anyone and everyone is welcome—a tenet that DJ Kool Herc said: “Come as you. We are family.”—which is the same mantra that the Block adopts. Even though several people contest the idea that Hip Hop is all love, which has truth in its historical roots, the Block actively tries to maintain an environment that is open to both connection and love. Important in building this community, bell hooks would argue, is love: “Enjoying the benefits of living and loving in community empowers us to meet strangers without fear and extend to them the gift of openness and recognition. Just be speaking to a stranger, acknowledging their presence on the planet, we make a connection” (2000:143). However, since the Block is racialized as multi-ethnic, since we are trying to steer clear away from oppressive paradigms of color-blindness, we must realize that there are implications, especially in the context of the city of Boulder.

For instance, Hickcox (2007) explored the experiences of people of color living in Boulder:

White privilege grants white people exemption from the stares, comments, excessive helpfulness, and isolation that many people of color remark on. It is reinforced by convivial lamentations among white people about the lack of people of color in Boulder. These remarks simultaneously reinforce an idea of unified hegemonic whiteness in the city and erase the nonwhite residents and their claims on the city as home. (246)
This reality, of the normalization of Whiteness, creates, again, the hypervisibility of people of color (Collins 2000). Since people of color are highly visible, those that are noticed are then perceived as a negative force and are subsequently Otherized. Since people of color feel that they are being isolated, many feel that Boulder is an un-safe space for them. This is again, as Bre mentioned before, why she only goes to the two spaces where she feels most comfortable in Boulder: Block 1750 and CU Boulder. I was on the bus in Boulder, riding home from school, when I heard a small altercation erupt between two women. One woman, a White, older, perhaps middle-to-upper class (I’m assuming from the Lulu Lemon bag she held in her hand) was sitting across from an older Black woman, who I assumed might be middle-class, since there was no indication that she was otherwise. The Black woman said to the other lady in haughty frustration, whom was boring her pointy, dagger-like stares in the eyes of the Black woman, “What? Do I have a bright red sticker on my face?” This stuck with me for several reasons, but for the main reason being that there was no other reason that the White woman would have been staring at the Black woman other than in an act of utter discrimination. Her gaze was not kind and after the Black woman had retorted, turned her nose up high and looked away from the Black woman for the rest of the bus ride. In this case, the Black woman was hyper visible to the White woman, discriminated against, Other-ized, and then made completely invisible by the very same woman who had chosen to make a scene. In what I had sensed was a familiar encounter, the Black woman identified immediately that this woman was attempting to deem her “unfit” and “not normal” in the context of this public bus in Boulder, Colorado.

Since Boulder is no stranger to these obvious forms of racism, people of color then have to find nodes and pockets of spaces where they feel they can survive living in the city. For Jorge, it was the Block. In particular, this space, since it functions as a site where multiple identities,
even those outside of race and ethnicity (gender, sexuality, age, class, etc.) are tolerated and welcomed, can help to create those nodes of safety for those who are consistently ostracized in the city at large. For instance, bringing back Bre’s discussion of what spaces she visits, she said, “I think that at the Block, it’s more of a community setting than anywhere else I’ve been. it’s still like the vibe is great and stuff; it’s just there’s like that home feeling at the Block…identity-wise [when asked if her identity was safe in that space], yeah, it’s definitely fine…which is why I tend to go there and stay”. When I said, “Like you stick to your specific spaces where you do feel okay,” she said, “Yes”. Jorge shared similar sentiments in that in this space, he was not continually being reminded of who he was in the context of the Block, in the way that he was in Boulder, where he was always aware that he was not White.

In this way, by providing a fluid multi-racial space within the larger context of a White-dominated city of Boulder, people of color feel that they can enter, find other people of color that may have the same or similar feelings about Boulder, and then find a solidarity and a community that they would not have otherwise. It is important to tie that ability to walk into this space back to the notion of this space as a dance space—a Hip Hop dance space. For if these people, in some way, had not been interested in learning how to dance, they would not have walked through the doors. If the same people had not resonated with the culture of Hip Hop, in its ability to be a platform for oppressed peoples to express themselves, then there would be no empathy, and therefore, cohesiveness in this dance studio. Since this space exists as a dance space where Hip Hop flows freely throughout its door, I posit that dance both had the power to create this space, and create the safety in which these relationships could be formed. For as John said:

I think the community we strive for is an all-encompassing one…one that, you know, includes anyone and everyone, you know, one that’s diverse ethnically and culturally, you know, because, we feel that that’s really important…the more mixed up that is, the more input from different dancers, and different artists, and different cultures, and different people,
the better, you know. That’s kind of our community here.

Therefore, people of color can interact with a culture that they identify with, with people who think in similar ways, who choose to express themselves in similar ways, in a space that safely facilitates that.

CONCLUSION

Dance granted several things to the people at Block 1750. It granted the ability to express themselves, the freedom to escape withheld emotions, and the family that may have been lacking from their lives. The presence of power structures that are at play within this space and outside of it, created a very unique use of dance. Never before had I considered what dance may grant others based on how they identified. Never before had I considered what dance may grant them that lacked in their day-to-day lives. For instance, I am able to control my expressions of vulnerability, control my own visibility, and have access to my own family that lives a 30-minute drive away from my current residence in Boulder. Never before had I considered how instrumental dance was in creating a space in which dancers could express themselves wholly, in a place where they felt as if the oppressiveness they encounter on a daily life, especially within Boulder, was somewhat eradicated to the point where they felt safe enough to be vulnerable.

Of course I had evaluated power structures such as class dynamics that existed in the Block on the business side of its operations. For instance, the people that could come take class, could afford the drop-in fee, and move about freely in the space due to their ability to blend-in with the somewhat racially and ethnically homogenous space of the Block was something that I had noticed and was aware of every day as I greeted and checked people in. That, I had witnessed and analyzed. However, with the more implicit and hidden attributes of dance and group mentality, vulnerability and family somewhat eluded me. At first, I fought these
underlying themes. I refused to believe that what I struggled with so much was a form of privilege. I struggled with the notion that vulnerability, something that scared me and something that I fight with daily, could be something that I was granted access to in the form of my ability to use it or not. I fought the notion that something so prickly for me, so uncomfortable for me, was something that I could also take for granted. I fought the notion that in order for me to carry out this project and to carry out these conclusions I would have to be extremely vulnerable to allow myself to understand that vulnerability in itself was a privilege.

I struggled to come to terms with my own access to dance in that space. Dance for me has always been my one place that I did not struggle with who I was, what I mean, or how I portrayed myself. Dance, for me, is a safe place. However, never had I considered that dance was not only a safe place for some people, but a necessary space. Dance was an instrumental part of people’s lives; they literally could not express themselves or even live completely or wholeheartedly without. While my reasons were similar, I admit that I have access to finding other avenues to live completely or wholeheartedly because my identity as a White woman grants me that access to explore different avenues in which to express myself and my vulnerabilities, such as my family or my friends (that I have ease at finding—another form of privilege). I recognize now that assumptions that I had made about different people are obsolete—no longer can I assume certain things about people based upon what I perceive about them. I had not known about Lars’s hesitations and introverted-ness outside of that space. I had not known about Jorge’s lack of family structures or access to expression and growth outside of that space. I had not known that Bre was not African American, but wholly African, and that it could mean that her production of vulnerability in Hip Hop was different.
Who I am, and how I identify, directly impacts not only my relationship to dance but to different modes of expression, vulnerability, and family. Dance, as an art form, gives us the ability to say with our bodies what our mouths cannot—a quality, I think, is necessary for those of us who have a hard time spitting out exactly what we are bursting at the seams to express. For me it is just that: that I cannot truly express myself due to the limitation of my lack of eloquence. However, for them, dance became something greater. It became a means with which to negotiate not only with their marginalized identities, but with everyone else’s assumptions and expectations interacting with their marginalized identities. Dance became the vehicle through which the space that they created at the Block was one of the only ones that they could wholly be themselves.

I want to thank my Block family for several things. One, this would not have been possible without the outpouring of support and love during this process. The amount of time that I have put into this project, the parts of me that I have detached and sewn into this project, and my choice to give up sleep, peace of mind, and wellness was a direct reflection of the immense love and compassion that I have for this space and these people. Two, I want to thank my Block family for showing me love, family, and dedication in some of the most horrendous periods of my life. I do not think you will ever know what you got me through, and I do not think you will ever know everything that you have given me, for there are no words to express them. Three, please never forget what you have built. I know I could not as I move on to other spaces come January. You all are forever branded into my psyche and my heart, and even though I am moving away, I have no doubt in my mind that you will all be a part of my life forever. I love you endlessly, Block 1750. Ball, Pnutz, this was for you. There were several moments where I wanted to quit, but I had to put these words on paper, and your words, charm, light, and love are
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