

Slide one

What is love? And in what ways might thinking about how different spaces enable and close down possibilities for love help us to foster what bell hooks calls a 'love ethic'? That is a culture in which the possibilities for freedom, joy and emotional fulfilment are open to everybody: a culture in which our responsibilities of care for one another replace economic growth as the central measure by which we judge a society's health.

As hooks argues all radical movements that have sought social justice have had a love ethic at their core. This paper is my (first) attempt to think about how love manifests as a means of opposition to the dominant neoliberal culture in the street dance practices of New York, how the street space fosters love and also how love transcends politics as a force of life. This work is part of my new project, exploring formal and informal street practices in a number of geographical contexts: a project that emerged when I witnessed crews of break dancers perform on New York's subway system during a 2014 trip with my mother to celebrate my 30th birthday. I was immediately struck by the energy and joy that infused the performances, and by the visibility of street dance both above and underground.

The phrase 'for love or money' is often used in discussions about the competing motivations of artists and performers, particularly those who work outside the constraints of conventional industry, or who attempt to eschew the capitalist imperatives that underpin the production and dissemination of artworks. Three of the seminal books on street performance in New York City

– including Susie Tanenbaum’s ethnography of the subway music scene, place the relationship between love and money — or the question of the relationship between passion for the arts practice and need to survive at the centre of their writing. Sally Harrison Pepper argues that many performers ‘care’ about the street, she emphasises the word care, using italics, pointing to the fact that street space becomes part of the identity of the performers, who often see themselves ‘Rebelling against the structures of the indoor auditorium and its conventional behaviors’. As Pepper argues:

These performers have ‘become the street,’ a term street performers use to indicate that a performer is either no longer interested or no longer able to perform anywhere else.

These exhalted performers have embraced the love that motivates them by turning away from commercial success — a position that comes close to the conception of love that Nicholas Ridout articulates in his book, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love*, exploring the communist and utopian possibilities of amateur theatre practice. Setting out the aims of his book Ridout writes:

I look at the theatre as a place and a practice where it might be possible to think disruptively about work and leisure, about work and love, and about the apparently separate realms of necessity and freedom

For Ridout love emerges as necessarily political, love — as the book’s blurb explains — desires something different from the capitalism under which

theatre makers are forced to work. For Ridout, love seems to exist in communist, communal practices, in utopian work, and is therefore divorced from, or opposite to capitalist imperatives.

While I agree that love has a radical political potential, I am also concerned with further refining our understandings of love, of thinking about love as not (or not only) a political response, or a counter-movement. I want to argue that love is not a political response to capitalism any more than breathing oxygen is a political response to capitalism. It is the fundamental way in which we stay alive. In this way, I want to suggest that the street has provided a pivotal space through which we have been able to save ourselves, despite the deathly destruction capitalism has wrought across the globe.

Street dance has emerged from hip hop culture (break dance is one of the four pillars of hip hop), itself part of an iteration of the 'the street', as a conceptual site bound up with the emergence of youth cultures and often associated with crime and violence. Using this conception of street space it might seem an odd to position love as a central aspect of the street's composition: to propose that this kind of street demonstrates the possibilities of space to produce love, and therefore to sustain life.

To consider 'the street' as inherently love-producing is perhaps especially counter-intuitive when thinking about the definitions of love as 'oppositional' in the way some of the theorists I quote above do. In many ways the urban street is a defining symbol of contemporary consumer culture not only

because it is so often lined with shops and bars, office blocks and restaurants, but because the urban street as a conceptual space is bound up in its own legal and illegal commercial cultures: certainly the dancers who I spent time with were invested in commercial success, and deeply interested in making a living from their practice.

However, despite its role in the production of the neoliberal city-space, the street makes love possible, providing a physical and conceptual space in which those who the wider neoliberal culture have cast aside — those who we might term as marginalised — can find a sense of belonging, freedom and identity that is made impossible in the other controlled and commodified spaces of contemporary cities. Think of the gathering of homeless communities in doorways, public squares, and on sidewalks, of the women's march, of the way in which control of the cities streets by authorities is always subverted and never absolute. In these ways love emerges not (or not only) as tactic through which opposition to the capitalist culture is manifested — it is a deeply human imperative that emerges despite of the political culture that surrounds it; that emerges because there is life. It is what we keep doing, even when the oppression wrought by the neoliberal political system causes a culture of despair. At moments of extreme pressure we inevitably erupt in acts of love, which remind us of our humanity, our responsibilities to one another — and these acts of love often take place on the street.

It's mid-July 2016: a sweltering summer afternoon in the Bronx. At St Mary's park, the eminent breakdancing couple Kwikstep and Rokafella are hosting the Streets to the Stage summer stage, a dance concert they've curated, part of a series of community concerts performed in parks across all five NY boroughs. Rokafella opens the event, she is in high spirits, upbeat and joyful, but her voice breaks as she welcomes us to the park: she tells us she's especially emotional because her elderly father has come to the show, she's just seen him in the audience and is overcome with joy — despite his mobility problems he made his way to the event and she didn't realise he'd be here. Later, I see her as I am leaving the concert — I am with an acquaintance of mine, Aviva, who runs a street dance programme sponsored by the city of New York, she knows Rokafella well. 'Do you know Katie?' She asks, gesturing towards me. Rokafella shakes her head and smiles at me, 'No,' she says, 'but if you with Aviva we family right?'

The concept of 'family', and the sense of deep care and emotional connectivity that I experienced at St Mary's Park, runs through many of the New York street dance practices I've come across over the last couple of years.

Without wanting to fetishize these practices, it became clear to me the more that I was exposed to them that something like love motivated the dancers and manifested in the culture in myriad ways: not only in the passion and joy individuals demonstrated in their work, but in how the dancers and other practitioners involved in the culture positioned themselves in relation to

each other and others, both in their immediate dance community and beyond. This culture of love, while tangible, is visible mostly in the micro interactions that structure relations. For example, Aviva's role as leader of a programme called It's Showtime NYC, involves her providing a great deal of care and advice to the young amateur dancers looking to turn professional – young people often from impoverished and chaotic family backgrounds. It is a role that requires patience, understanding and care, whilst the programme itself asks that the dancers put aside rivalries and differences to work together with a sense of mutual respect. Meanwhile, WAFFLE — a crew who practice a relatively new form of street dance called Litefeet — take their name from the initials 'We are family for life entertainment', and promote an ethic of brotherhood in their relationships to one another.

SLIDE 2: PLAY VIDEO

SLIDE 3:

I spent two weeks with the WAFFLE crew in April 2015. In November 2014, The City of New York had clamped down on subway dancing. Although panhandling on moving trains had always been illegal, (it is legal to perform on mezzanines), the dancers had happily paid the fines that were the penalty. The WAFFLE dancers explained to me that they began performing on trains to make the ten dollar fee to attend battles, but were soon earning between 100 and 150 dollars a day and contributing to their families household expenses. As most of the boys live in the projects and other low-income housing, dancing quickly became a low-risk illegal way to make cash quickly.

SLIDE 4:

Now, however, due to changes in legislation targeted at subway dancers, dancers can be charged with reckless endangerment, as misdemeanour A offence that carries a penalty of up to a year in prison. In an interview with Channel 12 News, a Bronx based news station – the WAFFLE dancers appealed to the police commissioner to meet with them and discuss the changes in the law that were affecting their lives. ‘We don’t want to run around getting arrested for something positive. Dance is positive.’ They said, to camera, in a heartfelt appeal during which they pointed out that dance was a route away from the ready life of drug and gun crime that still exists in the Bronx. Their appeal was cut from the final edit.

SLIDE 5:

On the slides behind are pictures of the signs prohibiting dance on subway trains, and the humorous t-shirts the dancers have created in response to the signs.

Slide 6:

Despite the city’s determination to control and exert power by legislating public space, the spirit of the street that underpins the practice of these dancers allows them to articulate love: to find joy and connection in each other and their work - while still striving for recognition through ‘official’ and often

oppressive structures. As this project progresses, I want to think more about the relationship between love and money on the street: and also about how acts of street violence such as riots and gang crime might be placed on a continuum of love — that is how we might consider street violence not only as street love's opposite as a cry for love, or in some circumstances as an act of love in it's own right.

Happy to articulate that further in questions.