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Perpetual Displacement and Stagnation: Quebradita and Krumping as Queer, Bordered Interventions

Latinxs and African Americans in California have been engaging in unique yet common struggles of brownness since the 1800s. Frustration had been accumulating for almost two centuries when tension finally broke in the 1990s in the form of riots, protests and the cathartic dance forms Quebradita and Krumping. This uprising was in response to the passage of legislation that reflected xenophobic, white supremacist values in a state with the largest black and Mexican American populations in the United States. Immigration control and border enforcement funded mass deportations of undocumented immigrants (Hernández 76) and the California legislature passed proposition 187 in 1994, which denied education and public assistance to non-U.S. citizens (Breaking Borders 41). Furthermore, the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act of 1988 and the passage of proposition 184, also known as the “Three Strikes” Initiative of 1994 dismantled the few remaining barriers to incarcerating brown bodies at an accelerated rate. The outcome of the Rodney King Trial in 1992 stoked the already intense aggravation among the black community about the complete disregard for black lives displayed by the police force and judicial system. These political outcomes reflect a long lineage of the displacement of brown bodies as the result of settler colonial projects such as geographic segregation, mass incarceration and deportation (Hernández 210).

It is not coincidental that Krumping, a hip-hop dance form invented by African American youth in South Central Los Angeles, and Quebradita, a social dance form developed by Chicax youth in Border States and Chicago, were churning through brown

communities while mass incarcerations and deportations were increasing, and disregard for brown lives (African American and Latino lives) was becoming increasingly institutionalized. One can look at politics and urban development to understand this racially tense era of the 1990s in California, particularly Los Angeles, but examining the dancing, marginalized bodies can yield a wealth of information that text based discourse cannot. According to dance scholar Jane Desmond, incorporating bodily texts into research “can further our understandings of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement” (29).

Krumping and Quebradita are embodied, performed, political acts that reflect and transmit histories of displacement and marginalization. These dance forms mobilize incarnations of resistance, revolts against hegemony and provide a form for African Americans and Latinx’s to declare and demand how their bodies are read. To understand the corporeal realities of brownness as they manifest in Krumping and Quebradita, I draw from Jose Esteban Muñoz’s queer analysis of gesture in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Even though Krumping and Quebradita are not typically categorized as sexually queer embodied expressions, they are queer in a broad sense in that they disrupt dominant norms. The passage of propositions 184 and 187 indicated that the majority wanted brown people to be punished, contained, and disposed of, yet in Quebradita and Krumping these very bodies are celebrated, supple and liberated.

From queer theory I also draw from Cathy J. Cohen’s discourse of “visibility.” The visibility of queerness is constrained in normative society, and this constraint extends to all marginalized peoples (440). People are conditioned to censor non-normative races and sexualities, or racial and sexual excess. By engaging in Krumping and Quebradita, two high

energy, ostentacious yet grosteque dance forms, Brown bodies defy invisibility by “emphasizing and exaggerating their own anti-normative characteristics” and behavior (Cohen 439). Practitioners of both forms take up and disrupt space as well as exaggerate the qualities they are encouraged to repress. Comparative ethnic studies scholar Juana Maria Rodríguez asserts “...racialized excess is already read as queer, outside norms of what is useful or productive...Forever tacky, the viscosity of our excess grates across the surfaces we touch” (153). Ephemeral phenomena are not privileged in academia, however the traces that are left behind after a performed event are fertile access points for knowledge and understanding, as gestures have the potential to “transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture” (Muñoz 67).

By participating in Krumping and Quebradita African Americans and Latinx’s break the restrictions that are imposed upon them by settler colonialist projects. The movements are present, then they are absent, and their residue is legible through “an optic of feeling, a queer optic that permits us to take in the queerness that is embedded in gesture” (Muñoz 72). Movement offers a kinesthetic empathetic experience, a transmission of feeling, and a transformation of presence. I recognize that attempting to use words to convey the power of a dance seems paradoxical, but bridging the ephemeral with the documented reiterates the impermanence of borders and identities and how things that are lost maintain a continuation. “Being lost, in this particular queer sense, is to relinquish one’s role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order. The dispossessed are appropriately adept at critiquing possession as illogical. To accept the way in which one is lost is to be also found and not found in a particularly queer fashion” (Muñoz 73).

Quebradita and Krumping both derive from an aesthetic of conflict, hybridity, and contradiction and involve a fusion of traditional and contemporary dance forms. This cultural and aesthetic hybridity also makes both of these dance forms applicable to Borderland studies. Though this field's focus is predominately on cultural and intellectual phenomena produced by U.S./Mexico border dwellers, the theories and relics that spring forth from cultural collisions are present in any hybrid culture. I am interested in approaching Krumping and Quebradita from a borderland studies lens. This discourse is easily applied to Quebradita as it developed in the borderlands. Where Krumping and borderlands studies converge is at the borders around and within South Central Los Angeles, and the collision of African Diasporic aesthetics framed by white hegemony. Both Krumping and Quebradita break the hegemonic compartmentalization of brown bodies and syncretize conflicting cultures in individual bodies. Both of these dance forms move on the edges of many cultures, exist ephemerally in a pool of white supremacist politics, respond to and challenge urban structuring, and defy hegemonic categorizations.

My aim is to make connections between urban structuring in Los Angeles and the development of Quebradita and Krumping while breaking open our limited understanding of the embodied experience of the brown bodies that dwell in the margins by framing Krumping and Quebradita as bordered and queer phenomena. Consideration of the urban landscape is essential to understanding dance phenomena as "where one lives influences how one understands and moves in the world-indeed, how they perform their identity based on their surroundings" (Border Intellectual 148). Chicana Border Studies theorists Cherría Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa posit that performances of identity are inevitably influenced by "the land or concrete we grew up on" (23). An examination of the fleeting yet

residual gestures in these dance forms reveal that Krumping reflects and deflects the geographically and socially structured immobility of black bodies while Quebradita reflects and deflects perpetual migration, incomplete settlement and the hypermobility of Mexican immigrants that threatens hegemonic whiteness. African American Studies and Performance Studies scholar Darieck B. Scott affirms the importance of geography and ways of knowing: “Where one goes affects how and what one knows, which makes one’s location-geographic and subject-all the more relevant” (Border Intellectual 151).

Krumping

There, in the belly of Los Angeles, a white settler town imagined to be the Aryan City of the Sun, grew the largest African American community in the U.S. West, zoned as the city’s repository of sin. Constant and brutal policing tracked the rise of Black L.A., caging black life and accelerating black death (Hernández 3833).

The Great Migration brought 7,500 African Americans to Los Angeles, and by 1930 the African American population increased to 47,000 (Hernández 3196). LA was and continues to be the largest African American community in the U.S. West (Hernández 3202). Blacks were prohibited from buying or living in homes in the suburbs, and were restricted to settling along South Central Avenue, a corridor 7.5 miles long and 2.5 miles wide (Hernández 3208). It was in South Central L.A. where Krumping developed in the 1990s in response to decades of police brutality and perpetual criminalization of black bodies enforced by mass incarceration of people of color in inner city neighborhoods. Mass incarceration and the ever present threat of it are modes of displacement. One can be removed from home and put in a cage, or be geographically restricted and removed because of the fear associated with entering white spaces, as doing so makes a black body

more vulnerable to arrest, police brutality and even death. L.A. was once considered a haven for African Americans, but overtime the conditions of the neighborhoods they settled in became subject to nearly constant police surveillance, and public spaces became dangerous to black and brown bodies. Access to public amenities like parks, beaches and libraries were becoming segregated, policed, and essentially off limits to immigrants and people of color who were afraid of falling victim to the police state (Davis 227).

The early 1920s are often referred to as the “Tribal Twenties” because of white animosity toward other ethnic groups. Racial groups were split through hegemonic white ideologies that drove the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, the coming of age of Jim Crow, and the preaching of eugenics (Hernández 2629). The 1920s was when the criminalization of blacks in Los Angeles became starkly blatant. Police would patrol the segregated black district that was emerging in the heart of Los Angeles in Central Avenue, beating up and killing unarmed citizens (Hernández 3089-3093). During the prohibition era saloons, gambling dens and late night dance clubs were banned in the suburbs and relegated to the center of the city known as “the segregated zone” (Hernández 3264). Vice raids and cereal arrests were common in the area, increasing the amount of incarcerated African Americans and their removal from the city (Hernández 3373). These racist practices were considered part of the progressive agenda, which was “generally committed to preserving racial and property hierarchies, while creating institutions that would turn out people who respected authority and knew their own limits” (Gilmore 82). If non-whites did not adhere to the established racial hierarchy they were removed by incarceration or death. By the 1950s, L.A. had the largest jail system in the United States, and blacks comprised an ever-increasing share of the city’s incarcerated population (Gilmore 45).

Police brutality of unarmed black citizens hit a tipping point during the six-day long Watts Rebellion of 1965 that ignited over a confrontation between a black man and a police officer. The Watts Rebellion was also an uprising against the harsh living conditions that African Americans endured including poverty, underemployment, poor housing, lack of education, and health care (Hernández 3828). The rebellion garnered attention, and city leaders increased investments in housing, education, and health care for Watts and South Central residents. However, in subsequent years “they invested even more in policing, keeping Los Angeles home to the largest imprisoned population in the United States as the United States built the largest penal system in the world” (Hernández 3839). After the Watts Rebellion there was incentive to reinforce spatial segregation to protect the white middle class from criminalized black youth (Davis 230). Redlining practices removed small businesses from the Watts area, and large retailers took flight out of the area, removing malls, pharmacies and grocery stores from the reach of black Watts residents (Davis 242).

In 1982 the California Department of Corrections committed to expanding prison capacity, and \$495,000,000 were allocated to building new prisons in Los Angeles, Riverside and San Diego to “enhance public safety,” even though crime was actually declining (Gilmore 84). One solution to filling the prisons was to change the classification of residential burglary and domestic assault to felonies requiring a prison sentence, and later the “three strikes law” (Gilmore 86-87), which requires anyone who commits three felonies to serve a lifetime prison sentence. Brown bodies were the targets of this new law, and it was clear that the intent was to cage as many brown bodies as possible. When the four officers who brutally beat taxi driver Rodney King were found not guilty, the black community’s rage erupted into the L.A. Riots in 1992. The televised beating of this unarmed

black man captured a police practice that was common in black neighborhoods like South Central Los Angeles, and the Police Officers' acquittal signaled that lashes to a black body are acceptable. The residue of slavery has carried on, and the impact of African American ancestral trauma erupted into violence and fury. For youth and young adults in South Central L.A., their trauma erupted into vibratory, convulsing, ruthless thrashing sessions in a cypher.

Krumping, in its traditional form, would always happen in large groups on the street or at house parties. One or more brown bodies would enter the circle and engage in a movement practice that looks like fighting, spiritual possession, and aggressive flailing in a manner that was at once smooth, raw, grotesque, tiresome, and energizing. Brown bodies built heat together, shared drips of sweat, held sacred space and encouraged one another. The Krumping event is a cleansing ritual and cathartic release that channels percussive, undulating aesthetics from traditional African dances and locking and popping from hip-hop dance. Scott points to an ancestral defense mechanism that is reproduced in black bodies: they are always prepared, at the drop of a hat, to receive a lash or a blow, characterized by tensed muscles and a readiness to flinch (3). Krumping's vibratory nature embodies tension and flinching, but also transcends it. It builds a space within confinement where abjection can be eclipsed. "Within the black abject...we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or at some far flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly like pleasure) without losing or denying what it is to suffer" (Scott 15). Krumping releases tension, and serves as a mode for processing present and ancestral traumas imparted by settler colonialist projects.

Quebradita does something similar, and responds to the settler colonialist assaults on Latinx bodies.

Quebradita

Mestizas live in between different worlds, in nepantla. We are forced (or choose) to live in categories that defy binaries of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Living in intersections, in cusps, we must constantly operate in a negotiation mode (Anzaldúa 71).

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo made Texas, Arizona, California and Colorado U.S. territories. With these territories came established Mexican and Indigenous cultures, which settler colonialist projects have always aimed to either remove or culturally assimilate. In the “Tribal Twenties” Nativists (anti-immigrant/anti-non-Anglo activists) aimed to restrict and eventually end immigration to the U.S. from regions other than Western Europe (Hernández 2629). Anyone who looked like a Latinx immigrant was subject to policing, surveillance and incarceration. A massive influx of immigrants to the U.S. in search of manual labor jobs threatened white supremacy, and this drove white persistence in preventing immigration and deporting undocumented Mexicans. City planners cut roads and filled rivers to concentrate Mexican residents on the east side of town (Hernández 2912) making it easy to patrol their neighborhoods. In an attempt to capture more undocumented immigrants and incarcerate even more brown bodies, Los Angeles focused on hitting Latinx people with public order charges. Eighty-six percent of the arrests of Mexicans made by the LAPD between 1928 and 1939 were for public order charges, which restrict how one can inhabit public space (Hernández 2926). Essentially, Mexicans were imprisoned for “living, loving, lounging and fighting in public,” effectively removing their right to be in the city (Hernández 2926). They need only be present to be in violation of the

law. In 1954 anti-immigrant efforts led to raiding worksites, communities, and homes, deporting thousands of Mexican Immigrants from Los Angeles (Hernández 3779). Those who the LAPD could not deport or incarcerate were restricted to settle only in specific areas. The Harbor Freeway built in 1952, and the redevelopment of Bunker Hill in 1955 blocked the developing city core from the surrounding immigrant neighborhoods (Davis 230). Deportation and segregation practices continued into the 1990's.

When the California economy crashed in 1990 white California residents blamed immigrants. They misbelieved that immigrants were hoarding jobs and government support, so in 1994 they voted to exclude social services from immigrants with proposition 187 and to put more people of color in prison for life with proposition 184, the "Three Strikes" Initiative (Gilmore 55). Both of these propositions were settler colonialist projects that were meant to bolster the economy by expanding prison programs, building more immigrant detention centers, and using legislation to fill more beds with brown bodies to reinforce white supremacy.

Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants alike were disheartened by the denial of education and welfare to immigrants, and viewed it as an attack on Mexicanness. Latinx youth responded by developing their own coded, embodied language of cultural hybridity: Quebradita or "little break," which refers to breaking borders. In *Luz en lo Oscuro* Gloria Anzaldúa describes colonial wounds as cracks and fissures where there exist opportunities for growth and light. She describes the growth as "plants pushing against the fixed cement of disciplines and cultural beliefs, eventually overturning the cement slabs" (Anzaldúa 73). Quebradita is the light or the plant that Chicax youth consciously created in response to the settler colonialist attack of proposition 187. Chicax youth rubbed the fear of Mexican

mobility in the face of hegemony by staging public dance events where dancers would move at rapid speed while weaving and winding into their partners, riding each others legs, accessing the sky through acrobatic lifts, throwing and catching each others bodies, and making it clear that they are indeed mobile, powerful, and unabashedly Mexican *and* American. Brown bodies embody confrontational, grotesque, seemingly off balance and careless aesthetics in Quebradita. They fuse highly contrasting dance forms such as country line dancing, hip-hop and *baile folklórico*, contesting ethnic boundaries and categorizations (Breaking Borders 48).

The dance is associated with “rugged, pristine, unspoiled and virtuous life” (Danced Politics). It takes place in a circle of people, who the *quebradores* in the center bump and rub up against, constantly gaging the territory and only executing the moves that can be safely completed in the space that is available. This element of the dance seems metaphoric for how Chicanxs need to constantly negotiate their hybrid ethnic identities. Both audience and dancers incorporate shouts or *gritos* into the dance space, not only taking up physical space but also sonar space. The incorporation of many different aesthetics communicates “a vision of culture in which Mexican and Mexican-Americans are able to participate in modern, technological, transnational society without losing their unique identity, their history, their ties to place” (Danced Politics). A confusing, conflicting environment is played out, embraced and welcomed. This dance demonstrated a refusal to assimilate to U.S. culture and to adopt a conservative Mexican American culture.

Where Krumping and Quebradita Converge

Although Los Angeles has been slammed with settler colonialist projects, brown communities have strong roots in Los Angeles that have relentlessly taken hold, creating what Bell Hooks calls a “Homeplace,” a place where one feels empowered to fight social injustices inflicted by the other (Border Intellectual 153). Quebradita and Krumping are ephemeral frameworks that are spontaneously accessed to negotiate injustice within and between bodies. They access the colonial wound corporeally, and rearticulate their identities through active embodiments.

African Americans and Mexican Americans hold in common the traumas of enslavement through their Native roots. Underneath their differences they meet in a shared history of captivity, or “a willful and violent severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers 67). Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers proposes that the flesh is a primary narrative that encompasses wounds, divisions and ripped apartness (67), so it follows that an expressive practice in the flesh is a particularly compelling place to access and transform these lacerations. Scott adds to this idea by asserting that people with an enslaved history have a clear understanding of embodied alienation (13). Brown communities in Los Angeles used this visceral connection to alienation to manifest an explosive corporeal expression that transmits and transforms the residue of a queer history.

Quebradita and Krumping both reflect, remake and represent a shared struggle in brownness: “struggle, which is a politically neutral word, occurs at all levels of society as people try to figure out through trial and error, what to make of idled capacities (Gilmore 55). Idled capacities materialize for African Americans through displacement by captivity and for Latinos through displacement by deportation. Both are idled by neglect, and this

idleness enabled the invention of these powerful, grotesque, dichotomous dance forms. Quebradita and Krumping do not just reflect L.A.'s urban context; they are part of it.

Quebradita and Krumping evade fixity by dwelling in ephemera, and bypass hegemonic surveillance by engaging in a corporeal practice that only brown bodies in these communities are fluent in. These dance forms created a space for making and remaking identity through corporeal codes that do not register on the hegemonic white map, thus enabling brown communities in Los Angeles to revolutionize the meaning and reading of their bodies to dispute the heated era of xenophobic, racist, government sanctioned settler colonialist projects in Los Angeles in the 1990s. To fully grasp the weight of what these dance forms mean for abject brown bodies it is important to consider politics, geography, and embodied texts without privileging one over the other. Queer theories of gesture and visibility as well as borderland studies lend themselves to bridging the disciplines of geography and dance.

Abstract theory has its place, but should not overshadow theories in the flesh. People make meaning in the gestalt of the story-telling [or dance] act-meaning they complement or even clarify otherwise obfuscated language (Border Intellectual 158)

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