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Spectatorship and Legacy: The 2000s Hip-Hop Musical

Introduction

The aging of culturally recognized films, those of which we discuss decades later in academia, relies on how institutions, scholars and theorists choose to place them. In this essay I will be analyzing the hip-hop musical, a subgenre rooted in the 2000s during a resurgence of hip-hop through on-screen portrayals of battle and street culture. Examples within this subgenre include *You Got Served* (Stokes, 2004), *Stomp the Yard* (White, 2007), and the *Step Up* franchise (2006). As a film scholar, I couldn't help but realize the lack of conversation for films that I believed to be well-recognized in my own life, and I felt an urge to read their invisibility within the realm of our studies versus their prominence in my environment.

Using frameworks from scholars Linda Williams and Janet Staiger, this essay will cement this subgenre in film scholarship. By reading these films through Williams's "body genre" theory with analysis of specific sequences and sociocultural boundaries, I argue that their strength lies in embodied and culturally specific literacies of hip-hop culture that dominant frameworks were missing. With the temporal distance of nearly two decades, observing franchise performance and nostalgic engagement indicate that audiences have sustained these films and preserved them where film history has not. Reading the aging of the hip-hop dance musical, while reading them seriously as body genre films, invites a new and elevated viewing of the subgenre in history.

The Body Genre

In 1991, Linda Williams tied three genres of film together that were seemingly unrelated: horror, melodrama, and pornography. These three were categorized together as “body genres,” films that are defined by their attempt to produce a bodily reaction from its spectator. In her work, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” she adds melodrama to a concept that only featured horror and pornography, built from Carol Clover. These genres are culturally “low,” labeled by Williams for their excess of emotion and spectacle. Fifteen years later, a handful of films under the small, short-lived subgenre of the hip-hop musical were released, including *You Got Served*. *You Got Served* is an early entry of its era, paving the way for a trend of hip-hop dance films such as the *Step Up* franchise and *Stomp the Yard*. This subgenre of films has formed itself to be an expansion of Linda Williams’s contemporary body genre, basing itself on the dance spectacle both inside of the narrative and exceeding it, with a power that depends on its surrounding culture.

You Got Served throws viewers into the middle of a dance battle with no connection or relation to anything or anyone within. There are no character introductions, no dialogue, and no information given; this is the introduction to the world of *You Got Served*. The only sounds we hear are that of amusement and Timbaland’s “Drop” with Fatman Scoop and Magoo, which leads to my first key point. Williams notes three sounds that define the three genres under her classification, sounds that go beyond any language, still encoding meaning on the way: sobs of anguish, screams of fear, and cries of pleasure, for melodrama, horror, and pornography, respectively. To add to that list: the cheers and chants of excitement in response to moves, as seen immediately in this opening sequence. On top of that, she also marks three bodily fluids displayed within each genre: tears, blood, and sexual fluids; I add sweat to that list under the hip-hop musical. When observing horror, many spectators go into horror films not looking for the narrative. What's instead searched for are the scales, the kills, the conventions that make a horror film what it is. Here, with the hook of the film being a lengthy battle sequence, viewers are invited through that spectacle, just like the classic horror opening with a great kill.

When thinking about the body genre films as culturally low, a heavy piece of the theory is focused on the specific display of the female body: weeping, screaming, or orgasming. Here's where we find a divergence. In the hip-hop musical, bodily display and physicality are not organized around suffering or exposure, but rather performance of skill and athleticism. Under this code, there is actually a higher emphasis on the male body. What would likely come to mind when thinking of this concept in the hip-hop musical subgenre is *Honey* (2003), which follows Jessica Alba as the lead character and displays her body in an exotic performance manner. However, this doesn't exactly follow Williams's theory, as this portrayal in *Honey* does not add or take away from its effectiveness as the body genre. This also applies to other films with female leads such as *Step Up 2: The Streets* (Chu, 2008); this expansion of the body genre as I propose, relies more on filmmaking techniques and choreography to provoke bodily movement instead of the bare image (a kill, an orgasm, etc.).

In Vivian Sobchack's "Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture", Sobchack proposes that the body makes meaning before the mind can interpret any. She also brings in Arthur Danto to verbalize film itself as a body: "with the movies, we do not just see that they move, we see them moving: and this is because the pictures themselves move" (Sobchack 147). *You Got Served* directly exemplifies this concept; the camera itself is a character within the spectacle, working in the diegesis. Cuts match every beat to Timbaland's song, while the camera shakes with the dancers who jump and land on the floor. The camera moves and reacts with the song, dance, and crowd, and the effect here is a response among body genre within the world and outside of it. The camera does not just showcase dancing on the screen, it dances with it. Let's look at how this concept hits spectators: Elena Benthaus takes the combination of dancing bodies and screen techniques and applies it to contemporary reality television, coining the "WOW-affect." "Apart from being an expressive response to something too stunning, too spectacular, too intense, or too emotional to put into more elaborate verbal expressions, the WOW as an immediate physical-verbal expression hovers at the threshold of a more articulated, recognized, and verbalized emotional response" (Benthaus 13).

Williams also has a focus on mimicry in her theory. In comedy, while we do laugh, which is a bodily response, rarely are spectators laughing at a character laughing. *You Got Served* is kinetic and rhythmic, and like other responses, it's immeasurable. The simple bop of the head or facial wince to a hard hit on the screen is mimetic, as a viewer moves their body and reacts with the crowd to the movement on display. It may not be exact; we may not backflip from seeing a backflip, but the reaction is still present. To jump in a seat or move your head is all the same. Evolving and expanding Williams's theory, the hip-hop musical inverts the mimicry to the physical disconnect between spectator and performance. Back to Benthaus: "The WOW as a verbalized response is indicative of an absence of empathy, because the spectator-at-home is wowed and stunned by the impossibility of imagining inhabiting this body while still experiencing the rhythms produced by the movements, the music, and the noise of the on-screen audience" (Benthaus 18). In this battle culture, the crowd decides who wins. This intense, not‑yet‑cognitive bodily response to hyper‑athletic dance performance, is produced through the interplay of moving bodies, music, sound design, and the noise of the audience. While one can pinpoint the elements behind it, the feeling itself is beyond articulation and measure, exactly how

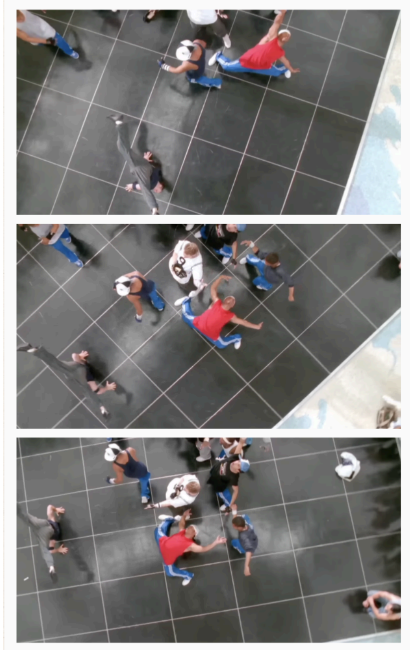
Williams classifies films under her theory. That’s just it: the film, like others in its era, rely on the “crowd pop”, and they know it. The excess in this case strengthens the film. As viewers, we are no more or less qualified than the members in the audience to be a part of the voting. All of it is audience-based, and it is whatever we are drawn to the most. It is self-aware of its performance; take the crucial first battle against Wade (Christopher Jones). David (Omarion) and Elgin (Marques Houston) lose, a result of Sonny (Jerome Jones) stealing their moves. It is the way that the performance makes the audience feel, regardless of who is performing it. Another example: throughout the film, David and Elgin are asking about a character named Oscar, a presumably strong performer who could help their crew out. Their teammate replies, “he ain’t into battles no more. He’s into the pureness of the art, he’s all spiritual, and what not,” showing us that the film is taking its stance on battling as a spectacle, disconnected from a higher form of performance; in turn it comments on its own separation from a film considered “high-art,” leaving itself next to Williams’s cultural lowness.

The Cultural Bounds of Genre

The longlasting importance of *You Got Served* comes from its contextual nature. My initial connection to the film was through the culture first. That is a reflection of expectation towards the genre, not the film. Andrew Tudor interprets genre, using art films as an example to state that genre is a concept that exists in a culture of a specific group or society (Tudor 1973). Over time, as more films catered to specific groups continue to release, conventions are created that connect to the expectations of a movie under the genre title, as seen in my own with *You Got Served*.

Under body genre, it is impossible to label a genre to have a universal affect on spectators. The reaction, while not intellectual, is still shaped by what a viewer already knows, expects, or recognizes within the genre. In Williams's original theory, it is never stated or argued that these genres are defined by being successful in eliciting reaction, but instead they are defined by their **attempt** to do so. Zooming into the three genres referenced in this essay: some viewers are more squirmy to paranormal activity, others are more reactive to slashers and gore, depending on which films pry on their specific fear. For some, melodrama depicts a personal pain. All impact is relative. The 1930s musicals in which we learn about in academia and therefore place them in the canon of such Criterion Collection's, National Film Registry's, etc., are done so through the moment of transition to sound. John Singleton's Hood Trilogy of the 1990s, which as of March 2026 has just been added to the Criterion Collection, has been placed for being "richly nuanced films" that "explore the experience of growing up Black and searching for one's place in the world". The cultural impact is there, and it also is within films of the hip-hop musical: a socially recognizable genre within its time, born out of the emergence of a new era in pop culture, yet somehow forgotten in conversations with film eras such as the western, or crime, with their respective inner-genres such as the spaghetti western and the gangster film. They are all bound in their times, but I argue that hip-hop films are the most reliant on the viewer's connection with the cultural context. That does not make it a flaw, but rather a structural piece of the genre both as hip-hop and body together, giving a reason behind the viewer's bodily response, expanding on Williams's argument for the melodrama inclusion.

In "Hip-Hop on Film: Performance Culture, Urban Space, and Genre Transformation in the 1980s," Kimberley Monteyne argues that hip-hop culture overcomes the impoverishment of city life, bringing a heightened energy and excitement to the black male's everyday. The culture makes the mundane spectacular (Monteyne 2013). In *You Got Served*, Mr. Rad (Steve Harvey) hosts the battles in his warehouse, where the audience declares the winner. The climax of the film, what each of these battles leads up to, is a big-scale finale at a commercial venue, exemplifying Monteyne's point on turning everyday life into spectacular performance, a link that is drawn towards working class, racialized youth. It is explained early on that David's motivation for battling is to earn money to help his family, as his little sister was accepted into Princeton University.



The lead dancer rotates, the crew rotates, and the camera follows, in one connected movement.

The big battle, for a prize of $50,000 dollars, is televised, features more crews, and most importantly: a judge panel, featuring rapper Lil' Kim. It removes itself from the culture we've grown accustomed to throughout. After an initial tie between the two crews, the battle pivots to, as Lil' Kim puts it, "straight street-style. No rules." The film goes back to its genre power: spectatorship. It returns to the kinetic energy, letting the crowd vote, and earns an explosive finale. Oscar shows up to help David's crew, and they pull off the win. *You Got Served* as a whole, strengthened most by this finale, highlights the audience response beyond articulation, woven in with the influence of hip-hop culture on display.

Janet Staiger's "The Politics of Film Canons" argues that selection (which is inevitable) of films that are carried forward are based on a political rationale that assists a hegemonic power; specific groups of scholars, critics and institutions come to a collective choice on placement of film in the canon (Staiger 10). "In purely practical terms, a scholar of cinema cannot study every film ever made. Selection becomes a necessity and with selection usually comes a politics of inclusion and exclusion. Some films are moved to the center of attention; others, to the margins" (Staiger 8). With this claim I highlight the subgenre as a whole. On an 8 million dollar budget, *You Got Served* opened to 16 million dollars and grossed a total of 48 million dollars. Let's place the *Step Up* franchise next to it, beginning in 2006: this entry is led by Channing Tatum, who plays a troublemaking kid with the "life-changing" opportunity of attending a performing art school. The film grossed a total of 114 million dollars against a budget of 12 million, and expanded into a franchise that lasted until *Step Up: All In* (Sie, 2014). Where does this longevity come from? *You Got Served* received a sequel, however it was straight-to-video. But as *Step Up* continues with its theatrical releases, they switch lead characters and settings. Marika Piday-Warren analyzes the franchise, noting that "the Step Up films derive a sense of 'coolness' from the superficial trappings of black culture, while allowing white lead characters to supplant an actual African American presence" (Piday-Warren 425).

The only film of the era to continue into a profitable franchise is that which originated with a white male lead. This is an important difference to acknowledge, compared to films such as *You Got Served* or *Stomp the Yard*. In *Step Up*, Channing Tatum's Tyler takes the minority struggle and converts it into a masculinity proxy, making it easier for the film to ignore sociopolitical and racial elements. Looking back, this, of all attempts at an entry in this subgenre, is what branches off into something bigger, with Tyler even serving a cameo in the direct sequel.

The existence of this branch-off in itself makes it the “most powerful hip-hop musical”, proving where the comfort stands among the thought process of mainstream cinema. Over time, the franchise leans fully into the spectacle of performance on screen. I do not bring this up to dismiss the films. It is worth acknowledging that this specific franchise that began with urban set hip-hop at its core, strayed away from that groundedness in order to keep thriving.

This series of films is not the only example that proves simply through its existence that the removal of street origins is necessary to move forward. Away from specifically dance, but staying within street culture, Hollywood has the world of *Fast and Furious*. One of the most profitable franchises in film history, the *Fast and Furious* franchise, began in 2001 with a film centered on street racing in Los Angeles. I read the cars on screen and see this portrayal reflected in dance through both franchises. The *Fast and Furious* series leaves street racing behind and moves to bigger action-crime spectacles, only using racing as a device to hint to its past and create another action piece, yet fans consistently ask to return to the street racing roots. Meanwhile the films build towards space adventure and super-beings. Take the character of Han (Sung Kang). Han’s origins are found in a film before his debut in the series, Justin Lin’s *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002). In the film, Han is part of a group of Asian Americans in Los Angeles who find themselves in criminal activity through dealing with meeting the expectations of the model minority myth. Crime is found as an outlet to their boredom of constant attempted perfection. It’s tied to their cultural identities and a sociopolitical myth. After his introduction to the world of *Fast and Furious* in *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (Lin, 2006), Han’s origins are ignored, and his death is even retconned to play him as a secret spy under Kurt Russell’s Mr. Nobody in *F9* (Lin, 2021). What happened to this beloved character has happened to these films in their entirety. This kind of mechanism operates within the diegesis of these films and within the studios behind them. There is a felt need for the genre to scale up, as any others in Hollywood. While the *You Got Served*'s and *Stomp the Yard*'s are pushed to the margins, the *Step Up*'s and *Fast and Furious*'s are pushed to grander, and the industry receives that as the priority for both preservation and further development in regards to 2000s street depiction in contemporary film. This priority moves these films into a safer, protected agenda, leaving fans to preserve the originals on their own.

Nostalgia and Canonization

The years that have passed since this era have given time for its audience to miss them. The increase of hip-hop dance in film and television in the 2000s (*So You Think You Can Dance* began its run in 2005, *America's Best Dance Crew* in 2008) brought home spectators into the competitive setting on a regular basis, forming a connection between worlds. Benthaus analyzes this connected spectacle through *So You Think You Can Dance*. The WOW-affect, as she applies to the series, is enhanced by the fan community that shares this affective experience. "The most powerful affective dimension that is shared here, even when aspects of the show are criticized, is the notion of joy and enjoyment, produced by actively engaging with other members of the fan community" (Benthaus 23). In this era of new media, dance has drastically changed in exposure and mainstream popularity. Recreations of sequences and numbers from dance in television and film (*You Got Served*'s opening specifically, which inspired this analysis) emphasize the cultural impact of these films. I view this subgenre under Pierre Nora's lieu de mémoire. Translating to "realms of memory", it is defined as "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of times has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora, 8). Scholars Jeongbeom Hahm, Tae-Ahn Kang and Hirotaka Matsuoka theorize this under the sports mega-event, using the 2002 World Cup as the primary analysis. Surveying hundreds of people from South Korea and Japan, they concluded that current football spectatorship is highly influenced by memories of the 2002 mega event.

"...an individual's accrued experience of the 2002 World Cup extended from a "specific place" (e.g., stadiums where football matches were held) to intangible "entities" (e.g., satisfaction as football fans, cheering on the streets, mingling with people, and the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat). These eventually formed a collective memory through "collective enjoyment" and "shared experiences", which led to changes in attitude, identity, or behaviour in the host country (Hahm et al, 13.) The effect of these films hit me personally. With this I find it important to bring in my own experience as a spectator. I was born in 2005 and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area during the peak of the hyphy movement, on top of the rise of dance in film and television as previously stated. Hip-hop was everywhere. Dance was everywhere. Representation for my own identity as a Filipino-American was not common in film media, but we could turn on *America's Best Dance Crew* on television and see ourselves in a mainstream light. It is because of this that I grew up connected to dancing. I must acknowledge this, because with that, a different piece of my identity grew to be represented with the hip-hop musical: that of a dancer. Now as an adult, that power is shown through my engagement with the films. The *You Got Served* with *Stomp The Yard* double feature lived in my childhood and now sits in my home; in revisiting these since, I was taken back. My head nodded, my body moved and reacted naturally with what I was seeing, along with the group I watched with. As spectators, our memories added to the bodily reaction, playing into Tudor's concept of genre foundations and expectations.

Twenty-two years later, Marques Houston, who plays Elgin in *You Got Served,* has announced a sequel to the film which is currently in pre-production at this time of writing. In what will be a revival attempt, this move places the film next to other major Hollywood productions that are intended to be legacy sequels, such as a *Top Gun: Maverick* (Kosinski, 2022) or a *Creed* (2015). In targeting older fans and the younger audience, this is a push on nostalgia and using that memory for a product. Nostalgia is a powerful force: Riya K. Sidhu, Diana M. Urian, Hong Zheng, and Jessica A. Grahn performed a study on young adults and music, using scales to measure desire to tap, move, and dance. The key finding was that earlier songs in their life were rated higher than more recent songs. Nostalgia is more than just a form of familiarity. It's distinct in having a role that makes something feel inducing of movement (in this case). Hip-hop musicals are unique and important in provoking nostalgia through a multitude of forms: music, performance, characters, and community.

Now that I have fully described the power of this genre, I will borrow Daniel Mauro's essay, "Of National 'Significance': Politicizing the Home movies of the US National Film Registry." Here, Mauro focuses on the U.S. National Film Registry, arguing that the home movies selected within are politically meaningful selections, moving from private family films to a public history, gaining new cultural value. The films referenced in this essay are representative of historical moments and communities that would otherwise not be seen on record. *Topaz* (Tatsuno, 1945) is a capture of life during World War II, specifically in an internment camp. *Disneyland Dream* (Barstow, 1956) captures 20th century leisure and middle-class life. These are just two examples, very distinct and separate in scale, but both chosen for their value of belonging to and representing a community. As Mauro writes, while the list continues to grow, so should the expansion of mobilizing histories that aren't yet elevated with others (Mauro 2013). That brings me to my argument for the hip-hop musical. There has been an overlooking of these films as nothing more than dance spectacle. Being able to look at them now, in being a defining moment in pop culture, I have written this essay with the focus of elevating them and placing them with similar value as other films in the canon.

Conclusion: A Legacy Parallel to Academia

In film and media studies, it is encouraged to be as objective as possible. In the case of this essay and the subject matter within, the body and its reactions will always be subjective. The foundations of my argument rested on the bones of Linda Williams, who created the body genre from her experiences of going to the cinema with her seven-year-old son: "these movies both fascinate and scare him," (Williams 2). The body genre at its core is subjective. When placing films in the canon and deciding what belongs in our preserved collections, there is an active subjective choice behind that. Janet Staiger and Daniel Mauro both shine light on this in their work on film canons, and with this essay I have hoped to do the same. These decisions on placement and preservation are made based on what those (who have that power) see as valuable and worthy of such. This is not to say that objectivity is impossible, but there is always a subjective influence in these choices.

With that, I'd like to close on a personal note with more of my own experience. When I was first taught the body genre in a course on film theory, my mind jumped to *You Got Served*, leading me to the rest of the hip-hop musicals. "What films have made my body react?" I asked myself. As an antithesis, when thinking of the genres under her definition, not much comes to mind. That does not dismantle her theory; this essay is intended to add more to the conversation. Again, the focus is on a film's attempt. To argue that *You Got Served* is not making an attempt on the spectator's movement is simply rash, as we are discussing a film centered around celebrating movement and performance. I wrote earlier about John Singleton's Hood Trilogy as an addition to the Criterion Collection. As we are all products of our environment, my emphasis on where I come from, especially in connection with the body's reaction, is necessary. As a scholar, looking at films and putting them in conversation with one another reveals patterns that create holes in our theorists and institutions who place them on pedestals. *Boyz N The Hood* (Singleton, 1991) or the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) live and rest with their call-to-actions for the world to engage with. Yet similar patterns exist in *You Got Served*, purely capturing an environment. Drug deals and violence are present in all three, but when Laurence Fishbourne preaches knowledge on gentrification or Vonte Sweet comments on the violence in the neighborhood, then you truly have something elevated, according to the film canon. With that I am not stating that these films don't deserve their place. Throughout the essay I have argued that we need room for **more**.

Must we always be critiquing the world around us in order to be appreciated? In celebration of each other, it's often not big enough, not grand enough, as I've analyzed. In the conversation of representation, I had grown up with close to none. In all that I have covered on the body genre, including mimicry, display, and reaction, the success of that rests on the spectator's imagination of it happening to them in that same moment. Because of that, representation does in fact play a role. In these films of the subgenre, I, for a very rare opportunity, get to look at the screen and see myself. As a member of the crew, a performer, a competitor. So I danced with them. And when people decades later are making videos on social media recreating sequences from these films and the studios are having legacy sequel conversations, it means that there was a heartbeat there; power in the time and place that we can only see now. Simply put, your body had to be there.

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