

# Tracing the Roots: An Exploration of Black Contemporary Dance



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## Introduction

Black contemporary dance is not a single style but a continuously evolving practice that takes many forms while remaining rooted in Africanist traditions. In Paris, this multiplicity becomes especially visible. The city has long served as a hub for the African diaspora, attracting dancers and choreographers who bring with them diverse practices such as vogue, jazz, and krump. Though each appears distinct, these forms share foundational principles—rhythm, improvisation, call-and-response, groundedness, and storytelling—that trace back to Africanist aesthetics and diasporic heritage.

This project asks: **How do Black dancers and choreographers in Paris integrate diverse diasporic dance forms to create a contemporary movement language that honors ancestral roots while reflecting their present-day cultural realities?** By exploring this question, I examine how Black artists use movement as a means of cultural preservation, adaptation, and innovation within Paris’s multicultural landscape. The city’s environment—marked by both its colonial history and its global artistic exchange—creates fertile ground for these styles to intersect and evolve. Through this lens, Paris becomes more than a site of performance; it is a living archive where Black contemporary dance embodies ancestral memory while reimagining identity and expression for a new generation.

## The Origins of Jazz Dance



Josephine Baker

Photo Sourced from Libertarianism.org

**“Dance is too difficult not to have fun and look for the joy in dancing and the pleasure of expressing yourself.”**  
–Millard Hurley

- Emerged in the late 19th–early 20th centuries from African American communities
- Rooted in African diasporic movement blended with European social dance forms
- Features Africanist aesthetics: polyrhythms, groundedness, improvisation
- Evolved through social dances such as the cakewalk, Charleston, Lindy Hop, and swing
- Grew alongside jazz music as an expression of identity and creativity
- Influenced American musical theater and contemporary dance

## Jazz Dance in Paris

- Arrived in Paris in the 1920s with African American performers seeking opportunities abroad during the Jazz Age
- Josephine Baker became an iconic figure, performing in cabarets like the Folies Bergère
- Paris offered greater visibility and creative freedom for Black artists compared to the segregated U.S.
- The city became a hub for artistic innovation and cultural exchange
- Jazz dance became a staple of Parisian nightlife, merging African American roots with French theatrical traditions
- Today, Paris remains a center for jazz dance, reflecting its legacy as a haven for Black artistry and cross-cultural exchange

## The Origins of Krump Dance



International Illest Dance Battle  
100% Krump

Photo Sourced from Lavillete.com

**“We tried to master it (Krump) to influence others and make a good community and a good game”**  
–Wolf

- Originated in South Central Los Angeles in the early 2000s
- Stands for Kingdom Radically Uplifted Mighty Praise (KRUMP)
- Developed in communities facing poverty, systemic racism, and violence
- Served as an emotional outlet and nonviolent alternative to gang involvement
- Characterized by explosive energy, grounded stomps, chest pops, arm swings, and improvisation
- Expresses resistance, spirituality, and storytelling through movement
- Draws on Africanist aesthetics—rhythm, call-and-response, and community focus—linking it to diasporic traditions while remaining contemporary

## Krump Dance in Paris

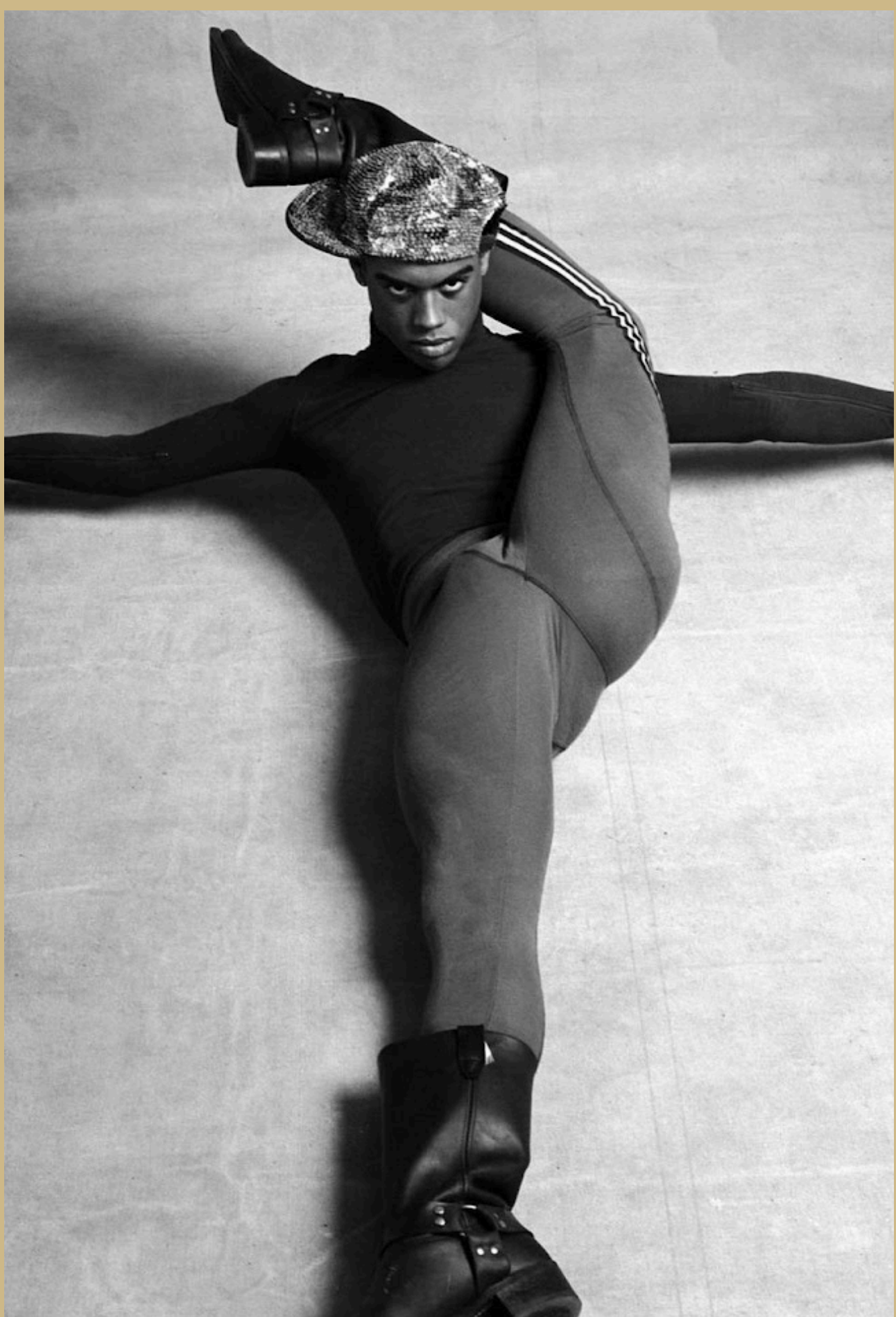
- Spread internationally through dance battles, the documentary Rize (2005), and global street dance networks
- Gained traction in Paris due to the city’s strong hip-hop and street dance culture
- Embraced as both a performance style and a social/cultural movement
- Parisian krumpers adapted the form while honoring its roots in expression, resilience, and spirituality
- Now a vital part of Paris’s Black contemporary dance scene, intersecting with hip-hop, jazz, and vogue
- Reflects Paris’s role as a global hub for street dance exchange and artistic transformation of struggle

## The Origins of Vogue Dance

- Originated in the late 1980s within Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ ballroom culture in Harlem, New York
- Created as a space for self-expression and resistance to racism, homophobia, and transphobia
- Inspired by fashion poses, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and club dance styles
- Features distinct elements: hand performance, catwalk, spins and dips, and floorwork
- Celebrates identity, resilience, and chosen family through performance
- Rooted in improvisation and theatricality, serving as both art form and political statement
- Gave visibility and empowerment to marginalized communities through dance

## Vogue Dance in Paris

- Arrived in Paris in the early 1990s via underground clubs, media, and visiting performers
- Expanded as ballroom culture spread internationally
- Paris became a major European center for vogue, merging with its fashion scene and LGBTQ+ community
- Ballroom houses formed, fostering self-expression, competition, and solidarity like Harlem’s
- Today, vogue in Paris is a thriving social dance and influential performance practice
- Contributes to the Black contemporary dance scene
- Blends diasporic roots with local artistic innovation, symbolizing liberation and cultural exchange



Willi Ninja

Photo Sourced from  
Artsandculture.google.com

**“It allows me to express myself as not only as a black dancer, but as a gay dancer as well”**  
–Melvin Hans

Scan this QR  
Code for clips  
from my  
**immersive**  
research in Paris!



Scan this QR  
Code for  
**references** from  
this project!



## Methods

- This project combined ethnographic research, artistic practice, and audiovisual documentation to explore how various styles—jazz, vogue, and krump—contribute to the evolution of Black contemporary dance in Paris. I attended and participated in two to three classes and/or performances for each dance style, observing how each embodied Africanist aesthetics such as rhythm, groundedness, and improvisation.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Paris-based instructors and choreographers representing each style: Millard Hurley (Jazz), Georgey Souchette (Jazz), Cameron McKinny (Jazz/Floorwork), Melvin Hans (Vogue), and Wolf (Krump). Each interview focused on the instructor’s personal experience, artistic process, and perspective on how their style connects to Black cultural identity and the Parisian dance landscape.
- Throughout the research process, I recorded video clips of classes, performances, and interviews using an iPhone, an external microphone, and a tripod. These materials were later edited using Final Cut Pro to create a choreographic work and supplemental video that integrates dance, music, and voiceovers from the collected interviews.