

**The Dungeon Sessions:
An Ethnographic Look at Krump in Toronto**

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*This paper is dedicated to late Andre “Menace” Christie

It's the national basketball league's 2015 final between the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Golden State Warriors. The game is tied at the end of the fourth period. As the game goes into overtime, the crowd is captivated and on the edge of their seats. The players are full of adrenalin, ready to try their hardest to take the win. Five minutes later... the final buzzer rings! It is the end of the game, taken by a close two points by the Cleveland Cavaliers. LeBron James, Cleveland's all-time leading scorer and multi-year MVP, screams! He whips the ball to the ground with all of his might. He throws all of his energy through his arms, into his fists, across face and down into his feet.¹ LeBron James is happy. His body is portraying aggression but not that of anger. LeBron James is ecstatic about his win and using all the energy left in his body to express this feeling. He isn't smiling, yet without a doubt, the crowd is aware and can feel his overpowering emotion. This paper aims to disprove the misconceptions of as an urban dance style called krump, which has been labeled as an "angry" dance form. Participants of krump, are like LeBron James. They show their emotions through fully embodied, aggressive motions that make up the foundation of krump. It is possible to divorce the ideas of anger from aggression within krump?

Over the previous four months, I have attended to one of homes of krump within Canada. Every Tuesday night is an event that is titled the 'Dungeon Session'. A krump session is where krumpers come to dance with each other, usually in a supportive, non-competitive atmosphere. Since this session is a reoccurring event, it is given a specific name thru a descriptive feel of the event. A former dancer and regular participant of the sessions had said the apartment transforms into the feel of a dungeon. The dungeon sessions have taken place in Toronto for the past eight years², inside the studio apartment of Amadeus "Primal" Marquez. Marquez is one of the leaders in the Canadian krump community.

“Primal” is his self-chosen name, which he has given to represent his dance character. This is a common practice within the krump and urban dance community. Marquez is the owner of Canada’s premier krump crew titled “Northbuck”³.

The apartment is always clean but grungy in appearance. Cleaning supplies such as mops and disinfectant sprays are surrounded by minor holes in walls, missing light bulbs or outlet coverings and a patchy paint job. The dancing or session is generally done in the kitchen as it is the largest space, or on that patio when the weather is warm. Tuesday nights are dungeon session nights, as advertised by Marquez on Facebook to start at 7:30pm; they



Scorpio Gentile performing in the Dungeon Session. Photography by Deanne Kearney

usually do not start till between 8:00pm to 8:30pm. Dancers hang out, watch television, listen to music and stretch before the session is called to begin. One evening when I walked in, I found dancers playing chess while waiting for the session to start.

Participants stand in a circle to face the dancers who has his back to the wall; this is deemed the performance space⁴. A krump track is played (a specific music created for this dance style⁵) and a participant dances to that track for what is called a 'round', between one and five minutes. The track is then replayed for each dancer as they take their turn for their round. Once everyone who is participating in the session has danced, the next track is played and this happens till about 10:00pm. The session is not only for krump dancers; all styles are welcomed to join in, as stated on Marquez's Facebook. Yet additional dance styles are infrequent and in the minority.

Krump is an urban dance form that was created in South Central, Los Angeles in the early 2000s⁶. The foundation of the dance is made up of chest pops, jabs, arm swings and stomps. Two dancers and friends named Ceasare "Tight Eyez" Willis and Jo' Artis "Big Mijo" Ratti created krump as youths to escape gang life, and to release aggression and frustration in a positive, non-violent way. It was an opposition to street violence within the notoriously dangerous South Central, Los Angeles⁷ and is a free, expressive, exaggerated, and highly energetic movement. The dance since its inception has travelled worldwide, with krump communities popping up in many different countries throughout the world. Canada has a growing krump community, with its largest in Toronto; others are located in Calgary, Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa. Even though the dance is practiced world wide, Krumping still has difficulty-gaining acceptance by our society as an art form; primarily because people do not understand this dance form and its spirit.

Krump was first brought to my attention when I started to work at a dance studio downtown Toronto named OIP. The open class based dance studio had a focus in hip-hop dance styles and provided a krump class every Thursday night. My friends would joke about the idea of me taking a krump class, as I am not a very aggressive person. I sadly was someone who did not take krump seriously at this time. My personal views on the dance form were skewed as a child when seeing krump portrayed on 2000's television show *MADtv*⁸, a popular sketch comedy show. The sketches showed the dance as overly sexual, angry, violent and dirty. *MADtv* even went as far as mistaking a person having a seizure for the dance style. There have been many misrepresentations through media outlets of the dance. A Canadian dance show titled "The Next Step", depicted the dance style with non-practitioners in 2014 saying it was an angry dance style in which you just throw your arms around⁹. The teacher of the class at OIP, was Amadeus "Primal" Marquez, the same man who holds the dungeon sessions. Marquez is very aware of krump's misconceptions, and saw my apprehension. He tried to convince me to take his class or come out to an upcoming krump event. When I finally did listen to this advice, the dance movement base and the overwhelming support of the dancers to one another blew me away. It was unlike any dance style I had witnessed before. I personally started dancing at the age of ten in studio dance, of which we practiced ballet, jazz, musical theatre and modern. In 2010, I went on to complete the BFA dance program at York University where I took ballet and contemporary every morning for four years. York University offers a breaking class, which is how I first was introduced to the urban dance scene. I am still currently a practicing b-girl, apart of a crew of all females. I am a dance teacher mostly in ballet, jazz and hip-hop. I think one of the reasons I was amazed at the support within krump because that was not my personal

experience within the dance styles I had been apart of. Breaking is an extremely competitive dance style to which is male dominated and generally males are not supportive of female participants. Krump is also male dominated but alternatively, very encouraging of any female participants. In 2013, Toronto started a movement to try to appeal to more females to join the dance form by creating an 'all female krump workshop' in which to teach the form to girls in a safe place. Montreal boasts an all-female krump crew entitled "BuckSwans", which are heavily cheered by the males in the community.

During the time of this study, I started to take private krump classes with a well-respected krumper of Toronto. Jamari Caesar "Rhino" Whittaker is a member of Northbuck crew, as well as the Jungle Bros with Marcus Paris "OG" Johnson. I spent a few years following krump, spending hours watching online videos and going to events, yet I never took a class or participated personally within the culture. I already had an interest in writing on urban dance, and new that I wanted to attend a masters program with a focus on urban dance. Professor Mary Fogarty at York University inspired me, after taking her breaking class and hearing about her research within breaking. I made an appointment to ask what had been written on urban dance and more importantly, what had not. She let me know that it was a new and growing field and quickly became a mentor as I began to dive into the world. With my love of krump only growing, I decided to situate myself outside the culture just enough so that I was still involved and recognized but not directly involved with the dancers. I wanted to be able to document the experience of joining the culture while attending a masters program.

Over the course of this research, I attended other krump sessions with Toronto and Montreal. This research specifically speaks to the space of the dungeon sessions. Krump

sessions in different location and with different participants can vary in vibe and conduct. The observations made at the dungeon sessions are not meant to blanket all krump sessions worldwide but to give a glimpse of the culture through one long running event. The dungeon sessions are a great example of a krump community that is extremely supportive of its participants and is essentially one of the happiest places for a dancer to be. From September to December of 2016, I attended the dungeon sessions as a participant observer. I had previously been to the sessions over a few years but only as a spectator. I was able to interview and record in audio, video and photography participants of the session. I was accepted and trusted by the participants at the session as I had been to many krump events before, volunteered at various battles and worked with various krumpers on different dance events and shows. Yet, I was other-ed as soon as I took out my notebook. At the first session of my fieldwork, a dancer immediately pointed out the notebook. As told them I was observing and taking notes about the session, Marquez shouted “Quick! Everyone do something weird!” Everyone hit strange poses or threw things up into the air in hopes that I would write it down. Eventually I found ways to be more discreet in my note taking, even though they genuinely did not mind and were openly supportive of the research. Another job that was handed to me at sessions was the role of filming. Dancers would hand me their phones to film their rounds, or I would send them the footage that I had taken of them by request. I was thanked by multiple dancers for not only sending the footage but also for supporting what they are doing.

Dancers use what is termed in the community as ‘hype’ to support each other through words and motions when a dancer is performing in the session. Dancers yell ‘Yo’, ‘What?’, ‘That’s Buck’ and other positive words to show a dancer their support of what they are

doing. Buck is a krump specific term, meaning exemplary or authentic krump. It is commonly said by participants, heard in music and printed on clothing. The hype from spectators continues the entire time a dancer is performing with peaks of encouragement when extraordinary movements are executed. Marcus Paris Johnson is a well-known Toronto krumper, known as “OG” within the community. OG in hip-hop culture stands for original gangster, meaning one of the first. He is one of the leaders of the dungeon sessions, and was there every week of my fieldwork. Through an interview with him, he told me about his personal understanding and experience of the dungeon sessions.

“I was at one of the first dungeon experiences here, when we all met up from the north, south, east, west of Toronto and for a person who has been here and seen it all from the beginning, from the very first session, its like home, you know what I mean? This mans house is like our second home in essence, we come here, we vibe and we express so much, our years and emotions are here... Its dope, it makes me feel good and its always good energy.” Marcus Paris “OG” Johnson

As a leader of the session, Johnson is usually in charge of the music that is played, mentoring younger and newer dancers to the dance form and showing them how to conduct oneself in a session. One of the most interesting observations I witnessed during my fieldwork was when Johnson shut down a session. He shut off the music, told the dancers that they were pissing him off, as they were not hyping up dancers enough. Before he had done this, I had already noticed the lower energy levels of the dancers present at that Marcus Paris “OG” Johnson surrounded by dancers during his round. Photography by Deanne Kearney

specific session. The session the following week was one of the loudest out of any of my fieldwork observations. On a separate occasion, Johnson started to address the dancers present at the session about their lack of hunger for battling. He was disappointed that more people were not calling each other out to battle, as that is one of the main ways to improve



within the dance form. He openly asked for anyone in the session to battle him, to which one dancer stepped forward. Battling within a session is not as aggressive as it may seem. Dancers go round for round with each other until there is agreed upon time to stop – usually once one dancer has an exceptional round. There are no judges and it is not talked about after, other than a hug or handshake between the participants. It quickly goes back to a general session. Spectators are expected to know who won the battle simply through watching.

On November 10, 2016, young krumper Andre “Menace” Christie sadly passed away. I had met him at different krump events over the years, always with a warm welcoming smile. He had regularly attended dungeon sessions and was apart of the Toronto Krump Movement. An amazing dancer looked up to by many. Marquez told me through a text message of his passing, which also asked for my help in preserving his memory through writing. The following Tuesday was an extremely emotional yet supportive dungeon session. Dancers took turns dancing there feelings about his passing, which resulted in

everyone present crying, hugging and talking openly about their love of Christie, as well as their support of everyone who krumps. Authoritative krumpers openly said that they were there for anyone that needed to talk to them about anything, whether they were close friends or not. Initiative was taken by krumpers in the community to start a fund to be able to pay for his funeral, for memorial items to be created, and further krump events to honor his memory. This coming together of the community was equally touching and heart wrenching. Opening up my Facebook account was heartbreaking, as it was filled with moving messages about Christie and his love of dance. All paired with the hash tag of #menaceforever. One post that stood out to me was

“Your passion for dance is what stuck out to me. You used dance as your outlet —storytelling, you called it. You were always buck. A1. I wish I got to see you at 21. Kingdom Radically Uplifted Mighty Praise. r.i.p.”

Aggression within sports, like LeBron James’ reaction to his 2015 NBA win are understood and accepted as an expression of pleasure instead of anger. One dance form that was previously portrayed as angry and violent, and has overcome these labels is that of breaking. Breaking, also known as b-boying or b-girling has a similar inception to krump. It is known as the original hip-hop dance style and is said to have started in the 1970s. In January 1980, Martha Cooper, known as a grandmother of hip-hop, was the photo editor of the New York Post. She arrived at a police station where she had heard of twenty-five young kids being arrested for a riot. In the police station, the kids explained that they were simply dancing and battling through dance. The police officers let them go and Cooper asked them to show her some of the moves that they had been doing so she could take photographs. These are the first pictures of the dance form known today as breaking. The media did in

turn label the dance “break dancing” which was rejected by its participants. Today breaking is practiced worldwide, and is an extensively accepted art form. It is rarely described as violent or angry as it once was. Breaking was able to break these labels with additional media that accurately represented the form.

Krump was first documented in the film entitled *Rize*, which was released in 2005. The film following the inception of krump and its growth out of a dance form known as ‘clowning’. Since the release of this film, a few more documentaries have been made such as *Battle for Existence* (2011) and *The Art of Krump* (2013). Yet, krump is under represented in dance studies and scholarship. The final essay of Julie Malnig’s *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* (2008), is one of the few published articles on krump. Christina Zanfagna wrote *The Multiringed Cosmos of Krumping: Hip Hop Dance at the Intersections of Battle, Media and Spirit*, however I am troubled with the way krump is described within it.

“In “The Multiringed Cosmos of Krumping: Hip Hop Dance at the Intersections of Battle, Media and Spirit,” Christina Zanfagna also invokes Turner and reformulates his concept of “liminality” to analyze how krumping- a twenty-first century incarnation of break dancing- embodies both competitive and spiritual dimensions that manifest in the circle or “ring” (harkening back to the African American ring shout). Zanfagna describes krumping as “a combination of street fighting, moshing, sanctified church spirit possession and aerobic striptease” a type of “serious play” in which dancers may confront anger, pain, and sadness.” (Malnig 9)

The use of street fighting and aerobic striptease as descriptions of the movement are concerning and are not my experience in examining the form. Krumpers are very open about not wanting to portray the dance as angry, that they express many emotions such as joy and happiness through the style. This is best told as by Ceasare “Tight Eyez” Willis in the documentary *The Art of Krump*.

“Actually dancing is the most happy part of our lives, so the facial expressions that you see, you can’t look pretty doing it, because it takes a lot of power, so sometimes you are going to make a crazy face but its acceptable because people understand what its taking to push it out and the more people can pull out of you, they are helping you get to your happy place. You see what I’m saying? Your krump round is your journey to your happy place, to that place of ‘yeah, I did it, I did something, I’m here, everybody knows me, everybody loves me, this is what I need’. Krump helps you get there. So we scream, we pull it out of you, we let you know, you see our faces and we are in your face. Crazy faces, hats flying everywhere, people pulling on your shirt but it actually helps you go up. What child doesn’t want to feel that? What family wouldn’t put their child where they could feel that? That’s why krump is good, it’s uplifting, it’s always going up. Yeah, it looks like is angry but that’s only what you see on the outside. But what’s going on in here, we are actually happy about what we are doing. It just takes a lot of mite and strength to do it.” Ceasare “Tight Eyez” Willis

Sociologist Howard Becker in his 1963 wrote a book entitled “Outsiders”, which examines the sociological understanding of deviance and difference. Becker explores how outsiders or unconventional individuals get labeled and placed in society. Through his investigation of different identities associated with drug use and dance musicians, he produces a mode of thought called “labeling theory”. Labeling theory shows that individuals or groups are labeled as deviant only though society and its socially constructed behaviors. Becker shapes the idea that being labeled as deviant is more of a question of the judgment by a social group, rather than the characteristics of the so-called deviant person or act.

Becker brought prominence to labeling theory in the 1960s and 1970s as inspired by the work of three scholars. George Herbert Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), shaped the concept of the self which is composed of self-awareness and self-image. Self-image is constructed by ideas about what we think others are thinking about us. Frank Tannebaum’s *Crime and Community* (1938), described the social interactions in crime, the difference or lack there of between individuals who have criminal thoughts and those who act on them.

Lastly Edwin Lemert (1951) introduction of “secondary deviance” which is the role created to deal with society’s condemnation of the behaviors of a deviant person.

Becker chapters “Becoming a Marihuana User” and “Marihuana Use and Social Control” are used to set how deviants get more involved within deviance lifestyle based on there surroundings and the ability to be apart of the deviant group based on secret knowledge. This is like the krump community, as it is not broadcasted widely. You have to know members of the community to be able to attend krump events. The only place the dungeon session is broadcasted is on Marquez’s personal Facebook page¹⁰. A simple Google search would not lead you to this krump session, only insiders can attend based on there knowledge. The title of a dungeon session is also misleading to outsiders without knowledge of slang terms such as session. While at the session, you are also presented with more knowledge of krump events or other sessions happening within the city.

Becker’s research on dance musicians is similar to that of a krump lifestyle. Becker’s chapters “The Culture of a Deviant Group: The Dance Musician” and “Careers in a Deviant Occupational Group: The Dance Musician” describe the cliques within the culture, specific insider knowledge and cultural norms. It is similar to that of krumper as there is a specific slang, clothing, and cultural norms. Clothing is based in hip-hop fashion but altered to be practical for dancing. Generally clothing is dark and basic in color, with supportive shoes. Most commonly worn are the classic timberland boots or Jordan sneakers. Clothing is altered by individual style. Krump specific shirts are sometimes worn, usually with krump specific sayings on them like crew names, past event names and slogans. I noticed that many members have tattoos of the crew name or initials.

The last chapter of Becker's "The Study of Deviance" looks at the problems within the study of deviance and the lack of solid scientific data of deviant behaviors. Not much has been written on deviant groups. For example, he references the studies of juvenile delinquents, and states that there are very few accounts of detailed activities and interviews with juvenile delinquents. To understand what they think of themselves, society and their activities would create a greater overall understanding. When we theorize about juvenile delinquency, we infer their way of life from fragmentary studies and journalistic accounts, rather than receiving right-hand knowledge. The chapter speaks well to gaps in scholarship around krump. With more right hand knowledge from participants about the dance form, we would better understand its spirit. Inferring our own understanding creates invalid information. The dance form of breaking is a great example of the turn around of information being transferred from outsiders to insiders. This switch created a better understanding and respect for the dance in the eyes of scholarship and the media.

I propose that krump has become labeled as an 'angry' dance and acquired an undesirable media portrayal by the social constructed connection of aggression with anger within movement vocabulary and aesthetics. Krump movements are aggressive, full bodied and grotesque in comparison to other western dance styles. This difference or deviance from the ordinary in the movement has created an invalid portrayal of krump. Although krump can transmit anger, the dance style can communicate any emotion yet will still have the same aggressive technique underlying the movement.

Amadeus "Primal" Marquez started his round with his back to the spectators. He rubs his hands on his arms quickly to create friction, motioning as if he is cold. He mimes putting on a jacket. He reaches up to the bare wall as if he is taking things off a shelf. He reaches his

left hand up to an imagined top shelf, grabs an invisible item and puts it on his face as if its mask. He turns around to join the group and begins dancing, taking everyone on a journey. Through out his round, he returns to the bare wall to put back various masks and try on others. I was taken back by the storytelling of Marquez's round. I have talked to Marquez many times before about his use of characters, so I immediately went up to him and asked him who or what he was portraying. He was sitting down, recovering from his round, breathing heavily between sentences.

“That last one was Smog. King under the mountain. The first one I was just playing with different faces and different characters... When I was putting stuff on the wall... Did you ever see Game of Thrones?¹¹ There is a part where, there is a guy with no face, whatever his name is... I'm exhausted... It's basically just like an entire underground sanctuary with all these faces of all these people and they basically are all of these people. So I have all these different styles that I was kind of playing with. And then I started to piece them together and then when I did piece them together I don't really know what happened. Just kind of did my thing.” Amadeus “Primal” Marquez

This playful act is a great example of the different ways krump is used, past simply portraying emotion into lively story telling. Marquez is most well known for his character called 'The Witch Doctor' to which he has taught to younger generations how to embody and personify. A previous Halloween, Marquez even dressed up as the character.

Amadeus “Primal” Marquez putting on a mask. Photography by Deanne Kearney.

During my fieldwork, what I look most forward to in the week was going to these dungeon sessions. It's impossible to not scream and smile at dancers in the circle. When you walk in, you are warmly welcomes with hugs and smiles. People tell you about their day through words and through dance. Aggressive movement does not equate to anger.

Aggression is defined as “forceful, and sometimes overly assertive pursuit of one's aims and interests”¹². We are able to understand the difference in aggression and anger in relation



to sports as it is highly relatable and a large part of the current society. When LeBron James or any sports player screams and throws his fists in the air after a win, we know that it is out of happiness and not that of anger. We understand this variance when we encounter breaking, since it has become a widely written about and practiced subculture.

When a body builder lifts up extremely heavy weights, he may make faces and portrays aggression, as what his body is attempting is difficult. Once involved in a hard and demanding task, bodies take over and express this. Imagine an individual going to the grocery store, once there he accidentally buys too much to carry. As he attempts to lift all the heavy bags at once, he grunts, he makes faces; he strains his arms, back and legs to attempt the task. The full body engagement does not look pleasant, yet the mind could be feeling any emotion, such as excitement for the food within the bags.

Although Becker's writing is dated with inappropriate references to different deviant groups. The overall idea of deviance and labeling theory is fitting in this situation. The understanding that a social group and their cultural norms create the labeling of outsiders,

more so than the so-called deviant group and its characteristics and acts fits krump's overall guise to the world.

The support that is available through the dungeon session to its participants is one that has changed many lives. Amadeus "Primal" Marquez is very open about how krump saved his life. From drugs, gang violence and jail time, he one day happened upon the movie *Rize*. The dance spoke to him as a way to express himself in a positive way. Without krump, he states that he would be dead or in jail. The creator of the dance Ceasare "Tight Eyez" Willis states a similar story and relation to krump.

"If I hadn't started krumping, I would be in jail for sure, or I would have gotten caught up in something that would have had me killed very early in life. Because I was around drama and violence but dancing always kept me away at the knick of time... I know if I wasn't dancing I wouldn't have had anything to keep me from the bad things. I'm sure I would have fell victim to it. So jail or dead, there wouldn't be no Tight Eyez, or no nothing. I know that for a fact." Ceasare "Tight Eyez" Willis

Through furthering the understanding of krump in scholarship and the media, we need to eliminate the wrongful associations of krump with anger and violence. In telling the stories and experiences of dancers, we can acquire right hand knowledge about the practices of this dance form. Krump is a dance style that could be helpful to many youth as an expressive dance form and help troubled youth escape from deviant lifestyles. Correcting the misconceptions of krump being an angry dance could open the door to so many opportunities for krumpers of the present and future.

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Endnotes

¹ Video of LeBron James' reaction to his 2015 NBA final win can be found here:

² Within the 8 years of the Dungeon sessions, there was a two-year break with inconsistent sessions as Marquez was leading another session titled the "416 Sessions" which took place biweekly in different studio spaces across Toronto with the hope to include more people in the events.

³ Northbuck was created in 2008 and was the first Canadian krump crew made up of ten members. It was originally created by B.J. "Pusha" Albino and handed down to Amadeus "Primal" Marquez.

⁴ This performance space differs from other urban dance forms, in which dancers usually form a circle which is called a 'cypher' and dancers take turn performing within the middle of the circle, facing any direction of their choice, and return to any point of the circle. Some krump sessions do work closer to the form of a cypher. The format may have changed for filming purposes.

⁵ Krump music is generally composed of heavy hip-hop beats, or popular songs that are manipulated to provide a very deep bass and strong beats. The vocals are usually repetitive and reference krump terminology such as 'buck' or '

⁶ Krump had started out of a dance style termed 'Clowning'. Clowning was created in 1992 by Tommy the Clown. The dance troop danced at events around South Central, Los Angeles to try to increase morale and give kids an activity to focus on.

⁷ South Central, Los Angeles has a long history of gang violence starting from the 1920s. It is the origin point for the infamous Bloods and Crips gangs of the 1960/70s and starting point of the Rodney King riots in 1992.

⁸ MADtv produced four different sketches on krump. The fictional krump crew was titled the Hype Jingleberries with two dancers danced Noodles and Nippy. Each sketch is located in a different place such as an elementary school, a retirement home and on the streets.

⁹ The NextStep is a Canadian documentary style tv show that follows dancers at a dance studio called The Next Step. The group before commercial break in there 2014 season, hoped to educate there audiences by adding one to two minute sketches about the performers of the show doing different dance styles. After the krump sketch aired, the krump community could not believe the portrayal. This had also happened with other urban dance styles such as dance hall. The Toronto krump community talked to the company about there wrongful portrayal. The sketch taken off the Internet and the producer was in turn fired.

¹⁰ With the addition of Facebook live streaming, Marquez does live stream krump sessions. Yet this is still only accessible to individuals with access to his page.

¹¹ Game of Thrones is a popular fantasy television show and book series.

¹² The dictionary definition is that from Google's rendition of the oxford pocket dictionary. There are dictionary definitions that do include the term angry in them for the use of aggression yet I did not apply those here.