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"There Were Females That Danced Too": Uncovering the Role of Women in Breaking History

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In the first-ever article written about breaking, performance critic Sally Banes (1981) characterized the dance as "a celebration of the flexibility and budding sexuality of the gangly male adolescent body." The "macho quality" she found embodied in the form was highlighted in terms of its "ritual combat," its "sexual braggadocio," and the "physical risk involved" in executing movements. Although, at that point, she had only witnessed the dance performed by a single group, the Rock Steady Crew, and admittedly knew little about its history (Banes 1985, 84), Banes did not hesitate to conclude that breaking was a domain exclusive to young men.

In the media craze that would soon follow, most journalists similarly described breaking as "competitive street dancing in which teen-age boys vie to outdo one another" (Crossette 1981), with practitioners said to have been motivated by "praise and admiration from the girls" (Mollov 1984, 15). Indeed, much of this narrative was directly influenced by Banes's writing. As her colleague, photographer Martha Cooper, explains, the media's coverage of the dance in the 1980s was reminiscent of a game of "telephone," with pundits picking up on what she wrote and repeating it in altered form from one outlet to another.

> Sally had some line in that original *Voice* article about, "We're dancing instead of fighting" . . . We always knew who was copying Sally's article cause that line, as a quote, appeared again and again and again and again, in variations in different articles about breakdancing. We knew that they hadn't really gone out and found the kids and done their own research. (Miller 2000)

Academics who later analyzed gender in breaking and hip-hop[1] history similarly turned toward mediated accounts and associated analyses to inform their scholarship. For instance, in her essay "Dance in Hip Hop Culture," historian Katrina Hazzard-Donald (1996) references journalistic writings from the 1980s and echoes Banes in suggesting that "in its early stages hip hop dancing aggressively asserted male dominance" and that, unlike past African-American forms, it was an "exclusively male" practice (225–227). Dance scholar Susan Foster (1998) likewise describes breaking as a "masculine-dominated arena" where women were mostly excluded from participation. When female hip-hop dancers began to appear in rap music videos in the 1990s, she contends that they did so mainly to express "solidarity with the masculine-identified form, their sympathy

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with the plight of young Afro-American men, and their distance from anti-black-male agendas" (16). As a result, the dominant discourse of breaking being a masculine activity was extended to suggest that women were historically marginalized from the form.

More recently, a growing number of scholars have critically analyzed the role of women in breaking, with many highlighting their contemporary contributions to the dance and the formation of b-girl[2] collectives around the world (Fogarty 2015; Johnson 2014; Pabon-Colon 2017). These studies have offered important insight into the challenges women face when taking on a form coded as "masculine" (Fogarty et al. 2018; Gunn 2016; Langnes and Fasting 2017; Ogaz 2006), as well as the potentially empowering effects of defying gendered expectations through its performance (Bakker and Nuijten 2018; Johnson 2014). Although several authors have pointed out that women were involved in breaking since its earliest stages (Fogarty 2010; Guevara 1996; Johnson 2014; Monteyne 2013), evidence of such involvement is often confined to those who appeared in the shadows of the 1980s media spotlight. As such, breaking's male-centered origin story has continued to predominate. Indeed, many of the above studies identify the narrative that the dance was created solely by men as one of the main obstacles to female participation. My aim in this study is to complicate such narratives and contribute to the growing stream of literature on women in breaking. Namely, by taking a deeper look at the historical dimensions underlying its gendered discourse.

For the past several years, I have conducted oral, textual, and archival research into the emergence of breaking in the early to mid-1970s, a formative period of the dance which has lacked adequate scholarly attention. I have found that consulting the voices of founding practitioners significantly complicates the way hip-hop history, overall, has been understood. When listening to the testimony of a wide range of pioneering artists, rappers, dancers, and DJs, one thing that immediately stands out are the references to prominent women performers, an unexpected result given the widespread assertion that hip-hop was founded as an exclusively masculinized movement (Ewoodzie 2017). When it comes to breaking, firsthand testimony reveals that not only were women always involved in the dance, they helped usher it in as a radical new form of African-American expression. Yet, their contributions have been consistently overlooked and invisibilized in dominant discourse. To address this historic erasure, I present in the following pages some of the missing perspectives regarding the role of women in the dance's first decade of development. At the same time, I ask fundamental questions about the process undergirding women's invisibilization: What made it possible to ignore women as historical actors in breaking? What does it mean to conceptualize a dance as masculine when there were considerable numbers of women who participated in its formation? What can the analysis of gender in breaking's history tell us about scholarship on hip-hop, more generally? How can addressing the history of women in breaking widen our understanding of gender as a culturally contingent performance? And how does our perception of breaking's gendered past affect its practice in the present?

Given the need for revision in hip-hop history, I take time throughout my discussion to clarify and contextualize several misconceptions about breaking's beginnings, all the while keeping my central focus on the role of gender in the dance's early performance. I also make a sharp distinction between the testimony of founding practitioners and the mediated narratives which have been disseminated regarding their expressions. In this way, I subscribe to what authors Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady (1991) have termed "hiphopography," a systematic study of hip-hop centered on the experiences of a broad cross section of practitioners, not simply mainstream figures or media commentators. By juxtaposing these two strains of information and exploring points of convergence and divergence between them, I seek to gain insight into the histories and ideologies that coded breaking as "masculine," while also exploring alternative approaches toward the dance's theorization.

The documentary material I employ for my analysis consists mainly of nontraditional primary sources: online videos, panel discussions, podcasts, social media posts, blog entries, articles in

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zines, self-published autobiographies, and interview clips. With the increased prominence of the Internet since the early 2000s, a great deal of information on breaking history has surfaced through such material, scattered across various hip-hop forums and online platforms. As an active practitioner within the breaking community, I have a close familiarity with such nontraditional sources and have spent the past several years critically sifting through them. In addition, although I have yet to secure an interview with a b-girl from the 1970s,[3] I have been able to speak with several notable pioneers of the dance and continue to reach out for testimony from others as an important component of my ongoing research. Of course, like other forms of information, I understand that personal narratives have their imperfections and, as a result, I have sought to collect as wide a range of testimony as possible and cross-check them across various sources, giving greater credence to eyewitness accounts corroborated by at least one other narrator. What I have found, so far, is a considerable degree of consistency and coherence regarding the involvement of women in early breaking. Indeed, it is precisely this consistency in practitioner recollections, and its significant divergence from the dominant discourse on breaking, which has prompted my intervention below.

Finally, it is my contention that this dichotomy between personal experiences and established narratives, and the resulting severance of women from breaking's roots, is emblematic of a much deeper problem. The commercialization and misrepresentation of an influential movement such as hip-hop is simply the latest symptom of a troubling historic pattern of obfuscating African-American cultural contributions (DeFrantz 2012; Dixon Gottschild 1996). By contextualizing who is speaking, a great deal can be revealed about the dominant frameworks shaping and limiting our understanding of breaking's beginnings. It is incumbent upon us to interrogate these underlying frameworks and correct them, both to gain a fuller understanding of an art form such as breaking and, more importantly, to properly acknowledge the communities and influences from which they arose.

Burning and Breaking

One of the most common misconceptions regarding breaking, based, once again, on the partial media coverage of the 1980s, is that the dance was the product of "cross-fertilization" between African Americans and Latinos (Rivera 2003, 64)—with many scholars even suggesting that it was invented and practiced mainly by the latter (Flores 1993; Schloss 2009). However, as firsthand accounts from leading practitioners affirm, breaking emerged in The Bronx, New York, of the early 1970s as a dance performed mainly by African Americans. Latinos did not adopt the dance in large numbers until the late 1970s and early 1980s (Hager 1984; Holman 1984; Israel 2002). This is important to point out not only in terms of clarifying the historical record but also in terms of tracing the development of the dance and the cultural meanings which may have been associated with its performance.

As in other urban areas during the early 1970s (Clark 1974), African-American teenagers in The Bronx regularly danced at house parties, clubs, and gatherings throughout the borough. While most did the latest social dances, a few began to express themselves in increasingly individualized ways, especially to the percussive crescendos in funk-infused records. They began to "freestyle" and "go off," as it was popularly known at the time, displaying innovative movements and garnering attention from other partygoers—often to the point that crowds would gather and cheer on the most exuberant dancers (PHASE 2 2010). As such dancing went beyond the bounds of standardized steps and couple formations, other forms of dance floor interaction began to develop, namely, a tradition of spontaneously challenging and outdoing a competitor, known at the time as "burning."

Nearly every early breaker from The Bronx associates the inception of the dance with this burning phenomenon. "Before we called it 'breaking,' it was known as 'going off' or 'burning,'" explains pioneering breaker and aerosol artist PHASE 2 (Hager 1984). "It was all about taking a guy out,

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burning him. The big phrase was 'I'm gonna turn this party out'" (33).[4] More than a formulaic dance with a set technique or structure, burning was a kinesthetic concept dictated by originality, musicality, wit, and competition. A dancer might put a more unique twist on a popular step, act out a humiliating insult, or drop to the floor and come back up with their hand in an opponent's face. Whether they felt aggrieved or simply wanted to test their skills against a peer, crowds would gather as dancers dueled in such exchanges. In turn, burning set the stage for what would later become known as "battling" in breaking, the competitive displays which many argue are at the core of the form's aesthetic development (Schloss 2009; Fogarty 2019). However, contrary to the assumption that such competitions emanated from male aggression, firsthand testimony from practitioners indicates that young women were heavily involved in this burning stage of breaking as well. In fact, many accounts suggest that it was often *specifically* the girls who would challenge the guys on the dance floor.

Take, for example, this account from Coke La Rock, a pioneering DJ and MC from the West Bronx who was partners with the "founding father" of hip-hop, Kool Herc. He describes how he and Herc became close friends in high school, partly through dancing against girls at parties.

> So girls during that time use to do what we call, "burning people up!" As they use to call it. The girls are burning people up and Herc use to come find me and say, "Come on Coke, come and dance with her." Herc never seen a girl burn me. So that was another reason how we got so tight. I use to go to a lot of clubs, so Herc use to come get me to dance against these girls. (Smith 2008)

La Rock is referring here to the early 1970s, before he and Herc began throwing their own parties, demonstrating how burning and breaking were taking place in The Bronx even prior to what came to be known as "hip-hop." Most accounts from these formative years suggest that women's participation was neither marginal nor occasional but, rather, central to the dance's inception. Although they are too numerous to print in full, it is important to quote a sample of these testimonies to demonstrate the extent to which this was indeed the case.

Like La Rock, another early rapper from The Bronx named Kool Kyle identifies women as central to burning in the early to mid-1970s. He discusses practicing dance routines with his friends as a teenager in anticipation of weekend parties, and explains that

> We were breakdancing before they called it "breakdancing." We called it *burning*. We would go to the parties, we'd grab a bunch of cute girls and we'd do these moves. We'd burn these girls. So, once we burned these girls, we would walk away and go, "Yo, we burned these girls." We would be all souped up, you know? That was a big deal. (Disco Daddy 2017a)

DJ Tyrone, the mixologist from the Southeast Bronx, also attests to the fact that "there was girls burning guys first" (Disco Daddy 2017b), while another early breaker, named Dancing Doug, recalls going to parties in Harlem and The Bronx, where he says, "I used to burn guys and girls but it started with the girls" (Norin Rad 2017a). Pioneering DJ and b-boy Grandmixer DXT, from the North Bronx, likewise remembers seeing girls burning guys as an elementary student in the early 1970s.

> When we were in elementary school and we would have school parties, one of the things was the girls would burn you. You know, *dancing*. The hand is old. That's from the '60s. Giving somebody the hand. A girl would drop down with both of her hands in her lap, and then come up and throw her hand in your face. You were done. You had to leave the circle. (Disco Daddy 2017b)

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As can be seen, many of these accounts suggest that it was often women who *initiated* this phenomenon. And these are individuals from different regions of The Bronx giving testimony independent of one another. Yet, they all recall virtually the same experience: girls going up against guys and helping set the competitive foundation that breaking would become known for. Even those who do not credit women for introducing this practice acknowledge the centrality of their involvement. "Guys started dancing with each other and then the girls got involved," is how early DJ Afrika Bambaataa describes the roots of the form. "Girls taking out other girls, girls taking out guys, all different types of break dancing" (Hager 2012). Cholly Rock, a member of the influential Zulu Kings breaking group, also states that "there were a lot of girls who had reputations" as good burners back then, to which he lists names such as Dancing Doll, D. D. Lawrence, Cokie, and others (Profo Won 2017).

What is especially interesting about such testimony is that it is referring to the elements of "combat" and "braggadocio" that hip-hop dance scholars so often attribute to a masculine "battle of libido and ego" (LaBoskey 2001, 114). Although burning was most often performed upright—and was not as acrobatic as breaking would later become—the dance during this period was known for its confrontational use of everything from comedic to offensive gestures, such as the miming of weapons or alluding to sexual inuendo. These are the very competitive displays that continue to be upheld as markers of breaking's "masculinity." However, if women were deeply involved in such activities—indeed, if they helped create them—how is it possible to characterize them today as products of masculine aggression or too "unfeminine" for women to perform? Can we maintain such historic characterizations even if they do not comport with the perspectives and experiences of those who ushered in the dance?

Although conventional wisdom may assume that challenging a man on the dance floor is "unladylike" behavior, we know that such norms are applied differently according to their temporal, cultural, and institutional contexts. Just as young men in The Bronx did not view their dancing as a "feminine" activity—as it is often stigmatized in dominant Western discourse (Fisher and Shay 2009; McRobbie 1984, 143–144)—neither did young women who were "going off" and burning see themselves as performing "masculinity." The above accounts suggest that those who cultivated these practices held different symbolic meanings for them. Along these lines, it should be remembered that burning was a largely underground phenomenon, in the sense that it was practiced only by a small segment of partygoers in The Bronx. Even within the African-American community itself, hip-hop and breaking were considered marginal, youth-based practices that went against the dominant strain of disco during that period. Accordingly, rather than globally applying dominant notions of "masculinity" to competition whenever it appears, it is important to examine the historical context in which such exchanges took place and the extent to which alternative values may have been embedded in them.

It is also important to acknowledge the African-American roots of breaking and the broader tradition to which such practices belong. As dance historian Jacqui Malone (1996) points out, "competitive interaction" has long been a cornerstone of innovation and expression within working-class, African-American communities (5). Whether it be the "challenge dances" of hoofers (Stearns and Stearns 1968/1994), the ballroom contests of swing dancers (Erenberg 1998), or the "step offs" of fraternities and sororities (Fine 1991), both women and men have historically engaged in such competitive displays. Burning was simply the latest manifestation of this tradition, enacted at clubs and block parties like a kinesthetic game of playing the dozens, where dancers perform a "ritual of permitted disrespect" aimed at testing the "facility, originality, ingenuity, and humor" of fellow participants (Levine 1978, 347).

Unfortunately, the historicization of past African-American art forms has similarly been skewed toward neglecting the role of women. For instance, historian Robin D. G. Kelley (1997) details how commentators have characterized expressions, such as The Dozens, as simply "a boy thing,"

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even though considerable numbers of young women took part in its verbal exchanges (33). He attributes much of this neglect to long-held stereotypes about the "pathology" of working-class, African-American culture and an infatuation among social scientists with dysfunction, criminality, and poverty in inner-city communities. In the realm of cultural expression, this has resulted in scholarly generalizations that reduce complex articulations of creativity and joy to masculine survival strategies for ghetto life. Women are commonly excluded from such narratives, as they do not fit the masculinized image of resistance to urban destitution and deprivation. McRobbie and Garber (1991) similarly point out how sensationalized media coverage of youth "subcultures" in the UK tended to overemphasize cases of violence and deviance, leading to an exclusive focus on young men and the erasure of women involved in such groupings (4–5). When it comes to breaking, we see this same pattern playing out. Competitive displays within the dance were attributed to an exclusively male form of alternative combat, with hip-hop itself being erroneously historicized as an outgrowth of street gangs (Aprahamian 2019). Recovering the history of women in the dance is critical in reversing these class and racially charged stereotypes, and incorporating new insights, which have hitherto been silenced or overlooked.

There Were B-Girls, Too

What about when breaking transitioned into more physically demanding displays on the floor? Did women continue their involvement, or did its changing structure and movement vocabulary result in an altered perception toward their performance? Although relevant information regarding this period is more mixed, firsthand testimony from practitioners, again, paints a considerably different picture than the one put forward in dominant discourse.

To begin, most practitioners associate the "b-boy/b-girl" era of breaking with the mid-1970s prominence of DJ Kool Herc. This is when the dance is said to have become more physical and virtuosic, developed alongside the repertoire of music Herc popularized, known today as "break beats" (Marshall 2007). Participants began increasingly adopting acrobatic flips, contorted poses, and prolonged floor movements to stand out from the rest of the crowd at his parties. Although the number of women appears to have dwindled in this stage of breaking's development, practitioner accounts suggest that they nevertheless continued to play a relevant role in the dance.

For example, two of Herc's most influential b-boys, credited with introducing many of the floor-based movements that would become staples in the form, are The Twins, Keith and Kevin Smith. They regularly list women among those active during their generation. "Now they have that terminology of 'b-girls' but there were females that danced too," explains Keith. "Let me tell you man: Sister Boo, Janice and her little sister Saundra, Deucy" (in Numata 2005). Although The Twins acknowledge that men began to outnumber women, they also suggest that the latter were not ridiculed or deterred from breaking but, rather, given respect. "It was a big deal to get in that circle," Keith insists when recalling early b-girls. "You had to have heart and not everyone did. Only a select few" (Smith and Smith 2015).

Other young women said to have been breaking at Herc's parties include names such as Kimmy, Yellow Banana, Doris, and Mother Earth. Clark Kent, another pioneering b-boy and DJ affiliated with The Twins and Kool Herc, remembers dancing with some of these figures and explains that he would not hesitate to battle them if challenged in a circle:

> Yes … they also had a sister Kim who I dusted off back in the days as well, okay? Cause there were some B-Girls back then, you know? Wasn't many of them but you know you had Kim, you had Janice … you had Duesy … there were quite a few girls that were very good … they just didn't have better skills than me. (Norin Rad 2017b)

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Keith's emphasis on the "heart" it took to enter a circle, Kent's assurances that b-girls "didn't have better skills than me," and both of their recollections that men outnumbered women may be interpreted in multiple ways. On the one hand, it may signal an increasing discouragement toward b-girls during this era, one which deemed them less capable of performing the dance and, thus, unable to outdo b-boys such as Kent. On the other hand, one could interpret these comments as an indication of a transcendent approach toward gender, wherein b-girls were approached with the same braggadocian combativeness and seriousness as b-boys. In turn, Kent's acknowledgement that "there were quite a few girls that were very good"—with no direct indication that they were derided for doing the dance—conveys a sense of respect for their participation and complicates the notion that breaking was exclusively created by men. Rather than directly confronting this dominant discourse—or, the opposite, overemphasizing and tokenizing the role of women—the above accounts indicate that b-girls were a part of the small coterie of dancers who set the foundation for the form. This is not to suggest that discriminatory attitudes did not exist toward them. Rather, it is to argue that, in order to properly examine such attitudes, the first step would be to affirm the continued presence of women within the dance and assess their participation according to the sole source of information we have regarding this ephemeral practice: the experience and testimonies of breaking's practitioners.

Of course, much greater research is needed to track down the perspectives of b-girls themselves, but even within the limited range of information available, we find hip-hop pioneers regularly referencing women as active contributors to the dance. For instance, a well-known DJ who played music for breakers at around the same time as Kool Herc was DJ Smokey, from the Claremont section of The Bronx. He describes a group of b-girls he was affiliated with called the Luck-a-Trons, which was the counterpart to his b-boy collective, the Smoke-a-Trons.

> We had a breakdance team called the Smoke-a-Trons and the Luck-a-Trons. The reason for them being so popular back in the 70s, the girls that used to hang in our house … they liked to dance. Sister Boo, Pebblee Poo, Sheila, the Yellow Banana (her name was Vivien). These girls liked to dance and perform. So, they would come up with dance steps. We called them the Luck-a-Trons. And they were good, they were good girls. (DJ Smokey 2019)

Again, Smokey's description of his dancers being organized along gendered lines might suggest that there were differentiations made between men and women within breaking circles. However, it is not clear whether this separation was a signal of discouragement (based on the perceived lesser abilities of women), encouragement (based on mutual support among dancers with a shared identity), or some other undisclosed factor. Certainly, Smokey acknowledges that women who danced at his parties "were good" and played a significant role in his career, so much so that he made it a point to highlight their contributions. Indeed, as reflected in the above quotes, many hip-hop founders specifically mention Sister Boo as a prominent early b-girl. For instance, in his autobiography, DJ Grandmaster Flash (2008) states, "Sister Boo showed how the girls could get down just like the fellas" (38) and Kool Herc regularly references her name in interviews (Gross 2005). Cultural sociologist Mary Fogarty (2010) takes stock of such references in her analysis of breaking internationally and notes how the media often overlook the mention of women by hip-hop pioneers, demonstrating just "how much the journalists are responsible for gendering hip hop culture into a male pursuit" (33). Once again, this raises questions regarding the tension between the voices of practitioners and those of external actors.

Even b-boys who say women dropped out of the dance during this period tend to qualify such statements by acknowledging their continued contributions. For example, Zulu King Cholly Rock states, "They [women] didn't go down to the floor like we did cause that just wasn't, you know, girls weren't really going to do that," but he quickly follows this up by stating, "Although we had some [b-girls] later on" (Profo Won 2017). His contemporary, Grandmixer DXT, also recalls

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that "the girls kind of moved away from it for a minute" when competitions became intense, but adds that "once it became more of your floor moves and your skills, and not burning, then the females became more involved again through just being b-girls" (Grandmixer 2017). Like The Twins and Clark Kent, these early breakers affirm that the dance was performed mostly by young men, but that women were never completely absent from it. Indeed, what is interesting is that many of the b-girls who were active during this period went on to also become pioneering MCs. As such, several of them have conveyed their experiences in early hip-hop, including their involvement in breaking.

One of the most well-known is MC Sha-Rock of the rap group Funky 4 + 1. Prior to becoming a pioneering rapper, she explains in her autobiography that she got her start in the culture by breaking at Kool Herc's parties. In fact, she dedicates an entire chapter to this experience, titled "B-Girl Stance," describing how she learned floor moves like the "sweep"[5] and performed at local house parties in the summer of 1976. She also discusses both the consternation and admiration she received for being a young woman involved in breaking. "All of the guys looked at me like, 'What the hell?'" she says about her first time breaking at a Kool Herc party. "But, at the same time, I could see that they respected that I was a part of the game and was good too" (Sha-Rock and Brown 2011). Her account signals how the perspective of women involved in the dance is critically important to gauge the extent to which gendered conceptions may have affected their participation. Although some may have been taken aback by seeing a woman break, others seemed to have encouraged and aided it, as she describes learning the dance from male peers in her neighborhood. In addition, she characterizes breaking as an important stepping-stone in her hip-hop journey, describing how she later transferred the respect and confidence she gained as a dancer onto the stage as one of the first female MCs in hip-hop.

MC Pebblee Poo's story is strikingly similar. As another influential early rapper, she is often asked how she got her start in the culture. She nearly always emphatically states,

> When I started, I didn't want to be no MC. I used to be a b-girl. I was breakdancing on the ground. I'm double-jointed, so I was competing with the guys. I was doing moves that no other person could do. They didn't understand it. I was getting all the "oohs" and the "ahs." (Rafika 2016)

The accolades she accumulated as a dancer eventually led her to pursue rhyming as well, with fellow b-boys such as T La Rock—who also went on to be an influential MC—giving her praise and encouraging her to get on the mic (Pebblee Poo 2009). She proved to have just as much of a commanding presence on the stage as she did on the dance floor, later becoming one of Kool Herc's official MCs and going on to record such renowned rap records as "Funkbox Party" (1982) with The Masterdon Committee.

Zulu Queen Lisa Lee, a noted member of the rap groups Soul Sonic Force and Us Girls, also associates her entry into hip-hop with seeing breaking for the first time around 1976. In a 2014 interview, she identified dancing at Zulu Nation parties as inspiring her the most.

> I just remember the b-boying and break dancing. I did that before I started rapping. And having those memories of breakdancing at those parties to those beats that Bam played. He still plays different beats from anybody else. You know it's Afrika Bambaataa when he plays his music 'cause it's completely different from anybody else's. And those are my favorite moments. (Lisa Lee 2014)

Other early female MCs, such as Kimba of the Infinity Rappers and Lady Sweet of the all-girl group Inner City Disco, also claim to have begun their careers as b-girls in the mid-to-late 1970s (Disco Daddy 2017c). This signals not only the continued involvement of women in breaking but also the

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interlinked relationship between dancing and musical performance in hip-hop's development—a recurring pattern seen in African-American expressions historically (Gaunt 2006). Most of these pioneering women recall stepping out into a circle and going up against challengers on an equal plane as a significant component of their careers in hip-hop, suggesting important connections between physical expression, musical comprehension, identity formation, and nonnormative expressions of femininity. In addition, although they were fewer in number, these testimonies reveal that women continued to participate in breaking as it transitioned into more athletic, floor-based movements. Unlike dance forms, which assign specific roles for men and women, breaking allowed its participants to share in its movement vocabulary and challenge one another without regard to gender. In theory, but not always in practice, this more egalitarian format and structure continues to hold sway today and has reemerged in nearly all solo hip-hop dance styles which have followed breaking (DeFrantz 2004).

This resistance to gendered categorization also demonstrates how early participants in the dance did not necessarily subscribe to dominant Western notions of "masculinity" and "femininity." As dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2014) has shown, rather than trying to "act like a man," working-class African-American artists have a long history of embodying alternative, independent, and assertive forms of womanhood through their expressions. Along these lines, Johnson draws insightful connections between b-girls and female blues singers, arguing that breaking offers young women an opportunity to enact a countercultural femininity, one which positions them as producers rather than objects for consumption, within hip-hop. Negating the role of women in breaking's history hampers our understanding of such emancipatory potential within the dance, as well as the countervailing social attitudes of the community and culture which gave it life.

Like the blues women before them, the prevalence of testimony from b-girls who became MCs also puts the lie to another dominant myth in hip-hop history: the notion that "there are no women who have contributed profoundly to rap's artistic growth" (Nelson George quoted in Pough 2004, 8). Contrary to such claims, women have historically been involved in the music of hip-hop just as much as the dance. For instance, there were pioneering female MCs such as Sha-Rock, Pebblee Poo, Lisa Lee, Kimba, Sweet & Sour, RD Smiley, Sherri-Sher, Little Lee, Little Bit, Baby T, Debbie D, and Lady B, as well as prominent DJs such as Baby D, LaSpank, Pambaataa, Wanda Dee, and the original Spinderella, to name a few. However, just as we have seen the role of women overlooked in histories of breaking, narratives surrounding the origins of rap music have consistently undervalued female involvement, leading to characterizations of the genre "as male in the face of a significant and sustained female presence" (Rose 1994, 152). This historic erasure continues to affect present-day discourse, with most commentators characterizing rap as "disenfranchised alpha males talking to other alpha males" (Ivey 2019). Accordingly, attending to the experiences and contributions of the many women who made their mark on the dance is important for addressing gendered misconceptions, in not just breaking, but in the musical, poetic, and artistic expressions of hip-hop, overall.

"Give Her Her Props"

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, as breaking spread beyond its epicenter in The Bronx and incorporated various other communities, it is possible that the dance experienced changes in both its aesthetics and embodied meaning. Again, more research is needed to shed light on such questions. However, even from the scant information that is available, we know that b-girls continued to break well into the 1980s. Indeed, a close reading of the media coverage from this period reveals that several women remained involved in the dance as it became a national commercial phenomenon. Unfortunately, their presence is regularly downplayed in news reports, with commentators focusing instead on the young men they deemed to be the progenitors of the form (Monteyne 2013). Although some may attribute this lesser attention to the greater number of men performing the

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dance, it is also important to question how stereotypes of urban life and Eurocentric artistic norms, among both authors and audiences, may have skewed the narrative of breaking. Indeed, this is the period in which the dominant male-centered discourse of the dance first took hold.

For example, in her initial *Village Voice* article, Banes (1981) herself quotes a dancer stating that Spy, an influential Latino b-boy from the late 1970s, had a girlfriend who was just as skilled as the guys (31). However, the focus on women in the article stops there. There is no mention of the b-girl's name, no questions about whether other women were involved, or how they fit into a practice that the author deemed to be an expression of "masculine vitality." In her later writings, Banes (1985) acknowledged that "there were some girls who joined in" but continued to maintain that breaking "was a specific expression of machismo" (99). This racialized and gendered depiction was coupled with references to police arrests of young breakers, descriptions of the dance as "ritual combat that transmutes aggression into art," and claims that competitions sometimes erupted into "fighting for real." Art historian Vanessa Lakewood (forthcoming) has astutely noted how much of this discourse was undergirded by a presumption of criminality. She analyzes how the visualization and narrative of Banes's *Voice* article presented the dance as an illicit expression of outlawry, a discourse which, I would add, excludes women from its masculine street imagery. In turn, audiences were captivated by these narratives, and media outlets commonly reproduced them in their subsequent transmission of breaking around the world.

Like others in the news and entertainment industry (see Monteyne 2013), Banes (1981) also repeatedly compared breaking to ballet, describing a dancer posing on his toes as being "on pointe," another performing floor-based footwork as "a kind of syncopated pirouette," and practitioners executing difficult movements "as unhesitatingly as a ballet dancer might toss off an enchainement." Viewed through this traditionally Western lens, it is not surprising that breaking's athleticism was attributed to masculinity, as the dominant discourse of ballet tends to ascribe "graceful" and "delicate" movements to women and actions exuding "strength" to men (Daly 1987). Although Banes (1998) has powerfully critiqued such gendered binaries in Western theatrical dance, the repeated references to ballet in her *Voice* article suggests that they may have nevertheless seeped into her analysis of breaking. Furthermore, it is my contention that, rather than compare breaking to such Eurocentric forms, we would do well to look at the cultural context from which the dance itself developed, and the many women who performed it. For her part, Banes's colleague Martha Cooper expresses regret for having not done so earlier on: "I had not paid enough attention to the girls when I was documenting [breaking] back in the day," she acknowledged. "It turns out that there have always been women doing all of these activities and, somehow, I had neglected to take any pictures of them" (Holman 2014). Cooper goes on to explain that she released a photo book dedicated to b-girls, titled *We B*Girlz*, largely to make up for this earlier neglect in the 1980s (Cooper and Kramer 2005).

As has already been mentioned, most journalists and commentators who have written about breaking in the ensuing years have similarly turned to the same group Banes and Cooper spotlighted: the Rock Steady Crew. But just as the above comments about Spy's girlfriend (whose dance name was Sunkist Evie) were glossed over, subsequent references to women by members of the group have been consistently ignored or subsumed within the dominant gendered discourse of breaking. For example, Mr. Wiggles, an influential member of the Rock Steady Crew, traces his beginnings to The Bronx of the late 1970s and reveals that one of the first people who inspired him to dance was an African-American b-girl.

> This girl pulled her pants leg up and did what Crazy Legs does when he does the "Drunk Man." And then she hit the floor. She opened me up. That girl was amazing. I don't know who she was. A sister from the Bronx. And I'm still that little Puerto Rican trying to get in on the breaking tip. She blew me away. Literally smoked me and my people. It blew my mind that she threw down that hard. (C-Bass and Omeed 2017)

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When asked about women's participation in breaking in the early 1990s, Mr. Wiggles similarly stated that he would "respect" a woman for doing the dance, although he is said to have paradoxically claimed that they should not exhibit the physicality its performance requires (Rose 1994, 49). In this same study, Crazy Legs from Rock Steady also expressed no objections to women breaking (49). Indeed, the Rock Steady Crew has had several prominent women who have contributed to their legacy, not the least of which is Baby Love, a b-girl who gained commercial exposure with the group in the mid-1980s. She was featured in several of the group's world tours, recorded an album with them titled *Ready for Battle* (1984), and appeared in major motion pictures such as *Beat Street* (1984), competing alongside the guys against the influential New York City Breakers. When asked by a reporter in 1984 whether "breakdancing is mostly men," Baby Love vehemently denied the claim. "No it's not," she responded. "A lot of good girls are doing it" (Hezakya 2018). And she has maintained this position in various public interviews since (Guevara 1996; Veran 1996).

Other early b-girls said to have been affiliated with the Rock Steady Crew include names such as Headspin Janet, Lady Doze, Lady Rock, China, Lisette, and Leslie (Veran 1996). In a recent interview with the well-known aerosol artist and musician DJ Kayslay (2017), Crazy Legs specifically names Janet as one of the best breakers in New York at the height of the dance's popularity. He recounts how they recruited her for another battle against the New York City Breakers, following the filming of *Beat Street*:

> *Crazy Legs*: That was the straight beat down. We beat New York City Breakers down so badly. And we used one of the illest b-girls at that time from the Bronx, on the front lines with us.
>
> *Kay Slay*: Umm, what's her name?
>
> *Crazy Legs*: Headspin Janet.
>
> *Kay Slay*: Okay, that's what's up. Give her her props.

Going back even further to the days preceding the founding of the Rock Steady Crew, b-girls such as Bambi from the affiliated The Bronx Boys/Girls (TBB/G) group insist that breaking was "a mixture of boys and girls. Of course, there was always more boys but there was a big, large group of girls" (Edukate 2015). Journalist Cristina Veran (1999) echoes this sentiment when highlighting other Latina b-girls such as Mama Maribel, Sunkist Evie, and Bunny Lee. "While never as great in number as their b-boy counterparts," she writes, "a few brave girls began stepping out from the sidelines as well" (55). There were also prominent all-girl breaking groups who were known to perform professionally in the 1980s, such as the Dynamic Dolls, an offshoot of the Dynamic Breakers from Queens, New York (Valente 2015).

As can be seen, women continued to play a considerable role in breaking as it spread to various communities and further adopted acrobatic spins and floor maneuvers. The narrative that it was too competitive, "unfeminine," or physically demanding for them to do is not borne out by the testimony of those who excelled in the dance. On the specific question of physical ability, figures such as Baby Love have repeatedly insisted that, "Breakdancing is concentration. If you concentrate you'll get it. That's the way I actually feel about breaking for girls" (Guevara 1996, 58). Many contemporary b-girls similarly attest to the fact that moves within the dance center more on focus, balance, and training than they do on "strength" (Johnson 2014, 24; Langnes and Fasting 2017, 1602). Whether in the past or the present, such practitioner perspectives complicate the dominant gendered discourse that b-girls were unable to perform the more "break-specific moves" reserved for men (Rose 1994, 48). According to Pabon-Colon (2017), such claims are examples of, "sexist discourse masquerading as commonsense knowledge about physical capacity" (178)—which

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I would argue have been put forward by commentators often in direct contradiction to the practitioners they consult. Sociologist Nancy Guevara's (1996) commentary on b-girl history attributes much of this discourse to broader discriminatory attitudes toward women and people of color in the mainstream media. "The undermining, deletion, or derogatory stereotyping of women's creative role in the development of minority cultures," she argues, "is a routine practice that serves to impede any progressive artistic or social development by women that might threaten male hegemony in the sphere of cultural production" (51). As a result, mediated accounts on breaking have often obfuscated the structure of the dance and the role of women within it, presenting b-girls as aberrations or objects of attention, rather than active, coequal participants.

In turn, this obfuscation has led to a conception of history in which factors attributed to masculinity by outside observers are the same ones practitioners acknowledge b-girls for participating in and contributing to: the competitive elements of burning in the early 1970s, athletic floor moves such as the sweep in the mid-1970s, and the more acrobatic "break-specific moves" of the early 1980s. With little knowledge of b-girl pioneers, most commentators have employed a distorted framework to interpret these elements as expressions of inner-city "machismo." However, just as it would be misguided to associate men who perform hip-hop dance with dominant Western notions of "femininity," universally assuming that women who break are enacting aggressive forms of "masculinity" can be fraught with problematic implications (see Johnson 2014, 19). As the brief historical sketches above indicate, these notions are culturally contingent and, if applied, need to take account of the specific temporal, institutional and social contexts in which they operate. Such examination calls for not only more in-depth research into the experiences of early b-girls but also the possible shifts in identity and meaning within the dance as it expanded into various communities. This is especially true when it comes to the period of breaking's commercialization in the 1980s. As dance scholar Cynthia Novack (1995) astutely observed over twenty-five years ago, "break dance in the seventies performed by adolescent boys for their peers on a Bronx street corner" cannot be equated with "break dance performed for an arts audience by these same boys at the Kitchen, a center for avant-garde music in Manhattan" (181). Thus, paying attention to the specific time period and region a practitioner is from is just as important as paying attention to her or his perspectives. Much of the confusion in hip-hop history has resulted from a lack of such delineation, with journalists and scholars conflating testimony from far removed figures and making sweeping generalizations.

It should also be remembered that these questions of history and embodied meaning in breaking are not simply intellectual exercises. Their reproduction and internalization by both commentators and practitioners have profound effects on an art form rooted in conceptions of cultural tradition. As Fogarty (2010) argues, the contemporary enactment of tastes in breaking circles are tightly bound by claims to historic legitimacy. Everything from what constitutes the "right" music to dance to the proper criteria on which to evaluate a performance is predicated on notions of "origins" and "authenticity." As a result, the modern discourse that breaking is a performance of masculinity has precluded many women today from even adopting the dance, while those who take part face the bifurcated challenge of having to perform "like a man" while also being objectified under the male gaze and pressured to enact stereotypical attributes of femininity (Fogarty et al. 2018; Gunn 2016; Langnes and Fasting 2017; Pabon-Colon 2017). In the words of Johnson (2014), "B-girls incur a much greater social cost for participating in a dance culture that is seen as being by and for young men" (p. 16).

Additionally, the partiality of historical information on breaking has conditioned various discursive obstacles for women, such as the prevailing assumption that the "authentic" name for the dance is "b-boying" (Schloss 2009). However, leading proponents of this term have recently revealed that they advanced it—long after the dance's inception—as a counterweight to the 1980s media misnomer "breakdancing." For instance, during a discussion panel in the Netherlands in 2013, Crazy Legs revealed that he and Mr. Wiggles decided to strategically brand the dance as "b-boying" in the

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1990s, when they saw a resurgence of interest in breaking within North America. "Sometimes, if you want to bring something out new, you rename it and kinda create the illusion that it's new now," Crazy Legs explained regarding their decision. "But, at the same time, you cause controversy which draws it back to the history of it, and then it gives us the opportunity to school people" (Colon 2013). A year prior to this panel, Mr. Wiggles had posted the following message to his Facebook page, which was then circulated widely on social media:

> When Educating about the Bronx Hip Hop Dance, please recognize. "We Never Called it BBOYING! It was called BREAKING, GOING OFF, BOI-YOING! "BBOYING is a NEW SCHOOL TERM!" (Started in the 90's) We Never said that back in the days. And Many Bronx Originals say it sounds MAD CORNY! (Strife. tv 2012)

As this comment and many others suggest, the dance has always been popularly referred to as "breaking," a more gender-neutral term which is still the most widely utilized among practitioners today. Thus, just as it is important to bring the dance's female pioneers into greater focus, it is important to clarify the history of its terminology and reconsider the use of such highly problematic labels as "b-boying," which, as Pabon-Colon (2017) aptly argues, discursively marginalizes women in the dance even before they get involved in it (181).

Conclusion

By making important distinctions between the voices of practitioners and those of external actors, I have sought in this article to complicate the widespread assumption that breaking is an essentially "masculine" expression created by and for men. Shedding light on some of the many women who have contributed to the dance's formation should give us pause to reconsider the gendered conceptions of breaking in dominant discourse. It is my contention that hegemonic stereotypes of African-American culture, coupled with Eurocentric standards of evaluating expression, have unfortunately limited much of our understanding of breaking's beginnings. Acknowledging and undoing these hegemonic frameworks is essential if we hope to gain a richer understanding of the dance's aesthetic meaning and its cultural underpinnings.

It is also worth noting how this revisionist account reinforces the extent to which conceptions of gender are not simply static givens but, rather, constantly shifting cultural constructions. Despite the powerful effect such conceptions have on social life, we can see how they fluctuate considerably over time and place. To take a historical case not far removed from breaking, there was a period when hoofing (commercially known as "tap dancing") was perceived to be an art form exclusive to African-American men—although there were also several pioneering female practitioners (Njeri 1998)—but, today, its performance conjures up images of young (often white) women in studios and recital halls (Seibert 2015). According to Foster (1998), ballet also underwent a gendered overhaul in the nineteenth century, with its previously egalitarian choreographic structure being split into divergent roles for men and women (12). Within breaking's relatively short history, we see similar shifts surrounding conceptions of gender attributed to its performance. How the past is conceived plays a decisive role in these shifts, as do the cultural settings, values, and institutions in which the dance operates. Accordingly, we should remember that, despite the weight of dominant discourse, the interpretation of the role of gender in any dance is dependent on its specific temporal and social context.

Viewed through this broader historical lens, claims regarding the supposedly inherent qualities of breaking should not be taken for granted but, instead, weighed against the experiences and perspectives of the practitioners in question. When speaking about the roots of the dance, the voices of its African-American founders must be particularly attended to. All of this suggests a need for more

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detailed investigation into the way various breaking communities have been historicized throughout the years, and how their expressions have not only reflected dominant gender norms but possibly danced back against them. Of course, given the limited scope of information we have on the lives and perspectives of early founders, most historic accounts of gender in breaking can only be regarded as tentative, at this point. My above interpretation is not meant to be a totalizing analysis but, rather, an indication of the many tensions and blind spots in the academic record which warrant reassessment. Only through ongoing inquiry and challenges to what has been regarded as the "true" story of hip-hop, more generally, can we hope to deepen our understanding of this complex artistic movement and make detectable those who have, for too long, been invisibilized.

Notes

1. I employ the term "hip-hop" in accord with its initial cultural meaning: an interlinked movement encompassing the artistic practices of breaking (dance), turntabilism (music), emceeing (poetry), and, more tangentially, style writing (art), which arose in The Bronx, New York, among working class African-American youth in the early 1970s. I do not simply employ it as a euphemism for rap music, as is common in scholarship and popular culture.

2. The terms "b-girl" and "b-boy" refer to practitioners of breaking. They were coined by the "founding father" of hip-hop, DJ Kool Herc.

3. In a cultural movement in which pseudonyms are the norm and publicly available contact information scant, tracking down b-girls and b-boys from the 1970s—some of whom have already, sadly, passed away—and securing formal interviews with them has proven to be challenging. Nevertheless, given that the information on breaking's beginnings exists almost entirely in the memories and embodied knowledge of its practitioners, carrying out such work is urgent if we hope to retain a semblance of the dance's history, and not have it give way to the vicissitudes of the life cycle.

4. PHASE 2 is using the words "guy" and "him" here in mostly gender-neutral terms, as he has relayed to me, on several occasions, that he and his friends would "battle" women at parties, as well. "You've always had sisters who could dance," he once explained regarding girls challenging guys at parties, adding that, "You never tried to burn her unless she drew first blood" (PHASE 2, e-mail correspondence with author, November 20, 2018). This second point suggests that, when he did experience such competitive exchanges, he felt it was the women who initiated them. PHASE 2 (1995) alludes to this same dynamic in an article on breaking for a European hip-hop magazine, wherein the reluctance of women to challenge him and his friends is cited as an indicator of their dancing abilities: "No brag, but girls didn't want to go near us … we weren't really trying to burn them but they weren't chancing the embaresment [sic]" (29).

5. The sweep is a floor-based move in which a dancer swings her or his leg in a squatted position, with hands placed on the floor to support the body as the swinging leg transitions underneath the opposite foot.

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