

EDITED BY

MARY  
FOGARTY

IMANI KAI  
JOHNSON



*Carly Wray*

≡ The Oxford Handbook of  
HIP HOP DANCE  
STUDIES

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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STUDIES**



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*Edited by*  
MARY FOGARTY  
*and*  
IMANI KAI JOHNSON

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## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

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**Serouj “Midus” Aprahamian** is a longtime practitioner of breaking, popping, and underground hip hop dance styles. He is currently pursuing a PhD in dance studies at York University, with a focus on hip hop history, and his writings have appeared in the *Journal of Black Studies*, *Oxford African American Studies Center*, and *Dance Research Journal*.

**Rebecca Barnstaple** is a postdoctoral researcher at the intersection of dance and neuroscience at York University, Toronto, Canada. Her primary projects involve developing new methods in dance research, and applications for dance in health and well-being across the life span.

**Andy Bennett** is Professor of Cultural Sociology in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. He has written and edited numerous books, including *Popular Music and Youth Culture*, *Music, Style and Aging*, and *Music Scenes* (coedited with Richard A. Peterson).

**Naomi Bragin** teaches performance and cultural theory at the University of Washington. Her article “Shot & Captured” links Turf dancing in Oakland to the policing of blackness. She’s a former NYC Hip-Hop Theater Future Aesthetics Artist and danced to de-escalate militarization in Seattle streets during the 1999 WTO protests. Her book *Black Power of Hip-Hop Dance* studies hip hop/streetdance aesthetics.

**Thomas F. DeFrantz** believes in our shared capacity to do better. Evidence: Hip Hop. Checking @ [www.slippage.org](http://www.slippage.org).

**Anthony “YNOT” DeNaro** explores the design, sustainability, history, and community of Hip Hop. Through a futurist lens, his work manifests in dance, typography, music, and architecture. Currently, his classes can be found on a workshop basis internationally, as well as online and in person through the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and Arizona State University.

**Joseph FX DeSouza** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology & and Graduate programs in Biology, Interdisciplinary Studies and Neuroscience Graduate Diploma Program at York University’s Centre for Vision Research. His lab aims to show how, when, and where brain networks change as a function of neurorehabilitation.

**E. Moncell Durden** is an active dancer, historian, ethnographer, author, and documentarian. Durden is an Associate Professor of Practice at the University of Southern

California Kauman International School of Dance, specializing in the pedagogical practices of what he calls the Morphology of Afro-Kinetic Memory.

**Mary Fogarty** began Breaking in the early 2000s and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Dance at York University, Toronto. She is coediting an issue of *Global Hip Hop Studies* about Breaking and the Olympics. Her recent writing about Breaking appears in *We Still Here* (2020), and *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition* (2019).

**Kenneth “Ken Swift” Gabbert** is a second-generation Bboy from New York City and is recognized worldwide for his contributions educating and preserving Breaking and Hip Hop culture for over forty years. Currently, he judges Breaking competitions and teaches at universities and schools around the globe.

**Tony Ingram** is a researcher, entrepreneur, and dancer based in Halifax, Canada. He has an MSc in kinesiology, an MSc in physiotherapy, and is pursuing a PhD in neuroscience. Prior to his current focus of running a medical-device company, he practiced physical therapy and taught injury prevention to dancers.

**Imani Kai Johnson**, PhD (Critical Dance Studies, UC Riverside) is founder and chair of the Show & Prove Hip Hop Studies Conference Series. Her book *Dark Matter in Breaking Cyphers: The Life of Africanist Aesthetics in Global Hip Hop* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

**grace shinhae jun**, PhD, MFA, is a mother, wife, mover, scholar, and organizer, who creates and educates on the unceded territory of the Kumeyaay Nation. She is a founder and director of bkSOUL performance company, and a cofounder of Asian Solidarity Collective. She teaches dance at the University of California, San Diego and at San Diego City College.

**Vanessa Fleet Lakewood** is a writer, educator, and photo-historian. She is a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholar and a Ryerson Image Centre Doctoral Research Fellow and currently a Lecturer in the graduate program in Film + Photography Preservation and Collections Management at Ryerson University. Her doctoral research examines the life and work of the American documentary photographer Martha Cooper.

**Stephen “Buddha” Leafloor** cofounded the Canadian Floor Masters. He has danced for James Brown, GrandMaster Flash, George Clinton and worked as a consultant for Cirque du Soleil. Buddha was appointed an Ashoka Fellow in Canada as a changemaker and awarded the Meritorious Service Cross from Canada’s Governor General. He has an MA in Social Work and has worked for 35 years in Child Protection, Probation, Street Work, and Group Homes.

**Yarrow “Osofly” Lutz** has been a multimedia artist, educator, and program director at numerous organizations, schools, and youth programs for over twenty years. She holds a Masters in Arts Education from the Pratt Institute and has worked with Precita Eyes Mural Arts Center, Urban Arts Partnership, Hip Hop Film Festival, and H2Ed.

**Carlos Mare** is a renowned artist from the first generation of Hip Hop culture. A respected and celebrated artist/lecturer/scholar of New York's Golden Age of Graffiti Art, his works push the boundaries of contemporary urban art, academia, and technology. Designer of the annual BET Award, and the first Hip Hop artist to earn a Webby Award, he was also a founding member of the Museum of Graffiti in Miami. His work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art and he exhibits in galleries and museums globally.

**Leah "McFly" McKesey** is an eclectic creator, performer, and choreographer. She has danced for such artists as Kool Herc, Wu-Tang, and Kaytranda; worked on music videos, television, and commercials; and won competitions. Leah has curated events and, for over fifteen years, has offered her skills as a youth mentor, guidance counselor, and motivational speaker in schools from primary to university.

**Matt Miller** is an independent scholar and musician based in the Atlanta metro area. He is the author of *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, published in 2012 by the University of Massachusetts Press.

**Terry Bright Kweku Ofofu** is an Assistant Lecturer and a pioneering popular dance scholar in the Department of Dance Studies, University of Ghana. He is the 1989 National Dance Champion of Ghana and currently a PhD candidate at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

**Halifu Osumare** is Professor Emerita of African American and African Studies at the University of California, Davis. She published *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop* (2007) and *The Hiplife in Ghana: West Africanist Indigenization of Hip-Hop* (2012), and was a 2008 Fulbright Scholar to Ghana. Her recent *Dancing in Blackness, A Memoir* (2018) won the 2019 Selma Jeanne Cohen Prize in Dance Aesthetics and a National Book Award.

**MiRi Park** is a b-girl, choreographer, performer, producer, scholar, teacher, and mother based in Southern California. She reps New York City where she spent her formative adult years and learned the art of b-girling and other underground dance forms.

**Eric Pellerin** is Assistant Professor and Librarian at Medgar Evers College, City University of New York. His research interests include hip hop history, authorship in film, and Hong Kong cinema.

**Emery Petchauer** is a scholar, teacher, DJ/turntablist, and cultural organizer. He works as an Associate Professor in the Departments of English and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. He has over twenty years of experience as a DJ in hip hop dance community spaces under his artist name, DJ ILL Literate.

**Déborá B. Rabinovich** graduated with honors from the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1988, and now works as a clinical psychologist. She holds an MSc. in Experimental Medicine from McGill University. Rabinovich has lectured at UBA

Faculties of Medicine and Psychology. Her research integrates dance into the field of neurological rehabilitation and wellbeing.

**Diana “Fly Lady Di” Reyes** is a multidisciplinary artist from Toronto, known as a street dance artist, DJ, and painter. McGill University educated and Elite Force/Dance Fusion NYC trained, Reyes has worked with industry greats like Jason Derulo, Ciara, and Director X. She is currently investigating her Filipino heritage.

**Rosemarie A. Roberts** is a Professor of Dance at Connecticut College whose artistic and scholarly work blend history, dance, and theater in order to investigate Afro-diasporic dance as embodiments of difference, knowledge, and resistive power. Her book project, *Baring Unbearable Sensualities: Hip Hop Dance, Bodies, Race and Power* is forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press.

**Niels “Storm” Robitzky**, started Breaking, Popping, and Locking in 1983 in North Germany. He is a choreographer for dance theater, researcher, author of the book, *From Swipe to Storm* (Backspin Verlag 2000), and considers himself a B-Boyologist.

**Paul Sadot**, PhD, is a Dance/Theatre practitioner, a practice researcher and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Performative Arts (CIPA), Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, UK. He is a Capoeira Professor and works internationally as a Movement Director and Choreographer.

**Marc “Scramblelock” Sakalauskas** is a practitioner of b-boying (1998) and locking (2000). He has learned from many originators in the locking scene and has won several international competitions. He organizes various events and is focused on building the Canadian locking community. He travels worldwide and continues to develop new teaching formats for locking.

**Joseph Schloss** is an interdisciplinary scholar specializing in the cultural politics of music and dance. He is the author of *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Wesleyan University Press, 2014), and teaches at the City University of New York and Princeton University.

**Roberta Shapiro** is a sociologist with a special interest in art, work and social change. She coauthored *Cultural Sociology: Special Issue on Artification* (Vol. 13: 3, Sept. 2019), and *De Lartification. Enquêtes sur la passage à l'art* (Paris, EHESS, 2012). She works at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales and the Centre de l'emploi et du travail in Paris.

**Helen Simard** is a choreographer, dance researcher, and retired b-girl based in Tiohtiá:ke/Montréal, Canada. Her interdisciplinary artistic research examines the musicality of the dancing body in improvisational practices. Her most recent work, *Papillon*, premiered via live stream in November 2020. She holds a BFA and an MA in Dance.

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# INTRODUCTION

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MARY FOGARTY AND IMANI KAI JOHNSON

THE announcement that Breaking is to be an official part of the 2024 Paris Olympics is one more pivot in Hip Hop dance studies' expanding repertoire of moves. As the diverse dance styles grouped together under the rubric, "Hip Hop dance," migrate from street and club, into film and video, book and university, conservatory and studio, and beyond, what remains constant is how these embodied expressions of social identity have always mattered. Irrespective of institutional recognition or disregard, Hip Hop dance has long offered a site where pleasure and politics arise in tandem. Taken seriously by its practitioners and dedicated followers, in the past few decades Hip Hop dance has entered more traditional—and at times problematic—spaces of acknowledgment and contemplation. As an intervention in this more traditional form of recognition, this Oxford Handbook seeks to honor practitioners by foregrounding their voices and stories, accompanied by insights from critical dance studies researchers. In so doing, it hopes to help set the stage for future work, by showing what can be done when practitioners, practitioner-scholars, dance scholars, and community workers from around the world get together to chronicle, contemplate, and at times criticize where Hip Hop dances have been so far, and where they may be going.

In this introduction, each of the co-editors outlines key aspects of the field of Hip Hop dance. Imani Kai Johnson sets up some of the political and social issues of our times. Mary Fogarty then looks at how researchers working both inside and outside the academy have crucially shaped scholarship about Breaking, the original dance of Hip Hop culture. She also provides an overview of the content of the anthology. Further reflection on the content of individual chapters can be found in the Afterword by Joseph Schloss. The respective authors of each section are indicated by initials (IKJ) for Imani Kai Johnson and (MF) for Mary Fogarty.

\* \* \*

## A LOVE LETTER OF SORTS (IKJ)

---

This is not a *roses are red / violets are blue* kind of love letter, but it is a love letter nonetheless. It is written for those who think deeply about the streetdances affiliated with Hip Hop<sup>1</sup> and who write about them with both curiosity and care. We share your desire to strengthen the field because, like you, we recognize that Hip Hop streetdance cultures are a wellspring of underexplored knowledges. Mary and I dedicate this book to students both inside and out of academia, because this kind of collection is most valuable to those who recognize such sentiments. *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies* is intended to serve as a compendium of topics, approaches, theoretical influences, histories, and perspectives that demonstrate the possibilities of a field in formation.

I met my co-editor, Mary Fogarty, through researching Hip Hop dances. I read and cited Mary's MA thesis as a doctoral student; and she then assigned parts of my dissertation to her students. When we finally met in person, we began an exchange that has been ongoing for years, learning from each other and shaping each other's ideas. We first plotted this anthology in 2012, walking down New York City streets, excitedly brainstorming about the types of research such a collection could include. It felt palpably important for us as junior scholars positioned across multiple disciplines (including music, dance, African diaspora, American, and performance studies), to assemble a collection informed by Hip Hop culture and with an eye toward our varied audiences—from Hip Hop heads and practitioners to new students and seasoned scholars. We sought to create a collection that we would have wanted when we were students, one that attended to the interests of practitioners themselves.

Such an approach matters precisely because there is a dearth of scholarship on Hip Hop streetdances in both Hip Hop studies and dance studies. Very little of the published research on Hip Hop over the last approximately forty years has focused on dance, (and little of what has been published goes beyond breaking). Dance studies does not frequently prioritize social, popular, battle, or competition dances,<sup>2</sup> which characterize most Hip Hop streetdances. That they are doubly overlooked signals the ways Hip Hop dance challenges both fields to shift their respective perspectives (i.e., from the proscenium stage to cyphers and clubs, or from textual analysis to embodiment), to discard outmoded ideas (e.g., high-low culture divides, or the mind-body split), and to trouble value systems that disregard non-Western epistemologies, oral cultures, and embodied knowledges. Hip Hop dances are an incredibly rich yet neglected area of research that can add critical insights to both fields.

Those walks in 2012 solidified a certainty that Hip Hop streetdances not only add to a body of knowledge; they contend with some of the ideological assumptions that invisibilize or exploit the peoples and sensibilities that grow out of them. Since the academy and its hierarchies play a significant part in the development of a field, the institutional contexts and hurdles contributing to this neglect merit attention. Consider, for example, how the approval process for fledgling dissertation projects shapes future

research. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose (1994) writes that her dissertation committee was initially “worried . . . that rap would disappear before I finished my research, I wouldn’t have enough material to write about, and I might be unmarketable as a job candidate” (xii). At the outset, Rose clearly had to convince the committee that rap music warranted attention despite their concern that it was a flash in the pan fad that could undermine her career. Some students looking to break new ground by studying emerging or little-known cultures are still told that their research is “too niche” to be worthy of sustained intellectual attention.<sup>3</sup> Others alter their projects beyond recognition to fit disciplinary expectations or abandon them altogether if they do not. Yet, though it was inconceivable to her committee at the time, Rose’s work was formative of a field. The book was so impactful that I have often wondered, had they not approved the project, just where Hip Hop studies would be over twenty-five years later.<sup>4</sup>

Our efforts to support research on Hip Hop dances extends beyond scholarship to the vulnerable and essential workers within the corporatized university whose labor is also invisibilized and exploited. Not long after our decision to make this a love letter, education strikes around the world hit close to home. In January 2020, graduate students at multiple University of California campuses (some already engaged in a grading strike) stepped up their demonstrations in support of a cost-of-living salary adjustment. By February, seventeen protestors at UC Santa Cruz had been arrested and eighty-two graduate student workers were fired, which (temporarily) eliminated their health insurance.<sup>5</sup> Yet the demonstrators marched on.

It should not be seen as an extravagance that graduate-student workers, some of whom were living out of their cars, want to pursue their studies while being able to afford groceries. The degree of economic precarity they experienced is an example of structural inequalities within the university. As a result, the stakes are incredibly high for students, and their sacrifices are not always evident. For us to vision toward a field, and in support of research yet to come, we must recognize the unreasonable sacrifices that people are forced to make now and “leverage our complicity”<sup>6</sup> with these institutions so as to not perpetuate them down the line.

As future-minded as we tried to be, by March 2020 the global pandemic that had been spreading worldwide for months became undeniable in North America, where we both reside. As much of the world began dealing with the uncertainty of COVID-19, sheltering-in-place, and the economic disparities it amplified, there was, too, a growing longing to be together. Hip Hop DJs began saving our spirits in nightly “live” sessions; rappers and singers competed or just shared music in live Veruz<sup>7</sup> battles featured in apps like Instagram; and dancers the world over fostered community by sharing their art online to cultivate embodied social exchanges in the face of physical distancing practices. The joy of dancing “together” to “live” music energized the spirit in the face of the virus, with Hip Hop illuminating hopeful strategies for living under the COVID-19 restrictions.

Within two months, though, following viral footage of an eight-minute clip featuring a Minneapolis police officer asphyxiating George Floyd,<sup>8</sup> weeks of protests and

public demonstrations ensued around the world against antiblack policing and state-sanctioned violence. Demands for action were distilled into calls to defund and/or abolish the police, tear down monuments to racist and colonial histories, and mounting pressure to hold institutions accountable for their continuing racist, and specifically antiblack practices and legacies. Empty statements were called out, and various organizations made public commitments to change, including academic ones like the Dance Studies Association.<sup>9</sup> What Mary and I hope is that Hip Hop Dance studies becomes a medium to study these various conditions through a streetdance lens, and be responsive to demands for the academy to reckon with racist legacies in thought and training.

We thus dedicate this handbook to students of all levels, within and outside institutions, because we share your enthusiasm and still need you to keep going. We call on you to follow your curiosities because perhaps they will offer clues to surviving, thriving, and cultivating new ways of living.

## IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING... (MF)

---

This Handbook represents a practitioner-based turn in the emerging field of Hip Hop dance studies. As someone who was a b-girl before she became a researcher into Breaking culture, I have always looked to dancers for insight as well as inspiration. While some of the chapters here take a more theoretical approach, much of the content addresses Hip Hop dance explicitly as a lived practice. Alongside the important work of scholarly researchers, the Handbook includes the insights of internationally recognized dancers who have made considerable contributions to Hip Hop dance scholarship, through their teaching as well as through their careers as artists.

The chapters share a number of common interests, including the outlining of teaching methods, the questioning of legacies, the exploration of how cultural traditions that matter are passed down from generation to generation, and of how vocabularies are codified. Unsurprisingly, the chapters in this anthology do not always use terms consistently; both practitioners and scholars seek to define and label their terms, sometimes being at odds with each other. While b-boys Ken Swift and Storm, for example, show considerable agreement in vocabulary, shared historical understanding, and concern about passing down knowledge and traditions, some of the authors in our anthology will deeply disagree with each other on terminology, history, and analysis. We believe it is useful for students to encounter these incongruencies and differences. We hope these chapters will not only map out the current stage of knowledge but, in particular, will also help to identify what future research is needed. Moreover, our inclusion of the insights of multiple practitioners from Hip Hop dance scenes not only offers counterpoints to scholarly orthodoxy, but equally helps to reimagine research agendas. In so doing, it is also our intention to highlight those contradictions that inform Hip Hop and its endlessly shapeshifting, fragmented, competitive yet collaborative energies.

This Handbook serves as a resource for students wanting to study different dance styles and their distinctive histories. Dances such as House, Popping, Locking, or Twerking, to name but a handful of the many styles, grow out of Afro-diasporic communities where music provides a central source of inspiration and solidarity. As the beloved, iconic, and late Tyrone “The Bone” Proctor said, “The best choreographer is music.” Although we are advocating here for more dance practitioner-based accounts, I also want to honor the crucial contributions of Hip Hop researchers who brought Breaking into the scholarly conversation. I have long advocated for more crossover conversation between popular music studies and dance scholarship. For example, the three ‘Rs,’ Tricia Rose (1994), Raquel Rivera (2003), and Rachel Raimist (1999), all provided early accounts of Hip Hop that considered dance important enough to conduct interviews with dancers. Their scholarly contributions helped create space for the work that would follow. I can still remember picking up Rivera’s *New York Ricans in the Hip Hop Zone* (2004) and being thrilled to discover that she had devoted ten pages to a discussion of Breaking. When Raimist’s documentary filmwork not only showed one of my favorite rappers, Medusa, but also the iconic b-girl Asia One, I felt seen as a b-girl, further validating a movement that mattered (an overview of the earliest scholarship on Breaking is found in Fogarty 2006).

Some of the contributors to this anthology wrote some of the earliest monographs about Breaking, such as Halifu Osumare (2007) and Joseph Schloss (2009). Schloss offers an overview of the field in his ‘Afterword,’ while Osumare extends her earlier thinking about the globalization of Afrodiasporic dances by collaborating with dancer and scholar, Terry Bright Kweku Ofusu. Their chapter captures the broader spirit of this project, and the ethos of working together, passing along knowledge, and centering dancers’ perspectives in the academy.

*The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies* consists of five parts. Part I addresses the first few decades of Hip Hop, its legacies and traditions, with chapters by Ken Swift and Yarrow Lutz, Storm, and E. Moncell Durden. Speaking more generally of legendary dancers, Durden asks “what happens when their personal truth is romanticized and passed on as fact?,” suggesting that the key is to keep on asking questions. Like Storm and Ken Swift, Durden is known internationally as a Hip Hop dance practitioner and mentor. Durden was part of the influential Hip Hop dance group, the Mop Top Crew, as well as being a dancer for Rennie Harris’ Puremovement; Durden has consistently emphasized Hip Hop dance as Afrodiasporic tradition and heritage, a fact too often obscured as Hip Hop dance becomes more and more globalized. In my chapter, I discuss transformations that happen within the lifecycle of an individual’s performance. I also explain for the uninitiated why Frosty Freeze and Ken Swift are so damn fresh.

Alongside this work by well-known figures in the global Hip Hop dance community, we also introduce new research by emerging scholars in the field. Vanessa Lakewood identifies the power of the media in shaping discourses about Breaking through a case study of early Hip Hop photography, including works by Martha Cooper that accompanied some of the very earliest writing in the press about Breaking by Sally Banes (1981). In Eric Pellerin’s chapter, he interviews second-generation B-Boys in New York City who were heavily influenced by kung fu aesthetics, considers how kung fu films were distributed, and highlights the impact of cross-cultural, mediated exchanges.

Part II addresses Hip Hop methodologies. Miri Park, B-girl-scholar-mother, compares oral historical traditions in Hip Hop to academic oral history methodologies. She takes as her case in point the history of New York City B-girls of the 1990s who went on theatrical tours. B-girls Rokafella and Honey Rockwell reveal the ambiguities and tensions of professional life as a B-girl. Imani Kai Johnson examines the challenges and complexities facing women ethnographers working in Hip Hop dance spaces. Andy Bennett then examines Hip Hop dance as an object of sociological and cultural research. He introduces key interdisciplinary frameworks from adjacent fields of youth, subcultural, leisure, and popular music studies to expand the toolbox available to Hip Hop dance scholars. DJ Emery Petchauer's approach is rooted in Hip Hop pedagogy, and centers on the experience of music when one is learning how to Break. Marc "Scramblelock" Sakalauskas presents a personal account of establishing and maintaining his archive, describing how he collects material, how he catalogues it as he does, and why. In the process, he lays out some of the terrain of locking as a dance style. In her second chapter for the anthology, Johnson explores the term *hiphopography*, a method that builds on other critical ethnographic, decolonial, and Black feminist epistemologies and methodologies.

Part III, "Overstanding Identities in Hip Hop Practices," includes academic-practitioner-artists who analyze Hip Hop identities. Thomas DeFrantz asks if Breaking can belong to House, placing the spiritual meaning of dance at the center of his analysis. Halifu Osumare and Terry Bright Kweku Ofusu then compare Hawaiian and Ghanaian popular culture and dance, offering an *overstanding* of the translocal, Africanist aesthetics of Hip Hop dances and their cooptation and corporatization in the circulation of popular culture, in the process, showing how "the Ghanaian class divide played right into the snare of American pop cultural hegemony." Serouj "Midus" Aprahamian's chapter builds on the earlier work of Osumare to provide a historically informed ethnography of Hip Hop dance in Armenia (a former Soviet Republic), where it becomes a globalized resource for youth seeking alternative ways of being in the world.

As a powerful point of comparison, grace shinhae jun's chapter examines the development of Asian Hip Hop dance teams in Southern California, and through them, the exponential growth in Hip Hop dance competitions. She argues that these Asian American dancers embrace Black culture, in part, as a means of being seen as more fully "American." Matt Miller's chapter explores the grassroots trajectory of twerking and P-Popping in New Orleans and, through thick ethnographic research, expands the definition of what counts as Hip Hop in the local culture. Finally, Helen Simard asks what happens when B-girls navigate an already-gendered space, initially emulating men, and then figuring out whether what they are doing is to be considered 'B-boying' or 'B-girling.'

In Part IV, we head to the stage, television set, and the studio. Naomi Bragin approaches Hip Hop aesthetics as Black aesthetics, considering the diminishing of authenticity that may occur when dancers learn Hip Hop dance in the studio rather than the street or club. Dance scholar and artist Rosemarie Roberts interviews Mr Wiggles, one of the most influential Hip Hop dancers internationally, and considers the political impulse of Popping's physicality.

Switching gears, Leah “McFly” McKesey, Diana “Fly Lady Di” Reyes, and I rehearse the influence of the Fly Girls, the dance troupe on the syndicated television show *In Living Color*. The Fly Girls get their shine in this chapter via a recorded oral history of their influence on dance practitioners. The questions about professionalization raised in the Fly Girls chapter lead us back to discussions about Hip Hop on the proscenium stage. In the next two chapters, Roberta Shapiro and Paul Sadot cover the development of Hip Hop theatre in France and the United Kingdom, respectively. Shapiro begins with questions about how Breaking moved onto the theatrical stage and into contexts of art and curation, while Sadot problematizes the development of Hip Hop theatre within UK institutional frameworks. The institutional contexts of the art school and art career also figure in the last chapter by Anthony “YNOT” DeNaro and I, where we explore the aesthetics of Breaking within writing (i.e., “graffiti”), music, and movement.

In Part V, the concluding section of *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*, Tony Ingram surveys the scientific research on dance injuries from Breaking. As a B-Boy himself, he wades through the vague, if not insulting, terminology of “break-dancing” used by scientific researchers, to argue that it matters whether researchers are looking at Breaking, Locking, Popping, or other dance styles, since they each require very different assessments when it comes to injury diagnosis and prevention. Rebecca Barnstaple, Débora Rabinovich, and Joseph DeSouza discuss ideas about dance and the brain, including a study I co-authored in which Ken Swift agreed to have an fMRI scan of his brain conducted while listening to music. Although it is perhaps unconventional to place neuroscience articles in a Handbook such as this, the chapter provides a provocation for future research in this area. Finally, Stephen “Buddha” Leafloor shares some of his insights as a social worker providing Hip Hop-inspired programming to Indigenous communities in Canada.

In the ‘Afterword,’ Joseph Schloss calls attention to how dancers position themselves in both Hip Hop culture and scholarly research, ending our anthology with movement as the central metaphor for thinking about how Hip Hop dance scholarship shapes, and is shaped by, practitioners’ positionalities in the world.

The different sections of *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies* seek to place the voices of practitioners in dialogue with scholarly concerns. Some of the chapters are polemical; others are more tentative. Some are written with undergraduate students in mind and are intended to empower new or marginal voices who are just entering the academy, while others challenge orthodoxies, guide graduate students, or provide facts for future history books.

## ABSENCE AND PRESENCE (IKJ)

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The *Oxford Handbook on Hip Hop Dance Studies* is a beginning conversation, not an exhaustive representation of a field. We have gathered scholarly and practitioner-based studies and accounts in a collection that indicates its possibilities. Although there are

absences in this collection (e.g., material expanding the geographic scope and analytical depth of Hip Hop dance), due to conditions beyond our control, it is important to acknowledge that what we bring together here is still in conversation with *that* material. There is so much more research that *is* and *can happen* beyond what is here. *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies* is first and foremost an introduction.

Absence is palpable in the text by way of another register: the OGs, the teachers, legendary practitioners, respected scholars, friends, and family who have passed away, several of whose deaths were immediate to the drafting of this introduction. The unexpected twist of a global pandemic is that collective losses, especially without our usual collective means of paying respect and celebrating lives, have made the urgency of this project even clearer. Those of us who study Hip Hop streetdances already know this urgency because in Hip Hop's fifty-year existence we were fortunate to experience and learn from so many of those legends while they were alive. In many cases we can still talk to the people who were "there," when and wherever "there" is. Getting their stories into the annals of history is essential, not simply to develop the field but because their lives do not end when they die. But rather than present an inevitably incomplete list of names that falls short of honoring the countless contributors to Hip Hop dance histories and cultures who have passed on, some we might not know but whose impact we nonetheless feel, we want to recognize that this collection strives to feature people and practices that have captured their lessons and legacies. We honor the dead because they live on in those they have taught, mentored, schooled, and battled. Thus, we end where we started: with appreciation for those students who carry the legacies of these figures in their bodies, their practices, and their writing.

## NOTES

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1. The term *Hip Hop streetdances*, or streetdances that fall under the umbrella of Hip Hop, acknowledges the range of practices that are affiliated with or related to Hip Hop culture in broad terms, while respecting that such genres have distinct histories beyond the ways Hip Hop gets narrativized and thus cannot be totally subsumed under that header. For a discussion on the capitalization of Hip Hop, see Johnson's "Hard Love Part 1" in this volume.
2. Including party, club, and combat dances.
3. Within the academy, getting such research greenlit can be its own challenge, but on the flip side, many Hip Hop practitioners are especially sensitive to Ivory Tower elitism and anything that reeks of exploitation and are wary of academics who dabble in their communities, take from them, and leave. Hence, the importance of care and respect.
4. In November 2019, the American Studies Association Annual Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, featured a panel titled "Black Noise at 25" to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication.
5. See UC Santa Cruz Wildcat Strikers (2020), "The University of California Strike Enters Its 4th Month," *The Nation* (online), April 6. Last accessed December 19, 2020. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/the-university-of-california-strike-enters-its-fourth-month/>.

6. I borrow this phrase from Fred Moten, who used it in a conversation with Stephano Harney during a talk titled, “The University: Last Words” on July 9, 2020, which was part of the Action Network’s FUC series on labor movements, decommodified knowledge, and the university. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqWMejD\\_XU8&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqWMejD_XU8&feature=youtu.be).
7. “Verzuz, also known as Verzuz TV, is an American webcast series created by producers Timbaland and Swizz Beatz. Verzuz was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic as a virtual DJ battle, with Timbaland and Swizz Beatz facing off in its first iteration through an Instagram Live broadcast in March 2020.” Wikipedia, s.v. “Verzuz,” n.d. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verzuz>.
8. George Floyd was an African American man from Minneapolis who was stopped by police after allegations of using a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy cigarettes. Officer Derek Chauvin was eventually charged with murder after kneeling on Floyd’s throat for several minutes until he died. See “George Floyd: What Happened in the Final Moments of His Life,” *BBC News*, US and Canada (online), July 16 2020. Last accessed 20 December 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726>.
9. See their letter addressed to the entire field of dance studies, titled, “DSA Strongly and Unequivocally Condemns Global Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy,” June 16, 2020, available on their website. Last accessed December 20, 2020. <https://dancestudiesassociation.org/news/2020/the-dance-studies-association-strongly-and-unequivocally-condemns-global-anti-blackness-and-white-supremacy>. The group followed up on August 21, 2020, with a letter to individual departments titled, “Departmental Call-to-Anti-Racist-Action.” Last accessed December 20, 2020. <https://dancestudiesassociation.org/news/2020/departmental-call-to-anti-racist-action>.

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PART I

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HIP HOP DANCE  
LEGACIES AND  
TRADITIONS

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## CHAPTER 1

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# FOUNDATION

### *Context and Components of Breaking Fundamentals*

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KENNETH “KEN SWIFT” GABBERT  
WITH YARROW “OSOFLY” LUTZ

## INTRODUCTION

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IN 1977, I was eleven years old, growing up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. My friend Dante<sup>1</sup> and I were walking by a record shop on 98th Street and Broadway while “Back in Love Again” by L.T.D.<sup>2</sup> played on the speakers. Dante did a top spin into a split, and it was the first time I saw someone drop and touch the floor in person, not on TV. It felt daring and radical. I was blown away that he didn’t care what people thought as he reacted to the music right there on the sidewalk.

“This is what B.Boys do,” said my friend Doze Green<sup>3</sup> the following year, 1978, as he dropped to the floor and did a little knee shuffle. Doze lived a floor above me on 97th St. and Amsterdam Avenue, Manhattan, and his cousin Tee, a DJ from the Bronx, had taught him how to DJ. Doze got a mixer and turntable, and we started practicing. Tee also showed him how to *go down* and do a few dance moves on the floor. It was the style of *going off*, which started in the Bronx at parties and jams in the early to mid-1970s. Because these moves were quick and precise, Breaking instantly made an impression on us as something fresh and new. It wasn’t on television yet, or in the schools, and our parents didn’t know about it. All of this made it something underground and intriguing. At that young age, creativity and physical daring came naturally to me. And it was easy to imitate and experiment with my body. There was a concrete path in Central Park at 100th St. next to a playground, where on the weekends a group of Black kids would run fast, do back handsprings for thirty feet straight, and then finish with high somersaults, some with twists and other impressive tricks. I was inspired by how talented and fearless they were.

At that time, the city had summer carnivals at night with rides and games in the big school park on W. 100th St. This is when I first saw kids my age and older dancing and “getting down” in a circle. As I watched one kid do some crazy movement with his body, it blew my mind. I later found out that his name was Greggo and that he came with other B.Boys from the East Side of Manhattan to this park on the West Side to get down. I was really excited, but at first, I felt I should just watch and check it out, because it was intimidating and different, and they were all Black, so I didn’t know if it was only their thing, if I was allowed since I’m not Black, but Puerto Rican and Cuban American. At the time, my older brother, Speedy, started hanging out with a crew called the #1 Sure Shot Boys, which included Raul, aka “Kid Terrific,” and Markie D. They were Puerto Rican, and when I saw them Rocking and Breaking, it made me feel a bit more comfortable, so I started practicing.

I started to Break in circles at church jams—Holy Name on W. 96th St. and St. Gregory’s on W. 90th would throw parties with music and dancing for the community—and also at block parties, where local residents would get a permit to close the street to play music, cook food, and socialize. There would be jams from 80th up to 104th Street, Amsterdam Ave. to Columbus Ave. The Douglas Projects had DJs like Mike D and The Untouchables, DJ Sherlock of the Shamrock Crew, and others bringing their music equipment out into the courtyard to throw jams. When specific songs were played, like “Apache”<sup>4</sup> or “Dance to the Drummers Beat,”<sup>5</sup> that’s when people would start breaking. Breaking at these jams is how I gained confidence, attention, and notoriety. It was also where I started meeting more local B.Boys, even some that were in that first circle I saw on 100th St. I discovered that some of those “Black” B.Boys were a mix of African American, Afro Latinos, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans. Race, ethnicity, and nationality meant less than the fact that we all shared the same living conditions, were all poor and lower class. And we all shared something else: it was also a dance that took some courage, so anybody who dared try to Break had to be willing to show what they could do with their skills, personality, and style.

It was said that Breaking was dying out in some areas of the Bronx in the late 1970s, when many original B.Boys were moving on from their late teens and adapting to adulthood. But breaking was strong and picking up on the Upper West Side, and in many other neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup> The original dancers from the Bronx had developed the “rules” and structure, and these were passed down to a second generation of dancers in my neighborhood and throughout the boroughs of New York City. It was during the late 1970s that the initial form took on new life, and a larger movement of dance and culture was created, all based on those original foundations of the traditions of the first B.Boys and B.Girls. It was a pivotal time that both solidified the dance and advanced it to another level. We had no idea that in just a few years, it would move across the whole country and quickly become an important popular culture around the world.

Over the last forty years, Breaking has evolved and grown into an international movement, with many schools and dance studios, as well as high-level competitions around

the world. The dance has been seen in music videos, films, commercials, on theatrical stages, and with the advent of YouTube and other social media platforms, it is now everywhere. Even with minimal access to electronic media, people across the globe have seen the dance, whether on their screens or in the streets.

But often, those watching the dance do not understand what they are seeing. Even many who actively break do not understand the form's basic foundations. And though they can perform some of the dance's elements, they know little of its complexities or its history. I am writing this chapter to pass down what was passed down to me regarding Breaking's foundation as I learned it. My aim in doing so is to keep the art form true to its traditions and history. Breaking is always evolving but, like other art forms, those who know where it comes from are best situated to bring it into the future.

I will describe the general context and aesthetics of Breaking in New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this period, Breaking consisted of six main components: *top rock*, *go downs*, *footwork*, *spins*, *air moves*, and *freeses*. These traditional elements kept the dance grounded and moving forward as an art form where creativity, innovation, and improvisation were highly valued. When Breaking was in its developmental stages, these components were already central to the dance, and they remain so today. They are the starting points and glue that holds Breaking together as it contemplates the infinite possibilities of its future, and I will describe some of their particular movements based on my own experience on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and the Bronx.

I have italicized the names of key Breaking moves to help readers identify and understand the dance's terminology. I have also chosen to use the term "B.Boy/B.Girl" when describing a dancer who breaks. There were a few B.Girls, but I acknowledge the vast majority of dancers in the 1970s and 1980s were male, and the term "B.Boying" was popular. The term "Breaker" came out in the 1980s, and when the media caught on, they started using the term "Breakdancer," which wasn't used in the streets. I also commonly refer to the dance as Breaking because it seems the most accurate description, one that stays true to the dance's history and is still in common use today. However, it is also important to keep in mind that much of the terminology of the dance and its movements varied depending on one's neighborhood. In that time, a move had completely different names in different parts of the city since the dance developed largely off the grid, in very local contexts.

For the more experienced dancer or dance scholar, some of what follows may seem too basic or overexplained, but I want to accurately document the fundamentals of the dance. These fundamentals make up the form's foundation and are also what make the dance unique. Understanding them is just as valuable to today's dancers as it was to those of my generation. To me, foundation is not about having an "old school" style or dancing like people did in the late 1970s. It is simply the starting point from which this art form has developed, and it still provides a platform to build on. I will leave it to others to conclude how the dance's fundamentals are present in their own work.

## THE CONTEXT OF BREAKING: JAMS, PARTIES, CREWS, AND BATTLES

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Like other dancers from the 1970s, I was introduced to Breaking by seeing it in person. There was no media coverage or documented information to explain Breaking back then. House parties, park jams, community centers, block parties, schoolyards, and roller-skating rinks were where one was most likely to see the dance. Local family gatherings also helped expose young people to elders or siblings who danced, which further contributed to their inspiration and exploration and spread the dance throughout various New York City neighborhoods.

A park jam or block party was especially important because it provided music and did not restrict attendance according to age. It brought out families and friends together in one place, and many practitioners first experienced Breaking in these situations. The DJs at park jams played different genres of music—both the newest hits and lesser known songs not heard on the radio. Each musical genre presented different opportunities to do a specific social dance, such as Rocking, the Freak, the Hustle, the Bump, the Gigolo, and the Bus Stop. The songs that had the most exciting breaks were recognized immediately by the audience, and B.Boys would get ready to show off their moves and excite the crowd. Some would develop a routine in advance, and when particular songs came on, the circle would form for B.Boys and B.Girls to perform in. “Some B.Boys would take a favorite song they liked and practice a routine at home,” as Grandmaster Melle Mel put it, “and then when the song would come on at a jam or party they throw the routine they made up in the dance circle.”<sup>7</sup>

Breaking wasn’t always competitive, but practitioners often wanted to demonstrate that their skills were better than those who came before them in a circle. As each dancer took turns trying to outperform another dancer and show off their individual variations of moves, the dance took on characteristics of a challenge and became known as a *battle*. In turn, the crowd would express who they liked better in a circle by vocally responding to their movements. This winning over of the crowd was an essential part of a battle in a party or park jam, whereas formal dance contests were a bit more organized, often with official judges; but even then, the crowd played a big part in determining the final winners, as well.

The individuality of a dancer was also expressed in their B.Boy or B.Girl name or “alias,” which was sometimes given to them by others or chosen by the dancer him- or herself. Such names tended to be descriptive of the dancer’s dancing abilities or unique characteristics. For instance, I first chose “Kid Zoom” as my alias because I was known for having very quick moves. That name later evolved into Ken Swift. Other B.Boys chose to use the name they had as writers or aerosol artists, because they liked the word or its letter combinations. Sometimes a dancer’s name would be preceded with a Lil or Junior because they were a student or had been inspired by another dancer.

First-generation B.Boy Sondance<sup>8</sup> said, “You can tell immediately who was a B.Boy by how he was dressed”; this was due to the fact that there was a distinct fashion style. From top to bottom, there was style intention, a full outfit from sneaker to hat, including shell toe Adidas sneakers, track suits, athletic gear, PRO-Keds, Puma Clydes, ski hats, Lee jean matching suits, Graffiti jackets, mock-neck shirts, BVD Nylons, Kangol hats, mesh baseball hats, and British Walkers. It was all about dressing with style, with matching colors to look good and stand out.

Many B.Boys and B.Girls would also either start a *crew* or become a part of one. These crews tended to be made up of people who lived in the same neighborhood, while some groups also were formed around the way they danced or some other mutually shared interests. Like individual dancers, crews would come up with a unique name to represent themselves—such as the Zulu Kings, The Smokatrons, The Bronx Boys, Rockwell Association, Floor Masters, Rock City Crew, or The Executioners—and these names were commonly displayed on their clothing. A typical approach would be to put the crew’s name on the back of a T-shirt and the individual alias on the front, either using iron-on letters or acrylic paint. Such names would also be featured in stylized letters on the back of a jean jacket or pant leg. A crew could be small, about three or four people, or it could branch out to more than fifteen or twenty. However, not everyone would be immediately accepted into certain crews. You had to either be skilled in the dance or battle someone to get in. This was to ensure that everyone in the group could hold their own weight and bring in their individual skills.

*Crew battles* would also occur, either spontaneously or at a set place and time decided in advance. Individuals that had more experience or skills would usually be at the forefront of these battles but everybody in the crew contributed however they could. Initially, the battle might go back and forth with solos to prove which dancers had superiority in a particular move or style. For example, most groups had a person who specialized in spins, flips, or flexibility. There was a buildup process in these battles, as well, so solos tended to be short, quick, and to the point. Usually, though, the battle would lean toward crew routines as the battles moved on. These routines showcased a group’s overall skills, using more of a storytelling approach that was attuned to the audience and geared toward making them react to a narrative. It was also common for crews to weave individual dancers’ specialties together within a routine, while at the same time creating a skit or story. Such routines displayed a sense of group confidence, teamwork, and camaraderie, as well as strong individualism.

Among the many crew routines performed citywide during this period, some particularly stood out for their creativity and popularity. For instance, there was one where a pair of B.Boys would face each other and *top rock*. Then one turns and faints while the other catches him from behind and throws him back up as he hits a *drop move* to the floor. Another common routine was known as the *throw back flip*, where one B.Boy would clasp his hands while the other stepped into his clasped hands and was thrown into a back flip. Other common routines involved two or more B.Boys transitioning in unison from *top rock* into *footwork* and then into a *freeze* (most times, a *baby* or *chair*)—or just *top rock* into a fast *spin* and then into a *freeze*. The *shoeshine* routine was also very

popular. It consisted of one B.Boy taking a knee while the other would put his foot up to get his shoe shined, act as if he was paying money, and then both would transition into a move and freeze. In the *heartbeat*, a B.Boy would break then just stop, as if he had died or fainted. Then another B.Boy would resuscitate him by miming that he had electric pads. The “dead” B.Boy would get “revived” and would go into fast, sporadic footwork to finish his solo. A classic full-crew routine would involve members doing the *spider*, *turtle*, and *bridge* moves to create a scenario: the turtles would crawl under the spider as the spider walked back and forth under someone in the bridge position. Crews worked together to create and perform these choreographic routines, which included both stage blocking and showmanship.

## FOUNDATIONAL STYLES OF BREAKING: ROCKING, FREESTYLE, BURNING, AND BREAKING

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*Rocking*—also known as *Freestyle*, *Burning*, or, later, *Uprock*—is a New York dance style that existed prior to and was a central influence on Breaking. Rocking consisted of side-to-side steps, turns, and drops, akin to the dances of the funk, disco, and soul eras. It also included signature *jerks* (big back and forth movements) and *burns* (competitive gestures). The aggressive gesturing in burns included mimicking the shooting of a gun, or bow and arrow and other creative ways to humiliate your opponent. Dancers would often act out the lyrics of a song or play imaginary instruments in tune with the music. Whereas the posture of Breaking is more hunched down and focused on the floor, Freestyle, or Rocking, was more upright, with a confident posture, and it involved a different kind of finesse and class.<sup>9</sup>

Rocking was also an improvisational dance that had a competitive component to it, where dancers took turns going against each other in pairs or in a line of multiple pairs. These contests were also referred to as *Burning*, where you would take out your opponent with aggressive moves and body language.<sup>10</sup> In formal contests, held in discos or clubs, a group of judges would decide who the winners were, but in many informal underground battles, the audience would determine who won.<sup>11</sup> Much as in Breaking, practitioners of Rocking had aliases and were part of “crews” (groups of friends) in neighborhoods throughout New York’s five boroughs. At that time, Latinos mostly did Rocking. As Sundance remembers, “That’s what the Latino brothers did.”<sup>12</sup>

In the 1970s, Rocking and Breaking were performed to a lot of the same soul, funk, rock, and disco records, but not in the same way. Rock dance was performed for the entire duration of a song, from start to finish, whereas Breaking maintained a fast, short dance-and-rest process, and was almost exclusively done to specific songs, which featured “breaks”—sections of the song when the band would “break down” to just the drums or to the drum and bass. During the songs that facilitated breaking, it was common for DJs to “cut up” and elongate the break of these songs, alternating back and

forth between two copies of the same record. These songs included “Apache,” “Scorpio,”<sup>13</sup> “Take Me to the Mardi Gras,”<sup>14</sup> “I Can’t Stop,”<sup>15</sup> “Scratchin,’”<sup>16</sup> “Shangri La,”<sup>17</sup> and “Dance to the Drummers Beat.” Some of the songs of this time period were up to fifteen minutes long, so Rocking was about endurance and being familiar with a song’s structure and progression, while Breaking was a high-energy expression that was specifically danced to the break of a record that B.Boys and B.Girls would anticipate from knowing the song. This exciting section of the song is where Rock dancers would do their better moves, too, and was also referred to as the time when you would “Break.”<sup>18</sup> Rocking involved upright movement, performance, skits and acting out lyrics, while Breaking was a quick moment to show off, to *go off*, and to *break it down*. These moments in rocking show its breaking roots, whatever the distinct differences.

In New York in the late 1970s, both Rocking and Breaking would happen on any given night at a jam, at house parties or block parties, where most of the music being played was current and popular, with a few underground songs now and then. During a typical party, people would dance with each other most of the night, and when these songs were played, usually only one or two times during the course of an evening, it would be the moment to Rock or to Break. Specific songs would dictate the moment when spectators would create a circle around the B.Boys to watch what was happening, as different people went in to show their skills and challenge one another. But it was always the music itself that would get breaking started.

## COMPONENTS: TOP ROCK

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*Top rock* is an evolution of the opening, upright dance movements of rocking before going down to the floor. It is the starting place of Breaking, and a time to introduce oneself to an audience and other dancers.

When I first began to break, I was told by Doze that you have to top rock before going down into floor-based moves. It was a very simple rule that I followed from that point on. At first, I was not truly interested in top rock, because it seemed like a boring prerequisite to me, and going down to the floor was more exciting. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Breaking was still relatively unknown and the innovative moves we did on the floor were the center of attention—for both the dancers and the audience. This is why most footage of Breaking from that time period features relatively brief moments of top rock. In those days, 5 percent of what I did was on top, and the other 95 percent was *foot-work* and moves on the floor.

Top rock is a major, valuable, and mandatory component of Breaking as we know it today. I still do it because it is part of being a B.Boy, and I’m following a tradition that I feel obliged to continue. Top rock is also an opportunity to showcase one’s character and dancing ability. As I grew as a dancer, I came to see its importance in developing my style and personality. Sometimes, in a battle or showcase, top rock gives a dancer valuable time to plot their next moves or to strategize against an opponent. Even so, top rock should not be separated from Breaking; it must be combined with going down to

the floor or it isn't complete. Though you can borrow moves from Rocking, or any dance form, in top rock, you cannot top rock in Rock because top rock is only done prior to doing floor movements in a Breaking set.

The performance of top rock consists of bouncing, rhythmic movements, and the main side-to-side step central to freestyle and Rock dance. Top rock has evolved from the earliest versions of that side-to-side step and was turned into more of a spring step, or even a lunge. Moving from side to side, with twisting bounce steps, top rock steps can repeat, move in a circle, or be executed with very high leg kicks. Some B.Boys are aggressive within their top rock; others have moments that are smooth, dancers even laugh while doing them as a ploy to pull the opponent and audience in to win. The confidence is an attack in itself, at times done with a smile to clown around and make it look easy. This I learned from watching what Frosty Freeze<sup>19</sup> and other early B.Boys/B.Girls did. In contrast to the posture of early Rock dance—supremely confident, with dancers standing upright—Top Rock was more aggressive and hunched over. It is performed almost the way a boxer like Muhammad Ali or a martial artist like Bruce Lee moves, with a pivot on the ball of the foot, bouncing, almost floating, moving around, and being in complete control.

Each person would then change those basic steps little by little, helping to showcase their skills and flexibility before going down to the floor. For example, a dancer might keep their upper body straight while twisting their hips and lower body, creating a noodle-like illusion, or rubber-band effect. Many dancers crossed and uncrossed their arms before stepping, announcing that they were coming in and presenting themselves. These simple movements could express who you were as a dancer, how you related to the song or to the people present, and a wide range of other emotions with style.

In certain neighborhoods, names were associated with some of these top rock steps—for example, the *truck driver*, where you acted as if you were turning a big steering wheel as you did your steps.<sup>20</sup> But it was more common to develop an individual approach to top rock without specifically naming a step. The top rock of Lenny Len, an older B.Boy from RCA Freakmasters and the Rock Steady Crew, was just kind of crazy and different; you could recognize the basic moves, but he was flexible and creative in how he turned and twisted in a way that stood out and reminded me of salsa. Frosty Freeze's top rock was also particularly *fresh* (unique). Those of us deeply involved in the dance also noted specific individual influences. For instance, one of the older guys in my neighborhood named Charlie Rock was a mentor of Frosty Freeze, and we could see the former's influence on the latter's top rock. This influence was so pervasive that one style of top rock was known simply as the *Charlie Rock*.

As practitioners, we expanded the creative journey by inspiring each other and taking inspiration from all that was around us, as well. We were inspired by Kung Fu movies, comedies, cartoons, animals—whatever we thought would be cool to include in our dance. One example is the *python style* top rock, which was inspired by the hand and arm movements of a fight segment in the Shaw Brothers film *Mad Monkey Kung-Fu* (1979). I added these hand and arm movements into my right-to-left lunges, leading with opposite arm and leg while doing the step. Importing moves from such

sources, combined with our youthful imaginations, greatly increased the vocabulary of Breaking. It also helped us to develop our character, as our B.Boy or B.Girl names and repertoire of moves started adding up to fully formed personas and styles that were integral to communicating our narratives and emotions.

## COMPONENTS: GO DOWNS

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*Dropping* or doing *go downs*—two terms used interchangeably to describe transitioning to the floor—were also integral to Breaking. Some of the main go downs, described below, included *drops*, *sweeps*, *spin downs*, *parachutes*, and *corkscrews*. Most B.Boys had these go downs in their repertoire and, in keeping with the individual and character-based nature of Breaking, adapted them in their own unique ways. One's approach and flow in top rock was used to set up certain go downs, and importance was placed on style, speed, and creativity.

The *drop* move is self-explanatory: you squat directly into footwork or go right into a floor-based freeze. The *sweep* is a move that happens at the same time you go down to the floor, sweeping your straight leg around in a circular motion and jumping over it with your opposite leg. Popping back upright after executing a sweep was a single move but also a kind of tease that would allow you to continue back up into top rock, and then go down again. A *spin down* was a rotating move that created the illusion that you were drilling into the floor, but it was also an opportunity to use hand movements and gestures. Some of the most common spin down hand movements included folding the arms, putting one's fists on the hips, pointing while covering one's eyes, rolling the wrists, and shooting two imaginary guns while in motion. The go down known as the *spin down* could be executed rapidly, with aggression and precision, or calmly, with finesse and personal style. It was ideal to have both approaches, because both could go right into a *freeze* or *footwork*. The most common and traditional variation of this move was to spin into a freeze, which was also prevalent in freestyle and rock dance. However, Breaking gave you more options for movement following the spin. In the *parachute*, you would use your arms to imitate throwing a parachute, and you would drop slowly to the ground, as if meeting some wind resistance. The *corkscrew* is when you tuck your foot behind your knee and drop to the floor and then spin up into your freeze. All of these moves allowed you to transition to the ground to either freeze or begin footwork and other floor-based moves.

## COMPONENTS: FOOTWORK

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*Footwork* is the primary element of Breaking—the distinctive component that separates the dance from any other. It was the first step in the evolution of the dance from the top

down to the floor. It was radical at the time—no other dances in New York spent as large a percentage of time on the floor, and none used dancers’ bodies in this way. Having very fast and/or smooth and fluid footwork was the prime indicator that you had skills as a B.Boy or B.Girl.

Footwork involves quick rotating and twisting motions on all fours, and the dancer controls most of the energy with the upper body. Some of the movements pause and repeat, which some people described as *legwork*. Quality footwork would often look as if a person was going off, or careening out of control, but at the same time being smooth and making it look easy, despite the physical challenge. A sharper, choppy type of footwork was done with raw power, aggression, and speed, involving less finesse and control but more energy. The range of physical flexibility among different B.Boys would also help make the delivery of their footwork unique and create more options for expressing their creativity.

Being able to stop a footwork rotation demonstrated one’s control, and highlighted certain moves. Sometimes, a B.Boy would stop in a position where their legs were in front of them, as in a right-to-left drop, or with their legs behind them, as in a *shuffle*, where you kick your knees up alternately. Single moves were often repeated on each side to show that a dancer had the skills to do moves on both sides of their body. Doing moves in both directions, left- and right-handed, was also an appreciated skill that expanded a B.Boy’s repertoire of moves. Another technique was using body parts aside from the hands and feet to hold up one’s footwork, like in *knee rock* or *elbow rock*. It was common to see B.Boys repeat a pattern with a small change or addition to make sure people saw their subtle skills.

These techniques and adaptations were also used to develop new moves within the dance. For instance, B.Boys began to show their ability by repeating a single sweep, and then adding more speed and repetition to the move, eventually leading to the *helicopter sweep*. Showing how you “rocked” (performed) a move with your own personal signature was also one way to take out another dancer in a battle. For instance, doing helicopter sweeps backward or forward with one hand, while holding your hat in the other hand, could make your performance stand out against a competitor. In addition, everyone sought to expand on what they could do with footwork because, at first, our collective vocabulary was extremely limited. Despite the challenge of coming up with a new move, the object in footwork was to pull out something extra, such as doing a move with one hand—or even no hands. A good example of this is a move known as *backrock*, where one basically performs a footwork move but, on their back, with no hands, and with right-to-left twisting of the legs. In *The Russian*, B.Boys would kick their legs out with no hands, like a Russian folk dancer. *Around the worlds* or *Zulu Spins* in footwork consist of tight, small, balled-up fast spins low to the ground, using the hands and feet, but some people can catch a few spins even without their hands. It was these little things B.Boys had to invent and perfect that made the dance a creative and innovative process.

Footwork is also where many ideas for other aspects of the dance originated. For instance, the leg movements in footwork created a base from which one could go in the air, using jumps and twists. Spinning existed in many aspects of the dance but, in footwork, it soon evolved into doing spins on various parts of the body. Freezing existed in

all elements of the dance also, but it was particularly common in footwork, as a way to signal the end of a solo.

## COMPONENTS: SPINS

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*Spins* are a true highlight in Breaking and allow for a huge amount of individual inspiration and inventiveness. We have seen spins in almost every form of dance, so, visually, an upright spin in top rock or a descending spin in a go down may seem similar to those in other disciplines. But spins in Breaking have, from the beginning, been continually evolving. To try to spin on every possible part of the body truly challenged B.Boys, and sped up the evolution of the dance tremendously. Common spins back in the day included the *shoulder spin* and *butt spin to back spin*. A shoulder spin is set up with a sweep first or comes right in from footwork. The sweep to a shoulder spin is a common combination and usually ends in a freeze. The spin matches the direction of the sweep to keep its circular motion and flow. The number of rotations depends on a dancer's flexibility, technique, the flooring material, and even the type of clothing they are wearing. When the spins were about to end, a dancer would keep the same motion and roll from one shoulder to the other (almost on the neck) into a freeze. When doing shoulder spins from footwork, the circular motion of the footwork helps increase power and momentum, since the spin has to come from the same circular direction of the footwork and starts with a single shoulder dive. Some use the term *neck move* when describing this footwork to shoulder to spin move.<sup>21</sup>

Another common type of spin back then was the *butt spin to back spin*. This spin gets its power from the circular upper body motion, generated by whipping the leg around like a propeller. The energy comes from pulling the leg up by the thigh to get momentum. The force needed for this could come straight from top rock or from footwork. From top rock, one drops with one hand reaching to grab the floor as the leg generates motion. It is common to see top rock that drops right into this move, catching as many spins as possible, and then finishing with a freeze. The straight leg acts like a propeller at first, to get the speed up, but then is retracted to ball up the body as tightly as possible after spinning from the butt to the back. Balling up creates a visual where the dancer looks almost like a spinning top. A person's flexibility in the waist and back plays a big part in being able to bring the knees closer to the chest to improve the quality of this spin. Some people rotate in one place, and others might move sideways, but the most impressive technique is to make that spinning transition from butt to back in one place and as fast as possible. The same technique applies when the dancer transitions to this spin from footwork; one just needs sufficient circular momentum from the footwork. The bigger circular motion transforms into a very small, fast spin that enhances the visual effect. The butt spin to back spin also often culminated in a freeze, such as the *chair freeze*, *baby freeze*, or *bridge freeze*—the most commonly used for ending spins back then. For more skilled B.Boys, however, it was also an option to pop up from these spins right into a *head spin*.

There was also an early spin, which some call the *California backspin*, where you roll back from sitting down, use your legs as propellers, and grab the floor with both hands to direct your rotation. A similar technique was the *stomach roll to backspin*. This basic movement—rolling backward onto your back and then popping up into a standing position—was common in Kung Fu films in the late 1970s, as well, but without the long spinning effect. As the early 1980s came in, the *single-hand pushing backspin*, the *continuous backspin*, and the *windmill* brought spinning to its peak. The *single-hand pushing backspin* generated more power than the previous spins, using a balanced burst of upper body strength and lower flexibility at the same time. The *continuous backspin* involved continuing the spin by restarting the initial one-arm push at each rotation. The *windmill* utilized flexibility, good technique, and, most importantly, momentum to spin up onto the shoulders and upper back.

In all of these spin categories, it was common to use different leg positions to create different visual effects. Keeping the knees tucked in and parallel while spinning created one type of look, and gradually crossing the legs while spinning was also a common adjustment. Mastering spins in both directions added to your versatility and opened up other options for combinations. In Breaking, to spin on every possible part of the body was one of the more intriguing challenges, and most B.Boys at that time developed one or two individualized spins as their specialty. Other common spins during that time were the *knee spin*, *hand glide spin*, and *head spin*.

The *head spin* was, at the time, the most radical, unpredictable, dangerous, and challenging move to do. The *one-shot head spin* was the most common, and could come from many different body positions and combinations. The name *one shot* is self-explanatory—you have one shot, or one push, to start and finish. There were also many other names for this move in different neighborhoods throughout New York, like *drill*, *pencil*, *burner*, and *sizzler*. Early *one-shot head spins* were done on concrete or asphalt, which limited the number of rotations—three to six was the average, and eight was extraordinary. A hat, or even a full head of hair, helped by cushioning weight and decreasing friction. Each dancer’s body positioning varied; some would use different leg and arm angles while spinning. Spinning with the body completely straight showed good control and balance. Unlike the discontinuity of the one shot, the *pushing* or *tapping head spin* made it possible to prolong the spin by repeating the push after a rotation.

Integrating these spins into combinations was also a common technique. For example, one could execute the knee spin, go into a back spin, then a shoulder spin, and then into a head spin. The idea was to connect these movements while keeping one’s speed and momentum steady. It is important to note that B.Boys throughout New York City did their own unique variations and alterations on these spins.

Again, spinning takes place in almost every dance form, but spinning in Breaking was radical due to its daring, unique, and experimental quality. Trying to spin on any and every part of the body challenged an individual’s creative and physical possibilities. Some of these larger, more dynamic moves are still among the most widely recognized aspects of Breaking today.

## COMPONENTS: AIR MOVES

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All of the elements of Breaking enhance one another. Although the core of Breaking remains on the floor, both the going-into-the-air and mid-level moves are important visual aspects of the dance. Because the battle is an essential part of the culture and practice of Breaking, dancers had a real incentive to be creative and experimental, taking inspiration from any source as long as the basic core elements of the dance were involved. The experimental push of the dance made going into the air a natural progression, and once it did, you always wanted to jump higher, try the same move bigger, do something that made the crowd excited, or something to intimidate other dancers.

Flipping and acrobatics were easy inspirations for B.Boys to adopt, and because of the wow factor, they were seen in the streets on a regular basis. In Uptown Manhattan, guys would often line up, run, and then round off into three or four back handsprings, followed by a somersault, an Arabian, or even a full twist. Back and front versions of handsprings and flips have always been visually exciting, so when people started Breaking, they used various flips in their dance if they could do them. Such moves got an immediate response and, when showing off or simply entering a circle, breakers incorporated many moves with similar effects. Many of these larger, acrobatic, and gymnastic moves were also executed in the air. I will never forget seeing The Light Brothers in the park at 100th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. They were clearly partners in that they were dressed alike. They had sweatshirts with the name “Light Brothers” in iron-on letters on the back. They also had matching train conductor hats and train gloves, and they wore hard denim Lee jeans, freshly dipped with the permanent crease sewed in on the front, thigh to bottom. They had these crazy flip routines that would rock the crowd. I saw them only once, but the impression remains magical to this day.

The competitive nature of battling pushed the limits of these exciting moments within the dance, and opened up an enormous number of new possibilities. The *helicopter sweep* is a prime example of this evolution, creating a visual that looked as if you were floating in the air. Going backward and forward with the helicopter was a skill move, and even though it was circular, it was not technically footwork because it was performed in the air. The helicopter was a move that you can also see in many of the older Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest Kung Fu films from the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A move that pushed things further in Breaking was the *high swipe*, which I first saw executed directly from top rock. It was a daring move that required a twisting leap, throwing the legs in the air and twisting half of the body in the opposite direction while reaching for the floor with the hands. Once the hands touched the floor, the lower body (which is still in the air) twists again and comes down to the floor. Delivering this move from top rock has to involve a quick, forward-moving skip step to create the power needed for an effective execution. The high swipe is an original

move that requires flexibility and quickness. In the best high swipes, the waist is very high, almost like a bridge. In my neighborhood, we were told that B.Boy Spy from the Bronx was the first person to execute the move within Breaking. This move also had a floor-based version called the *baby swipe*, which consists of a small hop or jumping twist from the sweep. The difference is the position of the waist: in the baby swipe, the waist is low to the ground. Either swipe can be done as one move, back-to-back, in place, or repeated in a circular motion.

Another prominent air move with a lot of variations was called the *suicide*. In one version, a dancer does a front flip with no hands and lands on their back, usually with knees up and feet flat on the ground. The higher a B.Boy did it, the more impressive it was. And if it was used from a surprise perspective, people respected the technique and inventiveness. Another form of suicide, which was not done by many dancers, was the *back breaker*. In this move you jump straight in the air, legs out in front of you, then straighten out your whole body and come down flat on your back. Frosty Freeze was known for this type of suicide, which he did in the movie *Flashdance* (1984). Both moves had to be done in a precise and careful way so that a B.Boy would not hurt himself but still give the shock value intended.

Some moves, such as the *donkey*, were also combined with flips to keep the feel of being in the air. The *donkey*, also referred to as a *bronco*, is a move that requires an initial dive in the air, then landing on both hands with the back bent, and snapping the feet back to the floor again. When repeating this motion in succession, the move looks like a bucking animal. Donkeys are more effective visually when they also contain a sort of springboard-like bounce at the start. Adding a backflip or even a front somersault to donkeys was pretty common to see in B.Boy solos during that time. *Nipping up*, or *kiping up*, is another move that had an air effect. The gymnastic version of the *kip up* move was done by springing up from the back, but in Breaking, the *kip up* was executed in different ways. For instance, it could come after a fake back handspring that would go straight into the high shoulders and then *kip up*, coming fully up, back to the feet, and then repeated—almost doing the *donkey* backward. The *turtle*, also an air move, consisted of propelling the body forward, backward, or circularly on two hands while facing the floor, with elbows as the brace pressed in the stomach. The hands are the only things that touch the floor in this move. The circular style, which was the most common, was also known to some as *floats*. It was performed in many ways, with different leg positions. Turtles were also done by some with a noticeable circular jump between each two-hand push, which gave it a floating visual.

Although some springy-type footwork that requires the legs to elevate could make it look as if a B.Boy was in the air at certain times, the most commonly considered air moves in the Breaking community are swipes, flips, spins, and, soon after, *flares*. A flare is an acrobatic move in which one alternates the balance between either arm while swinging the legs in continuous circles; it was originated by gymnast Kurt Thomas.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, there are a lot of different times in a solo that you are actually in the air, making the category of air moves much larger than is often realized.

## COMPONENTS: FREEZES

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The *freeze* is another very important category. The freeze is the moment when a dancer's movement stops abruptly, and the body freezes in a specific way. Stopping suddenly in rock and freestyle dance existed both on the floor and on top before Breaking, but the dancing would often continue right after it happened. To pause within dancing could be a personal gesture, showing the mood and attitude of the dancer, usually prompted by the music. The freeze emphasized not just the dancer's attitude of but the physical challenge and surprising nature of the pose. To stop motion in top rock was a way to have fun and work the circle while going in and out of floor moves. Some would stop in a position and gesture, for example, with one leg folded, holding the visor of their hat, or hands together on the side of their face as if they were sleeping, or one arm folded and the other arm with the hand holding the chin, like posing for a picture. Most of the time, however, a freeze would be the ending of a go down, set, or solo. The freeze was a highlight and, although there were many common freezes, the challenge was to come up with something unique. Again, creativity was important, but it was equally important to stop completely and cleanly, to finish with style and skill.

Some of the freezes performed involved an arrogance or showing a humorous side (or both). For example, B.Boys would do combinations of moves, and then end up in a comfortable, relaxed position, almost like a model posing on the floor. You might see a B.Boy go up high on their shoulders after a backspin, then fall flat on their stomach and not move, like in the *dead man freeze*. It could bring an immediate, desired reaction from the crowd when completing a set.

A freeze can be a physically challenging body position and animated gesture at the same time. For instance, the *baby freeze* went from a sort of skit of pretending to be a baby on the floor with a thumb in the mouth, to its evolution of moving like a baby with half of one's body held up in the air. The *chair freeze* was also one of the most utilized freezes. Here, the arm positioning was key: balancing the side of the body on the elbow, the arm from wrist to elbow being used as a brace, with one hand flat on the ground. The B.Boy is holding up the weight of his body while the bottom half of the body is twisted in a leg-folded position, as if sitting in a chair. The back corner of the head is resting on the floor while he gestures primarily with the free hand. The common hand gestures included reaching the floor over your head, putting the hand on the forehead as if looking into the distance, and also putting the fist on the side of the hip. These gestures were confident and comedic. The most intriguing and raw chair freeze involved grabbing one's crotch with the free hand while in that position. There was a macho, arrogant, and hardcore side to hitting that freeze, so it usually caught positive attention in circles, and allowed a B.Boy to outshine other dancers. The *chair freeze* was at its best when the B.Boy, no matter what gesture he did, looked completely comfortable and relaxed in that contorted position. As can be seen, the *chair freeze* centered on flexibility, so capabilities

with the waist allowed some to do it with special flavor. To be able to change the folded-leg position was a useful skill to have, as was being able to freeze from the right to the left arm while switching the folded leg. The same movement from the left to right arm was used in executing the baby freeze, as well. As such, the chair and baby were the most common freezes coming from footwork, combinations, and spins. So, again, having the versatility of being able to use both arms and legs gave you more options to choose from.

If an ending movement was not stable, or a dancer swayed in their freeze—even if balanced in place—it would not be considered a good freeze. Even though one could stop and go while in footwork, a freeze had to be held for a solid second and a half or more. The freeze signified the dancer’s ability, and signaled the feeling or personality they wanted to express, solidifying their character. Freezes could be either preconceived or spontaneously improvised. At times, a freeze would even happen by accident. For instance, one can overdo a move with too much energy or excitement and get momentarily stuck.

When a B.Boy or B.Girl came up with an original freeze, it was common for them to give the freeze a name and to make people aware that they had made it up. It would become a sort of trademark, a way to get recognition for their personal creativity, and a claim to fame that built notoriety and reputation. Taking someone else’s move, or *biting*, was looked down upon in the community. You would be called a *biter* by other B.Boys and B.Girls, and your reputation would be damaged. This could also easily result in a confrontation or even a fight. Due to how difficult it was to be original, and the work and discipline that it took to develop unique skills and ideas, many people took biting very personally. The dance vocabulary of Breaking in the late 1970s was very limited. The individual’s character had to be more interesting than the moves themselves, and it was imperative to have your own way of doing things that represented who you were as a person. Doing a freeze by stopping on a dime from top rock, footwork, air moves, or a spin was an important moment that not only showed command of your skills and body but also provided a striking moment to display your individuality, creativity, and character.

## OTHER CONCEPTS IN BREAKING

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These general components—top rock, go downs, footwork, spins, air moves, and freezes—were combined with each other and with other techniques in Breaking performances. B.Boys and B.Girls tried to use them in ways that demonstrated the breadth and depth of their skills, and that entertained and wowed the circle or audience. One essential way to do this was to *represent* the previously noted character and personality within Breaking. This was done with attitude, and drew on many different sources, such as movie roles, cartoon characters, neighborhood characteristics, or other cultural understandings. Also, as discussed earlier, certain moves—the helicopter, chair freeze, and so on—represented different entities in the real world, including animals like the

turtle and donkey. These representations were constructed from different components within the dance—a chair by using a freeze, for instance, or the helicopter as a floor move or an air move. These forms of imitation or representation were very quickly an essential part of a dancer’s repertoire, and the character they presented through their dance.

In imitating insects or creatures, B.Boys also developed a physical language that has continued to evolve. Early techniques included the development of moves like the *spider*. The *spider* required good flexibility and technique, and involved a practitioner squatting and reaching both arms under the legs and behind the body, with the hands flat on the floor. The triceps of both arms brace both quadriceps, with arms behind and feet forward. From that point on, the idea was to make small, quick movements back and forth, both circular and sideways, in the sporadic way of a real spider, or crazy like a cartoon character. As the move evolved, it began to include rolling forward or hopping on the hands while remaining in the *spider* position. But not all B.Boys could pull off these difficult moves. Representing creatures with moves like these was a creative challenge, as was trying to make the imitation convincing.

Other examples of such moves included the *roach*, the *crab*, and even a forward-to-back pushing of knees while on all fours called the *dog* or *walking the dog*. These moves were like skits—they can be thought of as a form of storytelling. Rock and freestyle dancers had already incorporated this theatrical dance-acting into their performances, and it appealed to the crowd. There were times when B.Boys would imitate specific actions, as in the case of sitting down and miming rowing across the floor in a *rowboat*. Or lying on the stomach, banging the floor with the hand, and humping the floor as in the *headache*. The *Russian* and the various borrowings from martial arts films demonstrate how this mimicry took inspiration from other art forms. In some ways, these were classic vaudevillian moves, and they made the audience laugh and react. Such performative displays are part of the endless evolution of Breaking, and an important element of the youthful exploration of mind and body that took place within the dance.

## CONCLUSION

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All of these general components and concepts of Breaking came together to create the full system of the dance as it exists today. All the current moves can be traced back, in one way or another, to these fundamentals. All B.Boys and B.Girls need to have these components somewhere within their dance vocabulary, and to have a good balance of these skills. With the incredible evolution of Breaking over the last forty years, it is important not to lose sight of the foundations of the art form.

Breaking has drawn inspiration from many other dances and many other performance genres over the years, but at its core, it has always been about the freestyle combination of these elements with style flowing through them. The sporadic, often abstract running around the body on the floor, the use of footwork, spins, air work, freezes, and top rock was unique in its time and place and content in NYC at that time. Especially,

the specific forms of circular motion footwork down on the floor—the stuff that made the news and was featured in movies—changed dance in NYC from the rock, freestyle, and funk styles that had existed previously. Footwork became the circular twisting and moving start-up process that created options for the evolved moves that came after, that is, windmills, halos, flares etc. When connected to all the other components, the dance becomes truly unique.

Early on, people drew from musical artists, athletes, movie stars, Kung Fu movies, acrobatics, gymnastics, and cartoons. As this dance has evolved, we have also infused it with inspiration from different underground dances such as African, capoeira, house, popping, locking, waacking, vogue, salsa, the hustle, swing, original jazz, Lindy Hop, and tap. While the dance has grown and evolved in communities around the world, one sees local cultural traditions, folk dances, and other artforms being incorporated, with these new contexts resulting in new movements and techniques. Personal style in Breaking, as in any art form, is key. Making sure that the foundation stays visual and strong is very important, as is maintaining the components that have built the dance as it has evolved. Some movement was purely about parody and making fun of other dance forms, animals, or pop culture to get a reaction from the audience. The context of the musical breaks of the DJ, the combining of the traditional fundamentals of Breaking with improvisational movements, and the emphasis on creativity and personal style all connect it to the elements of Hip Hop culture, and so the foundation of the dance is both a constraint and a source of endless ingenuity.

In my own journey, music has always been the main source of inspiration for me. The thing that helps me express myself and gets me to push further and try harder. When I heard the DJs cut the breaks back-to-back in my youth, I got excited. It made me want to go off to match the intensity of the drums. It challenged me to sustain my energy and push through what I had assumed were my limits. The music has always carried me beyond where I thought my abilities stopped and, through intuitively trying to connect with the mood, attitude, and emotional power of a song, I have had many happy accidents, expanding my dance vocabulary and suggesting new directions. You never know where the music can bring you, so it challenges you, in real time, to reflect back whatever feeling the music provides.

Theoretically, you can break to and be inspired by any kind of music. But, for Breaking, the beat and the break are the original and central contexts. All types of music have breaks, and we danced to it all in the 1970s and 1980s. But it was always the beat, not the melodic, harmonic, or lyrical aspects of a song (although those were important, too) that provided the groove and the energy needed for the physicality of Breaking.

We should all expect an innovative dance like Breaking to change and grow, but foundation is the definition, the master plan, and the manifesto of this dance. From this perspective we can preserve the early traditions and intention as this dance continues to evolve. Doing it your own way is actually the tradition, so you can make up your own rules and moves as long as you understand the basics. You can borrow from every other art form, dance, or sport, but style and context are the glue that brings it back to Breaking; otherwise, it is just the inspiration. Personal expression and creativity will

keep the dance alive, so I encourage experimentation and personal style as motivators in practice and theory. It is also a way to honor African American and Latino cultures by respecting the rules that were set out at the beginning of the form. Hip Hop is a full, multi-elemental artistic culture, and often “Hip Hop dance” is an umbrella term for many street dances. However, Breaking is the original Hip Hop dance, so it is important to understand the components and context to better understand how it relates to the other elements and other Hip Hop dance forms.

## NOTES

1. Dante was my best friend, member of my first crew Young City Boys, and later became my business partner, who helped open Breaklife Studios in 2005.
2. L.T.D., “Back in Love Again,” A & M Records, 1977.
3. Doze Green is a fellow member of Rock Steady Crew, and now a world-renowned visual artist.
4. Incredible Bongo Band, “Apache,” Polydor Records, 1973.
5. Herman Kelly and Life, “Dance to the Drummers Beat,” T. K. Disco, 1978.
6. Lenny Len (RCA Freakmasters/Rock Steady Crew), interview with the author, Rock Street Studios, Brooklyn, NY, September 2010.
7. Grandmaster Melle Mel (Furious 5 MCs), interview with the author, Pro-Am Event, Osaka, Japan, September 2006.
8. Sondance (Baby Spades/Rock City Crew), interview with the author, Rock Street Studios, Brooklyn, NY, March 2009.
9. Noel Angel (Latin Symbolics), Mike Dominguez “The Club Kid,” Danny Rodriguez, Papo, Enoch, Biscocho (INDs), Jose (J&R Dancers), Ron (J&R Dancers), interviews with the author, Rock Street Studios, Brooklyn, NY, September 2009– April 2011.
10. PHASE 2 interview with the author, Breaklife Studios, Brooklyn, NY, February 2006.
11. Mike Dominguez “The Club Kid,” interview with the author, Rock Street Studios, Brooklyn, NY, May 2010.
12. Sondance (Baby Spades/Rock City Crew), interview with the author, Rock Street Studios, Brooklyn, NY, November 2009.
13. Dennis Coffey and the Detroit City Guitar Band, “Scorpio,” Sussex Records, 1971.
14. Bob James, “Take Me to the Mardi Gras,” CTI, 1975.
15. John Lewis and the Monster Orchestra, “I Can’t Stop,” Sam Records, 1976.
16. The Magic Disco Machine, “Scratchin’,” Motown, 1975.
17. La Pregunta, “Shangri La,” GNP Crescendo, 1978.
18. Lil Dave (Lil Dave Rockers), interview with the author, Rock Street Studios, Brooklyn, NY, September 2009.
19. Frosty Freeze was a legendary breaking pioneer and the co-vice president of Rock Steady Crew.
20. Grandmixer DST, interview with the author, the New York City Rap Tour, November 1982.
21. Mr. Freeze (Rock Steady Crew), interview with the author, Rock Steady Park, Manhattan, 1981.
22. Kurt Thomas was an American Olympic gymnast and part-time actor from the late 1970s.

## CHAPTER 2

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# THE CAMERA IN THE CYPHER

## *High Times and Hypervisibility in Early Hip Hop Dance*

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VANESSA FLEET LAKEWOOD

### COVER STORY: BREAKING MEETS THE MEDIA

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WHEN the underground cultural phenomenon of breaking first surfaced in the mass media, its arrival was accompanied by a jarring visualization that conflated aesthetics with criminality. In the issue of April 22–28, 1981, the *Village Voice* published the first-ever article on the dance, written by performance critic Sally Banes and illustrated with photographs by Martha Cooper (Banes, 1981, 31–33). The story’s lead image features “Frosty Freeze” (Wayne Frost), a member of the Rock Steady Crew and gifted b-boy then in his late teens, rehearsing for a battle. Masking was used in the editing process to selectively hide and reveal specific elements of the picture. The background rehearsal space appears indistinct and transparent, and the wood floors had been dodged out of the frame so that the dancer appears suspended in mid-air. But the figure of Frost pops from the page in dynamic contrast to the hazy graffiti painting behind him; the dark ink of the image reveals the texture of his clothing, his concentrated expression, and the outline of his hair. Pictured in profile, Frost is in a forward lunge with his left leg extended straight in front of him, sneakered toes flexed upward, arm thrust out at shoulder height, fingers curled into a fist (see Figure 2.1). In the context of the other elements on the cover, the bold aesthetic action of this dancer takes on a slightly different meaning—one that is far less suggestive in Cooper’s unedited version of the image (see Figure 2.2). It looks like he could be fighting.

Appearing just below the paper’s main headline, “Revolt in Reagan’s Backyard,” the picture of Frost conjures a potentially threatening image of insurgency. The headline

## FILMS ON THE BORDERLINE (P. 30)

# the village VOICE

*Cockburn  
Rejects the  
Pulitzer  
(P. 18)*

VOL. XXVI No. 17 THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF NEW YORK APRIL 22-28, 1981 75c

# Revolt in Reagan's Backyard

## *Dispelling the Myth of a Reactionary Age*

By Alexander Cockburn & James Ridgeway

The conventional wisdom today is that the election of Ronald Reagan last November ratified a conservative political tendency throughout the country, which politicians can only ignore at their peril. The myth of a new reactionary age has a self-reinforcing momentum. Democrats, claiming fealty to "the spirit of the times," vie with Republicans in cost-cutting rhetoric. "New liberals" jump into bed with old conservatism.

But the evidence to back the myth is wanting. Within months of the election there are signs, in local politics, that what the voters want is not a return to 19th-century frontier politics, but effective government which will help them materially and offer a vision of the future. These were the ingredients of a political program which Jimmy Carter's Democratic Party so signally

failed to provide. (And to judge from polls on U.S. intervention in El Salvador, it does not seem that the voters much approve of resurgent cold-war adventurism either.)

An election in California last week offered an interesting inkling of what is really going on. There, in Santa Monica, a city of 100,000 wedged be-

tween the Pacific and metropolitan Los Angeles, the voters chose by a clear margin a highly progressive slate of candidates denounced by opponents as socialist agitators. The candidates came down strongly for the maintenance and indeed expansion of rent control against untrammelled development; they held their ground and final-

ly prevailed against the right on the issue of crime, with a proposition to increase financing if necessary for community protection. And they took a strong position on the poisoning of the environment with toxic substances.

The official name of the group sponsoring this victory is the Santa Monica Renters' Rights, which itself was a political coalition of four organizations: the Santa Monica chapter of the Campaign for Economic Democracy, the statewide political organization started by Tom Hayden; the Santa Monica Democratic Club; the Santa Monica Fair Housing Alliance; and the Ocean Park electoral network. The overall coalition has about 3000 members who have contributed \$5 or more.

The coalition won four seats to the Santa Monica (Continued on page 10)

### THAI SHTICK

*Mark Jacobson  
(P. 15)*

### BALI HIGHS

*Jan Hoffman  
(P. 38)*



*Physical Graffiti  
Breaking Is Hard To Do  
By Sally Banes (P. 31)*

*Sarris on  
Stanwyck  
(P. 43)*

### MAKING AGE LOOK EASY

*Rickey on  
Astaire  
(P. 44)*

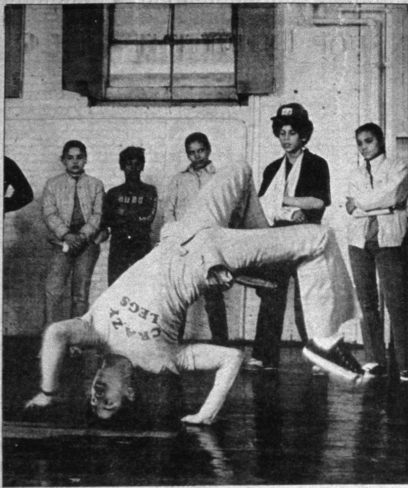
FIGURE 2.1. Frosty Freeze on the cover of the *Village Voice*, April 22-28, 1981. Courtesy of Martha Cooper.



FIGURE 2.2. Frosty Freeze with graffiti backdrop by TKid, April 1981. Common Ground studio. Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

echoes this sentiment, the word “backyard” evoking an image of enclosure, out of public sight, suggesting a boundary between the dominant order and those who are excluded from its communities.

While the cover conveys a visual message that seems to play on a mixture of readers’ assumptions and expectations, Banes’s article inside resolves the tension between physical aggression and performative action suggested in the image (see Figure 2.3). On page thirty-one, where it begins, we see four black-and-white photographs by Martha Cooper



Crazy Legs flips (left); Ty Fly, too.

## Breaking Is Hard To Do To the Beat, Y'All

By Sally Banes Photographs by Martha Cooper



Ty Fly and Freeze team up.



Crazy Legs shows Lil Crazy Legs a move.

### VOICE ARTS

Chico and Tee and their friends from 175th Street in the High Times crew were breaking in the subway and the cops busted them for fighting.

"We're not fighting. We're dancing!" they claimed. At the precinct station, one kid demonstrated certain moves: a head spin, ass spin, swipe, chin freeze, "the Helicopter," "the Baby."

An officer called in the other members of the crew, one by one. "Do a head spin," he would command as he consulted a clipboard full of notes. "Do 'the Baby.'" As each kid complied, performing on cue as unhesitatingly as a ballet dancer might toss off an enchainement, the cops scratched their heads in bewildered defeat.

Or so the story goes. But then, like ballet and like great battles (it shares elements of both), breaking is wrathed in legends. "This guy in Queens does a whole

bunch of head spins in a row, more than 10; he spins, stops real quick, spins. . . ."

"Yeah, but he stops. Left just goes right into seven spins, he never stops."

"The best is Spy, Ronnie Ron, Drago, me [Crazy Legs], Freeze, Mongo, Mr. Freeze, Lace, Track Two, Weevil. . . ."

"Spy, he's called the man with the thousand moves, he had a girl and he taught her how to break. She did it good. She looked like a guy."

"Spy, man, in '78—he was breaking at Mom and Pop's on Katona Avenue in the Bronx; he did his footwork so fast you could hardly see his feet."

"I saw Spy doing something wild in a garage where all the old-timers used to break. They had a priest judging a contest, and Spy was doing some kind of Indian dance. All of a sudden, he threw himself in the air, his hat flew up, he spun on his back, and the hat landed right on his chest. And everyone said, 'That was luck.' So he did it once more for the priest, and the hat landed right on his chest. If I didn't see it,

I would never have believed it."

The heroes of these legends are the Break Kids, the B Boys, the Puerto Rican and black teenagers who invent and endlessly elaborate this exquisite, heady blend of dancing, acrobatics, and martial spectacle. Like other forms of ghetto street culture—graffiti, verbal dueling, rapping—breaking is a public arena for the flamboyant triumph of virility, wit, and skill, in short, of style. Breaking is a way of using your body to inscribe your identity on streets and trains, in parks and high school gyms. It is a physical version of two favorite modes of street rhetoric, the taunt and the boast. It is a celebration of the flexibility and budding sexuality of the gangly male adolescent body. It is a subjective expression of bodily states, testing things that might be or are not, contrasting masculine vitality with its range of opposites: women, babies, animals, illness and death. It is a way of claiming territory and status, for yourself and for your group, your crew. But most of all, breaking is a competitive display of physical and imaginative virtuosity, a codified dance form

cum warfare that cracks open to flaunt personal inventiveness.

For the current generation of B Boys, it doesn't really matter that the Breakdown is an old name in Afro-American dance for both rapid, complex footwork and a competitive format. Or that a break in jazz means a soloist's improvised bridge between melodies. For the B Boys, the history of breaking started six or seven years ago, maybe in the Bronx, maybe in Harlem. It started with the Zulus. Or with Charlie Rock. Or with Joe, from the Casanovas, from the Bronx, who taught it to Charlie Rock. "Breaking means going crazy on the floor. It means making a style for yourself." In Manhattan, kids call it rocking. A dancer in the center of a ring of onlookers drops to the floor, circles around his own axis with a flurry of slashing steps, then spins, flips, postulates, and poses in a flood of rhythmic motion and fleeting imagery that prompts the next guy to top him. To burn him, as the B Boys put it.

Fab Five Freddy Love, a graffiti-based artist and rapper from Bedford

Continued on next page

FIGURE 2.3. Rock Steady Crew rehearsing at Common Ground. Sequence printed in the *Village Voice*, April 22–28, 1981. Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

that add context to Frost's potent freeze on the cover. These orient us more clearly inside a studio—a SoHo loft space called Common Ground—where bodies were expected to move more freely than in most public environments.

Cooper's photographs were taken at a dress rehearsal for *Aspects of Performance: Graffiti Rock*, a multifaceted exhibition and performance event that would feature a graffiti slide show and live breaking, music, and rapping. It had been organized by the artist Henry Chalfant, the photographer behind the slides, who had invited members of the Rock Steady Crew, artist/MC Fred Braithwaite (Fab 5 Freddy Love), and artist/DJ Rammellzee to participate (Lawrence 2016, 174). It was to have been, as Chalfant later claimed, "probably the first time that graffiti, breaking, rap, and DJing were connected under one roof" (quoted in Cooper 2004, 163). Such early performances and demonstrations of breaking, which were often recorded in lens-based media and involved the display of visual material, helped affirm the conceptual ties being formed between the distinct communities of breakers and graffiti writers in the movement that became known as hip hop—however artificial these ties may have been in reality (e.g., being an aerosol artist didn't automatically make one interested in rap music).

But if Cooper's rehearsal pictures positioned the reader visually and imaginatively in the Common Ground studio, the first line of Banes's (1981) article took us elsewhere, to a transit police station in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Upper Manhattan in January 1980: it is a sentence about criminal profiling: "*Chico and Tee and their friends from 175th Street in the High Times Crew were breaking in the subway when the cops busted them for fighting*" (31; emphasis added). Conjuring the kids' words, "We're not fighting, we're dancing!" Banes describes how the boys demonstrated dance moves to police officers to ostensibly prove their innocence. Together with Cooper's cover image of Frosty Freeze, Banes's secondhand account of the crew's arrest was myth-making. Narrating the illicit character of breaking, these framing devices wove a story of youthful aggression and outlawry into the origins of early hip hop dance.

Cooper, reflecting later on the significance of the *Voice* article in *Hip Hop Files: Photographs 1979–1984*, her magnum opus of hip hop photography, published some twenty-four years after the incident, rightly points out that though Chalfant played an important role as an organizer putting together a hip hop package her photos "were important in sending that out to the world" (Cooper 2004, 163). Yet the power of Cooper's photographs, their interaction with Banes's words, and the way they shaped early conceptions of the dance—as well as broader visions of a hip hop imaginary—have not been fully explored.

## HIGH TIMES AND HYPERVISIBILITY

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The circumstances and events leading to breaking's publicization and mediatization warrant further study. It is well-known that Cooper was present the night of the High Times Crew's arrest and saw some of the aftermath at the police station. She

also photographed the crew demonstrating the dance, producing the earliest known photographs of breaking.

It is important to note that those pictures—taken about fifteen months before Rock Steady’s rehearsal at Common Ground—were not the ones chosen to illustrate the *Voice* article. Nevertheless, soon after the *Voice* story broke in 1981, audiences seemed to already have a picture in their minds of young breakers being arrested, evoked by the anecdote narrated by Banes, and accompanied with a vision of Wayne “Frosty Freeze” Frost on the *Voice*’s cover). Cooper’s photographic record, as well as her written and oral accounts of this history, constitute formative documents of breaking’s arrival into public discourse. This chapter aims to unpack the significance of Cooper’s role in early conceptions of hip hop dance through an analysis of what her images revealed and where they were circulated. It also explores the broader social circumstances and photo-historical conditions that surrounded the surfacing of hip hop dance into the public discourse and mass visual media.

In considering this history and the ephemeral archive produced by its agents, this chapter will analyze themes of visibility, racialized perception, and aesthetic judgment as they align with issues of media and state power (Muñoz 1996, 16). What were the historical conditions that mediated our ability to visualize early forms of hip hop dance? And how were these historical conditions reactivated in mass-mediated discourse and hip hop’s early visual forms? To answer these questions, I examine Martha Cooper’s influence on how breaking was initially defined for outsider audiences. Starting with that night in January 1980, this chapter examines the broader circumstances that led to breaking’s emergence as visual news, as well as the impact the media had on the shaping the image of a dance once considered too violent to be an art form. In so doing, I attend to the slippages occurring between documentation, historicization, event, and experience—and the need to include the voices of subjects who appear in the research archive. I argue that lens-based media both illustrated and helped to fashion the aesthetics of outlawry that defined breaking’s early cultural formation. Tracing the diffusion and multiplication of Cooper’s images in print—as well as in the cult films *Wild Style* and *Beat Street*—the chapter explores her critical and complex role in shaping early hip hop visions.

## “NO RIOT, NO STORY”: MARTHA COOPER’S STORY AND PICTURES OF JANUARY 21, 1980

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In *Hip Hop Files*, Cooper recalls the night of the alleged subway riot. She was working for the *New York Post* as a staff photographer, and her editors sent her to a transit police station, where, she was told, a group of about twenty-five boys—some as young as ten or eleven—had been arrested for fighting.<sup>1</sup> In the station’s cramped holding area, an officer explained to Cooper that she would not be taking any pictures that night. Being

minors, he said, the boys were entitled to have their identities protected. But Cooper was coming from a daily tabloid newspaper culture, where “they didn’t care if you did anything illegal or not” to get the shot, and so she made a furtive move.<sup>2</sup> Angling the camera upward from her hip, she managed to “squeeze off [a] single frame without looking through the viewfinder,” capturing some of the boys’ downcast faces as they sat under the watchful eye of a policeman (Cooper, 2004, 70).

The black-and-white picture Cooper covertly snapped was published in the section on b-boying in Hip Hop Files. It is hard to tell just what is going on in the grainy, uncomposed picture. The subjects appear fractured and disorganized. A fluorescent light fixture cuts diagonally across the frame, reminding us of the awkward angle at which Cooper held her camera. Eclipsing the right side of the image are the blurred head and sweater-clad shoulders of a boy facing the officer in charge, who is pictured in profile, looking down at the group of youngsters barely captured in the scene. The boys appear very young, still wearing their winter jackets, waiting, and looking anxious and bored. Most of them look down, their chins tucked into coat collars or resting on their hands, and none of them watch as another officer leads one of their crew out of the room.

The story is that, eventually, some of the boys were released—the ones who had not been caught with weapons or graffiti paraphernalia. On a subway platform outside the transit police station, members of the High Times Crew demonstrated their moves for Cooper’s camera (see Figure 2.5). In the pictures, the boys stand in a semicircle and take turns getting wild on the platform floor, which is coldly illuminated by electric white light. A tiny kid in a knit sweater spins on his head and his friends break out in huge grins (uncropped versions of these photographs reveal a transit officer keeping watch on the group, smiling from behind a door).

In Cooper’s book, these images are positioned opposite a full-page photograph captioned “Cops with Confiscated Items”: a frank portrait of two White officers standing behind a table displaying paraphernalia: Marks-A-Lot and Marvy brand markers, cans of spray paint, switchblades, and a small gun (See Figure 2.4). The police had prohibited Cooper from using her camera in the holding area, but in this room, they pose willingly, holding up small weapons they had seized from the kids. One officer holds a pair of knives and stares sideways toward something beyond the frame; the other smiles slightly as he gazes into the lens, holding a pair of nunchucks. The iconography is indisputable. The White officers present themselves in their professional capacity, standing erect in crisp dark uniforms, facing the camera, projecting ease, confidence, and pride in a job well done fighting crime. The table of paraphernalia in front of them is at waist-level—a superficial extension of their bodies, displaying items seized from other bodies.

Cooper explained to her readers that when her editors at the *Post* learned there had been no riot, they were no longer interested in running the piece. “I thought this was a great story,” she explains, “so I called the *Post* editors and said, ‘They weren’t having a riot, they were having a dance contest.’ But the *Post* didn’t like that idea. No riot, no story” (Cooper 2004, 70). Although print media outlets can be powerful and fast ways of transmitting and broadcasting images, the speed at which pictures are released into the public eye will depend on “the social investment in either their dissemination or



FIGURE 2.4. Cops with items confiscated from kids. Washington Heights transit police station, January 1980. Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

occlusion” (Hill and Schwartz 2015, 8). That a group of young Latinx and Black kids were stopped and arrested because their activities were perceived as threatening was not considered unusual or even newsworthy, and so her editors were not interested in pursuing the story.

In 1980, the *New York Post* was still in the dawn of its takeover by Rupert Murdoch, a shift in leadership that had transformed the paper into a tabloid. Cooper was adamant about the paper’s decline: “[The new *Post*] was really a horrible paper, a rag of a paper,

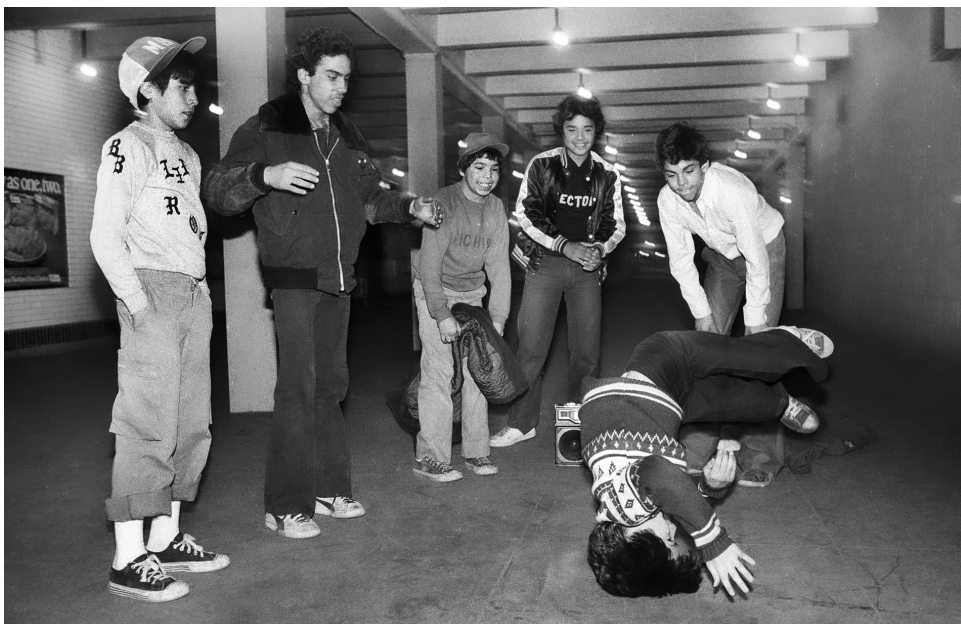


FIGURE 2.5. Kids breaking in a Washington Heights subway station, January 1980. Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

but it had a really good staff, because it had been a really *good* paper” (Cooper interview). Things had changed with the introduction of Murdoch’s ethos of daily reporting. The newspaper began featuring more sensationalized content, headlines, and visuals, and devoting less “grey space” to text (Pasadeos and Renfro 1988). “The [new] *Post* was heavily about crime, and celebrities. Those were the two main assignments” (Cooper interview). People left or got squeezed out. Her favorite photo editor, Susan Welchman, was fired—and after that, “the assignments were terrible.” Despite the good pay and benefits from her unionized position, Cooper would end up resigning later that year.

## HORIZONS OF THE PUBLISHABLE

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In the early 1980s, hip hop performance and dance entered the broader public sphere via a series of historical processes and permissions. These affected the way its aesthetics were defined for audiences and publics outside its community of practitioners and spectators. How would such images have been received? What was thought possible to publish about the subjects and communities that came together around hip hop’s early cultural formation?

Publishing is “a set of processes and relations,” Rachel Malik (2008) states in her important theoretical contribution to publication studies. These processes and relations

combine to form what the author terms “horizons of the publishable, which govern what is thinkable to publish within a particular historical moment” (709). The question of what does and does not get published, documented, and archived in the public record inevitably leads historians to consider the limits of how certain acts and actions get recorded. These questions are even more salient for historians of performance and dance, whose interpretations of bodily expressions and experiences are bound to be mediated through various spheres of public distribution and reception: in photographs, television, videos, newspaper accounts, reviews, and books, as well as in oral testimonies.

Photography historians Thierry Gervais and Gaëlle Morel (2017) have noted the ways news photography evolved through various visual styles combining words and images, arguing that twentieth-century American photojournalism was deeply shaped by an editorial model imported from Europe. For instance, Black Star, an international picture agency, was formed in 1935 in New York City by a group of photographers and publishers who had fled Germany following Hitler’s rise to power (115–116). As the field of journalism and photo-reportage professionalized, Black Star linked the services of picture editors with those of picture takers dispatched worldwide, creating a network that included Time Inc., the Associated Press, and *Life* magazine and setting the tone for news whose subjects were brought to life by innovative journalistic practices and a recognizably snapshot aesthetic of pictures taken in the field (116). As Gervais and Morel write about this period, “Producing visual stories became the goal of magazines and photographers alike” (127).

The historical developments in the professional field of photojournalism are important to consider, not only for their influence on Cooper’s training and eye, but also as a set of circumstances that made it possible for her to move her pictures into wider circulation. Born in 1943, the daughter of a camera-store owner and journalism teacher in Baltimore, Maryland, Cooper had been absorbing picture stories from an early age and began entering her own photographs in Kodak camera competitions as a teenager. She wanted to work for *Life*. To this end, after earning an art degree from Grinnell College, she got a competitive photography internship in the 1960s at *National Geographic* (the magazine’s first female intern). She then received further training at the Maine Photographic Workshop under John Loengard, the picture editor at *Life* (Cooper interview). Her mentors repeatedly emphasized that “newspapers were the way in” to more prestigious magazine work, and so Cooper started shooting for weekly papers in Rhode Island before finally making the move to New York in the 1970s, to try for “the big time.” The city, she said, “was the center of public things—everything was out of New York” (Cooper interview). Hoping to eventually work for the *New York Times*, Cooper accepted the job at the *Post* in 1977, when the paper was looking for a woman to add to its all-male photo staff. At a time when it was hugely competitive for any photographer to get a job at a daily paper, this gave Cooper an edge. As a woman, it was easier to get close to the action and gain the trust of her subjects. People never saw her as threatening (Cooper interview).

But in the mid-1970s, general news magazines were in crisis, and opportunities for jobs at mainstream publications were starting to disappear (Gervais and Morel 2017,

178). The creative energy devoted to making dramatic visual essays in glossy magazines like *Life* became downturned with the economic decline of the illustrated press. Tabloids and television broadcasting were starting to take over. Professional photographers responded to the changes by diversifying, seeking alternative forms of publication, working in various streams of visual media, and trying to publish their pictures in photographic books. . The rise of the photo-book author, “a new figure in photography,” attracted both newspaper and magazine photographers to the book market. This was the context in which Cooper worked: she was thinking and maneuvering in picture stories, with an eye to eventually publishing her own book.

Between 1977 and 1980, when she was still on staff at the *Post*, Cooper would walk the boroughs of New York City between daily assignments. She would use up her leftover roll of film by snapping photos of children playing among “abandoned buildings and rubble-strewn lots,” which, she wrote provided “raw materials and open space for improvised play” (Cooper 2006, 3). Cooper began documenting and collecting the elemental traces of young people’s vibrant street life, and this period became life-changing for her. The relationships she built with her young subjects were catalysts for her introduction and emergence into the underground art movements of graffiti writing and breaking, both of which captivated her and would remain the focus of her creative output for years. Defining her photographic practice in opposition to dominant channels of imagery in the popular press, Cooper was committed to discovering subject matter she had “never seen before” (Cooper interview), and she wanted to make the illicit actions of her young subjects *seen* as something other than an urban problem.

Later recalling her time at the *Post*, Cooper talked about the long and pointless hours she spent stationed outside a courthouse or a police station, waiting for officers to parade a suspect in front of a line of news photographers. It was boring and demotivating, and she hated standing around with other journalists instead of being out in the streets, on the hunt for pictures. “I just couldn’t be enthusiastic about the assignments anymore. I felt like I couldn’t do it.” Mid-way through 1980, Cooper eventually decided to quit her job so she would have more time to photograph the trains (Cooper interview).

On her last day, Cooper recalled, she packed up all her contact sheets, prints, and negatives, knowing their artistic and historical value. There is no question that everything started to move for Cooper after she left the *Post*, and that she became a better photographer, creating pictures for which there was no aesthetic precedent.

Cooper met Henry Chalfant in September 1980 at his solo exhibition at the OK Harris Gallery, *Graffiti in New York*. What may have started as a semicompetitive dynamic between them—they were aware of one another’s work but moved independently—evolved into a fruitful collaboration. Appreciating the challenges of the publishing market, they decided to try coauthoring a book on graffiti, rather than come out with two separate books on the same subject. Cooper and Chalfant shared a fascination with “art transit” (initially considering the term as a title), which resulted in their explosive 1984 publication *Subway Art* (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984). The historical significance of the book cannot be overstated. For their work collecting material and publishing a

photo book on graffiti at such an early time, music critic Bill Adler (2006) dubbed the pair the “mother and father” of hip hop photography (102).

While Cooper and Chalfant would not collaborate on another book project again, they remained friends and close colleagues, supportive of one another’s work. Looking through the pages of *Subway Art*, it is clear that, while Cooper and Chalfant had graffiti in common, their aesthetic leanings were not the same. Chalfant took close-up pictures of subway paintings in expressive detail, while Cooper took a longer view with her camera, catching whole-car murals on trains in good light, in places where the trains move above ground. As much as possible, Cooper wanted to capture subway murals in their full context, revealing the energy of the graffiti movement alongside the rush of the trains amidst street scenes and city scapes.

## BREAKING IS HARD TO WRITE

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In the fall of 1980, around the time she met Chalfant, when she was already freelancing, Cooper contacted Sally Banes, a PhD student in New York University’s Department of Graduate Drama. A mutual friend had put the two in touch. Cooper asked Banes if she would be interested in writing an article on a new kind of dance.

The *Village Voice*, a left-leaning, alternative weekly paper, would be the outlet for the article. It was a different kind of paper than the *Post*, the once-decent daily tabloid. For instance, the same year Cooper got her start in New York, the *Voice* hired Bill Bernstein (who also worked for Black Star) as a staff photographer, later sending him on assignment to Studio 54 and opening the channels of mainstream journalism to his iconic and transgressive images of the city’s nightlife and club scenes. The *Voice* is also where Michele Wallace started publishing her early Black feminist criticism and writing in the 1970s. The *Voice* prioritized more diverse, creative, and experimental forms in its coverage of the city’s events, and was a fitting venue for the breaking story.

Working with Banes as the writer of the piece made sense to Cooper, who was not confident in her own writing. She found the dance difficult to describe, telling her collaborator that it featured “solo performance with wild acrobatics and poses” (Banes 1986, 11). They got right to work. Using the names and phone numbers Cooper had collected from the High Times members in January, the two women tracked down some of the boys for an informal interview and demonstration. They were now reluctant to dance (claiming to have moved on to roller disco), but they were willing to talk about the art form they had been a part of creating: “Breaking means going crazy on the floor. It means making a style for yourself” (Banes 1981, 31). During this exploratory conversation, Cooper managed to snap some photographs of their moves. However, the pictures were awkward and aesthetic failures, and she needed more visual and contextual material to round out the story she and Banes were writing. The challenge would be to find a community of breakers who might open up their circle to this pair of aesthetic outsiders.

It was breaking's connection to the graffiti art scene that made this possible. In Steven Hager's book *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History*, Henry Chalfant remembers that he and Cooper had been comparing notes on graffiti for some time, when "one day she showed me a photo she'd taken of a break dancer" (quoted in Hager 1984, 86). Cooper had been talking about her old *Post* days and recalling her encounter with the High Times group. Chalfant had not seen anything like it before. His interest was especially piqued by the graffiti paraphernalia the police had found on the boys. As a result, he began probing the writers who would come by his studio about the dance. Promising to deliver the best, a young writer and breaker named Take 1 brought Frost, Crazy Legs, Ty Fly, and Lil Crazy Legs of the Rock Steady Crew into the studio. This facilitated Cooper's formal introduction to the breakers. Cooper had directed Chalfant's attention to breaking's underground existence, and his connections to the graffiti community would help move the dance into a wider public view.

Together, Chalfant and Cooper, along with Banes, acted as both documentarians and organizers of early expressions of hip hop. Their introduction to the Rock Steady Crew led to the planning of the *Graffiti Rock* event at Common Ground featuring the projected slide show exhibition of Chalfant's graffiti photographs and the staged battle by the dance crew. The boys divided themselves into two fictional crews and dressed in coordinating t-shirts displaying their names in iron-on lettering. In this way, *Graffiti Rock* can be understood in the context of other contemporary events and performances that sought to define a unified vision of what hip hop culture was and who was part of it. Some organizers and promoters, such as Michael Holman—who credits himself for putting on the first downtown show assembling all-live hip hop elements—acknowledged the potential artifice in such performances, suggesting, "We were toying with evolution" (quoted in Lawrence 2016, 177). While there was an element of fabrication to the work of Banes, Chalfant, and Cooper in the *Graffiti Rock* staging, it is also true they were following the aesthetic expressions of the young people involved in creating the culture.

In Banes's article, *Graffiti Rock* "was written up as something you could go to," Cooper explained (quoted in Holman 1984, 142), and it was scheduled to open on Sunday May 3, 1981, with two additional dates. But then Chalfant's show was suddenly canceled by the venue's owner, who feared that escalating tensions between Rock Steady and other neighborhood groups at the time would erupt into "gang warfare." But even though the event never happened, Cooper's photographs of the dress rehearsal would have a long public life as illustrations to the foundational article.

The piece in this history around gang violence is almost hard to believe, given the general wholesomeness of Cooper's images, which show members of Rock Steady practicing flips, windmills, and top rocking as their friends look on. Shooting from a low angle near the floor, Cooper captured the experience of spectating near the action of the dancers while also revealing the bright open surroundings of the rehearsal space. Visually speaking, she helped the esoteric and sometimes bewildering movements of breaking look appealing to a broader public, presenting the dance as accessible and fun, with a raw street edge.

The title of Banes's article in the *Voice*, "Physical Graffiti: Breaking Is Hard to Do," relates breaking's stylistic imperatives to those of graffiti—whose negative associations with vandalism, a deteriorating transit system, and ghetto culture—would have resonated for contemporary readers. Yet the article itself was the first to center the experiences of breakers, or "B Boys," as Banes called them. She did more than simply explore what breaking is and who does it. Like Cooper, she was enthusiastic about the dance and serious about its analysis, offering insights into movement vocabulary, musical influences, and ethnic and cultural references. Banes also connected breaking to historic freedom practices, writing that "the Breakdown is an old name in Afro-American dance for both rapid, complex footwork and a competitive format." Cooper and Banes completed the article with interviews of young practitioners and aerosol artists who were involved in hip hop, such as Fab 5 Freddy and Rammellzee.

The *Village Voice* article is important for many reasons, yet there are pieces around it that are confusing and appear inconsistent. From a framing standpoint, it made sense for Banes to write about the night of the High Times Crew's arrest—and it would keep the narrative faithful to Cooper's experience as an outsider called to the scene expecting to meet and report on a gang of young people involved in social disruption and unrest. But apart from a credit for her photographs of the Common Ground rehearsal, Martha Cooper's name is not mentioned in Banes's article. This is a strange omission, given that the former's work as a photojournalist is widely acknowledged elsewhere in the history.

Although the pictures Cooper took that January night were not used in Banes's article, they gained currency and mythic status through their retelling and reconstruction in hip hop history and its broader imaginary. For instance, Holman's (1984) recounting of the events erroneously suggested that the pictures of the arrested boys are the ones featured in the piece:

Sally Banes' article in *The Village Voice* in 1981 [was] about photographer Martha Cooper covering breakdancers in the subway who were arrested, then released when Martha Cooper identified what it was they were doing, not fighting but break-dancing. Martha Cooper's photographs which were meant for the *Post* were rejected but were picked up by the *Village Voice* and gave new light and new life to break-dancing in spring of 1981. (69)

Despite Holman's mischaracterization, his account is noteworthy for how it closely follows the initial rejection of Cooper's story by the *Post* and the subsequent hook that "gave new light" to the dance once the article finally surfaced, written in collaboration with Banes and published by the *Voice*. Steven Hager (1984) was also impressed by how a single quote in the article—"not fighting, but dancing"—seemed to break through the publishing barrier that had excluded early forms of hip hop arts:

Although it was still nearly impossible to publish articles on graffiti and rap music, both of which seemed to be universally hated by magazine editors, breaking had an immediate appeal for the national press, possibly because a quote in the *Voice* credited the dance with replacing fighting as an outlet for urban aggression . . . The