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THE BIRTH OF BREAKING

HIP HOP HISTORY FROM THE FLOOR UP

SEROUJ "MIDUS" APRAHAMIAN

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Hip-Hop History from the Floor Up

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On November 3, 2015, b-boy Richard “Crazy Legs” Colon posted a video on his Facebook page featuring MC KRS-One, DJ Afrika Bambaataa, Zulu Nation co-founder Ahmed Henderson, and himself discussing the need for clarity in hip-hop history. Given the critique these figures were receiving about their portrayal of the past, as well as the growing attention hip-hop history was getting from educational and state institutions, they decided to have a “meeting of the minds,” as they put it, to set the record straight about hip-hop’s beginnings. I had just begun my PhD on breaking history at York University when I saw this video and was immediately intrigued by its public message.

What struck me more than the content of the video, however, was a comment written on Crazy Legs’ Facebook post by a person going under the name “Firstwave Writers.” Their profile was a black and white picture of Bela Lugosi as Dracula and their comment read like a long, piercing manifesto against the myths pervading hip-hop history. Opening with the word “PERSPECTIVE,” in all caps, the commentor pointed out how everyone has a right to their own perspective but that each opinion must be evaluated according to the facts and evidence surrounding the topic. The lack of such delineation among hip-hop practitioners and researchers is why so much must be put back into perspective, opined the commentator. Given the colorful analogies, poignant examples, and creative wordplay that was used, I almost immediately knew that the person behind the post was none other than hip-hop pioneer PHASE 2.

I had followed PHASE 2’s interviews and writings on aerosol art, breaking, and music since I was a teenager. He was always offering important insights about the culture, often speaking directly from his personal experiences and contributions. Even more importantly, though, he spoke out against dominant

narratives in hip-hop history and offered blistering critiques of sources that everybody else seemed to unquestioningly revere, such as Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style* (1983) film or Jeff Chang's book *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*. I found it strange how most people seemed to either ignore or overlook the very apt and substantial criticisms he raised. When I saw this critical comment under Crazy Legs' post being similarly overlooked, I messaged the account to try and touch base with him.

After a few hours, he messaged me back and, although he did not directly acknowledge that it was him, we began corresponding about the issues surrounding hip-hop's historicization. Over the next several months, me and PHASE 2 kept in regular contact and I told him about my research as it developed. In turn, he openly shared stories about virtually every aspect of the culture I could think of, giving incredible insights that were almost always substantiated when I looked further into them. I also met him in New York on several occasions and maintained close correspondence with him up until his passing in December 2019. Although he would likely not have wanted me to acknowledge him—he was too humble and private for that—I would be remiss if I did not credit the impact PHASE 2 had on my questioning and understanding of hip-hop history. The fact that we met through a social media post about the culture's origins, and the fact that he passed away before I was able to complete my dissertation, also encapsulates the broader, urgent context behind this study.

Along these lines, I want to thank the other pioneers who I was able to interact with for my research, namely the Legendary Twins, GrandMixer DXT, COCO 144, Shakey Shake, and Pee Wee Dance, as well as the many practitioners who have spoken about their early experiences with documentarians such as Troy L. Smith, JayQuan, Davey D, Pete Nice, Sureshot La Rock, MichaelWayneTV, Disco Daddy, Mr. Biggs, DJ Kay Slay, Norin Rad, TheBeeShine, Pluto (TBB), Profo Won, and Nemesis. I utilized these sources of information just as much as I did the early hip-hop content featured in more formal archives such

as The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Cornell Hip Hop Collection, Museum of Popular Culture, Fordham University Bronx African American History Project, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Getty Research Institute, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

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1

Detecting Breaking's Beginnings

"Give credit where it's due."[1] This simple principle garnered headlines in the summer of 2021, when African American dancers protested their lack of recognition on TikTok. "THIS APP WOULD BE NOTHING WITHOUT [BLACK] PEOPLE,"[2] wrote Erick Louis, the organizer of the protest, pointing out that most TikTok influencers gained popularity by doing young people of color's choreography. Recording artists have also benefited from such content, as viral dances to rap songs have generated numerous hits. Yet the creators of these dances—not to mention the communities they come from—were rarely given proper acknowledgment on the app, prompting users to withhold their choreographic labor.

While the #BlackTikTokStrike generated a considerable amount of media attention and forced the tech platform to issue a statement in support of Black creatives, a similar process of erasure has quietly been taking place for decades in what is perhaps the most widely practiced dance in the world today: breaking. Despite its over fifty years of existence and recent estimates placing the number of b-boys ("break-boys") and b-girls ("break-girls") between 1 and 30 million,[3] the African American founders of this influential art form have not only been denied credit for their choreography, they have been expunged from modern memory.

Beginning with scholarship in the 1990s, an academic consensus emerged suggesting that *Latinos* shaped and dominated breaking from its earliest inception, despite the fact that researchers a decade prior had acknowledged that it was created by "primarily young Black kids."[4] Many commentators and practitioners similarly began associating breaking with Puerto Ricans in New York, even though the latter credited African Americans for founding the form. For instance, in the documentary *The Freshest Kids* (2002), Richard "Crazy Legs" Colón, from the well-known Rock Steady Crew, openly stated that, "A lot of people used to call it [breaking] … like, you know, *moreno* means Black [in Spanish] … they'd say 'That's that *moreno* style.' And that's the original style of b-boying."[5] His contemporary Kenneth "Ken Swift" Gabbert similarly explained that "The first times that I had seen it [breaking], it was the brothas, you know … brothas was doing it. I didn't see any Latinos or Hispanics doing it."[6] Going back even earlier, Rock Steady Crew co-founder Santiago "JoJo" Torres insisted that breaking "was mostly dominated by the Blacks"[7] in the 1970s, while his contemporary Luis "Trac 2" Mateo affirmed that "the jams back then were still close to 90% Afro-American, as were most of the earliest B-boys."[8] Such countervailing testimonies are widespread but nevertheless ignored by most scholars and commentators, leading to a profound ignorance of the names, movement styles, and motivations behind early breaking. Just as some influencers on TikTok have attempted to acknowledge Black dancers for their choreography, only to be placed above them on the app's algorithms, the academic literature on hip-hop history has rendered breaking's African American founders largely undetectable.

In addition to preventing any reasonable understanding of the dance's beginnings, such "invisibilization"[9] has skewed popular understanding of hip-hop history, overall. By "hip-hop," I am referring to the cultural movement that arose in the Bronx during the 1970s, encompassing breaking, DJing, MCing, and, more tangentially, aerosol art.[10] Everything from the percussive soundtrack of the movement (widely referred to today as *break*beats) to its

fashion, terminology, organizational impetus, and turntable innovations was informed by breaking, and dancing more generally. Yet hip-hop scholars have either neglected dancing in their historical treatments or relied on Latino practitioners to contextualize breaking history.[11] In a manner reminiscent of early writings on the blues, jazz, rock 'n' roll, and disco, this disregard for dance and primary research in hip-hop history has, in the words of scholar Samir Meghelli, led to the proliferation of countless "myths and unexamined assumptions."[12]

This book aims to address the dual obfuscation of breaking and hip-hop history by taking an in-depth look at the experiences and perspectives of founding African American b-boys and b-girls from the Bronx during the 1970s. As part of this process, I investigate how breaking's structure and movement vocabulary came to be, especially as it relates to its early stages of upright dancing, followed by transitions to the floor, and, eventually, prolonged floor movements using, first, the hands and feet and, eventually, dynamic spins and combinations using all parts of the body. What was the relationship between these aesthetic developments and other forms of expression within early hip-hop? Did breaking inherit any features from previous African American forms or was it a radical departure altogether? What were the primary institutional settings in which the dance was conceived and developed? What were the artistic influences, worldviews, and motivations informing breaking's founders and their audiences? How did practitioners approach social classifications such as race, class, age, and gender within the dance? What relation did breaking's emergence and expansion have with broader socioeconomic developments in New York during the 1970s? Did ethnic communities who adopted the dance have to negotiate issues of culture and identity? Although previous scholars have looked at these issues in relation to breaking history, none have done so in detail or outside the bounds of the Latino domination narrative.

Although Latinos and other ethnicities eventually contributed a great deal to breaking's growth, I demonstrate in this book how it was African American

youth in the Bronx who almost exclusively birthed and cultivated the dance during its formative years. To truly understand the dance's early influences, aesthetics, terminology, musical canon, and institutional expansion, we must turn our attention to what John Langston Gwaltney has called "core black culture"[13]: expressive attitudes and communicative practices emanating from working-class African American communities. My investigation, therefore, focuses on the latter community with the aim of enhancing our understanding of the movement's history, as opposed to demarcating claims over cultural ownership and authenticity. Like most practitioners around the world, I revere the multicultural ethos that breaking is known for today and believe that appreciating this ethos requires understanding the experiences and perspectives of the African American b-boys and b-girls who gave the dance life. Indeed, contrary to the widespread misconception that hip-hop emerged out of the "polycultural social construct of New York City,"[14] I will show how the eventual "cross-fertilization" that breaking experienced was itself a product of the seeds that were planted and tilled within the African American community.

At the same time, I argue that breaking was the primary factor in shaping hip-hop's development during the early- to mid-1970s. MCing had not yet come to the fore during this period and the musical choices of DJs were largely informed by the embodied expressions of *b-boys and b-girls*. Many of hip-hop's leading pioneers were themselves former breakers who transitioned from dance circles at parties to microphones and stages. In this way, hip-hop was a continuation of a long-held African American tradition of producing music and movement in tandem. As the renowned novelist Zora Neal Hurston noted nearly ninety years ago, African American culture has historically been conceived through the combination of movement and music in autonomous dance spaces—which she called "jooks." I will demonstrate how her contention that, "Musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America,"[15] holds just as much relevance for hip-hop as it did for the blues and jazz.

Indeed, building off of Hurston's work and that of dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, I contend that the "jook continuum"[16] of underground clubs, community events, and repurposed domestic spaces in the Bronx provided the institutional apparatus in which hip-hop was incubated. Since few scholars have attended to these spaces and their associated dance practices, let alone their African American founders, this study inevitably unsettles years of misinformation that has accumulated around hip-hop's birth.

More importantly, the obfuscation of breaking's beginnings has perpetuated a disturbing, yet seemingly unrelenting, cycle of erasing African American cultural contributions. As will be discussed below, the factors behind this erasure are complex, but their effect has been to perpetuate the marginalization of working-class African American life. Several pioneering b-boys and b-girls have, like their counterparts in the TikTok sphere, understandably expressed frustration with such marginalization. For example, Cholly Rock from the influential Zulu Kings breaking group laments how, "Some of the people you got talking weren't there!" in reference to Latino practitioners who are held up as founders of the dance. "And for Rock Steady, they didn't invent nothing. They were just in the right place at the right time and they picked up where we left off."[17] Another early African American b-boy GrandMixer DXT similarly criticizes the skewed historicization of hip-hop, insisting that, "Ninety-nine percent of those books that people are getting their degrees from are inaccurate."[18] He has called on hip-hop historians to "rescind" their doctorates due to them being grounded in "invalid" research. One can feel a deep sense of offence in such sentiments, which are common among early practitioners. Like African American artists before them, they have watched their contributions go unaccounted for, while countless individuals around the world have benefited from their innovations. Rectifying this erasure and incorporating their perspectives into the documentary record are, therefore, not only a matter of enhancing intellectual understanding, but also a matter of historical responsibility.

Understanding Erasure

After nearly half a century of existence and numerous studies being done on hip-hop history, how is it possible that breaking's African American founders have been erased from modern memory? This is a common, and very logical, question posed in response to the claim I am putting forth. It is also an important issue to unpack before delving into breaking's beginnings, both to address how the past has been obscured and to, hopefully, remedy some of the factors behind its obfuscation.

In the first-ever article written about breaking, performance critic Sally Banes identified what has, in my view, been the central problem plaguing histories of the dance: lack of primary information. "Breaking is wreathed in legends,"[19] she warned readers of her 1981 *Village Voice* feature before conveying what seemed to be inconclusive and contradictory accounts of the dance's origins. Although Banes provided insightful commentary on the breaking performances she witnessed, her writings were centered almost exclusively on the Rock Steady Crew, a group based in Upper Manhattan and made up of young Latino and African American—and even a Franco-Jewish—practitioners. Despite being in New York at the height of the dance's popularity, she could not find any other sources of information and, even several years later, maintained that breaking's "early history wasn't documented … it lives on only in memories and has taken on mythological form."[20]

Her contemporary, journalist Steven Hager, similarly complained about the difficulty of tracking down information on breaking history. "It is not an easy voyage," he conceded in the prologue to his influential study of hip-hop. "Little documentation exists and many of those who have 'made it' today seem reluctant to give credit to those who have preceded them."[21] Although Hager conducted interviews with several important early breakers, he pointed out that few researchers were willing to travel "well inside the ghetto"[22] where

such activities took place. This latter point proved to be crucial, as the dance's birthplace of the Bronx was one of the most vilified neighborhoods in the United States at the time. Skewed perceptions of the borough as ruined and dangerous kept many researchers from setting foot there, as can be seen by the fact that Banes' writings focused almost exclusively on the Rock Steady Crew's performances in SoHo, the East Village, and more affluent areas of Manhattan.[23] The lack of information that resulted was likely associated with the fear of venturing into working-class communities of color.

Class and racially charged stereotypes also permeated early narratives disseminated about breaking. As art historian Vanessa Fleet Lakewood has noted, Banes' inaugural article depicted the dance as an expression of "outlawry,"[24] with images of aggressive gestures featured alongside headlines that read "Physical Graffiti" and "Revolt in Reagan's Backyard." In addition, Banes put forward depictions of police arresting breakers, claims that competition "erupts into fighting for real," and characterizations of the dance as a "ritual combat that transmutes aggression into art."[25] In the media craze that soon followed, journalists and commentators similarly claimed that breaking emerged as "the answer to the boredom and gang fights of the 1970s"[26] and that its participants would "fight with steps rather than with weapons."[27] Again, many of these reporters did not travel to the Bronx to do research but, rather, relied on preexisting narratives and prevailing stereotypes. As Banes' colleague, photographer Martha Cooper, explains:

> Sally had some line in that original *Voice* article about, "We're dancing instead of fighting" … We always knew who was copying Sally's article cause that line, as a quote, appeared again and again and again and again, in variations in different articles about breakdancing. We knew that they hadn't really gone out and found the kids and done their own research.[28]

Hager similarly positioned hip-hop as a response to criminality, claiming that the movement's founders had "taken the violence out of the gang wars"[29]

through artistic expression. Although his important interviews with pioneering breakers such as PHASE 2, Keith and Kevin Smith, GrandMixer DXT, and members of the Rockwell Association did not suggest *any connection to gangs*, he nevertheless maintained this sensationalized narrative and echoed Banes in claiming that breaking began as an "aggressive pastime—a form of combat as well as dance."[30]

Unfortunately, as academic interest in rap music grew in the 1990s and 2000s, it was precisely this distorted media coverage from the 1980s that was used to contextualize breaking. While most scholars assumed that the dance had died, simply because it was no longer visible in the mainstream media, the few researchers who did discuss its history, once again, relied on preexisting narratives rather than primary research.[31] Banes was particularly privileged as a reliable source of information, despite the fact that she was (to her credit) quite up-front about the limitations of her findings. In addition, when scholars conducted historical interviews, it was overwhelmingly with the same group who appeared in her writings: the Rock Steady Crew.[32] As a result, the same "legends" and "mythological" accounts Banes qualified in her work began reappearing in scholarly texts.

Curiously, however, Hager's interviews with some of breaking's African American founders have been consistently ignored by hip-hop historians. To this day, the valuable testimony he gathered from pioneering breakers and his observation that Latinos adopted the dance from African Americans does not appear in *any* academic texts, although his discussions of gangs, rap music, aerosol art, and the socioeconomic context of the Bronx are commonly cited in these same studies.[33] Robert Farris Thompson's early acknowledgment that breaking was "invent[ed] in the South Bronx by black dancers, circa 1975," is similarly overlooked by most scholars,[34] as is Michael Holman's description of breaking's African American beginnings in the Bronx[35] and Banes' insistence that the dance's "basic building blocks are moves from the Afro-American repertory."[36] This consistent pattern of oversight is reminiscent of

Black choreographers on TikTok being bypassed in favor of the non-Black influencers their dancing has inspired, with early references to breaking's African American founders remaining largely absent from the academic algorithm.

At the same time, a scholarly consensus emerged in the 1990s suggesting that, while rap was "dominated by English-speaking blacks," breaking was "heavily shaped and practiced by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities."[37] This position became an important part of Paul Gilroy's famous "Black Atlantic" thesis, with breaking being positioned as the Latino strain of hip-hop's "cross-fertilization."[38] Other scholars such as Juan Flores maintained that breaking emerged "largely from developments in Latin dance styles," pointing to Puerto Rican members of the Rock Steady Crew during the 1980s as founding figures.[39] This Latino origin narrative has, in fact, become so prominent that, even in the face of contrary evidence—and at the cost of concealing breaking's African American founders—scholars of various backgrounds have consistently maintained it. For example, in his influential book on hip-hop history, Nelson George acknowledges that the "first break dancers … were overwhelmingly African American" but insists that it was Puerto Rican teenagers who made a "durable contribution" to the dance.[40] He argues that breaking "came and went" in the African American community and the idea that the latter created hip-hop on their own is an "appealing origin myth."[41] Joseph C. Ewoodzie similarly quotes pioneers explaining that "the first generation of b-boys were all black"[42] but goes on to argue that breaking is "a Puerto Rican entity."[43] As I reveal throughout this book, such conclusions are inaccurate and unsubstantiated. They contradict the very testimony these authors are themselves quoting.

Nevertheless, it is my view that these claims are maintained so as not to disturb the noble discourse that hip-hop was a product of multicultural co-creation. The mediated depictions of the dance in the 1980s—when breaking had already expanded ethnically—bolstered such a discourse, as did many

authors around the world who utilized this history to bestow legitimacy on non-African American practitioners.[44] At the same time, many commentators in the 1990s downplayed breaking's African American roots and emphasized Latino contributions as a way of countering what they deemed to be the exclusionary practices of the rap music industry. For instance, Flores' claim that Latinos spawned breaking was part of his broader critique that "the Latin creators are conspicuously absent" from mainstream representations of rap music.[45] Raquel Rivera also explained that she was interested in breaking because it "remained more class-identified (ghetto-identified) than African American-identified" by the media in the 1980s, in comparison to the rap music industry's presentation of hip-hop as strictly "a Black thing."[46] Early Latino practitioners similarly complained that their historical authenticity was questioned in the commercial realm, as when Rock Steady Crew member Mr. Wiggles states, "You know, you always get the misconception when you look a rap video that it's all black people … No, it wasn't all black people,"[47] or when b-boy Anthony "MAEZ" Colon is quoted as saying Latinos "got omitted" and "pushed out" of hip-hop history.[48] Such critiques of the one-dimensional depictions of rap music are very common among practitioners, demonstrating the extent to which notions of history shape entanglements over cultural ownership and belonging in the present.[49]

Even within the international breaking community, such historical questions are often fraught with struggles over authenticity and entitlement. As dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson has argued, many practitioners fear that acknowledging the African American beginnings of the dance will be used to override the inclusive ethos of the art form. "The underlying question is, 'If b-boying is a black dance (because of its African 'origins') then how do we account for its diverse cultural make-up today'?" she writes.[50] In his study of the modern breaking scene in New York, Joseph G. Schloss similarly asks, "Why is it important that b-boying should be credited to one and only one ethnic group?" and then goes on to argue that "b-boying traces its roots to Brooklyn

Latinos."[51] Although Schloss acknowledges that, "The conventional narrative among dancers is that b-boying was invented by African Americans,"[52] he does not quote or feature any early African American practitioners in his book. This might be partly due to the fact that some of the breakers he featured began to downplay the role of African Americans in the dance by the time Schloss carried out his fieldwork in the 2000s—despite being on record in the 1990s crediting them for their contributions. For example, in a 1996 letter to a hip-hop magazine, Richard "Crazy Legs" Colón criticized the publication for neglecting breaking's African American founders when he wrote, "Why didn't you interview any of the Zulu Kings or the Niggah Twins or even Kool Herc, who was an original B-boy that would've dropped more bombs than the U.S. did in Iraq?"[53] However, more recently, Colón has echoed the academic consensus that African Americans did not make a durable contribution to breaking in the 1970s and has, instead, insisted that it was Latinos who shaped the form as we know it today.[54] The scholarly narrative that Latinos dominated breaking, combined with heightened battles over ethnic entitlement in the new millennium, may have also conditioned this somewhat schizophrenic discourse, where people tacitly acknowledged the African American beginnings of breaking but later changed course or refused to engage with its founders, despite the historical contradictions and gaps in knowledge that result.

All of this suggests that, rather than being a careless oversight, the neglect of breaking's African American founders has been driven by a complex set of factors stemming from the pernicious legacy of racism and class demonization in the United States. For instance, the general neglect of breaking, and other dance styles, in hip-hop studies is part of a broader Western tradition of devaluing non-theatrical forms of embodied expression, and privileging text-based approaches to thought and analysis. Similarly, the absence of first-hand information on breaking in the 1980s and the reluctance of researchers to travel to the Bronx was tied to dominant stereotypes of the urban poor as