GOING OFF! THE UNTOLD STORY OF BREAKING'S BIRTH

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Abstract

When breaking first emerged in The Bronx, New York, of the 1970s, it was a dance practiced almost exclusively by African American teenagers. Yet, most scholarly accounts of the dance have focused on Latino/a youth and media narratives from the 1980s onwards to contextualize the form. As a result, much like jazz, rock 'n roll, or disco dancing before it, one can refer to dominant discourse on breaking today and find almost no mention of the African Americans who ushered it in.

I address this invisibilization of breaking's African American founders by analyzing the overlooked accounts and experiences of its earliest practitioners from the 1970s. Utilizing a wide array of non-traditional primary sources, untapped archival material, first-hand interviews, and movement analysis, I offer a revisionist account of the social dynamics and systemic factors that led to the creation of breaking as a distinctly working-class African American expression and its subsequent marginalization and misrepresentation in academia.

Given the significant discrepancy between the testimony of pioneering breakers and what has been reproduced in academic writings, I also utilize such testimonies to disrupt prevailing assumptions within the field of hip-hop studies. As part of this process, I emphasize the largely overlooked role breaking played in shaping hip-hop's musical development, as well as the impact youth socialization and alternative identity formation had on the culture's emergence. Central to this research is my contention that the non-normative aesthetics and principles of early hip-hop practices were shaped by the underground, working-class dance spaces in which the movement arose, forming part of a broader tradition of cultivating expression within the African American jook continuum.

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Chapter One

"Nobody's Heard the Story from the Basement": Uncovering Breaking's Beginnings

Breaking is one of the most widely practiced dance forms in the world today, with an estimated one million participants (Ball, 2020). In virtually every major city across the globe, one can find b-boys and b-girls[1] performing together in a transnational network of shared tastes and aesthetic practices (Fogarty, 2006). With growing numbers of adherents in the developing world especially (Sjöberg, 2014), breaking and its associated forms of hip-hop[2] dance, music, fashion, and art have become defining features of global mass culture (Osumare, 2007). Indeed, even established institutions such as the International Olympics Committee have recently sought to leverage breaking's appeal by adding the dance to their 2024 Summer Olympic Games (Keh, 2019).

Yet, despite its worldwide popularity and nearly five decades of existence, most scholarly accounts of breaking have neglected the African Americans who founded it. Although some early popular researchers acknowledged that breaking was created by "primarily young Black kids" in The Bronx[3] of the 1970s (Holman, 1984, p. 53), most scholars today have concentrated on figures from the 1980s to contextualize the dance's history. However, because breaking was already a prevalent multicultural practice by that decade, numerous misconceptions have developed from this chronologic leap, including the notion that hip-hop, as a whole, grew out of

[1] The terms b-boy ("break-boy") and b-girl ("break-girl") refer to practitioners of breaking and were originally coined by the widely acknowledged "founding father" of hip-hop, DJ Kool Herc (Israel, 2002).
[2] Hip-hop is a cultural movement that arose in The Bronx, New York, in the early 1970s. Its founding practices include DJing (music), breaking (dance), MCing (poetry), and, more tangentially, style writing (aerosol art). I employ the term "hip-hop" in accordance with this original cultural meaning, not simply as a euphemism for rap music, as is often the case in contemporary writings on the topic (see Dimitriadis, 1999).
[3] I capitalize the "T" in "The Bronx," in accordance with what borough historian Lloyd Ultan has argued is its proper spelling (Slattery, 2014).

the "cross-fertilization" of ethnic communities living in New York (Flores, 1993, p. 27; Gilroy, 1993, p. 103; Rivera, 2003, p. 43). Indeed, most scholars have even suggested that breaking was originally founded and dominated by Latino/as[4] (Flores, 1993, p. 28; Rose, 1994, p. 21, fn. 4; Schloss, 2009, p. 153). This chronological confusion has, in the words of early b-boy and hip-hop DJ GrandMixer DXT, "put the dots out of focus" (TheBeeShin, 2013), skewing not only the understanding of how breaking emerged but also how it expanded and overcame considerable social obstacles. For instance, the "cross-fertilization" which eventually did take place in the late 1970s and early 1980s was preceded by nearly a decade of seeds being planted and tilled in the breaking movement. It did not simply grow out spontaneously from the "polycultural social construct of New York City" (Hoch, 2006, p. 351). Thus, acknowledging the African Americans who set the groundwork for breaking and its associated forms of expression is critical for gaining a deeper understanding of the aesthetics and sociocultural processes undergirding hip-hop's development. More importantly, overcoming this neglect is essential if scholars hope to reverse the disturbing, yet seemingly unrelenting, cycle of "invisibilizing"[5] African American contributions to modern dance practices (DeFrantz, 2012; Dixon Gottschild, 1996).

It should also be said that this troubling historic cycle is not confined solely to scholarship. It exists within the contemporary breaking scene, as well. As a dancer who has been

[4] I use the term "Latino/a" to refer to individuals and communities who trace their origins to Latin America, as opposed to the term "Hispanic," which connotes cultural derivation from Spain. Although practitioners sometimes use these terms interchangeably, I have chosen to maintain the former label in my writing when not quoting someone directly. In addition, practitioners also sometimes use the term "Puerto Rican" to refer to early Latino/a practitioners, given that this former community made up most of those who adopted the dance within New York. However, it is important to note that there were also b-boys and b-girls of Dominican, Cuban, Colombian, and other Latin American cultural descent. Finally, despite the growing use of the term "Latinx" in higher education and activist spaces, I refrain from using it in this study mainly because I have not seen the practitioners I cite themselves employ it. For varying points of view regarding these terms in the Latino/a community, see Reichard (2017), Salinas Jr. (2020), and Torres (2018).

[5] This word was coined by dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996) in her study of the systematic omission of Africanist influences in modern American dance practices (p. 1).

involved in this scene since the late 1990s,[6] I have found that most practitioners today know very little about the names, movement styles, experiences, and perspective of breaking's African American founders. Such information is not so much suppressed as it is left unattended. Although leading figures within the breaking community regularly acknowledge that the early years of the dance were "mostly dominated by the Blacks" (Fricke & Ahearn, 2002, p. 112) and that "the jams back then were still close to 90% Afro-American" (Veran, 1996, p. 47), direct exposure to the testimony and movement vocabulary of these early practitioners is almost nonexistent. In fact, I can only recall *two* occasions in my over two decades of involvement in the international breaking scene in which a pioneering African American dancer was invited to judge, speak, or perform at a major competition,[7] and this is in a dance scene where notions of "tradition" and "authenticity" have a profound impact on the way b-girls and b-boys perform (Fogarty, 2010; Schloss, 2009). Given the general neglect of breaking's founders, such notions of tradition are often culled, once again, from individuals who gained prominence during the 1980s commercialization of the dance. In this regard, the following metaphor from pioneering DJ Grandmaster Flash applies just as much to breaking as it does to hip-hop music, more generally: "Too many times, people are hearing the story from the second floor. Nobody's heard the story from the basement" (Light, 2016, para. 8).

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[6] I have been involved in breaking since 1997, gaining notoriety (under the moniker "Midus") around the world for my unique approach and contributions to the dance. Originally from the greater Los Angeles area, I have been featured in several prominent VHS tapes, DVDs, and online breaking videos, as well as taken part in competitions and taught classes throughout the United States, Europe, Russia, and Asia. I also currently remain active as a member of the Style Elements Crew—a group widely credited for contributing a new vocabulary to breaking in the 1990s—and as a representative of the Originality Stands Alone movement.

[7] The first occasion I know of is when the Legendary Twins, two of the most well-known African American b-boys at Kool Herc's parties, were invited to judge a breaking event in Las Vegas in April 2000 called "Concrete Soul." I was in the audience at this event and remember being intrigued by the information they gave during a panel discussion there. From that day on, I began to search for more information about the early years of the dance. The second occasion I know of when an African American pioneer was invited to a breaking event was also in Las Vegas, but this time in August 2010, when GrandMixer DXT served as a judge for an event called the "Ultimate B-Boy Championship."

This study is my attempt to peer into the "basement" of breaking's beginnings, namely by looking into the neglected experiences of its African American founders. As part of this investigation, I concentrate on the formative, pre-commercial period of the dance in the 1970s and ask a range of questions related to its aesthetic and sociocultural development: How did breaking's movement vocabulary and format come to be, and what were the values and norms which undergirded them? In what ways was the dance a continuation or departure from previous African American forms? What were the primary institutional settings in which breaking developed and expanded? What were the artistic influences, worldviews, and principles 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 production and dissemination have with broader socioeconomic developments in New York in the 1970s? Were issues of identity negotiated as the dance moved through successive waves of practitioners and ethnic communities beyond its founding in The Bronx?

What I have come to conclude through my investigation is that breaking was indeed a product of a distinctly working-class, African American, youth-based experience. Everything from the cultural resources utilized to develop the dance to the meanings it held for practitioners was informed by this broader cultural trajectory. At the same time, the socioeconomic marginalization facing working-class youth in The Bronx during this period also imbued the dance with a sense of alterity and self-affirmation. I contend that this alterity, generated by external opposition and sustained by a sense of in-group camaraderie, propelled the dance forward as subsequent waves of practitioners and communities adopted it in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nevertheless, even as the dance expanded in this fashion—and went on to become a worldwide phenomenon—the aesthetic approaches, social values, institutional settings, and

cultural influences inscribed within breaking situated the form squarely within what anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney (1981) has termed "core black culture": expressive attitudes and practices emanating consistently from working-class African American communities. As such, it is my belief that studying breaking's beginnings can offer a great deal of insight into the broader cultural traditions from which the dance emerged and, in turn, made significant contributions to.

Furthermore, as the above quote from Grandmaster Flash suggests, I believe that the invisibilization of breaking's roots is emblematic of a much deeper problem plaguing the historicization of hip-hop. As historian Samir Meghelli has argued, despite varying degrees of accuracy, most historical narratives within hip-hop studies are "rife with myths and unexamined assumptions" (Meghelli, 2013, p. 95). He attributes these myths mostly to scholars relying on second-hand information, rather than primary historical accounts. In other words, the confusion and mystification plaguing hip-hop studies is a direct result of people "hearing the hearing the story from the second floor," rather than "from the basement." I concur with Meghelli's critique and add that the specific neglect of *dancers* in hip-hop history has especially skewed the understanding of the movement's beginnings. My research shows that, in a manner reminiscent of past working-class African American musical expressions—such as jazz (Harker, 2008), rock 'n' roll (Ehrenreich, 2006, ch. 10), funk (Pond, 2013), and disco (Fikentscher, 2000)—the inception of hip-hop was largely shaped by *dancing*, with breaking being the foremost performance style during the early years of the movement. However, the academic neglect of hip-hop dancing, in general (Dimitriadis, 1996, p. 180; Schloss, 2009, p. 8), and breaking's African American founders, in particular, has greatly undermined the scholarly grasp of the movement's impetus, musical evolution, and societal impact. Only by listening to the voices of

early b-girls and b-boys can research on hip-hop's emergence move beyond speculation to reasoned and sound scholarship.

Moving Beyond "Mythological Form": Literature Review

Contextualizing the early development of breaking is no simple endeavor. As mentioned above, there have been numerous assertions put forth regarding the dance's history, among both commentators and practitioners, which are often incomplete and misleading. These assertions must be scrutinized and, when necessary, corrected if scholars hope to gain a more nuanced understanding of how and why the dance emerged. In addition, critical questions need to be raised regarding the disturbing cycle of invisibilizing African American cultural contributions to the form. For example, how was it possible for scholars to bypass breaking's creators and subsume them within a dominant narrative of multicultural cocreation? What were the processes and ideas behind such omissions and why do the African American roots of so many art forms experience this erasure (Carrington & Wilson, 2004; Dixon Gottschild, 1996; Garofalo, 1990; Manning, 2004; Raeburn, 1991)? Again, only by asking such questions can researchers hope to partially remedy such historic obfuscation and gain a fuller understanding of both breaking and the community from which it arose.

In the first-ever article written about breaking, dance scholar Sally Banes (1981) identified what has, in my view, been the central factor behind breaking's historical obfuscation: lack of adequate information. "Breaking is wreathed in legends" (p. 31) she warned readers before conveying what seemed to be inconclusive and contradictory accounts of the dance's beginnings. Although Banes provided insightful commentary on the physical performance of the dance, her writings were based almost exclusively on the Rock Steady Crew, a group from

Upper Manhattan which was made up of young Latino/a and African American—and even a Franco-Jewish—practitioners. Despite being in New York at the height of the dance's popularity, Banes found it difficult to find other sources of information about its roots and, even some years later, maintained that breaking's "early history wasn't documented . . . it lives on only in memories and has taken on mythological form" (1985, p. 84).

Her contemporary, journalist Steven Hager (1984), similarly lamented the difficulty of tracking down information on breaking's past. "It is not an easy voyage," he conceded in the opening prologue to his influential study on hip-hop history. "Little documentation exists and many of those who have 'made it' today seem reluctant to give credit to those who have preceded them" (p. x). Hager also pointed out that breaking's early "activities took place well inside the ghetto, where few whites were willing to travel" (p. 89). This latter point seems to me to be another crucial factor in the dance's skewed historicization, as breaking's birthplace of The Bronx was one of the most vilified neighborhoods in the United States during this period (Rose, 1994, p. 33). Even a committed dance ethnographer such as Banes did not venture into the borough to conduct her research but, rather, based most of her analysis on performances of the Rock Steady Crew in SoHo, the East Village, and other parts of Manhattan (Banes, 1987). This distance from the communal context of the form was coupled with a discursive framework associating breaking with crime and danger. As art historian Vanessa Lakewood (forthcoming) has astutely noted, Banes' inaugural article depicted and fabricated the dance as an expression of "outlawry," with images of practitioners carrying out visually aggressive gestures alongside headlines that read "Physical Graffiti" and "Revolt in Regan's Backyard." In addition, the body of the article featured descriptions of police arresting breakers, suggestions that competition "erupts into fighting for real," and characterizations of the dance as a "ritual combat that

transmutes aggression into art" (Banes, 1981). Similarly, although Hager gathered invaluable testimony from pioneers such as PHASE 2,[8] GrandMixer DXT, the Legendary Twins, and Rockwell Association, he also popularized several exaggerated claims regarding the supposed gang origins of hip-hop (see Aprahamian, 2019, pp. 307-308), with the fantastic notion that its founders had "taken the violence out of the gang wars" through artistic expression (Hager, 1984, p. 103). In this way, both Banes and Hager made important contributions to the documentation of breaking but, at the same time, put forth several unsubstantiated claims regarding its historical beginnings.

In the media craze which was to soon follow, journalists and commentators similarly steeped much of their writings on the dance within this discursive framework of criminality. For instance, many insisted that breaking emerged as "the answer to the boredom and gang fights of the 1970s" (Mollov, 1984, p. 15) and that its participants would "fight with steps rather than with weapons" (Haskins, 1985, p. 11). These romantic, yet class and racially charged, narratives were often based on the early writings of researchers such as Banes and Hager. As Banes' colleague, photographer Martha Cooper, has explained, the media's coverage of breaking in the 1980s was reminiscent of a game of "telephone," with pundits picking up on what the former wrote and repeating it in altered form from one outlet to another.

> Sally had some line in that original *Voice* article about, "We're dancing instead of fighting" . . . We always knew who was copying Sally's article cause that line, as a quote, appeared again and again and again and again, in variations in different articles about

[8] The standard practice among aerosol artists is to capitalize their tag names, to accentuate the letters on which their calligraphic art form is based. I maintain this convention throughout this study and, thus, present monikers of such artists in all caps.

> breakdancing. We knew that they hadn't really gone out and found the kids and done their own research. (Miller, 2000)

Whether journalists failed to do their own first-hand research due to laziness, an unwillingness to travel to The Bronx, or, conversely, the apprehension of practitioners to speak with them is not entirely clear. What is clear is that this lack of adequate research led the proliferation of legend and opinion to prevail over sound information and analysis. Indeed, many practitioners have criticized the media's coverage of breaking in the 1980s for its overall penchant toward sensationalism, frivolity, and careless conflation of breaking with other African American dance forms such as popping and locking (Israel, 2002; Johnson, 2009).

Yet, as academic interest in hip-hop grew in the 1990s and 2000s, it was precisely this problematic media coverage from the early- to mid-1980s which scholars utilized to contextualize breaking (Forman & Neal, 2004; Perkins, 1996). Once again, historical representations were built on preexisting narratives and mediated accounts rather than primary research. Banes was particularly privileged as a reliable source of information, even though she was (to her credit) quite up front about the limitations of her historical findings. When scholars did conduct their own research, it was overwhelmingly with the same group who appeared in her writings: the Rock Steady Crew (Rose, 1994; Rivera, 2003). Not surprisingly, then, the same "legends" and "mythological" accounts which Banes qualified in her work began reappearing in scholarly texts. What is surprising, however, is that the one source which modestly overcame such obfuscation was the one scholars consistently ignored: Hager's *Hip Hop* (1984). His important quotes from early founders of the dance do not appear in *any* academic texts on breaking, although his discussions of rap music and aerosol art are commonly cited in these same studies. Much like The Bronx itself, the voices of breaking's founders seemed to be consistently

marginalized and overlooked in favor of those who popularized the dance during its 1980s commercialization.

Indeed, this privileging of those who appeared in mainstream media depictions in the 1980s is, in and of itself, another central factor in breaking's historical neglect. As sociologist Greg Dimitriadis (1999) has explained, research on hip-hop culture has generally followed trends in the marketplace, shifting scholarly attention from communal spaces of activity to the product-driven realm of the music and entertainment industry. He pointed out how academic interest in hip-hop coincided with the rise of recorded rap as a global commodity and, in the process, live performances and embodied expressions were neglected, with breaking and other dance forms suffering the most. Indeed, most well-known historical treatments of breaking feature the dance simply as a historical backdrop to discussions of rap music (Chang, 2005; George, 1999; Rivera, 2003; Rose, 1994). Several scholars and practitioners have cautioned against the confusion which results from this narrow focus (Forman & Neal, 2004, p. 4; Petchaeur, 2012, p. 5), with cultural sociologist Mary Fogarty (2006) most notably challenging the academic misconception that breaking disappeared after the mid-1980s, simply because it was no longer visible in films and popular culture. Not only was breaking not dead, she revealed, it was flourishing outside of the mainstream through a transnational network of events and activities developed by the practitioners themselves. Her work pointed to the blind spots which can develop when scholars concentrate too heavily on commercial, rather than community-based, manifestations of artistic activity. This issue is further pronounced when examining the formative years of the dance, as much of what transpired in The Bronx during the 1970s never gained mainstream exposure.

Concerns over race and identity also seem to have played a role in the ongoing distortion of breaking's beginnings. Given the prominence of Latino/a practitioners in the media coverage

of the 1980s, most scholars have suggested that the dance was developed as a cocreation of the latter group and African Americans, with the core aspects of the dance said to have been generated by Latino/as (Flores, 1993; Del Barco, 2002; Rivera, 2003; Rose, 1994; Schloss, 2009). This multicultural characterization of breaking's beginnings has proven so appealing that, even in the face of contrary evidence—and at the cost of concealing breaking's African American founders—scholars of all backgrounds have consistently maintained it. For example, in his influential book on hip-hop history, noted African American cultural critic Nelson George (1999) acknowledged that the "first break dancers . . . were overwhelmingly African American" (p.15) but insisted that it was Puerto Rican teenagers who made a "durable contribution" to the dance (p. 16). He argued that breaking "came and went" in the African American community and the idea that the latter created hip-hop on their own is simply an "appealing origin myth" (p. 57). Similarly, Ghanaian American sociologist Joseph C. Ewoodzie (2017) quoted pioneers explaining that "the first generation of b-boys were all black" (p. 215, fn. 129) but went on to argue that breaking is "a Puerto Rican entity" (p. 133). As I reveal throughout this study, such conclusions are inaccurate and unsubstantiated. They contradict the very testimony of the practitioners these authors are themselves quoting.

Nevertheless, it is my view that these assertions are maintained so as not to disturb the noble discourse that hip-hop was a product of multicultural collaboration between marginalized communities. The mediated imagery of the dance in the 1980s bolstered such a discourse, as did many hip-hop scholars and practitioners who utilized it to bestow legitimacy on non-African American participants (Hoch, 2006; Mitchell, 2001). Importantly, many commentators have also seemingly downplayed breaking's African American founders and emphasized Latino/a contributions as a way of countering what they perceive to be the entertainment industry's

exclusionary marketing practices and the Afrocentric leanings of rap music critics (Del Barco, 1996, p.64-65, 68, 81; Flores, 1996, p. 86; Guevara, 1996, p. 68, 82; Ogaz, 2006, p. 167; Rivera, 2003, xi-xii; Schloss, 2009, p. 63). Thus, rather than being a careless oversight, the historical obfuscation of breaking's African American pioneers was propelled by a complex configuration of inadequate information, commercialization, and contestation over racial entitlement—factors which continue to shape commentary on the dance until today. However, as I will argue in Chapter Six, recognizing the African American beginnings of breaking should not be positioned as a zero-sum game undermining the multicultural ethos of the dance. On the contrary, critical scholarly inquiry into the racial dynamics of early breaking offers invaluable insight into the role dancing has played in mending social divisions and attracting youth from different backgrounds into hip-hop culture.

Meanwhile, in the field of dance studies, several scholars have acknowledged how the privileging of Western theatrical forms, until very recently, has led to a relative absence of research on "popular" or "social" practices, overall (Desmond, 1997; Dodds, 2011; Malnig, 2009). Add to this the historic marginalization of African American cultural contributions (DeFrantz, 2002; Dixon Gottschild, 1996) and you have a discipline in which breaking and hip-hop dance, despite their global reach and influence, is greatly understudied (DeFrantz, 2014). Although a growing stream of dance scholarship is seeking to overcome these limitations and offer insight into hip-hop based practices (Bragin 2015; DeFrantz 2004; Fogarty, 2010; Johnson, 2009; Osumare, 2007; Roberts, 2013), comprehensive historical analyses into such forms remain limited in scope. For instance, there has yet to be a manuscript-length, academic publication dedicated to the histories of breaking, popping, locking, krumping, or any other form of dance associated with hip-hop, despite the profound influence these practices wield around the world.

And this absence of historic information is itself a hindrance to further research on such practices. For instance, in his study of the modern breaking scene in New York, ethnomusicologist Joseph G. Schloss (2009) grappled with many of the same historic questions Banes did nearly three decades prior, explaining that "the elders routinely contradict each other" when talking about the early days of the culture and that "virtually nothing is verifiable" (p. 130). At the same time, Schloss noted how nearly all aspects of breaking's modern-day practice are steeped in conceptualizations of the past. As such, he associated the contradictory claims that he encountered with the dance's ethos of competition. "I would argue that b-boy history, like b-boying itself, *has* to be contentious," he reasoned. "Any history that pleases everybody would—by that fact alone—lack important elements of b-boying: competition, ego, self-aggrandizement, battling" (p. 154, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, no early African American b-boys or b-girls were quoted or featured in his discussion of breaking's battle over history, even though Schloss acknowledged that, "The conventional narrative among dancers is that b-boying was invented by African Americans" (p. 16). Thus, although this study offered important insights into breaking's modern-day practice, the historical assumptions underlying it were evidently left partial and inconclusive.

Dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2009) similarly warned readers in her doctoral dissertation that, despite breaking's prominence in popular culture, little is known about its beginnings. She sketched out the contours of the dance's history but acknowledged that much of its details, especially its African-derived influences, have yet to be adequately addressed. Quite fittingly, Johnson titled her dissertation "Dark Matter," a metaphor for the Africanist elements that shaped the form's aesthetics but which remain largely invisible in dominant discourse. She provided astute analysis of how the dismissal of breaking's cultural lineage—often couched

under appeals to multiculturalism—is a product of power relations in society and anxiety over "blackness," while also tracing this lineage through personal observations and kinesthetic constructions of the form as it is practiced today. In many ways, my study aims to add to the deeper cultural connections she called attention to, namely by bringing in the perspectives and experiences of breaking's African American founders.

It is worth reiterating, however, that it is not just academics who struggle with these historic questions. Many practitioners around the world similarly strive to find clarity on what is commonly referred to as breaking's "foundation": the movement vocabulary, format, terminology, and so-called "essence" of the dance. However, these questions remain elusive even for seasoned dancers who are revered as authorities in the scene, many of whom openly acknowledge that "much has yet to be explored" in breaking culture and that there are many "missing links in the chains of history" (Pabon, 2011, p. 57). Moreover, these historical gaps have profound implications for an art form rooted in conceptions of cultural tradition. As Schloss (2009) thoroughly documented, there is an overtly "traditionalist approach" in many modern breaking communities, with practitioners associating their dancing with "an almost mystical set of notions" about historical lineage (p. 12). Fogarty (2010) similarly argued that everything from what constitutes the "right" music to dance to, to the role of females in the dance, to the proper criteria on which to evaluate a performance are predicated on notions of "origins" and "authenticity."

As a practitioner myself,[9] I can attest to the heavy emphasis on "knowing your history" and "respecting the lineage" of the dance which is placed on modern practitioners. When I first

[9] Employing Narayan (1993) and Alcedo's (2007) questioning of the extent to which any researcher can be an authentic insider, I approach my research of breaking's beginnings from a position of both closeness and distance. Although I am a practitioner of the dance with a unique perspective that bears on this study, I am also aware of how my background in the dance is quite removed from that of the early practitioners who were active in the

began breaking in the late 1990s, such notions were part of the reason I was drawn to the dance, providing a deeper sense of meaning, philosophy, and purpose behind its practice. However, the more I committed myself to looking into the past, the more I encountered the same contradictions, inadequate explanations, and missing links that researchers have been grappling with since Banes' first article. Indeed, this study largely emanates from my experiences as a practitioner engaged in these historical discussions. As such, I aim to account for the missing perspectives of breaking's African American founders not only as an attempt to clarify and outline the dance's beginnings but, also, to consider how reassessing its history may affect prevailing assumptions about its performance in the present. Attempting to account for the missing perspectives of breaking's African American founders is also a matter of personal urgency for me, as several of the dance's founders have, sadly, already passed. Although some have been briefly featured in prominent documentaries on the dance (Israel, 2002), most of their testimonies remain difficult to access, mischaracterized, or ignored in mainstream accounts.

Not surprisingly, pioneers increasingly express frustration with how their history has been misrepresented in this fashion. For example, in a recent online interview, Cholly Rock, an early member of the influential Zulu Kings breaking group, specifically pointed to commercialization as the cause of much of this confusion. "Some of the people you got talking weren't there!" he exclaims in reference to figures from the 1980s who are consulted for historical information on 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" (Michael Waynetv, 2013). Early African American b-boy GrandMixer DXT also criticized the skewed historicization of hip-hop in several online interviews, insisting that, "Ninety-nine percent of

1970s. With this in mind, I do not speak from the position of an "insider" regarding breaking's beginnings but, rather, use my more contemporary involvement in breaking to guide my research questions and analysis.

those books that people are getting their degrees from are inaccurate" (TheBeeShine, 2013). He went on to call for hip-hop historians to "rescind" their doctorates due to them being grounded in what he termed "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 is, thus, not only a matter of enhancing understanding. It is a matter of historical responsibility.

Paying Attention to Practitioners: Theoretical Lens

In his book *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America,* historian Robin D.G. Kelley (1997) examined the way social scientists have often reproduced narratives of poverty and social pathology when discussing working-class African American culture. In addition to the discursive force of dominant stereotypes, he attributed such misrepresentations to the failure of scholars to speak to those they claim to be representing. In Kelley's words, "the biggest problem with the way social scientists employ the culture concept in their studies of the black urban poor is their inability to see what it all means *to the participants and practitioners*" (p. 41, emphasis in original). As the above discussion of breaking's historicization indicates, this same pattern of neglect and mischaracterization has affected the depiction of breaking since its earliest exposure.

Although Kelley focused specifically on the African American urban poor, his analysis of scholarly misrepresentations can be also extended to studies of youth and working-class culture, more generally. For instance, much of the "subcultural" literature on youth expression in Britain

during the 1970s tended to neglect the views of young people in the same way Kelley critiqued social scientists for neglecting African American working people. Cultural studies theorists often speculated from a distance about youth activities, without actually engaging the cultural actors they were writing about. Instead, they interpreted "signs" and "artifacts" of youth culture from afar and made unsubstantiated assertions regarding their political and social meanings. As seen in the case of breaking, this lack of first-hand information often resulted in authors borrowing from preexisting discourse regarding youth delinquency and Marxist theories positioning youth "subcultures" as a form of "resistance" (Hall & Jefferson, 1975/2006; Hebdige, 1979). Although such detached theorizations have been harshly criticized by more recent scholars (see Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004), this subcultural literature nevertheless had a profound effect on studies of breaking and rap music (see Fogarty, 2006). Thus, whether discussing African American culture or working-class youth expressions (or a combination thereof), analyses not rooted in practitioner experiences tended to intertwine during this period, generating various tenuous assumptions in academic discourse.

At the same time, a small segment of cultural studies researchers sought to overcome such limitations. In fact, one of the key theorists Kelley employed in his critique of scholarly misrepresentations of the African American working poor was British cultural theorist Paul Willis, who, unlike many of his colleagues from the influential Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, was known for carrying out ethnographic fieldwork directly with young people (Willis, 1990). Like Kelley, he called on scholars to speak with the cultural actors they wrote about to better understand their social processes and subjective meanings, not simply their cultural products or texts. More recent scholarship in the field of cultural studies—often emanating from younger academics with a background in their subject matter—has similarly

privileged ethnographic fieldwork and first-hand interviews, with scholars studying dance being particularly critical of deterministic theories and practitioner neglect. Indeed, many such scholars have abandoned the value-laden term "subculture" altogether (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Malbon, 1999; Thornton, 1995).

A growing number of hip-hop scholars are also reassessing the overreliance on mediated accounts and textual analysis within their discipline, placing a greater emphasis on engaging with "practitioners rather than representational analyses alone" (Johnson, 2015, p. 30). These scholars feature testimony from cultural actors more prominently within their work and take the latter's lived experiences as the starting point for inquiry (Alim, 2006; Bragin, 2015; Dimitriadis, 2009; Fogarty, 2010; Roberts, 2013; Schloss, 2009; Templeton, 2005). I hope to contribute to this growing body of scholarship, particularly as it relates to breaking's beginnings. As such, my overall methodological approach can be characterized as paying attention to practitioners: their interpretations, viewpoints, and embodied experiences, gleaned from as wide a cross-section of testimony as possible. Although I do not discount the importance of theoretical analysis, I seek to ground such analysis, first and foremost, within the lived experiences of those who helped found the dance.

In addition, my study is also heavily informed by Willis' (1990) theoretical concept of "symbolic creativity," which refers to the refashioning of cultural resources (language, performance, music, fashion, and so on) in everyday life as part of the human process of meaning-making and identity formation. Once again, Kelley (1997) effectively built upon this theory to argue that African American expressions are not always a product of material impoverishment or oppression, as they are commonly presented in dominant discourse. Rather, he demonstrated how they are often a means to develop identity, pleasure, and bonds of

community among African Americans. My reading of breaking history closely aligns with his assessment, as I argue that young breakers tapped into their cultural heritage and refashioned previous dances to express their creativity and joy with one another. Indeed, this is the main reason why attending to the African American roots of breaking is so essential. There is no other way to understand the symbolic resources, institutions, and values which were utilized to develop the dance.

Of course, external factors such as socioeconomic conditions in The Bronx and broader social changes in the United States during this period also affected breaking's formation. However, as I will demonstrate throughout this study, the testimony of practitioners suggests that such issues were far more marginal than they are often purported to be. The central driving forces of breaking were youth socialization, collective exaltation, and identity formation, not resistance to poverty, gangs, or external oppression. Indeed, scholarly characterizations of breaking as a reaction to victimization are far more reminiscent of the "subcultural" theories mentioned above than they are of the experiences of the dance's founding practitioners. In turn, they reinscribe the dominant discourse that African American culture is a product of "the frustrations of oppression," rather than complex articulation of creativity, community, and collective joy. As cultural critic Albert Murray (1996) pointed out, associating African American music and dancing strictly with suffering is "nonsense" to "anybody who has ever really listened to [African American] music and felt the natural need to dance to it" (p. 205). As I will discuss throughout this study, attending to the voices of breaking's founders demonstrates that the dance was firmly rooted in a process of youth-based socialization and symbolic creativity, rather than any overt form of political resistance or coping strategy. Of course, the broader climate of racial injustice facing young, working-class, African Americans in the early 1970s certainly

contributed to the alternative outlooks and sense of self-affirmation, ingenuity, and irreverence imbued within the dance. And this sense of alterity differentiated the form from more mainstream expressions within the African American community itself, helping both attract breaking's adherents and repel its detractors.

Interestingly, in her famous essay on the characteristics of African American expression, the renowned author Zora Neale Hurston (1934/1970) similarly nuanced popular art forms such as the blues and jazz by noting how they emanated from working-class African Americans and departed from more mainstream conventions within this community. Indeed, she argued that disregarding prevailing norms was at the heart of these "authentic" African American art forms and that their adherents should not be judged according to the standards of the "sophisticated white man or Negro." Moreover, she identified autonomous dance spaces—which she called "jooks"—as the institutional cornerstone of this "true Negro style" of music and dance. Dance historian Katrina Hazzard-Gordon (1990) later adopted Hurston's theory and traced the development of such autonomous "jook joints" from the late 1800s to the mid-20th century, arguing that such "essentially underground" (p. x) spaces have allowed the working-class to maintain its Africanist traditions, communicate everyday experiences, and innovate new forms of expression. Her work also critiqued the lack of institutional analysis within African American dance scholarship and, like Hurston, suggested that previous commentators falsely depicted such expressions as "exotic variations of corresponding white forms" (xii). In response, Hazzard-Gordon put forward what she termed "the jook continuum," which encompassed community-based dance spaces unconstrained by mainstream institutions, and differentiated them from what she called "the commercial urban complex," African American dance spaces reliant on establishment approval and, thus, susceptible to outside influence. In other words, Hazzard-

Gordon made a clear distinction between commercial and underground venues within the African American community and, like Hurston, privileged the latter by suggesting that jooks "may very well be the most significant development in American popular dance and popular music history" (p. 76).

I concur with both these important studies and look to apply the institutionally focused framework they provided to the early days of hip-hop. Although Hazzard-Gordon claimed that the days of the jook continuum ended in the early 1960s (p. 154), and that subsequent generations "entered the dance halls and public dancing arenas of urban whites" (p. 174), I argue that the history of breaking suggests quite the opposite. Indeed, examining the experiences of founding b-boys and b-girls shows that the building blocks of breaking were coterminous with the configuration of working-class dance spaces and alternative dispositions identified in both Hurston and Hazzard-Gordon's writings on African American culture historically.[10] Furthermore, I hope to add to these authors' important works by delving deeper into the youth and gendered components of the jook continuum, as well as the underlying affective power propelling their proliferation.

Doing the Digging: Methodology

Given that working-class communities have long been at the "core" of African American culture (Gwaltney, 1981; Hazzard-Gordon, 1990; Jones, 1963; Murray, 1976; Thomas, 1977), it is my contention that many of the above-mentioned factors of marginalization and racial anxiety hampering the historicization of breaking have also impeded the study of African American dancing, more generally. Indeed, even when discussing the history of theatrical performance,

[10] For a critique of Hazzard-Gordon's claim that post-1960s cultural movements such as funk, disco, and hip-hop represented a deterioration of "black core culture," see Fikentscher (2000, p. 101-102).

issues of commercialization, lack of information, and racism have tended to obscure the contributions of African American artists (Perpener, 1999). Pioneering choreographer and dance ethnographer Katherine Dunham (1988) excoriated these hurdles when she pointed out that there had yet been "no comprehensive study of the dance forms of people of African origin," as late as 1972 (p. vii). Two decades later, Hazzard-Gordon (1990) similarly lamented the "dearth of information" and "lack of scholarly information" on African American dancing throughout history (p. ix). To deal with such challenges, scholars have had to rely on scattered, secondary accounts to piece together some semblance of history in the face of documentary limitations. It is also for this reason that dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2002) has characterized scholarship on African American dance as a process of "archaeological recovery," wherein researchers must sift through an array of archival and non-traditional sources in the hopes of uncovering that which has been buried. Borrowing from the methods and analyses of these prior studies, I likewise characterize my approach to breaking history as one of excavation, wherein I dig through the three main layers of documentary material: textual, oral, and embodied.

Although written or recorded accounts of breaking's beginnings are sparse, there are nevertheless several publicly available documents on the dance which feature important, yet often overlooked, testimony from pioneering practitioners. Hager's (1984) early study is the most notable example but there are also various popular books, articles, and documentaries which feature valuable first-hand information on the dance (Holman, 1984; Israel, 2002; Veran, 1996). In addition, many early breakers went on to become prominent figures in other aspects of hip-hop culture, such as DJing, MCing, and aerosol art. While their experiences have been documented in many journalistic and scholarly writings on hip-hop, their important reflections on breaking are often glossed over or cut short. This is not surprising, given the above-mentioned

privileging of rap music and neglect of embodied practices in hip-hop studies, overall (Dimitriadis, 1999). When well-known artists do speak about breaking (or other forms of dance), rarely do interviewers engage them on such matters. The prominent inclusion of such commentary in this study also reaffirms the close, yet relatively understudied, interconnection between dance, music, and art in African American culture (Gaunt, 2006; Malone 1996; McClary and Walser, 1994). As has already been mentioned and will be reiterated throughout this study, hip-hop's overall emergence cannot be understood without acknowledging the pivotal role breaking, and dancing more generally, played in relation to the culture's other artistic expressions.

When sifting through such textual and archival material for testimony, I also sought to check for the age and neighborhood of each interviewee, as well as information on whether other practitioners could corroborate their recollections on breaking. As I will discuss throughout this study, a relatively small circle of adolescents from The Bronx were involved in early breaking, and it is very common for these pioneers to reference one another in their interviews. Therefore, I sought to collect as wide a range of testimony as possible and cross-check them across various sources, giving greater credence to those accounts that were corroborated by at least one other narrator. I also checked for key identifying events, songs and other markers of time period in testimonies in order to situate accounts chronologically. Again, as I argue throughout this study, the youth-oriented demographic of breaking resulted in a rapid turnover rate in the dance, as well as a very age-specific trajectory of development, making the temporal context of testimony extremely relevant to my analysis.

Similarly, when consulting textual material, I made a sharp distinction between the testimony of founding practitioners and the commentary of authors or interviewers that often

accompanied these recollections. In this way, I subscribe to what scholar James G. Spady has termed “hiphopography,” a systematic study of hip-hop centered on the experiences of a broad-cross-section of practitioners, not simply mainstream figures or media commentators (see Alim, 2006; Eure & Spady, 1991; Meghelli, 2013; Johnson, forthcoming). Indeed, I have found an alarming degree of inconsistency between what founding practitioners have been recorded as saying and what leading authors—many of whom are the same ones quoting them—have written about breaking and hip-hop history (Aprahamian, 2019). Thus, by juxtaposing these two strains of information and exploring points of convergence and divergence between them, I sought to gain insight into the ideologies and assumptions which have skewed breaking’s historicization, while also centering the voices of the hip-hop community.

In addition, the modern international breaking scene provided another valuable repository of textual information on the dance’s beginnings. As mentioned above, “knowing your history” and honoring the pioneers of the culture have long been central tenets of this transnational network. In the 1990s, partly in response to the frivolous media depictions of breaking during the 1980s, more detailed historic information began to emerge through underground videos, educational panels, independent publications, and interactions at live performative events (Fogarty, 2006). Although much of this information was also contradictory and contentious (Fogarty, 2010), fragments of it offered further insight into the historical dimensions that shaped breaking’s development, while also opening new avenues for dialogue and research. Indeed, it was through active participation within this grassroots network that I first became aware of the issues and questions underlying this study. With the increased prominence of the Internet in the 2000s, previously unavailable historical accounts also began to surface through online forums, social media posts, blogs, websites, podcasts, and video clips. I have spent the past two decades

critically sifting through this wide array of non-traditional sources and I bring that knowledge to bear within this study.

When it comes to oral sources, I had initially assumed that primary interviews would be the centerpiece of my study. However, I ended up conducting only five formal interviews[11] for this dissertation, making oral interviews a relatively minor, but nevertheless critical, component of my research. This shift in methods was mainly due to my above-mentioned realization that there was a wellspring of publicly available information about the early years of the dance, much of which had been overlooked or mischaracterized in dominant discourse. In addition, I discovered several traditional archives that held material related to early breaking, but which had never been utilized in hip-hop studies research. I decided to concentrate my energy on such sources to demonstrate the extent to which the testimonies of breaking's founding practitioners had indeed been invisibilized.

At the same time, I realized that relying solely on oral testimonies would pose its own set of challenges, including the difficulty of tracking down contact information for participants, the reluctance of some to be interviewed, the request by a few for monetary compensation that I was unable to offer, and difficulties in communication having to do with technology and the issuing of informed consent documents. Nevertheless, although I did not make interviewing the cornerstone of my study, the five pioneers I was able to speak with provided me invaluable insight and information. They were all accomplished and recognized hip-hop practitioners from the 1970s who graciously gave about forty-five minutes to an hour of their time to answer my questions, addressing many of the most pressing issues arising from my documentary research. These interviews were all solicited through online outreach: finding the contact information of a

[11] Each interview conducted had the approval of the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conformed to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

practitioner through their social media and writing to them through direct message or email correspondence. After outlining the parameters of my research and securing their informed consent, I conducted interviews through phone conversation with three participants and in-person meetings in New York City with two participants (once over food in a restaurant and another in an apartment). My focus was on asking open-ended questions to each interviewee, allowing them to offer their input without me interjecting my own assumptions, as best I could. I then shared my initial transcripts with each participant through email and incorporated their clarifications—most of which related to minor issues, such as the proper spelling of terms and names—into the final text to keep the process of interviewing as open for dialogue as possible (Lapadat, 1998).

Given my interest in the perspectives of practitioners and the deeper symbolic meanings they associated with breaking, I also sought to closely examine the values, ideals, and themes they conveyed in these various first-hand accounts. I believe that a great deal can be learned about the social processes that propelled breaking forward through such analysis and that these issues are just as important as the dance's aesthetics and movement vocabulary. Accordingly, I paid close attention to practitioners' conceptualizations of race, age, class, gender, and other social issues just as much as I did their recitation of names, places, and physical movements. In turn, I relied on these reflections to inform my own analysis and commentary. Indeed, I have found no better theorists on breaking history than the founders of the dance themselves. My intention is not to "give voice" to these individuals, as they have their own and have been conveying it (to those willing to listen) for years. Nor is my aim to impose my own understanding on top of their conceptualizations. Rather, it is to ground my examination of breaking's history within the experiences and expertise of those who directly lived it.

However, this does not mean that I eschew my own interpretive capacity or merely present practitioner accounts uncritically. As British historian E.H. Carr (1964) famously stated, interpretation is the "life-blood of history" (p. 28). Undertaking a historical study inevitably involves making choices and assessments. Failing to embrace this reality would result in nothing more than an incoherent collection of statements or, worse, a misleading narrative which further clouds understandings of the past. Accordingly, I attended to the testimony of breaking's practitioners with a healthy view toward the potential contradictions, absences, and inconsistencies that may arise in their accounts (Howell & Prevenier, 2001). This is not to devalue the recollections of hip-hop's pioneers but, rather, to critically examine them and identify relevant processes and meanings which emerge. In other words, I maintained a pragmatic concern for historical accuracy in my analysis as an important component of gaining a deeper insight into the meanings of the past (Portelli, 1991; Roseman, 2016). My research approach in this regard can best be described as what sociologists Katherine Bischoping and Amber Gazso (2016, p. 16) have called "constructionism anchored in realism," wherein a balance is struck between understanding reality—although conceding that it may never be *fully* grasped—and the construction of that reality among individuals and groups. I also approached non-oral sources—such as popular texts, newspaper articles, autobiographies, online blogs, or archival records—with this same critical lens, as I believe that all forms of information have their imperfections and must be scrutinized, not just taken at face value (Thompson, 1978). Again, this is one of the main reasons I have sought to consult as many first-hand accounts on the early years of breaking as possible, cross-checking recollections among narrators and other source materials.

Surprisingly, doing so did not result in the often-touted contradictory claims encountered by previous scholars on breaking history but, rather, the identification of consensus on several

key issues among founding practitioners. What is significant is that such consensus tends to disrupt much of the dominant discourse about both breaking *and* hip-hop history in the media and academia. Therefore, I consider these points of convergence to be highly significant in terms of both their reliability and mnemonic agency. They show that individuals from The Bronx shared a common experience which has stood the test of time, even in the face of dominant discourse to the contrary (Green, 2004). As such, I regularly emphasized these points of convergence and discussed their implications throughout this study.

Of course, there are also points of contention and uncertainty among practitioners. I approached these matters with greater caution and situated my discussion of them within the competing frames of relevant participants. For instance, some practitioners emphasized competition as the driving force behind early breaking, while others emphasized entertaining audiences and socializing with peers. Similarly, a few early b-boys suggested that b-girls were looked at differently when the dance transitioned to the floor, while the majority indicated that the latter were encouraged to do the dance by their male peers. As I will address below, such divergences often had to do with interpretations of the past, rather than the content of historic events themselves. For example, virtually every early practitioner acknowledged that young women were involved in early breaking, and it is precisely this consensus—and its divergence from the dominant discourse on breaking—that prompted my dedication of a chapter to this topic. However, there were occasions where practitioners differed on their outlook towards these b-girls and I attempted to present these views, as best as I could, within the content of the chapter. I believe that such divergent viewpoints reveal the extent to which breaking was a diverse and complex cultural phenomenon. After all, neither the African American community in The Bronx nor the early adherents of hip-hop were a homogenous group with uniform thoughts,

intentions, and motivations. Their multiplicity of interpretations is an important part of understanding the richness of hip-hop history, as opposed to reifying it as an essentialized, static entity. Primary accounts particularly lend themselves to such a nuanced evaluation and I employ narrative analysis strategies to examine the ways breakers made sense of their past (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016).

In addition to oral and textual sources, I also utilized movement analysis, along the lines outlined by Janet Adshead (1988) and Marcia Siegel (2001), to uncover cultural knowledge buried within the body of breakers. Despite most early practitioners being in their late fifties and early sixties, some are still known to display their moves on occasion, and I have had the opportunity to witness such displays in person. I have also combed through online and archival video footage to retrieve rare snippets of seasoned dancers caught on film. I located distinctive patterns and qualities within these performances and matched my own observations with the corresponding meanings practitioners associated with the dance (Kaeppler, 1972). Furthermore, I compared these patterns with the modern movement vocabulary of breaking—as well as dances predating it—to excavate knowledge of the past "sedimented in the body" (Connerton, 1989). Indeed, a wide repertoire of gestures, concepts, and movements have been passed down and built upon throughout the years of the dance, forming what is commonly referred to as the "foundation" of breaking around the world. When encountering such kinesthetic recollections, I identified and evaluated them according to both their continuity and stylized variations. I believe there is a lot to learn from the reproduction of these basic moves, as well as their reinterpretation, from generation to generation. Of course, I recognize that caution needs to be exercised when trying to trace the historical past in the bodies of the present (Buckland, 2006). However, when coupled with oral and textual analysis, I believe such information is essential in identifying

matters of aesthetic significance in breaking culture. In addition, while I examined the ideology and values enshrined in these bodily expressions, I did not do so by reading them like a literal text. Rather, I focused on the underlying compositions, codes, and conventions they adhered to.

Aiding me in this analytical endeavor has been my own kinesthetic experience with the dance. Over two decades of personal involvement with breaking has familiarized me with the form's basic corporeal qualities, helping me identify and describe its performance. Although the breaking of my generation differed considerably from that of the 1970s, there is nevertheless a consistent strain running through these various iterations. Indeed, recognizing such continuity and departure has been one of the key facets of this study, as I believe the past has directly affected the present in the form of breaking moves, concepts, music, and terminology. In addition, the inner dimensions of the dance, which cannot be accessed by mere recording or observation, are also partly approached through my lived experience with breaking (Sklar, 1991). Although I refrain from trying to historically reconstruct the dance in full or draw sweeping generalizations based on my practice alone (Tomko, 1998), I nevertheless utilized my direct engagement with breaking to add another layer of investigation into the underlying patterns, sensations, and meanings I explore.

Finally, the fundamental aim of my research has not been to present an all-encompassing, final word on breaking history. Rather, I have sought to offer a critical investigation into the dance's hitherto neglected decade of development. Like all other historical endeavors, I acknowledge that my investigation is limited by my own subjective choices and the partiality of available information. Indeed, some of the original practitioners of breaking have already passed—without anyone being known to have documented their experiences—and with them has gone a very important piece of modern cultural history. This partiality of information is

compounded by the ephemeral nature of dancing itself, whose historical excavation often entails digging in the dark, looking for the fragments and traces of a complex and elusive past (Berge, 1999). The conclusions I have reached in this study are, thus, shaped by what I was able to access and my own judgements regarding them. My aim is not to signal closure on this topic but, rather, to bring in the voices of those who have, for too long, been ignored and excluded from the dominant narrative.

Indeed, the limitations outlined above and their exacerbation through the passage of time point to my central motivations for this study. By raising critical questions regarding the history of breaking and peeling back the layers of obfuscation that have sedimented around it, I hope to gain a more reasonable understanding of the early years of the dance, based mainly on the experiences and perspectives of its founding practitioners. As part of this process, I also aspire toward a more inclusive dialogue with researchers that will further the collective understanding of both breaking's past and present-day practice, and look forward to the future voices which will undoubtedly emerge to challenge, deepen, and enhance the discussion put forward in the following pages.

Peering into the "Basement" of Breaking's Beginnings: Chapter Summaries

As has already been discussed, the early years of breaking are closely intertwined with the development of hip-hop as a cultural movement, overall. However, given the need for revision in hip-hop history, I took time throughout this study to clarify and contextualize several misconceptions about both the dance and the movement's beginnings, all the while keeping my central focus on breaking's aesthetic development and symbolic meanings. For this dual purpose of clarifying the documentary record and gaining new insights into the dance, I regularly

distinguish between the testimony of founding practitioners and the mediated narratives that have been disseminated regarding their expressions. I also adopt a generally chronological approach, with each chapter focusing on a specific period of the 1970s and the relevant social, cultural, and historical factors that affected the dance's development.

To begin, I focus on the pre-development period of breaking during the late 1960s and early 1970s, before hip-hop had been put into motion as a distinct movement. Although numerous researchers have sought to situate the dance within a context of material impoverishment, crime, and political oppression in The Bronx during this period, few have taken an in-depth look at the cultural and ideological factors affecting these socioeconomic conditions. As such, Chapter Two, "'Dance Like Flame': Burning and Breaking in The Bronx," examines the demographic transformation and social ferment affecting the borough in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It also focuses on the outlook of young people who established breaking in this post-civil rights period. My central argument is that the zeitgeist of cultural pride and self-affirmation within the African American community during this period helped set the stage for breaking's emergence.

Chapter Three, "'From the Floor Up': Movement and Music in the Era of Herc," builds upon this discussion of the sociocultural context of breaking and traces the rise of Kool Herc as a dancer and DJ who, along with his sister Cindy Campbell, provided young people an independent environment in which to cultivate their artistic expressions. By doing so, these two individuals essentially reconjured the working-class African American jook continuum and developed a new cultural movement within its institutional parameters. I also discuss how breaking specifically affected Kool Herc's musical choices, turntable techniques, and microphone recitations within these spaces. As such, I argue that breaking was the driving force

behind what came to be known as "hip-hop," with the dynamic performances of dancers at early parties serving as the backbone for important musical and cultural innovations.

Chapter Four, "'The Smallest Guys in the Party': Youth Socialization and B-Boy Identity Formation," examines the mid-1970s when b-boys and b-girls increasingly began adopting prolonged floor movements. I argue that, in the process of altering the dance's aesthetics in this way, a new crop of young teenagers enacted a sense of self and community through breaking at a crucial stage in their adolescent growth. As such, I propose that the jook joints in which breaking and hip-hop developed provided young people with an important outlet for socialization, identity formation, and collective exaltation. I tie these developments to the broader African American tradition of jook-based cultural expression and the centrality of dancing to hip-hop's emergence in the 1970s. I conclude by discussing the opposition breakers faced from adherents of the more predominant disco craze during this period, arguing that the varying tastes and attitudes enshrined in each movement symbolized differing and, at times, conflicting cultural currents within the African American community.

Chapter Five, "'It Started with the Girls': Uncovering the Role of B-Girls in Breaking History," veers from the mostly chronological format of the dissertation employed up to this point. Instead, it surveys the neglected role of females in the overall development of breaking throughout the 1970s. Despite the dominant narrative that the dance was an "exclusively male" expression of "machismo," I demonstrate how young women influenced, initiated, and advanced breaking's aesthetics from its earliest years of development. I connect this neglected history to a broader working-class African American tradition of jook-based expressions and alternative expressions of womanhood, arguing that this alterity is largely responsible for the gender-inclusive structure of early breaking. I also consider the implications this invisibilized b-girl

history has on gendered performance within the African American community, especially as it relates to the more prominent disco scene during the period examined in this dissertation.

Finally, I conclude with Chapter Six, "'Latinos Started Migrating Toward Hip-Hop': Breaking's Expansion in the Late 1970s," wherein I analyze the spread of breaking to other ethnic constituencies and regions outside of The Bronx at the turn of the decade. Again, I emphasize the institutional and ideological factors affecting the dance's spread during this period, arguing that breaking's cultivation in African American jook spaces gained widespread appeal in New York as the dance gradually surfaced above ground into more outdoor venues and public gatherings. I revisit many of the same issues discussed in previous chapters—including the role of youth, identity formation, social belonging, alterity, and the reciprocal relationship between music and dancing—as they relate to the aesthetic evolution and multicultural expansion of breaking in the late 1970s. I conclude with a review of the distinction between the testimony of founding practitioners and dominant narratives regarding breaking's expressions, suggesting that the insight which is culled from this juxtaposition can be utilized for analyzing the modern global proliferation of breaking and hip-hop culture, more generally.

Chapter Two

"Dance Like Flame": Burning and Breaking in The Bronx

Identifying a definitive starting point to any complex cultural phenomenon is never a simple task. This is especially true for a dance such as breaking, which was not created by a sole choreographer or sparked by an isolated incident but, rather, developed within a community context of multiple influences and historic processes. Even those who made personal contributions to the dance did so within a network of peers who gave value to their expressions and adherents who carried them forward. To separate out all of this and demarcate a singular birth date or progenitor of the form is, thus, a difficult endeavor. Nevertheless, historical inquiry inevitably requires choosing where to begin, no matter how tentative or imperfect such a decision may be.

In his classic treatise on the theoretical and practical implications of such choices, cultural critic Edward Said (1975) defined a beginning as "*the first step in the intentional production of meaning*" (p. 5 emphasis in original). He acknowledged that, like any step, a beginning is informed by prior trails and aligned paths. However, its distinguishing hallmark is a shift away from the familiar toward something which is considered unique. Employing Said's definition and approach, I focus this chapter on the initial steps that guided the production of new meaning through breaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I examine not only the outward physical development of the dance during this period but also the cultural resources, values, terminology, and consciousness in which the form was forged. As such, my interest is not only the *moves* but the community-based *movement* which put breaking into motion.

In addition, although my aim is to offer new information regarding breaking's beginnings, there are also occasions where I address how dominant narratives have skewed scholarly conceptualizations of its history. What I have in mind here are the "legends" and "mythological" accounts that the dance has been steeped in since its 1980s commercialization (Banes, 1985). By clarifying such misconceptions, I hope to shed light on both breaking's past and what has followed into the present. Simultaneously, I seek to avoid "origin" stories that are not grounded in the experiences, perspectives, and actions of those who established the dance. For instance, it is often assumed that, because certain physical movements in breaking are similar to those observed in other disciplines (such as Russian folk dancing, kung fu, capoeira, gymnastics, and so on), the dance's roots must trace back to those far removed from its founders (Holman, 1984; Kato, 2007; Thompson, 1996). However, although such similarities are certainly interesting and worth exploring,[12] given the lack of any direct evidence connecting these disciplines to breaking's pioneers, I do not attribute causal significance to them. In other words, rather than assume causation between movement forms according to their physical manifestations, I maintain my methodological emphasis on the first-hand experiences of practitioners and the influences and cultural resources they acknowledge as the basis for their expressions. Similarly, other dance practices that may have correlated with, but were tangential to, breaking's founders—including the contemporaneous rise of locking in Los Angeles, boogaloo in Oakland, GQ in Philadelphia, Go-Go in Washington, DC, lofting in Manhattan, and so on—are also outside the purview of my analysis.

[12] In 2001, as part of an influential underground dance video called *Detours*, I produced a compilation, titled "The Parallel Scene," which highlights the many movements breaking and other hip-hop dance styles share with past cultural practices. The compilation has since been posted online by various fans of the video and can be viewed, for example, at https://youtu.be/9ou291N8E9c.

Finally, this chapter takes an in-depth look at the specific socioeconomic context of The Bronx in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is when breaking first emerged and when social ferment and racial transformation was taking place throughout the borough. Although I do not believe the dance was a *reaction* to such external circumstances, there was nevertheless a complex interplay between what practitioners expressed on the dancefloor and what they experienced in their daily lives. As such, I dedicate considerable attention to the history, motivations, challenges, and voices of working-class African American youth growing up in The Bronx. This is the community that ushered in the dance and I believe it is here that scholars must begin in order to truly understand breaking's beginnings. However, before I turn to this period, it is important to take a small step back and recognize the broader cultural continuum to which even this beginning belongs.

"Dance Like Flame"

In a 1926 essay for *The Nation*, the renowned poet Langston Hughes called on African Americans to resist assimilationist tendencies in the Harlem Renaissance and overcome the "racial mountain" of conformity by expressing themselves without fear or shame. Like Hurston (1934/1970), he placed his highest hopes in the working-class—"the low-down folks" or "common people," as he called them—whom he credited for creating such art forms as the blues and jazz, and who he lauded for maintaining "their own individuality in the face of American standardizations." He predicted a future drawing on their inspiration.

> And within the next decade I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame

> and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen—they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow. (Hughes, 1926)

Hughes' words today read like an anticipation of the hip-hop movement. Everything from the community he identifies to the values he associates with them were manifested in the emergence of this modern cultural phenomenon. And this should come as no surprise, as many scholars have argued that the "core" of African American culture has historically emanated from the working- and lower-classes (Bolden, 2013; Hazzard-Gordon, 1990; Levine, 1978; Thomas, 1977). Their retention of Africanist aesthetics, autonomy (or exclusion) from mainstream institutions, and penchant for disregarding societal constrictions are often pointed to as factors in their artistic innovations (Kelley, 1994). Breaking not only forms an important part of this cultural continuum, it emerged at a time when the issues undergirding it were taking on heightened significance.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the civil rights movement began increasingly focusing on issues of poverty and injustice in the North, it was met with a growing conservative backlash throughout the United States. When opposition to desegregation did not bear fruit, many established, middle-class residents began fleeing into the suburbs, leaving working-class people of color in urban areas further marginalized. In The Bronx, anxiety over integration combined with suburbanization to rapidly transform the borough from what had been considered a "white" and prosperous community to a "majority minority," impoverished area (Goodman, 2005). Whereas 90 percent of residents were identified as white in 1950 (Gonzalez, 2004, p. 144), the composition of the borough was inverted by 1980, with nearly two-thirds of residents being identified as African American or Latino/a (Gonzalez, 2004, p. 111). Along with this dramatic demographic reshuffling came a large-scale outflow of capital and public services,

leaving those who could not afford to move out stranded amidst deteriorating conditions. Class polarization intensified as a result, both between African Americans and other groups, and within the African American community itself.

As seen throughout American history, such socioeconomic transformations were driven as much by conceptualizations of race as they were by economic and political factors. For example, in his study of post-war suburbanization in Southern California, historian Eric Avila (2004) made the case that a "new mass culture" began to develop in the region during this period, one which increasingly associated upward mobility with dominant conceptions of "whiteness." By examining leisure activities and popular expressions in the 1950s and 1960s, he demonstrated how middle-class constituencies retreated into homogeneous suburbs, developed sanitized spaces of entertainment, and subscribed to a racialized political culture of conservatism. Avila's scholarship pointed to the way in which conceptualizations of race have been tied to structural factors related to housing, upward mobility, and capital accumulation. By examining the demographic shifts leading up to breaking's emergence in The Bronx, I hope to similarly shed light on how perceptions of cultural difference affected socioeconomic conditions in New York in the 1970s, especially as they relate to hip-hop's artistic expressions.

Indeed, with the advent of various struggles for social justice in the late 1960s, previously marginalized groups began asserting their rights and expressing themselves in increasingly defiant ways. In turn, people structurally positioned as white[13] became especially prone to retreat from urban areas during this period, often expressing concerns over integration, social disorder, cultural instability, and the demise of middle-class norms. As Hughes observed over four

[13] I use this prefix of "people positioned as" in accords with Horton's (2019) "New Style Sheet for the Abolition of Whiteness," in which he advocates for the use of New Abolitionist and Critical Whiteness Studies discursive strategies to displace the ideological function of the sign "white" from bodies (p. 99).

decades prior, working-class African Americans tended to disregard such norms in favor of a more independent cultural frame and, as I will describe below, this added to the sense of panic many residents felt as they began moving throughout The Bronx. Furthermore, policymakers in the 1960s began advancing a racist discourse which demonized low-income minorities as "culturally deprived" and "socially pathological," transforming the discredited biological justifications for racism of years past with incendiary cultural stereotypes and a discourse of criminality (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Ryan, 1976). These discursive and demographic responses served as the backdrop for breaking's beginnings in The Bronx, with working-class African Americans coming of age in the borough during a period of both division and unity, social turmoil and self-expression.

Unfortunately, most hip-hop histories have neglected such underlying social and racial dynamics. Instead, they have focused on public works projects such as the Cross Bronx Expressway, arguing that its construction destroyed the borough and triggered a downward economic spiral, to which hip-hop arose as a response (Chang, 2005; Ewoodzie, 2017; Hager, 1984; Keyes, 2002; Kugelberg, 2007; Reeves, 2008; Rose, 1994). Rather than addressing the racially motivated relocation of residents and the accompanying reallocation of resources, most commentators have scapegoated urban planner Robert Moses as the cause of The Bronx's demise. Yet, despite the widespread currency such narratives have in both the media and academia, historian Ray Bromley (1998) has conclusively demonstrated how Moses' Cross Bronx Expressway had very little to do with the issues facing the borough in the 1970s. Rather than examine the "social, economic, cultural and demographic transformations associated with suburbanization, economic restructuring, and changing lifestyles," Bromley argued, researchers have simply blamed all of The Bronx's problems on Mr. Moses (p. 25). I would add that, in the

process, they have obscured the cultural prejudice and racial paranoia affecting the demographic transformations of the borough, as well as the subsequent defunding and political abandonment working-class constituencies of color faced.

Similarly, most accounts of hip-hop history have claimed that New York City's loss of manufacturing jobs in the postwar period led to the "social pressure-cooker" of inequality and oppression (Potter, 1995, p. 142) that facilitated hip-hop's emergence (Chang, 2005; Ewoodzie, 2017; Keyes, 2002; Rose, 1994). However, African Americans had been systematically excluded from such jobs in New York even *prior* to deindustrialization (Waldinger, 1996). Most African Americans did not work in manufacturing jobs but, rather, in the public sector and service-oriented jobs. As a result, the loss of factories did not affect them nearly to the extent that these studies suggest. Instead, as I argue below, the socioeconomic conditions underlying hip-hop's beginnings in The Bronx were far more shaped by institutional racism, constructions of identity, and concerns over social order than they were by any highway project or deindustrialization. Unfortunately, as with other aspects of hip-hop history, the failure of scholars to attend to the experiences of founding practitioners has led to grave mischaracterizations of these important issues. I turn now to a more detailed examination of the socioeconomic conditions affecting The Bronx, in order to better understand the structural and ideological context in which breaking was born.

From "Dream" to "Ruin"

For much of the twentieth century, The Bronx was made up of working-class German, Irish, Jewish, and Italian families who relocated to the borough from overcrowded slums, both in New York City and abroad. These residents were attracted to the borough's wider streets,

abundant green spaces, and improved housing conditions. By the mid-1920s, such advantages made The Bronx the fastest growing county in New York, earning it the nickname the "wonder borough" (Goodman, 2005). It was home to the celebrated New York Yankees and a symbol of the American Dream. Yet, as in other cities throughout the United States, this "Dream" systematically excluded people of color.

Following World War II, African Americans and Latino/as were purposefully relegated to the borough's overcrowded, southernmost section (Gonzalez, 2006). Local civil rights groups and the New York City Commission on Human Rights regularly documented the racial discrimination preventing minorities from moving beyond the South Bronx, but neither the government nor the private sector was willing to put a stop to it (Purnell, 2009; Rosenblum, 2009; Rothstein, 2017, p. 274). Given the long history of racism in the United States, even many liberal and left-leaning white residents associated the presence of minorities with declining property values and, thus, participated in such exclusionary housing practices (Abrams, 1955; Biondi, 2003). Many African Americans and Latino/as from that period recall being assaulted for simply setting foot in what was deemed to be a white neighborhood beyond the confines of the South Bronx (Naison & Gumbs, 2016; Purnell, 2009).

However, as the civil rights movement gained momentum in the North and greater numbers of residents positioned as white made their way into the suburbs, landlords in The Bronx were forced to gradually open their doors to minority families seeking a better life. In turn, as a few "undesirable" neighbors moved beyond the southern section of the borough, the processes of white flight to the North Bronx and outlying suburbs rapidly accelerated. For example, areas such as the coveted Grand Concourse in the West Bronx, which was once known as the "Park Avenue of The Bronx," went from being 90 percent "white" in 1940 to 47 percent in

1970 (Rosenblum, 2009, p. 181). Such demographic depletion had little to do with any highway construction or the loss of manufacturing jobs. Instead, it had to do with deep-seated conceptualizations of race. As historian Brian Purnell (2009) succinctly put it, “The more blacks moved to the Bronx, the more whites moved out of the Bronx” (p. 53). The city even built the Co-Op City housing development in the northeast Bronx to facilitate the exodus from more established areas such as the Grand Concourse (Goodman, 2005).

Bronx borough historian Lloyd Ultan argued that, in addition to economic concerns, residents who fled during this period were unsettled by the changing way of life in their neighborhoods. “Color and language had less to do with it than culture,” he wrote, suggesting that this retreat was not due to racial hatred but, rather, the desire to maintain familiar customs in tight-knit ethnic communities. “And this question of cultural comfort cannot be analyzed rationally; this is based upon emotion,” he concluded (Epstein, 1991, p. 64). In other words, residents of various backgrounds wanted to maintain their “traditional” way of life they in their areas. Rather than opposing incoming African Americans and Latino/as based on skin color, this new framework rationalized discrimination based on perceptions of cultural difference. Lower-income minorities were particularly singled out as being incapable of adjusting to traditional norms and, thus, a threat to middle-class stability (Ryan, 1976). In The Bronx, this took the form of complaints over “garbage disposal, the need for nocturnal quiet, or other requirements of compact city living” (Meyer, 1975, p. 145). Oral accounts from residents who fled similarly refer to fears over violence and disorder, as well as references to unfamiliar forms of music, dialect, and communal congregation suddenly permeating the borough (Perez, 2006; Roby, 2008;

Rosenblum, 2009).[14] However, most former residents did not wait long enough to see what life would be like in such integrated communities. Instead, they fled almost immediately upon seeing the first signs of demographic change, helping bring about the very instability and deterioration they feared the most. In a manner akin to a stock market panic, accounts from that period indicate that the residents felt that those who could relocate first would lose the least, triggering others to quickly follow suit—quite apart from whether such concerns were warranted or not.

As in other "changing neighborhoods" throughout the United States—from as nearby as Canarsie (Rieder, 1985) to as distant as Compton (Straus, 2014)—cultural stereotypes, rather than economic or material conditions, often fueled much of this anxiety and relocation. The famed African American novelist James Baldwin summed up this process when he observed that:

> we began to move across the river to the Bronx, all those people who had lately become white fled in terror, and one of the results of that is the present disaster called the South Bronx where nobody can live. The motion of the white people of this country has been—and it is a terrifying thing to say this, but it is time to face it—a furious attempt to get away from the niggers. (as cited in Ultan & Unger, 2000, p. 217)

Young people who would later develop hip-hop similarly remember the backlash they experienced when traveling throughout The Bronx. For example, Cholly Rock, a member of the influential Zulu Kings breaking group, recalled how residents in the North Bronx perceived the influx of African Americans to be an "encroachment" on their traditional way of life. He talked about how white youth gangs, such as the Golden Guineas, Henchman, White Assassins, and

[14] Such attitudes have continued to affect social relations in New York City, with policies such as the 1990s "quality of life" campaign by the Rudy Giuliani administration channeling white middle-class resentment over values and behavior into a crackdown on marginalized communities of color (see Smith, 1998).

White Angels, chased him and his friends away when they ventured into white neighborhoods, as late as the 1970s (Michael Waynetv, 2016). Early Latino hip-hop DJ Disco Wiz similarly recounted the bigotry he faced as a student in a Catholic elementary school in The Bronx. "No matter how hard my mother worked to send us there," he explained, "the kids would always treat us like if we were on welfare" (Sanchez & Cedeno, 2009, p. 20). Such stereotypes and prejudices were also prominently depicted in the Hollywood motion picture *A Bronx Tale* (1993), which was based on writer Chaz Palminteri's upbringing in the Italian neighborhood of Belmont in the late 1960s. In the film, Palminteri depicted a gang of local Italian youth assaulting African Americans for simply passing through their neighborhood, while also portraying the tribulations of interracial dating amidst such ethnic tension. In an earlier unpublished essay, famed aerosol artist and early breaker PHASE 2 recalled walking through this same Belmont neighborhood with his friends in 1976 and being attacked by local residents, demonstrating how what was depicted on the screen was not far from what happened in real life. "It's hard to believe anyone felt intimidated by three red mockneck, Kangol-cap-wearing black boys walking thru [sic] their block," he wrote about his experience. "Nonetheless, I was greeted by the words 'black mother--ker' . . . and struck with nothing less than a car jack—a CAR JACK!!!" (PHASE 2, n.d., p. 6).

These are only a few of the many racist incidents early hip-hop pioneers recall having to go through while growing up in The Bronx, shedding light on how critical social and cultural perceptions were to life in the borough. As news reports from the 1960s commonly pointed out, "the fear of integration" and "ethnic changes" were the main driving forces behind residents relocating (Roberts, 1966) and, as in other urban areas throughout the United States, such "ethnic changes" were taking place irrespective of the Cross Bronx Expressway or deindustrialization. Instead, they were rooted in racial anxiety and contention over cultural differences. This is not to

suggest that *all* local residents were engaged in such antagonism. Indeed, many overcame racial divisions and developed friendships with one another, especially on a personal level. Others, including many affluent families of color, similarly moved out of areas to which minorities were migrating simply to protect their equity from declining property values—a process that was, in turn, tied to the discriminatory policies of the real estate industry. However, what I am arguing here is that the largescale demographic shifts experienced in The Bronx in the 1960s and early 1970s—from which falling housing prices, financial decline, and political neglect followed—were fundamentally driven by conceptions of cultural difference.

This was also evident in terms of the economic decay of the region in the 1970s. When people of color moved beyond the confines of the South Bronx, financial speculators quickly followed suit to profit from the resulting panic. They would buy up properties at below market value, overcharge incoming African American and Latino/a residents, and cut down on maintenance, knowing that the government would not attend to the new tenants' complaints (Goodman, 2005). This practice was known as "blockbusting," or "breaking a block," and was prevalent in major cities throughout the United States (Satter, 2009). With banks and insurance companies refusing to extend funds to newly redlined areas, and landlords systematically neglecting their buildings and hiking up rates, many neighborhoods of color inevitably deteriorated. And after a block had been "broken" in The Bronx it was susceptible to burning, as overburdened and dilapidated buildings were ripe for fires. These neighborhoods were also the first to have their fire stations closed by the city, leaving them with little capacity to put out the blazes (Flood, 2010; Wallace, 1998). Meanwhile, policy makers and pundits suggested that residents were themselves setting fire to their buildings, further bolstering the narrative that minority presence destroys a community ("Text of the Moynihan," 1970). After years of

exclusion and victimization, working-class people of color were being blamed for everything from New York City's budget shortfall to the ravaging of their own neighborhoods (Phillips-Fein, 2017).

While certain portions of The Bronx were being left to ruin in this process, others were carrying forward through the upheaval of the late 1960s. African American and Latino/a families managed to nurture their children and create vibrant communities, despite the obstacles put before them. Yet, they continued to be demonized in the media, deprived of financial capital, and subject to cuts in government spending. Such marginalization eventually took its toll on even the most stable of neighborhoods. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, large swaths of The Bronx had indeed declined and this was mostly due to their underlying racial dynamics, rather than any fundamental economic principles. Institutional discrimination and perceptions of cultural difference continued to affect life in the borough, and more importantly, how resources would be allocated within it. Even the geographic labels of The Bronx were altered based on race, with areas such as the Grand Concourse (located in the West Bronx) now being called the "South Bronx," simply because people of color had moved in (Rosenblum, 2009). The term was transformed from a geographic designation to an ideological one, connotating images of the feared Other. It was in this broader atmosphere of vilification, segregation, and social turmoil that breaking would emerge as a radical new form of expression.

The New Super Heavy Funk

The transformations taking place in The Bronx during this period were emblematic of developments happening across the United States (Sugrue, 1995). Following the gains of the civil rights movement, many cities saw their middle-class, white populations fleeing to the

suburbs, while working-class African Americans who remained behind increasingly saw their quality of life disintegrate (Jackson, 1985). Urban uprisings throughout the 1960s in areas such as Harlem, Watts, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Newark reflected the growing anger and disillusionment felt by these communities in the civil rights era (*Report of the National*, 1968). Many working-class African American youth especially began viewing racism and injustice as something embedded in society. Given the marginalization and alienation they experienced from dominant institutions, they believed those in power were intent on maintaining the status quo and, thus, began challenging traditional forms of authority, both in the public and private sphere.

"We understood that we were living in a society where the truth didn't matter, a society divided by race," explained PHASE 2, who grew up in the Morrisania section of The Bronx. He emphasized the experience of not only race but class in awakening his critical consciousness. "If you grew up in the suburbs, going to the best schools, you're not gonna be exposed to that," he insisted. "Even a black kid" (Mansbach, 2005, para. 43). Such feelings of disenfranchisement led to various forms of political resistance during this period, as well, with the high-profile activism of groups such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords exemplifying the rebelliousness of many minority communities. In turn, such activism further alarmed entrenched groups who felt their grip slipping from areas in The Bronx. It was not only that minorities were moving into these areas. It was that they were doing so with a renewed sense of self-determination.

This consciousness manifested itself in various forms of cultural expression, as well. Prominent African American athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar converted to Islam and renounced their previously Western-derived names, while large numbers of African American families began giving their children "distinctively Black names" (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). The "afro" appeared as a popular hairstyle, signifying values of cultural pride and

empowerment for African Americans. The well-known Motown record label went from producing relatively nonthreatening "crossover" hits to socially conscious songs such as "Message from a Black Man" (1969) by The Temptations, "War" (1970) by Edwin Starr, and "Hey Big Brother" (1971) by the white rock band Rare Earth. As this latter example illustrates, the ferment of the 1960s also saw youth positioned as white gravitating toward music that articulated messages of African American pride and self-affirmation, which, according to Lipsitz (1994, p. 216) reflected a more general desire from young people to transcend racial divisions and critique social oppression. In turn, African American musicians such as Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone came to prominence by experimenting with genres and styles that were coded as white, bringing together diverse audiences receptive to new subjective possibilities (George, 1988, pp. 108-110).

All of this made its impact on Bronxites who would go on to innovate hip-hop, as well. As early DJ Afrika Bambaataa recounted to scholar Jim Fricke in a 2000 interview, the activism of this era and the corresponding messages being put forth in music resonated with young people locally:

> [The southeast Bronx] was an area where there was still a lot of unity and a lot of social awareness was going on, at a time when people of color who were called Negroes or Colored, was coming into their own, knowin' that they were Black people, hearing records like James Brown's "Say it Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud", giving us awareness. Hearing people like Sly and the Family Stone telling you to "Stand!", "You Can Make it if You Try," "Everyday People."
>
> So, and then hearing the teachings of the Most Honorable Elijah Mohammed, Malcolm X, Minister Farrakhan, the Black Panther Party, and seeing a lot of the struggles

> that was going on all around the world through television, with the Woodstock era, the Flower Power movement, the Vietnam War, Lyndon B. Johnson and all that, which gave a lot of hope to this area to do something for self. (Fricke, 2000, pp. 1-2)

DJ Smokey, from the Claremont section of The Bronx, similarly associated Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968) with increasingly assertive forms of dancing and expression taking place among African American youth (Norin Rad, 2018a, para. 6). The South Bronx aerosol writer STAFF 161 also credited political appeals made by activists such as the Black Panthers and musicians such as Brown for providing him with "another form of education," one that motivated him to "make a statement in life" and "say it in style!" (STAFF 161, 2016, para. 3). Thus, whether in terms of fashion, music, dance, or art, the social ferment of this period was clearly manifesting itself in new forms of cultural expression. And, in the African American community, these expressions were widely embraced in urban areas imbued with a renewed sense of consciousness.

In many ways, James Brown was the ultimate embodiment of this new working-class African American consciousness (Vincent, 2008). His talent and grounding in the community earned him such endearing titles as "Soul Brother Number One," "Mr. Dynamite," and "The Godfather of Soul." By the late 1960s, headlines were asking "Does He Teach Us the Meaning of 'Black is Beautiful'?" and "Is he the Most Important Black Man in America?" (McBride, 2016, p. 21, 65). It was also during this period that Brown was advancing a musical and corporeal revolution that would perhaps be his most lasting legacy: *funk*. He attributed his innovations to the broader social climate of those years and, in turn, shaped that climate with his music. Like the audiences he spoke to, his funk was assertive, impassioned, and participatory, with constant appeals for people to "get involved," "let it all hang out," and "do your thing." As

African American studies scholar Tony Bolden (2013) has pointed out, even cultural norms within the African American community were challenged by this defiant new sensibility. “What was so distinctive about funk,” he argued, “was its brazen defiance of social conventions and its insistence on expressing that defiance in black vernacular *terms*—even if this meant resisting taboos in black culture” (p. 30).

In addition, Brown’s radical musical innovations were accompanied by his allure as a virtuosic *dancer*. In an era of packaged dance crazes such as “The Twist,” “The Watusi,” and “The Monkey” (Clark, 1973), he inspired his audiences with unique, individualized steps that defied categorization. He slid across the stage, shuffled his feet, gyrated his body, and abruptly dropped to the floor in a series of splits and floor maneuvers. Like his music, his movements left audiences in awe and broke the standards of conventional performance. Although he rooted himself in the working-class African American tradition of dancing, Brown placed a premium on individuality and seemed to add his own unique twist to even the most traditional of steps. Indeed, his approach in this regard can itself be considered a hallmark of the African American cultural continuum, as dance scholar Jonathan David Jackson (2001) has argued that a framework of “individuation”—personal style rooted in collective creativity—has long been at the core of vernacular dancing in this community. Much like Said (1975) associated novel beginnings in literature with the reconfiguration of previous works, Jackson demonstrated that African American dancers tend to establish a unique sense of self by renegotiating movements circulating within their community. In other words, they not only referenced past steps but built upon them, giving them new meaning and identity. Hurston (1934/1970) similarly pointed out that one of the most notable characteristics of “true” African American expression was “originality” (p.27-28), by which she meant “the modification of ideas” (p. 28) and “the will to

adorn" (p. 24). Brown paid homage to this characteristic as it related to dancing in his music, as well, as when in his 1967 hit "There Was a Time" he gave a venerable history of African American social dances such as the "Camel Walk," "Mashed Potato," and "Boogaloo," but ended by exalting his own personal contribution to the dancefloor: "Sometimes I dance, sometimes I clown / But you can bet you haven't seen nothing yet / Until you see me do the James Brown."[15]

Indeed, this framework of individuation was at the heart of funk, both sonically and physically, as listeners were encouraged to come together, tap into their emotion, leave their mark on the dancefloor, and free their bodies from inhibition. Even the term "funk" itself referred to a foul body odor (often produced from the sweat of movement) that mainstream propriety would have one deodorize and cover up. As dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2012) has explained, "'Funk' accurately described the experience of its musical and corporeal provocation, as a deeply etched, full-bodied musicality that enacted the awesome energy of serious soulful style" (p. 138). And dance was not only an addendum to funk but often the source of the music itself. As many of Brown's early bandmates recall, The Godfather of Soul paid close attention to dancers in the crowd wherever he toured, picking up new steps and grooves. "The steps inspired the music," stated JC Davis, of the original James Brown Band. "A song inspired by an action, a way to put your little thing over on what they did. But first came the dance" (Smith, 2012, p. 356). As in earlier iterations of African American culture, funk music emerged from within this working-class "ring" of collective dancing (Floyd, 1991) and, by the turn of the 1970s, Brown's innovations on and off the dancefloor—and their cultivation by

[15] Bolden (2013) noted how Brown similarly venerates a list of popular social dances, before calling attention to his own unique performative style, in his 1965 hit "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," which is commonly regarded as one of the first songs to usher in the arrival of funk (p. 14).

subsequent artists—symbolized the values of independence, pride, and self-expression felt by young African Americans coming of age during this period. It is, thus, no accident that when asked who was the first b-boy, many of those who developed breaking in The Bronx would emphatically respond, “James Brown” (Batey, 2011; del Barco, 2002).

When in Rome

In a 2015 interview, the widely recognized “founding father” of hip-hop, Clive “DJ Kool Herc” Campbell, had this to say when asked about James Brown: “Well, that’s my man. That’s the father” (Combat Jack, 2015). Here was the celebrated progenitor of the hip-hop movement giving paternal credit to another, further demonstrating the difficulty of pinpointing a “pure” beginning to any historical phenomenon. “I was listening to American music in Jamaica and my favorite artist was James Brown,” Herc explained. “That’s who inspired me” (Davey D, 1989, para. 11). Even as a child in the Caribbean, what stood out to Herc was the bandleader’s energy, individuality, and, as he explained it, “I liked what he was saying about Black people” (Wilson, 2015). When Herc’s family moved to The Bronx in the tumultuous late 1960s, the funk movement pioneered by Brown would take on an added significance in his life.

Being a young Jamaican immigrant in New York during this period was not easy for Herc, initially. He recalls being ridiculed by his African American peers for his foreign accent, fashion, and hobbies (Combat Jack, 2015). However, funk provided an avenue for him to embody new values of modernity and urban assimilation. “I’m in Rome, I got to do what the Romans do,” is how he has commonly summed up his experience during those early years (Broughton, 1998). Herc went on to make friends and attend local teenage parties in his West Bronx neighborhood, picking up the latest slang, fashion, and dance moves being done to the

music of The Isley Brothers, Kool & The Gang, The Jackson 5, and, of course, James Brown (Broughton 1998). He also adopted the alias "Kool Herc" and began writing it on walls and trains throughout the city, participating in yet another defiant, working-class movement which developed among New York City youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s (IGTimes, 1996). Through these community-based expressions, Herc began formulating an alternative sense of self and elicited admiration and acceptance from his peers.

It is worth pausing to stress here that, contrary to what has been written in the media and academia (Chang, 2005; Hebdige, 1987), Herc did not transmute Jamaican culture to The Bronx. Rather, he immersed himself in localized articulations of African American identity. Although he is very proud of his Jamaican heritage, Herc has consistently denied its connection to the beginnings of hip-hop. For example, when journalist Steven Hager (1984) asked him about rap originating from reggae in the early 1980s, Herc responded in a perplexed fashion saying, "Jamaican toasting? Naw, naw. No connection there. I couldn't play reggae in the Bronx. People wouldn't accept it. The inspiration for rap is James Brown and the album *Hustler's Convention*" (p. 45). Since then, Herc has repeatedly pointed out that he was only thirteen years old when he moved to the United States and, thus, never directly experienced sound system parties in Kingston (Broughton, 1998). And, indeed, there was no need for him to do so, as DJing had been widely practiced in New York since at least the early 1960s (Brewster & Broughton, 2010). In addition, Herc has revealed that being Jamaican in The Bronx was not "fashionable" when he was growing up and that, although he never hid his roots, he quickly adapted himself to his newfound environment. "I was talking so good, Jamaicans didn't believe I was Jamaican," he explained in a recent interview (Combat Jack, 2015). Herc's testimony along these lines reveals that he points to African American culture as the foundation for his development of hip-hop.

Unfortunately, the skewed narrative that Herc "transferred," "imported," or "adapted" a Jamaican style of playing music to The Bronx persists among most scholars and journalists, despite the lack of corroborating evidence and Herc's own denial of this narrative.[16]

Correcting this skewed Jamaican origin story is important not only for understanding Herc's early influences but also the way in which he constructed his identity as a young *dancer*. Listening to music and participating in social gatherings became an important part of Herc's upbringing in The Bronx and, by the early 1970s, he had gone from attending small, neighborhood functions to leading clubs throughout the city, often in the company of influential African American aerosol writers such as PHASE 2, SUPER KOOL 223, UNCLE RICH, EL MARKO 174, and SWEET DUKE 161. When asked how he got his start in hip-hop, Herc has consistently pointed to his involvement in writing and dancing: "All them guys, we used to like music," he has explained. "We used to *dance*. We liked to dance. After we start bombing places, little trains and stuff like that, we go hang out in The Puzzle or somewhere downtown: Nemo's, Nell Gwynn's, places like that" (Combat Jack, 2015). Just as they took the alphabet beyond its confines through stylized renditions of their nicknames, these young Bronxites expressed themselves in unrestricted ways when dancing, as well. Like other partygoers, they socialized and did the latest popular steps, but also went beyond them with individualized and unconventional movements, particularly during the climactic sections of funk-based music. This was in the same vein, although not necessarily the same movement, as James Brown and the community of dancers he drew his inspiration from. In The Bronx, they called it "freestyling," "turning the party out," or "going off," and it was here, in the working-class African American

[16] For a rare discussion of the unwarranted emphasis on such Jamaican "origins" in hip-hop scholarship, see Katz (2012, p. 26).

teenage parties of the early 1970s, that the seeds of what would become known as "breaking" were sown (PHASE 2, 2010).

"It's Turnout Time at the P.T."

During the early 1970s, there were several community-based clubs throughout The Bronx—with names such as The Puzzle, The Shaft, The Rat Hole, and Soulseville (later known as The Hevalo)—where young African Americans would gather, socialize, and dance to an array of soul, funk, and R&B records ("The Souls," n.d.). According to Hazzard-Gordon (1990), such distinctly working-class dance spaces, which she called "jooks," have long been at the core of African American cultural creation. She traced their emergence to the post-Reconstruction period, when honky tonks, after hours spots, rent parties, record hops, go-go's, and other expressive arenas provided a key forum for African Americans to develop cultural practices independent from mainstream standards. It is my contention that this "jook continuum" continued to manifest itself in the form of largely autonomous nightclubs and discotheques in The Bronx in the early 1970s, which, as in the past, served as the institutional foundation for alternative forms of African American cultural expression.[17]

One of the largest and most well-known of these clubs at the time was the Plaza Tunnel (P.T.), located in the basement of the Grand Concourse Plaza Hotel in the West Bronx. For much

[17] It is worth nothing that the music being played in African American clubs and parties throughout New York during this time was also being adopted by white DJs such as David Mancuso in Manhattan. The underground events he threw for a largely African American gay audience in his downtown loft garnered a strong following, and were soon followed by other DJs who modeled their selections after him. This eventually gave way to what would become known as "disco" (short for "discotheque"), which is itself named after the modern manifestation of the jook continuum (Lawrence, 2003). As described in a feature story in *New York Magazine* at the time, "The regeneration of the New York discotheque began in the early seventies, when midtown dance halls like the Jungle and the Headrest began to draw black people, and their music, away from increasingly expensive Harlem live entertainment" (Jacobson, 1974, p. 46). Thus, the historic practices cultivated in African American dance spaces in New York branched out to form another major musical movement at around the same time that hip-hop was coalescing in The Bronx.

of the borough's history, this hotel housed prominent politicians, businessmen, and New York Yankee baseball players. However, given the demographic shifts in the region in the 1960s, the hotel found it increasingly difficult to fill its halls with affluent guests. Instead, it began catering to the working-class African American and Latino/a residents who were populating the borough. It also turned toward the government for revenue by taking in welfare recipients and victims of the growing fire epidemic in the city (Jonnes, 2002). Ironically, this included Herc's own family, who were temporarily relocated to the hotel after their East Tremont apartment burned down in the late 1960s. They stayed there until they were relocated to a new apartment at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the West Bronx, where Herc would later famously throw his first parties (Marshall, 2007).

However, at the turn of the 1970s, Herc was still a writer and a dancer, not a DJ. Like other teenagers in The Bronx, he would go to the Plaza Tunnel on weekends to move to the music provided by DJ John Brown, a fellow high school classmate of his. Herc's recollections of the club suggest that it was an underground space, both figuratively and literally. Attendees—who were overwhelmingly African American—would go downstairs into a large, dimly lit room with just one strobe light and the red glow of exit signs illuminating its halls (Broughton, 1998). Crowds of up to 400-500 people would fit inside this dark space, according to Herc, and spend the night dancing to funk-based records such as "It's Just Begun" (1970) by The Jimmy Castor Bunch, "Get Into Something" (1970) by The Isley Brothers, and "Moment of Truth" (1971) by Earth, Wind, and Fire (Combat Jack, 2015). These tracks would be fused with an eclectic mix of soul and R&B records, as well as what author Nelson George (1988) has called "white Negro" rock music (p. 110): "Get Ready" (1970) by Rare Earth, "Maggie" (1970) by Redbone, and "I'm a Man" (1971) by Chicago (Hager, 1984; PHASE 2, 2017b, 2017c). Again, this eclectic mix

exemplified the mood of cultural fusion and alternative subjectivity being expressed within the African American community during this period. In addition, as the instrumentation of these records intensified, certain partygoers would react with dynamic and unorthodox movements. They would "go off," matching the high energy of a song with dancing that equally went beyond the bounds of standardized performance. The more extraordinary their personal style, the more attention they would garner, often to the point that people would cheer and crowd around the most exuberant dancers. Like the spirit of funk itself, such individualized dancing exuded independence, irreverence, and intensity, with practitioners being encouraged to cultivate their own corporeal subjectivity, rather than simply regurgitating proscribed steps.

Some invested so heavily in this subjectivity that they passionately guarded their moves from would-be imitators. "In my little neighborhood, you would get beat up for copying a guy's moves. That's how serious that dancing was," explained Coke La Rock, a close friend of Herc's who accompanied him to parties at the Plaza Tunnel and other local venues (Hager, 2010). Critical theorist Fumi Okiji (2018) has described how this pattern of placing a premium on individuality within African American culture, which has been seen throughout history, does not occur in social isolation but, rather, in a community context where artists seek to reconfigure past practices in their own distinct voice. Thus, "going off" at parties in The Bronx of the early 1970s was a way for young people to creatively refashion their cultural resources and develop a unique sense of self that was recognized by others. The community forbade the copying of someone else's moves, as it was deemed to be an attack on their very identity (Vernon, 2018, p. 108). Interestingly, dance scholar Cynthia Novack (1990) similarly pointed out how even theatrical dancers during this period—often influenced by African American practices—began to gravitate toward various forms of community-based, independent, and experimental performances. Rather

than privileging the directives of a choreographer, she noted how many dancers began seeking new movement techniques rooted in improvisation and nonstandard choreography. In this way, challenges to traditional forms of authority were taking place in emancipatory practices on a wide range of dancefloors in the early 1970s.

In Bronx-based venues such as the Plaza Tunnel, Puzzle, Shaft, and other local discotheques, such individualized "freestyle" performances often occurred upright, with various steps, spins, slides, and gestures interspersed throughout. However, certain practitioners also began to experiment with brief transitions to the floor. Herc's contemporary PHASE 2 specifically identified dancing at the Plaza Tunnel as the forerunner to the floor-based breaking that would later engulf the borough:

> DJs like John Brown would shout-out over a James Brown song: "It's turnout time at the P.T., turnout time at the P.T." That scene definitely set the stage for what became the b-boy. Plaza Tunnel was where this one cat name Walter introduced "The Drop," a move b-boys are still doing to this day. (Mansbach, 2005, para. 46)

As the name implies, the "drop" (also widely referred to as a "pin drop") was a way of transitioning to the ground. A dancer would place their foot behind the opposite knee and squat down until the ball of their connected foot touched the floor. In this cross-legged, crouched position, dancers would push off their feet and spin back upright. Although a version of this move was performed by African American jazz dancers in the early 20th century—and by Russian folk dancers even prior to that[18]—for young people in The Bronx, it was a novel,

[18] In their seminal book *Jazz Dance*, Marshall and Jean Stearns (1968/1994) called this move a "knee-drop" and described it as a Russian folk step that was performed by acrobatic jazz dancers in the 1930s (p. 268). Similarly, veteran jazz dancer Charles "Honi" Coles associated breaking in the 1980s with Cossack dancers of the early 20th century, wondering how, "in the absence of vaudeville and 'the acts,'" just "where the current break dancers discovered all those steps" (Horosko, 1984, p. 96). Thus, although it can be said that components of the "pin drop" likely trace back to Russian traditions, what is more important to note here is that the move was uniquely adopted

acrobatic new feat to fuse into dance sequences. The unexpected nature of the drop—with one foot concealed behind the other during the fall—and the rapid, rotating recovery of a dancer spinning back upright caught the attention of audiences, as many began picking up the move and doing their own personal variation of it. For instance, some would demonstrate their physical skill with the drop by jumping high in the air before coming down to the floor, while others would emphasize the number of rotations they could do when spinning up from it. Others would accentuate the move with a comedic gesture or mimic a famous popular cultural character as they dropped. In either case, through such varying displays, the pin drop quickly spread to become a sensation among African American youth in The Bronx and, as with other African American expressive practices before it, the movement vocabulary of breaking began to gradually consolidate through this communal context of individuation (Jackson, 2001).

In addition, as such dynamic displays went beyond the bounds of conventional dance formations, other modes of dancefloor interaction began to develop. Namely, a tradition of spontaneously challenging and outdoing an opponent, which became known locally as "burning." The legacy of "competitive interaction" (Malone, 1996, p.5) seen throughout working-class African American dance history reemerged once again within this youth-oriented practice, as teenagers tested one another through various unconventional gestures and movements. For instance, one might put a more creative twist on a popular step, act out a humiliating insult, or drop to the floor and come back up with their hand directly in an opponent's face. These mostly upright sequences could be interpreted as displaying everything

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and refashioned by African American dancers as early as the 1930s. More than the movement of the drop alone, what matters is the context in which it was performed. As Levine (1978) convincingly argued in regard to African American folk tales, "It is not necessary for a people to originate or invent all or even most of the elements of their culture. It is necessary only that these components become their own, embedded in their traditions, expressive of their world view and life style" (p. 24).

from wit and playfulness to aggression and intensity. It all depended on the situation, but the main aim throughout was to exchange with a competitor in your own unique way. "Before we called it 'breaking,' it was known as 'going off' or 'burning,'" explained PHASE 2 in Hager's (1984) early study of the hip-hop movement. "It was all about taking a guy out, burning him. The big phrase was 'I'm gonna turn this party out'" (p. 33). At around this same time, aerosol artists such as PHASE 2 were pioneering complex renditions of their nicknames on subway cars, putting outlines over their signatures and filling them in with greater color and design. Such elaborate murals were likewise called "burners" and, the act of outdoing another artist with them was known as "burning" (IGTimes, 1996, p. 4). Thus, whether in terms of painting on trains or dancing in clubs, the attitude of leaving your mark creatively and making your presence felt was encapsulated in the shared terminology of both expressions.

Young women were also heavily involved in this "burning" stage of breaking. In fact, many practitioners suggest that it was often *specifically* the girls who would challenge the guys on the dancefloor. Take, for example, this early account from Coke La Rock, describing how Kool Herc and he became friends by going to clubs such as the Plaza Tunnel and dancing against girls:

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

La Rock is referring here to a time before Herc and he began throwing their own parties, demonstrating how burning was an underground practice common among young people in the

borough even before the advent of what came to be known as hip-hop. And girls were not simply passive onlookers or partners for guys at clubs where such dancing would take place. As DJ Tyrone the Mixologist from the Southeast Bronx attests, “There was girls burning guys first” (Disco Daddy, 2017d), while early MC Kool Kyle from the North Bronx remembers going to parties where, “we’d grab a bunch of cute girls and we’d do these moves. We’d burn these girls” (Disco Daddy, 2017a). These are testimonies from different regions of the borough, given independent from one another, corroborating the fact that young women were widely engaged in the competitive acts of burning so often assumed to be an expression of masculinity by commentators (Banes, 1981; LaBoskey, 2001). Once again, this speaks to the alternative subjectivity being embodied by working-class African Americans during this period. Indeed, as Johnson (2014) has convincingly argued, female involvement in breaking should not be assessed according to dominant Western standards but, rather, according to what she called “badass femininity”: confident and, at times, confrontational performativity, which goes against mainstream notions of “proper” and “ladylike” behavior, that has been seen in African American culture historically. There are numerous other testimonies regarding the prominent participation of females in early breaking that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Five. For now, suffice it to say that the common assumption that the dance was created exclusively by men as an assertion of “male dominance” and “masculinity” (Hazzard-Donald, 1996, p. 225) is undermined by the testimony of hip-hop’s founding practitioners.

Criminalizing Culture

As the above discussion of breaking’s early development illustrates, a new generation of African American youth came to the fore in the late 1960s and early 1970s—at the same time

that The Bronx was undergoing rapid demographic transformation—and began expressing themselves in assertive and dynamic ways. The weekend parties at the Plaza Tunnel epitomized these changes both culturally and socially. Here was a formerly prestigious establishment for middle-class, white residents transformed into a nightclub for African American teenagers, where a diverse repertoire of funk, soul, and rock records could be heard on a weekly basis. Innovative new forms of expression—ranging from individualized dancing to microphone shout-outs—were also fostered within this underground atmosphere, helping set the stage for what would later become known as hip-hop (PHASE 2, 2010). And just as the media would later mischaracterize breaking as an outgrowth of criminality (Lakewood, forthcoming), the congregation of young African Americans at the Plaza Tunnel was met with denunciations by residents and state authorities during this earlier era.

In March 1973, the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs revoked the Plaza Tunnel's cabaret license after receiving complaints from neighbors that attendees were causing "annoyance, abuse and harassment" in the area (*900 G.C. Affiliates v. City of New York*, 1973). It was alleged that partygoers "had blocked the sidewalk, fought, made noise and intimidated" passersby (Corry, 1973, p. 45). As a result, the city sent inspectors to the venue and police began issuing arrests for minor "parking summons," "public intoxication," and "disorderly conduct" (Fowler, 1973, p. 29). The Plaza Tunnel's staff, however, insisted that they never had any problems on their premises and that the charges were racially motivated. One club official even told the *New York Times* that, "The people who live around here, they're trying to turn the clock back, make the neighborhood the way it was 25 years ago. That's why they're complaining" (Corry, 1973, p. 45). Such suspicions were reaffirmed by the paranoia local interviewees expressed in the same report. "There were a lot of colored people outside," said an elderly widow

who passed by the nightclub. “They may have been all right but you can never tell. I know that some of them looked drunk. I got away as fast as I could” (p. 86). Even a decade later, the Concourse Plaza Hotel’s owner Joseph Caspi maintained that racism was to blame for the club’s shutdown. “My personal opinion is that the local politicians were able to bring enough pressure to stop the blacks being in the hotel,” Caspi explained, adding that they were “hoping they might retard change in the neighborhood” (Jonnes, 2002, p. 285). Legal appeals were issued to overturn the city’s revocation but to no avail. The State Supreme Court Justice who ultimately upheld the decision was himself a resident of the Grand Concourse and refused to recuse himself (Corry, 1973, p. 45). By the summer of 1973, after only two years of operation, the doors of the Plaza Tunnel were permanently closed (“Revoking,” 1973).

Although the controversy surrounding this case was well documented at the time, hip-hop scholars today have, unfortunately, placed much of the blame for the club’s demise on African Americans youth. Specifically, it is claimed that members of the Black Spades gang would “intimidate the crowd” at the Plaza Tunnel (Hager, 1984, p. 31) and “overrun the floor” when the DJ would play “Soul Power” (1971) by James Brown (Chang, 2005, p. 77). Although Herc himself often attributes the closure of various clubs in The Bronx to gang intimidation, he never specifically mentions the Plaza Tunnel (Gonzalez, 1999). Nor is there any mention of gang activity in any of the available legal records related to the revocation of the Plaza Tunnel’s license. Furthermore, a prominent member of the Black Spades recently explained that it would have been too risky for them to engage in anything aside from partying at such a prominent venue like the Plaza Tunnel—which, at the time, was located across the street from the Bronx County Courthouse. “We would dance, that’s about it,” he recalled. “There was no fighting or

nothing in there" (Michael Waynetv, 2017). As such, it is difficult to determine conclusively what, if any, role gangs played in the club's shutdown.

However, public records suggest that the club's closure was due to older, mostly white, residents complaining about the congregation of young African Americans in their neighborhood. Once again, conceptions of cultural difference played a critical role in generating such opposition, as the stability of this "changing neighborhood" was deemed to be under attack by the nighttime activities of African American teenagers. Legal records even show that a few minor complaints—about patrons blocking the sidewalk and being a public nuisance—were enough for the city to revoke the club's cabaret license, using technical violations such as failing to keep a roster of each employees on call as a justification (*900 G.C. Affiliates v. City of New York*, 1973). As was the case more generally during this period,[19] the accusations that partygoers were engaged in social disturbances seems not to have ever been substantiated through any legal evidence. Instead, the city's crackdown corresponded with the emerging national discourse of working-class African American "social pathology" (Hinton, 2016), with local authorities presuming that such gatherings posed a risk to public order and conjuring up charges to shut down the club. Sadly, like the decline of The Bronx itself, this narrative of delinquency and criminality has persisted in leading hip-hop histories, as well, with most commentators attributing the demise of the Plaza Tunnel to African American gangs, while the racially charged complaints of local residents have gone completely unaccounted for.

[19] Several popular discos in downtown Manhattan, which catered to a largely African American, Latino/a, and gay clientele, similarly faced closures and the revocation of their licenses in the early 1970s. For example, the famous Loft disco was repeatedly shut down by the police due to residents in the area complaining about noise and quality of life disturbances. A similar fate met influential discos such as the Sanctuary, Tambourine, and Superstar (see Hae, 2012, pp. 55-59).

Furthermore, this dominant discourse of criminality has proven so powerful that it is often used to explain the emergence of breaking itself. For instance, scholars and commentators regularly attribute the beginnings of the dance to gang formations, fantastically asserting that they transformed fighting into dancing and reduced violence through artistic expression (Chang, 2005; Fricke & Ahearn, 2002; Hager, 1984). However, as the above analysis demonstrates, breaking had nothing to do with gang activity. On the contrary, it was a product of the longstanding legacy of working-class African American cultural expression. Indeed, the competitive displays of both young women and men involved in "freestyling," "burning," and "going off" during this period were reminiscent of the "challenge dances" of hoofers (Stearns, 1968/1994), ballroom contests of swing dancers (Erenberg, 1998), and playing of the dozens (Brown, 1977) that have long been exhibited in working-class African American communities. Thus, while breaking's sensibilities may be deemed "outlaw," in terms of existing outside the confines of Western norms (Evans, 1993; Johnson, 2018), the widespread claim that there was a causal relationship between gangs and hip-hop is unsubstantiated by the testimony of the movement's founders (Aprahamian, 2019).

In addition, although breaking was certainly informed by the broader climate of discrimination and cultural contestation taking place in The Bronx during this period, I would not attribute the dance's emergence to such external oppression, as is common in hip-hop studies (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). Rather, breaking's development was overwhelmingly centered on the style, pleasure, and sense of self African Americans derived from their expressions communally (Kelley 1997; Schloss, 2004). Young people dancing at clubs such as the Plaza Tunnel were not venting out in protest against prejudice but, rather, exercising what Paul Willis calls "symbolic creativity"—the construction of identity, articulation of aesthetics, and

association with peers (cited in Kelley, 1997, p. 41). They were expressing "their own soul-world" and "dance[d] like flame" as Hughes (1926) predicted they would, especially given the broader climate of social ferment and self-affirmation taking place around them. Many of these early practitioners were not from destitute backgrounds either[20] but, rather, from working-class families who were persevering despite the obstacles being put before them. And it was this sense of community and cultural continuity that was the basis for their kinesthetic expressions.

Of course, African American youth were also aware of the racism and marginalization taking place in The Bronx and beyond, only furthering their contempt for societal constrictions. Given the distance they maintained from mainstream society, they were not deterred from expressing themselves in alternative ways. In fact, young African Americans were increasingly emphasizing pride in who they were during this period, both culturally and individually. Thus, breaking emerged from a broader African American cultural continuum and contributed to it with the unique subjectivity of Bronx youth in the early 1970s: their distinct interpretation of funk-based music, individualized expression, local terminology, shared movement vocabulary, and heightened emphasis on assertive identity. It was both an embodiment of a cultural past and

[20] The narrative that hip-hop emerged within "the decaying surfaces of post-industrial urban America" (Potter, 1995) or that its practitioners "lived in an environment that had become comparable to the one in *Lord of the Flies* where children stranded on an island with no adult guidance create a new, brutal social order of their own" (Reeves, 2008) has been grossly exaggerated. For example, Herc was the oldest of six children in a two-parent family, with his father employed as a mechanic for Clark's Equipment Company in Queens and his mother working as a nurse. The 1520 Sedgwick Avenue apartment where they lived was in the West, not the South, Bronx and was part of New York's Mitchell-Lama Housing Program to support middle-income residents. It was not an "overcrowded, dilapidated tower" as is often suggested in the media and academia (Kemp-Habib, 2016). Instead, it was a newly built apartment for working families. As Cholly Rock from the Zulu Kings further explains, "The stereotypical narrative is, you know, they show the Bronx as just the South Bronx with burnt out buildings and all this stuff. And that these deprived kids made this culture because they didn't have anything. That's a nice, romantic, stereotypical version of it but the reality is there are parts of the Bronx, where I lived in the North Bronx, where people had private houses, people had jobs, had middle-class things" (Profo, 2017). Such refutations of the overly dramatized image of The Bronx as a "wasteland" (Chang, 2005, p. 17) are common among those who were directly involved in hip-hop in the early 1970s.

a reinterpretation of it, just as it was shaped by socioeconomic conditions and, at the same time, transcended them.

While the closure of the Plaza Tunnel unjustly deprived African American teenagers in The Bronx of an important venue for congregating together, it by no means stopped their symbolic creativity. Instead, such suppression gave way to more localized forms of expression and congregation, with the energy of clubs such as the Plaza Tunnel carried over into smaller jook spaces, neighborhood centers, and house parties where teenagers continued to "freestyle," "burn," and "go off." The visceral pleasure of dancing, socializing, and cultivating a sense of personal identity remained motivating enough factors for these young people to resist external attempts to stifle their expressions. And by August 1973, just a few months after the Plaza Tunnel had closed, Kool Herc's younger sister, Cindy, would provide a new forum where the musical and cultural energy harnessed in these community spaces would be propelled even further.

Chapter Three

"From the Floor Up": Movement and Music in the Era of Herc

The story of how Cindy Campbell decided to host a party on August 11, 1973, and asked her older brother Kool Herc to DJ, thus setting in motion the movement that would become known as "hip-hop," has been well documented (Marshall, 2007). What has not been is the cultural context from which this beginning emerged. Instead of discussing the social and racial dynamics in The Bronx at the turn of the 1970s, and, more importantly, the distinctly African American expressions being forged by young people during this period, most commentators have focused on the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway (Chang, 2005), street gang violence (Fricke & Ahearn, 2002), and the loss of manufacturing jobs as setting the stage for hip-hop (Rose, 1994). However, the movement that Herc spearheaded did not emerge as a response to such external conditions or government policies. Rather, it developed from a deeply rooted African American cultural tradition of kinesthetic and musical expression, manifested in The Bronx in a climate of demographic transformation and cultural contestation.

Herc's own interpretation of his rise as a DJ is very telling in this regard. "I'm coming up after the dust," is how he commonly characterizes his early experience, referring to the closure of prominent African American clubs such as the Plaza Tunnel (Combat Jack, 2015). He positions his transition to being a DJ within the vacuum left by such closures: "So I was the guy who kind of resurrected the music again, on the West side [of The Bronx]," is how he explained his contributions, suggesting that his parties were an extension of the music and dancing already taking place within the borough (Gonzalez, 1999b, p. 2).

Herc's background as a seasoned *dancer* was integral to this dual process of sustaining preexisting cultural expressions while also making profound contributions to them. "This how I became a DJ: I was breakdancing," he explained in a 1997 radio interview. "I was dancing and dancing, and knowing the records and why the DJ's not playing certain records. And that's how I got behind the turntable" (Will C, 2018). Everything from the songs he chose to play for his audience to the way he played them were informed by his previous experiences, both positive and negative, on dancefloors throughout The Bronx. Once again, it is important to quote Herc directly on this matter.

> I came from a dancer's point of view. I wasn't a DJ before I started doing all of that. I was a dancer. I danced. I was in the audience hearing, "How come he don't have that record? Why he took off the record at that point?" So, with all that going on out there in the audience, which I'm a part of, I took that gripe behind the turntables. Cause I'm always in the dancefloor's interest. (JaapenFrank, 2009)

Unfortunately, most historical treatments of hip-hop have ignored Herc's dance background. Instead, several unsubstantiated theories have been put forth to explain his emergence, including the notions that he "transmuted" a new style of playing music from Jamaica (Chang, 2005), spun records with percussive "points of rupture" in response to dislocation (Rose, 1994), or was inspired to play music from Latino/a street drummers (Rivera, 2003). By not attending to Herc's experiences as a dancer, these theories largely distort the cultural elements that were refashioned in the hip-hop movement. They also deny Herc and other pioneers the opportunity to share "the story from the basement" (Light, 2016, para. 8), as Grandmaster Flash put it, substituting speculative assertions in the place of practitioner testimony. Again, clarifying such historical

obfuscation requires centering the voices of hip-hop's founders and examining the broader working-class African American traditions in which they grounded their expressions.

In this chapter, I argue that hip-hop was, first and foremost, a youth-based movement rooted in local articulations of African American music and *dance*. Although breaking was not the only style of dance practiced at early hip-hop parties, it was certainly one of the most central to the musical innovations Herc would introduce. Indeed, contrary to the notion that the dance emerged as a *response* to Herc's style of playing music (Ewoodzie, 2018, p. 41; Thompson, 1996, p. 216; Wheeler, 2016), I argue that breaking was a *determining factor* in inspiring such musical choices in the first place. As a practitioner himself, Herc understood the connection between rhythm and movement, and was motivated to play records that would further invoke excitement and energy on his dancefloor. In turn, the autonomous, club-like atmosphere he provided his young audiences helped significantly enhance breaking's development. Thus, in a reciprocal relationship seen throughout African American cultural history, music and dance worked in tandem to inspire new ways of moving, listening, and meaning making in the era of Herc.

I further argue that this joint innovation of music and dance was rooted in the refashioning of African American cultural resources, institutional settings, and performative practices. Although many of hip-hop's expressive elements already existed, it was the unique way they were refashioned and formulated within the institutional settings Herc provided that sparked a new cultural beginning. Accordingly, I connect the early development of breaking with the broader history of African American jook spaces (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990) and their corresponding facilitation of alternative forms of expression. In so doing, I hope to peel back the layers of obfuscation that have sedimented around the dance, while also offering new insights

into the jook continuum that was central to its development. Finally, I argue that, as with previous African American art forms such as the blues, jazz, and funk, the musical sounds, technical innovations, and social impetus of early hip-hop cannot be adequately understood without considering the pivotal role dancing played in its development.

Deciphering the "Break"

Before discussing the evolution of breaking during the era of Herc's emergence as a DJ, it is important to discuss the etymology of this label itself, given its continuing use among dancers, its signification of meaning within the form, and its mischaracterization in dominant discourse. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, references to "breaking" existed in The Bronx even prior to Kool Herc getting behind the turntables, as the unconventional moves of a select few partygoers during the climactic sections of funk-based music were interchangeably referred to as "going off," "freestyling," "burning," and, most notably, "breaking" (PHASE 2, 1999). Such recollections by early practitioners suggest that, contrary to what has been written in most hip-hop histories, the term breaking did not stem from the "rupture of rhythmic continuity" in the records DJs played (Rose, 1994, p. 47) nor from the "breakdown sections" of songs (Ewoodzie, 2018, p. 17). Indeed, breaking did not relate to music or dancing at all, initially. Instead, the term stemmed from African American slang in The Bronx, at the time, which referred to extreme activity.

This point is made clear in the documentary *The Freshest Kids: A History of the B-Boy* (2002), which dedicates an entire section, titled "The Break," to this question. Recognizing the many contradictory claims regarding the meaning of the term, the producers of the film purposefully juxtaposed testimony from early African American practitioners with figures who

gained prominence during the 1980s commercialization of the dance. In one telling scene, pioneering aerosol artist and breaker PHASE 2 is sitting next to Crazy Legs, from the Rock Steady Crew, explaining to him that in the early 1970s, "We used to say, 'Why you breakin' on me? Why's my mom breakin' on me? Why you actin' crazy?' It really just meant doing shit above normal." A few frames later, GrandMixer DXT, an early b-boy who went on to become a pioneering turntablist, described how the word was used in everyday life. "When somebody gets mad," he explained, people would say, "Yo, he's breakin'. Stop breakin' man." Finally, Kool Herc—who is credited with coining the accompanying "b-boy/b-girl" (or "break boy"/"break girl") terminology—explicitly stated, "It didn't come from 'breaks' on the record. It came from, this man 'broke.' He went to . . . the breaking point. You understand? So, we just used that exaggeration of that term to the dancing" (Israel, 2002).

Even in the early 1980s, when breaking first gained media exposure, this same definition held sway among many practitioners. For example, in Sally Banes' (1981) influential early article on the dance, she quoted an unnamed b-boy explaining that, "Breaking means going crazy on the floor. It means making a style for yourself" (p. 31). A few years later, Marlow (1984) explained that "breaking" was a 1970s term among inner city youth in reference to "outbursts of anger," adding that, like "go-off," the term was later applied to "wild" and "hot dancers" in a party who gathered crowds around them (p. 14). These definitions stand quite apart from the widespread misconception that "breakdance" emerged as a way of "executing moves that imitated the rupture in rhythmic continuity as it was highlighted in the musical break" (Rose, 1994, p. 47), or the more far-fetched notion that it stemmed from gangs taking a "break" from "street warfare" to "fight with steps rather than weapons" (Haskins, 1985, p. 10-11).

As has been seen historically from “hoofing” and “swinging” to “popping” and “krumping,” breaking was simply the latest African American vernacular term applied to the dynamic movement of *dancers*. Cultural anthropologist Thomas Kochman (1972) discussed how working-class African Americans have long utilized such words expressing qualities of rapid and unrestricted movement—as opposed to static or impeded expression—as favorable labels for their kinetic activities. Clarifying breaking’s etymology, thus, demonstrates how coterminous the label was with broader African American traditions, while also exuding the dance’s distinct character. As I discuss below, the percussive records b-boys and b-girls would break to eventually became known as “breakin’ beats,” “b-beats,” or simply “breaks,” further demonstrating the causal influence dancing had on the musical innovations of hip-hop DJs.

However, in the early 1970s, when people would break at parties, it meant that they were performing stylized movements that transcended audience expectations. While most partygoers would do more formalized partner dances such as The Hustle, or loosely structured social dances such as the Washing Machine, Popcorn, Four Corners, Click Clack, and so on (Hager 1984, p. 33; Smith, 2016), a select few began performing highly individualized moves that went beyond categorization. They would shift away from couple formations and “freestyle” in the same vein as James Brown, but with their own individualized movements. In addition to often being more energetic and physically demanding, these movements stood out for their departure from what was generally considered “acceptable” in social dancing. For example, in his further attempt to explain such early displays, PHASE 2 is quoted in a documentary stating that, “Breaking is taking dancing to a level . . . [that] you could probably not dance with somebody because it’s a little too outrageous to be dancing with a girl” (Numata, 2005).

An upright move that seems to have emerged from this period, and which is still widely utilized among practitioners today, is a forward-lunging two-step which opens up the space needed for such individualized agency. Practitioners take a diagonal step forward with one foot, often extending their arms and lunging their hips forward when stepping, and then hunch back toward the center to perform the same movement with their opposite foot. If someone were to stand too close in front of a dancer performing this step, they would inevitably have sneaker marks on their feet. Pioneering MC Grandmaster Caz demonstrated this step in *The Freshet Kids* (2002) and, much like PHASE 2, explained that, "You couldn't really ask a girl to dance" when doing this move. In other words, this upright step "broke" the plane of traditional couple formations and signaled the arrival of a more individualized movement expression, which was not only visually appealing but a physical manifestation of the tenets enshrined in the concept of "breaking," or "doing shit above normal."

Like the pin drop discussed in the previous chapter, this forward-lunging two-step became a staple for many young people in The Bronx, with dancers adopting it and putting their own unique twist to it. The simplicity of the move allowed considerable room for creativity, with some performing it with an air of buoyancy while others might embellish it with arm movements, spins, or a change of direction with their feet. At the same time, some chose not to do the step at all, preferring to move side-to-side, shuffle their feet, or otherwise express their individuality in another manner (Douglas, 2020). During this period, there was no mandatory requirement for what to do when breaking, as the term itself symbolized going beyond the bounds of audience expectations and affirming one's personalized style. In other words, a dualistic process developed within the dance wherein two seemingly contradictory notions of individual agency and collective vocabulary complemented, rather than conflicted with, one

another. The wellspring of movements that resulted from dancers going beyond the norm in this fashion eventually led to new concepts and patterns that were further adapted and developed, eventually crystalizing into the convention of breaking itself.

According to dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2010), this formula of "performing the breaks" has been central to the perseverance of hip-hop and African American culture historically. "Expressive gestures in this idiom must somehow exceed the familiar for the break to succeed," he wrote when discussing breaking's aesthetic philosophy. "The apparition of excess is essential here. Among expert B-girls, what we think we see—and can't comprehend as really happening—becomes the standard for what is possible and what might be real" (p. 35). Indeed, much like the framework of individuation discussed in the previous chapter, pushing toward the unprecedented produced novel steps within breaking, helping create a new repertoire for subsequent practitioners to elaborate upon. In the Bronx, this meant upright dance steps such as those described above, as well as intermittent drops to the floor and competitive burns against opponents. Through these shared aesthetic practices, a common movement vocabulary began to take hold, alongside a continued emphasis on expanding breaking by "doing it your own way." Like James Brown and the funk movement which hip-hop emerged from, breaking exemplified a collective tradition of innovation through experimentation (Bolden, 2013) and it is for this reason that pioneers such as PHASE 2 maintained that, "The so called [sic] tradition has always been to break the mold. Even interpret a dance in your style. The rockers (breakers) who did that were the ones who got noticed the most and as well set the trends!!!" (PHASE 2, 2017a).

Again, as discussed in the previous chapter, these community-based practices of "performing the breaks" were well in existence throughout The Bronx by the time Herc began DJing. Indeed, Herc himself had developed his musical tastes and friendships as a dancer

engaged in such activity. Accordingly, he knew how to cater to the young crowds that would attend his sister's party and the functions that were to follow. This was, in fact, the very reason Cindy asked him to DJ in the first place. Not only did she want to save money by hiring her sibling to provide music but she knew that, as an experienced dancer, he had an ear for a range of soul- and funk-infused records that would make her party a success (Combat Jack, 2015; Gross, 2005).

The Shepherd and the Flock

The celebrated August 11th, 1973, party where Herc made his DJing debut has often been mistakenly described as a birthday celebration for Cindy (Batey, 2011; Hager, 1984, p. 32). However, it was in fact a back-to-school fundraiser that she had organized (Davey D, 2010). Although this may seem like a minor point, it is important to clarify as it bears upon the subsequent development of breaking and hip-hop culture.

Cindy was transitioning from junior high into high school and wanted to raise money to purchase new clothes to begin this new chapter of her adolescence (MC Debbie D, 2017). Many of those who attended her inaugural party were classmates and peers of hers from the local neighborhood, demonstrating the youth and working-class constituency from which hip-hop emanated from its inception. Indeed, Cindy herself often emphasizes that her parties were held on Saturdays in order not to conflict with school or work the next day. "Hip-hop came from humble beginnings," she explained in a recent interview. "It had everything to do with schooling, with the youth . . . teenagers having something to do" (MC Debbie D, 2017). Like Herc, she also interpreted her role in organizing hip-hop's founding party as one of service to the community, at a time when venues for youth in The Bronx were being closed—whether due to residential

complaints, gang intimidation, or financial hardship. As I will discuss in more detail throughout this study, such marginalization certainly affected the way breaking and hip-hop developed. However, in this section, I will discuss how Cindy and Herc succeeded in carving out an autonomous space for youth in the midst of such marginalization, helping carry on the tradition of jook-based cultural expression seen throughout African American history (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). I will also discuss how this process was guided by a drive for symbolic creativity, manifesting itself in everything from Herc's unique selection of funk-based music to the dynamic forms of dancing young people performed at his parties.

To begin, one of the most important, yet often overlooked, components of Cindy and Herc's successful "founding" party was their access to the recreation room of their parent's apartment building, at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the West Bronx—not the "South Bronx" as virtually every historical study erroneously asserts. Pioneering DJ GrandMixer DXT has attributed the confusion over the geographic location of this founding party to the racist discourse of criminality and European background of many of the early journalists who covered hip-hop:

> 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. When you walk out that door, there's a street, then there's some grass, and then there's the river. That's as west as you can get in The Bronx. That's where Kool Herc did his very first party . . . Most of the journalists who came into New York to interview the whole hip-hop scene were from Europe. They were European journalists and, subconsciously, racism played into that because they immediately thought that it happened in the most messed up areas of New York. 1520 is not broken down, burned down, abandoned buildings. It was not. (TheBeeShine, 2013)

Indeed, most practitioners who attended these early parties affirm that the Sedgwick Avenue location felt relatively safe and secluded to them, as it was in a calm, uncongested neighborhood of The Bronx, facing the Major Deegan Highway and Harlem River. For instance, pioneering b-boy Sasa recently explained that, “It’s a perfect place to party if you didn’t want to be bothered” (Nemesis, 2020), echoing other early practitioners who describe the Sedgwick Avenue area as a “residential” and “pedestrian” neighborhood (Allcity, 2020). This is important not only for correcting the misconception that hip-hop started in the South Bronx but also for recognizing how the geographic isolation of Herc and Cindy’s founding party contributed to the overall autonomy of the hip-hop movement that would emerge from it.

As a new development for working-class families, the 1520 Sedgwick Avenue building also provided its residents a ground-floor facility amenable to meetings and gatherings, with two bathrooms, a kitchen, large dancefloor, and separate room where Herc would set up his DJ equipment. Within this open setting, young people were able to express themselves more freely, with little concern about internal or external obstacles (Gross, 2005). For instance, Cindy did not have to worry about furniture getting in the way of dancers who wanted to break and go off, as was the case at most house parties. Chaperones and tolerant neighbors also proved to be manageable, as local friends and parents helped patrol the lobby to make sure nobody loitered or got out of hand (MC Debbie D, 2017). In addition, Herc borrowed a PA system from his father—who used it to set up sound equipment for a local R&B band (Combat Jack, 2015)—and this helped him project music loudly enough to make the rec room feel like a small club. Schloss (2004) and Katz (2012) have argued that accessing such DJ equipment was an expensive endeavor at the time, contradicting the widespread notion that hip-hoppers turned toward turntables because of financial hardship or cuts in school music programs (Gilroy, 1987, p. 211;

Keyes, 1996, p. 227; Rose, 1994, p. 34). Instead, Herc's access to DJ equipment was due to his family's support, his own desire to play records, and his sister's idea of hosting a party for the community. Such familial backing was essential to hip-hop's beginnings, as without access to the building space and sound equipment for this inaugural event, it can be speculated that hip-hop itself would have never developed.

Furthermore, by taking the initiative to throw their own independent party, Cindy and Herc effectively reconjured the spirit of working-class jook spaces seen throughout African American history. As in the rent parties of yesteryear, they used communal celebration to raise money for Cindy's back-to-school shopping, while circumventing the climate of suppression affecting local clubs such as the Plaza Tunnel—which had permanently closed only two months prior. By utilizing the recreation room in their West Bronx apartment, they could enjoy a night of music and dancing on their own terms, without concern for outside intervention or the approval of official authorities. Indeed, the importance of this autonomy was emphasized by Cindy herself when she stated, "If hip-hop didn't fly below the radar, it wouldn't have evolved to where it is today. They would've stopped it," referring to the movement's insulation from commercial and societal pressures (Davey D, 2010)

In addition, the musical tastes that Herc had developed over his years of dancing at local clubs provided him with a keen understanding of how to accommodate Cindy's young African American audience. He paid close attention to the dancefloor and—rather than playing reggae, as has falsely been claimed in leading hip-hop histories (Toop, 1984, p. 60)—put an emphasis on funk-based music to get people moving. Then, when it was time to slow things down, he reverted to more mellow soul and R&B records (Westwood, 1996). Such selections included both popular songs from the radio and more obscure tracks that were less familiar, yet nevertheless favorable

to his young followers. Some of these tracks are said to include “Give It Up or Turnit a Loose” (1970) by James Brown, “Scorpio” (1971) by Dennis Coffey & The Detroit Guitar Band, “Hot Pants” (1971) by Bobby Byrd, “Listen to Me” (1971) by Baby Huey, “Fencewalk” (1972) by Mandrill, “Shaft in Africa” (1973) by Johnny Pate, and ”Voodounon” (1973) by the Lafayette Afro-Rock Band (Gonzalez, 1999b, p. 4; Gross, 2005; Will C, 2018). As people in the crowd began to go off to these funk-based records, Herc and his close friend Coke La Rock would shout-out their names on the microphone, giving them even greater encouragement and accolades. Rather than being taken aback by these exuberant displays, Herc sought to facilitate them because, as he points out, “I used to do it too. I would jump out there in a circle and do my little thing” (Gross, 2005). He understood what it felt like to be a young dancer and prided himself on playing records for his attendees to enjoy. This is what Herc means when he says things such as, “I’m always in the dancefloor’s interest” (JaapenFrank, 2009) and “I’m busy playin’ and looking after the flock” (Combat Jack, 2015), an almost biblical metaphor he has used to describe his ascendance as a DJ.

By tapping into the African American cultural expressions he grew up with in this fashion, Kool Herc—who was eighteen at the time of Cindy’s back-to-school party—succeeded in providing a unique dance atmosphere for his teenage audience. He took the records circulating in local clubs, coupled them with several obscure, yet sonically familiar, songs, and reordered them in a manner that spurred his dancers to express themselves in more dynamic ways. In turn, Herc began to construct a unique identity for himself as a DJ, one that was situated at the intersection of local African American practices and his own individual agency. This further demonstrates how hip-hop did not emerge from Jamaican musical traditions, gang formations, or a series of anomalous events but, rather, from an organic process of dancing and playing music

seen throughout working-class African American cultural history. Indeed, the young people breaking at Herc's parties motivated his musical choices and, in turn, by seeking to encourage their expressions, he began exercising his own symbolic creativity. He went from the dancefloor to the DJ booth in a manner that was both driven by the needs of the community and informed by his own creative tastes. More importantly, the institutional setting in which he was able to perform insulated him from the strictures of state sanction, opening up alternative possibilities for congregation and individual expression at a time when many African American youth felt circumscribed by the suppression happening around them. And this autonomy proved to be one of the most important aspects of early hip-hop, making Herc's functions especially appealing to teenagers throughout the borough.

Indeed, as word of the success of Cindy's back-to-school party spread, Kool Herc's name—which many had previously seen tagged on walls and trains throughout the city—began to resonate as that of a DJ who provided a unique atmosphere for local partygoers. He and Cindy rented the recreation room again and hosted further parties, with each generating a greater turnout than the last (Davey D, 1989). What's more, the money that they made was reinvested into Herc's DJ equipment and distinct repertoire of records, further improving his sound quality and musical reputation. As he kept throwing events, he began developing a cult-like following among young people throughout the borough, attracting so many followers that, by the next year, the recreation room at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue had overfilled its capacity. As a result, Herc expanded into the building's courtyard, hosted block parties in the summer, and, soon after, arranged to play in local clubs such as the Twilight Zone, Hevalo, Top of the Lane, and, later, the Executive Playhouse (Marshall, 2007).

It is important to reiterate, however, that at this early point in hip-hop's development, there was no rapping or turntablism taking place. Rather, these events were concentrated mainly on *dancing*. As Herc himself has explained, "I was just the guy who played straight-up music that the radio don't play, that they should be playin', and people was havin' fun," adding that, "I play selections that people dance to. I wasn't into the other technique other guys came along the way of scratchin', 'cause my records to me is my tools" (Gonzalez, 1999b, p. 4). Thus, what distinguished Herc and placed him in high demand was his rare musical selections for dancers. Much of his records were, in fact, so hard to find that Herc would cover up album labels so people could not figure out what he was playing.[1] Accordingly, it was precisely the individuation of his musical choices and their simultaneous relevance to dynamic forms of dancing which garnered Herc a mass following in The Bronx.

Equally as important was the rare club-like atmosphere Herc provided for his partygoers. Contrary to the claim that hip-hop began in parks or street corners (hooks, 2015, p. 35; Rose, 1994, p. 22), these early events were hosted in indoor facilities where the more radical dance practices of young people could occur without constraint. New York's harsh winters also made Herc's parties an important sanctuary for dancers to express themselves in a relatively safe and comfortable environment. Again, Coke La Rock specifically pointed to the proliferation of breaking within this context as the distinguishing factor which made their early hip-hop parties a success. "It was different because you can breakdance," he stated. "That's the beginning of true

[1] This practice of covering up labels was common in other underground dance scenes known for playing obscure records during that time, as well. For example, many scholars have noted how Jamaican dancehall DJs would "soak records in the bathtub to remove their labels in order to stop competitors from 'stealing' one's signature songs" (Marshall, 2007, p. 12). DJs involved in the Northern Soul scene in England were similarly known for hiding the identity of rare African American soul records they would play for their audiences (Nowell, 2001).

breakdancing where you could dance on the floor. They was flippin' and turnin' and . . . dancing other than hustling or discoing" (Simjian, 2008).

Music to Make You Move

"My big record back then, and nobody had it then, was James Brown, "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose,'" Herc proclaimed when describing his early appeal (Brewster & Broughton, 2010, p. 170). Although this song had been released in 1969 and went on to be a chart-topping single, he is referring to a lesser known version of the track which appeared on the "live" double album *Sex Machine* in 1970.[2] Unlike the original, this extended version included a heavy rhythmic arrangement, with a call-and-response interval where Brown chants "clap your hands, stomp ya feet" and "in the jungle, brother" several times before bringing in his drummer with the exclamation "Clyde!" To many partygoers, it sounded as though Brown was summoning Herc himself (whose given name is Clive) and the high energy of the track made it an immediate hit with breakers, especially (Numata, 2005). "People would walk for miles just to hear that record—because nobody here could find it," Herc is quoted as saying in Hager's (1984, p. 32) early study of hip-hop. Such tracks defined the rhythm of Herc's early parties and set the standard that other DJs would soon emulate. To this day, this reworked version of "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" is a staple at breaking events and has been sampled countless times by prominent rap artists such as Public Enemy, NWA, and LL Cool J.

[2] Although Brown's *Sex Machine* LP reached the Billboard 200 charts when it was released in 1970, peaking at #29, many of the young partygoers at Herc's events were less familiar with the album in 1973-74, at least in relation to its version of "Give it Up or Turnit a Loose." Indeed, many early practitioners still refer to this track as "Sex Machine," demonstrating how its lack of radio airplay at the time made it more known by the heading of its album cover than by the title of the song itself.

Like many of the early records Herc became known for, this song was particularly popular for its percussion. However, rather than having a neatly defined drum section (or "breakbeat" part), it consisted of a series of rhythmic peaks in one long percussive instrumental, interspersed with Brown's vocals throughout its six-minute span. Before Herc had developed his groundbreaking "Merry-Go-Round" technique of looping records on his turntables, he intermittently played songs like this for his audience and a select few dancers would go off to their rhythmic intensity. In a manner reminiscent of Brown himself, these dancers would display innovative steps for the entire length of the track and save their most explosive moves for its peaks. Accordingly, being able to adapt to the rhythmic shifts of funk music became essential for these early breakers.

In this fashion, there were clearly collective norms guiding early breaking, even as the dance overall was about going beyond the norm. Musicality was foremost among these norms, as doing a physically difficult or eye-catching maneuver on the dancefloor was not valued unless it was in tune with the rhythm of the music. "It's *always* to the rhythm!!!," exclaimed Sasa, one of the most well-known early breakers at Kool Herc's parties. "That's what impressed them!" (Norin Rad, 2017a). Even dancers who did flips in the air or drops to the floor, for instance, maintained an emphasis on musicality: knowing *when* to execute certain movements, not just *how* to execute them. For example, Wallace Dee, another early breaker at Kool Herc's parties, described how he would move his hands and feet on time with the music that Herc played, almost as if it was pre-choreographed.

> as the beat went on I started moving my feet opposite of my hands...in sync...the finesse of the hands and the feet... the beat...it all went together. My hands went to the left and the right and my feet went to the right and the left. That's what made it look so

> spectacular...I always used to go with the beat and then at times I also used to freeze, you know? I used to freeze on the beat. I always had the shocking impression. (Norin Rad, 2018e)

This "shocking impression" came from not only his moves exceeding the norm of what audiences expected but from them being applied almost seamlessly to the music. Again, breakers from this early period danced to the percussion of songs—as well as their melody, grooves, and lyrics—with individualized movements that departed from convention and astonished audiences but which, nevertheless, conformed to their rhythmic parameters. As Trixie, another early dancer who gained notoriety at Herc's parties, explained, "Yeah, you would get into the move of it, you know?! Then once you see an opening then you come down to the ground and do your rolls, your spins, all of that....but you see there is a timing for that" (Norin Rad, 2017e).

When asked to reflect on the evolution of the dance, many early breakers specifically emphasize this issue of musicality as the main difference between their generation and subsequent practitioners. For instance, Keith Smith from The Legendary Twins, one of the most influential b-boys to come out of the 1970s, identified what he considered to be the lack of regard for music and an overemphasis on athleticism as the key distinguishing factor between the breakers of his era and many contemporary breakers. "When I see folks dance now, as opposed to what we used to do," Keith explained during a lecture he gave at York University in Toronto, "it's more acrobatics. I see less dancing and more gymnastics" (Smith & Smith, 2015). This perceived diminution of musicality signals one of the many facets of the dance that may have shifted with the passage of time, reflecting not only how early practitioners approached their expressions but also how the cultural values and expressive parameters of the form may have

changed as it spread beyond its initial context, an issue which I will return to in greater depth in Chapter Six.

However, the centrality of music to early breaking also points to another important facet of the dance's history: the decisive role *funk* played in shaping the dance's composition. Despite the multitude of musical genres Herc was known to play at parties,[3] breaking was overwhelmingly steeped in "a rhythmic, textural, and timbral profile characteristic of funk" (Katz, 2012, p.24). Herc maintained this emphasis on funk even as other popular African American DJs at the time—such as Frankie Crocker at radio station WBLS—played smoother, more melodic, and purportedly "sophisticated" R&B sounds, which would eventually become known as "disco" (George, 1988, ch. 6). In contrast, Herc's hard-edged funk provided his partygoers with complex and propulsive beats for irreverent and energetic forms of dancing. As I discuss in the next chapter, such contrasting musical and corporeal approaches reflected differing social attitudes within the African American community itself, generating both admiration and consternation among local youth. However, my aim in emphasizing the obscure funk records that Herc played here is to note how the "unexpected change in texture" (Katz, 2012, p. 25)

[3] It should be remembered that a great deal of music in the early 1970s consisted of experimentation and cultural fusion, with funk artists especially known for their eclectic mixing of styles (Vincent, 1995). However, regardless of the varying cultural backgrounds of the musicians and instruments used in these records—from congas and timbales to violins and cowbells—what defined the music early on for breakers was "funkiness" (Katz, 2012, p. 25). This is important to note, as many scholars have mistakenly attributed "breakbeats" to a Latino/a-derived influence (Perkins, 1996; Rivera, 2003; Schloss, 2009) and overemphasized the variety of genres early hip-hop DJs would play at parties (Toop, 1984). Despite these varying narratives, detailed investigation reveals that the overwhelming majority of "breakbeats" in hip-hop come from African American artists, with nearly all of them characterized by a distinctly funk-based musical sensibility.

Along these same lines, pioneers in other African American dance styles, such as popping and locking, have often sought to disassociate themselves from hip-hop by suggesting that they focus more on funk music than their b-girl and b-boy counterparts. However, Keith Smith of the Legendary Twins effectively debunked this myth during a 1999 panel at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, explaining that: "It was all about funk. James Brown is the funkiest as you can get. Not only that, some of these songs, like The Isley Brothers 'Get into Something'—that's funky. Babe Ruth 'First Base Mexican'—that's funky. Booker T & the MGs 'Melting Pot'—that's funky. Jimmy Castor Bunch 'It's Just Begun'—that's funky. Baby Huey 'Listen to Me'—that's funky. So, it [breaking] is all based on the funk. Nothing but the funk. The whole funk" (Smith, 1999).

characteristic of funk compelled breakers to develop a two-pronged approach to their movements: individualized steps to a steady tempo intermixed with dynamic and freeform displays during rhythmic peaks. Traces of this patterning are still present within the dance today, as even the most acrobatic breakers are expected to perform an opening sequence of steady, upright dancing before going into their more explosive, often floor-based, movements. This shift in dynamics is not only a product of dancers punctuating their performances with intense transitions to the floor but, just as importantly, a bodily blueprint forged within the structural and rhythmic parameters of funk.

Carrying on Tradition

Just as Herc's musical choices were informed by his previous experiences as a dancer, many of the breakers who attended his parties similarly refashioned the expressive practices circulating within the African American community of The Bronx in the early 1970s. For example, to go off and break with individualized steps, upright spins, drops to the floor, and animated routines was not *created* at Herc's parties but, rather, *carried over* from the days of the Plaza Tunnel, The Shaft, The Puzzle, and other local clubs. The ongoing practice of burning was also incorporated into the early moves that breakers at Herc's parties would perform, such as when the well-known Wallace Dee would drop to the floor and come back up miming with his hands as though he were shooting a slingshot against an opponent (Hager, 1984, p. 32). Others, such as The Amazing Bobo, would pursue more vulgar insults when burning, reportedly acting out sexual gestures and alluding to his private parts when going up against challengers (Smith, 2016). Like the verbal game of playing the dozens, such irreverent and competitive displays were

not necessarily "sexual"[4] but, rather, akin to an embodied performance of "permitted disrespect," aimed at testing the "facility, originality, ingenuity, and humor" of participants (Levine, 1978, p. 347-48).

Again, as in the past, young women were also involved in these competitive exchanges. For instance, names such as Sister Boo, Janice, Saundra, Mother Earth, and Deucy are regularly referenced as talented females who used to break alongside young men at Herc's parties (Numata, 2005). "She used to tear some dudes up!" exclaimed Sasa in reference to Mother Earth. "She would act like she was digging a ten foot grave and act like she would put them in there and then put the dirt back up on them" (Norin Rad, 2017a). Unlike the gendered approach of most partner-based forms, females in breaking were free to participate in such exchanges without being constricted to specific steps or roles. As DeFrantz (2004) has pointed out, such relatively egalitarian approaches have similarly appeared in other contemporary hip-hop dance styles, as well. "It may be argued that all social dance contains roles for men and women defined by gender; as a solo form, however, hip hop dance generally resists this sort of gendered categorization" (p. 77). Nevertheless, as breaking underwent commercialization in the 1980s, these more egalitarian approaches tended to undergo ideological and structural changes. I will examine these changes in more depth in Chapter Five, while also pointing to the need for

[4] As Kelley (1997) has pointed out regarding the dozens, scholars have often misinterpreted African American expressions when reading too literally into their articulations and taking them out of context. For example, rather than being about the lack of fathers in the home or the presence of domineering mothers, as many scholars of the dozens have suggested, the "yo mama" jokes characteristic of this practice are far more about having fun and trying to get a laugh, he insisted, adding that, "The pleasure of the dozens is not the viciousness of the insult but the humor, the creative pun, the outrageous metaphor" (p. 34). In the same way, the vulgarity and aggression of certain gestures in burning were far more about wit, creativity, and adolescent antics than they were about sexuality or violence. Indeed, there are many stories of women burning men with such gestures as well as men dancing with each other with these burns, without any indication that they held either heterosexual or homosexual implications.

bringing greater awareness to the involvement of b-girls in the development of breaking and hip-hop culture, more generally.

It should also be noted, however, that some within the dance did not associate it solely with burning or competition in its early years. Rather, such exchanges (which would later become known as "battling") were only one of many potential modes of dancefloor interaction that would take place at early hip-hop events, with many practitioners preferring to focus on having fun and entertaining audiences. As Keith Smith relayed during his guest lecture at York University, "Anytime we danced, we felt like it was a performance. The only difference is we didn't have a theater. We just had a circle, some music, and a room like this" (Smith & Smith, 2015). Within the context of Herc's jook-based gatherings, breakers such as Smith insisted that expression and socialization were main motivations for them, not necessarily venting out in aggression or competing against an opponent. However, if someone wanted to go up against them, Smith also explained that his brother and he would not hesitate to take up the challenge.

This performative atmosphere at Herc's parties was heightened by the way crowds would cluster around breakers and cheer them on, often forming a circle around those who competed and danced most noticeably. In this way, onlookers played a participatory role in the evaluation of the dance, reacting to practitioners "alongside others in an organic and multiperspectival event" (Crease, 1995, p. 209). Indeed, such impromptu circle formations have long been seen throughout African American cultural history (Floyd, 1991; Stuckey, 1987/2013) and, as hip-hop dancer and historian Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon (2004) has pointed out, were an important, non-theatrical arena for "spontaneous performance" during breaking's birth (p. 61). Thus, these circle formations made up another important component of the dance's early format and enhanced the atmosphere of communal energy being exchanged at Herc's parties. Dance scholar

Imani Kai Johnson (2009) has aptly utilized the metaphor of "dark matter" to describe such energy exchanges, pointing to the affective state of breaking circles, as well as their ongoing, yet often unacknowledged, Africanist dimensions. To this day, breakers around the world continue to emphasize the significance of performing in such circles (commonly referred to today as "cyphers") as a way to maintain the dance's tradition and foster free expression.

Along these same lines, many early breakers emphasize the collective joy they felt when going to a Herc party and suggest that the freeform atmosphere of early hip-hop provided them an avenue to embody a range of emotions, everything from serious to silly. In fact, a considerable number of practitioners describe their dancing during this period not as competitive or aggressive but, rather, as animated, rhythmic, and comedic. They recount preparing elaborate routines during the week in preparation for Herc's parties on the weekend and describe utilizing themes from popular culture, everyday life, and even physical props, to fuse within their performances.[5] The following vignette by Holman (1984) corresponds with much of this testimony:

> In these shows they [breakers at Kool Herc's parties] would do moves ranging from simple Charlie Chaplin penguin steps and drop routines, in which they'd catch each other in step and on beat, to involved pantomime acts, like dropping to the floor in a freeze while hiding their faces and coming up wearing shaving cream, with a razor in their hand. They would shave the cream all off and on beat! (p. 54)

[5] For example, in a conversation with Mike G and Cholly Rock, two early breakers who frequented Kool Herc parties, both described the dance in their era as featuring a great deal of humor and imagination. "You always add something different," says Mike G. "Something that'll make them laugh or something that's creative." Cholly Rock adds that they were much more comical than the breaking that would come later, explaining how they would do things such as imitate playing baseball, screwing somebody's head off, or driving a car while dancing (Michael Waynetv, 2016a). Early b-boy and pioneering DJ Breakout similarly recalled the dance involving humorous displays, such as of reading books and pulling out glasses or playing dead after reaching out to shake someone's hand (Smith, 2010).

For his part, PHASE 2 recounts how him and his friends also had routines that may have appeared confrontational—with the mimicking of knives and weapons being swung against each other, coupled with kicks, shimmies, dips, and abrupt squat drops to the beat—but were not necessarily aimed at opponents. Rather, they would execute these sequences, which PHASE 2 called "Battle Rocking," amongst one another in a synchronized fashion (PHASE 2, 2010). "I used to drop a guy to the floor and put my leg over his head," he explained, adding that such choreography was not influenced "from a Capoeira person," as has often been mistakenly assumed by outside commentators (Numata, 2005).

This wide range of expressive possibilities—from humorous and animated gestures to energetic and aggressive ones—demonstrates the loosely defined nature of breaking during these early years of its development, as well as the uniquely teenage demographic that enacted the form. Within a structural framework guided by funk's rhythms and irreverence, young breakers were given considerable room to experiment with various symbolic meanings that reflected their culture, interests, emotions, and identity. This freedom of movement also allowed breakers to develop new steps, sequences, and concepts that would eventually be consolidated into a recognizable lexicon of moves, distinguishing the dance from other practices during this period. Once again, the inextricable link between music and dance was central to this formulation, as subsequent practitioners would not only adopt the nascent vocabulary of breaking but also its unique musical soundtrack. For instance, the full bent squat drops and simultaneous miming of weapons that PHASE 2 mentions above eventually became widespread among breakers in The Bronx, as well as in a subsequent dance practice in New York known as "uprocking."[6] To this

[6] "Uprocking" is an upright dance form associated with breaking, but often considered distinct from it. According to Pabon (2012, p. 59), it consists of "a series of steps, jerks, and the miming of weapons drawn against each other."

day, uprockers perform almost exclusively to the repertoire of records Kool Herc is known for popularizing, demonstrating how the hip-hop movement not only propelled breaking forward but also affected associated forms of kinesthetic expression.

Interestingly, Herc himself can be seen executing such a squat drop (preceded by an upright, forward-lunging two-step) in the documentary *The Freshest Kids* (2002) when reminiscing about his early parties at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. However, in Schloss' (2009) important ethnography of modern breaking, this display is described as having stemmed from Brooklyn Latino/as (p. 149), with the suggestion that Herc obtained his core repertoire of music from this community, as well. As has already been discussed, some of the songs Herc played were certainly carried over from the New York club scene of the early 1970s. However, it is not clear to what extent (if any) he was inspired to dance or play music from Latino/as in Brooklyn. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how Herc would have developed a loyal following if his style of playing music was already in wide circulation in such a nearby borough. Why would he hide the labels of his records if they were already common knowledge among various communities? Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter Six, there were virtually no Latino/as present at Herc's early parties, nor is there any evidence of him crossing paths with such dancers.

An alternative explanation may be that such squat drops were a part of the vocabulary of early breakers in The Bronx and were later merged with other dancers from different parts of New York. Pioneering Latino style writer COCO 144 associates the way dance practices circulated in this fashion back then to the way aerosol artists, many of whom were also dancers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, shared information with one another. "I find so many similarities in writing and in dancing, cause you're adding something," he explained when recalling the moves he exchanged with fellow writers such as PHASE 2, STITCH I, and C.A.T.

87. “You pick something up and you add that to your style of writing or your style of dancing” (personal communication, February 27, 2020). Thus, like the canon of obscure beats Herc popularized in the early 1970s, such moves may have eventually spread and fused with other dance styles as the hip-hop movement expanded. Indeed, analyzing the public testimony and demographic details of those identified as uprockers in Schloss’ study suggests that they did not come to the fore until the *late* 1970s, when hip-hop was rapidly disseminating beyond The Bronx (Ahearn, 2000b; Fricke, 1999; Kostek, 2012; Rock, 2013; Schloss, 2009, p. 149-154; Sepulveda, 2009; Vitamin 2019). This is not to signal any final closure on this topic but, rather, to demonstrate how a reconsideration of the chronological, racial, corporeal, and musical development of breaking is important in understanding the social processes that affected the movement’s inception and expansion. Furthermore, that breakers and uprockers around the world continue to perform squat drops and other related moves to *the very playlist* Herc built his reputation on reinforces the impact his DJing had on modern music and dance history.

Merry-Go-Round

As breakers increasingly congregated to Herc’s parties, the crowds gathering in circles also grew larger and larger. Herc astutely noticed the moments of excitement emanating from these circles and, being a dancer himself, realized that breakers were the ones initiating them. Specifically, he noticed that they were waiting to go off with their most specialized moves to the percussive crescendos of certain songs. Around 1974-1975, in order to harness the appeal of these performances, Herc decided to gather several such songs and played them back-to-back to see how the crowd at his party would react. He called his approach the “Merry-Go-Round,” given the uninterrupted repetition of high energy music aimed at keeping the breakers at his

parties dancing. Here is Herc's own recollection of what would later become one of the most pivotal innovations in musical history:

> It was the b-boys warming up [Herc stands up and demonstrates a forward-lunging two-step for the audience]. When the break come, they went all in their bag [he performs a squat drop, hops forward, and mimicks doing a flip]. They'd bug out. I said, "I want to see this. I'm going to pull a trick on their ass tonight. And who ain't with it, they better back up! Cause the rattle snakes are gonna go loose."
>
> I put those records back to back and I called that segment of my format the 'Merry Go Round.' And lord have mercy! That was the beginning of what exploded into hip-hop. Cause people was coming to see this particular segment. Everybody was like, "Yo man, them muthafuckas just started breakin! I don't want them to step on my shit. So, the best thing for me to do is step aside and watch this excitement take place." (Kool Herc, 1999)

In addition to many of the songs already mentioned, Herc's Merry-Go-Round included such obscure records as "Apache" (1973) by the Incredible Bongo Band, "The Mexican" (1973) by Babe Ruth, "Love the Life You Live" (1974) by Black Heat, "Corazon" (1974) by Creative Source, "Yellow Sunshine" (1974) by Yellow Sunshine, "Scratchin" (1975) by Magic Disco Machine, and "Funky Music is the Thing" (1975) by the Dynamic Corvettes (Broughton, 1998; Westwood, 1996). This concentrated rotation of records for breakers proved so successful that it quickly became a regular feature of his subsequent parties. "It was a part of the format now," Herc explained. "People come in to hear that" (Broughton, 1998).

Playing percussive music in this fashion further distinguished Herc from other DJs in New York and attracted even more specialized dancers to his parties. In turn, Herc's format

became the basis for hip-hop's birth, as other DJs adopted his core repertoire of music as the starting point for their own excavation of obscure beats (Setaro, 2014). In the words of DJ Afrika Bambaataa, "Kool Herc came out from the west side of the Bronx, and he was doing these beat-type of records, whereas on our side of the Bronx we had the disco era still going strong" (Fricke, 2000, p. 4). Thus, before long, a new musical movement was inaugurated based on what became known as "breakbeats" (or "b-beats"): funk-infused records specifically intended to make dancers "break" (George, 1978). The fact that many early practitioners also refer to these percussive records as "the get down part" (Gonzalez, 1999a; Disco Daddy, 2017d), "breakin' beats" (Adler, 2001), the "jump part" (Founding Fathers, 2014), "sureshots" (T. L. Smith, 2015), or simply "b-boy records" (Disco Daddy, 2017c) demonstrates the centrality of dancing to the terminology and arrangement of hip-hop's musical soundtrack. Indeed, the "beats" that Herc noticed people would "break" to serve as the modern foundation for hip-hop's musical production. The Merry-Go-Round technique he ushered in was also the first of many DJing techniques that extended and reordered percussive sounds in the 1970s, giving way to such innovative hip-hop practices as needle dropping, backspinning, and scratching (Katz, 2012). Therefore, whether in regard to the musical trajectory of hip-hop or its turntable techniques, *dancing* was clearly a determining factor in the movement's early formation.

Breaking was also specifically harnessed at Kool Herc's parties in the form of microphone shout-outs, which, in many ways, helped set the stage for what would later become rapping. The creative slang terminology, chants, and rhythmic phrases recited by Herc and Coke La Rock were often geared toward encouraging dancefloor activity. Early breakers proudly recall how they received their monikers directly from these two figures, adding that it was an honor to hear their names recited over the microphone when they arrived at Herc's parties. "When Herc

gave you a shout out," explained Sha-Rock, an early b-girl who would go on to be a pioneering MC, "you best believe everybody in the park knew you were somebody. Everybody always wanted that status" (Sha-Rock & Brown, 2011). In turn, Herc is said to have prepared his crowd for the Merry-Go-Round by chanting "B-boys, are you ready? B-girls, are you ready?" (Pabon, 2012, p. 58) and directing people to make room for the dancers. When playing in clubs, he was also known for shining a spotlight on the circles with his favorite breakers. All of this resulted in the dance becoming a defining feature of Herc's early movement, to the point that many suggest that b-boys and b-girls were the "first celebrities of hip-hop" (Michael Waynetv, 2016a). In the words of Cindy Campbell, "People would come to see the breakers specifically, too. They were a part of the show" (Wilson, 2015).

Of course, Herc's innovative contributions also marked a significant turning point for breaking itself. Young practitioners knew that, at a certain point in the night, the distinct funk songs they favored would now be played back-to-back in a club-like setting, giving them a chance to go off in an uninterrupted fashion. As GrandMixer DXT explains, "What made Kool Herc parties special, the Herculords special, is that they were the ones who were playing that music on the loud system and they gave dancers a place to go, in a discotheque environment, to hear those records" (DXT, personal communication, December 28, 2017). Again, in the early- to mid-1970s, following the closure of venues such as the Plaza Tunnel, having a jook joint cater to youth was rare. Although a select few DJs in The Bronx such as Smokey or Dutchmaster, both from the Claremont section of the borough, played music for breakers and young people, they were mostly confined to local house parties, community centers, and outdoor events (Norin Rad, 2017d). As discussed above, such spaces were far more susceptible to outside interferences and the harsh winter weather of New York City. In contrast, Herc and Cindy provided a relatively

safe and conducive *indoor* atmosphere for teenagers to express themselves, at a time when breaking and the music it was associated with was largely seen as a marginal, unwelcome phenomenon in established venues. Along these lines, DXT echoed virtually every other early hip-hop practitioner I have come across when he stated, "We could not go into other places," because, "One, they didn't play those records. Two, you could not dance that way in the disco clubs where they would play disco style music" (personal communication, December 28, 2017). Again, Herc provided the one "real club"—what, in the past, would be called a "jook joint"—where young dancers could enjoy the climactic beats they preferred in an extended fashion, with a quality sound system, and a setting largely free of restrictions (Michael Waynetv, 2014a).

Conclusion

By the mid-1970s, what had begun as a party for Cindy's transition into high school burgeoned into an alternative movement for African American adolescent expression. Teenagers in The Bronx could now make their way from local neighborhood parties and community centers into independent clubs where Herc regularly played, such as the Hevalo and Executive Playhouse, and, later, all-age venues such as the Police Athletic League on Webster Avenue. The working-class jook continuum identified by Hazzard-Gordon (1990) once again became central to this African American cultural movement, providing an institutional setting where young people could enact their symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990) with little regard for external strictures or interferences. Dance and music also converged at these events, as they have throughout African American history, to cultivate new meanings, expressions, and identities during a crucial stage of adolescent growth. Gang violence and economic impoverishment were not as central to these early years as most hip-hop histories have made them out to be, although

the broader social climate of marginality in The Bronx certainly shaped the independent path these expressions took on. As Cindy Campbell has explained, “It [hip-hop] wasn’t done for drugs or gang-related” but, rather, “so that people didn’t have to go downtown,” where most established clubs were located and often more restrictive and expensive for Bronx teenagers (Davey D, 2010). As such, hip-hop was a movement rooted, first and foremost, in music and dance, and, as with past African American forms, its emergence cannot be understood without analyzing the kinesthetic expressions—especially breaking—that ran concurrent with its musical innovations. Early b-boy and DJ Afrika Islam aptly summarized this interconnection when he explained that most hip-hop pioneers found their way into the culture “from the floor up” (Robbie, 2015). “Everything was about dancing,” he insisted. “The rapper wasn’t at the middle of things, he was at the side of a DJ and a lot of people who were dancing” (Wasabi, 2013, para. 2).

It was also out of this uniquely African American sociocultural context that the embodied values of breaking developed. Just as Herc distinguished himself as a DJ by playing funk-based music that was less familiar yet favorable to his audience, dancers at his parties distinguished themselves through personalized movements that were nevertheless rooted in a collective framework of individuality, musicality, and alternative subjectivity. By tapping into their interests and “performing the breaks” collectively, young breakers built a cultural phenomenon heavily steeped in the legacy of African American culture (DeFrantz, 2010). Indeed, breaking did not emerge as a response to the music that Herc played but, rather, was an extension of preexisting practices that informed Herc’s aesthetic choices and, in turn, further blossomed under his influence. It is here, within the dual sites of dance and music, individuation and community where breaking and hip-hop found their mutually reinforcing appeal.

The early youth-based constituency of hip-hop also proved critical to pushing the boundaries of expression within the movement. The fact that Herc's parties catered specifically to African American teenagers meant that it was they who shaped the musical environment in which the culture was rooted. Furthermore, as I will argue in the following chapter, it was mainly young teenagers who would continue to advance the existing format and vocabulary of early breaking. Their combination of greater leisure time, more flexible worldviews, and proclivity toward self-affirmation all seemed to have played a role in opening new possibilities, ideas, and values to be embodied. In turn, the class and age range of early hip-hop practitioners helped distinguish it from broader currents within the African American community itself, further reinforcing the movement's autonomy and the symbolic meanings that would formulate around its emergence.

Chapter Four

"The Smallest Guys in the Party": Youth Socialization and B-Boy Identity Formation

During the years following Kool Herc's introduction of the Merry-Go-Round technique, "breaking" and "going off" rapidly evolved into a more concentrated and virtuosic practice, with innovations in the dance being propelled alongside the unique repertoire of "breakin' beats" Herc popularized. "Now the freestyle dancers had their cake and could eat it too," is how Holman (1984) summarized Herc's influence on the dance. "With more break time, freestyle dancers developed new moves and styles to match the length and intensity of the special mixed breaks" (p. 53). Younger attendees, ranging in age from thirteen to sixteen years old, were particularly motivated to push the bounds of expression within this context. Many were responsible for advancing the floor-based vocabulary that breaking would become known for.

The Legendary Twins (hereafter The Twins), Keith and Kevin Smith, were foremost among this new wave of practitioners. In fact, when they first went to a Kool Herc party at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, Cindy Campbell denied them entry because they were only about twelve or thirteen years old (Smith & Smith, 2015). Although hip-hop was a movement led by teenagers, this episode demonstrated how an age difference of even a few years signaled a major gulf in identity for its adolescent founders. Nevertheless, The Twins waited outside for over an hour, listening to the music pulsating through the walls and pleading with Cindy to make an exception for them. Finally, through their perseverance and charm, Cindy acquiesced and allowed them to experience what was happening inside (Smith & Smith, 2015).

As Keith Smith recounted this story during a presentation to Dr. Mary Fogarty's dance class at York University, one could feel the profound sense of significance it held for him. Given

that he and his brother were a few years younger (and a few feet shorter) than others at Herc's party, Smith felt especially lucky to have been able to experience the distinctive expressions, sounds, and atmosphere that night. He shared these details with the class proudly, emphasizing that he was there when the global movement now known as hip-hop was first being formed. After that night, he and his brother became immediate devotees of Herc, following him wherever he played. "[W]e didn't want to go anywhere else," Kevin is quoted as saying in Hager's (1984) early study of hip-hop. "It was Kool Herc's, Kool Herc's, Kool Herc's. Every weekend" (p. 32).

In this chapter, I will continue discussing the development of breaking during DJ Kool Herc's prominence in the mid-1970s. Along with the growing popularity of his repertoire of "breakin' beats," I will examine the cohort of young practitioners who began shifting the aesthetics of the dance increasingly to the floor. The Twins played a pivotal role in these shifts, helping forge new movements and meanings within the dance, which continue to be utilized around the world today. As in previous chapters, I argue that these developments did not suddenly emerge as a rupture from the past but, rather, as a creative reworking of previous African American cultural expressions. I also attempt to delve deeper into the jook continuum from which these expressions arose, arguing that their manifestation in the early days of hip-hop provided adolescents an important outlet for socialization and community identification.

In addition, I argue that early b-boys and b-girls were not tapping into their African American heritage as a response to oppression but, rather, as a way to exercise their symbolic creativity, affirm their identity, and interact with likeminded peers. The ability to express themselves in this manner was facilitated by the autonomous dance spaces in which hip-hop emerged, where "corporeal orature" (DeFrantz, 2012) among young people took place relatively unrestrained. In turn, Herc's emphasis on break-specific music, microphone exaltations, and

audience participation generated a transcendent experience for many of those who attended his functions. Subsequent DJs would follow in Herc's footsteps and build upon the unique formula he cultivated through music and dance. Thus, hip-hop's manifestation of the jook continuum did not simply exist as a given but, rather, was functionally employed to serve as an important outlet for collective joy and social interaction among African American teenagers.

I also focus on how hip-hop's alternative environments helped breakers forge a unique sense of self during their crucial years of adolescent growth. As with the underexamined evocative power of jook institutions, the role of dance spaces in the socialization and subject formation of African American youth has generally been understudied. However, when it comes to breaking's emergence, I find these issues to be paramount, given that the dance was created and practiced specifically by teenagers. Accordingly, I explore how practitioners negotiated their sense of self and community through breaking, not only in terms of its physical performance but also its use of terminology, crowd participation, and relation to other expressions during that period. In turn, I argue that the conceptual framework of individuation within breaking helped young practitioners define not only who they were but also the parameters of the hip-hop movement itself.

Finally, I conclude by discussing the challenges breakers faced from more prominent social and cultural currents within The Bronx during the mid-1970s. Contrary to the romanticized notion that breaking—and, by extension, hip-hop—emerged as a spontaneous collaboration between oppressed minorities in The Bronx (Flores, 1993; Del Barco, 2002; Rivera, 2003), breaking was, in fact, initially practiced by only a small segment of African American youth. Indeed, many institutions and elements within the borough initially derided the unorthodox styles, music, and fashion of the hip-hop community, viewing its aesthetics as an

unwelcome aberration from the more predominant disco craze. I discuss the impact such cultural contestation had on the subjectivity of breakers, as well as the alternative values embodied in their kinesthetic practices. I then relate these issues to the broader historical pattern of working-class African Americans defying normative conventions through their cultural expressions.

Collective Exaltation

Prior to attending their first Kool Herc party, Keith and Kevin Smith grew up immersed in local articulations of African American culture. They were raised in an area of The Bronx known as the "The Nine," a tough, yet tight-knit, neighborhood based around 169th Street and Washington Avenue, in the heart of the well-known African American section of Morrisania (Smith & Smith, 2015; Naison & Gumbs, 2016). In addition to experiencing music and dancing in this neighborhood at a young age, The Twins also remember a formative experience on their eighth birthday, when they were taken to the nearby Apollo Theatre in Harlem for a live performance by the Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown. They recall being mesmerized that night by not only Brown's music and message but also, more importantly, his dancing (Smith, 1999). "Our number one inspiration was James Brown," Keith explained, "because of who he was, the way he electrified the crowd every time he performed, and what he stood for" (Breakin', 2019). From these early experiences, the Smith brothers became infatuated with performing various dance steps, shuffles, and slides in a manner reminiscent of Brown and other popular African American entertainers. By the time they reached junior high school, they were already showcasing their talents in annual concerts and local community events (Smith & Smith, 2015).

As their close friend and fellow pioneering b-boy Clark Kent has relayed, The Twins were also known for entering local dance contests at the East Harlem Federation Youth

Association Center—which was popularly known as “Chuck Center” (in honor of its founder, community activist Chuck Griffin). “We used to love winning that dance contest,” Kent recalled. “Me and The Twins used to take turns winning that every other week” (DJ Kayslay, 2017b). Many other early breakers have also described frequenting Chuck Center in the early 1970s, where they would socialize, pick up the latest dance steps, develop their own variations of them, and challenge one another in both formal and informal competitions (Uitti, 2019). Again, contrary to the popular misconception that breaking developed on sidewalks and street corners (Rose, 1994, p. 22), most African American pioneers point to such community spaces, recreation rooms, gyms, hallways, and social clubs as the arenas where they honed their craft. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, many of these community spaces also had their limitations, both sonically and spatially. For example, Rayvon, a member of the Harlem-based hip-hop group the Magnificent Seven, recalled that, “Chuck Center actually had holes in the walls, and you had to keep your coat on in there because it was always cold in there. Freezing!” (Smith, 2004a). By providing a more conducive space for young people to congregate and express themselves, Kool Herc gave structure to these preexisting dance currents within the African American community. In turn, he garnered a loyal following among dancers, especially, and developed a new, appealing, and alternative movement with its own aesthetic tastes, customs, terminologies, and values.

The Twins first caught wind of Herc’s burgeoning movement while playing basketball in a community center in the West Bronx. “Are yall going to Herc’s” they recalled being asked by a friend while hanging out there one summer. “We were like, ‘Herc’s’? What is Herc’s?’” recounted Keith at a conference in 1999. “We had no idea what it was” (Smith, 1999). They were told that Kool Herc was “jamming every weekend” on that side of The Bronx and that his parties

were “the joint.” This was not referring to his functions being a “jook joint” in the traditional sense of the term but, rather, explaining that they were exceptional events, not to be missed. As enthusiasts of music and dance, Keith and Kevin were intrigued and determined to find out what all the buzz was about.

When they were finally allowed into Herc’s party that night at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, they were taken aback by not only the dynamic dancing they saw, but the unique sights, sounds, and atmosphere they experienced. “It was amazing,” recalled Keith Smith. “The music that he played, the people that were there. We saw circles of people dancing with names people here have never heard of,” to which Keith listed off aliases such as Johnny Cool, Chubby, Wallace Dee, Trixie, Sasa, the Amazing Bobo and James Bond (Smith, 1999). His brother Kevin similarly highlighted the aura of the event and the performative energy being exchanged between Herc and his audience.

> The thing I mostly remember was how loud the music was. The sound overtook you. The place was packed—a real sweatbox. Herc was on the mike [sic]. He’d say things like ‘Rock the house’ and call out the names of people at the party. (Hager, 1984, p. 32)

This fascination with the atmosphere and sensorial experience provided by Herc is echoed in the testimony of numerous other early practitioners (Gonzales, 2017), with many specifically pointing to the energy activated by the unique dance music Herc played. “I seen Herc play the get-down part of a record and see an audience lose their mind,” is how DJ Grandmaster Flash explained his first exposure to Herc (Brewster & Broughton, 2010, p. 183). Early b-girl and pioneering MC Sha-Rock also pointed to “all these different types of music that you could just breakdance to” as the driving force behind Herc’s appeal (Fricke, 2001b, p. 6), while Afrika Bambaataa, another early DJ who followed in Herc’s footsteps, associated the latter’s sound with

funk rhythms that made dancers "go off," explaining that "when that certain part comes, that percussion part with all those drums, congas, it makes you dance real wild. You just let all your feelings go" (Williams, 2011, p. 139, fn. 17). By solidifying this link between rhythmic sensation, bodily movement, and autonomous congregation, Herc provided his adherents with a participatory forum to express themselves collectively. And, unlike officially sanctioned clubs or regulated events, the independent atmosphere his parties provided further invited attendees to dance without regard for societal constrictions. It was this largely insular environment which generated a space for participants to go beyond the norm and transcend their everyday world, to the point that many describe their experience in almost religious terms: "Seeing Herc spin was a monumental moment for me," said DJ Jazzy Jay (Gonzales, 2017); "It was like somebody landing from another planet," said DJ Disco Wiz (Cedeno, 2008); "That changed my life," said DJ/MC Grandmaster Caz (Cornell, 2009); "Whenever I heard Herc spin, I felt a sense of freedom," said MC Sheri Sher (Gonzales, 2017); "My life changed that day," said GrandMixer DXT (DJ Kayslay, 2017c); "Herc was like a God," said DJ Mean Gene (Gonzales, 2017); "I just stood behind the ropes shocked and amazed as if something came over me," said MC Sha-Rock (Sha-Rock & Brown, 2011); "Back then I was a Kool Herc fanatic," said DJ AJ (Smith, 2006); "We followed Herc every-fuckin-where Herc went," said PHASE 2, because "really, there was nothing like a Kool Herc party" (Israel, 2002). These testimonials highlight not only the role Herc played in sparking the hip-hop movement but also the transformative impact his events had on partygoers.

In his analysis of underground dance music in New York City, ethnomusicologist Kai Fikentscher's (2000) similarly pointed to the "affective force" African American jook spaces have had on participants, noting how such experiences are often articulated in spiritualist terms.

Fikentscher attributed such reactions to the "vibe" generated when rhythmic energy is exchanged collectively between musicians and dancers. This vibe, he argued, binds participants together beyond ordinary social interaction, helping explain the ongoing "modern-day adaptation of the jook joint" (p. 102). Social psychologist Ben Malbon (1999) similarly highlighted the "oceanic and ecstatic experience" of dancing in a closely packed environment, arguing that the sense of joy and belonging generated through such experiences is central to clubbing.[27] Both Fikentscher's and Malbon's formulations are also reminiscent of Emile Durkheim's sociological concept of "collective effervescence," wherein communal gatherings produce moments of excitement, passion, and unified action (Durkheim, 1915/1968), as well as what anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) termed "communitas." Moreover, these concepts point specifically to the evocative power of dancing in autonomous jook spaces seen throughout working-class African American history. As Hazzard-Gordon (1990) argued, the emergence of jook joints in African American history trace back to the retention of West African spiritual traditions, with formerly religious rituals being secularized to achieve new forms of working-class congregation in the United States. Similarly, in the case of hip-hop, African American youth gathered in autonomous spaces to experience a powerful sense of joy and collective exaltation. Rather than being a response to dislocation, gang violence, or oppression—as breaking and hip-hop have been framed in dominant discourse (Chang, 2005; Ewoodzie, 2017; Forman, 2002; Reeves, 2008; Rose, 1994)—the testimony of practitioners suggests that the movement was driven by the immense pleasure and transcendence felt by participants internally. Indeed, by interacting with

[27] In her study of club dance culture in the UK, cultural sociologist Sarah Thornton (1995) similarly attributed the popularity of youth dance venues to the "vibe," "mood," and "atmosphere" experienced by young attendees. However, she associated these factors with external elements such as club lighting, patron drug use, and the jockeying for "authentic" status. As Malbon (1999) has astutely noted, Thornton "largely neglects the *experience of clubbing* itself," particularly as it relates to activity on the dancefloor (p. 17, emphasis in original).

one another and moving in synchronization with rhythm, young people were likely activating a core aspect of their cultural and human condition—one which has, unfortunately, been suppressed in many segments of modern Western society (see Ehrenreich, 2006).

In turn, the unique sound and atmosphere Herc provided breakers further inspired them to channel their energies in dynamic ways. Although The Twins were already familiar with popular African American forms of dancing during this period, what they witnessed at Herc's parties went beyond even their expectations. For example, breakers such as Sasa, whom The Twins regularly describe as "the greatest b-boy that ever lived" (Smith, 1999), were particularly influential in developing not only unique steps but a heightened level of acrobatic acumen, as well. "Sasa was double jointed," explained DJ Baron, an early follower of Herc who would go on to become an influential figure in early hip-hop. "He could do impossible moves that nobody else could do" (Ahearn, 2001b, p. 3). Such displays conjured the unexpected among audiences while also establishing personalized skills that could not be easily replicated. Indeed, in addition to using his flexibility for "folding on the floor like a pretzel" (Numata, 2005), Sasa would reportedly do flips in the air and mix aerial movements together with upright steps, humor, charisma, and, most importantly, musicality (PHASE 2, personal communication, November 11, 2015). Scholar Jim Vernon (2018) likened such dynamic displays to sculptors who use physical mastery to evoke the "divine capacity to transcend our natural limits" (p. 90), adding that the teenage age-range of breakers further bolstered this seemingly inhuman achievement: "Breaking provided those assembled at Herc's parties with the improbable sight of radically un-tutored and infamously awkward adolescent bodies reaching heights of corporeal grace and prowess hitherto unimaginable even by professional dancers," he wrote (p. 91). Although this may seem to be underestimating the abilities of professional dancers, Vernon's juxtaposition here nevertheless

captures the energy and excitement of seeing teenagers perform in dynamic ways at Herc's parties. Indeed, the concentration of such dancing during the latter's Merry-Go-Round further added to the overall "affective force" of the hip-hop movement, motivating younger attendees, especially, to hone their skills and take part in its artistic exchanges.

Taking it to the Floor

When The Twins finally discovered this new forum for dancing, they set their sights specifically on breaking, as opposed to courting, drinking, or socializing with the mostly older crowd in attendance. "We just was amazed at the things that they did," Keith revealed in regards to the early breakers at Herc's parties. "We wanted to dance. That's what we wanted to do. We wanted to do whatever we can to entertain people" (Israel, 2002). Being "the smallest guys in the party" (Smith, 1999), as they regularly point out,[28] motivated them to spend hours throughout the week practicing in their kitchen, trying out new routines in front of a mirror, and developing innovative steps "that would amaze the crowd" at Herc's events (Hager, 1984, p. 32; Smith & Smith, 2015). Thus, their relatively younger age did not deter them from entering breaking circles but, rather, spurred them to forge their own corporeal identity alongside other dancers at Herc's parties.

As in past African American art forms, The Twins added to the individuation of breaking by substantially reinterpreting and adding to the dance's preexisting elements. This included

[28] In April 2000, The Twins gave a panel presentation at a breaking event in Las Vegas, Nevada, called "Concrete Soul." This was the first time I had seen them in person and one of the few times they have been invited to a modern breaking competition. The organizer of the event, Darrick "Quali-D" Fields, remembered both Keith and Kevin talking about their early experiences at Herc's parties and emphasizing how, being the youngest ones there, they felt lucky to even be in attendance. They also explained how they took inspiration from the older breakers they saw and similarly sought to impress Herc's audiences with their own unique dancefloor contributions (D. Fields, personal communication, March 24, 2020).

rhythmic, upright sequences such as the squat drop and forward-lunging two-step discussed in the previous chapter, as well as transitions to the floor and various acrobatic moves exuding difficulty, capacity, and creativity. For example, rather than intermittently dropping down to the ground and springing back upright, as dancers as far back as James Brown had done, The Twins began using their hands and feet to *remain* on the floor in more extended combinations before returning to their feet (Israel, 2002). Although this may seem like a natural progression of the dance, for the time, it was considered a radical contribution that garnered the Smith brothers considerable attention. In a manner reminiscent of Herc's rotation of obscure funk-based "beats," which other DJs later added on to with their own selections, The Twins *built* upon the aesthetics of their predecessors, rather than mimicking them exactly or diverting from them entirely. The fact that they regularly give credit to "A1 b-boys" such as Sasa for inspiring them along these lines speaks to the ongoing collectivity of the dance, wherein symbolic resources from the past were reconfigured with new meaning and carried forward communally. Moreover, the generally older crowd at Herc's parties seems to have especially enjoyed seeing two young dancers incorporating such new, floor-based maneuvers within their breaking, further encouraging The Twins to develop their novel performances. In this way, the youth-oriented, working-class African American tradition of individuation and creating "diversity within unity" (Malone, 1998, p. 234) gave the Smith brothers considerable room to experiment and develop their own identity.

One of the most notable breaking moves The Twins are said to have popularized during this period is commonly referred to today as a "sweep." It involves the swinging of one's leg in a squatted position, with hands placed on the floor to elevate the opposite foot as the transitioning leg rotated underneath it (Numata, 2005). In their seminal study of early 20th century African American dance, Marshall and Jean Stearns (1968/1994) labeled this move an "Around the

World," noting how versatile hoofers such as Willie Covan adapted it from traditional Russian dancers (p. 269). Interestingly, some early practitioners can also be found referring to it as "around the world footwork" (IntangibleRoots, 2013)—suggesting a direct corporeal and discursive link to the jazz era. However, pinning down a precise name for such moves is difficult, as early b-boys and b-girls were generally not documenting or labeling their dancing in this fashion. Indeed, even when labels and descriptors for moves did emerge, they tended to vary from one neighborhood to another. Nevertheless, what is clear is that a variation of this floor-based maneuver reemerged among African American teenagers in The Bronx and became another important phrase added to breaking's evolving movement vocabulary.

The Twins also helped popularize the dance's downward progression by performing various low-level spins on the floor. Although they did not rotate on every conceivable part of their body, as latter-day breakers would, The Twins are said to have set the foundation for such innovations by getting low to the ground and swiveling in a circle on their feet and hands. "The Twins would go on the ground and spin. They were famous for that," recalled early b-boy James Bond, attributing the ease with which they would maneuver to their relatively shorter height (Norin Rad, 2017c). Cholly Rock from the Zulu Kings also credited The Twins for introducing such rotations, stating that, "The Twins would do their thing and they were smooth, they would spin down and come up real slow" (Smith, 2016). Thus, as with the double-jointed moves of Sasa discussed above, it seems that the creativity of The Twins was accentuated by their differing body types. Rather than serving as an impediment to their performances, they utilized their shorter height and physical exuberance to compose floor-based maneuvers that others might have found difficult or simply uncommon. This, once again, reaffirms the particularly unique role youth played in modifying and shifting breaking's aesthetics.

During their visit to York University in 2015, I had a chance to witness Keith Smith synthesize several of these early movements together in a rare display following his presentation. When the DJ on hand played James Brown's "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" (1970), Keith entered the circle performing a variation of the forward-lunging two-step, hiking his knees up in a stylistic fashion while stepping forward to the beat, followed by a drifting squat drop wherein he placed his right hand on the ground, hopped over his extended right foot, twirled in a half spin and slid back up to his feet. Here was the abrupt crouched position of the squat drop, connected to the leg swing of a sweep, combined with the body rotation of a floor spin, interspersed together in one seamless motion. Despite the entire sequence lasting only about thirty seconds, it was impressive to see Keith perform these moves nearly four decades after his brother and he had innovated them. And the way he wove it all together to the music showed how breaking's upright and floor-based vocabulary could be combined to develop even further variations.

To get a sense of how his brother and he came up with such moves, Keith suggested to the class that they watch the film *Stormy Weather* (1933), in which the famed jazz-era duo the Nicholas Brothers perform an iconic three-minute routine to the music of Cab Calloway. Once again, this further suggested a connection between breaking and previous African American expressions. Indeed, such connections have not been lost on dancers from previous eras, either. For example, in a 1984 interview with *Dance Magazine*, the famous hoofer Charles "Honi" Coles stated, in a perhaps oversimplified fashion, that "break dance is old stuff except for the fast spinning." He listed off various early vaudeville performers and "flash acts" who utilized "floor work" in the same way he saw young breakers doing in the 1980s. "But the question in my mind," Coles wondered, "in the absence of vaudeville and 'the acts,' is where the current break dancers discovered all those steps" (Horosko, 1984). Whether directly inspired from films or

older community members, or simply conjured in the same spirit of "dancing like flame" as previous working-class African Americans (Hughes, 1926), these references signify the common African American symbolic resources that breaking was bound to. Once again, it was precisely this cultural tradition from which breaking and hip-hop emerged in the 1970s.

Joining alongside The Twins to help shift the dance floorward during this period was their childhood friend Clark Kent. In a manner that was also reminiscent of the flash acts and eccentric dancers of the jazz era, Kent was known to spin on his feet and bend his knees back while simultaneously dropping his hands to the floor and arching his hips up. He is said to have used the gravitational pull of this "back drop" to concurrently bounce back upright several times, often gaining enough momentum to leap in the air and land in an animated pose on the floor (Smith, 2016). By building off the aesthetics of the dance and adding his own unique twist to it, Kent similarly forged a unique identity for himself with such moves. In turn, by experimenting with such variations and matching the intensity of Herc's music with equally intense floor-based movements, he and The Twins set a new standard for the dance that others would soon emulate and further transform.

For example, b-boys such as Cholly Rock (Michael Waynetv, 2016a) and Pow Wow (Norin Rad, 2018d) of the Zulu Kings are said to have extended "the sweep" by swinging *both* of their legs instead of just one, alternating from the left to right in a continuous swinging motion. Like the "pin drop" and "burning" discussed in previous chapters, these new iterations of breaking began to shift the dance floorward and were adopted by subsequent practitioners. Again, this included several female participants, as well, with b-girls such as Sha-Rock and Pebblee Poo recalling—independently of one another—how the sweep became an essential component of their dance in the mid-1970s (Sha-Rock & Brown, 2011; Zeke62, 2015). In turn,

out of respect for their stylistic contributions, pioneers such as Cholly Rock regularly cite The Twins and Clark Kent as important inspirations. “The first people that I saw really doing it, getting down like that and spinning were The Twins and Clark Kent,” he acknowledged (Michael Waynetv, 2013). Pow Wow has similarly stated that he was initially inspired by seeing The Twins, Sasa, Clark Kent and others break at Herc’s parties (Norin Rad, 2018d), while Sha-Rock insisted that “the ones that were taking it [breaking] to a whole ‘nother level were Keith and Kevin” (Disco Daddy, 2017a). Even earlier pioneers such as PHASE 2 (2010) have recognized Kent and The Twins for their contributions to breaking, affirming in Hager’s early study of hip-hop that, “Those boys were bad” (Hager, 1984, p. 33). Thus, in a collaborative process akin to the tradition of individuation discussed above, younger dancers picked up on the floor-based moves that were being introduced, added their own variations to them, and dramatically changed the gravitational orientation of breaking forever.

Center of Attention

As these floor-based moves continued to advance, the size of the crowds at Herc’s parties also began to steadily increase. In turn, breakers were given further encouragement to hone their creativity, as the stakes of a performance grew in proportion to the participatory audiences which gathered around them. Unlike the generally tame role of observers in a traditional proscenium stage setting, onlookers within breaking circles directly shaped the sensibilities of the dance through their encouragement or discouragement of practitioners. To quote Vernon (2018) once again, hip-hop’s early gatherings were “not spectator events, divided into active performer and passive audience.” Rather, breaking circles “demanded that the audience, as much as the breakers and DJs, *completely immerse themselves in and commit themselves to* the new culture in

order to appropriately judge" its performance (p. 107, emphasis in original). Musicologist Samuel A. Floyd Jr's (1991) discussion of African American musical traditions similarly stressed that cultural tastes and values within this community have historically been developed within the "ring" of performance itself—rather than in an abstract critique detached from its communal context. Thus, by voting with their feet and showing expressions of approval or disapproval, audiences directly engaged in breaking's development. This is important because it further exemplifies the participatory exchange of energy at hip-hop parties, as opposed to the self-contained consumption seen in more traditional forms of Western performance (Siegel, 1998).

As I discuss in more detail below, this dichotomy between audience etiquette and practitioner exuberance also had implications for how disco adherents would relate to the burgeoning hip-hop movement. Suffice it to say that the former's notions of "refinement" and "sophistication" did not hold sway at early hip-hop parties. Instead, hip-hoppers put a premium on "performing the breaks," where departing from convention with assertive and idiosyncratic movements was encouraged. However, as discussed in the previous section, this framework of individuation also maintained a loosely defined set of rules. For instance, musicality was heavily emphasized, as was physical difficulty and competition. In addition, the dance was rooted in a repertoire of movement stemming from African American cultural traditions, which were refashioned to enact a new sense of meaning but were, nevertheless, familiar enough to be accepted by the local community. It was also for this reason that partygoers gravitated to the floor-based moves introduced by The Twins: they were an extension of the floor transitions, such as the pin drop and the splits, that they were already used to. In other words, breaking on the floor was unprecedented enough to elicit excitement while also being situated within the

community-based process of dancing to obscure, funk beats that had been occurring since at least the days of the Plaza Tunnel. Such commonly held tastes and expressions were the reason the dance shifted floorward in the first place. Had they been executed in front of disapproving disco audiences or in an environment of strict conventions, they would have never become part of the shared, socially constructed blueprint of breaking.

Several early practitioners, in fact, emphasize this importance of audience acceptance in their recollections of the dance's early development. For example, Rossy, the younger brother of early breaker Trixie, emphatically stated that "the bigger your circle, the bigger you are!" (Norin Rad, 2018c), meaning that the more one could draw a crowd at Herc's events, the more their prestige would grow in the hip-hop community. Other breakers also proudly recall how partygoers would follow them throughout the night to see where they would dance. "It was crazy how people used to stand around and wait for you to dance," remembered Mike G, an original member of the Shaka Zulus breaking collective (Michael Waynetv, 2016a). Keith Smith of The Twins likewise boasted that, "When we danced, we always had a crowd around us" (Hager, 1984, p. 32). Such positive reception reinforced the sense of belonging dancers felt when entertaining audiences and validated their prominence within a socially rooted performative practice. In contrast, not being known and, to this day, not having others corroborate one's breaking prowess can hamper a practitioner's credibility. "The reality is, if you are who you say you are, somebody somewhere is going to say, 'Yeah, I remember them,'" stated Cholly Rock, adding that early breaking and hip-hop consisted of "a *small* fraternity and sorority" of practitioners (Mr. Biggs, 2019). Thus, involvement in the scene meant not only doing certain moves but doing them within a communal context of shared meaning.

In turn, receiving social recognition played an important role in motivating many breakers to pursue the dance. This is not to say that all practitioners sought to gain audience accolades, as several also emphasized the sensorial joy they felt when moving to music or the catharsis of artistic expression. However, a considerable number of participants point to audience appreciation as an important part of their dance journey. Being able to have your corporeal subjectivity validated by others helped impart a sense of confidence among these young practitioners. Again, it is for this reason that The Twins stated that they wanted to "do whatever we can to entertain people" (Israel, 2002), while others such as Cholly Rock have spoken about being acknowledged for the technical proficiency within breaking. "I found that this other dance, I could do it," he stated in a recent podcast. "I was good at it and I got a level of acceptance with it" (VIBES-LIVE, 2019). Sasa similarly explained that breaking helped him gain admiration as a teenager: "When I walked the halls all the people in my High School went, 'There goes Sasa!! What's up Sasa?!!'" (Norin Rad, 2017a). These early practitioners did not receive money or fame for their skills but, rather, peer group acknowledgment. And it should be noted that early hip-hop adherents in The Bronx often shared stories of what they experienced at parties to friends and acquaintances, making one's breaking prowess potentially reverberate throughout the community. "If you was at one of Kool Herc's parties, it was something big," explained GrandMixer DXT, "something you'd go home and brag about" (Hager, 1982, p. 72).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the specialized circles that formed during Herc's Merry-Go-Round rotation of breakbeats also transformed his parties into an exciting arena for artistic performance and entertainment. Although most partygoers would simply do the latest dances and socialize with one another, it was understood that, at a certain point in the night (usually at the height of the party), Herc would play his unique rotation of records for breakers to

do their specialized moves to. “[R]emember, they weren’t playing B Boy records all night,” insisted Cholly Rock. “We played regular stuff. . . But when the B Boy jams did come on that’s when we would go off” (Smith, 2016). This concentrated performative format allowed breakers to take “center stage,” as the audience made circles around them, with some even going head-to-head in impromptu exchanges. “Kool Herc's parties were the Superbowl of breakdance, okay?!” maintained Clark Kent, adding that the venues where he played music were attracting the “cream of the crop, the top of the line, A1 B-Boys” from throughout the borough (Norin Rad, 2017d). In turn, young people were given an important outlet to enact their creativity and embody a unique sense of self. Spectators were just as drawn to this experience as the dancers themselves, with breaking becoming one the most defining and highly anticipated features of the nascent hip-hop movement. “We were the people that they came to see,” said Cholly Rock. “We were turning the parties out. We were like little celebrities” (VIBES-LIVE, 2019).

In this way, breaking during the mid-1970s was both a social *and* artistic practice. Given that young people were often free from adult supervision at these parties, they could enact more alternative subjectivities and have them validated by a community of like-minded peers. As sociologist R. Milton Clark (1974) explained, despite its severe neglect in scholarship, such dance parties have long served as a “mechanism for the socialization of urban Black youth” (p. 145). Writing at around the same time that hip-hop was forming in The Bronx, Clark used ethnographic fieldwork in Chicago to position teenage parties as a means for African American adolescents to develop group identity and camaraderie. “Just as marriage and funeral ceremonies often show ritualistic family solidarity,” he wrote, “the dance party ceremony shows elements of a ritualistic Black Family solidarity” (p. 153). Similarly, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2012) has argued that African American dancing “forwards ideologies of *corporeal orature*—

expressive body talking—as a productive means of group formation and social connectivity" (p.128, emphasis in original). He points to the 1970s television *Soul Train* and maintains that both its public popularity and representation of African American identity stemmed from the relatively free reign dancers were given to enact their corporeal subjectivity. In his influential study of symbolic creativity among teens in the UK, cultural studies scholar Paul Willis (1990) also wrote about how conceptions of race, class, age, gender, and other identity markers are not so much learned as they are lived and experimented with through music, dance, fashion, and other forms of everyday expression. He demonstrated how young people creatively made meaning in their lives through the symbolic resources available to them and this can be especially true for marginalized communities, Willis explained, given that they often tap into their cultural heritage to cultivate an identity of their own (p. 8).

Thus, just as the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1960s brought with them new expressions of consciousness, the teenagers involved in breaking in the 1970s manifested their identity through a radical new dance practice steeped in working-class African American traditions and values. To engage in breaking meant to participate in this movement together with "a *small* fraternity and sorority" of like-minded peers and it was this sense of group formation, harnessed through the combination of dancing and music in the jook environment that Herc provided, which allowed hip-hop to flourish into a "common culture."

What's in a Name?

By the mid-1970s, the musical innovations and dynamic dancing taking place at Herc's parties were coalescing into an identifiable scene with its own unique aesthetics, musical soundtrack, autonomous dance spaces, and audience of receptive and knowledgeable viewers.

Younger dancers such as The Twins contributed significantly to this scene by adding prolonged floor sequences to the already established upright steps, intermittent drops, and aerial flips that earlier breakers were known for performing. This was also combined with the ongoing emphasis on musicality, competition, and corporeal subjectivity to help propel a youth driven, community-based dance that offered adolescents an important avenue for expressing themselves, socializing with one another, and enacting a sense of both collective joy and individuality. It was through these processes, with dancing at their core, that what would eventually become known as hip-hop first formed.

However, another critical component of the movement, which I have yet to address, were the unique nicknames and terminology that began to be associated with hip-hop. For instance, although I have been referring to Keith and Kevin Smith as "The Twins," the original name given to them by Kool Herc and Coke La Rock was, in fact, the "Nigga Twins." Since 2015, they have publicly disavowed this moniker due to the negative connotations associated with the "N-word," preferring to go by the title of "The Legendary Twins," which they explain was suggested by their friend and fellow hip-hop pioneer Pow Wow of the Zulu Kings (Smith & Smith, 2015). However, this rebranding itself demonstrates just how powerful names and terminology—in addition to the unique dance moves they performed—were for pioneering breakers. After all, as they grew in age and stature, The Twins modified their problematic dance names, rather than scrapping them altogether, to fit with their renewed sense of self and social consciousness.

Again, like many other facets of the dance, the coining of such nicknames can also be seen throughout African American cultural history. For instance, jazz era dancers of the early twentieth century similarly took on stage names such as Bojangles, Snakehips, Rubberlegs, Slow Kid, Cholly, Cutout, Jazzlips, Dynamite Hooker, and King Rastus to name a few (Stearns &

Stearns, 1968/1994). As New York educator and early street art researcher Herbert Kohl (1969) documented, many African Americans were also taking on African or Islamic names during the 1960s to signify a shift in their social consciousness. Using the famous example of boxer Cassius Clay changing his name to Muhammad Ali, Kohl observed how the failure of society to acknowledge such conversions were interpreted as a direct attack on people's dignity and existence. "These names are not merely symbols of new identities but also confirmations of them," he wrote, tying this analysis to the nicknames he saw young people writing on walls in Spanish Harlem, adding that such tags were not acts of vandalism, markings of territory, or proclamations of love for the opposite sex, as seen in past forms of "graffiti," but, rather, part of a new, "complex cultural phenomenon" signifying the formation of alternative identities among youth in working-class neighborhoods. "The given name is received from one's family and remains unchanged throughout life," Kohl observed as he took tours throughout Harlem photographing young people's wall writings. "This contrasts with the secondary or nickname which is usually a name the youngster chooses for himself or receives from his peers . . . It identifies him as a member of a peer group which can be as important to him as membership in his family" (p. 29). In much the same way, the aliases breakers adopted provided them with an important sense of adolescent identification. Like their personalized dance moves, such names became a vehicle for presenting their sense of self to an alternative community outside of formalized institutions. Conversely, to speak badly about a breaker's name, or use it without permission, was deemed to be an attack on their very existence, akin to copying their signature moves without giving them proper credit. For this reason, it was almost mandatory for every b-boy or b-girl in The Bronx to have a unique moniker.

Once again, Kool Herc and his partner Coke La Rock played a significant role in coining many of these monikers for practitioners. Through their microphone pronouncements and rhymes, they added another layer of significance and validation for those involved in hip-hop culture. In fact, many practitioners insist that to have their name shouted out on the microphone at a Kool Herc party was the ultimate symbol of achievement, especially for young breakers. “If that happened you were like GOD and that’s it!” exclaimed James Bond when recounting the first time Herc gave him a shout out (Norin Rad, 2017c). Such recognition imparted a sense of accomplishment for breakers and solidified their sense of connection to Herc, who many at the time regarded as a “superhero” (Chang, 2005, p. 80) and “rock star” in The Bronx (Tompkins, 2010, p. 94).

In turn, the unique vernacular recited at hip-hop parties added to the aura of this growing movement. For example, early b-boy and hip-hop artist Sisco Kid remembered being as “transfixed” by Herc’s pronouncements as he was by his obscure records and powerful sound system (Hager, 1984, p. 47). Another early hip-hop pioneer named Mean Gene, of the group the L-Brothers, once described searching for a rare James Brown record to give to Herc in exchange for a shout out. “I didn’t want no money,” he explained, “I just wanted him to shout out my name. If Herc shouted out your name on the mic, it made you an instant celebrity” (Gonzales, 2017). Such stories demonstrate just how powerful Herc’s voice was in boosting reputations and bestowing legitimacy among early hip-hop adherents.

Accordingly, for Keith and Kevin Smith, being nicknamed the Nigga Twins was initially a point of pride. It symbolized that they were recognized as important members of the cultural movement they were involved in. “When you’re twelve years old, going to these parties, and people were shouting you out on the mic, just to hear your name made you kind of feel good,”

Keith explained, adding that they used the "N-word" as a term of endearment at the time, not imagining that it would ever travel beyond their immediate community (K. Smith, 2015). However, The Twins' name gained a renowned reputation throughout The Bronx and, eventually, the world. Through their pivotal contributions to breaking, they continue to remain perhaps the most well-known African American pioneers of the dance. "Everybody knew them in The Bronx," relayed early b-girl and MC Sha-Rock. "They were the ones that people truly, truly respected" (Disco Daddy, 2017a). Thus, rather than getting rid of their nicknames altogether, The Twins recently modified it when they grew older to reflect their renewed social consciousness and more public profile.

In addition to giving out nicknames, Kool Herc and Coke La Rock also famously labeled the breakers within their parties as the "B-Boys" (or "Break Boys"). Contrary to the common misconception that this was a title for the dance overall, however, Keith Smith and others have clarified that, originally, "The B-Boys was a specific group. A select few individuals that came from Kool Herc . . . The B-Boys were Kool Herc's dancers" (Smith, 1999). In other words, "B-Boys" was the title of an early collective within breaking, not the dance itself. Members are said to have included The Twins, Clark Kent, James Bond, Amazing Bobo, and El Dorado Mike (Smith, 1999; Norin Rad, 2017c). Given the prominence of these dancers and their affiliation with Kool Herc, it is plausible that attendees at the latter's events heard him say it on the microphone and thought it was in reference to *all* breakers. As GrandMixer DXT explained to me:

> The B-Boys was actually the dancers that danced at Kool Herc's parties. His regular dancers. They were called "B-Boys." We took it home, you see what I'm saying? "B-Boys" were actually a particular group of dancers who danced at Kool Herc parties. We

> went home saying, “I’m a b-boy.” It became the terminology to explain the type of dancing that we were doing. (DXT, personal communication, December 28, 2017)

Whether they mistook Herc pronouncing it as a general label for the dance or simply wanted to emulate his group of elite dancers, the term “b-boy” (and its counterpart “b-girl”) quickly spread as a trademark for breakers throughout The Bronx. It seems to have been an especially important term for the growing number of *younger* practitioners who were transitioning the dance to the floor. Again, in the era of Herc’s expanding musical innovations, it was no longer enough to dance solely upright. To be a respected practitioner, you now had to be versed in floor moves, as well. According to Cholly Rock, this is what separated their generation from the pioneers who came before them. “[T]here were a lot of people who were what you called Burning or even Breaking who we would not consider B Boys or B Girls,” he explained. “They weren’t spinning like what The Twins, Fuji, Clark Kent, myself, and others were doing” (Smith, 2016). Keith Smith similarly told students at York University that, “Everybody who breakdances isn’t a b-boy but everybody who’s a b-boy breakdances” (Smith & Smith, 2015). In other words, this term came to signify both a generational and aesthetic shift in breaking, associated most famously with prolonged floor movements.

As the format and lexicon of breaking evolved in this manner, younger practitioners also noticed that those in their later teens were gradually distancing themselves from the dance. “Like some guys felt like dancing on the floor and gettin' your clothes dirty.... they was starting to feel like they was gettin' to old for that,” explained James Bond. “These people are starting to turn 17, 18, 19 so they are seeing different things in their lives. But we still like 14, 15, 16. We still kids, we're having fun dancing and it was popularity” (Norin Rad, 2017c). Of course, I do not rule out that some dancers continued to break even as they got older, while others may have

simply grew tired of the dance or felt ambivalent towards its floor-bound progression. Nevertheless, the general pattern during this period seemed to be that youth ranging in the ages of thirteen to sixteen years old made up the core of the form's practitioners. As I discuss in Chapter Six, this cycle of growing beyond one's adolescent years and moving away from breaking would be seen repeatedly throughout hip-hop history, suggesting that notions of "acceptable" behavior based on age—in addition to race, class, and gender—may have shaped the dance's development. It also reinforces the role dancing played in expressing one's youth identity, with new, more acrobatic floor-based moves helping distinguish younger practitioners from their predecessors. In turn, such aesthetic shifts were reinforced by new terminologies such as "b-boys" and "b-girls."

Additionally, it was not just younger dancers who acknowledged these shifts. Older breakers who were prominent in the early 1970s—even those affiliated with Herc himself—generally did not identify with the labels of "b-boys" and "b-girls." For example, Trixie, a well-known breaker at Herc's earliest events, continues to disassociate himself from the term, while simultaneously acknowledging its modern relevance.

> But I gotta say in my mind I was not a B-Boy at that time! I WAS NOT a B-Boy when I was breakdancing. Kool Herc did come up with that after I had stopped dancing. So I wasn't no B-Boy I was just Trixie. All the other guys he made them, you know, B-Boys and Herculoids. I wasn't around when he did that though. Nah, I wasn't with that. We gonna straighten that out right now! But now B-Boy that's what it is." (Norin Rad, 2017e)

Pioneering breaker PHASE 2 (2010) similarly explained that, "A lot of us never really considered ourselves as 'b-boys' because basically that was a title reserved for Kool Herc's boys." However, he insisted that dancers were breaking even prior to Kool Herc's parties, and

that many of the moves, concepts, and steps b-boys and b-girls later adapted evolved from this earlier generation. In this way, he drew connections between the two discursively demarcated waves of the dance. "[I]f B'boys are to be seen as the breakers of that primary era that's when or why we relate to ourselves as original b'boys because technically we were and our influences were all over," he concluded. In other words, while accepting its contemporary relevance, earlier practitioners such as Trixie and PHASE 2 often qualified the term b-boy when it was applied to them, indicating the impact both terminology and movement styles had on practitioners' subject formation.

Furthermore, the differing outlook towards such terminology reiterates the specific role *young* teenagers played in guiding the trajectory of hip-hop. After all, the "breakbeats" which became the cornerstone of the movement were specifically catered to adolescent "b-boys" and "b-girls." As Herc himself has explained, "Most of the James Brown, Jimmy Castor, they would . . . [he's dancing breaker style in the street] . . . you're not gonna have 35, 40 year-old people doing that. Whole different rotation. So I'm playing for them [young people] and rockin' their ass" (Brewster & Broughton, 2010, p. 171). Although Herc was no longer a teenager by the mid-1970s, he overwhelmingly played for dancers of high school, and later even junior high, age. Beatmaster Doc Ice, a member of the Southeast Bronx's Jam Masters Crew, specifically characterized these young dancers as "the barometer of Hip Hop itself," expounding on the fact that, "When these original breakbeats got played for the youth to dance on the ground; to me that was the seismic shift that created Hip Hop as we know it" (T. L. Smith, 2015). Others have also argued that the attire of young breakers—with their preference for sneakers, jeans, and caps—came to shape how hip-hop fashion would later be defined (Jenkins, 2015).

Thus, it should come as no surprise that, by the early 1980s, the terms b-boy and b-girl were being applied to adherents of hip-hop, overall. In the words of author Nelson George (2001), "The B-Boy, a phrase originally applied to break dancers, was, by the time I used it, a catchall phrase among hip hop fans for anyone deeply involved with or influenced by hip hop culture" (p. xv). Once again, this demonstrates not only the inextricable link between dance and music in hip-hop history but the specific role adolescents played in shaping the culture's evolution. Given their drive for self-affirmation and openness to alternative worldviews, it was particularly young African Americans who pushed the bounds of expression within this context. So much so that even the term hip-hop itself ultimately traces its roots back to them.

From Derision to Definition

When asked about the etymology of the term hip-hop, Rahiem, of the pioneering rap group Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, had this to say:

> The term hip-hop was actually, at first, it was a condescending term used by practitioners of disco music. Disco DJ's would disrespect hip-hop practitioners by saying, "Get out of here with that hippity hoppity stuff." They called us "floor sweepers" because, when we breakdance, we go down to the floor. The word "hip-hop" initially was a condescending term. (Get It Done, 2014)

This same description was given by Cholly Rock, who explained that the more predominant disco scene at the time looked down on breakers and used hip-hop as a derogatory description for their dancing—alongside other pejoratives such as "boi-oi-oings," "floor sweepers," "yo-yo's," and "jitterbugs" (Disco Daddy, 2017c; Michael Waynetv, 2014a). Like many other aspects of the movement's early years, these recollections are corroborated in the testimony of other leading

practitioners, including PHASE 2 (Mendez, 2008, p. 8), GrandMixer DXT (Lopate, 2017), and Melle Mel (Hudsonunionsociety, 2014). All of these figures affirmed that disco audiences belittled their expressions by using the term hip-hop. Kool Herc likewise maintained that:

> People used to just toss around, "Hey, look at the little hippity hop." It was the "hippity-hop." "Man look at the "hippity-hop" guys down there." Then they twist around and called, "Ah, look at the hip-hop guys with their hippy-hippy, hype parties." Then they finally went that way and this way, and out comes "hip-hop." And that label really tagged on it. Hip-hop tagged on it and covered the whole scope of the game. (Firehouse, 2011)

Thus, contrary to the misconception that the mainstream media (Charnas, 2010; Lawrence, 2016, p. 270) or founding practitioners themselves (Keyes, 1996, p. 231; Pabon, 2012, p. 57) coined the term, such testimony reveals that hip-hop was originally an insult hurled against the movement. And this is in the mid-1970s, prior to the advent of rap records or any commercial exposure of these expressions. In other words, those who looked down on practitioners as "hippity-hoppers" were local community members in The Bronx and surrounding areas in New York City.

As the above testimony of Cholly Rock and Rahiem also indicates, the term hip-hop was specifically a derisive description of the perceived "jumping up and down" of b-boys and b-girls when they *danced* (VIBES-LIVE, 2019). To those who followed the more prominent disco movement during this period, breaking was looked down upon as an erratic and unsophisticated spectacle. Indeed, most clubs throughout The Bronx prohibited the dance altogether, with many refusing to play the percussive funk records that breaking was rooted in. For example, well-known African American disco DJs such as Pete DJ Jones went so far as to stop a party if b-boys and b-girls dared to hit the floor. "When the break dancers start breaking, everybody run like it's

a fight," Jones disapprovingly stated in a 2004 interview. "And they gather around and then another one jumps down there" (Jones & Blow, 2004). Such seemingly frenzied displays were considered an aberration from the more traditional upright social dances, common among disco audiences. DJ Hollywood, another well-known African American disco DJ who played in The Bronx, similarly explained that, "All that diving on the floor shit, naw, that wasn't happening" (Ewoodzie, 2017, p. 75). Through such avowed opposition, disco proponents positioned breaking as not only foreign but, more crucially, *inferior* to their more formalized and partner-based dances.

In turn, the youth who were advancing breaking in the mid-1970s had to confront such negative attitudes as part of their subject formation. They knew that they were involved in a practice welcomed by only a small segment of partygoers in the borough and, thus, perceived themselves to be cultural "renegades." As GrandMixer DXT has explained:

> This experience is a lot smaller, originally, than what the narrative has made it. It is a very small group of people. It's less than a hundred. Less than a hundred practitioners. Between the dancers who became MC's and the DJ's, it's less than fifty. And these are the people who were doing all these parties. The romanticized story confuses everyone and makes them think it was the entire Bronx. It was not at all. Not even close. (Disco Daddy, 2017d)

This minority status of breaking within the African American community only further enhanced its practitioners' sense of camaraderie, solidifying their alliance in the face of antagonism. As sociologist Joseph G. Ewoodzie (2017) has argued, the symbolic boundaries of hip-hop were formulated along this axis of differentiation and contestation with the disco scene. By articulating their disapproval of breaking and the beats it was associated with, those who

preferred the more mainstream R&B and disco music being played on the radio helped, according to Ewoodzie, "generate a new social and cultural entity" in the form of hip-hop (p. 75). Although I would not go so far as to say the movement was defined strictly, or even mainly, according to such opposition—the shared cultural tastes and outlook of its practitioners were far more central, in my view—there was certainly a sense of alterity imbued within these forms due to their rejection by more prominent segments of the community.

Furthermore, contrary to the scholarly misconception that hip-hop arose as a response to the "white washing" of disco (Keyes, 2002, p. 43), or that youth in The Bronx hated disco (Ewoodzie, 2017, p. 45), the reality is that such opposition came from the African American community itself. Indeed, as cultural critic Nelson George (1988) has pointed out, "disco began as an extension of black dance music" and its "basic grooves were in the R&B tradition" (p. 153). Thus, when practitioners refer to followers of disco, they are referring mostly to people within their own community. As Cholly Rock has made clear, "White people weren't even in the mix cause they had no idea what we were doing. They weren't even around us. The people who were rejecting us were *Black* people" (VIBES-LIVE, 2019). Again, this demonstrates the complexity of the aesthetic choices, approaches, and values circulating among African Americans during this period, complicating any attempt to paint their cultural expressions as monolithic or singular. Just as importantly, promulgating a false dichotomy between "Black hip-hop" and "white disco" skews the fact that the latter movement was itself a product of the African American community, contributing once again to a disturbing cycle of invisibilizing African American cultural contributions (DeFrantz, 2004, p. 68).

When it comes to breaking, understanding this climate of opposition is also important in uncovering the alternative values embodied within the form, many of which are positioned by

practitioners in class terms. “I always called it [disco] the bourgeois scene,” said PHASE 2 (personal communication, January 19, 2017), while early rapper Kurtis Blow has written that, “The B-Boys were from the ghetto, while disco was for the middle class and the rich” (Blow, 1997). Although this connection between the socioeconomic status of practitioners and their cultural attitudes is crucial, it is also important to note that many of those involved in disco were from the same working-class neighborhoods as those who pioneered breaking (Founding Fathers, 2014). In other words, just as there were eventually b-boys and b-girls from various economic backgrounds and regions of The Bronx, disco also had widespread appeal during this period and involved various articulations of identity. Such associations between class and culture should, thus, not be taken as uniform. Rather, what is important is the African American community’s ongoing negotiation of attitudes and values, which often corresponded to social categories of class, race, and age, but were not strictly beholden to them.

In the case of disco versus hip-hop, the main differences among audiences lay in the former playing the “soft soul” music heard on “urban contemporary” radio stations like WBLS, while the latter emphasized obscure, funk-based records with hard-edged “beats.” Young men involved in the former tended to dress in upscale attire such as formal shirts, suits, and platform shoes, while young women wore dresses and heels. Meanwhile followers of the hip-hop movement often would wear, regardless of gender, stylized street clothing such as t-shirts, mock neck sweaters, rounded caps, jeans, and sneakers. The disco crowd tended to dance in a formalized and contained fashion, while breakers performed spontaneous movements exuding irreverence, creativity, and acrobatics. In turn, these differences reflected competing notions of identity, upward mobility, and respectability. Again, although often closely tied to class position, they were not entirely determined by them. Rather, the desire of breakers to embrace a dance that

was looked down upon only spoke to the affective power the form had on its practitioners, as well as their cultural penchant for defying dominant social standards.

In my view, rather than essentializing the African American community or romanticizing one expressive practice over another, scholars would do well to explore such varying cultural currents within The Bronx during this period. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2016) has famously argued, notions of identity and meaning are not fixed but, rather, constantly being negotiated within a broader confluence of power, dominance, and resistance. Early breakers themselves often emphasize this struggle, with many characterizing their dancing as a rejection of mainstream societal values. “We rebelled against the establishment by not dressing up and going to a party,” insisted DJ Kool Dee, who straddled both the disco and hip-hop worlds during the mid-1970s. “You don’t want to Hustle [a popular partner-based dance]. You want to dance freestyle. . . That’s what hip-hop is all about. You’re rebelling against the establishment.” Again, GrandMixer DXT has similarly elaborated upon this theme of self-determined defiance:

> Most people, even at that time, didn’t relate to what we were doing. I remember when I would be trying to dance—everybody remembers me as a b-boy—people would snatch me up and go, “What you doin’ man? What you doin’?” Or we’d go to people’s house parties and they’d say, “Yo, you can come in here b-boying cause last time y’all kicked the legs off my mother’s couch.” We’d carry our own records with our Flipper [hats] flipped up, our jeans . . . “Yo man, play this.” And those records we got from Herc.” (Sowards, 2000)

As has been the case in similar African American movements throughout history, breakers identified with one another and came together in autonomous jook spaces where “upper-class notions of respectability had little power” (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990, p. 130). By developing their

own unique corporeality, taking part in interactive exchanges, and, perhaps most crucially, performing prolonged floor-based sequences, these early practitioners were signaling an alternative identity that defied social convention. Indeed, this defiance was symbolized in the very meaning of "breaking," as going beyond the norm inevitably involved disregarding social standards. In this way, breaking represented both a youth-based penchant for expression and socialization, as well as a historically working-class tradition of developing community-oriented spaces where new meanings could be pursued. That practitioners later reappropriated the derogatory term hip-hop as a vocal chant (Eustice 2018) and *positive* descriptor of their movement (Mendez, 2008, p. 65) further reinforces this expressive defiance, and its inextricable link to *dancing*.

Significantly, this same manifestation of alternative worldviews within the African American community can be seen throughout history. As Hurston (1934/1970), Thomas (1977), Hazzard-Gordon (1990), and others (Gwaltney, 1981; Jones, 1963; Kelley, 1994; Levine, 1978) have pointed out, what has come to be referred to as the "core" of African American culture has consistently emanated from working-class communities, many of whom draw on their Africanist traditions to defy societal norms and constrictions. However, such expressions have also often been met with caution, if not outright hostility, by more traditional segments of the African American community. To take one related example, musicologist Christi Jay Wells (2019)[29] has demonstrated that, contrary to the dominant narrative that African Americans abandoned jazz dancing in the Bebop era, young people in this community continued to experiment with innovative movements well into the 1940s and 1950s, while more upwardly mobile African Americans restricted corporeal practices deemed to be too "wild" or "uncontrollable." Wells

[29] Formerly writing under the name Christopher J. Wells.

associated such competing “choreographies of listening” with a multi-faceted negotiation of agency among African Americans, arguing that conceptions of embodied identity should not be reduced to a monolithic racial determinism. Of course, in addition to differences in taste, such differing conceptions of “appropriate” expression often related to questions of ideology, assimilation, and class (Kelley, 1998). Indeed, it was precisely this articulation of difference which Langston Hughes (1926) was calling attention to when he implored African Americans to resist the “racial mountain” of conformity by turning to the “low-down folks” and “common people,” who he celebrated for resisting the “Negro middle class” tendency “to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization.” In contrast, the preeminent African American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois was known, especially in his early years, for advocating a strategy of racial uplift that called on African Americans to adopt middle-class white cultural standards, as opposed to what he saw as the less developed social practices of the working-classes (Kendi, 2016, p. 293). Again, my aim in pointing this out is not to concur with any political or moral judgments implicated in such sentiments but, rather, to note how there have historically been important distinctions made between various cultural currents and values within the African American community.

This can certainly be seen in the experiences of African Americans during the advent of hip-hop, as well. Breakers understood that they faced considerable opposition from the more predominant disco scene, with the little reward for their expressions beyond the visceral pleasure of dancing and gaining accolades from likeminded peers. Nevertheless, they cultivated a sense of identity through such accolades, refusing to rely on more mainstream institutions for cultural approval. Just as their predecessors in the funk movement found “delight in defying cultural norms” (Bolden, 2013, p. 18) and “revolt[ed] against this sense of having to ‘fit in’” (West,

1993, p. 3), breakers used the cultural resources available to them to craft their own symbolic meanings and sense of identity. The collective joy of dancing, socializing, and constructing a sense of self remained motivating enough factors for them to resist external attempts to stifle their expressions. The dance's emphasis on institutional autonomy also facilitated this defiance, as practitioners were provided an "experimental laboratory where new cultural concepts can be tested free from restrictions" (Hager, 1984, p. 103). Indeed, whereas most DJs in New York shunned young people for dancing on the ground and spinning on all fours, the jook environment harnessed by Herc welcomed and encouraged such innovations.

As I discuss in the following chapters, this stamp of alterity continued to color breaking and hip-hop well into its first decade of development, with non-normative approaches toward its aesthetics exhibited in other avenues of life, as well. To understand breaking's performance along these lines, it is important to look more closely at the sociocultural issues of gender, race, age, and class within the dance's history. As with other aspects of breaking's beginnings, scholarly assessments of such issues have been partial, at best, and wholly inadequate, at worst. I now turn my attention toward these critical issues, both to move beyond their mischaracterizations and to further examine the negotiation of subjectivity that took place during breaking's early years.

Chapter Five

"It Started with the Girls": Uncovering the Role of B-Girls in Breaking History[1]

In her influential inaugural article on breaking, dance scholar Sally Banes (1981) placed perhaps her greatest emphasis on what she deemed to be the masculine character of the dance. "Breaking is hard to do" her title read, suggesting that the form's acrobatic movements required a considerable amount of strength and daring. "It is a celebration of the flexibility and budding sexuality of the gangly male adolescent body," she continued, noting that the "machismo" of breakers was exhibited through their competition and ingenuity. Although, at that point, Banes had only witnessed the dance performed by a single group, the Rock Steady Crew (Banes, 1987), and admittedly knew little about its history (Banes, 1985, p. 84), she was convinced that its "macho quality" was embodied in its "ritual combat" and "sexual braggadocio." Such conclusions were also bolstered by an underlying narrative framework of "outlawry," with stories of b-boys being arrested, getting into fights, and channeling their aggression into art (Lakewood, forthcoming).

In the media craze that soon followed, most journalists adopted these characterizations and described breaking as "competitive street dancing in which teen-age boys vie to outdo one another" (Crossette, 1981, p. C7), with their main motivation said to be "praise and admiration from the girls" (Mollov, 1984, p. 15). Academics who later analyzed breaking also relied on such narratives to contextualize the dance's history. For example, in her essay "Dance in Hip Hop Culture," dance historian Katrina Hazzard-Donald (1996) referenced articles from the 1980s to

[1] Segments of this chapter appeared in a revised form as: Aprahamian, S. (2020). 'There were females that danced too': Uncovering the role of women in breaking history. *Dance Research Journal, 52*(2), 41 – 58. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/dance-research-journal/article/abs/there-were-females-that-danced-too-uncovering-the-role-of-women-in-breaking-history/71B35155DBC35F07C5650C7D48814A35

argue that “in its early stages hip hop dancing aggressively asserted male dominance” (p. 225) and that, unlike past African American forms, it was an “exclusively male” practice (p. 227). Dance scholar Susan Foster (1998) likewise described breaking as a “masculine-dominated arena” (p. 14) where females were historically excluded from participation. The noted literary theorist bell hooks (2015) took such characterizations even further, suggesting that breaking “emerged in the street” because its b-boy founders were intent on “an assertive patriarchal paradigm of competitive masculinity” (p. 35). Thus, according to hooks, these male practitioners perceived indoor spaces to be too “feminine” for them to perform in. With most commentators in the media and academia repeating such narratives, the overwhelming historic consensus has been that breaking was created by and for young men.

However, I have found in my research that not only were young women involved in the dance, they were, in fact, pivotal to its formation. Unfortunately, overlooking the voices of breaking’s founders has invisibilized these female practitioners from official histories, even more so than their African American male counterparts. Indeed, there is perhaps no issue more emblematic of the historical obfuscation surrounding breaking’s beginnings than the overlooked influence of b-girls on the dance’s development.

In this chapter, I turn my attention toward the many b-girls who participated in breaking’s birth, not only to clarify the historical record but also to further examine the institutional settings, social values, and aesthetic influences affecting the dance’s formation. It is my contention that, once again, the working-class African American jook continuum in which breaking was forged led its practitioners to structure their expressions in a mixed-gender, inclusive manner. I argue that, just as practitioners defied prevailing social attitudes and went beyond the norms of standard dancing in 1970s, b-girls and b-boys also approached questions of gender in ways

which diverged from mainstream conventions. Again, as Hazzard-Gordon (1990) emphasized in her important study of African American dance history, "upper-class notions of respectability had little power" within the "essentially underground" dance spaces of working-class jooks (p. 130), and this related to not only how one should dance but *who* should dance. Accordingly, questions of gender within breaking, or any other jook-based expression, should be evaluated according to the values and viewpoints of its practitioners, as opposed to the standards of dominant society (Hurston, 1934/1970). As dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2014) has argued, breaking must be approached on its own terms, with a cognizance that, as has been seen throughout African American history, alternative forms of womanhood may be embodied through its expressions.

In addition to the institutional factors shaping these nonnormative approaches, I will also examine how the cultural background and familial experiences of early breakers affected their outlook toward gender. Specifically, I will discuss how many male practitioners reference female family members as important influences on their dancing and how their outlooks toward gender may have been shaped by a broader, uniquely African American tradition of sharing expressive practices within the private sphere of the home. In addition, I will talk about how this mixed-gender experience connected to more public displays of dancing circulating among youth within The Bronx during this period. By returning to the years preceding Cindy Campbell and Kool Herc's inaugural party in 1973, I hope to demonstrate how teenagers coming of age in the borough refashioned longstanding African American traditions and values to enact their own sense of youth, community, and creativity. As part of this process, I also consider what implications the invisibilized history of early b-girls has for the development of African American music and dancing historically.

Finally, it should be noted that, like other researchers who have sought to speak with early b-girls (see Jones, 2010, pp. 30-31), I encountered difficulties in locating and securing formal interviews with female practitioners from the 1970s. Many of these difficulties had to do with the broader challenges of interviewing founding breakers that I discussed in Chapter One, which include the lack of publicly available contact information, technological impediments to communication for some older individuals, my inability to provide monetary compensation when it was requested, and the sad loss of many practitioners to the vicissitudes of the life cycle. Nevertheless, despite not being able to speak directly with any early b-girls for this study, the presence of young women in breaking's beginnings is overwhelmingly evident in the publicly available testimony on the dance, which I have been employing throughout this study. Indeed, it is through critically analyzing such information that I began to realize that b-girls played a much more prominent role in breaking than what has commonly been assumed in the media and academia. Accordingly, my main aim in this chapter is to call attention to this gap between practitioner testimony and "official" hip-hop history, with the hope that such an intervention will encourage greater research into the role of gender in breaking's past, as well as a reassessment of how notions of "masculine" authenticity have affected its modern performance.

Like Family Again

In her analysis of why most men positioned as "white" do not dance, sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig (2014) identified family upbringing and community background as two of the most important factors shaping how young men acquire movement habits. Certain ethnic, religious, and class groupings, she argued, incorporate dancing more within their homes than others, affecting the incentive structures and learning processes through which boys develop their

movement capacities. In turn, institutional conditions and ideological constructions of masculinity beyond the home—often tied to categorizations of race, class, age, and sexuality—affect whether men continue to dance or not, she insisted. Thus, a young man may be ridiculed for dancing in one community while, in another, they may receive praise and admiration from their peers. Although Craig specifically focused on masculinity in her research, my reading of hip-hop history suggests that her analysis of how upbringing shapes conceptions of gender in dance holds equally true for femininity, as well.

When it comes to breaking, notions of gender embodied within the form were strongly affected by the working-class African American background of its practitioners. In The Bronx, this included young breakers who were drawing on popular dances of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as African American entertainers such as James Brown and the Nicholas Brothers, to inform their movement expressions. However, even before these more public encounters with dance, many early breakers remember acquiring their initial interest in moving to music within the private sphere of their home, with mothers and sisters figuring prominently among their influences.

Pioneering breaker PHASE 2's experiences are emblematic of this pattern. "I never wanted to dance like Fred Astaire or anything I saw on TV," he insisted when I asked him about his early influences (personal communication, May 1, 2018). Instead, he pointed to his older sister and her teenage group of both female and male friends who would come over to his house and dance to soul and funk records in the late 1960s. "When I first saw my sisters dancing, I picked up on it," he recalled, adding that they had a unique style of moving that appealed to him. When he began approaching adolescence, PHASE 2 similarly began going to parties and doing the latest social dances, building on the moves he saw his sister and her friends perform, while

also experimenting with his own unique variations of them (Miller, 1989). Thus, rather than identifying with the "cool detachment" of film stars such as Astaire (Stearns & Stearns, 1967, p. 228), he preferred the expressive movement practices of the older teenagers within his community. And when he began constructing his own variations of popular social dances, PHASE 2 did so within a community environment that further validated his creativity—or, at the very least, did not deter it. "I could not settle for what was there. I had to make something of it," he explains, "and that's why people noticed us. Because we didn't dance the way other people danced" (Miller, 1989).

Early b-boy and pioneering MC Melle Mel similarly credited his older sister for introducing him to dancing.

> I remember my sister used to go to a lot of parties when I was even younger. They used to play the same kind of music and she used to go to the parties and dance. She was a good dancer. So, she used to come back and tell us how they do it at the parties, and the dances and stuff like that. (Numata, 2005)

Although Mel was too young to frequent local jook joints such as the Plaza Tunnel, he gained a glimpse of what happened inside these clubs through his older sister. Given that African American youth have long engaged in dance practices that do not constrict movements according to gender (Clark, 1973, p. 74), much of what Mel saw were moves that both young women and men performed interchangeably. Indeed, several scholars have noted how this "unisex" approach within the African American community is partly why these dances have historically gained widespread appeal, as seen in everything from the Lindy Hop craze of the jazz era (Hubbard & Monaghan, 2009, p. 133) to the "rock" dance movement of the postwar period (Novack, 1990, p. 42; Rust, 1969, p. 125). Not surprisingly, then, Mel's references to his older sister introducing

him to dancing suggests that he was able to take part in the same movement practices she was showing him. What's more, it directly connects his sister's dancing to the funk-based movement Mel would later encounter at Herc's parties, demonstrating how hip-hop was closely aligned with the African American expressive practices that preceded it. Again, as has been discussed throughout this study, a central part of the movement's appeal lay within this framework of refashioning new meaning out of preexisting cultural resources.

GrandMixer DXT has likewise referenced his older sisters—one of whom went on to become a professional theatrical dancer (personal communication, December 28, 2017)—as important influences on his musical and cultural development. "I was raised in entertainment," he explained to me when recalling the female members of his household who inspired him. "Dancing was just a natural thing in my house" (personal communication, December 28, 2017). He has also specifically highlighted the competitive dancing he saw taking place in his North Bronx neighborhood in the early 1970s.

> My sisters, we all went through the same school. So, I got to see all of the stuff that they were doing . . . Being in the same household, I got to see all of this stuff. All of the house parties, records, and the burning and all of that. (Disco Daddy, 2017d)

These "burning" experiences are what introduced DXT to breaking, given that they entailed young people "going off" to climatic peaks of funk-based music. "I got into it because it was something that was done in the neighborhood," he insisted, adding that the dance was familiar to him even before he attended Kool Herc's parties (personal communication, December 28, 2017). This is partly why DXT also has consistently argued that, although hip-hop was a unique phenomenon, its expressions were a reformulation of an "ancient energy" that existed long before even his time (GrandMixer, 1999b).

Numerous other testimonies from early b-boys and b-girls similarly attest to the involvement of young women in the development of breaking and hip-hop culture, both within the private sphere of the home and the more public sphere of social gatherings. To put it more precisely, young women figured prominently in the two leading institutions—the family and jook spaces—that shaped breaking's development and the values it emerged from. This not only suggests an important female role in the transmission of African American culture—one which deserves far greater scholarly attention in relation to the jook continuum itself—but also a potentially relevant role in the subsequent performance of gender within breaking, as well. After all, if many of the young men who pioneered the dance were partly inspired by their older sisters and female family members, how may have this affected their outlook toward b-girls in breaking? Although this issue requires far more in-depth research, my preliminary findings suggests that young women were important and active contributors to the dance within its first decade of development. Indeed, as I show below, first-hand testimony suggests that a substantial number of b-girls helped usher in the dance as a radical new form of kinesthetic expression. Moreover, much like Craig's (2014) observation that those who learn to dance in "less-structured home and neighborhood settings" tend to "pay less attention to gender and therefore are more likely to participate in the same activities, including dancing" (p. 144), I have found that the working-class African American jook continuum from which breaking emerged led to the creation of a relatively mixed-gender structure within the form—which is, at least theoretically, still with practitioners until today.

Burning People Up

As has been mentioned throughout this study, young women were especially active during the "burning" era of breaking in the early 1970s, when the dance first developed its often-touted tradition of battling and competition. However, contrary to the widespread misconception that these competitions were a product of masculine aggression or street gang activity, first-hand testimony reveals that they were often the result of young women challenging breakers at parties. Take, for example, this account from Tyrone the Mixologist, a DJ from the Southeast Bronx who recalls seeing a girl breaking against several young men at an event in the Castle Hill Houses in the early 1970s.

> They were breakdancing in the middle of the floor and here was this girl in there breakdancing. She was taking and wiping out a few guys. But then a few guys came from outside and they tore her down. I mean they broke her down. To the point where one guy was laying on the floor and he was vibrating on the floor. Not gyrating, *vibrating*. (Disco Daddy, 2017d)

Although Tyrone maintained that this unnamed b-girl was eventually defeated on the dancefloor, what is particularly interesting is his description of her "wiping out a few guys" in the process. It even seems as though she was the one who initiated the competition or, at the very least, did not back away from it. Indeed, Tyrone prefaced his above description by stating that, "There was a lot of girls that would start that burning stuff first" (Disco Daddy, 2017d), with no indication that partygoers deemed it "improper" for them to do so. Instead, he relayed this episode as an illustration of how women were involved in early breaking. In turn, the young men in his story are said to have approached her with the same seriousness and brass they would any other competitor. Numerous other accounts from this period similarly suggest that female participation was neither marginal nor occasional but, rather, central to the dance's inception.

For instance, another early practitioner who has referenced young women taking part in breaking's early years is Kool Kyle from the North Bronx. Here is an excerpt from an interview he gave where he discussed practicing elaborate dance routines with his teenage friends in anticipation of weekend parties.

> See what we used to do is go to party's [sic] and dance with girls and break on them. Cats would be at home practicing their routines, Friday and Saturday night you would start breaking. These routines that we did on these girls, actually became dance acts. (Smith, 2005)

When describing the beginnings of breaking, PHASE 2 has similarly explained that, "You've always had sisters who could dance," adding that, "you never tried to burn her unless she drew first blood" (personal communication, November 20, 2018). Although this second point might signify chivalry towards young women, PHASE 2 explained to me that, much like The Twins, he would simply prefer not to partake in burning unless he was challenged on the dancefloor, whether by a male or a female. In other words, he went to parties to have fun and would not engage in competition unless he was prompted to do so by another dancer. It just so happened that he felt it was often young women who would initiate these exchanges (personal communication, November 20, 2018). Indeed, he made this same point in an earlier, 1995 article on breaking in which he described girls being reluctant to battle him and his friends at parties due to what he characterized as his group's superior dancing abilities: "No brag, but girls didn't want to go near us . . . we weren't really trying to burn them but they weren't chancing the embaresment [*sic*]" (PHASE 2, 1995, p. 29). The fact that girls are used as the barometer of him and his friends' breaking prowess here, with no indication that females were sanctioned for

engaging in competition, further illustrates the extent to which young women were involved in early breaking.

Another early practitioner named Dancing Doug—who was from Harlem but frequented parties in The Bronx—has likewise explained that, "I used to burn guys and girls but it started with the girls." He expounded upon this claim by describing a move wherein he would spin upright and put his hat in front of a dancer's face when competing against them (Norin Rad, 2017b). However, he does not characterize such confrontational gestures as part of any "ritual combat" or manifestation of male "aggression" but, rather, as part of the revelry both young men and women took part in at parties. Again, GrandMixer DXT also recalled seeing girls doing these burning moves from a very early age.

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

As can be seen, these accounts were given independently of one another and are from individuals residing in different regions of The Bronx. Yet, they all recall essentially the same experience of seeing girls actively involved in shaping the competitive format that breaking would become known for. Indeed, even those who do not attribute this burning phenomenon to young women acknowledge the centrality of their involvement. "Guys started dancing with each other and then the girls got involved," is how early DJ Afrika Bambaataa described breaking's birth to hip-hop historian Steve Hager (2012). "Girls taking out other girls, girls taking out guys, all different types of break dancing" (p. 15). Cholly Rock of the Zulu Kings has also stated that "there were a

lot of girls who had reputations" as good burners in the 1970s, to which he listed off names such as Dancing Doll, D.D. Lawrence, Cokie, and others (Profo Won, 2017).

In addition to the consistency and coherence of these recollections, what is especially interesting is that they refer to young women taking part in breaking's expression of "combat" and "braggadocio" so often attributed to be a masculine "battle of libido and ego" (LaBoskey, 2001, p. 114). Although early burning was often performed upright—and was not as acrobatic as the floor moves b-boys and b-girls would later perform—the dancing during this period was known for its competitive use of everything from comedic to confrontational gestures, such as the miming of weapons or alluding to sexual innuendo. These are the very displays that are today upheld as markers of breaking's essential masculinity. However, if young women were involved in these activities—indeed, if they helped create them—how is it possible to characterize them as products of masculine aggression or too unfeminine for females to perform? Can such characterizations be maintained if they do not comport with the perspectives and experiences of those who ushered in the dance?

Although dominant Western culture may associate that challenging of a man on the dancefloor with "unladylike" behavior, such norms are often applied differently according to their temporal, cultural, and institutional contexts. Just as young men in The Bronx did not view their expressive dancing as a "feminine" activity—as it is often stigmatized in dominant Western discourse (Fisher & Shay, 2009; McRobbie, 1984, p. 143-144)—neither did young women who were engaging in competition see themselves as performing "masculinity." In other words, those who advanced breaking's early competitive practices held different symbolic meanings for them. Along these lines, it should be remembered that the dance was a largely underground phenomenon in The Bronx, in that it was practiced only by a small, specialized segment of

partygoers. Hip-hop and breaking were considered marginal, youth-based activities within the African American community, that went against the more dominant strain of disco during that period, and even within the hip-hop movement itself, only a select few would go off, freestyle, burn, and break. Accordingly, rather than blanketly attributing breaking's competitive practices to "masculinity," it is important to examine the historical context in which such exchanges took place and the extent to which alternative values may have been embedded in them.

Attending to breaking's African American roots is critical in this regard. As dance historian Jacqui Malone (1996) has argued, "competitive interaction" has long been a hallmark of innovation and expression within working-class African American communities (p. 5). Whether it be the hoofing competitions of the early twentieth century (Willis, 1994), the step offs of fraternities and sororities (Fine, 1991), or the social dance contests of the rock 'n' roll era (Mann, 1992), both African American women and men have long been seen engaging in such contests and competitions. Burning was the latest manifestation of this tradition, spontaneously enacted at clubs and block parties like a kinesthetic playing of the dozens, where young dancers performed a "ritual of permitted disrespect" to test the "facility, originality, ingenuity, and humor" of one another (Levine, 1978, p. 347).

However, just as with the case of breaking's historicization, most earlier treatments of African American dancing and expressions such as the dozens have tended to neglect the role of women. For instance, although Zora Neale Hurston (1934/1970) emphasized the centrality of women in working-class dance spaces—dubbing them "the queen of the Jook" (p. 30)—Hazzard-Gordon's (1990) historic study of these institutions did not address their contributions in any significant detail. Noted African American historians Carby (1992) and Hunter (1997) also both documented how female blues performers were condemned by social reformers for

their performances, but much of their analyses centered on the discourse of that time period, rather than the embodied practices of the women themselves. As such, like the issue of youth discussed in the previous chapter, the important contributions of women to working-class African American expression has gone largely understudied.

For his part, Kelley (1997) connected such neglect to his more general critique of social scientific misrepresentations of African American communities, arguing that dominant stereotypes of inner-city masculinity and criminality have tended to exclude females from scholarly assessments. In the field of popular music and cultural studies, McRobbie and Garber (1991) have similarly argued that the media sensationalized youth "subcultures" in the UK by overemphasizing episodes of violence and deviance in their coverage of them, leading to an almost exclusive focus on boys and the erasure of girls involved in such groupings (pp. 4-5). Unfortunately, these same patterns have been played out in the historicization of breaking, with the combined effects of practitioner neglect and presumptions of criminality leading to an almost total invisibilization of young women in the dance. It is my view that reversing such invisibilization is crucial if researchers hope to challenge such classist, gendered, and racially charged stereotypes, and to incorporate greater first-hand insights into the documentary record.

"There Were Females that Danced Too"

What about when breaking transitioned into more acrobatic displays on the floor? Did females continue their involvement in the dance or did its evolving structure and movement vocabulary lead to an altered perception of their performance? Although relevant information regarding this evolutionary period of breaking is more mixed, first-hand accounts from

practitioners, again, paints a considerably different picture than the one put forward in most hip-hop histories.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, DJ Kool Herc's rotation of break-specific music in the mid-1970s coincided with dancers increasingly adopting physically demanding movements—such as aerial flips, contorted poses, and prolonged floor sequences—to stand out from the rest of the crowd at his parties. In turn, the vocabulary of breaking began rapidly expanding through the same process of individuation, competition, and socialization discussed throughout this study. Although the number of young women appears to have dwindled during this more acrobatic progression of the dance, practitioner accounts suggest that b-girls nevertheless continued to play an important role within breaking.

For example, the Legendary Twins, Keith and Kevin Smith, regularly recall b-girls being active during their generation. "Now they have that terminology of 'b-girls' but there were females that danced too," explained Keith. "Let me tell you man: Sister Boo, Janice and her little sister Saundra, Deucy" (Numata, 2005). Although The Twins acknowledged that b-boys began to outnumber b-girls as the dance transitioned to the floor, they also suggested that the latter were not ridiculed or deterred from breaking but, rather, given respect. "It was a big deal to get in that circle," Keith insisted when listing off these early female practitioners. "You had to have heart and not everyone did. Only a select few" (Smith & Smith, 2015). Other young women said to have been involved in breaking during this period include names such as Kimmy, Yellow Banana, Doris, and Mother Earth.

Like Keith Smith, Clark Kent also recalled several b-girls who danced at Herc's parties, explaining that he would not hesitate to battle them if he was challenged in a circle:

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

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

Of course, much greater research into the perspectives of b-girls themselves is still needed to uncover such attitudes. In no way is my discussion of these accounts meant to be a

totalizing or conclusive analysis. Nevertheless, even within the limited range of information available, hip-hop pioneers regularly reference b-girls as active contributors to the dance. For instance, DJ Smokey, who played music for breakers at around the same time as Kool Herc, described the Luck-a-Trons, a group of b-girls with whom he was affiliated and that was the counterpart to his b-boy collective, the Smoke-a-Trons.

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

As with the above comment from Kent, Smokey's description of his dancers being organized along gendered lines might suggest that there were distinctions made between b-boys and b-girls within the hip-hop scene. However, it is not clear whether this separation was a signal of discouragement (based on the perceived lesser abilities of young women), encouragement (based on mutual support among dancers with a shared identity), or some other undisclosed factor. Certainly, Smokey acknowledged that b-girls who danced at his parties "were good" and played a significant role in his career, so much so that he made it a point to highlight their contributions. Indeed, as reflected in the above quotes, many hip-hop pioneers specifically mention Sister Boo as a prominent early b-girl. For instance, DJ Grandmaster Flash (2008) wrote in his autobiography that, "Sister Boo showed how the girls could get down just like the fellas" (p. 38) and Kool Herc has regularly referenced her name in interviews (Gross, 2005). Cultural sociologist Mary Fogarty (2010) took stock of such references in her analysis of breaking

internationally and noted how the media often overlook the mention of females by hip-hop pioneers, demonstrating just "how much the journalists are responsible for gendering hip hop culture into a male pursuit" (p. 33). Once again, this raises questions regarding the tension between the voices of practitioners and those of external actors.

Even pioneers who say females dropped out of the dance during this period tend to qualify such statements by acknowledging their continued contributions. For example, Zulu King Cholly Rock stated in an interview that, "They [b-girls] didn't go down to the floor like we did cause that just wasn't, you know, girls weren't really going to do that," but quickly followed up this statement by saying, "Although we had some [b-girls] later on" (Profo Won, 2017). His contemporary GrandMixer DXT also relayed to me that "the girls kind of moved away from it for a minute" when competitions became intense, but immediately added that "once it became more of your floor moves and your skills, and not burning, then the females became more involved again through just being b-girls" (personal communication, December 28, 2017). Like The Twins and Clark Kent, these personal recollections affirm that the dance was performed mostly by young men but that young women were never completely absent from the form. Indeed, what is interesting is that many of the b-girls who were active during this mid-1970s period went on to also become pioneering MCs. As such, several of them have publicly conveyed their early experiences in hip-hop and breaking.

One of the most well-known is MC Sha-Rock of the rap group Funky 4 + 1. Prior to becoming a rapper, she explained in her autobiography that she got her start in the culture by breaking at Kool Herc's parties. In fact, she dedicated an entire chapter to this experience, titled "B-Girl Stance," describing how she learned floor moves such as the sweep and performed at local house parties beginning in the summer of 1976. She also discussed both the consternation

and admiration she received for being a young woman involved in the dance. “All of the guys looked at me like, ‘What the hell?’” she said about her first time breaking at a Kool Herc party. “But, at the same time, I could see that they respected that I was a part of the game and was good too” (Sha-Rock & Brown, 2011). Her account signals how the first-hand perspective of b-girls is critically important to gauge the extent to which gendered conceptions may have affected their participation. Although some b-boys may have been taken aback by seeing a female break, others seemed to have encouraged and aided it, as Sha-Rock described learning the dance from a schoolfriend named JJ and his cousins, Mike and Pee Wee. “JJ taught me to uprock with the swiftness, transition to the floor, execute my power move, and then transition out smoothly,” she wrote (Sha-Rock & Brown, 2011). Whether being taught by guys in school, girls in the home, or a combination thereof, there seemed to be a relatively reciprocal relationship between both b-boys and b-girls in the early transmission of hip-hop dance.

MC Pebblee Poo’s story is strikingly similar to Sha-Rock’s. As another influential early rapper, she is often asked how she got her start in the culture and always emphatically states:

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

Like Sha-Rock, Pebblee also explained that “this little guy named Troy” taught her how to do the dance in junior high school (Zeke62, 2015). Between classes, they would practice moves such as the sweep and prepare themselves to break at local block parties, where DJs such as Smokey would bring their equipment outside and play music. The accolades Pebblee accumulated as a b-girl at these events eventually led her to pursue rhyming, as well, with fellow b-boys such as T

La Rock—who also went on to be an influential MC—similarly giving her praise and encouraging her to get on the mic (Pebblee, 2009). She proved to have just as commanding a presence on the stage as on the dancefloor, later becoming one of Kool Herc's official MCs and going on to record such renowned rap records as "Funkbox Party" (1982) with The Masterdon Committee.

Zulu Queen Lisa Lee, a noted member of the early rap groups Soul Sonic Force and Us Girls, also associated her entry into hip-hop with seeing breaking for the first time around 1976. In a 2014 interview, she identified the dance as what initially inspired her the most about hip-hop.

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

In other early interviews, Lee characterized breaking as something that all her peers were doing at parties, suggesting that female involvement in the dance was not perceived to be an aberration at the time (Holman, 1984, p. 139). Indeed, the influential Zulu Kings breaking group, through which the Zulu Nation collective that Lisa Lee was a part of emerged, also had a female affiliate called the Zulu Queens (akin to the Smoke-a-Tron and Luck-a-Tron collectives described above). Pow Wow, a leading member of the Zulu Kings, described personally teaching several Zulu Queens how to break (Norin Rad, 2018d), most notably Trina Tee, whom some in the Southeast Bronx have referred to as "one of the first b-girls" in their area (Michael Waynetv, 2016b). MC Kimba, who is also from this area, likewise insisted in interviews that she got her

start in hip-hop around 1976 as a b-girl who would dance in the Bronxdale Houses with b-boys such as Cookie and Clement. “I was a break dancer, that was the thing to do” (Disco Daddy, 2017f), she explained, further affirming that it was not uncommon for young women to break alongside young men during this period.

As can be seen, the prevalence of such testimony suggests that many of the dominant assumptions regarding breaking’s gendered beginnings require reconsideration. As an important part of this reconsideration, it is worth taking note of the specific social context in which these expressions were taking place: underground African American teenage parties. These were mixed-gender settings where young people—ranging in the ages of thirteen to sixteen—were socializing, expressing themselves, and having a good time. Breaking was not the only activity but, rather, a specialized dance nestled within a broader context of social interaction and musical movement. Young women took part in these activities just as much as young men and, indeed, it should be remembered that hip-hop itself emerged out of a back-to-school party thrown by a *young woman,* Cindy Campbell. The localized, informal, teenage context of these events facilitated an atmosphere where attendees were exposed to various movement practices and chose which ones they wanted to identify with. That a select few chose to break, while most did conventional social and partner dances, was in line with the more specialized character of breaking itself. Thus, even most male partygoers would not go off to b-boy records. Only a select few would, and several of these select few included females.

Just as importantly, the alternative cultural values enshrined within the dance seemed to have made such involvement acceptable to early hip-hop audiences. Given their own upbringing in homes where mixed-gender dancing was not an aberration, many early African American b-boys did not look down on b-girls breaking in circles with them—even when in competition.

Instead, they danced with and against these b-girls just as many working-class, young, African American dancers had done before them. Indeed, dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2014) has demonstrated how female artists within this community have a long history of embodying alternative, independent, and assertive forms of womanhood alongside their male peers. She drew insightful connections between b-girls and female blues singers in her writings, arguing that young women who break are not trying to "act like a man" but, rather, are enacting a countercultural form of femininity that positions them as producers, rather than objects for consumption, within the hip-hop movement. Thus, accounting for the role of b-girls in breaking history is essential in understanding the dance's broader social trajectory (Guevara, 1996, p.51), as well as its potentially emancipatory appeal.

Furthermore, the early experiences of practitioners reinforces the extent to which breaking and hip-hop deviated from the more popular disco scene of the 1970s. Unlike the latter's more formalized movement expressions, which was perhaps best encapsulated in the partner-based dance The Hustle, breaking provided its participants with a relatively open-ended, gender-inclusive structure, wherein participants were able to enact their symbolic creativity. This is not to say that b-boys and b-girls did not signify their gender through their performances or that they refrained from engaging in coupled dances or more traditional forms of expression. On the contrary, the hip-hop movement's emphasis on symbolic creativity gave participants considerable license to do so. Broader social pressures and obstacles related to gender also likely affected their behavior, something which deserves far greater research and analysis. However, what I am arguing here is that, unlike other dance forms, there were yet to be any formal gender codes or restrictions proscribed within breaking's movement vocabulary, structure, or system of transmission. Whether executing a squat drop, forward-lunging two-step, confrontational gesture

against an opponent, floor-based spin, or unique routine, young women seemed to have shared in the dance's aesthetics alongside young men. Indeed, I have yet to come across any early testimony that suggests b-girls were barred or dissuaded from performing movements b-boys did, although I do not rule out such a possibility. Again, far greater research is needed on the many founding female practitioners and their experiences to uncover such occurrences.

The autonomy and general marginality of hip-hop at the time also deserves greater attention along these lines. Indeed, it is my contention that breaking took on a relatively gender-inclusive structure, where those who were willing to take part in the dance were generally welcomed to share in its expressions, precisely because it was ostracized by the broader society. In turn, rather than exclude practitioners according to gender, b-girls and b-boys seemed to have largely embraced one another other according to the principles of participation and demonstrated skill within the hip-hop scene. In theory, but not always in practice, this same egalitarian format continues to hold sway among breakers until today—and has reemerged in nearly every solo hip-hop dance style which has followed in its path (DeFrantz, 2004). In the words of performance researcher Rachael Gunn (2016):

> Despite the broader social assumptions that 'women shouldn't do that', b-boys and b-girls have access to the same movement vocabulary, in that unlike other forms of dance, such as ballet, there is no division of labour or difference between vocabularies. B-boys and b-girls not only attend the same classes and workshops, but also learn the same moves and techniques, which exposes the underlying power of socio-cultural assumptions in limiting female bodily capacity. (p. 65)

Female Founders

As with many other aspects of hip-hop history, the considerable number of b-girls who went on to become prominent rappers also stands out when analyzing the early years of breaking. Indeed, given the scholarly overemphasis on rap music and the general neglect of embodied practices (Dimitriadis, 1996, p. 180; Schloss, 2009, p. 8), it is likely that there would not be *any* publicly available testimony from founding b-girls were it not for the many female MCs who have discussed their breaking beginnings publicly. This further emphasizes the need to document the stories of founding b-girls, as these relate to both the dance and the deeper connections between movement and music in hip-hop history.

"Any emcee that was on the scene at the time, that were like true, bonafied emcees," explained Sha-Rock in a podcast interview, "they were b-boys or b-girls before they began to become an emcee" (Disco Daddy, 2017a). The experience of MC Lady Sweet of the all-girl group Inner City Disco similarly aligns with this connection between music and movement in early hip-hop. Indeed, like the pioneering experiences of MCs such as Sha-Rock, Pebblee Poo, Lisa Lee, and Kimba, Lady Sweet associated her introduction to the culture with being a b-girl, who reportedly "burned quite a few brothers" in the 1970s. "The music, it just gets you and that's how you start," she went on to explain (Disco Daddy, 2017b). Again, such testimonies seem to suggest that there was a close interconnection between musical comprehension, identity formation, and physical expression among early rappers. Why else would so many female MCs point to their b-girl past—despite not being asked about it by interviewers and the widespread assumption that breaking is a "masculine" dance—when explaining how they developed their MCing proficiency?

Interestingly, this same pattern has also been seen throughout African American cultural history. Indeed, given the centrality of women to jook joints, they have often played an important

role alongside men in the creation of various cultural forms such as the blues, jazz, R&B, rock ‘n’ roll, funk, and disco. For example, there have been numerous influential women blues singers, such as Mamie Smith and Ida Cox, who began their careers as young dancers (Carby, 1991, p. 180). Music scholar Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (1991) also associated such historic connections to what he described as embodied forms of listening in the African American community, wherein musical production and reception center on a collective, participatory engagement with dance. Renowned African American critic Albert Murray (1976) similarly pointed to dance as “probably the most specific source of music” in African American culture, and noted how even earlier forms of European theater derived from a combination of poetry and choreography performed alongside an orchestra (p. 189). Thus, as in the case of hip-hop, both women and men have had a shared background in dance that has informed their musical tastes in various incarnations of African American cultural expression.

As ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt (2006) has notably argued, young African American women have an especially distinctive history of developing musical styles through embodied forms of expression. Although she focuses specifically on youth games such as handclapping songs, double-dutch jump rope, and cheering, I wish to extend her analysis to the many early b-girls who developed the same “in-body formulas” (p. 2) of music and movement that Gaunt calls attention to. Indeed, rather than treat dance and music as two separate spheres of activity, the jook institutions in which breaking developed gave young women encouragement to enact their creativity in a manner that was both physical and musical in form. Accordingly, as Gaunt and other scholars have argued (Dimitriadis, 1999; Fogarty, 2015a), far greater analysis is needed into the interconnection of music and dancing throughout hip-hop history.

Again, considering the mixed-gender composition of early hip-hop parties also provides important insight into the way b-girls made their transition into rapping. The youth-oriented, autonomous jook institutions in which hip-hop operated—and which were generally insulated from more commercial and state-sponsored institutions—provided female practitioners an avenue for embodying alternative forms of womanhood, outside of the scrutiny of dominant society. Thus, rather than constructing their identity according to dominant Western notions of deference and passivity, b-girls danced in circles and rapped on stages alongside their b-boy counterparts. Available testimony also suggests that b-girls were generally not sanctioned for such activity but, rather, recognized by their male peers within the scene. In turn, such social support was an important factor in enacting alternative subjectivities for both young men and women, especially for those who came from more socially constricted backgrounds. As Sha-Rock has conveyed, being able to break at parties provided her with a sense of confidence that she needed in her life, and which she later utilized as a prominent young rapper. “So what I had to do was basically be able to say that I was as prolific as the next man or male artist at the time. Because we were trying to prove ourselves to our communities,” she explained, adding that she did not feel marginalized for being a young woman. “So they didn’t look at me as, ‘Sha-Rock is a female emcee.’ They looked at it as, ‘Sha-Rock is a prolific emcee’” (Friedman, 2016, para. 23). Thus, like the blues women before her, Sha-Rock participated at hip-hop functions as an important contributor, rather than as simply an object of male attention, as some commentators have attempted to categorize her as (RapMatic, 2019).

Finally, the prevalence of such testimonies also points to the need to reevaluate dominant depictions of rap music in the media and academia, especially as it relates to the movement’s early years. For instance, another prominent myth in hip-hop history is the notion that “there are

no women who have contributed profoundly to rap's artistic growth" (Nelson George quoted in Pough, 2004, p. 8). However, in addition to the females already mentioned above, there were influential early MCs such as Queen Kenya, Sweet & Sour, RD Smiley, Sherri-Sher, Little Lee, Little Bit, Baby T, Debbie D, Taste, and Lady B, as well as prominent DJs such as Baby D, LaSpank, Pambaataa, Wanda Dee, Lady Love, Jazzy Joyce, and the original Spinderella, to name a few. In the realm of aerosol art, there were pioneering female writers such as BARBARA 62, EVA 62, MICHELLE 62, CHARMIN 65, BARMAID 36, S. PAT 169, POO-NI 167, ROCKY 184, STONEY II, and countless others. In this way, young women have historically made just as significant an impact on DJing, rapping, and style writing as on breaking. However, when viewing hip-hop through a mediated lens, such experiences are often obfuscated, given that the culture has consistently been characterized "as male in the face of a significant and sustained female presence" (Rose, 1994, p. 152). Such historic erasure also continues to affect present day discourse on hip-hop, with most commentators suggesting that rap is "disenfranchised alpha males talking to other alpha males" (Ivey, 2019, para. 12). Therefore, attending to the experiences and contributions of the many young women who made their mark on the dance is important for addressing gendered misconceptions in not only breaking, but the musical, poetic, and artistic expressions of hip-hop, overall.

Conclusion

As can be seen, early hip-hop was not merely a "masculinized space" that made it "difficult for young women to participate in the scene as performers," as has commonly been suggested in scholarly discourse (Ewoodzie, 2017, p. 142). The failure to account for the experiences and perspectives of hip-hop's female founders has led to grave misconceptions and

shortcomings regarding these issues, both in the realm of breaking and hip-hop music, more generally. It is, therefore, my hope that the above discussion of young women involved in early breaking will lead to a reconsideration of several important facets of this cultural movement's beginnings.

By conducting more research into the overlooked presence and impact of early b-girls in the 1970s, I also hope to encourage more critical examination of present-day discourses surrounding gender in breaking. For example, many of the moves commentators today associate with masculinity in the dance are the same ones early practitioners credit b-girls for shaping and advancing: the competitive exchanges of burning, prolonged floor moves such as the sweep, and, later, the acrobatic "power moves" of the dance. Furthermore, I believe that this dichotomy between what happened in the past and what is conceptualized in the present exemplifies the extent to which notions of gender are culturally contingent. Thus, b-girl history reminds scholars of the importance of constantly interrogating notions of gender according to their temporal, institutional, and social contexts.

This history also calls for more primary research into the experiences of early b-girls, as well as the possible shifts in identity and meaning within the dance as it expanded into various communities. This is especially the case when it comes to the period of breaking's commercialization in the 1980s. As dance scholar Cynthia Novack (1995) astutely observed over twenty-five years ago, "break dance in the seventies performed by adolescent boys for their peers on a Bronx street corner" cannot be equated with "break dance performed for an arts audience by these same boys at the Kitchen, a center for avant-garde music in Manhattan" (p. 181). In other words, paying attention to the specific era, background, and region of a practitioner are key when discussing the gendered meaning behind breaking. In my view, much of the confusion in hip-hop

history has resulted from a lack of such delineation, with journalists and scholars conflating testimony from far removed figures and making sweeping generalizations.

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

Furthermore, the presence and influence of early b-girls points to the need for centering the voices of the dance's African American founders. It is my contention that the alternative values and sociocultural resources these founders utilized when developing breaking allowed them to enact their symbolic creativity in an alternative manner, and this included a more defiant embodiment of womanhood. The mixed-gender, inclusive approach of breaking was also solidified within the autonomous jook joints in which practitioners danced, and this same pattern has been seen in subsequent hip-hop forms that have similarly been organized along gender-neutral lines (DeFrantz, 2004). As such, these structural developments must consider the broader

African American cultural traditions from which breaking and hip-hop emerged. Indeed, African American female theorists of jook-based expressions (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990; Hurston, 1934/1970) have long pointed to the distortion that results when these forms are evaluated according to the standards of dominant society, as opposed to the values and worldviews of their founding practitioners.

Finally, it is my view that these alternative approaches within early breaking—seen in everything from its attitude toward gender to its movement aesthetics and musical tastes—drove the dance forward while garnering it considerable antagonism from detractors. Given that "breaking" was about going beyond the norm of what audiences expected, this naturally led some to negative reactions towards its performance and values. Again, like the jook joints of yesteryear, which were commonly derided as "bawdy" houses (Hurston, 1934/1970), breaking's underground activities were deemed to be unseemly and crude by many followers of the more prominent disco scene of the 1970s. I argue that such opposition further heightened the in-group camaraderie of breakers and it was within this context that the values of inclusion, openness, and participation became further enshrined in the form's early structure. In turn, the aesthetic principles and social attitudes of breaking's young, working-class, African American constituency affected the way subsequent practitioners would continue to confront social challenges during the dance's expansion in the late 1970s.

Chapter Six

"Latinos Started Migrating Toward Hip-Hop": Breaking's Expansion in the Late 1970s

This chapter will explore the cultural expansion of breaking in the late 1970s, when young, mostly Latino/a practitioners first began gravitating toward this predominantly African American dance form. In addition to outlining how this transition took place, my aim is to examine how conceptualizations of cultural identity among African Americans and Latino/as affected breaking's aesthetics and symbolic meanings during this period. However, before I turn to this topic, it is important to take a small step back and illustrate the climate of social interaction in The Bronx even prior to the advent of hip-hop.

As discussed in Chapter Two, when Kool Herc first moved to the borough in 1967, his family settled in the East Tremont section, not the 1520 Sedgwick Avenue apartment where he would throw his inaugural party. As a young immigrant from Jamaica, Herc began adjusting to this new, working-class, multicultural neighborhood, where he attended the local Junior High School 118. Given that his hair had a reddish tint and he dressed differently from his African American peers, many Spanish-speaking students initially assumed that he was Latino. "Come te llamas?" they would ask him, to which he would respond perplexedly in English, explaining that he was Jamaican. Herc's recollection of such experiences suggest that he initially associated with Latino/a youth upon arrival (Combat Jack, 2015).

However, one day, while playing soccer on the field, Herc got into a fight with another student named Miguel. According to his account, he won the fight but learned that Miguel and his friends were planning to jump him after school. It was at this point that two African American youth, who were affiliated with a nationalist-religious movement known as the Five

Percent Nation, stepped in and protected Herc (Combat Jack, 2015). As a result, he began gravitating more toward the African American community and adjusting everything from his hobbies to his accent to fit in with his newfound friends (Gross, 2005).

In addition to reiterating how Herc assimilated into African American culture in The Bronx, this story illustrates how perceptions of cultural difference affected life for young people in the borough. Contrary to what has been written in most hip-hop histories, relations between people of color in the borough were not always harmonious. Although perhaps not as extreme as the animosity exhibited by some "white" residents, there was nevertheless a relative distance displayed between African Americans and Latino/as, as well. As a newly arrived immigrant from the Caribbean, Herc had to find his place in this system of race relations and figure out where to position himself. Thus, his eventual association with the African American community was by no means a given but, rather, predicated upon his early experiences and local constructions of identity. Although historical hypotheticals are merely speculative, there is no telling how Herc's teenage years would have ended up had he never got into a fight with Miguel or been protected by his African American peers.

Oddly enough, nearly a decade after Herc's arrival to The Bronx, this same East Tremont neighborhood where he first set foot became the hub of early Latino/a breaking. Numerous influential groups such as the Rockwell Association, The Bronx Boys/Girls Rocking Crew, The Disco Kids, and Starchild La Rock all emerged from within this general vicinity. In fact, Junior High School 118, where Herc went to school, became a central location where Latino DJs such as Charlie Chase and b-boys such as Spy and Trac 2 would perform (Guzman-Sanchez, 2012, p. 132; U.net, 2011, p. 94). Other nearby locations where Latino/as cultivated the dance included "The Dungeon," which was a clubhouse furnished out of an abandoned building near Tremont

Park (Guzman-Sanchez, 2012, p. 133); Mapes Pool, which was an outdoor community pool next to Junior High School 129 (U.net, 2011, p. 148); Mom & Pop's Disco, which was a basement just north of East Tremont; and St. Martin of Tours Church, which was located in the nearby Belmont section (Hager, 1984, p. 83).

I am not suggesting that Herc's presence in East Tremont had anything to do with this sudden influx of Latino/as within breaking. Nor am I suggesting that this area alone was responsible for the latter's adoption of the dance. Rather, my aim in pointing to this historical coincidence is to compare and examine how the climate of cultural interaction in The Bronx shifted from Herc's initial arrival in the late 1960s to the expansion of hip-hop in the late 1970s. When young, mostly Puerto Rican, breakers began gravitating toward this commonly coded "Black" dance, how did it affect prevailing conceptualizations of racial identity and belonging in the borough? Concurrently, how did the interaction between African Americans and Latino/as in hip-hop compare with similar interactions in other avenues of life at the time? Indeed, how did the Latino/a adoption of breaking occur in the first place? Was it contentious or harmonious? Did it involve a general continuation of the dance's aesthetics or a sudden rupture away from previous practices? Finally, what effect did breaking's jook-based institutions and framework of individuation have on the Latino/a youth who gravitated toward the form?

These are some of the many questions I examine in this chapter, beginning with a review of the overall growth of hip-hop in the late-1970s. As in the past, I maintain that breaking was the impetus behind the musical development of the movement, as well as the driving force behind hip-hop's organizational expansion through loose-knit "crews." At the same time, DJ-led musical innovations motivated new corporeal approaches within the dance, as well. Accordingly, I will discuss the ongoing reciprocal relationship between music and movement in hip-hop

history, and the aesthetic changes this interaction spawned. In addition, I will highlight the role b-boys and b-girls played in shaping the multicultural ethos of hip-hop, namely by providing a forum for large numbers of Latino/a youth to take part in a previously African American oriented movement. I situate these developments within a broader context of race relations in New York, arguing that the dance played an important role in mending social divisions and fostering cultural communication, at a time when such engagement was generally lacking.

I also take time throughout this chapter to address the misconception that breaking was a Latino/a invention or a product of "cross-fertilization" between African Americans and Latino/as, demonstrating that, instead, the dance's format, terminology, vocabulary, and structure were already solidified by the time the latter adopted and advanced it. Indeed, the cultural spread of breaking during the late 1970s occurred largely because the dance surfaced above ground, from private African American jook spaces into more visible outdoor venues such as schoolyards, playgrounds, and parks. Just as with previous practitioners, however, the Latino/a youth who gravitated toward breaking made lasting contributions to the form. The dynamic aesthetics that resulted, and the factors behind breaking's appeal, will also be discussed in relation to this expansionary period of the dance.

Finally, much like their African American predecessors, the considerable social consternation Latino/as faced when embodying breaking's alternative aesthetics will also be discussed. Once again, this consternation related to dominant notions of "sophistication," "legitimacy," and "seriousness," often tied to categories of age, race, class, gender, and social belonging. I examine how b-boys and b-girls navigated these issues, both within their immediate community and in the hip-hop movement, more generally. That the dance brought together teenagers despite such opposition speaks, in my view, to the recurrent pattern of practitioners

transgressing societal norms, both on and off the dancefloor. Accordingly, by centering the voices of founding practitioners, I hope to offer insight into the role that dance played in shaping alternative youth subjectivities and providing a transcendent forum for cross-cultural interaction.

Propelling the Movement Forward

As the popularity of Herc's parties grew in the mid- to late-1970s, the underground jooks in which he cultivated his movement also continued to expand. For instance, in addition to playing in independent clubs like the Hevalo and Executive Playhouse, Herc began giving all-age parties at venues such as the Police Athletic League (PAL) on Webster Avenue and the Claremont Neighborhood Center, located in the Legendary Twins' neighborhood of The Nine (Marshall, 2007; Smith, n.d.). Herc also moved his traditional block parties from the courtyard of his West Bronx apartment building to Cedar Playground, just a few blocks north, while also recruiting two young b-boys-turned-DJs named Timmy Tim and Clark Kent to assist him in his parties. By expanding into such public venues, Herc also began attracting younger African American and non-African American teenagers who began gaining a glimpse of what had previously been taking place exclusively in jook spaces. Since there were fewer age restrictions in parks and community centers, these younger attendees were now able to participate without having to negotiate their way into Herc's parties, as The Twins initially had to.

At the same time, other breakbeat oriented DJs began to emerge in The Bronx and establish their own independent venues. DJ Smokey, for example, held an event called Over the Dover in a small, refurbished hall above the Dover Theatre in the Morrisania section of borough (Ahearn, 1991a), while, a few blocks south, DJ Flash—who was himself a former breaker named "Rubberband Man" (Michael Waynetv, 2015)—played at a party in the basement of a building in

Hunts Point, called Garrison's Basement (Smith, 2016). His friend and associate Lovebug Starski would also throw parties in a nearby Burger King restaurant (Smith, 2004b). As can be gleaned from these brief descriptions, such venues were often unsanctioned and autonomous spaces where young people gathered without regard for any rules beyond their own sociocultural order. Crowds of mostly African American teenagers would socialize at these events and further popularize the obscure, percussive-based music and styles associated with the hip-hop movement.

As newer DJs emerged during this period, break-specific music also increasingly began to be played outdoors, in more public arenas, especially during the summer months. This was mainly due to newer DJs wanting to promote their names, as well as to summer weather making it too hot to be inside. DJ Flash, for example, was famous for throwing parties in playgrounds and schoolyards such as 63 Park and 23 Park in the South Bronx, helping, in turn, publicize his admission-charged, indoor events. A group of breakers known as the D-Squad (short for Def Squad)—which included figures such as Fuji, Flippin' Mike, Melle Mel, and Mr. Ness—would also help Flash liven up the crowd at these events, serving as his group of dancers (Ahearn, 1991b). DJ Afrika Bambaataa was similarly affiliated with a group of b-boys known as the Zulu Kings, who were based out of the Bronx River Houses. They would attend his local parties and eventually become the nucleus of his Zulu Nation collective. Bambaataa also collaborated with another nearby DJ and promoter named Disco King Mario, who likewise had b-boys from the Chuck City Crew accompanying him. In this way, loosely affiliated networks of DJs and dancers began to emerge as the bedrock for hip-hop's growth. Often modeled off Herc's original collective of "B-Boys," these groups would provide everything from promotional support and entertainment to security and equipment assistance for local DJs.

In addition, dancers continued to provide musical inspiration for hip-hop DJs. For example, many breakers began to recreate Herc's Merry-Go-Round technique on their stereos and boomboxes by splicing together short snippers of the "get down part" on their cassette decks. This practice became popularly known as making "pause button tapes" (Disco Daddy, 2017d; Disco Daddy, 2017e; Byas, 2009; Troy, 2018). DJ Flash went on to refine this practice on his turntables, developing a more precise and rhythmically stable technique for looping beats back and forth, manually, without interruption. He called this innovation the "Quick Mix Theory" (Brewster & Broughton, 2010, p. 183) and it became another major turning point in hip-hop's musical evolution, as even the shortest percussive samples could now be extended at a party ad infinitum. Flash credited b-boys and b-girls specifically for motivating this innovation, writing in his autobiography that, "some of these dancers now were really good—they were doing their moves *on time* . . . They needed a DJ to *extend time, and percussively rearrange the beat*" (Grandmaster Flash & Ritz, 2008, p. 54, emphasis in original). Thus, as in the past, the desire to invoke excitement and energy on the dancefloor spurred hip-hop DJs—who were often themselves dancers—to make pivotal musical contributions.

Breakers similarly advanced the scope of their dancing during this expansionary period of hip-hop. Some even became what GrandMixer DXT has called "nomadic b-boys," traveling from one neighborhood to another, seeking out new beats and practitioners to exchange with (personal communication, December 28, 2017). "During the summer of 1976, young b-boys cruised through the Bronx on bicycles, looking for block parties," is how Hager (1984, p. 34) characterized this stage of hip-hop's growth. Given the hunger for percussive music among these partygoers, DJs were further inspired to curate unique playlists modeled on Herc's canon of records, but simultaneously distinct from them, as well. For instance, DJ Afrika Bambaataa

earned the title “Master of Records” during this period, due to the large collection of eclectic, obscure, and funky beats he popularized (Perkins, 1996, p. 9).

In turn, breakers increasingly developed new moves and concepts to this growing musical soundtrack, further innovating floor-bound steps, transitions, and combinations within the dance. “The basic floor moves was universal,” explained DXT when recalling the modifications made during this period. “Everybody, no matter where you were from, had their own little finesse they would add based on their physical ability” (personal communication, December 28, 2017). For example, the sweep became augmented by changes in direction, steps, poses, stationary shuffle patterns, and combinations with other moves such as the pin drop. The extension of these movements led to the development of elaborate, floor-based sequences that breakers would perform using their hands and feet in a crouched position, commonly referred to today as “footwork.” Such sequences increasingly concentrated the dance on formalized floor patterns based on rotations, angles, and combinations, in addition to the earlier emphasis on animated story telling and musicality. Dynamic new moves also continued to evolve out of this shared conceptual foundation, as the hip-hop movement maintained its emphasis on individuation, competition, and improvisation. GrandMixer DXT specifically highlighted the impact of competition on this period of breaking’s progression.

> As it became more physical, guys started to battle even harder. Now you go down and spin on the floor. You *freeze* on the floor. Instead of freezing on your feet, you jump down and . . . one hand on the floor and both your feet straight out and you freeze, holding your eyes or holding your ear or something. The natural progression of that to outdo the next person is to not do one move and freeze, but to do *two* moves and freeze. And so on and so on and so on. To where now, you’re doing sequences of moves before

> you freeze. And that's where we are today. (personal communication, December 28, 2017)

In this way, dancers and DJs maintained their framework of individuation and channeled it into the reciprocal relationship between movement and music seen throughout African American history. The more breakers grew in number, the more DJs catered to their expressions, and the more DJs introduced new beats for breakers to dance to, the more the dancers had a chance to exchange and advance breaking's aesthetics.

Again, younger breakers emerged as central to this process of individuation, with perhaps the most famous group during the late 1970s being a sub-division of the Zulu Kings known as the "Lil Zulu Kings." Members of this group are often referenced today as having added greater velocity and variation to the floor moves they saw their predecessors perform (Israel, 2002). Although many were roughly eleven to fourteen years in age in the mid- to late-1970s—and, thus, could not get into the clubs where Herc, Smokey, Flash, and other hip-hop DJs would perform—they were able to experience the outdoor block parties and community center events now flourishing throughout The Bronx. As younger Zulu members, they took to breaking specifically as an outlet for expressing themselves and developing a unique identity. Indeed, names such as Beaver, Robby Rob, Swain, and Lil Boy Keith are still commonly cited today as having patented wholly new footwork patterns, steps, poses, spins, and acrobatic twists in the air (Israel, 2002). These unique displays proved so compelling that others soon adapted them and, as I explain below, their impact reverberated even beyond breaking's original African American constituency.

Breaking as a Bridge

By the summer of 1977, hip-hop's aesthetic influence was spreading beyond The Bronx and spilling over into nearby areas such as Harlem and Mount Vernon (Disco Daddy, 2017d). Although rapping and turntablism had not yet fully matured, the innovative sounds of DJs and the physical performances of breakers were captivating enough to draw the attention of various audiences. And, although the crowds at hip-hop parties were still overwhelmingly African American, the growing popularity of the scene was attracting other ethnicities as well. However, before discussing the cultural expansion of the dance during this period, it is important to reiterate the original demographics of breaking, given the widespread misconceptions regarding this issue.

"B-boying was going on. It was a Black thing," insisted Kevie Kev, a pioneering member of the hip-hop group The L-Brothers. "I saw no Puerto Ricans around this time. We was in the Bronx, those b-boys, they was Black and they was goin' off! It's a whole 'nother rhythm" (Fricke & Ahearn, 2002, p. 41). Virtually every early practitioner I have come across confirms Kev's assessment, despite most commentators characterizing breaking as "a Puerto Rican entity" (Ewoodzie, 2017, p. 133). Indeed, much of the pioneer testimony regarding the cultural background of breaking is in direct *response* to such historical mischaracterizations. For instance, when asked if he ever danced against Puerto Ricans, Beaver from the Lil Zulu Kings emphatically responded, "No!!! No!! They came on the scene later on . . . like I after I [sic] got out of it" (Norin Rad, 2018b). Shakey Shake, an African American b-boy from the West Bronx, also explained to me that, in his early years, "you would just find the *morenos* [a Spanish word meaning dark-skinned] doing this dance. But, later on, you had the Hispanics that was liking this dance" (personal communication, February 10, 2018). Similar responses are given when practitioners are asked about non-African American participants in hip-hop, overall. "Latinos

weren't involved in hip-hop directly that much in the early days of hip-hop," explained Grandmaster Caz, an influential African American DJ and MC who was partners with two of the earliest Latino DJs, Disco Wiz and Charlie Chase. "Puerto Ricans was playing *congas* and *timbales* in the park while we was playing turntables" (Djvlad, 2014).

That such statements are often delivered in response to interviewers asking about race in hip-hop speaks to the broader implications of breaking's historical obfuscation. Firstly, many African American pioneers are aware that the dominant narrative in the media and academia is that breaking was created by Latino/as. However, this misconception does not comport with their own experiences of going to parties where both audiences and practitioners were overwhelmingly African American. In other words, their personal memories do not comport with the prevailing historical depictions of breaking and hip-hop culture. The discomposure that results may explain why so many practitioners refrain from bringing up the issue of race at all. Instead, they tend to offer clarifications when asked about such topics by interviewers. Once again, virtually every early practitioner I have come across in this regard has corroborated the fact that breaking was overwhelmingly African American in its early years.

At the same time, early practitioners tend to espouse an ethos of multicultural unity when discussing the dance and its history. For example, leading hip-hop pioneers consistently affirm the African American beginnings of breaking while also praising the subsequent contributions of other ethnicities. Kool Herc is espcially known for stating that, "Martin Luther King's dream came in the form of hip-hop" with "little white boys, little Black girls walking together, breakdancing together, rapping together, making clothes together, doing business together" (Combat Jack, 2015). Such statements are reminiscent of the "beloved community" ideology of the civil right movement of Herc's youth, as well as the messages of prominent funk and soul

artists from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, another quote that Herc regularly cites when espousing what he calls the “we thing” of hip-hop, is funk singer Baby Huey’s declaration that, “There’s three kinds of people in this world. There’s Black people, white people, and then there’s my people” (UPTOWN AL, 2016).

In this regard, it should be remembered that leading funk artists of this period regularly professed multicultural aspirations, as when Sly Stone sang about “different strokes for different folks” and “we got to live together” in his hit single “Everyday People” (1968), or when James Brown sang about “the long-haired hippies and the Afro Blacks / can all get together across the tracks / And they party" in his “Get on the Good Foot” single (1972). Of course, the following passage from the famous b-boy anthem “It’s Just Begun” (1972) by the Jimmy Castor Bunch also speaks to this sentiment of unity: “Peace will come / this world will rest / once we have / Togetherness.” Given the prevalence of such messaging in the funk movement, it should come as no surprise that early hip-hop pioneers, who were steeped in this musical genre, went on to champion such principles. Indeed, pioneers such as PHASE 2 have long contended that “this art brings all of the cultures here together as one,” especially when comparing his experiences in writing and hip-hop with the segregation he saw growing up (Miller, 1990, p. 5). For his part, GrandMixer DXT has also pointed to hip-hop’s remarkable reach around the globe, especially among marginalized communities, as a testament to the widespread appeal of its Africanist aesthetics. “The hip-hop culture is universal,” he insisted during a panel at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum in 1999. “There are no color lines” (GrandMixer, 1999a).

Of course, this inclusive ethos is coupled with an equally strong penchant for correcting the misconceptions surrounding breaking history. For instance, the following unpublished poem

by PHASE 2 is emblematic of his dual desire to affirm the dance's beginnings without sacrificing its inclusivity.

LET'S TAKE IT BACK

EARLY 70'S JACK

DJ'S BLACK

NEIGHBORS BLACK

B-BOYS DESTROY

MORE BLACK, BLACK, BLACK

PARTY PEOPLE BLACK

HEARTY PEOPLE BLACK

EVERYBODY FOR A FACT BLACK

NOW THIS ISN'T SAID TO DISMISS ANY GENERATION

THAT CAME INTO THE MIX AFTER THE ORGINALS DID

JUST GIVE THE CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE, FROM ITS BIRTH

RESPECT OUR HISTORY

STRICTLY FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH (personal communication, September 11, 2019)

As can be seen, PHASE 2 was unambiguous in characterizing early b-boys as "Black," but he coupled this with an equally strong desire to not have those who came later dismissed. The core of his assessment is not racial exclusivity but, rather, historical reality and acknowledging communities for their contributions ("just give the credit where it's due" and "respect our history"). In an interview posted online, the pioneering hip-hop DJ and early b-boy Breakout likewise maintained that the "originators" of breaking were all African American but followed this up with an acknowledgment that, "When the Spanish people took over they went to another

level with it" (Smith, 2010). Such testimonies delineate the dance's evolution and contextualize subsequent contributions to the form, rather treating ethnicity as a zero-sum game of entitlement.

Similarly, many hip-hop pioneers have publicly stated that, although Latino/as were not present at Kool Herc's early parties—despite countless authors erroneously claiming they were (Davis, 2016; Suarez, 2020)—their subsequent involvement added a great deal to the movement's expansion. This nuancing of the ethnic makeup of hip-hop's early years is, thus, meant to illustrate how the culture evolved and overcome obstacles, especially in regards to breaking and its demographic shift in the late 1970s (Douglas, 2020). Once again, Herc has spoken positively in numerous interviews about the Latino/as who began participating in his events at the turn of the decade, stating how it was "good" to suddenly see "another element of the neighborhood" involved in the scene (Combat Jack, 2015). Unfortunately, most hip-hop historians have overlooked these important stages of the culture's growth. Instead, they have put forward a simplistic origin story of multicultural cocreation and, when it comes to breaking, specifically suggested that the dance emerged "from developments in Latin dance styles" (Flores, 1993, p. 28).

Again, what is missed in these mischaracterizations are the aesthetic transformations breaking underwent as it passed through various communities and cultural contexts. As indicated in Kevie Kev's above quote, early African American practitioners had "a whole 'nother rhythm" when they danced; and, as Breakout suggested, Latino/as "went to another level with it" when they adopted the form. As such, these testimonies indicate significant shifts, both at the level of movement and meaning, which are ignored when scholars assume that breaking was either "an expressive form associated with Puerto Rican youth" (Tiongson, 2013, p. 26) or a product of cultural "cross-fertilization" (Flores, 1993, p. 27; Gilroy, 1993, p. 103; Rivera, 2003, p. 43).

Instead, it is my contention that these expressive practices emerged from a distinctly working-class African American tradition and were later adapted and modified by subsequent communities. Furthermore, just as African Americans refashioned the cultural resources within their community to create breaking, subsequent practitioners brought in new approaches and outlooks informed by their diverse ethnic background. Thus, by examining the dynamics of this chronological development, scholars can better account for the shifting symbolic meanings being enacted through breaking's performance.

In addition, contrary to the widespread assumption that African Americans and Latino/as associated harmoniously with one another in New York in the 1970s, many practitioners recall a climate of racial distance, and even tension, exhibited between these two communities prior to hip-hop. For instance, much like Herc's early experience in East Tremont, one of the first Latino hip-hop DJs, Disco Wiz, has described having racist encounters growing up both with those positioned as white in his neighborhood and between people of color, as well. "Blacks and Latinos were not united," he wrote in his autobiography, "so not only were [Grandmaster] Caz and I about to become pioneers of the Hip Hop game, we were becoming pioneers in our own neighborhoods" (Sanchez & Cedeno, 2009, p. 39). In this way, Wiz saw his involvement in hip-hop as a challenge to the prevailing status quo. "We were showing people that it was all right for Blacks and Latinos to share a bond of brotherhood and we both took a lot of shit for it," he explained (Sanchez & Cedeno, 2009, p. 39). In nearby Spanish Harlem, African American aerosol artist and DJ Kay Slay similarly remembered Latino/as being antagonistic toward breaking and hip-hop when he was growing up. "'Look at these Morenos cleaning up the floor," he recalled people in his building saying when they danced, adding that Latino/as would throw eggs out of their windows at people breaking in the local courtyard. In turn, African Americans

would hurl wet tissues at musicians who played bongos and Latino/a music outside (DJ Kayslay, 2017a). Kay Slay relayed such episodes as an illustration of the very real rifts that existed at the time, which he credits hip-hop for overcoming. Early Latino hip-hop dancer Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon similarly described experiencing ethnic friction in Spanish Harlem when he first became involved in the culture.

> There was a time when there was some racial tension. Certain Black folks would look at us and say, 'Pssh, why you trying to do our thing?' And then there were times where we would dis ourselves, like 'Why you trying to do that *cocolo* thing?' And then we had our parents, the older generation, older sisters and brothers saying, 'Why you dressing like a *cocolo*? Why you want to be like them?' Man, it was hard. (Chang, 2005, p. 117)

Given the prevalence of such testimonies, it seems quite clear that breaking and hip-hop did not emerge out of a context of cultural pluralism, as most scholars have suggested (Flores, 1996, p. 103; Guevara, 1996, p. 50; Rivera, 2003, p. 13). Instead, the inclusivity exhibited by hip-hop's founders was, in many ways, a diversion from the state of strained ethnic interaction prevalent during this period.

In his early study of hip-hop history, Hager (1984) emphasized this alternative cultural outlook in breaking, as well, writing that the dance served as a bridge in The Bronx "during a time when communication between blacks and Puerto Ricans was somewhat limited" (p. 81). Hip-hop promoter Michael Holman (1984) also noted around this same time that the dance brought socially segmented communities together for the first time, while also maintaining that the "missing link" between the African American founders of breaking and their Puerto Rican successors "has never been explained" (p. 53).

> How and when did the young Puerto Rican Breakers of New York today pick up the art from the older Black breakdancers of the 70s? Who are the people that were involved? How did the moves change from simple floor exercise footwork, sweeps and comedy to the more acrobatic gyroscopic backspins, headspins and 1990 moves of the future? (Holman, 1984, p. 53)

Unfortunately, few scholars have taken an in-depth look into these historical questions, which were quite commonly written about early on. Instead, breaking's African American founders—who were pivotal in shaping the dance's trajectory—have been neglected and marginalized in academic writings, while the discourse of marginalized people of color uniting to create art against oppression has been championed. Although I certainly empathize with the ideals of this latter discourse, it is important to realize that important cultural distinctions and social achievements are erased when history is written in such simplistic terms. Accordingly, my examination of the "missing link" between African American and Latino/a breakers in this chapter is meant to nuance how dominant perceptions of race affected breaking's expansion, as well as how the dance provided an outlet for young people to enhance cultural interaction in New York during the late 1970s.

Out Into the Open

As has been discussed throughout this study, one of the most important aspects of the jook-based events in which breaking developed was their insulation from dominant society. The small, independent venues where Herc threw his parties were generally beyond the bounds of state regulation, adult supervision, or disco-oriented notions of "sophistication." It was in these more autonomous environments that the symbolic resources of the African American community

were refashioned by teenagers, helping form an artistic movement operating on its own aesthetic rules and values. Once a critical mass of followers coalesced around this movement, its practices were made visible through outdoor events and community gatherings. And it was in these transitory moments of public exposure that the alternative values embodied within breaking began attracting adherents beyond its original demographic.

"Everything, all the breaking and stuff, was considered underground until Kool Herc brought everything out into the open," stated Trac 2, one of the best-known early Latino b-boys. "All the in-house, all the hallway dancers and all the house party dancers were brought out to the street. And the more they took it to the street, the more nationalities got involved in it. It was no longer an Afro-American thing" (Israel, 2002). BOM 5, a well-known Latino b-boy and writer affiliated with groups such as The Bronx Boys and, later, Rock Steady Crew, similarly recalled seeing Herc for the first time only when he brought his music outdoors to Cedar Park. "I never went to the party," he relayed when asked about hip-hop's founding. "I went to the park jam because you had to be older to go to the house party or inside anywhere." BOM 5 went on to explain that he was informed about these parties from his mentor, pioneering African American b-boy El Dorado Mike. "Just to see these original b-boys that rocked mostly on top and did routines and stuff, was kind of dope," BOM 5 remembered. "It just opened my eyes to everything" (S.STREET, 2020). In this way, hip-hop's expansion into more public arenas in the late 1970s allowed its jook-based expressions to resonate with a wider audience, helping attract Latino/a youth living in these same working-class neighborhoods.

However, it should be noted that, even prior to this expansionary period of the dance, there were a small number of Latino/as associated with hip-hop and breaking. Yet, they tended to be mostly darker complexioned individuals who passed as "Black," to the point that many of

their peers did not even know that they were Latino/a. Just as Kool Herc assimilated into the African American community upon arriving from Jamaica—with many hip-hoppers at the time being unaware that he was even Jamaican (Kugelberg, 2007, p. 199)—the earliest Latino/a breakers subsumed themselves within local African American culture. Like Herc, they did not necessarily hide their ethnicity but they did not call much attention to it either. For instance, the Shaka Zulus breaking group had a member named Angelo "Angel" Rodriguez who is said to have been "a black Puerto Rican" that "didn't look Spanish" (Norin Rad, 2019), while the Rock City Crew in Manhattan had Carlos "Charlie Rock" Ortiz (not to be confused with Cholly Rock from the Zulu Kings), whose acquaintances jokingly said "fooled" them because they did not know he was Latino/a until later on in life (Ahearn, 2000a). Early rapper Whipper Whip also reportedly asked members of his group, The Fantastic Five, "not to tell the world he was Puerto Rican, 'cause he felt they would accept him in a different way" (Fricke & Ahearn, 2002, p. 248).

These examples illustrate how dominant racial categorizations affected hip-hop's early formation, even within ethnically mixed, working-class neighborhoods. Many darker-skinned Latino/as were simply better able to blend in at early parties and, thus, avoided the real or imagined perceptions of racial difference occurring around them. On the other hand, pioneering DJ Disco Wiz—who is relatively lighter-skinned and, thus, more noticeably Latino—described feeling conspicuous at early hip-hop parties and facing animosity from some within the scene.

> A couple of times I'd be going to a club with Caz and I'd be carrying records and the guy [the bouncer, an African American] would have a stupid look on his face, like, 'Fuck, it's a Spanish guy.' And Caz would say, 'That's my fucking DJ!' That's how it was. (Katz, 2012, p. 28)

When breaking began to gain more exposure through park jams and community-based events, these same issues of visibility and difference affected pioneering Latino/a breakers, as well. “I know for a fact that when I went to some parts, it was rare to see a Puerto Rican dancer breaking,” said Jojo, a founding member of the Rock Steady Crew. “And when they did it was like, ‘Oh shit, check out the Puerto Rican B-Boy,’ you know?” (Israel, 2002). Given the African American background of the dance, many participants were initially taken aback by seeing visibly Latino/a practitioners break. “There wasn’t really too many of us out there,” explained Jojo in another interview, “so, when they seen one of us dance it was a big thing” (Chalfant, 2006). Depending on the region and context of the event, these perceptions of difference took the form of everything from positive feedback and support, to ridicule and laughter. However, judging from the testimony of early practitioners, most African American b-boys and b-girls seemed to have been receptive toward Lation/a involvement. Indeed, virtually everyone I have encountered credits learning to break either directly or indirectly from an African American pioneer. For instance, BOM 5 lists El Dorado Mike, PHASE 2, Sisco Kid, and Beaver as his b-boy mentors (Schloss, 2009, p. 49), while Batch, a founder of The Bronx Boys, is said to have been introduced to breaking from a “black kid” named Tee Tee Rock (Norin Rad, 2018g). Meanwhile, Latino pioneers such as Willie Will from the Rockwell Association and Trac 2 from Starchild La Rock describe learning the dance from friends who were taught by the overwhelmingly African American Zulu Kings breaking group (Hager, 1984, p. 82; Veran, 1996, p. 47). Such transmissions of knowledge and encounters with early practitioners provided Latino/as a critical boost as they took an interest in the dance, helping simultaneously ameliorate their concerns over racial conceptualization and forge an alternative path toward adolescent socialization.

However, even among these early adopters, there was still some apprehension toward performing a dance coded as "Black." The potential for being stigmatized as "Other" within an unfamiliar milieu, or a "traitor" to one's own culture, seems to have been significant obstacles for many practitioners in those early years. For instance, Lucky Strike, a Latino gang member who became a b-boy in the late 1970s, described the anxiety he felt when going to his first Kool Herc party.

> I felt awkward because that was the first place I ever been to that was Black and at that time I was down with the Savage Skulls. That day I wanted to just experience and go have a party with a couple of friends. I felt weird because people were looking at me. I looked pale and weird to them (laughs). As the night went on there was no beef. No nothing. So I felt comfortable. (Ahearn, 2001a)

As can be seen, Lucky Strike's concern was shaped largely by his previous involvement in the mostly Latino/a Savage Skulls gang. "I had like this hate for Black people at that time," he said when recalling the segregation of street life in those years. "It was so stupid" (Ahearn, 2001a). However, when he saw that there was little antagonism being exhibited towards him at hip-hop parties, it drew him closer to the movement. In other words, the dance and the music offered him an alternative approach to race relations in The Bronx, one which diverted considerably from his gang past.

Ken Swift, a highly influential b-boy from the Rock Steady Crew, similarly described being hesitant about breaking when he first saw "flashes" of it as a twelve-year-old boy. "I didn't see any Latinos or Hispanics doing it," he admitted. "So, I was kind of like, you know. . . not knowing if I should do it, believe it or not" (Swift, 1999). The initial doubt he had was alleviated, however, when he came across a Latino/a breaking group known as the Number One Sure Shot

Crew. “[T]hey inspired me more ‘cos all I saw was brothers, but when I saw Puerto Ricans I felt more comfortable about Breaking” (Sinckler, 1999). In this way, visibly Latino/a participation in breaking made it easier for others to join the hip-hop movement. Beyond skin color, a large part of this ease had to do with knowing someone who can accompany you to the underground social environment of a hip-hop party. The benefit of seeing other Latino/as also provided a stronger sense of camaraderie and meaning to aspiring breakers, allowing them to feel more at home in such communal gatherings. In turn, even some practitioners who were positioned as white—such as Mr. Freeze of the Rock Steady Crew, who is of Franco-Jewish descent, and the Eastside Juniors crew from the North Bronx, who are described as a “group of white b-boys” (U.net, 2011, p. 93)—are said to have adopted breaking during this late 1970s period when Latino/as of various shades took to the dance.

Beyond skin color and social acceptance, however, another important hurdle facing Latino/a practitioners had to do with breaking’s stigma of unorthodox expression. Just as African American disco adherents derided the lack of “sophistication” within the dance, many in the Latino/a community objected to breakers doing sporadic and prolonged movements on the floor. “My parents and other adults used to call B-Boying ‘*dania ropa’* [wash your clothes],” said Trac 2, “because they thought we were ruining our clothes and we felt we were expressing ourselves” (Guzman-Sanchez, 2012, p. 140). Crazy Legs of the Rock Steady Crew likewise recalled feeling embarrassed for his family when he saw his older brother break for the first time. “I didn’t understand why my brother was throwing himself on the floor,” he said (Arnold, 2018). Breaking’s penchant for seemingly frenzied movements on the ground was a radical concept for those accustomed to the more traditional upright dancing prevalent in discos and social spaces at

the time. As such, b-boys and b-girls were deemed to be deviating from this more "normal" form of expression, leading many to deride the dance as lesser and crude.

In turn, Latino/a youth who gravitated toward breaking knew that they were defying social standards through their performances, just as much as they defied racial divisions through their association with African Americans. It is for this reason that, borrowing from the work of theorists such as Monica Evans and Imani Perry, dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2018) has fittingly characterized breaking as a manifestation of "outlaw culture," pointing to its practitioners' multifaceted disruption of prevailing social norms. Not surprisingly, exponents of traditional propriety—both within The Bronx and, later, mainstream American society—have tended to denounce such "outlaw" behavior for its perceived cultural transgressions (pp. 66-67).

Along these same lines, numerous Latino/a practitioners recall being scolded by their community for allegedly abandoning their heritage. "My mom used to call me a light-skinned black, blah-blah-blah," Mr. Wiggles, from the Rock Steady Crew, is quoted as saying. "That was just another generation. They didn't understand" (del Barco, 1996, p. 68). MARE 139, an influential Latino aerosol artist from the late 1970s, similarly withstood criticism for adopting a hip-hop lifestyle. "I used to have the mock necks and the shell toes, and the Pro-Keds," he explained, "and my mom used to be, like, 'What up? Why you want to be a Moreno?'" (del Barco, 1996, p. 68). Such stories demonstrate how breaking and hip-hop were seen by many (mostly older) detractors as an anathema to traditional Latino/a culture. Those who came from families where maintaining ethnic heritage was stressed especially felt the psychological pressure to maintain their traditional cultural identity. However, Latino/a practitioners themselves emphasized how breaking gave them room to utilize their cultural resources and express, rather than suppress, who they were. They were able to introduce new steps and

expressive their individuality within breaking, just as their African American predecessors had, and this often meant tapping into their own cultural background. “That’s the beauty of rocking to b-boying,” explained Trac 2 when reflecting on this process of symbolic creativity. “Because no matter where you come from, it allows each person to interpret it, keeping the essence of the dance in its context and makes it look different every time” (Superbbeatshow, 2012b). Dance scholar Halifu Osumare (2002) has similarly documented how the Africanist traditions of signifying and improvising within breaking have allowed its practitioners to incorporate their cultural heritage into the dance, resulting in what she calls the “intercultural body” of local movements combined with breaking’s African American aesthetics. She argues that this openness to incorporation has been central to breaking’s proliferation, suggesting that it may even offer a vision for transcending artificial boundaries between states and nationalities (p. 42). For Latino/a breakers living in The Bronx in the late 1970s, the opportunity to express themselves through dance in this way, while also forging ties with their African American peers, proved appealing enough for them to disregard societal constrictions in favor of contributing to the growing hip-hop movement.

No Cardboard, No Linoleum

One of the most interesting aspects of testimony on early breaking, especially as it relates to aesthetic changes within the dance during the late 1970s, are the consistent references to the surfaces practitioners performed on. “When we used to go down on the floor,” explained Keith Smith of the Legendary Twins, “we didn’t get dirty. And we didn’t dance on linoleum, we didn’t dance on cardboard. We danced on the *cement*” (Israel, 2002). Cholly Rock of the Zulu Kings likewise maintained that their earlier generation did not wear protective pads or lay out soft

flooring when they danced. “No cardboard! None of that! Anybody who’s an original b-boy will tell you that in no uncertain terms,” he maintained in an online interview (Michael Waynetv, 2016a). Beatmaster Doc Ice also echoed this sentiment when he wrote that you had to “pick the little shards of glass out of your hands when you came up” from breaking back then.

> We broke everywhere in schools, playgrounds, gyms, clubs, halls, centers, everywhere. There was no plastic moldings or anything on the ground in the parks to save you from injury. Everything was steel, wood, aluminum and the ground was concrete, asphalt and tar. All that other stuff came later. (Troy, 2015a)

At first glance, such statements may seem like a “when I was your age” lament about the relative hardships early breakers faced. It may also be interpreted as a rejoinder to yet another myth in hip-hop studies: the suggestion that breaking emerged from youth “reappropriating” scraps of linoleum and cardboard on street corners (Rose, 1994, p. 48; Hoch, 2006, p.353). However, what I have found in my research is that such statements are often issued as an explanation for how Latino/a youth transformed the aesthetics of breaking at the turn of the decade. The central argument is that the acrobatic maneuvers introduced during this period were a result of greater access to conducive flooring. “That linoleum made all the difference because it allowed them to do that head spinning,” said Cholly Rock in reference to groups such as Rock Steady Crew. “We weren’t able to do that on the concrete and were [*sic*] weren’t thinking about doing it” (Smith, 2016).

Yet, as with other speculations about breaking history, this argument does not hold up when examined according to first-hand testimony. For instance, Latino/a breakers did not dance on cardboard and linoleum until the early 1980s (Israel, 2002), when moves such as the headspin, backspin, and other acrobatic maneuvers were *already* in wide circulation. Indeed,

many of these moves were developed in the late 1970s by both African Americans and Latino/as, without the benefit of having padded dancefloors. For instance, in Hager's (1984) early study on hip-hop, a well-known Latino b-boy from The Bronx named Willie Will is quoted as saying that he learned to break from the Zulu Kings, who he remembered performing "footwork, headspins, backspins" on rough surfaces. "We used to break on the concrete in Belmont Park. If you did a backspin, you'd only spin around once or twice," he is quoted as saying (p. 82-83). Other Latino b-boys such as Jojo have similarly insisted that, originally, "Rock Steady came from the bumps and bruises we sustained from hitting the floor, 'cause we didn't use cardboard then" (Ahearn, 2000c). In the DVD extras of the documentary *The Freshest Kids* (Israel, 2002), Trac 2 also stated that "breaking was done on concrete with no cardboard" back then, adding that several acrobatic movements such as the headspin and chair freeze were developed by African American b-boys such as Swain and Robby Rob from the Zulu Kings. Thus, the idea that the Rock Steady Crew changed the dance when they introduced linoleum in the 1980s is not borne out by publicly available testimony. Instead, just as with their predecessors, young Latino/a and African American practitioners continued to enact their symbolic creativity through the dance, adding more daring acrobatic movements as part of their personalized expression. And, as in the past, such moves were cultivated in hallways, community centers, schoolyards, and apartments, not on cardboard or linoleum, and later performed in jook-based events with various types of flooring.

Nevertheless, the consistent espousal of the "no cardboard, no linoleum" theory by early breakers exemplifies an awareness that the dance's vocabulary shifted quite dramatically by the late 1970s. The speculations surrounding this shift, however, stem mainly from the fact that earlier breakers moved on from the dance by the time Latino/as and younger African Americans became involved in it. "[W]e were done by 1978," admitted Cholly Rock in reference to his

cohort of the Zulu Kings and their contemporaries such as the Legendary Twins and Clark Kent. Like their burning and breaking predecessors, b-boys and b-girls from the mid-1970s began distancing themselves from breaking as they approached the end of their adolescence. “[W]e got older, plus you’re not going to keep spinning around on the floor, so it kind of went on hiatus,” he concluded (Smith, 2016). As a result, these practitioners never saw how the next wave of breakers innovated the form. Instead, they relied on mediated depictions of cardboard-wielding breakers from the 1980s to conceptualize how the form evolved.

Interestingly, what is revealed when demystifying such speculation is how much breaking continued to be shaped by social constructions and symbolic meanings, rather than the often-touted claim that it was a response to material conditions. As can be seen in other forms of popular dance, including within the African American community (Fisher & Shay, 2009, p. 113), breaking was seen to be an exclusively teenage activity, with practitioners expected to leave the dance behind upon reaching adulthood. The resulting turnover meant that younger dancers embodied an age-specific identity through their performances that, in turn, contributed to breaking’s framework of individuation. While older dancers may have considered it “uncool” or “improper” to continue breaking, younger practitioners were given room to take ownership of the dance, instill their cultural influences into it, and innovate new movements out of it. The aesthetic shifts that resulted—including more acrobatic spins, poses, and prolonged floor movements using the entire body (not just the hands and feet)—had to do mainly with this cultivation of symbolic creativity, rather than the utilization of linoleum or cardboard.

It is also important to reiterate that African Americans who distanced themselves from breaking during this period did so largely as a result of age-appropriate notions of behavior, not cultural abandonment, as it has often been suggested in hip-hop studies (Ewoodzie, 2017, p. 133;

George, 1999, p. 15-16; Tiongson, 2013, p. 26). In fact, just as those from the early 1970s moved away from burning and breaking in the late 1970s, many African American and Latino/a practitioners from the late 1970s and early 1980s stopped breaking by the time they reached eighteen or nineteen years old (Norman, 1983). Once again, Hager (1984) pointed out that many early Latino b-boys "felt they were too old to continue rolling around on concrete, getting skin cuts and tearing their clothes" (p. 86). This further demonstrates how social attitudes confined the dance within a particular age range, helping reinforce its high turnover rate and association with adolescence. In other words, with many older practitioners distancing themselves from breaking, young people carried it forward by making new meaning out of it and affirming their collective sense of self through its performance. "If my self-esteem was real low, I probably would've never been a dancer," explained Jojo when describing the opposition he received from *older* African American b-boys. "Not to dis the brothers but they started downplaying something that we loved," he said. However, he and his local group of friends were able to overcome these disapproving attitudes through the camaraderie they established as younger practitioners of various backgrounds. "We got bigger, better, stronger," is how he characterized their perseverance in the late 1970s (Ahearn, 2000c).

Young women also continued to play a considerable role in breaking as it spread among Latinas and adopted new aesthetic approaches during this period. For example, b-girls such as Bambi from The Bronx Girls (TBG) have insisted that breaking was "a mixture of boys and girls" in the late 1970s. "Of course, there was always more boys but there was a big, large group of girls" (Edukate, 2015). Journalist Cristina Veran (1999) echoed this sentiment when highlighting prominent Latina b-girls such as Mama Maribel, Sunkist Evie, and Bunny Lee. "While never as great in number as their b-boy counterparts," she wrote, "a few brave girls

began stepping out from the sidelines as well" (55). Indeed, there were also b-girls such as Wanda Gonzalez, who is said to have been "*bad* at breakdancing" and served as the founder of the early, mixed-gender breaking group, The Mexican Crew (Kid Terrific, 2020). Shakey Shake also recalled seeing young women taking part in breaking during this period, both in parties and formal dance contests that would take place in his neighborhood (personal communication, February 10, 2018). Another African American b-boy named Pee Wee Dance similarly insisted that it was acceptable for girls to enter breaking circles at parties back then. "Things weren't about 'me,' 'me,' 'me,'" he said regarding the inclusivity of the dance during this precommercial era. "We turned the 'm' around and made it about 'we'" (personal communication, June 22, 2018). Indeed, even in the early 1980s, as breaking gained more mainstream exposure, all-female breaking groups such as the ethnically mixed Dynamic Dolls, an offshoot of the Dynamic Breakers from Queens, New York, began to emerge and perform professionally (Valente, 2015). As such, young women continued to figure prominently within the dance, even as it expanded beyond The Bronx.

Along these same lines, it is important to note that young African Americans also continued to break into the late 1970s and early 1980s. While their older counterparts may have moved on from the dance, younger members of the community continued to engage with it. For example, Frosty Freeze, an African American b-boy from Manhattan's Rock City Crew (RCC), was breaking well into the early 1980s, helping popularize the dance with his subsequent group, the Rock Steady Crew. "[M]y crew had just stopped," stated Freeze in reference to RCC, "but, like I always used to go down if I see anybody else go down, cuz it was played out to me, but then again it was still in me" (Fricke, 2001a). Indeed, the Rock Steady Crew itself is said to have been co-founded by an African American named Jimmy Dee and a Latino named Jimmy Lee,

exemplifying the cross-cultural interaction that was taking place in hip-hop during the late 1970s. African American b-boy Lil Boy Keith, of the often-referenced Zulu Kings, also explained that there were several DJs still catering to breaking, even as many older practitioners within hip-hop began gravitating toward rapping, turntablism, and other activities.

> Other dances came out like The Freak...stuff like that but Breakdancing really never went nowhere. If you went to those places where they would start to do all these other dances you probably thought breakdancing had gone somewhere but I always went to places where people was breakdancing. I went to a lot of block parties, talent shows...stuff like that...there were still a lot of DJs that were DJing outside....like Theodore or Flash.. so we always had something to do and some place to go to....I mean we would also break at house parties. Dancing was always our thing, it kept us out of trouble. (Norin Rad, 2018f)

Such testimony suggests that the dance's expansion during the late 1970s was facilitated by both Latino/a *and* African American practitioners. Indeed, it was by dancing together in clubhouses, basements, schoolyards, parks, and community centers that many younger members of these communities began breaking down cultural barriers in The Bronx. In addition, while the most prominent hip-hop venues began concentrating solely on turntablism and rap performances, several lesser known DJs continued to play beats for a younger crowd of b-boys and b-girls in peripheral locations. This included Latino DJs such as Charlie Chase, Cisco and Bucko, and Lil Angel, as well as African American DJs such as Lay-Lay, Kool T, and Sisco Kid, to name a few. In this way, the two communities began to merge on a group level—albeit outside of mainstream institutions—for the first time in hip-hop history.

And through their affinity for a shared expressive practice, they developed a sense of cross-cultural solidarity, even as they competed in heated exchanges. "When the Hispanics

started getting down," recalled Shakey Shake, "we were all growing up on the same block, same hood. So, everybody is now doing this dance" (personal communication, February 10, 2018). Frosty Freeze also stated that there would sometimes be competitions "between the Blacks and the Spanish trying to outdo each other, from either playing sports or to this dance thing" (Numata, 2005). Rather than spurring antagonism, however, such battles reinforced a common, albeit loosely defined, competency in the format and vocabulary of the dance. This helped forge a new sense of respect, community, and reciprocity. "I hung out with a lot of my Black friends in school but, when the school year was over, they would go their way, we would go our way," said Trac 2, when recalling his early interactions with African Americans. "But when these jams were happening more and more often, in park jams and schoolyard jams, it allowed us to come together" (Superbbeatshow, 2012). Again, this coming together, even when in competition, helped facilitate cross-cultural dialogue, a process that has similarly been repeated throughout breaking's global expansion (Johnson, 2009; Osumare, 2002; Fogarty, 2010). Indeed, by serving as an alternative forum for interaction, breaking became the central conduit through which large numbers of Latino/as began making their way into hip-hop for the first time, helping boost the movement's overall spread throughout New York. As Grandmaster Caz has aptly summed up:

> In '78-79, more Latinos started migrating toward hip-hop through dancing, as b-boys. They kind of changed the whole fabric of the breakdancing thing as b-boys but it was a gradual thing as far as Puerto Ricans getting involved into hip-hop. (Djvlad, 2014)

Changing with the Times

In addition to the underlying meaning and aesthetics of the dance, the evolving sonic landscape of hip-hop also had a profound effect on how Latino/a b-boys and b-girls "changed the

whole fabric of the breakdancing thing." As mentioned above, DJ Flash, who took on the title of "Grandmaster" around 1978, enhanced Herc's Merry-Go-Round technique by synchronizing breakbeats on his turntables. This made it possible for the percussive sections of records to now be played without interceding vocals or melodies, and for turntables to be used as instruments through manipulative scratching techniques. As MCs recited more complex rhymes over these instrumentations—advancing the earlier microphone incantations of Kool Herc, Coke La Rock, and others—breakers also employed more dynamic movements to match the music's newfound format.

"As a b-boy in the 70s, scratching helped build our creativity," is how Trac 2 (1999) explained the reciprocal relationship between music and movement in his era. "When the DJ changed the pace of the music, we changed our dancing and that helped build our creativity." Thus, musical choices continued to shape what happened on the dancefloor, as the climactic "get down" part—which was now being looped more precisely and repeatedly—compelled breakers to develop extended steps, shuffles, and combinations in their crouched-down footwork patterns. Concurrently, moves such as the "swipe"—wherein a dancer initiates a sweep but then lifts their legs off the ground to do an about turn with their torso—were further elevated by practitioners during this period. B-boys and b-girls would now lift their hips into the air when doing this move, pushing up into semi-handstands as they rotated. According to Trac 2, the unique hand placement of a chair freeze was also experimented with to create countless other variations, including the "track," "reverse chair," "baby," "turtle," "figure four," "hand glide," and, perhaps most famously, the continuous backspin (popularly known as a "windmill") (Chalfant, 2006; London Real, 2017). Many of these movements involve placing one's back and head on the floor, in addition to the hands and feet, for longer periods of time, suggesting that the vocabulary

of breaking was extended and considerably compounded during this period, with looped breakbeats serving as the soundtrack for younger dancers to "add more flava to something that already existed" (Davey D, 2001).

However, the advancement of these floor-based movements did not necessarily mean b-girls and b-boys took more time when they danced overall. Instead, they seemed to have concentrated their performances into shorter bursts of intense, dynamic displays, matching the quick mixing of breakbeats being looped on turntables. For instance, rather than dance for the entire duration of a song, which was common at Kool Herc parties, practitioners would often now dance in a circle for less than a minute, conserving their energy for more difficult feats and matching the shorter fragments of music being rotated. As a result, the upright dancing of breaking (commonly referred to today as "top rocking") began to recede into the background. Ken Swift of the Rock Steady Crew acknowledged that his generation began focusing more on floor-based sequences, rather than upright dancing. "Ninety five percent of what you did in breaking was on the floor," he explained, adding that he reluctantly incorporated a brief, forward-lunging two-step when he started simply because a mentor told him it "was just something you had to do" (Kennedy, 2015). Although practitioners continued to dance on their feet—with some even incorporating stylistic flourishes from the Latin Hustle and other cultural dances—they did so mainly out of a regard for the bodily blueprint of breaking. As discussed in Chapter Three, this blueprint consisted of a steady sequence of upright dancing prior to the execution of more explosive movements, which was dictated by the ebb and flow of funk-oriented records being played. However, once the soundtrack of the dance shifted through innovative turntable techniques, the intricacy and variety of such upright dancing became less and less of a priority. As the years went on, especially as breaking moved into the

commercialized period of the early 1980s, this emphasis on rhythmic dancing dissipated even further. “To me, a top rock is a two-step that never lasts more than three seconds before you go down,” is how Alien Ness, a Bronx-based Latino b-boy from this latter period summarized his approach, in concurrence with Swift’s above remarks (Strife.tv, 2013).

In contrast, founding African American b-boys and b-girls placed a premium on rhythmic dancing, to the point that even virtuosic moves were deemed an addendum to such upright steps. “You had to dance on time or if you did a stutter step you had to bring it back to time,” wrote Beatmaster Doc Ice, emphasizing the fact that “original breakers” were not “just doing moves and acrobatics” (Smith, 2015c). PHASE 2 similarly stated that upright dancing was like an “art form” for his generation. “Now it’s kind of lost. You see guys saying they’re topping but they’re not really putting that energy into it” (PHASE 2, 1999). Such comments reflect an awareness among pioneers of a considerable aesthetic, and perhaps cultural, shift within the dance, reminiscent of the above comments regarding the absence of linoleum in their era. However, it is my contention that, in addition to the alternative norms and outlooks of younger people who became involved in breaking, the concentration of looped breakbeats in hip-hop music in the late 1970s had a dramatic effect on the increasingly floor-based focus of the dance.

Nevertheless, although earlier practitioners seem to be discontent with some of these changes, most pioneering African American b-boys and b-girls did not deride those who transformed breaking in the late 1970s. Instead, they often expressed appreciation, and even admiration, for those who carried the form into the following decade. “They took it [breaking] to the next level for sure,” stated Grandmaster Flash in a 1993 interview. “It died for a while then it came back and it was this new acrobatic, gymnastic type of style” (George, 2004, p. 47). PHASE 2—who later co-founded the influential New York City Breakers group in the early 1980s—also

praised those who kept breaking alive. “I would have to be blind in the ‘80s not noticing that the Latin kids were on some next ish [sic],” he explained to me. “It was surprising” (personal communication, November 8, 2015). Beatmaster Doc Ice also characterized the dance’s cultural transition as overwhelmingly positive when he wrote that “a whole new crop of younger, acrobatic, mostly Latino brothers took it and ran with it. It was time” (Troy, 2015b). Similarly, Kool Herc has insisted that, “The Puerto Ricans carried breakdancing” (George, 2004, p. 47), while GrandMixer DXT credited this demographic for rejuvenating the dance.

> The Puerto Rican community kicked in on the dance part and brought it back. Brought it back big. They did their thing. They brought new moves to the dance . . . It came from just uprocking and jumping down, and coming back up, and putting your hand in the face—to spinning on your head. (personal communication, December 28, 2017)

Such comments illustrate the transcendent outlook many early practitioners held toward those who adopted breaking and hip-hop culture. The differing ethnic background of those in this latter cohort did not deter pioneers from recognizing their talents and contributions. Nor did the open-ended structure of the form fluctuate according to the ethnic makeup of practitioners. Instead, the alterity of breaking was manifested in its ongoing emphasis on youth identification, individualized expression, and a commitment to the broader tenets of the hip-hop movement. This framework was passed down from one generation to the next and continued to encourage innovation according to the values of its youth-based constituency. That breaking was tied to a broader community of independent events, shared musical tastes, self-governing principles, and a detachment from societal standards only further solidified this groundwork for going beyond traditional norms. Indeed, it was this openness to inscribe new meaning within breaking which drew Latino/a youth closer to the dance in the first place. And by embracing the expansion of the

dance's aesthetics, these practitioners carried the form forward into the 1980s, eventually helping disseminate it around the world.

Conclusion

By the time breaking appeared in the mainstream media in the early 1980s, the dance had already undergone a decade of development in The Bronx and surrounding areas. At that point, it had indeed become multicultural, with ethnically Latino/a, African American, and even some white and Asian breakers participating in its performance (Holman, 2014; Kid Terrific, 2020). Unfortunately, scholarly overreliance on media depictions from this period—coupled with a general neglect of those who wrote about its African American pioneers (Hager, 1984; Holman, 1984)—has led to an obfuscation of breaking's formative years of development. More crucially, it has led to the invisibilization of the dance's African American founders.

As has been discussed throughout this chapter, the standard depiction of hip-hop as a product of cross-fertilization among marginalized communities in The Bronx is an oversimplification that skews several important issues related to the dance's early aesthetics and social significance. Indeed, contrary to the claim that breaking emerged from "diverse origins" (Flores, 1993, p. 27) or a "polycultural social construct" (Hoch, 2006, p. 351), the testimony of a wide cross-section of early hip-hop practitioners demonstrates that perceptions of racial difference affected how Bronx residents interacted with one another. In turn, such perceptions affected breaking even as it expanded in the late 1970s, with virtually all Latino/a pioneers describing their initial ambivalence toward adopting a form coded as "Black." Nevertheless, the alternative, working-class, youth-based, Africanist aesthetics of the form resonated with these practitioners, to the point that they were willing to defy social opposition in order to take part in

them. Much like their African American predecessors, they came together with like-minded peers in the face of social disapproval to build a sense of common identity, belonging, and resilience through the dance.

In addition, the jook-based institutions in which breaking took place provided its practitioners with an independent environment where they could develop their own symbolic creativity and sociocultural rules. Rather than subscribing to dominant racial paradigms, these jook spaces encouraged participants to build social bonds predicated on alternative values and aesthetics. As a result, just as b-girls and b-boys danced back against prevailing notions of "legitimate" performance, so too did they dance back against prevailing notions of racial difference. Indeed, the multicultural ethos of hip-hop first saw large scale enactment through the influx of Latino/a *breakers* in the late 1970s. This demonstrates, once again, the critical role dancing played in not only the musical and organizational development of hip-hop but also its socio-cultural makeup. The transcendent appeal of moving together to music and exercising symbolic creativity made breaking a rare and appealing outlet for young people during this period, helping mend racial divisions in New York, at least within the underground confines of the hip-hop movement.

Taking these complex cultural dynamics into account is crucial for understanding breaking's deeper symbolic meanings, as well as its ongoing appeal to young people throughout the world. Indeed, many scholars have documented how, like The Bronx of the late 1970s, most countries who adopted hip-hop in the early 1980s did so through the introduction of breaking, not necessarily rap music (Mitchell, 2001). Such developments raise important questions regarding the relationship between music and movement in hip-hop history, as well as the implications such embodied performances have had on notions of social and cultural identity. As

cultural sociologist Mary Fogarty (2010) has shown, DJs and dancers have continued to interact closely in modern breaking communities and have often developed "imagined affinities" through their shared cultural tastes (p. 76-78). Similarly, dance scholar Halifu Osumare (2007) has argued that "connective marginality" has been the driving force of the underground hip-hop movement internationally, with young people gravitating toward the emancipatory appeal of Africanist aesthetics. Thus, whether in regards to the cross-cultural interaction or the impact of dancing on musical development, it is essential to incorporate greater discussion of hip-hop's embodied expressions when examining both the culture's past and present proliferation.

Epilogue: Back to the Beginning

The invisibilization of breaking's African American founders has not been limited to historical scholarship. It has also occurred within the modern breaking community itself, with few practitioners, promoters, or commentators today knowing much about the African American pioneers who founded the dance. Indeed, rarely have such pioneers been invited to major breaking events, let alone consulted for educational initiatives or mentioned in discussions regarding the form's early aesthetics.

In fact, on one of the rare occasions where a founding b-boy, GrandMixer DXT, was invited to a major competition, attendees were so unaware of who he was that they complained about him serving on the judging panel. The event was called the Ultimate B-Boy Championship and it was held in August 2010 at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, Nevada. The cash prize for the winning team was reported to be fifty thousand dollars—a relatively large sum for a breaking event at the time—and the judges included three Latino b-boys from the late 1970s, who were described by organizers as "founders" of the dance, as well as a French b-boy from the modern era and GrandMixer DXT, who was described as "a special invited judge" (UBC International, 2010). As DXT explained to me in our interview, the losing team at this event approached him backstage following the finals, complaining to him about their loss and stating that he was not qualified to judge them because, in their minds, he was only a DJ, not a b-boy.

> He [member of losing team] was like, "You don't know nothing about dancing!" I'm looking at him going, "See, he's talking to a first-generation b-boy." It would take too much time to explain to him that he wouldn't even be *dancing* if it wasn't for someone like me. I didn't want to go through it cause they were being just rude and disrespectful.

> And they were looking like they were getting ready to jump me. So, he said, "You don't have no moves!" So, I showed him. I just showed him. I said, "Man, I'm a b-boy. Like before you were born." I just showed him some of my moves and they were like, "Oh shit. Okay. He actually is." (personal communication, December 28, 2017)

This episode demonstrates the extent to which breaking's African American founders remain undetectable to most modern b-boys and b-girls. It was not until DXT—who was around fifty years old at the time—hit the floor and embodied the dance in front of these competitors that they realized he was a pioneering b-boy. Moreover, several individuals who were there that day relayed to me that they were perplexed by DXT's unique aesthetics and floor combinations. The latter also confirmed this when he stated in our interview that, "I did some moves to show them like, 'Listen. For real?' And it was moves that none of them did" (personal communication, December 28, 2017).

This process of invisibilization is continuing with the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) recent decision to incorporate breaking into its 2024 Summer Games. To my knowledge, no African American pioneers have been interviewed or quoted in any of the news reports regarding this dramatic development. Instead, journalists and commentators have, once again, turned to "legends" and "pioneers" from the 1980s to contextualize the dance's history (Schad, 2020; Justich, 2020; Vega, 2020). The IOC has likewise not reached out to any African American founders of the dance for consultation or involvement in the Olympics, leaving the creators of breaking sidelined, once again, by the very individuals and institutions who have benefited from their innovations.

My central aim in this study has been to counter this disturbing cycle of invisibilizing breaking's African American founders, namely by challenging the narrative that the dance was a

product of ethnic "cross-fertilization" (Flores, 1993, p. 27; Gilroy, 1993, p. 103; Rivera, 2003, p. 43) or "an expressive form associated with Puerto Rican youth" (Tiongson, 2013, p. 26). On the contrary, in its first decade of development breaking was an exclusively African American phenomenon, as it was teenagers from this community who birthed the format, structure, terminology, soundtrack, and early movement vocabulary of the dance. Indeed, that breaking was birthed by the African American community is something that early popular researchers (Hager, 1984; Holman, 1984) and well-known Latino/a pioneers openly acknowledged. In this way, there is a clear dichotomy between the recollections of early practitioners and what has been written in modern scholarly literature. I have sought to call attention to this dichotomy and amplify the testimony of breaking's pioneers to both address this cycle of invisibilization and confront the many "myths and unexamined assumptions" resulting from it (Meghelli, 2013, p. 95). In addition to remedying the epistemic violence caused by such erasure, I believe this centering of participant testimony is critical for gaining a more reliable understanding of the dance itself.

As Zora Neale Hurston (1934/1970) argued over three-quarters of a century ago, the unique expressions of working-class African Americans must be contextualized according to their own historical circumstances and standards. This is something many practitioners today similarly emphasize when they stress that historical "knowledge" is essential to breaking and that you cannot overlook the "foundational technique" and "original b-boy moves" from which the dance evolved (Williams, 2011, p. 165). However, how can such determinations be made if the founding generation of b-boys and b-girls are not properly accounted for? How can meaning and appreciation be advanced if the dance's early development is suppressed in favor of speculative theories about street gang influences, martial arts techniques, or multicultural cross-fertilization?

Of course, b-boys and b-girls from various backgrounds have made profound contributions to the dance, but, as was discussed in Chapter Six, even the earliest and best known Latino/a pioneers inevitably trace their roots back to the African American practitioners they learned from. It is for this reason that serious historical inquiry requires attending to the developments and motivations of the African American community in The Bronx of the 1970s.

Failing to properly acknowledge this historical context also denies modern adherents an opportunity to learn about the dance's early values and symbolic meanings. For instance, the lack of awareness regarding the many b-girls who developed the form in the 1970s—and even the 1980s—has led to numerous misconceptions regarding the inherent "masculinity" of breaking, which has served as a formidable obstacle to female participation in the dance today (Fogarty, 2015b; Langnes & Fasting, 2017). Similarly, the unsubstantiated notion that breaking emerged out of gang culture has led many b-boys and b-girls to embody a persona of aggression in their performances, just as many rappers have adopted a problematic narrative of criminality and violence in their lyrics (Aprahamian, 2019). Such choices are not incidental but, rather, the product of skewed conceptualizations of historical "authenticity," demonstrating just how much conceptions of the past affect conditions in the present.

It is for these reasons that, again, my overarching aim has been to challenge the dominant depictions of breaking and hip-hop history. Although confronting accepted "truths" in any field can be fraught with contention, I believe such critique is paramount if scholars hope to examine the dance and its associated forms of expression on their own terms—as opposed to the unreliable, and often harmful, perceptions of commentators. As hip-hop pioneer PHASE 2 had emphatically warned prior to his passing:

> From what I've seen, people who don't have a clue tend to stretch their imagination and theoretics far beyond what the actual factual reality is. Such is the case in almost everything written in hip-hop's so-called 'history.' . . . With hip-hop, it's some Tarzan-of-the-Jungle type nonsense, with a tinge of the butcher Christopher Columbus tossed in. We already know what came after that. The way I see it, it's like time is repeating itself in a different way. As opposed to the hip-hop masses being wiped out, the integrity of its reality and past is being raped and massacred. (Harris, 2019)

It is by heeding such dire warnings and questioning hip-hop's dominant discourse that I have sought to thwart the disturbing cycle of African American invisibilization from "repeating itself in a different way." And it is through such questioning that I have uncovered important new insights for my ongoing inquiry into this globally influential cultural movement.

Symbolic Creativity in the Jook Continuum

When I first began this study, I did not expect to focus much on the venues where breaking took place. Like most other practitioners and researchers, I simply assumed that the dance developed outdoors, in parks and street corners. However, as I examined the testimony of founding practitioners, I quickly noticed that they mostly referred to dancing in indoor spaces: independent clubs, house parties, community centers, church halls, and building lobbies. This was especially true for figures from the early 1970s, who rarely referred to breaking outside or in public places. Indeed, upon reflection it became clear that New York's harsh winter climate would preclude the dance, and hip-hop culture more generally, from emerging as a mostly outdoor phenomenon.

As I became aware of this additional contradiction in hip-hop history, I also read dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon's (1990) seminal study *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*. I was struck by her critique of the lack of institutional analysis in African American dance scholarship and her distinction between commercial and underground spaces within this community (pp. x-xii). Although she maintained that "black core culture is deteriorating" and that the "jook continuum" of underground dance spaces from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had been subsumed within the "commercial urban complex" of officially licensed venues in the 1960s and 1970s (p. 174), my research demonstrated that breaking was, in fact, steeped in a continuation of the jook institutions she emphasized in her writings. Not only did breaking develop in independent clubs and autonomous indoor spaces, but it was also characterized by the same working-class, Africanist traditions she identified as pivotal to core African American culture.

As I have argued throughout this study, this jook continuum was critical to the cultivation of alternative values within the breaking scene. Indeed, Herc's youth-based, breakbeat-oriented events provided dancers a forum "where new cultural concepts can be tested free from restrictions" (Hager, 1984, p. 103). In addition to developing new ways of moving that departed from convention, the underground confines of the hip-hop movement cultivated principles of creativity, community, and unity in the face of social opposition. In other words, these events provided an alternative environment where young people could socialize and embody values distinct from mainstream society. Had the jook continuum been subsumed with the commercial urban complex, as Hazzard-Gordon maintained, breaking would likely have never developed, as it was largely forbidden in more established clubs throughout New York—even within the African American community itself. In turn, the alterity embodied within the dance appealed to

its adherents just as much as it repelled its detractors and complimented the gradual expansion of hip-hop to outdoor locations in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This expansion marked the first shift in breaking's institutional context, leading to gradual changes in its public exposure, ethnocultural makeup, and movement vocabulary. Since then, the dance has moved beyond the jook continuum and traversed numerous other institutions—including the mainstream media, theatrical concert stages, studio classrooms, and, now, sporting competitions—and undergone considerable changes in the process, a topic that has received some important analysis (Banes, 1984; Fogarty, 2006; Shapiro, 2004), but which deserves far more scholarly attention.

Similarly, the invisibilization of breaking's African American beginnings has, in my view, been shaped by the institutional context in which the dance has been historicized. For instance, many of the misconceptions surrounding breaking's beginnings trace back to media coverage of the dance from the early 1980s. As rap music came to the fore in the latter part of this decade, multicultural depictions of the dance in the 1980s came into conflict with the music industry's characterization of hip-hop as an exclusively African American practice, sparking considerable dismay from Latino/a scholars. For instance, social and cultural analyst Juan Flores was adamant that, like jazz music, hip-hop was "not just Latinos doing a black thing, but it's really them jamming together and coming up with something that's not the same as either of the two they started with" (quoted in del Barco, 1996, p. 68). Similarly, sociologist Raquel Rivera (2003) argued that young Latino/as "had less explaining to do regarding their 'belonging' or 'entitlement' to hip hop" (p. 59). In turn, debates regarding history, ethnic identity, and cultural appropriation within academia and the music industry eventually found their way into the breaking community, as well. As a practitioner involved in this community in the 1990s, I remember several Latino/a practitioners referencing the names of African American founders

and publicly recalling the difficulties they encountered when they first adopted breaking. However, as the dance experienced a global resurgence in the 2000s, and greater numbers of scholars began to write about hip-hop culture, the same scholarly narratives of "cross-fertilization" and "Latino domination" mentioned above began to permeate the discourse of modern practitioners. Today, as institutions such as the Olympics offer the lure of legitimation and economic opportunity for dancers, these battles over history and racial entitlement are becoming even more pronounced. As such, it is my view that the institutions in which the dance operates—whether those be communal jook spaces, commercial media outlets, theatrical concert stages, academic departments, or sports competitions—have a major effect on how it is both performed and perceived.

However, this is not to suggest that conceptualizations of breaking's past are shaped by institutional pressures alone. There are also very personal reasons why discussing the beginnings of the dance can be rife with contention. As I have argued throughout this study, breaking was an important outlet for symbolic creativity and identity formation among young people in The Bronx, and this included early Latino/a practitioners who developed a sense of self, overcame racial divisions, and contributed to hip-hop culture through their dance practices. For these individuals to later be told by critics, commentators, and activists—*not* by hip-hop's African American founders themselves—that they were "treading on black turf" (Flores, 1996, p. 104) or, more recently, that they are merely "guests" in the house of hip-hop, is understandably taken as a major affront (MRWIGGLES, 2020). It is my view that this remains at the heart of current battles over breaking's beginnings. Indeed, hip-hop's founders similarly get upset when African American disco adherents, who vociferously opposed hip-hop in the 1970s, now profess to be progenitors of their cultural movement (Michael Waynetv, 2016b). Such disingenuous claims

understandably sow resentment, demonstrating how hip-hop signified a distinct sense of identity and community that cannot be reduced to skin color or ethnicity alone. To ignore these nuances is to deny hip-hop practitioners their agency, creativity, and artistic struggle. After all, hip-hop's founders not only created the most influential artistic movement of the modern era, but they did so in the face of considerable social opposition.

Furthermore, this obfuscation of history has implications for the many African American *dancers* who shaped hip-hop's musical trajectory. Ignoring these early b-boys and b-girls has led to numerous misconceptions regarding the origins of hip-hop's percussive beats, including the notion that Herc transmuted Jamaican sound system culture to The Bronx or that Latino/a street drumming influenced hip-hop DJs. Indeed, dancing, when discussed at all in hip-hop studies, is often treated as a backdrop to rap or a reaction to the choices of DJs, not the other way around. As several scholars have convincingly argued (Dimitriadis, 1996, p. 180; Fogarty, 2015a; Schloss, 2009, p. 8), this general devaluing of embodied performance in hip-hop studies forms part of a broader Eurocentric tradition of ignoring the body in discussions of music and culture. In turn, just as breakers at the Ultimate B-Boy Championship assumed that DXT could not be both a pioneering DJ *and* a b-boy, scholars of varying backgrounds have neglected the dance backgrounds of the hip-hop founders they have consulted. For instance, pioneers such as Kool Herc, PHASE 2, Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel, Sha-Rock, Grandmixer DXT, DJ Breakout, Pebblee Poo, Afrika Islam, and countless others trace their beginnings to dancing in The Bronx, but rarely have hip-hop scholars explored this interconnection. Many subsequently influential rap artists such as Dr. Dre, Ice T, Jermaine Dupri, 2Pac, and Common, similarly had their beginnings in breaking and hip-hop dance practices. Yet, this link between music and dance in hip-hop history remains largely overlooked in scholarship, leaving practitioners unacknowledged for

their multiple talents and, more importantly, leaving the public in the dark about how corporeal expression has informed hip-hop's musical development. Furthermore, it should be remembered that dancing has historically been central to various African American musical expressions (funk, rock 'n roll, jazz, blues), suggesting a consistent historical pattern that requires far more scholarly analysis.

But It's Just Begun

As stated at the outset, my examination of the institutional context of early breaking, its symbolic creativity, and interlocked relationship with hip-hop's musical formation are not meant to signal closure on these topics. Rather, they are meant to encourage greater dialogue and a rethinking of conventional narratives in breaking history. As part of this process, I anticipate future research that will offer critical viewpoints on these matters, as well as greater first-hand accounts that will help move hip-hop history beyond the "legends" and "mythological accounts" of yesteryear.

Given my central focus on the invisibilization of breaking's African American founders, I have discussed the many issues connected to this cultural context in relatively general terms. As such, there is a great deal more research needed into the various waves of early breaking practitioners, the complex background and experiences of its founders, and the specific regional circumstances the dance developed in. For instance, Harlem eventually became an important hub for breaking alongside The Bronx in the mid-1970s, and far more research is needed to determine how the dance transitioned to this region, as well as what impact its practitioners had on the form. Similarly, more local analysis is needed of The Bronx itself, given the likelihood that different sections of the borough impacted the dance according to their own unique social

and cultural dynamics. The gathering of more first-hand testimony can open the way for such detailed investigation, as well as more insight into the dance's early sequencing, improvisatory approach, and symbolic meaning. Again, this necessitates greater primary research into not only the experiences of b-boys and b-girls but also audience members who observed and evaluated the dance. Of course, as was mentioned in Chapter Five, the role of women in early hip-hop also deserves far greater attention, as do questions regarding the relationship between the associated practice of aerosol art and breaking, the development of fashion within the culture, and the relationship between early hip-hop promoters and the dancers who attracted audiences to their events. I intend to deepen my examination of these issues but also look forward to others who can better fill in the gaps of knowledge left behind from my inquiry.

Along these same lines, breaking's reliance on the broader history of African American culture also merits more in-depth analysis. For example, I referenced several parallels between hip-hop and jazz throughout this study, but such links can only be conclusively determined with more extensive research. The effects of adolescent identity formation, collective exaltation, and female influence in breaking history also raise important questions regarding these understudied factors in earlier jook-based expressions. Correspondingly, the suppression of working-class African American dancing and its relation to broader structures of racism, criminalization, and Anglo-conformity are also issues that arise from breaking history that can benefit from more thorough historical analysis.

As Hurston (1934/1970) so powerfully argued in her seminal essay on African American culture, "Musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America" (p. 29). This was true for the jazz and blues of her era just as it was for subsequent forms such as rock 'n roll, funk, disco, and now, the leading cultural movement of today: hip-hop. Delving deeper into this

jook continuum has, thus, been a critical component of my dissertation, one that I hope to further contribute to by exploring several fundamental questions arising from this research: Why is it that so much of modern popular dance and musical culture emanates from the working-class African American jook? What is the specific role dancing has played in this consistent historical pattern? Why do these forms attract so many adherents around the world? What relationship do structures of power, education, institutionalization, and commercialization have on this continuum and its production of cultural capital? These are some of the many questions prompted by my research, reaffirming how the more I peer into the past, the more I realize that the search for beginnings has only just begun.

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