

ARTICLES

On Popular Dance Aesthetics: Why Backup Dancers Matter to Hip Hop Dance Histories

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We appear to have reached a peculiar pass, wherein everything is culture (or so it seems), or everything mimics culture.
~ Hortense Spillers, *The Idea of Black Culture*

Although breaking was practised in the early 1980s in Toronto,¹ as it was wherever movies like *Flashdance* (1983) and *Beat Street* (1984) were available and captured the imaginations of youth (Fogarty 2016), the dance form essentially died out for a time in Toronto (Fogarty 2006). The dance styles that took over locally were newer hip hop dances, featured in movies such as *House Party* (1990) starring rap artists/dancers, Kid ‘n Play.² Similarly, the hip hop dancers who performed with rap artists such as EPMD,³ Big Daddy Kane, and Maestro Fresh Wes became trendsetters, inspirational to dancers of all ages. The early 1990s mark a particular moment in hip hop history when the backup dancers for hip hop artists were seen as artists in their own right: as hip hop dancers who were recognized for their talents and style. I am not speaking here about dancers who work for a choreographer on a project and, in doing so, are generally asked to fade into the background enough that the star singer is foregrounded. In this context, backup dancers—dancers who work professionally performing alongside musical acts—are a prime constituent of a performance whose many elements are put together to complement each other in specific ways. I will argue that these dancers, at this moment in the early 1990s, were aesthetic innovators whose contribution has played a larger role than has been recognized in the developments of breaking: the original dance of hip hop culture that was marketed as “breakdancing” in the early 1980s by managers and dancers trying to make a living in New York City.

In order to show the impact of the innovations these dancers introduced, I will analyze some historical examples of popular performance by their own aesthetic rubrics, treating the work of individual dancers not as “works” by choreographers but as individual moves (such as those captured in music videos in shots) that express not only their creativity but also their community. My approach is rooted in sociological, ethnographic methods including interviews (some anonymized, some named) and participant observation over a sustained period (2003–19), although I focus in depth on the experiences and influences of a few particular b-boys to provide some social backdrop to the topics at hand. In doing so, I build on the work of various scholars who have considered how people working within infrastructures shape art practices from Howard Becker’s (1982) identification of a coffee porter’s role in a writer’s practice, to Vicki Mayer’s (2011) analysis of television producers in *Below The Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, to Lucie Vánarová’s (2017) considerations of women in electronics assemblies, Will Straw’s (2011) analysis of film “extras,” and Christopher Small’s (1998) considerations of roadies and ticket agents in live music.

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The aesthetic trajectories of hip hop dancers performing as backup dancers are critical to this discussion, and I will draw out their importance to audience experience, while also examining how producers have downplayed the value of backup dancers, reducing them to a background status that belies their influence. What's at stake in this argument for the contemporary climate of international breaking culture is the significance of the role that professional hip hop dancers have played in the development of the dance form from very early on. This analysis will, I hope, demystify the structures that have influenced the dance, and challenge the assumption that hip hop dance is only authentic if performed in a competitive, battle context.

My topic addresses an area that deserves more attention in performance studies: popular dance aesthetics. Note that the “popular” here is often set against both art and subcultural discourses; the “popular” is also a descriptor commonly used to identify the commercial labour of dancers who work in professional settings within various entertainment and cultural industries, especially in the music business. I build on the work of Marc Lamont Hill, who notes:

In line with my neo-Gramscian approach to popular culture, I strongly dispute the notion that “conscious” hip-hop provides a transcendent sphere within an otherwise hegemonic culture industry. Such a notion hinges upon the invocation of a faulty (and elitist) modernist dichotomy between high and low culture—in this case mainstream vs. conscious rap music—that obscures the complex interplay between reproduction and resistance in all sites of hip-hop cultural production. (Hill 2009, 51n8)

These observations apply to hip hop dances such as breaking, which are often compared to commercial hip hop dances, marked by their relationship to industries as opposed to communities. The tension between what Hill characterizes as the “transcendent” and the “popular” or “mainstream” has resulted in a rejection of a particular kind of professionalization and aesthetic that involves a perceived loss of integrity (often the integrity of dancing your own movements even if that means creating choreography for others). Dismissing the aesthetic possibility within commercial dance performances, the “transcendent” accords value to “community” above all else—a dynamic that comes with its own set of problems, which match those outlined in Miranda Joseph's (2002) seminal text, *Against the Romance of Community*. Breaking practices can be romanticized and set apart as antagonistic toward outsiders, other hip hop dances, commercial and studio contexts, and counting and “choreo” movement vocabularies. Many of these arenas are female-led, and the rejection of these forms has come with the globalization of hip hop culture and the shift away from its roots in black communities.⁴ This makes professionalization for dancers very difficult, as the more they want to make a professional career of the dance, the more they are seen as not being true to a romantic notion of its origins that is not borne out by the facts of its own global developments. In order to open out the details of the discussion, I develop a case study of a few key b-boys from Toronto whose lineages demonstrate how professionalization was both an ambition of participants and represented by the dancers that they looked up to, who were professional, “backup” dancers performing on theatrical stages, in music videos and in live music contexts.

In the fields of performance studies and sociology, the amateur has been thought of as a dedicated participant (Hennion 2001, 2007) who can offer a grounding or resistance to a particular type of professionalism within capitalism or enterprise (Ridout 2013). However, anthropologist Ruth Finnegan (1989) has argued that the everyday lives of musicians usually involve the blurring of these distinctions and participation happens across genres and spaces that involve both amateur and paid

performances. Following from Finnegan, the argument I want to make here troubles this opposition between the amateur and professional in hip hop dance: the innovations of professional backup dancers who toured with musical acts inspired shifts in breaking which, like any artform, is practised by amateurs, some of whom may go on to have short-lived, or, if they are lucky, longer professional careers as dancers. This is complicated because the aesthetic legitimacy of b-boys—which dictated the way that styles developed in Toronto, for example—is not quantifiable in terms of professional success, and yet it matters. Dancers aspired to have professional careers and, in doing so, tried to locate the institutional structures that might support their development and their aesthetic agency.

In addition to this troubling of the distinction between the amateur and the professional, I want to speak to new generations of performance studies scholars who specialize in hip hop studies; scholars such as Sean Robertson-Palmer, Vanessa Lakewood, Helen Simard, Serouj Aprahamian, Deanne Kearney, Jacqueline Melindy, and Joshua Swamy, who are posed for a finetuned and very specific, local argument about how communities tell histories to each other over time. In other words, my writing is implicitly politicized as I write for a community that has been underrepresented in dance scholarship, who may not exist yet in the field, and who hopefully will engage with this topic to fill in the gaps that I have left. Acknowledging that some of the most reputable and respected international dancers and teachers are professional dancers who often have to perform a rejection of institutions for their livelihood (or at least encounter participants who want them to perform rebellion) explains the historical moment of the present, where attempts to professionalize the field are interpreted as threatening the existence of the form in its “authentic” state: a state that, quite possibly, never existed.

Dance Economics

In the professionalization of hip hop culture in Toronto, emerging musical acts (rappers and producers) were supported by government job programs. In this way, music was seen to be an economically viable option for young black artists in a way that hip hop dance was not. Yet, in the same period, backup dancers were being employed by the music industries⁵ as a means to offer support and volume to a show. These dancers came to define the music for audiences, providing prototypes for how to engage with it. Backup dancers perform a particular kind of bodily organization and control: an expression and articulation of sound. They are bodies on display that, through their technical engagement with the music, show us how to (ideally) ride beats with our bodies and participate in the spectacle. Despite this centrality to audience experience, the process of writing about backup dancers reveals their precarious position and their marginalization, both in scholarship and in their professional capacities.

The marginalization of dancers is not unusual. B-boys and b-girls, although central to the development of hip hop culture, have often been backgrounded. For example, DJ Kool Herc became a household name, but the b-boys and b-girls that danced at his parties are not generally known. The Legendary Twins, two b-boys that had big reputations at Kool Herc’s parties, used to create routines, wear costumes (trench coats with cigars), and enter dance contests, and although they were not part of the early 1980s movement when breaking became popularized globally—having moved on to coach basketball—they are still invested in hip hop as (ideally) black-owned business.⁶ The aspiration to a business model is important. Some of the earliest images of breaking that circulated around the world feature b-boys in the act of getting paid. In *Flashdance*, there is a scene where the protagonist comes across a group of b-boys dancing on the street, and herein lies

the contradiction at the heart of breaking: the b-boys and poppers in the movie were getting paid (as extras) yet they were represented as b-boys out on the street dancing publicly for free. In the scholarship about breaking there is little discussion of the paid labour of b-boys, including discussion of dancers, such as backup dancers, working in the entertainment industries. Thus, many local b-boys and b-girls who took up the dance globally subsequently idealized the form as an authentic street dance (how it was represented in the movie), rather than seeing the dancers in the scene as extras doing a job for pay (however marginal).

One of the b-boys in *Flashdance* was Frosty Freeze from New York City. His performance is emblematic of the spirit of the dance, with his bouncy steps, direct address (he blows a kiss to the camera), and spectacular moves. Frosty Freeze became a sort of celebrity, so although he was only an “extra” in the movie, that movie made him a household name in hip hop dance circles internationally. When I interviewed Frosty Freeze (2003), my final question to him was what advice he had for up and coming dancers. His response was, “get a lawyer to look at your contracts.” At the time, this comment surprised me: I was an amateur dancer, and someone who travelled to compete, socialize, and learn histories of breaking as a passionate hobby. I hadn’t yet thought of breaking as paid work. However, at the same time, I was a dedicated practitioner until an injury took me out of my physical practice and into a research role. I had thrown events that involved getting sponsorships from local businesses (mostly to donate prize money or merchandise) and had been the recipient of some free merchandise at events. I was occasionally paid a small fee for a one-off performance, and I was aware that some of the more elite b-boys and b-girls in the international scene had deals (usually with clothing companies) to wear their products as tastemakers. Breaking, for me, was something that happened in social spaces rather than as a commercial enterprise. I would go to a club to dance, and I would practise in deserted areas of shopping malls or share the fee with other dancers to rent out a dance studio for an hour to practise on our own. Looking back at footage of the emerging breaking scene in Toronto in the early 2000s,⁷ there was emerging talent, but not many people had yet transitioned into any sort of professional context for their work. In other words, we were amateurs who defined ourselves in terms of our identity, lifestyle, and culture.⁸

The b-boys with more experience from Toronto, however, had been going through a process of trying to cultivate professional careers as artists. They had managers, got booked for live performances and music videos, and some had even begun to teach classes in breaking (which was a novelty, and rare at the time). Teaching breaking technique was complicated by the fact that people didn’t want to teach their signature moves, and most classes were a mixture of a general dance up top (“toprock”), some basic foundational floor moves (the six-step quickly became a starting point for many teachers during this time), a backspin and maybe a freeze.

Breaking has undergone a rapid professionalization since that time, although the story of dancers from New York City involved professionalization on a larger scale and earlier on: when “breakdancing” exploded in the 1980s, there were opportunities for world tours with rappers and spots in films as “extras.” This is why Frosty Freeze’s insight makes sense, given the context of his experience, an experience that has been framed in most accounts of hip hop dance as “exploitation” because of the poor remuneration for b-boy labour. Thomas DeFrantz (2014) argues that the early films, such as *Flashdance*, set the standard for the exploitative movie business practices directed toward young hip hop dancers that would define their involvement as cultural labourers. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Fogarty 2006), many of those same dancers evolved their knowledge of various entertainment industries through this early success in building reputations, but not an economically sustainable career. Many of the well-known b-boys and poppers moved into live

theatrical performances as an avenue where they might gain more control over their artform than what the film industry had offered.

Backup Dancers

In the early 1990s, prominent, professional New York City dancers such as Ken Swift and Mr Wiggles were either working with professional dance companies or starting their own, becoming the named choreographers (although they had always been creating the movement of their shows) and working their way into contracts with entertainment companies to set up theatrical world tours. In fact, Toronto was the first stop on one of those tours of predominantly NYC dancers, and this event facilitated the “return” of breaking locally; the new batch of local Toronto dancers, inspired by this American tour, would work toward professionalization, with managers, stage shows, and routines.

Part of that professional work, for some of the dancers, involved becoming backup dancers for rappers who worked in the music industries. Within the context of hip hop culture, those dancers would be called “hip hop dancers,” but the vocation that they were getting involved in was a tradition rooted in variety entertainment television shows (like *Soul Train*), a tradition that continued into the emergence of music videos with the rise of television channels such as *MTV* and Canada’s version, *Much Music*.⁹

The work of backup dancers is integral to Toronto b-boy history in a few ways. First, many of the young b-boys and b-girls active in Toronto in the 1990s had looked up to the hip hop dancers that performed for groups such as EPMD, Big Daddy Kane, and Maestro Fresh Wes. Their admiration for artists featured in music videos was performed in a form of partnering, with two dancers doing routines together. The social hip hop dances of this period, popularized in movies such as *House Party*, played an important role in the development of hip hop choreo aesthetics. These new trends and styles contributed to a dwindling of interest in breaking. As b-boys in Toronto recalled to me, females didn’t want to see breaking anymore; they wanted the social dances, and so many b-boys were motivated to move into these new arenas. However, these social dances would go on to inform the stylistic modifications and innovations for which Toronto breakers would become renowned in later decades, such as “threading” or “origami” styles. The idea of social dance, unlike dance for an explicitly theatrical performance, is that anyone can do the dance and make up their own moves as they go. And so, in the commercial representation of hip hop, dancers make sense as “extras”—consider *Soul Train* party scenes where everyone is dancing to the latest hit record or music videos where dancers are made to look like part of a regular party (just ordinary people) and yet dancers are selected by talent scouts.

Breaking history in Toronto is inseparable from the larger history of hip hop party dances that made their impact in the 1990s during one of the lulls in breaking practice locally. Hip hop dancers who performed as backup dancers to local rap acts doing upright hip hop dances became instrumental in the development of local b-boy styles. In fact, in a guest class he taught at York University, B-boy Lego, the b-boy who taught two of Canada’s most iconic b-boys, Dyzee and Megus, recalled that a local producer suggested that he take upright popular dance styles like threading the needle and bring them into his floorwork for breaking on the ground. He did this, and the rest is (local) history.

The relationship between the “commercial” or “professional” work of dancers and the “underground,” “local,” or “subcultural” practices of passionate amateurs is defined by tension, with the two domains separated not only by vocation but also by vocabulary. And yet, the two approaches to the form exist on more of a continuum than is currently recognized. In the 1990s, backup dancers for rap artists created innovative steps and styles (recorded in music videos and also performed at live events) that led both to the decline of breaking practice locally, as people in Toronto moved into party dances, and also to the return of breaking, as b-boys went back to the ground with moves inspired by the hip hop styles of the time, including party dances.

Breaking aesthetics rely not just on a taste for moves but also on the same systems that allow social groups to form: crews are crucial to breaking. How crews choose who joins is a reflection of who they are as a group and how they navigate their aesthetic credibility. To understand the practices of a b-boy or b-girl, you have to get to know their crew dynamics. Crews have often been made up of dancers, DJs, rappers, and (graffiti) writers. Unlike backup dancers, who are hired for a job, hip hop dancers have often been part of crews that levelled the playing field across the arts even as the entertainment industries weighted economic value toward music over dance. This is where partnering comes in, finding someone to practise with and making up moves together.

What Is a Crew?

Almost since its earliest days in NYC, breaking has always revolved around hip hop crews, groups of individuals who decide, formally, to make their affiliation with each other known. They name their crew, compete together (known as “battling”), and decide how to enact and negotiate their crew politics. Each crew has a collective reputation based on their abilities to dance and win at competitive performances.

Since crews battle together, and there is more and more at stake in larger international competitions, some contests have tried to set boundaries or criteria for dancers as to what constitutes a crew. Organizing a crew of elite, professional b-boys rather than one that consists of people who practise together as amateurs in one locale yields questions of fairness, meaning, and cultural codes and practices within hip hop culture. This discussion of the tension between amateur and professional practice reveals just how central the codes of conduct surrounding crews have been to breaking culture to date. For example, Ken Swift, an internationally influential b-boy, has often suggested that a collective of dancers is not a *crew* unless they do crew routines.

The social dynamics within a crew are quite complex. Some crews have an acknowledged and agreed upon working leader (known often, in long-standing American crews, as the “president”; in the UK, I have heard one DJ referred to as “coach”). The difference between Toronto crews of the 1990s and the present is the multigenerational component of many crew formations. Within breaking culture, the meaning and purpose of a crew is hotly debated. Like rock bands (Cohen 1991), breaking crews often regard themselves as a “family.” This analogy expresses an authentic relationship between the members that extends beyond their practice to suggest a closeness and type of bonding. For this discussion, it is important to understand that some crews undergo a process of professionalization while others do not. Some see themselves as a business and try to create careers out of dance, and some crews just do the dance for fun. Crew members that have had the opportunity to tour with rap acts (especially internationally) undergo a radical process of professionalization that forever alters their feelings about crewmates. The shift from “family” to

“business” has had many consequences for dancers’ lives, and the process of entanglement over who can represent the name of the crew once the crew has become a business has more often than not ended in the courtroom.

Dance as Art

For many fields in the arts, professionalization is tied not only to contracts, unions, and pay but also to discourses of art. I asked a second-generation New York City b-boy when people began to call breaking “art.” I wanted to know when dancers began to self-identify as artists, rather than having the label applied by people looking at the cultural practice from the outside. He thought about this and returned the following day with the answer that he started to call breaking “art” after the year 2000. From what he could remember, he was inspired by a Bruce Lee book that referred to martial arts. In other words, there wasn’t much at stake for him in aligning with an art discourse, and the external influence of kung fu cinema and aesthetics is apparent in his recollections.

The question of when and how outsiders consider breaking art is also crucial for unpacking some broader societal constructions about practice and meaning. This issue is taken up by French sociologist Roberta Shapiro (2004), who argues that, in France, breaking only becomes art when it goes through a series of “artification” processes, including being put on theatrical, proscenium stages. Shapiro and Nathalie Heinich (2012) further pose the question: when is breaking an art? This research does not account for the popular or commercial notions of art that also circulate but rather focuses on theatrical, proscenium stage contexts. Simon Frith’s (1983) comparison within the study of popular culture offers an analysis of how interpretations of “black music” produce a “paradoxical mediation.” Frith writes:

The assumption was that while black music was important as an expression of vitality and excitement—was, in other words, “good to dance to”—it lacked the reflective qualities needed for genuine *artistic* expression. . . . This position assumes a straightforward distinction between mind and body. Black music, as “body music,” is therefore “natural,” “immediate,” “spontaneous.” Art, by contrast, is something deliberately created, self-consciously thought, and involves, by definition, complexity and development. (1983, 21)

Thus, one might be a good dancer, but the value that art world professionals will often place on a dancer or choreographer is their ability to stage their art as sophisticated, theatrical, and mediated. Who is afforded this interpretation is racialized. The same may hold true when we think about how dance practices are framed in contemporary culture, and how the development of breaking is understood. As Hugues Bazin (2002) points out, those b-boys who can work in theatre become doubly legitimate, both within their own dance communities and within art worlds. In Fogarty, Osborne, and Kearney (2015), we argue that dance companies such as Montreal’s Tentacle Tribe have “multiple legitimacies” across theatrical, competition and commercial worlds, and that they maintain these legitimacies by having mastery over the making of slight, aesthetic adjustments in order to appease the expectations of these various worlds. Again, this is afforded to participants who can navigate multiple spaces, and this is a site of privilege and exclusions.

Hip hop theatre is an example of a hybrid form that remains at the edges of the art world. It is a broad category that often encompasses movie scenes as well as proscenium stage performances, but

here I focus on theatrical stage productions (see Fogarty 2014). This line of work is regarded as less commercial than the entertainment industries, and it is meant to be taken more seriously as art, although a large amount of the work appeals to youth, a trait supported by the use of clear narratives and experiences that young people can relate to. It is an emerging field that began quite quietly in the early 1990s. This performance avenue became hugely popular in France and is growing right now in the UK with the development of Breakin' Convention, the largest hip hop theatre festival in the world, and one that is developing off-shoots in various countries, including Canada. Dancers who headline this tour tend to train in their own city and then migrate for the final rehearsals, performances, and tours. Alongside these dancers, there are now DJs, tour managers, lighting technicians, and so on, that turn the breaking crew into a cast and technical crew.¹⁰

In addition to this art discourse, most of the early accounts of hip hop culture, and of breaking's position within that culture, can be understood within the context of subcultural theory. Steven Hager (1984) describes hip hop as an “experimental laboratory,” and from his account, breaking fits within art discourses of originality. He writes, “[Hip hop] has created an art form so original and vital that black and Hispanic artists have gained access to the established New York art world for the first time” (103). Given that many of the b-boys, poppers and writers (graffiti) who were successful attended art-focused high schools then is less surprising than it might otherwise seem.

Notably, breaking was a style invented by young people who were heavily influenced by popular cultural forms—“television, movies, radio, and video games” (Banes 1994, 132). According to Sally Banes' account, these stylistic influences provided a “relationship between the dance form and the mass media” that was “densely layered, beginning with the use of pop culture imagery and with brevity of format, and evolving with the succession of responses to media coverage and dissemination.” In her concluding thoughts about this mediated relationship, Banes argues, “these kids' sensitivity to—and sophistication in the use of—the popular media is essential to the nature and development of this urban folk dance” (132).

Although Banes relates breaking moves and styles to African American folk traditions, she acknowledges that the youth are also incorporating influences and aesthetics from other cultures through mediated representations and narratives (such as kung fu films). The situation of the arts in the United States in the early 1980s, and the popularity of pop artists such as Andy Warhol, possibly assisted this celebration of popular cultural forms—not only as inspiration for consecrated artists, such as Warhol, but also as arts on their own terms. In comparison, accounts that focus on the anthropological aspects of youth culture—predominantly that of ethnic minorities who are being assimilated, problematically, into educational systems and urban centres dominated by white people—do not place so much emphasis on the dance as art (see Kopytko 1986). They are more concerned with the way the identities of the participants are fractured by social forces, and with the resistance of young people who identified with the oppression of African Americans represented in movies, or in other media. For this sort of account, the dance is situated as a social practice with no mention of the professional development of artists or the situations where dancers are getting paid. In other words, these accounts address identity rather than vocation.

Gizmo's Chapter: From Amateur to Professional Experiences in Breaking

In this section, I discuss a local, Toronto b-boy's forays into professional work. Although he was invited and paid to dance internationally, he continued to define his involvement with the dance as a

lifestyle and identity (being a b-boy). Gizmo, of Toronto's Bag of Trix (hip hop) crew, was influenced by developments in dance styles in his particular locale in the 1990s. Some biographical background demonstrates a range of influential sources and materials. Gizmo had a background in both gymnastics and martial arts (Gizmo 2007).¹¹ He also grew up with influences from the dance and pop music worlds, such as Dick Van Dyck, Sammy Davis Jr., Michael Jackson, and a variety of musicals. Around 1983, when he was eight years old, breaking blew up and he danced for a few years, before shifting to become more involved in martial arts. At thirteen or fourteen he was going to clubs. There were all-ages nights at places in Toronto such as Inner City, RPM (which is now called the Government), Club 44 in Brampton, Club Focus in Toronto, and Club Mecca. His preferred form was house dancing, but with his partner TicTac he also did a locally inflected form of hip hop dance called '95 *South Style*—the same style performed by EPMD's¹² dancers, which included trendy hip hop dance moves such as “the running man” and “cabbage patch.” From there, the dances became more complex, and as Gizmo would describe it, “artistic.”¹³ He names influences, including Big Daddy Kane's dancers and the local dancers who represented with Maestro Fresh Wes.

In 1994, Gizmo went to New York City and met many of the key international figures there. He danced for them and was quickly put down by the Rocksteady crew. With the Rocksteady crew, he went to Zulu Nation Anniversary in 1994 and Rocksteady Anniversary in New York in 1995. Dancers in Japan saw a tape of his performance at the Zulu Nation Anniversary and recognized him from that footage the following year, when they were together in person at the Rocksteady Anniversary. In a mutual creative exchange, Gizmo invited this group of dancers to Toronto, an invitation that was quickly reciprocated with invitations to Japan to present shows and workshops. Gizmo recalls his time in Japan, where they would practise in train stations and malls. On each floor of the mall, kids would be practising a different style like house or popping. Gizmo commented that this setup and the scale of this scene was larger than what had been going on in Toronto.

He recalls that at this time the Rocksteady crew had different chapters, including a Toronto chapter. The president, Crazy Legs, would organize a team of dancers to perform in Switzerland, Italy, and other countries, and they would do rehearsals and fly out. Crazy Legs acted as an agent and manager, setting up shows for up and coming b-boys' shows. Gizmo took time off school for these travels, but when he returned, he picked up his studies again and, for a time, became a legend of the past. Although Gizmo ended up in a different line of work than most dancers who remained in “the scene,” the career paths for b-boys and b-girls committed to the dance have splintered off into various types of dance industries and types of employment. For example, the famous New York City b-boy, Crazy Legs of the Rocksteady crew, works professionally as a DJ.

Biting vs. Innovation

This discussion of influence and innovation across amateur and professional boundaries has to consider the issue of “biting.” Toronto, possibly more than any other locale where I have conducted research, is obsessed with the notion of originality, and its opposite, biting. Dancers regulate issues of originality through the development of rules around biting (taking someone else's moves or ideas); discussions about originality and the ownership of different moves abound in the practice. There is a substantial emphasis on “flipping it” (making moves your own) because of the centrality of competition in determining the status and earnings of dancers. Dancers are also concerned with corporate exploitation; the use of dance moves and dancers by commercial enterprises of various

kinds (advertising agencies, film and TV personalities, theatre companies, and especially music videos) is often unaccredited, unattributed, and unremunerated.¹⁴ Both of these issues have become a problem because of the difficulties dancers have protecting their rights, and even defining those rights. Whereas in the history of music, the concept of work/author developed in symbiosis with copyright law (and publisher interests), this did not happen for b-boys and b-girls—especially those who did not move their craft toward contemporary dance and its aesthetic values and contexts.

For example, Gizmo met Benzo, Daze, Caso, and Magic, who were all doing the '95 *Southstyle* in the early 1990s. He battled Benzo and Caso and Daze and then got into the Bag of Trix crew. There were about fifteen crew members, and they used to hang out, practise, and go to parties. They were focused on the art of dancing, and they each had their own style of breaking. They had a main rule in their crew that no biting was allowed. A lot of crews learn each other's moves and yet, within these crews, biting is not permitted. Gizmo (2007) explained:

Biting is when you take a certain move from another dancer and claim it for your own. You take it straight. But what Bag of Trix thinks is that you need to take a move and flip it or give recognition to the person you took it from. It only takes a minute to take it but it takes a long time for people to come up with moves. With execution it's the same you have to flip it for example doing an elbow drop to a lotus position. You've got to flip the move and change the position in your retaliating move.

Gizmo explains that his crew had “everything,” not just dancers but also emcees, graffiti writers, and DJs. This is significant to his understanding of what constitutes creativity in cultural practices. Another b-boy who grew up near Toronto added that dancers are not just biting moves now; they are also taking whole feelings, characters, and looks of other dancers as their own. Basically, *identities* are being copied as they relate to dance. I will return to this idea of copying dance identities in my conclusion.

Karl “Dyzee” Alba: A Case in Point

Another small case study of an individual Toronto dancer, Karl “Dyzee” Alba, who became well known internationally, will situate this part of the discussion more clearly. Dyzee recalls that he started dancing in 1994, when he had just turned fourteen years old.¹⁵ The first local crews he saw were Bag of Trix, Intrikit, and Supernaturalz; he was also inspired by seeing the b-boy Crazy Legs on television. Dyzee remembers being told Crazy Legs was the best dancer, and so he emulated the unique qualities of Crazy Legs' aesthetic. In doing so, Dyzee developed a style of footwork defined by sporadic and intricate legwork.

His crew practised at a recreation facility in the Scarborough Town Centre as part of an initiative to provide a space to deal with problems of youth violence (rather than as an arts initiative). Here, he recalls being mentored by an older b-boy, Lego (recall my earlier mention of Lego's upright styles). Dyzee recalls:

Lego, the oldest member in my crew, the guy that was like a father figure to me, he was still coming and still dancing every Friday. So every Friday that's what I was looking forward to and I started meeting all the kids there, the punks and we formed

a crew, Skills to Kill. And we were all a bunch of friends. In '99 we entered the Unsung B-boy battle [in Toronto] and that's the first battle that we/I ever entered and we won that in '99.

An older b-boy being treated like a father figure was a common trope in my interviews with other dancers as well. The involvement of particular individuals in the crew reveals some other important factors about aesthetic choices and familial-like ties in the formation of this specific type of social group. Within this crew, the organization of aesthetics is around your individual moves, not the creation of a “work” for stage.

Crews also can grow to incorporate new generations of dancers, and this social restructuring is complex as it involves relations between many different people. Dyzee explains:

So me and Lego talked and we decided that we were going to start Supernaturalz and bring everyone from Skills to Kill into Supernaturalz. So that's the 3rd generation [of the crew], we started getting big and battling everybody. Then we started meeting people and expanding out of Toronto so we met Jester and Trx from Hamilton, that's when I met Jessfx from Seattle and she joined the crew, A-B-girl and Problem Child from New Jersey so they joined the crew. So it was more outside influences, that's how the fourth generation came about. [There are six generations now.] After that, we got so cocky that we were winning all the battles that we decided we weren't going to let nobody into the crew anymore. The fifth generation is when we decided to open up the doors again and we brought in Puzzles, who is now one of the biggest guys in Toronto who usually battles. This guy Rubex Cube who used to be Ground Illusionz. There was Lee (Lethal) whose like my little brother that I've known forever and Antics, his friend, Ozzy.

There is a dimension of respect for the elders that informs decisions about who to let into the crew. When I asked who decided who joins the crew and whether this was up to particular people, Dyzee said:

We were just a bunch of friends. But I know a lot of guys look up to me to make decisions. Jester started becoming the oldest. Everyone always still looks up to Lego but then he's become very relaxed, he goes: whatever you guys want to do. Everyone respects his opinion the most. Right now it's the most organized where I'm considered the president, or the leader. Then you have guys that are still at the same level as me but don't try to push the crew as hard which is Jesse [that's Jester referenced earlier], J-Rebel, Puzzles. . . . We'd probably consider Lego the owner.

At the time of this particular interview, August 9, 2007, Dyzee was aware of his international reputation and suggested that he is well known outside of Canada because he has had longevity. He has won the most international one-on-one competitions and has been asked to judge competitions more than anyone else.

The Supernaturalz crew has done theatrical performances and commercial work, yet their internal evaluations and aesthetic judgments revolve around the battle format and crew formations. Dyzee's understanding of his art revolves around a definition of work borrowed from popular music. He thinks of his sets as songs, and his “album” is the compilation of various “sets” that he has

developed.¹⁶ This leads me to questions about where considerations of popular dance aesthetics might fit within the field of performance studies. How can we move from aesthetic theories of “works” to an aesthetic theory of popular dance that encounters moments, battles, and moves on their own terms, without locating them as amateur performances? How can we approach these forms in terms that are judged neither by commercial success nor by a contemporary dance aesthetic valuation of what makes a practice count as art? More importantly, how can hip hop dancers professionalize and unionize for the particularities of their various contexts from music and film industries to the contexts of various art worlds?

The point here is that those “backup” dancers who did “commercial” work also inspired the creative practices of b-boys. These circles of influence and creation are deeply embedded in the social practices of dancers and crews. Contexts in which hip hop dancers performed as “backup” dancers with rap artists in Toronto were never seen as art by the local art world, nor were the theatrical shows that b-boys put together. In fact, a promoter of a local b-boy crew described in a panel at York University how he had applied for arts funding and was told that breaking is not an artform like ballet and thus didn’t qualify. At that time, Toronto b-boys were getting recognized internationally at b-boy events and known for their dynamic and sophisticated showcase rounds (i.e., theatrical performances rather than battles within the competition framework). Of course, this definition of “art” reveals how aesthetic gatekeeping is racialized, classed and, most importantly, that the logics of legitimacy and gatekeeping have historical weight. Once kept from developing their skills through art world and Higher Education institutional contexts, the dancers are now criticized for their lack of “autonomy” and their connection to commercial ventures.¹⁷

Popular Aesthetics in Dance

This consideration of how breaking’s aesthetic conventions are produced, stabilized, translated, and disseminated on an international scale, bridging the fraught divide between the amateur and the commercial, has shown the significance of hip hop dancers appearing as backup dancers. Mediation and circulation, by means of videos, the Internet, informal educational structures, competitions, and the travels of dancers themselves, have been central to this significance. As a cultural sociologist interested in performance, I have detailed the agency of the participants, in terms of aesthetic choices, while also identifying the structuring forces that both aided and excluded participants in the course of their professional development. Note that in these personal biographies of influence and experience, the role of dance institutions and educations is absent. It seems paradoxical that the music industries provided more opportunities for aesthetic innovations than the local contemporary dance scene and its supportive infrastructures. This is worth a moment of pause as my argument is as much pointing to how arts communities might support new and emerging forms as it is about how it might support forms that have established their own aesthetics over forty-odd years as in the case of hip hop culture.

Locality is central to how styles and moves are organized, understood, and transported into the present professionalization of the dance. This is evident in how the infrastructures in France, or a few key cultural workers, fought to establish hip hop dance within art world dance contexts in a way that did not happen in Toronto. However, understanding breaking aesthetics is less about homologies between style and place than it is about the circulation of aesthetics in complex international networks. And there are levels to this. First, the “era” within which a b-boy or b-girl begins their practice is critical for the values and meanings that they link to their particular style, and

this is as central to their understanding of style as their locality. Francis Sparshott (1995) has suggested that dance, unlike other arts, is so firmly rooted in perceptions of specific localities that people assume dance must be observed in its own habitat. In this article, I have explored one particular locale, but also the ways in which that locale participates in a wider discourse. Second, although the dancers never claim to be, or position themselves as participants in an autonomous art form, they imagine and construct their discourses around values that are not dependent on income or commerce. This is one of the unique characteristics of breaking: the work of the dance may involve a desire to earn money, yet the desire to earn recognition (“props”) from one’s peers dictates the development of particular styles within the practice, adhering to trends in the culture.

There is a tendency in histories of art to discuss the great figures. This style of historicization is reproduced in the attempts by breakers to legitimize their art within international configurations. The great figures of breaking are those who have contributed a move, a style, or a value to the international culture. As one b-boy explained, if people copy what you do, then you have made an impact on the scene.¹⁸ So, although copying the moves of others is seen to be unethical, b-boys and b-girls also build their reputations by being internationally influential, which often involves being copied. Regardless of how dancers feel about their imitators, what is revealed in these comments is that these dancers see themselves as contributors to a culture. They also liken their practice to an art form. These values are crucial to considerations of the political economy of the style—the work of dance.

B-boys internationally don’t talk about “backup” dancers in the 1990s as part of the overarching history of breaking. However, local Toronto b-boys talk at length about the importance of “hip hop dancers” of the 1990s to the development of their styles. These conversations speak to the intimate values of the dance: where it was done and who it is for, as well as to the pressures that shape wider histories. What I have argued is that hip hop dancers’ identities are complex, holding commercial values and the “autonomous” art discourses of local contemporary dance aesthetics in tension. In that way, we are primed to rethink what professionalization means for dance as an art form beyond “autonomy” and “commercialism,” and behind the collectivity that progressive crews animate.

Notes

1. See Robin Coltez’s video documentary, *Break In and Out – Toronto 1983–1985 – Toronto B-Boys*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CttgJ8BOWbc>.
2. Popular music acts that can also dance, such as Kid ‘n Play, were able to capitalize on star structures in a way that backup dancers could not because they were rarely named.
3. EPMD is an American hip hop group from Brentwood, New York.
4. In my field research in New York City and Toronto, I have observed that black men defend other hip hop dances and the black women that do them as legitimate hip hop culture whereas these same styles were dismissed by many b-boys who came to the practice without any background in other dance forms or styles. In the past, this has usually meant (white) males as most women interested in dance have been exposed to and practised other styles growing up besides breaking. Traditionally, females came to breaking later in their youth than males, although this has changed dramatically over the last ten years of the dance.
5. See Williamson and Cloonan (2007) for an extended discussion of why “music industries” is a more accurate depiction than an imagined monolithic “music industry.”
6. Legendary Twins have recently been recognized as pioneers by Breakin’ Convention, the largest hip hop

dance festival internationally, and appeared onstage with Jonzi D in Harlem and London, England. They were also guests of my breaking class at York University (December 7, 2015), their first appearance and invitation to a postsecondary university dance program.

7. See for example, a video from the Back 2 Da Underground events of a legendary battle, *B2DU 4 – Supernatz/Redmask vs DDT/Flowrock – Toronto 2000* at Scramblelock’s YouTube channel that hosts a lot of archival footage of the Toronto b-boy scene and battles like this one between dancers from different cities: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dL_gZow58vw.

8. We would never have called ourselves “amateurs,” though because there was no distinction to be seen. Part of this can be explained by our novice experience but the brand deals of the time, and contracts with companies that some b-boys had involved secrecy. They were tastemakers wearing clothes to sell products without transparency. This is difficult to research, although in my ethnography some b-boys hinted at this situation and used similar corporate speak about “mutual benefits” in their relationships with sponsors.

9. Further research is needed into the various unions that dancers have belonged to (or not) in the United States and Canada, which is complicated as dancers are affiliated with different unions (or not) with every separate context from music videos, to live performances, film industries as extras (historically although that is changing), dance companies, corporate events, etc.

10. See Howard Becker (1982) for an extended analysis of the groups that create art worlds, a sociological account of art foundational to this sort of study.

11. Interview with Gizmo, July 14, 2007.

12. From interview with the author, August 2007 (b-boy is anonymized).

13. From interview with the author, July 14, 2007.

14. One area where dancers have received more sufficient payments and credit is in their involvement with video game motion capture: consider the game *B-boy Playstation*, for example. Also, the recent bid to be considered in the Olympics has heightened the international discussions on infrastructure and what it means to be a professional within this emergent field.

15. From interview with the author, August 2007.

16. From interview with the author, August 2007.

17. Numerous conversations with contemporary dance artists working inside institutions and part of the local art world and its logics, 2013–19.

18. From interview with the author, August 2007.

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