

**School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry**

**“Our Lives are Lived in Freestyle”: Social and Dynamic  
Productions of Breaking and Hip Hop Culture**

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of  
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## DECLARATION

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university.

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## ABSTRACT

Based on fieldwork with breakers living in New York, Osaka, and Perth, as well from prior experiences within my field of study, this thesis builds on a growing body of scholarship which examines the productions, expressions and consumptions of hip hop culture. This study looks at how breakers—hip hop dance practitioners—work to produce, sustain and transform hip hop culture in ways that are local and unique. It is not, however, my intention to set out a definitive list of good or bad, authentic or unauthentic, notions of hip hop, or to suggest that there is one true or correct way in which to participate and identify as a member of. What is emphasised are the ways in which breakers, through their embodied dance practices, negotiate, express, understand and conceptualise hip hop.

The title of this thesis, “Our Lives are Lived in Freestyle”, is a line from a spoken word poem, by a breaker from Texas named Marlon. In breaking, to “freestyle” means to improvise in the moment; to use the tools one has at their disposal to perform and create. Hence, this term “freestyle” is an apt metaphor for this thesis as it illustrates the dynamic and improvisational modalities by which hip hop is reflexively constituted, pushed and pulled in a variety of different directions, by a diverse and ever-changing aggregate of different peoples from around the world.

Throughout the chapters of this thesis I demonstrate how hip hop is a globalising and diverse social field, governed not by any institutions, offices or titles, but rather by individual hip hop persons, within and across different local settings. This study contributes to contemporary anthropological writings on culture, process, agency and social action. Additionally, this research also contributes to a growing body of hip hop scholarship, which consider hip hop and its many practices as a living, transformative, global phenomenon.

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# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	i
CONTENTS .....	iii
GLOSSARY OF TERMS .....	iv

## ONE

<i>"TOP ROCKING"</i> Locating Hip Hop in The Social .....	1
--	---

## TWO

<i>"UP ROCKING"</i> Theory, Method and My Reading of the Scholarly Hip Hop Literature .....	29
--	----

## THREE

<i>"GETTING DOWN"</i> The Politics of Hip Hop Culture .....	53
--	----

## FOUR

<i>"RUNNING FOOTWORK"</i> The Expressions and Experiences of Hip Hop: Similarities and Differences Between The Breaking Scenes of New York, Osaka and Perth .....	79
---	----

## FIVE

<i>"IT'S A BATTLE!"</i> The Contestable Nature of Hip Hop's Origins.....	129
---	-----

## SIX

<i>"ORIGINALITY", "RAW ENERGY" AND "STAYING RELEVANT"</i> Making Legitimacy Through Breaking Performances.....	155
---	-----

## SEVEN

<i>"POWER MOVE COMBOS FOR DAYS"</i> The Dynamic Craftings of Aesthetic and Sensory Hip Hop Knowledge: Ethnographies of Breaking Cyphers .....	185
---	-----

## EIGHT

<i>"THE GO OFF"</i> The Fragility of Hip Hop Culture.....	210
--	-----

## NINE

<i>"OKAY JUDGES... 3,2,1"</i> Dancing Towards a Hip Hop Theory .....	231
---	-----

Works Cited .....	242
-------------------	-----

List of Figures .....	262
-----------------------	-----

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Baby-Freeze:** A common bboying (freeze) position/pose that rests all of one's body on their wrists/arms.

**Bboy:** Refers to a male breaker.

**Bgirl:** Refers to a female breaker.

**Biting:** Refers to the act of stealing breaking moves from other breakers (i.e. plagiarism).

**CC:** A common breaking (footwork) dance step.

**Crew:** A group of breakers.

**Footwork:** A way to describe a range of dance steps and movements that are performed in the deep-squat position or in the push up position.

**Freeze:** A way to describe a static position or pose.

**Powermoves:** A way to describe an acrobatic or gymnastic style breaking tricks or moves.

**Top-Rocking and Up-Rocking:** A range of dance steps and movements breakers perform in the standing upright position. Top-rocking and Up-Rocking are often the first moves that breakers perform before they move towards the floor.

**Halo:** A common breaking (powermove) trick.

**Knee-drop:** A common breaking (footwork) dance step or drop.

**Knock-out:** A common breaking (footwork) dance step.

**Signature footwork set, throw down, or run:** is a sequence of dance steps performed in a set order that is unique to the individual. Signature runs, sets, tricks and styles are praised by others as being original and unique.

**Swipe:** A common breaking (powermove) trick.

**OG:** "Original Gangster", refers to a respected hip hop elder or pioneer.

## – Chapter 1 –

### *“Top Rocking”*

#### Locating Hip Hop in the Social

In March of 2016 I flew to Singapore from Perth to attend the Radikal Force (RF) jam, a three day hip hop dance event which brings together people from all over the world. The RF jam is host to a variety of hip hop dance competitions, parties, workshops, discussion panels and a lot of time in which to hang out and dance with one another. The jam has been running every year since 2009 and 2016 was my sixth visit.



Figure 1. Sentosa Island, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016. Photograph by JYN Photography.



The third day of the RF jam is typically held at Wave House Sentosa, a small beach bar located on Singapore's Sentosa Island. Figure 1 depicts a bunch of breakers, myself included among them, dancing together. As I jump into the middle of the dance circle—or cypher as many breakers tend to call them—the breakers around me begin to chant: “Oh! Oh! Oh!” As they chant, I try to dance along with each of the “Oh!” sounds that they make. The more that my movements connect with the sounds of the chanting crowd, the more applause and the wilder the breakers around me become. As I pop up from my back and land on my bum, a gesture and mark of punctuation that ends my performance for the moment, breakers around me laugh, point, smile and shout. As quickly as I leave the cypher another breaker jumps in right after me. Like me, he also dances along with the chanting crowd and it becomes a sort of game between us. The game being: who can garner the most cheers from the crowd? Who can do the most interesting moves to the crowd's chants of “Oh!”?

Breaking jams like these are, as I show, representative of the kinds of gatherings I attended while in the field. They are what Erving Goffman might have described as an “encounter” – a focused or situated gathering where breakers collectively, playfully and socially, negotiate how breaking works within that moment (Goffman 1961). Like Goffman, my interest in the gatherings that happen between breaking practitioners is their relationship to the larger social worlds in which they are embedded (1961, 1-13). Thus, my analysis throughout this thesis begins at the level of particular breaking gatherings, what I will refer to as particularities, and extends to the broader dynamics of connections, made both within and across the larger social field of breaking and other hip hop practices.

The central aim of this thesis is to examine how, through their actions and relationships on the ground, individuals actively produce, sustain and transform the cultural worlds in which they identify. This is an important concern for many, who, across different times and spaces, struggle to make sense of hip hop culture. However, it is also a concern within the discipline of social anthropology; where notions of process, agency and social action have been employed to investigate the cultural productions and reproductions of modern, globalising, social configurations

(Giddens 1971; Turner 1974; Becker 1982; Abu-Lughod 1991; Maxwell 2003; Amit and Dyck 2006; Postill 2015).

In his chapter on social fields, Postill states that, “A social field is an organised domain of practice or action in which un-equally positioned social agents compete and cooperate over the same public rewards” (2015, 47). As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, hip hop culture can be understood as a modern social field due to the fact that hip hop is governed not by any dominant social systems, institutions or offices that members can agree-upon, but rather by a large and ever-changing aggregate of people (social agents), all of whom make sense of and understand hip hop culture in different ways, across different times and spaces. In this thesis I employ the use of ethnographic methods to explore how breakers living in New York, Osaka and Perth, produce, sustain and transform hip hop in ways that are local and unique. The common thread linking each of my chapters together is that they illustrate how hip hop is actively generated by persons, rather than overarching social structures.

It is not, however, my intention to set out a definitive list of good or bad, authentic or unauthentic, notions of hip hop culture; or to suggest that there is one true way in which to participate or be a legitimate member of. Instead, this thesis aims to investigate the social processes and cultural labour required to make and maintain a diverse and constantly evolving social field (Becker 1982; Maxwell 2003; Condry 2006; Alim et al. 2009; Rodger 2011).

While I acknowledge that many breakers—and others who identify as hip hop practitioners—often describe hip hop as a “culture”, like Rodger (2011, 1) I write against models that conceive of and represent “culture” in such reified forms (Skelton and Allen 1999, 4). I argue that breakers and other hip hop practitioners are involved in an ongoing and never-ending struggle, having to collectively produce and maintain the cultural worlds with which they identify. Although the notion of “culture” is something that is often experienced as fixed, coherent or natural, in this thesis I problematise the notion of the hip hop culture, demonstrating that breakers have very varying and conflicting understandings about what this culture is and means. However, I do not think we need to abandon the term “culture” but rather

use it in a particular way; recognising hip hop culture as something that is socially negotiated, with no one individual person or group having the final word.

The title of this thesis, “Our Lives are Lived in Freestyle”, is a line from a spoken word poem, by a breaker from Texas named Marlon (stance 2014).<sup>1</sup> In hip hop circles, to “freestyle” means to improvise in the moment. Breakers “freestyle” when they dance, they react to the situation at hand: the music, the floor, the space, the people and the vibe. This term “freestyle” is an apt metaphor for this thesis – which is that hip hop is a world reflexively constituted, managed and improvised, through ongoing social interactions within local settings. What Marlon’s spoken word poem draws attention to is hip hop’s capacity to be transformed, in the moment, by those who practice and identify as participants of hip hop culture.

Although this study is situated around the lives and experiences of breakers, it does not encapsulate how *all* breakers or *all* hip hop persons, across all localities, navigate these complexities, like some scholarship does. What is illustrated here is how breakers are charged with the task of inventing hip hop for himself/herself. To this end, what is presented here is not representative of what breaking or hip hop is like for all, but rather what it is like for some. There are many studies about hip hop which focus on questions about issues of race, ethnicity and gender; this is not one of those studies. This study focuses on the lived experiences of breakers in specific moments in time and space, it is therefore shaped by these particularities and the happenings within these moments.

## **Locating Breaking**

Breaking, otherwise known as “breakdancing” or “bboying”, is a complex style of dance. However, many breakers do not like to call it a “dance” they tend just to call it “breaking”.<sup>2</sup> Typically, breakers spend most of their time moving in swift,

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<sup>1</sup> A full transcript of Marlon’s poem can be found at <http://21stcenturymaroons.tumblr.com/post/96009828541/my-life-is-freestyle-bboy-marlon-havikoro-crew>.

<sup>2</sup> As will be demonstrated many times throughout this thesis, this act of renaming—whether it be a hip hop practice, a breaking move or even a person’s name—is all part of concerted effort to see and locate what hip hop peoples are doing within a different context. Thus, calling it “breaking” instead of “dancing” separates it from other dance practices and activities, allowing for new possibilities to be crafted and for it to be seen as something else, something new.

acrobatic, rhythmic-like circular motions close the ground. Within these positions they tend to make sharp, staccato-like shapes with their bodies, in time with music. Some of breaking's more physically demanding movements can take years of training to master. As Imani Kai Johnson pointed out in her PhD dissertation on the activity of the breaking cypher: "it [breaking] demands a great deal of upper body strength to balance the body, while creating intricate movement patterns on the floor and in the air with one's legs and feet" (2009, 2). Every breaker has their own unique performative breaking style and character, although to the untrained eye breaking performances may look rather similar to one another. Those who are familiar with breaking are often better able to see the immense diversity that different kinds of breaking movements, gestures and styles entail.

Breaking is an activity which is both highly physically and mentally challenging. Whilst the incredible gymnastic-style tricks and spins tend to garner the most attention, I have often been more drawn to the distinctive, creative and improvisational aspects of the dance. As there is no agreed-upon set of foundational breaking moves or dance steps, different individuals who engage in the practice are able to come up with unique and distinctive ways of doing breaking. In fact, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, breaking is a unique cultural practice in that one is encouraged to be "original", to create and transform the practice in new and innovative directions. This emphasis on being "original" in breaking has led the dance to become an extremely broad and aesthetically diverse form of dancing.

I describe breaking throughout this thesis as a dance "style" or "practice". This is because breakers generally move to music and there is a certain look to breaking, one which I and other breakers I have spoken about in great detail. However, breaking is somewhat hard to define in any strict sense as it is comprised of a continually growing and ever-changing collective of physical expressions: moves, gestures, performative styles, approaches, attitudes and ideas. There is no one true or agreed-upon look or style that all breakers can readily agree upon; there is no agreed-upon breaking identity, ethos or ideology either. As a practice, breaking is hard, albeit impossible, to define as it is constantly changing, shifting, developing

over time and across different spaces.

As mentioned earlier, many of the breakers I spoke with for this thesis tended to use the terms “breaking” or “bboying” to describe the dance. Many of them also spoke passionately about breaking’s strong cultural and socio-historical ties with hip hop culture. The relationship between breaking and hip hop is one that has been extensively written about and examined by several scholars (Banes 1985; Rose 1994; Light 1999; Osumare 2002; Chang 2005; Schloss 2009; Katz 2010). One of the most notable and influential scholarly hip hop writers, Tricia Rose, wrote in her award-winning text, *Black Noise*, that “Hip hop’s central forms – graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music – developed in relation to one another and in relation to the larger society” (1994, 27). Rose and others have mentioned how breaking emerged in conjunction with other hip hop practices, all of which have said to have emerged in and around the lower socio-economic neighborhoods of New York City during the early-to-mid 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Studies of hip hop outside of the USA have tended to focus on how people from different walks of life have worked to authenticate themselves as legitimate members of hip hop culture (Bennett 1999; Mitchell 2001; Maxwell 2003; Alim et al. 2009), whereas others have begun to explore how people from outside of the USA have imbued hip hop with new meanings, particularly when they incorporate hip hop practices into a new cultural settings (Condry 2006, 2). One of the first texts to examine hip hop outside of the USA was Tony Mitchell’s *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* (2001). In this text, Mitchell states that:

Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world... Rap and Hip-hop outside the USA reveal the workings of popular music as a culture industry driven as much by local artists and their fans as by the demands of global capitalism and U.S. cultural domination. (2001, 1-2)

Similarly, in this thesis I contribute to discussions of hip hop, both inside and outside the USA, connecting these discussions with anthropological literature that focuses

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<sup>3</sup> In Chapter Five, “The Contestable Nature of Hip Hop’s Origins”, I argue that this origin story is not as simple as it seems.

on social agents and how they actively produce and reproduce the lifeworlds in which they are connected (Giddens 1971; 1979; 1991; Garfinkel 1967; Barth 1969; Bourdieu 1977; 1984; Cohen 1985; Amit and Dyck 2006; Long and Moore 2013; Amit 2015). Throughout this thesis I show how through their actions breakers produce, sustain and transform hip hop in ways that are local and unique. This study contributes to understandings about identity, authenticity, agency and sociality.

## **The Meanings of hip hop**

Throughout this thesis I write “hip hop” as two separate words, in lower case and without a hyphen, as per the convention used by both Bennett (1999) and Banes (2004). Although other hip hop writers like to capitalise (Maxwell 2003) or use hyphens (George 1985), I have chosen not to adopt these conventions because this was the way the majority of my participants wrote the term: both in correspondence with me and in online forums.

Up until only recently, scholarly hip hop writers have had a tendency to use the terms “hip hop” and “hip hop culture” interchangeably, which assumes that their meanings are self-evident or at least widely understood (Alim 2009, 2; Rodger 2011, 3). However, as Alim writes, “hip hop” and “hip hop culture” are both problematic labels when “one engages in ethnographic studies of hip hop practices across wide-ranging and diverse scenes and contexts” (2009, 3). Both Alim and Rodger make the point that we must not take for granted we know what hip hop is, or what hip hop might mean for different peoples.

Many of the breakers I have spoken with hold different views and have a diverse range of understandings of what the term “hip hop” means; some use different idiosyncrasies when speaking about it. For example, I have witnessed breakers describing hip hop as a “culture”, “community”, “scene”, “lifestyle”, “art-form”, “civilisation”, “nation”, “world”, “sport”, as well as various other labels. The use of different idioms are sometimes used to invoke specific connections with, or to, specific kinds of hip hop peoples, practices, ideas and/or histories; though, sometimes not. Sometimes the meanings were general. While the broader term of “hip hop” is widely used—particularly within scholarly hip hop literature—to refer

to hip hop music, the vast majority of breakers I spoke with used the term “hip hop” as though it was synonymous with the practice of “breaking”.

For some, hip hop can mean the broader collective of activities, in which the practice of breaking is situated; to others, hip hop can literally mean the practice of breaking itself. There are many people who “break” (engage in breaking practices) and identify as such within particularised social and geographical settings. However, these settings are not always demarcated by geography; some are transnational (Wulff 1998), bound together and maintained by a shared set of beliefs and/or social bonds. For others, geographical boundaries are extremely important.

### **My Social Theory: A History of the Issues**

One of the main theoretical concerns in this thesis has been to ask: what does it mean to be a “person” within a particular social context; a question posed by many anthropologists and one that I have sought to ask within the context of hip hop. This concern has a history in the discipline of anthropology and my research intends to contribute towards these discussions in a number of ways.

Firstly, I aim to contribute to an ongoing debate within anthropology regarding structure and agency. In *Conceptualizing Society* (1992), Adam Kuper speaks of two divergent theoretical formations in social anthropology over the past century: one being concerned with the role of “social structures” in determining human activity, and the other with the role of individual “agents” and their capacity to produce, maintain, challenge and resist these social structures. This division is widely known as the debate between “structure” versus “agency”. Kuper articulates a history between these two formations as being Malinowskian, on the one side, and Durkheimian, on the other. In Kuper’s words:

The modern Malinowskian is concerned with individual agents. Structures are simply the record deposited by their strategies, and values are the conventions they invoke when they try to influence the behavior of others. A Durkheimian, in contrast, believes that collective representations and agencies inform the actions of the socially constituted individual. (5)

Durkheim and Malinowski, as well as Marx, Mauss, Weber and Simmel, are a few of the most notable and influential historical figures within the social sciences, and

their work has shaped much of our thinking in regards to whether social structures or individual agents have more of a role in the organisation and working of social life. Durkheim's sociological positivism—also sometimes described as structural functionalism—which, broadly speaking, perceives human activity as the result of social structures, dominated much of the thinking across the social sciences throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prominent proponents of structural functionalism post-Durkheim include Radcliffe-Brown, Levi-Strauss, Parsons, and more recently, van Gennep and Turner (to some extent).

However, in the latter years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the structural functionalist approach began to lose a lot of traction across the social sciences, and particularly within social anthropology, where post-structuralism and ethnomethodology (see Garfinkel 1967) started to develop and find its footing as a counter to the views expressed by the structural functionalists. Nonetheless, many anthropological scholars, such as Hannerz and de Coppet, have sought to renew the traditions of Durkheim and other structural functionalists, not because they are persuaded by the arguments of functionalism, but because writers like Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Levi-Strauss and Parsons have more to offer than their structural functionalism.

Weber, for example, who broadly worked within a historical structural functionalist framework (and who wrestled with this) was the mastermind behind a key conceptual tool of post-structuralism, known as “social action” theory. According to Weber (1978), a “social action” is an act that takes into account the actions and reactions of others within a social context. This theory suggests that people vary their actions according to the particular social contexts they are in at any given moment. For example, when a potential reaction is not desirable in a specific social context, Weber suggested that an individual will modify their actions accordingly so as not to produce an undesirable reaction/effect. Although “social action” theory is not without its critics (see Schutz 1972), its emphasis on individual agency and meaning, within a social context, led to the development of more critical formulations of agency, action and process.

If one was to understand and examine hip hop culture through the lens of structural



functionalism, one would be likely to focus on how certain social structures produce, sustain and transform hip hop culture, and not on the roles, effects and capacities of individual hip hop persons. For example, some hip hop writers have focused on concepts like the “four elements of hip hop” model (as discussed in Chapter Five) and suggest that concepts like these organise and determine the actions of individual hip hop persons around the world (Rose 1994; Chang 2005). Studies that put emphasis on models like the four elements of hip hop, tend to produce quite clear answers as to where hip hop’s borders lie, who hip hop’s rightful owners are, and what makes someone legitimate and/or authentic within hip hop culture.

In this thesis I contribute to the work that Mitchell (2001) and other hip hop writers and researchers have sought to establish, which has been to consider hip hop and its many practices as transformative, continually shifting, global, cultural phenomenon (Bennett 1999; Condy 2001; Maxwell 2003; Alim et al. 2009; Johnson 2011); where concepts like the “four elements of hip hop” are not determining social structures, but rather are tools that different hip hop actors use to negotiate notions of identity, authenticity and legitimacy. In her interview with a breaker named Rokafella, Johnson (2011) reflects that hip hop in its global context is “increasingly something that requires negotiation” (189). I would add that this negotiation includes dealing with a number of dominant social structures as well. As I will illustrate in the chapters that follow, there are indeed issues of racial and gendered power dynamics that govern how individuals are able to participate and express themselves within hip hop culture. However unlike other social configurations, such as a university or other more formal bureaucratic institutions, hip hop is not a field which is dependent on its structures. In this way, my study of hip hop sees it as more of a living, breathing, world in which different hip hop actors can themselves transgress and produce their own notions of legitimacy and authenticity, as it is a field managed and governed by people, within local settings.

Moreover, an emphasis on hip hop’s structures can lead one towards a conceptualisation of hip hop people as “cultural dopes”—a term most often

attributed to Talcott Parsons—who mindlessly respond to the social structures that are said to be governing their lives. Yet, as Kuper suggests, quoting Hannerz,

The traditional Durkheimian vision – one society, one culture for each person – might have been appropriate to ‘the prototypical small-scale society, in which people exposed to much the same living conditions have similar personal experiences and are at the same time available to a massively redundant communication flow only from people largely like themselves. It is the modern world itself which has rendered the traditional model obsolete. (Kuper 1992, 6)

What Kuper and Hannerz suggest is that it is our modern globalising world that has led to the decline of a structural functionalist approach. In this way, studies of hip hop are, I argue, more suited towards an approach that are concerned with the roles and capacities of individual hip hop actors and their actions.

There are some, such as Barth, who have argued that a structural functionalist approach was always problematic. As Kuper writes, quoting Barth, “The Durkheimian model was always an illusion, the product of a European fantasy that humanity is divided into units approximating bounded nation-states, each with its jealously guarded frontier, language, and culture” (1992, 7). On the other hand, those who have carried on the Malinowskian tradition—which Hall articulates nicely in “Notes on Deconstructing The Popular” (1998), was to see people within a cultural group not as “dopes” but as “active” and often critical participants in the productions and negotiations of their own lives and cultures (446)—have developed a post-structural language which includes notions of process, agency and social action.

The post-structural turn or tradition, which Kuper suggests began with Malinowski (1992, 5), but includes a number of key anthropological writers—including (but not limited to) Weber, Bourdieu, Garfinkel, Cohen, Giddens, and more recently, Geertz, Jackson and Herzfeld—all of whom further developed this approach towards an emphasis on process, individual agency and social action. This thesis, although situated within the field of hip hop, is a study grounded within a disciplinary approach that began with the anthropological writings of many post-structuralist theorists and thinkers.

In *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979), Giddens was critical of Weber, suggesting that “social action” theory was still too deterministic (49-53). Giddens sought to find a middle ground between structure and agency, putting forth the concept which he described as the “duality of structure”. In his words, "By the duality of structure I mean that the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems" (1979, 69). Thus, to Giddens, it is social structures that make social actions possible, but ultimately it is social actions which create and maintain these structures, and not the other way around.

In the continuing effort towards a theoretical grounding of human agency, many have established that it is people who are—as Amit and Dyck (2006) write—“purposeful agents” who play “active” rather than “passive” roles in the social systems that govern their lives (9). Thus, insofar as there are structures in hip hop, I argue that they are structures which are generated through social action, by hip hop actors.

Another way in which I intend to contribute to anthropological writings on “persons” is to examine the discussions around notions of “community”. To write about hip hop is, in many ways, to write about a kind of community; but while notions of “community” are widespread across the field of anthropology, it is a concept that has been highly contentious. In *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Cohen claims that the reason community is a contentious concept is because it has been “highly resistant to satisfactory definition” (1985, 11). In his text Cohen highlights the many shortcomings of a structural deterministic approach to the study of community, proposing that researchers should instead consider what different notions of “community” means to people and how these meanings vary among its members. Cohen pays particular attention to boundary making and managing, specifically how and where members of a specific social group draw and negotiate its boundaries. Cohen’s primary concern with the concept of “community”, as stated by Peter Hamilton in the foreword to his text, has been:

To deal with community as it is symbolically constructed, as a system of

values, norms, and moral codes which provides a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members. This emphasis on meaning neatly sidesteps the definitional problems posed by the search for a structural model of community as a specific form of social organization. (Hamilton 1985, 9)

Thus in order to understand what it means to identify and be a legitimate member of hip hop, one might examine how different hip hop actors negotiate the concept of hip hop culture itself. This has led me towards the literature on sociality, which, as Amit (2015) explains in the introduction to his edited text, *Thinking Through Sociality*, has been a shift in thinking about how particular social and/or cultural worlds are organised, managed and understood.

In the past, widely-used anthropological and sociological concepts, such as “culture”, “network”, “society” and “community”, have often been rebooted by social theorists: “community” has been rebooted as “imagined communities”, “network” has been rebooted as “actor-network theory” and so on (Amit 2015, 8). Yet these reboots do not always adequately remedy the issues they sought to resolve; these issues being the structural functionalist portrayals of social groupings. However, some concepts become ubiquitous for a reason. This is because some concepts can have a discursive life beyond the academy. As Amit explains, this may be because “they signal, even if very loosely and imperfectly, concerns or ideas that have some broader purchase” (9). Similar to the writings of Peterson and Bennett (2004), Alim (2009) and Rodger (2011), I use the phrase “hip hop culture”, not in a strict or bounded way, but rather as the result of various ongoing social interactions, relationships and negotiations that different hip hop peoples around the world are engaged in.

### **Working with Scene, Event, Field and Claims-Making**

Throughout the thesis I employ a collection of terms that represent hip hop in ways that are local, social and dynamic. Four central terms I use heavily throughout this thesis are “scene”—to speak about the different groupings of breakers in different places; “event”—to speak about the social gatherings that breakers engage in; “field”—to speak about the broader social collective of breaking and other hip hop peoples and practitioners worldwide; and “claims-making”—to speak about the

actions of breakers and how their reputations and social standing works to enable what they say and do to be taken more seriously.

My use of the term “scene” can be traced to the works of Straw (1991), Peterson and Bennett (2004), Cohen (1997; 2007) and Maxwell (2003), although there are many others who have developed and also employ this term. These scholars have written about the dynamic and negotiable boundaries of particular musical “scenes”. Likewise, the term “scene” for examining breaking, while being a dance practice, is useful for similar purposes, due to the fact that the term “scene” implies that such groupings are not fixed but open and constantly changing. As will be illustrated in the chapters that follow, local breaking scenes are not distinct or bounded social collectives, but loosely defined and constantly shifting social collectives. Individual breakers have the capacity to move in and out of different scenes. Therefore, breaking scenes tend to change very quickly and are thus hard to characterise.

My use of the term “event” can be traced to the works of Goffman (1961; 1963). Geertz, who drew from Goffman when he argued that anthropological understandings do not come from distant and removed observations but rather from a two way conversation between the particular and the general (1973, 9), offered a methodological approach in which one weaves in and out of specific observations (the particular) and makes sense of those observations in context (the general). My use of “event” here implies particularity, space, place and context. Breaking happens at social gatherings and these gatherings take place in a variety of different spaces: parks, community centres, town halls, theatres, dance studios, night clubs, gymnasiums, churches, and so on. Lefebvre (1991) suggested, somewhat generically, that space is understood as something which we not only physically inhabit but something which we culturally construct and invest with meaning. Hence it is through specific breaking “events” that I suggest the spaces in which these events occupy become significant to those who travel to and take part in them.

My use of the term “field” can be traced to the works of Bourdieu, Turner, and

more recently, Postill (2015). In *Distinction* (1984)<sup>4</sup>, Bourdieu refers to the term “field” when speaking about the interpersonal negotiations of power and position that individuals hold within particular social groupings. He argued that one’s power and position within a field are determined by one’s social, cultural, educational and economic capital (1984, 13-16). According to Bourdieu, the boundaries of a field, as well as what constitutes cultural and social capital, are always in constant flux. He stated that all three forms of capital are utilised by different individuals in order to gain status within their respective fields (245). Although I do not subscribe to Bourdieu’s notion of “capital” as a process of social determination, his emphasis on agency and the notion of individuals being able to ascribe, enact and transform their lives, have led me towards a framing of hip hop as a “field” comprised of many local hip hop “scenes”; all of which are shaped by those who occupy these scenes at any given moment in time.

Thinking of hip hop as a “field”—as conceptualised by Turner (1974) and Postill (2015)—in which human agency plays a significant role in its messy configuration, allows for both conflict and coalition to exist in concert with one another. Similarly, Turner’s essay, “Hidalgo: History as Social Drama” (1974), employs the notion of “field” to discuss the conflict which took place in a failed uprising of colonial Mexico. Here Turner argues that the concept of “field” enabled him to examine the uprising from various perspectives and introduce an array of competing voices and ideas (1974, 128). In his blog post titled “The concept of field”, Postill (2010) writes that Turner understood this historical moment as a “social drama” taking place across different social “arenas”. Postill writes the concept of “field” enabled Turner to focus on the complex and varied ways in which individual actors both cooperated and contended with and against one another across these arenas. In a similar way, the concept of “field” enables me to focus on the varied mix of different hip hop actors and see how their voices, within particular hip hop gatherings, compete and cooperate with one another. My use of field here is not aimed at presenting some hip hop voices as being “better” or more authentic than other voices, but rather to

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<sup>4</sup> Originally published in 1979 by Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, as. *La Distinction: Critique Sociale Du Jugemmt.*

illustrate how different voices intermingle and clash within specific moments across space and time. This is where notion of process and “claims-making” come in.

My use of the term “claims-making” comes from the writings of Amit and Dyck (2006), who suggest that claims are a form of social action in which individuals risk social rejection and failure in order to gain a level of acceptance and/or recognition (9). In the hip hop context, I argue that claims-making is an interpersonal process, where people make and negotiate claims within their own local and social settings. As will be discussed in later chapters, the negotiations over the veracity of claims made are not only dependent on the facts of a claim, but are dependent on a myriad of different social and political factors: such as a person’s reputation and social standing. Claims-making across the field of hip hop are subject to the scrutiny of other hip hop persons, and thus can be both authenticated and rejected by different people, across different localities. An emphasis on the process of claims-making reveals the interpersonal, dynamic and social ways in which hip hop is socially and locally produced and maintained.

What will be illustrated throughout this thesis is that hip hop is a world full of claims-making and negotiating. Breakers, through their actions, contribute to the ongoing cultural productions and reproductions of hip hop. Additionally, because every claim is subject to the scrutiny of others there tends to be a lot of division and debate surrounding the negotiations of particular claims, especially when a claim pertains to something of deep cultural or historical significance. That being said, even with the most convincing and compelling of claims, there tends always to be someone who will contest or disagree with a claim. In this way, claims in hip hop need to be constantly made and remade for them to continue to survive.

Similarly, in *Art Worlds* (1982), Becker’s discussion about art looked at how judgements about what is—and what is not—art are managed socially. His conclusions were that such aesthetic judgements about art do not rest on a natural or universally agreed-upon understanding of art, but rather were claims made by individual artists. In Becker’s words:

Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn’t art, what is and isn’t their kind of art, and who is and isn’t an artist.

(Becker 1982, 36).

There is, Becker argues, an ongoing debate regarding what ought to be thought of as art (or at least good art) and what art is perhaps aesthetically pleasing or productive. Like Becker, I discuss how individuals negotiate what is (and is not) breaking and how this varies amongst different breaking practitioners, and how these negotiations are never ever truly resolved. Both Bourdieu and Becker reflect on the dynamic, individual, social and processual nature of these diverse social groupings within particularities, and employ the term “field” to give emphasis to the open and changing nature of these worlds. Likewise, the aim of this thesis is not to make judgements about what is or is not good breaking, or what a winning claim in hip hop looks like, but rather to examine how claims-making works in particular local and social contexts.

There have been similar approaches undertaken by several cultural studies scholars. In Sara Cohen’s (1997) study of the Liverpool rock music scene she examined the “systems of ideas that inform the scene, including the contested concept of “scene” itself” (Cohen 1997, 18). Similar to Cohen, I will discuss the meanings and ideas breakers employ in situ to conceptualise their own notions of breaking and hip hop culture more broadly. Cohen wrote that local scenes are “shaped and constrained by specific relationships and institutions, situations and circumstances” (1997, 18). Thus, my use of the terms “scene”, “event”, “field” and “claims-making” enable me to emphasise the local, social and dynamic nature of hip hop culture, as well as how different individual hip hop actors, across a variety of different local and social settings, work to produce, sustain and transform this culture from the ground up.

### **Method: My Three Breaking Scenes**

The field research I conducted took place across three distinct geographical locations: New York, Osaka and Perth. Similar to Johnson’s (2009) study of breaking cyphers across the United States and Europe, this study was a multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus 1995), entailing social research which was qualitative, interpretive, ethno-methodological and ethno-historical in nature (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Wolcott 1999; 2008). The multi-sited ethnographic project,



writes Marcus, is when:

Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the “local” and the “global”, the “lifeworld” and the “system”. (1995, 95)

In *Black Noise*, Rose expressed a hope that future research projects on hip hop culture would deal with “more globally focused projects” (1994, xiv-xv). She even suggested “Japanese breakdancers” in her list of examples of what such projects might focus on in the future. This, however, was not the reason I choose to study breakers living in Osaka.

The reasons for deciding to embark upon a multi-sited ethnographic study of breakers living in New York City, Osaka and Perth was due, primarily, to satisfy my theoretical concerns regarding the local, social and dynamic ways in which hip hop is lived and experienced. As hip hop is nowadays considered to be a diverse and globalising social field, shaped and moulded by various local and global forces, it seems only fitting that a study which seeks to examine the productions, expressions and consumptions of hip hop employ a multi-sited approach; a point also made by other scholarly hip hop writers (Gilroy 1995; Bennett 1999; Mitchell 2001; Forman and Anthony Neal 2004).

I chose these three breaking scenes because they each offer a uniquely local perspective on the social ways in which hip hop is lived and experienced by different breaking practitioners. More details about the unique and varied aspects of these three scenes is discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

As will be addressed in Chapter Three, depending on where you live, as well as various other social and cultural factors, one’s understandings and experiences of hip hop are heavily shaped by their local dynamics. Thus, I selected these three field sites for what they offer in terms of an ethnographic study. The city of New York City is widely regarded as being the birthplace of hip hop; the place where hip hop is said to have originated (Rose 1994; George 1998; Light 1999; Forman and Anthony Neal 2004; Chang 2005; Katz 2010). New York City is home to many breaking and

hip hop practitioners and pioneers, as well as being a site for several large international breaking competitions. As Schloss, in his book, *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York*, said about the breaking scene in New York City:

In reality, New York is only one node of a community that is truly international. Dancers from around the world visit New York regularly, while b-boys and b-girls from New York routinely travel to other states and countries to compete, teach workshops, and judge competitions. Yet there remains a unique sense of history in the New York b-boy scene—a mixture of the past with the present—that does not exist in other places. (2009, 12)

The historical legacy and large breaking scene in New York was one of central reasons that I chose it as one of my field sites. I spent a little under three months in New York, from the months of February to April of 2015. I then travelled to Osaka, and stayed there from the months of April to July. The city of Osaka, Japan, is a less obvious choice of a field site for an ethnographic study of breaking practitioners. My decision to work with the breakers in Osaka came about initially from speaking with a good friend of mine and fellow breaker who lives and works in Osaka named “Sly” (also known as “Sly Smooth”). Sly lived in Perth for a number of years and it was during this time in which he and I became good friends. After returning home in 2010, Sly moved back to his hometown of Kawachinagano, an area roughly thirty-five kilometers south of Osaka’s city center. Having a close friend who lives and breaks in Osaka, as well as having some prior knowledge of the breaking scene—from past trips to Osaka and conversations with Sly—I chose Osaka as my second field site. As addressed in Chapters Six and Seven, breakers in Osaka offer a unique perspective to the production, expression and consumption of hip hop culture.

I spent roughly the same amount of time in both New York City and Osaka (three months). However, my fieldwork in Perth was a less structured and constrained experience. Having lived in Perth for most of my life, and having an ongoing and close relationship with many of the local breakers who live there, my fieldwork in Perth was a more staggered exercise. I conducted semi-structured interviews with a few breakers before and after my trip overseas. I also gathered various ethnographic materials online and thus continued to gather ethnographic materials

across each of my three field sites during a fourteenth-month period: which started in January 2015 and ended (roughly) in March 2016.

Whilst I was staying in New York City and Osaka, I managed to arrange short term accommodation with local breakers whom I knew were actively engaged in the local breaking scene. These individuals provided me with extremely helpful and useful information about how best to navigate and meet other local breakers; as I was very much an outsider to how things worked in the scenes of New York and Osaka. Sly, for example, introduced me to a number of local Japanese breakers, helped translate things they said for me and even drove me to several local jams and practice sessions around Osaka.

The guidance and information I received from Sly was very rich in detail, as it contained a wealth of experience from a local breaker who had lived and danced in the Osaka breaking scene for many years. In New York City, I stayed with another friend and fellow breaker named William, or Will. During the time I was in New York, Will was living in an apartment in Bushwick, Brooklyn. As with Sly, I stayed with Will in his apartment and he provided me with a wealth of local knowledge and advice about how best to navigate and meet other local New York breakers. It should be noted that meetings with the majority of the breakers I encountered for this thesis would not have been possible without the help of both Will and Sly.

What I have come to appreciate, after having experienced breaking across each of my three field sites, is how my ethnographic experiences within the field compliment my social theory. Each breaking scene offered both unique and somewhat common perspectives. Breakers living within different scenes expressed, imagined and made sense of breaking in vastly different, and yet also somewhat similar, ways. For example, there were many similarities between the kinds of activities that breakers tended to engaged in, such as: practice sessions, cyphers, battles, teaching classes, performing shows and communicating with others online. However, there were also various differences to be found, particularly in how these activities were understood and experienced by different individual breakers on the ground. These differences became more clear and visible within specific moments. As I will discuss in Chapter Seven, although the activity of the breaking cypher

may—from afar—look somewhat similar, there are subtle differences with how cyphering is understood, engaged in and experienced within particular moments in time and space. Thus, to better appreciate the perspectives that different local breaking scenes have to offer necessitates an engagement within the particularities, moments that occur on the ground within the scenes themselves.

As will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three, different individuals come into contact with breaking in a variety of different ways and means. Depending on a multitude of factors, one's sense and experience of breaking—even within the same breaking scene—can also differ enormously. Some people are introduced and are taught breaking by those who claim to be qualified breaking teachers. Others are self-taught and learn how to break by imitating what they see others doing in video-clips online or on television. All of this produces the kinds of differences and similarities I mentioned earlier.

Although rap, and other hip hop music practices, are often the dominant lens through which scholarly hip hop writers and researchers typically analyse and study hip hop culture, breakers and other forms of hip hop dancing are also an important aspect of the culture. Breakers engagement in hip hop, through various social and embodied dance practices and activities, offers a unique perspective than that of other hip hop practices and activities. An argument made throughout this thesis is that there are no best, true or natural ways in which to engage or experience hip hop from. Each practice, and person who engages, identifies, contributes and expresses across the field of hip hop, has a perspective on hip hop culture. One might be able to claim to examine hip hop from a neutral position, but it is not a winning claim. What studying breakers living in New York, Osaka and Perth offers is a uniquely local and embodied perspective on the cultural productions, expressions and consumptions of hip hop; one that is not often discussed within the scholarly hip hop literature.

That being said, my fieldwork with breakers across these three cities contributes to only part of my ethnographic analysis. As a long time breaking practitioner, I frequently drew from past experiences—including a nearly twenty year involvement in the dance. Having started engaging in breaking in 1999 and having continued to

engage in the dance ever since, my long-term engagement in the practice has undoubtedly contributed to the work conducted and presented throughout this thesis.

As a result, this study trends towards self-reflexivity in the ethnographic accounts that follow. This self-reflexivity and the act of boundary-crossing between the roles of hip hop practitioner and scholar are what Reed-Danahay (1997) and others (Strathern 1987; Denzin 1989) have described as “autoethnography”. In this way, my accounts are more than just an observational ethnographic interpretations of the breaking experiences I encountered in the field. They also include and draw from my own extensive and personal engagement and experiences as a breaking practitioner.

There have been a few inspirations for undertaking a study of this kind: Cynthia J. Novack’s, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990) and Helena Wulff’s, *Ballet Across Borders: Career and Culture in the World of Dancers* (1998), both of which are anthropological studies of dancing where the author is either an ex-dancer or practising dancer within the field. Although my study is not only about dancing—as there is much said about hip hop culture more broadly—I draw from both of these dance literature texts as the authors reflect on the dual identities and blurredness of lines between being both a practitioner (or ex-practitioner) and a researcher.

As Harry F. Wolcott wrote in *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, doing ethnography “on oneself” would have at one time been unthinkable (2008, 2). Yet nowadays the role and relationships between a researcher and their field has shifted; indeed it is always shifting. As Wulff writes, with modernisation and increasing transnational connections there are likely more anthropologists doing work across fields in which they are intimately connected (1998, 10). Both Wulff and Novack specify that although having an intimate connection to one’s field can provide a researcher with some privileges: Wulff in particular writes about how her experience as an ex-ballet dancer enabled her to gain access into the closed world of ballet dancing (1998, 11). However, she says that it can also limit your research as well. It becomes the

primary lens through which you see the field, and as a researcher one must find a balance between one's position as a practitioner and as a researcher.

Sometimes these two positions, practitioner and researcher, can be at odds with one another. I felt this at times during moments in the field, as I was unsure of what I personally found intriguing and interesting to explore further, and what others (who are not as engaged in my field as I) would care to want to know about in as much depth.

In order to find a suitable balance between these two positions, I employed a range of qualitative and ethnographic research methods in order to stay critical and reflexive of these two positions. These methods included the use of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, photographic materials, ethnographic writing, and digital ethnographic analysis. The majority of the research I conducted often took place during public, casual and informal hip hop dance gatherings.

These gatherings typically included a range of social activities, such as: breaking competitions, jam sessions, parties, practice and training sessions, workshops, meet-ups, concerts, conversations and social excursions (such as hanging out on the train or in a car on the way to a gathering). During these social gatherings I took many photographs, recorded voice memos and made many field notes. Typically I would try to capture what was happening at the time on my iPhone or on a scrap of paper. The photographs and notes taken would then inform the production of further, more detailed field notes, which were often written up at the first opportunity after an event took place. Some of my field notes are interspersed within the chapters that follow as they provide a more vivid description of the particularities of the breaking gatherings in question. These notes are presented, single-spaced and in separate paragraphs, so that it is clear that they are notes from the field. Given that most of the breaking gatherings I attended ran late into the evening, the first opportunity to write detailed field notes was often the following morning, in a café. The nature of these gatherings, such as the lack of lighting, large and noisy crowds, limited seating and so forth, made it difficult to conduct more formal interviews or take substantial field notes.

All of the names of the people who appear in the thesis are unchanged. Though typically their “breaking names” are used, as per their request. In addition to the ethnographic materials gathered, this thesis also contains many direct quotes and photographs from a variety of online media sources, including video footage from YouTube, lyrics of musical tracks, magazines (both online and offline), as well as discussions from social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. It should be noted that the quotes used have been presented as in the original source, without altering grammar or spelling errors. To improve readability, I have on occasion translated the quote, as well as provided a screenshot of it in its original format. Where I use song lyrics, I have transcribed these from recordings. More specific information about the research materials are discussed within the chapters in which they are presented.

### **Thesis Organisation**

In each chapter of this thesis I illustrate the local, social and dynamic ways in which hip hop is actively produced, sustained and transformed. I named the introductory chapter, Chapter One, “Top Rocking”: Locating Hip Hop in the Social, because “top rocking” is one of first things breakers typically do when they begin a dance performance. When a breaker enters a cypher or battle they tend to initially dance upright for a short while. This style of dance is known as “rocking” and there are two main rocking styles that breakers typically do: “top rocking” and “up rocking”. A breakers “top rocking” can set the stage for what is to come. It is an introduction of one’s style and character, they show a little of one’s ability and you can deduce a lot from the way a breaker does they “top rocks”.

In Chapter Two, “Up Rocking”: Theory, Method and My Reading of the Scholarly Hip Hop Literature, I continue my discussion of theory and method, and write to show how a focus on individual agency and claims-making shapes my reading of the scholarly hip hop literature. In this chapter I establish where my study is situated within the scholarly hip hop literature and how it contributes towards discussions of hip hop outside of the USA.

In Chapter Three, “Getting down”: The Politics of Hip Hop Culture, I examine the

politics surrounding the fashioning of local breaking identities. Through sharing parts of my own journey into the world of hip hop, I discuss the unique and creative ways in which hip hop is experienced and made sense of by individuals within local settings. This chapter ultimately suggests that strong and fast notions of a homogenous hip hop culture tend to fall short, as hip hop is learned and experienced by individuals who embark upon their journey into hip hop in a variety of different ways. Being comprised of many different peoples and practices, hip hop is a field that is constantly in flux. Therefore, I suggest that it is not the case of finding the most authentic of hip hop voices and offering it up as the “best” or most important voices across a cavalcade of competing voices. There needs to be an acknowledgement that across different localities there are different notions of authenticity and even though some locals are bigger than others, they all contribute to the ongoing productions of hip hop culture.<sup>5</sup>

In Chapter Four, “Running Footwork”: The Expressions and Experiences of Hip Hop, I present the reader with a collection of photographic images—taken from each of my three field sites—in order to offer an insight into the local worlds of each breaking scene. I use photographs here to illuminate specific moments and experiences that I encountered during my time in the city. There is also particular focus given to the spaces that make up these dynamic and eclectic breaking scenes. The chapter begins with photographs of the New York breaking scene, followed by the Osaka breaking scene, and then the Perth breaking scene. Each collection of images is initially located geographically, with the help of city maps I created using the ArcGIS online mapping tool, and then short descriptive accounts are offered which help ground the image to a specific time and place. This chapter illustrates how some local breaking scenes are larger and more significant (in some respects) than others, but ultimately that they are still all considered to be “local breaking scenes”—even New York—within the broader, global, context of hip hop culture.

In Chapter Five, “It’s a Battle!”: The Contestable Nature of Hip Hop’s Origins, I examine the social processes and discuss the contestations surrounding hip hop’s

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter was presented, in a slightly different form, as a paper at the Australian Anthropological Society (AAS) conference, “Shifting States”, in Adelaide in December, 2017.



cultural origins. As hip hop's history is still largely an oral history (Perry 2004, 10; Johnson 2011, 14), passed down through stories told, there are many competing stories and claims made about its history and who its most authentic actors are. In this chapter I draw on ethnographic conversations I had with breakers in New York and Perth to illustrate how these origin stories are continuously being negotiated and re-negotiated by different hip hop actors, across different local settings. I demonstrate how there is not a clear or agreed-upon truth about where hip hop culture originated, but rather that origins stories told are part of a social process individuals use in order to construct local hip hop identities. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on what Paul Gilroy wrote in *Let's Get It On*, which was that hip hop has non-linear origins and that there should be more of a focus on the rich mix of voices that have led to the proliferation of hip hop around the world rather than fighting over who are its rightful owners are (1995, 15).<sup>6</sup>

In Chapter Six, "Originality", "Raw Energy" and "Staying Relevant": Making Legitimacy Through Breaking Performances, I continue my exploration of the social to examine how breakers negotiate the dance performances of other breakers. Through three ethnographic accounts of breaking performances (one in Osaka, one in New Jersey and one in Perth) I make evident how breaking performances are not the sum of a specific set of physical movements or gestures, but rather that a breaker's dance performance is constituted into a breaking performance through the social negotiations that occur between individual actors within the local. Thus, I argue that the legitimisation of breaking expressions occurs through social interactions on the ground.

In Chapter Seven, "Power Move Combos for Days": The Dynamic Crafting's of Aesthetic and Sensory Hip Hop Knowledge: Ethnographies of Breaking Cyphers, I examine the practice of the "breaking cypher", focusing on the dynamic processes of knowledge transmission that breakers experience within this practice. In this chapter are three ethnographic accounts of my own experience dancing in the cypher. I illustrate how through cyphering breakers negotiate, through bodily

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<sup>6</sup> This chapter was presented as a paper at the Asian Conference on the Social Sciences (ACSS) in Kobe, Japan, in June, 2015.

gestures and social actions, how one ought to act and perform as a breaker; extending much further than just the dance itself. Thus, I argue how dancing in the cypher is one of the ways that breakers actively produce and play with/against the social structures that govern hip hop; a process, which, I argue, spirals dynamically from the ground up.

In Chapter Eight, “The Go Off”: The Fragility of Hip Hop Culture, I examine the act of claims-making by breakers, showing how claims made are a form of social action where individuals risk social rejection and failure in order to seek recognition, belonging and acceptance (Amit and Dyck 2006). In this chapter, I examine one particular claim in question, a claim I encountered at a breaking event in Bridgeport, Connecticut. It was during this event that I met Kid Freeze, a breaker who claimed to have invented one of the most iconic, perhaps the most iconic, move in breaking today: the continuous head-spin. I draw attention to the fact that hip hop is a world full of claims made and that—broadly speaking—claims are not just the verbal assertions that individuals make, they are the ways in which all hip hop actors are “actively” engaged with the culture.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in my concluding chapter, Chapter Nine, “Okay Judges... 3,2,1”: Dancing Towards a Hip Hop Theory, I reflect on the local, social and dynamic illustrations provided throughout each of my chapters to address the broader themes of significance that this research project speaks to. I discuss how the field of hip hop itself is an agent that has heavily shaped and informed my methodological and theoretical approaches to a study of “the social”. How then might we think about “hip hop” as a lens in which to make sense of other fields?

Before I move into the chapters, I want to emphasise once again that breakers are not a homogenous collective of people with identical opinions and shared understandings about how breaking works or what it means to be connected to the hip hop culture. In each chapter of this thesis is an attempt to present the voices of my participants fairly and represent their views and opinions with the intention they have expressed to me. By engaging with the lives and experiences of breakers I have

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<sup>7</sup> This chapter was presented, in a slightly different form, as a paper at the Australian Anthropological Society (AAS) conference, “Anthropocene Transitions”, in Sydney in December, 2016.

attempted to avoid the shortcomings of some hip hop studies that have taken a more “structural” approach and privileged theory at the expense of field based research (Templeton 2003).

There will be times within this thesis where I give space to ideas, practices and beliefs that some might reject as irrelevant or do not fit with their own experiences and understandings of breaking or hip hop culture. Throughout my research and in the writing of this thesis it has been my aim to respect all differing views of hip hop culture. I wholeheartedly respect the passion and commitment of breakers and of other hip hop peoples and practitioners worldwide. In any thesis there is likely to be a grappling with one’s theory and one’s field; in my case it is the social theory of persons and the world of hip hop culture. This is mediated, of course, by my methods. In the next chapter I continue to develop my theoretical ideas and my positioning as a breaker in light of the scholarly hip hop literature.

## – Chapter 2 –

### *“Up Rocking”*

#### **Theory, Method and My Reading of the Scholarly Hip Hop Literature**

“Up Rocking” is the moment in a breaker’s dance performance where one’s rocking movements begin to build up momentum. In Chapter One I set out my key theoretical terms. In this chapter I follow on from this, connecting these terms with my theory and method, writing to show how my social theory—with its focus on process, agency and social action—as well as my own positioning as an active breaking practitioner shapes my reading of the scholarly hip hop literature. I begin by discussing how a focus on agency and social action has particular implications for a hip hop study; these implications being that they drive down an emphasis on social structure and lead one towards focusing on social relationships. I then unpack how my positioning as a breaking practitioner has lent itself to the formation of a unique methodological approach; one that sees what breakers say and do within particular local, social and situational contexts.

In light of my theoretical and methodological concerns, I then review the scholarly hip hop literature, situating my work within it and establishing how my research with breakers in New York, Osaka and Perth productively contributes towards these discussions.

#### **Hip Hop as a World of “Persons” and “Claims-making”**

In an article titled “When Worlds Collide: A Subculture Writes Back?”, Ian Maxwell

(2005) describes how his writing on hip hop was received by some hip hop people in various online forums. In this article, Maxwell recounts how he was challenged by those who reacted negatively to his admission that he did not “love” hip hop culture, even though Maxwell is an academic who does have a love for thinking about social and cultural phenomena (2005, 12). As Rodger observed, Maxwell’s lack of love for hip hop culture meant that he was viewed by some as being an outsider and therefore his right to write about hip hop was being questioned (2011, 24).

I can understand this negative reaction to Maxwell’s admission that he does not love hip hop culture. Hip hop has a history of people using it for economic, political and personal gains. And those who do so without contributing or giving back to hip hop (in a way that one deems to be appropriate) can be seen as being a “sell out”, “appropriator” or “co-opter”. Though rather than profess that my own love for hip hop—and long history and engagement in breaking—allows me to write about it in a way that others will agree with (which I do not feel to be true), I do feel a level of pressure to do right by my peers. Hence I am not claiming to be an authority on breaking or hip hop culture. Yet, my claim as a breaker and practitioner is indeed a claim which could be contested.

My theoretical perspectives throughout this thesis are used to analyse hip hop “persons”—where by individuals who identify as a members of hip hop each have their own unique perspective, understanding and experience of hip hop culture. In this way, my writings on hip hop are not to be seen as being a true or authentic account which all hip hop persons are likely to agree with. Rather, my writings should be understood to also be grounded within my own unique local and social perspective, and this perspective will be unpacked in more detail in Chapter Three.

Thus, my concept of a “hip hop person” is similar to that of an individual as expressed by Abu-Lughod (1991), who wrote that individuals are themselves social agents who are confronted with various choices, struggles and sometimes make conflicting statements (154). Throughout this thesis I use the terms hip hop “persons” and “practitioners” when speaking about individuals who connect and identify with hip hop, some of whom are breakers and some of whom are not.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, due to the social conditions of hip hop—in which there exists no central authority, no clear or agreed-upon rules, guidelines or boundaries—it is hip hop persons and their relationships which are central to understanding the ongoing social and cultural re-productions of hip hop around the world. A focus on hip hop’s social structures has led scholars, like Gaunt (2004; 2006), to demonstrate how dominant ideological power structures are at play with how different individual hip hop actors are able to engage, participate, create and express themselves (legitimately) within and across the various domains of hip hop culture. However, a focus on hip hop’s social structure does not account for the way in which these individuals themselves have transformed hip hop over time and across different spaces . What a focus on the processual, the agency and social actions of individual hip hop actors enables is an understanding of the shifting and dynamic nature of hip hop culture as a living cultural phenomenon. As will be demonstrated, hip hop is constantly being pushed and pulled in all sorts of different directions by a large and diverse aggregate of hip hop persons around the world.

Framing hip hop as a world of “persons” offers an alternative perspective to that of a homogenous and neatly bounded hip hop culture. The hip hop presented in this thesis is that of a continually shifting, dynamic social field (Postill 2015), comprised of many hip hop persons (social agents) all of whom are wrestling with questions of hip hop authenticity, identity, authority and cultural expression. As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, there are many competing notions of what makes one an authentic and/or legitimate hip hop “person” . These claims are constantly being negotiated across different local settings, producing new and alternative notions of what it means to be a hip hop person.

The unresolvability of hip hop culture is of deep concern for many hip hop practitioners, but it also illustrates an important aspect of the social conditions of hip hop more broadly. Which is that what is authentic and true in hip hop is grounded not in any collective social structures, but rather that it exists in the minds of the individual hip hop person; and one can perceive what is authentic and true for different individuals through their actions within particular local and social settings. It is for this reason that this study of hip hop is located within three specific breaking

scenes: New York, Osaka and Perth, and aims to contribute to a growing body of scholarly hip hop literature that explores the socially constructed nature of hip hop outside of the USA (Osumare 2002; Maxwell 2003; Pennycook 2007; Alim 2009; Rodger 2011).

As Pennycook writes:

The global spread of hip-hop authenticity provides an example of the tension between a cultural dictate to keep it real and the processes that make this dependent on local contexts, languages, cultures, and understandings of the real. (2007, 101)

Within every local breaking scene are many individual breaking practitioners, all of whom struggle to make sense of what it means to be a breaker and hip hop person within their local scene. Additionally, they also struggle to make sense of what it means to be connected, culturally, to the broader social collective of other breakers and hip hop practitioners around the world.

### **My Positioning as a Breaking Practitioner**

There have been only a small number of hip hop research projects conducted with breaking practitioners, many of which being have been carried out with those who live and dance in the USA (Osumare 2002; Schloss 2009; Johnson 2009).

Furthermore, what research there is has been conducted primarily by researchers whose connection to hip hop has been that of spectator/admirer, rather than of practitioner, as is the case with my own research position.

What does my relationship with breaking offer in terms of writing and researching hip hop culture? Like others who have conducted ethnographic research projects with breaking practitioners, my methods include the use of participant observation and live performance analysis. Osumare's research on breaking was primarily one of participant observation. She attended various public breaking events in Honolulu and took many photographs and field notes (2002, 33). Johnson's research also included the use of participant observation, although Johnson's study was, like mine, a multi-sited ethnographic study (2009, 19). Her field sites were New York City, Los Angeles and some parts of Europe. Being non-breaking practitioners, the research of both Osumare and Johnson took place primarily during breaking events

and social gatherings. I, on the other hand, as a breaking practitioner, was fortunate in being able to access some of the more private breaking sessions and gatherings that both Osumare and Johnson might not have been able to access. This is because access to some gatherings between some breaking practitioners requires being an active participant in the breaking activities that occur at those gatherings. For example, one gathering I attended in New York City was a small cyphering session held in a small classroom at Hunter College. The breakers who organised this cyphering session seemed adamant about there being no spectators loitering in and around the session space. This could have been because of the small size of the room itself, but it seemed also to be the case that they wanted to preserve a particular vibe: this being one that everyone at the session participated in the breaking cypher.

Thus, my claim and position as a breaking practitioner is not one that I think offers a “better” or “richer” perspective on breaking than a non-practitioners. My claim is rather that my position as a breaker affords me a different kind of treatment from other breakers. It allows me to gain access to certain spaces and peoples which a non-breaking practitioner would not necessarily be able to gain access to.

Moreover, as an “active breaker”—someone who still currently engages in breaking practices—I was treated differently because of this status. For example, I was asked on a few occasions to enter breaking competitions and attend private breaking practice sessions with breakers who I was working with. However, I was not asked to attend these sessions as a researcher but rather as a breaking practitioner. To be clear, I am not someone who has just learned a few breaking moves in order to get in the door. I have a long history and I am well known across several breaking scenes, particularly in Australia and in the United Kingdom. However, this does not mean that I am necessarily considered to be a breaker by all breakers with whom I encountered. My claim as a breaker is still subject to the scrutiny that all claims are subject to. In this way, when I ventured into new breaking scenes I had to prove myself, and I also had a reputation that I wanted to protect. It was this reputation that granted me a level of respect and cultural currency that newcomers and observers simply do not have; it was this reputation that allowed me to gain access



into spaces and build relationships with other breakers which someone who is not an active breaking practitioner would not have been able to achieve.

Similar to the works of Osumare and Johnson, a large portion of my ethnographic research took place during large public breaking gatherings: events, jams, competitions and open practice sessions. However, there were also many small and private breaking gatherings I attended as well. During each of these gatherings I did not just observe and spectate the breakers around me, but took part in the gatherings as an active breaking practitioner. In this way, I was able to connect and build relationships with other breakers through both dancing and chatting with them; the ethnographic accounts which follow offer the reader this unique perspective, and this is something I have not yet seen in other accounts.

Some of the breaking gatherings I went to were held in quite dangerous settings.<sup>8</sup> But, besides the threats of violence (both real and perceived), many of the gatherings I attended were also quite alienating to outsiders. By this I mean that if you went to a small breaking gathering and arrived without the intention to “break”, then you could sometimes be treated with suspicion and contempt. An example of this is when people come to my local breaking practice session in Perth, at the King Street Arts Centre, and they do not take part in the session as a breaker (dancer), but have come for some other purpose. When this occurs, often the other breakers in the room (myself included) will treat these individuals with disdain and caution. This is because we do not want to be gawked at or “studied” at our local practice spot. We came to break, not to be photographed, interviewed or exploited for a purpose we have not consented to beforehand.

Familiar with the sort of animosity this sense of intrusion can lead to, in my own fieldwork I adopted an approach of attending the local breaking gatherings in New York City and Osaka as a breaking practitioner first and foremost, and then as a researcher second. I only brought up my research if a fellow breaker showed interest or did not mind me asking them a question. I did this for two main reasons:

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<sup>8</sup> One time on my way back to New York, after having attended a small breaking jam held in the outskirts of New Jersey, I was threatened with a knife and very nearly mugged by two individuals whilst waiting for the train back to the city. Luckily, after a short while, the train to New York arrived and I managed to board it without losing my wallet or suffering any physical injuries.

firstly, so as not to annoy or infringe upon those who might not care or want to be involved in my research; and secondly, so that I would not get a bad reputation with other breakers in a scene to which I was myself a visitor/outsider.

Having spent nearly two decades of my life breaking, Schloss' assertion regarding a face-to-face engagement in breaking is one that I respect and understand, yet one which I personally deviate away from; not because I think this kind of engagement is not useful or important, but because I am not convinced by his claim that hip hop "cannot be understood without becoming personally involved in it" (2009, 8). The assertion that one must become personally involved within their fields of study before being able to offer anything productive, is an old argument which saw a distinction between "native" and "non-native" anthropology.

Before the 1960s, the majority of the methodological commitments by anthropologists were historically founded on the image of "The Stranger", offered by Alfred Schutz (1964). As Schutz depicts it, a stranger entering a foreign environment becomes highly aware and suspicious of their new surroundings. They then become more critical of social life in this foreign environment than they would in their own society. The stranger then quickly learns that their assumptions about the new world they inhabit – its social practices, hierarchies, and cultural customs – were perhaps incorrect. They discover that they must learn "native" knowledge in order to survive. So they begin the process of learning: they learn the cultural patterns of this new community and their objectivity allows them to see the cultural patterns underlying everyday life which native people take for granted. Thus, they are privy to some hidden truths of culture through an engagement of becoming. Renato Rosaldo referred to this classic field situation with the notion of "The Lone Ethnographer" (1989), who, like the stranger, must become detached and objective when making sense of a foreign cultural group.

Proponents of a native anthropological approach argue that research done by "outsiders" is superficial as outsiders lack the cultural competence to grasp the meanings and practices of the cultural group they seek to comprehend. Accordingly, such arguments propose that understanding breaking on a deeper level requires a native anthropological approach. However, critics of this approach, such as Motzafi-

Haller (1997), who reject the claim that a native voice is necessarily more authentic or of greater significance than the non-native, has said:

The binary categories of “native” and “non-native” are themselves superfluous and misleading. A researcher who has experienced in her own life oppression and had become conscious of it in ways that significantly inform her scholarship *is more likely*, I suggest, to write critically – to write from a position of social and political engagement. (1997, 217)

Although my experience as a breaker could be said to be that of a “native” I do not see my scholarship as being a more authentic or of greater significance than those who are not breaking practitioners. Like Motzafi-Haller, I would argue that my experience as a breaker informs my hip hop scholarship and enables me to write from a position of social and political engagement. Motzafi-Haller asserts that by collapsing these categories of native and non-native, subject and other, researcher and their subject of study, one can embrace the blurred and often changing power dynamics that researchers are faced with when engaging in any social field. The challenge is perhaps to be critical and reflexive of all perspectives, our own most of all.

Schloss’ writing on breaking, as mentioned earlier, is perhaps the most extensive ethnographic research with breaking practitioners to date. His fieldwork, which took place in New York City from the years 2003 to 2008, consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with many breakers living in and around New York City (2009, 14). Schloss wrote about how the observations he did of breakers deeply shaped his thinking about breaking and hip hop culture. Schloss also wrote extensively about his own personal relationships with certain members of the hip hop scene in New York City, and how these relationships also affected much of his thinking and writing about the field (14). Like Schloss, my fieldwork has also been heavily shaped by my own personal relationships with particular breakers, as well as various other hip hop dancers, practitioners, writers and thinkers. Other writers and researchers who have conducted ethnographic research on social fields in which they are themselves deeply connected have also commented on the complex tensions that can arise from doing such research (Wulff 1998; Novack 1999).

In the context of my own study, the relationships I have with the breakers in Perth is completely different to the relationships I formed with the breakers in New York City and Osaka. Having lived in Perth for many years and having close relationships with many of the breakers who live and dance there, the ethnographic materials I gathered in Perth were heavily shaped by the relationships which I had formed over many years. Consequently, the ethnographic materials I gathered in New York City and Osaka were different due to the kinds of relationships I formed with the breakers I encountered within those scenes.

Finding the right balance between these complex positions: that of breaker, researcher, friend and research participant, was itself an ongoing and confusing set of relationships for me. It required a level of reflexivity which I have tried hard to maintain. Knowing how much or how little to say or explain requires thinking carefully about the people I was working with and the impact it may have on the broader field of hip hop itself. However, working across these three breaking scenes—with all the different kinds of relationships that I either established or had previously—helped me to explore these tensions. Sometimes the breakers I met in New York City or Osaka would forget that I was there gathering ethnographic material and that I was not just some travelling breaker. This sometimes led to awkward and tense moments where I was asked directly what the research I was doing was all about and why I was doing it. Doing research in a field in which one is so closely connected requires, I think, a sensitivity towards the people who one interacts with. For me this meant constantly reminding and speaking about my research with the breakers I met: asking for feedback and keeping them in the loop with my thoughts and my ideas.

On the other hand, what my positioning as a breaker allowed is a particular kind of engagement within my field of study. As I have noted there are no simple pathways as to what kinds of experiences one might have as conducting ethnographic research within a field in which they are connected. Depending on a complex range of situational and relational factors, one is apt to experience a varied range of responses to their work. Some of the breakers I know are very supportive and interested in the research I am doing, others as less supportive and interested.

Therefore, one must both recognise and respect the varied kinds of reactions that people may have. In my own writing, I have aimed not to overreach and claim to speak for other breakers, or of the breaking scenes in which my research is situated. This is due to the respect I have for the views of hip hop peoples and practitioners around the world. As I have already stated, I do not see my own experience as a breaker being more “true” or “authentic” than others, thus my writing aims to reflect this position. In the next section of this chapter I will discuss where my research with breakers is situated within the scholarly hip hop literature, but first I will provide a brief history of how hip hop became a legitimate field of study within the academy.

### **Hip Hop in the Academy**

The earliest academic writings on hip hop, which began in the mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s, typically focused on the textual manifestations of hip hop music (rap lyrics) and were concerned with historical questions regarding hip hop’s cultural roots and origins (Petchauer 2009, 950). Significant in this respect are two of the most widely regarded scholarly hip hop texts: Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* (1994) and Nelson George’s *Hip Hop America* (1998). Both of these scholars trace hip hop’s historical roots in and around New York City during the mid-to-late 1980s, and emphasise hip hop’s African-American influences and cultural origins.

Both Rose and George, as well as numerous other scholarly hip hop writers, also tend to have a focus on hip hop persons. Yet, their notion of persons is somewhat different to my own. For example, both Rose and George write about how particular historical hip hop figures significantly influenced the development of hip hop culture. Their texts name figures like Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc to make the case that hip hop originated in New York City and that it has strong cultural ties to African American peoples. However, their view of persons is one in which there are a select number of key historical figures who speak for the culture. The rest of the many hip hop persons around the world simply respect and agree with these hip hop originators/pioneers. My view of hip hop persons is not one in which there are a select number of key historical hip hop figures who speak for the culture. Rather, my view of hip hop persons is that no one person is able to speak for the

culture and that what hip hop people say and do is negotiated by different persons, across different local and social contexts.

Since *Black Noise* and *Hip Hop America*, the number of scholarly works that examine hip hop culture have grown, and this literature has often been generated from the field of cultural studies (Smitherman 1997; Light 1999; Bennett 1999; Kitwana 2002; Perry 2004; Forman and Neal 2004; Chang 2005). The increasing growth of hip hop literature has led to the creation of a number of hip hop institutes and archives, resulting in what Snell and Soderman (2014, 76) describe as the “academisation” of hip hop culture.

Snell and Soderman compare the rise of Hip-Hop Studies as being similar to the musical genres of jazz and rock emerging as academic fields of study (2014, 85). In 2002, Harvard University started *The Hip-Hop Archive* and according to this archive, in 2005, there were over three hundred classes, courses and programs in the United States related to hip hop in some way (Snell and Soderman 2014, 77). Additionally, in 2007, Cornell University started the *Cornell Hip Hop Collection*: an initiative to collect hip hop music recordings, photographs, event flyers and other historical objects perceived as being significant to hip hop’s cultural history. This rise of hip hop institutes and archives, as well as the growing number of related classes, courses and programs is demonstrative that hip hop has, since the mid-1990s, become a serious and legitimate field of study within the academy.

As stated by Petchauer in 2009, the scholarly works on hip hop reside mostly across the fields of philosophy, sociology, psychology, counseling, communications, higher education, Black studies, cultural studies, women’s studies, spirituality, ethnomusicology, critical literacy, curriculum studies and sociolinguistics (949). The trend towards new interdisciplinary fields has brought about the development of the field of Hip-Hop Studies—a interdisciplinary field which is becoming more and more established, particularly in North America since the publication of Forman and Neal’s (2004) *That’s the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, which has helped fuel and further legitimise the “academisation” of hip hop culture.

*That’s the Joint!* can be considered a key rejoinder to the work of critics like Kilson and Pearson, who argue that hip hop is not a field worthy of any serious (and so

scholarly) examination. The volume comprises a collection of essays written by a number of writers who Forman and Neal consider to be the leading scholars within the field of hip hop studies and who originate from a broad range of academic disciplines. The essays compiled in *That's the Joint!* emphasise hip hop's broad, nuanced and critical capabilities. As Eric Dyson (2004 xiv) states in the Foreword to the text,

This book makes it plain that hip-hop is no fad, either culturally or intellectually, and that its best artists and intellectuals are as capable of stepping back and critiquing its flows and flaws as the most astute observers and participants in any other genre of musical or critical endeavor.

These efforts on the part of those who initially worked to develop hip hop as a legitimate site of academic enquiry, writing about rap music and race, have paved the way for the current generation of scholarly hip hop writers, such as myself. However, hip hop research is still fraught with many tensions and push-backs and my work is part of a continuing effort that seeks to highlight hip hop's capabilities within the academy, one of which being that hip hop can itself be a lens through which to build a social theory.

### **Hip Hop Research: From New York to Beyond**

One of the tensions that exists within the scholarly hip hop literature has been with the legitimacy of hip hop practices, histories and peoples outside of the USA. In the earliest scholarly writings on hip hop there was not a lot said about hip hop culture outside of North America. This is because in much of the earlier writings there was a strong emphasis on discussions pertaining to issues of race and hip hop culture: Judith McDonnell (1992) and Houston A. Baker Jr. (1993) located hip hop solely within the African American culture and Tricia Rose (1994) prioritised hip hop's Black roots in *Black Noise*.

Even now, in 2018, there tends to be an attitude—both within hip hop circles and across much of the scholarly hip hop literature—that the hip hop which happens *inside* the USA is, for one reason or another, more legitimate, authentic and culturally significant than the hip hop that happens *outside* of the it. This attitude seems to reflect many of the realities held by various North American hip hop

practitioners. As one breaker from New York said to me, “I don’t think you should be able to call yourself a bboy outside of New York City, it should be called something else”.

Competing notions of authenticity have been the subject of numerous scholarly hip hop books and journal articles: Mitchell (2001), who addresses the various differing notions of hip hop authenticity outside of the USA in *Global Noise*; Osumare (2002), who has a different take to Mitchell and sees hip hop being practiced by non-African Americans as being an appropriation of Black American culture; and Pennycook (2007) who writes about the global spread of hip hop authenticity as being similar to the global spread of the English language.

Writers such as Bennett (1999), Mitchell (2001), Maxwell (2003), Condry (2006), Alim (2009), Osumare (2002) and Dimitriadis (2009) are but a few who have positioned hip hop as a form of social narrative that exists across many places, not only within the United States of America. These scholars have sought to consider hip hop and its many practices as a living, constantly evolving, global field—in which authenticity and legitimacy is something that is earned and socially constructed across local settings, rather than something that is fixed or agreed upon. They have each used hip hop as a lens to explore various aspects of cultural production, some of which has been in relation to how local and global cultural identities are made and negotiated (Mitchell 2001; Maxwell 2003; Condry 2006); how authenticity is negotiated and contested (Bennett 1999; Osumare 2002; Pennycook 2007; Alim 2009), how hip hop knowledge is transmitted and informed by local peoples and cultures (Dimitriadis 2009).

As Mitchell states in the introduction to his text, *Global Noise* (2001), he aimed to fill a void within the academic literature, which, at the time, was that manifestations of hip hop outside the USA were rarely acknowledged or seriously examined (2001, 2). In this thesis, I intend to build on this growing body of scholarly hip hop literature which explores hip hop’s expressions, narratives and cultural productions outside of the USA. I also intend to build upon the small but growing body of anthropological research which examines the embodied and performative acts of



breakers (Osumare 2002; Schloss 2009; Johnson 2009).<sup>9</sup>

## **Hip Hop Research: Where are all the Breakers?**

Anthropological research on breaking is a fairly small domain within the scholarly hip hop literature. In preliminary research for this thesis I discovered only a handful of scholarly texts that have focused on the lives, performances and practice of breaking practitioners. Schloss' text, *Foundation* (2009), is perhaps one of the most widely recognised and extensive scholarly works on the subject of breaking. He covers breaking's (or b-boying's, as he describes it) oral histories and its strong connection with funk music. His text *Foundation* includes many descriptions of what typical breaking performances look like in situ, an aspect rarely touched upon by other scholarly hip hop writers. Yet one of the difficulties I have with Schloss' representations of breaking is how he presents their performances in a neat and straightforward manner. From reading his accounts of breaking one might get the sense that there is a formula that *all* breakers, across all localities, are aware of and that breakers typically follow this formula when they dance. For example, Schloss writes:

The form of b-boying, in particular, provides a narrative structure that gives meaning to the specific moves. Each performer begins with toprock (rhythmic upright dancing that introduces a dancer's style and character) before dropping to the ground and engaging in footwork (disciplined, flowing moves that display rhythm, finesse, and creativity), power moves (displaying strength), and air moves (acrobatics). Each dancer's turn ends with a freeze, a concluding pose that summarizes his or her statement. Every time b-boys or b-girls return to their feet, they have made an assertion about who they are, and the group has accepted or rejected that assertion. (2009, 13)

As there are only a handful of scholarly writers and researchers who have engaged with what breaking performances look like, there does tend to be one dominant narrative that many writers to adopt and reproduce: the top-rocking start, the footwork and/or power-moving middle, and the freeze ending (Osumare 2002, 34;

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<sup>9</sup> Although the work is not anthropological, the earliest academic writings on breaking were written by Sally Banes in 1985. Her chapter "Breaking" was first published in *Fresh Hip Hop Don't Stop* (1985) and remains an informative and influential piece of hip hop scholarship.

Lefebvre 2011, 8). This three-part act presents a strong-and-fast image of what breaking performances (generally) look like. The problem with this description is breaking—when examined in situ—does not often adhere to this three-part structure. The boundaries between toprocking, uprocking, footwork, freezes and powermoves are often blurry and the distinction between them is one that breakers tend to play with and against, rather than something that they strictly adhere to. Again, this illustrates the agency by which breakers are not constrained by social structures, even though scholars claim that such structure are essential to most breaking performances.

Many of the breakers that I personally dance with on a regular basis tend not to follow any set performance structure or formula when they dance. For those who do follow a structure, this three-part act is but one of many structures that breakers can use and play with/against. Contrary to what Schloss and others (i.e. Banes 2004, 13) have asserted, this is not the true or even the most agreed-upon performative structure, but rather one of many that breakers employ.

Approaching breaking performances in this way draws from, and builds upon, Judith Butler's concept of "performativity" (1990; 1993; 1996). "Performativity", according to Butler, is the way in which identities are brought into being through a continuous series of performative acts. Hence, Butler articulated how gender is "real only to the extent that it is performed" (1998, 527).

This notion of performativity in relation to the politics of gender and gender performances in breaking has been explored by fellow Australian scholar and breaking practitioner Rachael Gunn (2016; 2017). In her PhD thesis titled, "Deterritorializing gender in Sydney's breakdancing scene : a B-girl's experience of B-boying" (2017), Gunn draws from her own extensive experiences as a female breaker within the male-dominated breaking scene of Sydney, Australia. Utilising the works of Butler and other feminist and post-structural theorists, particularly Deleuze and Guttari, Gunn argues that the activity of breaking offers a space to displace and transgress gendered norms. Similarly, in this thesis, I, like Gunn, think that the agency afforded to individual practitioners in breaking allows for new

possibilities to manifest within and across different breaking scenes..<sup>10</sup>

I have no doubt that Schloss, and other hip hop writers, are aware of the improvisational qualities and performativity that shapes the diverse expressions of different breaking performances. Attention is often drawn to the dynamic and improvisational nature of breaking across different contexts. For example, in a comment about footwork, Schloss writes, "Although floor work [footwork] can sometimes be choreographed (most commonly in the case of group routines), most breakers improvise this portion of the dance (89)". Nonetheless the three-act structure still tends to be depicted in broader descriptions of breaking performances again and again, and so it is worth asking why this is the case. Perhaps it is because this structure is a simple and effective method by which to explain what breaking performances (generally) tend to look like, particularly to those who may have very limited experience or knowledge about breaking or hip hop culture.

From speaking with breakers about this issue I have gathered that it is often the most common breaking performances that are the most negatively received. This is due to the fact that, over time, formulaic breaking performances become tiresome to watch. Simply, people get bored of seeing the same routine, and this creates a push amongst breakers to innovate. The drive to be seen as innovative results in the dominant structures of breaking performances shifting, and thus new performative structures can emerge.

One of the difficulties I have had with my own representations of breaking performances has been to try to articulate the improvisational and dynamic ways in which the aesthetics of breaking constantly shifts and moves, over time and across different spaces. Thus, the representations of the breaking bodies in the chapters that follow are not aimed at capturing or presenting linear accounts of the dance, but rather are aimed at describing particular gestures, movements and actions in situ.

In "The End of the Body" (1992), Martin suggests that we are seeing the end of one

kind of body and the beginning of another kind of body (121). Contemporary research on the body is producing new and varied perspectives on how writers are perceiving and conceptualising bodies in space and time. In anthropological discourses there has been a shift from seeing bodies, particularly Black bodies, through the lens of ethnography and White bodies through the lens of art. But also, new research on the body have started to shift towards paying more attention to the limitations of textual representations of bodies in space and time, and working towards finding more fluid and flexible representations of bodily actions and gestures (Martin 1992; 1994). As Martin suggests (1992), there may not be any clear-cut method by which to translate the movements and actions of bodies in space and time onto the page, but if one is to attempt to do so then there needs to be a more reflexive and open representation of the body in such an account (134). Martin's claim is that more attention needs to be given to the situational, dynamic and fluid ways in which bodies experience different modes and forms of being.

The work of dance scholars who conceptualise the body as a vehicle through which to examine cultural expressions of identity and power relations (Kaeppeler 1978; 2000, Hanna 1979; 1987; 1988, Martin 1992 and Novack 1999), have led me to examine breaking performances as a claim of what breaking looks like, and how one ought to do and be a breaker. As Martin writes, bodies and their actions are seen and made so within a particular context (1992, 121). I do not claim to know all the ins and outs of what all breaking performances mean. Nor am I able (or foolish enough) to interpret other people's breaking performances in the same way that I could my own. There needs, I think, to be room for some ambiguity in one's interpretation of breaking so that multiple readings of the same performance can be made.

Historically, and somewhat evident by the traditional "three-act" formula of breaking performances, textual representations of breaking performances have in the past often been quite rigid. An example of this can be found in the writings of Sally Banes, who wrote about breaking from a perspective of dance studies, and who describes breaking performances as a "competitive, acrobatic, and pantomimic [form of] dancing" (2004, 13). She invokes the language of competitive sporting

activities in her descriptions, in her words: “It began as a kind of game, a friendly contest in which black and Hispanic teenagers outdid one another with outrageous physical contortions, spins, and back flips” (13). When Banes goes on to describe what breaking looks like, she says, “The simplest combination of a breaking sequence was entry-footwork-spin-freeze-exit. But [this] could be extended by inserting more footwork-spin-freeze segments. In other words, you might get: entry-footwork-spin-freeze-footwork-spin-freeze-exit. And so on” (15-16).

These kinds of neat description is useful for explaining to those who are unfamiliar with what breaking is or what it looks like, what some breaking performances typically entail. However, Bane’s description offers is a fairly simple explanation and does not account for the immense diversity and improvisation which, to some breakers, is breaking’s foundation. In George’s *Fresh, Hip Hop Don’t Stop* (1985), there is a discernible appreciation of the messy and blurred qualities of breaking performances. George provides, I think, the reader with more of a sense of how breakers improvise in the moment, and how they are able to play with and against certain things that are present during that particular moment in space and time. There is still a sense of a neat structure to breaking performances, but there is perhaps more openness to his description than there was offered by Banes. Thus, in his description of a breaking performance, he writes:

Each person’s turn in the ring was very brief – ten to thirty seconds – but packed with action and meaning. It began with an entry, a hesitating walk that allowed him to get in step with the music for several beats and take his place “on stage.” Next the dancer “got down” to the floor to do the footwork, a rapid, slashing, circular scan of the floor by sneakered feet, in which the hands support the body’s weight while the head and torso revolve at a slower speed, a kind of syncopated sunken pirouette, known as a helicopter. Acrobatic transitions such as head spins, hand spins, shoulder spins, flips and the swipe – a flip of the weight from hands to feet that also involves a twist in the body’s direction – served as bridges between the footwork and the freeze. The final element was the exit, a spring back to verticality or a special movement that returned the dancer to the outside of the circle. (George 1985, 90)

What one can learn from George’s description is that there is less of a focus on the general categorisations of breaking: floorwork, footwork, freezes, powermoves and

so on, and more of the evocative, open and *lived* experience of a breaker's body in space and time. His account provides the reader with a more personal and situational description of breaking performances, as though we are seeing the actions and gestures from his own personal perspective, rather than a more general, objective, perspective. Personal representations of breaking performances draw attention to the situational, improvisational and lived experiences of what these performances are like in situ and it is these kinds of descriptions that I offer in the accounts that follow.

In my own experience, and practice, I have seen the importance of this kind of open and unassuming description expressed repeatedly. My friend and fellow breaker, Benny Benz, asked (jokingly) of another breaker (whilst being aware that I could overhear him) whether they thought they were a *style* or a *power* bboy; to which any serious reply was going to be met with ridicule. The reason that Benny Benz was going to respond to any serious response with ridicule is because he (and many other breakers that I know) think the categorisation of a "style" breaker and a "power" breaker is ridiculous; a distinction patently nonsensical to any practised breaker.

Osumare (2002), Schloss (2009) and Johnson (2009) are three scholarly hip hop writers who have undertaken ethnographic research with breaking practitioners and whose research has been useful for my own approach and theory. Although their work is still situated (for the most part) with breakers who live within the USA: Osumare's research was focused on breakers in Hawaii; Schloss' on breakers in New York; and Johnson's on breakers living across various cities in America, and some of her ethnographic work took place in Europe (mainly in the United Kingdom), their writing about breaking has still been very useful.

Osumare's (2002, 36) writing about "identity" led me towards Butler's concept of "performativity" and how local breaking identities are shaped, in part, by the embodied gestures and actions expressed on the dance floor. Schloss's (2009) writing about what a personal engagement in hip hop can offer, helped me to formulate my own unique positioning as a breaker who writes about other breakers. And finally Johnson (2009, 201), who wrote extensively about the activity

of the breaking cyphers, illustrated to me how breaking is, in her words: “a rich site for the analysis of Hip Hop’s globality” (201). Johnson claims that because hip hop is a globalising field, it needs to be analysed through its various practices: hence the analysis of breaking becomes a useful way in which to examine broader social and cultural concerns that relate to hip hop’s globality.

Crucially, in locations outside of the USA, hip hop dance practitioners—specifically breakers—are themselves rarely examined or discussed. Although there have been several hip hop texts that have described hip hop as a dynamic and diverse cultural world—comprised of many people, practices, histories and cultural expressions—there is often a reluctance to give much attention to the embodied acts and physical performances that breakers engage in. Instead, what tends to be examined across much of the scholarly hip hop literature are hip hop music practitioners and their expressions, identities, histories and understandings. In many hip hop texts, breaking is often consigned to a single book chapter and sometimes not even that much.

Exemplifying this point is Forman and Neal’s *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004), which consists of a large collection of hip hop related essays, divided into seven sections (the book is nearly six-hundred pages long). As Eric Dyson states in the foreword, *That’s The Joint* is “a summary text, one that captures the many sided features of a dynamic culture that demands rigorous criticism and consideration” (2004, xiv). In Shanesha Brooks-Tatum’s review of *That’s the Joint* (published in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, second edition, 2012), Brooks-Tatum states that Forman and Neal set out to construct a text with the most significant and ground-breaking research across the field of hip hop (2012, 1113). Yet out of the forty-four essays that appear in the text, only three talk about hip hop dancing, and out of these three only two examine breaking. Rap music, on the other hand, has eighteen essays dedicated to it.

If Forman and Neal really did set out to provide a summary text of hip hop in *That’s the Joint!*, capturing its many sides, whilst also drawing from the most significant and ground-breaking research, then is the problem that the research on breaking is not significant or ground-breaking enough? Or, is it that breaking is perhaps not

seen (even by hip hop scholars) as being worthy or significant enough to warrant a more serious inclusion in such a collection?

I argue that breaking is just as significant and worthy of examination as any other hip hop practice or activity. Furthermore, I would assert there is a basis for this claim in the writings of one of hip hop's most prominent scholarly texts, *Black Noise* (1994). In *Black Noise*, Rose provides the reader with a clear definition of what she understands to be hip hop's three "central forms" – that is its main characteristics. As stated by Rose, "Hip hop's central forms – graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music – developed in relation to one another and in relation to the larger society" (1994, 27).

Rose takes this notion, of hip hop having three central forms, further by providing a brief explanation and history of each of them (1994, 34-61). What is important to note here is that Rose presents each form as existing on equal footing with one another. Thus, to Rose, rap music is no more or less significant to hip hop than graffiti or breaking. This point is made clear at the end of her second chapter:

Hip hop events featured breakdancers, rappers, and DJ's as triple-bill entertainment. Graffiti writers drew murals for DJ's stage platforms and designed posters and flyers to advertise hip hop events. Breakdancer Crazy Legs, founding member of the Rock Steady Crew, describes the communal atmosphere between writers, rappers, and breakers in the formative years of hip hop: "summing it up, basically going to a jam back then was watching people drink, dance, compare graffiti art in their black book". (1994, 35)

*Black Noise* is held up as one of the masterpieces of scholarly hip hop literature (Snell and Soderman 2014, 78), often praised as being the touchstone or foundational academic text on the subject of hip hop culture (Petchauer 2009, 950). As such, *Black Noise* has had a significant impact (and still does) across the field of Hip Hop Studies. Even Johnson claims (2009, 22) that *Black Noise* was the first text to examine hip hop politically and intellectually.<sup>11</sup> Forman (2004, 1-12) echoes this point also in the introduction to *That's the Joint*, citing Rose as one of most

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<sup>11</sup> Two other texts cited by Johnson (2009) as being early intellectual engagements with hip hop are: David Toop's *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop* (1984) and Dick Hebdige's *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (1987).



influential and important scholarly hip hop voices in the field. Nonetheless, even though *Black Noise* names breaking as being one of hip hop's central forms, Rose herself does not treat it as equal in her text.

If Rose (1994), Chang (2005), Forman and Neal (2004) and others have stated that breaking is a central element of hip hop culture, that it is on equal footing with other hip hop practices, then why is it the case that breaking is so rarely examined within the scholarly hip hop literature? Why are there so many publications dedicated to examining the lyrics in popular rap music songs, but only a handful of publications on the dance performances of breakers and other hip hop dancers?

In *Foundation* (2009), Schloss provides us with two very compelling reasons as to why this might be the case. The first, writes Schloss, is due to the fact that there has been a history of writers and researchers who may be hesitant to write about "the body" compared to writing about "the mind" (8). In a similar fashion, Novack explains in *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990) that "if researchers do pay attention to movement and the body, it may be only in order to see the "mind" which lies behind it" (7). This, writes Novack, is because the body has in the past been seen as an unintellectual and separate characteristic of the human, though as Schloss, Novack and other writers (O'Neil 1985) have articulated, our cultures are embodied – meaning that our bodies and our minds are not separate entities, but deeply interrelated. Thus, Novack makes the point:

A primary means of understanding, knowing, making sense of the world comes through shared conceptions of our bodies and selves and through the movement experiences society offers us. (1990, 8)

The notion that our bodies and our minds are separate entities is an idea which is often traced back to Rene Descartes' influential concept of the mind-body dualism. The legacy of Cartesian philosophy has restricted the level of serious research into bodily practices and expressions, even up until very recent times. Although Novack agrees that the division between the mind and body has long since been debunked, a hesitancy to research the body still exists, despite the fact that writers have moved away from propagating this outdated notion.

The second reason as to why breaking is not widely discussed within the scholarly

hip hop literature, writes Schloss (2009, 8), is due to the claim that it is much easier to study rap music than it is to study breaking. There seems to be a focus on the end product here, as rap music is itself produced within embodied spaces, yet the claim seems to disregard the process of creation. Regardless Schloss makes the case that one is more easily able to study rap music from the comfort of one's own home, whereas to study breaking, particularly the embodied expressions of breakers in situ, requires one to engage in the practice up close and in person. He explains,

In the case of something like rap music, which is intended to be experienced by people who have no personal relationship with the artist, this may not be a substantial liability. But in the case of b-boying, which is intended to be experienced in person, such an approach can distort its subject to the point of invisibility. Unmediated hip-hop, by definition, cannot be understood without becoming personally involved in it. (2009, 8)

However, as noted above, I take Schloss' assertion regarding an "unmediated hip-hop", which he defines as being face-to-face interactions (2009, 4), not entirely convincing. Schloss' use of the term "unmediated" can be read as implying that there is some objective truth to be discovered about hip hop if only researchers employed a more tacit and personal engagement. I do not think my own engagement in breaking is "unmediated", as there is always a social and cultural lens that mediates our experience of the world; and as I have argued earlier, I do not think that my own personal experience as a breaker enables my writing about hip hop to be readily accepted by other breakers. Whether one engages in breaking personally or through the distance of a computer screen, there is I think always some kind of mediation at play. Furthermore, this ambition to capture the unmediated might discourage future writers and researchers from studying breakers and other hip hop dance practitioners, if their studies are not engaged in a face-to-face interaction.

In this chapter I have shown how studies of breakers within the scholarly hip hop literature are somewhat limited, namely because breaking and other hip hop dance practices are not as a well-known and perhaps harder to engage with in the same way that one can engage with other hip hop practices, such as hip hop music. I addressed the connection between my social theory and my positioning as a

breaking practitioner. In my review of the scholarly hip hop literature I discussed how my method and theory is situated within this literature, as well as how I seek to contribute towards the research with breakers outside of the USA. In the next chapter, I share parts of my own journey into the world of hip hop, in which I began learning about breaking during the late 1990s in my hometown of Perth, Western Australia.

## – Chapter 3 –

### *“Getting Down”*

#### **The Politics of Hip Hop Culture**

*The best things about being a bboy and travelling all around the world is that you get to know so many people from all sorts of places that either come to your country or you get to go to their country. And you get to experience what the scene is like in that city or in that country and you get to know how their culture affects our culture. So breaking culture in Colombia, for example, is different to breaking culture in the U.K. So it's like an insight into our culture in many different cultures around the world.*

– Bboy Spin, Undisputed IV (Stance 2018, 5:16).

I started breaking when I was thirteen years old. I remember watching people doing the most incredible dance moves and tricks in popular music-video clips, films and across the fringes of what Jenkins (1992; 2004) and others have described as the “digital” or “new media” landscape. Across this new media landscape, writes Jenkins (2004, 34-35), there has been a considerable shift, not just in terms of media ownership, accessibility and consumption, but also of the role that individual consumers (audiences) have within this new media environment. Jenkins describes this shift as being a move towards a more active and influential “participatory culture”, whereby audiences/spectators of media are able to, in his words, “appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (1992, 23).

Initially, it was through seeing and then dabbling in these hip hop dance moves that

I began to participate in and produce a local hip hop identity; an identity constructed in part from the images I witnessed on television and the internet, and in part from the social interactions I had with others regarding these images and others. This was, for me, the beginning of my journey into the politics of hip hop culture.

My use of the term “politics” here is in reference to the ongoing, contestable and conflicted nature of this culture, as people who identify as hip hop practitioners struggle to make sense of what the culture is and what it is not. I first encountered the term “politics” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus’ *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), and then again in Jeffery O.G. Ogbar’s *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (2007). In *Writing Culture*, Clifford and Marcus use the term to draw attention to the contestable nature of writing and representing different people’s cultural worlds. As Clifford states in the introduction to the text,

Cultures are not scientific "objects" (assuming such things exist, even in the natural sciences). Culture, and our views of "it," are produced historically, and are actively contested. (1986, 18)

Similarly, in *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (2007), Ogbar’s use of the term also refers to the actively contested nature of culture. However, in his text he looks at the politics of hip hop through the lens of various rap and hip hop music artists. In this chapter I examine the politics surrounding the fashioning of local breaking identities. Through sharing parts of my own personal journey into the world of hip hop, I discuss the unique and creative ways in which hip hop is experienced and made sense of within local contexts. This chapter ultimately suggests that strong and fast notions of a homogenous hip hop culture tend to fall short, as hip hop is learned and experienced by individuals who embark upon their journey into hip hop in a variety of different ways, producing varying kinds of local hip hop scenes. As bboy Spin says in the epigraph above, there are “many different [hip hop] cultures around the word” and not all of them are in harmony with one another.

It should be noted that the term “culture”, across hip hop circles, is a term which is

both highly pervasive and controversial. It is pervasive in the sense that many notable hip hop peoples, practitioners and scholarly hip hop writers tend to describe hip hop as being a culture. However, it is controversial by the fact that when it comes to questions about what the culture is, where the culture originated, who gets to decide who is in or out of the culture and various other cultural disputes—many of which are not able to ever be truly resolved—hip hop culture is a term comprised of many meanings, to many different peoples. As this thesis aims to examine how hip hop culture is produced, sustained and transformed, this chapter frames and positions how the processes of cultural production is experienced within the local. The politics of hip hop culture is that what hip hop peoples say and do is never truly read from a neutral position. Hip hop is always seen and experienced through a particular lens, from a particular perspective and position.

This chapter is organised into three parts. In Part One: “Learning to Break”, I share the journey I undertook as a young teenager learning about breaking and the culture of hip hop in my hometown of Perth, in Western Australia. I show how my entry into the practice of breaking was heavily informed by the North American breakers I watched in popular films and music-video clips. I discuss the unique and varied ways in which I learned about breaking and hip hop culture.

In Part Two: “We Don’t Buy into All of It”, I discuss how individual breakers play with and against aspects of hip hop culture, across different social situations. Drawing from Maxwell’s (2001) point in *Global Noise* that hip hop is “always up for debate” (264), I look at how breakers do not necessarily buy into everything that is said and done in the name of hip hop. That there is a capacity for individuals to connect with some aspects and dismiss others.

There are many aspects of hip hop that are not adequately addressed within this thesis: the sexism and misogyny in popular rap music, the representations of women’s voices in hip hop and the struggles of African American peoples and cultures, to name a few. Many of these issues may seem—to some writers and practitioners—to be vital in any study of hip hop culture, regardless of its proposed aims or intentions. However, many writers have written about, acknowledged and examined these the issues in great detail. Thus, the aspects of hip hop I discuss and

examine throughout this thesis are shaped and informed by my own personal experiences, as well as the materials I gathered out in the field.

Lastly, in Part Three: “The Relationship between New York, Osaka and Perth”, I examine the relationship and power dynamics between each of my three breaking scenes. Each scene is comprised of a unique and ever-changing aggregate of different breaking practitioners: different peoples from varying social, cultural, political and economic backgrounds. What makes them connected to said scene are the relationships they form and the experiences they share with one another. Although scenes are located within a specific geographical locations is it not these locations that are central to the imaginations of scenes, but rather the people who make up the scenes themselves. What is illustrated here is how breaking scenes offer unique ways of seeing and understanding hip hop. Scenes offer unique perspectives to the globalising shifts and developments that occur across the broader field of hip hop culture—a position from which to examine, critique, interpret and analyse.

### **Part One: “Learning to Break”**



Figure 2. Breaking session with my high school mates at the Rosalie Primary School. Photograph by Nathan Pinkerton, 2001.

Figure 2 shows a picture of me and my high school friends, who I started breaking with in the late 1990s—early 2000s. We used to break everywhere back then: in the parks, on the streets, at home and during lunch breaks during school. This photograph of us was taken at the Rosalie Primary School, one of our regular meet-up spots.

At Rosalie we would set up our speakers and settle in for a session. The music we listened to was not what you might describe as hip hop music—in fact, it was very rarely rap music that we danced to. I used to enjoy breaking to The Prodigy’s *The Fat of the Land* (1997) album, and Rage Against the Machine’s *Renegades* (2000) album. These two albums had songs which really pumped me up and gave me the adrenaline I needed to commit to trying the harder breaking moves that were most likely going to cause me injury if I did not commit to them completely. Our breaking sessions at the Rosalie Primary School were improvised around an idea of what breaking might be, shaped by my early interactions with hip hop (but not defined by them).

The first time I remember actually seeing people doing breaking moves was in the music-video clip for the song “It’s Like That!” by Run DMC vs Jason Nevins (see Figure 3).<sup>12</sup> It begins with two groups—one consisting of all men, the other, all women—strutting towards one another in what looks to be an abandoned warehouse. When the two groups finally meet they have this epic stare-down moment where both the men and women stand opposite one another, arms-folded. It is kind of cheesy looking back on it nowadays, but at the time I thought it was really cool. The scene is reminiscent of what you might expect in a film where a street brawl is about to break out. But instead of punches being thrown around these two groups, or crews as I would describe them, engage in what breakers call a “battle”. The way a battle works is there is a call and response nature to the exchange: one person goes in (occupying the dance space) and performs a sequence of dance movements. Then a member of the opposing side goes in and responds to the previous person’s dance movements. This sequence of events then

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<sup>12</sup> “It’s Like That”, by Run-DMC and Jason Nevins, was produced by Russell Simmons, Larry Smith, and Jason Nevins. It was released on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1997.



repeats itself for an extended period of time.

Near the end of the breaking battle in the video, one breaker with a big afro struts into the middle of the dance space shaking his head wildly to the beat. His afro goes wild as he circles around the space—like a shark—before jumping into a flurry of gymnastic-style tricks and spins, ending up on his head, which he then spins on, like a pin, really fast, for just a short moment.



Figure 3. Screenshot of Krazy Kujo performing his head-spin in “It’s Like That!” by Run DMC vs Jason Nevins (Marcus Sternberg 2013).

After seeing this breaker with the afro—who I later discovered went by the name Krazy Kujo—do the head-spin in “It’s Like That!”, I really wanted to learn how to do the head-spin myself. I spent the next year working on it as well as a bunch of other breaking moves and steps. At the time there were not a lot of resources to be found on how to learn breaking moves. The tools that my friends and I had consisted mostly of a small collection of bootleg films and video-tape recordings. These recordings contained various music-video clips and a few notable hip hop films from the early 1980s and 1990s.

I remember watching films like *Style Wars* (1983), *Beat Street* (1984), *La Haine* (1995), the instructional video *The DMC B-Boy Foundations* (1998), and *The Freshest Kids* (2002), a documentary. It was through watching these few films, as well as a

diverse and eccentric collection of other bits and pieces, that my high school friends and I began to learn the names and looks of many of the common breaking moves and tricks. We also began to learn the names of some notable breaking practitioners from Europe and the United States. Consequently, we were beginning to learn about the world of breaking and how this dance practice was connected, historically and culturally, to what many breaking practitioners described as the hip hop culture.

The breakers my friends and I watched, people from Europe and North America who came to us via our television and computer screens, presented to us stories about what breaking was. Their stories became our stories, and then the stories we told others. For example, I learned, early on, that the word “breakdancing” was an incorrect term to use to describe the dance.

In *The Freshest Kids* (2002) documentary, notable breaking practitioner Crazy Legs says “The word bboy originated from Kool Herc” (Casey Suchan, Quincy Jones III and Eric Brenner 2002, 9:02), and the terms “bboy” and “bgirl”, or “breaking” itself, were the original terms used by the majority of hip hop’s pioneers. In the documentary’s interview with Kool Herc he provides a brief explanation of where the term “bboy” comes from:

Bboy – boys that break. It didn’t come from break on the record, it come from this man, you broke. He went to the point, the breaking point. We just use that exaggeration of that term to the dancing. The bboys: the break-boys. (2002, 9:55)

Throughout the documentary there are other people’s voices who offer slightly different narratives to Kool Herc’s definition of the dance practice, yet collectively there seems to be an agreement that the terms breaking, bboying and bgirling are the correct terms due to the fact they are the preferred terms by many hip hop pioneers. Throughout the documentary it is believed that the term “breakdancing” was created and used by mostly media pundits and journalists who had not been listening to what pioneers such as Herc, Bam and others were saying.

From watching *The Freshest Kids* (2002), and other popular hip hop documentaries, one learns therefore that the term “breakdancing” is an unauthentic term used by

“outsiders” of hip hop culture, whereas the terms breaking, bboying and bgirling are the legitimate and authentic terms, used by most “insiders”. Also in the documentary *the GREAT Donald D* states that “hip hop is a culture that started in the boogie-down Bronx” (2002, 4:13). DJ Africa Bambaataa chimes in after Donald D and adds that hip hop culture “has different elements: dealing with music (rap); graffiti art; bboys, what you call break-boys; or bgirls, what you call break-girls” (2002, 4:16). If one takes what Donald D and Africa Bambaataa say in this documentary seriously, as I did, one begins to piece together an image of what being actively engaged in the practice of breaking means within a global context. You develop a connection, via an engagement in a dance practice, with a hip hop culture of specific norms and origins.

These stories not only shaped my own understanding of breaking, but also provided me the license to police what others were doing and saying about breaking as well. If people called the dance “breakdancing” or claimed that breaking had originated somewhere other than the Bronx, then I could direct them to the words of Kool Herc, Donald D, Bambaataa and Crazy Legs. Watching films and documentaries about hip hop was how I first learned about what hip hop was and what it meant to be a legitimate member of the hip hop culture.

Similarly, in the *DMC B-Boy Foundations* (1998) video, Popmaster Fable says at the start of the film that “any true bboy starts off his dance with top-rocking”. Top-rocking, being the part of a breaker’s performance where they dance in an upright position before moving down towards the floor, is something which many breakers do as they enter a dance space. Johnson (2009) eloquently describes top-rocking as “the rhythmic dancing that opens a breaker’s entrance in a dance circle” (2). What Popmaster Fable claims about top-rocking provides those who witness his claim the ability to police the actions of others. For example, if I saw a friend of mine begin his or her breaking performance without performing any top-rocking before moving down towards the floor, by quoting Popmaster Fable I could easily call them out on this blunder and assert that their breaking performance was lacking, due to their absence of any top-rocking.

Examples like these illustrate how what hip hop peoples say and do (but not just

any “hip hop people”, the ones that have been held up as authorities because of their involvement in these documentaries) have a large impact on how I, and others around the world, learn about hip hop culture. The popular films and documentaries I watched as a teenager formed my initial understandings about hip hop culture. As I continued to break, I continued to listen to what others had to say about breaking. Within their words were various terms, phrases, concepts, philosophies and attitudes about what was supposedly the right and wrong way to express, perform, connect and identify as a breaker, as well as how this identity as a breaking practitioner was connected, more broadly, to the hip hop culture.

My connections to breaking were formed while growing up in Perth, Western Australia, quite far away from New York City, the supposed birthplace of hip hop culture. This meant that what breakers said and did in Perth was often seen as being lesser to our North American counterparts. There is a sense that those of us in Perth are always playing catch up to what is going on in North America and Europe. This distance and the differences between the breaking scenes in Australia and the scenes in the United States formulated a distinction, whereby New York City was seen as a kind of cultural hub or center of hip hop, and Perth and other Australian cities were on the fringes.

### **Breaking Names**

Many of the breakers and hip hop practitioners I have mentioned thus far have all had an alias. These nicknames are often known and used within and across various hip hop circles. DJ Kool Herc, bboy Crazy Legs and Krazy Kujo are not the names which their parents gave them, but are instead names created, given to and used by themselves and others, and within the world of hip hop. Many of the breakers whom I regularly dance with in Perth have themselves adopted a unique breaking name, which they prefer to be called by.

There are many reasons given as to why breaking names are important. Naming is not just about identifying someone, it is about understanding “persons” within a different context: a hip hop context. Speaking with breakers about their own breaking names, some told me that having a breaking name makes you unique to

others. Some said that breaking names are useful in that they can offer an insight into ones performative style and/or character. What naming in breaking does is it separates oneself from a bureaucratic world and locates them within the world of hip hop. Breaking names are interpersonal and they are for this social world, used within particular social practices. Some breakers say that breaking names are a way of indicating to others that you are part of hip hop, and not having a breaking name is indicative that one is not yet part of the culture.

In speaking with fellow breakers about the process of acquiring and using breaking names, some have said that they already had a nickname before they started breaking, and that it was often this nickname which became their breaking/hip hop name. Others who did not have a nickname or could not come up with a suitable one, told me stories of how other breakers had given them their breaking name. This seemed to be, for some, a kind of rites of passage into the world of breaking and hip hop culture. Whereas some breakers I know completely reject this notion that having a breaking name is important and dismiss the claims that one needs to have a breaking name to be considered an authentic breaker or hip hop person.

One of the few breakers I know of who does not have or use a breaking name is my good friend and fellow breaking crewmate Natty. Natty and I went to high school together and he started getting into breaking in 2001, two years after I had started breaking. After having tested out a few breaking names Natty gave up on them entirely. Regardless of the lack of a breaking name, Natty has continued to practise and identify as a breaker, with relative ease, although Natty is a kind of nickname in itself, as his full name is Nathaniel.

In 2002, Natty had only been breaking for a year but had managed to achieve great success in breaking competitions and having mastered many of the extremely hard breaking moves in a very short period of time. This prompted some breakers in Perth to begin calling him "Endless Natty", in light of his remarkable ability to learn breaking moves very quickly and with little noticeable effort. There was a short period in which many were calling Natty "Endless", however, the name never really stuck. Being quite a shy and humble individual it seemed that the name Endless was perhaps a little too self-aggrandising for Natty to stomach with any conviction. Thus,

the name Endless became a bit of a running joke and continuing to call him Endless was obviously something that Natty did not appreciate. After continued rejection of the breaking name, the breakers in Perth and I reverted to just calling him Natty, which he prefers. His choice not to have or use a breaking name has not been, to my knowledge, of any significant concern within the Perth breaking scene. I have no doubt that he is sometimes asked whether he has a breaking name or not, and if not, why. But his rejection of a breaking name is demonstrative of the fact that there is no simple process or agreed-upon rites of passage into the world of breaking and hip hop culture. Some people have unique hip hop aliases and some do not. These names do not articulate a system and are not practised by all who identify as members of the hip hop culture.

In my own case, I possessed a unique nickname given to me during primary school. My friend Jeremy gave me the nickname “Ippy” in year three. By the time I was in year nine, Ippy had become the name that was used by most of my close friends and even many of my close family members. This really irked my mother who has told me on many occasions that she loves the name Lucas and is horrified that I abandoned it for such a strange nickname that has no apparent connection with my birth name. When I started breaking, Ippy just became my breaking name. It seemed easier not to craft another nickname but just to go with what everyone was already calling me at the time. The nickname Ippy fit the criteria which I assumed a breaking name should: unique to my person and known amongst my fellow breaking mates.

## **Breaking Moves**

When I started getting into breaking, I initially cared very little about dancing to the supposedly correct breaking music or using the correct breaking terminology—except for the term “breaking” which was a term I did in fact adopt quite early on. What attracted me to breaking in the first place was the amazing physical dance moves that I saw breakers like Krazy Kujo and others doing in music-video clips and films. Breaking moves like the head-spin and the windmill were what drew my attention to the dance, and all the other things which seemed to be of such importance to others—the music, the clothes, the top-rocking—were not as

important to me. As my engagement in breaking was controlled through my own exploration, I had the capacity to focus solely on the physical moves that breakers performed in situ. I dismissed other aspects of the dance, such as the music.

I used to spend hours of my free-time practising breaking moves, some of which took me months – sometimes years – to perfect. The windmill, for example, took me roughly six months to learn. It was about three months before I was able to perform something that even resembled the windmill, and then a further three months to do it clean, without smacking my shoulders roughly against the floor.

The windmill is a breaking move which consists of a sequence of bodily positions that you perform in motion. Each bodily position is not held statically, as the move in its entirety involves a lot of swinging of your hips whilst kicking your legs around in an upside down position. It requires a certain level of physical strength and flexibility, and figuring out the timing of when to swing and kick to harness the right amount of momentum is a challenge. The aim of the move is to hold a particular position whilst rotating smoothly from your back, onto your shoulders, onto your hands, and then onto your back again. Once I managed to get it down, my thirst to learn more breaking moves was insatiable.

In the same year that I began practicing breaking moves such as the windmill, I saw the popular science fiction film *The Matrix* (1999) which had just been released in cinemas around Australia.<sup>13</sup> In the film the protagonist, Neo, has the Chinese martial art, Kung-Fu, uploaded into his mind in a matter of seconds. Watching this scene made me think about how incredible it would be to have all the breaking moves I'd seen uploaded into my mind in a matter of seconds, just like Neo. I thought that, if it was possible, I would want to be able to do a head-spin, like Krazy Kujo in "It's Like That!"

As its name suggests, the head-spin is a move in which a dancer literally spins, upside down and for an extended period of time, on their head—without the use of their hands or arms for support. Seeing breakers like Kujo and others perform the head-spin made it known to me that such a move was possible. Almost

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<sup>13</sup> *The Matrix*. Directed and Written by The Wachowski Siblings. Released in 1999. Roadshow Entertainment.

immediately, I began trying to work out how to perform it myself.

## **Learning the Head-Spin**

Growing up in Perth, the physical activities that many of my friends and family were doing at that time consisted mostly of team sports. My dad was an avid cricket and Australian-rules football player and he encouraged me to play cricket and football during my primary and high-school years. When I attended cricket and football practice, the moves that we learned were often taught to us by teachers who seemed to know the moves inside and out; those moves were taught to us in a very systematic way. For example, complex physical movements in cricket were often broken-down and compartmentalised into smaller, easier, moves which we would then practice in a step-by-step manner. The dance moves in breaking, however, seemed to us much harder to break down, and we lacked the trained professionals to teach us the moves step-by-step. My friends and I tried to systematically break-down the head-spin move, but after failing to do so we resorted to just attempting the move in its entirety.

Without much information (remember, in 1999 the internet was still young and video sharing was limited), my friends and I just tried doing it: we placed our heads on the ground and attempted to spin for as long as we possibly could. Using a skateboarding helmet for protection, I began practicing the head-spin by copying what I saw others doing in the videos I was inspired by.<sup>14</sup> I tried using my arms for support and then began attempting to spin because it seemed that a lot of the people who could do the move began from a position in which their hands were supporting their body. From this head-stance position they would then reach across with their arms in order to build up momentum for their eventual spin. My friends and I improvised, and copied what we saw others do. This was the process we stumbled through when learning most of the breaking moves that we did. There was a lot of trial and error, and a lot of injuries and setbacks along the way.

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<sup>14</sup> During the late 90s and early 2000s, my friends and I created and shared bootleg compilations of breaking videos. These videos contained short recordings of breaking performances that we saw on television; mostly snippets of music-video clips and films. These bootleg compilations were passed around from breaker to breaker.



The process of learning the head-spin and other breaking moves proved to be a fun and creative challenge for me, although the injuries I sustained were far less fun to deal with. The amount of pressure I was applying to my head in order to practice head-spins made my scalp bleed often. I had bits of hair falling out from the friction I was applying to my head. And some days I could not bear to practice the move at all because of how much my neck and head were hurting. Besides the damage I was doing to my head and neck, I also landed quite roughly on my shoulders, wrists and toes. I sustained several bruises, scars, sprains and hyper-extension injuries. My family thought that what I was doing to my body was absolutely ridiculous, and my parents requested that I stop multiple times. But I could not stop, as I was slowly beginning to improve and was enjoying the process of learning more and more. Some of the injuries, such as the rough bald spot on the top of my head, or the dark bruises visible on my shoulders, have never completely healed, and seeing them reminds me of the many hours I have spent working on these moves.

The marks on my body allow me to reflect on the way breaking has transformed my own body, for good or bad. As far as bad injuries go, the worst I received from practising head-spins would have to be a particularly gruesome ingrown-toenail, which I had to get surgically removed by a podiatrist. I achieved this injury from persistent heavy crashes onto my left toe. But, over time, I was falling over less and was able to reach further across my body with my arms. My head-spins, although inconsistent, were slowly beginning to look half decent. I was gradually gaining the ability to spin for short periods of time. Finally, after a year or so of practising the move, I was able to spin on my head: one, two, three, four, five times, without the use of my hands for support. I remember the moment when I managed to do five full rotations: it felt incredible.

I became obsessed with the head-spin. I watched as many videos as I could find of other breakers doing them, and I studied the way in which they held themselves; I noted the positions of their arms, legs and hips as they spun. I made mental notes of what to try at my next training session. My engagement in breaking has often comprised of hours and hours of time spent thinking about, reflecting on and trying out the many different physical breaking moves and tricks. Learning how to spin on

my head was both a painful and rewarding process, in that I did eventually learn how to perform the move well, even though it left me sporting those long-lasting injuries.

Learning the head-spin is not something that has an end-date. The learning process is one that still continues for me today. In order to be able to perform the move consistently, I have to make sure to practise doing the move regularly, otherwise I can feel it slipping away. I know that if I do not continue to perform the head-spin often, I will eventually lose the ability to do it.

What my learning of hip hop and the head-spin illustrate is the diverse and individual pathways that people, across different times and places, undertake within hip hop. Hip hop is comprised of many different kinds of practitioners: singers, dancers, painters, poets, writers, music producers and many other kinds. Not everyone comes to learn about hip hop in the same way as one another, nor do people continue to engage in a particular hip hop practice for the same reasons or purposes. Breaking practitioners, such as myself, are an extremely diverse bunch. One example: not everyone who breaks can perform the head-spin. Many of the breakers I dance with regularly cannot do the move, nor do I think that they are committed to learning it. Likewise, there are many other moves that I have not yet committed to learning either.

Around the world, and across the various scenes in which breakers coalesce, people experience and express their breaking in both unique and similar ways. Not everyone who participates in breaking is motivated to learn the same moves or dance in the same way. Not everyone is able to perform the same moves, which are dependent on physical abilities such as strength, flexibility and coordination. Personally, I have often been quick to learn powermoves which require lots of swinging and momentum, moves like the windmill, or the turtle or the swipe, which took my friends comparatively longer to master. Yet I find other breaking moves, such as hand-stand freezes or power moves that require a lot of upper body strength, fairly tough to learn.

Without any centralised institutions, offices or schools to govern how breaking ought to be learned or expressed, there is an agency afforded to those who engage

in the dance. Without any strict systems of authority, hip hop practitioners (dancers, artists and musicians) have the opportunity to work out for themselves, within their own local and social settings, what it means to be a hip hop practitioner. This agency also affords practitioners the capacity to pick and choose—across different social settings—what kind of hip hop they want to express and connect with.

## **Part Two: We Don't Buy Into All of It**

The capacity by which different hip hop persons negotiate the cultural boundaries and dimensions of hip hop, as well as the agency afforded by the lack of strict cultural institutions and authorities, lends people the ability to dismiss or distance themselves from certain aspects of culture of which they do not wish to engage in. As a consequence, some hip hop actors are likely aware of the importance that some devote to matters of race, gender and class, though they might not themselves see it as essential to their own experience or engagement with hip hop.

In *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes*, Maxwell suggests that to write about hip hop is to be imbricated in questions of race, racialism and racism (2003, ix). He states that those who write about hip hop should acknowledge the long history of white appropriations of black art forms (2003, ix). As mentioned earlier, although discussions of race and gender are undoubtedly important, and play a significant role in the social and dynamic productions of breaking and hip hop culture (see Gunn 2016; 2017), such discussions are not important to all hip hop practitioners, across all localities.

The diversity with which hip hop is socially and cultural produced, across different local settings, suggests that what is deemed to be significant can differ immensely depending on the context. Breakers in Perth, for example, are, from my own experience, concerned more with one's physical skills on the dance floor than they are with one's understanding of race in America or of hip hop's African American histories and origins. What this speaks to are questions of legitimacy and authenticity for different hip hop actors across different local and social contexts. That being said, there are many breakers in Perth who do see one's racial or ethnic

heritage as a marker of legitimacy, however it cannot be said to be a marker of legitimacy for all breakers, across all localities.

In an online interview with PaulSkee, a well-known and highly respected breaker from New York named AlienNess, told PaulSkee, “Bboys, they don’t exist no more. Anything past second generation we no longer looking at real bboys, we looking at the bandwagon generation” (mighty4tv 2010, 1:53). Even though he is a highly regarded breaking pioneer, one does not necessarily buy into everything AlienNess says and does. In this 2010 interview with PaulSkee, AlienNess is claiming that anyone who calls themselves a bboy nowadays is not considered, at least not in his eyes, to be a legitimate bboy. Although there are many breakers who hold a lot of respect and admiration for AlienNess, myself included, we can still disagree with him on this particular claim. Hip hop is a world full of claims-making and thus breakers, across different scenes, are able to construct local hip hop identities through the picking and choosing of a broad collective of claims made. Furthermore, breakers can play with and against these claims in situ depending on the context.

### **Playing With and Against Hip Hop Culture**

In November of 2013 I auditioned for a dancing role in the West Australian Opera Company’s contemporary production of *La Boheme*. The audition brief had stated that they were looking for a “breakdancer” to perform a head-spin at the end of the second act, right before the intermission.

To get this role I had to meet with the director and his team to prove that I could perform the required move: the head-spin. As well, I had to fit the role they had in mind for the part. During the audition there were other breakers—friends of mine—who could also perform the head-spin just as well, or in fact better, than I. However, being born from a mother of Indian and Malaysian origins, my dark skin seemed to award me, in the eyes of the production team, a level of cultural authenticity. My lighter skinned friends who also auditioned for the role had the ability to perform the head-spin, but the director told them that it was I who possessed “the right look”. I got the part.

During rehearsals and throughout the run of shows, many of the chorus members

and production team spoke of and treated the practise breaking as though it was an exotic, street-gang filled, aggressive, black, African American dance culture. When I told some of them about the many breakers living in Perth and across Australia, many of whom I knew were nerdy white and south-east Asian peoples, they seemed both shocked and fascinated by the idea that hip hop could be anything more than the simplistic stereotypical images they had become so familiar with from media representations. For the most part, I found myself playing into the assumptions they held about breaking and hip hop culture, as well as reflecting these assumptions in the director's opinion of what the audience would perceive as authentic hip hop.

Amongst my breaking friends, however, I would often criticise, and poke fun at, the way people at the opera company would speak about breaking. Their crude and exotic simplifications of the dance were hard to stomach, but as most breakers who venture into paid work end up doing, I did what I needed to in order to make a good impression and get paid. When playing into some of the stereotypical assumptions they made about breaking, I am ashamed to admit that I would, on occasion, flirt with the notion that my dark skin did make me a more authentic breaker than my lighter skinned friends. When they expressed opinions of breaking being an "aggressive street dance" I did not readily challenge them. I felt there was no harm in playing into the assumptions that many of them held; some of these expectations, such as the colour of my skin making me a better or more authentic breaker, worked in my favour and so I did not speak my mind or show any sign of disagreement. In doing so, I helped contribute to opinions and assumptions about breaking and hip hop culture which I did not personally agree with myself.

In *Narratives of Place, Culture and Identity*, Christou (2006) writes that "identity" is a complex and multidimensional construct, which is always in process and is always being reconstituted (41-44). My performance of a particular hip hop identity—during my time at the WA Opera Company—demonstrates how hip hop is not some fixed script which actors are bound to follow, but rather that hip hop identities are fashioned, played-with and against, across different social situations, settings and circumstances. As Christou states, "The dynamic process of identity construction, or identification, occurs in mundane, everyday life, in collective, communal spaces and

forms a component of the interactiveness of thought, action and experience" (44). In this way, the breakers do not necessarily buy-into everything that is said and done in the name of breaking or hip hop culture. Their identities and their understandings of the culture are constructed in ways that are local and unique. Furthermore, they tend to shift and change over time, and thus can be re-constituted.

As my ethnographic encounters with breakers often took place at various breaking gatherings, where dancing and watching others dance tended to be the focus of these gatherings, there was not a lot of discussions pertaining to issues of race or sex. As a result, there is little said within this thesis about what breakers think when they hear sexist lyrics in popular rap music songs, or what they have to say about the struggles of ethnic minority groups. There is, however, attention given to the embodied and physical performances and practices of breakers in situ. Thus, to come back to Maxwell's suggestion that to write about hip hop is to be imbricated in questions of race, racialism and racism (2003, ix), I would suggest is an aspect and position from which to examine hip hop culture from. It is not the most essential or best mode by which to make sense of the culture, or of the identity discourses that surround questions of authenticity within hip hop. There are many ways in which hip hop actors perform and make sense of hip hop identities; and as will be discussed in later chapters, many competing notions of authenticity as well.

### **Part Three: The Relationships between the Breaking Scenes of New York, Osaka and Perth**

The Perth breaking scene, as with other breaking scenes around Australia and across the world, are not social groupings that people clearly enter into or out of. They are dynamic, fluid and ever-changing aggregates of people whose connection to these scenes are formed through practice and social relationships. In this sense, breakers tend to move in and out of breaking scenes quite easily and without instruction. The boundaries of a breaking scene are therefore ambiguous and the components of breaking scenes are ones which are self-regulated and shift often. Breakers who identify within a particular scene are often likely to know other

members of the same scene. This was true of my research and of my experience as a breaker. However, I found that the level to which different breakers within the same scene knew of other breakers was contingent somewhat on the size and number of breakers with the scene itself. For example, in the larger breaking scenes of New York and Osaka, where the numbers of breaking practitioners was likely to be in the hundreds, breakers tended to only know a handful of other breakers within these scenes (notwithstanding the more charismatic and active members who were often known by most). In the smaller scenes, such as Perth—where there are roughly thirty or so active breaking practitioners—breakers are more likely to know most, if not all, of the active and even non-active members. At breaking jams, events and sessions held in Perth, it is often the same individuals who regularly attend; those who attend irregularly are still well-known as the scene does not have a very large number of regular breaking practitioners.

### **Contexts, Differences and Power Dynamics between the Three Scenes**

To speak briefly about some of the generalities of each scene: the New York breaking scene, although widely regarded as the birthplace of breaking and hip hop culture (Snell and Soderman 2014, 4-5), has garnered the most attention from scholarly hip hop writers and researchers. The breaking scene in New York is where the majority of breaking's most notable practitioners and pioneers reside. As a result, it is a highly influential breaking scene, spanning the various boroughs of New York City and home to hundreds of breakers and host to many international competitions and dance events.

The Osaka breaking scene, on the other hand, is not as well known, nor does it have the kind of recognition that the New York breaking scene has; even though estimates from locals put the number of active breaking practitioners in the hundreds. Speaking with breakers who live in Osaka, they told me that the scene in Osaka has a fairly long history, dating back to the mid-1980s where breakers would travel to Tokyo and other cities across Japan to compete in various breaking jams and competitions. During my time in Osaka there were a number of large breaking competition and events held in the city almost every weekend. To my knowledge, there have been no ethnographic studies done of the Osaka breaking scene,

although Condry (2001; 2006) and others have written extensively about other hip hop practices and people (mainly rap artists) in Osaka and in other areas of Japan. The Perth breaking scene is perhaps the least known and recognised scene out of the three discussed within this thesis. To my knowledge, there have been no ethnographic or anthropological studies done of the Perth breaking scene. However, there is one chapter, in an edited text by Tara Brabazon (2005), written by Leanne McRae, in which McRae mentions a number of local Perth breakers who, funnily enough, are old friends of mine who started breaking roughly around the same time I did (55-61). Nonetheless, when one typically thinks about breaking and hip hop culture, one does not often think about it in Perth, Western Australia. Yet Perth is home to number of breakers, as well as a number of other kinds of hip hop dance practitioners. Since the early 1980s, Perth has had a small but relatively consistent hip hop dance scene. Local Perth breakers, such as Maze and Mega Mike, both of whom used to break in Perth back during the early 1980s, but have since stopped breaking, told me stories about how they used to meet up in the middle of Forrest Chase in Perth's CBD during the early and mid-1980s. They relayed stories to me about how they used to break on cardboard boxes, buy copious amounts of batteries and play funk music on their oversized tape players (boom-boxes). They were not exactly sure when breaking first began in Perth, but they were certain that it started sometime during the early 1980s. They also made it clear to me that those who were involved in breaking back then (like themselves) were heavily influenced by breakers from the USA and Europe.

A further layer of context to add to this discussion of breaking scenes is to acknowledge that every breaking scene holds varying levels of social and cultural influence and power within the broader global field of hip hop culture. Many of the breakers I spoke with in Perth tended to look outwards, towards the breakers from New York and Los Angeles, as a way comparing whether or not they were doing it correctly/authentically. When it comes to questions about how to break, the things that happen in New York carry with them a lot of cultural significance. Yet, there are also many local processes at play through individual constructions of breaking as well. As such, breakers living in New York tend to have a perceived higher level of



legitimacy and authenticity than breakers who live in other places; a level of power afforded to them because of New York City being seen as the birthplace of hip hop culture. Nonetheless, there are other ways in which legitimacy and authenticity can be generated as well.

Breakers living in Osaka, for example, are home to quite a large and competitively successful breaking scene. The breaking scene in Osaka has a number of well-known individuals who have been successful in several international breaking competitions; an achievement which has put the city of Osaka and its few successful individuals on the radar for many around the world. When speaking to some of the younger breakers in New York and Perth, there were many locals who were able to name a number of local Osaka breakers who they had seen (typically in the YouTube video posted online) win various breaking competitions. They mentioned specific breakers, like Shigekix, Babylon and Kaku, who live and break in Osaka and who have had great success in many notable international breaking competitions.

Being quite geographically isolated from other cities, there are not many breakers from Perth who have travelled overseas and competed in these international breaking competitions. The lack of success in the domain of international breaking competitions has meant that breakers in Perth are not very well-known internationally; by other breakers who reside in other breaking scenes. Therefore, breakers in New York, Osaka and Perth, each hold different levels of notoriety, status and influence. Different scenes generate different sorts of breaking activity and this shapes the kinds of relationships, power dynamics and understandings that people have about these scenes.

In discussions with Perth breakers about some of the conflicts surrounding questions of cultural significance, influence and authority, I found that breakers in Perth tended to draw heavily from what those in New York had to say, rather than what those living in their own scene (in Perth) had to say. This was also confirmed by Japanese breakers I met with in Osaka. For example, when I spoke with Optik, a breaker and krumper from Narrogin (which is a town in the Wheat Belt region of Western Australia), he told me: "I remember it was KRS-One who said that hip hop

culture is a civilization” (Interview with Optik).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in a discussion about the four-elements of hip hop with Jesta, a breaker from South Perth (which is an inner city suburb of Western Australia), he told me:

“Africa Bambaataa actually added knowledge as the fifth element of hip hop, because he was the one who like made up the word. He was the one that said this is what it is called. It was in that newspaper article he was like: there are four elements that make it up blah-blah-blah and then later he went back and added knowledge” (Interview with Jesta).<sup>16</sup>

What this shows is how breakers in Perth and Osaka were likely to think about New York as the sort of mecca of hip hop, and see themselves as being somewhat on the fringes of the culture. Even though they were themselves producing, sustaining and transforming hip hop within their own scene, and were aware of the agency they had in this regard. Equally, breakers from New York tend to think of themselves at the centre as well, and thus discussions pertaining to hip hop cultural roots tend to look inwards: at specific people, cultures and sites within New York City.

Rarely did breakers from New York look outwards, to the cities of Perth or Osaka as places of cultural significance or influence. When I told some of the breakers from New York that I was a breaker from Perth some were astonished to hear that breaking even existed in Australia, let alone Perth. They were certain—and right—that I would know that breaking had originated in New York City, and that I was aware of New York’s historical and cultural significance in this regard. This reflected a cultural asymmetry, for breakers in New York City it was an accepted and expected standard that I, as a breaker from Perth, would “know my history”—a popular phrase used by many breakers.

There are many differences and similarities between the breaking scenes of New York, Osaka and Perth. They are similar in the way that the breakers within each of them tended to engage in similar kinds of breaking practices, yet they differed in how members of each scene saw and positioned themselves in relation to one another. Additionally, the way in which individual breakers self-identified as

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<sup>15</sup> KRS-One is a well-known rapper and hip hop music producer from New York.

<sup>16</sup> Africa Bambaataa is a well-known DJ, singer, songwriter and hip hop music producer, also from New York.

belonging to hip hop—communicated through clothing, practices and language—would resonate differently in the mainstream culture of each locale.

As I spent time breaking and conversing with locals across each of my field sites, I came to realise more and more differences between them; even though breakers are connected globally through various communication technologies they are also influenced and shaped by the peoples and local context within which they are situated. So although they might express a connection to a global cultural world, these worlds are experienced within local cultural settings and are thus shaped by them.

Having lived and danced in Perth for most of my life (except for the two years I lived in London), but only having visited New York and Osaka on a couple of separate occasions, both for short periods of time, my experiences across each of these three scenes was somewhat skewed by the short amount of time I spent in each city. Breaking scenes are highly diverse and unique social collectives, made up of individuals, their continuing relationships and their shared practices. However, no breaking scene is ever able to be truly grasped in its entirety or characterised in any strict or generic sense.

### **The Seeing and Experiencing of Hip Hop**

In this chapter I have argued that strong and fast notions of a homogenous hip hop culture tend to fall short in understanding the complex and varied ways in which individuals experience hip hop on the ground. With multiple notions and imaginations of hip hop culture around the world, many of which do not fit neatly together with one another, hip hop is best seen as a highly fragmentary and socially diverse cultural field. There needs to be an acknowledgement that different hip hop actors within different social settings, produce, sustain and transform different kinds of hip hop experiences and understandings. As there are no true or natural ways in which to see or experience hip hop, one can only make sense of one's position in relation to other positions. Drawing from the breakers I met in New York, Osaka and Perth, I offer multiple perspectives and a nuanced analysis of how hip hop is actively produced, sustained and transformed. As hip hop culture continues

to be fraught with various conflicts and tensions, it is not the case that one must find the most authentic way of seeing hip hop from, and then offer it as the “best” or most important perspective. There needs to be an acknowledgement that hip hop is a living social field, continually being made and remade by those who identify as members of the culture.

In 1999, the year I started breaking, Andy Bennett (1999) published his paper “Rappin’ on the Tyne: White Hip Hop Culture in Northeast England – An Ethnographic Study”, in which he wrote:

The localisation of hip hop, rather than being a smooth and consensual transition, is fraught with tensions and contradictions as young people attempt to reconcile issues of musical and stylistic authenticity with those of locality, identity and everyday life. (6)

What Bennett clearly articulates is that hip hop is a field governed by its people: those who engage and identify within the field itself. Thus, in local breaking scenes individuals navigate and wrestle with these difficulties regarding cultural identity, authenticity, legitimacy and authority. My experience learning to break in Perth was a journey fraught with many of these tensions that Bennett named.

Often when people think about the hip hop culture they tend to imagine a homogenous global collective, all working together, collectively pushing back against the powers that be and rising up against systems of oppression (Ogbar 2007). Media representations tend to overplay hip hop’s cohesiveness and homogeneity.<sup>17</sup> However, what representations like this discount is the fact that within and across different localities there is a lot of diversity and asymmetry between different hip hop persons. My own journey into the world of hip hop has revealed to me how this culture is a deeply fragmentary social world, in which different persons are struggling with, as Bennett says, “to reconcile issues of musical and stylistic authenticity with those of locality, identity and everyday life” (6).

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<sup>17</sup> The New York Times have a page on their website which includes all the commentary and archival articles they have published about rap and hip hop (<https://www.nytimes.com/topic/subject/rap-music>). This is just one of many places in which to view the neat and homogenous portrayals of hip hop culture by a large and very prominent media institution.

Looking at hip hop from the perspectives of breakers in New York, Osaka and Perth—drawing on local Perth breakers’ notions of legitimacy and authenticity—offers a unique, analytical position in which to examine this fragmentary social world; one that is seldom recognised as being a legitimate or valuable position, but one that is, I argue, valuable and legitimate nonetheless. In the next chapter I further explore each of these three breaking scenes. Using a collection of photographic images taken from my time in the field, I show more of what each of these three scenes are like on the ground: where they are located geographically, the kinds of people who live within them and the kinds of practice and spaces they tend to engage in and occupy.

## – Chapter 4 –

### *“Running Footwork”*

#### **The Expressions and Experiences of Hip Hop: Similarities and Differences between the Breaking Scenes of New York, Osaka and Perth**

In Chapter Three I examined aspects of hip hop’s cultural production and transformation in relation to how different individuals—engaged within different practices, with different peoples, from different localities—learn, navigate and make sense of hip hop in different ways. To continue this discussion, in this chapter I show some of the similarities and differences between the three breaking scenes of New York, Osaka and Perth, in order to illustrate how even though some local breaking scenes are larger and perhaps more significant (in some respects) than others, that ultimately they are all still considered to be connected, and thus play a role in hip hop culture’s continuing productions and transformations.

I use a collection of photographic images, taken either by myself or collected from others (these will be cited as such), in an attempt to present a living, transformative, shifting and diverse illustration of my three field sites. The photographs shared below are ones that depict particular moments in time and space. They are not—and should not be assumed to be—complete or whole representations of what breaking or hip hop culture looks like within each locality. They should be thought of instead as being partial representations of what breaking

is like on the ground. As James Clifford (1986) remarked, ethnography is “inherently partial—committed and incomplete” (7). All ethnographic material has its limits, whether that material is textual, visual or something else.

Whilst these images depict an incomplete snapshot of what breaking is like on the ground, they are still able to offer a much needed context for further ethnographic analysis and discussion; some of which will be built upon in later chapters, though some of which will not. Therefore, in this chapter I embrace the partiality of these photographs and of the moments they depict, seeing them not as complete representations of local breaking scenes but rather as insights into how individual hip hop actors express and experience hip hop within their own local and social contexts.

The chapter begins with a collection of photographs of the New York breaking scene, followed by Osaka and then finally the Perth breaking scene. Each collection is initially located geographically (with the help of city maps), then short descriptive accounts of the images are offered to provide the reader with some context for what is happening in the picture. There is particular focus on the “places”, “spaces” and “people” of each scene, as well as some discussion of the similarities and differences that I noticed between them. As is argued throughout this thesis, local breaking scenes are not distinct, fixed, or unconnected communities (Cohen 1997), rather they are dynamic, living and ever-changing social worlds which are connected and disconnected to one other in all sorts of different ways. This further problematises the notion of a fixed and/or localised hip hop culture, something I stated in the introduction I intended to write against.

## Location of the New York Breaking Scene



Figure 4: Map of New York City, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool, edited by author.

The City of New York—often called New York City or just New York—is home to an estimated population of around 8.6 million people (Barron 2018). Located on the north-eastern side of the United States of America, New York City is made up of five boroughs. These boroughs (the Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island) are sometimes collectively referred to as “the five boroughs”. At least that is what some of the breakers I met with in New York referred to them as. Across these five boroughs are hundreds of small, local neighbourhoods, many of which are densely populated and have their own local history and cultural identities.



## Peoples, Places and Spaces of the New York Breaking Scene



Figure 5: Christopher Sawyer breaking, Upper West Side, New York, 1983, image by Martha Cooper (2013).



Figure 6: Frosty Freeze of the Rock Steady Crew, Lincoln Center, New York, 1981, image by Martha Cooper (2013).

Figures 5 and 6, from Martha Cooper's (2013) celebrated text *HIP HOP FILES: Photographs 1979-1984*, are beautiful images of breaking and hip hop culture in New York City, during the early 1980s. However, these images are of a particular moment in time and space. They are not representative of what hip hop culture is like as a whole, nor are they representative of what hip hop culture looks like in New York City today.

Hip hop has undoubtedly changed since the 1980s. Yet, in many respects there are many similarities to be made between the past and the present. Breakers who live and dance in New York City today are a fairly diverse and eclectic bunch of people. There is much diversity in regard to their age, gender, social class, as well as their ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds. Yet with respect to gender there were more male breakers than there were female breakers. This is true for many breaking scenes around the world, for example in Gunn's (2016) writing on the Sydney breaking scene she describes the scene in Sydney as very male-dominated, and argues that one reason for this might be because people's exposure to breaking was, as Gunn writes, "limited to movies and music video clips, which predominantly feature male breakers performing power (athletic, gymnastic) moves" (184).

There is also a great deal of diversity in the aesthetic and physicality of different breaking performances across different breaking scenes; a point that I explore in more detail in Chapters Five and Six. However, the breaking scene in New York City is, and has been since the early days, an activity that is undoubtedly dominated by men, though even this is shifting in some places.



Figure 7: Photograph of a breaker (bgirl) cyphering at the Bronx is Burning Jam. Image taken on my iPhone, 13th March, 2015.



Figure 8: Group photo of those who attended the Bronx is Burning Jam. Image taken on my iPhone, 13th March, 2015.

These two photographs (Figures 7 and 8) were taken at a breaking jam I attended called the Bronx is Burning (see Figure 4). The gathering was held up in the Bronx on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 2015. The photographs illustrate a little of what this jam was like: it was located in a small dance studio, involved a relatively small bunch of local breakers, and there was lots of cyphering happening between breakers. Cyphering is one of the most common activities that breakers, around the world, are able to engage in with one another. They are collaborative and chaotic sites where breakers band together and break (dance)—both with and against one another—in a semi-organised fashion. Much more will be said about this activity of breaking cyphers in Chapter Seven, though what I found interesting about the cyphering which occurred at this particular jam was how through cyphering breakers were able to organise themselves without having to be formally told or guided by anyone in particular. The music which played at this jam was funky and soulful: jazz and rock tunes were played, but at a much higher tempo than their original recordings. I found some of the breakers at this jam quite intimidating. They gave cold stares as they watched me and others break in the cypher; others were less so, they cheered and shouted as I and others executed our moves to the music.

While I was in New York City, gathering ethnographic material for this thesis, I attended many breaking jams just like this. I also attended several other ones which were larger and had more structure and organisation. At each breaking gathering, whether it was an organised competitive event or a more casual breaking jam (such as the Bronx is Burning jam), I was able to meet and connect with many breakers who live in and around of New York City. One of the breakers I met and become close with was Goody Roc, a bgirl and rocker (rocking is another style of hip hop dance) from Brooklyn.



Figure 9: Goody Roc, image downloaded from Facebook.

I first met Goody Roc at the Humboldt Community Centre in Brooklyn, a local practice spot which many breakers attend every week. It was during one of these practice sessions that Goody told me she belonged to a local Brooklyn breaking and rocking crew named “Mastermind Rockers”. Goody and her husband Edwy are both members of the “Mastermind Rockers” crew, and breaking and rocking play a large and important part in both Goody and Edwy’s lives. They both spend a lot of their time travelling to breaking and rocking events and jams around the country; most of their mutual friends are into breaking and rocking, plus they both work as breaking and rocking teachers—teaching dance classes to young kids and young adults around New York City.

Goody welcomed me to New York when I first arrived and she was extremely helpful in providing me with lots of information about upcoming breaking competitions, jams and practice sessions. After having explained my research project to her, she added me on Facebook and invited me to a bunch of local hip hop dance events that were happening during the time I was there (see Figure 10).



Figure 10: Screenshot of Facebook invites to various local breaking jams and events that Goody Roc sent to me. Screenshot taken with my iPhone, 19th March, 2015.



Figure 11: Photograph of the one-versus-one breaking battle between Tata and Pocket, at the Dance Society Jam in Queens. Image screenshot captured on the 11th of November, 2016.<sup>18</sup>

One of the events that Goody invited me to was the Dance Society Jam, a one-versus-one breaking competition held at the Taiwan Center in Flushing, Queens. I entered this competition myself, winning two one-versus-one battles and thus making it into the top-eight of breaking competition. The event had over a hundred breakers who entered and there was a qualifying round to get into the top-sixteen bracket. The top sixteen breakers then went head-to-head, with two rounds of dancing each, after which a panel of three judges decided on the winner, who would advance to the next round.

In Figure 11, a breaker named Tata is on his head performing a unique freeze (static pose). He got into this position by rolling backwards up onto his head, then snapping his left leg back and grabbing it, for just a split second. As he performed this amazing sequence of moves the crowd erupted in applause.

Tata won this battle against Pocket, a breaker from Seoul in South Korea who, like me, was travelling around New York at the time. It was a close and exciting battle to witness, and it could have gone either way in my opinion. In competitive breaking battles like these the judges have to make a hard decision. This is often a tough

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<sup>18</sup> This image was screen-captured from a video which was posted to YouTube on the 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2015 (link to video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySXMjUf\\_q3Y&t=131s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySXMjUf_q3Y&t=131s)).

choice to make because there are no rubrics or guidelines for them to follow. They have to make a personal choice of who they think won the battle, which is why three judges (an odd number) is often used to make sure that there will be a clear winner chosen after each round.



Figure 12: Photograph taken of the Taiwan Centre in Queens. Image taken on my iPhone, 23rd of March, 2015.



Figure 13: Photograph taken inside the Taiwan Centre during the Dance Society Jam breaking event. Image taken on my iPhone, 23rd of March, 2015.



Apart from competitive breaking events like this one, I also attended several breaking parties. These “parties” were typically informal social gatherings held at local bars and nightclubs around the city. During these parties there were often small dance cyphers which would form, and breakers would break in these cyphers for many hours (see Figure 14). At this particular party in the East Village, depicted in Figure 14, there were cheap alcoholic beverages on sale at the bar; a band played live funk music and many breakers and other kinds of dancers danced and partied all night. These parties were not a space for breakers to practice or train, but to rather to perform and socialise with other breakers and dancers.



Figure 14: A photograph taken of myself cyphering at a breaking party held in the East Village, in Lower Manhattan. Image taken by Will, on the 31st March, 2015.

In this photograph of me in the cyphering (Figure 14) you can see the small size of the dance space. The lighting in the room was in fact a lot darker than this photograph represents: Will’s camera had a flash on it. Some of the people standing around me were breakers, but some were not. There was a mix of breakers and just regular club goers, who, fascinated at what was going on, came over to watch.



Figure 15: Vlad breaking at Columbia University, 9th April, 2015.

This photograph (Figure 15), which I took with my iPhone during a breaking practice session at Columbia University, was of a breaker I met and danced with a lot named Vladimir (or just Vlad for short). Vlad invited me to this session after he himself was invited by a fellow Columbia University student a week prior.

I attended numerous practice sessions with Vlad around New York City. His family had just recently migrated from the Ukraine to the United States. Like me, he was

also fairly new to the breaking scene in New York City and was looking for other friendly breakers to train with, and perhaps enter some competitions together. Vlad and I entered a number of breaking competitions together and became fairly good friends in the process. I initially met him at the Bronx is Burning Jam and it was there that we first chatted and organised to meet up at a practice session in Manhattan the following day.

The session we attended the following day was a practice session held at the EXPG dance studios in Downtown Manhattan (see Figure 16). After this we began attending many other practice sessions with one another: we attend sessions at the Brooklyn Zoo (see Figure 17), the Humboldt Street Community Centre (see Figure 18) and the Forest Hills Community Centre (see Figure 19).



Figure 16: Photograph of the EXPG Dance Studio practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 14th March, 2015.



Figure 17: Photograph of the Brooklyn Zoo practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 17th March, 2015.



Figure 18: Photograph of the Humboldt Street Community Centre practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 25th March, 2015.



Figure 19: Photograph of the Forest Hills Community Centre practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 6th March, 2015.

Each of these different practice sessions were semi-private gatherings between different groups of local breakers. They were each held in spaces where breakers could train and practice their breaking moves and tricks with one another. Most of these sessions were held in community centres, on university campuses and in various dance studios around town. Besides the EXPG session, the other sessions were all free of charge. EXPG, being a private studio, charged a small fee of five dollars (USD) for breakers to use their studio space. These sessions can however vary in a multitude of ways, such as: the kinds of people who attend; how open or closed the session is to outsiders; where the session is located; the differences of floor texture, space and size; the music that is played; and whether the session costs money or not. These are some of the ways that breaking practice sessions occur in New York City and across other breaking scenes around the world. I noticed that many of the local breakers in New York often only trained at one or two local practice sessions. Most of the local breakers I met and spoke with did not tend to travel far or attend sessions that they did not regularly attend. It seemed that many were particularly hesitant to travel to somewhere new, especially if the session was

located in a different borough to where they were used to training.

As somewhat tourists to the New York breaking scene, Vlad and I travelled to as many practice sessions as we could find. We wanted to see what the different sessions were like, what kinds of breakers attended and what the vibe was like at each of them. However, in doing so, we came across to some locals that we were indeed “outsiders” to the New York City breaking scene. After attending these various sessions for a couple of weeks, Vlad and I began to discover that the only breakers who attended as many sessions as us were typically travelling breakers (like myself) and those new to the scene (like Vlad). Because of this, Vlad and I were both treated as outsiders and found that we were not taken seriously by local breakers.

In subsequent conversations with Vlad since leaving New York he has told me that he now predominately breaks only in Brooklyn. Vlad does not train at the Columbia University sessions or at the EXPG sessions anymore. In fact, rarely does he now travel to Manhattan and the Bronx like he did when I was over there. He told me that he now only travels to these borough if he is entering a breaking competition or attending a party. In this way, Vlad has, over time, become enculturated into the local scenes factions: now an active and loyal member of the Brooklyn scene.



Figure 20: Photograph of a busker playing drums in the 23rd Street subway station platform, in Downtown Manhattan. Image taken on my iPhone, 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2015.



Figure 21: Photograph of two buskers drumming on paint buckets at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street platform subway station in Midtown, Manhattan. Image taken on my iPhone, 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2015.



Figure 22: Photograph of a group of young hip hop dancers busking on the L line. Image taken on my iPhone, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

While I was in New York City I saw many buskers performing on the streets and in the subway stations. I was told by some local breakers that buskers in New York City can earn a semi-decent living by doing street shows. I enjoyed encountering the buskers who sang, danced and played music, and I took many photographs of them in action (see Figures 20, 21, 22).

Even though busking on the trains are considered to be an illegal act in New York City, there were many who took this risk. Perhaps the fine was worth the money they were able to make by busking there. Amongst the various buskers I encountered on the trains were, often, those who looked to be breakers. These hip hop dance buskers performed breaking moves that I recognised. I wondered if some of them were, or used to be, breakers. Travelling across the bridges on the underground subway was where I most often encountered these breaking buskers. The photograph above (Figure 22) is an image I took whilst travelling on the L Line,



from the Bedford Avenue stop in Brooklyn, to the 1st Avenue stop in Downtown Manhattan. This route is popular with breaking buskers because it has longer period of time between subway stops. My friend Will called these breaking buskers “hitters” because they “hit-and-run”, he said. They do a show on one train carriage, collect the money from the show, then move to another carriage and do it all again. The images of the buskers I encountered in New York City highlight the public nature of music and dance practices in the city. Particularly within busier parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn, you are very likely to encounter people busking. It is a part of many New Yorkers’ daily life.



Figure 23. Photograph of a group of breakers jamming together on the concrete, in front of the Union Square Park. Image taken on my iPhone, 25th April, 2015.

This photograph (Figure 22) was taken on a Saturday afternoon. Here you can see the group of breakers, standing around in a semi-circle, each taking turns to dance one at a time. The breaker in the middle is performing what some call the “W freeze” (this is because his legs make the shape of the letter W). Others around him watch and wait for their turn. Behind the group of breakers is a small speaker attached to someone’s iPod; it was playing a mix of funky breaks and jazz tunes. The floor on which these breakers were dancing is quite rough, dirty and unkind to bare skin. The breakers here seldom span on their heads or back and instead they stuck to footwork and freezes. The particularities of spaces like the impromptu sessions at

the Union Square Park in downtown Manhattan, a spot where many breakers liked to congregate, impacts on the kinds of breaking practices and performances that happen. These spaces, as well as the various others mentioned thus far, have an impact on the breaking scenes within each locality. These impacts that particular spaces have on local scenes is something I will discuss in greater detail in later chapters.

In addition to the public display of music and dance practices, New York City is also covered in a lot of graffiti art. Graffiti covers many of the cities buildings and bridges (see Figures 24 and 25). It was hard to know if some of this graffiti was legal or illegal.

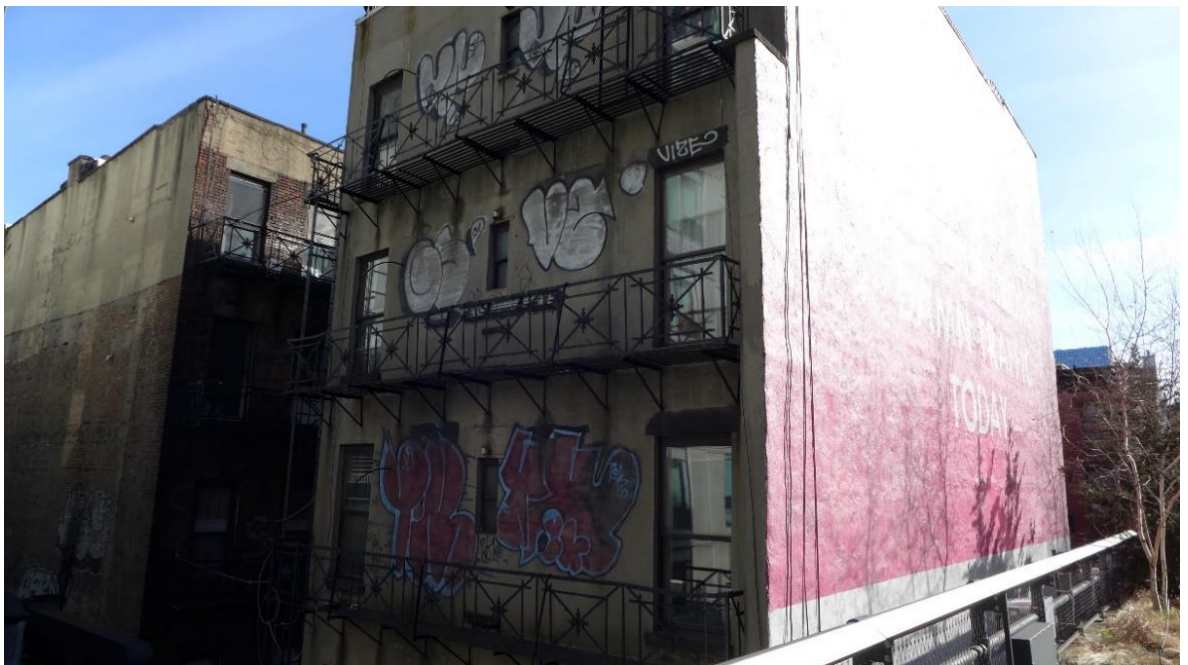


Figure 24. Graffiti on a building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Image taken on my iPhone from The High Line walk, 13th April, 2015.



Figure 25. Graffiti on the Williamsburg Bridge. Image taken on my iPhone, 16th March, 2015.

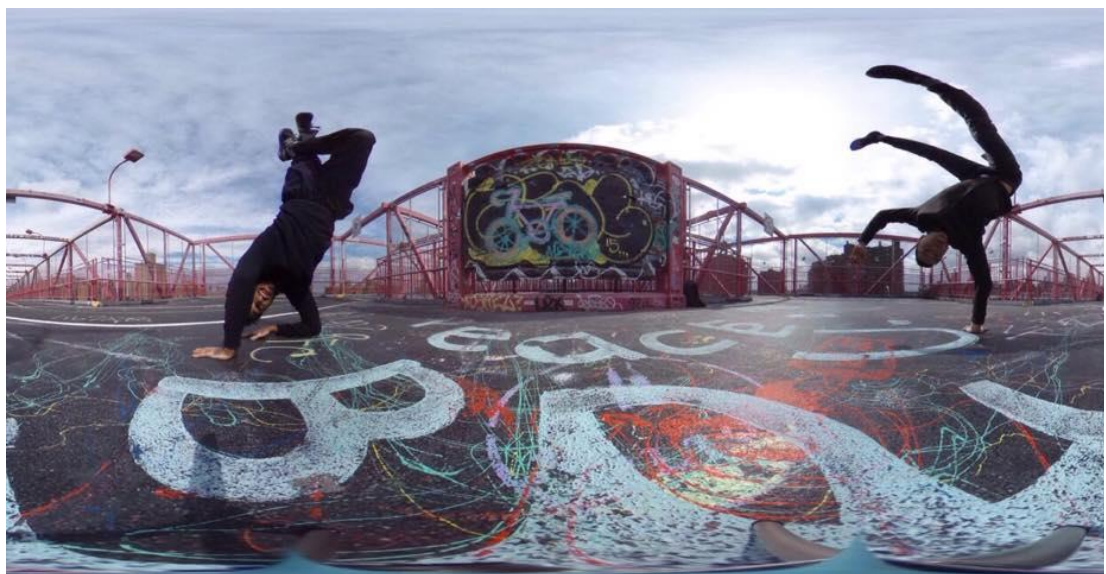


Figure 26: Will and me dancing on the Williamsburg Bridge. Image taken by Will on his theta360 camera, 16th March, 2015.

My roommate Will was often keen to take me out to different tourist locations around the city. When we went out to explore new areas we always ended up breaking, taking photographs and filming ourselves break (see Figures 25 and 26). On one of these occasion Will and I walked along the Williamsburg Bridge, from Brooklyn to Manhattan, stopping half-way along to film and take photographs (see Figure 26). As we would break in these public spots around the city most people just

walked or cycled past us. Some glanced over, but most kept going without even looking. Seeing two people dancing and filming on the Williamsburg Bridge was perhaps not such an uncommon occurrence for local New Yorkers.

After spending some time in New York City and getting to know many of the local and travelling breakers who were living there at the time, I came to realise and appreciate how significant boroughs and local neighbourhoods were for many of the local breakers. For instance, when introducing themselves to me breakers would often tell me which borough or neighbourhood they were from. I had some introduce themselves to me by saying, “I’m so-and-so from Flushing, Queens” or “I’m so-and-so from Melrose in the Bronx”. This act of describing one’s connection to a specific borough or neighbourhood seemed to be a way of positioning oneself and one’s identity within the local breaking scene itself. This illustrates some of the ways in which hip hop identities are constructed in ways that are “local” and “unique”.

Whilst mentioning to some breakers how strange I found this description of which borough they were from, I was told of the vast economic, social and cultural differences between the five New York boroughs, as well as some of the differences between the specific neighbourhoods within the boroughs. Breakers told me many stories of the local histories of their neighbourhoods. They told me of the famous breakers and other hip hop persons who put their local areas on the map. Many were proud to be connected to a specific neighbourhood within a particular borough; some even had the postcode of these areas tattooed on their bodies.

Below is a short transcript of a recorded conversation I had with two local breakers from New York City (who wished to remain anonymous and therefore will be referred to in the transcript as breaker 1 and breaker 2). The context of this short transcript was that a group of local Brooklyn breakers and I were on a train heading to an event at Rutgers University, in New Jersey. There was a breaking competition being held there that day and so we all caught the train from Penn Station together.

Lucas Marie (LM): When breakers (in New York) tell me about where they’re from, they always talk about their hometown like they talk about their local areas a lot don’t they, it’s like “oh I’m Jerry from the South Bronx.”

Breaker 1: (murmuring) Yeah, yeah it's true.

LM: Because people do that even now I ask them where they are from and they go, they don't say like New York, they say the specific area within Queens, within New York.

Breaker 1: hahaha Estoria!

Me: Like, if anyone asks me where I'm from I just say Australia. I don't say Shenton Park, which is in Perth, the city, which is in Western Australia, which is in Australia.

Breaker 1 and Breaker 2: hahahahaha

Breaker 2: But you should, you should!

Breaker 1: But here they do that here a lot because there is like all this rivalry between the different areas.

Whether it is rivalry or some other difference, breakers in New York held and produced quite distinct imaginings as to what it meant to be a breaker from a particular area of the city. For example, a breaker who identifies themselves as a breaker from the Bronx is read in a particular way. This is true also of those who identify as breakers from Brooklyn, Staten Island, Queens and Manhattan. I heard that breakers from the Bronx tended to be quite aggressive in their dancing and that they tended to do more footwork than powermoves. These differences and their imaginings are not wholly accurate representations of the reality that one experiences on the ground, but they are known and discussed stereotypes that are bought into by many.

For many breakers living in New York City there seemed to be various tensions and divides between those who identify with particular areas of the city. As mentioned earlier, not many breakers traversed across boroughs to attend practice sessions outside of their own local area. And the breakers who did so were most likely to be tourists and travelers, like myself. I spent much of my time in New York listening to different breakers argue with one another about these various differences and where they originated from. I listened as they lamented the contrasts in breaking styles, attitudes, histories, practices and understandings. It was almost as though the five boroughs were (to some) completely different hip hop territories: each with their own breaking style and cultural (hip hop) identity.

## Location of the Osaka Breaking Scene



Figure 27: Map of Japan, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool.



Figure 28: Map of Osaka, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool, edited by author.

The city of Osaka is the second largest city in Japan and home to many breaking practitioners. Situated roughly five hundred kilometers from Tokyo, Japan's capital city, Osaka is located in the Kansai (southern middle) region of the country. When I arrived in Osaka in 2015 I was not surprised to discover that Osaka's breaking scene was a somewhat smaller than that of New York City's. Yet, Osaka has a fairly large and growing breaking scene in comparison to many other cities around the world. There are many breaking events, parties, practice sessions, jams and competitions held regularly in and around the city.

While I was living in Osaka, I was quick to locate several breakers with the help of my friend, Sly. I discovered that the breaking scene in Osaka has a very busy competition schedule, in which competitive breaking battles were being held almost every weekend. Although not all the breakers in Osaka were competitive, many were, and these breakers spent many hours training and practising for the competitions. Generally speaking, I found that breakers in Osaka put a lot more emphasis on training and on competing than those I met in both New York and Perth.

## Peoples, Places and Spaces of the Osaka Breaking Scene

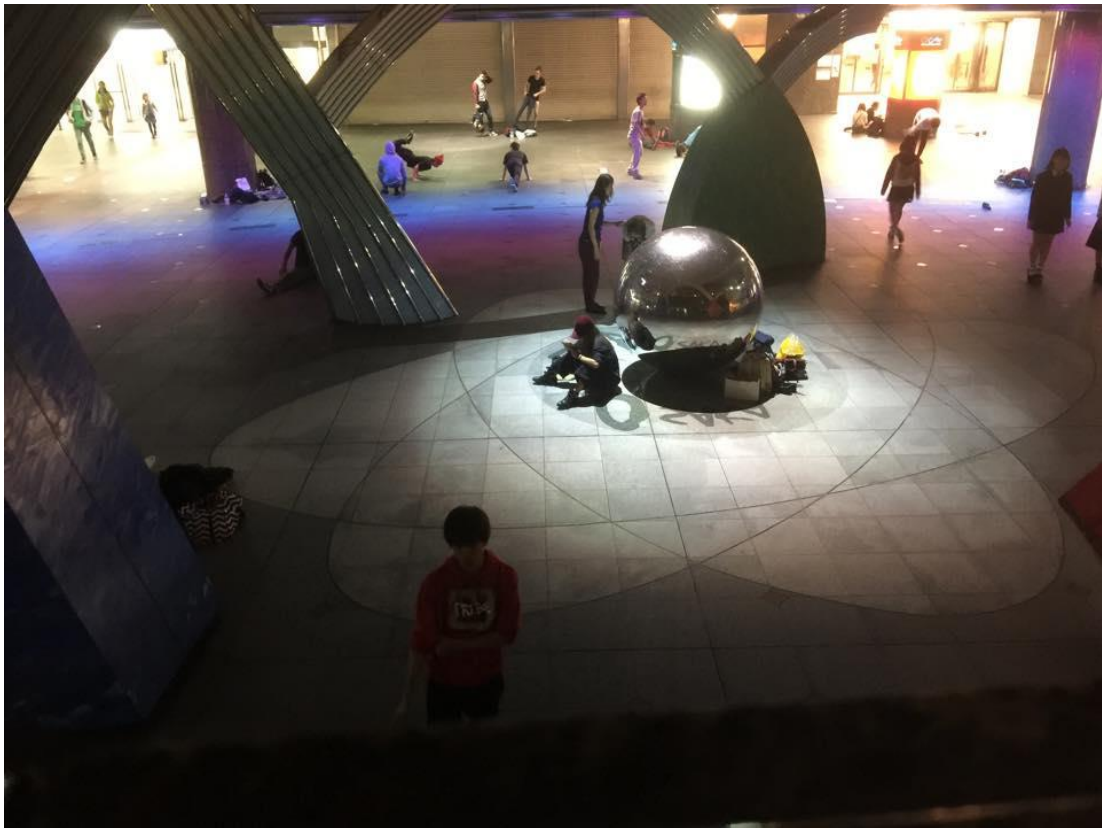


Figure 29: Photograph of the breaking practice sessions at the Osaka City Air Terminal (OCAT). Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015.

This image, Figure 29, was taken at the Osaka City Air Terminal (OCAT) station in Namba. For the breakers who live and work in Osaka, OCAT is the largest and most popular breaking practice session spot. The station is part of a large train and bus network, which is located in the middle of Osaka's CBD. At roughly six o'clock in the evenings, every night of the week, until around midnight (just before the last train departs), you will likely find breakers gathered here, training.

There are many regular attendees, some of whom come from work, school or home. I noticed that younger breakers, kids who looked to be about thirteen or fourteen, trained at this spot too. Some of the breakers brought along portable speakers, which they used to play music. They often put on a mixtape (a collection of hip hop and breakbeats all mixed together into one long track). However, there were multiple occasions in which no one brought any portable speakers and on these occasions there was no music to break to. I personally found it quite hard to



break at OCAT without any music, as breaking to music is what I am used to doing. I noticed that some other breakers did not seem to care as much about the lack of music. Music or not, every night of the week, breakers came to OCAT. They practised on the rough concrete floor for many hours.



Figure 30: Photograph of breakers training at OCAT. Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015.

The OCAT floor was rough and there was lots of space for everyone. It was always cold in that concrete courtyard: dark, a little dusty and too exposed to the elements for my liking. The vibe was lacking here. There was a large metallic looking ball was sitting in the middle of the space. Some breakers used the ball as a mirror, though it distorted your reflection when you looked at yourself in it. Breakers often congregated close to where the speakers were playing music, though some liked to train far away from everyone else. Maybe they were shy, or maybe they did not want others to see what they were working on. I always stayed near the music and in the lighter areas of the space.



Figure 31: Photograph of two breakers, Sly and Babylon, doing some footwork steps at OCAT. Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015.

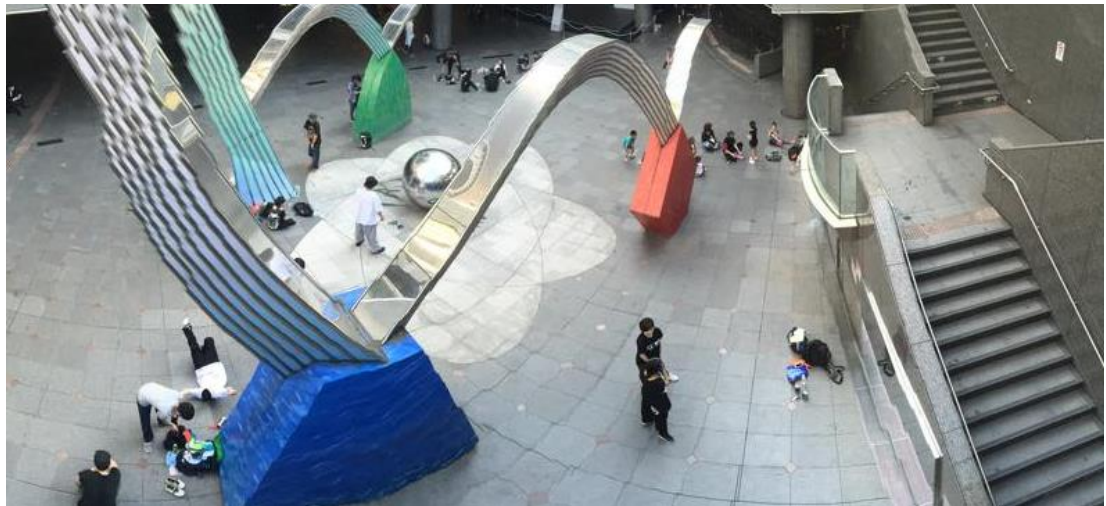


Figure 32: Photograph of breakers training at the OCAT on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Image taken on my iPhone, 6th June, 2015.



Figure 33: Photograph of breakers working together, creating a routine, at OCAT. Image taken on my iPhone, 6th June, 2015.

Figures 31, 32 and 33 are all photographs I took during the time I spent breaking at OCAT. These sessions varied depending on who showed up, but generally they tended to be very busy sessions where many local breakers who lived or were travelling through Osaka met up to practice and hang out.

Another breaking practice session I went to while I was staying in Osaka was the Moriguchi practice session (see Figure 34). This session was held at the Moriguchi train station. Though not as busy as the OCAT session, Moriguchi was another popular practice spot for many local breakers living in Osaka.

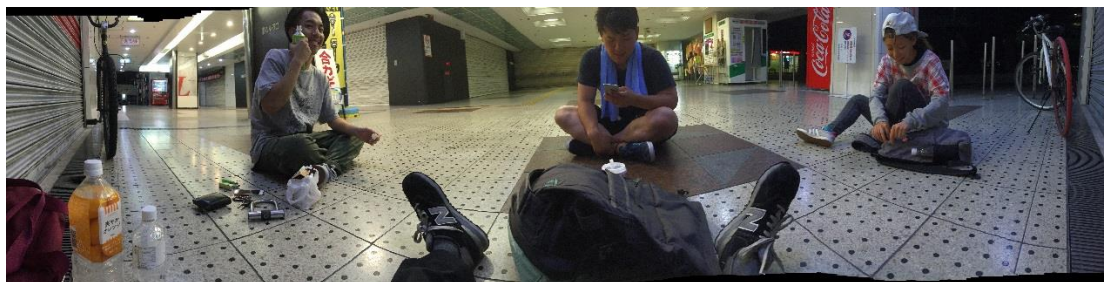


Figure 34: Panorama photograph of a breaking practice session I attended at the Moriguchi train station, 26th of June, 2015. From left to right: (breakers) Budawolf, Sly and Naru.

A detailed ethnographic account of the Moriguchi session can be found in Chapter Six. What I found interesting about the sessions at both OCAT and Moriguchi was

how they felt very public. Breakers in Osaka often gathered together to practise breaking in quite public locations around the city: train stations, parks, shopping malls and so on. Speaking with local breakers about this I was told that it was because these spaces are large and they do not cost any money. However, breakers practising in these public spaces seemed shy when onlookers stopped to watch them. They were not breaking in these public spaces because they wanted to be seen, but because it was a cheaper and more flexible option. Dance studio hire in Osaka is expensive and you can only book these spaces for a short amount of time. Breaking at OCAT or Moriguchi, on the other hand, is free. And the breakers who train in these spaces can spend hours and hours practising there, all night if they want.

Many times I observed breakers at OCAT and Morguchi looking uncomfortable when being watched by people walking by. If passersby stopped to watch them, then they would often stop breaking and wait for those watching to get bored and hopefully walk away. In these moments they would go to the bathroom, check their phones, drink some water or engage in a social conversation. Then, when the passersby got bored and left, the breakers would return and begin dancing again. This differed quite drastically from the moments I experienced in New York, where breakers looked like they were thriving on the attention they got from passersby.



Figure 35: Photograph of a group of breakers dancing in a secluded area of the Namba train station. Image taken on my iPhone, 16th May, 2015.

Figure 35 shows a bunch of breakers located in one of the many secluded corners of the Namba train station. This image gives you a sense of the kinds of spots that breakers typically chose to congregate in when breaking in public. They picked

spaces like this one, areas where people walking by were not likely to pass or were unable to comfortably sit and watch them. Also, the time in which they chose to break was typically in the late evenings, this being the time when most people were not as likely to be out and about. Breakers in Osaka were not looking for any unwanted attention; they gathered in areas which were public, but picked secluded spots and were shy, rather than excited, when people noticed them.

In regard to the breakers themselves, Osaka is home to many talented individuals. People who keep up with the competitive breaking scene will know that there are a number of local breakers from Osaka who have gained a lot of international success from recent wins at various breaking competitions. During my time in Osaka I met some of these individuals and saw how long and how hard they trained. Every day these breakers would train. It is perhaps why the Osaka breaking scene is more competitively successful than that of the New York or Perth breaking scenes. Speaking with my friend Sly about this, he told me that most of the breakers in Osaka are very driven to win international breaking competitions. He said that winning BC One—one of the largest one-versus-one competitions in the world—was the measure of success that most young breakers in Japan were striving to achieve. Sly told me that if I wanted to see how competitive the breaking scene in Osaka was that I needed to check out some of the competitions being held in and around of Osaka. Sly instructed me to go to The Dance Collection, a clothing store located in "Ame-mura" (or Amerikamura), a popular retail area close to Shinsaibashi in the city. This store, said Sly, was where breakers go to find out information about upcoming breaking jams, competitions and other social hip hop dance events.



Figure 36: Photograph of a breaker named Shinya perusing the event flyers at The Dance Collection store in “Ame-Mura”. Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015.

This photograph of Shinya (Figure 36) is one I took at the Dance Collection clothing store. Here you can see local breaker Shinya checking out some of the event flyers which were located near the store’s entrance. Shinya and I discovered that there was a one-versus-one breaking competition on the weekend following our visit to the Dance Collection. The event was the Red Bull BC One “Osaka Cypher”, a qualification event for a large, annual, international breaking competition, the Red Bull BC One. The winner of the “Osaka Cypher”—along with winners in a few other

notable cities—are flown out to represent their country at the Red Bull BC One finals, which is an event held in a different city each year.



Figure 37: Photograph taken during the Red Bull BC One “Osaka Cypher”. Image taken on my iPhone, 10th May, 2015.



Figure 38: Photograph taken during the Red Bull BC One “Osaka Cypher”. Image taken on my iPhone, 10th May, 2015.

Shinya, Sly and I all attended the Red Bull BC One “Osaka Cypher” event that weekend. It was great to witness, first hand, the high level of breaking moves and combinations that those who trained extremely hard were able to perform. Sly was right. The complexity of the breakers’ movements, their stamina in the battles, their original and unique flow and character was unmatched. The event was held in a large nightclub, yet the BC One competition ran during the day. It lasted for approximately four hours. The winner was a local breaker named “Wu-tan”. For winning, Wu-tan would be representing Osaka at the BC ONE “Japan Cypher”, an event that would be held in the city of Tokyo later that year. If Wu-tan managed to win the “Tokyo Cypher” he would be flown overseas to represent Japan at the BC One world finals.

Something to note is that the BC One Cypher qualification events are held in both New York and Osaka. However, there is no BC One Cypher qualification event held in Perth; a seemingly minor, but particularly significant, point of difference between these three breaking scenes (my three field sites). To the Red Bull company it would seem that the breakers living in Osaka and New York are worthy of a Cypher qualification, whereas the breakers in Perth are not. This is but one of the many examples of how these three breaking scenes are regarded differently, by different groups of people.





Figure 39: Photograph of a small breaking jam, held at a nightclub in Namba.  
Image taken on my iPhone, 20th June, 2015.



Figure 40: Closer shot of the front of this nightclub. Image taken on my iPhone,  
20th June, 2015.

Another gathering I attended whilst living in Osaka was a small breaking jam held in a small nightclub in Namba. By comparison to the Red Bull BC One competition, this jam was much smaller, though there was still a good turn-out. Not as many breakers attended this jam, perhaps between fifty and seventy dancers in total. This jam reminded me of some of the parties I attended in New York City. There was a fairly small dance space and there were other party-goers present.



Figure 41: Photograph of Sly breaking in one of the cyphers at the Namba club jam. Image taken on my iPhone, 20th June, 2015.

In this photograph (Figure 41) you can see the small area that Sly has to break in. Others stand close around him, watching as he breaks. The white tape you can see, running through the middle of the floor, is a boundary for the one-versus-one competition that was being held after the cypher qualification. The winner of the one-versus-one competition was a breaker named Yasmin. Yasmin's breaking was incredible that night, she danced with such confidence and charisma and managed to secure the win in the finals after a two-to-one vote by the judges. For winning this jam, Yasmin received a small cash prize of ¥20,000 (JPY), a quite different prize compared to what Wu-tan won after winning the Red Bull BC One competition ten days prior.

Most of the competitive breaking events I attended in Japan were located in and around Osaka, although I did travel to Tokyo for one breaking event: the “Loose Jam”, a two-versus-two breaking competition which took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015.

I caught the *Shinkansen* (the Japanese bullet train) from Osaka to Tokyo on a Sunday afternoon. The Loose Jam was held at a nightclub in Shibuya, a busy area in the middle of Tokyo. The event was scheduled to start at around 10:45pm and run through the night until roughly 5-5:30am the following morning.

A lot of breaking jams, practice sessions and competitive events that took place in Japan tended to run during this strange time of the day: late evenings/early mornings. This was something that I had never experienced in other breaking scenes. From conversations with Sly and other local breakers I was told that it makes sense to hold breaking gatherings during this time for reasons that seemed to be specific to Japanese work life and culture.



Figure 42: Group photograph of those who attended the Loose Jam in Tokyo. Image taken by TMFM, 5th May, 2015.



Figure 43: Photograph of one of the breaking battles during the Loose Jam. Image taken by TMFM, 5th May, 2015.

Those familiar with Japanese work life and culture will know that people in Japan tend to work very long hours. My friend Sly, for example, had a sales job that required him to work six, sometimes seven, days per week; no exceptions. As many people's work routines in Japan are quite demanding of their time, breakers who live here do not often have the capacity to attend many events which take place during the day or in the afternoon. It is for this reason that for many breakers the hours between 10pm until 6am is the perfect time to attend a breaking event.

As stated earlier, the Loose Jam started at around 10:45pm on a Sunday evening and lasted until approximately 5am the following morning, as this was the optimal time for those who had to work late on a Sunday night and needed to be back at work the following morning. My friend Sly also told me how breaking events like this help Japanese people save money on accommodation. For example, when travelling from Osaka to Tokyo to attend the Loose Jam, I did not have to book a hotel for the night or pay for any accommodation. I was at the Loose Jam all night long and caught the first train home to following day. This meant that I was able to save money on accommodation expenses. After the Loose Jam finished I was extremely glad, that unlike many others who had to go to work the following morning, I could just go back home to Sly's place and get some much needed rest.

## Location of the Perth Breaking Scene



Figure 44: Map of Australia, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool.

The city of Perth is the capital and largest city in the Australian state of Western Australia. Home to an estimated population of around 2.5 million people (ABS 2018), Perth is located on the south-west corner of the Australian continent. As mentioned earlier, the Perth breaking scene is perhaps the smallest and least regarded of the three breaking scenes in which I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork. Firstly, with only a small number of active breaking practitioners, none of whom have been highly successful on the international competitive breaking scene, not many breakers from other scenes are aware that Perth even *has* a breaking scene. Secondly, Australia is not a country that many would consider to be a cultural hub for hip hop culture, let alone a place that has many breakers.

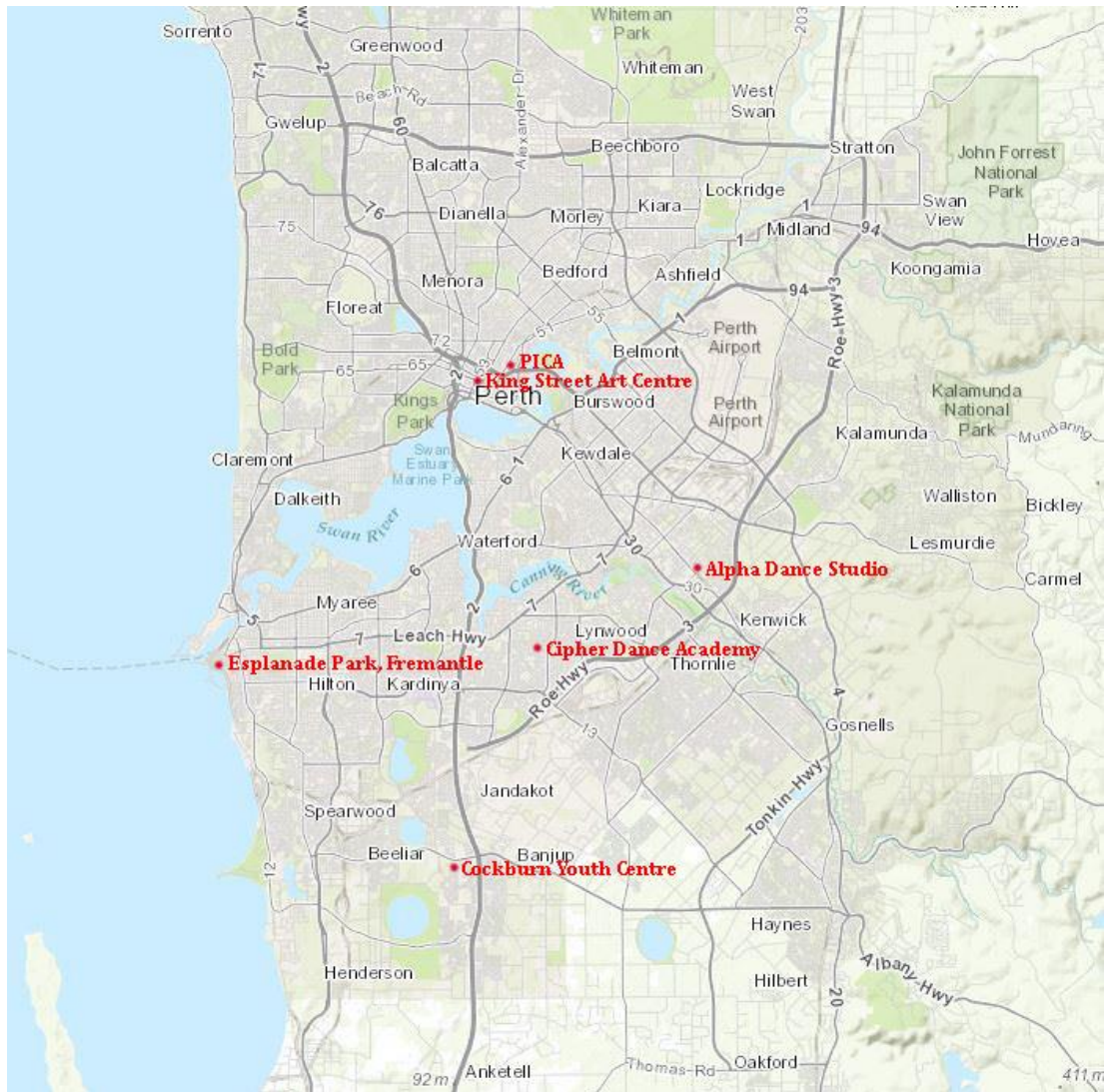


Figure 45: Map of Perth, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool, edited by author.

When I met with breakers in New York City and Osaka and told them that I was a breaker from Perth, in Western Australia, many did not know where Perth was or knew that there was even a breaking scene out there. Hence, it is perhaps a little understandable that the Perth breaking scene is considered by many to be on the fringes of the field of hip hop culture. Nonetheless, Perth does indeed have a breaking scene and the breakers who reside in Perth are just as passionate about the culture and about hip hop as the people I met with in both New York and Osaka.

### **Peoples, Places and Spaces of the Perth Breaking Scene**

Unlike the breaking scenes of New York and Osaka there are only a handful of breaking events held in Perth. Many of the local breakers tend to congregate

together at various weekly practice sessions, most of which are held close to the CBD of Perth city. There are a number of breaking practice sessions which are held in the outer suburban areas of Perth, though many of them are small, informal, private sessions between specific breakers. The sessions that are attended by the majority of the local breakers, and open to everyone, are the ones held in the city: the most popular one being the weekly breaking practice sessions held at the King Street Arts Centre, on the corner of King and Murray Street.



Figure 46: Photograph of breakers practising at the King Street Arts Centre in Perth. Image taken on my iPhone, 26th September, 2015.

The King Street Arts Centre has three main dance studios. Figure 46 depicts a session being held in studio 3. During sessions like these breakers typically arrive at the studio, say hi to everyone, put their bags down in the corners of the room, then find a space in the room in which to begin their session. Many of the regulars have specific spots that they are familiar with. Interestingly, when new people arrive at the King Street sessions there is often a shuffle where claims of particular spots and spaces are negotiated.

As can be seen in Figure 46, there are sometimes as few as six breakers at this session. On other occasions there can be up to thirty breakers in attendance, the numbers vary from week-to-week. The King Street practice session is organised by a local Perth breaker named "Benny Benz". Benny has been organising the King

Street studio space for breakers in Perth since the early 2000s. In return for hiring the space, Benny asks those who turn up each week to contribute four dollars (AUD) to cover the cost of hiring the dance studio space. This arrangement has been the same for the past fifteen years.

Breaking practice sessions at King Street are typically the spaces in which I see and interact with other local Perth breakers. Most of the active members within the scene attend this practice session every week and it has become a sort of central meeting spot for the majority of local Perth breakers over the years. During these sessions we not only break but chat about breaking, discussing upcoming events, workshops and shows, though for the most part, we mostly come just to break and catch up with one another.

After a two-hour session many will head over to Taka's Kitchen, a cheap Japanese restaurant close to King Street. Here we continue to socialise, chat and form bonds with others in the Perth breaking scene.<sup>19</sup>

Asides from meeting up at local breaking practices sessions, there are a few annual breaking competitions which take place in Perth every few months. The "Food Truck Rumble" jam, a two-versus-two breaking competition held at the PICA art gallery in Northbridge, is one of these annual breaking events. The event has been running since 2014, in conjunction with the annual Perth Food Truck Festival event, which is organised by the City of Perth. A local breaker named "Airrico" (otherwise known as Eric) is in charge of running this breaking competition; without Airrico's connections with the Perth Food Truck Festival's organisers, this annual breaking event would not be possible.

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<sup>19</sup> Sadly Taka's Kitchen closed in 2017 and so it is no longer our post-King Street dinner spot.





Figure 47: Photograph of the breaking battles at the 2015 Food Truck Rumble breaking competition. Image taken by Alison Clunies-Ross, 12<sup>th</sup> April, 2015.

Held on a small purpose-built stage outside of the PICA art gallery in Northbridge, the Food Truck Rumble breaking competition is run quite similarly to other breaking competitions around the world: there are breakers who enter, a DJ who plays music for the battles, and a host who emcees the event. There are judges who pick winners and losers after each battle, and the winners of each battle advance to the next round in a knockout style tournament with one eventual winner. The winner of the Food Truck Rumble competition is typically awarded a small cash prize, as well as some items provided by the sponsors of the event.

Here, in Figure 47, we see a photograph from of the battles at the 2015 Food Truck Rumble competition. Natty, the breaker in the middle of the stage (and the same Natty mentioned in Chapter Two), is performing a series of powermoves whilst onlookers in the crowd watch and applaud. He and his girlfriend Shu are battling together in the competition against two much younger breakers in the top-sixteen round of the competition. The crowd watching are mostly people who came to check out the food truck festival, or just happened to be in Northbridge walking by at the time. This event is held in a busy area of Northbridge—popular for its

restaurants and nightclubs—and thus there are always a lot of spectators who come and watch.



Figure 48: Photograph of the breaking battles at the 2017 Food Truck Rumble breaking competition. Image taken by Premillume Photography, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2017.

Here is another photograph taken at the Food Truck Rumble breaking competition, though this photograph was taken during the event in 2017. The Food Truck Rumble event is typically located in the exact same location every year, using the same purpose built stage, and most of the participants in the competition are the same as well. This photograph above (Figure 48) depicts a moment of the final battle of the 2017 Food Truck Rumble competition, where I am on the floor. As there are not many regular breaking competitions held in Perth, breakers tend to travel east—to the larger cities of Sydney and Melbourne—in order to participate in bigger and more vibrant competitions and events. The few events which are held in Perth are often one-off, small jams, organised by specific individuals (like Airrico) who run these events on their own time, and sometimes out of their own pocket.



Figure 49: Photograph of a local Perth breaker named Maze, performing a head-spin on the stage at the 2015 Zou Rock Anniversary Breaking Jam. Image taken by Premillume Photography, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2015.

In 2015 my local Perth breaking crew, Zou Rock, organised an event to celebrate our twelve year anniversary together. We called it the “Zou Rock Anniversary Jam” and we ran it in combination with the Fremantle Festival. The event took place on a small stage at the Esplanade Park in the middle of Fremantle. In the photograph above (Figure 49) is Maze, a local Perth breaker, and one of the original Zou Rock crew members, performing a head-spin while others stand around him and watch.



Figure 50: Photograph of the 2016 WA Junior Breaking Championships event at the Cockburn Youth Centre in Success. Image taken on my iPhone. 21<sup>st</sup>

September, 2016.

Another breaking event that occurs annually in Perth is the WA Junior Breaking Championships event in Success. Three local Perth breakers, Rush, Pepito and Airrico, organise this event in collaboration with the Cockburn Youth Centre. This jam has a great vibe with many younger kids and their families in attendance. Rush, Pepito and Airrico ran the event in 2015, 16, and 17, though recently Rush moved back home to New Zealand and it is not confirmed whether this event will run again in 2018. What is apparent with all of these breaking events is how crucial individual Perth breakers are to their survival and the continuing supply of regular breaking jams and events in Perth. When certain breakers leave Perth or stop breaking altogether, the scene in Perth can be very heavily affected by this, particularly if they are someone who plays an important role; such as Airrico who organises most of the breaking events in Perth. Unlike the Red Bull BC One Cypher competition in Osaka, smaller breaking events like the Food Truck Rumble in Perth are organised by local Perth breakers. They only happen if the individual decides to continue to put in the effort to run them. If, for some reason, Benny Benz decided not to go to the effort of paying and collecting money for the King Street studios, these breaking practice sessions will cease to exist and this would be very detrimental to the Perth breaking scene as a whole.

These is a transitory nature to these breaking scenes. They are managed by individuals. Though smaller scenes, like the one in Perth, are perhaps somewhat more fragile than others because of the small number of breaking participants who live there. Nonetheless, every breaking scene has people who play important roles. For example, breakers like Airrico, who continue to run and organise regular breaking events for the rest of the Perth breaking scene do a huge service for the continuing survival of the Perth breaking scene. These breaking gatherings are not only a place in which prize money can be won for winning the dance competitions; they are sites in which breakers get together and form social bonds, produce a sense of belonging, negotiate the performances of themselves and others, as well as craft local breaking and hip hop identities.

With only a few regular breaking jam and events held in Perth every year, it is typically during the weekly practice sessions that the scene gets together on a regular basis. Breakers like Benny Benz, Airrico, Rush and Pepito are important members of the local Perth scene (at the time of writing) and this will inevitably change over time.



Figure 51: Photograph of Airrico breaking at The Bird nightclub/bar in Northbridge. Image taken on my iPhone. 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2017.



Figure 52: Photograph of a breaking workshop held at the Cipher Dance Academy in Willetton. Image taken by Clancy Oopow. May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

Although the Perth breaking scene is fairly small scene in comparison to many others around the world, there is still a solid network of local breakers who live there. Furthermore, there is much to be gained from examining smaller breaking scenes. For example, what smaller breaking scenes like the one in Perth allow us to see is the significance of particular individuals: who play crucial and extremely important organisational roles within these scenes. Breakers like Airrico and Benny Benz play a vital role within the Perth breaking scene. In organising the weekly practice sessions and running the few breaking events and jams throughout the year, they play a vital role in the continuing development and survival of the Perth breaking scene. Larger breaking scenes, like the ones in New York City and Osaka, have many more regular breaking gatherings (events, jams, practice sessions, parties, etc), and more corporate sponsors, which enable them to sustain and develop their local scenes more easily than those of us in Perth, as they are not as reliant on only a few notable individuals. However, even these larger breaking scenes are still ultimately managed and sustained by specific individuals, though they have many more of them.

### **The Dynamic Nature of Breaking Scenes and Hip Hop Culture**

In the photographs that I have presented throughout this chapter, I aimed to offer an insight into what these breaking scene look like on the ground. These images show, at least in some respect, the kinds of people, places and spaces that make up each of these three breaking scenes. As mentioned earlier, there are many aspects of these three breaking scenes which are not captured in these the photographs or within the ethnographic accounts that follow. As breaking scenes are extremely diverse, ever-changing and dynamic social worlds, they are impossible to capture in their entirety. What is provided is only a snippet of the kinds of breakers, experiences, places and spaces that I encountered within each scene. Breaking scenes boundaries are fuzzy and always shifting. The lived experiences of those reside within them are always changing and developing over time. What I have also

shown is the fragility of these breaking scenes, something which is not easily understood without a sense of how these scenes operate on the ground.

Breakers living within a particular scene are not bound by these groupings. They are able to freely move in and out of them as they please. Some breakers inevitably quit breaking or they move, travel, get injured; there are also many new breakers who are constantly being introduced into the scene, some of whom end up playing significant roles within them: such as organising new sessions, jams, competitions and parties. In this way, these scenes are very dynamic and ever-changing collectives, managed and sustained by those who identify within them; and these people each have the capacity to push and pull these scenes in new and varied directions.

Although some breakers may imagine their local breaking scene as distinct and/or fixed, they are anything but. Revealing some of the ways in which scenes are lived and managed by hip hop actors illustrates how notions of a fixed and/or localised hip hop community or culture does not reflect what is happening on the ground. To this end, breaking scenes can be understood as loosely connected groups of people, within loosely defined geographical borders, held together by an active and continual engagement within specific breaking activities and practices, which are themselves quite loosely defined. In the next chapter, I look at the highly contested and socially constructed nature of hip hop's cultural origins, discussing how origin stories told are part of a social process which help to authenticate local hip hop identities.

## – Chapter 5 –

### ***“It’s a Battle!”***

#### **The Contestable Nature of Hip Hop’s Origins**

*Our story doesn't begin with a once upon a time. Our history is not in books. Our beginnings are based in crevasses, concrete, the outside, the in.*

– Marlon, “My Life is Freestyle” (stance 2014, 00:25).

In this chapter I examine the origin stories told about hip hop’s cultural history and the tensions that surround origins in regard to the social constructions of local hip hop identities. As Cameron (2001) says in *Working with Spoken Discourse*, speakers construct their social identities through talk, as language-use is an act of identity (171). Thus, I draw on some conversations I had with breakers living New York and Perth in order to illustrate how origin stories across the field of hip hop are being continuously negotiated and re-negotiated, by different hip hop actors, within local settings.

Discussions pertaining to hip hop’s history have often been a matter of great importance and contestation (Lipsitz 1994; Gilroy 1995; Bennett 2000). This is due—in part—to their being a lot at stake with regard to where, how, when, and who, either invented, influenced and/or created hip hop culture; as well as how different hip hop actors, across varied local and social contexts, have come to make sense of its origins and re-tell what they believe them to be to others. What is interesting about hip hop’s origins is how they are retold in different ways, by different people, across different places.

The vast majority of the breakers I spoke with about hip hop’s origins expressed to



me how important it is to know about the history of hip hop culture, even if its history is highly contested. Speaking about the origins of hip hop with Jesta from Perth, he told me:

Well, if you claim to be a part of the [hip hop] culture, then I guess you should know some of the basics of where it came from and who its pioneers are. (Interview with Jesta)

The weight that is given to “knowing the history” is something that many hip hop actors suggest to be paramount for anyone who claims to be part of the culture. As Rodger (2011) writes, some hip hop actors think that "by educating themselves about the history of Hip Hop culture, they believe that they more fully appreciate and understand not only the current state of the Hip Hop scene but the future possibilities" (27). Thus, claiming to know hip hop’s history seems to be a way of claiming to belong to the broader cultural field. Though when it comes to questions about who, what, where and when (depending on who you ask) there tends to be several competing stories told (Gilroy 1995).

Rather than simply accepting or buying into one of the many narratives that are out there, I examine the processes of what claiming particular versions of hip hop origins does for different hip hop actors. In this chapter I bring in more voices of local breakers with whom I spoke with during my time in the field. My aim with sharing this material is not to provide a definitive history of hip hop culture, but rather to understand the implications and uses of different origin stories.

As hip hop’s history is still largely an oral history, meaning that it is passed down through stories told, it is in many ways still open for debate (Maxwell 2003, 57; Perry 2004, 10). Instead of debating over who hip hop’s rightful owners are, I argue, as Gilroy (1995) has argued, that there should be more of a focus on the rich and diverse mix of voices that have led to the production (and reproductions) of hip hop scenes around the world

### **Hip Hop’s Origins: What’s at Stake?**

The rise of hip hop as a commanding musical industry, a growing competitive dance sport, a form of contemporary art and an academic discipline (Hip-Hop

Studies), has led to the origins of hip hop to be a somewhat contested and fought-over space. This is because there is a lot at stake with regards to origins. There are various economic, social and political gains to be made from those who come out on top of these debates.

The select few noteworthy hip hop pioneers—those who are credited with being described as early innovators and creators of the hip hop culture—have been lucky enough to be named as cultural pioneers. Some of these individual have made strong and prosperous careers due to this status as a hip hop pioneer. It should be noted that the majority of these pioneers tend to be men, who have either lived or grown up in the surrounding neighbourhoods of the Bronx, in New York City. The ongoing debates over where, when and who hip hop's rightful owners are is an ongoing dispute that will most likely never be resolved. It will probably continue to be fought-over due to hip hop's continual popularity and influence around the world.

An example of the benefits which come with being named a cultural pioneer of hip hop can be seen through the life and career of the legendary Bronx bboy known as Crazy Legs (or just Legs for short). Even though Richard "Crazy Legs" Colón grew up in Manhattan (and not the Bronx), he has, for many years, emphasised his strong connections with the Bronx. His crew, the Rocksteady Crew, were one of the first breaking crews to capture large-scale commercial appeal and success (Johnson 2009, 14). The Rocksteady crew has been featured in several films (*Flashdance* 1983; *Beat Street* 1984), documentaries (*The Freshest Kids* 2001), books (Martha Cooper's *Hip Hop Files: Photographs 1979-1984*) and even video games (*B-Boy the Game* 2006). Legs is often described as a hip hop legend: a cultural pioneer, innovator and creator of breaking and hip hop culture. Legs claims to have invented three very popular and well-known breaking moves: the "W freeze", the "backspin" and the "windmill" (Banes 2004, 39).

Having featured in some of the earliest stories about breaking, Legs has been able to sustain a profitable and highly respected career, not necessarily as a breaking practitioner, but more as a cultural pioneer and leader. Since the 1980s, Legs has continued to be involved in the practices of breaking as a judge or host of large

competitive breaking events. He regularly hosts the annual UK Bboy Championships competition in London, and has done for many years. And in November of 2017 he was asked to be one of five judges to precede the judging panel at the world finals of the 2017 Red Bull BC One competition (Red Bull 2017). As mentioned before, at the time of writing the Red Bull BC One competition is perhaps one of the largest annual breaking competitions in the world. This is due to the large number of participants who compete in the event and substantial cash prize pool that the winners receive. To be asked to judge this competition is a recognition of one's high cultural status and success within the world of breaking, and there is perhaps no other breaker more famous or recognisable than that of Crazy Legs of the Rocksteady crew.

Needless to say, Legs and a number of other notable hip hop pioneers have profited immensely (not just economically) from their position as cultural pioneers of hip hop; yet how is this status of a cultural pioneer of hip hop gained and legitimised? To appreciate this requires an understanding of the dominant historical narratives that are continually being produced and reproduced about hip hop cultural origins.

### **Hip Hop's Origins: The Dominant Historical Narrative**

In much of the scholarly literature on the subject of hip hop's history there tends to be an acknowledgement that hip hop culture has no "official" history (Watkins 2005; Akom 2009; Rodger 2011, 27), although there is one particular account which tends to garner the most attention. This origin story is one that circulates more so than other competing origin stories and it is the story that hip hop culture is a product of what was happening in the South Bronx of New York City, during the early-to-mid 1970s. The story goes that in the house and street parties of local African-African and Latino-American peoples in and around the South Bronx, hip hop was something that emerged from these parties and became a positive social, cultural and political force for these people and for their local communities (Bennett 1999, 2; Alridge and Stewart 2005, 191; Snell and Soderman 2014, 4-5). As Lipsitz (1994) writes, hip hop was formed by ex-gang members, Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc, in an attempt to "channel the anger of young people in

the South Bronx away from gang fighting" (26). Across much of the scholarly hip hop literature there tends to be an agreement that hip hop emerged from a specific point in time and space (1970s; The Bronx, New York). What there seems to be less agreement on is the ethnic dimensions of its origins, as well as its significance as a form of cultural expression.

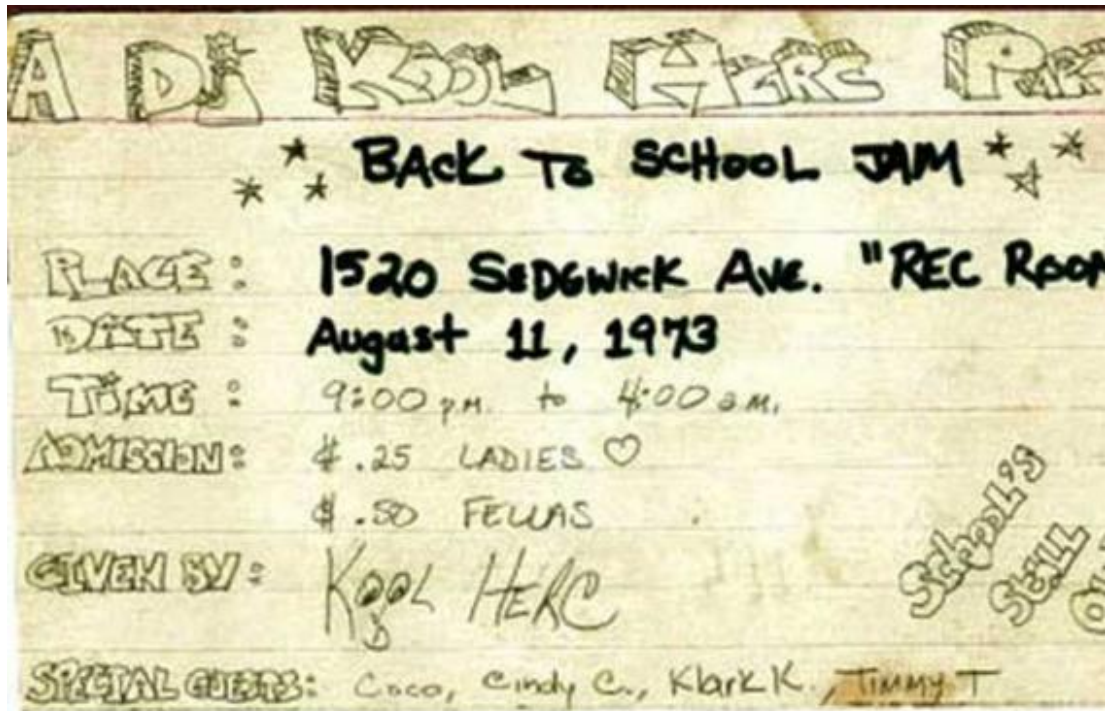


Figure 53: Image of the famous event flyer to DJ Kool Herc's "Back to School Jam", 1973 (Katz 2010, 19).

In *Hip-Hop Within and Without the Academy* (2014), Snell and Soderman's description of hip hop culture's history is rendered with this statement:

Hip-hop culture evolved in the mid 1970s in New York City. It rose out of the late 1960s gang warfare which dominated the largely poor and ghettoized neighbourhoods in the Bronx and Harlem. Instead of continuing to fight, the mainly black and Latino rival gang members from these areas began to come together to hold block, house, and park parties, gatherings in schools and community centres, and events in selected clubs. (2014, 4)

Although many are not as bold as Snell and Soderman in their accounts about hip hop's origins, the details they put forth in relation to the time, place and people are somewhat similar to various other scholarly hip hop texts (Rose 1994; Light 1999; Chang 2005). This dominant hip hop origin story asserts that hip hop culture

began in the house and street parties that were happening in poor, lower socio-economic neighbourhoods in and around the South Bronx. And one of the first of these parties is said to be the Back to School Jam, a party organised by DJ Kool Herc for his little sister's birthday. The Back to School Jam is said to have taken place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August 1973, at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in Morris Heights (Chang and Watkins 2007, 61; Snell and Soderman 2014, 4). It has been said—both by Chang and Watkins (2007) and Snell and Soderman (2014)—that DJ Kool Herc's party grew into something which today has become known as the very first ever hip hop jam: the birthplace of hip hop culture.

Chang and Watkins refer to the Back to School Jam as hip hop's "humble beginnings" (61). The flyer for this jam (see Figure 53) confirms specific details which are often referred to when constructions of hip hop's origin are being made, that is, the time, place and that it was DJ Kool Herc who organised it. This origin story is not simply an oral account told by a number of hip hop actors, it is an account which has been written down, published, and thus legitimised by various scholars, media pundits and even some politicians.

In February of 2016, the mayor of New York City, Bill De Blasio, signed a bill that led to the renaming of Sedgwick Avenue in Morris Heights to be known hereafter as "Hip Hop Boulevard". Changing the name of Sedgwick Ave only further legitimised the claim that the Back to School Jam was the first official hip hop jam. Amusingly, right before De Blasio signed the bill to change the name of Sedgwick Ave, he made a comment that spoke directly to the ongoing debates regarding hip hop's origins. During a press event in which De Blasio was unveiling the new street name, he said:

If you have friends on the West Coast, remember to tell them it all started here, okay? Just remind them of that fact. Sorry West Coast (De Blasio said to applause) (Yahoo News 2016).

Chang and Watkins (2007) interviewed a number of people who were attendees at DJ Kool Herc's Back to School Jam in 1973. Those who they interviewed told Chang and Watkins of the rich vibe and energy that was present at the jam. What they made of these comments was how unique this vibe and energy was for people

living in the South Bronx during this time and how it defused much of the ongoing tensions between rival gang members living in the South Bronx, leading to a positive transformation for these people and their communities (62).

Chang and Watkins go on to say that the Back to School Jam was a pivotal moment in hip hop culture's history. They argue that it prompted others in New York City to begin organising their own hip hop parties and street jams in order to defuse gang violence within their own local neighbourhoods (2007, 62-65). As Tony Tone from the Cold Crush Brothers said to Chang and Watkins, "Hip-hop saved a lot of lives" (62). This origin story—with its emphasis on hip hop as a tool for positive change for those living in troubled neighbourhoods—places individuals like DJ Kool Herc, Africa Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and others living in the South Bronx at the time, as being pivotal players in the creation and development of hip hop culture.

### **Hip Hop's Origins: The Four-Elements of Hip Hop**

In addition to the development of hip hop's origin stories, was also the development of various structures that were said to underpin this dynamic cultural field: one of which being the known as the concept of "the four-elements of hip hop".

The four-elements of hip hop is a conceptual framework and discursive construct which sees hip hop as the sum of four central artistic practices. This structure positions these four practices as being core to the foundations of hip hop. In *Foundation*, Schloss (2009) claims that there was a general consensus within the hip hop community that the four-elements of hip hop was a concept founded by Africa Bambaataa, or as Schloss calls him: "the godfather" of hip hop culture (37). The four-elements are: (1) deejaying, (2) emceeing, (3) bboying, and (4) graffiti art.

Thinking about hip hop as a collection of four distinct elements is something that has been echoed by a number of prominent scholarly hip hop writers (Rose 1994; Light 1999; Forman and Anthony Neal 2004; Chang 2005; Katz 2010), and one that I have said I intend to write against. This is due to the restrictive nature of this concept, as well as the fact that it does not accurately represent the realities of most hip hop peoples today.

Since the concept of the four-elements of hip hop was first conceptualised it has been continually shifting and stretching over time, in order to encompass the growing number of hip hop practices. There are many instances where different hip hop writers and practitioner have named slightly different elements (or added sub-elements) when making reference to the concept.

In Jeff Chang's (2005) *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, he describes the story of an epic musical performance which took place in the South Bronx in which all four elements of hip hop were brought together by DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa (1974). The assertion by Chang is that the four-elements is representative of what hip hop culture "looked like" back then, that it is just a simple way of recognising the culture but it is not a rigid concept that describes what hip hop looks like today. So for example, if a DJ is playing music, an emcee is spitting rhymes, a breaker is dancing and graffiti artist is painting, then by Chang's definition you are witnessing the core elements that make up hip hop culture.

As hip hop has undoubtedly changed over time, there are nowadays many kinds of hip hop dance, art and music practices, and many do not fit well with the concept of the four-elements of hip hop. As A. A. Akom (2009) writes:

Most aficionados locate the origins of hip hop to five fundamental elements: deejaying, break dancing, graffiti art, fashion, and emceeing (rapping). Yet there are others, and I am among them, who trace the origins of hip hop back to Africa and argue that hip hop has multiple elements, histories, origins, and births". (Akom 2009, 52)

Notice that Akom describes not four, but five, elements of hip hop. Though it is not the number of elements of which Akom is particularly critical of, but rather the notion that hip hop is defined as having a select number of elements in the first place.

Since the conceptualisation of the four-element model of hip hop there have been many disagreements regarding the exact number and names of these elements. There have been additions, amendments and subtractions made by hip hop practitioners and scholars. In my discussions with breakers from Perth about the elements of hip hop model, there was a suggestion made that the four-elements

was just a concept in which to begin to understand what hip hop looks like. The point being made was that the elements were not a definitive list of what is and is not hip hop culture, but rather a starting place in which to understand what the culture looks like.

I think it's kind of like a starting point or a guiding kind of line. So you kind of have to start at the four-elements and then kind of branch off to where you want to go. (Interview with Nate Don)

What Nate Don from Perth's explanation illustrates about the elements model is how they are understood in different ways, by different people. For some, the four-elements of hip hop model is gospel: a truth given by hip hop's most-notable cultural pioneers. For others, such as Nate Don, the four-elements is less of truth but more like starting point: a useful, but not limiting, concept.

Speaking with other breakers about the four-elements, Jesta explained to me:

My teachers originally said that the four-elements was this, this, and this, but I don't think it should be exactly those words. Being a spectator can still be a part of hip hop because they can still be going to all the jams, all the events and watching all the different stuff, taking in the knowledge you know. Just because they don't do something like they don't participate in it doesn't mean they aren't part of the culture. But there's no real line to draw I suppose because there are so many different ways to be a part of the culture. You can be listening to the music or you can be a graffiti artist or something, even if you're not doing the rest of it. (Interview with Jesta)

What I understood both Jesta and Nate Don to be saying was that concepts like the four-elements were tools that hip hop actors use to make sense of the culture. This resonates for me with Levi-Strauss' (1966) notion of the bricoleur. In his book *The Savage Mind*, Levi-Strauss brings together his analysis about "mythical thought" with the notion of "the bricoleur" (17). The bricoleur, writes Levi-Strauss, is a French verb that refers to the kinds of activities performed by a handy-man. For example, a handy-man performs their job by using the tools and materials they have at their disposal. They use what already exists in their tool bag, whilst an engineer or scientist, says Levi-Strauss, seeks to exceed the boundaries imposed on them by society: (in the English translated text) "the scientist creating events (changing the world) by means of structures and the 'bricoleur' creating structures by means of



events" (1966, 22). This notion of the bricoleur is a useful metaphor for thinking about the ways in which individual hip hop actors make sense of hip hop culture and its history.

The tensions between those who see the four-elements as the truth, a useful starting point or an outdated concept, reminds me of a quote by the anthropologist Michael Jackson (2008), who in his piece "Between Biography and Ethnography", wrote that "*all* lives and lifeworld's are more complex and variable than is suggested by the paradigmatic discourses of both the academy and the popular media" (378). Jackson commented on the individual's "struggle for being" (389), which was in relation to "process" and how individuals actively construct their social lives.

In the case of Nate Don and Jesta's remarks about the four-elements it seems that they understand the concept as being one which different hip hop actors are able to negotiate, and even dismiss if they want. Some breakers do tend to evoke the four-elements of hip hop model, whereas others will dismiss them entirely. Discussions about hip hop's history and these conceptual models continue to be re-worked and redefined over space and time. Thus, new models are continually being produced and old ones are continually being revised. This is also the case with the origin stories and accounts that hip hop peoples re-tell.

### **Hip Hop's Origins: The Ongoing Debates Surrounding Race and Authenticity**

Within the scholarly hip hop literature, debates surrounding hip hop origins have often centered on issues of race and ethnicity. Throughout this thesis I have emphasised the socially constructed nature of authenticity within hip hop, arguing that what is deemed to be authentic is always "socially agreed-upon" (Harrison 2008, 1785). Therefore, the notion of what is authentic in hip hop is often tied to the particularities and is always shifting. Dominant origin stories told about hip hop, having emerged from the Bronx of New York City and that its origins are closely linked with African American peoples and their cultural traditions is one which has been substantiated by numerous scholarly hip hop writers (Rose 1994;

Potter 1995; George 1998; Szwed 1999; Perry 2004; Ogbar 2007).

These writers have maintained that hip hop, particularly within the USA, has strong links with the oral and cultural traditions of African American and Caribbean peoples. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to champion hip hop's African American-ness, and write extensively about their lives, histories and experiences over other racial and ethnic groups.

In *Prophets of the Hood*, Perry (2004) explores how rap music has clear and visible roots which can be traced to African peoples and their language:

Hip Hop music is black American music. Even with its hybridity: the consistent contributions from nonblack artists, and the borrowings from cultural forms of other communities, it is nevertheless black American music. It is constituted as such because of four central characteristics: (1) its primary language is African American Vernacular English (AAVE); (2) it has political location in society distinctly ascribed to black people, music, and cultural forms; (3) it is derived from black American oral culture; and (4) it is derived from black American musical traditions. (10)

Perry argues that there is strong evidence of a link between the discourses of rap music and African American Vernacular English. Contrary to this argument, since the early 1990s there has been a push by others against the notion that hip hop has any specific or agreed-upon cultural language forms.

Gilroy (1993), Cross (1993) and Mitchell (2001) have each made the case that the notion of hip hop having strong links to the African and Caribbean cultural traditions may be true for some hip hop peoples, but not all. Gilroy (1995), in particular, has written that to suggest hip hop is more authentic or more closely tied to one specific category of people is to be highly selective of its diverse and multi-cultural histories (15). This is not to say that hip hop has not been highly influenced or heavily shaped by African American or Caribbean peoples or their cultural traditions, but rather it is to suggest that no one specific group or peoples should be thought of as being the most authentic or legitimate members of hip hop culture.

Perry's response to Gilroy was that there has been a double standard that African American peoples have to face from a western, ontological, emphasis on "originalism"—that is to say, a fixation on who was the first. As Perry (2004) argues

back,

Why can't something be black (read, black American) and be influenced by a number of cultures and styles at the same time? (10)

To deem something French or English rarely implies that there were no Germanic cultural influences, or Irish, or even Algerian. Why, then, is it so troubling to define something as black? (11)

Although I am sympathetic to Perry's point about the double standards that African American peoples have had to face (and continue to face), my own personal and ethnographic experience have led me to believe that authenticity in hip hop is something that is never able to be resolved. Different hip hop peoples, across different scenes, will continually fight over who is the most authentic and provide various reasons as to why. Furthermore, I do not think that hip hop is something that can or should be thought to have cultural "owners", as is the central claim of this thesis: that hip hop is continually produced, sustained and transformed by many hip hop peoples from around the world.

The sentiment against hip hop having cultural owners is a point which has also been echoed by Juan Flores, who has written extensively on the forgetting and sidelining of hip hop's Latin American cultural histories, origins and influences (2000; 2004). In "Puerto Rocks: Rap, Roots, and Amnesia", Flores (2004) attempts to trace the histories of some of the early Latino rappers. He argues that many of the early Latino hip hop practitioners and pioneers have been sidelined in much of the historical discussions and stories regarding hip hop's cultural origins. During the earlier years of hip hop, Latino peoples, writes Flores, had a significant historical impact and influence, but unfortunately their histories have largely been forgotten (69).

Flores claims that this forgetting has as much to do with the selective vagaries of the music industry and with the social placement of the Puerto Rican communities in the prevailing racial-cultural hierarchy (2004, 69). He blames the logic of commercial representation and the public discourse of music media for both the distancing and forced-forgetting of hip hop's Latino histories. Flores' research of the early Puerto Rican rap artists was not at all a straight forward endeavour. As he

explains, “Primary evidence of a historical kind is even harder to come by, since Puerto Rican rhymes were never recorded for public distribution and many have been forgotten even by their authors (2004, 71).

The forgetting of Latino rappers history and influence speaks to an important point regarding the debates surrounding hip hop’s origins. As hip hop’s origin stories are transmitted orally—from person to person—through stories told, they are, as Vansina (1985) has illustrated in regard to oral traditions, always dialectical and always political (3-32). In this way, origins stories should not be thought of as agreed upon fixed truths, but rather as claims; and as I have mentioned earlier claims are tied to persons and subject to the scrutiny of others.

This is perhaps why Flores does not seem to hold any grudges against non-Latin hip hop practitioners who, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, omitted the histories and influences of their Latino hip hop brothers and sisters. Flores says that we should not blame individuals for trying to gain as much they could from the media’s attention on hip hop during this time (2004, 69). As the current technological shift of media convergence, as described by Henry Jenkins (2004, 34), alters the relationship between technologies, industries, genres and audiences, hip hop exists in an era where the media environment enables some figures to claim cultural ownership and call themselves pioneers and creators of hip hop culture. This, writes Flores, is what should be criticised and held to account, rather than vilifying those who spoke to the media and became known as hip hop pioneers.

### **Ethnographies of Origins: Conversations about Hip Hop’s History, Place, People and Authority**

What follows are two ethnographic encounters I recorded in which discussion about hip hop’s origins were had: one which took place between myself and two local New York breakers on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2015, at an impromptu jam session at the Union Square Park, in downtown Manhattan. The other was a conversation I arranged with a bunch of local hip hop dancers from Perth, which took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December, 2014, during a practice session at the King Street Arts Centre.

## A Heated Discussion with Tiny Love and Goody Roc



Figure 54. A jam session at the Union Square Park, 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2015.

I arrived at the Union Square Park (hereafter USP) in downtown Manhattan as I had heard, from some local breakers, about a jam session that happens between breakers sometimes. In the warmer months, when the weather is a bit nicer, all styles of hip hop dancers tend to gather in the northern area of the park and jam with one another. Like many musicians, to have a “jam” means to be engage in a particular practice or activity with one another. A common way in which breakers jam is through the activity of the breaking cypher. When I arrived at the USP that day I found a bunch of breakers cyphering together, busting moves one-at-a-time on the rough concrete floor, near the entrance of the Park (see Figure 54).

After the session was over, a few of us stood around, just chatting and hanging out. Some were talking about where to go and get some food. As I stood there chatting to those around me, I found myself enter into an interesting conversation with two local breakers from Brooklyn. We spoke about a lot of different things and then quite accidentally we ended up getting into somewhat heated discussion about the origins of hip hop culture in New York City.

Having only got permission to share part of the conversation we had, I am only able

to discuss part of what was said that day. Below is a short transcript which begins mid-way through the exchange. I present the transcript, without interruption, to highlight a couple of things. The first being with what Deborah Cameron (2001) wrote about in her text, *Working with Spoken Discourse*, which was that through speech acts and forms (such as turn-taking), we can examine the social processes that hip hop actors use to produce and sustain origin stories (7). Secondly, I want to highlight the contextual and relational aspects of these conversations: origin stories about hip hop are often crafted in ways which are local and unique. They are generated by social actors within particular local contexts and these aspects play a role in their re-telling.

It should be noted that these two conversations move quite quickly and cover a range of different topics, some of which are hard to follow without prior knowledge of the subject matter in question. In my discussions with Tiny Love and Goody Roc, we began talking about DJ Kool Herc's Back to School Jam in 1973, and Tiny Love explained to me how this was not really the first ever hip hop jam, but one of many during that time period.

Tiny Love (hereafter TL): They were doing that shit in Brooklyn way beforehand and with the huge more big speakers than him (him being Kool Herc). Because in Brooklyn there was a whole bunch of Jamaicans, like real Jamaicans, ya know? And they has (sic) sounds systems way beforehand.

Lucas Marie (hereafter LM): yeah

TL: But like media didn't go there to film them. They went *there* (pointing north towards the Bronx) to film *these* guys.

LM: Why didn't they film like...

TL: Because I don't know, I think like with Bambaataa got connected with the hippies at that time and...

LM: Cause Bambaataa and Flash are always named aren't they?

TL: Yeah they got connected with the hippie movement and the punks and there was the white people and they got connected with them.

LM: Ah okay.

TL: And ya know these guys seen the culture: oh this is lovely film, film, film, and ya know, once these guys got into movies back then, that was like the biggest celebrity to ever be! To be in a movie and Rocksteady became so big. But there was better than Rocksteady here (pointing south towards Brooklyn) ya know? Like these guys, I don't remember, ahh—when they

battled—ahh—in that—ahh—place in—ahh what’s that, there was a big battle with Rocksteady in—ahh—Lincoln Centre.

LM: Okay.

TL: You know who they battled over there? Hold up (Tiny Love turns towards a group of dancers standing a few metres away from us and shouts), “Who they battle: Rocksteady and Lincoln Center? Who they battle, what was their crew?”

Goody Roc (hereafter GR): Rocksteady and Dynamic.

LM: Oh, Dynamic Rockers?

TL: Ahh yeeees Dynamic Rockers!

GR: You know the history though?!

TL: (cuts in) Dynamic Rockers won that shit! Rocksteady didn’t win that!

GR: Rocksteady didn’t have any rockers. Dynamic knew how to rock-dance. Rocksteady hired people who were rock-dancers. Our friend Amigo –

TL: Yeeep.

GR: He was not Rocksteady!

LM: So wait this is before breaking sort of thing?

TL: No no after, this is around eighty-something.

LM: Oh okay after.

GR: Yeah, this is when the rivalry was between the two crews (Rocksteady and Dynamic) was really strong and when they were like fighting each other.

LM: So you’re saying like there were all these rockers in the Bronx and in Brooklyn –

TL: Most in Brooklyn!

LM: and they were doing this in the sixties and then in seventy-three or whatever um hip hop started to be called hip hop? And...

TL: Nah not seventy-three like towards maybe the eighties.

LM: Oh really?

TL: Like in seventy-three they (people in the Bronx) started doing it. All they were doing was copying these Brooklyn guys that were already doing that sort of stuff, like parties in outside in the parks. So these guys in the Bronx started copying that and they started calling it something else once the media came in. The media came in, “Oh what do you call this”, and they were like, “Oh its hip hop”, and da-da-duh and you know that’s how you know, they basically commercialised this type of movement; which was actually funk and soul. It was funk and soul in the beginning!

LM: So this Flowers, Grandmaster Flowers (A DJ from Brooklyn, who TL and GR said started hosting hip hop jams in Brooklyn before Kool Herc and Africa Bambaataa), he was playing like funk and soul?

TL: Yeah funk and soul and disco. At that time a lot of these guys they think disco was like John Travolta! Hahaha.

LM: Maybe that's the pop version of disco? Hahaha.

TL: YEAHH (GR: YEAHH) Disco is actually black. Black sound! But since John Travolta came with his stupid shit everybody thought like, "Oh that's a white sound."

LM: Yeah and Rockers were dancing to that in the sixties? Like to disco right?

TL: yeah, yeah.

GR: A lot of them hustle dance too.

TL: Hustle, yeah. So it wasn't like really, you know like that disco? It wasn't what you seen in that John Travolta. It was like very um, you know the thing is, the way they set up those jams. The rockers wouldn't just battle each other for hours and hours like bboys do, because you do like that and the women leave your ass. That's why bboys now in those bboy jams have no girls.

GR: hahahaha

TL: So stupid! That's what that vibe does. Battling and battling and you know ahhhh, so anyway the rockers wouldn't battle, they would play three or four songs, they battle each other, and then after that they can play disco and hustle –

GR: – they grab a girl and dance –

TL: – and they grab a girl and dance.

GR: That's what Ringo always says to do, he's always like, "What you doing!? Why you dancing with each other!?" (Goody puts on a screechy voice imitating Ringo)

TL: That's the mentality of those guys ya know, once they see bboying they would be like, ahhhh I'm not gonna jump on the floor and dirty my clothes cause then nobody is gonna like me no more, ya know? Girls don't want to dance with you if you fucking dirty like a motherfucker. So there was like a big battle between bboys and rockers at the beginning. Rockers didn't like the bboys and the bboys didn't like these guys (the rockers).

LM: And do you think rockers want to be part of the history of hip hop or do they think of themselves as separate?

GR: Their music wasn't hip hop.

TL: Some they think of themselves as separate.

LM: Do they? But the music wasn't hip hop when those bboys were doing it (back then) either right?

GR: Yeah that's true. That's true.

TL: Some of them want to be here connected, but some of them don't because in the end like everything you seen in hip hop (breaking) is from



rocking. Like this (TL shows me a common top-rocking gesture that many breakers do), this called freezes ya know?! And it's from rocking! The dick burn (TL demonstrates another common breaking move), it's also from rocking! Like drops...

GR: And kick-outs, zulu-spins, these are all rocking moves!

LM: Cause I have heard before that hip hop started in Brooklyn. I've heard that claim by others, but so you're saying this is what they mean?

TL: Can you pull up YouTube or something so you can see this documentary? It is going to tell you a lot of shit. It's called hip hop founders, founders of um, ahh...

LM: I don't have internet sorry cause I'm from Australia and...

GR: hahahaha.

TL: haha, alright so I'll give you a link you can check it out later.

LM: Thanks man.

TL: Don't worry about it. But anyway, so yeah behind this whole thing, like I said, the media made these people become who they are, and they were like the "chosen ones". But in Brooklyn they were doing it before them! It was like decades and decades before!

LM: But don't you think like when they (early hip hop practitioners from the Bronx) got interviewed and they (the media) were like, "Oh when did this start?" Don't you think they (Bronx hip hop practitioners) would have been like, "Oh man there are these rockers in Brooklyn who..."

TL: Nooooo!

GR: *They* wanted to take all the credit!

TL: Nobody would ever say that!

LM: What about Grandmaster Flash? He wouldn't ever talk about this guy Grandmaster Flowers?

TL: He never mentioned it, but he knows about him.

LM: Isn't that fucked up?

TL: You know what they have, they have a trick. They use it all the time. They say, "Oh yeah those guys they were disco DJs"

LM: Ah okay.

TL: and like I said, a lot of people when they hear the word "disco" they think, oh, it's that white shit, but it wasn't! And this disco in the beginning was everything man. DJ, Disc Jockey, means "disco" ya know?! The thing is when they were playing disco it was RnB, funk and soul, funk and soul; and you know it was mostly black stuff.

What you see on like Soul Train (An American television program from the 1970s) that's how it was. See like they don't really consider them to be a part of hip hop. But these guys they are! Disco dancers.

LM: Yeah.

TL: and then another thing is like the white media don't really film them because the rockers were like crazy.

GR: They were like gangsters.

TL: They *were* gangsters. What happened in Brooklyn, the way they died out so fast, because a lot of them were drug dealers and that late eighties something happened. A lot of people got arrested, even in the Bronx some of the bboys got killed because of it. But in Brooklyn a lot of those dudes got arrested and taken to the pen.

LM: Shit.

TL: So the media, that whole mix, you know something like what happened is like in hip hop we got all these dancers but we don't have the root, like rocking. And because there is politics and this crazy media type of thing and these guys (hip hop practitioners from the Bronx) becoming famous and never mentioning nothings about these guys (hip hop practitioners from Brooklyn).

(Interview with Tiny Love and Goody Roc)

What this conversation with Tiny Love and Goody Roc shows is how hip hop's origins are of deep contestation—even for those who live in New York City—and how individual hip hop actors manage and make sense of the origin stories that are out there. As these stories are oral histories, the roots of hip hop culture are a malleable account, able to be picked apart and deciphered in various ways and thus offer different kinds of interpretations of where and how hip hop came to be.

What I learned from speaking with Tiny Love and Goody Roc was that if you accepted the origin story that hip hop began in the Bronx, then you most likely bought into the distinction (crafted by those Bronx hip hop pioneers) that there is a strong difference between the genres of “disco” and “hip hop”. But if you accepted that hip hop may have started in Brooklyn, then you were perhaps more likely to think of disco as being a part of hip hop's history. Both Tiny Love and Goody Roc expressed how disco music and disco dance practices in Brooklyn were a central and defining influence of much of hip hop's music and dance practices today. Yet, as Tiny Love mentioned, those from the Bronx tend to dismiss the influence and histories of their Brooklyn counterparts by naming them “disco DJs” rather than “hip hop DJs”, making a distinction based on genre, whereas to Tiny Love and Goody Roc there is no real distinction.

Speaking with Tiny Love and Goody Roc about hip hop's Brooklyn histories also demonstrated to me how individuals are able to pull together, skillfully and in the moment, various facts, details and other bits and pieces of evidence, in order to produce a rational, coherent and persuasive origin story. It should be made clear that stories like these are continuously being made and remade across the field of hip hop.

### **A Chill Conversation with Jesta, DT, Optik and Nate Don**



Figure 55. Photograph of a group of local breakers and other hip hop dance practitioners from Perth. Image taken with my iPhone at the King Street Arts Centre, 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2014.

During a regular practice session at the King Street Arts Centre on Murray Street in Perth's CBD, I asked a bunch of breakers and other hip hop dance practitioners if they would mind having a chat with me about hip hop dancing in Perth and what they thought about hip hop histories and/or origins.

Figure 55 is a photograph I took before our group discussion got underway. In this photograph we were located in the "green room" of the King Street Arts Centre. The formal setting of the green room, in comparison with the dance studios next door, granted a certain formality to our discussions. Yet with an approach to keep the talk

informal and casual I give each participant a chance to share their thoughts and understandings about the hip hop's origins and did not come in with any prepared questions. Having known most of these guys for many years, through my involvement in the Perth breaking and hip hop dance scene, it was fairly easy to speak candidly and honestly and our discussion was fairly relaxed. We joked around a bit beforehand and then I began by posing a couple of questions about hip hop's origins. We started talking about the four-elements of hip hop; you might recognise Nate Don's words as I quoted them earlier in this chapter.

Nate Don: I think (the four-elements) is kind of like a starting point or a guiding kind of line. So you kind of have to start at the four-elements and then kind of branch off to where you want to go.

Optik: But like now everyone knows what hip hop is and like we can say, "Ahh that can be a part of it because it relates to this element." The same thing as like, "That's a breakfast cereal because it has this quality to it."

DT: I definitely think there is like um like where it started from, like hip hop has to have a ground base foundation. So it's kind of hard to see all these other random things join in and be like, "Yeah what we're doing is hip hop", you know what I mean?

It's pretty much the same thing as what he (Optic) was saying, like you can't really categorise it (hip hop) cause it just doesn't really suit, but yeah I wouldn't say it is like strictly hip hop. If someone is rapping, then that is already hip hop cause that is hip hop!

LM (myself): Where did this concept of the four-elements come from do you guys think?

DT: umm...

Jesta: It's like the people who have been in it for ages know about the four elements somehow, even if they don't remember how they know about it. It's just a thing that's there.

LM: What do you guys think about when people say knowledge is the fifth element?

Optik: I remember Africa Bambaataa actually added that as a fifth element like was the...

LM: Is he allowed to do that?

Optik: I guess he is because he was the one who like made up the word or he was the one that said this is what it's called. But when he did that newspaper article he was like, "There are four elements that make it up blah blah blah", and then later he went back and added knowledge.

LM: Was he (Bambaataa) really the guy who created the concept of the four-

elements?

Optik: Nah there were arguments about some emcee from the Furious Five and um one of his friends went away to the military and you know how they march like left-right-left-right? Well he used to mock them like hip-hop-hip-hop and yeah that's one of the stories, but apparently there are so many other stories.

I remember I interviewed Boogie T, the popper, because I used to be into videography and I actually wanted to make a documentary about hip hop culture in Perth, but I just got over it. So I asked him, "What's hip hop?", and he was like, "Hip hop's like a religion", and that really stayed with me cause he was one of the first people that wasn't a Krumper that I really spoke to and when he said that, I was just like, ahh okay well I thought a religion was this and so then when I got back on the bus back to Narrogin I had heaps of spare time so I was just thinking, if hip hop was a religion then who would be the god?

Jesta: Hip hop could also be a religion without a god kind of thing. Like you follow teachings from people who came before you and yeah then you pass down the teachings further and further, but then you just kind of let it expand and evolve by itself. Like Christianity now isn't the same as what it was thousands of years ago. So it changes a little bit but your still part of a group together. Like if you go outside and see someone you can tell they are not a dancer just by looking at them. Just by how much the culture affects them.

Nate Don: I just see hip hop as a lifestyle.

Optik: But with the lifestyle thing it is like look at the all the clothes we are wearing, all these things we are wearing are influenced by hip hop. I know everyone in Narrogin always gives me shit for wearing like these sorts of shoes and like hats and stuff all the time. I remember KRS One said that hip hop culture is a civilisation. But personally I don't really agree with the civilisation thing because civilisation is such a different term.

(Interview with Jesta, DT, Optik and Nate Don)

Conversations like this one are reminiscent of so many similar conversations I have had with others in the past. Those of us who live in Perth often reference what prominent North American hip hop peoples and pioneers are saying and doing, yet as is illustrated within this conversation, we do not simply blindly accept what our counterparts in the USA say and do. We are critical, picking and choosing specific points made and using them to their own advantage. For example, when Optik says, "There are so many other stories", he is alluding to the fact that it does not matter what you think is the truth, because there is always another truth out

there. Optik is aware that there are competing stories being told about hip hop's origins, so whichever story you choose buy-into is your choice to make. This was also confirmed when Nate Don told the group, "I just see hip hop as a lifestyle", which is to say that he sees hip hop as something more than just a set of key artistic practices, but something he can redefine for himself.

After speaking with everyone as a group, I also conducted one-on-one interviews in order to get more detailed and personal responses to some of the points made during the group discussions. In the one-on-one interviews I noticed that individuals were more likely to make stronger and bolder claims about what they thought about hip hop's history. In my one-on-one interview with Jesta, he told me:

My uncle used to tell me that the core elements (of hip hop) were emceeing, djing, graffiti and bboying. But then I think it should be just dancing in general, not only bboying, because you can't say that bboying is hip hop but popping isn't, or locking isn't, or krumping isn't, because it is all the same thing. So it should just be dancing.

My uncle said that the four elements was this-this-and-this, but I don't think it should be exactly those words. I suppose if you're feeling it, then you can feel like you're a part of hip hop and that's cool. I think as long as someone feels it then that should be cool for them. Like Optik was saying, you can't just go around and say who is hip hop and who is not. You have to let people be in the culture if they want to be there and you can't really stop them even if you wanted too. I think it is a very individual thing as well as taking from everyone at the same time.

(Jesta interview)

In my interview with DT, he said:

I believe no one truly owns hip hop. I guess it's more of a progressive kind of thing like a collective, progressive, consciousness. Hip hop is not something like, "I'm hip hop on the weekend" you know what I mean? Or I'm hip hop when I'm hanging out with my friends or when I'm listening to music. It's not something you can just claim when you're following it. You *are* hip hop itself! It's like a lifestyle, as Nate said. You know that feeling when like you are bopping your head to hip hop (music)? It's like the same thing like that. Like that is the hip hop feeling to me. You have got to feel all these different kinds of things and just feel hip hop. I feel chilled and relaxed when I listen to hip hop music. It helps me relax more and be one with myself sometimes you know? I think more straight when I'm listening to hip hop.

(DT interview)

In my interview with Optik, he said:

So for me I think people don't know as much they think they know, but you know who am I to say that because when I was a kid, like fourteen or fifteen, I was the same way.

I was in Narrogin by myself and I was like, yeah I know everything about hip hop, and then when I came up here (to Perth) I was like, fuck man I don't know anything. So it's really up to the context. If someone in the same situation is up in some country town and they just watch a few hip hop videos online, comparatively to everyone around them they will probably think that they are pretty hip hop.

But for me, as a krumper, I am a part of the Perth scene because I krump. So I think it depends on each person themselves. For me a lot of the hip hop dancers in Perth I've met through krumping so that's how I see it I guess.

(Optik interview)

In my interview with Nate Don, he said:

So there is this guy who's been doing it (dancing) for less than a year, and he's trying to educate me, and I'm like, dude, like come on...

So yeah anyone that hasn't really travelled and has less years' experience they need to be humble and get knowledge from how others more experienced than them look at it.

(Nate Don interview)

What one can say about hip hop is often shaped by the contexts in which is situated in that moment. The negotiations of hip hop's origins, by different hip hop actors across different hip hop scenes, shows how origin stories are constructed through social interactions, and shaped by local and situational contexts in which these discussions occur. Cameron writes about the relationship between discourse and culture, saying that:

Even the most seemingly straightforward interaction actually depends on a great deal of shared, tacit knowledge, both cultural and linguistic (2001, 110)

In this sense, origin stories in hip hop are not only shaped by one's local scene (context) but by the social interactions in which they engage in discussions

surrounding hip hop's origins.

## **The Many and Varied Origins of Hip Hop Culture**

In this chapter I have discussed how origin stories about hip hop culture are reflexively constituted by different hip hop practitioners through social interactions: constructed and transformed through these interactions. In *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, Gilroy (1995) says that the majority of hip hop scholars recognise that hip hop has non-linear origins, and that instead of arguing over who are its rightful owners are that there should be more of a focus on the rich mix of voices which have led to the proliferation of the many and varied manifestations of hip hop cultures around the world (15).

Poe One, a breaker from Los Angeles who now lives in Adelaide, said to me during a breaking event in Sydney that, in regards to hip hop's history, "everybody has got their story." The many and varied ways in which origins are understood and discussed within the field of hip hop are illustrative, not a truth about where hip hop came from or why, but rather an insight into how different people imagine themselves as part of hip hop culture. Origin stories in hip hop are claims about hip hop's history, pieced together in situ, by different people, for a variety of different purposes.

Through sharing the voices of breakers discussing and debating hip hop's origins, I have shown how hip hop's histories are not neat or simple accounts that everyone agrees with, but rather hip hop's origins are highly contested and continually being re-made through stories told. I have shown how these origins are able to shift and develop over space and time, how different individuals imagine and make sense of origins in different ways. Origins are a way, a mode of presentation if you will, that allows each individual hip hop person to make claims and position themselves in relation to the field of hip hop. Hip hop culture, more broadly speaking, is a fragile social world because it is grounded in these relationships that are freely and openly contested, and any (even partial) agreement is likely understood as momentary rather than enduring. In the next chapter, I examine how breakers negotiate the physical breaking performances of others in situ, discussing how these



performances are legitimised in different ways, across different local and social settings.

## – Chapter 6 –

### ***“Originality”, “Raw Energy” and “Staying Relevant”***

#### **Making Legitimacy through Breaking Performances**

*When you’re dancing and you’re in a zone, and you do something that you even never did before, or, you can never do it again, you know, that’s like being in the moment, that’s like... what is that? You can’t explain that.*

– Bboy Abstrak, Catch The Flava World (2017).<sup>20</sup>

*Life is lived forward but it is understood backward.*

– Clifford Geertz quoting Soren Kierkegaard, in *After the Fact* (1995, 166).<sup>21</sup>

In this chapter I analyse a number of embodied breaking performances in order to examine how different embodied actions and gestures are legitimised through social interactions within local contexts. Through an examination of three separate breaking performances I witnessed during breaking gatherings: one in Osaka, one in New Jersey and one in Perth, I demonstrate how breaking performances are not the sum of a specific set of physical movements or gestures, but rather are made into a breaking performances through the social negotiations of one’s performance in situ.

This draws from and builds upon Butler’s concept of “performativity” (1990; 1996),

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<sup>20</sup> This quote was taken from a promotional video for the “Catch The Flava World” breaking camp in Krakow, Poland. Produced by Mason Rose, published to the “Catch The Flava World” Facebook page on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> This is a shortened and translated quotation is from Soren Kierkegaard's Journals IV (1843). One of the first references to the quotation, in English, is said to have been in a lecture in October 1904 delivered by Dane Harald Høffding (Tilley 2012, 1). Høffding had been invited by William James to deliver a lecture to his students. Høffding mentioned Kierkegaard by name and referred to a version of the quotation I have used above. James was captivated by the quotation and from that point on used it on various occasions.

in which one's identity is socially constructed through a series of performative acts. Through the negotiations of breaking performances, specific embodied actions and gestures, which at one point would not be thought of as being part of breaking practices, become, over time, part of breaking practices. In a field which has no central governing body—where its boundaries are a constantly shifting over time and space—what constitutes a typical breaking style, form, movement or attitude is constantly shifting, as these aesthetic qualities are being constantly negotiated by different breakers, across different localities.

Amidst all the theorising around the body, Bourdieu's work, and in particular his writing on "habitus", stands out because of its sophisticated and practical dealing with the complex processes of embodiment. As stated by Noble and Watkins (2003, 521), Bourdieu was not the first to use the concept although his writing has been applauded for being perhaps the most sustained theoretical development of the notion. Simply put, habitus to Bourdieu (1990) is defined as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations" (53). In this way, habitus offers us a tool in which to explore the capacity of human agency and action, which in turn overcomes the binaries of a lot of social theory such as object/subject, structure/agency, and mind/body.

As noted by Noble and Watkins, Bourdieu showed us that "our being-in-the-world is largely a practical mastery of the implicit principles of the social world, not the symbolic mastery of explicit, consciously recognized rules" (2003, 522). In his book *Body & Soul* (2004), Wacquant's analysis of boxing extends Bourdieu's insights, and emphasises habitus as "bodily capital" which is a capital that one accumulates and cultivates through the actual *doing* of boxing.

By examining the performances of breaking practitioners I aim to demonstrate how one accumulates and cultivates bodily capital through the doing of breaking. I offer up three terms: "originality", "raw energy" and "staying relevant". Each term is somewhat ambiguous in what it represents, yet significant in what it enables: the authentication, or the rejection, of one's performance as a legitimate breaking performance. Thus, from the embodied actions and expressions a breaker exhibits in

the moment come the negotiations of one's bodily capital in the context of breaking and thus determining whether such a performance is—or should be thought of as being—legitimately and/or authentically connected to the practice of breaking.

These three terms are part of a continuously shifting lexicon of numerous other terms, which breakers invoke in order to make sense of a chaotic field. From speaking with breakers about what constitutes a typical breaking performance, one is likely to discover that there are no simple or agreed-upon ways in which to determine what is acceptable and what is not. As mentioned before, there is no set number of physical moves, gestures or embodied expressions one can pinpoint as being essential to the practice of breaking.<sup>22</sup> Instead what there seems to be is a general feeling, within particular moments in time and space, about what is acceptable and what is not. My own personal interest in how breaking performances shift over time, and are negotiated and legitimised in different ways, by different people, has a fairly long history.

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that many breakers might disagree with me on this point. For instance, breaking competitions being added in the youth Olympics demonstrates that this is likely.

## Kenny's Private Workshop: Brooklyn, New York, 2007



Figure 56. Photograph of (from left to right) Edit, Beni Benz, Nasa, Ippy (myself) and Kid Drama, having dinner at the Carnegie Deli in Midtown, New York City, 2007.

In 2007, long before I began studying anthropology or doing any ethnographic fieldwork, four breaking mates and I travelled from Australia to the United States, embarking on a one month-long trip which we planned to coincide with two international breaking competitions. The first competition was the Rock Steady Crew's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Jam, which was being held in New York City. The second was the Freestyle Session 10<sup>th</sup> Year Anniversary Jam, which was being held in Los Angeles a month after. During the ten days my friends and I spent in New York City, one of my friends managed to get in contact with Ken Swift and arranged for us to take a private workshop with him at his studio in Brooklyn.

Ken Swift, or Kenny—as many breakers tend to call him—is sometimes referred to as being one of the greatest, most influential, breakers of all time. He has been

credited with having created many of breaking's foundational dance moves, as well as being credited as an innovator of many breaking "styles". For example, Kenny's signature "Mad Mugsy" style (see Figure 57) has become part of the breaking lexicon for many breakers, myself included. Mad Mugsy is a unique persona of Kenny's, which one can witness when he breaks. Many breakers often refer to Kenny, when speaking about what a breaking performance *should* look like. When questions of style, character, flavour and other aesthetic qualities are concerned, reference is often made to Ken Swift. In addition, Kenny has made appearances in almost all the big-name hip hop films from the 1980s: "Style Wars" (1983), "Flashdance" (1983), "Wild Style" (1983) and "Beat Street" (1984). While not a universally agreed position, a friend from Perth said to me once that to break like Kenny is to break correctly.

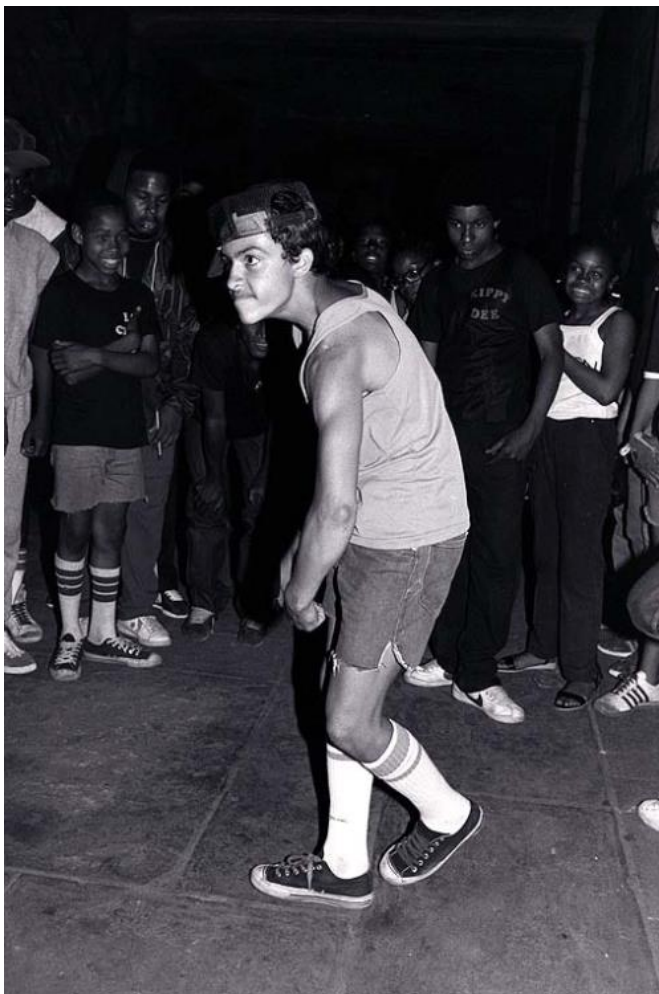


Figure 57. Ken Swift's Mad Mugsy look, image downloaded from <http://www.breaklife.com/ken-swift>.

I was excited as we made our way to Kenny's workshop in Brooklyn. Not only was I nervous about meeting him in person, I was excited for what he was going to say and teach us. Having watched countless videos of him, online and in the films named above, I assumed that whatever he had to say and teach was going to be special.

As we arrived at his studio in Brooklyn we each paid a large sum of money up front. This, we were told, was to cover the cost of Kenny's workshop. Although the price was a little higher than I had expected, it seemed reasonable as it was Kenny's workshop after all. As we made our way inside the dance studio, we gathered round and waited, but Kenny was somewhat distracted. He was arguing with a friend of his about the supposed origins of a particular breaking move; a move which he asserted originated from a different person than his friend was claiming that it had. My friends and I, we just sat there waiting, listening to the conversation as it went back and forth.

I watched as one of my friends got out his notepad and started jotting things down that were being said between Kenny and his friend. I saw him make note of specific names, places, dates and various other things. As the discussion continued it seemed that each side had their own personal account, and neither seemed likely to submit to the other. At the time I was not interested in this discussion between Kenny and his friend. I was more interesting in doing the workshop that we had paid for. Although, if this had happened more recently I would probably have had a lot more interest in what was being said. I would most likely have taken notes and thought about how the conversation would be illustrative of the way breaking and hip hops past, its history, is always being re-constructed in the present.

After an hour or so the conversation petered out and it seemed that finally we were going to begin our workshop. However, I soon realised that the workshop was not going to be what I had expected it would be. It began with Kenny telling us a long story. He told about where and when he started breaking, who his influences were (many of whom I had not heard of before) and what it was like to growing up in New York City during the late 1970s. He spoke for a long time about how breaking and hip hop culture had changed since he started breaking in 1978. Regardless of all

these changes, breaking, he said, was still a part of hip hop culture and that meant that it was still very much connected to its roots in New York. To prove this point more clearly, Kenny spoke to us about the “rockers”, those he called “the original bboys”.

The rockers were the people who were dancing at the very first hip hop jams, before the word hip hop was even a thing. Rocking, he told us, was the dance which had inspired the breakers of today.<sup>23</sup> Kenny’s appeal to a genealogy regarding the rockers was to legitimise their influence and history. In a rocking battle, he said to us, it was custom to have your t-shirt taken off you and burnt if you were deemed to have lost the battle. These t-shirts were significant, Kenny told us, because they usually had your name and the name of your breaking crew printed on them. That was where the phrase “getting smoked” or “getting burnt” came from, he said. It came from rocking.

Thinking back to that time when Kenny and his friend were arguing about the origins of a particular breaking move reminds me of the Kierkegaard quote in the epigraph to this chapter: “life is lived forwards but it is understood backwards”, referenced by Clifford Geertz in *After the Fact* (1995, 166). When Geertz made reference to Kierkegaard, he was emphasising the fact that history is something which is never truly settled. That the present seems to end, but the past is never actually finished or complete. History tends to be reimagined over time as we continually (re)construct it. Breakers, like Kenny, are always in the process of re-constructing hip hop’s past.

As my friends and I sat there listening to Kenny’s account of the rockers and their influence in breaking we nodded and smiled at him politely, indicating to him that we were listening and interested. Kenny’s status to us as an influential and respected breaker meant that we were mindful of our actions whilst we remained in his presence. I could sense that some of us were itching to get into the more hands on stuff, hoping that Kenny might show us some breaking moves, though we made sure not to voice any of these concerns at the time.

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<sup>23</sup> A point made earlier by Tiny Love and Goody Roc.



After what seemed like a long while, Kenny finally proceeded to show us some rocking steps. One of the steps he taught us was the “outlaw step”, a move that involved placing your feet and weight forwards and then backwards, repetitively. Having already learned this move by watching others perform it countless times, I did not feel the need to have it be re-taught to me, especially by Kenny of all people. Nonetheless, my friends and I did not protest or question what Kenny had planned to show us. Nor did we show any sign of annoyance at having to go through this simple dance step, again and again, for the remaining hour of Kenny’s workshop.

Once the workshop was over Kenny asked if any of us wanted to purchase his new DVD, “The Ken Swift Collection”. It was a double DVD he was currently selling, which consisted of two (home-made) feature films: “The Ken Swift Vol.1” and “The Epitome Vol.2”, both containing hours and hours of raw (unedited) video footage of Kenny breaking. Being a tad disappointed with the workshop, I purchased a copy of Kenny’s double DVD and got him to sign it for me. My signed copy of “The Ken Swift Collection” is not something I watch often, but it is something I treasured once. It is proof that I had once met the legendary Ken Swift and taken his workshop, but it is also proof that I have listened to his story, a story that I continue to think about and draw from.

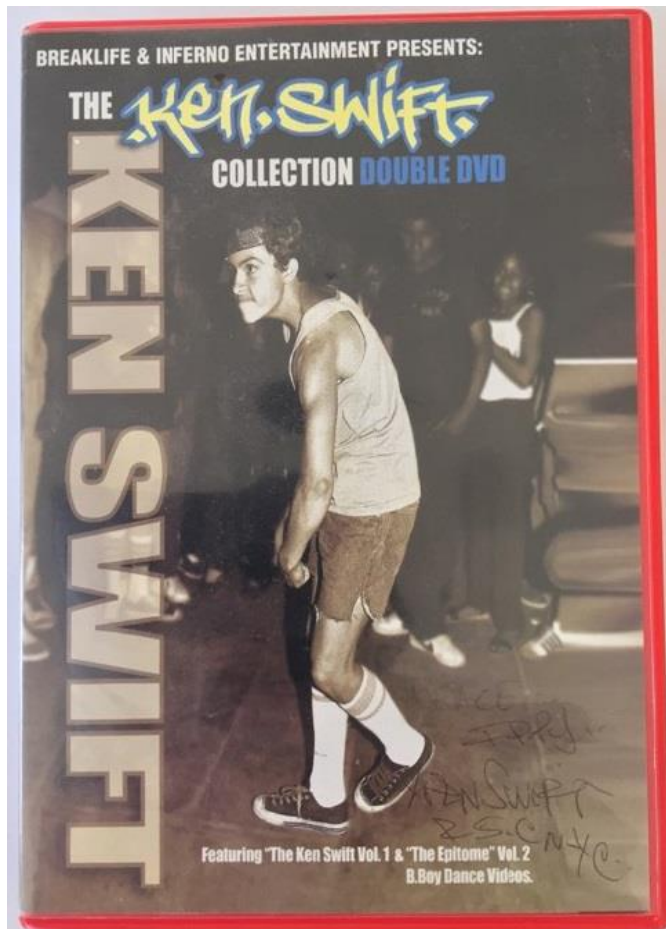


Figure 58. My signed copy of “The Ken Swift Collection” Double DVD.

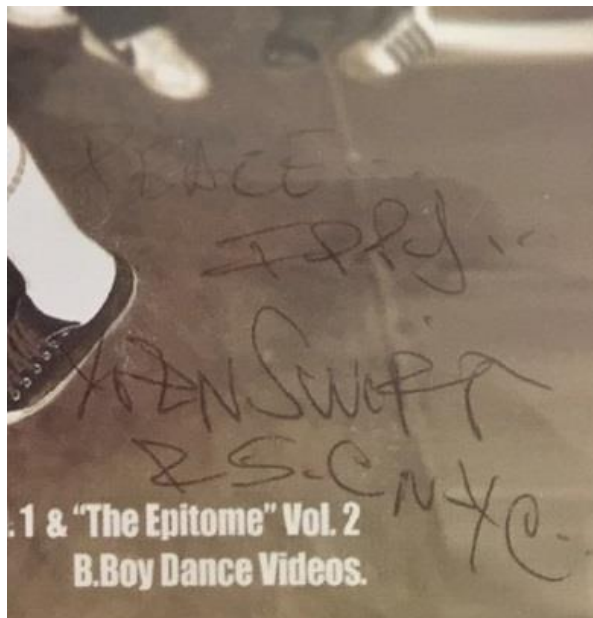


Figure 59. “Peace Ippy. Ken Swift. R.S.C (Rock Steady Crew) NYC.”

What this story of meeting Kenny back in 2007 illustrates is central to the social

negotiations that occur within hip hop circles. Although breaking performances tend to vary immensely across different times and spaces, the majority of the performances I have witnessed over the years are often recognisable as being somewhat connected to a specific time and place, a celebrated era: Kenny's era. Through imitation breakers are able to express a clear message, "I am a breaker just like Kenny". Across the world there are breakers who copy and imitate the breaking styles and aesthetics of well-known breakers, like Kenny and others who they feel *embody* what breaking looks like.

Not everything that Kenny says or does is seen by every breaker as being the best or most authentic. There are, as mentioned before, multiple kinds of breaking styles, forms and moves. Yet, there are some breaking styles, forms and moves which are more easily recognised (and legitimated) than others. In the three ethnographic accounts that follow are specific examples of varied breaking styles, forms and moves in different situations, and the processes by which these performances are recognised and legitimated as breaking performances.

## Ethnographies of Breaking Performances

### I. Originality at the Full Throttle Jam



Figure 60. The main competition room at the Full Throttle Jam, taken on my iPhone, 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015.

We arrived at the Full Throttle Jam (hereafter FTJ) a bit after one o'clock in the afternoon. When I say we, I mean my friend Sly, his wife Kaori, and myself. As we entered the jam I could hear a DJ playing hip hop music as over two hundred local Japanese breakers made their way into a small room which was to be the arena for the two-versus-two breaking competition that day.

Located at a recreational center in Habikino, an area north-east of Osaka's city, we crammed ourselves into this tiny dimly lit room you can see in Figure 60. I found the room a bit claustrophobic. It was hot and stuffy. Too many bodies and not enough air. It was hard to wander around or even stand still without being constantly knocked around by other people.

The room was split into two distinct sections. At the back of the room was where the main competition battles were set to take place. The area was cordoned off with blue tape marking a large square on the floor. Behind this the DJ had set up his turntables. There were also some chairs, placed there, I assumed, for the judges of the competition.

On the other side of the room, close to the entrance, were a bunch of people mingling and chatting to one another. Around the edges I saw parents whom I suspected had bought their kids to the event. The FTJ was one of many breaking jams I attended whilst living in Osaka. Speaking with Sly and another breaker named Narumi (Naru for short), they both said to me that the breaking scene in Osaka has grown a lot over the past ten years or so. Naru said that, for many breakers here in Osaka, it is all about winning the competitions. For Sly this was a depressing but accurate statement. He said that he agreed with Naru that this was true, but seemed disappointed and told me that there was a time in Osaka when the breaking scene was not as hung up on winning competitions. But then he said, "Well, if that is what they want to do then whatever good for them".

Over several conversations Sly and I had together we discussed what we thought to be the different driving forces that shaped what breakers in Perth versus Osaka thought about breaking. We were both interested in why people today choose to get into breaking, compared to why we both choose to break. During these conversations Sly told me about the differences he believed to be true between breaking in Osaka compared to breaking in other cities across Japan. Osaka breakers, Sly said with some pride, are more "original" than other Japanese breakers.



Figure 61. Photograph of Sly (left) and Kaori (right), taken with my iPhone.

Osaka breakers, Sly said, might not be the best in the competitions, but they are the more creative and original in their breaking performances. Sly himself has quite a unique performative breaking style. He likes to make up unique footwork patterns which flow smoothly from one position to another, often in ways that others might not have thought of doing. He also likes doing random things in breaking battles which surprise or shock his opponents, the crowd, and the judges. He is definitely not the most athletic breaker, yet what he lacks in strength and flexibility he makes up for in his original and creative footwork patterns.

Sly and I entered together in the two-versus-two breaking competition at the FTJ. Out of the forty-eight breaking crews (teams) who entered we made it all the way to the semi-final round, placing ourselves in the top-four of the competition. Yet, it is not our success in the battles that I plan to discuss but rather an encounter which took place during the FTJ, in a breaking cypher that occurred in another room of the recreational center, a room which I will call the “warm-up room”.

Those who entered the breaking competition at the FTJ were able to use this warm-up room to stretch, practise and store their personal belongings. When Sly and I entered the room much of the space was taken up by others. Some were practising moves whilst others were lounging around and chatting or just looking at their phones. In one of the corners of the warm-up room was a small cypher between a group of breakers. Sly and I watched as breakers went in and out of this cypher. As

we watched we saw this one guy doing the most incredible breaking movements I had ever seen. As he was breaking in the middle of the cypher he was holding these really hard-looking bodily positions, transitioning from what looked to be one very hard position to execute, to another very hard position. He performed these transitions with such speed, precision and strength that it was almost impossible to work out what he was doing with his body in the cypher. His flexibility, strength and power was incredible, but most of all his unique body positions were incredible to watch. Sly looked over at me grinning: it was like he was telling me, “this is the original Osaka breaking style I was talking about”.



Figure 62. Photograph I took of the warm-up room at the FTJ. Image taken with my iPhone, 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015.



Figure 63. Photograph I took of the breaker I witnessed in the warm-up room cypher. Image taken with my iPhone, 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015.

I stood there transfixed as I watched him chuck his left foot behind his head, then perform a back-flip from this position. Never had I seen someone do a backflip with their leg behind their head before. I almost thought he was going to knock himself out. Luckily he landed safely on his left foot, which was still hanging there behind his head. From here he sprung backwards and landed roughly onto both of his palms, making a heavy sound as his hands hit the floor. His hands and wrists seemed to be taking most of the impact from these hefty manoeuvres.

He then pointed his right foot up into the air, creating a shift in his body position which turned his torso upwards, yet at the same time sending his hips towards the ground. He then mustered all of his strength to slow this process down as much as possible. Whilst doing this he unhinged his left leg from behind his head and quickly grabbed hold of it with one hand and then using the gap made, threaded it through the other leg. With only the one hand to do this very complex sequence of moves he then planted his entire body onto his right shoulder, landing forcefully but solidly onto the ground. It was hard to know if this was sequence of movements were intentional or not. Though because it was controlled I think that he meant it. From this position on his shoulders he then bounced back up onto his feet, spun around on his left foot marking a large circle on the ground, and then abruptly ended and walked out of the breaking cypher.

After this incredible display of skill and strength, and what looked to be a series of very painful positions to perform, this breaker was greeted with a round of applause from those of who were in the room and saw his dancing in the cypher. I watched Sly and noticed him nodding his head and clapping in approval, as were many others also were, myself included. Everything about this individual's "run"—a term breakers use to describe a breaking performance—in the cypher was unique: the movements, gestures and bodily positions. If I had seen this performance in a different context I might not have even thought about it as a breaking performance because of how different it was. Yet by witnessing it at a breaking jam, in a breaking cypher, it reminded me that within specific contexts the boundaries between what *is* and what *is not* a breaking performance are quite diverse. What one is able to do in breaking is open to interpretation and will likely be tested by those in the room.

Personally, I like to begin most of my breaking runs with some top-rocking or up-rocking movements first, then move into the more difficult tricks and manoeuvres later on. This breaker, however, went straight into his harder tricks without performing any top-rocking or up-rocking movements whatsoever. His run contained little to no flow, it was just one strange bodily position into another equally strange bodily position. It did not look much like the breaking runs with



which I was familiar, and in this way it was both refreshing and confusing. I and other breakers around me clapped and cheered after he had finished breaking. It was, by most standards, an impressive performance, but I was confused as to whether or not it was a legitimate breaking performance. To get an answer to this question I looked around at what other breakers around me were doing. How were they responding?

Judging from the positive response by those of us in that warm-up room (many were cheering and clapping), it was safe to say that his run was, by and large, accepted as a legitimate breaking performance during that moment in time. Later on that day, Sly and I approached the breaker in question (who asked to remain anonymous for this thesis) and we spoke to him about his unique breaking style. As he spoke only a small amount of English I could not directly communicate with him, instead Sly had to translate most of my questions and comments for me, as well as translating his response from Japanese to English.

From our brief discussion together I discovered that he was very passionate about breaking and very motivated in trying to create new breaking movements and styles. He told Sly and I who his influences were, they were other breakers from around the world, one of whom was a breaker from Germany named Rubberlegs, and another was a breaker from France named Benji. He told us that he thought the judges of the FTJ competition did not appreciate his original breaking style like we did, and that they did not understand the creative effort and years of training it had taken for him to develop his unique breaking style. He told us that he had been breaking since 1998 and that his breaking had changed a lot since then. He said that his unique style and approach to breaking was a reflection of the many years of training he had done. I told him (with Sly translating) that I appreciated the effort and creativity of his breaking and that I thought it was very unique and impressive to watch. He thanked me for my comments and told me that he liked my breaking as well (though I was not sure if he had even seen me break yet). He was proud to tell Sly of how he had personally invented many original breaking movements and that he had named some of them. I did not catch any of these names though.

In asking this local Japanese breaker questions about his unique breaking style, Sly

and I we were trying to locate his dancing style within the practice of breaking. This can be seen as a way of legitimising his performance as a breaking performance, as we sought to connect it within a genealogy. This is also helped by the fact he named other breakers, such as Rubberlegs and Benji, as influences for his breaking style. Being influenced or inspired by other breakers is a way of demonstrating that you are connected to a broader cultural tradition. Additionally, another way to legitimise one's breaking style—particularly if it is a little strange or unique—is to describe it as being an “original” breaking style; connecting it with notions of “originality”.

In breaking, originality is a way of describing “new” and/or “innovative” breaking movements, styles, expressions and gestures. It is located within the spirit and approach of breaking, and hip hop more generally. Hip hop has evolved over time because of the continual creation of new and innovative ways of being, thus to call something “original” is to connect one's actions within the hip hop trend of innovation and transformation.

As new hip hop styles, practices and trends come and go, there is—on the one hand—an emphasis for hip hop actors to stay true to pre-conceived notions of what hip hop is. For some breakers, this can mean imitating the breaking styles and performative expressions of other highly respected and well-known breakers, like Ken Swift. As I mentioned earlier, imitating Kenny's breaking is something that many breakers do, and it is a pathway which does lend one's breaking performances to be easily recognised and legitimated as true breaking performance. On the flip-side, imitating Kenny's moves, copying exactly what he does and how he does it, can sometimes be perceived in a negative way.

“Biting” is a derogative word that breakers and other hip hop practitioners (see Katz 2010) use to describe the act of imitating (plagiarising) the moves and creative works of others. There is a sense that imitating is a natural part of breaking practices, but that imitating too much is a problem. In his book, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ*, Katz (2010) writes that “in the world of hip-hop, a “biter” is a plagiarist, someone who steals another's creative work” (78). There is, however, a tension about what counts as an acceptable level of biting. What counts

as an acceptable level can be the cause of much debate, as different individuals come to different conclusions.

In an online interview in 2011, the well-known and highly respected breaker, Poe One, had this to say about biting:

For me it's okay to copy to get to where you want to go. But if you're doing interviews and you're getting props and you're getting all this credit for being an incredible bboy, and yet you haven't added anything to the game that you can call your own, or anything to the game to uplift the evolution of it, then I just think you're just the average if you want to say it like that. It's like for me Kenny is the epitome of it all. Every time I watch Kenny get down it's better; he keeps getting better. He has a better understanding, yet, all he's doing is pulling out old moves from before and twisting them up and changing them around, you know what I mean? ("POE ONE talks about modern bboying and originality" 2011)

What Poe's comments illustrate is that there is indeed a grey area between biting and originality. Breakers are instructed to create and develop new breaking performances, yet they cannot develop them too quickly. It has to look like breaking, at least to some degree. Poe's claims that Kenny "is the epitome of it all", because of his ability to traverse this boundary between carrying on the tradition and transforming the dance at the same time.

In a panel discussion at the hip hop dance camp in Poland in 2013, the well-known and highly respected breaker, Ivan, had this to say about originality:

Everybody has different body types. Everybody is unique. Everybody is free and wild like a bird. I think you need to tap into that inner energy and dance from within all the time. And if you can't quite get it the way the people inspired you? That is what makes you original. It's to be free! ("Catch The Flava KNOWLEDGE - IVAN about ORIGINALITY" 2013)

Ivan describes the concept of originality as some kind of personal journey of discovery. He claims that originality has no end point, but that it is a life-long endeavour. Being "original" to Ivan means to express oneself in breaking in a way that is deeply personal and ultimately unique because of this.

The words of well-known and influential breakers, such as Poe One, Ivan and various others, are employed in order to negotiate the embodied acts and physical expressions of individuals breaking within local contexts. The concept of originality,

as described by Ivan and touched on by Poe One, is useful for legitimising the unique performances of breakers which do not fit with the mould of what has come before. Originality is a way of connecting these new, innovative and creative performative acts as part of an ongoing tradition within breaking and hip hop culture. Thus, it was how Sly, myself and others legitimised the breaking performance of that guy in the cypher that day, in the warm-up room at the FTJ.

## II. Raw Energy at the Ruthless 4 Jam

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of April in 2015, I attended the Ruthless 4 Jam, a competitive breaking event held in the Living Student Centre at Rutgers University, New Jersey. This jam was host to two separate breaking competitions: a one-versus-one footwork battle and a two-versus-two breaking battle. I went to the Ruthless 4 Jam with Vlad and we entered the two-versus-two competition together. We did pretty well, qualifying for a spot in the top-sixteen, but then we lost our top-sixteen battle against a local New York crew. In the one-versus-one footwork competition, however, I had more success. Out of the forty one breakers who competed, I made it all the way through to the final battle.

As the final battle of the footwork competition was announced I was all set to battle Nebs, a local New York breaker, who, like Vlad and I, travelled by train to attend this jam at Rutgers University. Although it was a close battle, I ended up losing, with a two-to-one vote by the judges in Nebs favour.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 64. A photograph taken of the Ruthless 4 Jam, taken with my iPhone, 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 2015. Notice the relatively small number of participants who attended the event, the size

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<sup>24</sup> Video footage of our final battle was posted to YouTube (link): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=va-x0wv6kbo> ("Ippy vs Nebz | Footwork Finals | Ruthless 4 | BNC" 2015)

of the room, and the tightly-knit arena in which we all crowded around.



Figure 65. Photograph of the cyphers at the Ruthless 4 Jam. This image was taken by a friend (with permission, but who has asked to remain anonymous for this thesis). This image shows me standing with others in the cypher, to the left of frame, head down, watching the performance of the breaker in the middle.<sup>25</sup>

These two images (Figures 64 and 65) do not capture much detail in regard to the bodily expressions and gestures of the breakers in motion. They present a snapshot of what the jam looked like at a particular moment in space and time. There is so much to say in order to fill in the gaps of what these images do not (and are not able to) capture: the sound of the music playing, the sound of people's bodies scraping and smacking the floor, the heat and the energy of those shuffling around beside me in the cypher. What it is like to be at the Ruthless 4 Jam, or at any

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<sup>25</sup> This image was taken by a friend of mine who wishes to remain anonymous.

breaking jam really, is hard to describe through words alone. I can remember standing there in the cypher, watching as breakers went in and out, cheering for the movements I thought looked cool and staying silent for movements I found a bit odd or strange.

Breaking at jams like these can be a very social experience. Although there is much attention given to the individual breaking in the middle of the cypher space (Figure 65), there are constantly subtle looks and gestures being made by those standing around watching. There is a constant conversation (both verbal and non-verbal) being had by those standing around, as people make noise and react to things that are happening in front of them. These experiences are hard to capture after the fact, as there is too much to say which cannot (and will not) fit on the page, and therefore must, unfortunately, be left unsaid.

The vibe at the Ruthless 4 Jam was electric. The small darkened space where the breaking cyphers were happening generated a very intense and focused energy. DJ EX on the ones-and-twos (turntables) was playing this very high-tempo funk music, which only further added to this intensity. As breakers jumped into the middle of cypher, I watched their facial expressions and felt them react to the vibe through their bodies. I could sense people's nervousness, anxiety, confidence and aggression. I was standing so close to the front that I got kicked in my shins a couple of times when someone lost control. I was close enough to hear them breathe as they would break. There was a lot of heat being generated from all the bodies that surrounded me.

Afterwards, I wrote down some notes about this one particular breaking performance I witnessed in the breaking cyphers during the Ruthless 4 Jam:

I watched as this one breaker in a tight blue t-shirt waltzed confidently into the cypher in front of me. Unlike others, he did not look at all nervous. I could tell that he was *feeling* the music from his body language. His head was facing downwards and his eyes were so tightly closed as he grooved to the music playing. He made his way into the very middle of the cypher in his own time. There were wrinkles on his forehead from how tightly he was closing his eyes. As he was breaking his movements were connecting with every accent the music offered. Every major drum beat was accentuated by a dramatic physical gesture, every change in rhythm was acknowledged and responded to through the flow of his movements. Through embodied movement and gestures he captured the vibe of the room, or at least the

vibe that was felt by me. He was riding alongside the sounds and the rhythms of the music that DJ EX played. If the track playing had a smooth melodic rhythm to it, so too did his breaking movements. He mimicked the rhythm and the tempo, moving in one way for eight bars, then, when the rhythm changed (as he knew it would), he would move the other way for the next eight bars. His sense of rhythm and his ability to react to the music in the way that he did was on another level to the other breakers in the room.

Over time his movements to the beat became wilder and more explosive. They became somewhat unhinged. There was a lot of emotion and energy in his movements. He swung his legs so hard that it made him slip and lose his balance but he did not seem to care. The directional changes he made were starting to become more erratic and intense over time. At one point he dropped into a crouched position on the ground and went absolutely wild with his legs. They moved so fast around his body that parts of his upper body could not keep up. There were some slips as he threw himself around in this manner, he knocked into people, but again did not seem to care. As I watched, in that moment, I was inspired by his breaking. Inspired by his confidence and his energy. It was something to be experienced and felt in that moment.

This performance I describe above probably lasted just under a minute. Although it was arguably quite a sloppy breaking run, I ended up thinking about it for a long time after. More than three years later, as I write this thesis, it has still left an impression on me. Unlike the many other breaking runs I have seen since, this breaker's performance was memorable because of the raw and unhinged energy he expressed in his somewhat deranged bodily movements and gestures. His run did not look to be a pre-prepared sequence of movements, constructed and perfected at a training session beforehand. Nor did he perform any unique or original movements that I considered as innovative. What he emphasised that day (at least to me) was what I ended up describing to Vlad on the train ride back to New York City, which was that he was "raw" and had so much "flavour".

These terms, "raw" and "flavour", are again terms which appeal to notions of legitimacy. When I think of the term "raw" I think of it as highlighting the intense energy of someone's movements within a breaking context. On that train ride to New York, I used the term in conversation with Vlad to legitimise this breaker's sloppy but captivating breaking performance. Even though it was somewhat messy in its presentation, this breaker in the tight blue t-shirt responded well with the music, the vibe at the Ruthless 4 Jam and the intensity of the cypher space. Similar

to the concept of “originality”, the definition of what it means to be “raw” is flexible and is fashioned through the way in which others—typically the more famous/notable breakers—use and understand the term.

Similar to the term “raw” is the concept of “flavour”, which was one of the words Vlad opted to use in response to my use of the term “raw”. Again, Poe One (2010) explains what he means by the term “flavour” in a YouTube video titled “What is Flavor?”

Flavour is the way you do something. It's the way you react to sound, it's the way you portray yourself in public, it's the way you portray yourself behind closed doors. It's who you are, it defines you. That's flavour. Some people say style but nah, in our world it's flavour. It's the way you look, it's the way you talk, it's the way you lean, it's the way you move, alright? It's the way you listen, it's the way you see, it's a certain energy that you project alright? Pffft there is *a lot* to flavour. It's spiritual, its confidence, finesse, charisma, humbleness, heart, character—there's so much to flavour, to that one word: flavor. Think about it...

Here Poe illustrates how this concept of “flavour” carries with it a lot of different meanings and ideas. What is also important to note is his comment that “in our world it's flavour”. This is to acknowledge that there are other definitions of these terms that breakers and other hip hop people use, but that within the world of hip hop they hold different meanings.

As with the concept of “originality”, when breakers use the term “raw” and “flavour”, these concepts have meanings that are particular within a hip hop context. They are also tools which breakers employ in situ to make sense of and negotiate the legitimacy of individual breaking expressions and performances. In this way, they are part of a process which work to validate or deny what actions are legitimate to breaking and what actions are not.

There would have been some people at the Ruthless 4 Jam that day who might have regarded the breaker in the tight blue t-shirt's run in the cypher as poor in its execution, lacking in its originality, and an indication of a breaker with little-to-no physical skill. The negotiations of breaking performances are not subject to any strict set of guidelines. They are negotiated in different ways, by different people, who employ a wide range of different tools (concepts) with which to either accept,



deny or dismiss the performances of others. This process happens across different scenes, within particular moments in space and time; taking place between different social actors producing a variety of different outcomes.

### **III. Staying Relevant: Leigh's Return to the King Street Practice Session**

When a breaker is actively engaged in the practice of breaking over a long period of time, then one is apt to be aware of the constant shifts and development that occur over time. As breakers are constantly negotiating the actions of others, some breaking styles and movements become outdated, boring and overused. The creative additions to the world of breaking, as well as the new concepts which shape what lends a particular individual's performance to be thought of as a good performance, push the dance in all sorts of directions. Even in the breaking scene of Perth, breaking has gone through many shifts and developments over the past twenty years in which I have been actively engaged.

Although the number of individuals who identify as breakers in the city of Perth is relatively small, especially in comparison to other Australian cities of a similar population size, there is still an important emphasis placed on the notion of "relevancy". This means to be aware of the various developments and trends that are happening, not only within one's local scene but across other breaking scenes as well. Not remaining active, and the ramifications this can have on one's capacity to claim to belong, is illustrated by the recent experience of my friend and breaking mentor Leigh, who, after a long hiatus, came back to breaking for a short while.

Leigh was one of my first breaking teachers when I started in 1999. There used to be open practice sessions held at the Subiaco PCYC (Police and Citizens Youth Club) and Leigh, and his brother Jared, used to run the session every Saturday afternoon, between twelve and four in the afternoon. I really enjoyed these sessions with Leigh and Jared because of how casual they were, but also because I would learn so much from them. I remember they used to wander around the gymnasium, helping people out if they were having trouble with executing a particular movement or step. I would not describe the PCYC practice session as a formal dance class, it was

highly informal. You could, if you wanted, use the space to do your own thing, which many people did. But because I was fairly new to breaking at the time I was very interested in what Leigh and Jared had to say. I looked up to both of them and still do. They were both very talented breakers, were well travelled and seemed to know so much about breaking and about hip hop culture in general.

After a few years Leigh stopped coming to teach us at the Subiaco PCYC. Jared said that family life was starting to get in the way of Leigh being able to break and teach on a regular basis. Leigh had recently married and his wife was now pregnant. Jared had also started taking on a more managerial position at his work, and was himself becoming too busy to attend the PCYC sessions every week. Slowly others had to take the lead. My mate Shannon, who worked at the PCYC as a gymnastics teacher, started doing what Leigh and Jared had done, though he was not as respected or as capable a breaker as they were.

Over time the Subiaco PCYC sessions ceased to be a regular thing and I saw Leigh and Jared less, until eventually they stopped breaking altogether. It was a little sad at first but over time I got used to the rhythm of people coming and going in the Perth breaking scene. The scene in Perth has always been relatively small, and consists mostly of younger, newer, additions. Only a few of the people who I started breaking with continue to break regularly today. Most of the people who get into breaking tend to stop due to various injuries they sustain or some of them just lose interest. But there were a few, who, in their minds, never really left. Leigh was one of these guys, even though he had not been active in the breaking scene for many years, every time I saw him it was as though he had never left.

Surprisingly, Leigh contacted me once via Facebook and asked where the breakers in Perth sessioned regularly. I told him that most of us trained at the King Street Arts Centre in the CBD. Leigh told me that he was interested in getting back into breaking, mainly for health reasons, plus his son—who was now a little older—was keen to give breaking a go.

For roughly one month, Leigh and his son came to King Street and trained with the rest of us. Leigh's son seemed relatively happy to be at the sessions and was giving breaking a real go, but Leigh did not seem to be enjoying the practice sessions all

that much. He complained to me about his body, how hard it was for him to perform even the simplest of moves. Over the years that Leigh had not been breaking he had gained a bit of extra weight and this made it hard for him to do the moves he used to be able to perform so easily. But there was something else: watching Leigh break was like going back in time. All the footwork patterns, moves and freezes he did seemed outdated. They were quite different to how the rest of the breakers at King Street were moving at the time. His breaking looked not only heavy, but it did not flow well either.

I watched Leigh squat down on the floor at King Street and go into a “six-step”, a simple footwork pattern comprising six distinct bodily positions. Mid-way through the second or perhaps third rotation he just stopped moving. He paused randomly, perhaps thinking about what step or movement to go into next. Without any transition whatsoever he shifted his legs, so that they were now in front of his hips, and from there he began doing CCs. The “CC” is a simple footwork pattern where you shift your weight from side to side, whilst kicking your heels towards the sky. After a number of CCs Leigh then went into another awkwardly timed pause. He then stood up and started top-rocking. His breaking was so disjointed and his top-rocking movements were not even on beat: the music playing was providing one clear rhythm, but Leigh’s top-rocks were moving to a completely different rhythm. After a minute or so he then attempted to perform a “windmill”, a power-move which he used to teach me at the Subiaco PCYC and one that requires a lot of core and shoulder strength. After one windmill rotation Leigh’s hips smacked the ground hard and after that he stopped moving altogether. He just lay there for a while on his back with both his hands on his head. I remember watching as he got up slowly and walked over to his bag and sat down. He looked sore and defeated. I don’t remember him trying anymore moves that day.

It was not just Leigh’s lack of flow, the inability to shift seamlessly from one move to the next, which made his breaking seem old and outdated. Watching Leigh at the King Street practice highlighted to me just how much the scene in Perth had changed in his absence. Many of the breakers in Perth had become inspired by the rise of these funky European breakers who were winning lots of international breaking competitions, and doing so with these intricate flowy movements and steps. Also, at the time of Leigh’s return there was a new found emphasis on moving more so with the music and connecting one’s breaking steps to the tempo and rhythms, something that Leigh did not seem to be aware of.

For roughly one month in which he and his son attended the King Street session,

Leigh seemed to struggle with the fact that breaking had changed since the last time he was active in the Perth scene. What this meant for him was that doing hard power-move combinations and freezes, which at one point had been “all the rage”, was not as popular and trendy as it once was. Many of the breakers in Perth were not working on power-move combinations anymore and were focused on other things: dancing to the music and working on intricate and flowy footwork patterns: the current trend in Perth at that time. Leigh was not able to appreciate or understand this trend because he had not been around to experience their emergence or their significance.

Back when Leigh was breaking regularly these were not the kinds of things that breakers in Perth were doing or paying any attention to. I remember back during the PCYC days when breakers would spend hours and hours working on perfecting their powermove combinations. We spread out across the gymnasium and practised head-spins, flares, halos, 1990s, windmills, swipes and turtles. Everyone had some basic power-moves back then, but getting a decent 90 and flare took a lot of effort. Leigh treated the King Street session as though it was the Subiaco PCYC circa 1999. When he arrived he would find an area in the corner of the room, but that was not how we sessioned anymore. We did not spread out in the room and practise powermoves in the corner, we made small cyphers and we would break together. We cyphered and we battled each other. Leigh’s actions were ones which I interpreted as “old school”, a term which connotes one’s actions as old and outdated.

It was not as though Leigh’s breaking was not legitimate, it was rather that his performance was not relevant to the scene at that moment in time. Leigh was, I think, undoubtedly aware of his “old school-ness”, particularly because no one else at the King Street sessions was moving in the way that he was. He made subtle, somewhat negative, remarks to me about this during the sessions. He asked why no one in Perth was good at power-moves like they used to be; he spoke about how breaking had changed a lot since the 1980s and how much better it was back then. When asking my opinion about these things I tended to stay quiet, not wanting to offend.

After about a month, Leigh and his son stopped coming to the King Street sessions. Perhaps his body was suffering too much for him continue or perhaps it was because the Perth breaking scene had changed too much. Perhaps it had changed so much that he did not recognise what breaking was anymore? I felt sorry for Leigh. I knew that if I was to take a ten years hiatus from breaking then I would probably feel the same as he did. Leigh had not stayed active within the Perth breaking scene and therefore could not easily understand or appreciate the development that had occurred during his absence.

This notion of “staying relevant” is an important concept that many breakers often employ in order to highlight or emphasise the continual shifts and changes that happen, both within local and global breaking contexts. As scenes transform over time the boundaries between old and new is a constant struggle. If one’s breaking is thought of as being a bit “old school” this is not always such a terrible thing, however it does connote the idea that one’s breaking is becoming a bit outdated, and might one day be thought of as being disconnected with more relevant and contemporary notions of breaking practices.

Leigh’s return to breaking after a long hiatus demonstrates the deeply social ways in which breaking practices are constantly being re-made, by people, within the particularities. After coming back following such a long break, Leigh was not able to connect, or perhaps did not even want to connect, with the contemporary notions of the breaking that were being expressed at the King Street session, through mine and other people’s breaking performances. It was as though Leigh was stuck in a world that had long ago been left behind, and upon his return was a clash of the old and the new.

### **The Ongoing Negotiations of Breaking Performances**

In this chapter I have discussed how breakers, through performance, demonstrate their bodily capital and through their actions are able to invoke and evoke notions surrounding what it means to be authentic and legitimately connected to breaking and hip hop culture. Within each ethnographic account I have shown how specific embodied actions are expressed and read by people in the moment, and produce

varying notions of legitimate breaking practices and performances.

At the FTJ in Osaka, I described how the concept of “originality” was employed as a way for Sly and I to validate the extremely unique breaking we witnessed during a cypher in the warm-up room of the event. At the Ruthless 4 Jam in New Jersey, I described how the concepts “raw” and “flavour” were appealed to, as a way of positioning the improvisational and unhinged moves of the breaker in the tight-blue t-shirt, as an inspiring and legitimate breaking performance, rather than a sloppy or messy breaking performance. Lastly, my discussion of Leigh’s return to the King Street practice sessions was demonstrative of how notions of “relevancy” are a way of understanding the constant shifts and changes that occur within local scenes. This account also echoes Wacquant’s notion of “retooling” (1995, 70), which is the continuous practical labour required to enable one’s body to perform the way other breakers expect a “competent breaker” to perform. Like Bourdieu and Wacquant, I emphasise here the unconscious nature of habitus, arguing that the performance of an authentic breaker cannot be gained by simply an act of will or through a conscious effort to understand breaking theoretically, but rather through the processes of *doing* lots and lots of breaking with other breakers in situ.

Each of the concepts discussed illustrates how breaking is not the sum of a key set of physical moves, gestures or embodied expressions that one can pinpoint as being essential to the practice. Instead what occurs through social interactions between breakers within local settings are negotiations about what is legitimate, which, through these negotiations, legitimacy is ultimately awarded. What I have tried to highlight is that there is a complex process whereby the embodied actions and expressions of breakers are *made* into breaking performances due to the social and situational negotiations that take place on the ground. What this means is that legitimacy in breaking that dependent on the context, subject to the social negotiations of particular breaking performances in situ.

I have focused here on only a small number of breaking performances, yet though analysing the physical movements and gestures of specific breakers, demonstrated the local, social and dynamic ways in which breaking practices are produced and sustained. What is evident from my analysis is that through particularities one is

better able appreciate the processes which work to produce and sustain hip hop culture. Across the scholarly hip hop literature there has been a lot of energy spent mapping the physical components of the dance, that is, categorising all the different moves and gestures that breakers express. There is no question that mapping dance practices is an important and useful task, particularly as breaking shifts into popular sporting domains. At the time of writing it has been recently announced that breaking competitions will be part of the 2020 Youth Olympic Games (“Breaking into the Youth Olympic Games” 2017). However, there is still not yet an agreed-upon understanding of what actually constitutes a breaking performance and what does not; this may be an issue for the committees that have to develop these boundaries. As new breaking performative styles, moves and expressions are continuously generated, across a diverse and ever-changing global landscape, there should be more of a focus on the ways in which individuals contribute to these shifts and changes over space and time.

## – Chapter 7 –

### *“Power Move Combos for Days”*

#### **The Dynamic Craftings of Aesthetic and Sensory Hip Hop Knowledge: Ethnographies of Breaking Cyphers**

*Despite the widely recognised importance of knowledge as a vital source of competitive advantage, there is little understanding of how organisations actually create and manage knowledge dynamically.*

– Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000)

There I was, in cities that I had never been to before, hanging out with breakers who I had only just met, not being able to verbally communicate with one another (due to the fact that we did not speak the same language) yet we could engage in the activity of the breaking cypher together. Through shared tacit knowledge of this activity breakers are able to produce, sustain and transform hip hop culture in particular ways, producing new forms of bodily capital, ones which are locally generated and authenticated. In this chapter I continue discussions from previous chapters regarding the local and unique ways in which human action and agency contribute towards ongoing social productions and reproductions of hip hop culture. Yet, in this chapter, I examine how the social practice of breaking cyphers draw attention to the local, social and dynamic ways in which hip hop is managed; a process, which I argue, happens on the ground within the particularities but then spirals upwards, shaping broader cultural notions about breaking and hip hop.



## Cyphering as Social Practice

Although I describe cyphering as an activity, cyphering between breakers is a chaotic and performative site where breakers band together—both with and against one another—in a semi-organised fashion. What breaking cyphers allow, amongst other things, is a space for breakers to exchange ideas and learn about breaking in a dynamic and open way. Breaking cyphers, where breakers gather in a circle and take turns breaking in the middle, are hard to define because what happens in a cypher depends on where, between who and when the particular cyphering in question occurs.

Many anthropologists have suggested that it is through social and cultural practices in which individual members of a group are able to locate, witness, observe—as well as ground—their understandings, relationships and their identities within the group (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1989). A cypher, in the context of breaking, is also a site where dynamics of racial and gendered power are maintained and transgressed. As Johnson states, "cyphers perform multi-racial and transnational connection through movement, they act as resources to consider ideas of the whole that are attuned to internal differentiation and conflicting interests, particularly with respect to race and national difference" (Johnson 2009, x).

Unlike Chapter Six, where the embodied performances of breakers were examined in order to discuss notions of legitimacy, in this chapter I focus on the breaking that occurs within the activity of the breaking cypher, in order to address how breaking activities like the cypher work to produce, sustain and transform hip hop in ways that are local and unique.

Although aesthetics, broadly speaking, may be understood as being based in experience, they are, as Bakke and Peterson (2017) suggest, "grounded in and defined by modes of perception that are coextensive with wider cultural formations and social uses of art forms" (118). In this way, breaking performances within the activity of the breaking cyphers contribute to ongoing social re-productions of aesthetic breaking norms; a process which is continuously being crafted through

ongoing interactions between different groups of breakers, within different local breaking scenes.

As a Japanese breaker said to me after one particular cypher that we shared together at the OCAT practice sessions in Osaka, “Cyphers are the shit! They are where the *real* breaking goes down” (Interview with Kouichi Masspull Masuda). Comments by breakers like this one emphasise the importance of this activity as a tool for cultural expression. What follows are three ethnographic accounts of cyphering, each of which took place within a different breaking scene. The first, a cypher at the Moriguchi practice sessions in Osaka; the second, a cypher at the Bronx is Burning Jam in New York City; the third, a cypher at the King Street practice sessions in Perth.

I will discuss some of the similarities and differences between cyphering in Osaka, New York and Perth, and how these factor shapes the dynamic knowledge-making process that occurs within this activity. For me personally, cyphering is always a somewhat a unique and varied experience. What a multi-site approach to cyphering draws attention to are the unique local conditions that shape the kinds of formations, expressions and experiences of cyphering. For example: the music, the floor space, the breakers and their relationships to one another, the type of gathering—whether it be a private practice session or a large public breaking competition—these conditions have an enormous effect on the activity and its social outcomes. Though before I consider the ethnographic moments themselves, I want briefly to expand on the definitions of the breaking cypher.

### **Dimensions of the Breaking Cypher**

Cyphering is an activity that many kinds of hip hop practitioners engage in. However, in breaking, cyphering happens in a particular way. Johnson’s (2009, 3) definitions of the breaking cypher speaks to the complexities in which cyphering is able to be defined, understood and experienced by different individuals.

Cypher [sɪˈfer]: n. at least two practitioners, some spectators, and a music source. (Jihad, Third Sight, Los Angeles); the imaginary space or circle a b-boy creates in his mind to battle his opponent (Trac 2, Star Child La Rock, Bronx); a self-contained space, where there’s no escape for the energy (Krazy Kujo, Soul Patrol, Burbank); a cypher is when people get together, take turns, and

the music's playing non-stop (777, Street Masters Crew, Bronx); the stage where you go to show off or the battleground (Brooklyn Terry, Elite Force Crew, Brooklyn/ Tokyo); the heart of breaking. (Ana, Fraggie Rock Crew, Seattle); a meeting of souls, getting together as one, and taking over (Aby, TBB Crew, Bronx); it's spiritual going back to the motherland, you know whether it was to communicate with gods or for better crops or something (Ness4, Zulu Kings, Bronx); energy, spirit, emotion, confronting fears, confronting your own demons, self-testing, and self-release that can make or break you OR there's a whole circle and we're channelling this energy (PoeOne, Style Elements/ Zulu Kings, Los Angeles); you got to listen and know the music and also know how to break to the music where everything you are doing is to the beat (Leanski, Floor Lords, Boston); it must entail a rawness and a powerful energy of respect, competitiveness and love and passion for what you're doing or what your counterpart is doing (Genesis, Flowzaic, London); there's always drama of some sort (Slinga, KR3Ts, Queens).

After presenting all these definitions Johnson says that "there is no single definition of cyphers, just as there is no single cyphering experience" (3).

Not many hip hop writers have considered the physicality' of breaking cyphers as comprehensively as Johnson (2009; 2011). Johnson notes that the experiences of cyphering differ over time and across different spaces. She also says that although cyphering is not always about battling, they are nonetheless always competitive, even if only with oneself (6). The notion that the breaking cypher is competitive is not something which necessarily rings true from my own experience having engaged in this activity for nearly two decades. In fact, most of the breaking cyphers that I engage in regularly tend to happen between close friends, in private, at local breaking practice sessions. As such, these cyphers tend to be considerably different from the cyphers that one engages in during large, public, competitive breaking jams or events.

Johnson's research regarding the breaking cyphers was primarily conducted during competitive breaking events (2009, 20), and so her understanding of this breaking practice would have been heavily shaped by the interviews she conducted and the experiences of cyphering that she witnessed. Johnson is not the only hip hop scholar to conceptualise the practice of breaking cyphers as a competitive activity; the majority of the literature on the subject has tended to conceptualise cyphering as a deeply competitive hip hop practice.

In her chapter on “Breaking”, Banes (2004) defines breaking as, “a style of competitive, acrobatic, and pantomimic dancing” (13). The notion of competition is something that is often described as being essential to breaking culture, however, from my experience I do not accept that breaking is as competitive as scholars have made it out to be. As Johnson (2009, 3) states, there is “no single definition of cyphers” and she claims that every cyphering experience is but a microcosm of the practice as a whole.

### **The Punch Heard Around the World**

In a YouTube video titled *Spring Sprung: 5 Crew Dynasty vs Floor Obsession + GRAVITY'S PUNCH* (bboysurestep 2012), is a moment in breaking which I describe as “the punch heard around the world”. The short one minute and twenty-eight second video depicts an historic moment in breaking cypher history, similar to the one that happened in the NBA (National Basketball Association) on-court fight between Kermit Washington and Rudy Tomjanovich in 1977.

In 1977 there was a moment (which many NBA fans might remember) where Kermit Washington punched Rudy Tomjanovich during the game which nearly ended his life. Although the moment depicted in this breaking video is not as horrific as the moment between Washington and Tomjanovich, it does consist of a brutal attack by a breaker named Gravity, who ends up punching another breaker in the face because of his provocative actions in the breaking cypher. This particular attack by Gravity went down in breaking history for reasons I explain below.

How it unfolded was that Gravity was standing patiently, waiting for his turn to enter the breaking cypher. When he saw that the dancer currently breaking was about to finish, he promptly got ready to enter with a sequence of gymnastic style flips and spins. However, Gravity’s sequence of flips and spins was cut short as he suddenly collided with the previous breaker, who, for some reason, was taking his time to leave the cypher space.

This breaker, whose name is not revealed in the YouTube video, looked as though he was purposely delaying his retreat from the cypher space so that he might put Gravity off as he entered. The cyphering circle can be an intensely fought-over

space, where playful and sometimes rude gestures are expressed. The intensity of the cypher can sometimes result in quite aggressive behavior between breakers. That said, some breakers show a lot of respect to one another during a cypher, it all depends on the particular cypher in question. In this particular instance it looked as though this breaker was trying to encourage Gravity to stumble during his entrance. Not only was Gravity visibly shaken because of the injury he may have sustained from this breaker's actions, but he was also very angry because his entrance was now completely ruined. Gravity stood up and instantly went for the guy, punching him in the face.

After Gravity threw that punch the crowd around him erupted, people were rushing into the cypher to stop the fight. The emcee of the event proceeded to shout on the microphone, "Yo-Yo-Yo", trying desperately to defuse the situation. The DJ cut the music and there was some protest from the crowd at what Gravity had done.

Physical violence of this nature in a breaking cypher is often thought to be crossing the line, yet from the comments that people were making on the YouTube video some have argued that Gravity's punch was justified because of how hurt he could have been from this individual's actions. What Gravity's punch demonstrates is that although cyphering is a loosely defined social practice with no clear or agreed-upon definitions or rules, individuals bring to the cyphers their own preconceived notions of how cyphering should work and how breakers should act when engaging in the cypher. Thus to this end, doing the "wrong thing" in the eyes of a particular individual breaker can have dire consequences. The ongoing debate among breakers over whether Gravity's Punch was justified or not continues, both online and offline. Situations like these shape people's understandings of what the cypher is and how one should conduct oneself within them. But more than that, as Johnson said about breaking cyphers, "a cypher's force is invisible but impactful" (2009, 2). As will be shown below, cyphering contributes to the ongoing production of breaking knowledges, norms and practices.

## Ethnographies of Breaking Cyphers

### I. Cyphering in Osaka



Figure 66. Photograph of myself mid-way through a breaking run at the Moriguchi practice session in Osaka, 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 2015.



Figure 67. Enjoying a beer with a few local Osaka breakers after a long practice session at Moriguchi, 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 2015.

Moriguchi is a bus and train station located in the city of Osaka, Japan. It is one of many practice sessions spots where local breakers living in Osaka regularly meet up and break with one another. My friend Sly told me about the Moriguchi practice sessions and offered to drive me there one night. Sly and I arrived at Moriguchi station just after nine-thirty in the evening on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 2015. The session was set to start around ten and last until around three or four in the morning. I was initially surprised by how late at night the practice session was scheduled to happen but (as noted earlier) after living in Japan for a little while I had discovered that this was quite a normal occurrence. The Moriguchi practice session was located in what looked to be in an alley way of sorts, tucked away from the main walking thoroughfare of the station. There was a quietness here, though we were still publically visible to onlookers who walked by.

As we put our bags down alongside a closed shutter, which I assumed was the entrance to a convenience store during the daytime, you could see the floor we were about to break on was covered in these little black dots. The majority of the floor surface was a smooth white marble with a mix of these rough dark dots in between (see Figures 66 and 67). This was one of the first things I noticed about Moriguchi. I understand that this fascination about the surface of the floor might seem quite odd to most people, but this detail is extremely important to those of us who spend much of our time spinning and rolling around on the ground. The floor surface is important to breakers: it both limits and allows for certain kinds of breaking styles and movements. For instance, seeing these small, rough, dark dots everywhere made me wary about doing any moves that involved either spinning or sliding, especially where my head was concerned.

It was not long before a few other locals began to arrive at the Moriguchi station. Some rode their bicycles in, whilst others caught the train or drove. I refer to the gathering at Moriguchi as a “session” because of its informal nature. There was no competition, no judges, no DJs, no entrance fee and no prize money to be won. Like a jam, a “session” in breaking can imply a casual, relaxed, more open and less organised, kind of gathering. Breaking sessions range from very loose gatherings—like jams, parties and sessions—to very coordinated ones—such as competitions

and showcases. The Moriguchi practice session was a very small, relaxed gathering between a few local breakers.

Besides Sly and me there were only three other dancers who came to the session that night. One of them was Naru, a local breaker who I mentioned in Chapter Six, who can be seen in Figure 67, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the photograph, looking at her phone. Naru spoke English well, having lived in Melbourne, Australia, for a couple of years. To the right of Naru, in Figure 67, is Sly, and to the left of Naru is a breaker whose name I did not catch at the time. The other breaker who attended this session was Budawolf, another local who was unfortunately caught out of frame when this photograph was taken.

As we put down our phones, Naru pulled out a set of cordless Bluetooth speakers from her backpack. She then connected her iPhone to these speakers and began playing some break music. As Sly went across the road to get a drink at the *konbini*, a Japanese slang/term for the convenience store, I started warming up and breaking, getting accustomed to the floor and the space. Once Sly returned we began to congregate in a small semi-circle. Slowly this circle transformed into a breaking cypher.

One at a time we each stepped forward, entering the cypher space, and “threw down”. I watched others break and they watched me. Over the course of two hours or so we exchanged moves, gestures, smiles, and we got into small battles and there lots of respect between each of us. One of the battles between us was between myself and Budawolf.

### **Battling Budawolf: Part One**

I am in the middle of the cypher. I swirl my hips across the floor and lift my body up and then down to execute a “halo”. This move is where you use your arms and head and create a lot of momentum through your shoulders, neck and upper-back. As I perform the halo I make sure to land (forcefully) on my right shoulder, instead of my left arm, which is not typical of the move that most are familiar. As I do this specific halo-variation one of the breakers watching claps their hands in approval. Perhaps they expected to see me land on my left hand or perhaps they were surprised by the sudden modification of the halo. Either way I was happy they were surprised and that they clapped.

I follow-up this halo-variation with a front sweep, bringing both my legs underneath



my body so that as all my weight is transferred up onto my hips. I take a moment to gather myself in a deep squatting position and then move quickly into another move, the “swipe”. Swipes are executed in a hand-standing position upside down. I rotate my shoulders around to the right, then twist and then untwist my hips and shoulders. This is what the swipe looks and feels like when it is performed. The movement involves a lot of twisting and throwing one’s legs, hips and shoulders up in the around. From the swipe I land smoothly onto my back and without pause I immediately swing up from my back and land in a “baby freeze”, a static position where my weight is evenly distributed through both arms and my forehead.

As I land in this baby freeze I can see Budawolf’s feet in front of me. I watch as his feet shuffle in front of me. He looks as though he is ready to jump into the cypher after me. My reading of the situation is spot on. As I stand up and spread my arms wide, gesturing that my run is about to end, Budawolf does not miss a beat. He quickly jumps in after me and directly faces me as he toprocks. With this gesture he looks to be “calling me out”, proposing that we battle one another.

### **How Do Breakers Know When They are being “Called Out”?**

How did I know Budawolf was proposing that we battle during his round in the cypher at Moriguchi? Having been “called out” many times like this before, I read the subtle signals that Budawolf was providing. When responding to them I was able to confirm that this was in fact the case. Budawolf was calling me out that night and I accepted his invitation and we had a short, but fairly intense, cypher battle. There are many kinds of exchanges that can happen during a breaking cypher, one of which is a “battle”. Some battles can be friendly exchanges, some are not. Getting “called out” meaning to gesture to another breaker that you invite them to battle, is a process which also happens in a variety of different ways. Some breakers are very clear and explicit, others are less so. Budawolf was fairly subtle in his invitation. The only gestures I noticed was how quickly he entered the cypher after I had finished and his choice of facing me while he would break. Had I not responded to these signals our cypher battle may not have happened.

As Budawolf and I do not speak the same verbal language (his English being poor and my Japanese being poor also), his choice to direct his breaking movements towards me for a short period of time until I noticed what was going on was how we communicated. Breaking, like other practices, has a language which some participants are able to use to communicate with one another, although it is not a very clear language as many of these communications are expressed non-verbally

and require participants to pick up on bodily gestures and movement patterns.

Being called out in a cypher varies depending on the context, and the individuals involved in the call out. The reason that a breaker may or may not call another breaker out in a cypher depends also on a variety of personal reasons. Sometimes for no particular reason whatsoever.

### **Battling Budawolf: Part Two**

Buda goes in; I go in; Buda goes in again; I go in again. This back and forth between the two of us continues for a short while. We don't talk and hardly make eye contact. Our heads facing towards the ground and our bodies recovering from each run we throw at each other. It feels like that sometimes: throwing breaking moves and gestures at one another.

As I make my way into the cypher once again, not sure whether it is the fourth or fifth time, I can feel Buda's eyes watching me, looking critically and closely at every movement. I can tell that as I break he is gathering back his energy. His breathing is heavy as his body lacks oxygen. Slowly he begins breathing more evenly and is nearly ready to pounce back into the cypher once my round is over. I can feel it.

As Buda jumps in the cypher for his fifth or sixth time, his feet move so fast. He makes a strong tapping sound on the floor as he performs his footwork. Each time his feet smack the floor you hear this sound: ta-ta-ta... ta-ta-ta... Buda likes to repeat his footwork patterns a couple of times. The patterns he does are quite aesthetically pleasing to watch. They flow nicely and are very quick. On the third loop of his pattern he then changes it up and transitions into something else: maybe a freeze or some trick.

After he is done Buda lifts his head up and does a full rotational spin, before looking at me and watching to see my reaction. This sequence of movements becomes familiar to me after a few rounds into our battle. I start to become more acquainted with Budawolf's breaking style: the footwork pattern or two, a freeze or powermove middle, then a big spin before he finishes. Buda's breaking is not always so formulaic, but as we get more tired from our battle, our rounds, my own as well as his, become a little more predictable.

As the sound of the hi-hats and snares repeat themselves in the music, the more I thought of how best to move to these rhythmical beats. The music playing had a kind of popping quality to it. This popping sound began to influence the way I started move in the cypher. I kicked and I flicked my arms to the "pop" sound that was repeating in the music. There was an energy that seemed to be propelling me to move in this manner. My whole body began to pop. My legs straightened and my wrists whacked the air. These moves I was making were sharp and static-like, just like the quality in the music playing. I tensed my shoulders and my arms and felt as though my body was a musical instrument of some kind.

As I continued to move with to this popping sound, I moved my feet from one position to the next because the music dictated that I should move them like this.

The music was a guide for me and so I continued to repeat what I was doing, listening intently and making my choices based on what the music was telling me. As I turn to face Budawolf I listen as the music began to change. The popping sound that was once so present was now petering out. I wait to hear what was coming next. I anticipated the sounds of new beat, but it was a more busy-sounding track that was full of drums beat and loud horns sounds. I did a front-sweep and then switched this sweep into a CC. As I moved around in the CC position I transitioned into a knock-out position. My body was constantly shifting around on the floor, from footwork, to freeze, to spin. As I continued to shift my weight from the left side of my body to the right, I used this momentum to push up onto the palms of my hands. My hips then follow suit and my body swiveled around to the front, and then to the back again, like a gymnast on a pommel horse. This small, but complex combination of movements was something that I had practiced doing before. Often when I dance I tend to mix both pre-prepared sequences of moves with more improvisational moves. Although this all depends on the musical tracks playing and how I am feeling in the moment.

It is hard to say how conscious breakers are of the movement choices they make during the moments in which they are breaking. I often find it hard dealing with the nerves and the anxiety that the activity of cyphering can sometimes bring. That moment when you enter a cypher and feel people eyes on you can be quite intimidating. What some breakers can do in the comfort of their own home or even at a training session does not always work out in the high pressure environment that a cypher can sometimes produce. Having to perform and make quick choices in the moment is something that some breakers are able to deal with better than others. Many of the breakers I have spoken with about cyphering have said that the more that they have engaged in this practice the easier it becomes to relax and make more considered movement choices.

## II. Cyphering in New York

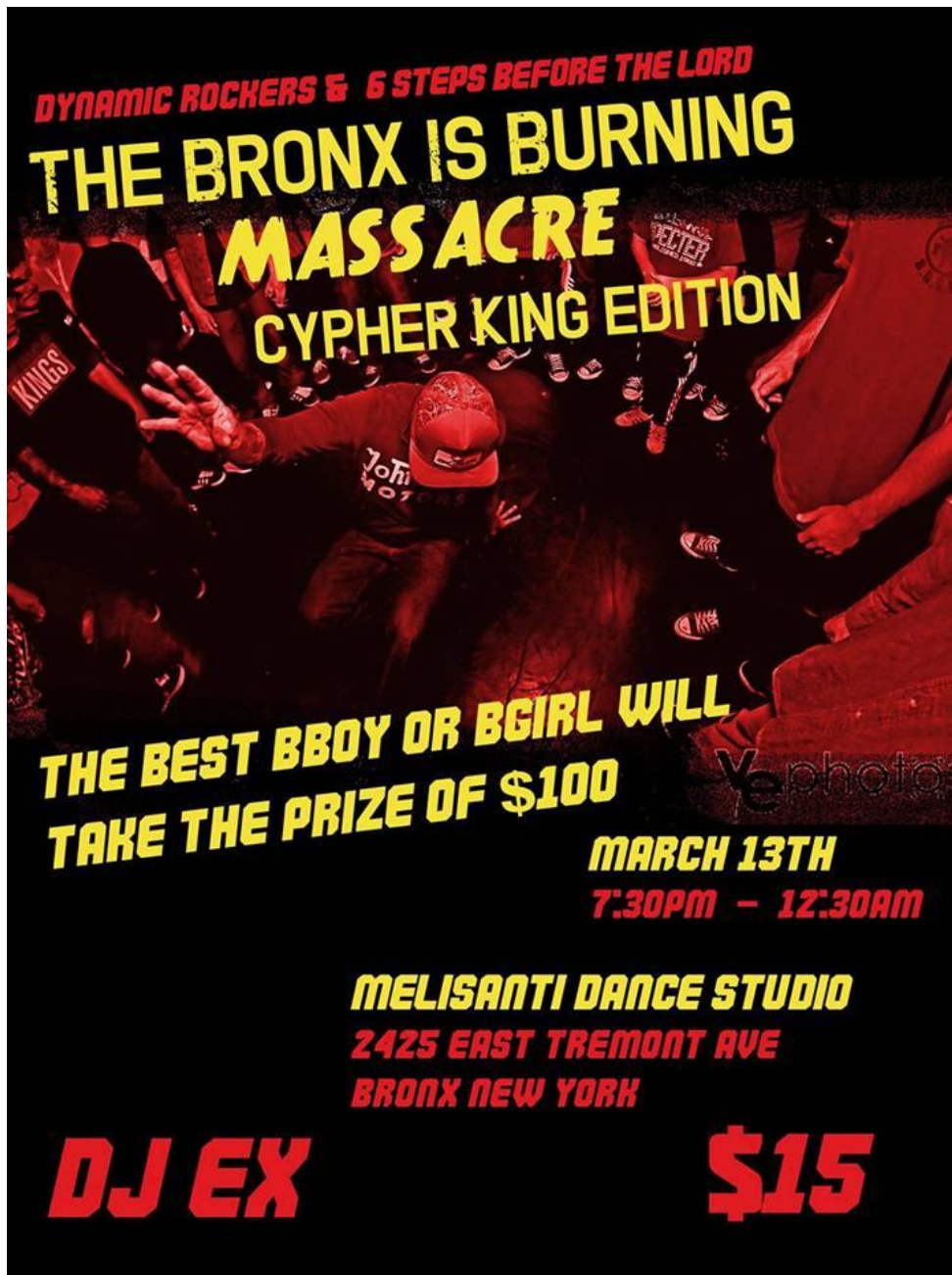


Figure 68. Event flyer for the Bronx is Burning Jam.

The “Bronx is Burning MASSACRE Cypher King Edition” (hereafter as just Bronx is Burning Jam) was a small, community run, breaking event held in the Bronx, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 2015. A friend sent me the flyer for the event (see Figure 68) via Facebook messenger. Unlike the casual and small Moriguchi session, the Bronx is Burning Jam was a much larger event. I describe the Bronx is Burning Jam as an event because for me this terms signifies a particular set of conditions pertaining to

gatherings like this one. For example, the Bronx is Burning Jam had an entrance fee, there was a DJ who played music, an emcee (or host) who was in charge of the night's schedule, a competition and prize money to be won, and it was located in a private studio space.

Nervous and a little excited, I arrived at the Bronx is Burning Jam at around seven-thirty in the evening. The smell of burnt barbecued sausages and onions was the first thing that caught my attention as I arrived. From looking at the event flyer you might not expect to have discovered a sausage sizzle at the jam, but there it was. As I peered inside the dance studio, the first thing I noticed was how pink the walls were. They were painted a bright pink. I handed over fifteen (US) dollars to a woman inside whom I thought might have been Melisanti, the owner of the dance studio where the event was located. In the middle of the room was a small group of kids, crouched down on the floor. As I made my way inside I was greeted by smiles and friendly looks from a large group of middle-aged mums and dads. I supposed they were the parents of the kids crouched in the middle of the studio. These mums and dads were seated on what looked to be cheap folded deck chairs situated around the edges of the room. As there were no free deck chairs for me to sit on, I sat down on the floor off the side, and from here I spent a little while taking in the scene that was in front of me.



Figure 69. Photograph I took the moment I arrived at the Bronx is Burning. 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 2015.

The floor surface of Melisanti's studio was a nice, smooth, varnished wooden floor. Great for doing spins and slides, I thought. I noticed that some of the mums and dads were looking curiously at me as I sat there. I felt a little uncomfortable. These people did not know who I was and why I was there. Their children were here and it

made sense that they would likely be wary of someone who they did not know. I tried to act as friendly and as non-threatening as I could.

The kids who congregated in the middle of the studio were now being ushered around by a charismatic man named Indio. Indio introduced himself on the microphone, telling the crowd that he was from the Dynamic Rockers breaking crew and that he was the host of tonight's event. Indio, it was revealed to me later that night, teaches regular breaking classes at Melisanti's dance studio during the week. While some of his most talented students began to perform in the middle of the studio space, Indio spoke on the microphone about the positive impact that both religion and hip hop have played in his life. Indio said, "I really believe that bboying is a god given dance. When you tell a kid to dance what do they do? They put their hands on the floor right?" The mums and dads in the room all seemed to be proud of their kids and of what Indio was saying. I watched them as they smiled and laughed as their kids, with their hands on the floor, were jumping around and dancing with one another. It was lovely sight to see.

At the back of the room was DJ EX, who was in charge of the music. Once Indio's students had finished their showcase, DJ EX put on some hip hop tunes and went outside to grab a sausage from the barbecue. There was lots of shuffling around as people waited for the Bronx is Burning Jam to begin.

After about an hour or so most of the kids and their parents had left. Other breakers had slowly arrived throughout the night. Many of them stood around waiting for the cyphers to start. Was Indio going to tell us when the cyphers would happen or was it up to us to create them for ourselves?

### **The Random Beginnings of the Cypher**

Sometimes it is hard to pin-point the exact moment a cypher is going to form. They often happen naturally and when the conditions are just right. Forcing a cypher to happen can often be detrimental to the vibe of a cypher. Not all, but a lot of the cyphers that I have experienced tend to have music playing. It is hard to talk about breaking or hip hop without talking about the weight and significance that particular musical sounds have on the practice.

In his book, *Foundation*, Schloss (2009) devotes a whole chapter to the historical influence that particular funk music tracks have had on breaking. Schloss' chapter, "The Original Essence of the Dance: History, Community, and Classical B-Boy Records" (17-40), lists a select number of bongo-laden musical tracks from the early 1970s which he claims are deeply significant to breaking's cultural identity. Schloss says that "an honoured repertoire of records that b-boys prefer to dance to—in effect, a canon—is one way in which hip-hop has developed its own set of cultural traditions" (18). Needless to say, music is extremely important to the lives and social identities of many breakers.

As the attendees of the Bronx is Burning Jam drifted around Melisanti's studio, chatting and hanging out with one another, DJ EX came into the room, went over to the DJ station, and changed the music. The speakers, which were just a second ago playing a mellow hip hop tracks started blasting lively funk music. Horns and bongo-laden drum beats were now filling up the room. Hearing this music my body stiffened a little. James Brown's "Give it up or Turn it Loose" (1970) was playing and it seemed to me that a breaking cypher was going to take shape at any moment. While the funk music was playing breakers started toprocking, uprocking and grooving around the room.

While this evokes Turner's (1974) notion of liminality in ritual processes to me, there are a few key differences between his concept and my own experience of the beginnings of a cypher. It is impossible to determine what role or social function music plays for hip hop culture, as Turner's concept of the liminal might seem to suggest. Although particular kinds of music and musical sounds have and continue to be significant to breaking and hip hop's history, identity, and continuing social and/or cultural productions, music has no "strict" cultural or social function. In this way, the funk music DJ EX played that night may have been a catalyst, indeed I think it was. However, it should be noted that breakers, across different breaking scenes, are inspired and like to dance to all sorts of different genres and varieties of music. Particular musical tracks or sounds that are deemed as being significant to some are not necessarily apt to be significant to others. Yet, it can be strongly claimed that

breakers typically *do* breaking to music, and to that end there is no doubt that music is extremely important to breaking's ongoing social and dynamic productions.



Figure 70. Photograph I took during the Bronx is Burning Jam as the cyphers were beginning to form. Breakers can be seen here toprocking to the music and DJ EX can be seen at the back on the turntables.



One of the songs DJ EX played during this moment, captured in Figure 70, was “It's Just Begun” by The Jimmy Castor Bunch (1972). This song was named in Schloss' exclusive list of classical breaking tracks from the 1970s (17). What one cannot help to listen to when hearing this track are the song's lyrics:

**Lyrics to “It's Just Begun”, The Jimmy Castor Bunch (1972)**

Watch me now.  
Fill the room.  
Into something.  
Gonna make you move.

Here we come.  
On the run.  
Don't know what.  
We're running from.

Day or night.  
Black or white.  
That's the scene.  
You gotta do your thing.  
You gotta do your thing.

Peace will come,  
This world will rest,  
Once we have,  
Togetherness ahhhh!

Day or night.  
Dynamite.  
We had fun.  
But it's just begun.  
It's just begun.  
It's just begun.



Figure 71. Photograph of a breaker in the cypher at the Bronx is Burning Jam. 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 2015.

While DJ EX played “It’s Just Begun” and other lively funk music tracks that night, it generated, on this occasion, the right conditions for the breaking cyphers to emerge. In this moment I watched as breakers sang and cyphered for hours to the music. Not many of us, I think, knew if or when the breaking cyphers were going to happen that night, but when those funk tracks started playing it seemed clear that the cyphers were about to happen at any moment.

Many of the breakers in the room knew all the lyrics to “It’s Just Begun”, and just as

many of them new all the rhythm changes in it as well. What moments like these demonstrate to me is how culturally specific, local hip hop knowledge, plays a role in the way in which activities like the cypher are managed. What breaking practitioners say and do within particular moments, unconscious or not, can be a learning and transformative experience for some; for others it may just reaffirm what they already know and accept. In Schloss' chapter regarding the historical importance of these bongo-laden musical tracks (2009, 17-40), he asserts that these are historically influential to many breakers worldwide, though they are not necessarily known (or loved) by all breaking practitioners. Therefore, it is moments like these, within the activity of cyphering, that illustrate what local knowledge individuals hold about breaking and hip hop culture.

### III. Cyphering in Perth



Figure 72. Photograph of local Perth breakers practising together at the King Street Arts Centre. Perth, Western Australia. 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2015.

#### **Cyphering With Close Friends**

As I roll out my thigh muscles on a foam roller that I brought to the King Street practice session my friends, Isaac and Shu, drag the moveable mirrors to the front on the room. Natty then plugs his phone into the speaker jack and turns on a breaks mixtape for us to break to. “Deeejay ScrEAM – yo yo yo!” booms at us through the two large speakers in the corners of the room.

As more regulars arrive and move to their usual haunts of the room the studio starts to fill up. The King Street dance studios are fairly large and breakers tend to spread themselves around the room in various spots (see Figure 72). A bunch of my close breaking friends—Airrico, Beast, Natty, Isaac, Keenan—and I set ourselves up on one side of the room. As Natty and Shu begin to stretch, Beast begins to break. As Beasts toprocks to the sounds of DJ Scream, we slowly begin to gather around him.

As Beast finishes toprocking, Airrico moves into the space that Beast had previously occupied. Then, just as Beast had done, Airrico begins to break. As I finish using the

foam roller, before I even realise, a breaking cypher has formed in front of me. After Airrico leaves the cypher, Natty then makes his way into the space. There is no stress or tension, no awkward moments about who is going to go in next. There is no heated exchange or competition between us here, no call out battles are likely to take place. As Natty breaks in the cypher he moves relatively slowly. His footwork is controlled as he thinks carefully about each of his moves. His movements are relaxed. There is a comfort to them, which you don't see when Natty is breaking in cyphers with strangers. But amongst friends, while he is just warming up, he can move more slowly and take his time.

Unlike other cyphers at a large competitive event, where the breaking can be intense and where people are trying to show off or prove a point, the cyphers between my friends at the King Street session are not intense at all. We are all sprawled out in our corner of the room, next to our bags and drink bottles. I notice that Airrico is not watching Natty as he breaks in the cypher. Instead Airrico is on his phone scrolling through Facebook. Beast is not watching him either, he stares blankly across the other side of the room, his mind a million miles away. Shu and I are watching though. I move to stand up behind Natty and wait for him to finish his round. He notices this movement of mine and calmly moves back. I move forward and enter the cypher. As I break I do not feel any pressure to do anything hard. This cypher is a regular occurrence for us who practice together at King Street. Like Natty I move slowly in the cypher in order to warm up properly.

Beast jumps into the cypher after me. He moves quickly onto his right knee and plants his left foot over the top of it. From here he slides forwards along the smooth wooden floor, whilst shifting his bodily position and readjusting himself so that he can repeat the move, again and again. As he gets up he looks at me and asks: "What do you think Ippy?" Natty and Airrico nod approvingly as do I, "Yeah it looks cool", I tell him.

I like Beast's breaking. He does a lot of moves that allow him to travel around the floor. Beast often does this move where he holds his left foot with his right hand and threads his foot in-between his legs. He performs this complex manoeuvre whilst at the same time rolling on his chest and moving across the room. To thread his leg through requires him to lift his shoulders slightly, which he does by shifting his weight onto his stomach.

The King Street session is an open, loose, gathering between breakers and anyone is welcome to come and use the space if they want. Having engaged in many breaking cyphers together with my friends at King Street our cyphering tends to be a more relaxed and casual affair. Cyphering between close friends produces a different kind of cyphering practice. Thus, this illustrates how breaking and hip hop culture is, more broadly, shaped by the social relationships that individuals have with one another. Cyphering has no essential characteristics, but rather it is characterised by

what those who engage in the practice bring to it. The interpersonal relationships between myself and those who I cypher with at the King Street sessions generates a particular kind of breaking cypher: ones that are non-competitive, encouraging, relaxed and familiar. Unlike the cyphering that I experienced at Moriguchi and at the Bronx is Burning Jam, the King Street session cyphers were different due to the individuals, and the relationships I had with those individuals.

What these three accounts aimed to show is how varied the activity of cyphering is, depending on the relationships between the breakers involved and the context in which the cyphering occurs. Cyphering is shaped, managed and generated by those who engage in this activity, and not some shared understanding or belief about how this activity works. As this thesis has sought to investigate the processes and labour required to make and maintain a diverse and constantly evolving cultural world, the activity of cyphering is one example of how breakers work together to make and maintain the practice of breaking.

### **How Do Breakers Make Cyphers Together?**

In places all over the world, breakers gather together and make cyphers. They may not have ever met, though, they are still able to organise themselves without many noticeable difficulties. What this is reminiscent of is Faulkner and Becker's chapter (2009, 1-17), "How Musicians Make Music Together". Except, instead of "the stand", where Faulkner and Becker suggest musicians assemble and negotiate amongst each other how to play and what to play, for breakers it is "the cypher". Jazz musicians and breakers draw from pre-existing knowledge and their cultural productions are shaped by various contexts and their social relationships to one another.

Additionally the cypher is also a site where one body is molded into a "breaker's body". Like the "boxing gym" to Wacquant (2004, 14-15), the breaking cypher is an activity in which accomplished breakers are forged through many hours of practice and training.

In this chapter I have discussed how the activity of cyphering is part of a dynamic knowledge-making process, which, through one's ongoing, tacit, engagement in social breaking practices produce local understandings and attitudes about breaking

and hip hop culture. This knowledge gained is then put to practice in every subsequent breaking cypher a breaker takes part in. Thus, one's experience engaging in cyphers over time and space can either modify, re-affirm or even transform one's understandings. Furthermore, breakers have a lot of agency within the cypher. Cyphering is both an activity and site in which breakers are able to learn from one another, express ideas, solve rivalries, express admiration and respect; but also they are a place where rivalries and divides are sometimes created and where violence can take place. For many breakers who regularly engage in the practice of cyphering, the things which I have emphasised and examined within the moments described above, may or may not resonate with their own experiences. I understand that cyphering is both a personal and collective experience and that there is no one way in which to conceptualise or describe the practice as a whole.

With regard to the knowledge-making process that takes place within the breaking cyphers, there have been three main points made throughout this chapter. The first is how through a social engagement in cyphering breakers learn how to engage in, make sense of and contribute to, the ever-changing and fluctuating rules and procedures that govern breaking cyphers. And secondly, that it is an active and social involvement in this practice that provides breakers with a range of aesthetic and sensory knowledge about how cyphering works. Through cyphering breakers learn how to engage with other breakers. The kinds of culturally specific understandings one gains through cyphering are also made and transmitted through an engagement with other breaking activities as well.

The breaking cyphers I experienced during my time in New York City were not very different from the cyphers I experienced in Osaka or in Perth, although there were many minor differences to the ways in which breakers organised themselves and the ways in which they engaged in the practice itself. That being said, cyphering does not have one common function or property that one can define. There is no one particular social function that breaking cyphers offer, offer various things to different individuals and these can differ greatly across space and time.

Lastly, breaking cyphers are one of many sites in which broader understandings about breaking and hip hop are expressed, tested, reified, lost, dynamically and

collectively negotiated over, as well as being shared and transmitted across hip hop's global landscape. As shown from the ethnographic moments described above, understandings people gain from doing cyphering spirals upwards, shaping broader ontological notions of both breaking and hip hop.

As Nonaka et al have stated:

Knowledge is created in the spiral that goes through two seemingly antithetical concepts such as order and chaos, micro and macro, part and whole, mind and body, tacit and explicit, self and other, deduction and induction, and creativity and control. (2000, 7)

The knowledge-making process that takes place within the cypher is a dialectic process; an ongoing exchange, crafted through interactions between individuals and their environment. In the next chapter of this thesis, I want to pursue further this discussion of the dynamic knowledge-making process, by looking at how claims of truth by hip hop persons are ultimately made and negotiated.



## – Chapter 8 –

### *“The Go Off”*

#### **The Fragility of Hip Hop Culture**

*The oral song (or other narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer’s memories of songs sung.*

– Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

As I walked into the semi-crowded town hall in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the mood was casual, perhaps because the breaking battles had not yet started. It was an early afternoon in March of 2015 and I had just arrived in Bridgeport, Connecticut for the United Outkast Jam (hereafter OUK Jam), a three-versus-three breaking competition. Outside the venue it was a cold and cloudy day, typical of early-spring. But within this brightly lit town hall with lots of excited bodies shuffling around, the weather outside was of no concern to us. As I wandered around seeking out familiar faces, I watching as people “threw down”—danced together in small circles around the room. As I continued to wander I stumbled across a man wearing a t-shirt, which, printed on the back in large bubble-sized text were the words: “THE INVENTOR OF THE CONTINOUS HEAD SPIN”. And on the front in the same, large, bubble-sized text was his name: “INCREDIBLE KID FREEZE”.



Figure 73. Photograph of Kid Freeze. Taken on my iPhone, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2015.

The “Go Off” in breaking means to go off script, to venture into new territory and take uncalculated risks. In this chapter I explore some of the risks that individual breakers make themselves. As hip hop is a social field that lacks a central governing body, where no one group, person or institution holds the power or authority to validate or deny the things that hip hop peoples say and do. Claims-making across different localities is subject to various levels of consideration, importance, analysis, scrutiny, criticism and consequence. Depending on *who* makes the claim, where the claim is made, and the substance of the claim itself, some claims are more easily

accepted, while others may be simply rejected outright. What lends a claim to be accepted (or at least taken seriously) is part of the focus of this chapter; the other is the process involved in the making and negotiating of claims made. In this chapter I look primarily at Kid Freeze's claim to show how claims are constantly and continually being negotiated and renegotiated by different hip hop actors, over different times and spaces. I also discuss how claims-making online—across digital spaces—bring about new challenges to this process, one of which being that there are key differences between “oral” and “online” claims-making.

Upon meeting the Incredible Kid Freeze at the UOK Jam, it was there that I was first introduced to his claim as the inventor of one of the most iconic, perhaps *the most* iconic, move in breaking today: the continuous head-spin. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, I see claims-making is a form of “social action” (Amit and Dyck 2006), where breakers who make claims risk social rejection and failure in order to seek recognition, belonging and acceptance. Furthermore, claims-making draws attention to hip hop's fragile and socially contestable nature.

### **The Fragility of Claims-Making**

Claims made about one's identity and belonging to a particular social group have led researchers to ask questions about how individuals who identify as being connected to a group police and manage its boundaries. As Amit and Dyck (2006, 4) have argued, historically researchers have not focused on the lives of individuals and the actions they perform within the collectives with which they identify:

During the last third of the twentieth century, the development of a processual and distributive notion of culture (Barth 1966, 1969; Goodenough 1973, 1976; Hannerz 1969, 1990), the fashioning of hermeneutic critiques of ethnographic representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986), and the forging of feminist analyses (Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Moore 1988) all combined to call into question inclinations towards exoticism and cultural reifications judged to have underpinned too many anthropological analyses.

This focus on the lives and actions of individuals sought to dismantle the notion of social collectives as homogenous: the idea that an objective, authentic, culture exists as a bounded entity outside of peoples socially constructed relationships. The

post-structural critique of cultural life led to anthropologists calling for us to write “against culture” (6). Abu-Lughod (1991, 154) wrote that one way in which to do so is to focus on the lives and social actions of individuals:

By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence and timelessness. Individuals are confronted with choices, struggle with others, make conflicting statements, argue about points of view on the same events, undergo ups and downs in various relationships and changes in their circumstances and desires, face new pressures, and fail to predict what will happen to them or those around them.

The focus on agency and individuality has been a way of pushing back against the notion of the individual as an archetype for a specific cultural group. In the context of Kid Freeze’s claim as the inventor, I understand his claim, not as a truth about hip hop, but rather as a claim of belonging and of ownership.

Since I started breaking I have been witness to many claims by many hip hop actors. I have listened as many have told me competing stories about who invented this particular breaking move, style, approach and so on. And I have been persuaded by many of these stories. What tends to happen, after a while, is that you begin to hear contradictory claims being made and authenticated. People’s stories change and new stories emerge with new claims being made. I have spent hours listening and arguing and even making claims myself about what is true to breaking and hip hop culture.

Claims making is the assertion of what is true to a particular individual. Thus, claims are often tied to individuals and need to be constantly made and remade. Nobody seems to know when a claim is lost but if it is not continually being re-made then it will eventually be lost. What strikes me about Kid Freeze’s claim, as well as many other claims that are constantly being made, is that no matter how many times a claim is authenticated, they never truly do seem to stick.

## Claims-Making at the United Outkast Breaking Jam



Figure 74. Photograph of the United Outkast Breaking Jam in Bridgeport Connecticut. Taken on my iPhone, 22nd March 2015.

The United Outkast Breaking Jam was one of the first hip hop dance gatherings I attended in New York. The breaking jam was organised by the UDEF team, a non-profit organisation which funds, promotes and organises a whole host of hip hop dance events in North America, mostly competitive breaking events.<sup>26</sup> It was by chance that I met with Kid Freeze that day at the UOK jam. It was not a planned occurrence by any means. I had found out about the event through contacts via social media and had planned on entering the competition.

### My Encounter with Kid Freeze

Near the entrance of the UOK jam there were people selling clothes and other bits and pieces of merchandise. I watched as they set up their stores. They arranged their items in neat piles on top of the tables: durags, beanies, knee-pads, helmets, custom-designed t-shirts, belts, jackets, hats and various other things. Many of these items looked to be made specifically for breakers. For example, one of the items for sale were beanies that had mesh sewed into the top of them. This is something that many breakers do because the mesh helps reduce the friction when spinning on your head.

As I made my way over to these stores I caught a glimpse of one of the sellers: a charismatic man who I watched pace around his store and constantly re-arrange the items he had brought to sell. What was hard to miss was the outfit this person had on. He wore a custom-designed t-shirt with the words, “INCREDIBLE KID FREEZE”, printed on the front of it, and on the back were the words, “THE INVENTOR OF THE CONTINUOUS HEAD SPIN”. This statement—or claim as I understood it—was an extremely bold claim to have printed on a t-shirt, I thought. Furthermore, he wore a black cap with the words, “HEAD” and “SPIN”, embroidered onto it (see Figure 24). This I found to be a little excessive. The shirt, the hat, he was like a walking billboard for his claims. His claim to have invented the continuous head-spin could be seen from the back and front of his person. After meeting with the incredible Kid Freeze I

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<sup>26</sup> The Urban Dance & Educational Foundation (UDEF) is a not-for-profit organisation that runs and supports breaking events around the United States and in Europe (UDEF 2017).

do not think that this was at all unplanned on his part.

Besides Kid Freeze's outfit, I noticed that he moved around the room with a bit of a limp. I saw a pair of crutches, they were sat up, leaning up against the wall near his clothing store. Perhaps he was injured, I thought. Kid Freeze was always on the move. His eyes, darting around the room, as though he was looking for someone. But the longer I watched, the more I realised that he wasn't looking for anyone in particular. He was scanning the room constantly, looking out for people of significance. I watched as he ran over to a bunch of people and aggressively shook each of their hands. He was imposing and confident. I watched him do this to a bunch of people, some of whom I recognised as organisers of the UOK jam, others who looked to be OGs, which is a term breakers use to describe well-established and highly respected individuals within the hip hop culture. For example, within the Perth breaking scene there are some who might consider me to be an OG, as I have been active in the Perth breaking scene for nearly two decades. Whereas within the New York breaking scene I do not assume that anyone here would consider me as an OG whatsoever.

After watching Kid Freeze work the room for a little while, I eventually plucked up the courage to introduce myself. I walked over to him and we spoke for only a couple of minutes, during which he asked if I knew who he was. Before I even had a real chance to answer he began telling me that he was Kid Freeze from legendary Dynamic Rockers crew. He then said that he was the inventor of the continuous head-spin, as well as many other powermoves. I smiled and nodded in agreement, not wanting to seem rude or anything. Then, after he had got this off his chest, he asked me where I from. I told him that I was from Australia and that I was in town doing research on hip hop for my PhD. I told him that I was a bboy, and that I had been breaking since I was thirteen. As we spoke about breaking and hip hop I noticed from watching his eyes that he began to look a little distracted. He began glancing around the room, already looking for his next encounter. Noticing this, I asked whether it was okay to get a photograph together: "no problem", he said to me. It was almost as though he was waiting for me to make this request. As though he expected he was going to be asked.



Figure 75. Photograph of Kid Freeze and me at the UOK Jam. Image taken on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2015.

As I handed my camera to a stranger beside me I asked whether it was okay to take a photograph of Kid Freeze and me. As we posed for the photograph, Kid Freeze put his arm around me and struck a pose, pointing his left finger up towards the sky. Not knowing what to do myself I awkwardly copied what he was doing. Kid Freeze made sure to tilt his hat so that it was directly facing the camera. I found it interesting that he was aware to make sure that his hat and t-shirt were clearly visible for the camera. I guess it was not the first time he had been asked by someone to have a photograph taken. Once the shot was done, he asked if I could email him the photographs I had taken of him that day. I told him that I would. He immediately took this confirmation as an indication that our conversation was over. He then shook my hand, told me that it was nice to have met me, and then charged off into the crowd. He limped away as though he was on a mission, in search of someone or something else.



Figure 76. Kid Freeze’s business card.

Kid Freeze’s indie-looking business card had two phone numbers and an email address. It also contained his claim, “Inventor of the Continuous Head Spin”, written in bold text up the top, in case anyone had forgotten. What also amused me about this card was the line of text at the bottom, “For Bookings Call Danny Diaz”. It made me wonder about what kinds of bookings Kid Freeze is asked to do.

### **My Reflections of Kid Freeze’s Claim**

After my short encounter with Kid Freeze that day, I watched and observed as he interacted with others at the UOK jam. He shook hands and took photographs with lots of people that day. He reminded me of a politician, the way he worked the room. Some of his encounters with others I noticed the same distracted, eye-wandering, body-language that happened during my encounter with him. His eyes were constantly darting around the room as he chatted to people. Once or twice I caught him smiling and waving to others across the room, whilst still in conversation with a person standing next to him. He was always trying catch the gaze of others, and often it was with the more notable people in the room: the top breakers, the judges, the organisers, and of course other well-known and respected breaking practitioners.

Not having grown up in New York City, I only recognised a couple of the breakers who Kid Freeze was trying to get the attention of. Kid Freeze, on the other hand, seemed to know who all the important people in the room were, and what is more is that they all seemed to know who he was as well, though not all of them seemed



happy to see him.

When Kid Freeze spoke to people—and it was usually *him* speaking—his body language was quite imposing. He was aggressive. He would shrug his shoulders and wave his hands a lot as he spoke. He dominated the conversations that he was in. I noticed that his feet, they never seemed to be still. They were always moving. This may have been due to his injury and perhaps he couldn't stand still for too long, who knows. Whatever the reason, the constant movement of his feet as well as the large gestures he made whilst talking, added to his charismatic and imposing image.

Most of the encounters I witnessed him having were quite short. After a minute or so, either he or the person he was speaking too would begin to edge away from the interaction. Other than the one-on-one interactions Kid Freeze was having with people around the room, I watched as someone from afar pointed and giggled at Kid Freeze. It was hard to say why, but it certainly looked critical. In another instance I saw a group of younger people standing close beside him reading the back of his t-shirt. I watched as one of them secretly took a photograph of Kid Freeze's t-shirt, without him noticing.

Subtle but similar reactions to Kid Freeze and his claim can also be seen in two of the photographs that I took of him. In Figures 73 and 75, you can see people in the backdrop reacting to Kid Freeze and me posing for a photograph.

In Figure 73, standing off to the right wearing a gold chain, denim jeans and a black hoodie, is a respected rocker from New York named King Uprock.<sup>27</sup> Facing the camera, you can see King Uprock's face. His expression looks amused by the photograph being taken of Kid Freeze's shirt. In Figure 75, a man in dark hoodie, standing behind my shoulder, sticks his tongue out at the camera whilst Kid Freeze and I point our fingers to the sky. The reactions to Kid Freeze in these two photograph (Figures 73 and 75) are, I will admit, a little critical.

A little while after the jam was over, I was speaking to my friend Will about my

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<sup>27</sup> In Sezai Coban's eBook, *Knowledge - The Urban Skillz Dictionary* (2013), there is a short section titled "Dynasty Rockers Role in History of Uprock". King Uprock and his crew, Dynasty Rockers, are mentioned in this text and Coban draws a lot from his interview with King Uprock.

experience at the event. Whilst showing him some of the photographs I had taken that day, he immediately reacted by laughing out loud when he saw the photos of Kid Freeze and me. He turned towards me with a big smile on his face as he said, “So... you met the inventor...”

What I began to realise from speaking to other local breakers in New York was that my encounter with Kid Freeze was not an uncommon experience, especially for many travelling breakers who come to New York City. Will told me that Kid Freeze goes to most of the local breaking jams and events in New York and across the east coast. And like he did at the UOK jam, Kid Freeze “works the room” at these events. He wears his outfits with his claim printed on them, he talks to people and takes photographs with them. What he seems to be doing is spreading the word, which is his claim to have invented the continuous head-spin.

Long after the UOK Jam was over, I thought about Kid Freeze and my encounter with him that day. I thought about whether his claim was true or not, and what evidence it would take to prove that it is either true or false. Whether it was due to his age, injury or perhaps not having performed the head-spin for many years, Kid Freeze did not look as though he would not have been able perform the move anymore. Yet he was out there, making and remaking the claim, keeping it alive.

## Claims-Making Online: A Highly Contested and Participatory Arena



Figure 77. Screenshot of Kid Freeze in the video, “Inventor of the Continuous Headspin Kid Freeze” (Stephen Dirkes 2009), uploaded onto Vimeo, captured October 24<sup>th</sup> 2017.

In digital spaces there are discussions between breakers from all over the world. Claims that are made orally within local settings are able to be transmitted and shared across a global network and shape local worlds, however claims made online not only reach a larger and more diverse collective of people, they are also able to be remediated by this collective through various online media forms: a Facebook post, a tweet, a video, a blog post, YouTube comments, and so on. Claims made by hip hop people online exemplify the participatory nature of hip hop culture that many other social interactions online precipitate (Jenkins 1992; 2004).. In this section of the chapter I examine Kid Freeze’s claim online, discussing how his claim is remediated by others, as well as being made into a sort of digital record that can be referred to by others.

Claims made online bring many new challenges to hip hop culture, one of these challenges being that claims are easily hijacked or lost by the immense volume of

voices that are able to comment, evaluate, scrutinize and ignore one's claim.

For example, when I initially typed the words "Kid Freeze" and "headspin" into Google it returned with many hits, one of which was a link to a video titled, "Inventor of the Continuous Headspin Kid Freeze" (Stephen Dirkes 2009). The video was uploaded to the video-sharing website Vimeo in 2009, and its description revealed that it had been filmed at the Alphabeta shop in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, by a Stephen Dirkes. Stephen Dirkes was, I assumed, the same Stephen Dirkes who uploaded the video, as the name in the description matched the name of the account in which it had been uploaded.

This Google search further revealed that this particular video of Kid Freeze has since been re-uploaded and shared across various other social media websites; the most recent being uploaded onto YouTube in July of 2016 by a user named "pluto seven TBB". However, this more recent upload contained no mention of Stephen Dirkes in the description. Instead the description reads as follows:

Kid Freeze explains his 70's origins, inventing the continuous headspin his Dynamic Rockers history all beginning in the mid and late 70's... (pluto seven TBB 2016, accessed October 24<sup>th</sup> 2017)

In both of these videos, however, is the same exact video content. The clip begins with a shot of Kid Freeze standing in front of the camera and telling his story of how he invented the continuous head-spin during the late 1970s. I have, for discussion purposes, transcribed the parts of the video where he provides evidence for his claim.

It was one day in maybe 1976—ah 77 to 78—you know pretty much I was buggin' out. I was doing some footwork then I went to a back-spin and then I went up to my head, slightly, and I just dropped, boom!

And he said, "Oh shit that'd be hot! Yo spin on your head!"

And I'm like, "Spin on my head? Yo that's crazy, you know what I'm saying."

He goes, "Yeah you get that head-spin you know what I'm saying you be the man!"

And I'm like yo. So pretty much I started tampering with it, going left, right, left, and then I'm like—okay I started getting momentum from it—so I started feeling it out. So I keep tampering with it and finally I made the whip. (Stephen Dirkes 2009, accessed October 24<sup>th</sup> 2017)

The part in which he describe “the whip” on the screen is when we see Kid Freeze demonstrating him doing the continuous head-spin. He places his head onto the ground and throws himself upside down. He then winds up his legs whilst continuing to speak about what the whip requires. He then twists his body around and from here spins fifteen times around his head without his hands touching the floor once. This incredible display by Kid Freeze is, I think, part of his claim as being the authentic head-spinner.

Watching Kid Freeze perform the head-spin in this video was an eye-opener. I noticed that he brought his legs together near the end of his spin. As someone who has also performed many head-spins myself, I can attest that this manoeuvre is extremely hard to do at the best of times. When you bring your legs together whilst spinning on your head your spin become very quick all of sudden and it can be hard to control. Yet, Kid Freeze performs this manoeuvre with ease. He then stands up and looks directly at the camera and says:

That’s the continuous head-spin, that’s what I brought to the table in the bboy industry, I am the inventor of the continuous head-spin. Don’t forget it. Don’t get it twisted. I’m Kid Freeze, I come in Peace.

Don’t get it twisted literally means: *don’t get it mixed up*. What Kid Freeze is saying here is that not everyone’s claim is as true as his claim. In the video’s description on Vimeo it states that “Kid Freeze and B-Boy 360 Lay down the invention of the continuous (sic) Headspin in 1977-78!!!!”. This suggests that Kid Freeze was perhaps not the sole inventor of the move, but that there was another person, this bboy 360, who might have been the co-inventor. Yet Kid Freeze does not tell us about bboy 360 in the video, nor does he mention him as a co-inventor. There is a slight reference to another person when Kid Freezes says, “Oh shit that’d be hot! Yo spin on your head”. This, one can assume, might be the words of the elusive bboy 360. However, it seems that since 2009, Kid Freeze’s story may have shifted as there was no mention of another breaker in his claim to me at the UOK Jam.

It is hard to say for sure, but perhaps Kid Freeze’s claim began as being a story of two breakers playing around and creating a this new move; a collaboration between two people. Nowadays, perhaps the claim has changed into the claim it is today,

which is that the continuous head-spin was created by one person, the Incredible Kid Freeze.

Another thing to highlight from this Dirkes video, is the date of when he claims the head-spin was invented. He states that the continuous head-spin was created “one day in maybe 1976—ah 77 to 78”. You would think that when making a claim of having been the *first* to have invented the head-spin might require offering a more specific date, time and place on when exactly the move was first created. However, the time, date and place Kid Freeze offers in the video could not have been more vague. This imprecise description of when he invented the continuous head-spin suggests that, to Kid Freeze, such a detail is not important for the authentication of his claim. What Kid Freeze’s claim employs is his charisma and his word that it was he who invented the move.

### **Counter-Claims against Kid Freeze’s Claim**

Being a participatory culture, there are many counter-claims which can easily be found against Kid Freeze’s claim online. What these counter-claims reveal is not only the ease with which claims made by hip hop persons online are more openly contested, but also how digital spaces alter this process of claims-making, negotiating and authenticating.

Across digital spaces, claims made are subject to the scrutiny of many more hip hop persons, not all of whom necessarily buy-into the same kinds of notions of authenticity as one another. In the context of Kid Freezes claim as the inventor of the continuous head-spin, there were many kinds of counter-claims I discovered through a simple google search of his person and his claim.

From an initial google search of the move in question (the head-spin) I stumbled across a Wikipedia page titled “Headspin” (Wikipedia contributors 2017). The contributors of this Wikipedia page describe initially what the head-spin looks like and where one might typically encounter the move. Then the description goes on to state the following:

Though b-boy Kid Freeze is sometimes credited with having invented the headspin, the first known footage of the move is seen in the 1933 film, *Wild Boys of the Road*. One of the film's protagonists Edward 'Eddie'

Smith, played by Frankie Darro, performs a Headspin at the 67 minute mark. There is also an older video featuring a headspin "A Street Arab" Thomas A. Edison, INC April 21, 1898 in which a preadolescent boy, dressed like a street urchin, performs acrobatic stunts for the camera. The dancer, Olav Thorshaug, performed Norwegian Hallingdans shows in the United States of America around 1910-1920, incorporating the headspin in his dance. (Wikipedia contributors 2017, para. 1, accessed October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017)

The description of the head-spin on this Wikipedia page rejects Kid Freeze's claim outright, firstly by making reference to his claim as false, and then secondly, by providing alternative sources to where one can see the head-spin being performed before Kid Freeze claimed to have invented it. This counter-claim is critical of Kid Freeze's claim in that it claims there is video footage of someone else performing the move as far back as 1898. I do not reference this Wikipedia page because I think the source material is wholly accurate or valid, but rather, I use it to highlight how easy it is to find counter-claims online. A simple google search links you to hundreds of different sources where Kid Freeze's claim is being made and negotiated.

Another counter-claim I found against Kid Freeze's was on a website called "OldSchoolHipHop.com". On this site is a blog article titled "The Dynamic Rockers" (JohnG 2010, accessed October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017), in which there is a lot of information about the Dynamic Rockers crew's history. It mentions the number of films, television shows and music-video clips that members of the crew have appeared in over the years. The article also lists some of the crew's most notable members. Interestingly, Kid Freeze's name is not mentioned in this list. However, below in the comments section, where people are able to publically comment on the article, there is mention of Kid Freeze.



**Jay125**

NOVEMBER 11, 2013

Though your article is informative it is not complete. There is no mention of Kid Freeze. He is the reason Dynamic got put on the map for it was his style that everyone bit. Every bboy today owes their style and thanks to to Kid Freeze, Crazy Legs and Ken Swift

Figure 78. Screenshot of Jay125's comment, captured on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017 (JohnG 2010, accessed October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

Although Kid Freeze is not mentioned in the article, his omission in the piece is itself a strong counter-claim. In the piece there is a description given of another breaker who the author credits as being known for doing continuous head-spins. In the fifth paragraph, the author writes:

Four of the Rockers, Airborne (Jose Lopez), Spider (Cliff Lyons), Kano (Milton Torres) and Flip (Juan Barranco), decided to form their own crew when the opportunity to sign with a management company (Breakdance Int'l.) came up. They called the crew the Dynamic Breakers. It was these four who had been largely responsible for the gymnastic and acrobatic elements that the Rockers were known for, as they were all teammates on their high school gymnastics team. They also added a breaker from New Jersey named Duce (Julio Martinez), whose signature move was the doo-rag-enhanced extra long headspin. (para. 5, accessed October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017)

The counter-claim here is that it was a breaker from New Jersey named Duce (Julio Martinez) whose signature move was the head-spin, and not Kid Freeze. Yet the comment by Jay125 shows us that this counter-claim is one that is openly contested. In an interview by Andreas Vingaard in 2013, published online (Vingaard 2013, accessed October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017), Duce says:

Everyone brought something different to the table. I was the head spin specialist. No one in the group did head spins. I was the craziest head spinner you can ever imagine. I remember one time I was battling someone and I said, "Okay, you want to mess with me?" I decided to take my pants off and moon the guy while spinning upside down [laughs]. (para. 6)



Although Duce does not explicitly claim to have invented the head-spin in this interview with Vingaard, his assertion that he was the only breaker in the group to be doing head-spins seems to contradict what Kid Freeze has claimed in various accounts online. What these different claims and counter-claims illustrate is how the nature of claims-making across digital spaces are all preserved here (digitally) and people can easily find them and access them through google searches or through word of mouth. Before the rise of the internet, claims-making across the field of hip hop were predominantly expressed by individuals and were transmitted orally from person-to-person. In this way, claims made were not preserved in this messy but widely accessible digital library, which claims made online enables and facilitates. Other comments and counter-claims I found online in relation to Kid Freeze’s claim are shared below.

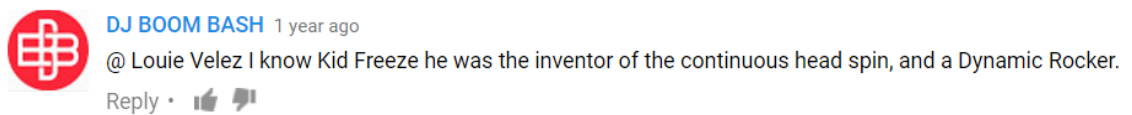


Figure 79. Screenshot of a YouTube comment on the video, "Rock Steady Crew VS Dynamic Rockers - style warz" (shumba7zimbabwe 2009), uploaded onto YouTube, captured October 27th 2017.

The comment reads as follows:

@Louie Velez I know Kid Freeze he was the inventor of the continuous head spin, and a Dynamic Rocker.

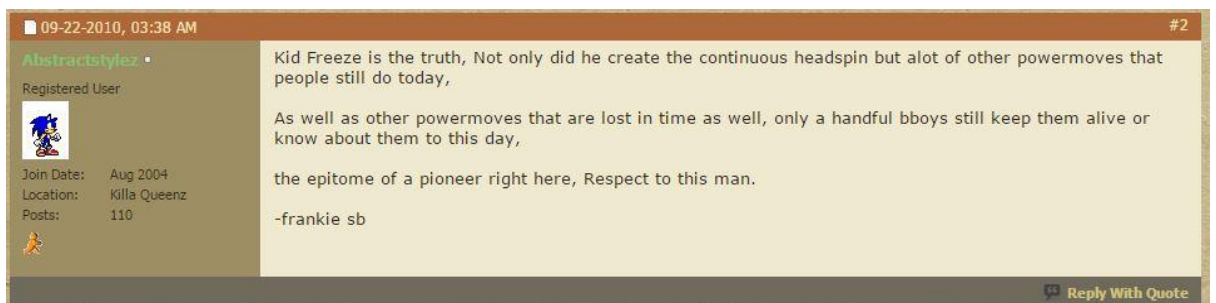


Figure 80. Screenshot of a comment on an online discussion board forum (Abstractstylez 2010, captured October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

The comment reads as follows:

Kid Freeze is the truth, Not only did he create the continuous headspin but alot of other powermoves that people still do today,

As well as other powermoves that are lost in time as well, only a handful bboys still keep them alive or know about them to this day,

the epitome of a pioneer right here, Respect to this man.

-frankie sb.

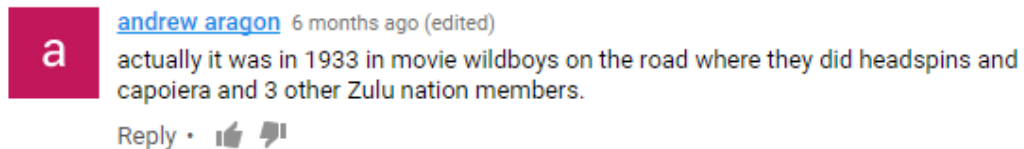


Figure 81. Screenshot of a YouTube comment on a video titled: "Origins of 70's Bboy Kid Freeze and the Continuous Headspin..." (pluto seven Tbb 2016), uploaded onto YouTube, captured October 27th 2017.

The comment reads as follows:

actually it was in 1933 in movie wildboys on the road where they did headspins and capoeira and 3 other Zulu nation members.

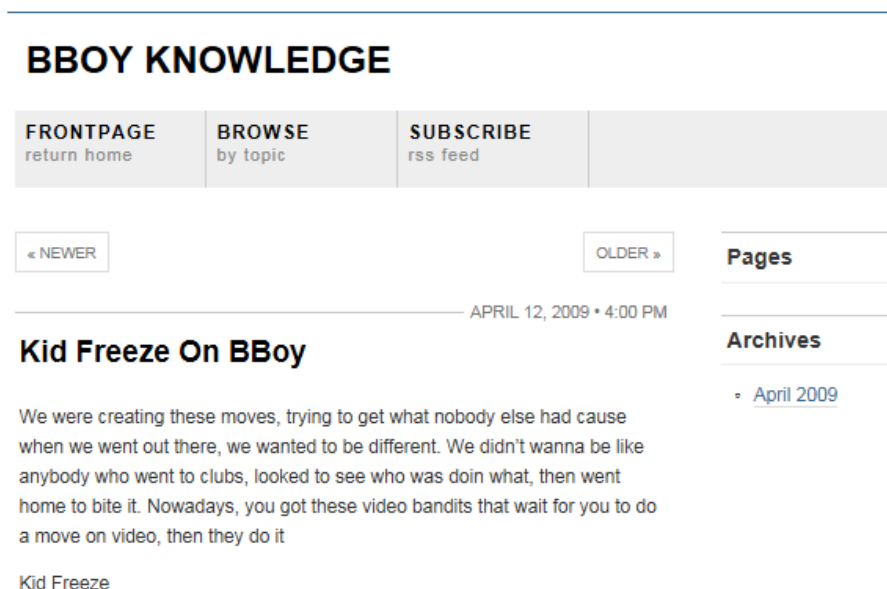


Figure 82. Screenshot of a quote said to be from Kid Freeze himself. Posted on a personal blog page (bboy knowledge 2009, captured October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

The quote reads as follows:

We were creating these moves, trying to get what nobody else had cause when we went out there, we wanted to be different. We didn't wanna be like anybody who went to clubs, looked to see who was doing what, then sent home to bite it. Nowadays, you got these video bandits that wait for you to do a move on video, then they do it.

My exploration of Kid Freeze's claim online reveals some key differences between oral and online claims making, particularly within the context of hip hop culture. I have shown how the process of making, negotiating and authenticating a claim shifts due to the conditions of these participatory digital communication technologies. The process, which was once an oral transmission from person-to-person, has shifted in the way in which these communication technologies allow for remediation to occur so easily, as well as capturing what people say and do in situ, creating a record of claims-made in a digital library of sorts. There are many concerns that such technologies and the introduction of digital records bring to the process of claims-making, not only within the context of hip hop but in various other social-cultural contexts;; one concern being that those who are well versed with using these technologies may have the ability to craft stronger claims and counter-claims against those who are not as well versed.

By looking solely at Kid Freeze's claim online I have shown how much easier it is for people to mount counter-claims within this arena. These communication technologies allow people to introduce multiple sources, bring in a wider milieu of voices, and pick apart the language and specifics of Kid Freeze's claim. Thus, the online arena through which claims by hip hop persons are made and negotiated only further fragments the already highly diverse field of hip hop.

### **Invoking Authenticity to Legitimise Claims Made**

The notion of "authenticity" in hip hop is a culturally contested concept and one that has been the subject of much debate and discussion across the scholarly hip hop literature. McLeod (1999), Judy (2004), Solomon (2005), Pennycook (2007) are just a few who have written extensively on the contested and distinctly localised notions of authenticity across the field of hip hop. What these hip hop scholars have made clear is that what is deemed to be authentic is not inherent to any object or

event that one might designate as authentic, but rather, that authenticity is a socially agreed-upon construct, invoked and appealed to by different hip hop persons for a range of different local, social and uniquely individual purposes. As stated by McLeod (1999, 135):

This "socially agreed-upon construct" (authenticity) is a sign, a discursive formation with multiple meanings. It is at the center of not just hip-hop, but many cultures and subcultures threatened with assimilation.

What McLeod suggests is that claims of an authentic nature speak to a much broader issue than whether or not a particular individual invented the continuous head-spin. McLeod wrote about how African American hip hop practitioners are expressing claims that pertain to be "authentic" in order to preserve and maintain control of a culture which they perceive as being taken-over (assimilated and appropriated) by (white) outsiders (1999, 138). In this sense, claims-making can be seen as a tool hip hop persons use in order to gain control, police and manage the cultural features and boundaries of hip hop within their own local, social and situational contexts.

### **Claims-Making and the Stories We Tell**

In *Black Noise*, Rose (1994) described rap music as a form of rhymed storytelling. In this chapter I have shown how the claims breaker make are also a kind of story, a story which breakers tell themselves about themselves and about one another. They reveal hip hop's fragility through their ongoing contestation and negotiation, yet they also appeal to broader cultural concepts regarding authenticity, identity and history.

When I first encountered Kid Freeze's claim at the UOK Jam, I witnessed an appeal—not to the evidence of where, when and how Kid Freeze had invented the continuous head-spin—but to a particular notion of what it meant to be an authentic hip hop practitioner, pioneer and innovator. In a diverse and ever-changing social field in which authenticity is a culturally contested concept, continuously being re-negotiated by different hip hop persons across times and spaces, Kid Freeze's claim is more than just a claim as the inventor of the continuous head-spin. His claim is about what hip hop looks like and how it is

governed. His claim implies that there is a system of cultural pioneers who have invented particular breaking moves, and that he is one of these pioneers.

What examining claims-making in hip hop demonstrates is how different individual hip hop persons hold different understandings about what hip hop culture looks like and how it is managed; claims-making reveals what people think about hip hop and how they imagine it operates. As stated earlier, claims made are always tied to particular persons. In this way, claims are judged, in part on the veracity of the claim itself, but more so on the reputation and social standing of the person who is making the claim. Even though the record of how Kid Freeze invented the continuous head-spin is out there, his claim is still up for much debate and discussion. As is the question of who Kid Freeze is and why his claim is one that we should seriously consider. In the next and final chapter, I will reflect on what I set out to achieve within this thesis and in doing so will address the significance of the research material, both for anthropology and the field of hip hop.

## – Chapter 9 –

### ***“Okay Judges... 3,2,1”***

#### **Dancing Towards a Hip Hop Theory**

*My life is lived in freestyle... OUR LIVES ARE LIVED IN FREESTYLE.*

– Marlon, “My Life is Freestyle” (stance 2014, 1:47).

In this thesis I set out to examine how individuals, across a highly diverse and contested social field, as hip hop is, actively work to produce, sustain and transform hip hop culture. I sought to investigate how breakers produce, sustain and transform hip hop in ways that are local and unique. I emphasised the individual, dynamic and improvisational ways in which breakers in New York City, Osaka and Perth actively produce and reproduce varying kinds of breaking and hip hop expressions, identities, knowledges, understandings and attitudes. Yet, it is not really the case that breakers are conscientiously *actively working to produce, sustain and transform*, but rather that through their actions and social relationships, they inevitably engage in processes which in turn produce, sustain and transform this complex social world.

Due to the social conditions of hip hop culture—a world without any centralised governing bodies—I employed particular theoretical and methodological approaches that I felt best suited a study of hip hop, and ones which I felt were necessary in order to carry out the aims I outlined in the introduction of the thesis. These being:

- (1) That I aimed to investigate the social processes and cultural labour persons require to make and maintain hip hop.

- (2) That I aimed to write against models that conceive of and represent hip hop “culture” in a reified form.
- (3) That I aimed to illustrate how hip hop persons—and their actions and relationships—are central to the ongoing social and cultural productions of hip hop around the world.

Contrary to what is often portrayed in popular media accounts, hip hop is not a world that consists of an overarching social system. There are no offices, institutions or governing bodies that rule over what those who identify as members of hip hop say and do. Across different localities are individuals who learn about a particular hip hop practice or become acquainted with hip hop through variety of different ways. These individuals encounter a world full of claims in which there are countless ongoing debates surrounding issues of cultural identity, expression, history, legitimacy, authority, authenticity, ownership, none of which can ever truly be resolved (Maxwell 2003, 57). What is said and done in the name of hip hop culture is not tied to any system, but rather, is tied to the particular person who makes the claim. In this way, hip hop is a world which is organised and governed by hip hop persons, yet it is also a world that is constantly wrestling with and against various institutional forces, authorities, systems and hierarchies. As Kyra Gaunt’s (2004; 2006) research on how diverse communities engage with hip hop music shows us, there are ideological power structures at play with how different individuals are able to engage, participate, create and express themselves (legitimately) within hip hop culture.

For example, women’s participation in hip hop music has not been a smooth journey. As Gaunt (2004, 261) explains, “It is the ideological power of maleness in a mass-mediated hip-hop culture that makes it so difficult to fully appreciate African-American women’s creative and expressive participation as anything other than subsidiary to men’s.” There are always dominant systems and hierarchies of power at play, even in the fluid and dynamic world of hip hop culture. Yet what the culture of hip hop allows for and celebrates is transgression and change (Gunn 2017).

What I have aimed to demonstrate through each of the chapters in this thesis is that the world of hip hop is not a total free-for-all, but that within particularities,

individual hip hop actors negotiate and come to an understanding of what it means to be a part of the global hip hop community. These understandings may shift or be lost over time. Thus, what hip hop ultimately is, or is not, is a not question that can be answered, but perhaps it can within the particularities; in specific moments in space and time.

The notion of “freestyling”—a term that breakers refer to when describing one’s ability to improvise and create—is a metaphor which has been central to my thinking of breaking and hip hop culture. The playful and improvisational qualities that freestyling refers to extend much further than what is happening within the world of breaking. They permeate throughout the conversations and imaginations of hip hop peoples and scenes around the world. It is part of the fabric that has been central to hip hop’s continual shifts and changes around the world. In the last line of Marlon’s spoken word poem he says: “OUR LIVES ARE LIVED IN FREESTYLE”, this emphasises how breakers lives are *lived* in a state of “freestyle” in which individual persons and their agency is what counts.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that hip hop is always shifting and changing over time; that it is constantly being pushed, pulled and prodded by a large and diverse aggregate of different people. Furthermore, I have argued that no one person has the final word. That even the most respected hip hop pioneers do not have the ability to control and regulate what happens on the ground. Hip hop moves more quickly than those who write about and do research on this field can hope to comprehend. It is perhaps why hip hop is so resistant to any firm or definitive definitions.

In the introduction of this thesis I argued that a structural functionalist approach—one which sees social structures as determining forces that shape what people say and do—does not adequately address the ways in which hip hop culture is actively produced, sustained and transformed over space and time. As mentioned, although there are structures which govern what hip hop peoples say and do, such as the “four elements of hip hop” model or the “three-part structure” of a typical breaking performance, that not everyone is governed by these structures or understands these structures in the same way. For example, although some breakers have



“breaking names” and are affiliated with “breaking crews”, these names and crews are not indicative of titles or offices. So when “the prince”, bboy Ken Swift, eventually dies there will be no breaker who is going to take over his title of “the prince”. His title is not independent of his person and does not articulate a system. It is perhaps why poor kids from the Bronx can make it in hip hop. Making it is not about moving up through an institution. Breakers construct their own local set of rules, hierarchies and social systems, sometimes these catch on and are adopted by others and sometimes they do not. Nevertheless, ultimately there are no agreed-upon global social systems or structures that all hip hop peoples, across all localities, accept.

Hip hop is a world where individuals hold their own fate in their hands. No one individual hip hop person determines another individual hip hop person’s credentials. This is not to suggest that one’s hip hop credentials are not checked, in fact I would argue that within hip hop your credentials are constantly being checked. The point here is that no one individual, group or institution has the supreme authority to dictate what is, or is not, part of hip hop culture. No one has the final word. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that it is a total free-for-all, where anything goes. There are, as several of the accounts shared within the thesis have demonstrated, dynamics of power at play and these occur in every expression and experience of the culture.

### **Significance for Anthropology**

When Evans-Pritchard (1951; 1970) wrote about the Nuer, he wrote about a people without politics. He asked, among many other things, how do three hundred thousand people live without a political leader? How do these people manage their lives without a rational system? What he proposed was that it was the lineages that did it all: family, kin and so on. He called it “ordered anarchy” (1970, 296), in that in the absence of a centralised government the Nuer were highly individualistic and libertarian. In a similar way, those who identify and connect as members of hip hop culture also exist within a chief, without an organised or agreed-upon bureaucratic system of governance.

Similar to the Nuer, hip hop is also very individualistic, managed not from the top-down but from the bottom up. The interactions and processes which happen between persons within local settings contributes to the ongoing shifts and developments of hip hop culture. In this thesis, I have demonstrated that what it means to be a person in hip hop is a claim, one that is socially constructed in different ways, across different local settings. Hip hop persons are made through their ongoing engagements within particular practices and activities, as well as their continuing relationships with others who also engage in these practices and activities. In this way it is hard to say, in any general sense, what makes someone a hip hop person or not.

The significance of this research and its findings for anthropological research, is that for many other dynamic social collectives of people with similar conditions to that of hip hop—where individuals across different times and space wrestle with questions of authenticity, legitimacy, identity and authority—I have argued that through the lens of individual hip hop persons one has the capacity to examine and make sense of how these dynamic social collectives are actively produced and reproduced by their members.

In the context of hip hop culture, I have shown how breakers who live in the cities of Osaka, Japan and Perth, Western Australia, are not simply meek copies or inauthentic imitations of their counterparts who live in the USA, particularly those who live in New York City. But rather that they are in fact legitimate and authentic hip hop persons in their own right. In a field without a centralised governing body or any agreed upon ways of being, persons are made in ways that are local and unique. They are local in that they are shaped by local settings: by various cultural, social, political and geographical factors; and they are unique by the fact that they are moulded by the social interactions individuals have within these settings through various social practices, activities, relationships and reputations.

The future of breaking and hip hop culture is highly uncertain. As more people get into breaking and it becomes more mainstream, such as its inclusion in the Youth Olympic Games, there is becoming larger and more powerful institutional forces at play. Yet, it is still today a highly diverse dance practice which is managed, defined

and able to be transformed by those who engage in the practice. As bboy Maurizio—one of the most influential European breakers from the late 1980s and early 90s—said to the crowd after his recent 2018 battle at the “V1 Battle of the Gods” event in St. Petersburg, Russia, with Lil Cesar, Orko and Ken Swift:

Who are you to separate this from that? Who are you to describe us as old or new? I'm still here to prove [that] I love so much of what I do and I don't let any category label me or consider me done! It will [be] done only when I say it's done. Nobody else can say that, and if you take me away from this culture I [will] keep on fighting till the last breath in this planet earth. Thank you hip hop culture! You gave me a great opportunity to follow my dreams; catch it and make it real because this shit is real... And I really hope that real, real, real hip hop culture is growing in every single country, village, city, neighborhood all over the world. We gotta lot of things to do, we know that hip hop and our beautiful dance, breaking, is very, very hard. But one more time we proving that we are pioneering something that is possible. But mostly I know there will be always people that love, like us, this culture! Each one of us has something beautiful and if you're smart enough you gonna inspire everybody. So this culture is made by all of us. All of us!”  
(v1battle 2018, 26:52-31:07)

It is common practice for anthropological writers and researchers to be forthcoming with their reasons for studying a particular field and throughout this thesis I have strived to comment on, share and be forthcoming of my own positions, motivations and engagements in attempting such a study, particularly as this study is situated within a field to which I am so closely, and still actively (at the time of writing), connected.

Whilst completing my fieldwork, some breakers asked me, “Are you doing this for the *culture* or is it purely for some university/academic thing?” To which I would reply: “I hope it can be for both.” For some breakers, this was confirmation that my research was not for the culture, but for some other gain or purpose. This critique was not entirely untrue and therefore hard to stomach at times. Wrestling with the position of being both a researcher and practitioner created many tensions that remains unresolved for me. For example, sharing my writing with fellow breakers has, in some instances, resulted in strange conversations about what exactly I am trying to say about the three breaking scenes. As one breaker said to me (not in these exact words, but something to this effect), “who are you to write about the

New York breaking scene?”

Having, since the late 1990s, been actively engaged in breaking practices, both in Perth and in other places, the way in which I have come to write, think and position my writing on this field is shaped by the field itself. In this way, hip hop has agency, and hip hop peoples have agency within this thesis. For example, when I write about hip hop’s history or when I describe a particular dance movement or gesture, I imagine what some of my fellow hip hop peers might say about what I have written; I think about how the field of hip hop (as an agent) would react to my claims, arguments and representations. Thinking of one’s field of study as having a level of agency has a long history within social anthropology, as far back as Malinowski (Kuper 1992, 4). One of the contributions of this research is what the field of hip hop can offer other studies in regard to the productions, expressions and consumptions of culture. What might hip hop have to say about the way in which others make sense of the social and cultural worlds with which they identify and are actively connected?

### **Hip Hop as Local, Social and Dynamic**

Throughout this thesis are chapters which illustrate the local, social and dynamic ways in which hip hop culture is actively produced and sustained. In each chapter there is an emphasis on the local, social, processual, relational and dynamic ways in which hip hop culture is actively made and negotiated. Consequently, some voices in this thesis are heard louder than others. Some voices are seen to be more important, legitimate, authentic and significant than others. This asymmetry between different hip hop peoples is, I have argued, not predicated on anything concrete, but rather that there is an arena in which voices are fighting for space and new voices are constantly emerging because of this. Denise Roman calls this the politics of lived life (2007, 27). To this end, the future of hip hop is highly uncertain. Who knows what hip hop will look like in twenty, thirty, forty or even fifty years from now, or if it will still be around then.

While there is a growing body of scholarship on the social constructions of hip hop

cultures around the world, there is not much said about the roles that breakers and other kinds of hip hop dance practitioners have played in these constructions. As Johnson wrote in the conclusion of her PhD thesis, “Though there is more academic and documentary work on Hip Hop in different parts of the world, little of it examines b-boying, which demands that we pay attention to movement and its discourse” (2009, 201). What this thesis has illustrated is how breakers, through bodily practices and bodily movements, engage in these constructions.

Furthermore, because much of this communication is had through gestures and bodily performances, there can be a broader and more inclusive conversation within breaking because, unlike rap, it is not limited by its participants being able to speak the same verbal language.

The experiences I described of breakers living in New York, Osaka and Perth is demonstrative of how, across different localities, hip hop is highly diverse and that some breakers feel both connected and disconnected with other breakers. I think that if scholarly writers and researchers of hip hop are to claim that hip hop is a diverse and dynamic social field, as Dyson states that it is in *That's the Joint!* (2004, xiv), then we must treat hip hop as diverse and dynamic, and not only focus only on the same kinds of peoples, practices and places that have largely dominated the literature since the 1980s.

In this thesis I have shown how the contours of hip hop are shifting and that hip hop shifts in different ways in different places; that people who live on what some consider to be the fringes of the culture, in the cities of Osaka and Perth for example, are not simply meek copies or unauthentic imitations of their counterparts in the United States, but are in fact legitimate and authentic members within their own right. Hip hop is a world with many shades and as more and more people around the world begin to engage with this social field, hip hop will continue to be transformed by these people.

### **Giving Back to the Culture**

In 2003, a couple of good mates of mine and I formed a breaking crew called “Zou Rock”. Zou Rock is a crew of about ten breakers who I regularly break and hang out

with. As a crew we enter many national and international breaking competitions together. In the Perth breaking scene, it is our crew, the Zou Rock crew, who run the most of the local breaking events and jams. We do this because it is one of the ways that we are able to give back to the culture. We want to develop and support our local breaking scene because we love it and it has given us so much.

Having contributed to the Perth breaking scene in this way the Zou Rock crew is a fairly well-known breaking crew. Many of our members are—at the time of writing—in their early-to-mid-thirties and have been breaking since they were teenagers. Many of the active members have slowly started to move away from entering the breaking competitions and have begun to play a more supportive and organisational role within the local scene. For example, one of the crew members mentioned throughout this thesis, Beast, teaches breaking classes in schools and community centers across Western Australia. He spends a lot of his time travelling to remote communities around the northern parts of Western Australia, teaching breaking to kids in Port Hedland and Karratha. This is one of the ways in which aging hip hop persons maintain connections to their local hip hop scenes; how ones hip hop identities is maintained over time.

Thinking of the notion of a hip hop identity as a social and performative construction that is constantly managed over time has led me to consider my own continuing relationship with the culture into the future as a writer and academic researcher. Although it is not common for breakers to transition from practitioner to researcher, this is still a way in which I am able to craft a continuing relationship with the culture into the future. As mentioned earlier, my history as a breaking practitioner has led me to be extra sensitive to how others might interpret what it is I am doing and how it is I am doing it. I feel it paramount to restate that I do not claim to speak for the Perth, New York or Osaka breaking scenes. In fact I am critical of those who *do* claim to speak for the hip hop scenes in which they have conducted research.

Hip hop culture is a world comprised of a diverse bunch of people who hold a variety of differing views, understandings, knowledges, opinions and attitudes about the culture. In this way, I have been careful not to overreach or to speak too

generally about the lives and experiences of breakers as a whole. This concern is something that I have gained from my own position as a practitioner, as well as reading the works of other practitioners who have written about their practices (Wulff 1998). I would suggest that those who conduct research on the fields with which they are personally connected are more aware of the boundaries of what they can and cannot say. This is perhaps because they have had a wealth of intimate experiences with people within their fields and are perhaps better placed to imagine how others might feel about what they say about their fields.

Although what breakers say and do is the bread and butter of my research, I have intended to be clear that everything presented here is presented through my own lens and the lens of other individuals. Similar to the writings of Motzafi-Haller (1997), Wulff (1998) and Wolcott (2008), I reject the notion of being described as an “insider” or “native anthropologist”. In this position, as Wulff (1998) clearly points out, one is unable to comprehend the shifting and multiplex of identities that one—even those who are closely connected to their field of research—has to navigate for oneself (8-10).

When I first arrived in New York to conduct the initial part of my ethnographic field research, I was invited by a friend of a friend to attend a small breaking practice session in Queens. About an hour into the session an intimidating looking gentlemen with a thick beard and a tight skull-cap approached me and asked: “Who invited you to come break at this session?” I was immediately taken aback and I told this gentleman of the friend who had invited me to the session. He then paused and nodded and after a short moment said, “Hmmm... okay. I’ll have a word with him then.”

What this interaction revealed to me was that this practice session was not an open session for just anyone to come and attend. It was a private session between a group of breakers and my being there was noted. It had undoubtedly caused some friction between the friend who had invited me and this breaker who had approached me to ask why I was there. I felt bad that I had got this friend of mine in trouble, but on the other hand it was a clear reminder that I was very much an outsider in the New York breaking scene. It made me more aware that even though

I had been breaking for almost two decades, no amount of years was enough to ensure my status as an “insider” across every breaking scene. Like other breakers, I have to constantly prove myself as a breaker when venturing into new scenes.

After coming back to the ballet (to conduct her ethnographic research) after a long hiatus, Wulff said that she also had to “acquire a new form of nativeness” (1998, 10). What Wulff also came to terms with was the realisation that she was not considered to be an “insider” in the world of ballet simply because she used to dance. She had to re-earn her position and learn how to navigate the world of ballet with this newly formed position.

My own position as a breaker doing ethnographic research with other breakers has contributed to a growing body of literature focused on the dynamic relationships and positions between “the researcher” and the “researched” (Strathern 1987; Denzin 1989; Reed-Danahay 1997; Wolcott 2008). It is this body of literature which has led me to understand that “insiderness” is not a given, but rather that it is something earned, negotiated and maintained through social relationships. I will end with this note, that one’s status as a breaker or hip hop person can always, very easily, be lost. The fragility by which one’s hip hop identity is both made and lost speaks to the social and dynamic nature of hip hop culture, and those who remain connected are often aware of how hard won this relationship can be to maintain.



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## List of Figures

Figure 1. Sentosa Island, 22 <sup>nd</sup> March 2016. Photograph by JYN Photography. ....	1
Figure 2. Breaking session with my high school mates at the Rosalie Primary School. Photograph by Nathan Pinkerton, 2001. ....	56
Figure 3. Screenshot of Krazy Kujo performing his head-spin in “It’s Like That!” by Run DMC vs Jason Nevins (Marcus Sternberg 2013). ....	58
Figure 4: Map of New York City, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool, edited by author. ....	81
Figure 5: Christopher Sawyer breaking, Upper West Side, New York, 1983, image by Martha Cooper (2013). ....	82
Figure 6: Frosty Freeze of the Rock Steady Crew, Lincoln Center, New York, 1981, image by Martha Cooper (2013). ....	82
Figure 7: Photograph of a breaker (bgirl) cyphering at the Bronx is Burning Jam. Image taken on my iPhone, 13th March, 2015. ....	84
Figure 8: Group photo of those who attended the Bronx is Burning Jam. Image taken on my iPhone, 13th March, 2015. ....	84
Figure 9: Goody Roc, image downloaded from Facebook. ....	86
Figure 10: Screenshot of Facebook invites to various local breaking jams and events that Goody Roc sent to me. Screenshot taken with my iPhone, 19th March, 2015. ....	87
Figure 11: Photograph of the one-versus-one breaking battle between Tata and Pocket, at the Dance Society Jam in Queens. Image screenshot captured on the 11th of November, 2016. ....	88
Figure 12: Photograph taken of the Taiwan Centre in Queens. Image taken on my iPhone, 23rd of March, 2015. ....	89
Figure 13: Photograph taken inside the Taiwan Centre during the Dance Society Jam breaking event. Image taken on my iPhone, 23rd of March, 2015. ....	89
Figure 14: A photograph taken of myself cyphering at a breaking party held in the East Village, in Lower Manhattan. Image taken by Will, on the 31st March, 2015. ....	90
Figure 15: Vlad breaking at Columbia University, 9th April, 2015. ....	91
Figure 16: Photograph of the EXPG Dance Studio practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 14th March, 2015. ....	92
Figure 17: Photograph of the Brooklyn Zoo practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 17th March, 2015. ....	93
Figure 18: Photograph of the Humboldt Street Community Centre practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 25th March, 2015. ....	93
Figure 19: Photograph of the Forest Hills Community Centre practice session. Image taken on my iPhone, 6th March, 2015. ....	94
Figure 20: Photograph of a busker playing drums in the 23rd Street subway station platform, in Downtown Manhattan. Image taken on my iPhone, 19 <sup>th</sup> March, 2015. ....	96
Figure 21: Photograph of two buskers drumming on paint buckets at the 42 <sup>nd</sup> Street platform subway station in Midtown, Manhattan. Image taken on my iPhone, 19 <sup>th</sup> March, 2015. ....	96
Figure 22: Photograph of a group of young hip hop dancers busking on the L line. Image taken on my iPhone, 27 <sup>th</sup> March 2015. ....	97
Figure 23. Photograph of a group of breakers jamming together on the concrete, in front of the Union Square Park. Image taken on my iPhone, 25th April, 2015. ....	98

Figure 24. Graffiti on a building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Image taken on my iPhone from The High Line walk, 13th April, 2015. ....	99
Figure 25. Graffiti on the Williamsburg Bridge. Image taken on my iPhone, 16th March, 2015.....	100
Figure 26: Will and me dancing on the Williamsburg Bridge. Image taken by Will on his theta360 camera, 16th March, 2015.....	100
Figure 27: Map of Japan, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool. ....	103
Figure 28: Map of Osaka, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool, edited by author. ....	103
Figure 29: Photograph of the breaking practice sessions at the Osaka City Air Terminal (OCAT). Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015.....	105
Figure 30: Photograph of breakers training at OCAT. Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015.....	106
Figure 31: Photograph of two breakers, Sly and Babylon, doing some footwork steps at OCAT. Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015.....	107
Figure 32: Photograph of breakers training at the OCAT on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Image taken on my iPhone, 6th June, 2015. ....	107
Figure 33: Photograph of breakers working together, creating a routine, at OCAT. Image taken on my iPhone, 6th June, 2015. ....	108
Figure 34: Panorama photograph of a breaking practice session I attended at the Moriguchi train station, 26th of June, 2015. From left to right: (breakers) Budawolf, Sly and Naru.....	108
Figure 35: Photograph of a group of breakers dancing in a secluded area of the Namba train station. Image taken on my iPhone, 16th May, 2015. ....	109
Figure 36: Photograph of a breaker named Shinya perusing the event flyers at The Dance Collection store in “Ame-Mura”. Image taken on my iPhone, 7th May, 2015. ....	111
Figure 37: Photograph taken during the Red Bull BC One “Osaka Cypher”. Image taken on my iPhone, 10th May, 2015.....	112
Figure 38: Photograph taken during the Red Bull BC One “Osaka Cypher”. Image taken on my iPhone, 10th May, 2015.....	112
Figure 39: Photograph of a small breaking jam, held at a nightclub in Namba. Image taken on my iPhone, 20th June, 2015. ....	114
Figure 40: Closer shot of the front of this nightclub. Image taken on my iPhone, 20th June, 2015. ....	114
Figure 41: Photograph of Sly breaking in one of the cyphers at the Namba club jam. Image taken on my iPhone, 20th June, 2015. ....	115
Figure 42: Group photograph of those who attended the Loose Jam in Tokyo. Image taken by TMFM, 5th May, 2015. ....	116
Figure 43: Photograph of one of the breaking battles during the Loose Jam. Image taken by TMFM, 5th May, 2015. ....	117
Figure 44: Map of Australia, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool. ....	118
Figure 45: Map of Perth, created with the ArcGIS Mapping tool, edited by author. ....	119
Figure 46: Photograph of breakers practising at the King Street Arts Centre in Perth. Image taken on my iPhone, 26th September, 2015.....	120
Figure 48: Photograph of the breaking battles at the 2017 Food Truck Rumble	

breaking competition. Image taken by Premillume Photography, 3 <sup>rd</sup> April, 2017. .	123
Figure 49: Photograph of a local Perth breaker named Maze, performing a head-spin on the stage at the 2015 Zou Rock Anniversary Breaking Jam. Image taken by Premillume Photography, 9 <sup>th</sup> November, 2015. ....	124
Figure 50: Photograph of the 2016 WA Junior Breaking Championships event at the Cockburn Youth Centre in Success. Image taken on my iPhone. 21 <sup>st</sup> September, 2016. ....	124
Figure 51: Photograph of Airrico breaking at The Bird nightclub/bar in Northbridge. Image taken on my iPhone. 7 <sup>th</sup> September, 2017. ....	126
Figure 52: Photograph of a breaking workshop held at the Cipher Dance Academy in Willetton. Image taken by Clancy Oopow. May 7 <sup>th</sup> , 2012.....	127
Figure 53: Image of the famous event flyer to DJ Kool Herc’s “Back to School Jam”, 1973 (Katz 2010, 19). ....	133
Figure 54. A jam session at the Union Square Park, 25 <sup>th</sup> April, 2015. ....	142
Figure 55. Photograph of a group of local breakers and other hip hop dance practitioners from Perth. Image taken with my iPhone at the King Street Arts Centre, 13 <sup>th</sup> December, 2014. ....	148
Figure 56. Photograph of (from left to right) Edit, Beni Benz, Nasa, Ippy (myself) and Kid Drama, having dinner at the Carnegie Deli in Midtown, New York City, 2007. .	158
Figure 57. Ken Swift’s Mad Mugsy look, image downloaded from <a href="http://www.breaklife.com/ken-swift">http://www.breaklife.com/ken-swift</a> . ....	159
Figure 58. My signed copy of “The Ken Swift Collection” Double DVD. ....	163
Figure 59. “Peace Ippy. Ken Swift. R.S.C (Rock Steady Crew) NYC.” ....	163
Figure 60. The main competition room at the Full Throttle Jam, taken on my iPhone, 17 <sup>th</sup> of May, 2015.....	165
Figure 61. Photograph of Sly (left) and Kaori (right), taken with my iPhone.....	167
Figure 62. Photograph I took of the warm-up room at the FTJ. Image taken with my iPhone, 17 <sup>th</sup> of May, 2015. ....	168
Figure 63. Photograph I took of the breaker I witnessed in the warm-up room cypher. Image taken with my iPhone, 17 <sup>th</sup> of May, 2015. ....	168
Figure 64. A photograph taken of the Ruthless 4 Jam, taken with my iPhone, 5 <sup>th</sup> of April, 2015. Notice the relatively small number of participants who attended the event, the size of the room, and the tightly-knit arena in which we all crowded around. ....	173
Figure 65. Photograph of the cyphers at the Ruthless 4 Jam. This image was taken by a friend (with permission, but who has asked to remain anonymous for this thesis). This image shows me standing with others in the cypher, to the left of frame, head down, watching the performance of the breaker in the middle. ....	174
Figure 66. Photograph of myself mid-way through a breaking run at the Moriguchi practice session in Osaka, 26 <sup>th</sup> of June, 2015.....	191
Figure 67. Enjoying a beer with a few local Osaka breakers after a long practice session at Moriguchi, 26 <sup>th</sup> of June, 2015. ....	191
Figure 68. Event flyer for the Bronx is Burning Jam. ....	197
Figure 69. Photograph I took the moment I arrived at the Bronx is Burning. 13 <sup>th</sup> of March, 2015.....	198
Figure 70. Photograph I took during the Bronx is Burning Jam as the cyphers were beginning to form. Breakers can be seen here toprocking to the music and DJ EX can	

be seen at the back on the turntables.....	201
Figure 71. Photograph of a breaker in the cypher at the Bronx is Burning Jam. 13 <sup>th</sup> of March, 2015.....	203
Figure 72. Photograph of local Perth breakers practising together at the King Street Arts Centre. Perth, Western Australia. 8 <sup>th</sup> of August, 2015.....	205
Figure 73. Photograph of Kid Freeze. Taken on my iPhone, 22 <sup>nd</sup> March 2015.....	211
Figure 75. Photograph of Kid Freeze and me at the UOK Jam. Image taken on the 22 <sup>nd</sup> March, 2015. ....	216
Figure 76. Kid Freeze’s business card. ....	217
Figure 77. Screenshot of Kid Freeze in the video, “Inventor of the Continuous Headspin Kid Freeze” (Stephen Dirkes 2009), uploaded onto Vimeo, captured October 24 <sup>th</sup> 2017.....	220
Figure 78. Screenshot of Jay125’s comment, captured on October 27 <sup>th</sup> 2017 (JohnG 2010, accessed October 27 <sup>th</sup> 2017). ....	225
Figure 80. Screenshot of a comment on an online discussion board forum (Abstractstylez 2010, captured October 27 <sup>th</sup> 2017). ....	226
Figure 82. Screenshot of a quote said to be from Kid Freeze himself. Posted on a personal blog page (bboy knowledge 2009, captured October 27 <sup>th</sup> 2017).....	227