

GLOBALIZATION AND EDUCATION IN BREAKING CULTURE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eddie Lu is a dancer and music teacher living in New York City. He has been breaking for about ten years, training and competing in the U.S. and Taiwan. In 2015, he earned a bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature and Society.

SUMMARY

This essay examines the origin and spread of breaking (otherwise known as breakdancing or bboying) to understand why and how it is practiced all over the world today. In particular, it analyzes the educational value of breaking rituals such as cyphering and battling, and looks at their adaptation to the globalization of breaking. In conclusion, the essay will comment on current issues such as the development of breaking as a competition sport, the growth of cultural and commercial industries around breaking, and the incorporation of breaking into school programs.

NOTES

*Quotation marks are used throughout the essay to mark colloquial expressions used by breakers.

**The term “breaker” is used throughout the essay to avoid gender discrimination. It also is a safe middle ground between the colloquial term “b-boy/b-girl” and the media term “breakdancer”.

***I am not trying to remove breaking from the context of hip-hop by writing specifically on breaking culture. Rather, by focusing on one element of hip-hop culture, I hope to inspire others to think critically and not to generalize when it comes to hip-hop. Consequently, I believe many of the conclusions drawn about breaking culture in this essay can be applied to the broader subject of hip-hop. I am significantly more knowledgeable about breaking than I am about other aspects of hip-hop—a shortcoming on my part—but feel I am doing more by writing about my specialty instead of trying to paint the entire culture of hip-hop in broad strokes.

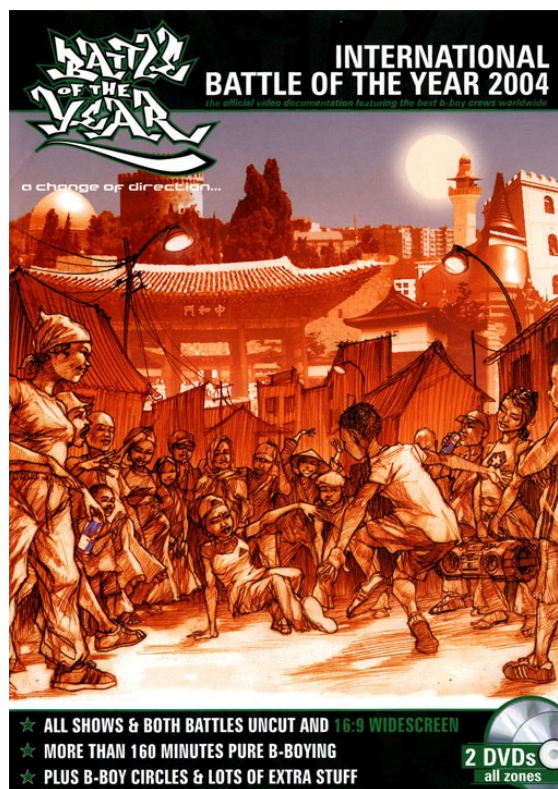
PREFACE

When I was 11 years old, I started going to the cafeteria of Taipei American School everyday after school to practice breaking. My friends were all into it—plus, the performances at school assemblies, dance battles at functions, and occasional glances of my female classmates were enough to keep me motivated. At home, I would browse internet forums looking for the hottest new breaking videos and music. I would scour local markets for clothing that would fit on me like the older dancers at my school whom I looked up to. I stretched furiously and practiced holding yoga poses each night before going to sleep. All I wanted to do was become the greatest breaker the world had ever known.

I kept my obsession hidden from my parents. Once, when they came to pick me up from school, they secretly watched me practice. When I realized they were watching, I flushed with embarrassment, and my mom, seeing that I was uncomfortable, quickly pulled my dad away, whispering something in his ear. I quickly wrapped up my practice, and, joining my parents in the car, was promptly asked by my dad, “Why can't we watch you practice?” I mumbled, “Just don't!”, knowing that I had no justifiable reason for my embarrassment. They never asked me much about it after that, and I would often pitch it to them as 'a great form of exercise' from then on, though it obviously meant more to me than exercise. Outwardly, they seemed satisfied with this response, but I knew that as I spent more time on breaking they would continue to be confused by my strange hobby.

I remember bringing home a couple of breaking DVDs my friend had lent me and finally inviting my mom to watch some footage with me. Halfway through the DVD of “Battle of the Year”, the biggest international breaking competition at the time, my mom asked me, “I don't really understand. How do they decide who's better?” I began explaining to her, “Well, this guy is great because he's interpreting the music with his movements, and this guy is responding with some incredibly dynamic moves, though I think the first guy will win because he is really dancing.” Nodding as if to feign understanding, or simply acknowledging that I was lost in some foreign world, my mom left me to gasp wide-eyed at the dancers flying across the stage in faraway Germany.

My inability to explain breaking to my parents dealt a big blow to my confidence. When I moved away from Taipei and the friends I had started breaking with, I became more of a solitary dancer. I thought that once my craft was fully developed I would be able to show my parents and friends where I was coming from. Though I heard about a lot of battles and local practices in Beijing and San Francisco, where I lived after moving away from Taipei, I was not very interested in going. For a long time, I did not consider breaking an art that ought to be shared with everyone, but my personal style of therapy to cope with adolescent stress.



Left: "Battle of the Year 2004", the first breaking DVD I showed to my mom.



Right: Me breaking in high school.

When I was accepted to college in New York, I knew this had to change. New York was where the dance had begun—it was the mecca to my pilgrimage, and I made up my mind that I was going to absorb as much knowledge and information as possible during my time there. I began showing up to competitions and meeting local dancers. To my surprise, the scene in New York was nothing like I had imagined. Where were the mocknecks, the kangol hats, the fat laces and broad-rimmed glasses that I had seen in documentaries? At the time I entered college in 2011, the scene in New York had just begun to experience an influx of money and corporate sponsorship, and the competitions I went to felt more like boxing tournaments than dance events. Still, I made some close friends in the scene, and for the first time I felt like I mattered in a larger breaking community. Realizing that the culture of breaking in New York was not something I would simply absorb but had to actively seek out and experience, I began studying the history and origin of breaking by watching videos of breaking pioneers and speaking with my local friends on the subject.



Left: Rock Steady Crew (USA) vs. Battle Squad (Germany) cypher battle at the 1994 Zulu Nation Anniversary.



Right: Fantastic Armada (France) vs. Gamblerz (Korea) at Battle of the Year 2004.

The so-called “old school” styles and videos were an acquired taste. As my crewmate Alec would often put it, “they were doing an entirely different form of dance back then.” I didn't immediately enjoy the glitchy, pixelated footage and electro-funk soundtracks, nor could I understand the art of dancing while standing up, which I thought was boring compared to the technical floor moves I was used to seeing on the internet. As I watched more, however, I began to make connections between what the original breakers were doing and what breakers today were doing. The evolution of breaking was incredible, and not just in terms of the increasing difficulty. It was amazing to me how the first few generations of breakers exchanged styles and information, relying on sparse VHS footage of their remote counterparts to hone their craft and traveling to challenge and “call out” the people who inspired them. Though the current international competition circuit is by all means a larger melting-pot with extremely advanced stylistic exchanges, the old school of breaking clearly laid out the significance of breaking as cultural exchange, dialogue, and conversation. I understood from watching the older generations that competition was just one way of partaking in breaking culture, among many other important ways. Suddenly, I didn't want to spend all my time practicing alone. I wanted to be part of the broader conversation going on in breaking.

And what a conversation it's proven to be! Breaking has allowed me to meet and make friends with people from many different backgrounds, and to get a cultural and aesthetic education through a kind of mutual mentorship with fellow breakers that I rarely experienced in structured educational institutions. Although there is no denying that breaking is currently being developed into a competitive sport, it is crucial to draw attention to breaking as a lively, multidimensional culture so that it may continue to connect people around the world and thrive in the variety of settings which its remarkable adaptability permits.

INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE

Breaking, a dance which originated in New York City during the early 1970s, is one of the most ubiquitous counter-cultural movements today. Though its presence in the mass media has dwindled from its eruption onto the international stage a few decades ago, it continues to thrive all over the world, whether in the form of public gatherings or solitary practice. No longer exclusive to the urban youth of New York City, it is being made into a universal dance form, particularly through organized competitions and their insistence on formulaic judging and technical criteria. The universalization of breaking is problematic, however, in several ways. There is hardly an agreed-upon definition of breaking, as the dance was disseminated so quickly through media outlets that many local breaking communities took off in separate artistic directions with different relationships to the form of breaking conceived in New York during the late sixties and early seventies. Furthermore, the lack of consistent investment in the breaking scene pits many organizers against one another in competition for limited resources, creating ideological divisions that obstruct the critical exchange of breaking knowledge and information among the newer generation of breakers. In short, the breaking community is developing into a competitive sport because its sponsors struggle to perceive it as a culturally and socially productive community, much less an educational asset for disenfranchised youth. The competition stage is the most visible part of breaking culture as far as its representation to the outside world, while the cultural exchange and sharing of breaking-related knowledge is conducted through grassroots networks, internet forums, and other inconspicuous channels.



Discussion panel featuring eminent breakers at Catch the Flava Bboy and Bgirl Summer Camp.

When investors outside of the breaking community do offer funding to the scene, the money is going almost exclusively toward breaking competitions. Yet, from a statistical standpoint, the vast majority of breakers will never win a major competition in their careers in spite of the time and effort they have invested. Many artistic discoveries and valuable friendships made during their breaking journey may be lost when, unable to sustain themselves on the competitive platform, there will scarcely be other opportunities for them to continue their passion and discipline in the dance. Though breaking is undoubtedly a highly competitive dance, the global and multicultural nature of the contemporary breaking community requires attention and support toward workshops, intellectual forums, teaching artists, breaking brands and media companies, and experimental platforms such as breaking-based theater and stage shows, film, and fitness therapy, in order that the valuable work being done by breakers can be shared on a larger scale. Most importantly, there can be a greater emphasis on the positive impact of breaking on the development of physical health and cultural/technological literacy.

This essay will analyze the educational value of breaking, in order to show that the skills learned by the contemporary breaker are essential to a humanistic education. I hope to point out some of the issues with the current state of breaking competitions while increasing awareness of other settings where breaking can thrive. The first two sections of the essay will be an outline and analysis of the development of breaking from a local New York-based ritual to a global art form. The third section will consider ways in which the experience of participating in contemporary breaking culture is powerfully educational. The final section of the essay will focus on some practical suggestions for the breaking scene and its sponsors based on the conclusions drawn in the preceding sections.

ORIGINS OF BREAKING: A BRIEF HISTORY

The history of breaking is often contested, and with active crews and individuals whose legacies/careers are intimately tied to different historical accounts of breaking, it is not my intent to prescribe one view of breaking history as factually correct. Nevertheless, to many breakers who started during the internet era, breaking's beginnings play more the role of a creation myth than historical fact. For example, it does not matter to many breakers if breaking *actually* reduced gang violence, a point that is heavily debated (many argue that breaking battles instigated as many fights as it prevented)—what matters is that the narrative of breaking as a peaceful movement resonates strongly with today's breakers, who consequently carry out the non-violent values of this particular narrative within their own communities.

The uncertainty of the 'peaceful narrative' in breaking history goes to show how distant most

breakers are from the original social conditions which birthed the dance. Breaking was first circulated globally through media; news reports and television programs, music videos, and curated VHS tapes were the vehicles of its globalization. Only later, with the development of a mutually supportive international circuit, were the breakers who actually experienced the original social climate able to communicate personally with the people they had haphazardly inspired around the world. For a long time, many breakers were left to their imaginations as to the meaning of the dance, how to perform it, and how to relate its movements to their own environments.

With a limited amount of reference material, many interpretations of breaking therefore tended towards technicalization. Many new movements were adapted directly from prototypical “foundation” moves displayed in early broadcast or VHS footage, imitated and developed without much contextual information. One example of technicalization is the development of the famous breaking move, the “windmill” (or “continuous backspin”), a move which is often credited to “Crazy Legs” of the Rock Steady Crew, and which was later cooperatively developed by breakers all over the world (particularly European breakers). Today, technical variations of the windmill such as barrels, babymills, nutcrackers, tombstones, German mills, and others are firmly established components of the breaking movement vocabulary.



Bboy Storm performing the windmill, a classic breaking move.

Although technical developments in breaking were firmly grounded in foundational movements being practiced by original breakers from New York, they were mostly carried out in relative isolation, differing significantly from the spontaneously interactive creative process of early breaking. Therefore, there were some major changes to breaking as it spread across the world, due to a combination of this isolated creative process and the highly mediated nature of breaking's globalization. In order to understand these changes, it is important first to examine, without being too prescriptive, the original conditions of breaking culture.

Breaking started out as a street dance, meaning that it was practiced almost exclusively at block parties and house parties, bars and clubs, on street corners, and other public spaces. To my knowledge, there weren't many private, enclosed practice spots or ticketed performances when breaking just started in the late sixties and early seventies—it belonged to the public sphere, and as such, was an important form of communication among urban residents in New York, particularly young teens. Most of the first breakers were Black and Latino boys in their early teens. Some of these first-generation breakers have noted that the average retirement age for breakers back then was around sixteen or seventeen years old. Breaking was therefore primarily an adolescent activity, practiced in public as these kids tried to relate to one another in creative ways.

Though breaking is a cornerstone of hip-hop culture and is often considered a product of hip-hop music, it has deep connections to hip-hop's own musical predecessors. In particular, the rock music from which many drum “breaks” are borrowed was popular among early breakers. Some hip-hop scholars have noted the influence of other musical genres such as funk, soul, jazz, and reggae on breaking. Besides simply “bugging out” and “party dancing”, there were also many distinct movement-influences that affected how these kids danced. For instance, many early breakers were influenced by forms of latin and jazz dance that their parents practiced. Often times, they would share the dance floor with these styles at family-oriented parties, and would only break out into the characteristically dynamic form of breaking movement when the drum groove became isolated or accentuated. Chinese martial arts movies were also popular at the time among young city kids, and many of them would borrow the choreographed fight-movements of these films while play-fighting with their peers. There is also evidence of the influence of capoeira and gymnastics moves on the early breaking scene.



Left: Legendary dancer and hip-hop historian Jorge “Fabel” Pabon wearing a gang-inspired Zulu Nation vest.



Right: Original vests representing NYC outlaw gangs.



Perhaps most importantly, breaking was influenced by gang culture. Whether or not kids actively participated in gang-related crime, it was a local tradition to claim and represent where you were from. Many kids were simply inspired by the way gangsters moved and “acted hard,” and used gangster-like body movements or “hand-styles” in their dance. Many breakers were gang-members, and “battling” was a way to resolve gang conflicts (or in some cases, to start fights with rival gangs). In any case, gang culture added a competitive edge to local dance parties, and the younger generation attending dance parties became increasingly different from their parents in that their dances related to turf-based affiliation, confrontation, and dialogue.

In short, we know that the early breaking scene had an incredibly diverse range of cultural influences, all converging in public spaces. What allowed these various influences to interact and fuse? And how did breaking emerge as a distinct dance style? Older dancers active before the competition-era maintain that the “cypher”, a dance circle created by spectators as someone begins to “bug out”,

was essential to the conception of breaking as a unique style. A space that is formed by eager spectators as they make room for a dancer's frantic movements, the breaking cypher encourages spectator participation because the act of watching a cypher simultaneously creates that cypher. The idle spectator marks the edge of the cypher with h/er body and is responsible for justifying this arbitrary boundary on a crowded dance floor. Whether by giving the dancer(s) in the circle feedback, or actually entering and contributing directly to the cypher, the spectator sustains the energy of the breaker that created the cypher, without which the cypher would collapse on itself. The impulse to sustain these cyphers, which became spaces where kids could vent their everyday frustrations, “bug out”, and engage in physically imaginative behavior without the discipline of social norms, is key to the formation of breaking as a distinct movement and culture. In cyphers, kids could imagine they were Chinese warriors, tap dancers, gymnasts or superheros, without the judgmental social repercussions which convey the impossibility of these identities to them in their everyday lives. Thus, in the hip-hop documentary *The Freshest Kids*, DJ Kool Herc points out that one connotation of the term “break” was to reach an emotional breaking point at which, presumably, the dancer's emotional expression is liberated from their concrete reality.



Breaking cypher at Cypher Adikts, a non-competitive series of parties dedicated to preserving cypher culture.

Though dance circles with similar structures have undoubtedly preceded breaking, there are some qualities of a breaking cypher that are quite distinct. One example is the culture of “call-outs”, a ritual of spontaneous confrontation between dancers and a mark of breaking's hyper-participatory nature. By forming a cypher, one is also becoming vulnerable to being called out. The call-out was originally a way for conflict mediation between gang members, but eventually became a ritual part of

breaking cyphers—a way for dancers to test their skills against each another and air out aggressive energy through improvisational exchange. Call-outs also contributed to the technicalization of breaking, since dancers from various styles had to be compared by the audience on some form of criteria in a call-out battle. So a general idea of what made a “good” breaker began to take shape, and crews and individuals alike started to make a name for themselves by calling out their peers in cyphers. Ultimately, cyphers provide a shelter from real-world discipline and discrimination, while encouraging mutual ideological criticism through exchanges, call-outs, and battles—they are a breaker's classroom, a space temporarily delimited by human bodies then dispersed when the need is gone. Within cyphers, breaking was incubated into a distinct style with its own structure, meaning, and technique.

While breaking remained most popular within cyphers at clubs and parties, some dancers also chose to perform breaking on subways and street corners to the general public. Though these performances were more choreographed than cypher-based breaking, they were also highly participatory in that they attracted crowds by using call-and-response strategies, flipping over audience members, or using public architecture such as subway poles or building pillars as part of their performances. These street performers are known as “hitters,” and are also an important part of breaking history and culture.

MEDIA AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF BREAKING

The intensely participatory culture of breaking shifted in a new direction, however, as breaking was exposed to a global audience by mass media outlets. Often times, these media outlets preferred to represent breaking as a non-participatory performance, focusing on the most physically demanding movements in the breaking vocabulary—movements which portrayed breakers as superhuman athletes and distanced them from the general public. This visual approach is epitomized by the New York City Breakers' performance during Ronald Reagan's 1985 Inauguration Gala. Dressed in morph suits and performing various gymnastics-inspired “powermoves”, the New York City Breakers achieved a completely different visual effect on the world stage of the inauguration gala, compared to their peers in the small space of cyphers. Though TV reports and film representations of breaking battles were common, highly choreographed stage performances began to replace broadcasts of battles, especially as music videos and other commercials started to hire breakers as backup dancers. In this way, the participatory focus of breaking was lost in translation to the majority of audiences worldwide who were exposed to breaking in the form of choreography, stage performance, and acrobatic movement.



The New York City Breakers performing at the 41st American Presidential Inauguration Gala, 1985.

The transmission of breaking as an athletic performance art had several effects on the new, international generation of breakers. The first was that breaking became an intensely private practice for many, especially after the media's fascination with breaking faded during the eighties. Breakers who started during the heyday of breaking's media exposure suddenly found themselves excluded from the public spaces they had enlivened in the past. For example, the British pioneers Second to None Crew noted that for several years in the early eighties, club-goers would pour beer on the floors of dance venues to make sure that breakers, who were no longer considered relevant to mainstream popular culture, could not get down. New breakers therefore became more solitary than their original New York City counterparts, and formed styles in critical and meditative thought. These styles were less inspired by cyphers and street performances. Consequently, watching practice footage while polishing premeditated “sets” (choreographed routines) became a popular form of training. The sudden decrease in breaking's public visibility also meant that many breakers who sought to carry on their practice had to rely on VHS footage as reference material, circulating recorded performances or curated compilations of “OGs” and pioneers and relating this footage to their own lives through philosophical discussions with one another. The standard of athleticism among breakers increased noticeably as private, repetitious practice and critical study of breaking footage sped up the development of highly difficult and perfectionist movements which would have taken much longer to emerge in the spontaneous approach of cypher-based breaking.



Breaking pioneer Ken Swift in an interview from one of the first hip hop documentaries, "Style Wars" (1983): "I never ever felt like bboying deserved [to be] on stage, I never felt like it deserved anywhere other than where it came from. I mean, I perform on stage, I like to get in front of people, but ... it's not built for stage ... bboying is ... if I grab my dick to you, and give you the dick, you know ... fuck you ... you know, that's not for the Olympics, that's not for Broadway, you know what I mean? That's my way of saying, fuck you, you on my block right now, or you in my neighborhood, and you trying to act like you nice on the floor like that."

Finally, the media representation of breaking created a divergence of breaking styles around the world. Relegated to private spaces and sparse underground networks, hard-working, solitary breakers developed individualistic styles which pushed the dance form in separate directions. Some breakers remained faithful to the formula of old-school dancers, some focused and improved on specific aspects of the original formula, while some incorporated other movement styles and traditions into breaking, or borrowed breaking movements to enhance their foundations in other dance forms. For some, breaking simply inspired physical freedom, and they had little concern about whether or not they were practicing "breaking" or "hip-hop". Effectively detached from its specific socio-cultural roots of inner-city New York, breaking became a chimera of modern movement, absorbing cultural influence wherever it went. The will to break out of specific models of public behavior and decorum was universal, and breaking provided an outlet to all who felt the claustrophobia of unrealistic social expectations.

Though the rebellious spirit of breaking found sympathy and support around the world, the physical form of breaking movement became fractured through the overwhelming influence of media. Breakers related to one another in principle, but when the scene began to organize again on an international scale following the media lows of the late seventies and early eighties, the broad diversity

of styles which belonged under the umbrella of breaking made unification a difficult task. Local scenes had developed breaking techniques in such different directions that it became nearly impossible to compare global styles to one another, though they stemmed from similar basic movements created by the first few generations of breakers. These global styles of breaking are therefore compelled to interact on a much more poetic level compared to the vernacular interactions of New York City breaking, using highly dense and technical movement vocabularies and media technology like YouTube and Instagram videos to express and debate their styles. Besides “battling” and “burning” one another, breakers around the world developed new ways to communicate that reflected the newly elevated stakes of the breaking game: cultural and political representation. A breaker's choice of style no longer only represented where s/he was from, but also h/er individual lifestyle, culture, and political orientation. In other words, no longer solely organized around local gang culture, breaking became a way for people to simultaneously communicate and confront broader social values. Nonetheless, the underlying structure of gang-conflict mediation remained, meaning that most breakers continued to approach these stylistic confrontations with respect and dignity, using dance rather than violence as their approach to social dialogue and intercultural exchange.



Poe One, a member of Style Elements Crew, breaking in "Enter the Bboy" (2003), a martial arts-inspired movie that pushed the envelope for creative breaking videos.

With the technical and poetic development of breaking, the community also became more inclusive. Needless to say, people of all backgrounds currently participate in the breaking community. The gender bias in breaking is gradually disappearing, as now more than ever, girls are breaking and taking the craft to new heights. (Dis)ability-oriented crews such as “Ill Abilities Crew” are doing away with the perception of breaking as an art with physical prerequisites. The age range of breaking is also expanding, with breakers starting younger than ever and many breaking careers extending past the age of 40, due largely to the sharing of fitness techniques that help avoid career-ending injuries. As a way to express oneself, breaking now belongs to the general public and not just disenfranchised inner-city youth. It has simply become a form of universal movement poetry—the only problem being that the highly reactionary and political nature of its origins can sometimes be overlooked as a result of this generalization.

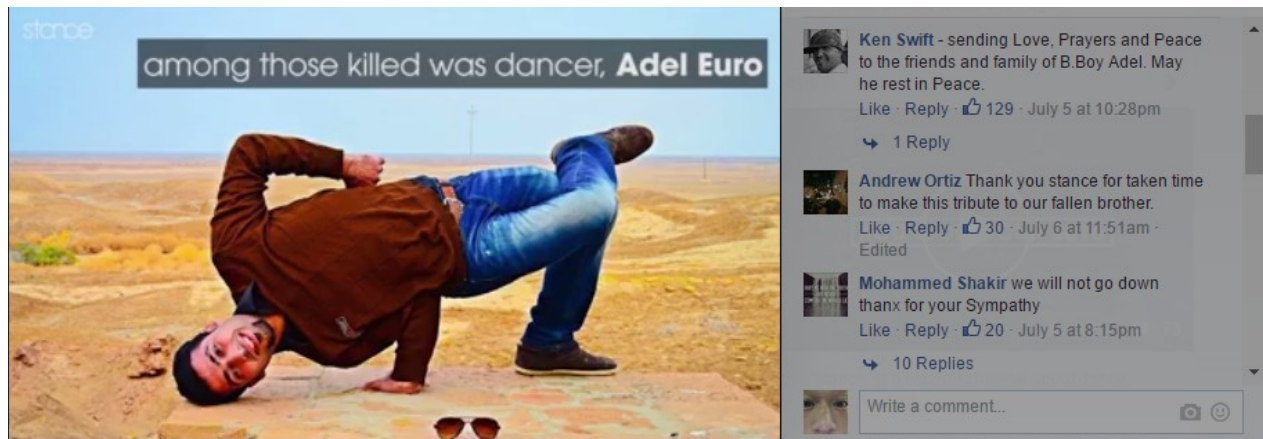
With the increasing number of claims to breaking as a universal form of personal expression, it is more and more difficult to respect the origins while allowing for the growth, appropriation, and hybridization of breaking which follows from its primarily internet- and media-based circulation. How can breaking maintain its integrity even while it expands at an increasing rate, coursing through the digital veins of modern society? What factors contribute to the solidarity of the breaking community, in spite of the watering-down of its original form through media influence? The next chapter will suggest that these questions can be approached by looking at breaking as a form of education.

BREAKING AS CULTURAL EDUCATION

In July 2016, several breaking social media outlets posted on Facebook about the death of an Iraqi breaker, Adel Euro, in an ISIS attack in Baghdad. Breakers around the world, most of whom did not personally know Adel, collectively mourned his death by paying tribute in the comment sections. As breaking icon Flea Rock has noted, breaking can act as a *de facto* nationality—breakers share history, experiences, and an imagined communal identity that creates empathy across national boundaries. In spite of all the cultural and stylistic differences between contemporary breakers, a sense of shared identity and empathy still exists.

In light of the analysis of cultural difference, media influence, and globalization in the previous section, the question arises: what are the shared experiences which allow breakers to bond in today's highly differentiated scene? The critical study of breaking materials in the form of music, footage, fashion, etc. is one obvious commonality. Another is the physical discipline required to perform even the most fundamental breaking moves in today's standard vocabulary. Yet, these factors barely justify the heartfelt reactions to Adel Euro's death, or Flea Rock's proposal that breaking is a nationality—after

all, many other academic- and fitness-oriented communities exist which do not share this strong emotional bond.



Breaking media outlet Stance's video tribute to Adel Euro generated many heartfelt reactions from within the breaking community.

Breakers actually have far more in common as far as their experiences in community organization than they do in terms of movement style or breaking philosophy. Regardless of their approach to the physical movement of breaking, they face challenges while organizing practices, planning for events, and networking in their local scenes—struggles that, in turn, give them common ground to interact with breakers from completely different cultural backgrounds. The stubborn will to continue breaking in spite of limited career opportunities and the lack of broader social recognition unites breakers who share the desire to escape their respective societal molds, to step outside of themselves, so to speak, and perhaps in the most direct way possible: by taking (or losing) control of their bodies. It is the universal experience of creating and maintaining social conditions that protect the practice of free physical expression which relates breakers from different backgrounds. The cypher therefore still exists as an imagined common space, although it takes different forms now in each breaking community.

Based on this understanding of breaking as a community with clearly shared social goals—that is, community organization around free expression rather than movement techniques—it becomes more apparent how young people cooperatively developed breaking to its current state without much institutional sponsorship. The clearest example of breakers' cooperation with one another toward shared social goals is the ritual of housing, carpooling, and generally accommodating each other during their travels. Though breaking may be highly competitive, breakers enjoy increased mobility when they travel due to their recognition that travel and cultural exposure is a breaker's best friend. In fact, travel tends to justify a breaker's position as a community organizer within their local scenes. As the breaking

scene is highly aware of its global nature through the consumption of internet media, the well-traveled organizer acts as an important hub connecting the local scene with people and ideas from the international scene. The interaction is beneficial for both guest and host, as the host's position as a local organizer is advanced while the guest is gaining access to local resources. While traveling, breakers are able to exchange knowledge about movement techniques as well as community organization strategies, becoming mentors to one another in a process known as “each one, teach one”. Whether through battling in competitions and cyphers, or through sharing local resources, breakers participate in a unique process of grassroots education that is increasing in scale and sophistication.



Mastermind Rockers Crew teaching rock dance, a close relative of breaking, to aboriginal children in Taiwan. After breakers Jacky Burnz and Yell-G traveled to New York to learn rock dance from the Mastermind Rockers, they were able to invite members of the New York-based crew as guest teachers in a series of workshops throughout Taiwan's aboriginal townships.

This structure of travel and exchange in the international breaking circuit is especially impressive considering that there is no universally accepted educational authority in the breaking scene. The educational work that goes on is done almost exclusively through this structure of co-mentorship and cultural exchange, which requires little in the way of tuition beyond symbolic acts of “paying your dues” through historical study, physical discipline, and cultural respect. Though this form of education taking place in the breaking scene is highly decentralized, there is at the same time a universal standard as far as the quality of education, encoded in the ethics of “biting”: a taboo in breaking culture referring to the outright copying, or unwarranted appropriation, of another breaker's moves.



A famous scene from “Beat Street” (1984), one of the first feature films to use breaking and hip hop as its central subject.

Powerful Pexter: Yo, ya'll biters. All your homeboys are biters. Y'all whack so what's up with that.

Kuriaki: Yo, what you talking 'bout, I ain't never stole no moves from you. All your moves ain't worth the bit. So what's up with that, punk!

While there is no agreed-upon definition of biting, it is an ongoing discussion used to evaluate the content of breaking movement. On the one hand, if a breaker's movements appear to resemble another breaker's movements too closely, that breaker will be deemed a “biter”, a label which carries a negative association in the scene. On the other hand, if a breaker takes somebody else's idea and “flips” it (using it as inspiration rather than as a mold), it symbolizes the progression of that breaker's style and is applauded in the community. Though education in the breaking community is mostly carried out through diffuse individual encounters and small-group sessions, the universal ethics of biting makes sure the emphasis of this education is on innovation, across the board. The particularity of breaking education is that the student is deterred from appearing too much like h/er teacher; however, in clearly displaying the element of inspiration from the teacher, the student also shows the teacher how s/he developed something new from the original concept, thereby teaching something to the teacher and reciprocating what becomes a constant reversal of roles. As a result, this entire process can happen without explicitly labeling one party as the teacher and another as the student. In what is becoming known in academia as 'cypher-based pedagogy', the participant is simultaneously student and teacher, receiving only as much as s/he contributes. The motivation for travel and cultural exchange, then,

becomes not only to increase one's social capital, as mentioned before, but also to discover one's style by directly confronting other styles—to build one's craft in relation to others. By discovering one's style in this manner, one can more adequately contribute to h/er local scene, more comfortably navigate multicultural landscapes abroad, and more fluently speak on global issues that transcend national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. In conclusion, travel and cultural exchange is valued in the breaking community as a way to improve the quality of the scene by promoting the development of different styles through dialogue.

Looking at breaking as a form of cultural education makes it clear why breakers still feel emotionally connected to one another in spite of immense differences in background. The form of education provided by engaging in breaking is equally valuable to breakers around the world, no matter what struggles they face in their everyday lives. The drive to carry out this form of education is present in all breaking communities, small and large. The legacy of the cypher as a combined creative space and educational environment continues to inspire breakers everywhere, though today's cyphers may not quite resemble the ones breaking pioneers danced in.

While cypher-based culture and pedagogy continue to thrive in grassroots breaking events, the development of breaking through corporate and state sponsorship has largely ignored this aspect of the dance. Large-scale breaking competitions have preferred to enlist breakers as performing artists, selected by a judge panel through increasingly sophisticated technical criteria (i.e. judging systems used by R16, UBL, UDEF, Undisputed, etc.) for the entertainment of large groups of non-participatory audiences. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as there are breakers who thrive off this model and gain artistic validation and career opportunities through persistent participation in competitive big-event circuits and choreographed showcases. Moreover, as previously noted, the advent of breaking as performance art is an irremovable part of breaking history and culture. However, the challenge for serious investors in the breaking scene is to provide support not only to competitions, but to the cypher-based, grassroots educational networks that produce great breaking artists. An excess of competitions ultimately shifts the overall focus of the scene from cyphering and “building” to individual fame and success. The final section of this essay will consider ways in which the scene can balance its competitive side with alternative platforms that ensure the educational value of breaking is not compromised.



An example of the live scoring system used by the R16 battles. Similar judging systems are being developed and popularized in big competitions.

BREAKING BEYOND COMPETITION

There is something to be said about the difference between individual competitions, which rightfully seek to provide a space for breakers to come together, and the “competition scene”, which is the entire nexus of competitions perpetuating the idea that competitive events are the be-all-end-all of breaking culture. The blame for an overly competitive focus in breaking does not rest solely on competition organizers, who are individually looking to do the right thing but unknowingly representing breaking as purely competition-based as a whole. This is why it is as necessary to propose alternative platforms for building breaking culture as it is to criticize the state of the competition scene. To begin with, we have to consider how breaking competitions became the most popular form of congregating in the scene. Only then can other, supplementary forms of bringing breakers together be suggested and implemented.

At its inception, breaking was a true public art form. Many New Yorkers in their forties and fifties talk about a golden age when there were people “rocking” and cyphering on nearly every street corner in New York City. When breaking became less popular, however, a lot of breakers moved into nightclubs, effectively excluding very young kids and older folks from joining in the cyphers. Semi-private practices at gyms and dance studios also became widespread during that time, meaning that

crews were less likely to encounter each other in public once they became comfortable with their private practice spots. When breaking transitioned away from the truly public sphere of street corners and block parties, there was less occasion for breakers to exchange and compete spontaneously, therefore giving rise to the registration-based, judged competitions where breakers and crews could sign up to compete with one another. Judging panels at these events ensured that all styles of breaking would be equally valued and a deserving winner would be chosen from among the competitors. Furthermore, as competitions began to offer prize money and opportunities for travel, they became preferred for the instant gratification of establishing dominance over other crews/breakers and for the direct reward of travel-based sponsorship—goals which would have taken much longer to achieve in the street-based economy of early breaking. Structured competitions therefore gave a small group of elite breakers the opportunity to make a living solely off of breaking (though many hitters also make a living by breaking, hitting is generally less attractive to the average breaker than the glamor and glitz of big-stage competitions).

As the competition circuit grew, the number of consistent competitors rapidly outnumbered breakers with sustainable competitive careers. Competitions became very systematic, with highly technical judging criteria, time limits for dancers' rounds, and repeated interruptions to the DJ's music in order to enforce the rules and structure of the competition. They also started charging entry fees to handle the logistics of accommodating the large number of breakers registered to compete, effectively privatizing these events and excluding those people who only wanted to watch, but not enough so to pay the entrance fee. Many competitions became six- or seven-hour affairs with little cyphering or cultural activities involved, and executed in short spurts of staged battles between randomly selected contestants. Showcase-based preliminary rounds, where contestants perform for the judges in order to be selected into the round-robin battle brackets, also became common. The result of these developments were that many breakers focused only on practicing the technical criteria required to win a competition formatted as such—criteria which, once standardized, began to take the form of a perfect, one-size-fits-all style of breaking.

The upside is that now, more than ever, breakers are training hard toward very well-defined technical goals which allow them to be fairly compared with one another and therefore provide reasonable expectations for breakers at a certain skill level to win, travel, and make a living off of their craft. In no way am I suggesting this is an easy task or one not worth pursuing. The downside is that the focus on competitions leaves very little time and energy for breakers and organizers to pursue other activities related to the culture of breaking. Given the limited number of breakers whose careers the competition circuit can support, it is essential to create new environments for breakers to capitalize off

of the incredible creative skills they all share, instead of stubbornly competing with each other for the top spots in a field where most breakers are already functioning around a similar—albeit amazingly high—skill level. By making these new spaces for breakers to keep creating, there can also be a more effective commentary on the technical criteria being used to judge competitions; for, each time a breaker enters a competition, they are subconsciously sponsoring the definition of breaking ruled by the judges' preferences and sensibilities—win or lose.

Simply put, in order to continue supporting breaking as a melting pot of different cultures and stylistic approaches, it is important to imagine alternatives to a purely competition-based community. I have come up with two general proposals. The first is to expand the “culture-industry” of breaking, much like how the skate and surf cultures developed their own media outlets and lifestyle brands. This will create more jobs for breakers and help translate the seemingly anachronistic phenomenon of breaking to a modern audience. The second proposal is to incorporate breaking into school programs, which will be essential to the revitalization of cypher culture. I will briefly touch on both of these suggestions.

There are several platforms that come to mind as far as building a culture-industry around breaking. The first is the aforementioned approach of creating lifestyle brands and media outlets that allow breakers to express themselves through fashion and design, multimedia production, and branding/marketing. Many breakers are already familiar with video and audio editing due to the trend of filming creative break videos with matching music. Most breakers also already use social media and other technological platforms to create and market their own brands. Breakers' skills in designing “fresh” crew uniforms at a low cost also give them a foundation for creating a breaking-based fashion industry. When applied, these brands and media skills help non-breakers relate to the entire culture of breaking, instead of being intimidated by the demanding nature of breaking movement. Some examples of existing breaking lifestyle brands and media outlets include YAK Films, Mason Rose, Bofresco, The Bboy Spot/Biggest and Baddest, and Strife.tv. Special emphasis can be placed on the representation of breaking in both independent and mainstream film and TV. With the production of the Netflix series “The Get Down”, and documentaries like “The Bboy Mercenaries” and “Rubble Kings”, interest in the rich and complex history of breaking is at an all-time high. Independent outlets like KoreanrocTV continue to shed light on the VHS-era of breaking and beyond, sparking discussion of stylistic developments and a general appreciation for the artistic process of breaking as represented by its dense historical progression. Fresh approaches to the media arts and branding in breaking culture will undoubtedly breathe new life into the scene.



Breaking brands set up shop at Outbreak 10 Hip Hop Festival in Orlando.

Another way of building the culture-industry is by fostering the fusion of breaking and fitness. The increasing amount of information available regarding how to train effectively for breaking movements is extending breakers' longevity and allowing more people to pick up breaking without being discouraged by injury. Breakers have unique experiences training their bodies towards extreme goals, while at the same time recognizing that everyone's definition of fitness is innately different. Most breakers are not textbook-fit; rather, they have come to a state of fitness through arduous trial-and-error. Therefore, they are qualified in many respects to help others achieve individualized fitness. Breakers could go far in balancing out the mainstream fitness-culture of gym memberships, group classes, and unrealistic expectations for body-image, by drawing attention to the shifting definition of fitness from person to person. By marketing breakers' self-attained knowledge of their bodies and training regimens, breakers can help promote breaking as a positive lifestyle and correct some common misconceptions about what it means to be fit.

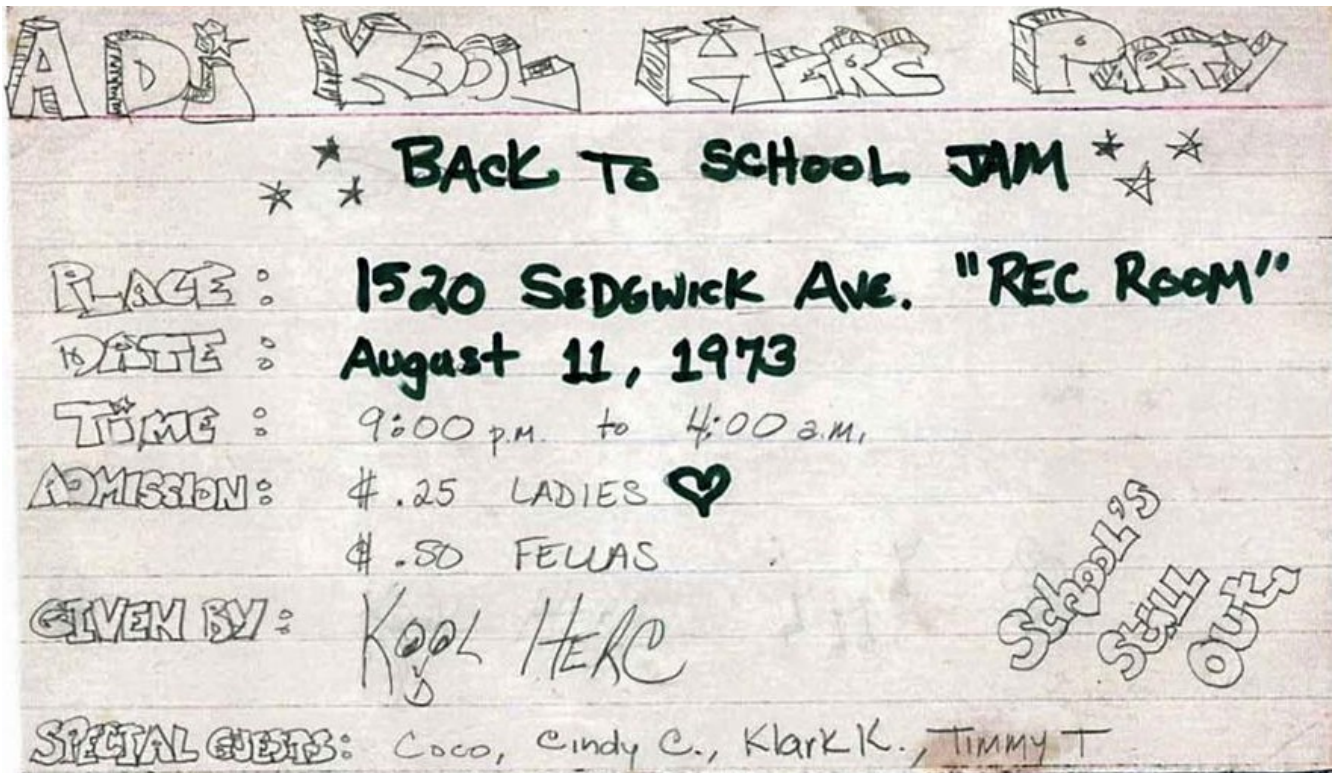
The last platform I will mention is to actually take the fusion of breaking with performance art to the next level, and present breaking in groundbreaking stage-show settings. Although treating breaking as pure stage performance can make it less participatory in many respects, there is no doubt that, with a historically informed approach, breaking can be a powerful and emotional performance art. Many breakers have been able to learn different styles and discover new dimensions of the dance by performing on stage, often touring and representing the art of breaking to many different demographics.

A pioneer of breaking stage-performances is Niels “Storm” Robitzky, who has fused breaking with other styles such as popping and locking on the big stage. Dance companies like Bboyizm and Ghettooriginals also combine narrative and musical theater with breaking movement, expressing many stories in breaking which are hard to explore in the competitive context. The Dutch crew Hustle Kidz produces a stage performance called “Father Father” that mixes aspects of modern dance with breaking as a form of social commentary. These creative developments in breaking-based stage shows allow breakers to communicate complex messages and help non-breakers see the artistic value of breaking outside of cypher and competition environments.



Members of the Hustle Kidz Crew performing stage choreography.

Besides encouraging diversity and experimentation within the breaking scene, these culture-industry platforms also translate the increasingly stylized and poetic movement of breaking to broader audiences. As a form of cultural translation and education, however, there is no better place for breaking than in schools. Although breaking is often associated with street life and gang activity, some of the first breaking jams and block parties were back-to-school fundraisers, and the culture has an intimate connection with schools.



A flyer for one of the first, if not the very first, hip hop parties in the Bronx.

Today, many of the biggest “open practices” continue to be hosted in school settings, and there are breaking clubs at colleges and universities that teach the techniques and history of breaking to anyone who is interested. These practices are important spaces because of their political neutrality within the breaking scene. As they are not directly sponsored by one breaking crew or organization, but rather by schools, open practices are places where breakers of all different styles feel comfortable practicing and creating. The culture of private dance gyms and studios, in contrast, can be politically charged, as the crews who sponsor such studios have to constantly market themselves and compete with other studios for students, often creating divisive ideological tensions within the up-and-coming dance community. There are many examples of these studio-based divisions in Taipei, where students of each studio tend to become absorbed into the crews funding the space and are therefore discouraged from seeking out other studio spaces and practice spots where they can interact with different styles of breaking. In short, school-based breaking communities are an effective remedy to the politics of private studios.

Aside from the value of extracurricular breaking clubs and practices, however, there is a strong case to be made for the incorporation of breaking into educational curricula, particularly as electives at the pre-collegiate level. Though hip-hop academic programs abound in colleges and universities, these

specialized departments hardly provide an easy point of entry for non-experienced hip-hop enthusiasts. Somewhat analogous to the incorporation of jazz education into American school music programs, the incorporation of breaking as an elective could feasibly offer much of the social and cultural value of breaking to interested beginners without presenting an intimidatingly technical view of the craft. Like jazz, the participatory and improvisational nature of breaking can provide another means for socialization at this level in the school system, where many kids struggle to find supportive social groups. It may also help eliminate the distinction between artistic and athletic electives, becoming a sort of creative team sport where kids can exercise while being artistic. Middle schools in Japan have already adopted so-called “hip hop dance” as an elective choice within the newly implemented, mandatory dance education program, with the aim of “enriching student communication through image-based expression and dance”. Expanding breaking programs in school settings will make breaking accessible without the baggage of career and competition considerations, while giving students alternative outlets to communicate and socialize with one another. By strengthening the breaking culture-industry and expanding breaking's presence in school settings, breakers can become more engaged in shaping their own communities, without being forced to do so through the major competition circuit.



B.E.A.T. (Bringing Education and Art Together) Breakers performing at the White House. B.E.A.T. is one of several emerging non-profits in NYC that teaches after-school breaking classes at public schools.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, increasing public awareness of breaking is not just essential for the growth of the breaking community. It is an important way for people to tap into the language and culture that is hip hop and to communicate with one another about issues that have reached a deadlock in traditional academia and politics. The challenge of the last half-century of breaking has been to establish a standard vocabulary for this language; now, it is to find relevant subject matter. To draw another comparison to jazz, which is now an important part of many education systems in spite of its street/vernacular roots, breaking education has value for everyone because it affirms that the body, as an improvisational instrument, can spontaneously express full-fledged lifestyles and values. Without making explicit political statements, but rather speaking through our bodies and interpretations of popular music, we learn to analyze art without imposing authoritative structures of evaluation and to spontaneously interact with the world through gaze and gesture, extension and intention, all at once. As a vehicle of this kind of free expression, breaking carries the dreams and aspirations of people around the world, helping us collectively imagine different realities we might one day inhabit. The hope is for current breakers to cooperatively translate the movements they have created to a broader audience so that these channels of expression can be shared with everyone.

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