A Historical Overview of Hip Hop Dances

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Hip Hop dance is not a single genre of dance, or even an accurate label for the dances for which it attempts to account. This term though is more appropriately an umbrella that encompasses a range of genres, some that were born out of Hip Hop, and a number that precede Hip Hop's coming to being. "Hip Hop dance" refers to dances both adopted and invented that converge aesthetically under Hip Hop.

Unfortunately, in the growing field of Hip Hop Studies dance is the least written about part of the culture. While a number of Hip Hop scholars address dance in works that largely focus on rap music, only a handful of scholars have made dance their primary focus. They include Joseph G. Schloss (writing on *breaking* and *uprocking* in New York City), Carla Stalling Huntington (writing on media marketing of Hip Hop dance), Mary Fogarty (who covers a broad scope of work including international networks and cultural tastes of breakers), and myself (with work on *b-boying* cyphers and its African diasporic influences). More extensive have been a growing number of documentaries made about Hip Hop dances, their social contexts, and their histories. And of course, the practitioners themselves are the true experts in the field, though few write academic studies on the culture[1]: b-boy Louis "Alien Ness" Roberto Martinez, b-boy Niels "Storm" Robitzky, popper Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon, and house dancer and locker Moncell "Ill Kosby" Durden are exceptions. Ultimately, one must mine the expanse of information from all of the above to get a better understanding of Hip Hop dance.

I. Historical Overview

There is no singular place, time, or genre that constitutes Hip Hop dance's "beginnings." Rather there was simultaneous activity across the US that would collectively assert themselves as a shared culture *after* Hip Hop came into being. One of the shared qualities of these dances are in their adaptation of traditional African diasporic aesthetic imperatives in new ways and for contemporary contexts. All of the below genres play with polyrhythms, improvisation, call and response, spiritual communion, and a number of other elements that, though not exclusive to the African diaspora, are central to its aesthetics. They also frequently incorporate traditional buck, wing, and jig elements indicative of African American culture.[2] Beyond diasporic influences, these dances reflect urban American contexts among culturally diverse, working-class and working-poor communities of predominantly African diasporic peoples—including African Americans, West Indians, and Puerto Ricans—as well as small pockets of working-class whites, Mexican Americans, Dominicans, Pacific Islanders, and other ethnicities depending on location.

One among many "beginnings" is through the California-based "funkstyles" of *locking* and *popping*. Long before Hip Hop began to congeal into a culture and prior to it even having a name, there was the funk. Noted for its syncopated bass line, dynamic percussions, soulful or gospel-inspired singing, and the rhythmic build up of energy as all of the instruments worked together toward an improvisational climax, funk music is just that: funky.[3] The term funkstyles is used to designate the range of social dances and genres generated out of their relationship to funk music and in counter-distinction to Hip Hop. *Locking* and *popping* are the two most recognized genres. Most credit *locking* to Don "Campbellock" Campbell, a Los Angeles- based dancer who cites his inspiration from having stumbled onto the dance's titular move after a failed attempt at the Robot Shuffle (or the Funky Chicken some sources say), a popular social dance in the early 1970s. Locking exudes a vibrant and playful theatricality that found an audience via

Soul Train, television's first nationally syndicated black popular music and dance show hosted by its founder Don Cornelius. The show moved to Los Angeles from Chicago in 1971, and provided a platform for young black teenagers to display their skills for a national audience. Interest in *locking* prompted its swift transition from a local style to staged entertainment on national television. The Lockers, a group formed by Campbellock, was one of the most recognized groups and featured a number of noteworthy dancers: including Fred "The Penguin" Berry who would go on to play "Rerun" in the television show *What's Happening?*; Adolfo "Shabadoo" Quiñones who would play Ozone ten years later in the *Breakin'* franchise; and choreographer/singer Toni Basil. The Lockers creatively combined dance and storytelling, then staged it for diverse television and theater audiences.

Popping is not *locking*, though they are often mistakenly combined into "pop-locking"—an early 1980s misnomer frequently depicted as an aspect of "breakdancing," which combined all of the funkstyles. Where *locking* is presentational, bouncy and playful, *popping* combines staccato-like movement with water-like flow for a more forceful and almost confrontational style that pushes at the limits of what it seems possible for the body to actually do. Inspired by the dynamic social dances that were part of the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area club scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *popping* was a distinct style of dance wherein one would pulsate the muscle's contractions rhythmically in sudden bursts or pops. Sam "Boogaloo Sam" Solomon is one of the originators of this genre. He would go on to form the Electric Boogaloos (originally the Electronic Boogaloo Lockers) in 1977 with Nate "Slide" Johnson and Joe "Slim" Thomas.[4] *Popping* too quickly found an audience via *Soul Train*. The dance garnered so much attention that pop star Michael Jackson trained with Bruno "Pop N Taco" Falcón for over fifteen years, ultimately inspiring Jackson's signature dance style including the "moonwalk"—which was in

fact a *popping* move called "the backslide." A number of other genres that fall under the "unauthorized umbrella" of *popping* include *ticking*, *waving*, *tutting*, *strutting*, *roboting*, and *boogaloo*—all of which developed in different parts of southern, central, and northern California.[5]

Another "beginning" to Hip Hop dance is through the urban underground dance club scene, predominated by but not exclusive to Black and Brown gay men whose post-Stonewall social dance venues became legendary sites for a freedom of expression through dance in safe, welcoming environments. Their dancing styles helped to usher in an era wherein it was acceptable for "collective performances" of "individual free-form dance" in club environments.[6] Innovations in dances like *lofting* and *house* grew out of these types of venues in Chicago and New York (e.g. The Sanctuary, The Loft, Paradise Garage)—while dances like *waacking* grew out of similar venues in California. They were places that openly invited clientele that until then had been typically doubly discriminated against by race and sexuality. The underground dance club scene had its beginnings within venues created by a small handful of party promoters and DJs like David Mancuso, Larry Levan, and Francis Grasso. DJs (rather than a jukebox) "foreground[ed] the beat" of bass-heavy music, and the "loosened…matrix of social dance" no longer required male-female couples or couple dancing altogether.[7] This new standard helped to foster marathon dance sessions that became the signature of these social spaces. Though "underground," these networks of parties helped to generate chart hits that shaped a new genre of music: disco.[8] As the discotheque went mainstream and rapidly expanded, so did a formula for commercial disco music, both of which eventually overshadowed the underground club phenomenon. Disco became so big in fact that it sparked a profound backlash that for many also felt racist and homophobic. Yet the so-called "death" of disco did not mark the end of the

underground dance music scene. The music diversified, newer generations of dancers entered, and times changed; but the fundamental call and response exchange with the DJ and a full-body collective communion on the dance floor would remain key features of the culture.[9]

Finally, the most familiar point of entry into Hip Hop dance is the South Bronx phenomenon of *b-boying/b-girling* or *breaking* (popularly though again mistakenly referred to as "breakdancing").[10] *B-boying* is presentational, confrontational, and communal. It is a battle dance but not exclusively so. It constantly borrows from many genres yet maintains a distinct brand of bravado and style that has become its signature. Some mark this "borrowing" from cultural predecessors as *breaking's* own multiple beginning points. For example, while the dance draws inspiration from an incredible range of movement practices including such areas as tap, kung fu, and mambo, one local dance in particular—called *rocking* or *uprocking*—is crucial to b-boying's aesthetic. *Uprocking* is a "battle dance in which two people…square off and simultaneously taunt each other through movement," while openly insulting each other with "burns" or pantomimed violence against an opponent.[11] *Uprocking* is identified as a Brooklyn style, though popper and dance history documentarian Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon argues in his documentary *Rock Dance History: The Untold Story of Up-Rockin'* that it too was born in the Bronx. Origins aside, variations on *uprocking* would become part of *breaking's* upright dance aesthetic.

Breaking began as a genre in the early 1970s when dancers basked in the "break"—a "brief percussion solo" typical in funk music—whose eventual repetition would extend their opportunities to dance for longer periods of time.[12] Extending or looping the break, and modifying its rhythms with scratching—made possible by new DJ'ing techniques innovated or perfected by DJs Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Grand Wizard Theodore, and Africa

Bambaataa—would become the foundation to Hip Hop music. In the midst of basement parties and block parties in the South Bronx, the beginnings of *b-boying* predominately formed by early-teenage boys (and a small handful of b-girls) of African American, West Indian, and Puerto Rican descent. In its earliest manifestations, it was an upright dance that was named "rocking," "going off," "the boiyoiyoing," and other names that attempted to described its frenzied, sometimes bouncy, and explosive movement—a visual spectacle that matched the breakbeats of '60s and '70s rock, funk, disco, soul, and salsa music played by the DJs. As it began to form a distinct style and eventually moved from an upright dance to the ground, breaking's rudimentary manifestation incorporated stylized footwork, shuffles, drops, spins of various kinds (e.g. butt spins, backspins), and freezes. It is a style wherein one moves in constant revolutions, while pushing oneself to do something unprecedented. Groundbreaking for its time, this would be the foundation to the extraordinary dance we see today.

While the first generation of breakers who started in the early 1970s aged out within five years, newer generations in their early teens were coming up and seeking out others who kept the dance alive on their own blocks in New York City. This is the story of the Rock Steady Crew (RSC), one of the most recognized crews in b-boying history. RSC has been under the long-standing presidency of Richard "Crazy Legs" Colon, who got permission from the former RSC president, Jo-Jo, to continue the then defunct crew among a new generation that would take it into the 1980s, and to the world.[13] As a result, RSC were among the first faces of Hip Hop culture to hit mainstream media. While songs like Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" were already hits, the media had little sense of the expanse of the culture and its near-defunct dance until a *Village Voice* cover story in April of 1981 by dance critic Sally Banes with Martha Cooper's photographs. The article featured RSC Vice Presidnet, the late Frosty Freeze—tall,

slim, and afroed—on its cover. By 1983, members of RSC were featured in a thirty-second clip in a summer blockbuster titled *Flashdance* (Crazy Legs would also body double for a portion of the dance finale). This clip showcased *b-boying* (and *popping*) to international audiences for the first time, triggering a frenzied response by nascent breakers from around the world. For anyone not a teenager in the South Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn at the time, b-boys were the public's first introduction to Hip Hop as a culture.

By 1984, *b-boying* was the hot new thing, though it was not the only dance captured in this moment of popular culture. Street dance in general became trendy, but with little understanding of what they were looking at media outlets labeled everything "breakdancing" whether it was *breaking*, *popping*, *locking*, or something else. "Breakdancing" was featured on the news, in movies, on sitcoms, commercials, music videos, and on tours with DJs, rappers, and the Fantastic Four Double Dutch Girls. Breakers were coupled with ballet dancers in showcases meant to juxtapose high and low culture. So intrigued was the public by these performances that b-boys were a featured segment on *Ripley's Believe It or Not* (1983), a popular television show dedicated to mystical natural wonders and freak show oddities. The New York City Breakers danced at the opening of the 1984 Olympics in front of President Reagan. And the extremely short-lived television show *Graffiti Rock* (1984), produced and hosted by Michael Holman, attempted to further package the culture and the dance for weekly national consumption (though the show only aired its pilot episode). By 1984, *breaking* was a hook for dozens of low-budget, teen-oriented movies that showcased street dance in their storyline, though very often they relegated actual practitioners to the background and foregrounded modern dancers who simply incorporated one or two *breaking* moves. The most popular of these films were *Beat Street*, *Breakin'*, and *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (all released in 1984). Interestingly, there was very

little actual *b-boying* in the *Breakin'* series, which featured *locking* and *popping*. More accurate presentations were available in small, independent favorites like *Wild Style* (dir. Charlie Ahearn 1983) and *Style Wars* (dir. Tony Silver 1983), which featured a legendary battle between RSC and Dynamic Rockers.

Though not as dramatic as the backlash against disco, the popularity of *breaking* and street dance quickly waned in the US, and by 1986 it was considered passé. Clubs discouraged circles wherein breakers demonstrated their solo skills; patrons would throw drinks on the floor to make it difficult and dangerous to *break*. Young kids around the country were ticketed or arrested for public dance circles that were said to be disruptive to the flow of traffic and commerce, and gathering sites for criminals (a particularly classed and racialized reference to the kind of youth who gathered to break). One city ordinance in San Bernardino California attempted to ban "breakdancing" circles altogether, though they eventually simply passed a $100 fine.[14] The media began to depict "breakdancing" as dangerous and disruptive, featuring stories of *untrained* beginners injuring themselves in some way, the most notorious being that of a man who broke his neck after attempting a head spin. Though injuries in any dance are common, breaking was ultimately depicted as a problem. Yet simultaneously, in the midst of this domestic backlash two things also took place: 1) the innovation of new Hip Hop social dances; and 2) the growing interest in street dance outside of the US.

The surge in Hip Hop social dances reflected the music of the late-1980s and early 1990s. By then, rap music had supplanted *breaking* as Hip Hop's representative cultural element. As rap began to flourish and influence other genres, especially R&B, a new expanse of Hip Hop social dances reflected the stylistic shifts in music. These dances included moves such as the Running Man, The Roger Rabbit, The Smurf, The Wop, and many others along with them. The

kinds of club spaces that welcomed the dancers schooled in circles were the very same underground dance clubs that originated in the early 1970s. Formerly called discos, these clubs branched off in multiple directions including electronic music (e.g. techno, drum 'n' bass, etc.), and house music. The house club space was where all of these different approaches to dance intermingled, influencing each other. Dance troupes also began to form, and were featured in music videos that had by the late 1980s become commonplace. Mop Top Crew was the most prominent, and its members were featured in two TV documentary shorts: *House of Trés* and *Reck'n Shop: Live from Brooklyn*.[15]

By the time *breaking*, *popping*, and *locking* peaked in US popular culture, they found new life internationally. Countries like England already had prominent breakers by 1984, with particular attention on The B-Boys of Wolverhampton—featuring b-girl Bubbles (now Hanifa Queen), the first recognized b-girl in Europe. Mary Fogarty's "Whatever happened to breakdancing?" is one of the few works to trace international b-boying networks through the 1990s. She argues that the street dance scene in Europe flourished, as a result of three channels of interactions: the tours that started in the early 1980s, underground videos, and competitions. Dance centered tours—including Rock Steady Crew, Rhythm Technicians, and Ghetto Original Dance Company—were comprised of breakers and poppers largely from New York who formed their own dance companies. Underground videos (first VHS tapes, later DVDs) featuring their shows, interviews, and club excursions after performances began to circulate. These networks fostered new communities that culturally identified with Hip Hop, though their direct interactions with each other were greatly limited.[16] With technological advancements came new ways of learning how to break and connecting with others trying to do the same. Mediated images allowed beginners to play back videos in slow motion, to pause, rewind, and skip to the

good part. Finally, large-scale competitions such the International Battle of the Year in Germany (now France) began in 1990, and the Notorious IBE (International Breakdance Event) in Rotterdam beginning in 1998, expanded international networks of street dancers. These competitions sought the return of early practitioners, fostered a flourishing international scene, and became venues for direct interaction with the resurgent US scene in the early 1990s.

In the new millennium, Hip Hop social dances (like the Soulja Boy, the Chicken Noodle Soup, and too many others to cite) continue to impact the mainstream. New genres on the other hand have also come into prominent recognition. Los Angeles' *krumping* and Oakland's *turfing* are two such examples of dances whose births developed out of a combination of Hip Hop and the histories of street and social dances in California, where both hail from. Again, an overlap with Hip Hop does not capture all aspects of those genres, especially as they begin to branch off in distinct directions, including music production and expressions of spiritual worship and memorial practices. Yet Hip Hop offers an inroad to witnessing and understanding the unique contradictions of these burgeoning dance cultures.

II. New Directions in Hip Hop Dance Research

Though the scope of the literature on Hip Hop dances is limited, ongoing work indicates that this area of Hip Hop Studies will soon feature more prominently in the field. The 21st century ushered in a growing body of crucial analyses of Hip Hop dance cultures and practices. Joseph G. Schloss' *Foundation* (2008) is the most recognized examination of b-boying culture and aesthetics, yet more work is on the horizon whether it is from students, like Naomi Bragin, junior scholars such as Dr. Mary Fogarty and myself, or documentarian practitioners like Moncell Durden.

New studies on Hip Hop dances challenge Hip Hop scholars to consider its centrality rather than the peripheral impact on the culture, and on how we understand Hip Hop's roles around the world. Scholar and practitioner, Dr. Mary Fogarty has written extensively on breaking, perhaps because she is also a b-girl known as Mary Jane out of Toronto. Rather than re-hashing origin stories, a frequent topic in Hip Hop dance discussions, she delves into the aesthetic and cultural politics of contemporary and global practices. Fogarty explores areas of research that foreground the pivotal moment in the early 1990s when b-boying resurfaced as a dance of interest in North America, and other underexplored areas including musical tastes and values, cross-cultural aesthetic transmission, improvisation, apprenticeship culture, careers in Hip Hop dance, aging, Hip Hop dance in the academy, and soundscapes in Hip Hop dance movies.

In his forthcoming documentary, *Everything Remains Raw*, locker, house dancer, and choreographer Moncell "Ill Kosby" Durden draws together an incredible array of footage and interviews of dancers from different eras and genres to document both the aesthetic progenitors to Hip Hop dances and the histories entailed therein. He firmly embeds the aesthetic foundations of Hip Hop dance within the African diaspora, often foregrounding Latin American and Caribbean dimensions. What becomes clear in the film is that innovations in Hip Hop dance are re-contextualized forms of movement repeated over time, as with for example, the echoes of lindy hopper Al Minns in the 1920s that we see in Link of Mop Top Crew in the 1990s. Durden's work is a praisesong for the rich aesthetic depth of Hip Hop dance.

Naomi Bragin's studies of *popping*, *turfing*, and *waacking* set a new precedent for critical analyses of streetdances precisely because she gives long overdue attention to both long-standing and burgeoning dance practices. Like Fogarty and Durden, she is a practitioner as well, studying

the practices of those dances alongside their histories, discourses, and politics surrounding gender, race, class, and sexuality. The latter aspect of her work is largely absent from work on Hip Hop dances, which reminds us that dance, like all forms of cultural production, are political practices that allow people to literally perform their identities, and subvert or complicate the workings of power through the body.

In a similar vein, my own work on *b-boying* engages the politics of race, gender, and national different through a relatively more focused approach. My research on b-boying looks specifically at ritual dance circles (called "cyphers") and those elements essential to its dynamics. The project's central focus is on the dynamics of cyphers that are beyond the visual spectacle of their enactments, exploring the spiritual dimensions of cyphering, the cultural foundations born in conditions of socio-economic exclusion, the gendered politics of marginality, the dynamics of globalization evident in the transport of Hip Hop culture, and the effect of social networking cyphering dynamics. By focusing on both a specific genre of dance and a specific practice within that subculture, I use the physics concept of dark matter as a metaphor to emphasize that embodied understandings born in cyphering experiences are not visible to the naked eye, but remain nonetheless tangible elements of its practice. Cyphers act as theoretically rich sites to examine dance as a mode of communication across races, ethnicities, nationalities, genders, and generations.

Prominent across these new works are a focus on practitioners rather than representational analyses alone, and due attention on the global scope of Hip Hop practices, building on current ethnographic and international approaches in Hip Hop Studies. Hip Hop dances and the scholarship on them force us to understand Hip Hop differently. If we center movement and dance communities rather than the music, entirely new sets of question,

dynamics, peoples, places, and histories come to the fore. The beauty and spectacle of dancing only adds to its potential and its power. What is at stake in overlooking the dancers and the scholars researching them is a deeper and more accurate understanding of global Hip Hop culture.

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[1] Many practitioners write extensively about Hip Hop in popular forums online. Though they are not recognized as academic works, they do provide a highly valuable archive of Hip Hop dance and culture.

[2] Buck dances, wing dances, and jigs are a trilogy of dances that developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries that continue to resonate in African American social dances today. They are characterized by stomping, heavy-footed

percussive footwork (buck), flapping motions of the arms and legs (wing), and high-energy and fast-paced dancing (jig). *Thomas DeFrantz: Buck, Wing, and Jig* www.youtube.com/watch?v=A34OD4eA17o

[3] R. Vincent, *Funk: The Music, The People, & the Rhythm of the One* (St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), p. 13.

[4] J. Pabon, "Physical Graffiti: the History of Hip Hop Dance" in (ed.) J. Chang's *Total Chaos* (BasicCivitas, 2006), p. 23.

[5] Ibid.

[6] K. Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!": Underground Dance Music of New York City* (Wesleyan University Press, 2000) p. 111; T. Lawrence, "Beyond the Hustle: 1970s Social Dancing, Discotheque Culture, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Club Dancer" in (ed.) J. Malnig's *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake* (University of Illinois Press, 2008) p. 201.

[7] Lawrence 202.

[8] Lawrence 210; W. Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline & Disco," in (eds.) A. Ross and T. Rose's *Microphone Fiends* (Routledge, 1994) p. 149.

[9] See Fikentscher.

[10] The "b" in b-boying conventionally refers to "break," i.e. the break of a record that people dance to. First generation b-boy Trac2 says that when he first used it, the "b" meant "beat," because they were dancing to the beat rather than the "break"--a not yet common term. Finally, for some the "b" refers to "the Bronx," in reference to the dance's geographical roots. Ultimately, the "b" comes to represent a beginning point in the dance's culture that marks its first naming and thus its roots.

[11] J. Schloss, *Foundations: B-Boys, B-Girls, & Hip Hop Culture in New York City* (Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 132.

[12] M. Katz, *Groove Music: The Art & Culture of the Hip Hop DJ* (Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 14.

[13] See Israel (dir.) *The Freshest Kids*.

[14] R. Goldberg, "'All-American City' Puts the Freeze on Break Dancers," *The Wall Street Journal* (May 1, 1984).

[15] Though sometimes written as *Wrecking Shop* or *Wreck'n Shop*, its official title is spelled "Reck'n".

[16] M. Fogarty, "What ever happened to breakdancing?: Transnational b-boy/b-girl networks, underground video magazines and imagined *affinities*" (Master's Thesis, Brook University, 2006).