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Breaking the limits? Exploring the breaking scene in Havana, Cuba and belonging in a global (imagined) breaking community

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the findings from my initial foray into the Havana breaking scene in February 2020. Inspired by ethnomusicologist and hip hop scholar Joseph Schloss's (2009) ethnographic study of the New York breaking scene, I deploy three central aspects from his work: community as social entanglement, music as a creator of belonging, and movement as the connecting elements between dancers. I explore how these aspects are visible in Havana and suggest that there are various aspects, for example, heterogeneity, internet access and possibilities to travel, connect and exchange within a global dance community, that define the local breaking scene in Havana, which add to the three pillars Schloss develops from breaking itself. In addition, I question breaking's 'normed narratives' – for example, the assumption that b-boys and b-girls always draw inspiration from the United States, breaking's country of origin – to interrogate US and Eurocentric/western-nation perspectives. I also explore how I was able to dive in and conduct qualitative research with relative ease in a short period of time as a white European b-girl, hip hop, and dance scholar as well as a foreigner to Cuba's breaking scene.

KEYWORDS

foundation
movement
practice-of-theory
embodied knowledge
urban dance
breakdance
global hip hop nation
The Concept

I reflect on the importance of travelling as a means of knowledge acquisition, the idea of belonging to a 'Global Hip Hop Nation', an 'imagined community' and 'connective marginalities' as concepts to help untangle the forms of belonging within the global breaking community as they play out in Cuba. This research is based on a practice-of-theory approach that places the body at the centre of investigation enhanced with the idea of meaningful movement. Data is collected through participant field observation, qualitative interviews as well as my embodied and cultural knowledge as a b-girl, which informs my role as 'hybrid expert' in, and between, Havana's breaking scene.

In February 2020, before the corona virus pandemic forced the shutdown of global travel, I flew to Cuba. As an active b-girl, I was interested in exchanging with dancers to explore the local breaking scene. One of my crew mates knew two Havana-based dancers, Miguel and Tulio, thanks to a recurrent hip hop exchange project between Berlin and Havana. Having reached out to them before departing for Cuba, we felt immediately connected through our shared passion and praxis even before we met.[1]

I arrive in Havana, Cuba, in the early morning. Tulio and Miguel pick me up from the airport. Both are dancers from their soon-to-be founded urban-contemporary dance company known as The Concept. We meet up at a sandwich shop and talk about the Cuban breaking scene. They tell me that currently there aren't as many b-boys and no b-girls on the scene. A few years ago, it was different. The level of breaking was high and there where many b-boys. I wonder what happened and am eager to understand the dynamics of the breaking scene in a country that seems to be cut off from the rest of the (hip hop) world. With limited access to the global breaking community and opportunities for exchange, how does the scene in Cuba manifest itself?

In this article, I will discuss the findings from my initial foray into the Havana breaking scene during a one-week research trip in February 2020. I am inspired by ethnomusicologist and hip hop scholar Joseph Schloss's (2009) ethnographic work on the New York breaking scene. Here I became aware of three major aspects that I would like to deploy from his work: community as social entanglement, music as a creator of belonging and movement as connecting element between dancers. During my research it became clear that there is another question to reflect on: why can I, as a b-girl, hip hop and dance scholar (but also a foreigner to Cuba's breaking scene), dive in and conduct qualitative research with relative ease in such a short period of time? This reflection led me to understand the importance of travelling as a means of knowledge acquisition and the idea of belonging in a 'Global Hip Hop Nation' (Alim 2009: 3). I discovered an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006: 6; Huntington 2007) and 'connective marginalities' (Osumare 2001: 172) as concepts to help untangle the forms of belonging within the global breaking community as they play out in Cuba.

COMMUNITY, MUSIC AND MOVEMENT

Community: Breaking can be seen as a social and cultural practice, rooted in cultural traditions of the African diaspora (Rose 1994: 21; Schloss 2009: 155). It is grounded in face-to-face communication and mainly acquired through observation, imitation, peer-to-peer learning and each-one-teach-one informal pedagogy (Fogarty 2013: 58; Rappe and Stöger 2016: 120; Schloss 2009:

1. Cuba has a socialist political system and controls its citizens (e.g. repression of public criticism, refusal of travelling abroad) as well as the tourist sector and attempts to separate locals and foreigners (e.g. through two different currencies until 2021, specific accommodation system for tourists, neighbourhoods and localities nicely made up for tourists with prices that only foreigners can afford). Saunders (2015: 3) recalls how, in the time of her field research in Havana, it was forbidden for Cubans to be with foreigners and how she had to pretend to be a local in order not to get her Cuban friends into trouble (this law was cancelled in 2005). Today, exchanging with Cubans is possible, but without local friends it is difficult to see behind the tourist facade of the country and get an understanding of the challenges Cubans face in daily life. Next to economic embargoes by western states such as the United States, contributing to the island's isolation and product shortages, the Corona pandemic has caused another crisis in the country with shortages of food and medicines as well as strict lockdowns, resulting in demonstrations of the population and several arrests (Human Rights Watch 2022). The personal contact to Tulio and Miguel and their openness to invite me to their practice sessions, company rehearsals, and even their friend's wedding, as well as numerous discussions about hip hop, life in Cuba, and their visions as dancers were key

41). Personal interaction between and among breakers is central to community and this is apparent in practice spots, ciphers, battles and everywhere b-boys and b-girls come together to share knowledge with each other.

Music: Breaking movements are deeply connected to breakbeats, the musical structures from which they emerge. Music provides rhythmic inspiration for dancers' movements as well as the historical reference to breaking's origins (Schloss 2009: 17–18). A 'b-boy canon' (Schloss 2006: 418–19), which includes historical songs and shared 'musical tastes' (Fogarty 2010: 93, 130), circulates in breaking communities. It creates belonging between dancers in local scenes while forging a global community of dancers.

Movement: Since breaking becomes visible through movement, being among and with and watching how and what others do is the first aspect that draws dancers to the practice. B-girls and b-boys construct their identities in a global subcultural scene by exploring the practice, creating an individual *style* and recognizing each other through the creation of an intercultural body (Kimminich 2010; Langnes and Fasting 2014: 361–62; Osumare 2002: 36).

While Schloss's observations are specific to New York City, how do these three aspects shape Havana's breaking scene? As the widely acknowledged birth place of breaking, the New York scene was and remains a heterogeneous mix of breaking pioneers and up-and-coming young dancers (Schloss 2009: 11). It is 'a mixture of the past with the present […] that does not exist in other places' (Schloss 2009: 12). Because breaking is a worldwide practice, Schloss's research on New York's breaking scenes seems applicable around the globe. Still, each scene is specific and Schloss's observations must be revised and refined whenever we apply them to other breaking scenes. What are the limits, and who breaks them?

TRAVELLING AND THE GLOBAL (IMAGINED) COMMUNITY OF DANCERS

Breaking[2] emerged in the 1970s as an element of hip hop culture with in predominantly African American and Puerto Rican communities in postindustrial New York (Pabon 2004; Rose 1994). In the early 1980s, breaking spread globally after mainstream media appropriated it (Mitchell 2001). Today's global[3] circulations and exchanges occur through media platforms and social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Still, face-to-face communication and physical interaction are vital to connect in the global breaking community, to motivate and inspire, to circulate implicit and explicit cultural knowledge's and to facilitate and negotiate the development of dance culture (Fogarty 2010; Frost 2022b).

Thus, with in breaking, b-girls and b-boys learn by exchanging with other dancers in local practice spots or the next breaking event. They travel near and far to get to know new dancers and find inspiration and motivation. Travelling is common and a means of knowledge acquisition. If possible and with little financial means, b-girls and b-boys travel around the globe to meet and mingle with dancers worldwide. B-girl, dance and popular culture scholar Mary Fogarty (2011) asserts that travelling, especially to the place of origin of a dance culture to learn from pioneers, is mandatory for enriching a dancer's portfolio. Mostly, when b-girls or b-boys travel to new countries or cities, we are already in contact with the local dancers beforehand (like I was with Tulio and Miguel). Connected to the global breaking community, we actively seek out and discover local practice spots.

for my research. I am grateful for their trust and for allowing me to use any material from field observations and interviews in this article.

2. Breaking, b-boying and b-girling are the terms circulating in the breaking scene; the term breakdance was coined by the media, is seen as commercial terminology and is rejected by many practitioners of the 'global' breaking community (Fogarty 2013: 53). Schloss (2009: 15, 64–66) argues that b-boying is a gender-inclusive term, but as a b-girl myself I feel that it highlights male dominance in the scene. As we are currently working on gender equality within breaking, I prefer to use breaking as the gender-neutral term. In Cuba, dancers use dominantly the term b-boying – maybe due to the lack of b-girls?

3. By the term 'global', I do not refer to a Eurocentric perspective that often limits the term to describe the western world. I refer to breaking as a transnational practice that is widespread on all continents, creates the opportunity for practitioners to travel all over the globe and exchange with the local breaking communities.

In global hip hop culture, the connection between dancers meeting online or via international travel, is replete with the idea of 'nationhood' which Alim formulates as the 'Global Hip Hop Nation', a 'multilingual, multiethnic "nation" with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical given's of the present' (Alim 2009: 3). Nationhood cultivates belonging to an *imagined community* due to shared values and interests (Anderson 2006: 6) between and across ethnocultural lines (Alim 2009), as between Havana and Berlin. For b-girls and b-boys, it is common sense to be welcomed into breaking scenes around the globe and to engage in exchanges with local dancers.

Dancer and dance historian Carla Stalling Huntington (2007: 32) has already applied Anderson's concept of the imagined community to dance to suggest that an imagined community of dancers is created by the practitioners shared 'emic'[4] approach in hip hop dance practices, that embraces movement as connected to its cultural and historical context (Huntington 2007: 32, 38). I want to adapt this idea to explain b-girls' and b-boys' senses of identification with and belonging to a worldwide breaking scene which, in turn, creates an *imagined community* through their subcultural, creative, meaningful and *embodied* practices.

Furthermore, the concept of 'connective marginalities' (2001: 172) by popular culture scholar and choreographer Halifu Osumare is meaningful here, encompassing 'the gamut of culture' (2001: 174), and thus also the two cultures between Havana and Berlin, where 'class, historical oppression, and generation' (2001: 174) intermingle, exchange, coexist and collaborate. These connective marginalities may refer to practitioners with experiences of racial oppression, sociopolitical marginalization, or sexual oppression – for example, youth in Cuba (Osumare 2001: 172) or Turkish youth in Berlin (Kaya 2001). Essentially, they are young people who strive to express themselves through hip hop dance practices. As dancers, we create connection and belonging through the physical body language, across ethnographical lines.

According to Schloss (2009: 15), the global breaking scene strives for meritocratic participation through skill, performance and involvement. The racial and sociocultural backgrounds of the practitioners or their experiences of marginalization are not pre-conditions for access and participation in breaking, but should lead to an awareness of and appreciation for this dance culture, its history and its Black cultural heritage (Johnson 2011: 187–89). As a transnational culture (Nitzsche 2013; Osumare 2002; Welsch 1995), breaking has united various influences from the beginning. It shares aesthetics, codes and traditions that create meaning and refer to transcultural movements and cultural traditions developed by, and within, the African diaspora while incorporating influences from the freshest popular cultural trends and movement practices (Chang 2005; DeFrantz 2004; Frost 2022a; Hazzard-Donald 1996; Osumare 2002; Rappe 2010; Rose 1994).

Inspiration is found and shared by participants all over the globe. Breaking movements follow these transnational flows, get picked up and diversified, and enable dancers to construct their identity through the shared creative expression of breaking (Osumare 2001, 2002). Through local appropriations of dance, the 'flow of Hip Hop movement to countries around the globe' (Johnson 2009: 117) and breaking's fundamental approach of improvisation and innovation (DeFrantz 2004: 236), b-girls and b-boys create a diversity of breaking practices, embedded in the geographic and sociopolitical culture of their respective scenes (see Kaya 2001; Osumare 2002: 41–42). B-girls and b-boys create

4. Huntington considers an emic approach and participation in hip hop dance practices as '*emic* when written and read within historical social contexts' (Huntington 2007: 38, original emphasis).

'a counterhegemonic international language as different bodily dialects of the same b-boy language' (Osumare 2002: 41) as well as an 'Intercultural Body' (2002: 39) that contains cues from the practice that allows dancers the world over to recognize and interact with each other in ciphers, battles or in public events even if they have not previously spoken or met. Thus, participants from all over the world, including myself, can recognize each other and feel a sense of belonging to a global community through transnational, embodied dance practices.

BELONGING TO THE GLOBAL BREAKING COMMUNITY AS A WHITE B-GIRL

I am a *white*, cis-gendered, European b-girl. Since I was raised and socialized in Germany and first got to know breaking in Berlin, I hold a German/European perspective on the global breaking scene. With roughly twenty years of participation as dancer, judge, organizer, dance pedagogue, cultural activist and later, a hip hop scholar, I feel that I belong to this global imagined community of b-girls and b-boys, particularly through the shared creative expression of dance. I am an *insider* of breaking culture.[5] I grew up in a single-mother, low-income family in Kreuzberg, a district in Berlin, Germany. As a hotspot of hip hop culture in the early 2000s that bore the imprint of global migration, Kreuzberg was a diverse space where young people with predominantly Turkish backgrounds (Kaya 2001: 88ff, 155ff) could interact. For me, hip hop and breaking offered not only an opportunity for creative expression, but the chance to participate and find belonging in a local community with little financial means. It also created a way to connect to local youth with diverse racial backgrounds.

Still, my interpretation of the dance as a European b-girl and academic will differ from others. It depends on my individual perspective, experiences, socialization and privileges. I am not marginalized in terms of race and spatial identity, but I can relate to those who are marginalized by class and especially gender. Breaking remains a male-dominated culture shaped by heteronormative gender constructions. Since the male body is seen as a reference point and b-girls are constantly benchmarked against b-boys, the participation of b-girls in the culture is regularly questioned or downplayed (Güngör et al. 2021; Gunn 2016). During my time on the scene I have experienced sexism, exclusion, discrimination and marginalization due to my gender (and class), both in and outside hip hop culture. Still, and perhaps somewhat controversially, breaking can offer a space of identity expression away from hegemonic gender stereotypes.[6]

My privilege is my white racial identity and my German passport. Connected with my long-term involvement in breaking, both provide me with the possibility to travel and to conduct research on the breaking scene in Havana. I'm able to meet dancers around the world and become a part of a global, imagined community of dancers. That allows me to share my creative expression with others in breaking's connective marginalities that might not have the opportunity to travel. Thus, breaking is transnational and as an active b-girl I feel that I belong to the global breaking community. Since breaking is subversive and African American by heritage, and since I am part of a *white* academic education system, I find it critically important to apprehend and understand the fine line between cultural appreciation and appropriation whenever I switch between the roles of practitioner and scholar. I am aware of my critical role as a *white*, German researcher, especially in marginalized

5. Since I started breaking in 2001, I have been organizing breaking events and projects, travelling to participate or judge breaking events or exchange with local dancers and dance pioneers in Europe as well as in countries such as Canada, India, Mexico, Morocco, Singapore, the United States or Vietnam. Here, I was always interested in the specifics of the local dance scenes, eager to understand the cultural uniqueness of each place.

6. African American Studies and dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson points out diverse expressions of femininity that b-girls 'contend with dominant discourses in order to embody non-hegemonic, marginalized femininities' (2014: 16) and enable identification.

breaking scenes like in Cuba. I write this article as independent researcher, Ph.D. student and freelance dancer. This article offers observations about what I experienced and learned during a short, one-week stay in Havana. Showcasing members of *The Concept* and dancers in Paseo del Prado, this article does not address the entirety of Cuban hip hop culture. Instead, it presents a specific case study about one corner of Havana's breaking scene.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

I work with a practice-of-theory approach that places the body at the centre of the research (Reckwitz 2003). It is enhanced with the idea of meaningful movement, often cited by practitioners themselves as well as hip hop scholars, sometimes linked to the concept of signifying (Dodds 2016; Gates 1988; Osumare 2002; Rappe 2010; Schloss 2009). To grasp movement as meaningful, the 'diacritical approach' to movement by sports scholar Monika Fikus and (sports) philosopher Volker Schürmann (2004: 31) offers a theoretical pathway. Developed from a movement-philosophical approach, this diacritical approach has been theoretically applied to dance by sport and dance scholar Denise Temme (2015). Within my research, I apply the concept to breaking by observing dancers in ciphers, battles and practice spots. I am interested in their movements. What can we learn from them and what they can reveal to us?

During my research in Havana, I conducted an initial participatory field observation with dancers in action, based on the qualitative ethnographic research method known as thick description (Geertz 2015), which emphasizes the importance of collecting and analysing data in the environment of any given practice (2015: 21). In breaking, these environments (practice places, ciphers or battles) are fluid. They depend on, and are shaped by, local peculiarities. My belonging to the global breaking community, which foregrounds dance as means of expression and/or the shared experiences of professional dancers, enables me to visit and flow in and out of breaking scenes to connect with local dancers. During my short visit in Havana, I had the opportunity to meet dancers every day and become part of their busy schedules.

My field observations in Havana resulted in new questions, for which I needed to better understand the Cuban context. In order to give voice to the dancers themselves as well as to challenge my own European perspective, I decided to include qualitative interviews with local dancers – who I understand as experts – to enable the most extensive data collection possible (Gläser and Laudel 2009). These interviews were based on qualitative research criteria (Mayring 2016) and aimed to complement the results obtained during participant observation. Since qualitative research is a dynamic process of interaction (Mayring 2016: 32), the research and collected data refer to a specific context – in this case, Havana's breaking scene.

Since I had already been in contact with the dancers of *The Concept* several weeks before my trip and our belonging to the global breaking community created a personal connection, they were open to my participation in their activities and my interview questions. I was able to interview them several times over the duration of my stay, to review and discuss the insights I had gained in the field, and to constantly reflect on my white-German female point-of-view as an academic and dancer. Unfortunately, I was only able to interview male breakers, as there were no b-girls in Havana at the time of my stay. While this data reflects a male point-of-view, I hope to address its

masculine bias by critically reflecting on my own positionality as a female researcher and dancer.

Alongside field observations, qualitative interviews, and a review of the literature, my own (dancing) body is a medium for research and an archive of knowledge (Frost 2022b). Like dance scholar Sherril Dodds (2018: 246), I recognize embodied knowledge as an invaluable information source that enriches academic research on breaking. The connection of embodied and cultural knowledge and the involvement in hip hop practice with academic epistemology fuses duelling perspectives. Following philosopher Hubert Dreyfus's (2001 [1978]: 12) concept of 'experienced hybrid', which describes a person that is physically and theoretically involved in a practice, I call a person that combines these two perspectives on breaking a 'hybrid expert'. By suffusing my involvement in breaking with the academic discourse, I understand myself as a 'hybrid expert'. My research is equally informed by my embodied and cultural knowledge on breaking earned through my role as b-girl and hip hop activist as well as my research on dance and my perspective as a hip hop scholar (see Frost 2022b). Without my own embodied knowledge gained through twenty years as a b-girl, it would have been difficult to meaningfully explore Havana's breaking scene in one week of participant observation. The study of breaking, and possibly the hip hop arts more generally, necessitates hybrid experts.

HIP HOP CULTURE IN CUBA

Most studies on hip hop culture in Cuba privilege rap music as a 'medium for social critique' (Saunders 2012: 45). Research topics include identity, subversive practices and activism, politics or race (Fernandes 2006; Hankin 2017; Klien 2009; Saunders 2012, 2015), negotiations of nationalism, institutionalization and assimilation of rap by Cuban cultural politics (Baker 2005, 2011) or the representation and reception of Cuban hip hop by foreign cultural producers (Baker 2014). Neither of these studies addresses hip hop dance practices.

Cuban hip hop can be defined as a transnational, African-diasporic cultural practice (Hankin 2017; Saunders 2012). Rap artists in Cuba draw from US hip hop as their primary source of inspiration, but they add their local spin to it (Klien 2009). As Cuba is an African and European multiracial society (Saunders 2012: 49), the individual cultural heritage of each hip hop practitioner enables them to innovate local hip hop practices.

When and how hip hop came to Cuba is not entirely clear. Following Saunders (2012) and Baker (2005), rap music emerged in Cuba in the 1990s, but hip hop culture, and especially breaking, had already arrived on the island through US-radio transmissions, films, television broadcasts and US-American soldiers stationed in eastern Cuba in the early 1980s.

When asked about influential movies, hip hop practitioners frequently name *Beat Street*, *Flashdance* and *Wild Style* (Saunders 2012). Since breaking only requires a breaking-able body[7] and some space, it proved to be very accessible for the Cuban youth (Klien 2009). As there is no language barrier which has to be overcome, breaking can be imitated immediately. Even the world-famous Cuban ballet dancer, choreographer and director Carlos Acosta claims he experimented with breaking in 1983 when he was about 10 years old (Mackrell 2003).

Hip hop culture developed as a social and subversive practice in Cuban society, both promoting and turning against the socialist political system

7. What is a breaking-able body? Breaking challenges our ideas of 'abled' and 'disabled' bodies. Movements can be executed with different bodies that do not need to meet our social norms of an 'able body'.

(Klien 2009). Official Cuban cultural politics attempts to make art accessible to all Cubans and offers free music education and/or governmental benefits for producing music professionally. Hence, (commercial) cultural production and artistic freedom is largely controlled by the government (Klien 2009). An *Agencia Cubana de Rap* was implemented in 2002 to support rap musicians, and rap became part of official cultural policy (Baker 2005; Saunders 2015: 2). Unfortunately, this agency focuses on music only and does not support other hip hop practices such as graffiti and breaking. Additionally, the annual *Festival Internacional de Rap* brings international rap stars to Cuba to give concerts, organize film screenings and hold panel discussions (Baker 2005, 2011). To the best of my knowledge, the festival includes a breaking battle. Still, not all hip hop activists agree with governmental guidance and its support system, suggesting that official support limits artistic freedom. As a result, they try to keep their art 'underground' and independent (Saunders 2012: 46).

SEARCHING FOR THE LOCAL PRACTICE SPOT: MEETING DANCERS FROM PASEO DEL PRADO

I wander aimlessly through the streets of Centro Habana. Two young men approach me with a dynamic, swinging walk. They wear jeans and sweatpants, sneakers and baseball caps. To me, they look like dancers. I greet them, they are surprised. 'Are you dancers?' I ask them in English. They confirm by nodding their heads. 'B-boys?' I ask. Yes, they break and dance other styles, too. 'Cool, I am a b-girl and I was looking for the local practice spot', I say. They don´t believe me. 'B-boying?' They ask. 'Well, yes, breaking!' I confirm. They are on their way to practice, and I ask if I can join. Of course! 'Come, come! Let´s go! Let´s practice!' We arrive at Paseo del Prado, a big esplanade in the city centre that functions as the local practice spot. It's a weekday around 5 o'clock in the afternoon. We are some of the first dancers to arrive. Music is playing: hip hop, Afrobeat and popular songs from recent US charts.

As Osumare states, 'the body language of ordinary life of a hip hop practitioner projects encoded cues that allow other b-boys or b-girls to literally recognize him/her' (2002: 39). The two young men I recognized as dancers led me to the local practice spot, as each local scene has specific places where its members meet, exchange and practise. Here, b-boys and b-girls occupy

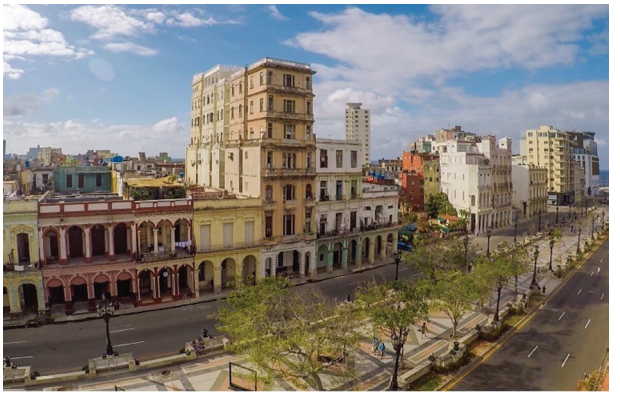

Figure 1: The promenade of Paseo del Prado in Centro Habana, the local practice spot for many urban dancers in Havana.

local sites wherever the floor suits the movements. At Paseo del Prado a part of Havana's local dance community meets to practise. B-boys, hip hop and – what they classify as 'Afrodance' dancers – come together to practise, socialize and exchange dance moves. They use different musical genres to which they adapt their dancing, and breaking movements mix with hip hop and 'Afrodance' steps. The dancers present small choreographies and then jump back to their individual practice minute by minute. They seem to hugely enjoy the collaborative activities of the other dancers and the movements they co-create.

I observe the movement of the dancers and understand that they focus on *spectacular moves*. I refer to *spectacular movements* as power moves, tricks, air moves, or other acrobatic movements that impress the audience with momentum, velocity, rotation, balance, energy and obviously difficult techniques.[8] These movements often become signifiers for a cool urbanity in commercial media shows, advertisements or music videos. Observing the quality and flow of the movements of the b-boys at Paseo del Prado, I find the basic steps that usually accompany a dancer's solo here to be lacking. This suggests that these practitioners are not knowledgeable about the historical foundations of breaking. Additionally, they play whatever music is popular, not necessarily breaking's musical canon that has determined the tempo and rhythm of breaking movements for decades (Schloss 2009: 18). They dance in whatever way and with whatever music they enjoy. In their multi-generic practice, there is not necessarily a reference to breaking's emergence through movement (by movement foundation) or a reference to a collective history via musical selections (Schloss 2009: 28, 39). Still, their focus on movement creates a vivid community that meets regularly at Paseo del Prado.

8. Spectacular movements is not a term derived from breaking culture. I have chosen this term because it most accurately describes the arsenal of movements realized in Havana. It contains for instance powermoves, combinations with tricks or freezes and acrobatic or air moves. These spectacular movements can be inspired by other practices like gymnastics, capoeira, martial arts, tricking or parkour.

NEGOTIATIONS OF BELONGING IN A LOCAL BREAKING SCENE

We form a small cipher and take turns. Our ciphering is constantly disrupted by the switching from individual dancing to choreography. I get restless, I miss the true exchange of movement that constitutes my ideal cipher, the kind that makes me feel comfortable and at home in any place or country – by sharing the cipher, dancing together and exchanging through movement. Physical interaction makes me feel a part of the global community of dancers. My presence seems to change their regular practice: I am guest and a woman so the dancers, all male, want to impress me by showing off their best moves and choreographed routines. But I know that if I showcase my own skills, I can convince them to focus on my dance and less on my gender. Thus, I show off some of my more spectacular moves and they seem convinced of my abilities as a b-girl. Proving myself with my skills, they decide if I am to be accepted to participate in their dance community.

It is interesting: I feel that I belong to a global breaking community, but I cannot decide if I can participate at Paseo del Prado. The dancers of the local spot decide if they accept me and my movement skills seem to help me to be accepted. The meritocracy that breaking claims (Schloss 2009: 15) offers me a possibility of participation. Are movement skills the 'invitation' to this local scene, the possibility to belong to a global breaking community through shared creative expression? I feel that physical interaction, the dancing and exchange of movements, is the way dancers who just met are able to immediately connect. This connection creates an understanding through body language that doesn't need words. It is the movement and this breaking-specific body

language that creates meaning and belonging, what Osumare describes as 'Intercultural Body' (2002: 39).

At the same time, I do feel that I am judged in terms of gender. According to cultural studies scholar and b-girl Rachel Gunn, the 'meritocracy of hip hop culture does not extend to the female participant, who is more often judged before any kind of involvement' (Gunn 2016: 56). This is exactly what I experience here. I feel that the heteronormative structures of breaking are in play. Cultural studies and music scholar Michael Rappe and music pedagogy scholar Christine Stöger (2017: 140) propose that b-girls form two identities in breaking: a female identity and a hip hop identity. To me it feels as though my hip hop identity wants to be accepted as a dancer but that my female identity interferes in its effort to create belonging.

Belonging to the imagined community seems to have several layers and is intertwined with the heteronormative structures of breaking. While my movement skills (and, thus, the meritocracy) allow me to participate in this local community, the heteronormative structures of breaking interfere. The conceptual community of dancers is not only an imagined community because we conceive of being part of a global scene (even though we do not know all participants), but also because it is not certain that I can or will be accepted the moment I arrive in a local community practice spot. In such locations, the imagined community becomes real, and it can be inclusive or exclusive, thus determining the belonging, or not, of a visitor.

SPECTACULAR MOVES SERVING A CAUSE

After we dance a little while, they ask me to teach them a move. I am happy to share some moves as they invited me to join their practice and embrace hip hop's each-one-teach-one principle. I demonstrate a diagonal travelling handstand that can be used to connect various spectacular moves, and two b-boys in particular exercise it and combine it with their own individual movements. As I have a meeting with Tulio and Miguel to practise in the evening, I say goodbye, and two b-boys accompany me until the end of the promenade. They seem happy with my visit and ask me to come back again.

For me, in the dance community of Paseo del Prado it becomes noticeably clear that the dancers I met valorize spectacular movements and that the cultural knowledge of breaking, which is summed up in the concept Foundation, which emanates from the New York breaking scene and which Schloss formally wrote into the historical record in his book Foundation (2009). Dancers refer to *Foundation* as fundamental breaking movements interconnected with the cultural knowledge, and Schloss describes *Foundation* as

> an almost mystical set of notions about b-boying [and b-girling] that is passed from teacher to student. In addition to the actual physical movements, it includes the history of the movements and the form in general, strategies for how to improvise, philosophy about dance in general, musical associations, and a variety of other subjects.
>
> (2009: 12)

To remain visible and resist dilution and cultural appropriation, it is a claim of many b-girls and b-boys of the New York breaking scene, but also of many protagonists around the globe, that it is essential for b-girls and b-boys to

remember breaking's cultural foundations and oral history, to gesture towards its cultural heritage in New York City. The question that pops up in my mind is: Who has *access* and who can *acquire* Foundation? For the dancers at Paseo del Prado, it looks like dance and physical movement is more important than wider cultural attachment. I wonder why that is the case – a lack of interest or knowledge? Or do they focus on spectacular movements to impress external audiences to generate work in the tourism sector?

I speak with Tulio and Miguel about my visit to Paseo del Prado and my assumption about the importance of spectacular moves. They confirm my observations and tell me that acrobatic and dynamic movements are highly valued in the Cuban breaking scene. Mastering them creates work opportunities in the tourism industry, which is a major business in Havana. Additionally, the dancer with the most spectacular movements usually wins battles here – which garners fame and reputation in the local dance community. Another suggestion could be the possibility to earn income by busking as a breaker on the promenade. Yet in Havana dancers are not allowed to give street shows to earn money. Paseo del Prado is solely a space to practise, exchange, hang out and pass the time. The boulevard is a public space for leisure activities where local citizens meet for dance sessions (for instance, Salsa), play music, or just hang out.

Tulio and Miguel seem to separate themselves from the community at Paseo del Prado. They have a holistic, cultural approach to breaking and tell me that they are not interested in doing spectacular moves; instead, they want to learn about the history and the culture of breaking. It seems like they no longer need spectacular moves to access work opportunities, as they no longer work in the tourism sector but create their own choreographies and shows. Thus, they did their own research, invested considerable time extensively watching and imitating movements in videos to practise the fundamental moves of the dance form. Further, they have gained cultural knowledge by meeting and exchanging with dancers when travelling during their assignments or by participating in exchange projects. Like that, Tulio and Miguel created networks to the global (imagined) dance community, and visiting dancers like me often contact them to exchange and practise together, which in turn enables further acquisition of dance knowledge. We spent hours discussing breaking history, the Cuban and German breaking scenes, our dance philosophy and work as dancers. Here, it became clear that personal exchange with visiting dancers is key to access deeper cultural knowledge. Consequently, they inherited the concept of each-one-teach-one, widely known as informal knowledge transmission in global hip hop (Singh and Dattatreyan 2016). Each-one-teach-one can be described as 'informal education' that 'reminds each member of the local community of their educational duties to each other' (Singh and Dattatreyan 2016: 57) and thus helps to mediate (cultural) knowledge to peers – mostly a selected group of people. *The Concept* inherited this ethical pedagogy of knowledge sharing and created their own small community to support, motivate, inspire and above all, teach one another.

Due to different access and approaches to breaking and the varying possibilities of professionalization, it seems that two different breaking communities have emerged in Havana: on the one hand, *The Concept* (with its access to cultural knowledge and reach into an exchange with a global community of dancers) and on the other, the dancers from Paseo del Prado who have limited access to cultural exchange but who value spectacular movements.

TRAVELLING, INTERNET TROUBLES AND THE GENERATION GAP

Tulio and Miguel work as professional dancers. They teach breaking in schools, perform shows with The Concept*, or dance in music videos that are filmed in Cuba for international stars. With the opportunity to visit other countries through work in touring (dinner) shows, they travelled through Europe and lived in Zurich and Berlin for several months. Now, Tulio and Miguel focus on establishing* The Concept*, to be able to tour (inter)nationally.*

Travelling is therefore, one of the major ways to gain cultural knowledge in the breaking scene and to connect to the global (imagined) community of dancers. New and sustainable knowledge is predominantly exchanged through personal interaction. Through travel, dancers can visit numerous breaking events where lectures are held, experts or pioneers teach, or dance culture and its history are discussed. After those happenings, dancers often share their acquired knowledge with their local breaking community peer-group through the each-one-teach-one concept.

For Cuban dancers, it is nearly impossible to travel outside the island due to strict visa policies. Yet if Tulio and Miguel could travel due to their professional work as dancers, what about the dancers of Paseo del Prado? As far as I understood, the dancers I met did not have the possibility to travel outside Cuba. What does that mean regarding a feeling of belonging to a global, imagined community of dancers? Without the possibility to travel, there are other sources needed to learn breaking movements and acquire cultural knowledge. This can come from visiting dancers from outside Cuba (like me), but these visits and subsequent access to knowledge are limited and cannot be foreseen. Additionally, visiting dancers might only connect with *The Concept*, and shared knowledge might stay within their peer-group. But in breaking communities there is another resource which is an important means of knowledge acquisition and exchange: the internet. This leads to another difficulty: the internet is not always available and is often too expensive for many Cubans.

After my arrival in Havana, Tulio and Miguel help me to set up a data plan on my Cuban sim card. It is expensive and takes some time. 'Cuba is a different planet, time passes differently here', they say, warning me not to 'open Facebook or Instagram with your phone! We only use WhatsApp here'. Welcome back to the offline world! As Facebook and Instagram are the main tools to connect with dancers worldwide and to promote oneself as a dancer, I wonder how Tulio and Miguel stay connected. 'We have "Facebook light" which uses less data, only seldom Instagram, and communicate through WhatsApp – it's cheaper than SMS or phone calls'. With limited access to online (video) platforms to connect with others, it slowly dawns on me how limited one is as a dancer in Cuba.

Today the international breaking scene has a huge number of resources via online platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook or Instagram. Access appears unlimited: breaking videos, interviews, documentaries, tutorials and event livestreams are constantly available. But what about those with limited internet access? 'If we want to download videos, we buy one hour of internet, go to one of the Wi-Fi spots in the city and download as much as we can', says Tulio. Internet access does not seem to be that problematic in Cuba, does it? Not at first glance. But if you understand more about the situation in Cuba, including income and prices, it quickly becomes clear that the internet is a luxury good. In addition to high costs, Wi-Fi hotspots in the city offer unstable connections. Furthermore, downloads are not always possible, and access to certain platforms is often blocked.[9]

9. Although internet access was extended in 2017 (Human Rights Watch 2022), Cuba still blocks access to online platforms such as Zoom and Twitch, making online exchange and participation for Cuban artists (e.g. online lectures and conferences) difficult or impossible.

For dancers in Cuba, acquiring knowledge on breaking is difficult and precious and dancers have to work with the resources they have. Since many older b-boys from the previous generation have emigrated to other countries for better work possibilities or free artistic expression, many are no longer available to pass on their acquired knowledge. Thus, a generation gap is developing. With dancers that could teach the younger generation about breaking out of the picture, the dance scene has been impacted. Fogarty observes that 'older dancers clearly shape the development of younger dancers, and their performance of taste is an integral part of this relationship, both in terms of aesthetic expression and in demonstrating competence in the culture's codes and conventions' (2013: 54). Older dancers take important roles in the breaking scene, as they develop from being a dancer to the roles of coaches, organizers, leaders and/or mentors. This creates the infrastructure needed to maintain a consistent and sustainable breaking scene (Fogarty 2013: 54). The heterogeneity in age and experience of dancers in any breaking scene is important so that knowledge can be passed on. Schloss states that

> the way the dance is taught exerts a profound influence on the way it is experienced. It affects the way individuals understand the history of the form and their own place in it, the way they express their individual and group identities, and the way they pass this knowledge on to others.
>
> (2009: 41)

The lack of older b-girls and b-boys to mentor younger dancers results in a lack of movement skills, cultural knowledge, musical competence, inspiration and especially role models: it is more difficult to acquire knowledge. Tulio confirms my conclusions and states that 'we have a lot of good dancers with good movements and good creativity. But they need guidance, a vision'. The need for the mentorship of experienced dancers is reinforced due to the limited access to online platforms, where knowledge on breaking culture and movement skills typically circulates. But even if knowledge is available online, it needs to be evaluated as important, correct or false. In contrast to Havana, in New York, breaking pioneers are part of the local dance scene and the heterogeneity of the scene regarding experience and knowledge creates a direct source for the local dancers and the possibility of passing on of first-hand knowledge (Schloss 2009: 12).

INSPIRATION AND BATTLES IN THE CUBAN BREAKING SCENE

As Schloss has argued, breaking's 'primary expressive environment is the battle' (2009: 11). Likewise, ciphers and battles are crucially important for Cuban b-boys. Battles are places for dancers to exchange, compete and benchmark themselves against others as well as to meet and mingle with the local or imagined global community of dancers. Not only are battles important physical places, recorded battle-videos (ciphers seldom get recorded and/or uploaded) inspire dancers (Fogarty 2010).

When I asked about inspiration and the learning process, most dancers spoke about one specific battle: the RedBull BC One 2005. The narrative of this event has been handed down from dancer to dancer many years after the actual event took place, as the video footage was one of the few available opportunities to directly learn from international breakers. This battle can be understood as one of the historical events that has had a major impact on the

breaking scene in Havana. The dancers who are perhaps most remembered are Lilou (France), Hong10 (Korea) and Pelezinho (Brazil) – world-renowned b-boys famous for their spectacular moves. This might explain why, in addition to tourism work opportunities, a majority of Cuban breakers valorize spectacular movements. One interesting fact about these international b-boys is that none of them are from the United States. Hence, it appears that a major source of inspiration for the dancers I met in Cuba does not come from breaking's country of origin, but from available video sources and the dancers in these sources that impress and inspire.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, there were few breaking events in Cuba. However, one of the prime locations for dancers was Fábrica de Arte Cubano, a local nightlife hotspot. Dancers from Paseo del Prado emphasized the importance of ciphers happening in la Fábrica, and they urged me to go there.

MUSIC, MOVEMENT AND THE CIPHER IN LA FÁBRICA DE ARTE CUBANO

When I arrive at la Fábrica, I am immediately surprised. The complex could be anywhere: Berlin, London or New York. La Fábrica is a spacious industrial building that contains various bars, stages and rooms with live music or DJ booths, numerous art galleries and a pop-up art shop. Between young and old and from locals to tourists, the visitors are heterogeneous. I am here with dancers from The Concept. *We end up in a big room with live salsa music. Later, a DJ starts to spin some hip hop tracks. We get excited and start dancing some toprocks. A guy approaches me: 'Hello my friend! Nice to see you!' He is one of the two young men who introduced me to the practice spot on Paseo del Prado. I am happy to see him here and am curious what will happen next. As soon a breakbeat booms out of the speakers, a cipher opens. The energy is high, and the dancers, mixing various dance styles together, take turns trying to impress the audience. The audience responds by cheering. But then it is time for the breakers. A b-boy jumps into the cipher and shows off his spectacular moves, which excite the audience even more. But then the dancers from Paseo del Prado want to see me dance. I jump in and drop my own spectacular moves. The dancers scream and jump around, and I am pleased by their positive response. On my way back home, the energy and power of the cipher lingers and I feel that the dancers, their movements, and the music all combined create a profound sense of community.*

According to African American studies and dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2009: 78), the cipher can be described as a space of personal uplift, exchange, energy and even spiritual experiences. Regardless of differences and diversities in culture, language, movement approaches or personal connections among and between dancers, to me the cipher seems to be *the* place of unity and community in breaking. In the cipher at la Fábrica, I felt connection to practitioners through the shared creative expression of dance and the energy of a shared experience. It left me with a feeling of deep happiness to be able to share this moment through a global dance culture and community – which in this moment was not imagined, but real. For a moment it felt like I, a foreigner, was part of the local breaking community.

THE BODY-AND-MUSIC CONNECTION

After a long walk to the bus station, a 30-minute bus ride and another ten-minute walk, I arrive at the Casa de la Cultura Mirta Aguirre, where the dancers from The Concept *practise on Thursdays. The stone floor is hard, but the small place allows*

you to dance in a safe and clean space. We start a short breaking session and every dancer takes turns in the cipher to show their skills, including me. Breakbeats boom from a Bluetooth speaker. We react to the musical accents with kicks, freezes and stops and applaud when a dancer hits a musical accent particularly successfully. Then the music changes. Abstract and atmospheric hip hop beats change the dynamics of our movements. I can observe from the movements of the other dancers that they are experienced and know how to use their bodies in new musical contexts. Their movements fuse breaking, hip hop movements and contemporary dance techniques. No longer dictating the meter or the rhythm of movements, the music offers an open and experimental approach for a creative development of movement in the moment. We watch excitedly as every dancer in the middle of the circle conveys a story with their bodies. The music stops; the session is over. What remains is the confirmation of the strong connection between music and movement, and the influence of the music on the dancer's movement dynamics.

Just as Schloss (2009: 29) describes a direct reaction of the dancers to the way they move when a DJ plays a certain song, I could see a direct change of movement rhythm and energy in the dancers' bodies when the music changed in our cipher. Music functions as a key aspect in breaking and dancers often describe their bodily connection to the music as powerful and even spiritual (Schloss 2009: 18, 105). As breakbeats contributed to the emergence of breaking in New York City in the 1970s, the practice is deeply connected to their funk drum patterns that provide the rhythm, tempo, dynamic and expressiveness for the dancers' movements (Schloss 2006: 419, 2009: 23–24) and create a cultural-historical reference because b-boys and b-girls dance to the same records on which the dance form was created. These 'socio-historical associations […] place any given performance in the context of b-boy history' (Schloss 2009: 28). Even if musical tastes and selections are individual (Fogarty 2010), shared musical tastes in the breaking scene, including canonized music, is dominant. These tastes shape communities and impact movement.

Considering the context in Cuba, I argue that the breaking canon creates a frame work that places b-girls and b-boys in the context of the practice, possibly also in relation to breaking's history. But the spectacular approach to movement by the dancers on Paseo del Prado questions if they are connected

Figure 2: Practice at Casa de la Cultura Mirta Aguirre in Playa, Havana.

to the history of breaking in a conscious way or if they take a holistic approach to hip hop culture in general. Although the music functions as reference to the origins of the practice, it seems questionable to me whether the dancers of Paseo del Prado are even aware of it.

Conversely, the dancers in *The Concept* have a very conscious understanding of the musical canon of breaking. They gained 'musical competence' (Fogarty 2010: 77–78) and connect breaking with its musical genre. They apply movements *to* the music. With the past and present of the practice that relates to its context of origin – and thus becomes part of a 'collective history' (Schloss 2009: 39) – they are aware of it, consciously or not, even if their inspiration does not necessarily come from breaking's country of origin.

However, I could observe the connection between the music and the dancers at la Fábrica, where music – especially breakbeats – created a call for action and an energetic aura to form a cipher, in which the dancers released tension through their bodies. This shows that the musical canon of breaking is not always known or respected, that dancers do not always place themselves in a cultural-historical lineage, but nevertheless feel connected to the type of music that facilitates breaking. As Fogarty (2010) shows in her research, music is the key for building a common understanding among dancers. In turn, that creates community – like the dancers of Paseo del Prado, which created a communal identity based on *their* 'agreed' shared musical tastes (Fogarty 2010: 166).

HAVANA'S BREAKING COMMUNITIES

How the Havana breaking community manifests itself suggests that the community is divided into *two different* dance communities with *two different* approaches to breaking. Local breaking communities often differ from each other, as dancers adapt to the local sociopolitical and geographical contexts, for example, prerequisites, restrictions and perspectives. Additionally, individual preferences, inspiration and musical tastes play into the building and shaping of peer-groups and communities. To find different dancer communities in Havana – the community at Paseo del Prado and *The Concept* – is not surprising. What is interesting is *how* these two communities differ and *why*.

For the community of Paseo del Prado, movement is central. Dancers play the music they enjoy and create a community that adapts itself to the Cuban system and the local professionalization possibilities. They use available resources and focus on physical movement. In contrast, the community of *The Concept* focuses on the notion of Foundation: they select the music in accordance with the breaking canon, have access to the global dance community and enjoy deeper cultural knowledge. *The Concept* adapts but outdances the given circumstances. They break the limits and get recognition as an innovative urban dance group that creates its own work and travel opportunities.

The two different communities do not seem to have many shared interests apart from the desire to express themselves through dance. One could say they recognize each other's *connective marginalities* through shared creative expression. Still, for both communities the social aspect of breaking – exchange, sharing and each-one-teach one, as well as sharing energy in a cipher – was hugely important.

These two differing approaches to breaking cannot be seen as a new or 'Cuban' phenomenon. Discussion about how to approach breaking likewise

exists in Germany, and I heard very similar discussions among breakers when travelling through Mexico. Based on informal and open access to breaking, approaches to the practice can be chosen by each individual. Breaking communities are constructed by the dancers themselves depending on local context. Yet approaches may change over time due to personal preferences, exchange opportunities and knowledge sharing. Likewise, breaking communities change.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My initial research also shows that community, music and movement are visible, but there are various aspects that define the local breaking scene that add to the three pillars:

Heterogeneity of dancers: The loss of heterogeneity (diversity of approaches, knowledge and experience) and a generation gap results in the loss of mentors and role models and the experience and knowledge older dancers pass on. While the presence of breaking pioneers can shape a more traditional scene (like in New York City), a lack of experienced dancers in contemporary scenes can result in barriers to the acquisition of historical knowledge. Diverse approaches to breaking emerge from this tension.

Internet access and possibilities to travel: Access to the internet is the most important means to acquire breaking knowledge in Havana. But since internet access is expensive and unstable, this option is very limited. Additionally, the lack of personal interaction with the global breaking scene due to the difficulty to travel and the non-existent international battles in the country further limit the face-to-face exchange. In breaking, travelling and personal exchange is key, and the importance of both was again proven by the coronavirus pandemic, which significantly limited each one, severely affected Cuba's socio-economic situation, and also prevented another research trip on my part.

Approaches to breaking: The holistic approach to breaking and the connection between movement and music proposed by Schloss as a base of the practice in his study on the New York breaking scene turns out to be unrealistic in the Cuban context. Not all dancers strive for Foundation or place themselves consciously in a collective breaking history.

Chances and ways to belong to a global, imagined community of dancers: Breaking movements and breaking itself is the unifier of the imagined dance community. Belonging to a global breaking community is intertwined with the meritocracy of breaking. Both function within heteronormative, predominantly masculine structures, but stay largely imagined for those without possibilities to connect to the global community through the internet, by travelling themselves or through visits by foreign dancers.

While my research illustrates that Cuban dancers strive for knowledge and movement skills, the idea that all b-boys and b-girls draw inspiration from the United States, breaking's country of origin (and especially New York City), seems to be a US- and European centric/western-nation perspective. It does not necessarily match with realities in countries from the Global South, with limited access to the internet and exchange, or countries that are not connected to the US or European nations. This leads to diverse breaking scenes that adapt to local conditions, and underlines the claim that breaking is a transnational practice with a transnational community. Inspiration is found from dancers all over the globe and often drawn from the internet, when possible. The breaking scene in Havana is one case in point.

To conclude, my rather short research period could be extended to get deeper insight into Havana's breaking scene. Since the dancers from Paseo del Prado, *The Concept*, and myself all identify with an imagined community of dancers, it was possible for me to participate in their practice and conduct this initial research. Without our shared identification with breaking and a feeling of belonging to a global dance community, my research would not have been possible in such a short time. Because of our shared identification as dancers, there was no hierarchy between dancer-researcher, but instead one organized around gender and, to a certain extent, class – that is, my privileged socio-economic position and how it provided the means to visit Cuba and be a guest in a country that still is cut off from the rest of the hip hop world.

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