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The Philadelphia story: Jams and battles in Olympic shadows

ABSTRACT

As breaking moves to the Olympic stage, we anticipate that the dance will succumb to increased regulation, standardization and homogenization. The modifications that occur as dance migrates from a vernacular practice to a competition framework have been well identified in dance scholarship and are evident from existing international breaking contests that feature elite dancers who tactically train for these events. Undoubtedly, its presence in the Olympics will award breaking an unprecedented degree of international visibility, funding and sponsorship, and hyper-athleticism within this sporting domain. As breaking transforms into a global spectacle for a mass audience, many of whom will be unfamiliar with its history and culture, we look to Philadelphia as an exemplar of a collectively articulated and self-regulated breaking community to question what will be erased and no longer legible. We examine the diversity of participants, the myriad of styles and abilities, dancing in shitty spaces, the intimate presence of the crowd, and unregulated behaviours to consider what might be marginalized and why that matters.

KEYWORDS

breaking
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spectacle
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visibility

INTRODUCTION

We delicately push past the rocking crowd at the entrance and make our way to the huddle of bodies that map out a lone, tight cypher. The dark atmosphere hangs heavy, filled with tension, possibility and booming bass. Orange light from the bar in the far corner frames the elevated booth, where the DJ stands in their cockpit of records, faders and buttons. On the small dance floor, heads are down, tucked into the groove. Peering over shoulders, we stand mesmerized as breakers jostle to enter the dance circle. A flash of scruffy jeans, fresh sneakers and crumpled T-shirts, breakers catch wreck at the heart of the cypher. Riding the beat, limbs at angles, feet flexed, hands pattering across the floor. Sweaty, breathy bodies fly in and out. Deep in the underground, each of us will leave a trace tonight.

This is Philadelphia's Second Sundae, a jam that blends a traditional nightclub space with grassroots competitive breaking. It represents what pioneer breaker Ken Swift calls a *dark circle*, the tight, shadowy spaces that designate the way we break, where creativity and soul rule.[1] Every local breaking scene has its version, and Philadelphia boasts a close-knit community that values rawness, musicality and feeling the funk. Yet while this knowledge of our dance family sits deep within our sense memories, we look towards a less certain future as breaking is poised to enter the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Although breaking might not seem like a likely candidate for the Olympic stage, in recent years the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has expressed concern over a diminishing youth audience (Wheaton and Thorpe 2019). The IOC therefore began to introduce new urban 'action sports', such as skateboarding, into the Olympics to appeal to a youth market. In response, the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF), which constitutes the official governing body for amateur competitive ballroom dance, quickly capitalized on this agenda (Maese 2021). Although it had already made several unsuccessful attempts to introduce ballroom dancing into the Olympics (Etchells 2017), the WDSF successfully bid to feature breaking in the 2018 Summer Youth Olympics. This unusual allegiance between ballroom and breaking has received some pushback from the breaking community, which expressed concern over the legitimacy of the WDSF using breaking to facilitate its Olympic goals.[2] Nevertheless, breaking is now set to make its formal debut in 2024, the WDSF has hosted international qualifying events for selecting and ranking Olympic athletes, and the official national body, Breaking for Gold USA, is busy training and preparing its breaking team.

In this moment of flux, we reflect upon the characteristics of a local breaking scene that we value and appreciate, and how these elements of breaking culture might become marginalized or disappear when transposed into the Olympic context. The formal announcement that breaking would be included as an Olympic sport ignited heated debates in the hip hop community concerning the implications of this for the dance and its culture. Indeed, similar concerns have been voiced in relation to skateboarding, which previously operated as an underground DIY subculture, but made its Olympic debut in 2022 (Bäckström and Blackman 2022). Like skateboarding, breaking not only exists as a grassroots recreational practice, but also now offers opportunities for professional engagement through performance, teaching, battling and judging. Yet its presence in the Olympics will award it an unprecedented degree of visibility, funding and sponsorship, and though some community

1. Mark Wong was in conversation with Ken Swift when they collaborated on a production by Olive Dance Theater in 2010.
2. Serouj Aprahamian (breaker Midus) led a lively petition that accused the WDSF of using breaking as a 'Trojan horse' to orchestrate its own pathway to the Olympic Games (Etchells 2017; Maese 2021).

members welcome these commercial and career-affiliated developments, others remain sceptical.

The template for breaking as an international competition form is already well established through large-scale battles that feature exceptional breakers who strategically train for, and tactically participate in, these events (Li and Vexler 2019). The introduction of elite international breaking competitions, such as Red Bull BC One in 2004, R16 in 2007, and the Philadelphia-based Silverback Open Championships since 2014, have certainly provided a template for the development of breaking to a high level of athleticism and contest. Yet these events have also been met with mixed reactions, given the precedents of other vernacular dance practices that have moved from a community-based pastime into formal competition. As several scholars have observed, the regulation and standardization demanded by organized contest lead to dances that are heavily codified and hold little opportunity for creative innovation (Dodds 2019; Hall 2008; McMains 2006). Other debates concerning breaking's transition to the Olympics pivot around the assertion that it constitutes an art rather than a sport (Li and Vexler 2019). The distinction and interconnection between art and sport have been well debated in academia: some delineate the two, with the argument that sport is utilitarian, goal-oriented and has measurable criteria, while art is autotelic with discretionary and relative values (Byczkowska-Owczarek 2019; Kosiewicz 2014); and others conceive sport and art across a spectrum of shared and differentiated attributes, whereby factors such as cultural conventions, performance venue and audience expectations dictate whether movement idioms are staged as a zero-sum competition or artistic entertainment (Guarino 2015; Holt 2017; Kosiewicz 2014).

For the purposes of this article, we attempt to hold space for the idea that breaking is an adaptable and nuanced movement practice that circulates across multiple sites of performance and consumption. We specifically aim to examine Philadelphia as a collectively articulated and self-regulated breaking community to consider what will be erased or no longer legible as breaking transforms into a global Olympic spectacle for a mass audience, many of whom will be unfamiliar with its history and culture. In doing so, we caution ourselves to recognize that the Philadelphia breaking scene is neither a static and unified community, nor that it holds an authentic lineage to the first generation of breakers from the 1970s South Bronx area of New York City. Although breaking continues to have a strong underground identity (Fogarty 2019), we acknowledge that the Philadelphia scene has been reinvented by newer generations of breakers to express their tastes, experiences and philosophies of twenty-first-century breaking culture. That said, in this article we hope that our Philadelphia story might be a pertinent case study for how other local or regional breaking scenes might fall into the shadow of the Olympics and what concerns this might raise for such a community.

Methodologically, this is a small-scale study that draws on three key sources of evidence. First, we mine our collective experiences of spectating, training, battling, judging and teaching breaking in Philadelphia. Mark (breaker Metal) has been breaking for over twenty years and is co-owner of the education company Hip Hop Fundamentals. Sherril (breaker S-Dot) has been breaking for eight years and has been doing research on breaking for thirteen years as a dance professor at Temple University. We therefore bring our mutual passion and investment in the scene to this research. Secondly, we conducted three 60-minute, semi-structured interviews with breakers, each of

whom could speak knowledgeably about their experiences of jams and battles in Philadelphia, as well as their involvement in either international breaking competitions or Breaking for Gold USA: Sunny initially learned breaking in Philadelphia and, although now resident in NYC, she has continued to battle in the Philadelphia area and is a serious contender for the 2024 Olympic breaking team; Steve Believe is, in collaboration with Mark, co-founder of Hip Hop Fundamentals and host and organizer of *Second Sundae*; and Box Won trained in Philadelphia, is a world champion breaker, and an Elite Athlete Representative for Breaking for Gold USA. Thirdly, we consulted both scholarly literature on breaking and competition culture, in addition to social media and popular publications that concern breaking and the Olympics. We organize our discussion around five themes concerning what might be overshadowed as breaking transitions to the Olympics and conclude by considering why this matters.

DIVERSITY OF PARTICIPANTS

In preparation for the Olympic Games, Breaking for Gold USA swiftly created a governing rulebook that sets out the regulations for the qualifying events that will enable a select group of breakers to participate in Paris 2024. Item 4.2.1 states,

> To enter a Breaking for Gold USA sanctioned competition, all individuals must be current Athlete members of a member organization of the WDSF. If the individual's respective country does not have an organization holding membership in the WDSF, the individual(s) desiring to participate in a BFGUSA/USA Dance sanctioned competition will require the prior written permission of the Breaking DanceSport Council.[3]

Notions of vetting, membership and permission are almost inconceivable when we think about who might participate in a local Philly jam: little children with their spindly footwork; older folk and their embodied archive of breaking back in the day; a gamut of body shapes and sizes without much concern over an athletic ideal; a corporate-sponsored, world champion breaker; a novice crew of breakers who each replicates the same baby freeze; and the weird hairy guy in a random sweater and battered sneakers. Breaking in the underground scene presents a visibly inclusive practice whereby participants who vary in age, race, gender, body mass, ability, education, socio-economic position, and religious and political affiliation test their mettle in both competitive events and informal cyphers.[4] That small-scale jams can hold and appreciate such a rich mix of dancers is well-supported by Sunny, who values the distinct personal approaches that breaking enables:

> I've seen people dance with random props, I've seen people who don't do anything that anybody would even really classify as breaking, they just go battle, in heels, whatever it may be. You see such a variety, not only of styles of dance, but body types, and just the mentality and approach that people have to the dance.

Although we acknowledge the discrete objectives between a recreational dance practice that engenders community and participation over an elite

3. https://cdn.ymaws.com/usadance.org/resource/resmgr/breakin/breakingdancesportrulebookv3.pdf. Accessed 17 January 2024.

4. While we recognize that the scene can display aspects of misogyny, homophobia and other forms of bigotry that challenge its inclusive ethos, the cypher itself holds a diverse group of individuals within a shared community space.

sporting competition that showcases individual athletes, the privileging of a vetted corporeal ideal on the Olympic stage skews the notions of access and inclusion on which the underground breaking scene prides itself. The extensive regulations cited in the *Breaking Dancesport Rulebook* artificially hierarchizes the breaking community according to a categorization system that will minimize difference, given competitors are separated by gender, age and ranking, and that will foreclose an open field of participation. To climb the ranks to the Olympic stage, breaking athletes require both the economic resources to enter multiple qualifying events and the social networks that will ensure optimal training opportunities. As also set out in the regulations, they will be forced to curb political and religious expression, yet they can display up to four official sponsors on their attire. Such political censorship is deeply ironic, given that breaking evolved in the South Bronx of the 1970s among an African American, Puerto Rican, and Caribbean youth who experienced reprehensible social and economic disenfranchisement (Chang 2005; Johnson 2018), and therefore throughout its history hip hop has been heavily fuelled by political intent. Equally, although breaking experienced commercial exploitation from early in its inception, the push to assign breaking bodies as a vehicle for corporate branding indicates the extent to which the Olympics plays to a neoliberalist agenda of self-interested individualism, transnational marketing, and a capacious desire for competition (Harvey 2005).

While Breaking for Gold USA includes a well-respected range of breakers who have participated and battled within the underground scene, the rulebook's processes of qualification structures and membership fees prioritizes exclusivity and privilege. For Sunny, this emphasis towards elitism and contest has had a homogenizing effect on the breakers who participate in these high-stakes events: 'The types of dancers you see on the big stage are one type of dancer. They're that competitive breaker who distills their style so it's perfect for competition, and that's how they got there'. Within our local scene, the question of whether a breaker is qualified enough to throw their hat in the ring never arises. As Metal recalls, Ken Swift regularly voices the philosophy that 'hip hop doesn't ask for permission', and this can be attested to at breaking events like *Second Sundae*, with its open format and open doors, where anyone can step in. While not every cypher welcomes dancers with open arms, and Philly sometimes carries a tough reputation for holding back on props, no-one is excluded or eliminated. The community holds space for a panoply of bodies to shine.

MYRIAD STYLES AND ABILITIES

With a diversity of participants comes a colourful spectrum of personal styles and abilities: we perceive style as the unique organization of movement choices employed by each dancer, and ability as the competent execution of varied levels of difficulty. Thinking back to Second Sundae, we recall a medley of breakers who move in compelling and idiosyncratic ways: flickers of krump, house and 1990s party dances that pop up in their rounds: the cypher heads who groove in a suspended display of toprock that magically rides the beat; the breaker who loves to headspin and shows up with helmet ready to mesmerize with endless rotations; and those with novice skills who judder through their six-steps attempting to stay on cue. How can such pleasure in personal expression and nascent progress compete with the Olympic ideal of 'Faster, Higher, Stronger'? Certainly, a sense of contest filters through

into underground events. Yet this competitive edge emerges through breaking's lineage as an Africanist practice that celebrates the individual within a community structure (De Frantz 2014). Although one-upmanship, intentional heat and combative derision all feature in Philly battles, the community holds space for a myriad of levels, styles and competencies.

Perhaps more importantly, the underground scene demands that breakers show the heart and soul of the dance, and this finds voice in a variety of ways. The ability to engage with and embody the music is highly prized. As Steve Believe notes, '[r]egardless of how good a person is, it's their connection to the music if they're battling, and you can see it and feel it'. Thus breakers will sometimes get lost in toprock, riff on goofy gestures, or enact an elaborate burn in ways that relish the musical vibe at the expense of executing virtuosic power moves or a fully rounded set. Whereas the Olympics will set guidelines regarding length and tempo of music, Philly breakers take pride in dancing full out to a miscellany of testing sounds and rhythms.[5] Thinking back to competing at local jams, Sunny observes, '[i]n these smaller events you just see so much more creativity, much more variety, so much more emotion and feeling, and just the dancing feels much more genuine'. Moving to express rather than moving to win offers breakers greater opportunity to play with movement, explore the music, take risk and dare to fail.

Box Won also values individuality and creativity. Although he acknowledges that 'your foundation has to be solid, you have to be able to represent and show that you are a practitioner of the discipline', he strongly emphasizes the confidence to be different: 'you have to be willing to take risks and express who you are and not just follow the cookie cutter or do what you saw on a video'. For him, showing your sense of self is an audacious and vulnerable act that speaks to the essence of breaking. Indeed, he welcomes the opportunity to express and test novel ideas at local jams, which would be inconceivable on the Olympic stage. At high-level competition, success rides on a faultless one-off performance (Fogarty 2019; Li and Vexler 2019), and Box Won admits, 'I hate the anxiety that comes with it'. The pressures of competition often lead to performance apprehension and perfectionist tendencies (Mainwaring 2009) that skew the creativity and pleasure typical of local jams.

The Olympic platform will feature outstanding athletes who are well-rounded competitors, skilled in polished execution, whose spectacular skills must be visible to a remote global audience. In a study of competitive Irish dance, anthropologist Frank Hall (2008) states that social rituals usually amass a community who share the same status, whereas competitions are structured around a hierarchy of winners and losers. In the context of the Olympics, breaking moves from a task-oriented practice that privileges self-mastery to an ego-oriented performance in relation to others (Balague 2009). As victory becomes the central goal, aided by athletic coaches, physical therapists and sports psychologists, the community-oriented vision of the dance circle will no longer support a mix of aptitudes and abilities. This flies in the face of the underground scene, which supports all who enter. Not only will this inclusive community ethos be rendered invisible, but the dance itself will be modified as it succumbs to and responds to systems of judging that set guidelines and privilege particular qualities. In reference to competitive ballroom dance, sociologist Dominka Byczkowska-Owczarek (2019) describes how the conflict between sport and art shows up in the body, which becomes increasingly formalized and uniform. Although we continue to see some differences in the dancers who are coming through in the Olympic qualifiers concerning

5. Breakers often complain about the poor quality music at high-level competitions, which is restricted by copyright laws due to the livestreaming of these events.

personalized movement styles and signature combinations of material, the expectation is that all breaking athletes will be masters of toprock, footwork, freezes and power. We therefore anticipate that the glorious mix of abilities, movers and styles in the underground scene will hover on the margins, eclipsed by a singular vision of sporting excellence.

DANCING IN SHITTY SPACES

Hip hop scholar Joseph Schloss describes how a cypher will spring up anywhere as they do not require a purpose-designed space or specialist equipment: they represent 'the most authentic, challenging, and raw environment for b-boying' (2009: 99). Between us we have experienced cyphers and breaking battles in dark and dingy clubs, in a recreation centre with a grimy smattering of dust across the dance floor, in a soaking wet basketball court after an unexpected downpour, in a shopping centre with a make-do floor wrinkling at the edges, and in a heated midnight exchange on the sidewalk. Without donors and sponsorship, the local underground scene operates through a DIY model of self-sufficiency. It employs a micro cash economy, which ensures that monetary exchange stays predominantly within the community: breakers will book a venue, take cash on the door, and whatever is collected will cover prize money, space hire and fees for the DJ, host and judges. Most will break even, with a few contributing personal funds to make up any shortfall. Yet the point is not to generate income, but as Box Won explains, 'it's centered around fun. The competition is like a by-product rather than the main portion of why we're all there. It's about coming together and celebrating'.

Grassroots breaking events in Philadelphia are therefore oriented less around a competition space than a party atmosphere intended for community engagement. Consequently, breakers become skilled in throwing down rounds in any given space regardless of size of venue and quality of floor. Evidently, this is not the case for everyone. Steve Believe recalls, 'We've seen it many times. Giant power movers coming into a tiny space and they can't do nothing. The floor's slippery, someone spilled a beer, they're done!' Therefore the capacity to break under any given conditions constitutes a prized quality in the scene.

As an inclusive community endeavour, the organization of the cypher stresses the value of collective participation. Box Won emphasizes this spatial structure in thinking through the heritage of the dance: 'This thing that was birthed as a circle needs to remain a circle. We're not on stage. It's a circle, it's a cypher'. Given breaking's lineage as a dance of the African diaspora, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2001: 11) invokes Frantz Fanon's description of the social dance circle as a space that 'protects and permits' black bodies to engage in self-articulation and affirmation. Notably, DeFrantz (2001) contrasts the cypher with the concert dance stage, which he conceives as a site of whiteness in which outsiders gaze upon black bodies. The structural division of the latter resonates with the Olympic auditorium, which will offer a capacious, sanitized and well-resourced performance platform for breaking, with an external audience who will not participate as a community of dancers but as a spectatorship that tries to make sense of, assess and evaluate this Africanist dance practice.

In addition to the racialized power dynamic that separates spectators from participants, Box Won also reflects on the challenges of dancing on a large competition stage:

> not only does it change your movement mentally because everything has to be bigger, but now you have to exude more energy because you have to take up more space physically. […] You can't just stay on one spot. […] I might have a certain set of moves I might want to do, like a few combos and they all work well in a small space, but on a big space they're not that ideal because they seem small and ineffective.

The *Breaking Dancesport Rulebook* states that national and championship events must have a dance floor of 'no less than 24[foot] by 24[foot]' and 'dedicated seating or bleachers' for a minimum of 400 spectators, which then obliges breakers to travel across the entirety of this space executing dynamic and spectacular movement variations that will be starkly visible and technically legible both to live and remote viewers. The danger is that subtlety and nuance will be relegated to the margins.

Although the Olympic stage promises a large and sterile performance environment, why do we continue to treasure the shitty little spaces where underground breaking thrives? The makeshift sites, which set constraints on dance improvisation, simultaneously facilitate opportunity to showcase detail and shading, character and soul. These essential qualities of flexibility and creativity in the moment, as well as intentional understatement and stylish restraint, will likely disappear under the spotlight of the large competition stage. The messy joy of dancing as a community within the safety of the circle is lost to the capitalist apparatus of competing before an eager audience of consumers with its desire for clean-cut perfection. While the purely competitive environment anticipated of breaking on the Olympic stage has also characterized some of its predecessors, such as Silverback and Red Bull BC One, the sheer scale of the Olympic platform sets it apart as a unique moment in breaking history. Whereas the aforementioned breaking competitions primarily attract other breakers as its core audience, the global stature of the Olympics constitutes the largest and most widely consumed sporting event in the world (Wheaton and Thorpe 2019). Therefore, not only will the size and quality of the space radically alter the experience of breaking contest, but the dance's relationship to the breaking cypher will change beyond all recognition.

THE INTIMATE PRESENCE OF THE CROWD

A breaker who says they do not care what anyone thinks is lying. As with any live performance art, the audience reaction folds into the experience. At *Second Sundae*, we all surf the same waves: your crew gassing you up, the hate from rivals, the genuine love we share for a song. This intimate vibe can only be fostered by the huddle of a crowd leaning in on the cypher at small-scale local jams. Underground cyphers contain both theatricality and authenticity, as we stand behind our crewmates, egg each other on, root for the underdogs, and even entice beef. While we often respond through exaggeration and hyperbole, there is truth within. This energy, which emanates from the passion, values and biases of a crowd educated in the art of breaking, is an important factor that speaks to breaking's traditional roots. As Sunny states,

> [the local audience] adds so much energy and hype to a battle […] they physically take up space […] you feel them, you hear them, you smell them. It becomes a community. It's not just about the people dancing. You know everybody is a part of the event.

In thinking about the Olympic audience, both the live spectators set back from the breaking athletes in the formal arena, and the remote television audience watching an even further mediated performance on-screen, this viewing crowd will miss out on the sensorial and affective experience of up-close seeing, feeling, smelling and hearing breakers in the heat of the dance. The Olympic setting will, and should, be less intimate than a local jam, but it will likely overwrite a vibe of close-knit community and felt expression. In Sunny's terms, breaking rests on community, and every individual in the room engages with the culture. Conversely, an Olympic-stadium crowd is distanced behind an athletic fourth wall, which delineates an artificial division between dancer and spectator. Sunny describes an inverse relationship between dancer and stage size, which then impacts the atmosphere of the event, or what those in the underground scene dig as the vibe:

> There's much more atmosphere [at local jams] as opposed to bright lights [and] big stages, where you have twenty feet between you and your opponent. You have to go all the way out into the middle to do your dance. You try to take up as much space as you can, but sometimes you can't take it all up. It's so distilled and so cold compared to local events.

The intimacy and warmth of smaller jams encourages personalities to shine, where a single breaker can both performatively and physically command an entire space. The experience is one of immersion in which the dancer calls out to the crowd through their energy, character and spirit of movement, and the crowd responds through a heightened display of word, sound and gesture. As with many African diasporic dance forms, the crowd is woven into the experience, displaying implicit coded languages of participation. Largely unknown to those outside the scene, we throw specific gestures to signal encouragement, concede respect to originality, cringe at crashes, accuse someone of stealing or repeating a move, and even groan in awkward silence when the favourites are 'robbed' or 'jerked' out of advancing. Other than guts or skill, there is no barrier between spectator and practitioner in the underground scene; we give energy inward towards the breaker at the centre of the cypher who replies with attitude and attack, rather than performing outward towards a judging panel, a stadium of distance onlookers, or a remote broadcast audience.

Within a local event, the crowd not only contributes to the value and vibe of the night but can sometimes influence the outcome. Sunny recalls,

> Back in the day, the crowd could one hundred percent sway the battle. I remember one time at a jam, I did something, and everybody rushed the floor, and I crashed a little bit, but you couldn't see it, because everyone was rushing the floor, and screaming, and jumping. […] It just makes the moment feel so much bigger than it really even is.

Thanks to the intimacy and involvement of the crowd, minor moments can become bigger and more exciting; an attempt on a tricky move, rather than hitting it successfully, can win huge support; and having the crowd behind someone because of either local popularity or underdog status can occasionally throw the result in an unexpected direction. While the best might not always win, this offers plenty for individuals in the crowd to love, hate, resent and debate.

Clearly, large-stage competition has pushed the limits of breaking's athleticism to a spectacular level of virtuosity and competitive breakers enter with the intent to win, which means focusing on executing the perfect round. As a former competitive gymnast, Sunny is experienced in this regard:

> I just get into a zone, I have no idea what's going on around me, I don't hear anybody, I don't hear anything, I don't see anything basically […] there's so much else that goes into mentally and physically preparing for the next round, that I just can't be in the moment unfortunately.

Notably, Sunny defines her competitive zone by its erasures, by what's missing. For better or worse, the heat, passion and intimacy of underground breaking are invisibilized, go unseen and unheard, both for the athletes and the spectators as the dance hits elite competition status.

RELISHING IN UNREGULATED BEHAVIOURS

Underground hip hop is constantly teetering on the edge of possibility. Your local hero could get smoked by the unknown suburban upstart. The Red Bull dream team could happen to be in town for the weekend. Whether driven by music, the hype of the crowd, the Holy Ghost, or pure luck, a random breaker will stick a move that should be scientifically impossible. The unpredictability is part of the attraction, but of course this fails to work for formal competition. Understandably, the Olympics needs to bring regulation and order in its search for the ultimate athletes. The *Breaking Dancesport Rulebook* sets out this agenda, with a lengthy section that outlines procedures and penalties for anyone who might infract the rules. The anticipation that rules might be bent or broken speaks to the ethos of underground breaking which plays dangerously close to the law.

In the official rulebook, item 4.11.2.2. warns against 'behaving in an unsportsmanlike or uncivil manner'. While 'cocking' and the 'middle finger' can feature in the local scene, Box Won observes how they can be incorporated in creative and nuanced ways:

> You know there's a way to give someone the finger and *there's a way* to give someone the finger! […] [I]t's all about the intent and how it's presented. That stuff is obviously not going to be tolerated on a stage like the Olympics, but in the underground space there's a way to do it where it's tasteful and it's witty rather than disrespectful.

Along, similar lines, Sunny recounts the 'no touch rule':

> Like c'mon, in Philly, people used to touch people and they would try to get away with it… Those unspoken rules are like not hard fast rules, because they're unspoken… Not only do you have people creating in a less bound environment, but you're having people pushing the boundaries further. I feel like on an international stage that's a big no-no! You don't cross those rules because you'll be disqualified.

Importantly, Sunny's observation that the rules are not set *because* they are unspoken seems key. Once the rules are formally documented, creativity is bound rather than nourished. While 'no touching' is a commandment of

breaking, both big-stage and underground, even more vital to the Philly scene is the principle that 'all rules are meant to be broken'. Perhaps the extensive laws laid out in the *Breaking Dancesport Rulebook*, in the spirit of sportsmanship, tradition and maintaining a standardized performance environment, seem to overly anticipate, and possibly overcompensate for, breaking's desire to push boundaries.

The imaginative and uncensored behaviours we witness in Philly's spaces are more playful than disruptive or dangerous. All bets are off in terms of what you wear, what you say, or what you gesture, but in general, the scene monitors itself. Real violence is rare, while disrespect is ubiquitous. Indeed, disrespect, whether pantomimic or genuine, forms part of the tradition and adds to the thrill. Steve Believe explains,

> You want to be disrespectful and you want to do it in a way that's shocking, unexpected… I don't know what [the Olympics] is going to do with disrespect [...] because this dance is so heavy with gestures and disrespect. You win by being disrespectful. The most exciting part of this dance is when two people have personal beef and they settle it in the dance, and you can see that energy… how do you bring that energy to the Olympics?

The antagonistic energy that underground breaking loves comes out through holding beef and personal clashes, but actual fights rarely occur. Aggressive or derisive gestures are not typically malicious and are encouraged by jeers and laughter or policed through sounds of disapproval. At one jam, mid-round, a breaker dragged a giant trash can to the centre of the cypher to signal to his opponent, 'Yo, your whole style is garbage'. The Olympic regulations will not allow for these surprises, outbursts and outliers to exist in any meaningful way.

The unpoliced creativity of a city such as Philadelphia, or what breaking scholar Imani Kai Johnson (2018) characterizes as an 'outlaw culture', will certainly recede into the background. Her use of the term 'outlaw' is not to reproduce tropes of deviance and criminality among its practitioners, but to emphasize the way that early generation breakers created a 'meaningful existence' separate from the norms of a white middle-class mainstream, and the desire to push against rules and boundaries within the context of the dance circle has produced a vibrant underground scene. The rule-breaking and border-blending that has come to characterize breaking means that the dance has evolved and part of this concerns its journey to the Olympics.

Yet evolution and revolution are forces that lead to vastly different outcomes.

THE MATTER OF THE MARGINS

In this article, we have set out some key characteristics of our local breaking scene and how these might be overshadowed as breaking moves to the Olympic stage. Through making these arguments, we know that we have created a binary between the down and dirty environment of the underground vs. the sanitized and regulated site of the Olympics. In truth, there already exists a spectrum of dance battles that take place in and around Philadelphia, from small-scale jams through to corporate-sponsored events, such as Red Bull and Silverback, and the same breakers will turn up for all.

6. We are aware that underground battles can be poorly organized, at times dull, engender judging bias and perpetuate a toxic masculinity.

We do not want to romanticize or idealize our local scene, yet there are characteristics inherent to grassroots breaking culture that will be marginalized as breaking becomes an Olympic sport.[6] While we appreciate that the presence of breaking in the Olympics will offer visibility and validation for the art form, and will hopefully offer further resources and opportunities for those who wish to engage in its practice, we also identify concerns about what will be lost and why it matters.

First we argue that underground breaking models core values that will not easily transfer to the Olympic stage: a diverse participation based on an ethos of inclusion that honours multiple skill levels through holding space for everyone in the cypher; wearing one's political or religious affiliations without shame and repercussion; opportunity to take risk, fail and still be successful; dancing in nuanced and creative ways without the need to hit a winning formula; being in the sensory mix of hot and sweaty bodies, shouting and gesturing allegiances as a vital part of the dance; and flouting the rules to show bravado, invention and a challenge to what has gone before. Secondly, the values we outline above are rooted in breaking history, which saw a disenfranchised community demonstrate vital creativity and connection despite reprehensible economic and political hardship. Given that hip hop continues to address a minoritized population through protesting against multiple forms of oppression, including critiques of capitalism and imperialism (Motley and Henderson 2008), the values of pluralism, community and creative dissent within the underground scene honour breaking's social, political and racial lineage. And finally, the emphasis on pleasure and participation in the underground scene over winning and remuneration raises the pressing questions of who will gain and profit as breaking enters the commercial behemoth of the Olympics and who might never have the access and resources to enter this high-stakes game. Our hope is that this historic moment offers an opportunity for the WDSF, IOC and the national governing bodies to take responsibility for shedding light on breaking history and culture as the dance is incorporated into this global sporting event. The imperative to provide resources to enable access and inclusion for young people who might wish to connect with underground breaking will offer one step to honouring breaking's core values and traditions.

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