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The Australian breaking scene and the Olympic Games: The possibilities and politics of sportification

ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse the impact of breaking's inclusion in the Olympics on the Australian breaking scene. We draw on our experiences as Australian breaking practitioners, as well as ethnographic field research conducted between 2018 and 2021, to show how Australian breakers have responded to, and made sense of, breaking becoming an Olympic sport. While some breakers see the Olympics as an opportunity and space for wider recognition, many have expressed concerns with the growing influence (and embrace) of transnational commercial organizations and institutional governing bodies in shaping and managing breaking's future. Alongside concerns of an increasing sportification of breaking, this trajectory points towards an increasing loss of self-determination, agency and spontaneity for local Australian breakers and will have profound consequences for the way in which hip hop personhood is constantly 'remade and renegotiated' in Australia (Marie 2020: 4). Isolated from the major breaking hubs (North America/Asia/Europe), Australia's breaking scene is marked by distinct, self-determined localized scenes separated from each other by the geographic expansiveness of this

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1. This project received ethics approval from Macquarie University on 2 August 2021.

island-continent. Here, breaking is a space for those 'othered' by Australian institutions to express themselves and engage in new hierarchies of respect. We argue that breaking's institutionalization via the Olympics will place breaking more firmly within this sporting nation's hegemonic settler-colonial structures that rely upon racialized and gendered hierarchies. As such, in this article we discuss and examine how the Olympics impacts ongoing local, social and cultural productions and expressions of hip hop, and the distinct possibilities of breaking that enable its participants to 'show and prove' outside standardized, institutionalized rubrics.

1 INTRODUCTION

On 8 December 2020, one of the authors, Rachael Gunn, woke up to a missed call from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) requesting an interview about breaking's inclusion in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. The inclusion had just been confirmed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the news had quickly become the top story of that day. Less than an hour later, she was on ABC News 24 answering questions about breaking terminology, its athletic prowess, whether it is a 'dance' or a 'sport' and Australia's international standing. It would be a series of talking points she would be asked many times that week in the dozen or so interviews that followed, and she would often try to incorporate into her answer some of the concerns Australians breakers had about the Olympics. However, rarely would this information make it to broadcast, with producers and journalists often cutting a five-minute interview down to a sound bite (such as in a Channel Nine interview where she was simply quoted as 'it's exciting'). Her fellow breakers around the country who were similarly inundated with media requests shared these experiences, and in a few cases their well-intentioned interviews were turned into a gag for Australian audiences to laugh at the notion of breaking being an Olympic sport.

That some media workers distort or exclude parts of an interview to fit their own programming goals and requirements is by no means unique to this situation. However, we want to highlight how these conversations about breaking on Australian broadcasting and print media, the kinds of questions asked, the lack of public knowledge about breaking and the largely negative reaction to its Olympic inclusion reveal a number of key insights about breaking in Australia. Notably, the relationship between Australian breakers and dominant Australian culture, and also how that may change with breaking becoming an Olympic 'sport'. In this article, we examine how Australian breakers have responded to, and made sense of, breaking becoming an Olympic sport. Drawing on our own breaking practice, informal conversations and formal in-depth interviews with Australian breakers, we discuss a range of responses and concerns, as well as address many of the potential gains and possibilities, regarding breaking's Olympic inclusion and the involvement of the World Dance Sport Federation (WDSF).¹ We have identified three key themes that underscore these responses: legitimacy, culture and agency, and we situate these themes within the context of Australia as a self-proclaimed 'sporting nation'.

The article is organized as follows: first, we discuss sport and the Olympics in Australia to contextualize not only breaking's Olympic inclusion in Australia but also the local responses to it. Second, we outline our theoretical and methodological framework to situate our approach within the scholarship on hip hop and ethnography. Then, we introduce and contextualize the Australian

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breaking scene, drawing from our own experiences as well as the interviews we conducted with Australian breakers. Finally, we examine the themes of legitimacy, culture and agency as markers of some of the local tensions around breaking's Olympic inclusion. As this research marks a specific moment in time in breaking's Olympic journey, we conclude this article by looking to the future in terms of breaking in Australia.

2. For example, Australia placed sixth in the total medal tally in the 2020 Tokyo Games.

2 THE OLYMPICS AND SPORT IN AUSTRALIA

Self-described as a 'a sporting nation' (Cliff 1999), Australia prides itself on its sporting prowess, engagement and particularly its international achievements. For a country with a population of only 25 million people, Australia boasts an impressive medal tally at each Summer Olympic Games.² Australia's Olympic performance is not only a source of pride but also a site of national unity, with broadcasts of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games reaching over 17 million Australians (Billings et al. 2019: 326).

With sport in Australia connected to a kind of idealized settler-colonial masculinity, the introduction of breaking as a 'sport' in many ways complicates this construction. As an expressive and social dance style originating in the Bronx, developed and largely practised by People of Colour (PoC), breaking has thrived outside institutional spaces. It does not easily 'fit' with the construction of the idealized Australian sporting hero – the large, muscular, White, cismale uniformed body enculturated as part of an established sporting institution (or club). Breaking, as part of hip hop, has also been historically connected to criminality, a connection which Aprahamian (2019) and Lombard (2013) both address and undermine. What is more, as an artistic competitive pursuit breaking also falls outside the favoured (and more easily understood) types of physical competitions that have clear winners and losers via goals scored or times beaten. The prevalence of questions about whether breaking is a dance or a sport in the media interviews that followed the IOC's announcement reinforce this confusion and may help to explain the baffled reaction in Australia to breaking's Olympic inclusion.

So perhaps now it is not surprising that some sports, particularly sports grounded in colonial history, that were overlooked for 2024 Summer Olympic inclusion were 'fuming' at breaking's prioritization [Keoghan 2020: n.pag.]. Following this announcement, in the Australian press the Olympics were considered an 'utter embarrassment' [Otto 2020: n.pag.] and branded a 'mockery' [Australian Associated Press 2020: n.pag.]. And, as introduced above, attempts by Australian breakers to explain and translate breaking to Australian audiences were either cut out of the final product or turned into a joke. In analysing these reactions, we might see how breaking threatens the neat and established performance, industry and culture of a sporting colonized subject. But before we begin our analysis, we want to first introduce our theoretical framework and methodology.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical framework

We want to preface our analysis by first explaining how we understand key terms (such as 'scene' and hip hop) and thus situate this work in broader literature on hip hop, popular music and dance studies. Our use of the term 'scene' can be traced to the works of popular music studies scholarship, such

as Peterson and Bennett (2004), to describe the dynamic and fluid boundaries of different musical and cultural groupings. The term has gained traction within hip hop literature because of how it distinguishes between different local artistic practices in a non-essentialist way and has been applied to hip hop both internationally (Harrison 2009) and within the Australian context (Rodger 2020). Hence the notion of the Australian breaking ‘scene’, in comparison to notions of the Australian breaking community or culture, implies that such groupings are not fixed, but are constantly changing and evolving across time and space, and that people can move freely in and out of them as they please.

One of the tensions that exists within the scholarly hip hop literature has been with the legitimacy of hip hop expressions, practices, peoples and their histories outside of the United States. Australian hip hop scholars, such as Mitchell (2001, 2006, 2008), Maxwell (2003) and Rodger (2019, 2020), have demonstrated how hip hop can be understood as a social narrative which exists and is made authentic by those living across many places, not just within the United States or in some parts of Europe. Their research, primarily involving hip hop music practitioners within the Australian context, has shown how people within different local contexts have to continually work to construct and manage notions of authenticity and legitimate hip hop expression, no matter where they are geographically. As a result, this article aims to contribute to this body of scholarship, as well as address an under-studied and important gap within the literature: the lives, histories and experiences of hip hop *dancers*. Building on the work of numerous hip hop scholars (Fogarty 2012; Rose 1994: xiv–xv; Schloss 2009: 8; Johnson 2009: 203; Rodger 2019: 19), this research seeks to draw attention to the social lives and experiences of Australian breakers as they navigate breaking’s inclusion at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

3.2 Methodology

To begin to understand the diverse and fragmented social field that is Australian breaking, in this article we use a number of different methodologies, including analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006; Crawley 2012), active interviewing (Plummer 2001) and intimate insider research (Taylor 2011). These methodologies enable us to critically reflect upon our own experiences and insights as breaking practitioners, as well as draw on informal conversations and formal interviews with Australian breakers. Also, our methodological approach resonates with similar studies in the fields of dance (Dodds 2011) and hip hop (Harrison 2009), which often draw on personal experience and involvement in the scene.

As such, we want to now introduce ourselves in order to contextualize our approach to, and understanding of, the Australian breaking scene. Rachael Gunn, also known as ‘Raygun’, is a White breaker who has been breaking since 2011 and represents the crews *Vanguards of Style* and *143 Liverpool Street Familia (143LSF)*. Lucas Marie, also known as ‘Ippy’, has been breaking since 1999, representing *RAW*, *Naacals* and *Zou Rock* crew. Our experiences within Australia’s breaking scene have always been outward-looking, thinking about how Australia fits in, or does not fit in, within the broader field of global breaking and/or hip hop culture. Our interactions with *AusBreaking Association (ABA)* and *WDSF* have also shaped our understanding of how breaking’s Olympic inclusion is impacting the Australian breaking scene.

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Though we acknowledge the ethnographic advantages of being actively engaged in hip hop culture, we do not posit this as a superior or more authentic research position. Similar to the writings of Motzafi-Haller (1997), Wulff (1998) and Wolcott (2008), we reject the notion of an ‘insider’ or ‘native’ researcher as being more legitimate in its perspective. Rather, our positions as breakers doing ethnographic research with other breakers have led us to better understand ‘insiderness’ is but one of many productive research perspectives, and more importantly, that it is not fixed or universally agreed-upon, but is something earned, negotiated and maintained through social relationships.

In 2021, a total of twelve Australian breakers were formally interviewed in-depth about breaking in Australia and their views on the Olympics. The breakers were from Meanjin (Brisbane), Yugambah (Gold Coast), Gadigal (Sydney), Naarm (Melbourne) and Kaurna (Adelaide). There were nine male breakers and three female breakers, with a mix of backgrounds (British, Korean, New Caledonian, Vietnamese, Filipino, Chinese, Taiwanese and Puerto Rican). All participants had been breaking for at least ten years and could speak to diverse experiences in the scene (such as representing AusBreaking overseas, organizing events, teaching breaking and involvement with ABA). We acknowledge that this small sample of formal interviews cannot represent the diversity of views across the scene, but they do offer some insight into the discourses and ideas about breaking’s Olympic inclusion.

4 THE AUSTRALIAN BREAKING SCENE

As the world’s biggest island, at 7.692 million km², the landscape of Australian breaking is marked by distinct, self-determined, localized scenes that are isolated from each other by the geographic expansiveness of this island-continent. Lacking the infrastructure of a city-to-city rail network, Australian breakers fly or undertake lengthy drives to visit other Australian breaking scenes. And so, these scenes are held together by their shared connections and relationships to the practice of breaking, which is itself quite loosely defined. This lengthy explainer from Sammy the Free, a breaker from Gadigal (Sydney), reveals how breakers think about the different Australian scenes:

Yeah Australia is such a vast geographical space. You’ve got the Sydney scene that’s one, you’ve got a small scene in Canberra who will occasionally come up to Sydney jams, that’s another one, you’ve got Melbourne, you’ve got kinda twin scenes – the Brisbane and Gold Coast scene, so obviously they’ll go to each other’s jams but you know they’re not the same scene, you’ve got the Perth scene, and other smaller scenes around, very small scene in Adelaide, Tasmania is now getting a scene, like this. But they just can’t jump on the train or the bus or jump in your car and come to a jam on the weekend in Sydney, we’re so far apart. So there’s different cultures that come up in those scenes as well. You know for the most part, once you reach a certain level the higher level dudes will know all the other higher level people in the other scenes, but the contact between them and the exchange between them is limited.

(2021: n.pag.)

The differences between the scenes may be the result of each scene's histories, politics, stylistic preferences and how they've been influenced, over time, by the cultural dynamics that exist within each state and city. And yet there are shared attributes across the Australian scenes. Broadly speaking, they tend to be quite friendly, supportive, with several open practice spots and kid-friendly jams.

The predominant way in which breaking is socially practised across Australia is through training sessions and competitions. Indeed, most of the mixing between scenes tends to happen at the more notable breaking jams and competitive events which often take place once or twice a year (such as, currently, Sydney's Destructive Steps Festival and Brisbane's BrisAsia Festival). Estimates from AusBreaking put the national scene as having approximately 400 breakers. We want to highlight that these low numbers, spread across Australia's seven states and territories, mean that individual breakers, individual breaking crews and individual decisions have a profound impact on the national scene. Gadigal (Sydney) is, at the time of writing, the largest breaking scene, both in terms of active breakers, training spots and the number of regular breaking events. To survive, many of the smaller scenes across Australia are intertwined with the local street dance scenes, and breakers rely more on all-style battles and events to compete and jam.

Competitions have always played an important role in building the Australian scene and establishing a connection to international breakers, cultures and histories. Since the early 2000s, big Australian competitions, such as Planet X Games, The Australian Bboy Championships, Shadow Wars, Platform Hip Hop Festival, Return of the Bgirl and Destructive Steps, have invited international breakers to judge, teach and, in the latter's case, battle local breakers. With the exception of Planet X Games, all these competitions were created and organized by Australian breakers. Australia's isolation (and therefore cost of flights) has meant that regular qualifying competitions (such as Red Bull BC One, Freestyle Sessions, R16 and Battle of the Year) are infrequent if not rare. Indeed this cost of flying judges, teachers or (in the case of qualifiers) competitors internationally has meant that many Australian breaking competitions run at a loss.

It has always been hard to attract broader support to Australian breaking events, be it general public attendance, government funding or corporate sponsorship. As a studio owner, experienced event organizer and Meanjin (Brisbane) breaker, Flix understands the challenges of organizing events: 'Sponsorship's been really hard. Red Bull's really been the only sponsor we've had. Early days, I had a lot of clothing sponsors, but that was even before Instagram. So now, because I'm not Insta-famous, sponsorship is not a thing' (2021: n.pag.).

Similarly Mamoose, a breaker from Meanjin (Brisbane), explains,

From my experience here in Queensland we don't get too much of a crowd, it's usually a bit tough. I can probably speak for a few of the states like that where it's actually hard to get people through [the door], so it's kind of hard to get sponsors. [...] So I feel like the [Australian] scene is a bit different in that sense, maybe because we don't have enough big battles where people come and see and get everybody hype and new generations would come and see and get hype.

(2021: n.pag.)

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Mamoose points out that poorly attended events impact the ability not only to attract sponsors but to also build the next generation of breakers. And yet we see this lack of broader support and interest has also lent itself to a kind of freedom, a kind of self-determination for the scene. Event organizers are not beholden to the corporate interests of sponsors, which may impact decision-making around judges, music and formats.

Historically, the Australian breaking scene has been organized, managed and governed by individuals, people like Flix who are actively engaged within their local scene. Flix manages an events space in Brisbane called 'Elements Collective' in which she runs and manages weekly practice sessions, regular jams and competitive breaking events. When organizing a breaking event she ultimately gets to decide who judges the event, what DJs will play and how the overall format of the competition will run. However, with the development of more centralized governing bodies, like the AusBreaking and by proxy the WDSF, there will undoubtedly be the introduction of certain rules, rubrics, guidelines and restrictions on how events relating to the Olympics will run. This change may indeed bring with it additional funding, sponsorship and perhaps more legitimacy by the wider public; however the loss of self-determination by local scenes in which to organize and manage themselves may also be hindered.

4.1 AusBreaking

In 2019, soon after breaking's successful debut at the 2018 Youth Olympics, AusBreaking was established to help support Australian breakers in the lead up to the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Initiated by Lowe, a breaker from Dharug (Sydney's west), AusBreaking is a not-for-profit organization that aims to unite and represent the Australian breaking scene. At least one breaker from every Australian state and territory (more than one in the larger scenes) was selected to sit on AusBreaking's executive committee to represent and voice the concerns of their local scene. Such a national committee is momentous, because never before in Australia's history has there been this unity and representation from every Australian scene. However, many breakers had issues with how and why some of these representatives were selected.

Like many national bodies formed over the past few years in response to breaking's Olympic inclusion, the learning curve and workload to establish a formal, transparent and accountable entity has been steep. At a national level, AusBreaking has created its own national rankings system, whereby breakers score points based on how far they have progressed through an event. By early 2022, AusBreaking had organized five Battle Series events (two of which were online competitions during lockdowns, the other three in Sydney). It has also established a Selection Committee (ABSC) that aims to select elite Australian breakers to represent at international breaking events. Then there are state-level initiatives, such as coached training sessions. AusBreaking were also vital in connecting journalists with breakers in each state and territory to ensure that we had opportunities to try to educate the public on breaking and Australian breakers.

5 RESPONSE TO THE WDSF AND BREAKING'S OLYMPIC INCLUSION

Drawing from our ethnographic interviews, as well as many informal conversations with Australian breakers over the past few years, we have identified a broad range of perspectives on the potential gains and concerns regarding the Olympics, specific to the Australian context. The responses we share in

this section underscore the central themes introduced above, relating to legitimacy, culture and agency. We discuss each theme in more detail below.

5.1 Legitimacy

First and foremost, some breakers see the Olympic Games as a chance for wider recognition of their hard work and skill, for the legitimization that comes with being a 'professional athlete' and/or 'Olympian', and a chance to forge a career in the pursuit to which they have dedicated their lives. Viewing it positively, J One, a breaker from Gadigal (Sydney), explains, 'I think it provides another avenue for people to make a living, job creation, employment, is another avenue for those who want to achieve more for their country' (2021: n.pag.). Similarly, Sammy the Free says,

It's gonna give people space to be a legitimate pastime, where they can make money, or at least have respect in doing it. So it's kind of a legitimization and gaining greater respect from outside the community, you know that's what immediately comes with the Olympics, despite you know all the [negative] comments on all the announcements of the Olympics whatever, as soon as people see it, as soon as people see it, it's all gonna change. People can get full-time jobs out of this, and not just as breakers. There's only so long you can be a peak level breaker, you could be a coach, you could be on the board, whatever else is gonna be.

(2021: n.pag.)

It is near impossible for breakers in Australia to make a living from breaking, as many of our interviewees reminded us, with most people fitting it in alongside an unrelated full time job or career. The breaking competitions that are currently held across the country are modest, with prize money rarely enough to cover travel and accommodation costs. And so the commitment to breaking in Australia requires financial sacrifice to get to a high level.

The Olympics, then, not only facilitates other pathways in breaking but also provides greater support so that breakers are not isolated in their jobs or families. Mighty Duck, a breaker from Gadigal and Dharug (Sydney and Sydney's west), noticed a change in his mum's attitude towards his breaking following the Olympic announcement:

With my mum it's like knowing that I'm trying for the Olympics, she's like 'Don't get hurt', but back in the day, for over 10 years plus, she's like 'Stop it, stop it, you've got to work, you've got to work and make money'.

(2021: n.pag.)

A similar change in family attitude was identified by Fontz, a breaker from Naarm (Melbourne):

To now have it recognized in the public eye as, 'hey this is a legitimate thing', seems to be, again, quite, that's cool you know? That's exciting! All of a sudden my conservative grandparents are all of sudden asking about it and they're calling it breaking and they're like, 'oh breaking, hey, it's in the Olympics', and it's like, 'why, I've been doing this for ages, why

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have you only just started paying attention?’ So it almost validates all the time and energy that you put into it.

(2021: n.pag.)

Jedi61, a breaker from Kaurna (Adelaide), offers some broader potential reasons for this change in attitude:

But yeah, I think one of the pros is that we get more kind of national respect for what we do and that will hopefully lead to kids wanting to break. [...] My dad was like, ‘Are you going to retire or are you going to stop?’ and I was like, ‘I’m not even really going to explain this because you’re not quite understanding that unless my body literally can’t do it anymore, I won’t be stopping’. [...] So I think, like I said, the Olympics will provide a kind of validation for kids and even me, you know, just the way of being like, ‘Shut up. This is what I do’.

(2021: n.pag.)

This sense of legitimacy brought on by breakings’ Olympic inclusion impacted familial relationships and was framed by Australian breakers as a positive result. They saw the Olympics as potentially easing for future generations some of the hardships they experienced. This consideration of future generations is a repeated key concern for Australian breakers due to, as outlined above, the difficulty attracting new people into the dance via large public events.

This ‘end goal’ has also impacted breakers training. TNT, a breaker from Gadigal (Sydney) observed:

So I think, I’ve seen that since the Olympics have announced adding breaking in, that definitely the Australian scene has grown a lot and more people are involved with breaking and the skills have really grown a lot as well. And I think for those individuals that are really wanting to push to aim for the Olympics I see them growing. So I think it’s really positive to see that kind of push and that end goal for the individuals.

(2021: n.pag.)

This has been coupled with the ABA’s development of processes like competitions, rankings and training sessions. As the founder and president of the ABA, breaker Lowe from Dharug (Western Sydney) shares his perspective regarding breaking’s Olympic inclusion:

Good thing about the Olympics, and the best thing, is the media attention. So, we can do a repeat of, let’s say, what happened with [...] Rock Steady [Crew], the whole media boom, and then everyone started breaking. So there’s potential that that can happen again with the Olympics, which is what we really want to utilize to get those numbers in the community. And the second thing that’s good would be the opportunities for the new gen and people growing up in this era.

(2021: n.pag.)

It is worth noting that these new opportunities have equality at the forefront. The IOC have placed gender equality as a priority, and for the first time, female breakers will have the same opportunities as male breakers, which has the capacity to bestow another layer of legitimization upon the skills and

artistry of breakers. In cultures dominated by men, formalized spaces are often the way in which to advance gender equality. Dax D’Orazio’s (2021) article on skateboarding, for example, shows how it is in the formalized competitions that women gain recognition and reward, not in the informal masculinized subcultural spaces where male privilege can reign unchecked. In a meritocratic culture such as skateboarding or breaking, formalized spaces, then, can facilitate the push to give women an equal platform to ‘show and prove’ their skills (in the hip hop tradition) and to encourage more women to participate in the scene. Though how this interacts with the dance sports governed by the WDSF, such as Latin, Tango and Ballroom, who have entrenched gender roles remains to be seen. Yet there has already been an increase of female breaker competitions – at the local, national and global level – since the Olympics announcement.

5.2 Culture

On the other hand there are concerns over what cultural aspects of breaking may change or perhaps be lost through the Olympic process and representation. The WDSF’s aim is to regulate, administer and develop breaking as part of DanceSport, alongside its repertoire of partner dances. The sportification of these ballroom dance styles impacts their connection with their diverse cultural histories. Thus many breakers are concerned that WDSF, and the Olympics more broadly, will decontextualize breaking from its African American and Puerto Rican cultural roots and histories. As Jedi61 notes:

As a bboy, for me the culture is the most important thing of breaking and with breaking going to the Olympics my main thing is wanting the culture to still remain, and that the culture isn’t sacrificed for sports funding or whatever it is. But we’re still trying to make sure that whatever we’re running that there’s still cyphers happening, there’s still the culture, we’re still getting judges that are valid within the community, which is a working process.

(2021: n.pag.)

This concern was also shared by Lowe (ABA president):

[T]he proper education of the culture is the biggest question mark. [...] If they get good commentators then it might actually be beneficial, because if there’s a commentator referring to historical things and correct terminology and stuff, then the people they get interested from watching it, come into the community.

(2021: n.pag.)

Jedi61’s comments regarding the cypher and the process of choosing (what he describes as) ‘valid’ judges, as well as Lowe’s comments regarding ‘the proper education of the culture’, speak to broader concerns about the loss of cultural and historical norms that have developed throughout the course of breaking’s history.

While we discuss judging below, the historic and cultural practice of the breaking cypher has been an important space for breakers to self-express, improvise, build reputations and resolve conflict. Not many hip hop writers have considered the significance of the breaking cypher as comprehensively

as Johnson (2009), who shows how cyphering has historically been a collaborative and chaotic site where breakers band together and dance – both with and against one another – in a semi-organized fashion. Johnson (2009: 3) also makes clear that although there is ‘no single definition of cyphers’, that they are significant in how they, ‘perform multi-racial and transnational connection through movement, they act as resources to consider ideas of the whole that are attuned to internal differentiation and conflicting interests, particularly with respect to race and national difference’ (2009: x). Whether WDSF events will include space for cyphers, and whether athletes will engage in them given the competition stakes are so high, remains to be seen.

Breaking’s Olympic inclusion has also raised several concerns about the growing influence (and embrace) of transnational commercial organizations and institutional governing bodies in shaping and managing breaking’s future. The Olympics is by no means the first to introduce governing bodies, like the WDSF, to the field of breaking. There has for a long time been concerns about the growing influence that Red Bull and other commercial bodies have had on breaking culture and practices over the past twenty years. According to Australian breakers, Red Bull’s influence, for example, has been extensive: from normalizing the round-for-round judging system, to popularizing the one-vs.-one breaking competition, as well as the potential effects this has on ‘crew culture’, which in turn has led to fewer breaking specialists (‘Footworker’, ‘powermover’, ‘original head’) and more ‘all-rounders’. So Australian breakers have shared growing concerns around a lack of diversity and creativity, with judging systems potentially imposing a kind of checklist for rounds. What is more, Red Bull’s use of the term ‘cypher’ to describe a solo formalized battle rather than a ‘semi-organized’ improvisational circle, is reflective of a growing disregard for historicized and culturally specific breaking practices.³

Another concern that emerged in the interviews was, as Jedi61 articulates, ‘the issue of music’ (2021: n.pag.). Many Australian breakers have pointed out the current changes in breaking’s music, from our classic musical canon analysed by Schloss (2009: 411) of ‘rock and funk songs’, to the more generic style of beats now played at Red Bull and WDSF events. While this shift in music has been attributed to increasing copyright issues with sharing and live-streaming battles on digital platforms (see Fogarty 2019: 413), importantly, it normalizes a loss of connection to breaking’s African American and Latin cultural musical traditions and history. Such a decontextualization of the dance that is occurring alongside the involvement of transnational commercial organizations and governing bodies is a significant concern for Australian breakers, particularly since Australian events do not have a history of such ongoing outside involvement. It also leads to questioning what other kinds of cultural and historical breaking traditions, norms and practices will be altered, diminished and perhaps even lost, through this Olympic process.

5.3 Agency

As outlined above, Australia’s breaking scene is a collection of self-determined, localized, isolated scenes. The majority of competitions and events are organized by individuals with little to no commercial or public support, and so an outside entity, like WDSF, making top-down decisions for the global breaking scene is going to impact how individual breakers experience and understand their scene. While there are breakers working with the WDSF, these breakers

3. Names of national qualifiers are called ‘Red Bull BC One (country) Cypher’.

are largely from the main breaking hubs of North America/Europe/Asia, and so perspectives regarding smaller scenes, and/or the southern hemisphere, are not front and centre of discussions about Olympic qualifiers and processes. Many breakers shared concerns about the Olympics further entrenching the current geopolitics of breaking by continuing to privilege those scenes and voices, and ignore or exclude breakers outside those hubs.

The frustration regarding the top-down decision-making and lack of transparency was evident in our interviews and conversations. This was particularly the case with Australian breakers who are leading figures within their respective local scenes and have organized and run numerous breaking events. For example, Flix explains:

So for me, I've personally found it quite challenging to be someone that people talk to me about in Queensland, saying, 'What's happening with the Olympics?', I'm like, 'I don't know, I don't know'. If we had clear information on when are the qualifying events? What judging system are they doing? How is the qualifying event going to operate in Australia? Where is that going to happen, and who is facilitating that? Then at least we can have some kind of guidelines. It's like no one knows what the fuck is going on. Every time we try and get information, it's filtered down through seven different avenues and you go, 'Why am I finding out about this on someone else's Instagram account?'

(2021: n.pag.)

While Australia is by no means the only scene experiencing issues with communication, there are factors that compound these issues: the lack of an Oceania representative involved in WDSF discussions, Australia's distance from qualifying competitions and a reliance upon an external national body (DanceSport Australia) for information and opportunities.

The sportification of breaking necessitates the need for objectivity, transparency and professionalism. While breaking battles have historically been a space for originality, innovation and self-expression, the past few years have seen the development of a number of standardized judging systems, from the R16 'O.U.R. System' to the Trivium judging system (see further Fogarty 2019). While these systems were designed for greater transparency in judging decisions, there is a risk that breakers may shape their performances to what the judging system dictates. In fact, Australian breakers noted different styles of breaking, and ways of battling, that were unique to R16, to Battle of the Year and to Red Bull BC One, respectively, a 'Red Bull style' for example. And so we question what might an Olympic, or Trivium, or WDSF style of breaking and battling look like, and how the public nature of the Olympics might impact breaking performances. This was a point made by Mamoose, explaining:

It's not gonna be as raw, like you can't express yourself like you would, like you can't do gestures, things like that. You can't bring that hype that you would wanna bring, it's like you always have in the back of your mind, 'oh I'm on TV', and I've got these new rules now, it's a new thing.

(2021: n.pag.)

As Mamoose points out, the sanitization of breaking, alongside a self-conscious awareness, may impact a breaker's sense of agency in expressing themselves on the dance floor.

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There are more explicit ways in which agency and self-determination are being curbed via this Olympic process. Australian breakers criticized the newly established conditions for Olympic breaking judges. The current WDSF rules stipulate that breaking judges cannot be actively competing or teaching (including coaching or teaching workshops), and an official pathway has been established for breakers to become WDSF breaking judges. As Jedi61 states,

I mean, culturally there's a couple of reasons why that doesn't work. The first reason is that most breakers, renowned judges, they make their living off teaching and workshops. Also, judges aren't allowed to compete on a national, on like a world level and essentially doing so would de-qualify our judges because our judges wouldn't be still involved in the scene, they wouldn't need to go to competitions, they wouldn't need to compete, they wouldn't need to stay up to date, they would just need to have a piece of paper that says, 'I'm a WDSF judge' which is completely contrary to what we require from judges in general.
(2021: n.pag.)

Being engaged in breaking as an active participant and building a reputation on the floor is not merely a random prerequisite that some breakers are claiming as significant, it means that judges will more likely understand much of the tacit and embodied knowledge being expressed on the dance floor; something that is hard to follow without the context of having been in or performed those bodily positions oneself. But it is not only these compelling reasons that breaking judges should remain as active participants but that this is simply how the breaking scene has operated until the involvement of the WDSF.

Implicit within agency is a consideration of access, and many Australian breakers expressed concern with how breaking's Olympic inclusion will impact upon breaking's accessibility. There are numerous barriers to sports participation, most notably the financial requirement to engage in sports, as 'sport and physical activity have become "commodified"' (Collins 2004: 728). Sport in Australia is largely a middle-class White affair, with institutions structured in a way that privileges and excludes particular people and backgrounds. This occurs through the cost of equipment and uniforms, the club membership fees, the access to facilities (not just financial but geographic), the parental support and investment, and the social and cultural capital required for participation and inclusion. Yet breaking attracts a diversity of people from a broad cross-section of society, and our own work in Australia confirms this. As Sammy the Free points out,

You don't even have to have a team. You just have to have yourself with a body, no matter what body, and you can start breaking, you can dance. So there's much less barriers and I think that's why we do have a diversity, I think more of a diversity of people in breaking than perhaps other sports.
(2021: n.pag.)

There are concerns that the increasing commodification of breaking will therefore increase barriers to entry. Sammy the Free continues:

[A]nd this will change and this will be one of the devastating things in my opinion about breaking is that, you know, you won't be able to get

to a certain level if you don't have a coach or take lessons for 10 years at a whatever school.

(2021: n.pag.)

His concerns here are valid, as in revealing the great facade of sport's fairness, Hogan shares that 'neo- and post-Marxian critics have suggested that rather than breaking down social inequalities, sport in general and the Olympics more particularly serve to reinforce these inequalities' (2003: 100). Despite the Olympics often framed as a benefit to socially excluded groups, research shows that it actually leads to few benefits for them (Minnaert 2012). Anticipated increased costs of music, specialized flooring, competition registration, trained judges and judging systems, as well as the prevalence of highly specialized breaking training and knowledge required of high level breakers, may all contribute to a decreasing accessibility and self-determination of breaking.

6 CONCLUSION

In this article, we have outlined the key ways in which Australian breakers are responding to, and making sense of, breaking's inclusion in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Our ethnographic materials and analysis demonstrates that this development is not simply understood as either 'good' or 'bad' but rather that there are gains and concerns specific to the Australian context. These gains include the chance for wider recognition and legitimization of the dance, the monetary and career possibilities that a future breaking industry might provide and a sense that things will be easier for future generations of breakers. Yet the concerns are centred on the impact upon culture, and a potential loss of agency and self-determination. Isolated from neighbouring countries, and consisting of distinct, localized scenes guided by individual agents, top-down decision-making led by the WDSF already impacts the social organization, identities and hierarchies of respect within the Australian breaking scene.

While sport and the Olympics are framed as 'great equalizers', the exclusivity of Australia's sporting institutions along gendered, class and racialized lines means that breaking's sportification may in fact impact the accessibility of breaking. While the ABA aims to ensure that Australian breakers retain self-determination and agency through this Olympic process, there are many obstacles that come with the introduction of concepts like governance, transparency and accountability. Making global what is essentially a localized practice invariably requires standardization, homogeneity, professionalism and risks further moving breaking away from its African American and Latin cultural traditions and histories.

It is important to note that this research captures what Australian breakers expressed to us at a particular moment in time, before 2024. As the 2024 Olympics comes and goes, the consequences for the dynamic ways in which the Australian breaking scenes (as well as other breaking scenes around the world) are constantly being 'remade and renegotiated' (Marie 2020: 4) across time and space remain to be seen. How breakers from all parts of the world respond to, and make sense of, these changes within their respective scenes should continue to be mapped and documented.

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