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EDITORIAL

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In pursuit of gold: Breaking's debut at the Paris Olympics

ABSTRACT

The announcement that breaking will be featured in the 2024 Paris Olympics has produced a wide variety of responses, both from within and without hip hop culture. This first of two Special Issues of Global Hip Hop Studies (GHHS) seeks not only to explore contemporary debates about breaking in the Olympics, but also to develop critical discourses that can offer insight to practitioners, cultural organizations and the International Olympics Committee (IOC) as we approach this landmark confluence. In this double issue, members of the global community of breaking scholars and practitioners have come together to present research and artist statements that engage local, regional and national perspectives. We intend for the first of these Special Issues, in particular, to serve as an intervention from hip hop stakeholders around the world, providing useful insights for those involved in this milestone moment, whether at a cultural community level or those working with intermediary institutions such as World Dance Sport Federation (WDSF) and the IOC.

KEYWORDS

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seeks not only to explore contemporary debates about breaking in the Olympics, but also to develop critical discourses that can offer insight to practitioners, cultural organizations and the International Olympics Committee (IOC) as we approach this landmark confluence. In this double issue, members of the global community of breaking scholars and practitioners have come together to present research and artist statements that engage local, regional and national perspectives. We intend for the first of these Special Issues, in particular, to serve as an intervention from hip hop stakeholders around the world, providing useful insights for those involved in this milestone moment, whether at a cultural community level or those working with intermediary institutions such as World Dance Sport Federation (WDSF) and the IOC.

Breaking's introduction at the 2018 Buenos Aires Youth Olympic Games stirred debate within breaking communities across the globe, resurrecting concerns regarding the dance's misrepresentation and possible exploitation. With the Olympic viewership already in decline, appealing to a younger market was the catalyst for the introduction of new categories – which attracted scrutiny from the breaking community. Yet commercial intervention is also responsible for a range of global developments, opening up different possibilities that did not exist before. In acknowledging the budding opportunities for professionalization and upward mobility that commercial co-optation presents, many dancers are still critical of the role these institutions play in appropriating this cultural practice for their own ends. Rightfully so, these concerns are heightened by the rapid pace of breaking's industrialization towards increasingly mainstreamed and globalized formats. Given that similar points of contention around breaking's commercial co-optation have also been framed as both actualizing and critical departures from hip hop's grassroots – from its rapid industrialization in the 1980s, to more recent interventions made by global conglomerates, such as Red Bull – breaking's Olympic institutionalization marks the most recent and critical event in this legacy of appropriation.

This distrust was seemingly tied to the various divergences from breaking's communitarian traditions towards competition culture. Indeed, preliminary research into the Olympic institutionalization by Li and Vexler (2019) highlighted this very trajectory with reference to a potential bleak future where breakers may only be perceived as athletes – diluting the cultural, social and political power of the art form. Unsurprisingly, these tensions between breaking veterans, activists, the general public and corporate interests have intensified as breaking inches towards its debut at the 2024 Paris Olympics. At the same time, many veterans and community leaders responsible for breaking's introduction into the Olympics also believe the dance has much to gain from this development (in terms of its formal elevation or mainstream rediscovery, for instance).

This Special Issue starts with Paolo Bitanga's research which examines both communitarian and commercial intersections happening across the transnational Filipino scene in the lead up to the 2024 Paris Olympics. It draws on Ng's (2019) notion of cross-cultural intermediation to interrogate key figures working between the local and the global (diaspora) in the creation of the first Bboy and Bgirl Association of the Philippines (BBAP). This article brings into focus a range of questions pertaining to the national-diasporic history of the Philippines which now complicates participation under the new model for breaking in the Olympics. A number of studies have similarly prefaced this local-global relationship in Filipino hip hop (Villegas 2016; Perillo 2013; Tiongson Jr. 2013), however, few offer longitudinal ethnographic engagements with local breaking communities. Bitanga's research broaches this important

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gap in scholarship to highlight the local–global intersectionalities and tensions accompanying the transnational effort that seeks to develop commercial opportunities and community outcomes from this Olympic moment.

The next article by Sherril Dodds and Mark Wong provides a localized account of one US city, reporting on the Philadelphia story. Given that breaking's entry into the Olympics has had direct effects on local communities and cultures – not unlike the impact of international breaking events (see Fogarty 2018) – these first two articles reveal important similarities (in the perceived tensions around the Olympic moment) as well as distinct responses (in the respective national and local scenes). While the Filipino diasporic artists, committed to local contexts, have come together despite differences to try to assimilate this new model, the Philadelphia scene exists in some tension with the directives of the US national project in revealing ways.

Lucas Marie and Rachael Gunn likewise provide an overview of the Australian scene's responses to the Olympic moment, in recognizing key potentials and tensions that surface along with Olympic co-optation and the re-articulation of breaking as 'dance-sport'. One notable development highlighted within the community is a new-found mainstream legitimation that did not exist before. While this suggests a broader issue of misinformation and cultural classism regarding hip hop arts, the new attention brought to breaking by the Olympic moment has also opened up a useful dialogue that bridges the insider–outsider divides in new ways; Australian breakers reflect on how this new model changes their embodied practice and may offer new, positive and sustainable opportunities for professionalization in the future.

This Special Issue also provides three critical dialogues from practitioners reflecting on a number of important angles surrounding breaking's entry into the Olympic Games. Firstly, Ariyan Johnson prefaces breaking's Olympic co-optation by highlighting existing gaps in representation within hip hop's cultural history. With the censoring of women's contributions to breakings beginnings already documented (Arahamian 2020) Johnson's critique is both timely and critical. Focusing on the lack of awareness and acknowledgement of the contribution from African American women in hip hop culture, Johnson asks us to consider why these resilient and integral figures from the community continue to remain unknown to many ahead of breaking's main-series debut in the Olympics.

Secondly, addressing other elements of systematic erasure, breaker Rokafella critiques mainstream media responses that fail to capture the complexity of breaking culture in the wake of the Olympic announcement. Rokafella calls for accountability by journalists and organizers who consistently and casually misrepresent breaking as a disorganized, pop-cultural fad of the 1980s, rather than acknowledging the span and breadth of this living and resilient global culture – reminding us that media play an important role in how hip hop culture is represented and misrepresented to the mainstream public. Given that breaking emerged among Black and Brown people in the United States, Rokafella's concern is with the colonizing potentials of a predominantly white administrative team leading the Olympic project.

Lastly, Ng interviews breaking's first impresario, Michael Holman, on his forecasting of the Olympic moment. Holman was the first person in the world known to record a vision of breaking in the Olympics and his first book, *Breaking and the New York City Breakers* (1984), documented how this dream of breaking's potential future came to be. Their conversation explores everything from decades old models for judging to new potentials for cultural entrepreneurship and industrialization.

1. A new judging system created by Storm and Renegade to evaluate breaking in the Olympics. The system reviews performance under three core criteria: mind, body and soul (with various subcategories).

We believe these six pieces contribute to historicizing and interrogating this unique moment, touching on a range of novel benefits and major issues to be broached by future research. These include the barriers of access and privileged status afforded to affluent Global North participating countries, how expression is impacted by new evaluative frameworks (e.g. the Trivium system)¹ and how breaking's cultural and creative industries are impacted by this global mainstreaming event. By incorporating the voices of scholars, practitioners and cultural intermediaries, it is hoped that this Special Issue will provide the basis of new dialogues and debates around a remarkable historical moment, as this long-marginalized dance steps into the arena of the Olympics – one of the most viewed athletic *and cultural* events in the world.

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Dr Jason Ng is an Irish Research Council (IRC) postdoctoral fellow at the University College Cork, researching hip hop with a focus on cultural entrepreneurship via beat-making, dance and other forms of cultural production in the Asia–Pacific region. His work explores the intersections between contemporary music cultures, media, creative industries, urban geographies and globalization and has been published in the journals *City, Culture and Society*, *Ethnomusicology* and *First Monday*. He continues to work in the field, drawing from his own critical practice as an artist in dance, film, music and theatre.

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Lifelong breaker Mary Fogarty is now associate professor of dance at York University, Toronto. A long-time member of the KeepRockinYou arts collective, which organizes the Toronto B-Girl Movement, Mary has performed in Canada, the United States, Germany, Scotland, England and Portugal. She has served as a judge at various international breaking competitions, including the first Olympic qualifier (held in South Korea in 2022) that will help determine who competes when breaking debuts at the Paris Summer Olympics (in 2024). Mary has published two collections of research on dance: *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies* (2022), co-edited with Imani Kai Johnson, and *Movies, Moves, and Music: The Sonic World of Dance Films* (Equinox, 2016) co-edited with Mark Evans. Her other recent research appears in *Contemporary Music Review* (2021), *We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49th Parallel* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020) (Marsh and Campbell, editors), *Beyoncé: At Work, On Screen, and Online* (Indiana University Press, 2020) (Iddon and Marshall, editors) and *The Oxford Handbook of Dance Competition* (2019) (Dodds, editor).

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