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IN THE CIPHER

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The overlooked contributions of African American women hip hop dancers to breaking and hip hop culture

ABSTRACT

In the late 1980s through 1990s shifts within the aesthetic of hip hop culture helped the sustainability of breaking. When the discussion of hip hop and its major contributors are mentioned, seldom is there any acknowledgement of African American women. Like many art forms, hip hop is male-dominated, which can eclipse narratives about African American women in early hip hop dance circles. African American women practitioners are rarely called upon to moderate panels, write or are acknowledged as true pioneers of the field. Many times, throughout hip hop, African American women kept the dance alive with their resiliency, becoming the catalyst from the streets that help preserve and continue its legacy. The question I ask is: How have these African American women impacted global hip hop culture and why are they unknown to us? The article will examine performance qualities within interdisciplinary practices that forged ahead hip hop culture with these under-represented New York hip hop female dancers. Insights about the experience of these African American female pioneers bring into light historical concerns of exploitation and representation right in time for the introduction of breaking in the 2024 Olympics.

KEYWORDS

dance
social justice
representation
gender
Olympics
African American women

> When people think of hip hop they go to break dancing and skip the 90s.
>
> (Segar 2021)

INTRODUCTION

The prominence of breaking shifted away from being at the forefront of hip hop culture in New York during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Resilient African American women hip hop dancers 'became the catalyst – from the streets, to the clubs, to the videos, then to the world' that helped 'preserve and continue its legacy' (Johnson 2021: n.pag.). Although African American women have been staples of the hip hop cultural community from its beginnings, most of the narratives have often been male-dominated. Feminist scholarship has importantly 'concentrated on the historical invisibility of Black women in the United States, for example, in their relative absence from consideration in civil rights and suffragist movements' (Sesko and Biernat 2016: 142), so why would hip hop history be any different? Sometimes placing these dancing artists in one compartmentalized aspect of an embodied knowledge like hip hop contributes to rendering them invisible. Women, although overlooked, have always been centred within the culture of hip hop; it was Cindy Campbell's vision to have the back-to-school jam on 11 August 1973. It was the women at the party who initiated a dance 'battle' with the guys (Aprahamian 2020: 44). Why are women's contributions and recollections not then also dominant within hip hop narratives? I hope to move towards a restorative depiction of this history by including African American women's contributions as building blocks of the culture. Mary Fogarty Woehrel (2019) details the artistry of backup dancers in the 1990s as a critical part of hip hop history that has been skewed towards a focus on the men. How might a focus on African American women backup dancers in the late 1980s–90s and their hip hop cultural involvement change the way we see them as significant contributors to the sustainability and globalization not only of breaking's existence but of hip hop culture today?

I interviewed New York female pioneer dancers (who mention other notables) to acknowledge the intersectionality of why these women are not better known. As stated by Mowatt et al., who 'encourages multidisciplinary approaches to Black women research' (2013: 653). I examine dance performance qualities that reveal interdisciplinary practices such as practice association, labelling and cultural contributions. My research features the contributions of these women who danced in clubs like Nells, at block parties, in music videos, on television, in films and on tours with artists as backup dancers. My perspective as a scholar-practitioner from this era is to reconcile these invisible ladies' inclusion in hip hop history which is its own anomaly because of the 'lack of Black women's representation as researchers' (Mowatt et al. 2013: 649) across many academic fields. As Candice Marie Benbow states, 'it matters that you have an academic text that would situate Black women's lived experiences […] and it not be written by a Black woman' (cited in Alter and Harris 2022: n.pag.).

PRACTICE ASSOCIATION

> It's just dance and dance has a life of its own. Period. I think even then I was probably guilty of just thinking that break dancing, the Rocksteady

> crew was the only hip hop element as opposed to what we created and did and built and how it morphed into this whole big thing that it is now. (Segar 2021)

Invisibility affects the perception of self, and these dancers 'needed to heal from industry biases and trauma in order to recognize their own value' (Johnson 2021: n.pag.). Black women face harm when 'their unique experiences of both racism and sexism go unappreciated by larger movements' (Coles and Pasek 2020: 2). Hip hop is a global cultural movement that has been inclusive to all in practice but has often left these women out of the narrative despite their critical role in sustaining it. Dance in this era continued the practice association of breaking (power moves, freezes, downrock and toprock). One dancer is the exemplary in executing all elements of breaking, specializing in power moves while keeping the aesthetic of music and movement of her era, Leslie 'Big Lez' Segar. In the 1992 documentary, *Wreckin Shop*, by Diane Martel, Lez freestyles with the guys in a circle and does a back tuck. On world tours and in countless videos, Lez's dancing aesthetic – which viewers associate with power moves in breaking like her handstands which are preparations for breaking moves 1990s/2000s (handstand spins), flips, double-twisting somersaults and front handsprings – are all currently displayed in breaking competitions today. She visually challenged contemporary B-girls (Rose 1994: 48) and B-boys to work on their power form.

Social practice association relates to these women's feminist activism towards their artistry by forming crews and establishing wages with increases per job. Former club kid, and current music executive, Kira Daniels highlighted the importance of this organization, given the notable imbalances in representation: 'Besides being seen everywhere, they had a style, a different perspective. You were used to seeing the male dancers even Salt-N-Pepa had male dancers, it was a novelty it was that they were rare' (2021: n.pag.). Similarly Segar noted that 'there weren't that many of us that got to tour and see the world and do what we loved to do, dance' (2021: n.pag.).

Big hard-hitting movements in this era were stylized to fit the breakbeats that differed from the drum of funk records of the 1970s and early 1980s to the drum machine of this era. Lez choreographed for many artists creating new grooves to dance (Greenwald 2002: 266). We did not just dance during the break (Rose 1994: 51), we danced the entirety because we embodied the transition of storytelling embedded in song to a viewership audience of various cinematic offerings. To choreograph and dance to the words of the song and its beats became a practice of movement responsibility that concentrated on unique movements because the party was recorded. Creating and dancing for the camera took resourcefulness and calculations. These women did hitch kicks on the floor, which has the practice association of downrock seen in the party scene of *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, a hip hop indie classic female coming-of-age story. During this period, hip hop culture grew with the explosive circulation of videos, the internet, tours around the world, films (Osumare 2001) and the social impact of performing in a country on tour and then attending the local club scene where the cultural exchange of movement is influenced by watching these women dancers take the floor.

LABELLING

Some B-boys became synonymous with the label hip hop dancer when dancing backup in the 1990s (Woehrel 2019: 21). The women who contributed to

breaking aesthetics focused on creating rather than claiming labels, yet hip hop cultural labels helped erase them. Music videos validated these women on national cable networks like Black Entertainment Television (BET), which created a lifeline of visibility for these women. It was a three-hour Amtrak train ride from New York to Washington (BET headquarters) to do this work. The label 'video girl' became a reference to these women's frequent employment. Eventually, African American 'non-dancers' replaced these women when it became more about sexuality and not artistry; many quit performing altogether because of the increasingly exploitative sexual nature of the music business, causing the latter to overshadow the historical contributions of the former. Labelling *who* was a hip hop dancer and *who* were entertainment imagery becomes convoluted, as seen in 2Pac's 'How Do You Want It' video featuring porn star Heather Hunter who 'dances a bit'. Segar reflected on this very moment:

> I think the culture was ready to shift at that time. And as much as we were sexy we weren't trying to be that. And they [entertainment imagery] couldn't be us. And that's when they were allowing all that risque stuff on TV after hours, they can push the element and get the hype in the street.
>
> (2021: n.pag.)

Labels like 'video vixen' were misapplied to these pioneer women with no distinction because the Black female body is subjected to prejudices that encompass the erasure of culture (Gottschild 2003: 158).

CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Representation matters with Black women. De La Soul's China and Jette (the Flower Girls) immortalized lyrically on a mix of *Plug Tunin'* and Queen Latifah's Safari Sisters help shape the Afrocentric landscape of hip hop. Many of these pioneers embodied elements of the culture contributing to a multifaceted artistic life. Cetra Dance Wilkins began in Doug E. Fresh's video and went on to sing backup for Bad Boy, combining movement with each note. Jossie Harris Thacker mentions being at 'the block parties […] feeling a spiritual release' (2021: n.pag.). She joined the television show *In Living Color* as a Fly Girl and became the inspiration for Janet Jackson's character in the film *Poetic Justice*. Lez became the first female host of BET's *Rap City* using her insight as a dancer to connect with those she interviewed. Fatima Robinson (a native of Arkansas) danced for rappers like Heavy D; she went on to centre hip hop choreography as a staple of contemporary dance as we see it today starting with Michael Jackson's *Remember the Time* video and Aaliyah's empowering feminine movement that incorporated male/female partnering seen in both videos. She captured the cultural dynamics of male and female exchanges, which Thomas DeFrantz refers to as 'contain[ing] dual transcripts of "public" and "private" meaning' (2004: 1). Fatima's historical hip hop 2022 Super Bowl halftime show fused hip hop dance movements from East to West Coast styles.

Each contribution involving movement qualities, fashion influences and consistent media exposure in different media, markets and hip hop elements kept the culture alive. Throughout hip hop history, while breaking was not glaringly in the forefront, 'those "back-up dancers" […] inspired the creative practicing of b-boy [ing]' (Woehrel 2019: 127). Sampling and the remixing of

artistic work is the foundation of the culture of hip hop, extending not only from music but also to the dance as it has moved 'towards a global village' (Osmuare 2001: 180). African American women remixed the style and made it their own, liberating and inspiring all who watched them. These women helped restore and maintain dance, contributing to hip hop culture and expanding its diversity in perspectives in the art preparing the way for the resurgence of breaking today. With breaking in the Olympics now on the horizon, it is important that we think back to this history of representation so we might move towards a future that is no longer plagued by the same neglect of the past.

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Ariyan Johnson, a native New Yorker, is a graduate of LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, where she studied dance; she holds a BA from Lehman College in speech pathology and audiology and an MA in applied theatre from CUNY School of Professional Studies. She is a multi-disciplinary artist, a pioneer of hip hop dance, an award-winning filmmaker and an Independent Spirit Award Best Female Lead-nominated actress for the first female hip hop coming-of-age story – *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* Some other credits include *Bulworth*, where she depicted a rapper influencing hip hop culture onto the political landscape and a series regular on *The Steve Harvey Show*. As a professional dancer, she has danced, choreographed and toured worldwide for an array of artists such as LL Cool J, Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, Chaka Khan, Ms. Melodie, Ya Kid K, 2 in a Room, Mary J Blige, SWV and many more. A former member of Abdel Salaam's Forces of Nature Dance Theatre and Ronn Pratt's Alpha Omega Theatrical Dance Companies where she began her site-specific work exploring jazz-based dances of protest with Eleo Pomare's Dancemobile. As artistic director of Faithful Dance Company, she created interactive performances at Faithful Central Bible Church's 18,000-seated arena. Currently, she is an assistant professor of Dance at University of California, Irvine.

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