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# Uplift the breaking trajectory<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*For the title of an article to state that breaking is an 1980s pop cultural trend, this may have been forgivable in the 1990s, but it is not today. It is 2021 (at the time of writing this), and everyone has access to research via the internet. Breaking was not a trend that ended in the 1980s, and then 'made the leap' to the Olympics. It has succeeded in preserving and evolving the vocabulary that attracts the best dancers to it from around the world to this day. The dancers who upheld its history and solidified its place in the dance pantheon have created relationships with realms once thought of as intangible such as theatre and academia. Many hip hop dance movies have copied the format and theme of resilience found in the original cult classics such as Beat Street and Breaking. In this article, I explore the tensions emerging from lazy research practices sustained in the media surrounding the announcement that breaking would be included in the Olympic Games. I argue that mainstream media networks need to have a greater respect for the dance, its practitioners and its traditions to avoid this type of appropriation.*

My official name is Ana Garcia. My tribal name is Bgirl Rokafella. I have been interacting with hip hop since its emergence in the late 1970s to early 1980s as a native New Yorker growing up in East Harlem and the Bronx where my family lived. I have been living a dance lifestyle since my early teens and I am pushing 50 as I write this letter. I built my career and established my credentials by learning as much as I could from my elders who imparted references via oral history and some footage on VHS tapes. I lived and should say survived the decades of fire, AIDS, Crack and mass incarceration in New York City, so my particular perspective is unique since not that many of my peers are around to testify. I am an internationally known dancer, teacher, mentor

## KEYWORDS

breaking  
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1. This piece was originally written as a response to the Washington Post article 'How break dancing made the leap from 80s pop culture to the Olympic stage' (Maese 2021). While things have developed since then, many of the reflections around appropriation remain critical in any discussion of Breaking's Olympic adoption.

and well-respected woman in hip hop. I have fostered relationships with many arts organizations based in NYC and the East Coast. Full Circle Souljahs is a non-profit dance theatre company I co-founded with my husband Kwikstep in 1997 based in the Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop. Our mission back then and today is to uphold the positive aspects of our urban Indigenous African diasporic culture and to encourage new generations of aspiring dancers to evolve and contribute their voices to the hip hop dance legacy. I am a professor at The New School University, and I am on the advisory board of directors for Pepatian in the Bronx and for True Skool Inc in Milwaukee. I received a National Dance Teachers Award from the American Dance Foundation in 2017 and have been a guest lecturer at numerous universities. I have appeared in many hip hop music videos and worked with major recording artists in the past. My knowledge of my national and international breaking community and its trajectory is strong and growing each day. My weekly schedule pairs me simultaneously with young dancers and elders, affording me an understanding of what is helping and what is hurting our dance scene. The elders are becoming a fading part of our culture due to lack of inclusion/divestment as well as serious health issues. Below is my response to an article published in *The Washington Post* on 9 February by Rick Maese (2021).

For the title of an article to state that breaking is a 1980s pop cultural trend may have been forgivable in the 1990s but it is not today. It is 2021 (at the time of writing this), and everyone has access to research via the internet. Breaking was not a trend that ended in the 1980s, and then 'made the leap' to the Olympics (Maese 2021: n.pag.). It has succeeded in preserving and evolving the vocabulary that attracts the best dancers to it from around the world to this day. The dancers who upheld its history and solidified its place in the dance pantheon have created relationships with realms once thought of as intangible such as theatre and academia. Many hip hop dance movies have copied the format and theme of resilience found in the original cult classics such as *Beat Street* and *Breaking*.

Despite what can be interpreted as attempts to erase the cultural aspects of breaking in the entertainment field, the dancers established a traditional vocabulary that was upheld locally and internationally. Up to this day, breaking competitions are being held monthly and annually by dancers to establish the best of the best. These contests also help to create a platform that develops and uplifts young talent independent of TV, film and the established dance world. Some are larger in scale and others are smaller but they all serve the purpose of keeping the dance style open to new vocabulary and new energy.

*The Washington Post* quotes an observation from Ellen Zavian – a woman admittedly who never grew up listening to or dancing to hip hop. In the quote she claims that ten years ago the dancers were 'disorganized and anti-establishment' (Maese 2021). Highlighting this perspective is similar to how colonizers regarded the natives as ignorant, uncivilized and lazy, thereby justifying the imposition of a new order to help the Indigenous people live better. Breakers are then considered incapable of making their own decisions, so Ms Zavian had to bring in a Skateboarder to convince the dancers that breaking was indeed a sport and would be moving in the right direction if it goes to the Olympics. The actual span of growth within the community is never highlighted or described.

The other person described in the article as someone who moved the dance in a better direction is Steve Graham – a man who tried breaking when he was younger but moved on. He created a competitive tour and then helped fund the Youth Olympics. The article refers to a petition that was drafted in

opposition to this push by outsider efforts, which points to our ability to organize. Unfortunately, the voice of the people expressed in that petition was disregarded because the effort to bring Breaking into the Olympics continues to this day.

The urge to bring Breaking to the Olympics did not come from the actual breakers because we do not need to wait every four years to discover who the top-level dancers are. The impulse comes from outsiders who never saw the gains or strides of the actual community as worthy of respect. The outsiders never ask how are we operating, what are the generational traumas, is the history being preserved and what are the new lanes being created by breakers. They only seem to know that there is a benefit for them and, as is apparent, that their voice is louder in the mainstream news than any of the voices of the people who live the dance and bear the tradition in our everyday lives.

There are dancers who are people of colour quoted in the article but there was no representative from the original generation of Breakers from NYC. The dance community from NYC is thriving and should not feel like it is irrelevant when it comes to how the dance appears or is translated into any new platform. The International Olympics Committed (IOC), the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC), the World Dance Sport Federation (WDSF) and USA Dance need to undergo cultural sensitivity training, learn how to build local relationships with national Breaking communities and ask the community how to bring culture and competition to the Olympics. These are not overnight solutions, but rather are long-term processes that will nurture trust and ownership by the community for future generations. There are many of us that can facilitate and build these bridges for both sides to build better. But the mainstream media has to cease perpetuating stereotypes, especially in the wake of the 2020s, when there is no reason to stay in this offensive holding pattern.

If you are planning to step into a BIPOC community that has experienced appropriation and erasure in its young lifespan, ask yourself – are you helping or hurting the people of that community with your thought process and are you willing to embrace their legacy and their different way of living?

## REFERENCE

Maese, Rick (2021), 'How break dancing made the leap from '80s pop culture to the Olympic stage', *Washington Post*, 9 February, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2021/02/09/break-dancing-olympic-sport-paris-2024/>. Accessed 9 February 2021.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ana 'Rokafella' Garcia is a New York City native who has represented women in hip hop dance professionally over the past three decades. She co-founded Full Circle Prod Inc – NYC's only non-profit break dance theatre company – with her husband veteran breaker Kwikstep, generating theatre pieces, original poetry and local dance-related events. In addition to directing the documentary about breaker girls, *All the Ladies Say*, she premiered a new dance work

*Beauty Meets Beast* to help explore the duality of women in Street and Club dance. She is hired internationally to judge break dance competitions based on her knowledge of the classic hip hop dance style. She teaches unique workshops aimed at celebrating the roots and history as well as the technique of classic hip hop dance styles and has hosted breaking sessions at various locations in NYC since 1997, including The Point CDC, The Door, High Bridge and Alfred E. Smith. Presently an adjunct professor at The New School and a hip hop dance instructor at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), she motivates aspiring dancers to understand and to learn the business side of being an independent artist. More at <https://www.fullcirclesouljahs.com/>.

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