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The future of Filipino breaking: A tale of two *kuyas*

ABSTRACT

With world champions breakers like Canada's Karl 'Dyzee' Alba and the United Kingdom's Ereson 'Mouse' Catipon, Filipino diaspora have been a global force in breaking; however the domestic Filipino dance scene has remained relatively understudied. In this article, I argue that breaking in the Philippines has been stymied by an ongoing ideological battle between professionalization and tradition. This juxtaposition is aptly distilled in the legacies of Dyzee and Mouse, in which the former mentored local dance professionals and the latter made the country a mecca for hip hop humanitarianism. These highly regarded thought-leaders each garnered local followings that are often at odds with each other. Despite these differences however, on the issue of the Olympics, the two camps have joined together in unprecedented fashion. In 2021, Filipino dance community leaders formed the B-boy & B-girl Association of the Philippines (BBAP) in order to unite the local scene and take ownership of the country's Olympic endeavours. With Dyzee as president and Mouse as vice president, BBAP combines community-building and enterprise in order to enhance the Philippines's global competitiveness and visibility in the world of breaking. This research aims to historicize Filipino breaking culture in light of the Olympic moment. To do so, it employs an ethnography among BBAP supported by personal and archival interviews from the 2011 documentary, Pinoy B-boy (Bitanga 2011).

KEYWORDS

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cultural intermediaries
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1. R16 South East Asia Qualifier, hosted in the Philippines was spoken about in very polarizing ways. It is considered one of the most contentious events hosted locally and, for many in the region, was thought of as a failure due to issues with the events organization, local management and the conditions surrounding participant welfare.

INTRODUCTION

Filipino hip hop practitioners have made significant contributions to global hip hop culture and the development of its various artistic elements since its inception (Tiongson 2013). Filipino breakers have been documented through the works of scholars like Mark Redondo Villegas (2016), who explore the Philippine–American War and Filipino–American hip hop cultural practices. Villegas’s analysis highlights the complexities of cultural identity in hip hop expressions made manifest from US–Philippine colonial and neocolonial encounters. Other scholars, like J. L. Perillo (2013), explore street dance culture and the Filipino diasporic experience, highlighting the use of dance as a practice to decolonize space and offer practitioners a means to express counter-hegemonic histories. Despite this growing attention to the diasporic Filipino experience, little has been published regarding the history and ongoing developments within the domestic Filipino breaking scene.

In the new millennium, domestic Filipino breakers have excelled at international events, including the Philippine All-Stars at Hip-hop International 2006 and 2008, the debut of Project P-Noise at R-16 Korea 2010 or even Baclaran-based SAS Crew taking the first runner-up at Radikal Forze Jam (the largest street dance festival in Asia). The overseas success of Filipino crews has also attracted global competition organizers to set up satellite events in the Philippines to give more local dancers a chance to compete overseas. I began documenting this diversification abroad while filming my first documentary ‘Pinoy Bboy’ (Bitanga 2011). During this time I interviewed over fifty Filipino dancers between the United States and the Philippines. It was here where I first highlighted the noticeable distinctions forming across factions of the local Filipino scene. Despite the various global developments claimed abroad, an ideological rift began to form at home, between whether Filipino breaking should advance towards professionalization (an outcome of the industrialization taking place over the last decades), or preserve its grassroots communitarian essence. In 2018, when breaking debuted as a Youth Olympic sport under the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF), the rift grew wider as debates erupted all around the world (Li and Vexler 2019).

The prevailing scepticism in the Philippines came from years of botched events,¹ raising similar suspicions around failures in local supporting infrastructure for breaking in the Olympics, ultimately sowing further distrust in the local institutions. In 2021, the B-boy & B-girl Association of the Philippines (BBAP) was formed to find solutions to these concerns, electing a board of both domestic and diasporic leaders still active in the community. The coordination and amalgamation of these legacies were made possible by the work of hip hop ‘cultural intermediaries’. Their collective agenda for BBAP merged both ‘commercial motivations’ and ‘communitarian ideals’ (Ng 2019: 46) to present a hybrid approach for the future of Filipino breaking. Asia-Pacific hip hop scholar Jason Ng describes these individuals as connectors of scenes, communities and cultures, typically working in the creative industries to develop partnerships between cultural community, state partners and commercial sponsors. These individuals have become critical for developing hip hop from within and outside of the Philippines leveraging their intercultural competencies to structure ‘inter-regional exchanges between local, regional and global networks’ (Ng 2019: 2). In order to construct an image of the future, it is important to consider how we arrived at this Olympic frontier with the help

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of passionate intermediaries who have historically helped develop the Filipino scene.

This article presents a social history of the local Filipino scene drawing on my autoethnographic experience as a breaker, an event organizer, a journalist and a creative producer, alongside a series of interviews conducted between 2010 and 2023 with prominent members of the Filipino (local and diasporic) breaking scene. This ethnographic data is used to interrogate the dual legacies of prominent hip hop cultural intermediaries forming case studies that emphasize the complexities of scene and community development in the Philippines, as well as the growing need for more sustainable modalities of professionalization for Filipino breaking. The article first considers the history of Filipino hip hop and breaking at home and abroad, before interrogating how commercialist and communitarian ideological positions have developed from the work of two prominent community leaders. Finally, the article articulates how these leaders have come together to develop new opportunities in light of the announcement of breaking's co-option by the International Olympic Committee for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

THE DUAL HISTORIES OF FILIPINO BREAKING

Hip hop culture arrived in the Philippines as early as the 1980s, due in large part to the Philippine–American military network. Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines acted as key ‘contact zones’ (Villegas 2016: 29) for hip hop culture to spread in the Pacific. Filipino breaking pioneer Jay ‘J-Masta’ Cambay described Clark Air Force Base as an area where ‘every afternoon, off-duty service men battle, exchange technique[s] and practice b-boy’ (Cambay 2022: n.pag.). Inspired by the 1983 movie *Flashdance*, a then-teenage J-Masta would commute outside of the city alone and learn foundational dance moves from American soldiers. This paralleled what Filipino-Americans were doing in the United States: ‘remaking military towns into social landscapes productive for their hip-hop cultural expressions’ (Villegas 2016: 29).

Here we see the rise of two disparate Filipino hip hop scenes: (1) the domestic Filipino scene, and (2) the *balikbayan* ‘immigrant’ scene (Bitanga 2011). Literally translating to ‘return to nation’, *balikbayan* is used here to describe the Filipino diaspora as a whole – those living away from their ancestral homeland (Perillo 2013: 74). In the 1990s, the *balikbayan* breakers of the United States and Canada rose to global prominence during this era of breaking's evolution as international breaking competitions started to grow. This innovative generation included Abigail ‘ABGirl’ Herrera, Gabriel ‘Wicket’ Joachico, Rayan ‘Reveal’ Casas and Arnold ‘Gizmo’ Vidad, to name a few. Such dancers represented a spectrum of diverse and new dance styles that marked an evolution in the dance form itself.

Despite the prominence of the *balikbayan* scene, the domestic Filipino scene remained very niche and underground in the 1990s. ‘You would see a lot of people like battle, who would be around in the clubs all the time’ (Diaz 2022) recalled Lema Diaz of the Philippine All-Stars, a multidisciplinary street dance crew made up of breakers and dancers of other styles like popping and krump. While breaking spread overseas with competitions like Battle of the Year Germany and R-16 Korea (Fogarty 2018, Robitzky 2022), breaking in the Philippines was very much obscured amid the larger street dance movement. With dreams of one day seeing a Filipino crew at Battle of the Year or R-16, J-Masta, still the torchbearer of domestic Filipino breaking, united the breakers

of Manila under the name 'Battle Krew'. In the new millennium, Battle Krew branched off into what would become some of the country's golden age crews, including Funk Roots, Style Banditz, Soulstice and the Philippine All-Stars. In 2006 and 2008, the Philippine All-Stars won the Hip-hop International Street Dance Championships in Las Vegas, bringing global attention to the burgeoning domestic dance scene.

In 2009, California-based foundation All the Way Live held 'All the Way Live Philippines', a monumental breaking tournament in Manila that attracted international dancers from the United States, Europe and Asia. The event drew attention to the growing multitude of breaking crews around the Philippine archipelago, from Cavite province's CASH Crew to Palawan island's Infinite Crew. The domestic Filipino breaking scene was finally coming into its own with crews representing distinct cities and provinces. As more and more footage of domestic Filipino breakers circulated around YouTube and online forums, the *balikbayan* community took serious notice.

I happened to document the collision of these two communities while filming *Pinoy B-boy* in 2010, when I met Mouse and Dyzee, who many local dancers refer to as *kuyas* ('older brothers'). With Mouse's wins at the UK B-boy Championships and Dyzee's wins at the Rock Steady Crew Anniversary, the two *kuyas* amassed a large online following in the Philippine motherland. In the same way that Filipino migrant workers bolstered the country's booming remittance economy, Dyzee and Mouse sought to turn their global success into local prosperity for the domestic Filipino breaking community. This type of local-global connectivity is a hallmark of cross-cultural intermediary work and demonstrates a leveraging of experience and symbolic capital (reputation and fame) in the creation of new events (Ng 2019). Looking back on the time he and Mouse first met in Europe, Dyzee confirmed this very impulse: 'We talked about all the stuff we wished that we could do in the Philippines all the way back in 2006' (Alba 2021).

Despite their common goal to elevate the domestic Filipino breaking scene to a world-class level, the two *kuyas* diverged in approach. This is typical of hip hop cultural intermediaries who often appear diverse in roles – 'as enablers, activists, risk takers, experimenters, negotiators, connectors and mentors' (Ng 2019: ii) – while sharing a common desire to advance hip hop in their own ways. Nonetheless, their two approaches formed the foundations that would later give way to important partnerships that developed the scene in anticipation of the Olympic Games. Notably, how to balance the burgeoning economy surrounding professionalization with the communitarian work that emphasizes breaking's traditions in its grassroots contextualities. In the next section I present two case studies of cross-cultural intermediaries who represent these often polarizing positions and showcase some reconciliation of their ideological distance through a shared vision of the future for Filipino breaking in the Olympics.

KUYA DYZEE, THE COMMERCIALIST

Raised in Toronto, Dyzee began dancing in 1994 when he was 14 years old and had taught youth in his neighbourhood in Toronto after making his own name internationally (Fogarty 2012). He had travelled to the Philippines as a teenager, but later came to Manila in 2007 to film the documentary *All Out War* (Pilichowski 2013). He summarized the experience: 'So I made good for the camera, you know, we're on the street and kids came, and I taught them

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some moves, but when I left that time, I was thinking, like, I'm never gonna see them again' (Alba 2021).

While working as a hip hop humanitarian, Dyzee realized to truly uplift communities through dance he needed a more economically sustainable game plan. For him, the answer lay in empowering the local breakers and community leaders that were starting to emerge. By granting them world-class opportunities, they could inspire future youth to follow in their example.

In 2010, Dyzee founded Project P-Noise, an all-star crew that united *balik-bayan* and domestic breakers to wave the Philippine flag for the very first time at R-16 Korea – leveraging funding acquired from the Korean Government and other commercial sponsors who supported the event. The team combined icons like Dyzee and Reveal with up-and-comers from Soulstice, a young crew of college breakers that won a qualifier held in Manila. Project P-Noise's historical campaign at R-16 Korea saw the Philippine team defeat a similarly constructed Puerto Rican all-star crew, before facing off against hometown Korean favourites Jinjo Crew in an historic semi-final battle. Despite the loss, Dyzee succeeded in his mission to 'make as much noise as possible, so that everybody will start talking about it' (Bitanga 2011). In the succeeding years, R-16 and other international competitions like Denmark's Floor Wars and Chicago's Breaking the Law hosted satellite events in the Philippines. The Philippines's inclusion into the global competitive circuit signalled profound growth in the domestic breaking scene, as crews from all over the archipelago aggressively competed for the chance to represent the country overseas. On an individual level, Soulstice leader Reflex and child prodigy Allen Añas competed at the R-16 Korea solo battles and regional championships for Red Bull BC One. On a crew level, however, one particular name made waves overseas: SAS Crew.

Representing Baclaran, a marginalized neighbourhood deep within Manila, SAS Crew was a true underdog in the Asian breaking scene. Their teenage leader, Hogan Santiago started the crew by practising on the street outside his house, naturally attracting more kids, especially those trying to escape gang life. Here is how Hogan described a regular day of practice: 'while we're training outside, the cops are chasing peddlers all around us' (Bitanga 2011, translation added). This literal street dance crew became proof that domestic Filipino breaking was growing even more localized – from city crews to neighbourhood crews. Thanks to the efforts of Dyzee and foreign organizers, many of these low-income individuals travelled internationally for the first time and battled several times in Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong and the United States. This type of support highlights a particular cross-cultural intermediary capacity for structuring flows of economic capital and people between creative economies – supporting new mobilities in the region – as it has been done elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region (see Ng 2019). While Dyzee's vision was starting to show promise, the question remained: was competitive breaking ultimately sustainable for dancers from the local scene?

In 2015, the Philippines hosted the R-16 Southeast Asia regional championships for the first time. The crowd that gathered witnessed what might have been the greatest Filipino team of the golden age: an all-star team made up of SAS Crew, Soulstice and the young breaker Allen. Designed to become the first fully domestic Filipino crew to advance to the R-16 Korea world championships, this 'Team Philippines' succumbed to a more seasoned 'Team Taiwan' in the final match. With nearly 3 million views on YouTube, the video of this battle is one of the most viral displays of Filipino breaking on the internet

today. At the time, however, Team Philippines's efforts were dwarfed by a series of online rants posted by members of visiting countries like Singapore and Malaysia, who endured logistical and hospitality problems throughout the event. Over the succeeding years the Philippines saw a significant drop in international breaking events and the circuit of international practitioners visiting to participate.

Although the members of Team Philippines built a decent rapport throughout their campaign, the breakers returned to their respective crews and never trained together again. According to Reflex, 'the goal there was unity and there was unity for that day. But in terms of follow-through you know that only happens in events' (Gotangco 2022). Coming from someone who was a part of both Project P-Noise in 2010 and the Team Philippines in 2015, these words reflect a growing cynicism within the scene. Most of these events also only paid out the winners – or in some cases, awarded them in kind with all-expense-paid trips to other events that only paid out the winners. This seemed to go against Dyzee's whole vision for sustainable development. Meanwhile, golden age crews like Soulstice, Funk Roots and CASH Crew began to dissipate due to financial reasons. The following year, the R-16 organization lost its Korean government funding and relocated to Taiwan. Dyzee likewise moved to Taiwan, which was ripening with commercial breaking promise. His big dreams for the Philippines would have to wait.

KUYA MOUSE, THE COMMUNITARIAN

Having achieved commercial success as one of the United Kingdom's top breakers, Mouse came to the Philippines in 2012 to film a music video for British electronic band Rudimental. Currently at 80 million YouTube views, the viral video entitled 'Not Giving In' portrayed Mouse's biographical story growing up on the streets of Manila before rising to breaker fame (Rudimental 2012). Breaker Allen portrayed a young version of Mouse, with Mouse himself playing an altruistic *kuya* who teaches dance to street kids. Although a fictional character, this persona perhaps portended Mouse's present-day capacity as a communitarian leader. Around this time, Mouse led humanitarian projects with Germany-based Hip-Hop 4 Hope, a non-profit organization that sent foreign breaker mentors to teach marginalized youth in the Philippines. Sensing the same concerns Dyzee had concluded in his own charity work, Mouse decided to stay in Manila and localize hip hop education. He found the perfect partners for this work in the SAS Crew.

Through all their international success, SAS Crew continued to hold their practices out on the street so that young people could learn for free. According to crew member Randolph 'Killa-4' Bagalawis, 'Mouse saw us and said, "What you guys are doing is exactly what Zulu is doing"' (Bagalawis 2022, translation added). Mouse was referring to the Universal Zulu Nation, perhaps the longest-running hip hop grassroots organization. As a member of this group, Mouse teamed up with the SAS Crew to establish Zulu Pinas, a national chapter that included other hip hop practitioners from other crews and other hip hop disciplines like MCing, DJing and graffiti. Zulu Pinas proceeded to roll out a slew of local events, including the annual Bronxclaran Block Party, which drew attendees from Japan, Singapore and Germany to the otherwise unwelcoming streets of Baclaran.

Mouse wanted to establish a more stable vehicle for his hip hop education goals. In 2016, he founded the Kapayapaan Project. *Kapayapaan* (trans.

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'peace') alludes to the Zulu Nation virtues of peace, love, unity and having fun. According to their website, the non-profit organization seeks to impact unschooled children by combining hip-hop elements (dance, music and visual art) with formal education (English, digital literacy) and Filipino cultural practices' (Kapayapaan Project 2016: n.pag.). This echoes the lyrics of Zulu Nation MC KRS-One: 'Hip and Hop is more than music. Hip is the knowledge, Hop is the movement' (KRS-ONE & Marley Marl 2007). With SAS Crew breakers and teacher volunteers on the ground, Mouse leveraged his international network to raise the necessary funding for these humanitarian activities. Take for example, flows of support from Australia and Japan – with breaker Nasa and Katsu-1, respectively, joining Kapayapaan for outreach and to support events in 2017. Meanwhile, SAS Crew members learned new enterprising and intermediary skills by working with Mouse.

It is important to note that Dyzee's and Mouse's initiatives occurred simultaneously and with little animosity towards the other. In Mouse's words, 'I work mainly on community, culture [and] with the people. I don't say that he doesn't, but rather [that he's] on the business, the bigger side' (Catipon 2021). Mouse stretched out a fist in front of him, demonstrating, 'I'm here, I'm close to the people'. Then he raised his other hand above and said, 'he's (Dyzee's) up there, but he's still for people'. Bringing his hands together, he ended with, 'we are peace' (Catipon 2021). The somewhat equal domestic influence of the two *kuyas* formed a commercialist-communitarian equilibrium – at least, until mid-decade.

On a macro-level, the Filipino domestic breaking scene began to tip heavily towards communitarianism, weakening its competitive ambitions and further slowed the number of large events that potentialized new economic stimulus for the hip hop community. SAS Crew retired from R-16 and participation in international battles declined. In 2019, the remaining members of Soulstice formed Manila Soul, an aspiring professional crew that carried Dyzee's legacy. That year, they won first-runner-up at Respect Culture (formerly R-16) Taiwan and hosted a qualifier event for Hip-Fest Vietnam. On the other side of the world, breaking's debut at the 2018 Summer Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires beacons a new frontier for competitive breaking.

PRO-MINDED VS. STREET-MINDED

In 2021, I asked Dyzee what he thought about my juxtaposition of him and Mouse as 'commercialist' and 'communitarian' leaders, respectively. He gave it his own spin: 'It's like the pro-minded and the street-minded' (Alba 2021). This pro-street alternative is poignant because in the context of hip hop, it speaks to history – from the origin of breaking in the streets of the Bronx to its professional future as an Olympic sport. With his latest work running a professional breaking league and starting his own sneaker brand in Taiwan, Dyzee established himself as a cultural entrepreneur and a poster child for breaking's professionalization. In his view, 'if we don't find a way for [dancers] to live from this, like, to do this full time, they're gonna' have to go back to the streets' (Alba 2021).

I explored the theme of passion as a profession while filming *Pinoy B-boy*. Back then, Reflex explained, 'b-boying here in the Philippines has yet to actually come to a level of a really decent profession, but I'm really hopeful and very faithful that it will happen in a few years' (Bitanga 2011). While the other Soulstice members moved on to different career paths, Reflex carved

out a dance career by pursuing every available opportunity – from dancing in commercials to teaching as a full-time faculty member for the prestigious Ateneo de Manila University. Still, in aggregation, these activities paid less than the typical full-time jobs assumed by college graduates. More importantly, such opportunities were likely inaccessible for those without college or high school diplomas, which constituted most of the domestic breaking population.

For the breakers of the SAS Crew, many of whom did not graduate high school, their passion was almost entirely separate from their profession. To support a breaker lifestyle, many of them opened small businesses unrelated to the dance. Hogan started a dog-breeding business to support his family while Killa-4 inked tattoos to support himself. Since the latter was one of SAS Crew’s only active dancers, I asked him if he made any significant money from breaking. He answered:

sometimes, I make money from judging competitions. When that happens, I bring my family – my kids, my wife. The money goes to our transportation and our food. I get to take some home, but what is important to me is that I got to experience it with my family.

(Bagalawis 2022, translation added)

Killa-4 and his crewmates hardly taught at studios or performed paid gigs. Even though there was money to be made in breaking, the breakers of SAS Crew did not seem to think much of it. Given their socio-economic standing, just finding time to dance was a luxury. In light of the Olympics, however, and with Dyzee’s growing success in East Asia, the question remained: could professional breaking work in a developing country such as the Philippines?

This question was put to the test at the 2019 SEA Games, one of the first events to host Olympic-level breaking under the WDSF. With Dyzee as a judge and Mouse as a coach for the Philippine national team, the two *kuyas* came together for the first time in over a decade. As for the outcome, however, things panned out poorly for the home team. The other Filipino DanceSport athletes collected ten gold medals in categories like Tango and Waltz, while in the breaking division, breaker Debbie ‘Hate’ Mahinay won silver while breaker Killa-4 came in last out of all the male competitors. Killa-4 kept a low profile in the following months and only later on disclosed the logistical, financial and bureaucratic distractions that took away from his training preparations leading up to the event. According to him, ‘the budget did not get to us at the time we needed. We had to pay our own money for practice, training, gear, food and preparation’ (Bagalawis 2022, translation added). This was a scenario reminiscent of R-16 2015, except this time, the home team suffered. Additionally, the Philippines SEA Games as a whole was shrouded in controversy for ‘subpar treatment of official delegates and the rushed venues, among others, vis-a-vis the huge budget provided to organizers’ (Gavilan 2019: n.pag.). Assuming such issues are really systemic, it raises important questions around the future sustainability of Olympic Philippine breaking, which will have to funnel through the same government agencies.

A year later, the International Olympic Committee announced breaking’s inclusion into the Paris 2024 Games. This reawakened post-SEA Games tensions as Killa-4, Hate and concerned members of SAS Crew posted open letters addressed to the former SEA Games organizers. My first instinct upon

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reading was to immediately call Mouse, then Dyzee, to finally hear their side of the SEA Games story.

B-BOY & B-GIRL ASSOCIATION OF THE PHILIPPINES

Mouse, who was still chasing SEA Games reimbursements to that day, admitted that he encouraged the dancers to speak up on social media in order to get the attention of the Philippine DanceSport Federation (PDSF). He wanted to ensure that history would not repeat itself now that the stakes were higher. It was clear that Mouse had lost trust in external non-hip hop organizations to act in the best interest of the culture and its athletes. As for Dyzee, he recognized a broader problem in how the dance was being packaged with all these big events. Dyzee had long felt that the competition circuit focused too much on events rather than investing in the athletes themselves. That is the reason why his sports league in Taiwan focused on building professional crews that battled each other in high-profile showdowns. In 2019, Dyzee argued for a grounded approach to supporting practitioners rather than the organizations: 'what it does is it markets the team. Not the event, the team' (Bitanga 2019).

It occurred to me that both Mouse and Dyzee had not deviated from their original missions. Mouse's mission was to build a self-dependent breaking community in the Philippines. Dyzee's mission was to make professional breaking a sustainable career for Filipino dancers. Now, the inevitability of the upcoming Paris 2024 Olympics posed a 'make or break' moment for the dancers of the Philippines, as with any other nation. In spite of previous missteps and recent traumas, the two *kuyas* viewed the moment as an opportunity to finally bring their visions into fruition; but they had to first make good with PDSF, who held full authority over Olympic breaking in the Philippines. Given Mouse and Dyzee's concerns, the best plan of action was to establish an independent organization that could form a partnership with PDSF. I believed we could make it work in the Philippines even though I witnessed other countries like the United States and Indonesia attempt this route and struggle with their respective DanceSport counterparts.

Throughout 2020, the *kuyas* and I commenced a series of online meetings with various Filipino community leaders who expressed both their aspirations and reservations about the Olympics. From there, we elected a board of directors and incorporated BBAP with the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission on 5 October 2021. Our board was a balanced representation of Dyzee's professional vision and Mouse's grassroots methods: Anthony 'Lamaroc' Lawang and Luke Lasam worked for Mouse's Kapayapaan Project and I worked closely with Dyzee on his projects in Taiwan. The other two directors, Lema Diaz and Madelle Paltu-Ob, were former Philippine All-Stars who operated popular street dance studios in Manila's north side and south side, respectively. Indeed, BBAP continued the tradition of forming an 'all-star' team to catalyse growth – this time, on an institutional level.

To solidify the commercialist-communitarian equilibrium, Dyzee interfaced with PDSF as our Director of Competitions while Mouse interfaced with our members as Director of Community. Dyzee and Mouse were also elected president and vice president, respectively. With both sides of the spectrum front and centre, BBAP hoped to unite the community and regain their trust – 'because our people in the Philippines, [have] been [made promises] so many times [that have] been broken' (Catipon 2021), summarized Mouse. Highlighting the intensity of the conditions in the Philippines he argued:

There's poor, there's poor-poor and then dirt poor. For me to change that is to really go down to the roots rather than fill up the fruits, you know? We cannot blame the fruit. The fruit is just the fruit. We have to go down to the root and that's what I want [to do].

(Catipon 2021)

I have watched Mouse grow more cynical about bureaucracy and more outspoken about class discrimination over the years; and yet, his actions showed optimism. With empathy, he described the street-minded community members as those who 'have so much kindness but so much hate at the same time. Yin and yang' (Catipon 2021).

In the online tirades that followed the Olympic announcement, no one particularly objected to breaking's future in professional sports. In this new era, it seems that every breaker is at once both street-minded and pro-minded, both communitarian by nature and commercialist in ambition. Their position along this spectrum is influenced by the words of their peers and elders, as well as the socio-economic conditions of their everyday reality. When Filipina weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz won the Philippines's first Olympic gold medal on 26 July 2021, it sparked a new optimism among Filipino would-be athletes. The BBAP board was engaged in an online meeting when we heard the news. We paused our discussion and replayed the moment over Zoom, with members watching from the Philippines, Taiwan, Australia and the United Kingdom. The symbolic significance of this moment was not lost on us. For BBAP, our Olympic dream became that much more tangible. Seeing the amount of public and private financial support that came pouring in for Hidilyn and the three medal-winning Filipino boxers, the domestic breaking community caught a glimpse of what Olympic breaking could do for our struggling scene.

On 25 February 2022, BBAP signed a partnership with PDSF, recognizing BBAP as the exclusive representative organization for breaking in the Philippines. The agreement protected both BBAP's operational independence and PDSF's authority in all matters related to the Philippine Olympic Council (POC). This meant that, although PDSF ultimately held the keys to the Olympics, it was up to BBAP to draft the national agenda and pursue the plethora of activities outside of the POC's scope. With everything he learned from the SEA Games and Taiwan, Dyzee designed a professional Filipino breaking league that could work even without the Olympics. True enough, the inaugural 'BOOM BBAP!' competition was scheduled in June as a build up to China's Asian Games – but when the Asian Games were postponed indefinitely, the event still carried on with great success. Dancers from around the Philippines flew to Manila and battled for coveted spots in the BBAP league. At last, Dyzee's plans were no longer subject to foreign factors, nor at the mercy of government subsidization. Paris 2024 was not as much a goal as it was a springboard to finally bring the professional dream to the Philippines. For Dyzee, '[t]he Olympics is not the end. It is the beginning' (Bitanga 2021: n.pag.).

POLITICAL COMPLEXITIES AND THE PDSF

With official recognition by the PDSF of BBAP as the exclusive representative organization for breaking in the Philippines, the new partnership also brought with it a number of complexities. The original agreement was designed to support BBAP's operational independence and retain the PDSF's

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intermediary authority in all business with the POC. This meant that although the PDSF ultimately held the keys to the Olympics, BBAP had the freedom to lay the pre-Olympic groundwork. With the need to hastily organize, Dyzee assumed communications with the PDSF as our Director of Competitions and Mouse interfaced with our members fulfilling his responsibility as Director of Community.

With everything he learned from the SEA Games and Taiwan, Dyzee's new independent breaking league managed to support the national selection of athletes for the Olympics. Meanwhile, Mouse organized online town halls to engage BBAP's membership, which were divided into the following paid tiers: 'Community', 'Competitor', 'Chief' and 'Business'. Community members enjoyed unlimited admission into events throughout the year, while Competitor members, who were mostly aspiring Olympians, competed at such events. Chief members included organizers, judges, DJs, MCs, intermediaries and anyone who would collaborate in the operations and organization of such events. Business members were commercial partners – both large corporations and independent businesses – that would pledge regular sponsorship. With our eyes set on the Olympics, the stage was set and the focus was on recruiting Competitor members for 2022 – offering bulk discounts for individuals who signed up with their crews.

In the midst of pandemic lockdown, BBAP began the national qualification process with a 'cyber cypher' that enabled nationwide participation via online video submission. From over one hundred video submissions, 22 finalists then competed at the inaugural 'BOOM BBAP!' tournament in Manila on 25 June 2022. The top six breakers and top four breakers then advanced to PDSF's National Championships on 29 October 2022, establishing the country's first national rankings. Manila Soul's Ilyvm 'Dudut' Gabriel and Alyanna 'Yani' Talam emerged as the top breakers, both of whom represented the Philippines back in 2019 at international DanceSport events in China and Japan.

While things seemed to go according to plan in our inaugural year, finding sponsoring partners and proceeding through national selections, we also encountered a variety of hurdles that forced us to re-evaluate our initial strategy. With less than 50 members by the end of the year, most of whom were offered either discounted or free memberships, we realized we could not sustain an operation on annual dues. As it stood, each of us board members attended monthly meetings and conducted these initiatives in-kind, sometimes even funding initiatives out of pocket. Additionally, ranking events proved to be more costly, as we would have to secure travel and accommodations for a rigid pool of ranked athletes. We also learned that these PDSF-endorsed athletes were not necessarily entitled to government funding, adding significant complexity to their ability to participate as professional athletes. Each individual still had to undergo an additional screening process with the Philippine Sports Commission, where they were evaluated on a number of factors, including projected chances of winning an international medal. This left us in a precarious situation where we found ourselves caught between not having the necessary funds from partnering organizations to support athletes and our organizational committee, while also not having access to local government funding regimes.

At the end of 2022, the board settled on a 'minimum viable product' (MVP) approach to our operation, where we would focus on fulfilling pre-Olympic requirements while garnering economic capital to eventually roll out a fully independent and self-sustaining league. More notably, we would expand

BBAP's efforts outside our board by empowering our growing membership base to take more initiative and step into organizational and leadership roles where possible. Dyzee's commercial proof of concept was about to be bolstered by Mouse's capacity for communitarian crowdsourcing, obtained from his ongoing philanthropic work. While we focused heavily on empowering competitors in 2022, our strategy now pivoted to empower the 'Chiefs' for a larger network of supporting staff. However, as each month drew closer to the Olympics, BBAP's plans for independence were put into tension with the government mandates that were levied over its now signed partner, the PDSF.

EMERGING LOCAL-GLOBAL TENSIONS FROM *BALIKBAYAN* PARTICIPATION

On 4 March 2023, Filipino-American Red Bull BC One champion Logan 'Logistx' Edra debuted on the Philippine DanceSport Federation Inc.'s roster of national athletes. This development follows the Philippine Sports Commission's mandate to open up national team selection to international prospects of Filipino descent – including generational *balikbayan* born abroad. Athlete importation is however a common practice in the Philippines, given the nature of the *balikbayan* and the various generations of diaspora brought up abroad. This practice has seen the likes of Filipino-American NBA star Jordan Clarkson join the Philippines's national basketball team and American track star Kristina Knott as the national 200-m record holder. Indeed, this type of importation aligns with how nations have typically utilized the Olympics for raising their global capital. While this offers developing nations opportunities for this type of prestige building, it also puts locally born and raised athletes into a broader pool of athletes, many of whom live in more affluent countries and for that reason benefit from various privileges. In spite of this, the individual nature of breaking in the Olympics will only see the world's top sixteen breakers to compete in solo battles. The question now is whether naturalized Filipino-American superstar Logistx will emerge as the sole representative of the Philippine national team. Such an outcome would profoundly amplify the historical themes mentioned earlier in this article.

If a young female prodigy like Logistx were to become the face of Filipino breaking, it would paint a progressive and promising future for the small breaker population in need of growth across the archipelago. But, given her background as a second-generation immigrant from San Diego, California – one of the military bastions of Filipino-American-specific hip hop history (see Villegas 2016) – one might question whether her ancestral homecoming enforces a traumatic history of American imperialism or reverses history by way of reclamation. I find it necessary here to restate that BBAP is a Philippine domestic organization co-led by Dyzee, a Canadian national, and Mouse, a long-time UK resident. This brings questions of local and global agendas into light. As a dual American and Filipino citizen myself I have had to regularly consider if BBAP's leadership is still captivated by this same complexity.

When I first set off to write this piece, I sought to excavate the history of domestic Philippine breaking given its absence from scholarly literature. I framed such a study with an international lens: of two international *kuyas* that shaped the Philippines's golden age for breaking and paved the path towards a gold medal. While our local history has its own story, it is inevitably a product of the global reach of our people and the various approaches that coalesce in the archipelago. Our collective hope, both in erecting BBAP and chronicling

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its origins here, was to pass the torch over to a new generation of leaders that did not come into the local Filipino scene but came out of it.

Indeed, in my conversations with Logistx after she had conquered Red Bull BC One, then the pinnacle of solo breaking, I foresaw her instinctive drive to ‘connect with [her] ancestry and help build the community’ (Bitanga 2022: n.pag.). But when Logistx took her very first step on Philippine soil in February and arrived to a grand welcome from the POC, several powerful senators and various news outlets, she experienced a very different scene, one paved more in politics and limelight than grassroots community-building. She was only granted enough time for commercial diplomacy and very little for communitarian connection. And although Dyzee, acting as BBAP’s president, had initiated her recruitment in November 2022, BBAP as an organization had been virtually left out of the process during its progression.

When Logistx made her Philippine national debut 4 March, it sent shock-waves across the national breaking scene. The key question being, for a nationally ranked breaker like Yani, who conquered the 2022 events that led her to being the number one breaker prospect for the Olympic team in the Philippines: would she now be ranked down with the addition of Logistx to the national roster given Logistx held more international points from previous participation as a member of Team USA? This brought BBAP under scrutiny as the politics of governmental interventions in support of global prestige building via Logistx had also led to a distinct oversight of local athletes with the same ambitions. With little opportunity for recourse by BBAP the domestic Philippine community flared up once again as it did post-SEA Games, looking for answers from what we set up to oversee these official matters (Sy 2022). Logistx’s entry into the system exposed a massive hole in the structure BBAP had designed, that it was still held captive by external interests regardless of its intention to act independently. It seemed that in an instant, BBAP’s structure, and perhaps the organization itself, was brought to a halt.

As the Philippine breaking scene enters a more politicized chapter, it is unclear how BBAP will fit into the Olympic picture with new tensions threatening the groundwork laid in its first term. The same ideological rift that BBAP sought to mend has pervaded our very own organization and made clear both the compatibilities and tensions that stem from the overlapping and somewhat divergent paths of our two leaders. Such a noticeable ideological departure now sets the stage for BBAP’s first open elections to be held later this year (2023).

CONCLUSION

The previous decade marked a golden age for domestic Filipino breaking, in big part thanks to these two *kuyas* who have guided the local scene. For now, while the complexities of dance–sport partnership threatens the cultural community’s control over how the dance is managed, communicated and delivered, cultural intermediaries like Dyzee and Mouse are working hard to provide the local scene with the best chance for professionalization while sustaining its connection to the grounded everyday cultural histories and communitarian traditions throughout the country. With both Dyzee and Mouse living away from the Philippines at various points in their lives, the desire to cultivate a local response to the Olympic co-option also signifies a critical step in unifying the scene in their ancestral homeland. An objective that still exists but is made complex by their two approaches to scene building:

Dyzee leads BBAP with a 'league' model while Mouse manages its members with an 'agency' model.

As they end their first terms as president and vice president, Dyzee focuses on integrating international prospects into the existing qualification framework while Mouse focuses on sourcing independent support for incumbent national champions like Yani and Dudut, who have struggled to find funding for Olympic qualifiers in 2023. While one *kuya* focuses on the importation of potential economic and cultural capital to cultivate the local Philippine scene, the other focuses on the exportation of participants from the Philippines scene to demonstrate their value to the world – one concentrating on opening opportunities for the future, and the other on fulfilling the promises of the past. The Yin and the Yang.

By working together in 2021, they accomplished something remarkable. They ushered us into the Olympic era – an unprecedented achievement. There are however new divisions that have recently emerged between the two and it seems that future cooperation may not be possible. My heart breaks as I conclude this piece. I am like a child covering his ears while his two *kuyas* violently argue. But I have grown through this experience. When I co-founded BBAP in 2021 alongside Dyzee, Mouse, Lema, Madelle, Luke and Lamaroc, I became a *kuya* myself. For two years, I too accomplished such feats working alongside not just Dyzee and Mouse, but Philippine All-Stars Lema and Madelle, the two *ates* ('older sisters') of the group. In the same way we must not discount the depth of talent that comprises our dance community, we must also acknowledge the greatness that lies within ourselves. Lema was the main reason our 'BOOM BBAP!' (2022) event was such a success and Luke impressed us all when she collected over six hundred names to build our first national census.

As the board and executive leadership is meant to change on a yearly basis this presents new challenges into the future for BBAP. Originally formed as a launchpad for a commercial-communitarian hybrid agenda developed by two distinct visionaries, what we ultimately established was a platform for any future set of leaders to assume. With this first term seeing unprecedented triumphs alongside devastating hardships, BBAP has ultimately demonstrated the complexity of the local–global connection and distinctions between our people, and how this can be our greatest strength or greatest challenge to overcome. With the global expansion of Olympic breaking comes the consolidation of the scattered descendants of the Philippine archipelago which offer up new connectivities and potentials for cross-cultural intersectionality. With Philippine breaking history already so deeply rooted in diaspora, its future will likely continue this local–global narrative, producing dancers and community leaders who are diverse in thought, practice and approaches to intermediation. While BBAP faces a challenging new era, there is hope for the possible futures for Filipino breaking given its rich diversity of dancers who shortly will step into leadership roles.

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