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IN THE CIPHER

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Breaking the normalization of appropriation and exploitation

ABSTRACT

Capitalism often gives away gold in exchange for something much more lucrative. Breaking was created by people of color whose ancestors originally owned the land from which the gold, now offered to the best dancers at the Olympics, was extracted. In this article, I wish to examine the financial inequity between the creators and the exploiters in the Hip Hop Dance Scene globally. I examine the relationship between dancers, dance schools and intermediary dance organizations globally. I question how most of the money is made and how much trickles down. I also consider how people of colour participate in the global organization efforts of breaking in the Olympics and discuss how the notion of 'winning' can also obscure the healing power of dance. Gold is symbolic of scarcity and capitalism will sell this to dancers in the same way that overnight fame is sold to rappers. I reflect on three primary questions: Will this dance join the others already exploited by dance schools who have no historic connection to the culture? Will the World DanceSport Federation and the International Olympic Commission celebrate the creators of the Breaking moves or will it perpetuate racist appropriation of culture without learning about its heritage? and finally, what efforts are being made to create an economically self-sustaining dance community?

KEYWORDS

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I started Breaking 1982. I am an educator, a self-published author of 24 books, a playwright of five plays, and an artist that created 23 albums. I am the founder and creative director of a multiple award-winning hip hop cultural education NGO called Heal the Hood Project based in Cape Town, South Africa, and a member of one of South Africa's oldest hip hop groups, Black Noise, who placed third at Battle of the Year in 1997. As a community we have hosted events to raise money for flights, visas and in some cases accommodation to send more than two hundred fifty practitioners to travel to international events like Battle of the Year, R16, Floor Wars, Trinity International Hip Hop Festival and the DMC World DJ Championships. Before moving on I have to add that I grew up during apartheid in South Africa (which was in place from 1948 to 1990). I was chased and shot at by the white supremacist South African police and the military, simply because I wanted equality. Today I reflect on the inequality noticeable around breaking's emerging involvement with the Olympic project. My concern is primarily with how money generated from Breaking at the Olympics will remain in the hands of a select few, while very little trickles back down into the community – where economic capital can change the lives of practitioners, dancers, artists and creatives who are less fortunate.

In the lead up to the Olympics, numerous dancers and dance teachers I talked to feared speaking openly about their relationships with dance studio owners, advertising agencies, international film crews and the local World DanceSport Federation (WDSF) governing body. I also noticed a fear of talking about how much they earned. It was clear that they were warned about pursuing a career in arts, which is ironic given that hip hop music has generated over \$200 billion in profit over the last twenty years (Giacomazzo 2021). They all repeated cliched statements uttered by their parents and other concerned family members such as 'get a real job', 'I'm a struggling artist' and 'have a backup plan'. Despite the wealth that hip hop can generate it seems like capitalism has created an inverted pyramid for the distribution of wealth in the hip hop industry at large.

Here is what I mean. In 2015 the International Olympic Committee President earned a €225,000 in annual indemnity (Grohmann 2015) while the vast majority of athletes globally considered themselves not financially stable (Narishkin et al. 2021). South African hip hop dancers already struggle to make ZAR 24,000 (USD 1560.54) a year, and many athletes do not receive stipends from the government or the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC). Even winning medals (Gold ZAR 100,000, Silver ZAR 50,000, Bronze ZAR 25,000) pales in comparison to the salaries afforded to these elite positions. With so much money held by administrators and with dancers increasingly in need to pay for registration and membership fees to their WDSF representatives, these imbalances also highlight how regional affluence impacts equality in participation, athlete welfare and access to qualifying opportunities.

Hip hop dancers from the economically poorer regions of the world spend huge amounts of money to attend classes and participate in annual competitions as it is. They also have to pay for their own flight tickets to travel to international events. Every year I get calls from numerous dancers for help. In South Africa this money is raised from communities, with an average household income of USD 3210.63 per year (Gastaldo 2013). Many dancers have to forgo their participation because they simply cannot afford it. I wonder about this economically exclusionary dimension of hip hop's industrialization and

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how this impacts the way the South African and other national Olympic hip hop teams are selected and awarded national colours.

Other issues around representation have also become apparent in this economic exclusion. The white population in South Africa is 7.8 per cent (SSA 2021) of the national population, but the national representation (at least as it appears online) shows that they make up a significant majority of the South African hip hop dance teams. My fear is that, like other hip hop dance styles, Breaking (under the banner of the WDSF) will become more and more economically exclusive, making 'opportunities' like the 2024 Olympics economically unattainable for many who are already at a disadvantage. During apartheid, Black African people were excluded because of their race and now it appears we are excluded by an economic apartheid.

While I was promoting breaking in economically poor communities, I saw its power to forever change and save the lives of young people. I have also seen how easy it is for them to fall back into the gangs, drugs and social ills of their communities because of lack of vision and understanding from the local and global bodies that engage dancers – as they are far removed from their realities. Organizations like the WDSF do not seem to care nor understand the communities from which these dancers' funds are being extracted. Breaking was created by people of colour to solve social issues within their communities. Ironically, breaking's control is now being handed over to organizations not interested in understanding these communities, but instead have an extractionist economic interest in benefitting from it.

These are particularly troubling issues given that this global platform and coalition between the WDSF and International Olympic Committee (IOC) highlight a number of hypocrisies hidden behind their inclusive posturing. Take for example the WDSF vision statement which highlights that they will: 'Promote the sport on the strengths of a greater constituency of the broadest demographic appeal and of benefits arising from economy of scale' (WDSF 2022: n.pag.). This seems to emphasize a need for greater numbers of participants, extracted from a number of regions for the purpose of seeking profit. It would also appear that economically wealthier countries have larger numbers of participants at both the Olympics and WDSF championships events. The economics of these operations cannot be ignored as a determining factor for participation and inclusivity. Both the IOC and the WDSF are based in the global north in Europe with their headquarters in Switzerland – one of the richest countries in the world. The IOC and WDSF cannot begin to understand the realities of the people that created hip hop culture, hip hop dance and breaking without including Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) from these struggling communities to be part of the organizational team. By doing so they would enable practitioners to better govern themselves, and empower their communities in ways these wealthy organizations alone cannot.

There are of course other issues around inclusivity noticeable in the Olympics' approach. Here is a section of the Olympic Oath:

We promise to take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules and in the spirit of fair play, inclusion and equality. Together we stand in solidarity and commit ourselves to sport without doping, without cheating, without any form of discrimination.

(IOC 2021b: n.pag.)

Given the Olympics started 126 years ago in 1896 it seems hardly equal that it has never been hosted in Africa. Similarly, the WDSF started operation 65 years ago in 1957 and only has seven African affiliates out of the 54 constituent countries. If you take this statement above about solidarity and apply it into other contexts, the same ambivalence for minorities is obvious. Take for example China's bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics. Amidst accusations of genocide against the Uyghur population in China's Xinjiang province in the far west, the IOC determined it was a fitting venue to host the Winter Games (BBC [2013] 2021).

In closing, I want to comment on the slogan 'Breaking for Gold' used by the WDSF for their global Olympic qualifying events. I am from South Africa, one of the biggest gold mining countries in the world. Our country's gold has been extracted and stolen by the descendants of colonial land theft and most South Africans have never held, nor can afford, that gold. The ancestors of the pioneers of hip hop dance were similarly extracted from Africa and taken as slaves to enrich the European and American elite and their countries. I have watched academia also extract and steal information from hip hop breaking education pioneers for their theses and doctorates, never rewarding the practitioners with the same accolades. They encode their lessons in exclusionary language and place it in economically exclusive academic silos like universities, removed from the very people that birthed these ideas. I hope that the gold-plated silver medal does not distract *we the people*, from our collective power to demand that the people are truly the beneficiaries of their creation.

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