Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 4 Number 2
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00092_2
Published Online July 2024

INTRODUCTION

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The polarizing politics of breaking's inclusion in the Olympics

ABSTRACT

As nations across the world incorporate breaking into their national sports systems in anticipation of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, the new dancesport classification has resulted in a number of tensions and possibilities among dancers. The increased support from state governments and commercial sponsors in recent years has noticeably impacted dancers and their prospective careers. While this development has been promising in some countries, a range of disparities has become apparent across the globe, particularly in relation to funding, stipends, salaries, and contracts from state agencies or local DanceSport organizations. This disparity between the global north and south is becoming more pronounced in the lead-up to the Olympics. This creates a contradiction our issue explores: on the one hand, the Olympic opportunity is a sign that breaking is thriving around the world, while on the other, the resources required to participate successfully will, as ever, favour the globally powerful. Furthermore, the articles and statements in this issue seek to situate the Olympic project's impacts on the dance,

KEYWORDS

breakdancing
global hip hop
hip hop dance
mediation
institutionalization
dancesport
2024 Paris Olympic Games

particularly in terms of colonizing mindsets, misogyny and unequal power relations more generally.

In the lead up to the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, as various countries around the globe adopt breaking into their national sport systems, this new dancesport categorization has resulted in any number of tensions and possibilities. Of note are the varying degrees of support offered by institutions and state governments, with vast differences seen across the globe. These affect individual dancers and their trajectories as athletes. Disparities have become apparent, mainly around funding, stipends, salaries and contracts issued by either state agencies or local DanceSport member bodies. This variance has also exacerbated inequalities in participation from the global south, as many dancers are forced to fund their own travel to qualifying competitions (there they compete in a point-based system, in hopes of making it into the final group of 32 dancers who will ultimately compete at the Paris Olympic Games).

This disparity between the global north and south is becoming more pronounced in the lead-up to the Olympics. Affluent nations typically benefit from greater access to diverse streams of funding and better organization. This creates a contradiction our issue explores: on the one hand, the Olympic opportunity is a sign that breaking is thriving around the world, while on the other, the resources required to participate successfully will, as ever, favour the globally powerful. That is to say, who does, or does not, get to participate as a competitor and which nations are able to secure the most prospects for their national teams, will likely resemble existing hierarchies of power. Many dancers remain apprehensive, as their local member bodies have failed to deliver on promises. Yet some nations have benefitted from organized and conscientious partnerships with their national bodies – such as in Japan – leading to significant advances in the legitimization and professionalization of breaking.

To be sure, breaking's international networks have been growing since the 1980s (see Fogarty 2012). Innumerable major international competitions have been produced by respected, integral members of that community (Fogarty 2018), alongside the remarkable growth of energy drink sponsored events. Access to the Olympic arena has in turn involved the development of partnerships with a ballroom association, the World DanceSport Federation, whose aesthetic practices and community differ greatly from those of breaking. This has meant an unparalleled adjustment, involving the building of bridges across cultures, along with the inevitable misunderstandings and growing pains. While some federation representatives look to the breaking community for self-representation and genuine partnership, others have hesitated to embrace the new discipline and marginalized its traditions and communities. The international breaking scene has also voiced its concerns about Olympic-qualifying competitions being run by ballroom dancers, rather than experienced event promoters well-versed in organizing large-scale breaking events. The challenges in the sportification of the dance continue, as questions about lack of gender equity in leadership, concerns about professional judging, and demands for fair representation from the global south remain to be adequately addressed.

This second issue of 'Breaking and the Olympics' begins with an article by breaker Frieda Frost and researcher Jaspal Singh, who provide a timely

ethnography of Morocco's breaking community. They document dancers' perceptions, experiences and dealings with the Fédération Royale Marocaine Des Sports Aérobics, Fitness, Hip Hop Et Disciplines Assimilées, in the lead-up to the Olympics. This research highlights the challenges faced by dancers in obtaining financial support for travel, salaried contracts and/or the official athlete/artist status necessary to obtain state welfare benefits. According to their research, the local federation has struggled to support breakers. The authors explore how activism has helped challenge the authority of the local federation and secured more favourable outcomes for athletes. Frost and Singh bring to light challenges experienced by some Moroccan-based dancers, again highlighting how global south locales may be marginalized in the often-Eurocentric world of dancesport.[1] The authors also address gendered participation, linked both to historical inequities in Morocco and the broader erasure of women in global hip hop culture.

Moving from Morocco to Japan, Jason Ng explores the nation's particular response to breaking and the Olympics. There, local community members working as cultural intermediaries skilfully negotiate a nexus of community and commercial enterprise (Ng 2019). Ng's work offers a much-needed reflection on the industrialization of hip hop as a business, taking into account local sentiments that have enabled commercial partnerships to be appreciated as a means of pollinating community-focused, social infrastructural development. This is in part due to the confidence placed in breakers by both the federation and the government in Japan, enabling the rapid development of the Japan DanceSport Federation's breaking division. There have been a number of benefits for dancers and these efforts have aided in the dance's mainstream legitimization (particularly through competitions televised across Japan's major public service broadcaster, the NHK). This contrasts with the typical global response, one more resistant to institutionalization. Ng thus highlights a specific, perhaps unique, cultural response by this early adopting and affluent nation in Asia's global north.

The adjudication systems utilized for breaking are both varied and crucial to its Olympic aspirations. Drawing on data from a large global sample of participants (namely from China, the United States and Israel), Jonaton Vexler, Cindy Foley and Candy Phoelix present an investigation into the variety of judging practices, contrasting the nascent Trivium judging system against pre-existing evaluative systems for competitive battles. Perhaps most importantly, Vexler's study critically compares the Trivium judging system (see Robitzky 2024) to the Objective, Unified, Real-Time (OUR) system when each is used to judge the same battle. This study considers the experience of judges in decision making to determine how judging outcomes may correlate or vary.

As with our previous issue, this collection incorporates perspectives from the dance community in the form of two artist statements. Firstly, South African dancer Emile Jansen considers the colonial, indeed extractionist, dimensions of the International Olympic Commission (IOC) and the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF) agendas. Jansen's critique highlights how the global north continues to overlook conditions in the global south that determine who gets to participate (a perspective also noted by Frost and Singh in this issue). For Jansen, pre-existing barriers faced by cultural minorities are structurally reprised through both governmental and DanceSport organizational practices. Jansen reflects on what he considers an economic apartheid, one that that privileges the white middle class

1. This non-capitalization refers to the general phenomenon of competitive dance, whereas 'DanceSport' refers to the particular administrative body (e.g. WDSF).

and restricts opportunities for the already marginalized majority of BIPOC South Africans.

The second artist's statement, from Scottish breaker Emma Ready Hamilton, explores the urgent need for breaking communities and organizations alike to consider how the tragedy of sexual abuse and harassment in elite athleticism must be confronted by breakers as they transition into this new global sport-industrial arena. While breaking's nascent position in the Olympic games has seen an ongoing development of organizational policies, the communal connections that sustain hip hop cultures must also grapple with coaching relationships where lines between professional and personal conduct may become blurred. Recognizing a long history of misconduct, Hamilton calls for greater systems of intervention and support by (and for) breakers, both within the WDSF and IOC.

Together, the articles and statements in this issue seek to situate the Olympic project's impacts on the dance, particularly in terms of colonizing mindsets, misogyny and unequal power relations more generally. At the same time, as the globalization of hip hop dance continues apace, recent scholarly research has addressed the various and ongoing erasures of Black, African American and Afrodiasporic roots and traditions (see Fogarty and Johnson 2022; Johnson 2022; Aprahamian 2021). This Special Issue further highlights such arising tensions in the significant advances for the hip hop dance scene at large, where new pathways for professionalization and participation open for some, while others may be left out or behind. This means continuing to consider the various forms of inequity experienced across the globe – not just across global north–south divides but also between cultural communities within the same nation. While breaking will soon take the main stage at the Paris Olympic Games in 2024, its subsequent Olympic status is uncertain, as the IOC have announced that it will not feature in the Los Angeles 2028 main series games. Nonetheless, breaking will remain a youth Olympic sport in 2026, and the community rallying behind breaking in the Olympics is working to reinstate the dance at the 2032 games in Brisbane, Australia.

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