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A Battle of Repression: Hip Hop Bgirls, Burns and Gestural Languages 1970-2010

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF DANCE

A BATTLE OF REPRESSION: HIP HOP BGIRLS, BURNS AND GESTURAL LANGUAGES 1970 to
2010

By

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I dedicate this to all women in hip hop dance and to the progression of hip hop culture as a whole.

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ABSTRACT

The gestural language of a hip hop dance battle is one of the most important elements of the form. This study's primary focus is the gestural language of "burns" used in battles by women hip hop dancers. Burns, the specific gestural language in battling used to insult the opponent, will be analyzed through several theoretical points of view such as feminism, queer theory, and historiography to name a few. These theories will be used to trace the evolution of women burns from the 1970s in New York City to today's contemporary bgirls. The masculinized/sexualized forms of battle behaviors have shaped the physical expression of the women. However, this gestural language has evolved from the transformative to the repressive affecting the bgirl psyche in many ways, becoming both empowering and disempowering. I will question why there exist few potent female-centered gestures in the women's burns, and how empowerment might be gained through bgirls using their own sexual/reproductive gestures in battling.

PREFACE

PERSONAL NOTE

I am a bgirl. When I was battling frequently (1996-2006), strategic planning and the use of carefully chosen gestural language was my main focus. In fact it won battles--and to win was all that mattered--but never at the expense of denigrating girlhood. As young women who got down on the floor and battled, we prided ourselves as *girls* in control of the scene and gloated when boys came to join *our* crew. However, battling was also changing tremendously as I matured. I noticed how phallic gestures, such as “throwin’ the dick” became a primary gesture in the battles. Consequently, I began to watch, attend, and research the setting of this language—“bboying battles.”

I quickly became fascinated with gender and its representation in the breaking battle by investigating breaking and its representation of women to its gendered spoken language. I started to concentrate on women’s identity (as a collective) in hip hop dance. Next, I began questioning the rarity of specific women’s burns in battles, such as “nursing the baby” or other female sexual-reproductive gestures, comparable to the omnipresent, male-centric phallic gestural languages. Peculiarly, bgirls themselves started to heavily utilize male sexual-reproductive language in battles, throwin’ dick even against other women. Dancing inscribes the body and affects self-expression and definition of womanhood. The unquestioning adoption of hip-hop’s homogenized masculinized/phallic physical and verbal languages caused women to repress female-sexualized language in breaking, in their movement choices and gestural phrasing.

This began to affect my self-esteem immensely. I would say to myself, “God! I have got to lose this ass in order to be good.” I struggled with body image (wanting to lose my hips and thighs) and I began thinking of my body in negative ways. Eventually, I began to police my body like the weight-conscious ballerina: I monitored what I thought, what I ate and how I exercised. Things began to shift into harmful rituals. It became a constant battle between wanting to lose weight and not wanting to lose what I deemed my femaleness -- which was strong, fearless, confident and extremely exaggerated in battle. But I was starting to think of myself as biologically weak, uncontrolled, thoughtless, and became severely insecure as a result. With a lot

of hard work, strength and perseverance, I eventually realized that I had second-guessed what I knew best: my body.

As I watched other bgirls use phallic gestures I began to question the effects of breaking culture on their psyche: Why are women using male sexual-reproductive gestures as a statement of strength? Are women affected by this negatively in subconscious ways? Are the clichéd male battling gestures manifesting those negativities? More importantly, how can this power-hold of gestural language on women be lifted? Can women be empowered through the development of pro-woman language?

This study focuses on the battle “burns” used by women hip-hop dancers.

“Burns” are specific physical gestures or danced gestural-narrative phrases that are directed at the opponent. They are meant to insult, demean and discourage the rival and highlight her/his weaknesses. These exchanges are quick (lasting about ten seconds or less) physical dialogues that can be crude or clever, witty or cruel, flashing by in a danced one-upmanship. But if they are to count, they must always be in rhythm with the music and on the beat. Because the dancers have to think fast on their feet to create these dialogic exchanges, burns are the most intense dramatic elements in any challenge, whether informal or formal competitions. They are also core characteristics of a dancer’s identity and agency. The masculinized and sexualized forms of battle practices, which have shaped the physical expression of the women, have evolved from the transformative to the repressive, becoming both empowering and disempowering. Looking at female gestural burns and physical practices from the 1970s in New York City to bgirls on a global level in 2010, I question why there exist few potent female-centered gestures in the women’s burns, and how empowerment might be gained through bgirls using their own sexual/reproductive gestures in battling.

Women are unremittingly omitted from the history of hip-hop dance. Still, this thesis is *not* an attempt to write the history of women in hip-hop dance but to offer an overview of how women helped shape this form. This thesis is the beginning of an attempt to fill in the historical gaps and to assist in understanding women’s presence in and contributions to the form. Hopefully, this work will initiate a dialogue, more investigations, and shift a much-needed focus on women in hip hop, shedding light on their crucial involvement in shaping its discourse, narratives and history.

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTERS AND METHODOLOGIES; TERMINOLOGY; REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Because of the dearth of information concerning women in the first two decades of hip hop (1970-1990) I decided to conduct interviews with as many of the women dancers as I could find. This supplemented the few books, articles and videos available on the subject. Certainly the most significant information in this study comes from these interviews, which I conducted with women over a two and a half year period and who were able to bring life and insight to the contributions women have made to hip hop. For each decade I use specific theoretical approaches to analyze and explain the women's empowerment and disempowerment within the form and what they contributed to hip-hop dance forms, particularly in terms of their roles in the development of breaking (probably the best known of the many hip-hop dance forms, breaking literally breaks down to the floor on the "break" in the music). Tracing the shifting intentions and vocabularies of female gestural burns and physical practices from the 1970s in New York City to contemporary bgirls of the New Millennium, several theories are posited to interpret aspects of these physical behaviors, including retained Africanist ideologies and practices of social/communal praise and censorship, feminism, panopticism, gender representation and queer theory (drag kings, abject female body, threatened patriarch), racial repression and historiography.

Chapter 1 is a brief data-descriptive overview of hip hop from the late 1960s to the present, concentrating on those events and practices that will affect the physical behaviors of breaking bboys, which the bgirls will submit to, and inherit, as their legacy in the latter decades. The hope is that this short summary will assist the reader in orienting themselves in the flow of events, and give background information that will help in understanding the more detailed chapters that follow.

In Chapter 2, which concentrates on women during the 1970s, I use Robert Farris Thompson's Africanist aesthetics on community to explain women's involvement in the form. Thompson theorizes that the communal role of dance ("assertable actions") is just as important as the dance itself. The fluid flow of the relationship between spectator and dancer anchors his

theory of “consulting the experts.” In this reciprocation, the dancer is consulting (by performing for and with) someone as knowledgeable as themselves. This is living interaction that testifies to the importance of women’s influence in the hip hop community. Although most of the women were keen watchers who remained on the edges of the “ciphers” (circles), I consider them active dancer/participants. Through their physicalized attitudes of approval or dismissal (in reality, responses are carefully selected and choreographed poses and gestures¹), their facial expressions and verbal comments they to a great extent controlled the men. The men sought their approval, which caused bboys to push the form, to create something better, bigger, more virtuosic. As knowledgeable witnesses, commentators and critics, women fueled the competitive nature of the dance, which many male pioneers say is what drove the dance’s quick evolution (especially breaking). Although the men now credit the women, they fail to give specific details about their influences on the essence of the form.

In Chapter 3, women were making their mark and acquired work in the 1980’s mainstream commercial hip-hop media. They were a visible part of the public culture and in many of the intracultural ciphers. In hip-hop party-dances, popping (and all other funk styles), locking, and other forms of hip-hop dance, women were chosen to perform. The 1980s hip hop superstar MC Hammer, for example, included many women in all his concert-tour extravaganzas, music videos and television shows. They were treated equally to the men and were expected to do the same intense and high-energy dancing as the males. With the explosion of breaking in the media, hip-hop women had commercial careers in the visual media, creating niches for themselves as hip-hop dancers while also paving the way for very successful careers in the New Millennium, for the singer/rapper/dancers like Beyonce, Ciara, Lady GaGa, Rihanna, Britney Spears, Christina Aguleira, Missy Elliot, Mariah Carey and Lil’ Kim.² I theorize women of this decade as continuing the feminist women’s movement of the 1960s-1980s, claiming agency and place in the metaphorical and actual ciphers as pro-feminist with physical statements of presence, independency and pride.

Hip hop women of the 1980s can be seen as third-wave feminists, helping sow the seeds for today’s hip hop feminists. Nancy Whittier, author of *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women’s Movement*, explains that in the 1980s there was a split between the

¹ The physical responses of Black and Latina women also included everyday language such as the hand in the face or rolling of the eyes and neck (which has become a stereotype) constitute as dance language.

² More so than the men.

radical (women taking a stand) and liberal feminists (women focusing on single issues).³ Mainstream organizations were considered liberal to many veteran radical feminists. I consider women's hip-hop feminism in the 1980s to be a kind of mainstream liberal feminism. Women were not taking a stand *per se*, but they were definitely taking advantage of the rights they had as women in hip hop (the right to express self). Though anti-feminine discrimination was present inside the male-dominated hip-hop community, women found some power through movement and dance in the public arenas. With each break down to the floor, they displayed mental and physical force, concretizing feminine authority. They accomplished sets of physical skills unexpected of them, moves previously reserved for men alone, thereby displaying new levels of female prowess.

I use Amy Swerdlow's book *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* to explain how hip hop women made a name for themselves in this masculinized form through a commercially feminine image. The hip hop woman's agenda in the 1980s resembles that of the WSP (Women Strike For Peace Organization). WSP used traditional motherhood as part of their protest against nuclear war. The 1980s women used this same base of femininity to obtain jobs and opportunities. However, bgirls faced a different set of problems. Bgirls could not use traditional femininity to succeed in the breaking world. Therefore they emulated the masculinity of the underground and used it to their advantage. However in the 1990s, masculinity turns into a false consciousness and becomes a negative force against their freedom to create their own identity.

In Chapter 4, the 1990s, women represented a much higher percentage of breakers than the prior decade, but during this era, women's gestural language transformed and began to be proscribed and restricted to represent only patriarchal-power perspectives. This is the beginning of the false consciousness⁴ of bgirls. The agency that the 1980's women gained was mediated and diminished by these patriarchal views, especially in breaking. As dance writer and historian Sally Sommer states, "break-dancers got pushed underground, and the rappers mutated into hard-core

³ Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

⁴ Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971). Borrowed from Karl Marx and defined by Georg Lukacs.

gangstas, then ‘players,’ then big Mac Daddies, who pushed women down to ‘ho’s as their personal booty, or, booty dancers.’⁵

In Chapters 5 and 6 I analyze women who are disempowered, using Sandra Bartky’s “panoptical male connoisseur in the consciousness of women,” based on her article, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.”⁶ They are classified as mimetic bgirls, using Katherine Rosenfeld’s interpretations of liminality and mimesis from her thesis, “Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other.” Utilizing Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection from her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, I look at the female body as the “abject body” in breaking. This abject subjection, promoted by the homogenized male physical and verbal language, and expanded by the rampant rise of regional, national and international formalized/commercialized mass competitions, carried into the 21st century. Once again, bgirls were pushed back to the edges of the circles.

Investigating women’s identity in hip hop as encoded in the movement, and specifically in the gestural language, highlights the contradiction of hip hop’s golden goal of “finding self.” It also reveals that hip hop’s “realness” is little more than a masked reinforcement of patriarchy and male sexual domination. In 2010, several women are classified as “liminal bgirls” because they do not abject the female body. Instead they erase the negativity associated with any “feminine,” “girly” stereotypical moves, gestures or attitudes of the female body by utilizing them in battle as material for burns.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, focuses entirely on liminal bgirls and their feminine-oriented burns, centering much of the discussion on the renowned Ana “bgirl Rokafella” Garcia, who has toured the world with her company Full Circle Productions, taught and lectured at numerous conferences and is now screening her documentary around the country which highlights the lives of seven bgirls entitled, *All the Ladies Say*. These burns are helping women realize that they do not have to imitate males to be empowered [pretend to be something they are not], perhaps the strongest messages that the burns send. For example, Kate “bgirl K8” Morrissey frequently uses phallic gestures but she is rethinking her use of them. However, there is also resistance from women about using anything that would be “girly” or believed to be “corny” and “weak.” For these women, the end-all is to become powerful and have the same

⁵ Sally Sommer, “Prophets in Pumas: When Hip Hop Broke Out,” *Dance Magazine*, July 2004.

⁶ Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, edited by Diamond Irene and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

advantage and opportunities as men, on men's terms. For them, using female-reproductive burns and womanly physical representations to fight oppression seems a silly waste of time. Kelley "bgirl Mohawk" Greene states, "How would that even work? Pull a tampon out of my vagina and fling it? I just don't see it happening. And, since I am masculine, I would rather throw a dick."⁷ Ironically, the very gesture that bgirl Mohawk described was one of the first "liminal" female-reproductive burns seen in the 1970s by a man, who describes this as a most powerful burn. The man "burned," truly toasted and clueless, asks "How the fuck can you burn that?"⁸

Burns like these help realize the different levels of patriarchy in hip hop dance forms. In other hip hop forms like locking and popping, and even in the mainstream diluted counterparts of hip hop/pop dance, there are less restrictive ideas than those applied to breaking. Is this because of the missing requirement to re-live movements and ideas that were generated by a group of adolescent boys in the 1970s? Or, is it because of the movement itself? Whatever the case, there seems to be a price to pay for women who enter breaking. Hopefully the burns and experiences of other women in other forms can begin to reflect those of the bgirl. New burns could transform the women's body into a force, ironically, by expanding and giving power, through burns, to the images and ideals that once defined the woman and her body as "weak."⁹ Women have the possibility to turn around the negative self-images of themselves and other women through breaking. Lastly, it is hoped that this patriarchal hold can be reversed, and that women can join as a collective to stop the considered and unconsidered hatred being spread through hip hop in the name of "truth and authenticity" and loyalty to tradition.

Hip-hop movement has extraordinary power, representing one generation's struggle and the definition of "cool" to another. In his article "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop dance and Body Power,"¹⁰ Thomas DeFrantz states, "The palpable presence of physical pleasure bound up with racialized cultural history, makes the dances powerfully compelling."¹¹ He further

⁷ Mohawk, phone interview with the author, October 18, 2009.

⁸ While interning for Pop Master Fabel in the fall of 2009, I had the privilege to view some of the footage from his upcoming documentary *Rock Dance History: The Untold Story of Up-Rockin'*.

⁹ LaneSki. "Laneski," interview with Jee-Nice, *Anattitude Magazine*, Issue 03, 2008. As Lane Davey "bgirl Yoda Laneski" Pogue states "... Back then women were not raised to be active or do sports; it was seen as unfeminine or strange, so for a 14 year old girl to be physically strong and coordinated was shocking to most." Here Laneski proves that these ideas about the women's body are still alive and an issue that today's women are fighting through breaking.

¹⁰ Lepecki. André. *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

¹¹ DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible," 65.

explains that this “amalgamation of pleasure and critique form the basis of power within hip hop dance forms.”¹² However, this mixture of pleasure and critique that DeFrantz discusses is no longer the formula for power in hip-hop dance. The power of gestural language has effectively become the suppression of women’s identity, and, “actionable assertions”¹³ definitely speak louder than words. Breaking’s underpinning is a misogynistic male aesthetic that is increasingly becoming a part of women’s identity. It affects the movement, determining what movement is good or bad, what movement is considered “dope.” Male patriarchal dominance controls the worldwide important sports-like competitions that feature winners and numerous male (and a few all-female and fewer co-ed) contests.¹⁴

All of this is now the basis of power for an entire generation of men. It hooks into an interesting and infamous debate within hip hop about the “real” (that is, the underground culture) versus the “fake” (mainstream culture). When hip-hop culture is discussed, the mainstream is always criticized for being “watered-down.” It is presented as if negativity, commercial values, and, most importantly “fake ass niggas” do *not* exist in the underground. But they do. And in more ways than one, especially in dance. For many (if not most) hip hop dancers, the style of breaking and other hip-hop forms from the 1970s and 1980s is seen as the only “real.” DeFrantz, perhaps unintentionally, enters the argument with his assertion: “We ‘represent the real’ through the dance, accessing its common speech like denominators; making phrases that can be understood by others; becoming the dance”¹⁵ But once we, *the women*, become this dance, what happens if it is untrue? What if it does not really “represent the real” femininity and power?

Tricia Rose addresses hip hop’s defensive stance when she states, “The more under attack one feels, the greater the refusal to render self-critique is likely to be.”¹⁶ It is more than possible in the underground for “realness” to go un-critiqued. In order to protect it from criticism the

¹² Ibid., 66.

¹³ Ibid., 71. In a section of DeFrantz’s article, he analyzes a description of black dance by Charles Dickens in *American Notes*. DeFrantz characterizes these earlier black dances and hip hop as “dances of actionable assertions,” and defines that “It is this conflation of inner and outer aspects of African Diaspora dance that I interrogate as the basis of an aesthetic of body power palpable in hip hop dance forms.”

¹⁴ At the 2008 NHHPC (National Hip Hop Political Convention) in Las Vegas Mr. Freeze (a third generation Rock Steady Crew member and considered the first white bboy) expressed extremely misogynistic views about bgirls and their bodies. He proclaimed that bgirls would never be able to beat bboys because they are biologically weaker. When I challenged him on his statement he defended “ It’s scientifically proven. The best bgirl will never beat the worst bboy. The same goes for sports.” He later went on to say that bgirls are encouraged to participate - - if they want. This is an example of the misogyny against bgirls in breaking by a pioneer.

¹⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹⁶ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

underground is notorious for preserving its ideology and heroic image of the culture and dance form (it saves kids from robbing, gang-bangin' and going wild). This protection also exists to showcase hip hop in a tame, all-inclusive and respectable light.

However, gestures reflect deeper psychological insights about hip hop that surface and are a part of each of us that participate in this form. If one believes that hip hop is about self-expression then, when analyzed, it should reflect multivocal approaches. It is quite the opposite. In the New Millennium most of the dancers repeat movements and gestures that are formulaic and preordained. In fact, bgirls oppress themselves by clinging to the “real” form rather than freeing themselves. They are hindered by working within in a hip-hop community that has candy-coated itself with “truth” and an ironically rigid sense of “authenticity.”

* * * * *

The colorful jargonized and particularized terminology of hip hop comprises a notable contribution by hip hop to our vernacular language. However, for the sake of understanding gender concerns in breaking language and culture, I will define my usage of the terms here in the Introduction, and throughout the chapters as the jargon comes up. *Breaking*, *bboying* and *bgirling*¹⁷ comes from early nomenclature. *Bboying*, considered the original name of the form by male hip-hop dance pioneers stands for “boys who break,” that is boys who dance “during the break” in the record. The term “Bboy” has become controversial¹⁸ because of the entrance of women into the form. Therefore, I will use the term *breaking* to refer to the dance form. I use the term *bgirl* to refer to women who break on the ground and use particular vocabulary from breaking such as power moves.

I refer to hip-hop *party dancers* as women who practice and battle with hip-hop party dance movements (popular moves such as “the running man,” “The roger rabbit,” “the wop” and today “the jerk” would be considered a party dance as defined by the women themselves. The terms *gestural language* and *gestural phrasing* will be used interchangeably. *Male reproductive burns* and *female reproductive burns* are specific categories of highly-charged sexualized burns for which I coined these phrases. *Foundation* is the name of the codified

¹⁷ In the 1980s, bgirls adopted the term “bgirling” and deliberately differentiated their style from the guys. This style employed movements that were considered “girly” and associated with the gender binaries such as strong/weak, hard/soft and in breaking’s case fast/slow. For example, bgirls who believed in this ideal did not attempt power moves or footwork. Today, bgirls are accomplishing the same movements as the men and have been doing it for at least two decades.

¹⁸ The term *bboying* is controversial for me. When the dancing is only referred to as “bboying,” it compromises equality for tradition and promotes essentialism and the invisibility of women.

techniques taught as the fundamental steps and phrases of hip hop, which were derived from the movements and attitudes developed by adolescent bboys from the late 1970s to mid-1980s. This Codification of male attitudes along with the movement begins to take hold in the 1990s. It is an attempt to make hip hop a male dance -- exclude femininity and *women* from the dance form. *Cipher* is the name given to an impromptu circular formation created by four or more people. The cipher can be small or large, and the dancers or spectators may be sitting or standing (standing is more practical). In the cipher, everyone is positioned equally, creating a democratic dance environment -- as opposed to stage space with its two-dimensional, frontal orientation, which separates the dancers from the watchers. Dancers can enter the cipher either individually or two at a time. Individual dancing today is called *ciphering*, and *ciphering* is also used as a verb synonymous with *free-styling*, when the dancer engages in individual improvisations within the well-known form.

When dancers enter the cipher together, it is considered a *battle*. *Battling* has become a separate manifestation from the cipher. I concentrate and analyze the gestural language used in the battle. In early hip hop (1970s-1980s) the term “jam” referred to something informal and fun. Today, the term *jam* is synonymous with organized competitions. When using the term *jam*, I will state which era I am referring to and the type of jam. The terms masculine and feminine have been particularly tricky in their meanings and usage. Therefore I differentiate between the phrases *masculine dancing* and *male dance*. I define *masculine dancing* as dance that has masculine characteristics through style (not through technique) has traditional masculine qualities. And although it has these characteristics it does not render a “feminine” characteristic style or any other non-considered masculine style as wrong.¹⁹ I define male dance as a dance done by and defined strictly as a dance for men.²⁰ I use *masculine* to refine descriptions of anything copied with the intent and perspective of male patriarchal views.²¹ For example, gestures that play into what guys want are “masculine” or “panoptic masculine.” Because

¹⁹ For example, if one would define a wide stance and wide steps as masculine then executing a movement with a more narrow approach is not wrong.

²⁰ Using the same example from note 17, in a male dance taking narrow steps would be wrong and no variation would be allowed.

²¹ DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible,” 76. DeFrantz states “. . . copying steps only achieves a repetition of outward shapes, as opposed to rearticulating of the communicative desire that drives the dance.” This is simply not true for gestural language in breaking. Under Foundation, male pioneers teach intent and desire through the movement (which constitutes as “copying” another person’s communication through dance) and it is apparent in the psyche of women in breaking. For a more detailed explanation see chapter 5.

women in hip hop are dealing with a series of inherited male movements, I tend to use and redefine *female gestures* as gestures that originate from the female perspectives and bodily functions. I use “feminine gestures” to describe movements that have been stereotypically associated as a part of women’s movement (like putting on lipstick). Because I am dealing with an inherited movement vocabulary, I will sometimes use *male movements* to describe those moves that are shaped by society’s view of what is normative masculine, like the “Thomas-flare” in which the dancer rotates the entire body in a circular motion on both hands; in gymnastics training this is taught only to male gymnasts. Or, I will use rude hyper-masculine language (like “throwing the dick”). For example, in Chapter 1, understanding that the basic *Foundation* (codified movement vocabulary) is male or *masculinized* movement helps to understand why it is that bgirls are therefore viewed as “masculine” when they perform certain traditional movements in order to gain respect from the men. Bgirls throughout the generations continue to strive to earn respect, and will suffer tremendous physical and mental discrimination due to the inherent struggle involved. In the 2000s, the outcomes and possibilities are numerous, however it is up to the bgirl to decide what is right for her.

* * * * *

In reviewing the literature there is a lack information on women in general in hip hop, but most markedly during the 1970s. There is also little theorization about the women, and their gestural language has yet to be analyzed. I reviewed many books in hip hop dance finding little to nothing on women. Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* is a historical account of how hip hop began. It includes one section dedicated to dance, and is one of the first books to discuss the hip hop battle-dance form, Uprocking. Chang gives information about when and where bboys and other hip hop dancers danced and what places they frequented. But this is where the information stops. There is no mention of any bgirls as a part of this history. Jeff Chang’s *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* is an anthology of writings focusing on the understanding of hip-hop art: rap/emceeing, dance, theater, graffiti and poetry with scholarship addressing multiculturalism, nationalism, gender, queer theory, religion and photography (to name a few), and, the aesthetics of hip hop of the past, present, and what he believes is to come in the future. It includes five articles that specifically discuss hip hop dance: “Physical Graffiti: The History of Hip-Hop Dance” by Fabel Pabon, “The Art of Battling: An Interview with Zulu King Alien Ness” by Joe Schloss, “The Pure

Movement and the Crooked Line: An Interview with Rennie Harris” by Jeff Chang, “From the Dope Spot to Broadway: A Roundtable discussion on Hip-Hop Theatre, Dance, and Performance” by Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Kamilah Forbes, Traci Bartlow, and Javier Reyes and “Codes and the B-Boy’s Stigmata: An Interview with Doze” by Jeff Chang. These articles are helpful in their accounts given by the pioneers, who give their opinions about dance and historical facts. However, none mention anything about women in hip-hop dance and their presence in the form. Kyra D. Gaunt’s book *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* is an insightful overview concerning girls’ and women’s authoritative positions of creativity in and contribution to Hip Hop culture. Gaunt gives examples of specific songs used by black male artists, which originally belonged to the practices of black girls’ play. Because hip hop has been mostly labeled a “male” form of musical and cultural expression, most of the movement is labeled the same way. There are excerpts comparing double-dutch to breaking, suggesting there is no reason why women should not be participating heavily in hip-hop artistic expression and production. To some extent it seems the author may be saying that women are not as artistically expressive and in the forefront when they dance. Moreover, it seems she is describing the provocative (considered submissive) movements of the “video vixens” in the background of various hip hop artists’ videos. Ultimately Gaunt is concerned with communicating the heritage of African-American culture as a non-gendered practice in movement. She manages to break down stereotypical beliefs of hip hop being a “black male” expression, which parallels my aim of foregrounding women -- contrary to the prevailing history and mainstream culture, which omits women. However, Gaunt did not cover women who are expressing themselves in the forefront of breaking culture, the bgirls, though this book seeks to highlight women as such. *That’s The Joint! : The Hip Hop Studies Reader* edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, is an important compilation of articles on hip hop culture. Articles specifically about, or articles that deal with dance, include “Breaking” by Sally Banes, “Breaking: The History” by Michael Holman, “Dance in Hip-Hop Culture” by Katrina Hazzard-Donald and “Hip-Hop’s Founding Fathers Speak the Truth” by Nelson George. These articles are extremely helpful on the male view, history and analytical perspectives about masculinity and machismo in breaking. Yet again, as a collective, it mentions nothing about women and their influence on the form, with the exception of Michael Holman and Nelson George. In George’s interviews, the Founding Fathers reveal a few dance names of the early

bgirls and crews of the 1970's and state that women got down just as much as the men. Micheal Holman gives incorrect information particularly in his assertion that bgirls did not do floor moves. This misinformation again renders women invisible, with no mention beyond their dance names and their unnamed presences. Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* is a critique and analysis of black women rappers. Her chapter "Bad Sisters" was especially helpful. The ways in which Rose discusses female rappers may be transferred to my analysis of bgirls. Although many of the bgirls I interviewed are southern white American women, there are a few parallels with women rappers that I am able to make. Her discussion of black women and their bodies -- in women rappers' videos -- is important to my parallels of women in breaking. However, it fails to discuss the women dancers themselves. Joseph G. Schloss' *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip Hop Culture in New York* is valuable and extremely important in that it is recent, and one of the two books focusing on breaking.²² It gives a basic account of breaking (terms, names of movements and communal lingo) and includes some wonderful theory on music. However, Schloss has an uninformed opinion of women's issues in breaking, especially revealing in the questions he poses. His discussion of bboys/bgirls and their place within the field circulates sexism and negativity in the community by confirming it. In 2009 Schloss boldly states that the term *bboy* is a general one that includes women, as explained to him by men of the community. His articulation of this points out exactly how women are under-represented, starting with exclusive gendered terminology which seeks to honor the male perspective and pioneers.²³ This book, in my opinion, excludes women in a very deliberate way by re-gendering bgirls and using their quotes as support of what is and is not accepted as Foundation, which is a patriarchal male view. Roni Sarig's *Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland, & How Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing* theorizes the south as hip hop culture's "roots" as opposed to the north. He states "At the start of World War I, almost 90 percent of all American Blacks lived in the South. As they migrated, they brought their folk music to northern

²² Cooper, Kramer and Rokafella, *We B* Girlz* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005). Along with Martha Cooper and Nika Kramer's *We B* Girlz* Book focusing on bgirls.

²³ Ciprian "Bboy Radio" Gontea and Dwayne "Axel Brown" Brown, in conversation with the author, Summer 2008. Newschool bboys especially emphasize bboy as a general term and discriminate against women both unconsciously and consciously when defining it as such. For example, when I performed in Savannah Georgia with Chief Rockaz Crew (in which I was never a member) I asked the bboys to introduce the entire performing group as bboys *and* bgirls. Rodney "bboy Xman" Anderson , a newschool bboy who considered himself the founder of the crew strongly defined the term bboy as a general term, thus refusing to say bgirl in the introductory line for performances. He routinely excluded women dancers from Chief Rockaz' performances and deliberately instructed other members not to inform the women who danced in or along side the group of performances.

cities, where it flowered into sophisticated works of genius.”²⁴ This is a wonderful theory that had yet to be explored before this publication. However, again, he mentions only the history of the “video vixens” of today’s media. This helps with my theory of why bgirls reject certain movements, but, there is still no mention of women hip hop dancers. Tricia Rose’s *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* illuminates both sides of the debate about hip hop’s effects on the black community’s debate between the “Hip Hop Defenders” and the “Hip Hop Critics.” Both sides discuss their positions on women in relation to hip hop. This is crucial in understanding the context in which women are discussed. Looking at these arguments about women being outsiders is important to bgirls’ role and identities in hip-hop culture. Yet, once again, female hip-hop dancers are not the focus of this work.

However, there were a small number of useful (four) articles included in anthologies, six articles in the *We B* Girlz* Festival magazine,²⁵ one article in a popular dance magazine *Dance Spirit*, one article in *Anattitude* magazine, one article in the *Village Voice* and one book exclusively focusing on bgirls, *We B* Girlz*. Edited by Constance Kreemer *Further Steps 2: Fourteen Choreographers on What’s the RAGE in Dance?* is an interview with Rennie Harris covering his opinions about hip hop culture, aesthetics traditions and his career. He goes into some detail about women and how the media treats women. He names one bgirl, “Jules,” as one of his female company members who truly could “bring it” as a bgirl. This was helpful to me in finding her contact information specifically (though she was not available for an interview). George Nelson’s “Hip-Hop’s Founding Fathers Speak the Truth” in *That’s The Joint! : The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, is an entire interview with Clive “Kool DJ Herc” Campbell (father of Hip Hop), Afrika Bambaataa²⁶ (God Father of Hip Hop Culture) and Joseph “Grandmaster Flash” Saddyler (credited with popularizing Hip Hop Djing and DJ producers). There is information on breaking in these interviews and of the first bgirls and women of hip hop and informing material about a few bgirls from the 1970s and 1980s. Also Bambaataa discusses women and has key sections that I cite. Another article in the same book entitled “Breaking: The History” by Michael Holman, presents a media-influenced view of breaking. The tone of his article is very macho,

²⁴ Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland, & How Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing* (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2007).

²⁵ This magazine was a part of a project for women in hip hop in conjunction with the book *We B*Girlz*.

²⁶ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005). I have not found any documentation of Afrika Bambaataa giving his real name.

contributing to the male view of breaking. Nevertheless, he mentions some of the early bgirls of the 1970's, though he gives incorrect information, stating "the girls did not do the floor moves that the guys did." In the book *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap, Music, and Hip Hop Culture*, Nancy Guevara's article "Women Writin', Rappin', and Breakin'" devotes exactly 1 ½ pages to bgirls. Miri Park's "Dance Special 2002: Very Young Hotshots: Breakers: The Next Generation: In the Outer Boroughs, True Hip-Hop Dance Thrives" in *The Village Voice* discusses a young male's view of hip hop as he was taught "bboying" by his mother, who is a bgirl. There are also other opinions of what earlier generation bgirls thought in comparison to the changes today, affecting my analysis of what bgirls in the 1970s and 1980s were doing, while also helping me find names to search for interviews.²⁷

In *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*, there is an entire essay dedicated to bgirls titled "Not the Average Girls from the Videos: B-girls Defining Their Space in Hip Hop Culture." In *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip-Hop and the Globalisation of Black Popular Culture*, the chapter "'Nobody Knows My Name' and an interview with the director Rachel Raimist" highlights the documentary's²⁸ discussion of women's underrepresentation in hip hop culture, including "bboying." In the *We B* Girlz* festival magazine²⁹ there are six articles³⁰ that I found especially useful: 1) In Maike Schroder's interview of Nika Kramer in "Nika Kramer on We B*Girlz Festival," Kramer discusses her inspirations, goals and the basic need for a platform for women and its possible facilitation of a feminist agenda in hip hop. Kramer explains "The ultimate aim of We B* Girlz is to promote women in Hip Hop as great role models by presenting their varied accomplishments... we also want to document and preserve the role that women played in Hip Hop history, so that this part doesn't get lost."³¹ 2) Bianca Ludwig's interview of Martha Cooper entitled "Martha Cooper on We B*Girlz," is similar to that of Kramer's in that Martha states the goals of the *We B*Girlz* project. 3) Kim Valente's "The

²⁷ Park has also done extensive research focusing on oral histories of the 1990s bgirls entitled "Dancing Like a Girl: The Oral History of B-Girls in NYC in the 1990s." Her abstract in the program from the Congress on Research in Dance November 14-16, 2008 states this research "attempts to complicate the current hip hop historical narrative by listening to the experience of woman participants." However, she explained in a phone interview that it is not ready to be published so therefore I was not able to build off of this research as source material.

²⁸ I tried to get a copy of *Nobody Knows My Name* by Rachel Raimist but the copy was too expensive for the university to purchase at the time.

²⁹ This magazine was created specifically for the We B*Girlz festival.

³⁰ Half of the magazine articles are in German and because of this they were not able to be incorporated into this research.

³¹ Maike Schroder, "Nika Kramer on We B*Girlz Festival," *We B*Girlz Festival Magazine: Women in Hip Hop*, August 2008, <http://b-girlz-berlin.com/downloads/magazine/>.

Dynamic Dolls - The Original Breakers” was a confirmation of my personal interviews and conversations with Kim about her experiences as a bgirl in the 1980s. Valente also writes about the lack of information on women in hip hop. She explains “While there is so much out there about the original male breakers there is nothing mentioned about us; the females that paved the way and helped make female breakers more acceptable.”³² 4) Maike Sc Schroder’s interview “B-Girl Val and B-Girl Flavor Roc: Winners of the We B*Girlz battle 2007” is useful in that these two bgirls add to the collective voice of the women in this research. 5) Ana Garcia’s “Herstory by Rokafella from the book ‘We B*Girlz’” is her personal testimony of her life as a bgirl. In it she illuminates much of the discrimination that she and many women deal and have dealt with. An important message in this piece is the triumph and the agency that she has gained overcoming her obstacles as a bgirl. 6) In Martha Diaz’s “2008- Year of the Hip Hop Woman!” she explains, “The ‘Year of the Hip Hop Woman’ is a proclamation of liberation for women and girls from the Hip Hop generation worldwide. Diaz defines the year of 2008 as “... Our [women in hip hop] Molotov cocktail to set things off. As an inspired Feminist, I am prepared to help support a social paradigm shift for all women.”³³ All of the articles in this magazine have helped add to the truth that there is a small amount of documentation on women in hip hop.

In *Anattitude* magazine, Jee-nice interviews Bgirl Yoda Laneski, which is helpful to my documentation of women in the 1980s.

Carl Cunningham’s “Fem Powered,” an article featured in *Dance Sprit*, November 2004, discusses women hip hop dancers but with no mention of specific bgirls. Lastly, the book *We B*Girlz* is the only book exclusively dedicated to bgirls and has exactly 35 pages of text, consisting mostly of short, one-paragraph quotes from the women themselves. Though all of these resources have helped tremendously and are majorly important to this work, they only scratch the surface of women in hip hop and their importance in the evolution of the form. Lastly, the films that were extremely useful to this research were *Breakin’: Where Breakin’ Was Born* by Joel Silberg, *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo* by Sam Firstenberg, *You Got Served* by Christopher B. Stokes, *The Freshest Kids: A History of the B-boy* by Isreal, *Beat Street* by Stan Lathan, *Style*

³² Kim Valente, “The Dynamic Dolls: The Original Female Breakers,” *We B*Girlz Festival Magazine: Women in Hip Hop*, August 2008, <http://b-girlz-berlin.com/downloads/magazine/>. She also discusses her plans to add to the literature on women in hip hop by writing a book on the Dynamic Dolls.

³³ Martha Diaz, “2008: Year of the Hip Hop Woman!” *We B*Girlz Festival Magazine: Women in Hip Hop*, August 2008, <http://b-girlz-berlin.com/downloads/magazine/>.

Wars by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, *Bgirl* by Emily Dell, the *We B*Girlz* documentary and *Wild Style* by Charlie Ahearn.

Researching the position of women demonstrated that their contributions are mostly part of living memories, still existing as an oral tradition. Therefore, I have relied mostly on websites, YouTube, and on the interviews I gathered over a two-and-a-half year period for vital information. There are a few highly respected, constantly debated and updated websites that tend to have more accurate information such as www.mrwigglez.biz. Mr. Wiggles is a third-generation bboy, and Funk styles pioneer and Steve “Mr. Wiggles” Clemente’s website, documents hip-hop history to an extent in its entirety (using male pioneers and their stories); www.toolsofwar.com is an event newsletter that features hip-hop events from around the world, www.anattitude.net proclaims itself as Europe’s only female hip-hop magazine; <http://b-girlz-berlin.com/> focuses on women in hip hop, especially bgirls mainly from Europe and Asia and old school bgirls, www.facebook.com and www.myspace.com were wonderful networking sites as I was able to connect with most of the bgirls I interviewed for this thesis. Still, most of the websites lack information about the women from the early era of 1970-1985. There are many current websites but they focus mainly on modern day bgirls, where to find classes in certain areas, and function to provide more as promotional and biographical material.

But above all, the most significant information in this study comes from the interviews conducted with women from each decade who graciously answered questions about how women functioned, and what contributions they made to hip hop. Though few in numbers, the women’s involvement and gestural language has played an important role in the development and sustainability of hip hop dance.

CHAPTER 1

BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Hip hop culture and dance acted as response to oppression, especially for the early practitioners. A quick generalization that helps in understanding the changes that took place in the development of hip hop reflected in its vocabulary, is to imagine it as a three-part process that resulted in its formal structure: 1) The early 1970s- toprocking and drops, 2) The mid to late 1970s-footwork /floor rock, 3)The early 1980s- power moves, and freezes (air). The beginnings of hip hop culture and dance appeared around the 1970s in the South Bronx, New York City, during a decade of economic city crisis that exacerbated unemployment among African-American and Puerto-Rican youth. In the beginning, bboys³⁴ were mainly African-American (early 1970s) as Santiago “Jojo” Torres, a Puerto Rican, from the Rock Steady Crew remembers, “I know for a fact that when I went to some parts [in the city], it was rare to see a Puerto-Rican dancer breaking. And when they did, it was like ‘Oh shit! Check out the Puerto Rican bboy!’ you know?”³⁵ By the mid-1970s, Luis Angel “Trac 2 (Star Child La Rock)” Mateo states:

Everything -- all the breaking and stuff like that -- was considered underground until Kool Herc, the father of hip hop, brought everything out into the open. And that was like, say, '74, '75. All the underground stuff, all the in [inside the] house stuff, all the hallway dancers, and all the house-party dancers were brought out to the streets. And the more they took it to the street, the more ethnicities got involved in it. It was no longer an Afro-American thing. The Hispanics took to the dance.³⁶

Reiterating this, Michael Holman (hip-hop author and former manager of the New York City Breakers) says, “Though black kids invented breaking as we know it, as we understand it -- it was the Puerto-Rican kids that put breakers on their backs.”³⁷ During this early period, the

³⁴ Fabel Pabon, “Physical Graffiti,” in *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, ed. Jeff Chang (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006), 18-26. Clive “Kool Herc” Campbell is credited with naming the dancers at his parties bboys and bgirls (the exact date of when the term “bboy” arose is unknown, however it was definitely in the early 1970s).

³⁵ *The Freshest Kids*, DVD, directed by Israel (Chatsworth, CA: QD3 Entertainment, 2002).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

dancers were predominately 12 to 14-year-old boys and -- crucially for the future -- the basic ideologies, verbal language and dance movements that eventually were codified as the sacred hip-hop "Foundation" originated from this adolescent male mind-state.

In the seventies' the South Bronx was burning down, block by block,³⁸ drugs were rampant and death came early. Richard "Crazy legs" Colon states "'retirement' age for a bboy back then was like 16, 17-years-old."³⁹ Bboys expected to be dead at an early age and this placed them in a short-timed pressure-cooker that coerced them to live hard, make their lives count and leave their marks inscribed on the city as fast as possible. It sparked extraordinarily rapid innovations in the graffiti, music and rapping -- but it began with the dancing. The physical environments in which the pioneering bboys and bgirls lived and performed were the large tenement areas in the poor ghetto neighborhoods or in the city housing projects of the South Bronx.⁴⁰ Previously, in the 1960s, the youth had danced in the clubs, high school cafeterias and gyms, youth, church, and community centers and at the big outdoor summer parties in New York City.⁴¹ The second-generation of the 1970s, however, began dancing in their living rooms and bedrooms, in the building's entry hallways, on street corners, sidewalks, at parties and on basketball courts. Anywhere that had a floor or space was a bonafide locale for breaking. They did not frequent the clubs -- not because they were too young to get in, since NYC clubs did not "card" the teens until the late 1980s (the underage could not drink inside the clubs, however) -- but because the clubs cost money. Besides, the new styles of dancing these youth were doing and the kinds of music they were dancing to, were not welcomed inside clubs. They took up too much space and sound in clubs that were still featuring disco music, and the hip-hop kids had contempt for the elevator-synthesizer discotheque musical sounds. Many essential traditions that define breaking arose in these wild-card contexts. It was in these situations that the hip-hop cipher was born, and whether it was created for battling, free-styling/ciphering, or for trying out new ideas, the cipher was "a space within a space," the safety zone for dancers practicing hip hop movement and music.

Although there is abundant material about men in hip hop from the second generation and early period of commercialization (early 1980s), it is only in the last eight to ten years that

³⁸ *From Mambo to Hip Hop: A South Bronx Tale*, DVD, directed by Henry Chalfant (New York: City Lore, 2006).

³⁹ *The Freshest Kids*.

⁴⁰ Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

documentation is being dug up about their predecessors of the 1970s. Men were, from the beginning, dominant in the hip-hop world and were initially the main creators of the form. During this time, breaking as well as many other forms of hip hop dance (locking, popping electric boogaloo, waving, “party hip hop”) were just beginning to formulate and become stylistically recognizable. The terms “breaking, break-dancing, bboying, bgirling, bboy and bgirl” were nonexistent. What constituted early breaking is notably different from what is recognized as breaking today. Breaking in the 1970s was danced in an upright position, less restrictive (but ironically less dynamic and virtuosic), and rarely utilized the floor. When the floor was incorporated, dancers moved on and off of the floor, as opposed to strictly dancing on the floor. The dance form’s developmental period spans approximately ten years, from the early 1970s to the early 1980s.

During this time breaking’s unique structure became clear. The first generation bboys (approximately 1970-1975) contributed part of what is known as the “Foundation”⁴² (Mr. Wiggles calls this era “The early 70s: The Creation and the Blue Prints” that laid the groundwork that bboys would build upon in the years to follow). Grand Master Flash states, “In early breakdancing, you hardly ever touched the floor.”⁴³ If they did get down, it happened in short and quick bursts of movement. Early crews such as the “Zulu Kings”⁴⁴ created “top rocking,” “drops,” “foot work” or “floor rocking,” and “freezes.”⁴⁵ This style, called “toprock,” was the first prominent manifestation of breaking in the 1970s. Toprock was influenced by the early funk and soul songs and especially by the instructional dance songs of the 1950s and 1960s. Top rocking means that the performer is dancing on their feet and, any movements standing up-right such as “the Sling shot,” “the Frankenstein,” and “the Dracula” are part of the vocabulary.⁴⁶ In addition, movements were inspired by the tap dancing of the Nicholas Brothers, the Lindy Hop, uprocking (a battle form of hip-hop dance, different from the category of toprocking in breaking though today many use them interchangeably), and especially James Brown’s “Get on the Good

⁴² “The Foundation,” *The Freshest Kids*. Pop Master Fabel, currently senior vice president of the Rock Steady Crew, says the following about foundation: “They used to do a style I hardly see anyone do which is more like, jerky kinda. It wasn’t like six-step ... it was a little more sporadic and wild spirit.”

⁴³ Nelson George, “Hip-Hop’s Founding Fathers Speak the Truth,” in *That’s The Joint! : The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) 45-55.

⁴⁴ Mr. Wiggles’ Hip Hop Page, “Hip Hop History,” <http://www.mrwiggles.biz> (accessed November 17, 2010). The first bboy (The dance division of the)Universal Zulu Nation crew consisted of Tricky, Sau Sau, Charlie Rock, The Amazing Bo-Bo, Eldorado Mike, The Nigga Twins (Keith and Kevin), and Norm Rockwell.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Foot,” released November 1972. Some consider Brown to be the first bboy.⁴⁷ There is also a toprock step that was created from the “Charleston” called the “Charlie Rock.”⁴⁸ As a part of toprock, a common step that many bboys and bgirls used to gain momentum before they “dropped” to the floor came into play. This movement resembles today’s basic toprock and the Indian step⁴⁹ (Mr. Wiggles states today’s toprock differs from the toprock back-in-the-day).⁵⁰ The basic toprock step is executed with one leg crossing diagonally in front of the other with the arms swinging simultaneously towards the back of the body. The dancer steps back to the center, feet hip-width apart while crossing the forearms in the front of the torso (some cross arms at the wrists or the elbows). The same step then goes diagonally to the other side, making it seem as if the dancer is executing a kind of runaround -- like movement that might go either side-to-side, tracing a semi-circle.

Eventually, these bboys extended their movement to the floor, and when they eventually dropped to the floor, the transitional drop steps between toprock and footwork, and the floor⁵¹ might be called (and this is one example) a “corkscrew,” where the body spirals towards the ground gradually. The structure of movement on the floor was termed “floor rocking.” Movements leading to the drop and floor-rocking are “footwork” (this can include power moves). Footwork/ floor-rocking during the 1970s consisted mostly of leg shuffles (the dancer is on all fours and he shuffles the feet rapidly from side to side). Then, traditionally the “freeze,” which consisted of a still pose on the floor, ended a dancer’s sequence, a much revered contribution of the second-generation [c.] 1976). The next logical iteration was “Somebody went down and stayed down” and it became known as “breaking,” primarily performed on the ground to the break in the music.⁵² The second-generation, what I call the “Martial” period⁵³ began certainly by 1976. Most of the bboys at this time were Latino and they brought in different movements and ideas. The main contribution from these dancers was the incorporation of martial-art forms and related culturally-specific art forms like Capoeira. Many second-generation

⁴⁷ Ibid. Mr. Wiggles states on his website under a section entitled James Brown Good Foot, “From what the TWINS say. James Browns movements inspired young BBOYS dance styles.” The song was danced by Brown as a kind of fast “bebop” footwork with some quick drop splits to the floor.

⁴⁸ Pabon, “Physical Graffiti,” 20.

⁴⁹ *The Freshest Kids*.

⁵⁰ Though the two different toprock steps (the old and the new) and the Indian step are different, they have many similarities in the way that they are executed and the positioning of the arms.

⁵¹ *The Freshest Kids*.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Mr. Wiggles’ Hip Hop Page. Mr. Wiggles has entitled this “The Mid to Late 70s: The Next Level.”

bboys watched Kung–Fu flicks that also inspired their movements. These bboys added new movements to the toprock (like “salsa rock”) and to the footwork -- the all-important “six step” (originally called “cc long footwork”).⁵⁴ This has become the basis of footwork today and consists of a circular movement on the ground, with the hands planted as the central axis, while the body circles around this focal point. The two most popular freezes of the second generation include the “chair freeze” and the “baby freeze.” In a chair freeze, the dancer’s hand, forearm, and elbow support the body while allowing free range of movement from the hips and legs.⁵⁵ In the baby freeze,⁵⁶ the dancer also supports the body with the hand, forearm, and the elbow except the body curls up into a ball and the knee closest to the floor rests on the opposite elbow.

The third and final period of breaking was the early 1980s, a period known for its Gymnast/Acrobatic/Ariel contributions (although some did come from capoeira).⁵⁷ Gymnastics, and the upside-down movements and acrobatics including the martial-arts moves from the second-generation era acted as the 1980s’ third-generation bboys’ main inspiration. Some of the bboys who entered the dance during this time were gymnasts who combined gymnastic training with breaking and created “power moves.” Power move is a debatable term because it is unknown which movement takes more power -- footwork and freezes, or, spins and gymnastics.⁵⁸ Certainly they have overshadowed the other elements of the form.⁵⁹

Then, and still today, bboys and bgirls will re-dance this lengthy history in any order they please. These movement-units together, from these three periods, created what we know today as breaking. However, it is the grandiose power moves that have become exceedingly popular, probably because of their flashy visual appeal, and they have become the most favored, in-demand part of breaking, affecting who and what movement is considered “good.”

In valuing power over wit, the most conversational, clever and humor-filled aspect of the form remains backgrounded and contained within its gestural language. What is gestural language in hip hop dance? Gestural language is the miming of specific actions and ideas

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Pabon, “Physical Graffiti,” 21.

⁵⁶ In a dance class with Kenny “Prince Ken Swift” Gabbert at PMT studios in Manhattan, New York he explained that the baby freeze was originally where a dancer would lie on their side in a fetal position and alternate the lower legs in a kicking motion miming “a baby sucking its thumb.”

⁵⁷ Mr. Wiggles’ Hip Hop Page. Again, Mr. Wiggles entitles this “The 80s: the Power Move Era.”

⁵⁸ Pabon, “Physical Graffiti,” 21. Also, Bboy Ken Swift noted that spins take more momentum and balance while footwork and freezes require more muscular strength.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

through movement -- a corporeal communication. Gestural language also travels fast as emotions are instantly translated into visual statements or a physical dialogue that can be read like a text (as if a codified sign language). Inspiration for gestures comes from music, cartoons, movies, television, everyday situations, animals, or from the heat of improvisational dance exchanges or from the dancers themselves. Gestural language is most commonly recognized as hand gestures. A dancer may point at their opponent to challenge them, or they may “give” their opponents two thumbs down, giving the opponent a bad “rating.” However, I extend this definition to facial expressions, individual body parts, and, to the body as a whole and analyze a much wider range of movements as legitimate breaking gestures. For example, a bgirl is picked up and mimed (used) as a gun against the opposing crew.

Gestural language in hip-hop dance has two manifestations: “freestyle” gesture and gestures in battle called “burns.” Gestures in freestyle erupt when dancers are improvising (freestyling) in a cipher or “ciphering.” This language surfaces mainly in relation to music. Although free-style gesturing is minimal in its interactive conversations with other dancers, when it does occur, it becomes a “commando”⁶⁰ or a “game.”⁶¹ Battles are dialogic conversations occurring between two or more dancers in which the subject can include anything within the range of human communication. The dialogue is competitive, friendly, everyday conversational and witty as a good debate, chess or capoeira game.

However -- and this is an immensely important distinction -- when battles become *personalized critiques* of other dancers and the gestures turn raw and insulting, they are called “burns.” Burns are a special category of gestural language meant to intimidate the enemy combatant. Phallic or violent gestures are used to discourage or draw attention to the other’s vulnerabilities as a strategy to humiliate or demean them in critique battles.⁶² These are best described by Razvan “Tiny Love” Gorea. “The burns are where you, like, take the guy, cut him up, shoot him ... There’s a lot of violent movements, and those are called burns.”⁶³

Traditionally in breaking the burns happened in the freezes (a bboy might be in an upside-down freeze and mime throwing feces at his adversary). But today, burns are mostly

⁶⁰ A commando is a term used by some bboys and bgirls to describe a shared movement that is one dancer’s entrance and the other dancer’s exit into the cipher.

⁶¹ I am defining a battle in a cipher as a game in order to differentiate it from battling in organized competitions now called “jams” or “battles.”

⁶² These gestures in and of themselves can be considered a strategy of battle as well as gestures.

⁶³ Joe Schloss, *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip Hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

separate from the freezes. Burn gestures have been inherited from the breaking lineage and this language is also rooted in the early gang-affiliated dance form of uprocking (different from toprocking), which mimics gang habits in different ways. For example, “The Apache Line” is a ritual set into action when potential members are being initiated into the group or when a member is requesting to leave the gang.⁶⁴ In a gang initiation, the initiate or departee would have to finish walking through two lines of fists, bats and chains in order to complete the rite of passage into or out of the group. In uprocking, however, the line is used symbolically for the same reasons of initiation.⁶⁵

Uprocking specifically uses violent battle gestures creatively with the music.⁶⁶ Violent burns can be categorized in two ways: through the use of mimed weaponry and miming physical contact. Weaponry includes the enactment of using knives, swords (fencing and Asian martial art techniques), bats, shanks, mallets, guns and bullets. Physical contact miming is more commonly represented by punching and grabbing motions in the air. A bboy might mime taking his opponent’s head to smash, slap, or hump and throw away, crushing the opponent. Phallic gestures,⁶⁷ which are another kind of physical burn, are not far from the crotch-grabbing mic-holding gestures recognizably employed by rap emcees. I analyze these burns as “sexual patriarchal expressions of power.” For example, “throwing the dick” and many other forms of derogatory gesturing are frequent in uprocking battles.

If breakers teach uprocking and breaking as separate forms, then how did these gestures become a part of breaking battles? As hip hop spread worldwide and other cultures began adopting the dance, they merged all the forms. Also, hip-hop teachers who did not know the distinctions between one form and the other lumped them together in their classes. Fabel states: “The mixing and blending of popping, locking, bboying/bgirling, and uprocking [and toprocking] into one form destroys their individual structures. Unfortunately, the younger generations of dancers either haven’t made enough effort to learn each dance form properly, or [they] lack the resources to do so.”⁶⁸ Although many disagree on the issue of fusing forms, most of the styles were introduced side-by-side on stages and through performances. The blending of

⁶⁴ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*.

⁶⁵ Schloss, *Foundation*. Schloss points out another difference of there not being one person getting jumped but the two lines attack each other.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Phallic gesturing is also considered to be a form of phallic gesturing and these phallic gestures are mainly sexually dominating.

⁶⁸ Pabon, “Physical Graffiti,” 25.

these forms spread battle-burn gestures into breaking. The terminology can get confusing. Uprocking is also termed “battle rocking”⁶⁹ and because bboys and bgirls will uproock for about 10 seconds in a cipher before breaking down, uprocking gestures also began to appear often in breaking battles. Most confusingly toprock is interchangeable with uproock, though I use them as distinctly different forms. “Throwing the dick” became extremely trendy with bboys and then bgirls. Throwing the dick is a prevalent male gesture in uprocking but today, because these aggressive male gestures have become a part of breaking, women are using them as heavily as men in the 2000s.

Phallic gesturing may double as weaponry in battle. The bboy will mime using his semen as a way to “shoot” his opponent, clearly demonstrating that his dick symbolizes a gun. These gestures, along with many others, were carried in the dance forms and vocabularies, and currently, these gestures are commonplace and easily identifiable since they are frequently deployed.

Interestingly, women use these same phallic gestures in battle today (discussed in later chapters). But when women use penis gestures, it significantly changes the meanings of what is being communicated. Along with all of the other influences, the numbers of women in breaking affect the original function and meaning of gestures and the battle. Meaning has also been altered by mainstream sports and popular culture and despite the fact that battling used to be co-ed now the sexes are segregated and battle separately (mainly because of the exclusion of women).

Media representations of breaking are prolific. Over the last 30 years, outfits and shoes, the physically arresting “tough” attitudes, the “dead-face” expressions and colorful lingo have appeared in newspapers, magazines, in films, television and on theater stages. The media quickly recognized the possibilities of commodification, and gave hip hop substantial coverage during the 1980s. Hip hop attributes have been translated into a multibillion-dollar, multinational fashion industry. Images were appropriated, extrapolated and distanced from the aesthetics of breaking. In turn, these same images have cycled back and altered the interpretations and practices in hip hop, both in the past and in the present. These disconnected appropriations, which re-interpreted the context, traditions, and aesthetics of hip hop, were projected by the media as an “actual reflection.” In reality, it was a media narrative that was picked up and used by the bboys to perpetuate power issues within the hip-hop community itself. It was a clever

⁶⁹ This is a term coined by the new generation.

construction that simultaneously communicated a slightly menacing but very attractive, potent “hiphopitude” [my word].

Towards the end of the first burst of media exploitation of breaking (from 1980-1986), the media’s interpretative narrative about hip hop *dancing* cooled down. However, in 1985 the media-hounds were hunting down the hot and dangerous West Coast “gangsta rappers” and MCs. In their music videos, these guys pushed the bboys offstage and replaced them with their “posse” (wannabe lookalikes who did what the rapper did, magnifying and extending his body; or some would say hype men) and the dancing “ho” who polished the rappers’ fiercely misogynist images and lyrics by hanging her ass and titties on their arms.

In the 1990s, internationalism and the panoptic masculine ideology dominated the aesthetic of women’s gestures in breaking. The female hip-hop language from the 1970s and 1980s was completely replaced by male movement and aesthetics. Validating this change was the new form of sport-like competition that took over the breaking cipher, limiting the bgirls from self-expression more than ever before. As hip hop traveled around the world, Europe began the trend of sport/Olympian-like competitions. In this new world, women neglected, disowned and rejected/abjected their bodies through an internalized misogynistic male view, promoted by competitions and the fevered teaching of “Foundation” that does not take into consideration the female body, or in fact, the female identity.

In the beginning, breaking expressed ideas of a marginalized hip-hop scene, and through this expression, an underground/background scene gained status as a site of power. With the ascendancy of gangsta rappers, and the disappearance of bboys into the underground and/or the European scene, hip hop was personified, once again, by a media-created rap artist who was concocted of glorified violence. It was a drama about sex, quick riches and danger that was controlled by media corporations and designed for one goal: commercial success.

When the dancing lost its media following, its dominant aesthetics trickled down to the underground hip-hop culture and had a substantial effect on it. The older material and film footage still existed in private archives and in the memories of its practitioners. With the advent of YouTube and the internet it re-emerged on computer monitors to reinstate hip-hop aesthetics in the New Millennium, bringing a focus for this generation, who, if they are cool, turn away from the “commercial” styles and consider themselves to be adherents of the “authentic”

“underground” hip-hop culture.⁷⁰ However, as dancers learn hip hop today the only readily available historical information they receive comes from the media -- via the old footage shown on YouTube. This older footage from the early 80s, tends to concentrate on the dramatically visual power moves, speed and flash. As Grand Master Flash noted, “Bboying died for a while. Then it came back, and it was this new form of acrobatic, gymnastic-type of dance.”⁷¹ Not only is the physical change noticeable, but also the changes in the aesthetics and traditions is noticeable. The meaning of gestural language, specifically the burns, has radically shifted. Rather than rewarding wit and “outsmarting” the opponent, “fairness” (in competitions) is categorized through a number of “rules” that govern movement. Endurance and speed are prized. Judged competition categories exclude gestural language or burns as a winning factor (in the real-life battles they are valued as the epitome of signifying motions).

In the 2000s, women are more marginalized than in the past. When gestures are used, they are copied directly from hip-hop dance movies that always narratively frame the dance as a competition between the bad-ass-commercial bboy who is going to ruin the pure “real” underground good-hearted bboy (this trope is also presented, with different characters, in *You Got Served*, the *Step It Up* movies and many other films). In all these movies, the women simply accompany the heroes and encourage them throughout their trials and awakenings into being better men. At their core, these movies dismiss women and glamorize the males.⁷² At worst they present a kind of sentimentalized and soft misogyny. As this convention gets played out in the successful (2004) hip-hop film, *You Got Served*,⁷³ a brutal battle is being waged between two crews, the bad versus the good. There are many examples in this film of sexualized misogynist burns and these gestures are easily picked up by the knowledgeable watcher. For the novice spectator, they pass by so quickly-- in milliseconds -- that they may go unnoticed. Besides having a lot of “throwing the dick,” one of the bad bboys takes his index and middle finger, slides them from the back-to-front of his female opponent’s vulva area (without contact, done front and low on her torso). He proceeds to smell the two fingers and makes a face that says “Oo-o-hh you stink!” Then, he takes the two fingers and waves them in front of his crew-mates

⁷⁰ *The Freshest Kids*.

⁷¹ George, “Founding Fathers,” 47.

⁷² *B-girl*, DVD, directed by Emily Dell (Screen Media Films, 2009). The *Bgirl* movie is one exception.

⁷³ *You Got Served*, DVD, directed by Christopher B. Stokes (Culver City, CA: Screen Gems, Inc., 2004).

and they all faint dramatically from the “smell.”⁷⁴ In testament to the potency of this visual phrase and the persuasiveness of the media, this exact gestural phrase is repeatedly used today by men against women.⁷⁵ A superficial analysis translates that the dancer “stinks,” in the sense that she is not a good dancer. However, a deeper analysis concludes that because only women have vaginas they not only stink, but they “stink” (not good dancers) precisely because they are women. As women begin taking new roles in the hip hop scene in the 2000s in the commercial realm and in the underground, their presence is not readily welcomed by the men.

In an interview with Lisa “bgirl Mona Lisa” Berman, she explained her resentment for this “played out” gesture. “There’s definitely one that I really, really hate when guys do it to girls, and I think it’s just gross. When guys pretend to stick their finger up you and they smell it and then they faint... That’s something that they have done to me a couple of times in a battle and I’m like ‘that’s so old.’”⁷⁶ Thus, the burns have been demoted, perhaps desensitized slightly. But they still sting and display the beliefs and ideas of the male breakers and highlight the inequality that exists in this community.

In 2000, the bboy combatant-demeanor upon entering the room or the cipher which, in the old-days (1970s through the 1990s) could be viewed as a version of the “African cool” (as defined by Robert Farris Thompson), has become nasty and fierce, ratcheted up from the cool to the arrogant. This is also true in the dancing, since in competitive forms it makes no real commentary that pushes creativity. Instead it excels at bringing the other opponent down -- at the expense of honoring what were the hip hop community values, especially affecting the women and their participation in the form. The resurrection of the values may lie within the women’s actions, and they might – if they continue to work as a collective – arrive at some creative solutions. At this point in the New Millennium, the status of women is on the edge of disappearing, or surviving and becoming victorious in their abilities to change and grow in positive directions.

⁷⁴ *You Got Served*. This same “stinking” finger gesture is/was used by boys against boys by wiping the ass of the opponent but this gesture has been copied “verbatim” by bboys and used against bgirls today.

⁷⁵ This gesture was used against my dance partner in a two-on-two impromptu battle at a now closed club in Augusta, GA “Tinted Windows in 2003.” I have seen it used countless times in other battles against women.

⁷⁶ Mona Lisa, phone interview with the author, February 26, 2009. This is testament to the fact that generations copy burns from the media.

CHAPTER 2

1970's BGIRLS AND DANCING SPECTATORS

As was true of the men of the early 1970s, early bgirls were predominately Black and Latina youth around 12-14-years-old who lived and danced in New York City. Because of the lack of interest of women in hip hop during the 1970s, bgirls were/are marginalized and difficult to locate. As well, there were many other female dancers who were unrecognized and unnamed and danced as toprockers, breakers, hip-hop party dancers and freestylers. However, the most important role the women fulfilled in that early decade in terms of the evolution of breaking was to function as knowledgeable spectators and social commentators -- the consulting experts. They made the continuation of hip hop possible. As *active* watchers and peripheral *moving* participants they were part of the hip hop breaking events. Using Robert Farris Thompson's theories of African spectatorship and social communal critique, I analyze these spectators as dancers, positioned outside the center of the circle. One extremely helpful bgirl was Pebbles "Pebblee Poo" Riley, who vividly describes the raw bgirl burns she threw when battling bboys.

Judgments about the stylistic distinctions between women who were uprocker, breakers, hip-hop party dancers and freestylers were in force at this time. Women who were uprocker or breaking were looked upon as being more "credible" dancers than the freestylers. Female uprocker and breakers were the first to dance in the streets alongside the boys, and this probably earned them their credibility ("props" or respect) because they had the courage to enter ciphers on the street.⁷⁷ As they matured and wanted to act older, they started to go to the clubs. Freestylers, on the other hand, had always danced in the clubs or at block parties. Not surprisingly, club ciphers included more dancing styles and more women than the breaking ciphers erupting on the street. In the clubs it was easier to join the circle and it was physically and mentally smoother and more comfortable to dance on the floor instead of cement.⁷⁸ In addition, any competitiveness in a club cipher is mediated by the presence of many other

⁷⁷ This also includes girls who were friends of bboys.

⁷⁸ *The Freshest Kids*. The Nigga Twins explain with pride that they did not dance on linoleum or card board but they danced on the cement. Dancing on rough surfaces that present a possible danger are considered masculine or manly. Thus women on the street "took these risks," which is another reason why they were given more credibility than the women in the clubs.

dancers; its purpose is different. It is about fun and entertainment, not the exciting confrontational modality of ciphers that spontaneously arose in street challenges.

The absence of any written documentation about the seventies' women underscores the fact that the beginnings of hip hop reside in memories, and this dance remains an oral tradition. This presents research problems, especially in collecting information about the women who are more obscured than the men. Recently information about the 1970's men has begun to be actively gathered and disseminated.⁷⁹ Because media attention about social dancing in these early years was directed towards the glamorous nightlife of the 1970's discotheque with its fashionable outfits, electronically-synthesized music, drugs and exotic "night creatures," there is much we may never know about the early women uprockers.

However, there is evidence provided about women in hip-hop dance in the 1970s by the bboys themselves. And, two 1970's women were discovered and interviewed for this study.⁸⁰ The women's legacy exists mostly in the hearts of the male pioneers and in the almost mythical tales told by some of the "Legends"⁸¹ (someone who is accepted as a pioneer of hip hop dance, and accepted as such in hip hop culture). Incomplete and intriguing stories of the "Zulu Queens" and the "Shaka Queens" of the early 1970s⁸² and the women of the "Dynamic Dolls" of the early 1980s (which included Susan "Susie Q" Vega, Jeanette "JaeCie" Cruz, Brenda "Brenda K. Starr" Kaplan⁸³ and Kim "Kim-A-Kazi" Valente),⁸⁴ plus the mentioning of the names of a few women in between, create nostalgic discursive frame with no subjects. The emcee group "Us Girls" had a bgirl named "Lisa Lee"⁸⁵ who was part of the Zulu Queens.⁸⁶ Mr. Wiggles wrote in an email conversation the names of a few women he remembered, such as bgirl "Sista Boo" who

⁷⁹ Ibid., In *The Freshest Kids* there is abundant information on the 1970s men. Also, hip hop dance pioneer Jorge "Fabel" Pabon is actively creating documentaries about the dancers from the 1970s (all men). However, one of the most lengthy and important works (books) about bgirls entitled *We B*Girlyz* includes nothing from the women of the 1970s.

⁸⁰ This information on women of the 1970s is very rare. I have not been able to find any research that includes women from the 1970s beyond my interviews.

⁸¹ This is a hard status to define. However it is defined the male pioneers. For example, many bboys are considered legends because they created specific or because they were in a legendary crew (i.e. Rock Steady Crew). However, the women who should be considered pioneers (Baby Love the first female member of the Rock Steady Crew) as well during that time because of their association with these crews are not considered legends.

⁸² George, "Founding Fathers," 46-47.

⁸³ Kim Valente explains that this was her name at that time.

⁸⁴ All names were given to me by Kim Valente of the Dynamic Dolls.

⁸⁵ Was not able to find her real name. She appeared in wild style.

⁸⁶ George, "Founding Fathers," 46-47.

went back to the Nigga Twins era.⁸⁷ He referred to Sista Boo as the “FIRST” bgirl from the early 1970s, and “Nasty Top Roke.” But--and this was not uncommon -- he was unable to provide details about who she was or what she did. He spoke highly of the Dynamic Dolls’ “Suzy Q” stating, “She was nice [a good dancer]. They performed at the Kennedy Center Honors with us and New York City Breakers.”

There are several reasons why the women were difficult or impossible to locate. Hanifa “Bubbles” McQueen Hudson, a 1980s bgirl considered to be the UK’s first bgirl, told me about a 1970’s bgirl, “Rican Rose.”⁸⁸ In turn, Rican Rose explained to Bubbles that, “many of these women are dead or in jail.”⁸⁹ Despite the fact that these women would be fairly young today, gangs or violence may have taken their lives prematurely. Another factor is that technology has left the older generation of women dancers behind. The internet is a primary tool-of-contact when searching out various social networks and groups.⁹⁰ When Pebblee Poo was finally reached she apologized for not responding for months: “I am not online that much.”⁹¹

The women from the 1970s do/did not always identify themselves as dancers. Bgirls today are easily found by their popular bgirl names alone, which are trumpeted across social networks such as Face book, MySpace and Twitter. But this is not the case for the 1970’s dancers.⁹² Many more women than men stopped dancing, and they became less involved in dance compared to their male counterparts. As women, pregnancies, and childbirth often placed careers on hold for about sixteen months. Afterwards, especially for single mothers, giving up dance was their only option. While it is fairly easy to find older NYC 1970’s bboys who travel, teach, and dance today, women may have stopped dancing because of their age. Breaking is extremely demanding on the body. Older people have less energy and most likely they have not been able to keep up the necessary and rigorous techniques that breaking demands. Unfortunately as the female body ages, breasts, hips, buttocks get heavier and larger, and stomachs sag because their essential core and oblique muscles have been stretched by pregnancies. Breaking becomes impossible if the body is not regularly trained. Furthermore,

⁸⁷ Considered first generation bboys (early 1970s) by many pioneers and documented as such in *The Freshest Kids*.

⁸⁸ I located Rican Rose’s name on myspace.com but was not able to speak with her. I began to get frustrated about the lack of information that existed about women of the 1970s.

⁸⁹ Bubbles, email message to author, September 7, 2010.

⁹⁰ The hardest group to find online was the 1970s bgirls. Quite naturally the easiest group to find were the 1990s and 2000s bgirls.

⁹¹ Pebblee Poo, email message to author, January 6, 2010.

⁹² It was difficult to locate women by their previous dance names, and, even harder to find them by their real names.

misogyny and discrimination undoubtedly caused women to leave. To struggle for recognition and equality, in and out of the cipher, became too much. And lastly, in the 1970s hip hop was viewed as a passing fad by the rest of the world (hip hop music did not even become a Grammy category until after 1985) and many bgirls and bboys became discouraged because they too believed it would not continue.

In spite of it all, two women who were dancing in the 1970s were located: Kim-A-Kazi and Pebbles “Pebblee Poo” Riley. Although Kim-A-Kazi was actively breaking in the 1970s, she did not become a member of the Dynamic Dolls until the 1980s, the decade with which she identifies herself as a dancer most, and therefore she is a self-described 1980’s bgirl. However, Pebblee Poo⁹³ began breaking in 1972 and her memories make up the bulk of the primary source interview material in this chapter. In addition to these two bgirls, I define *all* women who participated at the edges of the cipher as dancers. Because these women contributed to the circle’s energy and fueled the dancing with their physicalized responses, I analyze them as early women in hip-hop dance. Ken Swift of the Rock Steady Crew talks about these women on the edges:

Martha has a lot of girls in the background of her pictures [Martha Cooper was the first professional photographer who was on the hip-hop scene]. But she doesn’t have them [women] breaking because back-in-the-day it was taboo for the girls to jump out like that. Maybe they were just girlfriends. They may have been breaking [before] but I guess they figured that with the cameras out, it was time for the boys to do their thing.⁹⁴

The cipher is both a closed figure and a place where an exchange of ideas and energy takes place, and in which the spectators are most responsible. Because ciphers appear and then disappear, they are only experiential for the watchers and the watched. Existential and transitory, a cipher can take place in a car, around a table, in the street. A cipher is in fluctuation because it is a performative exchange that exists in a “now-ness.” The cipher is a kind of mystical entity that seems to manipulate space, time, location and identity. The dancer (if s/he is good) and the

⁹³ As a solo bgirl from the Bronx, and later affiliated with the Smoke A Tron’s and eventually created a crew, Pebblee Poo and the Non-Stop Crew.

⁹⁴ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 16. Quote by Ken Swift.

spectators seek the “zone,” a psychological state of euphoria when all time stops. The zone is not static despite the sensation that insubstantial time has stopped. The cipher-zone exists because it is intensely interactive. The dancers -- and the watchers -- are in constant flow and motion, reacting in microseconds to what is occurring. In this situation “identity” becomes a stream of perpetual slippage. People and situations seesaw from being the challenger, to the challenged, just as the attacker can abruptly become the humiliated. Because the spectator is an empathetic kinetic witness, the slippage of identity extends from the center of the circle to its outer edges. The spectator is a dancer in her physicalized reactions. The difference of dancing is one of degree. She is a more subtle dancer than her male counterpart performing in the middle of the cipher.⁹⁵

In the 1970s women mainly participated as watchers but this does not mean that the women standing in these ciphers were not-dancers. For example, Aiko, a bgirl from the 1980s states “I waited until I was good enough to hang with the guys before I even stepped on the dance floor.” This explains how many women feel when they are dancers but not considered as good as the men. Without their reception, the dialogue between the seer and the seen, there would be no energy strands to hold the cipher together and it would lose its magical effects.⁹⁶

What power do women spectators have that the dancing male bboys do not? To be admired by the spectators is as much a part of breaking as any other element of the art form. The various roles women played in the community as spectators, and their influence as spectators, is a significant factor in the continuation of hip hop dance. In a lecture given in November 2010, Jorge “Pop Master Fabel” Pabon admitted “We did it for ourselves, but we also did it to get the girls.”⁹⁷

Women’s active spectatorship made up a physical discourse of what is, and is not cool in the ways they sequence or enact their responses. Their perpetually changing poses and

⁹⁵ Because of this, the only sure way to identify a dancer in the usual sense is to see them dance in the cipher -- unless they are already well-known because they enter the cipher frequently. Dancers do not give as much significance to spectators as they do their dance cohorts. In later years this position becomes a threat to the respect women seek as dancers. As breaking spreads, and competitions reign, the importance of the spectator diminishes. This diminishes the importance of women, and therefore the women’s movement from the 1970s will no longer be as powerful for the later generations. As the generations progress, the women who do not enter the cipher will be seen merely as unimportant watchers. They lose all power by not entering into the cipher.

⁹⁶ The magical effects I speak of concern the cipher’s ability to transform location, space and time through temporal boundaries and the dancer’s ability to enter “the zone,” an altered state in which the total being -- mind, body and soul -- are at their highest level of communication.

⁹⁷ Interview with Sally Sommer November 19, 2010 guest lecture given by Fabel for her class, “FSU in NYC.”

movements as well as their audible and visual codes, formed a gestural language of dance. Audible codes included clapping, encouraging the dancers by shouting “Yeah! That’s it!” or “Go! Go! Go!” or hooting approvals. Audible codes could also be discouraging. The women might “boo” the dancers, “hi-s-s-s” or say “s-hi-i-it!”⁹⁸ announcing that the dancer is not skilled. Visual codes could be anything from static poses of “Oh, yeah?” with one hand on a hip with head cocked, to the wary-watcher “show me your stuff” with the arms crossed, legs slightly akimbo, the mouth frowning, eyes focused on the cipher’s center. Big approval actions might consist of clapping, smiling and head bopping and jumping up and pumping their fists in the air.⁹⁹ More subtle movements of approval are holding an arm(s) slightly out in front of the body, pulsing them up and down in time to the music, heads nodding. And, there were the facial expressions. When the women disliked the movement, they stood still, looked away, and frowned. Even worse, they might not react at all, which was the ultimate expression of dismissal.

The various roles women played in the community as spectators were profoundly influential. In his book, *African Art in Motion*, art and dance historian Robert Farris Thompson theorizes an African dance aesthetic in which the flexible, active *communal* role defines the dancing itself, no matter how brilliant the moves may be. “An aesthetic is a mode of intellectual energy that only exists when in operation, *i.e.*, when standards are applied to actual cases and are reasoned.”¹⁰⁰ In “Consulting the Experts” Thompson writes that the crowd, or, the majority of the community decide who is, and is not, a great dancer. The “experts” are the knowledgeable community members who make up the audience. He divides the experts’ understanding into three different categories.

According to Thompson the first level of experts are defined: “The traditional expert in Africa who is defined as any person who holds a strong and reasoned opinion about dance and who . . . is a member of a traditional society.”¹⁰¹ When translated to early hip-hop, this fits women on the edges of the ciphers who act as the authoritative experts of the community, since they lived in and around the bboys, and were always a part of the social circle and the dancing

⁹⁸ Kim-A-Kazi, email interview with the author, December 28, 2009. Kim-A-Kazi explains how women would yell out discouraging things from the crowd, “when I went on the 1984 Fresh tour I was the only female. The females in the stands would yell out ‘Shoo-ooo—t what that white girl think she gonna do?’”

⁹⁹ *WildStyle*, 25th Anniversary ed. DVD. Directed by Charlie Ahearn. (Burbank, CA: Rhino Entertainment Company, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ Robert Farris Thompson, “African Art and Motion,” Chap. 1 in *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California press, 1974).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

cipher. Moreover, there are more levels within this level of expertise -- and women have occupied them all. For example, there are women who dance and enter the cipher, women who dance but do not enter the cipher, and women who are non-dancers but are still essential members of the dance community, all with varying levels of expertise as “experts.” They fall into Thompson’s second level of “Modern experts on music, dance, and art.” The third level is “the White Collection.”¹⁰² In his definition, the white connection is the written record or outsiders. Thompson’s explains that “whites” do not know as much because they are outside of the community, non-residents. The theory is useful because it relates, not by race, but by level of expertise. Everyone who studies hip hop culture but does not participate directly in it (regardless of race) would be considered the “white collection.”¹⁰³ All of these individuals are a part of the larger circle that inform the process of consultation.

To further apply this theoretical breakdown to members in the hip-hop community, the traditional members (the most important experts) in hip hop are the women who congregate with, and around, the crew members.¹⁰⁴ From this relationship, bboys began dating women who were part of the cipher. Rock Steady Crew member Ken Swift states, “There weren’t girls doing it [breaking].¹⁰⁵ But, if there was a dancer who had a girlfriend, she would eventually either had tried it or [she] was taught how.”¹⁰⁶

Much of the existing documentation of women consists of photographs and video footage of the women standing in the circles supporting the bboys. Ken swift states that “We had a bunch of girls in Rock Steady, but they were there for the support--and they would bug out and do the stuff here and there.”¹⁰⁷ The female spectators were extremely influential, and without their confirmation, who would the bboys really be? It compares to the relationship between superstars

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid. This also resembles the relationship of the researcher and the community of study. For example a scientific researcher may be seen as part of the “white collection.” However an ethnographer can be considered closer to the expertise level because of the required involvement in the community of study.

¹⁰⁴ In Nancy Guevara’s article, “Women Writin’ Rappin’ and Breakin’” she states “relegation of females to a cheerleading role in breakdancing contests is also closely related to repressive definitions of femininity.” While this is true, I am looking at the “cheerleading” role as a very important one in the history of women in hip hop dance/gestural language evolution. This role is also a very important one in the way that ciphering functions.

¹⁰⁵ The time Ken Swift is referring to is the early 1980s. His statement “there weren’t girls doing it” may be true in terms of where he lived and where he frequented. However, there were definitely girls “doing it” at that time. Violeta “Fire Starter” Galagarza states “there’s so many politics of ‘that’s not the style of this’ or ‘you wasn’t around this.’ back in the days we wasn’t paying attention to anybody or going “hey what’s your name?”” This shows the relativity of Ken Swift’s statement.

¹⁰⁶ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

and their fans. Without the public discourse, the superstar ceases to exist. Thompson writes that he “Consulted the Experts” for his book, recognizing that without their opinions, he would not have been able to gain the understanding he needed to complete the project.¹⁰⁸

Many pioneering bboys proclaim competition as the prime ingredient that drove the dancers’ creativity and rocketed the dancing to new levels of virtuosity. Unmentioned or downplayed in these tracings, was the bboys’ competition for admiration from the women. “I use to hustle, and I use to practice by myself, cuz’ I didn’t dare cut in with the girls thinking that a girl might be like, ‘Ooh who is you?’ You know? So I use to just take to the floor. If they didn’t notice me for my hustling abilities, they were gonna notice me for my breaking abilities.”¹⁰⁹

When women are mentioned in the mix of spectators, they are targeted for their affection towards bboys. Pop Master Fabel writes in dialogue found on www.universalzulunation.com, “We fed off of the crowd a lot--to get them hyped was half of the reason we did it. Well, at least a quarter. Three-fourths were more selfish reasons, like, there’s some fine girls around here, yo!”¹¹⁰ Dancers are considered great when they can finesse and manipulate the crowd to their liking. When bboys dance, they are trying to finesse women to like them. Thus, every action of the bboy is done with consciousness of the opinion of women. For example, Ciprian “Bboy Radio” Gontea states “If I am attracted by you, and you’re in the cipher [the edges], and when I go out and dance and you don’t seem to have a reaction, I would keep going out and try to peek and see what the girl is thinking.”¹¹¹ In working to gain affection from the woman, Bboy Radio’s thought process changes to disappointment because of the woman’s lack of reaction, so he will “peek” to continue to observe her reaction. This process affects his emotions, shifting his intentions in dancing at that second, determining how many times he enters the cipher to dance and how virtuosically he performs.

Women’s involvement as spectators constitutes early women’s hip-hop dance language. Through coded sounds and subtle movements (specifically gestures and expressions) they controlled the thought process, emotions, and intentions behind the bboys’ performances and they had an extremely important role in determining the evolution of the form. Certainly there

¹⁰⁸ Thompson, “African Art and Motion,” 2-4.

¹⁰⁹ Jo Jo, one of the co-founders of the Rock Steady Crew. For more on this see Ch. 9, “The Birth of Rock Steady” in *The Freshest Kids*.

¹¹⁰ www.universalzulunation.com

¹¹¹ Ciprian “Bboy Radio” Gontea, in conversation with the author, September 5, 2009.

could be no more credence and importance accorded to the women. They are, in truth, the real movers in this dancing dialogue of performer and spectator.

As the young bboys battled with scatological gestures, the dancing bgirls of the 1970s -- who entered the ciphers -- responded in kind, enacting the sassy young-girl attitude, "We can do what you do, but better." When speaking with Pebblee Poo about the possibility of using feminine gestures in the future, she explained "No. Women love to do things that the guys do, but add style to it."¹¹² However, feminine language was already being used by women of her generation by the edge-of-the-cipher dancers. In more explicit language seen in the film footage of Pop Master Fabel's documentary, *Rock dance History: The Untold Story of Up-Rockin'*, acclaimed uprocker Papo Luv¹¹³ describes women uprockerers from the 1970s movement as "sexual" and proclaims, "they be getting' dirty!"¹¹⁴ Papo describes the burns he saw women throw in battle. As he talks, he paints a picture of female domination in the burns of women uprockerers. "I seen girls that'll take a nigga like this [at this moment he begins to uprocker], wrap you up into a little ball, take you like a douche and flip you up like w-i-i-s-s-h-h-h with no mutha'fuckin' thinkin' about it! And you just a douche, thinking 'I just got flinged the fuck off!' He finishes his analysis of her movements and asks dejectedly, "How the fuck can you burn that?"¹¹⁵

The burn Papo Luv describes is what I would label as a "female sexually-reproductive power burn." Although the burns were (and still are in many ways) dominated by male interpretations and genitalia, this woman is remembered as a fierce battler who found a way to express female power in the same way. The gestures the edges-of-the-cipher female spectator uses are more subtle and very different from the hard gestures a bgirl would use inside a cipher. When asking Pebblee Poo about her gestures when battling, she said "grabbing the coochie like I was fixin' myself, like a man do, and standin' with my arms folded like 'Yeah! Now what?'"¹¹⁶ Although these gestures are blatantly different from gestures used while when standing in a

¹¹² Pebblee Poo, email interview with author, January 6, 2010.

¹¹³ Fabel explains that Papo Luv is a member of BVD: Brooklyn's Vicious Dancers. He is not comfortable with his real name being displayed.

¹¹⁴ POPMASTERFABEL, "Rock Dance History: The Untold Story of Up-Rockin' = Papo Luv on "Outlaw" Sisters that rock.mov," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR_MULaVMg0 (accessed December 21, 2010).

¹¹⁵ Fabel, "APACHE LINE: From Gangs to Hip Hop," [youtube.com/watch?v=mdmQludvzBQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdmQludvzBQ) (accessed September 16, 2009).

¹¹⁶ I will use all vernacular language when quoting the women I interviewed.

cipher they give an idea of the range of what some of the early women were doing -- and definitely what Pebblee Poo was using.

However, what else can the women's gestures mean (and this includes Pebblee Poo adapting the male sexualized gestures for her own use) besides giving approval or disapproval of men's dance? This is consequential when looking at them as part of a lineage that will affect the ideas of the next generations. Still, gestures in the 1970s for bgirls display a struggle for showing womanhood as equal. When Pebblee Poo discusses the gestures, they are seen as a way to fight against men in a very practical manner. If women are to dance against men, women take on the ideas that they must do everything that the man does -- but better. "I just did what I saw other guys do," Pebblee Poo said, "but with a little more finesse. I feel that women should use male gestures and act like a boy on the dance floor. It's impressive. We as women like to show the man, whatever you do, we can do better."¹¹⁷

As hip hop evolved, the relationship between bboys and women dancers changed. In the 1980s, women became more expert dancers and spectators, and, they took the center of the cipher. Women's gestures were less subtle, more pronounced, and they gained credibility as a whole. This was because their next cipher was in the center of mainstream popular culture.

¹¹⁷ Pebblee Poo, email interview with author, January 6, 2010.

CHAPTER 3

1980s

Expanding and solidifying their presence in the 1980s the numbers of women in hip hop significantly increased.¹¹⁸ Although the majority of women were Blacks and Latinas, more Caucasian females were coming in. As a group, the 1980s' women entered as 14 to 18-year-olds, making them more mature than their 10- to 14-year-old predecessors of the 1970s. However the biggest transformative event to affect hip hop occurred when the media "discovered" the dance in 1980. What had been an underground community-based dance transformed, almost overnight, into a national then international dance craze. A flood of publicity followed: newspaper and magazine articles, hot photographs, movies, how-to-dance books, record deals, music videos, stage performances/exhibitions, television shows, and the emergence of a multimillion-dollar sneaker (shoe) industry and immediately after, a multibillion-dollar fashion industry. Attractively packaged, hip hop was presented as a physically virtuosic, slightly dangerous yet redemptive dance that deflected the youth from crime. This was partially true, and irresistibly glamorous. *Everybody* wanted a piece of the action-- or wanted to be an actor-dancer-choreographer-designer. Women auditioned as dancers for films, commercials, music videos, or, to be fashion models and designer spokeswomen. They were traveling, performing and pursuing careers in the media spotlight whose scrutiny represented, then imposed, stereotypical normative sexual-gender representations on the women.

Like the women of the WSP (Women Strike for Peace) movement of the 1960s, the women of hip hop (excluding bgirls) "Wore the mask" (of the media's prescribed femininity) to advance their agenda of agency and presence was a strategy used by 1980's women to get jobs in the media.¹¹⁹ In Catherine R. Stimpson's foreword in Amy Swerdlow's *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s*, she states "...The members of WSP appealed to the public with uncanny skill, as housewives and mothers...."¹²⁰ For example, hip hop women would dress the part of the 1980's women in the media such as the Fly

¹¹⁸ In the 1970s I only found one woman to interview. In the 1980s, I found 12 to 15 women, though not all were able to participate in this research first-hand.

¹¹⁹ Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1993).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

Girls of *In Living Color* did. However, they would execute the movement with strength and power like their male counterparts. Similarly, Women of the WSP movement would “go public, demonstrate while they pushed baby carriages, speak, march, picket, petition, write research reports and press releases.”¹²¹ Bgirls however wore the mask of prescribed masculinity (but injected femininity in various ways),¹²² thus they were rejected from the media but accepted in the underground. For example, bgirls in all-male crews dressed in male fashioning.¹²³ Consequently this mask warped into a false consciousness; no longer a disguise to gain agency, it became a way of life for women to suppress and police their bodies in order to “find themselves” in the 1990s and 2000s. Nevertheless, this move gained women a permanent position in both worlds. In the underground women were making head way by following the guys lead. In the media women were being recognized and thus documented, written about and became the focus of the new image of hip hop that would pave the way for women in the 1990s.

Distinctions were exaggerated between the bgirl and the hip hop-party dancer (although the same women sometimes did both forms). The hip hop-party dancers were feminized and tamed, while the strong bgirls were masculinized and toughened.¹²⁴ Complicating the bgirls’ identity were the bboys, who resisted the bgirls’ presence in the ciphers with gestures danced out in uproar battles. Instead of freezes¹²⁵ that cut the phrase and threw out a challenge, the bboys were now throwing out phallic battle burns. Consider the differences: In the 1970s’ female spectator-dancers-critics encouraged the men’s movements as good, or dismissed the men if their *movements* were bad. But in the 1980s, bboys began to attack the bgirls’ presence with phallic burns aimed at sexually demeaning them as women (throwing the dick then spraying them with semen). Phallic battles between bboys has the youthful bragging quality of “mine is bigger and better than yours.” But when aimed at women, the message becomes decidedly anti-feminine.

The hardening of lines between what is feminine and what is not can be viewed as the Anxious Patriarch versus the Black Matriarch and the duality between male control and fear of

¹²¹ Ibid., x.

¹²² Hanifa. “Video clip of the Wolverhampton Crew From the UK,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaE0d9BWxJo> (accessed August 10, 2010). For example in one of Bubbles’ video clips she wears a skirt while doing windmills.

¹²³ When women danced in hip hop they wore earrings and makeup to counterbalance the male fashioning they adopted (discussed further as liminality in Ch. 6).

¹²⁴ This changes, however, for the hip hop-party dancer in the 1990s, when women report being considered “masculine” for the movements they used when compared to the women in the earlier videos.

¹²⁵ Many of the freezes included phallic gestures such as ending with a freeze by grabbing the crotch.

women, and women's need to establish presence gets expressed in what I have called the Anxious Patriarch-Black Matriarch paradigm. This urge to dominate/control and therefore re-define the image of the women is Anxious Patriarchy. The Black Matriarch is a term that evolved from the writings of senator and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan's research *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* more commonly referred to as *The Moynihan Report* (1965),¹²⁶ which can be applied to any black woman who is seen as unfeminine, too strong, aggressive and assertive. Certainly this defined the breaking bgirl in the eyes of the media, which became a controlling Anxious Patriarch eager to define the gender representations and the parameters of what was, and was not, good dancing and who were appropriate participants. Women were not welcome in the cipher and on the ground except as a novelty. Representing the ultimate struggle between established ideas of femininity and masculinity in hip hop, a struggle that has yet to be addressed as a whole.

In this era these raw gestures of contempt entered the vocabulary as embodied discrimination and they were interpreted as a part of the "Foundation" legacy (Foundation is the term used for the codified movements and ideologies of breaking), which came to be considered as the "real" and "authentic" inheritance from hip hop. Is Foundation folklore or folklorism? In truth, it is both. Using the definitions established by Dina Roginsky, "The concept of 'folklore' has connotations of an 'authentic' and 'genuine' expression of a 'traditional' nature, performed in its 'first life of existence' in its community of 'origin' by group members who 'own' it, sometimes manifested as a naïve form." What Roginsky calls "Folklorism," on the other hand, she regards as misleading "'fake-lore' that exists in a 'second life' outside its 'source-community' [and] is materialistic and popular (e.g., 'commercialized folklore'), and is manifest in an 'objectified form.'" Roginsky is analyzing these two concepts through "processes of synchronization" which she believes reveals "the empirical social conditions in which folklore and folklorism are negotiated: a dialectic process of cause and effect."¹²⁷ If folklore, in order to be true, must have everything agreed on unanimously by the pioneers of the culture, then Foundation is folklorism because it leaves out women. However, Foundation is also a semi-

¹²⁶ The U.S. Department of Labor Website. "The Negro Family- The Case For National Action," www.dol.gov (accessed December 23, 2010). *The Moynihan Report* was carried out by the United States Government to discover why blacks were so poor in the US. "Black familial structure" paired with the Black Matriarch were therefore recognized as the fundamental problem of black poverty.

¹²⁷ Dina Roginsky. "Folklore, Folklorism, and Synchronization: Preserved-Created Folklore in Isreal." *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 44, No.1 (2007): 41-66.

folklorism in another sense because it was established after the media took hold of it, used it and threw breaking away after its initial popularity died down--however, it was also created by the pioneers (“group members who ‘own’ it). It is folklorism in the sense that despite the fact that the actual pioneers established it, it was *not* in its “‘first life of existence’ in its community of ‘origin.’”¹²⁸ Foundation was created in order to counter-balance the diluting effects of commercialization and in an effort to recreate tradition.

As the bgirls tried to deal with the negativity of phallic burns, they paradoxically began to copy and use the same phallic burns, thereby incorporating into themselves the negative male “panoptic gaze.”¹²⁹ It was ingrained in the movement and internalized by the individual bgirl who became her own suppressive and controlling agent.¹³⁰ In this chapter, the women’s interviews reveal these ideologies in practice, then they voice (for the first time) their experiential reality “back in the day.”

Finally the women were really going public, not limited to just dancing in their bedrooms, school dances and talent shows. As older girls they were able to dance wherever they pleased. Lane Pogue “Yoda LaneSki” Davey remembers, “Back then, we looked for battles wherever we went, the dances, the mall, the airport, schools, whatever.”¹³¹ Other public areas included park-jams, house parties, block parties, school campuses and the street. Clubs were also a major space for women; the Octagon, The Fever, Mars, Souls Kitchen, Wild Pitch, Nells, Two ii’s, New Music Café, The Rooftop, Roseland and Union Square, Irving Plaza and The World are a few named by the interviewees. But hip hop party dancers’ Doreene (Deena) “SnapShot” Clemente and Wanda “WandeePOP” Candelario also noted the difference in the numbers of women who danced in clubs in comparison to the numbers of bgirls who danced in the streets. “The few girls we encountered were in the park-jams or house-jam battles. The crews in the neighborhoods were all-guys. We did not have any other female street influences other than our family members.”¹³² Performance spaces were also practice spaces. “There was no such thing as

¹²⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹²⁹ See Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze and Michael Foucault’s theory of panopticism. It is a combination of the two; self-surveillance from the male point of view.

¹³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment* (Vintage Books: New York, 1995). “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.”

¹³¹ Bgirl Yoda LaneSki, email interview with author, December 23, 2009.

¹³² SnapShot and WandeePOP, email interview with author, December 2, 2009.

street dancing in the studios, so that [the street] was our only outlet to practice what we created”¹³³

Women began forming crews ¹³⁴ and creating choreography for their groups. Crews had names like the Dynamic Dolls, the Lady Popatrons, the Gucci Girls, FBI (Far Beyond Ur Imagination), Unique Force, The Sleek Dancers, KGB (Ko Gettin’ Busy) and BUTTA (Bustin’ Up the Total Atmosphere). Still in the breaking and the hip hop party dance world, women were the minority. Lenaya “Tweetie Bird” Straker, a prominent hip-hop party dancer of the 1980s explains that she was the *only* woman who danced with Mop Top Crew and Elite Force at the time, “but [was] never a member of either.”¹³⁵ However, she was a part of two female crews, KBG and Butta in her high school years; “KGB was eight girls and Butta was nine girls.”¹³⁶ She also mentioned two other all female crews the Gucci Girls and FBI. Hip hop party dancers were easily finding spaces for themselves -- compared to bgirls who were struggling to establish themselves.

Violeta “Fire Starter” Galagarza, a bgirl who also identifies with other styles, explains that she did not think of herself as part of a crew because to her the word “crew” was a “boy” thing. “We collaborated as a group ... because we’re ladies you know?”¹³⁷ But she also remembers that “Back-in-the-day when we used to be in clubs we wasn’t paying attention to anybody else but who was around us. We’re not going ‘Hey what’s your name?’ I mean, you battle somebody -- you battle them and that’s it. I don’t wanna know your name. I did my thing, I repped¹³⁸ in the circle and that’s it you know?”¹³⁹ Whether as a solo dancer or as a part of crews, women are moving into the center. Fire Starter describes the sheer fun of the ciphers in the clubs.

I was excited. I mean just seeing a cipher, any cipher, just to see the ‘ampness’¹⁴⁰ of everybody! People enjoying what they’re seein’, whether people dance or not. It’s the feel you know? Back in the day, too, it wasn’t *only* about battling, but, we’ll start something, and a certain rhythm comes out, and they’ll start following us. If a certain

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ These crews were either all or mostly women crews.

¹³⁵ Tweetie Bird, email interview with author, January 12, 2009.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Fire Starter, phone interview with author, January 27, 2010.

¹³⁸ To represent.

¹³⁹ Fire Starter, phone interview with author, January 27, 2010.

¹⁴⁰ Exciting energy.

thing [dance/song] comes out we'd do the 'wop,' and then everybody does it. Or, the 'bizmark,' and everybody does it. It was fun, you know? I was in another world."¹⁴¹ [itals mine]

Although this is true for Fire Starter, did the other 1980's women dance in this kinder type of cipher? What does the cipher mean to the women in this decade? What kinds of pressures did women face? Aiko Shirakawa states "Being a girl in Hip Hop back then was very difficult because you had to be as hard as the guys to be seen or respected..."¹⁴² Bgirl Yoda LaneSki recalls how bboy crews capitalized on women's success as dancers, even when they were not part of the crew. "Sometimes my crew [the one she hung out with] would tell me to do a move and another move, then the circle would just end and start up somewhere else. I never really knew if it was because I won, or, if they just did not want to battle a girl."¹⁴³ Through regulating authenticity and the battle structure, the bboy patriarch regains his power by always controlling the formula of the contest.

Generally women were excluded from the comfort that crews were supposed to offer.¹⁴⁴ As Nicole "Olopop" Guess, a native Hawaiian bgirl states, "Many guys did not have females as an official part of their crews."¹⁴⁵ So women felt alienated and often felt extra pressure to prove themselves. Aiko states "I find that we have to come harder to get the respect the guys get and some of us girls get easy props¹⁴⁶ when we have very little skill. Either way it sucks."¹⁴⁷ Daisy "Baby Love" Castro, known as the "Rock Steady Crew's first bgirl," professes "It was hard to be the *only* bgirl with them! [itals mine] I wanted to be treated as an equal. But because I was a girl it wasn't always possible...As the only girl you want to prove yourself all the time, but for them it was never enough. And, that was a hard thing for me to acknowledge."¹⁴⁸

Sexism and racism affected their careers and personal relationships and these issues would also impact how they were assessed. Kim-A-Kazi acknowledges this. "Back in the

¹⁴¹ Fire Starter, phone interview with author, January 27, 2010.

¹⁴² Aiko Shirakawa, email interview with author, February 23, 2010.

¹⁴³ Bgirl Yoda LaneSki, email interview with author, December 23, 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Bubbles reassures that she had no problems with being a woman in her crew. In addition, Bubbles' crew was all boys excluding her.

¹⁴⁵ Olopop, email interview with the author, February 3, 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Asia "bgirl Asia One" Yu attempts to combat this issue in the 1990s with her crew No Easy Props.

¹⁴⁷ Aiko Shirakawa, email interview with author, February 23, 2010.

¹⁴⁸ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 16.

beginning ALL Breakers were discriminated against because we were looked at by society as thugs, gangsters and criminals.”¹⁴⁹ But discrimination also came from other dancers. “We were still trying to convince the world that we were a serious dance form. When we performed for President Reagan in 1983 at the Kennedy center honors, Mikhail Baryshnikov warned us, “Don’t expect a great response from the audience. What you do is a fad, what I do is an art.”¹⁵⁰ Kim continued, “But guess what? He went on before us and we received a standing ovation and he did NOT! Ha in your face! Ballet boy lol.”¹⁵¹

The two white women I interviewed said they felt pressures and were excluded not only because of what was expected of a girl, but because of the prejudicial expectations put on white girls. “When I went on the 1984 ‘Fresh’ tour I was the *only* female. The females in the stand would yell out ‘Shoo! What that white girl think she gonna do? And they would laugh at me!”¹⁵² The guys also laughed at her at first -- until they saw her dance. Then, Kim proudly states, “Then they were *all* on my strap!”¹⁵³[itals mine]” Bgirl Yoda LaneSki had a similar experience as a white bgirl. “Guys were so shocked to see a female dancer [and a white girl] that they did not know what to do.”¹⁵⁴ In what ways does the Black Matriarch theory apply to white women, to the majority of bgirls who are not black? As Patricia Hill Collins states,

Not only does the image of the Black Matriarch seek to regulate black women’s behavior, it also seems designed to influence white women’s gendered identities. In the post-World War II era, increasing numbers of white women entered the labor market, limited their fertility, and generally challenged their proscribed roles as subordinate helpmates in their families and workplaces. In this context, the image of the Black

¹⁴⁹ Kim-A-Kazi, email interview with author, December 28, 2009.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ This slang “all on my strap” is appropriated from the male slang phrase “all on my jock strap or jock.” It is defined like “I wasn’t popular before, but now that I am people want to be affiliated with me— all on my jock or bra strap.” Also, “get off my strap” means get out of my business, you are in my personal space, trying to get to know me after I am famous or credited for something I was not before. Today, the male slang phrase is called “dick riding.”

¹⁵⁴ Bgirl Yoda LaneSki, email interview with author, December 23, 2009.

Matriarch serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and White women of what can go wrong if White [black Anxious Patriarchal] power is challenged.”¹⁵⁵

Sexist prejudices deeply wounded the women. Kim-A-Kazi talked about the sexism the Dynamic Dolls endured during their professional careers. “We were discriminated against by our own manager. He did more for the boys than us.” I asked her to explain. “For example, ‘Test This.’ It was a record the Dynamic Breakers made and all we [the Dolls] did was the ‘ahhs haas’ and the ‘ooh hoos, that’s fresh’ in the background. I wrote raps for us! And in one session, we were rapping in front of Joe Web of Sunshine Records who loved it.” She continues that Web began recording the rap, “and when our manager came in and saw what was happening, he threw a fit. ‘This is the boys’ record!’ He said we would do ours next. Yeah, right. Never did.”¹⁵⁶ Mariette “Peaches” Rodriguez, a popper from the 1980s discussed her experiences when she was given gigs just because she was a girl, a kind of inverse sexism which made things difficult for her.¹⁵⁷ Peaches described other struggles she faced as a woman.

I had a, you know, a very cute look and about 60 to 70 percent [of the] skills that the guys did. But when I danced I would garner attention. And that was a pervasive issue for me back then. I would not be as good as them but [I would] get the attention. They didn’t wanna be in a group like that. They wanted to have their own shine, so it broke up a lot of partnerships with us.¹⁵⁸

Just being a girl affected their activities and self-image in the male-dominated hip hop world. “My parents weren’t comfortable with me cruising with seven other guys, so I was limited how much I could dance with them”¹⁵⁹ It also affected women on tour. “I think when you’re a female, you’re always somewhat solo. Because you can’t just hang with the guys like

¹⁵⁵Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁵⁶ Kim-A-Kazi, email interview with author, December 28, 2009. She also talked about other opportunities passed up by their manager: “They wanted to make a “Dynamic Dolls” doll [like a Barbie Doll] but my manager let that one slip away too....”

¹⁵⁷Peaches, phone interview with author, February 11, 2010. “I would go on a commercial audition with them [the boys] and I would end up getting chosen, and they didn’t. It was a very difficult... it’s a hard relationship, you know, career-wise, not even talking about the personal. I’m talking about career.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Bgirl Yoda Laneski, email interview with author, December 23, 2009.

the other guys do.”¹⁶⁰ If a bgirl had the physical skills to execute power moves, “boy crews would ask for my help at battles -- though I never was a part of their crew. I was the last-minute-secret weapon, if their crew was not winning, it was ‘Bust out the girl who could break dance!’ And your crew pretty much won the battle.”¹⁶¹

On the other hand, pioneering bgirls and hip-hop party dancers, SnapShot and WandeePOP said “We did not find ourselves struggling with issues being women because we had strong female role models in our families.”¹⁶² The women of the 1980s began practicing specific variations. For example, hip hop party dances consisted of any of the earlier popular social dances like “the twist”¹⁶³ and dances that pertained exclusively to hip hop music and dancing, such as “the running man,”¹⁶⁴ the “roger rabbit,”¹⁶⁵ “the smurf,” “the boggle” and “the wop” to name a few. Hip Hop party dancers also had the freedom to create their own dance vocabulary and become pioneers because of it. Snapshot and WandeePOP explain “Unique Force would practice to come up with our own to showcase at battles like ‘The Jason.’”¹⁶⁶ Hip-hop party-dancers did not confront as much discrimination. More latitude was given to “femininity” in hip hop-party dance, undoubtedly because more women went into this style. “Our 80’s crew ‘Unique Force’ included five girls and [only] two guys.”¹⁶⁷

However, bgirls (as opposed to the party dancers) certainly had the most issues with negative self-images, but also with the abilities of the body physiologically. Bgirl Yoda states that she is “still dancing because I learned the culture early, and know what is behind the moves,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Olopop, email interview with the author, February 3, 2010. This use of women in battle is also seen in the movie *Breaking* (1984). Both of the crews (all male) have it out until the opposing crew uses a girl to win the battle. For the next battle the main characters, “Ozone” and “Turbo” include “Special K” to win their next battle.

¹⁶² SnapShot and WandeePOP, email interview with author, December 2, 2009.

¹⁶³ *The Twist*, Jim Dawson (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1995), 35. A popular song and dance hit from the 1960s. Twisting was a side-to-side movement with the hips, twisting on the balls of the feet while the arms alternately pumped forward and back. There were also different variations of this movement. Chubby checker explained “... when my ‘Twist’ came out we decided that the twist would be like putting out a cigarette with both feet, or like coming out the shower and wiping your butt with a towel.”

¹⁶⁴ The basic running man is executed with the forearms perpendicular to the torso. The arms pump forward and backward (accent on the back); the feet slide backward with the backward force of the arms, alternately, and in place.

¹⁶⁵ The roger rabbit is a moving dance with the arms pumping from the back to the front while the feet alternately move back to front but while crossing behind the other foot and thrusting the hips forward.

¹⁶⁶ SnapShot and WandeePOP, email interview with author, December 2, 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

and why we do them. If I were dancing just to be cool, I wouldn't be still dancing at 39, 'cause it hurts!"¹⁶⁸

Women were also credited with bringing choreography into breaking. Michael Holman writes, "They concentrated more on routines and synchronized group moves which pioneered the idea of complex routines for breakers years later."¹⁶⁹ Kim-A-Kazi confirms; "I Loved to Choreograph -- it was Dynamic and Myself that Brought Choreography INTO BreakDancing (Its History)."¹⁷⁰ Today, 30 years later, choreography in breaking is included as a category in major competitions all over the world. Naturally, the vocabulary also expanded because of women participating. Contrary to Holman's claim that "The girl breakers did not do the floor moves the guys did,"¹⁷¹ according to the women themselves, during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, woman breakers *did* execute all the floor moves the guys did. Because the bgirl is an assertive woman, she rouses fears of the Anxious Patriarch when she encroaches into his territory (power zones).

The Black Matriarch, as mentioned earlier is a term that is applied to black women who were seen as unfeminine, too strong, aggressive and assertive.¹⁷² During slavery, they were also seen as physically stronger than normal. bell hooks, author of *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* states,

While Black men were not forced to assume a role colonial American society regarded as 'feminine,' Black women were forced to assume a 'masculine' role. (...) In the eyes of colonial white Americans, only debased and degraded members of the female sex labored in the fields. And any white woman forced by any circumstances to work in the fields was regarded as unworthy of the title 'woman.' (...) On any plantation with a substantial number of female slaves, black women performed the same tasks as black men; they plowed, planted, and harvested crops. On some plantations black women worked longer hours in the fields than black men.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Bgirl Yoda LaneSki, email interview with author, December 23, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Michael Holman, "Breaking: The History," in *That's The Joint! : The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) 31-39.

¹⁷⁰ Kim-A-Kazi, email interview with the author, December 28, 2009.

¹⁷¹ Holman, "Breaking: The History," 37.

¹⁷² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 77.

¹⁷³ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1981).

Under this negative definition, black women were considered a “failure to the true cult of womanhood,” that is, failing in the psychological and physical roles of “submissiveness” under which the white women functioned.¹⁷⁴

During the 1970s and 1980s, women were using breaking vocabulary and posing and gesturing less. In fact, every bgirl I interviewed or read about from these two decades testified about their abilities to execute power moves, or they talked about how they worked hard until they mastered the moves.¹⁷⁵ Bgirl Yoda LaneSki began her career in 1983 in Seattle Washington. “I had a lot of power moves from being an elite gymnast. And, most of the guys could not beat me because power [power moves]¹⁷⁶ was the main thing at that time.”¹⁷⁷

In the 1980s, the women did less verbal discouraging/encouraging, and less of the dramatic responsive posing¹⁷⁸ and gesturing than the women-spectators of the 1970s. Burns were becoming more prevalent. Burns were used by all women hip hop dancers; but, depending on the hip hop dance form, they acquired different meanings. The women began doing more gestural phrases and burns, and, all the hip hop movements became more virtuosic.

Gestural language in the 1980s manifested as battle language. Fire Starter notes, “Well, at that time, we would always see guys do it [burns] and it wasn’t something where you go to classes like now, and they show you different versions.” She continues explaining how they dealt with these gestures: “We would get back at them [the boys] the way they got back at us, with our own style you know? ‘Cause our thing was ‘this is the guys, so we gotta show ‘em no fear,’ and that we’re on the same level. If they grab a knife -- we’ll grab a knife too.”¹⁷⁹ This is the Black Matriarch in action, challenging the male role and traditional structures. They are as fierce, or fiercer, than the men, and their power and roles as single mothers, undercut black masculinity.

Hip hop-party dancers responded to phallic burns aimed at them with a wide variety of feminine gestural language -- but they *never* returned bboys’ raw male-reproductive power

¹⁷⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 77.

¹⁷⁵ There is footage and pictures of women from the 1980s executing these movements.

¹⁷⁶ LaneSki. “Laneski,” interview with Jee-Nice, *Anattitude Magazine*, Issue 03, 2008. LaneSki states, “I laugh when I hear all the new schoolers try to claim the early 80s were all about style. In Seattle at least and all my videos from NYC, it was certainly about ‘power moves’ back then.”

¹⁷⁷ Bgirl Yoda LaneSki, email interview with author, December 23, 2009.

¹⁷⁸ Tweetie Bird, email interview with the author, January 12, 2010. Women still used audible/verbal language. “I would stand there and clap to the beat of a song really loud to show the audience they [the bboys] were off beat, and also to help them [the audience and dancer] find the right beat lol. I still do that today. Lol.”

¹⁷⁹ Fire Starter, phone interview with author, January 27, 2010.

gestures. Peaches explains, “There always was a couple of things. If a guy ever put a dick in my face, you know, I’d do the scissors thing and I’d cut his dick off and throw it away. So, I mean, yeah we always had comebacks but... I tried not to use them [phallic gestures].”¹⁸⁰ Obviously this responsive gesture was a harsh and potent gesture-answer to an aggressive sexualized burn -- but the hip hop-party dancers did not use male sexualized phallic burns. “When we popped or rocked, it was gesture weapons: the baseball and the bat, eating gestures, shotgun, hammer, knife, body slam or throwing a punch/kick.”¹⁸¹ The bgirl is a forceful woman who is labeled as “manly” because she takes power from the traditional patriarchal structures and assertive actions.

As Tweetie Bird explains, “I used a gesture like giving people the finger, lol, slappin’ my butt which means ‘they can kiss your ass.’ [A] fist meant that you would punch them in the face. The thumb behind you or your shoulder meant that ‘they were outta here.’” Women also had general battle gestures and/or statements that all forms used. “Back-in-the-day a lot of females use to grab their ‘crotch.’ Lol, we still do that.”¹⁸² Importantly, Tweetie Bird described the women using sexual *feminine* gestural retorts that displayed the female power, like “grabbin’ my chest or shakin’ them [her breasts] towards the other person. I would pat all of my private parts to state ‘yes I gets busy’ but I am very much a female.”¹⁸³ Fire Starter described other gestures within the parameters of feminine responses. “They [the boys] would comb or brush their hair, like they’re slick. And we’ll wave our hair like we’re divas, you know?” tailoring the same gesture to fit them as women with “flavor,” or, “feminine” perspective.

The 1980s was also the period when the word and idea of “movement”¹⁸⁴ becomes the burn. But it was not enough for bgirls to win battles by gestural language. Bgirts had to go toe-to-toe with male counterparts. Kim-A-Kazi states, “As Females We *had* [itals mine] to work harder than the guys. Men had more upper-body strength. But we would never give up! No matter how many injuries, black and blues we had. We kept going until we mastered the moves.”¹⁸⁵ However, “In hip hop party-dancing, it was about who could rep [represent] the

¹⁸⁰ Peaches, phone interview with author, February 11, 2010.

¹⁸¹ SnapShot and WandeePOP, email interview with author, December 2, 2009.

¹⁸² Tweetie Bird, email interview with author, January 12, 2009.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Bgirl Yoda Laneski, email interview with author, December 23, 2009. The movement considered mostly as a burn was power moves or freezes in breaking.

¹⁸⁵ Kim-A-Kazi, email interview with author, December 28, 2009.

dance style/character the best. So when the ‘wop’ was created you had to prove your ‘wop’ was better.”¹⁸⁶

I asked Kim-A-Kazi if she ever felt obligated to use phallic burns in battle. “Yes, in uprock mostly, because those were the kind of disses [dismissals,] you used.”¹⁸⁷ She continues, “As women in the World of MEN breakers we had to use our breasts and booty in an uprock battle. It’s the only things we had to use against them! LOL.”¹⁸⁸ I asked Fire Starter exactly what burns were executed and she stated, “The grabbing part of it. They would do something with arms, you know, like dissing them with their middle parts [penis and balls], you know. It was the guys doing it to other guys.”¹⁸⁹ After this I asked what the women did to counter these gestures. “The guys would do that and we would do it right back to them [men did pelvic thrusts to other men and to women; and women did the pelvic thrust right back to them].”¹⁹⁰ Fire Starter explains “grabbing, pushing, pulling the thighs [while doing the pelvic thrust], grabbing their hats, throwing things.” I asked when these gestures appeared most often and she said, “In uprock. That’s when I would see it.”¹⁹¹

However, many bgirls merged phallic burns with breaking, and by copying the guys, they absorbed the controlling-male panoptic gaze embedded in the anti-feminine movement. “I liked making fag hands¹⁹² to the guys, but that would be politically incorrect today.”¹⁹³ Thus, when bgirls used gestures as battle burns they were extremely male oriented and it seems they were the only women who were using phallic gestures. “The main hand gesture I knew of was ‘the dick.’ That gesture was mainly used by bgirls. *Real* bgirls [itals mine].”¹⁹⁴

The bgirls started to feel compelled to gain respect from the bboys by playing the established male rules. The eighties decade was when the bgirl interviewees, along with other female hip hop dancers, stated they received a lot of respect for mastering and executing the difficult physical movements “like the guys.” On the contrary, Nancy Guevara and Alesha

¹⁸⁶ SnapShot and WandeePOP, email interview with author, December 2, 2009.

¹⁸⁷ Kim-A-Kazi, email interview with author, December 28, 2009.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Fire Starter, phone interview with author, January 27, 2010.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Bgirl Yoda Laneski, email interview with author, December 23, 2009. This gesture is done with the hands in front of the chest with broken wrists. Using this gesture against men suggests that they are gay.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Tweetie Bird, email interview with author, January 12, 2009. Not all bgirls used vulgar burns. The majority of bgirls revealed that they did not use vulgar burns in breaking, only in the battle dance form uprocking.

Dominek Washington quote Baby Love. “We do a more feminine style than the guys, just to show that were not girls trying to look like guys,” and, as Guevara states, “In general, slower and smoother breaking moves are considered feminine and appropriate for bgirls.”¹⁹⁵

While this may be true for Baby Love (and other women), all of the bgirls I interviewed said they executed the movements “just like the guys” in the ciphers and earned respect for it. Femininity in dance existed only in the sense of adding “finesse” or “flavor.” When I asked about an understanding of “flavor,” I was told it meant to execute it like, or much better than, a man -- i.e., accepting without adapting the masculinized power vocabulary of breaking, since other kinds of movements are not readily accepted.¹⁹⁶ They can also mean “smooth” and “slick.”¹⁹⁷ However, by doing it “as the boys would” meant that bgirls had a much more restricted movement palette for their creative processes. Doing it “like the guys” buys into the male perspective, signifying how bgirls were beginning to internalize the male rules (panoptic self-policing). “A b-girl is a female who is courageous, with a definite style, and definitely a winner in moves.”¹⁹⁸ Based on this definition “courageous,” is the bravery to enter all-male ciphers; “have a definite style” and be a “winner” at the moves means “doing it better than the men.”

The most common movements bboys used to measure a bgirl’s skill level were power moves. “Moving like the guys,”¹⁹⁹ became synonymous with what it meant to be a “serious” or “real,” and this skill became a major marker for 1980s’ bgirls.²⁰⁰ On a deeper level, both bboys and bgirls were being judged and shaped by the media’s ideologies of masculinity. The media had taken over the role of the Anxious Patriarch in their efforts to control the flashier qualities of the dancing. This is apparent and vivid in the photographs and rarer filmed footage from this decade.²⁰¹ There is an inexorable progression of breaking movement towards the most flashy,

¹⁹⁵ Nancy Guevara, “Women Writin’ Rappin’ Breakin’” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, edited by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) 49-62.

¹⁹⁶ This is interesting because the main view of hip hop is to “express yourself” through the forms.

¹⁹⁷ In the trailer for Rokafella’s Documentary “All the Ladies Say,” the narrator states “we [meaning women or bgirls] have style; we don’t crash when we dance.” Implying that bboys do not dance smoothly or execute their movement perfectly.

¹⁹⁷ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 15. Quote from Bubbles.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ “Moves like the guys” specifically meant power moves and movements generally unexpected of women.

²⁰⁰ Many bgirls today also aspire to “move like a guy.”

²⁰¹ Kim-A-Kazi and Yoda LaneSki both have footage and numerous photographs of themselves and their crews dancing in the 1980s.

acrobatic and dramatic power moves. It was the stuff of exciting filmic opportunities. Kim-A-Kazi describes some of the power moves that defined the “good” and/or “professional” bgirls.

There were other female crews, but The Dynamic Dolls were the ONLY Professional Female Breakers and the ONLY Females who could do the moves the guys did, e.g. I used to pick Susie Q up with one hand, and then spin her on my head [the propeller]. I then used to pick up both the girls and spin them [the helicopter]. I also could, and did these moves with guys. We all had footwork, top and bottom. We did hand glides, floats, headspins and windmills....²⁰²

Since being able to do these moves was like validation from the men, it affected how women perceived themselves. Bubbles, the first UK bgirl states “After I had mastered my windmills and headspins, males throughout the world of b-boying respected me for my skills alone.”²⁰³ Bgirl Yoda echoes this: “In my younger days, I just did what the guys did. Being able to be a female and do the power moves was almost like reinventing a new move.”²⁰⁴ Headspin Janet, another popular bgirl²⁰⁵ of the 1980s was perceived as a “real bgirl” because she did not “give a fuck.”²⁰⁶ Luis “Bboy Alien Ness” Martinez states, “We used to make jokes about the b-girl freeze, how long it takes a girl to get into a freeze, but Janet was real fluid. She was strong! And she would go into headspins just like Crazy Legs.”²⁰⁷ To be a real bboy or bgirl you must battle with literal rules as well, helping to establish the pure new order. Through the regulation of authenticity and invented traditions, the Anxious Patriarch retains power, and eases his anxiety.

Some women, however, believed that merely copying the guys was a negative habit. “I think women only use it because it [the penis gesture] brings them to the same level as their male counterparts. I believe it just belittles us females.”²⁰⁸ On the other hand, Peaches Rodriguez, an enormously influential dancer, justifies her representations. “I think the reality of this [her] particular style of dance, which is popping and waving... it stems from...African roots, um Latin

²⁰² Kim-A-Kazi, email interview with author, December 28, 2009.

²⁰³ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 15. Quote from Bubbles.

²⁰⁴ Bgirl Yoda Laneski, email interview with author, December 23, 2009.

²⁰⁵ In the book *We B* Girlz*, Alien Ness informs that Headspin Janet came out of the Hot Feet Rockers crew, a subdivision of the Rock Steady Crew.

²⁰⁶ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 16. Quote from Ken Swift.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 12. Quote from Alien Ness.

²⁰⁸ Olopop, email interview with the author, February 3, 2010.

salsa-style roots.²⁰⁹ It is a masculine dance. The contraction of the muscles during it makes it a masculine dance. The style, the attitude, the um posing, the element of it is a masculine dance. And I think to execute this particular style of dance properly a women does have to honor that.’’²¹⁰ Peaches holds deeply-considered views from her thirty years experience about how women should honor hip hop forms as male dances.²¹¹ This also, however, demonstrates how internalized the panoptic male gaze of the female body is in breaking.

I think that goes for bboying too. You don’t try to change something to bend it to your sexuality. You execute it the way it is -- without changing it. I think the best female breakers are the ones who emulate men completely. I think it’s good to keep the style pure. Each individual style is like the difference between doing Tai chi and Muay Tai. You don’t change the form as it is. You don’t try and create a new dance form. You have to respect its structure. I wouldn’t wanna ... feminize breaking. Because there’s something just basically wrong with that. Here’s the problem with women doing it: That if you do it, or you start it with a sexual connotation then you’re gonna get it back. You’re gonna get it back from the guy, and, um, the guy will always have the upper hand.²¹²

In Peaches’ view, honoring the form as it is, respects the form -- and this represents the Bboys’ party line. But honoring and respecting some of the ideas in breaking often means suppression of the female body.

As the role of the bgirl changed over the next twenty years, defining the male as dominant soared to new heights. This became extremely harmful to the bgirls of the New Millennium and subsequently their roles and expressivity was affected. Women were restricted from within and without. Discrimination was becoming ingrained and relative to each woman’s

²⁰⁹ Most forms of movement that have African roots expect one to develop an individual style as a part of technique (unless they are partner dances). This is contrary to Peaches’ comparison of breaking to the fighting forms of Muay Tai and Tai chi, which do not stress the development of the individual self. A form that has African roots can not be compared to forms with such rigid definitions of movement, gender within movement and require a person not to develop a style. See her comparison below.

²¹⁰ Peaches, phone interview with author, February 11, 2010.

²¹¹ Although Peaches’ defines hip hop dance forms as masculine, I believe she means to define them as male dance forms.

²¹² Ibid.

identity in their power-move skill levels (whether beginner, intermediate or advanced) and in their genderized movement choices. Bgirls experienced inequality in personal and career relationships in the 1980s, and these women began to battle with the negative feminine images projected onto them. The initiation of negative self-images began strongly during this era as the bgirls' struggle with identity, measured by their experiences and how well they were accepted by the bboys. Panoptic censorship was manifested in the dancing and in the gestural language of the burns. Although there were more bgirls than ever before they were dealing with damage deeply ingrained in the movement.

CHAPTER 4

1990s AND 2000s

During the 1990s and 2000s hip hop underwent an international relocation and its dancing energy shifted from America to Europe and Asia. The numbers of American bgirls dropped in comparison to European and, most strikingly, Asian women became the bgirl majority. Although the overall number of women worldwide in hip hop exceeded that of previous generations, and the 1990s bgirls were older when they began dancing, women still remained marginalized in the masculine breaking culture.²¹³

As a result of internationalism, the spread of “Foundation,” the rise of competition circuits regionally, nationally and internationally, bgirls established a presence for themselves and began to form loose collectives as they became aware of the power that women had together. They “made space” for themselves in bboy crews and founded more all-female crews.²¹⁴ “When I started No Easy Props in ’97 [an all-female crew] it was all about earning respect for your skills. You don’t want your props [compliments, praise] easy...”²¹⁵ While working hard to master “skills” (physical techniques) and gain respect for their virtuosity, they also polished their female gestures, movements and burns. Women also initially organized some of (what would become) big-time national and international breaking competitions that, ironically, they eventually left because of being marginalized by the men. Disheartened by having judges and promoters take away any choice-making from the “official” battles, bgirls returned to smaller venues to collaborate with other women in crews and initiated smaller jams, spontaneous battles or smaller competitions where their gestures, moves and burns would flourish.

The 1990s are also a period when women copied the bboys’ gestures (movement phrases and hand movements), along with male-reproductive power burns like “cocking” or “throwing the dick.” I analyze the women as complicit in their own repression, oblivious -- or blatantly proud -- of what these gestures signify about them as women (detailed in Chapters 6). This

²¹³ If we count mainstream manifestations of hip hop as hip hop then I believe that the number of women exceeds the number of men in hip hop dance.

²¹⁴ Colleen “Miss Twist” Soto, email interview with the author, December 23, 2009. Miss Twist is another bgirl who formed an all-woman crew in 1998 called Powerfemalia. Other names of all female crews from the 1990s and 2000s include Dirty Mamas, Female Artistics, Ikandee, True Essencia, Rhythm Queens, Venus Fly Trap Crew, Sistaz of the Underground, Collective 7, The Synergy Girls, Extra Credit Kru, Fox Force Five and Shebang.

²¹⁵ Cooper, *We B*Girls*, 33. Asia-One quote.

oblivion to the negativities in the culture of women about women I analyze as the falseconsciousness.²¹⁶ As Daniel Little, a professor at the University of Michigan summarizes, “members of a subordinate class (workers, peasants, surfs)” – which I consider women and bgirls in hip hop -- “suffer from a false consciousness in that their mental representations of the social relations around them systematically conceal or obscure the realities of their subordination [for example Foundation conceals the agenda to erase ban femininity from the form] , exploitation, and domination those relations embody.”²¹⁷ Kathryn Rosenfeld, author of “Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other” explains the cross-gendered problematizing of this adaptation. “Women who feel powerful when they pack a dildo and strut out into the evening, and the women who lust after them, [both] manifest queer girl desire of the phallus.”²¹⁸ The opinions of the bgirls who employ male-reproductive power gestures is that they assume domination with these gestures, and/or, they are merely following the practices of “Foundation.”²¹⁹

As the breaking battles quickly grew in popularity, they were transformed into highly regulated, judged international competitions. “Battle” codification paralleled the entrenchment of hip-hop “Foundation” codification, with its inbred masculinized discrimination. These changes profoundly affected bgirls: On the positive side during the 1990s, women found agency and space for themselves as they organized crews and competitions; on the negative side, bgirls were rigorously policed not to be “girly.” In crews that accepted females, and in classes in Foundation, bboys increased their gender patrolling of the women’s movement. Many bboys treated bgirls as inferiors, refused to teach them certain movements, and did not accept the fact that women’s bodies function differently. In the late 1990s and 2000s, things were becoming decidedly more difficult for bgirls, although things were in many respects becoming easier for the women practicing other forms of hip hop dance (locking, popping, hip hop party-dancing).

The worldwide epidemic spread of a misogynistic hip hop was pushed forward by an aggressive American multibillion dollar celebrity-publicity machine combined with the music and fashion industry. Profit margins increased significantly if a company only had to promote rap/rapper and cultivate a glamorized image of the macho rapper. In this separatism, the rapper

²¹⁶ Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*.

²¹⁷ <http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/iess%20false%20consciousness%20V2.htm>.

²¹⁸ Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other” (master’s thesis, Roosevelt University, 2002), 201-219.

²¹⁹ This will be covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

and his rap were effectively divorced from the cultural context of poetry, graphic art, hip hop dance, improvisatory challenges and vibrant street life that gave them “juice” [power].

Rampant commercialization of hip hop began about 1985 and edged out the dancers. By the 1990s the gangsta rapper reigned supreme; this was the era of the East Coast/West Coast hip-hop rap wars and the murders of rappers Tupac Amari Shakur and Christopher “Biggie Smalls” Wallace.²²⁰ Other performative hip-hop artists got shuffled underground, which (thankfully) kept the culture alive. The better-known bboys and graffiti artists (“writers”) went to Europe and Asia to perform and teach on regular circuits.²²¹ European and Asian youth were mesmerized by the power, glamour, edginess and rebellion of the entire hip hop culture. In their eyes, the culture and the practitioners represented the exotic/erotic “other” who lived hard, danced hard, and made hard art spontaneously. It was liberating and in-your-face. It was the perfect form of youthful revolt. Foreign bboys and bgirls flooded into New York City to get close to the source and soak up the vibe. One hip-hop cliché claimed they got off the plane at JFK International Airport in New York City and asked how to take the subway to the South Bronx. “Yeah, good luck!”²²² was the response. The international hip-hop dance-craze served to link youth together in a worldwide yet stylistically recognizable form. By the beginning of the 1990s hip hop culture was firmly established in Europe, Asia and South America, Russian, German, French, Korean, Japanese and Brazilian youth wanted to look, dance, talk and walk like their inner-city, Black and Latino NYC ghetto counterparts, feeling more connected to each other than to their home cultures. Hip hop was so popular in France by the early 1990s that “*c’est le Bronx*” meant to play your radio loud and dress like a “bro.”²²³

In the 1980s, hard-core bgirls stateside had been mostly of Latina/Hispanic/Puerto Rican descent with a few Whites, almost no black women, and most lived in and around New York City²²⁴ or on the West Coast. Hip hop spread nationally in America, first as a musical craze then as a dance fad, attracting youth, sponsoring competitions and always disturbing the established

²²⁰ These murders were important to all areas of hip hop because the focus shifted and changed everyone’s perspective, even dance.

²²¹ The bboys’ exportation first began around 1983 with Rock Steady Crew then continued during the mid-1980s and through the 1990s with other well-known bboys such as Ejoye Wilson, Brian Green and Terry Wright.

²²² *From Mambo to Hip Hop*

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ With the exception of Bubbles (United Kingdom) and Olopop (Hawaii). In addition, there were women from other countries that I was not able to contact for various reasons but not at the magnitude of women from other countries in the 1990s.

norm with its rebellious attitudes (the perfect format for teenage success). Yet hip hop's adoption abroad was stronger and quicker. Overseas, the numbers of bgirls were growing, particularly in Japan and Korea.²²⁵ In New York, however, by the early 2000s, Ana "bgirl Rokafella" Garcia made a prophetic observation that the numbers of practicing bgirls were actually diminishing at the turn of the century. "At this time there was only one other girl training with me, "Honey Rockwell." I met a girl from Italy -- "Marcella"-- and later heard of another girl from California, "Asia One," and another from Chicago, "Lady Champ." But that was *it*. One girl from Germany... and "Bentu" from France, and "Beta" from Miami...but we were all just a handful of women hitting the floor."²²⁶ Karima (considered the first French bgirl from the 1980s) with Actual Force in Paris, and Kayra²²⁷ from the Rock Steady Crew Japan Chapter, were mentioned by Ereina "Honey Rockwell" Valencia, a well-known bgirl from the 1990s. "They were out there, especially in Europe, and these girls had power."²²⁸

Because the 1990s women were breaking in their late teens and early twenties, they were old enough to consciously consider decisions about "masculinity" and "femininity," and age made them perceive things a bit differently. Now, the women's emulation of the men and how they were learning from bboys (less the actual techniques than the performative modes) became more problematic. To learn "properly," women had to experience the panoptic oppression of the homogenized male language.

The all-powerful sites where discrimination got formalized were in the popular international competitions (they immediately went to YouTube in the 2000s) that became the center of breaking culture. We B* Girlz battle was started by Martha Cooper and Nika Kramer in their efforts to acknowledge and preserve the history of women in hip hop,²²⁹ "Bboy Summit" was created by bgirl, Asia "Asia-One" Yu, who was one of the first bgirls to become highly

²²⁵ In Europe many of the women came from the immigrant populations of the Turkish, Eastern Europe and North Africa; but even more Japanese and Korean women were attracted to breaking. It offered them license to be publicly assertive, physically strong and self expressive.

²²⁶ Ana "Rokafella" Garcia, interview by Sara Rosen, *The Boogie Down Bronx Presents... LA ROKA*, wordpress.com weblog, October 1, 2009.

²²⁷ I was not able to find the family names of Karima or Kyra.

²²⁸ Ereina "Honey Rockwell" Valencia, email interview with the author, January 25, 2010. This shift has an interesting connection to mainstream hip hop's portrayal of women. In the late 1980s and 1990s images of pimps and hos flooded the media. These images of hos were mostly of black women and this had a gigantic affect between black women's association with hip hop culture.

²²⁹ <http://b-girlz-berlin.com>. There are a host of others whose urls and links can not be found.

visible in the 1990s internationally.²³⁰ “Battle of the Year,” the first international organized battle in Germany in 1990 lists its scoring on the website. The scoring includes: stage presence, theme and music, synchronicity, and choreography. Everything is informed by the aesthetics of sports and media and judged quantitatively by a point system.²³¹ In the American as well as the international battles, “Judges will tell you, ‘I wanna see footwork, I wanna see this I wanna see that....’ Once you do that, you’re dictating how a person should dance . . . I’m gonna judge a battle, not a dance contest!”²³² The overall choice of who battles who and/or with what moves is handed over to promoters instead of being dictated by the dancers.²³³ Freestyle Session (1995), began in California by “Cross One” a bboy/promoter), Bboy Summit (1995), and IBE aka International Breaking Extravaganza (1998) were famous battling venues that breakers all over the world aspired to attend. Because of the publicity, hype and prestige these organized battles eventually became the only place breakers *would* battle. This radically changed the tradition and art of battling by standardizing the movement, and altered the prime aesthetics of the form -- eliminating the element of “surprise,” the spontaneity (thinking fast and dancing faster) that attracted devotees in the first place.

By the 2000s, breaking battles were sporting events supporting essentialism, separatism and women’s inferiority to men. Currently, the rules and regulations that monitor mainstream sports culture influence the dancing and the structure of battles, compromising the democracy of the form.²³⁴ Through the categorization of movement into sport-like competition, dancers lose the choice of which movements to execute and what movement is considered “good” or “bad.” For example, Emiko “bgirl Emiko” Sugiyama reveals the following about battling decisions. “. . . If they [judges] say ‘Oh, we are looking for power move,’” then of course I have to do power move to win the battle.”²³⁵ Lauren “bgirl Ellz” Rodeheaver states, “When you’re in a sport like

²³⁰ Asia One would go on to judge Battle of the Year 2004 and many others.

²³¹ www.battleoftheyear.com, 1990.

²³² Cooper, *We B*Girls*, 85. Quote from Alien Ness.

²³³ Jorge “Laces” Gallo, “Tribal Floor Wars II,”

http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=524760855&v=app_2344061033#!/event.php?eid=113273255407513&index=1 (accessed December 21, 2010). For example, on C.I.P.H.E.R.’s (Florida State University’s hip hop organization) Tribal Floor Wars II (hip hop jam scheduled January 15, 2010 by C.I.P.H.E.R.) facebook page, the rules of the battle are listed. It reads, “**** ONLY ONE ROUTINE OR COMMANDO PER BATTLE**** (* OR* means, if you do a routine, you can’t do a commando and vice versa! Basically pick one of the two to do and that’s it)” as of December 21, 2010. This is interesting because something that was created by women is actively being excluded from competitions.

²³⁴ Today, bboys and bgirls battle most often in set-up competitions as opposed to spontaneously in the cipher.

²³⁵ Schloss, *Foundation*, 123. My brackets.

breaking, there's so many different things. There are some things that guys do, and some things that girls do."²³⁶ Furthermore, battles have become separated in terms of sex. Early Rock Steady Crew bboy Ken Swift states: "You shouldn't separate or segregate boy or girl... because I see that now [2000s] where it's like bgirl events. We never said 'boy events and girls are not invited'... I don't know what the underlying theme is, but that's not the way to do it. We need to be together, everybody."²³⁷

In addition to organized battles, exhibition battles became popular. These battles are non-judged one-time showcases of two semi-famous crews "battling" (a complete misuse of the word) in order to "give a good show." "Europe vs. USA" in 1997 and "Ultimate Session" in 1998 are the first two recorded exhibition battles.²³⁸ Unfortunately, these battles exert the same determining power over breaking that the media commanded in the 1980s, and almost singlehandedly, they govern what is good breaking and what is not. In 1990 in Berlin, Germany, "Battle of the Year" was the very first, and now the oldest, organized battle. Originally, this event consisted only of shows and performances. However as the "battle" popularity grew, it began featuring shows, thus creating a physical and ideological separation of battling from the dancing. Battling was taken out of its original context and became a showcase, a spectacle that garnered international media attention. Showcase-battles were like dance competitions and talent shows. Exhibition-battles also became popular, exhibiting only the well-known crews "battling" but, an exhibition-battle is actually collaboration between two crews since no one "wins." This is slightly different than the set-up battles where the crews may collaborate as well, but in this case, the collaboration is created in order to increase one crew's chances of winning. These groups and types of battles have affected the breaking world's idea of performance on many levels. Breakers usually explain that a battle is not a performance. The media have always loved the flash of what they see as "power moves" (not always the most difficult moves), and because they are now controlling what is "good" and "not good," power moves became the focus of the form. In fact, now there are "power move" battles, which consist only of this category of power moves (considered something manly).

²³⁶ Ellz, phone interview with the author, March 2, 2009.

²³⁷ Ken Swift on Bgirls youtube clip and Mr. Wiggles' website. Ken Swift is a third generation bboy who pioneered moves such as the air baby and the elbow slide. It is clear that Ken Swift is not aware of the rampant discrimination of women in hip hop which has led them to create their own spaces.

²³⁸ There may have been other exhibition battles but because these were recorded they become the only documentation of exhibition battles. Exhibition battles became more popular after the 1990s.

Although breaking was/is the main dance form featured in these large organized battles, locking and popping battles were also allowed to be a part of it. Unfortunately, these battles alienated hip-hop party dancers and the real freestylers, who got stuck between existing in the underground or being co-opted by the media. Effectively, through competition segregation, regulations, and the increasing emphasis on power-moves, bgirls became a tiny and intimidated minority, afraid to enter the cipher. By the mid-2000s, they were completely alienated from the competitions and many stopped coming to them all together.

From the beginning, bgirls (as opposed to women who specialized in the other hip hop styles) had to overcome prejudice from the bboys. It was permissible to stand and encourage, it was another thing to enter the circle. Auristela “Lady Champ” Nunez recalled, “I always wanted to break. My cousins use to break in the early ‘80s and wouldn’t teach me ‘cause I was a girl.”²³⁹ I also asked Honey Rockwell about the prevalence of women breaking in the 1990s and she states, “There were other women in other crews. For every crew that was even out [there], they tried to represent with at least one girl.”²⁴⁰ The Rock Steady Crew grew from having one female dancer, Daisy “Baby Love” Castro in the 1980s, to having three more women in the 1990s: Masami²⁴¹ from Japan, Honey Rockwell from the Bronx and Asia-One.²⁴² More women were being let into bboy crews (probably through a sense that it would be prudent and good for the bboy crew’s image) with at least one girl, yet the numbers of women were purposely kept low in crews. For example, Bgirl Asia-One states, “It was frustrating being the ‘token’ girl in the crew.” For some bgirls this also meant that they were competing with each other, or with bgirls from other crews since the “token” girl was a person on whom the crews could capitalize. Asia-One explains that she was not able to perform because of her skill level and position in the crew. She stated, “For instance, in RSC, since Honey had more seniority than me and was better than me (initially), she got the gig since “Legs”²⁴³ usually only used *one* [itals mine] girl per show.”²⁴⁴ Despite the reality that there were three women in Rock Steady Crew, only one of them was allowed to perform. In making this selection, the men were intentionally sending out the idea that only a few women should be allowed in breaking crews. There were many more women

²³⁹ Lady Champ, email interview with the author, January 7, 2010.

²⁴⁰ Honey Rockwell, email interview with the author, January 25, 2010.

²⁴¹ Was not able to find her family name.

²⁴² Asia-One, email interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

²⁴³ Crazy Legs, one of the most famous bboys and president of the Rock Steady Crew.

²⁴⁴ Asia-One, email interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

participating openly in breaking than before. However, there were still issues with being the only woman. Lady Champ explains “I did have issues. I grew up with my crew [and] I couldn’t relate to them a lot, and I always wondered why. I was in an all-guy crew ‘Chicago Champions Crew’; I was the only girl.... There was no girls in Chicago at the time [when] I was breakin’. It felt like I was solo. I felt weird, alone, and like the black sheep. It was very lonely time for me because I couldn’t relate to them, and them to me, on certain things. As I got older I realized it’s cause I’m a Lady!”²⁴⁵ Bboys who teach women are often unaccepting of the fact that women’s bodies function differently. Lady Champ also noted “It was awkward to break when I was on my period, or didn’t wanna break when I was crampin’. They didn’t understand. I [also] would break a little different 'cause I had feminine fat, lol.”²⁴⁶

However, where women were successful and dominated as hip hop dancers, was in the enormously popular TV shows such as *In Living Color* as the Fly Girls. In music videos women were almost always bopping in the background and provided a pretty, saucy addition. This inequality in job opportunities must have rankled the male dancers in hip-hop. They began to proclaim, “if you don’t have bboys in your video then you’re not doing hip hop.”²⁴⁷ The contextual causes of this female-prevalence is the result of how hip hop was regionalizing in the United States.

Since the mid-1980s the steady rise of Jamaican “dance hall” music, and southern bass out of Miami and Atlanta (“bass” features the lowest booming bass beats of hip-hop music), accompanied by the buttock and pelvic-centric party-dance styles had been seeping into the national forms, adding different and sexualized flavors to hip hop-party dance, and to some of the moves in breaking. When Miami Bass came to the forefront in the late 1980s and early 1990s, both women and men were using this movement. Originally, however, these butt-centric dances did *not* mark women as sexually available in the south. But this would change. Music video producers/rappers saw it as an economic opportunity and way to increase and control the sexualized reception of the macho rapper. By the end of the 1990s, southern styles had infiltrated the music and lyrics and either influenced or were involved in the creation of “30 to 40

²⁴⁵ Lady Champ, email interview with the author, January 7, 2010.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ *The Freshest Kids*. This is also true of the word bboying. Pioneers will say to “keep it real” or “true” you must call the dance form bboying. This means that any other manifestation may be considered “fake” or “mainstream.” This is also an attempt to discredit the women in the videos.

percent” of the “singles” (records or DVDs) at the top of the hip-hop charts.²⁴⁸ But the biggest boost came from Miami’s Uncle Luke (Luther Campbell) and the 2 Live Crew, “possibly the first Miami bass record to feature on its cover the backside of a scantily clad black woman—a connection between bottom-heavy ladies and bottom heavy music that would be drawn forever.”²⁴⁹ Hip hop music producers and rappers leapt on what 2 Live Crew began and in music videos, such as those of Uncle Luke and many, many others, the clichéd trope was that women slithered around in supportive roles (like living sexualized bling-bling), dripping off the arms and necks of somewhat indifferent men. Women were portrayed as sexually ravenous animals who clung to the rappers’ bodies or they bounced about in the background. They were scantily clad (often bikini-clad) “arm candy” doing a lot of sexually explicit butt- and pelvic-swiveling, with “shaking it” as the central feminine dance motif.²⁵⁰

Such problematic representations of women overshadowed women’s significance in hip hop culture, and clearly, it had a damaging influence on female dancers. As hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris states, “For whatever reason, the males take the spotlight in hip-hop. Although there are a lot of women who do hip-hop, and who are *amazing*, the media push or highlight women for their sexuality. They don’t emphasize women to show their skill and ability.”²⁵¹ The 1980’s dancers Snap Shot and WandeePOP described how the 1990s affected their identities. “It was not until the 1990s when it was all about shaking the booty and showing lots of skin that we realized our style was considered hard, and not feminine. Their version of what they call hip hop was jazz fusion to a hip hop beat and the exploitation of women.”²⁵² Bgirls now (suffered) felt the challenge the female body’s “preexisting meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze,” which ultimately “can prevail... despite the intentions of the woman herself.”²⁵³

Although women were entering the ciphers, there were multiple layers of “approvals” to move through. During the 1990s, bgirls were still hidden from the forefront of the culture.

²⁴⁸ Sarig, *Third Coast*, xiv.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20. Now this movement is considered a part of strip culture.

²⁵⁰ Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2 Live Crew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2_Live_Crew). 2 Live Crew 1989 album, *As Nasty as they Wanna Be*, featured sexually explicit lyrics, with song titles like “We Want some Pussy” and “Throw that Dick.”

²⁵¹ Rennie Harris, “Rennie Harris” in *Further Steps 2: Fourteen Choreographers on What’s the RAGE in Dance?* Edited by Constance Kreemer (New York: Routledge, 2008) 79-94.

²⁵² SnapShot and WandeePOP, email interview with the author, December 2, 2009.

²⁵³ Janet Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics” in *Meaning and Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, edited by Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 81-99.

Hence, the spectators encouraged and the bboys -- who were numerous and obvious -- discouraged the few bgirls -- whether good or bad. Certainly moving into the cipher was about proving oneself. “Most times people underestimated what I could do so getting in the circle was a trial by fire.”²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, sometimes being good was not enough. “As I got better, some heads would purposely say I was ‘whack’ or not as good as the other girls who were doin’ other moves.”²⁵⁵ Certainly it is true that without substantial prior experience in breaking, the energy of a cipher can destroy a dancer’s ability to grow, and women are especially affected by this. Rokafella explains how her confidence in the cipher changed when she reached a certain skill level. “I think I peaked in 1998 when I had a lot of moves I always wanted, like windmills, tracks and lots of footwork and freezes. But in 2004 [when] I was asked to go judge international competitions, I felt I had reached a good place with my skills because I was able to dance with real good breakers, and not feel like I was under-the-standard.”²⁵⁶ This is the main reason Asia-One created her all-bgirl crew No Easy Props in 1997.

On the other hand, bgirls, could also receive “props”²⁵⁷ just for being girls, for being out there in the cipher. Baby Love believes this. “I think every girl group that’s out there is good, because they’ve got the nerve to do it.”²⁵⁸ However, this can also be disadvantageous and condescending. As Asia-One explains, “Throughout the years [No Easy Props] has evolved more into a movement, and the motto, for what most of us [women] in hip hop stand for, which is hard work and dedication to our skills, taking no shortcuts [shortcut] and earning respect the real way.”²⁵⁹ Condescension is the perception that No Easy Props aims to eradicate. However, it is extremely hard on bgirls because women receive so much negativity within ciphers. Rokafella states, “To my dismay, no matter how I excelled at my club steps, some guy would always have to grab me or humiliate me in the circle—as if to say ‘But you can’t beat this!’” Rokafella explains that bboys would do this to other girls as well. She continues, “I would observe how the other girls would not want to get into the circle. I also noticed this was *not* [italics mine] how they handled one another—man to man. Among the guys, it was either straight respect, or straight

²⁵⁴ Rokafella, email interview with the author, October 18, 2009.

²⁵⁵ Cooper, *We B*Girls*, 10.

²⁵⁶ Rokafella, interview with the author, October 18, 2009. It is important to note that the community has a huge influence on determining whether a dancer is good or not. In hip hop, men ultimately set the standard for women’s level of respect.

²⁵⁷ Props means respect, congratulations or recognition for doing something impressive.

²⁵⁸ Guevara, “Women Writin’ Rappin’ Breakin’,” 58.

²⁵⁹ Asia-One, email interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

battle skills.”²⁶⁰ Moreover, many bgirls’ self-surveillance to submit wholeheartedly to the bboy masculine codes, conclude that discrimination does *not* exist or they downplay the prevalence of sexism in hip hop suffer from the false consciousness. I asked Honey Rockwell if she had issues being a woman she stated: “Yes, of course. But I don’t think it was a gender thing as much as it was just having experience in your business, and your level of skills.”²⁶¹ Asia-One reiterates this belief. “Hip hop is about skills, not about gender.”²⁶²

Women began to monitor themselves to dance hard like men, both in the burns and in the impossibly difficult skills. There were some extraordinarily punishing moves in breaking that took extraordinary upper-body strength, like the “hollow/holla back,” where the body is in an inverted handstand with the hands as the balancing point and the head moves towards the front of the body past the arms and the legs reach towards the back of the body.

In striving to fit the bboy mold many bgirls connect their struggles with discrimination with their skill levels (technical level). Bgirls began to believe that if you are “whack then you are whack” -- and it has nothing to do with sex. For example when Asia-One explained that she did not dance alongside other women in Rock Steady, highlighting that the reasons for not being able to dance with RSC as being issues of experience and affiliation with the crew. However, she stated a very clear fact about discrimination in hip hop: She knew that Crazy Legs only used one girl per show. However she downplays this fact by explaining, “But I’m not gonna front [lie]. That made me work harder to get better to earn more gigs. Scarce resources make you put up or shut up. Ain’t no use in complaining. We got to get up, get into it, and get involved!”²⁶³

On the one hand, this is a great way to overcome discrimination. On the other hand, discrimination is being swept under the rug by implying that if one is “blaming gender,” it is not really the point, since it is actually only the result of not “having skill.” Discrimination was not only inbred, it was used to regulate ideas about breaking in teaching a singular (masculine) way of doing things. This is only one example of the way that all-male crews used women to their advantage. Bgirls have to work unfairly twice as hard, yet they still have to master certain movements in order to gain respect as a bgirl, while many bboys are not held to the same standards in the breaking community. By blaming themselves, bgirls are perpetuating the idea

²⁶⁰ Cooper, *We B*Girls*, 10. Rokafella quote.

²⁶¹ Honey Rockwell, email interview with the author, January 25, 2010.

²⁶² Asia-One, email interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

²⁶³ Asia-One, email interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

that gender discrimination simply “goes away” once one has the skills. Using this kind of rationale is a way to perpetuate women’s discrimination against other women, setting the established bgirl against other bgirls, especially beginners. Rokafella addresses this discrepancy and how approval is also framed in sexual terms. “Then, when I got the skills to show off in a circle, I was [still] approached by many guys who were flirting with me, and I had to figure out who was good, or bad, for me. When I finally got a dance partner boyfriend, it was easier. But the guys would just get slicker with how they flirted.”²⁶⁴

Because of up rocking’s entrance into breaking through organized events (uprocks are hip-hop battle-dancing based on the gang behavior and initiations; different from top rocking which is danced before going to the floor in breaking) many of the male-centric phallic gestures, began to enter the form. In the 1990s’ bgirls started using this uprocking language frequently²⁶⁵ while breaking -- but they also expanded on the concepts of creative gestural-burns from earlier decades. They might, for example, build a short narrative -- on the beat. “I was more into storytelling type shit. So I would rock (uprocks) on my opponent: I would stab ‘em, shoot ‘em, sweep up dust and blow it in the air, kiss ‘em goodbye!”²⁶⁶ Instead of just stabbing someone, the usual cliché, a bgirl might stab them then begin shoveling at the ground, suggesting burying her opponent.²⁶⁷

The 1990s was a particularly rich period where female expressivity and “feminine” gestural language was played with as well as male language (gestures are like everyday body language). Sadly by the 2000s, female gestural language has become a very limited category. However, there are bgirls who use them. Adrienne “Vendetta” Lee explains how she flavors her gestures with femininity. “I like to take it a little bit further and make it more magical so people can know what I’m doing.”²⁶⁸ Making it more magical might include doing a gesture entirely to the beat of a song. SnapShot and WandeePOP said “We used the lipstick, the mirror, sexy walk, putting on perfume, fixing the hair, and sexy props in the 1990s.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁴ Rokafella, email interview with the author, October 18, 2009.

²⁶⁵ This is not to say that guns, aggression etc are masculine or male. These ideas become male because of the context. Because hip hop was and is male dominated, a perspective of phallic imagery and dominance through the idea of penetration reigns supreme in the intent of gestural language. Therefore by this I define it as male centered.

²⁶⁶ Asia-One, email interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Vendetta, phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

²⁶⁹ SnapShot and WandeePOP, email interview with the author, December 2, 2009.

Gestural language is telling of the individual and their expression. Bgirls of all generations have grappled with movement and gestural language, trying to balance the idea of femininity and masculinity as it pertains to their expression as women. “I dressed different; I always added a feminine twist to my gear. I wore lipstick, earrings.”²⁷⁰

To remedy this problem, they define “moves” (which are usually gestures) as burns (when the gestures purposely demean and belittle the opponent). Bgirls believe that one should “let the movements speak for themselves.” Bgirls of the 1990’s generation expand the idea of moves as burns. Honey Rockwell states, “When I battled, I basically was more about the moves than the gestures [here she means gestures as burns].” Honey Rockwell was not the only bgirl who believed in using moves as burns. I asked Colleen “Miss Twist” Soto what burns she used and she explained, “Not many. Mostly [I] tried to burn with moves.”²⁷¹ Bgirls who burn with moves use simple gesturing as a kind of strong/hard punctuation at the finish of a sentence/movement phrase. “I dance with my hands. And just put hands out, like ‘Take that!’ or ‘Bring it!’”²⁷² However, moves are specific breaking vocabulary that becomes a burn because of its dynamism and/or potency, virtuosity rather than the witty undercutting of the contestant.

A large amount of bgirls’ gestural language comes from mimicking the gestural language of bboys that I have classified into two main categories: cross-gendered gestures and male-reproductive power gestures. Cross-gendered gestures are the iconic posed actions and mannerisms associated with men -- with dominant reference to black masculinity and being specific to hip hop culture. Most of these gestures for bgirls cast back to an embodiment of traditional gender stereotypes of male/masculine equals strength; and, female/feminine equals weakness. This traditionalism is what many of today’s bgirls strive to embody. For example, pointing directly at an opponent with two fingers, and posturing and posing with arms crossed, shoulders in a symmetrical position, with wide-legged open stances, are considered masculine. Vendetta explains, “I like to do things that people normally wouldn’t do, you know? ‘Cause you have those typical gestures that people naturally do, like shooting a gun. But if I do shoot a gun, I’ll do something like shoot myself in the knee and, you know, like break down, and do

²⁷⁰ Lady Champ, email interview with the author, January 7, 2010.

²⁷¹ Miss Twist, email interview with the author, December 23, 2009.

²⁷² Rokafella, email interview with the author, October 18, 2009.

something and reload.”²⁷³ “Candy”²⁷⁴ Bloise says, “I like brushing my shoulders off, kicking dust at people, shooting people.”²⁷⁵

Male reproductive-power gestures reference claiming power through the male-reproductive anatomy (the penis and the balls) and is theorized by Katherine Rosenfeld, author of “Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other” as phallic desire. By the 2000s, the emphasis on masculinity and power had become so prevalent that of all the homogenized language, male-reproductive burns became the most popular. For example, burns that reference traditional feminine gestures such as blowing kisses and batting the eyelashes becomes a specific statement when used by men -- “I’m so good I can be feminine (act submissively) and still beat you.” These gestures clearly communicate misogyny (discussed further in Ch.6). I asked 1990’s bgirls what they thought of these gestures and most said that they see bgirls doing them more today than in the past. Honey Rockwell said “I see it being done all the time. Even now (2010), people still do it.”²⁷⁶ Moreover, the most infamous burn, in a category by itself was made notorious by 2 Live Crew’s song, “Throwing the D,” or “cocking.”²⁷⁷ Throwing the cock is a gesture that uses the penis or its excretions (pee or ejaculation) in a sexually-dominating manner.

One example is crotch-grabbing,²⁷⁸ a well-worn staple in hip-hop culture from the crotch-clutching, microphone-manipulating emcee to the penis-extending bboy. The gesture, of course, also alludes to the little boy-child who, when he discovers his penis’ vulnerability, is constantly holding it, cupping it, protecting it and fondling it. It is also decidedly rude behavior by a man. Some examples of crotch-grabbing prove to be male statements of superiority. For example, men grab the crotch during a number of movements especially power moves. While executing a variation of a windmill (continuous backspin) called “nut crackers,” bboys hold their crotch the entire time. Complicating this is the fact that bboys do the crotch-grab during power moves, something unexpected of women to perform, the gesture makes the movement decidedly anti-

²⁷³ Vendetta, phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

²⁷⁴ Her real name is also her dance name.

²⁷⁵ Candy, phone interview with the author, September 29, 2009.

²⁷⁶ Honey Rockwell, email interview with the author, January 25, 2010.

²⁷⁷ Cocking is another term for raping someone (metaphorically through movement).

²⁷⁸ Crotch grabbing raised considerable discontent with bgirls being defined as a “masculine” gesture. Many explained crotch grabbing as a neutral gesture because “guys and girls both have crotches.” However, part of the power of gesturing lies in its nuance and the perception of others. Therefore because of its larger association and meaning as a male oriented gesture in hip hop culture, I categorize it as a masculine gesture.

woman. Grabbing the crotch is like stating “I have the penis/ balls so I have the power,” which is today used by a number of bgirls.

Going into the 2000s, cocking has expanded in usage, meaning and graphically-mimed depictions. The most basic structure for throwing the dick includes a hip-thrusting motion, which can be executed once or repeatedly. Some of these movements include grabbing the crotch combined with a thrust, or, holding out the arms parallel with the ground and thrusting repeatedly. A common gesture phrase accompanying this is to mime an extended penis, symbolizing power over the opponent. When executed, it becomes synonymous with sexual harassment/rape (like forcing someone to suck a penis). In this gesture, the penis is mimetically held at the base with one hand, with the other hand at the tip of the penis (bigger is better), while the hips are thrust forward as if to say “Take this!” Going further, the gesture is sometimes accompanied by masturbatory or ejaculatory actions (semen being the ultimate dominating finish), indicating power gained during, or after, the dancer executes this movement. For example, in a battle a bboy, after thrusting repeatedly, would send his body into a full-body tremor, depicting the end of ejaculation or dominance. When used against the opponent, it is literally mimed. This opponent can be taken by “surprise” or the opponent may be totally oblivious about what is being mimed. For example, a bboy and a bgirl are battling. As the bgirl finishes her sequence with a freeze on the floor the bboy mimetically shoves the dick into her mouth. An example of unawareness would be if a bboy were to slide on his head with his back facing her, and she might “cock” (rape) him from behind without the opponent’s knowledge. This material is raw, but it is the vocabulary of battle. What mediates its fundamental repugnance is that is executed quickly and always on the beat, in rhythm with the music. If the gestures fall off the beats of the music, the gestural phrase is considered a bust and the dancer is dismissed, and is transformed into a gross loser.

I asked bgirl Rokafella what male-oriented gestures she saw women using in the 1990s. She answered “I do [see women use male gestures]. But it usually is using an imaginary penis...’throwing the dick.’” How many bgirls of the 1990s have thrown the dick? Rokafella responded, “I never threw a dick cuz I use my breasts or my ass if I want to get vulgar with it.”²⁷⁹ Miss Twist explains “I have done it as a joke, because I think it is funny...never serious.... I

²⁷⁹ Rokafella, email interview with the author, October 18, 2009.

have seen women do it. And to each their own. But it's not for me."²⁸⁰ Asia-One explains, "I remember back in freestyle session 2001 or 2002 when No Easy Props battled I was throwing d's to the Philly crew we were battling. It was kinda cool, back then, a powerful statement coming from a woman like, 'I can do that shit too, don't matter!' I still see girls doing it today. It's kinda played out though."²⁸¹

Oldschool bgirls today and the mature bgirls of the New Millennium, are beginning to reconsider the adaption of cocking. As Janet Wolff writes about dealing with the female body in western society, "It is through the body, too, that women in our culture learn their own particular form of self-surveillance."²⁸² For the bgirl, this means re-considering her representations of femininity in the high-testosterone world of breaking. She needs to reclaim herself, with new representations. Bgirls are thinking of themselves as women and are becoming conscious of the gender and identity expressivity. The discursive practices that produce female-ness in hip hop need to be reformulated.

Bgirl Rokafella confesses in thinking about her use of male reproductive burns, "At first I used to grab my pants in the crotch area cuz I knew sexual reference was how to humiliate or intimidate... but as I said before, it was in the beginning that I was following the guys lead.... It then changed when I began to see that sex could not possibly express my power over the opponent when dance skills was in question." She is among a handful of very influential bgirl practitioners whose ideas can, and will, affect how women may choose to represent themselves and the field. "I felt like I wanted to prove that I was capable of physically maneuvering my body around without fear. I wanted to show that I could be aggressive also, and [I could] execute physically hard moves, too. But as I a matured, I realize my blending of grace and aggression is what makes my expression so unique."²⁸³ Contemporary bgirls struggle with the idea of femininity and masculinity. Another bgirl named Tammy "Kadence" Tso explained "I actually am not the one who does a lot of burns. I think part of it is where I'm at right now. And the other part is figuring out how I feel about a lot of them." Kadence explains that a burn has to be her way of showing something about herself. To her, "It's all about finding creative ways to do

²⁸⁰ Miss Twist, email interview with the author, December 23, 2009. In this quote Miss Twist explains that she uses it as a joke but also states that the gesture is not for her, maybe stating that when used as a joke it is ok but when used seriously it is not for her.

²⁸¹ Asia-One, email interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

²⁸² Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality," 87.

²⁸³ Rokafella, email interview with the author, October 18, 2009.

that.²⁸⁴ They are attempting to find ways to blur the edges of the female/male binary, to find a new identity that will fit ideologies and new hip hop iterations of the 21st Century.

²⁸⁴ Kadence, phone interview with the author, September 5, 2009.

CHAPTER 5

2000s

OPPRESSION THROUGH PANOPTICISM AND THE ABJECT BODY: BATTLING AS SELF-DISCOVERY

A statement written in 1988 by feminist Sandra Bartky identifies one of the major issues for New Millennium bgirls: “In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women.”²⁸⁵ The “panoptical male connoisseur,” Bartky argues, exists to keep femininity in order and to monitor and control women. Certainly the panoptical male in bgirls’ consciousness exists to completely restrain femininity and the female body from reproducing images of femaleness.

As Little explains, “Marx asserts that social mechanisms emerge in class society that systematically create distortions, errors and blindspots in the consciousness of the underclass. If these consciousness shaping mechanisms did not exist, then the underclass, always the majority would quickly overthrow the system of their domination.”²⁸⁶ Men (The Anxious Patriarch) are threatened by commercial hip hop’s femininity, the power it holds in defining hip hop and how many women have entered the realm of hip hop over the last 20 years -- commercial or not. As mentioned before, if we include all manifestations of hip hop as valid, women at the very least equal the number of men in hip hop -- which makes the men anxious. Bgirms , the underclass here, are under the influence of Foundation, the social mechanism put in place to dominate and control women and femininity in hip hop.

One of the principle methods of control is the teaching of “Foundation” (the codified early technique of breaking). It began in the 1990s, then picked up intensity in the 2000s, so that by 2005 panoptic oppression was more pervasive than ever before. Thoroughly inculcated into bgirl practices, to step outside the rules is considered disrespectful to hip hop history. The panoptic invasion of the bgirls’ psyche is instilled in three ways: 1) Men are teaching women to dance, so 2) male ideas are embedded in the aesthetics, assuring that the panoptic guardian of masculinity is internally in place, and 3) these ideas are reiterated on to others through ubiquitous

²⁸⁵ Bartky, “Foucault and Femininity.”

²⁸⁶ <http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/iess%20false%20consciousness%20V2.htm>.

battle burns. Other methods of control are the numerous international, national and regional competitions that are formally organized and judged and serve to rigidify what had been a flexible and innovative dance form.

The influence of male teachers plays a crucial role in how women learn about expression of self. Bgirls are vulnerable when learning because they want to be accepted and generally want to be judged as “good.” Bboy Alien Ness is very clear on this subject. “I teach a lot of girls now because, from my standpoint, they are easier to teach....A b-girl wants to be able to do what you can do [meaning the male teacher], so she’s gonna take it and absorb it.”²⁸⁷ Almost every bgirl said her inspiration came from her crew, usually all or mostly all-male. Naturally if something “looks” or is “wrong,” a good teacher will correct it. Since the panoptical bboy connoisseur guards against emasculation from the biological and imaginative female,²⁸⁸ bgirls’ expressions are policed. For women who may interpret or approach movement differently from the established canon, this can be profoundly problematic. Instead of being innovative or “original,” women’s bodies are marked as wrong. In writing about literature, Marilyn Francus states, “this condemnation of female authors [and by extension their creativity] functions within a broader literary agenda: to promote a masculinist model of art.”²⁸⁹ Therefore when bgirls dance and accept these ideas, they will be praised. Bgirl Mona Lisa describes how it works. “Sometimes I’ll be doing moves, and the guys I practice with would be like, ‘Damn, you *totally look like a dude* [italics mine] when you do that!’ and I’ll be like, ‘Yes!’ Because that’s like, I don’t want to look all-girly when I’m doing stuff, you know?”²⁹⁰ Thus, bgirls may never have authorship over the movement they make. Bgirls are ridiculed for not “totally looking like a dude.” Stasha “Bgirl Stash-One” Sampson explains that her crew constantly urges her to be more “masculine.” “I hear that from the crew all the time you know? ‘Don’t be girly,’ or you know, ‘Try and rock like a guy,’ so I’m going more on that end of it.”²⁹¹ All of these influences

²⁸⁷ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 135. Alien Ness does go on to say, “... if she is a good b-girl, she’s gonna flip it, to the point where you hardly recognize it.” However, he later explains that teaching is all about spreading his personal legacy.

²⁸⁸ The imaginative female was used in battle by the bboys when they were much younger in the 1970s. For example, the pin-up girl poses etc.

²⁸⁹ Marilyn Francus, “The Monstrous Mother: Reproductive Anxiety in Swift and Pope,” *ELH* 61, no.4 (Winter 1994), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873360>.

²⁹⁰ Mona Lisa, phone interview with the author, February, 26, 2009.

²⁹¹ Stash-One, phone interview with the author, September 5, 2009. The crew she speaks of is HBO crew based in Atlanta. The meaning of their crew used to be “Home Boys Only.” They recently changed it to Hebrew, Black and Oriental.” However, “Home Boys Only” is apparent in their enforcement of misogynistic ideals of dance on women.

are expressed very quickly in movement phrases or spoken expectations. However, these ideas are also systematically taught through the fixed teaching philosophies of “Foundation.”²⁹²

Ken Swift, bboy and Rock Steady Crew member says, “I don’t want people to take these dances into the New Millennium on some different whole vibe and feel and origin. You know, I think it’s important to teach the people about where these dances came from, and how people felt, you know, so they can take it on to the next level.”²⁹³ As Sarah Laboskey writes, “For male teenagers growing up in poor, dangerous neighborhoods, the desire to become someone, to overcome and make it out as somebody is a powerful drive.”²⁹⁴ For this reason, Foundation is more than a codification of movements. It is a code of honor and respect given to the pioneers -- from executing the movement like the pioneers to breaking for the same reasons as the original creators of the form. For example, in *The Freshest Kids* numerous old-school bboys explained their ideas of originality and breaking. Jo Jo, one of the two founders of the Rock Steady Crew states “Whoever wants to keep it real will keep calling it bboying.”²⁹⁵

What does this mean for bgirls? Crazy legs states “*We* [itals mine] did the first shows and set the Foundation for what has become an industry, and we ain’t getting no love. Why is that?”²⁹⁶ This question articulates the idea that Foundation was put in place to preserve the “original ideas of the pioneers.” Alien Ness of the Zulu Kings and Essential Rockers is a prime example of the teaching philosophies that many older generations of breakers believe. “If I don’t ever break again, I wanna be able to go to a show, go to a battle and still see Alien Ness. That’s what teaching is all about.”²⁹⁷ He further proves that teaching is not about the individual coming up with their “original style,” but a way to keep the ideas of his originality alive. “My mission is to keep the original shit alive.”²⁹⁸ What is the original shit? “When you get everybody doing shit that you created, that’s when you can say, ‘OK, I did what I had to do!’”²⁹⁹ Teaching is more about keeping each of the creators’ names alive than it is about teaching someone else to grow through the art form as a person. And, these legacies carry with them deep patriarchal codes of

²⁹² Also referred to as the original style or being original.

²⁹³ *The Freshest Kids*.

²⁹⁴ Sarah Laboskey, “Getting Off: Portrayals of Masculinity in Hip Hop Dance in Film,” *Dance Journal Research* 33:2 (Winter 2001): 112-120.

²⁹⁵ *The Freshest Kids*.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Cooper, *We B* Girlz*, 135.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

order. Laboskey states, “Hip hop dance has provided the arena for the expression and affirmation of masculinity. Built into this artistry is competition and domination, sexuality and libido, and hero worship,” and these concepts manifest in every aspect of many of the pioneers’ pedagogical methods. For example, Fire Starter explains her distaste for ideas such as Foundation and what they create.

“In this era, there are so many politics. Now [old-school and up-and-coming dancers] all they’re doing is going to other people’s countries and telling them what’s right and wrong -- when everybody has their own verse, just like the bible, a belief you know, just like a culture. We all have our own version. I’m not here to say I’m the first of whatever. When I go to other countries, I feel bad when I hear ‘Oh we studied so hard and learned this.’ So I just don’t respect how other people now are building this way of their own truth, or, ways that everybody gotta follow.”³⁰⁰

This resembles the competitiveness of colonization and is an ongoing debate in hip-hop dance and in the culture overall. These ideas were verbalized during a class being taught by a bboy pioneer, Ken Swift, who teaches at the PMT studios in Manhattan. He proclaimed to the class, “I am not gonna teach you my personal shit. Why would I show you all my moves?” Though different from Alien Ness, Swift’s statement displays the same priorities outlined by Laboskey. Alien Ness seeks to dominate by perpetuating all his moves; but, because Ken Swift is still battling, he teaches with the idea of competition (he will not give away his best moves). Sexuality and libido are not only demonstrated in the gestural language, but in the idea of having the force and stamina to be able to dance for hours without tiring. And, of course, hero worship is obvious through the pioneers themselves and their Foundation. The idea of old school -- or what people believe to be “authentic” -- changes geographically.³⁰¹ For example, Carla “Ill Mischief” Silveira describes her observation of Florida’s interpretation of Foundation. “I definitely um, don’t necessarily have a typical Florida Foundation. I do a lot of foundation, but

³⁰⁰ Fire Starter, phone interview with the author, January 27, 2010.

³⁰¹ Pabon, Jorge “Fabel,” *The Last Bboys in New York*, youtube.com/watch?v=ftj0l3MMEOs (accessed September 5, 2009). Even with the older generations ideas of old school or original style change. For example Fabel is creating a documentary entitled “The Last bboys in New York.” This idea of unpredictability and dynamism is different from the general idea of foundation that most people know from the Rock Steady Crew. Although the idea of foundation that “The Last Bboys in New York” discusses is more about a quality of the dance rather than a particular lineage of certain people’s movements and ideas, it still polices what movements should and should not be done.

I've always had a slightly cheekier attitude. For a long time, when I first moved down to Miami, it was very much 'Oh you know you can't look like a girl...' People really get burned a lot for that."³⁰² Florida style is essentially equivalent to dancing like a man. This is a very discriminatory attitude that would be based on what it means to "dance like a guy" or "*not* look like a girl." Paradoxically, self-expression is hindered through this very restrictive form of codification but many bgirls become fixated on the idea of "authenticity," "keeping it real" or keeping it "old school." Tiffany "Schizo" Hines states "Knowing the culture and the Foundation, it means a lot to me, because, it's like my character."³⁰³ Schizo gives an example of the false consciousness. Charlotte "Pretty Sick" Schultz explains her favorite movements as "Any kind of like, dope original type of footwork that stays within the boundaries the dance was meant to stay in."³⁰⁴ Pretty Sick elaborated on this idea further. What did she mean by "original," and what are the boundaries that "the dance was meant to stay in?" "Well, you know there's Foundation" she answered. What would be a movement that is *not* considered staying within the boundaries? She explained, "Um, that's really hard to say. That's not for me to say."³⁰⁵ She continues with the idea that breaking has a history and that one should learn the history and why they do the dance in order to understand it. However, when analyzed, what she is saying is that bgirls should dance for the same reasons that the pioneers danced. According to her definition, old-school or original is equivalent to the bboys from the 1970s and 1980s. In the opinions of Pretty Sick and many others, one must not only execute and use specific movements of the pioneers, but they must even dance for the same reasons! The old school or original way is to preserve the male ideas of breaking culture. For instance, many forms of innovation such as power moves are accepted as new movement. However, if women execute movements in certain other ways they are seen as inferior such as a "hollow/holla-back."³⁰⁶ During a practice with the crew Mixed Motions from Augusta Georgia, I observed Edrick "Bboy Kydsonx" Ramsey tell a bboy not to arch or curve (flexibility is seen as something naturally feminine) his back while executing the movement. "That's how *the girls* [itals mine] do it, man! You wanna have your body in a straight line because you use more strength." What is considered as female or as

³⁰² Ill Mischief, phone interview with author, September 29, 2009.

³⁰³ Schizo, phone interview with author, December 28, 2009.

³⁰⁴ Pretty Sick, phone interview with author, October 25, 2009.

³⁰⁵ Something for dancers in general to consider: How might one stay within the boundaries of the dance if they cannot identify and explain them?

³⁰⁶ There are many different names of movements in breaking. I choose to acknowledge them all.

female execution is discouraged and the idea of “Foundation” or the old-school essence is a patriarchal instrument put in place to sustain male ideas as superior.

Sandra Bartky defines self-surveillance as a form of obedience to patriarchy. Once these ideas are in place, policing of the body for non-male characteristics becomes an everyday occurrence of monitoring according to these rules. For example, Pretty Sick explains, “A lot of times males try to take away that femininity... You have to be masculine enough to stay on that [masculine] level -- but you have to be feminine enough to stay who you are.”³⁰⁷

Bgirls, in excluding “feminine” movement begin to discriminate against other women for using it. “To come out and be a girl and be feminine about it, you’re not truly being a bgirl, I believe.”³⁰⁸ Kate “Bgirl K8” Morrissey expresses similar panoptic views of her body when practicing. “I try to move like a guy as much as possible because I think that it looks better that way. I’m trying to study the way the guys hold themselves, and the way their hips move when they go from side-to- side, or, the way that they hold their shoulders or their arms. So, that way, I can put that into what I do.”³⁰⁹ When discussing their feelings about the way that men move, these same two bgirls had negative ideas about what it meant to “dance like a girl.” “Like um, when you watch bgirls some bgirls really move like girls, and then there are some bgirls who figured out how to move their bodies like guys. And the ones who move their bodies like guys, dance better.”³¹⁰ Mona Lisa said “I definitely try to move away from looking ‘girly’ when I break.” When I asked Mona Lisa earlier what was her definition of feminine was, she stated: “It’s the word weaker.” However, later she shows tension between her choices of trying not to be “girly” when she goes on to say “There are definitely times where I feel like I wanna do feminine movement and be girly you know, like... I feel more carefree, I guess. So I guess it affects my breakin’ that I try not to look feminine.” April “Bgirl Squirrely” Vaughn also strives to keep feminine movement out of her vocabulary. “Females use their hips a little bit more, um, twirling around, so on and so forth. Um, I try not to do that. But of course sometimes I do.”³¹¹

³⁰⁷ Pretty Sick, phone interview with author, October 25, 2009.

³⁰⁸ Stash-One, phone interview with the author, September 5, 2009. This is the same bgirl who was chastised for “dancing like a girl.” Now she believes that it is “wrong” or “fake” – much like commercial hip hop – to utilize femininity -- as a bgirl.

³⁰⁹ K8, phone interview with author, May 7, 2009.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Squirrely, phone interview with the author, September 5, 2009.

The attitude that leads to the embodiment of these gestures starts the second a bgirl decides to attend an event. Bonita Lovett explains, “From the time you walk into a jam³¹² to the minute you step foot in a cypher, you must have style, grace, and flavor.”³¹³ But what is style and flavor and how is it defined? In this case, in the New Millennium, bgirls are being judged on these characteristics: Now “style” and “flavor” may be defined by how much a dancer adheres to the panoptic views.

Bgirls have a ritual they follow when it comes to preparing for a jam. Creating a certain atmosphere, or “feel” for themselves is key, and it depends on what kind of jam they are attending. For example, when going to a party, the attitude is about having fun and “getting down.”³¹⁴ When one goes to an “organized battle,” the preparation is very different because it involves evoking aggression.³¹⁵ Although battles can produce a number of feelings, the new focus in the battling encourages negativity. Emiko “Bgirl Emiko” Sugiyama confesses, “When I battle, I still smile—I can’t help it. I was like, smiling, and people [were] like, ‘Don’t smile!’ I can’t help it!”³¹⁶ For example, Chyna defines breaking as “An opportunity to talk shit, be angry, and be a badass, and it’s cool. You suck if you can’t do that.”³¹⁷ Chyna continues, “You go to a battle, and the idea is to be aggressive, really offensive, like you’re attacking someone. As a result, dancers feel they have to choose between being negative and positive. And this has become especially hurtful to the community of women in hip hop.”³¹⁸ In *Foundation: b-boys, b-girls, and hip-hop culture in New York*, Bgirl Emiko is quoted as recalling an experience at an all-bgirl event, where she had to choose between connecting with bgirls or battling. Although Bgirl Emiko did state, “You know females do talk a lot,” connecting talkativeness with being female, Schloss simply reiterates this stereotype, instead of questioning these traditional gender ideas. Joe Schloss interprets this. “In Emiko’s eyes, the other bgirls were violating battle protocol by attempting to be sociable before the competition.”³¹⁹ Schloss concludes that bgirl Emiko had

³¹² Today, the jam is another name for an organized competition.

³¹³ Cooper, *We B*Girly*, 125.

³¹⁴ Term for expressing self through dance to the fullest.

³¹⁵ Schloss, *Foundation*, 39. Even the music is seen as evoking aggression. For example, Schloss explains the idea that dancers “carry history in their bodies” by dancing to these songs. He states, “the emotions that the songs evoke—particularly aggressiveness—provide a deep connection to that history as well.”

³¹⁶ Schloss, *Foundation*, 109.

³¹⁷ Cooper, *We B*Girly*, 57.

³¹⁸ Smiling in the previous example with bgirl Emiko is seen as a “feminine” characteristic another approach to controlling ideas of “femininity” by bboys.

³¹⁹ Schloss, *Foundation*.

a tough choice to make: to choose between being female and bgirl. By stating this Schloss reinscribes the idea that being a bgirl is to not be feminine. In making these decisions, bgirls not only have a false sense of what the “true essence of battling” is, but they are also discriminating against each other. However, being female, and being a bgirl, are the same -- and they should not be separated.

Many bgirls listen to certain types of music before they go to an event. In fact, music plays a key role in the dancer’s establishing and maintaining the performance mode from beginning to end. However, there is what Schloss has defined as a “bboy canon” of music that is expected to be known, and reacted to, in certain ways in order to *understand* “bboying.”³²⁰ This too hinders expression in dance. For example, Schloss defines “The canon, then, is the site of mutual influence: bboys who wish to maintain these steps [Foundation] as a part of their dance will show a strong preference for bboy songs. At the same time, the continued prevalence of b-boy songs preserves such steps as an integral part of bboying.”³²¹ So, the question is: Are you a real bboy or bgirl if you do not show a strong preference for these songs? “Carrying of legacy” of the pioneers seems to mean that you must listen to, like and *prefer* their music as well.

The jam creates an immediate ostentatious energy from dancers as they boast through gestures and movements. Some dancers walk into a jam really slow and smooth, as if everything should come to a stop: They have arrived. These gestures establish their identity, a reason for other dancers to think “Oh, she must be really good.” All these gestures are subtle, resembling the 1970s era.³²² For example, a bgirl walks in as if she is trying not to be seen, and everything about her is reserved. To a person who is not a battler, she may come off as timid or shy; but, to someone who battles, this may be a battling strategy. Just as identities slip and blur in performances, another slippage occurs between battling and performing, because “jams” have turned battling into performance. Bonita explains this blurring. “I love the feeling of being at a jam and suddenly hearing that song that makes you want to get up and battle everyone around you!”³²³ As discussed in the previous chapter, the most recent morphing of what had originally

³²⁰ For a more thorough discussion of Foundation and music’s role in it see chapter 2 in Foundation entitled “‘The Original Essence of the Dance’: History, Community, and Classic B-boy Records.”

³²¹ Schloss, *Foundation*, 34.

³²² These gestures are coming back from the bgirls of the 1970s and being reintegrated into the thought process of bgirls.

³²³ Cooper, *We B*Girlz*, 57.

been spontaneous or somewhat chaotic, and loosely organized, jams or battles into huge competitions is reshaping the vocabulary, redefining what is, and is not breaking.

These commercialized confrontations are most akin to the fixed fights in wrestling exhibitions. Contestants lose their freedom to make decision because they are constantly adjusting their dancing according to the judges opinions. “Like, last battle, [We] B* Girl[s] battle, I did not know what Honey Rockwell and Rokafella were looking for, so I just did whatever I do for the battle. But if I knew what they wanted [me] to have, I would have done it [a] different way.” Bgirl Emiko.³²⁴

In fact, it is the spontaneous cipher *before* a battle that becomes the real “virtuoso display of style” at its best.³²⁵ In other words, style is best recognized and shown in a non-sponsored, non-controlled cipher than in a competition. When a dancer enters the battle cipher, however, the gestures change, shifting codes of meaning. It is about the way you arrive and showing your movement language as clearly as possible. As Lady K Fever explains “From there, it became about who could stop the crowd and be the most creative.”³²⁶ During a cipher, bboys and bgirls take turns entering. It is in a spontaneous cipher where the wrong gestures a dancer uses will be read as inappropriate. A gesture used while battling is inappropriate and confusing to deploy at spontaneous cipher or jam. For example, in Tallahassee a woman at a jam entered the cipher to dance. She already had an aggressive stance -- which is confusing because she is not battling anyone, much less challenging another dancer. At the end of her set, she runs her hand across her throat to signify that she decapitated someone’s head.³²⁷

Battle modes are always associated with looking confident and arrogant with a sort of “fuck you” attitude. Battling strategies are performative -- especially in battling events -- because the judges base decisions on how contestants present themselves. Bahar³²⁸ states, “The way you dance in a battle depends on the situation and your mood. It depends on if you’re aggressive or chillin’. If you’re stressed out, and want to let out your anger, you’ll dance to that effect.”³²⁹ Competitions are transforming all the gestures, making them homogenized and generic, and the battle-emphasis today has pushed the certain gestures and burns to new levels of intensity.

³²⁴ Schloss, *Foundation*, 123. Brackets in the original. The second and third brackets are mine.

³²⁵ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 118.

³²⁶ Cooper, *We B*Girlz* 60.

³²⁷ But whose? In a battle this gesture would be made against an opponent, and in that context the gesture becomes a specific burn.

³²⁸ Was not able to find her real name.

³²⁹ Cooper, *We B*Girlz*, 79.

Initially, battling was so crucial that it is credited with advancing the virtuosity of the movement and the development of the form. However, the new battle manias have totally altered the movement and the structure of improvisation -- which is/was the creative heart and expressivity and individual commentary. Some of these alterations have been damaging, primarily in the emphasis on vulgar gestural violence -- which when used against women degrades the female.

When bgirls begin to battle it becomes a way of life. This is where the false consciousness manifests. Bgirls are claiming to find self – discovery through breaking. But how is this possible when they are so restricted in creativity? “I think battling -- it’s a key, essential foundation to progression. You can’t progress if you’re not battling.”³³⁰ Battling bgirls experience certain advancements and understandings of self through breaking that non-battling bgirls do not. Many bgirls found their confidence levels lifted. “Bboying gives you a certain confidence, or swagger. You carry and present yourself in a certain way.”³³¹ Vendetta explains “You know what? To be honest with you, if I wasn’t exposed to this dance, I might not have been able to really reach or understand the full extent of myself.”³³² Because of the experiential intensity at the battling point, breaking has an overpowering impact. “For me, to be able to work through this dance and learn about myself and my body movement, how I work, how I think -- and then be able to come up with my style -- is one of the beauties I love about this dance in general. [It’s] the idea of exploring yourself and connecting with yourself.”³³³ Bgirl Squirrely describes what breaking has done for her life. “It’s definitely taken me down a road to finding my identity. I don’t think I’ve completely made it there but it’s definitely teaching me and showing me a way of finding out who I am and who I want to be.”³³⁴

Bgirls understand that battling is between a dancer and her opponent – but also a battle with self.³³⁵ Severe explains this. “At the end of the day, it doesn’t even really matter who you are battling, because you’re really challenging yourself.”³³⁶ Even though dancers see the battle as a personal challenge with personal issues, no one cannot ignore the literal battle and what it

³³⁰ Schizo, phone interview with author, December 28, 2009.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Vendetta, phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Squirrely, phone interview with the author, September 5, 2009.

³³⁵ This layered battle with self intrigues me. What bgirls mean is the battle with personal issues. However I believe it to be a literal battle with the female body, with self or between the female body and the panoptical male connoisseur, foundation and the false consciousness .

³³⁶ Severe, phone interview with the author, October 26, 2009.

represents. “When you’re battling, you’re sizing yourself up against everyone else you know? It both motivates you or it crushes you -- which applies in both dance and in life.”³³⁷ Although battling is a performative and constructive tool for the dancer, it can be, at its best, a comparison of self to others and a physical conversation between two dancers about what needs to, and what could be, improved. As Candy Bloise and many other bgirls proclaim, “Like, for me now it’s [battling] become something that I do if the moment calls for it. It’s not like before. I used to be like, ‘Oh I need to battle ‘cause I have to pay dues,’ or, ‘I have to battle because so and so is better.’ I guess I’ve like gotten older, and [now] I’ve stopped comparing myself so much to others.”³³⁸

Currently, there is an epidemic of hard-core confrontational battling, which has become more important than dancing in the cipher for oneself and in order to be able to learn more. K8 attaches absolutely no importance to dancing in a cipher individually. “If you gave me a choice between battling and just dancing in the cipher, I will battle every single time.”³³⁹ As Tammy “Kadence” Tso pointed out, she is constantly “siz[ing] herself up against everyone else,” implying that she cannot understand herself without relation to other people. For Bgirl K8, breaking is a part of daily life. If she is not dancing, then she is thinking about dancing. In fact, this translates as constantly thinking about how to move and carry her body like a man, on a daily basis. At this stage panoptic oppression is violent and dangerous to the female bgirl psyche.

Through male-reproduction power battle burns, bgirls diminish their worth and value. Bgirls use precisely the same gestures in the same ways that bboys use them, sometimes fully conscious of the many negative allusions they are portraying, but most of the time emotionally and intellectually desensitized about the real visual messages of the gesture, burning bad out of habit. Bgirls mindlessly “cock” people while dancing. “You know people do it so much, people do it to the point where you wonder if their trying to make up for something they’re lacking.”³⁴⁰

Here, the queer girl desire for the phallus becomes the catalyst for the abject body. “I expel *myself*, I spit myself out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to

³³⁷ Kadence, phone interview with the author, September 5, 2009.

³³⁸ Candy, phone interview with the author, September 29, 2009.

³³⁹ K8, phone interview with author, May 7, 2009. This maybe a result of the lack of self-expression in Foundation. Ciphering is self-expression, however new age competition battling is not necessarily about expression. It is about comparing your moves to others and/or doing what is expected of you by the judges.

³⁴⁰ Kadence, phone interview with the author, September 5, 2009.

establish *myself*.”³⁴¹ Julia Kristeva, author of *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* is defining the abjection of self. One has to abject herself to “be” self. This theory directly correlates with bgirls when they “cock” each other: They suppress themselves in order to “express themselves” -- the paradox of self-expression for bgirls in breaking.

Kristeva explains that the same way we gag at (are repulsed by) the various excretions of our body (an essential part of us as human beings), we define our femaleness and maleness by how much we “abject” (are revolted by) them. Bgirls may not necessarily “gag” at their bodies and vaginas but they definitely severely oppress themselves through this idea of abjection. They abject the female body as they use the non-existent penis to assert domination over their opponent and simultaneously themselves. Abjection encompasses fear and want: Fearing for what the vagina can do to their identity and wanting the penis to obtain power. The bgirl physically enacts Freudian ideas about the girl-child’s desire for the penis by “cocking.” Putting a racialized iteration on Judith Butler’s theory of “actionable assertions,” DeFrantz defines “black performativity as gestures of black expressive culture, including movement and dance that perform actionable assertions.”³⁴² But what are the actionable assertions of throwing the dick? Bryant Keith Alexander states “Aggression of men is used often as dominance over women (and gay men) in ways that diminish worth and value.”³⁴³ Most bboys and bgirls disingenuously proclaim that gestures don’t actually mean what they imply. However, the sexual dominating ideology of cocking is a vivid motion that represents rape of (the man) but more commonly defilement of womanhood and the female body. Bboys often hip thrust their genitals to suggest an elevated power over other bboys, and with females, they use it as their biological advantage over bgirls.

Janet Wolff theorizes that the body has been systematically repressed and marginalized in Western culture, through specific discourses controlling and defining the female corporeality. As stated earlier, bgirl Mona Lisa unequivocally said, “ I feel like, to me, the word ‘feminine’ comes across, um, ‘not as strong.’ Um, like it’s a little weaker -- like it’s the word ‘weaker.’” Most bgirls believe that feminine gestures relayed “weakness” and usually stayed away from any movements/gestures classified as such. But without exception, the gestures and body parts every bgirl mentioned as being “feminine” involved the hips and buttocks. Looked at in reverse, they

³⁴¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

³⁴² DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible,” 66.

³⁴³ Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, 84.

also define precisely the body parts through which women can be empowered. Stereotypes can be mediated by breaking. Women of color have different experiences in how they reach their identity. Stephanie “Seoul Assassin” Aasen uses hip hop to intervene in any preconceptions. “I am constantly struggling and constantly pushing to have acceptance in my community, whether it’s a community of color [or] a community of, um uh sexuality you know? They [all] play a part when I hit that cipher....I try to make everything just kinda like uh... leave all the B.S. on the outside of the circle, and then show everybody in the circle what I can be. Show everybody, whatever they think... the opposite you know?...Open their minds, in a sense, through movement.”³⁴⁴ She goes on to explain her struggles in the community and how breaking helps her cope because it makes her feel free. “I’m a Korean adoptee so I have Caucasian parents, but I’m Korean. And, I’m also a Queer woman in the community. So, I’m a woman of color but I’m also crossing the crossroads at every, you know, little turn....Like I’m not white enough, or, white people aren’t Korean enough...and you know like people overlook me because...of my sexual preference... um... so Hip Hop like definitely lets me, allows me, to just be who I wanna be and not really... you know... give two craps about what people think about me.”³⁴⁵

Bgirls are suspended in a binary dilemma. When enacting the phallic-dominate movement she is also subverting her femininity -- regardless of whether she chose to cock her opponent with full realization of what she is embodying or whether she does it as an unconscious gesture that is part of the vocabulary. Do bgirls understand throwing the dick as “tradition?” Or, is it taught as pure movement stripped of meaning? All of these issues and questions about gestures and meanings and Foundation will be transferred to New Millennium bgirls, from the phallic to the panoptic-male connoisseur to the meaning of the clothing and right down to the genitals. But some of these new bgirls will try to formulate new responses to the old legacy. “You know I’m not one of those chicks that’s gonna go out there and cock people. Because, what’s that about? Not like to say that I’ve never done that before.... Playing around in practice with the homies, that’s one thing. But I don’t think it’s necessary to include very graphic gestures or mannerisms.”³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Bgirl Seoul Assassin, phone interview with author, March 4, 2009.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Bgirl Divine, phone interview with author, March 1, 2009.

CHAPTER 6

BGIRLS AS DRAG KINGS

Bgirls as drag kings may appear to be an outrageous theory but it is through the embodiment of black masculinity and “genderfuck,” presented in the styles of movement, clothing, and battling that bgirls resemble Drag Kings.³⁴⁷ In Kathryn Rosenfeld’s *Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other* she states “by performing/becoming the other, drag kings engage in a practice of magic which transforms both the margin and center.”³⁴⁸ The magic that Rosenfeld recognizes in drag performance is the magic that bgirls experience when battling. Part of this magic incorporates androgyny, which encompasses all genders in a single entity. Through liminal androgyny, they not only transcend the adolescent bboy’s sexist ideology in that “girls can’t do this,” but they concurrently challenge the larger patriarchal society’s gender norms by gaining power through battling and empowering themselves.

According to Rosenfeld, some drag kings represent specific types of maleness while others emphasize a fluidity of gender, so Rosenfeld separates drag kings into two categories: “mimetic” and “liminal.” I am borrowing these two categories of drag kings to describe how bgirls transform the margin and the center of traditional gender norms, especially concerning female sexuality and reproductive power through battling. When drag kings appear macho, they are more layered and nuanced than the macho in the mainstream.³⁴⁹ Rosenfeld argues, “By drag kings performing maleness—by performatively/mimetically “becoming” men—drag kings simultaneously alter the nature of power-over [*sic*] as it operates in the general culture, and claim power for themselves.”³⁵⁰

On the positive side of empowerment, bgirls performing masculinity (whether queer or straight) can create new possibilities for a number of different masculinities and femininities within breaking. Through mimesis, many bgirls, especially bgirls who identify with queer culture, recognize this and claim power for themselves. Paradoxically however, mimesis is just as disempowering as it is empowering. As Rosenfeld states, “It is important to add race as treated by drag kings to the discussion not only because it makes for a more complete picture,

³⁴⁷ Rosenfeld, “Drag King Magic,” 208.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

but because it further exemplifies drag kings' 'power play.'"³⁵¹ Mimesis is limiting in its empowerment because many of the ideas bgirls mimic are misogynistic, and therefore oppress womanhood. According to Rosenfeld, white drag kings have both no power and some power when they mimetically embody masculinity. Race problematizes things in the matter of degree because the black drag king is caught in a potent double-bind. First, the black drag king's mimesis of male whiteness (that also subsumes the "privilege of whiteness") is disempowering because of its impossibility: biologically black cannot be biologically white. Second, the black drag king's mimesis has more power because of its intracultural mirroring -- they are black females mimicking black males. Thirdly, and this applies to both black and white drag kings, disempowerment resides in biology. A biologic female is still a biologic female -- even with a dildo.

The practice of breaking has unique parameters of power-privileges. It is the domain of black masculinity that all bgirls enter, which includes certain behaviors that all bgirls must attempt to embody. If the bgirls buy into the full masculinity of breaking, at the expense of femininity, they *de facto* become mimetic drag kings, taking part in their own suppression.

Rosenfeld explains that drag is a performance of gender, but it also extends into race, at least stylistically and through performative characteristics.³⁵² In hip hop, the stylistic and performative characteristics are predominately black and male. Mimetic bgirls dress exactly like men, effectively disguising parts of the body to pass as male, such as dressing in oversized all-male clothing, de-emphasizing (flattening) their breasts, locking or braiding their hair in male African/black styles (if they are not black), wearing typical bboy hats or tying back their hair in the gang scarf, and walking in a black male fashion. Rosenfeld discusses in her article that "passing" -- historically in reference to the black community -- has double meaning. As Bryant Keith Alexander argues in his book, *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*, "passing is a performance of suppression that is associated with the origin of denial."³⁵³ There, the glorification of black masculinity and suppression of black femininity is racially coded. Bgirds perform suppression through "throwing the dick" which denies the female body

³⁵¹ Rosenfeld, "Drag King Magic," 210.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Bryant Keith Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity* (Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2006).

power. However, the phallic link of “becoming/performing male” within battling represses the option of womb-power within battling.

For example, certain clothes have become iconic symbols of hip hop and black masculinity. Some black men describe any tight pants (considered uncomfortable) as “nut huggers.”³⁵⁴ This idea references the stereotyped aggressive sexuality that the black male supposedly possesses an “enormous penis” (it even needs room to swing). Many emcees even talk/rap about walking with a limp -- as if their penises are so huge that they are incapable of walking correctly. For example in the song, “I’m So Hood” the rapper proudly states that his “pants hangin’ off my ass cuz my dick is heavy.”³⁵⁵ Bgirls also wear baggy pants that embody this “heavy penis” idea enhanced by grabbing the crotch and thrusting. Does the bgirl unconsciously do this because she feels the need to wear baggy pants? Or, is there another reason, such as the “gangsta” rapper look?³⁵⁶ As Alexander states, “We can recognize the “gangsta” concept as a culturally indigenous example of black masculine fashioning.”³⁵⁷ Because of this image, many bgirls feel that walking in a certain way, even throwing up hand signs that symbolize where they are from (much like gangs) becomes a part of their identity. For example, the peace sign (fingers form the “V”) is thrown in a certain way by African-Americans called “deuces” (the “V” to the side like scissors means “see you later” as opposed to the upright peace sign, meaning exactly that). Many bgirls have adopted these specific ways of representing their neighbor hoods or crews. Nicole “Severe” Rateau states that one of her favorite gestures is the “A town-down” (the index finger and the middle finger form an upside down peace sign with the thumb between the two) “because she is from Atlanta,” and it was made popular by Usher “Usher” Raymond, Christopher “Ludacris” Bridges and Lil’ John in their song entitled “Yeah.”³⁵⁸ There is also a general stereotype of black men as sexually lustful, “the black rapist.”

³⁵⁴ The practical reason for bboys wearing baggy pants is that they are more comfortable to dance in and they refer to the “gangsta” rappers’ style.

³⁵⁵ Rapper Ludacris in the song “Beamer, Benz and Bentley” (Beamer is a BMW car; Benz is a Mercedes Benz, and Bentley is a Bentley) states the same thing. See the lyric book).

³⁵⁶ Baggy pants do not echo gang life. There is a stylistic difference between baggy pants, and pants hanging off the ass. One of the many mythical stories surrounding the origin of the style of pants hanging off the ass is that it copies prison clothes where the men were denied any kind of belt to keep up their pants, hence the “hang down the ass” style. It’s a myth, because prison clothes, at least since the 70s, has been the one-piece jump suit. Also, sweats loose pants (not hanging off the ass) are easy to hide things in and because they are loose, the wearer can run when necessary. Gangstas don’t wear hang down the ass pants because they can’t move quickly. If they wear jeans they are loose jeans, but not the extreme street style where the crotch reaches the knees.

³⁵⁷ Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, 221.

³⁵⁸ Severe, phone interview with the author, October 26, 2009.

Bgirls are performing this “angry” masculinity when they dance, as well as performing other stereotypes of black masculinity.

As Rosenfeld states, “The centrality to drag of costuming and style leads back to questions of mimesis and desire.”³⁵⁹ For example, mimetic bgirls do not experiment with or reference femininity in their styles, or significantly in the gestures they use in battling. Gestures within battles are monitored by the panoptic-bboy in the consciousness of the mimetic bgirl. When mimetic bgirls use battle gestures, they either become the object of the male gaze/ the dominant male, or the phallic-gesturing male.³⁶⁰ Gestures by bgirls that elicit the male gaze are usually flirtatious or incorporate themes of seduction. The index finger is used as a seductive tool (“co’ mon, baby”), which bgirls claim they use in order to “catch the attention of” or “throw the bboys off of their game.” Bgirls gave examples of other female gesturing. For example, blowing kisses was a very popular gesture that at least six bgirls labeled as a “feminine gesture.” Bgirls also become the male through phallic gesturing.

For example bgirls Kadence and Dawnette “Patience” Joseph explain that there are more creative ways to use the “cock” for women. Kadence states that turning the guys around on themselves is a way of getting back at the bboys. Patience gives a more detailed account of what is done. “If there are two guys battling each other you can go up to one guy and chop his off and then use that to cock the other dude.”³⁶¹ Although this is “alternative,” the bgirl acting as if she has a cock is still using male anatomy as an instrument of power. And in using this power it references the domination and ultimately the power of rape. In an interview with bgirl Ellz, she explains her viewpoint about the use of phallic gestures. “I try not to use anything [pause] too crazy. I try to avoid stuff like that. It’s just -- I don’t have to do that in order to let someone know I’m gonna wipe the floor with ‘em. I can just look at ‘em in the face and do that.”³⁶² Even though Bgirl Ellz does not use the phallic gestures per se, she uses patriarchy to battle. Bgirl Ellz says, “Like, if I’m battling against a guy I will definitely use...um... flirtation in the dancing to try and throw them off...because they get distracted easily or stuff like that. But if I am battling a girl,

³⁵⁹ Rosenfeld, “Drag King Magic,” 204.

³⁶⁰ Refer to Laura Mulvey’s theory of male gaze, that although is used as a jumping off point for discussion.

³⁶¹ Patience, phone interview with the author, October 6, 2009.

³⁶² Bgirl Ellz, phone interview with the author, March 2, 2009.

it's just...you know...kinda making sure that they feel over-powered and making sure they feel that I am the dominant one.”³⁶³

As a woman battling a man she focuses on becoming a sexual object to “throw off” the bboy. However, bboys are not always thrown off by the sexual gestures because of the androgynous appearance that most women present. If they were thrown off, this refocusing of the bboy’s attentions -- away from the bgirl’s skill and talent -- to her body as a sexual object, contradicts the purpose of why bgirls assume androgyny in the first place. When bgirl Ellz discusses battling women, she strives to be “dominant” while her female opponent is “dominated.” This domination replicates the panoptic view of patriarchy; someone has to be the “man” and someone has to be the “woman.” Hence, bgirls are oppressing womb-power within themselves, reverting to the idea of the male gaze and the overall patriarchal view that men are dominant-superior and women are submissive-inferior.

The phallic-gesturing male uses power over bboys and bgirls, so mimetic bgirls find power in being able to use phallic gesturing against bboys. In one scenario, the mimetic bgirl dances up to her male opponent and humps his face (fucks his mouth). This gesture is symbolic of male-sexual dominance. Bgirts have a power they previously did not own (through throwing the dick) but they reinforce male dominance through them. Devastatingly, phallic gestures used *against* bgirls by bgirls are one of the ultimate suppressions of female sexual and reproductive power. For example, a bgirl may mime raping another bgirl with her imaginary penis. In this case, the bgirl is suppressing -- through rape -- her sexual and reproductive power as well as the power of all women. In referring back to the drag king’s “power play” Rosenfeld discusses, the power struggle within a battle, at its most extreme, is between men and women’s power of sexuality and reproduction. Bgirts are not only performing/becoming male, they are fighting against their own bodies’ possibility of power. This becomes problematic not only because of the possibilities of queer-girl power but for all types of feminine power manifested in battling.

Rosenfeld ultimately states that the power of drag kings lies in mimesis because they invoke change by taking back power and empowering themselves. Because they are not biologically trying to change into men, be men, they embody that power and use it for themselves. However, the fact that the mimetic bgirls are striving to be accepted/pass as men by

³⁶³ Ibid.

battling with the male gaze/phallic gestures, they reinforce the patriarchal standpoint. This again begs the question “How is mimesis empowering bgirls?”

I am theorizing that it only works to a certain extent when women battle against men with an imaginary penis. My theorization is the opposite of Rosenfeld’s mimetic power: I believe that the power exists with the “liminal” bgirl who becomes androgynous -- and the liminal is the genderfuck that occurs here. Rosenfeld believes genderfuck to be a way to successfully masculinize and therefore concludes that mimesis is empowering. However, I think of it as the equivalent to liminality rather than mimesis and a way to successfully merge femininity and masculinity into the unrecognizable -- again which expands both femininity and masculinity and creates more options for the bgirl and ultimately the “b-world.” Because “Elements of masculinity are clearly evident, yet concealed in extremely feminine packaging,” androgyny allows the liminal bgirl to battle against traditional patriarchal gender roles with feminine power.³⁶⁴ Bgirls who float between the gendered states and play with the ideas of femininity and masculinity through dance are categorized as liminal. As Dara Milovanovic states, “Male clothes liberate women. Their sex is not concealed, rather it is emphasized.”³⁶⁵ It is important to note that it is not male clothing itself but the appropriation of it that allows for this freedom. For instance, Milovanovic in her reading of Fosse’s clothing choice for his female dancers explains, “male attire is appropriated by women with their repeated use of bowler hats, highly stylized jackets, or pinstriped bikini-briefs” and “Hats are male: they conceal the face and introduce an air of austerity or playfulness.”³⁶⁶ In addition, liminal bgirls tend to play with the masculine and feminine consciously through their gestures in battling, thus expanding definitions of both. Liminal bgirls utilize traditional feminine qualities mediated through liminal, comedic means female reproductive-power gestures dancing out the power of the mother, as well as the generative mother.

For liminal bgirls, appropriated black male attire may consist of pink trucker hats, baggy pants that display panties instead of boxers, and jerseys that show the mid section. For example, a liminal bgirl would pair men’s pants with a bikini top or wear all men’s clothing while wearing

³⁶⁴ Dara Milovanovic, “.Androgyny, Glamour, Fetishism, and Urbanity: An Analysis of Bob Fosse’s Choreography” (master’s thesis, Florida State University, 2003).

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 7.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 12.

large earrings and heavy makeup. For example Moanne81³⁶⁷ states “when I see a b-girl who perfectly manages the tightrope walk between tight and baggy, sporty and feminine, I admire that.”³⁶⁸ Liminal bgirls do not use phallic gestures. Instead, they use gestures that comment on the power of femininity and the female body. Milovanovic states that “An androgynous looking woman becomes associated with masculine elements of mind and reason, rather than the feminine elements of nature, feelings and emotions, which are often connected to instability and weakness.”³⁶⁹ For example Monica “TahXic” Kelly states “I completely embrace the fact that I am a woman and I use it to my advantage. I think my masculine qualities are manifested in my mind and personality, while my feminine qualities are manifested more physically.”³⁷⁰

For this reason, liminal bgirls use mind and reason through strategies within a battle and are able to recognize the advantages of using feminine gestures against men. The fact that women can play multiple sexual identities and switch from one second to the next, that they can and do use feminine and masculine gestures, becomes strength.

Like, a lot of times I’ll dance very aggressive or what people will call ‘like a guy’ and use a lot of aggressive gestures like guns and knives. And then, all of a sudden I’ll twist, and do a shimmy that’s more feminine...like grab my breasts you know like ‘bam!’ like ‘I can play your game and I can play my game? Can you play my game? ‘Cause I know you don’t wanna step in my area. But I can play your game as a man and I’ll smack you too and then you know hold my breasts and be like what!’³⁷¹

As Adrienne “Vendetta” Lee explains, many of the “feminine” burns that liminal bgirls use are not merely traditional gestures of femininity but things that women can use that men will not. Severe explains a gesture that she uses for men. “Um, if I’m battling a guy and he’s doing a lot of derogatory gestures because I’m a female I’ll do something like he has a small dick.”³⁷² TahXic also creates gestures related to this idea. “I came up with some good burns when I did battle. With one I would get down on my knees in front of the guy I was battling, and pretend to

³⁶⁷ Not able to get family name.

³⁶⁸ Cooper, *We B*Girlyz*, 121.

³⁶⁹ Milovanovic, “Androgyny and Glamour,” 7.

³⁷⁰ TahXic, email interview with the author, January 1, 2010.

³⁷¹ Vendetta, phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

³⁷² Ibid.

pull out a telescope from behind me, extend it al-ll-ll-ll [her emphasis] the way close to their ‘you know what’ and kinda scratch my head like ‘Huh? What am I looking at? And where is it?’”³⁷³

Feminine sensibility has tweaked the gestures with comical liminality. Liminal bgirls do not subject themselves to the male gaze but gain agency by placing themselves in liminal roles of power. Severe states “Sometimes you can play up being ‘girly’ in a smart and comical way by like looking at your nails or checkin’ your hair just to be kinda like ‘There’s no sweat.’”³⁷⁴ In a personal battle I engaged in against Timothy “K.T. (Killer Tim)” Langston, I also won by being bored and “painting my nails” as he vigorously danced full-out. The liminal androgynous bgirl is not yet “pretty,” and she is therefore using the transitional state *before* she is “pretty” as a comical battle strategy. The gesture is potent, amusing and belittling because it is “in-between.” Liminal bgirls also transfer the power of the male gaze to themselves. Vendetta describes “I know some girls blow kisses, but um, I’d rather not. If I did, I’d say like, ‘You called me? Or, ‘Let me write down your number. You call me.’”³⁷⁵

The power of women and mother is used as well. In women gestures, women may grab their breasts to symbolize power in the female anatomy (much like that of the bboy crotch-grabbing). In all power-mother gestures, women transform bboys into their children. For example, the breasts are used to “feed” the bboy, from which he gains all of his power (this is used by Rokafella). In another example of a power-mother gesture by a liminal bgirl, a bboy enters the cipher to battle. While he toprocks he mimes masturbating and ejaculating on her. The liminal bgirl’s approach may be that she wipes the mimed ejaculatory fluids off and signals him to her belly. She mimes that she is pregnant, gives birth (by using facial expressions), rocks the baby (which signifies raising the baby) and as the baby grows up, she is metaphorically stating that everything he does is just an extension (literally the offspring) of how good she is. Therefore his power will never overpower the fact that she created and “raised” him.³⁷⁶ Examples of liminal bgirls in battling such as this one show the magic that exists in these burns.

³⁷³ TahXic, email interview with the author, January 1, 2010.

³⁷⁴ Severe, phone interview with the author, October 26, 2009.

³⁷⁵ Vendetta, phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

³⁷⁶ Though this interpretation is long, a burn colorfully explains the action and it happens within seconds. It does not work unless it is on the beat and happens quickly at the right moment. There is no time for prolonged pantomime.

Marilyn Francus, author of “The Monstrous Mother: Reproductive Anxiety in Swift and Pope,” discusses the negative image of the “fecund female” in the West.³⁷⁷ These traditionally negative ideas about the female body are reversed and made powerful through female reproductive gestures. The Liminal bgirl uses the power of the generative mother to battle bboys.³⁷⁸ Bboys have a very peculiar relationship with their sexual-reproductive gestures and claiming power to be “men.”

Considering that bboys originally were pre-adolescents when they created “Foundational” bboy movement, there is a strong fundamental attachment to the mother that has power over the boy and is represented in the movements. This is also enacted in the basics of breaking. Bboys work on the floor, like the crawling baby, then they change instantly from the baby to the man, perfectly playing what it is to be in the pre-adolescent then adolescent state. Bboys, in a sense, have not grown up. These gestures turn the bboy into the “child” and subject him to the entire range of power that the generative mother possesses. Bboys, in fact, represent that sexual state between baby and man.³⁷⁹ Another macho-yet-childlike example of the bboy is the constant pride they take in enduring bruises, cuts and scrapes. For example in the documentary *The Freshest Kids*, the Nigga Twins state: “We didn’t dance on linoleum, we didn’t dance on cardboard. We danced on the cement!”³⁸⁰ Hard or rough surfaces can be understood as a challenge to face down in order to become a man, or, what signified a real bboy. It is glorified as a state of manhood, especially for boys. It is apparent through this behavior that he is trying to separate from that need of the mother through enduring bruises. As Marilyn Francus explains, “The female is dangerous because by making herself instrumental to the satisfaction of male

³⁷⁷ Francus, “The Monstrous Mother,” 829.

³⁷⁸ Sally Banes, “Breaking,” in *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Forman Murray and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004) 13-20. Bboys also use the power of the mother through their status as creators of the form. As Banes states, “bboys learned a system of master apprentice, referring to each other as father and son... and chose names that reflected their relationship.” For example, there are “Crazy Legs” and “Little Crazy Legs.” This is disguised as a paternal relationship when in fact it is not. The undertones of this relationship refer to generative power through the mother because, really, it is she who has the ultimate power to claim/name the baby.

³⁷⁹ In heterosexual normative society men learn that they own women’s bodies, or have the power (penis) to take that body. Sexual immaturity becomes sexual domination as they age. The connections between the names of movements like the baby and power moves today is intriguing. This name is interesting because this freeze or power move is named after a stage in childhood development, and the form used to assert “manly” power shows their in-between state of being.

³⁸⁰ *The Freshest Kids*.

need, she enforces male stasis and dependence; the nurturing mother is the exemplary instance of this phenomenon.”³⁸¹

By performing the liminal not-yet-but-mother-to-be, women hold varying powers over bboys. For example, a bgirl is battling a bboy who throws the dick at her. She may take his body, signal putting him in her womb while miming a pregnant belly. She decides to eliminate him by taking abortion pills or simply jumping onto her belly and waving goodbye. Within the same motions she may make a “mistake” by slipping and falling, aborting/miscarrying the bboy/baby as well. Another example of what the generative mother could do is while pregnant with her bboy, she may blithely smoke a cigarette and drink alcohol. She will give birth to the bboy she is battling within seconds of her bad actions, but he is not developed enough to battle her. Women have the power to choose to mother a child or not -- a paradoxical interplay of male negativity, concepts defined by sexism about the female body, pro-choice, and child-neglect are the stuff of female reproductive burns. Francus explains. “The refusal to mother is the only active monstrosity available to the domesticated mother, for unlike the self-empowered fertile female who has many options, the domesticated mother has all too few.”³⁸² Although this may have been true in a society governed by normative gender stereotypes, in breaking, the liminal bgirl can choose and refuse to nurture or not -- and both hold significant power.

In female reproductive power gestures, the vagina is portrayed as powerful. The stereotypical “mystery” of the vagina is used against the bboy. Her vagina may become a “black hole,” be deadly as quick sand, or resemble the *vagina dentata* that Freud postulated as the fearful tool of castration. For example a bgirl is “cocked” by a bboy. She then runs two fingers up her vagina lips and her fingers turn into scissors, she then cuts his dick off. Excretions associated with the vagina as well are imagined as toxic liquids, like acid rain, much like the bboy uses his semen against his opponent. Bgirls may mime using menstrual blood as acid thrown in the eyes of the bboy. Bgirls may also use the lack of fluids to signify that she is sexually uninterested if the bboy uses the penis against her and her vagina may be mimed as if it was sandpaper or was an old-style winding pencil sharpener, that sharpen and files down the penis. She finishes it off by blowing the excess dust off of the now pencil-thin penis.

³⁸¹ Francus, “The Monstrous Mother,” 839.

³⁸² Ibid., 845.

Liminal gestures create a voice for women in breaking. But neither the gestures nor the voice that they create is the ultimate goal. Rather it is the possibilities that the gestures open up for self-expression that have yet to exist since the first movement on concrete to dope beats took place. These gestures serve as an entry point to expose the myth that "...hip-hop culture gives its participants the power to redefine themselves and their history, not by submission or selective emphasis, but by embracing *all* of their previous experience as material for self-expression in the present moment. 'that's why the dance form is so phenomenal.'"³⁸³ In looking at these different possibilities, maybe this statement will become truth rather than contradiction.

³⁸³ Schloss, *Foundation*, 44.

CHAPTER 7

AFTERTHOUGHTS ABOUT BGIRLS AND LIMINAL BURNS

Some of the most recent evolutions in breaking are the bgirls reclaiming space through the invention of, and discussions about, liminal burns. Women are also regaining empowerment by moving beyond the limitations of bboy patriarchy by taking the practical powers accorded them as strong Black Matriarchs. Boundaries previously closed by the rules and regulations of Foundation and competitions are being opened. Women's breaking has new iterations of hip-hop dance styles, such as Jamaican-dance hall influences on krumpin', women's house-dance floorwork; and, for the men, multiple versions of fast-footwork, the C-Walk/Oakland Style and the slow controlled fluidity of Brazilian break crews' remix ideologies and practices of "power moves." Performative modes purposely blur the lines between what is masculine and what is feminine. Gender-liminality is also seen in hard-core rappers who are (amusingly) borrowing feminized clothing and behaviors while stridently proclaiming their machismo by boasting about how hard it is to control their enormous genital equipment. These changes are just at the beginning of visibility and remain vulnerable.

"The obstacles that females are overcoming in breaking aren't just physical. They are much more cultural, mental and social expectations of their own and everyone else's that affect how they approach their training, their dedication—affect everything."³⁸⁴ One obstacle bgirls are trying to analyze and overcome is the struggle with feminine freedom of expression, particularly as expressed through burns. Initially bboys sought out and danced, in part, to elicit positive female response for their prowess. But now that bgirls have created a space for themselves, men are, whether intentionally or not, erasing the expressivity of women through Foundation, and through "abjecting" the female body through battle burns like throwing the dick. Although bgirls do narrative gestures, most of the women of this generation throw the dick. When questioned about these battle burns, bgirls' usual response was "I most definitely don't throw the cock!" But are bgirls aware of the meanings of this gesture? Are they aware of the anti-female empowerment it wields? That by cocking they are symbolically raping?

³⁸⁴ Cooper, *We B*Girlyz*, 71. Quote from bgirl Catfox.

Abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you...³⁸⁵

Problematically, the abjection of the female body is claimed as strength because bgirls are copying the bboys, doing like the boys in a boys' world. The abjection of women's bodies through male reproductive-power gestures is, I believe, figurative physical abuse. Female breakers constantly take abuse from male breakers, and themselves, literally, and through physical metaphors. They "stick" with it claiming that the female who can get through the pressures is "strong." If this were applied to women "sticking" through domestic violence situations, she would be considered foolish. So why is it not thought foolish and violent in the case of the breaking community?

Bgirls suggested that "playing with the homies" -- or not doing it "seriously" -- is different than when women use it seriously. It is only when it is intended seriously that it becomes a problem. The same bgirls that used the gesture "playfully" are the same ones who denied "using" the gesture at all. But what are the circumstance and the performative behaviors that signal to the dancer, the opponent, and the watchers when a bgirl is serious or not? In battle, all gestures become serious. Therefore, it can never be used playfully, at least not in the eyes of the viewer or the dancer's recipient. As I continued to question, bgirls discovered that they *did* throw the cock in one scenario or another. Bgirls would state feeling ashamed after they used the gestures wondering, "Why did I just throw a cock if I don't have one?" What propels bgirls to use it?

Bgirls explain how the cock gesture remains an ongoing influence in their breaking communities to the point where they end up using it involuntarily. Carla "Ill mischief" Silveira explains, "I unfortunately am from Miami, the southeast. My natural inclination is to throw cock. It's like you see it so much, it just becomes a part of you."³⁸⁶ She continues, "Like for some reason I'll just cock -- and I'm like, 'Why did I just do that?'" Candy explains the same thing. "I've caught myself doing that a couple times."³⁸⁷ Candy speaks of "catching" herself using the gesture, emphasizing her involuntary use. Other bgirls explain that they throw dick as a kind of

³⁸⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

³⁸⁶ Ill Mischief, phone interview with the author, September 29, 2009.

³⁸⁷ Candy, phone interview with the author, September 29, 2009.

mockery. “Some people don’t like it like that, but whatever. I’ll use the cock, but I do it not because that’s what the guys do. I almost do it as a way of making fun of it.”³⁸⁸ This is a perfect example of separation between bgirls’ intended meanings of gestures and what the gestures actually represent.

Bgirl Aruna states, “since there’s so many more b-girls coming up right now, soon you will get a *girl’s* [italics mine] way of how to do it. We’re not there yet, but that’s coming.”³⁸⁹ The existence of liminal burns has begun to change the erasure of women’s expression. Bgirls are learning from the previous generations, increasing the probability of woman-centered breaking language. Now that we are beginning to have “a girls way of doing it,” how is it viewed in comparison to the established canon of Foundation?

Rokafella³⁹⁰ has been using liminal burns in battle since the late 1990s and has already influenced New Millennium bgirls on the path of empowerment. “Rokafella tells the story about somebody she saw a long time ago. They scripted the action of opening up their -- excuse me-- ‘pussy lips’ and engulfed the guy in them.”³⁹¹ Rokafella did not say who the woman was that used the burn and Severe said she did not see it firsthand. “I only used my imagination to figure out what she was representing.” Bgirl Vendetta has witnessed Rokafella use female-oriented burns. “I have to say, before me and Rokafella, I didn’t know what the heck would be something that’s a hardcore-feminine gesture to throw at a man.”³⁹² She explained some of the feminine gestures Rokafella used. “And, you know, one thing that she did was, where she shimmy’s down, and grabs the breast you know? And then, she did this one where she was battle rocking³⁹³; she would lift up her leg, and grab her lips [vulva] and [mime] cover[ing] the person, and throw them on their back, like, ‘You’re back in my womb. Shut your mouth!’”³⁹⁴ After Vendetta described the movement, she reflected on how it made her feel. “I was like ‘OK!’ It was funny. I kinda liked it! I mean, it’s grotesque, but I’m like, ‘Yeah, that’s pretty raw, I kinda like that.’ I mean, to be honest with you, you know, I need to think more about that because that’s actually an

³⁸⁸ Vendetta, Phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

³⁸⁹ Cooper, *We B*GirLz*, 144. Quote from bgirl Aruna

³⁹⁰ I consider Rokafella the ambassador of female language in breaking because she is the only woman I interviewed who illustrated pride in being women through battle gestures. She organizes projects around women and their involvement in hip hop. Rokafella is creating a documentary entitled “All the Ladies Say” that highlights women in breaking.

³⁹¹ Severe, phone interview with the author, October 26, 2009.

³⁹² Vendetta, phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

³⁹³ Battle rocking is the new generation’s term for the battle dance form known as Uprocking.

³⁹⁴ Vendetta, phone interview with the author, November 1, 2009.

interesting avenue to try to venture down, and try to come up with more feminine gestures.”³⁹⁵ Vendetta also listed specific movements she has learned from Rokafella that reference the mother’s generative power. “Something I learned from her: she would go to them [the bboy], grab them, cradle them like a baby, pat them, you know, let them suck on her breasts.” This passing of knowledge from woman-to-woman is what bgirls need to establish female gestures in breaking.

K8, who used the cock gesture in battle, was met with contempt by a bboy who mocked “You don’t have one!” when she used it against him. The next second she tried a feminine gesture. “I pretended to grab my uterus and threw that on his head.” Because it didn’t work, she gave up on it -- until she went to a workshop where the topic of burns was brought up. Now K8 is rethinking gestures. “I went to a workshop with Alien Ness and he talked about like, burners [burns] being something that comes from you, and is true to life, to your everyday existence. I’m trying to be more like that now and not, um, throwing dicks and penises everywhere -- because that’s kinda weird.”³⁹⁶

On the other hand, there are bgirls who do not agree with liminal burns. Bgirl Mohawk asks, “How would that even work? Pull a tampon out of my vagina and fling it? Not as easy of a feat. I just don’t see it working, and since I’m masculine, I would rather throw a dick.”³⁹⁷ Later, Mohawk explains that she will never be “THAT competitive [where] things like gestures, pre-battle meditations and other routines become serious or deep to me.”³⁹⁸

Bgirl Candy states that Rokafella encouraged her to “throw her boobs” when battling. However, Candy chose not to, perceiving this as “flaunting herself to the guys,” which she considers “sleazy.”³⁹⁹ Bgirl Dura explains her perception of liminal burns. “I went out west and the girls are like grabbing their chest and pushing themselves at the guys, and I’m like ‘Yeah I don’t really dig that.’ I don’t like when girls grab themselves or their stuff.”⁴⁰⁰

A recent example of a women being transformed and then used as a sex object was told to me by Peaches. “At one of the battles recently I just saw a girl get down on her knees in front

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ K8, phone interview with the author, May 7 2009.

³⁹⁷ Mohawk, phone interview with the author, October 18, 2009.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Candy, phone interview with the author, September 29, 2009.

⁴⁰⁰ Dura, phone interview with the author, November 8, 2009.

of the guy, and look like she was giving head to a guy.⁴⁰¹ And what he did, of course, was put his hand on the back of her head. That is a situation a woman should never put herself in.”⁴⁰²

Do liminal gestures allow the female body to become a site of feminist cultural critique?⁴⁰³ Janet Wolff explains that its “preexisting meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze, can always prevail and reappropriate the body, despite the intentions of the woman herself.”⁴⁰⁴ Both Candy and Dura perceive any feminine gestures as objects of the male gaze; and Mohawk and Peaches do not see feminine gestures working as well as male-reproductive gestures.

As Wolff acknowledges and as Mohawk states, female reproductive gestures are not “as easy of a feat.” The art of female gestures is certainly an art of understanding the representations of, and by, the female body. And because there is less of a cultural repertory of female aggressive sexuality and gestures to draw from they are tricky. They require wit and skill (the first recipe of battling) to be delivered effectively . Wolff suggests that “Any body politics, therefore, must speak *about* the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction [while] at the same time disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation.”⁴⁰⁵

Where does female expressivity reign? While liminal burns are still working their way into the vocabulary of breaking and bgirls, other dance forms, such as Jamaican Dancehall, House, locking, popping, and Krumpin’ have been practiced and perfected by the women from the beginning. Dance-hall krumpin’, uses powerful hip movements assertively to express a femaleness that seems not allowed in breaking. In Krumpin,’ women dance with power, speed and energy. They aren’t seen as masculine, they do not take pride in “dancing like the guys” or adopting -- possibly because of where movement stems from in the female body in their style of dancing: the sternum and the hips. Women are allowed to move their hips any way they like and are not shunned for doing so. Likewise, men are not seen as homosexual or less masculine when they rotate their hips.

⁴⁰¹ It is important to note that Peaches already interpreted the girl’s burn before the guy responded as an advantage to the bboy because she was on her knees in front of the guy.

⁴⁰² Peaches, phone interview with the author, February 11, 2010.

⁴⁰³ Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality,” 81. Wolff questions whether the female body may be a site of cultural studies and critique. I am asking whether liminal burns make this possible.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality.”

Many of the “burns” in krumpin’ emphasize the open crotch and the power of femininity with floor movements. Floor movements consist of sitting in wide open 180 degree, second-position splits, bouncing up and down. Women will flex or vibrate one butt cheek while lying face down in the open splits. They will use these same isolations while extending one leg up to their heads in the “six-o’clock” position. Squatting, with their hands are on their knees, the women will rapidly bounce up-and-down (so fast as to almost vibrate), even travelling across space with this up-and-down motion, then rise up with using quick circulations of the hips.

Tweetie, a 1980s hip hop-party dancer recently created a piece in collaboration with her dance partner Soraya. She uses mainly popping (contraction of the neck, chest, forearm and leg muscles), tutting (A style that involves creating 90 degree angles with the arms, hands and fingers), and waving (creating the illusion of a wave traveling through the body) techniques in her choreography, accenting her piece with wonderfully executed feminine gestures. Some of them include hands on the hips, in the infamous “runway” walk. Hands placed under the ears and framing the face, “tease the hair.” All movements were executed with the fragmented stop-and-go motion of popping. Tweetie states, “ ‘Below’ is a piece that I am very proud of. It has been a very loooooong [her emphasis] time since I did something that made me feel more than [of] a woman, and performing a style I truly have grown to love. Finally, with the help, inspiration, motivation and choreography of my home girl Soraya (eeiiiooww) featuring our friend Cicely of Nu-Stylz, (middle girl) this was truly a nice collaboration from the both of us.”⁴⁰⁶ With this piece, Tweetie demonstrates her love for the woman she has grown to be. At Hard Body’s (an all-female house dance crew based in NYC) party “The House Warming” in New York City, their gestures included a wide variety of femininity represented in the dance. Women mimed mirrors, applying makeup, playing with hair and all danced with an upwardness I never see in breaking. [These gestures are like the gestures of the women from the 1980s, self referential of women’s history in breaking.]

Anxious Patriarchy is certainly being voiced and acted out among the bboys today. “You are not doing real hip hop [or being a real emcee] if you do not have bboys in your videos [take out the booty dancers]” and “if you want to keep it real, you will call the dance bboying.”⁴⁰⁷ These statements are the start of “taking back and redefining the dance” with Foundation, which,

⁴⁰⁶ Email from Tweetie.

⁴⁰⁷ *The Freshest Kids*.

for women, is both admirable and destructive. Foundation creates the idea of “authenticity” by establishing traditions that are totally male-oriented. In terms of performative modes, it depends on the teacher. Many unfortunately, are simply “inventing tradition.” Daniel J. Wolkowitz, who also deals with folklorism and the analysis of invented tradition states, “Dancing bodies in couple dances also express social relations of power—who leads and who follows....” The social relation being established in hip hop is one of the pioneers leading, and the new generation following. The social order must be followed, and “pioneering” is the validation used. This reinstates power back to the leaders of the subculture. The students learn the movements -- along with the ideas of the pioneers and their experiences in New York during their prime time. The question is: Do these strictures leave room for new inventions and changes in the future? Or is Foundation’s job to keep it static? Or can both exist like traditional ballet and new forms?

Struggling against this order of truth are the liminal bgirls who reflect values of the Black Matriarch re-appropriating the traditionally negative stereotypes and changing them into power. She is subsequently labeled unfeminine, too strong, aggressive and assertive.⁴⁰⁸ bell hooks explains, historically, how the strength, manly endurance and resiliency is a retained legacy that holds credence today. Black female power challenges masculinity and traditional family structures -- especially today with the numerous young and single black mothers -- undercutting black masculinity. Decidedly, “many Black men reject Black women as marital partners, claiming that Black women are less desirable than White ones because we are too assertive.”⁴⁰⁹ Black women were/are considered a “failure to the true cult of womanhood” (also an invented legacy about white female propriety), a failure to “the submissiveness of the White woman.”⁴¹⁰

White women are considered “nicer” or more “obedient.” This is the rationale that some black girls have reported as being the reason given about why pioneers did not teach them. “They teach the white girls [how to break] because they do what they want.”⁴¹¹ (I have personal experiences with another black woman in Savannah, Georgia. It was much harder for us to get the bboys to teach us, but when white women were around, or even remarked “Oooh that’s cool!” they (the bboys) quickly offered to teach them). At this point, the white bgirls have the ability to use their traditional stereotypical “submissiveness” to flirt their way into power (that is,

⁴⁰⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 77.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Discussion with Amanda.

make the men teach them the moves). However as non-black bgirls get into breaking, they also experience the same discrimination and ridicule for being manly. Now they are subsuming the power of the bgirl “Black Matriarch-ness.” Just as the stereotypes of the female body (white submissiveness) can be used in battle by all bgirls, so can the Black Matriarch (strong, powerful) be used in battle by all bgirls. It just takes careful attention to details.

Since the New Millennium women have begun to take power in hip hop, now the men are beginning to take their position of liminality as well. For example, women are integral in organizing, hosting and sponsoring community events nationally as well as internationally. Yet the emcee/rappers and the men who follow their “swagger” are pouncing at the opportunity to gain back power in hip hop.⁴¹² They have become fashionable young ladies without even realizing it! The emcee has been putting on feminine identities in their dress and movement. Rappers outfit themselves in oversized clothing to the extreme -- in fact, it resembles women’s dresses and skirts. The oversized white T-shirt called a “tall T” comes down to the knees and past the elbows. They are sold in popular sporting-goods stores that market the “hip hop” fashions of today. In various “Urban Wear” stores, ankle-brushing shorts can be purchased. More recently, bright neon colors (something considered very feminine to previous gangsta-macho generations) have become the main hue of “hip hop fashion.” For example the “New Boys” who released the popular song-dance hit “The Jerk” sport bright colors and skinny jeans (form-fitting jeans)⁴¹³ in their videos. The popular New Orleanian rapper, Lil’ Wayne, also wears skinny jeans in his video, *My Leather ‘So Soft*. Rappers have begun to lash out at the skinny-jeans trend claiming that *real* rappers do not wear skinny jeans. Rapper Plies connects skinny jeans to race stating, “I don’t wear tight jeans like the white boys, but I do get wasted like the white boys,” which is featured in Gucci Mane’s song, “Wasted” off of the album *The State VS. Radric Davis*. JayZ⁴¹⁴ boldly connects femininity with skinny jeans and bright colors, scornfully stating “You niggas jeans too tight, colors too bright, voices too light” in the song “D.O.A (Death of Autotunes)” from his album *The Blue Print 3* (affiliated with rapper “50 cent”). 50 cent created a

⁴¹² Particularly since the demise of the record industry with the rise of the internet.

⁴¹³ The New Boys even created a song entitled “Skinny Jeans and a Mic” about their choice to wear skinny jeans.

⁴¹⁴ The L Magazine.com notes that JayZ “mentioned the issue [the skinny jeans trend] on [the song] swagger like us off rapper T.I.’s album Paper Trails, ‘I can’t wear skinny jeans ‘cuz my knots don’t fit...’” In the Texan rapper Chamillionaire’s song “Swagger like Coup” he agrees with JayZ stating “...tried to put on skinny jeans couldn’t zip my zipper, now let me be blunt real quick, I don’t wear skinny jeans cuz my dick don’t fit.”

tank top whose cut and shape resembled a woman's blouse with thin little straps, a kind of thick-spaghetti strapped tank.

In the mainstream, new hip hop dance evolutions have become increasingly feminine. Another instructional song dance called the "Stanky Leg" showcases a feminine style of dance that is reminiscent of whacking and voguing. An example of a feminine movement in the "stanky-leg" style occurs when the hand circles around the head as if the dancer is slicking the hair down the neck.

Interestingly, all this feminization is satirically captured and interpreted on "tape," in the popular comic strip turned video cartoon, *The Boondocks* created by Aaron McGruder. His second season features the rise of the Anxious Patriarch through liminality. The cartoon depicts the current state of generational black life in America from slavery to hip hop America. Rappers help depict their own materialistic lives through sardonic storylines -- since the hip hop story is narrated from multiple perspectives by different "stars" even while the trends are being played out in society at large. A few sharply funny episodes focused specifically on the feminization of male rappers in their fashion choices of dress and movements. In their outfits, rappers in the cartoon-videos wore the same oversized shirts and dress-length flowing shorts as they do in real life. Rappers in *The Boondocks* followed the instructional song-dances of hip hop through mocking videos such as "Homies over Ho's." The dance is done as the two men face each other, arms positioned in a half rectangular shape. Then the men begin to "bump" chests repeatedly, like celebratory football players do after scoring a touchdown. The rappers chant "homies over ho's" as they execute the dance to the same tune of a very popular song, entitled "Shake that Laffy Taffy" by the popular rap group, D4L. In the cartoon, the sensible character "Huey" is looking at and analyzing the video remarking to his commercially-influenced little brother "Riley," "Co'mon Riley the song? The dance? I mean, 'do the homie?'" as he watches the rapper "Gangstalicious" shake a bottle of champagne until it overflows like a super big man ejaculating super semen on other men.⁴¹⁵ Of course, Riley denies that he sees any gay tendencies with his favorite rapper Gangstalicious. This "music video" sends a message to *The Boondocks'* viewers that rappers are beginning to have more bodily contact with men than women, highlighting the feminized, homosexualized and eroticized tendencies of rappers today. Their anxiety has led

⁴¹⁵ "The Story of Gangstalicious, Part 2," *The Boondocks*, DVD, directed by Seung Eun Kim (Culver City, CA: Adelaide Productions, 2008).

them to take on both masculinity *and* femininity (i.e., the feminization of hip hop through clothing and behaviors). The Anxious Patriarch is attempting to assume both genders-- so the women may assume none.

As Tricia Rose argues, “These public sphere contests must involve more than responses to sexist male speech; they must also entail the development of sustained, strong female voices that stake claim to public space generally.”⁴¹⁶ Women must begin to claim spaces for themselves within the male territories to access the freedom of expression that hip hop culture pledges to its practitioners. Fighting the oppression of women on literal, figurative and metaphorical fronts is an important mission for women in hip hop. Women must connect in order to fight oppression.

The Liminal bgirls have already begun to accomplish this goal. Liminal gestures are not simply responses. They transcend traditional stereotypes and beliefs of the female body and femininity. Utilizing these traditional, essentialist ideas⁴¹⁷ as a symbol of power critiques ultimately usurps male-reproductive phallic gestures. Wolff “raises the question of whether, or how, women can engage in a critical politics of the body in a culture which so comprehensively codes and defines women’s bodies as subordinate and passive and as objects of the male gaze.”⁴¹⁸ This is already a triumph for liminal burns.

How do we fight abjection and ultimately oppression in the breaking battle and in the hip hop world at large? Again Wolff points out, “The general question raised by ‘the monstrous-feminine,’ whatever its presumed origins, is whether it renders the (abject) body a potential site of transgression and feminist intervention.”⁴¹⁹

In the New Millennium the courage that women may possibly gain from female reproductive gestures will give them the daring to enter the ciphers, to stop comparing themselves to men, and to begin to cultivate the strength to believe in themselves.

⁴¹⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 163.

⁴¹⁷ For example, the vagina dentata was a depiction of women’s vaginas as a castration tool of the male anatomy. Utilizing this image and many others (like that of quick sand) as an entity of power.

⁴¹⁸ Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality.”

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ansley Joye Jones aka Jukeboxx is a bgirl, capoeirista, hip hop feminist, dancer/choreographer, writer/researcher, student, educator, artist and foremost, activist. Born and raised in Augusta, Georgia she began her journey as a Hip Hop dancer at the age of eight. It was in her first year of college when she acquired a love for dance history and decided to go to school for dance. She earned her BFA in Visual and Performing Arts at Savannah State University in 2004. She is currently a master's candidate in the American Dance Studies program at Florida State University. In the future she plans to pursue a doctorate in dance studies, direct a hip hop dance degree program and continues her community activist work with young people through hip hop culture.