Step Into a World

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Campus was bleak this early January morning. It was twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Many spaces were beginning to allow masked, double-vaccinated groups to gather indoors, but spring semester had not started. Aside from a few staff and stray researchers, the only people on campus at Princeton Theological Seminary were there for me. I walked the length of campus with a swirl of emotions. It had been a thirteen-year battle to get to this dissertation defense, and I felt the weight of my sacrifices. I was in my forties and on food stamps. I believed in my work, but I still got butterflies in my stomach when thinking about the challenges that my professors would level at me today. Despite all this, the biggest thing on my mind was the eclectic group of people who were making their way to Princeton that day. They represented different worlds from my past. There was my mother, who flew in from the Seattle area. My sister, the Instagram model, and her husband, an Italian-trained bespoke tailor. Uncle Brad would be there, a professional cowboy. My Brazilian-Taiwanese girlfriend was there with me. My best friends: a child of Jamaican immigrants who is now a sci-fi writer, and a child of Hong Kong immigrants who is a creative type working in corporate America. While most of those who began the PhD program with me had graduated, one of them became a professor at PTS and would attend my defense as a member of the dissertation committee. One of the younger PhD candidates came to support me as a colleague. A number of undergraduates from Princeton University were coming. A few academics had come to town for it. And, of course, my dance crew would be there.

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WORLDS APART

I didn't grow up in the hip hop community. This is not necessarily because it was foreign to my white family in the suburbs. While music was valued very highly in our household, the truth is that rap, rock, and most anything other than Christian hymns were rarely heard in our conservative Christian house. Somehow, I convinced my parents to let me listen to Christian rap in eighth grade, and I was hooked. It was something new and different. And it was fun. Hymns were great and all, but rap was fun. Our family did not have cable television, and MTV was a completely unknown entity to me. I was an energetic fourteen-year-old, trying to learn how to fit in with my peers and how to stand out at the same time. I was coming of age and hoping to figure out my identity while I was sheltered from exposure to the outside world. In such an environment, it may seem like a paradox that my family also encouraged me to learn from people who are different from me, but my father lived during the civil rights movement and engrained a healthy amount of xenophilia into his kids. Christian hip hop music let me explore the edges of my boundaries without overstepping them.

As chance would have it, I was also the least musical person in my family. While I struggled to clap on beat, my sister and father would belt out praises that sounded like a choir of angels had descended upon Clear Creek Baptist Church. It's not that I wasn't a performer; I had been doing stand-up comedy for my family and neighbors since I was four years old. But there wasn't much of an outlet for stand-up at church, where musicians were front and center. I had tried my entire life to be musical enough to join my family jam sessions, but my pitch was so bad that I was usually asked to leave or criticized until I cried. I joined a few youth choirs along the way in hopes of learning to sing on pitch, but it never worked. By stumbling into hip hop, I thought I might have found a way of doing music without fighting the endless battle for pitch. Maybe one day I could perform for our church like my sister and father. I started writing goofy Christian rap songs. Other than DC Talk and Vanilla Ice's appearance in a Ninja Turtles movie, I really didn't know anything about hip hop. Finally, someone humored me and let me perform one of my raps at a summer camp, and some real rappers in the audience invited me to join a freestyle circle that night. I had no idea what I was doing, and they were clearly disappointed. But I learned a great deal from that brief encounter. Now I had heard of "freestyle," and I started practicing nonstop. Unlike my singing, my rapping actually did get better with practice.

I always struggled with team sports, and the basketball players were the cool kids at my junior high. I unsuccessfully tried to improve my basketball skills until I was homeschooled for a few years and team sports were off the table anyway. Instead, a lady in our church offered my parents a discount for me to attend her Tae Kwon Do school. Keep in mind that, like every other kid born in the 80s, I wanted to be a ninja when I grew up. A decade of Ninja Turtle fandom had prepared my heart for martial arts, and I fell into it like a fish in water. My supportive family would drive three hours to Portland every few months for my tournaments and belt tests, and every time my father would tell me how good I was. He also offered plenty of criticisms, but it was different when he saw potential in me. Around this time, my parents even started letting me watch Kung Fu movies, starting with *Rumble in the Bronx*. Every time I made a trip to Hollywood Video, I would rent a movie with Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, or Jet Li. I would try to practice their moves and implement them while sparring.

Returning to high school for a year, I once performed a lip sync to the epic (I'm sure everyone agrees on its epicness) rap song, "Turtle Power." All the coolest kids in class – including the cheerleaders and basketball players – told me that I was a great dancer. My flying ninja kicks were one thing, but they also said I had rhythm! In fact, I learned to clap on beat around this time. It started happening when I let the music move my entire body. My church didn't encourage much movement during hymns, which is why I learned rhythm from hip hop. Well, maybe not exactly hip hop. I probably learned it at a Carman concert. In any case, rhythm could only be unlocked by letting the beat into my soul.

At community college the next year I met a guy named Marc, who knew a little of the style popularly known as "breakdance." He wasn't an expert, but I asked him to teach me what he could. We started meeting for dance practice several days a week. It required the balance, flexibility, and coordination of martial arts, along with the creativity and rhythm of rapping. All my interest in martial arts and hip hop came together, and this dance started to take over my life. Marc's friend group became like family, and several of them used to break in high school. A few of them showed me some moves, like windmill, and my mind was blown. They helped me start learning it. My parents started opening up to secular music around this time. Soon I had rented Hollywood Video's entire collection of breaking VHS tapes: *Beat Street, Style Wars, Wild Style, Krush Groove, Body Rock, Breakin', Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, and even more recent ones, like *You Got Served*. I couldn't believe that humans could do these feats with their bodies. I saw a dancer doing a move called the "worm" during Usher's performance at the Grammys, and I kept the recording and refused to let anyone in my family tape over it. I learned that I could pay exorbitantly high prices at Mr. Rags (a hip hop clothing store) to buy VHS tapes of low-quality camcorder recordings of underground breaking battles. When I stumbled into other breakers practicing in parking lots or at the mall, I would ask them to teach me anything they could. I found websites on the nascent dial-up Internet that contained long explanations of moves in paragraph form. Once in a while I could convince my family to stay off the phone long enough for me to download a ten-second dance video. Along the way, I read whatever I could find about the history and culture of this art form.

Breaking was not a way to win my father's approval, by the way. Unlike my sister's glorious voice, or even my stand-up comedy, he actually shook his head when I watched breaking and said, "I don't know how you can waste your time with that stuff." But I was about to move out of the house, and hip hop connected these different parts of myself and helped me figure out who I am.

THE WORLD OF HIP HOP

The roots of hip hop were humble and organic. In the 1970s, the South Bronx saw a fusion of cultures that brought together dance and music influenced by funk, mambo, "toasting" (a Jamaican way of playing records), disco, and, of course, kung fu films. The Bronx was plagued by a struggling economy, grueling gang violence, and a series of fires.[1] Teens in this lower-income community started coming together for parties, and rituals and myths were formed that are still engrained in the culture fifty years later. As I began to learn about hip hop *culture*, rather than just the music genre, one term was repeatedly highlighted: "the four elements." Whatever the origin of the term, Afrika Bambaataa is credited with being the primary advocate of the idea that true hip hop is made of DJing, Breaking, MCing, and Graffiti.[2] Practitioners of these four elements are known as "hip hop heads."

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As the legend goes, hip hop was born at a back-to-school party on August 11, 1973, at 1520 Sedgwick Ave. in the Bronx. A Jamaican immigrant named DJ Kool Herc played songs for a majority Black audience, and he noticed that people danced harder during a song's "break." This is the part where the vocals, guitar, keyboard, bass, and most instruments suddenly go silent. Only the drums continue. A break often lasts no more than one or two eight-counts. Ethnographer Joe Schloss draws an important

connection between hip hop's break and Barbara Browning's research on Samba. Browning notes that the syncopation in Samba music suppresses the strong beat, and this is what generates the dance of Samba. Her wording is poignant: "This suspension leaves the body with a hunger that can only be satisfied by filling the silence with motion."[3] When expected sounds are missing from a song, listeners tend to fill that void by clapping or dancing. Take a moment to listen to the Amen break, one of the most sampled breaks in history. The break happens at 1:26, and it lasts merely two eight-counts. Let yourself feel it. You *feel* the break hit. Kool Herc's awareness of this – at only eighteen years old – changed the world. He saw the dancers going crazy during the break. Right after it ended, he took his fingers and slid the record backward, so the turntable's needle was back at the beginning of the break. This "looping" of the break started hip hop. While the music of the time period (James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, the Jimmy Castor Bunch, etc.) was foundational for hip hop, DJs like Herc would hunt and find breaks that no one could recognize, coming from any genre.[4] The role of the DJ was to give audiences a unique experience that they could not get anywhere else, introducing them to new music and new ways of partying. DJing is the first element of hip hop.

As partygoers danced with more enthusiasm on the break, they began grouping together in circles. The circles are still called "cyphers," a term likely taken from the Five Percent Nation, in which a "cipher" is a constant circle of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. Within the hip hop community, dancers, rappers, or other artists form cyphers and take turns sharing their art with others in the circle. From the beginning of hip hop, artists tried to outdo each other. As dance cyphers formed around the break, the dance quickly became competitive and revolved around "burns" (insults). Herc and other popular DJs recruited the best dancers for their crews, and they became known as "B-Boys" and "B-Girls." Herc's original B-Boys performed theatrical dance moves inspired by larger-than-life performers like James Brown. The Legendary Twins were known to dress like Groucho Marx and circle the room, while Clark Kent's signature move was "the Superman," in which he pretended to run into a phone booth and change into a superhero.[5] According to Herc, "B-Boy" and "B-Girl" stand for "Break-Boy" and "Break-Girl," because "breaking" was slang for "going off" or "going crazy" in the Bronx in the 1970s.[6] Of course, the happy coincidence of this turn of phrase is that the most enthusiastic dancing happens on a song's break. Every Bronx DJ needed B-Boys and B-Girls in their crew to throw lively, memorable parties. The dance of hip hop became known as "breaking," and it is the second element.[7]

The dance that is today called "breaking" is different from the dance of Herc's B-Boys, and the reasons for this are debated. While the original B-Boys called their dance "burning," a separate dance style that was also frequently called "burning" had already made its way around New York City's boroughs in the late 1960s. The prior dance is primarily remembered as "rocking" (sometimes called "uprock"), likely named for the rock music to which performers frequently danced.[8] It was a bit more athletic than Herc's B-Boys' style, though it also centered on burns, particularly during the break. From the outset, rocking crews met for competitive dance battles all over New York City. By 1981, a particular dance style of the Bronx was called both "rocking" and "breaking," and dancers were called both "rockers" and "B-Boys"/"B-Girls." This dance conforms very closely with the dance that is called "breaking" today. While connections between uprock and today's breaking have long been recognized, more and more people now argue that the dance currently called "breaking" traces its lineage *directly* to uprock, while the dancers at Herc's parties were merely an indirect influence.[9] Others claim that Bronx rocking crews revived the B-Boy dance of the hip hop parties in 1975 after it began losing importance among DJ party crews.[10] Dance battles in the late 1970s were less connected to parties, often taking place on the street and in abandoned buildings.[11] In any case, the dance conventions of today's breaking were solidified between 1975 and 1979, and the terms "rocking" and "breaking" were largely conflated.[12] By all

accounts, Latin Americans had a heavy influence on hip hop dance duringthis time, and they were increasingly more involved in other elements, as well.

Bronx DJs got members of their production crews to pick up the microphone and make announcements at parties when the DJ was busy. Announcements included details about upcoming parties or something along the lines of, "So and so, your mother's lookin' for you at the door."[13] Over time, the more charismatic announcers had fun on the microphone and started rhyming. Of course, the person on the microphone would comment on the extraordinary dancing in the cyphers during breaks. Just as dancers are compelled to fill the silence in the break with motion, the announcer sometimes filled it by rhyming alongside the drumbeat. This is the third element of hip hop, called MCing (taken from "master of ceremonies"), and the focus was on bringing energy to the party. The rhyming was often called "rapping."

DJs, dancers, MCs, and everyone else in hip hop took on new names that reflected their style or characteristics. All over New York City in the 1970s, kids were writing their hip hop names in highly stylized displays with spray cans and paint markers. While graffiti has been around for millennia, Joseph Ewoodzie argues that it served a particular function for marking gang territories in Philadelphia and New York in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to a unique subculture of its own. Unique artistic and social conventions developed, including two competitive aspects: to have the most widely distributed name and to have a name in the most difficult locations. In the 1970s, New York's subways were plastered with names inside and out, which became a major topic of conversation across all sectors of the city. New Yorkers were forced to discuss the nature of art and vandalism as the city began to enact stricter prohibitions and policing measures.[14] Since the beginning, graffiti writers have both lamented and thrived on being targeted by authority. Graffiti writer Ron English notes that television viewers offer an unwritten agreement that they will watch advertisements in exchange for content, but there is no equal exchange for street advertisements, in which people and businesses with money display their names with no benefit to those who have to see it.[15] As such, graffiti is often perceived to be an equalizer for those with lesser means. In one of the first news pieces about graffiti (1971), writer Taki 183 asks, "Why do they go after the little guy? Why not the campaign organizations that put stickers all over the subways at election time?"[16] Graffiti rounds out the culture as the fourth element of hip hop.

The story of hip hop is inspirational. Now that I teach in higher education, I begin each class by telling this story to my students. The Bronx in the 1970s was synonymous with urban decay.[17] In the face of adversity, teenagers decided to get together for parties and began creating art. They changed the world.

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FROM THE WORLD OF THE BRONX TO THE WORLD

Hip hop comes from a very particular environment. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, and the final throes of the Vietnam War raged under Nixon in the early 1970s. Kids in the Bronx saw their parents and older siblings fighting for civil rights while at the same time serving in the U.S.'s controversial war. All the while, the Bronx itself faced heavy economic hardships that were exacerbated by New York City policies, which in turn, led to a rise in gang violence.[18] Eric Schneider points out that soildiers returning from Vietnam found that their warfare experience quickly earned them status in gangs.[19] But over time, the urban decay that had pushed people into gangs was only aggravated by gang life, and eventually gang members began to seek new outlets. Black Benjie, a young adult recruited by the Ghetto Brothers gang to be a peace counselor instead of a warlord, was killed on December 2, 1971, while trying to mediate during a flare-up of violence at a park. Rather than seeking vengeance and escalating a gang war, the Ghetto Brothers responded by setting up the Hoe Avenue Boys Club Peace Meeting the next week, in which over forty gangs agreed on peace. Lorine Padilla, former first lady of the Savage Skulls, says that this peace treaty opened up the Bronx and allowed people to go to parties in any Bronx territory. She said, "Had there been no peace treaty, there'd had been no hip-hop."[20] Gang-related homicides peaked in 1972 and decreased significantly after 1974.[21] Ewoodzie argues that hip hop replaced gangs as the primary way for Bronx teens to find status.[22] On the other hand, many also left or avoided gangs because hip hop was more alluring.[23] Still, remnants of gang culture stayed in the Bronx and left their marks on hip hop. Dance crews would "fly colors" (wear distinguishing clothing to set their crew apart) like gangs, and rocking crews were accompanied by fight crews when they traveled to other territories for battles.[24] B-Boy Ken Swift, who began breaking at the age of twelve in 1978, describes Bronx residents smelling daily fires and seeing the buildings next door in ruins. He says, "What do you got to look forward to? When something comes you just grab it, because you're so vulnerable… And when the hip hop and the stuff came, it's like, 'Yeah. Yeah! Ok, I'm with this.'"[25]

Regardless of the cultural milieu surrounding hip hop's birth, Schloss offers an important caution not to give the credit for hip hop's origins to a socio-economic environment. The artists deserve their due just like any other artist in history. Schloss highlights that hip hop was created by *people* in the Bronx. It was not created by the *world* of the Bronx.[26] Ken Swift says he loved breaking because he could create a move that was his own, despite the pressures being pushed on him as a kid.[27] Having a unique name attached to one's art is crucial to hip hop. Graffiti writers' lives revolve around where to display their names. DJs and MCs take on names from characteristics or personal histories. Breakers are given a name – usually by a mentor – to match their unique style, and then they maintain their style for the rest of their lives in order to match their name.[28] These names are associated with the unique legacy that each member of the hip hop community leaves within their art forms. Rembrandt was a product of his time, but his name is still remembered for his unique creativity, originality, and mastery of his craft. In the same way, the names of Kool Herc, the Legendary Twins, floor rockers like Batch, MCs like Grandmaster Caz, Taki 145, and all the artists in the 1970s Bronx should be given respect for their artistry.

Perhaps this last point is why these four art forms resonated so strongly with teenagers around the globe as soon as they were exposed to it. The rise of punk rock paralleled that of hip hop, and it was clear that teens were hungry for new edgy and aggressive outlets to express creativity. Media agents put the Dynamic Rockers, the Rock Steady Crew, and the New York City Breakers on international TV, film, and stage. The Fatback Band, the Sugar Hill Gang, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Kurtis Blow, and others started making music records based on performances at Bronx hip hop parties. Fab Five Freddy, Lee Quiñones, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and other street artists disclosed their identities and found acceptance in the art world. Children of the 80s saw hip hop take over pop culture, and it was larger than life. Kids from around

the world rushed into it – not only as consumers, but as new practitioners learning these four crafts.[29] In the face of adversity, the Bronx artists had the grit and determination to make art, accomplish incredible feats no one ever imagined, and to make their names known. This is what continues to connect with people in completely different worlds. People like me.

Hip hop is constantly evolving because of its competitive nature. This is partly due to the way Bronx residents channeled their grit into art. Ken Swift says that while breaking can be performed on stage and in public arenas like the Olympics, the inherent aggression in the dance is built for the rawness of the Bronx.[30] DJs of the early 1970s competed to throw the best parties. Each graffiti artist (then and now) tried to make their name the most widespread and to place their name in the most difficult locations. The dancers in the Bronx were constantly battling each other throughout the 1970s, seeking to perform the most exciting, memorable, original, musical, and stinging burns. Rap battles awarded clout to MCs that insulted their opponents with the most clever rhymes and wordplays. Competition pushes artists to innovate and showcase their art. A ten-year-old recently told me that he breaks because of his "thirst for greatness." The uniqueness of the Bronx also leveled the playing field. Traditional dances and instruments are usually learned from paid lessons, while underprivileged kids in the Bronx made their own dances and turned their record players into instruments. Within 1970s graffiti culture, it was almost imperative that paint materials were "racked" (stolen) – even by affluent writers.[31] There are legends that the number of DJs expanded after equipment was looted during the great New York City blackout of 1977.[32] Hip hop has always carried the promise that anyone with determination can become great.

While learning hip hop is not expensive, monetary rewards are also hard to come by. This makes prestige, being recognized for one's art, one of the highest values in hip hop culture. Authenticity is important. Those who practice the art forms without caring about the culture are treated as outsiders. The 1980s is often referred to as the "breaksploitation" era by those within the community. At that time promoters hired breakers to perform around the world, but it was only a passing fad in popular media, stripped of its culture. It went back underground in the 1990s and stayed within a tight, close-knit community of people who appreciated its artistry and were determined to maintain control of its conventions. Breakers train as full-time athletes with no other goal than to impress each other. Ken Swift says:

> Unless you're a B-Boy, you can't understand some rhythmic patterns within movements and combinations if you don't do it. So most people look at it as, "Those kids are just really angry. They just bouncing on their backs…" They don't look at it as a dance, first of all… Everything they've been fed, since the 80s, practically, dealt with feeding someone a physical feat that didn't have relationship to music…. People seeing that will look at it and think "breakdancers are acrobats."… They would never show someone making a connection with a song. Because that isn't dynamic. It's not exciting. But that's the essence of B-Boying.[33]

The breaksploitation era clinched hip hop culture's skepticism about popular success. Like punk culture, hip hop frowns on those who "sell out," that is, those who are willing to misrepresent their culture in exchange for a paycheck.[34] Where to draw the line is a topic of discussion within the community. As breaking was fading from pop culture, rap became entrenched in the music industry and began to repeat the patterns. Much of rap became separated from the rest of hip hop culture as outsiders created new dances, new styles of art, and new forms of music to keep up with the passing trends of pop culture. It was not long before there were famous rappers who could not even name the four elements of hip hop. This has exacerbated frustration and distrust of outsiders among many within the hip hop community.

Any cultural phenomenon that leaks into mainstream society is at risk of taking on too much external influence and becoming

unrecognizable, but the hip hop community developed a way to keep its culture together by naming the four elements. As the culture spreads into new territory, it is always at risk of assimilating to the point of losing its foundation. This is why the four elements are so crucial. While the hip hop pioneers are proud of their Bronx heritage, they do not close it off to just the Bronx. Hip hop itself draws inspiration from a vast array of cultures and welcomes new innovators who stay true to the four elements, understand their history, and remain dedicated to the culture. Since the 1990s, it is the breakers who have held the four elements together. As I studied hip hop history through VHS tapes and primitive websites in the 1990s, I soon learned that my hunger for knowledge was a common aspect of being a breaker. Anyone who teaches breaking also teaches the culture and history of the dance. Part of this is because of lessons learned from the breaksploitation period, but Schloss argues that breakers are the ones transmitting hip hop's oral history because breaking is the element that cannot be learned without a teacher.[35] I have met numerous rappers who could not name the four elements of hip hop, but I rarely meet breakers who cannot. While the launch of YouTube in 2005 might have somewhat dissipated the close relationship between mentor and student, the Internet has also opened new mediums for breakers around the world to pool resources for studying hip hop history and philosophy. Breakers often perform in multiple elements, as well. The four elements may be seen as anachronistic, simplistic, too limiting, or too broad, but these four art forms provide an anchor for the culture's identity. No matter how far away from the Bronx hip hop goes, it will never lose artists in these four categories. If it does, it is no longer hip hop culture.

It is challenging to maintain a distinct identity among external influences, and when terms like "hip hop" or "breakdancing" take on new meanings in mainstream society, it is difficult for the community to reclaim it. Our hip hop names are central to our personal identities, and our communal terms are central to the way we relate to our art forms. Rap is ubiquitous in today's popular culture as part of the music industry, and the word "hip hop" is often associated with a music genre rather than a culture. This problem is amplified when the music is not representative of the culture.[36] The term "hip hop dance" is applied very loosely today, but there are purists who say that the only true dance of hip hop is breaking.[37] Popping and locking are West Coast dances, often called "funk styles," that were subsumed into much of the breaking culture early on, and opinions differ on whether they can legitimately be called hip hop styles. In the late 1980s, the term "hip hop dance" was applied when choreographers borrowed aspects from breaking, popping, locking, jazz, and party dances to accompany the growing rap music industry. Purists call this style "street jazz," but the "hip hop" label has become so pervasive in dance studios and music videos that it is unlikely to change any time soon. Many breakers are offended by the term "breakdancing," which is generally considered to be coined by exploitative marketers from outside the culture.[38] Breakers have been so insistent on this point that they have had some success in reclaiming their terminology in popular usage. Some mainstream television shows like *America's Best Dance Crew* began using the terms "breaking," "B-Boy," and "B-Girl" in the 2000s.[39] Many breakers heralded the official decision of the International Olympic Committee to name the sport "breaking" in 2024, although its own press uses it alongside "breakdancing." "B-Boy" itself has lost precision at times. In 1993, *The Source* magazine published an article written by Ken Swift and other prominent B-Boys seeking to clarify the term "B-Boy," pushing back against its popular application to rappers or even a style of dress.[40] The community regularly has open debates about terms for individual moves and how to determine whether a move was inspired by preexisting moves or directly copied ("biting," or stealing a move, as termed by breakers, is still harshly castigated). Competition has become key for maintaining the dance's purity by enforcing its foundations. Breakers develop and discuss criteria for judging battles, and they carefully delineate dance that falls outside of breaking conventions. I have seen dancers enter a breaking battle after learning "hip hop" dance in a studio, only to realize that they are completely unaware of the basic steps. While

hip hop absorbs influences from other cultures, it has also formed a clear culture of its own. Breaking must always be distinguishable from its influences, including other styles of dance, gymnastics, and martial arts.[41]

By the same token, it is sometimes paradoxical that originality is integral to hip hop. A misunderstanding of this paradox by those outside the community can lead to reluctance in ascribing artistry to hip hop heads. For example, DJs make use of fully formed songs.[42] Schloss paints a full picture of the way DJs slice out breaks from their original context to create something new. He cites Mr. Supreme, who draws attention to small scale between a recording of a single drum hitting a snare, versus an eight count.[43] The standard for the amount of existing material that can be part of a "new" creation varies widely between cultures.[44] Breaking, graffiti, and rap have an emphasis on originality, but only if they conform to strict conventions.[45] To be a B-Boy or a B-Girl is to be a choreographer. The dance is rarely performed in unison with other dancers, and each dancer develops an individual style. Two breakers will look different performing the same steps. Figure skating provides a helpful parallel as it is both a dance and a competitive sport that is judged on musicality, acrobatics, and originality, all within restrictive conventions. Existing breaking moves are called "foundation," while new moves that are invented or borrowed from outside of breaking are "original," and no one is allowed to bite them. However, original moves frequently become foundation once multiple dancers bite them, even in recent decades.[46] Hip hop pushes practitioners to bring something new to their art – something unique to themselves. It invites the influence of new cultures and outside art forms, but it also protects itself from losing its identity and foundation.

Breakers aspire to leave a mark on the dance itself. Hip hop evolved from both party dances and gang dances. Early breakers were inspired by tap dancers like Bill Robinson, Sammy Davis, Jr., the Nicholas Brothers, and Fred Astaire, along with energetic performers like James Brown.[47] Herc's B-Boys impersonated Hollywood stars like Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx. Just as DJs dig for obscure breaks that no other DJ plays, breakers dig for inspiration to create new moves that no other breaker does. Moves like the "Thomas Flare" were taken from gymnastics. The "Latin Step" comes from mambo. The "Baby Love" is a foundational move named for the B-Girl who created it by doing salsa moves down on the floor. "The Russian" is inspired by the Russian Prisiadki style and Ukrainian Hopak style folk dances. Martial arts have been a particularly significant inspiration. Breakers frequented theaters on 42nd Street and Chinatown that regularly showed kung fu films in the 1970s and 1980s, and they watched kung fu films on WNEW on Saturday afternoons in the 1980s.[50] Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art that is also a dance and a game, was seen in demonstrations in Bronx public schools around 1975, and perhaps Bronx teens had other exposures to it.[51] B-Boy Crazy Legs describes the breaking mindset of that time period as being like an itinerant warrior traveling to other towns to see the style of other masters and to offer the challenge of battle.[52] Within breaking foundations, even before its global spread, pieces from cultures all over the world came together in the Bronx to inspire a new creation.

The music of breaking likewise brings together eclectic traditions. Dance is formed around music, and then music is created for the dance. Many ballet conventions were solidified around the music of Jean-Baptiste Lully in the seventeenth century, and ballet music continues to imitate those rhythms and sounds for dancers. Black dancers in Harlem created lindy-hop to the jazz music of the Savoy Ballroom in the 1920s and 1930s, and new music created for the dance maintains similar patterns, even when it evolved into neo-swing and electro-swing in the 1990s. Breaking today is rarely done to the mainstream rap music that is heard on the radio, as its rhythms are not designed for breaking. Instead, breaking is performed to 70s-style funk, soul, rock, Latin jazz, Afro jazz, and rap that is inspired by these genres. Examples of performers whose music is regularly played at a breaking jam include: James Brown, Dennis Coffey, Curtis Mayfield, Fred Karlin,

Tom Zé, Jun Mayuzumi, Manu Dibango, The Jimmy Castor Bunch, Incredible Bongo Band, British rock band Babe Ruth, Sly and the Family Stone, Dave Cortez & the Moon People, K.I.S.S., Chicago, Fusik, Toploader, Ivano Fossati and Oscar Prudente, The Souljazz Orchestra, Los Tios Queridos, Eric B. & Rakim, Pete Rock, KRS-One, Big Daddy Kane, Tribe Called Quest, and Das EFX, to name a few. Anyone of a certain age is bound to recognize a name or two on this list. "Renegades of Funk" by Afrika Bambaataa is very different from its cover by Rage Against the Machine, but both can be heard at breaking jams. "Killing in the Name" by Israeli funk band The Apples has become a staple breaking song. Only after dancing to it for many years did I learn it was, in turn, a cover of Rage Against the Machine. Remixes of orchestral songs often become popular within the community. DJs continue to dig for new breaks, and no realm of music is off limits.[53] In true hip hop fashion, the music reflects limitless creativity within boundaries that are conducive to the culture.

Debbie Harry and Chris Stein were in a rock band, Blondie, that enjoyed success in the music industry in the 1970s. Their friend, Brooklyn-based graffiti writer Fab 5 Freddy, occasionally took them to Bronx hip hop parties. Harry and Stein were impressed with the entire production, particularly the competitive MCs.[54] In 1981, Blondie released a rap song inspired by what they had seen, calling it "Rapture," with the implication that hip hop can en*rap*ture the listener. By this time, several commercial rap songs had been released, but the music industry, along with MCs and DJs, struggled to reproduce an authentic hip hop party in the form of a record. Blondie did not pretend to be a Bronx MC or DJ, and "Rapture" stays true to the band's style while contributing to the growing collection of hip hop music. Blondie's lyrics describe a late 70s hip hop party in the Bronx: "Toe to toe, dancing very close… and they're stepping lightly, hang each night in rapture." Harry raps about Fab 5 Freddy and Grandmaster Flash. Hip hop's elements are displayed in the music video: Freddy portrays himself writing graffiti; Jean-Michel Basquiat, another friend, portrays DJ Grandmaster Flash. Hip hop was beginning to evolve as it spread out of the Bronx. Freddy brought several subcultures together, including the Bronx's hip hop community, Brooklyn's graffiti writers, members of Manhattan's art scene like Andy Warhol, and figures within the music industry like Blondie. Of Freddy, Chang says, "The nineteen-year-old found himself moving through two very different worlds, and he had both the charisma and the desire to bring them together."[55]

By 1997, Blondie's description of the four elements coming together at hip hop parties felt like a different world. Rappers had become famous, and many made good music, but it was rare to see connections with the other three elements of hip hop. It was the perfect time for the Bronx's KRS-One to revisit early hip hop with "Step into a World (Rapture's Delight)," a song that challenges rap fans to step into a world where skills are valued more than money and popularity. The title gives homage to the early commercial hip hop releases by Blondie and the Sugarhill Gang. The chorus borrows the tune of Blondie's "Rapture." Running through the song is a classic hip hop break from "The Champ," a song originally performed by British composer Alan Hawkshaw and a session band in 1968. KRS-One's lyrics overtly give honor to each of the four elements. The music video prominently features breakers, including B-Boy Kwik Step, B-Girl Rokafella, and the Breeze Team. Bronx DJ Funkmaster Flex works the turntables, and it features graffiti art. KRS-One declares that he seeks prestige within the hip hop community first and foremost.[56] "Step into a World" invites listeners to enter hip hop *culture*. It shows a world where hip hop is more than a music genre, deeper than popular media could ever convey, and still available for those who are willing to find it. It highlights the many worlds that have come together to form hip hop's past and present: Blondie's fusion of hip hop and rock, Hawkshaw's British production music that has become a staple for breakers, and Sugarhill Gang's first successful use of MCing on a pop record, alongside contemporary breakers, DJs, and graffiti writers. At the same time, it declares that there are boundaries to the world of hip hop and opposes those who would forget its roots.

Photo credit: Photo by Samuel Regan Asante on Unsplash

SOME READERS OF *JOT* MIGHT BENEFIT FROM SOME TERMINOLOGY.

Battling has been a crucial aspect of hip hop since its inception, especially for breaking. In a battle, opponents – whether individuals or crews – take turns attempting to outdo each other in their art form, whether it be dancing, rapping, or another element.

Breaking is a sprint, not a marathon, and it is usually performed in intervals of one minute or less, called "***sets.***" In a battle, a set usually makes up one "***round.***" In "1 vs 1" battles, the only time a breaker can rest is during the opponent's round. While each breaker has specializations and signature moves, each round is expected to *answer* the previous round by finding ways of matching or outdoing the opponent. Battles are scored by round-for-round exchanges; they are not necessarily awarded to the overall best dancer.

A breaker may not repeat memorable moves in a single day. This means that breakers strategize when to use their best moves, and they must develop a large ***arsenal*** of moves that can win many rounds throughout the day.

There are formal tournaments, called *"jams,"* with judges, brackets, and even point systems, like what can be seen at the Olympics. There are also battles that happen spontaneously, with no judges, when a dancer "***calls out***" another dancer. The motivation may be to prove one's level, to engage in a friendly exchange, or to announce a rivalry.

Dancers *"get down with"* (join) a *crew* to practice and battle together like a family unit within the larger hip hop community. Many breaking crews also have members who are primarily DJs, MCs, or graffiti writers. Whenever a dancer is in a battle, all of their crewmates will stand behind them and get involved. Crewmates hype up the dancer and point out key highlights in the battle to influence the crowd, judges, and even opponents. This tradition is an act of solidarity.

Battling someone is a sign of *respect*. Experienced breakers rarely battle a beginner; they battle others at the same level or better. Sometimes outsiders misunderstand the aggressiveness in a battle. Our breaking community is a close-knit community worldwide, and we often appear the most hostile when we battle our closest friends. But I've rarely seen a battle that did not end in a hug and a word of admiration.

STEPPING IN

As I got deeper into hip hop culture, it became central to my identity. In just three months, I completed my first successful windmill. Marc still hasn't learned it, and he was amazed at my progress. I had become enthralled by both the art form and the community of breaking. I wanted to learn unreal feats and to create new ones. I was given the name "Loose Goose," because of my fun, lighthearted style. Breaking is aggressive, and most breakers portray an angry character as they dance. I try to make them crack a smile when I battle them. I began to innovate new moves and leave my mark on the art form. I invented the legendary face-nut mills ("legendary" is part of the name, not a description of status. I do hope that one day they will become legendary legendary face-nut mills). I also invented steal-yo-girl mills, where I burn my opponent by pretending to receive a phone call from their mother during battle. Coming from a background totally different than the Bronx, I always had imposter syndrome. I couldn't believe I was part of the rich legacy of hip hop. Yet, given hip hop's roots and origins, it makes sense that it would grab me. I needed something

that gave me freedom to create. I needed the restrictions of an art form that gave me the structure to learn a new craft. I needed something with a rich history that encouraged me to explore the world with academic rigor. I needed to find music that spoke to my soul. I needed to realize my dream of becoming a ninja in order to know the kind of performer I am. I needed to leave my sheltered bubble and meet different kinds of people. Even though my family didn't realize it at the time, these values that found culmination in hip hop were instilled in me by my upbringing.

Breaking offers particularly difficult obstacles for those who wish to become proficient. On several occasions, I have had the honor of giving historical tours of the Bronx with legendary MC Grandmaster Caz. He would ask tourists, "Which element of hip hop is the most difficult?" Once someone responded, "MCing." He gave a look and pointed out that no one ever broke a bone because of an MCing injury. Breakers experience this on the regular. I myself have had four knee surgeries and an ankle surgery from breaking injuries. Breaking requires sacrifice. It takes research and mental energy to learn the foundation, know how to use one's arsenal of moves against opponents, analyze strengths and weaknesses, and design training regimes that make use of an existing arsenal. A breaker must budget time for conditioning, creating new moves, and drilling one's current repertoire. Quick reflexes are essential; a dancer must be able to radically change plans instantly, depending on changes in the music, the moves thrown by an opponent, and even a particular judge's or crowd's expectations. Breakers must portray skilled onstage presence, flourishing creativity, and athletic excellence all at the same time. Breaking is similar to a second language. Both entail memorization and require improvisationally piecing together individual parts. Breakers must build syntax and vocabulary into muscle memory before they can select moves and arrange them properly in order to respond to the person in front of them. Breaking is the best way to enjoy a beat, but it requires hard work, dedication, and sacrifice.

It was hard to become competitive as a B-Boy while I was getting deeper into formal academics, but I never let go of it. Moving overseas, I made myself put the books away at least once a week to immerse myself in the local hip hop culture. Before social media, it could take a long time to find the local hip hop heads, but I always managed. I find an immediate bond with the hip hop community wherever I travel. When I visit a new city, I immediately take note of the prominent graffiti names that can be found around me. I bleed with other breakers at practice and battle alongside them and against them at jams. I helped found the Holy City Rockers in Jerusalem, where I was the token Christian among Jews and Muslims. I joined the 24-7 Family in Vienna, which remains active in all four elements. I learned to speak modern Hebrew, German, and Spanish from the hip hop community. I started teaching at dance studios for grocery money. Even when I was busy, I found time to remain involved in breaking.

After I was accepted to Princeton Seminary, I spent a year buried in the books without much dance, and I felt like I was suffocating. I decided to make breaking a bigger priority in my life – even if it meant my PhD would take longer. I needed both worlds in my life, and I was willing to make sacrifices to hold them together. I started training more seriously than I ever had. I organized local events and practice spots. I was president of Sympoh, Princeton University's breaking crew, where I'm still remembered for bringing the undergraduates into contact with the larger world of hip hop. I switched social media to my hip hop name because very few of my contacts knew my government name. I joined the organizational board of the Kids Breaking League during its second year and I coached a kids crew to become league champions. Those kids still feel like family. And I was hitting milestones as a dancer. I finally learned flares, something that took me eight years. That's a similar accomplishment to a PhD. I won my first jam in New Jersey while teaming up with a few Austrian friends who had come to visit. Once my PhD funding ran out, I picked up enough dance gigs in commercials, parties, and night clubs to piece together an income. Eventually, I was officially recruited into the Dynamic Rockers. This is something I had only dreamed about as a high schooler studying

hip hop history.

The Dynamic Rockers is one of the most prestigious dance crews in the world. Formed in 1979, we pioneered breaking as an art form, and we are arguably responsible for its acceptance in mainstream society. I am crewmates with Kid Freeze, the inventor of the continuous headspin, and Glyde, who is said to have invented the windmill. The renowned Lincoln Center first recognized hip hop as an art form at a festival in 1981, where a stage was organized for the Dynamic Rockers to battle the Rock Steady Crew. Many still consider that to be the most important battle in hip hop history. The Dynamic Rockers were featured in *Style Wars* in 1983. Since that time, the Dynamic Rockers have traveled the world, battling, performing, and judging jams. We have continued to recruit dancers from each generation since 1979. I have performed on TV and stage with my crewmates. Of the historic crews, Dynamic is the most competitive on the battle circuit today.

When one joins an established crew, the recruit is "battled in." Profound respect is given to the recruit by this process. One person stands alone, while all the crewmates line up on the other side of the room. The recruit must throw one round after each opposing member until the crew decides to stop. This means that the recruit throws five to ten times as many rounds as anyone else in the room, while resting very little between each one and without repeating moves. I rarely see breakers with the stamina to battle beyond ten rounds in a single battle, and even the highest-level athletes have trouble going above twenty. The Dynamic Rockers require a new recruit to throw one round for each year of their life, plus one more for the future. This meant that I went forty-two rounds when I battled into my crew.

Battling into the crew took months of training on top of my regular dance training, not to mention that it happened two months before my dissertation defense. I didn't know when or if it would happen, so I had to prepare and maintain my readiness for months. It's difficult to have an arsenal large enough to have forty-two fresh sets ready to go. I also had to train my mind to remember all my moves during the battle and keep track of which ones I had already used. A marathon runner coached me on building a regimen for stamina training. One day, during our usual Sunday practice, Kid Glyde called me out. He said that if I wanted to be down with Dynamic, it was time. The other crewmembers who were present went to the side of the room to face me. The crew is made up of top-tier breakers. Kid Glyde is a well-rounded veteran with infinite moves and smart battle strategy. Indio is a master of footwork, with speed, creativity, and musicality. Elite has unique dynamics and originality, with power moves and freezes that leave an impression. Mouse has an intense explosiveness that sucks the air out of the room. Each one knows how to battle and win, and they did not hold back. I got blasted with everything that makes the Dynamic Rockers what they are today, and I took it as a badge of honor. The crew came at me with moves I had never seen them throw. I had to battle each one differently, planning out when to use my moves without repeating or wearing myself out too early. Kid Glyde asked me if I wanted to stop after about twenty rounds, but there was no way I would even consider it. By the end of the battle, one of my opponents was injured, and one had stopped to rest after about twenty rounds. They had a shirt ready to give me with the crew name on the front and my name on the back, in traditional breaking style. Battling into the Dynamic Rockers was one of the greatest accomplishments of my life. Not only was the battle itself a feat, but it was the culmination of two decades of involvement with the hip hop community as a battler, organizer, teacher, event MC, and performer. And it validated a desire that every breaker has: to be a part of history.

THE WORLD OF ACADEMIA

As I entered Stuart Hall to defend my dissertation on that January morning, I saw the legendary Dynamic Rockers already standing in the lobby with their eyes peering over their masks. They had taken the train from New York City to Princeton, and it was pleasantly odd to see them in this environment. The usual meeting spot was our crew's dance studio in Harlem. We'd been on college campuses before for dance battles and performances, but this was the first

time I had mixed them into the other side of my life. They saw me teach dance classes all the time, but now they stood in the building where I taught ancient Hebrew. I was preparing to code-switch – the way I speak to my friends in the hip hop community is different from the way I speak to my professors in the academic community. But my crew quickly identified similarities between the two communities. Most notably, they recognize prestige.

I took notice of the building. It was a grand, stone structure that had broadcasted the Princeton Seminary's self-importance for 131 years. It was an institution with a rich legacy, and I cannot begin to explain how grateful I was to be part of it. The seminary branched off from Princeton University in 1812 in order to offer a graduate degree for students who wanted more theological education. Its founders envisioned graduates to be the most educated ministers in the nation. Past professors are heralded as some of the greatest academics in the past two centuries. The faculty that was about to question me had inherited this academic tradition, being trained at the nation's top-tier academic institutions. Their CVs boasted prestigious publications. This academic world has its own value system. Like hip hop heads, many academics decry monetary advancement in favor of respect and recognition in this world. The currency here is prestige.

I had worked hard to be acknowledged in this world. I had gone from community college to three master's degrees. I had learned numerous languages and had been published in the flagship journal of my field. Still, I had never been able to shake my imposter syndrome. My dad was born to teenagers who dropped out of middle school. He himself barely graduated high school and dropped out of his first year of college. He always said my mom was out of his league, and she had pedigree. Her father graduated from Utah State, where she got her bachelor's degree. My parents never pressured me academically – quite the opposite. When I received a high score on my initial first-grade exam, my father was astounded. He talked about it for days. He kept telling me how proud he was of me, and how he couldn't relate. I learned that I could get my father's approval through academics, and this set a trajectory for my life. Despite his background, my father deeply valued learning and respected the conventions that academic institutions have established for education.

Compared to others, my family placed little value on money. I have friends whose parents pressured them to get good grades, to get into a highly ranked school, and to become physicians or lawyers. My mother, on the other hand, used to say, "Ryan, if you keep getting grades like this, you can get into… COLLEGE! And then you can be whatever you want to be!" Around the time I was born, my father found a mentor who invited young couples to his San Diego home for Bible study. My dad's career path – and everything else in his life – had been somewhat unpredictable, but he was drawn into the study of the Bible, and it gave his life focus. The next decade saw our family moving across the country several times, and my dad changed jobs numerous times. But somehow, the value he placed on the study of the Bible only grew. When I was in fourth grade, he became a pastor, and I watched my dad teach from the pulpit every week. He somehow made use of extensive historical knowledge to fashion together strong arguments in his sermons.

Academic culture has developed strict conventions to protect itself and determine what is and is not "academic." That word is frequently used in ways that would offend purists within academia. Terms like "pseudoscience" and "misinformation" are designed to establish the boundaries of the culture and prevent academia from being diluted. "Peer review" is a powerful term that is used to mark contributions that fall within these conventions. While modern academics have a more complicated relationship with history than hip hop heads, stalwart institutions continue to pride themselves in the tradition of maintaining precise standards. This includes refusing to cater to demands of the outside world as they fight both to combat misinformation as well as to ensure academic freedom. Researchers can become famous in popular culture,

they are sometimes featured in mainstream movies and TV. But they typically stay within the conventions of academia because they seek respect from their peers first and foremost. Conventions of academia include coherence, strong argumentation, and exhaustive documentation. But there are also artistic conventions, such as creativity and rhetoric.

My father went to college in his forties and completed a two-year associate's degree. Over the next decade, he completed correspondence courses through the mail until he earned a bachelor's – and then a master's – degree. He was not seeking prestige. In fact, he rarely talked about his degree for fear that his parishioners would think of him as uneducated. I don't even know if it was accredited, but his master's degree was something that quietly brought him great pride. Despite their conventions, I'd like to think that most academics would applaud my father's humble hustle the way established breaking crews applaud local B-Boys who work hard to become proficient in the art form. There was an authenticity in his desire to learn. If I'm honest, my father's master's degree has a lot of prestige in my mind. I still find myself wanting my parents to see me as someone prestigious – the way I looked at my father.

My mom coached me on getting into Washington State University for my undergraduate education after my associate's degree. At the end of college, I didn't know what I wanted to be, but I knew that I wanted to learn more. I kept learning until I had three master's degrees. I had very little plans for my life; I simply wanted to study more. Eventually, having written some good papers for my professors, I wanted to find a way to contribute something new to scholarship. Institutions like Princeton Theological Seminary felt out of my league – too much history, too much prestige. But I met a graduate from PTS who encouraged me to apply, and my parents cried when I was accepted. My father bragged about it to anyone who would listen. My father felt like an outsider to academia, but it was different than the foreignness to hip hop. With academia, he understood its values and the difficulties of gaining prestige in that world. Once again, I had earned my father's approval through academia.

WORLDS COLLIDING

Once everyone had gathered on the second floor of Stuart Hall for my defense, the professors asked me to speak a bit about my project. My dissertation was about the book of Job, which is a rap battle. It contains thirty-nine chapters of performed poetry, nearly all of which are filled with caustic burns and eloquent wordplay. Job was written to a community that was recovering from exile and becoming more and more moralistic in their religion. In order to draw this out, I considered *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), which was written to a moralistic Victorian society that was preaching to children. Like Job, Alice engages opponents in a series of debates marked by constant wordplay. Both Job and Alice learn to find their own voice through their battles.[58] I began the defense by summarizing how I had brought together two seemingly unrelated worlds in my scholarship.

And then my academic battle began.

Choon-Leong Seow challenged my philological arguments, pushing Jenga blocks to see if one might come loose. Alan Cooper questioned the precision of terminology in my literary claims. Elaine James called me out on critical theory. Chip Dobbs-Allsopp pressed my comparative work. Other faculty members joined in. My professors picked apart my dissertation for three hours while my friends, family, and crewmates looked on. I cannot express how much it meant that my crewmates had my back the entire time. After sending everyone out, then calling me to reenter alone, I heard *"Welcome to the community of scholars, Dr. Armstrong."* Not only was this an accomplishment in itself, but it was the culmination of two decades of higher learning as a student, scholar, and teacher.

I had assumed my entourage was utterly bored while they watched

us nerds use esoteric jargon for three hours. I was surprised to learn that they were on the edge of their seats tracking the dynamics of the battle. It turns out that my crewmates related to my dissertation defense in a very personal way. They followed each exchange between me and my professors, later recalling vivid details. Indio explained to my mother that the battle mechanics of the defense paralleled the day I battled into Dynamic Rockers, matching each style round-for-round, making use of foundation while improvising in the moment. My crewmates even understood the respect that came with my professors' aggression. They recognized the look in my eye as I fought for prestige in the world of academia. And they were behind me the whole time.

An academic colleague once mentioned something about my "hobby." When she saw my confusion, she clarified: "You know. Your dance stuff." I never thought of breaking as a hobby, just as I never thought of academia as a hobby. Both are a way of life and require utter devotion. As academics, we create new works that add beauty to the world while helping it make a little more sense. As hip hop heads, we do the same. Our art forms push the boundaries of current knowledge, dreaming up new movements and determining to make our bodies learn them. While these two worlds may seem vastly different, my crewmates helped me realize that they share strong parallels. My dissertation was about the parallels shared between Alice and Job despite being in different worlds. The Taiwanese-Brazilian girlfriend at my dissertation defense became my wife a few months later, and our toddler son is showing us how cultures can mix together. The more I look around me, the more I see connections between worlds.

My father died six years before I battled into Dynamic Rockers, earned a PhD, and got married. I often think about how he would've reacted to each of those moments. He gave me a clue three years before his death.

He saw a video in which I step out of the world of academia and into the world of hip hop. He called me, in tears, to tell me how proud he was of my accomplishments as a B-Boy. I never thought that would happen. This was a world he couldn't understand, an art form that baffled him, and even a hindrance to my academic progress. But he saw me stick to it for fourteen years, and he realized it was a part of my world. It took time for him to realize the values shared between my upbringing and the world of hip hop. I know he would've loved to meet the Dynamic Rockers at my defense. And he would've loved to see them go off at my wedding, where the New York and New Jersey breaking community came out on the forty-ninth anniversary of hip hop.

After speaking with my crewmates, I now see that much of what drives me to seek excellence in academia is the same motivation that drives me toward excellence in breaking. I love the art form and the community. Often, when two cultures seem different, we simply need to step into another world.

Photo credit: Courtesy of Ryan Armstrong

Notes & Bibliography

[1] See Gonzalez, “Fire Defined the Bronx.”

[2] Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 90. Bambaataa later added a fifth element, “knowledge,” although there have been many attempts to add elements to hip hop culture. See, for example, the song “9 Elements” by KRS-One.

[3] Browning, *Samba*, 9-10; Schloss, *Foundation*, 19-20.

[4] DJs would often keep their records secret, so others couldn’t find their breaks. On the significance of “digging” for unique music in DJ tradition, see Schloss, *Making Beats*,79-100.

[5] See the interviews with Keith and Kevin Smith, the Legendary Twins (Israel, *The Freshest Kids*; Breakin’ Convention BCTV, *Legendary Twins*). See also B-Boy Focus’s interview with Herc’s B-Boy, Dancin’ Doug (B-Boy & B-Girl Dojo, 2021), and Norin Rad’s interview with Clark Kent and Trixie. Trixie’s signature move was “the Trixie Shake,” in which he would vibrate his entire body. There are some floor moves in the accounts of Trixie and Dancin’ Doug. In 1973, Dancin’ Doug was unfamiliar with the terms “toprock” (today applied to a foundational aspect of breaking) and “uprock” (a term often used for a dance that started in the late 1960s). Instead, the style of Herc’s B-Boys entailed theatrical burns like “the Dracula” and “the Superman.” To be sure, burns were essential to rocking, as well.

[6] See Kool Herc’s interview in *The Freshest Kids* (Israel). Undoubtedly, Herc’s opinion is not the only view. There are numerous theories about the origins of the terms “B-Boy” and “B-Girl.”

[7] “B-Boying” was the most common term for the dance throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The more gender-sensitive term “breaking” became more common during the 2010s. See Schloss’s 2009 discussion on the difficulties of talking about the dance in a gender-sensitive way while also maintaining a sensitivity to the community’s own terminology and self-identity (*Foundation*, 15).

[8] See interviews with 70s rockers Bushwick Joe, Pjay71, and Amigo Rock (Superbbeatshow). Most people agree that the dance remembered as “uprock” originated in Brooklyn, although Schloss records Trac 2 as crediting Manhattan with the origins of rocking (*Foundation*, 164, n. 6). It should be noted, however, that ‘rock’ is also English slang for exploding energy. It was common to “rock the mic,” “rock the floor,” or “rock the party.” Herc’s crew took names like MC Coke la Rock and B-Boy Teenie Rock.

[9] See interviews with Batch (The Bronx Boys RockingCrew), and with Trac 2 of Starchild la Rock (Estrada). See also Batch’s account in “The History of ‘The Bronx Boys Rocking Crew’” (Dance Mogul). Batch argues that the dance today should be called “rocking,” not “breaking.” Batch’s strongest evidence is that the competitive dance crews of 1970s Bronx called themselves “rockers,” not “B-Boys,” “B-Girls,” or “breakers.” The term “rocking” is still used for aspects of the dance, such as “toprock” and “downrock,” while “uprock” is reserved only for the older style of rocking. Schloss puts together similar arguments without Batch’s input (*Foundation*, 125-54). Schloss’s argument is based on close connections between uprocking and the dance that is today called “breaking.” Batch is also careful to give credit to Herc, Flash, and Bambaataa for founding hip hop culture, even if they did not develop the dance style that stayed with hip hop culture. Batch would likely say that rocking in the Bronx was influenced by the DJ crews, just as it was influenced by martial arts, gymnastics, tap, and other styles of movement. Batch’s brother, Aby, says that the Bronx style of rocking was influenced by Brooklyn rocking as well as “the Go Off,” which seems to come from the tradition of Herc’s parties (Norin Rad, “B-Boy Aby”).

[10] Israel, *The Freshest Kids*; Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 117; Ewoodzie, *Break Beats*, 133. The debate is frequently framed in terms of the racial identity of hip hop’s creators. To say that the dance of hip hop comes from rocking is sometimes taken to imply that Latin Americans created it, as rocking is usually thought to come from Latin-American dancers in Brooklyn. To say that the dance comes from Herc’s parties sometimes implies that Blacks created it. Dancin’ Doug, however, one of Herc’s original B-Boys, is part Black and part Puerto Rican, and he dismisses the entire debate as irrelevant, as all parties agree that both Black and Latin Americans played a part in hip hop’s development between 1972 and 1975. He finds it unnecessary to designate only one group as the creators. See Profo Won’s interview with Dancin’ Doug. There are even those who say that Brooklyn deserves credit for starting hip hop (see Schloss, *Foundation*, 132).

[11] A well-known home for battles was “the Dungeon,” which was purchased for one dollar by Joey of SalSoul Crew through a government program. A group of teenagers renovated the Dungeon, furnished it with discarded furniture, and gave it a DJ booth. It became the central hub for breakers who met there daily until it burned down in 1979. The Dungeon even hosted large parties and became a major informal club. Trac 2 says it was like Studio 54 to the Bronx teens. See Norin Rad’s interviews with Jojo, Wizard Wiz, and Big Boom, as well as interviews with Trac 2 and Trace in *Mambo to Hip Hop* (Chalfant).

[12] The Rock Steady Crew and the Dynamic Rockers were called “breaking” crews by 1981, and the foundational dance conventions seen in footage during that time period are essentially the same as today’s breaking conventions. Even today, breakers routinely talk about “rocking the floor,” or “rocking the beat,” and it is still far more prevalent to see the word “rockers” in a crew name than “breakers.” Since the early 2000s, prominent breakers have insisted that “uprock,” a term used exclusively for the older (pre-1975) style of rocking, is a different dance than breaking, and some judges discount uprock moves in breaking battles. But it seems to have been an integral part of breaking as far back as the early 1980s. Doze Green of the Rock Steady Crew made flyers for the 1981 Lincoln Center battle between these two crews that said, “Breaking, or otherwise known as (B.Boy) is a competitive warlike dance, making the opponent look bad…” (@ thhmuseum, July 16, 2024). Both crews have “rock” in their names, and both crews performed uprocking as a significant part of the battle. At the previous battle at United Skates of America, the MC called it a “rocking battle.” This can be heard in footage appearing in Style Wars (Silver). In a recent collection of interviews about these battles, nearly all involved parties speak of “uprock” as part of the “breaking” battle. See *Breakin’ on the One* (JamsBash).

[13] Ewoodzie quotes Grandmaster Caz as saying this (*Break Beats*, 86).

[14] This conversation was well-documented in the film *Style Wars* (Silver).

[15] *Bomb It*, Reiss.

[16] *New York Times*, "Taki 183," 37.

[17] Ewoodzie calls the south Bronx the "epitome of urban decay" (*Break Beats*, 20-31). Chang latches onto the description "a Necropolis – a city of death" (*Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 16), that he attributes to Dr. Harold Wise, founder of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Health Center in the Bronx in the 1970s. While Wise does not use this phrase, he is interviewed to speak on the hardships of the Bronx in Tolchin's, "Future Looks Bleak." Chalfant's documentary From Mambo to Hip Hop opens with a Parisian speaking about growing up thinking of "Bronx" as French slang for something that "was a mess."

[18] Ewoodzie (*Break Beats*, 20-31) provides an extensive analysis on the concentration of poverty in the South Bronx and the burdensome effects of city policy. Caro and Ley argue that Robert Moses's Cross-Bronx Expressway, in particular, increased hardship. See Caro, *The Power Broker*, 877-92; Ley, "Bronx's Air."

[19] Schneider, *Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, 241.

[20] Custodio and Siegel, "The 'Black Benjie Way.'" Chang argues that the Hoe Avenue Peace Meeting was inconclusive, but a quieter follow-up meeting solidified the peace shortly afterward (*Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 61-62).

[21] Collins, "New York Street Gangs," 22-32.

[22] Ewoodzie, *Break Beats*, 19.

[23] In an interview in *Mambo to Hip Hop* (Chalfont), Grandmaster Caz says hip hop killed the gangs, because hip hop gave them an outlet that was cool, but also less stressful than having to run from police.

[24] See Aby's interview with Norin Rad, in which he talks about the "warlord divisions" of the dance crews. Schloss documents numerous ways in which breaking is influenced by gang culture (*Foundation*, 81-82).

[25] See the interview with Ken Swift in the bonus footage of the DVD release of *Style Wars* (Silver).

[26] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 26-27.

[27] Bonus footage in *Style Wars* (Silver).

[28] For an interesting discussion on this, see Schloss, *Foundation*, 92.

[29] In fact, "Rapper's Delight," the first rap song to make it to the top forty charts, was produced by fans who were excited to do their own version of what they saw in Bronx MCs. See Chang's analysis of the Sugarhill Gang (*Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 132). Big Bank Hank went to school with B-Boy Trixie, one of the first hip hop dancers. He was involved in the hip hop community as a bouncer and music manager, but he was not a regular performer with the major DJ production crews. See also Skinner and Stanley's interview with B-Boy Trixie (The For What Movement).

[30] Ken said, "That's not for the Olympics. That's not for Broadway" (Silver, *Style Wars*). Ken's insights were prophetic. Breakers face penalties for doing burns in the Olympic games. Aggressive burns were the centerpiece in the earliest forms of the dance. This raises the question within the hip hop community about whether or not it is even the dance of hip hop. Watching the early Olympics battles, it seems that breakers and judges ignore the rule in most cases, although the burns are more mild than usual.

[31] See interviews with writers in *Style Wars* (Silver) and *Break Beats in the Bronx* (Ewoodzie, 35). To be sure, a white writer in *Style Wars* says that his skin color helps him steal spray cans, because store owners assume writers are black. Graffiti writer Connor McCann talks about how stores started locking up common graffiti materials by the 1990s, and how his affluent friend used his appearance to help with racking (@braindrainpod, "San Francisco Graffiti in the 90s: Racking Paint," Video, June 13, 2023). Racking is still an important part of the culture, as seen in the numerous entries that offer tips for racking in the discussion forums of *Bombing Science*, for example.

[32] Ewoodzie follows Grandmaster Caz in making this argument (*Break Beats*, 128). Also see Hall, "New York City Blackout."

[33] Silver, *Style Wars*.

[34] This is not to say that breaking cannot be done for those outside the community, or even that breakers cannot train in a way that performs for outsiders. There is a tradition called "hitting," which refers to hitting the streets for money, i.e. performing street shows and asking for tips. Hitters dance differently for outsiders than they do when they are battling or cyphering with other breakers. Hitting is its own subculture within the breaking community, but hitters tend to remain involved in hip hop. I personally think of any performance for outsiders as hitting.

[35] Schloss, *Foundation*, 41.

[36] On the changing role of the MC from exhorting dancers at a party to rhyming in a studio, see Schloss, *Making Beats*, 2; Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 129-31.

[37] Ewoodzie (*Break Beats*, 129) argues that the term "hip hop" itself began as a derogatory term. An MC named Cowboy talked about someone joining the army and lining up to march: "hip hop hip hop hip hop." Other MCs started saying it at parties, but no one referred to themselves or their community as "hip hop." The older crowd, who preferred disco, spoke disparagingly of the young "hip hoppers." Over time, the name stuck. Here, the very name of the culture was given by outsiders and later used by the community itself.

[38] See Schloss, *Foundation*, 60-63. Schloss points out the difficulties of scraping away the myths and uncovering the true origins of these terms. He is careful to include the thoughts of Michael Holman, an early promoter, who says that "breakdancing" was one of the original terms, but it was retroactively associated with media exploitation by key leaders within the community. Hip hop terminology can be esoteric, and the community struggles to understand its own terms. It has constantly struggled to maintain the names designated by members within the community against mass media and popular culture.

[39] These shows produced robust debates within the culture for several reasons. Some questioned whether the style was even breaking, as it was not done with burns or within typical breaking conventions (I personally associate it with the "hitting" tradition of breaking). Another controversy was the effect on mainstream perception of our culture. Breakers think of these shows as cheap imitations of real breaking competitions, but non-breakers frequently assume they are pinnacle showcases.

[40] Gabbert [Ken Swift] and Pabon [Pop Master Fabel], "To B-Boy or Not to B-Boy,"

6. See also Schloss's analysis of the watering-down of the term "B-Boy" that prompted the publication in *Foundation*, 63.

[41] I once heard B-Boy Storm offer a philosophical solution to the conundrum of encouraging creativity and seeking to remain within breaking conventions. He said that it's fine to innovate beyond the conventions of breaking outside of competitions. Breakers often point to Don "Campbell-Lock" Campbell, who invented locking by doing his own version of the funky chicken.

[42] To be sure, I've seen creative DJs like Franco de Leon pull out a guitar and play along with tracks during breaking battles.

[43] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 1.

[44] A clear analogy can be found in my field, as biblical scholars frequently attempt to delineate the point at which a book of the Bible becomes a finished product, or a "canonical" work, as biblical authors frequently used large swaths of earlier material.

[45] A debate has grown within the MC community about whether rap battles can be performed pre-written and acapella, as they traditionally involve the challenges of freestyling and keeping the beat.

[46] There are numerous examples of original moves that are now breaking foundation, such as the multiple airflare invented by Pablo Flores from Climax Soul Control Crew.

[47] See Skinner and Stanley's interview with B-Boy Trixie (The For What Movement), and B-Boy Spaghetti's interview with early 70s dancer Willie Marine Boy (Rezvani). Both describe precise moves that they borrowed from well-known tap dancers. The Legendary Twins also cite James Brown and the Nicholas Brothers as inspirations (Breakin' Convention BCTV).

[48] See Norin Rad's interviews with Dancin' Doug and the Legendary Twins.

[49] See the interview with Baby Love (Top 2000 a gogo).

[50] See the extensive research of a New York B-Boy who was born in 1975, in Pellerin, "Kung Fu Movies," and Pellerin, "Kung Fu Fandom," 97-115. Schloss also talks at length about this topic (*Foundation*, 42, 52).

[51] While some of the connections between capoeira and breaking may be overstated, there is a blog dedicated to finding them.

[52] See the interview with Crazy Legs in *The Freshest Kids* (Israel).

[53] During the past decade, music copyright has been a challenge for dancers who wish to share their work online. More and more breaks DJs produce new music to overcome this hurdle. The earliest instance that I know in which a DJ produced entirely new music for a jam to post footage was DJ Fleg playing his own music for Red Bull BC One in 2018.

[54] Myers, "Rap in Blondie's 'Rapture.'"

[55] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 148.

[56] KRS-One actively attempts to keep hip hop culture together. He performs with breakers and a DJ on stage, even inviting breakers to come from the audience. He publicly rejected an invitation to perform for the Grammys 50th Anniversary of Hip Hop in 2023, saying that the Grammys will feature rap, but not hip hop. As one of the most prominent members of the hip hop community, he does not want to associate himself with an institution that has consistently neglected the four elements of hip hop.

[57] For a full treatment of the 1981 Lincoln Center battle, see JamsBash's recent documentary, *Breakin' on the One*.

[58] This work is now available in Ryan M. Armstrong, *The Book of Job in Wonderland: Making (Non)Sense of Job's Mediators* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

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