“The paradoxes of breakdancing.”

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There are a myriad of paradoxes that emerge in the dance form and culture of breakdancing. This paper will examine how contemporary cultural norms regulate bodies according to their gender, and question what it is about breakdancing that surpasses these cultural norms and renders the dance masculine. Through breakdancing, males are able to transgress the cultural limitations imposed on their bodies that socially discourage their participation in the ‘feminine’ activity of dance. This re-categorisation of dance consequently affects female participation, and the minority that do participate are confronted with articulating their body in both a masculine and feminine manner. Breakdancing is therefore a paradoxical physical activity and culture, particularly regarding the articulation of gender.

The following discussion draws from my experiences as a female who learns breakdancing, as well as my observations of the Sydney culture. Breakdancing, which is also referred to as ‘breaking’ or ‘b-boying’¹, is a dance form that amalgamates African and Latin dance styles with improvisation and acrobatics. It provides a unique experience for both genders that other dances are unable to provide. This is not only through the physical demands of the dance, the emphasis on traditions and culture, or the distinct method of learning, but also through other people’s reactions to the chosen form of physical activity. When I inform both males and females of my participation in breaking, both genders respond in a (politely) confused manner. Perhaps they are thinking that females have a plethora of choice in terms of creatively expressing their body through dance (in the appropriately feminine way), so why would they choose a masculine dance form? In saying this, my male friends that break also receive an interesting response. If they begin with stating they are a
dancer, immediately they are emasculated in their listener’s eyes. Dance is culturally viewed as a feminine activity (note the emphasis is on gender not sex, this concept will be discussed in greater detail further on). However, once my male friends clarify that they breakdance, the listener is immediately impressed. This is usually followed with the question, “does that mean you can spin on your head?”. The emphasis placed on impressive feats of physical strength in breaking seems to be the key factor in people perceiving the dance as a distinctly masculine form, thus paradoxically rearticulating the activity of dance.

It has been suggested that different sports may be thought of as masculine or feminine based on certain characteristics associated with each sport. Klomsten, Marsh and Skaalvik examined how 357 secondary-school students viewed particular physical activities as either masculine or feminine. Characteristics such as strength, endurance, aggression, and risk typify 'male' sports (Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik; Koivula, “Perceived characteristics of sports categorized as gender-neutral, feminine, and masculine”; Metheny). Examples of ‘male’ sports include martial arts, wrestling, rugby, weight lifting and ice hockey (Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik). 'Female' sports are associated with characteristics such as gracefulness, flexibility, beauty and rhythm (Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik; Metheny). Examples of ‘female’ sports include dance, aerobics, gymnastics, ballet and figure skating (Klomsten, Skaalvik & Espnes; Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik; Koivula, “Ratings of gender appropriateness of sports participation”; Matteo; Metheny; Pfister). Furthermore, sports categorised as either masculine or feminine according to their characteristics had participation ratios that reflected this. In other words, sports associated with masculine characteristics such as martial arts and weight lifting had a significantly higher proportion of male participants than female.

This study demonstrated how students are learning contemporary ideologies that reinforce the hegemonic conduct of their genders, which consequently physically regulates
their body. In other words, they are learning the appropriate manner in which to move their body according to cultural norms and expectations, which is being physically regulated through either the participation in, or lack of participation in various physical activities.

Marcel Mauss, in his groundbreaking discussion of the ‘techniques of the body’ asserts that the body’s ‘way of moving’ is culturally and historically specific. He states that the “things we find natural are [actually] historical” (82-83). This includes a range of pedestrian movements, such as walking and resting, which are in fact “laboriously acquired” (81). Mauss states that the body learns the pre-existing movements of society through imitation. This can be both a conscious and unconscious act, and may manifest in formal teaching environments such as school, or may be informally in the home. The movements comprise of both pedestrian actions and activities of dance and sport, which are dependent on a body’s gender and are historically and culturally specific. In other words, the way each of us moves in all areas of life is a product of the time and place we live in. It is therefore important we learn these movements in order to move in the socially appropriate way. Mauss argues, “in every society, everyone knows and has to know and learn what he has to do in all conditions” (85). Cultural norms can therefore not only encourage or discourage participation in certain physical activities, as seen in the study on secondary-school students, but they also affect how different genders participate in certain activities.

Breakdancing is a synthesis of various physical activities and cultural influences. It was created in the ghettos of New York City in the early 1970s by socially oppressed African-American and Puerto-Rican youths (Banes; Rose). They amalgamated their histories of song and movement with images and music of popular culture to produce the new dance style of breaking. More specifically, the influences include swing dance styles such as the charleston, the lindy hop and the jitterbug, as well as the Latin hustle, the composite dance style known as rocking, and the more physical activities of capoeira and gymnastics (Banes).
Particularly in the early days of breaking there was great importance placed on the ‘freeze’, which is a pose that is usually held at the end of a set. The freeze saw references to popular culture such as b-boys re-enacting poses of pin-up girls, or a karate or kung-fu move featured in popular films of the time (Banes). Breaking is therefore in some respect a fusion, or physical reference to these varied influences. Significant impacts of musicality and rhythm include (but are not limited to) salsa, mambo, disco and funk. In fact, these musical styles are still used to break to today. Though it could be argued that capoeira’s influence on breaking was not prominent until the form had well been established, a closer analysis of the activity is beneficial in highlighting the analogy of two art forms.

The African-Brazilian tradition of capoeira has proved difficult to define. Downey (“Scaffolding Imitation in Capoeira”) characterises it as “an acrobatic, danced game done to distinctive vocal and instrumental music” (204). Yet both Lewis and Downey (“Listening to Capoeira”) explain the difficulty in categorising the form. This is because it combines elements of dance, sport, martial art, drama, game, folklore, theatre, competition, ritual, musical performance and combat training, all of which would be featured at a typical event. Consequently Lewis labels capoeira as a ‘blurred genre’, a term he adapts from Geertz. Similar to capoeira, breakdancing combines various elements that can make it difficult to categorise. These include, dance, competition, performance, sport, ritual, acrobatics and one could even argue combat training. Perhaps breaking’s paradoxical analogy to these ‘masculine’ activities is what rearticulates the category of dance (a traditionally feminine domain) as a ‘masculine’ form.

Lewis discusses the ‘strategic ambiguity’ in capoeira, a term he borrows from Kochman (1986), where the boundaries between play and fight are deliberately pushed. Downey (“Scaffolding Imitation in Capoeira”) describes this ‘strategic ambiguity’ in a capoeira game, “at the same time, they balance aggression with a need to demonstrate
dexterity, creativity, and artistic flair in response to changes in music” (204). This tradition of balancing intensity and vigour, creativity and aggression draws parallels with breakdancing. Maxwell also makes this comparison, “this preparatory moment is familiar: a curious blending of the extraordinarily tense, with a kind of strutting languidness. It is almost the break dancer’s equivalent to the capoiera ginga, that series of movements with which the capoierista prepares himself for the sudden movement to come, establishing a kind of balance in imbalance” (Maxwell 233 citing Lewis; italics in original).

This equilibrium is specifically evident in the first report of breakdancing in mainstream media. According to Banes, the New York Post sent Martha Cooper (who later became a renowned photographer of hip-hop) to report on a riot that had erupted in a subway station. However to her and the local police’s surprise, the youth involved were not actually fighting, but dancing!

Therefore the paradoxical blurring of the lines between dance and fighting in breakdancing (dance situated within the domain of femininity and fighting within the arena of masculinity) may be the catalyst that enables the transgressing of cultural norms that leads to the articulation of breakdancing as a masculine form. But the question arises, why are these qualities culturally viewed as innately masculine?

It has been reported that in most mammalian species, males are more risk prone, dominance-oriented and aggressive than females (Daly & Wilson; Eibl-Eibesfeldt). In a recent study by Hugill, Fink, Neave, Besson and Bunse, males were measured for propensity of risktaking and were also recorded dancing. Females observed these recordings and were asked to rate attractiveness. It was found that the ratings of attractiveness were positively correlated with a propensity to risktaking. The authors explained that propensity to risktaking has been shown to be a signal of genetic quality amongst males (such as health and vigour),
and evidence to date suggests that this trait may well be detectable through observation of movement, such as dancing.

Similarly, a study by Hugill, Fink, Neave and Seydel reported that men’s dancing ability signal physical strength and fighting competency. Women’s ratings of attractiveness of men after observing them dance were positively correlated with measures taken of their physical strength. Therefore, dancing may be utilised as another arena for male competitiveness, where women can evaluate genetic quality in males.

Breakdancing therefore draws from these historicised domains where masculinity is powerfully enacted (such as fighting). This is not only through the reproduction of particular hegemonic masculinised sentiments (such as intensity, aggression and competitiveness), but also through the physical demands of the dance itself (such as risk-taking and feats of strength and endurance). The paradox of breaking is that through accentuating these traditionally masculine elements, breakdancers can transgress cultural norms that dictate dance as a feminine activity, consequently re-articulating the domain of dance as masculine. This act of protest against contemporary discourses could be experienced as a source for empowerment.

In a study on female participation in pole dancing, Holland discusses how transgressing social norms can be empowering. She states:

Many of the women I spoke to overwhelmingly had a history of not liking exercise and of having previously ‘failed’ at it. They were in the habit of defining themselves apologetically or negatively as clumsy, or not physical, not fit, not strong, or not sporty because they did not, and probably had never, enjoyed the sorts of physical activities that are traditionally seen to be acceptable. Nonetheless these same women
said they had seen benefits in their fitness, strength and body confidence, both during and after the classes. (Holland 180)

To reiterate Holland’s findings, women were struggling to exercise, an activity that is a cultural and physical demand of their bodies, as they were confined to the strict conformities of what is acceptable for their gender. Through attending pole-dancing classes, the women transgressed these cultural regulations of what is appropriate for their gendered body and consequently felt a sense of empowerment.

Similar to these women, breakdancing has the potential to provide a sense of empowerment to males as they transgress the social norms that deem the activity of dance as feminine. In addition, through their participation they protest the cultural regulations of their body as they articulate it through dance. However the cultural pressure for males to express themselves in certain ways (such as through sentiments similar to fighting) has caused the dance to be articulated in a uniquely male fashion, thus paradoxically reinforcing hegemonic ideals of masculinity. In addition, through this over-compensation of masculine expression, the dance consequently suppresses the existence of any femininity. Paradoxically, the dance has become more masculine than feminine.

Although breaking may have originated as an egalitarian dance form in the early 1970s, it has since progressed to a globally male dominated arena. A possible reason for the gradual demise of female participation may be the proliferation of more athletic, vigorous dance moves. In particular, the gradual increase of ‘power’ moves may have discouraged female breakers from partaking in these more acrobatic movements. In a discussion of the lack of participation of genders in hip-hop in Australia (of which breaking is a subset), Mitchell justifies, “given the degree of danger graffiti involves, it is not surprising it remains a male-dominated activity … A similar case could be put for the demanding physical skills
required for breakdancing and the exacting technical skills required for DJing [also referred
to as ‘deejaying’], both of which activities tend to attract few women” (8).

However, in this case I am not merely referring to the potential physical limitations of
the female body, rather the cultural limitations that have been imposed on it. Rose reiterates,
“in keeping with young women’s experiences in graffiti and breaking, strong social sanctions
against their participation limited female ranks” (57). Additionally, Ken Swift a notable
figure in the global breakdancing culture discusses the cultural expectations of females
breaking. He begins by referring to Martha Cooper and her photographs of breakdancing:

Martha has a lot of girls in the background of her pictures, but she doesn’t have them
breaking, because back in the days it was taboo for the girl to jump out like that.
Maybe they were just girlfriends. They may have been breaking, but I guess they
figured what with the cameras out, it was time for the boys to do their thing, ‘cause
the pictures have about 90 percent or maybe even 98 percent dudes. They knew they
weren’t really competition, serious b-girlz; they did it for the fun. We had a bunch of
girls in Rock Steady, but they were there for support – and they would bug out and do
the stuff here and there. (Swift qtd. in Kramer 16)

Importantly, Ken Swift notes the cultural norms that were impeding the participation
of females. In addition he points out some significant details regarding the presence of
women in breakdancing. They took on the identities of girlfriends, as supporters, they “knew
they weren’t really competition” (Swift qtd. in Kramer 16) against the boys, and they knew
when to step aside for the boys. The masculine presence was domineering. Maxwell
describes the greater hip-hop culture in Sydney in the 1990s:

The Hip-hop world I encountered was for the boyz, a masculinised, even phallocentric
world in which young men performed, rapped, breaked, boasted, bombed, leaving
their phat tags to mark their presence, hung out, strutted, posed with their legs thrust out and their hands hooked in low-slung pockets, fingers brushing their groins. Where young men talked about their Community, Culture, Nation. (Maxwell 59-60)

Examining the vocabulary used, though ‘b-boy’ is a generic term used within the global culture (for example a popular website within the culture for forums, videos and clothing attire is bboyworld.com), and used interchangeably to refer to both male and female breakdancers, the term ‘b-girl’ is used only to describe female breakdancers. In other words, males and females participate in b-boying, but only females participate in b-girling as well. This may indicate that the girls have a unique experience of the dance form that needs to be separately articulated. Schloss argues, “the way the term[s] [are] used seems to imply a sort of gender essentialism – that the dance is, in some fundamental way, an expression of one’s gender identity” (“Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation” 64). He proceeds, “this suggests not only that the term b-boying is normative, but that so is the projection of masculinity itself. This can sometimes put b-girls in situations where their dedication to the (often masculine) ideals of b-boying comes into conflict with their identity as women” (“Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation” 65).

The minority of females that do participate in breaking are therefore physically confronted with masculine techniques of the body, and must attempt to translate them onto their own differently gendered body. In other words, for females to learn the dance they must not only learn and perform the dance steps, but they must also learn how to perform a new gendered way of moving, acting and even dressing. They need to learn how to perform masculinity. This process is learnt through the modeling of one body that enacts a certain gender and appropriated onto another, differently gendered body, attempting to imitate it.

The result is a compromise between a masculine and feminine way of moving.
Maxwell observed the equilibrium of gender articulation for female participants in the Sydney hip-hop culture in the 1990s: “women tended to win respect through the adoption of specifically masculine embodiments and habitus, by becoming what in other contexts would be known as tomboys. Even the most broadly respected female writer ceded her own femininity into her graff [graffiti] practice, writing ‘Sugar’ and ‘Spice’” (61-62). Importantly Maxwell highlights how females felt they needed to incorporate some aspect of hegemonic femininity into their identity.

Though this compromise of gender expression transgresses the social norms that dictate a female’s engagement with physical activity, paradoxically their bodies are still a product of cultural regulations and discourses. In other words, they are still (and always will be) females enacting male techniques of the body (even without the distinct feminine articulation). This is because according to Deleuze and Guattari the female body is situated in the category of ‘minority’. Rather than using the term ‘minority’ as merely referring to quantities or numbers, Deleuze and Guattari use it to refer to counter-hegemonic existences (of which are culturally and historically specific), such as women or different ethnic identities. Each of us undergoes a process of categorisation, which is measured against the axiomatic majority. Those that do not represent the majority are always first and foremost perceived as a minority. With males situated in the majority, female breakdancers will therefore always be viewed as that – female breakdancers. The terms b-girl and b-boy, though interchangeable on a female body reflect their struggle between representations of gender. In confronting the dance (and the histories of masculinity associated with it), they are paradoxically reinforcing their status as minorities.

In the current Sydney breaking scene, the significant outnumbering of b-girls in Sydney has lead to an ambivalent mode of inclusion. Through mere participation women receive ‘props’ (excessive recognition or encouragement) by males in the culture. This can
create a positive environment that encourages women to participate, while decreasing levels of intimidation in an obviously male dominant environment. Perhaps the males are sympathetic to the girls competing in a testosterone-fueled space, subconsciously recognising their biological and cultural disadvantage. In any case the manifestation of ‘props’ can also be counter-productive as it lowers the expectations of skill level in women. For example, when a b-girl ‘gets-down’ in a ‘cypher’ or ‘battle’, spectators cheer. Yet if a b-boy performed the exact same moves, the crowd would most likely not respond (except for maybe a small group of their friends). The differentiation of gender is clearly articulated. Consequently, women can potentially have a significantly shorter breaking career than men as they reach their climax much earlier. In other words, while it may take a male approximately eight years to place at a national competition level (in Australia), it may take a female only three years (my own personal observations, which are also dependent on the amount of training and the level of dedication the participant has to the dance and its traditions). The breaking culture therefore paradoxically imposes its own forms of cultural limitations onto female bodies, limitations that are reinforced due to gender inequality.

To conclude, though the domain of dance is typically articulated as feminine, breakdancing is expressed as a masculine activity as it draws on historicised qualities of masculinity (such as aggression, competiveness, risk-taking and feats of strength and endurance) and plays with the strategic ambiguity of fighting. While this process transgresses social norms of acceptable gendered physical activity, and can be a source for empowerment, it can also reinforce these hegemonic ideals of masculinity. In addition, the over-compensation of these masculine qualities suppresses the expression of any femininity, resulting in the cultural discouragement of female participation. Paradoxically, the dance has become more masculine than feminine. In saying this, those females that do participate must negotiate a masculine way of moving with their female bodies. This too can be a source for
empowerment as social norms of physical activity are protested against. However due to the learning of gender-specific techniques of the body, this negotiation merely reinforces the female’s status of minority. Breakdancing therefore enacts multiple paradoxes in terms of the articulation of gender.

Notes

1 The word structure of b-boy has been taken from the work of Schloss ("Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation", Foundation).

2 The word structure of hip-hop has been taken from the work of Schloss ("Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation", Foundation).

3 ‘Get-down’ implies breakdance, specifically doing floor work.

4 Schloss describes the cypher as “the circle of observers, in the center of which b-boys and b-girls take turns dancing” (“Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation” 413).

5 Schloss describes the battle as a “formal contest” (“Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation”).

Works Cited


Schloss, Joseph G. “‘Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation’: History, Canon, and Community in B-Boy Culture.” *Ethnomusicology* 50.3 (2006): 411-432