Re-articulating gender norms through breakdancing

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Abstract:

Breakdancing has the capacity for bodily difference. This difference challenges cultural regulations that inhibit a body’s way of moving. Gendered categorisations of physical activity culturally discourage particular bodies from participating in certain activities. However, this article argues that breakdancing attempts to transcend the cultural regulations that limit bodies. In breakdancing, males participate in a typically feminine activity - dance - and females adopt a ‘masculine’ way of moving. Yet in this process, hyper-masculine/feminine expressions are reinforced. Paradoxically, breakdancing both enables and hinders the re-articulation of gender norms.

Article:

Breakdancing has the capacity for bodily difference. This difference challenges the physical and cultural parameters that inhibit the body’s way of moving. An assessment of such bodily movement drives this analysis of the Sydney breakdancing culture, which takes as its focus breakdancing's capacity to re-articulate the ‘feminine’ domain of dance as ‘masculine’, and perhaps in the process, to break down the boundaries of gendered movement.

My observations of the Sydney breakdancing culture are derived from my experiences as a female who learns breakdancing. Also referred to as breaking and ‘b-boying’, breakdancing is a hybrid dance style that elicits confusion and concern to those external to the culture regarding the nature of gendered engagement. While males are emasculated through participating in dance, females are culturally discouraged from breaking due to its levels of physicality and risk. The gendered categorisation of physical activities consequently inhibits the body’s capacity for difference.

There has been much investigation into how bodies are regulated according to gendered norms. Klomsten, Marsh and Skaalvik (2005) examined how particular physical activities are viewed as either masculine or feminine based on certain characteristics associated with each sport. Characteristics such as strength, endurance, aggression and risk typify ‘male’ sports (Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik, 2005; Koivula, 2001; Metheny, 1965). Examples of ‘male’ sports include martial arts, wrestling, rugby, weight lifting and ice hockey (Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik, 2005). In contrast, 'female' sports are associated with characteristics such as gracefulness, flexibility, beauty and rhythm (Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik, 2005; Metheny, 1965). Examples
of ‘female’ sports include dance, aerobics, gymnastics, ballet and figure skating (Klomsten, Skaalvik & Espnes, 2004; Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik, 2005; Koivula, 1995; Matteo, 1986; Metheny, 1965; Pfister, 1993). Additionally, sports that were categorised as either masculine or feminine (according to their characteristics) had participation ratios that reflected this. These participation ratios demonstrate how cultural expectations of gender can physically inhibit the body’s capacity for difference.

The manner in which this process of gendered categorisation of physical activities relates to breaking will be examined later in the article; however, prior to this a brief overview of breaking’s history relevant to this article will outlined. Breaking is a synthesis of diverse physical activities and cultural influences. It was created in the multicultural ghettos of New York City in the early 1970s and formed part of the greater culture of hip-hop (in conjunction with ‘deejaying’, ‘emceeing’ and graffiti). Hip-hop developed as a response to the deterioration of the social infrastructure (Rose, 1994; Vliet, 2007). Rose (1994) argues that the catalyst of this deterioration was the development of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Socially oppressed African-American and Puerto-Rican youths amalgamated their histories of song and movement with images and music of popular culture to produce the new dance style of breaking. In particular, musical and rhythmic influences include (but are not limited to) salsa, mambo, funk, soul and disco (Schloss, 2009). In fact, these musical styles are still used to break to today (Schloss, 2006). Physical influences on the dance include swing dance styles such as the Charleston, lindy hop and jitterbug, as well as the Latin ‘Hustle’, the composite dance style known as ‘rocking’, and the more physical activities of capoeira and gymnastics (Banes, 1994). Popular culture was a significant impact on the development of the dance, and these influences are evident in the ‘freeze’ (a sudden pose, typically held at the end of a ‘set’ (sequence of moves or performance)), which held references to the poses of pin-up girls and kung-fu moves featured in popular films of the time (Banes, 1994). Breaking is therefore a fusion of - or physical reference to - these varied influences.

There has been much commentary on the influence of capoeira on breaking culture (Banes, 1994; Mitchell, 1999; Schloss, 2009; Thompson, 1987). This African-Brazilian tradition arises from its synthesis of elements of dance, sport, martial art, drama, game, folklore, theatre, competition, ritual, musical performance and combat training (Downey, 2002). These varied components have lead Lewis to label capoeira as a "blurred genre" (1992:1), a term he adapts from Geertz (1983).This term can be applied to breaking, as it combines elements of dance, competition, performance, sport, ritual, acrobatics and, one could even argue, combat training. The synthesis of these varied elements may work to ‘blur’ the boundaries that regulate the gendered participation in certain physical activities.

This amalgamation of disparate physical techniques is especially evident in what Lewis labels ‘strategic ambiguity’ (1992:219), a term he borrows from Kochman
(1986) to describe the manner in which capoeira deliberately pushes the boundaries between play and fight (1992). Downey describes this 'push' 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" (2008: 204). This practice of balancing creativity with aggression informs some of the tenets of breakdancing:

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 capoieraginga, that series of movements with which the capoierista prepares himself for the sudden movement to come, establishing a kind of balance in imbalance. (Maxwell, 2003: 233; italics in original)

This equilibrium is particularly evident in the first report of breakdancing in mainstream media. According to Banes (1994) Martha Cooper (who later became a renowned photographer of hip-hop) was sent by the New York Post to report on a riot that had erupted in a subway station. Yet ‘riot’ turned out to be an inaccurate description, as the youth involved were not actually fighting, but breakdancing!

This misinterpretation of activities is not completely unforeseen. Due to the limited opening hours of dance studios and community halls in Sydney, the public domain of the street is a popular site for both training and ‘jams’ (casual dance social events). Typically featured at these gatherings would be types of circular formations of observers surrounding a dancing b-boy. These formations include ‘battles’ (a typically organised “formal contest” (Schloss, 2006: 413) between two individuals or two crews) and ‘cyphers’ (a spontaneous circle where b-boys take turns to dance in the centre). Outsiders could easily misconstrue the combination of athletic movements performed within the circle and the animated reaction from the encompassing crowd as a fight. Yet a redeeming factor towards its articulation as a dance is the accompaniment of this activity with (loud) music. Breaking’s practice of blurring gendered categorisations may be the catalyst that re-articulates the activity as a masculine form. Yet how certain characteristics are assigned to gender requires further investigation.

There has been much research into the prevalence and significance of certain qualities among males (Daly & Wilson, 1983; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Hugill, Fink, Neave, Besson and Bunse, 2011; Hugill, Fink, Neave and Seydel; 2009). It has been reported that in most mammalian species, males are more risk prone, dominance-oriented and aggressive than females (Daly & Wilson, 1983; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989). In a recent study by Hugill, Fink, Neave, Besson and Bunse (2011), males were measured for propensity of risk-taking 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 risk-taking. The authors explained that propensity to risk-taking 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 (2009) reported that a male's dancing ability signals 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. Dancing may then be utilised as another arena for male competitiveness, where women can evaluate genetic quality in males.

These studies demonstrated that women have observed certain characteristics among males as signifiers of genetic quality. As a result, these characteristics in men are desirable to women. These ongoing convictions have contributed to their cultural adaption as masculine qualities. Through the expression of these historically male characteristics, the traditionally feminine domain of dance is re-articulated as masculine. In order to maintain this re-articulation, however, these characteristics must be meticulously reproduced. Importantly then, breaking relies on strict modes of learning in order to be effective in this transgression.

The process of learning breakdancing is distinctive. In order to communicate and preserve traditions, the culture prefers the verbal transmission of knowledge as well as imitation learning techniques. Rather than these characteristics featuring in a typical class environment (as is the case for most dance forms, including jazz, tap and ballet), breaking is traditionally learnt collectively at various types of locations. These include community and youth halls, dance studios (though not through classes), domestic environments and street locations. At these sites, b-boys of various skill levels individually ‘train’ (the preferred term used in the Sydney culture to imply breaking practice or rehearsal) unguided within a group (numbers range from two to twenty b-boys). More specifically, though they work individually and practice different moves, they also assist one another through instruction and encouragement. While one b-boy may be advanced at one move, they may be novice at another. The large numbers participating in unguided training allows for an egalitarian approach to learning.

Downey (2008) recognises that, even in informal settings such as collective training, there is more involved than a mere 'look and copy' approach. Rather, pedagogical skills such as tailored directions, as well as an interactive relationship of modeling and imitation, form the basis for learning this type of performance. He describes this process in capoeira:

To learn capoeira techniques, novices carefully watch experienced players, haltingly try to copy techniques, rehearse movements over and over again until they become expert and, in turn, become models for other novices. … But practitioners do not consider imitation alone to be sufficient to learn the art. [as] … imitative learning itself [is] a
complex, two-way form of interaction, in which the model [is] far from
a simple object of observation. (2008: 205)

In an environment rich in socialisation, the breaking culture enables novices to
 observe and interact with various advanced b-boys. Within this interaction, the
importance placed on oral communication ensures the longevity of the culture’s
history and traditions. This includes the tradition of innovation and the development
of a distinctive style (within certain parameters). Training is therefore not reduced to
the mere rehearsal of steps. The added component of socialisation leads to
camaraderie, which can then inform the teams (or ‘crews’) that b-boys compete with
in battles. Schloss explains the crew’s significance in regards to training - “part of the
value of a crew is that it allows breakers to combine socialisation with practice,
making the necessary repetition [of learning moves] more interesting” (2009: 54).
This repetition is required in order to gain proficiency in the performance of the dance
style.

Théberge points to the importance of repetition in learning musical style, explaining
that style “is something that is acquired only through an extended process of learning
through practice” (1995: 276, italics in original). These learnt acts and movements are
laboriously and meticulously practiced, despite the expert’s outcome of an effortless
appearance. As Théberge argues, “the body become[s] accustomed to routines, not
simply as a form of acquired technique, but as elements of musical style” (1995: 276).
The performance of this ‘style’ becomes physically embodied through the body’s
conscious repetition.

Mauss explores the embodiment of socialisation and argues that the “things we find
natural are [actually] historical” (1973: 82-83). This includes a range of pedestrian
movements, such as walking and resting, which are in fact “laboriously acquired”
(1973: 81). He argues that through imitation the body learns (both consciously and
unconsciously) the pre-existing movements of society. These comprise of pedestrian
actions and movements of dance and sport, which are dependent on a body’s gender
and are historically and culturally specific. In order to move in the socially
appropriate way it is therefore important the body learns these movements. Mauss
argues, “in every society, everyone knows and has to know and learn what he has to
do in all conditions” (1973: 85). Cultural ideologies therefore inform the regulations
that inhibit a body’s way of moving.

The physical enactment and consequential reinforcement of social praxis can be
explored using Butler’s notion of ‘performativity’ (1990). She states, “the effect of
gender is produced through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood
as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds
constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (1990: 191). Rather than viewing
gender as a constructed stable identity that is regulated according to biology (sex),
Butler views it as an ongoing process of reproduction, which takes form through the moment of the body’s historicised performance. This performance is not an individual occurrence; rather it is a regulated organisation of performances.

Osumare (2002) applies Butler’s notion of performativity to his research on breakdancers in Hawai‘i. First, he distinguishes that the term ‘performance’ refers to the conscious act of learning and reproducing the distinct dance form of breaking. This includes the standard historicised moves that are consciously learnt and then built upon with innovation (an important component of the culture). He then applies ‘performativity’ to the unconscious study of historically and culturally specific bodily movements, gestures and postures that in their reproduction enact a particular social identity, such as male-ness or ‘b-boy-ing’. The enactment of socially inscribed movements (such as gendered movements) paradoxically leads to the reinforcement of their cultural meanings and associations. Within breaking, the exploitation of historicised male characteristics has lead to the re-articulation of the dance as masculine. Yet the cultural pressure for males to express themselves in certain ways limits the body’s capacity for difference and consequently reinforces these historicised ideals of masculinity.

In examining the kinaesthetic movements of breaking, the accentuation of hyper-‘masculine’ qualities makes it distinguishable from most other dance styles. Ballet dancers, for example, are typically situated on their toes; they plantarflex (point) their feet and transition their movements through light, soft, flowing extended lines. Through directly opposing these feminine characteristics, the representation of masculinity in breaking is achieved (Kломsten, Marsh and Skaalvik (2005) highlight the prevalence of this trait when it comes to the gendering of physical activities). In contrast to ballet, breakdancers appear flat-footed (they are in fact slightly raised off their heel; this example specifically refers to the standing aspect of the dance known as ‘toprock’), their weight is heavy and grounded, they dorsiflex their feet, accentuate sharp ninety-degree angles, suddenly cut their transitions short (via changing direction or height, or performing a freeze) and their movements are performed with strength and purpose. This characteristic intersects into other aspects of the dance, and can at times appear aggressive. Other aspects of breakdancing include footwork (performed on the floor where dancers display vigour by transitioning between a variety of crouched positions using a number of steps, kicks and patterns) and ‘power’ moves - difficult and risky acrobatic movements that require high levels of physicality and balance; such as headspins, ‘1990s’ (a spinning one-handed handstand) and flips (though their inclusion in this category is debatable within the culture; for some breakers, this group constitutes a category of their own). It is evident that these varied components of the dance draw from historicised masculine characteristics, including aggression, high levels of physicality and risk. Through directly opposing the ‘feminine’ characteristics of ballet, breaking’s over-compensation of masculinity consequently suppresses the existence of any femininity. Paradoxically the dance is 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. In the Sydney breaking culture, females are not only in the minority numerically, but they are also, as Deleuze and Guattari (1988) would suggest, in the minority ideologically. Rather than using the term ‘minority’ as merely referring to quantities or numbers, Deleuze and Guattari use it to refer to counter-hegemonic existences (which are culturally and historically specific), such as women or different ethnic identities (1988). They explain that each individual 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. Though female presence in the early breaking culture was situated in a numerically equal environment, their female identities were still placed within a hierarchy of ‘majority’ versus ‘minority’. What led to the downfall of female participation can be investigated through examining the cultural limitations present surrounding the culture.

A possible reason for the gradual demise of female participation may be the proliferation of more athletic, vigorous dance moves (such as power moves). In a discussion on the lack of participation of genders in Australian hip-hop, 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, both of which activities tend to attract few women” (2003: 8). Not surprisingly Mitchell highlights risk and physicality as qualities unique to males.

However, it must be noted that I am not merely referring to the potential physical limitations of the female body, but rather the cultural limitations that have been imposed on it. Rose elaborates, “in keeping with young women’s experiences in graffiti and breaking, strong social sanctions against their participation limited female ranks” (1994: 57). Additionally, Ken Swift (a notable figure in the global breaking culture) discusses the limitations that inhibited female participation:

Martha [Cooper] 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 in Kramer, 2005: 16)

Importantly, Ken Swift indentifies the cultural norms that have impeded female participation. In addition he points out some significant details regarding the presence
of women in breakdancing. These women took on the identities of girlfriends and supporters, they “knew they weren’t really competition” (Swift in Kramer, 2005: 16) against the 'boys', and knew when to physically exclude themselves from the activity. Evidently, 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, broke, 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. (2003: 59-60)

Maxwell describes not only a hip-hop culture physically populated by males, but also a hip-hop culture performed as masculine.

Another example of the masculine presence in breaking is evident through the examination of the vocabulary used. ‘B-boy’ is a generic term used within the global culture and used interchangeably to refer to both male and female breakdancers (for example, popular websites that provide online forums, videos and male and female clothing attire are www.bboyworld.com and www.thebboyspot.com). However the term ‘b-girl’ is used only to describe female breakdancers. That is to say, 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 that “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” (2009: 64), and the ‘majority’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) of that identity is masculine. 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” (Schloss, 2009: 65). The equilibrium between performing an overtly masculine dance and maintaining the performativity of the feminine identity may discourage females from participating.

In the current Sydney breaking scene, the significant outnumbering of b-girls 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. Yet the manifestation of ‘props’ can also be counter-productive as it lowers the expectations of skill level in women. In Sydney, for example, when a b-girl begins dancing in the cypher or battle, spectators cheer. Yet if in Sydney 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. While in Australia it may take a male approximately eight years to place at national competition level, it may take a female only three years (my own observations, which are of course also dependent on the participant’s dedication and amount of training). The breaking culture therefore imposes its own forms of cultural limitations specifically onto female bodies.

The minority of females that do participate in breaking are physically confronted with masculine techniques of the body. They must attempt to translate these techniques onto their own differently gendered body. Not only has their body been conditioned according to feminine gendered norms, but also the cultural coercion of female preference for physical activities (such as ballet and figure skating) has accentuated a hyper-feminine way of moving. When females then first attempt breaking, the new ‘masculine’ way of moving is kinaesthetically foreign, resulting in a different physical interpretation (and experience) of the dance. 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 (as outlined in Maxwell’s description). They need to learn how to perform masculinity. This takes the imitation learning technique to a new level, as imitation must be reappropriated through the modeling of one body that enacts a certain gender 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 [graffiti artist] coded her own femininity into her graff [graffiti] practice, writing ‘Sugar’ and ‘Spice’” (2003: 61-62). Maxwell highlights the compromise females were faced with between their participation of the masculine culture and their own feminine identity. The equilibrium was achieved through performing the masculine body, yet incorporating some aspect of hyper-feminine articulation. Yet the fact that the females felt the need for some feminine articulation further highlights their status as minorities.

Though this compromise of gender expression transgresses the regulations of the female body, paradoxically these women 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. With males situated in the ‘majority’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) female breakdancers will therefore always be viewed as just that – *female* breakdancers. The terms b-girl and b-boy, though interchangeable on a female body reflect their struggle between representations of gender (and highlight what the normative body is – b-boy). In
confronting the dance, and the histories of masculinity associated with it, they are paradoxically reinforcing their status as minorities.

Breakdancing therefore has the capacity for bodily difference. This difference challenges the gendered categorisations of physical activity, such as dance, which then enables new forms of expression for male bodies. However the reproduction of this expression reinforces historicised qualities of masculinity, while also suppressing the existence of any femininity. Consequently, the dance is more masculine than feminine. Female engagement in the dance is therefore confronted with masculine techniques of the body. The compromise between the participation in an overtly masculine dance style, and the performativity of the female identity leads to a lack in female participation. Yet those that do participate are situated within the ‘minority’, as they are separately articulated as female breakdancers. Paradoxically, breakdancing both enables and hinders the re-articulation of gender norms.

Reference List


