B-GIRL LIKE A B-BOY

MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN HIP-HOP DANCE

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ABSTRACT

Many female hip-hop dancers (such as b-girls, poppers, lockers, choreography dancers) have embraced and struggled with hip-hop dance, a dance where many of its sub-styles honor the male body and masculinity. In a male dominated dance culture, how do women negotiate with issues of gender in the dance movement and social practices? This thesis responds to these concerns by documenting the experiences of hip-hop dancers and urban street dancers in New York City. By examining the woman's experience in hip-hop dance, this thesis looks into how the marginalization of female dancers within breaking is connected to how the dance was molded around the male adolescent lifestyle, social practices, and cultural values within Black urban ghetto communities of New York City during the 1970s and 1980s. In addressing how the conditions and issues associated with the dance's reverence for masculine expression affects the lives and careers of women, this research aims to find and reclaim the woman's voice and body in hip-hop dance culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

It never occurred to me that women did breaking, and upon my first few lessons I understood why. During my sophomore year in college, a few of my friends who were b-boys told me to drop by an open session at the university's campus center. Breaking is a very physically demanding dance form and despite my martial arts and athletic background, breaking was still difficult for me to pick up. I stayed involved with the college breaking crew for a couple of years but eventually stopped. I was not aware my departure from the dance was a common experience that many women encountered with breaking as well.

Within hip-hop dance, breaking is one dance style that demonstrates an extreme favoring of masculine expression and honoring the capabilities of the male body. Many female breakers, or b-girls, have embraced and struggled with breaking because male dancers have been and continue to be the main participants, historians, and teachers. Female dancers deal with discrimination, lack of support, limited access to resources, and partial membership. Given these circumstances, how do b-girls negotiate with the dance movement and social practices of breaking?

The intent of this thesis is to demonstrate the significance of how the reverence for masculinity found in hip-hop dance affects the lives and careers of female hip-hop dancers. By taking on an ethnographic approach, this research aims to focus on the female dancer's experience. This thesis is meant to show that an alternative shared experience exists in hip-hop dance culture and is intended to help other hip-hop dancers, particularly women, gain a better sense of what came before them, how things have

changed, how things are affecting them now, and what should be done to produce changes that will provide greater support for women within the hip-hop and urban street dance scene.

What I found troubling within hip-hop culture is the discrepancy of how women are represented in reality, in historical documentation, and how they are imagined. As far as hip-hop dance goes, the inclusion of women as performers, in writing, film, and within ciphers is rare, and at times, ornamental. Some past accounts have generalized men and women as equally present, but had the tendency to primarily feature men when it came to highlighted moments or giving special recognition. Some journalists and hip-hop writers claim that hip-hop dance is strictly masculine and male-oriented. In my literature research, I did come across a few comments or narratives stating that women were indeed avid participants, with some women described as out-dancing men. With such mixed statements and recollections, the role and involvement of women dancers in hip-hop culture was unclear.

Filmed documentaries such as *The Freshest Kids,* a fairly recent and popular hip-hop dance history documentary, barely had a single clip of a b-girl dancing. There were no indications of female poppers, lockers, nor any female emcee (MC), disc jockey (DJ), or event promoter.[1] Jeff Chang's *Don't Stop Can't Stop*, a hip-hop history book published in 2005, does not include any biographical documentation or commentary from any b-girls or female hip-hop artists. Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon, a well-known popper and

[1] As will be discussed in "Background History," the documentary plays a three-second clip of a b-girl dancing upon the narrator's explanation of a b-girl. There is a clip of b-girl Baby Love in the Rock Steady Crew's music video (though she's not even acknowledged as a b-girl). Although b-girl Asia One is interviewed and filmed dancing, cliops of her aren't shown until after the documentary ends in the rolling credits. Only one woman's interview appeared within the documentary where she briefly talked about the parties of the Bronx during the 1980s.

hip-hop historian, makes a point to mention both "b-boys and b-girls" in his writing, but he barely gives recognition or writes about female dancers in any of his more popular written works. This is not to put these hip-hop dance historians "on blast," for they have made major contributions to the documentation of hip-hop dance culture and are highly respected within the hip-hop community. However, with men being the primary historians of hip-hop culture, the over-looking of women in their writing results in a history that is centered on men and virtually void of women. Even more troubling is that these authors play a significant role in shaping an audience's perception of hip-hop's past. How does their documentation project a skewed understanding of hip-hop culture's main participants, producers and artists?

In my research I looked into physical, mental, and social issues teenage girls and young women encountered that not only affected their experience as performers, but also how being female impacted their progress as dancers, affected their respectability, and their relationships within the hip-hop dance community. Why these issues were happening was a key to understanding whether women just don't fit into the culture or if the culture purposely omits them.

When analyzing hip-hop dance culture, there are a number of concerns that need to be considered, particularly in looking at how female dancers are marginalized. Issues I address in this thesis seek to answer the following questions:

1) Is there documentation of female hip-hop dancers from the past?

2) How does the valuing of masculinity in hip-hop dance impact the way men and women dance? In particular how does it affect the physical behaviors, mental states and social realities of female dancers?

3) What changes can be implemented to help provide greater support, advancement, and acknowledgement of women in hip-hop and urban street dance?

As this thesis explores gender expression within a dance culture, the use of the terms male/female dancers was chosen over the use of men/women due to the socially constructed implications that come attached to the use of men/women within an American patriarchal society. The usage of men and women also denotes age. Rather than consistently having to write teenage girls and women, the term female dancers encompassed a wider range.

This thesis documents, through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, the experiences of b-girls and other types of hip-hop and urban street dancers from New York City. Following the introduction, Chapter Two provides a general literature review and commentary on the historical documentation of Black American dance, hip-hop dance, hip-hop culture, and dance research. In Chapter Three, I detail my methodology. In Chapter Four, I provide background information and some history on tracing hip-hop dances back to the concept of an African aesthetic. Based on the lack of documentation of female hip-hop dancers, this chapter introduces some of the dancers active between 1970 and 1990 who were interviewed in this study. I use the experiences and perspectives of my participants to paint the picture of what the urban street dance scene was like in the past. Ethnographic profiles of the younger dancers categorized as the "2000-generation" are also included in this chapter.

In Chapter Five, I begin analysis of some of the issues my participants have dealt with. I look into the cipher circle and the activity of ciphering, an important aspect of

breaking and other urban street dances. Following this topic, I give particular focus towards issues surrounding special treatment, limited training accessibility, lack of support, and physical appearance. This is then evaluated in terms of how b-girls are confronted with the challenge of emulating masculine movement versus expressing the dance on their terms as women. In Chapter Six, "Tackling Marginalization," I provide examples of the experiences and efforts of particular individuals who through their projects are taking the initiative to change the circumstances in order to provide greater support, acknowledgement and opportunity for female dancers in hip-hop and the rest of the urban street dance scene.

Finally, Chapter Seven looks into how breaking's reverence for power, attitude, style, and aggression are seen as masculine qualities stemming from the social practices and cultural values of teenage boys growing up in Black American urban ghetto communities of New York City during the 1970s and 1980s. I look into understanding breaking as a male adolescent coming-of-age activity and suggest that breaking and other early hip-hop dances were a way boys could display the physique and capabilities typically associated with men. Based on this concept, I revisit how the issues female dancers experience are reflective of breaking's origins as a male adolescent coming-of-age display dance. In this thesis I conclude with an overview of the significance of masculinity and male orientation in hip-hop dance and how the greater inclusion of female dancers is making an impact on present and future generations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In exploring the topic of the marginalization of women in hip-hop dance, my initial investigation started in hip-hop dance history and dance research methods. Choosing to focus on hip-hop dance, I soon realized I was also looking into socio-economic and racial tensions that exist in America**.** In particular is the impact of hip-hop music going mainstream with the majority of the producers and consumers being White Americans and the defining of Black American identity via hip-hop industry's glorification of the ghetto. Hip-hop dance not only reflects Black American dance traditions, but it is also an American dance tradition that has spread to impact communities around the world.

The concept of hip-hop dance being comprised of several different styles was introduced to me through the training program taught by the Hip-Hop Dance Conservatory in New York City. The Blade Technique created by Safi Thomas, director of the Hip-Hop Dance Conservatory, recognizes four elemental styles: boogaloo and popping[2], locking, breaking, and social party moves as the foundation to what is now understood as hip-hop dance. Although there are variations of how many and which styles are considered the foundations of hip-hop dance, most sources and teachers will acknowledge similar categories. Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon's "Physical Grafitti," Sally Banes' "Breaking," and Holman's "Breaking: The History" describe each of these

[2] Boogaloo is categorized as a predecessor to popping, but relatively developed around the same time and credited to have been created by two brothers, Boogaloo Sam and Popping Pete.

styles in detail, acknowledge their creators,[3] and discuss the social and musical influences that have shaped these dances.

Foundation (2005), written by Joseph G. Schloss is one of the few research projects focusing on b-boys, b-girls, and the breaking community in New York City. Schloss examines what breaking is as a dance form, as a component of hip-hop and New York urban culture, and he puts an emphasis on establishing the history, tradition, and distinct subculture that exists in breaking. Conducting interviews, observation/participation, and a having background in ethnomusicology theory, Schloss demonstrates the utilization of ethnographic approach. The value of ethnography as Frosch describes in her article "Dance Ethnography" is that it offers a way to study and write about a people and culture with an awareness of many socio-cultural influences and factors that affect anthropological research:

> At its most basic, ethnography is "writing" about people (from the Greek ethos, folk, people; and graphein, write). Descriptive in nature, ethnography pursues understanding through the layering of the specific and highly complex contexts of human experience. The idea of ethnography may be best introduced by its primary research methodology: participant observation. Participant observation typically takes place in the "field." The field may be a social situation well known, in fact "native," to the ethnographer, or an alien situation. In either case, attempting to set aside their own preconceived notions, ethnographers immerse themselves in the particular cultural setting. With the help of consultants and local

[3] In the case with breaking where there is no single known creator, dancers who have influenced the style are acknowledged.

> experts, the ethnographer examines culture in context. Working to develop a cultural understanding through the points of view of both "insider" (by learning the language, dance, music, and native categories, participation, interviews, embodiment, and so on), and "outsider" (by observation, reading, reviewing field notes, and so forth), the ethnographer attempts to come to an understanding of culture on its own terms, an ideal that may prove to be elusive. (258)

With dance being physical, moving, and performed live, the documentation and analysis of it has been limited in traditional scholarly research methods. Compared to other socio-cultural fields, dance research possesses a unique set of challenges that have pushed for different approaches to gathering, documenting, and analyzing data. *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry* provided insight from well-known dance scholars covering the basics of how to form, to develop, and conduct dance research as well as exploring different perspectives of how to evaluate one's own voice within the research. The last section of the book provided specific approaches that were pertinent to my research on how to gather data and how to present one's research such as movement analysis, dance ethnography, feminist inquiry, and dance history.

As I came to learn, hip-hop dance has not been taken seriously for many years. In effect, I started to realize the objectives and interests within many of the older literature on hip-hop dance contained questionable or misleading information. One example was *Hip-Hop Dance: Messages and Meanings,* a book written by Carla Stalling Huntington, who is an African American Studies professor in North Carolina. A lot of her descriptions of the dance moves were, as far as I could tell, her own interpretations of

linking African American racial struggles to hip-hop dance. Although her arguments were strong, there was no way to prove they were accurate. Her book was neither based on interviews, nor did it reference any resources when she defined hip-hop dance moves or their origins. Huntington failed to acknowledge any hip-hop dancers in her book. If anything, *Hip-Hop Dance* exhibited the dangers of personal agenda and the lack of credible resources relative to hip-hop dance to support her arguments.

Other sources were less extreme, and it was difficult to know if their information was reliable. Hazzard-Donald was one of the few authors who discusses house dance and waacking. These styles became important in my study, and her descriptions of the styles appear accurate, except that she claims hip-hop dance derived from or contains house and waacking influences. Again, like Huntington's work, Hazzard-Donald's article did not acknowledge the use of primary resources, such as interviews or field research.

Based upon personal knowledge and comparing notes between literature, I found several factors to be good indicators for the credibility of a particular literature. Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon's writing was supported by the fact that he is a popper and one of the most recognized faces of hip-hop dance in New York City during the 1980s. He personally knew or knows some of the dancers he writes about, or he spoke with their peers and students. In many ways his writing is documentation on his story, his peers, and his community. Although Sally Banes was not a hip-hop dancer but rather a dance writer, she became heavily involved in documenting breaking ever since her first article on breaking written for the *Village Voice* in 1981, which had put breaking and hip-hop culture on the map to the public.[4] Her years of involvement along with getting to know

[4] Refer to Banes 1981.

the dancers and organizers as well as being present at some of the earlier documented historical moments in break culture suggested some reliability. Schloss' book was based on his interviews and on field study of breaking in New York City. He talked to people within the community and attended many hip-hop and breaking events. He even tried learning how to break and participated in ciphers. If one was not present or an actual member of the community of concern, the next best way of producing sound research was through field research, observation, and participation—ethnographic methodologies similar to those Schloss used for his book.

When it comes to hip-hop culture, the scrutinizing of resources is extremely pertinent to the perception and portrayal of hip-hop dance due to its explosive popularization in pop media and pop culture. The presentation of hip-hop dance in how the culture is portrayed, documented, produced, and profited lacks authenticity and recognition of its members. This has generated an extreme caution and disdain within the hip-hop community. Given the fact that many of the pioneers of the culture are still alive, many people within the hip-hop community are angered by the people who produce "hip-hop" without guidance or reference to the original dancers, tradition, and culture. Thus the emphasis as researcher is to distinguish what is reliable information and to understand the history of hip-hop dance. To that effect, utilizing ethnographic and dance history research methods as the direction I needed to take with my research became more apparent.

As mentioned earlier in Holman's article on breaking dance history, he links breaking to dance movements that were performed prior to the 1970s. He suggests many of the moves and structural elements found in breaking are from older dances and dance

practices amongst African Americans. The intent of Holman's association of breaking to dance moves from the past was to place breaking as not only a dance with a history, but also a dance that comes from a long line of well established African American dance practices.

To further the investigation on hip-hop dance's African American influences, books such as Malone's *Steppin to the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*, Emery's *Black Dance From 1619 to Today,* Hazzard-Gordan's *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture*, and Roberts' *From Hucklebuck to Hip-Hop: Social Dance in the African-American Community in Philadelphia* provided information on the history of African American dance practices from as early as the slave trade ships arriving in America. Many of the authors describe African American music and dance as a valued social activity amongst African Americans. Music and dance knowledge were consistently passed down, recycled, revamped, and expanded geographically and stylistically. This provided support in being able to trace a connection between older African American dances and practices to more contemporary styles such as breaking and other hip-hop dance styles.

Several of these dance history books also point to the concept of an African aesthetic. The African aesthetic is based on an established set of characteristics deriving from African cultural values and traditional practices that continue to shape and define dances developed by the diasporic African descendants. The characteristics as defined by Robert Farris Thompson and expanded on by other authors such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild are found within hip-hop and other urban street dance styles. In fact, breaking

embodies almost every characteristic Thompson and Gottschild identify.[5] Thus a significant aspect of how I view the structure, influence, and practices of hip-hop dances is based on viewing them as descendants of African dance[6] that embody an African aesthetic.

From hip-hop dance and Black American dance,further literature review shifted to hip-hop history. As the dances grew alongside graffiti, DJ-ing, and MC-ing, their relationships to these other urban street arts were solidified the moment all of these elements became coined as a single "hip-hop culture."[7] Looking into hip-hop history books not only provided many valuable pieces of information pertaining to hip-hop dance specifically, but also what was happening around hip-hop dance. Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* played a crucial role in my understanding of hip-hop history, where the social, economic, political, racial, cultural, and music industry impacts were discussed alongside biographies, media documents, and interviews from many of hip-hop's known and respected artists, organizers, journalists, and producers. Nelson George's "Hip Hop's Founding Fathers Speak the Truth" also relives the early years of hip-hop as told in a group interview with the three founding DJ's of hip hop: Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa. Their perspectives as the pioneers, party organizers, and the influential figures who sparked a whole new wave of music and dance in the Bronx clarified several aspects, such as the social environment of parties and women's roles,

[5] Refer to the Background History section and for further detail see Thompson and Gottschild 57.

[6] Descendants of African dance here also include Afro-Latin, in particular Cuban and Puerto Rican, and Caribbean cultures as major cultural influences on hip-hop dance.

[7] In one resource, Afrika Bambaataa is referred to as the person who made the term "hip-hop culture" popular. (See Pabon 19.) However, there are several explanations in circulation of how the term hip-hop came about.

during the transitioning from the funk era into hip-hop. Their insight on what life was like in New York City in the 1970s along with their visions and objectives as DJ's further colored the cultural mural hip-hop dance was a part of.

Recent research within the last ten years has also given emphasis on the Latin American influences in hip-hop culture. In particular is Raquel Z. Rivera's book, *New York Ricans in the Hip Hop Zone.* By acknowledging Latino[8] DJ's, b-boys, rappers, and graf artists, Rivera re-writes hip-hop history. She discusses the cultural influences Latinos have contributed to hip-hop that were overlooked for a long time and rarely acknowledged as coming from Latin music traditions. Rivera credits the second wave of breakers of the early 1980s, many of who were Puerto Rican, as those who kept b-boying alive past its first generation of mainly African Americans. They incorporated the Puerto Rican uprock, and contributed many of the acrobatics, spins, and freezes that have come to symbolize breaking. Schloss also dedicates a section of *Foundation* to identifying dance practices and specific impacts Puerto Rican b-boys have contributed to breaking. These books' re-visioning of hip-hop history demonstrated the possibility and value of bringing out a once perceived minority in a culture as major contenders in the movement, a focus similar to my own quest to find women's presence and influences in hip-hop dance.

As demonstrated by the events documented in hip-hop history books, there are two prevalent concerns within hip-hop cultural studies: the relationship and impact of White American control over the hip-hop music industry, and the

[8] When referring to Latino Americans, Rivera (and Schloss) mainly discuss Puerto Ricans; however, in her book, Rivera does include information on other Latino influences and hip-hop figures of Latino descent beyond Puerto Ricans.

glorification/misrepresentation of the Black American ghetto and Black American identity in hip-hop culture. Books such as *That's the Joint* (eds. Forman and Neal), Chang's *Total Chaos,* Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* and *Hip Hop Wars* look into the issues such as the commercialization and commodification of black urban culture occurring in the rap industry. Rose argues that the over emphasis on the black ghetto feeds into the anxieties and forbidden fantasies fostered by White Americans about Black Americans. Rose points out that the images portrayed in the hip-hop industry and the imagination of the black ghetto are represented by the "Triton of Hip-Hop," the pimp, the ho and the gangsta.[9] Through these limited social roles, hip-hop and Black American identities are narrowly associated with violence, street hustlers, gang life, and an obsession for surviving or making money in a broken environment. The presentation of hip-hop dancers are also stereotyped into these three identities. Thus, as several sources indicate, the dominant representation of women in hip-hop revolves around the ho/prostitute persona who uses her body for profit, or better titled, the video vixen.

Within music videos, women of color dressed in bikinis and form fitting outfits surround the rap star as objects of desire and symbols of masculine power. This points out that the role of the video vixen has "become a necessity within hip-hop music videos, (and) the vixen's body, in particular have also become deified to a certain extent." (Rose 8). As a dominant portrayal of women in the hip-hop industry, hip-hop scholars such as Story, bell hooks, Michael E. Dyson, and Imani Perry argue that the black woman's body and social status are affected by men's imposition.

[9] For further discussion, refer to Rose's *Hip-Hop Wars* pg. 48-52, and pg. 124.

In hip-hop music videos, black women have become symbolic tokens of lust, exoticism, and seduction. The subordination of the black woman is accomplished by narrowing her identity to that of a forbidden fantasy of sexual desire. As explained in bell hooks' "Eating the Other," the exploitation of the black woman's body in hip-hop culture is nothing new. It is an extension of a historical legacy of colonial domination. The dominating images of women seen in hip-hop culture are problematic because they promote a highly sexualized dance identity that objectifies the black woman on the basis of her body. Rana A. Emerson's analysis of women in music videos stresses how music videos' "one dimensional depiction of black women as objects of male pleasure undermines their legitimacy and agency as artists." (Emerson, 123) Emerson's findings point out that hip-hop's main depictions of women focuses on their sexuality and their bodies.

Further supporting Emerson and hook's argument, Kaila Adia Story refers to the historical exploitation of black women through comparing the public exhibition of Sara Baartman (better known as Hottentot Venus)[10] and the sensational entertainer Josephine Baker to our current music video vixens. No matter the amount of fame and popularity these women obtained, it was ultimately still based on the commodity of sexuality, fantasized forbidden desire, and the display of colored women's bodies for the entertainment and profitability of others, particularly men. As these authors point out, the presentation and production of hip-hop culture is mainly in the hands of men, thus a key

[10] Sara Bartman was an African woman contracted in the early 1800's to display her body and be examined. The hypertrophy of her genitalia from traditional ritual practice made her famous. Even after her death, her genitals were preserved and displayed at a French museum until 1982. Based on information from Story's article.

aspect of the presentation and treatment of women is based on the control, perspective and desires men have about women.

Michael E. Dyson argues further that this is a tension fostered by patriarchal ideas, which place women in submissive roles. The objectification and stereotyping these authors argue black women encounter may be a key component to why women feel marginalized in hip-hop dance. What these authors emphasize is the need to understand the impact of gender and the significance of seeing women as minorities. Within hip-hop feminist studies, women become the forefront of such matters.

Taking on hip-hop feminist objectives, Guevarra in her article "Women Writin Rappin' Breakin': " interviews several female hip-hop artists about the challenges of participating in a male dominated subculture. Another article by Washington (2007) re-examines Guevarra's interviews of the b-girls featured in her article. Guevara and Washington point out that women feel the need to have safe spaces to dance where they can establish their identities as b-girls on their own terms. Both articles address issues of physical differences, discrimination, and limitations within a male dominated space as b-girls attempt to embrace a culture that doesn't necessarily reciprocate support towards its female participants.

The fact that these articles bring these issues into the open is important. These two articles became significant in shaping what types of questions and issues I incorporated into my research. The concept of a safe space discussed in Guevarra and Washington's articles had not occurred to me. Within my own fieldwork, I explore the significance safe space has for female dancers.

The women's experience and women as sources of knowledge have been two aspects of history that have been traditionally ignored. As discussed in Carol Brown's "Dance History: An Introduction" (1994), feminist dance history provides an arena for discussion on topics specifically pertaining to women such as the significance of the woman's body, gender as a constructed social category, and the woman's experience—issues often overlooked by white male scholars.

Like Guevarra and Washington, my research touches on three main areas of focus that Brown indicates are a few of the main objectives of feminist studies. From a historical stance, feminist inquiry looks into recovering the women's experience that oftentimes is lacking or altogether overlooked. As demonstrated by the hip-hop sources used in this thesis, there was barely any information on female dancers or any indication of what female dancers were more invested in if they were not breaking, popping, or locking. In finding traces of female hip-hop performance I came across a few sources mentioning that in early hip-hop days, double dutch jump roping was featured as the female form of hip-hop performance. If double dutch jump roping has almost been completely omitted from hip-hop culture, are there other female specific and aesthetically more feminine oriented performances, specifically dances in hip-hop culture that have been omitted from the overall picture?

Secondly, feminist studies look into the issues that pertain to women specifically. Women's inferior status in a society dominated by men skims over recognizing that the woman's experience is different from men. Although Guevarra and Washington touch upon some of these issues, such as overcoming physical limitations and the lack of social support, they are not explored in depth. The documentary *All the Ladies Say* is a prime

example. Filmed by b-girl Rockafella, the documentary follows six b-girls and gathers testimonials on their tribulations with training, motherhood, sexism, and emotional obstacles in dealing with gender discrimination in the hip-hop community.

Third, feminist inquiry aims to empower women by providing support and perspective on how they can define their identities and roles in society on their own terms within an environment dominated by men. With women's well being in mind, feminist hip-hop literature emphasizes the need to address the existence of double standards, working around the limited and subordinate roles imposed on women, and how women are redefining femininity on their own terms. Drawing from Perry's article, "Venus Hip-Hop and the Pink Ghetto," where she analyzes the identities of female rap artists, understanding how women can define themselves on their own terms within dance movement and be respected members of the urban street dance community become the driving purpose of my research.

In addressing the issues and circumstances of women in hip-hop dance, there are many factors and concerns that affect the present situation. As the breadth of literature demonstrates, there are many aspects of research this thesis is affected by. With a big gap on the documentation of women in hip-hop dance and considering the wide range of foci the marginalization of women in hip-hop dance entails, the direction of my own research was narrowed to a case study on breaking. Breaking is the style of hip-hop dance that has the most written about it. The documentation I was able to find on female dancers was mainly those who were involved in breaking. Regarded as a highly masculine, possibly the most masculine of all of the hip-hop dances, I hoped what I uncovered in my research

in breaking would help me to gain a better understanding of the gender dynamics found in hip-hop dance.

3. METHODOLOGY

Having grown up in the city that breathes hip-hop, I conducted my field research in New York City, where hip-hop claims its origins and a place where I have familiarity and a personal relationship with the hip-hop dance community. The field research was conducted for the duration of ten weeks: from June 2010 to August 2010.[11] Experiences were also drawn from short visits of several days to San Francisco, Chicago and Los Angeles prior to and after the ten weeks in New York City. Combined with my previous experiences of living in New York City and Honolulu (I have been living in Honolulu since 2006), I had ample material to draw from.

During my fieldwork I had four objectives. These were to:

1) document the experiences of female urban street dancers;

2) explore issues of gender that affected female urban street dancers;

3) understand why these issues existed or what they stem from; and

4) learn what is being done (if anything), and what can be done to provide greater support, recognition and respect for female urban street dancers.

In my fieldwork, I incorporated a broad spectrum of people involved in the hip-hop/urban street dance community. Among the people I interviewed and spoke to the majority were hip-hop dancers: professional and non-professional, beginners to well known figures in the community, b-boys, b-girls, poppers, lockers, choreography performers, and dancers who were avid freestylers (dancers who base their dancing on improvising and aren't necessarily categorized within one specific urban street dance style.) Many of these dancers were also hip-hop choreographers, teachers, hip-hop dance

[11] Refer to Appendix for full list of events, classes, parties, jams, studios, company rehearsals, break sessions attended.

company directors, hip-hop battle event organizers, urban street dance party promoters, and graduate students who wrote similar Master's theses focusing on the marginalization of women in hip-hop dance/culture. I also interviewed a hip-hop music video director, a film editor who worked on a b-girl documentary, an aspiring female hip-hop/pop artist, and several hip-hop dance scholars and researchers. I asked interviewees about their personal experiences and their views on issues related to gender in urban street dance. In addition to the interviews, I observed the participants as they performed, taught classes or workshops. I took dance classes myself and attended hip-hop dance events, such as hip-hop dance performances, hip-hop/breaking/house dance competitions and hip-hop festivals.

Interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, and over Skype. Most of the interviews were either video or audio recorded. Interviews averaged between sixty and ninety minutes. Follow up interviews were conducted with half of the participants based upon their availability.

Initially, the interviews focused on the participants' life stories. Then the interviews emphasized gender-specific topics, the interviewees' knowledge of urban street dance history, and current issues in the hip-hop dance community. As my field research progressed, my questions began to shift based upon my new-found knowledge and the participants' responses. My second round of interviews focused on interviewees' exposure to dance and hip-hop when they were growing up. My third round of interviews (which were all follow-up interviews during the ninth and tenth weeks of fieldwork) delved into the changes in the social aspects of urban street dance, such as interactions between men and women in the nightclub scene and the impact of the commercialization

of hip-hop. Thus, the interviews I conducted were not identical in content but reflected a gradual shift in the research progress through related topics dealing with urban street dance and gender.

Social networking sites, along with the Internet in general, made finding information on events and people relatively easy. Facebook and YouTube in particular, as a recent phenomenon of social cyber-networking, proved to be valuable modes for connecting and communicating with the participants. I used Facebook to find dancers and to keep in touch with them. In addition to Facebook messaging, I had access to photos and video recordings that were posted on the participants' Facebook page. Many dancers were avid updaters using their wall to post events such as upcoming competitions, classes they were offering, gatherings, events, or shows. With YouTube, I was able to look up recordings of either the dancers or the events that the dancer(s) had participated in. In essence, YouTube provided an unofficial database of recorded dance material.

What began as a personal outlet during my time in the field, attending nightclub parties catered to urban street dancers, ended up being one of the most important aspects of my research. Not only did I meet many people in the dance community, but I also had the opportunity to see how dancers interacted, and I got a better sense of who and what urban street dance was beyond the spotlight of performance, competition, and formal training spaces. This was the real space where the dance lived and flourished. My own participation (dancing with other dancers and not necessarily entering the cipher circle) also allowed dancers to become more familiar with me, to earn their trust, and where I was able to build a rapport with the participants.

At the end of the field research, notes that were taken during the interviews were inputted into a computer and were referred to in conjunction with the transcriptions of the interview recordings. Note taking during the interview often took away from the flow of the interview, yet having the bulk of the interview written down made the transcription process easier.

The motive behind this thesis was initially sparked by my personal experiences with hip-hop dance. The more involved I became with my research, the harder it became to leave my own story out. As a Chinese-American growing up in New York City when it was racially and economically diverse yet segregated during the 1990s/2000s, something about hip-hop dance empowered me as a young woman of color. However, hip-hop also challenged my sense of self worth as an Asian woman from New York City and eventually the stereotypes and particular lifestyle relegated in the rap industry made me step away from hip-hop dance for several years. Much of this thesis is a reflection of my own tribulations with hip-hop dance. This is an important element in my thesis where I have allowed it to be a guide in my writing and the understanding of my research.

4.1. BACKGROUND HISTORY

For over twenty years of my life, I lived in New York City. It wasn't until I lived and visited other cities that I noticed all the things that were specific to the Big Apple. Those things were not only in how the city functioned compared with other cities, but also how living in New York shaped the way people walk, the way people think, the way people dress, act, react, and move in a particular way. New York City is about walking down the streets and passing massive concrete buildings, one after another. It's about taking the subway everywhere and all of the time. People walk in their hurried paces to wherever they have to go. The next meal between meetings or jobs consists of made to go orders from street carts, fast food joints or the corner deli store, otherwise better known as a *bodega*. New York City is about constantly being stopped by homeless people asking for some spare change, being distracted by some kids breaking, a man banging on bucket drums, or a woman singing while strumming a guitar. Whether people are in business suits or rugged attire pushing handcarts of supplies, most New Yorkers work long hours where fifty or sixty hours a week is the norm. And often times the commute to and from work is an additional hour to three hours on the bus, subway, or suburban trains.

Neighborhoods such as Brighton Beach, Bedford Stuyvesant (Bed Stuy), Chinatown, Spanish Harlem, Flushing, or the Heights, are like mini Russia, the Caribbean islands, China, Puerto Rico, Korea, and all the rest of the countries around the world with only the compact concrete buildings, yellow New York taxis, blue and white Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) busses, and the classic green and white street signs on every block to pull the casual observer back and let him or her know that he or she is still in New York City —and the United States. Many people in these

neighborhoods speak two languages, and it is not unusual to come across someone who doesn't speak English at all. In New York City, the American dream is twisted into some cramped up ball of foreign smells and sounds, make-it-or-break-it hustler mentality, but it's about as American as it gets. New Yorkers wouldn't have it any other way.

Few, if any, people say, "hi" to strangers. There's always construction blasting somewhere, and cars are honking their horns incessantly. New Yorkers don't stand on the curb of the sidewalk to wait for the light to change. They stand off the curb and as close to the street lane without getting hit by an oncoming car. They also don't wait until the light changes to "walk," to cross the street. New Yorkers will go when the light turns yellow, or whenever a car is far enough that they can get across without having to run.

New Yorkers might know their neighbors by first name, but it is not surprising if they don't. Apartments that are in four to forty-story high buildings are more than likely the mode of residency. New Yorkers know their neighbors better via late night arguments, wailing children, television shows and music blaring on their neighbor's radios through the drywall and open windows rather than through the simple conversations made on the elevator down to the lobby. It's never pitch dark, and it's never silent at night; if there is such a place like that in the city, it usually isn't safe. Somehow people find their release, niche, and community in the concrete jungle called New York City. Open mic nights at an artsy bar, shopping on 5th Avenue or 34th Street, expensive cocktails at an exclusive nightclub, a pick-up game at the neighborhood basketball court, a basement gambling den, or venturing through the streets going anywhere and everywhere.

This is an idea of the New York City that I grew up in, and it is the same city that made hip-hop. Hip-hop grew out of its New York environment, a product of the way of life, resources, beliefs, and realities a particular population of New Yorkers experienced. The marginalization of women in hip-hop dance can arguably be the effects of hip-hop's existence during a specific time, a specific place, with specific people, sights, sounds, and chain of events. The Background History section of this thesis is a compilation of hip-hop dance history that gives the landscape of what the hip-hop dance scene was like for women during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s based on the interviews I conducted in the field.

Hip-hop culture[12] is considered to have its roots and beginnings in the 1970s in the ghettos of the Bronx, New York City. By hip-hop culture, the reference is to four elements of artistic expression that began to grow amongst young African and Latino American teens: DJ-ing, MC-ing (rap), graffiti art, breakdance (or the current politically correct terminology: breaking, popping, locking, and boogaloo). Before the term hip-hop was used, these art and performance elements weren't considered as parts of a distinct and specific culture. These were activities urban African and Latino teens did for fun that eventually got lumped together. Where resources, money, and training were limited, teenage kids were documented as creating art within their surroundings with what they knew about the things that mattered to them.

Hip-hop culture was documented as having developed within an urban African and Latin American working class community. In the 1970s, Black Americans were

[12] The next section is a brief description on how hip-hop started and the definition of early hip-hop dance as based on the information compiled by Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop, Freshest Kids* documentary, Sally Banes' "Breaking," Rivera's *New York Ricans in the Hip Hop Zone,* Pabon's "Breaking: The History," and Hip Hop Dance Conservatory's Blade Technique foundational hip hop dance class.

experiencing the changes that resulted from the post-civil rights era. Despite the implementation of equal rights, racism and discrimination were still harsh realities. Socio-economic conditions were almost worse than before, with the Bronx being a clear example of government neglect.[13] Buildings were falling apart, and landlords were burning buildings down in order to collect money from insurance companies. Minorities had to deal with issues of good education accessibility, limited job opportunities, and dangerous neighborhoods where no money and no support were being funneled into the area because of various reasons, including apathy on the part of local, state, and federal government.

Despite the circumstances, these communities dealt with the challenges of inner-city habitation and put their time into cultivating a life and culture around them. Two aspects in particular, music and dance became an important socio-cultural and socio-political outlet. In the 1970s, funk and disco, derived from the earlier jazz and doo-wop music were popular. In these urban neighborhoods, block parties and house parties happened frequently. People would blare music from their apartment windows or bring out their instruments and boom boxes to the front door steps of their apartment buildings, street corners, in front of candy stores, or in the parks. People danced, DJ-ed, and MC-ed indoors, outdoors, in roller rinks, in disco halls, in basements, in building hallways, or on subway platforms. Graffiti, spray-painted "tags," or signature code names and colorful murals done on the sides of building walls and subway trains by teenage boys and some teenage girls were creative and territorial forms of artwork (or vandalism, depending on

[13] For further information, see Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 10-18.

the observer). Within their own urban bubble, the New York ghettoes produced an entire culture and way of life amongst its youth, unbeknownst to the rest of America.

Among the musical and cultural pioneers of this time period, DJ Kool Herc is regarded as the father of hip-hop because he revolutionized the role of the disc jockey, or DJ. Through his music and party set up, he sparked a new genre of music.[14] Herc introduced the merry-go-round technique, where he utilized two record players and played two of the same records. By looping the tracks to specific cues and switching between the records, he was able to repeat and extend a song. In particular, Herc became known for extending the break, the percussion-heavy part of a song that party-goers loved. DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa were considered the three kings of DJ-ing who threw some of the biggest and most sought after parties in the Bronx during the late 1970's and early 1980's. Their eclectic and worldly choice of records along with their skill of blending and manipulating music beats had people venturing across neighborhoods for a good party, something unheard of at the time.[15]

Always trying to attract and excite the crowd, DJs began to experiment with turn table techniques. The accidental "scratching" of the records while they were playing on the turntable became a way to create live beats and to re-mix pre-recorded tracks. MCs at parties spoke in rhymes and messages alongside the DJs. Some individuals, having practiced beforehand, waited to show off their best dance moves in front of everyone to the beat of their favorite songs. The DJs anticipated and played for the people, especially

[14] Information taken from Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 77-82, 89-107, and 111-114 George 45-54.

[15] Until these DJ's and their parties, it was unsafe to venture out of one's own neighborhood due to gang territorial issues and city mentality where strangers and being in unfamiliar areas were dangerous. These parties were so popular, people were more inclined to travel outside of their neighborhoods and comply with the DJs' push for non-violence and refrain from fighting, just so they could partake in the parties these DJs hosted.

for these dancers. The extended breaks gave the dancers more time and opportunity to experiment with their dance techniques. The MCs entertained and fired up the crowd, verbally bringing people into the moment. All of these elements developed alongside each other, and oftentimes ended up happening at the same time, same place, and with the same people. As these artistic elements grew, DJs such as Afrika Bambaataa flaunted a whole entourage called the Zulu Nation, which was comprised of dancers, MCs, and graffiti artists.[16] Media and nightclubs organized "hip-hop" showcases that featured all of these elements together. Presented to the American public as a phenomenon of urban youth culture, the idea and the movement called "hip-hop culture" spread like wildfire.

The dance element of hip-hop culture is a bit complicated to define because it refers to several different types of dances that were lumped together because they were all danced to funk and then hip-hop music. Over the years, what was considered hip-hop dance changed, expanded, and evolved. There are four or five dance styles that are attributed to being the predecessors of hip-hop dance. These are defined as the foundational elements of hip-hop dance.[17] These styles are breaking, boogaloo, popping, locking, and social party moves (referring to popular dance moves that came about during

[16] Graffiti, as noted in several resources (George 46, Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 110,) was not exactly directly affiliated with hip-hop music, dancing, or hip-hop parties. However, oftentimes teens who were into breaking were also into graffiti art. DJ Kool Herc states that he was a graf artist and had a friend design his party flyers and posters with graffiti art. As indicated by Bambaataa, in his entourage, parties, and particularly hip-hop showcases for clubs downtown, he featured graf artists and graffiti art. In addition, the graffiti documentary, *Style Wars*, directed by Tony Silver and co-produced with Henry Chalfant, also featured hip-hop parties with DJs, MCs, and breaking, thus giving greater solidification to associating graffiti with hip-hop.

[17] Depending on who one asks, the predecessors of hip-hop dance are sometimes referred to as the defining styles of hip-hop. The Blade Technique/ Hip-Hop Dance Conservatory claim the four elements of hip-hop dance are breaking, popping, locking, and social party moves. Pabon discusses four styles when talking about the history of hip-hop dance: breaking, boogaloo, popping, and locking. *The Freshest Kids* documentary refers to popping/hitting and its variations, locking, and breaking as the foundations of hip-hop dance. Elite Force Crew's Buddha Stretch acknowledges using dance moves from popping, locking, breaking, waving, house styles, and social party moves to create their hip-hop choreographies.

the funk/hip-hop era). All of these styles developed in the 1970s and were danced to funk music. They existed before hip-hop materialized but continued to grow as funk music gave way to hip-hop music.

On the east coast of the United States, originating from New York City, breaking was a combination of funk moves inspired by James Brown, resulting in a local type of dance called uprocking, mixed with acrobatics/gymnastics, and martial arts. On the west coast of the United States, several styles centered around the concept of hitting or the manipulation of tensing muscles and movement isolations such as the boogaloo, popping, dime stopping, strutting, roboting, and tutting, combined the movements found in martial arts, miming, and Afro-funk dance moves together. Boogaloo's creator was Sam "Boogaloo Sam" Solomon and his brother, "Poppin' Pete" is given credit for creating popping, both of whom played a huge influence on the development of the popping styles in California. Locking, another west coast style that was created by Don Campbell, was based on his reinterpretation of the funky chicken dance. Campbell and Sam made their mark dancing to funk music with their particular movement style. They trained others to dance like them and formed their own dance crews, or teams. The popularity of their dance moves laid the foundation of what eventually became established funk and hip-hop dance styles.

An important element that distinguished early hip-hop dance is the cipher, or dance circle, a central aspect to many African/African Diaspora performances. With the cipher, dancers share, exhibit, and interact on an individual and group level. The cipher shapes the nature of the dance both literally and figuratively. The hip-hop cipher not only

exhibits but also heavily embraces all of the other characteristics that are defined in the African aesthetic as described by Thompson:

- Circular space orientation where dancers take turns one by one to dance inside the circle;
- Improvisation that demonstrates personal style, mastery of dance movement, and musicality;
- Syncopation and multiple meters where dance movement is performed to accentuate or visually add another layer to the rhythmic scheme of the music;
- Personifying and projecting a sense of "coolness," an attitude and stylish presentation of self that alludes to self confidence; and
- Taunting/mocking or challenging others where dancers incite competitive one-up-man-ship between dancers.

The last characteristic listed is perhaps one of the most prominent features of hip-hop ciphers. Challenging other dancers or crews in the form of a cipher battle pushes dancers to try to out-dance the other through the display of one's mastery of technique, musicality, and style. In more serious battles, or competitive dance set exchanges, reputations are on the line. In more social or practice battles, the exchange is more about pushing each other to dance better. Regardless of the purpose, hip-hop ciphers exhibit the "show and prove" mentality.

Part of the mystique of breaking is the portrayal and description of the dance by media and the hip-hop industry as masculine[18] and very aggressive, linking it to street life, and even gang activity. Hip-hop is known and described as "forms of ghetto street culture" by writer Sally Banes in the infamous *Village Voice* article she wrote, with photographs by Martha Cooper, on hip-hop culture.[19] Exposing hip-hop to the New York arts scene in the early 1980s, Banes described the dance as a "ritual combat that transmutes aggression into art." (Breaking, 3).

The aggression in the dance's style projected the impression of violence or battling, a competitive one up-man-ship at its extreme. Renee Harris, a well known hip-hop dance company director pointed out, "You never see the arms release down. They're always up in fighting position. It's going to war, what do we say? We say you're going to battle. You go out there to fight" (Chang *Can't Stop* 115). Other writers and hip-hop dancers mirrored similar impressions of the dance. Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon recalls the first time he saw breaking and remembered it being "…very aggressive, really aggressive to the point that I thought it was a gang dance at first" (Chang *Cant Stop* 115). Pabon continues:

> I'd never seen a dance approached like that original b-boy flavor, that straightforward, aggressive sort of I'm a-tear-up-this-floor feeling. A lot of times in my neighborhood I didn't see smiles on their faces. They were on a mission to terrorize the dance floor and to make a reputation, ghetto celebrity status. (115)

[18] Breaking was considered masculine because of its aggressive, athletic, street ghetto characteristics; however, at this point I cannot explain what is meant by masculinity apart from these characteristics. What makes the dance masculine will be explored further in the next section.

[19] "Physical Grafitti: Breaking is Hard to Do." *Village Voice.* April 22, 1981.

The simulation of aggression and fighting through dance was intimidating yet at the same time invigorating. It was representative of life in the ghetto by incorporating life realities into music and dance. Breaking and popping were dances that unlike other dances at the time, allowed teens to express and explore anger, dominance, and physical capabilities. Because of these unique characteristics, cipher dances sparked the interest and involvement of many youths.

One of breaking's influences was rocking, also known as uprocking. Rivera states that rockers of the late 1960s into the 1970s:

> …confronted opponents by dancing one on one and by reacting with swiftness and inventiveness to counter and subvert their rivals' moves. In the newer dance style, just as in older traditions, aggression and violence were often contained within the realm of performance but at times turned into real fights. (38)

The purpose and movement style of rocking from the 1960s/1970s was to simulate fighting actions.

Uprocking, which was incorporated into breaking, was also used amongst gangs as a form of representing their gangs and a way to dispute rivalries. Chang states, "Many specific b-boy styles had their roots in the gangs, practiced from the Bronx and uptown Manhattan to the Brooklyn ghettos of Bushwick and Bedford-Stuyvesant, as a prelude to a rumble" (*Can't Stop* 116). According to Chang's interview with Trac 2, break battles in the 1970s occurred prior to a gang confrontation, and whoever won the break battle got to choose where the physical fight would take place.[20] Trac 2 exclaimed that b-boying

[20] Refer to Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 116.

demonstrated many violent and martial gestures and movements to convey what one person, or one gang, would do to the other. Thus breaking carried with it a strong link to street life, street credibility, and suggested violence,[21] all of which carry a greater association with male dominance .

Not surprisingly, many of the b-boys expressed a love for and being influenced by martial arts and Kung Fu movies. In an interview with Chang, b-boy DOZE recalls going to Times Square with his friends, also b-boys, to watch movies all day long. He particularly mentions Shaw Brothers movies and talks of incorporating the moves he and his friends saw on the screen into their dance (Chang *Can't Stop* 137). In another interview, Alien Ness describes to Chang his application of the concepts from the *I-Ching* and Bruce Lee's *Tao of Jeet Kun Do,* two Chinese philosophies based on nature, energy, and martial arts (Schloss *The Art of Battling* 29). Alien Ness uses the concepts and ideas to guide him in his b-boying style and even how he judges b-boy battles. Other famous b-boys such as Crazy Legs[22] and King Uprock[23] also expressed strong ties and idolization of Bruce Lee, Kung Fu movies, and martial arts' philosophies.

The nature of the dance possessing aggressive, masculine, and martial arts qualities is regarded as the reason why there is such a low level of b-girls involved in breaking. Yet b-girls did exist and were recorded as battling alongside the b-boys. The Zulu nation boasted the Zulu Queens who were the b-girls as well as female MCs of the

[21] Ibid.

[22] Refer to Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 137.

[23] Refer to Schloss' *Foundation* 52.

Zulu members.[24] Some resources indicated that b-girls did not battle against b-boys much and due to the low numbers of b-girls, did not battle as much as the b-boys.[25] B-girls' participation seemed to be affected the most by the inclusion of many acrobatic and strength-type movements. Washington and Guevarra point out that the physicality of the dance prevented many teenage girls and young women who did not have any exposure or experience in such skills from taking their dancing to more advanced levels within breaking (83).

Within urban Black and Latino communities, there is also an indication of another activity girls were more invested in than cipher dances. Once considered a part of hip-hop culture, Kyra D. Gaunt points out double-dutch jump roping was a very popular game amongst Black girls, incorporating music, rhythm, physical agility, and song topics that were more pertinent to urban Black female upbringing.[26] In early hip-hop packaged performances, double-dutch was another component that was displayed and was regarded as the female dance element separate from breaking. It was considered the element of hip-hop culture where young women could be represented. As noted in Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, Afrika Bambaataa featured double-dutch girls in his hip-hop shows. Gaunt also identifies double-dutch as being featured in the New York City Rap Tour, one of the first presentations of hip-hop culture in Europe during the 1980s.

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[24] Refer to Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 101. Afrika Bambaataa exclaims, "The Zulu kings started with five main guys: Zambu Lanier, Kula Smokes, Ahmad Henderson, Shaka Reed, Aziz Jackson. Then came the Shaka Kings and Queens. And it was just as many women that could tear guys up on the dance floor as there was men…."

[25] Refer to Washington's "Not the Average Girl From the Video" which was based on Guevarra's *Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin.'* As stated by Baby Love, she "didn't battle much cuz there weren't that many other b-girls to battle" (84).

[26] For more information on double-dutch jump rope, see Gaunt's "Translating Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop: The Musical Vernacular of Black Girls' Play".

The eventual decline and elimination of double-dutch from hip-hop culture raises several concerns as to how and why it happened. Gaunt exclaims that with dominant representations of hip-hop culture emphasizing male performers, "by the 1990's, girls' double-dutch rope jumping would no longer appear to be emblematic of hip-hop culture and would rarely, if ever again, appear as part of a bill for a touring rap concert" (260). Gaunt argues that the double-dutch's lack of violent aggression, emphasis on female subjects, and lack of male participants placed it in an awkward stance of lacking many of the traits firmly associated with hip-hop, which led to its eventual disappearance from hip-hop culture and erasure from hip-hop history.

As hip-hop music and rapping shifted towards corporate recording, music sampling, and verbal dexterity, breaking, popping, locking and boogaloo styles phased out of popularity and gave way to a dance format that accommodated beats, rhythms, and the lifestyle of a new generation of hip-hop. The late 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the explosion of MTV, music videos, and rap/R and B artists on a mainstream level, helped foster the popularity of hip-hop choreography. This style of hip-hop dance combined social party moves, popping, locking, waving, breaking, and American jazz dance technique. With an emphasis on uniform group routines, hip-hop choreography catered to film/television viewing aesthetics and concert staging. Choreographed and staged hip-hop dance removes or takes away the emphasis of several elements that had defined early hip-hop dance, such as the departure from the cipher circle orientation, improvisation, and the battle mentality of mocking, taunting, and challenging other dancers.

On the other hand, hip-hop choreography brought out a side of hip-hop and urban street dance that has always been there: the hip-hop party environment and group/crew ensembles. Hip-hop choreography provided visual performance and was used to accompany and highlight the hip-hop rapper or singer. The dancers were the physical and moving representation of hip-hop culture. It is in hip-hop choreography and in the hip-hop music industry that a larger, but not necessarily positive, representation of female dancers can be seen.

Although this thesis focuses mainly on cipher styles that marginalize female dancers, it must be noted that the hip-hop dance choreography scene and industry exhibit just as much sexism despite a drastic contrast in the roles of female dancers. Hip-hop dance choreography's departure from certain aspects of traditional hip-hop practices and the effects of corporate music industry marketing has perpetuated the hypersexualization and idolization of women at the other extreme of sexism experienced by women within hip-hop culture. Although this genre of hip-hop dance will not be explored, its impact on how female hip-hop dancers are envisioned and treated within hip-hop culture because of these stereotypes will be addressed.

4.2. Tracing Female Dancers in Literature and Film

Prior to my fieldwork, I analyzed some of hip-hop's most well known films from the 1980s. Documentaries such as *Style Wars* (1983) and films such as *Beat Street* (1981), *Wild Styles* (1983), *Flashdance* (1983), and *Breakin'* (1984) are not only important resources for their portrayal of hip-hop culture in the 1980s, they are also iconic for being the resources that exposed hip-hop to the world. Examining the films for

the presence of female dancers and how they were portrayed was a way to see how media represented hip-hop, and in turn, how these films impacted people's understanding of the culture's characteristics, in particular, their understanding of gender in hip-hop culture.

Beat Street was one of the first major breakdance/hip-hop movies that was released. It featured one b-girl, Baby Love, from the Rock Steady Crew. Her presence in the movie was brief, and arguably a lot less than the rest of the male dancers featured in the movie. In scenes where her crew battles the protagonist's crew, Beat Street Crew, the viewer sees clear shots of all of the dancers' faces when they enter the cipher circle except for Baby Love. Only two or three other female dancers received any credits in that movie, such as Peaches who had a quick cameo appearance. Peaches' cameo was meant to highlight a female popper. At the same time, like Baby Love's role, it was so brief and overshadowed by the rest of the male dancers that Peaches's role seemed decorative.

In another breakdance movie, *Breakin',* locker Ana "Lollipop" Sanchez was the third member of the antagonist's crew, ElectroPop. She had considerable screen time but nothing compared to the amount of screen time her male counterparts received. As far as could be seen on screen, not many female dancers were breaking, popping, or locking. In film, any female dancer who made it on screen did not receive as much attention as the male dancers.

On the other hand the television hit, *Soul Train*[27], a weekly show that aired in the 1970s until the mid 2000s, featured funk, soul, rhythm and blues (R&B), disco, and hip-hop music. Dancers in the show portrayed more balanced gender dynamics. *Soul Train*

[27] For more information on *Soul Train*, refer to Jake Austen's *TV-A-Go-Go: Rock on TV from American Bandstand to American Idol (2005)* and Mark Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Popular Culture (1999)*.

was the "go-to" source for the latest black dance moves, and in many ways provided a valuable resource for dancers. Many dancers I interviewed or read about mentioned watching *Soul Train* as a favorite pastime, so its influence cannot be disregarded. Unlike other urban street dance media, *Soul Train* displayed a more even ratio of male and female dancers on screen. If there was a balance of genders on *Soul Train*, then it is unclear as to why that same balance did not carry forth into other media representations of hip-hop.

On *Soul Train*, both men and women were popping, locking, boogalooing, waacking, doing vogue, breaking and performing all of the latest dance moves that were found in the nightclubs. *Soul Train* emphasized a house party setting in a television studio with non-professional dancers who were hired from an initial audition and later on through an exclusive referral system. Each episode always ended with its signature soul train line. The soul train line, unlike the cipher circle, was linear with all of the male dancers lined up on one side of the room/studio and all of the female dancers on the other side. A male/female couple would enter the center of the soul train line and perform their way down the line towards the camera. This required an equal number of male and female dancers participating in the line, and it created a situation where both male and female dancers were represented. Despite programs like *Soul Train* that demonstrated a social party setting with more gender-balanced presentations of funk, disco, R & B, and hip-hop dance, they could not counter the already dominating masculine images and male aesthetics associated with hip-hop that was growing to be the definitive representations of Black Americans and hip-hop culture.

The Freshest Kids: History of B-Boying (2002*)* is a more recent hip-hop documentary that tells the history of hip-hop through the interviews of the pioneers themselves: well-respected b-boys, DJs, graffiti artists, and hip-hop event organizers. Upon closer observation of the documentary, it is apparent that none of the interviewees were women. Asia One, a well-known breaking event organizer and b-girl is featured dancing in the rolling credits after the documentary is finished. Parts of her interview are shown during the rolling credits but she is nowhere to be found in the documentary itself. There were at least twenty individuals who were interviewed in the documentary and none of them were women.[28] The documentary has only two video clips of a b-girl. One was shown to define the term b-girl. The other is of Baby Love being featured in the music video performed by the Rock Steady Crew. The video never shows her dancing, nor is Baby Love credited with being a b-girl within the documentary.

In *The Freshest Kids*, many men who were interviewed were known individuals who were major participants of hip-hop culture during its developmental period between the early 1970s and late 1980s. Of the nearly two hours of interviews and dance footage, there was barely thirty seconds in the documentary that featured women. Despite the reality that there were fewer women involved in hip-hop, it was a hard pill to swallow that no women were acknowledged in this monumental documentary. Where were Peaches, Honey Rockwell, Rokafella, Dina, Tangerine, Beta, and Lollipop Sanchez, just to name a few? This documentary portrays hip-hop as a culture consisting mainly of men and demonstrates how women are made into nameless participants.

[28] There was a fifteen second remark made by a woman describing a memory about how b-boys entered a party. Her name was not displayed, and on the screen, she was titled, "party dancer." Asia-One was not included in the documentary, for reasons unknown. She was shown in the rolling credits including portions of her interview. The material in her interviews was quite pertinent and would have fit into the documentary, but as noted earlier, for reasons unknown, they did not make it.

In all of the research conducted, only one book was found that honored b-girls from around the world, past and present**.** *We B*Girlz* (2005) was a b-girl project created by Nika Kramer, a known German hip-hop photojournalist, and Martha Cooper, an American photojournalist well known for her photography of hip-hop culture in the early 1980s. Documented in their book is a compilation of photos and interviews conducted in 2004 when the two toured around the world to spotlight b-girl legends such as Rokafella, Honey Rockwell, and Asia One as well as more up and rising b-girls in the scene. Their project finished with a successful b-girl festival/competition.

Currently *We B*Girlz* is an internationally recognized festival and holds qualifying battles worldwide for the final battle held within the *Battle of the Year* event in Germany. The organization has also produced several films on b-girls, offers dance camps, and a b-girl photo/video archive on their Web site. The book and the organization's continued efforts to promote b-girling is a prime example of a b-girl resource. It is one of the few books and Web sites that contain an archive of interviews, photos, and video footage of b-girls. The *We B* Girlz* project generated documentation, recognition, and support for b-girls on a global scale. Acknowledging the presence of b-girls is not only proof that they exist, but more important, this acknowledgement gives female dancers a sense of recognition and a resource by which they can validate their role and membership in the hip-hop dance community. A large reason why people don't associate women with breaking and the other hip-hop dances is because they are missing from documentation; a blurred face in the photos, the cipher set that got cut out of the video, and the names people forgot over the years because few people bothered to ask or try to remember the women on the scene. Just as Cooper and Kramer took action to put

the focus on b-girls, the next part of my case study focused on the active recovery of information on female dancers in the early hip-hop years.

4.3. Some History, and Her-story, About Hip-Hop Dance From Back in the Day…

With minimal literature for tracing women in hip-hop dance and identifying a women's experience to work with, the next segment of the background history of this thesis utilizes the profiles and experiences of the older generation of dancers interviewed in the 2010 fieldwork (defined as those dancing professionally between 1970 and 1990).

Featured in this chapter is Mariette "Peaches" Rodriquez, one of the first respected female poppers from the east coast. Ana "Rokafella" Garcia is a well-respected b-girl and breaking company director. In working with Rokafella I also interviewed her husband, b-boy Gabriel "Kwikstep" Dionisio. A good friend of Rokafella and Kwikstep featured in this chapter is Violeta Garganza, who runs a hip-hop dance training company for inner city youth, a company that I had trained with when I was still living in New York City. Safi Thomas, another teacher I had studied with was a hip-hop industry dance choreographer who founded the Hip-Hop Dance Conservatory, a certified training program in hip-hop dance. Lastly, Bobby Mileage is a popper and professional hip-hop dancer who is a part of the Elite Force Crew, a team of dancers who made a significant mark in the hip-hop music industry through their choreography and performances. All of these dancers were referred to me because of their longstanding presence and involvement in the hip-hop community in New York City. They are respected by many and were valuable to this research because of their knowledge and experiences with hip-hop and other urban street dances past and present.

I was introduced to Ana Garcia, better known as Rokafella, shortly after I arrived in New York City at a party she and her husband, Kwikstep, hosted once a month called "In the Groove." She had just released her documentary on b-girls a couple years earlier, which was why many dancers I spoke to recommended that she would be an ideal participant. Rokafella, now in her early forties, was in her late teens/early twenties when she started breaking around the early 1990s, which would group her in the same generation of b-girls as Honey Rockwell and Asia One.[29] Prior to breaking, she enjoyed dancing salsa, African, hip-hop choreography, house, and vogue. Born and raised in Spanish Harlem, Rokafella grew up in the heart of hip-hop, breaking, and the street life. She remembers going to clubs with her former boyfriend. They went wherever the most happening hip-hop music and dance were at, but Rokafella points out, they weren't always welcomed or accepted. Sometimes they would be physically barred from entering ciphers in African-American nightclubs because she and her boyfriend were Latino.

At one point, drug addiction took over Rokafella's life, but at a pivotal juncture, an opportunity was presented to her. Several weeks into rehab, Kwikstep, a friend at the time, invited her to audition for a hip-hop show. Unknowingly, she was casted in what would be known as one of the first successful hip-hop productions made for the stage: GhettOriginal Productions. Rokafella immediately went on tour in Austria, and in many ways, this played a major role in getting her off drugs and getting her life straightened out. The experience also set the stage for her dance career as a b-girl.

Despite the performance opportunity, wealth of knowledge, and recognition she was receiving by dancing with legends, Rokafella was frustrated with the conditions and

[29] Honey Rockwell from New York City, Asia One from California, and Rokafella are highly respected b-girls who made their marks starting in the mid 1990s. For more information, see Guevara and Washington.

treatment she encountered as a woman. Her input was not taken seriously. She was denied principle roles and the opportunity to choreograph. After leaving GhettOriginals, Rokafella went on to start a new breaking crew/non-profit performance company with Kwikstep called Full Circle Productions. Teaming up with another community dance leader, Violeta, who started a non-profit hip-hop dance company for urban street kids, KR3T (Keep Rising to the Top), Rokafella and Kwikstep collaborated with her to produce shows.

Rokafella claims to owe her life to dance and Kwikstep for helping her get back on track. As a Puerto Rican American who spent his teen years in Queens and Brooklyn during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kwikstep grew up listening to Marvin Gaye, The Jackson 5, Dr. Buzzard, as well as Tito Puento, Sera Cruz, and Hector Laro. During a time when Latinos were neither accepted as white nor black, and gangs and violence were everyday realities, Kwikstep found his passion in dancing through his family and block parties. Having learned from his older brothers and other relatives and friends, Kwikstep got into breaking in 1981. He recalls dancing at basement parties and block parties where it was more about street credibility and in nightclubs where one had to be more polished.

Shortly after connecting with Rokafella and Kwikstep I met Peaches, a female popper who was a guest speaker at one of Rokafella's screenings of her b-girl documentary, *All the Ladies Say* (2009). Mariette "Peaches" Rodriguez is probably best known for her featured appearance doing a popping solo sequence on the movie *Beat Street* (1984). Peaches is among the handful of female poppers who earned respect in the cipher scene and made a career out of dancing. Peaches originally grew up in

Connecticut, and after college, moved to New York City to pursue a career in dancing. For Peaches though, her connection with dance came through the show *Soul Train*, where she watched people performing the robot and locking as well as special appearances from famous dancers such as Michael Jackson and James Brown. As a child and teenager, Peaches had picked up salsa dancing through her Latino parents and family. She had also trained in karate and tinkered with the robot dance. Eventually, she would realize these skills she had exposure to would be crucial components in popping.

In Hartford, Peaches met a man who was one of the original members of the Boogaloos crew, from whom she started to learn more advanced techniques in doing the robot. In the streets of New York during 1982, Peaches saw a group of male street performers who incorporated karate, the robot, and mime to create an intricate and creative dance. Three of these young men, Mr. Freeze, Fabel, and Mr. Wiggles, would end up becoming some of the most well-respected poppers from the East Coast. Peaches knew that she had the foundational skills to perform the same dance as these men. She started following these poppers around town, and through befriending Fabel, she eventually got to train under him. Peaches was among the few female dancers who were able to make a living dancing, appearing in music videos, movies, commercials, concert shows, and teaching. All through the 1980s and 1990s she ciphered and performed among some of hip-hop's most reputable male dancers and worked hard to establish herself as a female popper within the popping community.

Violeta Garganza, who I had trained under, was also present at Rokafella's film screening. Violeta Garganza, the founder of KR3T (Keep Rising to the Top), was an aspiring dancer born and raised in Spanish Harlem in the 1970s and 1980s. Even though

she was not into breaking, Violeta remembers going to the parks with her sister and battling others in uprocking and popping. She was fortunate enough to obtain a dance scholarship with Alvin Ailey when she was in high school. However, she hit a wall when she became pregnant at sixteen. Violeta had to put her passion aside to raise her son, but her love for dance did not subside. At the age of eighteen, Violeta decided to pursue her dreams and created KR3T, a hip-hop dance company meant to provide training and opportunities for underprivileged kids in the Bronx and Spanish Harlem. Her company attracted many young, talented individuals, and through rigorous training, performance and choreography opportunities, many of her students went on to have successful careers in the hip-hop entertainment industry.

KR3T and Violeta have both received significant recognition because of Violeta's efforts to provide a safe environment for urban street kids and to give them the tools to build a professional career in the entertainment industry. As a Puerto Rican American single mom, Violeta understands the hardships of growing up and being successful in one of the most competitive cities in America. Being involved in the urban street dance scene in New York City and managing young dancers in the industry, Violeta has had to work around the expectations of being a female dancer in the industry. Sensuality, aggression and recreations of "ghetto" lifestyle are elements linked to hip-hop performance, and Violeta delivers these aspects to her audiences. In an industry where the representations of hip-hop culture are overtaken by perceptions of Black Americans being drug dealers, gangstas, and video vixens, she made sure she retained the integrity of her dancers and kept her choreography relative to the Latino/Black identities and hip-hop community she was a part of.

During my fieldwork I also got back in touch with another hip-hop dance director I had taken training classes with, Safi Thomas, creator of the Blade Technique[30] and founding director of the Hip-Hop dance Conservatory. Safi grew up during the 1970s and 1980s in Jamaica, Queens (an outer borough of New York City). His mother, a principal ballerina with the New York City Ballet, had enrolled Safi in ballet and modern dance training as a child. He also took up Bok Gwai Kung Fu, a form of Chinese martial arts. He claimed that although he was a nerd and danced ballet, his ticket to coolness was having a natural ability for dancing. Safi's friends, who were several years older, introduced him to breaking and popping before these dances were even known as hip-hop or breakdancing. Safi traveled across boroughs and sneaked into nightclubs with his older friends to battle and cipher with other b-boys and poppers. Oftentimes he lied to his mom that he was studying at the library or hanging out at his friend's house when he was actually meeting up with dancers in Brooklyn or at a club in the Bronx.

Even though Safi acquired a position as an English professor at Columbia University, he decided to pursue dancing professionally. As a hip-hop dance choreographer, Safi had first-hand experience with the commercial music industry. He went on to start his own hip-hop dance company, Blade Entertainment, along with an intensive dance-training program. Eventually Safi transitioned out of the industry and focused on expanding his training program. Several years later, his program officially became the Hip-Hop Dance Conservatory with a fully accredited certification program in hip-hop dance. Safi believed in instilling integrity in his dancers so that their beliefs and self worth were not compromised for the sake of an industry job. He is proud to say his

[30] Blade Technique is a training program Safi Thomas developed that had a specific training regiment and philosophy meant to educate and properly train dancers to become professional hip-hop dancers.

conservatory has been set up to minimize gender discrimination, with women receiving equal training, support and opportunity for advancement.

Another dancer who made it in the hip-hop dance industry is Bobby Mileage Barnette. I had met Bobby a few months prior to my fieldwork in New York when he had visited Hawaii to perform and teach a dance workshop for a hip-hop event. Bobby Mileage had gotten his nickname because for years he would take the bus to New York City from Boston just so he could dance. He knew that if he wanted to make a name for himself as a dancer, he had to earn his respect in New York. Being able to survive and be recognized in the ciphers in New York City was a way for making a name for himself as a dancer—enough that he was able to get noticed and get hired to perform in music videos and concert tours. Bobby became a part of the Elite Force Crew while on a Mariah Carey concert tour during 1998. A crew of dancers that included Buddha Stretch, Brooklyn Terry, Link, Ejoe, and Loose Joint, Elite Force Crew was known for its choreography, being the "elite," front line "force," and made their mark by creating and performing some of hip-hop's most well known music video choreography sequences and concert tours during the late 1990s. As a member of the New York hip-hop dance community, Bobby's recollections of the scene between the 1980s and present day provided some valuable insight on women's presence and the treatment of women in the urban street dance scene.

Based on the profiles of the dancers from the 1980s and 1990s generation, New York City was perceived as the east coast hub for hip-hop dance. The dancers recall ciphering in the streets, going to nightclubs, or traveling to other boroughs to find dancers to cipher with. Most of these dancers were fortunate enough to have been able to pursue a

career in hip-hop dance. For some, like Rockafella, it saved her life. With backgrounds in Latin, African, and funk dance, many of these dancers grew up dancing and listening to the music that would influence hip-hop culture. As I got to know each dancer, their experiences and perspectives, I began to look into their memories for any recollections of women in the hip-hop dance scene. I hoped that in reliving their past, they could help me to trace female dancers, or the lack of them, in the past. More important, their stories helped to provide some clues or suggestions as to why teenage girls and women experience marginalization in cipher dance styles.

4.4. Tracing Female Dancers in New York City

In the interviews I conducted, the older generation of dancers was asked about their recollections of women dancing in the 1980s and 1990s. The purpose of wanting to know this was to see if their experiences matched with what was being written and filmed about women dancing during that time period. From their interviews, I wanted to gain a better perspective of women's presence and how they danced.

In New York City, popper Bobby Mileage doesn't remember seeing many women breaking, popping, and locking but he recalls seeing many women dancing. He commented that sometimes he felt a few of the women danced harder than the men. Likewise, Kwistep doesn't recall many b-girls, and in his opinion, many young women weren't that good at it. He remembers many young women hanging out and looking pretty. One woman who stood out was Rokafella, whom he knew from dancing in the street jam sessions. When he took Rokafella under his wing, he saw that she was really strong and passionate about dancing.

Safi Thomas, initially a popper who was introduced to funk and hip-hop dance in Queens in the late 1970s, barely recalls any b-girls or female poppers during the late 1970s and 1980s. He remembers young women in the club standing around the cipher circle cheering breakers and hitters (poppers). Back then he understood breaking and hitting as dances girls "just didn't do." He described the typical dance floor:

> When you did see girls at parties, they were not dancing how the guys were dancing. Just typical, social dancing of the day: two step, not anything crazy. [Back then] I just thought it was a social normative where girls just don't do that. (Personal interview)

Although Safi has many female friends who have been dancing since the 1980s, he doesn't recall running into any of them during the 1980s. Dancing in the streets, Safi remarks, it felt like women were non-existent.

Peaches doesn't remember too many young women who made it into the commercial industry during the 1980s. She recalls Daisy, better known as b-girl Baby Love of the Rock Steady Crew and a few other b-girls; however, she was not too familiar with the breaking scene. Within the popping scene, Peaches only recalled four or five female poppers/dancers who stood out, including Denise CoCo Pop, Kim, and Tangerine. Bobby Mileage acknowledges female dancers such as Rokafella, Wandee Pop, and Snapshot (Mr. Wiggles' sister) holding it down in the ciphers. However, Bobby feels there were more female dancers participating in ciphers early on in the 1970s but by the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, women were rarely seen participating in the cipher circle, particularly with breaking.

On the other hand, other participants recall many young women who enjoyed dancing to funk and hip-hop during the late 1990s. Rokafella confirms that at one point many people, including women were popping, locking, and boogalooing in the clubs. It was the social dance vocabulary of the time. Just as many knew how to do the twist or the Charleston or the running man at the height of its popularity, many people in the New York scene were familiar with these funk styles during the 1980s and into early 1990s. Within the episodes of *Soul Train*, there was abundant footage of dancers performing various forms of popping, locking, boogaloo and uprocking. Some dancers focused on one style, but many dancers, men and women alike, incorporated different funk dance elements into their dancing.

By the 1980s there was a distinct separation between b-boy and b-girl battling. Baby Love exclaims that she rarely battled or performed because there were no b-girls in other crews to battle against (Washington 84). Several interviews and resources indicate that during the early 1980s, teenage girls danced a female version of breaking.[31] Baby Love describes b-girls who, in the 1980s, were more about dancing their own way: b-girls emphasized their femininity through slower, jazzier moves as a way to distinguish the b-girl style from the b-boys (Washington, 83). Violeta recalls that young ladies were more invested in the uprock element of breaking and rarely performed floorwork. In Violeta's opinion, girls were too cute to be getting dirty on the floor with breaking.

Rokafella was recognized for her hip-hop dancing, and as far as breaking, her uprock style. She points out that she didn't actually do floorwork and freezes until she began training for GhettOriginal Productions. Holman also claims girls in the earlier

[31] Refer to Guevarra's *Rappin', Writin', and Breakin'* (1996).

years of breaking did not do floor moves. He adds that the Zulu Nation b-girls, the Zulu Queens and Shaka Queens were more invested in complex group routines and synchronized group moves. He also suggests b-girls played a role in the development of commando routines, or choreographed battle sets executed by multiple b-boys within one crew against the other crew in battles. It becomes a popular battle tactic b-boy crews utilize years later.[32]

It took some time to understand the contradictory images that were being presented of female dancers in the past. Based on the interviews, female dancers did not have a strong presence in cipher circles and the entertainment industry (or performing for pay). Peaches, Rokafella, and Violeta all participated in ciphers out in the streets, at nightclubs, or in auditions. However, they were among the few women who did so. Teenage girls and women were cited as dancing in groups rather than performing solos at social gatherings, such as block parties or at nightclubs.[33] Teenage girls and women were just as actively engaged in the music and dance. The key difference was that many of them danced at a recreational level or in group choreography and few participated in ciphering or battling. It seems that because young women weren't observed ciphering and battling, the memory of them dancing in a general sense was lost. As was indicated by many sources, women were present and dancing at parties and nightclubs; however, because they did not battle, the recollection of them dancing at all wasn't really recorded.

Based on this speculation, male dancers were the most visible. Through their dancing, the association with masculinity was molded into people's understanding of the

[32] See Holman 37.

[33] As stated by Holman 37.

dance's style. Masculinity is a characteristic used often to describe breaking and other hip-hop dances. What exactly this entailed is difficult to define. Most of the reasoning or associations made in literature, media, and people's responses regarding the dance being masculine was that the majority of the dancers were male and the dance itself was aggressive, competitive, and physically demanding. Furthermore, the correlation between masculinity and male majority to low female participation and female dancers experiencing discrimination has been vaguely addressed. Based on what information has been gathered in literature, films, and interviews, the next step is to explore what made hip-hop dances "masculine" and the effects this had on the participation and treatment of female dancers.

4.5. B-girl Like a B-boy: Why is Breaking So Masculine and Male Dominant?

For many b-girls (and b-boys), what attracted them to the dance was that it possessed this raw energy, style, and attitude that are linked to their perception of masculinity. The understanding of breaking is that it's not just masculine, but very masculine and epitomizes the values, behavior, and traits associated with masculinity. A b-girl from Queens, Ya-Ya's eyes lit up when she described how b-boying's relishing of masculinity made her feel and how she had aspired to look and dance like a b-boy. She recalls that she wanted to possess that same style and presence as b-boys such as her late uncle and closest friends, whom she had looked up to while growing up. Rokafella exclaims that the b-boy environment may be more suitable for certain types of young women particularly tomboys, because the breaking scene allows them to be masculine as well as not feeling pressured by the expectations of having to be feminine. Almost all of

the women I interviewed, particularly the b-girls, described themselves growing up as tomboys. On the one hand, b-girls were regarded with positive esteem when taking on masculine characteristics in breaking; on the other hand, there was a tacit implication that expressing femininity was not as valued.

A generalization made by many people about who was breaking in the early years of the dance will state that breaking and other forms of hip-hop dance were masculine and that dancers were mostly male. However, based on the fieldwork interviews and literature, there is an indication that early on this wasn't the case. [34] DJ Grandmaster Flash described that in the 1970s, both men and women were avid dancers who participated in the dance circle. He remarks that breakdancing was very different from how it is now and stemmed from solo shines performed within partner dancing between men and women:

> Early breakdancing hardly ever touched the floor. I would say, maybe this is a bad comparison, but it was more like a Fred Astairish type of thing-stylin', the hat, you know touchin', white laces, finesse, that's where the two intertwined. It was just one particular couple would draw a crazy crowd in the street. (George 46)

It seems that in the beginning of the hip-hop era (early 1970s) when funk music was just beginning to evolve, there wasn't much distinction in the gender orientation of breaking. Schloss states that the dancers he interviewed for his book did confirm that women were definitely in the scene and participating.[35] As dancers explained to him,

[34] As quoted by Bambaataa,"There were a lot of women who was really into the breakdancing too that would tear the guys up in the early stages" (George 47).

[35] Personal interview

couples would dance to funk music doing the hustle, a popular type of social partner dance. When the break segment of the song came on, the male dancer would break away from his female partner and both would perform some of their best moves, otherwise known as a solo shine. When the break segment finished, the couple would go back to dancing with each other. As Schloss points out, women were dancing alongside men and most likely doing their own solo shines during the break; however, there is little recollection of how women danced during these breaks.

When DJ Kool Herc extended the break to become a whole song, the breakers' dancing became elongated and evolved to become more elaborate high performance solo shines. By singling out the break beat, hip-hop music and breaking reveled in one element of the song and one element of the dance: the most exciting, driven part of funk music and the more competitive exhibition style of dance moves. This specialization of the music and dance moves might be the pivotal reason why breaking became more and more aggressive, acrobatic, and competitive. The emphasis and purpose behind the dance was showing off, battling each other, and claiming the title of being the best. What was once a brief solo shine within a dance transformed into a solo dance all about shining.

In the early 1980s, the incorporation of aggression, battle displays, and martial arts influences became staples of the dance style, and it seems that these components are a likely indicator of why the majority of the second generation of breakers was male. These aspects of the dance not only reflected activities that were more male-oriented, but they were also ideal components for displaying masculinity. The addition of acrobatics, power moves, and floorwork required high levels of physical strength and stamina. In many ways breaking started to reflect the characteristics of high impact sports, exhibiting

rigorous training, aggressive competition, and extreme physical activity, which back in the 1970s, 1980s, and even 1990s were uncharacteristic of female involvement.

Other components found in breaking also suggested male orientation. Banes points out, graffiti, rapping and b-boys "celebrate[d] the masculine heroes of the mass media--Superman and other comic book heroes, the Saint of detective book and TV fame, kung fu masters, and great lovers." (Forman and Neal 18) B-boys portrayed male superheroes, male actors such as Al Pacino in his role as Micheal Corleone in the Godfather, and male artists such as James Brown within their battle sets. All of these characteristics defined a turning point in the relationship the dance had to its male dancers. By the early 1980s, the majority of the breakers being male indicated a permanent shift in the dance's male orientation and a valuing of masculinity.

As one of the very first known female poppers, Peaches reasons that because men created the styles such as popping and locking, the dances are supposed to embody all the characteristics and movement preferences of these creators, including their gender:

> If it was a man who created the art, then you should be executing it like the man who created it. You don't try to feminize or water down what is unfortunately a male craft. If you step into other arenas or other styles of dance which are feminized… i.e. voguing and waacking, that's where the feminine power, female form and female attitude take the mastery of the dance… But for the style that I learned, and how I learned it, it's very masculine. (Personal interview)

In popping and locking where there are individuals (all male) who are acknowledged for creating a specific style, Peaches argues that masculinity is a part of the dance's identity. Breaking on the other hand does not have a single traceable creator. It does, however, credit certain individuals, almost all male, for signature moves such as Frosty Freeze's suicide, or Crazy Leg's windmills. Unlike popping and locking, breaking was initially seen as a unisex dance, however the signature moves that became engrained in breaking's general repertoire were mainly moves created by b-boys. What this suggests is the dance started to acquire a male identity. By the early 1980s, breaking's second generation incorporated more acrobatics and power moves. By this time, the dance was heavily associated with masculinity and the majority of the dancers were male.

Back in the 1980's Safi and Kwikstep, Alien Ness, and Crazy Legs described traveling "everywhere" to battle other b-boys and poppers. As Rockafella points out, prior to the 1990s, most people didn't really venture out of their neighborhoods. Especially for young women, it was dangerous and not socially accepted for them to take the train on their own, be out in the streets dancing, affiliating with gangs, or venturing anywhere after dark. Getting mugged, assaulted by gangs and being raped were real daily concerns. In many ways breaking neither reflected nor catered to the social realities of young women. The concept of girls and women dancing in a masculine and aggressive manner was also not socially acceptable. Kwikstep remarks, back then girls who acted "hardcore" or tough were not sought after. Rivera points out, at the time, "adopting breaking's street warrior aesthetic was undoubtedly unappealing to many young women." She adds, "those whom breaking was a passion found it extremely hard to be considered worthy competitive partners or rivals by their male counterparts." Not only was the

activity not attractive to girls, boys didn't find girls who danced that way attractive. To add, Rivera states that b-girls were neither accepted as equal participants who were good enough to join b-boy crews nor were they regarded as someone b-boys would want to battle against.

The difficulty for teenage girls and women to engage in a dance that emphasizes masculine qualities in turn led to a low participation of young women in the dances. Within this environment, the next generation of dancers was brought up with few female dancers, and there was no acknowledgement that female dancers were in fact experiencing gender discrimination. The representation of what early hip-hop dance was like was referenced through rare homemade video footage, film clips from the b-boy movies from the 1980s and the images portrayed in the growing commercial rap industry. With hip-hop exploding into a multimillion-dollar pop culture commodity, hip-hop dance and the representation of hip-hop dancers underwent even heavier corporate influences of making hip-hop culture a profitable and marketable product to the American masses.

Born in the 1980s, inspired in the 1990s, the dancers of the 2000 generation stepped into a dance culture that was battling old and new traditions, its incorporation into American mass pop culture, exponential worldwide growth and evolution, and the initial movement of hip-hop scholarship's reclamation of its people, history, purpose, and identity. In their interviews and outlooks on the hip-hop dance scene, it can be seen how the 2000 generation's dancing and perspectives are reflections of what was passed down to them, and how, as the current generation, they are impacting the dances and culture today.

4.6. Generation 2000- The B-boys, B-Girls, and Urban Street Dancers of Today

I used to notice her picture on the faculty wall every time I passed down the hallway on the way to or from a dance class in the Broadway Dance Center. Ephrat Asherie, also known as b-girl Bounce, is a New York native in her early thirties and one of the well-recognized b-girls on the scene these days. After months of impersonal contact, we were able to meet at a favorite coffee shop of hers to conduct an interview. Ephrat, born in the early 1980's, grew up with four brothers. She remembers running around and roughhousing with them. She played soccer and took ballet. Ephrat didn't get into breaking until she went to Italy at the age of twenty to study abroad. She saw a bunch of b-boys sessioning[36] and found their dancing interesting. They were very friendly and encouraged her to learn. They assumed because she was American, she was a b-girl or knew all about it already. Although she didn't recall many b-girls when she started breaking, she loved it so much she didn't care. She was always excited to get in the cipher and battle.

Coming back to New York, Ephrat continued her training through her friend Nicole and eventually b-boy Breakeasy. Nicole was also the one who introduced her to Shelter, a nightclub in Manhattan known for its house music. Ephrat began to help Leslie Feliciano, a well-known hip-hop dance teacher, with his warm-ups at Broadway Dance Center (BDC) and occasionally substituted for Kundoo's hip-hop class. In 2006, she began to teach her own breaking class at BDC and has been teaching there ever since.

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[36] Sessioning or a session is one way to refer to practicing, short for holding a cipher session.

Ephrat became part of an all female breaking crew called the Fox Force Five and was invited to form an all female dance crew called MAWU with her female colleagues on the dance floor. She already had close relationships with many of the members from both of these crews, having entered battles with them and growing as dancers through countless nights dancing together in the nightclubs. These two crews were unique for Ephrat because not only were the members of the crews good friends and talented dancers whom she respected, they were also her support group.

Damaris "Ya-Ya" Ramirez, also representing the generation 2000, is a Queens native who I met during a training session at a community center in Queens. Ya-Ya had a tough, street air about her, but at the same time she was loud, outspoken, goofy, and had a memorable laugh. Ya-Ya always had a smile and exhibited a positive spunky attitude. When it came to breaking, however, she was all business. Ya-Ya has been breaking for over ten years and had earned respect in the breaking community reppin' (representing) it for the b-girls in New York City. She believes her fascination with breaking came from watching her uncle break when she was four years old. Her uncle died young, at about the age of 18, but his b-boying was something she remembered fondly. Her brother, not coincidentally, got into breaking, and so did all of her friends. She eventually took up breaking in her teenage years by joining the high school breaking club, and credits her best friend, b-boy Paranoia, and fellow crew member Elvis for teaching her how to break.

The first b-boy battle I attended during my fieldwork was the Who Can Roast the Most breaking event.[37] One of the organizers and hosts of the event was b-boy David "Xzist" Martinez. Originally from Miami, Florida. Xzist moved to New York City in the

[37] For more information on the Ground Zero Crew and the Who Can Roast the Most event see www.groundzerocrew.com

mid 2000s. Xzist is part of the Ground Zero Crew, which was founded in Miami, but after several members relocated, they started another branch of the crew in New York City. Growing up in Miami he vividly remembers dance parties at the roller rink where b-boys, poppers, and lockers danced to hip-hop, funk, and Miami bass (a local music and dance Xzist refers to as "booty dance"). It was at these parties that he would look up to older dancers and got involved in breaking. He did not see too many b-girls in Miami except one, b-girl Beta, who is one of the world's most respected b-girls. Therefore, Xzist was exposed early on to b-girls who could dance just as well as the b-boys. When he moved to New York, he met many more b-girls, but he realized that most b-girls were not as good as Beta. In fact he noticed many of the b-girls were considerably slower and less developed. In his interview, his mixed views reflect the varied experiences he has of b-girls, and he is a prime example of the perception b-girls are subjected to in the breaking community.

The next dancers I feature in this section are not breakers but nonetheless are well known in the New York City urban street dance scene. Some, like Nene and Melanie, had experience with learning how to break, while Amy Secada had many friends who were b-boys. Their stories and experiences were important to my research because these women are highly respected for their dance abilities and for their strong presence as women in the cipher scene.

Prior to leaving for New York, I met Melanie Aguierre in Hawai‘i during a dance festival we were both involved in. A couple months later we reconnected in Manhattan. Melanie claims that she was dancing before she was born. Both of Melanie's parents were dancers: her dad was a b-boy; her mom was a disco-freestyle, salsa, and jazz dancer.

Her mom danced in the nightclubs while pregnant with Melanie. Her mom and the rest of her family joke that it was for that reason that Melanie loves to dance and can do it so well. Born in the mid-1980s, Melanie grew up in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. When she started high school, Melanie began to hang out with gang members. Melanie claims that she has hip-hop dance to thank for steering her from leading a life of crime, drugs, and violence. One day her mom got fed up with Melanie being around the wrong crowd and asked Melanie's uncle for help. He worked at Carnegie Hall, and one day he took Melanie to midtown to see the theater. On this trip, he suggested she take a class at Broadway Dance Center, which was located across the street.

Melanie remembers watching Bev's hip-hop class[38] for the first time, and at sixteen, she started taking Bev's class. Melanie enjoyed Bev's class because it gave her emotional support. Learning in a class that she could relate to made all the difference in her lifestyle change. She liked Bev's style because it "had a lil hood but was classy." Melanie started attending other classes, including one on waacking from Brian Green[39], and eventually started auditioning for gigs, dance crews, and concert tours. She never thought she could make a career out of being a professional hip-hop dancer. She was involved in the commercial industry for several years but came to resent the industry's demand for female dancers to be "ghetto exotic sex objects." Melanie switched to the more underground dance scene where she is most known for her waacking and vogue.

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[38] Bev Brown is one of the long-standing hip-hop faculty of BDC. In the 1990's she was a professional hip-hop dancer who performed amongst legends such as Michael Jackson. With her tutelage many of her assistants and former students have gone on to perform and tour with some of hip-hop and pop music's biggest artists.

[39] Brian Green is also another senior faculty of BDC who taught hip-hop, house, and according to Melanie, introduced waacking to BDC which exposed this underground style and helped popularize it into mainstream dance culture.

Rather than accept taking a backseat in the urban street dance community because she was a woman, Melanie established herself as a party promoter, event coordinator, and dancers' rights advocate for the urban street dance community.

Through Melanie I became interested in learning more about waacking. In attending a house dance competition, House Dance International, Nubian Nene was one of the female waacking/house dancers who stood out to me because of her ability to compete on stage in stiletto heels and then jump into cipher circles comprised of mostly men. Nene's first memory of hip-hop dance was going to a cousin's house for a party in the mid 1980s and watching the older kids trying out the "Running Man," a popular social hip-hop dance move at the time. Born in Haiti and raised in a suburban Caucasian town several hours from Montreal, Nene was exposed to hip-hop through music videos on television and from watching her older brothers, relatives, and friends dance at social gatherings. As a kid, Nene remembers taking some classes in jazz, ballet, gymnastics, and traditional Haitian dance. In high school she started dabbling with hip-hop dance with her friends by copying moves they had seen in music videos. It wasn't until college that she started to learn breaking through her friend Dazl and his break crew, Flow Rock, at a local b-boy training spot in the Cote-des Neiges Community Center in Montreal. Dazl, and another friend, Marvin also taught her how to house dance. A year after training in house and breaking, Nene got into waacking.

While conducting my fieldwork, I noticed that Nene was one of the few female dancers who entered the open ciphers that formed outside of the House Dance International competition venue. She was also one of the few female dancers who consistently participated in house dance ciphers. As an up and coming urban street

dancer, she was featured to teach a waacking workshop in the Ladies of Hip-Hop Festival among other well-established female dancers. Her confidence may be attributed in part to her upbringing in Montreal which she described as being less biased towards female dancers than New York City and other cities around the world. She realizes that she didn't feel the amount of insecurity and animosity that women elsewhere did. That doesn't mean Nene was exempt from gender insecurities. She expressed concerns over the limitations of her body and having to always dance around a bunch of male dancers. Even though she did not grow up in New York City, she has become a recognized member of the dance scene in New York and beyond.

Many dancers urged me to get in touch with Amy Secada, the founder of the women's all style crew MAWU.[40] Amy Secada trained in ballet as a child but didn't really discover dance that spoke to her until she went to her first rave[41] when she was fourteen. Amy was inspired by the freedom, the joy, and the ability to explore one's own body through movement—something ballet had never allowed. At the raves, she danced to mostly jungle, house, trance, and tolerated the hip-hop and b-boys. She loved that she could wear baggy clothes, interact with other dancers, and get in the circle on a friendly level. She avoided the b-boys because they brought aggressive energy to the circles. She preferred the house and jungle scene to hip-hop rooms, where sexual tension limited her ability to dance freely.

Amy was frustrated with how dance was divided by gender and what the general expectations were of how a female dancer should move. She felt that she was physically

[40] For more information on MAWU, see www.MAWUDANCE.com

[41] A rave is a large warehouse nightclub or massive outdoor party based on techno, hip-hop remixes, trance, house, electro and jungle music. They are typically associated with heavy psychedelic drug usage, music that provokes a trancelike state and prolonged hours of operation well into the morning hours.

capable of doing the moves the b-boys did, but she didn't want to dance in a manner that exuded masculinity. She felt that in order to be respected as a dancer, she should be allowed to show her femininity and move in ways that brought out the woman in her without being perceived as weaker or sexually objectified. Amy stood out not only because of her dance style but more importantly she projected such a confidence and presence on the dance floor that was inspiring and powerful. Amy represented what women were capable of dancing and she proved to the urban street dance community that she didn't have to dance like a man to participate in a cipher circle.

Based on their interviews, the 2000 generation of dancers grew up during a period of change where they were exposed to women gaining social mobility and being involved in activities normally done by men. Although they had women like b-girl Rokafella and rappers such as Salt'n'Peppa to look up to, their experiences within the dance scene were no different than those that older dancers such as Peaches and Violeta encountered in the 1980s and 1990s. Based on these fieldwork interviews and the interviews in Guevarra's article, issues of indifference, difficulty relating to the dance, and feelings of exclusion are explored in detail in the next section.

5. ISSUES B-GIRLS EXPERIENCE:

5.1. The Physical Aspect of Breaking and Training

Even though I already had an athletic build and exposure to intense physical training, learning to break was a rough experience. One of the biggest concerns outside of strength and agility was the aspect of getting hurt. Practicing the dance moves was painful. It was a constant run of bruises, falling, blood rushing to the head, and conditioning body surfaces especially the knees, elbows, hips, and to some extent the back and the head to get used to getting banged up. To become a b-girl, if you aren't built or accustomed to the sheer grittiness of hard physical training, you aren't going to get far.

The physicality of breaking presents a huge set of issues for b-girls. Since the 1980s, Guevarra[42] found b-girls were hindered from breaking because of their inability to execute power moves as efficiently as b-boys. Although power moves are but one aspect of breaking, the direction breaking has evolved to favors the use of power moves, and it is this favoring of the power moves that has impacted the number of b-girls who were able to keep up with the physical demands of breaking. Honey Rockwell, a b-girl from the 1990s, acknowledged in her interview with Guevarra[43], that even with a background in gymnastics, developing herself as a b-girl was a difficult task because of the physical and mental strength needed to perform the dance.

In my field research I received mixed responses on whether girls and women were physically capable of breaking like b-boys. Most b-boys I spoke with did not know too many b-girls who had attained the skill level and repertoire that b-boys had. B-boys

[42] See Washington 83.

[43] See Washington 85.

commonly noted that b-girls, tended to move slower, and their development took longer. Many b-girls expressed their frustrations of learning and keeping consistency in the execution of power moves due to their lack of physical strength and acrobatic skills. Ya-Ya describes the frustration she has to deal with over the fact that it may take her longer to accomplish a certain power move that other b-boys, particularly those who started after her, can master more easily and faster than her. She reasoned that it's harder for her because as a woman her body is not innately as strong. She remarked that she has dedicated a lot of time to learning the moves, and she knew it had nothing to do with her effort. Ya-Ya feels that a lot of women encounter similar situations with their bodies.[44]

Melanie Aguierre, who tried to learn breaking, also felt that because many of the power moves required her to be upside down, to be able to hold her own weight or to propel herself into the air, these were physical actions that she had no prior experience with and the fear of getting hurt impacted her development and learning progress.[45] To bring into perspective as to why Ya-Ya and Melanie felt their bodies were lacking in physical strength and capabilities, neither of them started learning how to break until they were in their late teens and were not involved in contact sports or other activities that would require intense physical training as children. Rokafella suggests that teenage girls and women may have greater difficulty as a result of social standards that position girls having far less physical training growing up:

> To me guys start being physically active when they're like four or seven. Where for us [girls] it's a choice we make at thirteen or twelve. So they

[44] Personal interview.

[45] Personal interview.

> [boys] have way more years of like throwing a ball, wrestling, hitting each other, you know jumping over fences. Whereas a girl, and I'm a b-girl, if I had a daughter; I would make sure she does not get hurt at four. Not be punched in the nose at eight, you know. Like try to maintain your femininity. So it's a double standard that exists that holds us (girls) back longer than when we're able to blossom. (Personal interview)

Rokafella attributes women's weaker physique to a lack of intensive body conditioning during their most crucial years of physical development during childhood. While boys are encouraged and expected to engage in physical activities, girls are, for lack of better words, raised to be " domestic housewives." Rokafella explains girls are not expected to play sports, engage in rough play or be as physically active as boys for the sake of retaining a sense of femininity. Even though Rokafella doesn't agree with this mentality, she admits that if she were to ever have a daughter herself, she would probably raise her with the ideals of femininity. Rokafella remarked that when girls choose to commit and pursue breaking, they are already behind in physical development, and their bodies are less conditioned to endure intense physical contact and substantial muscular wear and tear.

Some of the research participants also argued that b-girls have to deal with certain challenges due to a female physique. Nene points out that the center of gravity for female dancers is lower, towards her hips. She says this would affect the way b-girls conduct floorwork involving weight balance and body propelling power moves such as windmills, turtles, or airchairs. The curvier physique of the female body potentially affects the ability to execute power moves, spins and freezes.

Well-defined upper body strength is crucial to breaking, which many female dancers possess less of compared to male dancers. B-boys admit to having similar issues with their own unique body types with regard to certain types of breaking moves. B-boy Lucid from San Francisco found his legs problematic because they were so big from being a soccer player. Having large, muscular legs hindered his ability to execute power moves because of the extra weight his arms and upper body had to support or propel in spins and aerial power moves.

The lack of extreme physical contact and training as children along with the female biological physique need to be recognized as plausible factors for b-girls' physical limitations. Yet to this day, many people fail to acknowledge these factors. Granted these factors should not be regarded as excuses, they do have a large effect on the development and success of b-girls. Despite these limitations, a far greater sentiment b-girls expressed on the topic of physical training focused on their access to training and wholehearted support. Part of the reason b-girls were not mastering the moves required for breaking had to do with the way they were trained. Ya-Ya expresses how b-boys fail to help b-girls:

> It comes down to the way they [b-girls] were taught. If someone teaches them like, oh I'm gonna teach a "girl" because most b-boys DO that [pretending to be a b-boy, she rolls her eyes] and [be] like yeah, Imma teach her something so she can stop bothering me. They teach half-ass. It's only on rare occasion [b-boys take training b-girls seriously]. There are very few b-girls that can have that, that have a dude that really wants to [train you]. (Personal interview)

Ya-Ya points out that b-boys hold the knowledge, and it is the b-boy who controls how much of that knowledge they give to b-girls. This withholding of certain knowledge from b-girls, even if it's unintentional, limits women's progress and ability to grow into mature dancers and to be able to pass the knowledge down to other b-girls.

Nene and Rokafella point out that until recently, many b-girls learned from b-boys. Sometimes it was harder for a b-girl to master a move or technique under the tutelage of a b-boy because he was training the b-girl under the pretense of how he learned the move with his own body. In other words, the b-boy isn't taking into account the differences in physiology. Ya-Ya had discovered this discrepancy when she trained with other b-girls. She learned certain techniques or alternate ways of doing a move that seemed to work better for b-girls than from how she had learned from a b-boy. Often times, b-boys overlook the physical differences between male and female bodies that might entail approaching a break move or technique differently. Furthermore, if the b-boy can't relate or is unfamiliar with the physical capabilities of girls and women, he may not know what adjustments she needs in order to learn faster and execute the move more easily.

Through teaching, Ephrat, Michelle, Safi, and Rokafella also came to understand that women had different strengths, weaknesses, and thought processes than men. The typical learning process in breaking was to watch someone do a move and then to try to figure out how to do it on one's own. If needed, one could approach another breaker for general advice or for a description on how to execute the move. Women do not seem to do well in this type of setting. Rokafella noticed many more young women chose to attend her classes and found that they excelled through structured training such as classes

or in one-on-one sessions. B-boy Malik who taught a breaking class in Portland also agreed that girls did better in a classroom setting where everyone learned together and where everyone was expected to take a turn in entering the cipher to practice moves they were learning.

The training process was and remains physically hard for many b-girls, but as Malik points out, the bigger concern is that b-girls are not being trained properly and are not receiving a positive support system during the time they are learning and developing their skills. To add to this, outside of his classes, Malik realized the b-girls he taught experienced indifference, lack of inclusion, and intimidation from b-boys that made his b-girl students feel insecure.

In the classroom, Malik was able to regulate the flow of the training, and because he trained the b-girls just as hard as the b-boys, the girls were dancing just as well, with some of these girls doing better than the boys. As far as breaking goes, the structured class setting seems to work better for girls based on the nature of breaking itself. Being a show and prove dance, b-boy training relishes in b-boys' ability to create and master moves on their own. Being in a class presents a student-teacher complex; girls are put in an environment where they know they are receiving attention and guidance. In a true b-boy sense, and possibly why some boys don't do as well in these settings, breaking classes take away the individual competitive flair.

Breaking teachers, in their experience, find their classes to be effective initial resources for people who don't have open access (friends and family who break and can train them) to breaking. However, as Malik explains about his students, as the b-girls he taught got older and moved on to becoming more involved in training outside of the

classes, entering battles and interacting more with the breaking community, he saw that many of them started to hold back with their dancing and one by one dropped out of the scene. This was frustrating for Malik to see happening because it was unrelated to his b-girl students not being good enough. Despite his support and mentorship, Malik knew that the b-girls he trained would be dealing with many more b-boys, and b-girls for that matter, who may not be interested in helping them grow, and they would have to face much more indifference and intimidation before they became established enough to be recognized and respected.

B-girls accept that there are limitations to what their bodies can do compared to b-boys. They work around these limitations to make the dance happen. Even so, b-girls are dealing with another challenge when it comes to finding b-boys and other b-girls who are willing to train them. Many b-girls who were interviewed recalled at least one experience when they felt the b-boys didn't really want to teach them. Some b-boys, too, admitted they didn't teach b-girls because it was a waste of time. These b-boys exclaimed that they are hesitant to help b-girls out because they neither think b-girls take breaking seriously nor are the b-girls willing to dedicate themselves to the dance and the culture. Rokafella points out that training time is highly valued, and jokes b-boys are very selfish with their training. Every minute spent training someone else is a minute not spent on themselves. B-girls are not seen as sound investments, and most b-boys don't want to give up their time on someone who is likely to quit and not likely to become a seasoned breaker.

Although these assumptions were not overtly expressed, many women felt this attitude coming from the b-boys. In other words, girls and women start experiencing a lack of support and respect almost from the minute they become involved. The physical

setbacks and training environment teenage girls and women encounter sets the tone for the insecurity and indifference they must deal with. It doesn't stop there. In fact, as women become more involved in breaking, they undergo further obstacles to establishing their membership and building their respectability as b-girls. As Rokafella noted, despite her years of being in the community and the reputation she has acquired, she still occasionally encounters indifference and lack of respect as a b-girl because she is a woman. Based on the experiences of the women interviewed in this research, the next section looks into one of the most important aspects of breaking and other urban street dances, the cipher circle, and the issues female dancers experience in trying to participate in cipher circles.

5.2. Female Dancers and the Cipher

Several weeks into my fieldwork, I attended a house dance competition called House Dance International (HDI), held in New York City. Although hip-hop dances were not included, the competition was based on a cipher battle set-up and the majority of the house dancers who competed and attended were also some type of hip-hop dancer. My field notes illuminate the significance of women entering and participating in the cipher circle:

> The competition battles were over, but nobody was ready for the dancing to end. In the concrete area in front of the building entrance, someone wheeled out their portable speakers and turned on their iPod. As more people gathered around, a handful of dancers began to take turns dancing in the circular space. All of them were men. I noticed Nubian Nene tentatively eyeing the circle. She was staring intently at the dancers,

> sometimes bobbing her head to the music, other times standing very still and watching. It took fifteen minutes, or about three songs before she stepped in the circle to do a set. Several of the men cheered Nene on and were happy to see she jumped in. After her, a few other women began to jump in the circle (Fieldnotes, July 2010).

Before Nene, there seemed to be an unspoken taboo. Female dancers mingled in the peripheries of the cipher circles, but it was noticeable that a few, like Nene, wanted to go into the circle but were hesitant. I stayed on the sides watching, moved by the dancers who went in, but hitting an invisible wall that kept me from stepping in. There was something powerful about that cipher, and something more powerful from within that prevented female dancers like Nene from stepping in.

Jumping into a cipher circle has plagued even the best of dancers, not just women. Entering the cipher is an artistic expression in real time, not rehearsed, and not choreographed. The cipher, as the epicenter of the dance, is where relationships are established, maintained, or altered between dancers. It is where one's membership and status are tested, challenged and upheld. In the cipher, dancers are being judged, accepted or rejected on the basis of their performance. The space created by the cipher not only works as a way to let certain individuals display their talent, but if other dancers do not approve, it also works as a barrier to keep others out physically and socially. Dance movement is the currency in a cipher; a good song needs to be paid with good dancing. Going in the cipher is the act of establishing membership and gaining respect. For that, going in the cipher can be challenging literally and figuratively.

Many of the women I interviewed would laugh about their own tribulations of going in the cipher. As a space for establishing one's reputation and group acceptance, the cipher is the central focal point for the dance as well as the social practices surrounding the dance. For women who aren't as confident about their membership in the dance community, the cipher can possess even greater meanings of power and social approval. Nene was one of the few female dancers I saw consistently jump into ciphers, but even with her, I noticed that it took a while for her to get in. In our interview, I asked her what the process of getting into the cipher was like for her:

> Sky: Do you ever have trouble entering the cipher?
>
> Nene: To go in? Yeah, I still do. Any kind of style, any cipher, especially if there's men, I think twice about going in just because I don't wanna mess it up, and I don't wanna hear any kind of (backlash.)… You keep saying "I'm gonna go in after this person." I might know a song by heart, but I'm not sure how to hit it properly. I think I'm going to ruin it for people so I end up staying on the outside for a minute… I hate it 'cause I'm hungry to go in, but I'm not going in. It happens to me in house. It happens to me in any kind of dance… It's really hard for women to get any kind of respect from men unless you really come correct. Most of the men that I've met are amazing. Those amazing men, they won't be like no, don't come in, but they won't be welcoming either. They won't be like, "Yo, come on, let's go!" (Personal interview)

Nene demonstrates a very conscious awareness of her status as a woman and personal skill level. She takes into account who is participating in the cipher. If men are

involved in the cipher, Nene encounters a greater amount of hesitation followed by personal frustration deriving from peer-induced but self-inflicted intimidation. As Nene points out, very good male dancers are not necessarily discouraging female dancers from ciphering, but they are not very supportive either. Thus in many ways, female dancers choosing to cipher may feel like they are entering an exclusive space without an invitation.

Peaches echoes Nene's sentiment that women were tolerated in the cipher:

> Guys, they're respectful. They'll wait for them [women dancers] to finish, to like you know, start again. It's one of those things. It just is one of those kinds of things. If you were not going in there bringing it as hard as the guys, there was always, I don't wanna say, a roll of the eyes, but you were barely tolerated. (Personal Interview)

While Peaches who was trained by men viewed this mentality as a way to screen the serious female poppers from the amateur ones, other women regarded this treatment as discrimination.

As exclaimed by the dancers I interviewed, during the 1980s, 1990s and even in present times, women were not encouraged to go in the cipher, or as my thesis participants and some hip hop scholars remark, were "merely tolerated." B-girls experiencing a hard time of getting in the cipher may not be solely due to personal reasons but because other dancers, particularly male dancers, are controlling who goes in the cipher. For a long time the men forming cipher circles were perpetuating an environment that implied that women did not belong in the cipher. The ciphers' affinity for aggression, competition, and male dominance put women in an awkwardly tense

environment. Rokafella noted women getting involved in the cipher were regarded as a liability. Female dancers who entered ciphers were usually under the watchful eye of protective brothers, friends, and boyfriends, which Rokafella insinuates was a potential reason for other men to start fights in the cipher if they felt that the woman was being disrespected. She also explains that men would not allow a woman to make him "look bad." If he danced better than her, he could be criticized for showing off. If she danced better than him, however, he faced getting ridiculed for letting a woman beat him. It was a lose/lose battle for men. Additionally, the immediate environment surrounding the cipher was tense, and if fights broke out, women would be up against men, including possibly gangs and weapons.

In the past, another reason women were discreetly and blatantly discouraged from entering ciphers was because it was seen as an immoral act of putting herself out there. It was not proper for a woman to show off her body through public performance. However, for men, entering the cipher was something they almost had to do in order to gain respect. It was more acceptable for a woman to enter a cipher if she was encouraged or told to go in by a man. This invitation by a man to go in takes the decision out of her hands and upholds the man's control of the woman's right to dance. In some loophole it justifies her time to shine because a man endorsed it.

Men have historically controlled the display of the woman's body in public with male sponsorship being one of the ways women's public performance is deemed socially acceptable. One such example is European ballet and its infamous male sponsorship system. As discussed in Susan Foster's "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," ballet was one of the few realms in European society where women were revered for their public display

and performance of their bodies. The male sponsorship and adoration of prima ballerinas, or sometimes a specific ballet or ballet company, were key financial and social supports. Similarly, in hip-hop dance, female dancers who had male support willing to invest in training them and making room for them in the cipher were more likely to succeed and gain respectability.

Nene also believes it is more complicated for women to enter ciphers because the nature of the cipher does not compliment the way women think or go about things:

> The energy is strong. The male presence is huge. In the cipher they [men] are so caught up. They [women] go in and not up to par, it ruins the energy. Guys have the ability where they are more open. They don't care; they just go in and cipher. Girls think too much. It's how we are. We rationalize, analyze much more than men. (Personal interview)

Nene reasons that women may have a different approach to ciphering based on their tendency to over-think the situation, which makes the decision to go into the cipher harder. Other female dancers point out the whole purpose of the cipher is not as appealing to women. Amy Secada, a house dancer, conjectures that women don't feel the need or care to be in the spotlight. She even joked how women preferred the corner of the room, where they could dance without any attention paid to them.

> We don't feel the need. I feel like it's a very different process for us. We just so want to feel and move our body, express ourselves. It's for us. It's not an external process. It's not like "Yo, let me show this dude wassup. Let me like hit 'him wit this move." It's about, "Do I feel like doing this move?" What does this move bring me? Does it make me happy? I feel

> like we're so in our head, and we've been so repressed for so many centuries that just to be able to have the right to be a woman and get down and breakdance, do whatever you want with your body, is beautiful. (Personal interview)

Amy makes an important point that women have been socially repressed and are still exhibiting the effects of those restraints. According to Rokafella, only twenty-five years ago it wasn't considered "normal" for women to jump in the cipher because it was seen as an immoral act of attracting attention. Perhaps what women feel about ciphers is not so much their inability to relate to a cipher circle but the fact that dance ciphers tend to be dominated by male dancers and thus, male dancers govern the nature of the cipher and what is considered good dancing. Based on the perspectives expressed by female dancers in their interviews, it is apparent female dancers feel some sort of exclusivity within ciphers. In effect, this makes them feel they need to dance like the male dancers and can make them devalue their own personal style and capabilities.

While jumping in the cipher continues to be a major issue for female dancers, the issue of undue support to go into the cipher also belittles female dancers. When b-girls start to sense that they are being over acknowledged and celebrated as representatives for all the women, it makes them feel uncomfortable. Ephrat remembers losing her temper at her friend who was also a b-boy because he always pushed her into the cipher and incessantly cheered her on during her sets:

> I remember getting into a fight, not a fistfight, but a big argument with my friend. I remember being at this club and he was always pushing me into ciphers. Now I get what he was trying to do but back then, it was like,

> "Dude leave me alone!" He would just push me in and I would get in and he would be super hype[d] and everybody would be hype[d] and I was just like, that was bad! I felt wick. Why are you clapping for me? I would get mad at him. I remember this one time I walked out the club and I was like, "Don't ever do that again. If that shit is not good. DO NOT give me props!" I hate that. Argh!... We got into an argument. Why? Why would he do that? It doesn't make any sense. Dancing is good if it's good, not based on who it is. (Personal interview)

Ephrat knew her friend was only trying to be supportive. He may have thought he was giving her an ego boost since he saw potential in her. However, for her, the extra enthusiasm came off as over the top and undeserved. Not only do women feel the lack of inclusion and support on the one end, they also encounter an overemphasis and special treatment on the other end based solely upon the fact that they are women. The struggle not only comes within the b-girl dealing with her own capabilities but on top of that, she faces the task of having to assess the treatment and support of others. She wants to be acknowledged for performing well, but she doesn't want to be patronized or glorified simply for being a woman.

5.3. The Token B-Girl

The "celebration" or undue support for teenage girls and women getting in the cipher or battling is a daunting issue for b-girls and other female urban street dancers. When I got back in touch with an old college friend, Corrine Mannibat a/k/a b-girl Calamity, who also happened to be one of the editors for Rokafella's b-girl documentary,

All the Ladies Say (2009), we started discussing the topic of b-girls getting "easy props." Calamity had learned how to break from a student organization/ breaking crew in her college, State University of New York (SUNY) New Paltz during the early 2000s. Once she was able to master the basic moves, such as a top rock, the six step[46], and some simple freezes, she was invited to perform with the crew. She remembers the crowd would cheer her on when she performed.

At first she admits it was a great feeling and very encouraging, but after a while, she began to question the significance of this support. She began to realize that every time she performed or went into a cipher, people were extra supportive and excited that she went in, giving her "props" for "reppin" for the girls. She knew that, in truth, her performance was very basic, and the only reason people were being so supportive was because she was a girl. Calamity eventually began to feel resentment over being the featured b-girl of the crew during performances and found the compliments she received held little value.

Within our discussion, Calamity and I coined the term "token b-girl." The token b-girl is that one and, usually, only b-girl in the crew. She is usually a good friend of the boys in the crew, who have taught her a few moves. Once in the crew, she is featured in performances and battles as the "girl" element of the crew's repertoire. Being that there were so few b-girls in the scene, they were viewed as special and deserving of recognition. In the sea of masculine bravado, it is the job of the token b-girl to "represent" for the ladies. B-girls received special treatment that on the surface seemed supportive, but in reality it undermined their respectability as breakers.

[46] The six step is one of the most basic footwork combinations and usually one of the first dance moves taught in breaking.

The token b-girl is nothing new, and the format of featuring one female dancer in a crew was epitomized in the signature breakdance movies of the 1980s. In *Wild Style*, the Rock Steady Crew included b-girl Baby Love. On the movie's international press release tour, she was featured as the b-girl of the crew. In *Breakin',* Lollipop Sanchez, a locker, was catapulted into the final scene's cipher battle as the female element who was fierce enough to step up to the lead actor/dancer and get in his face with her locking moves. Although Baby Love and Lollipop were featured dancers, their roles in the movies were nothing close to those of their male crewmates. The token b-girl existed early on in the dance, and through its representation in pop media, she became established as a standard within early hip-hop dance culture.

Michelle, the organizer of Ladies of Hip-Hop Festival remarks at seeing the positive in the token b-girl:

> You go to battles. It's all guys. Then their secret weapon is a woman. They grab her and throw her out and the crowd goes crazy. If you're that woman, you should take advantage of that and embrace that opportunity. (Phone interview)

The token b-girl can be a feel good entitlement to have because she is *the* b-girl in the crew. It's just her and the boys. As Michelle points out, there are advantages of playing a special role and having the opportunity to be surrounded by a potentially strong support group of friends and dancers. On the other hand, the token b-girl can be regarded as a mere spectacle. Safi points out that the token b-girl's role is almost ornamental:

> It's sort of like what a lot of dance crews do with kids. They have that one kid and they put that kid out there. Or you treat them like your prized dog

> or something. A lot of times because they don't teach her, she's a very mediocre breaker. She's got something. She's got that one signature move. They all have their one signature move in these groups where it's just one girl. She does her one signature move, and everyone's like "OOOOOOH!!!" and then she goes to the back to support the rest of the crew. And she's just happy to be there. (Personal interview)

Being the token b-girl provides a false sense of recognition that young women can thrive on and are limited by. The token b-girl gives attention to the female presence in breaking. They are given the opportunity to be featured, included, and to bear the title of being a unique element of a crew. On the other hand, it also sets her apart as being different from the b-boys. As Safi points out, being a token b-girl denies b-girls true membership in breaking and can actually hinder her progress to grow as a dancer. Once touted as *the* b-girl of the crew, Safi remarks many of the crews fail to maintain supporting and training their b-girls as equal members of their crew. The special title barely merits into any substantial special attention for b-girls, and in actuality, it gives a false sense of valuing women within the breaking community. Thus, the token b-girl both features and simultaneously puts down women's presence in breaking.

At first female dancers don't notice it, or because they are just beginning to cipher and battle, they perceive it as beginner's support. There comes a moment in their lives when it dawns on them that it has nothing to do with their dancing and people are cheering for the sake of cheering because she is a woman dancing.

The token b-girl is a good example of Dyson's argument on the double standards women experience in hip-hop culture.[47] He argues the ideals that classify a respectable black woman of good standing, a "good sister," puts her on a pedestal of virtue that at the same time keeps her away from modes of power, such as sexual freedom, positions of authority, access to money and in this case, respect and full membership as a breaker. Essentially the role of the token b-girl is testament to the control men have over the cipher and the dance itself, where the b-girl is placed on a raised pedestal that highlights her presence, but on the other hand, it sets her aside, literally. By being considered different, b-girls lose the ability to be considered equals.

The ironies of being a token b-girl are more apparent when crews are training and competing for battles. More often than not the b-girl is not at the level of skill as the rest of her crew, so if the crew wanted to create sets or routines to use during a battle, the crew would be limited by what she was capable of doing. This then limits the b-girl from being part of the crew's best sets. If there weren't any b-girls to battle against in the other crew, the b-girl was going to have to battle against a b-boy from the other crew. This was risky if the crew knew the b-girl's skill level was not up to par, and oftentimes, the b-girl ended up not battling at all. Overall, despite the b-girl's special title, she was left out of some of the most important aspects of breaking in a crew.

For example, during a battle I attended in Seattle called *Massive Monkeys Day* in April 2010, I noticed the first battle of the night had a b-girl in one of the crews. I was even more surprised that she actually went in the cipher first and started the battle. After her first set, she never came out to battle again, even though all of the other b-boys went

[47] See Dyson 112

in at least twice. Based upon the interactions between the b-boys battling, her set didn't even seem to count in the battle, except for the announcement by the MC host to "Give it up for b-girls reppin' it in the house!" followed by a few supportive applause and cheers. By going out first she was featured, but because her ability level was considerably lower than the rest of the crew and those participating in the battle itself, doing another set later on would have jeopardized her crew's performance. When the battle finished, I felt disappointed because I expected more from her as a b-girl, and I was hoping to have seen her battle more. I also felt that she was put in a position where she was not ready to battle someone, but the crew felt inclined to include her and essentially her participation in the battle held little competitive value.

The difficulty women face with jumping in the cipher and the experience of being the token b-girl fosters a great amount of insecurity over their capabilities and challenges their sense of membership in the breaking community. The frustration and lack of self-confidence many women experience is not just because they feel intimidated and ignored in some aspects of breaking. Women have pointed out they experience discrimination in all aspects of breaking, from training, to battling, to how they get paid or promoted, to their respectability and reputations possessing less credibility than men. Women have even expressed their intimate relationships and sexual reputations are closely monitored alongside their reputations as dancers. As many of the women I spoke to realize, the weight of their frustration challenged their love for the dance. For some women, this became the pivotal point for them to figure out ways to overcome the negative circumstances they had to deal with.

6.1. TACKLING MARGINALIZATION

Many female dancers initially tried to cope with the gender biases in urban street dance and deal with the limitations. This was (and still is) a frustrating aspect of being part of a culture yet not feeling completely accepted. Female dancers who choose to continue their involvement in urban street dance despite the gender setbacks have either figured out ways to work around the obstacles or have taken an active stance in bringing about awareness and change.

To stay in the game, women have had to come to terms with where they stand within the dynamics of self, the dance, and the underlying social nature of the dance culture. In this final section of fieldwork, I present the ways women have successfully handled discrimination and focus more on what changes are being done or need to be done to give teenage girls and women greater support and inclusion in urban street dance.

6.2. Acknowledging Discrimination

Acknowledging that marginalization is happening is the first step to addressing gender discrimination in urban street dance. During my fieldwork, I vividly remember contacting a well-known b-boy, who is considered one of the pioneers of breaking, to see if he would be willing to participate in an interview. When I mentioned I wanted to discuss gender issues in breaking, he quickly responded, “What issues? There are no gender issues. Everyone is cool with everything. If women have problems with breaking it’s their personal problem; it has nothing to do with the culture.” I wasn’t sure if I was more taken aback by his statement or the way he delivered it. It bothered me that such a statement was coming from a legendary b-boy who so many looked up to and so many

based their philosophies of breaking from. The incident made me realize that before one can even tackle the issues of discrimination, one has to convince people that these problems exist.

In 2005, Rokafella embarked on a new project that would focus on bringing out the b-girl experience. Released for viewing in 2009, her documentary *All the Ladies Say* offers one example of raising awareness of the discrimination b-girls experience. The documentary presents footage from five years of touring, b-girl exhibitions, and panel discussions featuring a group of well-known b-girls. In their interviews, these women talk about their personal experiences of being a b-girl. They discuss how they were treated by b-boys, the difference in the learning experience, and issues of physical and social setbacks. Other woman-specific topics such as pregnancy and the significance of what it meant to be a b-girl were also featured in the documentary. Rokafella's objective was to bring recognition to well known and respected b-girls such as Baby Love, Honey Rockwell, Aiko, Vendetta, Beta, Lady Champ and Severe. She wanted to address the issues many b-girls had and hoped that having a group of women openly talk about breaking would empower other b-girls and provide a sense of support.

The biggest issue for many b-girls is dealing with the fact that they are a minority. As b-girls, they have more to prove but less to gain. Rokafella wanted to show that many b-girls dealt with common insecurities and similar barriers, no matter how good they were. She wanted to give b-girls a source of encouragement and push for a greater awareness of how women have been and continue to be undermined in the breaking community. The documentary was intended to encourage b-girls to support each other and to establish their place in breaking as dancers to be reckoned with.

For the first time, I saw video footage of b-girls such as Honey Rockwell, Rokafella, and Baby Love ciphering and battling. This stood in stark contrast to other breaking and hip-hop documentaries. The documentary offered proof from several generations of b-girls of their presence in hip-hop culture along with the struggles they dealt with as minorities.

Rokafella's desire to produce *All the Ladies Say* was sparked by her own struggles as a b-girl. One major experience that impacted her awareness of gender discrimination was when she toured with the GhettOriginal production. Despite the opportunity, wealth of knowledge, and history she received by dancing among legends such as Crazy Legs, Ken Swift, Doc, Areola and Kwikstep, Rokafella was frustrated with the treatment she encountered while performing with the GhettOriginal company. At one point she spoke out against not being given the opportunity to contribute to the production:

> What I felt was, onstage and in discussions for articles, the company members were very respectful. But behind the scenes there was this feeling that women couldn't really like hang. We're really weak and that we had to be kind of catered to. And I felt really messed up about that because I know that I'm a tough girl. I've been a tomboy all my life. I get really down for mine. I don't need you to give me a hand out, you know. I can carry my weight. And yours. And that part bothered me. But you know you have to keep going. I wasn't the boss of the crew-company. You just kind of deal with it. But as I got better with my skills, I was not trying' to have it, so I was like, look, you know, talk to the hand or don't

> talk to me like that. Give me the opportunity that I'm asking for. I want to choreograph. I want to be in front. And they were just so irritated by my stance and you know the other two girls in the company were NOT trying to follow me or make any waves. They were kind of like, you should just know your role. We're guests here. I was like, oh no, no no! Hip-hop is not their house. I have a room in this house too! And so eventually I got expelled or suspended from the company. I had to go back to the streets. But I felt at that point like there's no turning back. (Personal interview)

Rokafella was aware that she may have seemed out of line, but in many ways, she felt her talent and respectability were being compromised. Rokafella understood that when it came to breaking, she was entering a male domain. However, having grown up in New York City within the very communities and culture that fostered hip-hop, the aggression, toughness, and street ghetto experience that defined hip-hop culture were as much a part of her reality as the other dancers in the company. That didn't matter though and she knew as a woman in the company, she would never be paid as well, trained, or promoted to the same level as the top male dancers. Most significantly, her voice, ideas, and input would not be heard. Although she says she has so much respect for the opportunity and the dancers of Ghetto Original Productions, her role and time in the company was bittersweet.

Rokafella was eventually released from the production on the premise of being difficult to work with, but in Rokafella's eyes, she felt she had the right to point out that there were double standards at play. Her intentions were not to create conflict but to make members of the production understand her position and to be fair in working with her.

She admits, had they told her she wasn't qualified to fill the role of principal dancer or contribute choreography, she would have accepted it. However she feels the senior dancers failed to even give her the chance or the training to allow her to rise to that level of performance, and she believes she was held back solely because she was a woman. In the late 1990's, when Rokafella challenged status quo by speaking out, men and women barely understood gender discrimination could exist in a dance, in hip-hop dance. To this day, Rokafella and other breakers still encounter people who have no awareness for gender discrimination in hip-hop dance. For that reason, it is especially important for women to speak out to make these issues known and push for acceptance and recognition by establishing presence as dancers with voices.

6.3. Speaking Out and Establishing Presence

Despite the negative outcome Rokafella had in speaking up about not receiving equal opportunity, Rokafella felt it was important to make the people who she looked up to realize the unfair treatment they were perpetuating. She has had to confront issues of gender bias even when dealing with her husband/co-director, Kwikstep. For example, Rokafella has had to make Kwikstep ask himself why she, as a woman was always getting stuck with all of the administrative work or getting paid less. In the beginning Kwikstep didn't see anything wrong with the way things were, but eventually he became more aware of the biases Rokafella faced as a woman. This change occurred largely because of Rokafella's persistence in bringing up these concerns. As a result, Rokafella and Kwikstep have learned how to resolve these issues such as splitting the administrative work more evenly or by fairly compensating Rokafella for any extra work

she does, and Kwikstep gives part of his paycheck to Rokafella when clients pay him more money, even though he and Rokafella hold equal positions and work commitments.

Melanie, a waacking and vogue dancer, also encounters gender bias when working with men. The only woman on a team of nightclub party promoters, Melanie has had to deal with the group making decisions without her, overlooking her suggestions, or blatantly ignoring her when she's talking. Rather than letting it slide, she makes sure her voice is heard and addresses any incidents of possible sexism on the spot. She acknowledges that it's a constant battle to keep the men she deals with in check. She feels that if she lets anything slide, the boys get comfortable, and unintentionally fall back to bad habits of gender bias.

Oftentimes men and women do not realize that they are leaving women out. For example, Nene, a house and waacking dancer once attended a breaking battle where in between the battles the promoters held mini contests for giveaway prizes. Nene noticed all of the contests revolved around power moves. These contests automatically excluded almost all b-girls because power moves are not within the capabilities of most b-girls. She went up to the organizer and brought that to his attention. She suggested there should be contests that bring out other distinguishing elements of breaking in order to give everyone, particularly b-girls, the chance to join in because ultimately these mini contests were supposed to be fun activities for event participants. Nene's story illustrates the way organizers failed to make the event a full experience for all participants by eliminating b-girls from one aspect of the event.

Speaking out puts the woman in a position of challenging the status quo, but by doing so, she is establishing voice and presence. In a monthly party called "In the

Groove" hosted by Rokafella and Kwikstep, Safi, the director of Hip-Hop Dance Conservatory witnessed one of his staff members being harassed in a cipher and notes the significance in her ability to hold her ground:

> Recently, somebody was trying to get at Raphaela in a cipher. She just held her own. It's funny people don't expect that. They don't expect you as a woman to do that. I haven't seen people do that since Honey Rockwell and Rokafella. There's very few women I know who have that attitude of you know, you're not going to try to play me in a cipher. I've seen a lot of women walk out of a cipher because a dude comes out at them like that. Because they [men] think if they come at them [women] like that, they're [women] gonna get all scared, and they'll just walk out… I think the attitude these women [referring to Raphaela, Rokafella and Honey Rockwell] have I wish all women had. Look, this is who I am, this is what I'm doing. You have to respect me for who I am. If someone doesn't, they [referring to women] bring it back at them. They don't shy away in a little corner. (Personal interview)

Holding her ground in the cipher, as Safi points out, is not typical behavior from women but in doing so, Raphaela gained more respect. Women have to think, act, and react at the same level as men. The anecdote suggests that in order to gain respect, women have to earn it. In order to empower herself, she needs to assert power.

6.4. Working Around a Man's World

Speaking out is not easy or always fruitful, and oftentimes results in an ongoing process. Another way women have dealt with gender biases has been to work around a male-oriented culture. In understanding that there were certain situations or people where women would not be able to get around the fact that they were women, they have had to demonstrate or prove to others that they were qualified and deserved the same respect as men. For example, when visiting high schools as a guest teacher, Rokafella exclaims that she welded less clout as a woman and found herself always having to prove her authority:

> From my experience I always have to bring it. I always have to show and prove first. When I go into a classroom like when I work in a high school, and it's mostly guys and a few girls, I have to first push the desks out the way and show I am qualified to talk to them in a way that is aggressive or have authority. I have to prove I am an authority in this scene or subject or topic. So that's first. I just can't walk in there and expect them to be like, "Oh yeah." I think that's unfair because Kwikstep can just walk in and be like yeah I'm a b-boy and let's go, five, six, seven, eight. Let's all stretch and do push-ups, whereas I have to prove myself. (Personal interview)

Additionally, Rokafella's experience as a company director made her realize there were just some things she couldn't do to change people's minds as far as accepting her as a female authority figure. There were some issues where she knew proving her authority only made matters worse and she had to figure out a way to work around the attachment people had to male dominance:

> [Some of] the guys that have come [to] work for me, I've learned through the years that I cannot be the director, cannot be the choreographer, I just can't 'cause there's so much [here Rokafella is banging her fists together] this conflict that is caused when I'm trying to tell them you need to be here at 8, [or] do this in a synchronized form…Whereas if it was Kwikstep [who] cracks the whip, everybody's okay, and if they don't like it, they leave and never come back. But you know 'cause it's those two that just can't take any kind of authority that I have to fall back a little and enforce, or work my authority through Kwikstep. (Personal interview)

As much as Rokafella pushed to gain equal respect and authority, she realized sometimes it was pointless or counterproductive. There were some circumstances where it was just better to let Kwikstep speak for her because some people had such a difficult time accepting her as an authority figure.

6.5. Understanding the Impact of Men

No matter how much women complain, speak out, or work around gender discrimination, the impact of the male figure goes a long way. Safi points out even though it's a women's battle, men play a huge role in changing the circumstances for women:

> Men need to start being honest with themselves. What are you truly doing for women? I get it you respect women; all right, fine, but what do you do in order for them to be able to have a better pathway than the one that is currently there? You say you train women. Well, are you giving the same

> training, and are you providing them with a platform for growth, a consistent platform for growth? ... It's men taking accountability for what they're doing [as well as] what they're not doing. (Personal interview)

Safi argues that men need to acknowledge how much they affect where women stand within the culture. Men may say and think they respect women but as Safi points out, many are still upholding sexist practices. Secondly, Safi points out these issues aren't going to improve for women unless men actively take on the responsibility to support women:

> You talk to Peaches, one of the very first female poppers. She had to fight to get trained. She had to bust her butt...They [men] say they [women] have to "train hard." All right, but well, how? No one has the answer. No one says, "How?" Everyone's just like "Just train harder. Do better." I mean if you're a woman, you're trying to get somewhere; just find people that are gonna train you. WHO?!?! Who's willing to take that time out of their life to train someone like that, and if you're [referring to men] not doing that, don't say you're trying to help women. It takes more than just talking about it; you have to be doing it, so what are you doing?... [A] Lot of people say it's the woman's responsibility to uplift herself, but how can that happen if she's constantly having men [Safi stamps his foot] holding her down? (Personal interview)

Although many men acknowledge the fact that women should receive just as much respect as men, very few are willing to go out of their way to support women, or change their habits that are still reflective of male indifference and male dominance. As

exclaimed by Safi, men play an important role in the process of furthering women's presence in the dance scene. Without men's support, in particular, active support, women will remain limited, sidelined, and never realize their full potential nor have their presence acknowledged. Men's attitude toward the advancement of women in urban street dance is not unique and is essentially a reflection of how women are generally treated in American society today. In this regard, many women realize their struggle will only go so far if men remain indifferent. In the meantime, rather than mainly focusing on making men understand and constantly fighting against sexism, many women have chosen to focus more on their own outlook and how to approach urban street dance on their own terms.

6.6. Coming to Terms with Oneself: Embracing Femininity and Finding Balance

In my research, I found that many women have a hard time with breaking because they are unable to approach the dance on their own terms. In almost all aspects, b-girls must conform to the structure, standards, and aesthetics set by young men even though the essence of the dance and the culture revels in the freedom of self-expression. Worley in her article *Loving Hip-Hop When It Denies Your Humanity* examines the most problematic foundation of women's struggle in hip-hop culture, which is women's lack of control of their own identities. Worley states that women want to maintain control over their own images and narratives of identity. In "Venus Hip-Hop and the Pink Ghetto," Perry argues that certain women in hip-hop have been able to normalize the concept of strength and attitude in feminine terms rather than solely adopting masculine representations of these qualities. Perry's article examines the work of female rap artists

such as Missy Elliot, Lauren Hill, and Lil Kim and what they have done to counter marginalization and the narrow stereotypes women are put into in hip hop. Her article provides insight and proven tactics of how some women have been able to deal with the circumstances and work around them in order to establish their identities the way they want to be seen as female rap figures. Female urban street dancers have also come to utilize similar approaches, the most important is embracing feminine expressions of strength, attitude, and style as being just as valuable as masculine expressions.

Breaking is a powerful and aggressive dance form, qualities that attract many people to the dance. Ya-Ya found the attitude and aggression her b-boy friends demonstrated in their dancing was empowering. Ya-Ya and Rokafella initially took on many of the masculine qualities associated with breaking. As Ya-Ya exclaims, there really weren't any b-girls to learn from, so for b-girls, learning how to break meant approaching the dance from a b-boy's perspective. However, over the years, Ya-Ya and Rokafella also found ways to incorporate feminine qualities. When Ya-Ya started learning how to break, she wanted to dance like the b-boys she looked up to. She eventually developed her own b-girl style that allowed her to define herself apart from her b-boy mentors. In many ways, Rokafella says she receives more respect from both men and women because she has been able to incorporate masculine and feminine characteristics into her breaking. Michelle, director of the Ladies of Hip-Hop Festival, says she admires Rokafella's ability to display power and aggression as a woman in her breaking:

> When I first saw Rokafella dance, I was amazed. She was probably one of the most beautiful women on stage. I was amazed at how feminine she

> came off, but she looked like she was in a street battle. I think you can do that, embrace the woman and at the same time you can be very aggressive and execute the movement in a very strong and powerful way without looking like a guy. I realize this comes with age. It comes with really understanding what is unique. (Personal interview)

Many of the b-girls I interviewed came into their own as dancers when they became comfortable with and openly embraced their femininity as part of their identity in breaking. Many of them did encounter a period in their lives where they denied or were sensitive to being a woman especially when it came to dancing, due to the social stigmas that distinguished b-girls from other female dancers. In Story's "Performing Venus: From Hottentot to Video Vixens," she examines the big issue in hip-hop culture where women are pigeon-holed and face the possibility of being branded as sluts, hoes or gold diggers. They undergo this pressure to act and dress like the video vixens portrayed in media because they understand these video vixens as representations of what men want. The images as seen in hip-hop music videos foster a hypersexualized identity of women in hip-hop, one that has generated some form of insecurity and disdain for femininity among women because of its association with sluttiness and being a rap artist's sex object. So extreme are b-girls' efforts to not be associated as a video vixen, many b-girls I spoke with mention moments in their life where they struggled with reclaiming their femininity after years of dressing or dancing in a masculine way. Rokafella clearly recalls the first time she ever bought skinny jeans and went breaking in them:

> When I first started to break, I was hiding everything. I had baggy pants, a baggy shirt, a hat to the side, wristbands, and I really didn't want to be

> considered a girl AT ALL. But that was coming from my experiences in the street… So I think I came into my breaking life not tryin' to be a woman, not trying to play up my prettiness, not try to come off as weak… When I was first coming out in the scene, I was very hard, and I was hiding everything… When I [could] finally see that it was my moves and not my looks, I was more confident that I would maybe throw a hip, or play with my hair or blow a kiss at somebody to show "Oh, I AM a woman." And that's when I really started to transform. (Personal interview)

It was a significant transition when Rokafella was finally comfortable with wearing lipstick and more form fitting apparel. For a long time she felt displaying femininity and her body were distracting and took away from people paying attention to her dance moves. Linked to this insecurity was the concern that looking sexy or displaying feminine energy would be misinterpreted as sexual and in turn affect her respectability as a b-girl. Unfortunately it has become apparent through the interviews conducted that for women, being respected as a dancer is closely linked to their sexuality and sexual reputation. As Dyson had explained in his article, "Cover Your Eyes While I Describe a Scene So Violent," this is one of the ways men's dominance over women is manifested. The "good sister" revered by black men as the ideal wife and successful modern black woman, is attractive but does not make herself sexually available (in this case dressing in revealing clothing and dancing provocatively) or else she risks being branded as a slut or promiscuous. Ideally she is educated and independent but when she becomes too assertive, she is called a bitch or dyke. For that many women are extra

conscious of how they present themselves to the hip-hop community. So much so that many women have opted to eliminate femininity from their identity.

Although challenging, embracing both masculinity and femininity is the key to surviving and evolving as a b-girl. Knowing their physical capabilities will most likely not reach the level of men is disheartening, but women have to learn to accept this fact and keep progressing. Michelle expresses the need to look beyond the challenges of conforming to standards geared towards men:

> Women have this thing in the front [breasts] that they have to figure out how to work with and something in the back [hips and buttocks.] Their center of gravity is different. Understanding the facts will allow you to be more comfortable with who you are. There are a few women who do that, Rokafella, b-girl Mega, and b-girl Kat. I feel it can be done, but it's about understanding who you are, and what you have to bring, and NOT being threatened by feeling like being a woman in this culture is some kind of handicap… There's an assumption or understanding that if you train as a guy, you can do almost anything that most of these b-boys can do, but there's also the understanding that women have to work harder, and we do have a different build, and it's tougher to do certain things. For me, it's about knowing yourself and allowing yourself to be a woman in this culture. (Personal interview)

Amy Secada expresses similar feelings about having to let go of the obsession for adhering to status quo, which in this case is dancing in a masculine way. In fact, she argues that it's almost ironic that women try so hard to prove themselves and end up

focusing too much on executing masculinity—so much so that they compromise their identities as women and suppress their femininity:

> I feel like it can be equal, but women, by trying to breakdance like men, are saying it's not equal. Does that make sense? If you go in the circle and break and throw feminine moves, or do it your way, or create your fem way to do it. Keep the feminine energy, but still break hard, have moves like [snaps her fingers repetitively to signify drilling] hit it, you know. Still kill it. But don't be afraid to put the fem in it, then you've owned it and you've made it unisex. But if you go in there, [like] so many girls, …like "I'm hard, uh!"… Is that really you? Or are you trying to put on this front? And that's what makes me think, it's not equal because now you're making yourself look less of an equal because you're trying to breakdance like a guy… Women don't allow [themselves] to bring [their feminine qualities] forward because they are so focused on mastering the male quality. Then we're losing the feminine aspect of the dance. (Personal interview)

Michelle and Amy support the need to embrace both masculine and feminine aspects of the dance. They believe that women (and men) who could embody both spectrums of dance quality are regarded as more wholesome and well rounded. Amy understands the value in female dancers who possess both masculine and feminine qualities in their dance, and by bringing such female dancers together would deliver an empowering representation of female urban street dancers:

> I think it's important when you educate people… show them the beauty of male energy and the beauty of female energy, and how they can combine them together... If they can respect both energies, they're gonna respect the women in their life… It's beautiful when a b-girl gets down, holds the floor and nobody questions it 'cause she's badass and she's flipping around doing her thing. Nobody questions it… That's one of the main reasons I created MAWU. I wanted to get a group of women together that I felt shook the dance floor, and when we walked in, when we battled guys, they were like, "Oh crap!" (Personal interview)

Creating all female crews recognizes talented women and by bringing them together offers support for each other and establishing a safe space for these women to dance. Washington stresses a necessity for women to be able to break on their own terms. All b-girl crews and b-girl events provide a safe space and supportive environment. Several notable b-girls such as Honey Rockwell & Asia One[48] were able to come into their own by taking part in all female crews such as Tru-Essencia and No Easy Props.

6.7. The Safe Space

The concept of a safe space for women works not only to create a supportive environment for female dancers, but as Washington remarks on the objectives of the No Easy Props crew, also a space where women "challenged each other to exceed the standards set for women in breaking and hip-hop" (86). The reason behind Asia One naming her crew No Easy Props was a message she wanted to send out that she was not

[48] Refer to Washington 85, 87, 88.

only creating an all female crew, but also acknowledging the fact that the women in her crew were not just token b-girls and they weren't going to take easy props.[49] As exclaimed by Forrest Get'em Gump, a b-boy of the IllStyle Rockers crew:

> In a lot of ciphers a woman can walk out and do a move and the crowd will go crazy just because she is a woman. She could totally suck. That is why I give Asia One a lot of credit because she started a thing called No Easy Props in which females have to have the skill as opposed to just being in a circle with a big butt, smile, half-ass footwork and doing a freeze where a pigeon flies out of the behind. (Washington 87)

The safe space and all female entities allow women to have something and somewhere they can learn, think, and grow as female dancers. Having to adhere to masculine aesthetics and male dominance, the pressures of being a minority makes it harder for female dancers to excel due to the constant stresses of feeling and experiencing limitations, apathy, and trying to dance like men. Understanding the constraints and limitations young women have in hip hop, Michelle decided to create the Ladies of Hip-Hop Festival to provide a space to counter such environments:

> It is something about bringing women together to have a place of your own… I've danced with men and been the only woman and had to deal with all kinds of comments and being hit on… There's a thing about being a woman in dance I enjoy, right? I enjoy being a woman. I don't want to be a man. I don't want to dance like a man. I don't want to look like a man. I want to bring the things that are unique about women into that

[49] Props is a slang term and action that refers to a verbal acknowledgement or gestures that express giving respect and recognition to someone for doing or saying something skillful, inspiring, or worthy.

> presence. I love the feminine body and I love being sexy and all that stuff too, right? But it's a way to do it where it's not demeaning, and you command the presence, and you command what goes on, and you shut down whoever you want to shut down. And you deal with people on your terms… It's about creating a space on our terms. (Personal interview)

The significance of a safe space does more than buffer female dancers from masculine aggression. It provides female dancers with an environment where femininity is embraced alongside masculinity, where they feel respected, supported, and encouraged to grow. This need for a safe space is seen in the popularity of instructional dance classes among female dancers. Rokafella, Ephrat, Michelle, and Safi find there are a higher number of women who take their classes, and teenage girls and women tend to feel more comfortable learning in a structured class environment.

6.8. House: An Urban Street Dance Scene That Embraces Women and Femininity

Not all urban street dances marginalize women as drastically as breaking. House culture, an underground scene, delivers music based on the ideals of free love, unity, and open sexuality, which is inviting for many women and homosexual men. The dance is more fluid and continuous than hip-hop or breaking with a spring-like/bouncy quality to it because house emphasizes dancing on the upbeat.

For many of the participants in this research, house dance was a departure from the aggressive breaking/cipher dance scene or the pigeon-holed parameters of the commercial hip-hop industry. Safi recalls back in the 1980s and 1990s, house clubs were

the after hours place to go to after hip-hop clubs closed. House clubs, he noted, had a more open atmosphere with a greater presence of women literally and figuratively:

> The house scene always seemed to be open and just different. When you went to the hip-hop club and they always ended early, and then you went into the house club, 'cause those were open. It was like the vibe was totally different. One, there were more women there. Two, you actually saw women getting down. And three, the atmosphere was just more inviting. You didn't have to have your whole guard up. (Personal interview)

Participants I interviewed, both men and women, agreed that men treated women differently at house clubs. In hip-hop clubs, men were noted for either always trying to "look hard" or making sexual advances on women whereas in house clubs, men approached women and interacted with them on more amicable terms. It wasn't a subtle difference. Many women noted feeling uncomfortable at hip-hop clubs due to the risk of being groped, having to deal with aggressive courtship from men, or violence breaking out. When I asked Safi about the difference, he was quick to note a change in gender relations from hip-hop to house clubs:

> I think in the house scene, you can't help but embrace the love. That's just what the house scene is. Which is [why] I think the gay community got into house and into waacking 'cause it's all about love and respect, giving back to each other. It's a mutual sharing. House clubs were where I saw people truly exchange movement between dancers, actually communicating and talking while on [the] floor. (Personal interview)

The fact that there were many women dancing and involved in the house scene was a stark contrast to the breaking, popping, and locking cipher scenes. In an interview, Amy exclaimed the physical presence of many women in itself was impressive. Seeing many women dancing encouraged her to dance because she had someone to look up to and seek inspiration from.

Melanie describes the atmosphere of house as more open than hip-hop clubs with people more willing to acknowledge your talent. The point was not about battling to be the best dancer. In one style of house dance called lofting for example, dancers would weave and thread through one another emphasizing the intimacy between dancers, space, the floor, and the music. House was, in Melanie's words, a gorgeous dance because it was so open and free.

Ephrat also enjoyed house as a departure from breaking because she found she didn't have to be aggressive. After a while, she felt it was nice to not always go in a cipher with "the prove and conquer" mentality. She grew fond of house dance because it possessed a type of dance expression that she didn't necessarily get from breaking and hip-hop:

> House was very much like [you] go to the club. It was a release. Breaking was so intense, so aggressive, so a solo kind of thing. When it came down to it, [breaking was about] putting in the time on the floor for yourself. [However,] I really love the social aspect of house, how you can exchange with someone. That's still my favorite part. Dancing with other people at the club. (Personal interview)

House dance may project a very different environment for women but the dance and culture itself is not vastly different from breaking and other cipher dances.[50] Rooted in Afro-Latin cultural communities and the urban street culture of the late 1970s/ early 1980s, house dance uses the practice of the cipher circle and incorporates many of the other aspects of African aesthetics that breaking, popping, and locking embody such as improvisation, syncopation, multiple meters, and call and response. The one major difference is house dance's lack of mocking/taunting aspect, and for the most part, competitive one-upmanship characteristics, which are two very important elements to breaking. This seems to be a distinct characteristic as to why women are more comfortable with house dance culture, because there is a lack of male aggression and the honoring of male competitiveness.[51] What house does prove is that there does exist an environment and urban street dance style that not only respects women but also equally embraces feminine and masculine dance movement.

Through active efforts to change the way people perceive and treat women in the urban dance scene, women are beginning to gain more respect, support, and presence. Older generation dancers such as Peaches, Rokafella, Bobby Mileage, and Safi have seen the scene grow and evolve to where female dancers are no longer rare "anomalies". Their efforts, whether by just being female dancers who stuck in the game, or as supportive mentors to young female dancers, have made a big impact to shift hip-hop

[50] For more information on house music and dance culture, see *This is Our House*.

[51] Note: There are two urban street dance styles, vogue and waacking that embrace competitive feminine expression. Although many women participate in these styles and display female aggression, it was mostly homosexual men who initially did both of these styles. Thus, the aggression and competitive nature of these styles may not be reflective of a women's competitive dance or female aggression, but may still fall under the same category of being a men's competitive dance and exhibiting male aggression. On the other hand, what vogue and waacking demonstrate is an approach to aggression and competitiveness that honors femininity.

culture's attitude of women by proving women are viable and capable members in the scene. Today's female dancers such as Amy Secada, Ephrat Asherie, and Nubian Nene have solidified women's place in urban street dance culture as not only entities to be reckoned with, but their styles and involvement in the scene have become significant contributions to the culture. Dancers want to learn how to move like they do, how to think like they do, and take what they have as defining aspects of urban street dance. In that matter, women have come a long way in their struggle. At the same time, this struggle is not yet a thing of the past and as many women (and men) will point out, hip-hop dance has still a long way to go for women to fully gain the respect they deserve.

7. **DISCUSSION**

In this research, I sought to trace where gender issues in breaking and other related early hip-hop dances stemmed from and to determine if breaking is indeed a masculine dance. I asked what characteristics are associated with masculinity; particularly within American and African/Latino American culture during the 1970s and 1980s. If breaking is truly a masculine dance, incorporating the female body and feminine movement aesthetic tampers with the authenticity of the dance. In other words, is the format of breaking being challenged and changed by accepting women as equals and incorporating feminine aesthetics? If breaking is indeed a masculine dance form, how can I argue for women's place in breaking and other cipher dances?

In retrospect, there is documentation of young women breaking in the past who are acknowledged for their style. Rokafella, Violeta, Baby Love, and Honey Rockwell reflected that they initially danced amongst b-boys in a slightly different way. At some point, the way b-girls danced lost its validity and they began to dance more and more like the b-boys. The complication with that was many of the dance moves, particularly those that showcased strength and speed, were not within the capability of most young women. Thus b-girls reflected a washed-down version of what b-boys were doing, and as dancers, they were "tolerated." With the woman's body and movement aesthetic denied and discriminated against in breaking, is it plausible to argue that women's place in breaking is long overdue? Had they been given adequate acknowledgement and inclusion, would women's presence and contribution to the development of breaking have taken a greater hold?

In determining if breaking is a male-oriented dance and why female dancers experienced partial membership, I started to mull over a remark Schloss made in the beginning of his book about the purpose of breaking. He pointed out that breaking, along with other aspects of hip-hop culture, was made for teenagers by teenagers:

> B-boying also illuminates another of hip-hop culture's most distinctive features: it was designed not only *for* teenagers, but *by* teenagers. The original hip-hop culture, taken as a whole, includes almost everything an adolescent could be interested in: music, dancing, sports, vandalism, fashion, various game and pastimes, art, sexuality, the definition of individual and collective identities, and a number of other activities. (11)

Based on Schloss' statement, breaking was an element of urban youth culture. Expanding on this concept, I came to realize that breaking should be viewed as not just an urban youth culture but more specifically as a coming-of-age dance that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood. Breaking was a form of socializing for teenagers, a way to bond with others, or a way to confront enemies. It was a way to establish individuality, as well as forming a tight group bond through establishing crews, and yes, even a way to incite courtship. Breaking and other funk dances became a specific form of expression that adults did not understand and teenagers relished in because it was something they were able to call their own.

On the other hand, how much of the specific characteristics and values found in breaking appealed to both teenage boys and girls? Based on how, when, and where breaking developed, many of the elements and the nature of breaking did not fit well with

what teenage girls were socially capable of doing at the time. Many aspects of breaking were in some respects taboo or unbecoming for a teenage girl to do such as showing off one's body, challenging male dancers, leaving the home and neighborhood, traveling across town, and dancing in the streets or clubs. Teenage girls and young women usually didn't engage in such activities, especially by themselves, because they were dangerous. Many of the dance moves in breaking were beyond the average girl's capabilities and went against traditional values of what made a young woman attractive or respectable such as getting dirty and sweaty, dancing on the floor, being physically strong and muscular, displaying aggression, and dancing in public for attention. On top of that, breaking did not accommodate women's dress during that time period such as wearing dresses, tight jeans, shorts, or high heeled shoes: you just couldn't b-girl in those. So would Schloss's original statement that breaking was "made by teenagers for teenagers" make more sense if it was "made for *teenage boys* by *teenage boys*?"

In re-examining breaking as a male adolescent coming-of-age display dance, it answered a lot of questions about the nature of breaking being such a highly male exclusive dance culture. If teenage boys were the main participants, the ones creating the moves and creating the rules, it can be postulated that by design, breaking was the embodiment of the interests, capabilities, and philosophies of teenage boys. The dance is thus a reflection and reinforcement of a lifestyle that not only encompasses a culture and a historical time period of urban Blacks/Latinos in America during the 1970s and 1980s, but also a specific period in life experience, in this case male adolescence or the transition period from boyhood to manhood.

Seeing breaking as a male adolescent coming-of-age display dance, I argue that the biases b-girls experience as were discussed in the fieldwork and noted throughout this text stems from the structure and purpose of breaking being molded for the teenage b-boy. Breaking was a way for teenage boys to depart from acts of child's play and transition into more adult male roles. Breaking helped teenage boys practice and improve certain aspects of their lives that would be important for them as adults such as physical fitness, handling aggressive and competitive situations, and developing a social reputation. Through the acts of improvisation, ciphers, battles and crew bonding, breaking, and other early hip-hop style dances reinforced teenage boys' social relationships by using the dance to negotiate rivalry, group cohesion, courtship, and individual identity. Breaking in many ways honored masculinity and provided teenage boys a way to leave one chapter of their lives and take on a new one.

Ironically, in this regard, breaking can almost be seen as a safe space for teenage boys. As a boy's safe space, it could explain why girls are treated indifferently or not considered actual members because the first and foremost requirement would be one would have to be male. In many ways, girls were an interference to this safe space breaking provided for teenage boys. It could explain the hesitation b-boys have in teaching girls how to break and the justifications b-boys have for why they believe girls can't break. It would explain why feminine aesthetics or b-girls showing off weren't as valued, or valued at all, within breaking because breaking is about displaying and celebrating the male body and masculinity. It would explain why b-boys didn't battle b-girls because breaking was supposed to help them showcase their masculinity. Battling a b-girl, particularly losing to one, challenged a b-boy's manhood. Breaking culture was

where boys got to be boys, what they did to have fun, how they learned about who they were, and how they made sense of growing up. From this perspective, it would explain why girls didn't fit in the picture. In order for them to fit in, b-girls had to embrace and support breaking culture in all of its male exclusive, boyhood to manhood nuances.

Seeing breaking from this angle is significant because it may help clarify where the many gender issues that occur in breaking derive from. However, this does not quite do much in figuring out how to resolve these issues. The research within this thesis has been able to explore many aspects surrounding gender in urban street dance from what it was like in the past, documenting what teenage girls and women experience, to understanding why gender issues are occurring, and most importantly learning how to improve the situation for female dancers in the hope that this would improve the urban street dance scene overall. Although viewing breaking as a male coming-of-age display dance does not justify nor necessarily resolve the gender issues found in breaking, it is an important piece to the puzzle that provides much insight on what defines breaking as a male-oriented dance, culture, and philosophy particularly in its reverence for masculinity.

8. CONCLUSION

By classifying breaking as a masculine dance, it is easier to understand why female dancers experienced the biases and prejudices that they have in urban street dance culture, particularly breaking. However, I find it difficult to accept that although breaking is a masculine dance, this somehow justifies how teenage girls and women have been treated. Breaking has definitely transformed and evolved over the years. In many respects, breaking has also undergone its own "growing up" alongside its b-boys (and b-girls). It is no longer a dance mainly associated with urban teenage Black and Latino boys. Breaking is popular all over the world and the age range has shifted up with most active breakers being in their twenties and thirties. Women's involvement in breaking has grown through the years due to their ongoing efforts to attain respect and a place in the urban street dance scene.

Embracing masculine aesthetics was important for b-girls to do in order to become more incorporated into breaking whether by choice or necessity. With breaking, toughness, strength, agility, and attitude are closely associated with masculinity, and for some b-girls, there came a process of understanding whether or not having these qualities compromised their dance and their identity. Many of the contemporary b-girls are able to embrace their identity as women within breaking culture, but many express that it has been a challenging process because masculinity is so strongly affiliated with the dance, and femininity is pitted as an undesirable trait that is opposite of good breaking.

In effect, women said that with time they benefitted from learning how to embody both masculine and feminine movement affinities. In their initial years of dancing, many

young women underwent an internal battle between embracing masculinity in juxtaposition to femininity. However with experience, all of the women I interviewed expressed that in coming to terms with who they were as dancers, the most significant process of understanding their dance identity was learning how to possess both masculine and feminine characteristics. Their resolution and liberation was through finding ways to express and mold the two gender aesthetics together. In taking both sides of the coin and blurring the lines of gender, women accomplished a sort of elimination of gender from their identities. These women were no longer judged by how masculine or feminine they looked and this made these women beyond gender. Attaining this status where gender is no longer associated with their dance ability and reputation is the ultimate accomplishment female dancers strive for. However, often times these women are considered exceptions or anomalies and in effect, they are no longer associated alongside female dancers. Despite the irony, these women nevertheless are paving the way for establishing a redefined representation of female dancers in urban street dance.

Women who overcame the discrimination in breaking said they did so by standing up and speaking out, finding safe spaces, and surrounding themselves with good people/ dancers who are respectful and supportive, as well as creating avenues to support other female dancers. B-girls such as Rokafella made it a priority to raise awareness about the marginalization b-girls experience through projects such as her documentary, *All the Ladies Say,* as well as taking on the role of being a mentor for b-girls and b-boys alike. All-female dance crews such as MAWU and True Essencia are another form of empowerment women have created as a way to bring together talented female dancers and to gain respect from the urban street dance community as a female collective.

Michelle's Ladies of Hip-Hop Festival honors and celebrates the women of urban street dance by providing exposure, mentorship and networking opportunities within the festival gathering.

As demonstrated in other urban street dance styles, such as the house scene, there is evidence for a dance that recognizes female dancers and embraces the feminine aesthetics just as much as it does for its male dancers and masculine aesthetics. With love, unity and sharing as the backbone of its musical and movement philosophy, women felt greater support and encouragement to share their dance in the house scene. Men's greater willingness to watch and let women dance in the cipher circle made the dance more accessible and empowering for women.

I believe that if this slight shift in mentality found in the house dance scene can be incorporated into breaking, female dancers will benefit enormously and grow exponentially. To some extent female dancers are beginning to see this happen within the breaking community. Despite the dominance of men found in early hip-hop dances, Schloss notes that women have a far greater presence in breaking in comparison to all of the other hip-hop art forms. Remarking on the Rock Steady Crew Battle he attended several years back, Schloss estimated almost 25% of the one on one battle competitors were female, a percentage that MC and DJ battles couldn't even come close to matching. He also concurred that within breaking in more recent years, women were better represented not only in the number of women participating, but as he stresses, also in their ability to represent their point of view and the ability to have that point of view taken seriously. As Schloss suggests, out of all the hip-hop art forms, breaking has demonstrated the most shift towards acknowledging and accepting women as legitimate

participants. Of course, most important, women have had to step up to the occasion. If women truly want to gain respect and prove that they deserve a place in what was initially a male coming-of-age display dance, they need to convince not only men, but themselves that they are viable members of the dance form.

The main issue is not so much that gender discrimination exists in hip-hop dance; sexism is a prevalent issue in American society overall. The dominant images people are exposed to in pop culture are reflections of a society where many men and young men are still engaged in male dominance and hyper-masculine expression. Whether it is in sports, business, or in a dance cipher, the competitive aggression and dominance of men in these fields challenge women to have to adhere to a set of standards that honors the male body and masculine aesthetic while also enforcing the social stigmas of how an ideal woman should act, move, and look like. Although the process has been slow, there is evidence that we are transitioning from a male dominant society to one that is starting to recognize and adjust to a lifestyle that acknowledges women and their perspective.

Written as part of a personal journey and academic endeavor to recognize the women of urban street dance, *B-girl like a B-boy* is an ethnographic research project that looks at the impact of gender within urban street dance culture in America. The research was essentially sparked by my own tribulations as a woman in urban street dance. Focusing on breaking and related urban street dances that centered around ciphering and battling, I wanted to bring to light the experience women had and have, which has been consistently downplayed or completely overlooked.

Despite living in a generation that recognizes women's rights, equal gender ideals are still somewhat lagging in urban street dance. Although gender issues are heavily

addressed in hip-hop studies, few have looked into the dynamics of gender within breaking, hip-hop dance, and other urban street dance styles. Hip-hop gives off a male dominated and male-oriented identity. In turn, this has had a large impact on how female dancers present their bodies and approach their identities within the culture.

As my research brings into perspective, many female dancers have often adopted the movement aesthetics of male dancers, or more specifically conformed to the dance expectations structured by and catered to male aesthetics. By adhering to standards made by men and made for men, female DJs, graffiti artists, dancers, and producers fall into the trap of compromising the expression of their work. Women face being cast as second-rate men and/or projecting a feminine identity that has nothing to do with their own understanding of what it means to look, perform, and express their art as women. The fact that their skills are judged based on their identity as women is restricting as well. Women need to be respected as artists and not as female artists where their gender is a defining component of their professional identities.

The greatest challenge in conducting my research was confronting those who don't believe these issues even exist. Many believe women are just coming up with excuses, overanalyzing, or being too sensitive. The issues women deal with are further complicated by the fact that it is mostly men writing, recording, and teaching hip-hop. Thus the discussion of gender issues made it even more complicated to address.

Through the process of writing this thesis, I find myself metaphorically "jumping into the cipher" of hip-hop scholarship and being in a daunting position of expressing my own views and speaking out before the very people who are successful professionals and living icons/faces of hip-hop, most of them men. Through the stories told by my

participants, I began to see another side of history, another element of the culture, and a piece of the puzzle that helps to validate women's place in urban street dance culture.

In my fieldwork, I discovered other women with similar research objectives and have found that my work in turn supports others in this growing effort to address the marginalization of women in urban street dance. The research demonstrates just how significant a role gender plays in the dance style, and how it affects the lives and careers of female urban street dancers. Coming from a hip-hop feminist approach, the documentation from this research provides a resource for other female dancers to relate to. It is meant to show that an alternative shared experience does exist, and it is intended to help other urban street dancers, particularly women, gain a better sense of what came before them, how things have changed, how things are affecting them now, and what should be done to produce changes that will provide greater support for women within the urban street dance scene.

In the current generation of hip-hop dance, female dancers and all-female crews are growing in number and gaining recognition as dancers to be reckoned with. With mentors such as Rokafella, Michelle, Melanie, Ephrat, Amy Secada, and Nubian Nene, young women have female role models they can look up to and train under, and a support system that will push them to be the best, regardless of gender. Male mentors such as Kwikstep, Safi and Malik dedicate just as much effort and time to their female students as their male students. They have consciously made the effort to educate their male students to learn to respect and be supportive of fellow female students in training.

As more women take the initiative to speak up, take action, and establish themselves as dancers, it is important to make sure their efforts are not in vain. The

continued growth and establishment of a place for women in urban street dance is picking up pace, and it is exciting to see more and more women attaining positions of recognition, battling, and winning. Hopefully, one day this thesis and the many projects, forums, and struggles will be a thing of the past. The transitions seen in hip-hop dance thus far demonstrate how women have overcome sexism and male dominance in a particular community. Hip-hop dance is still a far stretch from equal standing but by continuing to push forward for women's place in urban street dance, women may one day finally feel the same support, respect, and power men have within urban street dance.

APPENDIX A: A Note on Terminology and Classifications Used in This Thesis

Hip-hop dance and hip-hop history are highly controversial terms. Tied to the terms and identities found in hip-hop dance are the politics of race, socio-economic relationships, American history, cultural performance, and the commercial music industry. Hip-hop dance is such a generic term with different meanings for different generations and populations. The concept of hip-hop dance is vague and the term has gone through misuse and misinterpretation. At the same time it has also undergone exponential growth and evolution throughout the course of its relatively young existence. Provided in this appendix is a short terminology and classification that will explain what terms will be used in this thesis. They are all not the politically correct terms nor universal terms but in an attempt to be respectful of cultures and peoples discussed in this thesis, I chose these to be the best fit for the purposes of this research.

To add, initially the research looked at women in various styles of urban street dances. Due to the time constraint and limitations of this masters thesis, the focus of the writing of the thesis was narrowed to mainly b-girls and breaking. Only a third of the women interviewed were b-girls, but most of the women interviewed had tried breaking or were immersed in the breaking community. Therefore the thesis reflects the experiences of different types of urban street dancers with a particular case study on issues found in breaking. These issues are not limited to breaking culture and are found in the other urban street dance styles, just less pronounced.

Ethnicity, Race, and Cultural Classifications

African American vs. Black American

Hip-hop culture has been heavily associated as being African American. As more current literature acknowledges, New York City's Bronx where hip-hop claims its origins did not develop amongst a solely African American community. In fact many of hip-hop's first participants were not African American. There were many Puerto Ricans, other Latinos, Caribbeans and not to mention, a handful of Jewish and Polish who made up these neighborhoods and were involved in early hip-hop culture. In this thesis, I use the term Black Americans to reference Africans, African-Americans, Latino Americans, and Caribbean Americans. This is based on the notion that all of these ethnicities share a

commonality of being descendants of an African Diaspora and exhibit an African Aesthetic, or cultural practices/ values linked to traditional African culture. On occasion I will distinguish African Americans from Latino Americans (Spanish speaking), Caribbean Americans, and Afro-Caribbeans (see below).

White American

White Americans is used to refer to Caucasians in the United States, particularly those who have resided in the United States for several to many generations. In this thesis, White Americans are considered the dominant population in the United States and a culture in itself.

Latino American

Latino American is also a very broad term. As far as New York City and the beginning of hip-hop culture is concerned, the Latinos residing in the Bronx and participants of hip-hop culture were mainly Puerto Rican, Dominican Republican and Cuban. The term Latino Americans is used based on the author or interviewee. When the reference to Latinos in New York City during the early hip-hop era is used, the assumption is mainly Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Cubans. For more recent hip-hop or outside of New York City, Latino is meant to signify Spanish speaking nationalities deriving from Mexico, Central and South America and the Spanish speaking Caribbean islands.

Afro-Caribbean

Afro-Caribbean references to all Caribbean peoples, Spanish speaking as well such as Cubans and Puerto Ricans and Dominican Republicans, if the topic pertains to their ties to African culture.

Men/Women vs Male/Female

As this thesis explores gender expression within a dance culture, the use of male/female dancers was chosen based on the implication of gender with the usage of men/women. The usage of men and women also denotes age. Rather than consistently having to write teenage girls and women, female dancers encompassed a wider classification.

Dances Discussed in Thesis

Hip-Hop vs. Rap Music

Rap music typically refers to the commercial aspect of hip-hop culture, or the rap industry. Early hip-hop music had a greater focus on live performance between the DJ remixing records, the MC's and dancers. The hip-hop music that breakers, poppers, and lockers dance to fall more in the older styles of hip-hop music that have greater semblances to funk, freestyle, and electro-funk. Rap music is more centered on the rap artist and pre-recorded cover music sampling.

Hip-Hop Dance

In this thesis hip-hop dance will refer to all styles danced to hip-hop music: breaking, popping, locking, boogaloo, and choreography. This also includes regional specific or song specific dances that have arisen within hip-hop or Black American dance culture such as the Running Man, Harlem Shake, Dancehall, twerking, etc.

Urban Street Dance

I use this term as a broader umbrella term for dances that shouldn't technically be classified as hip-hop, mainly because these styles are typically or originally not danced to hip-hop music. Some styles considered under this category are house, waacking, punking, vogue, flexing, Chicago footwork, Detroit Jittin', Caribbean Dancehall, Stepping. House dance comes from a disco background. Waacking also derives from disco and funk music. Vogue utilizes music deriving from disco/house dance/freestyle music.

Cipher/Dance Circle

The cipher is basically a dance circle. The cipher is the term used in urban street dance and typically the term dance circle is used for African and older African American dances.

Cipher Dances

All the early hip-hop dances (breaking, popping, locking, boogaloo) and house dance utilize the cipher circle as the focal activity. Dancers form a circle where one by one they take turns to perform, or do a "session" or "set." Early hip-hop dances exhibited a greater affinity for competitive cipher circles whereas house circles were meant to be more exhibition style. Social party hip-hop ciphers followed a similar atmosphere to house dance, however they were more likely than house ciphers to engage in competitive battling.

Battle

Within cipher dances, the battle or the art of battling is an important aspect of early hip-hop dances. Battling is utilized in other hip-hop practices such as rap battles and DJ battles. Within the urban street dance styles, the concept of battling is also used in vogue and waacking. Competitive one-upmanship, urban street dance battles utilize improvisation, intimidation, mockery or taunting the opponent, and showing off one's skills, musicality, and dance ability. The term battle is also used to signify a competitive hip-hop event. For example, rather than saying, "Are you going to the breaking competition?" most people would say, "Are you going to the battle?"

Breakdance vs Breaking vs. B-boying

In recent years, the breaking community has emphasized the use of the word breaking and b-boying over breakdance. Breakdance was a term that media used to describe the early hip-hop dances. Early hip-hop movies showcased different styles (breaking, popping, and locking) but classified them as a single dance: breakdance. Thus breaking, or b-boying is used in this thesis. If the term breakdance is ever used, it is meant to refer to the commercial classification and the combined styles as they were presented in the past.

Choreography/ LA Style/ Street Jazz/ Street Funk

This is probably the most popular and most recognized form of hip-hop dance. Hip-hop choreography or just choreography will be the term used in this thesis to refer to this

style. People usually refer to choreography as simply hip-hop dance and its other popular titles are LA Style, Street Jazz, or Street Funk. However since this thesis discusses several different styles of hip-hop dance, the term choreography will be used to refer to the hip-hop dance style that is solely based on routines and staged performance. Hip-Hop choreography is the dominant form of hip-hop dance performance and dance class commonly offered. Choreography was developed for music videos and music industry hip-hop performances. Early choreography combined dance moves seen in breaking, popping, locking, social hip-hop party moves, and even vogue and waacking. In the earlier years of hip-hop going mainstream, Jazz dance choreographers and dancers were hired to perform hip-hop dance, hence the Jazz dance, Western technique, and Euro-American performance influences hip-hop acquired. For many, this is not considered "real" hip-hop dance, especially if the dancer/teacher does not have training or affiliations with the original hip-hop dances: breaking, popping, locking, social hip-hop party moves.

Popping/Hitting

Popping and hitting essentially mean the same thing in this thesis. Hitting was the term more commonly used in the 70s and 80s. Popping and hitting are used as nouns and as verbs.

Derivatives of Popping

Popping is a particular style of early hip-hop dance but is also applied as a more general term to dances that derived from the concepts utilized in popping, mainly the tensing of muscles and body isolations. Many of the derivatives of popping came from the west coast. To list a few styles there is dime stopping, strutting, tutting, waving, liquid pop, and the puppet. Also mentioned in the thesis is the robot, which is a style that came before popping and many concepts utilized in the robot are applied in popping. The robot focuses movement at the joints, or hinges to resemble the mechanical movement seen in machines and robots.

House Dance

House dance culture is an underground dance style and music stemming from disco music that developed in the late 80's. Just as hip-hop was the extension of the breakbeat, house music was the continuous and sped up evolution of disco music. House music and dance culture stayed relatively underground until recent years. The music incorporates more Gospel, African, Afro-Caribbean, and Latin percussion, repetitive simple phrases or minimal lyrics, often times about free love, unity, open sexuality, and release. Combined with trance like qualities in the music, dark venues with psychedelic lighting, the use of psychedelics drugs, and live percussionists invokes an atmosphere where people dance all night long. In the beginning house clubs were predominantly attended by homosexual black men where they could dance all night. Many women also came to prefer house clubs over hip-hop clubs as places where they felt welcomed and were encouraged to dance and express themselves with their bodies and movement. Many of the women interviewed in the thesis have a connection to house dance and in Chapter 7. Discussion , I use their comments to compare the differences they feel between house culture and hip-hop culture.

Social Party Moves

The term social party moves is used by several authors to describe known dance steps in hip-hop that are done at hip-hop parties. Rather than being a particular style, these moves may be specific to a song such as Running Man, Cabbage Patch, Tootsie Roll, or they can be dance moves that are not associated with a song but are done often. Hip-hop choreography utilizes many of moves that done at hip-hop parties.

Vogue

Vogue is a style that was popular amongst homosexual men in the 1980's and 1990's. The style was inspired by fashion runway and is based on posing as if for a fashion photo shoot or walking down a runway. Vogue was one type of dance battle within a social competitive gathering created by homosexual men called the ball where people competed in different types of vogue battles and runway battles. Vogue has seen a resurgence and

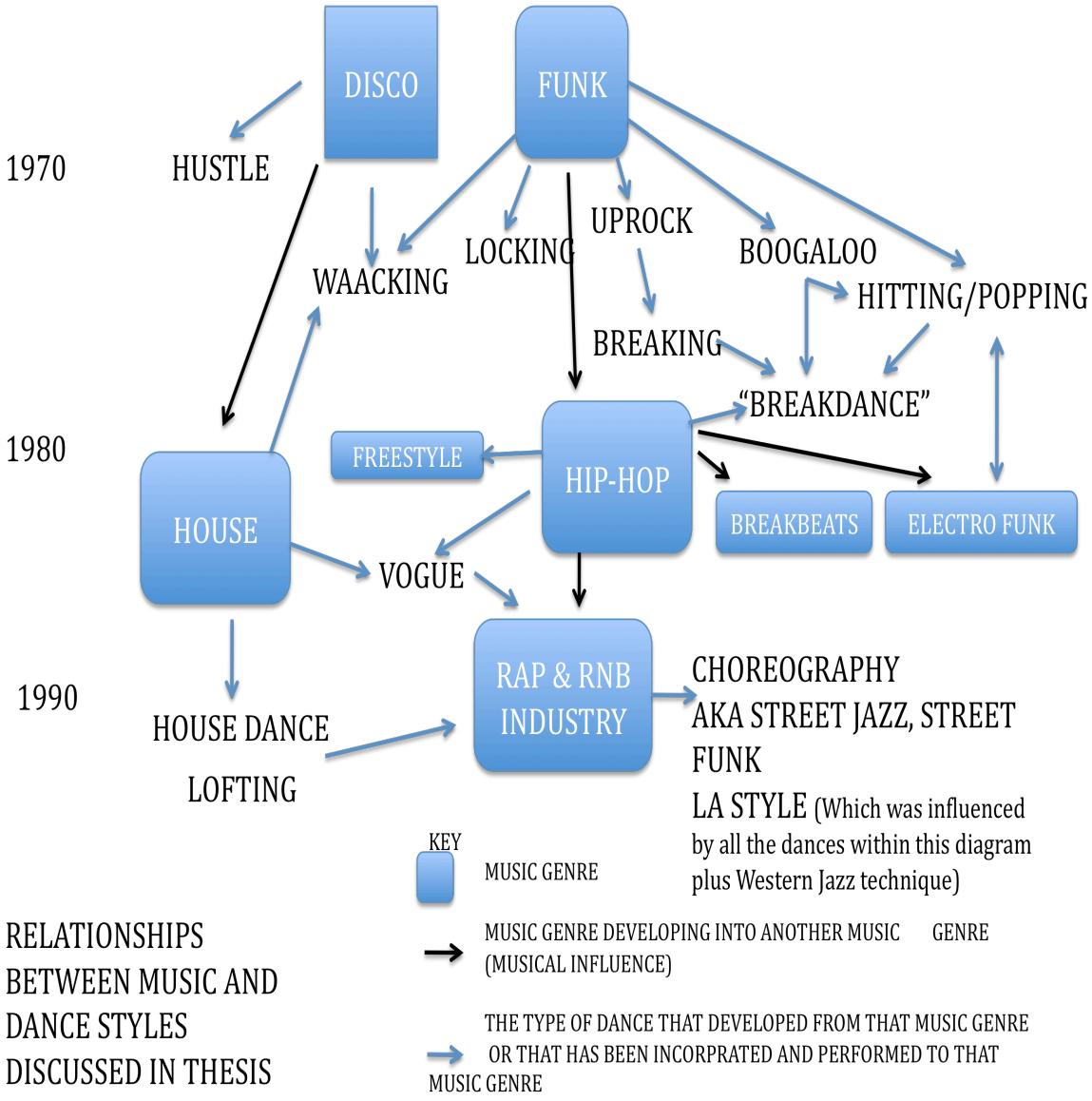
many women have adopted the style as the style is meant to highlight female models, the way they walk, and pose.

Waacking/Wacking/Punking

Waacking is a style that developed in the seventies, and is danced to funk and disco music. Diana Ross' dancers were known for showcasing waacking in their concert choreographies. The glamorous actresses of the 40s and 50s as well as female singer performance inspired the style. The dance utilizes the swinging of arms around the face and upper body. The dance also relishes in dramatic moments of slow elaborate movement to captivate the audience. Waacking, like vogue also leans towards a feminine aesthetic. Punking is like Waacking. The differences are debatable, but several dancers state the differentiation had to do with one style refers to the style homosexuals did, and the other was considered the more heterosexual, mainstream, or approved style.

APPENDIX B: Timeline/Diagram

The Relationships Between the Music and Dance Styles Discussed in Thesis



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