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B-boying, Voguing, Krumping: Not Too Different After All

The dance element of hip hop culture has always been considered to be b-boying, or what is more widely known as breakdancing. However, in reality, hip hop dance consists of a wide variety of forms and styles, including the Harlem Shake and Voguing, as well as more recent dances such as Krumping and the Chicken Noodle Soup. Both participants and audiences are inclined to agree that each dance is unique and distinct from the other. This can be demonstrated by taking a close look at such distinguishing themes as space and place, sex and sexuality, and even the differences in movement. In this essay, I plan to evaluate the characteristics that make b-boying, voguing and krumping distinct from one another, and in so doing, offer an opposing view that in fact, these forms of dance express great similarity.

B-boying was developed in the South Bronx of New York during the late 1960's and early 1970's. In her essay, *Dance in Hip-Hop Culture*, sociologist Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains that b-boying emerged at a time when marginalized African American communities suffered from sudden, harsh economic and social circumstances (Hazzard-Donald 507-508). They were able to channel their frustrations and anger through dance, specifically b-boying. DJ Kool Herc also played a large role in the birth of breakdancing, primarily by creating breakbeats at block parties and offering a space and time for black youth to dance. According to the b-boying documentary entitled *The Freshest Kids*, the term "break" in breakdancing or breakboy was in fact derived from these beats and was coined by Kool Herc (The Freshest Kids). Other key figures included James Brown, with his dance called the Good Foot, and Afrika Bambaataa who started one of the first b-boy crews called the Zulu Kings ("History of

Breakdancing").

A crucial aspect of b-boying is the spirit of battling. Competition is often viewed as the essence of breakdancing, providing the drive and motivation for a dancer to defeat or burn his opponent. A large number of crews were established in New York City during the 70's, composed of dancers with nicknames such as Crazy Legs and Mr. Freeze, and with matching outfits for solidarity. Crews often battled against each other underground and on the streets for territorial claims, street credit, respect, acceptance, and women (The Freshest Kids). B-boying has been characterized as very masculine and heterosexual; only men were involved in the dance, either individually or in groups (Hazzard-Donald 508-509). By displaying powerful gestures and poses, men attempted to impress women and gain their attention. On the contrary, nowadays, breakdancing engages both men and women.

B-boying possesses its own language as well, with specific names used to identify the majority of movements. These names characteristically mirror the movements themselves, ranging from windmills, cc's, and Russians, to nike's, flares, and the turtle (The Freshest Kids). Steps that are conducted while standing are referred to as toprocking, whereas floor work is recognized as downrocking. A freeze categorizes any pose that is held for a finite period of time, typically with one's feet suspended in the air. The basic routine starts with toprocking, which transitions into downrocking, and ultimately culminates in a freeze. As detailed in arts critic Sally Banes' essay *Breaking*, b-boy moves are drawn from many different sources including the lindy hop, Charleston, gymnastics, and Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian form of martial arts disguised as dance (Banes 18). They are acrobatic, outrageous, intricate, and stylish.

Personal inventiveness and style are key elements of b-boying. Banes describes breaking as "a competitive display of physical and imaginative prowess, a highly codified dance form that in its early stages served as an arena for both battles and artistic invention and that allowed

for cracking open the code to flaunt personal inventiveness" (Banes 14). It is the dancer's style, flavor, rhythm, finesse, and individuality that defines him and allows him to claim the name "b-boy." Someone is not considered a b-boy or bgirl if all he/she can do is a windmill. It is also the dancer's ability to create impressive moves and insults that drives the crowd to declare him winner of a battle.

Initially an underground street dance involving mostly black and Hispanic youth, b-boying became very much commercialized when the Rock Steady Crew brought it into the mainstream. The Rock Steady Crew, arguably one of the most well-known breaking groups in existence, starred in films such as Flashdance (1983) and Wildstyle (1983), which led to a huge outbreak of interest in the breakdancing movement both nationally and internationally (The Freshest Kids). However, "as kids began to learn breakdancing moves by watching the pros on TV or at dance classes, instead of from breakers on the street, the performance style became homogenized. There's now more of a tendency to copy personal style directly instead of making one's own signature" (Banes 20). B-boying is no longer a social and political street dance done only by those who understand the meaning and importance of the dance. It has developed into a performance art.

This brings us to the idea of dual transcripts, described in Thomas DeFrantz's *The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power*. As breakdancing commercialized, the divide between "public" and "private" meaning grew larger. Audiences became more multi-cultural. Though they found the dances to be aesthetically pleasurable, they could not interpret its messages of protest and personal expression, or communicative abilities called corporeal orature (DeFrantz, The Black Beat 1-7). Consequently, theorist Tricia Rose, in her book entitled *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, claims that b-boying as a performance art lost its ability to speak to the audience, and slowly, transitioned from a predominantly black cultural practice to a popular practice (Rose 83).

In the film *The Freshest Kids*, viewers can observe that breakdancing has in fact become and is portrayed as a commodity. There are a number of long scenes in the film depicting only dance sequences, and moreover, they are edited so as to look aesthetically impressive and visually exciting. By seeing this, viewers are encouraged to "consume" breakdancing and strive to become a b-boy or bgirl. One can argue that b-boying now focuses less on personal identity and development, and much more on selling the dance and persuading more people to join.

When b-boying emerged in New York City during the 1970's, another form of dance called voguing surfaced as well. In fact, some historians claim that b-boying and voguing played off of each other through the collaboration between various artists from both groups in Central Park, along with the borrowing of moves and styles (Brown, "What is Vogue?"). This can be attributed to the spaces that these dancers share. Nonetheless, though breakdancing and voguing are in many ways quite similar, there are certainly qualities that make the two distinct from one another.

According to the documentary *Paris is Burning*, voguing came about as a result of the oppression of gay African American males. At a time when it was already difficult enough to survive as an African American male, society made it even harder for those who were not heterosexual. Through voguing, they were able to thrive in a community that accepted them for who they were. The term voguing was derived from Vogue Magazine, from which many dancers imitated model poses and stances. This dance is a theatrical and energetic take on runway walking and modeling, and draws from many different forms of dance and sport, including tutting, gymnastics, martial arts, and breakdancing (Paris is Burning). Voguing is comparatively slower and less acrobatic than b-boying, and is often characterized by its rigidity and sharpness. Those involved in the dance strive for perfect positions/poses, angles and lines (Paris is Burning).

Competitions were held between various voguing houses in the district of Harlem. Each house was named after the mother or leader of the house, for example, the House of Xtravanganza and the House of LaBeija. They were in essence gay street gangs battling for fame and respect. On occasion, fights broke out as a result of intense emotion circling the dance (Paris is Burning). Voguers have their own vocabulary as well, though it is much less comprehensive than that of the b-boy due to voguing's improvisational nature. The execution of floorwork in a vogue competition is called dipping, while a suicide is referred to as a shwam! Interestingly, b-boying and voguing share particular terms such as popping and locking (Brown, "Vogue-cabulary"). This further confirms the collaboration between voguers and breakers in establishing the separate art forms.

Vogue battles are arranged into various categories: high fashion, executive realness, town and country, butch queen, and evening wear to name a few (Paris is Burning). The clothing is a crucial aspect of voguing, perhaps even more important than the moves themselves. Although voguing in and of itself is not portrayed as a commodity, as will later be discussed, consumption is very relevant to the practice of the art. Voguers embrace materialism. As Regina Austin states in her article *A Nation of Thieves: Consumption, Commerce, and the Black Public Sphere*, despite being "foreclosed from the world of executives, pampered females and the military…[voguers] were able to live out their fantasies through consumption conspicuously displayed on the ballroom floor" (Austin 240). It is the clothing that defines the person, and contributes to how "real" he appears to the audience as a man or woman. For most voguers, it is like "going back into the closet" (Paris is Burning). In this sense, voguing restricts personal inventiveness and style. Much of the art revolves around acting and pretending to be someone you're not. Moreover, the MC often dictates instructions to voguers, and thus, they do not have complete freedom to do what they choose (Paris is Burning). This is contrary to b-boying's emphasis on style and individuality.

Another feature of voguing that distinguishes it from b-boying comes from the theme of sexuality. Both performers and audiences consist primarily of gay men. Unlike b-boys who often dance to pick up girls, voguers simply dance because they want to become legendary in the voguing/gay community. They feel accepted in the realm of voguing, as opposed to the rest of the world (Paris is Burning). I believe it is the sexual orientation of the dancers and their community that adds on a layer of complexity in relation to voguing's popularity and the way it is portrayed.

Even though b-boying and voguing both emerged approximately thirty years ago, b-boying has since developed into a global phenomenon, while voguing remains a localized dance practiced in specific spaces. Efforts were made to integrate voguing into mainstream culture, the most notable example being Madonna's single titled Vogue (Brown, "What is Vogue?"). However, regardless of her watered-down version of the dance, voguing did not receive massive media attention and was never significantly commercialized. Perhaps it is sexuality that has limited its popularity. Since the large majority of voguers are homosexual men, it is possible that much of society finds it difficult to be receptive of the dance. Moreover, due to the lack of commercialization, voguing does not experience the same duality in transcripts and audience perceptions as b-boying does. Those who are involved all seem to have a common experience and understanding.

The importance of sexuality is emphasized in *Paris is Burning*, which largely focuses on the idea of personal identity. As DeFrantz puts it, "Social dance is inevitably tied to the construction of personal identity, by dancers and the participating audiences who observe them" (DeFrantz, The Black Beat 8). In the film, many voguers describe how difficult it is to be a minority as well as a homosexual in New York City, having to constantly monitor behavior and dress. Unlike *The Freshest Kids*, this film avoids displaying long dance sequences and portraying vogue as a commodity. Rather, based on extensive commentary,

viewers get a strong sense that sexuality, and the lifestyle that it entails, contributes significantly to the roots of voguing and defines the performer's personal identity. What makes hip hop so dynamic is that it "can create space for alternative conversations of sex, conversations that would not happen in other musical contexts," explains DeFrantz in his paper titled *Hip Hop Sexualities* (DeFrantz, Hip Hop Sexualities 6). Voguing is a dance that creates such a space for gay black and Hispanic youth to express themselves.

At the start of the 21st century, another form of hip hop dance called Krumping emerged. According to the recent krumping documentary called *Rize*, krumping was developed in the projects and ghettos of Los Angeles a few years back. In fact, it grew out of another type of dance called Clowning, created by Tommy the Clown (Rize). The geography from which krumping came about immediately sets it apart from breakdancing and voguing. Although West and East coast hip hop interact with each other, the culture and history of the two locations are different and thus have a definite impact on the qualities of dances that are created in both communities. Hip hop scholar Murray Forman, in *Space Matters: Hip Hop and the Spatial Perspective*, asserts that "space and place figure prominently as organizing concepts delineating a vast range of imaginary or actual social practices that are represented in narrative or lyric form and that display identifiable local, regional and national aesthetic inflections" (Forman 3). This implies that different regions/places express distinguishable characteristics, which are reflected in local practices such as dance. Similar to the distinction between West coast b-boying and that of the East coast, krumping in L.A. is unlike breakdancing and voguing in New York City.

Krumping, as portrayed in *Rize*, is a very aggressive and even violent dance. According to Lil C, one of the founders of krumping, audiences perceived him to be crazy and on drugs while getting krump (Rize). The dance involves a great deal of energy, spastic and jerky movements, as well as exhaggerated chest and pelvic thrusts. Such violence may be attributed

to the violence in West coast gangsta rap, consequently reflecting the influence that location and its culture has on the development of dance. The film recognizes that krumping is deeply influenced by its African roots; the movements are tribal in nature and mimic tribal fights. Krumpers paint their faces as well, further drawing connections between krumping to tribal dance. Unlike b-boying and voguing, which both have their own distinct languages, krump appears to lack specific names for moves. In fact, much of the dancing seems very random and lacks foundation, while the style is constantly evolving (Rize).

From the start, females participated in the krump movement, with notable contributions from South Central's Miss Prissy. Although krumping is considered to be rather masculine and raw from a viewer's perspective, females are able to blend in well (Rize). Competitions are even categorized to include a Little Mama Match. Sexuality, from both the dancer and audience perspective, does not play as large of a role in krumping as it does in voguing. Audiences consist of families and friends for the most part, implying that krumping was and still is a local practice. Krumping, unlike b-boying, has not exploded into mainstream hip hop dance. Since *Rize* was released in 2005, there has certainly been an increase in krumping's popularity across the nation. However, from observation, it does not seem that krumping is growing quite as quickly as breakdancing did in the 70's and 80's. I anticipate that krumping, like voguing, will remain relatively un-commercialized, or as Lil C claims will avoid becoming a "clone of the commercial hip hop world" (Rize).

Interestingly, krumping is portrayed in *Rize* as a commodity. Most of the film is made up of dance sequences and battles, with little social commentary as compared to the documentary *Paris is Burning*. Moreover, the director, David LaChapelle, incorporates slow-motion scenes in which krumpers dance with their bodies oiled up. This is of course visually artistic and exciting, but may detract from the meaning behind krumping. Viewers may lose sight of the krump movement's significance and focus their attention onto the impressive power of the

dance itself.

Although krumping, voguing, and b-boying display key differences in style, audience, sexuality, and place, leading viewers to perceive them as separate dance forms, they are actually quite similar in many regards. One such similarity is the origin and space of each dance. All three grew out of impoverished ghetto areas of major cities, and were created by African American and Hispanic youth. These dances embody the youth's response to their economic, political and social status. The "dance movements convey speech-like qualities which contain meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement detailed by the body in motion" (DeFrantz, The Black Beat 4).

From the dancer's perspective, krumping's significance lies in the fact that it serves as a channel for releasing anger and hate. Instead of joining a gang, which happens all too often among kids in South Central L.A., they can dance and do something positive. Many of them suffer from unfortunate family situations: Lil C's father committed suicide and Baby Tight Eyez's mother is in jail (Rize). All of their hurt, anger and anxiety are released through dance. Similarly, b-boying and voguing both represented positive activities for marginalized youth in New York. In the case of b-boying, the kids protested against their social and political situations through dance, rather than through crime. Voguing allowed gay youth to feel right in the world. It gave them a way to forget frustration and become the people they've always dreamt of becoming.

As a result of these kids being marginalized by society, a strong sense of community became an important factor in each dance. There are countless krumping groups, b-boy crews, and voguing houses nationwide. Each community behaves as a surrogate family, wherein members support and care for one another. There exists a unity that brings dancers together to fight for a common goal, and to share styles and ideas. With these communities comes an inherent desire for competition. Though there may be slight differences in what each

individual competes for, the overwhelming objective is that of gaining respect and being the best. Battling and competition are what drive these dances to excel and continually evolve. It also leads to the throwing of insults at opponents, as observed in all three dances. Currently, b-boying has become a very performance-oriented dance. Nonetheless, its roots are embedded in competition.

Krumping, voguing and b-boying have cyclical qualities. The formation of a circle by audience members around the dancers is a physical representation of a cipher and the exclusion of those outside the circle. This theme dates back to African tribal dances, as well as the Afro-Brazilian form of martial arts Capoeira. Those who do not actively participate in the dance or share similar life experiences cannot understand the actions communicated by the dance. Moreover, the motions and steps in b-boying and voguing appear to convey a circular theme, in turn building a stronger connection between these dances.

While the music for each dance differs to an extent, whether in speed or style, there is a commonality in the dancer's response to the beat of the music. In *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, theorist Kodwo Eshun describes that "there's a sense in which the nervous system is being reshaped by beats for a new kind of state, for a new kind of sensory condition. Different parts of your body are actually at different states of evolution...the feet may well be more evolved" (Eshun 182). This implies that the body can sense and respond naturally to the beat of the music. It senses the rhythmic pulses generated and then goes on to make the beat visible through action. B-boying, voguing, and krumping are all heavily dominated by beat and percussion, which can be observed by the body's accented hits. There is an "employment of call and response with the body responding to and provoking the voice of the drum" (DeFrantz, The Black Beat 3).

It is fascinating how these three dances that appear to be so different, can share such similarity. Krumping developed in an entirely separate location and community, yet

exemplifies many of the themes expressed in b-boying and voguing. I believe that environmental factors led to the diverging of these dances; however, it is African tradition and ancestry that keeps them bound together. There is an inherent understanding and common history among African Americans that is reflected in their social practices, including dance. According to Hazzard-Donald, “most African dance styles exhibit angularity, asymmetry, polyrhythmic sensitivity, derision themes, segmentation and delineation of body parts, earth-centeredness, and percussive performance” (Hazzard-Donald 511). Competitiveness and solidarity are also typical characteristics shared among dances of the African Diaspora. Despite differences in place, sexuality, culture and style, common elements will continue to pervade African American art forms, as demonstrated through krumping, voguing, and b-boying.

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