

## Breaking Grahamstown; Breakin' the Dance: Exploring the Role of Break Dancing in the Construction of a Break Dancer's Identity

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Lauren Kent is currently studying toward her M.A. in Urban Anthropology and Town Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research focus is on the usage of public spaces for break dancing and capoeira training in the inner city of Johannesburg. The following article, which she presented at the Hiphop Symposia in Johannesburg, is a shortened version of an Honours research paper that she wrote in fulfillment of her B.A. degree in Anthropology at Rhodes University in 2010. In the paper, she explores the complex interplay between break dancing and identity formation processes by offering a case-study of a break-dancing crew based in Grahamstown, South Africa.

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### B-boys are in da House: The First Round

When someone becomes a B-boy, it is like being initiated into a prestigious brotherhood.<sup>1</sup> It is this space and fraternity that I began to explore – the way break dancing influences identity construction. While there has been much focus on “traditional”/ritual dances in Anthropological writing, I attempt to understand contemporary dances’ influence on a young persons’ understanding of the world. Tate (1992) agrees that being part of a crew is like belonging to a fraternity (cited in Foreman and Neal 2004: 157). Who a person chooses to be and why they choose this identity will be analysed in this paper. The identity construction will be analysed in terms of historical stereotypes, subcultural stereotypes and gender stereotypes, and storytelling through embodiment of identities. In focusing predominantly on the body as a site of pleasure, I want to further unravel the role that dancing plays, separate to political protest or social commentary. I want to propose the possibility, as Nuttall and Michael (2000) suggest, of dance and its pleasure being a form of escapism and an end unto itself.

My primary informants were the members of a break dancing crew<sup>2</sup> in Grahamstown and my research took place in 2010. In beginning my research, I attended breakdancing battles and performances and generally “hung out” with the dancers. Anthropology methodology is participant observation – we chat, we question each other, we participate in our participants’ everyday life (in this case dancing, dance battles and

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<sup>1</sup> My focus was on male dancing and male constructions of identity.

<sup>2</sup> When I refer to them as a group they will be called “the dancers,” otherwise, they will be referred to by their names.

visiting friends) and we exchange knowledge. There is little formal structured interviewing or surveys. Rather, Anthropological methodology relies on long term emersion in the lives of the participants and we often refer to our methodology as deeply hanging out. Furthering my emersion into the break dancing crew (I danced with the dancers), I began to see their 'exclusivity' as a sub-culture and the way a dancer entered into the sub-culture of a break dancing crew became important to further understanding how break dancing affects and is affected by identity construction; and these identities were multiple. I take time in the paper to consider the political implications of identity construction for these break dancers and how they are agents in their own everyday construction of identity. Their "exclusivity" also meant that it took me a long time to find them - I couldn't just open the telephone book and search "break dancers in Grahamstown." Only when they decided to 'reveal' themselves in specific places in Grahamstown did I find them. This paper is thus an exploration as much into the use of space and embodiment of identity through use of space, as it is the construction of identity based on one of the four elements of Hip Hop.

Let's break it down!

Break dancing does not stand alone but is part of a Movement called Hip Hop. The Movement is comprised of four elements: MCing<sup>3</sup> and/or rapping; DJing; street dancing and graffiti art work. Potter (1995) says that the incorrect associations of Hip Hop with gangs is because the media (which has been the driving force in spreading Hip Hop around the globe) ignores the histories of where the music, the dancing and the art work come from (p. 26). Yet there is still a strong assumption that Hip Hop is a large reason why young men engage in untoward antics on "the street" and Hip Hop/rap music is seen as the main instigator for this (Oliver 2006). To understand the history of break dancing and where it came from, one also needs to understand the history of African American youths and how break dancing has emerged out of specific socio-political environments- often in poorer areas, where government service delivery was lacking and where little or no provisions were made for young people; in other words, often racially divided areas where non-white youths had little opportunity to entertain themselves in lavish night clubs or even had the money to do this. The latter does not suggest however that break dancing is the same everywhere. It is evident that specific cultural and social situations of a particular locale will influence the form and style of break dancing. This paper is an exploration of how break dancing manifests itself in a South African town by South African dancers.

Dramatis Personae

Daniel 'Pang' du Plessis, 20, average height, moustache, always wears a beanie on his head to dance. He says he got his name when he was five years old - there was a

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<sup>3</sup> The Master of Ceremonies, he (or she) is the person who oversees the dance and music event.

bench he used to sit on in his house and friends and family used to say “Pang sit op die bang”<sup>4</sup>.

Siyanda ‘Carrots’ Vanis, 23, tall with long, skinny limbs. He smiles a fair bit, causing the three parallel scars on the right side of his mouth to distort. He also knows how to do *Kwaito*<sup>5</sup> dancing.

Wallace ‘Wak’ Wessels, 22, also tall, also skinny. His signature move is the Air Flare. He apparently got his name from always being late and from a word that rhymes with the expletive that people would use to shout at him.

Roscoe ‘Flirt’ Brooks, 17, in matric at Mary Waters High School. Short, stocky with an amazing amount of energy radiating from his moves.

Myron ‘Tooth’ Williams, 17, also short, but not as much as Roscoe, also exploding with energy as he dances but seems to spend more time watching the others dance. One of his front, upper incisors is missing.

Malvern ‘Mike/Matrix’ Elbrecht, 21; Matrix is his B-boy name, Mike is his shortened name. Matrix and Kamma are the only members who have permanent jobs.

Ian ‘DJ Kamma’ Keulder, 33, seems to be the manager of the group but says he does not like to be referred to as such because firstly, people might not like him, and secondly, it makes him feel old. He is skinny with very long dreadlocks and he wears them tied in a knot at the back of his head, covered with a yellow “Bionic Breaker” bandana. He is a self-confessed Pop ‘n Locker.

The dancers come from the same area in Grahamstown – Hoegenog, an area in the surrounding townships of Grahamstown. Originally set out during apartheid under the 1950’s Group Areas Act (where different races as classified under the regime were only allowed to live and work in designated divisions), it is a predominantly ‘Coloured’<sup>6</sup> area (Lemon 2004: 272). The “Coloured area” (as the dancers refer to it – sometimes, in jest, they say “the ghetto”) forms a “transitional belt” before the black townships (Lemon 2004: 272). During apartheid White, Indian, Coloured and Black inhabitants of Grahamstown were separated into ‘racial’ areas. These areas are still very visible in 2010 (*ibid*). The Bionic Breakers initially began dancing on an open field in Hoegenog, now they have moved to the Princess Alice Hall, on African Street. This is also where the academy is situated and where crew members teach break dancing classes. It is here where the majority of my fieldwork took place. Every Tuesday and Thursday evening and every Saturday morning, I joined the break dancers in dancing in the Princess Alice Hall. I joined them at one audition for SA’s Got Talent, and I joined them at a break dancing battle in East London, Eastern Cape. Those taxi drives back and forth gave me a

<sup>4</sup> Pang sits on the bench (said in colloquial language, it only rhymes when said in Afrikaans)

<sup>5</sup> The genre *Kwaito* is a style of South African Black contemporary dance-music. Kwaito dancing is done to Kwaito music, a mixture of American Hip Hop music, European house music among other international sounds (Stephens 2000: 256)

<sup>6</sup> The reference term ‘coloured’ in the South African sense refers to people of mixed skin colour backgrounds. While coloured in many other countries is an immensely derogatory term, in South Africa, the term has been claimed by coloured people as a means of identification and a heritage and ‘culture’ unto itself. I have used this term because this is how the dancers identified themselves to be throughout my fieldwork and therefore, I have chosen to use this word and not a *politically correct* term which clouds part of who these young men are.

great opportunity to see interactions within the crew. That East London battle provided me with opportunity to speak to break dancers in other crews, and I spent time sitting in the back yard of the houses, eating crisps and drinking Coke – an activity that the dancers mirrored in their back yards in Grahamstown. Grahamstown is a small city, and so regularly I bumped into the dancers in town centre. However, much of their time was spent in their homes and back yards. The next discussion will be on the multiple identities present within a crew, within each dancer – how they portray themselves in different locales and how this affects the places they choose to dance. I also tackle the stereotypes and perceptions of the identity of a young coloured man in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Finally I consider the implications of the intersection of these stereotypes and new identities that are formed and expressed in Grahamstown’s public spaces.

### Let’s Kill a Monkey Flare: Multiple Identities in Dance

One of the important observations that I have made in my time with the Bionic Breakers and learning about break dancing is this: there is more than one narrative being played out. When one sees a dancer break dancing it is a somewhat violent experience inasmuch as the moves are abrupt and inelegant, articulating a hegemonic masculinity by the show of power and dominance. By aggressively challenging the opponent with stomping, or stopping a move abruptly right in front of them, or by waving their crotch in the air, dancers project a very angry collective mentality. Engel (2001) says in her article on break dancing in Copenhagen that the essence of this dance style is the creativity it demands and the ability to play with forms and shapes of the body (p. 367). She calls it the poetic dancer – just as a poet struggles with words to convey messages in an interesting and succinct way, so a dancer grapples with using the music and moving their bodies through the sound. Yet it is also more than this; it is the dancer responding to external influences – how they relate to their world and how they use this in their dancing.

Yet the facial expressions of the dancers tell a whole other story. My dance teacher taught me the most about this storytelling when he stopped me dancing one day and said:

“Lauren, you must look up, not at the ground, and you must dance with expression on your face.”

I looked a little confused at this and so he said again,

“Watch me.”

Off he went, into a Brooklyn Rock and while panting told me to look at his face. He was grinning. And then he stopped and pointed to his face.

“Look,” he told me again, “I am smiling; I am joking with my dance partner. But look,” he pointed again, “I can also be cross,” and then he frowned, “but I mainly dance like this,” and he pointed with both hands to his face and he smiled again.

The Brooklyn Rock, ironically, is a dance move that enacts a fist fight. Step one is the lunge forward onto one foot, lifting the other, punching inwards with both fists. Step two is the lunge backwards, front foot lifted now, upper body and arms thrown backwards in an attempt to dodge the imaginary opponent’s return punch. And then there is a little

foot dance: the quick alternating jump between legs, three times, simulates the dancer kicking at the opponent's shins and/or Achilles tendons, in a final attempt to beat the (once again) imaginary opponent. I say imaginary because one of the most important things about a battle is "... moenie raak'ie,"<sup>7</sup> so there is no physical manifestation of the Brooklyn Rock. It is all made real through body movement and the audience's imagination.

Imagination is one of the most fundamental parts of storytelling. Any child would know this. And any good children's book author knows how important it is to leave enough non-description in a story to allow for the reader's imagination to fill the gap.

That dancing becomes a symbol of pleasure is evident in the way the body moves in the music and responds to the beats. Engel (2001) says the intense concentration, the removal of the self from the physical world into a place where only the body and the moment exists shows the dancer embodying the present (p.369). The memory of the dance is held in the muscles that respond to the music. From my experience, overthinking the dance moves dulls their intensity and power. By simply letting the music and the muscle memory lead the body through the dance, the pleasure of being in the present, without worry of past or future, becomes the sole purpose of break dancing. Each dancer has a personal way of dancing. Below I describe two of the dancers' individual way of dancing:

### Embodying the Present

Break dancing, with its emphasis on improvisation gives the dancer what Engel (2001) calls an "embodied sense of being present" (p.370). To draw on the dancing of Matrix, he allows the music to take him to a place where he needs not think about what moves he can and should do. Instead he just allows his body to move on its own, finding a place within the sound that he particularly likes and then allowing his body to respond accordingly. He can often be found dancing in view of the mirror and so he engages his sight sense to tell if a move is pleasing to other eyes. By embodying the present the element of escapism is close by, because by thinking of nothing except the present, one need not think about past mistakes or future stresses. I asked a friend of his in the crew why they both dance in similar ways (he is a friend who used to dance in Grahamstown but now lives in Port Alfred and occasionally visits the Bionic Breakers). He spoke quickly and eagerly, telling me that it was because the man who taught him and Matrix was also a Capoeirista<sup>8</sup> and so taught them to be light on their feet. If quick thinking, improvisation and "choreographing" is needed, the dancers tend to look to Matrix for help in that. Saggies Man, Saggies<sup>9</sup>

If on the other hand they want spectacle and a move to stun the audiences, they look to Wak. He is the only one in the crew who can do an Air Flare. He does it regularly

<sup>7</sup> "Moet nie raak nie". Afrikaans meaning: "Don't touch..."

<sup>8</sup> An experienced Capoeira dancer.

<sup>9</sup> Translation: "Gently dude, gently".

and his Air Flare draws applause from the rest of the dancers, especially when he makes quite a few rotations.

The technique is how to get oneself into the move. In the Princess Alice Hall, Wak's dance moves tend to be slower and lending themselves towards contortions and balance. What makes a good Air Flare is control and balance of the body. If you go too fast, the body gets into a "speed wobble" and throws the dancer off balance. Too slow and you are unable to spin. The Air Flare looks like the dancer is in the hand-stand position, but is turning in on himself by means of transferring the weight from arm to arm and creating the effect of jumping from hand to hand.

This move requires control. Lil' C, American dancer and co-creator of the nu-style of Hip Hop dancing called *krumping* told dancers on a television program that while Hip Hop (and break dancing) dancing has the air of chaos and danger, the dancer needs to find a point of stillness and control inside themselves which then makes the difficult moves appear easy<sup>10</sup>. Not only does this calmness play out in Wak's dancing, it also translates into his personality. Not a big talker, he comes across as a shy person. When he talks, he has little to say, getting to the point soon. More often he talks by saying nothing. In East London, I saw B-boy Skip, Hugo and Wak analysing the Air Flare. Few words are spoken but bodies are moved and questions are asked by simply pointing to the body part that is in use. Wak becomes present in his body as he tests his balance, feels the weight of his body and turns over in his mind how the move will play out. Skip says to him, "saggies, man, saggies"<sup>11</sup>. From side to side, he shifts his body weight on his legs, getting himself ready for the move, turning inwards to his body, becoming in touch with its weight, its balance, its strength. Then he does the Air Flare, repeatedly. Some of the Bionic Breaker dancers try but alas, their bodies move too quickly and their balances are thrown off. It was here on this road that I contemplated the importance of "the street" in dancing. Break dancing originated, according to oral myth passed down from generation to generation, on "the street" and in public spaces. Yet South Africa has a complicated relationship with public space.

### Breaking the Streets (and Roads)

I always thought that without music there would be no break dancing. But this above scene in East London, where in complete silence, Wak danced his move, proved me wrong. And it was in East London that for the first time I understood the *significance* of the street to break dancing – the freedom to be able to dance anywhere, regardless of whether the floors are sprung<sup>12</sup> or is covered with dance mats<sup>13</sup>. This is a dance for anywhere anytime, and being able to dance it in full view of passers-by just adds to the

<sup>10</sup> The American hit series *So You Think You Can Dance*

<sup>11</sup> Translation: "Gently dude, gently".

<sup>12</sup> Ideal flooring for dancing, meaning the floor is not solid (concrete or tiles) and therefore aids the dancer in jumping high and landing softly.

<sup>13</sup> Slip-resistance matting often placed over the sprung floors, especially needed for ballet and contemporary dance.

status to which a dancer can lay claim – they identify themselves as a dancer by using their bodies to communicate the fact that they are dancers to anybody who happens to be watching

Roads have significance in South Africa as symbolising more than just a route for cars and transport. Fox (2000) reminds us that roads were an integral part of apartheid, transporting labour from rural to urban areas and back again, ensuring constant supplies of workers to bolster the white ruled cities of the country (p. 443). The roads were a symbol of power. Roads were used to cut off white residences from non-white townships and roads were a symbol of control of who was allowed to move where (*ibid*). Slowly, nearer to the end of apartheid roads became symbols of resistance where protests and riots took place in the streets (Fox 2000: 444). By looking at the symbolism of the street, especially in the South African context, it gives insight into what symbol the street plays in the construction of a South African break dancer's identity.

Just as protests and riots are a means of opposition, so is dancing in an undemarcated "dance" area. Imagine walking down the road and suddenly a group of youths break out into dancing. Public place that was set aside for walking, for sitting, for waiting is transformed without the authorities' permission. By "breaking the law" and using public property to dance on, in and around, the street becomes a symbol of the freedom that the dancers have over their bodies and their lives, even though there may still be many other constraints on them as individuals and groups. The dancers subvert the original symbolism of the road and embody its symbol of power – except it is the young and the marginalised who hold the power, not the other way around. Thus break dancing becomes a way of breaking away from convention and constructing a place for themselves outside of the conventions that society places on them (school, work, money, success). The road becomes a play and a means to reconstruct the "coloured" body.

### The Coloured(ful) Body

The road has been a symbol of power and resistance. Nuttall (2004) however argues that academics need to interrogate whether South Africa has an identity apart from its apartheid legacy (p. 732). In my view there are other elements, historical and contemporary, that affect identity. She says that when theorists study 'the city' or 'youth', these categories are often embedded within a framework of differences and separation (*ibid*). To be Coloured under apartheid laws meant that the person was neither black nor white and the category acted as a kind of buffer between the two. This meant that the Coloured identity has been constructed as an in-between space, as being creolised and therefore having no concrete history and heritage to lay claim to (Nuttall 2004: 733). To consider the body as a sight (a place) of identity construction is one such way to find new elements in identity construction (how the body itself, through its physicality, becomes an agent in creating the identity of a person).

A few of the dancers have made it evident that they want success but are not pursuing positions of status and success. To those who do not really know the crew, this lack of 'action' can come across as being unmotivated in life. The way I see it, because

coloured men and specifically Coloured break dancers are cast as the jobless, hypersexualised and seen as potentially violent (Wicomb 1998) it is easy for the Coloured man, and especially the Coloured dancer who is not working and who appears violent in his dancing, to be associated with these negative stereotypes.

Consider when Pang, referring to the act of teaching me how to do a new move, says, "Let's kill a Monkey Flare". This kind of statement contains violent undertones un-Hip Hop-educated people could interpret as gang language. With just a hint of a grin, Pang means that we are going to get it right first time; we are going to nail it, beat it and not let it get us down (in other words, we will not fail at getting it right). As said before, the dancers break the dance, literally and figuratively. Dancers dance to break-beats, they achieve a style of dancing originally referred to as "breaking" (...the norms of conventional dancing?). The music that informs their moves is a "break" beat, and they break away from conventions of success and break the stereotypes of violence in a coloured community. It also becomes a means of coping in a situation where people may continuously tell them that they will not succeed. It is not a violent response to failure. Instead by using this 'violent' dance within a broader context of clowning and spectacle, the dance subverts the 'violent' body of a Coloured break dancer into a body using movement to cope and to articulate who they are to anybody willing to listen to their message (Deyhle 1986: 126). Break dancing is hybridised and in my view becomes a safe space in which an already in-between identity can find meaning and a place to fit in. And it becomes a place of "killing" the moves and not letting themselves be trumped by the complexity of the dance and of negotiating a position of status within the community. And there is a pleasure in getting a move right, a pleasure beyond the senses, in 'feeling' the euphoria at getting it right, time and time again. In this way, once again, dance for pleasure becomes an end to itself (as Nuttall and Michael 2000 suggest).

Break dancing as an urban youth phenomenon (to those who ascribe to it) is just that - found in the urban areas, the cities of South Africa. In 2002 when break dancing first came to Grahamstown as the newest fad, the youngsters had their pieces of cardboard out in the street, under street-lights at night, breaking in the streets of Grahamstown (according to Matthew). Then the enthusiasm began to wane and the streets emptied. Now the only breaking happens in the Princess Alice Hall (and occasionally Mary Waters High School field).

Battersby (2003) says, that by claiming and naming places and spaces, the colonial powers took ownership of areas that were previously not theirs and denied anyone else access to these areas (p. 115). Now the Bionic Breakers, through the use of the Princess Alice Hall in the Central Business District of Grahamstown, begin to reshape their identities by claiming space that was long ago denied to people of their colour. By entering a previously 'white-only area' and being allowed to do this, shows that they are not only articulating their identity in a space other than their neighbourhood, it also shows the changing nature of space in South Africa, where spaces are no longer strictly demarcated. Spaces have begun to adopt an identity as fluid as the identity that a person can adopt.

Similarly, the dancing body of a Coloured man/boy is no longer seen as lazy or uninvolved in its own identity construction. It is a body actively participating in articulating its identity, a body that embodies notions of personhood and agency (Csordas 1994: 4). It is an identity and a body of strength. Nuttall and Michael (2000) encourage academics to find other types of bodies through which to analyse scenarios and I suggest the “strong body” could be one – the body that endures with strength, whether it be for dancing or for everyday hardships. The juxtaposition of masculine strength and non-violence dancing is an interesting way to see how a dancer constructs his/her identity. This achieved identity construction removes itself from opposition to the outside world and to stereotypes of how people should behave and instead turns inwards to the dancer and asks the question of how the dancer negotiates stereotypes and how they view themselves. And the strength can be a symbol of the changing nature of South Africa, where the individual body is in control of defining who they want to be, instead of an outside force. By allowing themselves to be immersed in pleasurable activities (in a space previously denied to them and now open to them) another body emerges – the “pleasurable body” – dance and pleasure of dance as an end to itself. One can also see how by viewing a dancer as another being who experiences pleasure by way of senses, the body can no longer be viewed as a thing separate to the mind. The body becomes embodied in analyses and takes on the role of an agent in identity constructions in as large and important a way as a verbal statement of identity. As a dancer using specific spaces in which to dance, the ways in which these places and spaces influenced the dancers’ construction of identity is important an element to consider, especially in the South African context.

### Place and Space

In the context of the city, youth identity has been overlooked in place of urban migration and all the evils that followed from this migration of rural labour (Nuttall 2004: 740). One of the most profound claims regarding the city is that people affect what the city means by creating for themselves an identity (de Certeau 1984, cited in Nuttall 2004: 740). Instead of the city being seen as shaping a person’s identity, the above statement claims that theories have failed to look at how the individual – regardless of whether they are aware of it or not – in fact shapes the city. Most often, the individual in constructing his/her own identity is unaware of how they affect the identity of the city (*ibid*). Gasa (2010), on talking about space, says that as much as a person tries to claim space, space also claims them in the way that they behave in a certain space. There is a continuum of influence running between the two effectors of identity – the person and the city. So as much as the break dancers react in a certain way to a space, the space too is shaped by how the dancers use the area.

In the area of Princess Alice Hall, there are few people whom the dancers know and can relate to easily. The dancers and I still struggle to relate to each other and even after months of working with them, we can still experience awkward moments. The dancers have their ‘comfort-zones’ (their home and neighbourhoods) where they feel

most at ease. They also have to enter the spaces and places where they may not feel as comfortable (the hall). In this way, the hall shapes the dancers identities. Outside the hall they would come across as shy, awkward and not very confident of their abilities. They would stand with their shoulders hunched, their hands thrust deep into their pockets and pressed up against the hedge that lines the front of the hall. It was an attempt to be as inconspicuous as possible in an area that was unfamiliar to them. People would walk past them without the slightest glance.

Once inside the hall they relaxed more. What is significant is that at the start of my research there seemed to be very definite places where each dancer moved, as well as designated "student" areas. It was the dancers who made the first move to invite me into their space, showing their acceptance of a new dancer. I presumed there would have been some other formal acknowledgement. This is important inasmuch as dancing crews are considered to be a form of a gang, wherein members are initiated. This shows that membership and access to a 'break dancer' identity is fluid and not constrained to who the crew members themselves bring into the group (this is similar to how constructions of identity are fluid and not constrained to certain elements).

After a few months of regular dancing in the hall, I saw a definite shift in the dancers' mentalities regarding the dance space. One evening I drove to the hall and turned into the BP Petrol Station opposite the hall. While the car was being filled with petrol, I watched the dancers waiting outside the hall for the yoga class to finish. Pang and Wak were there and from the distance and in the fading light I was unsure but I thought Flirt was there as well. Casually and confidently they were dancing outside on the pavement. Mainly they seemed to be practicing their balances. People walking past the hall had to step aside and walk for a short distance in the road. There was no fear in the passers-by, just acceptance. For the time before the class the dancers not only "owned" the hall but they also "owned" the space outside. Their bodies were no longer foreign bodies but skillful dancing bodies.

I have watched the dancers become more confident in dancing in the town centre. This is not to say that they were ever confident before and that opening the Academy has changed the lives of the dancers. But by coming into a space that before this time had seen little of this type of dancing has meant that the dancers have been creating a space for themselves in the town centre, where before their space was predominantly the "coloured area" (as they call it). They have done this in a similar way as women are making a space for themselves in rap music (Keyes 2004) – by empowering themselves (in opening a dance school) and by making choices (about who they are in a dance space and as a dancer). By making themselves visible in Grahamstown they are slowly beginning to break away at the stereotypes surrounding break dancing, young coloured men, and the whole Hip Hop Movement. Yet another interesting observation is that if people do not understand what break dancing means for a dancer, they may interpret the dancer's presence in a negative way, following the already constructed image of break dancers as violent or as possibly criminal elements. Regardless, they are now bringing with them ideas and their individual and collective identity as break dancers into

Grahamstown city centre. This will, in the long run, begin to affect the way the city identifies itself (how it will develop remains to be seen).

One also needs to consider the fact that the dancers have been inviting people into their space to learn their dance. It has not been a creating of dance space separate from the Grahamstown population as a whole. This means that the identity of b-boy is available to more than just them. After three months of dancing with the crew, Flirt and Tooth gave me a b-girl name – Fully Girl, because I spoke a lot, was the only woman dancer and I danced saggies<sup>14</sup> (the latter is my own addition). As I said in the beginning, once a dancer becomes a b-boy (or b-girl) their whole energy changes and they become not just a student but a legitimate break dancer as well. To take on the identity of a break dancer is to be in a space that is filled with the sounds, sights, smells and feelings of the dance form; it is also about being confident in this identity. I was not. And a b-girl needs to embody spontaneity, clowning, acrobatics and strength. I struggle with improvisation, clowning and the strength to do the moves. Suffice to say I did not stay as a b-girl for very long. But one thing stuck in my mind, when Tooth said, “once a bgirl, you are always a bgirl”... A touching thought and one I will always remember; a token of acceptance on a group – the subculture called Hip Hop.

#### Who Wanna be a Hip-Hopper? – Break Dancing as a Sub-Culture

Dance as a subculture opens avenues for understanding alternative identities in South African youth and most specifically in the Hip Hop Movement. According to Gelder and Thornton (1997) a sub-culture can be defined as a social group organised around shared interests, interests that set them apart from other groups (cited in Potter 1996: 193). The first time youth cultures were officially named was in the 1950s when increased access to jobs and thus spending money for young people meant that young people could engage in activities outside of the home (Shuker 1994: 191). However, at this time it was thought that all young people had similar wants and were “passive consumers”, being shaped by the leisure industries and doing no shaping themselves (Shuker 1994: 192). The 1970s saw a shift from a homogenous view of youth to coin the term “sub-culture”. Youth culture saw young people as socialising in age-groups. This obscured the fact that many young people socialised according to likes, values and interests (*ibid*).

Music is one of the binding elements in a sub-culture, according to Potter (1996), and still is an important element of cohesion in the Hip Hop Movement (p.193) – music is created to listen to, dance to, sing to and inspire graffiti. Hebdige (1979) is considered to be a key theorist on sub-cultures and states that sub-cultures make their values and interests visible to the society around them by means of styles, language et cetera (cited in Shuker 1994: 193). Most importantly is that sub-cultures offer a solution (even if it is just on a ‘magical’ level) to the problems in their lives (*ibid*). They do this through creating what Shuker (1994) calls an “achieved identity”; an identity that is adopted which is

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<sup>14</sup> Translation: “gently”

different to the ascribed identity that one may be born into at home or at work. In such a way, sub-cultures are a way to carve a space for oneself within a dominant discourse, and so make oneself visible in a place where there is the possibility of being forgotten or lost among the multitude of sameness.

The sub-culture of the Hip Hop crew becomes a support/socialisation network. They go most places together. Whenever the Bionic Breakers come into the central business district of Grahamstown they come as a group. Regardless of age, they socialise in most cases within the crew. The crew becomes the support network where most of their information is passed. The dancers do not necessarily want the crew to be a deviant and alternative group but a few Grahamstown residents seem to think that the break dancers are 'different' and separate to the rest of the town. As discussed above, the ascribed identity of many young coloured men is of violent under achiever, and separate as the Grahamstown residents seemed to think. However, the achieved identity that these young dancers create for themselves is of a successful achiever in their chosen art form, channeling their 'violence' into their dance.

The fact that Grahamstown residents see the dancers as separate does not mean that they are closed off to the dancers. In my last month working with them, Pang approached me to help the crew start workshops with schools in Grahamstown. When I proposed the idea to a few schools in the town, even though most had not heard of the Bionic Breakers, all were very eager to have the crew give dance workshops to the school students. When one thinks of the city, there is this underlying assumption that the city is a large machine that controls the behaviours of the people under its command (Nuttall 2004: 740). One forgets that people make up a city and therefore people influence the way the city as a whole 'behaves'. Without saying that the Break Dancing Academy has changed the lives of the dancers and the perceptions of the town, I feel that because the dancers have carved a space for themselves in the Central Business District (CBD) they are no longer considered an enigma, an invisible group of people. And in doing so they are also breaking through stereotypes of break dancers being violent. This is evident in the schools' willingness.

In Mitchell's (1956) study of the Kalela dance similar themes of a sub-culture can be found. The dancers of the Kalela are found on the mines in the Copper Belt of what was in the 1950s Northern Rhodesia (p. 1). The way he has written about the dance is from a style reminiscent of the early dance anthropologists where the art form is reduced to analytical parts that are there purely for functional purposes. I am thus not using his work for his framework of analysis. Instead I want to use themes that he has picked up among the dancers and relate them to the break dancers in this story – themes of skill, striving for education and improving ones skill, and membership.

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*"Have they (the dancers) ever danced in the Princess Alice Hall?" I ask Kamma while we sit at Café Blanca.*

*“Oh yes. Yes they have. Most of the guys have done Capoeira there. A guy taught them – all of them, even the young ones”. That’s another dance to add to their repertoire, I think. Just to make sure that these dancers can call themselves Capoeirista’s<sup>15</sup> I ask “For how long did they do Capoeira?”*

*“Well, the teacher only left about three years ago, so for about five years...”*

~\*~

The Bionic Breakers dancers set themselves apart not only by dancing and dancing well, but by mastering other dance styles (as the discussion above highlights). I have observed (not only in break dancing) that when you call yourself a dancer you do not only dance one style, you are adept in other dances, mastering some better than others. To be good at more than one dance is a form of self-praise, a way to symbolise themselves as better than someone who does not have the same credentials. Here break dancing becomes political, in local terms, for status means respect and respect means success. Dance is a lived experience, and Young (2005) states that a person relates to their body in terms of a specific socio-economic context (p. 16). For the dancers in the Bionic Breakers, the body becomes a means for success and to protect against being forgotten in the masses of the Grahamstown’s population. The body holds the vehicle for self-praise and self-validation. It once again embodies experience. For the dancers of the Kalela dance, their self-praise is generated through songs that they are taught once they become part of the Kalela dance team (Mitchell 1956: 8).

To be a member of a Kalela dance group is a mark of prestige. This prestige is measured on a scale of success akin to the white businesspeople that dancers saw around them. In this way education was an important membership requirement into the dance group and status within a dance group was measured by the occupational ranking of a person (Mitchell 1956: 14). In the Bionic Breakers, DJ Kamma is a strong motivator for the dancers – he tries to get them to finish school and to find jobs. Kamma continuously refers to the collective – “we are trying to...”; “...it is our job to...”. Some of the dancers have anger problems, he tells me, or have been expelled from school. He says that “we have been working on his quick temper”. Education is not a pre-requisite to join the crew but education, of any kind, is high on the agenda. I say education of any kind because the Hip Hop Movement does not hold “Western Education” in very high esteem, mainly because segregation was taught in many governmental curricula (Dyson 2004). This is in contrast to the Kalela dancers who appear to desire that form of education (Mitchell 1956: 15). This is not to say that the dancers do not have a desire for knowledge. In Port Elizabeth, while waiting for the auditions for the television show, one of the dancers began talking to me, first asking my opinion of Home Economics subject at school and then onto sex and abortion. My opinions were listened to with grave nods and a frown

<sup>15</sup> A Capoeira dancer, like a ballerina does ballet or an actor does drama etcetera.

of concentration between his eyes. He also then tells me, after telling me he doesn't read at home because he reads at school, that they are reading Jane Austen at school. In my informed opinion, this shows a desire to be known to be knowledgeable about issues in the community and world.

The dancers know that they have skills and do not want to settle for less. It need not be the expected skills that a young man has. And their success in their lives is not motivated solely by money. When asked why he dances, Pang says it is because he gets to travel. He gets to experience new things, things that his friends who are not part of the crew may never experience. In this way as well, break dancing offers status of gaining experience and knowledge. Once again it is not conventional school knowledge; it is a break away from the norms of school and everyday life and constructing their own knowledge, of themselves and the world around them.

### We're Finished for Today<sup>16</sup>: Conclusion

So what role does break dancing have in these young men's identities? David Toop (1994) writes in *Rap Attack 2* "that competition helped to displace violence and the refuge of destructive drugs, while it also fostered an attitude of creating from limited materials" (cited in Engel 2001: 369). However, there have been times when the dancers have seemed so unfocused and uninterested in doing things in their lives, and it was only DJ Kamma and Matrix who got passionate enough to get the dancers doing something. For dancers, "fostering an attitude of creativity" possibly means something different to them than it does to me. One day, on a suggestion from one of the Academy students, Matrix danced with a shirt over his head, obscuring his vision. And when he manages it he throws down the shirt passionately and throws up his arms victoriously. He has been creative in his use of movements and space to fit the fact that he had limited vision. To be creative in the safe space that is break dancing space is enough for them to consider it a success

This paper has shown, among other things, that this dance can also be a means of pleasure as an end to itself, something the Nuttall and Michael (2000) say is a new 'body' that is emerging in studies - the pleasurable body who responds to sound, to touch and predominantly to sight. This is not to negate the fact that break dancing provides important commentary on the lives of a dancer. However, I have attempted to break away from seeing break dancing from purely a functional perspective ("explaining it away" by over-analysing everything), whereby everything that a dancer experiences has a definite function. In dance, and specifically break dancing, to dance in a space is to take a unique and personal style and inscribe it in the area of dance (Banes 2004: 14). When the dancer and the dance is looked at from the stand point of pleasure for the senses - the sight, sounds, feeling, touch and smell - one is able to see that a dancer is not some type of strange entity that is unfathomable. Instead the dancer experiences joy, pleasure, excitement and emotions similar to what everyone experiences. To understand a person through their body and their sensual experiences is to normalise the body of the

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<sup>16</sup> What Pang says when we have finished training for the day

informant so that they are not the 'other' but a "lived body". The 'performing body' is a fluid body, as Csordas (1994:) states, and it embodies elements to become an active agent of identity as opposed to an object of identity.

When I first started this fieldwork I thought that in order for my informants to be 'good' informants they had to be both historically and politically aware of Hip Hop's place in the greater society. Repeatedly I got nothing of what I expected. Eventually I encountered Deyhle's (1986) ethnography on break dancing in an Indian border Reservation school and the situation was similar to the one found in Grahamstown. In her words, they were unconcerned with the history of break dancing but knew why they did it - for some it was to keep out of trouble, for others it was "cool" and "neat". For the dancers that I interviewed, to dance "keeps them busy and out of trouble" (Tooth) and is simply a way to travel (Pang), to see new places and thus to once again raise their status. They have almost-exclusive membership to this group that offers opportunity and success.

Break dancing in Grahamstown, I argue, is not only about opposition or social commentary; it is also a form of escapism. For the two hours that the dancers dance, there is a child-like innocence where they embody the present moment and worry only about the next beat or the next move and not about the past or the future. In this space they transcend the stereotype of the coloured body being violent and create an identity of the break dancer as being supple, spontaneous and clown-like, eager to learn and eager to teach. Historically, women have been considered to be closer to and more in touch with their bodies than men (Shildrick and Price 1999: 2). Yet by embodying the present moment within the dancing body, regardless of whether one is male or female, the dancer becomes in touch with their bodies. Similarly, by becoming in touch with their dance space (the Hall) the dancers are transcending the stereotypes of the violent break dancer, through simply using their bodies to dance - to dance a dance that many think to be violent, and to be accepted as dancers in their own right in the greater town. In my view, this has a lot to do with the fact that the dancers do not keep themselves separate from other people, but have opened themselves and invited people into their space. They have done this predominantly through opening the Break Dancing Academy and teaching people what it means and feels to be a b-boy (or b-girl).

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