

The Archipelago as a Metaphor for the Creation of Collective Knowledge in Breaking

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Abstract *As part of a qualitative research project on how breaking has been learned since its first generation in Germany, interviewees described their initial encounters with dance as a form of affective experience that sometimes struck them with great intensity. Interviewees vividly conveyed both the intensity of the impact and a perception that this cultural phenomenon was not only present in a local context but found in many other places, along with their impression that it remained elusive or indescribable in words. The individual b-boys and b-girls consequently assembled fragments of a culture while always having a sense of participating in the larger whole. In seeking to explain these experiences, we found resonance with the theoretical approach of philosopher Édouard Glissant. Glissant employs the spatial metaphor of an archipelago to articulate his ideas. His theory of the creolization of the world corresponds with the hybrid form of breaking and its movements. Drawing from this image and the theoretical implications that follow from Glissant's thinking, this chapter describes the early history of breaking and the void at its origins, the importance that b-boys and b-girls place on searching for traces, and the communication of knowledge within dance itself, to then examine the role in exploring identity that breaking always plays. The text concludes with a reflection on what the form of knowledge sketched out here and its transmission could mean for educational contexts.*

Being Touched – Getting Moving – Exploring Exchange

Even though I didn't see it that way at the time, but from the very beginning. It was as though we'd looked for and found each other. So I don't believe Hip-Hop was looking for me, but that [...] I was looking for it.

DJ Phonky Vogelfutter (2014, 00:30:33)

Engaging with Hip-Hop inevitably leads to a complex, highly mediatized cultural network of art forms and their communication. Hip-Hop's diverse narratives intertwine stories of upward social mobility, self-empowerment, and artistic, highly individual opportunities for self-realization with portrayals that glorify violence and are entangled in intersectional forms of discrimination. Hip-Hop is highly ambivalent, and yet this culture has been and still is biographically significant and relevant for many people well beyond their youth. Its diversity and vitality seem boundless, as does the personal commitment within its individual scenes, as immediately becomes clear when its practitioners speak about or demonstrate their art. The fascination it provokes has touched scholars in a number of disciplines—including us.

Our collaborative work focuses on breaking as a subdiscipline of Hip-Hop. As part of a qualitative research project investigating how breaking has been learned since its first generation in Germany,¹ we held initial discussions rooted in the belief that this is not only a dance culture that has not yet been understood well enough in aesthetic terms, but also a learning culture offering many opportunities remaining to be discovered. The fact that a dance culture which was initially practiced primarily in informal settings has become increasingly formalized, and that those who took their first “steps” either through early documentary material on film from the United States or in chance encounters are now offering courses, promised profound insights into the evolution of this dance form and its local appropriation.

1 Further remarks and our interview material primarily refer to the breaking scene in West Germany.

In the qualitative interviews we conducted,² our interviewees largely concurred in their accounts of their first encounters with Hip-Hop in general and dancing in particular, as a form affective experience with an immediate and powerfully individual impact intensively perceived in the body. The Berlin MC Fuat describes it as follows:

I was on fire. I got goosebumps when I heard Doug E. Fresh. I felt it intensely, even though I didn't understand a word. That really got to me. (Krekow/Steiner 2002: 263–264)

The intensity of those first encounters seemed to impart an immediate call to action, as expressed in the following quote from b-boy Telle:

One evening in September 1983, I was sitting in front of the TV as I often did, watching one of those music shows, when a video by the Space Cowboys titled “Pack Jam” came on. A Black guy was making weird waves go through his entire body and leaning all bent and twisted against walls that weren't even there. When I saw that, I immediately got up, stood in front of the mirror, and started experimenting, trying to figure out how he did it. Then things moved quickly; within the next few days, I discussed it with other people and started meeting regularly with a few like-minded people to practice. (ibid.: 229)

Looking at these two quotes, we can identify three key moments in the narrative that are also found in other interviews. First, the initial moments are often portrayed as coincidental events; second, they seem to provoke an immediate, strong, and lasting impact; and third, they consequently begin moving into a search for new information and like-minded people. This three-step process could be described as being touched, getting moving, and exploring exchange.

And yet those who are touched and moved in this way, entering into new kinds of exchange, describe the experience in ways that go beyond its singularity. Although they themselves describe their encounters as emerging unex-

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- 2 The study on educational processes in breaking is based on narrative interviews with b-boys and b-girls from the beginnings of breaking in Germany and with newer practitioners as young as ten years old in schools. We analyzed these interviews using tools taken from ground theory methodology, supplemented by observations from jams and learning settings, as well as additional interviews with experts from other disciplines of Hip-Hop culture. The results are presented in Rappe and Stöger 2023.

pectedly from individual encounters, they clearly note that from the first contact, a cultural phenomenon seemed present to them—like a kind of cultural noise existing far beyond their own sphere of influence. In the interviews, we repeatedly find such tentative formulations, clearly indicating how the interviewees passionately make a choice for something that can only be described as a hunch and for which they still lack words. In this way, the individual b-boys and b-girls “constructed” the fragments of a culture while always being guided by a sense of participating in a whole.

In search of an explanation for these many nonhierarchical moments of appearing—for these various movements exploring the processes of learning and community-building that they immediately spurred, and for the “knowledge” they held of something not (yet) known—we found insight in the theoretical approach of the philosopher, writer, and poet Édouard Glissant. Glissant explains his ideas with the spatial metaphor of the archipelago as a series of diverse islands, connected beneath the surface of the water surrounding them and without any center. This metaphor offers one way of understanding and making visible, as a process of becoming, the emergence of seemingly unconnected elements—and of the unexpected coming-into-relation, as equals, of heterogeneous elements and explorations. His idea of the creolization of the world, developed from his engagement with colonialism, corresponds with the hybrid—or, to use Glissant’s terminology—“creole” form of breaking and its movements.

In this chapter, we would like to begin by introducing Glissant’s metaphor of the archipelago and its theoretical implications. Building on this idea, we then employ the figure of the archipelago as a form of representation to introduce four “islands,” which mainly refer to the early phase of the development of Hip-Hop in general and breaking in Germany. The first is intended to illustrate the emerging and coming-into-relation of heterogeneous elements around a void; the second illustrates how the communication of knowledge in dance itself leads to an engagement with identity; and the third represents the emic narratives of breaking culture during its development. In this third section, we grapple with the role that social conditions played in the consolidation of breaking culture in the early 1990s. We conclude with a fourth island: a reflection on what the form of knowledge sketched out here and its transmission could mean for educational contexts. These four islands represent the diverse processes of negotiation in the dance archipelago called Breaking that we have imagined, though we can only present them briefly in this chapter. For a more

detailed discussion, see the results of our various studies on educational processes in breaking (Rappe/Stöger 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2022, 2023).

***Archipelagic Thinking: Édouard Glissant and the Creolization of the World*³**

Archipelagic thinking is essayistic, experimental, intuitively feels its way forward, unlike continental thinking, which is primarily systematic. Thinking continentally, the mind runs ahead boldly, but we have the sense of seeing the world as a unified block or great whole, as though it were formed in a single sweep, a kind of impressive synthesis much like how a total view of the landscape and the terrain unfolds from an aerial perspective. Thinking archipelagically, we come to know the rocks in the rivers, even the smallest ones; we come to see the shadowy holes they create and conceal.

Édouard Glissant (2009: 45)

The concepts of Glissant from which we draw in the following can be considered imprecise from a scholarly perspective. They lack a clear definition and cannot always be demarcated from one another. Glissant's texts should rather be read as expressions of a poetic, or rather poetological, way of speaking and thinking that weaves its concepts together, creating palimpsests. At times, terms are used synonymously. In our view, their appeal lies precisely in this open and opening usage, which allows for a view of diverse cultural practices and widens the possibilities for approaching phenomena from different perspectives.

To gain a better understanding of Glissant's central terms, we must first engage with his fundamental theoretical ideas. Glissant's concern is to engage with the effects of colonialism, and one of the key concepts introduced by

3 This theoretical section has largely been taken, in slightly abridged form, from our 2023 publication.

his writings is that of creolization. For Glissant, creolization is the unpredictable intermingling that results from collisions, harmonies, deformations, retreats, rejections, and attractions (see Glissant 2020: 9–10). Historically, this refers to violent and involuntary connections that followed from the European colonization of the world and the associated trauma of slavery (see Müller/Ueckmann 2013: 14). As Glissant uses the term, “creolization” describes these histories as a state of mourning over exile, loss, and brutality, and as dynamic processes of cultural reshaping, as people who were enslaved created composite cultures from the traces of their past—from narratives, rituals, music, African languages, and the languages of the colonial powers (see Glissant 2020: 37–40). These new (Creole) languages and their associated rites, music, and narratives allowed these enslaved people to found new sites of community and solidarity. At the same time, as political scientist and feminist Françoise Vergès has written, a knowledge about colonial forms of oppression was woven into these cultural practices, which could offer protection from assaults (see Vergès/Martinez-Turek 2008). And finally, in the words of cultural theorist Michél de Certeau, these often coded, sometimes “miniscule,” everyday practices formed a network of antidisciplines and instructions for how to resist oppression, colonialism, and racism (De Certeau 1984: xiv).

Glissant is concerned both with depicting and coming to terms with the traumas and conflicts of these multiethnic, originally colonial societies and with thinking about the specific characteristics, strengths, and resilience of these cultures or cultural practices, in order to elevate them to the level of global political and economic relations (see Müller and Ueckmann 2013: 26). To this end, he compares Creole cultures with those of (former) colonial powers, which he also categorizes, likewise using spatial metaphors (see Glissant 2020: 37–40), as atavistic cultures (see *ibid.*: 20). The landscape of Martinique, and the archipelago of the Antilles, serve as a model here. This is an archipelago with no center: a series of several islands and cultures connected beneath the surface of the water. Glissant contrasts this metaphor of the archipelago with the metaphor of the continent (by which he also means: the nation). For him, the culture of colonizing powers—with their expansionist aspirations so closely intertwined with “the European project of modernity [...], claiming freedom, progress, emancipation, reason, knowledge, and understanding” (Müller/Ueckmann 2013: 15)—is characterized by clear and firmly demarcated borders. They distinguish between an inside and an outside; they assert themselves absolutely and impose their world view on other countries. According

to Glissant, these (atavistic) cultures narrate their own identities and histories as homogeneous and

are based on the idea of a Genesis, i.e. a creation of the world, and the idea of a filiation, i.e. a continuous connection from the community's present back to this Genesis [...] And at the beginning of all these atavistic communities is the poetic cry: the Old Testament, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Song of Roland*, the *Nibelungen*, the Finnish *Kalevala*, the sacred books of India, the Icelandic Sagas, the *Popul Vuh* and the *Chilam Balam* of the Amerindians [...] the traditional epic assembles everything that constitutes the community and excludes from it everything that is not the community. [...] These communities that are beginning to take shape formulate and project a poetic cry that gathers together the home, the place and the nature of the community and by the same token excludes from the community everything that is not the community. (Glissant 2020: 20–21)

This contrasts with the metaphor of the archipelago and with archipelagic thinking. It is not the poetic cry of a founding narrative that forms the structure, but the intermixing of heterogenous, fragmented elements and traces to form new languages, rituals, and arts (or artistic skills) that proves characteristic (see Glissant 2020: 9–10). In the archipelago, and in its composite cultures, the various connections of traces from other places, languages, movements, and cultural practices become visible; these diverse origins cannot be denied. Here, Glissant sees a great correspondence with the thinking of diversity and of becoming, as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychiatrist Félix Guattari elaborated in their texts *Rhizome* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (see Glissant 2020: 37–43; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Their most widely influential concept, “rhizome,” finds a counterpart in Glissant’s spatial metaphor of the archipelago. Borrowing this concept from botany, Deleuze and Guattari describe a rhizome as a “subterranean stem [that] is absolutely different from roots and radicles” (Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 6)—“a kind of antigenealogy” (ibid.: 21).

For Glissant, the archipelago of the Antilles, with its unfolding composite cultures and cultural identities, is such an antigenealogy. Creole identities do not stem from “a single root, but a root reaching out to other roots” (Glissant 2020: 11). There was and is thus no cohesive narrative that might found a unity, no uniform (tap)root from which everything developed and to which everything could be traced back. Archipelagic thinking rejects any single origin; it

thinks in relations produced in a multiplicity of ways—across times, countries, borders, and identities—and is thus also an overcoming of territorial thinking. It is a kind of “trace thought” —nonsystematic, “intuitive, fragile, and ambiguous” (ibid.: 12). As literary scholar Julia Borst explains,

it is a nonhierarchical, rhizomatic notion set against the universalizing and demarcating tendencies of Western discourse, replacing the notion of the Other perceived as absolutely subaltern with a vision of the Other *en relation*, which epistemologically exits from its supposedly subalternity. (Borst 2013: 209)

As these elucidations make clear, Glissant is not only concerned with the specific or self-empowering representation of multiethnic societies of born of colonialism. Beyond that, he aims to elevate his conceptions of thinking and acting in relations characterized by equality and solidarity to the level of global politics and economics (see Müller/Ueckmann 2013: 26).

Here it is necessary to return to Glissant’s analogy between the rhizome and his metaphor of the archipelago, to realize that uses both metaphors synonymously. Like Deleuze and Guattari, he does not see the rhizome as a pure negation of the root but perceives the dualism as an “oscillation of mutual dependencies between rhizomic and arborescent structure, or between poetological metaphors of the rhizome or of trees” (Kuhn 2013: 187). Roots can grow within rhizomes, while rhizomatic sites can develop within roots; within atavistic cultures, for instance, creolizations can develop or transform back into composite cultures, while composite cultures can in turn (further) develop into atavistic cultures through the poetic cry of a founding narrative.

Glissant considers global developments in terms of such transformative processes, in which individual and group-related identities are constantly negotiated through unpredictable collisions, harmonies, deformations, retreats, rejections, and attractions. The results of these processes, as well as the processes themselves, are not always peaceful, nor does the integration they entail always coincide with a “multicultural” harmony. On the contrary: they can spark armed conflicts, such as those that broke out in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, where the disintegration of the state and the complex and its complicated multiethnic coexistence ran up against essentializing homogeneous narratives and the rise of separatist tendencies (identities of being Serbian, Croatian, etc.; on this point, see also Hall 1992b: 304–309).

Nevertheless, for Glissant it is also possible to discern, in the various currents of creolization in the world, “advances in consciousness and hope” (Glissant 2020: 6). Here, he cites as an example the interethnic conflicts of the Yugoslav Wars, and in this context, the appeal made at a congress of the International Roma Union for a peaceful coexistence of Roma and non-Roma. In this appeal, the Union compared borders of Yugoslavia, as they were dissolving at the time, to the borders of Europe’s Schengen Area that were similarly falling away, which it linked to Europe’s long history and experiences as a transnational ethnic community. The document thus referred to the possibility of a common civilization allowing freedom of “movement, art, life, tolerance, hospitality, welcome, hybridity, creolization, which do not prevent singularity and identity,” while also sharing “a large number of their cultural features: religion, language, customs, local destinies” (Glissant 2020: 42; see also Kovacsazy 2013: 239–252). It is here, in these dynamic processes oscillating between being and becoming, that Glissant finds precisely this “trace thought” par excellence. This is a notion of identity that remains fluidly situated between cultural particularity and Glissant’s poetic cry, between being and becoming, that constantly strives for renegotiation, that is “always formed in relation to our neighbors—in our interactions with other islands,” as the cultural theorist Marsha Pearce writes (2014: n.p.).

This idea of archipelagic thinking as a space without a center—and of a trace thinking in which completely heterogeneous elements unexpectedly come into relation as equals—can also be applied to key moments in the history and development of dance in Germany. In taking recourse to Glissant, we see Germany as a postcolonial space: Glissant himself implies as much when he presents the example of Yugoslavia described above as a process of global creolization. His application of the metaphor outside of the Caribbean directs attention to the “power-geometry” within which such transformative processes occur, to use a concept coined by the cultural scientist Stuart Hall in his work on the relationship between “the West and the rest” (Hall 1992b: 306; 1992a). Hall is referring to the discourse of modernity and its effects, which are linked with the historical, economic, cultural, and mental colonization of countries and peoples. This discourse, he argues, is still a powerful and violent one, as it still carries in itself the inscription of those disruptions (see Hall 2021: 100–101) by which the world was divided into an “us” possessing civilization and a “them” waiting to receive it. We understand Germany as a part of this post/colonial space, and the history and development of Hip-Hop culture as a mirror and site of contestation for this powerful discourse. Hence when in

the following we employ the term “trace thinking,” we mean—with reference to Glissant—nonhierarchical, resistant, poetic, nonsystematic articulations that can be identified in artistic and discursive practices.

First Island: On the Origin as a Void and the Traces of Many Beginnings

In order to describe the coming-into-relation of heterogeneous elements around a void, we would like to begin with an ethnographic vignette.

It is 29 September 2018. At the screening of one of the very early Hip-Hop movies (*Breakout – Tanz aus dem Ghetto*) in the dedicated store for graffiti artists in Cologne, I (MR) witnessed the following scene. After the screening, Popmaster Fabel, one of the protagonists of this film who was present at the screening and a member of the Rock Steady Crew was asked if he had film footage of a battle between the Rock Steady Crew and the Dynamic Rockers at the Lincoln Center Out of Doors Festival on 15 August 1981. Fabel said he didn't and even that he doubted it existed, prompting extremely skeptical reactions from the b-boys who were there: there's a stubborn rumor that there must be recordings of this legendary battle, and that people just haven't looked hard enough yet to find them. This rumor is fueled by a few short Super 8 recordings that were edited into the video clip *Planet Rock* (1982) by Afrika Bambaataa. Both the extensive discussions—ranging in tone from earnest to heated—about the existence, possible ownership, and potential content of the film, and the efforts to find it, struck me as a kind of “holy grail” story.

This search for a possible artifact is characteristic of engagement with one's own culture, often bound up with efforts to find an origin that are so crucial for one's own participation and are thus pursued with great commitment. How can this be linked to the metaphor of the archipelago and to trace thinking?

Breaking itself is a Creole culture, i.e., a decentralized archipelago of many beginnings, including African American and Caribbean cultural traditions, the (aesthetic) practices of inner-city gangs, and martial arts, influenced by technological developments in nascent postindustrial capitalism (see Toop 1984, Rose 1994, DeFrantz; 2004; Rappe 2011; Johnson 2023). The ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss shows this in his book *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York*, a study of the New York dance scene. Schloss lucidly

reconstructs the possible origins of this form of dance, retracing controversies within the scene over whether the African American practice of breaking emerged predominantly from battle dance settings of rocking practiced by Puerto Ricans, to emphasize the impossibility fixing history in this way (see Toop 1984, Rose 1994, DeFrantz; 2004; Rappe 2011; Johnson 2023). The origins always remain in the dark—the connections surrounded by water.

Interestingly, the impression of this void at the origin of breaking recurred in Germany and Europe in the early 1980s. In this case, the dancers had to employ their own interpretations in order to articulate the knowledge gaps caused by the lack of information as cohesive, meaningful units. B-Boy Deniz Cengiz describes this in the context of naming dance moves as follows:

We used to call popping “Klicken” in Germany, right? [...] the Americans called it “popp[ing]” [...] and in France, they called it “blocage.” [...] If you go to France and you know what *blocage* is, then you know [what] they are talking about. And at the time, that’s not something we knew. We were like: “*Blockage*? What’s that? A new kind of dance?” And then they come with popping. And we’re like: “Oh, you call that popping?” *Blocage*, popping, *Klicken*—every country has its terminology for this kind of dance. And then you start [...] to compare: Why do they call it *blocage*? What is blocking, and why? [...] Why do they call it pop[ping]? And why do we call it a click? And [...] you have to make such comparisons yourself. (Cengiz 2013, 00:43:56)

This “comparing,” the linking of existing knowledge gaps into units of interpretation, which has been described here at the level of moves, also applies to all other areas of breaking culture. Whether it’s the search for *the* first move, *the* first dancer, *the* correct designation, or *the* first battle: every new discovery that wants to claim a beginning or a definitive form as a poetic cry of clarification always becomes lost again in the rhizome of the manifoldly linked beginnings of trace thinking.

At the same time, we also observe that this unbreakable connection between being and becoming, this play between genealogical determination and rhizomatic entanglements, continues to be a central—and joyful—motivation for the explorations these artists make in their movements. The double void of breaking’s origins in the United States and as an assemblage of cultural fragments by individual b-boys and b-girls in Germany has consistently, and repeatedly, produced open questions about who might be the creator of a move, where a certain Super 8 film might be found, what influence the martial dance

capoeira might have had, and so on. These sources nourish the immense potential of breaking as a call for action.

The artists refer to this searching, in its particular movements and shapes, as digging. Digging means not only digging deeper but also, for example, traveling to the origins, seeking out creators, and arguing with all earnestness. It also means dealing with one's own relationship to the culture as well as its traditions, connections, and histor(ies), learning more and more about one's own culture, and being recognized as belonging. Hence the ongoing argument over the beginnings of breaking not only acts as a never-ending attempt to claim linguistic power for oneself and one's crew but also leads to implicit and explicit engagement with the collectivizing and resistant potentials of an in/visible archipelago originating in a void stretching from the neighborhoods of New York to the German breaking scene.

Second Island: Bricolage of the Self and "Identificatory Suspension"

This joyful linking of disparate elements around a void could also be understood as a homology, i.e., as a relational structure between an object and a social group. The cultural studies scholar Paul Willis describes this as follows:

It is the continuous play between the group and a particular item which produces specific styles, meanings, contents and forms of consciousness. The artefact, object or institution in such a relationship must consistently serve the group at a number of levels with meanings, particular attitudes, bearings and certainties. It must help to support, return and substantiate particular kinds of social identity and the practice and application of particular kinds of sensibility—conscious and unconscious, voluntary and automatic. (Willis 2014: 250).

It is clear that trace thinking does not represent an object in the sense of a cultural item or artifact, but rather contributes, in a performative sense, precisely to what Willis defines here as "a particular kind of social identity [...] and sensibility" that accordingly helps the members of a community adequately relate to the world and take up a position within it.

To understand this homological moment of trace thinking, it is necessary to briefly address the social context in which early Hip-Hop culture developed. In the 1980s, this was a multicultural scene. As the Cologne MC Signore Rossi

emphasizes, it was primarily “the migrant kids who started with Hip-Hop here” (Güngör/Loh 2002: 93), who turned to this culture with excitement, not least because of their experiences with racism and exclusion; it was the children of labor migrants, the so-called second generation, who discovered breaking for themselves.

This strong identification can be well understood with the positions of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall: as people who were “forced to migrate from one cultural context to another,” they experienced identities

[...] which are not fixed, but poised, in transition, between different positions [...]. People belonging to such cultures of hybridity have had to renounce the dream or ambition of rediscovering any kind of “lost” cultural purity, or ethnic absolutism. [...] They are the products of the new diasporas created by the post-colonial migrations. They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them. (Hall 1992b: 310)

This emerging cultural Hip-Hop archipelago enabled them to reflect on and process their situatedness within the majority society on a deeper level, both unconsciously and consciously. With the bricolage prompted by their knowledge gaps, they were able to address what we might call their own “incompleteness,” their “being-in-between.” At the same time, by linking the various fragmented elements, they could perceive their multiple identities as a resource—precisely in opposition to the majority view, which considered them problematic and out of place.

In the homology of the diverse possibilities for creating links, these practitioners thus created a shared space allowing them to perceive the realities of their hybrid identities without denying themselves (see Glissant/Obrist 2011: 9). This “potential identification,” to cite Stuart Hall (2017: 14), offered them the opportunity to perceive the culture and identities they were claiming as their own without flattening out the discontinuities that a Creole identity in Germany entails. With trace thought in the centerless void of the archipelago, i.e., with the three steps of being touched, getting moving, and entering into exchange, these artists learned to perceive themselves in terms of complex identities that “were neither immutable nor permanently fixed” (Glissant/Obrist 2011: 9). Their various roots came together to form a network by “reaching out to other roots” (Glissant 2020: 11). They consequently created a composite culture with a diverse range of places, rituals, movements, and

music, and thus also instructions for how to resist exclusion and racism. Hip-Hop activists and authors Hannes Loh and Sascha Verlan express similar ideas in describing this period as a phase of “global identity” and depicting the actors at the time “as part of a global youth culture, as Hip-Hop world citizens, who were not subject to national or ethnic barriers” (Verlan/Loh 2015: 91).

Third Island: The *Poetic Cry* of a United Germany and Its Echo in the Hip-Hop Archipelago

These Creole identities described above, as perceptions of the Other *en relation* (Borst 2013: 209), were decisive for the first phase of the constitution of Hip-Hop in Germany. However, at the beginning of the 1990s, something occurred that could be called the poetic cry of Hip-Hop, and its development lies not only, but especially, in a specific historical moment.⁴ We can name some of the important social, structural, and cultural circumstances of this moment:

- Against the background of the policy of glasnost in the USSR, under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, the peaceful revolution in the then GDR got going in November 1989, leading to the reunification of the two German states in 1990.
- At the beginning of the 1990s, Hip-Hop started be a lucrative genre for the German-speaking music market. A central moment in this context was release of the single “Die da!?!” by the Stuttgart band Die Fantastischen Vier on 7 September 1992. Other acts followed very quickly—and “German Rap” took shape as a genre of its own, becoming increasingly popular.
- The racializing discourse of minority exclusion that began in the 1980s with catchphrases such as the “flood of foreigners” or the “over-foreignization of the German people” intensified (Seeliger 2018: 21), reaching a climax with the tightening of German asylum law in 1992 and claims

4 With reference to the work of cultural studies, these are significant moments in which a specific convergence of economic, structural, cultural, and biographical circumstances rearticulates notions of culture, history, or ethnicity (Hall 2000: 65–66)—historical moments where various “impulses come together and articulate a new, formative unity” (Lindner 2000: 11). Culture is the site for such struggles over power and meaning. Its analysis allows statements about the inner logic of these moments, making it possible to analyze and understand the social significance of cultural action, i.e., how people are able to perceive their social or political concerns together.

that multiculturalism had failed as a model for German society (see Seeliger 2016: 23).

– At the same time, the numbers of racially motivated attacks on citizens with so-called migration backgrounds rose—including an arson attack committed on 23 November 1992 by neo-Nazis on two buildings in the Schleswig-Holstein town of Mölln; and some six months later, on 29 May 1993, when five people were killed in another arson attack on a two-family house in the North Rhine-Westphalian town of Solingen, with a further seventeen people injured, some seriously.⁵

The development and self-perception of the scene were directly influenced by the discourses triggered by global and national events of a strengthening nationalism in united Germany, with its extremist and deadly excesses, and by the growing attention of the national music market. Many perceived music industry tendencies of appropriation and commercialization as a threat. In the narrow focus on a musical genre that reduced Hip-Hop to rapping/MCing and, moreover, marketed only German-language texts, many artists did not recognize themselves. They saw this as an attempt to destroy “their” multicultural and multilingual Hip-Hop culture.

The poetic cry of a united Germany, along with German as the hegemonic language of the scene, repeatedly excluded a large share of members in this globally networked composite culture. And the previous self-perception of participation in the culture—namely, the opportunity to prove oneself beyond ethnic ascriptions through knowledge and skill—was repeatedly delegitimized. This was reflected in the statement of MC Tachi from Fresh Familee: “We didn’t even know we were a multicultural band—that was something the media told us” (Verlan/Loh 2015: 93).

However, the vehemence of the reactions prompted by these ascriptions cannot be understood solely as attempts made by a subculture to distinguish itself from a hegemonic culture industry. Sources from this time show that within the Hip-Hop scenes, a connection was made between the cultural

5 These victims during the so-called Wende years, or years of transition following German reunification, are the first in a long line of people who were injured or died as a result of right-wing violence. The Amadeus Antonio Foundation has set out to maintain a list of these victims, making them visible. See <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/todesopfer-rechter-gewalt/>, accessed 9 September 2020. See also <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/saytheirnames-55215/>, accessed 25 February 2021.

industry's appropriation of Hip-Hop as German rap and the so-called integration debate with the real threat it posed to life and limb from racist terror (on this point, see Güngör/Loh 2002: 108–128; Verlan/Loh 2015: 359–292). Hip-Hop artists resisted terms like “foreigner,” “overforeignization,” or “xenophobia” and the function they played of excluding Others (see Advanced Chemistry 1992 and 1994). The Heidelberg group Advanced Chemistry, for example, addressed this underlying structural racism in their tracks “Fremd im eigenen Land” (Stranger in one's own country) or “Operation Artikel 3” (Operation article 3). Sociologist Ayla Güler Saied has argued that they and other groups thus showed how far they were “ahead of their time [...] and demanded alternative concepts of equality and participation” (Saied 2013: 67).⁶

Members of the scene then countered these threats with a founding narrative capable of generating a shared identity. It was based on the idea of the Zulu Nation from the US Hip-Hop movement, which presented Hip-Hop as a unified culture consisting of the four disciplines of music (MCing, DJing, beat-boxing), painting (writing and tagging), dance (breaking), and knowledge (see Hager 2007: 115). Using Glissant's poetics, this emerging narrative of a unified culture could also be called the poetic cry of Hip-Hop. In contrast to countries such as the United States or France, where commercial success was mostly positively associated with upward social mobility, in Germany, a more dogmatic attitude emerged—opposing, for instance, a commercially appropriating mainstream by insisting on independent structures. This happened not least because, as noted above, its actors perceived “German conditions” and their “destructive development both for individuals and for a liberal and humane society” as a threat (Heitmeyer 2012: 15).

6 The antiracist initiative Kanak Attak also had a major influence here. According to musician and author Murat Güngör, this network of cultural creators and academics had set itself the “goal of undermining the identitarian ascriptions—especially those that co-opted those to whom they were applied—and countering them with a self-assertive political stance” (Yurtseven/Pennino 2019: 104–105). Kanak Attak pursued, as the two rappers Kutlu Yurtseven and Rossi Pennino of Microphone Mafia wrote, “an approach to antiracism [...] that wanted to escape the victim role, that did not need to justify itself for anything, that set out to take what belongs to us” (ibid.: 107). In its unprecedented mix of social analysis of racist structures and assertively presented political demands, combined with a pop-cultural appeal, “Kanak Attak [...] was antinationalist, antiracist, and rejected any form of identity politics, such as those fed by ethnological ascriptions” (Kanak Attak 1998).

Here in this chapter, with the aim of understanding how Glissant's metaphors can be used for individual and collective processes of community-building and knowledge production, the focus has been on reconstructing how this archipelago is constituted and how its first three islands can serve as an example of cultural production. Yet this chapter cannot elaborate the further development of Hip-Hop, and of breaking. It should, however, be noted that in the following decades, diverse, parallel processes of negotiation unfolded, oscillating between the various forms of trace thinking and poetic cries as genealogical consolidations,⁷ which we examine extensively in our book *“Lernen nicht, aber ...” – Zur Tanz und Lernkultur Breaking* (Rappe/Stöger 2023).

Fourth Island: Learning amid the Hip-Hop Archipelago's Field of Potentiality

The ideas we have explored here in relation to the macrolevel of the historical development of a culture—with reference to trace thinking and the metaphor of the archipelago—can also be transferred to the microlevel of the individual. Hints of this possibility appeared in our discussion of identity negotiation. In our study on which this chapter is based, we asked how breaking is learned, attempting to identify and describe learning and educational processes in terms of what breaking culture identifies as its educational goal, namely “foundation.” “Foundation” can be characterized as a package of dance skills, improvisation art, explicit knowledge about the dance culture, and the ethical prin-

7 It should be noted here, for example, that the event formats of the individual disciplines developed independently of each other. DJs, for instance, built a global network of battle events over the course of the 1990s, while in MCing, language differences led to a differentiation within national scenes. Here, after the dissolution of the jams, smaller competition formats developed, partly parallel to—partly in connection with—the mainstream, from which successful MCs continue to emerge. Furthermore, within the various practices, more or less strong demarcations from the original Hip-Hop narrative can be observed. Examples include the success of gangsta rap around the Aggro Berlin label (since the 2000s), or the currently very successful genre known as street rap. Elsewhere in the archipelago, subgenres with completely different notions of race, class, and gender have coalesced. In these spaces, artists are utilizing the empowering aspects of Hip-Hop to address issues ranging from sex-positive and post-migrant perspectives to queer and feminist stances. Since the early 2000s, in all of these developments, social media has been instrumental in diversifying the Hip-Hop archipelago.

ciples embedded in it that are ultimately expressed in representation through individual styles (on this point, see Rappe/Stöger 2023, chapter 3.3.4). Foundation thus contains a wealth of forms of knowledge. Here and in the following, we use a broad concept of knowledge that goes beyond what can be expressed in language to include skills as forms of practical knowledge and that sees knowledge not only as an object but also as an activity.⁸

How is knowledge constructed, represented, and passed on in individual dancers, and how could the metaphor of the archipelago be helpful here? For breaking culture as a whole it is insightful to look at what its practitioners describe as an initial experience:

I just thought: “What’s that?” [...] It tore me apart. At first, I was just amazed. It’s very strange, you sit there and realize how something grabs you, as though a certain resonance had been hit. I wanted to do that too. (MC G.E.R.M in Krekow and Steiner [2002]: 60)

Here, as in other statements, a kind of shock is described that connects with strong, affective reactions. This is reminiscent of the German term “Widerfahrnis”—meaning an experience that happens to you—that scholars such as Dörpinghaus investigate as a source of educational processes (see Dörpinghaus 2015: 464–480). What stands out in this example is the suddenness and immediacy of the affects experienced here, their physicality and the sense of being personally addressed. Those having this experience seem hardly able to grasp, at least in conceptual terms, what it is that is triggering such a resonance. It nevertheless appears to be a kind of personal access presenting itself as both meaningful and challenging, and as something shared with others, even if they are not yet visible:

What was interesting was the immediate hype surrounding it. We didn’t know anything about it; the culture was relatively unknown, but it was everywhere. (Dittrich 2011, 00:03:01)

The challenge, I think, was that we had chosen a culture we didn’t fully understand ourselves, where we couldn’t quite articulate what it was, but

8 Foundation contains many of the forms of knowledge discussed as examples in the volume *Schweigendes Wissen* (Kraus et al. 2017).

still felt some level of understanding. There was something resonating with us. (Cengiz 2013, 00:00:01)⁹

This almost indescribable connection can be termed tacit, or “silent” knowledge (see Kraus et al. 2017). The metaphor of the archipelago seems apt not only to describe the decentralized, burgeoning emergence of a culture at the macrolevel but also to indicate the processes of emergence and linking of various forms of knowledge at the individual level. Certainly, there is explicit knowledge about the terms, basic moves, practices, and locations of the dance culture. However, the crucial forms of knowledge are those that are embedded through experience—physical, unspoken, and developed in social processes, here through aesthetic play. To use the metaphor of the archipelago, this part of knowledge might be likened to what lies beneath the water’s surface—and this is precisely what creates a profound impression of connection, initially only sensed, especially for beginners. In this context, knowledge operates both as an object and as a process; one could describe it as “doing knowledge.” Following the initial touch, there is a literal and metaphorical movement into action. It’s not just about performing dance movements in place; it’s about a journey to seek artifacts that provide deeper insights. For example, b-boy STORM talks about his relentless attempts to access a recording of the show *Wetten daß...?!* where two breaking crews (the Rock Steady Crew and the Magnificent Force) had performed.¹⁰ He coincidentally found out about a shop that had the video:

I think I rewound that video twenty times and watched it secretly over and over. Back then, I must say, nobody had a VCR. So I would go back to that store every day, hoping to see *Wetten dass ...* again. (Robitzky 2000: 19)

In this case, a video acts as a cultural fragment, a gateway to something much more significant, somewhat submerged under the surface. There is a recurrent drive to seek out terms, origins, and any authentic traces of the culture. While this seems particularly relevant for the first generation of b-boys and b-girls in Germany trying to connect to a culture that had already been established elsewhere, the need to acquire knowledge through references is also fueled by the

9 Pseudonyms are used for interviewees.

10 This was one of the grand entertainment shows produced by the channel ZDF in the 1980s and 1990s.

fact that the goal of the personal learning journey is developing one's unique style.

Breaking is an inherently social and performative art, not just because it's done together or within a community, but because it is based on shared and developed knowledge that is inclusive from the start:

And in b-boying, things were very open right away. Anyone could come along and say: "Listen, I can do this or I am doing this," and if it was good and people saw that it made sense or was interesting, then there was this immediate response: "We want to learn that too." And then it didn't matter: "How old is he? How big is he? What training does he have? What language does he speak?" It was all about: "How can we learn this move?" [...] this "each one teach one" ethos breaks down the barrier between teacher and student, allowing for the possibility that you can be both student and teacher. This is easily achievable here. (Dittrich 2011: 00:34:03)

While today there are courses for "breakdance" and learning from each other is not as significant as it was in the early phase, the way knowledge is constructed and imparted remains distinct from formalized educational spaces. This might be one reason why our initial question—"How did you learn breaking?"—regularly led to confusion in interviews. The interviewees associated the term "learning" with the formal education system—such as the clear division in roles between teacher and learner, and the hierarchy and formalization of what is to be learned. But in breaking, as in Hip-Hop culture overall, what is required is a creative and individual interpretation of existing material as a creative seed, here through the practice of flipping. Moves are imitated and subsequently transformed. In the competitive environment of a cipher, highly charged with excitement, this happens spontaneously, improvisationally, and with the aim of constantly "improving" what came before. Mere repetition is not desired and is ideally negotiated in the performative act of dancing in a group. All of this applies from the start, so even the first steps of a b-boy or b-girl can contribute to the entire knowledge formation. One of the core categories of our study is thus called "cultural producers from the very start." For the movements of knowledge formation in breaking, we can once again employ the image of the archipelago, as connections that are constantly growing and changing while remaining directionally open, as is the case with rhizomatic root structures that Glissant himself related to trace thinking. This metaphor

can be applied to culture as a whole, as well as to processes within an individual.

In the seed of repetition in difference—which is another way to describe flipping—a field of potential knowledge and learning is opened up, fostering the development of individual styles. “Learning in the field of potentiality” thus emerged as one of the two central categories in our study. One characteristic feature of the encounters with breaking and the statements made by our interviewees was the impression of being pulled into an energetically charged field. Again and again, the question came up of what was driving dancers to these feats in their continual search for aesthetic solutions. The constant drive to find an expression of one’s own, a kind of identity and group-driven exploration in movement, seemed to be crucial. The construction of knowledge, as well as its representation and dissemination, are intimately or existentially linked to individuals.

In the prototypical form of the cipher, for instance, individuals present not just what has been learned, but also themselves. Statements about dancing in the cipher show how close this comes to an initiation. However, access to certain forms of knowledge cannot be obtained otherwise. The cipher is designed as a kind of threshold space, and learning can be understood as a crossing of the borders it marks. It involves not just spontaneously reacting and responding to, and outdoing, dance performances after entering the circle, but also engaging performatively with history and discovering new things, in addition to acquiring knowledge about oneself that becomes synthesized as a style.

Conclusion and Outlook

The ideas we have presented here may provide a first, limited insight into the universe of forms of knowledge and its construction and communication in breaking. This may contribute to a more differentiated understanding of knowledge in its many forms—a task that is essential for pedagogical work. However, engaging with forms of knowledge is always also connected with the question of what is recognized as visible and worthy of appreciation. Far beyond pedagogical concerns, it is of social and political significance to turn to such bodies and forms of knowledge. It is in this sense that the volume of tacit or “silent” knowledge noted above writes:

Researching systems of “silent” knowledge allows us to emphasize components that are nondiscursive, unintended, physically mediated, latently effective, unconscious, secretive, covert, unspoken, subaltern, exposed to repression, and informal. (Kraus et al. 2017: 12)

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