Breaking and the Island Life

A Practitioner/Activist Response to Rappe and Stöger

Saman Hamdi

In their text on the "Archipelago as a Metaphor for the Creation of Collective Knowledge in Breaking," Rappe and Stöger look at collective knowledge creation in Hip-Hop culture and, specifically, learning processes in breaking. Using Glissant's highly visual metaphor of the archipelago, they invite us to visit four main islands of learning in breaking and Hip-Hop culture. The idea of an archipelago as a group of islands divided by water but invisibly connected "underground" resonates with Hip-Hop on various levels. Hip-Hop's elements often seem unrelated to the observer of modern popular culture. Those who choose to visit, deep-dive, and dig for "underground treasures" will find a vast network of philosophical, ethical, political, and artistic connections between the elements. Hip-Hop culture's coral reef is thus as interesting as the life on the various islands. The metaphor of an archipelago also resonates on another level, since Hip-Hop has many cultural influences from Afro-Caribbean island cultures, and it serves as a space of refuge—an island, if you will—from cultural oppression in an exploitative economic system.

Rappe and Stöger's description of breaking's and Hip-Hop's archipelago of learning resonates a lot with my islander biography of becoming a b-boy for twenty-five years (a lifelong process) and listening to rap music even longer. Especially their fourth island resonates with my early Hip-Hop years: Rappe and Stöger describe how some dancers from Germany's first generation lacked access to US American communities of practice and media (aside from some GIs stationed in Germany) and had to rely on collective autodidactic learning to fill in the knowledge gaps. Similarly, I lacked a teacher and had to reconstruct all movements from VHS tapes.[1] This experience stands in contrast to

1 Shoutout to my main influences: my crew, Amigo, Poe One, and Storm for his Footwork Fundamentals DVD.

current dancers, who can find predesigned courses on the web and train in dance schools or even on Olympic teams.

Rappe and Stöger's second island also reflects a major aspect of my breaking experience. They propose this island as a bricolage way of constructing one's own hybrid identity in Hip-Hop via creating an original style as an honest expression of oneself. This process can overcome national essentialisms and explains why many migrant adolescents in Western countries have adopted these cultural practices. Being a son to a Kurdish father (a people without a state) and a German mother (highly critical of any Germanness), I have always found the idea of an ethnic national identity or state rather absurd. Instead, I felt more at home in Hip-Hop's globally imagined community, expressed in universal ideals by its Black creators. When I saw my youth idols of Berlin's multiethnic Flying Steps in music videos, or winning the Battle of the Year, I knew breaking culture would be a place for me. Its autodidactic and collective ways of learning were also a refreshing contrast to the horrifying experiences in German youth sports. Instead of coaches shouting at me, breaking practice offered stylistic freedom.

The first of the four islands of learning in breaking described by Rappe and Stöger represents a constant search for the culture's sources and its various beginnings. In my case, reading b-boy Storm's biographic accounts of international breaking history, watching VHS cassettes, and skimming through online forums, I learned about Hip-Hop culture and how it could provide a sense of home. Some of Tupac's messages of social justice resonated well with the lefty ideals instilled in me by my Kurdish father. Whenever I traveled, I found the dance's global communities of practices very welcoming—if you had the required skills that is. I would exchange with the people I met about their views of Hip-Hop and find more sources across national borders.[2] Later on through Hip-Hop studies, I learned more about the afrodiasporic origins of the dance and culture.

For me personally, the communal practices of breaking, cyphering, digging for Hip-Hop history, and creating one's identity via stylistic innovation always stood in contrast to Western notions of national identity. Rappe and Stöger portray Hip-Hop and many other modern Black/afrodiasporic cultures

2 This was well before today's national Olympic teams, and the predominance of large commercial competitions showcasing the national flag for every competitor. Throughout the article's more historical analysis of the '80, '90s and beyond, the question of national identities in today's breaking scene remains open.

as being highly complex collages combining influences from many different sources via a "creolization": the culture's earliest, Black creators combined their own West African, and Afrocarribean rhythms, dance styles, and cultural practices by digging, sampling, flipping, and appropriating various forms of music, Eastern martial arts, superhero, and comic book aesthetics. I was early on drawn to these communal rituals, the energy, and the larger-than-life aesthetics of Hip-Hop. These characteristics are typical of afrodiasporic cultures developed in response to colonial violence, enslavement, and racism. According to Glissant, such communities can be nonexclusive, have no center, and are nonlinear in terms of historical identities.

Accordingly, Rappe and Stöger via their third island show how, in unified Germany, Hip-Hop's subcultural practitioners resisted commercial German rap, which omitted critical and migrant perspectives in a time of growing nationalism. Some of the practitioners then responded with antiracist musical resistance. The authors' descriptions of this third island draw mostly on rap examples, but account well for my own learning experience in breaking, as well as later cultural activism. In 2013, my crew and I started to make pedagogic use of this transcultural approach to Hip-Hop, by teaching breaking to German and refugee youth together. We helped youths from Syria, Afghanistan, Serbia, Kurdistan, etc. in forming crews, while fighting the deportation of their families. This experience shows both the potential and limitations of using Hip-Hop culture for social change inside larger systems of oppression.[3]

The way Rappe and Stöger describe Hip-Hop's antiracist forms of resistance is also a way to structure educational formats and help people make sense of the postcolonial and postmigrant societies they live in. From 2014 on, I based university seminars and high school workshops in Berlin and eastern Germany on such an approach. Together with my friend Ali Konyali

3 We initially prevented a handful of deportations, but finally could no longer maintain the teaching during COVID lockdowns and facing the German state's racist oppression. A few of our students and their families were deported and relocated far from our training spot by German authorities. After 2015's short-term glimpse of a "welcome culture" and solidarity initiatives, there was a radical shift to the right in Germany's migration policies. In response to inflation, economic crisis, and austerity measures, Germany's politicians and media discourses shifted back to demonization and racist agendas, instead of addressing the underlying economic inequalities. This hindered our Hip-Hop activism. I analyze such activist aspects of Hip-Hop in my forthcoming book: *Hip-Hop's Organic Pedagogues: Teaching, Learning, and Organizing in Dakar and New York – between Non-Profits and Social Movements*.

we tied our family's and Germany's migration histories into an analysis of the musical forms of resistance described by the authors. Together with youth in workshops, we listened to the rebellious music of the "Gastarbeiter" generation (German for "guest worker"; migrant workers who had moved to West Germany between 1955 and 1973) and queerfeminist MCs, and we discussed racism, slavery, and the civil rights movement. Via the students' favorite music, we talked about some of the empowering and problematic aspects of sexist, neoliberal discourses in today's German rap music. Hip-Hop's cultural practice of digging, its self-critique, and its fifth element of knowledge thus enable educational formats that criticize economic exploitation and injustice, racism, and patriarchy. At the same time, these learning processes are fun and empowering by including artistic practice. Life on Hip-Hop's islands is thus not only fun but can be used to work with youths to create more social justice kinds of curricula. Rappe and Stöger's islands provide a solid starting point for such a process.