Interlude: Circulation, Standardization, and Technique

Much like the bodily practice of dance, the leading of a dancing life is marked by both mobility and flexibility. The self-entrepreneurism discussed in the previous chapter reveals that dancers must be highly flexibile in their approach to generating income for themselves and their families. On the one hand, the precarity of dancing labour requires them to pool resources and to quickly switch from one occupation to another. On the other hand, they are able to combine different skills and knowledges and make them work to achieve their own aims. What is more, as shown throughout this book, dancers are highly mobile, moving through the city from one public space to another, or to a dance studio, communal house or convention hall, in order to participate in dance practice or dance battles. Overall, the character of a particular place can only be created and understood by linking it with places beyond (Massey 1994). This is how dancers create geographies of dance within the city through their embodied dance practices. Many dancers started out dancing in a particular public place, such as the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace, and from there they moved to Ly Thai To Square or the Lenin Monument, before finally ending up in a private dance studio. Participating in dance battles, they move beyond the confines of their own city, travelling to provincial towns in both northern and southern Vietnam, including the southern hub of Ho Chi Minh City. In the meantime, new dance spaces have evolved in central Vietnam, particularly in the cities of Da Nang and Hue. Hip hop's intimate relationship with place becomes apparent as dancers identify with "their" city.

Hip hop's relationship with the urban has been commented on extensively. In Vietnam, too, there is a bias toward urban areas that seems to persist. Yet, in actual fact, hip hop is practiced anywhere, including in rural and mountainous areas. Whereas Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City remain the primary sites of

hip hop activities, other more localized hot spots have emerged in the country's rural provinces and medium-sized towns, as well. The TiTan Crew in Ninh Binh City, and the 81 Days Crew of Quang Tri Province, are cases in point. In central Vietnam, moreover, Da Nang and Hue have evolved as focal points where the community of hip hop dance assembles. A large crowd of Hanoian dancers travelled to the Hue Street Festival in 2019, where they battled with local hip hop dancers. Social media posts by members of the hip hop dance community also show that battles also take place in the country's peripheral areas, such as in the southern Binh Duong Province. The house of youth in Binh Duong Province was the site of Binh Duong Street Kids Vol. 1 battle, held on December 29, 2019, which offered open-style dance competition for youth from the surrounding area.

Popping has also expanded to the periphery, more precisely, moving to the highlands. In a video on the history of hip hop dance dating from 2014, three Hanoian poppers, TF Star and CK Animation, the MC Trung X from the Red Bull Freestyle Battle, and three other male dancers, all fashioned themselves in the garb of different ethnic groups that traditionally inhabited Vietnam's highlands. Dancing outdoors in front of a mountain range, they combine popping with folklore dance, aiming to make the culture of hip hop more widely known in Vietnam. TF Star says "we want to bring the culture of hip hop closer to everyone, regardless of age, even if people don't like dancing, we'll make them like it" (YouTube 2014). While the community of dance expands geographically across the country, connections with the diverse other communities of practice, including DJing, rap, and graffiti, still remain rare. Where connections do exist, they are mostly with rappers. Although some dancers declare that they like listening to Viet Rap, this is rarely the music to which they dance. Most of the dance styles introduced to Vietnam fit with particular genres of music that have been developed internationally. Locking goes with funk music, waacking with disco music, and popping with electronic music. Hip hop dancers, as well as b-boys and b-girls, will occasionally dance to rap, mostly U.S. rap and sometimes Viet Rap. Nonetheless, they usually do not know rappers personally and rarely meet with them. Moreover, interactions with practitioners of hip hop's other elements of graffiti writing and DJing are rather rare. One exception, however, is the b-boy, Viet Max. Originating from Hanoi, he and his wife moved to Ho Chi Minh City, where he promoted hip hop dance. He connects the different elements of hip hop, as he simultaneously engages in breaking and graffiti writing, having produced the original music video for Northside rapper LK's track, *Thu Dầm* (2018).

One of the events that created a platform for hip hop culture, integrating these different cultural practices, was the Hanoi Unity event in 2015, organized by Thanh Phuong and her fellow crew members. Hanoi Unity featured all four elements of rap, graffiti writing, DJing, and dancing. A more recent event mentioned by many dancers was the annual Why Not Crew event, *Aixo*, which is an exclamation that translates as, "Oh, my god!" Aixo took place in late September 2018 at the Sidewalk Bar in Hanoi's West Lake District, bringing together rappers, dancers, and live music. The dancers performed to the live rap music. The Why Not Crew is a rather new crew in the Vietnamese hip hop community of practice. A dancer named Hao explains: "The leader of Why Not Crew, he is really cool. He always wants to do really meaningful things for the community." A lot of icons from the Hanoian dance community of practice joined the event. Yen Hanh participated in the freestyle battle together with her "younger brother," a fellow b-boy. Likewise, Mai Tinh Vi as well as Thanh Phuong from New York Style Crew joined the battle. Mai used the video of her performance on her Facebook page for several months. As more and more events emerge in Vietnam, they bring together members of multiple communities of practice, who join forces to promote hip hop culture in the larger cities.

Dancers not only move around the city, and travel within Vietnam, but they also cross national boundaries. However, their travel often remains confined to the Southeast Asia region, due to visa and financial restrictions. Aware of their marginal position in the hip hop cultural industry, they relate to dancers in distant locations through social networking platforms. Moreover, they invite international dancers to Vietnam to give workshops and share their knowledge of hip hop, putting Vietnam on the global map of hip hop. According to sociologist David Farrugia (2018), youth cultures produce fluid topological connections that articulate connections well beyond established territorial boundaries. Through the circulation of information artefacts like mix tapes, music videos, images, and commodities as well as the mobility of people, hip hop has evolved as a transnational practice, creating distributed communities of practice sharing sonic and bodily sensations, aesthetics, language, values, and more. In her research on ballet, Helena Wulff (2015) shows how language facilitates the travelling of ideas and bodily practices. She notes that, despite or perhaps because of its transnational nature, all dancers are aware of nearly 200 ballet steps and their French designations, such that different versions of classical ballet are similar enough to be quickly learned. The use of terminology in a language other than one's own points to the historic-

ity of dance, as it shifts in geography and time (Hamera 2007: 69). A similar observation can be made about the different dance styles assembled in this book. Most of the dancers are aware of, and referred to, English movement vocabulary for their particular dance styles. For locking, dancers are aware of the English names of basic moves. Similarly, for hip hop dance, Hoang Phuong quotes the Old/Middle and New School Dictionary, created by members of Elite Force Crew, Henry Link, and Buddha Stretch, as a common point of reference, and thus standardized vocabulary, that she teaches in her hip hop foundations class. Such standardization of linguistic and bodily terms facilitates communication and cooperation between actors from diverse social worlds (Star and Griesemer 1989). At international events like Juste Debout or the Arena Dance Competition, Vietnamese dancers assemble with dancers from Southeast Asia and elsewhere around the world. While they mostly do not share linguistic repertoires beyond English terms for dance moves, they do share a common repertoire of bodily movements. On the basis of such kinesthetic repertoires, they are able to build relationships and friendships across geographies, creating distributed communities of hip hop dance.

Likewise, Hamera (2007: 6, 19) considers dance techniques as codes that govern and standardize dance practice, rendering performing bodies both legible and intelligible, while offering frames for the analysis of those bodies. Dance technique thus evolves as common vocabularies and grammars, assisting in the deciphering dancing bodies and learning to dance. Techniques evolve as a primary language among fellow dancers, translating individual bodies into a common repertoire. In hip hop dance, the common grammar and vocabulary of technique is referred to as basics or foundation. As many dancers put it, the key to success is learning the foundation, on the basis of which it is possible to develop a personal style and thus uniqueness. Yen Hanh put it this way: "All the good dancers, they always say that you need to keep with the basics, you need to have a foundation before you can improve your own style." That is why advanced dancers tell their students to continue exercising the basics, so that they can develop their own style. Once they have incorporated the basics, they are also able to integrate one dance style with another, such as locking with popping or locking with soul dance, thereby generating bodily creativity. Hoang Phuong likewise points to the importance of the foundation, and yet suggested that while some dancers really know these techniques, they still lack their own style. She tends to prefer the dancer who only knows the basics, but has developed her own style and feeling for the music, to a dancer who just masters advanced techniques.

The constant improvement of technique and skill, as well as self-invest-ment, are important to all of the dancers presented in this book. The dance styles presented above are all rather competitive, with their focus being the dance battle. At battles, dancers come together to present themselves to the community, competing with other dancers, while being evaluated by national and international judges. Many of the protagonists in this book, such as Nguyet, Mai, Rufu, C2Low, CK Animation, or Thanh, serve as judges and MCs at the national and international level. So, how do professionals of diverse dance styles assess and evaluate the quality of a dancer's perfor-mance? One factor that they all agreed upon was technique and foundation. However, technique was often not the first response they gave. Rather, they referred to somatic qualities that make for a good dancer, while pointing to the intersubjective ties produced through shared sensations, frequently mentioning feelings, emotions, and sounds. Nguyet, for example, quotes the American waacker, Princess Lockeroo, suggesting that waackers are those who guide listeners into the feelings of a song. Consequently, she suggests that the main task of the waacker is to kinesthetically express the feeling of a song:

> "If the song is fun and happy, then we express the same feelings as the song. So for me, when I judge a good waacker, I look to the feelings of the waacker, not just their technique, not just the basics, just some technique or another. The technique is fine, but I want to see the feeling. Because that is the reason why we love waacking."

Similarly, Thanh Phuong emphasizes the relevance of feelings, comparing technique to reading a book. If one repeats the same moves over and over again, she explains, then it is "boring," like reading the same book twice. Con-sequently, when assessing a good dancer, she explains: "I want to look to their energy, their power, and their feeling (…), I like a dancer with a good feeling more than good technique." Like Thanh Phuong, other dancers agreed that technique is something that anyone can acquire through continuous training and exercise, but that sensations and emotions are important to giving dance a soul. In fact, dance sensations appear to be more highly valued than tech-nique in the evaluation of a dance performance. Likewise, for popping, CK Animation names three capabilities a good dancer needs to have: First, a pre-sentation of one's talent, representing good flow and style; second, good and high-quality technique; and, third, bodily sensation that goes with the mu-sic. CK's last point is shared by Hoang Phuong with respect to hip hop dance.

She explains that she needs to see the dancers' "feeling with that music, and with their body." She would like to see that the music really lifts the dancer. Feeling the music, and transmitting the emotion to the audience, was a recurrent theme in conversations that I had with dancers about what makes for a good dancer. Theatre scholar Katharina Rost (2017) discusses this sensory dimension of dance as "body listening" (Körper-Hören), suggesting that dancers' movements on stage are kinesthetic traces of audibly perceived energy currents. Rost's analysis does not rest on the individual body and sensation of the dancer, but expands to the audience's bodies, as they resonate with the dancers' embodiment of what they hear. The dancers are not the only ones to hear the music, as surrounding dancers, judges, and audience members listen as well. Meanwhile, the dancers guide everyone into the song's feelings, as Nguyet puts it.

The locker Yen Hanh linked the capability to feel the music to the performer's confidence, explaining: "When you feel confident, you can follow the music very well." If a dancer is shy, by contrast, it is very difficult for them to follow and feel the music. Overall, Yen Hanh evaluates three factors when watching someone else dance: pace, technique, and "the way they listen to the music." The relevance of listening to learning how to become a good dancer is shared by many dancers. Yen Hanh compares those who do not know how to listen to the music to music without soul. Apart from the value of a performance, others cited listening when it comes to learning dance. In addition to the kinesthetic differences between training indoors with a mirror or outside in public space, Nguyet pinpoints listening as a further dimension of learning: "Now I teach my students, they have to get into the song. Just listen, only listen, and then do, do, do, do, but listen – get into the body and spread it out." Her emphasis on both space and listening recalls Thomas Clifton's (1983: 70) claim that music, very much like space, is experienced "as fields of action for a subject," rather than music being a mere object outside the self.

In his account of the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira, ethnomusicologist Greg Downey (2002) emphasizes how the social and individual processes of musical encounter determine the significance of music (Porcello 1998), and outlines an apprenticeship of hearing. According to Downey (2002: 500), the bodily apprenticeship in listening conditions capoeiristas' perception of sound, "leading them to 'discover' the art's kinesthetic, not as an object external to the body, but as a sensitivity immanent in their lived flesh." Consequently, as much as a phenomenological study of music needs to recognize the dimension of corporeality (Downey 2002), a full phenomenological

study of body and dance must attend to the dimension of listening. Listening is a social experience as the moving body is informed by mimetic processes of learning from others. As mentioned earlier, all of the dance style practitioners began by training in public space. The bodily knowledge of different dance styles was transmitted through dancing bodies that were visible, audible, and tangible in public space. The early dancers facilitated social learning by making their movements visible and accountable to others, highlighting how learning occurs through bodily interactions with others. The spatial formation in which the attunement of somatic modes of attention occurs is most often the cypher. Consequently, inspired by Downey's (2002: 493) account of the "affective soundscape of the roda [wheel, circle]" in capoeira, I suggest that the cypher formation employed in hip hop battles be understood as an affective, sonic, kinesthetic, and thus a sense-scape.

In conclusion, moving the focus away from technique, as urged by most research participants, opens to the recognition and awareness of the self as constituted through somatic modes of attention. Yen Hanh defines dancing as listening to the music and moving with your body. The energy currents that Rost alludes to are verbally expressed when the dancers refer to "power" or "energy." Stated differently, dance sensations are energetic and intimately linked to emotions. Yet, extending beyond the individual self, dance sensations are also experienced intersubjectively, as Csordas (1999) emphasizes the relationship between the experience of bodily moment and intersubjective meaning-making. In collective practice and performance, dancers realize "strategies of solidarity in difference" (Hamera 2007: 13). Through collective performance in public spaces, they create intimate spaces in which pleasures, mischief, and success are shared.