Breaking

Breaking constitutes one of hip hop's four elements. Whereas the other dance styles discussed in this book are not explicitly mentioned in the canon of hip hop, breaking is one of hip hop's four cultural practices, apart from DJing, MCing and graffiti writing. Breaking is a transnational, eclectic, and referential bodily practice. The style integrates black dance with Russian footwork, gymnastics moves, pantomime, martial arts, among other disciplines (Holman 1984). While the date and location of breaking's origin typically refers to 1970s New York City, the historical roots of the dance style have been traced to parts of Africa, feudal China, tribal Eurasia, as well as to Caribbean and South American dance styles (Banes 2004; Holman 1984). Notwithstanding such multi-referentiality, scholars agree that the main source of breaking's movement repertoire is black dance. Accordingly, breaking, like the cultural practice of MCing, is closely linked with regimes and experiences of suppression and subordination, in particular to slavery in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, where European and African dance styles began to mesh. Whereas Europeans introduced the minuet, the waltz, and the quadrille, enslaved Africans introduced a shuffle step dance, called the juba. Slaves mimicked while simultaneously mocking the masters' dance (Holman 1984). As such, the juba dance is a perfect example of mimicry identified in postcolonial theory, in which mimicry has a double meaning. While the imitation of colonizers by the colonized is often a means for establishing domination and suppression, mimicry may also serve as a powerful medium for mocking colonizers and undermining the sociopolitical status quo. Accordingly, Homi Bhabha (1984: 127) refers to mimicry as both a resemblance and menace. In fact, as a rather recent discourse and sensation, hip hop embodies subversive meanings of mimicry. For example, hip hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994: 99) suggests that the oppressed make use of language, dance, and music to mock those in power and produce subversive imaginaries. Drawing on frameworks

developed by James C. Scott (1990), DeFrantz (2004) similarly draws attention to public and private transcripts latent in black social dance, arguing that dancers perform for two communities, their black community and white spectators, with the latter largely unaware of submerged and subversive layers of communication involved in the performance. Accordingly, the element of protest remains part of the private script, only legible to those who are initiated in black social dance styles. Scott considers the open interaction between subordinates and those in power as part of a public transcript, which serves as a self-portrait for the ruling elite, evolving around discourses represented by those in power. By contrast, the hidden transcript can be expressed through rumours, folk stories, narratives, gestures, and theatrical performance. Hidden transcripts formulate a discourse that takes place outside the public stage and withdraws itself from observation by those in power. Hidden transcripts are specific to the localities and actors they are performed in and by. Dance as a hidden or private transcript thus conveys meanings beyond its formal qualities, as it is performative in the sense that dance can incite action. DeFrantz (2004: 4) captures the performativity of dance with the term "corporeal orature": "Corporeal Orature aligns movement with speech to describe the ability of black social dance to incite action." Corporeal orature is linked to the linguistic practice of call and response. In many African diasporic dances, call and response occurs when the body responds to the call of the drum (DeFrantz 2004; Thompson 1966). Furthermore, the differentiation between public and private/hidden transcripts in hip hop dance becomes important when considering the separation between audience and performer. DeFrantz (2004: 10) notes how separation across cultural and racial lines affects the power of hip hop as an instrument of struggle, preparing the dancers to oppose oppressive societal forces.

In this context, we need to ask how public and hidden transcript are altered when hip hop travels beyond the African diaspora, for example, to Vietnam. First of all, it should be noted that within the Asian American community, and particularly the Vietnamese diaspora, hip hop has been embraced as a tool for combatting oppressive societal forces. The first Vietnamese rap track, published in 1997, was produced by a young man named Khanh Nho from Oregon in the United States. Khanh Nho rapped about his family's flight from Vietnam to the U.S. Today, rappers like Lee 7, who migrated from Vietnam to Germany, can relate to and identify with Khanh Nho's story. Likewise, contemporary Viet rap—frequently performed in Vietnamese language—addresses social, political, and economic inequalities. In other words, the dias-

poric experience and marginal positionality of individuals who have migrated to the U.S., such as Khanh Nho, is negotiated in the social world of hip hop.

Second, the multiple layers of communication embodied in hip hop can be found in other communities, as well. Yet, these layers change according to locality, sociopolitical context, and history. The legibility of embodied practices employed by those initiated into the dance style is crucial, as the following anecdote suggests: A well-known b-boy in Vietnam was asked to curate dance choreography for a national television program. He suggested choreography that depicted a prison brawl. Of course, the authorities did not welcome the theme, asking him to rewrite the show. In response, he altered the choreography and submitted a second draft, whose hidden transcript was still about an imprisoned man. For the public transcript, he altered the narration: "There is no need to tell what hip hop is about. Now we can do what we like." Again, the separation between performers and audiences opens opportunities to confer diverse meanings through bodily practices. What is more, the hidden transcript in this anecdote alludes to the political and social marginalization embodied in hip hop.

Origins of breaking

Etymologically, the term break was used as a signifier for diverse practices in the 1970s. Break was often used as a reaction to an insult, for example, "Why are you breaking on me?" According to Israel (2002), the 'b' in b-girl/b-boy may also connote being "broke," which means financially strapped or being at one's emotional, psychological, and financial "breaking point." Moreover, break also denoted the percussive rhythms of musical recordings that were most aggressive. Breaking as dancing, in fact, evolved from the dancers' reactions to such musical breaks, as freestylists danced in the breaks of funk and disco records. With the improvement of technical infrastructure, DJs such as DJ Kool Herc were able to prolong the breaks by using two turntables, a mixer, and two of the same records. DJ Kool Herc also coined the terms b-boys and b-girls, or "break boys" and "break girls," respectively (Chang 2006). The simultaneous evolution of the terms b-boys and b-girls also points towards females' early involvement in the bodily techniques of hip hop. This is further indicated by the co-presence of the breaking crews, Zulu kings and Zulu queens, which were both part of the Zulu nation that was founded by Afrika Bambaataa.

Original breakers were black and Hispanic teenagers, most of them male. The fact that teenagers practiced breaking highlights the close connection between breaking and adolescence, since breaking embodies the anxieties and aspirations of adolescence. Breaking was first performed indoors at parties during school breaks or in the cafeteria, as well as outdoors in parks and the subways, only visible and recognizable to those who knew (Banes 2004; Holman 1984). Just like graffiti writing, breaking is about marking territory. Graffiti writers claim public space by spraying tags and pieces on walls, public transport vehicles, and the like, while b-boys and b-girls appropriate public space with their bodily postures and ghetto blasters (Banes 2004). Accordingly, dancing oscillates between visibility and invisibility. Drawing on a sensory code, which among other senses, relates to vision, breaking can be seen by passers-by, yet the meaning conferred through the bodily practices remains exclusive to those initiated in the dance style, as demonstrated in the prison choreography mentioned above.

The aesthetics of breaking are commonly associated with powerful, energetic male bodies, at least in Western culture (Bragin 2014). As Imani Kai Johnson writes:

> "The aesthetics of breaking are steeped in performances of clichéd masculinity. The dance is a clash of big acrobatics, a steady rhythmic flow, small gestures of humorous or violent retribution, and an aggressive, threatening attitude, especially in battles. Gestures of sexual domination, shooting, chopping off heads, or breaking backs all remind us that key aspects of breaking aestheticizes violence. The confrontational and aggressive qualities of breaking are more aligned with conventional notions of masculinity than femininity in Western culture." (Johnson 2014: 15)

The term "Western" can be contested, since breaking is practiced around the world, and in many cultures is associated with masculinity. The term culture, likewise, requires further explanation. In the case of breaking in the U.S., Bragin and Johnson both point to the aesthetics of embodied practices linked to masculinity. Likewise, Matthew Ming-tak Chew and Sophie Pui Sim Mo (2019) point out the relevance of "cultural issues" in their assessment of Chinese b-girls' hip hop-based gender politics. One of these cultural issues is linked to dress, women's bodies, and fear of indecent exposure. Many of the movements performed in breaking, particularly power moves, may lead b-girls to accidentally reveal their bodies or underwear.

Vocabulary for breaking movements is quite diverse, comprising footwork, rocking, power moves, freeze, and thus targeting diverse lower and upper body parts, including facial gestures. Sally Banes (2004) describes a rather fixed format for the dance in its inception. Dancers and onlookers formed an *ad hoc* circle, also referred to as a cypher, taking turns performing. Each dancer received a time slot of only 10 to 30 seconds. A single dancer's routine was comprised of three sequences referred to as entry, footwork, and exit.

> "It began with an entry, a hesitating walk that allowed him time to get in step with the music for several beats and take his place 'onstage.' Next the dancer 'got down' to the floor to do the footwork, a rapid, slashing, circular scan of the floor by sneakered feet, in which the hands support the body's weight while the head and torso revolve at a slower speed, a kind of syncopated, sunken pirouette, also known as the helicopter. Acrobatic transitions such as head spins, hand spins, shoulder spins, flips, and the swipe – a flip of the weight from hands to feet that also involves a twist in the body's direction- served as bridges between the footwork and the freeze. The final element was the exit, a spring back to verticality or a special movement that returned the dancer to the outside of the circle." (Banes 2004: 15)

In fact, these sequences were so standardized that there was little room for the development of "personal" style. The only sequence that allowed for the expression of individual style was the freeze, an improvised pose or movement that broke the beat. In a dance battle, the freeze was meant to be as insulting and obscene as possible. The freeze sequence is often comprised through pantomime, which graphically emphasized the insult (Banes 2004: 16). Dance sequences, such as the freeze, frequently involve explicitly sexual and militaristic gestures. The freeze's primary function is to provoke and challenge an opponent in a dance battle. As such, it celebrates the physical fitness, flexibility, and sexuality of the adolescent male body. Pantomimes of gun imagery combine both militaristic and sexual gestures, simultaneously symbolizing a physical as well as phallic assault against the challenger (Banes 2004; DeFrantz 2016). However, such referentiality also occasions citation of symbolic materials outside the standardized dance themes, often resulting in the queering of movements and bodies. Such quotations may involve historical or contemporary events, past and present popular culture, as well as family affiliations, thus demonstrating personal style while resulting in admiration from the group. An example common from the 1980s includes the incorporation of a feminine posture by b-boys and b-girls alike at the end of their

floorwork, when many ended their dance with a female fashion model pose. According to DeFrantz (2016: 67), such feminine expressivity was accepted due to its exhibition of physical agility, while also demonstrating "fleeting connotations of queer sexual identity." In other words, queer postures are accepted and even celebrated in breaking, since they index a dancer's virtuosity, in part through their ability to quote symbolic materials beyond routinized dance vocabularies (DeFrantz 2016).[13] These improvisational practices lead Johnson to redefine the term breaking in relation to dance and gender, as "playing with and breaking through social conventions in life to expand the terms by which bodies are able to move through the world" (Johnson 2014: 17).

Social learning in breaking mainly occurs in the master-apprentice relationship. The relationship is rendered equivalent to kinship ties, as master and apprentice refer to one another as father and son (Banes 2004), at least in the U.S. context. For Vietnam, teacher and student(s) frequently refer to each other as elder brother or sister and younger brother or sister. However, as the use of kin pronouns is quite common in the Vietnamese speech community, the use of such terms in the master-apprentice relationship deserves closer examination. In chapter 3, I examined the use of kin terms in the hip hop dancing community. In American breaking, the relationship between master and apprentice is also linguistically marked by the choice of dance names. Dance names index intimate relationships, as seen in the example of master Ty Fly and his apprentice, Kid Ty Fly (Banes 2004). In Vietnam, interestingly, there is no indication that master-teacher relationships are established via dance names. While it is a common practice to register for a battle, using one's dance name and the crew name to which one is a member, I have not found any relationship between dance names of teachers and students. On the contrary, most dancers explained that they came up with their dance name themselves, suggesting that the initiation of a master-apprentice relationship is not marked by any baptismal moment of bestowing a dance name.

Breaking in Vietnam

Nguyen Viet Thanh, also known as b-boy LionT, recalls the first years of breaking in Vietnam: "In the beginning no one really knew which dance style they were practicing" (Margara 2011). Basically, people just mimicked what

13 See Schumacher (2004) for referentiality and intertextuality in hip hop music.

they had seen from foreigners, when studying abroad in the U.S., Germany, France, and Great Britain, or from videos they brought home with them from abroad. Thanh himself initially learned how to break from video tapes. He explains that it took him and his crew quite a while, actually until 2003, to understand what they were doing. Then in 2003, the German b-boy Storm came to Hanoi to perform. Storm was invited by the Goethe Institute. Thanh and his crew asked him to practice together and Storm battled against all the crew members, altogether 15 b-boys at the time. While he was in Hanoi, Storm trained them not only in physical skills, but also shared his knowledge about the moves' names and histories. Thanh remembers how Storm pointed out the importance of understanding each move's history, as well as being able to feel the music. As will become clear later, when looking at dancers of other styles, dancing is definitely about skills and particular techniques, but it is primarily a sensory experience.

Born in 1974, Thanh started breaking in 1991. Thanh travelled and still often travels abroad, participating in battles, teaching, performing, and choreographing dance shows. He taught in Canada and Japan, and has performed numerous times in the U.S., Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Holland. As a choreographer, he was invited to the Metropolitan Theater Tokyo to do a show comprising hip hop, locking, and popping. In 2011, he performed *Nhiều Mặt* (Many faces) with other dancers, including Mai Tinh Vi in both Berlin and Hanoi, which was funded and organized by the Goethe Institute.

Thanh has also organized the dance competition "Floorkillers," which occurred several times in the Savico Mega Call Long Bien. After two or three years, however, he stopped organizing the event, since he lost all his money as it was difficult to find event sponsors. According to Thanh, it would be easier to find sponsors for such an event in Ho Chi Minh City. He is also the co-organizer of "Together Time," an international dance competition held annually in Ho Chi Minh City, in which dancers from all over the world participate.

Thanh is so well-known that he was also part of the national TV program, *Vũ Điệu Xanh*, broadcast on VTV 6, as well as *So you think you can dance?*, which was broadcast on local and regional channels, such as HTV7 (HCMC), H1/H2 (Hanoi), VTV Can Tho 1, DRT (Da Nang), Yan TV (Cable), and VTVcab 1 (Cable). The national TV program, *Vũ Điệu Xanh*, targets both "old and young" people, presenting diverse dance styles, such as breaking, popping, waacking, hip hop, belly dance, and dance sports. *So you think you can dance?*, by contrast, is a global television format that has been adopted in many countries, including

Germany. Thanh served as a judge on both shows, and in one show Mai Tinh Vi tutored participants, as well.

Thanh still dances, but today he focuses mainly on teaching. Together with his wife Trang, he owns the Pro G Academy, a dance academy for young people. His wife is also a professional dancer, specializing in sports dance. The name of his academy is a combination of his wife's former dance club, Pro Club, and his former dancing school for children, Golden Horse. The main studios are located on the 4th and 5th floor of a condominium on Minh Khai Street. The space is 500 square metres in size, and the rent is some $10,000 USD per month. Together with his wife and small daughter, Thanh lives in a flat in the same housing complex. Both husband and wife work every day from 3 pm until 10 pm, and on Sundays they start even earlier. During their busy work schedule, his mother-in-law takes care of their young daughter. Growing up in Hoan Kiem District, Thanh actually prefers to live in Hanoi's Ancient Quarter, but for now it is convenient for him and his family to live close to work. Commuting hours have accelerated in Hanoi in recent years, as I learned when returning to my own family's apartment on Thuy Khue Street on one occasion, which took more than an hour by taxi one Saturday evening.

Thanh training at Pro G Academy

Source: Nils Kurfürst (2018)

Thanh still participates in dance battles. He was a participant in the final battle of the 2 vs. 2 house dance at the Juste Debout in Bangkok 2019, and he is recognized by the younger generation of street dancers as an OG (*Đại*) of the Vietnamese hip hop scene. Thanh is also the leader and co-founder of the Big Toe Crew, Vietnam's infamous breaking crew. Originally, Big Toe was founded in 1992. At that time, the crew's founder invited Thanh to become a member of his crew. Soon thereafter, the crew dissolved and Thanh asked the founder for approval to revive the crew. After its reestablishment, Thanh became leader of the Big Toe Crew. The name "Big Toe," which translates as *ngón chân cái* in Vietnamese, refers to the part of the body that is most important in dancing, as the big toe renders stability. Some people in Vietnam still refer to the crew by the Vietnamese name, but Thanh deliberately chose an English name in order to attend international competitions.

At its height, Big Toe was internationally renowned. The crew won major international competitions, such as the Battle of The Year (BOTY) SOUTH-EAST & SOUTH ASIA in 2010, was champion in China, made top five at BOTY in France, and was awarded third place in the international b-boy R16 tournament, organized in Korea in 2010. At that time, the winning crew was comprised only of b-boys, with no b-girls. The crew was very successful because, as Thanh says, they mixed breaking with a bit of hip hop and popping. Many times during our conversations, Thanh emphasized how important it was to him to combine different dance styles. For him dancing was never about breaking only.

While Big Toe was founded in Hanoi, it soon expanded to Central and Southern Vietnam, with branches in Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City. In Ho Chi Minh City, the Big South Crew, led by Viet Max, emerged as a major breaking crew. Viet Max was one of Thanh's first students in 1994. Thanh taught him for one year, after which they began performing together and became friends. When Viet Max went to Ho Chi Minh City, he built his own crew there and helped to develop the hip hop scene. Thanh explains that he named Viet Max's crew Big South, as a way of indexing Big Toe in the South. Apart from breaking, the Big Toe Crew integrates dance styles as diverse as popping, waacking, and house.

When I met Thanh for the first time in 2015, he told me that each dance style had its own group within Big Toe. At that time, Big Toe had a group of 10 constant members engaged in breaking, sometimes expanding up to 20 breakers, with only one of them being female. The only b-girl among the breakers was Mai Tinh Vi. Apart from breaking, 20 members were engaged

in popping, 15 in waacking, and only five members in house dance. Female dancers could particularly be found in the popping and waacking groups. The Big Toe organization was decentralized, but still hierarchical. All of the subgroups had their own leader, with Thanh being the overall leader of Big Toe. In a 2015 interview, Thanh described his leadership responsibilities to me as follows: listening to the opinions of group leaders, discussing various issues with them, and mediating among them in cases of conflict. In 2011, one year after the crew's great international success, the crew broke up, at least according to Thanh. As Thanh explained earlier, he felt that as a leader, he needed to focus on more than just winning, as he also hoped to provide livelihoods to his crew members. Thus, while Thanh formally dates the crew's break-up to 2011, the next generation of Hanoi's dancers keeps the crew alive, as they claim to be members of Big Toe. To Thanh, this is not a contradiction, as he understands that dancers long to be part of Big Toe. In other words, the crew is kept alive, yet with new actors. Every year, old members like Thanh, Mai, and many new members celebrate the anniversary of Big Toe, both on the ground and online via social media platforms. On the 25th anniversary in 2017, a celebration took place with Thanh as the MC, introducing all the old members of the crew, among them Viet Max, anh Ha, Phuong Silver Monkey, anh Long, among others. All the old timers reunited on the stage. On the occasion of the crew's 26th anniversary in 2018, Mai Tinh Vi posted on Facebook, "Happy Birthday to all the big brothers of hip hop in Vietnam. BIGTOE CREW. 21/11/1992 - 21/11/2018." The post was followed by the hashtags #Longl ivetheking #NgónChânCái #26thAnniversary #BigtoeCrew.

The photo accompanying the post shows Mai in a pose, preparing to strike in a battle with an opponent outside the frame of the picture. In the picture, Mai appears to head the crew, while all male dancers comprising her back-up. In this narration of the crew's birthday, the break-up that occurred in 2011 is not mentioned, whereas the post instead suggests that the crew has been in existence since 1992. In reaction, Thanh responded to Mai's post stating: *Xong đi đâu mất*. (Well… where has it gone?)

In other words, Big Toe has evolved into a hip hop icon in Vietnam, which is revived over and over again, yet by different actors. Already in 1992, in the beginning, Thanh revived the crew, asking permission from its original founder. In the meantime, the name Big Toe was also used to found a new breaking crew in 2014, the bboyz Big Toe, which uses the self-chosen motto "Keep Moving." Virtually, the crew claims a lineage with the 1992 Big Toe Crew, although the mission statement on its Facebook page states that the crew is

Big Toe Anniversary 2018

Source: Facebook Mai Tinh Vi (2018)

independent from Big Toe and has its own studio at De La Thanh nho Street. Among others, the crew is comprised of Bun-X, who used to be a member of the Big Toe Crew, and FuJi Pop, a contemporary of Thanh, who is the owner of ASDJ dance studio, where Nguyet teaches, and Mai Tinh Vi. Consequently, as the first (internationally known) Vietnamese hip hop formation, many performers feel the need to keep the Big Toe Crew alive. More precisely, references that different groups of dancers make to the Big Toe Crew gradually generate a common history and shared sense of belonging. In other words, these references allow for cooperation without consensus in the Vietnamese hip hop community of practice. The name Big Toe thus serves as a signifier for different signifieds, signalled by different group members and leaders at different times. Overall, the crew name Big Toe Crew symbolizes the roots of breaking in Vietnam, and has become a temporal marker for the beginnings of hip hop in Vietnam. Whenever I talked to hip hop dancers, they would often refer to Big Toe Crew as the first dance crew in Vietnam, and remember dancers like LionT or Phuong Silver Monkey as members of the first generation of dancers. All other crews and dancers are measured against the zero point of Big Toe Crew's foundation. One of the interviewed dancers considered Linh3T, the leader of SINE Crew, to belong to the second or third generation of dancers following LionT.

In the meantime, the dance landscape in Hanoi and elsewhere in Vietnam has diversified, with crews mushrooming all over the country. Yet, the affiliation with and linkage to Big Toe appears to render legitimacy to newly found crews. While Big South formed as a section in Southern Vietnam many years ago, Big Toe's latest spin-off, B Nashor, is a Hanoi-based allstyle hip hop crew, comprised of members from Big Toe Crew and Milky Way Crew, and constantly looking for new members. What is striking about B Nashor is that the crew is dominated by female dancers, whose leaders are Mai Tinh Vi and Mia Nashor. Their Facebook account and social media representation introduce the name B Nashor, which is quite new in the Vietnamese hip hop landscape.

Breaking in the periphery

Big Toe is thus not only well-known abroad, but it is thus renowned across Vietnam, as a spatiotemporal reference point for many Vietnamese b-boys and b-girls. Bi Max, a b-boy from Quang Tri Province, is also familiar with the name. Born in 1993, Bi Max started out breaking in Quang Tri Province. Today he lives together with his wife, Nguyet, in Hanoi. Back in Quang Tri Province, Bi Max was a member of the 81 Days Crew. In a conversation with Bi Max, he remarked that they changed the crew name three times before coming up with the current name, which references a historic event that occurred in Max's home province during the Vietnam War – or the American War, as it is referred to in Vietnamese. After the Geneva Conference in 1954, conflicting military parties were ordered to retreat to the Northern and Southern parts of the country. As the Viet Minh retreated to the north under governance of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the French troops in the south under the Republic of Vietnam, a demilitarized area emerged in Central Vietnam. Quang Tri Province, the northernmost province of the Republic of Vietnam, was thus the battle ground for two major confrontations that occurred between the two opposing political regimes: the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the Easter Offensive of 1972. On both occasions, North Vietnam's army struck the Southern Vietnamese and U.S. armies. The crew's name, 81 Days, references the second battle of Quang Tri in 1972, shortly after the Easter Offensive. During the Easter Offensive in 1972, the North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam captured Quang Tri Province as well as the northern part of Thua Thien-Hue Province. The second battle of Quang Tri began on 28 June

1972, and lasted 81 days until 16 September 1972. On that day, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam defeated the North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam on the battle ground of the ancient citadel of Quang Tri, reconquering most of the province. Accordingly, the crew name quotes this historic event. The choice of the crew name also supports Schwenkel's (2011) argument that contemporary Vietnamese youth, although not having experienced the hardships and turmoil of the war, are well aware of their national, and in this particular case, local history. Accordingly, naming the crew after this historic event can be regarded a performative act of identification with the national community. What is more, the crew name's reference to the second battle of Quang Tri is indexical of breaking. The battle is idiosyncratic to breaking since striking "attacks" toward the opponent, and the overall participation in battles, are crucial to the dance style. Thus, the choice of the crew name reveals members' knowledge of hip hop culture, while integrating the crew into the transnational collective of b-boys and b-girls.

In Quang Tri, Bi Max used to practice with his crew outdoors in a square close to his hometown, where they mainly connected with breaking crews from Central Vietnam. Bi Max was the vice leader of the crew, and he noted that, back then, there were many dancers in Central Vietnam. Bi Max primarily practiced breaking and popping. As each dance style did not have its own crew, each crew integrated these different dance styles. This is similar to the TiTan Crew of Ninh Binh Province in the North, which also integrates different dance styles. However, Bi Max notes that, these days, there are fewer and fewer dancers, since the "young generation" is not interested in hip hop any longer. Instead, they like to go out to watch movies. Bi Max was only able to connect with the Big Toe Crew when he moved to Hanoi to live with Nguyet. In Hanoi, he extended his repertoire to include hip hop dance. Thus, Bi Max has become a member of the New York Style Crew, in which his wife Nguyet is also a member. Bi Max has a lot of popping and b-boy friends, who regularly meet in the same public spaces for training.

Material infrastructures of public space

Already with the rise of breaking in the U.S., dancers gathered in New York's public spaces, on street corners and along sidewalks. Through their bodily contortions on concrete sidewalks, they created make-shift youth centres (Rose 1994: 22). Breaking requires a particular materiality, including a smooth

and flat surface, as well as sufficient space to perform in a cypher. When dancers "get down" on the dancefloor, they check that the ground is free from any fissures or splinters. In Hanoi, b-boys and b-girls mingle in the city's central public spaces, like Ly Thai To Garden, Lenin Monument, Thong Nhat Park, and previously around the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace. While the materiality of these spaces offers infrastructure for urbanites to engage in dancing, their daily dancing routines create such communal spaces and times (Hamera 2007). In other words, dance practices interweave disparate places within the urban fabric, connecting dancers from different neighbourhoods, social backgrounds, ages, and genders with one another.

The following vignette describes my observations of Ly Thai To Garden one evening in October 2018.

As I arrive at the square together with my husband and my two sons at 8:20 p.m., eight dancers, one of them female, gathered in front of the statue. Throughout the evening, the girl maintained an observer position, not participating in the dancing. When we arrived, the dancers almost seemed to form a circle, taking turns entering the cypher. However, this formation changed quickly and the spatial practices diversified. Dancers turned to focusing on their individual exercises. Further to the left of the square, dancers started practicing power moves on the ground. Before they began breaking on the ground, they wrapped cloths as protection around their heads, such as scarves, hats, or bandana. As new dancers arrived in the square, they first warmed up and then start grooving before entering the footwork and expanding their moves. Later, their spatial practices began to align with the outline of the square, as the dancers positioned themselves not so much in a circle, as in the cypher, but rather in a rectangular. The dancers formed two parallel lines along the square's North-South-axis, facing each other. As a result, five b-boys were standing with their backs to the king's statue and the other five b-boys with their backs towards the lakefront. A closer look at the layout of the garden might explain the arrangement of these bodies in space. After dark, two large spotlights are directed towards the statue facing the lake, providing light for the dancers, creating an imaginary stage or dance floor. Those dancers facing the statue and with the lights in their back, are even able to see their own shadow on the ground. Behind the statue, there is a spot that remains untouched by the spotlights. This area is used as a dressing room, as b-boys changed their clothes under cover of the night.

Legitimate peripheral participation is once again recognizable in space, as two smaller lines of dancers form along the square' east-west axis. One

Ly Thai To Statue in the evening

Source: Nils Kurfürst (2018)

of the dancers in this circle explains that he was from Blue Garden Crew, and that he comes to practice at Ly Thai To Garden when he does not have to work in the evening. At first, he did not feel comfortable coming to the garden, as there were many advanced dance practitioners, but his teacher encouraged him to join. In this public space, many dancers from different crews practice together. The dancer says: "It is very friendly. Everyone who wants can come here." His quotation reminded me of the b-boys I had met at the same place ten years ago. In 2008, B-boy Born told me: "We got to

know each other here. Everyone who likes to dance, comes here. Every day it is getting more crowded." Both b-boys indicate the inclusiveness of their practices and their openness to newcomers.

The young man I talked to is joined by a young b-girl along the periphery of the square. She wears sneakers, sweat pants, and a wide blouse. Before she joins him, she walks along the cypher counter-clockwise, shaking the hands of all the b-boys. She greets them in a very polite manner, holding her right hand with her left, and addressing them as *anh*, using the polite suffix *ạ*. She warms up, and then performs some moves by herself. She starts out with some footwork, before taking to the floor to practice some slow moves on her head. In order to prepare for this floorwork, she wraps a black cloth around her head. After 9 p.m., another b-girl joins the group of dancers. While they are dancing, other spatial practitioners are using the space as well, for skateboarding, inline skating, football, and prayer, as people light incense sticks in front of Ly Thai To. Although other spatial practitioners are allowed entry, the dancers create a well-demarcated space for themselves with their spatial practices and the positioning of everyday objects. They place their bags, backpacks, and water bottles in front of the statue, while those taking breaks sit in front of the statue facing the lake.

One week later after this evening at Ly Thai To Garden, on the evening of October 10th, Hanoi municipality celebrated Liberation Day of Hanoi. On this 64th anniversary of Liberation Day, Ly Thai To Garden is decorated with flags presenting a hammer and sickle, while official celebrations take place in front of the statue. On the platform in front of Ly Thai To, dancers and singers perform in turn. To their left and right, spotlights facing the lake as well as large loudspeakers and music equipment have been erected at the site. A female chorus performs two songs, the women all dressed in long blue dresses. A female host leads the evening's events. A rather large crowd comprised of spectators of all ages gathers in front of the scenery. Since the official festivities occupy their usual breaking spot, the young dancers do not gather at Ly Thai To Garden on this evening. However, the official celebration does not seem to disrupt their daily routines, which take place in the park behind the statue, where various groups who regularly dance there have assembled. Most of the groups consist of women doing aerobics, dance sports, and gymnastics, as well as elderly women practicing movements with their fans.

The following Wednesday is a normal working day, and the b-boys and b-girls reassemble at the same spot as they did two weeks before. Yet, the scene lighting is different, as the spotlights that usually shine on the Ly Thai

To statue are turned off. At 8 p.m., only two b-boys practice in front of the statue without music. Fifteen minutes, however, the scene has changed. Loud U.S. rap plays and the b-boys become a multitude. An hour later, 11 b-boys and one b-girl practice individually or in small groups of two to three people. The girl, wearing a white extra-large t-shirt, baseball cap, white sweat pants, and white sneakers, begins practicing alone and then crosses the square, joining a small group of three b-boys. The oldest of the boys instructs the other two boys and the girl.

This evening, the breakers once again do not form a cypher. Most of the dancers practice facing the statue, while only few of them face the lake, with most of them squatting at rest. Breaking is a very intensive and exhaustive bodily practice compared to the other dance styles discussed in this book. During battles, there is usually no need to keep time for breakers, as the dancers are physically exhausted after roughly one minute. That is why breakers take frequent rests.

On a Monday evening two weeks later, seven b-boys and the b-girl from the week before practice in front of Ly Thai To. Once again, the amplifier, their backpacks, and water bottles are placed in front of the statue, demarcating the dance floor. U.S. rap and breaking music is playing the entire time. The big spot lights are switched off, in favour of a more pleasing orange light, shining on the statue. Once again, most of the dancers face Ly Thai To statue while dancing. With the orange light at their backs, they can see their shadows on the ground. The shadow, in fact, functions as a mirror with which the dancers can assess their movements.

Square infrastructures are thus crucial to creating and maintaining communities of practice. The materiality of Ly Thai To Garden allows for different dance practices. I showed that breakers mainly gather on the smooth surfaces surrounding the statue, making use of the space's lightening, while aligning their bodily practices with the outline of the space itself, thereby creating an iconic index. Instead of convening in a round cypher, they instead form a rectangle with two long lines of dancers facing one another. Apart from the materiality of the space itself, the symbolism of the space, including different degrees of state and municipal control, likewise shapes how dancers gather in particular spots. Ly Thai To Garden, as well as Lenin Monument, are places known to all Hanoians, although their symbolism may diverge or even be contested. To members of the hip hop community of practice, these squares and gardens are symbolic spaces as these are sites where dancers first mingled. Moreover, through their dancing in public, they contest common ideas about

Breakers practicing in front of Ly Thai To Statue

Source: Nils Kurfürst (2018)

proper youth conduct in public spaces. First of all, they introduce a kinesthetic vocabulary into public space that diverges from other uses, such as playing football or badminton. Second, dancing allows for "new" intimacies in public space, transgressing the norms of physical proximity. For instance, a b-girl and a b-boy may stand very close to each other, almost kissing. Such physical affection between lovers can be hardly observed in public space, except under the cover of the darkness, such as on Thanh Nhien Street, which translates into "Youth Street." Located between West Lake and Truc Bach Lake, the street is well-known in Hanoi as "lovers' lane," as young couples sit tightly entwined on their motorbikes along the banks of the lake. On this street, however, they would be alone or at most one couple among many. At Ly Thai To, by contrast, they are the only couple among a group of mostly male dancers, and constantly watched by the others. Accordingly, such public displays of affection challenge common ideals of youth's proper conduct, thereby creating "scenes of intimacy" in otherwise public spaces (Berlant and Warner 1998: 554).

B-girls: Mai Tinh Vi

When I conducted field work in Hanoi for my research on public space between 2007 and 2008, I had an opportunity to interview Mai Tinh Vi. At that time, I could not have known that, some 10 years later, she would become Vietnam's most famous b-girl.

Born in 1991, Lai Sao Mai, popularly known as Mai Tinh Vi, is Vietnam's most famous b-girl, hip hop, and house dancer. Starting out as a b-girl, she has expanded her stylistic repertoire to include waacking, locking, hip hop, house, and soul dance. Since she likes to combine different dance styles, and is frequently either a participant or judge in freestyle battles. Her b-girl name, Mai Tinh Vi, already indicates self-confidence, as it literally translates as "Sophisticated Mai," demonstrating both self-confidence as well as authenticity, since she has become sophisticated in diverse dance styles. Mai explains that the phrase *tinh vi* has two meanings, first, "I think I am better than you," and second, that you are good in every detail. This makes her b-girl name ideal for participation in battles, as it deploys two incremental forms of street rhetoric, including the taunt and the boast. The taunt is embodied in insulting gestures toward the opponent, whereas the boast is incorporated in acrobatic virtuosity (Banes 2004: 14). In breaking, the taunt and the boast are analogous to the stylistic devices of dissing and bragging in rap. Bragging, brought to an extreme in braggadocio, is a stylistic device used by the MC to verbally elevate herself above all others (Banes 2004; Bradley 2009). Consequently, the demonstration of physical virtuosity and inventiveness is the braggadocio analogue of breaking, verbally symbolized in the name Mai Tinh Vi. However, like so many other dancers I spoke to, Mai did not choose the name herself, but rather received the name from her cousin. One day, Mai's cousin created a Yahoo messenger account under that name without Mai's knowledge. Her cousin seemed to have a liking for Tinh Vi, as he also gave this suffix to another cousin, which Mai only found out later. The other cousin is also a dancer, but does not participate in battles. In fact, the act of the name-giving matches the everyday usage of *tinh vi*, as it is usually employed to characterize someone else. Mai explained how she eventually came to like the name, and has never considered changing it since.

Mai started dancing in 2003, at age 12. She first encountered hip hop in a Korean movie. Her personal summary of the movie boils down to a short-haired girl who does hip hop dance and has a handsome boyfriend. Watching the movie, she wanted to become like the movie's protagonist. Both love and

the short hair are two recurring themes in her autobiographic narrative of how she became a hip hop dancer. First of all, Mai has always had short hair, which is a statement in itself, since most Vietnamese women, as in many other places around the world, have long hair. Moreover, a well-known Vietnamese pop song, which she describes as one of her favourite Vietnamese songs to dance to, is called *Tóc nắng*, or "Short hair," by the female singer My Linh. This song is often played at dance battles by Vietnamese DJs. Second, during our interview she reflects on the role different boyfriends played in supporting her, and pushing her to become the skilled and sophisticated dancer she is today. While she performs body movements whose aesthetics are associated with masculinity, she also points out the emotional and sometimes professional support she received from boyfriends who encouraged her to believe in herself, and pushed her to new levels. In fact, she stresses the word "love" when suggesting that it "was the love" that made her stronger. Johnson (2014) rightfully points out that while it may seem trite to integrate love into discussions about women and femininity, she nonetheless claims that b-girling could be linked to a more progressive reading of love as a resource, fundamental to building community, while changing one's community to be more receptive to alternative futures and lifestyles. Love not only implies romantic love, moreover, but also love of the self (Nash 2013). Mai thus employs love as a term to denote a resource and communal bond that provided her with strength and power to become who she is today. Not only does she stand out as an individual in the hip hop community of practice, but she is also active in building and supporting the local hip hop scene and market.

Let me return to how Mai got involved in breaking. After she saw the Korean movie, a neighbour's friend took her to the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace to learn hip hop. At that time, there were only a few well-known places for b-boys in Hanoi, one of them being the *cung xô*. Mai tried to gain access to two crews, regularly practicing there, but none of the crews let her participate. When talking about how she was denied access to practice with them, Mai does not make gender an issue. Rather, she refers to the crew members—whether female or male, she does not say—as simply ignoring her, as they were "so cool." Later in 2004, she went to the Big Toe Crew training site in Giang Vo Street. In contrast with her previous experience at the *cung*, in her narrative she now cites gender as a factor that helped her access the Big Toe Crew. At that time, Thanh was already leader of Big Toe. He was receptive to her as a girl who wanted to learn breaking, and he decided to train her and another girl personally. Mai recalls how they cycled every morning

to Thanh's house in Hoan Kiem District during the summer holidays. There, Thanh would teach them different moves, including power moves, from 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. After these exercises, an advanced team from the Big Toe Crew came to Thanh's house for further practice. Mai remembers how she longed to become a member of the crew one day, eventually succeeding, as the Big Toe Crew was explicitly seeking women who could dance. Thanh's attitude, willingness to train her, and finally accepting her into the crew diverges from the approach of his male peers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. Chew and Mo (2019) demonstrate that male instructors frequently refuse to teach difficult moves or combos to b-girls, assuming that it would be enough for women to learn footwork. Thanh, by contrast, was excited to teach women these physically challenging postures.

When I first met Thanh in 2015, he told me that Big Toe's breaking team consisted of 10 core members, sometimes extending to 20, but only one of them was female. He suggested that I get to know the only b-girl in the crew, Mai Tinh Vi. In 2005, Mai founded her own crew, named CunCun, which translates as "cute dog," and initially consisted of three female members. As the crew originally wanted to participate in a showcase, they did not put much thought into the crew name. One day when they were called on stage, and asked their crew name, they simply answered CunCun. From 2005 until 2012, CunCun focused on showcase dance. The founding and training of CunCun reveals parallels with the early involvement of women in breaking in the U.S. As Michael Holman (2004) notes, the early b-girls focused more on synchronized movements of the collective body of their crew. Although within these choreographed routines, each b-girl had a solo part to a particular section of music, the b-girls would refrain from doing the same floor moves that the b-boys did. In 2014, CunCun was champion of the Idance competition in Vietnam. Part of the winning team included Mai as well as two other girls who used to practice with her at Ly Thai To Square in 2008. Today, CunCun Crew has its own studio on Thai Thinh Street, where Mai and others regularly offer dance classes. Moreover, the crew annually commemorates its anniversary, if not in real life celebration, then on social media, such as Facebook.

Together with Big Toe Crew, Mai participated in the Battle of the Year South Asia 2014, which took place in Vietnam. Jointly with other Big Toe Crew members, she was part of the company that performed the break dance theatre performance, "Faces," first in Indonesia in 2009, and then in Germany in 2011. The theatre was a collaborative project between the Goethe Institute

Hanoi and L'Espace in Hanoi. In 2012, Mai was awarded second place in the *Vũ điệu Xanh* dance competition on national television.

Interestingly, Mai does not make gender an issue herself. This is also an observation made by Barley Norton in his research on spirit mediums in Northern Vietnam, and Jane Atkinson's study of Wana shamans in Sulawesi. Norton (2006) shows that although women and men assume different ritual roles in the Mother Goddess religion, most followers did not link this differentiation strictly to gender. In a similar vein, Atkinson (1989) explains that most of the Wana of Sulawesi refuse to regard gender as a prerequisite for becoming a shaman, despite the fact that most shaman were male. This suggests that although to the observer gender appears to be a crucial factor in becoming a b-boy or hip hop dancer, the actors themselves do not necessarily agree. In our conversations, Mai refers to gender two times, first when talking about how she became a member of the Big Toe Crew, and second in her self-perception as a dancer. In a conversation we had in October 2018, she adds that she is so used to working together with men, that she would not know what it feels like to work with women. At the time, she would soon find out, since she was planning to participate in the Juste Debout Battle in Bangkok in January 2019, together with a female hip hop dancer from Hanoi, Hoang Phuong.

Mai explains that she receives respect from her male peers, which she links with her drive toward continuous self-improvement – a crucial element in breaking. Sociolinguistically, these expressions of respect are evident in the forms of second person address that Mai's male peers use to address her (see Chapter 3). The October 2018 Red Bull Battle in Hanoi offers an example for the circumvention of hierarchies through peer address. Mai was not only the organizer of this prestigious event, but she was also the only female of three judges in the freestyle category, as well as the only female dancer in the Hanoi House Dance Crew, which performed that evening for the first time ever in Vietnam. The freestyle battle on the first day was moderated by Trung X, a male popper, who was born in 1990. The judges, apart from Mai Tinh Vi, included Tune Tun of the Last Fire Crew and Phuong of the Milky Way Crew. Before the winners of the preliminaries were called on the stage, the MC asked the judges to come to the stage and to share their experiences with hip hop in Vietnam with the audience. Trung X first welcomed Tune Tun from the Last Fire Crew, and then Phuong from Milky Way Crew. He referred to both men, using the pronoun *anh* (older brother), while explicitly addressing Phuong as *anh* Phuong. Phuong said of himself that he is the oldest on the

stage. Mai, apparently the youngest dancer on the stage and the only female, was addressed by the MC as Mai Tinh Vi or Mai, instead of using the proper kinship term of *em* (younger sister). By addressing her first with her dance name, Mai Tinh Vi, and then her given name, Mai, Trung avoids conveying a gendered status difference between himself and Mai, and between Mai and the two male judges. By using her given name, the MC expresses his respect for Mai as a peer, the organizer of the event, and as a renowned female dancer.

Mai Tinh Vi judging the Red Bull freestyle battle

Source: Sandra Kurfürst (2018)

Mai's self-perception reveals continuity in an otherwise binary gender system. In our first interview, Mai self-identified as a "b-boy-girl," describing herself as a bit "boyish." In her social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram, moreover, she regularly posts videos and photos with the subtext "dep zai." *Dep Zai* is a dialect form as well as a creative play on words built from the adjective *đẹp trai*. In Vietnamese, *đẹp* means beautiful, pretty. The masculine form, *đẹp trai*, is used for men, and could be translated as "handsome" in English. Moreover, *đẹp trai* is typically used to refer to other people, and not usually to characterize the self. Posting photos of herself, and commenting on them with *dep zai*, thus diverges from the norm in two ways, first, with respect to the gendered usage of the term, and second, by referring to herself

in such terms. The creative connotation of the term is further grounded in her substitution of *trai* for *zai*, as the letter z is not part of the Vietnamese alphabet. In other words, she reflects upon her non-hegemonic femininity by using the term, *dep zai*. Mai explicitly identifies herself as a b-boy-girl, not a b-girl-boy or just b-girl. She characterizes herself through creative word play, thereby transgressing gender boundaries fixed by standard Vietnamese language. Performative gender effects are thus realized both through dancing as well as verbally, in the speech act, as both can serve as mediums for change. Performativity can be both a medium of subjugation, and a subversive resource at the same time (Reuter 2011). Like the embodied practice of dance, word play and other creative uses of language can become subversive resources.

Mai Tinh Vi at Red Bull Battle 2018

Source: Sandra Kurfürst (2018)

Breaking gender

According to Johnson (2014), b-girls help us, first, to think about breaking beyond the male body, and second, to expand our understandings of gender performativity. In consideration of the fact that the aesthetics of breaking

are usually associated with fit male bodies, b-girls transgress conventional notions of femininity. While both Bragin (2014) and Johnson (2014) are right to point out that they focus on a Western appraisal of gendered aesthetics, the bodily aesthetics of dances, such as popping and breaking, are assessed against a gendered matrix of corporeal postures, as well. In a 2018 interview with a young male dancer, he explained that since his crew specialized in breaking, there were more male than female members. His explanation referred to breakers as being very strong and requiring a lot of energy. The female members of the crew, by contrast, would engage in free style categories because, according to him, "hip hop dance is more comfortable for them than break dance because break dance is very hard very, very, very hard." Likewise, in another 2018 interview a female popper pointed out that the style "looks quite hard for girls," but cited this as the precise reason why she wanted to learn it. As a consequence, breaking has the potential to counter hegemonic and dominant femininities (Johnson 2014: 16; Bragin 2014). In breaking, dancers are able to perform diverse gender, thereby creating something new that literally "breaks" with established gender norms. In other words, the bodily performance makes room for the fluidity of gender. Through performance such gender fluidity and crossings of gender are enacted in the public sphere (Johnson 2014). While female dancers remain outnumbered by male dancers, they are becoming more and more visible in the public sphere, as they appropriate public spaces and can be increasingly seen performing on national television. As a result, marginalized femininities increasingly move to the centre of public attention, such as in b-girls' and female poppers' performances on television shows like *Vũ Điệu Xanh* and *So you think you can dance?* Their flamboyant performances model and may encourage other individuals to perform non-hegemonic femininities, as well. Rufu, a female popper, and Mai, a b-girl, both participated in the national media programs, and were celebrated for their artistic bodily contortions. Their reworking of normative ideas of femininity involve both their appearance or rather representation in public through visual markers such as clothing, tattoos, as well as their body movement in public space. Their popping or breaking in public space diverges first from other activities commonly practiced in public, such as badminton, aerobics, football, as well as from the movement repertoire expected of young women. Moreover, they contest dominant representations of women on a global scale. If there is such a thing as a global hip hop nation, then female poppers and b-girls challenge representations of women as sexual objects – most dominant in rap videos, where men conspicuously consume

women in order to elevate their social status, thereby reinforcing the binary system of heteronormativity. Consequently, Johnson (2014: 17) reminds us that b-girls are located between two competing notions of heterosexual femininity: First, expectations that women undertake polite and ladylike behaviour, and second, the pornofication of women (Johnson 2014: 17). I am aware that the first reading of b-girls is based on a Western, especially American, ideal of a woman's proper behaviour. However, drawing on my own and other scholars' analyses of the representation of women in Vietnamese popular culture, advertisement, and state propaganda, b-girls and female poppers are likely to challenge normative ideas of gender in Vietnam, too. An example for the negotiation of ideal femininity in Vietnamese popular culture is the case of Hoang Thuy Linh, which hit the headlines of national newspapers and online media in 2007. Hoang Thuy Linh was the leading actress in the TV soap opera series, *Van Anh's Diary*, which deals with teenage issues. In the daily episode, Thuy Linh played the school girl Vanh Anh who, in spite of her modern appearance, adhered to traditional Confucianist female virtues of *công*, *dung*, *ngôn*, and *hạnh*, which determine woman's labour, appearance, speech, and behaviour. In real life, however, a private sex video of the actress Thuy Linh and a former boyfriend circulated on the internet, initiating a public outcry. In discussion platforms on the internet and in newspapers, people shared their consternation and disappointment that she did not follow her TV character's moral lifestyle in real life (The Associated Press 24.10.07). What is more, the internet scandal led to public debates about morality and gender, as viewers were mobilized to vote on moral and lifestyle issues by short text messages and e-mails (Thanh Nhien 26.10.07). The evaluation of the actress's morality reveals gender norms underlying such an appraisal. While b-girls and female poppers are far from being publicly condemned for their sexual behaviour, they nonetheless diverge from dominant gender norms through their clothing, embodied practices, and not the least their life style. Participating in crew practices and battles means staying out late at night, frequently travelling alone, and thus detaching themselves from social and gender expectations.

In conclusion, being a b-girl anywhere in the world is ultimately political, not in the least because the "private is political" – a concept rooted in the Global North, particularly the U.S., British, and German feminist movements of the 1970s — but because b-girls constantly have to "deal with the sexual politics of being in an incredible minority," in spaces dominated by men (Johnson 2014: 17).