Invisible Skillz. Thoughts on Hip-Hop as an Artistic, Creative Culture

A Response to Kattenbeck

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Hip-Hop is a creative culture of participation that demands constant communication between artists, their artifacts, and the audience in the form of a call and response (Frost 2022a). This communication can take various forms: be it the exchange in a dance or rap cypher, listening and then dancing to beats, or, as Kattenbeck shows in his contribution, knowing and sampling existing sound material.

Exchange and communication form a central core of practices in Hip-Hop culture. They invite collaboration that is both *active* and *participatory*—whether it's the way the audience responds to a dancer in a battle, the artistic-creative negotiation and appropriation of space and movement for a stage performance, or exploring (digging) the subversive and political origins of Hip-Hop culture and its elements. Pure *reproduction* is (ideally) not something to be found in Hip-Hop—as it contradicts its core principles, such as knowledge of self; flipping of existing material; or creating one's own style in movement, beats, and fashion, etc. In this creative engagement with Hip-Hop, individual interest, origin, and access to its practices always play a crucial role (Frost 2022b).

I discovered Hip-Hop culture at the beginning of the 2000s in Berlin-Kreuzberg. First through listening to rap, then through writing, until I found my element: breaking. Since then, I have been active internationally as a breaker and jury member; I teach breaking in schools and universities and study the practice as an artist and scholar. For this response, I would like to share a note from a participatory field observation in Rabat, Morocco (2023), that I conducted during my research on individual style in breaking:

> *Today I am practicing on a friend's terrace. We have laid a PVC mat on the tile floor, and a breakbeat mixtape is blaring from the Bluetooth speaker. Sarah (name changed) is practicing her footwork, repeating various basics. She then tries out different ways of connecting and changing the movements. What does a step look like if she puts her knee on the floor instead of her foot? Or her elbow instead of her hand? Sarah creates a range of variations; she finds individual ways to implement the basics. And in so doing, she not only appropriates them but also creates her own style—her own movement identity in her breaking.*

The call for creativity, productivity, and active participation as well as the search for an individual artistic identity makes Hip-Hop interesting for many youths and (young) adults, and thus also for educational contexts in schools and extracurricular settings. It allows students to explore and solidify their own identity; it can awaken an intrinsic motivation for learning, teaching, and artistic creation and allows students to acquire social skills and self-competencies (Frost 2023; for further discussion of learning in breaking, see Rappe and Stöger 2022).

Because Hip-Hop means creative production instead of reproduction, and active, individual responses to existing practices, the institutionalization of beat-producing, rap, breaking, or one of the many other practices of Hip-Hop in formal educational contexts is also challenging. It questions set school structures and demands more flexibility. It calls for engagement with the dynamic practices of Hip-Hop, and finally to allow an Afro-diasporic culture entry into white and Western-dominated education systems, as Kattenbeck also elucidates (see also Frost and Nietzsche 2022). Hip-Hop artists still face structures that do not recognize their forms of skillz and knowledge—what Kattenbeck describes as their "artistic agency" (see Kattenbeck in this volume). Part of this artistic agency is the ability to be inspired by a multitude of possibilities and to incorporate them into one's own practice, which is perhaps the greatest skill possessed by those involved in Hip-Hop culture. It is these *invisible skillz* that are often not seen by the white majority society and therefore receive neither understanding nor appreciation.

Kattenbeck highlights how German educational and scientific institutions often fail to recognize the knowledge of Hip-Hop artists, using the example of beatmakers' theoretical understanding of waveforms, which isn't acknowledged in traditional music theory. The result is that Hip-Hop-specific skillz are invisible in these settings. In dance, for instance, many German educational institutions are reluctant to treat urban dance practices on par with classical

Western dance practices, often excluding them from practical training programs or academic research. This attitude not only diminishes the value of urban dance practices but also effectively erases the artistic agency of urban dancers.

German educational institutions often struggle to recognize or validate the artistic agency of Hip-Hop artists, partly because of these institutions' resistance to change and adapt, and perhaps also because of the unique and varied skillz that Hip-Hop artists possess. As Kattenbeck notes, the Hip-Hop emphasis on creativity and developing one's own style challenges the rigid, standardized training structures prevalent in cultural and educational settings. These institutions are usually focused on uniform learning outcomes, which clashes with the ethos of Hip-Hop culture. In Hip-Hop, the aim is for each individual to discover their personal interests and strengths within Hip-Hop practices. Hip-Hop practitioners seek to learn what intrigues them, engage with practices that capture their interest, and find their own forms of artistic expression. This ideally leads to a culture where individuals complement each other's styles rather than (re)producing them—thus fostering artistic growth and evolution within Hip-Hop, both locally and globally, through interactions with other cultural practices, contemporary popular culture, political events, etc.

The learning and creative mastery of knowledge, skillz, and Hip-Hop practices typically happen away from the public eye, in private and subcultural spaces such as local practice venues with peers, and through interactions at Hip-Hop events. Outsiders often only see the performance: the concert, the battle, the dance performance, the produced song. Often, the understanding of Hip-Hop culture is based on a limited perspective that sees only the tip of the iceberg, but not what lies behind or beneath the performance.

For those who see only the performative aspect, Hip-Hop culture remains mere entertainment. But those who look further and discover the *invisible skillz*—whether as scholars, teachers, artists from other disciplines or as interested audience—understand how extensive the practices of Hip-Hop culture are and the creative and artistic depth they possess.

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