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From blues women to b-girls: performing badass femininity

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This article introduces the concept of badass femininity, a marginalized femininity captured in the performances of contemporary b-girls (women breakdancers) and blues women of the 1920s. The author uses the work of Hortense Spillers, Maria Lugones, Chela Sandoval, and Angela Davis to argue that non-normative gender performances from the fringes of society are necessary consequence of histories of enslavement, genocide, and exploitation. Badass femininity is a one version of a multiplicity of femininities. It re-signifies qualities typically associated with masculinity through women whose work in dance and music move these gender performances from the margins to center stage.

Keywords: b-girls; breaking; breakdancing; b-girling; b-boying; marginalized femininities; badass femininity; oppositional consciousness; blues women

Differential consciousness is linked to whatever is not expressible through words. It is accessed through poetic modes of expression: gestures, music, images, sounds, words that plummet or rise through signification to find some void – some no-place – to claim their due.

– Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Sandoval 2000, 139)

Battles give women an opportunity to show a side of them that's not necessarily socially acceptable. You go to a battle and the idea is to be aggressive, really offensive, like you're attacking somebody. That's not something you can do in your normal day life; you're expected to be polite and ladylike. Breaking is an opportunity to talk shit, be angry, and be a badass, and it's cool. You suck if you can't do that.

– B-girl Chyna, *We B*Girlyz* (Cooper and Kramer 2007, 57)

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.¹ The confrontational and aggressive qualities of breaking are more aligned with conventional notions of masculinity than femininity in Western culture. That breaking adopts a male-identified moniker – b-boying – attests to why it is primarily characterized as a masculine dance by its practitioners. Despite that, Chela Sandoval makes the case that dance, as a poetic form, can move us through socially

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agreed-upon constructions of meaning. The void on the other side of that which is socially accepted or hegemonic is “no-place,” not because it does not exist but because its existence is unrecognized or made epistemically invisible. B-girls help us recognize breaking beyond notions of masculinity.²

As much as confrontation, aggression, and an outlaw persona are intrinsic parts of breaking’s aesthetic, being a b-girl means *being* an outlaw – a badass in “normal day life.” This is due in no small part because b-girls incur a much greater social cost for participating in a dance culture that is seen as being by and for young men. As a result, breaking’s inherent qualities are often interpreted differently on the bodies of women. Chyna makes it clear that being a b-girl means exhibiting qualities not typically associated with conventional notions of femininity as performed by a female-bodied person. Yet dance can quite literally move us to recognize that which is beyond the familiar and expected. B-girls contend with dominant discourses in order to embody non-hegemonic, marginalized femininities.

Chyna’s words in particular have inspired the following exploration of one form of marginalized femininity, what I call “badass femininity” – a concept that draws attention to non-normative femininities born out of the margins of society, and enacted in the public sphere through performance. Within the transnational subculture of breaking, increasingly events are organized with b-girls in mind and they are present in larger numbers in support of one another. Popular culture in particular opens up opportunities for b-girls to enact marginalized femininities in the media. The popularity of shows like *America’s Next Best Dance Crew* quite literally put b-girls center stage, with all-female crews such as The Beat Freaks and season four winners We Are Heroes showcasing images of b-girls as more than just token crew members. Badass femininity names a type of gender performativity captured by b-girls today and emblematic of women artists of prior generations who occupied the margins of society, using performance to make marginal positionalities socially viable modes of existence.

As a precursor to b-girls, I look to blues women as one of the earliest examples of badass femininity. In the post-Emancipation period, blues women were an important historical departure from colonial gender systems that were imposed on the enslaved, and consequent representations of black women in pop culture. B-girling, as a continuity of sorts with blues women, is in turn a critique of contemporary representations of women in Hip Hop through the language of dance. This discussion makes the case for b-girls and blues women as representations of claims to alternative versions of femininity. Badass femininity is one example of marginalized femininities worth consideration in the scope of gender performativity.

Where my b-girls at?!

The topic of women in Hip Hop is often discussed in terms of misogynistic lyrics and nearly (or fully) pornographic imagery. In Margaret Hunter’s analysis of what she calls the “new gender relation in Hip Hop,” she argues that strip club culture and conspicuous consumption, buttressed by the rise of Hip Hop moguls as contemporary Horatio Algiers in combination promote a Hip Hop “lifestyle” that consumes the bodies of women of color as readily as designer clothes and diamonds (Hunter 2011, 18). Part of the shift in gender relations that

she names is a new politics of dance wherein “getting low” and “making it rain” position women dancers as objects for the male gaze, interchangeable brown and black bodies that bend over (get low) and “shake it baby” in exchange for money literally thrown at them (making it rain) (26). Women dancers in this case are positioned to shore up “a performance of masculinity” that depends on a display of status through wealth, and power in relation to the women at whom they throw the money (29). In that respect, women are not producers of Hip Hop culture but objects to be consumed.

At the same time, Hip Hop carries the possibilities of resisting these very stereotypes. Hip Hop feminists are re-examining women’s relationships to the culture in all of its contradictions, and redefining the discourse on women in Hip Hop. In light of the inevitable contradictions within pop culture, Hip Hop feminism by definition draws attention to the place of authority forged within spaces of contradiction, especially from the positionality of post-Civil Rights era women of color³ (Durham et al. 2013, 117). Their work makes clear that there is far more to say about gender in Hip Hop than has previously been discussed (Davis 1995; Morgan 1999; Pough 2003; Durham 2007, 2010; Pough et al. 2007; Peoples 2008; Smalls 2011; Durham, Cooper, and Morris 2013).

Shifting our attention to gender practices within the lesser explored Hip Hop subcultures – the DJs, underground MCs, graffiti writers, and b-girls in the cyphers⁴ – expands our understanding of gender performativity. My work focuses on those women who get down to the ground, and break. B-girls deal with the sexual politics of being in an incredible minority, and they continue to hold their own in a genre that is dominated by men and can be resistant to women’s involvement beyond the realm of spectatorship. The genre’s earliest b-girls set the stage for future generations. Dancing roughly between 1974–84, the earliest b-girls included: Headspin Janet, Suzy Q, Sista Boo, Chunky, Pappy, Yvette, and Baby Love, along with the Shaka Zulu Queens and the Dynamic Dolls (the female crew counterparts to two well-established all-male crews, the Mighty Zulu Kings and the Dynamic Rockers).⁵ While they haven’t received a great deal of attention in Hip Hop communities or scholarship, their cultural work demonstrates how performance can trouble ideas about gender, appealing to girls and women who sought out like role models in this male-dominated culture.

B-girls are situated between two competing notions of heterosexual femininity: one is the pornification of women in Hip Hop, and the other refers to “normal day life” expectations of polite, ladylike behavior. At the same time, Hip Hop is also an incredible tool to challenge this contradictory position precisely because it was born out of racism, and socio-economic and political marginality. That the “b” in b-girl/b-boy (short for “break”⁶) can connotatively reference being “broke” (financially strapped) and being at one’s “breaking point” emotionally, psychologically, and financially (qtd. in Israel 2002), suggests that we have to think of breaking as a dance of survival. In battles, survival is a strategy characterized by the unofficial rule that the “last man standing” wins. But being the last woman standing is as important to b-girling’s survival as mastering an existence exemplified by the dance itself: playing with and breaking through social conventions in life to expand the terms by which bodies are able to move through the world.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the fewer number of b-girls than b-boys was itself a result of a range of social constraints placed on young women. Tricia Rose (1994, 48) writes that the “lack of experience, social support, and male discouragement” were contributing

factors. She specifies that cultural mores that more readily hindered young girls' participation, familial constraints that sanctioned leisure time in large groups of boys, and the threat of being given reputations of sexual availability all discouraged young women's participation:

Although this absence [of b-girls] has in some cases to do with relative ease of execution of specific moves for female bodies, most girls were heavily discouraged from performing break moves because they were perceived by some male peers as "unsafe" or "unfeminine." (sic) Female breakdancers sometimes executed moves in conventionally feminine ways, to highlight individuality and perhaps to deflect male criticism. Again, women who performed these moves were often considered masculine and undesirable or sexually "available." (Rose 1994, 48–49)

Not surprisingly, anatomical and moral claims were used against women. In other words, a woman's physique is not built to handle b-boying's more difficult moves, and even if they could, that style of dance is unladylike and unattractive. What's not stated is that none of breaking's moves are not necessarily "relatively easy" for anyone unprepared for them as they demand hours of training. That b-girls were discouraged from learning these moves speaks to the way in which cultural gender politics shaped the limited ways that b-girls were encouraged to participate. Nancy Guevara argues that the fewer number of b-girls participating conditioned people to think that they were either non-existent or altogether unqualified (Rose 1994, 48; Guevara 1996, 58). Those that participated despite the backlash breached expectations associated with heterosexual womanhood. The consequences were contradictory: b-girls were deemed undesirable and yet sexually available. The earliest b-girls were young African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latina women who were already subjected to a similar set of accusations by society at large through a range of stereotypes. So within the context of their own communities b-girls were doubly ridiculed.

By the 1990s, the discourse shifted from capability with the rise of prominent and respected b-girls like Rokafella, Honey Rockwell, and Asia One. Though their presence did not necessarily mean that women were recognized on an equal playing field – questions of tokenism and training again became more prominent – the exponentially growing number of b-girls reflects the cultural space staked out by those women who participated in breaking culture despite the backlash. They remain leaders in the breaking community, constantly evolving representations of alternative versions of femininity in Hip Hop and broader society.

Tomboys and b-girls

B-girls demonstrate the capacity for the body to signify femininities that are critically resistant to narrow constructions of gender performativity. Badass femininity builds on efforts to transform the landscape of gender performativity that we see in work on "female" and "feminist masculinities," but from angle of femininities rather than masculinities.⁷ Specifically, my claim of femininity goes against reading b-girls through masculine categories like that of the tomboy, the most culturally salient social category available to b-girls. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam (1998) refers to tomboys as one of

many categories of female masculinities that do not require male bodies. They are associated with youth and the permissive space for “boy rebellion” in the body of a girl, tolerated that is until her teen years when the dictates of adult femininity are enforced (5–6). One can read what b-girls do as youthful practices of playing in spaces of “boy rebellion” if for no other reason than that breaking is a male-dominated culture. Yet their aberration from gender expectation is especially evident precisely because they are no longer girls but adult women in their 20s and 30s. Like tomboys, b-girls stake claim to a freedom of expression that pushes the boundaries of gender performativity for female-bodied persons of a certain age. It is a freedom that even b-boys may not experience because they are more encumbered by a compulsory heterosexist male masculinity that can only imagine notions of femininity on male bodies as something to be avoided, associating it to homosexuality. (B-boying spaces are largely homophobic, especially with respect to gay men.)

Yet the category of tomboy does not fit b-girls entirely. From eight years of research on breaking communities in North America and Europe, I have come to understand b-girling through femininity rather than masculinity. In fact, most of the b-girls that I have met claim femininity, even when they operate outside of social expectations of what femininity is supposed to be. Honoring their identifications and the language they employ is part of a politics to foreground their cultural work rather than my theory. Moreover, reading b-girls through masculinity runs the risk of subsuming them under a label that misrecognizes the kind of power to which they stake claim. Masculinity, in that respect, can be as confining as hegemonic notions of femininity, negating b-girls’ own identities.

On a personal level, I am all too aware of the ways that black women are othered by being labeled masculine, emasculating, or simply unfeminine. By 12 years old, I knew that my body failed to meet the criteria for femininity, that in fact I failed. My thighs were too thick, hair too wild, laugh too loud, and opinions too strong. It felt as if I always fell short of European ideals of femininity when it was defined in terms of being quiet, demure, petite, and pretty. In an effort to grab on to some aura of femininity in junior high, I even went so far as to play the flute in the school orchestra because I thought it was the more feminine instrument, even though I really wanted to learn the drums. At the same time, I was raised in a family comprised largely of women, and was taught early on of the responsibilities of being an Avington woman. My maternal grandmother’s maiden name held honor and distinction, rooted in ideas of strength and independence. This legacy translated to every aspect of life, from learning how to drive a stick shift (because a strong woman should be able to drive anything), to claiming my sensuality, cursing out and possibly cutting anyone who had the audacity to lay hands on me, making a mean fried chicken, and always having the financial means to take care of myself without depending on anyone, especially a man. This criteria was problematic in its own way. While I grew up with a legacy of strength, my older brother grew up with a legacy of “trifling” or worthless black men that he had to somehow learn to avoid becoming. Yet this legacy was generations deep, even as I re-imagine its meaning so that strong femininity isn’t dependent on weak masculinity. Ultimately, my particular experiences taught me that there was value in claiming non-normative versions of femininity.

Badass femininity and its historical context

Badass femininity is an attempt to name a marginalized femininity. I define badass femininity as a performance that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded of ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass, or explicit expressions of a woman's strength. These expressions are not aligned with masculinity. They are expressions of femininity that rely on a brazen and authoritative stance, and are accessed through the permissive space of performance. They speak to lived experiences of feminine identities produced in the margins of society.

Marginalized femininities come out of historical conditions wherein the capacity to take control of one's subjectivity and to claim the body were acts of rebellion against the literal constraints historically placed on black and brown people. Histories of enslavement, genocide, forced labor, and colonial exploitation disallowed black women from claiming their subjectivities, and distorted the ways that gender was read on them. They became territories for fantasies of racialized sexual difference that did not comply with hegemonic constructions of a gender binary. Hortense Spillers and Maria Lugones describe distinct versions of the distortions resulting from the imposition of Western gender systems in relation to enslaved African and indigenous peoples. Spillers discusses a process of ungendering the captive body; Lugones describes gender itself as an imposed social hierarchy. Taken together, they clarify conditions prior to emancipation that set the stage for the emergence of marginalized femininities, particularly in the performances of blues women and b-girls.

In her canonical work, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers identifies a systematic process of ungendering to which African and indigenous people were subjected. Spillers writes:

The socio-political order of the New World ... *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body* – a willful and violent ... severing of the captive body from its motive will ... Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome* ... (Author's emphasis; Spillers 1987, 67)

Severed from their motive will and desires, African and indigenous peoples were forced out of their own subjectivities into a thingliness whose existence was for their captors. Captive bodies were both desired and feared, held up as the pinnacle of that which is outside of humanity yet still constructed as being in service to the captor sexually, physically as labor, biologically for "science," and so on. Acts of torture, mutilation, medical experimentation, and hard labor demonstrate the impossibility of a rights-bearing subject position for black and indigenous people. Their bodies became metonyms for the power of Western colonialism and its capacity to rename and re-signify different subject identities.

Across two articles, decolonial feminist philosopher Maria Lugones (2007, 2008) takes a different approach, arguing that imposed gender systems depicted African and indigenous captives as outside of the scope of Western humanity. Lugones refers to the differential application of Western gender binaries for whites versus that for blacks and indigenous as "light" and "dark" respectively (Lugones 2007, 22; Lugones 2008, 2). On the light side, women are subordinated to men and excluded by and large from "collective authority." On the "dark" side, racist distortions led colonizers "to imagine the indigenous

people of the Americas as hermaphrodites or intersexed, with large penises and breasts with flowing milk” (Lugones 2008, 7). African women were imagined to be more animal than human, positing that their uncontrollable sexual appetites meant that they could not be raped (Collins 2004, 101). The perceived inhumanity of black and indigenous peoples sanctioned their captivity, and the replacement of pre-colonial indigenous and African social systems that contended with Western versions of reality (Lugones 2007).⁸

In certain ways, Spillers and Lugones contradict each other. Spillers operates on the premise that gender existed in pre-colonial societies and enslavement stripped them of it. In contrast, Lugones argues that instead of ungendering, a gender binary was in many cases imposed where it didn’t exist before. Both scholars’ works converge at the site of the captive body being severed from her subjectivity through a distorted relationship to Western gender ideals, which solidified ideas of African and indigenous sub- or inhumanity. Upon emancipation, there was a radical shift in the capacity for the formerly enslaved to claim their bodies and their subjectivities, despite the contradictions of being granted citizenship yet denied of its benefits through violent encroachments on their newly established freedom – e.g. Jim Crow laws, sharecropping, lynching, and policing. Profound expressions of the possibilities of that freedom opened up as a result. Blues women were an early expression of emergent marginalized femininities, gender identities attuned to their contradictory positionalities in society post-emancipation.

Badass femininity: blues women

Marginalized femininities exist not simply because they can, but because they must. They are vehicles for survival produced in the margins of society by those who have been historically relegated to the status of second-class citizens. Staking claim to gendered subjectivities that spoke to positionalities in the margins of society was a new form of political possibility. As Angela Davis (1998, 5) writes: “The birth of the blues was aesthetic evidence of new psychosocial realities within the black population.” Performance spaces allow women to openly play with identity, as well to encode counter-narratives in and through the language of music and dance. In fact, black vernacular expressive practices and the body itself were platforms for hidden transcripts, indicative of African diasporic expressive practices in the Americas (Christian 1988; Hall 1992; Rose 1994). Out of the margins of society, blues women performed a badass femininity in counter-distinction to dominant notions of bourgeois femininity of the 1920s.

The legacies of the Judeo-Christian Madonna/whore dichotomy, the sexually repressive dictates of Victorian womanhood, the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood, and the middle-class aspirations of African American club women were versions of womanhood that set up strict categories of “respectable femininity” and labeled the women who breached them as “bad.” Whether racist, classist, xenophobic, or all of the above, Western constructions of femininity excluded women of color, poor, and immigrant women. Nonetheless these same women were subject to the judgments spawned from such constructions in broader society. Blues women spoke to the particular experiences of working class black women in those changing times (Carby 1986, 10).⁹

Blues women of the 1920s represented a radical departure from the expectations of women generally, of working-class black people of that era, and of black women in

particular. Angela Davis (1998, 22) writes poignantly about the work of blues women as “a brazen challenge to dominant notions of women’s subordination.” Stereotypes of mammies and coons caricatured black rural living, prompting black urban populations in the North to distance themselves from Southern culture. Blues women embraced their Southern, working-class roots; they opted for the road over the kitchen; sang of sexual relationships with women and men; addressed violent confrontations of which they were both victim and perpetrator; and they embraced folk cultural figures like the conjure man when it was increasingly passé to do so. Blues women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith produced counternarratives of black womanhood. Davis writes:

In Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s and Bessie Smith’s times, women’s blues bore witness to the contradictory historical demands made of black American women. On the one hand, by virtue of their femaleness, they faced ideological expectations of domesticity and subordination emanating from the dominant culture. On the other hand, given the political, economic, and emotional transformations occasioned by the disestablishment of slavery, their lived experiences rendered such ideological assumptions flagrantly incongruous. (Ibid.)

The lives of many black women after slavery in the US were incompatible with the “ideological assumptions” tied to bourgeois womanhood, black or white. In the interstice between white society and black realities, blues women created performances that were attuned to this incongruity, and represented a brazen black womanhood that “undermined mythologies of phallic power” (Carby 1986, 21). And they brought this positionality to the general public through live performances and race records (Ibid.). They were women on their own terms and in support of their distinct social positionalities.

Consider for example the violent description of marriage in Bessie Smith’s “Hateful Blues,” which presents a disturbing challenge to conventional representations of matrimony and romantic love (Davis 1998, 287; “Bessie-Smith – Hateful Blues (1924),” 2011).

I cried last night and I cried all night before, cried the blues
 And I said that I ain’t gonna cry no more, no more

 If I see him I’m gon’ beat him, gon’ kick and bite him, too
 Gonna take my weddin’ butcher, gonna cut him two in two

 The ambulance is waitin’, the undertaker, too
 A suit in doctor’s office, all kinds of money for you

 Ain’t gonna sell him, gon’ keep him for myself
 Gonna cut on him until a piece this big is left

In this song, Smith’s performance displays a complicated mix of emotions, from feelings of rejection, vulnerability, and sadness, to anger, a demented self-satisfaction, and even a bit of humor. Her blues are channeled through action, rather than a passive lamentation of loss. Smith’s tone is unapologetic and matter-of-fact. Yet the graphic explanation of butchering her former lover, reducing him to “a piece this big,” is reminiscent of a horror movie put to the rhythmic, forlorn sounds of a guitar and fiddle. One can dance a sensual, slow grind to a

song where a wedding gift is turned into a murder weapon. Most importantly songs like this were performed in public, on stage no less! Badass femininity is not contingent on violent expressions, but it is especially evident in this particular example. Smith “forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings” (Davis 1998, 41).

Hundreds of blues women who recorded in the 1920s captured femininities that echoed in the everyday struggles of black women, and challenged hegemonic notions of femininity from within and outside of the black community. Musical performance opened up the possibility for blues women to nourish themselves artistically, to support themselves financially, and ultimately to enact a vision of their existence that was not yet imagined for women of that era. Their legacy lives on in representations of them as physically and psychologically strong, sexually free, and authorities over themselves and others. For example, August Wilson (1985) depicts these very qualities in his work *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Blues women like Smith and Rainey revealed truths about working-class black women’s lives through performance, and set a precedent for badass femininity.

Though scholars have written extensively about the cultural work of blues women, my use here is an attempt to draw out the hints of differential interpretations of femininity in that work, most notably by Hazel Carby and Angela Davis. I am not establishing a complete history of badass femininity, but rather specific moments wherein it manifests. Women performers provide insight into an expanse of femininities, indicative of a capacity to talk back to the gender discourses to which they are subjected.

Badass femininity: b-girls

Girls who are breaking are very aware of their choices. Because if you’re a girl, you really have to make a choice to start breaking. You have to give up more socially than a guy to be able to break.

– B-birl Aruna (Cooper and Kramer 2005, 113)

B-girls represent a kind of partial continuity with blues women, in a post-Civil Rights era. They bring dance to the fore as a language of oppositionality in the public sphere, working against the constraints of conflicting discourses of appropriate femininity. Aruna’s opening statement makes clear that one must make the choice to sacrifice aspects of your social being in order to break. Though Aruna (founder of the Hip Hop Huis in Rotterdam) speaks of sacrifice and a social cost – echoing Chyna’s opening statement about the aberrant nature of b-girling vis-à-vis dominant notions of femininity – both also speak from an understanding of something gained or accessed by virtue of their positionality. In the discursive field of gender performativity, badass femininity makes visible otherwise overshadowed positionalities.

The Internet becomes an especially powerful medium through which to redefine this discursive terrain, and to assert the interests and concerns of female Hip Hop practitioners. Jessica Pabón, a performance studies scholar writing about female graffiti artists, calls the Internet a “system of visibility and communication for these women” (“Jessica Pabón at TEDxWomen 2012” 2012). Though writing about graffiti, Pabón’s (2013) conclusions

about the work of the internet for women Hip Hop practitioners is very fitting when talking about b-girls: “With the availability of the Internet, female graffiti writers are not only performing their countercultural identities and demonstrating their belonging, but they are also building and sustaining their communities and crews . . . ” Practices that sustain and develop b-girling also foster the perpetuation of a badass femininity in breaking, in Hip Hop, and beyond. B-girls sustain their identities in Hip Hop through specialized events and programming, short documentaries, social media, and web videos. “Strictly B-Girl,” a webseries dedicated to spotlighting b-girls, features 18 three to 10-minute interviews with b-girls largely from across North America. In them, they impart the importance of courage and discipline, advise dancers toward originality, and encourage rookies to stay strong. In the same manner that race records opened up performance spaces for blues women in the 1920s, the Internet does the same in a much more expansive way.

Interestingly, mobility and reclamations of the body recur as areas of interest for b-girls, though in a different way than these themes were for blues women. In this case, reclaiming the body’s physical strength through training and discipline speaks to the skills necessary for mastering breaking. Strength is wrapped up in ideas that the female anatomy lacks the proper upper body musculature necessary for one to be able to master b-boying. Yet training the body for these skills debunks this myth. B-girl Lee attests to that in her description of lessons from her first teachers, Dale and Mike: “They started teaching us just some basic, old school moves: Russian kicks, some footwork, six-step, pancakes, and taught us how to do handstands and then walk across the floor on our hands. And they would . . . put us through some rigorous drills. It was a good start because it . . . gave us a frame of reference that you have to train hard, you have to do stuff over and over” (“Strictly B-Girl: Lee” 2011). Doing repeated drills to build her strength set the stage for Lee to enter breaking culture already contending with ideas that once completely impacted the presence of b-girls and the quality of their training. She participates in a discourse about women and breaking, whether she likes it or not, just by doing it. Moreover, under the dictates of competing notions of appropriate femininity that demand women prioritize being sexy or pretty over being physically strong, claims to that strength trouble those expectations.

Mobility refers literally to moving the body as one pleases, without constraint on the types of moves undertaken. Moving the body as one pleases is also not a discursively neutral decision. B-boying’s basic aesthetic elements prompt questions as to the appropriateness of this aesthetic on a woman’s body. The question of whether a b-girl dances “as a guy” or “as a girl” remains unsettled. In a 2010 video short titled, “What Is a B-Girl?,” we hear both sides within the first two minutes of this nearly eight minute piece. Asia One states that:

Being a b-girl to me is representing the official cultural dance of Hip Hop, which is b-boying. I don’t call it b-girling. I don’t care if other people do. I feel like we do the style of dance that’s called b-boying, but we’re girls that do it so we’re b-girls . . . [B]eing a part of that culture [means] representing it right in the way we dance.

There is a kind of judgment attached to departing from the path of b-boying, as if those who do are misrepresenting the culture. Simultaneously, Asia One attempts to erase a conceptual difference between b-girls and b-boys, perhaps to situate them on an equal plane. This is a

mission of sorts for her since her crew, No Easy Props, is named after an admonishment of giving “easy props” or unearned respect to b-girls for simply being present rather than for being good. Easy props went hand-in-hand with not pushing b-girls to train in the more athletic moves, or keeping a b-girl in the crew as a token rather than as a member on equal footing with others. In contrast, 30 seconds after Asia One’s statement, b-girl Peppa remarks that:

It’s important for b-girls to understand that you are a woman, you are a female. So, yes we learned a lot of these moves from b-boys ... but it’s really important to note that you can dance feminine. You can still be strong and fierce and powerful. ‘Cause otherwise, if you wanna break like a b-boy and just only look like a b-boy, dress like a b-boy, and move like a b-boy, that’s b-boying. That’s not b-girling. There’s a difference. (“What is a B-Girl?” 2010).

On one level, Peppa offers a somewhat oversimplified critique of those claims that argue that b-girls are b-boying, because for Peppa that correlation enacts a failed attempt at imitating b-boys in their look, dress, and movement. To be fair, Asia One gestures more toward respecting the dance and thus Hip Hop by way of a certain kind of allegiance to its aesthetic foundations, which are wrapped up in the name “b-boying.” Beyond that critique though, Peppa acknowledges a “strong and fierce and powerful” femininity through b-girling. She expands ideas of dancing feminine to include breaking, rather than just conventional ideas about graceful long lines, seductive undulations, or hip-sashaying footwork. So when b-girl Vendetta pantomimes digging a grave, dragging b-girl A-Plus’s body into the imaginary hole, and shooting her with a shotgun before dropping into a couple of windmills, a head-spin, and a freeze, we can consider that feminine too, just in a different way (“Bgirl Vendetta vs Bgirl A-Plus” 2011). Peppa’s statement is all about badass femininity, developed out of the margins of a male-dominated culture.

Perhaps then the difference between b-girling and b-boying is in re-signifying femininity in a distinctively Hip Hop way, attesting to the unique contribution of b-girls for the culture as a whole. A Hip Hop femininity is not only about being women practitioners within *this* culture. Their performances re-signify the meaning of femininity on female bodies in general precisely because Hip Hop is the culture of multiple generations. Peppa’s words key into a legacy of strong, fierce, powerful feminine performances, and draws b-girls into a tradition that precedes them.

Coda

The benefit of Hip-Hop ... in relation to gender discourses, is that it offers contemporary conceptual space to negotiate gender on new terms with an audience that spans across race, class, and sexual boundaries – and often initiated by women of color, something that few other conceptual spaces can claim!

– T. Hasan Johnson, *You Must Learn!* (Johnson 2012, 74)

Social expectations of conventional femininity continue to work against today’s b-girls. Yet performances of their own strength, talent, and pleasure in the dance make the recognition of alternative public performances of femininity possible. It is not a performance exclusive to racially, sexually, or economically marginalized communities. B-girls, as cultural figures

of badass femininity, circulate wherever breaking exists worldwide and they bring this sensibility to new audiences who are receptive to the message.

The significance of this message translates into different possible theoretical directions. Badass femininity lends itself to analyses of feminism in the contemporary moment, Hip Hop feminism in particular, and emergent feminist consciousness through non-verbal performance practices. Though much of the work of hip hop feminism focuses on rap music, this article demonstrates the value of engaging dance and embodied practices to build on our understanding of this concept.

Another possible direction is with regards to love. While it might appear trite to end a discussion about women with love, as if capitulating to conventional notions of femininity, the case can be made for a connecting b-girling to more progressive definitions of love, focusing specifically on its capacity to change social conditions. Many b-girls talk about love explicitly in relation to breaking. For example, Ladieone states: “I fell in love with [breaking] ... I love the way it makes me feel ... Being able to do what I love passionately, just to keep dancing, that’s what keeps me inspired” (“Strictly B-Girl: Ladieone” 2011). JK-47 praises the Vancouver scene because it is, “all about the love” (“Strictly B-Girl: JK-47” 2012). And Ill LIL simply states, “I love it” when asked about why she breaks (“Strictly B-Girl: Bongo Roc & Ill LIL” 2010). Feminist scholars redefine love in ways that are committed to anti-racist, feminist, coalition-building work toward social change (Walker 1983; Lorde 1984; hooks 2000, 2001, 2002; Sandoval 2000; Jordan 2003; Nash 2013). Chela Sandoval (2000, 139) defines love as, “breaking through whatever controls in order to find understanding and community.” bell hooks (2001, 185) suggests that we “need to vigilantly create the alternative ground where our love can grow and flourish.” Jennifer Nash locates a politics of love in black feminist intellectual traditions that are about self-love rather than romantic love. Nash (2013, 12) specifies that love “stakes out a radical conception of the public sphere.” Altogether, these approaches suggest that love is both a modality through which to build community, and a resource for changing that community such that it is more receptive to alternative grounds that challenge existing forms of control. Radical conceptions of love are projects rooted in alternative futures that will recognize these different ways of being in the world, out of the margins and in the middle of the cypher.

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Notes

1. Verbalizing these gestures seems more explicit than seeing them in action.

2. B-girls are female breakers, the counterpoint to b-boys. I use “breaker” interchangeably with “b-girl” and “b-boy” when seeking more gender-neutral language.
3. Durham (2010, 117) defines Hip Hop feminism as follows: “an emergent interdisciplinary field of study forged from the symbolic annihilation of young women and girls of color in the popular media, and shaped by artists, activists, and scholars using language and oppositional consciousness of hip hop to craft a culturally relevant, gender-specific creative, intellectual, political movement.”
4. Cyphers are Hip Hop dance circles, and the structure for battles.
5. This list was compiled from citations in Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise*, and notes listed in the gallery at “We B-Girls” in 2006 at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis MN (Rose 1994, 48).
6. “Break” typically refers to drum solos that became the musical foundations to Hip Hop.
7. Jessica Pabón examines feminist masculinities in Hip Hop in particular. Both my and Pabón’s work build on efforts to transform the landscape of gender politics in and through Hip Hop.
8. Lugones (2008) looks to Paula Gunn Allen’s work on Native American matriarchical systems, third gender categories, and positive associations with homosexuality; and to Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyèwù-mí’s argument against the very existence of “woman” as a meaningful social category bound to anatomy in pre-colonial Yoruban societies of southwestern Nigeria.
9. Hazel Carby (1986, 10) notes that when African Americans mass migrated to Northern cities in the 1910s, their movement and the reconstitution of black communities as a result shifted the political terrain such that black intellectuals could no longer presume to speak for all black people. Intellectual constituencies fragmented and people found “alternative forms of representation” for their experiences of race.

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