

# “This is the Filipino scene for me”: Ethnicity, Gender, and Hip-Hop dance in Hawai‘i

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In the spring of 2007, I attended Pamantasan,<sup>1</sup> a conference for college students organized by Filipinos Linked in Pride (F.L.I.P.), and joined Filipinos across the state of Hawai‘i collaborating under the theme “Reach for the summit, reach for the sky.”<sup>2</sup> The event brought to the fore intersecting academic, social, and cultural issues. Amy Agbayani, Director of Student Excellence, Equity, and Diversity at the University of Hawai‘i (UH) in Manoa, was the keynote speaker. She highlighted the significance of the annual event with the stark and persistent under-representation of Filipinos in higher education, despite the high Filipino demographic (Gonzalves & Labrador, 2011; Okamura & Agbayani, 1997). To identify a key component to sustainable progressive reform, one attendee asked during a break-out session, “Where are the Filipino youth?” Randy Cortez, a second-year student at UH responded, “I know where the youth are. They’re at the FilCom in Waipahu breakdancing.”<sup>3</sup> Cortez was referring to the Filipino Community Center by its colloquial handle, FilCom, in reference to a series of recent Hip-Hop events there. Cortez’s words connected Hawaii-based Hip-Hop, which has achieved widespread recognition with groups like Hype 5-0 appearing in the fifth season<sup>4</sup> of *America’s Best Dance Crew*, to Filipinos’ subordinate status, and the more gradual shifts in the political and economic status of underserved groups in Hawai‘i, like Native Hawaiians, Micronesians, and Filipinos. Cortez’s words highlighted Filipino diasporic youth culture as a key to understanding how to challenge institutional barriers to higher education.

Inspired by Cortez's words, this article highlights a space in which Filipinos find themselves well-represented, unlike institutions of higher education or the United States mainstream media. In the shadow of state governmental tropes of valorizing multiculturalism, this article analyzes how Hip-Hop as a niche in American consumer culture has been mobilized by a colonized and disenfranchised social group—Filipinos in Hawai'i—as a strategy for constructing identity and generating collective meaning and belonging. Moreover, this article is interested in the ways that the local O'ahu Hip-Hop scene, and the Filipino heritage youth that predominate it, are mutually shaped by the material realities of, and discourse of, space. Therefore, the article advances the claim that spatial practices in O'ahu Hip-Hop are particularly productive for understanding how b-boying and b-girling are key to constructing ethnicity and gender, even if their practices “fail” to meet New York Hip-Hop definitions of authenticity.

This article details and analyzes one of many types of Hip-Hop dance: breakin'. This dance is also known in mainstream media as “breakdance”, but many of its practitioners refute this as misnaming and emblematic of commodification. Instead, they refer to the dance as b-girling and b-boying. After contextualizing Hip-Hop studies in Hawai'i and the “cultural maturation” narrative, one can better appreciate the cultural significance of breakin', and the heretofore overlooked spatial dimensions as they inform Hip-Hop's popularity among Local youth in O'ahu (Osumare, 2007, p. 111, p. 116, p. 120; Imada, 2004). In the social and political contexts of b-girlhood around one dance crew, Another Girl's Battle (AGB), within the region's largest event in its time, The Monarchy dance competition (2007), spatial practices yield two important conclusions: first, the relationship between ethnicity and Hip-Hop is not necessarily clearly articulated or cohesive, but is rather contextual and non-essentialist. Second, although the relationship between gender and Hip-Hop consolidates gender binarism, it also appears that Hip-Hop is the most practical space for progressive change because of its clear articulations in elements like battle design and movements.

## Methods

As a Filipino heritage scholar, my language proficiency, strong homeland ties, and physical appearance have influenced the ways that other dancers in O'ahu interacted with me. My diasporic positionality allowed me a unique perspective, unlike a strictly "Philippine" (Filipino, Area studies) or "American" (white, Western) scholarly approach. My Filipino-American perspective influenced the recognition of the insularity and connectivity of Hawai'i, the global presumptions of the mainland United States, and the particularities of Filipino cultural sensibility. Fieldwork for this article took place during multiple visits to Hip-Hop performance sites in O'ahu, Hawai'i, and the United States between 2005 and 2007, and included a dozen in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and direct participation, or talking and dancing with other dance students and dance leaders. Dancers hailed from a range of settings including a public after-school program and privately-owned dance studio in Kalihi, which is an area with a substantial demographic of working-class Filipinos. In order to understand the cultural politics of O'ahu Hip-Hop dance, I also conducted participant observations at The Monarchy in Waipahu and interviewed dancers and audiences in this facility. I observed and analyzed battles live as well as social media representations of the event in the context of a burgeoning online video platform. More specifically, my positionality produced an insider-outsider relationship with the site and subjects of the study that resonates with what Martin Manalansan (2000) distinguishes as "homework" (pp. 3-4). Borrowing from Kamala Visweswaran, Manalansan emphasizes the blurring of "home" and "field" that decenters the colonial boundaries of ethnographic fieldwork. Similarly, as a dancer and choreographer who identifies as Filipino with nearly a decade of experience in Hip-Hop dance in California, the "homework" of this article was shaped by a level of kinship between myself and Hip-Hop cultural and Filipino cultural communities. In Hawaii, Local identity and culture originated out of the experiences of working-class Native Hawaiians and Chinese, Japanese, Okinawan,

Puerto Rican, Portuguese, Korean, and Filipino plantation laborers, and the political and economic necessities related to pre- and post-World War II ethnic relations, and relative opposition to nonlocals (i.e. foreigners, recent immigrants, military, and tourists) (Okamura, 1995, p. 162-165). In this context, I was also received with a level of inclusion by practitioners related to my ability to pass as a member of the panethnic local identity group due to my dark brown skin complexion, long hair, and being born in Hawai'i, even as I was Other-ed for my tall stature and not actually having been raised in the islands. Shaped by this ethnic and cultural multiplicity, my positionality shaped a similarly ambiguous ethnographic portrait of the Hip-Hop dance scene.

### **Beyond "Honolulu Style"**

Since the late 1990s, a growing body of literature<sup>5</sup> has examined Hip-Hop as a cultural practice, not in Brooklyn or Los Angeles, but places such as New Zealand, O'ahu, Samoa, and Guam.<sup>6</sup> Across these various former United States and European colonial societies on islands in the Pacific Ocean, already thriving dance cultures adopted Hip-Hop to share striking compositional similarities that include: participation of indigenous youth; reference to Native images of male warriors; the issue of distinguishing between superficial mimicry and self-conscious reference to Black American cultural representations; high regard for cultural productions that use oral language to convey an overt indigenous and post-colonial political message; and reference to cultural developments during the 1960s.

In her landmark study on Hip-Hop in Hawai'i, popular culture and dance studies scholar Osumare (2007) gave "props" (propers or respect) to the Hip-Hop community in Hawai'i by defining "Hip-hop, Honolulu Style" first temporally, and second constitutively, comparing its components against the normative economic infrastructure of urban mainland places (most likely the Bronx and Brooklyn) (pp. 105-127). While Osumare's timeline from 1982 to the year of her ethnography (1998-1999) reflected

that early 1982-1985 Hip-Hop was imitative, influenced by breakdance movies, and a markedly “trendy new mainland fad”, the 1990s Hip-Hop was more mature and no longer mimicked mainland Black American style (p. 115). Throughout the 1990s, the eighties youth displayed this maturity with new adaptations, use of Native Hawaiian culture, and engagement of Hip-Hop as an enduring lifestyle (p. 141). These changes occurred alongside a developing economic infrastructure that consisted of nightclubs, recording stations, radio stations, recording and clothing companies, and resonated with normative Hip-Hop culture in urban areas of the continental United States (p. 117).

Osumare wrote about Hip-Hop’s shift from the 1980s to the end of the 1990s and offered a provocative thesis of Hip-Hop “Honolulu style”, that Hip-Hop culture and rap are the latest in a long history of cross-cultural embodiments of music and dance in the islands (pp. 113-114). Part of the issue with the “Honolulu Style” framework lies in how it unintentionally reproduces inequalities by assuming “popular culture” began when working-class haoles (foreigners and often Whites) came into contact with Kanaka Maoli, indigenous and Native Hawaiian people of Hawai‘i. From this narrative vantage point, Kanaka Maoli have a “natural affinity” for Western culture, and Hip-Hop is simply the latest example of this essentialized behavior (p. 113). While Osumare’s “Honolulu Style” implicitly opposed Hawai‘i’s commodification in its citation of Haunani K. Trask’s political writing and the Hawaiian Renaissance, it also extended a simplification of terra nullius, or “nobody’s land” logic (Banner, 2007, p. 2).<sup>7</sup> While usually a term invoked regarding land ownership, terra nullius also seems appropriate for describing the devaluing of indigenous, local, and settler aesthetics, and the politics of performance in Hawai‘i. Evidently, the “Honolulu style” narrative evaluates Hip-Hop based on how it meets the standards of “normative urban hip-hop culture” (Osumare, 2007, p. 106, p. 117). The approach naturalizes a cycle of Other-mimics-West cultural studies and produces a metric of evaluation based on establishing “cultural maturity”, a status only afforded to subjects engaged in overt political statements

through oral practices, such as the Big Island rap group Sudden Rush.<sup>8</sup> These varied contexts open up a space for exploring beyond “Honolulu style” and connecting how Filipinos in Hawai‘i participate in Hip-Hop in ways that resist ethnocentricity but also do not abandon the generative function of comparison by punctuating multiple cultural contexts.

### The Monarchy B-boying Competition: Inside the Royal Cypher

At the Monarchy, one young dancer sprang forward and playfully taunted his opponent as he toprocked and opened his set. The competitor comically mimed the young dancer’s arm motions as if to highlight that dancer’s uncoolness. Another teenager spun four times on his beanie-clad head and fell into a chair freeze while all of his crew lifted their arms fanning the fancied heat coming off his compacted body. Yet another lanky, floppy-haired dancer tapped the floor to signal to the judges that his opponent had committed a stylistic error—falling out of a freeze and touching the ground. These dancers served up derision just as easily as they gave props. They aimed to show the judges that they knew their James Brown—proven by the display of their beat-savvy accents. And for ten adrenaline-pumping minute rounds they communicated, congratulated, and competed, almost entirely without verbal expression.

When I began this research I was interested in competitive scenes like the one in the above vignette, which was drawn from my “homework” notes because they figured as the most documented and centralized aspect of breakin’, or b-boying, culture.<sup>9</sup> One exceptional example of the competitive Hip-Hop community resides in the Monarchy. This event intended to find “Hawai‘i’s Royalty of Breakdancing” through a series of inter-island breakdance competitions billed as “the biggest crew battle in Hawai‘i” (Funky4corners, 2006). “[S]pecial guest judges from the mainland” (emphasis added) whittled the dozens of crews down to one championship battle that culminated on O‘ahu (Funky4corners, 2006). Mostly young, local competitors danced within crews of three to eight members for rounds of

ten minutes each. From December 2006 until March 2007, the Monarchy had several installments across Maui, Kaua'i, the Big Island, and O'ahu. The Finals took place on O'ahu on March 30, 2007. An investigation of the Monarchy from a space-based analytical framework promotes a deeper understanding of breakin' culture while connecting and differentiating those localized practices to the presumably authentic New York Hip-Hop dance culture.

To get inside the cypher, or b-boying social space, and analyze the interactive nature between individuals at the Monarchy, requires beginning with the idea behind it all, the search for "Hawai'i's Royalty of Breakdancing". I adopted ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss' (2009) approach to spatiality in b-boying culture and analyzed the event's varying dimensions of social and cultural function to understand the Monarchy as a moment of b-boy space-making (pp. 94-106). According to Schloss' study of New York breakdancin', b-boy spaces consist of three main aspects: shape, size, and surface (p. 94). I highlight my observations of b-boy space-making at the Monarchy because they demonstrate dancers' localization of Hip-Hop signifying practices. At the Monarchy and in b-boying events in general, the cypher is the most commonly recognized dance shape. Schloss states,

The cypher is a social space that teaches many valuable lessons to b-boys and b-girls: a connection to Five Percenter spirituality and politics, a connection to other circle-based elements of hip-hop, the ability to overcome shyness or reserve, developing one's general ability to perform under pressure, the ability to project confidence, and the ability to seamlessly correct mistakes. (p. 101)

Schloss defines and describes the cypher's historical origins, authenticity, improvisation, competition, and its parallels in African diasporic dance, religious rituals, and martial arts (pp. 5-6). The common rationale underlying Hip-Hop studies is the notion that African diasporic dance, religion, and martial arts practices address issues of belonging and exclusion for individuals of African descent beyond the geographic

borders of the continent. The particular demographics of the Honolulu Hip-Hop scene, however, inspire my inquiry into the multiple meanings of these practices for members of the Filipino diaspora. In the context of Filipino culture and disenfranchisement, I view the Monarchy event as delivering an important message not about the African diaspora, but about underprivileged youth populations carving a playful, artistic, and competitive space for themselves through an event that reconfigured Hip-Hop cultural conventions of space with localized meanings.

The key to understanding the success of the Monarchy lies in the relationship of its elements—the structure, style, form, and content—to broader perceptions of political and social power. To underscore an analysis of these components I narrow my discussion to the Monarchy's (a) serial design, (b) interactive nature, and (c) the ways it relates to New York b-boying spatial aspects. The Monarchy develops a “story” for its participants in part through its successive design that incorporated preliminaries on four neighboring islands. Not a one-night-only annual concert or talent show, this serial structure infused the final O'ahu event with a different type of energy and gave participants a growing sense of inter-island community investment. The Monarchy provided the narrative drive for the lives of youth from month-to-month in ways that one's school homeroom or typical football game might not. When asked about her competitive motivation, Filipina B-girl Mo-Shen replied, “For the challenge and because it's fun” (Mo-Shen, personal communication, January 26, 2007). But, after experiencing the Monarchy for myself, I observed that the Monarchy was not only a space for entertainment or even stress relief and exercise—as other participants claimed. The Monarchy helped Local Filipina youth negotiate their own dancing identities and pushed them to think and re-think how competitions operate on their own value system. I observed that a “bad” competition is one that is not competitive at all and where folks walk away without learning anything new about the community, and a “good” competition is made up of vibrant battles, how close the loser lost, and how faithful to dance genre conventions the competitors stayed. A great competition revises the ways



that individuals engage dance as a live embodied experience and suggests that they re-conceive a community of peers before them.

The Monarchy was a wheelhouse for the attributes that scholars and b-boys have gained historically from the practice—the ability to overcome shyness, the expertise to perform under pressure, and the capacity to project confidence (Schloss, 2009, pp. 107-108). Looking beyond the b-boy competitor, the judges' roles emerge as similarly significant for understanding b-boying competitions. American Studies scholar Imani K. Johnson (2009) described the judges' role:

The social act of battling is actually policed in competitions. Judges determine winners and losers, and only a generous few explain their decisions. Thus, the competition socializes to conform in some ways to the demands of the structures and codes that characterize b-boying as a practice. Competitions are an opportunity to transmit this approach and re-present it to the community. (p. 29)

In a practice where judges “make decisions depending on their tastes, preferences, and the principles they hold dear”, the lack of explanation of battle decisions can feed into heated community debates (Johnson, 2009, p. 63). Johnson described such controversial rulings like one at the Ten Year Anniversary of Freestyle Sessions in Los Angeles between the Mighty Zulu Kings (MZK) and Gamblerz Crew; many audience members interpreted the Gamblerz loss as a result of judges who overly favored “old school” sets—individual style, footwork, burns, and less power moves—as national bias for the United States over the Japanese team, and cultural stereotypes of arrogant Americans and techno-orientals (“too clean or too precise”)(Johnson, 2009, p. 65). Some see a judge's or a spectator's evaluative criteria as markers of his/her insider-outsider status to b-boying culture. San Francisco Bay Area's B-boy Smily states, “If a purely power dancer goes up against a purely style dancer, the winner will be determined by the judge's bias. Since 2005, judges usually give it to the style b-boy. People unfamiliar to breaki'g are likely to give the battle to the dancer using power”

(Smily as cited in Rajakumar, 2012, p. 21). At the Monarchy, judging takes on another layer of insider-outsider dynamics given the salience of histories of colonization and foreign occupation. Thus, mainland judges/O'ahu b-boys bear a particular colonial dimension which is constituted as a superior/inferior dynamic in which the mainland infers a type of benevolent tutelage, inherent prestige, suspicion, or status with assumed proximity to more *authentic* Hip-Hop cultures (Funky4corners, 2006; Knox, 2010).<sup>10</sup> With such outsider/insider dynamic, the prospect of evaluation from outsider judges is a mixed blessing.

According to Local b-boys, judges originating outside of the O'ahu Hip-Hop scene offer a promise of belonging, growth, and legitimacy. The legitimacy of mainland judges is partially enabled by what Euro-Canadian b-girl and popular dance scholar Mary Fogarty (2012) calls "imagined affinity" (pp. 452-453). Following Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities", which links the rise of print capitalism to the readers' sense of belonging to a national collective, Fogarty defines "imagined affinity" as a shared sense of identification that b-boys and b-girls experience as a result of shared cultural artefacts, mediated and embodied elements of the dance practice (p. 453).

They are sustained through mediated texts, by means of videos or online representations, by travels through new places involving brief encounters, exchanging knowledge and acknowledgment with other b-boys or b-girls. Whether in a cypher, or through a video, dancers imagine a commonality with each other that is often challenged by extended conversations, shared space and interactions. With these interactions, b-boys and b-girls discover they actually have little in common with other practitioners besides their dance practice. (Fogarty, 2012, p. 453)

Fogarty calls attention to the ways that media and embodied culture also play vital roles in developing imaginary commonalities. In the context of The Monarchy, such "imagined affinities" requires an added layer of understanding that "travels through new places"; it does not occur in a

vacuum and underscores the benefits and risks of O'ahu b-girls and b-boys evaluated by mainland judges.

Sometimes the most successful burns and physical insults are those that make imaginative allusion to real Local cultural referents and “inside jokes” that might make less sense to outsiders. At the Monarchy, one competitor completed his set with a freeze that placed him spatially at the foot of his opponent, a local teenager with a closely faded multi-color buzz cut. After his freeze, the b-boy quickly stood up, pulled an imaginary spoon out of his pocket, and made a scooping gesture at his opponent's head. At first, the motion was subtle, fluid, and timed perfectly, but then the b-boy seemed to recognize that the judges did not “get it” so he made his gestures more exaggerated. His movements quickly turned amateurish and arched as if to ensure the judges would recognize the other b-boy's shaved head, as the majority of the crowd already had, as an imaginary cone of shave ice, a staple of local food culture. While this interaction did not represent the majority of the rounds at the Monarchy, it was instrumental in depicting ambivalence around b-boy interactions between judges and competitors. On one side, Local b-boys operate as authorities of a Local cool aesthetic that relies in part upon the recognition and approval of mainland breakin' experts whose perceived measure of “authenticity” gets couched as “special” (Funky4corners, 2006). On the other side, as strangers to Local culture tasked to interpret a battler's intentions vis-à-vis their actual executed movements, judges can inadvertently stifle the breadth of innovation and artistry that is vital for performing the befitting “hip” to Local Hip-Hop. This is not to suggest that participants of the Monarchy were limited to riffing off of local culture. In fact, an example of a deliberate allusion to Hip-Hop's origins was visible in one of the non-dance aspects of the Monarchy.

In another type of competition, a “Writers' Battle”, young visual artists equipped with broad-tipped Sharpies and Prismacolors design vibrant and stylized illustrations and textual art pieces. Two notable aspects of the Writers' Battle occurred at the same time as the main dance battle. The first was that the battle did not occur on the dance floor or wall but upon

pieces of cardstock, each standardized by outlines of a New York subway train car. Since Hawai'i does not have a subway train form of mass transit, the battle thus amplified both the Pacific's "imagined affinity" with Hip-Hop's Atlantic origins and the innovative content of the Local Honolulu Hip-Hop scene's writers. The affinity of the subway as an icon of New York urbanity and the focus upon literacy and its associations with education as upward social mobility are juxtapositions of acceptance of post-Pacific War mainstream American values.<sup>11</sup> The second aspect of the Writers' Battle was the presence of the competitors in relation to the dancers. With their backs against the walls, several writers sat heavily concentrated on their act of writing. Other writers formed in the outdoor courtyard, heads lowered close to their pieces, almost indifferent to the seeming disorder that surrounded them. Displayed along the walls of the room, the finished pieces were evidence of the intertextuality between members of Hip-Hop diaspora. Like the semi-cyphers that surrounded the main cypher, these writers decentered the b-boy as the default point-of-view.

In the context of Filipino cultures, social dances, particularly those from ethnic minorities, have parallels in forms that predate and persevere in the wake of Spanish and American colonialisms. Filipino dance scholars Ramon A. Obusan and Esteban Villaruz (1992) write,

Most young men's dances enact a fierce fight or a martial art. Among the Badjao, Tausug and Samal, the **silat** (or **kuntao**, **lima**, **pansak**) belongs to the general and martial langka which style makes it a gamesome dance. The Badjao learn this out at sea or on a boat where they spend most of their lives. Among the Maranao, the youth is initiated into the **marinaw** which is a pre-combat chant and ceremony that lead into the full-fledged sagayan dance that transforms him into a respectable young man. Like the sagayan, the Subanon *soten* supplicates the spirits to give strength and courage to a warrior who shakes a shield and palm leaves (bold emphasis in original). (p. 14)

The presence of Philippine “ethnic dance” characterized by adolescent masculinity, martial vocabulary, spiritual function, and mimesis of violence underscores the parallels between b-boying and Philippine culture. Filipinos in Honolulu and throughout the islands are familiar with Philippine ethnic dance and other Pacific dance forms as they are often included in public school May Day celebrations and cultural festivals. To this point, the similarities between Philippine ethnic dance and b-boying present an interesting predisposition or pattern of continued youth cultural choreographies arguably both *despite* and *because* of large-scale structural changes of colonialism and migration.

As the shapes of dance hold important roles in meaning-making, size matters. The magnitude of the dance area and the self-control necessary to adapt to different sizes establish a connection between today’s dancers and the not-so-well-documented community dances, crowded nightclubs, and parties that served to first develop b-boying in the Bronx in the 1970s (Rajakumar, 2012, pp. 1-4). At the Monarchy, examples of both small and large cyphers emerged. The smaller cyphers popped up sporadically and revealed a more intimate style of b-boying that seemed to be managed by beginners and style-based dancers for training purposes. Power move specialists and dancers with highly stylized toplocks maintained the larger cyphers; these larger, wider cyphers seemed more public, impersonal, advanced, and projected one’s technical skills and personality.

The cypher’s different surfaces—from wet and sticky nightclub floors to rough concrete—created the conditions through which breakdancers highlighted their versatility, knowledge of their repertoire, decision-making, and self-control (Schloss, 2009, p. 98). The Monarchy’s two main types of dance surface, a laminate tile dance floor that looked like light oak and the surrounding carpet, had ideological and functional meanings (pp. 97-98). Unlike a concrete sidewalk, the Monarchy dance floor did not project an image of cool rawness, “the streets”, or the struggle against the exploitation of urban poor living conditions noted in traditional Hip-Hop

culture (p. 97). It did, however, promote a wider range of spins, gliding, power, and air moves that were less injurious than concrete. Similarly, the “uncool” carpeting provided safe landings from stalled freezes and airmoves, albeit with the added risk of carpet burns. While the inner positioning of the Monarchy dance floor seemed useful for concentrating attention to the main events, the outlying carpet seemed to garner as much dancing before and during battles. The amount of off-center action countered the competitive atmosphere, while it also highlighted the ludic qualities of the dancers and added to the immersive experience that the event offered all participants—dancers, judges, and less mobile enthusiasts.

Although the dance surface did not align with Hip-Hop traits of rawness and street performance, it nonetheless reflected the cultural labor executed by underserved youth populations in the face of systemic inequality. The Monarchy offered a window into the unique importance of serial design, interplay, and connection to existing b-boying spatial aspects of Local Hip-Hop. Even so, the community is less surefooted in particular areas and these mitigated the success of the Monarchy. The event’s goal of searching for “Hawai’i’s Breaking Royalty,” for instance, indicated how the Monarchy fell short in developing a language to deal with the complex and contested racial and ethnic politics shaping the lives of its participants, mostly Filipino descendants of settlers in Honolulu. Beyond the event’s title and the use of Native Hawaiian King Kamehameha images on publicity flyers, there was no other instance or reinforcement of the idea of the Monarchy; this suggested that the theme was less about literal definition of people of royal Hawaiian genealogy status, and more about invoking the superficial trope of the Monarchy used to reference power, locality, and place, hence the map images of the island archipelago in promotions. In the context of the continued Hawaiian sovereignty movement, the title and publicity flyers represented a shallow appropriation of representations of Native Hawaiian people and a (successful) attempt to capitalize on what is “cool” and masculinize the indigenous monarchy as a local proxy for Hip-Hop’s popularly theorized Black cool aesthetic. The promotional materials of the

Monarchy appropriated Native Hawaiian codes to localize the New York image of Hip-Hop and lend the “uncool” surfaces more “rawness”.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s (2003) studies of the Black dancing body explored the dancing body as a process of relaying the tensions between paradoxical roles and as a symbol of Black pride and as the “negative space around which the White dancing body was configured” (p. 2). Gottschild’s theory for the Black dancing body was useful when interpreting Local organizers’ use of the Native Hawaiian body in the Monarchy. If we suppose the Native Hawaiian body acts as both a symbol of pride and negation, what racial body is configured in its negation? Eager to unpack how these issues of race play out in the experiences of b-boys in Honolulu, I turned to veterans and amateurs in the field and was met with a mixed understanding of the ways racial and ethnic difference characterizes the Monarchy. For Local Filipino Style-Len (Leonard Acio) of the Rock Steady Crew, Hawai’i chapter, Hip-Hop is a family affair. Style-Len recounted how he met Crazy Legs, President of the Rock Steady Crew, one of the most well-known b-boy crews after he performed in 1983 at the Oceana Hotel.<sup>12</sup> Style-Len began practicing breakin’ after getting backstage to meet Crazy Legs and other foundational breakers such as Ken Swift, Kuriaki, Baby Love, Devious Doze, and Buck 4.<sup>13</sup> Today, Style-Len’s son, Desmond “B-boy Des” Acio, competes alongside his father at competitions, such as those held at the FilCom Center, and helps teach youth as young as five at the Center, a performing arts studio in his hometown of Kalihi.

Skill-Roy (Roy Ramey), like Style-Len, is also of the Rocksteady Crew Hawai’i Chapter, but self-identified as “from here, born and raised in Kalihi” (Osumare, 2007, p. 124).<sup>14</sup> He recalls that in 1986-1987 breakin’ stopped and was “kept alive” by a few who would “bust it out at parties for a kick.”<sup>15</sup> Skill-Roy’s accounts paralleled those of Jeff Chang, who claimed that New York’s “bedroom b-boys” incubated Hip-Hop dance culture when it was otherwise believed to be a dead fad (Chang, 2005, pp. 114-115). In our interview, Skill-Roy objected to the then rising popularity of *So You Think You Can Dance*, a reality television competition he saw as unfair and unrealistic, asking b-boys

to execute ballet techniques but not asking ballet dancers to perform power moves. Skill-Roy's comments struck me as a matter-of-fact way of pointing out the glaring incommensurability of dances. When we discussed the racial demographics of the b-boying community, he described the crowd as "multicultural", simply reflective of the Local mixture, and rejected the idea that it was predominantly Filipino. Skill-Roy emphasized that the crews which compete at the FilCom are not just from Waipahu and asserted that "[a]s far as the Hip-Hop scene and the raw elements of b-boying, that's the biggest events [sic] that are happening right now" (Skill-Roy, personal communication, March 23, 2007). Skill-Roy's statement suggests that there are multiple types of Hip-Hop events co-existing in Honolulu and, that for him and his principles of rawness and scale, Funky4Corners events like the Monarchy are the most "legitimate". The significance of these comments is its ability to downplay race in favor of both a multiculturalist Locality and b-boying culture. While Skill-Roy spoke frankly about the difference between dance and commercial representation and identifies breakin' as an important place-making practice for Local identity, ethnic studies scholar Jonathan Y. Okamura (1995) argues that, despite the benefits of the Local identity for people of Hawai'i and the popularity of melting pot myths it contributes to, "the tradition of tolerance allows for Hawai'i's people to avoid acknowledging and confronting the institutionalized inequality among ethnic groups and the resultant tensions and hostilities that are generated" (p.165). Given increasing external and internal forces such as overdependence on tourism, foreign investment, and the military, Okamura concludes that Local identity is not a viable social movement and works to debunk the rainbow image of Hawai'i, a blend between America's melting pot mentality and Hawai'i's Local islander inclusivity (p. 176).

Skill-Roy's Localist comments stood in disagreement with those of other dancers and one in particular whom I met early in my research in Kalihi. At the Center Dance Studio (aka the Center), I met Nixon Dabalos, of the Awesome Breaking Crew (ABC), who taught and trained with Rock Steady Crew at the Center. A 30-year-old private caterer, Dabalos immigrated



from the Philippines in 1985 and began breakin' soon after seeing kids who transferred from the mainland breakin' at a high school's Winter Ball 1988 (N. Dabalos, personal communication, March 21, 2007). Dabalos recounted how his crew originally trained in front of the school's auditorium, where many young dancers still train because it provided access to a free power source; his accounts resonated with early accounts of breakin' spaces for African American and Puerto Rican immigrant youth in New York (Chang, 2005, p. 114). When asked about his thoughts on race and the recent events organized by Funky4Corners, Dabalos said, "About 80% are Filipino" (N. Dabalos, personal communication, March 21, 2007). This rough estimate pointed to one of the difficulties of b-boying events—obtaining accurate data that accounts for the social demographics of their participants; my observations and informal interviews with other respondents supported Dabalos' estimates.

The disparate ways Style-Len, Skill-Roy, and Dabalos make sense of race and b-boying in familial, multicultural, and Filipino terms spoke to the complicated space of the Monarchy. In some ways, the Monarchy actually abutted, cordoned, and de-emphasized markers of racial history. Behind the competitors of the Writers' Battle and juxtaposing their displayed artworks lay a greenish mural of prominent Filipinos who seemed to watch over the action and inscribe the events within a backdrop of Local Filipino history. Behind a corner of the judges' side of the cypher were a sugar cane-cutting sculpture and a plaque paying respect to Hawai'i's first *sakadas*, the fifteen Filipino agricultural contract laborers who were recruited by the Hawai'i Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) in 1906. The year of the Monarchy (2006) was also a year of several Filipino Centennial community events that celebrated the *sakadas*, who comprised fifty percent of all plantation workers by 1926 and continued to be imported until 1946 (Aquino, 2005, pp. 60-63). Curiously, the statue is physically and aesthetically separated from the Monarchy by glaring yellow caution tape. Perhaps the organizers thought the statue might be damaged by air moves-gone-awry; maybe whoever put up the tape predicted that a dancer might hurt his body on the

*sakada's* sharp-edged tools. Whatever the intentions, this separation made the absence/presence of racial history more provocative. For someone like me who approached the event with the intent to be consciously aware of representations of race, the apparition of the caution-taped Sakada statue, representing the earliest immigrants who broke their backs toiling in the Hawai'ian plantations, made the leisurely pursuits of Filipino b-boys even more meaningful.

As read through the Monarchy experience, Hip-Hop speaks persuasively to the importance of space and place-making in constituting multiple forms of identity and racial attitudes. The fact that Dabalos shrugged his shoulders when asked about his awareness of the Filipino Centennial community events on O'ahu highlighted the success of Hip-Hop in affirming identity despite its lack of an overt political statement and "uncool" carpeting. Dabalos replied, "This is the Filipino scene for me" (N. Dabalos, personal communication, March 21, 2007). An exploration of the event's inability to produce a singular understanding of race as it promoted and inhabited the lives of its participants suggested one of the interesting dynamics within the current b-boying cultural conversation. Despite its successes as a Hip-Hop space, the Monarchy's construction of masculine cool aesthetics and mixed messages about Filipino racialization affirmed and undermined the Filipinos' ambivalent status.

### Politics of B-Girlhood

The mechanisms by which dancers form, express, and challenge historical and contemporary notions of gender provide a necessary line of inquiry into the ways individuals invest new meanings into sticky concepts—Hip-Hop music's historical development in post-industrial society and the globalization of Hip-Hop cultural arts as Africanist diasporic tradition.<sup>16</sup> In the same instant, these mechanisms naturalize Filipinos as benefactors of a Local or homegrown identity formation, which inform the material and genealogical solidarities and contradictions of O'ahu Hip-Hop. A

look at the spatial politics of O'ahu Hip-Hop reveals that the relationship between gender and Hip-Hop seems to consolidate gender binarism, but also appears like the most feasible space for progressive change because of its clear articulations, unlike its ethnic formations. Here, I demonstrate that Hip-Hop culture provides educational and competitive practices that support young women in Hawai'i in resistance and resilience against colonial formations popularly engendered in dance, like the stereotypical "lovely hula hands" and "Maria Clara". But, if Hip-Hop dance, as an art form, competitive sport, lived cultural practice, and discrete system of knowledge production employs heteronormative notions of gender performance, where does the potential resistance and resilience exist?

Despite its constraining images of women, Hip-Hop culture also produces a resistant spirit and politics that assuages a liberal notion of gender relations by rendering women's bodies hypervisible as active participants of the lived culture (Perillo, 2012). For example, feminist scholar Charla Ogaz (2006) writes, "I am a fan of, if overidentified with, the old-school b-girls. When I see b-girls take the circle, I'm not only deeply impressed, but also pleasantly enraptured with the sense that females can overcome seemingly all-pervasive, personality-saturating fear of male arenas and deliver the beauty of the dance for their own sake, against almost all odds" (p. 169). Indeed, Latinas, African American, Native American, and Asian American women have not had an easy path in Hip-Hop culture given that pervasive racial stereotypes like the Puerto Rican mami and Black Jezebel undermine the ability of women to move freely through Hip-Hop worlds (Rose, 2008, p. 152).<sup>17</sup> Raquel Rivera (2003), a leading scholar on Puerto Rican Hip-Hop offered this claim: "Actress Jennifer Lopez's ass is a good example of how Puerto Rican mamis have been eroticized within the hip hop zone as tropical Butta Pecan Ricans part of a ghetto black 'us'" (p. 130). African American literacy activist Elaine Richardson identified the links between rapper Lil' Kim (Kimberly Jones) and use of the myth of immoral Black Jezebel by prosecutors in the perjury trial, *The United States of America v. Kimberly Jones and Monique Dopwell* (p. 58). Gender

politics have also shaped the experience of dancers in Hip-Hop such that they have curbed the movement vocabularies they execute. As B-girl Baby Love recounted when she joined the Rock Steady Crew in South Bronx in 1981, women displayed slower, jazz-derived movements to “avoid looking like guys” and so as not to be perceived as threats to the male-dominated culture (as cited in Washington, 2007, p. 84).

The neglect of women’s social practices, like Double-dutch jump rope, and the narrow construction of women dancers can be seen as byproducts of these texts’ inherent aim—to legitimate Hip-Hop as a subject of scholarly research.<sup>18</sup> Scholar Nancy Guevara (1996) has argued that even “traditional” Hip-Hop studies—that recognize the racial, class, and artistic prejudices that African American and Latino males must often overcome—have outright discriminated or tacitly marginalized women.<sup>19</sup>

When oral historians, intellectuals, and journalists *do* include women’s voices in studies of gender, feminism, and anti-sexism in Hip-Hop, they provide rich histories of Black cultural politics germane to a majority public’s understanding of Hip-Hop, yet often overlook essential, b-girling and dance elements.<sup>20</sup> Kaila Adia Story (2007), African American Studies scholar, contextualizes Hip-Hop music video vixens in relationship to the Venus Hottentot and colonial desires of excess Black sexuality that overlook the value of women’s intellect, beliefs, and personalities (p. 245). The vast majority of scholarship derives from music-centered sources, media portrayal of women rappers like Foxy Brown, Lil’ Kim, and Missy Elliot, underground artists like Medusa, and controversies propagated by male artists like Nelly and 2 Live Crew. Still, as artist-scholars Miri Park, Sky Fung, Mary Fogarty, and Toni Blackman illustrate, dance figures centrally. For example, Toni Blackman, a Hip-Hop activist and once designated a United States Hip-Hop Ambassador by the Department of State, was introduced to the culture through its dance (cited in Richardson, 2007, p. 62). Although not a professional dancer nor known for her dancing, this aspect of the culture was a crucial pathway to Blackman’s current role as author, diplomat, organizer of Rhyme Like a Girl, and founder of

Freestyle Union, a group that employs freestyling for social responsibility (Richardson, 2007, pp. 62-79).

B-girlhood in Hawai'i, then, requires a focused inquiry regarding the ways women act, embody, and perform complicity and resilience to gender inequity, thus allowing for discussion of women beyond video vixens, outsiders, or cheerleaders.<sup>21</sup> As Hip-Hop cultural modes of expression provide an alternative to existing hegemonic stereotypes of women, these expressions also undermine efforts to critically engage with the ongoing politics of multiple colonial relations in Hawai'i (Trask, 1999, pp. 113-122). As mentioned earlier, women dancers in Hawai'i continually navigate between colonial politics engendered by an enduring "lovely hula hands" caricature that works to orientalize women's bodies, evaluate their labor based upon their abilities to receive the touristic gaze, fulfill foreign expectations of Hawai'i as an unpopulated, exotic paradise, and circumscribe their physical abilities based upon colonialist notions of racial "authenticity".<sup>22</sup> In Philippine dance contexts, the young Filipinas' agency continues to be circumscribed within "respectable" Spanish colonial heteronormative representations such as those found in the "Maria Clara suite" derived from the research of Francisca Reyes-Aquino, the folk dancer and National Artist who pioneered preservation fieldwork and curriculum since the 1920s and drew from Russian ballet and Scandinavian folk dance manuals, and Lucrecia Reyes Urtula, founding director of the Bayanihan Philippine Folk Dance Company. Of course, this does not mean that Hula, Philippine folk dance, and other indigenous dances that enliven the choreographic landscape of Hawai'i have not held continued important meaning for the Kanaka Maoli and numerous settler groups in Hawai'i (Stillman, 1996, pp. 357-380). Scholars Adrienne Kaeppler (1993), Momi Kamahale (1992), Amy Ku`uleialoha Stillman (1996), and Angeline Shaka (2011) have documented Hula as a compelling practice of spirituality, cultural preservation, diasporic belonging, and wellness, as well as a mode of oppositional politics of resistance.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the "lovely hula hands" and "Maria Clara" tropes persist and contextualize young women's dancing in O'ahu Hip-Hop. If

the decision for girls and women to participate in Hip-Hop dance broadly means an uphill battle against both internal and external male hegemony, as Guevara (1996) contended, in the United States settler state of Hawai'i such dance aesthetics also offer a promising local alternative to the continued colonial and national scripts.<sup>24</sup> Young women dancers in Hawai'i navigate a complicated blend of gendered choreography—the Black and Latina colonial hypersexuality of Hip-Hop's "video vixens," colonial "dusky maidens" of Hawai'i, nationalist Philippine dance archetypes, and the muted dancing body of b-girls valued more for what they verbalize than what their dancing communicates. Yet, how might we characterize their pathways to Hip-Hop's promise of transformation? What constitutes Local women's experiences, choreographies, and physical rhetoric as unique?

### Another Girls' Battle

At the Kalihi-based dance studio, The Center, I met B-girl Jem who offered advice upon seeing me struggle with footwork. In between our training, we talked about the Hip-Hop scene outside of the classroom. B-girl Jem began breaking after her older brother introduced her to the dance form. B-girl Jem's training sessions with her crew complement the competitive Hip-Hop setting. She explained that mostly all-male crews compete at events like the Monarchy. For this reason, B-girl Jem admired and respected the members of the only Local b-girl crew, Another Girls' Battle (AGB) (Funky4corners, 2007).<sup>25</sup> Composed of b-girls in their late twenties and early thirties, AGB's exceptionality drew from the fact that typically b-girls in Honolulu are not in the same crew but rather the singular exception to all-male crews (Rivera, 2003, p. 240).<sup>26</sup> At the Monarchy O'ahu event, AGB huddled together before their first competitor opened the cypher. B-girl Remedee wore dark red sneakers, a black t-shirt, and a beige undershirt that hung low and accentuated her hips; her eyes were hidden behind the brim of a black engineer cap, and her elbow bands were both functional and fashionable. B-boys typically begin a set with toplocks, an

upright introductory phrasing that emphasizes an individual's sense of rhythm, musicality, and character, and B-girl Remedee was no different. Her crewmates B-girls Floorluv, Juju, LG, Ahn-It, and Stylet lined up behind her. They bent their knees and clapped, a visual and percussive backdrop as Remedee dropped down to the floor. B-girl Juju fixed her bandana and hair while Stylet pounded her fist in the air toward Remedee's set, a gesture of encouragement. Audiences stood on chairs, sat in seats, and folded in cross-legged masses, risking personal injury for a closer look at the action.

To the cynical observer, b-girl or b-boy, AGB's dancing may not have stood out as remarkable (Washington, 2007, pp. 86-87).<sup>27</sup> They lacked the power and air moves of the Rock Steady Crew and Awesome B-boy Crew, and generally approached the cypher with a relaxed attitude. The significance of these representations of dancers lay not in their virtuosity but in their ability to shift the male-dominated b-boying norm. The practice of naming is an important aspect of Hip-Hop culture and aesthetics and AGB's name aimed to work against Hip-Hop's detractors (Schloss, 2009, pp. 68-93). Responding to the idea that Hip-Hop is responsible for demeaning women, by naming their crew Another Girls' Battle, they sent a message that the discrimination and social inequality experienced in male-dominated b-boying culture were everyday issues women face whether inside or outside the cypher proper, or simply *another* struggle, which coincides with Nancy Guevara's claim that women in breakin' must deal with internal and external male hegemony.

What are the types of gender-based differences within Hip-Hop necessary to parse out multiple consequential distinctions between the choreography of battles? Because battles are diachronic, crews often make snap judgments about who opens the cypher and when other members will take their turn, depending on the previous competitor's set, an individual's specialties, and energy level. B-girl Remedee, for example, opened the cypher because she was known in local circles for her toprocks. The fact that these women were much older than individual b-girls in otherwise all-male crews suggested that age played a factor in their affiliation. Their

age also perhaps explained why b-boy competitors targeted them over the younger b-girls with lewd burns (physical insults) in attempts to distract AGB members during their set. B-girl Remedee's crew members who backed her up and entered the cypher seemed more organized and linear than the b-boy crews they battled. These details highlight how masculinity has been relatively absent as an analytic in previous scholarly inquiries of Hawai'i-based Hip-Hop.

Gendered movement, clothing, and tactility constitute the Monarchy, although attendees may not have verbally acknowledged these concepts. Insofar as breakin' repertoire—toprocks, floorwork, freezes, power, and air moves—depends upon an individual dancer's height, limb length, weight, center of gravity, agility, flexibility, and strength, these often gendered traits are directly related to the difficulty or energy necessary to perform.<sup>28</sup> It is not always the case that b-girls dress similar to b-boys, but the unspoken breakin' movement vocabulary, especially those that require inversion, curbs women performers from wearing particular types of dress, like skirts they might wear in Hula, Philippine dance, or ethnic dance. In their absence, differences in bodily movement, hair, and behavior bear more responsibility in marking gender. At the Monarchy, for example, B-girl Floorluv wore a green t-shirt with rolled-up sleeves, exposing her arms. She hopped left with her right foot in front and the hair beneath her dark blue bandana bounced a beat delayed. Both white sneakers landed simultaneously like scissor tips. She took another lighter hop and the back foot slid inward and continued rocking. Unlike Floorluv's dark blue jeans, B-girl Juju's camouflage capris pants lent her more range of motion as she six stepped counterclockwise and then reverse. At the top of the reversal, she planted her hands and forehead on the floor and kicked both legs into the air to transition into a modified chair freeze. She wore a burgundy shirt, complementary to her capris, white shoes, and a beige bandana that made it easier for her to pivot on her head. In the context of the hypersexualized Black and Latina Hip-Hop "video vixen," the clothing b-girls wear is significant because what a woman wears can intentionally and unintentionally send particular messages to



audiences, judges, and competitors. When a b-girl like Floorluv exposes her arms with rolled-up sleeves or tank tops, she emphasizes her repertoire of strength moves. When b-girl Ahn-It covers her torso, she prevents chances that her figure might distract the audience's attention from her movements; yet she also opens herself up for back-handed commentary, "She's good because she's like a guy."<sup>29</sup>

It is worth noting that the significance of gender relations as read through gestures of dancers at the Monarchy branch out beyond these moments of formal and informal dancing. With a sense of ritual, crews line up on opposite sides of the floor until one makes its way across and initiates props, a gesture of mutual respect taking different forms—handshaking, daps, snapping, head nodding, eye-brow raising, and hugging.<sup>30</sup> In Local custom, women greet one another with hugs and kisses on the cheek signaling appreciation, affirmation, and affection relative to familiarity. Unlike male forms of touching, like daps and dap hugs that are forceful and punctuated, women's tactility is more gradual, suggesting a restricted range of tactility allowed between males under the dominant cultural paradigm and propagated in the male-dominated Hip-Hop space.

At the Monarchy, the variety of ways battles were designed—who can compete and how they compete—can also provide provocative views on the culture's gender-based biological and cultural relations in the way that they replicate narratives of haole (foreigner and often White) heterosexual courtship as gendered repertoire. Unlike football, surfing, and other popular O'ahu youth competitions, Hip-Hop dancing positions girls against boys in both solo and team contexts. This format is significant because such events offer the potential for novel everyday exchanges between women and men. For many b-boys and b-girls, these battles are not reflections of Local Hip-Hop gender politics but different opportunities for leisure and pleasure. For example, dancers were invited to participate in "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" battles that offered a space for b-girl inclusion, albeit a constrained one.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the solo 3-on-3 and crew battles, "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" battles are the only ones marked by gender. B-girl Jem competed in "Mr.

and Mrs. Smith” battles with her friend and classmate, B-boy Luke (B-girl Jem, personal communication, May 2, 2007). Jem and Luke competed in the “Mr. and Mrs. Smith” battles in February 2006 and 2007, and she implied that the event was an opportunity to dance as equal partners in a team, with her friend who happened to be male, rather than a specifically gendered form of expression. In a holistic context, the structures of these events that explicitly recognize gender are decidedly gimmicky. The Funky4Corners stages these battles around Valentine’s Day as a revision of the “Battle of Sexes”. The “Mr. and Mrs. Smith” battles are interesting because they secure a place in Hip-Hop for women alongside men while maintaining a fixed colonial man/woman binary. As the dance competitions un-ironically whitewash the cypher by donning names that are emblematic of haole heterosexual marriage, they also maintain gender borders. Theoretically, b-boys can dance against b-girls and b-girls can dance against b-boys at their discretion in informal, spontaneous cyphers; however, in the “Mr. and Mrs. Smith” battles, gender borders are impermeable and b-girls are expected to go head-to-head only with other “Mrs. Smiths”.

The gendered movement, attire, gestures, rituals, and questions of whom a b-girl should dance against that ring true through the Monarchy and Honolahu Hip-Hop challenge the existing threads of gender—neutrality, blindness, and transcendence—by prominent experts. Some pioneers proclaim an equal opportunity type of b-boy pedagogy. Richard Santiago, or B-boy Breakeasy, described this type of logic to ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss (2009):

I was [teaching] them the same way I would do b-boys. “You want to be a b-girl? That’s it: you gonna do the same training.” ... I don’t care [if] you’re a girl ... This is the game. When you’re in that cypher, it’s no “b-girl cypher” or “b-boy cypher.” No. It’s a cypher! There’s no gender breakdown. This is what you got. You want to do it, you do it! (p. 66)

In this quote, we see the concept of gender neutrality that is different from the contemporary version of non-gender binary inclusion. In this

instance, gender neutrality operates as one that maintains a status quo of male privilege reliant on an omission or ignorance of the lived realities of b-girls like Baby Love and Honey Rockwell in New York since the 1980s.<sup>32</sup> The “Mr. and Mrs. Smith” code in Honolulu that b-girls only battle b-girls resonates with accounts by Latina Baby Love, an old school b-girl, and the main b-girl of New York Rock Steady Crew in the 1980s. The historical accounts that b-girl Baby Love did not battle much because there were few other b-girls suggests a small, yet significant, point that the supposed old school norm was not gender neutrality but clearly defined gender borders. In this way, b-girls only battled other b-girls, even when there were many prospective b-boy opponents (Washington, 2007, p. 84). It is perhaps unsurprising that some b-boy pioneers ask b-girls to train in similar ways as themselves because those are most likely the techniques that they feel qualified to teach. Yet, B-boy Breakeasy’s view is controversial because it goes beyond that idea and asks b-girls and b-boys to disavow the gender difference and inequalities they actually experience. The notion that b-girls have been and continue to be handed down b-boying knowledge that demands that they train the same way b-boys do reveals not only the gender inequality-through-neutrality of b-boying foundation but also the deficiencies of such learning practices as they seem ill-equipped for preparing dancers who must actually be prepared to adapt to several types of gendered competition. In light of the “I don’t care [if] you’re a girl” attitude of B-boy Breakeasy, efforts to degender cyphers in the name of maintaining authenticity and proximity to the “old school” seem nothing short of problematic.

Beyond the “Mrs. and Mrs. Smith” battles, there are opportunities for breakers to engage in O’ahu Hip-Hop rivalries. In these other settings, one factor that undergirds whom b-girls battle is whether b-boys are willing to dance against b-girls in the first place. As Johnson observed, whereas the b-boy’s decision to battle a b-girl can be an opportunity for sexist exploitation, the “b-boy retreat”, or when a b-boy refuses to battle a b-girl, can signal perceptions of weakness, elitism, and pity, and lead

to the cypher's failure (Johnson, 2009, pp. 8-9).<sup>33</sup> Unlike a "successful" cypher, whereby dancers participate in a social space that teaches lessons about "a connection to other circle-based elements of Hip-Hop, the ability to overcome shyness or reserve, developing one's general ability to perform under pressure, the ability to project confidence, and the ability to seamlessly correct mistakes", Johnson observed gender as an inhibitor (Schloss, 2009, p. 101).

While in reality "b-boy retreat" is less likely to occur in formalized competitive structures like "Mr. and Mrs. Smith", for crews made up of all women these situations are commonplace in informal settings or sessions or pre- and post-battle situations. At the Monarchy, some b-boy competitors visibly hesitated and actively pushed their crewmates forward to battle b-girls so they would not have to. For the sole, all b-girl crew AGB, the structures of competition that attempt to account for gender difference can be just as gimmicky as "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" battles and twice as insulting. As noted earlier, their crew name, "Another Girls' Battle", was intended to blur gender politics across b-boy and non-b-boy circles. Tapping into their title and its meaning, Funky4corners took explicit actions to contextualize the importance of gender in AGB's participation proclaiming, "Women face everyday battles and being taken seriously on the floor is just 'Another Girls' Battle' Witness as the ladies of AGB battle it out in 'The Ultimate Hawaii(sic) B-Boy / Girl Crew Battle'" (Funky4corners, 2007). This gesture is surprising as organizers decided to cancel a much-advertised b-girl battle and forced AGB to register in the "Newbies" category. Organizers alleged, "Unfortunately no other b-girl crews showed up, leaving no option but to battle in the Newbies category" (Funky4corners, 2007). The Newbie title is provocative because, just as Funky4corners' gestures toward creating a space for b-girls to dance competitively, they imply that b-girls are inherently lesser than b-boys. By placing AGB in the "Newbie" category, the production staff ideologically infantilizes the crew and cements their role in a type of b-boy paternalism. This categorization disregards the fact that AGB was not new to breakdancing and calls into question how b-girls

are configured in the scene. By reframing the categorical discrimination as a technicality, organizers can obscure their paternalism as well as the normative male gaze. These events challenge Richard Santiago's claim for gender neutrality ("There's no gender breakdown") as a definitive component of Hip-Hop dance.

The b-boy paternalism behind the subordinate categorization of AGB co-signs on conservative gender politics that exist both inside and outside b-girl/b-boy cultures. A popular ideology held by b-boys and b-girls can be described as a gendered version of "colorblindness". Some scholars have even taken this gender ideology beyond the scope of breaking's internal culture. For instance, Schloss (2009) states that

The idea that a b-boy or b-girl should be judged on their skills rather than their gender (or any other factor, for that matter) is central to the ideology of the dance. At the same time, it sets a clear standard that can be carried over into other aspects of life: if you expect to be taken seriously, you should be prepared to compete on an equal footing with anyone. (p. 66)

The risks with this kind of statement lie in its abandonment of the possibilities of a gender-conscious and race-conscious standpoint. By promoting a meritocracy of b-boy skills, this view aligns with colorblind ideologies that incorrectly and dangerously assume a "difference-free" ideal over a reality that is systematically and informally shaped by difference. Beyond the accuracy or significance in the lives of informants, any characterization of such terms as universal or "carried over into other aspects of life", in the context of social justice, is evidently lacking. A smaller group of breakers and breakin' scholars differs from this "difference-free" version. Writing on the importance of gender and safe spaces for b-girls, Alesha Dominek Washington (2007) concludes that "Overall Hip-Hop is more than just being a man or a woman. It is truly a state of being..." (pp. 87-88). Washington recognizes the spectrum of global Hip-Hop and a key tension in both the realness of b-girl experiences and transcendence of Hip-Hop. The gender awareness in both verbal and kinetic behavior observed in

the O'ahu Hip-Hop scene, at the very least, signals a significant departure from mainstream New York practices, and at a broader level, suggests that Schlossian outsidership has overlooked nuances of a plurality of gender modalities within Hip-Hop writ large.

Notions of gender neutrality, "blindedness", and transcendence seem more capable of tacitly allowing sexism to persist in favor of a male-dominant status quo than actually "keeping it real". This is perhaps related to the male gaze traceable in a minority of responses to the individualized bravado of AGB's competitors; one viewer commenting on this projected stylized attitude said, "Those girls were too cocky" (Funky4corners, 2007). This comment curiously straps on the phallic modifier to AGB's members and implicitly signals an assumption that even in a form where bragging is the norm, femininity should be constituted in humility, or perhaps the demurity of the "Maria Clara" trope (Rivera, 2003, pp. 239-240). Comments such as these act like little proofs that gender "blindedness" and Hip-Hop transcendence lack the adequate explanatory capacity to make sense of O'ahu's Hip-Hop scene. At the Monarchy, b-girls can experience things differently, produce multiple types of contradictory interactions, and garner a variety of responses. In these varied processes, there is the potential to unsettle the normativity of b-boying spaces and challenge the assumptions of competitors, judges, and observers about b-girlhood in Honolulu.

## Conclusion

The O'ahu Hip-Hop landscape is composed of several prominent areas, or punctuated spaces, that contribute to and complement a wider understanding of Filipino Hip-Hop culture. Unlike previous studies of Pacific Islander Hip-Hop that depend on a logic of cultural maturation or comparison to mainland forms, Hip-Hop Honolulu should be considered in its own right. In some ways, Hip-Hop Honolulu does not appear to resolve itself into a singular narrative with a unidirectional trajectory, but, instead, demands from its participants scattered attention to cultural, racial, gender,

educational, and competitive arenas. Attention to dance cultures, a high spatial intelligence quotient, and ability to navigate gender practices as points of value and analytical approaches, are useful for analyzing what the culture means to its particular participants. The incongruity of Hip-Hop and Filipino American cultural politics in Hawai'i requires an approach that questions the trade-offs between Hip-Hop's promise and the concessions of Local Filipino discourse. The problematic "rainbow" melting pot myth enables individuals to distort the realities of inter-racial stratification and re-imagine a history of upward social mobility in attempts to reconcile with enduring economic and social subordination.

For the Filipino youth in Honolulu, what Hip-Hop means and why it matters are specifically and intimately tied to postcolonial, racial, and gendered immigrant experiences. At the Monarchy, Hip-Hop dance manifests through a sense of empowerment and a cultural politics of decolonization at the level of the psyche and self-esteem. The Monarchy's "outsider" culture was made more "raw", legible, and legitimate despite its lack of alignment with "authentic" New York b-boy spatiality. The Monarchy's surface use of Native Hawaiian representations and mixed messages about Filipino racialization replicate the problematic rainbow melting pot ideal and undermine the community's ability to deal with race realities. Local b-girlhood complements existing portraits of Pacific Hip-Hop and provides a clearer image beyond their verbal expressions. The politics of b-girlhood in the Monarchy, contrary to the ambivalence of its b-boys toward ethnic identity formation, reveal clear articulations of gendered difference which we might think of in terms of multi-tiered phenomena: meta, meso, and micro. Relatively abstract concepts such as gender neutrality in breakin' pedagogy, gendered neocolonialism in battle design, and b-boy paternalism provide meta glimpses into the ideal, irrational, and indefensible. Meso-level of circumstances—including snap decisions around competitor sequencing, b-boy retreats, lewd burns, and naming practices—are tangible and directly observable in the head-to-head battle. Scattered micro-differences in movement vocabulary, costume,

tactility, and online commentary play smaller but important parts in the ways participants can shift norms and move through the cultural landscape. These experiences inspire hope and call for new looks at Hip-Hop dance practices and their implications for Filipino communities across the diaspora.

### Notes

1. Pamantasan is the Filipino word for “university.” Pamantasan 2007 program brochure and F.L.I.P. flyer. F.L.I.P. is “committed to active involvement on our [UH Manoa] campus and throughout the state unifying ourselves to promote knowledge, awareness, and pride in our rich and diverse Filipino heritage through the education and empowerment of our communities.” The annual event continued a tradition of twenty years, at Leeward Community College on O’ahu, and joined together local Filipino student leaders (and a few Filipinos who are alumni from colleges outside of Hawai’i), Filipino faculty, and legislators from the Filipino caucus. The event agenda included community-building activities, networking sessions, food, and afternoon performances. The event also featured small group discussions, called Barrios, in which Barrio members participated in personality assessments, identified community issues, and strategized action plans. One of the performances included a breakdance demonstration by the Awesome B-boy Crew.
2. I would like to thank the dancers of Honolulu for sharing their knowledge on and off the dance floor. In accord with modern Hawaiian orthography, the ‘okina’ is employed for Hawaiian terms. I would also like to thank Ruth Jordana Pison and Patrick Alcedo for their support and encouragement.
3. FilCom is shorthand for the Filipino Community Center in Waipahu.
4. The third episode of Season Five introduces audiences to the West Coast Regional competitors and was originally aired in the US in January 2010.
5. See Chang, 2005; Kato, 2012; Henderson, 2006; Gonzalves & Labrador, 2011; Osumare, 2007



6. See Kopytko, 1986; Henderson, 2006; Mitchell, 2001.
7. *Terra nullius* refers to the notion that land inhabited by indigenous peoples is not owned by indigenous people and thus subject to White British and American colonial claims. In strict terms of land ownership, this idea had uneven application throughout the Pacific. Indigenous people of Oregon and Washington negotiated land through treaties while California land was seen by the US government as *terra nullius*.
8. See Osumare, 2007, pp. 141-145; Kalyan, 2010, pp. 605-624; Akindes, 2001, pp. 82-98.
9. See *Planet B-Boy* (2007) directed by Benson Lee, which follows notable crews competing in the Battle of the Year competition in 2005.
10. The detail of recorded music at the Monarchy might also be an area in which *authenticity* is contested. Recorded music has been criticized by b-boys like Joseph M. Knox, who argues that live music with drumming is essential for rejuvenating what he perceives as a stagnant culture.
11. I thank the anonymous reviewer for leading me to this insight.
12. The histories of breaking are few, but Rock Steady Crew is mentioned or described to varying degrees in several texts. See Banes, 1981; Holman, 2004; Forman and Neal, 2004; Pabon, 2006; and Schloss, 2009.
13. Style-Len was thirty-seven years old at the time I interviewed him in 2007.
14. I came to learn later on that Skill-Roy was also quoted as source of Local B-boy history that demonstrated that direct contact with mainland Hip-Hop pioneers combined with local innovation led to what Halifu Osumare (2007) calls "Hip-hop Honolulu-style." In her book, Skill-Roy is quoted, "East, an aerosol artist, sorta brought Rock Steady to the islands, and then invited [Crazy] Legs to come down here. He saw us dancing and he wanted us to be the Hawai'i chapter. This was back in late '93 and early '94. We then had a couple of performances here on O'ahu where we were honored to have Crazy Legs with us." (Skill-Roy as cited in Osumare, 2007, p. 124).

15. Skill-Roy (Roy Ramey), interview with author, Honolulu, Hawai'i, March 23, 2007. Such accounts may contribute to histories in Osumare's study. In the sense that Hip-Hop dance was kept alive by both the videotaped documentation and the embodied documentation of the moves.
16. See Rose, 1994; Chang, 2005; Nelson, 1998.
17. Tricia Rose talks about the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire as racial gender stereotypes.
18. Guevara (1996) conceives of women's role in breaking as one in which they must continually counter two main issues; countering male hegemony within the Hip-Hop scene (family, society, state, media) and media's portrayal (inferior, subordinate, superficial).
19. See Guevara, 1996.
20. See Guevara, 1996; Ogaz, 2006; Washington, 2007; Lissel, 2005; and Maira, 2008.
21. See Sharpley-Whiting, 2007, pp. 23-52; Osayande, 2008.
22. See Desmond, 1999; Imada, 2004.
23. Resistance to the cultural stereotype of the hula girl has also taken place in the concert dance world on and off-island.
24. See Shaka, 2011.
25. AGB's six members are B-girl Remedee (2006 b-girl champ), B-girl Floorluv, B-girl Juju, Stylet, LG (Kauai underground artist), and Ahn-It (2007 Mrs. Smith winner).
26. Rivera (2003) writes, "A lone woman in an otherwise all-male group performing a dance style where women are a minority for many seemed to warrant a sexualized explanation." Snickering outsiders called her "the group's ho."
27. In California, B-girl Asia-One began an all b-girl group, "No Easy Props," to create a space for women to support each other, and challenge each

other to surpass the low bars set for women. This highlights the problems between gender blindness and low expectations for women.

28. See Schloss, 2009. Downrock is when dancers drop from toprocks to execute types of floorwork during the percussive sections of funk tracks (p. 32). Freezes are punctuating poses dancers use between sets, while power and air moves, defined by traits of strength and acrobatic skill, include vocabulary like windmills and flares (p. 86). In general conversation with dancers at the Monarchy, I found that there are specific expectations around how b-girls perform and with what vocabulary. Some feel that b-girls tend to perform toprocks, floorwork, and freezes. When a b-girl has the ability to do power and airmoves they are often seen as most advanced technically and often have gymnastic training.
29. B-boy apparel at the Monarchy is not spectacular. For the most part, b-boys wore black or white t-shirts and blue jeans. A small subset dressed down with less formal clothes like boardshorts or more formal long-sleeve cotton button ups, kangols, and fedoras. They could also be seen wearing multiple accessories for safety and smoother breaking—gloves, elbow guards, beanies, baseball caps, and knee pads.
30. Eyebrow-raising has often been identified informally as a typical Filipino behavioral act although theories on its origin, intent, or meanings are never formally articulated. Daps, an African American custom, are thought to be safe ways to express male affection on special occasions and a version of the handshake but they have also made their way into more formal settings.
31. These battles are specific to the Funky4corners productions and are likely named after the same-named action film in 2005, starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Similar battles occur with different names in other cities. For instance, in California there are “Bonnie and Clyde” battles.

32. Gender neutrality may be a characteristic of other dance genres like modern dance, although the degendered modern dancing body may still be sexualized and eroticized.
33. Johnson describes an incident when a White German b-girl used racial linguistic markers as burns (verbal assaults) and that instigated racist taunting at a target Mexican b-boy. For additional studies on ciphers and competition dancing, see von Hofe; Lefebvre.

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