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"Women are Stronger Than Men": Breaking Norms Through Hip Hop in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines women's motivations for engaging in men-dominated hip hop dance in urban Vietnam, arguing that it is the kinesthesia that draws the young women into hip hop. Dancing is a resource of joy and confidence for the women dancers studied. Yet, the playfulness and creativity of dance should not obscure the hard bodily work the women dancers invest in order to attain their unique style. In addition, joining a dance class or crew practice late at night often requires confronting parental concerns about their daughters' safety and ideas about what constitutes a good career.

Examining the socio-political implications of young women's decisions to become and be hip hop artists, the paper argues that their (gendered) performance is evaluated differently across different value regimes, depending on the emplacement of their bodily practice. Family and kin might assess their lifestyle choice as breaking with prevailing gender norms, whereas their community of peers might appreciate the performance of gender bending as a sign of virtuosity and a marker of unique style.

KEYWORDS

dance; hip hop; gender; public space; Vietnam

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ENTRY

"Women are stronger than men" was the opening sentence in an interview I conducted with Thanh Phuong, a thirty-year-old woman hip hop dancer from Hanoi. With her statement, Thanh Phuong emphasises the quality of performance of women hip hop dancers, and also the gendered social boundaries they are confronted with when becoming and being a hip hop artist.

In urban Vietnam, hip hop is an emerging practice. Although men dominate the scene, there are now some well-known women dancers, too. Against this background, the focus of this article is on young women's motivations for taking up the practice of dance, and how this requires them to navigate different value regimes in Vietnamese society at large, and the Hanoi hip hop community specifically. Why do they pursue their passion for hip hop even though it stands in friction with social expectations and dominant gender norms? While Vietnamese women have long been active in the public sphere, including through the performing arts (Bui, 2018; Nualart, 2018; Vu, 2019), I argue that breaking speaks to women's experiences of the private and public spaces in new ways.[1] To address the above, this article follows two trajectories in dance research outlined by dance scholar, Deidre Sklar (2000). The first trajectory is socio-political, building on the ideas of cultural studies. Addressing the socio-political by and in dance means teasing out the social construction of human movement and theorising bodies' capacity to express ethnic, community, gendered, and individual identities (Sklar, 2000; Reed, 1998). The second trajectory is kinesthetic, drawing on the ideas of the anthropology of the senses and the phenomenology of the body. With a focus on kinesthesia, scholars seek a deeper understanding of movement as a way of knowing, "a medium that carries meaning in an immediately felt, somatic mode" (Sklar, 2000, p. 70). Angela McRobbie (1998) combines the socio-political and kinesthetic dimensions of dance, calling for a sociology of dance:

> to step outside the field of performance and examine dance as a social activity, a participative form enjoyed by people in leisure, a sexual ritual, a form of self-expression, a kind of exercise, and a way of speaking through the body. (p. 195)

In this paper, I argue that the kinesthesia, the interplay of music and movement, is what draws young women into hip hop culture. The sensations of dance give them a sense of belonging and are "sources of pleasure and power" (Rose, 1994, p. 22). However, the playfulness and creativity of dance should not obscure the hard bodily work the dancers have invested in order to attain their unique style. Becoming an accomplished dancer is also based on social struggles they needed to fight and overcome. Therefore, the paper examines the socio-political implications of becoming and being a hip hop dancer, particularly with regard to dominant gender norms.

This paper is structured as follows: In the next section, I introduce the Vietnamese hip hop context and describe the methodology underpinning this article. In the next section, *Moving Between Public and Private Space*, I link the presented research on women dancing on the streets to the wider literature on private/public space and youth in Vietnam. I then discuss the kinesthesia of hip hop dance, presenting the different somatic dimensions of dancing in public and in private. Next, is the

[1] In this article, I use the term "breaking" because it is the original term that the practitioners use themselves. The term "breakdancing", by contrast, was introduced by the media in the 1980s that turned the dance style into a "dazzling entertainment" (Banes, 2004, p. 14).

section, *Crossing Gendered Ideals*, that situates women's movement between private and public space in the wider literature on Vietnamese gender studies. Against the blueprint of prevailing gender norms, I discuss the social struggles the women dancers needed to take up, particularly with their parents, in order to follow their passion for hip hop. In the section, *Gender Bending*, I present the value regime of the hip hop community, differing from the gender norms presented in the previous section, in so far as I regard the queer practice of gender bending as a trait of virtuosity and play. Although the body is so central to the practice itself, the gendered body is hardly mentioned in conversations about what makes a great dancer. I show that the quality of a dancer's performance is measured against her/his style, technique, ability to 'listen to the music', and expression of emotion (Interview 25 October 2018). In the final section, *Bodily Contortions and Breaking Norms*, I synthesise the above discussion of the somatic and socio-political dimensions of dance, arguing for a nuanced and situated analysis of (gendered) performance and the value regimes against which such performance is assessed.

Contextualising Hip Hop in the Vietnamese Context

In Vietnam, rap and breaking became known and practiced around the 1990s, in the period following the Communist Party of Vietnam's introduction of a series of economic reforms starting in 1986 (known as *Đổi Mới*) (Turley, 1993). The country's economic opening-up, its integration into the global economy, as well as technological change, significantly contributed to the arrival of hip hop in Vietnam and its further circulation within Vietnam. The uptake of breaking in Vietnam was driven by young Vietnamese studying abroad in Germany, France, and the U.S. Upon their return, these young people shared the hip hop skills and knowledge they had acquired during their stay abroad with their friends. In more recent years, the connection to social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok has further fueled the exchange of music, videos, dance skills, and knowledge about hip hop.

Hip hop dancers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are aware of hip hop's U.S. origin. Nonetheless, they orient themselves more eastwards, seeking connections within Southeast and East Asia, particularly Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, and Japan. Korean and Japanese breaking, popping, and hip hop crews are among the best in the world. This has to do with the popularity of Korean and Japanese popular culture more generally among young Vietnamese since the 1990s (Dang and Pham, 2003; Huat, 2015).

In recent years, hip hop can no longer be viewed as a subculture exclusively as it has also entered Vietnam's mainstream popular culture, as evidenced by the emergence of music programmes such as the Hanoi-based *King of Rap*, and Ho-Chi-Minh-City-based *Việt Rap,* as well as dance-shows *Vũ Điệû Xanh*, and *So You Think You Can Dance?* broadcast on national TV. Nonetheless, the majority of hip hop artists still belong to the underground scene, which almost exclusively consists of men. However, over recent years, Vietnam has seen the emergence of some popular women rappers, like Suboi, Kimmese, and Phao. Nevertheless, women artists are still a minority, especially in the dance styles of breaking, popping, and hip hop dance that I focus on in this article (Vibe, 2017).

In Hanoi, the first (men) dancers practiced in the city's major public spaces, like the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace, Lenin Monument, and Ly Thai To

Garden, making their bodily movements visible and accountable to a larger public.[2] In urban Vietnam, groups of youth in public space are not unique to hip hop and have also been studied in the context of street disciplines (*bộ môn đường phố*) such as skateboarding and parkour, but mostly with reference to young men (Geertman *et al*., 2016). Geertman *et al*.'s work brings out some similarities that hip hop shares with other street disciplines, such as the bottom-up and self-organisation of activities. Further, movement in public space provides them with feelings of freedom and ease, allowing them "to explore self-directed ways of being and offer identities that differ from the values and models predefined for them by the state and by their families" (pp. 602-603). However, practitioners of hip hop dance in Vietnam maintain a community distinct from other street disciplines, which is also evident from their self-perception and denomination as 'hip hop culture' (*văn hoá hip hop*) instead of 'street culture' (*văn hoá đường phố*). Furthermore, in contrast to the street disciplines presented above, hip hop's dance styles, such as breaking, popping, and hip hop dance, as well as waacking and house dance, are all highly competitive, with competitions taking place in the form of dance battles.[3] Another difference lies in the perception of the urban public and municipal authorities alike. Whereas street disciplines are considered to disturb the urban order (*trật tự đô thị*), and therefore practitioners are often expelled from public spaces (Geertman *et al*., 2016), hip hop dancing, by contrast, was only prohibited in the early years, but soon after came to be tolerated by the municipal authorities. Wherever a cipher (the circular formation of hip hop dance) forms, a diverse urban public, including local authorities monitoring the park's order, stop to watch the flamboyant dance moves, often turning into a cheerful crowd. The visibility of dancing in public spaces has arguably contributed to its popularity and attraction of a growing number of dancers.

Hip hop's dance styles are mostly learned via face-to-face interaction in public spaces, even though the ways of sharing embodied knowledge have changed through the rise of social media. Hanoi-based hip hop dancers often mentioned practicing a particular style at home by themselves with the help of online tutorials circulated on YouTube. However, the more advanced dancers agreed that it was important to learn through face-to-face interactions, too. These advanced dancers always referred to 'their' teacher, a person that initiated them into their style, and guided them throughout the learning process (various interviews October/November 2018). In contrast to the first generation of Vietnamese dancers that predominantly were young men, the second and third generations of dancers

[2] The Palace and Monument are landmarks of the city's transformation to socialism, and were built in the 1970/80s. Ly Thai To Garden, by contrast, was built under French colonialism and transformed into a symbol of the independent nation with the installation of the statue of king Ly Thai To, the founder of Hanoi in 1010.

[3] Popping is an umbrella term for different forms of the dance, such as boogaloo, strutting and waving etc. Popping describes the sudden muscle contraction of the triceps, forearms, neck, chest, and legs. Initially, waacking evolved in queer Latino or Black private social spaces, such as gay underground discos in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Waacking connects the muscular tensing of different body parts with brief flowing transitional movements that might be considered feminine (Bragin, 2014; DeFrantz, 2016). House dance is a freestyle street dance, originating in the underground house music scene of Chicago and New York in the 1970s and 1980s. House music runs on faster beats than hip hop music, and comprises foot work and an ecstatic movement of the torso.

display more gender diversity.[4] In the past years, more and more young women, as well as queer dancers, have taken to the streets.

The material presented in this article was collected between September 2015 and November 2018 based on participant observation in public spaces, attending dance battles, joining crew practices, and dance classes. I conducted narrative interviews with eighteen dancers (ten women and eight men dancers) in English and Vietnamese. Ten interviews had a length of between one and a half to two hours and were conducted sitting and talking in coffee shops. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed, using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti. The remaining eight interviews were conducted during participant observation, *e.g.* when participating in dance battles and/or during crew practice. Four of these interviews were recorded and the others were documented by taking notes during the conversation. Notes from interviews and participant observation were likewise coded using the ATLAS.ti software. Additionally, I followed the dancers online on different social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube.

The research participants agreed to participate in this research and to record interviews based on informed consent. Proud of what they have achieved, they preferred to have their first names mentioned. I thus negotiated their wish to write about Vietnamese hip hop in order to make it known to the world, and my own responsibility as a scholar to protect the privacy of my interlocutors and to do no harm to them (de Koning *et al*., 2019). Therefore, I chose to mention the dancers' names, when talking about their accomplishments, and to anonymize quotes that touched upon sensitive and intimate matters. The narrative interviews themselves were already multisensory events. In our conversations, the participants in my research made use of a wide range of communicative repertoire including the making of clicking sounds, buzzing a melody, and clapping their hands in a particular rhythm while expressing their emotions with facial gestures. Often, while sitting and talking, their affection was accompanied by a clapping hand, foot-stomping, or a movement of the head. In other words, the performing body became a part of the interview itself, signifying embodied ways of knowing. The use of such non-verbal communication in interviews allows researchers to include otherwise socially marginalized forms of knowledge and communication, as called for by feminist research (Pink, 2015).

Moving Between Public and Private Space

Sally Banes (2004) considers breaking "a way of claiming the streets with physical presence, using your body to publicly inscribe your identity on the surfaces of the city." (p. 14). Accordingly, dancers claim and take urban space. In the late socialist city, public space used to be and still is – to various degrees – controlled by the state. In the pre-*Đổi Mới* era, such spaces had a key function in mobilizing the masses and symbolizing the state's power. Since the introduction of economic reforms, however, urbanites increasingly use these spaces for private economic, leisure, and social activities and thereby transform their symbolism (Drummond, 2000; Kurfürst, 2012; Thomas, 2002).

[4] Within the community, dancers differentiate between first, second and third generation of dancers. The term generation here signifies, how long a dancer has been part of the hip hop community already. Dancers of the first generation are also referred to as *đại* (grand), and OG, an abbreviation for "original gangsta", by members of the hip hop community.

Dancing is one of the performative acts reshaping public space (Oakes and Yang Yang, 2020). In Hanoi, the main sites in which hip hop dancers first congregated (Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace, Lenin Monument, Ly Thai To Garden) were attractive because they offered a smooth and flat surface, ideal for going down on the floor. Some of these spaces like the Lenin Monument are also used by other street disciplines (Geertman *et al*., 2016). The Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace housed the first generation of b-boys, poppers, and hip hop dancers, exercising under the roof of the palace's colonnades. However, as more dancers joined, the municipality resumed control over the space, banning dancing and other street disciplines (Interview 08 October 2018). In the colonnades, a sign reads that all 'activities of freedom' (*hạnh động tự do*) are prohibited.

The recent dynamics of urban development in Vietnam and the emergence of an urban middle class have led to a growing tendency for leisure activities moving from public space into indoor semi-public and private spaces (Earl, 2014; Harms, 2009). With regards to dance, an increasing number of dance studios offering hip hop dance, urban choreography, and waacking classes have opened up in Hanoi catering to the demand of the urban middle class in particular.

The emerging role of privately owned indoor spaces as a site for youth's leisure activities is usefully contrasted with the situation in the recent past when mass organisations like the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union played a key role in organising youth's spare time. The Youth Union gave meaning to youth's leisure time by engaging them in volunteer work and projects of the socialist state. Simultaneously, the Union's work took young people away from supposedly dangerous places and activities in the city, establishing "new, morally legitimate places for them" (Schwenkel, 2011; Valentin, 2008, p. 78). Now that young people in Hanoi increasingly organise themselves outside these formal organisations in horizontal and free-spirited manners for both leisure and non-confrontational politics (Geertman and Boudreau, 2018), media reports on youth decadence have mushroomed. Such reports link youth's drug abuse, laziness, and, generally, their 'aimlessness' to particular spaces within the city (Drummond and Nguyen, 2008). Against this background, the offering of hip hop dance classes in studios moves young people from middle class backgrounds away from supposedly dangerous public spaces to indoor monitored spaces. Hoang Phuong, who regularly teaches hip hop classes, says: "So I really need a studio. If you want to teach so you have to have the studio. Because the parents they don't want their children to go to the park" (Interview 08 October 2018). In addition, dance classes appeal to middle class parents and youth alike as a way of physically disciplining the body, while maintaining a cosmopolitan lifestyle (various interviews and participant observation 2018).[5]

The opening of a dance studio or teaching a class also needs to be understood as a way for professional dancers to make a living from hip hop. Renowned dancers in Hanoi gave classes in a dance studio, for which students needed to pay. However, they also continued teaching additional informal classes to their followers in outdoor public spaces. This practice was widely shared among advanced women dancers too, who used this to initiate more women into their particular style (Interviews October 2018).

[5] Judith Ehlert (2019) shows how the rising problem of child obesity in contemporary Vietnam aligns with dominant discourses about motherhood, holding mothers responsible for their child's eating practices.

Nguyet, a renowned hip hop and waacking dancer, teaches a class of five to six young women twice a week for free. For this, she uses two different locations, one in the studio, where she usually gives fee-based classes, and the other at the Lenin Monument.

> Actually, I want my class once a week to go outside and once a week [to exercise] inside. Inside dancers can see the mirror, and they can see their moves. But when you go outside you are free. You can feel free to do whatever you want, not just look into the mirror […], too narrow. But when you are outside, you can go everywhere and do whatever you like (Interview 08 October 2018).

In her quote, she refers to different sensory experiences of moving in the classroom and outdoor public spaces, associating the latter with freedom of movement. By contrast, the classroom, with the presence of a mirror, provides her with the infrastructure to monitor and control the movement of her body and the collective body of students. This mechanism of discipline is necessary in order to improve technique. Judith Hamera (2007) defines technique as "codes of governing and standardizing dance practice", rendering performing bodies legible (p. 6). Hoang Phuong, a renowned hip hop dancer and owner of the Wonder Dance Studio in Hanoi, likewise teaches women students for free who have been following her for some years. Like Nguyet, she wants them to experience both dancing in the classroom and in public space. She explains,

> if you want to develop yourself, you can't practice in the park forever. […] I need a space that I can concentrate, and in the park are many people. And actually, for some of the practice, I have to hear, to see what my posture is like. So, I really need a studio. (Interview 08 October 2018).

In the above, both dancers link the emplacement of their bodies to technologies of the self. According to Foucault, technologies of the self:

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988, p. 18).

In relation to dance practice, the aim of these operations exerted on the body is certainly perfection (of technique). However, the appeal of dancing, both in indoor classes and outdoor spaces, also lies in the pursuit of happiness for dancing youth. Li Zhang (2012) explains that the "desires to pursue personal happiness and perfection are played out differently in multiple terrains" (p. 663). In the case of hip hop dancing, the pursuit of happiness and perfection are played out in the constant movement between private and public space. The co-presence of bodies moving together in public space generates feelings of belonging, joy, and intersubjectivity. As Nguyet puts it:

> some of my friends, they are not dancers. They see me now, [and think] dancing is really nice. Because they are just busy at work and then go home. Just no more life. But they cannot experience the feelings of people who join together and dance together. (Interview 08 October 2018).

According to Hamera (2007), dancers realise "strategies of solidarity in difference" in collective practice and performance (p. 13). In public space, techniques that are fine-tuned in indoor studios render the body legible in a shared idiom, offering

possibilities to imagine new ways of being oneself as well as being together (Hamera, 2007). With their artistic performances in public spaces, women dancers imagine new ways of being themselves that oftentimes do not conform to social expectations of their gender performance. By practicing in public, they make their actions visible and accountable to other women, who also might be inspired to follow them. The final report of the *Hanoi Youth Public Space Project* similarly states that young women watching 'strong activities' undertaken in public space by other women, such as skateboarding and street dancing, are aware of their socially transgressive nature, and evaluate this positively by describing women's performances as 'stylish'(Boudreau *et al*., 2015, p. 5).

CROSSING GENDERED IDEALS

Scholars working in public spaces in Vietnam have extensively pointed to the fluidity of private and public in Vietnamese urbanism (Drummond, 2000; Geertman and Boudreau, 2018; Gibert, 2018; Kim, 2015; Kurfürst, 2012). This resonates with feminist research that has challenged the socially constructed division of private and public altogether (Bondi, 2005; Fraser, 1993). Lisa Drummond (2000) refers to the conduct of private activities, like cooking, eating, and nurturing children, on the sidewalks of Hanoi as 'inside out' (p. 2377). By contrast, she comprehends the state's intervention into the private sphere of the family e.g., through family planning measures, as "outside in". Family planning campaigns primarily target women, advising them when to marry, what kind of partner to choose, and when to bear children. For instance, the *Cultured Family Program* addressed themes such as health, hygiene, and social conduct generally, as well as women's behaviour in particular; re-assigning women to the sphere of domesticity and requiring them to perform "'feminine' attributes" (Tran, 2014, p. 14).

In Vietnam, feminine attributes are represented in the Four Virtues (*tứ đức*), which define the norms for women's labour (*công*), appearance (*dung*), speech (*ngôn*), and conduct (*hạnh*). Women ought to be skilled at cooking and housekeeping (labour), be physically attractive to one's husband (appearance), use a humble and submissive voice (speech), and, finally, embody female integrity by presenting obedience to seniors and the husband (conduct) (Khuat, Le and Nguyen, 2009). In practice, these ideals often remain unrealised and might even be resisted. Yet, these norms of feminine virtue persist and inform discourses about cultural ideals of femininity (Endres, 2008). Consequentially, women in late socialist Vietnam must navigate conflicting roles and pressures placed on them. On the one hand, female bodies are increasingly commodified, creating the "desire to become 'marketable' or 'sexually desirable'" among women (Hoang, 2015; Nghiem, 2004, p. 312). On the other hand, women remain doubly responsible for the family and household as providers and caretakers for children and the elderly (Bui, 2018; Nguyen, 2019).

In this context, young women's dancing can be seen as a performance of 'life as art' – a way of life encountered by Geertman and Boudreau (2018) in their study of Hanoi youth. Life as art means leading a non-conforming life, living in the here and now, and following one's passion intuitively (Geertman and Boudreau, 2018). Indulging in their passion (*đam mê*) for dance, was a recurrent trope in the conversations I had with Hanoi-based dancers. The women dancers perceived breaking, popping, and hip hop dancing as sources of joy and freedom, something they had not felt in their life until they had started dancing. Hoang Phuong recalls how hip hop changed her life by giving her the confidence and freedom to express herself. Thanh Phuong, the woman hip hop dancer cited in the introduction, perceived dancing as a form of language (communication without words) and still

maintained dancing although she had a demanding office job (Interviews 08, 23 October 2018). Thao, a woman dancer says about dancing:

> At first, I just think that it is a hobby. Because when I dance I feel happy. But now after ten years, I can say that dancing is a part of my life. […] because I'm kind of a lazy person […], rarely active. But when I start to dance, I feel my personality changes, I am more active, more confident" (Interview 22 November 2018).

Women dancers' motivation to pursue happiness and gain confidence through dance, was, for most women dancers, met with opposition and scepticism towards their choice of dancing, especially from their parents. Some of the women reported the struggles they needed to take up with their parents until they got where they are today. Concern about the interference of dancing with their studies at high school or university was one reason why parents were not fond of their daughters' choice to dance. Parents feared that their children would not have enough time to study and that their passion for dancing might keep them from making a successful professional career. One young woman was even physically prevented from joining dance class, as her parents locked her into her room (various interviews October/November 2018).

My interlocutors explained that their parents were not so much concerned about the bodily practice itself or its aesthetics, but they were anxious about the temporal and spatial settings of the dance practice. Leading a dancing life means staying out late at night, since dancers usually return home from work in the evening, have dinner, take a short rest, and afterward, go out again to join crew practice or teach dance classes. Apart from the time, the space of practice also concerned their parents. All women dancers I got to know had learned dancing in public space (at times in addition to taking indoor classes). In contrast to the women, the men dancers participating in this research did not report these quarrels with their parents.

Minh Nguyen's (2019) work on gendered spatial orientations of urban consumption sheds further light on these observations. Nguyen (2019) differentiates between men and women's spatial orientations of consumption, noting that the ephemeral pleasures that the city offers are largely men's privileges. Young men feel entitled to taste the urban consumption, and their exploration of themselves outside the home before they settle and marry is socially accepted. Women's consumption of the urban, by contrast, centres on the home as they are expected to focus on the family's needs. Women hip hop dancers effectively defy such gendered orientations of consumption, as they engage in the ephemeral pleasures of the city, going out at night for drinks and food, playing loud music, and dancing in public. Paul Horton and Helle Rydstrøm (2021), with respect to members of the LGBTQIA+ community, show how a non-conformity with gender norms can have implications for the collective face of the family (p. 69). The authors explain that even if parents had nothing against homosexuality in general, they nonetheless might react strongly to their children's divergence from heteronormative norms due to societal expectations. The same can also be recognised in relation to dance.

Thuy, a hip hop dancer in her early thirties, mentioned that her parents kept telling her to quit dancing although she already had made a career for herself in the management of a transnational operating company. Her parents linked her being single at the age of 30 to her hip hop dancing. She recalled how they would yell at her at night when she returned home, demanding her to quit dancing and go find a husband. However, she continued dancing and finally was able to convince her parents of the importance of dance in her life. In the meantime, she invited them to

a Latin dance class, and now they sometimes go out to dance in public space together (Interview 24 October 2018).

While some parents were able to accept their children's pursuit of happiness in dancing, women dancers were confronted with gendered expectations on a daily basis. The following title of an interview with a woman icon of Vietnamese hip hop, with the Vietnamese street dance blog, *Văn Hóa Đường Phố | Vietnam Street Culture,* illustrates the gender stereotypes at work. The title reads "How does a women dancer balance family, work, and being inspired to continue exercising and training hard to compete in battles?" (translated from Vietnamese). While disguised as considerate and curious, the question reinforces the implicit masculine norm in assuming that there is something special or exotic about a woman hip hop dancer. Moreover, in its title, the blog reproduces gendered expectations toward women's achievements in life as it assumes that a woman in her late twenties is already married with children. While men also face pressure to marry - sometimes well into their forties - women beyond the age of 30 are already considered past the marriageable age (Bui, 2018; Horton and Rydstrøm, 2019). Most of the women dancers participating in this research were at the end of their twenties at the time of this research. In 2018, only one of them was married, whereas the other nine were unmarried. None of the women had children.

Gender Bending

What all the women engaging in hip hop dance share, is being a minority among men. This configuration is not unique to Vietnam, but b-girls, women poppers, and women hip hop dancers move in spaces and groups dominated by men. Styles like breaking require physical fitness and endurance as well as control over the body (Bode Bakker and Nuijten, 2018). According to Imani Kai Johnson (2014), breaking comprises "big acrobatics, a steady rhythmic flow, small gestures of humorous or violent retribution, and an aggressive, threatening attitude, especially in battles" (p. 15). Breaking comprises different sequences of movement, such as the entry, footwork, exit, and freeze. Particularly, the last sequence of the freeze celebrates, according to Sally Banes (2004), the flexibility and budding sexuality of the gangly male adolescent body. Research on b-girls in the U. S. and China emphasizes the ways that such "performances of clichéd masculinity" (Johnson, 2014, p. 15) pose a challenge to b-girls, who are refrained from learning such movements, as their male peers consider them "unsafe" or "unfeminine" (Chew and Mo, 2019; Rose, 1994).

Interestingly, such discourse on sexuality (or the unsuitability of breaking, popping, or hip hop dance due to its aesthetics and body styles for women) was not evident from the interviews (also not mentioned by b-boys) or the participant observation that I conducted in Hanoi. On the contrary, whenever a b-girl or woman popper participated in a battle – typically only one or two among a large number of men – they would receive as much applause, shouts, and props as their male counterparts (participant observation at *Red Bull Battle 2018* and *Lang Ha Popping Battle* 2018). Generally, the women dancers participating in this research agreed that they gained respect from their male peers. This was also evident from posts on social media, where women dancers were addressed as *chị cả*, which translates as eldest sister. This is a reference to seniority, not only in age, but also to their expertise in dancing, which is highly relevant in a society defined by asymmetric relationships based on gender, age and status (Shohet, 2021).

However, what came up in our discussions about breaking and popping were the issues of the hardships of training and the physical fitness required to perform

breaking or popping, also in relation to gender. Women and men dancers contemplated that men, generally, had more physical strength than women, explaining why some styles might be more suitable for women to learn than others. A woman popper said, that when she first encountered popping, she found it to look "quite hard for girls", but finally chose to learn this style, exactly because it posed a physical challenge to her (Interview 22 November 2018). Women engaging in physically challenging activities is the 'normal' state of affairs in much of Vietnam, where women have long taken an active part in armed conflict and engage in hard manual labour as waste collectors or construction site workers (Bui, 2018; Nguyen, 2019; Tran, 1995).

Despite such physical manual labour carried out by women and their presence in the public sphere in politics, gendered norms, concerning a woman's appearance and body styles, still prevail (Endres, 2008; Rydstrøm, 2003). In her monograph, *Embodying Morality*, Helle Rydstrøm (2003) shows how, in a rural commune located in Northern Vietnam, male and female characters are associated with the complementary forces of *dương* and *âm*. Against this normative framework men are perceived to be "hot" (*nóng*) and active, bold, and assertive, in contrast to women who are perceived to be "cold" (*lạnh*), and gentle, sweet, and deferent (Rydstrøm, 2003).

Such ideals of femininity and masculinity are also performed through body styles. Sweeping movements that take up more physical and social space are considered bodily manifestations of masculinity. Girls, by contrast, are taught to refrain from broad movements and from expressing emotions in public. According to Rydstrøm, the display of emotion and outbursts of anger, in particular, such as kicking things, or walking angrily around, are reserved for those who orchestrate and thus dominate social interactions and are generally "connected with being 'hot-tempered'" (Rydstrøm, 2003, pp. 142-143). In this regard, the corporeal vocabulary of breaking ultimately refers to notions of masculinity. However, recent studies on rituals, such as the *lên đồng* of the Mother Goddess religion, have pointed out those interactional situations when gender bending, the performing of body styles associated with the opposite gender, may come to be accepted, instead of being socially sanctioned (Endres, 2008; Norton, 2006). In the course of the ritual, both men and women mediums constantly transgress binary categories of gender as they perform both men and women spirits in the ritual. The liminal phase of the ritual, just like the liminal phase of the dance performance or battle, requires men and women performers to act, move, and ultimately dance outside of prescribed gender conventions (Norton, 2006; Turner and Fischer-Lichte, 2009).

Dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2016) locates the gesture of innovation in black social dance exactly in the queering of movement: "Often, the gesture of innovation that defines excellence in these social dance forms defies common expectations of normative gender or sexual identity" (p. 66). For instance, in breaking, this innovation and personal style can be expressed in a set of bodily motifs of the opposite of masculine vitality (Banes, 2004). Accordingly, a good dancer is not judged against their gendered body, but the quality of their performance.

Most of the participants in this research were well-known dancers and often acted as judges at dance battles themselves. Therefore, they had experience in judging dance performances. Asked about what makes a good dancer, they all agreed on a set of protocols, comprising technique, style, and a more somatic dimension of going/flowing with the music. All the advanced dancers mentioned the technique. According to Hamera (2007), the dance technique assists both dancers and the

audience to decipher dancing bodies while offering frames for the analysis, interpretation and critique of those bodies. In hip hop, practitioners refer to the common grammar of technique as 'basics' or 'foundation'. Dancers agreed that it was only possible to develop one's personal style once a dancer had accomplished the foundation. Women dancers, in particular, also mentioned the sensations of dancing and the emotions embodied as a criterion of judgement. Hoang Phuong said that she wants to see that "the music lifts" the dancer, and woman locker Yen Hanh mentioned "the way they listen to the music" as a dancer's quality (Interviews 08, 25 October 2018).

Theatre scholar Katharina Rost (2017) engages with this sensory dimension of dance, introducing the term 'body listening'. Body listening conceptualizes dancers' movements on stage as kinaesthetic traces of audibly perceived energy currents. The dancers participating in this research explained that they guide the audience into the song and that the task of their dance is to express the feelings of the song (Interview 08 October 2018). This latter point of communicating emotions in dance was mentioned by Thanh Phuong in relation to gender. According to her, women are more capable of embodying emotions than men, and therefore might even be better dancers. She elaborates that women are able to have a strong and powerful appearance like a man and combine such appearance with a smooth motion, therefore being capable of performing various emotions (Interview 23 October 2018). The combination of feminine and masculine body styles that the renowned women dancers I worked with had mastered is regarded as a trait of excellence. Consequently, gender bending can be read as a sign of distinction and an expression of virtuosity and creativity in hip hop.

A dancer, who was frequently mentioned for her unique style and outstanding performance as b-girl, hip hop, and house dancer is Mai Tinh Vi. She perceives herself as a 'b-boy-girl', dressing foremost in baggy pants, XXL-t-shirts, sneakers, and caps. Her preference for hip hop apparel is shared by other women dancers. As a result, the fashion's unisex character not only communicates being a peer in the hip hop community, it also contributes to blurring some gendered distinctions. The choice of XXL-t-shirts and caps, which women dancers often combine with a short haircut, diverges from common beauty ideals in Vietnam that emphasize a slim figure, elegant dress, and long, well-groomed hair (Nguyen *et al*., 2020; Horton and Rydstrøm, 2021). In the video *Sóng Ngầm Sông Hồng*, presented by Cyril Kongo Vietnam Gallery, Mai dances across different value regimes of gender. The video is set in an art gallery with live music playing, integrating traditional Vietnamese instruments with DJing. Mai starts her performance wearing baggy jeans, sneakers, a wide long sleeve, and a cloth tied around her head, combining hip hop, and popping/locking moves with feminine movements of her arms that seem to quote motions from ballet. In minute 1.20, Mai's performance changes. She is now dressed in a red áo dài inspired top, still wearing her jeans and sneakers. [6] In her hand she holds a red fan, conducting movements with her arms and torso inspired by Vietnamese fan dance. In the last minute of the video, she resurrects dressed as a hip hop dancer, performing wide sweeping movements on the floor in the form of power moves from breaking and hip hop motions (Hoai Anh, Hoành, DJ Jin and MaiTinhVi, 2021).

[6] The *áo dài* evolved as a dress for Vietnamese women at the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1980s and 1990s, the áo dài developed into a national symbol of the stylized Vietnamese woman (Lieu, 2000)

B-girls' self-awareness of their queer performance is also evident in their posts on social media. On social media, they post compositions of photos and videos of themselves, and short comments and hashtags. In these texts, women dancers engage in word play. For example, one hashtag used in combination with photos of an all-female crew dressed in hip hop apparel is #depzai. #Depzai is a play on words on *đẹp trai,* which translates as handsome and is solely used for males. Women's appearance, by contrast, would be addressed as (*xinh*) *đẹp*, also translating as beautiful. What is more, the "z" is not part of the Vietnamese alphabet and is therefore non-existent.[7] #Depzai thus evolves out of creativity and play, representing in words the fluidity of gender performance in hip hop dance.

BODILY CONTORTIONS AND BREAKING NORMS

Breaking literally denotes dancing to break beats, but it also connotes a form of resistance, such as breaking with norms. Indeed, hip hop has been conceptualized as both an art form and a form of resistance, giving a voice and bodily form of expression to those that are otherwise marginalised (Bode Baker and Nuijten, 2018; Rose, 1994; Johnson, 2014). Reischer and Koo (2004) refer to "the agentic body" to denote the body's capacity for resistance and transformation. The paper has illustrated young women's imagining of alternative futures and being themselves through the body. The kinesthesia of hip hop dance provides women dancers with confidence and feelings of joy. Choosing a dancing life, they make life choices that break with gendered expectations. In the public eye, it is not so much the corporeal vocabulary that is not fitting with women's proper conduct, but rather the spatialities and temporalities of dance.

First of all, parents considered dancing to interfere with the career path they had foreseen for their children. Dancing was considered to withhold their children from studying to attain a good job. Second, as the title of the blog on street dance suggests, women are considered caretakers of the family, and dancing appears to pose a challenge to women to fulfill their social responsibilities as daughters, wives, and mothers. However, the paper also shows that within the hip hop community itself different norms are at stake, such as mastering technique, 'listening to the music', or expressing emotions. Measured against the quality of their performance, women dancers are equally valued as men in the hip hop community. In fact, gender bending can be one way to embody virtuosity and gain recognition from peers. In conclusion, women hip hop artists constantly cross different value regimes, resulting in shifting readings of their body. Depending on their emplacement - in private or public space, among a group of hip hop peers or an anonymous public, or family and kin - their performance is evaluated differently, e.g. as breaking or conforming with norms. In the hip hop community, women dancers' performance is assessed based on their technique, unique style and play. By contrast, in urban society, unfamiliar with hip hop norms, their dance performance might be considered as diverging from gender norms with regards to their clothing and women's conduct in public space.

[7] I am thankful to Nguyen Minh Tien, who pointed out, that "depzai" could also be a dialect word. However, since the users of the hashtag are all from Hanoi, and the "z" is absent from Northern dialect, I understand it as a gesture of queering (personal conversation, 6 June 2021).

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