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Making Futures in Hip Hop

Peer Production and the Meaning of Community

Introduction

In this paper, I conceptualize hip hop as a multipolar art form. Originating in New York in the late 1970s and traveling around the globe ever since, hip hop has come to be viewed as a cultural form that travels globally and is locally adopted and integrated into local practices and materials, thereby shaping the politics of belonging (Alim 2009; Androutsopoulos 2003; Pennycook 2007; Schulz 2012). Against this backdrop, Jenny Mbaye urges us to think of hip hop as multipolar and multireferential. This perspective opens up ways to think about this form of expression beyond its country of origin. The United States, where hip hop's four cultural practices of MCing, break(danc)ing, DJing, and graffiti writing first developed, is seen as the art form's birthplace and hence its cultural center. However, Mbaye rightfully argues that such a specific geohistorical understanding of hip hop might lead scholars to regard its other manifestations as appropriations of an original culture. Instead, she suggests regarding hip hop in each time and place as a "singular translation of commonality" (Mbaye 2014: 398). This approach carves out space for a comparative perspective, taking into account hip hop's performativity and its local cultural, economic, and socio–political underpinnings. The starting point for such an analysis is what Mbaye likewise refers to as a Southern positioning.

> From this perspective, hip hop constitutes a phenomenon localized on the borders, on the margins of an assumed sociality and urbanity; it tends to emerge from a 'southern positioning,' a place of marginality; it is a 'path of passage for a borderline sociality' in cities north and south. (Mbaye 2014: 398)

In the following, I would like to use this notion of Southern positioning to make sense of hip hop artists' endeavors in different localities around the world. Hip hop can be a practice of resistance and simultaneously a source of joy and pleasure (Rose 1994). In this paper, I will examine artists and forms of expression in different local environments, specifically Brazil, Ecuador, Senegal, and Vietnam. While my examinations of hip hop artists' aspirations in the first three countries are based on a review of secondary literature, the data on Vietnam draw on my own field research in Hanoi between September 2015 and November 2018.

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Utopian Aspirations

Hip hop has been closely associated with the city ever since its beginnings in New York. In Brazilian cities, hip hop has evolved as a movement from the urban periphery that expresses the most powerfully articulated form of revolt that Brazilian society has seen in many years (Caldeira 2003). Moreover, da Silva and Shaw explain that hip hop has evolved as a new way to organize the network of relationships that constitutes the favela and reframe society's viewpoint on people from the urban periphery (da Silva/Shaw 2012).

The Southern position is at stake on the scale of the city, but also on a global scale. The US has emerged not only as hip hop's cultural center, but also as the economic hub of a global market: the most prominent labels, producers, and rap and dance crews are located in major metropolises of North America. The art form's periphery, then, consists of countries such as Vietnam, Senegal, Brazil, and Ecuador, where vibrant hip hop communities have emerged in recent years, and have begun cultivating local markets and seeking to make an impact on the global hip hop economy.

Aware of their Southern positioning, rappers and dancers in these locations share the same values of community and representation, for example, as well as "utopian aspirations" (Bode Bakker/Nuijten 2018), to which Bode Bakker and Nuijten (2018: 225) ascribe a mobilizing and energizing force. The authors particularly locate the impulse to contest social structures and strive for utopian alternatives within the transitional period between childhood and adulthood (McRobbie 1990). Breaking offers one such utopian alternative, as it has the power to provide young people with a sense of belonging and a role in life outside their kin relations (Langman 2008; Moore 2016). This dance style is particularly attractive for young people in search of a different life, a new sense of belonging, and a new role in society (Bode Bakker/Njuiten 2018). Accordingly, hip hop artists built up communities of their own, cherishing the values of community and mutual support. Moreover, they celebrate individual achievements, which in turn reflect on the collective as they win a dance battle in the name of their whole crew (Talk by Mai Tinh Vi, 20.9.23).

Breaking in Quito, Ecuador

In their study on breaking in Quito, Ecuador, Maritza Bode Bakker and Monique Nuijten (2018) examine the social dynamics of the Naturalz Crew. In the context of working-class neighborhoods in the city of Quito, and within a highly segre-

gated and violent society, the members of the Naturalz crew engage in breaking as a dynamic and physically challenging activity while refusing to take on conventional family roles or to join gangs (Bode Bakker/Nuijten 2018: 210). They aim to prove to their parents and society that it is possible to break away from both conventionality and criminality and to lead a distinct and positive lifestyle. This take on breaking in particular and hip hop in general is also shared by hip hop artists in Hanoi, Vietnam. While they are aware that many people associate hip hop with crime or consider it "useless", believing that does not provide a "good job" or steady income, members of different crews in Hanoi promote their own attitude to hip hop (Interviews Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City 2018).

In this regard, the professionalization of street dance becomes important, as breaking grows from a passion or hobby into a source of income. Accordingly, members of the Naturalz Crew seek to have breaking recognized as a respectable profession that requires dedication, skill, and commitment and indeed hope to prove to their parents and their neighborhoods that there are different paths to the "normal" life as defined by their parents and community. In the long run, the crew members aspire to combine dancing with academic education or vocational training in areas such as electric engineering or graphic design. Others hope to open their own dance schools or retail stores. Their hopes and desires for the good life – in other words, their utopian thinking – comprise both individual and collective goals (Bode Bakker/Nuijten 2018: 220).

Hip Hop and Community

In hip hop, artists realize personal aspirations and achievements. But these are, in turn, linked to the social sphere in the ways that practitioners attach (new) meanings to hip hop culture (*văn hóa hip hop*). Many respondents claimed that hip hop, for them, meant helping each other, talking to each other, being connected, and spending time with people they liked (interviews October 2018). CK Animation, an icon of the Northern Vietnamese popping scene, says that to become a member of his crew, newcomers must be persistent in exercising and good at training. But it is equally or even more important that all the members have fun together (*chơi với nhau*) (interview October 2018). Because the dancers spend a large portion of their time together, it is important for them to be on good terms. In a similar vein, a young dancer named Hoàng says of his high school dance club: "It's very fun. We're very close, just like a family, because we have to play and support and practice with each other a lot" (interview November 2018). Dancing becomes a shared experience, spawning new collectives. The sense of belonging to and identifying

with a particular crew, team, or club is highly relevant for hip hop practitioners. On social media, Vietnamese hip hop artists usually present themselves either individually or amongst their crew, but invariably include a reference to their crew name in the form of either a hashtag or the crew's logo. The affective bond of the individual with the larger collective of the crew then becomes institutionalized through such references to its name.

The value of mutual support is also well captured by hip hop's catchphrase "Each one, teach one", which also emphasizes the importance of sharing knowledge. Indeed, the value of sharing knowledge connects the individual with the collective in the way that the individuals receive recognition from peers and newcomers alike for their skills, techniques, and virtuosity. At the same time, they are sharing this knowledge with others who seek to cultivate themselves. Even though opening a dance studio or teaching dance as a freelancer might constitute an important source of income, dancers are willing to share their embodied knowledge with others. For instance, WHowl a prominent hip hop dancer and waacker from Hanoi, combines an online job working for a fashion company with teaching dance classes for children and teens at different dance studios in Hanoi. Yet she still teaches another free class twice a week for young women who have been training with her for several years. Some evenings, she teaches them inside the studio, and others, she takes her students outside to the park surrounding the Lenin Monument in central Hanoi. By teaching a free dance class in the park, she is harvesting the urban environment (Simone 2019): using the materiality and accessibility of public space to create a public domain for hip hop culture in the capital. Together with other dancers, she makes these physical practices visible and recognizable in the city. Dance techniques render the body legible in a shared idiom, offering possibilities to imagine new ways of being oneself as well as being together (Hamera 2007). WHowl is not the only dancer (of any gender) teaching free classes in public space. In fact, public dancing – making the bodily practices of hip hop dancing visible and accessible to others – is what first raised awareness of hip hop as an art form in Vietnam, drawing more and more young people to it. Today it is practiced by not only urbanites, but also young people in rural and mountainous areas, who have come across hip hop on social media or television.

Peer Production

Sharing knowledge about hip hop goes hand in hand with developing a distinct local hip hop market. Adam Arvidsson et al. (2008: 10) consider the hip hop economy an ethical economy in which the entrepreneurial motive extends well be-

yond monetary incentives of the market economy. In this context, peer production becomes crucial. While peer production is reliant on capitalism, it also holds an emancipatory promise, offering an alternative life logic that could replace the current capitalist system. According to Michel Bauwens, peer production incorporates elements of post-capitalist economies and has the potential to strengthen autonomous communities of production. He defines "peer to peer" as "a relational dynamic that emerges through distributed networks" (Bauwens 2009: 122). Peer production is characterized by the following three traits:

1. "Open and free" availability of raw materials
2. Participatory "processing"
3. Commons-oriented output

Studying hip hop communities in Dakar, Senegal, Mbaye (2014: 405) demonstrates that the hip hop economy is organized in a way that allows individual artists to create autonomously within the community while becoming aware of themselves as a new generation of entrepreneurs in their city.

As Mbaye shows, the rationale expressed by hip hop entrepreneurs in Dakar is to create a market for hip hop in a Global South location that has been largely ignored by the global music industry. Aware that their music rarely leaves the country, they therefore try to pave the ground for local music production. A prerequisite for such peer production is that the peer producers own or control their own productive assets. Hip hop entrepreneurs in Dakar own their instruments and technical infrastructure, such as recording devices, which are necessary for music production (Mbaye 2014: 407). Furthermore, they engage in and have the skills for self-production. In other words, they possess the means of production as well as the skills, techniques, and knowledge necessary to manage the production process.

Horizontal and Vertical Integration

In Vietnam, the Wonder Dance Studio in Hanoi offers an excellent example of peer production, as the founders seek to cultivate an environment for dancers to develop skills and cultivate their own styles of hip hop and popping. Bạn Rùa, a popular hip hop dancer, recognizes that there is generally more consumer demand for dance classes in categories such as urban choreography or "sexy dance" than in hop hop, so the studio she co-owns with popper CK Animation also offers these first, more profitable classes as a way to subsidize the "real" hip hop classes.

> Because actually, my dance studio now is, how to say, it is not to earn the money from that. [. . .] because I teach in many, many studios, so there the money comes from. It is not from my studio. It is a studio because [. . .] we educate and we create people that have the passion for hip hop dance. (Bạn Rùa, October 2018)

Consequently, hip hop dancers engage in what economists call horizontal integration – but at the same time, hip hop entrepreneurs are practicing vertical integration, taking advantage of their interconnections with music production processes. Some dancers, for instance, extend their entrepreneurial activities to festivals, media, audiovisual, and graphic design companies (Mbaye 2014: 405–406), and even streetwear fashion brands.

Combining the knowledge they have gathered from their office jobs with their embodied knowledge of dance, hip hop artists engage in vertical integration – for example, by organizing events that serve as local hubs and markets for hip hop. One example is the Nhiệt battle, which the members of New York Style Crew organized at least three times in a row. A crew member named Thanh Phương, who has been with the crew from the beginning, explains that the first edition was a rather small event given the small size of the local hip hop dance community. However, the second time she organized it, it already drew a larger crowd because they had opened the event beyond hip hop dancers to include b-boys and b-girls. From then on Nhiệt, had two types of battles: hip hop one-on-one and b-boy/b-girl one-on-one. This was because breaking had become much more popular over time, while hip hop had only drawn greater appeal within the past fifteen years. The New York Style Crew launched the event in order to share their passion for hip hop dance and expand their community. In other words, the purpose was both to build social relationships and to expand their social horizons. Others have founded street fashion labels. Mai and Mia, two well-known b-girls from the B.Nashor Crew, both host their own fashion label on social media platforms. While most of the clothing is sold online, they also collaborate with small shops in their hometowns to sell their fashion products. Vertical and horizontal integration mostly occurs along the supply chain and is highly motivated by the artists' combination of different types of knowledge.

Aihwa Ong (2008) introduced the term "self-fashioning" to characterize the individualizing logic of young professionals in the Southern megacity of Shanghai. Self-fashioning involves "the astute defining and mixing of different knowledge and the capacity to convert information from one zone into a new value in another" (Ong 2008: 187).

Outside her dancing life, the aforementioned Thanh Phương works as a lawyer for a real estate company. She engages in self-fashioning when she sets aside money from her full-time job and uses her skills to raise money from sponsors

for a local hip hop event such as Nhiệt Thanh Phương can navigate and capitalize on her knowledge of and connections in the different value regimes, moving between the real-estate sector and hip hop culture.

For the organizational knowledge that she puts into planning such an event, she receives recognition from the Hanoi hip hop community for providing a space for hip hop in the city and giving back to the community. Her elevated position in the hip hop community is reflected in the honorific she has been assigned by her peers: eldest sister (*Chị Cả*). In Vietnam, older sister (*chị*) is a respectful form of address, acknowledging her age, status, and gender. Replacing "older" with "eldest" further elevates her status in a hierarchically and asymmetrically organized society, and a dance community dominated by men. With the money she earns at the real estate company, she aspires to own her own dance studio someday. She plans on renting the dance studio's location from the real-estate company she works for, which would give her a discount.

Circulation of Digital Performances

The circulation of imagery from dance performances, battles, and individual dancers on social media is essential in order to be seen and heard from their Southern position. These performances not only include self-portraits and videos, but are assemblages composed of visuals, text, and metadata, such as hashtags. Hashtags may label a post with a particular dance style, such as house dance, b-boying, popping, and waacking or a crew name such as #BNashor, #BigToe, or #NewYorkStyle. Social media posts may also include hashtags referencing dancers' aliases, such #Maitinhvi, #Banrua, #Rufu, and might sometimes refer to a particular group of dancers as in #femalepopper. The choice of a hashtag is decisive in addressing a particular audience. In this context, the usage of English hashtags, in particular, connects (visual and textual) content produced by Vietnamese dancers with content produced outside of the linguistic confines of Vietnam. The communicative repertoire of the hip hop community of practice is thus defined by multilingualism. Given the art form's roots in Black culture and language, English has evolved as hip hop's lingua franca (Hassa 2010). Overall, translanguaging becomes a defining feature of their social practices. According to Garcia and Wei (2017), translanguaging (not to be confused with code-switching) considers the language practices of (bilingual) individuals as "one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages" (Garcia/Wei 2017: 2). Although most of the Vietnamese hip hop dancers are not in fact bilingual, English terms and utterances are as much part of their linguistic repertoire as of their dance practice.

Moving through Unequal Fields of Globe-Spanning Power

In the global hip hop economy, Vietnam, Senegal, Ecuador, and Brazil are located at the margins, but hip hop practitioners turn their marginality into an asset (Harms 2011). As their utopian aspirations combine individual and collective goals, hip hop artists in these locations strive to expand the hip hop community as well as to establish local hip hop markets within their city, country, or region outside of the metropole of the US. With regard to dance, they aim to succeed as individual dancers, but also as members of a particular dance crew. In fact, representation is an important value of hip hop worldwide. Individual dancers, rappers, or graffiti writers represent their specific crew, which in turn may represent an entire neighborhood, community, urban district, city, or – at international battles – an entire country. When dancers bring home achievements after winning a battle, such as a trophy or price money, they never do so as individuals but always as part of the collective of the crew. While New York Style Crew typically represents Hanoi, it represents Vietnam at international dance competitions, such as the Singapore Arena Dance Competition and the Juste Debout preselection in Bangkok, Thailand. At the Singapore Arena 2017, the New York Style Crew and Mai Tinh Vi were invited to represent Vietnam. For this purpose, the crew and Mai developed distinct choreography incorporating elements of Vietnamese culture. For the performance, they used Vietnamese music, wearing costumes resembling the dress of Buddhist monks. In their dance, they brought to life a poem by Vietnamese writer, Ngô Xuân Diệu. Known for his love poems, short stories, and literary criticism, Ngô Xuân Diệu is an important representative of modern Vietnamese literature. In 1943, he joined the League for the Independence of Vietnam (Việt Nam Độc lập Đồng minh Hội), commonly known as the Viet Minh. In his writings, he promoted resistance against the French colonial regime. Accordingly, their choice to incorporate Vietnamese literature and music into their choreography indicates a politics of belonging and representation on an international stage. For the Vietnamese dancers, “to represent” in Singapore meant not only representing their crew or the city of Hanoi, but showing to the world that Vietnam has a vibrant cultural scene spanning from literature to music to dance.

Furthermore, their utopian aspirations extend to the production of hip hop commodities and artefacts. As demonstrated with regard to hip hop artists in Senegal and Vietnam, they engage in peer production to organize festivals and dance battles but also to create street fashion and visual artefacts. Visual artefacts consist of their own bodily performances, which they distribute via digital networks, creating opportunities for global encounters with members of the hip hop com-

munity around the world. Moreover, their communicative repertoire is defined by both multilingualism and the sophisticated use of social media. Their everyday practice – for instance, teaching and learning hip hop, popping and breaking in the classroom or in public space – is also characterized by translanguaging. They use English terms to denote a particular move or state of being, such as "the flow", "grooving", etc. They also tag their social media posts in both Vietnamese and English to make their content and products accessible to hip hop practitioners globally. Thus, even young people located at the margins of the global hip hop economy can communicate their aspirations in person while using digital media to promote and market their work.

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