

### TRANSFORMING GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH BREAKING.

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This chapter explores the negotiation of gender within the physical culture of breaking (which is better known as “breakdancing”). Specifically, using Barker-Ruchti et al.’s (2016) conceptualization of crossing, shifting and transforming gender in physical cultures, I investigate how male breakers challenge and reinforce dominant gender practices and expectations within the field of Norwegian breaking.

### BREAKING IN THE NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

Breaking grew out of the hip-hop culture that evolved in the ghettos of the Bronx during the 1970s. From a marginalized position Black American youth used breaking to protest against mainstream society and to construct an alternative identity (Banes 2004; Schloss 2009; Williams 2011). In Norway, the impact of hip-hop culture became evident in 1984 after the movie *Beat Street* was released. That year, breaking became popular throughout the country as many young people performed breaking in the streets (Dyndahl 2008; Holen 2004). However, breaking’s popularity faded after a few years and was bypassed by other elements from hip-hop culture; such as graffiti and then rap, which became increasingly popular during the 1990s (Holen 2004). Today, breaking has disappeared from the streets and primarily remains an underground activity.

Even though it has been moved off the streets and is mostly performed behind closed doors, breaking sporadically appears in the forefront of Norwegian popular culture. In 2012 and 2014, alongside traditional dancers, breakers performed for a full house on the main stage of the Norwegian Opera House. During these performances, excerpts from classics such as *Swan Lake* and *Don Quixote* were coupled with the breakers head spins and acrobatic tricks (Danseinformasjonen 2014). As ballerinas and breakers challenged one another and with their respective forms of dance, they also broadly challenged (and reinforced) gender norms in Norwegian culture.

Physical cultures, such as dance, play a significant role in prescribing gender-appropriate activities and identity performances for boys and girls. They serve as models for how male and female bodies should and should not move, how male and female bodies should be presented, and how male and female bodies should be seen. In Western society, dancing is often framed as an activity for girls and women. The men who enter into this feminine field are always in danger of being classified as effeminate (Craig 2014; Gard 2008). This is especially true for white, heterosexual men who are not supposed to dance (Craig 2014). Within this chapter, I explore how the men who enter into the feminine field of dance, challenge and reinforce gender norms in society. Specifically, I investigate how the breakers practices (re)construct gender norms, behaviors, identities, and hierarchies in society.

### METHODS

The research discussed in this chapter draws on data from a larger Ph.D. project (Langnes 2017) that combined fieldwork and qualitative interviews to understand the gendered practices of breaking in Oslo, Norway. The data was compiled from eight months of fieldwork that was primarily conducted at two dedicated breaking sites in Oslo. Even though the two breaking sites were located in different socio-cultural areas of Oslo, they appeared to be quite similar. This similarity allowed me to merge the two sites into a single conceptual

## Transforming gender identity through breaking

space, which I deemed “the Location.”

The fieldwork was followed by 17 semi-structured interviews with male and female breakers. However, this chapter solely focuses on the 11 male interviewees. All interviewees were between 15 and 30 years old. Approximately half of the interviewees came from Norwegian backgrounds, and the other half came from other ethnic origins, such as Asia, Africa, South America or the Nordic countries. The breakers resided throughout the city of Oslo and came from different social classes. Moreover, my respondents’ level of experience ranged from novices to experts.

### BREAKING AS AN ARENA FOR GENDER CROSSING AND SHIFTING

I use Barker-Ruchti et al.'s (2016) conceptualization of transforming gender to closely examine how breaking creates alternative ways of expressing gender. Within this framework, I understand the transformation of gender practices as an ongoing process that can involve crossing and shifting. The term *crossing* refers to concrete actions that challenge gender boundaries; one example of this is when men get involved in a physical culture that society has traditionally deemed appropriate for women. The concept of *shifting* involves perceptual changes in one’s interpretation of gender. This is when a person can envision new ways of performing gender (Langnes and Fasting 2017). Using this framework and these key concepts, I discuss some of the ways that breaking challenges and reinforces the dominant gender performances and expectations that exist within the field of Norwegian dance.

#### *Crossing the gender boundaries of dance*

In Western European culture dance is frequently framed as a female activity. Dance’s image of being expressive, passionate, and emotive stands in opposition to “White middle-class heterosexual masculinity, [which] is equated with a stolid, self-contained, non-sexualized, minimally expressive body” (Craig 2014:190). This opposition often alienates and prevents white men from engaging in the activity as male dancers are always in danger of receiving the label of effeminate or not being a real man (Risner 2009). However, despite the potential stigma, breakers strongly identify with the emotional aspect of dance. For them, breaking’s artistic performance of emotion is a key characteristic that bonds them to the activity. One established male breaker noted, “It’s from within. We talk through dance.” Building upon this a young breaker explained:

I started with breaking since I wanted to tell something while I danced. I wanted to express myself... With breaking, I can express my emotions through movement. Happy or sad. It is like creating sentences. You can tell a story... To express oneself without words – it is magic! Something special.

By using their bodies as a medium for emotional expression and communication, male breakers become involved in practices that are coded as feminine (e.g., Gard 2003). They cross gender boundaries by using their bodies expressively rather than instrumentally which puts themselves at risk of being perceived as the perfect example of a type of failed masculinity (e.g., Adams 2005; Craig 2014).

Another code of femininity in Western culture is explained through the male gaze (e.g., Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) which objectifies and sexualizes female bodies for the pleasure of heterosexual men. This positioning of female bodies, in turn, reduces their agency. I contend that the male breakers’ style promotes a similar objectification of their bodies.

## Transforming gender identity through breaking

Importantly, the breakers perform in a cypher (i.e., the circle of people who surround the breakers and trade turns dancing in the middle), setting up a stage in which they offer up their bodies to audiences for visual spectacle, beauty and potential erotic pleasure (e.g., Adams 2005). In these cyphers, the breakers regularly rip off their t-shirts and reveal muscular and toned bodies while grabbing their crotches (Langnes 2018). This space of glistening, almost nude, idealized male bodies that are sweating and breaking together can be read as homoerotic (e.g., Gurlly 2020). Male breakers cross gender boundaries and challenge the traditional masculine and feminine practices of heterosexuality by putting themselves forth as objects of the (male) audience's gaze.

Male breakers cross the gender boundaries of dance. While men learn during their childhoods that they should avoid adopting any feminine or homosexual performances such as involvement in displays of emotion, style that objectifies the body, and entering spaces that invoke the audience's gaze, the breakers enthusiastically perform these behaviors. They express feeling through impassioned practices and situate their bodies as objects for the audience's gaze. Male breakers cross traditional gender norms and indicate possible alternative behaviors for men.

### *Be cool! Reaffirm masculinity*

Despite the breakers crossing behaviors, these men draw on hypermasculine behavior and tropes. In particular, they frame breaking through the codes of aggression and violence were key in reaffirming their masculine status. These codes are acted out by battles, exaggerated movements, and by using Black American identities as sources of power, strength, and cool.

While the breakers understand their activity to be an expression of emotion, they often perform in battles where the attempt to dominate their fellow breakers. The battle is an essential part of breaking and is initiated when breakers enter the cypher to battle one against one, crew against crew or against themselves. The framing of breaking as a battle can be interpreted as a way of reaffirming masculinity and countering feminization. As emphasized by Kim, an established male breaker, "Breaking is [tough] and cool... You should be hard, aggressive, explosive and strong. [You should] be able to challenge, attack and kill the opponent." Throughout the battle process, breakers confirm each other's masculinity by showing aggression and taking physical challenges and risks.

Moreover, breakers perform a hyper-masculine identity through exaggerated physical postures, enlarged gestures, and movements. They perform an aggressive "attitude" (i.e., presenting themselves with self-assurance regardless of their skills), which highlights the hyper-masculine characteristics of breaking. As pointed out by Oakley an established male breaker, "[Breaking involves] very masculine and explosive movements... It's pumping and crumping. Violent movements." Breakers entered the cypher with dramatic and exaggerated movements to develop an intimidating persona.

Building upon their exaggerated constructions of masculinity, they reference a superficial images of marginalized young men in the American ghetto (Langnes 2018) Breaking's legacy and attitude are linked to protest masculinity (Connell 2005) or what Majors (2001) defines as the "cool pose." The cool pose is an extreme version of masculinity that was created by urban Black youth to fight the white patriarchy (Craig 2014; Majors 2001). Through exaggerated displays of manliness, Black men have actively responded to the threat of losing their manhood in a society that privileges white masculinity (e.g., hooks 2004). In its fundamental link to whiteness, the Black male body is assigned a subordinate position as "out-of-control" (hooks 2004). For the white male breaker, the cool pose provides

## Transforming gender identity through breaking

an opportunity to distance himself from the imminent feminization of white masculinity (e.g., Brayton 2005). Embodying the cool pose replaces the soft white masculinity that is caged to an office desk with physical exertion. However, their embodiment lacks the oppressive baggage that is attached to Black males who adopt the same image (Anderson 1999).

For breakers of color, the embodied cool pose is closely connected to stereotypes that portray the Black body as violent, uncivilized and the embodiment of criminality (e.g., Bromley 2012). Indeed, by adopting the cool pose, breakers of color risk reinforcing negative stereotypes about people of color that exist within Norwegian society. Nevertheless, most stereotypes are characterized by duality. The cool pose offers breakers of color an alternative masculine identity that is detached from hegemonic masculinity within Norwegian society. Ethnic diversity is regarded as a natural part of breaking, and most breakers communicate a strong sense of belonging and sameness across differences. Furthermore, by adopting the values of the subculture, breakers learn the importance of providing their own contributions to the dance. The result is a strong sense of respect and recognition and a feeling of “being someone.” As such, the cool pose seems to have a positive, empowering effect that is useful in contexts outside of breaking.

### CONCLUSION – CROSSING, SHIFTING AND TRANSFORMING

By examining how male breakers negotiate and challenge gender practices, I have discussed how breaking contributes to the transformation of gender. Breakers present themselves to the world through movement; how this movement is perceived leads to assumptions and confirmations or the questioning of preconceived ideas about gender identity. Breakers who belong to multiple social groups negotiate their identities simultaneously in response to multiple social stereotypes – i.e., race is gendered, and gender is raced (as well as sexed and classed) (e.g., Azzarito and Macdonald 2016; McCall 2005).

By crossing gender boundaries and defining breaking as an artistic dance, male breakers signify a perceptual shift regarding men and dance. Since most breakers are male, the Western European standard of dance as a female activity that alienates males is contradicted. Male breakers express their emotions and make their bodies objects of the audience’s gaze while breaking. As they move, they perform identities, establish meanings and embody masculinity in ways that negotiate our ideas about the male body and male behavior (e.g., Craig 2014). Hence, I argue that male breakers create a perceptual shift regarding men and dance by transforming gender norms and stereotypes.

Furthermore, breaking’s legacy as a male, Black street dance frames breakers’ constructions of gender identity. As such, breaking is a contested area in which gender constantly interplays with race and class. The social diversity among breakers challenges Eurocentric perceptions of dance and masculinity. However, it is important to recognize that even though race and gender are similarly used to stratify groups and societies, they do not function similarly for all groups. Consider the relevance of racial stereotypes in comparison to gendered stereotypes. For white male breakers, the cool pose offers them an opportunity to cross racial boundaries to construct a type of masculinity that is detached from white masculinity, while male breakers of color have very few alternatives to racialized stereotypes. However, by embodying the cool pose, all breakers construct an active masculine identity that demands power, which signifies a challenge to hegemonic masculinity in Western society. According to Connell (2005), male breakers’ masculinity constructions can be viewed as a re-embodiment for men and a shift in ways of using, feeling and displaying male bodies.

Crossing, shifting and transforming gender boundaries occurs on a continuum of possible alteration. Gender boundaries are being negotiated to be less determining and

## Transforming gender identity through breaking

disadvantageous. What is likely to begin as internal challenges of symbolic boundaries will affect and alter gender practices and discourses on a larger scale. As breakers cross gender boundaries, perceptions shift, and gendered practices are challenged and transformed. Understanding the representation, participation and experiences of breakers of color offers the potential to challenge gender stereotypes and enlarge ideas about what it means to be male. However, more research is required to understand when and how social interactions can become less gendered.

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## Transforming gender identity through breaking

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