



The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies

Mary Fogarty (ed.), Imani Kai Johnson (ed.)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190247867.001.0001>

Published: 2022

Online ISBN: 9780190247874

Print ISBN: 9780190247867

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CHAPTER

2 The Camera in the Cypher: High Times and Hypervisibility in Early Hip Hop Dance

Vanessa Fleet Lakewood

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190247867.013.33> Pages 32–57

Published: 19 December 2022

Abstract

This chapter examines Martha Cooper's visual influence on public conceptions of hip hop dance. While working as a staff photographer at the *New York Post* in January 1980, Cooper had an encounter with a group of boys at a police station that resulted in the earliest publicly recorded images of breaking. Tracing the diffusion and multiplication of images associated with this event in print and lens-based media, the chapter observes the historical permissions and conditions that allowed breaking to enter mass-mediated forms of discourse. It draws on theoretical interventions addressing the force of hypervisibility on the movement, congregation, and performance of Black subjects. It argues that lens-based media both depicted and fabricated the aesthetics of outlawry that defined breaking's early cultural formation.

Keywords: [breaking](#), [b-boys](#), [photography](#), [news media](#), [cinema](#), [hypervisibility](#), [aesthetics](#)

Subject: [Ethnomusicology](#), [Dance](#), [Music and Media](#), [Music](#)

Series: [Oxford Handbooks](#)

Collection: [Oxford Handbooks Online](#)

Cover Story: Breaking Meets the Media

WHEN the underground cultural phenomenon of breaking first surfaced in the mass media, its arrival was accompanied by a jarring visualization that conflated aesthetics with criminality. In the issue of April 22–28, 1981, the *Village Voice* published the first-ever article on the dance, written by performance critic Sally Banes and illustrated with photographs by Martha Cooper (Banes, 1981, 31–33). The story's lead image features "Frosty Freeze" (Wayne Frost), a member of the Rock Steady Crew and gifted b-boy then in his late teens, rehearsing for a battle. Masking was used in the editing process to selectively hide and reveal specific elements of the picture. The background rehearsal space appears indistinct and transparent, and the wood floors had been dodged out of the frame so that the dancer appears suspended in mid-air. But the figure of Frost pops from the page in dynamic contrast to the hazy graffiti painting behind him; the dark ink of the image reveals the texture of his clothing, his concentrated expression, and the outline of his hair. Pictured in profile, Frost is in a forward lunge with his left leg extended straight in front of him, sneakered toes flexed upward, arm thrust out at shoulder height, fingers curled into a fist (see Figure 2.1). In the context of the other elements on the cover, the bold aesthetic action of this dancer takes on a slightly different meaning—one that is far less suggestive in Cooper's unedited version of the image (see Figure 2.2). It looks like he could be fighting.

Figure 2.1.



Frosty Freeze on the cover of the *Village Voice*, April 22–28, 1981.

Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

Appearing just below the paper's main headline, "Revolt in Reagan's Backyard," the picture of Frost conjures a potentially threatening image of insurgency. The headline

echoes this sentiment, the word "backyard" evoking an image of enclosure, out of public sight, suggesting a boundary between the dominant order and those who are excluded from its communities.

Figure 2.2.



Frosty Freeze with graffiti backdrop by TKid, April 1981. Common Ground studio.

Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

While the cover conveys a visual message that seems to play on a mixture of readers' assumptions and expectations, Banes's article inside resolves the tension between physical aggression and performative action suggested in the image (see Figure 2.3). On page thirty-one, where it begins, we see four black-and-white photographs by Martha Cooper ↵

↵ that add context to Frost's potent freeze on the cover. These orient us more clearly inside a studio—a SoHo loft space called Common Ground—where bodies were expected to move more freely than in most public environments.

Figure 2.3.



Rock Steady Crew rehearsing at Common Ground. Sequence printed in the *Village Voice*, April 22–28, 1981.

Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

Cooper's photographs were taken at a dress rehearsal for *Aspects of Performance: Graffiti Rock*, a multifaceted exhibition and performance event that would feature a graffiti slide show and live breaking, music, and rapping. It had been organized by the artist Henry Chalfant, the photographer behind the slides, who had invited members of the Rock Steady Crew, artist/MC Fred Braithwaite (Fab 5 Freddy Love), and artist/DJ Rammellzee to participate (Lawrence 2016, 174). It was to have been, as Chalfant later claimed, "probably the first time that graffiti, breaking, rap, and DJing were connected under one roof" (quoted in Cooper 2004, 163). Such early performances and demonstrations of breaking, which were often recorded in lens-based media and involved the display of visual material, helped affirm the conceptual ties being formed between the distinct communities of breakers and graffiti writers in the movement that became known as hip hop—however artificial these ties may have been in reality (e.g., being an aerosol artist didn't automatically make one interested in rap music).

But if Cooper's rehearsal pictures positioned the reader visually and imaginatively in the Common Ground studio, the first line of Banes's (1981) article took us elsewhere, to a transit police station in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Upper Manhattan in January 1980: it is a sentence about criminal profiling: "*Chico and Tee and their friends from 175th Street in the High Times Crew were breaking in the subway when the cops*

busted them for fighting” (31; emphasis added). Conjuring the kids’ words, “We’re not fighting, we’re dancing!” Banes describes how the boys demonstrated dance moves to police officers to ostensibly prove their innocence. Together with Cooper’s cover image of Frosty Freeze, Banes’s secondhand account of the crew’s arrest was myth-making. Narrating the illicit character of breaking, these framing devices wove a story of youthful aggression and outlawry into the origins of early hip hop dance.

Cooper, reflecting later on the significance of the *Voice* article in *Hip Hop Files: Photographs 1979–1984*, her magnum opus of hip hop photography, published some twenty-four years after the incident, rightly points out that though Chalfant played an important role as an organizer putting together a hip hop package her photos “were important in sending that out to the world” (Cooper 2004, 163). Yet the power of Cooper’s photographs, their interaction with Banes’s words, and the way they shaped early conceptions of the dance—as well as broader visions of a hip hop imaginary—have not been fully explored.

High Times and Hypervisibility

The circumstances and events leading to breaking’s publicization and mediatization warrant further study. It is well-known that Cooper was present the night of the High Times Crew’s arrest and saw some of the aftermath at the police station. She also photographed the crew demonstrating the dance, producing the earliest known photographs of breaking.

It is important to note that those pictures—taken about fifteen months before Rock Steady’s rehearsal at Common Ground—were not the ones chosen to illustrate the *Voice* article. Nevertheless, soon after the *Voice* story broke in 1981, audiences seemed to already have a picture in their minds of young breakers being arrested, evoked by the anecdote narrated by Banes, and accompanied with a vision of Wayne “Frosty Freeze” Frost on the *Voice*’s cover). Cooper’s photographic record, as well as her written and oral accounts of this history, constitute formative documents of breaking’s arrival into public discourse. This chapter aims to unpack the significance of Cooper’s role in early conceptions of hip hop dance through an analysis of what her images revealed and where they were circulated. It also explores the broader social circumstances and photo-historical conditions that surrounded the surfacing of hip hop dance into the public discourse and mass visual media.

In considering this history and the ephemeral archive produced by its agents, this chapter will analyze themes of visibility, racialized perception, and aesthetic judgment as they align with issues of media and state power (Muñoz 1996, 16). What were the historical conditions that mediated our ability to visualize early forms of hip hop dance? And how were these historical conditions reactivated in mass-mediated discourse and hip hop’s early visual forms? To answer these questions, I examine Martha Cooper’s influence on how breaking was initially defined for outsider audiences. Starting with that night in January 1980, this chapter examines the broader circumstances that led to breaking’s emergence as visual news, as well as the impact the media had on the shaping the image of a dance once considered too violent to be an art form. In so doing, I attend to the slippages occurring between documentation, historicization, event, and experience—and the need to include the voices of subjects who appear in the research archive. I argue that lens-based media both illustrated and helped to fashion the aesthetics of outlawry that defined breaking’s early cultural formation. Tracing the diffusion and multiplication of Cooper’s images in print—as well as in the cult films *Wild Style* and *Beat Street*—the chapter explores her critical and complex role in shaping early hip hop visions.

“No Riot, No Story”: Martha Cooper’s Story and Pictures of January 21, 1980

In *Hip Hop Files*, Cooper recalls the night of the alleged subway riot. She was working for the *New York Post* as a staff photographer, and her editors sent her to a transit police station, where, she was told, a group of about twenty-five boys—some as young as ten or eleven—had been arrested for fighting.¹ In the station’s cramped holding area, an officer explained to Cooper that she would not be taking any pictures that night. Being ↵ minors, he said, the boys were entitled to have their identities protected. But Cooper was coming from a daily tabloid newspaper culture, where “they didn’t care if you did anything illegal or not” to get the shot, and so she made a furtive move.² Angling the camera upward from her hip, she managed to “squeeze off [a] single frame without looking through the viewfinder,” capturing some of the boys’ downcast faces as they sat under the watchful eye of a policeman (Cooper, 2004, 70).

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The black-and-white picture Cooper covertly snapped was published in the section on b-boying in *Hip Hop Files*. It is hard to tell just what is going on in the grainy, uncomposed picture. The subjects appear fractured and disorganized. A fluorescent light fixture cuts diagonally across the frame, reminding us of the awkward angle at which Cooper held her camera. Eclipsing the right side of the image are the blurred head and sweater-clad shoulders of a boy facing the officer in charge, who is pictured in profile, looking down at the group of youngsters barely captured in the scene. The boys appear very young, still wearing their winter jackets, waiting, and looking anxious and bored. Most of them look down, their chins tucked into coat collars or resting on their hands, and none of them watch as another officer leads one of their crew out of the room.

The story is that, eventually, some of the boys were released—the ones who had not been caught with weapons or graffiti paraphernalia. On a subway platform outside the transit police station, members of the High Times Crew demonstrated their moves for Cooper’s camera (see Figure 2.5). In the pictures, the boys stand in a semicircle and take turns getting wild on the platform floor, which is coldly illuminated by electric white light. A tiny kid in a knit sweater spins on his head and his friends break out in huge grins (uncropped versions of these photographs reveal a transit officer keeping watch on the group, smiling from behind a door).

In Cooper’s book, these images are positioned opposite a full-page photograph captioned “Cops with Confiscated Items”: a frank portrait of two White officers standing behind a table displaying paraphernalia: Marks-A-Lot and Marvy brand markers, cans of spray paint, switchblades, and a small gun (See Figure 2.4). The police had prohibited Cooper from using her camera in the holding area, but in this room, they pose willingly, holding up small weapons they had seized from the kids. One officer holds a pair of knives and stares sideways toward something beyond the frame; the other smiles slightly as he gazes into the lens, holding a pair of nunchucks. The iconography is indisputable. The White officers present themselves in their professional capacity, standing erect in crisp dark uniforms, facing the camera, projecting ease, confidence, and pride in a job well done fighting crime. The table of paraphernalia in front of them is at waist-level—a superficial extension of their bodies, displaying items seized from other bodies.

Cooper explained to her readers that when her editors at the *Post* learned there had been no riot, they were no longer interested in running the piece. “I thought this was a great story,” she explains, “so I called the *Post* editors and said, ‘They weren’t having a riot, they were having a dance contest.’ But the *Post* didn’t like that idea. No riot, no story” (Cooper 2004, 70). Although print media outlets can be powerful and fast ways of transmitting and broadcasting images, the speed at which pictures are released into the public eye will depend on “the social investment in either their dissemination or ↵ occlusion” (Hill and Schwartz 2015, 8). That a group of young Latinx and Black kids were stopped and arrested because their activities were

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perceived as threatening was not considered unusual or even newsworthy, and so her editors were not interested in pursuing the story.

Figure 2.4.



Cops with items confiscated from kids. Washington Heights transit police station, January 1980.

Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

In 1980, the *New York Post* was still in the dawn of its takeover by Rupert Murdoch, a shift in leadership that had transformed the paper into a tabloid. Cooper was adamant about the paper's decline: "[The new *Post*] was really a horrible paper, a rag of a paper, but it had a really good staff, because it had been a really good paper" (Cooper interview). Things had changed with the introduction of Murdoch's ethos of daily reporting. The newspaper began featuring more sensationalized content, headlines, and visuals, and devoting less "grey space" to text (Pasadeos and Renfro 1988). "The [new] *Post* was heavily about crime, and celebrities. Those were the two main assignments" (Cooper interview). People left or got squeezed out. Her favorite photo editor, Susan Welchman, was fired—and after that, "the assignments were terrible."

Despite the good pay and benefits from her unionized position, Cooper would end up resigning later that year.

Figure 2.5.



Kids breaking in a Washington Heights subway station, January 1980.

Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

Horizons of the Publishable

In the early 1980s, hip hop performance and dance entered the broader public sphere via a series of historical processes and permissions. These affected the way its aesthetics were defined for audiences and publics outside its community of practitioners and spectators. How would such images have been received? What was thought possible to publish about the subjects and communities that came together around hip hop's early cultural formation?

p. 41 Publishing is “a set of processes and relations,” Rachel Malik (2008) states in her important theoretical contribution to publication studies. These processes and relations ↴ combine to form what the author terms “horizons of the publishable, which govern what is thinkable to publish within a particular historical moment” (709). The question of what does and does not get published, documented, and archived in the public record inevitably leads historians to consider the limits of how certain acts and actions get recorded. These questions are even more salient for historians of performance and dance, whose interpretations of bodily expressions and experiences are bound to be mediated through various spheres of public distribution and reception: in photographs, television, videos, newspaper accounts, reviews, and books, as well as in oral testimonies.

Photography historians Thierry Gervais and Gaëlle Morel (2017) have noted the ways news photography evolved through various visual styles combining words and images, arguing that twentieth-century American photojournalism was deeply shaped by an editorial model imported from Europe. For instance, Black Star, an international picture agency, was formed in 1935 in New York City by a group of photographers and publishers who had fled Germany following Hitler's rise to power (115–116). As the field of journalism and photo-reportage professionalized, Black Star linked the services of picture editors with those of picture takers dispatched worldwide, creating a network that included Time Inc., the Associated Press, and *Life* magazine and setting the tone for news whose subjects were brought to life by innovative journalistic practices and a recognizably snapshot aesthetic of pictures taken in the field (116). As Gervais

and Morel write about this period, “Producing visual stories became the goal of magazines and photographers alike” (127).

The historical developments in the professional field of photojournalism are important to consider, not only for their influence on Cooper’s training and eye, but also as a set of circumstances that made it possible for her to move her pictures into wider circulation. Born in 1943, the daughter of a camera-store owner and journalism teacher in Baltimore, Maryland, Cooper had been absorbing picture stories from an early age and began entering her own photographs in Kodak camera competitions as a teenager. She wanted to work for *Life*. To this end, after earning an art degree from Grinnell College, she got a competitive photography internship in the 1960s at *National Geographic* (the magazine’s first female intern). She then received further training at the Maine Photographic Workshop under John Loengard, the picture editor at *Life* (Cooper interview). Her mentors repeatedly emphasized that “newspapers were the way in” to more prestigious magazine work, and so Cooper started shooting for weekly papers in Rhode Island before finally making the move to New York in the 1970s, to try for “the big time.” The city, she said, “was the center of public things—everything was out of New York” (Cooper interview). Hoping to eventually work for the *New York Times*, Cooper accepted the job at the *Post* in 1977, when the paper was looking for a woman to add to its all-male photo staff. At a time when it was hugely competitive for any photographer to get a job at a daily paper, this gave Cooper an edge. As a woman, it was easier to get close to the action and gain the trust of her subjects. People never saw her as threatening (Cooper interview).

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But in the mid-1970s, general news magazines were in crisis, and opportunities for jobs at mainstream publications were starting to disappear (Gervais and Morel 2017, ↪ 178). The creative energy devoted to making dramatic visual essays in glossy magazines like *Life* became downturned with the economic decline of the illustrated press. Tabloids and television broadcasting were starting to take over. Professional photographers responded to the changes by diversifying, seeking alternative forms of publication, working in various streams of visual media, and trying to publish their pictures in photographic books. The rise of the photo-book author, “a new figure in photography,” attracted both newspaper and magazine photographers to the book market. This was the context in which Cooper worked: she was thinking and maneuvering in picture stories, with an eye to eventually publishing her own book.

Between 1977 and 1980, when she was still on staff at the *Post*, Cooper would walk the boroughs of New York City between daily assignments. She would use up her leftover roll of film by snapping photos of children playing among “abandoned buildings and rubble-strewn lots,” which, she wrote provided “raw materials and open space for improvised play” (Cooper 2006, 3). Cooper began documenting and collecting the elemental traces of young people’s vibrant street life, and this period became life-changing for her. The relationships she built with her young subjects were catalysts for her introduction and emergence into the underground art movements of graffiti writing and breaking, both of which captivated her and would remain the focus of her creative output for years. Defining her photographic practice in opposition to dominant channels of imagery in the popular press, Cooper was committed to discovering subject matter she had “never seen before” (Cooper interview), and she wanted to make the illicit actions of her young subjects *seen* as something other than an urban problem.

Later recalling her time at the *Post*, Cooper talked about the long and pointless hours she spent stationed outside a courthouse or a police station, waiting for officers to parade a suspect in front of a line of news photographers. It was boring and demotivating, and she hated standing around with other journalists instead of being out in the streets, on the hunt for pictures. “I just couldn’t be enthusiastic about the assignments anymore. I felt like I couldn’t do it.” Mid-way through 1980, Cooper eventually decided to quit her job so she would have more time to photograph the trains (Cooper interview).

On her last day, Cooper recalled, she packed up all her contact sheets, prints, and negatives, knowing their artistic and historical value. There is no question that everything started to move for Cooper after she left

the *Post*, and that she became a better photographer, creating pictures for which there was no aesthetic precedent.

p. 43 Cooper met Henry Chalfant in September 1980 at his solo exhibition at the OK Harris Gallery, *Graffiti in New York*. What may have started as a semicompetitive dynamic between them—they were aware of one another’s work but moved independently—evolved into a fruitful collaboration. Appreciating the challenges of the publishing market, they decided to try coauthoring a book on graffiti, rather than come out with two separate books on the same subject. Cooper and Chalfant shared a fascination with “art transit” (initially considering the term as a title), which resulted in their explosive 1984 publication *Subway Art* (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984). The historical significance of the book cannot be overstated. For their work collecting material and publishing a photo book on graffiti at such an early time, music critic Bill Adler (2006) dubbed the pair the “mother and father” of hip hop photography (102).

While Cooper and Chalfant would not collaborate on another book project again, they remained friends and close colleagues, supportive of one another’s work. Looking through the pages of *Subway Art*, it is clear that, while Cooper and Chalfant had graffiti in common, their aesthetic leanings were not the same. Chalfant took close-up pictures of subway paintings in expressive detail, while Cooper took a longer view with her camera, catching whole-car murals on trains in good light, in places where the trains move above ground. As much as possible, Cooper wanted to capture subway murals in their full context, revealing the energy of the graffiti movement alongside the rush of the trains amidst street scenes and city scapes.

Breaking Is Hard to Write

In the fall of 1980, around the time she met Chalfant, when she was already freelancing, Cooper contacted Sally Banes, a PhD student in New York University’s Department of Graduate Drama. A mutual friend had put the two in touch. Cooper asked Banes if she would be interested in writing an article on a new kind of dance.

The *Village Voice*, a left-leaning, alternative weekly paper, would be the outlet for the article. It was a different kind of paper than the *Post*, the once-decent daily tabloid. For instance, the same year Cooper got her start in New York, the *Voice* hired Bill Bernstein (who also worked for *Black Star*) as a staff photographer, later sending him on assignment to Studio 54 and opening the channels of mainstream journalism to his iconic and transgressive images of the city’s nightlife and club scenes. The *Voice* is also where Michele Wallace started publishing her early Black feminist criticism and writing in the 1970s. The *Voice* prioritized more diverse, creative, and experimental forms in its coverage of the city’s events, and was a fitting venue for the breaking story.

Working with Banes as the writer of the piece made sense to Cooper, who was not confident in her own writing. She found the dance difficult to describe, telling her collaborator that it featured “solo performance with wild acrobatics and poses” (Banes 1986, 11). They got right to work. Using the names and phone numbers Cooper had collected from the High Times members in January, the two women tracked down some of the boys for an informal interview and demonstration. They were now reluctant to dance (claiming to have moved on to roller disco), but they were willing to talk about the art form they had been a part of creating: “Breaking means going crazy on the floor. It means making a style for yourself” (Banes 1981, 31). During this exploratory conversation, Cooper managed to snap some photographs of their moves. However, the pictures were awkward and aesthetic failures, and she needed more visual and contextual material to round out the story she and Banes were writing. The challenge would be to find a community of breakers who might open up their circle to this pair of aesthetic outsiders.

p. 44 It was breaking's connection to the graffiti art scene that made this possible. In Steven Hager's book *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History*, Henry Chalfant remembers that he and Cooper had been comparing notes on graffiti for some time, when "one day she showed me a photo she'd taken of a break dancer" (quoted in Hager 1984, 86). Cooper had been talking about her old *Post* days and recalling her encounter with the High Times group. Chalfant had not seen anything like it before. His interest was especially piqued by the graffiti paraphernalia the police had found on the boys. As a result, he began probing the writers who would come by his studio about the dance. Promising to deliver the best, a young writer and breaker named Take 1 brought Frost, Crazy Legs, Ty Fly, and Lil Crazy Legs of the Rock Steady Crew into the studio. This facilitated Cooper's formal introduction to the breakers. Cooper had directed Chalfant's attention to breaking's underground existence, and his connections to the graffiti community would help move the dance into a wider public view.

Together, Chalfant and Cooper, along with Banes, acted as both documentarians and organizers of early expressions of hip hop. Their introduction to the Rock Steady Crew led to the planning of the *Graffiti Rock* event at Common Ground featuring the projected slide show exhibition of Chalfant's graffiti photographs and the staged battle by the dance crew. The boys divided themselves into two fictional crews and dressed in coordinating t-shirts displaying their names in iron-on lettering. In this way, *Graffiti Rock* can be understood in the context of other contemporary events and performances that sought to define a unified vision of what hip hop culture was and who was part of it. Some organizers and promoters, such as Michael Holman—who credits himself for putting on the first downtown show assembling all-live hip hop elements—acknowledged the potential artifice in such performances, suggesting, "We were toying with evolution" (quoted in Lawrence 2016, 177). While there was an element of fabrication to the work of Banes, Chalfant, and Cooper in the *Graffiti Rock* staging, it is also true they were following the aesthetic expressions of the young people involved in creating the culture.

In Banes's article, *Graffiti Rock* "was written up as something you could go to," Cooper explained (quoted in Holman 1984, 142), and it was scheduled to open on Sunday May 3, 1981, with two additional dates. But then Chalfant's show was suddenly canceled by the venue's owner, who feared that escalating tensions between Rock Steady and other neighborhood groups at the time would erupt into "gang warfare." But even though the event never happened, Cooper's photographs of the dress rehearsal would have a long public life as illustrations to the foundational article.

The piece in this history around gang violence is almost hard to believe, given the general wholesomeness of Cooper's images, which show members of Rock Steady practicing flips, windmills, and top rocking as their friends look on. Shooting from a low angle near the floor, Cooper captured the experience of spectating near the action of the dancers while also revealing the bright open surroundings of the rehearsal space. Visually speaking, she helped the esoteric and sometimes bewildering movements of breaking look appealing to a broader public, presenting the dance as accessible and fun, with a raw street edge.

p. 45 The title of Banes's article in the *Voice*, "Physical Graffiti: Breaking Is Hard to Do," relates breaking's stylistic imperatives to those of graffiti—whose negative associations with vandalism, a deteriorating transit system, and ghetto culture—would have resonated for contemporary readers. Yet the article itself was the first to center the experiences of breakers, or "B Boys," as Banes called them. She did more than simply explore what breaking is and who does it. Like Cooper, she was enthusiastic about the dance and serious about its analysis, offering insights into movement vocabulary, musical influences, and ethnic and cultural references. Banes also connected breaking to historic freedom practices, writing that "the Breakdown is an old name in Afro-American dance for both rapid, complex footwork and a competitive format." Cooper and Banes completed the article with interviews of young practitioners and aerosol artists who were involved in hip hop, such as Fab 5 Freddy and Rammellzee.

The *Village Voice* article is important for many reasons, yet there are pieces around it that are confusing and appear inconsistent. From a framing standpoint, it made sense for Banes to write about the night of the High Times Crew's arrest—and it would keep the narrative faithful to Cooper's experience as an outsider called to the scene expecting to meet and report on a gang of young people involved in social disruption and unrest. But apart from a credit for her photographs of the Common Ground rehearsal, Martha Cooper's name is not mentioned in Banes's article. This is a strange omission, given that the former's work as a photojournalist is widely acknowledged elsewhere in the history.

Although the pictures Cooper took that January night were not used in Banes's article, they gained currency and mythic status through their retelling and reconstruction in hip hop history and its broader imaginary. For instance, Holman's (1984) recounting of the events erroneously suggested that the pictures of the arrested boys are the ones featured in the piece:

Sally Banes' article in *The Village Voice* in 1981 [was] about photographer Martha Cooper covering breakdancers in the subway who were arrested, then released when Martha Cooper identified what it was they were doing, not fighting but breakdancing. Martha Cooper's photographs which were meant for the *Post* were rejected but were picked up by the *Village Voice* and gave new light and new life to breakdancing in spring of 1981. (69)

Despite Holman's mischaracterization, his account is noteworthy for how it closely follows the initial rejection of Cooper's story by the *Post* and the subsequent hook that "gave new light" to the dance once the article finally surfaced, written in collaboration with Banes and published by the *Voice*. Steven Hager (1984) was also impressed by how a single quote in the article—"not fighting, but dancing"—seemed to break through the publishing barrier that had excluded early forms of hip hop arts:

Although it was still nearly impossible to publish articles on graffiti and rap music, both of which seemed to be universally hated by magazine editors, breaking had an immediate appeal for the national press, possibly because a quote in the *Voice* credited the dance with replacing fighting as an outlet for urban aggression ... The statement was not entirely accurate ... *but it was just the sort of quote that makes good newspaper copy.* (87; emphasis added)

In his book *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, historian Jeff Chang discusses the dynamic interplay between violence and aesthetics as narrated by Banes in the *Voice*. He quotes from the article:

Breaking isn't just an urgent response to pulsating music. It is also a ritual combat that transmutes aggression into art. "In the summer of '78," Tee [of the High Times Crew] remembers, "when you got mad at someone, instead of saying, 'Hey man, you want to fight?' you'd say, 'Hey man, you want to rock?'"

(Banes (1981), quoted in Chang 2005, 157)

The transformation of outlawry into art, according to Chang, was the element of the story that most captivated the *Voice*'s liberal readership: "Rocking instead of fighting—the idea would become one of the most enduring myths of hip hop" (157). Chang is correct to acknowledge this. However, he and other historians have not fully explored the piece of the history about the *presumption* of criminality and the misreading of aesthetic action as deviant behavior. This phenomenon was projected into outlaw visions, culminating in what cultural scholar Richard Iton (2008) called "the omnipotent and spectacular but faceless and threatening b-boy" (129).

Ultimately, Banes produced a ground-breaking story that has been referenced and repeated in much of the historical literature on hip hop. A hungry market for hip hop would soon develop, fueled by a desire for its musical and performative elements as well as its *look* and aesthetics. Cooper also played a role in organizing

and documenting other early performances by the Rock Steady Crew—notably, at the Conference on the Folk Culture of the Bronx, May 15–17, 1981, and their infamous battle against the Dynamic Rockers at Lincoln Center on August 15, 1981, among others. As Banes recalled in a later article, between the fall of 1980 and the spring of 1981, breaking was a waning dance form, “a fad that had appeared and already disappeared” (1986, 11). The public attention brought by her and Cooper’s efforts helped revive and make visible a dance that had been losing momentum. If her first feature pictures of breaking were ambiguous, her later photographs have the quality of magic. Cooper’s image of Frosty Freeze at the Lincoln Center battle, executing a move called the Suicide (the one he is, perhaps, best known for), catches the dancer mid-flight, hovering at a seemingly impossible angle before executing a death-defying drop (see Figure 2.6).

“Ritual Warfare” on ABC’s 20/20

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A few months after Banes’s article in the *Voice* was published, the pictures Cooper took at the 175th street transit police station in Washington Heights were used as still images in a special report by correspondent Steve Fox on the American Broadcasting Corporation’s 20/20, titled “Rappin’ to the Beat” (20/20 1981).³ ABC aired the program in early July 1981, making it the first national televised news program to cover the hip hop movement. In it, Fox interviews the syndicated rock columnist Lisa Robinson and asks her about the increasing public presence of boom boxes blaring rap music over loud beats. “It is very Black, and very urban, and people are scared of that,” she replies. Fox linked the aural aggression of African American rap music to the physical competition it inspires in breaking, noting that some of the dancers’ movements “have occasionally been misinterpreted by the authorities as gang warfare.” Fox’s commentary is presented alongside a bird’s-eye view of Wayne Frost on his back, knees pulled up close to his chest, spinning like a turntable. The camera then cuts to Fox’s interview with a New York transit police officer, Lieutenant John Englert, who tries to explain how his men responded to and subdued a “riot-in-progress” in January 1980 that had turned out to be just kids breaking. Englert says the police arrested thirty-seven kids that night, out of fear they were involved in “ritual warfare.” As he speaks, the camera cuts to Cooper’s still photographs of the High Times Crew demonstrating their moves in the subway outside the transit police station. The camera then zooms in on the face of one of the officers in the picture *Cops with Confiscated Items*. Whether Englert is one of the men Cooper photographed is not known with certainty, however he does resemble the officer on the right (see Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.6



Frosty Freeze of Rock Steady Crew battling at the Lincoln Center Out of Doors Festival, Rocksteady Crew versus Dynamic Rockers, August 1981. New York City.

Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

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We See That We Are in Trouble

Historians of race in contemporary culture often consider blackness in popular media as a site where disciplinary narratives play out. The cultural work of the white-dominated visual media, which tends toward representations of race that contain, commodify, and reproduce negative stereotypes about culture, results in a particular kind of subjection of racialized people. Ronald Jackson (2006) proposes “scripting” as a way to think about this, noting that the US popular media’s “scripting” of the Black body with signifiers to histories of racism, reinforces destructive myths and stereotypes, while also compelling subjects to participate in their creation and positive reception. Scripting envisions limited pictures of and possibilities for Black life, particularly in representations of the poor. Cultural theorist bell hooks (1992) writes: “There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness, that support and maintain the oppression ... of all black people” (2). Just by flipping through books and magazines, looking at the daily news, or going to the movies, hooks observes, Black people experience “a collective crisis” in the realm of the image—“*we see that we are in trouble* [original emphasis]” (6). And Michele Wallace (1990), observing a link between the stories that get told about Black life in the news and a white-dominated art world that does not usually see minoritized subjects as legitimate cultural producers, has addressed the impact of mass media on the institutional acceptance of Black artists.

Hip hop scholars also often recall the disturbing news images of Black and Latinx communities in the Bronx—the home and heartbeat of hip hop culture—that proliferated in the media after the late 1970s. A number of factors worsened the decay of already impoverished neighborhoods and intensified the socioeconomic devastation of that period: the completed construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway and other public works projects, wide deindustrialization and loss of manufacturing jobs, a growing youth unemployment rate. Moreover, the racial make-up of the neighborhood had shifted with the influx of African American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican immigrants, who took up residence in public-housing projects while many Jewish and Irish Americans moved to the suburbs. The stories and pictures of this time and place that endure in the imagination are of arson and gang violence, a devastated inner city made up of ruined

buildings and yards of rubble, symbols of social decay and unrest. The first chapter of Hager's (1984) influential *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History* features images taken by Black Star photographer Michael Abramson in 1973 for an in-depth documentary project on the Savage Skulls and Black Spades gangs of the Bronx. Abramson's photographs of teenagers in embellished vests and jackets, roughhousing and embracing on the street and in their clubhouses helped solidify a problematic gang origin narrative around hip hop's prehistory (see Aprahamian 2019).

p. 49 Reflecting on the pictures of the Bronx that fixed themselves in public consciousness through news stories and popular films, Tricia Rose (1994) observed that the popular media joins the American public school system and the police in the disciplinary perception and construction of "young African Americans as a dangerous internal element in urban America; an element that, if allowed to roam freely, will threaten the social order; an element that must be policed" (126). Rose and other scholars, such as Naomi Bragin (2014), Simone Browne (2015), and Mark Anthony Neal (2004), root this perception in deeper historical concerns about Black social congregation in public spaces, tracing how the reactions of the press and law enforcement construct and contribute to racial paranoia in American society.

In his expansive study of this subject, Neal (2004) suggests that the changing urban landscape of New York and the erection of public housing projects were factors in the conflation of the private and public realms, as pathological stories of African American social "dysfunction" entered the public discourse. Although dysfunction exists in any communal setting, the script of Black dysfunction "was mass mediated and commodified for mass consumption via network news programs, Hollywood films like *Fort Apache*, and television programs like *Starsky and Hutch* and *Baretta*." Neal concludes, "The black poor or underclass as human spectacle became a standard trope of mass culture" (422). Such misrepresentations were showed up in the rhetoric of conservative politicians like Ronald Reagan, who famously supported racist stereotypes by referring to single Black mothers as "welfare queens" and opposed spending on social programs (432). Given this context, it is not surprising that there was tension between the pictures Cooper was creating and the type of picture stories it was possible to tell about Black experience.

Performance Under Arrest

The night of the High Times Crew's arrest and release contained three separate performances, all saturated with visual significance. Two of them occurred without cameras present. The first was the dance-battle-turned-stop-and-arrest in the Washington Heights subway station: an improvised performance that began when police officers and transit authorities failed to find legibility and meaning (in the form of recognizable dance steps) in the bodies of the dancers.

The second performance occurred out of public sight, behind the walls of the police station, when the boys were called upon to give a sort of show to the officers—a performance under arrest—listing and then executing a series of moves to demonstrate their innocence, to prove they really were just dancing. Banes (1981) writes:

An officer called in other members of the crew, one by one. "Do a head spin," he would command as he consulted a clipboard full of notes. "Do 'the baby.'" As each kid complied, performing on cue as unhesitatingly as a ballet dancer might toss off an enchainment, the cops scratched their heads in bewildered defeat. (31)

p. 50 It is difficult to imagine how this scene would have taken place in real time. Banes's account injects an element of comic relief into what must have been an uncomfortable and physically intimidating situation. But there is much we don't know about this second performance. Did the cops really make all the boys dance

on cue, isolated from their friends? How long did it take to round everyone up, process them at the station, and then assess their dance moves?

“The important thing to remember about this story is that the night was January 21st,” former High Times member Hector Ortiz told me.⁴ Ortiz, who was fifteen when Cooper took his picture and is now a Grammy-winning DJ and producer performing under the name Hex Hector. When I interviewed him, he didn’t know about the 20/20 segment and had no idea his picture had been shown on national television. He joked about the iron-on letters he and his brother wore on their t-shirts, spelling out their name, but this is partly what enabled a friend of his to identify him in Cooper’s (2004) book *Hip Hop Files*. Hector explained that the temperature was freezing that night, and he and his crew had gone into the subway station to keep warm.

Hector described the Washington Heights neighborhood of his youth as “a safe and fun place for a kid to grow up.” That night, the boys were doing what a lot of kids did for fun back then: they laid some cardboard on the ground, started up some music on a portable boombox, and got crazy on the floor. They favored a rarely used corridor near the end of the station, where the music would be amplified by the empty subway tunnel. Hector estimates they had practiced between forty-five minutes and an hour, surveilled by transit cops, who maintained their distance at first, and then decided to swarm the group. He wanted me to understand the crew had been profiled. I asked if he knew that Lieutenant Englert claimed on 20/20 that they had arrested thirty-seven boys during the “riot-in-progress.” Hector could hardly believe it. He clearly remembered the group was small—no more than eight or so individuals—and described the experience of arrest and the conduct of the officers as intimidating. Of Cooper, Hector remembered that she was approachable and kind, and seemed genuinely interested in what he and his friends were doing. He never met her again after that night. Hector and his friends got back on the train and went home.

Projections

The conflation of aesthetics and criminality that animates the visual forces at work in Cooper’s early breaking images were diffused and multiplied in a series of semifictional and documentary films that embraced this burgeoning outlaw aesthetic. In 1981, American director and artist Charlie Ahearn began work on the cult film *Wild Style* (1982), which featured performances by real-life graffiti writers, rappers, and b-boys. It was the first in a handful of “breaksploitation” films made around that time. The film included a small role for the no-wave actress and gallerist Patti Astor, who played an intrepid reporter who travels to the Bronx to do a story on hip hop artists. Whether Ahearn’s vision of her character was an oblique reference to Cooper is not known, although the latter was the still photographer on the film (see Figure 2.7).

Wild Style opens with a dramatic scene that narrates the force of hypervisibility on the bodies of young men of color: the lead character, Zoro, played by real-life graffiti artist Lee Quiñones, scales a graffiti-covered wall to break into a train yard at night. The scene invokes lynching-related imagery. Lee lowers a rope down the wall—where it hangs for a moment—before descending himself, gripping the rope with both hands while he tries to find his footing. He drops to the ground, then stands. Dressed entirely in black, with a do-rag around his head, he advances into the train yard, climbing over another chain fence. In this unedited shot, the camera remains motionless, giving the viewer the experience of watching surveillance footage. As Lee approaches the camera, his face becomes partially illuminated by a harsh white light. His eyes search the scene. He is looking to see if he is being watched.

Similarly, *Beat Street* includes a famous scene that compels us to reflect on the pathological scrutiny of the bodies of young men of color, whose mere presence in the public sphere is misapprehended as dangerous or deviant. It also effectively reimagines the break battle of Hector’s past, only this time, the stakes are higher and more stylized. Two rival crews who previously had an encounter in a nightclub engage in a brazen

dance-off in an empty corridor in the subway before being swarmed by police officers. A White cop is shown using his baton to hold down the talented young b-boy Lee, played by Robert Taylor. Yet *Beat Street* also rehearses and reimagines the possibilities for resistance to a scripted narrative of police domination. At the station, where the kids are shown inside a chained-off holding area, the commanding officer is confronted by Lee's mother, who has come to take him home. She reprimands the cop, calling on him to consider the deviancy of the criminal justice system in the profiling of young people.

Dark Matters

These images and projections offer examples of what Simone Browne (2015) articulates as “moments of living with, refusals, and alternatives to routinized, racializing surveillance” (82). In her book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Browne asserts that, historically and in the present, “cultural production, expressive acts, and everyday practices” can resist such techniques by allowing us to think otherwise about “the predicaments, policies, and performances constituting surveillance” (82). The predicaments and practices that concern Browne take place in the mid-nineteenth century in New York City, yet she traces how the historic regulation of Black life is felt over two hundred years later. Arguing that “the potentiality of being under watch” is a cumulative effect of technologies of surveillance, micro-regulation, and restrictions stemming from transatlantic slavery, Browne considers visual and printed media, such as fugitive slave posters and printed news advertisements, as among numerous sites of invasion and the scrutiny of Black life. However, she also understands that these channels play a role in bringing performances of freedom into fuller view.

Figure 2.7.



The cast from *Wild Style* posing for photos in Riverside Park, Manhattan, August 1983. Left to right: (row 1) Doze, Frosty Freeze, Ken Swift; (row 2) Patti Astor, Fab 5 Freddy, Lady Pink; (row 3) Lil Crazy Legs, Revolt, Sharp Revolt. Sharp painted the mural.

Courtesy of Martha Cooper.

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Browne (2015) historicizes the apparatus of watchfulness of Black life through laws that forbade enslaved people to assemble, including gathering in groups of three or more to talk or play sports, or to make loud noises. She points to the Lantern laws, which required individuals and groups of enslaved people to carry candles and lanterns after dark so they could be “plainly seen,” their mobility regulated, “made knowable, locatable, and contained within the city” (78–79). Browne locates this in the larger project of racialized surveillance of Black, mixed-race, and Indigenous subjects. Illuminating the possibilities for unsupervised leisure and socializing that persisted despite such conditions, Browne turns to “spaces of sometimes interracial and cross-class commerce and socializing” and to “black performative practices of drumming, dancing and chanting” (80). Browne offers published descriptions of “public negro dances,” including one eyewitness account of the Catherine Market breakdown. (80). Various styles of competitive dance were performed for market spectators—but the historical account describes how the breakdown was danced on a wooden board while participants kept the rhythm by tapping their feet and clapping their hands against the sides of their legs (81). Browne claims that the performative sensibilities of these dances can be

felt “200 years later, through the emergence of hip hop in the Bronx” (80), and that the remains of these performances linger “in the cardboard, turntables, b-girls, and b-boys of the breakdancing cypher” (82).

The Camera in the Cypher

In their unsanctioned forms of public dance and occupations of space, breakers in the 1980s continued to attract the attention of law enforcement and news reporters alike. In the years following the publication of the *Voice* article, newspapers reported more arrests of Black and Puerto Rican dancers for “disturbing the peace” and “attracting undesirable crowds in the malls” (Rose 1994, 50). A newspaper story announced that the city council of San Bernardino, California, was introducing fines of \$100 for breakers performing in public without a designated permit: “City Council to Dancers: Break It Up!” the headline read.⁵

But even as breaking was being actively policed, the dance was becoming a popular craze across the United States and overseas. As hip hop expanded into the visual field, its aesthetics became “violently public” in the late 1980s, coming into view with greater ubiquity and intensity. Iton (2008) has argued that this, combined with technological developments such as handheld video recorders and surveillance cameras, would bring about a “heightened performative sensibility” or “expectation that one is always potentially being watched” in response (105).

Of course, breakers sought to dance and compete in front of other people; but there is a difference between being observed by members of one’s aesthetic community and being looked at by outsiders. Hager (1984) observed that the visual force of the media attention on the breaking phenomenon coincided with the appearance and rise of rap music and hip hop celebrity culture in nightclubs such as Negril, where it was a priority to have “plenty of Bronx boys on hand to give the place an authentic flavor” (89). And Rose (1994) noted that dance schools hired breakers to give lessons oriented to the “‘hip’ middle class whites” who were the main partygoers at the downtown clubs and in private venues where breakers were recruited to perform (50). She quotes Crazy Legs recalling this period of notoriety: “We weren’t making no money ... all these white people coming in ... we were pretty much on display, and we didn’t even know it Now I realize we were on display. People were paying \$8 and \$7 whatever it cost ... to watch us” (50).

It is important to acknowledge the presence of cameras in the context of breaking cyphers—and the effect they had on the way the dance was performed and made visible to its own practitioners and to wider audiences. The mediatization of breaking battles both translated and affirmed the outlaw aesthetics of the dance’s practitioners. Visual and printed media tended to play to mainstream white America’s fascination with the “news” of the breaking craze and its supposed gang origins. A surge of still photographs, videos, television, and film, helped move breaking from marginality in the 1970s to public visibility in the 1980s.

The presence of the camera compounded a shift in the way hip hop’s performing arts were created and consumed. Breaking’s journey from cypher and street to still and moving image carried with it a new emphasis on a frontal orientation and predesigned composition—at the expense of the raw energy and improvised vernacular that defined its indigenous forms. This was a necessary outcome of the logistical needs of television camera crews, reporters, and film crews who needed room to record the quick maneuvers of their subjects. Thus, the dance itself evolved and changed as crews made room for and engaged with people holding cameras. Banes (1986) reports an anecdote about Crazy Legs at a battle, repeating the words of a camera person who earlier had instructed them to “open up the circle” so they could film. The dancer told everyone to “open up the circle,” and they moved (16).

The anecdote comes from a piece Banes (1986) published titled “Breakdancing: A Reporter’s Story,” with pictures by Cooper, in which she looked back on the “telescopic story of breaking,” reflecting on the experience of reporting on the breakdancing “craze” and the “wildfire popular diffusion” of media

attention that came in the wake of the *Voice* article. Pointing out that breaking “was invented by a generation of kids raised on television, movies, radio, and videogames,” Banes acknowledged that the dance’s relationship with the media is “densely layered, beginning with the use of pop culture imagery and with brevity of format, and evolving with the succession of responses to media coverage and dissemination” (20). In part because of this relationship, she argued, early observers and reporters (among whom she included herself) were active participants in early hip hop dance, having had “such an enormous effect on its meteoric history” (10).

Conclusion

p. 55 Hip hop performance and dance has not been fully explored as a hypervisible phenomenon: one that is the product of the hegemony of what Fred Moten terms the visual $\hookrightarrow$ (2003, 197). Even as the commodification of hip hop aesthetics toward auditory and performative experiences has accelerated over time—acquiring widespread acceptance, celebration, and economic success in terms of record sales, music downloads, and live concerts—it has generated considerable visual material (Iton 2008, 105). Early in this history, Cooper contributed images to several books and other publications that built formative understandings of breaking as a dance and hip hop as a cultural movement. Picturing the complex, imaginative, and dynamic actions and gestures of breakers, her photographs appeared in how-to manuals and “definitive guides” to hip hop—giving small bursts of color and life to the more static and serial imagery these types of books tended toward. Within a framework of looking in which increased visibility is linked with commercial exploitation, Cooper’s early breaking pictures offer counter-documents to this narrative of success.

The presence of Cooper’s camera in the High Times Crew’s breaking cypher heightened the experience of spectatorship and extended the parameters of the visual field to viewers beyond their immediate circle. Like a subway-car mural moving beyond the borough limits, the photographic image—by participating in a circulating image economy that brings subjects into relation with one another—expands the cultural (and temporal) space in which practitioners of hip hop operate. The historical anecdote about the High Times Crew’s arrest tells us how particular bodies, histories, and creative forms of expression are affirmed or denied in public discourse. As the first published witness, spectator, and photographer of breaking’s emergence in New York City, Cooper’s accounts of this history constitute a powerful record that both accompanied and set the conditions for the art form’s arrival above ground. To come into more meaningful contact with this history, however, it is necessary to pivot our perspective from her published account and speculate into territory that is difficult to see. Cooper was creating photographs for which there was no aesthetic precedent. Working at a historical moment when the elevation of Black performance was not fully seen in white-dominated media, Cooper’s contribution to hip hop and visual culture—while not uncomplicated—is significant.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge Martha Cooper for sharing her experiences and recollections in an interview and in anecdotes and conversation, for providing me access to her archives and collections, as well as permission to use her photographs in this chapter. The research for this work would not have been possible without her participation and generosity. I am also grateful to Hector Ortiz for agreeing to be interviewed for this work. Research for this chapter was supported in part by a Ryerson Image Centre (RIC) Doctoral Research Fellowship. I am grateful to my colleagues at the RIC for their time, energy, and assistance during my fellowship.

Notes

1. The exact number varies between sources. In an interview with Michael Holman (1984) for his book *Breaking and the New York City Breakers*, Cooper estimated the number of boys who were stopped and arrested to be around forty-five or fifty (142). A televised news clip from 1981 reported the number to be thirty-seven.
2. Martha Cooper, interview with the author, February 6, 2017, New York City, New York. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations from Cooper in the chapter are from this interview, cited in the text as “Cooper interview.”
3. I gratefully acknowledge Serouj Aprahamian for sharing the clip and alerting me to Cooper’s connection.
4. Hector Ortiz, personal interview, April 26, 2018.
5. “SB Council wants to bran breakdancing,” *Desert Sun*, No. 184, March 6, 1984.

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