

MATERIALS

Personal Notation Styles in Breaking: Performance, Identity, and Perspective

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The notation of Western theatrical dance has been a concern of academic scholarship for quite some time. This discussion takes on the task of combating the ephemerality of dance (McFee 2012) and the impact of this intangible nature for dance aesthetics and recorded histories of dance (Sparshott 1998, 129–32). Many of the concerns regarding the ephemerality of dance have come from philosophers with a vested interest in positioning dance alongside other art forms, and in particular ways to support their analyses. Dance practitioners and theorists have also been concerned with dance notation in terms of its impact on dance copyright (Van Camp 1994), dance history (Pierce 1998, 287–99) and reconstruction (Kendal 1990, 3–27). Victoria Watts argues that to understand notations for Western theatrical dance you have to create the dance notations in the studio with your body, thus disrupting various dualisms in Western thought and the valuing of the written word over physical practice (2010, 7–18). Although we remain unconvinced by the radical impulse of this claim, we would like to explore how dance notation has been thought about in popular dance practices. Namely, we are interested in personal notation practices in Breaking and its impact on performance, identity, and perspective.

In our exploration of personal notation in Breaking, we consider personal notation practices of local b-boys in Toronto, Canada. This project is uniquely a conversation between a dance sociologist and a dance philosopher who both engaged in ethnographic research with b-boys to discuss each dancer's notation system and, importantly, to collect the notations. In this sense, we wish to engage with our materials through a dialogue that we hope will raise more questions than it answers as we pursue this new area of enquiry. Why have b-boys developed personal notation, yet the community has no interest in a shared notation system? What strategies do dancers employ through the use of personal notation? What does a personal notation system afford dancers? We interviewed eight different dancers, primarily from the Toronto area. These dancers were selected because they have been vocal about the importance of notation within their practice. We were aware of this through our involvement in the dance community as practitioners ourselves; however, we were able to analyze and study notation only through the dancers' already in-depth understanding of how notation fits into their dance.

Notation and Its Uses

Just as each dancer's style is unique, so is their notation. While notation within Breaking has no formal structure or taught strategy, most breakers recognize its importance. Each of the dancers we spoke with focused on notating their creations as a means to memorize and organize their moves. However, each explained how the act of notating is also design oriented and strategic.

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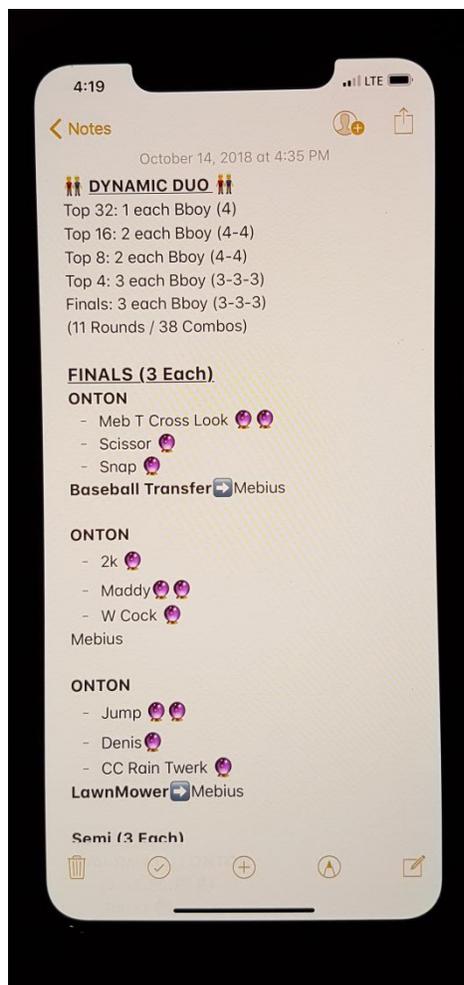
All of the dancers that we spoke to seemed to agree that writing down moves was an important part of memorization. The creation and editing processes are fluid, internal, and physical, whereas notation is a space for reflection. The dancers explained that moves existed as ideas in their heads that were then physically executed before being translated into notation. Putting their physical ideas into words allowed them to be personally codified.

Some of the terms artists used for naming were either part of the shared lexicon of existing Breaking terms, or else something more personal that allowed them to remember more easily. Two of the b-boys, James Wilkinson and Anthony “Illz” Put, described reducing a move to its core symbolism or idea (Wilkinson 2018; Put 2018) which could then be contained in only one word. This word would refer to a unique element of the move so that it would not be confused for another. Each move thus had its own identity and name. Taking a different approach, Onton See and James Wilkinson preferred to use longer names for their moves (See 2018; Wilkinson 2018), and Ryan Porter skipped the naming process altogether and simply filmed all his moves and catalogued them in a private Instagram account for easy access (Porter 2018). The B-boys organized their moves into larger categories, but individual memorization was based on movement and visual aesthetic.

Notably, both Wilkinson and Put used their phones in their notating, thus emoticons became a helpful strategy alongside text (Wilkinson 2018; Put 2018). As Lucy Venable has noted, advancing technology changes the way that notation has happened in Labanotation as well (1991, 76–88). Images have long been a part of shared notation systems. Although our interviewees are not engaged with these more formalized notation traditions, they likewise turned to images and changing technologies for the ease of memorizing and recalling their personal notation systems.

Karl “Dyzee” Alba’s journals and personal notation style take on a creative life of their own with illustrations that express a dynamic relationship between the visual arts and movement in hip hop culture (graffiti and Breaking expanded to visual arts and illustrations more broadly here). Alba was meticulous in planning his sets, and during the larger research project of top performing b-boys and b-girls internationally, it seemed that those who won battles the most frequently based on strategic planning usually had a thorough archive and collection of their moves recorded and documented (see Fogarty 2011, 2018).

While each dancer took a unique approach to notation, the differences across systems were even more clear in the range of approaches to strategy and organization of the notated moves. The b-boys mentioned how listing their moves in various ways allowed for strategic structuring. For example, Onton See explained that he ranked his moves in order of difficulty or energy their performance required (2018). See’s hierarchy of difficulty was expressed visually. He placed an orb emoticon next to moves that he could execute mindlessly. Four orbs meant that the move would require all his energy and should not be used if he was exhausted. After ranking the moves, See organized them into performance, beginning with tougher moves and working down towards easier moves so that he would always have the energy to execute them during a multiple-round battle. In doing so, he would organize and plan an entire competition layout, from prelims (short form for preliminary rounds of a competition) to finals (See 2018). Every single round was laid out, including potential tiebreakers, specific responses to types of moves, and more spontaneous moments based on the energy of the crowd and event.



A page from the digital notes of Onton See.

Similarly, Put (2018) explained that he could plan out one round by putting together three of his personal words (recall that each word stands in for a specific move). If he remembered the three-word phrase he developed before competition, he could easily remember an entire round. However, both Put (2018) and See (2018) explained that drilling and repeating moves during practice was a key part of how they thought about the notation process (always in conjunction with drills and repetition). If you could not remember what a move looked like upon reading it, none of the planning and strategy would matter. The strength of the link between the notated word and its movement was imperative.

It is common for dancers to make lists of their moves either in preparation for a specific battle or to guide their training sessions. Ryan Porter explained that he had a list of moves but did not plan them. Instead, they were all “loaded” in his mind, and when the moment came around to perform, he would decide then and there which move to perform (Porter 2018). Most dancers agreed that they favoured this strategy.

However, not all of the dancers we spoke to found notation helpful. Bridge Qiao explained that he did not write down his moves, nor could he plan any of his rounds in advance (Qiao 2018). Qiao stated that his rounds were always spontaneous and reflected the music being played. His philosophy

was that his Breaking would always be linked completely to the music and the energy of the moment. DJs select the music for battles (competitions) and dancers do not know what music will be played in advance of the battle although they may recognize the track. Thus, Qiao could not plan his moves around the music or the energy of the moment because those were factors he could not predict. He explained that he had a list of moves in his head, a combination of personal signature moves and basic foundational moves. This basic vocabulary was performed differently based on the energy and music, thus removing the need to prepare something unique for each moment. His strategy was not to plan, but rather to be spontaneous. He explained that he felt this strategy reflected a more authentic relationship between movement and music.

In Joseph Schloss' monograph about Breaking, he addresses the “foundations” of the dance form, such as the six-step. Arguably a foundation move that only emerged in teaching in the 1990s, the six-step became a point of concern for Schloss because the moves did not seem to line up with the music (2009). Most advanced b-boys do not perform a “six-step” in a battle because that would be “textbook” rather than original enough to win the battle. Their modifications would add the accents and more subtle layers of the music that Schloss was searching for as he learned the basics of the dance for his research.

In our accounts, Qiao has a clear system to distinguish his own “signature” moves from “foundation” moves, a distinction that helps him organize his moves (2018). Foundation moves form a vocabulary of movements that can be combined in different orders. These foundational moves are shared and often thought of as pillars of the dance form. However, “signature” moves require additional preparation for performance, as there is both a creative process involved and a need to recall the movements. These “signature” moves are either extensions of existing foundation moves or are original. They are recognized as a part of that dancer's identity: coming up with “signature” moves that become known in the dance scene is the foundation for a good reputation.

What we began to discover was that performance was determined along a sliding scale between preparation and spontaneity, and that this scale often had to do with how the dancer navigated their performance anxiety. How one responded to spontaneity and thus what preparations would be necessary to achieve the best results in the moment informed whether their “best practice” involved notations or not.

Personal Notation and Transmission

There has been little drive in Breaking communities to develop a shared notation style. This is partly because Breaking is a practice centred on individual signature moves and so personal notation is more important than any sort of group notation. As such, personal notation rarely has the purpose of instruction—notation is rarely designed to teach moves to another dancer. Certainly for the dancers we interviewed, this was unnecessary. In those instances when groups come together to form routines, they use foundational moves for simple routines as mulch, a groundwork on which more advanced or creative routines are built or arranged. Learning or copying someone else's movement combinations is most accurately accomplished through the use of online or video footage; this would be nearly impossible to accomplish through examining their personal notation lists.



Pages from a notebook of Karl "Dyzee" Alba.

While Breaking culture is concerned with history, it does not focus on recording its history through a shared notation system, unlike the scholarship on Western theatrical dance with its emphasis on notation systems. Instead, it appears that the stories of events passed on by dancers and the invention of signature moves are the central focus of Breaking histories, which are circulated most often through conversations. Unlike conventional Western traditions, the invention of moves dominates over the focus on combinations of movements in questions of copyright and notation. While personal notation systems are sometimes shared with crew members, this usually happens only in preparation for a battle so that the crew member can help the dancer recall their moves both in training and during the competition. Although "black books" (and now "phones") are kept

concealed from the spectator, there have been instances in which dancers cue a crewmate during a battle to call for the performance of a particular set of moves.

To prevent people from taking moves, b-boys have historically attempted to prevent cameras from filming them at practice or even at events. During the 1990s and early 2000s, this effort to conceal one's moves was easily practised, as any captured footage was private, not widely accessible. Even if a dancer was recorded through personal cameras or published on VHS by the event organizers, footage was not easily shared. As the Internet grew and sharing dance footage of events became simpler, it became more difficult to hide signature moves. Nowhere was this more evident than in the historical case when international competitions were on the rise and videos of dance footage began to circulate instantaneously through online forums. This became a problem for competitors who relied on the surprise of the audience seeing moves they had never seen before. Like comedians on a circuit where the audience cannot know the jokes in advance, b-boys had relied on the ability to surprise opponents and audiences. Anthony Put stated that he did not want to share photographs of his personal notation (2018). When the audience is able to see and understand the notation, they can dissect it before it is performed.

In fact, some dancers stopped entering filmed competitions—however, as Qiao admits, this becomes difficult as it works against efforts to build a name in the global marketplace (2018). Onton See takes the widespread circulation of his moves online as a challenge, forcing himself to create new moves or update old moves in order to keep surprising the audience (2018). Another strategy has been to perform combinations of footwork with such escalated speed that it is hard for viewers to figure out how to replicate the moves: if you can't recognize the “moves,” you can't remember them. The personal notation systems are not meant to be seen, nor are they created to share movements or recall choreographies; rather, Breaking notations are used to cue and remember movements for training and performance purposes.

Personal Notations

What is at stake for the sociologist and philosopher in thinking about personal notation systems? First, there are questions about the defining characteristics of the form. In Breaking, what makes a “set” and what constitutes Breaking's aesthetic more broadly? The way moves are identified, classified, and notated is important because it relates to the identity of the dancer. The more creative, forward-thinking, and innovative a dancer is in their peers' estimation, the more valued their contribution to the ever-evolving aesthetic. The identity of a move is bound to the dancer who created it—both in terms of crediting and the felt ownership of the movement. However, because foundational moves are used and modified to create new movements, signature moves contain an element of the foundation within them. Identifying where the foundation ends and the signature move begins is vital in efforts to distinguish what is shared and what is owned. In a form that valorizes signature moves, the question of ownership becomes important. Thus, thinking about how personal shared notation systems work tells us about the underpinning values of the dance form and the dancers who practise it.

Personal notation styles also raise questions of privacy. Private notation gives us insights into the internal processes involved in creating, recalling, and performing the form, and underscores the strategy that characterizes battle performances. Because Breaking hinges on an element of surprise and an unpredictability of moves performed, the changing nature of private records of movements

honed in secret exposes a link between the form and its surrounding technological advancements. Personal notation also reveals the nature of the relationship between dancer and audience. For example, the care involved in crafting moves for optimal audience experience is evident in Karl Alba's personal notation system, which is sketched from the perspective of the audience. The sketches depict what the audience sees. A lot of the "magic" of Breaking relies on the audience not being able to figure out how the dancer achieved a move—and, by way of personal notation, this attention to audience perspective and experience is built into the documented history of the form.

There are also questions that are raised by these personal notation systems about the inner/outer experiences of the body. From what vantage point does one see oneself, and what prompts does the dancer need in order to recall the combinations? We have mentioned that Alba's illustrations are sketched from the perspective of the onlooker indicating a major feature of Breaking: it is fundamentally concerned with a performance for the spectator. While the process of creation and notation is important, it is clear that the product (the performance) and the reception of that product are key. Like a magician creating a new trick, dancers are always considering how the audience will view the moves. In this vein, none of the b-boys used internal cues about the somatic organization of the body in their notation (though perhaps Qiao comes closest with his emphasis on how music drives his performance); rather, they focused on shapes and movement direction—elements that would be part of the audience's experience of the dance.

Throughout the shared personal notations we examined, moves were tied to other dancers and the broader environment. Many dancers' personal notations involve the names of the dancers who taught them or who influenced a particular movement. Unlikely to be shared (unless a crew member and credit is due), these notes don't necessarily reference the person who "invented" a movement; instead, they indicate an interpreted link between a dancer and a movement that serves as a memorization aid. In other words, signature moves sometimes reference their social and physical environments: moves are sometimes tied to objects (as in the "chair" freeze) or to actual people and memories (consider iconic K. Swift moves, etc.). A dancer might be able to remember a move that was influenced or shared with them by another dancer by recalling the original dancer's aesthetic. Even seemingly private movement creation and notation is actually situated in a social meaning. Creativity is a social fact (Frith 2011). This is relevant for both the dance sociologist and the philosopher. Creativity in Breaking isn't defined as an activity that happens in isolation in an individual's mind and body; rather, the creation and maintenance of the form is socially constructed and historically determined.

Dancers want to make meaning in the form of a composition—a series of movements that can be understood, that is aesthetically pleasing, and that has its own logic. This is intimately bound to everyday life and physical practices. In Breaking, the purpose of remembering, of notating, is to perform the movements. The setting for the performance is not always known in advance for Breaking, so the form is adaptable: moves can be rehearsed, modified, and expanded for particular moments. Strategy and expression are key in Breaking. Battles are like a chess game. You have to bring out moves at the right time against the right opponent. Performing well requires premeditation to avoid repetition and keep things fresh; for a lot of b-boys, notation helps with this.

This analysis of personal notation provides some insight into how creative processes function socially: what they are, and who uses them. An examination of personal notation also reveals the intersection of the dance sociologist's analysis of the creative process as social fact and the dance philosopher's investigations into the philosophy of mind. In this sense, sketches become a sort of

“extended mind” (Clark and Chalmers 2010, 26–42) that allows the dancer to remember what has been rehearsed in the body.

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