Hip-hop dance

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2 Hip-hop dance

IMANI KAI JOHNSON

Hip-hop dance is not a single genre of dance, or even an accurate label for the dances for which it attempts to account. The term, is more appropriately an umbrella that encompasses a range of genres, some that were born out of hip-hop, and a number that were adopted into the culture. "Hip-hop dance" thus refers to both adopted and invented genres, which overlap aesthetically, and are related to one another through hip-hop culture.

Unfortunately, in the growing field of hip-hop studies, dance is the least written about of the four elements. While a number of hip-hop scholars address dance in works that largely focus on rap music, only a handful of scholars have made dance their primary focus. They include Joseph G. Schloss (writing on breaking and uprocking in New York City), Carla Stalling Huntington (writing on the media marketing of hip-hop dance), Mary Fogarty (who covers a broad scope of work including international networks and the cultural tastes of breakers), and myself (with work on b-boying cyphers and their African diasporic influences). More extensive have been a growing number of documentaries made about hip-hop dances, their social contexts, and their histories. And of course, the practitioners themselves are the true experts in the field, and a few are publishing works that have academic import: b-boy Louis "Alien Ness" Roberto Martinez, b-boy Niels "Storm" Robitzky, popper Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon, and house dancer and locker Moncell "Ill Kosby" Durden are exceptions.[1] Ultimately, we must mine the expanse of information from all of the above to get a better understanding of hip-hop dance.

Historical overview

There is no singular place, time, or genre that constitutes "the beginnings" of hip-hop dance. Rather there was simultaneous activity across the USA that would collectively assert itself as a shared culture *after* hip-hop came into being. One of the shared qualities of these dances lies in their adaptation of traditional African diasporic aesthetic imperatives in new ways and for contemporary contexts. All of the genres discussed below play with polyrhythms, improvisation, call and response, spiritual communion, and a number of other elements that, though not exclusive to the African diaspora, are central to its aesthetics. They also frequently incorporate

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traditional buck, wing, and jig elements indicative of African American culture.[2] Beyond diasporic influences, these dances reflect urban American contexts among culturally diverse, working-class and working-poor communities of predominantly African diasporic peoples – including African Americans, West Indians, and Puerto Ricans – as well as small pockets of working-class whites, Mexican Americans, Dominicans, Pacific Islanders, and other ethnicities depending on location.

One among many "beginnings" is through the California-based "funkstyles" of locking and popping. Long before hip-hop began to congeal into a culture and prior to it even having a name, there was the funk. Noted for its syncopated bass lines, dynamic percussions, soulful or gospel-inspired singing, and the rhythmic build up of energy as all of the instruments worked together toward an improvisational climax, funk music is just that: funky.[3] The term "funkstyles" is used to designate the range of social dances and genres generated out of their relationship to funk music and in counter-distinction to hip-hop. Locking and popping are the two most recognized genres. Most credit locking to Don "Campbellock" Campbell, a Los Angeles-based dancer who cites his inspiration from having stumbled onto the dance's titular move after a failed attempt at the Robot Shuffle (or the Funky Chicken some sources say), a popular social dance in the early 1970s. Locking exudes a vibrant and playful theatricality that found an audience via *Soul Train*, television's first nationally syndicated Black popular music and dance show hosted by its founder Don Cornelius. The show moved to Los Angeles from Chicago in 1971, and provided a platform for young Black teenagers to display their skills for a national audience. Interest in locking prompted its swift transition from a local style to staged entertainment on national television. The Lockers, a group formed by Campbellock, was the most recognized group in this genre, and featured a number of noteworthy dancers including Fred "The Penguin" Berry who would go on to play "Rerun" in the television show *What's Happening?*; Adolfo "Shabadoo" Quiñones who would play Ozone ten years later in the *Breakin'* franchise; and choreographer/singer Toni Basil. The Lockers creatively combined dance and storytelling, then staged it for diverse television and theater audiences.

Popping is not locking, though they are often mistakenly combined into "pop-locking" – an early 1980s misnomer frequently depicted as an aspect of "breakdancing," which combined all of the funkstyles. Where locking is presentational, bouncy, and playful, popping combines staccato-like movement with water-like flow for a more forceful and almost confrontational style that pushes at the limits of what it seems possible for the body to actually do. Inspired by the dynamic social dances that were part of the California Bay area club scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, popping

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was a distinct style of dance where the muscle's contractions are pulsated rhythmically in sudden bursts or pops. Sam "Boogaloo Sam" Solomon is one of the originators of this genre. He would go on to form the Electric Boogaloos (originally the Electronic Boogaloo Lockers) in 1977 with Nate "Slide" Johnson and Joe "Slim" Thomas.[4] Popping too, quickly found an audience via *Soul Train*. The dance garnered so much attention that pop star Michael Jackson trained with Bruno "Pop N Taco" Falcón for over fifteen years, ultimately inspiring Jackson's signature dance style including the "moonwalk" – which was in fact a popping move called "the backslide." A number of other genres that fall under the "unauthorized umbrella" of popping include ticking, waving, tutting, strutting, roboting, and boogaloo – all of which developed in different parts of southern, central, and northern California.[5]

Another "beginning" to hip-hop dance is through the urban underground dance club scene, predominated by but not exclusive to Black and Brown gay men whose post-Stonewall social dance venues became legendary sites for a freedom of expression through dance in safe, welcoming environments. Their dancing styles helped to usher in an era where it "collective performances" of "individual free-form dance" were acceptable in club environments.[6] Innovations in dances like lofting and house grew out of these types of venues in Chicago and New York (e.g. the Sanctuary, the Loft, Paradise Garage) – while dances like waacking grew out of similar venues in California. They were places that openly invited clientele who until then had been typically doubly discriminated against by race and sexuality. The underground dance club scene had its beginnings within venues created by a small handful of party promoters and DJs like David Mancuso, Larry Levan, and Francis Grasso. DJs (rather than a jukebox) "foreground[ed] the beat" of bass-heavy music, and the "loosened . . . matrix of social dance" no longer required male–female couples or couples dancing altogether.[7] This new standard helped to foster marathon dance sessions that became the signature of these social spaces. Though "underground," these networks of parties helped to generate chart hits that shaped a new genre of music: disco.[8] As the discotheque went mainstream and rapidly expanded, so did a formula for commercial disco music, both of which eventually overshadowed the underground club phenomenon. Disco became so big in fact that it sparked a profound backlash that for many also felt racist and homophobic. Yet the so-called "death" of disco did not mark the end of the underground dance music scene. The music diversified, newer generations of dancers entered, and times changed; but the fundamental call and response exchange with the DJ and a full-bodied collective communion on the dance floor would remain key features of the culture.[9]

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Finally, the most familiar point of entry into hip-hop dance is the South Bronx phenomenon of b-boying/b-girling or breaking (popularly though again mistakenly referred to as "breakdancing"). B-boying is presentational, confrontational, and communal. It is a battle dance but not exclusively so. It constantly borrows from many genres yet maintains a distinct brand of bravado and style that has become its signature. Some mark this "borrowing" from cultural predecessors as breaking's own multiple beginning points. For example, while the dance draws inspiration from an incredible range of movement practices including but not limited to tap, kung fu, and mambo, one local dance in particular – called rocking or uprocking – is crucial to b-boying's aesthetic. Uprocking is a "battle dance in which two people . . . square off and simultaneously taunt each other through movement," while openly insulting each other with "burns" or pantomimed violence against an opponent.[10] Uprocking is identified as a Brooklyn style, though popper and dance history documentarian Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon argues in his documentary *Rock Dance History: The Untold Story of Up-Rockin'* that it too was born in the Bronx. Origins aside, variations on uprocking would become part of breaking's upright dance aesthetic.

Breaking began as a genre in the early 1970s when dancers basked in the "break" – a "brief percussion solo" typical in funk music – whose eventual repetition would extend their opportunities to dance for longer periods of time.[11] Extending or looping the break, and modifying its rhythms with scratching – made possible by new DJing techniques innovated by DJs Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Grand Wizard Theodore, and Afrika Bambaataa – were the foundation to a burgeoning music-based culture that would eventually be named hip-hop. In the midst of basement parties and block parties in the South Bronx, the beginnings of b-boying predominately formed by early-teenage boys (and a small handful of b-girls) of largely African American, West Indian, and Puerto Rican descent. In its earliest manifestations, it was an upright dance that was named "rocking," "going off," "the boiyoiyoing," and other names that attempted to describe its frenzied, sometimes bouncy, and explosive movement – a visual spectacle that matched the breakbeats of 1960s and 1970s rock, funk, disco, soul, and salsa music played by the DJs. As it began to form a distinct style and transitioned from an upright dance to the ground, breaking's rudimentary manifestation incorporated stylized footwork, shuffles, drops, spins of various kinds (e.g. butt spins, backspins), and freezes. It is a style with moves in constant revolutions, with the dancers pushing themselves to do something unprecedented. Groundbreaking for its time, this would be the foundation for the extraordinary dance we see today.

While the first generation of breakers who started in the early 1970s aged out within five years, newer generations in their early teens were coming up

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and seeking out others who kept the dance alive on their own blocks in New York City. This is the story of the Rock Steady Crew (R.S.C.), one of the most recognized crews in b-boying history. R.S.C. has been under the long-standing presidency of Richard "Crazy Legs" Colon, who got permission from the former R.S.C. president, Jo-Jo, to continue the then defunct crew among a new generation that would take it into the 1980s, and to the world.[12] As a result, R.S.C. were among the first faces of hip-hop culture to hit mainstream media. While songs like Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" were already hits, the media had little sense of the expanse of the culture and its near-defunct dance until a *Village Voice* cover story in April of 1981 by dance critic Sally Banes, with photographs by Martha Cooper. The article featured R.S.C. vice president, the late Frosty Freeze – tall, slim, and afroed – on its cover. By 1983, members of R.S.C. were featured in a thirty-second clip in a summer blockbuster titled *Flashdance* (Crazy Legs would also body double for a portion of the dance finale). This clip showcased b-boying (and popping) to international audiences, in the case of the former for the first time, triggering a frenzied response by nascent breakers from around the world. For anyone not a teenager in the South Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn at the time, b-boys were the public's first introduction to hip-hop as a culture.

By 1984, b-boying was the hot new thing, though it was not the only dance captured in this moment of popular culture. Street dance in general became trendy, but with little understanding of what they were looking at media outlets labeled everything "breakdancing" whether it was breaking, popping, locking, or something else. "Breakdancing" was featured on the news, in movies, on sitcoms, commercials, music videos, and on tours with DJs, rappers, and the Fantastic Four Double Dutch Girls. Breakers were coupled with ballet dancers in showcases meant to juxtapose high and low culture. So intrigued was the public by these performances that b-boys were a featured segment on *Ripley's Believe It or Not* (1983), a popular television show dedicated to mystical natural wonders and freak show oddities. The New York City Breakers danced at the opening of the 1984 Olympics in front of President Reagan. And the extremely short-lived television show *Graffiti Rock* (1984), produced and hosted by Michael Holman, attempted to further package the culture and the dance for weekly national consumption (though the show only aired its pilot episode). By 1984, breaking was a hook for dozens of low-budget, teen-oriented movies that showcased street dance in their storyline, though very often they relegated actual practitioners to the background and foregrounded modern dancers who simply incorporated one or two breaking moves. The most popular of these films were *Beat Street*, *Breakin'*, and *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (all released in 1984). Interestingly, there was very little actual b-boying in the *Breakin'* series,

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which featured locking and popping. More accurate representations were available in small, independent favorites like *Wild Style* (directed by Charlie Ahearn 1983) and *Style Wars* (directed by Tony Silver 1983), which featured a legendary battle between R.S.C. and Dynamic Rockers.

Though not as dramatic as the backlash against disco, the popularity of breaking and street dance quickly waned in the USA, and by 1986 it was considered passé. Clubs discouraged circles where breakers demonstrated their solo skills; patrons would throw drinks on the floor to make it difficult and dangerous to break. Young kids around the country were ticketed or arrested for public dance circles that were said to be disruptive to the flow of traffic and commerce, and gathering sites for criminals (a particularly classed and racialized reference to the kind of youth who gathered to break). One city ordinance in San Bernardino, California, attempted to ban "breakdancing" circles altogether, though they eventually simply passed a $100 fine.[13] The media began to depict "breakdancing" as dangerous and disruptive, featuring stories of untrained beginners injuring themselves in some way, the most notorious example being that of a man who broke his neck after attempting a head spin. Though injuries in any dance are common, breaking was ultimately depicted as a problem. Yet simultaneously, in the midst of this domestic backlash two things also took place: the innovation of new hip-hop social dances; and the growing interest in street dance outside of the USA.

The surge in hip-hop social dances reflected the music of the late 1980s and early 1990s. By then, rap music had supplanted breaking as hip-hop's representative cultural element. As rap began to flourish and influence other genres, especially R&B, a new expanse of hip-hop social dances reflected the stylistic shifts in music. These dances included moves such as the Running Man, the Roger Rabbit, the Smurf, the Wop, and many others along with them. The kinds of club spaces that welcomed the dancers schooled in circles were the very same underground dance clubs that originated in the early 1970s. Formerly called discos, these clubs branched off in multiple directions including electronic music (e.g. techno, drum 'n' bass, etc.), and house music. The house club space was where all of these different approaches to dance intermingled, influencing each other. Dance troupes also began to form, and were featured in music videos that had by the late 1980s become commonplace. Mop Top Crew was the most prominent, and its members were featured in two TV documentary shorts: *House of Trés* and *Reck'n Shop: Live from Brooklyn*.[14]

By the time breaking, popping, and locking peaked in US popular culture, they found new life internationally. Countries like the UK already had prominent breakers by 1984, with particular attention to the B-Boys of Wolverhampton – featuring b-girl Bubbles (now Hanifa Queen), the

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first recognized b-girl in Europe. Mary Fogarty's "Whatever Happened to Breakdancing?" is one of the few works to trace international b-boying networks through the 1990s. She argues that the street dance scene in Europe flourished, as a result of three channels of interactions: the tours that started in the early 1980s, underground videos, and competitions. Dance centered tours – including groups such as R.S.C., Rhythm Technicians, and Ghetto Original Dance Company – were comprised of breakers and poppers largely from New York who formed their own dance companies. Underground videos (first VHS tapes, later DVDs) featuring their shows, interviews, and club excursions after performances began to circulate. These networks fostered new communities that culturally identified with hip-hop, though their direct interactions with each other were greatly limited.[15] With technological advancements came new ways of learning how to break and connecting with others trying to do the same. Mediated images allowed beginners to play back videos in slow motion, to pause, rewind, and skip to the good part. Finally, large-scale competitions such the International Battle of the Year in Germany (now France) began in 1990, and the Notorious International Breakdance Event in Rotterdam beginning in 1998, expanded international networks of street dancers. These competitions sought the return of early practitioners, fostered a flourishing international scene, and became venues for direct interaction with the resurgent US scene in the early 1990s.

In the new millennium, hip-hop social dances (like the Soulja Boy, the Chicken Noodle Soup, and too many others to cite) continue to impact the mainstream. New genres on the other hand have also come into prominent recognition. Los Angeles's krumping and Oakland's turfing are two examples of dances that were born out of a combination of hip-hop and the histories of street and social dances in California, where both hail from. Again, an overlap with hip-hop does not capture all aspects of those genres, especially as they begin to branch off in distinct directions, including music production and expressions of spiritual worship and memorial practices. Yet hip-hop offers an inroad to witnessing and understanding the unique contributions of these burgeoning dance cultures.

New directions in hip-hop dance research

Though the scope of the literature on hip-hop dances is limited, ongoing work indicates that this area of hip-hop studies will soon feature more prominently in the field. The twenty-first century ushered in a growing body of crucial analyses of hip-hop dance cultures and practices. Joseph G. Schloss's *Foundation* (2009) is the most recognized examination of b-boying culture and aesthetics and yet more work is on the horizon, whether it is

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from students, like Naomi Bragin, junior scholars such as Dr. Mary Fogarty and myself, or documentarian practitioners like Moncell Durden. These new works move in distinct directions, yet each contributes to a larger body of work that takes dance seriously as an area of inquiry.

New studies on hip-hop dances challenge hip-hop scholars to consider movement as central rather than peripheral to the culture, impacting how we understand hip-hop's roles around the world. Scholar and practitioner Dr. Mary Fogarty, for example, writes extensively on breaking, perhaps because she is also a b-girl known as Mary Jane out of Toronto. Rather than rehashing origin stories, a frequent topic in hip-hop dance discussions, she delves into the aesthetic and cultural politics of contemporary and global practices. Fogarty explores areas of research that foreground the pivotal moment in the early 1990s when b-boying resurfaced as a dance of interest in North America, and other underexplored areas including musical tastes and values, cross-cultural aesthetic transmission, improvisation, apprenticeship culture, careers in hip-hop dance, aging, hip-hop dance in the academy, and soundscapes in hip-hop dance movies. Her attention to dancers' concerns and investments is a prominent feature of her work.

In his forthcoming documentary, *Everything Remains Raw*, locker, house dancer, and choreographer Moncell "Ill Kosby" Durden draws together an incredible array of footage and interviews of dancers from different eras and genres to document both the aesthetic progenitors to hip-hop dances and the histories entailed in them. He firmly embeds the aesthetic foundations of hip-hop dance within the African diaspora, often foregrounding Latin American and Caribbean dimensions. What becomes clear in the film is that innovations in hip-hop dance are recontextualized forms of movement repeated over time, as with for example, the echoes of lindy hopper Al Minns in the 1920s that we see in Link of Mop Top Crew in the 1990s. Durden's work is a praisesong for the rich aesthetic depth of hip-hop dance.

Naomi Bragin's studies of popping, turfing, and waacking set a new precedent for critical analyses of streetdances precisely because she gives long overdue attention to both longstanding and burgeoning dance practices. Like Fogarty and Durden, she is a practitioner as well, studying the practices of those dances alongside their histories, discourses, and politics surrounding intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. The latter aspect of her work is largely absent from work on hip-hop dances, which reminds us that dance, like all forms of cultural production, is a political practice that allows people to literally perform their identities, showcasing their capacities to subvert or simply complicate powerful social processes enacted on the body.

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In a similar vein, my own work on b-boying engages intersections of race, gender, class, and national difference, albeit through a relatively more focused approach.[16] My research on b-boying looks specifically at dance circles (called "cyphers") and those elements essential to its dynamics. The project's central focus explores the spiritual dimensions of cyphering, the cultural foundations born in conditions of socio-economic exclusion, the gendered politics of marginality, the dynamics of globalization evident in the transport of hip-hop culture, and the effect of social networking on cyphering dynamics. I use the physics concept of dark matter as a metaphor to emphasize that embodied understandings born in cyphering experiences are not visible to the naked eye, but remain nonetheless tangible elements of its practice.

Prominent across these new works is a focus on practitioners rather than representational analyses alone, and due attention to the global scope of hip-hop practices, building on current ethnographic and international approaches in hip-hop studies. Hip-hop dances and the scholarship on them force us to understand the broader culture differently. If we center movement and dance communities rather than the music, entirely new sets of question, dynamics, peoples, places, and histories come to the fore. The beauty and spectacle of dancing only adds to its potential and its power. What is at stake, and thus what can be gained from, acknowledging and engaging the dancers and the scholars researching them is a deeper and more accurate understanding of global hip-hop culture.

Further reading

Banes, Sally, *Writing Dance in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown, CT: University Press of New England, 1994).

Johnson, Imani Kai, "B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 31 (2011): 173–195.

Schloss, Joseph G., *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Spady, James G., H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli, "Umum Dance Cipha: Streetdancing to B-Boying to Hip Hop Phenoms and G's," in James Spady, H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli (eds.), *The Global Cipha: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Black History Museum Publishers, 2006), pp. 318–333.

Notes

1 Many practitioners write extensively about hip-hop in popular forums online. Though they are not recognized as academic works, they do provide a highly valuable archive of hip-hop dance and culture.

2 Thomas DeFrantz, "Buck, Wing, and Jig." Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=A34OD4eA17o (accessed June 1, 2013). Buck dances, wing dances, and jigs are a trilogy of dances that developed in the nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries that continue to resonate in African American social dances today. They are characterized by stomping, heavy-footed percussive footwork (buck), flapping motions of the arms and legs (wing), and high-energy and fast-paced dancing (jig).

3 Rickey Vincent, *Funk: the Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), p. 13.

4 Jorge Pabon, "Physical Graffiti: the History of Hip-Hop Dance," in Jeff Chang (ed.), *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), p. 23.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Kai Fikentscher, "*You Better Work!*" *Underground Dance Music of New York City* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 111; Tim Lawrence, "Beyond the Hustle: 1970s Social Dancing, Discotheque Culture, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Club Dancer," in Julie Malnig (ed.), *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 201.

7 Lawrence, "Beyond the Hustle," p. 202.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 210; Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," in Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (eds.), *Microphone Fiends* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 149.

9 See Fikentscher, "You Better Work!"

10 Joseph G. Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 132. The "b" in b-boying conventionally refers to "break," i.e. the break of a record that people dance to. First generation b-boy Trac2 says that when he first used it, the "b" meant "beat," beacuse they were dancing to the beat rather than the "break" – a not yet common term. Finally, for some the "b" refers to "the Bronx," in reference to the dance's geographical roots. Ultimately, the "b" comes to represent a beginning point in the dance's culutre that marks its first naming and thus its roots.

11 Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 14.

12 See *The Freshest Kids* (dir. Israel, QD3 Entertainment, 2002).

13 Rube Goldberg, "'All-American City' Puts the Freeze on Break Dancers," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 1984.

14 Though sometimes written as *Wrecking Shop* or *Wreck'n Shop*, its official title is spelled "Reck'n."

15 Mary Fogarty, "Whatever Happened to Breakdancing? Transnational B-boy/B-girl Networks, Underground Video Magazines and Imagined *Affinities*" (Master's Thesis, Brook University, 2006).

16 Imani Kai Johnson, "Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 2009. See also Imani Kai Johnson, "From Blues Women to B-Girls: Performing Marginalized Femininities," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, special issue *All Hail the Queenz: A Queer Feminist Recalibration of Hip-hop Scholarship* 24/1 (2014); and Imani Kai Johnson, "B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 31 (2011): 173–195.