6.9.1 - Hmong Breakers in Fresno

The Asian American Education Project

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Grade Levels	7-10
Lesson Overview	In the 1990s, the Hmong communities in Fresno, California experienced high rates of poverty, crime, and gang violence. Much like the Black and Latino youth in the Bronx who started the culture and movement of Hip Hop in the 1970s, the Hmong youth in Fresno turned to breaking, or breakdancing, as a form of escape. However, breaking provided much more. It was an outlet for creativity, a foundation for community-building, and an expression of identity. In this lesson, students learn about the Hmong breaking community in Fresno and its impact on Asian American youth culture.
Lesson Objectives	Students will: Describe the Hmong community in Fresno Identify the factors that led to the formation of the Hmong breakers' community Examine the impacts of breaking on the Hmong youth in Fresno Explain the contributions of Hmong breakers
Standards	 College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards D2.His.1.6-8. Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts. D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts. Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts Standards » History/Social Studies » Grade 6-8 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions. Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts Standards » History/Social Studies » Grade 9-10 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text. National Council for the Social Studies Standards Culture - Essential Idea: Human beings create, learn, share, and adapt to culture. Students understand that human cultures exhibit both similarities and differences, and they learn to see themselves both as individuals and as members of a particular culture that shares similarities with other cultural groups, but is also distinctive. In a multicultural, democratic society and globally connected world, students need to understand the multiple perspectives that derive from different cultural vantage points.

Hmong Breakers in Fresno Essay

Overview of the Hmong People

The **Hmong** are an **ethnic group** of people originally from the mountainous regions of southern China. They have over 5000 years of history. In China, the Hmong people are classified as a subgroup of the Miao people. In the early 1800s, land expansion by the Chinese government forced some Hmong to migrate to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma (present-day Myanmar).

In the early 1960s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began to recruit and train the Hmong people in Laos to fight against the **communist** North Vietnamese Army during the Vietnam War (1955-1975). This was the beginning of what was known as the "Secret War." The Hmong played many critical roles under the leadership of the U.S. CIA. For example, they fought the communists on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the major supply route for the North Vietnamese forces. They provided information about enemy operations. They guarded U.S. war equipment. They rescued American pilots who were shot down by the North Vietnamese military.

The Vietnam War ended in 1975 after communist forces took control of Saigon, the capital of democratic South Vietnam. Because they assisted the United States, the Hmong were **persecuted** by the communist governments of Laos and Vietnam. Thousands of Hmong **refugees** fled from Laos to Thailand. They were eventually **resettled** in France, Canada, Germany, Australia, and the United States. By 1978, about 30,000 Hmong refugees were in the United States.

Hmong Resettlement in Fresno

Fresno, California is home to the second-largest Hmong community in the nation. Southeast Fresno is a diverse, **working-class** neighborhood with a large Latino and Hmong population. The Hmong began coming to Fresno in the late 1970s as refugees from the "Secret War" in Laos. (It is important to note that many refugees had little say in where they resettled and were limited by resettlement policies and the availability of sponsorships.)

Many Hmong refugees came from largely **agrarian** backgrounds. Because of its many grape farms, Fresno is known as "The Raisin Capital of the World." Other major crops that are grown in Fresno are almonds, cotton, peaches, and nectarines. These agricultural opportunities drew many Hmong people to make Fresno their home.

However, life for the Hmong refugees was challenging. Because of their war experiences, many refugees faced mental health challenges, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Many refugees did not speak English, which made it difficult to find jobs and access resources like healthcare, welfare, etc. The Hmong have some of the highest levels of **poverty** of any ethnic group in the United States. Hmong Americans also have the lowest rate of educational attainment within the Asian **diaspora**. As such, many Hmong **youth**, particularly male youth, became vulnerable to crime and gang violence - often as a means of survival.



Formation and Growth of Breaking in Fresno

Breaking, also known as breakdancing, is a dynamic, acrobatic street-born dance performed by individuals known as **breakers**. Breaking is one of the core elements of **hip hop**, along with DJing, MCing/rapping, and graffiti. Hip hop culture was created by African American and Latino youths in the Bronx in New York City in the 1970s. Clive Campbell (born 1955), also known as DJ Kool Herc, created a new DJing technique that included percussion "breaks" in the music. Individual breakers started joining together to create breaking crews. Different crews would participate in dance battles at house parties, in the parks, and at the clubs. Hip hop culture became a positive outlet for urban youth communities who were experiencing high rates of crime and gang violence at the time.

All through the 1970s, breaking spread throughout New York and eventually around the world through the **media**. Breaking crews started appearing on national television. Breakers started appearing in music videos and movies. As breaking and hip hop gained more media attention, the culture's influence spread widely outside New York and into communities across the country, such as Southeast Fresno.

In the early 1990s, crime rates and gang violence were high in Southeast Fresno. Similar to Black and Latino youth in the Bronx, many Hmong, Cambodian, and other Southeast Asian American youth in Fresno participated in breaking as a way to feel a sense of safety. Breaking became their escape from crime. Breaking also provided opportunities for **networking** and a sense of **belonging** for Hmong youth. **Breaking battles** and jams became spaces for Hmong youth to build community and share their creativity and resources with others. Many Hmong breakers also adapted their **identity** to the art form. They used it as a way to express their identities as Hmong Americans by incorporating traditional Hmong dances into their breaking sequences.

Breaking **crews** such as Bumz, Smurfs, Dancing in Style (DIS), and Wizardz laid the foundation of the Hmong breaking culture in Fresno. Bumz and Smurfs established a unique identity for Fresno Hmong breakers who became most known for their acrobatic **power moves**. By the mid-1990s, DIS and Wizardz crew took center stage in the Fresno breaking scene. These crews were mainly made up of Hmong breakers. The Wizardz crew is known to be one of the pioneering crews who streamlined the breaking culture in the Hmong community. The Wizardz were mainly Hmong American breakers who helped normalize breaking within and outside the traditional Hmong culture. These early Hmong crews in Fresno paved the way for other Hmong crews like Airsteps, which was formed in Sacramento in 2001. In the early 2000s, many Hmong crews drew local and international attention as they started competing in larger organized competitions.

Early Hmong breaking crews participated in informal battles that took place in public parks and community spaces. Since most of the breakers were working-class youth, many lacked the resources to perform in professional dance studios. (The accessibility of hip hop is one of the reasons why breaking was and is so popular among urban youth.) By the late 1990s, more breaking crews started participating in dance battles across Fresno. Informal **breaking jams** grew into organized events such as "Hip Hop in the Park" breaking jams at Holmes Playground and "Urban Kombat" breaking jams held at Fresno State University. These organized events became networking spaces for both Hmong breakers and non-breakers. They helped Hmong breakers find resources, such as competition spaces, funding, and sponsorships from other artists and community leaders. Organized events also helped Hmong breakers in

Fresno connect with other Hmong breakers across the country.

Aside from organizing events, pioneering Hmong breakers are preserving their hip hop knowledge and culture by teaching future generations of Hmong breakers. Hmong youth in Fresno have access to open jam sessions at local parks, after-school breaking clubs, and breaking workshops in local dance studios.

Impacts of Hmong New Year

Hmong New Year celebrates the end of the harvest season. The annual Hmong New Year celebration in Fresno is the largest Hmong celebration in the United States. It lasts for four days. Many attendees enjoy traditional Hmong food, music, dances, and sports. In addition to participating in Hmong New Year customs, breaking competitions grew to become a significant part of the Fresno Hmong New Year celebrations. Breaking battles called "Battle of the New Year" started in 2015 at a City of Fresno Park and then continued in 2018 at the Hmong New Year celebration in Fresno. These events were later renamed "Next Level Breakin" in 2021 by community leader and Hmong breaker, Gary Yang. In regard to the breaking jams and battles at the Fresno Hmong New Year, Yang states, "It's very important to me because it showed a lot of diversity, inclusion, education, and awareness of breaking in and around the Fresno area" (Yang, 2024). The breaking competitions at the Fresno Hmong New Year attracted breaking crews from around the United States. The Fresno Hmong New Year celebration ultimately became a space not only for the Hmong community to celebrate and preserve Hmong traditional culture, but for breakers to amplify their hip hop identity as well.

Impact of Breaking on Hmong Youth

Breaking had several positive impacts on Hmong youth. Yang said, "... the reason why they were breaking was because they didn't want to join street gangs... there was a saying back then that if you were a break dancer, like a breaker, then the gangs would leave you alone" (Yang, 2024). Instead of joining gangs, Hmong youth formed breaking crews. Instead of committing crimes, Hmong youth participated in breaking battles and jams at local parks and community events. Because breaking required a lot of practice and dedication, it prevented Hmong youth from spending time on the streets where they are vulnerable to crime.

Breaking created a **counterculture** for Hmong youth. It became a form of **empowerment** and **resistance** against racial **stereotypes**. Because of their participation in gangs, Hmong youth are often tied to negative stereotypes like being delinquents and gangsters. Breaking provides a way for Hmong youth to combat these harmful stereotypes. A young Hmong breaker said, "I am a Hmong person who is dancing, who is doing hip hop. We are not that typical stereotype where we are involved with gangs and drugs and alcohol and all that stuff. So I use it kind of as an empowerment as well" (Nguyen and Ferguson, 2019). Breaking provided Hmong youth with a sense of pride and belonging. Another young Hmong breaker said, "When I break, I feel like the ethnicity doesn't matter anymore. It's all about the dance. Like the dance becomes like the culture. It becomes the language... Because being Asian, being a minority, sometimes I feel at a disadvantage because...I'm not white, I'm not privileged, you know?...the dancing really gives me something to be proud of" (Nguyen and Ferguson, 2019). Hip hop gave Hmong youth an opportunity to be a part of a larger community of outsiders. They were able to engage in and transform this art form, on their own terms and in their own way.

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*Vocabulary:*¹

- agrarian: of, relating to, or characteristic of farmers or their way of life
- **belonging:** close or intimate relationship
- **breakers:** people who practice the art of breaking, and also follow and live the hip-hop culture and lifestyle ²
- **breaking:** a style of hip-hop dance in which soloists perform acrobatic moves that often involve touching various parts of the body (such as the back or head) to the ground
- breaking battles: a breaking competition in which breakers or breaking crews show off their moves ³
- **communist:** a government system in which a single authoritarian party controls state-owned means of production
- counterculture: a culture with values and mores that run counter to those of established society
- **crews:** groups of people associated together in a common activity or by common traits or interests
- diaspora: people settled far from their ancestral homelands
- **empowerment:** the act of promoting the influence of a person or group



- **ethnic group:** a group of people with a common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background
- **hip hop:** a stylized rhythmic music of African American origin that typically features rapping over synthesized beats or sampled tracks
- Hmong: a specific ethnic group of people from southeastern China and parts of Southeast Asia
- identity: the distinguishing character or personality of an individual
- jam: an organized event that celebrates hip hop and breaking ³
- **media:** a form of communication (such as newspapers, radio, or television) that is designed to reach the mass of the people
- **networking:** the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions
- persecute: to cause to suffer because of belief
- **poverty:** the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions
- **power moves:** a breaking move that involves a breaker to propel their whole body into a continued spinning or rotational motion, while balancing on their hands, elbows, head, back or shoulders ⁴
- refugees: a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution
- resettled: being settled again or anew after disturbance or upheaval
- resistance: the act of opposing something
- **stereotypes:** standardized perceptions that are held in common by members of a group and that represent an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment
- working-class: the class of people who work for wages usually at manual labor
- youth: a young person

https://volumeone.org/articles/2009/08/20/200777-breaking-it-down-breakin-terminology-101

Discussion Questions:

- 1. How were the Hmong affected by the Secret War?
- 2. How did the fall of Saigon affect the Hmong refugees?
- 3. How would you describe the history of the Hmong community in Fresno?
- 4. How did hip hop culture reach communities outside of the Bronx such as the Hmong in Fresno?
- 5. How did the breaking community form in Fresno?
- 6. How did the Hmong adapt their culture to breaking?
- 7. How did breaking impact the Hmong community in Fresno?
- 8. How did Hmong breaking crews contribute to the culture of hip hop?
- 9. What roles do Hmong youth play in developing breaking culture in their community?
- 10. Why is the Hmong New Year celebration significant to breaking culture?
- 11. How does breaking create a counterculture for Hmong youth?
- 12. How does breaking empower Hmong youth?
- 13. How does breaking provide Hmong youth with a sense of pride and belonging?

Activity 1: Defining Community

A. Have students define what "community" means. Tell students that a community could mean a physical place in which one lives, the people with whom one associates, and an interest group of like-minded people.



¹ Definition adopted from Merriam Webster Dictionary

² Definition adopted from https://www.redbull.com/us-en/breaking-terminology-basics

³ Definition adopted from

⁴Definition adopted from https://www.redbull.com/us-en/understand-the-basic-elements-of-breaking

- B. Have students create an "image board" describing a community to which they belong. Encourage students to draw and/or cut out images from used magazines.
 - 1. Have students brainstorm a list of words to describe their community based on their image boards. Have students add these words to their image boards.
 - 2. Have students share their image boards with a partner. Have students talk about why this community is important to them.
- C. Tell students that this lesson is about two communities: The Hmong community and the Hmong Breaker community in Fresno.
- D. Facilitate a discussion by asking one or more of the following questions:
 - 1. Why is community important?
 - 2. Why is a sense of belonging important?
 - 3. What does being a good community member look like?
 - 4. How can people belong to different communities?
- E. Tell students that the lesson is about how hip hop and breaking helped build community among the Hmong youth in Fresno.

Activity 2: Learning about the Hmong

- A. Show students a <u>map of Southeast Asia</u> (Source: Library of Congress). Have students identify the countries located in Southeast Asia. Ask students to share what they know about the history and the countries of Southeast Asia.
- B. Tell students, "In this lesson, we will be learning about the Hmong breaking community in Fresno. The Hmong live in southern China and northern regions of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma (present-day Myanmar)."
- C. Show students a map of Fresno, California.
- D. Tell students, "Fresno is in central California. It is home to the second largest Hmong community in the nation."
- E. Show the trailer <u>"Secret War Valley PBS Trailer"</u> (Run time: 2:50). Have students share their thoughts, reactions, and questions about the video.
- F. Have students read and annotate the essay sections entitled, "Overview of the Hmong People" and "Hmong Resettlement in Fresno."
 - 1. Encourage students to annotate the text while they read.
 - 2. Have students complete the worksheet entitled, "Reading Comprehension Organizer." Have students summarize the gist of each section and record in the right column.

Activity 3: Learning about the Hmong Breaking Community in Fresno

A. Access prior knowledge by having students share what they know about hip hop. Record student



responses and display for all to see.

- B. Have students write a Quickwrite given the following prompt: "What do you think about hip hop?"
- C. Show students the video entitled, "The Birth of Hip Hop" by Black History in Two Minutes or so.
- D. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - 1. What is something new that you learned about Hip Hop?
 - 2. Who were notable pioneers mentioned in the video? Why are they important?
 - 3. Why was hip hop so impactful to multiple communities?
- E. Have students read the rest of the essay.
 - 1. Encourage students to annotate the text while they read.
 - 2. Have students complete the worksheet entitled, "Reading Comprehension Organizer." Have students summarize the gist of each section and record in the right column.
- F. Facilitate a discussion by asking the Discussion Questions listed above.
- G. Have students revisit the list and Quickwrites they wrote earlier about their preconceptions of hip hop. Facilitate a discussion by asking students the following questions:
 - 1. What new things did you learn about hip hop that you didn't know before?
 - 2. How has your earlier thinking about hip hop changed and why?
 - 3. What are some pros and cons of hip hop becoming more mainstream?
 - 4. Why is it important to honor the Black and Brown history of hip hop?

Activity 4: Analyzing the Impacts of Breaking on Hmong Youth

- A. Show students the video entitled, "Among B-Boys Bonus Feature." Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - 1. How and why did Hmong youth participate in breaking?
 - 2. How would you describe the community that Hmong youth create when breaking?
 - 3. Why is breaking so impactful to Hmong youth?
- B. Break students into small groups. Assign each group to review the following artifacts:
 - 1. Group 1: Bumz Exhibit: Ville Thao discusses b-boying as an alternative to gangs
 - 2. Group 2: Bumz Exhibit: Ville Thao discusses the different generations of Hmong b-boy crews
 - 3. Group 3: Bumz Exhibit: Bobby Bliatout discusses the origins of Bumz
 - 4. Group 4: Climax/Soul Control Exhibit: Charles discusses his time in Hmong Crews
- C. Have each group complete the worksheet entitled, "<u>Hmong Breakers Oral History Analysis</u> Worksheet."
 - 1. Have students answer the following questions in the "Observe" section:
 - a. What do you notice about the format of the oral history you are examining now? Does it seem like an interview or a conversation?
 - b. What is something the speaker shares in the oral history that tells you about his life/experiences?
 - c. What other details do you notice?
 - 2. Have students answer the following questions in the "Reflect" section:
 - a. What is the purpose of this oral history?



- b. What is the significance of this oral history? Why is this important?
- c. What can you learn from this oral history? What does it tell you about the impacts of breaking on Hmong youth?
- 3. Have students answer the following question in the "Question" section:
 - a. What questions do you have? What do you wonder about the oral history, the speaker, etc.?
- D. Tell students, "These oral history recordings were part of the public history project and historical archive collection, 'Straight Outta Fresno: From Popping to B-boying and B-girling.' It was founded in 2016 by Dr. Romeo Guzmán and Professor Sean Slusser as part of Fresno State University's History department's Valley Public History Initiative: Preserving Our Stories (VPHI). The project focused on documenting local hip hop dance culture in Fresno."
- E. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - 1. How did breaking impact the Hmong youth in Fresno?
 - 2. How did Hmong youth benefit from breaking? How did Hmong breaking crews contribute to the culture of hip hop? What is the legacy of Hmong breaking crews?
 - 3. What roles do Hmong youth play in developing breaking culture in their community? What are ways the Hmong are keeping the culture of breaking alive in their community?
 - 4. Why is the Hmong New Year celebration significant to breaking culture?
 - 5. How does breaking empower Hmong youth?
 - 6. How do Hmong youth contribute to breaking as a counterculture?

Extension Activities

- A. Have students watch the documentary entitled, "Among Bboys" (2011). Jigsaw students in small groups. Assign each student in each group one of the following themes: family, refugees, breaking, crews, Hmong culture. Have each student analyze how their assigned theme was represented in the film and explain its significance to their group.
- B. Have students listen to one of the <u>Straight Outta Fresno Oral History recordings</u>. Have students write a report summarizing and analyzing their selected oral history. (Have students complete the worksheet entitled, "Analyzing Oral Histories."
- C. Have students research pioneering <u>Hmong Bboy crews</u>. Have students create a media kit for each crew that includes the following elements:
 - 1. How and when the crew formed
 - 2. Demography of members
 - 3. Significant performances
 - 4. How and why the group disbanded
 - 5. Legacies and contributions
- D. Have students watch the documentary entitled, "The Hmong and the Secret War." Have students write a reflection about their reactions and reflections about the documentary.
- E. Have students watch a video about a traditional Hmong dance and a Hmong breaking routine. Have them note the similarities and differences. Encourage students to try out some dance moves!



Further Information

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