

## **Transcript: Marking Time and Percussive Corporeality**

"Assemblages are inherently productive, entering into polyvalent becomings to produce and give expression to previously nonexistent realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, ideas, and so on" (Weheliye 46).

This assemblage of footage and mixed media plays on a much older artistic and rhetorical tradition: that of the palimpsest. A palimpsest is a layering technique where written work is continually built upon with "newer," revised, or all-together different compositions while the older, "original" work remains visible. The opening words, which serve as an origin point for artistic work, are layered and entwined with one another. The collage of layered media presented here (the paragraphs and quotes taken from this artist statement as well as the collection of images, bodies, sounds, and narrations through camera lenses, audio clips, and cellphone footage is assembled or collected in the video/essay) is meant to replicate the palimpsest showcasing the important interconnected and multidimensional network of stepping's marking of time and percussive corporeality.

This work aims to highlight the relationship of temporality and corporeality while centering Black rhetorics and ways of thinking. This work's primary focus isn't about highlighting the different attitudes, philosophies, or even so much about the histories of the evolution of Black women's social clubs and their contemporary iterations of greek life. It isn't about self-promotion or competition. I am wanting to tie together the rhetorical sense of temporality (as it is communicated by/through stepping) as a means of claiming agency in and through the body (with and without the traditional understanding of "words"). The artistic work is meant to illuminate how Black rhetorics weave a network of resistance through establishing a community, engaging in call-and-response, and cultivating spaces to be unapologetically Black in times where Black bodies are often de/valued via assemblage. In simpler terms, it is intended to demonstrate how types of public media can act or reverberate through the body and rhetorically signal the need for social action—be that as critique or celebration, camaraderie or competition, care and consideration.

Karma Chavéz outlines the historical connections between rhetoric and the abstract body in "The Body: An Abstract and Actual rhetorical Concept." Since its inception, Rhetoric (as a discipline) has always been entangled with the relationship between mind and body thus placing the physical body as an important agent in interpreting meaning. However, Rhetoric's implied awareness of the body often relies on the discipline's normative, Western understanding of a particular kind of body capable of producing a specific, valid kind of knowledge.

It is imperative we come to terms with the body's various ways to communicate the relationship between time, knowledge, and agency rather than continuing adhering to problematic and static interpretations of the body's rhetorical abilities—after all, the body is a multidimensional network. Chavéz writes that, "The material in these contexts [and realities that undergird the body's informed rhetorical practice(s)] refers to modes of production and labor under capitalism, which implicate the laboring body and laborers, but those bodies are rarely foregrounded" (244). What would happen if we followed the threads of the boy's reverberating knowledges? For many people of color, this question is not inherently new.

Excerpt transcript from "The Racial Politics of Time" a TED talk by Brittney Cooper  
([https://www.ted.com/talks/brittney\\_cooper\\_the\\_racial\\_politics\\_of\\_time](https://www.ted.com/talks/brittney_cooper_the_racial_politics_of_time)):

"I wanna talk to you more about the political nature of time. For if time had a race it would be white. White people own time [...] that desire to mitigate the impact of race and racism shows up and how we attempt to manage time and the ways we narrate history and the ways we attempt to shove the negative truths of the present of the past and the ways we attempt to argue that the future that we hope for is the present in which we're currently living [...] Time has a history and so do black people, but we treat time as though it is timeless as though it has always been this way as though it doesn't have a political history bound up with the plunder of indigenous lands, the genocide of indigenous people and the stealing of Africans from their Homeland. When white male European philosophers first thought to conceptualize time and history, one famously declared Africa is no historical part of the world. He was essentially saying that Africans were people outside of history who had had no impact on time or the March of progress. This idea that black people have had no impact on history is one of the foundational ideas of white supremacy.

Black Studies scholars like Alexander Weheliye, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Katherine McKittrick have asserted the body's potency as a theoretical, material, and rhetorical site of knowledge mobilization. Alexander Weheliye's meditation on the assemblage of Black bodies as a counter/point of/to humanity, noting that:

I use the phrase habeas viscus--'You shall have the flesh'--on the one hand, to signal how violent political domination activates a fleshy surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality, and, on the other hand, to reclaim the atrocity of flesh as a pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed. The flesh, rather than displacing bare life or civil death, excavates the social (after)life of these categories: it represents racializing assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds. (2)

Excerpt transcript of "Beyoncé - Sorry / Me, Myself, and I / Bow Down / I Been On Coachella Weekend 1" (0:00-3:10):

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=beyonce+cochella+step#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:6415b8bc,vid:V9TmU5nT1nM,st:0>

**[Beyoncé]** Suck on my balls, pause

**(Pledging)** Bug-A-Boos! I need a good laugh

You! Make me Laugh!

**[Line brother #1]** (slaps thigh twice) Bug-A-Boos! O-o-o-o-o-o-o-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah

**[Beyoncé]** Did that make us laugh?

**[Audience and Line sisters]** NO!

**[Beyoncé]** Think about it.

**[Line brother #1]** Bug-A-Boos! (suicide fall)

**[Beyoncé]** Fall in line!

Ladies, Are we smart?

**[Audience and Line sisters]** YES!

**[Beyoncé]** Are we strong?

**[Audience and Line sisters]** YES!

**[Beyoncé]** Have we had enough?

**[Audience and Line sisters]** YES!

**[Beyoncé]** Show 'em

**[Beyoncé Line sisters]** (polyrhythmic step begins)suck....on my baaalllss....suck on my...  
baaalllss...suck on my balls bitch! (pledges join) suck....on my baaalllss....suck on my...  
baaalllss...suck on my balls pause!

Brittney Cooper (2017) recalls Fannie Barrier Williams' essay (1900), "A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race," in her book *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Here, Cooper describes Williams' portrayal of the work that early Black women's social clubs aimed to do: "the Club Movement [i]s an outgrowth of the 'organized anxiety of women,' a result of their recognition of their 'low social condition' and their desire to reform it. The Club Movement had also helped Black women build racial self-esteem: 'to feel that you are something better than a slave, or a descendant of an ex-slave, to feel that you are a unit in the womanhood of a great nation and great civilization, is the beginning of self-respect and the respect of your race'" (34). To clarify, Cooper writes that "As women met together and shared information about the terribly troubling conditions Black women were facing, an anxiety emerged, borne of a deep and growing consciousness of their 'low social condition' and their 'desire to initiate the forces of reform.' They were both outraged at and anxious about the public assaults on Black women's character because they knew that this public discourse of vilification subjected Black women not only to discrimination but also to rape and violence. Thus, they organized themselves to change it, not only by offering social services but also through the mechanism of intellectual activism" (39).

Excerpt transcript from *Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé* [17:40-19:03]

I grew up in Houston, Texas,  
visiting Prairie View.  
We rehearsed at TSU  
for many years in Third Ward,  
and I always dreamed of going to an HBCU.  
My college was Destiny's Child.  
My college was traveling around the world, and life was my teacher.  
I wanted a Black orchestra.  
I wanted the steppers, I needed the vocalists.  
I wanted different characters; I didn't want us all doing the same thing.  
And the amount of swag is just limitless. Like ...  
the things that these young people can do  
with their bodies,  
and the music they can play, and...  
the drumrolls, and the haircuts, and the bodies, and the...  
It's just not right.  
It's so much damn swag.  
It's just gorgeous. and it makes me so proud. And, umm...  
I wanted every person that has ever been dismissed

because of the way they look  
to feel like they were on that stage.  
Killing 'em. Killing 'em.

The intellectual activism that Cooper discusses is intimately tied to our corporeality; that is, understanding the intersectional pressures from various systems as being constantly imposed on our bodies and relentlessly trying to navigate thriving in such an existence. Meta/physical spaces like fraternities and sororities, for example, that were spurred from the Black social Club Movements, encourages community development and expands boundaries to be unapologetic about and take pride in Black culture. In other words, these embodied, sonic, and meta/physical locales help us foster both collective and individual agency; to further develop our grammatical subject-ness.

Hortense Spillers revised the notion of the "subject" in her critique of American grammar. In other words, Spillers argues that the persistent racist logics which replaces the proper noun, our name, with essentializing and obfuscating nicknames rhetorically untethers our bodies from all assemblages of humanness. Spillers writes, "The eye pauses, however, not so much at the provisions of this enactment as the details of its delineation. Everywhere in the descriptive document, we are stunned by simultaneity of disparate items in a grammatical series [. . .] To that extent, the project of liberation for African-Americans has found urgency in two passionate motivations that are twinned—(1) to break apart, to rupture violently the laws of American behavior that make such syntax possible; (2) to introduce new semantic field/fold more appropriate to his/her own historic movement" (226). This "new" rhetorical grammar that Spillers alludes to, as I interpret and build its palimpsest here, is a "new" somatic field/fold that counters the assemblage she, and other Black studies theorists/rhetoricians, names. Black women's bodies are wholly present in time—scaffolded with pasts, presents, and futures.

Transcript of cell phone footage of Texas State Gamma Sigma Sigma probate step clip posted to Facebook by Seoul Sista 2010

**[line sisters:]** G-A-G-A-M-M-A

**[Alexis]** Y'all wanna know what I heard today?

**[line sister]** Whatchu heard?

**[audience]** Swing dat hair

**[Alexis]** I heard, somebody over there in that section...

**[line sisters]** was it chu?

**[Alexis]** I heard...that they think us Gamma Sigs step

**[line sisters]** ahhhhh

**[Alexis]** well let me tell you a little secret

**[line sisters]** awww no, go head

**[Alexis]** (while clapping) should I tell 'em a little secret

**[line sisters]** tell 'em

**[Alexis]** well..."I don't see nothing wrong... with a Gama step and stroll]

**[audience]** neva let 'em stroll neva let 'em stroll

**[prophyte, audience member]** a'ight Lexi

Polyrhythmic step performance by line

**[Alexis]** 1-9-5-2 (repeats)

**[line sisters]** you know you like this beat

Polyrhythmic step performance by line

Mapping the body marking time

The hands and feet tell us where to go, when to go

Time travels through the limbs clapping and stomping the beat of progress

Remembering the past informing the future

Our time signature is our body

mark time mark

Excerpt transcript of *StepAfrika New Interview* video (1:03-4:25)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpQ-VggoZw4> ]

**[White male anchor]** Yeah, we heard a little bit, We heard a little bit of them stepping in here earlier, just warming up. Sounds really good. What's the storyline...that gets kinda weaved in?

**[C. Brian Williams]** Well this production tells the story of The Great Migration. Right? A really pivotal moment in American history, where African Americans left the South for the North. It really changed the country, ya know?

**[White male anchor]** ah!

**[C. Brian Williams]** And Jacob Lawrence is one of our country's most fantastic artist, visual artist. He created a series, "The Great Migration" series, that you can see at the Phillips Collection...

**[White male anchor]** ok.

**[C. Brian Williams]** And Step Afrika is so honored to be able to interpret his work and bring those paintings to life. So, if you love the visual arts, if you love dance, if you love music, I think this show has so many elements in it that it really is a must see production.

**[Black female anchor]** You have a big company of performers..

**[C. Brian Williams]** Yeah, yeah..

**[Black female anchor]** This is just a small snippet, the most that we can fit on our small...

**[C. Brian Williams]** Beautiful studio!

**[Black female anchor]** ... stage. Ah, yes, thank you for that. And tell us about the power of putting step with this storytelling and how you've been able to do this for three decades. And why it's so very important to the African American story.

**[C. Brian Williams]** Well stepping, umm, is an artform created by African American fraternities and sororities, and Step Afrika is the first professional company to kind of demonstrate stepping's unlimited artistic possibilities and to really introduce stepping to the American theater.

**[Black female anchor]** yep.

**[C. Brian Williams]** So that's what we've done, ya know, and that's what we kind of pioneered stepping's use in the theater—taking off Broadway, all over the world—and so this production allows us to expand upon the performance you and I did on the campus of Howard University

[...]

**[Black female anchor]** let's get out of the way

**[C. Brian Williams]** Alright. Let's do it

**[Black female anchor]** Ladies and Gentlemen

**[Performers]** Makes ya wanna Go!

Polyrhythmic step performance begins

The history of Black bodies' corporeality in America is largely framed through capitalistic narratives which, in turn, produces the assemblage and fungibility of Blackness. Interchanging our body parts, swapping out our proper names for tokenized labels, imposing a temporal linearity of progress in which to measure our social lives holds Black bodies in an unproductive stasis in a time where white supremacist logics are not only accepted but encouraged.

Intentionally ignoring the rhetorical, innovative work of the flesh that counters notions of private property funneling through the systematic oppressions that distance Blackness from humanness maintains the farce of the "quick" strikes/strides of progress or liberation. The guarding and surveillance, the relocation and forced migration, the imposition or restriction of translated freedoms placed upon Black bodies performed throughout America's history rests on the capitalistic understanding of private property: that the body can be owned and operated, in part, to profit another or make profit off of something/someone that does not come freely.

Retribution for carrying out these inequitable exchanges requires a performance of "myth theater," according to Augusto Boal. "It is simply a question of discovering the obvious," Boal suggests, "to logically tell a story, revealing its evident Truths" (130) is key to revealing and eventually dismantling oppressive power structures. Black rhetorical practices, like stepping, often work against the individual and capitalist systems that strip the body of agency and temporality by subverting the assemblage, by illuminating the irony of private property, by building community, and by resisting a simply linear line of thought and "progress." Stepping offers a retelling of our histories and a reclaiming of our bodies to unapologetically celebrate all parts of our identities even when we are in hostile environments. There is always an urgent need for the body to assert our presence and humanity as time is rarely on our side.

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