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PERFORMING THE BREAKS

Notes on African American Aesthetic Structures

Many forms of African American expressive culture derive their aesthetic capacities from the manipulation of rhythm. In these modes, subjectivity emerges in high contrast at the crossroads of performance execution — at the “break,” an intellectual concept and aesthetic capacity accessed by performers in contemporary music, drama, and dance. The expressive possibilities enabled by the breaking of the beat have now extended to circulate globally as well.

Breakdancing has now achieved mainstream awareness as a widely circulated popular culture idiom built upon emphatic, improbable articulations of the corporeal. Breakdancers do amazing things with their bodies, usually in concert with breakbeats performed by a DJ sampling media. Between the accents created by the dancer and the assemblage of the DJ’s art, audiences recognize flow and its disruption. Flow derives from a communal awareness of the basic rhythmic pulse. In African American expressive cultures, this rhythmic pulse arrives as a sacred trust, as the site and source of aesthetic ability. Rhythm makes space for event; it sets the tempo for coherent accord; it points us toward the places we can find flow. In the aesthetic structures under consideration here, flow and rhythm are allies: one allows for and inspires the other.

This might not seem self-evident. However, in black expressive structures, flow emerges alongside the grounding structures of rhythmic pulse. The pulse grounds flow, and working together, they create possibilities for the break.

The break is an unexpected, uncontrollable space. It is where an insistent beat is interrupted by a flash of contradictory rhythmic ideas. For me, the break is the most significant gesture of African American performance, as it contains both the tie to a ubiquitous rhythmic flow and the potential for anarchy and disruption. The break creates a liminoid space that allows attentive listeners a place to enter the musical dance.

So the break as I conceive it here, then, is a particular aesthetic practice as well as a concept. It is something that people do, and is something that is done within various expressive genres — it is relational, interstitial, and contingent. Deployed effectively, the break can also seem authoritatively present and spontaneous as well. Because the

Aretha Franklin
at the Obama
Inauguration,
Washington, DC,
January 2009.
Photo: Robyn Beck /
Getty Images

break is referenced wherever there is aesthetic action that draws on African American imperatives, we have become quite accustomed to its contours. We see it in tap dance and hear it in pop music or jazz. But the break is also an intellectual concept deployed by artists to extend the possibilities of theatrical form.

BREAKING THE GENRE:
SONG AND SOUND

African American aesthetic practices consistently break open performative structures to imagine unprecedented possibilities. This happens as artists claim individual agency in various performance modes; as we mark the performance as an original, uniquely stylized version—the fundamental concept of effective performance. In musical performance, individual artists have at times laid open entire genres of composition through singular performative response, as in John Coltrane’s famous recording of the Rodgers and Hammerstein show tune, “My Favorite Things” (1961). More recently, at the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama, Aretha Franklin offered a fine performance of “My Country ’Tis of Thee” that effectively broke the genre of nationalistic music. (*Franklin’s performance can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GjDMP3nuWE.—Ed.*)

Franklin breaks the song from her opening, improbable articulation of “my country,” which was widely derided by YouTube commenters for its audacious backphrasing that broke the word *country* into multiple syllables. YouTube commenters missed the audacity of this performance choice, which effectively grounded the performance as Franklin’s from its beginning. Undaunted by the slow triple-meter pulse of the arrangement, Franklin finds her own way through the simple song, separating words at her breath’s will and according to her own creative sensibility. Words she needs come more than once; words that inspire her spontaneously shift upward from their original registers to sound as their own echoes an octave higher; and the symphonic arrangement—complete with offstage, invisible singers chirping compliantly in the background—follows a black church aesthetic tactic of upward harmonic modulation. The arrangement is structured with successive rounds going higher and higher, like Jacob’s ladder, as if the song might actually open out into a drive section, and the congregants might break through the solemnity of the moment to run the sanctuary, as happens in black church practice. Of course, a group praise dance is not really possible at this inaugural event, and what Franklin can do is dispatch the song with simultaneous care and studied casualness; to allow it to arrive unexpectedly through her performance. The nut of this nationalistic tune, derived from the British national anthem, “God Save the King,” arrives with lyrics edited to emphasize the ringing freedoms of American democracy rather than a religious appeal to preserve the monarchy. Franklin finishes the song as an imperative appeal and reiteration of calls for freedom; she breaks the chestnut open so that it can flow into the inaugural.

Franklin's presence at the inaugural corresponded to her celebrity as the American "Queen of Soul." Her performance, though, was grounded in black church musical aesthetics that predicted the swooping, echoing, call-and-response phrasing that she engaged. In the tethering of black church performance aesthetics to national attention, we open the possibility of black sound as an official musical voicing of the nation. This tethering of gospel-inspired singing to public discourse may be something of a break in and of itself, one that surprises familiar conceptions of song or sound to insert unprecedented bursts of rhythmic accent, unlikely articulations of once-familiar lyrics, and unusual shifts of melody and harmony. Unlike Marion Anderson's nationally acknowledged concertizing of an earlier generation, which effectively demonstrated African American ability within European-derived aesthetic structures, Franklin's performance breaks the genre of the patriotic anthem with African American aesthetic devices, and in the process embeds particular performative concerns of the black church into the sounding of official American discourse.

BREAKING THE STAGE: DANCE AND SPACE

An affinity between the spirit house that underlies black church practice and the theatrical space has been successfully mined by many African American artists. An example comes from choreographer Katherine Dunham's wide-ranging oeuvre. Born in Chicago, Illinois, Dunham's abiding aesthetic emerged at the overlap among modes of performance. She began formal dance training in ballet and modern dance as a teenager and began teaching in those genres while a student at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s. Dunham pioneered the use of folk dance and ritual as a basis for modern theatrical composition. She established the Dunham Technique, built upon African and Caribbean styles of movement, including a flexible torso, precise articulation of pelvis and limb isolations, and the integration of movements from classical ballet. Her dances often traded in the possibilities of staging trance, and aligning the theater with the recovered spirit house. Many of her works offered layerings of rhythmic ideas, song, dance, scenery, props, and narrative to create polysemic assemblage.

Dunham worked to break the stage in several ways, typically by allowing the audience into her particular conception of connections between African and European performance diasporas. In *Shango*, the work that was the finale to act 1 of the 1945 Broadway offering *Carib Song*, she tied folklike dance tempi of the Euro-Atlantic to theatrical visions of Black Atlantic religious practice. This short narrative dance work depicts a Caribbean community's ritual worship of Shango, staged in a short introductory sequence followed by an enactment of the ceremony. A bouncy orchestral score accompanies the introductory gestures of a community's movement from daily life to

the worship space. Quickly, the orchestral sounds are replaced by onstage drumming that accompanies the actual worship. A priest consecrates the event and its participants, and all are surprised by the timely arrival of Damballa, a snake deity, who possesses a young man. The man breaks his everyday physicality to embody the movements of the snake, and, for a time, leads the worship.

The dance offers a break as a structural device, in the abrupt movement from the symphonic orchestral to the drumming orchestral. Dunham's choreography encourages flashes of spirit that can intentionally break muted, smooth dance-time; in the central section of trance dancing to drums, as Damballa descends onto the young man, dancers and audience are invited to engage open, indeterminate, stage space. Groups of dancers gather into columns on the stage, performing movements that contradict and amplify aspects of the rhythmic pulse of the drum orchestra. By the end of the work the entire stage breaks in layered accord, in a phantasmagoric sectioning of group movement that blurs the spectatorial eye. In this final section of the work, the audience is invited to imagine events that occur in indeterminate realities of time, space, gesture, smell, and voice. Shouting, singing, and dancing in small groups, the artists break the stage space into simultaneously functioning groups, each with its own rhythmic structures that open the perception of stage space for the audience. (Dunham's comments on *Shango* can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ab6KWufcCUw. A performance of *Shango* can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7GvAYnnDg8&feature=related.)

BREAKING THE WORD: DRAMA AND TIME

Suzan-Lori Parks numbers among the expressionistic theatrical writers whose work achieves its own quirky sense of rhythmic pulse and flow. Her early play *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) features three playlets connected—or separated—by two self-contained scenes set on a slave ship. These interludes operate as breaks within the overall structure of the play and suggest an expansive disruption of place and time. Titled “The Third Kingdom,” these interludes function as cleansing gestures for the larger form; they break the temporal chronology of the whole.

Following its titular provocation, *Imperceptible Mutabilities* explores concepts of time and change, and the ways in which a particular African American family arrives in similar but distinctive circumstances at several abstruse historical moments. Of particular interest, Third Kingdom scenes are set on a slave ship rocking through space, out of time. These scenes arrive without recognizable dramatic event, as ciphers of hyperbolic statement and counterstatement. Like other works by Parks, these scenes include references to sounds and rhythmic devices that are not quite dialogue, by naturalistic standards of theatrical expression, but still manage to convey emotional flow

and its percussive breakage. In these sounds—these pauses drawn on the page as dashes, or lines that ask the actors to “Chomp. Chomp. Chomp” and “gaw gaw gaw”—Parks breaks open the dialogic, to allow dramatic structure to open time as a space of African American possibility.

The ending spoken dialogue of the play aligns African American teleology with that of slugs, suggesting that movement through time bears little fruit of prospective progress. Yet the Third Kingdom scenes, cast in an open space and time(lessness), form the coup de théâtre that confirms African American presence and possibility. Parks, like Amiri Baraka in his play *Slave Ship* (1967), dramatizes the middle passage as a site of open-ended terror, an indeterminate, open wound that both breaks the quirky rhythm of the whole and, surprisingly, soothes in its jangled setting of nonsensical uttered repetitions.



BREAKING THE BODY: HIP-HOP AND VISION

For the original B-boys and B-girls, the break was a musical concept; the part of the DJ's process that tethered the open drumming breaks from prerecorded music to each other to form an extended danceable sound. These constructed breakbeats became the defining pulse of the new musical whole, and from that pulse, breakdancing could emerge. In its earliest manifestations, the breakbeats fed the corporeal process of B-boying; by 2009, though, B-boys and B-girls can break in silence, to Bach, to spoken word poetry.

B-boys break the body and its apparent possibilities. Expressive gestures in this idiom must somehow exceed the familiar for the break to succeed. The apparition of excess is essential here. Among expert B-girls, what we think we see—and can't comprehend as really happening—becomes the standard for what is possible and what might be real. Breakdancers trade in tricks of the visual, built upon displays of

*Imperceptible
Mutabilities in the
Third Kingdom,*
by Suzan-Lori Parks,
directed by
Liz Diamond, BACA
Downtown,
New York, 1989.
Photo: Kyle Chepulis



the break/s by
Marc Bamuthi Joseph,
World Performance
Project, New Haven,
2009. Photo:
Bethanie Hines

seemingly impossible strength or illusions of excessive physical mastery that blur the coherency of the body. These dances confirm that the body itself can be aesthetically “broken” and still retain its singular expressive capacities.

GLOBAL CIRCULATIONS

It may be that within the realm of dance that the concept and action of the break has circulated globally most successfully. As we witness the body breaking, we understand the implications of resilience and trauma; submerged strength and possibilities of resistance; concept and capacity. This holds in movements affiliated with hip-hop dance in Senegal and Sweden, in Iraq and Argentina. B-boying and B-girling are now practiced in all corners of the globe, by young people who will test their agility and corporeal imagination against what everyday activities demand. This theatricalization of the corporeal—the extension of gesture and desire into the realms of creative expression—demonstrates a noteworthy circulation of aesthetic ideology. This particular practice of the break may have crystallized among dancers in the South Bronx circa 1980, but its value expands geographically and seemingly without limit. (A compelling clip of B-girl competition can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yBWquvFcc4.)

As concept and practice, the break offers powerful confirmation of African American aesthetic structures. Of course, there is a caution to be sounded about focusing on the breaks. Breaks are powerful and can be effective only when accessed sparingly. Breaks have to be singular to be effective, and singularities in any realm might cause us pause. While we draw on the break to understand futurity and possibility, we must acknowledge that the break completes its process by allowing the rearticulation of persistent rhythmic pulse and flow. Breaks are, therefore, related to an assumption of stable meter. While the breaks may command our attention in their flamboyant resistance to this stability, they are also a single and signal component among many that may be drawn upon to produce effective black expressive culture.