

BLACK ART AND AESTHETICS

RELATIONALITIES, INTERIORITIES,
RECKONINGS



EDITED BY
MICHAEL KELLY &
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BLOOMSBURY

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Relationalities, Interiorities, Reckonings

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DANCE ON

Thomas F. DeFrantz

“Pick It Up. . .”

If you can hold the beat. Or at least, if you can only work with and through the beat. If you can ride it, or enhance it; if only you could respond to it and predict it, move along with it and vary it. If only.

The beat lives beyond our imagination, in a place where we already know its contours and complexities. Many of us figure out how to wrangle its possibilities, and we dance. A lot. We enjoy the maneuvering with the beat; adjusting rhythm within ourselves according to what's needed where.

The beat might be an imaginary inevitability; a formation that gathers the complexity of world-making as time, or storytelling as practice. It's entirely real and not there at once; an indication of gesture made manifest as a relationship-in-motion. A contending with intuitions born in the body and borne out by creative response to social lives. We meet each other in relation to the beat, as we dance, and as we move towards a social destiny of some sort. The beat offers standards and guideposts towards what can happen, and we choose how to respond to its call.

We might understand that Black aesthetics are organized around rhythm, which is possibly another way to narrate “the beat.” We Black artists admire and respect the beat and its manifestations as rhythm (although it could be the other way around, with rhythm making way for the beat). We structure our embodied creative time around the beat and its insistence; we develop complex modes to elaborate its capacities and test our abilities in relation to it. We write poems, construct sounds, and practice dances that stretch the beat towards its unexpected possibilities.

This is, then, an aesthetics of rhythm as foundational to Black creativity.

Rhythm remains exceedingly difficult to write about. This challenge arrives at the heart of theorizing through, at least, popular music and Black social dance. The particularities of shifting time while moving are hard to catch and nearly impossible to predict or remember. Witnessing rhythm might be like watching time, but rhythm is both a proposition and an activity; an affordance *to have and to hold* as well as something far beyond language.

Rhythm, engaged, is surely more than pattern and variation, accuracy or predictability. That would be the basic definition offered up in most accounts: rhythm as pattern and

variation. But we know that rhythm has qualities, and also valuations. Good rhythm becomes manifest as an ability to transform event by shifting its terms—the terms of time and pattern and variation that might characterize its nature. Suspension, cross-pattern, complexity, and recognizable grooves might become ways to characterize what happens in a musicality. Ultimately, though, we're looking for the beat within Black performance and especially Black dance, in order to understand how we are connected and what we might do about that connection. The search for the beat, and how we care for it help us consider what might be at issue.

Prince

I recently moved to the Midwestern part of the United States; here I reacquaint with how rhythm animates Black life and Black thought in a manner particular to the region. The music of Prince Rogers Nelson came forward for me and inspired this chapter. Prince hailed from the Midwest and hailed the Midwest again and again in his creative output, and also in his structured responses to rhythm as a mode of assemblage and creative imperative.

The Midwest is both cold as ice and as friendly as a conversation about cars with a stranger on the sidewalk. Less blood-soaked than the deep South of the United States, for Black people at least, the Midwest encompasses a casual normativity, where expectations are narrow and obvious, and social presumptions are many. This everyday Blackness among whites who understand that their ancestors stole this land and murdered the indigenous people who lived here before, encourages a sort of willingness to try out other people's stuff. Mixed-race Black people are legion here, including Prince by way of his grandfather, and curiosities about modes of creativity spill out of bedroom neighborhoods and workplaces in a sort of aesthetic stew. For our purposes, though, what binds creative excellence from the Black Midwest—whether Chicago Blues, Detroit Techno, Ohio Funk, or Memphis Soul—is the beat.

Prince follows R&B and funk band practice with a conception of rhythmic array as the hook for hundreds of recordings, and of course always in his live shows. The tightly-woven capacity of rhythm surrounds his most famous recordings; the inevitable relationship to a rhythm blues beat we've already heard, rendered fresh again in "Alphabet Street" or "Kiss." And Prince recorded an endless stream of romantic ballads that allowed his falsetto voice to waver above an insistent slow groove; tunes that allow the musicians and listeners to lean back, behind the beat, and settle into something soothing as a reflection in sound.

Prince explored queer desire as the foundation of Black desire again and again, in songs like "Sister" or "Controversy" or "Sexy MF." Several times Prince sang as a femme in original songs about relationships, or voiced a non-normative duality in expressions of sex and love. Prince wondered, "If I Was Your Girlfriend" and narrated the "Erotic City;" claimed astonishment at "Pussy Control" and orchestrated the Kamasutra; wrote for the "Sexy Dancer" and explained how we should "Do Me Baby." These tracks, including their lyrical contents, assumed an erotic capacity within rhythmic manipulation. They reminded

dancing listeners that following, and breaking, the beat could claim space in a relational aesthetics of expertise concerned with, at least, flow and rupture.

Most of Prince's recordings are danceable jams. Tracks that encourage a sociability born of physical movement to capture and elaborate the beat. Dance music entirely designed to provoke Black Social Dance.

Black Social Dance provides the rhythmic motor for an entire constellation of popular music and culture, a constellation that encompasses most of Prince's output. This chapter renders Black Social Dance toward its abilities to provoke physical improvisations that confirm corporeal agencies: individualities within a group context that propose variations in time. Rhythm arrives as a sacred trust in structures of African diaspora performance, and if we can ride and then cut the beat, we can remake our destinies.

Dance as a structuring logic or technology offers a counterpoint to "black death" and the unlikely, but enduring, nature of afropessimistic integrity. Remarkably, afropessimism coheres as a "metatheory" (Wilderson) that explores connections among theoretical models that inevitably undervalue or disregard Black life.¹ Afropessimism encourages us to consider an ongoing disavowal of Black life as a state of being, the historical rupture of enslavement as the pre-accelerated confirmation of Black as an under-category or sub-status that marks difference from a preferred norm.

The ongoingness of an anti-Black climate, sometimes referred to as *the weather* (Sharpe), forces Black life into a space of being always fugitive, always slightly out of step with anything that might be normative, always in transition and re-figuration.² This ability to be flexible and to form and reform in small combinatory gestures becomes the promise and achievement of Black aesthetic creativity. This manifests as a capacity to create from within the scream (Douglass), from within the attic chamber hiding place (Jacobs), from within substance addictions (Holiday), carceral formations, military subscriptions, transphobia, disavowed childhoods, etc.³ The creative world-making of Black aesthetic production proves again and again that *something else* might be possible (Crowley), that *hope* might be constituent to the unfolding of Black life in aesthetic gesture (Muñoz), and that creative acts can offer remedy and "means for setting right a wrong" (Jackson).⁴

To consider how rhythm subvenes Black aesthetic production is to consider the tempi of Black life in multiplicity. Rhythm, as an aesthetic device, determines how events stack one to the next; it shapes memory and intuitive response; rhythm predicts the changing flows that constitute a liveliness-in-motion endemic to Black life, always in spite of its disavowal. Rhythm and its manipulation through embodied practice allow us to understand pattern and its disruption as a metaphysics of assembly, engaged by multiple modes of access to counting and discounting the beat. Dancing, in a social space of gestural responsiveness to the call of rhythm, allows a multi-modal response to time as a non-linear formation.

In this model, rhythm and dance allow a manipulation of presence that resists "straight time" or the inevitable pulse of neoliberal capital and structural racisms. It becomes possible to dance, through rhythm, towards an unexpected destiny or an *"otherwise modality of being"* (Crowley).⁵ A general fascination with Black modes of social dance, rendered as expertise in designing rhythmic response through a body in motion, drives popular culture forward. As example, the "Watch Them Whip: A Decade of Viral Dance

Moves" short video produced by the *New Yorker* magazine, features Black social dances practiced by an international cohort of athletes, dancers, and "people on the street" as a translocational assembly.⁶ Black social dance, practiced widely, becomes widely available as demonstration of resistant knowing, intuitive remembering, and expansive imagining of social potential.

Black social dance acts as a gathering notion (Outlaw), a site for creative assembly and an embodied temporary release of the strictures of normativities of many kinds.⁷ These dances are organized around the manipulation of rhythm to produce the affective register of physical imagination. The best Black social dancers are those who understand how to manipulate rhythm in order to produce in- and out-of-time elaborations of movements and dance forms that are already known by many. It matters that assembled witnesses understand a base-line assumption around how rhythm and form operate in the dance that is near-to-hand; what becomes interesting are the disruptions and unexpected accenting and cross-phrasing that a dancer explores. In the "Black Social Dance" exhibition at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, an array of expert Black social dancers demonstrate their distinctive moves that galvanize attendant witnesses in theatres, on streetcorners, and in gymnasiums and social centers (DeFrantz and Smithsonian Channel).⁸ The whole is tied together, as in the "Watch Them Whip" moving-image object, by a steady danceable pulse, one that needn't be in direct relation to the snippets of movement displayed in the film. The flashes of movement are already small examples of how rhythm matters, and gestures of incalculable choreographies (Derrida) through infinite variation.⁹

The Prince track "Dance On" arrives as a minor bit of funkiness, almost hidden on a minor collection of works gathered as *Lovesexy* (1988). No matter. Minor or major, funkiness emerges as affirmation of beat possibility. The track insists on a stuttering, out-of-sync rhythmic device, sounding like a wave of electronic djembe sampled and transformed into an angry string ensemble rumble. Each wave of sound is answered by an open rhythmic break, a wandering in suspension that encourages moving outside the basic pulse of the jam. Electronic hits and a dissonant wall of guitar sound confirm a moving-beyond-moving demanded by the musicians in an awkward, end-of-days dance rave.

"Dance On" begins with the exhortation "Pick It Up," meaning, of course, the beat. For Prince and collaborators, the beat is always already there, awaiting activation. It is something that can be organized by musicians and danced through by a general public of listeners, dancing Black sociability through a shared effort to bend time towards a preferred Black space of temporary liberation.

Prince and The Time

Prince fomented a side-project band, The Time, named literally for the incessant demand that Black musical structures explore an ontological rhythmic pulse. The Time essentially acted as an alternative rhythm section for Prince's creative wonderings, operating outside of the core group of The Revolution. Even as the band refused to stay coherent for more

than a year or two, The Time allowed its rotating number of musicians to hone their skills alongside headlining singers Morris Day, Vanity Six, and at times, Prince.

The Time's name spoke to the rhythmic organization needed to craft spaces for dance conceived as the sharing of cultural knowledge through social assembly. The Time regularly crafted pulse as a relational affordance that could be enabled by dance practice; their biggest hits were dance instruction songs that told the listener what moves to make in order to join a sociality-in-motion (Banes and Szwed).¹⁰ As musical sidemen, The Time set the foundation that allowed others to explore cross-rhythms and cross-purposes to the guiding beat.

The Time, like any number of rhythm musicians, enabled a relational affordance that allows Black social dance as Black thought to extend beyond the event of here and now. Black social dance becomes an aspect of social memory and social projection that can extend a metaphorical skin of Black being-in-motion (Ahmed).¹¹ An orientation towards Black being through social dance becomes a willingness to take time and consider time as a foundational aspect of aesthetic entanglement (Ahmed). Repetition, and practice, set in motion through aesthetic orientations offer predictive awarenesses that allow Black creativity to cohere in particular rhythmic formations (Ahmed). Our consideration of time as a musical practice and a theoretical elaboration of Black social possibility extends outward, spidering diasporically, like Anansi's web, to entangle our orientation towards rhythm (George-Graves).¹²

Let's Work

Aligning conceptions of Black Time from several contemporary cultural theorists reveals a kaleidoscopic and coherent awareness of its again-emergent place in Black thought.

Time must be shifted to allow Black creativity to foment, and Black gestures reach through time in order to cohere with aesthetic and political force. Creativity allows us to undermine the disavowal of Blackness as a social deathliness. "Black movements are embodied actions that participate in political movements by creating links across time and space, thus disrupting the accumulative force of blackness when it unfolds in linear time" (Colbert).¹³ Blackness emerges in a "racialized temporality" bound up with capital and its ability to produce Blackness as difference, rendering "racial distinction as a timeless timeliness" (Crawley).¹⁴ Black Time shimmers in these formations, sounding a call towards something now, before, and just ahead. Something queer.

The disruption of straight time becomes key to a forward-casting creative constellation, Afrofuturism, modeling "disruptions to the dominant time line as rhythmic rather than directional" (Lothian).¹⁵ This distension of time according to what's needed in the creative moment produces "cross-time touches and nonteleological histories that resonate with evocations of queer temporality" (Lothian). The queerness of this affect "exceeds any standard notion of timing" as rhythm—the crafted manipulation of rhythm—offers "the future of movement-moving makes itself felt."¹⁶ Rhythm "is how we know duration, a duration that is always more than one" (Manning).¹⁷

While Erin Manning may not be solely concerned with Black thought in her writings about social relation, time, and affect, implications for time as a "dynamic form that recasts

how relation is conceived" resonate in our consideration of Black liveliness alongside Black social death. When Manning affirms that an "affective attunement cannot be measured in linear time" she tilts towards an emergent branch of European philosophy that contends with Black thought as an inciting formation of the current moment (Manning).¹⁸ Attempting to depict rhythm as an aspect of music, Jean-Luc Nancy asserts "rhythm: it is nothing other than the time of time, the vibration of time itself in the stroke of a present that presents it by separating it from itself" (Nancy).¹⁹ This *separation* might be the cleavage of difference bound up in Blackness-as-being; a mode of creativity aligned with its origin as a remain of the unholy rhythms of the Middle Passage. Rhythm may have always been a weapon, but its re-purposing as Black aesthetic method in the crucible of enslavement and capital production made a *something else* possible in the caring for the beat: a way to modulate towards the temporary, imaginary *freedom* defined as movement (Nyong'o). This "afro-fabulation" of temporary freedom arrives as a "theory and practice of black time and temporality" that undergirds Black creative craft (Nyong'o).²⁰ Afro-fabulation might exist even within the wake, as the "residence time of the wake" can be *troubled*, through rhythmic elaboration (Sharpe).²¹

Prince released "Let's Work" on the album *Controversy* (1981). A thumping funk-groove, the track sits "in the pocket" with a forward-leaning tom-tom at the center of an assemblage that includes a handclap on the two and four of each cycle. The beat calls for moving forward and up-and-down at once, demanding moving bodies to acknowledge the repeating pattern. Here, dancing is cast as a certain sort of creative labor, something we do among each other towards an end of shared imagination. Dancing, we amplify the in-between possibilities of this rhythmic insistence. We work together, because we must, to dance, and to dream collectively through our labor. In direct counter distinction to labor for capital, this is the labor of Black imagination.

The beat in Black Social Dance reveals as much in its implications as it might in its sounding. In "Dance On" and "Let's Work" social dancers are hailed by the rhythmic formation to fill in or enhance the recordings through embodied responsiveness. By enacting things felt but not heard, we engage histories yet to come and remembrances of social formations (are these always families?) we never knew in person.

Moving across time, and allowing a movement through time, the beat supports an ongoing status of fugitivity as Being-In-Blackness. Manipulating time as an ordering of Black creativity, an aesthetics of rhythmic seeking and invention supports the impossible strictures of Black life. The beat draws us into its capacities, to *make time* where things seem stuck by dancing out-of-time in the interstitial spaces of the beat and its cadence.

Keep Bustin'

Beat juggling is conjuring with rhythm; a curated, metaphysical wondering at the capacity of recording as object. Digital or analog, the stacking of recorded rhythm to produce an unanticipated distension of sound allows another way to experience the past, this time with the flash and fire of a now to be embodied by dance. The recording of beat juggling, as in a mixtape, produces a seeming-singularity; a sounding of something special, like a

one-off. A rhythmic dubplate. The mashup as a single. Not just a mixtape, but a dubplate mixtape.

The dubplate arrives with particular rhetorical force in Black aesthetic structures, as it enacts a recorded singularity of sorts; a one-time-only object that offers evidence of a moment and contains implications towards its outcomes. Dubplates lean in to the logics of neoliberal capital, turning the acquisition of a performance into an achievement of status bound up with Black creativity and possession. And yet, the dubplate spills outward with Black creativity; affirming a special production of sound that can be repeated locally, and shared as a memory first by those who encountered its wonders, and then by those who find a way to hear its contents.

Prince produced a vast storehouse of recordings that were never released publicly. Prince worked diligently as a musician and recording artist, crafting so many dubplates and one-off versions of materials that there might never be an accounting for the entirety of compositional output. Like the dubplates that evade wide circulation, even among connoisseurs, Prince's experiments and achievements in sound are always already known to exceed what might be available to a Black commons of listeners and dancers. This expansive output might distinguish Prince among Black creatives of the 20th and 21st century; Prince worked ceaselessly towards a Black sonic deliverance of creative rhythmic address.

Prince often worked as a solo musician, overlaying tracks of himself to produce a recording. Prince created the hit dance single "Batdance" (1989) differently, though, as a self-sampled mix that sutured a stream of grooves and snippets from the Hollywood film *Batman*. We hear an unusual process-driven groove that serves as background to a hard-rock guitar solo; a rewinding through an end-of-phrase device that stutters the ongoing pulse; an actor's snuffle transformed into a breakbeat. The groove changes three times in this track, reforming in distinctive, wildly unexpected array. In the slow, central back-beat strut section, the lyric "work" becomes a repeated mantra, sampled from dialogue in the movie. Beyond the call to labor, the call to work supports an understanding of dance as a repeated practice that produces outcomes likely beneficial to the group. We work together in the dance, crafting rhythm to reshape time. In this, the "Batdance" assemblage references world-making through dance that must be produced as event beyond its sounding. As with all good dance music, the track incites thinking towards formations of dance and Black sociability well beyond any sort of "here and now" that might permeate other forms of social dance.

"Batdance" ends as a jumble; a chaotic plea for rhythmic consistency. Prince calls out, "Don't Stop Dancing" and then a final "Stop!" to end the adventure. The stop is temporary. The dance continues, in our memory and on our skin, even as we are bathed in the sweat of deliverance by its engagement.

We return to the dance because we actually never left it, not really. It was the movement of the group that allowed us to recognize Black as a formation; it was the manifestation of the beat that we cared for at the beginning. The movement of the womb inside the enslavement ship, perhaps; the very human-animal assertion of creative drive as a response to the reorganizing of time. Working with time and the beat, caring for its contours and dropping it only to pick it up as we work, we danceBlacktogether. We

wonder through our dancing, and figure out the endless variety of a beat and our relationships within it and beyond it. Weirdly, we are surprised that our Blackness is replenished through our dancing and the ways it always bounces back a little different. Not quite what we remembered, but something else. The dancing reveals its manifestation as a *something else*. Moving around the beat, and always considering its relationship to those temporary constructions, Black social dance replenishes, with an inevitable physical dissidence.

Notes

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- 20 Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5.
- 21 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 41.