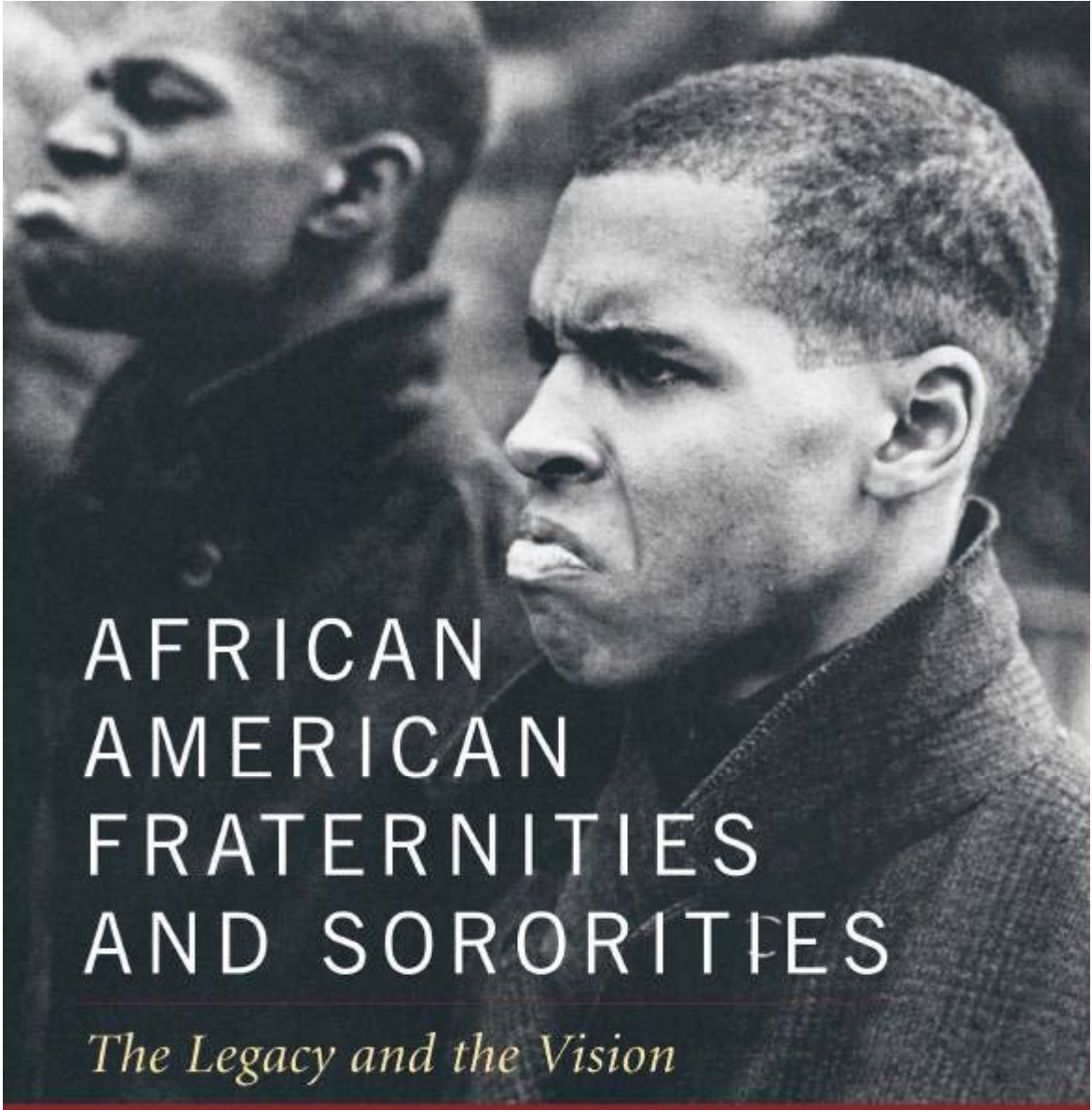

AFRICAN AMERICAN FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES

The Legacy and the Vision

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11

Variegated Roots

The Foundations of Stepping

Carol D. Branch

Cars prowl through the parking lot hoping to pounce on the closest open slot. Streams of young women, men, and families head toward the event arena. Along the way, verbal calls float in the air, the final run-through of an unseen team is heard, and the eyes are bombarded with waves of blue, red, black, pink, brown, and purple. The air is filled with a sense of anticipation about the coming hours. It is springtime, and for many black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs), that means one thing: the Long Beach Step Show.

It is an hour before showtime on the campus of California State University, Long Beach. Outside the Pyramid,[1] the local hip-hop station plays the current hits and throws T-shirts to the yelling throng. Meanwhile, the doors, watched by the Fruit of Islam, are opened. As the tickets to one of the biggest step shows in California exchange hands, the DJ skills of Mr. Quick reach out and pull the incoming crowd through the doors.

Once inside, the audience stands in awe of the immenseness of the arena. The entrance level is filled with vendors selling Greek paraphernalia and cultural items. From that level, one goes down through the main audience section. As soon as the crowd enters, it is evident where the Greeks sit. The bottom rows quickly become blocks of undulating color, signifying the various organizations. The men of Alpha Phi Alpha sit next to the women of Alpha Kappa Alpha. The brothers of Phi Beta Sigma are next to their Zeta Phi Beta sisters. The sorors of Delta Sigma Theta seat themselves next to Omega Psi Phi frater-

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Variegated is a botany term that means having discrete markings of different colors. Although commonly used to describe leaves, it can also be applied to roots. By using this term in the chapter title, my intent is to convey that stepping has been shaped by a variety of influences, and the contacts and experiences of its practitioners, all of which have left their mark on the phenomenon of stepping.

nity. The gentlemen of Kappa Alpha Psi sit next to the ladies of Sigma Gamma Rho. And in the midst of these organizations are the brothers of Iota Phi Theta.

On the floor level, two sections of seats face a stage whose blackness is relieved only by the nine colorful banners hanging along its rear. In front of the stage and down the aisles surrounding the floor seats, fraternity and sorority members provide the audience with a glimpse of the hours to come through the party strolls. In the back, a group of Kappas throws one cane in the air while manipulating a second cane on the ground. The audience waits with bated breath to see if the performers will catch the first cane before it hits the ground. As they watch the organizations perform, clusters of people wonder aloud about anticipated feats and relive moments from past shows: "Wonder what the Alphas are going to do?" "How are the Deltas going to top the tambourines?" "Were you here when the Kappas used umbrellas instead of canes?"

Finally, it's showtime. The host is introduced, the black national anthem is sung, and the preshow entertainment moves off the stage. The air fills with BGLO calls and chants as the various teams are announced. During the next five hours, the crowd will be entertained as the organizations compete with one another. However, this show is not just a weekend diversion at the end of a long school year. Rather, the step show is a visual chronicle of the history of blacks, with all its social, cultural, and psychological aspects played out in twelve-minute intervals through the medium of stepping.

Stepping is a community dance form, in that it showcases various aspects of not only black Greek life but also black life. It is evident that the performance of this vernacular dance, generally done in groups, aids in maintaining the social cohesiveness of the BGLOs. By examining the sites where these performances take place and the verbal and physical expressions of the dancers, one finds that stepping contains the history, philosophies, dreams, and rebellions of its practitioners—past and present. It is simultaneously one of the most private and public performance behaviors of BGLOs. Stepping can be found not only on the college yard but also in secret ritual contexts (pertaining to initiation, meetings, and rites of passage) to which the general public is not given access. Even in public demonstrations, the sacred meaning of the performance is not thoroughly understood by non-Greeks.

Stepping is a marriage between the visual and the oral, characterized by precise, synchronized body movements that are stylized and percussive. Frequently coupled with songs, chants, and verbal calls, stepping is a vibrant performance practice that has been shaped by the experiences of blacks, yet it continues to evolve. It is a mixture of Old World and New—the product of a

variety of African, African American, and American influences that have been melded over the course of decades. Each organization has its own distinct form of stepping that may or may not have a name, yet there are similarities across organizations and genders. Informally, the Alphas and the Omegas term their style of stepping "hopping," the Sigma style is called "clapping," and "caning" is the term used by the Kappas. Many fraternity members use these designations to differentiate their performance style from "pitty-pat," which involves a lot of clapping and is considered feminine.[2]

Owing to the diverse influences and differing organizational lore, beliefs about the origins of stepping vary. Many members of BGLOs agree that stepping has its deepest roots in Africa, and scholarly works focus on the African foundation of stepping; however, there is no agreed-on history, and a number of opinions have been advanced. One view is that stepping was brought to BGLOs by Kwame Nkrumah, a member of Phi Beta Sigma who would later become the president of Ghana. Another view is that soldiers returning from World War II brought with them military marching and cadences that were later turned into steps by BGLO members. Yet another theory is that the gumboot dancers of South Africa influenced the growth of stepping. Still others say that stepping has been influenced by the performance practices of white fraternities and popular culture. Although the history of stepping at certain colleges can be traced, following the history of stepping across the country is nearly impossible. Not all organizations, or chapters of the same organization, were stepping at the same time, nor did all colleges keep public records of BGLO activities. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the foundations of stepping, it is necessary to examine the works of scholars such as Jacqui Malone and Elizabeth C. Fine, who combine research, fieldwork, and practitioners' personal narratives.[3] This chapter also explores the various layers of influence to obtain a meaningful picture of how stepping has evolved into the performance phenomenon seen today on college campuses, on dance floors, and in music videos.

African Origins of Stepping

Rhythmically and stylistically, African music is a strong, driving force, and many of the components of African music continue to influence the music making of African Americans. These elements include the use of call and response, polyrhythm, repetition, improvisation and variation, pitch modifica-

tions or blue notes, and percussion. These components work together to give the music a fullness of sound and the ability to adapt to various situations and to be a mechanism of inclusion within society. Visually, the dances of the various African peoples have also lent their components to the diaspora in the form of dance formations, upper and lower body movements, and body isolation.[4]

Because stepping combines music, song, and dance, one must understand the cultural significance of music and dance to the peoples of Africa in order to examine the African foundations of stepping. There have been numerous accounts of the importance of music and dance in the spiritual and communal lives of African peoples. Kwabena Nketia writes, "In traditional African societies, music making is generally organized as a social event. Public performances, therefore, take place on social occasions; that is, on occasions when members of a group or a community come together for the enjoyment of leisure, for recreational activities, or for the performance of a rite, ceremony, festival, or any kind of collective activity."[5] It is the practice of joining together to make music that maintains the social cohesion within traditional African societies. Making music strengthens a person not only on a collective level but also on a personal one. "Music and dance give the individual his or her precious sense of uniqueness, of worth, of place in the scheme of things, and mediate relationships, teach responsibilities and show opportunities."[6] It is through stepping that the collective and individual features of music making present themselves in BGLOs.

At a marchdown[7] in Los Angeles, a few of the African fraternity members in attendance said that the first thing they noticed about the African American fraternities was the stepping, because it was "reminiscent of home."[8] This familiarity is due in part to the cultural links between Africans and African Americans and the influence of three regions of Africa: West Africa, the Congo, and South Africa.

WEST AFRICAN DANCE MOVEMENTS

Phi Beta Sigma credits Kwame Nkrumah with introducing a heavy African influence and adding the cane to stepping. One Sigma Web site claims, "he introduced certain steps from his traditional African culture which used dance as a celebration of 'coming of age.'"[9] Whether Nkrumah brought stepping to the fraternities is left to legend, but by performing steps from a rite of passage, Nkrumah is credited with deliberately adding African ritual to stepping. This

use of stepping to mark the passage of significant moments for black fraternities and sororities is seen in ritual events such as the "Death March," the neophyte march, and the prophyte march.[10] These events are likely to take place at a yard show[11] during social hours, such as Howard University's Friday ritual times and "Black Wednesday" at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA).[12] They comprise not only rites of passage but also the element of play, in the form of derisive songs and chants. These gathering hours, in which play and ritual are present, contain parallels to the monthly *avogan* in Benin, in which participants travel from various parts of the city to engage in a form of ritual lampooning of their rivals, with honors going to the most verbally adept participants.[13]

THE CONGO GAME AND PLAY MOVEMENTS

The Congo serves as one source for the waist, hand, and foot movements found in stepping. Malone quotes Zairean scholar K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau after his first viewing of footage from a step show: "I can't believe this is passing; that this is being done. . . . Who is the trainer of these young people? Because this person could not lead them to do this without going to the Kongo area." Fu-Kiau further comments that "crossing the hands underneath the thighs and above the thighs is typical Kongo play" performed by young girls, called *nsunsa.* Further, the precision hand and arm movements, according to Fu-Kiau, have their foundation in the play of children in Zaire. "*Mbele* literally means 'knife' and it consists of moving the hands in a cuttinglike fashion, similar to fighting."[14] This type of play is married with song. Such manipulation of the body, found throughout West and Central Africa, shows a continuation of an aesthetic of sound and play, and it is through this sense of play that the African American begins to outwardly manifest this inner sense of rhythm.

Having roots in the Congo, juba (or patting juba) is a game utilizing the hands and the body. "The thigh-and-chest slapping dances imparting confidence and self-spirit in Kongo *kamba* evolved in the U.S. into 19th century patting juba, 20th century black-Brazilian *bate coxa* (literally 'slap thigh') dancing, and 20th century hambone in the black United States."[15] The hands are struck, or slapped, and the fingers are snapped in ways that create beat and rhythm. This game has been translated in North America as hambone, in which the hands are slapped against the body in a variety of ways to show the performer's dexterity in creating percussive rhythms. These techniques are further applied to stepping, where stomping of the feet is combined with slap-

ping of the body with the hands. The slapping of the chest and thighs, as well as the clapping of the hands alone and with other members of the step team, is an extension of juba.

SOUTH AFRICAN GUM-BOOT DANCERS

Gum-boot dancers were workers in the diamond mines of South Africa. Oppressed by the institution of apartheid, the African miners were overworked, underpaid, and ill-treated. They were forced to work from sunup to sundown, chained to their work stations, and forbidden to speak to one another.[16] Cheap rubber boots, called gum boots, were provided to protect them from the mine runoff. In an effort to communicate, the mine workers created a code by slapping their rubber boots.[17] As this code evolved, it became a tool for entertainment and a method of spoken and unspoken rebellion.[18] Today, this same dance is performed by dance troupes from South Africa as a means of expressing nationhood, tradition, and remembrance.[19] It is also seen in groups such as Step Afrika! which provide a visual reference to the dances of today's African American youth.[20]

Fine notes that the influence of gum-boot dancing, *isicathulo*, could have come as early as the 1930s, when South African dancer Reuben T. Caluza attended Hampton University and later Cornell. She also points out that South African performers were themselves influenced by American films of the 1920s and touring African American dancers and singers who made their presence felt in 1890.[21] According to a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, when BGLO members step, it is a way of honoring their African ancestors who struggled under European domination and yet found a means of expressing their rebellion and spirit: "Steppin' originated in South Africa . . . back in the diamond mines where our ancestors had to work. So what we, and other groups have done, is use it [stepping] to connect back to our African past."[22] In an effort to learn from and share cultural knowledge with their oppressed brothers, members of Alpha Phi Alpha and other BGLOs have journeyed to South Africa.[23] The 1960s was the decade when many African Americans began to learn about the diverse peoples of Africa and to embrace the cultural phenomena of these peoples with whom they shared a cultural or social heritage. Additionally, Malone writes of South African dance troupes touring North America during the 1970s and 1980s, introducing gum-boot dancing and other traditional dance styles to North American urban areas.[24]

OTHER AFRICAN INFLUENCES

Stylistically, a variety of components in African American music and dance have been derived from the peoples of Africa. Although some elements were consciously added, such as gum-boot dancing and other traditional dances, many occur due to their culturally relevant aesthetic, such as juba. Added to these are the call and response, polyrhythm, and the circle. These elements reoccurred in African American practices as European practices were tailored and reinterpreted through an African gaze, as described by W. E. B. DuBois: "In each case an attempt has been made to connect present conditions with the Africa past. This is not because Negro Americans are Africans, or can trace an unbroken social history from Africa, but because there is a distinct nexus between Africa and America which, though broken and perverted, is nevertheless not to be neglected."[25]

Call and Response. Call and response is a prevalent element in African and African American music, and it occurs when the song leader sings (or performs) a line alone, followed by a repetitive chorus from the rest of the group or the audience. Call and response moves the chant along, as in Omega Psi Phi's "Cadillac." This step was observed at Omega's Sixty-ninth Grand Conclave in Los Angeles. Here, one brother calls, and the group responds:

CALL: A Que!
RESPONSE: Aye! Aye!
CALL: Psi!
RESPONSE: Aye! Aye!
CALL: Phi!
CALL: Some people live.
RESPONSE: What they live for?
CALL: Cadillacs and diamond rings.
CALL: Some people live.
RESPONSE: What they live for?
CALL: Fine cars and fancy things.

It can also bring the audience closer to the performance, as in Phi Beta Sigma's "Sigma Strut" (described later). Sororities use the call and response as well, illustrated by Zeta Phi Beta's chant:

CALL: I say my sorors.
RESPONSE: Yeah!
CALL: You lookin' good today.
RESPONSE: But then a Zeta lady looks good every day.
EVERYONE: Z-Phi!

When the audience is part of the response, this musical structure is sometimes called "back and forth" by the performers. In stepping, this also occurs on the dance level, when the step master[26] executes a step and the rest of the group repeats the movements.

Polyrhythm. Polyrhythm is the combination of two or more contrasting beats used simultaneously in a given composition. This musical aspect is seen in many BGLO steps, especially those in which separate segments of the step team perform a different sequence of movements and thus a different rhythm. Early forms of stepping exhibited a four-beat pattern, but this pattern has moved into the background over the last twenty years. Presently, although the basic four-beat pattern continues to drive the steps and helps keep time, various beats have been inserted to add complexity to the step. These additive beats can be seen and heard in steps such as Alpha's "Syncopation," Omega's "The Red, Black, and the Green," Kappa's "Locomotion," and the "African Step," which is performed by both Zeta Phi Beta and Phi Beta Sigma. During these routines, the various steppers perform a separate rhythm pattern around a central four-beat pattern. These "polyrhythmic structures increase the overall intensity of musical performances because each repetition produces added rhythmic tension."[27]

The Circle. Psychologically, one of the most significant African influences is the circle, or ring. The circle is present at most BGLO events—both formal and informal—although there are occasions when the circle is only implied. In public settings, the circle step may be found at the end of "informal exhibitions,"[28] as well as formal public events such as weddings. Fine documents the presence of the circle at Howard University "as the most commonly photographed pattern in the singing and stepping rituals of the 1960's."[29] During the circle step, an organization calls for its members to meet at a specific location to take part in the circle. Members gather in a circle, hold hands, sing a song, and move slightly from side to side. Marcella McCoy discusses how those observing the circle understand that it is not to be broken, and all who wish to

pass must walk around the circle.[30] The counterclockwise movement in circle steps is also found in Kongo culture, where it symbolizes the "circle of the sun about the earth."[31] This movement, which is observed in both sacred and secular practices, is continued in the ring shouts and juba of early African Americans. It is found in church services, informal social environments, and the play of children in early American history.[32] Indeed, due to is sacred nature, the circle step is rarely taught to those not in the organization, and when it is publicly demonstrated, it is "often performed around a sacred object such as a monument, sundial, or tree."[33]

On the surface, the circle, or ring, is created to afford the audience the opportunity to view the performance clearly. However, there is more to the circle than entertainment. Even though the circle is not always obvious to, or even consciously created by, those present at the event, it is of symbolic importance to the performers and the performance. Both Greek and non-Greek audiences respect the circle and the public ritual it contains. Indeed, the ring is, as Samuel Floyd states, a "symbol of community, solidarity, affirmation, and catharsis."[34] In essence, it is symbolic of a bond among members that cannot and should not be broken.

This circle of community is also found in the stroll. A stroll is an informal type of line dance, performed to music, in which a group forms a line and performs a series of synchronized, stylized moves (steps) while moving forward, often weaving through other dancers and spectators as they go. Each organization has its own stroll, and the fraternities and sororities tend to perform them separately. However, Zeta Phi Beta and Phi Beta Sigma have strolls they can perform together. During the stroll, a line of performers dances around the spectators and other fraternity or sorority lines; each organization does its own stroll, but they all make a circular pattern as they move around the room. When the stroll is performed by a group during a step show, BGLO members execute at least one circle before exiting the performance area.

The largest and most significant circle is created by the audience, which gathers around the performers. If the stage does not allow a full circle, the audience will form a half circle to view the event. At more informal arenas, such as picnics and parties, the Greek observers may join in the ongoing steps. This inclusion of the nonperforming community is especially significant, in that it echoes the circle or round dances found in some African societies, such as the eseni, yango, and adzobo discussed by Nketia[35] and the gahu, a circular dance of Ghana.[36]

Underneath the various performance aspects of stepping is Robert Ferris

Thompson's concept of the aesthetic of the cool. In Liberia, coolness is the "ability to be nonchalant at the right moment . . . to reveal no emotion in situations where excitement and sentimentality are acceptable—in other words, to act as though one's mind were in another world. It is particularly admirable to do difficult tasks with an air of ease and silent disdain."[37] Through the filter of this concept, being a stepper means not letting others see you at a disadvantage. Because students of color have so many things that are beyond their control, this makes the desire to keep themselves and their emotions in check during the show particularly poignant. It is this aesthetic, this air, that gives good steppers a certain flair while performing, demonstrated through the use of sunglasses during the performance or maintaining an expression of "grit" on their faces.[38] The aesthetic of the cool is found not only in the demeanor of Africans and African Americans but also in their dance. In reference to dance, the aesthetic of the cool helps

> create an appearance of control and idiomatic effortlessness. What vernacular dance celebrates is a "unique combination of spontaneity, improvisation, and control." Yet, while being creative and innovative, the performer is not to lose him/herself in abandonment. The performance should appear unforced and the performer unconcerned with any physical hardships. Stepping is not a matter of "letting it all hang out," but a matter of proceeding in terms of "a very specific technology of stylization." A loss of control and a loss of coolness places one *squarely* outside of the tradition.[39]

Many of the step teams move with an air of nonchalance while on stage, what many scholars call a "strut." While performing, audience members may yell "Be out" to the steppers. This is an exhortation for the steppers to give the performance everything they have, while staying cool. Although the steppers are to dance with enthusiasm, the performers dare not miss a cue, drop a prop, or stumble, lest they risk ridicule.

Just as music and dance play an important role in African cultures, they also figure prominently in African American culture. In *Music of the Common Tongue,* Christopher Small writes, "throughout the years of slavery, the practice of making music and dancing never died among the black people in America." Rather, he states, these behaviors served as "a ritual for survival in those horrible times, and the slaves could for the duration of the dance feel themselves fully realized as individuals and as members of a community."[40]

Thus, music continued to be a vehicle of empowerment, a means through which the slaves were able to maintain a sense of self, even while being separated from those things and people that were familiar.

The Drum. Enslaved Africans adapted many traditional cultural practices to their new environment. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the use of the drum and social dancing. In West African societies, the drum was a major means of communication in both secular and sacred settings. It was used to send messages across long distances, in celebrations, and in worship. "When the drums were silent, the old gods came no more."[41] The drum, with its bass, percussive sound and ability to communicate, played a major role in shaping the practice of stepping in BGLOs. Indeed, the drum was at the heart of stepping. Reginald Love III, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, states: "They [Africans] marched to the beat of the drum. They danced to the beat of the drum. The drum was the symbolization of the heartbeat. The drum symbolizes the spirit, the African spirit of the drumbeat, and all our dance, all our music, has that rhythm of the drum." When speaking of the drum in terms of its importance to African American society and the individual, Love states, "The drum is our metronome, our metronome for life. It's how you progress. One step at a time."[42]

Historically, slave owners in the United States understood the revolutionary aspect of the drum and its centrality in the lives of Africans. As a result of this understanding, and for fear of a concentrated revolt by slaves, use of the drum was banned. Lewis Paine, in his 1851 work, writes about the southern laws that forbade the "using and keeping of drums, horns or other loud instruments which may call together or give sign or notice to one another."[43] As a result of this suppression, the drum was obliged to relocate; rather than disappear, the body became the site of the drum. According to Gerhard Kubik:

> In a time of slavery and oppression specific cultural traits may be forced to disappear among their carriers. They do not really disappear. They only retreat to a safer area of the human psyche. For example, if you prosecute drumming in an African community and even burn all the drums of the people, what will happen? The drums will perhaps really disappear and the drum patterns will not be used again, but they will still remain—in a silent shape. The drum patterns will just retreat into the body of the people. This has nothing to do with genetics, because the transmission is cultural, through human interaction. The drum patterns will be transformed into a set of *motional behavior;* they will go back to their source. In this form

> they will continue to be transmitted from mothers and grandmothers to their children, from father and son during work, non-verbally, as an awareness of a style of moving. When a favorable moment in history comes, the drum patterns surface again, perhaps on some other instruments. Some young people suddenly "invent" something new.[44]

Slaves placed the percussive sound of the drum into their hands, feet, thighs, and chests. This "new" instrument allowed Africans in America to celebrate, socialize, and worship without fear or retribution. It was during this time of oppression that there was an upsurge in what are now called children's games, such as hambone and the juba-derived hand patting games. These games continued to teach new generations about the importance of internal rhythm and the percussive beat. Although this hidden drum was found in the secular community, it was also present in the church, as evidenced by the stomping of the feet and the clapping of the hands. Thus, it is not surprising to see this continuation of the body as an instrument in BGLOs. "The body is the drum, and you step to the beat of the drum, and that's your natural beat."[45]

Dances of Pageantry and Ridicule. While the body continued to provide enslaved Africans with a source of rhythm, the social dances of early Africans perpetuated the tradition of mocking those possessing a higher social status and showing the performer's ability to control his or her body while executing complicated movements. Because fraternity and sorority performance behaviors are a mixture of the verbal and the visual, it is important to look at the influence dance has had on the phenomenon of stepping. The ritual challenge and the elements of control are contained in the cakewalk, a stylized dance performed as a means of entertainment, competition, and subtle rebellion. McCoy writes of stepping that its "informal exhibition can be linked, mostly by its pageantry, to the Cake-Walk or the Chalk-Line Walk. This dance evolved from a mid 19th century plantation pastime, to being popularized in turn of the century African American productions. . . . The Cake-Walk originally was a kind of shuffling dance that evolved into a smooth walking step with the body held erect . . . the movement became a prancing strut."[46] The cakewalk is one of the earliest U.S. cornerstones of stepping, not only in terms of its prancing gait but also in terms of the idea of a ritual challenge, where performers compete to see who has the most control, the most "coolness."

The John Kunering ceremony, also known as John Canoeing, showcased an intricate form of the cakewalk. This event occurred during the Christmas

holidays as a means of celebration and originated in West Africa and the Kuner people. During the John Kunering ceremony, "costumed performers were led by a heavily disguised leader known as the 'ragman.'" The dancers executed a variety of body-contorting movements, including kicks and various gyrations, while a second leader sang in tandem with the performance.[47] Just as today's steppers are costumed and led by a step master, so too were early Africans in the United States. Thus, from early celebrations to today's Greek events, there is a continued sense of pageantry, challenge, community, and ritual in music making and in stepping.

U.S. Influences on Stepping

Although African traditions and early adaptations of African movements lay the foundation of stepping history, the United States has lent its own influence to the performance through military cadences and marches, the songs of white fraternities, black music forms, and a variety of pop cultural inspirations. The shared aspect of stepping is further displayed through the inclusion of these phenomena. Through marching, organizations exhibit public solidarity; the use of music and pop culture shows that sororities and fraternities exist in the larger framework of U.S. culture and that stepping is an outward symbol of this inclusion.

THE MILITARY

The military has played a large part in the formation and continuation of BGLO chants and steps. One might even say that the performance behaviors of both the military and BGLOs exist in a type of symbiotic relationship. Blacks have enlisted and continue to enlist in the armed forces. The military has always been a place where those without money or opportunity can provide support for their families and distinguish themselves. As a result of blacks entering the military before, during, and after attending college, one finds BGLO behavior in the military and military behavior in the BGLO system.

The brothers of Omega Psi Phi, with their paramilitary garb, trace stepping back to the military influence of the early 1900s. Ex-soldiers attending college would incorporate marches and drills into their BGLO performance behaviors. During the grand conclave in 1996, a group of Omega men were interviewed regarding the early influence of the military on stepping. "A lot of

the brothers who helped found this organization were members of the military ROTC programs back in college. . . . If you ever see a line marching down pledges, they march like a military line that you might see when . . . marines do their drills. It's the same with a pledge line or brothers when we step."[48]

Shannon Rawls of Kappa Alpha Psi elaborated: "Members of black organizations, brothers of Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi . . . that went to the military for World War II in the late '30s and early '40s would come back home and incorporate some of the same cadence and military style back into . . . the stepping style, or to the dancing style that they did."[49]

Stepping during this early period was called lining, descriptive of the formation in which soldiers march. Some Omegas and other BGLO members still refer to stepping as marching on account of this early military influence.

This military behavior is further observed in the clothing, stance, and marching of BGLO members. Part of the basic working military wardrobe consists of camouflage pants, or fatigues, and combat boots. These garments, though found at all fraternities, are especially prevalent among the brothers of Omega Psi Phi. The Omegas wear this attire as a means of paying homage to blacks who were on the front lines during military conflicts. Over the last decade, the wearing of fatigues by sororities has become popular, especially among the members of Delta Sigma Theta. By adopting this military look, the sorors convey that they are every bit as capable of "real" stepping as the fraternity brothers.

The positions of "attention" and "at ease" are often found in BGLO step performances. When at attention, the steppers face forward with their feet placed together, their eyes directed slightly over the crowd, and their arms either at their sides or parallel to the earth with both fists meeting in the middle of the chest. When given the call for at ease, the performers spread their feet shoulder length apart, clasp their hands behind their backs, and turn their heads first to the side, then forward to face the crowd. Between the various segments of the performance, the steppers stand at attention or at ease as a method of showing readiness. The precision marching of the military is also found in steps such as Alpha Phi Alpha's "Parade," in which the steppers form a tight group and, using cadence, execute sharp turns and coordinated hand and arm movements that are paired with the calls of the step master. Alpha brother Reginald Love III states, "When we step, it's got a cadence to it. I learned that being in the military; a lot of [fraternity] cadence is military related."[50]

Versions of the chants found in BGLOs are also found in military jodies, commonly known as cadences.[51] It is unclear which came first, but this dual

presence suggests a close relationship between the two organizations. For example, chants such as Alpha's "Saint Peter" exist in both places with only minor changes. The military's version of "Saint Peter" is as follows:

> When I get to heaven [repeat]
> St. Peter's gonna say,
> How'd you get to heaven,
> How'd you earn your way?
> And I'll reply,
> With a little bit of anger,
> I made my way blood, guts, sweat, and danger.
> I live my life as an airborne ranger.

The Alpha version of the chant is identical except for the omission of the last line.[52]

Attention to teamwork, precision, and footwork is also evident in the black drill team. Before entering the military or the university, many young adults have already experienced the drill team, which has a long history in the African American community, borrowing from the practices of nineteenth-century minstrelsy and black mutual aid and benevolent societies.[53] Indeed, both these stages set the tone for the comedy and pageantry of stepping. The burlesque stage showcased the slave practice of "lampooning white military practices," an event known as "Training Day."[54] The mutual aid and benevolent societies provided a model of pageantry and showmanship with their parades and drill team competitions, which included both male and female participants.[55] The modern-day drill team usually consists of young girls who perform precision marches combined with popular dance and arm movements. A drum squad containing a big bass drum and a snare often accompanies the unit. Although young men generally join the drum squad rather than the drill team, they are acquainted with the rhythms, arm movements, and footwork of the latter. A common occurrence is for fraternity and sorority members returning to their hometowns to mentor or lead school or church drill teams. These new leaders are not only teaching the familiar moves they learned as children but also incorporating the step movements acquired at the university.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The evolution of stepping has not occurred without contact with other ethnic and cultural groups. Although stepping is an art form that has grown

out of the black Greek experience, its early singing form may have been borrowed from, or influenced by, white fraternities. White fraternities' practice of serenading—gathering to sing fraternity songs either amongst themselves or to their sweethearts—was adopted by BGLOs and transformed by the black aesthetic[56] and by black experiences in the military and in a changing modern era. Kappa Alpha Psi member Shannon Rawls discusses the phenomenon of stepping as a mixture of different influences that were partially determined by time and environment:

> White organizations were serenading or crooning. They would stand in line and sing their songs or their creed. Black organizations took it a step forward and included dancing. It was not the traditional dancing. It was a movement of the body that the black fraternities did. Originally it was said that the [white] fraternities men would do it [sing] to get girls. If they sounded good . . . they were the hot guys on campus. The black organizations would sing and dance. If they were the best looking, the same results happened. . . . The NPHC [National Pan-Hellenic Council] was formed in 1930. I believe it was at the third international meeting, to pass the time between sessions, they would begin the stepping. That is when . . . the sororities got involved in the stepping. Then came the '50s and the '60s, when [doo-wop] groups like the Temptations and the Chi-Lites would sing on the streets. That's where . . . it got really organized, in the late '60s and early '70s.[57]

A cappella and doo-wop singing groups of the 1950s and 1960s stand at the forefront of the popular cultural influences on stepping. "What most young steppers don't know is that stepping used to have more singing than body percussion. One of the earliest steps of my chapter is a doo-wop style tune with matching choreography that only includes snapping and foot movements. We call it 'Oh-A.'"[58] Besides singing, these groups added choreographed hand movements and footwork to their performances, and these additions were absorbed by the fraternities and sororities during the 1970s.

In addition to a full complement of dance movements, the verbal dexterity in stepping is well rounded. Although it is easy for those unfamiliar with stepping to focus solely on the dance movements, the oral component is an essential aspect. Oral influences begin with the African tradition of the griot, the singer of history; continue with the black preacher; and are reshaped and developed through children's play, the toast, street talk, and rap. Through the

latter forms of oral tradition, fraternities are able to show their love for one another, their organizations, and their community.

The griot and the black preacher have served similar functions in their respective communities, that of oral historian. The griot (or jali) of West Africa was both the keeper of history and an entertainer. Performing at functions, the griot was able to recount family lineages and recall significant deeds of the region. Likewise, the black preacher keeps the history of the various families in his or her congregation and can speak on past events that affected the black community. The preacher continues to be the purveyor of community mores.

Children's oral play has contributed to the performance repertoire of BGLOs in the form of nursery rhymes. In the case of the chants used at parties, nursery rhymes are turned upside down and given a risqué touch. Omega Psi Phi has done this with "Old Mother Hubbard." By subverting the role of the maternal figure, the Omegas transform a rhyme dealing with the plight of hunger into an illicit parody:

Old Mother Hubbard
She went to her cupboard
To get her Q-Dawg a bone.
All right, all right, all right!
But when she bent over,
Rover took over,
And gave her a bone of his own.

Jokes and toasts offer some insight into the themes of the songs and chants of black fraternities. Langston Hughes states that "in the category of the bawdy joke there are hundreds illustrating the prevalent folk belief in the amorous prowess of the Negro male."[59] Along with other street language, jokes continue to mock the mainstream's preconceptions of the oversexed black male. Toasts also explore the myth of the sexual black male, a stereotype that characterizes him as sexually overendowed and possessing a rampant sexual appetite. Black folkloric figures such as Shine and Staggerlee are prime examples of this stereotype, in that they are known as much for their sexual exploits as for their bad attitudes.[60]

The overt sexuality found in the braggadocio of jokes and toasts is continued in the party chants and steps of black fraternities. This exaggeration of the sexual abilities of the performers raises the "street" stature of the indi-

vidual, and thus the organization. These behaviors stay firmly in the aesthetic of these oral phenomena by exploiting the idea of the overendowed, extremely sexual black male. This is illustrated by the existence of chants such as the following:

> This leg,
> Well, it's my hurt leg.
> This leg,
> Well, it's all right.
> Chorus: all right, all right, all right.
> This leg points to the window.
> This leg points to the wall.
> Chorus: the wall, the wall, the wall.
> This leg, [gesturing to the penis]
> Well, it's my third leg.
> And it races down the hall.
> Chorus: the hall, the hall, the hall.

This step was performed by members of Alpha Phi Alpha at a 1996 yard show at UCLA. At the end of the performance, the audience laughed and whooped at the antics of the entertainers, understanding that the step routine was a satire of the long-lived stereotype of black men.

Sororities rarely perform routines drawing on a hypersexual stereotype. Kirsten Smith, artistic director of Step Afrika!, states that when she attended college in the 1980s:

> Sexually explicit themes were only carried out by the men and were only done at the Block Show where very few elders attended. This was a picnic thrown by the students for the students. Sexually explicit themes were never meant to be performed at the Step Show during homecoming where families attended. I have never heard of sexually explicit themes done by women at the graduate level. To brazenly spew sexually explicit themes in the name of any public service sorority or fraternity, is the ULTIMATE form of disrespect . . . to our elders and to our respective organizations.[61]

Rather than draw on overt sexual imagery, sororities such as Sigma Gamma Rho and Alpha Kappa Alpha brag about their members' ability to "take" any woman's man and to be the object of all men's desires.[62] This uplifts the repu-

tation of the sorority members among their peers without causing them to lose the respect of their elders.

POPULAR CULTURE

Music, in both its sacred and secular forms, plays a large part in the performance practices of fraternities. The verbal and rhythmic influences of black music are evident not only in the songs and chants but also in the very beat of the performance. In the sacred realm, it is easy to find evidence of black spirituals in the pledge songs and chants of these organizations, which are often linked to the step performance. Chants, such as "I've Got a Feeling," are sung to the tunes of early spirituals and gospel songs.

Omega Psi Phi's "Zoom"[63] displays an obvious spiritual influence through its allusion to the river Jordan, which must be crossed to get to heaven. At various public events, BGLOs open their routines with spiritual-style songs praising their organizations.

> When I die,
> And leave this old earth.
> I know there's a place for me.
> It's way up there,
> In that light shining bright.
> That no man but Omega can see.

Sororities, such as Delta Sigma Theta, utilize spiritual imagery to show that membership in their organizations sets one apart:

> When you get to Heaven
> And you can't get in
> You just show St. Peter your Delta pin.[64]

Secular music also leaves its mark on BGLOs' songs, chants, and steps. The syncopated rhythms of jazz are found throughout the music of the black fraternities. One example is the "Sigma Strut," which combines the braggadocio of the toast with the smooth rhythm of jazz and jive talking. This song begins with the performers asking the audience to snap their fingers in a 4/4 beat and to call out "a boom, boom" on the fourth beat. The sound produced is similar to that of the high hat on a drum set. During the performance of this song,

each individual member takes the spotlight and recites a four-line verse introducing himself and then elevating himself in the eyes of the audience.

Chorus:
A boom, boom [the audience repeats this part]
Goddamn the Sigmas are here
A boom, boom
We came to make this perfectly clear
A boom, boom
It only takes a few of us
A boom, boom
To do the bad-ass Sigma strut
A boom, boom

My name is Quiet Storm
A boom, boom
I love to keep you ladies warm
A boom, boom
Even though I don't talk much
A boom, boom
I love to bust . . . What? [said by the Sigma team]
A fat ass nut

Chorus

My name is Caramel
A boom, boom
I love to give the ladies a thrill
A boom, boom
When it comes to freakin' time
A boom, boom
Damn right I'm a work my behind [hands on knees while thrusting pelvis in a circular motion]

Chorus

My name is Megadeath
A boom, boom
I lick it low on the first request
A boom, boom

Even though I'm the tail of the line
A boom, boom
Don't trip, I'll still tap that behind [holding left hand stiff while hitting it with the right]

Chorus

Further evidence of a secular influence is the recreation of popular music in the steps of the fraternities. The brothers of Phi Beta Sigma take popular music, such as rap, and combine it with the driving bass provided by stepping. One example of this is LL Cool J's "Rock the Bells." Toward the end of the opening verse, the performers changed the words of the last line to reflect their affiliation: "Phi Beta Sigma came here to rock the bells." This twisting of popular songs is present in sororities as well, such as in Alpha Kappa Alpha's "Hey There Ivy Girl," which parodies "Hey There Lonely Girl," and in the use of the Temptations' lyrics, "we're doing fine on the ivy line."[65]

More recent popular black dances have also affected stepping. Some of the dances incorporated by the fraternities are the wop, the bounce, and the gator. The Alphas use the wop in their step routine "Ice, Ice, Baby." In fact, this dance is used whenever the performers want to give the routine an "old school" feel. The concept of "old school" differs, depending on the age of the person using the phrase; generally it refers to those people or things that have influenced the individual's behavior. Commonly, "old school" refers to activities, music forms, and artists of the 1960s. In the case of the 1996 Alpha step team, however, "old school" refers not only to the innovators and creations of the 1960s but also to the 1980s wop.

BGLOs have also adopted the gator (also called the worm) and the posturing of hip-hop. The gator is executed by jumping in the air, but instead of landing on the feet, the dancer turns his body downward so that his hands are the first to touch the ground. The body is then lowered in a controlled flop to simulate, supposedly, an alligator flopping in and out of the water. Performing this dance shows the crowd that the performer is "out" and firmly in the aesthetic of the cool. Although hip-hop posturing is not a dance, it is part of the music event. Through this posturing, which includes strutting across the stage, the performers assume a stance of aggressive masculinity or female self-determination. This posturing contributes to the sense of coolness. This strut can also be called the Gangsta Limp, which is really the Pimp Walk of the 1960s, and 1970s.[66]

Another dance form that has found a home in stepping is poplocking. Poplocking, innovated by Don Campbell in the early 1970s, is characterized by kicking the legs and waving the arms.[67] Although the dance contains a series of jerking movements, it relies on the performer's steady control to give it a smooth flow. This dance also includes squatting and slapping the ground, performed by steppers when they want to charge up the audience.

The popular mass media have left their mark on certain elements of the performance as well. By using mass culture icons, black fraternities show that although they are distinct, they are also a part of society as a whole. Popular television shows and films have influenced the clothing and content of step shows in the form of Star Trek uniforms, Mortal Combat martial arts movements, Matrix-type trenchcoats and body contortions, and nightly news skits. Movies have also impacted the music choices used in stepping. "Once the late 1970s/1980s style of stepping became the style, [that is,] became the norm, there became a need for an 'intro' and 'outro.' Most of these were heavily influenced by the video era and continue to be so."[68] During 1997's Califest, held at the University of Southern California, the Sigma step team entered the stage to the theme of *Car Wash*, a 1976 movie. Accompanied by rhythm and blues group Rose Royce, the performers stepped across the stage in blue coveralls, black boots, and plastic hair caps. Well-known legends have also made their mark; for example, the legend of King Arthur pulling his sword from the stone is recreated by a lone Kappa Alpha Psi stepper pulling his cane from the stone.

Many of the influences that have enriched stepping are detailed in Jacqui Malone's work *Steppin' on the Blues*, where she discusses the history of stepping at Howard University. Howard was and continues to be the site where many of the performance activities of BGLOs occur. From the jazz dancing of the 1920s and the jitterbugging of the 1930s to current-day step shows, it is clear that social and ritual dancing has occurred in the black Greek community for many years. From these early events, "song and dance rituals were made an official part of the pledging program . . . [and] 'probate shows' developed." At the end of probate, "each pledge group, or 'line,' was required to perform publicly."[69]

Stepping came to mainstream attention with Spike Lee's 1988 movie *School Daze* and to global attention when it was performed at the 1996 Olympic Games' opening pageant. Currently, stepping is seen not only at organized step shows but also in music videos, at the theater, and in exercise videos. It is both global and multicultural, as more ethnic groups take the performance behavior and adapt it to their cultural and communal needs. Although much of its history is

unwritten, stepping is traceable through an analysis of the myriad peoples and influences that have impacted its development. It is this ability to adapt and transform that will allow the future of stepping to be just as varied and colorful as its past has been.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. The Pyramid (so named because of its shape) is the sports venue on the campus of California State University, Long Beach.

2. E-mail communication with Kirsten Smith, artistic director of Step Afrika! and a member of Delta Sigma Theta, May 2003.

3. Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Elizabeth C. Fine, *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 118.

4. J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974); Portia Maultsby, "Africanisms in African American Music," in *Africanisms in African American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Halloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).

5. Nketia, *Music of Africa*, 21.

6. Small, *Music of the Common Tongue*, 29.

7. A marchdown is an intrafraternity competition in which regional champions compete to determine the best stepping chapter in the organization. The marchdown is usually part of the entertainment of a national conference or conclave.

8. Field notes from Omega Psi Phi's Sixty-ninth Grand Conclave, Los Angeles, CA.

9. Phi Beta Sigma, "History of Stepping," May 30, 2000, at http://www.inetport.com/~sean/pbs.html.

10. The "Death March" is a rite of passage near the end of the pledging process. According to Reginald Love III of Alpha Phi Alpha, "The Death March symbolizes the period where you go into probate, you're in a different phase of your pledge process. You're progressing more towards becoming a brother. You only have a few weeks, final

weeks left in your pledge process." A neophyte is a new member of a BGLO. One is technically a neophyte until the next pledge class is initiated, or for one year. A prophyte is an older member of a fraternity or sorority.

11. The yard show, also called a block party, is one of the more frequently organized events and is relatively informal. Organizations utilize this event to attract the interest of future members, mark important occasions in the fraternities and in the African American community, and perform various rites of passage. The yard show generally takes place at a central campus location.

12. According to Jacqui Malone, in *Steppin' on the Blues,* between the hours of 12:00 and 1:30 P.M., fraternity and sorority members gather in the upper quadrangle of Howard University, "the Yard," and perform. A similar event, called "Black Wednesday," occurs at the center of the UCLA campus, known as Bruin Walk, from 12:00 to 1:00 P.M. on Wednesdays. These are not merely social hours but also arenas for black Greek ritual activities.

13. Fine, *Soulstepping,* 77.

14. Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues,* 190.

15. Robert Ferris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 56.

16. University of Nebraska, "Scarlet Arts," May 27, 2003, at http://www.unl.edu/scarlet/v10n33/v10n33arts.html.

17. Field notes from Step Afrika! clinic held at the First National Conference on Stepping at Virginia Tech, 2001.

18. Carol Muller and Janet Topp Fargion, "Gumboots, Bhaca Migrants, and Fred Astaire: South African Worker Dance and Musical Style," *African Music* 7, no. 4 (1999): 88–109.

19. Ibid., 106, 107.

20. Step Afrika! is a dance ensemble based in Washington, D.C. It melds the traditions of stepping; tap; South African dances, including Zulu and gum boot; and modern, hip-hop, house, and freestyle dancing. Further information can be obtained from the Step Afrika! Web site: http://www.stepafrika.org.

21. Fine, *Soulstepping,* 78, 92.

22. Field video of UCLA yard show, 1997.

23. Fine, *Soulstepping,* 117–19.

24. Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues,* 247.

25. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Family* (1908; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1969), 9.

26. Also known as the call dog or hob master, the step master is usually the individual who teaches steps to other performers, puts together step show routines, and begins steps during performances.

27. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African Music," 193.

28. Maracella Lynn McCoy, "African American Fraternities and Sororities and

African Communities: Cultural Parallels among Selected Public Rituals" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1998), 85.

29. Fine, *Soulstepping,* 18.

30. McCoy, "African American Fraternities and Sororities," 82.

31. Fine, *Soulstepping,* 81.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 148.

34. Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting the History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21.

35. Nketia, *Music of Africa,* 213, 225, 228.

36. McCoy, "African American Fraternities and Sororities," 86.

37. Thompson, *Face of the Gods,* 41.

38. Fine (*Soulstepping,* 40) describes grit as "a characteristic expression displayed by pledges—a stern face with an out-thrust lower lip." Any stepper can don this expression to show that he or she is serious about the performance.

39. Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues,* 34.

40. Small, *Music of the Common Tongue,* 97.

41. John S. Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 39.

42. Reginald Love III, interview with the author, 2000.

43. Lewis L. Paine, *Six Years in a Georgia Prison* (New York: n.p., 1851), 127; Southern, *Music of Black America,* 182.

44. Gerhard Kubik, *Angolan Traits in Black Music, Games and Dances of Brazil : A Study of African Cultural Extensions Overseas* (Lisboa: Junta de Investigações Científicas do Ultramar, 1979), 49–50.

45. Love interview.

46. McCoy, "African American Fraternities and Sororities," 89.

47. Hayward Farrar, "The African Roots of Stepping" (paper presented at the Fifth Congress of the Americas, Puebla, Mexico, October 18–20, 2001), 4, available at http://www.ipsonet.org/congress/5/papers.html.

48. Four members of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., interview with the author, 1996.

49. Shannon Rawls, interview with the author, 2000.

50. Love interview.

51. Military jodies, or cadences, are rhythmic sequences of lines containing the element of call and response; they are usually performed while marching or running as a means of motivation.

52. Love interview.

53. Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues,* 186.

54. Fine, *Soulstepping,* 57.

55. Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues,* 185–86; Fine, *Soulstepping,* 57.

56. The black aesthetic may be seen in terms of Davis's concept of aesthetic com-

munity (Gerald L. Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I Can Sing It, You Know: A Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985], 30–31). This community consists of "a group of people sharing a knowledge for the development and maintenance of a particular affecting mode of 'craft' and the articulating principles to which the affecting mode must adhere or oppose" (Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues,* 193).

57. Rawls interview.

58. Smith e-mail.

59. Langston Hughes, "Jokes Black People Tell Themselves," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel,* ed. Alan Dundes (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1990), 641.

60. Shine is a figure in African American folk tales who is known as the "bad man." His exploits depict him as overindulging in wine and women. Staggerlee, also known as Stackolee, is another "bad man" figure in African American folk tales. He is characterized not only by his use of violence but also by his rampant sexual appetite.

61. Smith e-mail.

62. An example is this Alpha Kappa Alpha routine, courtesy of Tasha McAllister:
They don't want Zeta Phi Beta
And they don't want Sigma Gamma Rho
And they all had some D.S.T.
But what a real man wants is some pink and green
Skee Wee!!

63. This version of "Zoom" was recorded in 1996:
Down by the river, who-o-o-oa
There's no place I'd rather go
I can hear Omega ringing in my ear
It says Omega, Omega, Omega

64. McCoy, "African American Fraternities and Sororities," 84.

65. Ibid., 79.

66. Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 25.

67. Don "Campbellock" Campbell is the former *Soultrain* dancer and stripper who sparked the dance craze of locking in the 1970s, paving the way for break dancing. R. J. Smith, "Lock, Pop, and Quarrel," *Vibe* (September 1998): 267–68.

68. Smith e-mail. An "intro" and an "outro" are performance skits that are distinct from the main step performance. The intro is used to set the mood and give the audience a glimpse of the theme of the step routine. Some of the intros performers have used feature them as secret agents, ninjas, time travelers, and newscasters. The outro signals the end of the performance and usually involves some type of stroll performed to music as the steppers exit the stage.

69. Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues,* 204.