

Beyoncé's New Weave Swing, or How to Snatch Wigs With Hair Choreography

madisonianmoore

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Dance/Movement, Fandom/Fan Studies

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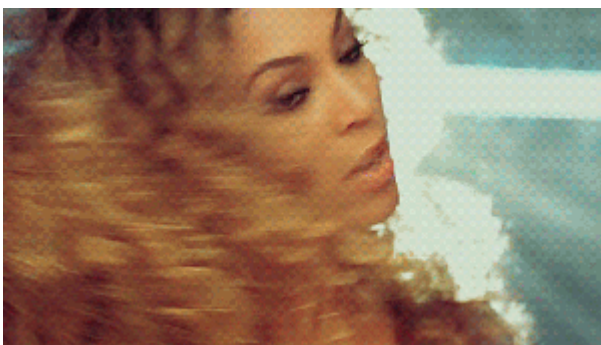


This September, *Sounding Out!* challenged a #flawless group of scholars and critics to give Beyoncé Knowles-Carter a close listen, re-examining the complex relationship between her audio and visuals and amplifying what goes unheard, even as her every move—whether on MTV or in that damn elevator—faces intense scrutiny. Last week, [Regina Bradley](#) (writer, scholar, and freelance researcher of African American Life and Culture) introduced us to the sonic ratchetness of Baddie Bey; the week before you heard our [Beyoncé roundtable podcast](#) featuring our first two writers, [Priscilla Peña Ovalle](#) (English, University of Oregon) and [Kevin Allred](#) (Women and Gender Studies, Rutgers)—as well as Courtney Marshall (English, University of New Hampshire) and Liana Silva (Editor, *Women in Higher Education*, Managing Editor, *Sounding Out!*), who will close out our series next week. Today, madison moore gives us not only great face but killer hair choreo. Mic drop. Hair flip. **—Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Stoevers**

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“Which Beyoncé are you trying to do?” a sales associate at Beauty Full, the largest beauty supply house in Richmond, Virginia, asked me. It was a good question, because the shop had whole rows of wigs and ponytails that conjured Beyoncé enough for what I needed to do. Choosing just one would be tough.

“This one is very Beyoncé,” he said, pointing to a style reminiscent of the huge, teased out curly Afro Beyoncé [worked](#) in the early 2000s. I wasn’t really feeling this particular style but I could tell my sales guy was *living* it. “It’s not fierce enough!” I told him. “I need something that really *moves*!” I’d been invited to give an hour-long lecture on Beyoncé at a university, one of my first gigs, and I was out at the last minute shopping for a wig to wear during my talk so that I could give the children a little sip of Beyoncé. That’s when I saw it: a long, black and dark brown two-toned wig with curls for eternity that I knew would look great on stage. *Come on, wig!*



I wanted to wear a wig “that really *moves*!” during this talk to demonstrate what I feel is the creative genius of Beyoncé’s performance persona: what I call “hair choreography.” Not unlike dance moves intended for the body, “hair choreography” is a mode of performance that uses hair to add visual drama to the overall texture of sound and it’s

the special genius of Beyoncé's stagecraft. On one occasion some friends and I were drinking wine and downing live Beyoncé videos on YouTube when one of us was like "I am *living* for her hair choreography!" I'm not sure we invented the concept but the phrase "hair choreography" has certainly stuck with me. Hair choreography is one of the secret weapons of the pop diva, those places in a live performance where she flips and whips her hair in exactly the right point, using "haircrobatics" to punctuate a moment, a feeling, raising the stakes, the sex appeal, and even the energy in the audience.

Hair choreography is exciting because it tells a story, but even more than telling a good story in performance "hair choreography" punctuates everything else happening on stage: the lights, the dance moves, the glitter, the sequins, the music. In this way, "hair choreography" becomes part of the spectacular offering of stage presence; a type of magnetism that, despite everything else happening on stage, draws us into a single performer – the star – whose single energy needs fill up the whole space. "Hair choreography" occurs in those moments of a live performance where the hair is flipped, whipped, dipped, spun and amplified during the most exciting, emotion-filled sounds and dance moves.

Even though many scholars still often approach them as separate practices, [sound and motion are so fluidly entangled](#), as Jennifer Stoeber has revealed. In this way, "hair choreography" builds on performance studies scholar Imani Kai Johnson's call for the "[aural-kinesthetic](#)." The "aural-kinesthetic" is not a method or a theory but simply a way for scholars to think about how music and movement happen at the same time. "Hair choreography" is about the relationship between sound, body and movement, and how each of those comes together to leave a visceral impact on an audience.



https://youtu.be/_HafQLoBzew

One video that shows the importance of hair choreography to Beyoncé's package is her medley "If I Were A Boy/You Oughta Know," a mélange of the soft hard rock her own track coupled up with the aggressive rock of Alanis Morissette's iconic break-up jam of the same title. In the clip, as Beyoncé segues from "If I Were A Boy" into "You Oughta Know" the wind machines appear to blow

her hair faster, and with every emotional note or beat she knocks her head to the side with attitude, forcing her straight hair with it. By the time Beyoncé sings “And I’m here, to remind you...,” the most emotional (and recognizable) transition of the song, the hair is already going full blast. Guitars and drums go off while strobe lights engulf the stage in a frenzy of chaos.



https://youtu.be/gsAVZ5z_fsM

At “You, you, you oughta know” she falls to her knees and performs a choreographed head bang while sliding across the floor using only her knees. It’s important to note here that the singing has stopped because this is a moment of “hair choreography,” a transition indicating an impending change in mood.

Everyone loves Beyoncé’s hair. In her will the late comedian Joan Rivers [requested](#) “a wind machine so that even in the casket my hair is blowing just like Beyoncé’s.” There are countless YouTube [tutorials](#) showing young girls how they too can achieve that Beyoncé look with weaves, wigs and lace fronts. Even the comedian [Sommore](#), who starred in the 2001 film [Queens of Comedy](#), had something to [say](#) about Beyoncé’s hair:

Beyoncé is a bad motherfucker. Oh this bitch bad. Let me tell ya’ll how bad this bitch is. I went to see her concert in Atlantic City after she had her baby. I sat in the second row – this bitch was flawless. I mean I’m talking about the bitch was flawless. Only problem I had with Beyoncé...she had on too much hair! This bitch came out she had at least 18 packs of hair on. She came out I thought the bitch was the cowardly lion from The Wiz. I’m sitting there in awe of this bitch neck, I’m like, “This bitch neck is strong as a motherfucker!”

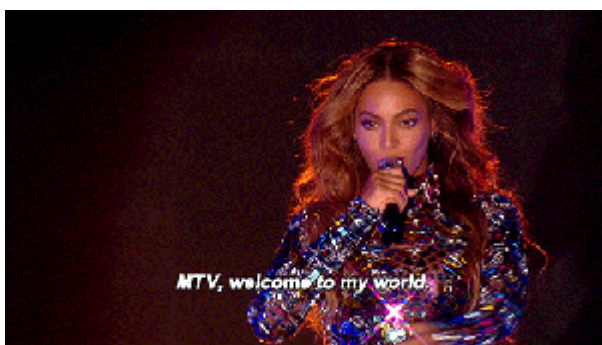
All jokes aside, the mystery of Beyoncé’s hair--and all of the technologies involved in keeping it moving--is part of the genius of her brand image, particularly because it works to make her ethnically ambiguous.. Having various types of hairstyles allows her creole body to infinitely play with race, and this makes her marketable to nearly everyone. Is she black? Is she Spanish? Is she biracial? Could she be Brazilian or from [Latin America](#)? Yes. In this way, her hair choreography not only punctuates her sound, but it shapes the very way it is heard, enabling her to morph into

more personalities and fit into more demographics than even Lady Gaga or Madonna. It's why she's able to sound sexy or inspirational, "hood" or "classy," vampy or [masculine](#), vocal or dance-y. Look at a video like "XO," to me the most mass-marketable song on *BEYONCE*. First of all she looks fabulous, but I think it's hard to watch that video and not feel like it's specifically pitched to 15-year-old white girls in Connecticut. Everything about the video, especially her sweeping hair flourishes, positions Beyoncé as relatable to teenage girls all over the US.



<https://youtu.be/3xUfCUFPL-8>

As dance studies scholar [Melissa Blanco Borelli](#) sees it the mulatta body engages with a practice she calls "Hip(g)nosis," or a type of hypnosis enacted by the yellow-bodied performer on fascinated audiences. This type of hypnotics, via the *hips*, "exposes the male gaze" by thinking through the "pleasure and consumption of the mulatta..." (*She Is Cuba*, forthcoming, Oxford University Press). Through hip(g)nosis Beyoncé has learned to use her ambiguous skin color and hair optics to her (monetary) advantage as a way to slide in and out of ethnic categories. Indeed, what does the fact that she is the lightest member of Destiny's Child and also the groups' most successful member have to do with her celebrity? The irony in all of this race play is that she was recently awarded the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award after her jaw-dropping 15-minute performance at the MTV Video Music Awards, and she is one of the few contemporary black pop singers who can play with race in the same way Michael Jackson did.



When I watched her recent MTV VMA performance I screamed a lot during her show, but the one moment I remember specifically, and still keep rewinding back to, happened right at the end of "Mine," to me the best track on *BEYONCE*. She

vamps “MTV, Welcome to My World,” and quickly spins and flips that hair back around *baby*, giving face to the camera, making millions of queens all over America scream YAASSS!!! at the top of their lungs. Beyoncé herself nodded back to queer performance and performers during a performance of “XO” this year on February 28th 2014 at the O2 Arena in London, after one overzealous fan threw a wig at Beyoncé as she sauntered off the stage and into the crowd (3:17).

<https://youtu.be/MUppXbcpB1s>

When she turned around to pick the wig up she ad libbed “You got me snatching wigs, snatching wigs” into her microphone, knowing perfectly well that “Beyoncé snatching wigs” is one of the most popular fan-created Internet memes. In black gay male performance culture people often talk about “snatching wigs” or “coming for your wig,” and to this end scholars like [E. Patrick Johnson](#) and [Marlon Bailey](#) have done important work in theorizing the interplay between black gay colloquialisms and performance. If you’re “[snatching wigs](#)” then you’re performing better than everybody else while completely eradicating the competition. You’re seemingly indefatigable. Snatching a wig means a particular performance was highly effective or unique, and a snatched wig implies how an audience might surrender itself to a strong performer, as was the case with the aforementioned wig thrower. Beyoncé definitely understands the power of stage presence; a type of magnetism that, despite everything else happening on stage, draws us into a single performer – the star – whose single energy needs fill up the whole space. Filling up an empty stage with a single body is a lot of space to fill if you think about it. And making an audience focus on you when there are 10,000 other things are happening around you is an even more challenging task.



But “snatching wigs” can also mean you’re revealing someone’s deepest secrets, something you know they’re hiding. What’s underneath a wig but a secret – your real hair texture, a bald spot you don’t want anyone else to know about. A snatched wig can mean a break of the illusion. When I wore that wig during my Beyoncé talk to demonstrate hair choreography everyone knew it was fake – I put it on in front of them – but if the wig came off the illusion would have been broken nonetheless.

Part of Beyoncé’s monumental fame has to do with the fact that while she synchronizes, punctuates, captivates, and performs, she never lets us see underneath her wig. She just lets it whip.

[madison moore](#) (Ph.D., American Studies, Yale University, 2012) is a research associate in the Department of English at King’s College London. Trained in performance studies and popular

culture, madison is a DJ, writer and pop culture scholar with expertise in nightlife culture, fashion, queer studies, contemporary art and performance, alternative subcultures and urban aesthetics. He is a staff writer at Thought Catalog, Splice Today, and his other writing has appeared in Vice, Interview magazine, Art in America, Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture, the Journal of Popular Music Studies and Theater magazine. He is the author of the Thought Catalog original e-book [How to Be Beyoncé](#). His first book, The Theory of the Fabulous Class, will be published by Yale University Press.

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