

Black Mourning, Black Movement(s): Savion Glover's Dance for Amiri Baraka

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Abstract

It has been a little over a year since Amiri Baraka passed, and still I hear the echoes of his presence. I am especially attentive to the ways his work has been carried on by those involved in recent black uprisings in Ferguson, New York City, and Baltimore. Powerful political poetics that have emerged from these events include work by Danez Smith, Claudia Rankine and the many contributors to blackpoetsspeakouttumblr.com.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Cultural Studies



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I don't worry about the look of it so much. Choreography comes later, when I'm putting together a piece. I'm into the sound; for me, when I'm hittin', layin' it down, it's all about the sound. – Savion Glover, [My Life in Tap](#)

It has been a little over a year since Amiri Baraka passed, and still I hear the echoes of his presence. I am especially attentive to the ways his work has been carried on by those involved in recent black uprisings in Ferguson, New York City, and Baltimore. Powerful political poetics that have emerged from these events include work by [Danez Smith](#), [Claudia Rankine](#) and the many contributors to [blackpoetsspeakouttumblr.com](#).

And yet, part of what I've witnessed in the streets, actual physical spaces of public protest against police violence and systemic racial oppression, is an example of what [Thomas DeFrantz](#) has termed "[corporeal orature](#)," or the ability of bodies to resonate throughout public space and shift political discourse. In these moments, the body talk of protesters is not simply the sound of clattering feet through city streets, but a commitment to the ways in which physical gestures can speak truth to power. I am especially interested in connecting Baraka's legacy to the larger conversation about the [aural kinesthetic](#) that [Imani Kai Johnson](#) has proposed, and in teasing out the various dimensions and potentials embedded in that category.



Dance at Ferguson Protests, 2014, Image by Shawn Semmler

For me, Savion Glover exemplified the lingering sound of Baraka's spirit in his tap dance at his memorial service. Whenever I listen to the recording—which still brings tears to my eyes—I am reminded of the abundant sense of joy, sadness, and love that characterized Baraka's service. Listening to Glover's dance is an aural kinesthetic experience, like watching a comet pass across the night's sky. I am reminded, too, of the way I clamored to record that moment, to keep a piece of the poet alive on my iPhone even after his public passing. And indeed, that performative sound of feet tapping, that measured excess of the body produced through movement, has kept Baraka alive for me; like his groundbreaking work, it is powerfully resistant to the proper rubrics of any one discipline except, perhaps for the study of sound itself.

So, this post then, is about tap dance and its ability to sound out Baraka's name and life. But in a larger context, the intricate vibrations of Glover's performance facilitate a deeper understanding of the relationship between sound and mourning, and a kind of mourning that is particularly African American, that is to say, American. It is a mourning that exists beyond the word, written text, or image and a sound practice that enables the bereaved to make a joyful noise and a mournful one at the very same time. So I ask, how do you write a eulogy with the body? How do you perform an embodied love? What does Black love and a reverence for Black life sound like? Sometimes, the answer is tap.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/savion-glover-at-ab-funeral.m4a>

Audio Clip of Savion Glover's Dance at Amiri Baraka's Funeral, 18 Jan 2014

The dance explodes on stage like a burst of light. It begins with something approximating a drum roll – and then hard slow taps, hammering away like someone at a typewriter, I imagine, or a train gaining steam.

It is coming.

Slow, insistent and strong, with a little riff now and then, a little picking up of speed here and there. It is coming on louder now, that explosive thing, the tension you are noticing. He is *doing* the thing. And then there is that skillful, smooth, strong tap. Glover is at work, y'all.



Savion Glover at Work, Image by Flickr Users Raquel and Soren

As a tribute to Baraka, Glover's dance bears numerous stylistic implications. Among them, I understand the rhythm of Glover's tap as the rhythm of writing, an aesthetic that complicates the way his dance can be understood as a manifestation of the black vernacular. Sketching out the early connections between her son's artistry and the percussive taps of the keyboard, Yvette Glover says. "I was working for a judge, as an assistant, when I was pregnant with Savion...And when I would type, and the carriage would automatically return, he'd walk, he'd follow it, in my stomach. You could see him move" (39). He does it still. In the audio clip, Glover's footwork evokes the dexterity of Baraka's language, all the while telling a story of its own.



Savion Glover's Shoes, Sadler's Wells, 2007, Image by Tristram Kenton

But what about the intensity of the dance, its crescendo toward the end of the service, a flurry of percussive steps beside Baraka's coffin? Baraka himself reminds us this particular musicality is so necessary here. In his discussion of "Afro-Christian Music and Religion" in *Blues People*, Baraka notes that in Black diasporic religious services, "the spirit will not descend without a song" (41). Glover's dance takes place at a moment in the service when emotion exceeds the power of language, but not sound. He uses his body as an instrument of sound in its fullest sense. His performance is a choreography of embodied sound: full-on and at-once body poetry, mourning and tribute.

Elucidating the use of his body as an instrument of sound, Glover declares:

It's like my feet are the drums and my shoes are the sticks[...]My left heel is stronger, for some reason, than my right; it's my bass drum. My right heel is like the floor tom-tom. I can get a snare out of my right toe, a whip sound, not putting it down on the floor hard, but kind of whipping the floor with it. It get the sounds of a top tom-tom from the balls of my feet. The hi-hat is a sneaky one. I do it with a slight toe lift, either foot, so like a drummer, I can slip it in there anytime. And if I want cymbals, crash crash, that's landing flat, both feet, full strength on the floor, full weight on both feet. That's the cymbals. So I've got a whole drum set down there (19).

Combining his body's drumbeat with the tic of Baraka's keystrokes, Glover embeds the pattern of Baraka's life in this tap dance, communicating it with the kind of deep and reverential love you are taught to have for your elders when you are young, appropriate and deep.



But as powerful as his body-poetry is, Glover's silences are also key. In those inaudible spaces, Glover spreads out his arms, offering up the dance in a gesture of expansive love; the immensity of the silent gestures mirroring the immensity of Baraka's life. He holds it out as a gift towards the audience, bows his head, too.

In moments of sound and silence, the audience calls out to Glover the way they would a preacher. At these moments, the dance becomes a call and response akin to the way Baraka's life's work was a call and response. A call to respond. A call to take what was given to you and make it *mean*. Listeners to the dance are called up out of themselves. We are changed by the dance and by the listening.

Tap tap tap.

Glover's performance shows us how his specific blend of African and European dance traditions exists in a spiritual and artistic dimension. There is a religious explanation for this, too. In [African Dance](#), Kariamu Welsh-Asante explains the function of the African funeral dance in definite terms:

All African dances can be used for transcendence and transformational purposes. Transcendence is the term usually associated with possession and trance. Dance is the conduit for transcendent activities. Dance enables an initiate or practitioner to progress or travel through several altered states, thereby achieving communication with an ancestor to deity and receiving valuable information that he/she can relate back to the community. Repetition is key to this process as it guides the initiates, or dancers, through the process of the ceremony. The

more a movement is repeated, the greater the level of intensity and the closer a dancer gets to the designated deity or ancestor. Transformation means to change from one state, or phase, to another (16).

Glover certainly brought us close to Baraka. And yet, I would go a step further to suggest that this is, above all, blues dance. As such, it reveals continuing relevance of social dance and movement to Baraka's political legacy. Baraka and Glover work directs us towards the propulsive nature of black social/percussive dance forms. These sonic gestures clarify the ways black life matters, impacts the public sphere and policy. The politicized nature of Black Arts Movement performances and the performative elements of contemporary Black protest are still linked through sound. Politicized Black aesthetics continue to offer us multiple opportunities to witness the convergence of sound and movement. Ras Baraka, affirms this in his own eulogy for his father:

Have you seen black fire it burns deep it never goes out you can try and extinguish it but it never goes out it never goes out it never goes out only up or out as in broad as in multiply as in blues black base of the fire dancing flickering at times but never all the way gone dancing flickering at times but never all the way gone...

The power of the dance, of the Black Movement to *move* is still with us.



Protestors dance to a community band, Baltimore, MD, 28 April 2015, Photo by Adrees Latif/Reuters

Featured Image, Screen Capture of Savion Glover dancing by JS

Kristin Moriah is the editor of Black Writers and the Left (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013) and the co-editor of Adrienne Rich: Teaching at CUNY, 1968-1974 (Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, 2014). Her critical work can be found in Callaloo, Theater Journal, TDR and Understanding Blackness Through Performance (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Moriah is completing a dissertation on African American literature and performance in transnational contexts at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her research has been funded through grants from the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada, the Freie Universität Berlin and the Graduate Center's Advanced Research Collaborative. She is a 2014-15 @IRADAC_GC Archival Dissertation Fellow and spring 2015 Scholar-in-Residence at the NYPL Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Sometimes she tweets via @moriahgirl.



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