

From Gumboots and Greek Letters

Preserving African American heritage through stepping

Jennifer Uharriet

You've taken my blues and gone—
You sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

(Hughes, 1959, p. 190)

In *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Brenda Gottschild argues that African and African American contributions to the arts in America have been so well ignored their African roots have been *invisibilised* (Richards, 1996). African American dance, especially, has been integrated into mainstream American culture to such an extent that it is no longer recognised as African American. This has been the case with lindy hop, tap, and hip-hop. Now many critics believe stepping faces a similar fate.

Although I have seen evidence of Gottschild's observations in my own experiences with stepping, I would argue stepping remains a powerful institution of African American culture. This is particularly true of African American fraternity and sorority culture, often referred to as 'black Greek' culture.¹ Within black Greek-letter organisations, such as Alpha Phi Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta, stepping continues to promote black Greek identity and unity among fraternity and sorority members. As stepping grows outside of these organisations, the potential invisibilisation of stepping's African American roots can in fact be countered by all those who highlight African American culture as they share stepping with new audiences. In this way, stepping can be used to foster African American awareness and bridge cultural differences within America and around the world.

What is stepping?

The term *stepping* can be misleading because it can refer to so many different forms of dance as well as to the simple idea of walking. Dances such as French-Canadian step dancing, Irish hard shoe, and American clogging and tap, can all be referred to as stepping or step dancing because of their focus on footwork above all other elements of dance. This paper, however, focuses on another type of stepping – the unique dance form that has developed in African American fraternities and sororities throughout the last century.

In contrast to the dance forms mentioned above, the *steps*, which make up African American stepping, referred to hereafter as simply *stepping*, are not simply movements of the feet, but complete routines often involving the entire body as well as the voice (Malone, 1996, p. 189). According to scholar Elizabeth Fine, 'Stepping is a complex performance that melds folk traditions with popular culture and involves synchronised percussive movement, singing, speaking, chanting, and drama' (in *Soulstepping: Folk Roots*, 2005). It focuses on body percussion with stomping and body slapping. Today stepping may even include hip-hop moves, gymnastics, and advertising jingles (Fine, 1991, p. 39).

Stepping and the Divine Nine

The particular organisations responsible for the development of stepping are the black Greek-letter organisations now known as the National Pan-Hellenic Council or the Divine Nine. Made up of five incorporated fraternities (Alpha Phi Alpha, Iota Phi Theta, Kappa Alpha Psi, Phi Beta Sigma, and Omega Phi Psi) and four incorporated sororities (Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho), these societies were created long before stepping came into being. All were created to promote service and scholarship among African American students (*About Us*, 2006; Malone, 1996, p. 168).

While some critics are concerned the Divine Nine may only be recognised for the entertainment value of their stepping, others see stepping as a tool for building leadership: 'A leadership that recognises the deep, intrinsic difficulties involved in social change, that accepts life's often unfavourable odds – but will not stop hoping, or trying, or enjoying when it's possible to enjoy' (Ferguson and Hailes, in Fine, 2003, p. 134). Many groups also use their step routines to promote the culture and values of their organisations on campus and in the community. For instance, fraternity and sorority members use *retrospects* (descriptions of a fraternity or sorority's founding) and symbols to preserve and pass on their black Greek identity. Here is one example:

Eighty-eight years ago
Twenty-two women had to go
On a mission to make the world a little brighter
So in 1913 they founded Delta Sigma Theta.

(*Many Steps*, 2002)

Tributes such as this are an important part of many black Greek step shows. These *retrospects*, exhibit pride in the organisation and teach the audience

about the legacy of that particular member of the Divine Nine. To these students, stepping is more than a fun social activity or demanding dance form. Stepping is a part of a rich legacy of joining together to achieve greatness despite discrimination and discouragement.

Symbolism also plays a major part in stepping because of its key role in black Greek identity. For instance, each fraternity and sorority in the National Pan-Hellenic Council has its own colours. Alpha Phi Alpha claims black and gold. Alpha Kappa Alpha is pink and green. Phi Beta Sigma sports blue. These colours are often part of a group's performance whether used in costumes, props, or both, and can bring cheers as soon as the group enters the stage (e.g. *Soul Steppin*, 2006; National Collegiate Greek Step Show, 2005).

Hand signs are another type of identity marker that set each organisation apart around campus and on stage. Members of Delta Sigma Theta make a triangle with their hands in the shape of the Greek letter 'Δ' or 'Delta.' Alpha Phi Alpha members use the 'hang loose' sign, but show the back of the hand. Omega Psi Phi puts their outward-turned hands near their faces like dogs' ears to highlight their 'Q-dog' image. Often these well-known symbols are the focus of a dramatic pause or closing pose, proudly showing off a team's Greek identity. They can also be used to salute or crack on other teams (Fine, 2003, pp. 62-66).

Saluting and cracking are two key forms of communication that are practiced widely in stepping. Both are based on the distinctive style and trade steps that have developed in each fraternity and sorority over time. In *saluting*, members of one Greek-letter organisation imitate the trademarks of another group as a way of greeting or complimenting that organisation. Often a fraternity salutes its sweetheart or sister sorority and vice versa. *Cracking* or *cutting*, on the other hand, involves chanting and/or imitating steps to put down another group. Generally, fraternities crack on other fraternities, sororities on other sororities (Fine, 2003, pp. 62, 140; Fine, 1991, pp. 47-48; Malone, 1996, p. 196). The following chant is a parody of AKAs and Zetas performed by the Deltas of Howard University:

Leader: What is a Delta?

Team: It is a serious matter...

(performed in the song and dance style of AKAs)

Leader: That is definitely not a Delta!

Soros, what is a Delta?

Team: Woo-pee-doo, Woo-pee-doo...(performed in a Zeta style)

Leader: That is not a Delta!

Soros, what is a Delta?

Team: Devastating, captivating, oh so fine

My soul stepping sisters gonna blow your mind.

Many are called, but the chosen are few.

Delta Sigma Theta's gonna rock it for you!

(in Malone, 1996, p. 195)

This crack seems fairly good-natured, but some can be quite offensive. A well-executed crack is a great way to involve the audience, but because the

Greek-letter organisations are so competitive, cracking can sometimes cause serious tension between groups. The use of cracking and saluting tells a great deal about the nature of stepping. Cracking, of course, exemplifies the competition among fraternities and among sororities, while saluting other teams embodies the main purpose of stepping: building unity (Fine, 1991, p. 56).

In continuing all of these elements of stepping – retrospects, symbols, cracking, and saluting – just to name a few, black Greek organisations are preserving and passing on their unique identity. Like stepping, that identity continues to evolve. Shaped by experiences of WWII and the social and political movements that followed, Black Greek identity and stepping also have much deeper roots that seem to tie them both to Africa more strongly today than ever before.

Many roots

Ethnographer Jacqui Malone describes the development of stepping this way: ‘The older it gets, the more African it looks’ (1996, p. 190). Why is this? First of all, stepping did not begin as an Africanist movement. It grew out of the post-war era when equality and ‘sameness’ were the goal. Black and white men had fought and died side-by-side in Europe and in the Pacific. But back in the United States, black Americans struggled to be seen as equal to white Americans. Even among the black bourgeoisie, lighter skin and straighter hair were praised as being more high-class, more ‘white’ (Fine, 2003, pp. 77, 127).

But money and light skin were not enough to fit into white society. On college campuses, many African Americans joined black Greek-letter organisations to help one another succeed despite harsh antagonism and intense discrimination (Sheh, 1997). It was in this setting that stepping developed. Black fraternity brothers were not trying to show pride in their African heritage or to make an Africanist statement of any sort (Fine, 2003, p. 77). They were simply meeting together with friends on the quad to sing the hits of the Temptations, Four Tops, and others. Soon these brothers were imitating the suave dance moves of the music groups and improvising some of their own to win attention from the girls, which in turn would win more recruits to the fraternities (*History of Stepping*, 2005). Over time, the dancing was combined with other aspects of black Greek culture such as marching around the quad, standing on the line, undergoing the probate process, displaying symbols of group identity, singing fraternity hymns, et cetera. And thus stepping was born (Fine, 2003, p. 45).

Stepping became more African, though, with time, when African Americans became more ‘African’ – when they began celebrating their ancestral roots. The Second Black Renaissance occurred from approximately 1965 to 1976, about the same period as the Black Power Movement. Racial pride was fostered during this time, and blacks were encouraged to create artwork that reflected their own unique cultural identity. Direct interaction with Africa increased, facilitating exchange of dances and other cultural material (Smith, 2006, pp. 247-8). Stepping also began to expand at this time with the

incorporation of traditional African dances and a wide variety of performance skills including tap, gymnastics, and cheerleading (*History of Stepping*, 2005).

That push to create a new black identity and renew ties with African roots has continued to shape stepping into the 21st century. In fact, many steppers today believe stepping is a direct descendant of South African gumboots dancing which grew out of the gold mines of Johannesburg (National Collegiate Greek Step Show). Despite the terrible working conditions the miners suffered, they found release in dancing: meeting together to practise beating out rhythms on their gumboots, arms and legs; perfecting routines and competing against other groups of miners (Henry, 2001).

While tradition claims gumboots developed as a way of communicating inside the mines, this legend cannot be firmly proven or disproven. Wayne Harrison, creative director of *Gumboots: The Musical*, commented, however: 'Whether it's true or not seems to me to be irrelevant. It's true for them when they dance' (in *Gumboots: An Explosion of Spirit and Song*, 2000) Harrison's statement may also be applied to the link between gumboots and stepping. Because stepping and gumboots gained popularity at roughly the same time with little interaction between their respective homes, it seems most likely that these two dance forms developed independently, despite their striking similarities (*Many Steps*, 2002). But, just as gumboots dancers honour those who worked and suffered in the mines, black Greek step teams in the U.S. today honour both their African roots and their African American heritage through stepping. The idea that stepping has been passed down from those resisting oppression in the mines of southern Africa is true for many black Greeks when they step (Sheh, 1997).

Although gumboots seems an obvious relative of stepping, African American stepping shares ties with several African dance forms. For example, upon witnessing his first step show, a scholar of Bakongo culture, K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, was positive that the students could not possibly have learned those movements without a trainer who had studied in the Kongo area. The slicing motions of the dancers' hands and arms, as well as their playful chanting, matched that done near Kinshasa. According to Fu-Kiau, 'Using the body as a drum' is also 'fundamentally Kongo' (in Malone, 1996, pp. 190-91).

Had any of these Howard University performers been to Kinshasa? No. Had any seen the gumboots dances of South Africa? Probably not. So how could they be so strongly influenced by dances they had never seen? Gerhard Kubik explained that even if oppression and slavery attempted to stamp out a specific cultural trait such as African drumming, the trait would not truly disappear but would retreat into the bodies of the people, into their human psyche. The drum patterns, though perhaps never heard again, would be 'transformed into a set of *motional behavior*,' and then would 'continue to be transmitted from mothers and grandmothers to their children, from father to son during work, non-verbally, as an *awareness* of a style of moving.' Then when the time was right, 'the drum patterns [would] surface again, perhaps on other instruments' when the youth 'suddenly 'invent[ed]' something new' (ibid.,

p. 191). Stepping has proven to be one such manifestation of the drumbeat of black Africa.

Though most definitely 'animated by the style, spirit, and social and aesthetic organisation of sub-Saharan Africa,' stepping itself is the unique creation of African America (Abrahams, in Malone, 1996, p. 189). A more direct ancestor of stepping than the bloodlines of Africa is the military marching of the World War II era. In the 1940s, many students were returning from the war and others were participating in the Student Army Training Corp (Trotto). Many African American students were part of black college marching bands as well. At that time, initiation into a black fraternity or sorority often required marching around campus in military style (Fine, 2003, p. 46). It was in these black Greek-letter organisations that stepping truly evolved.

Popularity pains?

During the 1980s, with the institutionalisation of step shows, stepping began to change drastically. The step shows were moved from the yard or small auditorium to large public auditoriums in which the audiences now came from every rank and race. In this new setting, cracking has been kept to a minimum. This is in part due to rules forbidding harsh cracking, but perhaps more significantly, because the increasingly diverse audience may not understand or appreciate the cracks (Fine, 2003, p. 51).

While these large, step shows increased awareness of stepping on the local campus level, Spike Lee's 1988 film *School Daze* brought more widespread recognition (ibid., p. 39; Malone, 1996, p. 188). Since that time, stepping has been incorporated into commercials and music videos. It was performed at the Atlanta Olympic Games and at President Clinton's inaugural celebration in Washington D.C. (ibid; Sheh, 1997). The professional company *Step Afrika!*² has taken stepping back to its fabled roots in South Africa and to Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean as well (*About Step Afrika*, 2005).

Although (or perhaps, because) audiences around the globe love stepping so much, some critics are concerned this mainstreaming of stepping will invisibilise both the meaning and history behind the movement. Gottschild voiced her concerns on this topic in her afore-mentioned book, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*. First and foremost, when African American choreography has been presented on the main stage in the past (e.g. as part of Balanchine's *Cabin in the Sky* and de Mille's *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*), the African American choreographers received no recognition. Instead, their great work was brushed off as a short improvisation or rehearsal, a simple accomplishment of the renowned white artists heading the shows (Richards, 1998, p. 167; Gottschild, 1996, pp. 69-70).

On a similar note, African American fraternities and sororities are losing ownership of their stepping traditions as more and more non-black Greek members and non-African Americans get involved in the step scene. For example, white American one-hit-wonder Vanilla Ice won short-term fame not only by borrowing a black ghetto background, but also by capitalising on the Alpha Phi Alpha chant, 'Ice, Ice' (Fine, 2003, pp. 96 & 144-45). Because the

song 'Ice, Ice Baby' was so widely played, it is likely that those watching an Alpha Phi Alpha step show for the first time would think the fraternity was copying the white rapper when, in fact, the opposite is true.

Also decimating the validity of African aesthetics is the notion that only through Western influence can the raw material of Africa be 'rendered as culture,' because, Gottschild accuses, 'dominant ideology.... refuses to recognise African peoples as producers of culture and hence, of whiteness' (Richards, 1998, p. 168). This harsh process is evidenced throughout history as black dance forms such as lindy hop and tap dance have been 'whitened' to fit the standards of white society. As stepping is moved to the white concert stage it is undergoing a similar transformation.

Recently stepping has been included in modern dance concerts, for instance *Dance in Concert* (2005) and *Homage* (2005). The dance movement is similar to what would be seen at a Greek step show, but it is stripped of Greek identity markers, such as hand signs, chants, retrospects and hymns. Any steps borrowed from fraternities and sororities would only be recognised as copies by those familiar with traditional stepping. References to African American figures and the African American experience are largely stripped away as well. While being impressed by the rhythms of the dance, without a specific introduction, the audience has no way of knowing where these exciting steps have come from or what they mean to those who first created them.

However, hopes to exclude 'outsiders' or to 'preserve' stepping as it is now or has been in the past are both impractical and incongruent with the dynamism of stepping. As more and more dancers around the globe are gaining access to stepping video clips and performances, they are trying it out for themselves and sharing it with friends. While this is bound to have an effect on the dance form, it is not unwarranted. Stepping has changed incredibly over the past five or six decades since its birth, and steppers, even in traditional black fraternities, are constantly adding to their repertory to please audiences and judges. Even so, is it possible to preserve stepping's cultural moorings as it continues to grow?

Visibilising African American culture through stepping

To maintain the power of stepping and to limit further invisibilisation of its African American culture, the main body of stepping must stay true to its roots. As stepping spreads from there, from the centres of black Greek-letter organisations, teaching African American culture and history along with the dances will be essential to preserving the meaning and purpose of stepping as it spreads around the world.

Those most responsible for visibilising the cultural roots of stepping are the college students who step in historically black Greek fraternities and sororities. Each year these students teach new recruits about their organisation's unique legacy through hymns, retrospects, tradesteps, and so forth (*Many Steps*, 2002). By performing at Homecoming and other campus events, members of the Divine Nine share their culture with increasing

numbers of other students, university employees, family members, and friends.

Black Greeks can also counter the invisibilisation of stepping's cultural roots by teaching others outside their university communities about the history and heritage of stepping. Visiting elementary schools and high schools, for instance, gives black Greeks a special opportunity to teach younger generations about stepping while expanding upon the Divine Nine's much broader goal of encouraging students to succeed in school and in life (Baker, 2004).

As stepping continues to grow, teachers outside of the Divine Nine will play an increasing role in the invisibilisation or visibilisation of stepping's cultural legacy. If they make the effort to learn the history of stepping before they teach this exciting new dance style, their students will gain a better understanding of what they are dancing and why they are dancing. If dancers are familiar with African American culture and the history of stepping, they will have that much more appreciation for the art. At the same time, as informed dancers and audiences enjoy the power of stepping, they will hopefully gain greater respect and appreciation of African American culture in general. Their newfound understanding will spread as they share their experience with others, and so the cycle may continue.

The future of stepping

It is difficult to predict exactly how stepping will change over the next decade. At present, stepping traditions seem to be growing strongly in chapters of the National Pan-Hellenic Council around the country. In 1995, a critic warned, 'If [stepping] becomes too commercialised ... African Americans will move away from it ... or we will change it to such an extent that it's not recognisable in its original art form ... Just like with our slang, when other cultures pick it up, we drop it' (Brookins, in Fine, 2003, p. 146). However, more than twenty years have passed since that statement was made, and stepping seems to be more popular than ever, inside and outside of the Divine Nine. Because so many aspects of stepping are relevant only within the black Greek community, it may happen instead, that commercialised stepping will develop 'to such an extent that it's not recognisable in its original art form' – the process of invisibilisation – while stepping within the Divine Nine continues to preserve many marks of black Greek culture.

Attending step shows in Southern California and Utah Valley, surfing the internet for black Greek websites, and watching DVDs of competitions held across the U.S., it seems to me the spirit of stepping is alive and well. Stepping's main objective has always been 'to create a fellowship' and 'to celebrate brotherhood and sisterhood' within a community (Branch, in Sheh, 1997). This unity is evident in the stepping of the Divine Nine. If the growth in stepping outside the Divine Nine could continue to be matched, even in part, with greater awareness of African American culture, many more could enjoy the excitement of stepping as well as the creation and celebration of a much greater brotherhood and sisterhood.

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Notes

¹ The term 'Black Greek-letter organisations' refers to the college fraternities and sororities founded by African American students. Each is distinguished by a Greek-letter name such as Phi Beta Sigma or Alpha Kappa Alpha.

² *Step Afrika!* was founded by Alpha Phi Alpha member C. Brian Williams in 1994. It is a professional company based in Washington, D.C., dedicated to promoting understanding and appreciation of stepping throughout the United States and around the world (*About Step Afrika*, 2005).

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Biographical statement

Jennifer Uharriet earned a master's degree in public administration from Brigham Young University after completing her undergraduate degree there in both dance and international studies. She now works as a budget analyst for the State of Arizona.