

Performative Cultures in Historical Context: Creating a Documentary Film on Black Greek Step-Dance

‘Stepping’ is a performative tradition created by African-American fraternities and sororities during the mid and late twentieth century. It continues today at the University of Memphis, with Step Shows drawing enthusiastic crowds. Innovation is the hallmark of stepping; dancers incorporate references to current events and contemporary advertising as well as to their own lives. At the same time, stepping reaches back into African-American folk traditions such as the dozens, military jodies, signifying, and hand-clap games. In this course, students will research, write, direct, and edit a documentary film about stepping.

Required Texts

Tamara Brown, Ed. *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1988).

Elizabeth Fine, *Soulstepping: African-American Step Shows* (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Walter Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Sororities and Fraternities* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003).

Jacqui Malone, *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African-American Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

Course Requirements

1. Consistent attendance and participation: On any given day, be prepared to discuss the readings listed for that day. Be prepared to report back on your task for that week. You have one excused absence, to use at your discretion. Missing more than one class will lower your course average by a full grade.

2. Follow-through on tasks: Each week you will be assigned tasks essential to the production of this film. Such tasks may include research, writing, bringing in still photos, bringing in film clips (from other documentaries), arranging interviews and/or film dates, interviewing dancers, filming dancers, logging footage, and editing footage. Everyone will take turns doing administrative work as well. **Do Not Drop the Ball.** As part of a production team, you are accountable to the group. When you take responsibility for a task, we depend on you to see it through by deadline. If you get sidelined by illness or other natural disaster, it is your responsibility to delegate your task to another member of the team. If you would like advice on whom to delegate to, feel free to consult with me. In the professional world, you always make sure your task gets done, even if you have to ask for help to finish it.

COURSE OUTLINE

Jan 13 **Introduction to the Course**

- a) Making a Film
- b) Historical and Conceptual Frameworks
- c) Production Team
- d) Contact List
- e) Production Assignments for Jan 20th:
 - contact Sigma Gamma Rho sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, and Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity at U. Memphis, explain project and request participation. Meet in person to exchange info.
 - contact AKA sorority sisters Sheria Holmes, Kerri Campbell, and Melanie Hall, explain project and request interviews. Meet in person to confirm & exchange info.
 - Find a film clip of black Greek step-dancing from either a documentary or feature film; bring to class on the 27th.
 - Find an article on military jodies; on hand-clap games; on call-and-response; xerox 10 copies & bring to class.

Jan 20 **Rise of Black Mutual Aid and Fraternal Organizations in the United States**

Reading: Anne Butler, "Black Fraternal and Benevolent Societies in Nineteenth-Century America," *African American Fraternities and Sororities* (hereinafter *AAFS*), 67-94.

Jaqui Malone, "African American Mutual Aid Societies: Remembering the Past and Facing the Future," *Steppin' On the Blues*, 167-86.

Michael Washington & Cheryl Nunez, "Education, Racial Uplift, and the Rise of the Greek Letter Tradition: The African American Quest for Status in the Early Twentieth Century," *AAFS*, 137-80.

Walter Kimbrough, "The Foundation Era of Black Fraternalism," *Black Greek 101*, 19-36.

Andre Mackenzie, "In the Beginning: The Early History of the Divine Nine," *AAFS*, 181-210.

Production Assignments for Jan.27th:

- write a treatment that combines elements from 3 of the above readings.
- identify Greek dance practice and step show dates/times for this spring.
- Scout for potential narrator, by voice and diction; tape record candidates.
- Contact African American faculty & staff at Rhodes, identify Greeks and request interviews.

Jan 27 **Cultural Roots of Stepping**

Reading: Jacqui Malone, “‘Gimme de Kneebone Bent’: Music and Dance in Africa,” *Steppin’ on the Blues*, 9-22.

Jacqui Malone, “Keep to the Rhythm and You’ll Keep to Life: Meaning and Style in African American Vernacular Dance,” *Steppin’ on the Blues*, 23-36.

Marcella McCoy, “Calls: An Inquiry into Their Origin, Meaning, and Function,” *AAFS*, 295-314.

Jacqui Malone, “Mocking and Celebrating: Freedom of Expression in Dance During Slavery,” *Steppin on the Blues*, 37-50.

Carol Branch: “Variegated Roots: the Foundations of Stepping,” *AAFS*, 315-40.

Production Assignments for Feb.3rd:

- write a treatment using elements from 4 of the above readings.
- take one element of your treatment, and find still images to tell it visually. xerox the images and bring to class on Feb.3rd.
- update contact list, with notes.
- set up interview dates for both preliminary (no cameras present) and filmed interviews.
- set up filming dates for dance practices and step shows.

Feb 3 **Historical Perspectives on Stepping**

Reading: Lynne Fauley Emery, “Jim Crow and Juba,” *Black Dance From 1619 to Today*, 179-203.

P. Sterling Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance,” *Dancing Many Drums*, 39-58. [handout]

Elizabeth Fine, “A History of Stepping,” *Soulstepping*, 11-47.

Walter Kimbrough, “Stepping Defined,” *Black Greek 101*, 136-46.

Elizabeth Fine, “Stepping Out an African Heritage,” *Soulstepping*, 76-93.

Production Assignments for Feb.10th:

- write a treatment using elements from 4 of the above readings.
- firm up filming schedule: cinematographers, filmed interviews, dance practices, pick-up shots, and step shows.
- archival research, newspapers, posters, programs, and still photos.
- do preliminary interviews; identify stories & issues to address during filmed interview.
- generate list of 10 questions for filmed interview.

Feb 10 **Winds of Change**

Reading: Walter Kimbrough, "The Maturation Years, 1910-1960," *Black Greek 101*, pp.93-96.

Robert Harris, Jr. "Lobbying Congress for Civil Rights: The American Council on Human Rights, 1948-1963," *AAFS*, 211-29.

Walter Kimbrough, "Black Power, Blaxploitation Era, 1960-1980," *Black Greek 101*, pp.97-103.

Walter Kimbrough, " Individualist/Multiculturalism Era: 1980 to the Present," *Black Greek 101*, pp.103-06.

Walter Kimbrough, "Afrocentric Era: 1985-Present," *Black Greek 101*, pp.106-10.

Elizabeth Fine, "Stepping Forth: New Participants and Venues," *Soulstepping*, 94-125.

Production Assignments for Feb. 17th:

- in small teams, make an historical timeline showing key themes and issues that inform step dancing, both cultural and historical.
- do filmed interviews.
- do pick-up shots and film still images.
- film dance practices if scheduled.
- meet with Ryan for logging lesson; log the footage that your team filmed.
- Meet with Ryan, Joann, or Eric for editing instruction.

Feb 17 **What Makes the Story?**

Reading: Elizabeth Fine, "The Cultural Politics of African American Step Shows," *Soulstepping*, 126-48.

Jacqui Malone, "Stepping: Regeneration Through Dance in African American Sororities and Fraternities," *Steppin' on the Blues*, 187-214.

Report in, on key moments, salient issues; discuss dramatic arc.

Report in, on timelines and discuss chronology.

Production Assignments for Feb. 24th:

- writing team: work up narrations and transitions.
- continue filming interviews, dance practices, and/or step shows.
- log your footage.
- editing team: continue training with Ryan, Joann, and Eric.
- bring to class a clip from any documentary film on any subject, that you find especially compelling; be prepared to say why.
- bring to class a clip from any documentary that you find dull, say why.

Feb 24 **Production and Logging**

Discussion: Challenges of filming dance; challenges of filming still photos.
Storylines and chronology; themes and issues. Dramatic arc?

Production Assignments:

- continue filming interviews, dance practices and/or step shows.
- log the footage you worked on. Identify key moments.
- writing team: write narration for still photos; write voiceovers for action shots (ie. for dance footage). Use shooting script format, and identify music or sound effects as needed.
- filming teams: each person, on your own, view one documentary about any topic; identify an element of direction or editing that works especially well; bring in a film clip to show us on March 3rd.
- storyboard teams: create storyboard (in broad strokes, how should story unfold?)

March 3 **Production and Logging**

Discussion: Storyboard teams present how they think the story should unfold.
Everyone weighs in, and productive wrangling ensues....

Production Assignments:

- Writing team and storyboard teams view logged interviews and dance practices.
- Film teams read shooting scripts with xeroxes of still photos, and reread storyboards.
- Everyone: jot down ways to blend material from shooting scripts & still photos, with logged interviews &/dance practices, with storyboard concepts. What is the story you want to tell?

March 10 **Production and Logging**

Discussion: Brainstorm ideas for short pieces that illuminate an issue or theme;
editors take notes!

Production Assignments:

- film remaining pick-up shots.
- film follow-up interviews and/or remaining dance practices/step shows.
- log all footage, using storytelling categories we have identified.
- editors: create the short pieces we discussed in class, and bring on DVD to March 24th class.

March 13-21: Spring Break

March 24 Editing team brings in short pieces for viewing and discussion. Consider how we might fit these together to tell a larger story. What transitions are needed? What narration is needed to connect the dots? What elements of the story are missing, and how can we fill them in?

March 31 Editing team brings in longer pieces, building blocks of story. Troubleshoot issues described above.

April 1-4: Easter Break

April 7 Editing team presents rough cut, using filmed interviews, still photos, dance practices, step shows, narration, music, and transitions. Class critiques and troubleshoots.

April 14 Editing team presents revised rough cut; class critiques and troubleshoots.

April 21 **Post Production:** Revised rough cut submitted to class for approval. Add title and credits.

April 28 View and critique film. Decide on any final revisions. Editing team revises for screening at URCAS, Friday, April 30th.

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