

Dis/Orientation: Rhythmic Bodies and Corporeal Orature in *The Fits*

Elena Benthous, University of Melbourne

Abstract

In Anna Rose Holmer's 2015 film *The Fits*, 11-year old protagonist Toni is depicted as moving between the steady rhythms of the local boys' boxing club and the highly syncopated, vertiginous, call-and-response rhythms of the local girls' drill dance team, all of which culminates into a polyrhythmic, contagious, and seemingly uncontrollable, uncontainable, and indescribable form of fitful corporeal fainting spell. Since the film does not overly depend on dialogue, the film's affective-ness relies on the protagonists' expressive and active corporeality, as that which moves in between different spaces and rhythms. Often described as a coming-of-age story, in this article, I will be looking at *The Fits* as a dance film in order to examine the film through its beats and rhythms by drawing specifically on Thomas DeFrantz' concept of corporeal orature, Julian Henriques' notion of affective vibration, Imani Perry's notion of the cypher, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's concept of polycentrism/polyrhythmicality. In relation to this I propose that spectators are drawn into this movie by a constant negotiation of movement as that which sits at the border of consciousness, giving access to a spectatorial experience, in which the moving, rhythmic bodies-on-screen serve simultaneously as points of orientation and disorientation.

Keywords: *The Fits*, corporeal orature, rhythmic corporeality, cypher, dis/orientation

In Anna Rose Holmer's 2015 film *The Fits*,¹ set at the Lincoln Community Recreational Center in Cincinnati's West End neighborhood, 11-year old protagonist Toni (Royalty Hightower) is depicted as moving between the steady rhythms of the local boys' boxing club² and the highly syncopated, vertiginous, call-and-response rhythms of the local girls' drill dance team, *The Lionesses*,³ all of which culminates into a polyrhythmic, contagious, and seemingly uncontrollable, uncontainable, and indescribable form of fitful corporeal fainting spell. As Manohla Dargis has described it in her *New York Times* review, the girls "move — fluidly, ferociously and with escalating mystery — to their own transporting beat."⁴ Since the film does not overly depend on dialogue and spoken word, the film's affective-ness relies on the protagonists' expressive and active corporeality, as that which moves in-between different spaces and rhythms, in order to draw the spectator into the film's fold. My use of fold here is indebted to Giuliana Bruno's notion

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of the screen surface as an "enveloping fabric"⁵ and what she refers to as the "haptic sense"⁶ which reaches into this cinematic fabric and is touched by its "folds of experience."⁷ It's something that resonates across different reviews of the film, for example when Tasha Robinson from *The Verge* responds to the film's touching fabric with "But *The Fits* is all about the experience of the moment and it winds up as feeling remarkably immersive and lyrical,"⁸ an experience she locates in the way that *The Fits* feels like a dance film, though it is mostly described as a coming-of-age story.⁹

Taking this observation as my cue, in this article, I will analyze *The Fits* as a dance film to account for and examine the film's enveloping fabric through its beats and rhythms by drawing specifically on Thomas DeFrantz's concept of corporeal orature, Julian Henriques' notion of affective vibration, Imani Perry's notion of the cypher, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's concept of polycentrism/polyrhythmicality. In relation to this I propose that spectators are drawn into this movie by a constant negotiation of movement as that which sits at the border of consciousness, giving access to a lived spectatorial experience, in which the moving, rhythmic bodies-on-screen serve simultaneously as points of orientation and disorientation.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed points out that orientation and disorientation as modalities of perception are inherently linked, because moments of disorientation are needed in order to become aware of "what it means to be orientated in the first place."¹⁰ As a way of inhabiting space, the space of one's body as well as the spaces and places surrounding the body, the joint encounters of dis/orientation locate the body in space and time, in the here and the now. Whereas Ahmed locates orientation in the feeling of being at home, or feeling the familiar, and finding one's way,¹¹ disorientation dislocates the sense of home as unfamiliar, "as the 'out of place' or 'out of line.'"¹² In relation to *The Fits* rhythmic textures, rhythmicality functions to both orientate screen and spectating bodies in the familiar and the regular beat of finding/knowing one's way, while simultaneously dislocating them to feel out of place and out of line. Spectators thus move in-between a visibly/seen perception of the film to a rhythmically/felt perception, which is centered and focused through the eyes of protagonist Toni and the point of view of black girlhood. The movement in-between the visible/seen and the rhythmic/felt is important here as it decenters and de-focuses the orientating eye in favor of a disorientating haptic-rhythmic sense-perception that destabilizes what it means to "see" and hence "know" through the way the film invokes how to "sense" and "feel" its vibrations.

This decentering, defocusing, and disorientating of both the eye of the spectator and the ear of the listener in favor of a haptic-rhythmic sense-perception that involves and envelops the whole spectatorial body can be tied to the notion of sonic blackness, an "afro-sonic-philosophy"¹³ as Tavia Nyong'o has called it in his reflection on Alexander Weheliye's book *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*¹⁴ and Julian

Henriques' book *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*¹⁵ in relation to black sound studies.¹⁶ Looking at how orality and music as "two main techniques of cultural communication in African America"¹⁷ have been altered by the invention of sound recording technologies at the end of the 19th century, Weheliye establishes the concept of sonic Afro-modernity as a mode of existence for black subjectivity in/against Western modernity.¹⁸ As he argues,

locating the subject in the sonic grants a quite different notion of this concept – which does not mean that the subject as a linguistic category is rendered null and void; it just relocates to a new analytic neighborhood without losing its ties to old friends – one that does not posit meaning and/or intelligibility as its teleological end point...¹⁹

Sonic specificity and sound become important here as it establishes the subject not purely in linguistic and visual terms, but through hearing and sensing as a way to dislocate a monocausal narrative for the black subject. Paying attention to the sonic-haptic then tilts perception of its axis through dis/location as a modality of dis/orientation.

It is similar to what Julian Henriques describes as "thinking through sound"²⁰ in *Sonic Bodies*, in which thinking through sound and its auditory vibrations is established as a "way of thinking, a process of knowledge, and a gnosis,"²¹ a technique that he is sounding out in his investigation of the auditory culture of Jamaican reggae dancehall sessions. Thinking through sound here is intimately tied to the experience of the body and its embodiment of being in the world of sound, surrounded by its textures, playing through the senses, with but also against the eye. As he argues,

sound is always a dynamic event, forever incomplete and continually in a state of change. Thus, thinking through sound offers a way to voice criticisms of the status quo and raise questions, in the way that images are often used to settle them. In the mechanics of auditory propagation, noise is necessarily a disturbance...²²

Again, the sonic is established as a mode of dis/orientation in the way it skewers visual perception as finding one's way by way of sound that seeks to disturb, or dislocate and disorientate through an immersion in the complexity of sound textures. To return to the *The Fits*, both the idea of the sonic subject as well as the notion of the sonic body, are an important aspect of the film's immersive and dis/orientating quality, which, as I said before, seeks to de-center and de-focus the orientating eye in order to envelop spectators in its rhythmic-haptic patterning of cinematic space and time. In order to account for the dis/orientation of the visual through the sonic as understood in black sound studies, the following analysis seeks to be thinking *The Fits* and its affective corporeal orature through rhythm.

Getting in to and out of Rhythm

When Julian Henriques talks about affect in his article, "The Vibrations of Affect and Their Propagation on a Night Out on Kingston's Dancehall Scene," he suggests that "affect is expressed rhythmically – through relationships, reciprocations, resonances, syncopations and harmonies,"²³ or what he calls "rhythmic patterns of frequencies."²⁴ Rhythm in this case is particularly used to describe the possibility of affect to transfer across the surfaces of multiple media and pass through bodies by way of movement and sound. As such, it is related to a visceral experience of multiple bodies, who experience the rhythm and vibration of movement and sound, individually and together, as instances of "transsensorial perception."²⁵ In this sense, rhythm can be seen as what Henrique calls "a dynamic connective tissue,"²⁶ which circulates as a form of collective sensation or to quote Sara Ahmed, "as impressions left by others."²⁷ Rhythm as such is in excess and beyond conscious thought, a vibration that ebbs and flows between multiple modes of perception and being.²⁸ Rhythm as vibration, connection, and movement is thus linked to the concept of kinesthesia . Particularly from a dancer's perspective, kinesthesia is the awareness of the position and movement of parts of the body by means of its sensory organs, or proprioceptors, in the muscles and joints. Thus, kinesthesia means being orientated towards movement and sense perception, both of which pick up on rhythm. In that way, kinesthesia can be understood as a 'sixth sense,' the very particular sense of movement perception through a corporeal rhythmicity. As Naomi Bragin argues, kinesthesia "produces visceral knowledge" that "does not begin as an object outside the body but develops through a co-constitutive process of moving and meaning making."²⁹ Through kinesthesia , this visceral knowledge passes rhythmically between bodies through dance and movement.

Which brings me to Thomas DeFrantz's notion of corporeal orature. In his chapter "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power," DeFrantz states, "All African diaspora dance, including black social dance, may be likened to verbal language most in the dance's conspicuous employment of "call and response" with the body responding to and provoking the voice of the drum."³⁰ He goes on to state that

If we can accept that the dance responds to the drum, not solely in a reflective manner, but within a configuration of communicative collaboration, we can understand how dance is performative, mirroring the way in which speech may be equated with action.³¹

Corporeal orature as a form of communicative collaboration aligns movement with speech in relation to the beat or rhythm of the drum. Moreover, through a call and response structure, movements might cite or signify contexts beyond the dance, or beyond the timeframe in which the dance happens. These corporeal citations are rhythmic "calls" in themselves, and are read and acknowledged by other dancers, who respond to them in kind with dance-speech-rhythm actions of their own, all of which

produces a form of kinetic orality and affective physicality. It also produces and transmits the knowledge inherent in the dance movement/dance style/dance community.

In *The Fits*, the girls of The Lionesses drill dance team communicate and relate to each other through the movement of their bodies, both in sync as part of the group's formation and more individually in call-response battle-communication structures. As one of the two spaces that Toni is navigating rhythmically throughout the movie, the drill dance team as a site for communicative relations is significant for the overall framing of black girlhood within the cinematic space. As Patricia White has pointed out in her article "Bodies That Matter: Black Girlhood in *The Fits*," drill "has an extensive history in black communities,"³² alongside other dance team cultures like majorette and step. Marquicia Jones-Wood, the founder of Q-Kidz, the actual drill team behind all the roles and appearances of *The Fits*' Lionesses, has started the drill dance community program in the Cincinnati West End's predominantly black working-class neighborhood almost 30 years ago to provide girls with a place to go to and feel a sense of belonging through the discipline and community of engaging with drill.³³ *The Fits* focus on black girlhood points to the complexity of erasure and reproduction of black female adolescence in American life and American cinema,³⁴ as Rizvana Bradley has noted in her article "Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion," and as I would add popular screendance narratives that center girlhood.³⁵ Belonging to a community of black girls extends beyond merely dancing together in the film as Toni, through bonding with the other girls, also starts to participate in, experiment with, and thus navigate rituals of girlhood: applying her first nail polish, getting her ears pierced in the bathroom of the community center, and overhearing the drill team captains talking about boys in the girls' bathroom. It is the specific rhythmicity of the drill, however, that calls to her at first.

Toni's first visual encounter with the girls as a group occurs at the start of the movie when she is getting water for the boys' boxing gym upstairs, dressed in a light grey sleeveless shirt, light grey tracksuit pants, black sneakers, her black hair styled in Dutch braids falling past her lower back. While she is rolling the water container up the slope in the community center in a steady 1-2, 1-2 rhythm, the camera firmly fixed on her back bend over the container she is rolling, the first point of contact with the girls is aural. Rather than seeing them, Toni, and by extension the spectator, hear the girls, talking, giggling, chanting, in a mix of overlapping sounds and voices. When the camera cuts from the medium shot of Toni to a full shot of the scene, four of the Lionesses are standing in the hallway in front of the room they are rehearsing in, bouncing, hair-flipping, moving, communicating through voice and body. The moment they sense and then see Toni all movement ceases and there is a moment of stillness where Toni and three of the girls form a loose circle around one of the girls sitting on the floor. In contrast to Toni, all of the girls are barefoot, wearing leggings with sleeveless, formfitting crop tops or singlets, and their black straightened hair is either worn open or in a ponytail. This tableau is broken up by a drumming track that starts playing in the rehearsal room, a call for the

four Lionesses to respond to by moving into the dance rehearsal space, leaving Toni behind in an empty hallway, booming with the syncopated rhythms of the drumming track.

The next edit takes the spectator to a set of closed double doors with inset narrow rectangular windows, framed in a medium shot, from behind which the drumming track can still be heard. A moment later Toni walks into the frame, approaching the windows in the doors, responding to the call of the drums. The next edit frames Toni's face in a close up shot, looking through the window, before cutting to what Toni is looking in on. The scene before her eyes and ears is one of the call-response conversations between the two team captains, Legs (Makyla Burnam) and Karisma (Inayah Rodgers), who, similar to the girls in the hallway before, are barefoot, wearing leggings, formfitting singlets, and their hair past shoulder length; Legs' black hair is completely straight with blue highlights at the ends and Karisma's black hair is slightly wavy with red highlights at the ends. Both team captains are battling-conversing to the syncopated rhythms of the drumming track, surrounded by the rest of the team cheering them on. The resonating syncopations of the music and the syncopated movements of the two dancers speak to her so much that she joins the team to access and learn this form of embodied knowledge and communication, to join the rhythmic encounter, to become part of the fold of the group. Rhythm is the connective tissue here, providing knowledge and community, orientating bodies in space and time.

To become a point of orientation, rhythm as connective tissue and knowledge has to be physically absorbed. The first synchronized section of the drill routine Toni learns when she joins The Lionesses to become part of the family fold, is called "the clap back call," which, within the movie, provides one of the rhythmic-connective hooks, beside the battle-conversations, and later the fitful convulsive episodes. To learn the routine, Legs and Karisma line up the six new members of The Lionesses, or "crabs" as they are called in the movie. Clad for the occasion of joining the older girls in the drill team, all of the crabs are barefoot, wearing leggings and either a formfitting singlet, t-shirt, or long-sleeved shirt. In contrast to the rest of the crabs, Maia (Lauren Gibson), as the tallest girl in line, is also the only one wearing her shoulder-length black hair straightened and open, while the others are wearing either natural hair pulled up in a top bun, braids pulled back in a ponytail, or in Beezy's (Alexis Neblett) case cornrows ending in two bun puffs on top of her head.

Framed by a full shot, the crabs remain in their line, while Legs walks out of the frame to demonstrate the choreography. Whereas the crabs see the movements that Legs demonstrates, in the first instance, spectators only hear the articulation of the movements through her voice, calling out, "step-around-step-step-around-out-up-cut-up-back/back/back/back-snatch-punch-punch-around-down-step-step-around-punch." After the initial show/tell, Legs counts in the girls, "5-6-7-go" and the girls start mirroring

"the clap back call" twice, responding to the sound of Legs' voice. As a point of orientation, Legs voice provides the rhythmic frame, calling to spectators to follow along. Within this sonic framing, however, the visual frame slightly disorients her calls, as each of the six crabs responds in a slightly different rhythm to Legs' voice and also each other. By not yet being fully in sync, the rhythmicity of the routine is layered while crabs and spectators are striving for orientation.

Whereas the syncopated rhythms of the drill dance team, the synchronized routines and the battle-conversations alike, provide moments of orientation, the fitful convulsive episodes disrupt the orientating flow of the group and function as moments of disorientation for Toni, The Lionesses, and the spectators. After both captains have been overcome by the fits, the opacity as to the cause of which has left a disorientating mark on the scene, Toni, her new friends Maia, Beezy, and two of the other crabs, who are a part of the fold of the dance team on the one hand, yet not part of the fold of the experience of those who have made it through the fits on the other hand, are encountering another battle-conversation between two other Lionesses in a corridor. This battle-conversation ends with one of the girls moving from the battle-conversation space into a fitful, convulsive episode, leaving one part of the fold to join another. The camera in full shot opens on the five crabs sitting in a circle on the floor, while four of the older team members stand in a loose circle opposite, all of them chatting and giggling, wearing rehearsal gear consisting of leggings and formfitting shirts and singlets, hair straightened, with one of the girls combing out the hair of another one. It is a self-contained moment in which the sounds of chatting and giggling in conjunction with the underlying melody of the score, played on wind instruments saturates the sonic *mis-en-scene* of the shot, without spectators being able to discern any particular dialogue from the conversations, bar the occasional word that sticks out. This moment is visually disrupted by an edit that shifts the focus on the four older Lionesses in a medium shot. Against the sonic backdrop of the chatting crabs and the score, one of the girls can be heard saying, "oh, I got moves. Let's go," to which the others reply, "I wanna see." With this call for dance-speech-rhythm-action, two girls move into the center of the corridor with the camera following along in a medium shot, focusing on the corpo-reality of the initial caller, first over the shoulder of the respondent, and then through an edit from behind the girl, who initiated the call. She finishes her call-response with "WHAT!", while jumping into the other girl's face with an explosive jump-punch. The responding girl nods in acknowledgment of the call-challenge and begins her dance-speech-rhythm-response.

At this point, the syncopated-corporeal response is further heightened by an increased noise level of the spectating girls commenting on the action with "hit it!" and "uhhhhhhh" as well as the increasing volume of the wind instrument score. Then the camera cuts to the crabs on the floor, watching in awe and excitement, encapsulated by Beezy calling "hot sauce!" and someone from outside the visual frame calling, "come on girl, you can

do better." The camera remains focused on the crabs as the convulsive episode starts, so that spectators get their first indication of the girls' disorientation from a corporeal shift in the spectating girls, huddling together, grabbing each other, confusion showing on their faces. As part of a shot reverse shot sequence, the camera cuts to the convulsing girl framed in a low-angle medium shot, upper body tilted backwards, arms raised, eyes closed, shaking uncontrollably. The moment she sinks down the camera cuts back to Toni, Beezy, and Maia on the floor, who huddle even closer together, while the score intensifies, picking up the trembling corpo-reality of the fits through a sonic corpo-aurality of quivering string instruments, drowning out the eerie melody of the wind instruments. This scene works so seamlessly that the spectatorial experience moves from being orientated towards the kinetic-rhythmic corpo-reality of the battle-conversation, its corporeal orature, to a moment of disorientation when the convulsions begin, made even more disorientating through the score's sonic corpo-aurality. This interplay heightens the tension between orientation and disorientation, between the corporeal rhythmic patterns of frequencies and the irregular sonic and corporeal resonances and syncopations of the convulsions, the tensions between one fold and another. In both folds knowledge as a form of corporeal orature, its corpo-orality, so to speak, is passed on through movement and sound. Similar to learning the drill routine and "the clap back call" for the competition and the parade, the convulsions that contagiously travel from dancing body to dancing body convey knowledge through their affective physicality, too.

Inside and Outside of the Polyrhythmic Circularity of the Cypher

In black social dance corpo-orality happens within the space of the cypher, as an enclosed space in which knowledge, interiority and exteriority, and rhythm is organized. As Imani Perry explains in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, the cypher is "a conceptual space in which a heightened consciousness exists."³⁶ It is also an actual circular space made up of bodies of spectators, who form a circle around performers, in the space of which performers show off their movement skills within a call-response structure. Inside the cypher, performers claim and present an insider's perspective and expertise, meaning an intimate knowledge, experience, and a form of belonging to a movement community. They perform an understanding of the embodied code of movement and its rhythms. Since the form of the cypher organizes interiority and exteriority, for spectators, who are not performing nor are intending to perform, there is always a certain inaccessibility to the experience. However, spectators still phenomenologically or kinesthetically encounter the movement through the mediated rhythmical vibrations across the interface of the vibe of the crowd, or if we are talking about screens, the interface of the screen.

The Fits is made up of multiple cyphers. As I mentioned before, Toni first experiences the kinetic orality and affective physicality of The Lionesses through encountering the battle-conversation between Legs and Karisma, in which the competing girls are surrounded by the rest of the team, all of whom are looking in on the action. As team captains and hence the most experienced dancers on the team, Legs and Karisma perform interiority in the cypher through their expertise and intimate knowledge of the dance movements and the community of girls they belong to. Legs and Karisma are also the first to exhibit *The Fits'* convulsive episodes, and in each case, the other girls form a ring around them to watch. In Karisma's case, part of her fitful episode is additionally shown through the other girls' mobile phone screens as an additional layer of mediated distance for spectators. Karisma's screen dance body is thus twice removed from the spectating eye, blurry in the background of the mobile phone screens that depict her form through a much smaller frame. The surrounding girls while being able to claim a certain amount of interiority through being part of the dance team's community are, at that stage, positioned as not experienced and knowing enough yet to claim the inner space of the cypher, the interiority of the cinematic-mobile frame. At this moment, they experience the fits only through the rhythmicity of the convulsions of Legs and Karisma's bodies and the accompanying sounds.

Before Toni joins The Lionesses, she is even further removed from, or exterior to the movements and rhythms of that space, being not just at the edge of the cypher but completely outside of it, separated by a door, looking in through the surface of the glass window. Toni however, is not unfamiliar with the heightened space of consciousness a cypher provides, since the boxing ring is another example of the cypher that organizes belonging through affective physicality and kinetic orality. The boxing rink provides the other significant communal space within the movie that has an equally extensive history within black communities.³⁷ As Theresa Runstedtler notes in her book *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line*, since the early 1800s, black pugilists were articulating and engaging with images of an assertive and independent masculinity that "emerged from the subaltern, homosocial spaces of the diaspora" and engaged in "a subversive camaraderie that cut against the normative grain of the white imperial order."³⁸ In the space of the boxing rink at the community center, the boys perform and practice rituals of boyhood, similar to that of the girls, not just through their boxing training sessions, but bonding over more mundane activities like lifting weights, eating pizza, and talking about girls. Again, it is the rhythmicity of boxing that Toni specifically relates to in this space and particularly the easy camaraderie that boxing as a corporeal communicative practice creates between her and her brother Jermaine (Da'Sean Minor), who is passing on knowledge through movement. This image is established right at the beginning of the movie when Jermaine is working with Toni inside the cypher of the boxing ring. Moreover, Toni's movements through the individual spaces she inhabits can also be described as circular. Moving from the boxing ring for

boxing practice to the gymnasium for dance practice to various outside spaces around the Lincoln Community Recreational Center's Cincinnati West End neighborhood for cardio training, including dancing on an overpass along the way, hanging out with her friends, to going home in the evening with her brother to return to the center the next day, creates its own cypher through a circularity of daily life and temporality within the filmic space. This circularity serves as a point of orientation for the spectator (and Toni) amongst the moments of disorientation that come with each fitful episode.

The circularity of this experience is intensified through the film's use of rhythm, or rather polyrhythm. If we think about rhythm as what the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as "regularity in the repetition in time or space of an action, process, feature, condition, event, etc." and "continuity of movement or delivery; pace, flow, stride,"³⁹ polyrhythm is the simultaneous combination of two or more contrasting rhythms, intensifying the overall delivery, pace, flow, and stride. The experience of polyrhythm is linked to what Brenda Dixon-Gottschild refers to as polycentrism in her book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, in which polycentrism is one of the five principles of an African aesthetic visible in American performance. Where polyrhythm is about embracing contrasting rhythms, polycentrism means that movement can originate from any body part and multiple shifting centers operate at the same time, inherently linking polycentrism and polyrhythm.⁴⁰ This creates an intensified affective experience through what she calls the principle of "high-affect juxtaposition,"⁴¹ signifying a shift, or re-orientation, in mood, attitude, and movement. For spectators, it results in constantly shifting modes of orientation and disorientation, "an encounter of opposites," as another principle of black performance, in which conflict, difference, and discord is incorporated rather than removed.⁴² As such the modality of spectatorial dis/orientation is tied to the praxis of the corporeal orature of black performance aesthetics, its conflicting, yet encompassing polyrhythms, their corpo-aurality, corpo-reality, and the resulting corpo-orality of rhythms within the frame of the cypher.

The corpo-orality of polyrhythm and polycentrism is visualized on multiple levels in *The Fits'* textual spatial fabric, in which cinematography and editing function as the framing exterior to rhythmicity. Through slow pacing camerawork and long duration between edits the camera is lingering and hovering, drawing out each individual moment on screen besides what is happening within the frame of each shot and each scene. Erin Manning refers to this quality of stretching the fabric of temporality, of "languidly holding movement"⁴³ as the "elasticity of the almost," which is, in her words, "the intensive extension of the movement, a moment when anything can happen, ... No step has been taken, and yet in this elastic the microperception of every possible step can almost be felt."⁴⁴ The rhythmicity of the elastic, lingering camerawork is intensified by the unhurried pace of the editing, creating a steady rhythmic pattern of frequency that expresses an affective suspension in the way it stretches the film's temporality to the

maximum by drawing each moment out, by stretching the fabric wide, by extending the visibility of the beat, to refer back to Bruno⁴⁵ and DeFrantz.⁴⁶

This exterior rhythmicity is linked to the interior rhythmicity and multiple centers of the film, which is created through the screen bodies and the different spaces they inhabit. We get two types of rhythmic patterns of frequency: the boys boxing club rhythm and the girls drill team rhythm. In the boxing room, as one center, the rhythmicity of the pace and the movements is more regular in its repetition, as when Toni does her sit ups or pull ups, which she counts on the up with an exhale, while going down with an inhale. When she boxes with her brother at the start of the movie, the rhythmic pattern goes "slip slip - roll; 1 2-3 roll; 1-2 step over; 1 2-3 roll; 1-2-3-4 step over," which creates a steady, regular repetition and pattern. This steady rhythm is contrasted with the way that rhythmicity plays out in the gymnasium where the dance team practices, which functions as another center. While the team captains use the usual dance 8 count bracket to count in the movement with "5, 6, 7, 8, 1," or "5, 6, 7, go," with no more counts being used after that, the pattern and frequency of the movement does not fit easily within the 8-count frame, they used to count the girls in, because the unique phrasing and rhythmicity of the moves cannot be contained within regular patterns. Instead the moves are actualized through a loud, high energy, syncopated, staccato, and burst-full dynamic, that is narrated through images and sounds, rather than counts as described in the scene where the girls learn the clap back call routine. Toni, moving from one space-center to the other, provides the link between these contrasting interior rhythms, all of which come to find a place within her body. This is not only visualized in her fit at the end of the film, to which I will come back further down, but also in a scene almost halfway through the movie, where Toni is caught between cardio training on the overpass and practicing the clap back call. The camera is following Toni, dressed in a light grey hoodie and light grey track pants, carrying the bag with her boxing equipment in a medium wide shot as she walks towards the overpass. At the top of the first flight of stairs she stops, drops her bag, turns, and starts running up and down the second flight of stairs. All the while the camera is tracking her in a medium wide shot, without interrupting her progress through editing, all the way up on to the overpass, where Toni starts jumping jacks, before moving into rehearsing the clap back call.

There are multiple layered rhythms at play here, both through soundtrack and movement. At first, Toni slowly walks up the first flight of stairs carrying her boxing equipment bag, which she puts down at the top of that flight, where the movement then pauses for a short amount of time. When she starts running up the second flight of stairs to the overpass, her slow walk speeds up and intensifies to a 1-2, 1-2, 1-2 running rhythm up and down the stairs. When she is on the overpass and starts doing jumping jacks, the regular 1-2, 1-2, 1-2 rhythmic pattern of frequency continues, before she pauses, turns, and starts the clap back call. It is here, where the rhythmicity gets more complicated, both through the way the movement is actualized, organized, and repeated, as well as

through the additional layer of sound. While Toni is doing the jumping jacks with its 1-2 basic rhythmicity, another beat gradually starts filling the sound-scape. This beat is accompanying Toni in the jumping jacks as well as in the clap back call, through its "DA-dadada / DA-dadada / DA-dadada" syncopation. As she repeatedly moves through the clap back call, inhabiting the movements, rhythms, and knowledge more and more with each repetition, all patterns of frequency gradually intensify, building up in momentum through the repetition of the dance routine and the sound. The sonic rhythmic patterns of frequency, which contrast each other and Toni's corpo-reality throughout, are crucial to this intensification, as the syncopated percussive beat (DA-dadada) is joined by a slower, more deeply resonating beat (bum bum bum-bum / bum bum bum-bum), a rhythm section played on string instruments (de-de-de / de-de-de), and the wind instruments playing the eerie melody that accompanies Toni throughout the movie. Momentum and intensification is created through this layering of the corpo-aurality and corpo-reality of poly-rhythm/polycentrism: the exterior frame of the cinematography with its steady lingering hover; the cardio section with its steady, measured rhythmicity; and the dance routine with its high energy, syncopated, staccato, and burst-full dynamic all folding in on each other through Toni's performance. At this point, Toni moves from the very edge of the cypher, closer to its center, although she's not quite there yet.

It is at the very end of the movie, when Toni is finally going through her own convulsive fitful episode, that all of the different spaces, cyphers, and rhythm are eventually joined in her imagination, collapsing the multiple folds and fabrics of Toni's experience of community into each other.⁴⁷ The scene starts with a long shot framing Toni looking skywards standing in the middle of the drained pool from behind, to cut to a low-ish angle medium close up shot of her face and part of her upper body, from which the camera then revolves clockwise around Toni's contemplative reflective figure, cutting to a close up shot of her face in profile and ending on zooming in to an extreme close up of Toni's forehead, eyes, and nose to the first line of the lyrics of Kiah Victoria's song *Aurora*, "Must we choose to be slaves to gravity."⁴⁸ As this line is repeated, the camera and the editing take the convulsive episodic imagination through the different spaces of Toni's life, starting with an edit to her walking down the corridor of the community center with the camera focused on her bare feet in a medium shot. To the lyrics of the first verse, "we were born of the sun / out shine the moon / shouldn't we be light / shouldn't we be treasured,"⁴⁹ the camera follows Toni's walking feet through the community center as they begin to lift off the floor, walking on air. The presence of the other girls is announced sonically, through chattering voices and pattering feet, underlying the music, as they rush to meet her. The next edit takes the viewer to a medium wide shot of Toni's upper back in front of the drill dance team, who are slightly blurry in the frame, expressing signs of worry and distress through gasps and corporeal gestures signaling distress and recognition.

To the line "we choose to be slaves to gravity" and an accompanying whooshing sound of surprise from the girls, this edit quite literally drops Toni into the midst of the cypher of the fits, surrounded by the rest of the team. Interspersed with her convulsive body in the cypher, rhythmically contrasting the piano melody of the song and Kiah Victoria's mesmerizing voice, are imaginings of her in all the spaces she has gradually come to inhabit throughout the movie. She is simultaneously in all of them: the corridor of the community center connecting inside and outside as well as the boxing club and the dance rehearsal room; the overpass, where she strips off her training hoodie underneath which she wears her dance costume – a high-collard, sleeveless, blue, white, and gold sequined leotard over gold leggings, and gold jazz shoes – and is joined by the rest of the team in full costume for the drill routine; the cypher of the boxing ring, in which Toni is depicted dancing with her fellow crabs in full costume; and the drained pool, where the whole team is shown to move in sync and in formation with Toni in their midst, back to her in the corridor in the final throes of the fits. The film ends on the final repetition of the contrasting lyrics "we choose to be slaves to gravity / must we choose to be slaves to gravity,"⁵⁰ to which Toni drops out of her fitful episode into the arms of her fellow drill dance team members, a smile curling her lips before the camera cuts to a black screen and a moment of stillness before the closing credits start to roll.

(Poly)Rhythmic Dis/Orientation: A Dis/Conclusion

What does this mean for the spectator? As I said at the start, the movie reviews all identify specific spectatorship experiences in their descriptions. *The Verge's* Tasha Robinson called the film immersive and lyrical; *New York Times'* Manohla Dargis describes it as atmospheric "through sumptuously textured visuals"⁵¹; Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* remarks on the film's rhythms, comparing it to "a ballad that ranges from lyrical to startling"⁵²; and in *Huck Magazine* Marta Bausells states that "The juxtaposition of dance routines and mysterious fits, ..., together with the film's minimalistic style, evocative cinematography, and intimate performances, makes for an uneasy but absorbing viewing experience."⁵³ In that same article, Bausells quotes director Anna Holmer's thoughts on the intended affective spectatorial experience, "it's a movie about bodies, so we end it with this very out-of-body experience. My hope is that the audience brings themselves to that moment and that it triggers for them that first moment of transcendence, that first moment of feeling like your universe is larger than you,"⁵⁴ reflecting on the film's potential lived spectatorship experience that involves a constant negotiation of moments of orientation and disorientation through the movement and fits of the screen dance bodies.

This transcendence, as I mentioned at the start, happens through the point of view of black girlhood, represented through girls whose skin tones range from the light brown skin tone of the initial caller of the hallway battle to the dark brown skin tone of Toni's

complexion and all the different ways in which the girls wear their hair. This transcendence is also located in the particular rhythmicity of the drill dance team and the fits that contagiously travel through the group. Focusing on the fits for a moment, White specifically examines the contagious elements of mass hysteria and the mania of the dancing disease, which Holmer names as the inspiration for the film, in relation to Freud's definition of mass hysteria, gender, race, and the spectacularity usually associated with media coverage of mass psychotic illness (MPI).⁵⁵ As she points out, "instead of the spectacle of black girls getting out of line, Holmer's *The Fits* shows staying *in line* – in formation – as an art form, through the discipline and community of drill team dancing."⁵⁶ Though the roots of the fits as a form of mass hysteria in the film are never resolved nor explained, the fitful screen dance bodies are also never presented as being completely out of control or in crisis. It is not about overcoming the fits as an obstacle or opponent, but about going through them, crossing the threshold,⁵⁷ or, in other words, becoming dis/orientated and re-orientated in the process. The drill dance team functions as an anchor, a home base, a point of orientation for the girls in the movie. In *The Fits*, as a film about fits, about fitting in, the fitful episodes are also fitting in to the overall texture of the movie, as one rhythm in the polyrhythmic formation of the cinematic space.

Rather than spectacularizing, fetishizing, or pathologizing⁵⁸ black girlhood through the drill and the fits, the film asks spectators to stay in line with the girls, to look, listen, and feel closely with the multiple rhythmicities of the corporeal orature at play. As such *The Fits* asks for an empathetic stance that is not located in trying to inhabit the girls' bodies, to become them, to be inside the cypher, to claim absolute interiority over their experiences, to claim to know. Instead spectators, being positioned at the very edge of the cinematic cypher-frame, are asked to experience alongside them through a rhythmic-haptic sense perception that fine tunes perception and modes of empathetic experiences. As Henriques notes about the importance of listening for the notion of thinking through sound, "listening concerns depths rather than surfaces...It is haptic sense and, as touch itself, simultaneously both makes a connection between one and another, and recognises their separation."⁵⁹ That is where dis/orientation as a spectatorial mode comes back into focus. Audiences are asked to hear/see alongside and be with all of the girls in *The Fits* through the various rhythmic modalities at play. It involves moving through dis/orientation, being in and out of line, feeling the tension and discrepancies, encountering its sonic vibrations and disturbances, recognising the separation. In all those moments that the sonic-(poly)rhythmic-haptic tilts perception off its axis questions persist: of what it means to see and know; what it means to be a black girl coming-of-age; what it means to be a screen dance black girl coming-of-age; whose coming-of-age screen dance stories are centered, how, and in what way?

Biography

Elena Benthhaus graduated with a PhD in Dance Studies from the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne in May 2016, where she also teaches in the Screen and Cultural Studies Department. She has a M.A. in English Literary Studies and Theatre Studies from Humboldt University Berlin and Freie Universität Berlin and a degree in Modern and Contemporary Dance. Her research focuses on the transnational production, circulation, and transmission of popular screen dance works and their impact on spectatorship communities on social media in particular, as well as popular culture more broadly

Email: elena.benthhaus@unimelb.edu.au

Notes

¹ Though Anna Rose Holmer is singled out as the director of the film when it comes to coverage and interviews, she always frames her work on the film as a collaboration. The script was co-written with creative producers Lisa Kjerulff and Saela Davis. The Q-Kidz founder (the actual drill team behind all the girls' roles and appearances in the film) Marquicia Jones-Woods, or Ms. Quicy as she is known, is credited as an associate producer. Her two daughters Mariah and Chariah Jones were responsible for the choreography. Moreover, Holmer has also clearly stated in multiple interviews that they adapted the script in collaboration with the drill dance team girls and aimed for making it a community project as much as possible. See, for reference: Bausells, "Anna Rose Holmer on her daunting film *The Fits*"; Bugbee, "Q&A: The Fits Director Anna Rose Holmer on Making a Movie about 'The Dancing Disease'"; Felsenthal, "Anna Rose Holmer on Directing *The Fits* and the Power of Contagion"; Fear, "How 'The Fits' Became the Girls Power Movie of 2016"; Schmidlin, "Meet the Cincinnati Dance Squad Behind 'The Fits': A conversation with director Anna Rose Holmer and Q-Kidz dance squad founder 'Ms. Quicy' Jones-Wood."

² The boys of the boxing club in the movie are played by the boys of the Queen City Boxing Club, located at the Lincoln Community Recreational Center where the film was set. See: Schmidlin.

³ All of the girls in the film, including the ones in major and minor speaking roles, are from the actual drill dance team Q-Kidz, located at the Lincoln Community Recreational Center where the film was set. See: Schmidlin.

⁴ Dargis, "Review"

⁵ Bruno, *Surface*, 13.

⁶ Ibid. 19.

⁷ Ibid. 20.

⁸ Robinson, "The Fits Review."

⁹ For examples of that, see Bausells, Bugbee, Felsenthal, and Fear.

¹⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 6.

¹¹ cf. Ibid. 9

¹² Ibid. 10

¹³ Nyong'o, "Afro-philo-sonic Fictions," 173.

¹⁴ See Weheliye, *Phonographies*.

¹⁵ See Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*.

¹⁶ While I will be focusing on Weheliye and Henriques for the purposes of this article, it is important to note that, as Nyong'o has further pointed out, both Weheliye's and Henriques' work is located in a network of black sound studies and the contributions of Paul Gilroy, Fred Moten, Kodwo Eshun, and Samuel Floyd, among others. See: Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Moten, *In the Break*; and Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun*.

¹⁷ Weheliye, "I Am I Be," 102.

¹⁸ cf. Ibid. 103.

¹⁹ Ibid. 104.

²⁰ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, preamble.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Henriques, "The Vibrations of Affect," 58.

²⁴ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, preamble.

²⁵ Henriques, "The Vibrations of Affect," 69.

²⁶ Henriques, "Rythmic Bodies," 83.

²⁷ Ahmed, "Collective Feelings," 25.

²⁸ cf. Henriques, Tianen, and Valiaho, "Rhythm Returns," 3-29.

²⁹ Bragin, "Techniques of Black Male Re/Dress," 63.

³⁰ DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible," 66.

³¹ Ibid. 66.

³² White, "Bodies That Matter," 27.

³³ cf. Schmidlin.

³⁴ cf. Bradley, "Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion."

³⁵ It is crucial to note here, that in *The Fits*, the experience of girlhood is firmly situated in the community center and spectators never see the girls at their respective homes and hardly any adults really enter the cinematic frame. Patricia White locates the reason for this "self-enclosed world" (28) in the fact that *The Fits* is an independent film on a small budget and thus working with restricted means and a more concentrated production time (28).

³⁶ Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 107.

³⁷ cf. Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner*, 25-27.

³⁸ Ibid., 28.

³⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary* Online, s.v. "rhythm (n.)," accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/view/Entry/165403?rskey=k1ybto&result=1&isAdvanced=fals>.

⁴⁰ cf. Dixon-Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, 14.

⁴¹ Ibid. 15.

⁴² cf. Ibid. 13ff.

⁴³ Manning, *Relationescapes*, 32.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 32.

⁴⁵ Bruno, *Surface*, 20.

⁴⁶ DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible," 73.

⁴⁷ For a look of the final scene, see <https://youtu.be/sENdrIPNOjU>.

⁴⁸ Kiah Victoria, "Aurora," Vimeo, uploaded March 9, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/121740441>, accessed January 24, 2018.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Dargis, "Review."

⁵² Peter Travers, "Review of The Fits."

⁵³ Bausells, "Anna Rose Holmer on her daunting film The Fits."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ cf. White, "Bodies That Matter: Black Girlhood in The Fits," 23-31.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 27.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 28.

⁵⁸ In her book *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, Aimee Meredith Cox points out that stories about black girls that garner a lot of mainstream attention usually involve painting the lives of those girls as dysfunctional and in need of reform (6). More often than not, however, she points to the lack of stories and the erasure of the voices of those who actually matter in those contexts – black girls.

⁵⁹ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, preamble.

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