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RESEARCH NOTE

Black Embodied Political Subjectivity

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Abstract

Drawing from an interpretivist framework, this paper proposes Black Embodied Political Subjectivity (BEPS) as a conceptual framework that foregrounds the body, affect, and historical memory as critical to political subjectivity. BEPS draws on Black political thought to challenge dominant epistemologies that prioritize disembodied rationality and abstract ideological commitments over lived, felt, and corporeal political experiences. Rather than treating the body as an inert vessel or secondary site of politics, BEPS argues that the body is central to the ways Black people negotiate, contest, and reconstitute power in lived political contexts.

Keywords: Embodiment; political subjectivity; Black feminist theory; affect and politics

Introduction

How does embodiment inform political subjectivity? Political science has traditionally conceptualized subjectivity in abstract, physically untethered, and disembodied terms, sidelining the ways political subjectivity is informed by embodied experiences that are felt, expressed, or produced via the human body (Brown and Gershon, 2020; Soss and Weaver, 2017). This emphasis on abstraction has deep philosophical roots in Descartes' mind—body dualism, which enshrines the separation of reason from corporeality. By privileging cognition as the basis of political agency, this tradition relegated embodied experience to the margins, shaping subsequent theories of political subjectivity in ways that exclude or diminish the corporeal.

Political subjectivity is conventionally understood as the process by which individuals internalize and enact their roles within political systems. Classical theories, such as Hegel's (1991 [1820]) claim that subjectivity is realized through membership in the state, link it closely to institutional structures. Similarly, Max Weber's (1978) concepts of legitimacy and authority, as well as more contemporary theories like Tyler and Mentovich's (2010) conceptualization of procedural justice, assume an abstract, universal subject whose relationship to power is primarily mediated through

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institutional recognition. This subject is constructed as rational, detached, and disembodied, presumed to engage with the political realm through procedural fairness. Even in scholarship that centers race, political subjectivity is often understood through concepts like discrimination, bias, or relations between racialized groups and the state (Hajnal and Horowitz 2014; Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Weaver and Lerman 2010). These approaches reveal how racism structures political participation and state legitimacy, but they rarely foreground embodied, lived experiences, which are shaped by intersecting axes of social differentiation, as constitutive of political subjectivity (Jefferson 2023; Laniyonu 2019).

Recent scholarship in political science has begun to take embodiment more seriously. Brown and Gershon (2017), for example, argue that the body is constitutive of politics and call for political science to engage the body as a central analytic category. McKinney (2017) demonstrates through the case of racial passing that the body is an active site through which identity and power are constituted, while Threadcraft (2016) highlights how the Black female body makes visible the intersections of state failure and necropower. Together, these interventions underscore the importance of embodiment for political analysis. Black Embodied Political Subjectivity (BEPS) builds on and extends this work by theorizing embodiment not simply as shaping political practice, but as constitutive of political subjectivity itself.

Embodiment plays a significant role in how individuals experience power, whether through racialized policing (Weaver and Prowse, 2020), gendered expectations (James, 1996), economic insecurity, ableist exclusions, or religious identity (Robinson, 2013). These experiences are not isolated; they intersect in ways that fundamentally shape how political subjectivity is felt, negotiated, and understood. If we fail to account for how political life is experienced and navigated through the bodily experiences of hierarchical social differentiation, we risk drawing incomplete or misleading conclusions about political behavior, power, and resistance.

This paper introduces BEPS as an interpretivist framework for understanding the intersection of embodiment and political subjectivity (Thomas, 2021). The framework emerged from my empirical research in Kingston, Jamaica, where I examined the relational dynamics among residents of inner-city communities, known as garrisons, the dons (leaders of criminal organizations who occupy governing roles), and the state. Developed in the context of a specific population in a country marked by the enduring legacies of colonialism, BEPS centers the lived experiences of Black residents and their fraught relationships with both the criminal bosses who govern their neighborhoods and the state itself. For instance, residents' everyday interactions with dons, such as displays of respect or bids for protection, reveal how political subjectivity is shaped through embodied and relational negotiations. These encounters shape how subjectivity—a term I use according to Amina Mama's definition to mean "the way in which individuals act on and use social history and experience to invent their own identities along the interrelated dimensions of race and gender, to constitute themselves as racialized and gendered individual subjects" (1995, 62)—is experienced, contested, and reimagined in everyday life.

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By theorizing political subjectivity as fundamentally shaped by embodiment, affect, and historical experience, the BEPS framework offers insights into how marginalized or racialized communities navigate political life. While Blackness and Black subjectivities are plural and context-specific across the globe, BEPS highlights the fundamental commonalities arising from the shared histories of anti-Blackness. At the same time, BEPS is designed to illuminate the variations in the production of Blackness and subjectivity across transnational contexts, allowing for nuanced analyses that account for specific local histories and political formations. And while this article focuses on Blackness as a specific historical and political formation, future scholarship, from Indigenous studies and other critical traditions, may take up this framework to examine how different histories of dispossession, settler-colonial violence, and systemic exclusion shape embodied political meaning across various contexts.

Existing theories of embodiment, such as Foucault's biopolitics and Mbembe's necropolitics, have contributed significantly to our understanding of how power operates on and through the body. Biopolitics explores how modern states regulate life itself, managing populations through surveillance, discipline, and the optimization of health and productivity (Foucault, 1978), while necropolitics examines how sovereign power determines who is killable, exposing racialized subjects to social and literal death (Mbembe, 2019). BEPS, rather than centering the state's regulation of life and death, foregrounds the ways Black political subjectivity is formed through embodied histories of trauma and relational practices of survival, resilience, and joy. In Kingston's garrisons, for instance, residents navigate the dual threat of state and gang violence; BEPS highlights how this embodied vulnerability shapes political subjectivity that is both affective and strategic.

This paper outlines the theoretical foundations and significance of BEPS, demonstrating how it provides a framework for analyzing political life. The goal of this article is to describe the power of BEPS as a rigorous approach with broad application potential in political science. The paper proceeds in three sections. First, it engages with the canon of Black political thought to trace the intellectual lineage of BEPS. Second, it articulates the core tenets of BEPS, demonstrating how it can be operationalized as a framework for political analysis. Finally, it considers the implications of BEPS for the study of political subjectivity, particularly in contexts shaped by histories of racialized violence and coloniality.

Black Embodiment in the Politics of Subjectivity

Black political thought and feminist epistemologies intervene in dominant political discourses by centering embodiment as fundamental to political subjectivity. Scholars in critical phenomenology, such as Lisa Guenther (2013) and Alia Al-Saji (2010), have made related interventions, showing how race and racialization are lived and experienced through the body. Taken together, these approaches reject the fiction of a disembodied political subject and illuminate how racialized and gendered expectations of what constitutes political truth systematically exclude certain embodied experiences and truncate the possibilities for liberation. Their work offers the theoretical precursor to BEPS, laying the groundwork for a framework that foregrounds embodiment as central to political meaning-making. What unites these

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intellectual interventions is their overarching concern for understanding what it means to move through the world as a Black political subject—or, at times, to be denied political subjecthood altogether.

One of the most influential contributions comes from Frantz Fanon, whose works *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) provide a foundational account of how colonial power structures and racial hierarchies are experienced and internalized on the body. Rather than simply being subjected to colonial violence, the colonized body is a site where the trauma of oppression is lived, enacted, and resisted. Fanon's insights into the psychological and corporeal effects of colonialism remain relevant in contemporary discussions of race, power, and embodiment, providing a framework for understanding how systemic racism and colonial legacies continue to shape bodily experiences.

This lineage continues with contemporary philosophers such as Lewis Gordon, whose Black existential phenomenology demonstrates that the constitution of Black subjectivity is always a political and existential struggle against the dehumanizing projects of anti-Black racism. Similarly, expanding on Fanon's analysis, Sylvia Wynter interrogates not only how colonialism inscribes itself on the body but also how it constructs the very category of "the human" as a racialized and exclusionary framework. She argues that Western political thought is structured by what she terms the "genre of Man," a colonial construct that positions whiteness as the normative ideal of humanity while relegating racialized bodies to the margins of political and ontological recognition. Calling for a rearticulation of what it means to be human (2003), Wynter offers a radical critique of the ontological foundations of Western political thought, insisting that any understanding of political subjectivity must grapple with the histories of dehumanization that shape the very definition of the political subject. Her epistemological intervention is particularly critical for BEPS, as it reframes embodiment not simply as a site of oppression or resistance but as a challenge to the colonial construction of subjectivity itself. This theoretical shift provides the groundwork for thinking about how political subjectivity is structured by colonial categories of humanity and how Black bodies exist both within and against these frameworks.

In a complementary manner, bell Hooks (1984) expands the discussion of embodied political subjectivity by showing how Black women's bodies, in particular, are sites where multiple forms of oppression are simultaneously enacted and contested, though they are also sites of resistance and meaning-making. Her assertion that "the personal is political"[1] underscores how Black women's political subjectivity is shaped through their everyday encounters with power, whether through systemic economic exploitation, racist and sexist violence, or struggles over representation and visibility. She highlights how political subjectivity is not solely determined by formal institutions but is also produced through affective, relational, and material experiences, all of which structure how Black women come to see themselves in relation to power. Hooks' analysis of relational power complements Fanon's work by demonstrating that the internalization of oppression is not only racialized but also profoundly gendered and classed. This emphasis on intersectionality is essential for understanding how BEPS is constructed across multiple axes of oppression.

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Building on these insights, Patricia Hill Collins' foundational work *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) challenges dominant knowledge systems that privilege abstraction and objectivity over situated, embodied knowledge. Collins' articulation of Black feminist standpoint builds on feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983) while extending it through the lived experiences of Black women, arguing that Black women's knowledge emerges from their everyday lived realities rather than from detached theoretical frameworks. Collins' work is particularly significant for BEPS because it demonstrates that political subjectivity is not only constructed through external power structures but also through how individuals and communities make sense of embodied histories and positionalities.

This genealogy of Black political thought and feminist epistemologies is complemented by other critical interventions that foreground embodiment as constitutive of political life. Joy James (2003), Dorothy Roberts (1997), Annie Menzel (2018), and Lisa Beard (2018) offer powerful accounts of how Black embodiment is central to the negotiation of power, belonging, and exclusion, underscoring the need for frameworks like BEPS. The process of internalizing oppression and negotiating power does not take place solely at the cognitive or ideological level; it is embodied, emotional, and deeply felt.

Trauma, as both an individual and collective experience, structures how Black communities navigate power, authority, and resistance. Scholars such as Peter Levine (2005) and Judith Herman (1992) argue that trauma is not merely psychological but deeply embodied, shaping the ways individuals experience and respond to their social and political environments. As Joy DeGruy Leary (2005) and Robert T. Carter (2007) have shown with their concepts of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (PTSS) and *Race-Based Traumatic Stress*, respectively, slavery, colonialism, racial capitalism, and systemic anti-Blackness have left lasting somatic traces, carried across generations not only in social conditions but in the ways Black people inhabit and experience their bodies. I use "racial capitalism" as described by Cedric Robinson (2000): a system where capitalism is inherently racial and structured by racial hierarchies. My application of this term focuses on how the combined logics of race and capital subordinate Black life (Jenkins and Leroy, 2021). Black political subjectivity, then, is not only shaped by external structures of domination but also by the embodied memories, emotions, and intergenerational imprints of oppression. This insight is critical for BEPS because it reveals that Black political subjectivity is not solely a reaction to external oppression but also a negotiation of internalized histories of violence. In contexts of state surveillance, anti-Black policing, and systemic exclusion, the trauma of historical and contemporary violence becomes inscribed onto the body itself, structuring fear, mistrust, and survival strategies.

Similarly, the affective turn in political theory has taught us that emotions are deeply political forces. Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on the cultural politics of emotion highlights how collective emotions circulate within communities, shaping political consciousness and structuring how individuals relate to power and resistance. For example, state violence does not just produce material dispossession; it also generates grief, fear, and anger. These emotions, in turn, shape political agency: anger fuels resistance, grief builds solidarity, and fear produces strategies of survival. The emotional aftershocks of colonial and state violence do not merely disappear; they accumulate, manifesting as somatic responses, collective anxieties, and affective

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orientations toward power. Yet, as Sharpe (2016) reminds us, even "in the wake" of slavery and anti-Blackness, joy, beauty, and care persist as embodied practices that sustain communities, shape solidarities, and animate visions of freedom. BEPS, therefore, attends to the way joy and pleasure shape political subjectivity.

This understanding of trauma and affect is crucial for BEPS because it complicates traditional models of political behavior, which assume that individuals act purely based on rational interests or ideological commitments. Instead, BEPS highlights that Black political subjectivity emerges from embodied experiences of oppression, the visceral memories of historical violence, and the affective ties that structure community and resistance. The experience of trauma is not merely individual or psychological; it is also collective and political, shaping the ways entire communities engage with power, authority, and governance. The embodied knowledge of oppression, what Saidiya Hartman (2007) refers to as the *afterlife of slavery* and Deborah Thomas (2019) refers to as the *wake of the plantation*, conditions the ways Black communities relate to the formal state, which has often been an agent of their subjugation rather than their protection.

The theoretical insights from Black political thought, Black feminist epistemologies, and racial capitalism illustrate the necessity of a framework that accounts for embodiment, affect, and historical memory in the study of political subjectivity. BEPS operationalizes these insights, providing analytical lenses for examining how power is experienced, negotiated, and resisted through the body.

Core Tenets

The BEPS framework responds to the rich tradition of Black political theorizing by offering specific ways to recognize and analyze how power is internalized, negotiated, and contested through the body. In this framework, Black bodies, long positioned as sites of both subjugation and resistance in world history, telegraph specific histories of racialization and gendering that structure political agency. In the BEPS framework, the body is not just a passive recipient of political forces but an active site of political meaning and resistance.

In BEPS, embodiment, lived experience, and affect are interrelated but distinct dimensions of political subjectivity. By embodiment, I mean that the body is an active site where histories of racial violence, dispossession, and resilience are lived, navigated, and resisted. Lived experience refers to how those conditions are felt in everyday life, while affect captures the emotional and relational forces, such as grief, fear, and joy, that circulate collectively. BEPS does not reject reason; it prioritizes embodied knowledge by challenging the colonial elevation of disembodied rationality over corporeal and affective modes of political meaning-making.

BEPS rests on four core tenets that challenge dominant epistemological assumptions in political science. The first tenet is that our bodies are sites of political knowledge. This means we cannot fully understand political subjectivity without paying attention to how people experience power through their bodies. Most traditional political theories treat the body as an incidental factor rather than a primary mode of engaging with political life. However, BEPS foregrounds the ways Black people's political experiences, whether of state violence, economic marginalization, or spatial exclusion, are not only ideological but somatic.

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Political subjectivity is a lived and affective condition shaped through the everyday negotiations of power that occur in and on the body.

Second, BEPS emphasizes the centrality of affect and emotion to political analysis. Most dominant frameworks in political science have historically favored rationality and procedure, dismissing the political significance of feelings like grief, anger, fear, and joy. Yet affective responses to power, such as the grief of communities mourning state-sanctioned violence, the justified rage expressed in protest movements, or the exhaustion produced by chronic racial surveillance, structure political action in profound ways. BEPS makes explicit that emotions are not incidental to political subjectivity but integral to how political meaning is produced and acted upon.

Third, BEPS accounts for historical memory and the afterlives of racial violence, insisting that political subjectivity is not only shaped by contemporary structures but also by the intergenerational transmission of racial trauma and resistance. This tenet expands traditional political analysis by recognizing that Black political engagement is informed by a deep historical consciousness, one that links present struggles to past modes of domination, survival, and refusal. This historical consciousness is not simply a recollection of past events but an active force that shapes Black political subjectivity in the present and informs visions of the future. In Kingston, memories of political violence and state abandonment continue to shape how residents interpret present conditions, often reinforcing reliance on dons as sources of order and protection rather than the state. I conceptualize this phenomenon as "Blacktime," a non-linear understanding of time where the past, present, and future are deeply intertwined. Blacktime captures the ways in which historical traumas and struggles remain alive in Black political life while simultaneously enabling the radical reimagining of what the futures can be, including joy. It stresses that ancestral memory, lived experience, and future possibilities all coexist within the political consciousness of Black communities.

Fourth, BEPS commits to relational and situated knowledge production, drawing from Black feminist epistemologies that reject detached, "objective" analysis in favor of research that is accountable to and co-produced with Black communities. Political science has long relied on epistemological frameworks that construct knowledge as neutral, universal, and detached from the conditions of those being studied. However, BEPS insists that knowledge is always situated and that research must be self-reflexive about how power operates in knowledge production. This tenet underscores the importance of participatory methods, where communities are not merely studied but actively engaged in theorizing their own political subjectivity.

These tenets illustrate the analytical power of BEPS. Consider, for example, the study of Black protest movements. Conventional political science might analyze these movements through institutional frameworks, focusing on legal claims, policy outcomes, or strategic mobilization. A BEPS approach, however, would begin by examining how bodily risk, trauma, and affective labor shape political action. Through participant observation and embodied testimony, a researcher might document how Black activists navigate police presence, how their movements are shaped by historical memory, and how collective chants, gestures, and protective formations operate as affective political acts. Rather than treating protest as simply a

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strategic decision, BEPS reveals it as a site where historical trauma, somatic knowledge, and political resistance intersect in real time.

By centering embodiment, affect, historical memory, and relational knowledge production, BEPS challenges the epistemic constraints of political science and offers new ways to understand political subjectivity. This framework pushes scholars to rethink dominant approaches that see and treat political actors as rational, disembodied individuals. Instead, it foregrounds the lived, felt, and embodied realities of power, oppression, resilience, and resistance.

Future Research Directions: Expanding the Scope of BEPS

While this note discusses BEPS within the context of Black life in the Americas, the broader framework of embodied political subjectivity has potential applications beyond this specific case. It can be applied to dominant groups, whose privileged embodiment shapes their political subjectivity, and to other communities, such as Indigenous peoples and colonized populations, to examine how their own embodied histories of dispossession, state violence, and systemic exclusion inform their political realities.

Scholars might explore how embodied resistance manifests in different socio-political landscapes by applying BEPS to diverse contexts. One avenue for future research is comparative studies across the Global South, examining how embodied political subjectivity takes shape in postcolonial nations with distinct colonial legacies. Examining how histories of enslavement, racial stratification, and anti-colonial struggle interact with modern governance and resistance could provide insight into how embodiment shapes political life in other parts of the world. Another important direction is the role of digital spaces. We need to investigate how affect, trauma, and bodily experience are shaped by online activism, digital surveillance, and virtual political engagement. As digital technologies increasingly influence political discourse and protest, new questions arise about how political identity is performed, negotiated, and contested in virtual spaces where the body is both present and absent.

Additionally, BEPS could be applied to spaces of incarceration, migration, and displacement, where state control over bodies is explicit, yet political agency persists in complex ways. Whether through prison uprisings, migrant protests, or the embodied resistance of detainees against state surveillance and confinement, these sites reveal the tension between bodily constraint and political action. In these contexts, embodied political subjectivity (EPS) names the broader analytic framework, of which BEPS is a historically specific articuation, for understanding how political subjectivity is constituted through lived, affective, and material conditions, rather than simply through legal recognition or institutional participation.

By pushing beyond state-centered models of political behavior, EPS invites scholars to investigate political life from the perspectives of those whose embodied experiences have been historically ignored, dismissed, or erased. This framework is not simply an expansion of political science's toolkit; it is a call to rethink our understanding of political agency itself.

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Conclusion

This research note has introduced BEPS as an interpretive approach in political science, offering a framework that foregrounds the body as a site of political meaning-making. By emphasizing embodiment, affect, and historical experience, BEPS challenges dominant theories that rely on rationalist, state-centric, and disembodied understandings of political subjectivity. Rather than assuming that political engagement is solely mediated through institutions, legality, or formal participation, BEPS reveals how power is internalized, contested, and negotiated through lived, bodily experience.

Engaging BEPS allows scholars to ask different kinds of questions and arrive at new insights that other frameworks might overlook or inadequately address. Conventional frameworks in political science often privilege procedural justice, institutional legitimacy, or material incentives as primary drivers of political action. Yet, as BEPS demonstrates, political subjectivity is not merely a cognitive or strategic process but an embodied and affective one. If scholars continue to rely on abstract frameworks that of political actors from their historical, racialized, and gendered experiences of embodiment, they risk producing analyses that fail to capture how marginalized communities experience and enact power in ways that defy dominant paradigms.

How, for instance, would our understanding of political resistance change if we centered bodily risk, affective attachments, and intergenerational trauma as key determinants of political agency? What does legitimacy look like when it is not granted by the state but produced through relational structures of care and respect in communities historically excluded from formal governance? What forms of political belonging and exclusion become visible when we analyze how the body itself is marked, surveilled, or dehumanized in political systems? BEPS invites scholars to rethink what counts as political behavior, how political agency is defined, and what sources of power are deemed legitimate.

The challenge ahead is not only to apply BEPS to new contexts but to expand its theoretical horizons, pushing the boundaries of what political science considers legitimate sites of inquiry, and whose knowledge it values in the process. This includes recognizing that embodied political subjectivity is shaped not only by trauma and dispossession but also by joy, care, and solidarity, which are themselves vital modes of Black political life (Sharpe 2016). This work is an invitation to further explore how embodiment operates as a site of political meaning-making across different contexts, and I look forward to seeing how other scholars may take up, challenge, or extend this approach in their own work.

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Note

1 Carol Hanisch (2000) is often credited with coining the phrase "the personal is political" in her 1969 essay of the same title.

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