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FORMATION

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*photo credit: Tayarisha Poe*

THERE IS A GLAMOROUS, SHIMMERING EAGERNESS  
WITH WHICH I OFFER THIS WORK. THIS WERK.  
GLISTENING IN SWEAT AND STUDY. PATTERNED  
IN A CASCADE OF REPETITIONS AND DO-OVERS  
AND FALSE STARTS AND HESITATIONS AND  
CRESCENDOS AND WAITING. AND WAITING.  
AND PAYING ATTENTION.

photo credit: Gema Galiana

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Underneath that shimmer, I am shaking. I am nervous. This labor has been a consistently evolving idea in the pregnant minds and physicalities of, first, Donte and me, and then our beautiful collaborators as well. For years, the idea has evolved, and rested, and evolved, and turned over, spilled out a bit here and there. And now, we get to (have to?) share it more widely, allow it to become what it becomes as a collaboration with the audiences who help us to realize it. I am scared, even as I am courageous, to share something that I have nurtured with such precious attention for years.


Donte, it feels like we were kids when we first came together to meet ideas. Almost a decade ago. In different bodies (\*sigh\* i miss that body...), with different language to express ourselves and communicate with one another. I think often about how our language has grown toward one another over these past years, how we have gotten to approach what in the world one another is talking about with more precision, more clarity. And, beyond that, how we have learned how to dream together, how to imagine what does not yet exist together, how to deal with the discomfort of admitting to those things that we desire.

I am grateful to you, Donte. I am grateful to all of our collaborators who have helped us put this together. I am grateful to you, reading this, experiencing this work in the way that you have come to it. Let's imagine together, seriously. Rigorously. Let's put in this work, and know that it is going to get us somewhere that we are going. Thank you.

A SMILE,  
**JUMATATU**



photo credit: Tayarisha Poe



LET'S SEE... HOW DO I EVEN BEGIN? THE THANKFULNESS WITHIN ME IS UNEXPLAINABLE. THE PEOPLE I HAVE ENCOUNTERED AND THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE HELPED TO PAVE A WAY FOR THIS PROJECT HAVE EMBEDDED WITHIN ME A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF SATISFACTION, PLEASURE AND JOY. I LIKE TO GO BACK TO THE TERM "JOY" BECAUSE IT WAS OUR TRUE FOCUS INITIALLY. OF COURSE, IT STILL FACTORS IN, BUT WITH MANY NEW DISCOVERIES, IT HAS BECOME A DIME IN A DOZEN.

I remember this one day, randomly, I checked my messages on Youtube only to see a message from a complete stranger. Being super protective of myself, I voided the message with no regrets. I am unsure of the number of contact attempts from this stranger, but one day I finally decided to see why this stranger contacted me so. Finally responding was the best decision I could have made.

Reminiscing moment... Looking back on my life after finding my new love in jsetting, I found myself so worried about how the world would perceive me doing this sexual & feminine form of dance. What would my parents say? What would my family say? But, guess what? jumatatu gave me the essential tools to love myself no matter what. Patting me on the back, encouraging me verbally, physically in the studio, exposing me for the better, and motivating me by continuously exploring his unfulfilled explorations in the jsette world.

photo credit: Gema Galiana

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That being said, after adopting the jsette form as my own, I vowed to myself that; I would (1) within this world, create the most appreciated and respected name for myself; and then, (2) take this form to places it has never existed.

To my unknowing knowledge, I would meet jumataatu, the one who made it all come true for me. Never before had I met someone outside of the jsette world who was genuinely interested and respectfully curious about the art form. His questioning, his abilities, his passion, his desires, and his helping hand have always been exactly what I have sought for. To create such a project and to include me... My expressions run forever!

The challenges continue and there are doors that remain unopened. I say wholeheartedly, the two of us together without a doubt will not sleep (well mostly jumataatu...LOL, I enjoy my rest) until all problems have been solved, or we at least have a working equation that will solve them.

To all of the dancers (previous, current, and future) of the Let 'im Move You project, I take my hat off to you!

To all of our collaborators, I'd climb the highest mountain peak in your honor!

To jumataatu... You are my friend, my mentor, my inspiration, and my evolving energy. I would only rewind time to do it all over again! You are my Judy GUH! => => =>

"WORK TO BE DONE" READY!

YOURS TRULY,  
**JERMONE DONTÉ BEACHAM**



photo credit: Tayarisha Poe

## A HISTORY OF PROJECTS

In 2009, we (jumata tu m. poe and Jermone Donte Beacham) began an artistic relationship, initiated by jumata tu's interest in Donte's sharply rhythmic approach to J-Sette. J-Sette is a call-and-response dance form originated in the early 80's by Black southern US majorette lines at various historically Black colleges. Leagues of Black queer men, prohibited from trying out as majorettes, would create competitive teams to practice the form in gay clubs and pride parades. Choreographic phrases are extremely set, confidential until they publicly premiere, and strategically "call"ed by a captain to be "respond"ed to by their squad. Searching for satisfaction and subversion within J-Sette's team-oriented call-and-response structure, we created the *Let 'im Move You* series to house our artistic projects together.

### A STUDY

**A Study** was the first performance work created for series. We used J-Sette as a means to explore strategy in dance making and social design. Major interests for these explorations included rhythm, pattern, and attention. We performed early research within studios and domestic spaces of the German city of Neuss, where we had an artist residency, and we also used movement as a way to agitate social codes in gay bars and clubs in Köln.



photo credit: Gema Galiana

## THIS IS A SUCCESS

*This is a Success* was the second performance work of the series. This work explores notions of African-American exceptionalism as expressed through middle class, Black American values reiterated within the J-Sette form. It explores the performers' respective relationships to Blackness, gender and queerness through movement and living experiences.

## INTERVENTION

*Intervention* is the third performance work created for the series. Part public action, this work was first performed in three predominantly and/or historically Black locations in Philadelphia, each variously dealing with its own contemporary issues of dislocation due to gentrification. On June 12, 2016, 49 people were murdered, 50 injured at Pulse Night Club in Orlando, FL. Pulse is a queer night club and the night of the murders was their Latin night, highlighting area drag and transgender performers. The spilling of water (symbolic alcohol) is a theatrical libation (a drink poured in offering) for those murdered. As the series grows, *Intervention* continues to morph to include new structures, games, and local references within each new place of performance.

## INSTALLATION

*Installation* is a visual installation that accompanies the performance work. As the series grows, the installation continues to grow, including collections of visual and audio material from each of the performance works.



photo credits (top to bottom):  
Theo Cote, Gema Galiana, jumatatu poe

LATEST PROJECT:

## THIS IS A FORMATION

**This Is a Formation** brings together 7 Black dancers with various histories of connection to institutional space performance and social space performance. The dancers perform a questioning of feminine and masculine embodiments using the aesthetically queer J-Sette vocabulary and performance codes as formalistic launchpads from which to examine “team” in performance. The structure of Formation is a game of strategies and possibility, always shifting its order with each new performance.

Our creative research for **Formation** has included working with popular and club music - central to traditional J-Sette - and the mobilizing 4/4 rhythmic structures that support this music. We have been using elimination and repetition to create different rhythmic structures with this music - creating 11/4 and 13/4 time signatures, for example. The choreographed movement is then in dialogue with these time signatures, and the dancers search for that familiar, mobilizing force and spirit of the traditional 4/4 music in these new, foreign structures. We delight in these challenges, the frictions between math and soul that occur in the performance of the movement. Syncing J-Sette’s use of strategy with strategic models found in gaming culture, we are designing the structure for

**Formation** within a non-deterministic finite state machine. This is a means for us to work with highly detailed movement material, in highly designed choreographic structures, in ways that allow for surprise and live problem-solving.

The calling of movement material and of choreographic structures is completely strategized in a given moment based on the game structure of the work, rendering each individual performance separate from the next. Live implemented laser light design is also a player within this game structure, providing cues for audiences and performers alike. Live video - captured by the performers and manipulated in real-time for projection on 12 hanging panels throughout the space - distribute scattered images of hyper-closeups of performers, referencing both pop-star-scale megalomania and the contemporary hyper-surveillance of Black human bodies.

**Formation** confronts respective historic imaginations and limitations of Black, queer selfhood in both institutional performance spaces, and outdoor spaces within predominantly Black neighborhoods., being performed in both of those environments, as well as within night club spaces.



THIS IS A MOVE.

THIS IS A DEEP SPINAL CURVE ON TOP OF A HIGH BOOTY.

THIS IS A GAME, AND THE RHYTHM IS KEY.

THIS IS LUMINOUS BLACK AND SMOOTH BROWN AND HARD YELLOW SKIN TONES.

THIS IS AN ALIEN, AND THAT IS A FAIRY.

THIS IS A MOVEMENT; WE DID NOT START IT.

THIS IS A STOMP THROUGH THE FLOOR, AND A BUCK ACROSS THE UNIVERSE.

THIS IS AN INVITATION FOR YOU TO AMPLIFY THE RESPECT, CURIOSITY, AND LOVE YOU FIND IN OUR SHARED SPACE.

THIS IS EXQUISITELY NORMAL. THIS IS SO QUEER, IT'S INSIDE OUT.

THIS IS A SHOW FOR THE FAMILY, WITH NUDITY AND SEXUAL THEMES.

THIS IS RIGOROUS BEAUTY.

THIS IS A FORMATION.





*illustration by khaleel based on photos from Tayarisha Poe*





illustration by khaleel based on photos from Tayarisha Poe

A wide-angle photograph of a football game in progress at Bragg Memorial Stadium. The stadium is filled with a large crowd of spectators, many wearing orange and white. In the foreground, several cheerleaders in orange and white uniforms with 'ARMY' on them are visible. The football field is green with white yard lines, and players in yellow and white uniforms are scattered across it. A large orange and black graphic with the number '2' is positioned on the field. The stadium building in the background has 'BRAGG MEMORIAL STADIUM' written on it.

# HOME, COME

Prepared by Jasmine Johnson in light of  
jumatatu poe's MANCC Residency  
Tallahassee, Florida , Oct 12-15, 2017

*Photo credit (right): jumatatu m. poe's Let 'im Move You: This Is a Formation  
Residency at MANCC. Photo by Chris Cameron*

## ONE -

**Tallahassee is hot, sticky.** The air seems to hold tiny weight; it rests on your face, adds a thin layer of tack. It is October, and I am meeting jumata m. poe and Laura-Paige at the airport. There we greet, find rental car, and taxi to our hotel.

Already there are signs of homecoming. Ripe navel orange and chartreuse, FAMU's colors, saturate. At the hotel, black folk with arms full of grocery bags drag in coolers. juma and I come and go: we drop our luggage off in our rooms and just as quickly turn back around. I drive while juma eats a salad. We navigate a parking lot maze and find our way to the FAMU Diamond rehearsal in the Rec Center. We are following Laura-Paige but she is also in some ways following us. She shares that she is unfamiliar with this area, so we are all venturing an unknown together.

We walk through the gym toward the studio lined with open pane windows. Inside, five dancers warm up. They match: all wear black high-waisted shorts, nude tights, black sports bras, shoulder length wigs, lashes that stretch northward, black shoes, a red lip. The women are in the middle of formation. SZA's "Weekend" plays followed by Beyoncé's "Hold Up." The movement is slow, highlighting an elongation of the body. It draws attention to the fullness of shape. The movement's texture oscillates between snap and taffy. Quickquickslow, slowslowquick are foundational paces.

We sit in the corner of the open studio with Q and James. Anita Baker's "Good Love" cambers in as Marcus, the group's director, leads a full-body warm up. "Warm it up before you stretch it," he advises over the music. "Get into the song. Communicate. Bring it in." The dancers form a circle and Marcus stands in its eye, turning around himself as though encircled by a merry go round.

When the Diamonds do one particular movement series, Q and James turn to each other in bright-eyed recognition: "That's a 'Doll' step right there!" They clap, clasping one hand and intertwining fingers as the grip releases. The shared recognition of embodied citation lingers on their faces a bit.

"Our goal today is to sync it up" Marcus says and the dancers transition from a circle, to moving diagonally across the floor to Beyoncé's "Blow." One by one they strut, all the while Marcus leading them. He walks backwards, mirroring each dancer. Shoulders snatch back at each buoyant stride. Marcus directs the path of movement. "Sync it up" he says. And just a beat later: "Stay engaged." I wonder here for whom or what Marcus is surrogating. Are the Diamonds dancing for an imagined stadium, a drumline, Marcus himself? "Playful, playful," he directs one dancer. "Keep it engaged, engaged, engaged."

The Diamonds move from dancing across the floor to dancing in a single file line. Beyoncé fades out while Marcus thumbs up and down his phone's playlist. Keith Sweat's "Make it Last Forever" rolls in. "Let's open it up, make it last, turn it on," he invites.

"Time starts on your first step," says Marcus. The Diamonds practice a series of cues in one straight line and later in various formations: "Girl by Girl," "Row by Row," "Back to Front," "Out and In," "Popcorn," "Do What You Want (But Keep It In The Catalog)." The dancers move between these cues to Janet Jackson's "Miss You Much" and Xscape's "Just Kickin' It." What looks like numbers choreographed to a particular song are actually a collection of movement phrases. Although Marcus explains that there is no captain or peer dance leader, one woman will inaugurate the phrase and signal to the others through a gesture of the hands how that movement will be engaged.

The women wear a perpetual smile that, in some moments, seems to betray the fact of feeling itself. The grin is unchanging, the corners of red lips arched up like a hammock. "Character, scholarship, discipline" we are told by Marcus, "are what turn a rock into a Diamond."

The music is turned off. Now the goal of rehearsal is precision of synchronicity. His refrain: "sync it up. The two to the four to the six. Two to four to six. Stop. Again. Stop."

Marcus invites the dancers to "warm up [their] character." This stands out to me, as it signals that the Diamonds are playing a role. Marcus moves back and forth across the line like a single bead on an abacus. He talks about the Diamond's upcoming performance, punctuating his talk with facial direction: "There's nothing like when you come around that [stadium] corner. TEETH. That's why we have to say focused. NO SMILES. Pull the faces in. TEETH. We don't have time to not be ready. ENERGY. You're not engaging to the fans if they can't see you. HAIR CHECK. SEX APPEAL. NO TEETH. Marcus motions for us to move from the corner to the front of the room. We do. He glides to us: "any questions? You can ask me whatever."

Marcus takes our questions. Juma asks about the Diamonds' cuing, about the repertoire from which they cull their movements. I ask about the difference between cheerleading and the Diamonds' movement. We learn that Marcus started the Diamonds when he was in high school. "How did you learn the movement" juma asks. "YouTube," he responds. "Really though, I enjoy it because [the Diamonds] enjoy it."

Day has turned to night by the time we exit the rehearsal. The agenda has us heading next to the "Rip the Runway Fashion Show" but juma and I hear the Marching 100 FAMU band practicing. It stirs something. It kites. Collective sound so mechanical and lush at once. Me, juma and Laura-Paige walk over. Drones hover above and around the field, keeping track of the musicians' movements and spacing. At this moment I am struck by the notion of formation. There is a geometry

here as there was in the Diamond rehearsal: both groups' efficacy marked by a commitment to sameness — a precision through which harmony comes. We stand below the band directors' tower where three black men with thick mustaches in tangerine FAMU coats hold court. The AKAs have bought water for the band. This is as much a scene of community as it is a site of sonic and embodied rehearsal.

The mosquitos buzz as we stand left of midfield. The band swings. Small and hefty instruments alike slice through air like knives through water. The space between bodies is measured and exact. One formation bleeds into another. The band members move to the next constellation with the pumping of arm bent into the shape of a chicken leg. Pump pump pumping as knees kick up toward navel. They are someplace between running and hovering. A quickened pace almost hummingbird-like: a floating that is only made possible through the repetition of a single gesture.

## Two —

**Today we spend the morning over coffee.** juma asking me: do you consider yourself to be a religious person?" I say no. Spiritual yes. I pray to an altar. Teaching and black study — I guess those are my religion. I ask the same question to him. He talks about being through and within religious space. Practicing something that might look like religion but is otherwise.

We walk to MANCC on the FSU campus. It is hot. Giant bugs as big as fists appear from what seems like nowhere. Moss like wet mops drape a row of live oak trees. I remember our walking path as a chain of buzzing, each bush we passed singing of bee hum.

A meeting. The MANCC team is waiting for us in the lobby. When we enter, they say they've choreographed a J-Sette number for us; we laugh. We tour the building. Laura-Paige and Alayna show jumatatu the space and things he will have access to with his key card. We look at the studios, conditioning rooms, and walk down each of the building's floors. We see the theater where juma will be performing. It is open and wide, like the middle of a yawn.

After, we rest a little and wait for Q and James to text Laura-Paige back to see if they are able to join us for a drive. juma and I drive around a bit, just the two of us. We head to "All Saints Row" which, we are told, is a "hipster neighborhood" (a synonym, of course, for blackfolkusedtolivethere). I see a coffee shop, a second-hand clothing store, and co-op grocery market. Later, I will read a report on Smokey Hollow, the neighborhood that kisses All Saints, and learn more about how ferocious urban renewal was in Tallahassee. Gentrification is food without calorie, shine without warmth.

We drive to S Adams street which cradles a row of barbecue spots, a cloud of smoke hovering just above my head. Giant smokers, foil trays, and coolers decorate this row. Handwritten menus are taped to



the front of plastic tables. Children tender for cash, helping out with the family business. But before I order brisket and juma orders shrimp and fish, we head into Eve’s Hair Supply. It is an electric pink building. I buy a bonnet and a pack of 500 rubber bands for when I retwist my hair next. I think juma gets some hair ties, and maybe a stocking cap but I’m not sure. We were both excited about the store’s swimming cap options.

We eat our food in the car, doors open. A sweet breeze moves across the front seats. We talk black time, planetary blackness, a blackness before slavery, a blackness not given shape to by whiteness. What would it mean to move/dance from this register? Later, I ask juma: “What won’t you tolerate?” He asks me the same.

We head to the Marching 100 Band Showcase that consists of high school troupes. It is helpful to see how intergenerational black band culture, and majorette dance, is. So much time, training and rehearsal already indexed in the young students’ performances. Although the University is homecoming’s navel, the convening makes visible a constellation of black living so much wider than a football game.

We go back to the hotel, rest, and later take the hotel shuttle to the gym for another Diamond rehearsal. This rehearsal is in the same place as the marching band show that we saw earlier that day. The Diamonds share the gymnasium floor with Mahogany, another dance troupe at FAMU. This rehearsal is more loose than the first, with Marcus spending the majority of the time giving directions to the dancers while sitting in the stands. Two of Washington’s friends are present, plus juma, Q, Laura-Paige, Millie, and

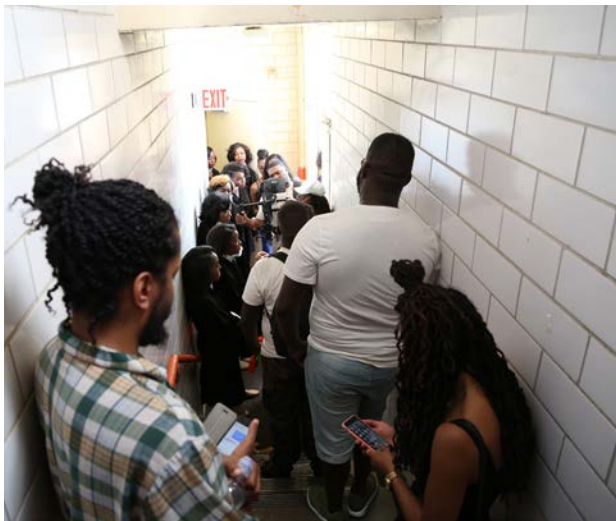


Photo credit (above): Jasmine Johnson

me. Millie sits behind Marcus and freely asks questions. "So do they all have to wear the same hair," she asks? "Collar bone length," is the answer. She asks him how he learned to dance in order to teach it. He reiterates: "YouTube." The Diamonds are given the direction to exit the gym and enter in both precise step and in full performance mode. They make their way in sync, settling into their stance (left hand perched at the place where the torso and hip meet). "Y'all are not synced. Again." They repeat this entrance five more times; at each turn Marcus tells them that something is off, but never offers an edit. Here is forced repetition that does not appear to yield a refinement.

juma teaches the Diamonds a phrase of his own. While they rehearse, Millie asks more questions about the origins of the Diamonds. Marcus shares that when the Diamonds first started, they had to be escorted onto the field by the police. The FAMU 100 Band refused to play for them. Marcus had to fight to get them a spot in the bleachers, he says. Q is sitting to my right and shares with me some of his own dance trajectory. All the while he is watching juma teach the Diamonds, quietly marking the steps in his seat. Finally, he tucks his Forever 21 and Aldo bags away and stands in formation with juma and the Diamonds., I am struck by this configuration: juma and Q as the tips of the jewel shape. [I also think of James sharing with us what he described as a jealousy toward women who had the 'freedom' to dance feminine; how James was shamed for desiring to move femme-like; how "dancing like a girl" was "beat out of [him]." How might these southern dance communities both open up and foreclose possibilities for black queer futures, I wonder?]

After this rehearsal Millie, juma and I get some food and drinks and reflect on the day. We note how the Diamonds' almost wooden smiles can hurt to watch: emotion as cosmetic. We wade through the gender dynamics embedded in this dance world. Millie said that when students who are trained in the majorette tradition find their way to her classes, they have to deconstruct so much of their previous training. "They don't know how to come from an authentic place," she shares.

At the end of this evening, I think about how many people surrounding the Diamonds we have been able to speak with. I also realize that, other than the "Greetings" that closed out that first rehearsal we attended, I have not heard a single Diamond herself talk about what dance means to her and why.

### THREE —

**On the third day we go to the homecoming parade.** We walk because there is traffic. The white woman police officer looks at her watch as we pass by. She protects us from traffic while telling us that the parade started at 8:30 so it is probably over. "Enjoy the game" she wishes sincerely. It is 10:30am.

The parade certainly has not ended by the time we get there. juma and I stand at the intersection of Gamble and Wahnish Way. This is where the path veers right to continue up Gamble Street. Next to me is a black woman named Claire. She is a black elder who wears a bedazzled pink

and green AKA hat. She is among her own crew of friends. When I settle in next to her she shares that there are “more dancing girls than there are bands to even play for them,” which is sad she says, because she would prefer to see less of “all this booty shaking.” “I’m too tired,” she follows, although I am not sure of what. Children sit or stand at the front of the crowd. juma says something at this parade that would hold so much of Tallahassee for me: I know this place, but I also do not know this place.

So much is advertised during this parade: churches, law firms, social welfare organizations, performing artists, dance troupes, hair bundle suppliers, high school bands. Some dance to sell services, others throw candy into the crowd. There is also the man who sells glossy candy red apples: “Two for five!”

The Strikers make their way down the parade. I say something about a black masculinity that does not announce itself. juma returns to this a bit later. “I actually see that kind of masculinity as always announcing itself.” He is right. The Strikers embody an indifference bestowed through gender privilege. Whereas the female dance troupes stay in formation, keeping pace even during delayed foot traffic, the Strikers saunter next to a costively moving car from which they grab and exchange bottles of water. I think about how gender and sexuality policing appears both through the constraint indexed within the Diamond’s smiles, and the indifference to formation embodied by the Strikers.

Later that day, we take the hotel shuttle to Gaither Gym to meet the Diamonds before the homecoming game. They are not in the gymnasium. Chris, the MANCC documentarian, is waiting for us when we arrive. One woman in a Diamonds shirt walks in. I ask her if she, too, is looking for the diamonds. “No.” She was not searching because she already knew where they were. I say we are dancers who have been attending their rehearsals. We were supposed to meet them here. Do you know where they might be? She introduces herself and leads us to a room where the group is getting dressed.

We walk into the dressing room. Surely Chris should not follow us into the room but then juma and I wonder if we should be there. We decide no, and wait in the hallway. When Marcus comes back he seems surprised that we are parked outside. He asks us if we know which room they are dressing in? We do, we say, but just wanted to give them privacy. “Y’all crazy, that’s the best part.” We still do not go into the dressing room.

Once dressed, we follow the Diamonds, who wear black robes and saunter in a single-file line from the gym to the football field. They settle and sit spaced-out in a section of the stands. They wear all white. Same hair, same red lip, same smile. We sit in front of them. Chris taking pictures to my right, Laura-Paige and juma seated in front of me. At some point during the first half, the Diamonds do a phrase juma taught them the day before.

*Photo credit (right): jumata m. poe’s Let ‘im Move You: This Is a Formation Residency at MANCC. Photo by Chris Cameron*



After the game we meet up with James and Q, who both wear pink. We hop in the car and head to pick up Millie. Our intention is 1) to go to where black people are and 2) to get some food. Seat-belted in, ready to go, but we can't think of a place where both one and two can be accomplished. I say, "I'm shocked! Are there no black people in Tallahassee?" Millie says "They are here. They just don't have any space." James picks a general direction for us and we taxi along. I think a lot about Millie's point: the pervasiveness of blackness and yet the impossibility for black living. Black people everywhere and nowhere at once. Perhaps this fact is, in part, why homecoming is so richly important: it conjures black living-out-loud within a cartography that has choreographed black absence.

James navigates us to the same neighborhood juma and I had fish and brisket the day before: just between All Saints and Smokey Hollow. James suggests a wing spot. We are there for hours: a black queer delight smack in the center of the restaurant. We talk falling in love, romance (sometimes lack thereof), thorny dance teachers at FSU, being black and gay in Tallahassee.

After, I smell like frying grease, the fishy perfume having settled inside my hair. When juma drove me to the airport the next day, the wind pouring in from the rolled-down car windows would ricochet the scent back to me. Catching a whiff was to remember feeling buoyant from laughter.

"The story of Smoky Hollow is the story of our nation," a Historic American Landscapes Survey reads. "Mid-twentieth century government intervention displaced vibrant communities of working class people, immigrants, and minorities. While the specific contours of that story in Tallahassee were unique, the outcome was not. At the same time, however, this account forces us to rethink historical narratives of the uprooted. Ideally, it will allow us to contemplate how other communities persisted in memory after dislocation."

After having moved through this constellation of once-black neighborhoods with juma, Millie, James, Q, and Laura-Paige, I am stuck thinking through the meaning of black movement in spaces where black folks are typically unable to publically convene. I am also considering the ways black folk and black communities live beyond/roam past their physical presence. Leaving doesn't necessarily mean gone, after all. In this sense, FAMU's homecoming is an occasion to reverse black out-migration—the parade itself a choreography of black sociality, slicing through what was once African American Tallahassee. The bands' thumping through the street, the dancers propelling through humid air: both a black persistence in memory and a refusal to disappear. In this way, perhaps homecoming is not noun, but verb. A reminder that, as juma said, I know this place, but I also do not know this place. A reminder that despite the ambiguity, this is indeed a black home. Come to it.



# CALCULATING BLACK JOY

THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ

When rehearsals began, Donte and juma told us that we would dance to reveal joy. To fashion joy within complicated structures of movement. To embed ever more complex mathematical equations into the practices of team dancing, presented as Black art. To embrace the releases of rhythmic manipulations as we danced and played, challenged ourselves and each other, and gestured through the air with curving, sinewing, sweeping, twisting motions that defy gender normativity.

We were a mixed group: professional J-Setters; contemporary performance artists; social dancers; theorists and historians; educators; male-presenting and female-presenting. Decidedly queer, even as some of us enjoy mixed-sex intimacies. Northerners, Midwesterners, Californians, Southerners, and living internationally. Just enough of everyone so that no one was alone. Could we make things together? Some of us new to the venues where we worked, but all of us new to most of what we had agreed to take on. **And that, of course, was the calculation of Black Joy.**

*photo credit: Tayarisha Poe*



photo credit: Tayarisha Poe

### **...scenes from a rehearsal...**

*The people have to find their way into a group. We come from many places and find ourselves not in concert, but in our difference. juma moves us into a slew of conditioning and physical training practices that he wonders at: rolling on the ground, slow dancing and grinding in partnerships, an intensive cardio burst sequence repeated until exhaustion. Some of us don't take on all of the physical challenges. But we understand the function of the physical cacophony: train the body and make it unfamiliar and unusual ... make ourselves do something we didn't do before ... do something we didn't know we wanted to do. Over time it becomes clear that the training is about generating physical accuracy, speed, and an ability to grab the beat - fiercely, and without hesitation.*

## **HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS**

The larger surprise of the multi-year, multi-part project **Let 'Im Move You** (L'MY) comes in its calculations of Black Joy through the innovative performance form of J-Sette. J-Sette, or bucking, was created as an extension of majorette pageantry that accompanied sporting events in the Southern USA. Like many forms of Black performance, the dance grows by design as it allows for an expansion of performance opportunities for people surrounding a social event. Alongside the football and basketball games that it originally accompanied, J-Setting created a competitive structure that made space for more people to perform than just the players on the court or the field.

Look online and you will find several journalistic accounts of histories of J-Sette and bucking; you will find stories that construct origins and an account of Jackson State's Prancing J-Settes. Youtube videos from the 1980s will confirm that the form has endured at least two generations; videos from the 2000s demonstrate J-Sette competitions at Pride rallies. Dig a bit deeper, and you'll start to understand the connection of competition studio dancing - think The Dancing Dolls on television - to bucking and J-Setting, and how it is that children come into the form. Girls are on television bucking in dance competition shows; boys have to wait until they are older, and able to be subjects of reality television exposés like The Prancing Elites to dance in mediated distribution. But everyone feels the pull of the form and its attractions. Black movements on public display in organized affiliations. Like Stepping, but funkier; more sensual and much freer in its organization. J-Sette emerged as a theatrical form; a carnivalesque claiming of queer time and space for participants and witnesses.



photo credit: Tayarisha Poe

### ***...scenes from a rehearsal ...***

*Those who have been bucking for some time simply learn the material. Others work to understand the theatrical impulses of the form. Is it like jazz dancing? Possibly, a bit, but not really: it is its own practice, and in our version, with a calculated lean back and away that distinguishes its strutting. Everyone has to learn this shared mode of moving, and make it her own somehow. We discuss the histories of the form, but more importantly, its implications in this creative formation. People wonder about how sex, sexuality, nudity, repetition of gesture, and algorithmic coding are all implicated in this mode of Black performance. And where is comfort here? If J-Setting and bucking are public modes of performance, where do intimacy and comfort go? Learning the material, we have to watch in the mirrors, and look to others to see what they are doing. For the first months, we are uncomfortable as a group. When will we approach Black Joy as its own affect of this dance?*

## **mATH**

L'MY moves toward complex structures of mathematical discovery. Where marching band music and nightclub beats tend toward the familiar phrasings of fours and eights, with an occasional triple added in for variety, the artists of L'MY explore elevens, thirteens, sevens, and their combinations. In rehearsals, juma, Donte, and Zen work toward surprising formations of counting. The idea is to make bucking different than it has ever been; to make it strange and ever more remarkable for the gathered audience.

Exploring Black culture to uncover a calculus of creative address is surely not new, but it still seems remarkable. Scholars in Kemet - an ancient name for cultures in Nubia and Black Egypt - taught and explored through advanced mathematics for centuries. Historians, and especially Afrocentric researchers, have helped us all understand that advanced mathematics were at the bases of African civilizations long before Christianity, chattel slavery, or a US Constitution that literally placed Black life at  $\frac{3}{5}$  the value of whites.

More than within the obvious formal structures of math education, Black culture holds a profound and complex relationship to rhythm as the basis of creativity. Rhythmicity, and the action of manipulating the beat, are at the foundation of how Black expression materializes. Our dancing and musicality, rhyming and oratory, textile designs and collage-making always seem to be concerned with a ubiquitous beat and its changes in order to mark time and effort. We explore through

the infinite varieties of rhythmic address in order to support myriad modes of musicality from dancehall to disco to gangsta rap, house music, and on and on and on. Rhythm drives the discoveries, the innovations, the explorations.

So it needn't surprise us that L'MY bases its exploration of Black Joy through an intense elaboration of rhythmic address and discovery. What happens to competitive social dances when they are challenged to materialize in unusual forms? When the counts are distended towards fractal dissolution? Where does the ability to predict what's coming next go? Can we find Black Joy in math?

Well, maybe all of us can't; the less geeky among us like to keep things straight-forward and in fours and eights. L'MY wants more than this from us all though; the project asks us to look for joy inside the changes; the advanced calculations that create oddly-numbered sequences. Joy inside the calculations and the appreciation of the rules that produce unusual structures. Black Joy inside the changes.

**...scenes from a rehearsal...**

*Part of the joy of watching J-sette is figuring out the structure of performance. How will the leader "throw a count" and will the others be able to follow? Something happens when we see a complex structure repeated by the group. Watching a wave of rhythmic assembly disperse and reassemble cheers us, reassures us, fascinates us. Did we see it correctly the first time? Are the others performing it correctly in sequence? Watching, we see the math embodied.*

*Of course, rehearsals for these unusual structures are not simple or smooth. Mistakes are much more plentiful than successes. With this unexpected counting, no one gets it right the first, second, or even third time. juma reminds us that the confusion of trying to perform the calculation while we are dancing is a large part of releasing the joy that is too often submerged. The play of shared attempts, of trying again and again while resisting an overwhelming sense of defeat, forms a foundation for working together. Figuring out how to get the 13s and 10s to work among the 4s and 8s produces an interesting sort of uncomfortableness ... one that is useful to confirming a shared stake in the project.*

## BODIES IN MOTION

The difficulty of dancing in unusual mathematical structures challenges all of the collaborators. This makes perfect sense, as L'MY also means to make the familiar somehow strange; to explore the movements of J-Sette in extended and distended fashion. Sometimes in slow-motion; in hyperreal mediated; in elevens and seventeens. And then to replace those gestures back into their original contexts, but now transformed: in public, in nightclubs, and where they have never been, in the museums and experimental theaters. Excavated and revised, the gestures of J-Sette become something else, related to their origins, but now in elaboration.

Dancing J-Sette is anything but physically demure or contained. The hard bounce and recoil that define J-setting call for a certain tension/tightness in the body as well as an unrelenting energetic production. Poses in J-setting tend to be passed through, on the way to the next hard-accent and pounce. But it is a constant bouncing through pose that defines the form: rhythm revealed in phrasing that allows accents to pop out as unexpected, powerful, and relentless expressions of unmitigated spotlight. Dancers attack its moves to demonstrate a toughness of weight and punch, wrapped within a sinuous, curvaceous demeanor.

Many dances of an African diaspora explore the movements of the circle; the rotations that emulate life-cycles, tidal time-shifting, and the possibilities of reproduction. Circling, we can move around the beat and its inevitability; we can reach around, without having to land. The

dances of winin', mostly from the Caribbean, inspire L'MY rehearsals: asking for attention to the small of the back, and muscularity of the lower body moving in opposition to the torso and the hips. We look for a circle within the circle; dancing around and around alongside the Trinidadian versions of reggaeton; holding the ribcage and then releasing it to spin against the neck and shoulders. And the hips, circling the hips. We look for the twist in the music, seeking through space with the neck and the shoulders working in revolutions. Stretching the body, working down towards the floor through dips of the hips. Dip - juicy, we try, and alongside each other, we become juicier in time.

J-Sette and bucking also call for attentions, postures of surveillance as performers await their turn and also the next set of calls from the leader. The attentions themselves feature movement material to be mastered; dancers in L'MY must track the attentions as well as the movement materials that follow them, and their permutations in real time. And of course there are particularities of the body within the form - as in any dance. Here, hands have many variations as they extend limbs into space: they might blade, fist, offer pretty fingers, Els, or demonstrate the ubiquitous "jazz hands." A question that recurs: where does the thumb go?

*Rolling the hips and rolling across the floor to create the space.  
Rolling the hips and turning around toward the sides,  
proprioceptions burning.*



photo credit: Tayarisha Poe

Spending time on the circling warmups, rolling the hips, rolling the head and neck. Serpentine, snaking movements that surprise each of us in a way. These twists and circles don't need to bounce, in the way that many J-sette steps movements do, but they must register to the watchers, as different from the directness of the arms.

The movements have an extra push into their ends, back into their attentions. An arrival of motion, upon the completion of a sequence. We find a pleasure in these arrivals; a pleasure in achieving these curves and turns and twists, and then the arrival together amidst these unexpected circlings.

And in rehearsing these circles, a certain joy arrives alongside being within and around the beat.

## GAMEPLAY

J-Sette developed alongside organized sport, and came to its maturity with handsignals and movement calls not unlike those of baseball. J-Sette has a hierarchy of a team leader who throws calls to the squad. Dancers must pay attention to subtle shifts in the calling that comes from the front. Counts can be called to be executed in various ways: from the front to the back of the group; performed one at a time; performed by the group all at once. Each variation has its own signals that squad leaders perform in the manner of baseball catchers and pitchers, calling the sequence with signs as well as embodied demonstration. The leader of the squad is always in the front of the group, and those who follow are responsible for keeping track of the call and its consequences.

In L'MY, the open structure of the call and response becomes a part of the fabric of the dancing. The artists are responsible to know a huge swath of movement material, and to be able to imagine it in myriad sequencing. The dancers have to be able to respond in real-time to shifting circumstances of the performance space and their own memory of what goes where. This wrinkle of live-action thinking-through and assessment might be unusual in contemporary performance. This is not some sort of "anything goes" improvisation at all. Mistakes can be made, and judgements passed among the participants and the witnesses.

Making the work like a game for the performers keeps it entirely lively, fresh, and of the moment. But it also becomes very unwieldy, in that no one is exactly sure what will happen within any particular sequence or in the project as a whole. At times this seems to be like participation in some sort of creative military exercise. The event is structured towards a shifting leadership, but to make it truly sing out, performers still need to exceed the demands of the dance in order to fulfill its potential. This contradiction emerges at times: dancers follow the call with its appropriate response, but everyone needs to somehow stand out from the group as well, in order to dance with the personal flair that marks Black performance and might allow for an emergence of joy. The challenge becomes clearer and clearer: to engage the tasks proposed by the dancing with a generous enthusiasm bound to the group. This might be like any performance, to be sure, but note that here the well-being of the group defines the task at hand. Black joy and personal flair will be approached through a rendering of the calls and willful playing of the gestural game. In this, the dance is like professional sport: competition wrapped up as entertainment - but with joy as its ultimate intention.

## SOUNDSCAPES

J-Sette originally developed in response to the outdoor calls of marching band music. When the form moved into nightclubs, to be danced with recorded music, better sound design buoyed up its contents. But in the theater space, collaborator Zen Jefferson brings forward an alchemy of overclocked sound, bursting with bruising, sensual affirmations of rhythmic energies. In 2018, Jefferson received a coveted "Bessie" award nomination for his design and execution of L'MY; his wizardry at deploying sound inspires the gestures of the dance toward ferocious levels of achievement.

Zen, an accomplished dancer - like all of the L'MY collaborators - seems to enjoy the working through of ideas while he jams at the sound console. He chooses from an expansive archive of recorded sound ... rummaging through amped-up versions of old songs by Jefferson Airplane next to something by Alice Coltrane or Rihanna. The music enlivens our assembly and also calms us down. Mariah Carey comes into the room along with Kelela; in all, the soundscape makes rehearsal feel like a club where you actually want to go to hear the music and its ordering and deployment. Zen works as if Black culture would always be near to hand, or like Heidegger's Hammer, ready-to-hand. Brandy sings, and we smile; Big Sean peeks out for a moment, but most often we recognize someone else's favorite tune among the mixing pot. We reflect a physical smile to them as they move, towards joy, in response to Zen's handiwork.



## WHERE IT HAPPENS

L'MY has at least three sites - the nightclub, the outdoors, and the museum/theater. In some ways, the project puts the gestures of J-Sette back into the spaces that nurtured their development, with an experimental performance twist. J-Sette arrives back in the public Black spaces that supported the emergence of Drum Major and Majorette style so distinctive in the Southern United States. Bucking is performed by the L'MY crew in nightclubs as an unexpected bonus for those who happen to be out for the night.

J-Sette and bucking happen outdoors in parades, football games, and in LGBTQai+ festivals. L'MY places these movements into a more general outdoors, pushing the ways that movement can change a social circumstance by imagining dancing along the streetcorner; in the park on a Wednesday afternoon; in a community center parking

lot. The dancing is offered up to passers-by as an affirmation of physical dissidence and the suggesting of an unexpectedness available to us all through performance art.

Of course, J-Sette has rarely been explored in the context of the museum or experimental theater. Those sites, mostly controlled by interests in European-affirming modes of artmaking, seldom consider the creative practices of Black people as worthy of elaboration. Quilting, hand-dancing, DJing, or expertise in storytelling offer examples of Black creative craft that has been largely overlooked by American institutions of art; like J-Setting and bucking, any of these forms might be extended towards experimental modes of expression in the service of a shared speculative commons.

Moving intimately in public was pretty much illegal for Black people until the turn of the last century. Dancing in this manner today may be normalized in some places, but not in outdoor spaces of sidewalks or parking lots. L'MY places same-sex couples in intimate slow motion in public, moving out-of-time and inexorably toward the arrival of a physical transcendence. Watching two move as one shifts how we understand partnership to be possible. How marvelous, and odd, can bodies look when they move in unexpected ways? Pressing towards each other, they generate heat, and demonstrate an embodied caring. Passing by, people move towards the dancers, to wonder if their intimate joy might be somehow contagious or available ...

## ETHICAL CARE

L'MY has engaged a radical transparency in its administrative structure. Participants were allowed to view contracts, agreements, and planning documents at every point along the process of the project's invention. This sort of openness modeled a propulsive collective action in research and performance, a way for everyone to be involved in the management of the event to a degree that felt comfortable.

L'MY also imagined itself toward an ethics of care for queer Black people in its rehearsal process. In rehearsals, poe and Beacham engaged Shani Akilah as an Ethical Artistry Guide, tasked with accounting for the dimensions of communication and power among the collaborators, as well as considerations of the implications of the work in the world. Akilah's labor made palpable the desire for the project to engage Black artmaking in dance through a lens of thoughtful engagement.

The laying on of hands; touching and holding; staying in contact with each other's bodies in space. juma talks about intimacy as an essential feature of this project; to understand bodies is to become involved in the emotional lives of the people we dance alongside. The intimacies that underscore L'MY might be what makes its movements legible as something other than jazz dancing, or blankly theatrical dance. In the football stadium, J-Sette is not bothered by how any of its practitioners feel; in the festival competition, bucking certainly expresses creative flair within a desire - to win - but maybe not much more. L'MY might contend with the uneven ground where traumas and excitations

produce unruly, virtuosic bodies; to encourage people to explore together in an ethically-engaged manner. We watch each other intently - in one exercise, staying in the looking toward someone else's eyes through four stages of engagement. 1 - making and doing, noticing blinking and breathing; 2 - "this is everything;" understand my body in presence and in place; 3 - what can you not get away from? what is your intention in looking/being looked at?; 4 - "this everything - that is you." At the end of the four-part cycle, we see among each other differently. We spend this time in meditation to deepen a possibility of life and time ... to deepen a possibility of our shared emergence.

## MEDIATED PRESENCES

From the beginning, L'MY imagined an ambitious live-processing visual design. Visual artist Wendell Cooper works to bring the performing bodies somehow closer to the audience in its theatrical presentation. Through extreme closeups, cameras ported through the space by the dancers, and a visual design that segments and partitions the performers in unexpected ways, a multiplicity of expression emerges. The performers film themselves and each other, shifting the point of view and creating impossible perspectives during dancing. 21st century performance arrives alongside Instagram and Facebook live-stream; of course this L'MY performance will manipulate those assumptions towards a theatrical end. Zooming in on a body in motion, or at a face smiling as it performs an advanced physical calculation, layers even more information onto our modes of encounter, encouraging us to see beyond ... sight.



*photo credit: Tayarisha Poe*

## DANCING TOWARD TOMORROW

*"I'm through with Blackness [...as a limitation...]"*

juma surprises us all with this proclamation at a rehearsal series in Dallas. He wants to move beyond a Blackness that always-already knows its contents and its possibilities; that always-already knows what sorts of performing belong in its purview. He goads us toward something else; something beyond what we know about the women J-Setting at the football game, or the men competing for honor at the nightclub. If Blackness is a container that constrains, he wants something else for us. What if we were to surrender to ... desire?

The collaborators offer up ideas in conversation: Donte - I got to know different people differently in our exaggerated movements together... Yeman - the embodied wondering is comforting; all is available in our process... Sanchel - I felt myself leaving the body sometimes, being somewhere else ... Maria - I explored dance and how to be danced; it was satisfying... Zen - I don't know what is safe space or comfort? How can we make even more space to be inclusive of access?... William - I wonder what I am, what is me and what is Other? How can I be more responsible for Others?

L'MY intends to open a space for considering Black Joy in the process of an experimental form of J-Sette/bucking. The "considering" is to be had by the performers as well as by witnesses; some who are audience,

some who are also dancers and clubgoers alongside the performers, and some who are passers-by. In this, the project elaborates on J-Sette's fundamental premise: that more of us should always be welcomed into performance circumstances, to compete for a moment and share a witty repartee. As is common in Black performance, we perform our wit through sound and motion combined; music and dance as bedfellows to the unexpected arrival of spirit in shared recognition.

So many rehearsals across so much space and time. So many performances already - experiments run, assessments still in process. The project enjoyed two residencies at Duke University; a three-day residency in the SLIPPAGE lab at the brand-new Rubenstein Arts Center January 19-21, 2018; and a second five-day residency November 14-18, 2018. SLIPPAGE: Performance|Culture|Technology was especially proud to host this investigation of embodiment, Black cultures of dance and improvisation, and technological interfaces.



photo credit: Tayarisha Poe

**...notes from a rehearsal...**

Aftergreetings and embraces, and making space for small conversations.

All come into silence and focus. The room actually feels dry. And still there is a hum of electrical machinery; of signal pulsing through the space.

How do we work on trust?

Trust for who is outside yourself and trust for how you are with yourself?

How do we work on trusting others?

On resisting hurt, resisting disavowal?

How do we move our hurt to the side, out of the way?

All the collaborators contribute to a free-association medley.

... trust creative process ...

... we wonder through Native modes of healing|being ...

... we work to become available and loving and ready ...

what is vulnerability?

... spreading and jiggling, oozing beyond my body's boundaries.

... we're looking for someway to better know ... what is a self?

... but who is the changing me who passes every day? the inconsistent me?

is trust the ability to not worry?

how is trust different from faith?

can I open myself around you?

trust love lips parted

...bodies that are of species that are of earth...

trust as something that performance reifies and consecrates.

juma says: We are not naive in thinking that this project will solve something or change things somehow. This is not about healing ... because we haven't thought of it that way yet. We explore the wild body, always aware that wildness has been a way to disparage Black people. There is a request for nakedness in this formation that may or may not be honored. But it needs to be at the center of our imagination.

**And it has to be witnessed.**

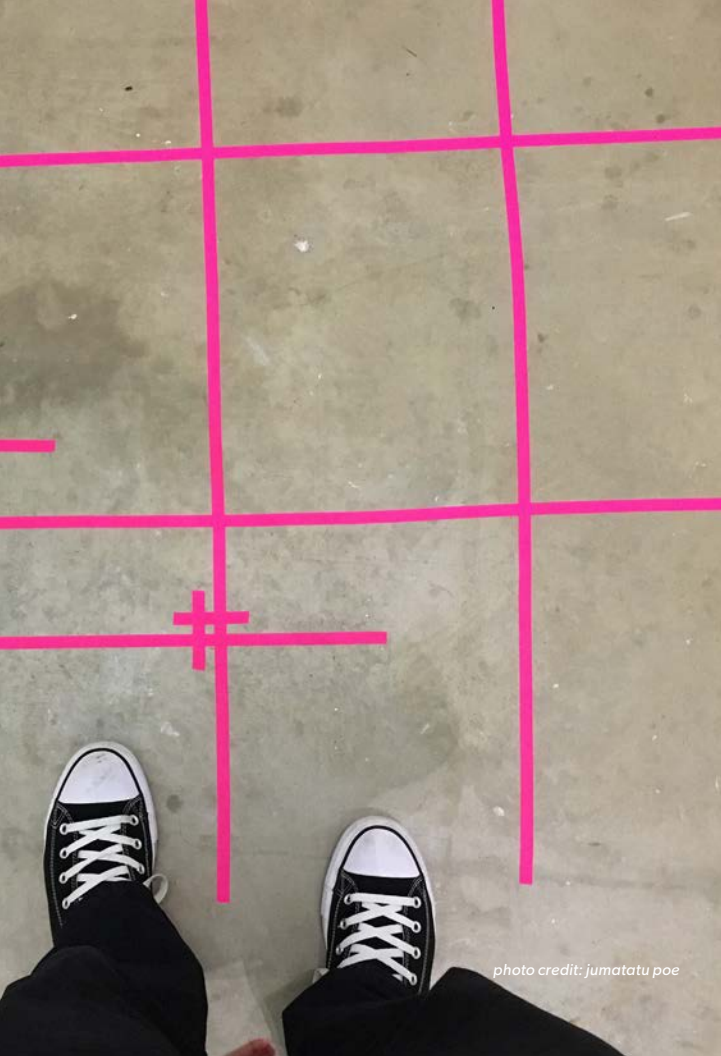


photo credit: jumatatu poe

## BLACK FEMININE QU#R FORMATION

This project is a formation. An unprecedented space in its totality of worldmaking. **This is a success.**

As L'MY finds shape for its theatrical premiere, it becomes more femme. It becomes happier, buoyed by dancing in the nightclubs of Durham, Dallas, Philadelphia, Tallahassee. It has found open space dancing alongside others in clubs, in the streets, and now an open address toward the audience in the theater. You can dance here, with us, too. You must, if you will.

L'MY wonders, for us all:

*Is there a better you inside the dance? Inside the j-setting?  
Is it a pressure? A test to do something to make it better?  
Is it hope? That the best is yet to come?*

L'MY cycles back toward Black Joy.  
let 'im move you ...

Figuring the terms of our encounter, numerically  
to release joy.

the best is yet to come ...  
the best is yet to come ...  
yes, let 'im move you.

**... the best is yet to come ...**

## PROJECT CREDITS

**artistic direction** by jumatatu m. poe

**choreography and styling** by jumatatu m. poe and Jermone Donte Beacham

**performance** by Jermone Donte Beacham, jumatatu m. poe, LaKendrick Davis, Maria Bauman-Morales, Nikolai McKenzie, Sanchel Brown, William Robinson

**sound, text and vocal compositions** by jumatatu m. poe

**sound design and DJ performance** by Zen Jefferson

**video installation** by Mx. Oops

**lighting design and technical direction** by Juan "Coel" Rodriguez

**panel design and costume consultation** by Precious Lovell

**provocation** by Thomas F. DeFrantz

**ethical artistry guidance** by Shani Akilah

**conversation\* moderation and commissioned writing\*\*** by Jasmine Johnson

**conversation\* participation** by Deborah Smith, Evelyn Davis-Poe, Zizwe Poe

**producing and tour management** by Mar'ya Wethers

**website design and project marketing management** by

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**project zine design** by Danae Mobley

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Thank you to Yeman Brown for his participation in the creative process of this work. Thank you to Black queer youth (younger than us), peers, elders, and ancestors who hold our hands while we practice life alongside others.

For biographical information on the creative team, please visit:  
<https://www.jumatatu.org/formation-bios>

*\*creators jumatatu m. poe and Jermone Donte Beacham participated in a public conversation with their parents, moderated by Jasmine Johnson, as part of the events connected to the premiere of the work*

*\*\*Jasmine's writing was supported through an initiative of the Mellon Foundation organized through jumatatu m. poe's choreographic residency at MANCC*

Cover image credit: Tayarisha Poe

