Cult Plastic

Dance And Culture In The Plastic Age

WRITTEN BY ANH VOMARCH 9, 2018MARCH 9, 2018

Black Success, Black Joy, and Black Excellence Within the Theatrical Architecture of Whiteness – jumatatu m. poe & Donte Beacham: Let 'im Move You… (2018)

Let 'im Move You (http://www.jumatatu.org/projects/let-im-move-you-series/) is a series of choreographic works initiated in 2010 by jumatatu m. poe, Donete Beacham, and LaKendrick Davis. Currently spawning three pieces – *A Study*, *This Is A Success*, and *Intervention* – *Let 'im Move You* researches into J-Sette performance, using its movement and its formal structure as a launchpad to investigate the intersection of blackness and queerness with/in rhythm, space, and time.

In the American Realness 2018 (https://cultplastic.com/2018/01/19/american-realness-where-is-the-economic-real-talk/) version, poe and Beacham combine two works, *A Study* and *This Is A Success*, into one 80-minute offering of dance-performance-installation extravaganza. The work enters the festival with a bang, bursting into the Abrons Arts Center with an excess of black and queer music, black and queer dance, black and queer bodies. It seems as if nothing can hold back *Let 'im Move You* – the work refuses to be confined within the physical theater space, to be contained under the "subversive" label of American Realness, and to a large extent, to be limited by the abstract space of whiteness (https://cultplastic.com/2017/07/27/remnants-of-colonization-and-whiteness-cecilia-bengolea-francois-chaignaud-dfs-2017/) that dominates the economy of dance and its mode of spectatorship. (https://cultplastic.com/2017/08/12/racism-at-impulstanz/)

Photo: Theo Cote

Throughout *Let 'im Move You…*, the haunting ghost of white institution is acknowledged, made visible, troubled, and grappled with in a manner that provokes both laughter, discomfort, and irony among the audience. Right at the opening moment when the DJ stands on stage right triumphantly announcing the title of the piece to follow – *Let 'im Move You: This Is A Success*, there is already a confrontation against the theatrical architecture of whiteness (https://cultplastic.com/2017/03/03/vision-a-tool-for-colonization-of-dance/) that is inherently set up to fail black and queer performances. To vocally assert that "this is a success" is to reaffirm one's value independently of white validation, refusing to conform oneself to the existing mode of (white) success in dance. No doubt, the piece is made possible by a lot of white institutions (such as Abrons or American Realness) and is presented to a predominantly white audience; but at the same time, there must be a way for black joy and black excellence to use up the resources stolen by the white colonizers, without having to measure up the metrics of success outlined by whiteness.

After the triumphant announcement of "this is a success," two performers, jumatatu m. poe and and William Robinson, enter the space wearing black/white crop-tops on black/white shorts – their heads looking down, their feet playing compact rhythms countering each other, their hands holding a container of some sort of white powder. As they march in the periphery of the theater, the groove of their bodies against the trumpet-heavy music allow the white powder to be shaken and spread evenly on the floor, creating a short ritual that prepares the performance space. After this opening ritual comes to an end, the two performers come to a halt, catch their breath, before poe delivers an effortlessly comedic yet informational mini-lecture/opening words addressing:

- The origin of the form J-Sette, which was created by the black female dance team "Prancing J-Sette" and was popularized among historically black colleges, and how the form over time has become an important mode of expression for black gay men.
- The lack of people of color in the audience. Yet, poe comes prepare – "I have brought some of my friends here," whose pre-recorded images are then projected onto the stage.
- The use of mobile phones during the performance. Far from being prohibited, they are highly encouraged – the spectators are more than welcome to film any parts of the performance, and are even encouraged to post these videos onto Instagram under the hashtag #_move_you_ (#moveyou is already taken, poe quips, before adding that #move_you is also taken).

Once the talk finishes, the two performers step back from the audience to stand in their places, subsequently delivering a high-intensity and extraordinarily-precise choreography inspired by the movement vocabulary of J-sette to the music of James Blake. Their movements are big and sharp, carrying a cheerleading quality to them; their bodies are unreserved and unapologetic in taking up space, asserting their presence through the highly energetic dancing; their executions are either carried out one by one, in unison, or in a canon, embodying a very simple yet clear and effective composition. What interests me the most about this sequence of movements is the choice of the "fake" smile that accompanies their dancing. Whenever they are done with their movement phrases, which usually last for no more than 16 counts, the "fake" smile would momentarily dissipate and dissolve into an awkward facial expression before another phrase starts again – sometimes the dancers lick their lips, sometimes they just look down on the floor, sometimes they wipe the sweats off their faces. These in-between unchoreographed moments within the tightly choreographed dance sequence can also be seen in conventional performances of J-Sette themselves, which for me serves as a glimpse into the performance of black joy, the necessity of that joy, and also what that joy demands of black people. Are these moments of recuperation inevitable under the exhausting conditions of black excellence and black exceptionalism? Or are they the cracks in the facade of excellence itself?

If the piece so far fits itself quite nicely within the white, western bicameral structure of theatrical spectatorship (https://cultplastic.com/2017/03/03/vision-a-tool-for-colonization-of-dance/)where there is a deep division between the performers on stage and the audience members who sit and watch quietly in the dark, *Let 'im Move You…* is not complacent with this process of assimilation for long. As the dance comes to stillness and Robinson sits on poe's lap, who are both half-naked by now, the audience is given a cue to stand up from their seats, to come closer and investigate this intimate exchange. Their bodies sweat profusely, their arms press against one another as their torsos ride the waves of their breath, their faces edge closer against each other as they speak their texts into each other's mouth: "What do you need from me, my sameness or my difference?" Here, the spectators are asked not only to watch from their seats but to also witness, scrutinize, and document the seemingly private experience of the two black queer bodies in ecstasy on stage.

#_move_you_

from **Anh Vo**

01:14

Even though there are people taking pictures/videos here and there throughout the whole performance, in no other sections does the presence of the phones intrude upon the space of the dancers more than this one. When everyone comes together in such close proximity and then pulls out their phone to record this quiet moment between the two performers, there is a spectacularization of their pleasure that strips away the privacy and intimacy of their ecstasy. Even as I pull out my phone to record, I hesitate for a while because it feels "wrong" for me to invade this highly sexual exchange between the two black queer bodies – for black and queer folks, it is already unnerving to bare their pleasure in public (https://cultplastic.com/2018/02/21/pleasure-in-racialization-sexualization-the-body-is-a-house-2017-narcissister/), let alone if they have a dozen of cameras pointing at them.

What the phones also do is that they make explicit the white architecture of experiencing performances that depends so much on the act of seeing. Even when the spectators are already off their seats, they still cannot escape the theatrical convention which codifies that there are no other ways to participate in a performance other than to sit/stand aside and watch. In a way, there is an uncanny parallel between having a predominantly white audience capturing two black queer bodies in ecstasy, and the colonialist tradition of having white anthropologists going into exotic countries in Africa or the Far East looking for/documenting/extracting the primitive truths. Thus, poe and Beacham make explicit that the theater is a white anthropologist structure in which the racially-sexually primitive bodies of the Other are incessantly deployed to bare their racial-sexual truths (https://cultplastic.com/2018/02/21/pleasure-in-racialization-sexualization-the-body-is-a-house-2017-narcissister/), so that their truths are in turn extracted for the benefit of white pleasure/knowledge-pleasure.

Even when *Let 'im Move You* tries to break free from the physical theatre space by bringing the dancing out into the installation space of Abrons Arts Center, and eventually bursting out into the street, this abstract structure of spectatorship does not refuse to let go. The deep division between the viewers and the performers, who are joined by many local dance artists, remain more or less static. Despite the catchy hip-hop/dance-pop music blasting on the speakers and the high-energy accompanied choreography, most of the audience members choose to stand and watch in a non-participatory manner as if they are sitting in the theater, their eyes fixated on either the performers or their phones while their bodies remain rather awkwardly stiff. Meanwhile, the few people who groove with and cheer for the dancers are explicitly black/non-white, further making visible how whiteness governs the perception of dance, and how black choreographers have to accept this fact when they bring their works into the economy of contemporary dance.

Let *'im Move You…* manipulates this theatrical architecture of whiteness quite virtuosically, assimilating into it, inflating it, and at once loosening its tight grip on the work. To perform black joy and black exceptionalism in the theater space is to deal with the conundrum of having to measure oneself in relation to the metrics set up by white culture, and to ask oneself the question: How can you succeed within an architecture that is not set up for *your* success?