

Editor's Note: We Been Knew

Ashayla Byrd

On a scale of one to “sign me up,” how eager are you to be launched from a cannon? To experience the maddening anticipation that precedes release? You are contorted, compacted, and counting every cool, steady breath as a blessing before the heat and sudden shock of inevitable propulsion. A hopefully recognizable voice counts you down before signaling your deliverance...ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two...

We Black and brown folks are not always guaranteed the catharsis of flying up and out, of soaring above all that confines us. Add on being anything other than a cisgender man, and that prospect can seem like an impossibility. Many of us long to breathe in the fresh air of the uninhibited, indiscriminate life. The United States of America—and if you’ve been paying attention, much of the world—doesn’t make it easy for us to be free.

Those of us who are melanated, the girls, the gays, the theys, the everythings, and the in-betweens have traveled through life developing our own ways to get free, to be the fire that sends us skyward. We’ve made our own tools, and we been knew that we are the blueprint for the liberation of all people. One of our timeless tools—dance—has never failed to be a vehicle for declaration, pleasure, change, and connection.

The Dancing Futures Residency—thoughtfully brought to us by Pepatían: Bronx Arts CoLLABorative and BAAD! Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance—has created a container within which BIPOC and/or Bronx-based artists can bravely fashion the worlds in which they dream of being, living, and loving. Artists are given the opportunity to create new performance work with access to rehearsal space, mentorship, documentation of their process, and ample professional development opportunities. Artists are given the space to dream, and they are supported while they do it. The 2023–24 cohort of Dancing Futures—Christina “CocoMotion” Smith, Mai Lê Hô, and Queerly Femmetastic—are dance artists who know what it means to use their artistic practice as a mechanism for release and joy. These BIPOC movers come to the residency with their own unique entry points into the field of dance.

CocoMotion and her NuTribe Dance Company fuse street, club, and other Africanist-based movement forms with contemporary dance to explore relationships and what it means to truly be in community with one another. CocoMotion is described by dance educator,

military veteran, artist, and self-proclaimed homie Jazelynn Goudy as a “warrior goddess superstar” (##) I think it certainly takes a goddess to know a goddess. In her essay, “She. Been. Dat. Gurl. We just waiting for you to catch up...,” Goudy offers a refreshing account of her relationship with CocoMotion, their shared trials and triumphs as Black femme dancers in New York City, and Interludes, CocoMotion’s evening of choreographed vignettes. Goudy’s writing also reflects on the “ethical, embodied collaborative approach” that creates space for “failure, growth, and progress” (##). CocoMotion’s process creates space for humanity in all of its error and glory.

Mai Lê Hô juxtaposes the highly social, in-your-face nature of club dance with the detached air of the proscenium setting to create a movement space that allows the tension of these two worlds to exist in tandem. She founded Layerhythm in 2015, a monthly jam session in NYC’s East Village. “Central to Layerhythm is the dizzying improvisational exchange between musicians and dancers, performers and audience, all of whose infectious radiation would not receive much support within the more alienating mode of theatrical spectatorship” (##). This ever-eloquent musing comes from Anh Vo, a fellow Vietnamese artist who connects with Hô on a number of levels including their shared heritage. Anh Vo’s reflections explore Hô’s *Walking in Layers*, a work created as part of her *Dancing Futures* Residency with Papatíán. One part choreography and another part a Layerhythm party, it is inundated with connections to Vietnam, from the movement to the costumes to the music. Layers upon layers of movement, storytelling, sound, and color coalesce to create an evening filled with textures and designs that co-exist without sacrificing their individuality.

Queerly Femmetastic is a name that clearly speaks for itself, and this queen takes over the burlesque space. Combining her love of cosplay and dance, this “Brooklyn-bred bombshell” acknowledges the Black trailblazers who laid the groundwork for her to experience the burlesque dance scene as she knows it today. *We Been Here: Black Burlesque Legacy* is a showcase created by Queerly Femmetastic and GiGi Holliday dedicated to those trailblazers. In the essay “Black Burlesque Legacy,” Dominant Jeane recounts the historical elements included in the formation of this work. Jeane interviews curator Queerly Femmetastic, and other BIPOC performers -- namely Miss AuoraBoobRealis, Nita B. Yellowcakes, and Susie Dahl. They each discuss their origin stories, the legacy of Black burlesque dance, their curiosities about Black burlesque history in NYC, and the inspiration that compelled them to become a part of the burlesque dance scene. With ferocity and boldness, these performers have staked their claim in neo-burlesque culture.

The fire inside performers Cocomotion, Mai Lê Hô, Queerly Femmetastic and writers Jazelynn Goudy, Anh Vo, and Dominant Jeane have been awe-inspiring to witness. Their breathtaking artistry, narratives, and convictions permeate throughout this issue of Pepatían's Dancing Futures Residency publication. Simply put, this was an impeccable first experience as an editor. It's incredibly easy to dig into this work when it fuels me, too. I hope that you feel free to dig in with me and support these artists as they propel the dance field forward. The moment before the cannon fires is filled with apprehension, but the relief of release is well worth it. Everyone, especially BIPOC artists, deserves the chance to ascend. We been here and we been knew.

BIO

Ashayla Byrd (she/they), is a writer, dance artist, scholar, and arts administrator who supports dance communities while creating brave spaces for queer and BIPOC folks to witness and be in fellowship with one another. She serves as the Manager of Executive Affairs for the Association of Performing Arts Professionals and has been a member of cohorts in the BlackLight Summit, DanceUSA Institute for Leadership Training, and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities' FY25 Arts and Humanities Fellowship Grant Program.
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