"An Echo of Ancient Things"
Dramaturgical Distillations
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“This work is an echo of ancient things through us.”—Marjani

We have Journeyed with Everett and Marjani with this piece since 2019. During our process together we have all shared our dreams, we have recounted our lineages, we have peeled open and tendered our hearts, we have held and Witnessed each other, and we have recognized and claimed each other as family.

In order to support "Prophet or Prophet: The Order of Lyricism" in fully manifesting most expansively as itself, we continuously asked Marjani and Everett questions. Questions that invited individual exploration, as well as an examination of their relationship as partners, parents and collaborators. We believe that the right questions amplify pathways to a richer creative process, and life. Here, we share a few questions we offered them, our evolving knowings around art/life, and Everett and Marjani’s own wisdom about this process.

What wants to happen?

It is a great privilege to have been Witness to the unfolding of this piece, and to have been privy to the magnitude of Marjani and Everett’s artistic vision—their Love of Black people—and each other. During our time together Marjani wrestled with understanding her role in the piece, and Everett grew into clarity about this piece as his story—a telling of his personal history, lineage, growth and relationship to being an Emcee. Their work required virtuosity through courage—going as deep as the work required—and an abiding trust that “the Ancestors got this.”

What are the Emcee's Spiritual technologies/artistic methodologies/and architectures of craft and form?

All the years of all the study of all the forms of dance. All the years of all the notebooks filled with words tested and released in Circles, and all the vibrations sounded and synced. "Prophet or Prophet: The Order of Lyricism" is rooted in Black brilliance through its circles, straight and diagonal lines; simultaneity; deep listening; polyrhythms and polycentrism\textsuperscript{1}; call and response; playing with time/multiple dimensions; non-linear storytelling; bodily acuity and nimbleness; Witnessing; improvisation; belief in Spirit; trust in Ancestors. This work exemplifies the Yoruba process of \textit{ikò́’ṣé}—learning a skill through the transmission of wisdom from a master\textsuperscript{2}. The inherent embodiment of active study with exemplars of a form, remaps intuition and promotes an organically acquired wisdom.

In this world, we find \textit{erè}, the Yoruba concept for serious play\textsuperscript{3}. What if their gestures/words are not only the improvised discoveries in the moment of a public sharing, but were also the rehearsal for the Spiritual/emotional/physical intimacy of their daily lives? What if their words/gestures are not only for the amplification of their union but also prompt our muscles/Spirits to be inspired, to emulate through the resonance of the frequencies they
activate?  In this way, they are practicing for their own loving lives and offering us tools to do the same. *Eré*, then, is where we all get to play together, to test possibilities and to clear new pathways. The work is for transformation—it moves in the realm of ritual—a practice with an intended result.

Everett pierced through stacks of notebooks and vivid remembrances to land solidly inside of his history with shape-shifting griots, unlikely healers, and priests that become invisible at will. Marjani experimented with her vast and varied facility with movement techniques as she searched to land inside of the right portals to embody Everett’s story, and to offer it back to him as memory, and future. Marjani also worked to find the right expressions inside the truth of her body as it evolves. Experimentation in a multitude of different kinds of residencies helped them gather the layers of sound, gesture, words and Spirit needed to weave the work with clarity. Together they lovingly honor the Black traditions they embody as they bring to life the street corner, the stoop, the pulpit, the mosque, the center of the cypher, the activated prayers . . . the manifested dreams. Our ancestors are here. Our sooncome children are here. Our wildest most profound possibilities are here.

> “Catch the air.  
> Know that in metaphysical health understanding air is more than just oxygen.  
> It’s also life force, having the power to heal and center.”—Everett

In theatrical jazz we often speak of time as a vibrant present beingness—then and now and will be is. Time is also Ancestral blood memory, what dance scholar M’bewe Escobar calls the habitual and ritual as “auto/body/graphy.” Some of us did not need our knowings to evolve into the now commonplace science of epigenetics in order to know the truths of how past times live “in the blood.” Through a Swahili lens, time might also be understood as *sasa*—the present moments of near past and near future that are always moving toward *zamani*, the past time. And, of course, there is the relativity of time that challenges uniformity, a process physicists have known since Einstein mapped it out in precise formulas and equations. All these realms of time vibrate in *Prophet or Prophet: The Order of Lyricism*.

> What can you do to allow the Diety that is Time to serve you, rather than scare you?

> “You charged me with studying my relationship to time (and therefore timing). This would become a kind of password, map, or code for me. A tool for me to find my way in the work. Unlocking…unblocking, unclogging, my pathways into the work, allowing the waters of my imagination and intuition to flow freely. I could go on and on with that metaphor, but ultimately we know that where fresh waters flow, life thrives. You literally ushered life into this work. This is why I/we call you our (and this project’s) Doulas.”—Marjani

During one rehearsal, Marjani was frustrated with her improvised movement response to a passage that Everett was speaking while also moving through the space. After a brief reflection
on time, Marjani re-entered the work with her body now moving not only in concert with Everett’s sonic pace and intensity, but now exploring her own temporal reality in the shape, repetition, and texture of her movement. The difference between the two approaches to the same moment was startling. The second exploration had a vigor born of the joined individuality of the two beings and the worlds they generated. This second iteration also swelled Everett to cleansing tears. As the two paused in silence to re-establish their equilibrium, their son gently laid hands on them, lightly stroked their arms, one at a time, then danced away. Gentle touches, skin to skin, knowing more than words can offer. We were all still in the sasa as it slowly crept into zamani.

The layers that are possible through simultaneity open both an individual and idiosyncratic relationship to the work as well as a communal resonance from the shared experience of the work. The productive tensions that their layering brings is the evidence of expansive embrace, the heat that forges a different now.

**What is your body telling you now about this piece that it didn’t tell you in 2019?**

“We are literally redesigning and re-discovering the project for Marjani and Everett. Sections that we did then are not the same as we did for this dynamic.” — Marjani

“I realize over these sessions, I move more when I try to explain things. Some of the things I was saying—movement and the body assisted the medium. I used to say, “I’m not a mover!” It’s given me a new way to be on stage. That moment when Marjani and I moved to each other’s words was one of the first times I was challenged to think about something I wrote through movement. It truly changes the way I’m doing work from this point forward. Like realizing I had on dark sunglasses then realizing there is a lot of light out here!” — Everett

Everett and Marjani offer in rich complexity many truths, many centers, many directions at the same time—creating neither dissonance nor harmony, but synthesis and possibility. With a dense soundscape of vocables and embodiments that criss-cross time/place, they are in sonic and visceral conversations with their selves. This work opened up new ways to create art which inevitably offers new ways to make lives. When interdisciplinary artist Florinda Bryant poses the question, “How do you break down the science of the cypher?,” Marjani and Everett’s work answers with the transformation of their very lives. The discoveries they shared are aligned with the path of innovators. And now, Dear Audience/Witnesses, we invite you to sit with some questions as you approach this work, just as we invited Everett and Marjani to stay with questions throughout their process. Consider how your answers shape what you offer our collective experience this evening.

**What can you do to be present in your attention with intention?**
What are you experiencing in your body right now, and how does that shape your experience with this work?

What do you perceive your responsibility to be in what happens here this evening?

“What’s Breathe…. Emcee Breathe.
You must first understand that the breath is the most important thing. In order to catch it you must first understand its purpose. Zan would say, ‘Rip the Belly.’” —Everett

“Rip the Belly,” by Everett Saunders
1 Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Dance*
2 Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, *Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Ase, and the Power of the Present Moment*
3 Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*
4 Ninoska M'bewe Escobar, *Wrought with Light and Dreams: Auto/body/graphy and the Persistence of Pearl Primus*, 2019
5 John M’biti, *African Religions and Philosophy*
6 Carlos Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lesson on Physics*
7 Florinda Bryant, *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic*