

Artist Talk Marjani Forte Saunders

Joshua Oduga: Hello, and thank you for joining us for this virtual program, "Artist Talk Marjani Forté Saunders." My name is Joshua Oduga. I'm the Public Programs and Exhibitions Manager at Art + Practice. I'm very excited to welcome you for this virtual program.

Today's program is an intimate discussion with artist Marjani Forté Saunders about her artwork and practice. Marjani Forté Saunders is a mother, choreographer, performer, and organizer.

She is a 2021 Dance Magazine Harkness Awardee, a 2020 recipient of the Foundation of Contemporary Arts Grants for Artists Award, and a two-time NY Dance and Performance/Bessie Award winning choreographer and performer for her latest work, "Memoirs of a Unicorn," which had its international premiere in Brussels, Belgium, in 2019, and will present in Berlin in October of this year.

Hello, Marjani. Thank you for joining us for this program.

Marjani Forté Saunders: Hello. We're currently in Berlin about to present Memoirs of a Unicorn. [laughs]

Joshua: Thank you so much for joining me during this, what I'm sure it's like a whirlwind of rehearsals and gearing up for the show.

I'm really excited to have first connected with you about a month and a half ago to start thinking about this program, but also to be able to make space for this conversation during a time where your practice is really so busy taking amazing work on tour during a time where it's so hard to even think about doing something like that.

Before we jump into I think the nuts and bolts of this conversation, I'd love a little bit to talk about currently where you are and what you're doing and getting the show together, if you want to spend a second talking about that.

Marjani: Oh, yeah. We are currently in Berlin, at the Sophiensaele, which is a beautiful theater space here in the Mitte District of Berlin.

Memoirs of a Unicorn was curated by Dr. Joy Kalu, who is an incredible thinker curator here in Berlin. Among the girth of her work is you'll find this if you google Joy Kalu lots of writing on notions of critical whiteness, which is a burgeoning conversation arguably in Europe, but most especially here in Berlin.

I will say being here in Berlin is really quite an auspicious invitation for me because I also recognize Berlin to be an important landing place for many Black artists who will become expatriates there in the US. [laughs]

Also, it's one of the few places to pay reparations to an oppressed group of people like [indecipherable 3:24], like the Jews who were held captive here, mistreated and experienced

extreme violence under the Hitler regime. Reparations were paid out to the Jewish community, particularly here in Berlin.

All of that history feels very alive and well, very present, not that long ago, and super informative and super special to our trip here.

Joshua: That's amazing, so glad to hear. I love how you're thinking about all of these things in tandem, putting your words together and bringing forth what has been years of works to think about this work. Thank you for sharing that. I'd love to now talk about the origins of your artistic practice.

I didn't go to art school or anything like that, so one of the things I'm always interested in is when artists and people who are creative really started to think about the beginning of the work that they were doing. When you knew choreography and movement were going to be such an integral part of the work that you put forth in the world. I'd love to talk a little bit about that, if you can.

Marjani: When we were talking about this, one of the things that occurred to me about the way that you so beautifully framed these questions, Joshua, is peripherally, there are lots of restarts for us as artists, or rebirths, reintroductions to how we enter the craft, no matter how early, or "late" in life start.

I would say that I had to refresh my relationship to my craft over and over again, in various points of my life that felt like literally starting over. I might offer that now is one of them. We've been home for a year. [laughs]

Joshua: Definitely. I also think what's really interesting about that and what I've been learning and engaging with this exhibition and Blondell Cumming's work, which this program originates from, is this idea of using your body and putting that forth as a central element of your work.

There is no way to do that without constantly rethinking what you're doing, constantly relearning various different practices and things like that.

For you, in terms of those origins, do you feel like it was something that you learned a lot on your own, or was it coming together in groups with other dancers and contributing to the education side of it and learning in that aspect that really began to push you towards dance and movement as a career?

Marjani: I have to say it's both ends. Though those are not really loved or beloved answers, particularly in our culture, American culture, [laughs] where we live in a very binary, dichotomous arrangement of things either are or they aren't kind of thing.

My learning has been so richly steeped in both of those circumstances. My clan learning, like I like to say, [laughs] how I'm learning with community or with groups of people, with like-minded thinkers and with non-like-minded thinkers, has deeply informed my practice.

They include at the really height of my professional practice as a Bush Woman, which we know that introduced me to "Chicken Soup" and to Blondell. Prior to that, places like Garth Fagan, LA

County High School for the Arts, the Loyola Marymount University, and the Ailey School. All of these been...

Joshua: [indecipherable 7:30] are always, to me they're like the pinnacle of these kind of things. Where it's obviously to even get to that level as a creative, to go to a creative high school or something, you have to be thinking about these things on your own.

You mentioned LA County High School of the Arts. I actually went to Cal State LA. That [indecipherable 7:47]. One of the amazing things about going to that school was driving there as a parent.

My kids were very small. They were

[7:56] stages of their life, walking through LA County High School to get to my classes, and seeing the kids doing theater, seeing them doing monologues, or all the little things that they create in these little creative pods, these [indecipherable 8:12] which she said that they made for each other.

I didn't quite understand what was going on there at that school. I didn't know the origin of it at that time. I didn't know how many other people passed through there. Amazing artists like yourself and so many other artists working in so many other fields. People who often times go on to do things outside of art as well. I feel like it's such an amazing container.

You mentioned all of these other places that are really great for coming together and building these memories as an artist.

Throughout this conversation, I want to take it back to some of your work that I've been able to find online, just videos that we can view.

One of the works that I've been able to find is an earlier work, "Memory Withholdings," reflections of memory, which has the subtitle "Work in Progress" as well on the video. I wanted to play that video for a little bit and then we can speak on it briefly.

I'll share my screen so that we can

watch. [music]

Marjani: Oh, my goodness, Josh. [laughs] Can you imagine [indecipherable 11:14] that make me tear up?

Joshua: I've learned so much working on this exhibition throughout the past years about choreography and these practices in general. One of the things that I spent a lot of time doing works with Blondell, dancing with other people. One of the things I've learned is that that's always a conversation.

I wanted to start this off by talking about your origins, because it's really beautiful in this work specifically, how that comes across the conversation between yourself, and can you please tell me

who the other individual dancing with you is?

Marjani: Hopefully, yeah. That other individual is actually a close mentor, a sister friend, kindred spirit of mine, Mia Love. She's a well-known, beloved choreographer. She's also the daughter of Ed Love, a very well-known and respected blacksmith and visual artist whose work was up at camp for a long time recently.

Among many things, Mia also often uses this word, "conical." As you talk about origins of practice, the very conical notion of this idea of origin, she's a tremendous originator for me of teachers and understanding process or taking time and evolution, and even for critical part of the evolution of my womanhood and motherhood.

She's the doula that helped me bring my child into the world. I could just ramble off about Mia all day long. LOVE/FORTE, which is who we were together, an intergenerational partnership and choreographic practice, began an early study of James Baldwin and Billy Holiday. That video was from that work.

Joshua: That's amazing. I feel like that came across from watching the video, the connection between the two of you, without me knowing the story. This is something that we haven't talked about. I really loved that.

Viewing the video, and even viewing it on YouTube, one of the things I learned, and even came up when we had our initial conversation, is that this work needs to be felt in person. You need to be in the room and experiencing it that way.

With Blondell and the video work that she was doing then some of your work, which we'll show later, which is still in live and in person, which brings in elements of video and brings in elements of projection, there is still this idea of making it personal and connecting it back to memories and experiences and in all of these things.

You begin to touch on it. One of the things I wanted to follow up on in terms of the origin question is my perspective of your work, is you're a student of the world and of your own personal experiences, taking it all in on a personal level and translating that idea through your work and through movement and ways in which only began to touch on the universal.

I wanted to touch on some of the origins outside of your own work like books, film, music, art that led you to this dual practice of movement and liberation, because I feel like these things go hand in hand in your work. That, for me, it's so much of the reading and engaging with other work that led me to that journey as well. I wanted to give you space to talk about that a little bit before we move on.

Marjani: I was introduced through email, so far, but hopefully we get to meet in person too. I have to figure out her last name, beautiful artist philosopher here in Berlin. Her name is Arlette. I'll get her last name before I leave here. It's so shameful.

She said something in a bio that I found of her. She spoke so explicitly about how invested she was in the material and the immaterial, the inbetween of those spaces that occur inside of craftsmanship in art.

I have found that as much as I love my practice as a choreographer and as a performer, that there's so much offered to us in these other forms that almost reveal how prismic our stories are, how many faces there are to these stories.

Literature origins are abundant for me. Among the stories I love that were introduced to me through my father, an avid sci-fi reader, that's sincerely avid sci-fi reader, I got to call out a girl, Octavia. I'm so grateful to see the renaissance of things coming from being born from other stories, especially now in this very dystopian feeling like time period that we're in [laughs] instead of going away.

Joshua: I've heard so many television adaptations and film adaptations of her work, which I discovered when I was just getting out of high school. An individual person, I immediately thought like, "Oh, movies of this would be so cool." Now that I hear about that, I'm like, "Well, we're kind of like living in some of those things a little bit at one point."

I'm not sure if I want to see that translated to a screen at this time. It's interesting that these elements bring themselves into your work. I'm a huge sci-fi fan myself. I'm currently at the [indecipherable 17:00] of trying to introduce these things into my kids and trying to make it be something that they also love as much as I do.

When I was looking at your work, these things came across so much. It beautifully leads me to the next work that I wanted to show. In doing it, I was looking online for a ton of videos and works that I can find of your work. One of the things I've been realizing in doing these programs is I love to share information that is widely available to the public.

People can also go out and find these videos. We will also share links to where they exist with this program so they can go out and explore your work on their own. I want to just share a little excerpt of a longer video that I believe begins to touch on some of the origins of these ideas. Let me just show it one more time.

[music]

Marjani: Woo! [laughs]

Joshua: Another excerpt of a larger piece. I'll let you speak first a little bit on that and then I'll share my thoughts.

Marjani: Oh boy. First, the artist who I meant, the philosopher, curator, artist that I mentioned, Arlette Louise Ndakoze. It's either Ndakoze or Ndakaze. She's from Rwanda. She is just an incredible painter.

That work "Ego," that [indecipherable 20:24], was actually the first collaboration with my now husband. [laughs] At the time he was my boyfriend, and he was just wicked talented and interesting.

Nia actually said, "You guys, you know, you should ask Everett to do the music." [indecipherable 20:44] now. She asked Everett to do the music.

I was like, "Ah, you don't know anything about dance coming out of Philly," and sure enough, we started telling these stories to each other. I said, "I'm working on this piece, it's my first mainstage work, but when you do the music, I want you to tell your own story."

Then he played that for me one day, and we tinkered with it a bit, and we ended up with this incredible score that set the...I have yet to have worked with another composer for my work. That was 12 years ago.

Joshua: Amazing. It's so interesting what you said about you connecting with him and saying, "I want you to tell your own story." I'll go back to what we were saying about sci-fi, and about that...

Marjani: Oh shit, I forgot [indecipherable 21:42].

Joshua: I think that that's amazing. For me, when I think about those kinds of stories, and I think what allowed me to really become a fan of those things and for it to be so ingrained in the work that I'm doing now, is this idea of these stories that are an individual story, and you hear these fantastical things.

I think Octavia was really hitting on that in a very specific manner with the stories that...I hear nowadays about where she gets the ideas for some of her stories, and things like that, and it's...

Marjani: Oh, yeah.

Joshua: He was moving...

[crosstalk]

Joshua: ...a way where she was consuming so much. She was getting so much information and really thinking about the sci-fi world as a way of figuring out her own personal story. You know what I mean?

Marjani: Exactly.

[crosstalk]

Joshua: ...into the larger conversation. It's really interesting how you say that is the beginnings of a long-term collaboration, both professionally and personally, between you and your husband.

I think those stories are so important, and I'm sure you both have learned so much about your individual practices. I have to go off and learn so much more about Everett's work as a composer

because the [indecipherable 22:55] is just so amazing. I think the relationship between the both of you creatively is really great.

Marjani: I was just going to say there was something about the way that you brought up this notion of sci fi in the stories in particular, and as I said, the dystopian future or the dystopian currents that we are inside of right now.

To me, it's no mistake that Octavia Butler's work would have this resurgence or resurgence as people search for answers and ways to take on the insanities of the moment. I think that as we look at other sci fi writers even like [indecipherable 23:36], or you look at Walter Mosley wrote some sci-fi. I don't know if folks know that. We keep going even into things as strange and bizarre as magic realism.

Or we look at...what's my boy's name? Who wrote "The Alchemist," Paulo Coelho? We look at folks we go really far back into this thing that I just cracked open, the "Foundation" series, and now they're putting it up on Amazon as a show, which I'm a little disappointed because I just cracked open the book.

Isaac Asimov would give us information in a sci-fi book that will come to inform the way we think about robotics, period. He literally gave us, through fiction, three fundamental laws of robotics. This association of sci-fi from actual blueprints for how to take on the future [laughs] is tricky because it actually continues to do that.

That's the way that I engage it in my work is like a kind of a blueprint.

Joshua: Yeah. [laughs] That's so beautifully stated. It also beautifully leads me to the next thing, which is a little bit more of talking about education. I was familiar with your work before. I had seen so many pieces of your work throughout my engagement as a curator and a person that just loves art.

It really came onto my radar when we started working on this exhibition with the Getty Research Institute. Amazing curator there, Kristin Juarez, was talking to me about Blondell and about her work and all these various different connections. She casually mentioned Marjani Fort Saunders and that you've had spent some time learning directly with Blondell and working with her.

Kristin, I think I have pages and pages of notes of things that she has just mentioned in these meetings that we have that I think go off and do research on. I remember specifically going off that day and looking up your name and engaging with your work. I was come to this by the idea that you studied with Blondell, but I just quickly went off down a rabbit hole thinking of you.

Throughout this exhibition, I've been thinking about the time that you must have spent with Blondell and learning from her and all of that, and I really wanted to give space in this conversation to talk just very briefly about that if you wanted to, to speak on your time learning with Blondell, the origins of that and anything that you might want to share about your time.

Marjani: We could talk about that as long as you want because I get a little giddy when I think about it. I get giddy because I feel so like I work with her. [laughs] I feel like that. I worked with

this person who I would say slipped by the radar of many, but because we weren't ready at that moment.

Now that we know what we know, and even looking back in the ways that Blondell did early in her career...Actually, there's a 40th anniversary of Black dance in America. I'm trying to remember what the name of the festival is. It was a beautiful festival that was curated about 40 years ago.

Melanie, a really wonderful [indecipherable 27:30], Melanie George, Jazz scholar and artists and dramaturg. The last place I understand she was with Jacob's Pillow and she moves about does a lot of things [indecipherable 27:44].

She brought it up on Facebook. She was like, "Hey, there is this huge festival coming up that looked at like dance artists across the country and this was the 40year go round of it." She posted the early programs, like who are the artists that were showing work and are connected and being a part of conversations there.

Among them, Eleo Pomare, right? Cleo Parker Robinson would chip in. Of course, I think Jawole was in there also. There is Blondell. [laughs] There is Marlies Yearby. When I say slip by many, I mean later down the road when we started to understand our relationship to a storytelling practice that rebuild the spectrums of how we, as Black folks, can approach craft.

Blondell worked that a lot. I came to learn and understand more about her history is that she worked very closely with Meredith Monk. She did a thing with Meredith Monk's work that Black folks do. I will say Black American folks, that we do. I'm going to speak from our cultural truth.

The way we iterate though, the way we take something like, "Uhhuh," and then we flip it, just speaks so beautifully to the concentric circles of what we know ancestrally, what we vision in terms of future, and how deeply rooted we are in who we are right here and now.

That's exactly what Blondell challenged me to do. When we were working on Chicken Soup, she challenged me to go back and fetch it. [laughs] We call it [indecipherable 29:36]. We throw that word around a lot. As an actual choreographic and enlivening practice, go back and remember some of the things that you learn from your mommy, your auntie, and your grand mommy.

As you do so, be in that moment right here and now to help us understand this practice and the futuring of taking care of home, of being mommy, partner, daughter, all of the things that you might occupy as womanhood, such that I can reflect on Chicken Soup now that I am all of those things and understand a whole other world of it.

Joshua: That's amazing. I've been thinking about her work and especially now that the exhibition is open, and I get a chance to be in the space and see people watching her work and spending time in front of the screens with the work.

I've been thinking so much of her as just a storyteller. She is a dancer. She is a choreographer. I'm

very new to the language that you need to talk about these things and talk about them in a way that you do so beautifully. Storytelling is something that I can talk about.

That's something that is inherent across generations and across cultures and how you just said, you're going to speak your Black American truth to what you're saying. Myself, as a first generation Nigerian American, when I experienced Blondell's work, there's some very specific things that I think of when I think of chicken heads and things like that.

Oftentimes, it's going to be very different than the person that's standing next to me, even if they look exactly like I do. I love to hear that your time with Blondell must have consisted of a lot of conversations. As much as you were learning movement, as much as you were thinking about these things, a lot of it had to do with her telling you to do that, to go back and to think about what you were doing.

Then just her work with Meredith Monk and how you said the way that she iterated that as a Black American woman and stepped forth and added her own truth in that, while also being able to understand the language that Meredith Monk was doing as well. That is something that I hope people are able to understand when they come forth into the space and they view the exhibition.

Also, the curators at the Getty Research Institute have done an amazing job to look at various different forms of scholarship. They've created this amazing resource guide with information and things that connect Blondell's work, not only to choreography and contemporary art but to things like food, anthropology, all these various other things that Blondell was talking about.

For me, that shows that she was not only collaborating with people in a sense that they were performers, but she was collaborating with these social and political history ideas. This thing of moving pictures, when I hear that, I think it's really amazing that she was thinking about that.

She came together. I was like well, I need to think of what she was doing as a concept when she was creating it. I started to think about how this idea of moving pictures can also translate outside of movement practices.

I wanted to show an excerpt of the work from you that incorporates some visuals of Chicken Soup, if we can do that now. I think that that is moving towards this idea of moving pictures in a really interesting way. I'm going to just share that work now.

Recorded Voice: I'm going to call [indecipherable 33:25], so if my mother wasn't lucky. I spray starched the [indecipherable 33:38] until they became sick. Then my [indecipherable 33:43] mom agrees. She used to bake cookies for us. There was that last [indecipherable 33:51]. I cut out two pieces of that. Maybe 35 years later, they called it [indecipherable 34:01]. I called it a wafer.

[music]

Marjani: [laughs]

Joshua: Now that the show is opening [indecipherable 35:35] , that initial musical cue is something that it just plays in my head all the time in a very good way. There's so much going on to talk about. I struggle to find where to start. The amazing set design, the movement vocabulary that you're working with, all of these things are so amazing.

This idea of moving pictures, how we got to this. If I were to teach a course or something and I was going to be, "Here's moving pictures," I would definitely bring this piece into the conversation. Just the interplay between your work and Blondell's is really amazing.

I'd love for you to talk about this piece, and how the time with Blondell influenced that and then about piece in general, just briefly.

Marjani: I love that you mentioned student head because...or showing something to your students, because one of the things I say when I'm working with students, particularly in a composition class or choreography class, is to say, "Don't imagine that you're going to come up with the most original idea.

"Let's consider for once that there's really nothing new under the sun. Rather than seeking to be an only thing, which again leads to these ideas of scarcity, rather than seeking to be the top, or the most important, ask yourself how your particular experience with the thing is in relationship to those who have done it also." [laughs]

When you're asking yourself about something or you're inquiring about domesticity, who are the other artists who have said something about domesticity too? What have they said? Are there any that you align with? If you disagree with them, why?

How does yours fit in the pantheon of those are the conversations? When you ask yourself questions like that, then you get to be in a relationship to things. My goodness, that's scholarship. [laughs]

That's what we're talking about, right? That's exciting for me too, because then you also see yourself prayerfully reflected in time. You realize that the things that you're landing on are really important and valuable echoes. Now you must do it.

When Grandmaster Flash was talking about how he discovered scratching the record, in the record player and to be designing the record player to give birth to that sound that we hear in the form that we will now come to call hip hop, [laughs] how he was such an important architect to that sound.

[indecipherable 38:45] also tells us that, "My daddy gave me the records, but my mama's seamstress practice [laughs] is what actually led to my ingenuity." There's only one person who've really other than my mama and the women of my family talks to me about the Juju that happens in our homes, Blondell. [laughs]

Joshua: I think also what you're saying is this idea of paying honor or even challenging what has come before you, in doing that as a creative, even as a person, because I think how much these concepts are universal outside of creative things as well.

[indecipherable 39:31] we even hear some of the things that you lead yourself with as a mother, as an educator, I think that this conversation can equally fit into any one of these things. I think that when you do that, when you began to look at what has happened before you, it can only make the work that you're currently doing better.

It also [indecipherable 39:51] to bring in other things outside of what you're thinking. Like what she said, don't think that you're going to come up with the best idea or that you're going to come up with the thing that is the best. One of the other things about that work that we just watched that's, to me, really important is all the other elements, the set design, which is really amazing.

All of these things that I know as the originator of the idea, you have your hand in all of these things, but that you're also bringing in all of these amazing collaborators. As I was exploring in your work and just looking at the list of people that you have worked with that are in your orbit, which I feel just given this conversation...I hate to speak for you, but it seems like it's personal.

These work with all of these individuals, the work that you're doing, there's no way that it could not be personal as well. I think that it challenges you to create the best work possible when you're thinking in this manner. I want to talk about collaboration, because like I said it's been central to your work throughout your practice.

Specifically your works with your partner and composer, Everett Saunders. Works like "A Prophet's Tale," and "Memoirs of a Unicorn," but you've also collaborated with other individuals like Khalil Joseph, Mimi Lien, and even your father as well, who you've talked about it a little bit in this program.

What really strikes me is your method of collaboration in a way in which is clearly grounded in your own personal research, and your own personal life living that you're doing. You bring in these individuals and you ask them to bring out the best of their work by you just being in collaboration with each other.

You spoke about this a little bit. You talked about the work Ego, I believe, which was the first work that you did with Everett and how you told him, "I want you to tell your story."

Can we just touch on how you think about collaboration and your personal idea of what collaboration means, both in art and personal life, just in general? I wanted to make space to talk to you about that in this conversation as well.

Marjani: OK, hold on, I think my plug came out.

[pause]

Marjani: My phone is charging. There we go. OK. Collaboration. How do I think about collaboration? It's funny, I was just having a conversation with our curator here, Dr. Joy Kalu,

and we were talking about, "Yeah, you said you don't draw any lines between your work and your identities and all these things." I say, "Yeah, but now I'm 37 and I'm starting to think about that."

[laughter]

Marjani: What I meant is that I can't say for certain that I approach collaboration in one way, Joshua, or in a set idea of ways, because there's so much, I feel like that I'm still learning.

For example, the way that I understood collaborating with Khalil where I served as like a movement coach or choreographer for a couple of his projects. I was really discovering, [laughs] but really trying to show up on my best shit, but also realizing that there's so little I actually know about film or how the moving image or how the body looks through this lens, like how you are seen.

I understand the stage quite well. It's where I've been all my life, but the screen is new. Versus how I might collaborate with someone like Mimi Lien who was an exquisite [indecipherable 43:47] genius award winning set designer, and arrive at this, what? Nine Foot pyramid [laughs] that my dad is the one who actually designed. They codesign and created this thing.

This is a discovery, but I think perhaps if I were to look at some things that show up for me in a collaborative process is there's a core value in Urban Bush Women's work when we work in communities. One of those values is validating the individual.

We bring that up because sometimes when we talk about community, we tend to talk about community as a monolith, and then all of our associations and our conditioning around what community is, which is often a default support, and often I would default too poor and Black, right? [laughs]

Then we get really limited on what we're supposed to be doing with and in relationship to community is really deep. When we think collaboration is not that far from that idea of community and when ultimately, we feel like we're coming in with the answers, and we're just here to share a little bit. [laughs]

What I love about Urban Bush Women's approach to anything when it comes to those realms, and the notion of validating the individual, is this huge consideration of the assets that we all bring to the table. That without those very particular assets, the thing wouldn't happen in the way that it's designed or destined, dare I say, or designated [laughs] to happen.

If we're all here, it's because we're all supposed to make some shit the way that we can only do it. Let's bring our best so that we get close to the thing that we have been destined to do. In so doing, then we must consider that there are some very particular gifts that we are bringing to this moment. That's perhaps a theme in my work and collaborative practice.

Joshua: That you don't have one general way of thinking about collaboration, you very beautifully have summarized what I think is one of the most on point [laughs] ideas of collaboration that I've ever heard of.

There's so much that I deal with in doing the work that I do that it's so important to think about what you just said, to think about what everybody's bringing to the table, how you engage in that.

Even when I engage with an artist like yourself and I ask them to take part in a program like this, this is one of the things that I'm always thinking about now.

What do you have to gain from coming and taking part in this conversation and reflecting upon work that you already moved on from? You're doing other amazing things. You also gave an amazing transition to one of the last questions that I wanted to ask you, your work as an organizer and an antiracist activist.

You are a lead facilitator at the organization Urban Bush Women, which you've mentioned various times throughout this conversation. Urban Bush Women was founded by dancer, teacher, and choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

Marjani: Zollar.

Joshua: Zollar, sorry.

Marjani: No, no.

Joshua: [indecipherable 47:20] antiracist organizer training these ideas create throughout your work, as we've talked about. I would love to spend some time exploring first Urban Bush Women as an organization, and then your work with the organization and tracing how these experiences, specifically the organizing and the antiracist work, inform your choreographic practice.

Let's start off by talking about Urban Bush Women, if you could give everyone a brief run through of what the organization is and what they participate in.

Marjani: Urban Bush Women, the organization, I lost count somewhere after 35 years. We're somewhere between 35 and 40 years old. It started as a vision of Jawole's but really a vision of a collective of sisters that was burning in Jawole's heart in a particular way.

In such a way that she would continue to develop and refine and grow this work as she gathered a couple of really powerful sisters together to build these stories and build these performed works and exercise this vision that she had of how she would tell these kinds of stories.

I would say that, as far as I understand, the way that the company would grow and come to know itself is in the doing, which required that they understood or they came to understand how their work exists in the field.

Every system and institution that we interact with in this country requires us to do something very particular, like deliverables. The language is very specific. It's very transactional. It turns our work into these very transactional things, such to a point that they can almost be mechanized.

When things become mechanized, then you need humans less and less to do them. You can have machines do them, but ain't no machine ever told you no story. [laughs]

Joshua: They're starting to do that now. There's machine learning stories that you can engage with...

Marjani: Damn.

Joshua: ...are the worst stories that I've ever read.

The language, these machines are learning how to tell stories and learning how to do this. It's never going to get to a point where it's going to be like when your father sat you down and started to talk to you about sci-fi. It's never going to be that way. Sorry, continue.

Marjani: It's OK. I love it. It reminds me that stories are probably among the oldest technology that we have, the oldest technology that we have for sharing information and for sharing knowledge and for sharing sensation, the thing that we have that is actually unreplaceable, or unreplicable is the word I'm looking for.

Long story short, Urban Bush Women wrapped its head around that and wrapped its heart around that, and then wrapped its organizing around that so that they could better build relationships with other folks who are doing this kind of work, including Junebug in New Orleans who they would go and study with for a long time.

I'm almost done. Not positioning themselves as the first people to ever do it but really being in relationship to who else is doing this kind of thing and also would connect with, while in New Orleans, The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond that would root their work with a critical racial analysis.

Once we get into the mechanisms or the mechanizations I'm making the word up, but it works for what I need once we get into that process, then we begin to repeat the same things like a machine. Once a machine gets in, then we can clone shit and do it the same way.

If there's anything that we know about the very capitalist machine that we're inside of is that what gets replicated over and over again are the very things that are killing us, are the very things that are rooted in the dehumanization and the oppression of us, in particular, as in Black folk.

Revolution and liberation are woven up inside of answering these very small questions. Who was that, Ella Jo Baker who said, "You know, babes," when she was working with SNCC, she said, "when the questions get too big, ask a smaller question."? [laughs]

That's what's so great about the work that Urban Bush Women does, that the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond does, whose work I'm also rooted in that informs my practice and has given

me an analysis with which to interpret and understand the function of race in my work and in the systems and institutions that I deal with.

That has permeated all of my work and helps me to understand how I collaborate, who I collaborate with, the questions that are undergird the way that we work that then inform the results or the product or the deliverables that come forth.

Joshua: That is amazing.

Marjani: [laughs] That was a mouthful.

Joshua: I don't have anything else to add to what you just said. What you very quickly summarized up what I think is a very important aspect of your work is taking in all of this and synthesizing it through the artistic gift that you've been given.

I want to say thank you for taking the time to engage with me in this conversation and, in a larger way, for having such a deeply research and care rooted practice in the work that you're doing.

As I've been engaging in Blondell's work, one of the things that I've learned is that it's so important for this information to be dispersed in the manner in which you all are doing it through movement, through choreography. To think that you're also doing this while taking on so many of these other ideas that we've talked about, that's the reason why I started doing some of the stuff that I'm doing now.

Thank you so much. All the best with your rehearsals and all your time in Berlin. I can't wait for us to meet in person and for you to come experience the exhibition at our exhibition.

Marjani: Ditto. I have to thank you for all of the incredible work that you've done though, my god, the depth and the breadth of your research. Perhaps most importantly, or in addition to, not most importantly, also importantly, the care and compassion that you brought to how we prepare for this.

All the care that was wrapped up in the time to do it, the time that you gave me to look things over, the compassionate and careful way that you reminded me of things and just your patience. I'm just so utterly grateful. I learned so much curatorially, as an emerging curator about this practice and about how to engage artists as crazy as myself. Thank you [laughs]

Joshua: Thank you so much. I'm going to let you go. I know you got to get to rehearsals.

[crosstalk]

Joshua: I'm sure you got people [indecipherable 54:53] trying to pull you over. Thank you so much for your time. Thanks everyone [indecipherable 54:59] this program.

Marjani: Thanks everyone. Bye.