

# Marjani Forté

A PRESS KIT



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photo: Judith Stuart

# The Artist

Fortè-Saunders is a Pasadena, CA native and Harlem resident. She traveled as a performer with Urban Bush Women Dance Co. for 5 yrs, and is now co-founder with Nia Love, of LOVE|FORTÉ A COLLECTIVE. [www.loveforte.org]. Fortè-Saunders is a 2014 Princess Grace Choreography Fellowship Awardee. For her work being Here...: a trilogy of works examining the intersections of Mental Illness Addiction, and Systemic Poverty, she's received support from the Foundation of Contemporary Arts- Emergency Grant (2012), Puffin Foundation (2013), 651 Artists Development Initiative Artist (2013), Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (2014), and a New Music USA (2014) grant for a fifth collaboration with husband and composer Everett Saunders in the construction of a 3-D Sound Installation [www.being-here.org]. Fortè has also received support from the Jerome Foundation (2013, 2014), Mertz Gilmore Foundation with LOVE|FORTÉ (2013), Yellowhouse (2013), and the Harkness Foundation (2014).

Her work has been presented at many theaters, centers, and in partnership with communities across the United States and in the New York Triborough area including Danspace Project, the Kelly Strayhorn Theatre in Pittsburgh, PA, Movement Research at Judson Church, New Orleans Mckenna Museum, Harlem Stage, The Pillsbury Theatre in Minneapolis, Spelman College, Pomona College, and Hunter College City University of New York. Fortè-Saunders has worked in residence at Dance Theatre Workshop (2010), Movement Research (2011-13), Brooklyn Arts Exchange with LOVE|FORTÉ (2012-2014), Dance Place (2013), Kelly Strayhorn Theatre (2014) and will begin a New York Live Arts Studio Series Residency in 2015. With a commitment to culturally driven performance art, that ignites positive, equitable action, stirs the human soul, and speaks bravely against injustice Fortè-Saunders' work has flourished into a bouquet of practices, which include teaching and lecture, community organizing/partnership, choreography, master classes in contemporary technique and improvisation, and research driven engagement that seeks to satisfy and inspire artistic development and structural critique.

She is also a member of Urban Bush Women's BOLD Teaching Network, offering UBW's unique approach to dance training and community engagement. Fortè-Saunders served as Adjunct Lecturer, teaching Modern Contemporary Technique at Hunter College City University of New York and Guest Lecturer/Choreographer at Princeton University in the Fall 2014. With deep gratitude, she mobilizes her work honoring that it stems from being born in and having engaged with culturally rich, vibrant, historic, and politically charged communities.



*"EGO is Marjani A. Forté's, and she has plenty of it, or none of it....she returns to the stage to burn even hotter ...in a delicious mix of menace and appeal."*

Quinn Bateson OFFOFFOFF.com Dec 2010



## **EGO (2010)**

VIDEO LINK: <http://vimeo.com/34880760>

**10 mins, 1-2 dancers**

EGO, explores the plague one's Ego unleashes on the multiple dimensions of self- the imploding nature of it all. It also shows transformation, seeking to capture the PROCESS of living in one's authentic and present self. A collaboration with artist and composer Everett V. Saunders, the movement and energy is that of a gasp, a silent scream.



photo: Judith Stuart

Judith Stuart

*This dance is not about making oneself intelligible to others, but about the ways that we view and respond to what we consider unintelligible.*

- Meredith Benjamin/The GC Advocate

# Here...

*(2012 Available for repertory teaching only)*

VIDEO LINK: <https://vimeo.com/43070655>

20 mins, 4-7 dancers

An observation of mental health in the face of systemic oppression, questioning notions of normalcy and the suppression of it. If sanity is defined as "...the ability to think and behave in a normal and rational manner" then who defines normal and rational?

**photo credit: Ian Douglas**

*There's a person in there,  
underneath the symptoms. "being  
Here..." gives us a glimpse.*

- Brian Seibert/The New York  
Times

## being Here... (2013-2015)

preview **VIDEO LINK:** [https://vimeo.com/  
63419866](https://vimeo.com/63419866)

90 mins 4-6 dancers

A trilogy of works (Here..., being Here..., & this  
time...) examining the intersections of Mental  
Illness, Substance Abuse, and Systemic Poverty.  
Includes the 3-D Binaural Sound Installation  
composed by Everett Asis Saunders.





## **SHE WHO**

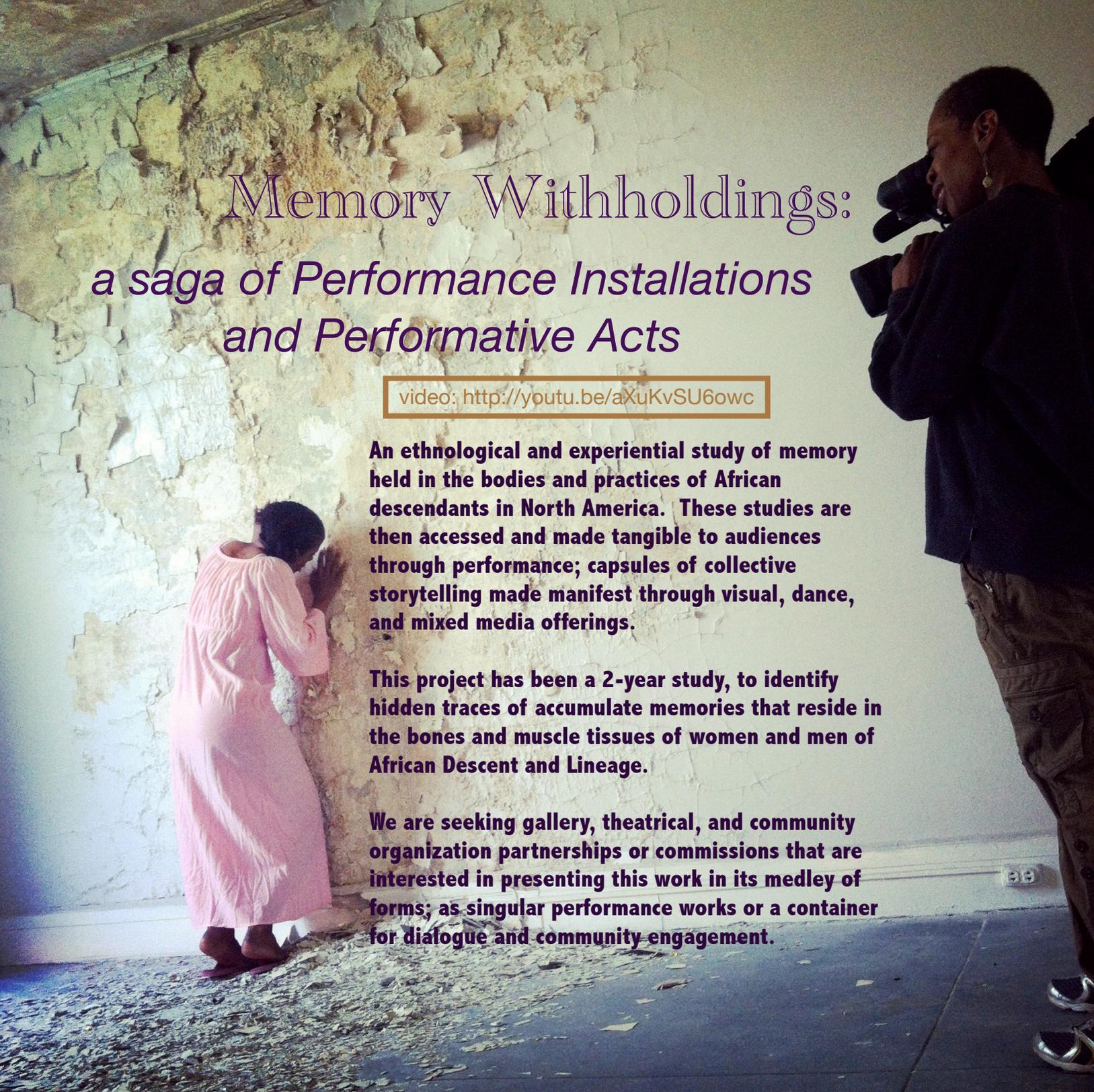
Drawing from highly politicized happenings, historical narratives, and the derivative of a clown suit, this work offered Hunter College Repertory Company an opportunity to engage with Forté's creative process, while diving into complex bold content that examined our experiences with the structures of race, perception, and identity.

## **SHE WHO: Frida, Mami & Me**

has been commissioned by Los Angeles based dance company, **CONTRA TIEMPO (2015 Premiere)**, supported by the prestigious **Princess Grace Foundation-USA**, to explore the intersecting narratives of Frida Kahlo, the goddess Mami Wata, and Forté's own brazen and beguiling stories of identity, love, and loss.

# LOVE|FORTÉ

The creative marriage of Nia Love and Marjani Fortè, LOVE|FORTÉ is a research/process, performance, and teaching geared collective, with a commitment to social and politically conscious art making that connects the human experience through generations. We have developed work and a teaching methodology that reflects our identity as artists of successive generations, reflecting an Africanist approach to learning and evolution. We're interested in re-defining the Performance Experience, through a commitment to the PROCESS of art making via choreographic and Improvisational-based Performance, and an equal valuing of Research and Embodied Memory as profound sources in the creative process. LOVE|FORTÉ embraces a spectrum of performance venues and spaces i.e. theatre, installation/gallery, and site-specific spaces. Current and recent activities include site-specific investigation as a part of our pluralistic training for young artists in dance (Dance Without Walls), WOW Café's, DanceNOW at Joe's Pub performance, Judson Church, and No Longer Empty Exhibit/Site-Specific.

A woman in a long, light pink dress is seen from behind, touching a wall with peeling, textured plaster. The wall is the central focus of the left side of the image. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

# Memory Withholdings: *a saga of Performance Installations and Performative Acts*

video: <http://youtu.be/aXuKvSU6owc>

**An ethnological and experiential study of memory held in the bodies and practices of African descendants in North America. These studies are then accessed and made tangible to audiences through performance; capsules of collective storytelling made manifest through visual, dance, and mixed media offerings.**

**This project has been a 2-year study, to identify hidden traces of accumulate memories that reside in the bones and muscle tissues of women and men of African Descent and Lineage.**

**We are seeking gallery, theatrical, and community organization partnerships or commissions that are interested in presenting this work in its medley of forms; as singular performance works or a container for dialogue and community engagement.**



# Contemporary Modern & Performance Technique

Explores the technique of performance choice and artist development. An Intermediate to Advanced leveled dance class, geared to create space for artists to tend their physical bodies, while marrying it with an artistic mind and willful passion to push for specificity, risk, and abandonment, and play. Students will dive into a richly diverse style (*that is rooted in contemporary modern and Africanist movement*) through a movement phrase where risk and structured improvisation are key to discovery. *It is also an excellent opportunity to engage with Forte's repertory.*

# Classes & Workshops

Marjani Forté/LOVE | FORTÉ are available for choreography and teaching residencies and workshops: creating and remounting of repertory for companies/student ensembles, and a range of physical and theoretical classes namely contemporary technique, improvisation, composition, and lecture series **Claiming Culture through Dance.**

## THE CYPHER

An Improv Jam

The Cypher is an Improvisation Workshop and methodology that uses the functionality of the circle in African Diasporic practices to challenge, and broaden choices in contemporary modern dancers. It is the opportunity for students of all backgrounds, levels, and disciplines, to explore their voices as movers!

Gentle processes open creative spaces of the mind, heart, and body.

## CLAIMING CULTURE THROUGH DANCE!

A Lecture Series:

A series of interactive lectures that examine a few of the ways African American stories and culture has historically been preserved and presented through Dance. It ultimately offers that we each own our unique cultural histories and use those stories to propel our future, humanize our work, and connect our sustainability.

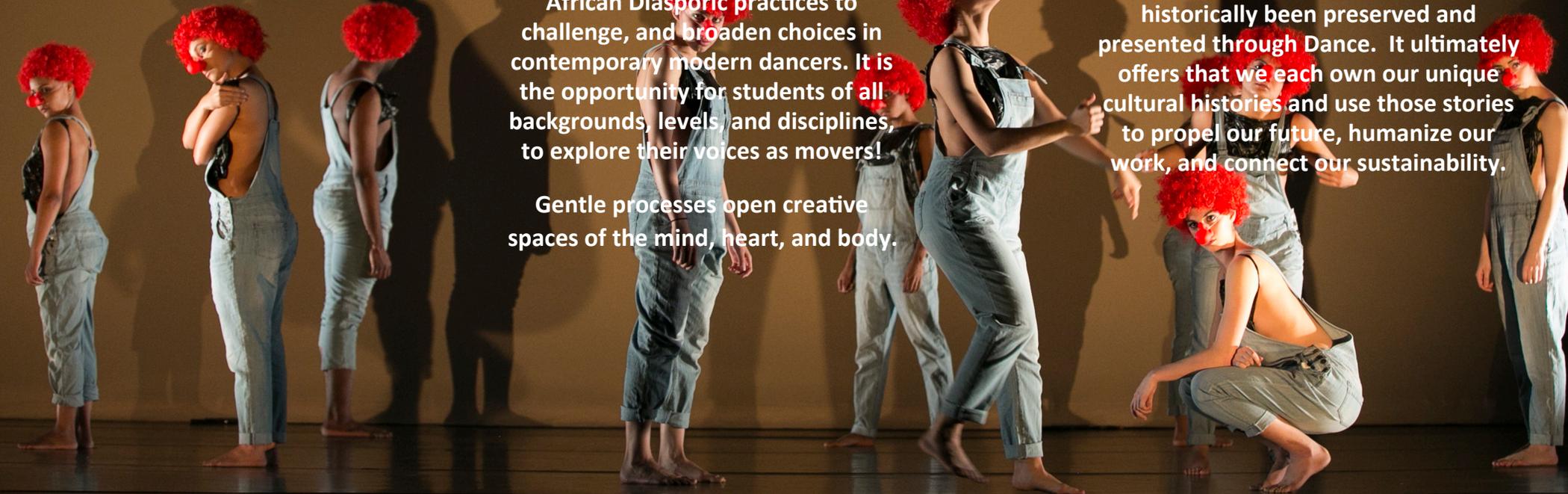


Photo Credit: V

# The New York Times

## The Sameness of Their Differences

By BRIAN SEIBERT

Published: March 22, 2013

In the darkness the sound might be crying or laughter. Brightening lights reveal a woman sitting in a pile of feathers. She laughs hysterically. She hyperventilates. One fit subsides, only to be followed by another. Pain seems to rack her body, as if she were giving birth. She screams.

And that's just the beginning of Marjani Forté's "being Here...."

This 50-minute dance, which had its premiere at Danspace Project on Thursday, takes a brave look at the ravages of mental illness and addiction. In scene after scene, six women shake and twitch. Samantha Speis's intense, committed performance as the woman at the start is matched by similarly intense performances by the rest of the cast. Each dancer manifests different symptoms. Autumn Scoggan gibbers, trapped in her vocal tics. Alice Sheppard pilots her wheelchair with aggression and melancholic grace. Jasmine Hearn's sinuous elegance complicates the creepy menace of her leering.

And still a numbing sameness sets in. A spectator can absorb only so much crazed laughter. The redundancy is worst in a scene set in a subway car, where no fewer than three of the five passengers serially harass the others. Scenes like that, from which most of us normally turn away, are what Ms. Forté wants us to face. But what then?

As part of Everett Saunders's score, the voice of Malcolm X advises learning the language of the oppressor, but does the responsibility for facilitating communication lie with the disturbed? The voice of Nina Simone singing "[Don't let me be misunderstood](#)" is more apt. Ms. Forté's dance, imprecise in its social critique, inspires compassion without deepening understanding.

Though composed with care, "being Here..." keeps petering out or hitting a wall. Its greatest virtue is its realism. When Tendayi Kuumba sucks on her arm, the sound is close to revolting. When she crosses the floor in huge stomps, the brief shift to less literal expression has even greater impact. The dance could benefit from more of it.

The program note mentions healing, but "being Here..." doesn't offer false hope. In her wheelchair Ms. Sheppard takes the giggling Rebecca Bliss for a ride, but their playful duet soon turns antagonistic, and Ms. Sheppard, resentful, runs over Ms. Bliss. When Ms. Speis covers the sputtering mouth of Ms. Scoggan, it's horrifying but also satisfies a shameful desire to shut her up. In the final moments each dancer points to herself, as if to say that healing begins in self-acceptance. A gesture from the beginning returns: a dancer's head peeking out from behind her arms. There's a person in there, underneath the symptoms. "being Here..." gives us a glimpse.

# T H E G C A D V O C A T E

*New in Dance: Paul Taylor and Marjani Forté* By Meredith Benjamin

...The cast of six women (Rebecca Bliss, Tendayi Kuumba, Jasmine Hearn, Autumn Scoggan, Alice Sheppard, and Samatha Speis, each powerful and captivating in her own way) included performers of diverse skin color, body types, and abilities. Difference is in many ways at the heart of this piece, and yet Forté refuses to reduce any performer to being defined simply by a particular dissimilarity. **I am reminded of a phrase from Audre Lorde's "biomythography," *Zami*, where she writes that "our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one difference." As the women of *being Here...* come together in various groupings (if only to separate again), Forté asks us to consider the ravages of mental illness and addiction as one of many (non-defining) iterations of difference.**

... **Forté asks us to look more closely at these interlopers we so often ignore: at what point do we consider someone "crazy" and thus ignorable?** That the two white performers are the passengers, and the interlopers all women of color, forces us to think about the racial dynamics of this question: are certain bodies, dressed in certain ways (here, mismatched oversized layers) more likely to be interpreted as disruptive, as "too much"?

Forté's choreography makes the connection between body and speech explicit: the women's muddled enunciations are mirrored by facial and bodily twitches and shaking: the effort to speak is made visible. The role of breath and of the tongue as integral components in speaking are foregrounded as well. At one point, the dancers draw large lateral arcs in the air with their tongues, seeming both to taste the air and to mark the space as their own. Later, another dancer, her back to the audience, voraciously sucks, licks, or kisses her own arms, exaggerating the smacking sounds of her lips.

In a duet with Bliss, Sheppard, in a wheelchair, assumed the active role, supporting and pushing her partner, driving and guiding the action with the same easy sureness she displayed in an earlier solo. Their duet, which began playfully, later turned aggressive, returning to the theme of emotional volatility that characterizes the piece. Having cast off Bliss, Sheppard puts her hand to Scoggan's mouth, in what is at once a violent silencing and a potentially compassionate act: relieving her of the burden of explaining herself to others.

The powerful penultimate section took on a militant tone, as movements became larger and powerfully aggressive. While the group continued to fragment and re-form, the more frequent collective movement in this section added to its forceful impact. In the final moments, Sheppard and Speis came to face each other, with a mix of compassion and curiosity. Their outstretched fingers almost touched, but then slowly changed direction to point back toward their own chests, in a shared moment of self-realization. This final image illustrates the hopeful potential of living and loving together "in the house of difference." **This dance is not about making oneself intelligible to others, but about the ways that we view and respond to what we consider unintelligible.**

photo credit: Wah Ming Chang

## **InfiniteBody** arts, culture and the creative mind

Being necessarily here...with Marjani Forté

by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Published: Jan 29 2013

In recent months, the American media and people, responding to a series of well-publicized tragedies, have opened up a new--although not always entirely helpful--conversation around trauma, mental illness, and public safety. For dance artist **Marjani Forté**, who has been considering these issues for some time, these discussions don't always lead us back to a significant source of mental distress and imbalance--the daily collision with injustice faced by millions of people marginalized by the mainstream culture.

"We need to have a deeper conversation around who we are as a country in regards to our history around race and our systems that have been constructed around that history," the choreographer says.

During curator Ishmael Houston-Jones's historic *Parallels* platform at Danspace Project (February-March 2012), Forté showed a work-in-progress called *Here...* which she describes as an "observation of mental health in the face of systematic oppression," the impact of racism and economic inequity. Feedback on that 20-minute preview, she says, provided insight into the value of making space for "the full picture of resilience, survival, and healing." The resulting evening-length work--retitled ***being Here...***--opens at **Danspace Project** on March 21 for a two-night run.

We rarely expect concert dance to tackle an issue as weighty and complex as the roots and consequences of mental illness in American society. But Forté, best known for her performances with Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's Urban Bush Women, is no stranger to social engagement or art that addresses difficult social concerns. Inspired by her interviews with women from the Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health, Forté aims, in *being Here...*, to "tell one story."

"The most powerful art pieces that I've seen have caused me to ask and generate my own questions about myself and how I'm implicated from telling *one* story," she says and notes the Benh Zeitlin film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, written by Zeitlin and playwright Lucy Alibar.

"That movie tells one story about this one community through the eyes of this one child and her journey into adulthood. In that one story, they address the isolation of this community, the power and assets that this community has without being defined by mainstream culture or government. They address this community's own set of values. They address how mainstream culture comes in and can completely dismantle this community by placing its values on a community that had been self-defined. They address poverty. And they also address how one person takes all of this in and owns her own self-worth and power inside of it.

"So, the way that I'm avoiding getting too complicated in my own thoughts around these issues is, I'm focused on telling one human story, hoping to affirm recovery and regeneration.

"I want people to step into one mind and the facets of that mind."

See *being Here...* at Danspace Project, Thursday-Friday, March 21-22 at 8pm.



“Thank you so much for presenting this work... Thank you for helping me unravel some more of the many layers I contain. You are an astonishing artist and person.”

**-Artist/Colleague Liana Conyers**

“Her control and skill allowed her to embody fluidity, rigidity, kinetic energy, spontaneity, and character ...in a split second.”

**Alexis Clements The L Magazine Dec 10**

“...Absolutely beautiful and riveting!...”

**MFA Student Patricia Nguyen**

“Beautiful work... a skillful hand...”

**Artist Malcolm Low**

“**EGO** is Marjani A. Forté’s, and she has plenty of it, or none of it....she returns to the stage to burn even hotter ...in a delicious mix of menace and appeal.”

**Quinn Bateson OFFOFFOFF.com Dec 2010**

## THE DANCE ENTHUSIAST

*Impressions of: being Here... by Marjani Forté*

Erin Bomboy

March 22, 2013

We hear Samantha Speis before we see her. As the lights come up we find Speis sitting on a disheveled duvet; its stuffing shredded and spilling into downy pools. Crumpling feathers in her hands, she veers from disturbed laughter to frantic hysteria. The audience twitches uneasily witnessing such extended, unbridled emotion.

That's the point of Marjani Forté's new, fifty-minute piece, *being Here...* She insists the audience confront their own prejudices about mental illness and addiction in a half-dozen vignettes highlighting six fervent and compassionate dancers.

Set against a background hung with crinkly black rectangles, bodies manifest inner turmoil through jutted chins, contorted wrists and ankles, and arched backs. Dancers compulsively shift weight from one foot to another as a solitary shoulder tortuously stretches upwards. Crimson-tinged lips spew profanities, sputter verbal nonsense, and twist grotesquely.

Abandoned by society and unable to receive the care they require, the mentally ill often turn to addictive substances to overcome the ravages of isolation. Tendayi Kuumba obsessively slurps on her arm as dancers slither slowly behind her — a gripping image of drugs fed to tame the inner beast. Maddened when she can no longer obtain her fix, Kuumba bottoms out into a fit of howling wails. Everett Saunders' score slants to the literal as he knits together John Coltrane's "After the Rain", Nina Simone's "Misunderstood", and snippets from Malcolm X's speech about learning the language of your oppressor.

*being Here...* builds to a riveting climax of redemption and acceptance. Alice Sheppard rockets around in her wheelchair, one side lifted high in the air. She frolics with grinning Rebecca Bliss before the situation turns darkly combative. Joined by Speis in the center, Sheppard claws and assaults herself in a brutal desire to extinguish her demons. The remainder of the group, flattened against the sidewall, echoes this exorcism like an agitated Greek chorus. The piece culminates with the dancers touching their fingers to the center of their chest in a gesture of self-forgiveness- a lesson in empathy for them and us.

Forté examines the effects when the mentally ill enter the public sphere. Tacit social rules are flouted as one dancer drags her hand lightly across the laps of the front row. A simulated subway car becomes an uncomfortable prison when one performer verbally harasses the strap-hangers.



THANK YOU!

photo credits:  
Ian Douglas  
Steven Schreiber  
Wah Ming Chang  
Whitney Brown  
Mark Simpson

