

## To Art and Profit

Honey Pot Performance  
Interviewed by Danny Orendorff

**Danny Orendorff:** *Honey Pot Performance has foregrounded the lessons and theories of Afro-diasporic feminism through multi-arts performance works. As a performance, activist, and research collective in Chicago you began under the identity ThickRoutes Performance Collage in 2001 and then evolved by 2011 into a collaborative in which each member contributes academic and street-level expertise from different fields: Felicia Holman in health and wellness, Aisha Jean-Baptiste from social work/services, Abra M. Johnson from sociology, and Meida Teresa McNeal from performance studies.<sup>1</sup> You seem to find hope and inspiration within informal networks of reciprocity and exchange, as well as through dedicated, sometimes spiritual relationships to art, music, and the survivalist strategies of ancestors. So, I find it striking how you use personal or cultural phenomena in this work to highlight widespread feelings of exhaustion, escalating cases of panic disorders, demographic inequities in terms of unemployment and incarceration rates, all of which are byproducts of a failing economic system. Could you speak to how your personal and professional backgrounds come into play in your collaborative work?*

**Meida Teresa McNeal:** Performance studies as a framework and training in ethnography have allowed me to sort of dance between the micro and the macro. The question that circulates throughout all the work is: what is the macro-frame that any micro-story sits within, and how can performance be this really incredible vehicle for knowledge? There's a meta thing that's about honoring that "this shit is valuable" and saying so in that way

in order to connect with people or tap into something that isn't exclusively academic. It can be intellectual, but it is also very emotional.

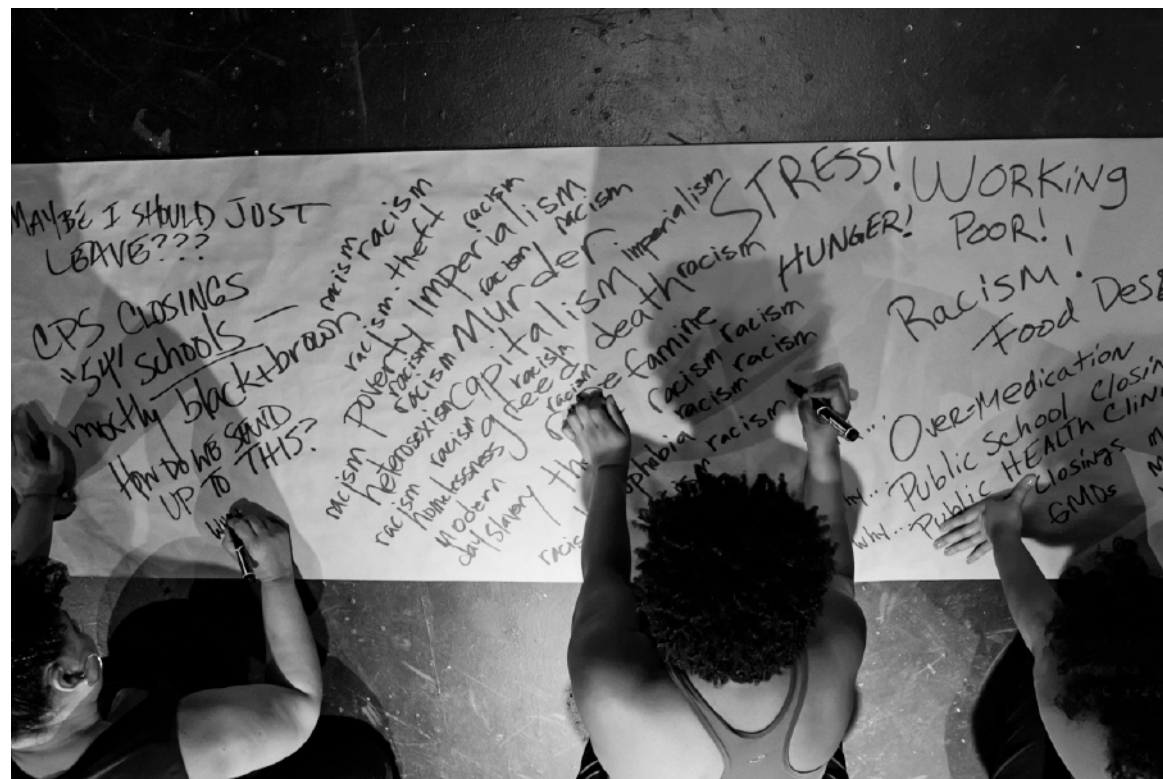
**Abra M. Johnson:** I teach sociology, so I take on the really fun task of reading about structural issues every single day, and then I have to present that research to students that get thoroughly depressed. But the part I like is when we get to my last module, which is always about social movements. We start with the social construction of identity as a byproduct of these larger economic forces, and then we discuss individuals who are always talking back and resisting. I teach how throughout the seven periods of violence within US history, there has not been one single policy alteration without violence, without protest, without mass protest.<sup>2</sup> So I teach how we have to cyclically keep rejecting, so that research part of what I contribute to Honey Pot Performance is something I'm doing every day.

I believe in sociology as a ministry, similar to how Meida feels about performance studies. It speaks to my deepest sentiments about what's happening and, to me, it's the most beautiful language for explaining that everything that's happening in your world is not just yours. Instead there's a part of you that belongs to society, there's a part of you that you never had a voice in designing but that at some point you do get a voice. So to be mindful of the way that voices can actually alter structures, but only in their collectivity, is important to convey. Sociology helps mitigate that individual fear—"Am I crazy?"—because it offers so many actual examples of "No, you are not crazy; in fact this is what is happening, and we can prove it."

**Aisha Jean-Baptiste:** For me, before I was a therapist and a health educator, I had a background in community organizing and activism. Using that within performance is really critical in order for me to feel like I am still contributing to what is ultimately the fight for liberation. Being on stage and talking about these crucial issues allows me to educate others. Even in my practice now as a clinician, serving people who find catharsis in sitting with me and sharing their narratives, I realize how similar it is to being on stage. I am doing the same thing.

**Felicia Holman:** I pretty much came to the realization after years of doing the corporate, nine-to-five, get-a-salary, get-benefits kind of thing that I had always actually been passionate about some other creative endeavor, and that in being a part of the corporate world my soul was dying. That was when, while in cubicle land, I caught the lifeline of fitness and made the transition into that industry as a personal trainer and group exercise instructor. So when I got with these ladies, first as ThickRoutes and then as Honey Pot Performance, I realized how the writing, public speaking, and movement exercises we were engaged in really fed into the work I was doing in health and wellness to guide people beyond just physical instruction.

I mean, all of us being African American women and having had expe-



Honey Pot Performance, *Price Point*, 2013, still from performance. Courtesy of the artists.  
Photo: Ania Sodziak.

riences with institutionalized systems of assistance but not really being helped in any way, we have a real perspective on how systemic disadvantage truly affects your quality of life and your access to safe spaces. Considering how we are all instructors and advocates, the impulse to make artwork together came from a mutual feeling that these experiences we all share are disturbing, and that we've got to do work about it.

**MTM:** The rhythm is typically like this: we settle on an idea and then it's a long gestation period, at least a year for most of our evening-length works. It's a combination of collecting critical essays, research articles, and other resources to take apart our topic on a conceptual or theoretical level. Then this is mixed with reflection in our own individual journals or through stories gathered from other people, and then pulling out what is shared in order to create a collage of stories informed by a patchwork aesthetic. So, really, the works are built in episodic non-linear ways throughout which we define connective tissue.

**AMJ:** For me, from a social sciences understanding of capitalism, the connective tissue is this notion of the body as product and really taking issue with the way that we are reduced to being a product through inequitable valuations of our labor-capacities, and as related to global histories of

exploitation, enslavement, incarceration, and systemic disadvantaging.<sup>3</sup> It's a way that I've understood the body from being within my particular identity, so I feel very clear about the ways in which we are considered products. But at the same time I reject the notion of simply being a product. Being a particular body and having a particular identity, the struggle is actually trying to interject humanity within that and communicate the notion that—throughout it all—we can be vulnerable and not just strong. Interrogating what strong means is part of it, especially under these backbreaking economic conditions in which even the so-called strongest of the strong of us have to admit that we are weak within a culture that stigmatizes the admission of weakness.

**FH:** Or of needing help.

**AMJ:** At the same time, being in this body and having these identities has made me very familiar with the history of living under harsh, unforgiving kinds of conditions for centuries, being perfectly comfortable with sharing resources, and comfortable with being a part of a community that helps one another. If this is what we are familiar with, if this is the historic part of being a part of this subculture, why not share the ways in which we share? Why not share the ways in which we've been able to survive, reject, or at least challenge and resist notions of our bodies as products? I think that's part of what we're offering.

**MTM:** I agree. This notion of rejecting the idea of the body as product is at the crux of our method. Instead, our work is all about the complexity and nuance of the human experience. That we are more than just this container. That we are more than just a story that's been created about who I am based on a reading of my phenotype. Both our performances and workshops are very much geared toward exposing these kinds of methods of self-understanding.

**DO:** *I'm really interested in the connections between ethnography and choreography that you refer to in your artists' statement. When you talk about how our identities are done to us, or how we are constantly determined/affected by cultural and economic forces beyond ourselves, it feels almost like a kind of structural social choreography. I'm wondering if you could speak more to these connections, and perhaps how they relate to your research into how folk and everyday sources of knowledge counteract our more institutionally received notions of one another.*

**FH:** Part of our generative process will include content from other people. We may ask audiences to share their economic frustrations and experiences at the end of performances. We've conducted audio and video interviews with people sharing their experiences, and it's very possible that this content will be incorporated. This is part of what we strive for in our work: bringing marginalized voices to the fore, which is, of course, related to

this ongoing notion of value and whose stories, whose labor is valued.

**AMJ:** And not just marginalized voices, but silence. I think that there are voices that are not marginal, but who feel pressure to be silent. And I think we, as Honey Pot Performance, attempt to facilitate a release of that kind of silence.

**MTM:** In terms of the connection between ethnography and choreography, it's this idea that everybody and every body matters. Every body has a vocabulary, a lexicon, a language, a logic, an order for its own existence. In choreography and theater you are often creating new languages or lexicons for the world of the work being made. With Honey Pot Performance, we consider the world we are making—its issues, its players, its cultural material, its architecture—and we build the world of the performance creatively using its own tools.

For our work *Price Point* that's a world of screwed-up economies, of human beings affected by those economies in spirit and psyche, and in the physical world. To tie this often-schizophrenic range of issues and experiences together, we created a series of chants, song fragments, a song cycle if you will, that captured the anxieties, the desperation, and the challenge in the face of the pressures of this particular economic frame and its dysfunctions. We also used popular media and music in a new kind of way for us; it became a kind of thread that helped move the world along, taking the audience from vignette-to-vignette. And those elements became part of the lexicon in the world of this piece. So the connection is about digging through the creative process for the appropriate socio-cultural lexicon and using that lexicon to figure out the work's existence.

On the other hand, there is this very central idea of play and laughter in our process that finds its way into each work. Like, we present a lot of hard, interrogative shit, but we attempt to make you laugh—and ourselves.

**FH:** Because that is part of our lexicon, too: laughing to keep from crying, a lot.

**MTM:** And to affirm the fact that this shit is absurd, which gives an audience so many different entry points or portals into the work.

**FH:** In *Price Point*, I think the moment that initially really gives an entry is the segment on the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, published first in 1936 by Victor H. Green and described as “a listing guide to help traveling African Americans find accommodating businesses during the first Jim Crow era.”<sup>4</sup> It was based on Green's own personal needs as a postal worker, and he created this as a response to the overwhelming need for shared resources that the whole community of African Americans had throughout this country. So we wanted to model and share that impulse for strategizing alternatives, not just for other African Americans but for working poor and unemployed individuals all over.

**DO:** Throughout our conversation what I've noticed is how you present models of self-care and self-exploration that may actually offer a way of seeing how the personal becomes translated into the political and into art. It also speaks to your interests in alternative economies or cooperative networks of exchange and reciprocity. It seems these alternatives come about because of widespread feelings that resourceful and inventive survivalist strategies have become increasingly necessary.

**FH:** For me, personally, thinking about concepts of alternative economies is really just a return to foundational economies of barter and trade or just simply helping each other out without currency. These impulses are based on good will and a desire to keep each other and the community healthy.

**MTM:** And of valuing people.

**AMJ:** The whole concept of self-care is premised on the notion that you are worthy of being cared for. But when you live in a society that in general reduces everybody to a state of production, and then layer onto that actually having pieces of your time chopped up and put into a hierarchy of value, it seems you as an individual are always at the bottom. So the notion that you are even worthy of being cared for, that you are worthy of a safe space, is really the first part of creating a culture in which everyone feels valuable.

**MTM:** Alternative economies is what all of the works we've done in the past several years have tried to address. The festival *To Art and Profit* was very much about interrogating this idea of creative labor and trying to make a space for artists to come together from different mediums and address feelings of not being valuable or of living in a state of shame due to their economic circumstances. To get together in a container of collectivity and talk to people who are going through the same things as you is catharsis, but it's also the beginning of a conversation about what can be created to get us all out of these circumstances.

This sense of a collective conversation is also apparent in our developing project *Juke Cry Hand Clap* where we are asking the public—an intergenerational and diverse public—to share their stories about house music, pleasure, and social practices in Chicago. We will use these stories, in addition to our own, to write and perform a new narrative about house music's importance as a critical and unsung piece of contemporary Americana. Coming back to the idea of alternative economies, this is about reclaiming a story and reinserting people of color back into the center of the narrative of this story. In many ways dance music has become whitened to the point that a lot of folks don't even know that house music emerged out of communities of color. We want to help make that intervention through performance and the archiving of that history by everyday bodies.

So here again we are seeing our work as an engine to stir up a social and cultural conversation, to open a space for dialogue about what bodies mat-

ter and which voices get heard, even in spaces that might seem innocuous, like the club or set. We want folks to understand and feel the way that folks of color have taken on that marginalization and found ways to resist and transform attempts to make them invisible. We open the space to the public to help us dig for the lexicon, the language, the important cultural symbols—and especially in this new work—the dance and musical sounds that will create this next performance and paint its world. Again it is this collective conversation and knowledge-making about how we construct a relevant story together that is the most important ingredient.

**AMJ:** In sociology theory, it would be called emergence.

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This interview was conducted on December 15, 2013 in Kansas City, Missouri.

**1** For instance, with the group's *Price Point* in 2013 they interrogated the existence of a social contract in an era of late global capitalism and fiscal collapse through personal stories of structurally engineered poverty that affect one's mental, spiritual, and physical health; while also bringing in historical and contemporary alternatives for unionizing, resisting, and forming collectivity under violent economic circumstances.

**2** The phrase "seven periods of violence within US history" is gleaned from Thomas Dye and Brigid Harrison's assessments of revolutionary violence occurring throughout American history within their co-authored 2010 textbook *Power and Society: An Introduction to the Social Sciences*. Dye and Harrison define these seven periods as "the birth of the nation (revolutionary violence), the freeing of the slaves and the preservation of the Union (Civil War violence), the westward expansion of the nation (Indian Wars), the establishment of law and order in frontier society (vigilante violence), the organization of the labor movement (labor-management violence), the Civil Rights movement (racial violence), and attempts to deal with the problems of cities (urban problems)." Thomas Dye and Brigid Harrison, *Power and Society: An Introduction to the Social Sciences* (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2010), 351–352.

**3** The phrase "body as product" is used by Johnson as a summation of her research and comprehension of the literature on labor, enslavement, race, gender, class, and capitalism, particularly considering the objectification of black bodies and female bodies during enslavement and after, within the entertainment industry, mass media, and labor force.

**4** Victor H. Green, ed., *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, (New York: Victor H. Green and Company, 1936–64).