

**THE PRANCING J-SETTES: RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS POLITICS AND  
THE MOVEMENTS OF BLACK WOMEN IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA**

A Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

For years Black women's subjectivity in the use of their bodies and movements has been overshadowed or completely erased by dominant hegemonic systems that created its own narrative of Black women, their bodies, and their movement. This thesis works to acknowledge and analyze the dialogic relationship among the narratives of Black women, Black women's performances of their "theories of the flesh" through dance as well as their everyday activities, and the race, gender, and class conditions that inform said "theories of the flesh."

During football season, everyone in the African-American community of Jackson, Mississippi is looking at and talking about the dance company, the Prancing J-Settes. There are audience members who critique their movements and costumes and there are those who view the group as a vital part of the community. Either way every audience member is captivated by the J-Settes because their cultural history is depicted by the women's performance. How does this work? How is the Prancing J-Sette image constructed and by whom, and why and how does it persist? These are the questions I ask to examine the gender, class, and racial relations that are inscribed upon the movements of Black women in the African Diaspora.

For a group whose African ancestors viewed dance as very spiritual, with such activities as the ring shout, it is interesting to note the ambivalence that surrounds the public dancing body in Jackson, Mississippi. While some Jacksonians view the female body in the public sphere with a Protestant Christian lens, they also enjoy the Africana aesthetics and aggressive energy of the J-Settes' performances. Also, while the J-Settes

buck their society's hegemonic system of propriety, they also comply with some of these standards in their performance. I examine this ambivalence through the discourses of critical race theory, Black feminism, the social significance of African Diaspora dance conventions and HBCUs, and the classed, racial, and gendered power relations in the African Diaspora. I argue that the stories about the Prancing J-Settes can be expanded to present a genealogy and present state of contradictory values and issues of visibility affecting all Black women.

**DEDICATION**

For my Grandparents and Parents

I let them know my name

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION CAN'T A BLACK WOMAN DANCE?

Every day, urban communities are danced into being. This is more than a metaphor. It is a testament to the power of performance as a social force, as cultural poesis, as communication infrastructure that makes identity, solidarity, and memory sharable. Communities are danced into being in daily, routine labor, time and talk backstage and off- sometimes way off-stage, as well as onstage. They are danced into being by virtuoso technicians and earnest amateurs. Diverse, generative urban communities emerge at dance's busy intersections of discipline and dreams, repetition and innovation, competition and care.

Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*

No thanks to the slaveholder nor to slavery that the vivacious captive sometimes dances in his chains; his very mind in such circumstances stands before God as an accusing angel.

Frederick Douglass, "The Nature of Slavery," 1850

Dance is a historical part of the African-American culture. As Thomas DeFrantz notes, "dance was the most difficult of all art forms to erase from the slave's memory" (41). Dance survived as an important part of African-American identity even when slaves were converted to Protestant Christianity, which abhors the sensual sins that it associates with the body, especially a moving body. Given the tenacity of the African-American's connection to dance throughout centuries of bondage and dance's centrality to the sustainability of African traditions, it is curious to discover, in the 1850s, a sharp aversion to dance in the nexus of the Black community: the church. In 1850 Frederick Douglass wrote about the attempt of slavery to destroy the will to dance in the African –



American's spirit, but in 1855 Douglass published a note in his newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, about the Black church's preoccupation with disciplining Black church members who resist instruction to refrain from dancing in church and at public functions. In the note titled, "Southern Methodist on Dancing," William James Watkins shared his thoughts on a Methodist church's meeting. He states, "The Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church, recently passed [revisions] expressing their decided disapproval of dancing... [as] a direct violation of Christian obligation. But not one word of condemnation have they to offer concerning man stealing, or man whipping, and cradle pondering" (Watkins). It is important to analyze what is put in and left out of this note.

I argue that the Black church wanted to manipulate embodied performances of the Black population, primarily Black males, to appeal to Protestant Christian values. As a political performance, to assist in the abolitionist movement and as a cultural performance to appear as "real" people to White Americans, the church attempts to act as though it sees no value in the body because the majority Protestant culture devalues the body. The obvious anxiety and preoccupation with the Black body, especially as it is seen in public, clearly works to underline the power of the Black body. This is a major contradiction in the Black church's text, but the contradiction lies in the bodies that are not a part of the archive. If one is not privy to the knowledge that Black women made up the majority of church congregations then the complexity of the Black church's crusade against movement is lost.

The church, as a large voice for Black people, had to eradicate the movement of Black women's bodies, which could be seen as hypersexual. They also had to downplay the power of Black women in the community because, according to popular belief, women having leadership in the community was unnatural. Also, women did not hold the same weight in the social class hierarchy as men did. Therefore, it was better for the church to leave women out of its textual communication with the rest of the country. This was all done, in part, to further the support from white abolitionists who suggest that painting a one-dimensional cartoon of Blacks as human, genteel, and in need of care from kindhearted Whites is the best way to push for freedom from slavery. This vision excludes women and working class Blacks. This political project is clearly a homosocial conversation based upon heteronormative reality, with the male elite of American Blacks attempting to represent the entirety of the community to upper class Whites.

### **A Legacy of Defying Erasure**

A similar operation is happening as it pertains to the Prancing J-Settes and their audience's and communities' receptions of their live, mediatized, and every day performances. Although the stage is not the Black church and the conversation is mainly intraracial and heterosocial, some of the same mechanisms and ideologies about the Black dancing female body persist. The Prancing J-Settes' bodies and voices are strategically eliminated from present day cultural discussions and images of their unique dance technique and multiple personae, as well as archival work done on the university, band, and community that the dance company has worked so hard for and given so much to. Just like the female members of the early twentieth-century Black church gave much

of their time, energy, and talent to the church yet were excluded from the written text, the Prancing J-Settes have been written out of the history they have helped mold.

Yet, what is so powerful that it captured my attention as well as the attention of the millions of J-Sette viewers is that the body of the Black female cannot and will not be erased. The nameless and voiceless women of the Black church that I have placed back into the archive, as noted above, rebuked the powers of hegemonic patriarchy and racism through their bodies that remained the topic of newspaper articles even as those same authors attempted to erase the bodies of Black women. The Prancing J-Settes also refuse to be silenced or erased through their bodies and movements. Though this is a similar story, we may never find in text the thoughts of the Black women whose bodies were only permitted to be viewed inside the church house. Through this thesis, I work to start a legacy of seeking, recording, and analyzing the stories of individual Prancing J-Settes, to reclaim their bodies, voices, past and future, for and to themselves. Just like the multi-layered messages, styles, and performances of the Prancing J-Settes, I found that the dancers' narratives revealed complex, contradicting, and intersectional themes that are not readily understood by an outsider population.

The theoretical framework for this thesis consists of Patricia Hill Collins' conception of Black Feminism, Critical Race Theory, and Womanism: theories which all discuss the intersections of race, gender, and class in the Africana Diaspora. I utilize Kimberly Brown's theory of the Revolutionary Black Diva as a Black woman who breaks from "fixed label[s]... and force[s] audience[s] to re-examine their assumptions of blackness and black womanhood" (5), to argue that the Prancing J-Settes are

Revolutionary Black Divas. I argue that The J-Settes embody their statuses as Revolutionary Black Divas through Soyini Madison's performance-based concept of theories of the flesh. The dancers take what happens in their every day lives as Black women to choreograph their performances and they use their performances to converse with the politics that make up their every day lives. This is not written down. It is expressed and understood through movement. In this sense, the dancers take advantage of the fact that as Black dancing women they are "always already troubling to the dominant visual field" (Fleetwood 6), which allows them to make interventions in the dominant discourse because of their counter-public positionalities. The Prancing J-Settes are not the first set of Black women to utilize the politics surrounding their bodies to transgress normative cultural politics. Nadine George-Graves does archival work on the amazing performances and activism of the Whitman Sisters, which showcases the historicity of Black female dancing bodies as critical social actors in the Africana Diaspora. My contribution to this discussion of women in the Africana Diaspora is that of the importance of viewing dancing as a political actor in these same cultural intersections.

I have structured this work to resemble the typical way that most audience members come into contact with the Prancing J-Settes. First, one attempts to decipher one's own positionality in society. Then, one uses that positionality to form expectations of the Prancing J-Settes' performances. Lastly, and many people never try to get to this point, one hears and listens to the Prancing J-Settes' voices. This structure is performative in that it takes the reader and writer through the typical way these Black

women's bodies are experienced and represented. This structure also makes an intervention in this normative gaze by dispersing the J-Settes' narratives throughout the thesis as well as leaving the J-Settes' voices as the final voices about their bodies and movements.

In Chapter One, I discuss Soyini Madison's critical ethnography and Bryant Alexander's critical reflexivity to theorize my use of narrative, thick description, and self-positioning. bell hooks' theory of homeplace and Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" are the impetus for the narratives and accounts of Mrs. Oatis and other Prancing J-Settes as well as community members. I go on to set the stage for themes that run through all of my data through mapping the similarities among my field work experiences, the oral history of Mrs. Narah Oatis, a legendary sponsor of the Prancing J-Settes, and the Prancing J-Settes' everyday lives. These themes are the embodied knowledge of discipline, hypervisibility, uniformity, responsibility to legacy, and movement.

Following, in Chapter Two, I discuss the sociopolitical factors that have helped to form the themes stated above and the community and audience's contradictory expectations of the Prancing J-Settes. In this chapter I give a history of the formation of Jackson State University's famous Gibbs-Green Plaza. This strip was formed out of resistance to the dominant gaze of White society and became a space for the JSU community to create its own politics of expression and gaze, which I call the Plaza Theory. The Prancing J-Settes negotiate an intense version of the Plaza Theory. In this chapter I also discuss Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionalities as I analyze

the relationships amongst Michael Warner and Deborah Whaley's definitions of public, counter publics, audiences, and communities. Because the J-Settes' performances are viewed live and virtually, there is discussion about the debate around live vs. mediated performance and how these interlocutors negotiate the dialogic relationship between the two.

Finally, in Chapter Three the voices of the Prancing J-Settes are heard. In her essay, "Effaced into Flesh," Jenifer Brody asks, "[H]ow can black female flesh be represented as other than an other's other given that the coherence and specificity of black female subjects is effaced by the logic that cannot produce her positionality except paradoxically?"(1). The purpose of this chapter is to remove the J-Settes from the paradoxical position of being viewed only as an intersection for others' experiences. The J-Settes are usually, as Brody states, "fixed as flesh rather than as a coherent, stable body"(4). Their bodies are used as bridges for their community and audience's political projects and identity crises, but not as a bridge to themselves. Also, they are usually thought of as one lump sum of Black women which erases the specificity of each dancer's experiences. Every J-Sette's narrative could not be relayed in this thesis but the account of Shanketta Newsom adeptly acts as a through line among the dancers I met and interacted with.

Shanketta describes the day-to-day activities of J-Settes, from auditioning for the squad, practicing, performing, and being a full time student. She also gives accounts of the insider life of the J-Settes by describing why hierarchy is established and works in the group's public and private moments. The themes that Shanketta brings out are

similar to the ones Mrs. Oatis brings out. Legacy, family/sisterhood, discipline, responsibility to other J-Settes, uniformity, and hard work are extremely important to the dancers as well as the JSU/Jackson community and these values can be seen in the dance company's choreography, which is a part of why the Prancing J-Settes' movements are so poignant and special in their community.

This "something special" about the Prancing J-Settes is the focus of the conclusion of this thesis. The narrative of Mrs. Ashley, a Prancing J-Sette who connects the experiences of Mrs. Oatis as sponsor and Shanketta as a J-Sette of the younger generation, belies the passion and respect surrounding the J-Settes. I have tried to capture her regard for the J-Settes, but much of it lies in the spaces between text and lived experience. There was a certain "something special" about the Prancing J-Settes that Mrs. Ashley held dear to her heart that transcended words. Also, as autoethnographer I respect the importance of my interlocutors' wishes, whether explicitly stated or implied through embodied knowledge, so I do not attempt to further analyze Mrs. Ashley's concept of the J-Settes' "something special". Instead I analyze the actions of another Black woman in the public sphere as a foil in ideology but equal in Mrs. Ashley's passion about the J-Settes. The president of Jackson State, Dr. Carolyn Meyers, believes that the J-Settes are "unladylike" and her intent to alter the format of the J-Settes' performance aesthetic proves the importance and power of the J-Settes' bodies and movements as well as those of all Black women. As Judith Hamera states in *Dancing Communities*, "The works and the talk I have shared with the artists discussed here have affected me profoundly and, as Madison states, simple silent appreciation does

not suffice” (16). Although recognition is a start it is not enough and that is why this thesis goes underneath the surface to analyze the movements, theories, and bodies of the Prancing J-Settes.



## CHAPTER II

### EMBODIED NARRATIVES

In this chapter I am looking at the multi-layered interventions that the public performances of the Prancing J-Settes' Black female dancing bodies make in the contradicting race, gender, and class politics of specifically the JSU and Jackson community but also in the Africana Diasporic community. I examine the ways in which the Prancing J-Settes and the wide array of J-Sette audiences and communities utilize performance as performance as a tool to work through intra-racial politics. For example, the J-Settes use their interactions amongst each other as individuals, as sisters, and as simultaneous "others" and members of their communities and audiences to form theories of the flesh that help produce their dance technique and performance style.

#### **"Can't a Black Woman Dance?"**

My research question stems from a question presented by Kimberly Brown in *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text (Blacks in the Diaspora)*. She recounts a scenario where a white female audience member of the talk show Donahue asks Ntozake Shange "whether or not she wrote from experience [and] Shange ... answered curtly 'Can't a Black person have an imagination?'"(5) Brown goes on to argue that this question is just another formation of the question "Can't a Black person think?" posed by authors of slave narratives, like Harriet Jacobs (7). In both instances Black authors were speaking to a White audience, but in this case I pose the research question, "Can't a Black Woman Dance?" to an Africana audience. This question encompasses both previous inquiries and extends them

to include intra-racial class and gender politics. For centuries African women's bodies and movements have been taken and overused by others and for others' political projects. Now hegemony has caused the concept of a Black woman using her body and movements for her own pleasures to be viewed as unnatural. Can't a Black woman perform without having to be accountable for everyone besides herself? Is it a Black woman's issue that young girls imitate her movements? Is it her concern that men ogle and fantasize about her body? Should she be concerned that her dancing may not fit into the image of the Black community's "ideal woman"?

Aside from these questions about the subjectivity that is typically stripped from Black women by the same people who vehemently admonish them to put on more clothes and behave like "proper women," my research asks, "Why is that Black women's movements are read in a linear fashion and viewed as dispensable and/or simple and regressive?" The Prancing J-Settes use their movements to deftly maneuver between the various stereotypes of Black women and their own activist agenda, yet the dancers are rarely viewed as such innovative cultural actors. The J-Settes' performances are typically read in one manner, even if it is a positive one, and thought to represent the dancers' identities outside of their performances. This means that much of the J-Settes' theories are usually lost in translation. For example, when the J-Settes "buck" in the stands for an 8-count and then sit down in a "proper ladylike pose" many audience members only view a group of Black women dancing sexually for men and then sitting like genteel women for men and probably enacting this same performance in their everyday lives as well. This reads as adhering to the status quo of race, gender, and

class politics. What the audience does not imagine is that they are watching a group of Black women showcasing their ability to succinctly perform differing identities which makes a profound statement about Black women's subjectivity as well as the many identities that are thought of as fixed. Through these questions of "Can't a Black woman dance?" and "Why is it that Black women's movements are read in a linear fashion and viewed as dispensable and/or simple and regressive?" I aim to trouble the hegemonic views about Black women and dance in the Africana Diaspora.

Many of the theorists who discuss race, class, and gender politics in the Africana Diasporas work across various schools of thought yet talk over the fact that dance is an integral part of this society's foundation and daily life. It is hardly ever stated explicitly. Dance is viewed as irrational, illogical, frivolous, fun, and expendable. Through this research I want to add to the discourses that acknowledge and examine the role performances play in everyday activities, ideologies, and structural formations. I also want to add with this research the inclusion of dance and Black women into that discourse. Performance, Dance, Black, and Women are socially constructed categories that have been accepted as naturally less than hegemonic Europeanist standards. They have historically been seen as not having the capability to "make sense" in that structure which, through hegemony, has also become the structure of Africana communities. I argue that the Prancing J-Settes' use of their dance performances as multi-layered negotiations of these same race, gender, and class politics showcase the important dialogic relationships between the Africana Diaspora ideologies and the movement of Black women. These performances do important, sophisticated, nuanced, and adequate

social work for this community and Black female performers across the Diaspora, even though these interactions are not always documented in the text. To examine these interactions I use D. Soyini Madison's concept of critical ethnography and Bryant Keith Alexander's approach to critical reflexivity as the theoretical framework for this chapter, which introduces my positionality in this research as well as the basis for my prominent use of narrative and thick description.

### **Self-Positioning**

D. Soyini Madison describes critical ethnography as research that “begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain”(Critical Ethnography 5). She also states that, “the critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances...bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control”(5). Because of the hegemonic and institutional injustices I have witnessed enacted upon the Prancing J-Settes and Black female, dancers I have been called to do critical ethnography on the J-Settes. For the J-Settes their bodies and movements are always hypervisible, yet their intelligent minds are hardly ever a popular topic of discussion. Also, their bodies are consistently used by the university, popular culture icons, and their classmates and audiences for economic and cultural reasons. Yet the J-Settes' stories of their own experiences are not desired or even known to exist. Because of these injustices I want to go beneath the surface of the accepted images and discourse around the J-Settes' bodies and provide a space for their individual voices to be heard. This is why I have chosen to give lengthy portions of their

accounts and narratives. This gives the J-Settes the opportunity to use their bodies and voices to represent themselves for themselves and “bring light” to their worldviews.

Because I am the one presenting this information it is important to address my positionality as well. Madison describes positionality as vital “because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects”( *Critical Ethnography* 8). Throughout the entire process of conducting field work and writing this thesis I had to acknowledge, analyze, and negotiate my own biases and positionality in regards to the Prancing J-Settes. That journey is explicitly described in this chapter through critical reflexivity in order to be up front about my own race, gender, and class politics before I discuss the politics involved in the J-Settes’ everyday lives. Bryant Keith Alexander states that,

critical reflexivity becomes especially important when we cross cultural borders; when we enter other realms of experience that call us to attend to the tracks that led us to that particular place, what our presence tracks over, and what we track into other people's sacred territories. (xvii)

I had to and still am striving to be critically reflexive about the tracks that led me to the Prancing J-Settes and the tracks that I leave in their sacred homeplace. I negotiate these dimensions of my research in this chapter through the description of my experience in the field. From Audre Lorde I learned that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” so I do not want to use my writing to inflict on the J-Settes the same kinds of injustices that I am protesting against. On the other hand, I realized that if I, my interlocutors, and audience have been living “in the master’s house” then that will surely

come out in my writing. This ambivalence between activism against the status quo and the realization that the status quo is a part of my positionality is something that I have had to wrestle with throughout this process and I have no doubt that all Black women in the Africana Diaspora wrestle with this as well. For these reasons, I assert that it is important to examine and be reflexive about what it means to write about race, class, and gender politics as I research and operate within these politics every day.

Working through my positionality and presenting it in my writing, just as the J-Settes work through theirs and present them through their bodies, led me to see a connection between the J-Settes' performances, the audience's performances, and my writing. This is a question I predict many of my interlocutors and community members will ask, "What is the point in writing about the J-Settes? What will that change?" The answer is that this writing caused me to think about the intersectional politics that Black women everywhere experience and although Black women's power has been historically linked to our bodies, I have learned that "thinking is doing." Thinking about what could be instead of being satisfied with what is. Thinking about the untold stories and their importance to gigantic institutions. Thinking about women, dance, and bodies and their dialogic relationship with society's ideologies. All of this is why I have chosen to write about the J-Settes, why I have chosen to utilize thick description, why I have chosen to bring out their voices in narrative, and why I have to position myself in this work. I have set the scene between self-positioning, oral history, and autoethnography.

## **Members of the Family: Prancing J-Settes and Community Members**

Mrs. Narah Oatis is an important figure in Prancing J-Sette history as well as in JSU/Jackson history. She was the second sponsor of the Prancing J-Settes. She worked tirelessly with the dance company from 1975 to 1997, twenty-two years. Throughout that process she had on the job training of the university and fans' expectations of a Black dancing woman in the public sphere. Although she succeeded in meeting those requirements, she also made her own interventions into that discourse and crafted her own performance of a Black dancing woman in the public sphere. She has helped lay down the groundwork for what many view today as the J-Sette performance and persona yet her individual story has never been documented. Her account shakes up the primary discourse about the Prancing J-Settes, which is usually circulated by people who are not J-Settes. She exposes the intersections between the audience and community's expectations of Black women's performances in private and public spaces. Two current J-Settes, twins Charlotte and Charlene, also navigate the realms of public and private spaces in their narratives but in different ways from Mrs. Oatis.

Charlotte has served as captain of the dance company since 2011 and Charlene is a senior member of the company. They are both in their senior year at JSU and are on schedule to graduate this May. Their accounts unmask the performances of women in public and private, but mostly focus on interactions between the Prancing J-Settes as they navigate their sisterhood in public and private situations. Both women recount the impact that individual J-Settes and the Prancing J-Sette organizational format has had on them in their personal journeys as women. The accounts of Mrs. Oatis and Charlotte and

Charlene display a through line of themes of hard work, perseverance, and responsibility to the Prancing J-Sette legacy that can also be seen in accounts of other J-Settes in chapters Two and Three.

Because of the Prancing J-Settes' hypervisibility and their role as an auxiliary of the Sonic Boom the group has enacted strategic modes of interaction that are distinctly more protective than those of the band. Mrs. Worthy, the J-Sette sponsor, and Mr. Taylor, the interim band director, both showcase the glaringly disparate ways in which the J-Settes protect and sustain their identities and the ways in which the band does the same. Though both were difficult to get in touch with, their mechanisms of interaction were very different and expose the gender politics of the band. These politics were also exposed by my interactions with Mrs. Ashley, a former J-Sette, and Mr. Armstrong, a former band drum major.

Because all of these interactions are seen through my eyes as an autoethnographer, I will begin with how I learned to situate myself among all of my interlocutors, which required more maneuvering than I had assumed it would and which parallels the trials endured by those desiring to become Prancing J-Settes.

### **A Dream Realized through Autoethnography**

I am a native of Jackson, Mississippi. I lived on the north side of Jackson in a neighborhood populated by middle and upper- middle class Black Jacksonians. I attended Jackson Public Schools from elementary through high school. I also attended Jackson State University, as did both of my parents and my twin sister. A large part of my identity was centered around the JSU/Jackson community and the social and cultural



event that is a JSU football game. I first saw the Prancing J-Sette dance line at these football games and instantly fell in love with them. I have always secretly dreamed of being a Prancing J-Sette and wondered what it would be like to be one. I realized that dream when I began to conduct field research with the dance line. I did not join the team nor was I invited to dance with them at practice. I did not literally dance in the stands of the Mississippi Veteran's Memorial Stadium, where JSU hosts its home football games, and I did not direct the "Thrill of a Billion Eyes," as the Prancing J-Settes are famously called. Even though I have not had these exact experiences, through the labor of autoethnography, I experienced some of the same issues of race, gender, and class politics that the Prancing J-Settes navigate every day.

I also found that my identity as a JSU alumnus and Prancing J-Sette autoethnographer is very similar to the identity of Mrs. Narah Oatis, the legendary sponsor of the J-Settes for twenty-one years. She too is a native of Jackson, but moved away to attain her bachelor and master degrees. When she returned and received the job of sponsoring the newly formed Prancing J-Sette dance line, she found that she had missed a lot while she was gone and had to find her place in her old community with her new identity, just as I did as I conducted field work on JSU's campus and in Jackson. I assert that the politics of race, gender, and class that these Black female dancers interact with daily not only affect them, but countless other women of the Africana Diaspora. I also assert that an analysis of the ways these women and their community make meaning through conversations surrounding the J-Settes and the actual J-Sette performances can problematize hegemonic views of power relations in Black societies. This through line

of shared experiences weaves throughout this chapter through my depiction of my fieldwork at the Prancing J-Settes' band camp and an oral history narrative of Mrs. Narah Oatis.

### **Band Camp: “This Will Make or Break You...It’s Not for Everyone”**

As a lifelong fan of the Prancing J-Settes, close friend to a few, and fellow dancer, I always thought that I could just about imagine what it takes to be a Prancing J-Sette. I knew they had to work hard and practice every day for hours on end, that they had to be prepared to perform at a moment's notice, that they had to maintain a 2.5 GPA, and overall that they had to be consistent, thrilling, and captivating performers for a very high maintenance crowd. Once I began my fieldwork, I learned, through embodied knowledge, that I could not fathom even a percentage of the complexities of a Prancing J-Sette's work and I quickly earned an entirely new respect and appreciation for them. It is no wonder why several J-Settes sing “Everyone can't be a J-Sette.” I faced several challenges in my attempts to do research on the J-Settes that were similar to the ones that the dancers face every day. I had to be constantly mindful of my attire, which I changed depending on with whom I was speaking. I was constantly performing the character of excited, young, polite, and educated researcher. So I could not appear tired, hungry, or aggravated by my interlocutors even if I was all of those combined. I constantly focused on my attitude. I sacrificed a lot, but I could not focus on that if I wanted to be successful in my research. Finally, I had to be extremely dedicated and prepared to work at a moment's notice. While the J-Settes were prepping for the upcoming season at band

camp, I was also paying my dues as a field researcher and it actually began long before I stepped foot on Jackson State's campus.

I started the ground work for my field work by Facebook messaging the captain of the J-Settes, Charlotte, and I filled her in on my hopes for my project and asked for her permission to interview her and her team. She instructed me to email the sponsor of the J-Settes, Mrs. Worthy, and the band director, Mr. Taylor. I did and never received replies from either of them. She told me that they would start band camp August 6, 2012 and that that would probably be a good time to begin my field work. So, I left College Station and went to Jackson and was prepared to start work on August 6. I facebooked Charlotte Sunday night and she told me that band camp had been moved back to start on Tuesday, August 7. So, Tuesday, I went to the campus around 8 a.m. and found that Blackburn middle school had moved to what I knew as the band practice field, so of course the band was not practicing there. After that fell through, I called Mrs. Oatis, with whom I had scheduled an appointment for later that afternoon. I got her fax machine, so I could not leave a message. Determined not to give up, I went to the T.B. Ellis gym and did not see anyone inside. So I called Mrs. Oatis again with no reply. As I trolled the campus looking for just a glimpse of a J-Sette or band member I ran into a security guard and asked if he knew the schedule for the band. He told me that the band would be in the AAC gym at 1:30 p.m. It was around 9 a.m at the time, so I went home and came back at 1:30 p.m only to find that no one was in the gym. I liken this experience to the Prancing J-Settes who have to try out for the dance company several times or those who make it through the try outs but only after the second or third round<sup>1</sup>.

It is also probably similar to first year J-Settes who have to master the style of dance in a short amount of time. Tenacity is a trait that is respected and revered among the J-Settes so it is fitting that I had to continue on in spite of challenges, to work with the J-Settes. These young women do not give up so neither could I.

So that day I went home somewhat defeated because I did not get to work with anyone. It was also exhausting to travel all around Jackson and to and from JSU. I had a flat tire as soon as I got into Jackson but my mother graciously allowed me to use her car and that was a lot to go around Jackson back and forth between JSU and her job. When I got home I called Mrs. Oatis and we rescheduled a time to do our interview the next day. So I did not get started, in my mind, until Wednesday. I was disappointed about that, but I could not foresee how everything would work out. Tuesday night I told my twin sister about how disappointing my first days were and she told me to contact Morgan, our church member, high school classmate, and current J-Sette. Morgan told me where the J-Settes were practicing and at what times. I found that it was very fitting that as I started my research a small community of believers and followers formed around me and tried to assist me in my endeavor. This is similar to the community that the Prancing J-Settes create with each other and probably have among family members, friends, and fans. As I went further into my research I found that this concept of family and community is an extremely important portion of the Prancing J-Sette life.

So, after being encouraged from my family/community, I went Wednesday to the TB Ellis gym before 9 a.m. and saw a lot of different dynamics when I walked into the dance studio. For example, there were three girls practicing a march in the middle of the

dance studio and I could tell that they were the new girls. I knew one of them because we were both members of JSU's Dance Ensemble, but I realized that it was not the right time to speak to her. I did not want to give her any unwanted attention. I waved and she smiled at me but she did not reach out for a hug either. On the other hand, Ariel, another girl I knew from Dance Ensemble, did run to me and hug me. Ariel had been a Prancing J-Sette for two years at this point and I believe she had permission to express herself openly unlike my other friend. Ariel made me feel like a big sister even though our relationship stemmed from another community. This role of big sister was one that I negotiated with the other J-Settes as well, especially Charlotte and Charlene. I am a part of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and three of Charlotte and Charlene's "big sisters" are my line sisters and they have a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for them so I had cultural capital with Charlotte and Charlene and they gave me a level of respect based on my association with their "big sisters." They also knew me from dancing with Dance Ensemble, which I had no clue about. They knew me and my twin and the difference between us. This sense of a community with the captain and her twin sister allowed them to feel more comfortable with me. They knew that if I was accepted by their "big sisters" then they could also trust me and let their guards down with me.

This was not the case with the Prancing J-Sette sponsor, Mrs. Worthy. Since I was dressed in workout clothes I did blend in well with the J-Settes and when Mrs. Worthy came in, she did not readily recognize that I was not a J-Sette, but when she did recognize it, I quickly felt her energy direct me to go into my elevator talk about my research. I also get very nervous and unfortunately ended up telling her that I'm a

graduate student at Texas A&M instead of telling her that I'm a graduate of JSU and that we are sorors<sup>2</sup>. I asked her if I could talk with her and some of the ladies, or even sit in on a practice, and she quickly let me know that practices are closed, but that if I talked to the captain and she was okay with it, I could talk to the ladies on breaks or at lunch. She also asked me for a write up of who I am and what I am researching even though I had sent her an email months ago with that information. So I politely obliged and went home to print out that email and gather all of my documentation from Dr. Hamera, my advisor, and my consent forms. When I made it back to JSU the girls were at lunch and Mrs. Worthy was nowhere to be found, but the J-Settes were all sitting at a table together in the Legacy Dining Hall. I found Charlotte and she excitedly whispered and asked me what Mrs. Worthy said about the project. I told her that she did not say yes or no, but that I had a packet to give to her. I also pulled out a packet for Charlotte. I wanted Charlotte to know that she was important in this research as well. While I was at lunch with the J-Settes I noticed that my high school classmate's younger sister was a Prancing J-Sette. I had always seen her performing her identity as a younger sister and it was surprising to see her perform her identity as an upperclassmen J-Sette. I heard her say to the new girls, who were all sitting on one end of the table while the older girls sat in the middle, "Ya'll got that song together? Let me hear it." She said it in a very demanding tone as I was sitting right in front of her. Though harsh this interaction did seem like typical new person treatment to me, which is, "Get with the program and fast. I am not going to be nice to you and I do not care if you do not like this approach because I am responsible for you getting the job done, not being happy."

The only other time I heard or saw anything that seemed a tad catty was when I brought water bottles to a J-Sette fitting and the girls did not really jump to receive the bottles. Everyone thought that my gesture was nice and said so, in her own J-Sette standoffish way, which is not mean but it is also not very welcoming. It is similar to the pretty girl who, because different guys and women always approach her, therefore guards herself against new people. When I left, I heard Charlotte say, “Ya’ll don’t want these drinks? Ya’ll acting like somebody hazing ya’ll.” This was clearly a joke and Charlotte’s attempt to use her position as captain to convince the dancers, as well as Mrs. Worthy, to accept me and my project. What is interesting is that the tone she used was the same tone I recall the J-Settes using when I tried out for the dance squad. They positioned themselves in front of everyone auditioning and talked to us about the tryout process. They gave helpful tips and on how to present oneself in manner and appearance before the judges, but their tone left one unsure of their motives and tense. The tone is that of an amplified, false but realistic attitude. One can put a “humph” at the end of every sentence. It is not clear if the person is joking or not. I have also witnessed this type of interaction between hierarchies in other dance situations and portrayed in countless movies about young women. Other than that, I thought that the older J-Settes were very cordial to the freshman J-Settes. They did not talk to them as much as they talked with each other, but the upper class J-Settes did not order the under classmen to get items for them or to pick up their plate during lunch and dinner. Maybe that is because I was there or because as Charlene told me, everything is seen as hazing these days, even “help.”

Although at practice I was not able to really interact with the J-Settes I was always able to talk to the current J-Settes during their lunch times. I actually interviewed Charlotte and Charlene at these times. In my interview with Charlotte she emphasized that the story of the J-Settes is one that few people actually understand but that many people make judgments about. She mentioned that it is a lot of hard work, but that it only lasts four years so it is best to enjoy it while it lasts. Charlene was more talkative and expressive than Charlotte and that could be because Charlene is not the group's captain. Charlene let me know that it is important for J-Settes not to believe that being a J-Sette is their world because they have to leave that "stardom" at some point. Even though the title does carry a lot of cultural capital, Charlene just got a job partly because she is a JSU student and a J-Sette, it is imperative that the girls do not think that they do not have to work hard at life just because they are J-Settes. Charlene shared that the being a J-Sette offers on the job training in time management, being public property, and working in a group. It ultimately changes girls into women. I found that she has a very deep rooted respect for her former captain Shanketta, and her big sisters Mea, and Ashlei. She strives to be like them in life not just dancing. She also emphasized that what moved her most as a J-Sette were not the moments when she was dancing but the life lessons that she learned. Charlotte and Charlene both are from a city outside of Jackson called Clinton and they were not on school dance lines, but the advisor for their community drill team group was a former J-Sette who brought them to a battle of the bands performance where they were first introduced to the J-Settes. When both girls



came to JSU they tried out for the J-Settes just because they wanted to keep dancing. They were not huge J-Sette fans like so many others and myself.

Charlotte encouraged me to continue working on Mrs. Worthy but also to talk to the interim band director so that he could hopefully work with me as well. So, I did try to but the old fashioned approach of emailing or leaving a message or coming by during office hours did not work with this director. It was band camp after all. I was fortunate enough to personally know and interview an old drum major of “The Boom,” as it is affectionately called, Mr. Armstrong. I interviewed Mr. Armstrong and we had a great conversation about the impact that the band has had on the community. His position as drum major put him as the direct link between the community and the band. He was not just an average student after he earned that title. He physically got chills talking about his experiences and I could see and feel how much passion he has for the organization and school. He volunteered to introduce me to an esteemed band director, Dr. Haughton, who would be at band practice that same night as well as the interim band director. He had no idea that I desperately needed a way to talk to the interim band director, but I thanked him profusely for volunteering his services. I met up with him and his daughter who is good friends with my younger sister around 7 p.m. and we walked to the parking lot that the band was using as a band field. Mr. Armstrong was enthralled with the exercises that the band was doing and couldn’t resist himself from helping correct some of the mistakes the students were making. Dr. Haughton was the same way. I tried talking to him about my project and he did give me his email address so that I could send him some interview questions, but I could tell that he was very much

focused on the band. He even directed for about an hour. That night I stayed out with the band until 11 p.m and I'd been on campus since 8 a.m. and even though it was a very long day I was introduced to the band director and we set up an appointment time and I got a chance to feel the excitement that surrounds an upcoming season from a band member's standpoint.

I finally did get a chance to speak with the band director after several failed attempts to meet. He gave me full access to the band as long as I gave him prior knowledge of what I needed and when I would come. I finally got a chance to talk with Mrs. Worthy when I brought water bottles to a fitting. I explained to her what I was doing and why and she seemed very pleased with it. She eventually said that she would let me know their practice schedule and even though she never said that she'd love for me to do the project she never said that she did not approve of me doing the project.

I was almost finished with all of my goals: Mrs. Oatis, the J-Settes, Mrs. Worthy, and the band director: Mr. Taylor, but I was missing one: Mrs. Ashley. I thought she'd been reticent to talk about the J-Settes when I mentioned it a while back, but when we did have an interview she was just as talkative as Mrs. Oatis, about whom more below. Mrs. Ashley gave me the run down of the practice schedule of the J-Settes, she told me that she always told her daughters that they could never be J-Settes because of all of the work that goes into it. She explained the differences between the J-Settes in her day and now and she told me the story of how she became a J-Sette. Her husband interjected some too, but he actually gave me some insight into how the social climate of Jackson was at the time and how the J-Settes were perceived by students of other universities

because he attended Mississippi State University. I was so glad that Mrs. Ashley agreed to be interviewed by me because I respect her as well as her views on the J-Settes. She is a bridge between women like Mrs. Oatis and Charlotte, Charlene and Shanketta. Her voice connects them all and her narrative is examined in the conclusion for this reason.

I learned so much during my two weeks of field research and even though it was exhausting, I wanted more and I had a couple of moments when I was talking with someone and I realized that I was at the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing and that was priceless. One of those moments was when I finally got a chance to talk with one of the busiest women I have ever met: Mrs. Narah Oatis. That same day I was able to interview Mrs. Oatis and it was such a treat. Mrs. Oatis talked about a range of topics and since she was the sponsor for the J-Settes for twenty-one years she had a lot of knowledge about the organization, politics, and impact it has had on the community. One point that she made to show how professional, fair, and perfection driven she was during her tenure, involved her story of the game that none of the J-Settes performed in because none of them either made the cuts for the performance or came consistently to the practices. She said that the university president, in office during the “heyday” of JSU, John A. Peoples, was bragging about the J-Settes to the opposing team’s administration and had to eat his words when no one performed. She was very proud of the interest he took in the J-Settes and she mentioned that he wrote a memoir and included the J-Settes in it. Not every president is that fond of the J-Settes. The current president, the first female president, Dr. Carolyn Meyers, recently asked Mrs. Oatis if she was the one who choreographed those “raunchy” moves for the dancers.

Always the professional and very thoughtful, Mrs. Oatis replied that she did not choreograph for the dance line, but she did not go on to comment on the said “raunchy” moves or explain who the current sponsor of the dance line was because she did not want to “throw anyone under the bus.”

### **Mrs. Narah Oatis: The Legend**

There is a middle-aged woman who works in the Physical Education department at Jackson State University in the T.B. Ellis gym who is a living legend. She is very petite, probably not weighing over one hundred pounds. She has a soft voice and very flighty movements; she never sits still for too long and always moves very quickly. Although this woman may seem unassuming at first glance, after just a deeper look it is very evident that this woman possesses a mighty strength and tenacity that surpasses what the eye can see. This woman is Mrs. Narah Oatis and I knew of her before I actually met her in person. Mrs. Oatis taught my mother in her Introduction to Dance class, when she was a student at Jackson State. She also was the sponsor of the dance group I joined while I was a student at Jackson State. Mrs. Oatis was also the sponsor for Jackson State’s cheerleading squad. She is a dedicated teacher and esteemed member of Jackson, Mississippi who is always involved in community service.

Although I personally knew Mrs. Oatis in all of these capacities, the first time I learned of her was while I was researching the Prancing J-Settes as a high school senior. In a small history of the J-Settes, I read of a woman who was the sponsor of the dance line and co-creator of many of their traditional and famous marches, dance routines, and performances. Mrs. Oatis was the sponsor of the J-Settes for twenty-one years and she

was the driving force behind most of the line's signature style, celebrated across the country. I am not sure of the woman I imagined when I read about Mrs. Oatis, but when I met her, I could not believe that a woman so much older than me and so tiny could have so much energy and could dance and execute movements so well. I could only imagine how great she was when she was younger and working with the Prancing J-Settes. I knew I had to talk with Mrs. Oatis if I wanted to write about the J-Settes, because she was such an integral part of the organization for several years and no one has spent a lot of time garnering her wisdom, her journey, her story. I am honored to listen. As Alice Walker professes in her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" I assert that Mrs. Oatis's narrative is so important because she has been a mother for many students at Jackson State. Her story harbors the stories of the women who came before her and creates a foundation for the women who will come after her. In describing the revelation she had about her own mother's creativity, Walker writes,

Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories - like her life - must be recorded. (407)

Although the power of Mrs. Oatis' narrative escapes words, this is a large part of why I wanted to interview Mrs. Oatis and why her story is the first one in this thesis.

I began my interview with Mrs. Narah Oatis in the hallway of the Physical Education office suite in the T.B. Ellis gym on Jackson State's campus. The décor of the office hallway has a 1970s vibe and we sat across from each other in two brown, plush office chairs. We were surrounded by office sounds of phones ringing, printing and fax machines running, and the other music notes of a department that was gearing up for a new school year. There were also several, "Hey Mrs. O!" and her response "Hey Baby!" throughout our interview.

Mrs. Oatis most definitely creates a space for herself wherever she is, literally and metaphorically, and one cannot help but go along with her. While we were conversing about the time, energy, sacrifices, love, dedication, and high expectation she put into her twenty-one years as the director of the Prancing J-Settes, she embodied this exact behavior. I was able to catch her in between running errands for her elderly mother and hosting a meeting with a fellow colleague. Even though we both knew that we had limited time to talk, Mrs. Oatis was so gracious that I felt like we had all day to gab and that I had her undivided attention. This is of course multi-layered, but I like to think that we both shared an understanding that what was transpiring between us was a transferring of history and a way of being, knowing, and understanding of what it is, looks like, feels like, and tastes like to be a successful Black woman in the "public Black sphere" ( Whaley). While Mrs. Oatis and I were discussing her life through working with the J-Settes she helped a student register for classes for the upcoming semester, which was days away from beginning. So that miniscule instance let me know that Mrs. Oatis is known for making what seems like the impossible a possibility and she is not

only a legend to J-Settes and fans, but to her many, many students and colleagues. Mrs. Oatis exemplified how she has balanced being a woman who takes on responsibility in the public as well as in the private. She was taking care of her mother, taking time out of her day to help me, a former student and advisee, with her education, helping a student who had no where else to turn complete his undergrad education, and waiting on a man to show up so she could have a meeting about the upcoming school year. Not to mention, that she asked me to help her with a community service project she has headed for many years and while she was making an effort to step down she was attempting to increase the involvement of dance in the project before she left.

It is important to note that Mrs. Oatis had left Jackson for five years before she became the J-Sette sponsor and when she came back, she took time to learn and absorb what the J-Settes meant to the school and community. It is equally important to note that after only a year, she was “off and running” and being innovative within the system, that she walked into. She is a Revolutionary Black Diva, which Kimberly Brown defines as “[a woman who breaks] loose from the fixed label of emasculators and force[s] the audience to re-examine their assumptions of blackness and black womanhood” (5). She is such a dedicated, precise, and hardworking professional that the fact that she is transgressing a mode of being and meaning making probably goes unnoticed. When I began to interview Mrs. Oatis, she literally talked for hours off one question. I asked her how she got started as the sponsor of the Prancing J-Settes and this is what she said:

### **“They Don’t Play in the SWAC<sup>3</sup>”**

*When I first got here to work at Jackson State, that’s when they asked me to be over the J-Settes and I had to ask, “What is that?!” because when I left going to college they were called majorettes. So, while I was gone is when the name changed. I left in ’70 to go to college, so that is in the time frame when Shirley Middleton was over the J-Settes. I’m from Jackson but I went to school in Missouri. She asked if they could stop twirling and focus on dancing, because they used to march, dance, and twirl and that’s when they got the J-Sette name. If I’m not mistaken it was spelled Jaycette. Later on during my administration, the Jackson Jaycees organization, their wives are called Jaycettes. So it was spelled the same and that group did not want that to be confused at all...that’s a White group. Now at first I don’t think the school paid them too much attention, but when they found out they were serious about it. So, Dr. Smith was the VP at the time and we sat down and talked and we changed the name. Now we changed the spelling so that the two groups could be distinguished. We were not going to relinquish the term or the word, but we just changed the spelling.*

*Now when I got here they asked if I would work with them and I said sure because I’d always been involved in some dance group from middle school on through college. But that first year was a true learning experience for me because of their style. The J-Settes have a style of their own and that’s what I have to tell parents a lot of times when their child auditions and they say, “Well my child has had such and such dance training for blah blah years” and I say “Well have they had this style?” You see J-Sette is its own style. You have modern as a style, Jazz as a style, Ballet as a style. So each*



*has its own movement vocabulary. So it's a thing of it's a style in its own. I think I just learned a lot that first year about how they wanted to do things. So the next year I felt more comfortable. As each month went by, I had a better understanding of what was the demand of the crowd's expectations. See I was gone for five years. See I went to Lincoln State University to get my B.S. and went to Ohio State to get my Masters and from there I came back home. So I was gone and things evolved, but I walked in and learned and understood that there was a certain expectation from the carriage, to how we executed things to the attire, their importance and relationship to the band. Mr. Harrell Haughton was the band director at that time. I learned the level of practice that was needed to make sure we were set and after that I was off and running. I had more of a rooting to understand what was expected and the tradition of the J-Settes and Jackson State as a whole and its expectation of the Sonic Boom of the South and all its auxiliaries. After that we just kind of evolved, where we tried to have a variety of shows before I finished my administration.*

*It's a learning experience when you hit college, but it's a whole 'nother learning experience when you hit college and join a group like J-Settes beecaaauuussee (dragged out for emphasis) of the amount of practice, you got to go get your studies done ya know, and the expectation at the end of the week. They do not care about your test, they don't care about your leg hurting, they don't care about how many hours. All they know is what they see. And then there's always that comparison. You got the SWAC. They don't play in the SWAC. It's a whole arena of its own of expectation of all the bands, of all the female dance units, they all take pride in themselves and of course*

*everyone wants to be the best and you're trying to image in some way like the best. You see what I'm saying? Even though they may not wanna own up to it, they're tryna make sure that they're pulling the best that they can to be in that top notch, top one or two. You always have to strive for that.*

Several themes brought out in this section of the interview resonate across this thesis. As Mrs. Oatis spoke about her first years as the J-Sette sponsor, she came alive. She leaned forward to me and her face lit up when the recollection of having to learn the J-Sette style and expectation of the Jackson State crowd crosses her mind. In contrast, her demeanor became very professional when she spoke of the J-Sette style and dealing with parents of students who took years of training in other dance forms. She did not try to view the J-Sette “bucking” through any lens other than a lens created for viewing the J-Settes. That decision is so profound because many Jacksonians and alumni J-Settes do not view the J-Sette style as a legitimate dance technique. It is not “real dance.” This proves that a J-Sette must master the style, not just be shapely, pretty, or have dance experience.

Interestingly enough, Mrs. Oatis frequently used the words “expectation” and “demand” many times to describe how she learned what her bosses and the JSU community looked for from the Prancing J-Sette dance group. I am curious to know what it meant then and means now to Mrs. Oatis that she utilized these term as tools to depict the environment that she walked into as the director of the Prancing J-Settes. It strikes me as interesting that Mrs. Oatis had to negotiate the double-consciousness of being an insider of the Jackson, Mississippi community, but an outsider of the Jackson

State University community, and given the responsibility of guiding this group of young women that already had a prestigious reputation. It is very similar to where I stand as an ethnographer/ fan/ Super Jacksonian (from Jackson and alumnus of JSU). She is now widely accepted, but I feel as though she had to earn her stripes, just as J-Settes earn their stripes; and she took her first year to learn, observe, and listen to the community as it informed her of its expectations and demands of her. Therefore, I wonder what would have happened had she not exceeded expectations and demands or had that attitude. The audience with all of its politics and aesthetic preferences was a large factor for the Prancing J-Settes under Mrs. Oatis from the beginning. The different permutations of community that surround the Prancing J-Settes are vital to their way of life. To name just a few of the communities, there is the community of YouTube viewers, of Jackson, Mississippi, of JSU, of the Sonic Boom, of the Prancing J-Sette nation, of the Prancing J-Settes, of the J-Settes, and the list goes on until it reaches each J-Settes home. This brings to bear the cultural question, “What is a Black woman supposed to do in the home and in the public sphere and where do her loyalties lie in each sector?”

I argue that Mrs. Oatis’s notion of the expectations thrown onto the J-Settes’s bodies by the Jackson State community is an alternate version of the community that Soyini Madison describes in her essay, “That Was My Occupation.” In the same way that Madison’s interlocutor learns through her mother, I believe that Mrs. Oatis learned from the J-Settes in her first year working with them. Madison writes that, in the narrative of young Alma, home place as a site of resistance is manifest in her dedication to her mother. It was her mother who was the guide and teacher for what it

meant to be human, to resist, and to live life. For young Alma, the mother and extended-mothers were the carriers of culture and the caretakers, but they were also the examples of lives based upon invention. (219)

Because Mrs. Oatis left Jackson to go to college she was not immersed in the culture or expectations of the Jackson State community. Therefore, she had to learn through being the J-Sette sponsor. She learned what it meant to be a J-Sette, to resist, and to make do and to make meaning as their sponsor. Mrs. Oatis also learned from the audience of the Prancing J-Settes. She was aware that there was a very high level of excellence that the audience members expected from her. Although, they did not gingerly guide or teach her how to meet their expectations, their message was received and engrained into Mrs. Oatis's mind. Although, the multiple communities Mrs. Oatis learned from in Jackson, Mississippi were not always of the caring and nurturing sentiment, she did learn from them how to function in her new occupation and carry on the legacy left to her from the Jackson State community. In this same manner, the Prancing J-Settes and I learned from various communities, some nurturing and some demanding, and the expectations of women in the public sphere. At the same time, we all enacted our agency and dealt with situations in ways that fit our needs.

In this chapter, I have set the stage for the importance of the narratives of these often overlooked and under-examined social actors. Mrs. Oatis' narrative, in particular, has so much resonance with the struggle that is being a Black woman performing in the public sphere. She also negotiates what it means to create one's own space amidst controlling images. She also intervenes into what this identity can possibly mean for the

communities and audiences surrounding Black women. Mrs. Oatis is one answer to Della Pollock's question, "what happens when a story begins in absence? When it takes its momentum from a gap, a break, a border space, or an element of difference..." (27). Mrs. Oatis, as well as other Black women, used her own intuition as well as the expectations of her community to create her own image of a Black woman in the public sphere. This was not given to her. She had to figure it out on her own because she literally was the "gap, break, border space, and element of difference." What I found with Mrs. Oatis is that she took her story that began in absence and created her own space, her own homeplace, through discipline, managing responsibilities in the private and public spheres, transgressing repressive social conditions, and dance. Her narrative helps us to navigate the absences that are the beginnings of other J-Sette narratives because it brings out many of the major themes found in all of the accounts. The next chapter examines the set of concepts that produces these expectations of the audience and community. I examine the cultural history and interactions of the community and audience amongst themselves to gain greater insight into the ways in which they view themselves and their fierce fascination, contradictory expectations, and protection of the Prancing J-Sette image.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **“THE THRILL OF A BILLION EYES”...WHOSE EYES?**

Through researching the history of JSU and The Prancing J-Settes I have come to like the phrase, “Jackson State University created the Prancing J-Settes.” The Prancing J-Settes were officially added as an auxiliary section of the university’s band in 1970. As Mrs. Oatis notes in the previous chapter, the Prancing J-Settes, band, and audience had an understanding about the expectations and priorities of the dance line since its inception. Because of this relationship that is so commonly understood that it often does not get verbalized or explained I argue that the JSU community “created” the Prancing J-Settes in a sense, as a way to use the performances of Black women’s bodies to negotiate and work through the race, gender, and class issues the community was facing. Performance, dance, and Black women are all areas that are viewed as “frivolous” or “insufficient” by popular culture and hegemony leads them to be viewed in the same way by the Black community. But performance, dance and Black women are all integral parts of the Black culture and especially the JSU community. Therefore, these areas are perfect tools for transgressing hegemonic norms because they will fly under the radar of the majority culture, or be misunderstood, which allows the minority culture the freedom to work through politics on bodies and performance styles that it can simultaneously identify as both important and/or insignificant.

The struggles, expectations, and constant vigilance that the Prancing J-Settes negotiate did not begin with the formation of the dance group. These cultural practices

were informed by the performances that created and took place on a stage that belongs to the JSU community: The Plaza.

As an autoethnographer I am privy to the general culture of the community so I was aware, and learned even more through research, how the community's general high expectation and celebration of the performance of Black middle class propriety, along with its affinity toward the spectacular, family rhetoric, and constant vigilance of its members, informs its expectations of the Prancing J-Settes. There is as much a show going on in the audience of a game or on the Plaza of JSU's campus as there is on the field during the halftime show. This is one of the reasons why it is vital to examine the people whose views and opinions have historically set the standard for the J-Settes. This chapter exists because to understand the Prancing J-Settes, one must be knowledgeable of the specific culture that formed and sustains the organization. Also, the community is a large factor in the Prancing J-Settes' performances and lives. Therefore it is important to know the aesthetics of this community's performances of its own identity.

Through looking at some of the history of Jackson's relationship with JSU and its production of culture, I examine the ways that various theorists' constructions of public and counterpublics work in this environment that both places great value on the rhetoric of community and is also a Black public (Whaley) where an African-American identity is an unmarked category and other races are viewed as "other." Also, this chapter notes how the popularization of and ease of access to the internet and mass media extends the reach of the Prancing J-Sette community to what Kiri Miller suggests is the virtual world. It also furthers Philip Auslander's discussion of the perceived rivalry between

live and mediatized performance and explores how the race, gender, and class politics of this particular community are negotiated in the virtual world.

### **The Plaza Theory**

Before 1970 Jackson State University's campus was split in the center by J.R. Lynch Street, which was and still holds a lot of traffic for West Jackson and the Downtown area. Because the university has an open campus, residents of the city frequently became absorbed into the activities of the campus and students and faculty of the university frequently intermingled with the residents. JSU still operates under an open campus policy, but J.R. Lynch Street no longer runs through the center of the campus because of a riot and subsequent deaths that occurred on the campus May 1970. Tensions were high across the country because of opposing views surrounding the Vietnam War and other political actions and when students at JSU heard rumors about the assassination of Charles Evers, the mayor of Fayette, Mississippi, and Medgar Evers brother, they began to riot on the campus starting several fires and turning over a dump truck. The city fire department, police force, and state troopers responded to the call to stop the riot, yet when the fire was put out and the riot calmed down, the fire department left while the city police and state troopers remained and strolled down J.R. Lynch Street to Alexander Hall with their guns ready. There is no official statement as to why the officers remained on the campus and marched to Alexander Hall. There was a group of about 75-100 students congregated around Alexander Hall who chanted at the police officers until a glass bottle was broken with a loud pop and a police officer fell after being struck by a piece of falling debris. From this point there is no official or consistent



story, but what is for certain is that the officers opened fire on the unarmed students for roughly 30 seconds killing two, James Green and Phillip Gibbs, and injuring several. Several students were trampled and the building was riddled with bullet holes which shattered all of the windows facing the street. Shortly after the policeman left and city officials denied the police force's involvement in the shooting. No police present that day were ever prosecuted.

After that devastating event, the Jackson City Council voted to close J.R. Lynch to through traffic and, shortly after, the Gibbs-Green Plaza was built in memory of the two slain students (Jackson State May 1970). This plaza has become the epicenter for cultural activities at JSU, formal or informal. Because of the events that led to the formation of the plaza, I view it as similar to bell hooks' grandmother's house, which she theorizes as a homeplace, a site of resistance. hooks states that,

historically African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace...had a radical political dimension...it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination.

(384)

The plaza is a space where the conglomeration of the politics of being Black in the Deep South of America, with middle-upper-middle class aspirations, yet living day to day among other Black people on the university's campus come together and are spectacularly performed and monitored. Instead of being objectified as "trouble" by the gaze of the dominant culture, the plaza allows Blacks at JSU to be publicly visible

without being “always already troubling to the dominant visual field” (Fleetwood 6).

The plaza is a Black public sphere, or more accurately, a JSU public sphere, because it is specific to the community and culture at JSU.

The community of Jackson State University places meaning onto women’s bodies, as well as men’s bodies differently than the community of Jackson. This JSU community largely consists of middle to upper middle class Black families that deposit markers of class and appropriate gender performance onto cultural capital such as completed higher education, church affiliation, political involvement, and business enterprises. There is a high, expectation of appropriate appearance and behavior, but that is more so because of Black southern culture. The culture at Jackson State is like an exaggeration of all of these expectations and cultural capital is accrued through living up to demands of spectacular performance. At Jackson State one is expected to be physically, emotionally, and fashionably ‘on’ at all time. Indeed, one word that can describe the vernacular culture of JSU is “spectacular.” I recall being a freshman and spending hours primping before a class because of the expected level of glamour that women and men must possess to walk on the campus of JSU. As noted above, Jackson State is an open campus so there is no telling who will be on the plaza at any given time. Walking across the infamous plaza, the nexus of informal and formal student activity, is like walking across a catwalk at a fashion show. Literally, there are photographers, people with camera phones, and an audience, people ranging from friends, to Greeks, to socialites, to parents. One learns quickly that if an outfit is not up to par or one does not feel up to performing for “the people,” one is wise to take the back way to class in order

to cut down on the stares or gossip that will ensue if one is on the plaza. The fashion is not the beginning and ending of the JSU persona, although it is most easily observed. The performance starts with an attitude and an awareness of an ever present audience. There are four major segments of the Plaza theory. They are: the Plaza gaze, which is internal and external; the Plaza parade; the Plaza aesthetic; and the Plaza discourse.

When it comes to the Plaza theory, Foucault's theory of the Panopticon is helpful, but the Plaza theory differs from it mainly because the Panopticon refers to prison and power. In regards to the racial power relations that necessitated the formation of the plaza and the statistics of minorities in American prisons, the Panopticon assumes a White normativity and dominance that I am not arguing here. What is similar between the Panopticon and the Plaza theory is the self-surveillance that ensues once one becomes a part of the community. Foucault writes,

he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*Discipline* 202-203)

There are certainly power relations in play, but different from those Foucault refers to and what is most similar is the duality of watching oneself because of the constant gaze of others. Members of the JSU community partake in the Plaza theory even if they do not walk on the plaza because they are aware of the expectations and by attempting to thwart the power relations, they make clear what the power relations are. The Plaza gaze

is best described using the internal voice of the second person narrator. It occurs when you know you're being watched so you watch to see who is watching you. You also watch to see who has passed and failed the Plaza audition. You want to see both, however so that you'll have something to talk about. You do all of this as you execute the Plaza parade or stroll. This includes a steady pace, slow enough for you to be seen by others but not slow enough to make it seem deliberate. It also includes walking in the middle of the Plaza or slightly off of the center. Walking on the sidewalk adjacent to the Plaza is slightly equivalent to being on the sidelines. It expresses that one does not want to be a part of the Plaza parade, but one will still be subject to the plaza gaze and expectation even while on the sidewalk. One also has to audition, in a way similar to the Prancing J-Settes, to be a part of the Plaza parade. If one fails the audition one can still find a place within the community, which is similar to the Prancing J-Settes who do not make weekly cuts to perform but still sit through the performance with the rest of the squad.

The Plaza gaze is a part of the Plaza discourse. The gaze and discourse work together to discipline the community in the proper aesthetic and mores. The discourse is similar to the discourse surrounding the Prancing J-Settes. It involves who was wearing what, if their hair was done or not, who was with whom, and what they were doing. There is a continuum of the Plaza aesthetic which is a tad different from the rest of Jackson. Mainly, the spectacularity of JSU's culture is what sets it apart. I will describe what I suggest are the polar ends of the continuum. What is probably most readily assumed to be a part of the aesthetic is what I will call the "middle class woman." She

wears a crisp white button down shirt with dark wash blue jeans and heels of some sort and her hair is done in a classy, understated fashion. She has clean natural nails and speaks to a fair amount of people on the plaza or a fair amount of people speak to her. There is also “the flashy, yet tasteful woman.” She wears trendy clothes with very high heels and her hair and makeup are done in dramatic fashion. She will definitely walk in the center of the plaza and she will definitely be noticed and talked about, although she may only talk to a select few people on the Plaza.

On the other side of the continuum, there is the “working class flashy woman.” She wears clothes that are trendy but are a season behind, are in season yet ill-fitting, and/or are manufactured by imitation designers. She has on high heels but cannot walk comfortably in them and her hair is dramatic but also not in tune with the trends. There is also the “woman who does not care.” This woman has rejected the rules of the Plaza aesthetic and dresses in sweat pants, a cotton t-shirt, and socks and shower shoes. Her hair is in a ponytail with a headband and she does not have on any make up or earrings, which is something that a lot of JSU women do not do. Even though this woman has rejected the rules of the Plaza aesthetic, the Plaza gaze and discourse are still upon her and she is very knowledgeable of that and what her dress and demeanor say to the rest of the community. The attitude presented by all of these women is one of confidence and bit of spectactularity, which is praised by the JSU community. I must note that I have depicted the dress of women here simply because that is my reference, but that is not to suggest that men are not also under the Plaza gaze, critique, and discipline.

Normally this type of pressure would make for an environment that does not feel safe or like home, but in the instance of the JSU Plaza, the adherence to the Plaza rules, the subjection to and partaking of the plaza gaze, and even the breaking of the Plaza rules does. Even if one does not succeed at the performance of adequate plaza etiquette and aesthetic one is still a part of the family and community because one becomes a part of the Plaza discourse by affirming what the Plaza aesthetic is not. There is rarely an instance when a person is kicked out of the JSU community. As I will discuss in Chapters Two and Three, even men dressed in J-Sette drag are accepted and given a purpose in this largely heteronormative, middle class, and Protestant community. Yes, everyone is aware of the Plaza aesthetic rules, the ever-present gaze of the Plaza, and the discipline that ensues if one breaks the rules. bell hooks speaks of the homeplace as a site where Blacks created this private space where they can nurture each other, grow, and express themselves free from the racism of the outside public. This is usually the physical home of Blacks. While the Plaza does provide a space for safe cultural expression and nurture it is not an entirely private or home space. The Plaza is a public within the homeplace of JSU.

There is more cultural work that occurs on the Plaza than just hypervisibility. The plaza has provided a space for a theory of the flesh to congeal to form what I call the Plaza theory. This is a way of knowing through movement, aesthetics, and attitude what it is to be a part of the JSU community. It does not have to be stated and is difficult to depict with words. It must be lived. Soyini Madison cites theories of the flesh as,

cultural, geopolitical, and economic circumstances of our lives [that] engender particular experiences and epistemologies that provide philosophies about reality different from those available to other groups... They privilege agency and honor ‘the extraordinary in the ordinary’ indigenous analysis, expressions, and meditations of ...homeplace. ( “That Was My Occupation” 213-214)

The Plaza Theory is that knowing that a member of the JSU community has as to why the Plaza aesthetic works on campus and who has it and who does not. It also explains why there is a need for the ever present gaze of the community on the Plaza. The Plaza is the epicenter of public social life. Therefore social work is done to make sure that those who are on the Plaza, thereby partaking of the culture JSU has created through resistance, are subjected to the Black middle class, heteronormative, and spectacular expectations of the community.

### **The Prancing J-Settes and Communities of Plaza Theorists**

I had more of a rooting to understand what was expected and the tradition of the J-Settes and Jackson State as a whole and its expectation of the Sonic Boom of the South and all its auxiliaries.

Mrs. Oatis

They don’t play in the SWAC. It’s a whole arena of its own of expectation of all the bands, of all the female dance units...

Mrs. Oatis

Mrs. Oatis notes above that the community of Prancing J-Sette spectators has always had an active role in the formation of the J-Sette performance. It is not clear what the dynamics of this relationship were in the initial performances, but it is now

evident that the audience members' expectations are very important to Prancing J-Settes. The community that Mrs. Oatis refers to consists of JSU officials, students, alumni and the Sonic Boom<sup>4</sup>, the fans of the football team, and as this same group in the other universities that make up the SWAC. With the general access to social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook, this community has expanded making the Prancing J-Settes the "thrill of a billion eyes." Because this large group is so integral to the psyche of the Prancing J-Sette organization, it is imperative to examine the complexities, contradictions, and intersectionalities that operate within each segment's very specific uses of the Plaza Theory and how the theory is embodied. I also reference the past to historicize this moment in the Prancing J-Sette history and I do observe social interaction between J-Sette fans on YouTube who are physically located all over the country.

### **Intimacy and Distance**

Along with the intersectionality found in J-Sette community there is also an intimacy with and distancing from the Prancing J-Settes that allows the community to use the dancers as a fulcrum for working through, policing, and creating social politics. The intimacy is socially created but the distance between the people involved in this vast field site is "real." The community is made up of individuals and each individual is not intimately connected to another. They all have different opinions and biases about the Prancing J-Settes and cultural politics, they all perform different class identities in varying spaces, and they may never meet or even know of each member of the community. Yet and still, this group does share a passion and love for JSU and the



culture and legacy of the university that in some instances brings them together and seemingly trumps the notion of distancing.

The community views the Prancing J-Settes in a similar format. They hardly imagine the J-Settes outside of the idea of a group of women who dance the same and think the same, even though the group changes each year and has several of its own hierarchies. The community lays claim to the Prancing J-Settes as their own and feels comfortable in expressing that ownership, whether it be by excluding others like the alumna on YouTube examined later in this chapter or discussing discontent with “our girls” amongst other community members. At the same time, the community distances itself from the J-Settes when it is convenient. There is a distance that comes from the J-Settes being performers and in a sense alienated from the “real” world. Also, when a woman becomes a part of the Prancing J-Settes she becomes a Prancing J-Sette. She takes on a different identity that follows her outside of the performance and this creates distance between the community and the performers. The J-Settes can never be regular members of the community because they will always be separated by the title of Prancing J-Sette and someone around them will find out. The J-Settes occupy a liminal space within their community. The members can identify the dancers as “not ours/us and not, not ours/ us” (Schechner 112).

This contradiction shows up in several different ways. In his second tenet of what makes up a public, Warner states that “a public is a relation among strangers” (55). In contrast, the family theme is one that is present in JSU’s rhetoric as well as the Sonic Boom’s and the Prancing J-Settes’. Although the dominant discourse about the affective

experience for the Prancing J-Sette members is one of family, one cannot forget that this is a family that has certain qualifications. For example, one has to audition to become a member of the Prancing J-Settes, but one does not fully become a “sister” until one successfully goes through the season long ritual of becoming a “Prancing” J-Sette. This hierarchy of family is not visible to the untrained eye, but it shows the qualifications of the Prancing J-Sette family and the ideology of family in the Sonic Boom and JSU. From this standpoint, this family-community has made and agreed upon a social contract regarding race, class, and gender politics. The community partially consists of Jackson’s upper middle, middle, and working class Black population, the student body of JSU, and Jackson’s public schools which consist of mostly Black youth. Also, JSU alumni consisting of middle to upper class citizens across the country are a large and verbal component of the community. Recently the addition of the millions of YouTube viewers have become another part of the community as well as the middle and high school dance teams who the Prancing J-Settes influence. There are also Pan-Hellenic Greek organization members, lovers of JSU culture; and band members and alumni within this community. Large portions of the community have spread out across the country but still convene for large cultural events like Homecoming. Also throughout the country are the other audience members of the SWAC conferences and their surrounding communities which cover working to upper class communities from Baton Rouge, Louisiana to Little Rock, Arkansas.

## **From the Plaza to the Field and From the Field to the Plaza**

The Prancing J-Sette community's understanding of the Plaza Theory, which regulates the expectations, vigilance, and discipline that is required of and enacted by its members is a large part of what makes it conceptually possible for it to have such high demands of the Prancing J-Settes. The JSU/Jackson culture birthed not only the Prancing J-Settes but also the conceptual framework of how and for what purposes the J-Settes are utilized. The J-Sette community has placed the Prancing J-Settes as representatives of this Black public sphere's major cultural mores of upward class mobility, heteronormative propriety, family, and spectacular excellence. Since this has been the primary purpose of the Prancing J-Settes in this community the dancers have been historically presented as monolithic characters with attributes that can change according to the community's need. The Prancing J-Settes have generally been portrayed as voiceless, moving, female bodies since the inception of the organization, which is why in the next chapter the Prancing J-Settes speak for themselves.

Although this is a mutual relationship- the community informs the Prancing J-Settes while the Prancing J-Settes inform the community- here I look at how much the "persona" of the Prancing J-Settes is reflective of the needs of the community. In relation to the Prancing J-Settes, the ability to move fluidly between the spaces of community, public, counterpublic, and audience while performing varying identities of race, gender, and class allows one to work through, subvert, or reify hegemonic cultural formulations by using the bodies and movements of the Prancing J-Settes.

In order to analyze the various components of this vast community I used methodologies of autoethnography, analysis of social media, and traditional archival research. I was aware that, as Robin Boylorn suggests, “as I [was] researching and examining others, I [was] simultaneously situating myself and reflecting on who I am and what experiences I bring to the room” (179). During the time frame of August – November 2012, I attended three culturally classic and representative football games in Jackson and Lorman, Mississippi and took part in participant observation during the games and the tailgates throughout the week of, the games. I also interviewed community members, including my father, as well as Prancing J-Settes who are also a part of the Jackson community, in order to examine the relationship between the university and the city, women and men, and public and private spheres. The use of social media websites allowed me to analyze the virtual politics that the community negotiates. Through adding Prancing J-Settes as Facebook friends I was notified when videos of the Prancing J-Settes were uploaded, usually by fans and members of the community. I was also notified when J-Settes either created or were tagged in statuses and video comments, which gave me a glimpse into the rare instance of members of the community interacting with individual Prancing J-Settes. Although I did not view this same interaction between individual J-Settes and community members taking place on YouTube as I did on Facebook, by searching through the videos of the J-Settes and the respective comments I was able to examine how community members utilize the videos of the J-Settes to interact with each other and critique the J-Settes in a permanent format. Searching the videos of the Prancing J-Settes’ performances led me to videos and

comments of another facet of the J-Sette community, which is the amateur performances of presumably gay men, who I call “J-Setters,”<sup>5</sup> appropriating the Prancing J-Sette dance aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> This dialogue between the live vs. mediatized performance of the Prancing J-Settes and the J-Setters is central to this chapter because it gave me a fuller understanding of the cultural and political molding of this ever expanding community.

### **The Prancing J-Sette Communities, Publics, and Counterpublics**

Jackson is the capital and most populated city in Mississippi with an estimated 175,561 of Mississippi’s 2,977,457 inhabitants. It is unique compared to the rest of Mississippi because 79% of the population is African American and 18.4% is White, while only 37% of Mississippi’s population is African American and 59.1% is White (Jackson Quick Facts). Jackson also hosts many of the artistic hubs of the state in its downtown area, like the Thalia Mara Concert Hall, New Stage Theater, and Mississippi Museum of Art. Jackson’s downtown is also the home of “Mississippi’s Urban University,” Jackson State University. Jackson State was founded in 1877 as Natchez Seminary by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, moved to Jackson in 1882, and the name changed to Jackson College in 1899. The state assumed responsibility for the college in 1940, but it wasn’t until 1974 that the school came to university status and was known as Jackson State University, “The Urban University of the State” (History). This is the same time that the Prancing J-Settes were formed as an auxiliary of the university’s band, the Sonic Boom of the South. Since its inception the Prancing J-Settes have had a large following and there are immeasurable amounts of people who are at least knowledgeable of the Prancing J-Settes.

When the group began, in 1970, the audience likely consisted only of SWAC fans in the American Southeast, but with the current growing access to popular media forms such as smartphones and video cameras, frequented sites such as YouTube and Facebook, and the increased amount of travel that the Sonic Boom does across the nation, the Prancing J-Sette audience has become virtually impossible to identify. Their audience crosses most, if not all borders of race, class, and gender. For example, the accessibility of smartphone technology and YouTube has allowed working through upper-middle class Black audience members to record and distribute videos of the dancers, making them available to different global ethnicities. Also, since smartphone and internet access have gone from being a marker of high class socialability to being markers of the norm, the Prancing J-Sette audience crosses class as well. Because of this normalization and the frequency that these videos are uploaded, viewed, and commented upon, the Prancing J-Settes are a vehicle for their audience members to negotiate their class identities. Although most of the recorders who upload videos of the Prancing J-Settes are Black, the access of the videos to anyone who watches on YouTube, allows the Prancing J-Settes to reach and complicate gender norms across the world.

Thus, the Prancing J-Sette audience is virtual, live, local and global and the segments of the audience overlap. Because of this, there is no way to know who the audience members are, what their multiple identities are, where they live, what they were doing at the time that they witnessed the Prancing J-Settes, etc. but I contend that if one is knowledgeable of the Prancing J-Settes, then one is a part of the “Prancing J-Sette’s public.” What I have found is that there are four large groups within which the

population in this field site is situated. These are public, counterpublic, community, and audience. As mentioned before, these are intersecting and overlapping identities but it is helpful to examine each category individually to understand how each works in relation to the other, and to the Plaza Theory.

## **Publics**

According to Michael Warner,

A public is constituted through mere attention...Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members. The cognitive quality of that attention is less important than the mere fact of active uptake. Attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated. (60)

By reading this work, you are now a part of the Prancing J-Sette public.

There is intersectionality within this concept of publics though. Kimberle Crenshaw defines intersectionality as “a concept that enables [one] to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias” (2). The Prancing J-Sette public is home to several other publics and counterpublics. The members of the Prancing J-Sette football game public can simultaneously be members of the Prancing J-Sette YouTube public, or of a Prancing J-Sette “J-Setter” counterpublic. Many are, and carry with them the biases of each group not only throughout their conversations about the Prancing J-

Settes but in their everyday performances. The concepts of publics, “the” public, “a” public, counterpublics, Black publics, Black counterpublics, and community are all present in my formation of the “Prancing J-Sette/ Bucking Public.”

I must note that for the purposes of this thesis I must make a distinction between “public” and “community.” “Public” is a term utilized by academics, while “community” is a term utilized by my interlocutors. Sometimes, the terms identify the same concept and sometimes they differ. I put both terms in conversation with each other since the politics of both play a major part in my field site, but I will refer to audience members, whether live or on line, as a community in order to keep with the language of my interlocutors.

Warner discusses the subtle difference in the imagination of “the” public and “a” public. He suggests that,

The public is a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general. It might be the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community...But in each case the public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question. This sense of totality is brought out in speaking of the public, even though to speak of a national public implies that others exist; there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as the public, the others are assumed not to matter. (49)

He goes on to say that, “A public can also be... a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of



totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space” (Warner, 50). I would argue, that for the Prancing J-Sette public, the binding factor is knowledge instead of shared physical space. Many members of this public have not seen the Prancing J-Settes perform, but they may have seen or heard of a dance movement called “J-Setting” that is directly influenced by the J-Settes. Here I do not mean a literal dance move, but a cultural movement, which I examine more in depth in Chapter Three. I find these clarifications of “the” public and “a” public useful because, when I speak of the Prancing J-Sette public or the Jackson State University or Jackson, Mississippi communities, I am speaking of the general population, while keeping in mind that there are people that are in a public of those more general publics. For example, “A” public is aware of the Plaza Theory, while “The” public may not be. In the same breath, I also must contend with the fact that the Prancing J-Sette public is a public in the larger sense of America and even the Africana Diaspora. This leads me to a discussion of Black counterpublics and Black publics.

### **The Black Public Sphere and Counterpublics**

There is a black counterpublic that makes up a subset of the Prancing J-Sette public. Deborah Waley uses the definition provided by the Black Public Sphere Collective, which states that a black counterpublic is “the critical practice and visionary politics, in which [Black] intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute and challenge the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States” (30). This definition partially works for the communities surrounding the Prancing J-Settes. My only points of difference from this

concept are that the surrounding community and audience of the Prancing J-Settes are culturally Afrocentric and not simply “intellectuals.”

Even though the sphere of the Prancing J-Settes’ influence is far and wide, their main audience at every performance is of the understanding that black culture and bodies are the norm and are not marginalized as they are in mainstream culture. I argue that this space is not a Black counterpublic in the academic sense, but simply a Black public. Because of our socioeconomic status, my family was able to travel with the JSU football team for most of their games throughout the SWAC conference. With this mobility, I was able to witness the multiple public spaces where Black language, body movement, ideas, and enjoyment were the focal points of the event. For me, the sustaining sensation of those experiences was never that a group of Black people found a tiny niche to celebrate themselves and their culture in a sea of negative conceptions of them. I felt like I was at home in a sense, and that the white or dominant culture and bodies were the marginalized and underrepresented. So the concept of Black counterpublic does play a role in the many communities and individuals who make up the Prancing J-Sette public, but as an autoethnographer, I cannot help but pay homage to the embodied memory that urges me to create a place in scholarship that recognizes the unnamed and under-discussed category that my community falls into.

My memory also beckons me to remark on the counterpublics that exist within this “counterpublic.” In *Disciplining Women*, Whaley utilizes Nancy Fraser’s conception of counterpublics, which states,

Counterpublics...are 'discursive arenas' where historically marginalized groups 'present counter discourses of their identities, interests, and lives'; they act as competing publics to the dominant society and emerge as a response to particular social conditions at specific historical moments. Counterpublic formation draws on cultural workers, often uses the apparatus of the media, and mobilizes for a specific issue or agenda. (40)

From one direction this definition exemplifies the work that the Prancing J-Settes, Mrs. Oatis, and I are doing in our everyday lives and this thesis. We are working to give voice to the highly visible but seldom heard women of the Jackson, Mississippi community specifically and the African Diasporic community at large. From another direction, this is the voice of J-Settes who are not Prancing, or who decide to step out of the group after the band camp period. Some of these women produce a differing view of the Prancing J-Sette way of life, which disrupts the largely uniformed chorus of respect and admiration for the process of becoming a Prancing J-Sette and the Prancing J-Sette family.

On the other hand, Warner defines counterpublics as something different. He states,

In the sense of the term that I am advocating here, such publics are indeed counterpublics, and in a stronger sense than simply comprising subalterns with a reform program. A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider

public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness. (90)

This definition best exemplifies the dance movement that involves mainly male, presumptively gay, dancers who perform in the Prancing J-Sette dance style. They are called “J-Setters” in their counterpublic and perform in the stadium stands along to the sounds of the bands at SWAC football games. They dress in Prancing J-Sette-esque costumes as well as compete in gay pride parades and dance-offs in the South West. In the JSU/ Jackson, Mississippi community, these men are not met with physical aggression. They actually hold a captive audience at football games and distribute their practices and performances on YouTube. Although, the general community does not physically torment the J-Setters, they are a spectacle and are treated as such. Although the J-Setters are a counterpublic they are still subjected to the vigilance and discipline of the Plaza Theory. Similar to the Prancing J-Settes, the J-Setters are viewed solely as entertainment and that form is usually comic relief because of their “spectacularly queer” performance. The J-Setters complicate many of the socially accepted rules of this community.

The Prancing J-Settes have been known to have differences with the J-Setters. The discourse that the J-Setters can outdo the Prancing J-Settes is met with harsh

criticism by the Prancing J-Settes. I assert that the community's coping mechanism with this very public affront to its cultural agreement is to laugh it off and pretend like the J-Setters performances do not matter, when the performances actually do in various ways. For one, the J-Setters are not affiliated with the university but they perform in the stands at the football games to the tunes of the marching band. For the many girls, like me, who have wished to perform on the level of the Prancing J-Settes but have not made it past the tedious regiment of try-outs, the J-Setters show a way of transgressing the norms of the Prancing J-Sette organization which also shows that there is a way to transgress the community's hegemonic ideologies.

Also, the J-Setters who move in the same way that the J-Settes move and dress in drag, trouble the accepted notion of not only their own sexuality, but also that of the audience. Therefore, nervous laughter ensues in order to escape dealing with the questions the J-Setters arise. Nevertheless, they have a captivated audience, however condescending. I do not have space in this thesis to examine the nuances of the J-Setter counterpublic, but I am very interested in the parallels to and differences from the ways the Prancing J-Settes are imagined and viewed and how the J-Setters are imagined and viewed. I am also curious as to how this group's existence in the public and counterpublic spheres does cultural work for gender, race, and class politics in the African Diaspora.

Now that I have discussed my use of "public" terms, I have to contend with the utility of the word "community." The community is also a part of the Prancing J-Sette public and the other forms of publics that are previously discussed. There is plenty of

intersectionality in this site and this is just one point that illuminates that fact.

“Community” in this sense refers to the Jackson, Mississippi and JSU performance of a cohesive group.

### **Audience, Community, Public, and Counterpublic**

The audience of the Prancing J-Settes is growing at a rapid pace, but my research indicates there are four groups. First, there is the community of JSU/Jackson and SWAC universities that witness the live performance of the J-Settes at football games, parades, and battles of the bands. Then, there is the section of that community that goes the extra mile to record and upload the J-Sette performances on their accounts on YouTube and Facebook<sup>7</sup> These videos are viewed by an innumerable public but are commented on by a community of viewers who have access to accounts on YouTube and Facebook and critique the dancers and talk amongst themselves about the J-Sette “cult of personality.”

I and most of the Prancing J-Settes assume that most of the audience members who leave comments under the videos are male dancers. These men create amateur dance groups that study the J-Sette technique from the posted videos and perform their own iteration of “J-Setting” at gay clubs and gay pride events. From here the cycle repeats itself because the amateur J-Settes or “J-Setters” upload videos of themselves J-Setting and their audience comments on their videos. Phillip Auslander discusses Jacques Attali’s concepts of representation and repetition in a way that unpack some of what is happening with the Prancing J-Sette and J-Setter videos. Attali “distinguishes...very

simply, representation in the system of commerce is that which arises from a singular act; repetition is that which is mass-produced” (28). Auslander goes on to say that, In his historical analysis, Attali points out that although representation emerged with capitalism when the sponsorship of concerts became a profitable enterprise and not merely the prerogative of a feudal lord, capital ultimately lost interest in the economy of representation. Repetition, ...held greater promise for capital because...in repetition potential hearings are stockpiled. (28)

There is definitely evident representation that occurs with the Prancing J-Settes’ live performance. Although, the J-Settes present new material at each game and their aesthetic does not fundamentally change with each performance, the live event only happens once. With the mass use of YouTube and smartphones, those representations become repetition. There are videos upon videos of the J-Settes performing on YouTube and Facebook, with new views and comments every day. There are also videos upon videos of J-Setters J-setting on YouTube and Facebook. These videos range from practices with one or two people, to competitions or battles between groups with six or more participants that are surrounded by a swarm of enthralled onlookers. These forms of repetition and representation expand the reach of the Plaza Theory for those who are in the know.

Depending on one’s subjectivity, these videos of J-Setters can be viewed as being somewhat in a competition with the videos of the Prancing J-Settes, but not with the “live” performance. When one types in J-Sette in the search bar on YouTube, videos of amateur and Prancing J-Settes appear. Also, when one hears about J-Setting outside of

the JSU/Jackson or SWAC community, the reference is usually toward the amateur J-Settes. The most distant and public mention of the J-Settes comes from the choreographer for Beyoncé , who the Prancing J-Settes are often compared to. He credits the J-Sette dance style for being the inspiration for her infectious moves in her video “Single Ladies” and “Diva.” (J-Setting: A Dance to Show Gay Pride?). He learned of the dance style through gay nightclubs in Georgia and directs interested parties to watch videos of amateur J-Setters to learn more about the style. He never once mentions the Prancing J-Settes. I address the implications of this omission in Chapter Three.

I contend that one reason for this dominance of the amateur J-Sette videos is the repetition of the videos of the J-Setters. Their live performance is in dialogue with a mediatized performance and mass media is a very strong factor in their community along with their live performance. This is different from the community of the Prancing J-Settes who did not start out having access to mass technology and still have not embraced mass media as fully as the J-Setter community has. Nevertheless, the encroachment of J-Setters onto the Prancing J-Sette “field/stand” brings up strong reactions from members of the JSU/Jackson community. These reactions unveil many of the contradictions that hold up the culture of this community and place the live and mediatized performance into even more of a complicated dialogue.

### **The Mass-Media Machine of YouTube**

Because of the popularity of the Prancing J-Settes and their dance technique the intersectionality between the community and public has recently extended to the virtual



world. For years, Prancing J-Sette performances have been recorded and used for personal reasons or for documentation on band websites. It was not until recent years that a community formed around the sharing of Prancing J-Sette videos on YouTube. These videos normally document the Prancing J-Settes performing on the football field for the halftime performance or the dancers performing their 8-count routines in the stands during the football game. Videos of parade, practice, entrance, and exit performances are available as well. The Prancing J-Sette videos are usually recorded and uploaded to YouTube by fans who have attended the performances and have no relationship with members of the group. The videos, recorded on video cameras as well as smart phones, contain most of the roar of the crowd and excited chatter of the recorder in the background. For example, one video that captures the Prancing J-Settes as they perform their ramp dance, which allows them to travel from the field after the halftime show back into the stands, includes the audio of the presumed recorder laughing and cheering as well as shakiness in the video that comes with the cheering and laughing (RealJSettes88threw99).

These videos receive numerous amounts of viewing and comments, which leads one to believe that the Prancing J-Settes are under the same intense scrutiny in the popular media as they are during live performance. The Plaza Theory expectations of the Prancing J-Settes follow them into the virtual world. One difference found in the YouTube videos is that viewers have the ability to leave comments under the video posts. Even though thousands of people ranging from long time, dedicated Prancing J-Sette fans to YouTube users who stumble upon videos of the dancers, view the videos,

usually only a certain community leaves comments. The comments, like the viewers, range in content and sometimes go from being about the Prancing J-Sette performance to conversations between commentators. In the same vein, the videos serve various purposes as well. Some viewers use the videos to study and perfect the Prancing J-Sette dance style for personal use or for their own performances. Others watch the videos simply to watch the Prancing J-Settes dance, while some watch to hear the Sonic Boom of the South play. Many viewers are able to attend the live performances of the Prancing J-Settes, but some are not and this difference in viewing is part of the discourse in the video comments. There are several different reasons that several different types of people watch the Prancing J-Settes on YouTube and I have listed just a few here. As I have mentioned previously there are some similarities and differences between the YouTube viewing experience and the live event experience. The ways that the Prancing J-Sette viewer's work through what it means to view the same group on these two different mediums are very intriguing.

### **Live vs. Mediatized Performance**

In attempting to think through the nuances of the relationship the Prancing J-Sette audience members place on the live performance and mediatized performance I came across a typical video of the J-Settes performing a halftime dance with an atypical interaction between the dancers and viewers in the comment section of the video. What is also unique about this video is that it is on Facebook and not YouTube; the site is "public" on Facebook and I am a participant observer on the site. Though it is "public"

to Facebook users, I have disguised the url to protect the identities of posters  
(<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=XXXXXX&type=3&theater>)

The videographer selected to record a side view of the dancers for the entirety of the performance even though the choreography was and is always formatted to face an audience that is directly in front of the dancers. The best view of the J-Settes' performances is directly on the 50-yard line. They never face the sides. Needless to say, some commenters stated that they were not impressed with the J-Settes' performance because the dancers were not in sync and lacked energy. Several J-Sette fans came to defense of the group, stating that the video does not offer the best view of the dance because it only pictures the side view and that the band was not performing well, which affected the dancers.

This type of interaction amongst J-Sette fans is not uncommon, whether they are critiquing live or mediatized performance. What is unique about the comments associated with this video is that the Prancing J-Settes, present and alumni, engaged with the fans and each other in the public sphere. This interaction differs from the norm of the Plaza Theory where much discourse is embodied. This is especially apparent with the J-Settes, who are viewed as one of the main cultural representatives of the university. Although their bodies are on public display virtually nonstop, the dancers rarely vocalize their thoughts in the public sphere. As I read through the comments I sensed an anxiety from the J-Settes and their fans that came about as soon as one J-Sette and a critic got into a heated and personal exchange of words that left the realm of critiquing the dance in question.

All of the posts that were not from J-Settes were from those whom the Prancing J-Settes consider to be presumptively gay men who possibly engage in amateur J-Sette performance and who certainly believe they are experts on the dance style. During my field work I witnessed many of the Prancing J-Settes identifying gay males as their largest and most dedicated fan base as well as their most negative critics. I also found evidence supporting this claim through archival work in the comment section of various Prancing J-Sette and “J-Setter” videos.

This interaction represents the ways many of the social politics that play out in the conversations about the J-Settes’ live performances. The high expectation of excellence is evident from the fans of this dance and its critics. They all thought that something about the performance was not at the J-Settes’ usual caliber, but had differing views on what that factor was. The constant display of the women’s bodies occurs in both live and mediatized performance. Also, the women have no control over what is said or associated with their bodies and performance. As I discuss in Chapter Three, they belong to everyone except themselves.

One J-Sette, who spoke out that she was offended by the harsh criticism her group received was admonished by critics who accuse her of “taking things too personally,” dictating that she has no claim or right to her body after it has entered the public sphere. There is also a transgression of heteronormative gender roles in both the live and mediatized performances, although they play out in different ways. In the live performance the Prancing J-Settes both transgress and reinforce the hegemonic ideology and mores of femininity and masculinity in their athleticism and perceived daintiness of

their seated positions, but are not afforded the opportunity to voice their individuality. On the other hand, in this case of mediatized performance, the women and men transgress those norms in their engagement with each other around the J-Sette technique, individual dancers, and performance. For instance, one J-Sette poster repeatedly demanded that a critic give an account of his expertise, transgressing the usual repressive stigma of the hegemonic gaze and utilizing it as a form of social capital. Because the male critic presumably has never been and will never be allowed to be a Prancing J-Sette he will never be placed under such intense scrutiny and vigilance as dancers. In other words he is not aware of how the Plaza Theory is embodied by the Prancing J-Settes. Therefore his lack of the J-Settes' specific positionality erases his authority in the J-Sette-poster's gaze.

There are differences between the social interaction around the live and mediatized performance. In this case of mediatized performance, the Prancing J-Settes spoke out in a public and permanent way. This never happens with the live performance. The community discusses the women without their input. Also, in my example above, the women were viewed and regarded, to an extent, as individuals. At the live event, the band is a vital component of the dance group. Indeed, the Prancing J-Settes are an auxiliary to the band. The band's song selections and performance are very important to the JSU/Jackson community, but in this mediatized performance the band is clearly secondary and even thwarts the success of the dancers. It is obvious that the videographer is not aiming at clarity of sound with the video and this ubiquitous listening carries over into the amateur videos that do not utilize the band's music at all.

As noted above, what is not evident by public comments like these, but is presumed by members of this community is that most of the men who comment on J-Sette videos are amateur J-Setters themselves. This is a complex issue and, while my field work indicates that many J-Settes feel this is fact, I am not clear on particularly how or why they think so. The J-Setters are known to study the J-Sette dance technique, perform at various events, and upload their performances to YouTube and Facebook similar to the way that the J-Settes videos are distributed. Therefore, the dialogue in this case of mediatized performance is among a community of dancers whose members are astute in the same dance vocabulary. This anecdote illuminates the rhizomatic nature and intersectionality of the relationships and communities surrounding the Prancing J-Settes' live performance, the use of mass media to produce and circulate their live performance, and the live and mediatized performance of amateur J-Settes. I am interested in how the social politics surrounding the live performance of the Prancing J-Settes informs, is informed by, and/or inverted by the social politics surrounding the mediatized and virtual performance of the Prancing J-Settes and of the amateur J-Setters.

#### **“Bucking” Along: Amateur Videos**

Here I use Kiri Miller's definition of virtual as “existing whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and the actual...[it] connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*”(8). The J-Setters can never be Prancing J-Settes in the public with its hegemonic heteronormativity. They can only be J-Setters in their counterpublic, although their large virtual and live presence inserts them into the discourse of the public. In her article, “If Ya Liked It, Then You Should've Made a Video,” Kirsten

Pullen discusses how the mass distribution of the same dance moves on different bodies and to different music allows for the “stability” of gender, race, and class identities to be problematized, especially by counterpublics. Pullen examines the genealogy of Beyonce’ Knowles’ hit viral video “Single Ladies” and the worldwide reiterations of it on different bodies. While Pullen focuses on major American constructions of public and counterpublic such as Black, White, female, male, homosexual, heterosexual, upper class and lower class, and I am looking at intraracial politics, the same concept applies.

Following from Pullen, I found that “using the YouTube dance archive to compare different dancing bodies allows users to recognize and highlight how racial, classed or sexual counterpublics mobilize dance”(147). In the J-Sette community this is usually done on the bodies of African American men in J-Sette drag, although there are performances and videos of young girls who imitate the J-Sette dance style as well. Within this counterpublic the negotiations of racial, classed, gendered, and sexual politics manifest in different ways than it does in the YouTube and dominant public. Using the heteronormative J-Sette community as public and the “J-Setters” as counterpublic I examine how this “traditionally marginalized group appropriate[s] [a dance style from a] recognized public [and inserts their] bodies and aesthetics into public debate” (147). The J-Setters do not need to cross over into the public to transgress its race, class, and gender politics.

The J-Setter videos allow viewers to travel into a sub-culture of the African-American community and their live performances allow the community to possibly temporarily suspend their heteronormative beliefs. This operation is very similar to the

ways that the character of CJ in Grand Theft Auto allows players to travel into a museum of sorts of a certain era of African-American culture. It all starts with the performance of the Prancing J-Settes and its transgressive nature. Miller cites de Certeau's analysis of "popular-culture reception practices, [saying] that a certain arc of placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space that develops as people navigate popular culture's established forces and representations" (27). The J-Setters have witnessed, mainly through mass media, how the Prancing J-Settes move through their community. They have found a way to get around the constraining space that will not allow them to officially participate in collegiate dance teams and, through their pattern of involvement with mass media, the J-Setters have propelled their way into the public sphere and now inform the culture outside of their counterpublic. Many of the J-Setters incorporate various dance styles into their versions of J-Setting and as the style's popularity and accessibility widens, those additions will be known as integral parts of the style. Miller's use of the terms "schizophonic performance" aptly coincides with the performance of the J-Setters. Miller states that she "uses the term 'schizophonic performance' precisely because it captures the ambivalence and even paranoia that characterizes much Guitar Hero and Rock Band reception"(86). I use the term here because there is a similar paranoia among the JSU/Jackson community as well as the Prancing J-Settes, about the J-Setters' performances. This is because the J-Setters' performances do not always stick firmly to the Prancing J-Settes' aesthetic and do not seem to associate with the Prancing J-Settes as humans, but only with the dance style as an abstract dance movement.



## **Rivals or Partners ?**

The Prancing J-Settes and the J-Setters, as cultural operators, seem to have an ambivalent and dynamic relationship on several different levels. They can be viewed as rivals because the Prancing J-Settes are the originators of the dance style and performance and the J-Setters appropriate the dance style and perform with little to no recognition of the actual women who are Prancing J-Settes. Also, the Prancing J-Settes are situated within a state sponsored institution of higher learning and perform at official events with the backing of the university band. The J-Setters normally perform at community-organized festivals, without institutional support, and accompanied by the sounds of locally mixed playlists. One glaring point of difference is that the Prancing J-Settes are Black women and the J-Setters are Black men. All of these differences could lead to a conclusion that the two groups are rivals, but there is an equally persuasive argument that the pair's relationship is one of a partnership. Both dance/social groups are subject to the Plaza Theory in different ways. Both groups use their bodies to embody, critique, and resist the heteronormative, middle class, and White Protestant Christian hegemony of their surrounding cultures. Also, the J-Setters are the largest portion of the J-Sette dance style's fan base and their performances of the dance style have taken the style from subculture into popular culture. This tension in embodied practice is reflected in the larger theoretical inquiry of whether live and mediatized performances are in battle with each other or are co-constituents.

In Auslander's book *Liveness*, he asks the question,

theatre and the media: rivals or partners? [His] answer to this question is unequivocal: at the level of cultural economy, theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners.

Neither are they equal rivals: it is absolutely clear that our current cultural formation is saturated with, and dominated by, mass media representation... (1)

Auslander argues that theatre and media are not truly in competition with each other and I agree. I assert that though they are different, live and mediatized performance are both commodities and have use value and exchange value. Auslander also points out that the interaction between mass media and live performance is bound to be different in various sites. In the site of the Prancing J-Settes I find that the live performance and mediatized performance are in dialogue with each other because of their intersecting use value and exchange value.

Marx states that, “a commodity is in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort” (35). The Prancing J-Settes are commonly viewed by their community as a commodity and as a collective object. They satisfy the desire for spectacle, excitement, and policing of women’s bodies in the public sphere. Marx goes on to state that, “the utility of a thing makes it a use-value... [and] the valid exchange-values of a given commodity express something equal; secondly, exchange-value, generally is only the mode of expression, the phenomenal form, of something contained in it, yet distinguishable from it” (36-38). The Prancing J-Settes’ exchange value in their community is to contain and maintain the cultural mores

of the community through their bodies and dance performance. The videos of the Prancing J-Settes are commodities of the Prancing J-Settes' performances. Their exchange value is to expand the number of people who can partake in the commodity of the Prancing J-Settes and give them an extra and prolonged use out of the dancers. Both types of commodities exhibit a certain level of alienation from the human labor that creates them, which is what Marx speaks of when he describes abstraction from a commodities use-value. He says,

along with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them, and the concrete forms of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract. (38)

The human labor in both the live and mediatized performance of the Prancing J-Settes is abstract for the audience. No one cares about the work that goes into just one of the Prancing J-Settes' performances, let alone the scrutiny they endure daily. They are simply expected to perform at a peak of excellence at all times. Also, there is no way to know who is recording, editing, and uploading the videos of the J-Settes on YouTube. The videographers want their viewers to focus on the dancers as if they were actually at the live event. It is not until a video distracts the viewer from the dancers by interfering with the sound of the band, being shaky, or being out of focus that viewers ever comment on the human labor that goes into producing the videos. This is one way that the live and mediatized performances are in dialogue with each other. There are also

cultural politics that play out in both forms of performance and both forms engage with intersecting communities.

### **Emulated but Never Duplicated**

There are many crossroads of intersectionality between the members of the J-Sette communities and publics. In attempting to think through the layers of audiences of the Prancing J-Sette performance, I came across a YouTube video that showcases the values or subjectivity given to live and mediatized performance by audience members and the overlapping relationships of community members that form out of these given values. “Community” here refers to the Jackson, Mississippi and JSU performance of a cohesive group and it also refers to the J-Setters around the country who are connected to the Jackson, Mississippi and JSU community through the performance, live and mediatized, of the Prancing J-Settes. For example, someone who claimed to be a female JSU alumnus left a comment under one of the YouTube videos of J-Setters battling at a gay pride event in Detroit. She posted that she understood the affinity to imitate the Prancing J-Settes, but she insisted that the J-Setters spell the title correctly. She also asserted that the J-Setters would never be better than the Prancing J-Settes.

Sorry but I'm alum of Jackson State University where the real J-Sette's are.. it's cool that they emulate them.. but please don't use "J-Sett" spelled incorrectly or correctly.. not hating on these young lades... I guess it's flattering when people try an emulate(but never duplicating) the Prancing J-Settes...but in this case.. hmmm on the fence. (P-JSDiva)

One of the characteristics of the community of video viewers is that the stability of identity is further complicated by the anonymity of posts. There is no way to tell what this person's identity is during their every day, live performance of self, and in this example her claim to authenticity and authority are accepted and respected. Her comment has been liked ten times by other viewers, making it the top comment on the thread. This JSU alum posited herself as a member of the JSU community by othering the J-Setters as merely a public who has witnessed and misinterpreted a special part of her community's culture. She places the apparent community of J-Setters, their fans, and enthusiasts in a class that is located beneath that of her community of the JSU family.

It is interesting to examine the role that social class plays in this interaction since American culture does not readily provide language for discussing it. The Prancing J-Settes are a fixture of an institution of higher education that is funded by the state. Most of the audience members of the Prancing J-Settes' live event are college educated, even though anyone who purchases a ticket is allowed to participate in the event, which theoretically affords them class mobility. Indeed, most people only become aware of the Prancing J-Settes when they attend a university in the SWAC conference and attend one of the football games. P-JSDiva makes a point to profess that she is an alumnus of JSU. Also, the Prancing J-Sette performance, whether it is in a stadium or on city streets during a parade, has a professional aesthetic from their costumes to the security that always accompanies them, because of the funding it has from the institution. The performance of the J-Setters is in a community park amidst a throng of viewers who

have formed a circle around them. Aside from this given space, there is no official place for them to perform. Also, their costume of identical red jackets, black tights, and black shoes looks pedestrian as opposed to a costume made solely for a dance performance. Nothing is inherently wrong or right about the performance of the J-Setters, but in the eyes of P-JSDiva they have severely missed the mark in imitating the Prancing J-Settes' performance in dance technique, class, and identity and she as a member of the JSU community must protect the Prancing J-Settes from bumbling imitators in order to protect her perception of her own stable class, gender, and racial identity.

This alumna is now also a part of the public that acknowledges the Prancing J-Settes through watching videos of others interpreting the J-Sette technique along with the Detroit J-Setters, but she chooses to identify with her JSU community affiliation. This example showcases some of the intersectionality between gender, sexuality, race, and class that is abounding within the communities surrounding the Prancing J-Settes. What is interesting about this case and others like it is that, as noted in my Introduction, the Prancing J-Settes bring into question many of the culturally accepted mores of the Jackson/JSU community even as they sometimes reify them, but the community still puts them on a pedestal. When it comes to the J-Setters, who trouble those same gender, class, and race identities, they are put down for not performing the J-Sette aesthetic correctly or laughed at and dismissed as a counter-public. Maybe it is safe for the men to dress in drag as "their women" because the men will never be able to actually be Prancing J-Settes. They must settle for being "wannabes," thus never truly making it to

the public sphere and thereby forcing the community to deal with the nuances and slipperiness of its constructed reality.

This comfortable ambivalence is also found in the community's reaction to YouTube videos of the live event of a Prancing J-Sette performance. The Prancing J-Settes and their community generally operate in a space of comfortable ambivalence as it pertains to identities. For example, while on the Plaza one is aware of both the expectations of the omnipresent, critical, and demanding Plaza Gaze and one's own participation in internalizing the gaze and constructing it for others. So while there is tension surrounding the Plaza Gaze, it is still utilized and understood as a form of cultural expression. I find that this is similar to the J-Settes and their community work through the use of YouTube videos. The live event is still crucial to the dance line, even though popular media has become a major part of its existence. Fans go back and forth between the two mediums, but the scrutiny under which they place the dancers remains the same. Fans also do not see the YouTube videos as a threat to live performance. This comfortable ambivalence may be unique to the Prancing J-Sette community or there may be communities with similar practices. I think it is important to critically examine the intersections of popular media and live performance in other diverse communities in order to discuss this topic effectively. It is not enough to attempt to decipher if there is a winner in a competition, but rather one should analyze the varying and contrasting ways people work through hegemonic politics through the use of mass media and live performance.

In this chapter we have seen the complex audiences and communities that engage the Prancing J-Settes. Even more complex than locating the audiences and communities are their race, gender, and class practices. This stems from the Plaza Theory as it is enacted on the campus of JSU to the virtual world of YouTube where the Plaza Theory and Gaze still exist yet are interacted with and utilized in different forms and by different audiences and communities. These complex and often contradictory interactions among audience members and Prancing J-Settes serve as a mirror for theatrical debates about live vs. mediatized performances. This gets worked theoretically every day and at every performance of the Prancing J-Settes. With all of this debate surrounding the performances of the J-Settes it is uncanny that little to no research, in literature and the vernacular, has been done about the actual women who are Prancing J-Settes and the ways in which they theorize themselves unto themselves. The difficulties, politics, and importance of analyzing the Prancing J-Settes without precedence to any other groups' needs is what I interact with in the next chapter



## CHAPTER IV

### THE PRANCING J-SETTES

I've had enough  
I'm sick of seeing and touching  
Both sides of things  
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

.....  
The bridge I must be  
Is the bridge to my own power  
I must translate  
My own fears  
Mediate  
My own weaknesses  
I must be the bridge to nowhere  
But my true self  
And then  
I will be useful

Donna Kate Rushin from *This Bridge Called My Back*

#### **Hypervisible Invisibility**

In previous chapters I have examined the ways in which the Prancing J-Settes are used discursively as symbols, but not viewed as actual people. In this chapter, I want to discuss now the hypervisibility of body and the invisibility of subjectivity that I see happening with the Prancing J-Settes. In their communities and publics these women are often physically and intellectually separated from the parts of their work that are socially viewed as productive, successful, and good. In their place stand gay men or a floating dance style with no known originators. People are unaware or unimpressed with the other identities that the women possess and are mainly concerned with the women's performance of a legendary Prancing J-Sette. The nuances of the dancers' everyday identities pales in comparison to the spectacularity of their bodies, the JSU socially

constructed image of a Prancing J-Sette, and the spectacularity of Prancing J-Sette aesthetic on male bodies in the gay counterpublic. This is all the more reason for the narratives of the actual women who are Prancing J-Settes to be documented and analyzed.

In her book, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses Black Nationalism's cultural practices as it pertains to Black women's sexuality. She states,

...dominant gender ideology divide[s] women into two categories: that of the virginal, married, good girls, contrasted to the sexually promiscuous, immoral, unmarried bad girls... This model legitimates Black women's sexuality only in relation to Black men, yet it offers no parallel legitimation of Black men's sexuality in relation to attachment to Black women. (109)

Black Nationalism may not be the primary social ideology of the current JSU community, and the phenomenon of cultures positing women's sexuality as dependent and made for men is not unique to Black Nationalism, but Hill-Collins' discussion does give an evocative look at how the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in America wields itself on the bodies of women and how this can be performed in African-American communities. I theorize that, in the symbolism of the Sonic Boom and the Prancing J-Settes, the band is viewed as a heteronormative male and the Prancing J-Settes are viewed as heteronormative females. According to Hill Collins, Black women are expected to be sexually loyal to their men and their Black nation, while it is understood that men are not required to do so for women. If the band/university is

looked at as male, then it makes sense that when it comes to Prancing J-Settes the primary performed and discussed identity is that of the embodiment of the school's historical culture and legacy. The student identity, which implies that the school or band is working for the woman, is secondary or tertiary.

Many social ideologies are transcribed onto the bodies of the Prancing J-Settes through discourse within their community. Some of this goes back to the female's role as mother and bearer of culture in Black Nationalism. At times, the bodies of the Prancing J-Settes are taken out of the conversation completely and replaced with a queer, male body or the J-Sette dance style that manages to stand on its own. In all of these iterations the women who make up the group are seen as bridges for everyone else. A bridge is viewed as stationary, stepped on, under foot, and not as memorable as the places that one uses it to travel to. As noted above in "The Bridge Poem" the Prancing J-Settes have been and are bridges for their communities and publics to connect and work through their social theories and their social practices, but this single story of the Prancing J-Settes immobilizes them when they are clearly dynamic. They must be viewed as bridges to their own "true" selves. I do not mean to suggest that the Prancing J-Settes should not be bridges for their communities or that the cultural work they do for their communities is negated by the lack of acknowledgment. I simply argue that the narratives of the Prancing J-Settes as women, not idols, bridges, fetishes, or objects, need to be examined as well.

## **Troubling the Plaza Gaze**

In this chapter I want to trouble the hegemonic view of the Prancing J-Settes as only mute Black female bodies used as surrogates for others' needs. I take this trope from Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision* where she discusses the "trouble" that is always already found in the visible Black body in the public sphere. She argues that,

the discourse of blackness is predicated on a knowable, visible, and performing subject...and becomes intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable, through racial discourse. Blackness, in this sense, circulates...Blackness fills in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. It fills the void and is the void. Through its' circulation, blackness attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such but it always exceeds these attachments. (8)

I want to add "the Black female" or "the Prancing J-Sette" in every place that Fleetwood writes "blackness." I will also add "gendered and class" to racial discourse.

The interaction between the Prancing J-Settes' audience, the discourse about the Prancing J-Settes, and the bodies of the Prancing J-Settes are perfect examples of how Black femaleness becomes intelligible and is circulated through discourses of race, gender, and class. The "cultural practices and products of the [Prancing J-Settes] reveal information about how we come to know what we know, particularly about the [Black female] body and the meanings that get attached to and circulate around it" (Fleetwood 7). The Prancing J-Settes are not exempt from the knowledge that comes from the

cultural practices and products of their performances as well as the cultural performances of their community and audience. The dancers, from the origin of the group to the present, are “inserted into systems of visual discourse that saw the world before” they even came into being. Using this platform, I will examine how the Prancing J-Settes view themselves as subjects in the Black public sphere during their live performances, in their everyday lives, as well as during their intimate moments of practicing and bonding. To use a term from Fleetwood, I am interested in how the Prancing J-Settes “render” themselves as individuals, as wholes, in a visual field whose dominant gaze has found its best use of them as particles of a subject and as continuous surrogates for raced, classed, and gendered politics. Fleetwood defines the term “render” as

...often refer[ing] to a technological process of production...in its explicit reference to subjectivity “to render” means to make or become somebody. [It also means] to give help; to translate; to deliver a verdict; to submit for consideration to purify through extraction; to surrender something; to exchange or give something back. (7)

As Fleetwood suggests it is important to keep in mind the multiple definitions and uses of the term “rendering” when discussing the visibility, view, vision, objectivity, and subjectivity of Blackness. Through this look at the Prancing J-Settes’ individual narratives I will keep in my mind not only the multiple meanings of rendering but also the ways in which the Prancing J-Settes render themselves.

While Fleetwood mainly focuses on visual art in popular media I argue that, in the case of the JSU/Jackson site, the movement of Black women's bodies is most important to study because, as expressed in the Plaza Theory, the movement of bodies is one of the primary ways that this community views and theorizes itself. It is no coincidence that the Prancing J-Settes are used as surrogate mothers, girlfriends, and daughters among this community. It is also no coincidence that through their public performances the Prancing J-Settes are allowed to simultaneously transgress and reinforce the race, gender, and class politics of their community. At the beginning of the twentieth century one of the most successful and longest running vaudeville troupes, the Whitman Sisters, took the public stage and entertained and pleased Blacks and Whites with their virtuosic mastery of the performing arts as well as their "respectable" private lives. The Whitman sisters also used their positionality to comment on, transgress, and reify the standard cultural politics of their time. The Prancing J-Settes and the Whitman sisters share many similar ways of negotiating their visibility in the public sphere. For instance, the Whitman sisters instilled a balance of what was seen in their time as respectable and progressive performances in their acts. One of the sister's acts involved a chorus line that titillated, pushed against hegemonic notions of Black female performers, and also walked the line of respectability. The women in the chorus line "were touted solely as serious dancers... [also] by having chorus girls of different shades, the Whitmans helped undermine a stereotype of what was considered beautiful"(George-Graves 73). I argue that this cultural work might not have been allowed or received had the Whitmans produced work deemed too risqué by their

audience. George-Graves assumes that, “the Whitman sisters may have framed the chorus girl dances with religious singing to soften the impact of the sexual and keep the overall appearance of the show respectable” (73). This operation foreshadows the juxtaposition that the Prancing J-Settes’ present between their highly athletic and erotic bucking dance style and their demure “respectable” seated positions.

Another example of similarities between the Whitman sisters and the Prancing J-Settes is that of the family trope. As I have stated in Chapter Two, the community of JSU/Jackson places a lot of importance on the Black family and the Prancing J-Settes do major cultural work to emphasize their sisterhood and family to each other and their community and audience. The audience of the Whitman sisters also valued the performance of “proper family values,” which were White, middle class, Protestant Christian values, and the Whitman sisters played on these politics by securing their image as upper class, “true” women by creating a family atmosphere in their vaudeville troupe and managing the troupe themselves. The Whitman’s literally adopted several “picks” that they chose to be in their traveling act. As George-Graves states,

The family company was the ideal vehicle for[the Whitman sisters]...the sisters, as surrogate mothers for young entertainers, were able to furnish a home life while becoming public successes, thus securing for themselves positions in perhaps the best of both worlds [the home and the public] (87).

This negotiation between the perceived importance of the Black woman’s position in the home and in the public is also evident in the Prancing J-Settes’ iteration of family and

homeplace. As stated in previous chapters, the Prancing J-Settes locate their position as Black female performers on the public stage as their homeplace. This is a knowledge that these women do not have to “self-consciously articulate in written discourse the theoretical principles of decolonization [and that this] does not detract from the importance of their actions” (hooks 387). In this chapter I delve into the subconsciously articulated theoretical principles that the Prancing J-Settes have developed for themselves and just as George-Graves remarks about the Whitman sisters, “I cannot speak for the [Prancing J-Settes]. No one can”(3). Therefore, I will share their narratives and give the Prancing J-Settes a place to speak for themselves.

This chapter is devoted to beginning a trend, or leaving a legacy, of serious analysis of and respect for the theories of the flesh that the Prancing J-Settes continuously create, alter, and negotiate to live and perform as Prancing J-Settes. Different intricacies and the structure of the group and relationships between members will be explored. Through the narrative of Shanketta Newsom, who was chosen as the captain for the years 2008-2010, many of the themes that most of the J-Settes expressed will be explored and analyzed. Shanketta shows how the J-Settes negotiate the anti-dance/performance bias and the bias against Black women dancing in public. She also shows how strong the desire to be a J-Sette is. It allows these women to sacrifice much of their college life and work through all of the social politics of their community for the chance to be a Prancing J-Sette. Since Shanketta performed as a regular member and as a captain she offers a unique view on the major themes of the J-Sette life. These are sisterhood, legacy, hierarchy, and perfectionism. She offers us a variety of instances



where these themes intersect differently based on her position as either captain or member, which gives an interestingly nuanced view of toils of a Prancing J-Sette.

The methods of research used for this portion are very similar to the methods described in Chapter One, because I am privileging the accounts of the J-Settes over others' interpretations of the dancers. The main difference in research method is the use of popular social media sites as a form of archival research. I utilized my identity as an insider and outsider to relate to the Prancing J-Settes. As an autoethnographer I was aware of the pride the J-Settes take in their sisterhood and was able to approach them with a level of respect and intrigue that they delighted in. Also, Facebook was a large assistance to my research because I only had limited time available to spend with the J-Settes to observe their interactions with each other. Through Facebook I was able to read posts among current and alumni J-Settes as well as audience members. I took into account that Facebook is a completely different space from the live performances as well as YouTube, which made for very interesting interactions and negotiations of social politics. I found that the Prancing J-Settes were involved in conversations with fans who acknowledged, if with several gender politics in play, that the J-Settes exist and are real live people. This proved to be a rarity among the interactions I found on YouTube and among practitioners of the technique.

### **The Prancing J-Settes Are Real? The Prancing J-Settes are Women?**

In September of 2012 I attended a performance activism presentation at Prairie View University in Prairie View Texas. Prairie View is a part of the SWAC conference and I was excited to engage with students who are a part of the extended Jackson State

community. After the presentation I talked with some of the undergraduate students about their post-graduation plans and encouraged them to pursue a Performance Studies degree at TAMU. They then asked about my research and I was elated to have a captivated audience and even more excited to find that they knew of the Prancing J-Settes. As we talked further, one of the male students explained to me that he actually did not know that the Prancing J-Settes gave live performances at Jackson State or that they were real people. He had only heard of “J-Setting” and thought that it was just a dance style without official, historical, female bodies. Therefore, I directed him to view a couple of their YouTube videos. Even though I was slightly surprised that a student of a university that has been in contact with Jackson State for years could not recollect witnessing the J-Settes perform, I realized that he represented an extension of the Jackson State community that separates the Prancing J-Settes as people from their bodies as cultural property. This student represented the Prancing J-Sette public that is a part of the SWAC community, but fully separates the Black female body from the innovative, spectacular, and popular dance style that the Prancing J-Settes have created over the years. This meeting encouraged me that this thesis is important in ways that even I had not anticipated.

Three months later I was researching the community of J-Setters when I came across an interview with the main choreographer for Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” video, which showcases her performing what I call one of the J-Setter versions of the J-Sette dance style. Obviously movement looks different on different bodies with different embodied memories and practices, but it is clear to me that Beyoncé has learned a

different though similar J-Sette dance style than what the Prancing J-Settes execute. The reason for this difference is made clear in the absence of the mention of the Prancing J-Settes in the choreographer's interview. He mentioned that he first witnessed the dance style being performed by male dancers at gay clubs in Atlanta, Georgia and that is where he learned and studied the technique (Bossip Staff). I cannot say if the interviewer and choreographer are both aware of the Prancing J-Settes but I can say that there was no substantial mention of the women of the Prancing J-Settes in the published interview.

Once again the presence of the Black female dancing body is taken out of the narrative and this time it is to make appropriate room for Beyoncé, another black female dancing body, as an original who is in tune with and receptive to the queer culture that is a large part of her fan base. Beyoncé could not be seen world-wide as a second-rate Prancing J-Sette; it was better for her to be viewed as a woman coming into a male gay territory and combining their embodied practices with her own. Not to mention all of the flash mobs who learned and performed the dance from the video did not need to know about the Prancing J-Settes as real Black women if they were going to idolize Beyoncé. The movement has gone from being performed by the Prancing J-Settes' Black female bodies to being performed by the J-Setters' Black male bodies imitating Black women's movements, to being performed by Beyoncé, a Black woman, imitating Black men, imitating black women. This find further encouraged me that this project was necessary and that the voices of the Prancing J-Settes needed to be recorded and given the respect that they deserve.

As Jennifer Brody proclaims in “Effaced into Flesh,” it is not enough for the Prancing J-Settes to be simply visible. Because they are black women who choose to perform they are seen as “flesh,” not even fully developed bodies. I agree with Brody in stating that, “In American discourses, the invisible forces of racism, classism, and sexism often materialize in the flesh of working-class Black females. The imbricated identity of this Black female subject serves as the locus for other competing identities on the national landscape”(2). In the case of the Prancing J-Settes, though they are not working class, the Plaza Theory reveals that their bodies are discursively used, mainly by their community, as a public embodiment of the contradictions that are the foundation of the community’s race, gender and class politics. Their “flesh” is used by others and for others, which ultimately makes the J-Settes seem imaginary in the public sphere because one hardly ever takes interest in the J-Settes’ personal lives, performances, or costumes unless attempting to find out one’s relation to others through using the J-Settes as a measuring stick.

For instance, some women use the Prancing J-Settes as an example of class, sexuality, and fearlessness, and will measure their own levels based on how close they are to matching the Prancing J-Settes. On the other hand, some women may use the Prancing J-Settes as an example of “lower class” irrationality and indecent sexuality and they measure their own levels based on how far they are from the Prancing J-Settes. Granted that the Prancing J-Settes do use their agency against and with this imaginary identity placed on them, I want to extend their work to the field of scholarship. The community of the Prancing J-Settes places a large amount of authority on written

documents. This public does give validity to the spoken word and cultural event, as is evident from the impact that the Prancing J-Settes and the band has had on the community. But my field work in Chapter One demonstrates that formal written documentation often equals propriety. I want to problematize that notion by placing bodies, affect, and desire into the text and by placing the body, voice, and specificity of the Black woman at the center of it. This goal brings me to the challenge that Brody contemplates when she writes,

reading black female bodies in literary discourse is difficult because, to use Kimberle Crenshaw's term, the "intersectionality" of the black female subject positions her at the crossroads of competing discourses of race and gender. This "intersectionality" is problematic because "such a formulation erases the specificity of black women's experiences, constituting her [only] as the point of intersection between black men's and white women's experience. (3)

In order to side step the temptation of positing the Prancing J-Settes as a homogenous group or as binaries I take their narratives out of their expected roles as Black "exceptional" women and allow them to stand on their own: without interruption, without attempting to make them fit neatly into the binary of a perfect Black woman who has been used by the system versus a conniving Black woman who uses the system. I strive to show the specificity of each Prancing J-Sette interviewed which includes idiosyncrasies and contradictions, but exemplifies the subjectivity of each Black woman.

## **The Voice of a Single J-Sette**

I interviewed several Prancing J-Settes, alumni and present members and found a couple of tropes throughout my interaction with all of them. One of them is the contradictions amongst the group's rhetoric of focus on education, the group's rhetoric of extremely hard work, and an expectation of excellence on the field demanded by any means necessary. In an interview with a former captain of the Prancing J-Settes I listened to the complexity of the J-Settes' relationship with discipline in education and in their work as a J-Sette and how that affects their relationships with others.

Shanketta's narrative deserves quoting uninterrupted and at length because being seen structurally as a tool does not leave one many equal opportunities to self-identify in the public sphere. So I want to give authority to the voices of my interlocutors and allow the complexity of their own 'theories of the flesh' to speak for themselves, without implying that Black women presenting themselves publicly as thinkers/voices, and not bodies is improbable, by interrupting their narratives. As noted in the first chapter, Mrs. Oatis' narrative is shown in a manner emulating her performance in the interview. She had so many memories, lessons, and theories of how to move in the public sphere as a Black woman and yet had never been asked to document her narrative's wealth. Therefore, her narrative poured out of her after only one question. In a similar manner Shanketta's narrative poured out of her with little aid from interview questions. She feels so much passion for her work and her life as a Prancing J-Settes that I was hit with a wave of intensity as she reflected on her experience. This intensity is parallel to the intensity of the Prancing J-Settes' hard hitting movements and their lifestyle, which is

another reason why I deem it necessary to present this narrative in an uninterrupted fashion. In “That was my Occupation,” Madison performatively writes in a way that presents her interlocutor’s, Mrs. Alma Kapper’s, oral narrative in poetic transcription and before Madison’s own inclusion of Black feminist analysis. In this same way I want to give precedence and authority to my interlocutors’ voices because their voices have been muted as insignificant or disregarded as incomplete by their own community for so long.

Shanketta is unique but her account aptly displays the themes that run throughout the Prancing J-Sette narratives, regardless of age, position on the squad, or current activity with the squad. Shanketta grew up in a small town in North Mississippi, hours away from Jackson and the Prancing J-Settes. She had been learning their style of dance through her high school dance team, although she had no idea that the dancing group existed. When she saw the group perform, for the first time as a young high school student, she instantly aspired to be a part of the group of women she found so glamorous and talented. Here two paths require attention. First, the decision to become a Prancing J-Sette implies becoming a college student, but if, as with many J-Settes, one’s focus is on an extracurricular activity then there is an automatic tension between school work and Prancing J-Sette work. Also, there is an automatic tension between the performances of a class aspirational young Black woman who understands how her behavior and success in college affects her family and community and a young Black woman who aspires to solely and unapologetically be a Prancing J-Sette, to place her body in front of millions as she uses her body to express herself in a way that is probably ambivalent in her family

and community. Second, this portion of Shanketta's narrative reveals the girls, boys, men and women who appropriate the Prancing J-Sette dance style for their own usage, who sometimes are not aware of or do not recognize the Prancing J-Settes as the originators, and whose public display of the J-Sette style as their own, helps fuel the Prancing J-Settes' sense to be constantly innovative. Shanketta describes some of the theories of the flesh that she uses to navigate her new lifestyle as a Prancing J-Sette. Shanketta also brings out the family trope that the J-Settes place in their rhetoric and everyday practices and how this trope intersects with the effects of hypervisibility on and off the field. Finally, Shanketta's narrative gives a glimpse into the rigors and pleasures of the dance moves, practices, and performances of the Prancing J-Settes.

*I came to Jackson State to be a J-Sette: Shanketta*

*Amber: Tell me about the moment you knew you wanted to be a J-Sette*

*Shanketta: It was in 2004. My high school counselors went to JSU, so every year we'd come down for high school day. My sophomore year we went and when the band came in I was like, "Oh my god they're doing our 8 count!" My dance instructor was like, "No sweetie, you've been doing their eight counts." (Laughter) They were so beautiful; they were so in sync, and on one accord. Then we went to the game I was like, "Whoa, where did the rest of them come from?!" Because I didn't know that only the freshmen did the high school day performance. Then when they started dancing my mouth just dropped and I was like, "Oh my God, I have to be a J-Sette!" It was like something I'd never seen before and ever since that day I knew I wanted to be a J-Sette*



*point blank period. No questions asked, I knew I wanted to be a J-Sette. I'd just started dancing and loved dancing and was like "I have to be one of those."*

*Amber: How did you become a Prancing J-Sette?*

*Shanketta: That's an interesting story. My mother would not let me try out for J-Sette my freshman year because I was in honor's college and the dean of the honor's college said, "No, she shouldn't dance; it's gonna interfere with her school work, she's on a full scholarship." So of course I was devastated because that was the reason I came to Jackson state, ya know I could've been at Mississippi State. But, ya know I feel like things are meant to be because a couple of months later they had an emergency tryout. I didn't tell my mom, said "Lord forgive me for being disobedient, but I feel like your will is your will." And I tried out and I made it! So it was midseason of 2007, I didn't dance in the stands because there's so much to learn but I did make the field and the rest is history.*

### **"That Was the Reason I Came to Jackson State": Race, Class, and Gender among Three Women**

Here, in Shanketta's narrative, a complex interaction between three minority women plays out around race, gender, and class and the trials of Black women navigating the public and private sphere in "appropriate" ways. For one, Shanketta grew up in Sardis, a small town in North Mississippi not far from Memphis, Tennessee. She is the oldest of her siblings, was raised by her mother and grandmother, and she was the valedictorian of her class at North Panola High School. When she not only decided she wanted to go to college, but also got accepted into college, and was also awarded an

academic scholarship, I can only imagine how proud her family was and how much of an impact that made not only on her family but her community as well. For many African-Americans, education is seen and presented as the primary key to economic, thus class, stability. Therefore, there is a large push for youth to attend college and to be as focused as possible while there. There is an even larger push for African-American females to attend college. So, when asked her opinion about Shanketta's involvement in a time consuming extracurricular activity her first semester of her first year of college it is fairly easy to see how the Dean of the Honor's College did not see the Prancing J-Sette's as a wise choice.

There is more going on than just the threat of Shanketta being academically distracted by the Prancing J-Settes and endangering her class and economic stability. There is another threat that Shanketta may interfere with an image of a focused, goal oriented, educated Black woman, who is socially acceptable and mobile through social classes, by intermingling with the Prancing J-Settes and their image of a sexually available, objectified, and frivolous dancers. It is implied that the art of dancing, because it has no obvious way of helping Shanketta socioeconomically, is not worth interfering with her serious academics. Granted the Prancing J-Sette obligations are very rigorous, but one of the underlying discourses present here is that of the irrationality of performance versus the rationality of academics.

Irrational or not, Shanketta had already made up her mind that she wanted to be a Prancing J-Sette long before she came to Jackson State. In fact, that is the reason she decided to attend Jackson State. Here is where the contradiction lies between attending

college for academic or extracurricular reasons. As a student, one will always have to perform an attitude of “school comes first” to be understood in the culture of the university. It is hard to find JSU students who will publicly admit that they decided to attend the university solely for extracurricular activities. They may admit it in private settings, but never publicly because it contradicts one of the narratives of Black middle class socialability: “Knowing the worth of a good education”. This ambivalent relationship between the J-Settes’ academic responsibilities and their involvement in the organization is complex and manifests itself in different ways with different J-Settes. Also, it is important to note that at that time the Prancing J-Settes were not awarded scholarships for their participation in the group, although the groups’ fame was used by the university to solicit fans to games and band appearances which provided a source of revenue for the band and the university, but not directly for the Prancing J-Settes.

So the dominant discourse from important people in the community, such as families, school administrators, and other professional women, was that performing as a Prancing J-Sette is most likely detrimental to academic and cultural success. Also, for the majority of its existence, the dance company has not received financial or academic incentive or reward for its tireless efforts and countless contributions to the university. The economic contribution of the J-Settes to the university is comparable to the contributions of the other athletic organizations and sections of the band, but the scholarships and assistance that those fellow student athletes and band members receive from the university far outnumber that of the J-Settes. Whether it is premeditated or not, these actions make it clear that there is a bias against dance and women.

With this lack of institutional support and recognition it is curious that the Prancing J-Settes continue to have a tireless drive to excel, challenge, and surpass their own and their audience's expectations. As a dancer I know that the thrill of performing and moving the body is intoxicating, but the practices and work that it takes to get to the performance is not for the faint at heart. This process is made a little easier if there is support, especially financial and institutional support, but the J-Settes seem to disproportionate support. This makes me wonder what it is that makes a J-Sette go through the day to day struggle of being a student athlete that is seen yet unseen. As our interview progressed Shanketta answered this question. What I have taken from her account is that much of the reasons for sticking with the J-Sette lifestyle are ephemeral. First and foremost there is a passionate love of dance and the Prancing J-Sette dance style. From that point stems a respect and understanding of the usefulness of legacy, sisterhood and hierarchy in the J-Sette family.

**A Day in the Life of a J-Sette (Member): “There is No Regular Day”**

*Amber: What is a typical day like for a Prancing J-Sette?*

*Shanketta: When we get to practice we're gonna run two miles (The J-Settes have to run two miles in eighteen minutes at every practice.) It was fun, scary, and challenging at the same time. You're coming into something that's legendary so you're responsible for keeping the legacy going... And having to learn this new style of dancing. There's so much technique you have to learn! You go to class all day, try to get a nap, do homework, grab something to eat, but you can't eat heavy, practice at 6 p.m. ,run, stretch, exercises, crunches, sit ups, squats, leg extensions, stretch. Sometimes we have*

*creative practices. We would do stands, marches, and parades. Monday through Tuesday we learn the dance. On Wednesday we have cuts. You can be a J-Sette. It's hard to make the team but to maintain is even harder.*

*J-Sette is a Legacy*

*People always wonder the J-Sette's secret, like "Oh, I know they practice all the time." But it's a lot of squads that practice all the time, but still isn't as good as we are and that's because we are a sisterhood. We are not just a group of girls that dance together. We are accountable for each other. So if you're just a group of girls that dance with each other then you're not gonna care that much about the next girl. But as sisters we're like, "No ma'am, sister! Un uh!" Then you have old heads from the 90s and the 80s who come back and show you love and show you how they did it as far as with the marches and stands so that the tradition won't be lost. We still do marches from the 80s. In 2012 we still do stands from 1980. The tradition is never lost. And that's because of the sisterhood and the bond. They feel like, "I'm a part of this. This is more than just about me. This is bigger than me". We do have a sisterhood where we know each other. We know each other birthdays, middle names, where your birthmark at...because it keeps us grounded. If you're just a squad that dances together if you have an issue or problem that causes tension in the squad then that shows in your performance. But in a sisterhood, it's like, "Okay, I got a issue with you but we finna talk about it, we gon put it all out in the open and bam!" because we're not just a group of girls that dance together we actually are accountable for each other and I can't stay mad at you because that's just like your blood sister. We are a sisterhood because we*

*don't want any negativity, any problems, or any issues within the squad to tear the squad apart because this is bigger than us. J-Sette is a legacy. So you can't have two or three girls who are beefin' cause a whole legacy to go to waste...and then you have clicques. That's why we have a sisterhood to eliminate clicques. You don't want 5 girls here, 3 girls here, 2 girls here. Then it's like, "3 girls dance alike, then them 2 got they own little style, then these 2 do the stand a different way cause that's how they like to do it. Naw!" That's why you have a sisterhood to be like, "THIS. IS. HOW. J-SETTES. DO. IT. This is how J-Settes have done it. This is how J-Sette is doing it. And this is how J-Sette is going to continue to do it in the future." In my eyes the sisterhood we have is necessary because that's what has set us apart from other dance lines.*

*It's the whole respect factor for the old head that comes in from the 80s to show how they did it so that the tradition won't be lost. It evolves because every captain has their own visions and goals, but it stays within the tradition. We're gonna always "Salt and Pepper", we're gonna always do "Get Ready", we're gonna always do the "Rest march", we're gonna always "Pull," we're gonna always "Tip Toe." That's how we keep the tradition and then you always bring new elements. If all else fails we still got our tradition. We got the same moves from the 1980s and they haven't failed us yet! So if this new stand don't make the cut, we got 300 hundred more to do!*

*If you have the underclassmen making the squad and the upperclassmen don't then it's a very interesting practice. You have good and frustrating days and it's not about you. And that's what I love about the J-Settes. So if you don't have it, it doesn't matter 'cause... (Here Shanketta implies that what matters to the J-Settes is the entire*

unit being uniform, not individual perfection. This is such an understood aspect of the J-Sette culture that she does not feel the need to even explain it to me)

*Thursday and Friday are fun days. We go to band hall and march with the band. We march from the band hall to the field and it's so much fun! All the sections have the chants. All the groups want to chant to the J-Settes. We're the trophy piece of the band. We practice alone and only practice with the band on Thursday. So Friday is hype because it's the day before the game. Of course older heads get uniforms first and everybody else gets in where you fit in. We actually have a uniform room in the T.B. Ellis gym and everything is coordinated and has names.*

*We perform "Get Ready" coming into the stadium and you get chills all over your body cause you're about to march in front of all these people and you got pressure from the older heads. It was a good feeling but its pressure 'cause you know you can't mess up but I enjoyed it. Then when you get off the field you're like, "Woo now it's over!"*

*From beginning to end, from dancing in the stands to the half time performance, you're always gonna be nervous. Even if we're going to the bathroom we walk in one line because people are watching and taking pictures. Mrs. Worthy will write you down for laps if you're not sitting properly! Sitting up straight, shoulders back, stomach tucked in, right over left hand, right foot over left foot and sitting up straight and smiling; and if the captain is slanted you have to be slanted. Then marching out is fun 'cause you got fans screaming your name and you got your friends. So it was fun.*

Here we see a small portion of the rigors of creating, learning, and executing the J-Sette dance technique. This embodied knowledge of the dance technique extends to the embodied knowledge outside of the J-Settes' practices. These are theories of the flesh that the J-Settes learn from their "particular experiences and epistemologies that provide philosophies about reality different from those available to others." (Collins, "The Social Construction" 300) Because of these specific interactions that J-Settes have with each other, their dance technique, and performances they have created ideologies that assist them with making sense out of their lives as J-Settes. There is a direct correlation between the rigorous, exciting, fast-paced, and athletic J-Sette dance style and the rigorous, fast paced, and exciting physical and emotional demands that are on the J-Settes. It is truly stunning how precise the relationship between the dance style and the demands are. This is a perfect example of "honoring the extraordinary in the ordinary indigenous analysis, expressions, and meditations of what bell hooks refers to as "homeplace"(Madison, "That Was My Occupation" 214). The everyday movement of the J-Settes' bodies has a direct relationship with how they experience life.

There are five major themes that I have found that are learned through the J-Settes' movements. Shanketta remarked on the "fun" of the dancing and experience, the quick and intense pace as well as the disciplined work ethic of the culture, the sisterhood, and legacy that runs throughout the structure of the Prancing J-Settes. Although, Shanketta did not give a hierarchy of themes there does seem to be more emphasis on some than on others. For example, even though Shanketta remarked several times about the "fun" of her experiences as a J-Sette, what stands out, much like



the speed and precision of the dance technique, is the constant dedication and discipline that is necessary to be a successful Prancing J-Sette. As Shanketta mentions, *“It’s hard to make the team but to maintain is even harder.”* To her point, the quick and precise dance style that matches the short amount of time the dancers have to learn new material weekly would make it rather difficult for most trained dancers to consistently succeed. The days allotted to learning are only Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesday the team undergoes cuts for performances on Saturday. The precision of the dance style correlates to the precision that is demanded of the dancers in order to make weekly cuts as well as coordinate their academic and social life. One low grade or off month for a Prancing J-Sette could mean a ban from the yearly try-outs because of the GPA requirement or a cut from the weekly performance because of a lack.

Along with the speed and precision that is required of the J-Settes through their dance style and practice regime, the ladies must always remain poised and in uniform yet individualistic. It makes sense that the preparation for execution of this style would be in a similar manner. This explains why the dancers are expected to learn and master decades worth of nuanced material in a short amount of time, actively participate in daily marathon long practice sessions, and do so with a certain level of excellence and poise. Just as the J-Settes must handle the aggressive comments of their audiences with proprietary grace and poise, they must execute aggressive movements and excel in an aggressive practice schedule with the same grace and poise. To that end, the J-Settes hold themselves to as high a level of perfection as the audience does. The sponsor, Mrs. Worthy, will make the dancers run extra laps, on top of the standard two laps per

practice, for infractions such as sitting improperly. This expectation of excellence has certainly been acquired from both the J-Settes as well as their audiences and it goes in a circle. Not only have the J-Settes historically held themselves to a very high technical and social standard, but their audience and community have either grown to or have always also held the J-Settes to high technical and social standards. So, the motive behind the sponsor's strict infraction policy could be deduced as a combination of the group's and the audience's expectations.

Legacy is also a huge aspect of the Prancing J-Settes and has had a lasting effect on Shanketta. She mentions that one of the traits she loves about the J-Settes is that the focus is not on one person. The group is most important and that extends from the current group to the former lines throughout the years. With legacy taking precedence over individual success, comes a respect and obedience for hierarchy. The interactions and hierarchy between under and upper classmen resemble the traditional J-Sette choreography, such as the "Get Ready" and "Salt and Pepper" marches, that have remained famed staples of the J-Sette repertoire over the new choreography that is created each year.

### **From Movement to Academics: "J-Sette Isn't for Everyone"**

The different theories of the flesh that the J-Settes create and learn through their movements also extend to the ways they relate to other areas of their lives. For example, as I talked further with Shanketta I realized that although she came to JSU to be a J-Sette, she also had high expectations of herself to be an exemplary student as well as dancer.

*Shanketta: Being a J-Sette really taught time management and accountability. Because you know that from 5 p.m. till who knows... 11 p.m. at the earliest you have practice all day. You don't know when you're gonna get out of practice so you can't chill and just say, "I'll finish this when I'm out of practice." So you had to stay on top of it if you wanted to be successful in college because firstly you're a college student trying to obtain your college degree, first and foremost. There's a GPA requirement. There's not a guaranteed spot on the J-Settes. You have to try out every year. If you don't have the GPA, have your references then you will not return. That's the way it works and J-Sette wasn't for everybody. There were a few girls who said, "Hey, I'm a med student and I have to study x amount of hours and this isn't for me."*

I find it interesting that from Shanketta's mother, the dean of the Honors College, the J-Sette sponsor, to Shanketta herself there is talk that school is the most important objective. From the unpredictable hours Shanketta has told me about, I see school as an important but secondary part of a Prancing J-Sette's life. Their GPA requirement is 2.5 and they must accomplish this every year that they try-out even if they have been on the squad before. There is a clear disconnect between the actual practices of the Prancing J-Settes and their rhetoric. I find it odd that the hours an institutional extracurricular organization demands from its members is too much for some students not because of their personal time management skills but because of their chosen major. This is different from the Alpha Kappa Alpha's underground hazing as addressed by Whaley, but I do feel that it is a weeding out process and as mentioned above it is a counter rhetoric to the narrative of "we are students first." Well, in no way are the J-Settes

treated like students. They are treated more like professionals or celebrities who are doing this thing called “school” as something on the side. In Whaley’s discussion of the underground ritual of hazing in the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, Inc. versus the official ritual of pledging, she examines the paradox of the prominent narrative of the AKA’s as respectable women and their underground rituals that involve activities that would not be deemed respectable by the sorority’s official mandates. She writes,

black sorority women’s former and current pledge activities create a rite of passage that stems from a long-standing cultural tradition among Black Americans to patrol and redraw the boundaries of Black respectability. The contradictory rites of pledging and hazing function as a private way for Black sorority women to resist the constraining politics of respectability that they are expected to embrace and embody in the public sphere... (89)

I see this contradiction played out in the J-Settes’ everyday lives. One facet of their “respectable” persona is to not just be a college student but a student who is excelling in all academic endeavors. No one on the outside understands the amount of time that is put into the group that makes it very difficult to maintain a level of excellence on the field and in the classroom first. Whaley states that,

...hazing is antithetical to the sorority’s public persona and has the capability to impede its ability to carry out counterpublic-sphere work. Nonetheless, pledge rites...remain essential...as an effective means for

acculturation into the sorority and into a specific kind of Black feminine identity capable of fulfilling service requirements. (96)

This same contradiction happens with the Prancing J-Settes and their “concern” about members’ education. The hours of practice and subsequent work load could potentially hinder many Prancing J-Settes from remaining on the squad, but the hours persist as well as the GPA requirement and the discourse of “we are students first” and “J-Sette isn’t for everybody”. These mantras imply that the Prancing J-Settes are an elite group of talented and skilled dancers and students, and that every woman who wants to be a Prancing J-Sette does not possess the work ethic and discipline it takes to excel. This is true, but the other, less heard, side of this narrative is that the band systematically designs its’ expectations to line up with only its’ own standards, not necessarily with the standards that are conducive to a healthy balance of school and extra-curricular. So, for some women, it is not that they are inherently less dedicated than the Prancing J-Settes but that their class work requires the majority of their time.

### **A Legacy of Struggle**

Hill Collins posits a legacy of struggle as one of the core themes of a Black women’s standpoint. She cites Katie Cannon in saying that,

Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle – a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and

oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed. (*Black Feminist Thought* 156)

I view the J-Settes as having an everyday struggle between the work that it takes to be responsible to themselves and their families/communities as successful students and the work that it takes to be responsible to their fellow J-Settes and university as entertainers. They are aware of the varying ways their community and university make use of their bodies and they also make use of the band and the community to transgress stereotypes of Black women. Shanketta recounts how her knowledge of the pressures and criticisms that the J-Settes are under in all avenues of life deepened once she was awarded with the esteemed position of captain.

*A Day in the Life of a J-Sette (Captain)*

*Shanketta: I learned the true definition of "to whom much is given much is required." Didn't think I'd be captain 'cause when I came on I didn't do a full two years. While I'm in class I'm doing homework for the next class. When I'm in that class I'm doing formations, checking inventory, checking my text messages, making sure everyone knows when practice is, when it is not gonna be. Captain is responsible for the team. Responsible for routine, execution, formation, inventory, and squad in general...me I felt responsible for my girls 'cause as the leader I felt like I was responsible for them being successful in class and on the field. I barely got sleep 'cause while everyone else is sleeping; I'm making up the dance for the following week. (Keep in mind that Shanketta was Captain her Junior and Senior years of college which are two very important years in ones college career.) On Sunday I'm making up the routine to*

*teach on Monday. Wednesday is cuts and Saturday the game, Sunday I start all over again. Practice was fun but you can't have your side talks 'cause you're in the front and leading but it's all eyes on you. You have to be that leader so no slacking, attitude is in check. Make them feel like, "I can trust you to make sure we look good." You're under pressure to make sure you're in shape 'cause you're leading and the whole legacy is in your hands. It's gone be like "What is Shanketta doing with these girls?!", not "Oh so and so messed up."*

*One time my friend told me that I was asleep in the café. I had just ate and fell asleep and didn't even know I had fallen asleep! But I loved it, 'cause the girls looked up to me, called me Mama Ketta, but it was a lot of responsibility. You're the liaison between sponsor and squad. Of course a couple months in I realized I'm only as strong as my team but after the first games I realized we can work together. She's good at regular 8-counts; she's good at traveling 8-counts. "Okay, you I need this. You I need this. Lets go. Boom we got a routine." I was like, "everyone has their strengths and weakness. So you, you're strong in this. Lets capitalize on that. You, you're not so strong in this, we gon' do something to help you so we can all look good together."*

*So in the locker room you check off names and write everything down. You have to go back three years. Say for instance we're playing Grambling...we have records of what we've worn to every performance...so we look back to make sure we don't repeat the outfit. The captain is in constant communication with the sponsor. Before the dance is shown to the squad it has to be shown to the sponsor. It's not during practice time. So the captain is really dedicating time to J- Settes. It's a lot of criticism 'cause they*

*know you're the creative mind...Lord if this is what celebrities go through I don't wanna be a celebrity. When I first became a captain yeah any little thing a captain does is criticized. If you're walking down the plaza and someone sees you but you don't see them, didn't even make eye contact with you, but they thought you saw them, they say "Shanketta actin funny. She's not speaking to people"! You are a role model. They put you on a pedestal. On Facebook, social networks, you're under a microscope. I knew they (The J-Settes) were known but I didn't know to that extent till I became captain...On Wednesday the captain makes up the routine but the day of cuts if you don't execute the way the sponsor likes it you're gonna do it over. So the captain goes through cuts! So she records you.*

*Getting on the bus you're gonna have the jitters 'cause you have to remember and know all of the stands and it's not so good that you repeat the same stands. I loved being captain 'cause I really motivated my girls and I didn't feel like it was just me I felt like it was us. I know my girls got me and I know we practiced and they gon do a good job. It's no better feeling in the world than marching in with the girls behind you. That halftime is like a reassurance. The captain is on the 50... I would try to do a formation where I was off the fifty. I used to hate that. But just to see my girls excited. But being the captain it becomes a battle zone. I tell my girls, "You better zip them Nancys<sup>8</sup> up and tie that cape up and get ready to work!"*



## **The Prancing J-Sette Family**

In Shanketta's narrative, the family trope, especially when she depicts her tenure as captain, is infused in the meaning of being a Prancing J-Sette. Shanketta felt that there was a burden in being captain because her audience held her responsible for the success and uniformity of her squad and because in essence she was the surrogate mother of a surrogate family and sisterhood. From Shanketta's account the sisterhood, led by her as "Mama Ketta" translated to not only great performances but also a tight bond between the members of the squad. The construction of the family helps the members deal with the pressures of being a Prancing J-Sette as well as well as reinforces the family trope of the surrounding community.

Another cultural trait that the Prancing J-Settes may take from their surrounding community is that of appropriating fan discourse for their own ends. As stated in Chapter Two, the J-Sette audience is very expressively spectacular in both their embodied responses to their Prancing J-Settes' movement as well as their fan discourse. This performance resembles the spectacularity of the J-Settes' live performances. The J-Settes also talk about themselves in a similar manner. As Shanketta states, she tells "[her] girls [they] better zip them Nancy's up and tie that cape up and get ready to work!" This enthusiasm and choice of words implies the porous relationship between the J-Settes and their audience and community. The dancers are not exempt from viewing themselves in a similar fashion as their audience although the point of reference is different. Also, Shanketta shows that the Prancing J-Settes are well aware of the Plaza Theory internalized appropriate behavior that is expected of them as well as the

negativity that may follow if the dancers do not live up to proprietary expectations. From her execution on the field to her execution on the Plaza, Shanketta remarks that she is always conscious of what someone might say about her behavior if it is not deemed fit. One can assume that Shanketta is also heavily aware of the power that one person's comment can have on the entire J-Sette audience, which is why her sense of the ever-present possibility of negativity comes across so often in her narrative.

One of the responsibilities and demands on the Prancing J-Settes from their community, virtual and live, is to never publicly showcase aggressive, negative behavior to anyone no matter what behavior is exhibited towards them. In an incident on a social networking site, I found one Prancing J-Sette breaking through that expectation by ranting in one of her statuses. This incident shows how Prancing J-Settes may actually feel about the constant scrutiny they are under, but are not expected to publicly comment on. It also shows how J-Settes use their hypervisibility and agency to transgress the demands placed on their bodies. The comments made in response to the status post aptly showcase the expectations of Prancing J-Settes by both their community and by each other. Those comments also show how demands are policed by the community and fellow J-Settes.

## **Family Discipline**

A recent widely witnessed and remarked upon outburst by a Prancing J-Sette illustrates the challenges of responding to this scrutiny and the ways these responses are disciplined by members of the community. Because the exchange violated Prancing J-Sette norms, as discussed below, it could be potentially embarrassing for the dancer in question, so I will not refer to her by name. The outburst demonstrated resentment of the relentless expectations and frustration that those who criticize the dancers could never step into their shoes.

Fellow Prancing J-Settes' corrections to the angry dancer show at least one expectation of the J-Settes by the JSU/SWAC community. The troubled J-Sette was admonished to "hush and buck", which basically meant that J-Settes are expected not to react in an emotionally aggressive and/or negative way to negative comments about their performances. This exchange shows that the J-Settes and maybe all women in the public sphere are not given the option to publicly show their disagreement with comments made about them in performance. Also, the comment to "hush and buck" has a different meaning here than it would in other social circles. As my interlocutors have shared with me, the Prancing J-Settes have learned over time that the discourses that their audience creates about them really has nothing to do with them at all and will take on a life of its own. Therefore, the dancers either keep their opinions of comments, whether positive or negative, in private settings or they do not discuss their feelings at all. The J-Settes state that people will love them one minute and hate them the next so it is best for them to

stay focused on their dancing and not crowd reception. Hence, it makes sense that the phrase “hush and buck” would not be seen as negative in this situation.

On rare public occasions, Prancing J-Settes do not take the “hush and buck” attitude to heart. In the case I witnessed, the dancer transgressed the socially accepted norms for the J-Settes, and there are people who readily try to police her behavior. Only one who is knowledgeable of the J-Sette community would know who these commenters are. Some, in this case Shanketta and Mea, are former J-Settes who coached this individual during her first years as a J-Sette and who led her through the process of becoming a part of the sisterhood that is Prancing J-Sette. These two women have a lot of clout because, as the Prancing J-Sette relationship hierarchy goes, they function as mother and big sister respectively. Other members of fan communities are at least aware of the level of scrutiny that the J-Settes are under and the wide range of comments that are frequently thrown at them from praise to scathing criticism. For example, Kevin Robinson is a professional photographer who follows the J-Settes as well as other SWAC dance lines, therefore he is a part of the mass production of the J-Sette and SWAC image. He is probably more aware than any of the other fan-observers, besides the former Prancing J-Settes, of how the comments of viewers can affect the J-Settes.

I see this insider community as attempting to graciously reprimand dancers for stepping out of the prescribed public uniform of the Prancing J-Settes. No one berated this particular individual for her outburst. What they do include are words of encouragement that she is not alone in the barrage of “haters” with no basis for criticism; that she will always have to deal with “haters” in life so she should not let them affect

her. A public, permanent, and heated reaction to the “haters” is not the appropriate “J-Sette” way of handling things. The phrase that catches on and sums up the appropriate behavior is “Hush and Buck.” The idea is that negative comments or people should never make a J-Sette publicly rant about mistreatment because it is never going to change. A Prancing J-Sette should use the negativity to fuel her drive to be an even better J-Sette and continue to give the “haters” something to hate on.

This behavior is reminiscent of family interaction, which is a reoccurring trope I have found that the Prancing J-Settes use to describe their community as well as a trope used to describe JSU’s community. “Family members,” her “Mama Keeta” her “Big Sister Mea” and her friends are reifying the performance of a publicly seen but not heard J-Sette. Shanketta, taught her dancers the correct way to deal with negativity, so it is clear that the Prancing J-Settes are trained in appropriate public behavior and those rules are enforced by the Prancing J-Sette family members. I do not think it is a far stretch to assume that among other reasons the Prancing J-Settes may have developed this attitude about their public performance off of the field as a way to protect themselves from the ever-present scrutiny of their viewers, virtual and live, but it is interesting to note the complex and fluid ways in which they reify and transgress the behavior rules given to them in their public and private Prancing J-Sette personas.

Responses to rare nonprivate outbursts give a glimpse into the inner social life of the Prancing J-Sette dance line. I find several of the tropes of Prancing J-Sette life in such instances. Of course there is the aspect of bell hooks’ concept of homeplace. For Prancing J-Settes this immediate family is the women with whom one becomes a

Prancing J-Sette and the women make one into a Prancing J-Sette. Within the immediate and extended family, there are general rules and expectations of how members must behave themselves in public in order to do their part in upholding the family name. Speaking out in an emotional and negative way about public berating by viewers is not acceptable behavior for someone who is a part of the Prancing J-Sette family. One will not be removed from the family, but it is not pleasing to the family elders.

What will remove one from the Prancing J-Sette family is lack of discipline of the mind and/or body. Usually this removal is voluntary. For example, Mea, a “big sister,” informed me that new J-Settes go through a form of Prancing J-Sette boot camp where “proper J-Sette behavior” is taught along with the J-Sette dance style. If a J-Sette does not adequately complete the boot camp she may remove herself from the group or she will continue to get chastised by her J-Sette family elders. Also, the life of a Prancing J-Sette is hectic and spontaneous there could be a required but unscheduled performance at any time. The life of a Prancing J-Sette is also strenuous. From the practice schedule to the execution of the complex dance technique, a never ending performance on and off the field, and as the J-Settes put it “[Is] not for everyone”. Those who cannot maintain the family code while adhering to the family discipline do not last in the Prancing J-Sette family.

## **Only The Prancing J-Settes Can Speak For Themselves: From Family to Individuals**

What I have found in my research about the Prancing J-Settes is that these women utilize their experiences as Prancing J-Settes to theorize their place in the JSU community as well as in their everyday lives. The demands that they and their community place on their bodies translate into how the women theorize their own identities and roles in society. This is also, very often, how these dancers utilize their agency and transgress societal mores. The affect that comes with the hard work, difficult technique, and strenuous performance and practice schedule works to produce themes like sisterhood and family that the J-Settes use to negotiate the intersections of their embodied practices and ideologies. The family that they are brought into, although it may not fit the standard idea of family, generally is the center of the Prancing J-Sette world. From the family sprouts the dispersal and discipline of the proper J-Sette social behaviors and movements. Also, identity within the group comes from the family. Shanketta went from being a regular member of the J-Sette family to being the mother of the group as “Mama Keeta” and disciplining her “girls”. This family also gives the J-Settes the social strength to combat and negotiate the politics of being Black women in the public sphere. The women use counterpublic terms such as “hush and buck” to invert social norms and protect themselves from the backlash of their critical audience.

What is most evident and what I hope is clear through this chapter is the nuance that exists among Prancing J-Settes. As I have stated before, the women are not stock characters, flesh, or surrogates existing solely to be utilized as tools by and for people

outside of themselves. Some J-Settes use the motif of the J-Sette in similar ways as their fans do, while others attempt to transgress the “publicly unemotional” J-Sette image.

There is no standard J-Sette and that is what is so special about the group. That is also why it is so unfortunate that the community that loves the J-Settes discursively steals this agency from them. Following George-Graves’ assessment, I cannot speak for the Prancing J-Settes. No one can except for them. What I can do is provide another stage for them to give voice to their own individuality.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### **SOMETHING SPECIAL: ONE DOES NOT BECOME A MEMBER OR A FAN OF THE PRANCING J-SETTES. ONE BECOMES A PRANCING J-SETTE AND A PRANCING J-SETTE FAN**

As I finish this project, narratives of certain interlocutors call to me and proclaim that my work is not done and that this site is not only salient for JSU but also for Black women in the Diaspora. In particular, the account of Mrs. Ashley, who bridges the gap between Mrs. Oatis as sponsor and Shanketta as the 2009-2010 captain, has a very powerful resonance. This power does not solely lie in the knowledge and history relayed in her narrative, but more so in its embodiment and what she chose to hold close to her heart or share with me. Even though she has known me closely since I was nine years old I was aware that there was something very special to her about the Prancing J-Settes that she was not willing to give away easily.

Mrs. Ashley is an exceptional case because not only is she a Prancing J-Sette but she is also the mother to two Prancing J-Settes. Also, she is a member of the J-Sette old school who genuinely respects the changes that have occurred in the repertoire and rigors of the company as well as the legacy that she has left behind. She delivers this respect and reverence for the embodied knowledge that only comes through being a Prancing J-Sette in such a way that I dare not disrespect it with theories and analyses that will surely miss the mark because of my limited knowledge of the “something special” about the J-Settes that Mrs. Ashley holds so close. What I can say is my interaction with

her did give me a sense of the multi-faceted and deeply rooted meaning and impact of the Prancing J-Settes on this community. Her account encompasses many of the tropes that have been discussed throughout this thesis. She touches on the importance of family, hard work, discipline, precise execution of the J-Sette technique, responsibility to legacy and innovation, as well as the academic and economic politics involved in being a Prancing J-Sette.

Because of the race, class, and gender politics of JSU/Jackson the Prancing J-Settes as Black women performers are a safe place for the community and the members of the company to negotiate, transgress, and reify the politics of their society. I argue that this can be expanded to examine relationships between Black women's bodies, voices, audiences and communities everywhere. As a Prancing J-Sette, mother of Prancing J-Settes, and JSU/Jackson community member, Mrs. Ashley embodies how Black women are the "something special" of the African Diaspora. This "something special" that occurs with the J-Settes' performance is what I have been talking around throughout this thesis because it defies language. In fact the performance of Black women is so powerful that it is routinely thwarted by those whose power it threatens to undermine. Jackson State has its own version of this power struggle going on right now.

### **Mrs. Ashley's Narrative**

*I played flute in high school and at JSU I was on percussion scholarship. Then after my freshmen year I had to participate in more than one music field in order to keep my scholarship, so I choose the boom and tried out for the J-Settes. So I was in the percussion ensemble, the J-Settes, and in the symphonic winds. That's how I got to school, playing instruments. When I was in school, in order to get the stipend we had to perform from band camp all the way through the football season and if you performed all of the games you got this amount and if you missed or got cut they would start deducting, but you got it before you went on your Christmas break. At one time I heard that they never awarded scholarships to J-Settes after Taylor, but yeah we used to have scholarships. You could perform as a J-Sette on scholarship. Chloe and them didn't get not one dime, but out of one breath they always say, it's like a calling card, The Sonic Boom of the South and the Prancing J-Settes.*

*Everything gets better or changes and when you were active it seems like it was the best and once you leave and new people come in and make changes whether for the better or whatever, you can find fault in them because they changed what you did. So now a lot of people who are my age and who came after us feel like the J-Settes are more acrobatic than they are dancers. But the only thing I can do is sit there and say oh my goodness how did you do that. And if I was on the team now I wouldn't be able to make these weekly cuts.*

*A lot of people take for granted how you have to physically train to do what they do. Because even if you can dance, doing some of the stunts they do, you can injure*

*yourself if you're not physically fit and if you don't eat right, don't get proper amount of rest, if your body's not into it you can injure yourself. And they do a really good job and I'm just impressed with them every year, they set the bar higher and I think it's just awesome.*

*When you think about what they have to go through in order to earn that spot on the field week after week, while maintaining their grades, being physically fit, listening to the good and the bad, it can take a toll on you. And those three months can set you back academically. I know when you're in there every week and going through the cuts you know what's required, but the average person doesn't have a clue to what it takes and that's why you get so many people who try out and get their feelings hurt.*

*I always feel like if you're gonna do it you have to do it with a purpose and passion but that also comes from my years as a J-Sette, 'cause when we performed one of the things that set us apart from other dance lines or dance troupes is that they're very precise. They're very uniformed and they're very precise. We'd be in there hours and hours and hours doing the same thing. I remember one week is dedicated, back then, to nothing but learning marches. Because in order to go anywhere or get in front of the band, the only way you could do it was perfect the five marches we have: "The Tip Toe", "The Strut", "The Salt and Pepper", "The Prance", and "The Scarecrow". They don't do the prance anymore and that came from the name, but we marched on our tip toes in a little strut like the Clydesdale's marching. It was very difficult, but the prance and salt and pepper were our trademark marches. The strut came on when we were*

*there. We didn't have it before 1976. Before you could learn the dance routine you got to learn the marches first.*

*Now you get to audition for the different phases. You can audition to march in. so if you're a J-Sette and all you can do is march, you march in, but when they get to the stands you just sit over to the side. Then you try out for the field and if you can't do that then you sit out. I totally disagree with that I think that's unfair. I don't think a member in the band comes in ...if you can't do it all then you don't make the cuts. It reduces the numbers, but I think it's fair. You may have some who don't wanna learn the field show. There were some young ladies during my time that would say when we came in on a Monday this is a rundown of the field performance then after we show it to you we gone teach you. During my time there were only 10-12 girls total. So they would see it and make up in their mind that they couldn't do it. Now you had to stay through the rehearsal, but secretly in their mind behind closed doors they were already picking out what outfit they were gonna wear to the game. Well they stopped doing that. And we had a lot of problems where parents would come back and say my child has rehearsed all week and I think she deserves to perform. So we started recording the tryouts so then if you look at the video tape if you got cut and you ask why I got cut you could go back to the video tape. And you get three times to make the routine. You go one time, no mistakes, round two you allowed two to three mistakes, and if you make five mistakes you're out so the ultimate goal is to make the first cut.*

Mrs. Ashley's account is so fitting for this conclusion because she showcases the evolution that the Prancing J-Settes have made with their evolving community. She also

highlights the different ways the J-Settes act as bridges for themselves and as bridges for their communities to view the world differently. Mrs. Ashley was on one of the first iterations of the dance line before the institution was finalized. For instance, currently there are not any J-Settes who are also involved with the band and the music department.

Furthermore, presently the Prancing J-Settes do not receive stipends for their work with the band as they did during Mrs. Ashley's experience. Even with these major differences, Mrs. Ashley recounts some of the same tropes that Prancing J-Settes have stated above. She states that hard work, dedication, technique, and excellence were even more prevalent themes of the Prancing J-Sette reality than they are presently. Overall, she exudes an understanding and respect for anyone who undergoes the pressures of being a Prancing J-Sette, even if they only march in and don't perform for the rest of the games. Her experience as a J-Sette has shaped her as a woman who is also an active JSU alumna and the mother of two J-Settes. Mrs. Ashley is the bridge between Mrs. Oatis as a sponsor and Shanketta as a modern day captain. She showcases how the performances of the J-Settes settle in the everyday lives of the Jackson middle class. Yet, Mrs. Ashley differs from most because she reveres the work of the J-Sette body and this is what is so special about her account. This appreciation and respect for the social work that the J-Settes do is the legacy I wish to leave with this thesis. Obviously, the J-Settes are viable contributors to the culture of JSU, but the respect for the women is not as obvious and this is exposed by current debates about the Prancing J-Settes by JSU officials.

### **The Prancing J-Settes are “Unladylike” and “Vulgar”**

On February 26, 2013 the sponsor of the Prancing J-Settes, Mrs. Worthy, who has been the sponsor since 1997, was fired from her position as sponsor by the President of JSU, Carolyn Myers. Following this rupture in the J-Sette family President Myers informed the J-Settes that because of their “vulgar” and “unladylike” performances, the repertoire of the team will be “altered.” Going forward the Prancing J-Settes will include twirling and flag work into their repertoire and will perform less of the classic Prancing J-Sette dance style. As of now, the interim band director of the Sonic Boom, Dowell Taylor, is working as the interim sponsor of the Prancing J-Settes while a search for a new sponsor is enacted.

Recently JSU has had a strained relationship with presidents who are perceived by many students and alumni to not have a strong sense of loyalty to JSU socially or structurally. The last president, Dr. Mason from Southern University, quickly stepped down from office in 2010, after the knowledge of his secret inclusion in the state governor’s plan to merge all of the HBUCs came out to the heated disapproval of students and alumni. Dr. Meyers, who was recently president of Norfolk University, was elected as the first Black female president of JSU in 2011 and has been steadily changing the face of the staff, which is seen as part of the JSU family, as well as the culture of JSU by limiting the social activities that can take place on the Plaza thus interfering with the embodiment of the Plaza Theory. She also has imparted a vision of expansion in campus size, in research, and in technological advancement.

With this build up of tension between the JSU community and executive leadership, and the massive amount of cultural value that is placed on the Prancing J-Settes, one can only imagine the backlash that occurred once the community found out about Dr. Myers' decision to, it seems to the community, disband the Prancing J-Settes. As I stated in Chapter One, the Prancing J-Settes only became the Prancing J-Settes when the director asked the president if the dancers could put their batons down. They were the first of the HBUC dance teams to do so. Therefore, Dr. Myers' decision to include the batons again and add flags to the performance erases the very definition of the Prancing J-Settes.

After the Prancing J-Settes found out about Dr. Meyers' executive solution to the "vulgarity" of the dance line, the dancers took to popular media sites to express their anguish about the situation, but surprisingly many of the current Prancing J-Settes constructed a discourse of defeat and mourning through posting collages of their past J-Sette experiences and statuses describing their sadness over the loss of their sponsor and the integrity of their dance company and style. I have only found a few of these public reactions and I also have not found any other expressions of emotion to these events by the current J-Settes. On the other hand, alumni J-Settes and publicly known J-Setters have gone on rants about the loss of a legacy and the false accusations against Mrs. Worthy as a proponent of hazing and the J-Settes as vulgar and unladylike. They have also pointed out the loss of income to the university that will ensue if the J-Settes are disbanded and the actions they are prepared to take to fight Dr. Meyers on her decisions. It is interesting to me that the current Prancing J-Settes, at least publicly, have taken on a



demeanor of helpless victims, thus taking the “hush and buck” mantra into a different realm, while the alumni J-Settes and the community of JSU have resolved to enact their agency against this encroachment on their university’s cultural values.

These events make this absolutely a penultimate conclusion to a constantly changing and dynamic field site that can help theorize experiences of all Black women in the public sphere. Although Dr. Meyers is another Black woman in the public sphere, her position is that of the male, hegemonic ideology. Because of this she does not deem the Prancing J-Settes fit to express nuance in their performance. To her they are simply “vulgar” and “unladylike” Black female performers. Thus they are expendable and malleable. Even though she sees the J-Settes as “excess flesh” (Brooks), her concern with their appearance and how it may be perceived implies that she is very aware of the cultural importance of the Prancing J-Settes. In other words she is aware of the importance and value of Black women’s bodies in the public sphere. Do not forget that the “heterosexual” and “male” performance of the entire band employ similar pelvic thrusts, vibrations, and sensuality as the Prancing J-Settes, but Dr. Meyers has not attempted to change its repertoire, yet. Dr. Meyers knows that the Prancing J-Settes are a reflection of the university’s aesthetics and if she wishes to change the appearance of the university to further her vision of expansion and research savvy, then she must start with the bodies of Black women.

### **We Must Make These Theories Dance**

As Judith Hamera states in *Dancing Communities*, “these chapters...argue[d] against the notion that performance, and dance in particular, happens only to disappear.

Performances persist in minds and hearts, in places and in talk...”(16). This persistence is made plain through the varying but equally passionate feelings that Mrs. Ashley, Dr. Meyers, and every one in between has about the Prancing J-Settes. They all have been affected by the “something special” and power that occurs when Black women dance. This thesis’ purpose is to argue for the nuanced and permanent recognition of the importance of Black women’s dancing bodies. Just like dance does not disappear after it is executed the recognition of dance should not appear and disappear with the comings and goings of political projects. There are still so many more conversations to be had about Black Feminism and Black women in the Diaspora and dance is a major component that is missing from the discourse. Even after twenty years of advances in Black Feminism, Critical Race Theory, Womanism and other like theories the questions, “Can’t a Black person have an imagination? “ Can’t a Black person think?” and “Can’t a Black woman dance?” persist.

As I was leading a seminar in an undergraduate sociology of African-Americans course I displayed a recording of the Prancing J-Settes performing and stated that J-Settes use their performances to transgress the hegemonic social structures in their community. A female student in the back of the classroom asked with grave concern what type of progress the J-Settes could possibly make in the oppressive stereotypes about Black women with their sexualized movements and aesthetics. This young woman was genuinely curious and could not readily see that she was operating out of the same hegemonic ideologies that she asserts the J-Settes render through their performance. I found it surprising that, although we had already discussed the power

politics inherent in dominant stereotypes as well as various strategies that African Americans utilize to combat those stereotypes, the notion that the J-Settes might actually be political actors did not overrule the dominant view of their performance. After this exchange and further discussion it dawned on me why the J-Settes have this captivating “something special.” They are the missing link, or step rather, to connect Black Feminist theory to lived experience. We must make these theories dance. Dance and its evasion of linearity, complex relationships with culture, and persistence is what can help us think about our world differently.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Prancing J-Sette try out format is a three day process starting with an interview, body cuts, agility cuts, and a performance of an individual and original piece on the first day. On the second day the applicants are taught the try-out routine by the J-Sette captain. On the third day, the applicants have three opportunities to perform the captain's try-out routine so if they do not make it on the first round, they have two more chances to try again. If they do not make it through the third round, they do not make the dance line that year. Finally, the captain and all of the dancers who have made the dance line perform the try out routine together.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Worthy and I are both members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> SWAC stands for the Southwestern Athletic Conference, which is the conference Jackson State's football team competes in.

<sup>4</sup> The Sonic Boom is officially titled "The Sonic Boom of the South." This is the official high stepping, performance band of the university.

<sup>5</sup> I term the male dancers "J-Setters" to highlight their association to the J-Sette dance technique. There are other names that my interlocutors call the male dancers that I find to be offensive and chose not to use them here.

<sup>6</sup> Appropriations of J-Sette technique by J-Setters recalls practices of African American dancers "stealing steps" from one another. See Anthea Kraut, "Stealing Steps". Anthea Kraut, "Stealing Steps" and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Intellectual Property" *Theatre Journal* 62 (2010): 173 – 89. The intellectual property issues involved in the uses of J-Sette technique exceed the scope of my analysis but the insistence on recognition for signature moves that Kraut describes is very real, as evidenced by the exchanges I include in Chapter Four.

<sup>7</sup> There are several band websites where the Prancing J-Sette videos are distributed. I am not talking about these here because I am more focused on the amateur videos and performances.

<sup>8</sup> Nancys are the white boots that the Prancing J-Settes historically perform in.

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