

## Freedom in the Form: Black Culture and the Liberation of Movement

Saniya Ridley, 2025

*This is a call to all the Seekers of Success—  
Attention Accomplished Aspirants! Gather round Grabbers of Greatness, Go-getters of Glory!  
Ambitious—nay—**Overly** Ambitious Aimers, Assemble!  
To all the Hopeful Hustlers, Striving Schemers, and Devout, Desperate Dreamers,  
...Are you good?*

My project begins with a promise. One that's been passed down from generation to generation, that's reached far and wide, and that I have recently discovered is complete and utter bullshit. Upon this discovery, I found myself at a loss, one which the beliefs I once held dear have never truly recovered from. In the midst of all my seeking, striving, and chasing, was a roadblock that I couldn't seem to get past no matter how hard I tried, but there was no returning as the road behind me had vanished the moment I turned my back. There was nothing to return to. I could not afford to slip up off this path either, lest all that I had worked for, and all that those who came before me had worked, lived, and died for, be rendered absolutely worthless. So there I was on this path; stuck, stifled, and unsettled.

Putting metaphors aside for a second, for so long, college was the ultimate goal for me. I wanted to be in college long before I knew what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go, or who I wanted to be in this world. But here I am, a college student, and I've never felt so lost in all my life. In order to get here, I have been pushed from early on to get into a "good" school. "You have to get into a *good* middle school so you can get into a *good* high school so you can get into a *good* college so you can get a *good* job and be successful and wealthy and happy," you know, the works. I just wish someone had told me earlier that a feature of these *elite* schools, these *exceptional* spaces, was an astounding lack of diversity. It would have been a big help.

Now, I can't speak on anyone else's behalf, but I, *this* black girl right here, have had the strangest time adjusting to these spaces. Sometimes I feel like I lose myself to these spaces I'm in; like long ago I was chipped away at in order to make me better fit the environment around me, and before I knew it, I was preemptively chipping away at myself too, for fear that if I failed to fit in, I would be cut down and discarded. And that has taken its toll on my mind, body, and soul. But lately, I have been asking myself, why? Why do I feel like I can't be as much of myself as I would like to be? Why can't I be as exuberant and free as I once was? Why did I go down this path in the first place? It's been an overwhelming endeavor trying to articulate how it has felt to be...myself. But that was the initial aim of this project. Through the guidance of my wonderful professor Dr.J, and the incredible works I had the privilege of witnessing this summer, the project has grown beyond mere articulation into a pursuit of realigning, reclaiming, and transforming myself through whatever means I see fit.

Using an interdisciplinary approach, I was inspired by several sources and outlets to better articulate and shape a dance. During the summer I performed in *Liturgy|Order|Bridge*, directed by Deborah Goffe, where I was able to explore concepts of community, radical rest, doing what you crave, and what it means to be transformational. I also attended the Urban Bush Women's performance of *Scat! The Complex Lives of Al & Dot, Dot & Al*, which depicted the dreams and desires of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's parents, and their own difficulties and successes in trying to move up in the world. Jasmine Hearn, a former dancer for the Urban Bush Women, had an open rehearsal for their dance, *Memory Fleet*, in which they speak on water, fluidity, remembrance, and honoring the people who impacted them, with an emphasis on black matriarchs in and out of the dance world. Their rehearsal was in a museum that featured an exhibition by the incredible artist, Firelei Báez, whose works reimagine the black body, often in unconventional or even sci-fi ways.

Some literary works that also inspired my project were *How it Feels to be Colored Me* by Zora Neale Hurston, *The Talented Tenth*, and *The Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B. Du Bois. With all these works in mind, I tried to create a piece that centered on openness and freedom to be who I am, say what I want to say, and move how I want to move. I welcome you to share in that experience as much as you want too, and find the time and space to really pursue what brings you peace, joy, or comfort. If you so choose, indulge in something even if just for a moment. Rest with me here, and let's feel united.

**Faculty Mentor: Professor Adanna Jones**

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