



EMPAC

**A
MEDITATION
ON
TONGUES**

**THURSDAY
APR 05
7:00 PM**

**NI'JA WHITSON /
NWA PROJECT**

"It is so poignant that Ni'Ja presents their interpretation of Marlon's landmark work *Tongues Untied* through the language of movement on April 5—the anniversary of Marlon's passing. We will be with you in spirit."

-VIVIAN KLEIMAN
PRESIDENT, SIGNIFYIN' WORKS™



CURATORIAL NOTE

A Meditation on Tongues is artist Ni'Ja Whitson's live-dance response to filmmaker and activist Marlon T. Riggs' 1989 film *Tongues Untied*. The film, which premiered on PBS in 1991, was a groundbreaking portrait of Black, gay identity. It was released during the height of the AIDS epidemic, a cultural moment rife with both homophobia and gay activism, and addresses this context directly.

Part documentary and part art film, *Tongues Untied* paired the personal with the social. Riggs linked imagery from the Castro District in San Francisco, an emblem of AIDS activism and gay culture in the US, with scenes of gay intimacy and Black male nudity. His rhythmic editing style repeated certain moments to provide different motifs and themes with greater narrative weight.

One such motif was the finger snap, a social choreography that Riggs breaks down and defines throughout the 55-minute film. Through repeated moments of focus on the snap, Riggs situated physicality and movement as defining and unifying practices. Another motif is voguing. Voguing is a dance style that mimics the angular arm movements, poses, and strut of runway models. Initially established in the 1960s in Harlem, New York, the form entered the mainstream in 1990 when it was featured in the video for Madonna's "Vogue," and continues to define the underground competitions of the ballroom scene in Harlem and beyond. Finally, Riggs' footage of political marches and chants tie the film to the social choreography of protest. In this way, the film is deeply emblematic of the "personal-is-political" identity politics that defined the 1990s, and continues to resonate with our contemporary moment in various ways.

Whitson takes up the strong presence of movement and dance in *Tongues Untied*, incorporating vogue and snapping as part of their choreography. Vogue performer and commentator Leggoh LaBeija's solo serves as a conceptual, artistic, and practical opening to *A Meditation on Tongues*. His performance literally invites the audience into the work, setting a tone that echoes and morphs throughout the performance. Whitson and performer Kirsten Flores-Davis incorporate Riggs' rhythms into their movements through snapping and other variations. The establishment of club vibes through sound and light support moments of intimacy and reflection, and moments of reflection bring context and dynamic to the club aesthetic. Threads from *Tongues Untied*, the AIDS epidemic, and queer cultures of color coalesce as *A Meditation on Tongues* processes through multiple performance spaces.

Whitson's performance uses choreography, film, and sound, to underscore the historical importance of Riggs' film during the early years of the AIDS pandemic and beyond. It then carries the work into the present, deeply acknowledging and respecting the ongoing cultural power of *Tongues Untied*, while submitting its own generous critiques. At its core, Whitson's performance extends Riggs' focus on Black, gay, male identity to consider what masculinities look like in the contemporary, especially in relation to the invisibility of a range of Queer and gender non-conforming bodies within the cultural dialogue on race.

ASHLEY FERRO-MURRAY / CURATOR, THEATER AND DANCE
EMPAC, 2018

CREDITS:

Concept, Transcription, and Direction by Ni'Ja Whitson
Choreographed by Whitson with collaboration from performers
Performed by The NWA Project—Kirsten Flores-Davis and Ni'Ja Whitson
Featuring pre-show performance and choreography of Leggoh LaBeija
Sound Design by Ni'Ja Whitson, featuring vocal performance by
Jonathan Gonzalez, and the music of Nina Simone, Alice Smith,
Billie Holiday, Kendrick Lamar, nikhil trivedi, and excerpts
from Tongues Untied
Lighting Supervision and Design by Tuce Yasak
Costume by Ni'Ja Whitson
Video by Ni'Ja Whitson (Excerpts from Tongues Untied by Marlon Riggs,
used with permission by Signifyin' Works)
Production and Tour Consultation by Meredith Boggia

BIOGRAPHIES

Leggoh LaBeija has been a member of the Legendary House of LaBeija since December 10, 2011. A multifaceted Ballroom performer since the days when his only outlet was YouTube and the Ballroom Scene-driven videos he posted caught the attention of many from his native home in California, LaBeija is not only a Voguer and a member of the music label Qween Beat Productions, but has also been making a name for himself as a commentator and resident emcee for the House of Vogue night at Brooklyn's House of YES.

Kirsten Flores-Davis earned their BA in Dance Movement Therapy from Hunter College while performing with the National Liturgical Dance Network in Bridgetown, Barbados, and Canberra, Australia. Combining a love for dance and theater, Davis joined the casts of the *Messiah Project* at HERE! Arts Center and BRIC, and *Boogieman: Diary of a Broken Home* at the Thespis Theatre Festival. Choreographic works have been presented at the South Orange Performance Arts Center, the Danny Kaye Playhouse, and in the 2016 Dance Block Festival. Recently, Davis has worked with movement-based choreographers Ursula Eagly, Maura Donohue, and Chafin Seymour. This is Davis' fourth year as a company member of the NWA Project.

Ni'Ja Whitson—artistic director/creator—is a celebrated interdisciplinary artist, Bessie Award-winning performer and writer who has been referred to as “majestic” by *The New York Times*, and received *Brooklyn Magazine's* “culture influencer” recognition. Whitson engages a nexus of postmodern and African Diasporic practices intersecting gender, sexuality, race, and spirit. Recent honors include Camargo Fellowship (France), Dance in Process Residency with Gibney Dance (New York, NY), Hedgebrook Residency (Seattle, WA), Bogliasco Fellowship (Italy), Brooklyn Arts Exchange Artist Residency, and a two-time Creative Capital “On Our Radar” award (New York, NY). Whitson collaborates with notables in experimental and conventional theater, dance, visual art, and music including Douglas Ewart, Sharon Bridgforth, Dianne McIntyre, Charlotte Brathwaite, Regina Taylor, Daniel Alexander Jones, Baba Israel, Byron Au Yong, Aaron Jafferis, and others. Recent commissions include the American Realness Festival, Lost and Found / Platform Festival at Danspace Project, Endless Shout—(ICA Philadelphia, curated by George Lewis), PRELUDE, Vision Festival, Dancing in the Streets, and Harlem Stage with financial support from the Mertz Gilmore Foundation and Jerome Foundation Individual Artist Grant. Ni'Ja Whitson is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of California at Riverside and is the founder/artistic director of The NWA Project. nijawhitson.com

Tuce Yasak graduated from the Department of Industrial Design at Middle East Technical University in Turkey. She designs for dance. She is interested in site-specific performances, light installations, architectural and urban lighting. Credits include: NOLA Fringe Festival; Urban Light Festival L.A.M.P, New Haven; Gutai Card Box project at Solomon R Guggenheim Museum; MEX I AM Festival with Vicky Araico at the Yerba Buena Arts Center, San Francisco; *Unsettled* at DanceMotion USA at Brooklyn Academy of Music and Bates Dance Festival with David Dorfman Dance and Korhan Basaran Company; *Color Me Warhol* at Dixon Place, *Another 37 Reasons to Cry* at JACK, *Tropico* at DanceSpace, *Another Fucking Warhol Production* at the Kitchen with the Feath3r Theory and Raja Feather Kelly; *La Medea* at BRIC Arts&Media with Yara Travieso. She is touring lighting director with Contra-Tiempo Urban Latin American Dance Theater.

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FUNDING:

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