

Iman Rose Louis-Jeune's Essence of Embodiment Festival

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“The beginning of healing is recognizing suffering and asking the question: Where does it hurt? Bringing this practice to our own wounding is key, and as we enlarge to include others, we open up potential for boundless healing in the world around us. If we really want to have a world where we can connect and respond to each other, we must widen the field and attend with the same understanding and care to all humans, all species, all the parts of this living world that are having trouble. We begin with the same question: Where does it hurt?”

- Tara Brach, meditation teacher and author

We, the global community, are suffering. The pandemic, racial injustice, historical untruths and cultural reckonings, political upheaval, sexual violence, climate crisis, endless wars... It can feel we are drowning in our divisions, cursed to repeat and recycle our injuries and cruelties in an endless feedback loop. But in March 2021, as we collectively mused on a surreal one-year-anniversary of life in quarantine, Iman Rose Louis-Jeune offered the world a gift. She fiercely and lovingly manifested The Essence of Embodiment Festival. This virtual event was vast in its scope, heart and execution, but singular in intention: healing.

Spanning four days, hosting forty-five contributing artists and teachers, and nearly two-hundred participants, The Essence of Embodiment Festival was an opportunity for artists, dancers, creators, and educators to explore healing through the universal lens of movement. It offered a safe, inclusive environment for sharing insight and inspiration and increasing a sense of belonging and bodily agency. Part film-festival, part dance intensive, it was created under the umbrella of the SMUSH Gallery Curatorial Fellowship and is one of few festivals where filmmakers also facilitated movement workshops and discussions.

Central to The Festival's mission was the advancement of BIPOC, Queer, Non-Binary, Transgender and Disabled- Identifying artists. This cardinal aspiration was accomplished by programming a rich and inviting calendar. The offerings were *abundant*. Movement courses included Expressive Flamenco, Psycho-Spiritual Movement, Afro Flow Yoga, Gospel Dance 'n Tone, Self-Release Techniques, and discussion panels centered around themes including The Lasting Impact of Disassociation, Caring for

Your Body, Defining Joy & Embodied Presence, and Facing Ancestral Trauma. Beyond presenting culturally diverse voices, the festival additionally welcomed a range of experience levels with offerings by and for both seasoned professional artists and people new to somatic exploration. The film festival aspect presented a sweeping range of aesthetics, stories and approaches to the body and movement. *Bear(v.)* offered extended virtuosic dancing. *Ballet Class* was a charming portrait of the love of dance. *Tilt Drop Roll* was silly. *The Body Beautiful* and *This is me eating* __ explored troubled bodies in hostile social environments. Hi-fi and low-fi productions highlighted each other and each curated day developed its own logic – a chemical reaction induced by a particular combination of classes, films and talkback prompts.

As a participant I enjoyed watching people who had never previously danced in a structured environment discover luscious personal movement vocabularies, and it was delightful to hear people tuning in from opposite sides of the globe discovering kinship through intimate exchange. Elemental to the virtue of the Festival was that it offered a uniquely cohesive vision. By approaching *the work* from multiple angles simultaneously, it drew clear connecting lines between dimensions of healing often isolated from each other: physical research in class, aesthetic expression in performance, advancing social context via discussion. The combined effect embraced participants in a multidimensional cathartic experience. They were able to synthesize a myriad of experiences and a community ecosystem blossomed. SMUSH Gallery artistic Director Katelyn Halpern attended nearly the entire festival and noted “I would run into people again and again in our different zoom rooms. I actually got to know people a little bit! For a virtual, everyone-at-home festival, this is kind of miraculous, and one of the greatest sweetnesses of the festival.”

In a time of isolation many people were hungry for this connection. Starting from the open call for submissions, applicants included personal notes: “This needs to happen!” “How can I help?” “Regardless of acceptance to teach, I want to thank you immensely for offering this platform.” Upon the festival's conclusion participants resoundingly echoed sentiments of feeling supported by what transpired: “A unique and very special, deep festival.” “It felt like a safe and judgement-free, creative space. It was extremely humbling to move with such a strong and resilient group of individuals.” “To find people so passionate about the intersection of trauma and art/ movement really made my heart smile.”

As Iman's co-fellow in the SMUSH Gallery Curatorial Fellowship, I witnessed the assemblage and unfolding of The Festival in awe. The care and comprehensive consideration Iman brought to every aspect was astonishing; a Herculean administrative feat. Throughout the festival her presence was quiet and unassuming, focused on executing the logistics smoothly. But it was clear she was drawing from a deep personal well to manifest such a vision.

Intrigued to learn more, I requested a meeting. I started by asking Iman about her inspiration for creating the festival. Not one to draw attention to herself, she first expressed she was unsure if she wanted her own story published. I said I understood completely, and anything shared could be a collaborative process. She then, very clearly and directly, articulated the difficult personal history which had driven her to create this refuge for others:

“I am a rape survivor. It's something I went through for, unfortunately, multiple years as a child. And then it happened again, by a different person, just a couple of years ago. It really fucked with me in so many ways and that's part of the reason why I gravitated towards the arts in the first place. Also, my home life was very difficult for me. Being the oldest child, I felt a lot of responsibility on my shoulders. I seriously thought the ongoing rape was something I would take to the grave with me. It was happening from when I was six up until I was thirteen, but I didn't come out about it to my family until I was nineteen. To think I'd stayed quiet about that for over a decade... Finally after talking to my family it felt like I could start

living my life. There was a weight lifted off my shoulders. So then when it happened again... it was... really humiliating. The sense of security I had built was stripped away. It also happened after having an extremely hard time in undergrad and the subsequent years after, partly due to not having anyone to advocate for me and partly because of the systemic racism at my university. I worked extremely hard maintaining a full-time job throughout my time in school. I then continued to work forty to seventy hours a week for multiple years after I graduated... Sorry, I don't know if this is too tangential, but it just accumulated to feel there were so many aspects of my life that were so unpleasant. I felt diverted from the path I really wanted to be on, an artistic career. And I just genuinely wasn't sure how to enjoy living... I felt really lost... So, for a long while, pretty much up until a few months before I sent in my proposal to SMUSH I was really exhausted from being tearful all the time. I would spend two to three hours crying everyday over these things that hurt me. But whenever things were really rough, like once I'd cried it out and reached the breaking point, the precipice of it all, and was ready to get to the next step, the question that always came to my mind was: What kind of help would I want that I'm not getting? And how can I help other people who are going through the same thing?"

To hear anyone has endured such suffering is heartbreaking. Yet what radiated from Iman was a commitment to transmute her struggle into care for others. Amazed by her fortitude, and curious to understand how she arrived at curating a somatic arts festival, I inquired as to how creative practices had served as a balm or outlet for her.

"Art definitely was an outlet. Every media I gravitated to, whether that was writing, drawing, dancing, painting, or playing flute, offered a way of expressing myself. Particularly in writing, I explored a lot of horror narratives. I think I was trying to unmask the monster and understand why things happen the way that they happen. I was trying to both understand that good people do bad things and vice versa, and also to see things for what they are. The person who raped me as a child) was someone who was supposed to be very close to me and have my best interest at heart. It really was a huge realization to arrive at the understanding that everything this person did to me was very manipulative, and there is no way for me to justify it as anything else. This realization completely changed my world. It lifted the veil from my eyes, pulled the rug from underneath me..."

*I turned to writing because there were a lot of other writers I could relate to who helped me arrive at this understanding, especially Maya Angelou. She was a rape survivor and she wrote about it. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she writes about losing her voice throughout that process and finding her way back from that. I could relate to, and was inspired by, this narrative.*

The Essence of Embodiment Festival highlighted many practitioners who use movement and mind/body practices for spiritual healing. I asked if dancing had facilitated healing for Iman. Her answer revealed that unfortunately she'd mostly had the opposite experience.

"With dance... I definitely struggle with dancing, even now. I started when I was four or five. My mom is a dancer and I danced with her at home for a while. At first, it was a really great release, because I had control over my body and nobody else did and that was a monumental deal for me. Then I started a pre-professional program at a well respected studio. Unfortunately I really can't say I developed a close relationship with any teachers besides my mom. At the studio, in the beginning, it was great because I was so over the moon to be dancing at a studio. To have a spot, in a place, and be a part of a community; I felt like I was on the right path. But as time went on it became clear my teacher didn't think I was meant to be a dancer. Not only did she stop focusing on me and my journey, but she sort of insinuated I was lazy and not trying hard enough. She also fed into a narrative of me being fat or overweight or whatever... So unfortunately, that didn't help me and just added to the trauma and struggles I was already having with my body."

Despite this disappointing studio experience, Iman made clear she has, however, been continually inspired by her mother: dancer and teacher Wendy Ann Powell.

“My mom, she does so much... She dances with two companies currently, she is about to be a dance minister with a church, she had a full-time job and she helps my step dad. It was really encouraging and informative to watch her process growing up. Seeing that she could work and dance, and importantly she could pull back from dance when she needed to really focus on her body and whatever injuries she had, or just needing rest. I think watching her find that balance in life was really crucial. She’s an older dancer who’s stayed active as a performer and choreographer and I think that develops some wisdom... Her whole ideology and how she views technique and discipline is crazy different. It’s all about the technique, not about tricks, not about what’s the next new best thing. It’s really about the mechanics, how the body moves. She always told me “you’re a human being, and nobody can take that away from you” So I think at the core of her teaching she sees people first, and not just their abilities: what they can do, what they can’t do. She’s really coming from a place of seeing the person first and then ‘okay, how can we help you be the best you can be and move the way you want to move’. Even now, she’s a breast cancer survivor and I think the fact that she’s still dancing, and still teaching and trying to inspire people is so moving.”

Rather than emulate a previous institutional experience, it was clear Iman was on a trailblazing mission to manifest the kind of supportive environment her heart yearned for, but had not yet found in a community beyond her family. She wanted to create a new reality better and more careful than the one she’d experienced, and acknowledged how daunting this felt at times.

“I didn’t know what to expect. In the planning process, I was second guessing myself a lot. It was such a specific intersection of all these things, and I really wanted to make sure that we weren’t going to re-traumatize people by showcasing this work (with sensitive themes). I didn’t want to add any harm, or for people to feel used or tokenized, or for there to be any negative connotations with being involved in this project. Since this was the first time this project was happening I didn’t really know how the artists would feel. I’m really grateful for all the feedback I received. The Festival seemed to help a lot of people. So that was a huge relief.”

The general ambience of The Festival encircled both artists and participants in a warm salve of understanding and egalitarianism. Iman wanted every person The Festival interacted with to have a supportive experience. She sent a list of residencies, grants, and other festival opportunities to every single festival applicant, whether their work was accepted or rejected. And she created beautiful individualized social media packets for every teacher and film contributor. The Festival embraced an expansive community with arms big enough to hold pain, joy, exploration and discovery. When asked if she had any favorite moments, a smile crept across Iman’s face.

*“Honestly, there would be too many moments to talk about, but the way Pampi (a nonbinary second-genx casteD-Bengali culture worker) moderated the last artist talk *Caring for Your Body: Defining Joy & Embodied Presence* was particularly special for me. The song they sang at the beginning, and the way they navigated the whole thing, giving just the right amount of attention to each artist was perfect. It wasn’t heavy-handed and Pampi wasn’t trying to push anyone into a corner or a specific way of speaking and I really appreciated that. I felt like people were really present and engaged, the participants that spoke shared some really insightful moments that we otherwise would not have been privy to.”*

As we wrapped up our conversation I circled back to ask if Iman wanted me to include her personal story in this piece.

“Yes. All of the participants were so open in sharing their stories and I want to meet them in that. That’s what this festival is all about. I am a Third-Culture Kid of Haitian, Bajan and Colombian descent with a diverse religious upbringing; visual storyteller, artist, filmmaker, designer, and dancer. I am also a rape survivor and all these aspects of my identity had a huge part in determining who I wanted to be involved in the project and the programming as a whole. I was not just looking internally at my identity, but also at the people closest to me; like my mom who is an older dancer with a disability and is also involved in theatrical education, community development, and other forms of dance not considered mainstream. I think because I have so many mixed identities, it was paramount that as many people and perspectives as possible feel seen and heard. The biggest question we (Iman and Festival collaborator Kelli Fox) considered was: ‘Will this film/class/project resonate with someone?’ We tried to make sure all the work wasn’t exclusively catering to our tastes, but would also act as a vehicle for growth, joy, or healing for the various communities involved. I actually didn’t know how important it was going to be for the varied aspects of my identity to be known to the broader community until I reached out to an artist and he brought it up through the course of our conversation. Prior to our video call he expressed he was concerned it would be just another white person leading a project about the BIPOC community. At first, I was thinking The Festival would stand out on its own, I really didn’t want it to be centered around me as a person. But participants’ desire to know who I was continued to come up more and more through other conversations I was having as well.”

As we talked, although topics skewed towards what some might consider “heavy” I had the sensation of sunlight creeping into a damp room. I felt honored Iman trusted me enough to share her story, and it seemed cathartic for her to tell it. I was inspired by her capacity to alchemize her own trauma into a framework for others healing, and she seemed to appreciate I wanted to listen. At the end of our meeting, she was smiling wide and laughing.

The name Iman is understood in Arabic to mean “faith” or “belief” in the metaphysical aspects of Islam. By transforming her own pain into the Essence of Embodiment Festival, I believe Iman gave faith to a broader community to know: they are not alone.

“The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers... We can say ‘Dear one, I am here for you.’ We don’t need to know where the suffering is coming from. We just need to embrace it, and that already brings some relief.”
- Thich Nhat Hhan, Buddhist monk and peace activist